



Spacious Joy

An Essay in
Phenomenology and Literature

J.L. CHRÉTIEN

Translated by Anne Ashley Davenport

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Contents

Translator's Note	vii
Introduction: Spaciousness, Joy, and the Legacy of the Word "Dilation"	1
1 Saint Augustine and the Wide Offshore of Desire	20
2 Saint Gregory the Great: Amplitude within a Narrow Confinement	44
3 The Dilated Runners of Psalm 118, from Henri Michaux to Saint Teresa	62
4 Mystical Dilations	85
5 Bossuet on the Open Roads	97
6 Amiel and the Pathology of Dilation	110
7 Return to Eden with Thomas Traherne	126
8 Whitman, Voyager without Limits	150
9 Paul Claudel's Cosmic Respiration	166
Further Reading	189
Index	190
About the Author and Translator	198

Translator's Note

It is nearly impossible to do justice to J.L. Chrétien's alchemical skill with words. Not only does Chrétien tease out hidden colors and overtones from every word, but he also exploits the immemorial wisdom of language in order to turn words into material building blocks for philosophical arguments. Two examples suffice to illustrate Chrétien's approach in this regard and the difficulty facing his translator. Commenting on the immense length of Henri-Frédéric Amiel's *Journal*, Chrétien writes that Amiel's work (*oeuvre*) is really a form of idleness (*désœuvrement*). In French, the two words are closely akin. Together, they convey the notion that Amiel worked on his great *opus* as a way of avoiding work, of compensating for not working, of challenging the very worth of work, and much more. Creating the equivalent density of meaning in English would require labored means. Should the translator attempt to transmit the multiple connotations of *oeuvre/désœuvrement* or keep to the lively tempo of the French text?

The second example brings us to the very core of Chrétien's investigation. In French, the verb *élargir* means both "to enlarge" and to "set free," as in "to release someone from prison." Depending on the context, I translated *élargir* as "enlarge," "set free," or "set at large" — hoping, against all odds, to evoke the multiple nuances implied by Chrétien in a single French word.

Fortunately, Chrétien's phenomenology of joy is not *only* about words. By bringing together authors who wrote in a variety of languages (Greek, Latin, French, English, German) and who pursued very different aims through very different formats, Chrétien himself teaches us to set aside our qualms about translation and to focus on joy as experienced by our shared humanity. *Spacious Joy* shows us how to hunt for robust phenomenological gold in unexpected places and across linguistic boundaries, pioneering a sort of open-ended bibliography on the theme of joy. The reader will spontaneously extend

the list to include his or her favorite authors and poets, assimilating Chrétien's discerning eye and applying it to new regions. In all of his works as in his life, Chrétien has sought to include an ever-widening chorus of languages and voices. Chrétien's phenomenology of joy overflows its own regional mother tongue and calls to be translated into ever more numerous mother tongues.

In *Spacious Joy*, Chrétien teaches us not only to scrutinize a literature of joy that stretches across space and time, but he also teaches us *to breathe*. Philosophically, *Spacious Joy* traces human being down to the essential in-and-out motion of breathing, signaling a paradox: I cannot affirm myself and thrive except by acknowledging my irreducible dependency on the external world. Being a subject *consists* in welcoming alterity into myself and in giving myself back to the external world with what I have begged from it. Implicitly, Chrétien "goes back to the things themselves" (as Husserl urged) and reframes *Dasein* in newly universal terms (as Husserl hoped). Unaccommodated man is a mendicant creature, immersed in the cosmos and in all of humanity prior to immersion in any local context. Over and beyond our myriad parochial differences, Chrétien affirms that we are essentially fellow breathers of each other and of all living things.

Three implications are perhaps worth pointing out. Chrétien's discovery of human being as "a hospitable beggar" validates but also nicely enriches Richard Kearney's "anatheistic instant." By tracing the liminal moment at which the human subject is free to welcome or reject alterity down to a deeper experience of begging for breath, *Spacious Joy* imbues the threshold that Kearney discerns in the Virgin of the Annunciation with a predisposition for delighting in self-effacement as essential to self-affirmation.¹ Similarly, *Spacious Joy* validates but also enriches Christina Gschwandtner's argument that Chrétien's distinctive emphasis on human fragility provides a powerful basis for environmentalism.^{2,3} Last but not least, Chrétien presents human being as essentially *transforming* cosmic being with every breath — as though the root schema of respiration had inspired the ideal notion of function, namely of what receives input and transforms it into output. If phenomenologists are right that their methods uncover essences (Husserl's claim), then we should not be surprised that some of the elementary structures that we breathe in and out from "things themselves" are returned into the world through our intentional activities in the form of mathematical idealities and artificial neural

1 See Richard Kearney, "Annunciation," *Giornale di metafisica* 2/2015, pp. 220–222.

2 Christina Gschwandtner, "Creativity as a Call to Care for Creation? John Zizioulas and Jean-Louis Chrétien," in Brian Treanor, Bruce Benson, and Norman Wizba, eds., *Being-in-Creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 100–112.

3 Republished in "God Making: Theopoetics and Anatheism," in *The Art of Anatheism*, ed. R. Kearney and M. Clemente (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), pp. 14–17.

networks. Man is not a machine, far from it: rather, our man-made artifacts and machines express/embody some of the structures that we have intuited from living and moving and having our being in the world.

Finally, let me add a personal, yet universal, note. I was prompted to translate *La Joie Spacieuse* when I realized that my grandchildren, Ansel, Jacob, Ada, Carlos, Ashley, and Felicity, would likely not grow up to know French sufficiently well to read the French text. The thought of their being cut off from Chrétien's great song of joy haunted me, called upon me, pressed me, mobilized me to act. All of our grandchildren across the globe deserve to have access to Chrétien's breathing music, heard for us at the top of a very high mountain.

Introduction: Spaciousness, Joy, and the Legacy of the Word “Dilation”

As soon as joy wells up in us, everything expands. Our breathing becomes more ample, and our body suddenly stretches out of its self-confined corner and quivers with mobility. Feeling more alive in a vaster space, we want to leap, skip, run, or dance. Our tight throat expands in order to give way to a cry of delight, a song, or a burst of laughter. Whether we are prompted to laughter or to tears, and whether we yield to tearful laughter or shed laughing tears, no matter! We respond to the very excess of what is happening to us. Our face opens up, and our gaze brightens. What is it that is happening to us? That which is *to* happen — the future. The future in this case, however, is not what has already been plotted, calculated, anticipated, or imagined. The future is what wells up here and now. And everything expands precisely because *here* and *now* cannot possibly occur at a single point.

The opposite experience is described by Schiller in the final verse of his poem *The Pilgrim*: “*Und das Dort ist niemals hier!*” (“And the there is never here!”). Through joy, what happens is that “there” comes “here,” “there” *is* “here” — yet not so wholly here as to exhaust its “there-ness.” This means that we are forced to expand, to depart from “here,” but not as though fleeing from here. Rather, we depart from “here” for the sake of keeping the promise that there is now here, that *there* has caused *here* to open up. Joy does not bring about a state but an act and a motion. Joy brings about a live inception. Its act belongs jointly to the human subject and to the world. Joy cannot be reduced and crammed into a psychological framework or into a philosophy of “the subject.” Joy gives us space, room, and a new playing field. To be joyous is to be set at large, off the coast of the vast offing of the world, which is suddenly revealed to us in its free expanse. The experience of joy is always a trial of expanding space. Is it the space of the self, or is it the space of the world that expands? Is it inner space or outer space? What is most characteristic of

joy is that the distinction is blurred. It is made obsolete. Joy is all at once a self-trial and a trial of the world. No one has put it better than Baudelaire, in the poem “The Balcony:”

Suns are so beautiful during hot evenings! Space is so deep! The heart is so potent!

It is only when space deepens that the heart strengthens, and it is only when the heart strengthens that the expanding depth of space is given to be seen and to be experienced.

The aim of this book is to describe and reflect upon the expansion of space, both internal and external, that happens through joy. I hope to map out the many forms and directions that capacious joy might take. The descriptive component is a key factor. It presides over my choice of authors, determining who is to be studied and explored. In no way do I set out to *define* joy philosophically or to frame *doctrines* about joy through the course of its history. The authors whose words the reader will discover here, or rediscover, *describe* the experience of joy and unlock its hidden pathways. Consequently, I will not focus on philosophers but on spiritual authors such as poets and mystics, drawn mostly from the past two centuries. The sample of authors will be diverse, even though the impact of the Christian tradition predominates.

Fortunately, indeed by God’s grace, the experience of increased capaciousness that comes with joy is not so rare as to be limited to a few exceptionally gifted authors. At stake is a universal human experience. It would obviously be impossible to evoke every single description by every single author, even if we were to pick only the most illuminating. It would also be a waste of time to draw up an arbitrary anthology, guided only by my own personal predilections and limited by my ignorance. Thus a more precise principle of selection is needed. This principle is the word “dilation.” The word has been used centrally and eloquently to describe the phenomenon of expansive joy. It serves as a password or shibboleth for my investigation, preventing the book from swelling into such an ungainly bulk that it would be burdensome to the reader and fatal to the author — to everyone’s grief. The result represents only a small subset of all that has been said intelligently about joy. The advantage, however, is that the word “dilation” provides us with a guiding thread. It provides us with coherence at the very heart of polyphony, allowing a methodical approach.

Existence and speech cannot be separated. The only *ex*-isting being, in the true sense of the term, is the speech-bearer that is human being, whose body is alone among animals to bear speech and who exists only in and through this speech-bearing. To name one’s joy *dilation* is not some after-the-fact denomination or guesswork. It is a key to disclosing a very specific

dimension of the experience and to discerning its meaning. We could say that the word “dilation” is one of joy’s inherited traditions — because joy, too, inherits. Victor Hugo put it succinctly in a poem from *Contemplations* about being and the power of words:

Every man is the disciple of some profound word.¹

The authors who are studied in this book form a sort of secret brotherhood because they are all disciples of the word “dilation.” So many voices have overlapped to endow the word “dilation” with resonance that it has become a *bona fide* figure of speech, presiding over the experience of joy and preserving its radiant outburst. These many voices have “answered for it,” as it were, and answered for themselves by using it. The following introductory chapter explains the basis for choosing the word “dilation.” It traces the fortunes and lineage of the word, without actually entering into the subject matter. The choice of a word that is derived from Latin committed us from the start to languages in which it appears, forcing us to set aside German authors, for example, although German has a rich vocabulary for expansion and enlargement (*Erweiterung*, etc.) and although Rilke, to name but him, is a great poet of capacious joy. Appropriately enough, our investigation into the notion of limit and limitlessness had to set itself a limit.

Not only is the word *dilatatio* a Latin word, it is characteristic of Church Latin. The venerable *Thesaurus linguae latinae* tells us that the word appears in literature with Tertullian and that it is largely specific to Christian authors. It appears in the first Latin translation of the Bible and in Saint Jerome’s Vulgate. The fascinating passages in which it appears will become familiar to the reader who sticks with the book, resisting the urge to close it because it seems to offer only a lexicon and not the promised joy! Every philosophical investigation has the right to ask for dues. As for the verb, *dilatare*, it already exists in classical Latin. It is frequently found in Cicero, not just in a physical sense but in a moral sense as well. *Dilatare*, however, will become conspicuously privileged among Latin and Medieval Fathers because the active process of dilating refers to a dilation of the heart, *dilatatio cordis*, a key term of biblical anthropology, where “heart” signifies man’s very ipseity and guiding core, including both intellect and will.² Dilation of the heart is a form of increase, a broadening, an amplification of ourselves, which means that it is tied to joy — a joy that renders us more capacious, more alive, and more vibrant. It is important to point out, in this last regard, that the earliest usage of the verb “to dilate” in English, at

1 V. Hugo, *Les Contemplations*, I, 8, “Suite.”

2 Cf. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *La symbolique du corps* (Paris: PUF, 2005), pp. 16–17.

least according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is found circa 1450, in the vernacular translation of *The Imitation of Christ*, which is itself indebted to the Bible. The verb “to dilate” will remain alive and well in English, as we will see in the chapters on Thomas Traherne and Walt Whitman. The biblical source of the term accounts for its importance in Church Latin. From the Vulgate, it migrated into secular Latin and into modern languages as an essential term for joy.

In French, *Littré’s Dictionary* reports a number of physical meanings, then states somewhat breezily (which is understandable for a positivist, perhaps, given the subject matter) that *dilatation* is a “mystical term” that means “expansion of the heart.” By “mystical,” Littré simply means “religious.” Littré then supplies examples drawn from Bossuet. When it comes to the verb, *dilater*, Littré adds, over and beyond Bossuet, a citation from Madame de Sévigné, who frequently says that the hope of seeing her beloved daughter “dilates her heart.” The expansiveness that results from this kind of anticipated meeting, which is a sort of meeting before the fact, or is like a gift from the other before the other is actually present, has nothing “mystical” about it. Madame de Sévigné writes, for example: “I cannot tell if it is the prospect of seeing you, which, by dilating my heart, makes me so extraordinarily joyous.”³ We could add the following citation from Voltaire: “My heart will be dilated with joy, and gratitude will be in it as much as on my lips.”⁴ And from Flaubert: “In eight days, we will be together; the thought dilates my chest.”⁵ The dictionary *Grand Robert de la langue française* is not very generous with secular examples (Hugo, Martin du Gard), whereas the *Trésor de la langue française* is more abundant. If we keep to authors who hardly stand out for the fervor of their Christian faith, we find Flaubert’s Madame Bovary bemoaning her marriage and day-dreaming about her childhood friends as follows: “What were they doing at this very moment? In the city, with the bustle of streets, the commotion of theaters and the bright lights of a ball, they enjoyed lives in which the heart dilates and the senses flourish”⁶ — in sharp contrast to her own cold, empty, and boring life. The narrator of Camus’s *The Fall*, in turn, gazing at the Seine by night from the bridge called Le Pont des Arts, remarks: “Facing the park of the Vert-Galant, I seemed to dominate the island. I felt a vast sense of power well up in me, or I might say

3 Letter of January 22, 1674, to Mme. de Crignan, in *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), I, p. 677.

4 Letter of 1742 to Fabiot Aurillon, in *Correspondance*, ed. Besterman (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), II, p. 671.

5 Letter of January 29, 1853, to Louise Collet, in Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), II, p. 243. Replacing “heart” by “chest” is a stylistic choice on Flaubert’s part, making the expression more physical and prosaic.

6 G. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, I, 7.

of achievement, which dilated my heart.”⁷ His exhilaration is immediately followed by a feeling of depression. The morbid dilation of Camus’s protagonist is nothing other than the swelling of pride that is described by the Church Fathers (we will discuss it with regard to Saint Gregory the Great). Camus’s narrator adds a bit later: “Every man needs slaves as he needs air to breathe. To command is to breathe, do you not agree?”⁸ Let us simply note that in these two cases, what is dilated is precisely the heart, which means that the biblical word is still featured, even if it is transposed to new realms.

The term remains alive in French literature, granted that its meaning, from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, is far more often physical (dilation of metals, of the pupils, of the nostrils, etc.) than cordial and joyous. To the examples borrowed from dictionaries, let us add a couple of examples that attest to its presence in twentieth-century poetry. Henri Michaux writes, in concluding a poem from *Moments*: “The privilege of living/ unfathomable/ dilated.”⁹ And Yves Bonnefoy, speaking of his protagonist’s experience of walking in *La vie errante*, writes: “Spaces relentlessly appeared to him to be vaster than he knew. Maybe, he wondered, maybe they dilate as I advance, under the morning sky, which has become immobilized. . . . Everything multiplies itself, everything expands.”¹⁰ The expansion of space that accompanies motion causes perception to expand into the distance and into the past. Elsewhere, among “shrieks of surprise,” “sounds of music,” and “strands of laughter,” Bonnefoy evokes the amplification, also, of gestures: “Arms open up, subside, multiply/ Gestures dilate, dissipate/ Color ceaselessly changes into new color/ And into something other than color”¹¹ — thereby capturing the resurrection that is brought about through joy. Besides the French *dilatation*, the term *dilatement* has also existed, but it never took root, as though it had been judged to be superfluous.¹²

Turning away from French, we find that Shakespeare himself associates the spacious and the dilated twice. First, in *Troilus and Cressida*: “I’ll not praise thy wisdom/ Which, like a bourn, a pale, a shore, confines/ Thy spacious and

7 A. Camus, *Théâtre, récits et nouvelles*, ed. Roger Quilliot (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 1493.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 1496.

9 H. Michaux, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Bellour (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), III, p. 752.

10 Y. Bonnefoy, *La vie errante* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), pp. 30–31.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

12 A. Rey’s *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* contains in this regard a mistake (there is always a mischievous pleasure in finding fault with such monuments of scholarship). Rey attributes “dilatement” to Huysmans in 1895 when it can already be found in 1841 in George Sand, *Horace*: “His eyes saw the objects; his brain barely understood them, but his heart underwent a dilation (*dilatement*) of joy, which brightened his face at the very moment that he fainted.” (The protagonist, wounded in a riot, enters a garret by accident, where he finds his beloved! Sand never worried too much about verisimilitude.) *Vies d’artistes*, ed. Fragonard (Paris: Omnibus, 2004), p. 497. Earlier, in the seventeenth century, Saint Francis of Sales, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Anney: J. Niérat, 1923), XXI, p. 55: “The boilings and dilatements of the heart.”

dilated parts.”¹³ Second, *All’s Well That Ends Well* urges us to make use of a “spacious ceremony” and to bid “a more dilated farewell.”¹⁴ In English, “to dilate” has also taken on the meaning of expanding a story, of elaborating a discourse, even of diluting it beyond what is called for. Rich with history, our term, in short, still speaks to us. The Latin *dilatatio* initially transposed the Greek *platusmos*, which appears in the Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint. There is a puzzle in this regard, however, since it is difficult to explain the absence of a fact — to explain why something did not occur. Curiously, the term did not enjoy the same rich fortune in the Greek tradition as it did in the Latin Christian tradition, even though it is found under the pen of the great Origen and of other Greek authors to mean dilation of the heart.

Be this as it may, authors who have attempted to describe our experience of space have, of course, noticed the connection between dilation and the parameters of spatial experience. Yet they never bothered to weigh the meaning or history of the word itself. Thus Gaston Bachelard, in one of his best books, *The Poetics of Space*, devotes a chapter entitled “Intimate Immensity” to the surprising unity of “two motions that concentrate and dilate.” This unity occurs when rêverie, which might seem at first blush to wrap us up more tightly into ourselves, instead opens up a depth in us that communicates with the immensity of the world. In an exquisite analysis of the adjective “vast” in Baudelaire, Bachelard shows how the term is used to convey that “the world expands in grandeur precisely as intimacy deepens.” He goes on to describe “the progressive dilation of rêverie to the supreme point at which immensity is intimately born in an experience of ecstasy, dissolving and absorbing, as it were, the sensible world.”¹⁵ As for Pierre Kaufmann, in a book that is less well known than Bachelard’s but no less remarkable, *The Emotional Experience of Space*, what he does is link “convergence and dilation” together in his description of the spaciousness of joy: “All directions are equivalent, in the sense that all directions converge, not only from here, but from everywhere.” “The dilation of the world through joy . . . expresses the way in which the present is open to all of the possibilities of space” — which also connects back to “the ubiquity of the thing that brings joy.”¹⁶ I make note of these instances here only for the sake of not forgetting them, as we will see more precise illustrations later in the book.

This brief sketch explains why “dilation” so often appears in definitions that have been given of joy throughout intellectual history. Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, in his *Summa theologiae*, asks himself whether joy

13 Act II, scene 3.

14 Act II, scene 1.

15 G. Bachelard, *Poétique de l’espace* (Paris: PUF, 1967), 5th ed., p. 173, p. 178, and p. 177.

16 P. Kaufmann, *L’Expérience émotionnelle de l’espace* (Paris: Vrin, 1969), pp. 76–77.

(*gaudium*) is the same as delectation.¹⁷ He concludes that delectation is much too broad, since it applies equally well to animals, whereas joy is a special kind of delectation that presupposes reason and follows upon the use of reason. Animals other than human beings experience pleasure and delight, yet they do not rejoice. Reflecting further on the Latin vocabulary that pertains to joy, which is richer than ours, Thomas shows that the diversity of terms corresponds to the varied effects that are brought about by the intelligent delight that is joy (*gaudium*). What is termed *laetitia*, he says, is so termed because delighting and rejoicing produce a dilation of the heart in man. He derives *laetus* from *latus*, “large,” as did Isidore of Sevilla centuries earlier in his *Etymologies*.¹⁸

A little further on, Thomas devotes an explicit analysis to *dilatatio*: “Does it belong to delectation to dilate?” Let us note that the “authorities” whom Thomas invokes here for the purpose of defending his interpretation of the concept are all drawn from Scripture — which confirms, if any confirmation were needed, the biblical birthmark that is impressed on the term “dilation.” Thomas, however, is also a reader of Aristotle, and he takes the fatal step of splitting the concept of dilation into two, namely into a physical meaning and a metaphorical meaning: “Since breadth is a dimension of corporeal magnitude, it cannot be said of the soul’s affection except metaphorically. In reality, dilation is like a motion of broadening.”¹⁹ What is involved is a figurative “spiritual magnitude,” which may take a variety of forms. We are expanded, or dilated, when we recognize that some new perfection is added to us. We are also dilated when we enjoy the object of our desire and have, in a sense, internalized it. Desire itself, moreover, dilates us “through imagining the desired object.” Finally, there is a special dilation that is brought about by love, distinct from what is brought about by pleasure: love expands us toward others, prompting us to care about them and not to care only about our own interests. Our field of concern is broadened. It is precisely because dilation is strictly metaphorical that Thomas is able to apply it to diverse objects and to the soul’s affections.

Must we, however, endorse Thomas’s split and reduction? Is there not a more primordial sense of dilation, anterior to the split? Is it really true that spirit can be described only by means of a term that is borrowed from what is sensed and objectified — from what is deprived of spirit? A shared feature of the authors who will be discussed in the present book is the fact that, contrary to Thomas, they do not treat the dilation of the heart as a mere metaphor. They do not view it reductively as transferring to the soul a term whose first

17 *Summa theologiae*, Ia, IIae, qu. 31, art. 3.

18 Isidore of Sevilla, *Etymologies*, ed. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), I, p. 55 (= I, 27, 14).

19 *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, IIae, qu. 33, art. 1.

meaning is exclusively and properly physical. This is what allows them to conceptualize, in the case of joy, the unity of what is internal and what is external.

The distinction between a proper meaning and a figurative meaning explains, nonetheless, the otherwise-surprising agreement that we find between Thomas and Condillac. In his *Dictionary of Synonyms*, Condillac distinguishes the terms “to expand,” “to broaden,” and “to dilate,” from one another. The project of assessing how synonyms differ in meaning is not just a linguistic project but may be a philosophical one as well. Condillac writes: “*To dilate* is said of bodies that occupy a greater space by expanding in every direction, increasing in volume without increasing in mass. Air *dilates*, the heart dilates with joy and shrinks with sadness. Figuratively, we say that the heart of a sensitive person *dilates* when he realizes that there is a need for his assistance. This figurative expression depicts a benevolent sensitivity that *extends* to all unfortunate human beings, proffering needed care to all.”²⁰ The emphasis that is placed on sensitivity tells us that we are in the eighteenth century, but the precise place at which the physical/figurative split is made tells us that, between Thomas and Condillac, Descartes has left his mark. The dilation of the sensitive person is metaphorical, but the dilation of the heart through joy is physical.

Without going into the details of Cartesian physiology, let us simply note that Descartes defines joy as a dilation of the heart, but the dilation is corporeal. It is a vaso-dilation that involves circulation of the blood. The article in *Passions of the Soul* that concerns “the motion of blood and spirits in joy” explains as much. Elsewhere, in a letter to Elizabeth in which he sets out to analyze “the heat and dilation that they (i.e. love and joy) cause to be experienced in the heart,” Descartes concludes: “I judged that the heat belongs to love and that the dilation belongs to joy.”²¹

We will certainly not concern ourselves with this sort of dilation, but it belongs to the legacy of the term. The relative weakening of the scope and meaning of the term in our contemporary usage traces back to the split operated by Thomas and embraced by so many others. When the heart’s expansion is viewed as a physical event or as a metaphor, something crucial is lost in our ability to ponder and to describe capaciousness as it is actually experienced.

Both the question of dilation and the question of how space is related to mind caught up with Descartes in the very last years of his life, from a completely different angle. The English philosopher Henry More, one of the

20 Condillac, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Le Roy (Paris: PUF, 1951), III, p. 261.

21 Descartes, *Traité des passions*, II, 104; in Adam-Tannery, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Vrin, 1978), XI, pp. 405–406 (henceforth AT); and letter of May 1646 (AT, IV, p. 408).

so-called Cambridge Platonists, challenged Descartes's conception of space and his definition of matter as extension. Descartes's definition of matter, in particular, implies that spiritual substances such as God, angels, or our own mind cannot be extended. Descartes answered More at great length and with great precision, using, as Koyré puts it, "a surprisingly moderate and courtly tone."²² The debate was interrupted by Descartes's death. Henry More, however, pursued it on his own; and despite being nicknamed the "Angel of Cambridge" (the English are not only famously prone to understatement, but to hyperbole as well), More exhibited a less-than-angelic and ever-increasing acrimony toward Descartes. A single aspect of this otherwise-important controversy is relevant to our inquiry.

For Henry More, every substance existing *per se* possesses *extensio*, even if the extension in question varies according to the essence to which it belongs and which it characterizes.²³ God's case is no exception. There is "another true extension" — other than bodily extension, that is, with its divisible parts and its parts outside of parts. It is found in angels and in human minds, which "can shrink and expand again to certain limits, while their substance stays absolutely the same."²⁴ Later on, More explicitly evokes "the dilation and contraction of angels"²⁵ and asserts that he clearly and effortlessly conceives of this "dilation and contraction" of substance.²⁶ More writes in his treatise on *The Immortality of the Soul* that spiritual substance, being penetrable and indivisible, unlike bodily substance, which is impenetrable and divisible, is able to shrink and dilate.²⁷ More coins the term "nullibilist" to characterize Descartes's position, which holds that mind is nowhere (*nullibili*). Moreover, without waiting for the advent of science fiction, More invents and names a "fourth dimension," namely *spissitudo*, which is to say substantial density,²⁸ allowing minds to occupy more or less space. The venerable tradition of Neoplatonism, in short, rose up in rebellion against Cartesian dualism and the birth of modernity. For Henry More, as for Bergson later, albeit through radically different pathways, the idea that "a consciousness that is closed in on itself and foreign to space could translate into words what occurs in space" would constitute an incomprehensible "mystery."²⁹ In his own way, More

22 A. Koyré, *Du monde clos à l'univers infini* (Paris: PUF, 1962), p. 114.

23 More's letters to Descartes are found in AT, V, p. 238.

24 AT, V, p. 301.

25 AT, V, p. 304.

26 AT, V, pp. 378–379.

27 H. More, *Opera Omnia* (London, 1679), II, 2; facsimile reprint, 1966, p. 307.

28 For "nullibilist," see H. More, *op. cit.*, II, 1, p. 307. For *spissitudo*, see II, 1, p. 320 and p. 326ff; and II, 2, p. 294. A succinct account is found in B. Willey, *The Seventeenth-Century Background* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 150 ff.

29 H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (Paris: PUF, 1968), 2nd ed., p. 245.

sought for what Bergson would call the “extensive” — “something half-way between divisible extension and pure inextension.”³⁰

Behind a metaphysical thesis that presents fanciful and even fantastical aspects, there is, nonetheless, a phenomenological truth: it is not our bodies but our whole selves who shrink in sadness or depression and who dilate in joy. Whether or not we attribute extension to substance, we ought to be able to reflect on a phenomenon of our daily life. The shrinking and expansion of our presence is not a matter of controversy. In the debate between More and Descartes, the important question is whether Descartes is able to address the shrinking and expansion of our presence. In a remarkably irenic page (which is not always the case), Descartes writes to More: “Well then, we basically agree, our difference reduces to a matter of wording, namely to whether true extension ought to be attributed to the latter (i.e. spiritual extension). As for me, I do not conceive that there is a substantial extension but only an extension of power, in the case of God, angels or our mind — so that an angel is able to adjust his power, proportionately, sometimes to a larger and sometimes to a smaller part of a bodily substance.”³¹

Descartes basically revisits what was said in the Middle Ages concerning the way in which angels are present in a place. Reading Suárez’s *De Angelis* will satisfy the most exacting minds on the matter. Even though it seems clear that Descartes was being disingenuous when he reduced the debate to a matter of wording, it remains nonetheless true that his *extensio potentiae* (extension of power) provided him with a way to account for a mind being present to a larger or narrower space. Suárez does not use the word “dilation,” but there is no impediment to speaking of a dilation and contraction of our power with regard to space.

Let us now pursue our investigation into the history of the term. Granted that the word “dilation” has essentially been tied to joy, it has also been associated at times with an illusory and unreal joy. An important passage in Baudelaire might explain why a poet *par excellence* of the expansion of space, of vastness and depth, never embraced the word “dilation.” The passage in question is found in an essay on Théodore de Banville, where Baudelaire defines with great rigor what, in his view, characterizes lyrical poetry, namely what distinguishes the classicism of lyrical poetry from “modern art.” As Jean Starobinski remarks, “In his essay on Banville, Baudelaire distances himself from Banville under the guise of praise and affirms a poetics that runs counter to Banville’s poetry.”³² Baudelaire indeed writes that the soul, when “feeling in a lyrical manner,” receives impressions that are “so powerful that it is as though uplifted. In such marvelous moments, one’s whole inner

30 H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 276.

31 Descartes, AT, V, p. 342; translation from Alquié edition (Paris: Garnier, 1973), III, p. 908.

32 J. Starobinski, *Portrait de l’artiste en saltimbanque* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 28.

being leaps into the air thanks to an extreme lightness and dilation, as though seeking to reach a higher region.”³³ This is because “every lyrical poet, by his very nature, seeks inevitably to bring about a return to the lost Eden.”³⁴ The author of *The Flowers of Evil* knows perfectly well that such a return is impossible. What is crucial here is the connection between dilation and lightness: the dilated poet uproots himself from the ground and from the gravity of what is real, like a balloon set loose. He flees toward “a kind of beauty that is such that the mind can only conceive of it as existing in a superior realm.” Does the balloon not run the risk of exploding as its sole accomplishment? Moreover, does the core of such an “exaggerated state of vitality,” leading as it does spontaneously to “hyperbole,” not involve a downright denial of the world and of reality? Some modern critics of lyrical poetry raise this Baudelairean question, which at the very least deserves to be asked. A certain kind of dilation is little more than an opiate leading to an imaginary world, causing us to feel contempt for our own world and thus depriving us of real joys. This degenerated and childish form of dilation will not be discussed in the book, except perhaps in some respects in the context of Walt Whitman — although we will have to point out that Whitman’s lyrical expansiveness comes from a utopian spirit reminiscent of the 1848 revolutions more than from any desire to escape into some ethereal realm.

Expansion must firmly remember the constraints from which it has emerged and the difficult victory over constraints that liberation represents. There is mortal peril in any limitlessness that loses sight of limit and is no longer able to limit itself. The ancient debate over *peras* and *apeiron*, over limit and the unlimited, will be at the heart of many of our descriptions. The exaltation of mania (in the psychiatric sense of the term) is not the joy of dilation. Nor is confabulation what defines a capacious speech. In a page on “the functions of lying between 1800 and 1840,” Paul Valéry writes: “People would lie to judges, to parliament, in churches, at the Stock Market, at the Institute: even philosophy lied, even words lied, style itself lied! — Chateaubriand and the poetic style lie. Mr. Victor Hugo and his friends distort, dilate truth at every word.”³⁵ In Valéry’s view, Stendhal reacted against this mendacious dilation of truth with vigor. Here, “to dilate” basically means to exaggerate, to inflate, to embroider, to cover things up with a verbose and sentimental halo. Yet is there not also a form of lying that is attached to dry, laconic, cynical, and disenchanting styles, which always claim to know more than joy does? One can be as verbose with only a few words as with many. Cioran is as verbose as Musset.

33 C. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Le Dantec et Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 736.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 737.

35 P. Valéry, *Oeuvres*, ed. Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), I, p. 575.

All of this raises the question of a possible *poetics of dilation*. The topic will be addressed only in passing in the chapters of the present book. Yet it is obvious that the thinkers and poets of dilation share certain stylistic features. How could expansiveness be conveyed in a constricted language? The first and most important feature is that a poetics of dilation must be a poetics of *breath* — of breath that is recovered, deepened, amplified, expanded. This is why a poetics of expansiveness cannot cut itself off from its native tie to oral delivery and to proffered speech. It is also a poetics of voice and of rhythm: atonality, monotony, absence of emphasis would ruin it from the start. Joy seeks to burst forth, and the sound of joy seeks fully to inhabit the space that opens up before it, welcoming and fraternal. Among the authors who will be considered in the present book, two at least, Saint Augustine and Bossuet, were experienced sacred orators, preaching before the public throughout their lives. Poets like Traherne, Hugo, Claudel, Michaux, and Whitman, in turn, deploy a capacious breath that stands at the opposite pole of Mallarmé's terse brachylogy. The long sentences of Saint Francis of Sales and of Louis Chardon provide further examples: in order to read them aloud, one needs ample breath, the same as for Claudel's verse. A poetics of breath leads by its very essence to the brink of breathlessness.

The second feature, which is really only a consequence of the first, is that a poetics of dilation is a poetics of *motion*: one cannot set up camp at one fell swoop, so to speak, into an expanding flood of joy. It is Whitman's most salient weakness and limitation that he reaches the highest pitch almost instantaneously. One has to be able to sense that one is slowly wrenched out of confinement, anguish, and gravity; one has to become aware that one's bonds are gradually broken, and that the parameters dictating one's judgment of what is possible or impossible are progressively shattered. Only then does it become possible to describe dilation rather than simply name it. The dilating motion must be simultaneously swift and gradual. It must comprise the unforeseen force of the sudden welling-up of joy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the gradual steps that are needed for a footing to be secured, as in the case of a newborn colt that is unsteady on its legs before gathering pace. This is why authors who have a tragic sense of human bondage, distress, and sin, like Saint Gregory the Great, for example, sometimes experience and describe dilation more vividly and better than authors who are readily satisfied and easily filled with bliss. Dilation always consists in a life-and-death struggle that is waged by our breathing against what stifles it (in this particular regard, Michaux overlaps with Saint Augustine, whatever their many differences otherwise). This agonistic dimension of being dilated translates itself into the very motion and rhythm of our speech.

The third feature, if we invoke the terms of rhetoric, is that a poetics of dilation is a poetics of *amplification*. The converse, obviously, does not

hold, since amplification can be used to show the horror and abjectness of a crime, as we see in the examples cited by Quintilian to illustrate the concept. When Quintilian discusses *amplificatio* in his *Institutes of Oratory*, Book VIII, he lists four types: “enlargement (*incrementum*), comparison, reasoning and accumulation (*congeries*).”³⁶ By definition, a motion of amplification requires in each case that many terms be used, or that the same term be used many times in diverse ways. Every poetics of excess makes use of amplification, even when the means that are employed do not fit into the established schemes of rhetoric. In the first item, *incrementum* or enlargement, a number of possibilities present themselves. One such possibility “allows us not only to reach what is highest but sometimes to reach, as it were, beyond (*interim quodam modo supra summum*).” Another possibility allows us to leap straight to the maximum, without any mention of degrees, which is exceptional: “For a good way to enhance something is to present it as inaugmentable.”³⁷ Quintilian also describes the case where “without pause in the flow of the sentence as it unfolds, elements of ever increasing force are made to follow one another.” Commenting on the example that he provides of this strategy, he notes: “Someone else might separate these various circumstances and linger on their various degrees; but Cicero rushes right to the extreme point, and he does not reach the summit laboriously but through a single swift stride (*ad summum non pervenit nisu, sed impetu*).”³⁸ The reader will find an embarrassment of riches illustrating these rhetorical devices throughout the chapters of the book. For example, we will see that Whitman relentlessly champions Quintilian’s final scheme, accumulation, to the point of intoxication, enumerating places or beings. “In amplification, one can also simply accumulate words and ideas that mean the same thing; the idea of a gradual rising tide is lost, but the impact is no less enhanced, so to speak, by accumulated bulk.” There is also the device of words “insurrecting” against one another: “An amplifying effect is often achieved by using words that interrupt one another with higher and higher emphasis (*verbis omnibus altius atque altius insurgentibus*).”³⁹

We must, of course, add hyperbole, which Quintilian addresses later on among tropes.⁴⁰ Hyperbole has its dangers, but it is “a virtue when the object of our discourse exceeds natural boundaries. It is permissible in this case to say more, because we cannot say enough, and it is better to say too much than to say too little.” Finally, we must include *emphasis*, while noting that the

36 Quintilien, *Institution oratoire*, VIII, 4, 3, trans. Cousin (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1978), V, pp. 86–87.

37 Op. cit., VIII, 4, 3–7, p. 87.

38 Op. cit., VIII, 4, 8–9, p. 88.

39 Op. cit., VIII, 6, 67–76, pp. 123–126.

40 Op. cit., VIII, 67–76, pp. 123–126.

term has for Quintilian a completely opposite meaning from the pedantic and declamatory meaning that it has in our modern language, since Quintilian discusses it in the section on succinctness and brachylogy. Emphasis “conveys more to the ear than what the words alone express. There are two sorts, one that signifies more than what it says, a second that signifies even what it does not say.”⁴¹ In the latter sense, all mystical writing and poetry of the ineffable will tend toward the emphatic: they express more than they describe and are able to describe. They point to what lies beyond description. In so far as it is a poetics of excess and limitlessness, a poetics of dilation cannot reach a resting point where dilation comes to a stand, a final and supreme joy to be described in minute detail. In this sense, dilation admits of no closure but signifies beyond what is explicitly articulated. All of these figures of amplification constitute the stylistic equivalent of dilation.

Before we enter into the subject-matter proper, which is joy, a final question must be considered in our preambles, aimed as they are at mapping out necessary limits for our attempted investigation into the unlimited. The reader is entitled to know what to expect and what not to expect. Except for Saint Augustine, the authors who are discussed here are not, strictly speaking, philosophers. Is this to say that dilation is essentially a matter of affect, that there is no such thing as dilation of thought and intelligence? We will see that this is not the case, which should not surprise us, since dilation of the heart, in the biblical sense, includes thought on a par with the will. Yet it remains true that love rightfully dominates our pages, be it the love for one’s fellow human being or for God. Dilation of thought will appear most often as the result of a broadening of desire or of love, ever renewed and increased by fresh resources.

There are, however, two penetrating insights into a dilation of intelligence, as such: in Victor Hugo’s doctrine of visionary meditation (*songerie*) and in Bergson’s doctrine of intuition. In his much-neglected but important book *William Shakespeare*, where he formulates his poetics, Hugo describes the critical moment that gives birth to genius. This is the moment in which the abyss of immensity is confronted, which is to say the moment where the unlimited is confronted in both a physical and metaphysical sense, where “the whole expanse of the possible is, as it were, set before one’s eyes,” and where “the dream that one has inside of oneself is discovered outside of oneself.”⁴² This is the moment when one topples over into the *apeiron*, and the expanding tide from outside and from inside swirl into one another. At such a moment, “you are not finite. You do not have a limit, term, or boundary before you. . . . You have no extremity.”⁴³ Hugo proceeds by way of *congeries*, and we might

41 Op. cit., VIII, 3, 82, p. 84.

42 V. Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, I, V, 1, *Oeuvres Complètes, Critique*, ed. Seebacher (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 331.

43 Op. cit., p. 335. One ought, really, to cite the whole page.

be tempted to smile before the whirlwind in which Aeschylus, Newton, Kant, Dante, and many others are jumbled together, except for the fact that what Hugo describes is an essential and vertiginous capacity in man (a caricature version would be Malraux expanding on art). In such deep contemplation, distances are incinerated, and the most distant things come right under our gaze — which is, properly, speaking *to envision* things, since indeed “To envision is to think here, there and everywhere.”⁴⁴

To Hugo, only this sort of deeply visionary thinking has the power to spread out to infinity. “No one sees that ocean with impunity. Henceforth, he will be the *dilated* thinker, expanded but afloat; which is to say a dreamer. He will be like the poet at one pole and like the prophet at the other. . . . The unlimited enters into his life, into his conscience, into his virtue, into his philosophy. . . . He perceives enough of bygone life in our dusk, and enough of future life, to be able to grasp both ends of a dark yarn and bind his soul to it. Whoever has drunk in the past is sure to drink in the future, whoever has envisioned once is sure to envision again.”⁴⁵ However, when someone goes off “into the borderless expansion of infinite meditation,” he might “descend” or “fall.” “To keep one’s free agency in the midst of a dilation of this kind is to show true grandeur.” How is this possible, if not by keeping one’s own firm center at the heart of such a measureless enlargement of space, if not by resisting, thanks to a power of self-limitation, the vertigo that would cause us to dissolve and lose ourselves? If visionary meditation is “thinking here, there and everywhere,” there has to be a voyager capable of withstanding the voyage. Amiel’s dramatic testimony will teach us much about the necessary tension between the limit and the limitless. The visionary meditation that we are describing is a dilation of thought as such, even if imagination contributes to it. It starts with dread and terror rather than with joy, even though it gives birth to a work of art and then, also, to joy.

Even when he comes to define love, Victor Hugo chooses to bring contraction and dilation into mutual play. “To embody the whole universe into a single person, to dilate a single person all the way up to God,” he writes, “that is what love is.”⁴⁶

What is singular about Bergson with regard to our topic is that dilation, in his view, does not constitute just one more experience alongside others, for example the experience of joy (although the connection with joy will not be broken). Dilation is the very name of his philosophical method. It is the only example where “dilation” denotes the core activity of philosophizing. To

44 Op. cit., pp. 300.

45 Op. cit., pp. 331–332.

46 V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, IV, 5, 4, *Oeuvres Complètes, Roman II*, p. 737. Another aspect of Hugo’s doctrine of dilation will be discussed *infra*, chapter 4.

Bergson, dilation is simply another name for intuition — in the fresh sense in which he takes the term. This does not mean that he uses “dilation” to serve two purposes, since it denotes intuition in its constitutive mode rather than in its direct access to experience. It denotes what allows us to penetrate hitherto veiled dimensions of experience. In short, for Bergson, dilation is nothing less than the underlying *condition that makes intuition possible*. The dilation that is proper to philosophy is absolutely specific. Bergson carefully distinguishes it from the dilation that is brought about by art in order to establish that the former is more universal than the latter, as well as a source of joy that no science can give. But what is it that dilates, and what does it mean?

In addressing “attentiveness to life,” *Matter and Memory* speaks of “a greater dilation of our whole personality. Normally coiled tight by action, our personality expands all the more when the stranglehold through which it was compressed becomes gradually looser; then, still whole and undivided, our personality spreads out over a larger and larger surface.”⁴⁷ Other pages speak of a dilation of the will or of the intelligence (we recognize the two dimensions of the biblical notion of *heart*, although the word itself is not invoked). Further passages insist that dilation reaches down into deeper regions through levels that expand in depth, rather than merely expanding on the same plane, which, Bergson says, is the case with art. There is nothing imprecise here. Dilation starts in the will as an act and an effort, and this effort, widening our consciousness and our temporal capacity, transforms the capacities of our intelligence. “Suppose that, instead of seeking to rise above our perception of things, we were to sink into the perception more deeply in order to dig into it and enlarge it. Suppose that we were to insert our will into it, and that our will by dilating were to dilate our vision of things.”⁴⁸ According to Bergson, we would have a new type of philosophy, which would no longer be partial and unilateral. False problems would be discarded: “To the extent that we dilate our will, that we reabsorb our thought into our will, and that we develop empathy for the effort that generates things, such daunting problems withdraw, decrease and disappear.”⁴⁹

The very act of dilation unifies the self. With it, the “unity of mental life” appears, and our gaze, too, acquires a new unity by unifying what it sees: “Philosophy must take hold of the fading intuitions that shed light on their object only from distance to distance, for the sake, first, of sustaining them; then for the sake of dilating them and bringing them into mutual accord. The more philosophy advances in this work, the more philosophy recognizes that

47 Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 7.

48 Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant*, 79ed (Paris: PUF, 1969), p. 148. For the role of the will, see *L'Évolution créatrice*, 118e ed. (Paris: PUF, 1966), p. 195.

49 *La Pensée et le mouvant*, p. 66

intuition is the mind itself — really, as it were, life itself.”⁵⁰ Philosophy is not alone in providing us with the expansion of our life that makes us see life, with the mobility of our being that makes us rediscover the mobility of being. Art provides it as well: “Undoubtedly, art makes us discover more qualities and nuances in things than we perceive naturally. It dilates our perception, but as a surface motion rather than as an in-depth motion. Art enriches our present, but hardly goes beyond the present.”⁵¹ Philosophy goes further. By initiating us into a “dense, and, what is more, elastic present, we can dilate backwards open-endedly by further removing the screen that masks us from ourselves.” Philosophy makes us grasp again “the external world as it really is, not only on the surface, in the actual moment, but in its depth, with the immediate past pressing up against the present moment and impressing its momentum upon it.”⁵² Thus, according to Bergson, everything is transfigured. What appeared to be dead is resurrected. This gift is not one that art can give us, except “to a few persons who are privileged by nature or by fortune, and only occasionally.” Thanks to the dilation of time (and, therefore, of ourselves and of the world before us), philosophy gives us more than art and gives it “to everyone” (a thesis that is strongly paradoxical and highly debatable, since it could only achieve it by turning into a “world vision,” even perhaps an “ideology”). Philosophy also gives more than science: “Science promises us well-being, at most pleasure. But philosophy could perhaps give us joy, here and now.” This last statement concludes Bergson’s famous study of intuition, where dilation retrieves its original meaning. What, exactly, does it consist in?

Dilation, to Bergson, is a veritable conversion. It is a conversion in the sense that is meant by Plotinus, which is to say a return toward the Absolute, which is, here, the Absolute of life — a return trajectory uphill, back to the source from which we are never really separated. “If metaphysics is possible, it can only consist in the effort of ascending back up the natural slope of thought. The goal of the ascent must be to place ourselves, through a dilation of the mind, in the immediate vicinity of what is to be studied; the goal, in short, is to proceed from reality to concepts rather than from concepts to reality.”⁵³ The theme of dilation-conversion is developed in most detail in *Creative Evolution*. In “the ocean of life,” our intelligence is shaped only locally, by a “sort of local solidification.” “Philosophy must be the effort to melt again into the whole. By becoming reabsorbed into its principle, our intelligence will be able to live its own genesis all over again, in reverse.” This is how we will become able to “dilate humanity within us” and “obtain

50 *L'Évolution créatrice*, p. 268.

51 *La Pensée et le mouvant*, p. 175.

52 *Op. cit.*, p. 142. On art, see p. 149 ff.; and *L'Évolution créatrice*, p. 178.

53 *Op. cit.*, p. 206; cf. *L'Évolution créatrice*, p. 268.

that it transcend itself.”⁵⁴ The idea is stated right in the introduction. The “complementary cognitive powers” that are in us, and that remain obscure to us, “will receive new light. They will become discernable one from the other when they perceive themselves at work, so to speak, in their natural evolution. They will learn, in this way, what effort is needed if they are to intensify and to dilate for the sake of life.”⁵⁵ As we saw earlier in the citation from Victor Hugo, what lies within oneself is discovered to lie outside oneself (although neither author conceives of a true *outside* of self). The world and nature explicate, explain, and clarify our own intimate core.

It is in the very evolution of life that we must “search for clues of how to dilate the intellectual capacity of our thought; it is there that we will draw the stored energy that we need to hoist ourselves up beyond ourselves.”⁵⁶ Indeed Bergson writes about life: “It is, without doubt, a creative reality, which is to say that it produces effects through which it dilates and exceeds itself.”⁵⁷ One’s own experience as a living self cannot be divorced from experiencing life as such, in its unity. With regard to the notion of intuitive thinking that he puts forth, Bergson remarks: “Because of the sympathetic communication that it will establish between us and other living things, because of the dilation of our consciousness that it will bring about, intuitive thinking will initiate us into life’s proper realm, which is made up of mutual co-penetration, being an open-ended, continuous creation.”⁵⁸ This is not the time or place to demonstrate the connection between Bergson’s idea of dilation and his concept of temporality, nor is it the place to conduct a criticism of his philosophy of life, which, as many later philosophies do, makes an overly facile leap into its own absolute object and never escapes from it again. Suffice it for us to note that, without cutting at its roots, Bergson has dilated the word “dilation” to the point of turning it into a decidedly philosophical term, unique and meaningful.

Before concluding, let me say a word to the reader. The reader might be disappointed to learn that what promised to be an investigation into joy and space will be approached through the narrow, or apparently narrow, door of the word “dilation.” You may wonder whether the author, who has recently devoted a whole book, *L’Intelligence du feu*, to explicating a single sentence (granted that it was uttered by Jesus), is not on some sort of miniaturizing kick, proposing now to explicate a single word. You need not worry. Remember that, to the eye of the attentive beholder, what is very small is heavy with

54 *L’Evolution créatrice*, p. 193.

55 *Op. cit.*, p. ix.

56 *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

57 *Op. cit.*, p. 52. The next page addresses the temporal aspects of dilation.

58 *Op. cit.*, p. 179.

immensity. Remember, moreover, Balzac's resounding lesson, at the start of the novel *Louis Lambert*:

Oftentimes, I have enjoyed delicious voyages while embarked on a single word, into the abysses of past times, like an insect clinging to a blade of grass, set afloat on the eddies of a flowing river. . . . What a magnificent book could be written detailing the life and adventures of a word! No doubt the word in question has received various impressions from the circumstances in which it has been used; in different localities, it must have awakened different ideas. Yet is it not grander still if we view it from the triple perspective of soul, body and motion? If we contemplate it in itself, abstracting from its functions, its effects, its acts, will we not have enough to fall into an ocean of thoughtful reflections? Are most words not deeply colored by the idea that they represent externally?⁵⁹

Are you now willing, dear reader, my friend, to cling to a blade of grass with a benevolent insect who has already scouted the trajectory?

In the same way that daily objects outlast those who use them, as Hegel once remarked, words are more ancient and more powerful than those who utter them. It is because words are more powerful than us that we communicate through language instead of through mere codes, and that language is able to give birth to poetry. For the same reason, speaking is always a wrestling match through which we hope to lift ourselves up to the level of words; and our own embattled embrace of them might bring about lasting transformations, to the point that no word will remain intact if our speech is sufficiently sincere. The subject matter of this book is the history of the transformations that have been impressed on the word "dilation" by those who have appropriated it to describe the welling-up of joy — appropriating it only because the word had already thrown itself beforehand into their lives, with its own dimensions of yet-unspoken joy. Whatever their date, we are free to appropriate new transformations into our own voice and to pursue the struggle. Nothing is more serious than joy, and nothing is more violent than the breach that it rips open in us, leaving us exposed.

59 H. de Balzac, *Louis Lambert*, *La Comédie humaine*, ed. Bouteron (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), X, p. 355.

Chapter 1

Saint Augustine and the Wide Offshore of Desire

How could a body of work as vast and oceanic as Saint Augustine's be born of anything but of an unremitting desire to expand? And how could his desire have remained so constant if it had not been the very desire to expand desire? Moreover, what more radical form is there of desire, and of the desire to expand desire, than the desire for the One who alone is able to stretch desire beyond its natural limits, which is to say the desire for Him whom human beings call God? The desire for expansion cannot be reduced to a mere thirst for space. It includes a desire for liberation — for taking leave of our own narrowness, our smallness, our constrictedness. It includes a desire to be released from the multiple prison sentences that we serve inside of the airless dungeons that we have built for ourselves or inherited from our parents. Confinement is not what prompts us to desire freedom. Rather, it is our desire for freedom that prompts us to dislike the confinement of prison. Indeed we see daily that a dwarfish desire accommodates itself perfectly well to a dwarfish dwelling, concerned only about making it as cozy as possible. It is from considering desire that Saint Augustine's relentless meditation emerged regarding all that shackles us and deadens us, which in biblical language he calls "sin." The desire for expansion is not some sort of psychological idiosyncrasy on Augustine's part, far from it. It is the measureless standard of what, on his view, the human condition can and must be.

It follows by inner logic that extension, expansion, and dilation will figure at the heart of Augustine's thought. There is a particularly important passage in a sermon, one of great simplicity. After noting the homophony between *caro* and *caritas*, between "flesh" (as in "carnality") and "charity," which are so proximate with regard to sound, and yet so distant with regard to meaning in our present condition (*in hoc tempore*), Augustine says to his audience: "Where there is charity, the heart is expanded and the flesh is restrained

(*cor dilatatur, caro angustitur*). However, since charity itself suffers because of the flesh, and since the capacious expanses of divinity have not yet welcomed you, o dearly beloved brethren, you must reflect upon the capaciousness of this building, as long as weakness still fetters you!”¹ Evoking the size of the church in which he is speaking in a voice that is not loud enough to be properly heard by everyone is meant humorously, no doubt, especially since he evokes it in order to get the audience to quiet down (“The path of my voice is your silence”). Yet Augustine’s two appeals to spaciousness resonate together. Until we are able to run around freely in God’s capacious heaven for all eternity, it is a comfort, as well as a chance to take a deep breath, that we find ourselves in a spacious sanctuary reflecting on God’s word! Capaciousness calls for capaciousness. We move spontaneously from one to the other.

The opposite approach is adopted in the famous descriptions of the powers and actions of memory in *Confessions*, Book X. There, to borrow Henri Michaux’s expression, we go from the vastness of outside space to “inside space.” What makes it possible for us to leave external space without regret or nostalgia is that “inside space” is vaster still. Rather than forsake external space altogether, it includes it in a new, internalized mode. In the quest for God that Augustine both describes and conducts, he turns in Book X to the present, having made his confessions regarding the past in earlier books. Augustine first surveys the spaces of the world (mentally, so already by means of memory) in the hope of finding Him. In these spaces he finds only the mute, yet eloquent, witness that the beauty of created things bears, inviting him through a visible voice to turn to their luminous source. This is when he turns toward himself, still seeking, and writes: “I now come to the expanses and large palaces of memory.”² We find here the same word, *campi*, meaning open and free spaces, that was used in the sermon we saw earlier for the purpose of evoking God’s own capaciousness. The first thing that we learn about memory, which to Augustine is the very basis and ground of spiritual life, is its capaciousness. Memory exceeds a simple commemoration of the past even if it takes its start in such commemoration.

The capaciousness of memory, however, is the capaciousness of a dwelling, which is to say of a place that is our own to be inhabited, inviting us to endless exploration through a multiplicity of secret corners and recesses. In a further passage, Augustine speaks of “the immense courtyard of my memory. There, indeed, the earth, sky and sea are present (*praesto*) to me, with all that I’ve been able to sense in their midst.” And again, “in the immense fold of my memory,” the future that I imagine, await, and hope for, is “as though

1 *Sermon Dolbeau*, 27, 1, in François Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons au peuple d’Afrique* (Paris: Brepols, 1996), p. 311. “Flesh” refers here to the condition of humankind that is wounded by sin, not to the body as such.

2 *Confessions*, X, 8, 12.

present” to me, to the same degree as the remembered past.³ The vast world in which I no longer move and to which I have shut my eyes reemerges at once, intact, whole, with its oceans and its mountains, “with spaces as immense as if I were seeing them outside.”⁴ The pathway to interiority is thus not a loss of immensity, but a dive into an immensity that is even more disconcerting since its disproportion is in me, is me. The privileged emphasis that Augustine places on interiority is not based on excluding externality but on including and exceeding it. What my memory gathers from the world and transfigures by transforming it into itself, into spirit, is no less large or less spacious than memory itself. There is, in this regard, an exact parallel between Augustine’s approach and the role that Rilke assigns to human being, and more particularly to the poet, at the end of the ninth *Duino* elegy. After distinguishing naturally existing things from industrial objects that are, as such, interchangeable and disposable, Rilke affirms that things aspire obscurely at being saved by us, at being transformed into us. They want to be lifted up to the realm of spirit. Rilke extends this desire to the earth itself: “Earth, is not what you want to be born again invisibly in us? — Is it not your dream/ to be invisible at least once? Earth! Invisible! What mission do you impose if not transformation?”⁵ Rilke concludes the elegy with the very Augustinian word of “heart” in order to evoke increased capaciousness: “Neither childhood nor the future decreases. An overabundant existence wells up in my heart.”

According to Augustine, we are so little confined in the “vast and limitless sanctuary” of inner space that it is this very lack of confinement that allows us to discover our narrowness, our *angustia*. How is that? What I experience as narrow, triggering dread and even stupor, is precisely that I cannot grasp or embrace more than a tiny part of the immensity of memory and spirit that I myself am, or that is “in” me. The conscious gaze of my mind is as though lost in the open stretch that extends beyond it. My own capaciousness frightens me because it is largely unknown to me. One might perhaps be able to go full circle around the world (which would only be one circle among others), but one cannot circumnavigate the space of one’s own heart, or go full circle around the self or oneself. How is it possible that I contain my own capacity if it is limitless? How is it possible that I am unable to embrace my own capaciousness? To experience immensity is also, by a strict necessity of logic, to experience limitation. To know dilation is to know constriction.

All of this explains why there is no contradiction between Augustine’s description of the immensity of human interiority and the ardent prayer that opens the *Confessions*: “Narrow is the dwelling of my soul. In order for you

3 *Confessions*, X, 8, 14.

4 *Confessions*, X, 8, 15.

5 R. M. Rilke, *Elégies de Duino*, trans. Angelloz (Paris: Hartmann, 1943), p. 95.

to enter it, let it be dilated by you (*dilatetur abs te*)!⁶ God's dilation of the soul for the purpose of dwelling in it constitutes the summit, the fulfillment and, therefore, also the organizing principle of Augustine's meditation on inner space. What is at stake for Augustine here is not some casual image. It is the highest possible prayer to be said and the deepest possible desire to be kindled. We do not discover our narrowness simply by examining the self that we are. The discovery comes from being raised up to God who is present everywhere. The discovery is the recoil that the heart endures, just as there is a recoil in the case of firearms. The desire for God is alone what discloses that our heart is neither capacious enough nor pure enough to host Him. And since the desire for God is kindled only by God Himself, it is true in every sense of the term to say that God's immensity alone is what *sheds light* on our constriction. In the form of anticipation and even of prevention, the first pages of *The Confessions* reveal the whole momentum of the work, which ends on the words "will be opened" (*aperietur*). As a case in point, the initial prayer asking God to dilate us comes immediately after a meditation on the divine immensity that contains everything, on God who is present everywhere in His creation and, therefore, in us. This meditation is really a prayer of invocation that is reflected back upon itself: *to invoke* God, etymologically speaking, is to call on Him to come, to come here, to come to us, where in fact He already is, as Creator who sustains all things in their being. God fills the world by containing it, not by being contained in it.⁷ To the One who is present in all things as Creator, who is no more present to one creature than to the next (which is precisely what later theology will call God's "presence of immensity"), we ask that He come into us through grace, according to a personal mode of presence, as our savior. If such a presence were to take place, it could only be excessive, raising us to a state that is beyond what is ordinary and natural. Augustine depicts it as a state of drunken elation: "Who will gift me with your incoming presence into my heart, that you may inebriate it?"⁸ What is involved is always the passage from vastness to an even greater vastness. Augustine starts by the end in order to delineate the horizon of his work.

In Book X, as a matter of fact, the vast open expanse of the world that inspires our admiration reveals itself to be narrow, so to speak, in light of the vast open stretch that is memory and the human spirit. In Book I, man's inner space, later to be described as capacious, appears as a wretched little shack relative to God's vast open sea. Yet we desire Him to enter into it, with a desire that seems at first blush to be impossible — a desire that would indeed be absolutely impossible if our heart had no capacity to be dilated beyond

6 *Confessions*, I, 5, 6.

7 *Confessions*, I, 3, 3.

8 *Confessions*, I, 5, 5.

measure. To Augustine, what is most at stake in dilation, and in meditating upon dilation, is nothing other than this divine ingress into the heart. Although *The Confessions* provides a clear answer to the question, the most explicit statements using spatial terms occur in sermons, articulated with the down-to-earth directness that characterizes Augustine's speech when he seeks to communicate to ordinary audiences without talking down to them. Thus a sermon devoted to the *Beatitudes* evokes the happiness of the pure of heart to whom the promise is made that they will see God.⁹ The desire to welcome God inside of us cannot fail to include a purification of the heart, lest our divine guest find in it only disorder and injustice. The question is whether we are capable of accomplishing this preliminary purification by our own means.

Perhaps you find it difficult to purify your heart: invoke the very One who will not disdain to purify this place for himself and who will condescend to dwell in you. Might it be that you fear to welcome such a great power and that it stresses you, just as men of low rank typically dread the idea of having to welcome travelling dignitaries at their homes? Nothing indeed is greater than God: do not worry about your many constrictions, receive him and he dilates you (*suscipe illum, et dilatat te*). Do you have nothing to offer him to eat? Receive him and he will feed you — and what is sweeter yet to know is that he will feed you with himself. He himself will be your food since he himself has said: *I am the living bread come down from heaven*.

The only solution to this terrifying and impossible hospitality, as there is a radical disproportion between our cramped dwelling, our wretched inside, and the grandeur of the awaited guest, is precisely that God Himself provides for the conditions of His own hospitality by enlarging us, dilating us. What is un hoped-for is not only a matter of the identity of the visitor but also of how he arrives and irrupts.

Another sermon develops the same theme from a different perspective, as is Augustine's wont. It vividly puts in place the parameters of Augustine's meditation on the dilation of the heart. "The heart of the faithful is not too narrow for the One for whom Solomon's Temple was narrow."¹⁰ Augustine then appeals to Saint Paul's words stating that we ourselves are God's temple, the living temple of the living God. He pursues in the same familiar vein:

If a dignitary of great rank were to say to you: "I will live in your house," what would you do? Given the cramped space of your home, you would likely

9 *Sermon Morin*, XI, 11, in *Miscellanea Agostiana* (Roma: Typografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1931), t. 1, p. 631.

10 *Sermo* 23, 7–8, in Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* (Petit-Montrouge: Imprimerie Catholique, 1840–1845), 38, 158 (henceforth PL).

become stressed, you would feel anxious in the extreme, and you would hope that it would not happen. Indeed you would not like to welcome someone so exalted into such a narrow room, someone for whom your wretched hut could never suffice. Do not fear the arrival of your God, do not fear God's affection: he will not belittle you when he comes, on the contrary, he will dilate you as he comes to you. In order that you may know that he will expand you, he has not only promised that he would come (by saying) *I will dwell among you*, he has also promised amplitude (*latitudinem*) by adding: *And I will walk in your midst*. And if you love, you see this promised amplitude. Precisely because fear has its torments and its constrictions (*angustias*), love, conversely, has its amplitude.

After evoking the capaciousness of love, literally its breadth, Augustine adds: "You seek a place for him. Let the one who dwells in your heart expand it himself (*Ipse inhabitator dilatet*)." He pursues further by distinguishing between a security and a deposit, as he so often does: a security is given as a warrant and is returned once the promised transaction has been completed, whereas deposit money is not returned, being of the same nature as the money involved in the transaction. The charity that is already in us constitutes a deposit in view of the future: it is not of a different nature than what will be given to us in eternal life. What matters for our present discussion, however, is the joyous expansion of our inner space by the guest who is welcomed there. It follows that it is alterity that dilates — and we must examine it rigorously.

In a surprising and profound letter, Descartes speculates that when joy, which manifests itself primarily through dilation, is already present in us, it goes forth to greet events, as it were, and to welcome joyous encounters with the world. Things often happen "according" to our joy, even when nothing seems to depend on it. There is an element of divination that belongs to interior dilation. Life treats the generously dilated human being generously. Descartes cautions Elizabeth that he "would not want to communicate this idea to a weak-minded person, from fear of inciting superstition." Yet caution does not prevent him from expressing himself clearly: "I am bold enough to believe that inner joy possesses a sort of secret power that makes Fortune more favorable. . . . I have often noticed that what I do with a joyous heart and without any inner aversion, often meets with success, even in the case of games of chance, where Fortune alone holds sway. I have always experienced Fortune to be more favorable when I'm joyous for some reason than when I'm sad." Descartes interprets the phenomenon of Socrates's demon on the same basis: "It is useful to be convinced that whatever we undertake without aversion and with the freedom that usually comes with joy will succeed unfailingly."¹¹ Granted that including games of chance in this analysis

11 Descartes to Elizabeth, November 1646, in *Oeuvres*, AT, IV, pp. 529–530.

is problematic, as Descartes himself concedes, there is nothing irrational about it. Whoever sets out as a loser has every chance of losing. Those who go out into the world with the look of a battered dog have every chance of being battered again and of being treated like a dog, since they go forth with less courage, less energy, less power of affirmation and less firm a will than someone with a free and joyous heart. The point is not to describe Coué's method before its time. Descartes is not promoting a psychological strategy. Yet it remains that, although believing in a happy outcome hardly suffices to bring it about, the fact of being in a joyous state of mind nonetheless adds a factor in its favor. Nor is this factor trivial. Someone who gets up in the morning feeling ornery and angry has already ordered a morose day for himself, nothing more, but nothing less. Inner joy, with its characteristic expansion, spontaneously reaches out, with a water-diviner's touch, for whatever joy there is to be met with in the world. We are ready for the world, and the world is ready for us because we are already off shore, out in the open expanse. The opening up to the world that is joy forms a welcoming space for whatever comes.

In the case of God's coming and in-dwelling in us in the form of charity, Augustine draws a very different model for dilation. He does not deny in any way that love serves to prepare the heart for expansion (even if such preparations are possible only through God's grace), but the preparation itself cannot produce or bring about what it prepares the heart for. God alone brings about the condition that makes His manifestation possible. God alone prepares in us the space that will welcome Him. He alone opens up the space of joy in which He will dwell and move (*I will walk in your midst*). The event itself of His arrival is what provides the ground of its possibility. What is actually real provides the ground for what is possible, not the inverse. Augustine's theological and mystical model long predates contemporary philosophies "of the event" that develop similar approaches. It is possible for God to come only when He actually comes, which is why there is no point in fretting about our wretchedly cramped selves. What we must prepare ourselves for is what is un-prepared.

In the same sermon, Augustine emphasizes the *furtive* character of God's arrival. The charity that is God arrives in us with a wolf's stealth, without warning and without being heard. "When grace comes to you, you do not hear its steps. Have you ever even once felt the footprints of charity's steps strolling about in your heart?"¹² Charity appears secretly, like God, simultaneously showing itself and hiding itself, through the same indivisible act. Since I do not hear it come, this means that I discover myself inwardly to be expanded and dilated without understanding how it came about. I am changed

12 *Sermo* 23, 13, PL 38, 160, and 14, 161 for what follows.

without having witnessed the change. In other passages, Augustine clarifies and develops the idea of a dilating hospitality and of a hospitable dilation. When God walks to and fro in the expanded space of our soul — Augustine says that he “ambulates” in us — it is because our freedom has been unfettered and raised up by grace, which implies that we are not meant to remain motionless and inactive. The point is not to hold our breath but to breathe more deeply, as Claudel will explicate at great length. Augustine puts it vividly: if God moves toward us and in us, His purpose is that we ourselves be able to move forward. He goes forth so that we may go forth. Unlike idols frozen in their immobility, God moves like the living God. “In truth, the royal presence cannot move to and fro in us unless it finds in us the expansion of love. . . . If we dilate (*dilatemur*), God walks in us: but God himself must act for us to be expanded. Since indeed it is love that brings about expansion, let us recognize that it is God himself, who knows no restrictions, who prepares this room in us.”¹³ *Latitudo*, which is to say the breadth or vastness of love, is God’s vacant lot in us, His playing field in our heart.

Another sermon develops in more detail the analogy of the poor man hosting a high dignitary: what bedroom should be given to him? What bed? Where should I put my wife, sons, and family? Should I quit my own home in order to welcome him in it with more dignity? The anguish that prompts me to see my once-comfortable home as suddenly cramped is, in truth, without basis. With generous wealth, the Holy Spirit does not come to evict my spirit, or to confine it to strained quarters, but to expand and dilate it. The Holy Spirit comes in order to give, not to take away.¹⁴ Nor is the Holy Spirit a temporary guest who comes today and is gone tomorrow, bringing only a brief bonfire of joy from which we would wake up empty in the morning. If I welcome him as I should, he may well make his dwelling in me for a lifetime.

Next, Augustine evokes the famous scene in which the two sisters, Martha and Mary, welcome Jesus into their home.¹⁵ He draws a fresh lesson from their hospitality by introducing the key term of his whole thought, namely the word *extensio*, which is obviously of immediate relevance to our present exploration of the capaciousness of human existence. Augustine introduces the term in the context of citing a sentence from Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Philippians — a sentence that is of the utmost importance with regard to understanding Christian time but also with regard to understanding Augustine himself. Every time that Augustine cites the sentence (as he does, for example, in his two most famous works, *The Confessions* and *De Trinitate*), it tells us that we are approaching the deepest core of his thought, as reliably as

13 *Sermo* 163, 1, PL 38, 889.

14 *Sermo* 169, 12, 15, PL 38, 924.

15 See my previous discussion, “La double hospitalité,” in Jean-Louis Chrétien, Etienne Jollet and Guy Lafon, eds., *Marthe et Marie* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002).

the needle of a seismograph alerts us of an impending earthquake. Although the sentence in question is not the only such indicator, it is one of the most dependable. In it, Saint Paul affirms that he has not yet reached his final goal and he has not become perfect. He explains: “I press forward in order to clasp my goal, having been myself clasped by Jesus-Christ. No, Brothers, I do not flatter myself that I have already attained it. I say only the following: forgetting the distance that I have covered so far, I reach forth, extending my whole being (*epekteinomenos, extendens meipsum*) and I run toward the goal, with my eyes fixed on the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus-Christ.”¹⁶

Now, to press forth toward eternity is not to flee from time, but to transfigure it. It is to respond to the urgent call that eternity issues to us when it gives itself to us as though in advance, summoning us to itself in the form of a future that is wholly distinct from the future that we plan for ourselves by means of our own calculations and controlling strategies. Paul’s injunction to forget the past might seem paradoxical given that a life of faith is based on remembering the narrative of the Bible and on commemorating the actions of Jesus, but what I am enjoined to forget is only what I have myself achieved by my own means. The danger of remembering my own past accomplishments is that it makes me forget the excess of God’s promise over what I have attained so far — the excess over me of what has clasped me and of the One who has clasped me. This excess is an inexhaustible supply of a future that is to come over and beyond what I have, myself, clasped. The Greek term that is translated here as “extending” will become the source of Gregory of Nyssa’s mystical doctrine of *epectasis*. Latinized, it will give rise to Augustine’s doctrine of *extensio*. Ironically, the term *extensio*, which would famously be appropriated by Descartes to characterize the principal attribute of matter, making it wholly distinct from spirit and thought, signifies for Augustine, on the contrary, the highest goal and achievement of our soul’s desire.¹⁷ What does Augustine say about it here? Paraphrasing Saint Paul, he writes: “Until now, I have pursued my course, until now I have progressed, until now I have walked forth, I have been on the road, until now I have extended myself forward, but I have not yet attained. Similarly, since you are walking forth, since you are extending yourself forth, since you are focused on what is to come, forget the past, do not look back at it, do not stay put at the spot where you have turned your head to look back.”¹⁸ After paraphrasing the Gospel, Augustine invokes the fatal example of Loth’s wife, turned to stone for having looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah in flames, although she had not taken part in their crimes. The constant tension forward of advancing on one’s

16 *Philippians*, III, 12–14.

17 See in this regard the excellent clarification provided by P. Agaësse, *De Trinitate*, in *Bibliothèque augustinienne* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1955), Volume 16, pp. 589–590.

18 *Sermo* 169, 15, 18, in PL 38, 926, and *ibid.* for what follows.

way is accompanied by an ever-renewed dissatisfaction with oneself: “Submit actively to the test. Let yourself be constantly displeased with what you are if you want to attain to what you are not yet. For wherever you approve of yourself, there you will remain.” The dissatisfaction to which Augustine invites us, however, is not the dissatisfaction of a miserable existence torn by self-hatred. It is the disquiet of a desire that must always grow wider and draw renewed strength from what it attains rather than die out and come to rest.

To corroborate his interpretation further, Augustine in the same context frames the apparently paradoxical expression of *perfectus viator* — of a “perfect” wayfarer, which is to say a pilgrim who is on the way but also in some sense already at the goal. The idea of advancing, of making progress, seems at first blush to be incompatible with the notion of perfection. If I am advancing and must keep advancing, it must be because I am not yet where I ought to be and am not yet who I strive to be. The notion that progress along the way might itself be labeled “perfect” implies that a blessing is bestowed on time as it unfolds: this blessing is based on the fact that time is where the dilation of desire, *extensio*, takes place. Here again, it is God who dilates us. As *De Trinitate* puts it: “The tension forward (*intentio*) of the seeker is most unremitting, until we actually attain what it is that we intend, which is also what extends us (*illud quo tendimus et quo extendimur*).”¹⁹ Augustine’s statement is itself called forth by Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians. Is there not, however, something strange in the claim that focusing on a single goal, to the exclusion of everything else, which is to say reaching out intently for a unique future while forgetting what has come before, constitutes a *dilation*? Augustine addresses the issue in another homily, taking the story of Martha and Mary as his starting point and guiding himself by the light of Paul’s own words.

Paraphrasing what Jesus said about the “unique necessary,” Augustine says: “May a single goal extends us, lest multiplicity *distend* us and wrench us away from the One.”²⁰ This is the unique goal that Paul seeks, “not distended, but rather extended (*non distentus, sed extentus*). What is unique extends us, it does not *distend* us. Multiplicity *distends*, the One extends. How long does it extend us? As long as we are here.” Indeed in eternity, God condenses all things together and unites; He does not extend. Let us note, however, that Augustine is never the prisoner of a rigidly fixed lexicon. He occasionally uses the word *distensio* positively. He gives it the same meaning as *extensio* and *dilatatio* rather than use it to mark a contrast as he does in the cases that have just been cited: “It is not necessary, Brothers, that your heart be stretched (*distendatur*) by us: you yourselves may ask God to help you

¹⁹ *De Trinitate*, IX, 1, 1.

²⁰ *Sermo* 255, 6, in PL 39, 1189, and *ibid.* for what follows.

love one another.”²¹ We will eventually have to examine the finer-grained descriptions that Augustine supplies in order to show how desire is dilated, but two chief theses may be brought to light right away.

The first thesis states that the open-ended multiplicity of objects of desire, by dispersing desire in every direction, shrinks our existence rather than expand it. The reason is that a distension of desire implies a loss of intensity. Inversely, concentrating desire actually expands it and allows it to expand further and further by giving it the full force of concentration: the more unified our life becomes, the more desire is strengthened and expanded. Augustine’s second thesis equates distension with sinful temporality, which is to say with the time of fallen man (ours), and equates extension with redeemed temporality, which is to say with the time of deliverance. What conversion enables us to do, while we remain within the realm of time, is to pass over from one temporality to the other, from the time of distention to the time of extension. Eternity already beckons the time of extension to itself and will gather it up into a point at the end. Contrary to what authors say who have barely skimmed a few pages of *The Confessions* and who write about Augustine with dogmatic self-assurance (only to be parroted by their even-more-ignorant disciples), *distensio* does not characterize the essence of human time generally, but only the time of man who is marred in sin. *Distensio* is thus defined by what it lacks, but also by what grace has the power to restore in us, not by uprooting us from the unfolding of time but by prompting us to live within time differently.

Extensio thus possesses three inseparable aspects: it focuses the soul on a single desire, it intensifies the soul’s capacity by enlarging and dilating it, and finally it orients the soul’s life toward the eschatological future of the One who comes. We must, however, distinguish dilation from inflation. Granted that the term “dilation” always refers to joy, and granted that Augustine uses it positively most of the time, there is always the possibility of malignant joys. As Augustine himself points out; “We must note that the dilation of the heart can also be said in a bad way.” The expansive exultation that stands at the opposite pole of constricting sadness can be good or bad, depending on circumstances. The pride that is kindled by a “harmful prosperity,” for example, also dilates the heart.²² In a passage from a small treatise that is formatted as a letter, Augustine clarifies the difference between the inflation that is brought about by pride and the dilation that is brought about by desire. In order to distinguish them, he frames a series of variations on his celebrated formula “*Da quod jubes et jube quod vis*” (“Give what you command and command what you wish”), which is really a bold synopsis of his whole

21 *On the First Epistle of John*, X, 5, 7, in PL 35, 2059.

22 *In Heptateuchum locutiones*, PL 34, 532 and 534.

doctrine of grace.²³ Here, in the passage in question, the formula is stated as follows: “We ask God to give us what He commands us to have.”²⁴ God commands us to have what we lack for the sake of letting us know what we must ask for, and of letting us know that we must ask for it in such a way that we will not forget that we have received it from Him when we have it — “lest we come to deny what we owe to God because we are inflated and carried away (*inflati et elati*) by the spirit of this world.” A Pelagian inflation of this kind prompts our free will to feel that it is strong through its own effort, with the result that it will deflate at the first sign of adversity, as quickly as it had become strong. Sooner or later, inevitably, presumption exposes the will to adversity and to deflation. Both our political history and our personal histories attest to the fact. It is a matter of “sleeping on one’s laurels” and of relying complacently on what one already possesses as though it conferred a right over the future. It is a case of being “conquered by one’s conquest” as Victor Hugo nicely puts it in his *Châtiments*.

Countering this, Augustine affirms the incremental character of gifts of grace, including the gift of dilation, through which our crippled and ailing freedom is unfettered: “The power of willing, indeed, is our own: but the will is chastized in order that it be able to rise up, it is healed in order that it become strong, it is dilated in order that it come to clasp, it is filled in order that it come to possess.” Each time, a passive structure precedes activity as the very condition of activity, describing the help that is given to the will in order for the will to be itself. The precise moment of *dilation* is tied to the will’s capacity to clasp — which is to say, to the will’s power for what lies ahead, not for what it has always achieved or conquered. Dilation is an opening up. Many other writings will show that dilation is connected to desire, namely to a desire that grows in its capacity to desire more and to desire otherwise than before. And there is joy, already, in the increase and rise of our desire, in its power to bring order to our life beyond following every flickering whim. Nor do we need to suppose that desire flies from victory to victory. On the contrary, desire may well grow through trials, delays, and setbacks.

Augustine considers the paradoxical way in which dilation grows, occurring as it does within narrow bonds and facing as it does ever new forms of constriction and confinement. Such challenges to the growth of dilation occur both in the collective life of the Church and in the individual case of the human heart. Augustine points out that the Church expanded and bore fruit when it was persecuted throughout the world, when the blood of martyrs was spilled as abundantly as water.²⁵ It was when the Church was vilified, widowed of

23 For a list of the occurrences of this formula, see P. M. Hombert, *Gloria gratiae* (Paris: Institut d’Etudes Augustiniennes, 1996), pp. 593–594.

24 *De bono viduitatis*, XVII, 21, PL 40, pp. 443–444.

25 *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 78, 6, PL, 36, 1013.

her Christ, and distinguished by the sign of the Cross, and it was when it was a crime and not an honor to be a Christian, “that Christ’s charity was dilated through witness after witness, and whole populations were converted to the Faith by means of this dilation of Christ’s charity.”²⁶ Augustine often uses the term *dilatatio* to describe the expansion of the Church to the four corners of the earth (there is no need here for an inventory of passages), and most often his purpose is to oppose universality (catholicity) to local sectarianism and to the provincial pride of the Donatists. Yet it matters to emphasize that the catholic capaciousness of the Church emerged through tribulation. The Church’s first fertile ground was made up of wretchedly small prison cells and iron shackles. In the same passage, Augustine does not fail to compare the Church’s destiny to the parable of the grain, which, the Gospel says, abides alone and without fruit unless it falls to the ground and dies. Small as it may appear to the eye, “how great this seed is,” says Augustine, because of its secret power to bring forth fruit: it is the seed of Christ’s death.

There is a psalm that starts by speaking of the God of justice in the third person but then shifts to the second person, addressing God directly to affirm: “In my trial, you dilated me.” Augustine comments that whoever receives charity “has no constraints of the heart, even if constraints are imposed on him externally by persecutors.”²⁷ Among the many different interpretations that Augustine offers regarding the shift from the third person to the second, one interpretation sees in the greater intimacy with God, who is now addressed directly and internally, an effect of the “sudden dilation of the heart.” The expanded heart no longer speaks *about* God but speaks *to* God. Far from being a mute emotion, the expansion of the heart opens up a new possibility of speech. When we are “led from the constraints of sadness to the wide expanse (*latitudinem*) of joys,” we speak and we might even sing. Let us note that the chiasmus of pluralities (constraints of sadness, breadth of joys) reveals the extreme self-assurance of Augustine’s viewpoint and choice of words. Although the oppressive attacks of sadness come in many forms, they engender only the same monotonous restriction of existence. Contrariwise, although the bursting open that is capacious joy occurs at a single blow and in a single act, the joys entailed can only be multiple, diverse, and forever fresh, rich with renewal.

Dilation is described here as an infused presence of God, just as it is described elsewhere as a form of hospitality. The very move through which God denies our prayers and refrains from granting us what we ask, namely Himself if we pray rightly, may well be a training of desire that prepares it for dilation through a sort of process of maturation. One of Augustine’s

²⁶ *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 59, 9, PL 36, 719.

²⁷ *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 78, 6, PL 36, 1013.

sermons says as much: “He withholds his answer, but does not withdraw it,” playing on the Latin words “*differt, non aufert*.” “And by withholding, what does he do? He widens the bosom of the soul through desire.”²⁸ Indeed the deferment, as such, may well give birth to dilation: “It is your capacity that is formed by the fact that these goods are postponed. Your capacity having been increased, you will be able to clasp what he promises and you desire.” The best description of how desire is educated is found in Augustine’s commentary on the First Epistle of John. The passage in question constitutes one of the high points of Augustine’s theology of love. The simplicity of the style brings out the depth of the meditation with special force. A Christian’s whole life, Augustine says, is a “holy desire.” Its holiness consists in being called to sanctification, which is to say that it consists in allowing oneself to be formed, broadened, and expanded by God. Augustine here uses the term *extensio* rather than *dilatatio*, and refers once again to the Epistle to the Philippians. Just as a bag or a wineskin must be stretched if it is to receive what visibly exceeds it, so “God, by postponing, expands desire (*extendit*), stretches the soul through desire and by stretching it gives it the requisite capacity (to receive him).” In this way, Saint Paul allows himself to be enlarged so as to receive what no eye has seen and no heart has anticipated.²⁹

The notion of being formed by desire presupposes that emptiness does a measure of work, namely by emptying the heart of all that clutters it, of all the bric-a-brac that we call our inner life. As for Saint Paul, he appears in the same Augustinian commentary as the paradigmatic proof that having one’s prayer refused is no sign of reprobation.³⁰ Despite evoking his dilated heart so forcefully, Paul did not see his prayer granted when he asked God to remove the “thorn in his flesh.”³¹ Such a widening of desire through non-gratification, which is really a stern discipline of prayer that learns to ask God for God alone and for the capacity to welcome Him, will later become, in the profane realm, a key resource of courtly love, for better or for worse. In Augustine, there is no cult of frustration, no romantic attachment to failure for the sake of maintaining desire in its purity. Rather, the deferment is put to the service of dilation and aims at God being able, finally, to come inhabit us. There is no perverse game involved, in which attraction is exerted deceptively, as a means to power.

The basic word here is “capacity.” The goal is to become *capax Dei*, capable of God. With its root in the verb *capere*, to clasp, seize, but also to contain and embrace, *capax* has a genuinely spatial meaning — Gaffiot’s Latin dictionary lists “spacious, ample, extended” — and denotes the possibility of

28 *Sermon Wilmart*, XI, 8, Misc. Ag., p. 107.

29 *Sur la Première Ep. de Jean*, IV, 6, PL, 35, 2008–2009.

30 *Op. cit.*, IV, 5–6, PL 35, 2021–2023.

31 Cf. II Corinthians, VI, 11, and XII, 7–9.

welcoming something within oneself, of receiving it, and containing it, be it spiritual or corporeal. This is the meaning that we still encounter today when we speak of the capacity of a container or of a tank, by which we refer to the volume that the container or tank is able to hold. We must be aware that this passive-receptive meaning largely predominates, maybe even exclusively, in patristic and medieval language, as it does in classical French (e.g., in Bérulle or in Pascal). The active meaning of capacity (the ability to do something, to produce, to take a risk) is not involved here. The theme of man as “capable of God,” which is central to Augustine, traces back to the great Origen.³² The parables of our inner hosting of God, cited at the start of the chapter, really constitute an exploration of man’s *capacity*. For Augustine, to be *capax Dei*, to be capable of God or susceptible of welcoming God, signifies what is, or might become, the highest perfection in man. It signifies man’s ultimate vocation and destination, where alone he finds his life’s fulfillment and beatitude. In a sense, the fact that man is “God’s image,” as the Bible defines him, forms only the prerequisite condition for him to become capable of God, which is to say to participate in God’s life. The *De Trinitate* states it clearly: “The human soul is God’s image because it is capable of God and of being God’s participant (*particeps*); such a supreme good would not be possible, were it not for the fact that man is God’s image.”³³

It follows that “dilation” and “extension” constitute the very process through which man, who is God’s image in whatever state he is, even in a state of hardened criminality, will become more and more capable of God. They form the process through which God’s image in man will become clear and bright, and through which man will be guided to his ultimate end, which is divinization. Thus to ponder “dilation” is not simply to reflect on a particular psychological state of exultation and joy. It puts man’s ultimate destiny into play, which, for Augustine, is the gravest matter of all. The perpetual prayer to which Scripture invites us does not consist in repeating the same audible formulas day and night, but in maintaining ourselves in a state of desire, in order to sharpen desire and expand it. As Augustine explains,³⁴ the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity, are nothing but the three ways whereby man, through being dilated, becomes more capable of God. Charity, however, constitutes the dilating power *par excellence*.

Before we clarify this last statement, a number of interconnected questions must be addressed. The first question concerns the relationship of dilation to thought. In most of the writings that we have cited so far, dilation affects desire, love, affectivity, and joy. In other words, dilation affects

32 Cf. M. Harl, *Origène et la fonction révélatrice du Verbe incarné* (Paris: Seuil, 1958), p. 109 and, especially, p. 267.

33 *De Trinitate*, XIV, 8, 11. Cf. the article by G. Madec in *Augustinus-Lexicon*, t. I, pp. 728–730.

34 *Ep.* 130, 8, 15 and 17, PL 33, 499–501.

everything that Augustine attributes to volition. Is there a dilation of the intellect? Although Augustine applies the word less often to the intellect, it is obvious, based on his fundamental doctrines, that the answer is affirmative. The heart's dilation goes hand in hand with the intellect's illumination. To love otherwise is to think otherwise. Augustine's doctrine of how faith and the intellect are related shows us how far the former expands the latter while at the same time requiring its reinforcement and expansion. Love and knowledge never cease renewing one another and infusing one another with new vitality. In a lovely passage where he evokes, as he so often does, the prologue of the Gospel according to John, Augustine turns *cogitatio* into the starting point of a process that expands the mind: "Thought (*cogitatio*) gives us extension, extension dilates us, and dilation makes us capable."³⁵ All of the terms that we have studied so far converge in this statement, impelled by thought, which is concerned here with the purpose of the prologue, namely the Word that is close to God and is God.

The second question pertains to the relationship between dilation and Scripture — Scripture being the inexhaustible wellspring of Augustine's thought. The Bible repeatedly speaks of dilation. Is there a dilation of the Bible itself? Augustine's commentary on a psalm answers us: "It is a single and unique divine word (*unus sermo Dei*) that is dilated throughout Scripture; and it is a unique Word that resonates through the multiple mouths of the saints."³⁶ The Bible is nothing but a vast dilation through which what is absolutely unique bursts forth and shines in multiplicity. The Word without words makes itself into an ocean of words, making instrumental use of all sorts of voices and hands, mouths, and pens. Divine Oneness calls for a multiplicity of human witnesses to reveal it — all of the above serving as a figure of the incarnation of the Logos according to Augustine, who follows Origen. If one might venture an anachronistic analogy, the Bible forms a sort of *Big Bang* of meaning and of communication unfolding without limit under the eyes of readers. Using terms of expansion at every turn, Augustine develops the theme further in *The Confessions*, where he considers how the Bible is destined to spread in the future, rather than evoke its initial constitution. The Bible is compared to a "firmament," to a celestial vault that is spread out above us like a vast tent, vaster and more "dilated" (used just once whereas "extension" is used four times) in our present time and experience than it was in the lifetime of its scribes.³⁷ Our cosmological analogy would not have appeared all that misplaced to Augustine.

35 *Sermo* 255, 3, PL 38, 1097.

36 *En. In Ps.* 103, IV, 1, PL 37, 1378.

37 *Confessions*, XIII, 15, 16.

The second question leads to a third. Is there a stylistic form of dilation? Is it possible to speak about dilation without dilating speech itself? In order to answer the question, we cannot simply look at how the word itself is used. Yet we must not lose track of it either. Most often in the context of oratory, Augustine speaks of stylistic “dilation” and “diffusion,” opposing it to speech that proceeds *constricta*, or by means of *constrictio sermonis*, in a tight, dense, brief, and concise fashion. He cites Saint Paul as providing examples of both.³⁸ Dilation here meets up with what rhetoric calls “amplification.” Augustine mentions it to characterize a superfluous development in a commentary.³⁹ This does not get to the bottom of the matter, however, since we could easily speak of a dilated constriction (e.g., a long and sorrowful discourse on anguish) or of a constricted dilation (e.g., a brief and sober account of love or joy). On the other hand, toward the end of *The Confessions* and in *De Doctrina christiana*, where Augustine puts forth his views of what a biblical commentary ought to be and of the style that a theologian or preacher ought to adopt, he shows himself to be a zealous partisan of dilation, without using the word explicitly, based on the idea that stylistic dilation corresponds to the expansion of the Bible itself. It is good and necessary that there be many diverse interpretations of the same biblical passage, whether by one and the same author or by different authors; and, therefore, that there be a diversity of books on the same issue. It is good and necessary that there be many formulations of the same thought and that a person’s style vary according to the audience or to the aim of his communication. This sort of pluralism fostering an ever-expanding speech shapes not only Augustine’s lessons to others but also the momentum of his own work from start to finish. Obviously, this does not imply that his style has to be dilated or amplified in the rhetorical sense of the term!

The explosion forth of God’s word in the Bible and its fertile multiplication must be pursued through us. The dilation that it involves has meaning only if it constantly refers back to the indivisible oneness of its source. Only then is it truly a dilation of intelligence and thought, put to work by means of a dilated speech. Our three questions, therefore, turn out to be closely interconnected. Moreover, the unitary use of the concept “heart” to signify the self or core ipseity of the human person and the doctrine of God’s image in man as it is described in *De Trinitate*, namely with intellect and volition mutually enveloping one another, mean that Augustine could not for a single instant propose a dilation of the heart that would not also be an expansion of thought and vice versa.

38 *Contra Cresconium*, I, 16, 20, Bibl. August., t. 31, pp. 113–115.

39 *Opus imperfectus contra Julianum*, VI, 37, PL 45, 1595–1596.

So far, we have analyzed the motion through which desire comes to be dilated. We have analyzed where dilation leads, namely to being capable of God, and we have looked at how someone might invite dilation. What is left for us to examine is how Augustine describes the implementation of dilation, which is to say the life of the person whose heart is dilated. Like many authors after him, Augustine approaches the matter most especially in the context of commenting on the psalms, in which he finds daily nourishment for the mouth of his heart. A key expression for our purposes is that of *latum mandatum*: a wide or ample command, which Augustine, of course, equates with the commandment to love God and one's neighbor. The expression is found in Psalm CXVIII, 96, but the clause in which it appears has been interpreted in many different ways. A number of modern translations perceive an opposition between the two clauses that make up the complete sentence and introduce an adversary conjunction: "I have seen the end of the most perfect things, *but* your command extends infinitely," says Lemaître de Sacy, long before Dhorme (among others). The King James Bible translates as follows: "*I have seen an end of all perfection, but thy commandment is exceeding broad.*" Chouraqui and Meschonnic, in turn, agree. Augustine, however, with remarkable depth, understands it otherwise: the breadth of God's commandment is not opposed to finite perfections that reach an end. On the contrary, to behold the end of all perfection is to behold that this end has no end and that it is broad and forever expanding. The end that the psalmist considers is "perpetual praise, Alleluia forever and without cease" or, rather, the place itself where praise unfolds forever, namely the vision of God in eternal life.⁴⁰ By telling us that he has seen the end of all perfection, the psalmist tells us, as well, what the end is: "The end itself is the breadth of the commandment. The breadth of the commandment is charity: for wherever there is charity, there are no oppressions (*angustiae*)." Augustine then recalls Saint Paul's dilation, whereby others are invited also to become dilated, and adds: "Charity, in short, cannot be oppressed. Is it your wish not to be oppressed on earth? Live *at large* (*In lato habita*)."

To live "at large" is to live in the commandment to love our neighbor. Since the commandment, which summarizes the whole Bible, includes the unjust (so that he may become just) and one's enemy (so that he may stop being it), nothing can make us feel cramped within it. This *latitudo*, this breadth of the commandment, has nothing facile about it.⁴¹ Indeed in another commentary of the same verse, Augustine sees in the "end of all consummation" of which the psalmist speaks the death of the martyr, "the

40 *Sur la Première Ep. de Jean*, X, 5, 6, PL 35, 2058.

41 There is at least an example where the word "latitudo" has been transferred to French with the same meaning. It is a letter of Bossuet, in which he speaks of "walking in the latitude." In *Correspondance*, éd. Urbain et Levesque (Paris: Gallimard, 1912), t. VI, p. 244.

struggle until death for the sake of truth” through witnessing. This is where Augustine speaks of an end without end: “The end of this consummation is to be raised into Christ’s kingdom, which has no end.”⁴² It is the person who perseveres to the end who sees “the end without end.” In accordance with the Epistle to the Romans, Augustine evokes the diffusion of charity into our hearts by the Holy Ghost, and concludes: “It is through this diffusion that breadth comes about, thanks to which one can walk without being cramped into a tight path.” The key is that the person who walks thus, or who lives thus, although he may not have reached his end, nonetheless finds himself already in the open-endedness that the end possesses. He experiences and perceives being “at large.” The notion that love is a way, already in the present, to enter into eternal life, is a constant idea of Augustine’s, as well as a most traditional idea.

Other verses of Psalm CXVIII allow Augustine to specify how breadth and being-at-large characterize every step of our earthly pilgrimage. Our spontaneous view might be that someone who thirsts for a vast and wide-open life is precisely someone who lives in the stifling oppression of narrowness, but the fact is otherwise according to the spirit. It is only by expanding ourselves that we are able to go forth into the offing of the open sea. Joy alone leads to joy, which is why joy is a form of grace. A joy that would merely compensate for sadness would be as narrow as sadness itself. Joy is not the negation of the negativity that is sadness. Whoever knows only what is cramped desires only a cramped sort of breadth: he desires just a bit more room, a narrow space that is slightly more comfortable, another sort of monotony than the monotony he has spun. Be this as it may, the same Psalm CXVIII, verses 46 and 47, states: “I meditated on thy commandments, which I have loved, and I lifted my hands unto thy commandments, which I have loved.” Augustine notes that some versions interpret the love in question to be violent or excessive (beautifully excessive!). In the two-fold image of both meditating and gesturing with one’s hands, he sees love in practice being accomplished in a unified way, through both thought and action (*Et cogitando et operando*), which confirms the indivisible character of dilation. But how has it been possible?

“Thus he has loved God’s commandments for the same reason that he has walked in ample space, namely through the Holy Spirit, thanks to whom love itself suffuses and dilates the hearts of the faithful.”⁴³ The only reliable sign that love is present, and that its source, the Holy Spirit, is present, is “walking in ample space.” The *latitudo* in question is nothing other than joy. The fact that I walk *in* joy attests that the joy that is given to me as my part is vaster

42 *En. In Ps.* 118, 21, 8 (and 7), PL 37, 1561–1562.

43 *En. In Ps.* 118, 14, 4, PL 37, 1540.

than myself, which means that there is no need to hoard it, budget it, or treat it as though it might be exhausted. The fact that I *walk* in joy reveals that the joy that I experience is not a static pleasure in which I myself am joyous and laugh happily to see myself laugh, which is a lame and stupid laughter, but an active joy full of knowledge and effectiveness, whatever the modes of my action. Above all and for obvious reasons, readers have been fascinated by verse 32 of the Psalm CXVIII, which is quintessentially about dilation, and which provides Augustine with a perfect opportunity to deepen his insight into the expanded space that characterizes the journey of the just. “*Viam mandatorum tuorum cucurri cum dilatasti cor meum*” — “I have run along the ways of your commandments when you have dilated my heart.”

Augustine starts by focusing on the notion of *running*. In it, he sees something like the fulfillment of the preceding verses of the psalm. It is for the sake of having space in which to run that the psalmist “chose the way of Truth.” It is for the sake of running that the psalmist chose “not to forget God’s commandments.” Finally, it is solely by running that the psalmist has “adhered to God’s testimonies.” “May I be wholly intent on the direction toward which I run, may I reach the goal that I intend!”⁴⁴ As is so often the case, Augustine anticipates Kierkegaard’s main themes. Here, in particular, he anticipates the theme whereby the wayfarer’s gait is the way itself. For indeed if the “way of Truth” is the space that is given in order to be able to run, this means that the two terms belong to one another indivisibly: it is possible to run only on the way of Truth, and the way is not the way of Truth if one does not run there. There are no neutral gaits as such, gaits that would be assessed only as a function of the nature of the path, good or bad, just or unjust, wherever they are deployed. Gaits change with the way that is taken, and the way that is taken changes with the gait (which reveals their identity). If one does not walk truthfully on the way of Truth, by what right does one say that one is walking in Truth? Does someone who wants the good in a vicious way really want the good?

The *running* that is so often evoked in Saint Paul’s Epistles is clearly dear to Augustine. Augustine is bent on exploring the ever-increasing intensity of desire and on depicting *inquietudo* as a key aspect of the human condition. The capacity to run, however, with its implied energy and zeal, does not derive from our own personal ground and resources. It comes from “God’s blessings rather than from the personal merits that the psalmist invokes before the Lord.” The many repeated appeals to the divine commandments provide a new opportunity to emphasize Augustine’s fundamental thesis as cited earlier, *Da quod jubes*: “I would not be running if you had not dilated my heart.” The point is that I cannot, by my own means, give myself the

44 *En. In Ps.* 118, 10, 6, and 11, 1–2, PL 37, 1527–1529, and the same for what follows.

necessary dilation: I may perhaps succeed in forcing a laugh, even if it rings hollow; I may succeed in provoking some giddiness in myself, but joy can be received from elsewhere only if we take the term in its most authentic sense. And joy in a strong sense is what alone makes us run on a wide path, with an ample breath and a tough resolve. In other words, joy alone moves us on the way of Truth. The joy that is named “dilation of the heart” by Augustine is one of the names for grace.

Grace expands and liberates us in a double sense. It sets us “at large” by removing our fetters, and it makes us more capacious. “Dilation of the heart consists in delighting in justice (*Cordis dilatatio, justitiae est delectatio*). It is a gift from God that, when faced with his precepts, we are not oppressed by fear of punishment but are instead dilated by love and by delight in justice. He promised us his own capaciousness when he said: *I will dwell among you and walk there*. What spaciousness there is where God walks! In this spaciousness charity is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that is given to us.” The unbreakable bond that connects dilation, justice, and love brings to light the fact that what is involved is not some fleeting moment of sentimental exaltation. Augustine’s further comments on the same verse in his next homily sufficiently prove the point. As Augustine himself admits, his descriptions are excessively expansive and extravagantly intense. A hallmark of the turning point of our existence and journey is that justice fills us with a delicious flavor, with a delightful and fortifying taste. Justice now feeds us by expanding our hearts and our capacity for action. Whenever we are unjust, which is to say most of the time, justice tastes bitter, acrid, and astringent, and so does everything that is connected to justice. Justice provokes a nausea that oppresses and debases the heart. And although it is obviously better to respect one’s neighbor grudgingly than to kill innocent persons heartily (history tells us that this last behavior comes to human beings spontaneously in our present state), performing a just act with ill will is not the same as being just.

Like Plato, albeit through a different reasoning, Augustine believes that justice starts internally and has its foundation inside of us, prior to any external act of justice. This innate foundation is required because it provides the only secure source for such eminently necessary acts. There is no true justice that does not spring from the love of justice.⁴⁵ Hatred of what is unjust cannot replace it. We cannot separate the justice and fairness of love from the love of justice. “Dilation” means “charity,” which is “the fullness of the law” and its fulfillment, not its suppression. Nothing can be substituted for justice or rise above it. Relentlessly engaged in commenting on the psalms as he is, Augustine is unlikely to forget their unforgettable Jewish root.

45 Cf. Plato, *Republic*, IV, 443 D ff.; Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX, 9, 14.

Still reflecting on the same verse and on the dilated heart, Augustine invites us to “know through understanding, and to accomplish good works through loving, in accordance with the breadth of love rather than with the constriction of fear. For he who complies with the law out of fear of punishment, not out of love of justice, acts unwillingly (*invitus*). And what he does unwillingly, he would rather not be commanded to do at all, if it were possible. So that he is no true friend of the law but rather its enemy. He whose will is impure is not purified by his works.”⁴⁶ The dilation of the heart that is described in the psalm is contrasted with unwillingness. The joy that I receive from God and through which I love justice is what empowers me to act willingly, from the heart. This matters critically to our understanding of dilation, which cannot be reduced to mere psychology since it includes an ethical dimension that is absolutely fundamental. Dilation of the heart is the action-less wellspring of just action.

However vast our inner space may naturally be, as Augustine’s description of memory has already shown us, grace is able to expand it beyond all measure. In this regard, Augustine cites a passage from *Proverbs*, which he removes from its negative context. The passage in question mentions streams of water pouring out into public plazas, prompting Augustine to recall that the Greek root of the word *platea* is “width.” He then equates the streams with the rivers of gushing water that spring from us as a result of divine grace.⁴⁷ Dilation of the heart turns us into a wide plaza streaming with superabundant waters.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, instead of “plazas,” we find halls, *atria*. Psalm CXXXIII invites us into “the halls of our God’s house.” Augustine comments: “By *halls*, we must understand that the most spacious rooms of the house are meant. Whoever stands in the halls is not cramped, is not oppressed. He is, in some sense, dilated (*dilatatur*). Remain fast within such spaciousness, and you will be able to love your enemy. . . . How should we interpret *remain in the halls*? Remain within charity and you will remain in the halls. In charity there is space, in hatred there is constriction.”⁴⁹ The heart itself becomes the temple wherein we worship God in spirit and in truth: “Adore the Lord within your sanctified and dilated heart: for you are his royal and holy sanctuary.”⁵⁰ The theme originates with Saint Paul. Through these analogies, we come back full circle to the notion of welcoming a guest who is vaster than ourselves, so that hospitality is possible only because the guest himself expands the space of our heart by coming into it. Far from reifying the heart, these

46 *En. In Ps.*, 118, 11, 2.

47 *Proverbs*, 5, 16; *En. In Ps.*, 118, 10, 6, PL 37, 1527.

48 Nietzsche, who held Saint Augustine in contempt, unknowingly revived Augustine’s image: “It is night: now the fountains gushing forth speak in a louder voice. And my soul, too, is a fountain gushing forth.” *Also sprach Zarathustra*, I, “Das Nachtlied.”

49 *En. In Ps.*, 133, 1, PL 37, 1736–1737.

50 *En. In Ps.*, 28, 2, PL 36, 213.

spatial terms are rigorously correct since they denote the precise motions, both passive-receptive and active, through which our capacity is transformed.

What conclusions are to be drawn from Augustine's reflections on dilation? To Augustine, as to all of the other authors who will be discussed in this book, to reflect on dilation is indivisibly to reflect on joy — on joy that bestows the gift of space and brings innovation, on joy that opens space up in order for innovation to be possible and for renewal. The space in question is never at a standstill: it always either grows or decreases. We are not joyous because of a dilated space or anguished because space is shrunk; rather we are joyous because of the very dilation of space, or saddened by its decrease. Space, each and every time, is what remains open for us and what in us and for us remains open. The emergence of a single possibility where there was none before makes us joyous, prompting existence itself to breathe more freely. Conversely, the disappearance of a single possibility makes us anxious, even if many other possibilities remain available, because it tightens our breath. In this realm, external space and inner space cannot be separated because any expansion of the "heart" strengthens our possibilities for action and for effective activity, which is to say for our deployment into the space of the world. To Augustine's mind, *dilatatio cordis*, the joy that manifests grace and attests to it, is a form of hospitality in which the two meanings of "host" (namely *host* and *guest* in English) cannot be distinguished. To put it differently, *dilatatio cordis* is both what makes hospitality possible and what is made possible by hospitality. It is all at once what possibilitates and what is possibilitated.

Joy is the unexpected arrival in me and inside of me of an improvised guest, the Holy Ghost, whom I am incapable of receiving, but who makes me capable of receiving such a guest by expanding me. When I receive such a guest, he receives himself in me by initiating me into new dimensions of myself. Even in the natural order of things, would joy really be joy if it did not invite itself in us unexpectedly? According to Augustine, the joy of dilation is supernatural insofar as it exceeds my own natural capacity, but nothing mystical or extraordinary in its actual form is implied. Rather than manifest itself as a sort of divine fireworks, it takes the sober and elusive form of a new taste for justice (which once seemed insipid and bitter to me), or of caring for a stranger (who once seemed threatening and dangerous to me). Dilation is closely related to what philosophers mean by "alterity." It does not denote a simple expansion of space. It denotes a space that is different from the old space — a space that freely opens up to welcome a desire that is increased and intensified. It constitutes an expansion and a release in the most legitimate sense of the term, since we are liberated from our narrow constraints. Borrowed from the Latin Bible and duly referred back to it, the term "dilation" is not of academic interest only. It finds itself at the pivotal heart of a galaxy

of terms that are absolutely fundamental to Augustine, such as desire, grace, charity, capacity for God, and the heart. Nevertheless, no single person is sufficiently capacious to receive in his own thought everything that is thinkable about joy. Augustine does not exhaust the contemplative exploration of dilation, granted that he provides us with one of its loftiest peaks.

Chapter 2

Saint Gregory the Great: Amplitude within a Narrow Confinement

Saint Gregory the Great, who was pope from 590 to 604 and was the first pope to bear the name Gregory, was deeply imbued with Augustinianism. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that dilation should play a major role in his thought. Yet Gregory's trajectory and style of thinking remain deeply personal. By no means are we faced with a mere re-spouting of Augustine. Gregory strongly emphasized the dramatic tension that characterizes Christian life, as his choice of Job to serve as the chief figure of our earthly journey attests. Gregory's vast commentaries on Job, his *Moralia in Job*, were read over and over again in the Latin Middle Ages, which means that they played an important part in our history. In his *Homelies on Ezekiel*, which is a spiritual and literary masterpiece, Gregory, however, offers more serene perspectives. Gregory was a great contemplative, which explains why the papacy was a burden to him. If we embrace the sound Platonic principle that is stated in the *Republic*, namely that power is best exercised when it is entrusted to someone who never desired it and who assumes it only reluctantly, then Gregory must be counted as a good pope.

As Carole Straw has nicely argued, Gregory's style is marked by deep tensions.¹ It is shaped by polarities and opposing theses that lend themselves to reversals, oxymorons, and paradoxes. "Dialectical paradoxes abound," she writes, "because they express complementarity. It is through tears that we are raised to joy, and it is the wound that heals." The "density" of Gregory's writing gives his works "a tense, aphoristic, at times even mathematical quality," which serves to etch his formulations into the reader's memory. Among the basic polarities in question, we naturally find the

1 Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great, Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 21. This energetic study is one of the very best expositions of Gregory's thought as a whole.

polarity of narrow and broad, of constriction and dilation. Gregory's main thesis in this regard may be summarized by the following chiasmus: the dilation of pride, or of a wicked will, leads fatally, in the end, to constriction and oppression; conversely, it is precisely the constriction of trials, of adversity and of temptation, that enables the heart eventually to strengthen and dilate.

This idea, simple in itself, will serve as the guiding thread of rich and subtle analyses and descriptions throughout the thick layers of human experience. What characterizes Gregory's views on dilation and distinguishes him from other authors may be boiled down to four points, which the present chapter will discuss one after the other, although the last two points are difficult to separate. First, the theme of a wicked dilation, of dilation into evil and through evil, is much more frequent in Gregory's approach than in Augustine's. Augustine, of course, did not neglect the case of dilation that is brought about by pride, by ambition, and by the desire to dominate over others, but he kept it to a limit. Gregory, in contrast, speaks of it a great number of times. We will not consider all of these instances, but we will obviously have to consider their underlying principle. The second point has already been broached. It concerns the emergence of capaciousness within the very bosom of constriction — the paradoxical dilation of the heart in the midst of tribulations. Here again, the idea is already found in Augustine's work (the source of it is Pauline), but with very different nuances. Martin Luther, who shared Gregory's predilection for dramatic paradoxes, would remember the idea, directly or indirectly. Consequently, we will include an analysis of Luther's main passages on the subject. The third point is that dilation is the hallmark *par excellence* of contemplative life. In this regard, we will find pages in Gregory that are absolutely unique to him. Fourth, however ample contemplative dilation may be, it obviously cannot ever equal the divine infinity to which the contemplative gaze aspires. Faced with divine infinity, dilation must pull back and recede, as though wounded by God's glory. Lastly, more than other authors, Saint Gregory the Great ponders the theme of inner space, of *mentis spatium*, and of the dimensions of the heart. In this regard, he reflects deeply on the conditions that make his own discourse possible.

Let us first address the question of evil dilation and its legacy. What do we know about it? The dual character of dilation has its source in the Bible. If the Bible pioneered identifying joy with love, on the one hand, and "dilation of the heart" on the other, it also knows about the dilation of pride. In *Proverbs* (XXI, 4), the Bible affirms that the *dilatatio cordis* of blasphemers, coupled with their haughty outlook (*exaltatio oculorum*), is nothing but sin. Interestingly enough, this is the only meaning that John Milton would retain in *Paradise Lost*. In Book IV, Milton describes Satan, who, "Collecting all

his might, dilated stood, Like Teneriffe or Atlas, unremoved.”² No less significantly, in Book IX, he puts the term “dilated” in Eve’s mouth after she has sinned and when she urges Adam to sin in turn: “Opener mine eyes, Dim erst, dilated spirits, ampler heart, And growing up to godhead; which for thee Chiefly I sought.”³

In Gregory’s case, we first discover this sort of wicked dilation through its short- and long-term consequences. We discover it in the precariousness of human existence, “exiled” as it is from its “celestial homeland” — a precariousness that the Book of Job serves most especially to illustrate. In his brief existence, man is “cramped tight with regard to life, and widely dilated with regard to wretchedness (*et angustatur ad vitam et dilatatur ad miseriam*).”⁴ The “dilation” in question means that we are exposed on every front, accessible from all sides, like a city that is open to invaders, to uncertainty and to suffering. According to Gregory, the uncertainty of our fate, which is due to the fragility of the body as far as well-being or health is concerned, as well as to the fragility of human relationships where treachery abounds, does not coincide with sin itself but embodies the result and punishment of sin. Our life is “mean” in the full sense of the old sense of the term. The tragic descriptions of human life that we encounter in the Church Fathers will seem overly dark only to those who live peacefully in prosperous societies. All we have to do in order to appreciate their veracity is to travel to another place or to another era, if only in a thought experiment. We must, however, trace the idea of our “dilation in wretchedness” back to its source, which is the “abysmal” character of evil and injustice.

Gregory stations himself within a moral framework most of the time, but he also occasionally writes as a metaphysician. Sin “has no foundation” since it has “no proper nature.” “Evil, as a matter of fact, is without substance.”⁵ This is Augustine’s doctrine: evil is not something, but the absence of something that ought to be there. It is a form of nothingness, a privation. To become unjust is not to acquire a new quality but to lose justice. To forsake that to which we are beholden for our maintenance is to lose what maintains us. The fact that evil is a pure nothingness, however, does not attenuate its seriousness, far from it! In the same passage, inspired by Isaiah, Gregory says that evil is the dilation of hell: its narrow mouth opens wide into an abyss. “Just as someone who attracts all sorts of things to himself might be said to be dilated without limit, so it might rightly be said also of a bottomless pit that

2 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV, 986–987. (The French text cites Chateaubriand’s translation.)

3 Op. cit., IX, 876–876.

4 *Moralia in Job* (henceforth M), XL, 49, 66, trans. Bocognano (Paris: Cerf, 1974); sources Chrétiennes (henceforth SC), 212, pp. 135–137.

5 M. XXVI, 37, 68. (When there is no French translation, Gregory’s Latin is translated from the critical edition established by M. Adriaen [Turnhout: Brepols, 1979]; page references are not needed, as the chapters are short.)

absorbs into the abyss of its immensity whatever it receives.” The abyss of evil is insatiable, properly speaking, because it is the abyss of emptiness. The emptiness of despair makes itself seductive and turns itself into a whirlpool to drown others. Gregory often evokes this sort of diabolical dilation, which is an infernal voracity that nothing can satisfy.

Behemoth “dilates his tail even more viciously at the end of the world,” becoming even more cruel than before through the very violence that he inflicts, intoxicated with evil.⁶ The ancient enemy fights with the energy of despair when he senses that his time is up: he “dilates as he boils over with a powerful anger.”⁷ Whoever is tempted to judge that these striking images of evil dilation and cruelty are purely mythological must be reminded of their phenomenological basis, which is translated into the symbolic language of the time.⁸ What is involved is nothing less than the spiraling vertigo of violence as it feeds itself. Such violence is sometimes wrongly labeled as “gratuitous” (wrongly on two accounts, since it seems to exonerate premeditated violence) when what it really is is perverse. What starts with a single slap on the face ends in a brawl, and what starts as a simple altercation ends in murder. The rapturous pleasure of humiliating another person discovers by sheer practice that only total destruction will satisfy it. What it really seeks is the annihilation of the humanity of the other, as the price for acquiring my own super-humanity. Such is the vertigo of emptiness.

Gregory sees this emptiness as the inner emptiness that results from the absence of love. Only a delirium of omnipotence can give the appearance of filling it. A wicked man, Gregory says, “seizes on the dignity of some transitory worldly power, and dilates himself all the more fiercely to do evil in that there is no one whom he loves through visceral charity.”⁹ We note that Gregory ties wicked dilation to power. We note as well the fitting image of “viscera,” of entrails: the absence of love brings about an inner desert, a hunger for violence. We “fool” our emptiness just as we “fool” our hunger, as the idiomatic expression shrewdly puts it. (Conversely, whoever expands inwardly with love for God and for his neighbor turns his back on injustice.¹⁰) Unbeknownst to us, our inner being is affected. The entrails of our being are wounded. “Indeed just as the stomach swells with food, the soul that is dilated by evil thoughts rises up.”¹¹ What is involved is not simply an illusory plenitude that stems from pride’s bulimia. It is precisely because I myself experience myself as empty that I must compulsively fill myself and expand

6 M. XXXII, 15, 24. Cf. M. XXXIII, 39, 68.

7 M. XXXIV, 1, 1.

8 Cf. M. XXXII, 18, 21.

9 M. XVI, 59, 72, trans. Bocognano (Paris: Cerf, 1975), S.C. 221, p. 249.

10 M. X, 6, 10.

11 M. XXVII, 21, 40.

myself. Gregory's remedy for this sickness, in the same passage, would be to apply the painful treatment of compunction and penance — pain that would bring about joy.

Not only does the dilation of pride corrupt the will, but it also dims the intellect and spreads an ever-growing darkness over it, causing us to lose our capacity for discernment. The more widely pride “expands, the more violently it snuffs out light.”¹² As the present study is devoted to the topic of joy, it would hardly be appropriate to call attention to all of the passages that describe this sinister aspect of dilation, however compelling such passages may be. The essential point is that wicked dilation tends of itself to topple over into its opposite, namely into painful constriction and wretchedness. Saint Gregory often describes this reversal as divine punishment for a false self-inflation and for a sense of plenitude that fools us: “He who today inflates himself in an evil way through pleasures will later be compressed by pain and torments.”¹³ The pleasures in question are evil because they have been obtained at my neighbor's expense, through injustice and by injustice. Like the rich man of the Gospel, we have indulged ourselves too much with bodily pleasures to be able to get through the narrow door that is the door of life. “He who recklessly inflates himself by following his own whims excludes himself from entering through the narrow door.”¹⁴ In analogy with penal law, punishments are ranked and measured according to the rank and measure of the faults that they punish: a man who is puffed up by ambition will be proportionally compressed by sorrow.¹⁵ The legalistic language, however, should not lead us astray: punishment does not come from outside, as though rectifying a wicked course that would have continued unabated without it. Punishment is an intrinsic part of the unfolding of evil dilation, just as the inner logic of political empires leads inexorably to “imperial overstretch” and to their fall, at least according to the historian P. Kennedy, who argues that empires inevitably expand beyond what it is possible for them to maintain and govern.

This is why Gregory invites us to practice an inner vigilance that detects evil at its source, from the start, hoping to uproot it from our very thoughts: “When avarice is not repressed in small things, it spreads beyond all measure.”¹⁶ He says the same about pride. Vigilance of this sort may well be susceptible of becoming pathological, as we will observe in Amiel's *Journal*, where the anxious fear is expressed that the slightest misdeed or shortcoming

12 M. XXIV, 23, 50. Cf. M. XIV, 19, 23, trans. p. 353: evil “expands (*dilatat*) the fog of its filth in the soul of the damned.”

13 M. XIV, 8, 10, trans. p. 334.

14 M. XXVIII, 11, 26, trans. by the monastic sisters of Wisques (Paris: Cerf, 2003), S.C. 476, p. 129.

15 M. IX, 65, 98.

16 *Pastoral Rule*, I, 11, trans. Morel (Paris: Cerf, 1992), S.C., 381, t. 1, p. 171.

will lead, through imperceptible steps, to catastrophic consequences. In itself, however, inner vigilance is highly advisable, since wicked dilation is no figment of the imagination, no chimera. It constitutes a chief dimension of the problem of evil. Evil dilation transforms us, alters us, and fogs up our gaze. Faced with such a dreadful chain of events, we would be mistaken to think that whoever started it had planned and mapped out its course. In the seventeenth century, the English historian of the Civil War Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, interpreted the “sudden growth of Wickedness, from want of care and circumspection in their first impressions” that marks the fate of “kingdoms swoln [swollen] with long Plenty, pride and Excess” to be a sign of God’s wrath. The fatal result is that “the Weak contribute to the designs of the Wicked, and suffering even those, by degrees, out of a Conscience of their Guilt, to grow more Wicked than they intended to be.”¹⁷

Let us move on to a theme that is no less weighty but is more joyous, namely the inverse theme, the theme of the dilation of love, joy, and hope, in the very midst of tribulations. There are many biblical sources illustrating the notion of an extraordinary upsurge of expansion and growth within the very confinement of oppression and constriction, revealing the nature of true spiritual amplitude within narrowness itself, yet Gregory’s chief paradigm, naturally, is the Incarnation. The fact that God, who fills all of space, comes to inhabit the cramped finitude of the human body, even experiencing at first the helplessness of childhood; and the fact that God, who is Life, is delivered into the narrow straights of death, through which He must pass, radically transforms the meaning and connection of what is narrow to what is wide, not to mention our own perspective on how the narrow and the wide are related. The Incarnation utterly changes the spatial parameters of human existence. Thus, for example, the Nativity appears as a veritable dawn, since hope for eternal life was weak and rare before it, as Gregory remarks. “When, however, through his human birth, Christ had taken our human weakness upon himself, he spread through love the knowledge of the glory that is to come to innumerable multitudes.”¹⁸ The same is true of Christ’s death and passage through the “prisons of hell.” “By traversing the narrow straights of death (*per angustias mortis*), the Lord expanded (*dilatavit*) faith among the nations and won the hearts of innumerable believers for Holy Church.”¹⁹

It is on the basis of this burning focus that Gregory the Great will develop the theme of the growth of capaciousness within narrowness. Such growth is the very momentum that constitutes Christian existence. Gregory asks: “How is Charity wide? If indeed it is through Charity that we come to God, and

17 Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, ed. Macray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), I, pp. 1–2.

18 M. XXIX, 2, 4, trans. p. 183.

19 M. XXIX, 14, 26, p. 219.

Truth in person tells us that we must *Enter through the narrow door?*²⁰ He then continues, appealing to further biblical expressions: “How is the yoke sweet and the burden light, if God’s commandments require that I persevere through harsh pathways? Charity itself solves the problem: God’s path is narrow for beginners, and wide for those who already live the perfect life.” The narrow door “becomes wide for those who love” (indeed there is no perfection outside of love). Assigning what is narrow to beginners and what is wide to the perfect must be taken cautiously, lest beginners have no source of motion and lest the perfect experience no victory. There is wideness right from the start, and narrowness never disappears in our life’s journey. Yet we experience them and bear them differently as we progress. Devotion to my neighbor implies “thankless” tasks, as we say, but as their relevance to caring for the actual person becomes gradually more perceptible, what is “thankless” is suffused with grace. We are prompted to accomplish the same tasks willingly, “graciously,” rather than grudgingly and out of mere duty, although the tasks themselves have not become more pleasurable.

In a further passage, Gregory makes it clear. He evokes contemplation based on the biblical image of “oblique windows into the marriage chamber.” He writes: “Light enters only through a narrow slit, but the inner part where the light is received is wide. Similarly, contemplative souls see only a thin ray of the true light, yet they are expanded (*dilatantur*) by a powerful amplitude. They grasp only an inkling of what they perceive. When they contemplate, what they see of eternity is almost nothing (*exiguum*); but this nothing expands their breast through an increase of fervor and love, so that they become inwardly spacious (*amplae*) simply because they welcome the light of truth inside of themselves, as it were through a narrow slit.”²¹

Gregory’s theory of how narrowness and width are mutually related clearly serves as a sort of founding principle. It is impossible to conceive of anyone apprehending the divine light by any other means than through a narrow slit. Were the situation different, were we *per impossible* on a par with the divine light, we would not be expanded by it but crushed and annihilated. No one can see God without dying. To Gregory, the “work” that narrowness and constriction accomplish (later there will be talk of “negative work”) is a dimension that constitutes existence. Whoever wants amplitude and wants to be set at large immediately, without breaking free of anything, without surmounting anything, without having to clear a pathway, his *own* pathway, will enjoy only an illusory amplitude, anonymous and fleeting, which is the

20 *Homélies sur Ezéchiel* (henceforth H.E.), II, 5, 13; trans. Morel (Paris: Cerf, 1990), S. C. 360, II, pp. 253–255, as for what follows.

21 H.E., II, 5, 17, t. II, pp. 261–263.

sort of amplitude that imbeciles desire, like winning the lottery. We broached this idea at the start of the chapter.

All of this explains why “the ancient enemy” also fools himself and is caught in his own trap: the person whom he thought he was compressing by attacking him has, in fact, been dilated, made larger, and set up as an example.²² Gregory’s fascination for the book of Job is understandable. In his view, the same destiny awaits God’s word. Rejected and misunderstood at first, it only gathers more force and bounces back elsewhere and further, by dilating. Gregory says it often with regard to Christ’s preaching and to the preaching of the apostles.²³ The term “dilation” returns again and again in his discussions.

In a pleasing and paradoxical comparison, Gregory draws an analogy between the light of the human mind and the sun. The sun must first illuminate its immediate vicinity before it can spread its light afar. Similarly, we must start by knowing ourselves and our own weaknesses, lest our own bright center remain in the dark.²⁴ It is unlikely that the “Sun King” ever thought of himself as solar in this sense! What is at stake here is the notion that a painful labor of constriction and of concentration constitutes the foundation of any true dilation. Saint Gregory applies this structure also to our intelligence, as the mind labors to study the Bible: “The very obscurity of God’s words is most useful. It exercises the mind and, while the mind tires, it expands (*dilatetur*); having thus been exercised, it will grasp what it would not have grasped if it had remained idle.”²⁵ Not surprisingly, Gregory developed this last idea in the context of commenting on Ezekiel, a prophet of notorious difficulty. Something more, and different, is involved, than Aeschylus’s famous *pathei mathos*, which stands at the heart of Greek tragedy. The point is not simply to learn through trials and to draw lessons from them. The point is to become stronger through the very suffering that threatened and attacked my strength at its core. It is more Pauline than tragic. Nietzsche’s well-known aphorism that “whatever does not kill me makes me stronger” is a distant offspring of the sorts of meditations that are found in Gregory. Gregory skillfully illustrates the matter by appealing to *light* and *heat*. “As a matter of fact,” he writes, “once light has spread, heat diffuses throughout the earth. Similarly, once justice has been preached in broad daylight, the heart’s constriction dilates so as to seek God through exercising gifts of grace,” which are quite varied.²⁶ What is the meaning, however, of this heat? It is not simply the heat of fervor, but it is also the heat of persecution: “We may appropriately

22 M. XXIII, 1, 1.

23 Cf. among other places M. IX, 8, 9, and M. XXVIII, 7, 18.

24 M. XXII, 4, 7.

25 H.E., I, 6, 1; trans. Morel (Paris: Cerf, 1986), S.C., I, p. 197.

26 M. XXIX, 22, 41, pp. 247–249.

interpret the heat as designating persecution, since the fire of persecution was lit in the heart of the heathen as soon as the light of preaching shone forth.”

To conclude this section of our discussion, we must look at a very beautiful page in the *Moralia in Job*, one that is of special importance for the theme of inner space. In this page, Gregory cites Psalm IV, 2, which could serve as an epigraph summarizing all that we have said earlier: “In tribulation, you dilated me” (*In tribulatione dilastati me*). Gregory’s citation prompts us to make a detour to visit Martin Luther, since Luther adopts the same verse from the same psalm as the leading thread of a key passage in which he reflects on the various forms under which dilation appears. Luther’s meditations descend directly from Gregory’s own meditations on the same theme, although Luther shows a greater diversity. Commenting on a passage in the book of Job that addresses extension, literally the earth’s expanse, Gregory had written: “The open expanse in which men of good will feel themselves to be at large (paraphrasing *latitudo bonorum*) is an inner expanse. It cannot be grasped without the most careful attention because it often happens that the just are poor and humiliated on the outside, as well as constricted (*angustat*) by suffering and torments. And yet, in the midst of their torments, an inner force that is directed toward the heavenly goods for which they hope always dilates them. Externally, the apostles were narrowly confined when they were whipped; but inwardly, they remained free and wonderfully at large.”²⁷ Inner capaciousness grows in the very lap of confinement, joy amid anguish. The spatial contrast implies a temporal contrast as well, since to live in a different space is also to live according to a different time. The persecution that occurs in the immediate present does not constrain every single aspect of the apostles’ existence through oppression. The apostles meet oppression with a stronger resource, namely hope, which makes them expand, but only inwardly. They remain upright and free instead of collapsing because they stand on a ground of which their persecutors have no glimpse or intimation — a ground that is not available to those who insist on always being paid in cash, which is to say in immediate currency, here and now. Their ground is the ground of God’s promises. To stand firmly and upright on the ground of hope is as great and magnificent a miracle as walking on water, granted that it is less uncommon. The gushing forth of future time dilates. Present time is magnified only when it seems to be pregnant and heavy with future.

Gregory pursues his meditation by citing Psalm IV, 2:

David kept this inner capaciousness in the midst of his anguish, since he said: *In my tribulation you dilated me*. This is the sense in which the earth, symbolizing the conscience of the saints, is dilated, whereas externally it is oppressed

²⁷ M. XXIX, 17, 31, p. 227.

by worldly adversity. Deprived here and now of what might secure its life, the conscience must re-enter itself in order to reach for higher goods through hope. When it no longer finds itself able to spread itself out into the world, it is sent back, as it were, to its own self and dilated (*quasi in sinum suum revocata dilatatur*). And whereas we plainly see the torments that the just endure, we do not see the joy that fills them inwardly. We may well come to know the vast expanse of their souls through their words and actions, but we never perceive exactly how far their capaciousness extends.²⁸

The passage is also of key importance for the genesis of the concept of conscience and for its connection with inner space. What dilates is the earth, symbol of *conscientia sanctorum*. Although the word “earth” is prompted by the citation from Job (“have you considered the expanse of the earth?”) equating it with “conscience” might surprise us. The connection derives from the Christian appropriation of the ancient theme of man as microcosm. The appropriation traces back to Origen and prompts the move to correlate the symbolic dimensions of our being with the elements of the creation of the world in Genesis.²⁹ The Church Fathers speak of the “earth” of our heart and of our soul, which we must cultivate and bring to fruition. Gregory’s equating of “earth” with conscience is significant, but we must not forget that we are not *only* earth. Crucial as this ground may be, it is not the highest aspect of our being. The “other world,” other than the external world, is first of all our own selves and our interiority. A halfway competent phenomenologist would point out that using the word “earth” means that interiority is conceptualized and named in terms of exteriority, in analogy with the physical world. While there is some merit to the objection, the analogy also implies that interiority is not conceptualized as some sort of extracosmic “subjectivity.” Our interiority does not exclude us from the world, we are still in the world and of the world, even inwardly. By the same token, by the very fact that the analogy works in both directions, our relationship to the physical world and to what constitutes this relationship is itself transformed and rescued from a contemptuous objectification.

To Gregory, the vastness of external space is where imagination is prone to wander, to drift aimlessly about and get lost (*vagari, evagari, divagari*). In contrast, the dilation of inner space presupposes a powerful effort of concentration. Inner dilation is possible only because of such concentration, and only as long as concentration is maintained. Let us note as well that inner dilation in our neighbor is not directly accessible to us; it is known only indirectly through its effects. Gregory’s discussion insists that such “secret joy” is known only to God, since God Himself is its source: what is secret about it,

28 Ibid., p. 229.

29 Origen, *Sermons on Genesis*, I, trans. Doutreleau (Paris: Cerf, 1985), S.C., 7 bis, pp. 29ff.

therefore, is not the secret of “subjectivity” but of grace. It is secret because it is a space that is open only for God and by God. It is not a “life experience” to be transmitted to my neighbor but a force that God has bestowed.

The connection that is made in the psalm between dilation and the constriction of tribulation was deeply probed by Luther when he commented on the psalms at the start of his journey. Luther’s commentary is deeply shaped by the tradition of the church. It already bears the theses and themes that characterize the body of his work and deeply mark modern philosophies of existence through the mediation of Kierkegaard. Some of the passages of this commentary are among Luther’s most explicit on the subject of dilation. To Luther, the very first lesson of Psalm IV, 2, is that God is merciful even in adversity. But Luther also discerns a triple meaning and a triple function in the dilation of tribulation. The first dilation pertains to learning (*eruditio*): “Because in tribulation we learn many things that we did not know before; and by immediate experience we learn many things with greater certainty than the certainty with which we knew them by pure speculation.” We also understand Scripture better than we did without trial (*sine tentatione*). “Through tribulation, man extraordinarily dilates” his moral insights and practical judgments. “Active works and practice grasp the meaning of Scripture, figures and creatures, like a commentary.”³⁰ Along with other passages, this one marks the birth of modernity. Such learning is empirical, practical. It is the learning of a conscience that is tested, subjected to trials, and whose knowledge is expanded and raised in rank above bookish learning. My own “praxis” becomes the key to the Bible and its living commentary. I reach certainty experimentally.

The second dilation concerns virtue, since “virtue, when compressed, dilates all the more forcefully” and since “charity, faith and hope, along with all the other virtues, dilate through persecution.” The third dilation is the dilation of “consolation and joy in the Holy Spirit.”³¹ We must keep in mind that all three dilations are, each time, brought about through trial and the suffering of tribulation.

Luther relates the three dilations to the patristic doctrine of God’s image in man, so especially dear to Augustine. It is precisely the dimensions of our spirit that are expanded, transformed, and renewed. There is no need to go into Luther’s doctrine in detail. His formula of summation suffices: “The blessed Trinity bestows a triple dilation on its own living image, which is man. The intellect is dilated through learning and understanding. Memory, which is the substance and nature of the soul, is dilated by virtue and by the

30 M. Luther, *Werke* (Weimar-Ausgabe: H. Bohlau, 2000), LV, 2 (a new edition rich with footnotes), pp. 55–57.

31 Op. cit., p. 58.

power of grace. The will is dilated by joy and consolation.”³² Conversely, there is a triple shrinking of the soul “through sin, error and sadness.” And there is a bad sort of dilation, a dilation that leads to ruin and damnation, which is the dilation that does not result from tribulation.

Luther insists, next, on the “vicissitude that affects these dilations in this life” and on the fact that “none of them is durable or stable.” He also emphasizes that all three dilations are inseparable: of what use, indeed, would a better moral judgment be to me if I did not have the strength and courage to implement it?³³ He concludes with an advice about how to conduct ourselves in their regard: we must not allow joys to lull us into complacency or make us lukewarm; instead we must “always return to the beginning and always start again anew.”³⁴ Outside of tribulation, dilation is “very vain,” “carnal and literal only.”³⁵ Through “dilation in tribulation,” we seek truth in “a perpetual beginning” (*per continuam inchoationem*).³⁶

Long before Luther and Gregory the Great, Origen had called attention to the importance of the same verse in his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. He had developed it by citing Saint Paul: “Tribulation, for the just, does not reduce the soul’s virtue but instead dilates it. . . . No one who is dilated by virtues can be reduced.”³⁷ Centuries later, the phenomenologist psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger would compose a lovely commentary on the poet Hofmannsthal’s statement that “only the man who is oppressed understands what the spirit is”³⁸ — never appreciating, no doubt, that he would be commenting, in his own way, on Psalm IV, 2!

Finally, we must turn to Gregory’s doctrine of contemplation, which is the place *par excellence* of dilation. The connection between contemplation and dilation may seem surprising at first. Insofar as contemplation requires us to extract ourselves from worldly concerns and from being scattered by business, insofar as it seeks the solitude of a retreat or of a monastic cell, the contemplative life strikes us as the most focused of lives, forsaking extension in favor of intensity. In order to engage in contemplation, the soul, it seems, must collect itself and gather itself up in itself, as Plato often urges it to do in the *Phaedo* by means of all sorts of metaphors and images. Gregory would respond, however, that the soul collects itself only for the sake of discovering a vast open expanse, of being set at large, into eternity, into a very different realm than the one in which it finds itself at the start. Moreover, active life and

32 Op. cit., pp. 59–60.

33 Op. cit., p. 61.

34 Op. cit., p. 64.

35 Op. cit., p. 66.

36 Op. cit., p. 68.

37 Origen, *Commentarii in epistulam ad Romanos*, ed. Heither (Freiburg: Herder, 1992), IV, 9, t. II, pp. 276–278.

38 Cf. *Ausgewählte Vorträge und Aufsätze*, t. II.

care of one's neighbor are required as a preliminary expansion: "It remains for the person who has already dilated his soul through holy works to expand it even further in order to reach the secret places of inner contemplation."³⁹ It is only by expanding through loving care of one's neighbor, with all that this implies of patience and focus, that one becomes strong enough to attempt to rise up toward God Himself.

Gregory presents the first loving dilation according to a vertical axis: because it plunges us into the depths of compassion, charity lifts us up to the summit that is contemplation.⁴⁰ Sacrifice, renouncement, ascetic practice, or self-labor that would not be of service to my neighbor would have no meaning and no value. "To what purpose would one restrict the flesh through continence if the soul does not know how to dilate itself through compassion and love of one's neighbor?" Chastity of the flesh is simply a means to reach "mental sweetness" (*suavitas mentis*).⁴¹ Personal experience and nineteenth-century English novels teach us that this is not always the case. Most often, however, when Gregory uses spatial terms to describe the dilation that is brought about by loving one's neighbor, he sees in it a horizontal dimension, distinct from the vertical dimension of one's love for God. "Width (*latitudo*) refers thus to loving one's neighbor, whereas height (*altitudo*) refers to understanding the Creator. . . . As wide as the soul has been stretched through loving its neighbor, as high up will it climb in its understanding of God. By dilating itself from its center through love, the soul rises above itself through knowledge. The more expansive the soul has become in loving its neighbor, the higher above itself it will rise."⁴² The horizontal dimension is not that from which the vertical dimension must be wrenched. It is, in truth, what makes the vertical dimension possible.

Despite appearances, Bergson does not include Gregory's notion that loving one's neighbor dilates when he discusses charity in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Drawing a contrast between a "closed" soul on the one hand and an "open" soul defined by charity on the other, Bergson writes: "It is not through self-dilation that one will pass over from the first state to the second." When a person rises from loving his own family to loving his country, then to loving all of humanity, we should not, he says, interpret it to involve "a same feeling in these three inclinations that dilates more and more to encompass an ever increasing number of persons."⁴³ Most assuredly, a circle that widens remains a circle all the same, no matter how vast, so that

39 M. VI, 37, 56.

40 M. VII, 15, 18.

41 M. VI, 34, 53.

42 H. E., II, 2, 15; trans. t. II, p. 123.

43 H. Bergson, *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (Paris: PUF, 1967), 164e edition, p. 34.

dilating myself leaves me self-enclosed and always and still within my own circle. Gregory, however, never says that loving my neighbor dilates me in such a way that I encompass my neighbor as a mere extension of myself. He says that only charity, love of one's neighbor (based on God's grace, which alone can make of me an "open" soul), is truly able to expand me. Dilation is not in any shape or form the cause of love. It is love's joyful result and one of its rewarding gifts.

Charity, Gregory says, "opens the bosom of the spirit" (*sinum mentis aperit*).⁴⁴ Loving God and loving my neighbor are not two loves that are simply juxtaposed. They act on one another mutually, so that breadth and height form the dimensions of one and the same inner space. "As much love as a soul inflamed with divine desire extends to the task of welcoming a neighbor, as much extended patience will it sustain to reach God. Such a soul will bear with resignation the many long stretches of waiting since the extent of its charity has been dilated through the neighbor's very progress."⁴⁵ Length is thus added to width and height. According to Gregory, the door that is featured in Ezekiel must have both width and length: the "length of hope" and the "width of charity." Preaching, according to Gregory, must aim at orienting the audience toward the length of hope and the width of charity.⁴⁶ Gregory does not separate time from space, or temporal dilation from spatial dilation. The dilation of the time of waiting, of patience, of hope, is all at once painful and joyful. It is a painful joy. The contemplative "tastes a joy that is mixed with tears that stem from the hope of heavenly happiness" whenever he "dilates his spirit continuously in awaiting heavenly joys."⁴⁷

Temporal dilation, of course, does not stem only from hope. In general, time forms an essential dimension of inner space and constitutes for Gregory the very hallmark of our finitude. Whatever we know through experience has a beginning and an end. "If a delay, no matter how brief, postpones a given end, we say that time is 'long.' Whether we turn our gaze backwards in time in order to bring memory into play, or whether we look ahead in a game of waiting, facing this length of time allows us to widen our mind, as it were, by a temporal interval (*quasi per spatium temporis dilatat in mente*)."⁴⁸ Gregory adds that we tend to invoke this sort of dilation when we try to picture eternity by pushing the limits of the past and of the future further and further away, imagining "long stretches of life." Yet to extend time open-endedly is not the same as grasping eternity itself. When we want to "dilate time's

44 H. E., II, 3, 11, p. 145, and for what follows.

45 Ibid. Once again, the translation includes a serious misunderstanding. *Ad colligendum proximum* cannot be translated as "to gather others" but must be translated as "to welcome one's neighbor."

46 H.E., II, 7, 2, p. 327.

47 H.E., II, 1, 7, p. 65.

48 M. XVI, 43, 54, p. 221.

brief expanse,” he says elsewhere, we go from moments to hours, from hours to days, from days to months and from months to years (the ancients did not know our seconds and minutes). Eternity as such, by its very essence, exceeds all of the above: in God, all is tightly gathered up. God Himself “is extended without space, is dilated without place (*sine spatio extenditur, sine loco dilatatur*).”⁴⁹ Gregory affirms dramatically that eternity, dilated without beginning or end, “devours” and absorbs into itself whatever is limited.⁵⁰

Gregory’s contemplative raising of time to divine eternity is not at all the same as what Plotinus, along with all of Neoplatonic philosophy, urges on his disciples. The difference is that the event of the Incarnation has transformed inner space and its dimensions. “Since he has taken flesh in the Virgin, the only Son has dilated the gifts of the Holy Spirit both in width and in length.”⁵¹ These are the gifts that dilate the space of our heart and enable us to aspire to eternity. Charity alone truly dilates us; and the charity that is infused into us is nothing other than a communication of divine charity itself. What is involved is not a dilation of our intellect through its own means and powers. In a passage inspired by Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians (III, 18), Gregory describes the four dimensions of width, length, height, and depth. He writes: “Charity is wide because it includes loving our enemies and bearing them with patience, showing to them the same charity that prompts us to love God Almighty expansively. We must, therefore, bear witness to our neighbor of what we see our Redeemer bear witness to us.”⁵² No one is able, spontaneously, to love his enemies. Yet God is able to do so, since He loves us, although we are His enemies — and this alone makes it possible for us to do so. Gregory adds, in the same passage, that God’s love is what makes it possible for us to reach a high and dignified *statura*, a state that results from the way in which love dilates our actions.

The dilation of love does not rest on a private revelation through which God would manifest Himself to me alone. Rather, it makes its way through the Bible and through God’s Word, which dilates and dilates itself. Commenting on the “flying book” that is evoked by the Prophet Zacharias and that measures ten cubits in width and twenty in length, Gregory interprets the width to signify human work (*operatio*) and the length, double in cubits, to signify hope. These are precisely the two dimensions of expansion that the Word provokes in us.⁵³ The fact that hope is twice as extended as our work reveals that hope is where eternity labors within time, within our time. We

49 M. XXVII, 7, 10.

50 M. IX, 47, 72.

51 H.E., I, 8, 26, t. 1, p. 137.

52 H.E., I, 6, 19, t. 1, p. 231.

53 M. XV, 14, 18, p. 35.

are not simply pulled out of time; rather it is the meaning of time that must be transformed through being dilated. It follows, moreover, that the dilation in question cannot remain confined inside of us: it must extend and diffuse itself externally, into the world, through action and preaching. In this context, Gregory revives the biblical image of clouds, rain, and dew, an image favored by Augustine before him, and applied now to biblical authors and preachers: they are the clouds whence the fecundating rain of the Word falls. By the “clouds that spread light” (which is paradoxical only *prima facie*, as anyone knows who watches the sunset), what is meant are the preachers who “dilate examples of life by speaking and by acting,” although this “light of inner annunciation” will not fully succeed, alas!, since preachers desire to convert all human beings.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, he writes: “The drops of dew, in fact, are the holy preachers: drawing on heavenly treasures of grace, they water the field of our heart, which dries up amidst the evils of our present life as though plunged in the darkness of a burning night.”⁵⁵ Gregory equates this watering with Saint Paul’s dilation of the heart when freely addressing the Corinthians.

It remains for us to aboard one of the deepest aspects of Gregory’s doctrine of contemplation. However high he rises, Gregory never loses sight of our finitude, or of the incommensurability of our eye relative to the divine light. His dilation never turns into an illusory exaltation in which we forget our limits entirely and forget that we ever had any. What happens, according to Gregory, at the summit of spiritual life? Push back, backsliding, a fiery return of the contemplative back unto himself, a narrowing — all based on the very excess over himself of what he has come to glimpse. Gregory describes this turning point in various ways. It pertains to all finite knowledge, to every finite creature, not only to man. Comparing angels to men, Gregory writes: “Angelic nature differs from our own in the fact that we are circumscribed in place and limited by the ignorance of our blindness. Angelic spirits, in truth, are also circumscribed by place, but their knowledge is incomparably more extended than ours (*incomparabiliter dilatantur*). Thanks to their knowledge, they can be said to be distended (*distendi*) inwardly and outwardly, as they contemplate the very wellspring of all knowledge. . . . Compared to ours, their science is fully dilated (*valde dilatata*). Yet if we compare it to the divine science, it is narrow (*angusta*).”⁵⁶ The utter disproportion between God’s infinite light and the created eye, even of angels, is thus nicely brought home.

54 M. XXVII, 31, 55.

55 M. XXIX, 27, 54, p. 273.

56 M. II, 3, 3; trans. Gaudemaris (Paris: Cerf, 1989), S.C. 32 bis, p. 259.

All of this explains why contemplation is always agonistic, always a form of combat, at each and every step. Well did the Church Fathers know what Rimbaud would say on the ultimate page of *A Season in Hell*, namely that “spiritual combat is as rough as combat between men.” Saint Gregory compares the contemplative life to the struggle between Jacob and the Angel.⁵⁷ Only a person who has never entered into it would imagine it to be restful! “Contemplative life involves a great tension (*contentio*) in the soul, which raises itself to celestial reality, directs the power of its love towards spiritual goods, strives to see beyond what is seen by bodily eyes, and shrinks itself in order to expand (*sese angustat ut dilatet*). At times, the soul triumphs and overcomes the resistance it encounters in the darkness of its own blindness, just enough to get a weak and furtive glimpse (*furtim et tenuiter*) of the limitless light; immediately repelled, however, it falls back into itself. The soul had set off towards the divine light, but it returns full of sighs to the darkness of its impotent eyes.”⁵⁸ This is when Gregory evokes Jacob’s struggle with the Angel, as an illustration of what he means. In such a struggle (*in quodam certamine*), we prevail at times and fail at others. But our failure is not really failure pure and simple since we will have “tasted” divine light.

A further passage puts it nicely, emphasizing as well that, with regard to the basic axiom involved, angel and man find themselves, so to speak, on the same level: “Be it angelic or human, the soul shrinks (*coangustat*) when it strives to open itself up to the limitless light because of the sheer fact that it is a creature; and while it is true that the soul guides itself above itself through spiritual progress, nonetheless, even when it is dilated, it cannot embrace the full radiance of a light that encompasses all things and transcends all things by sustaining them and inhabiting them.”⁵⁹ The fact that our soul pulls back, and shrinks before divine infinity, does not mean that its dilation was not vividly forceful. Gregory attests to this force, in a sort of chiasmus, by reflecting on Saint Benedict’s vision, in which the totality of the world was seen as though gathered up in a single ray of light (what is involved is a genuine vision, *ante oculos ipsius*, “before his eyes.”) “To the soul who sees the Creator, the whole of creation is narrow. . . . In God’s light, such a soul is ravished beyond itself and expands inwardly. When it looks down, below itself, it understands from on high how very small everything is that could not be embraced all at once when below. . . . When I say that the whole world was gathered up before the soul’s eye, I did not mean that the sky and earth had been shrunk, but that the soul of the contemplative had been dilated: ravished

57 Cf. my study “How to Struggle with What Is Irresistible,” in *Corps à corps* (Paris: Minuit, 1997), pp. 11–24.

58 H.E., II, 2, 12, pp. 113–115.

59 M. X, 8, 13.

into God, it could see without difficulty what lay beneath God.”⁶⁰ The Middle Ages will deeply reflect on Benedict’s spiritual dilation and vision.⁶¹

We can now appreciate the richness and density of Gregory’s meditations on dilation, which are as rich from a literary point of view as they are from a spiritual and mystical point of view. Over and beyond the frequent and pertinent usage of the term (not exhausted here, far from it), we must retain two features that mark its meaning. The first is that Gregory *always* relates expansion to narrowness, and dilation to contraction. Whether he considers the illusory dilation of pride and ambition, which shrinks us and narrows us down; whether he considers the difficult growth of charity in us amid trials and tribulations; or whether he considers the highest contemplation, in which the soul ends up contracting, wounded by light and as though repelled by glory because of its very dilation; Gregory never considers one of the terms without the other, nor does he ever consider a dilation that would leave behind all limit and measure in this lifetime. It is because dilation is always agonistic, because it always involves tension and is always the dilation of a finite being, that it is stabilized by reality. Gregory was not directly aware of the doctrines of Greek philosophers regarding *peras* and *apeiron*, but he fully understood their inseparable character.

The second feature that characterizes Gregory’s views of dilation is that he reflects on inner space as such. This is attested by his statements about inner dimensions, even if he did not elaborate a systematic doctrine. He not only presupposes inner space, but he also makes it into a theme. Moreover, the expression is explicitly found in his writings, since he speaks of the “dilated space of the mind (*dilatatum mentis spatium*).”⁶² This is no mere image. It treats inner space philosophically. Gregory’s importance for tradition, and for medieval tradition in particular, will mean that his doctrine will bear fruit along multiple paths. The richness of self-experience has no need for the concept of “subjectivity.” To claim that Gregory’s views constitute the “prehistory” of a philosophy of the subject is to argue in a circle and merely to reveal the narrow self-centeredness of our own viewpoint.

60 *Dialogues*, II, 35, 5–7, trans. Antin (Paris: Cerf, 1979), S.C. 260, II, p. 241.

61 Cf. Richard of Saint-Victor, *Opuscles théologiques*, ed. Ribaillier (Paris: Vrin, 1967), p. 152 (Latin text).

62 H.E., II, 3, 12, p. 147.

Chapter 3

The Dilated Runners of Psalm 118, from Henri Michaux to Saint Teresa

Over the centuries, one of the biblical passages about the heart's dilation that has prompted the most interest and the most numerous responses and developments (thus visibly dilating readers' hearts) is the passage from Psalm 118, verse 32: *Viam mandatorum tuorum cucurri dilatasti cor meum* — “I ran on the way of thy commandments when you dilated my heart.” Like the Vulgate, the Septuagint translates with a past tense, whereas modern French translations use a present tense. The Jerusalem Bible translates as follows: “I run on the way of your commandments because you have set my heart at large.” The present tense, featured already in Luther's translation, is adopted as well by Dhorme and Chouraqui. As Hebraic verb rules are more contextual than temporal, the choice of tense depends largely on the context and on the attitudes of the translators. Remarkably, our English neighbors have chosen the future. The King James Bible gives us: “I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.” Similarly, the *Book of Common Prayer* gives us, for evensong: “I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou hast set my heart at liberty” — the last expression nicely capturing the idea of dilation. In her autobiography, the American novelist Edith Wharton recounts how, as a child, she learned German by reading the Gospel. She was struck, as by a light ray illuminating the contrasting spirit of the two nations, by the radical difference in the choice of words regarding the episode of Christ's transfiguration: in English, the disciples wished to build “tabernacles,” whereas in German, they wished to build “shacks!”¹ Is the same not true in the matter of tense?

1 E. Wharton, *A Backward Glance (Novellas and Other Writings)*, ed. Wolff (New York: Library of America, 1990), p. 814.

Psalm 118, the longest of all, follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet. The letters of the alphabet appear in succession at the start of each new verse. It is a hymn in praise of God's law, with various terms that refer to it ("speech," "witnessing," "commandments," etc.) recurring at each verse. Thus it is quite elaborate from a literary point of view. God's law, the law of the unique God, is given only in the plural, through many commandments, because it addresses the many diverse dimensions of our life. God's law can be kept only if it is studied, memorized, understood. It can be ours only if we seek it and search for it. Implementing it in active works cannot be separated from scrutinizing its meaning. To seek it, however, is to seek the one who stands at its source, the one who addresses himself to us through it — it means letting ourselves be instructed by Him ("With all my heart, it is you that I seek," verse 10; "Teach me your will," verse 12; in the translation of the Bible of Jerusalem). The idea of a progressively deeper understanding, indivisibly "theoretical" and "practical," if such Greek terms are appropriate here, is clearly suggested by the alphabetic progression that structures the psalm. God's commandments are the pathways of life, leading to life in the ultimate sense, which means that the theme of "ways" and "pathways" is essential. The theme recurs a number of times in stanza IV, which concludes with the verse on dilation that concerns us in the present chapter. Man considers his "pathways," asks God to show him the "way" of his precepts, and distinguishes the "way of truth" from the "way of falsehood." Commentators will draw on these expressions.

The heart that is dilated, expanded, made capacious thanks to divine action is at the opposite pole of the heart of the proud, which is puffed up, bloated, and self-saturated: "Their heart is as thick as grease" (v. 69, Bible of Jerusalem), whereas the Vulgate says: *Coagulatum est sicut lac cor eorum*, as coagulated as rotten milk. The plenitude that comes from the heart's true dilation is indivisibly a freedom to change, to act, and to move, which is a freedom that only the law grants. In every way, it stands against that other plenitude that consists in gorging oneself on one's own greed. The law has a taste and a flavor for the palate and the mouth (v. 103). We open our mouths wide in order to breathe it in like fresh air (v. 131). Claudel was fascinated by this verse when he developed his poetics of respiration.

The starting point of the present chapter, in which Church Fathers and mystics will be discussed, might seem a bit strange. It is a poem by none other than Henri Michaux, "Apparitions-Disappearances," a poem that is included in *Moments*. The excellent edition of Michaux's *Complete Works* tells us that the poem was first published in a literary journal in 1968 and was thoroughly revised by Michaux for the book edition of 1973.² We hardly

2 H. Michaux, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Bellour (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), III, p. 1642.

need to point out that Michaux, especially the last Michaux, is not famous for biblical exegesis. In sharp contrast to Claudel, Michaux did not maintain a permanently open Bible on his desk, or hear the Bible continually flowing in his mind. This is why it is all the more remarkable that he cites verse 32 of Psalm 118, insisting on it by citing it twice: “Dilatate cor meum”/ “Dilastate cor meum”/ “this is it/ this is it exactly/ from it, surely/ Expansion in the purest state.”³ Not only does Michaux cite the Latin of the Vulgate, but he also manages to introduce a mistake in the Latin by writing “dilastate” instead of “dilastati.” The point is not to be pedantic and shame a great poet! The point is that the mistake reveals that Michaux did not copy the citation from the Vulgate itself but cited it from memory, which means that the phrase likely came back to him as a distant memory, dating back to his early Latin lessons with the Jesuits. A second hypothesis, more problematic, will be examined later. Be this as it may, the fact that there is, and could be, confusion regarding the final vowel is stated by the poem itself a few lines earlier: “On the page of the book that lies before me/ the letters in the lines are shrinking/ the last ones most especially.”⁴ (If we make the connection, this would be the Vulgate — objection conceded.)

The same poem is full of biblical references that are loaded with meaning. At one point, the poem includes two lines of mere dots, after which Michaux writes, with a predilection for alliterations that is worthy of Richard Rolle: “Presence of the hidden trainer/ Isaiah purified by the angel/ Persistent thought that perseveres.”⁵ Michaux refers here to Isaiah, chapter VI. The prophet had just characterized himself as “a man of impure lips,” when “a seraph flew toward me, holding a flaming coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my lips with it and said: “Here, this has touched your lips, your sin is erased” (6–7, Bible of Jerusalem). The story narrates Isaiah’s prophetic vocation. Toward the end of the poem, Michaux writes: “All meaningful words come as apostles/ The fall of the angels has ended/ Torrential life, life without end, has seeped in.”⁶ Transposed by analogy from the religious to the poetic realm, purification of the lips allows a renewal of speech, in which words become “apostles” and announce henceforth the Good News of life without end. The profusion of life puts an end to the fall. Our aim is obviously not to “christianize” a poem in which “Ramakrishna is personally present,”⁷ but to understand what the citation of the psalm on dilation means. The citation is particularly surprising, since Far Eastern

3 Op. cit., p. 739.

4 Ibid., p. 733.

5 Ibid., p. 738.

6 Ibid., p. 740.

7 Ibid., p. 736.

references are more typical of the last Michaux. In order to understand it, we must let the poem itself instruct us.

The opening pages of the poem create a space in perpetual transformation and motion, as Michaux does so well. The commotion stems from a disruption, or even from a loss of identity, both a loss of the speaker's personal identity and a loss of the identity of objects and places. Despite moments of joy, adventurous excitement, and youth, the space in question, on the whole, is anxiety-provoking. The space is as though under siege: unity is dissolved into helpless multiplicity, with "all sorts of interceptions," "dissolutions," "thousands of waves of perplexity," "formidable contortions/Faces torn apart into insane grimaces."⁸ All solid ground is lost. The body itself fails to provide security. ("What has become of my existing leg?") This means that progress and any forward motion are themselves threatened. ("I am prevented from following my line, any line at all.") One feels watched, spied upon. At times, repeatedly, places and buildings seem to be about to collapse on us. Even Notre-Dame "vacillates" — an image that prepares us for what Michaux will say later about "Importance that stands robust as a cathedral/ Importance of everything" once space and the poem's tone have been reversed. When this reversal is achieved, space will be positively expanded and everything will become as powerful and sturdy as Notre-Dame. When "space is rapacious," however, we are its prey. We find ourselves plunged into *apeiron*, having lost all limits and distinctions. We are engulfed in a terrible vertigo that is reminiscent of the nightmarish speculations of Plato's *Parmenides*, when Unity is not, and multiplicity multiplies without limit or meaning. The second part of Michaux's poem, in contrast, the part in which Psalm 118 is cited, describes a very different *apeiron*, another sort of limitlessness, which is a luminous space that expands, out of joy this time, even if it possesses its own quasi-unbearable side ("A light almost unacceptable"), which is true of all true joy.

The citation from Psalm 118 and the image of "expansion in its pure state" present themselves as what enables us to understand and to articulate with some precision the sudden and intimate transformation that starts with an illumination. The transformation occurs within the space of the heart, our biblical term for "interiority": "In the heart, a sort of caress, a sort of large, uncaused caress/ full, so full/ . . . abysses of caress" (these words precede the Latin citation). The large caress is what increases the heart's space. Paradoxically, but with rigorous veracity, it is also what makes the contact "abyssal." The relentless invasion into our most intimate interiority by what is stronger than us propels us into a new time frame, measured by our newly expanded and fortified life: "A pulse/ a different pulse/ a new pulse carries me off/ in a separate direction keeping a different time/ a sovereign time/ Surely this is

8 Ibid., pp. 733–735, as for what follows.

the Way/ I entrust myself to it.”⁹ The expanded heart beats in unison with the ascending tide of the space of the world, reaching “ever higher” stages. Space itself is embraced into a powerful diastole: “The earth’s wave that wells up/ When will it/ Will it ever fall?”

Everything converges into a unique motion of dilation, which is the dilation of all and of each, cosmic as well as personal and intimate. In light of the start of the poem, the reversal of the meaning of *apeiron* goes hand in hand with a similar loss of limits and distinct identities: but whereas such loss was anxiety-provoking at first, it is now full of jubilation because it is symphonic. “Kindness consists in properly channeling fluids” (which explains why life is “torrential” and why the earth is a “wave”). Kindness consists, therefore, in channeling fluctuating forces that do not have an inherently fixed limit. Words indicating amplitude and extension abound. The dilation in question serves as a purification that evacuates and dissolves “idiotic” differences. “The heresy of distinctions is submerged/ By the floods of this ocean.”¹⁰ Michaux gives the word “heresy” its true, original meaning, since heresy in Greek signifies making a choice in favor of singularity, a sectarian and divisive choice, opposed to the common good and to community.

A question remains with regard to Michaux’s admirable description of dilation, namely how to account for the sudden irruption into Michaux’s poem of the Vulgate’s Latin. The answer can be supplied only by the poem itself, which the poem does at its close. The last lines show that juxtaposing Isaiah, psalms translated by Saint Jerome, and Ramakrishna (whatever one may ultimately think of such a juxtaposition) is far from arbitrary: “Flooded with truth/ Everything uplifts/ everything carries us forth/ Free of strife/ of rivalry/ of standards: I endorse the standard/ of each and of all” — even the catholic standard of Latin. Syncretism appears here to participate wholly in a general expansion. Michaux, moreover, translates biblical dilation into his own idiom (the word “dilation” itself appears in the poem only in Latin). This means that he genuinely responds to it and makes himself responsible for it. Michaux, in short, pulls himself out of the “heresy of distinctions” by dilating.

All of this attests to the powerful pull that is exerted by the verse of Psalm 118. Emboldened by Michaux’s appropriation of it, we must now go back in time and look at far more ancient interpretations — interpretations that have attested to the same powerful pull differently. Of the commentary on Psalm 118 that was written by Origen, who was one of the loftiest Christian exegetes of late antiquity, we possess only a few fragments — a “chain.” Fortunately, the

⁹ Ibid., p. 739.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 740, and p. 741 for what follows.

fragments are in the original Greek.¹¹ As always, Origen explains the Bible by appealing to the Bible. He explains the Old Testament by appealing to the New Testament. Since the earlier verses of Psalm 118 distinguish “the way of truth” from “the way of falsehood,” it is fitting to invoke other biblical passages that might shed light on the same distinction. Origen invokes the Gospel according to Matthew: “For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”¹² The words are clearly chosen to create a parallel structure (many on the wide road, few on the narrow one), but also to mark a contrast between the road and the destination itself. Origen develops the contrast into a veritable chiasmus, integrating Gospel and psalm into a seamless commentary: “The narrow and constricted road leads to life, but what is holy and will see God and runs along the way of God’s commandments is a large and spacious heart (*plateia kai eurukhōros*), expanded by the Word. Conversely, the wide and spacious road leads to perdition, and a narrow heart (*stenè*), which does not allow the Father and the Son to dwell in it, prevents whoever has shrunk his heart through wickedness from ever reaching God, because of its narrowness.” The wide heart walks on the narrow road, and the narrow heart walks on the wide road. To Origen, however, the heart’s width and narrowness do not stem from the same source. It is I myself who provoke and cause my own cramped constriction and stenosis, if the medical term may be borrowed here, derived as it is from Origen’s Greek term. In contrast, the expansion of my heart is not my own work and does not result from my own initiative. It comes only from divine action.

Origen brings the contrast clearly to light in the same passage. Citing a sentence from *Proverbs* that depicts Wisdom as walking through streets and public squares, a sentence that will also be dear to Augustine, Origen remarks: “By public places (*plateiais*), he does not mean streets, but hearts, and all those whom God has expanded.” An expansion of this kind alone makes it possible for God to dwell in us personally. The close connection between dilation and a hospitality that is offered to God, which God Himself gives us to give to Him, will have a vast future, as we saw in the chapter on Augustine. The wicked human being, here, is the unwelcoming human being who refuses to receive God-the-Trinity inside of himself. As we see, it is not so much because he slams the door shut, but because he is so shriveled up, narrowed, and hardened, that there is no space in him for the visitor *par excellence*, God, to inhabit in him and work inside of him. If it were possible for a person to hold onto his inner capaciousness after shutting the door, nothing

11 *La Chaîne palestinienne sur le Psaume 118*, ed. et trans. M. Harl (Paris: Cerf, 1972), S.C. 189, I, pp. 242–243, and for what follows.

12 *Matthew*, VII, 13–14.

would be lost. Such a person could always change his mind. The problem is that our heart petrifies as soon as the bolts are drawn. What expands inner space is the very act of opening the door. The heart that is so full of itself that it is all dried up is the heart of the proud. Let us note that Origen, here, does not particularly address the notion of “running” except to qualify it as “beautiful” (“I ran on the paths of your commandments”).

Some of the elements of Origen’s exegesis will reappear in the Latin Church Fathers. In what follows, I will privilege either what the Latin Fathers added that is new, or what they developed more deeply. Hilary of Poitiers composed a systematic commentary of Psalm 118 in its entirety. In his commentary, he seeks to emphasize the progression and coherence of Psalm 118 (from a spiritual point of view, not just a literary one). Commenting on the verse that concerns dilation, he starts by affirming: “We arrived here by a series of levels.”¹³ He recapitulates all that has been said with regard to pathways and evokes the narrow door of the Gospel, but he does so for the sake of insisting on the sufferings and trials that appear in the narrow path, which prompts him to ask the following question: “Will we judge, then, that the prophet is arrogant to boast that he runs along this pathway?”¹⁴ Hilary answers that the psalmist “remembers that his speech must express a balance between his desire for a perfect life and the acknowledgment of his humility.” The two parts of the verse bring the problem to light: running on the pathways of God’s commandments expresses achievement, but the fact that we can run only because God has dilated our heart attests that what is involved is an act of grace, not some proud boast in which we claim to achieve something through our own prowess.

To Hilary, dilation offers two aspects: receptivity to God’s teaching, and receptivity to God Himself. Into the expanded space of our heart, we welcome both the Word and the One who speaks it, the teaching and the teacher. Hilary uses the word *capax* twice, which is the term for hospitable capaciousness. “A dilated heart is a heart that opens itself up, through faith, to welcome the divine teaching (*capax doctrinae Dei*).” Such a heart is also a heart “in which dwells the mystery of the Father and the Son; in the capacious dwelling of which the Holy Ghost rests happily.” Let us note that, unlike Origen, Hilary expressly mentions the presence in us of the Holy Ghost — who rejoices over our own joy, whose joy simultaneously causes our joy and inhabits it. After reflecting on the spatial vocabulary, Hilary develops the idea that the wide road, “where Wisdom, which is Christ, is praised in song” and where Wisdom freely walks about, is “for us, the fulfillment of many other paths.”

13 St Hilaire de Poitiers, *Commentaire sur le Psaume 118*, 4, 11, ed. and trans. Milhau (Paris: Cerf, 1988), S.C. 344, I, p. 191.

14 Op. cit., p. 193, and Section 12, pp. 193–194, for what follows.

It is the result of a convergence, or a uniting, of many narrow paths. In other words, the amplitude of the heart's capaciousness results from unification: the heart expands when we cease dispersing ourselves, when our efforts are all aimed in the same direction. This is how the heart becomes a "more ample and worthy" dwelling.

Hilary gives a precise content to God's dwelling in us. What is involved is not some vague and indeterminate feeling of God's presence, but God's very presence through His Word and teaching. The heart, which is the headquarters, biblically speaking, of both intellect and volition, becomes the receptacle of the divine presence when God's Word is understood and put into practice. When the heart is set free, when it is set at large of every shore, everything is vast. When a person runs freely on the way of God's commandments, the way is wide — the same road that seems narrow when we stumble along it, oppressed and unwilling. Wisdom prompts us to run when it runs. Wisdom constitutes the principle of motion. There is a feature, moreover, that brings the rigor of the spatial schemata to full light, although it seems, at first, very much to contradict these schemata. What feature? When the dilated heart is evoked, it is we who constitute a place for the divine presence. God comes to dwell within us. However, when we run along the ways of God's commandments, it is within God, or at least within the space that God has opened for us, that we move forward. The idea, obviously, is to show that the inclusion is mutual. God inhabits us when we ourselves progress within the space that is structured and enlarged by God's teaching.

Hilary reflects more precisely on the connection between dilation and God's Word in a later chapter. In the Latin translation that he uses, the word "dilation" returns in stanza 45 of the psalm: *Et ingredibar in dilatatione* ("And I went forth in dilation"). The term does not figure in the Vulgate, which says: *Et ambulabam in latitudine* ("And I walked in amplitude"). Following Origen,¹⁵ Hilary equates the stanza with Paul's statement: "Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels."¹⁶ Hilary insists on openness: even in the midst of trials, one "must always have a heart that is open to God (*semper ad Deum patulo . . . corde*)."¹⁷ He continues: "Narrow (*angusta*), therefore, is the heart of sinners, and a sullied soul does not receive God as its guest. God, who cannot be limited, requires an open dwelling (*patulum domicilium*). If the prophet walks in amplitude, it is because he is, at this moment, the dwelling of God who speaks in him. And he himself indicates the cause of his own openness by saying: *Because I often sought your commandments*" (this is the stanza that comes right after the one on dilation).

15 *La Chaîne palestinienne*, t. I, p. 267.

16 II Corinthians, 6, 12.

17 Saint Hilaire, op. cit., 6, 9, t. I, p. 237, as for what follows.

There is nothing unusual in the idea that the prophet, whose speech is divinely inspired, is inhabited by God. What follows, however, is more uncommon. Hilary describes the momentous event of reading and studying the Bible: “Let us recall what usually happens in us when, devoting ourselves to divine reading, we scrutinize God’s commandments and precepts. Let us recall how widely the narrowness of our soul dilates and how far the feeling of our humility opens up to the desire for God.”

We find here a nice example of the reflexivity of Scripture: Hilary’s commentary on the biblical verse makes the meaning of the verse manifest, namely by showing what happens, or at least what could happen, here and now, when we read the Bible. The verse describes a dilation that could belong to the act of reading itself. To Hilary, the Bible does not merely speak about dilation: it stems from dilation and leads to dilation. The Bible is dilated and dilating. What is made available to the attentive reader is the very experience that is spoken of in Scripture. (It is patristic exegesis, not modern literary criticism, that turned the experience of reading into a topic to be pondered and described, granted that patristic exegesis considered only the *sui generis* reading that is involved in reading the Bible.) We do not simply go forth to greet the words on the page; we go forth to experience the very event that they describe: and it is only by dilating ourselves that we can fully grasp what is conveyed about dilation. Hilary’s very words make it clear that the dilation of reading and of the reader is first and foremost a dilation of the *intelligence* (he uses the word). The intellect is what first expands and opens itself up by understanding more, better, and otherwise, and does so in order to understand more, better, and otherwise. The freedom of the Spirit that speaks in Scripture is given to the reader as his part, as long as he reads spiritually and in truth.

Among the rare authors who, after Augustine, took up the formidable task of commenting on the whole of the psalms, Cassiodorus also interprets verse 32 intellectually. The dilated heart is the heart that has been widened or stretched by the amplitude of science (*in latitudine scientiae . . . extensum*).¹⁸ “Indeed, the soul that receives the light of truth becomes open to multiple insights. Having been expanded, it returns to the virtues that it now understands, whereas before it was compressed by sins.” Dilation is a form of illumination, even if it goes without saying that it leads to practice and illuminates how we must conduct our life. The ways in which amplitude and narrowness are related here require special attention. As we saw, the image of running along the *way* of God’s commandments implies some kind of inner unification, of inner concentration of the heart on a unique desire, which Augustine called “continence” in a non-trivial sense, and which

18 Cassiodore, *Expositio psalorum*, 118, 32, éd. Adiaen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958), p. 1073. Augustine is omitted here because all that concerns him is gathered up in Chapter I.

forms an escape from the dispersal and disorganization of sinful life. Yet the unification occurs only in, and through, amplitude: the intellect acquires a field-of-view, the gaze embraces more things and embraces them better. This is why Cassiodorus insists that the unique light of the unique truth produces a wide variety of insights in us — a wide variety of cognitions that are really recognitions. One recognizes oneself to be in the space of action, which is the space of what one ought to be and ought to do.

The inner unification that dilates does not proceed by elimination or by mere diversion. Rather, the same light spreads over the landscape of life, making it possible to find one's bearings. Kant wondered about the meaning of finding one's intellectual bearings. One of the answers is the dilation of intelligence that is part and parcel of the motion of running. This is why Cassiodorus started by examining the diverse meanings of the word *way* in the psalm, prior to the passages that we have discussed. The diversity of these meanings no longer prompts us to err when "the light of truth" gives us a dilated gaze, which is to say a synoptic gaze, as Plato would have put it. In a completely different context shorn of any religious concern, Victor Hugo, with his typical genius, framed an extraordinary description of the spatial character and conditions of how understanding works. The passage occurs in his novel *The Man Who Laughs*.¹⁹ The protagonist finds himself in a wholly unexpected situation, which he cannot, at first, comprehend. He dilates his intelligence in order to seek its meaning, which is to say, to grasp how the situation is possible:

Gradually, in his mind, dilation penetrated into the darkness of the incident just as dilation had penetrated into the pupil of his eye in the underground darkness of Southwalk. The difficulty was to succeed in introducing some space within the mass of so many accumulated sensations. In order for opaque ideas to be brought to combustion, otherwise known as "understanding," air is required between each emotion and the next. Here, there was no air. The whole predicament was, so to speak, unbreathable. . . . There was not enough space between what Gwynplaine had feared and what was befalling him. It had all happened too fast. . . . The two contrasting set of events were packed too tightly one against the other. Gwynplaine was struggling to withdraw his mind from this stranglehold.

Hugo's phenomenological accuracy, in this passage, is flawless. The dilation of the mind's eye is powerless, at first, to adjust to the darkness of what is happening, because there is not enough "space" or "air" separating events. The protagonist tries to take a step back and to acquire perspective, but he

19 V. Hugo, *L'Homme qui rit*, II, V, 4, *Oeuvres complètes*, éd. Seebacher (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1985), *Roman*, t. III, p. 652.

remains caught in a “stranglehold” (the tightening of the stranglehold corresponding by analogy to the *angustia* of the sinner’s mind for the Church Fathers). What befalls him imprisons him by its raw facticity and is glued directly on his mind, so to speak, even though the event, this time, happens to be a happy one. An “unbreathable” event, according to the novelist’s apt expression, is not only an event toward which we cannot take any distance, but also one inside of which we cannot discern any spacing, free-play, or pattern of relatedness with other events (they are all “too tightly packed one against the other”). One is glued to the events (unable, therefore, to understand them) because the events themselves are glued to each other, mingling and influencing each other into obscure antitheses and enigmatic reversals. The lack of “space” among them means that there is no playing field, no room for meaning and possibilities to be articulated or tested for connections to one another, for example through causation.

To breathe an event does not mean breathing it as an isolated event. It means breathing the atmosphere and environment in which it unfolds and acquires meaning. It means breathing its connection to other events. Although they are distinct, the spacing that is required for the act of understanding and the spacing of what is to be understood cannot be separated. A narrow mind is not a blind mind: a narrow mind is a mind that is riveted by, or glued to, what it sees, to the exclusion of anything else. It cannot, therefore, either breathe what it sees or understand it. Such a mind is immobilized, hypnotized; it cannot detach itself from its exclusive perception, which means that it cannot “run.” Such a mind is ignorant of the fact that we must, as Saint Ambrose of Milan puts it, “run in the space that is open in man’s interiority (*in campo interioris hominis*) and not in the narrow straights of the mind.”²⁰

Let us return to Psalm 118 after our digression on the dilation of the intelligence. It goes without saying that a number of its interpreters, especially in monastic literature, have emphasized the affective and amorous scope of dilation, without however denying its intellectual aspect. Isaac Stella (or Isaac of the Star), for example, frames an interiorizing interpretation of the parable of the laborers who are sent to work in the vineyard at successive moments of the day (Matthew, XX, 1–16) — giving rise to the popular expression “eleventh-hour worker.” The point of the parable, as we know, is that all receive the same salary, even though not all have worked the same number of hours. It is ironic to note that the popular expression reduces the evangelical teaching to a worldly platitude, since the meaning of “eleventh-hour worker” is generally pejorative. Isaac is not unaware that the standard interpretation of the parable is collective, with the vocation of both Israel and Gentiles at stake,

20 Saint Ambrose de Milan, *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, éd. Petschenig (Vienne: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), pp. 80–81.

but he legitimately defends a hermeneutic pluralism when words themselves warrant inexhaustible meanings.²¹ He interprets the vineyard to symbolize each one of us. He interprets the day to symbolize our life, and he interprets the hours to symbolize the successive turning points of our spiritual progress.

Each hour mentioned by the parable becomes the activation of a specific human power or faculty, as well as the gift of a corresponding grace. The ninth hour corresponds to reason and the contemplative life, when a person “rises up to seek God on the wings of reading, meditation and prayer,” and “becomes disposed to love him.”²² (How delightful that he should depict reading also as giving us wings!) The eleventh hour eventually comes, the last that is mentioned in the parable. It is the last stretch of our earthly pilgrimage according to Isaac, who exploits the fact that neither the tenth hour nor the twelfth is mentioned to emphasize the open-ended, unfinished character of the two ultimate moments of our ascension. In the eleventh hour, “it is delectation that is sent into the vineyard.”²³ What is involved is a pre-savoring, a foretaste of beatitude. We receive the joy to which the many tribulations and labors of the day have brought us. The paradox of the parable is obviously avoided by Isaac’s transposition. The duration of the day, with its hours that symbolize as many tasks and graces combined, is the very life of the soul. The impending evening is simultaneously a dawn. The end is a beginning. (We must remember that Jewish time regards the day as starting at sunset and that Christian liturgy has preserved the custom.)

“Then there begins a sort of nightfall for fear and suffering, emptiness and sadness. Conversely, on the evening of the first day and morning of the second, a dawn for love and sweetness, fervor and cheerfulness, starts — which is to say, a certain kind of delectation and dilation of the heart, an inner exultation and vivid joy of the soul (*exhilaratio mentis*).”²⁴ Isaac Stella continues: “This is the start of perfection, which brings inchoation to term; the start of plenitude, which erases all that is half-complete; in short, the start of charity, which expulses fear.” How fitting that the soul itself bursts with joy, if not with laughter. How fitting that a beginning may have more than one meaning and bring one thing to its end while still beginning forever to begin. Isaac makes *inchoatio* last through the whole day as a road to plenitude, and he turns *initium* into the beginning of plenitude as such. In the spiritual day that he describes, the evening dusk is simultaneously the twilight of daybreak, since it marks the turn from one day to the next, from a day of labor to the day

21 Isaac de l’Etoile, *Sermons*, 16, sections 1–7, éd. et trans. Solet (Paris: Cerf, 1967), S.C. 130, t. 1, pp. 293–299.

22 Isaac, *Sermon* 17, section 18, pp. 323–325.

23 *Ibid.*, section 19, p. 325.

24 *Ibid.*, sections 20–21, pp. 325–327, and for what follows as well.

of love's rest. The dilation of the heart heralds the start (*ortus*) of the second day. Dilation is like a dawn.

Further on, Isaac paraphrases Psalm 118, 32: "Whoever delights in every action and passion suffers no vexation, pain or fatigue; then, bearing a light yoke and a sweet burden, he truly finds his soul's rest as the salary of his work. . . . And so it is that, living a holy life through habitual goodness, with a heart dilated by an ineffable sweetness, full of exultation and praise, he runs along the way of God's commandments on the second day, which is to say the day of charity, which expulses fear."²⁵ As the reference to Jesus's utterance indicates (Matthew, XI, 30: Isaac reverses the adjectives; the Gospel speaks, rather, of a sweet yoke and a light burden), what changes is the *how* of life, not the nature of its tasks and chores. One still does the same work as before, but one does it differently. What once required effort and a struggle in order to be mastered is now and henceforth accomplished easily thanks to inner joy. Such repose, such a joyous Sabbath of the soul uplifted above its chores, does not imply that work is dispensed with, but that dilation has made the person supple and ductile in the performance of his duties. He is not freed of God's commandments; rather he is free because he runs along their way. Instead of panting to catch his breath, he breathes freely and runs, dilated. The joy of dilation is *all the more active when it is engaged in tasks* — when it is not a prisoner of its own act of worrying and fretting. The deepest wisdom of the East holds the highest action to be non-action; the deepest wisdom of the West holds the highest action to be acting through love, and thus through dilation.

Another Cistercian monk, Gueric of Igny, gathered a veritable anthology of biblical passages on the theme of the Way and Wayfaring. Adopting Augustine's deep insight, Gueric considers Christ to be both the Way through which we travel and the Goal toward which we travel. We cannot, however, go forth to greet Christ unless He Himself comes to us and pushes the way of iniquity aside, far from us. As the last expression reveals, iniquity remains one of our basic possibilities: Christ must push it away from us, and not us away from it, as though it were external to us and belonged out there in the world. This double motion and cooperation do not imply that we are exonerated from preparing a way inside of us for Christ, which is possible only through Christ's grace. If we do, "he will often deign to set foot there, and he will stretch (*dilatabitque*) your own steps, so that you will run, with a dilated heart, along the way of God's commandments, about which you used to complain that its door was narrow." Wisdom walks the ways of Justice, seeking those who are worthy.²⁶

25 Ibid., section 23, p. 327.

26 Gueric d'Igny, *Sermons*, Avent III, sections 2–3, trans. Deseille (Paris: Cerf, 1970), S.C. 166, t. 1, pp. 125–127.

In Gueric's collection of biblical words and images, what might appear at times to be confused, and aimlessly meandering, actually describes perfectly what is distinctive about the space of joy. The rising space of dilation is a space *on its way to unanimity*, wherein all initiatives re-energize one another. I am expected, awaited, anticipated by the One toward whom I progress. He runs within me already when I run toward Him, borders and limits become porous, and it is impossible to keep track of who does what because all things and all persons converge. The convergence in question, however, instead of narrowing down to a point, gives rise to an ever more dynamic expansion. The motion that carries me to joy is joy itself if the joy that is involved is a joy whose essence is dilation. My very strides are more ample, just as they shrink, slow down, and tire out if I go where nothing and no one awaits me.

Be this as it may, we must journey upstream from the disciples to their master, from our two Cistercians to the founder of their order, Bernard of Clairvaux. Saint Bernard often cites Psalm 118, 32, but it is noteworthy that he tends to emphasize the running and to skip all mention of the dilated heart. There is a single instance, however, and it is of great beauty. Commenting on the Beatitudes for the feast of All Saints, Bernard remarks, first, that Jesus walked up a *mountain* in order to proclaim them. He had to climb it, at great personal effort: he was not carried there on the shoulders of his disciples. Bernard interprets this as a sign that Jesus himself is the first to practice what he preaches, setting the example for us by walking the way himself. "With confidence, I advance on the way of your commandments, knowing that you yourself have gone before me. Yes, it is with confidence, I say, that I run along the way of your commandments, for I know that you have come out of the most distant heaven, and that you have left it in order to run along the same way, and that it is in this way that you, also, reached the most distant heaven."²⁷ Here again, we transition from a first, directed motion (from the valley toward the mountain), where Christ precedes us, to a second one (from heaven to earth, through the Incarnation), where Christ comes toward us to greet us. Christ's dynamic precession invades all directions.

This is not to deny that Bernard reflects on the dilation of the heart elsewhere. In this regard, let us note a consequence of the psalm's words, which the reader may have already picked up. Because the psalm equates *dilatatio cordis* with "running" along the way of God's commandments, authors who take Psalm 118 as their point of departure tend to place dilation in the highest and rarest regions of the spiritual life. In contrast, authors such as Augustine, Thomas Traherne, or Paul Claudel equate *dilatatio cordis* with a joy that is

27 Saint Bernard, "Sur la Toussaint," I, 5, *Opera*, éd. Leclercq (Rome: Editiones Cirtsercienses, 1968), t. V, p. 330; trans. Emery, *Sermons pour l'année* (Turnhout: Brepols et Taizé, 1991), p. 769. Cf. *Sermons divers*, 24, 3, *Opera*, VI/1, p. 185, trans. Emery (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer), 1982, t. I, p. 198.

susceptible of taking many forms and degrees, according to various levels of spiritual ascent, starting with the very first step. Michaux is an exception, since, contrary to Bernard, he keeps dilation but says nothing of the commandments. What Michaux describes, however, is a very rare experience. By consulting further passages of these same authors, we are able to correct any asymmetry and compensate for the imbalance.

In his third sermon on the Ascension, which is when the fleshly Christ takes his leave and disappears, Bernard emphasizes that our two chief powers, intellect and affect, must be purified. Through his earthly actions, Christ has illuminated our spirits. His illumination is also a spatialization: our intellect is drawn out of its pettiness, out of its self-fascination and self-enclosure in order to be thrown, as it were, out into the open. Christ, Bernard says, “has left us very vast fields (*latissimos campos*) so that our intelligence may come and go in them (*spatiandum* = come and go in them).”²⁸ In order for our affect and desire to be transformed, however, an action is required of the Holy Ghost, to whom Christ must, in a sense, cede his place. Responding to the fact that Christ becomes invisible through ascending to heaven, the invisible Holy Ghost descends, whose presence is discernable only through action. Pentecost answers the Ascension. Hence there are monks who “not only walk but run, or even better fly” to practice the religious life, whereas others (whose intellect is enlightened, but whose desire is not mobilized) drag their feet, struggle, find night prayers too long, food distasteful, clothing shameful, and so on. Their affect is “recalcitrant.”²⁹ The former are those whose volition has been not only “renewed” but “created anew” by the Holy Ghost, and for whom what seemed difficult or impossible has become easy. “Happy are those who have reached this state: not only do they experience no evil, but they remain as well in a sort of marvelous dilation of the heart (*in mira quadam cordis dilatatione*).”³⁰ It is in them, at home in them, that the Holy Ghost will be able to dwell. What is most important here is that dilation marks a transformation of volition at its root. A quasi re-creation is involved, so new in character that the will passes over into a higher and different order. What we have here is no mere feeling of elation or well-being. For Bernard as for Catholic tradition, affect and will cannot be separated (which does not mean that deciding to love something suffices for me to love it!) My affects know far more about what I want than I know myself.

The key is to act at the root. Whoever waits until he is in a good mood, or until he “gets up on the right side of the bed,” as the saying goes, to do what he must, risks waiting a whole lifetime without doing anything, since he has

28 Saint Bernard, “Sur l’Ascension,” III, 2, *Opera*, t. V, p. 132; and trans. p. 524.

29 *Ibid.*, section 6, pp. 134–135 and p. 527.

30 *Ibid.*, section 8, p. 136 and p. 528 (the translation left out *mira*).

adopted a passive and childish attitude. The point, here, is that *it is renewal that unlocks the space of joy*. Joy renders all things new because joy comes itself from novelty. Further passages in Bernard develop this thought in light of Psalm 118, 32. In a sermon on circumcision that interprets the eight days separating birth from circumcision figuratively as a progress in acquiring virtues, Bernard equates circumcision with the seventh day: “You are now well-practiced in the virtues: ask, then, that the light of spiritual zeal (*devotionis*) be given to you, the very serene daylight, the sabbath of the mind, in which, like a soldier who has accomplished his tour of duty, you will be able to live without laboring amidst all possible labors (*in laboribus universis vivas absque labore*); and run, with a dilated heart, in the way of God’s commandments; so much so, that what you once did in bitterness and anguish of mind, you will now and henceforth accomplish with perfect sweetness and delight.”³¹ As the passage unfolds, novelty takes the form of *refreshment*, after the heat and fatigue of the day. The Sabbath in question is very active; the contemplative retreat is very busy! Once again, the point is not to desist from acting, but to act according to a different principle, in such a way that action is no longer laborious but done willingly. Bernard clarifies, however, that “the light of discernment, mother of virtues and of reaching perfection, is needed for the one who runs, lest he run to his own destruction (*ne incurrat qui currit*).”³² If a reader experiences this monastic language as foreign to her and unconvincing, let her consider the many people she knows who balk at having to work for an additional fifteen minutes a day at a task that weighs on them, yet who willingly undergo the most austere privations and suffering for the sake of training for a marathon or for a challenging mountain hike, embracing these hardships with joy, so great is the power of dilation! Such athletes of physical prowess must be reminded of the importance of *lumen discretionis*.

One of Bernard’s sermons on various topics distinguishes the “four degrees of a good will,” exhibiting that taste for making lists that medieval authors share with Chinese sages. Running with a dilated heart on the way of God’s commandments is twice equated with the third degree. It is marked by joy, by *hilaritas*, and thus by laughter, even if the laughter involved is inner laughter.³³ The third degree is the highest in this lifetime, since the fourth degree is reserved for angels. The image of a running race, along with a memory of Antiquity (when runners oiled their skin), prompts Bernard to affirm that the will “has its skin all bathed in the oil of spiritual grace,” as an image of ease and suppleness. There is thus nothing higher for man here below, with regard

31 Bernard, “Sur la circoncision,” III, 10, *Opera*, t. IV, p. 289, trans. p. 173.

32 *Ibid.*, section 11, p. 290 and p. 174.

33 Bernard, *De diversis*, 124, 2, *Opera*, t. IV, 1, p. 403, trans. Emery, t. II, p. 222.

to the good life, than the dilation of the heart. There is nothing higher than joy. We are at the polar opposite of Kant, for whom accomplishing our duty against our inclination increases moral merit, since it manifests a meritorious victory over the self. To Bernard, this would belong only to the second degree!

Over and beyond actual citations of Psalm 118, Bernard reflects elsewhere on the nature of dilation. In his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, for example, he views dilation as the very condition of God's dwelling in us. "Oh what amplitude (*latitudo*) and what prerogative of merits there are in the soul that is recognized as worthy to receive the divine presence, and that is apt to grasp it! What shall be said, moreover, of the soul that has inner pathways for walking at its disposal, spacious enough for the divine majesty to walk and be active in them?"³⁴

The image does not refer to the house of the soul that was evoked by Augustine, or to the castle of the soul that Saint Teresa of Avila will one day evoke, but to the cloister of the soul, with its peristyle. For this ample inner space to become available, however, we must be rid of our external worries and vices: "The soul must first be emptied of all such things if it is to become a heaven and God's dwelling." The depth of the sky is now added to the horizontal dimension of the pathway for walking. Bernard introduces the idea of emptiness, which will be so dear to Rheno-Flemish mysticism. Should we say that God abhors a vacuum, or that He is beckoned by it? In any event, He comes to inhabit it. The spatial experience of joy is an experience of plenitude, but of a vibrant plenitude that requires movement and free-play, excluding all clutter and impediment. It is a form of plenitude, therefore, that requires the openness of emptiness: joy fills me and carries me away, but it does not, strictly speaking, *fulfill* me.

What is empty of passions and of their clutter possesses, nonetheless, a definite content, namely love: "Its amplitude is its love, as the Apostle (Paul) says: *dilate yourselves in charity*. Although the soul, as a pure spirit, has no corporeal extension (*corpoream quantitatem*), grace, nevertheless, confers on it what is denied to it by nature. Yes, the soul grows and spreads, but spiritually" — which is precisely dilation. Augustine wrote a dialogue with a title that might dismay us at first blush, *De quantitate animae*, "On the quantity of the soul." In it, he explains that the soul's quantity does not refer to "how much space it occupies" but to "how much ability" it possesses. The soul is measured by its power.³⁵ Its measure is the measure of charity: "The soul must increase and dilate in order to be capable of God." The more love

34 Bernard, *Sermons sur le Cantique*, 27, 10, trans. Verdeyen (Paris: Cerf, 1998), S.C. 431, t. II, p. 137; as for what follows.

35 Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, XVII, 30, Bibl. Aug. 5 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1948), pp. 286–289.

spreads, the more the soul itself is capacious, culminating with love for one's enemies.

In the next page, Bernard inverts the spatial scheme, in a sense, by depicting us as those who must take over the space of charity, by which he means that we must take over its potentialities: "You may continue to exert violence to the far ends of the realm of charity, holy invader, in order to occupy it to its outer limits."³⁶ In all cases, the emphasis that is put on capaciousness is the same: space increases, be it the space that spreads within us, or the space in which we ourselves expand.

Another sermon on *The Song of Songs* brings a very different space into play, namely the space where the inside and the outside communicate with one another through the aperture of a window. The verse in question is the verse in which the divine Groom, who is outside the dwelling, looks inside through the dormer windows or attic skylights at his bride, who is inside. God's gaze upon us, Bernard says, is what makes us progress.³⁷ He invokes the celebrated distinction between the two meanings of "confession," namely admitting a sin and affirmatively praising. He applies the distinction to the two types of aperture onto the divine outside: "Every time that I confess my sins, which I cannot do without a tightening of the heart (*angustia cordis*), it is as though I opened an attic skylight, which is to say a very narrow window." Luckily, despite its mean size, God sees us through it. "Yet if, at times, with a heart that is dilated by charity, contemplating divine goodness and mercy, I delight in pouring my soul out in praise and testimonies of gratitude, it seems to me that it is no longer a narrow skylight that I open to the Groom who stands behind the wall, but a very wide window." God sees us all the better and all the more willingly! Bernard's heart is definitely not Leibniz's windowless and doorless monad.

The dilated heart, in short, is the heart that opens itself wide to let God see inside it. What is most remarkable in this mystic poetry of windows and doors is that the openings are brought about through *confessio*, which is to say through acts of the *voice*. As Plato had already proposed, voice is what exposes us in our nakedness. Voice is what alone makes us truly visible, even to God Himself, not solely to a human interlocutor. The beautiful expression of "opening oneself up to someone" on a given topic says it all. To open oneself up to another person is to open one's mouth to speak. Windows and skylights are not things but speech acts. When I praise, I appear openly, I become transparent. A word of love is a window opened onto the outside, which also renders the inside brighter. In Bernard's view, God would, of course, see what lies in the bottom of our hearts even if we did not open ourselves up to

36 Bernard, *Sermon sur le cantique*, 27, 11, t. II, p. 339.

37 Op. cit., t. IV (Paris: Cerf, 2003), pp. 148–151, S.C. 472.

Him, but that is precisely the point. It would not be an exchange, a mutual light.

Without attempting to follow the theme of the dilated heart of Psalm 118 through an open-ended multitude of authors, we must consider two later meditations because of their importance. The deepest and most magnificent of these is certainly the one composed by Saint Teresa of Avila. Although she is the least “cultivated” and “educated” of the authors who have been discussed in this chapter so far, her knowledge of divine things came evidently from the source, as no one will deny. She cites “*cum dilatasti cor meum*” twice in *The Mansions of the Interior Castle (Moradas del castillo interior)*, in connection with the fourth mansions (she explores and describes seven levels in all). Let us recall that she compares the soul to a castle with various “mansions” or “apartments.” The aim, if grace permits, is to approach the most secret and central mansion, where the king himself dwells. As the mansions become progressively more interior, Teresa elaborates their description in greater and greater detail. In her view, dilation of the heart characterizes the fourth level of mansions in what distinguishes it essentially from the three preceding levels. Dilation, in other words, marks the passage to a higher order. It heralds the entrance into a higher economy than the one in which we previously stood. Hence its special importance: what is involved is not passing from a cramped space to an expanded space as though the same space (the same dimensions of our life) were narrow at first and then expanded. Rather, the passage to spaciousness marks the passage to another principle. There is a qualitative leap.

In order to describe it, Teresa sometimes uses the verb *dilatar* and sometimes the verb *ensanchar*, which is another Spanish term for expansion, and which dictionaries also translate as “dilate.” The telling sign that a key difference is involved relative to earlier stages is that Teresa ends up contesting the notion that it is actually “the heart” that is dilated at the fourth stage. She prefers to say that it is the center of the soul, located at a greater depth. From a descriptive point of view, the passage to a higher level is conveyed by substituting “taste” or “tastes” for the “consolations” that were experienced hitherto. “Consolation” starts in us and by our own efforts, ending in God, whereas “taste” starts in God and ends in us.³⁸ It is for the sake of clarifying the difference that the great Teresa cites Psalm 118 for the first time in this context: “I remember at this moment a verse that ends the last psalm that is recited at prime. It ends as follows: *Cum dilatasti cor meum*.³⁹ Persons who have a solid experience of such favors need nothing more in order to grasp the difference between consolations and tastes; others, however, need further

38 Saint Teresa is cited from *Obras completas*, eds. Efen de la Madre de Dios and Steggink (Madrid: Editorial Católica, 1972); trans. The Carmelites of Paris-Clamart (Paris: Fayard, 1963), here, respectively, for *Moradas* 4, 1, 4–5, text pp. 382–383, trans. t. II, p. 566.

39 In the text, Teresa writes *cum* for *cum*, and *meun* for *meum*.

explanation.” The role of dilation in pinpointing the difference is clear. Teresa continues with the following sentence, paradoxical in many ways when compared to other passages that are discussed in this book: “Consolations do not expand (*no ensanchan*) the heart, on the contrary. They usually tighten it a bit (*aprietan un poco*).”⁴⁰ In what way?

Teresa cites the example of the exhaustion that we might derive from weeping inexhaustible tears over our sins or over Christ’s Passion. There is in such an exhaustion and in such tears a circumstantial and psychological aspect: “One does not become a better person for it” and “it is by no means certain that it stems entirely from love.” Be this as it may, what matters is that such states come only from us, and that “what is involved is almost wholly the soul’s own work.” We cannot, however, be the principle of our own dilation, if dilation is to be worthy of the name. Moreover, Teresa’s numerous concrete descriptions of consolations depict a see-saw effect. Consolations are often followed by desolations and melancholy. A person fluctuates easily between the two states. Whoever makes his feeling of the moment into the measure of his state as a whole will be profoundly dismayed when he suddenly feels nothing. The next chapter reveals the principle that underlies the difference between consolation and taste very explicitly. This is the chapter in which Teresa utters the famous sentence that fascinated Claudel: “Ignorant and lacking in wit as I am, I can find nothing more suitable to convey the idea of certain spiritual things than water. Generally speaking, I have a special predilection for this element. Consequently, I have observed water with special care.”⁴¹ She says, literally, that she is water’s “friend.”

What transpires? Two possibilities of life, two spiritual economies, are figured by two basins: “One basin receives water that comes from afar, through long channels and by means of human art; the other is built right at the source, so that it fills up without a sound.”⁴² The first basin symbolizes the first three levels of mansions, the second symbolizes what appears with the fourth level: “Water brought through a channel represents the consolations that are acquired through meditation. We draw them to ourselves through meditation, by reflecting on created things and through a tedious labor of understanding.” The water of consolation reaching us makes noise, which is the noise of our efforts. “In the other fountain, water proceeds from the source, which is God. . . . This water flows from our innermost depth, with extreme peace, tranquility and sweetness. Whence it springs, however, and how it springs, that is what I do not know.” Nor is it “felt at first in the heart,” Teresa adds, as the earlier consolations were. God inundates us wholly, body and soul.

40 4, 1, 5, text, p. 383, trans. p. 567.

41 4, 2, 2, p. 385 and p. 571.

42 4, 2, 3, pp. 385–386, and p. 572.

This is when Teresa cites Psalm 118 for the second time, making the very same mistake in Latin that Michaux would make, which makes one wonder.⁴³ She now explains herself fully with regard to dilation. On this rare occasion, she allows herself to correct the biblical text: “It seems to me that the pleasure in question is not born of the heart but of a place that is still more interior, from somewhere very deep. I think it must be the soul’s center (*el centro del alma*).” In a sense, she means the heart’s heart, or the place in us that is more interior than our own interior, to paraphrase Augustine. The gradual refining of the concepts employed for mystical theology over the centuries, and especially for its topicality and for its doctrine of the soul’s distinct powers, means that the biblical term of “heart,” which had long sufficed to signify ipseity, bothers Teresa here. The term seems too synthetic to her. It suggests something that is overly psychological and emotional, having gradually evolved in its meaning. We can objectify the heart and appropriate it by means of a possessive adjective. I can say “my heart,” or “my soul,” but I cannot, strictly speaking, say “my center.” The innermost point that is my soul is not something that I can call mine, as though I could take a hold of it and appropriate it to myself. The place where God’s transcendence is in contact with my soul cannot be included in what belongs to me, or among the conceptualizing powers of my consciousness. The innermost ground of my self is not mine. The source of what I feel is not felt. A center that could be called “mine” would be inferior to the true center and peripheral to it. The impossibility stems from this. It allows us, at the very least, to understand Teresa’s correction of the psalm.

“I return to the verse because it seems to me to be helpful in making the expansion (*ensanchamiento*) of which I speak understood. No sooner has this celestial water started to spring forth from its source, which is to say from our very depth (*lo profundo de nosotros*), that our innermost being seems to dilate and expand (*se va dilatando y ensanchando*). Then inexpressible spiritual goods abound. The soul itself is unable to comprehend what it receives at that moment. The soul breathes in a lovely perfume. If I may avail myself of a metaphor, it’s as though a furnace were burning in our innermost depth, in which exquisite perfumes were being thrown. Neither the fire nor its place can be seen: but the heat and odorous smoke penetrate the whole soul. Often, let me say it again, even the body participates in it.”⁴⁴ Saint Teresa shows, next, that the experience is not one that we can procure for ourselves. No

43 The translation standardizes the Latin text, but the Spanish edition records: “Dilataste cor meum,” p. 386. It is troubling that Michaux cites the same three words and makes the same mistake with the verb. Is it a coincidence? Or did he find the citation in Teresa? This would suppose that he used a serious Spanish edition. If a Michaux specialist could vouch that Michaux read Spanish and owned a Spanish edition of Teresa’s works, the probability would be high, since we know as a fact that he was interested in mystics.

44 Teresa, *Moradas*, 4, 2, 6, p. 386 and p. 573.

effort can achieve it. Moreover, its absence does not signify reprobation. Nor is what is involved yet a union with God in the strict sense (we are only at the stage of the fourth mansions!). There is something profoundly uncalculated, involuntary, and inspired in the basic joy that dilates us. Such abundant water is “given by God to whomever he wants, and he often gives it at the moment when the soul thinks of it the least.”⁴⁵

In the ensuing chapter, which is the last of the fourth stage, Teresa returns, after a short digression, to the dilation that is connected to “taste.” She modifies the spatial schemata of her description. Instead of an overflowing source that spreads in every direction, it is now the basin itself that expands: “There occurs in the soul a very manifest dilation or expansion. Suppose a source that does not flow *away* because its basin is made to expand as the water flows in and increases. . . . God prepares the soul and makes it apt to contain all that he wants to put in it. The sweetness and inner expansion that are involved may be recognized by the following effect: the soul no longer feels itself bound, as before, by God’s service, its action is much more extended (*mucha más anchura*). The fear of hell no longer disturbs it.”⁴⁶ Teresa’s new metaphor fits better with traditional descriptions of dilation, especially with Augustine’s: God Himself expands the soul’s *capacity*.

We must take care to note that the fruit of such joy is more freedom, more trust, and more ease “in what pertains to God’s service.” Although she does not cite the other half of the verse concerning the way of God’s commandments, Teresa, who was every bit as outstanding in decisive action as she was in contemplation, gives it its full due. Hers is by no means a paralyzing sort of ecstasy that might hinder our capacity to perform our duties and tasks. Rather, joy enables us to perform our tasks all the better in that we perform them with more suppleness. There is a convergence with our previously cited authors. Mysticism does not tear us away from our responsibility. As befits her great wisdom, Teresa gives solid advice with regard to the possible illusions and psychological (all too psychological) exaltations to which her writings might give rise. To her as well as to other teachers, imagination is the mistress of error. The comprehensive perfection of Saint Teresa’s doctrine is such that our chapter could stop right here, but it is not superfluous to add two brief codas.

In the same generation, Spain’s other irradiated and burning voice, Saint John of the Cross, did not fail to nourish himself with Psalm 118, albeit with a different pitch and more succinctly. In the section of *Obscure Night of the Soul* in which he describes the different degrees of the ladder of love (numbering ten, in his view), he equates dilation with the sixth degree. As in

45 Teresa, *Moradas*, 4, 2, 10, p. 387 and p. 574.

46 Teresa, *Moradas*, 4, 3, 10, pp. 389–390 and p. 579.

Teresa's doctrine, dilation represents an upper stage of the journey, but not the highest. In contrast, Augustine, as we saw, views dilation, in all of its degrees of strength, as basically coextensive with the whole unfolding journey. John of the Cross puts the emphasis on *movement*: "The sixth degree prompts the soul to run to God with a light foot, and allows the soul to reach God often. Through hope, the soul runs without weakening, because love has strengthened it, prompting it to fly effortlessly. . . . The reason why the soul enjoys love's great speed at this stage, is that charity is already very dilated in it (*ya muy dilatada*) and that the soul is almost wholly purified." John illustrates what he means by citing, among other passages, Psalm 118, 32. Unlike Teresa, however, he does not really describe dilation in this context,⁴⁷ except to record its effect and its connection with hope.

Let us allow little Teresa of Lisieux to have the last word, without commenting on it. Teresa of Lisieux sees the spiritual running as lasting into eternity, without interruption:

If it is difficult to give to whoever asks, it is harder still to let a possession be taken away without asking for it back. Oh, my Mother, I say that it is hard, but I should say, rather, that it *seems* hard, since the Lord's yoke is sweet and light. When one accepts it, one feels its sweetness directly, and one exclaims with the Psalmist: "I have *run* in the way of your commandments ever since you have dilated my heart." Charity alone is able to dilate my heart, o Jesus, and ever since your sweet flame has been consuming it, I run with joy in the way of your *new* commandment. I want to run in it until the happy day when, joining the train of virgins, I will be able to follow you into infinite spaces, singing your new canticle, which must be the canticle of Love.⁴⁸

Here, dilated running becomes the song that begins here and never ends.

47 Saint Jean de la Croix, *La Nuit obscure*, II, 20, 1, *Obras*, ed. Crisogono de Jesus (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores cristianos, 1973), pp. 680–681; trans. Cyprien de la Nativité de la Vierge (Paris: Desclée de brouwer, 1967), p. 478. (This seventeenth-century translation is the most beautiful.)

48 Saint Teresa of Lisieux, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Lonchamp (Paris: Cerf, 1992), pp. 255–256 (Manuscript C).

Chapter 4

Mystical Dilations

Unlike many of the other chapters, which examine the meaning and role of dilation in a given author's work as a whole, this chapter will limit itself to a few exceptionally important pages in two celebrated French mystics of the seventeenth century, Saint Francis of Sales and Louis Chardon. We will also take a side trip to fourteenth-century England and include Richard Rolle. The purpose of the chapter is to show that the heart's dilation, through which alone spiritual life begins and which constitutes under its many guises a first sign of grace, as we saw, is also found at the summits of mystical life. Oftentimes, indeed, it is found at the highest and most remote mystical summits. It matters to add that all three authors are gifted writers, each in his own vein.

Francis of Sales is our first case in point. His best-known work (because it was studied until recently in French schools) is the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which tends to overshadow his incomparable masterpiece, the *Treatise on the Love of God*. The lasting fire that is branded into the reader by the *Treatise* has the advantage of being less closely tied down to its time and place, but the language of both books is equally lofty and deliciously colorful. Its ample rhythm manages to stay close to the humble grain of ordinary human experience and to convey a brotherly sense of daily life. In the *Introduction*, where a large audience of lay Christians of various walks of life is addressed, Francis of Sales puts forth an accessible method of mental prayer and meditation. The first step consists in becoming conscious of God's presence, in whom we are perpetually immersed, like birds in the air. Then we must invoke God, pray to Him, and, finally, select a "mystery" (such as a scene from Christ's life) that helps us to collect ourselves and to focus, using

our imagination.¹ Deepening the exercise involves bringing our faculties into play in an ever-increasing order of elevation. “After the activity of imagination, there ensues the activity of understanding, which we call meditation.”² Meditation consists in “considering” the chosen theme, examining it and applying our thought to it.

The point, obviously, is not to meditate for the sake of meditation, but to become transformed as we meditate. The ultimate moment of meditation thus impacts the will: “Meditation provokes good motions in the will or affective dimension of our soul, such as loving God and our neighbor, . . . imitating the life of our Lord, feeling compassion, admiration, joy, fear of incurring God’s displeasure” and so on.³ Making the will one and the same with the power to love (be it good or bad) stems from Saint Augustine and traverses the whole Catholic tradition. The “affections” that are triggered in the will result deliberately from the previous exercise of “considering” and must not be experienced as fleeting states. We must allow them to linger and must in some sense inhabit them: “In these affections, our soul must pour itself out and spread out as much as possible.” Francis of Sales even supplies a short bibliography, suggesting two works that are completely forgotten today. One of these works, he explains, “shows how one must dilate one’s affections.”

We must not, however, dwell on our affections inordinately long, since, as Francis explains a bit further, a dilation of this kind might turn into an inflation of pride and an illusory bubble: “Virtues that we consider mentally at great length but do not put into practice sometimes inflate the mind and courage, since we tend to imagine that we actually are what we have resolved to be and chosen to be.”⁴ It follows that “general affections” must be converted into “special and particular resolutions for our correction and betterment,”⁵ requiring a concrete instance of application. The point is not to forgive trespasses generally, but to forgive such and such an actual trespass by such and such a person. In order for it to bear fruit, the affective dilation that has been prepared by the imagination and the understanding must give rise to a contraction of the will, mobilizing it to an urgent and goal-directed decision. The contraction, however, would not have such a novel force, a force that changes us, if it were not the contraction of what had been dilated, or of that into which we ourselves had first been dilated. Nothing in this is particularly mystical so far, but the high rank of dilation in the process is noteworthy, along with the connection between dilation and the will.

1 St Francis of Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote*, II, 2–3–4, *Oeuvres*, ed. Ravier (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 82–86.

2 *Op. cit.*, II, 5, p. 86.

3 *Op. cit.*, II, 6, p. 87, and p. 88 for what follows.

4 *Op. cit.*, II, 8, pp. 89–90.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

It is obviously in the *Treatise of the Love of God* that Francis of Sales develops the idea of our dilation further and higher. Significantly, dilation is evoked in both the opening and closing books of the treatise. In both cases, dilation is presented in terms of a contrast between what is natural (what does not depend on us and is not deliberately chosen by us) and what is voluntary. In Book I, after establishing in Chapter IX that “love tends to union,” as a loving kiss manifests, Francis affirms in Chapter X that “the union to which love aspires is spiritual.”⁶ In this context, he distinguishes between “natural unions” on the one hand, which are founded on “resemblance, blood ties” and other types of involuntary ties, granted that these natural unions may be strengthened by deliberate actions, and “voluntary unions” on the other. The causal connection between love and union is circular: “With regard to voluntary unions, they are subsequent to love, yet they also serve as causes of the same love by affirming love’s goal and unique aim; so that, just as love tends to union, union often expands and increases love. Love prompts us to seek conversation, and conversation often feeds and increases love. Love prompts us to desire ‘nuptial union’ and ‘nuptial union,’ in turn, conserves and dilates love — so true is it that love in every way tends to union.” *Conversation* here must be interpreted in its old meaning, namely its Latin meaning of shared life, intimacy, being-together — of which verbal exchange makes up only an intermittent part (in the same passage, Francis speaks of “conversation and companionship”). As for “nuptial union,” it is easily transferred to the union of human being and God, in conformity with the language of the *Song of Songs*, which pervades Francis of Sales’s work.

The union to which love tends, therefore, is not the sort of goal where one comes to rest, fulfilled by having reached it, stabilized at last. Rather, the union prompts new love and increases it. Such is precisely the role of dilation. Far from indicating a state of contentment, dilation indicates the very motion through which desire is born again, stronger and more vivacious for being joined to what is loved. What forms the spring or rebound of dilation is the excess of what is desired over any given desire. The excess carries me off and folds me into its presence rather than entice me through absence and distance. In various forms, the theme is a constant one in Christian mysticism, going back to Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. The notion that union “conserves and dilates love” must be taken in a strong sense, with the emphasis of *hendiadys*: union is conserved *only* through dilation.

In the same chapter, after a particularly fine discussion of how a person’s attention is proportionately more alert as it is more focused, Francis reflects that ecstasy may lift us to new heights but also drag us downward and degrade us (Francis here anticipates the philosopher Jean Wahl’s famous distinction

6 Francis of Sales, *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, I, 9 et 10, pp. 376 ff. and pp. 379 ff.

between “trans-ascending” transcendence and “trans-descending” transcendence). Francis then arrives at the main thesis of the chapter, well prepared by the previous analyses. Spiritual union alone, in his view, is what allows for a perpetual dilation. He does not shy away from invoking Aristotle’s notorious *Post coitum omne animal triste*, which used to make schoolboys giggle. (Is it still taught in sexual education classes?) Francis recounts how “the great Philosopher was prompted to say that almost every animal, after enjoying its most ardent and urgent physical pleasure, remained sad, forlorn and stunned, like a merchant who, convinced that he was about to make substantial gain, finds himself deceived and afflicted by a severe loss.”⁷ At the opposite pole of this experience stands what Francis called dilation at the start of the chapter: “In contrast, as intellectual love finds more satisfaction in uniting with its object than it had hoped, and seeks to perfect its delight, it perpetuates its delight further by uniting itself further, and becomes more tightly united by perpetuating its delight.” Desire is without end, not because of some infinite intrinsic resource, but because of the excess of what is desirable and the overabundance of the encounter.

At the start of the final book, Book XII, in a passage that does not carry, admittedly, the same weight or importance, Francis doubts that our possibilities in the realm of supernatural love (charity) correspond to the possibilities of our “natural complexion,” which is to say of our character or temperament. Nonetheless, Francis acknowledges that in persons who are naturally mild and loving, if they free themselves of their multiple attachments, “love finds it easy to dilate throughout the faculties of the heart; from which arises a very pleasant sweetness, one that is wholly absent in persons who have bitter, harsh, grim and surly souls.”⁸ The end of the chapter, however, invites such “poor souls,” whom nothing dilates, to direct themselves to the place where God will give them to become dilated. Here again, union and dilation go hand in hand. As we observe, Francis of Sales does not say that we dilate ourselves, but that love dilates within us. His point is to underscore that “the charity that gives life to our hearts is not extracted from our hearts, but is poured into them like a heavenly liqueur.”⁹

Our own effort, therefore, must consist, above all, in not obstructing or opposing the force of expansion that God extends to us. Explicating the theses of the Council of Trent on human cooperation with grace, which affirm that we are free to reject grace and push it away, Francis writes: “If we do not push the grace of holy love away from us, holy love dilates more and more through continuous increases inside of our souls, until our souls are wholly

7 Op. cit., I, 10, p. 385.

8 Op. cit., XII, 1, p. 950.

9 Op. cit., II, 22, p. 477.

converted: just as great rivers spread out and occupy an ever widening space when they flow into open plains.”¹⁰ Augustine invited us to live “at large”: here, the thought is inverted. We ourselves must become what is vast and “at large,” where love can become a flowing river. This leads to the heliocentrism of grace with which the book concludes: “If the soul and its body form a little world, charity is the sun that embellishes everything, heats everything, and vivifies everything.”¹¹ Since the sun in question is internal, it is internally that we must open up all that its fertile light is able to reach and must reach.

A final page of the *Treatise of the Love of God* matters for our present investigation. It is found in a chapter entitled “On the Love That Is Based on Conformity and Stems from Sacred Complacency.”¹² The term “complacency” has since taken on a pejorative meaning, equated with fatuity in the case of self-complacency, or with flattery and sycophancy in the case of complacency for someone else. Obviously, this is not Francis’s meaning, but the double meaning of the term is relevant. If we think about it, complacency means taking pleasure in something or in someone, and it also means seeking to please. In both cases, the term is relational and intentional. The double meaning is clear in the sentence through which Francis summarizes the chief thesis of the chapter: “True love is never ungrateful, it seeks to please those in whom it finds pleasure; whence stems the conformity between lovers, which prompts us to be the same as what we love.” Complacency, therefore, prompts assimilation and conformation, in a veritable exchange of properties — entailing either betterment or degradation, depending on the nature of the object. Love produces similarity where similarity does not exist initially and automatically. Thus the love of God produces the “deiformity” that mattered so deeply to Plato and to the whole Platonic tradition before becoming important for Christianity. For Francis of Sales, the highest form of union is certainly the union of wills: to do God’s will is the surest way to divine union.

Before concluding with a general remark on the meaning of dilation, Francis illustrates the complacency that he has in mind by drawing a comparison, as is his wont: “A person who is attracted by sweet perfumes and enters into a perfumer’s shop, perfumes himself through the pleasure that he takes in smelling the sweet scents; and when he leaves the shop, he shares with others the pleasure that he has just experienced, spreading among them the perfumes that cling to him. Through the pleasure that our heart takes in the beloved object, it draws the qualities of the loved object to itself, because delight opens the heart, just as sadness constricts it. Thus Sacred Scripture often uses the word *dilate* for the word *rejoice*.” He continues by showing that “the heart

10 Op. cit., II, 21, p. 474.

11 Op. cit., II, 22, p. 478.

12 Op. cit., VIII, 1, pp. 763–764.

finds itself opened by pleasure” and that “the pleasure that one takes in a thing is like a propagator that propagates the pleasing qualities of the beloved object into the lover’s heart” — even those that are not anticipated or wanted. Francis’s insistence on pleasure must not lead us to conclude rashly that his austere spirituality is nothing more than a sort of religious hedonism, far from it! Yet if love has its dark nights, its sufferings and torments, it also reigns through joy and dilation.

What matters most essentially is the clear affirmation that dilation is by no means a motion through which I enjoy myself and rejoice wholly in myself, which is to say a motion in which I extend myself and increase through my own effort. Rather, dilation comes from a momentous encounter that opens my heart. It is the Other who dilates me, transforms me, and assimilates me to him — not by fusion but by conforming me to him. Implicitly, dilation encompasses more than just myself and the dilating Other. The story of the visit to the perfumer’s shop says more than first appears. When Francis of Sales says that the visitor “perfumes himself,” he obviously does not mean that the visitor douses himself with perfumes. He means that, by breathing in their scent, he takes them in and becomes permeated with them unwittingly, simply because he has entered the shop, just as he unwittingly spreads the perfume that has become his own to others when he exits the shop. Is there a better way to express the diffusiveness and communicability of joy than to say that the dilated person becomes a dilator himself, beyond any calculation or aim of his own? The atmospheric character of perfume is as though predestined to symbolize the expansion and transitivity of joy. Who will assign limits to it? We say that a face “breathes” joy when it makes us breathe joy, often communicating joy more readily than through a deliberate intention to rejoice us. We must remember the close connection that exists between dilation and amorous union with God.

In the same century, Louis Chardon serves as a second witness. A Dominican, this great mystic and French author¹³ is exactly a generation younger than Francis of Sales. Born in 1595 and deceased in 1651, Chardon was younger than Francis (1567–1622) by thirty years, just as his masterpiece, *The Cross of Jesus*, published in 1647,¹⁴ followed the *Treatise of the Love of God* of 1616 by the same number of years. If Chardon does not enjoy his predecessor’s fame or his apostolic importance, Chardon’s work is no less full of grandeur and beauty. Here again, we will go right to the core of the matter, rather than conduct an exhaustive investigation into the term “dilation.” What distinguishes

13 Cf. my work *L'Intelligence du feu* (Paris: Bayard, 2003), pp. 173 ff.; as well as my article “Penser le style de Louis Chardon” in *Reconnaissances philosophiques*, ed. du Cerf, Paris 2010, Chapter V, pp. 93–104.

14 Following a courageous and beautiful initiative by the Editions du Cerf, the work was republished in 2004. The most recent edition dated back to 1937.

Chardon is that the term is most especially reserved for extreme situations and states, granted that it appears less frequently than it does in Augustine or Bossuet. Since dilation is nothing other than joy, namely the joy of a desire that has become more vivid and of a heart that has become more capacious, dilation accompanies our whole life according to more or less intense degrees, especially our religious life, from the first moment of our conversion. Chardon, however, does not describe dilation with any great precision except when it reaches an incandescent point beyond all measure, a point of which he himself says that it is a point of “folly” — granted that he means a “wise folly,” namely “the wise folly of souls that are excessively amorous of God.”¹⁵

There is something vertiginous in this wise folly, partaking of the vertigo that seizes those who are at the edge of the abyss of divine infinity. Even their disproportionate desire and love are insufficient before such an immemorial chasm. Their dilation vacillates and shatters before the infinite, which is glimpsed and experienced as such, in its measureless absence. Chardon describes the inner heart-rending that stems from dilation most distinctly with regard to Mary. Chardon’s Marian piety is far from sentimental, vapid, and mawkish, as the reader will judge for himself! Chardon focuses on the Virgin after the Ascension, after Jesus has disappeared and entered into glory. As the Virgin is separated from the son whom she loves without measure and with whom she desires to be reunited, a quasi-miracle is required, according to Chardon, to prevent her from dying of love. One might say about her what Teresa of Avila said about herself — that she dies from not dying. The Holy Ghost that keeps her alive hovers over her “not so much in order to comfort her but in order to make her feel her loss even more acutely, to feel her bereavement even more vividly and to feel even more forlorn amidst the most violent fire of her desire.”¹⁶ Love is “cruel” and a “tyrant,” love rips the heart: “Yet the Holy Ghost dilates her bosom, preventing it from being filled. The Holy Ghost opens his arms to her, simultaneously preventing her from the embrace.” Her mind sees the grandeur of celestial glory, and her volition is inflamed for it through the dilation of desire. “Is the point not to make her sorrow incomparably more anguished in her bereavement of what possesses so much grandeur? But what! If he treated the Son without pity, what should the Mother expect!” It is not in the festivities of Versailles but in such thoughts that we find the true grandeur of the *Grand siècle*, with its austere, bold nobility fed by excess rather than by reasonableness, contrary to what we are commonly taught. There is no doubt that it may well leave us stunned and disturbed.¹⁷

15 Louis Chardon, *La Croix de Jésus*, paragraph 489, p. 526.

16 Op. cit., paragraph 457, pp. 502–503, as for what follows.

17 In earlier analyses, I broached the idea of a “double constraint” that might come to mind. Chardon reflects deeply on the connection between joy and suffering.

So far, the joy of dilation seems to be but a means to make suffering more wrenching and more excruciating. Chardon even adds a new sorrow to the devotional tradition of the Virgin's "seven sorrows." It is the hallmark of real love and of what Chardon calls "separating love" — since the sorrow of separation is a trial of love's truth, increasing if love is strong and decreasing if love is weak and false. In this secret trial, Mary becomes "the mysterious burning bush that burns inwardly while its branches and leaves lose nothing of their verdure and beauty."¹⁸ The very fact that the desired death-by-love is postponed, making her desire for union all the more unbearable, is what allows her death to be a true death-by-love — one that is received. The Virgin "would be immortal if her Son did not come and draw her soul from her body with a kiss." According to Chardon, this is the rabbinical interpretation of the death of Moses, who dies from a "kiss" received from God. One is reminded of the later definition of the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, body and soul. In the context of the seventeenth century, let us recall Caravaggio's canvas, *The Death of the Virgin*, dating approximately from 1605. It caused a scandal, not because it depicts Mary's death, but because it depicts her body. The kiss that brings death to the immortal one, who is dilated in love without being able to embrace the source, brings Part I of *The Cross of Jesus* to a close.

The most important developments regarding dilation occur at the start of Part II. In a context that appears to be less wrenching, Chardon considers "the contemplation of divine perfections," and, therefore, infinity itself as "the source of insatiable desires" but also of "consolation."¹⁹ In the religious idiom of the seventeenth century, the contrast between "consolations" and "desolations" approximates the contrast that we might make between "joys" and "sorrows." Their alternation provides the rhythm of our whole life. As the contemplation of divine goodness increases, so does our joy (our "complacency"). Chardon adds that "the amorous delight that we find in God's delight dilates and strengthens within the will, for which it suffices that God be God, that his goodness be immense, that his attributes be infinite, that his magnitudes be limitless, that his riches be inexhaustible, that his joy be unchanging, his glory immutable and his being without end."²⁰ Such a list fully exhibits the primacy of infinity as a divine attribute (that "God be God" means that He is without end), just as it clarifies that God is the source of joy and the moving force behind dilation. If this were all, if we were to stop at this sole sentence, we might assess the wisdom involved to be a quiet and well-behaved sort of wisdom, rather than the disturbed and disturbing wisdom of love. Nothing

18 Chardon, *op. cit.*, paragraph 459, p. 504, as for what follows.

19 Chardon, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

20 *Op. cit.*, paragraph 486, p. 524, and for what follows as well.

indeed seems to distinguish what Louis Chardon says here about contemplation from what a metaphysician would say about the attribute of infinity — nothing, except dilation itself. The contemplative who rejoices that God is joy is prompted by dilation to want to increase what cannot be increased. He is prompted to want to give to the one who gives everything — losing all mooring and sense of proportion in a jubilatory synergy.

Since we cannot want anything for God that He does not have from all eternity, and since our powerlessness in this regard is tinged with pain because of the disproportion of our love, there is no solution except to transgress beyond what is possible and boldly to enter into the realm of what is impossible — into the “practice of desires that tend towards the impossible.”²¹ Indeed if the divine majesty “surpasses in perfection the full scope of the desires of all creatures,” and if the soul, nonetheless, cannot interrupt or suspend the dilation of its desire upon becoming aware of it, what is there to be done? “The soul has recourse to conditional or imaginary wishes.” Such wishes, although they are aimed at an imaginary object, are not themselves imaginary. Louis Chardon now invokes the famous “impossible suppositions” that have caused so many heated debates around mysticism, notably in the quarrel over quietism, which at this point lies ahead, in the future. Chardon’s approach is theologically irreproachable and perfectly balanced (although the last word might seem out of place in a discussion of excess, but there is and must be a fitting poise within disproportion itself. Otherwise, it would no longer be a disproportion of love but a mere exercise in words. The danger is always present, especially when the extreme is involved).

The soul responds violently to the “violent impressions that he (God) leaves on its understanding and will.” The classic example, inspired by the words of Moses and of Saint Paul, is that of accepting one’s own damnation if this would increase God’s glory or benefit one’s neighbor (but the point is precisely that God cannot want that the loss of Himself — the very definition of damnation — be the source of any sort of good). The impossible does not constitute an impassable barrier for love. In a typically protracted sentence that reproduces the very motion of unbridled increase that Louis Chardon describes, including its breathless culmination, he remarks that lovers of this kind “want to compensate for an infinite love, according to their faculties, from the side through which they participate in infinity; and as their desires can increase to infinity, we must not be surprised if their fervor dilates beyond their power, or if their judgment and reason cannot reach the excess of their ardor.”²² Love goes further than knowledge. In Hugh of Saint Victor’s marvelously deep formulation, love “enters and comes near, where science

21 Op. cit., paragraph 486, p. 524, as for what follows.

22 Op. cit., paragraph 489, p. 526.

remains outside.”²³ As for Chardon, he remembers Saint Anselm: “They love beyond all that can be thought.”²⁴ Consequently, such love “finds itself at last so powerfully exceeded by the dazzling beauties of divine perfections, that it is pressed (forced) by the disrupted uselessness and impossibility of its desires, to admit that it cannot wish anything more to the incomprehensible immensity of God’s abundance,” which in turn “excites a new pleasure in delighting in its own powerlessness.”²⁵ In order to be fully understood, this last sentence must be restored to the developing idea as a whole, which gives it its meaning. The lover dilates through wanting, impossibly, to give something of himself; he then discovers that he cannot, and the joy that he reaps at last from the fact that God cannot be increased (“his own powerlessness”) is the true recognition of God’s infinity, constituting *true praise*. It is a true recognition because it *became* one. It came to the soul through pain. It is more than a simple affirmation, known beforehand, that God is infinite.

The next chapter now tackles the ensuing stage: “the soul’s dilation for praising and loving God.”²⁶ The order of the words matters here: we were already in the midst of love and praise, but now praise takes the lead. “And as it (the soul) savors the sweetness of divine complacency more and more, all of its many forms of powerlessness band together and dilate in order to evaporate into actions through which it might be able to correspond to the ravishing impression that the pleasing sight of its object kindles in its breast.” *Evaporate* must be understood in its strict sense: one would like to become the vapor of a burning perfume, one would like to be consumed by praise.²⁷ The olfactory aspect will be found again later in *The Cross of Jesus* in connection with dilation. The context concerns the peace that God sometimes bestows: “Sometimes it (the soul) has the impression that this ravishing peace dilates and pours into it like an aromatic wine, or like a delicious balm, or again like a perfume from paradise, or like a precious and soothing oil, with an effectively penetrating power that carries the pleasant smells of eternity into the whole expanse of its being.”²⁸ *Ravishing*, like all powerful words, has weakened over time and acquired a maudlin meaning, but it traces back to the violence of rapture and ecstasy. Let us note that, similarly to what we saw in Francis of Sales earlier, the claim is not that we dilate thanks to peace, but that divine peace dilates within us.

As other examples in this book attest, the pleasant odor, the subtle perfume (no less powerful for being subtle, since what is involved is the “odor of

23 *Patrologie latine* (Migne), 175, 1038.

24 Chardon, op. cit., paragraph 490, p. 527.

25 Op. cit., paragraph 489, p. 526.

26 Op. cit., paragraph 491, p. 529, as for what follows.

27 Cf. *L’Intelligence du feu*, pp. 174 ff.

28 Chardon, op. cit., paragraph 563, p. 576.

eternity!”) together with their modes of diffusion, constitute a chief aspect of how space expands through joy. The emanations of the perfume spread out in the atmosphere and invade it by giving it a sort of plenitude. I breathe a sweetness that bathes me and invades me, coming from everywhere. The space involved is no longer neutral or indifferent; it possesses a taste and a flavor that beckon me and penetrate me. The perfume does not offer itself to me as something that I might accept or refuse; I have already imbibed it before determining its source and exact nature. There is a *prevenient* character to it, in the theological sense of the word, conforming to the etymology of a “prevenient” grace that precedes my volition and my actions by communicating its own motion to them. The perfumed space is full, but also, at the same time, free, allowing me to come and go and move about: I am circumvented, surrounded by a joy whose very essence is to be shared, and from which I deprive no one else by breathing it in. The perfumed atmosphere is a model of the harmony between the inside and the outside, of the happy communication between inner space and outer space. The taste of space is, then, the taste of joy. Allowing for obvious phenomenological differences, the same is true for the space of sound, in which song and music resonate: harmony invades space like a perfume and, there also, precedes us. The same characteristics turn an atmosphere marred by stench or by discordant sounds into a daily foretaste of hell. Ugliness and horror impregnate us in spite of ourselves, penetrating inside of us whether we want it or not.

The surprising English mystic Richard Rolle, a fourteenth-century hermit who died in 1349, articulated the dilation of spiritual senses in a particularly beautiful way. His distinctive style makes his writing impossible to translate (on account of its music, not of its meaning) because it is characterized by an obsessive alliteration based on a given initial letter. The idea is to use the greatest possible number of words, within a sentence or within a page, starting with the same phoneme. Let me cite a small example from the excerpt that we will consider: *Et in mulsum se mutat, non meminit mundanum*, which might be rendered as “And he mutates into must, remembering nothing of the mundane.” Rolle’s somewhat bizarre constancy in using alliteration is not what we admire most in him, granted that his poetics of repetition produces a sort of acoustic trance. In his work *Melody of Love (Melos amoris)*,²⁹ he describes how the soul first breathes in “the perfume of secret aromatic herbs,” and thereby becomes free, agile, and lively, seized with a “joyous desire” that lifts it above attacks of evil.³⁰ This means that smell is truly primary, giving access to the dimension that he will describe. From there we will move on to taste, mediated by contact and touch. “The soul senses the unction

29 Translated by the Moniales de Wisques, Paris, 1971, 2 volumes (*Sources chrétiennes*, 168–169).

30 Op. cit., t. II, pp. 110–111, as for what follows.

of God's sweetness. . . . The soul is filled with a mellifluous sweetness, and the heart, seeking to embrace the fullness of this sweetness in itself, makes a continuous effort to comprehend what is incomprehensible (*ut incomprehensibilem continue comprehendat*), and dilates always more and more (*et magis ac magis se semper dilatat*). The sense of taste is often fulfilled with joy; it perceives the savor of everlasting feasts; the palate is charmed by their sweetness." We then transition to drunkenness as a figure of ecstasy. "Like a man who drinks, he staggers as he walks. He rushes to take hold of a heady wine, drinks it, and remains dazed like someone intoxicated. He himself has been turned into a sweet wine and has no further memory of the things of this world." If the drinker becomes wine, the dilated person becomes himself a dilating agent, like the man who visits the perfume shop in Francis of Sales.

In a remarkable line of poetry, Rilke evokes the same metamorphosis, but one that transforms sorrow into joy: "If drinking is bitter to you, become wine (*werde Wein*)."³¹ Elsewhere, moreover, he speaks of the wine-press that is the heart, from which flows "an infinite wine for human beings," namely praise and celebration, which is even closer in spirit to what Richard Rolle describes.³² For Rolle, I become the wine that gave me to become dilated. The taste of it finally becomes concert, music, and song: "The hearing is filled with a sweet melody: it is like an inner voice that is perceived by the soul. The ears hear this harmonious concert, and the angels do not hesitate to reveal heavenly odes to the one who loves. Like a lyre concert, joy will invade him in the midst of his praise." (Joy thus comes to us and in us from elsewhere, the same as perfume.) It is a mystical version of Baudelaire's poem "Correspondences," in which "Perfumes, colors and sounds answer one another" (a poem that is also one of dilation, since it evokes perfumes "having the expansion of infinite things," with a dieresis that dilates the line itself). In one and the same page, we transition from smell to taste by going through touch, finishing with hearing. Sight is not lacking either, since it is evoked a little earlier in the form of light.

In short, dilation is found at every level of experience, including at the highest level of mystical moments. The supernatural is not necessarily the supra-sensible if there are spiritual senses that are susceptible of becoming dilated.

31 Rilke, *Sonnets à Orphée*, II, 29, trans. Angelloz.

32 *Sonnets à Orphée*, I, 7.

Chapter 5

Bossuet on the Open Roads

Bossuet's most famous pages and the ones that are most read today are from his *Funeral Orations*. As a result, Bossuet is remembered as a sublime orator operating on a symphonic scale and gifted with a powerful breath, but also as an austere and penitential thinker who reminds us of our creaturely nothingness and of life's vanity. More deeply, however, Bossuet is a man who is dedicated to joy, and, therefore, also, to dilation. Not surprisingly, the *Littré Dictionary*, which defines dilation as an "expansion of the heart," cites Bossuet when illustrating what it calls the "mystical meaning" of the term (which is to say its "spiritual" meaning). It adds further citations from Bossuet in connection with the verb form, *dilater*. Bossuet often uses the term, yet we must not look for it among his more rhetorical, amplified, and dilated works, namely his orations, but rather within his spiritual correspondence. We find the term, in particular, in the letters that he wrote for the spiritual guidance of nuns, where we encounter another Bossuet (or one who is neither wholly other nor wholly the same) — a Bossuet who is less carried away by the sublimity of sentences that soar like eagles. In these letters, we encounter a Bossuet who is more down-to-earth, more naked, more supple and, therefore, more rich in beauty: the same Bossuet that we encounter in his admirable commentaries on the Bible. This is a Bossuet who knows how to say the impossibility of saying, how to utter a truth that stutters, sharing with us the secret and gracious resource of his powerful speech. Those who have read these works have perceived their distinctive quality and said so.

Nonetheless, the term "dilation" is not, for Bossuet, a key term that calls for express definitions, as it is for Augustine. We penetrate its meaning by

examining how it is used.¹ Although his debt to Augustine is clear, Bossuet discerns something that is very specific about dilation. The term appears with its full importance right at the start of his work. In a discarded version of one of his first sermons, Bossuet draws a very Augustinian contrast (he says so himself) between the effects of fear and the effects of love. With regard to the former, he writes: “You see plainly that it stifles the soul’s feelings, but does not remove them” (meaning feelings that run against Justice). I repress and hide my evil wishes, but they remain within me. The power to eradicate them “belongs only to love; it is love that holds, so to speak, the key to the soul, that opens it and dilates it in order to let its own objects in.”² The antithesis between the “law of fear” and the “law of love” opposes what is inscribed only on our “surface” and what penetrates into our depth in order to transform us. We must beware, however, of reducing the contrast to a simple dichotomy between what is external and what is internal: for indeed the interiority of love has *become* so. The image of the “key” makes it clear: the love that is within us is not a natural love, but it comes from elsewhere and from far away. It must enter inside of us in order to accomplish in us the work that it alone is able to accomplish.

Bossuet would make use of the same passage in later works: “Love alone enters into the most secret depths of our hearts: it alone holds the key to the heart and tames its motions. You have wicked inclinations and disordered affections: these will never be chased away except by contrary inclinations — except by holy love, except by chaste affections for the true good. As a consequence of these contrary inclinations, the soul will be wholly other. Love dilates it through a special fervor, opening it up to its very core that it may receive the dew of heavenly graces. The soul is then no longer a stone upon which an external inscription is written, but a wax that is penetrated and melted by divine heat. It is in this manner that the Lord Jesus is truly engraved upon all of the faculties of our souls.”³ The irruption of love inside of the heart, which is forceful but not violent since love “holds the key” and thus has secret accomplices within the heart, and its subsequent invasion of the same heart are nothing other than the joy of dilation. In one and the same motion, dilation brings about both an expansion and a fecundation through which the heart is dispossessed of its hardness and desiccation, allowing it to receive an infusion of grace. The image of dew, like the image of rain, to designate divine grace, is of biblical origin. It was elaborated further by Catholic

1 In this regard, Jacques Le Brun’s excellent work *La Spiritualité de Bossuet* (Paris: Librairie G. Klincksieck, 1972) cites passages in Bossuet that concern our topic, but neither privileges, nor comments on, our term.

2 Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Oeuvres oratoires*, ed. Lebarq (Paris: Hachette, 1914), t. I, p. 35; cf. Le Brun, *La Spiritualité de Bossuet*, p. 204.

3 Bossuet, *Oeuvres oratoires*, t. I, p. 293; cf. Le Brun, op. cit., p. 563.

tradition and by Christian hymnology (*Rorate caeli . . .*). When love unlocks the heart and expands it, its aim is not to lock itself within but to leave the heart open, hopefully forever. “With an open heart” is the expression that Pierre Corneille, Bossuet’s contemporary, chose to render the term “dilated” when he cites Psalm 118, 32 (“I ran in the ways of your commandments when you dilated my heart”) in his exquisite translation/paraphrase of *The Imitation of Jesus-Christ*: “I will open the field of Scriptures before you/ That your holy raptures with an open heart/ may run along the ways of my commandments/ full of pure intentions.”⁴

Love alone can chase away a prior and other love. We are able to vanquish the love of injustice that shrivels and hardens us only by means of an opposite love — not by attempting by our own ourselves to push it away, as though desperately pushing back on the walls of a prison with our own hands. Such formulations, in which a “chaste love” chases away and replaces a “disordered love,” bear an obvious affinity to the doctrine of *delectatio vitrix* (one nail replaces the other, one pleasure chases another pleasure away), which results from a psychological simplification of poorly understood statements in Augustine. In the seventeenth century, the doctrine played an unfortunate role, most especially in Jansenism, but also to some extent in Bossuet. It constituted one of the sources of anti-mysticism, since mysticism presupposes that not everything is “felt” and conscious. Here, however, we note that what is actually involved in Bossuet’s words is Christ’s personal presence in the heart. Basically, there is nothing but truth in the fact that love alone is powerful enough to vanquish another love, as long as love is not reduced to a pleasure that is “felt.” To deny our injustice is but another way of paying attention to it, of engaging it. In a letter written toward the end of his life, Bossuet said as much, inviting his correspondent to daily communion and borrowing the language of the *Song of Songs* to equate Christ with the “heavenly Groom”: “It is he alone who can satisfy such hunger, in the heavenly feast. Devour him, submerge him in yourself, incorporate yourself into him and him into yourself. Do not focus so much on destroying as on building. The building must consume the ruins by being raised above them.”⁵

Even if the term “dilation” is not used here, a hunger that is such that the Word itself must be “submerged” within the soul in order for it to be satisfied implies a dilated soul. The receptive opening that desire creates must win the struggle against what blocks it. Bossuet goes further than the familiar doctrine, namely the doctrine that only what is replaced is destroyed. He emphasizes that we must first and foremost focus on replacing, and replace with

4 Pierre Corneille, *L’Imitation de Jésus-Christ*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Stegmann (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 1012.

5 Bossuet, *Correspondence*, ed. Urbain et Levesque (Paris: Hachette, 1913), t. VII, p. 114.

what is wholly other, so that it is only by way of consequence, so to speak, and as a sort of counter-blow, that we eventually destroy and will destroy completely. We have here a correct and healthy principle of how desire works. The Pauline antithesis of the old man/new man sharing our life confirms it. Everything that comes from the old man, including his self-disgust, his weariness, his impotent desire for youth, will be gathered up, by definition, into the momentum of decay and death that is his, incapable as the old man is of initiating a new beginning. It is up to the new man, who grows of himself and from himself, which is to say through God's grace, to "consume the ruins" of the old man. It sometimes happens that Bossuet quasi-identifies renewal with dilation, as for example in the following sentence, once again taken from one of his letters: "It seems that I have nothing else to tell you, except this: Renew yourself, dilate yourself."⁶

If love is the key to the heart, opening it in order to dilate it, *dilatatio cordis* emerges clearly as the starting point for a renewed life, as the starting point *par excellence* of the spiritual life (a start that is always a re-start, a second start, a rebirth). Other passages confirm it but also clarify the nature of this starting point and, therefore, the role and scope of dilation. The passages in question occur in letters to a female correspondent whose identity has so far remained uncertain. In their linear structure, the letters as a whole form a veritable treatise on the desire for God. Their character is Augustinian, particularly in the fact that they emphasize the importance of the theme of "capacity," but their tone and rhythm are distinctly personal. The beginning of the first letter attests that everything starts with dilation and because of it: "The desire to love Jesus-Christ is a beginning of holy love. Holy love opens and dilates the heart in order to abandon itself within the heart without reserve, in order to give itself wholly to it, to the point of losing itself and becoming one with it."⁷ In just a few words, this one sentence goes from start to finish, namely all the way to union with God, naming desire as both the initiatory force and the force of consummation. The gift of desire is the unsurpassable gift because what it gives is the power to give oneself. We note how the sentence, by means of a very slight anacoluthon, introduces the *self* discreetly and with the utmost modesty, as though obliquely, into what had started out impersonally ("what dilates the heart in order to abandon itself in the heart without reserve"). How fitting that the self makes its appearance only in the very motion through which it abandons itself!

The lines that immediately follow, however, in which Bossuet alludes to Philippians III just as Augustine had done earlier, add a vitally important detail about the starting point that is dilation: "Whoever loves Jesus-Christ

6 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. IV, p. 114, Paris, 1912.

7 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. I, pp. 43 ff., Paris, 1907, as for what follows.

always begins to love him. Such a person counts all previous efforts as nothing. This is why he always desires, and it is this desire that makes love infinite. If it were possible for love to produce a final effort, he would want to start all over again when he had reached this extremity. So that he never stops calling on desire to save him — on a desire that is always at its beginning and never ends, a desire that suffers no boundaries.” Bossuet then points out that those who are perfect “in the mystery of love consider themselves always to be beginners.” Desire calls for its own boundlessness, which is to say for its own perpetual dilation, so that it may truly desire the infinite and never cease to desire it. Desire is always the power of the beginning. A love that is no longer at its beginning is all too near its end. What do these statements, however, bring into play from a phenomenological point of view? What do they “give us to see”?

The notion that desire always renews itself hardly seems to denote perfection. Rather, it characterizes the most rudimentary and circular forms of desire, such as hunger, thirst, or the desire to sleep, which recur in self-same form after having been satisfied, without any change in their nature or suggestion that life has progressed. Their recurrence does not ripen them. As for the project of starting one’s life over at “zero” as though nothing had happened before, it belongs properly to scoundrels, felons, and criminals. The desire that “always begins” cannot, therefore, be a desire to start over again and again from the same starting point to which one has returned. It cannot be a desire for repetition. What is involved is wholly different, and a great lesson with regard to dilation. The wrenching joy whereby my heart expands does not aim at repeating itself endlessly as such, any more than it seeks to produce a more ample state that would serve as the condition for a new expansion. The increase of joy is joy, not some plan or calculation regarding future joys. Such joy has its worth only in its being wrenching, since the fact that my heart dilates has no other meaning than that something greater than myself has irrupted into it. This is why the clarification that Bossuet gives us a little further down, which at first blush might seem to contradict what it stated immediately before, actually reveals its true meaning: “O Jesus-Christ, O my love, o holy admiration, o holy beginning of love! Yet in this beginning, one can find infinity itself. Every mode of holy love possesses an infinite depth in which the heart must exhaust itself. When God wills us to be raised higher, he gives us a new capacity, all the way to infinity.”⁸

What does it mean to say that the heart “exhausts itself” and loses itself and collapses, so to speak, because of its own dilation, to the point of powerlessness, of not being able to bear it further? This is the signature of the Real, and, therefore, of limitation. My dilation cannot have any proportion

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

to that to which it opens me up; and what appeared to me to be a wholly disproportionate desire is still all too measured, granted that it is, to me, inexhaustible. I must experience the fullness of the dilation, yet for me to reach the exhausted and exhausting extremity of my love does not mean that I have reached the extremity of the One I love. Such is the wrenching character of joy: namely that a higher joy brings healing only by wounding still more deeply. Bossuet calls this higher joy “a new capacity,” reframing in his own language what Plato called the “dread of beauty.” Bossuet indeed describes incipient desire as “admiration” and describes admiration, in turn, as “the first wound that holy love brings about in the heart,” which is the beauty of the Beloved. The beauty of the Word wounds us with silence, with “a distinctive silence that hushes all other things,” a “silence that so hushes all things that it hushes even holy love, namely in preventing holy love from saying *I love* or *I desire to love*, lest it become intoxicated through speaking about itself.” The heart cannot respond to what is being done to it except with “some sort of Ah! of admiration.”⁹ The manifestation of dilated joy that forgets itself consists only in the dilation of lips that open up to let out the first vowel, the inchoative sound of *Ah!* This is the stuttering of the dilated heart, ceaselessly pondered by Bossuet. Its illustrious model is Moses’s stuttering, which Jewish and Christian traditions have both discussed in depth.¹⁰

Many decades after the letter in which he urges us to surrender to the whirlwind that prevents us from saying anything but *Ah!*, Bossuet ponders the *O!* The context is liturgical. During the week that precedes Christmas, a number of great antiphons that vary from day to day (they are sometimes called *O* antiphons) begin with the vowel *O*, asking that the Savior “come” to us (*O Sapientia*, *O clavis David* — the key of David that will deliver us from the prison of death —, *O Oriens*, etc.). Concerning these antiphons, Bossuet wrote the following extraordinary passage: “Say *O*, in silence, without adding anything more. *O* praises, *O* desires, *O* moans, *O* admires, *O* regrets, *O* enters into its nothingness, *O* is reborn with the Savior, *O* attracts him down from heaven, *O* unites with him, *O* marvels at its own happiness in a chaste rejoicing, *O* is humble, *O* is fervent. What is there that is less than an *O*, but what is greater than such a simple cry from the heart? The whole eloquence of the world lies in this *O*, and I do not know what more to say about it, so much do I lose myself in it.”¹¹ The scholarly but somewhat limited editor of Bossuet’s *Correspondance* adds a footnote commenting with pedestrian irony over what seems to him to be excessive: “One might be surprised by all

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰ Exodus IV, 10. Cf. Philo of Alexandria, *Vita Mosis*, I, 83–84.

¹¹ Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VII, p. 263.

that Bossuet finds in this exclamation.” Bossuet, however, finds all of it there only because it *is* there!

Following an ancient and uninterrupted custom that is most movingly illustrated by Christ’s cry of abandonment on the cross, Bossuet includes in the *O!*, which is also the initial of Psalm XXI, the content of various prayers that *O!* unlocks. Rich in evocations of Holy History and of biblical titles, such prayers present a whole dramatic art that Bossuet brings into play in his own phrasing without any hint of being inflated or arbitrary. We need only to read the invocations to which he refers to be convinced. What is most remarkable is that he builds a sort of prosopopoeia. The *O!* seems to be praying of itself and to utter itself, rather than to be said or sung by us: the person praying and his voice or his utterance are as though identified with one another, so that it is the prayer that prays, not us. Is this not, however, the property of any pure prayer, one that does not reflect back on itself, to which, moreover, Bossuet urges us without cease?

The Advent prayer in question, which is a nocturnal prayer awaiting light and a prison prayer awaiting liberation, is a prayer of expectancy for the dilation of Christmas. It prepares for the dilation of the heart, of the world, and of time. Just as the hope of joy is itself already joyous, however, the momentum leading to dilation is already dilated, following a rule that Bossuet teases out elsewhere: “Preparation contains its effect, and one possesses what one is still seeking. We must not stop seeking that which we can never have sufficiently found.”¹² With regard to stuttering, Bossuet himself uses the term, showing that deficiencies in speech are yet again forms of speech: “A love that is rehearsed before it is conveyed to the lover, and to what a lover (sc. The Christ child!) is no great love. Do you not know that your silence is your praise — that your stutter, your bafflement, your powerlessness, speak to him? And with so many forms of speech, you worry that you will lack words!”¹³ The stutter that stems from being embarrassed and self-conscious, however, which denotes a constricted presence, is altogether different from the stutter that results when the excess of what is seen, of what is admired and loved, allows only an *Ah!* or and *O!* to escape! There are states of joy about which we can say that “you are not yet allowed to speak, but you are allowed to quiver”: “Please accept my stutter and the a . . . a . . . a of my tongue, which has not yet been untied.”¹⁴ Claudel will also speak of the dilation of the *O!*, but he will focus on how the shape of the letter mirrors the shape of the mouth: O is “the perfect emptiness and the circle of a soul that is dilated towards the oral spirit.”¹⁵

12 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VI, p. 470.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 504–505.

14 Bossuet, *Elévations sur les mystères*, ed. Dreano (Paris: Vrin, 1962), p. 309.

15 P. Claudel, *Le Poète et la Bible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), t. I, p. 714.

A question remains unresolved, namely the question of the role of dilation. Bossuet views it to be the initiatory source into the spiritual life, but when he speaks of it, he is quickly led to speak of the summits of the spiritual life. How are we to understand this? With regard to the degrees and stations of the mystical life, Bossuet often criticizes the notion that “we can impose laws on God, as though determining what he ought to do at every degree and deciding: This belongs, or does not belong, to such and such a state.”¹⁶ He adds: “As for myself, I believe, and believe that I know, that God knows how to put perfect souls into the ABC of holiness without setting them back; and that he advances other souls to perfection without appearing to lift them out of the infirmity of the beginning. He is a master at fooling souls in this way; and what we have is like a game of wisdom. He plays it so well and so secretly that no one has any skill in it but himself. We must just let him do as he sees fit.” By the same token, the question of whether or not dilation is situated at a given stage or other of spiritual progress loses its critical relevance. It possesses all the less relevance if we proceed from beginning to beginning, as Bossuet affirms in the “Discourse on the act of self-abandon to God,” which invites the soul, finally, “to abandon itself to God anew at every moment, with the same fervor and ardor that it would have if it had never done anything before, putting its whole strength, repose and confidence, not in itself and in what lies within itself, but in God, from whom it receives everything.”¹⁷ The “abandon” in question, the “fervor,” “confidence,” and peace of renewal are as many descriptions that Bossuet provides of dilation, even though the term is not present. This means that dilation is always like an initial; it is always dilation that is “the key to the heart,” since dilation is part and parcel of the renewal of our “capacity.” The gift of amplitude is the moving force of the spiritual life.

This does not mean that one ought to be joyous all the time, or dilated at every moment. How would one experience dilation if one did not also experience tightening and constriction? Dilation would not be liberation if there were nothing in us from which it liberates us. Bossuet places such a solid confidence in dilation that he repeatedly describes how dilation is favored by constriction itself. The tightening of a dimension of our being or of our life may well call forth more amplitude in another. Alternatively, dilation may simply help us to bear a difficult trial of another nature — which is a variation of the same principle. A letter says it clearly: “You are overly anxious; dilate yourself, granted that anxieties help, in their own way, to dilate on one side what is tightened on another side. If this is your case, may God be praised. Your black sorrow is in his hand, he knows how to make use of it: you need

¹⁶ Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VI, p. 455.

¹⁷ Bossuet, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Lachat (Paris: Louis Vivès, 1862), t. VII, p. 542.

only to abandon yourself and let yourself be pushed high and low.”¹⁸ The abandon to which he so often returns, however, denotes an action. It does not reduce to pure passivity. It belongs to the active motion of whoever perseveres along the way, even when the way is unexpected and disconcerting, rather than retreat backward or endlessly worry over every forward step. The same letter said as much a bit earlier: “Go forth to God, therefore, through abandon. . . . Dilate yourself, walk freely. Do not turn confession into an exercise in anxiety, but make it be an exercise in confidence and in love; which is to say, in humility, since there is no confidence that does not come from humility as its basis.”¹⁹ “Go forth,” “walk.” The emphasis on mobility is clear, and the humility of which Bossuet speaks is what produces the amplitude of every active step forward, since humility tends toward self-forgetting rather than self-obsession. To mistrust oneself and to despise oneself are simply new ways, yet again, to focus on oneself. Elsewhere, Bossuet writes about a third person that she must “walk in dilation” with regard to her religious practices, whatever psychological torments she might experience. God “knows well how to remove the feeling of pleasure (sc. in prayer or in receiving sacraments), but at the same time, he dilates the heart in some other respect. Nor should she grieve over the fact that she does not feel the dilation in question (i.e., as though it were a sign of God’s distance). She must not become anxious in such a way that she is drawn out of communion and out of free communication with God.”²⁰ In his *Panegyric of Saint John, Apostle*, Bossuet views the juxtaposition of dilation and constriction to be at work in the case of Christ himself. Evoking two of Christ’s sacrifices, he says: “One dilates him, . . . the other presses him”²¹ — in the strong sense of squeezing, tightening, compressing.

To walk in dilation is also to allow God His capacity for improvisation and invention within our lives, without God being shackled to a predetermined course. Speaking of “attractions” (in the sense of what pulls us and attracts us toward God), Bossuet writes that we must “allow God the freedom to attract us in one way rather than another,” without “considering a given way to be the more perfect one absolutely speaking.” He adds: “Thus I tell you: follow your own way; it is what is best for you as long as God gives it. Enter, however, into the whole expanse of God’s ways; and, without becoming attached to any one way in particular, have faith in the One who possesses a thousand ways to attract you. This is where you will find the heart’s true dilation.”²² Our very tastes, preferences, and predilections are likely to turn into a prison

18 Bossuet, *Correspondence*, t. VI, p. 57.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

20 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VII, p. 246.

21 Bossuet, *Oraisons funèbres*, ed. Velat (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 418.

22 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VII, p. 28.

when we want to progress forward only by continuously following them. There is an essential bond between freedom and dilation — as implied by the double meaning of the expression “to be set at large”: whatever liberates us dilates us, and whatever dilates us liberates us. “Let me repeat to you once again that we must receive God’s gifts with freedom and dilation.”²³ The only criterion is *being open*, each time, to taking the path that enables us to open up here and now. “Open up wholly to the Bridegroom,” says Bossuet forcefully, before clarifying: “You ask me by what means you might bring forth the full outpouring of Christ’s love. Whatever I answer you, you will then ask me, perhaps, how to implement the means in question, and so on to infinity. Therefore, my daughter, know that there are things that are such that the best way to do them is simply to do them without having a way.”²⁴ Such a means without means, or way without a way, recalls expressions that are found in Saint John of the Cross. What a lesson this is against our whims and against the sort of self-enclosure, where, like caged hamsters on their endless wheel, our shrunken hearts become ever more shrunken! “To make our activity depend on no particular practice” is already to be set “at large.” In his path to dilation, Bossuet, too, discovered and articulated what “has no why.”

Dilation may also take the form of fusion and effusion, namely the effusiveness of tears. Bossuet is one of the greatest advocates of tears of all times, because the joy of dilation also knows how to weep. “Go ahead and weep, indeed, have another good cry; and let your heart, so to speak, dissolve into tears. There is no need to know why you weep, any more than whether you love, when you love without knowing whom you love, or why you love, since you lose yourself in something that is as sovereign as it is unknown. We must love without thinking about love, without even knowing that we love, more often than not, *a fortiori* without knowing why we love; for there is no particular reason.”²⁵ What is repeated is the exclusion of “the particular.” To love or to weep for a particular reason is to deny love and tears their space of expansion and their anticipatory, heuristic, divinatory capacity. It amounts to stopping them at us and at the boundary of what we perceive. It removes them as far as possible from the attraction that is exerted by that “something that is as sovereign as it is unknown,” magnificently denoting the divine abyss. The truth is that some tears are open and opening, namely the tears of the strong, and some tears are closed and closing, namely the tears of those who are narrow and cry only over themselves. Criticizing his contemporaries who were suspicious of tears, Bossuet writes: “When it comes to tears, we put souls in such narrow quarters that they do not dare to receive any gift from God. . . ;

23 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VI, p. 104.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 448–449.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 427.

if you have too many tears, send some to me. I will receive them, especially the ones that God sends us without us; they are the good ones.”²⁶ As we see, Bossuet’s praise of tears does not do away with all criteria for discernment, far from it. The loveliest tears are the ones that we shed without knowing it, or at least that we shed without meaning to shed them.

Again and again, Bossuet urges the nuns whom he advises to dilate: the term often summarizes the whole of the advice that he has to offer in the constellation where he enters with freedom and confidence. Just as medicine has its motto, *Primum non nocere*, first do no harm, Bossuet could say: first do not shrink, do not narrow yourself, and then, if possible, expand, or let God expand you. We may judge of it by glancing at the following list, incomplete but indispensable for assessing Bossuet’s constancy in this respect: “Confidence, dilation, delight in God through Jesus-Christ — this is all that God asks”; “May the joy of the Holy Spirit triumph over the sadness that you bear deep inside! . . . What God asks of you is confidence and dilation of the heart”; “Do not ever worry about intruding on me, worry only about shrinking your heart, which God wants to dilate. . . . Dilate yourself: May God dilate you”; “Do not ever use the word ‘intrude’; instead try hard to diminish your sorrows, lest they shrink your heart, which God wants to dilate”; “Be pliable under God’s hand, and dilate your ways under his eyes”; try to reach “the dilation of the heart to which God calls you through my voice . . . Enter into confidence and into blessed dilation: I cannot bear anything else in you anymore.”²⁷

As bitterly polemical and combative as Bossuet often showed himself to be when applying his gift to causes that were not always worthy, he managed to convey a very genuine concern for his feminine correspondents, as well as an inexhaustible patience. He tirelessly administered to them the only sovereign antidepressant, sovereign because of its divine origin, namely dilation. Dilation is opposed to constriction, of course, but also to “plight,” in the dire sense of torture and torment that the word used to have back then, whether the torment in question is inflicted from the outside or self-inflicted. “Instead of tormenting souls of good will, we should dilate their hearts, both when they follow common ways and when their ways are out of the ordinary.”²⁸ The freedom to which Bossuet invites us through dilation is, in a way, God’s freedom and man’s freedom, reciprocally. In other words, the more we open our life (as there are open cities) to divine improvisation, the more divine action liberates us and expands us, since this is its aim. Reciprocally, the more divine improvisation dilates us, the more we are able by our own efforts to

26 *Ibid.*, p. 16. On the gift of tears in Bossuet, cf. Le Brun, *op. cit.*, p. 389 (many references).

27 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, respectively: t. VI, p. 487; t. VII, p. 112; t. VI, pp. 387–388; t. VII, p. 4; t. VI, p. 471; t. VII, p. 401.

28 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VII, p. 357.

disentangle ourselves from all that makes our progress mean, narrow, and cramped. We must extricate ourselves from the trap that is auto-reflection, auto-explanation, and finally auto-justification, which is the twin sister of auto-accusation, without anyone knowing which sister came first. “Beware that your wanting to explain yourself always further may include some temptation, which could impede the perfect peace and thorough dilation that I wish for you.”²⁹ We must also disentangle ourselves from adhering too tightly to the external circumstances of our life: “Your behavior depends too much on external events. . . . Dilate your ways, and let go of these very indifferent things for what they are worth in God’s eyes (which is to say, nothing). Your union with God does not depend on such externals.”³⁰ Finally, we must extricate ourselves from the trap that consists in prescribing to God how He ought to act within us: “Walk in all things to your heart’s dilation, as much as God will give it to you, without constraining his Holy Spirit, whose wish is to be allowed to blow where and how he wants.”³¹

It is precisely when one no longer relies on oneself that one enters upon the most reliable path, which is, in truth, the most free: “Come out of yourself and out of all human support, put your need for support in God above all else. Dilate your ways through confidence by hoping against hope, in faith, in abeyance, in desire and in love.”³² It is only thus that God is truly able to act in us as He desires: Bossuet says to one of his correspondents that “by dilating your heart to God, you open it up to all that might come to it from his eternal mountains.”³³ The torments from which Bossuet seeks to liberate his religious advisees are quite routine for scrupulous and anxious persons (in spiritual language, the word “scruple” is negative; it denotes an exaggerated, unjustified, or imaginary pang of conscience). They are very similar in their object to the torments that haunted Martin Luther in his monastic days: the worry that one has forgotten to confess a grave fault, or that one must redo past confessions; the worry that one is in a state of guilt that forbids one to receive communion or the worry that one is guilty for having received communion despite being in a state of guilt.³⁴ To all of the above, Bossuet answers, with the frequency and constancy that we have witnessed: dilate yourselves, dilate your ways, let yourselves be dilated! When he does not speak of the heart’s dilation, he speaks of the dilation of our pathways, of our modes of action, of advancing. Dilation does not reduce to a feeling. It is in the mode of our acting and in our step forward. The scruples in question belong to what will

29 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

31 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VI, p. 58.

32 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VII, p. 435.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

34 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. V, pp. 1–2, and t. VI, p. 333.

later be called neurotic states, locking us into ourselves, like all neuroses, into a morbid delight, into an enjoyment of our own sorrow and of our own abjection, as spiritual persons have fully documented. Dilation, on the contrary, goes hand in hand with self-forgetting: it is when I no longer think of myself that I become expanded. As a matter of fact, English nicely captures states in which we are clumsy, gauche, affected, and ashamed, by means of the word “self-conscious.”

Bossuet, however, is not unaware that there are vain and prideful dilations: “All that surrounds me seems to me to be pure affectation, and all that seems to aggrandize me only helps me to see the infinite emptiness of the creature. With what things do we fill ourselves, alas! And in what futility do we remain when we grasp only shades with an eager hand and mouth!”³⁵ We feel heavy when we encumber ourselves with emptiness; we feel light and joyous when the emptiness that we clear out in ourselves is one in which God comes to dwell. The endpoint of dilation is affirmative and positive. Dilation is not a drug against sadness. Dilation is what allows the word “extended” to summarize Bossuet’s whole thought: “Let us, therefore, have Christ’s heart, a heart that is extended.”³⁶ Dilation, again, is what inspires him to the following prayer: “Make me, O God, find the right action, the action that is so extended and so simple that it will deliver all that I am to you and unite me to all that you are.”³⁷

35 Bossuet, *Correspondance*, t. VI, p. 417.

36 Bossuet, *Panegyrique de Saint Jean, Oraisons funèbres*, p. 248.

37 Bossuet, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t. VII, p. 535.

Chapter 6

Amiel and the Pathology of Dilation

A chapter on Henri-Frédéric Amiel might seem strange, indeed literally out of place, in a book that is devoted to joy. Amiel's *Journal*,¹ which is somewhat oppressive and frightening in length — over 20,000 tightly written pages — and which is perhaps the longest journal in literary history, contains descriptions of many fleeting joys, but its basic tone is sad, disappointed, bitter over the failure of a life that was rich in possibilities. Who can say whether Amiel's failure, all at once intellectual, moral, and emotional, is the result of the *Journal* or its cause? More precisely, is Amiel's failed life the result or the cause of his journey of self-observation and self-rebuke — journey that fosters the infinite rehashing of the *Journal*'s redaction? Or does causality here revolve in a circle, with the *Journal* aggravating the failure from which it results (like the “naked slaves” of Baudelaire's poem *Previous Existence*, “whose only care was to aggravate/ The painful secret that made me languish”) and making Amiel's failure, in turn, irreparable? In sharp contrast to Proust, the work narrates an idleness that is an actual privation of work — an idleness that produces no work at all and is a sort of “un-working” in every possible sense. Be this as it may, the question of the status of the limited and the unlimited and the question of the way in which a centrifugal force and a centripetal force are related to one another inside of the self, as well as the question of dilation and contraction, are relentlessly raised at the core of Amiel's debate, quest, and torment. Amiel's acuity (he was a professor of philosophy by trade) means that his *Journal* is not only an exceptional psychological document but also a high drama of human thought. In it, the conflict between *peras* and *apeiron*, between limit and limitlessness,

1 Amiel's *Journal intime* will be cited in this chapter by volume and page from the remarkable edition by Gagnebin et Monnier (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1976).

forms the weight that ballasts Amiel's individual's existence, pulling it down inexorably toward the abyss that is the *Journal* itself and is what the *Journal* discusses and narrates. Consequently, the conflict takes on a universal importance, both because of the question itself and because of its upsetting answer.

At times, Amiel formulates the conflict with regard to himself. At other times he formulates it with regard to forces that are at play in the world, as he does in the following passage on faith and science: "The characteristic role of every religion is to serve as a break to our limitless emancipation and to stabilize our anxious restlessness. Curiosity is the impulsive, expansive, radiant force that would dilate us without limit and volatilize us to infinity; belief represents gravity, cohesion, the concretion that makes us into bodies, into particular individuals. A society lives by faith. It develops through science" (VIII, 27). More often than not, however, the conflict is wrenching. Following Pythagoras, Plato, in *Philebus*, had made the limit and the limitless, *peras* and *apeiron*, into the constitutive components of every being. Both are required for there to be anything at all (we could also translate the terms as "the defined" and "the undefined," or as "form" and "the formless"). A limit would be empty and futile if there were nothing for it to limit. It would be a definition defining nothing. In turn, the limitless that would not take on a form by means of a limit would be an undefined flux, a chaotic motion that would never give rise to any determinate thing. Plato reflects upon these terms within an ontological and cosmological horizon. His concern is what constitutes beings and the things of the world.

The question traverses the whole history of philosophy under many guises. In one of his first masterpieces, namely *The System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800, Schelling had raised the question and put it to work with regard to the constitution of the self: "The self *qua* self can be limitless only to the extent that it is limited. Conversely, it cannot be limited as self except to the extent that it is limitless."² He proves the point by showing that the self cannot grasp itself as infinite except by grasping itself as an infinite becoming; and that this becoming *qua* activity can exist only if it encounters a resistance in the form of a limitation or an obstacle, upon which it must exert itself in order to destroy or overcome it. Such a becoming unfolds by displacing the limit to infinity: every given limit is overcome, but there is always a further limit. Crossing a border makes me see a new border beyond the one I have crossed. Without such a limit, the self could not be aware of its centrifugal motion of expansion. Conversely, a limit cannot give itself to me as a limit unless I bump into it, unless I have the momentum to go beyond it, unless I strive to suppress it or to push it back; unless, in short, I am rightfully endowed with an infinite force of expansion. Clothes hanging in a closet do

2 Schelling, *Système de l'idéalisme transcendantal*, trans. Dubois (Louvain: Vrin, 1978), pp. 46–47.

not feel imprisoned. Schelling says it further down: “The self has an urge to produce the infinite; and this urge must be conceived as a motion *outwards* (as centrifugal), but it cannot be discerned to be such without an activity that moves *inwards* back to the self as its center.”³ I must appropriate what I have conquered since I would not really have conquered it otherwise. In this conflict, each of the opposing forces is necessary. Consciously grasping each one of the two forces presupposes and requires the other. Unfortunately, this is not the right place to examine in greater depth what Schelling derives from this underlying conflict, or to ponder his ideas of how the self is limited *by itself*.

The mutual co-dependence of the dilating/expansive force and the contracting/constricting force, however, brings to light what characterizes Amiel, by way of contrast. In Amiel, the two forces never succeed in uniting, or in producing, thanks to their very conflict, a unified activity. They are not subsumed into a rhythm or pulse that would be the rhythm and pulse of a unique self. Contraction and dilation each appear as an intimate and vital threat. The danger, on the one hand, is that of collapsing into a center that would no longer be the center of anything, into a center that would be nothing more than a point emptied of all potential and future. On the other hand, there is a danger of losing oneself and of disappearing into a limitless dilation from which one would never return back to oneself, but where one would become volatilized, evaporated into infinity, having lost all contour. These dangers alternate and succeed one another like Charybdis and Scylla — or so it appears at first sight. As all readers of Amiel know, however, there is, in fact, a great asymmetry. Dilation poses the greatest and strongest threat, as the desire for expansion is Amiel’s very first desire and his last. Contraction forms a sort of mere consequence and result of the devastations and losses brought about by dilation.

Although Amiel’s dilation is not necessarily joyous, and although it does not define joy and is not defined by joy, the fact remains that it is of the highest interest for the purpose of understanding the fate into which we are delivered by the desire to extend ourselves limitlessly — the desire to become, in a sense, coextensive with the world and its possibilities. Studying Amiel’s view completes and enriches the other analyses of our book, granted that it borders on a *pathology of expansion*. On the question of dilation and contraction in Amiel’s thought and existence, we must rely with gratitude on the remarkable study conducted by Georges Poulet in his work *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*. Poulet’s study displays his usual penetrating acumen and is based on a deep and thorough knowledge of Amiel’s oceanic *Journal*.⁴ Yet it calls for

3 Schelling, *Op. cit.*, p. 53.

4 G. Poulet, *Les Métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris: Plon, 1961), pp. 305–370.

added commentaries with regard to our own specific subject matter. Poulet nicely points out that there is “a first Amiel, who is contracted, enclosed in a cramped space” and who discovers in scholarship and in reading the opportunity to be set at large without limit. Amiel’s expansion is first intellectual and cognitive in character. “The universe is equal to his vast appetite,” as Baudelaire would put it.

Poulet writes, moreover, that for Amiel, “knowing is a form of ubiquity. It involves being present all at once to the entirety of the knowable world. . . . His staggering erudition, deployed in every direction, seems like the spherical radiation of universal curiosities. . . . To direct oneself to the outside is thus to dilate oneself into a world that is both so rich in detail and so vast as a whole that the mind has hardly enough time available to it for it to strive to embrace it and fathom its parts.”⁵ As in Aristotle’s and Thomas Aquinas’s noetic philosophy (but on a very different basis and with very different results!), to know is to reach a veritable identity with what is known, in the very act of knowing it. In other words, as Pierre Roussetot put it with regard to Thomas, to know is to become the other *qua* other (according to its form, obviously)⁶ — a point that Poulet noted well, without mentioning that it summarized an ancient, long, and very basic philosophical tradition.⁷ The theme is also dear to Plotinus, an author to whom Amiel had occasional recourse. Pierre Roussetot wrote: “The force of an intelligence will be measured by the expansion of its own idea, by the possible distension of its thought-self (*sic*), which will be all the more a force to the extent that it condenses more of the *other* in itself, without losing its unity.”⁸ Will it, however, succeed in condensing, or will it be at risk of losing itself in what it knows? Will it maintain its unity or watch it burst asunder, even if the latter happens in a blaze of polymathic fireworks? Such is Amiel’s whole question, and he is certainly not the only one to be concerned by it.

What is clear, in any event, is that intellectual dilation and an avid desire to know are explicitly a desire to be everywhere and everything. Among the many passages that could be cited, two are particularly stark with regard to the nature of such desire: “To multiply my life by making it susceptible of taking on every particular form, to free myself of every limit by putting them *inside* of my own nature; in short, to be a man of all nations, religions, genders, professions and social categories; to have as my specialty virtual universality, to be enclosed only by mind and the infinite: such has been, basically, my aspiration” (II, 611). Amiel puts into practice Aristotle’s doctrine, according

5 G. Poulet, op. cit., p. 305 and 308.

6 Pierre Roussetot, *L'intellectualisme de saint Thomas* (Paris: Beauchesnes, 1936), p. 7.

7 Cf. G. Poulet, op. cit., p. 311: “To contemplate, is to become the being that one contemplates.”

8 P. Roussetot, op. cit., p. 17. We observe that the commonplace notion that Jesuits of old always wrote an exquisite French includes a few exceptions.

to which the soul is, in some way, every being. His Aristotelianism, however, has somewhat lost its marbles, as evidenced by the bizarre insertion of “genders” into the list, as well as by its place in the list. Amiel’s “formability” includes an intellectual transsexualism. In Amiel’s view, I am mentally free to become female. My nature, he writes somewhat later

needs universality and does not dare resolve itself into being something finite. It aspires to make itself everything to everyone, it aspires at omniscience and ubiquity. What it fears, above all, is to be enclosed and to be gullible, to be taken in by itself or by another. *It tends to omni-consciousness*, which implies possessing unity within the experience of infinite diversity. It follows that the unknown, to me, is an enemy, a threat, a humiliation — and also at the same time a joy and a discovery. The unknown belittles me in order to enlarge me, it is an island of ice to be melted down, a sphinx to be tamed. (II, 672–673)

Amiel’s words are important because they describe with great precision the *joy* of intellectual dilation as such, but also because, somewhat unexpectedly, he borders here on Schelling’s views as cited earlier. In order for there to be joy, the limitless *and* the limit are both required. The unknown against which cognitive dilation collides, the unknown that stops dilation as long as it remains unknown, forms the limit and obstacle that will give birth to joy: the joy of vanquishing, of overcoming, of moving beyond, of *dissolving*. Thought that expands to everything must indeed be a sort of volcanic flame if the unknown appears to it to be “an island of ice to be melted down”! Amiel presents himself here as a new Oedipus, but one who would go from sphinx to sphinx, from enigma to enigma, always victorious. Let us also note the subversion of the Pauline expression of being “everything to everyone” (I Corinthians, 9, 22). What refers, for Paul, to apostolic devotion and to humbly adapting himself to every kind of person he encounters becomes for Amiel a sort of auto-deification through pliability — nothing less than the desire, in fact, to “be everything *in* everyone,” like God at the end of times (I Corinthians, 15, 28).

To Amiel, intellectual expansion and noetic dilation are not arbitrary in the least, nor can they be reduced to a simple psychological urge. Their basis is properly philosophical. Amiel’s thought in this regard belongs to an ancient tradition. It presents us with a new variation on the old theme of man-the-microcosm, or of the soul as part-totality, which is to say as a part that is also the whole in a certain respect. If we can and want to become everything through thought, it is because we are already everything through our being. By dilating ourselves, we take possession of a realm that is already ours by right. What is involved is not the conquest of a wholly foreign land (the “scandal” of the unknown thus comes into its full meaning). “*The soul is the universe turned outside in*, just as the universe is a soul turned inside out. . . . Every part of the universe, universal systems, laws, have corresponding degrees in

the soul's hierarchy. Moreover, every individual is the universe under another format. The greater the format, the easier it is to study it. . . . Physiology is visible psychology. Law of *indefinite condensation*: man, condensation of the planet; the soul, condensation of the organism" (I, 290). In the same way that Plato proposed in *The Republic* to read the structure of the individual soul in the larger writ of the city, so Amiel sets out to read the soul in the great book of the world. Since we are already everything under the mode of condensation, we are able to feel at home everywhere (which is how Novalis defined the aspiration to philosophy) under the mode of dilation. Through thought, we retrace in reverse the path that led to the constitution of our being. Man is an abstract, or a condensed synopsis, of the world.

"The story of a soul is the story of creation; the history of creation is also the history of a soul, God's biography. We are able to understand everything because everything is for man the emblem of his destiny and a gloss on his being" (III, 941). The same passage asserts that the goal of contemplation is the "joy" of "identifying our Self with that unique thing, with that rhythm, that thought." It is "perfect effusiveness." In support, the case of Plotinus is cited among others. It is only because man is infinite (as a condensation of infinity) that he never ceases to desire the infinite, to hunger after it, and that any limit enclosing him is painful. One of Amiel's most cited statements, namely the statement that a landscape is really a state of mind, must be understood on the same philosophical basis: what is meant is not a whimsical projection of my personality; rather the landscape is a manifestation of the soul of the world, which is to say of the "unique thing" with which I rightfully identify. There is joy, most assuredly, in such a dilation of the self throughout all of the forms of being and of life, reaching out to the entire universe and even to God Himself. The term 'joy' is not uncommon under Amiel's pen in this regard. However, when he speaks of "dilation" in this context, his aim, as Georges has shown, is to point out the peril that it implies.

By dint of being everything, I am no longer anything. By dint of invading every foreign form, I lose my own form. By dint of being infinite, I am reduced to a zero. By dint of spreading out in waves and circles, I end up losing the center. The danger that reality, identity, substance, and also humanity will be lost has been nicely analyzed by Amiel's commentators following Amiel's own lead. Two passages that Poulet has already cited and in which Amiel describes "dilation" as the quintessential *danger* facing him (but is our highest opportunity not also our greatest peril?), namely the danger of depersonalization, of an amorphous pliability often referred to as his "proteanism," suffice to make the case: "Perhaps my mind has the same nature as a gas, refractory to every compression, limitation, captivity; and it spontaneously loves only open-ended expansion, dilation in every direction and wild dispersion" (VI, 917). And again: "My personality dismelts [*sic*], evaporates into

the blaze of universal activity. I no longer know what I want or what I ought to want. I dissolve into crumbs, I turn into a gas. . . . The attraction of the outside awakens the force of expansion in me so energetically that I dilate without limit. . . . Expiation of proteanism” (II, 734).⁹ Because of this expansive motion, all concentration, unification, gathering up at the center and contraction seem difficult, even impossible: “My whole nature is flaccid, pliable, modifiable. It asks for nothing more than to be put in sympathetic harmony with whatever surrounds it. Contraction is thus a monstrosity in me, a crease that is due to my outward history; my fundamental need, on the contrary, is expansion, union, communication, exchange” (II, 821).

This is where a veritable pathology of dilation and contraction appears, forming the proper subject matter of our chapter. Pathology is taken here in the sense of a trial and a suffering that are constant and structured, not in a psychiatric sense, although the psychiatric sense is not necessarily excluded. The key is that *there are two contractions and two dilations for Amiel* — and they are inversely symmetrical. The dilation that Poulet has so nicely analyzed is the dilation of thought as thought identifies with that which it thinks: a welcome opportunity and joy at first, it reveals itself to be danger, pain, and loss without a centripetal counter-force, as we just saw. In an attempt to get a grip on himself and regain himself, Amiel urges himself and exhorts himself repeatedly and vainly to focus, condense, contract, and collect himself. He complains about the cognitive dilation that is his own yet carries him off toward amorphousness, and he seeks a contraction that he never achieves. Yet there is also for Amiel a good dilation. He bemoans the fact that he does not experience it, or that he no longer experiences it. This good dilation is the dilation of love and of generosity, of the gift of oneself to one’s neighbor, of creative work and activity. Its opposite is a contraction that is a mode of recoil, a selfish withdrawal, a sterile timidity, an impotency with regard to existing and to affirming oneself by radiating. Amiel complains that he is a prisoner of this kind of contraction, whether he blames himself or blames someone else for his desiccating confinement. The first of these two dilations is predominantly intellectual, the second is predominantly affective, but both, in truth, put the whole of existence into play. Amiel is not only torn apart by dilation and contraction. He is also torn apart by the two possibilities that confront him within dilation and within contraction.

From the point of view of vocabulary, the positive meaning of dilation appears far more frequently than the negative one, and it definitely denotes joy, but it denotes an impossible and lost joy. This explains why Amiel, just

9 Cf. G. Poulet, op. cit., p. 312 ff. May I be forgiven for referring the reader to my essay “Amiel and the word that is given,” in *La Voix nue* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), pp. 143–158, which elaborates on this aspect.

a few pages or days apart, is able to exhort himself in two ways that seem contradictory: he exhorts himself to spread out and he exhorts himself to concentrate; he exhorts himself to dilate and he exhorts himself to contract. Be the judge: “How are you to replenish your will power? *Focus and concentrate*” (VI, 544–545). “*Make yourself focus*. . . . Give yourself some dominant interest, one that is there every day and is overarching. Then your spiritual vagrancy will come to an end. Concentrate” (VI, 533–554). “Regulate your desires, give order to your life, circumscribe your curiosity, gather up your ideas, focus your efforts, and you will accomplish something” (VI, 909). “Focus or die” becomes for Amiel a kind of motto.¹⁰

Historians, however, know only too well that a law that is reiterated often and burdened with new penalties and clauses is precisely a law that changes nothing in people’s behavior. In the same months or years, Amiel writes: “*Sanctify yourself and expand outwards* remains the right motto” (VI, 260). This, indeed, is his second motto. Criticizing his own defensive attitude of withdrawal, he notes: “Such a strategy has crippled you, shriveled you, paralyzed you: and you have practically no more expansive force. You have stopped growing and increasing for a very long time” (VI, 319). The only remedy is to expand outward: “*Sanctify and expand outwards* is simply an acquired formula for you, a *desideratum*, an ideal that is easily forgotten” (VI, 348). “*Love and expand out*” (VI, 638). “Give and forgive, support and comfort, spread out and lend yourself, this is always the true maxim” (VI, 800). The double imperative does not constitute a logical contradiction, or an oscillation between two opposites, or a “double constraint” that Amiel has framed for himself, although it clearly manifests an inner wrenching. It is not difficult to show it.

For centuries, there was a controversy in medieval (and not just medieval!) philosophy and theology regarding the primacy, respectively, of intellect or volition, knowledge or love, in various domains. To Amiel, the controversy becomes an inner standoff, in which the two terms fall outside of each other. On the one hand, he invites his dilated intelligence to contract and focus on a creative project other than the idleness of his *Journal* and of his endless readings. On the other hand, it is his contracted volition, set as it is on a narrow, mean course, that he urges to expand and diffuse itself into acts of generosity and confidence. Thus there is no inherent contradiction. Moreover, from a still deeper standpoint, does overcoming one of the two forms of powerlessness not go hand in hand with overcoming the other? Is the goal of our whole existence not that of reaching a flexible and vital harmony between centrifugal and centripetal forces, between the power of expansion and the power of condensation? A creative work that is worthy of the name is all at

10 Cf. G. Poulet, op. cit., p. 319; and *Journal*, VI, 823.

once dilated and contracted in its genesis: the solitude of a person who writes, paints, or thinks is already destined, already offered, to those who will cherish the eventual works. One does not accomplish such works for oneself. (This is why the so-called artists without works are monsters of self-centeredness, even as they are the puppets of their fatuous commentators.) As for moral theology, its teaching is often overlooked. Charity to oneself is necessary for charity to one's neighbors to be genuine. Self-hatred has never facilitated empathy or devotion. To escape from oneself by seeking out one's neighbor is not to welcome the illumination of brotherly encounter but to burden one's neighbor with the unpaid debt of one's own resentment. Over and beyond the conflict of faculties, therefore, it appears that dilation is joyous and radiant only if its joy and radiance are those of a force that offers itself by expanding, deeply patient, and slowly matured in secret. Similarly, concentration differs from a simple collapse, implosion, or shrinkage, only insofar as a rich and varied cluster of generous acts already palpitates within it, or palpitates within it still, either in germ or through reminiscence. In all of these many regards, Amiel's inner wrenching offers a lesson for every human being, one that is universal in scope. Even his inner conflict and failure tell us something about our own potentialities.

We must now take a look at what Amiel says about dilation in the sense in which it appears in the other chapters of the present book. Dilation is often evoked under the mode of absence, nostalgia, or desire, as a dilation that is lost or wished-for in a dream. Yet Amiel occasionally describes it, happily for him, as a force irrupting within him for a brief and fugitive instant. After attending a concert that swept him off his feet, and after receiving pleasant presents and letters, Amiel writes: "When I reconnect with sympathy, beauty, and the power of admiration, I feel as though I were reconnecting with my homeland, my element. Right away I feel myself be born anew. My being dilates, awakens and comes back to life. My true *self* surges forth, resurrects and shows itself to me: and I recognize that I had fallen into sleep previously, out of sadness and boredom. The phoenix shakes off the ashes of its funeral pyre, the immortal soul shatters its mummy to smithereens. Joy rises up against the dark regions of death" (V, 778). Very little, even what Amiel calls "the bare shadow of love," suffices to provoke a veritable resurrection. We have something essential here: the blaze that is joy is out of all proportion with the often-imperceptible spark that ignites it. The opening-up that is joy is always measureless when compared to the circumstance that made it possible. Even when there is a "why" to it, joy possesses a dimension that remains "without why." Nonetheless, it remains true that it is Amiel's fundamental sadness that gives him such moving tones with which to express his joy.

In what, however, does the resurrection actually consist? It requires the intervention of another being and of the world. An indispensable outside

element, however minimal in itself, must come, like the strike of a magic wand, to awaken our sleeping melancholiac, who, like Sleeping Beauty, is the prisoner of a veritable spell, mummified by his own contraction. Yet such sudden joy does not mean that something absolutely novel is discovered, or that a new world is unlocked before us by its light. It is a rediscovery, a return to the “homeland” from which we had been exiled. The rediscovery is of the *self*, the “true *self*,” in a joyous epiphany of the self to itself — which is to say, something that the obsessive self-observation in the *Journal* would not have been able to bring about. Joy emerges, rather, because of the work of mortification and mummification from which joy sets us free.

The dilating joy through which he resurrects and rediscovers himself appears to Amiel to be what liberates in him a shackled power of agency. To dilate oneself is not simply to feel but to act, or to find the force to act. Sometimes it is action that leads to dilation, and sometimes it is dilation that leads to action. “Activity, therefore, is a form of defense, at the same time that it dilates. Activity is wisdom’s first prescription. Life is action. And concentrated action is production. Therefore, create! Invent, compose, spend yourself, radiate! . . . Wake up, you who sleep” (V, 935). Here, Amiel counts on the exhortation that he addresses to himself in order to be pulled out of his lethargy. Yet the outside element is not absent, since what is involved in this passage is the necessity to react against “the riffraff of the press,” whom he appreciated as little as did Kierkegaard a few years earlier. Although a single instance hardly points to habitual practice, Amiel here contemplates a conjunction of centrifugal and centripetal forces, since it is “concentrated action” that provides the resource for human being to be able to dilate.

More often than not, however, what is involved is an alternation or a conflict. Alternation is featured in the following beautiful passage on the rhythmic pathos of our life:

Our inner feeling aggravates a continuous current between two poles. The current comes and goes ceaselessly between sadness and joy, quivering, slowing down, suddenly rushing ahead, all on account of a thousand imperceptible causes that influence it in its course. The current depends on the more or less of vitality and force that are found within us. Its restless vibrations are the sign of our unstable equilibrium with the surrounding world. Sadness marks a decrease in being, joy marks an increase. The former shrinks us, the latter dilates us. Feeling is thus a sort of speedometer, the speedometer of our intimate life. (VI, 329–330)

Amiel reformulates in his own way the unforgettable highlights of Spinoza’s theses on joy and sadness, namely that they mark a transition to greater or lesser perfection, but from a very different perspective than the perspective of the author of the *Ethics*. With its waves and vibrations, inner space seems

to obey causes that largely escape us and on which no hold on our part is mentioned. This inner space is not completely isolated, however, since the “speedometer” that feeling provides tells us where we are with regard to the world and what level of task we are in a condition to undertake, or not. Our feeling, here, beats almost like our very heart, in us and without us. We are never at rest, but always either in diastole or in systole.

Elsewhere, in one of his many recurrent bouts of despair, Amiel no longer perceives dilation and contraction as forming an alternating rhythm. He sees a life-and-death conflict in which he is already lost and already defeated: “I like to abstract myself and annul myself, in order to annul my responsibility and my faculty for suffering. Instead of *persisting in being* and dilating, my impulse is to *tend to non-being*, to shrink myself down as much as possible; I try only to preserve my situation, not to improve it” (VI, 461). What every spiritual tradition has known for a long time, however, is that not expanding is not the same as being conserved. Not expanding amounts to regressing and decreasing. The first sentences imply it, as a matter of fact. Dilation constitutes a necessity simply to continue being. It is this dilation that Amiel refuses, or which is refused to him.

Nonetheless, Amiel is able at times to envisage dilation as a permanent state, one which would not be reduced to a brief moment of joy but would be happiness itself: “To inhabit happiness, to manifest a continuous and sustained joy for months, is a very rare phenomenon, but one which I have been able to observe. It seems to me that such a state makes the soul that finds itself in it better — or I should say the soul that dilates and blossoms in it. . . . Happiness that is peaceful, smooth and even, deep as light and as the ocean, deep as eternal things are, is much higher than the leaps, frenzies and ardors of feverish joy and intermittent passion” (VI, 1105). Amiel’s daydream of a “smooth and even” state of dilation contradicts his meditation regarding the rhythmic character of feeling and regarding one’s perpetually unstable equilibrium with the world. It is hardly a matter of indifference that Amiel’s daydream follows a re-reading of *Hamlet*, with whom Amiel often identifies, and that it comments on “the misfortune of the man of thought who is forced to become a man of action.” The dilation/contraction alternation is thus present here as well, as though in spite of itself. It is immediately after considering his own impotence and contraction, prompted by Shakespeare, that Amiel evokes a perfectly leveled dilation possessed of a sort of elemental peace, of the peace of the ocean (but the ocean has its tides!) and of the peace of light (but ours has its waning and its nights!). Amiel’s very daydream casts a shadow, one that dwells within his heart. His description of “continuous joy” indeed affirms that the soul pours “the overflow of the heart back onto the wretched and disinherited of the world,” thereby becoming charitable,

active, and generous. Why? “The soul feels a need to expiate its privilege, to redeem its felicity, and to express its gratitude to loving Providence” (VI, 1105). Anguish, guilt, and negativity thus haunt perfect joy from the inside. As Amiel’s mention of Nemesis on the same page reveals, contradicting the notion of a “loving Providence,” what Amiel has in mind are pagan gods who are jealous of human happiness and achievements rather than the God who is revealed in the Bible. There is, in short, a contraction at the core of the dilation that is supposed to be ideal.

All of this, however, leads us to a deeper puzzle regarding dilation, a puzzle that is not Amiel’s own private one, granted that he has exposed it better than many who were plagued by it as much as he was. What is the puzzle? It involves the relationship between dilation and action. Is my heart’s dilation what gives me the courage to act, most especially to devote myself to others in some way through my actions and my care, or is it action, as such, on its own, that dilates me and gives me an excess of courage by the very fact that I am engaged in acting? Is joy what makes me act, or is it acting that makes me joyous? Must I wait for others and for the world to shower me with favors in order to accumulate a sort of treasure-trove of joy within myself so as to be able, in turn, to start diffusing myself; or, on the contrary, must I initiate the motion myself, even in the face of difficulty and pain? Must I myself pay the price of entry, being without a free ticket obtained from the light that emanates from joy? Moreover, are we talking about the same dilation in both cases? One is affective and passively received, and the other is spiritual and deliberate. One excludes contraction, and the other includes it in the form of decision, effort, and labor. We are also faced with the ambiguity of the term “heart,” depending on whether we take it in a purely affective sense or whether we take it in its biblical meaning, where intellect and volition are joined and where to “have a change of heart” means to change one’s rules of life and principle of action.

Amiel has a memorable page on *dilatatio cordis*: “What we call the *heart* is affective solidarity. It is the magnetic force that melts many existences into one. It is an extension of our sensibility, such that we suffer and delight through an infinitely wider surface than the one of our own proper individuality. More briefly, it consists in the moral identification of many existences through instinctual sympathy. Consequently, it is an increase of being for each one, but an increase that has dependence as its corollary. The heart dilates us, extends us, spills us outward, acting precisely as the reverse of selfishness, which shrinks us and contracts us” (VI, 120–121). Amiel now sounds more like Rousseau than like Spinoza. Dilation is not so much a given state of the heart as it is the heart’s very dimensionality, its “cordiality” in the fullest sense. The order of sensibility and affect clearly predominates. Following this passage, Amiel praises “alms” and “charity” in Buddhism, Islam, and

Christianity. Still, must one be joyous in order to give alms, or does the giving of alms bring joy? And how does one get oneself out of a state of contraction? By one's own efforts or through patiently waiting for another's initiative?

For indeed there is a state of contraction — Amiel names it as his most constant state. “As is my wont, when faced with vexations and hardships, I contract” (VI, 274). “My heart has been crumpled by gratuitous injustice and odious suspicions” (VI, 726). “Feeling of inner contraction; by basking in the sun, one dries up” (V, 987). “It is for my neighbor's sake that I must find a way out of a situation that always ends up reducing me to moral contraction and inertia” (VI, 90). Amiel writes these last lines in a passage in which he urges himself to stop “oscillating” between two roads to happiness, namely between the one that consists in renouncing personal satisfaction and in acting generously without hope of a reward, and the other, which consists in setting a “definite, modest, accessible” goal for oneself and in making “a vigorous and sustained effort to reach it.” In both cases, however, one would have to act *sponte sua*, so that Amiel is brought back directly to the need for external help. He adds: “It is a duty to maintain oneself radiant, expansive, communicative and productive, and for that we need some happiness. . . . One must be helped instead of being alone.” Most often, Amiel blames another for his state of contraction: “An uncongenial *milieu* shriveled me up into myself and constricted me, perhaps, beyond remedy; whereas my true nature is as effusive, loving and straightforward as a child's” (VIII, 257).

Like most people, Amiel blames others for his failure and says that his own selfishness results from the selfishness of others. The position is obviously nonsensical and circular. How can I claim to be nothing but a victim without having made victims myself, without making victims now and making victims in the future, in a world in which the majority of people claim to be victims? Be this as it may, the theme is a chronic one for Amiel: I was born expansive and others have constricted me, from childhood through the present. It would be fastidious and depressing to keep adding new citations that affirm it: “I was made for sympathy, exchange, effusion; and I am reduced to the cell of a prison” (VI, 831). “Born expansive . . . , I turned into the opposite” (VI, 813). “The contrast between my expansive nature and a world full of irony has violently disrupted my soul since the age of ignorance” (VI, 910). “To summarize, I have been persistently misunderstood and unjustly misjudged in the three or four environments in which I spent the whole of my life, namely family, Genevan society, the world of public administration and the world of intellectuals” (VIII, 62). Amiel's summary suffices.¹¹ Like certain plants or vulnerable animals, the misdiagnosed expansive or dilated

11 Cf. VIII, 354–355, and VI, 672: “He who has nothing is despoiled all the more; the less a person dilates, the more he is flattened under foot.”

person retracts himself and constricts, once and for all. Without meaning to add a *post mortem* to the irony of which Amiel says that he is the victim, let us evoke the depressives who no longer open their mail, no longer answer their doorbell or pick up the telephone, all the meanwhile suffering from the most debilitating sense of abandonment and solitude. The fact that no one forces their door open convinces them that no one loves them or understands them. Their paradoxical predicament is worthy of our compassion, not of our jibes, at least as long as it is not erected into the basis of a philosophy of resentment, against which we have every right to defend ourselves.

This brings us back to our basic question about the nature of dilation. Is an expansion that expands so little that it reverses into its opposite, as Amiel tells us expressly and repeatedly, practically imploding if it is not in immediate harmony with its environment and in resonance with those surrounding it — is such an expansion a true dilation? Amiel has always known that the essential element lies in action, in overcoming obstacles, in decisiveness, which, by limiting me and forcing me to give up on being everything, focuses my efforts in a determinate direction and alone makes me capable of a real expansion and dilation. The apparent contradiction between the extreme dilation of thought to the point of dissolution and the absence of moral and affective dilation to the point of becoming withered and dried up actually belongs to one and the same unified principle. It cannot be simplistically traced back to an opposition between intellect and volition, or between sensitivity and morality. All of the many dimensions of this pathology of dilation trigger one another and determine one another. The flight outside and beyond reality, where one must be limited and defined in order to be able to expand, means that “the voyage around my own room” (to cite the title of Xavier de Maistre) opens up a whole universe of possibility and ideality to my thought, a universe in which I move to and fro with ease and fluidity (these are features of Amiel’s style, as a matter of fact).

By the same token, an aesthetics of dilation becomes possible (in which Kierkegaard’s notion of aesthetics resonates). A shriveled and compressed existence that is in mourning over a lost dilation opens itself sometimes suddenly to joy, for no reason, merely because of a light on a mountain top, because of a woman’s or a child’s smile, because of a melody: opening itself up to brief epiphanies (an example was seen earlier), to fleeting dilations in which the homeland is glimpsed and lost again. Amiel’s *Journal* describes these moments of epiphany with a rare gift of expression, which is what earns Amiel his persistent survival as an author to this day. The desire to be enlarged would appear to be stronger than all of the lessons of bitterness and disappointment: “The instinct of conservation and expansion, the need to dilate one’s being through joy, survives over every theory and every practice of renouncement and detachment” (VI, 797). It is most

especially with regard to human encounters that Amiel speaks of dilation. Seeing children dilate in his presence in turn brings him joy: “They find in me what their instinct seeks . . . a nest where they feel their wings grow and their hearts dilate” (VI, 217). He assumes the maternal role of a “vivifying incubation” — as he puts it somewhat oddly. A single encounter suffices: “I spent three hours with a good soul, which dilates and exhilarates the heart. I did some good to another person, and it was returned” (VI, 252). And elsewhere: “A visit . . . dilated my heart a little bit” (VI, 872). Even if all we had were a single friend, that friend would be our Archimedes point, our leverage point: “What joy there is in relaxing, in dilating oneself, in blossoming at one’s ease with beings who are true and good” (VIII, 902–903). Even a letter that one writes can “dilate the heart” (VIII, 1031, cf. VIII, 1198). The word “dilation” is used far more often in this sense than in the sense that is described by Poulet, in which dilation is depicted as a danger, namely a danger of loss of all coherence and consistency. Let us underscore that the dilation of the heart is really present in confidence, affection, and communication.

Such dilations, however, are rare and fleeting. They seem to bring more sadness by vanishing than they bring joy by emerging. The “instinct” about which Amiel says that it survives everything else makes us suffer, more often than not, because we fail to reach its goal. The pessimism that haunts him means that Amiel sometimes brings himself to speak of a dilation of evil and of nothingness — although he is the very one who affirms that a force of contraction that tends to non-being is opposed by a force of dilation that tends to an increase in being. Non-being itself seeks to increase its being. It invades all of space: “Thus it is that emptiness, silence and night tend to increase within private relationships, simply because they have found a foothold. Everything, including evil and negation, tends to dilate, to enlarge its being. In this way, a cold shoulder turns into physical avoidance and distance, distance turns into antipathy, antipathy becomes aversion” (VIII, 123).¹² A personal and affective context gives meaning to such an expansion of nothingness, since it cannot sustain itself, metaphysically speaking, on its own (which does not mean that falsehood is bereft of power). Such a view partakes of Amiel’s general Catastrophism, according to which the smallest neglect, the smallest fault, gives rise, from step to proximate step, to vast and threatening consequences, with that loss of all proportion that is so characteristic of anxious persons.

Schelling’s forceful and bold thesis, namely that the Self is limited only by being unlimited and is unlimited only by being limited, is reframed by Amiel, both in his personal life and in his *oeuvre*, into a shattered, broken, dissonant,

12 Cf. G. Poulet, op. cit., pp. 348–349; and *La Voix nue*, pp. 153–155.

and discordant version. The Self remains limitless at the very point where a task, a meaning, a project would require that it be limited. It remains limited and constricted at the very point where it yearns to dilate without limit, to “dismelt” into the joy of friendship or of love. The author for whom *peras* and *apeiron*, contraction and dilation, served as the very ground of experience, as the very trial of an entire existence, however, is also a wellspring of information on the subject, granted that one may wholeheartedly wish that the reader will learn the same lesson from the opposite direction.

Chapter 7

Return to Eden with Thomas Traherne

Everything about Thomas Traherne is unusual, starting with the largely posthumous fate of his work. An Anglican churchman (1637–1674) who lived during the most disruptive and violent century of his country’s history, Traherne published little during his lifetime. He would be known by only a handful of scholars, at best, were it not for a series of discoveries and authentications of his poems in the twentieth century. Unpublished manuscripts of his were found in such unlikely circumstances (one of them, for instance, was discovered in 1967 on a pile of trash right before going up in flames) that the term “providential” cannot be avoided. These unexpected discoveries have established him to be a poet-thinker of the highest importance. He belongs to the group that is known by the English as the “metaphysical poets,” poets whom we might more soberly and correctly call “spiritual poets.” Knowledge of his body of work and of his worth has long been delayed, as though bathed in the silence of history, ripening in secrecy toward its appointed hour. Despite the efforts of Jean Wahl, who was the first in France to translate him and to present him to the public, and despite the later efforts of Robert Ellrodt in his masterwork, Traherne remains largely unknown in France.¹

Traherne is *par excellence* a poet and thinker of dilation, although the word itself, which is certainly present in his work, remains fairly rare. Instead, diffusion, expansion, enlargement, and so forth are frequent: dilation of desire, which is properly insatiable and infinite, dilation of sight, which is

¹ See T. Traherne, *Poèmes de la félicité*, trans. et commentaire de Jean Wahl (Paris: Seuil, 1951; henceforth, Wahl); and R. Ellrodt, *L’Inspiration personnelle et l’esprit du temps chez les poètes métaphysiques anglais* (Paris: Corti, 1973), Première partie, t. II, pp. 261–392 for Traherne. Poems will be cited here from Margoliouth, ed., *Poems and Thanksgivings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), volume II (henceforth *Poems*); from P.J. and A.E. Dobell, ed., *Centuries of Meditation* (1908; re-impression, Brook: Shrine of Wisdom, 2002; henceforth *Centuries*); and from J. Smith, ed., *Select Meditations* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997; henceforth *Select Med.*).

indivisibly sensorial and spiritual and tends to widen in order to encompass a boundless universe, dilation of human presence, which wants nothing less than to be everywhere and always, or to move freely everywhere and always, and to go forth into all times and all spaces. No less than others, Thomas Traherne thought within an inherited legacy. He read and pondered key books. He studied ancient philosophers and Church Fathers along with many other authors. He chose Platonism and Neoplatonism as his guiding thread, still vibrant with the vividly affirmative tone of the Renaissance. Whatever his sources and debts, however, Traherne elaborated a powerfully coherent thought that boils down to a few clear and firm doctrines. His philosophy resembles no other when considered as a whole. It follows its own groundbreaking path.

In a song that is both down-to-earth and meditative, Traherne sings of *glory* — of God's glory, as a Christian poet might be expected to do, but also and primarily of the glory of the world and of its beauty. He sings of the glory of the created spirit, of the glory of the body, all with a jubilation and a joy beyond compare, transporting the reader. He is the poet of joy, which is to say the poet of praise. He is the poet of a joy that is in perpetual increase but that is also perfectly ordinary when it comes to what spawns it, which might be as little as a blade of grass or a puddle of rain water in the street. In its many diverse forms, seventeenth-century spirituality most often speaks in a language of great austerity. Its language is usually marked by a strongly penitential dimension, showing reserve and suspicion toward any sort of spontaneous enthusiasm. This more usual language of seventeenth-century spirituality, with its mature poise, differs entirely from the stunningly child-like spirit that is Traherne's spirit. His song about a world that seems, at first — but only at first and in a global glimpse that goes right to the essence — to have been delivered of evil, ugliness, sin, and finitude, as though by enchantment,² is inherently compelling because of its own bewitching character. Yet it also sticks out in the context of its time because of its strangeness. We would more likely find something analogous in painting or in music, than in spiritual literature.

What does Thomas Traherne want? Joy. What kind of joy? Every kind of joy, all joy, joy in its entirety. In Traherne's view, we want the whole of everything when we want joy. We want to have everything, be everything, and be everywhere. Like the philosopher who, according to Plato, resembles a child in wanting everything and its opposite,³ Traherne also wants

2 Cf. Wahl, p. 33: "I felt no stain, nor spot of sin" (*Innocence*).

3 Plato, *Sophist*, 249D.

everything. As in every path to truth, the first step that opens up the path itself is a conversion of sight:

I saw moreover that it did not so much concern us what objects were before us, as with what eyes we beheld them, with what affections we esteemed them, and what apprehensions we had about them. All men see the same objects, but do not equally understand them. Intelligence is the tongue that discerns and tastes them, Knowledge is the Light of Heaven, Love is the Wisdom and Glory of God, Life extended to all objects is the sense that enjoys them. So that Knowledge, Life and Love are the very means of all enjoyment, which above all things we must seek for and labour after.⁴

No beauty, however great, delights anyone who has no eyes to see it. A man who is disgusted by what he sees is perhaps a man whose eyesight is disgusting. Let us note that the relevant sort of eyesight is wholly active as far as Traherne is concerned, and rests on the sympathetic broadening of our power (*Life extended to all objects*), since life alone discerns life and rejoices in it.

Elsewhere, he writes: “He thought within himself that this world was far better than Paradise, had men eyes to see its glory, and their advantages.”⁵ The conversion of sight is not so much the effect of turning one’s gaze in a new direction, since it is always the same creation that offers itself, and must offer itself, to our eyes. It is, rather, the effect of seeing otherwise — of looking with another kind of intention and another desire. What is involved is passing from what is narrow and mean to what is ample and wide: the conversion of sight coincides with its broadening and dilation. Although he generally praises far more often than he ever criticizes or blames, Traherne nonetheless speaks with horror and contempt of “narrow souls.”⁶ In a sense, narrowness alone is what horrifies our philosopher of dilation, since narrowness is evil *par excellence*. Narrowness is ingratitude toward God’s gifts and toward the splendor of a universe that is created by God. Every form of narrowness is malignant, not only narrowness of heart in the form of avarice and selfishness, not only narrowness of mind in the form of stupidity, but also sensorial narrowness in the form of a jaded stinginess. Traherne’s project includes a transformation of all of the senses such as Rimbaud will one day advocate, granted that it is conceived with very different parameters.⁷

In what, exactly, does a widening of sight consist — widening, that is, which goes hand in hand with a dilation of desire (for indeed, to Traherne,

4 *Centuries*, III, 68, p. 143.

5 *Centuries*, IV, 21, p. 174.

6 *Select Med.*, I, 87, and III, 25, p. 5 and p. 64.

7 Rimbaud, Letter to Izambard: “The point is to reach the unknown through the disordering of *all of the senses*.” In Rimbaud, *Oeuvres*, ed. Bernard (Paris, 1960), pp. 343–344.

whoever desires more, sees more)? It consists in reviving childhood within us, in reviving childhood's vision. *I must become a child again*⁸ is one of Traherne's major themes and one of those that have most attracted the attention of commentators. The requirement is evangelical, of course, as is the connection between childhood and the Kingdom of Heaven.⁹ Yet the content that Traherne gives to it in page after page of his works is quite unusual. The childhood of which he speaks is early childhood. To him, first and foremost, early childhood signifies a vision, a light, and a special way of being related to the world, to things, and to persons. To become a child again is to retrieve and vivify a gaze and a light that have become eclipsed and dimmed by our neglect, but which we have never truly or completely lost. Such a gaze is one of wonderment and awe before the splendor of the world, of people, and of things. Expanded, bathed in a light of glory, it is described as Eden, paradise, where we have, all of us, been Adam, Adam as he was before the Fall and before sin: "That day/ The ancient light of Eden did convey/ Into my soul; I was an Adam there/ A little Adam in a sphere/ Of joys! O there my ravish'd sense/ Was entertain'd in Paradise."¹⁰

With regard to the beauty of the world, he writes, elsewhere: "You are the Adam or the Eve who enjoy them (i.e. the splendors of creations)" for the sake of urging us to exultation and praise.¹¹ We must cite a beautiful passage in which he clarifies the theme: "Those pure and virgin apprehensions I had from the womb, and that divine light wherewith I was born are the best unto this day, wherein I can see the Universe. By the Gift of God they attended me into the world, and by His special favour I remember them till now. Verily they seem the greatest gifts His wisdom could bestow, for without them all other gifts had been dead and vain. . . . Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than I when I was a child. All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. I was a little stranger, which at my entrance in the world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys."¹² We cannot cite all of his lovely evocations. What is clear is the primacy of amplitude: the gaze, at first, is set free, set at large. "My Infancie no Sooner Opes its Eys,/ But Straight the Spacious Earth/ Abounds with Joy Peace Glory Mirth."¹³

According to Traherne, the child first sees the earth in a divine light, in a light of glory that is the light of admiration in the strongest sense; and to see the earth thus is to behold it such as it is in the divine plan, before the ugliness

8 Wahl, p. 36 (*Innocence*).

9 Cf. Matthew, XVIII, 3–4.

10 Wahl, p. 37 (*Innocence*).

11 *Centuries*, II, 12, p. 58.

12 *Centuries*, III, 1–2, p. 105.

13 *Poems*, p. 74 (*The Designe*).

that is introduced into it by our sin as though by a soiled and decrepit gaze. It is, in short, to see the earth in its truth.

The gaze that is co-natural to the whole splendor of the world is the gaze that *sees for the first time*, without human prejudice. Yet this *first time*, in truth, is a *once and for all* time. It constitutes a wellspring of light within us, and we have the power to make it gush forth and flow out, with more or less effort. It is not simply, or even primarily, a question of novelty! One of Traherne's most notorious lines, which he himself underlines, is the following: *The First Impressions Are Immortal All*. They are immortal because they give access to everything, and to the infinite vastness of everything. The lines that immediately precede the statement say that these first impressions have taken root in the heart, so much so that they continue to grow even if they are trampled, forever nourishing our life.¹⁴

The infancy in question, or, rather, the light of glory in which the child once beheld things, does not trigger *nostalgia*, strictly speaking, nor does Traherne describe it as a lost paradise. He considers it to be simply covered over and unrecognized. His whole project is to exhort us tirelessly to recognize it and rediscover it by changing our gaze. The past that belongs to infancy is thus an essential or transcendental past rather than an empirical stretch of past time that has been lost and which it would be our task to retrieve, be it in a sublimated form. Memory is rather what comes from it, than what reaches back toward it. In this regard, Robert Ellrodt shrewdly remarks: "Intuition of an eternal present excludes nostalgia of the past. . . . Traherne does not dream of making his way back into the past. He projects himself into a future becoming, a future that is already present since its splendor surrounds him. Past, present and future are wrapped into one and the same intuition. . . . There is no reminiscence, no remembering; instead there is 'revivification' of the impression thanks to its deep permanence."¹⁵

The gaze of infancy that Traherne urges upon us is indissolubly sensorial and spiritual, physical and metaphysical. It is a form of what Christian tradition has called "the spiritual senses." Describing the streets, squares, and gates of the town where he lived, as well as the people going about their daily tasks as "my living joys and moving jewels," as "walking Miracles," Traherne explains: "For I saw them all in the light of heaven. And they were all mine, Temple streets skies Houses Gates and people. I had not learned to appropriat any thing other way." Far was it from me, he writes again, to seize "any other way of appropriating Riches than sight and Love."¹⁶ Everything that delights me with wonderment belongs to me; my right to see is a right

14 *Poems*, p. 44 (*Dumnesse*).

15 Cf. Ellrodt, pp. 348–349.

16 *Select Med.*, III, 29, p. 67.

of appropriation. In a gaze that remains always at my disposal to reactivate, everything is mine, everything is for me, I am king and heir of the whole universe, and there is nothing that does not belong to me. Traherne's viewpoint here has sometimes been labeled self-centered or solipsistic.¹⁷ Some of his expressions may rub the reader the wrong way at first, as they seem to give a naive and unbridled leeway to the sort of egocentrism that is found in actual children, all the more absolute and dreadful in their case in that it proceeds without *ego*. The feeling of malaise, however, comes from isolating Traherne's statements from their context and from the horizon that give them their meaning, as well as from the deep spiritual dialectic that they contain.

The pristine joy that I rediscover before the measureless and limitless beauty of the created universe, the joy which makes me into a new Adam, tells me also that I am not merely a fortuitous or accidental spectator: the beauty of the universe is intended for me, and for me in particular. I am the heir, the king, the end, and the goal of this infinite profusion, of this avalanche of light. That such beauty is addressed to me expressly forms one of joy's very dimensions, like an official seal that marks it off from other experiences of wonderment. Traherne repeats it in a variety of ways when pondering the notion that man is God's image: "Souls are God's jewels, everyone of which is worth many worlds. They are His riches because His image, and mine for that reason. So that I alone am the end of the World: Angels and men being all mine. And if others are so, they are made to enjoy it for my further advancement. God only being the Giver and I the Receiver."¹⁸ To Traherne, the "for me" and "for me alone" aspect of creation prepares us for the "for me" and "for me alone" character of redemption. (Pascal, unbeknownst, agrees with him in his famous statement that Jesus spilled "these very drops of blood" for me.)¹⁹

What follows makes the point clear: "For as long as I am ignorant that the World is mine, the love of God is defective to me. How can I believe that He gave His Son to die for me, who having power to do otherwise gave me nothing but rags and cottages? But when I see once that He gave heaven and Earth to me, and made me in His image to enjoy them in His similitude, I can easily believe that He gave His Son also for me."²⁰ The apprenticeship of our own importance within the divine design is nothing other than our apprenticeship of gratitude toward divine generosity. Each one of us is the Adam-like *I* for whom the world was created, each one of us with the same exclusivity. One

17 Cf. Ellrodt, p. 280 ff.

18 *Centuries*, I, 15, p. 6.

19 Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Le Guern (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), paragraph 717. He puts the words in Christ's mouth: "I was thinking of you during my agony; I spilled these very drops of blood for you."

20 *Centuries*, II, 6, p. 55.

of Love's wonders, Traherne tells us further, is that "among innumerable millions, it maketh every one the sole and single end of all things." God achieves the impossible, namely what seems impossible to us and would indeed be impossible to anyone but God.²¹

Plotinus often said that there are two possible ways to be introduced to philosophy. The first consists in emphasizing the indignity and infamy into which man has plunged himself and in which he happily wallows — shaming him, so to speak, in order to transform him. The second, which is the way that Plotinus chooses, is to show him with great force the dignity that he has lost, but which he can recover, since it was his beforehand.²² The same applies to other aspects of the soul. Like Plotinus, Traherne believes that it is by dilating a person, not by piling shame upon him, that we make it possible for him to come out of his servile pettiness. In reminding us of our exalted grandeur as king of the universe, however, Traherne does not forget about evil and sin, as though he were childishly dreaming, since he writes: "Till you see that the world is yours, you cannot weigh the greatness of sin, nor the misery of your fall, nor prize your redeemer's love."²³ One must know the sublimity of the Giver and of his gifts, and know it by direct experience and sight, in order to grasp the depth of our ingratitude. Since evil is only a privation, however, the movement can only proceed in this one direction, for fundamental reasons. Contemplating the ashes of a Rembrandt canvas that has been burned will never enable us to grasp what we have lost, however open-ended our stretch of time for contemplation may be.

The *I* of praise is no less unsubstitutable than the *I* of responsibility: this is one of Traherne's finest ideas. Whoever wants to share his responsibility is irresponsible. In our era, Sartre and Levinas have powerfully argued this point. The initial moment of responsibility can only be one and indivisible: "I am, myself, alone, responsible." Otherwise, there is an attempt to dodge responsibility, and the start of an alibi. Similarly, Traherne basically affirms that the initial moment of gratitude is one and indivisible: "For what is offered to myself alone, I alone must give thanks and praise." The act cannot be delegated. In both cases, the initial moment may perhaps be broadened and enriched later on, but it can never be abolished. From the fact that the sun shines for everyone, I might only too easily draw the conclusion that I have a duty to give thanks only for the tiny part of its benefits that affects me. I might conclude that the sun's light and heat, after all, are not intended for me personally. Traherne, instead, says: the sun heats and shines only for you, as though you were alone in the world, so that you alone must give

21 *Centuries*, II, 55, p. 79.

22 Plotin, *Ennéades*, VI, 1, 1.

23 *Centuries*, II, 3, p. 54.

thanks. And if others also enjoy it, so that their very joy increases your own beyond measure and expands it, then you alone must give thanks for the fact that your joy is infinitely greater than if you were alone in the world. Praise has the same structure as responsibility in this regard because praise is man's first and highest responsibility, the one upon which all others depend, as Philo Judaeus so deeply understood.²⁴ Traherne's "self-centeredness," if we insist on the word, is thus very peculiar and has nothing selfish or psychological about it. It aims at emphasizing the unique and unsubstitutable character of my duties.

Traherne was perfectly aware of it: the "I alone" is creaturely and eschatological, misunderstood and perverted through impiety and sin. Indeed he writes: "The Ignorance of man maketh those Things obscure that are Infinitely Easy, those things ugly that are in themselves Beautifull, those Things inconvenient that are in them selves Blessed. Here I am censured for Speaking in the Singular number, and Saying I. All these things are done for me. . . . There [= in eternal life], it shall be our Glory and the Joy of all to Acknowledge, I. . . . Everyone shall Speak in the first Person and it shall be God's glory that He is the Joy of all. Can the freind [sic] of GOD, and the Heir of all Things in Heaven and Earth forbear to say, I?"²⁵ Traherne's extraordinary page demonstrates the sense in which the act of saying "I" *in truth* anticipates our eschatological fulfillment, like a glow of eternal life here and now, since it is in virtue of being God's image that we are able to affirm *so be it*. The ultimate choir will be a choir of voices that say "I" — as we do now for the *Credo* that is sung in Christian churches. It is I myself, in person, whom God asks to believe and to confess my faith, granted that the same I is each one of us.²⁶

Sadly observing children's games at Port-Royal, Pascal remarked: yours or mine, the start of injustice on earth, even if we are speaking only of a ball.²⁷ When Traherne says that the "whole world is mine," his "mine" does not serve as one of the terms of such an opposition, since he relentlessly argues that each and every person must say "I" in the same way, in order to praise and to give thanks. No one is dispossessed thereby of universal royalty; but instead every person is invited to exercise it. At stake is an acknowledgment of the created nature of ipseity.

The joy in question, of which we will soon show that it consists in dilation, is a joy that wells up before what is simple, ordinary, small, banal, and routine. A necessary feature of awe is that the ordinary is what is truly rare,

24 Cf. my study *L'Arche de la parole* (Paris, 1998), pp. 164 ff.

25 *Select Med.*, III, 65, p. 91.

26 In a rare instance, Ellrodt is somewhat unjust toward Traherne in this regard; and he could not have known.

27 Pascal, *Pensées*, Le Guern, paragraph 60. The illustration involves a dog.

and that the infinitesimal is what has true grandeur. A blade of grass is more precious than diamonds.²⁸ Traherne draws a contrast between the veracity of the child's gaze, filled with wonder at a blade of grass, and the falsehood of the gaze of "the bigger children." In his goodness, Traherne says, God often makes the best things to be the most common, and makes those things that have little worth to be rare.²⁹ Air, water, and trees are more common than rubies. "Seeing therefore all satisfactions are near at hand, by going further we do but leave them; and wearying ourselves in a long way round about, like a blind man, forsake them."³⁰ Traherne's grateful wonderment before what is simple is what imbues his best poems with beauty, just as it marks what is most poetic in his prose.³¹

What exactly does it mean that everything is mine and for me, and that I come into God's creation as "his Son and Heir"?³² The right that I have over everything is a *right of sight*, a right of contemplation and admiration, a right of use. Straightaway, it prohibits any proprietary right in the legal sense of the term, unmasking it as vanity and pettiness. What vanity there is, indeed, in wanting to own something, when I already possess all things! He who marvels at the trees of a park through which he walks as a mere passer-by possesses them more truly, in Traherne's view, than their owner, for whom they are nothing more than a part of his wealth. Perception *in statu nascendi*, which is Traherne's focus and the focus of his praise of infancy, also constitutes a vision *sub specie aeternitatis*. It makes us coeval with the first mornings of creation and makes us into a new Adam, on potentially each and every new dawn.³³ In the poem *Wonder*, Traherne writes: "The World resembled his *Eternitie*,/ In which my Soul did Walk;/ And evry Thing that I did see/ Did with me talk."³⁴ In order to understand the poem, there is no need to call upon empirical studies of child psychology or to cite Piaget.³⁵ Traherne's statements are rigorously true phenomenologically and poetically.

In knowingly reviving the "visible voice" that had appeared in Augustine in connection with the beauty of things, and in anticipation of Claudel, Traherne frames a theology that is both perceptible and perceptive: things "daily cry in a living manner, with a silent and yet most loud voice, We are all His gifts: We are tokens and presents of His love."³⁶ How would someone with whom things converse not think of himself as their interlocutor? How would

28 *Centuries*, III, 62, p. 140.

29 *Centuries*, III, 53, p. 136.

30 *Centuries*, I, 23, p. 10.

31 Cf. *Centuries*, I, 25, p. 11 on the dust of roads.

32 *Poems*, p. 6 (*The Salvation*).

33 *Centuries*, I, 28, p. 12.

34 Wahl, p. 27 (*Wonder*). Traherne emphasized *Eternity*.

35 Cf. Ellrodt, pp. 301–302.

36 *Centuries*, II, 28, p. 67.

someone who sees things in their place and in their order, who discerns their use, not believe that they are intended for him, if, as Aristotle puts it, sensation is indeed a single act that is shared by the sentient and by what is sensed? To discern something through sense necessarily means to grasp it as ours in some manner, although the idea that it was created for me says more than the basic co-belonging, or coalescence, that pure phenomenology is rightfully tasked to describe.

For Traherne, the pristine perception that we recover and the birthing moment of sensation in which the world, “I,” and the world *for me* emerge, all at once, in an excess of joy, are essentially and irreversibly a discovery of *apeiron* — of the limitlessness of the world and of the limitlessness of the soul. This is what makes him into a poet and philosopher of dilation. Our heart dilates in a dilating world. It dilates so much that the world itself will not be enough for it (“The world is not this little Cottage of Heaven and Earth,” he says).³⁷ The Franciscan element in Traherne is transformed by a new cosmology, namely the cosmology of an infinite universe. He who is transported to paradise by the simple sight of dust on the road ends up characterizing the solar system as a “Cottage”! One of his best poems, *The City*, puts it clearly: “We first by Nature all things boundless see;/ Feel all illimited; and know/ No Terms or Periods; But go on/ Throughout the Endless Throne/ Of God, to view His wide Eternity/ . . . Tho we are taught/ To limit and to bound our Thought.”³⁸

What he says here poetically, Traherne also describes in his prose: the infinite, to him, is the first thing that is naturally known. “Bounds and limits are discerned only in a secondary manner. Suppose a man were born deaf and blind. By the very feeling of his soul, he apprehends infinite about him, infinite space, infinite darkness. He thinks not of wall and limits till he feels them and is stopped by them.”³⁹ Infinity is grasped first under the form of the infinity of space, like a manifestation of divine infinity. Traherne does not hesitate to say, a couple of sentences later, that infinity is “as it were, the very essence and being of the soul.” How does one, however, pass from the former to the latter? The human soul’s self-discovery *qua* image of God is the discovery of its own infinity, more immense, still, than the infinity of space, since the first contains the second. “My soul oversteps all limitations,” and it is through this very insight that we behold in it “the luminous and radiant divine Image.” “I can Plainly see Infinit space, and am a creature Able to Enjoy Infinity.”⁴⁰

37 *Centuries*, I, 18, p. 17.

38 *Poems*, p. 144.

39 *Centuries*, II, 81, p. 91.

40 *Select Med.*, IV, 3, pp. 115–116.

Traherne adopts in this regard Augustine's decisive word of *capacitas*, capacity, to describe man's high point, but not without modifying some of Augustine's own perspectives. A poem entitled "My Spirit" affirms that there are in him "No brims nor borders, such as in a bowl/ We see. My Essence was Capacity,/ That felt all things."⁴¹ A brief review will help us to appreciate Traherne's originality. In Christian theology, *capacity* basically means the ability to contain and to receive. To say that man is capable of God, *capax Dei*, is to say that he can receive in himself something of the divine life, and partake in it, which Augustine reserves for man's highest powers, as we saw earlier in the present book. To Augustine, man's "capacity" in this sense requires grace in order to become active. It is distinct from the activity of our mental powers when they are turned toward created things and engaged in the task of grasping them and understanding them. In contrast, but without any radical break, Traherne seems to extend the notion of man's capacity to our entire spiritual being. He includes in it our relationship to the world as well as our relationship to God.

The capacity in question is, first and foremost, a capacity *for infinity* and an infinite capacity. It makes it possible for us to partake of the divine life, but also to partake of the limitless life of the limitless universe. It gives itself as a *response*: "But because God is infinitely able to do all things, there must of necessity be an infinite capacity to answer that power."⁴² Or, as Traherne puts it elsewhere in a remarkable formulation in the context of discussing man's deification: "An Infinit Question must have an Infinit Answer, for none can solve it."⁴³ The human spirit is a void that is capable of containing everything, a blank slate upon which everything can be engraved or written, and, by God's grace, "every man is alone the centre and circumference" of the universe.⁴⁴ How does Traherne illustrate it? "Creatures that are able to dart their thoughts into all spaces can brook no limit or restraint; they are infinitely indebted to this illimited extent, because were there no such infinity, there would be no room for their imaginations; their desires and affections would be cooped up, and their souls imprisoned." The space of imagination is a space that I really experience spiritually. Imagination is not something that is, itself, imaginary.

Like Claudel after him, Traherne desires infinity with all of his senses, all of his body, and all of his spirit. Abyss calls for abyss. The abyss of the heart calls for the abyss of the infinite world, just as the abyss of the world calls for the abyss of the heart and of desire, and both respond to God's abyss. We move from one infinity to another, more infinite still. Nothing stops

41 Wahl, p. 67 (*My Spirit*).

42 *Centuries*, V, 4, p. 221.

43 *Select Med.*, IV, 7, p. 118.

44 *Centuries*, V, 3, p. 220, and for what follows.

dilation. Traherne's poetry relentlessly voices Traherne's horror at walls and boundaries. There is in him a holy claustrophobia. "No walls confine!" is the exclamation that begins the poem entitled "Insatiableness."⁴⁵ Traherne's insatiability, however, has nothing in common with the insatiability that will haunt Romanticism. In exalting the infinity of the human spirit, Traherne never departs from a theology of the image and divine resemblance. There is not the slightest question of deifying man as such, or of making man into a rival of the true God, which is to say of making man into an idol. Capacity, once again, is the most adequate term for what in us is God's image: "A vast and Infinit Capacitie/ Did make my Bosom like the Deitie."⁴⁶ Such is God's design in us and for us, from the start.

Years later, Novalis would famously say that philosophy is the yearning to feel at home everywhere.⁴⁷ Traherne agrees with him in advance, following Marsilius Ficino and many other philosophers with regard to the fact that the desire for dilation is an essential human desire. For Traherne, it is even *the* essential desire, expressing our "capacity." On the one hand, however, Traherne would not limit the desire for dilation to philosophy. On the other hand, Traherne does not view it simply as a desire, but views dilation as a reality that is already present and accomplished as soon as we convert our gaze. Dilation is present as soon as we disengage our gaze from the narrowness within which a corrupted society keeps it imprisoned by convincing it that what is ours is what we have the power to buy, which will always be a laughable idea, even for the most powerful man in the world (think only of the famous parable of Pyrrhus and Cineas: even if the whole world were conquered, it would still be nothing more than a dot in the universe).⁴⁸ The joy of dilation, or the dilation of joy, which makes of us a new Adam in a new Eden, is the discovery that *we are already at home everywhere*. This is why there is no nostalgia in Traherne, in contrast to Novalis.

Traherne writes that the spectator of God's works and creation "is in them as in his territories, and in all these views his own possessions."⁴⁹ A poem says about the Spirit's strength: "It was so quick and pure,/ That all my Mind was wholly Evry-where,/ What-e'r it saw, 'twas actually there."⁵⁰ What is more delightful, Traherne asks with his jubilatory self-assurance: to have all of one's riches here in "some little place" while all other places are empty of them, or to have all places everywhere filled with our proper treasures?

45 *Poems*, p. 145.

46 *Poems*, p. 48 (*Silence*).

47 Heidegger devotes a long commentary to it in *Les Concepts fondamentaux de la métaphysique*, trans. Panis (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 21 ff.

48 Cf. *Centuries*, I, 22, pp. 9–10.

49 *Centuries*, V, 5, p. 221.

50 Wahl, p. 71 (*My Spirit*).

In having them everywhere, we are “everywhere at home honored and delighted, everywhere enlarged and in our own possessions.”⁵¹

How is it possible? How is one to dilate endlessly in space and time (since indeed Traherne is not content to be everywhere, he wants to be always as well)? How is one to become the voyager of a world without borders or passports, throughout space and throughout time, a voyager without baggage, moreover, since he who always arrives at his own home has no need for such impediments? Through one’s sight, through one’s gaze. To Traherne, sight is the organ of dilation and of being set at large, since sight transfers us and transports us to the place that we see, to where we gaze, to what it is that we contemplate. And it is sight, also, as we established, that confers on us our title of possession. The joy of sight is how we exercise our title and delight in what belongs to us. The only things and places that would remain alien to me, from which I would be excluded and exiled, would be those that I were not able to see. That there are such things is to be doubted, however, since Traherne includes sensorial vision, imaginary vision, and intellectual vision under the notion of sight. I am able to see according to all three types of sight, and I am where I see in all three ways. Since what is invisible to one type of vision is visible to one of the two others, it is difficult to conceive of anything that might elude my field of vision absolutely.

Since my vision, in Traherne’s view, goes hand and hand with my very essence, since I myself am my vision, it is I myself who am present where I gaze, which is to say that I am present in what I see. To be present everywhere and always is to see, or to be able to see, everywhere and always. By the same token, every expansion of my sight is an expansion of my presence and of my being, just as every narrowing of my vision is a shrinking of my presence and of my being. It is fitting to cite Traherne’s own words: “O God, so perfect is the Glory of thy Divine Image that my understanding is not only a sphere like Thee of Infinite Extent; an Ey without walls, All unlimited and Endless Sight, nor a sun only to shine on all the kingdoms and Things in kingdoms, that are or move within its Living Temple; nor is it only an Incomprehensible Mysterye, present every where, yet finite and confined.”⁵² Reluctantly, we must cut this astonishing passage short, in which man’s spirit is clearly identified with sight, all within a theology of God’s image. To what does Traherne’s “not only” refer, embedded as it is in the hyperbolic and paradoxical language of an ancient Christian tradition, without any idiosyncrasy or psychological peculiarity on Traherne’s part? What could one be that is more than an eye without walls and a sun that shines everywhere? Traherne contrasts these to what exceeds them beyond measure, namely being the image of Christ, of

51 *Centuries*, II, 77, p. 88.

52 *Select Med.*, I, 91, p. 9.

his wisdom and holiness, for indeed the glory of Redemption is greater even than the glory of Creation. The point, moreover, is not simply to bask in the extraordinary power that God gave our spirit when creating it, but to seek to please God in Christ (which refutes Traherne's supposed egocentrism once and for all). This is what prompts him to write: "Infinet of Extent is the least of perfections in the Soul of Man."⁵³ Let us also note that Traherne does not dissolve man's finitude completely and utterly, since he reaffirms it. Whether he gives it a fair assessment is another matter.

In the same work, another meditation develops the same dimension and the same identity of the spirit and sight: "There is in man a Double selfe, according as He is in God, or the world. In the world He is confined, and walketh up and Down in Little Room; but in God He is every where. Hence it is that his Thoughts can touch any part of Eternitie. . . . An extensiv and Immateriall Being, which is Like an Indivisible Atom without Bulk, All eye and sight, is therefore every where because its sight is so, which itself is, for the very substance of the soul is all sight, and Pure life as God is" at least when it possesses the perfection that it ought to have.⁵⁴ The mark of Neoplatonism is palpable in such passages. The conversion of sight consists in passing from a confined and confining self to a ubiquitous self.

To be everywhere is to be both center and sphere, as Traherne repeatedly asserts, which is to say to be the very motion of dilation through which the center makes itself into a sphere without losing its character of center. The poem "My Spirit" says it perfectly: "A strange extended Orb of Joy,/ Proceeding from within,/ Which did on evry side convey/ It self, and being nigh of Kin/To God did evry Way/ Dilate it self even in an Instant, and/ Like an Indivisible Centre Stand,/ At once Surrounding all Eternitie."⁵⁵ It would certainly not be misguided, here, to label Traherne a "metaphysical poet," comparable in some ways to our own Maurice Scève! The orb of joy is a center and embraces eternity itself because it has the power to dilate without limit and instantaneously. What dilates in this way is the eye of the spirit, becoming all that it sees, and going everywhere that its gaze reaches, while remaining one and the same indivisible sight. Traherne's description might present difficulties at first blush, but it possesses a phenomenological foundation that we have all experienced, namely the ubiquity of joy. The orb of joy alone enjoys this kind of mobility, and all human beings who have received unexpected good news have experienced, if only for an instant, being both orb and center, incorporating the *Yes* of eternity itself.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

54 *Select Med.*, II, 92, p. 44.

55 *Poems*, p. 54 (*My Spirit*); cf. Wahl, p. 73.

Elsewhere, Traherne speaks of the light of a lantern that is protected from nocturnal storms and is seen “Dispersing and Dilating evry Way.”⁵⁶ Here, a ray of light is compared to the mind’s eyesight. The poem resurrects, once again, the eyesight of which Traherne says that it was his “practically at birth” — translating pristine into innate. The light of the lantern describes perfectly what dilation is for Traherne. What happens next to the luminous ray, to the vision that belongs to the “Secret self”? “It did not go or mov, but in me stood,/ And by dilating of its self, all Good/ It try’d to reach; I found it present there,/ Ev’n while it did remain conversing here.”⁵⁷ The dilation of the mind’s gaze means that we are both right here and over there, just as our fleshly eyes reach all the way to the stars when we are lying down on our backs in a meadow. Such a motionless movement, spontaneous because it is the movement of desire, reveals to our mind its own power of ubiquity. The latently ubiquitous character of joy lies at the heart of Traherne’s poetry and philosophy.

Consequently, the word “dispersion” does not have a negative value in his writings, or imply the threatening possibility of a loss of self. Whoever remains right where he is while invading the space of the world in every direction cannot fear dispersing himself in the usual sense of the term. The center is never lost. Amiel’s anxieties are foreign to Traherne. What is more to be feared, in Traherne’s view, is expanding in a single direction (*one way*), since this would mean fixating oneself on a single object at a single place and thus truly risking self-confinement and self-narrowing.

Elsewhere, Traherne uses the verb “dilate,” always reflexively, in connection with love. Since sight is always indivisibly the sight of contemplation and of desire, however, the same phenomenon is involved: “By loving a Soul does propagate and beget itself. By Loving it does dilate and magnify itself. By Loving it does enlarge and delight itself.”⁵⁸ It is precisely because it radiates with joy that it is able to delight others as well. Without love, a person remains in a state of potentiality instead of being in act, which is to say “narrow and small,” deprived of what is intended for us. What is unique in Traherne’s thought in this regard is not that he describes joy as a dilation of presence — all of the chapters of this book show that the connection has been deeply pondered, and each one of us knows it based on experience — but that he finds the joy of dilation, to which he gives an unheard-of force, in the simple daily miracle of sensorial perception (enlarged to include imagination and spiritual sight). He does not place it in extraordinary states, in which we would encounter the object of our highest desire if not what positively

56 *Poems*, p. 60 (*Nature*).

57 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

58 *Centuries*, II, 48, p. 76.

exceeds our desire. Robert Ellrodt has written nicely on Traherne's "apology of the senses" and glorification of perception, granted that Traherne is not, for all that, a sensualist thinker.⁵⁹ It suffices that we be truly mindful of what we do and of what surrounds us when we open our eyes and see what is simply in front of us to be transported with joy and through joy.

If someone comes across Traherne without any knowledge of the grounds and coherence of his thought, he might be bothered by what seems at first blush to be wishful thinking, as though Traherne meant for us to persuade ourselves that we each are the king of the world, and to take measureless delight in it. Is this not an imaginary exaltation? In reality, what is involved is a new form of *thaumadzein*, of the marveling at the world in which Plato and Aristotle found the origin of philosophy. Thomas Traherne's "joyful wisdom" has for its object the fact that there is a visible world without end, that we are able to see it endlessly, and that we are able to deepen and expand our vision of it through the other possible forms of vision that have been given to us as our share. In order for our joy to be put into practice, it's enough that there be a world and our eyes to see it, even if we see only a blade of grass or a bit of road dust, to cite Traherne's own examples. To see is to voyage, to be present to what we see. Bergson will say that we journey all the way to the stars,⁶⁰ and this is basically what Traherne thinks.

What we see when we see the beauty and order of created things is the praise that they render to their creator: "By an act of the understanding therefore be present now with all the creatures among which you live, and hear them in their beings and operations praising God in an heavenly manner. . . . We infinitely wrong ourselves by laziness and confinement. . . . You are never what you ought till you go out of yourself and walk among them."⁶¹ To Traherne, the journey through space is also a journey through time. Imagination, which is a "liveliness of inner presence," has for him the same intensity as perception: "When I heard of any new kingdom beyond the seas, the light and glory of it pleased me immediately, it rose up within me, and I was enlarged wonderfully. I entered into it, I saw its commodities, rarities, springs, meadows, riches, inhabitants, and became possessor of that new room, as if it had been prepared for me. . . . When the Bible was read, my spirit was present in other ages. I saw the light and splendour of them."⁶² "Enlarged," "wide," "endless," "vast," and "boundless" are all among Traherne's most cherished words.

59 Ellrodt, pp. 323 ff.

60 Bergson, *L'Energie spirituelle* (Paris: PUF, 1967), 132e ed., p. 30: "By means of our perceptive faculty, and more especially sight, we radiate out well beyond our body: we go all the way to the stars."

61 *Centuries*, II, 76, p. 88.

62 *Centuries*, III, 24, pp. 118–119.

The glory of the human soul, he says, is that “it can see before and after the existence into endless spaces. Its Sight is its presence. . . . When my soul is in Eden with our first parents, I myself am there in a blessed manner. When I walk with Enoch, and see his translation, I am transported with him. The present age is too little to contain it. I can visit Noah in his ark, and swim upon the waters of the deluge. . . . Sure this power was not given in vain, but for some wonderful purpose; worthy of itself to enjoy and fathom.”⁶³ What could be more opposed to Pascal, who, in the same era, depicted imagination as the “mistress of error and falsehood,” adding that it “suspends the senses and makes them feel,” although this last statement actually applies perfectly to Traherne!⁶⁴ Traherne quite naturally and spontaneously undertakes an apprenticeship of presence, which enables him by way of the imagination to be transported into biblical scenes. Saint Ignatius of Loyola had made of such imaginary presence one of the key methods of the *Spiritual Exercises*. We travel by means of the imagination, which makes us see the past itself as though we were there.

Is there not, however, a basic ambiguity in this philosophy of visual and visionary dilation? Sometimes, as we just saw, Traherne invites us to come out of ourselves and of our confinement, to walk and journey endlessly among things, in an unending song of the world that has prompted him to be compared to Whitman.⁶⁵ Yet at other times he describes an internalization of the world in which all things come into us and gather inside of us. “The World was more *in me*, than I *in it*,” says a poem.⁶⁶ Another poem specifies: “A spiritual World Standing within,/ An Univers enclosed in Skin.”⁶⁷ Do we go toward all things by coming out of ourselves, or do all things come into us as though with a perfect fit? What has the last word, the outside or the inside? The fact that the center embraces its own radiated sphere solves the difficulty in advance. Traherne refuses to acknowledge any contradiction here. Rather, he sees two different ways of describing one and the same intentionality. My gaze is present to everything that it sees, so that, in a sense, it is a voyage, a stellar, and temporal odyssey. The presence in question, however, is intentional and spiritual. It forms an immanent act whereby things are present in me, appropriated by my gaze. I am able to be outside only because I am always inside. The inside, however, reaches its full plenitude only if it is raised to the scale of the world. Prior to Hegel and on a different basis, Traherne thinks that I am what my world is. We are responsible for our own narrowness or expanse.

63 *Centuries*, I, 55, p. 25.

64 Pascal, *Pensées*, Le Guern, paragraph 41.

65 Cf. Ellrodt, pp. 284–285.

66 *Poems*, p. 48 (*Silence*).

67 *Poems*, p. 58 (*Fulnesse*).

A philosophy of dilation and of capacity is necessarily a philosophy of desire, which we must now address. For indeed it is desire, alone, desire that is like a water-diviner of joys, that can expand us, as Augustine attests most eminently. Even the expansion of knowledge presupposes a desire to know. That man's highest desire, the desire that gives him his grandeur, is a desire reaching to infinity, a desire that nothing stops or lulls to sleep since nothing finite can satisfy it, is a properly Christian idea because it is in truth a desire for infinity and for God himself. The idea is radically opposed to the whole of ancient Greek wisdom. To the Greeks, a limitless desire would be the hallmark of disproportion and madness, the surest path to tragedy and despair. The Greeks saw no way to conceive of it except as an open-ended series of "always one more" finite goods, a pleonexia, a Danaides' barrel that nothing can fill, a hell. It is by eidetic necessity, therefore, that the idea of infinite desire is found in Traherne's writings, following a long tradition. The point is that he does not content himself with repeating it. He radicalizes it, with all in him that is firm, down to earth, "naive" in the noble sense of what is natural to him. He speaks of *want*, of *need*, and of *desire* — but the first word, *want*, is his favorite. The words "insatiable" and "insatiability," which usually have a pejorative sense in moral matters, have a positive meaning for him. Augustine's *inquietudo* becomes Traherne's *insatiableness*. It also constitutes an opportunity for Traherne to remain faithful to his theology of God's image, since the infinity of man's desire is an image of the infinity of desire in God himself.

"It is of the nobility of man's soul that he is insatiable. For he hath a Benefactor so prone to give, that He delighteth in us for asking. Do not your inclinations tell you that the Word is yours? Do you not covet all? Do you not long to have it; to enjoy it; to overcome it?"⁶⁸ In a form of preaching that might seem paradoxical for a Christian, Traherne cites world conquerors like Alexander the Great before concluding: "So insatiable is man that millions will not please him. They are no more than so many tennis-balls, in comparison of the Greatness and Highness of his Soul." Traherne's source here is undoubtedly Marsilius Ficino, who, in his *Platonic Theology (On the Soul's Immortality)*, interprets man's ambition and limitless desires as the mark of his soul's grandeur, granted that Traherne adds a flavor all his own by citing the unmistakably English example of tennis, which is foreign to Ficino.⁶⁹ Traherne pursues his meditation: "The noble inclination whereby man thirsteth after riches and dominion, is his highest virtue, when rightly guided; and carries him as in a triumphant chariot, to his sovereign happiness. Men are made miserable only by abusing it. Taking a false way to satisfy it, they

68 *Centuries*, I, 22, pp. 9–10, as for what follows.

69 Cf. the astonishing meditation of *Platonic Theology*, Book XIV, the last.

pursue the wind” as well as vanity.⁷⁰ We must admit that Traherne’s apologetics have the merit of consistency. Our first task is to understand it, not criticize it.

There is a strict parallel between the conversion of desire that is depicted here and the conversion of sight as analyzed earlier. The point is not to change the *nature* of desire (for example, by substituting humility for ambition), or to channel it in a wholly different direction (conquerors want to possess the whole world, and Traherne’s ideal man desires it as well, but to possess it through sight, knowledge, admiration, not by ruling over it as emperor). The point is to change its usage or mode of implementation. The point is to desire otherwise. In both cases of conversions, the conversion seems, possibly, to be immediate, even instantaneous. This separates Traherne from tradition, and from what we saw, for instance, in Augustine, concerning purification of desire itself — concerning the work of patience, of disappointment, of being denied one’s prayers, as constituting the way in which desire is dilated. As we saw in a line cited earlier, it is possible for us to dilate “in an instant.” We need only to grasp how to do it.

Hence Traherne’s lovely praise of “want”: “Were there no needs, wants would be wanting themselves, and supplies superfluous: want being the parent of Celestial Treasure. It is very strange; want itself is a treasure in Heaven; and so great an one that without it there could be no treasure. God did infinitely for us, when He made us to want like Gods, that like Gods we might be satisfied.”⁷¹ Traherne adds, anticipating some of Charles Péguy’s views: “The heathen Deities wanted nothing, and were therefore unhappy, for they had no being.” Earlier, Traherne explained that it was because Socrates was a pagan, oblivious of the fact that the world had been created by God for us to enjoy by living in His image, that he urged a doctrine of moderation and limitation of desire.⁷² If we take all of this just a bit further, we might find ourselves in the company of Charles Fourier!

Traherne’s view, however, has higher roots. Traherne emphasizes, again and again, with great force, the mystical paradox whereby God needs the world and human beings: “This is very strange that God should want. For in Him is the fulness of all Blessedness: He overfloweth eternally. His wants are as glorious as infinite,” but always satisfied. “He is from eternity full of want, or else He would not be full of Treasure. Infinite want is the very ground and cause of infinite treasure. It is incredible, yet very plain.”⁷³ In order to be in Blessedness like God, we must desire like Him: it is through the

70 *Centuries*, I, 23, p. 10.

71 *Centuries*, I, 41, p. 18.

72 *Centuries*, I, 40, pp. 17–18.

73 *Centuries*, I, 42, p. 18.

infinity in us of desire that we are, in truth, in His image.⁷⁴ (Schopenhauer is preemptively refuted.) Who says image in this sense also says active and living bond to the One of whom we are the image. The bond is the *want* that hollows out desire deeper. “From Eternity it was requisite that we should want. We could never else have enjoyed anything: Our own wants are treasures. And if want be a treasure, sure everything is so. Wants are the ligatures between God and us, the sinews that convey Senses from him into us, whereby we live in Him, and feel His enjoyments.”⁷⁵ We are not indebted to God, first and foremost, for the satisfaction of our desire, but for being men of desire. To extinguish desire in us would be to cut off our intimate and living communication with God. It would be to stop living in His image. “For without want, there Could be no Enjoyments, but all redundancies and Superfluities, for which respect want itself even is a sovereign possession.”⁷⁶ The depth of Eternity is the measureless measure of the depth of desire.

The poem *Insatiableness* describes the motion of elevation and growth where nothing suffices to my desire, neither riches, nor the whole world, not even time, since I want to see eternity: “’Tis mean Ambition to desire/ A single World:/ To many I aspire.”⁷⁷ Moreover, they will not suffice to our desire if each one is not rich in itself with infinite variety! Such a radical impatience and limitless dilation form, in Traherne’s view, the very way that leads to God’s infinity — but only because it is a way that comes from God’s infinity in the first place.

In what has been analyzed so far, it might seem that the limitless joy that Traherne describes involves only the soul and the world, and that other human beings appear in it only as elements of the world’s beauty, among trees, fields, and streets. This impression would be fallacious. If borrowing words from Leibniz may be permitted, what Traherne does is transition, in the course of his meditations, from examining a monad to framing a monadology. He passes from examining my mind before the wonder of the world to examining a realm of minds that limitlessly expands the beauty and worth of the world. To Traherne, God is essentially diffusive, communicative, radiant; He gives and gives Himself; He is a generous source that never ceases to illuminate. How, then, would the case be different in his image, man, especially since Traherne, as we saw, interprets God’s image in man quite radically? Thoughts about God’s image sometimes emphasize the distance that separates the image from its model, and sometimes their proximity. Traherne squarely belongs to the latter option.

74 *Centuries*, I, 44, p. 19.

75 *Centuries*, I, 51, p. 22.

76 *Select Med.*, III, 79, p. 97.

77 *Poems*, pp. 145–147.

If joy enlarges, it also seeks to communicate itself and to increase through self-communication. A wondrous world of which I alone perceive the splendor, without being able to share my joy with others, would not be as wondrous or as joyous as possible. A beautiful poem puts it nicely: “All things to Circulations owe/ Themselves; by which alone/ They do exist.”⁷⁸ Everything is addressed to me. I am the center of the universe, but the same is true for every other human being, who is also its center and end, and this infinitely multiplies our joy and makes it more vivid, as it does God’s own joy. The heart of the universe beats in each and every bosom. In Traherne’s perspective, letting another person in does not mean that I abdicate my own centrality; it means that joy is expanded by the perception of a spiritual world in which each and every soul is a center that affords no substitute. This spiritual world is the community of unique images of the unique God. God “giveth all the world to me, He giveth it to every one in giving it to all, and giveth it wholly to me in giving it to every one for everyone’s sake. He is infinitely happy in every one: as many times therefore as there are happy persons He is infinitely happy. Every one is infinitely happy in every one, every one therefore is as many time infinitely happy as there are happy persons. . . . Here is a kingdom! Where all are knit in infinite unity. All are happy in each other. All are like Deities.”⁷⁹ The “enlarged Selfe” is constituted by all of the others, in a state of mutuality.⁸⁰

The point is that we do not simply contemplate the same universe together and thank the same God. Our joy is enriched by the joy of others, and our perception is expanded by their perception. It is a way of inhabiting all spaces and all times, a way that joy opens up for us. It is not as utterly utopic as it might appear.⁸¹ What Proust would assign exclusively to great works of art at the end of *In Search of Lost Time*, namely the ability to make us see the world through another set of eyes, seems to be Traherne’s very paradigm for the communion of souls.⁸² It forms one of the dimensions of his philosophy of love.

To conclude, we must look at the important theme of praise, of *sacrificium laudis*, of the “sacrifice of praise,” and, therefore, also at its corollary, ingratitude. This is where Traherne is most deeply Augustinian — but not in a scholastic sort of way, merely paraphrasing Augustine’s formulations. Traherne’s whole *oeuvre* is a form of praise and an invitation to praise. The dilation of joy leads us to render thanks, but praise itself, in turn, dilates us. This is because praise is part of how our being breathes: “As no man can

78 *Poems*, p. 153 (*The Circulation*).

79 *Centuries*, I, 74, p. 36.

80 *Select Med.*, II, 79, p. 37.

81 Cf. *Centuries*, I, 81, p. 40.

82 M. Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), t. III, p. 474.

breathe out more air than he draweth in: so no man can offer up more praises than he receiveth benefits, to return in praises. For praises are transformed and returned benefits.”⁸³ Moreover, “As the world serves you by shewing the greatness of God’s love to you, so doth it serve you as fuel to foment and increase your praises.” Traherne imagines the world to be “a valley of vision,” where the praises of all human beings visibly rise as smoke, and God’s blessings visibly descend, forming a “region” or “land of praises.”

Praise is the very goal of the world, in so far as it is the respiration and circulation of love. “Are not praises the very end for which the world was created? Do they not consist as it were in knowledge, complacency and thanksgiving?”⁸⁴ Without praise, the world would be empty of joy and of true beauty — it would be vain. The world is created to culminate in an immense cry of joy, both a *Yes* and a *Thank you*. “Praises are the breathings of interior love, . . . an oblation of the soul and ascent of the heart on wings of divine affection towards God’s throne.” The goal of the world is the “Sacrifice of Endless Prais” that Christ alone is able to offer at all times.⁸⁵ As singular as Traherne is, he develops here a theme that is a major one of his era and is his era’s loftiest theme, most especially within the French school of spirituality.

As a result, or as the other side of the coin, Traherne considers ingratitude to be the worst form of evil and of misfortune. He writes: “Insatiableness is good, but not ingratitude.”⁸⁶ Ingratitude, which consists in not appreciating the goods that one has, and thus in failing to delight in them, leads indeed to a vicious and perpetually tormented form of insatiability. We note that ingratitude, to Traherne, does not reside primarily in the fact that I do not render thanks for a good that I have received and that I enjoy. Rather, it resides in not recognizing a good as a good, and in failing to delight in it. Ingratitude goes hand in hand with blindness and a decrease, a contraction of our being. No *thank you* comes out of our sour lips because we are bitter, disappointed, disgusted, in the true sense of the term, with what we have received from God and from others. Traherne’s words in this regard are particularly forceful: “It was no great mistake to say, that to have blessings and not to prize them is to be in hell. For it maketh them ineffectual, as if they were absent. Yea, in some respects, it is worse than to be in hell. It is more vicious, and more irrational.”⁸⁷ What is worse than hell is the true hell. It consists in constriction, in the narrowness of bitterness, of disgust, of displeasure, as in the refusal of joyous dilation and actions of thanksgiving. If Traherne is right, there are many who are in hell, who could be saved from it by having the

83 *Centuries*, II, 94, pp. 98–99, as for what follows. Cf., also, *Poems*, p. 152.

84 *Centuries*, III, 82, pp. 152–153, as for what follows.

85 *Poems*, p. 34 (*The Improvement*).

86 *Centuries*, I, 21, p. 9.

87 *Centuries*, I, 47, p. 21; cf. I, 49, pp. 21–22.

scales fall from their eyes and having their tongues set free! A whole series of Traherne's poems bears the title *Thanksgivings*, meaning actions of gratitude, praise, and grace.

As we clearly recognize, it would be hard to be more dilated and dilating than Traherne is, granted that the word "dilation" is not all that frequent. The deployment of his yearning for the limitless, for spreading out everywhere and always, refusing limitation as a "confinement," makes of Traherne an Amiel who has actually reached the ultimate end of his desire. An Amiel who has reached the ultimate end of his desire, however, would no longer be Amiel, since he would be liberated from his powerlessness! We might also compare Traherne to a Christian Whitman, but this would prompt a similar remark. In many ways, the most striking comparison to be drawn is between Traherne and Claudel, who never knew him.

Traherne's joy is a joy that he received. He received it in the midst of the terrible storms and anxieties of his country, during a violent era that was torn asunder and plagued by terrible hatreds. A few pages attest to how deeply affected and troubled he was by it. He responded to his own times instead of ignoring them. In order to understand him, we must bear it in mind. Traherne's joy does not straightforwardly reflect a peaceful and prosperous environment. A final question, however, must be raised.

In tirelessly interrogating the notions of limit and limitlessness, of *peras* and *apeiron*, Traherne seems to conduct an exclusive and unilateral praise of a dilation in which limits exist only for the sake of being overcome, destroyed, or suppressed. How might they be retrieved or posited otherwise? How might we return to finitude, we who are everywhere and are the kings of much more than the universe? Would there really be nothing but joy if we were truly nothing but wholly unlimited? The joy of an expansion in which we push limits back, in which we perhaps never cease to push them always further back, would invert itself into a vertigo of loss and dissolution if all limitation were truly abolished. Such a loss could conceivably be a panicked ecstasy, the ecstasy of dissolution into the Absolute, but this is not Traherne's ecstasy, since he always firmly maintains the identity and integrity of the I. Although he did not ask the question in so many words, there are elements of an answer in his work, which deserve a brief notice.

It sometimes happens that he explicitly praises limitation. The poet of the boundless occasionally affirms the necessity of finitude: "Power well-bounded is more Great in Might/ Than if let loose 'twere wholly infinite." God could have made an endless sea, but then it would not have been a "Sea of Bliss." A sea that is bounded by a shore is better for it.⁸⁸ In order for the world to be rich and varied, there must be in it a multiplicity of things, which

88 *Poems*, p. 186; cf. *Centuries*, III, 20–21, pp. 116–117.

entails that they must limit one another for their own good. The God who limits (*He bounding all*) thus signs the perfection of His works. Qualitative infinity is preferable to the quantitative infinity of a single element. Added to this is the theme of how the very great, even the immense, is included in the very small. The famous poem “News” ends by observing that the child possesses everything, and that the gaze in which everything is included is “A very little thing.”⁸⁹ Last but not least, with regard to a topic that we have not been able to address here and that warrants a full study, let us note that Traherne does not lose sight of the body, since he goes so far as to affirm that God created the world for the sake of body,⁹⁰ and voices one of the most vivid and frank praises of the body that has ever been sung.⁹¹ Palpitating hearth of my power of expansion and dilation, the body is also what saves it from dissolving into the indefinite.

89 Wahl, p. 58.

90 Cf. Ellrodt, p. 377; and *Poems*, p. 220.

91 Cf. *Poems*, pp. 215–229 (*Thanksgiving for the Body*).

Chapter 8

Whitman, Voyager without Limits

*What widens within you Walt Whitman?*¹ The American poet asks himself the question, in a line in which the repetition of his own first initials, also repeated in the next line (“What waves”), tells us that the answer is included in the question. Although the answer is in the question, the question nonetheless remains: how are we to know whether “Walt Whitman” is simply the cipher or pseudonym of a process of cosmic widening, or whether the world itself, with its whole expanse, has entered into Walt Whitman? A similar question is raised by other cases of personal identifications, such as the one we find in the celebrated Chinese example of Zhuang Zhou, who wakes up as himself after dreaming that he was a butterfly and “no longer knows whether he was Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or whether he is now a butterfly dreaming that he is Zhou.”² What is actually happening here? Is the world taking itself for Walt Whitman, or is Walt Whitman taking himself for the world?

In any event, both Walt Whitman and the world embrace one another, and their embrace is a powerful motion of expansion and growth: as “Song of Myself” puts it, “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son.”³ That Whitman’s use of the term “widen” is meant to include latitude in the geographic sense of the term is fully attested by the next stanza of *Salut au Monde!* (the original title is in French): “Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens.” Not only is Walt Whitman a kosmos, but he is also a kosmos with greater widths and lengths than the measured and measurable earth. The poem starts by inserting all continents within him, then makes him hear all of the voices of the world (“What do you hear Walt Whitman?”) before

1 Whitman is cited from *The Complete Poems*, ed. F. Murphy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983). Here, *Salut au Monde!*, 1, p. 168.

2 *L’Oeuvre complète de Tchouang-Tseu*, trans. Liou Kia-Kway (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 45.

3 *Song of Myself*, 24, p. 86.

making all beings and their actions appear before his inner gaze (“What do you see Walt Whitman?”). The visual aspect of Whitman’s song far exceeds its acoustic aspect, but the visual aspect follows from the acoustic aspect and is generated strictly by listening — by listening to his own voice, which contains all voices.

This fusion of acoustic and visual aspects resolves the question that is raised by “Song of Myself”: “My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,/ With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes/ of worlds./ Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,/ It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,/ *Walt you contain enough, why don’t you let it out then?*”⁴ In English, only a simple little letter, a phonetic liquid, separates “words” from “worlds.” Here again, the answer is contained in the question: if eyes cannot reach as far as the voice with its cosmogenetic power, then not to worry, Walt Whitman! You need only to do what you have already done. You need only to learn to see what you say, as you say it. You need only to let your speech unfurl the visible in a perpetual incantation — rather than seek to describe it, which you have, in fact, never done. Gustave Courbet’s youthful narcissism, which in the same era prompted Courbet to salute the ocean as his equal and as a power equal to his own power, seems almost inhibited when compared to Whitman’s *Salut au Monde!* Whitman treats the whole universe as his equal.⁵

The novelist D. H. Lawrence, who was no stranger himself to the experience of panic, targeted this aspect of Whitman with a delicious and biting irony. What Lawrence sees in such fusion (“I am everything and everything is me and so we’re all One in One Identity”) is a loss of self: “Your mainspring is broken, Walt Whitman. The mainspring of your own individuality. And so you run down with a great whirr, merging with everything.”⁶ Lawrence feels that Whitman’s characteristic fusion imbues Whitman’s poetry with something “spectral” despite its strongly affirmed physicality. “Walt becomes in his own person the whole world, the whole universe, the whole eternity of time, as far as his rather sketchy knowledge of history will carry him, that is. Because to *be* a thing he had to know it. . . . As soon as Walt *knew* a thing, he assumed a One Identity with it. If he knew that an Eskimo sat in a kyak, immediately there was Walt being little and yellow and greasy, sitting in a kyak. Now will you tell me exactly what a kyak is?” Lawrence then compares

4 Ibid., 25, p. 89.

5 Cf. Courbet’s “Bord de mer à Palavas” of 1854, in the Musée Fabre, Montpellier. H. Toussaint remarks in the Exhibit catalogue: “We generally associate this painting with a sentence written by Courbet to Jules Vallès in the same time period: ‘O sea, your voice is formidable, but it will not succeed in overpowering the Fame that will proclaim my name to the whole world.’” *Courbet* (Paris: Musées nationaux, 1977), p. 127.

6 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 171–175 (1st edition 1923).

Whitman to a powerful automobile racing through the night, seeing only what its headlights illuminate, sticking to a straight track without any inkling of diverging paths or of what might lie hidden in the dark bushes (which includes Lawrence, of course). Lawrence refuses to incorporate everything: “I don’t want all those things inside me, thank you.” He wants to defend alterity (“Eskimos are not minor little Walts”) and to defend a form of self-affirmation that presupposes a refusal, a *no* to many beings.

It is hard to resist the pleasure of citing these provocative barbs of malice. Our task, however, is not to pass judgment on Whitman’s inflationary psychology, but to examine what is involved in his Pan-frenzied and cosmic poetics of dilation. The real point is that the desire to become everything is an essential property of human being. If the word “dilation” itself is fairly infrequent in Whitman (like Traherne, Whitman speaks more readily of increase, expansion, widening, and limitlessness), the fact remains that dilation is implied in a multitude of ways within Whitman’s poetics and within Whitman’s human project. In “Song of Myself,” dilation appears as the key term of Whitman’s poetic art: “I chant the chant of dilation or pride./ We have had ducking and deprecating about enough./ I show that size is only development.”⁷ *I chant the chant of dilation or pride*: by a strange linguistic irony, English amputates the French “dilatation” of one of its syllables, but the meaning is the same as the French *dilatation*. The English “dilation” does not convey any idea of “delaying tactics” as does the French *dilation*.

German masters like Goethe and Schelling once proclaimed that the grandeur of mastery resides in self-limitation — in a concentration that renounces what is superfluous and resists dispersion. Concentration alone, in their view, is what allows a force to reach high summits. Instead, here, in Whitman, what is affirmed is an imperative of growth and of pleonexia. To possess volume, stature, and size consists simply in increasing volume, stature, and size — as well as in the positive duty to increase them (*size is only development*). Force consists in increasing force through expansion. Like a dreaming or unconscious sleep-walker, Whitman formulates a basic law of capitalism and imperialism. Yet his purpose is to emphasize the fact that everything that exists wants to be more and *must* be more, always more.

Whitman again identifies pride with dilation in a patriotic poem where he evokes “the American Soul, with/ equal hemispheres, one Love, one Dilation or Pride.”⁸ This American soul is “vast,” “encircling all.” Elsewhere, Whitman sees personified Democracy in a dream with its “dilating form” and its “spreading mantle covering the world”⁹ — not unlike the Virgins of Mercy of

7 *Song of Myself*, 21, p. 83.

8 *Our Old Feuillage*, p. 204.

9 *By the Blue Ontario’s Shore*, 17, p. 376.

long ago. Yet the poems also aim at widening and expanding the reader, the addressee: “With time and space I him dilate.”¹⁰ Urging those who are sinking down toward death to get rid of priest and doctor, and instead to entrust themselves wholly to the poet’s uplifting force, Whitman writes: “I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up,/ Every room of the house do I fill with an arm’d force,/ Lovers of me, bafflers of graves.”¹¹ Nothing resists the poet’s powerful breath! Whitman’s ideal human being, whom he explicitly deifies, is healthy of body and joyously “dilate in spirit.”¹²

Granted that we have now established the basic importance of dilation for Whitman’s poetics; granted that his poetics involves an expansion of self and of the world that ceaselessly converge and renew one another; and granted that Whitman’s poetics of dilation involves a form of speech that is itself dilated, as though it wanted to absorb everything into itself and to resound across a limitless space, how are we actually to pin down the characteristic features of Whitman’s poetics? Whatever the historic byways through which it came down to Whitman, it is Heraclitus’s theory, reinterpreted by Stoics on the one hand, and imbued with a Renaissance sense of wonderment for human plasticity and infinity on the other, that we find in Whitman’s poetic cosmology, revived to fit a boundless universe. What Whitman seeks to express is the One, conceived as the unity of the whole — of a whole that is made up of contrary and opposing forces, yet is not threatened or weakened by them. Far from decaying, the universal whole lives and grows thanks to the very tension that pervades it. The idea that contraries produce unity, and that we, in turn, must accept contraries and even bless both opposing forces equally, recurs again and again in *Leaves of Grass*. The ancient and robust concept of man as a microcosm also haunts Whitman: each human being is a part of the whole — a part that reproduces and contains the world itself. On the one hand, everything is in us. On the other hand and at the same time, we ourselves are everywhere, we roam everywhere, and we reach the extremities of space and time. In other authors, the two statements form a contrast, an alternative. If inner space has the immensity and richness of the universe, why leave this inner space and travel? What could travel possibly add? Is it not sufficient to travel inwardly? Conversely, if we crave being constantly at a fresh point of departure, if our desire is to open our eyes every morning upon a new landscape and upon new faces, is it not because we are tired of the monotonous emptiness of our own small soul, of its indigence and ignorance? Is it not a desire to escape from our cramped little soul by rushing out into

10 *For Him I Sing*, p. 43.

11 *Song of Myself*, 40, p. 109.

12 *Gods*, p. 296.

the world, into the heart of the world, which alone has the power to enrich and enlarge our heart?

In Whitman, however, there is no need to choose. Like the child whom Plato evokes in the *Sophist* (we have already cited the passage in connection with Traherne), Whitman wants both the outside and the inside at once, both the abyss of the self and the abyss of the world. In his eyes, it is only by wanting them both that we have a shot at obtaining each one, because the path leading outward is the same as the path leading inward — as indeed Heraclitus affirmed about the path that ascends and the path that descends.¹³ How is it possible? How is it possible that human presence to the world is simultaneously what is most dilated and what is most concentrated? It must be that human presence has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The fascinating and historically loaded formulation¹⁴ that describes God's presence to the world fittingly describes human presence, or so Whitman seems to suggest, as soon as man discovers what is divine in himself and discovers the extent of his power by exercising it. Where does such a mode of human presence give itself to be seen? It is seen in the perpetual implementation within us of a centrifugal motion and of a centripetal motion, from inside out and from outside in, comparable in some ways to the energizing motion of the Stoics. Such an ongoing process puts us in harmony and consonance with the same living interplay of forces in the world.

I inhale and exhale, just as a tide rises and wanes. My life, my thinking, my speech are all made up of systole and diastole, like the beating of my heart and the beating heart of the world. This explains the importance of the word “pulse” for Whitman. The word serves almost as a transcendental, in the medieval sense of the term, since it applies to the most diverse regions of being. The initial poem of *Leaves of Grass* evokes “Life immense in passion, pulse, and power.” (Whitman invents his own “rule of three nouns,” similar to the classic French “rule of three adjectives”: his rhythm is ternary.)¹⁵ But who is it who has taken life's pulse? Who has measured its strength? It rarely “exhibits itself,” which means that we must “take” it if we want to be able to project “the history of the future.”¹⁶ Through multiple figures, another poem evokes the “beating and pounding at my temples and wrists,” the “curious systole and diastole within,” the “subtle nourishment of the air,” before exclaiming: “O adhesiveness! O pulse of my life!” — “the limbs and senses of my body . . . take you and dismiss you continually.”¹⁷ It is in the poem's singing that the pulse shows itself most clearly.

13 Héraclite, D. K. 60.

14 It is Definition II in the *Livre des 24 Philosophes*, trans. Hudry (Grenoble: J. Million, 1989), p. 93.

15 *One's-Self I Sing*, p. 37.

16 *To a Historian*, p. 39.

17 *Not Heaving from My Ribb'd Breast Only*, pp. 152–153.

Whitman does not hesitate, moreover, to introduce erudite words such as “centrifugal” and “centripetal” into his poems, be it poems about man’s ritual dancing, or poems about the dance of the earth in space among other planets, its elder and younger sisters, its “centripetal and centrifugal sisters.”¹⁸ The “Chants of the prairie,” born of all sorts of American landscapes that Whitman tirelessly enumerates, shoot forth “in pulses of fire ceaseless to vivify all.”¹⁹ Connected to the thrust of desire, there is also “that pulse of my nights and days.”²⁰ With the “pioneers” whom he hails, Whitman believes that “All the pulses of the world” beat, in truth, “for us,” in concert with the movement of expansion that overcomes every assigned limit.²¹ Since everything beats, since everything has a heart that dilates and constricts, we will hardly be surprised that God Himself, “Transcendent Thou” and “nameless,” “light of the light, shedding forth universes” of which He, God, is the mighty “center,” is nonetheless susceptible of receiving a name and of being named, *pulse*. “Thou Pulse! Thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,/ That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,/ Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of spaces!”²² Whitman’s God is powerfully posited as universal center.

At this point, a cosmological puzzle comes to light, which also points to an existential puzzle for a poetics of dilation. The most important question is not to know *what* is at the center, but to know *that there is* a center of the world. The model of a centered universe, made up of circles and orbs, whether moving or motionless, cannot easily be wed to the model of an infinite universe bereft of center, with its “shapeless vastnesses of space.”²³ One solution, as we find here in Whitman, is to posit a divine center, which is to say a center of another order altogether. Our own human ambivalence, however, remains unresolved. If we are assigned a boundary that cannot in any way be pushed back or overtaken, we are filled with dread at the thought of a definitive imprisonment, of a constriction that diminishes us and stifles us. If, on the other hand, I were to set out for the great yonder and joyously roam in every direction without limit, in such a way that I would never be able to return, never find my way back, never find my way or myself again, another kind of dread would take hold of me, characteristic of dilation, namely the dread of self-loss and self-dissolution. Since the joy of dilation does not desire or aim at self-loss, it requires that I remain at all times the self that dilates, that I remain capable of getting ahold of myself again and again, within expansion

18 *Song of Myself*, 43, p. 114; and *Song of the Rolling Earth*, 1, p. 250.

19 *Starting from Paumanok*, 3, p. 51.

20 *Song of Myself*, 40, p. 108.

21 *Pioneers! O Pioneers!*, p. 259.

22 *Passage to India*, 8, p. 435, and 10.

23 Cf. G. Poulet, *Les Métamorphoses du cercle*; and, less familiar but no less informative on the relationship between poetry and cosmology, H. Tuzet, *Le Cosmos et l’imagination* (Paris: Corti, 1965).

itself. Otherwise, what is involved would be more like an explosion than a dilation.

What solves the problem, in Whitman's view, is the schema of pulsation. In order for the joy of diastole to remain joy, there must be a systole. If I go off into the space of the world without returning and never come back to my birth place, so what? As long as I carry myself with me into the great unknown — as long as I am able through memory and speech to recapitulate the whole journey and what it has made of me. This is why Whitman clearly affirms in "Song of the Open Road" that, wherever he goes, he carries his "old delicious burdens" with him, men and women whom he has loved: "I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them,/ I am fill'd with them, and I will fill them in return."²⁴ In this way, living memory itself acts as an expansion, an inner plenitude. After the lines that we have cited earlier from "Passage to India" (and the title implies "to more than India," setting off for a far-away distance that points to an even further distance), Whitman exorcises the dread of formless space through the plenitude of his dilation.

Addressing his own soul, he exclaims: "And lo! Thou gently masterest the orbs,/ Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,/ And fillest, swellest full, the vastnesses of Space."²⁵ The soul that bounds forward and voyages toward God (there *is* a term to the voyage) then becomes "Greater than stars or suns." The soul exceeds stars and suns because it contains them all and embraces them all in its joy full of blessings, which blesses even death. This is the only way for joy to be "daring but safe," and for Whitman to be able to invite himself to "farther, farther sail," since "all the seas" are "of God," as the poem concludes.

Man flows and ebbs, like the sea — sea in which Whitman, no less than Baudelaire, recognizes himself: how could the man of dilation not be oceanic? The poem "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" says it nicely: "Ebb, ocean of life, (the flow will return)."²⁶ Similarly, "Song of Myself" makes it clear that the sea mirrors human life to the extent that opposites are unified in one and the same life: "I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases./ Partaker of influx and efflux, I, extoller of hate and conciliation,/ . . . I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also."²⁷ As in Empedocles, love and hatred are conceived as cosmic forces of union and of separation, each one as necessary as the other. Everything has its ebb and flow, its high and low tides, its contraction and its dilation. The soul also has the same perpetual rhythmic motion, longer "than

24 *Song of the Open Road*, 1, p. 179.

25 *Passage to India*, 9, p. 436, and p. 437 for what follows.

26 *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, p. 283.

27 *Song of Myself*, 22, pp. 84–85.

water ebbs and flows.”²⁸ The body itself has a liquid aspect: “I effuse my flesh in eddies.”²⁹ Again, the orb, the circle, the whirl!

The strongly centrifugal motion of dilation and expansion that Whitman names “efflux” is joy itself. He defines it as what cannot be defined, what cannot be quieted, fixated, imprisoned — as what never stops growing. The “Song of the Open Road” puts it powerfully: “Here is the efflux of the soul,/ The efflux of the soul comes from within through embower’d gates, ever provoking questions,/ These yearnings why are they? . . . / Why are there men and women that while they are nigh me the sunlight expands my blood?/ . . . Why are there trees I never walk under but large and melodious thoughts descend upon me?/ (I think they hang there winter and summer on those trees and always drop fruit as I pass).”³⁰ Such effusive joy, which is always tinged with eroticism for Whitman, has nothing of a solitary self-affirmation by myself: it goes forth to greet all sorts of encounters with living beings, human beings, or trees, and it feeds on these encounters and draws strength from them. Joy forms a communication with the world that is sympathetic in the etymologic sense of the term. It attests to the unity of a world in which all things are in solidarity with each other (which is why Whitman sees in it a brotherly and empathic translation of democracy: there is something of the spirit of 1848 in him).

The deciding factor, however, is that the motion that comes from within constitutes an *Open Sesame*. The motion reveals its presence outside of us, unveiling it in every being in the world. My own active dilation awakens the dilating power that slumbers in beings and things, much like the thoughts that hang in trees and wait only for us to walk by in order to drop. The flame of our dilation sets ablaze all of the fires that lie smoldering under the ashes of appearances. And what we give to others through the mobility of our joy is returned by them to us a hundredfold. The same poem continues as follows: “The efflux of the soul is happiness, here is happiness,/ I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times,/ Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged.” Its “character” is “fluid,” which is to say that it is in a state of mobility by its very essence. There is an atmospheric dimension to the joy of efflux. All of this gives a clear phenomenological grounding to the act of affirming the identity of inward and outward motions. My effusion toward the world discovers and awakens the effusion of the world itself, which kindles and strengthens my own effusion all over again by spreading out and filling me. Joy would not be joy and would not last if it received nothing and basked only in its own plenitude. We see here again the same underlying schema of

28 *Starting from Paumanok*, 6, p. 53.

29 *Song of Myself*, 52, p. 124.

30 *Song of the Open Road*, 7–8, p. 183.

pulsation and alternation, exemplified in Whitman's case by breathing. Every time there is a poetics of voice, there is also a poetics of *breath*. The double meaning of the word "inspiration" is based directly on the things themselves. Traherne and Claudel give their own version of it in the present book.

When I inhale, it is not only a bit of air that I take in but the whole world: "I inhale great draughts of space,/ The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine."³¹ To inhale is to internalize the world and to appropriate it (which is why Whitman is able to speak of "feeding" on air). For this to happen, however, one must have first affirmed a cosmopolitan right over it: "From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines," declares the same stanza a bit earlier. Whoever inhales the world becomes "larger, better" for it. And yet, once again, we are not the only ones to breathe: the sea itself breathes "broad and convulsive breaths."³² To walk in front of the sea is to exchange breaths with it, as in a kiss without contact but no less intimate in character. The breath that we inhale from the world must be returned to it in the form of speech or song. French speaks idiomatically of having "a tightened throat" to express sadness or anxiety, but has no equivalent expression of "a dilated throat" or "a distended throat" to express joy. Whitman takes the step of supplying it: "A throat is now inflating itself and joyfully singing."³³ And elsewhere: "O the orator's joys! To inflate the chest, to roll the thunder of voice out from ribs and throat."³⁴ The danger of an inflated throat is a danger that belongs to Whitman's very substance and offends those who prefer a more sober, more restrained, more self-effacing form of speech. The danger, obviously, is that one might become intoxicated, inebriated by one's own voice, delighting in its sonority more than in the content that it communicates. This very danger, however, has its grandeur, as we know from the example of Victor Hugo. Sometimes, the sweeping motion of an untamed torrent allows riches to be uprooted and harvested from the embankments, which otherwise would have remained buried.

Be this as it may, what some think of as expressiveness, or as achieved through expression, is conceptualized by Whitman in terms of efflux, expansion, and effusion. An inverse motion is at stake. As Francis Ponge has emphasized, expressiveness stems from a pressure or a compression of thought, analogous to squeezing a fruit in order to force its rich inner pulp to be expelled. Instead, here, a lifting of barriers and dams allows a flow to follow its natural inclination to pour out and diffuse outside and everywhere. Whitman, however, describes the effusion of speech from inside to the outside in a variety of ways. Sometimes, a dilated inner force, as, for example,

31 *Song of the Open Road*, 5, p. 181.

32 *Song of Myself*, 22, p. 84.

33 *Starting from Paumanok*, 12, p. 57.

34 *A Song of Joys*, p. 211.

the force of desire, gnaws at our inner being and threatens it because it finds no way out. To let words escape then becomes a question of life and death. Suppression puts us in danger of exploding: “I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were threatening to consume me;/ I will lift what has too long kept down those smouldering fires;/ I will give them complete abandonment.”³⁵ In this case, the effusion of speech will, in a sense, serve to appease and calm a dangerous tension. In other instances, the inverse occurs. The effusion of words awakens a dormant or slumbering force within me, a force that had remained latent and unexercised, running the risk of atrophy and extinction: “I will sleep no more, but arise;/ You oceans that have been calm within me! How I feel you, fathomless, stirring,/ preparing unprecedented waves and storms.”³⁶ In both cases, speech is a dilation, an expansion. In the first case, however, speech merely liberates a power of expansion that painfully pushed against its boundaries, whereas in the second case speech is the source of dilation and of setting forces into motion. Speech dilates us, as its gift, from a standpoint of equilibrium. What exactly is the basis of this force of expansion whereby the poet is pregnant with a whole world, even a whole universe?

As is so often the case, Whitman, like his whole generation, is the unwitting heir of very ancient ideas, such as the idea, here, of panspermia.³⁷ There is a sort of ubiquitous seminal existence that is heavy with immense cosmic development. Everything is stored energy in what Whitman magnificently calls “a handful of space,” and what is true for the physical realm applies equally to the spiritual realm. A poem entitled “Germs” describes the whole of the material universe and the human world as having its source and resource “in a handful of space, which I extend my arm and half enclose with my hand;/ That contains the start of each and all — the virtue, the germs of all.”³⁸ Another poem, “To Thee, Old Cause!” — Roger Asselineau tells us that the expression, meaning Liberty, is borrowed from Milton — draws optimistic lessons from the horror of the American Civil War and exclaims: “Thou orb of many orbs!/ Thou seething principle! Thou well-kept, latent germ! Thou centre!”³⁹ Those who construe the struggle for freedom as the teleological meaning of history usually present it as a horizon toward which we direct ourselves, but for Whitman freedom’s seminal force is already here, at the center, seeking only to be deployed. Everything already circles around it. Whitman concludes the poem by saying that this is true of his book itself,

35 *Starting from Paumonok*, 6, pp. 53–54.

36 *Ibid.*, 17, pp. 61–62.

37 The idea goes all the way back to Anaxagoras. For the nineteenth century, see H. Tuzet, *Le Cosmos et l’imagination*, p. 191 ff.

38 *Germs*, p. 297.

39 *Leaves of Grass*, 9; in Asselineau, pp. 38–39.

“As a wheel on its axis turns.” Although Asselineau translates “Thou orb of many orbs” as “Thou orb made up of innumerable orbs,” the connotation that freedom *results* from other orbs is misleading. Whitman means, rather, that freedom is an orb that is heavy or pregnant with multiple orbs existing now or to come. “Song of Myself” formulates the universal principle as follows: “All truths wait in all things,/ They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,/ They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon.”⁴⁰

The germs of everything are everywhere, and therefore also in us. Whether he knows it or not, Whitman is responding to a statement by Saint Paul in the Epistle to the Romans,⁴¹ a statement that is weighty with history: yes, all of creation is the place of an immense gestation of freedom and novelty; no, the gestation is not characterized by a painful labor and impatient moans. The world journeys toward its deliverance as the seed journeys toward the plant, without pain or assistance. The freedom toward which it directs itself lies within it already in a virtual mode, “awaiting” only the right moment to be unfurled. The future is already here; the goal is contained in the point of origin. The furthest circumference preexists already in the center. All of this is of the utmost importance if we want to specify how Whitman’s view of the nature of the desire for dilation contrasts with other views. For Augustine, granted that the desire in question is always already inscribed in us as the mark of our supernatural calling, many transformations and conversions are implied by it, and a lengthy effort of self-discipline assisted by grace, before we come to receive in ourselves the excess of divine life. Our narrowness, our meanness, and the pettiness of most of our desires do not stem from external constraints and constrictions that are imposed on us in spite of ourselves. They come from us, and from the devastations that we inherit from the whole of human history. The problem does not boil down to barriers that might be sufficiently lifted. It is our own desire that imprisons itself. Voluntary captivity, as Plato knew so well, is the most terrible and stringent of all.⁴²

Whitman’s perspective is altogether different (and close to a number of ideologies in the next century): the limitlessness of desire is innate to it and cannot be rescinded. There is no need to expand one’s desire or to transform its nature and its object. We need only to grant ourselves the permission to exercise a power that is already given to us, leap over the obstacle of conventional rules and prejudices — obstacle that holds up only as long as we are timorous and cowardly since it has no real intrinsic strength of its own. It leaves the very stronghold of our own desire unshaken. The enemy is not within! Or, at the very least, it has not occupied the headquarters. Whitman’s dilation is like

40 *Song of Myself*, 30, p. 93.

41 Romans, VIII, 22–23.

42 Plato, *Phaedo*, 82 E-83 A.

the dilation of the *Jinn* in the *Arabian Nights*. Despite their gigantic size, *Jinn* are contained within a small flask by means of a magic charm. As soon as the flask is opened, they recover their natural size. They do not acquire their large size as something new; they simply recover it when they are let out of an unnatural state of compression. The difference is that, in Whitman's case, a *Jinni* has the power, of himself, to open up the flask from the inside.

We are naturally and innately dilated: this is Whitman's message. He merely urges us to become conscious of it and not remain bottled up in a narrow flask. "Each of us is inevitable;/ Each of us limitless" with a right to the earth and its "eternal purports." We are here "divinely."⁴³ Consequently, however, if the limitless is everywhere, if the slightest "handful of space" contains the seeds of galaxies; and if, as the Stoics put it, the whole is in sympathy with itself, then immensity is no longer a question of size. The joyous and capacious beauty of the world can be ours to see and to sing in the smallest creature. "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."⁴⁴ We must not watch the hands of the clock but "what eternity indicates." "I do not call one greater and one smaller,/ That which fills its period and place is equal to any."⁴⁵ The plenitude of occupied, saturated space, knows no degrees. An egg is as full as an ocean. What is true of space applies as well to time. Far from being cut off, the present moment contains in itself the whole past and the whole future: "I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be." And in describing how the past is included in us, not only our own personal past but the whole past history of humankind as well as the whole past history of the universe, Whitman writes: "All is inextricable."⁴⁶

We must be careful not to misunderstand Whitman's peripatetic roaming, his praise of the traveler without possessions who sleeps under the stars and wakes up every morning to see a new dawn over a new land. Despite what might appear at first blush, no lust for the unfamiliar as such is at play here, no addictive curiosity for what is always novel. Both such a lust and such a curiosity stem from weariness for what we already know and are, therefore, born from self-disgust and disgust for others, which nothing can really cure for any length of time (tourism as the opium of the people). Whitman's voyager incorporates the whole universe.⁴⁷ He incorporates all of space and all of time. With his body, he carries everything forth, most notably the past, with

43 *Salut au Monde!*, 11, p. 177. Whitman invents the "sexually correct" custom in the United States by writing "with his or her right."

44 *Song of Myself*, 31, p. 93.

45 *Ibid.*, 44, p. 115, as what follows.

46 *Think of the Soul*, p. 602. In the same time period, Haeckel and others framed the formula that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny."

47 The word "incorporate" appears in *Song of Myself*, 31, p. 94.

which there must be no rupture. He goes *from the same to the same*, he travels within the same, since, as Leibniz once said, “it is everywhere as it is here.”

We might well ask, then, why leave, if every place is a miracle of beauty for those who have eyes to see, if a blade of grass shelters as much immensity as a galaxy? The point is to experience, in every sense of the term, the beauty of the world, which is to say both to feel it first hand and to put it to the test of experience; to know by direct experience that I am everywhere at home; to appropriate *in fact* a world that is mine *by right* (since everyone is “master” of the world).⁴⁸ The point is to exorcise the unknown, not to discover the unknown as such. There is no alterity in any strong sense if I am master of everything, if I am everything and am everywhere (D. H. Lawrence recognized this perfectly). Whitman’s long lists of places, countries, and peoples are the verbal form of his voyaging: we have the charm of variety and diversity, but within unity. It is always the same familiar voice that recites lists of places and populations. The indivisibility of body and soul, moreover, means that the unity of the world cannot be a merely philosophical idea for us to contemplate. Our body must put the unity of the world into practice by walking, running, swimming, implementing everywhere and with regard to all beings what Whitman calls our *adhesiveness*, a term borrowed from phrenology, signifying our bonding capacity. Oh, and we must, of course, implement unity by speaking and by singing, by proclaiming the “Chant of joys.”

In a poem entitled “Vocalism,” Whitman asserts that “all awaits for the right voices,” for the “perfect organ” that is identical to “the develop’d soul,” thanks to which the power of expansion is liberated within us. We must, however, rise to the standard of the landscapes through which we move: “Do you move in these broad landscapes as broad as they?”⁴⁹ For “I will not make poems with reference to parts;/ But I will make leaves, poems, poemets, songs, says, thoughts with reference to ensemble;/ And I will not sing with reference to a day, but with reference to all days.”⁵⁰ To Whitman, voyaging does not constitute a trajectory of apprenticeship, maturation, and aging, or an ascetic self-dispossession that molds the self into another self. It implements the concrete practice of self-dilation in unison with the dilation of the world: “The certainty of space, increase, freedom, futurity”⁵¹ — once again, our three nouns! How better to experience the certainty of space than by traveling, in a universe that is itself nothing but a set of pathways and roads, a universe that resembles a ship unfurling its sails toward the open sea?⁵² “But O the ship,

48 *To You*, p. 263.

49 *Vocalism*, pp. 404–405.

50 *Starting from Paumanok*, 12, p. 58.

51 *Our Old Feuilleage*, p. 205.

52 *Song of the Open Road*, 13, p. 187.

the immortal ship! O ship aboard the ship!/ O ship of the body — ship of the soul — voyaging, voyaging, voyaging.”⁵³

There must, however, once again, be a centripetal force. There must be a power that gives us form and definition without stopping our motion forward. Without such a power, itinerant dilation would lead only to loss and dissolution. It takes many closely connected forms, depending on whether it concerns the world itself or individual existence. “To be in such and such a form, what is that?” The key is that having a form must not imply becoming petrified. “Mine is no callous shell,”⁵⁴ says Whitman; it has conductors and prehensive powers that bring to me whatever I touch. The power of inclusion and appropriation that body, soul, and human speech possess in Whitman’s view constitutes my individual form: I am my very capacity to include and to contain the outside. My defining limit may be a porous and living limit, but a limit it is.

Our power of expansion must also encounter resistance and bump up against the limits of things if it is to remain an active power. In order for the limitless in me to be able to ring out joyously and continuously along with what is limitless in the world, the limited in me must fraternize and cooperate with what is limited in other beings. “You air that serves me with breath to speak!/ You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape!”⁵⁵ Let us take note of the parallel that Whitman draws between internalization of the breath of respiration and the very motion of thought that stumbles against definite things and returns to itself enriched by them. Pythagoras’s and Plato’s lesson holds true: *peras* and *apeiron* are both necessary, the limit and the limitless. In his own way, Whitman solves the insurmountable puzzle that faced Amiel, for whom limit and limitlessness remained radically outside of each other, incapable of uniting (of marrying). The point is not to turn Whitman into a philosopher, or to claim that his answer to what is a basic question for all of human existence possesses any kind of veritable rigor. “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes).”⁵⁶

As for the universe itself, it is self-sympathy, which is a force of love and solidarity that insures its unity, gives it its limit despite its boundless character, and overcomes distances of space and time within it. “A vast similitude interlocks all.”⁵⁷ After typically listing stars, spaces, the living and the dead, past, present, and future, Whitman concludes: “This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann’d,/ And shall forever span them and compactly

53 *Aboard at a Ship’s Helm*, p. 286.

54 *Song of Myself*, 27, p. 91.

55 *Song of the Open Road*, 3, p. 179.

56 *Song of Myself*, 51, p. 123.

57 *On the Beach at Night Alone*, pp. 288–289.

hold and enclose them.” The universe has no temporal or spatial boundary, but it has a force of cohesion that holds it together and makes it always remain one. All is included and enclosed by love. Thinking by way of analogy thus sails through the ages.

As a world of dilation and joy, the universe is *full*, according to Whitman. Whitman’s universe is radically contrasted to Joseph Joubert’s poetics of emptiness. Joubert constantly fears being smothered. For him, the beauty of space *par excellence* is the vacuum, pure possibility of motion and play, as in the following magnificent statement about God: “As he found nothing more worthy than emptiness, he left space vacant.”⁵⁸ To grasp space through thought, in Whitman’s case, is to grasp its abundance, its profusion, its plenteousness, so as to become one body with all that fills it, so as to become one with the sky and stars.⁵⁹ The point is to become aware of “the measureless ocean of love within” and to pour it forth.⁶⁰ The point is to send forth “limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous.”⁶¹ The point is “that vast elemental sympathy” that the human soul alone is capable of “generating and emitting in steady and limitless floods.”⁶² All growth is joy and all joy is growth.

Whitman’s Pan-joyous and oceanic poetics of dilation often recalls Traherne’s poetics (although Whitman could not have known him) — but the poetics of a Traherne who is shorn of reverent reason and of Christian faith. The primary joy consists in discovering, along with boundless space, that everything is mine, that the whole world belongs to me, and that I am in some sense its center: before discovering further that the center is everywhere and also in others, so that the joy of expansion grows from the fact that it is shared in common with others who are also expanding. All of this appears in both poetics. Traherne’s notion of a personal capaciousness that is actually infinite, however, allows him to pursue the voyage into the beyond. We can only imagine, moreover, Traherne’s reaction to Whitman’s praise of promiscuity.

The reservations that we might have with regard to Whitman’s thought and poetry are so obvious that we need not cite them. We need only to refer ourselves to D. H. Lawrence. Is it really true that the desire to which Whitman gives such a free rein is brotherly and good? Does it not contain a core of savagery, cruelty, and human egocentrism? Is a joy that hollers out day and night at the top of its lungs not burdened with a secret potential of sadness and loneliness? Is it not the joy of a child who whistles in the dark out of fear?

58 Cf. my study “Joseph Joubert: une philosophie à l’état naissant,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, t. 84, 4, 1979, pp. 467–492.

59 *Song of Joys*, p. 211.

60 *Recorders Ages Hence*, pp. 154–155.

61 *I Sing the Body Electric*, 5, p. 131.

62 *Song of Joys*, p. 207.

Nevertheless, no one will deny that Whitman's poetry gives the reader a bath of youth and jubilation.

Despite Whitman's multiple attempts to introduce a limiting counter-force to the force of dilation and boundlessness that he affirms everywhere and at all times, the difficulty stubbornly remains that the force of dilation will take over, with the perils that disequilibrium entails, including a *loss of the poetic form and of speech itself*. If the sublime and the ridiculous are separated by a single small step, as the French saying goes, exaltation comes dangerously close to mere verbiage, which is to say to the very platitude from which one claims to be escaping. Last but not least, what lacks in Whitman's joyous voice is the knowledge of how to speak fully of mourning rather than merely hint at it by stammering — with the result that our joy lacks ballast allowing for a greater depth of joy. Whitman's joy rises up like a liberated balloon in manic weather. This too, however, teaches us much.

Chapter 9

Paul Claudel's Cosmic Respiration

Throughout the diversity of its modes and formats, Paul Claudel's entire *oeuvre* seeks to be a cry of joy and praise, stretching to the extremities of time and space. It reaches all the way to eternity itself because it comes from eternity as its source, like the breath-spirit that God breathed into the first man. We will each have to return it to God, enriched and made heavy by all that we will have accomplished with God's help. Claudel's vision makes the return of our breath-spirit to God into a major theme since this return brings our exchange with God to its fulfillment. A few pages of Claudel suffice for the reader to recognize that Claudel is in every sense dilated and dilating. He also dilates the French language to a point that marks a real achievement simply because it is a point of extremity, at the brink of rupture. After traveling the world on official diplomatic missions, but also voyaging into a biblical land and sailing upon a biblical ocean, land of breath and ocean of words, an aging Claudel decided that he did not want to limit himself to such activities for the remainder of his life on earth.¹ He stopped writing plays and poetry, leaving works of this kind largely unfinished. He pursued his writing in an experimental and *sui generis* format that he himself invented. He turned to the theme of dilation, which was always dear to him. He reflected very explicitly on its meaning, or its meanings — the term itself, drawn from his beloved Vulgate, appearing far more frequently than in his earlier writings. The present chapter will restrict itself to Claudel's biblical writings, which luckily have been collected recently under the title *The Poet and the Bible*.² Generally less read and less admired by the general public than the rest of his work, Claudel's biblical writings await a full recognition of their genius, at

1 Cf. Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Claudel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), p. 457ff.

2 All references in this chapter are to this invaluable *Le Poète et la Bible*, edited by M. Malicet (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), citing volume number and page (t. I, 1998; t. II, 2004).

once poetic and spiritual. Their structure is unprecedented. The patristic and medieval exegesis from which Claudel took his inspiration never produced books that are structured, or rather un-structured, by the free twists and turns of their subject matter. We discover a Claudel who wells up like a rain-gorged river, overflowing his embankments and bursting his levies — leaving us awed, as we might be by some blessed cataclysm, at once natural and supernatural. The utter freedom of these thousands of pages is a bit daunting for an author who hopes to write coherently in his mother's tongue. Dilation here is active and at work — knowingly so, as Claudel's freedom has nothing chaotic about it. The freedom that is at stake for Claudel is not primarily a topic for discourse but the very commotion that presides over speech and existence.

Citing some verses from Isaiah, Claudel writes: "Let us close our eyes, and allow these sublime words to dilate in our heart" (II, 662). There is beauty in the fact that it is by closing his eyes that the reader opens up a free-ranging space within himself for what he has just read — a space where the light of what he has read genuinely starts to shine. As though suspending the motion of the words that are written on the biblical page, the space of our intelligence and of our heart allows us to discern its intentional direction, which is to say its meaning. Who will succeed in making himself empty enough for the plenitude to which words aspire when they signify? Throughout two gigantic volumes, Claudel never stops letting the words of the Bible dilate. In what exactly, however, does the activity consist? It is a *respiration* — this is the key word of Claudel's whole thinking about dilation. The following dialogue shows it well: "*Daughter*: You mean to say that, by means of the Word, we inhale all of Scripture and turn it into life, understanding, and action. *Father*: Exactly. We do it implicitly or explicitly. Since we are gifted with understanding, however, who would refuse to go to the trouble of inhaling as deeply as possible what God Himself has gone to the trouble of expiring? Who would refuse to read, grasp and assimilate what He has bothered to write and to concoct?" (II, 271). Recalling God's invitation to Moses in *Deuteronomy* to put the words that he has heard inside of his heart, Claudel paraphrases: "Inhale them to the depth of your capacity."³

Reading is a communion of the mouth, a mouth-to-mouth incorporation and exchange of breath. Origen had already said so, long ago. In interpreting a biblical passage, we spontaneously kiss the lips of the Word who speaks to us in it when we come to grasp its meaning.⁴ Claudel, however, embeds the idea into a general theory of respiration. In fact, his theory is so general and vast that it would be easier and faster to cite what, for him, is *not* included

3 Malicet's edition puts these lines in italics — but the citation is not found in the biblical text.

4 Origène, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, I, 1, 14, éd. Brésard et Cruzel (Paris: Cerf, 1991), t. I, pp. 185–187.

in respiration, or analogous to respiration, than to list everything that is. God makes the earth, his creature, grow and grow up, and us with it, “like a mother who forms her child little by little through inhaling and breathing the child. . . . It is not a simple case of affinity: an irresistible thrust is involved, the whole prayer of the world below me dilating! The mountain of spices with energy!” (II, 291). For indeed, is there a need to specify that the breath that we inhale is perfumed? The same passage speaks of the earth as fertilized by prayer, according to a divine tectonics of grace. What it says of the earth, that it is “a mountain of confession, and of sorrow, and of supplication, and of nomination, and of joy, and of love, and of mindfulness, and of sacrifice,” applies equally well to the mountain of God’s Word that is the Holy Bible, whose irresistible upheaval Claudel seeks to accompany.

In breathing in the Bible that dilates him, Claudel acts mindfully, with lucidity toward himself, because his commentaries provide him with an opportunity to discern the general laws of respiration, which are the laws of dilation. To reflect on dilation is to reflect on respiration, which is to say to reflect on life as it affirms itself and expands itself — on life as it affirms and grows. Be the judge of it: “A person. Someone who says: *I*. Someone who is indebted to another, who must ask again and again for the power to be himself from an external element, every time his chest heaves to breathe. It is as though the self were resuscitated, reignited with each breath. Even in God there is a respiration. We adore a living God, a God who works, a God who breathes and who breathes Himself” (II, 1027). Since respiration requires some form of alterity, and since God breathes Himself in and out, this means that there must be some alterity within Him. God cannot be the Same raised to the Absolute; He must be God the Trinity, Father, Son, Spirit. Formal theology uses the term “spiration” for the Holy Ghost instead of the word “generation.” The very name of “Spirit” refers back to breath. Rejecting, in principle, any radical separation between what is corporeal and what is spiritual, Claudel always speaks of the corporeal in the same terms as he speaks of the spiritual. He tirelessly goes from breath to spirit and from spirit to breath.

Dependence on respiration is not limited to persons. The notion of life “is narrowly linked to the notion of respiration. Be it in the realm of vegetation or the animal realm, whatever lives, breathes. This means that every living thing, in order to sustain its form, borrows an element from outside, ferries it from outside into itself, then returns it impregnated with its own substance” (I, 1072).⁵ The *rhythm* of breathing characterizes all living things. To Claudel, the root phenomenon is the phenomenon of respiration. The first, most primitive, root event is the rhythm of dilation and contraction. Cardiac rhythm with

⁵ “Form” here is to be understood in the Aristotelian and Thomist sense of constitutive nature, not of external shape.

its diastole and systole is one of its manifestations. In this regard, Claudel is adamant: "Our spiritual being is subjected to the law of rhythm, as is our physical being. Our body is the effect of a clock that beats. Lungs, heart, even the brain itself, are all inwardly penetrated and animated by a law of swelling and relaxation, of absorption and ejection. Similarly, we do not think in a continuous manner, we think by a series of emissions, by a series of jets and rhymed ejaculations" (I, 579) — just as our attention and perception are, in turn, subjected to a law of "tension" and "remission."

Body and soul, we form a set of rhythmic and palpitating systems. These systems never stop contracting and dilating, taking in what comes from outside and expelling it again, transformed. According to Claudel, the same holds true of the unity of our personality, which can only fulfill itself and perfect itself within a rhythmic, respiratory, and desirous exchange with God, an exchange that brings it "mouth-to-mouth" with God (my own expression, not Claudel's) whether we are conscious of it or not. Hence the key importance of "doors," of the senses and their orifices — nostrils, mouth, ears, eyes — prompting Claudel to write: "Doors are the organs of exchange, which is to say of the passage from outside to inside and vice versa; from the limitless to an enclosed *milieu* that would not be able to subsist without doors" (I, 1135–1136). The idea of equating our senses with "doors" is an ancient one and is frequently found in the Church Fathers. The notion of "inner *milieu*" is more recent, framed by Claude Bernard. What is more deeply significant here, however, is that Claudel revives the Pythagorean and Platonic terminology of limit and limitless, of *peras* and *apeiron*, which we have already discussed in earlier chapters. To live is to welcome the limitless into what is limited. There would be no exchange if the finite were to dissolve and lose itself in the infinite (which Claudel will always firmly, even vehemently, reject, most notably with regard to some Eastern forms of mysticism). Neither would there be exchange and life, if the finite did not have porous boundaries, or boundaries with holes, allowing it to open itself to the infinite and incorporate it.

The word *exchange* thus acquires a universal meaning that it did not have in Claudel's earlier play, *The Exchange*. In contrast to German Idealism, to Amiel, and to many others, Claudel does not interpret *peras* and *apeiron* as defining two contradictory aspirations or demands that would tear human being asunder and would require eventually to be dialectically reconciled. Instead, the paradigmatic phenomenon is the phenomenon of respiratory rhythm. Here, this means a rhythm of exchange and communication between infinity and finitude, through contraction and dilation. Speech itself is an explicit feature of respiratory exchange: one of the doors is "the mouth, which, from the breath that it has shaped and which it now returns, exhales speech" (I, 1136). Rilke once spoke of the "invisible poem" that is

“breathing.”⁶ Claudel, however, raises Rilke’s apperception to the level of a vast and consequential thought.

What exactly are the consequences of Claudel’s respiratory paradigm for dilation? There are two such consequences, and they are of the utmost importance. The first concerns alterity. The second concerns the void. If the model of life’s rhythm is respiration, then the moment of dilation corresponds to the moment when I inflate my chest and expand my lungs in order to incorporate the air that I inhale. The moment of contraction corresponds to a gesture of expulsion, of giving back and exhaling the air that I have taken in and transformed. Dilation, in short, is a motion that is mine, a spontaneous motion that is made possible by the physical or spiritual forces of my being. It is an act in which I affirm my own life and my desire to live, but it is always an act through which I incorporate what comes from outside — from the environment, from the world, from other human beings or from God — and which I myself cannot in any way provide to myself. We can go without food for a couple of weeks, but we cannot go without breathing more than a few minutes. Dilation constitutes, therefore, a self-affirmation that is also, at the very same time, an avowal of my indigence and of the intimate request that I ceaselessly make for something other than myself. Dilation is a self-affirmation that attests to alterity: I am possible only through another, from another, and by taking that other into myself. The model of autarchic self-reliance and of self-growth whereby I would aim at thriving by myself is really a model of asphyxia and death. To Claudel, evil *par excellence* is what is unbreathable. Pride is its quintessential figure. Dilation, then, cannot be anything but a form of welcome, a kind of hospitality, a form of incorporation, a dependency, a heteronomy, according to the various orders in which it may be located (the terms are not identical, certainly). This explains why dilation is joy itself — in which I can affirm myself only by affirming the world and by being myself affirmed and vivified by it.

The second consequence of the respiratory paradigm is the necessity that there be *emptiness*. There must be some kind of void in us — in us body and soul, once again — for there to be a possible dilation. “Human being is something that is organized around a void and a hollow. God breathes us and we breathe Him” (I, 1161). Of the artistry of fire, Claudel writes: “Inside the bosom of matter a pocket has been carved out, a cavity yearning with desire, which we might call *soul* in the sense in which the French call the air-valve of a cannon its *soul*. This cavity in living beings gradually inhales air (*anemos*, *animus*) that lights a fire and keeps it going — fire that water, sap, or blood must carry to every part of the whole being in order to feed and nurture it” (I, 1304). Claudel then transitions from evoking physiology, which he knew

6 Rilke, *Sonnets à Orphée*, II, 1.

well but describes here in his own unique terms, to evoking the mysteries of Christian faith, with a natural ease that recalls patristic transitions. When Jesus on the Cross gives up the ghost with a great cry, “the world was emptied of the breath that was breathed into it on the day of the Annunciation. A cavity then formed, a deficiency so powerful that nothing within the Trinity is capable of resisting it” (I, 1350). Christ’s resurrection is an act through which God gives breath back to the empty lungs of Creation as a whole, threatened with asphyxia. The kenosis that allowed Christ to reach the point of being subjected to death ends up by bringing about a kenosis of the world itself, an emptying of the cosmos, at the moment of the crucifixion.⁷ On Easter Sunday, God gives breath back to a world that is in the throes of suffocating. Whatever may be the case with regard to such a supreme example, Claudel praises emptiness as a requisite condition for dilation and, therefore, for life. Claudel praises emptiness in connection with all sorts of situations and of special phenomena (emptiness is a good opportunity for Claudel to commune sympathetically with Eastern philosophies), but he also brings out its general essence: “Every void, every absence, is a principle and a means for abstraction and motion. It presents a container, a form susceptible of receiving a possible content. Whatever is full is inert. Void is an essential condition of motion and of life” (II, 569). Claudel is often described as the poet of plenitude, which is true enough, but his plenitude is the plenitude of breath. It presupposes the void that allowed breath to come in and fill it, and to which it returns for the sake of maintaining itself alive and in motion.

The quasi-irresistible appeal that the void of the soul exerts upon God is not Claudel’s own idea, nor does he claim to have invented it. He was undoubtedly aware of the many Christian mystics who have written on the subject. Claudel, however, merges the idea with his own powerful schema of respiration. To make use of speech toward God (in prayer, liturgy, hymns) is “a call for air, a way of actively provoking the future. By expelling our voice outward, we create a void within us that God has no choice but to come fill — as the psalm implies: *Dilata os tuum, et implebo illud* (*os* means not only the mouth but the whole respiratory capacity)” (II, 306).⁸ To speak is to “have spoken,” to have emitted and exhaled one’s breath and one’s thought. To speak is to have become as though empty again, nullified, and mute — which is to call on the breath of the Spirit to make it possible for us to continue. Speech is like a breath that kindles a spark through God’s grace and will — but a spark that God alone is able to fan into flame. Church buildings, with their inner capacity, are themselves nothing but pockets of void, “the radiant

7 The reader who is unfamiliar with this theological term must be reminded that kenosis is drawn from Philippians II, 7, and describes the action whereby the divine Logos “empties himself” of himself when assuming the human condition.

8 Translation of the Latin: enlarge your mouth, and I will fill it.

concave shape of a dome or vaulted apse,” which must be filled with “the triumphant dilations of incense and organ music,” as well as with paintings. Liturgy provides such architectural lungs with divine air (II, 650).

Emptiness that inhales a breathable alterity and self-identity that increases its vitality only thanks to what comes to it from elsewhere both are defining aspects of joyous dilation. Each of these two aspects will be countered, in turn, by an opposite aspect that defines evil dilation. Claudel rarely uses the term “dilation” to describe the increase and propagation of evil, but he sometimes does, as Augustine did by drawing on the Bible to describe pride. Pride is like a tumor, a puffing-up in which the Same, full of itself, grows like a cancer to the point of suffocating everything else, not unlike the famous bullfrog of La Fontaine’s fable. Paraphrasing a verse from *Deuteronomy* in which the Latin word *dilatatus* appears, and which describes turning away from the true God for the sake of worshiping idols, Claudel cites the Latin word but deliberately avoids using “dilated.” He uses words such as “Fattened, full of grease, thickened, puffy, inflated, engorged” and likens them to a totalitarian state, a machine made “to digest and exploit primary resources for its own benefit,” a machine made to produce more of the Same. In a contrasting context, Claudel eulogizes Charles de Foucault, a missionary priest who, like a prayerful flame burning in the desert, made not a single convert. In praising Foucault, Claudel puts the following words in God’s mouth: “Apostle of nothingness, of the void, of emptiness, you have nothing to fear. Yes, emptiness and void are what I reserved for you as your part among all human beings. Nothing that might feed complacency in you and the evil dilation of efficiency” (II, 956). Efficiency indeed seeks to be the principle of its own momentum — turning its back on non-action, which waits to receive momentum from elsewhere. Claudel says also that evil is “a squirming of the darkness, something that poisons the ambient air, that prevents us from seeing and from breathing. . . . There is a hidden life feeding the will-to-blindness and to asphyxia” (II, 1171). Comparing evil to biblical locusts, which are a figure of earthly devastation, Claudel contrasts the writhing motion of evil with the free mobility of goodness: “It does not fly, it does not run, it hops. Unpredictable. It uses itself as its own spring to grab what it needs to fall back down. . . . Every lapse and relapse only serve to wind up the spring.” It would be silly to quarrel with Claudel over swarms of insects. What matters here is the acute symbolic perception of a motion that feeds and strengthens on its own lapses, and of the distinctive energy that characterizes failure. Similarly, we speak of the “energy of despair,” which is not a smooth sliding down into darkness when it is truly evil, but is a form of energy that “springs back” from its own evil deed in order to commit worse evil still. Such a motion does not follow the continuous horizontal layout of the earth’s surface but exhibits an improvised, discontinuous, and mechanical character.

Elsewhere, Claudel draws on a number of biblical expressions to evoke the dilation of hell. He describes the Proud and the vertigo of power that is really powerlessness at the core: "The man who has dilated his soul like a hell is like death, which never fills itself enough. He scoops up all nations for himself, he accumulates all populations in himself. Woe to the man who increases his own weight only to give himself the means to fall even lower" (II, 1135–1136). Using still other terms, Claudel criticizes allergic reactions to others, the will to feed only on oneself or on the same as oneself, and the asphyxia of wanting to live by and for oneself: evil dilation is the dilation that never breathes.

Although his formulations are as bold as they are poetic, Claudel belongs nonetheless to the uninterrupted lineage of Augustinian thinkers who regard man as *capax Dei* — as a "capacity," through the dilation of desire, to welcome divine life as it gives itself to him. Claudel describes the properties of the communion cup, the Chalice, in such a way as to shed light on the sense in which every human being is also a chalice that is "capable of God." Claudel sees in the communion cup the instrument "of intoxication, of the dilated and confused state in which the soul forgets its boundaries and differences, a state that is akin to love, merging desire and somnolence" (meaning self-oblivion) (I, 475). Claudel specifies that transgressing our finitude in this case is a happy transgression. He adds: "This supreme blossom, this flourishing crater that serves us to make our offering is also a gaping emptiness that begs and receives, as the psalm intimates by saying: *Dilata os tuum et implebo illud.*" The statement, which we have already encountered, haunts Claudel. His whole *oeuvre* is nothing but a vast amplification of the succinct prayer of Psalm LXXX and of what is accomplished when the prayer is answered. It involves a request from God to us, so that it is we who answer God's prayer, in the hope that He will answer ours by inspiring us. Last but not least, "there is yet another property that belongs to the Chalice, namely the property that it is simultaneously inexhaustible and measured, it is a finite container that is capable of an infinite content. . . . Without ceasing to be what it is, the divine Expression takes on our form and our measurements, it adapts the inexhaustible to our own capacity." By juxtaposing the words "capacity" and "capable" twice in the same page, along with the word "dilation," Claudel attests that the terms refer to each other and shed light on each other, as they do for Augustine. Phenomenally, man's capacity for God is manifested by the fact that he dilates in order to receive life as it is communicated to him. The supernatural union (no longer Plato's natural union) of *peras* and *apeiron*, of the limited and the limitless, is man himself insofar as he is God's image, as Claudel will clarify. Our emptiness is a capacity, a receptacle, which does not know, which cannot know, and which must not know how far its dilation might extend.

Desire is a receptivity that begs, or a begging that is receptively hospitable. The incomparable mobility of the divine fire has always already inserted “a capacity of transformation” within created things (I, 533). This is why the divine fire is able to perform one of its many tasks, which is “to dilate, open, melt, dissociate, overcome form with the help of its accomplices, the mind’s own weight and violence.” The aim is not to destroy form by reducing it to formlessness, but to make it porous, to make it capable of welcoming and containing more volume. Extremity of desire and of hospitality, the capaciousness where we are able “to breathe the Holy Spirit with wide open lungs and . . . to make ourselves into what God asks us to be” (I, 641) thus involves cooperation, not artificial respiration. The same capaciousness, however, is lost and shriveled if it becomes sin, self-love and self-pleasure, a self-devouring by myself, sin that amounts to an “exploitation down to the geological bone of our own capacity.”

In Christian thought, the figure of the Virgin is the figure of the highest action of which human freedom is capable because of the Yes that she speaks to God. The Virgin Mary perfectly illustrates the meaning of capacity as hospitable emptiness: “Wishing to show us the extent of Mary’s emptiness, Scripture tells us that she is *full of grace*. There is nothing left in her that impedes or resists God’s will. She is no longer anything but a capacity, in a state of complete receptivity and desire. She has dilated her mouth. . . . Her fullness, however, is not a form of satiation that suspends all need, any more than our lungs would suspend respiration when they are full of air” (I, 1330). One would be hard pressed to say it better. All of the basic terms that we have surveyed so far are joined and woven together in Claudel’s statements, exhibiting dilation at its highest point, as Claudel sees it. Man is God’s image insofar as he is capable and dilatable. Claudel will say it explicitly when he cites Augustine. At the core, however, Claudel’s conception of the *imago Dei* is closer to Irenaeus of Lyon’s conception than to Augustine’s, since Augustine restricts it in *De Trinitate* to the highest powers of the human spirit. In Claudel, the whole human being is God’s image.

A key page of *Emmaus* generates, so to speak, the concept of God’s image. Claudel starts with the heart, with the human heart “that knows more than you and is far older than you” (II, 409). Nucleus of our being and principle of our life, the heart depends on God’s own heart for its existence and for its pulse, not immediately of course, but through organic and creaturely means. Such mediation does not in any way loosen the heart’s ties and “mouth-to-mouth” connection and dependency: “And our heart, what does it subsist on, if not on the power in us of dilation, if not on the power in us of inhaling and exhaling? Which amounts to saying that we live or subsist on God, we burn and are fueled by God. It is on God that we feed the ardent phenomenon that we are tasked to keep on stage for its prescribed time.” This is how Claudel

understands Saint Paul's statement, itself derived from the Greeks, that we live, move, and have our being in God. Paul's statement is particularly dear to Claudel, including in its very formulation, since we reach "being" only through life and movement.⁹

The most fundamental joy of dilation is to breathe God knowingly, mindfully: "In the morning, I rise, I open my window to the rising sun and I inhale God! I stretch out my arms to their full length and I inhale God, I inhale God's *oeuvre*" (II, 410). Here as elsewhere, there is no distinction between the last two actions: by inhaling the world I breathe in God. It is when I know that I inhale God in the world that my inhaling of the world reaches its greatest power and its greatest capaciousness. Once again citing Psalm LXXX on dilating the mouth, Claudel paraphrases it as follows: "The psalm says *Dilate*, dilate whatever opening there is in you, and I will fill it" (II, 410). If inhalation is so powerful, it is because life being born or reborn in us enters into respiratory, rhythmic, and sanguine communion with the eternal source of life and motion. When we drink and inhale from the Source itself, every mouthful and every breath provide us with a jubilatory youthfulness.

At this point, on the same page, Claudel addresses the concept of man as God's image. Scripture "never tells us that an image of God has been hidden somewhere in man, or that some part of man has been made in God's image. An image must be truthful and whole. Man is God's image in the wholeness of himself, body and soul, with all of his functions and faculties." Man is "a living and functioning image."¹⁰ Although Claudel acknowledges Augustine for having established the doctrine "with a magnificent lucidity," his own perspective on it draws from Irenaeus of Lyon. In particular, Claudel adopts Irenaeus's firm Christological foundation. The image of God in *Genesis* is interpreted as Christ-like by way of prolepsis, anticipation.

Before venturing into the many diverse forms of dilation that implement God's image in us as a matter of actual practice, we must consider a critical point. Dilation is an act and a motion; it cannot form a perpetual state. Only someone who learns narrowness can be susceptible of becoming large. Only someone who has studied the ABC of sorrow, letter by letter, is qualified to cry out with joy. If the bullfrog of La Fontaine's fable perishes from puffing itself up, it is because it failed to recognize that it should have first made itself smaller than a frog; dilating itself forever was not sufficient. Every true understanding of dilation implies a trial of constriction. We have seen this in multiple examples throughout the chapters of this book. Claudel understood it well and articulated it clearly. He reflected on the relationship between the narrow and the capacious in a twofold way, namely both from the viewpoint

⁹ Cf. Acts, XVII, 28. On the words of the formulation, cf. Claudel, I, 1234.

¹⁰ On the image of God, cf. Claudel, II, 887 ff.

of what comes into us to dilate us and from the viewpoint of our own dilating heart.

The first viewpoint involves an idea that was dear to Church Fathers. The idea is that of the “Abridged Word,” the *Verbum breviatum* of the Epistle to the Romans, which is also the “little booklet” that one eats.¹¹ “The Word that is dilated to Infinity is now shrunk, in contact with Himself, in the hand of an angel, shrunk down to the size of a small booklet. . . . The whole substance of the Bible is squeezed into a thin volume of leaves and verses, for us to swallow in a single mouthful” (I, 1011).¹² Claudel returns to the same theme a bit further down: “Open yourself, witness! The whole Spirit of the ancient Prophets is now put in your *dilated* mouth for you to incorporate into your entrails” (I, 1084). The immensity of the divine Word can come into what is infinitesimal (the infinitesimal Bible as a physical volume, the infinitesimal body of Christ as a communion wafer). Yet we must be expanded before we are able to ingest immensity in its contracted and abridged form. Most importantly, only someone whose soul has been tightened and constricted by hunger, sorrow, and want, whose soul is not cluttered by all sorts of possessions, will be able to dilate in order to ingest it. Only what is very small is capable of immensity. This brings us to our second viewpoint.

“O Infinite, there is nothing in my heart that is sufficiently narrow to contain you!” (II, 636). Claudel exclaims. A little further, the cry transforms into a prayer: “Lord God, give me for eternity something that is as limitless as infinity and as narrow as Thy heart” (II, 644). Another version formulates the same idea as follows: “Contraction and dilation. Something that alternates, at once as narrow as the heart and as dilated as infinity” (II, 1384). For indeed as Gregory the Great had often emphasized, “pressure is often only the means to burst forth and be dilated” (II, 1519). No one can reproach Claudel for turning a blind eye to patience, sorrow, and the work of negativity in his conception of dilation. These are all part and parcel of what makes desire ripen (which is to say, desire’s increase in us rather than its extinction or resignation), exactly as Augustine had argued. “In this regard, none of the powers that have been given to us, and none of the absences of power, is to be despised by us as useless. Every one of them is worth applying to the task,” affirms Claudel, before concluding with a list of joyous and sorrowful experiences. He then summarizes: “Constriction and dilation of the heart, all of this is good!” (I, 960).

The structure is distinctly Christian. It calls on us to reach the immeasurable joy of Easter morning only by traversing the valley of death and without

11 Romans, IX, 28. For the book that is eaten, cf. Apocalypse, X, 9. H. de Lubac cites Claudel’s text in his excellent analyses of the “Abridged Word” in *Exégèse médiévale* (Paris: Aubier, 1961), II, 1, pp. 192 ff.

12 On the same theme, see the excellent analyses of D. Millet-Gérard, *La Prose transfigurée*, Etudes en hommage à P. Claudel (Paris: PUPS, 2005), chap. I, especially p. 27.

forgetting it; to strengthen our heart through tribulations that help to dilate it rather than turn it into stone; and to seek divine infinity solely in the slave-like figure of Christ, or in Scripture rolled up to fit in our hand, or in a small bit of unleavened bread.

We now turn to examining the many diverse forms of respiration-dilation in Claudel, emphasizing from the start that they bring the whole universe into play. Claudel, author of *The Eye Listens*, is a key thinker of the spiritual senses and of inter-sensorial experience. Our mouth, nostrils, and lungs are not the only things in us that breathe. "The eye listens," but the eye also breathes, as Claudel tells us most explicitly. In the context of discussing the Prophet Jeremiah, Claudel dislocates his syntax, as though his sentences could not recover from their content or were crippled by it like Jacob in his struggle with the angel. Claudel writes: "Oh, with regard to seeing, he sees all right! It is not for nothing that the Lord by touching his mouth, the effect was not simply to Un-mouth and uncork him, he sees with a vision whose instruments are all of his organs and most especially his breathing" (II, 492). Eyes that breathe, breathing that sees, what is involved here? At stake is an exploratory and rhythmic gaze that combines with breath to discern and inhale the breath that is at work in other human beings that are there, present, before him. He does not merely reach the surface of their external shape; he grasps their breathing, with the positive or negative rhythm that animates them. Empathy here does not stem from the acuity of our thought but from the supple character of our breathing.

It follows that such a "breathing gaze" is prophetic: "It sees not only the face of every being, but his or her root, future purpose, past inheritance, and operating rhythm in the present" (II, 942–943). As In Homer, the clairvoyant perceives what was, is, and will be. What is involved, however, is not a spectacle offered to him by the gods. It is by means of his own rhythm that he inhales and "takes" the rhythm of others (in the same way as we "take" someone's pulse). To Claudel, there is a carnal lucidity that coincides with the highest aptitude of the spirit — which, we must not forget, is itself breath.

The "breathing gaze" is a gaze that dilates and contracts, together with all that we are. It is a gaze "that is desire." Claudel says so in the context of commenting on the Elders of the Apocalypse: "I do not perceive them to be immobilized, comfortably sitting on their thrones, like spectators in their seats at the theatre. Everything in them is a form of gaze — a respiratory gaze, which does not concern only a single sensory faculty but informs their whole being in the undivided integrity of its organs and faculties. It is a gaze that is a form of desire, since desire always manifests itself as a back-and-forth motion, through a rhythm with two beats, one that sets out to undertake a project and one that returns to the self, one that penetrates the outside and one that ingests internally" (II, 1217). Contraction, dilation, inhaling,

exhaling: these are everywhere. Moreover, I cannot stop myself from seeing except by rhythmically shutting my eyelids. A clear and deep philosophy is at work in Claudel's pages. The fact that the gaze is desire, and is susceptible, therefore, of being dilated, does not veil, dim, or falsify sight. Rather, desire gives sight an incomparable urgency and penetrating power because it powerfully stokes its interest in what it sees (with all of the connotations of *inter-esse* that the word implies) and because what it gazes at is always a question of life and death, of what sustains life or favors death.

Following his own pathways, Claudel also establishes the indivisible unity of perception and movement that phenomenology has established, but he grants it an even larger scope. Citing, elsewhere, his own title, *The Eye Listens*, Claudel demonstrates that the eye does not "listen" passively and by keeping still. He describes the eye that must be "planted" in God as "dilated by effort and as though furnished at its core with a quadruple depth" (II, 902). To Claudel, respiration is omnipresent because nothing exists that does not rhythmically breathe. (Claudel means "respiration" analogically here, in the philosophical sense in which "is" is taken analogically rather than either univocally or equivocally, to designate various degrees and dimensions of being.) The heart breathes by beating, and blood itself breathes: "*The fire that is in the blood*, is it not life, whose source is respiration and the combustion of carbon by oxygen?" (II, 1165). The act of drinking and of quenching one's thirst is a "liquid breathing" that Claudel describes by drawing on biblical passages depicting the Holy Spirit as a watering source for the soul. Drinking "is direct, immediate, like the reflex of a newborn, a sort of liquid respiration, as the mouth inhales and sniffs. Who has not seen an infant grasping his mother's breast while keeping the world at bay with an extended arm flailing rhythmically so as to ward off interruption? Every sip refreshes us, fills us, comforts us, dilates us, relaxes us" (I, 568). Claudel's powerfully oral sense cannot be denied, but we must not reduce him to a mere nostalgia for early childhood and nursing! What appeals to him here is the figure of an eager and unpremeditated thirst, deeply trustful that it will be satisfied. It is also the act of drinking milk as a veritable element, our sole nourishment as newborns. In Claudel's view, nursing at our mother's breast prefigures the second, spiritual child that we must become and learn to be.

Airy or liquid, respiration, together with its dilation, forms the place where we are related to the limitless, but not to a limitlessness that loses itself in emptiness: to a limitlessness, rather, that is a *totality*. We must inhale the world, humanity in its entirety, even God Himself, with the same direct simplicity and thirst with which a child inhales milk. Such is the horizon of dilation, according to Claudel. "Each individual must become aware of the totality of humanity bathing him like some great body of water, penetrating

him like a breathable and intelligible air, and in which every one of his movements propagates with open-ended repercussions" (I, 1234), just as the movements of others propagate into us. To Claudel, inhaling the whole of humanity and being inhaled in turn by all others, without, however, vanishing into anonymity, is nothing short of a foretaste of paradise. Far from being curtailed or denied, my personality consists of all the vibrations that it sends out and receives back. To breathe together and to breathe one another! To share the dilation of our many breaths! "There is not a single atom but that exerts an action on all the rest, with that disproportionate energy that science reveals it to possess. Not a single atom but requires the operation of everything else on it, for the sake of who knows what common visage and respiratory organ!" (II, 635). Claudel's real definition of the Heavenly Jerusalem and of Christ's Mystical Body is a universal community of co-conspirers (as in what the Stoics conceived of as a common act of breathing, *sumpnoia panta*). The heavenly future starts in every breath.

Respiration is truly *panegyric*. It gives us access to all things, to all that is in the world and to all that is human. Claudel does not offer us a Lilliputian individualism to counter Comte and Durkheim, but a community that communes even more abundantly than their communities do. This is why the greatest peril would consist in not dilating enough, in not dilating to the disproportionate extent of what is offered to us, in allowing desire in us to constrict. Claudel writes about God: "He is an ocean generously offered up to the whole world. All anyone has to do is dilate his mouth in order to receive the full totality of it" (I, 1195). Again: "The moment has arrived when You, God, are nothing but Desirable. But it is You Yourself who teaches us not to open our mouths half-way. *Dilata os tuum et implebo illud*" (II, 144). With every new dilation of our lungs, we are given the chance to ascend, to leap forth, to resurrect: "Similarly, a swimmer fully dilates the cavity of his thorax and lifts himself out of the depth by leaning, so to speak, on the abyss of air that fills him" (II, 1348).

In medieval Latin, *respirare* often has the meaning of "catching one's breath again" after having lost it, and thus has the meaning of "resuscitation" (misleading some translators). Appealing to the freedom that each one of us has to open myself up to my source and origin so that it may penetrate me "to my core," Claudel explicitly draws the connection: "I resuscitate, I *take in* awareness and conscience, oh how good the air is that I inhale! There is something decayed at the bottom of my lungs, and I cannot stop it from actively seeking to greet the vital air" (II, 491). Citing, next, the words of a psalm in which God is asked to give me joy, Claudel paraphrases them as follows: "You will give me oxygen. . . . You will come and rescue the respiration of my humiliated functions." He adds: "The air that I inhale is what gives me what I need in order to speak of myself, in order to understand, in

order to explain clearly with the help of my lips, in order to empty myself of what poisons me, in order to be able to confess!" To think is itself a respiration. The soul's inner dialogue with itself, by which Plato defined thinking, presupposes a circulation of breath. To dilate one's mouth and one's lungs is to inhale spirit, conscience, and intelligence, before restoring them through speech and action. To empty myself of breath by exhaling is to give back what I have received, transformed.

The "mouth-to-mouth" to which Claudel refers so frequently makes respiration into a form of exchange, a form of communication, a mutual gifting between God and myself, between the world and myself. When I inhale, I take, when I exhale, I give back. The eagerness of my breathing, prompting me to dilate as much as possible, is a good thing. It makes it possible for what I exhale by contracting to be generous and ample. Unless I am confined in some already deathly space, I take nothing away from anyone by breathing deeply. The mutuality of respiration (I breathe and am breathed) is key: the motion inward of appropriation always calls for a motion outward of expropriation and restitution, as its very test of truth. The mutuality involved in respiration also serves to refute in advance all sorts of common-place psychological interpretations, allowing the essence of Claudel's doctrine of dilation to come to light. The *joy* of dilation does not lie exclusively in the moment and motion of dilation itself. It culminates in the amplitude of what I can give, say, or do because I have been thus dilated. For indeed, whereas the air that I exhale, physically speaking, is depleted of oxygen and loaded with carbon dioxide, which makes it less breathable, the spirit-breath that I exhale in the form of speech, action, or prayer is actually richer. It is loaded with what in me was deeply breathable, so that it is more easily assimilated by others. When I dilate, I do not merely fill myself and satisfy myself, I shape what I will give back in return. I contribute to it. I offer my own breathy alms to universal respiration.

Claudel's *sui generis* Thomism and his hostility to Quietism prompt him to emphasize the call that God issues for our cooperation and collaboration. Similarly, Claudel emphasizes that the true grandeur of the First Cause lies precisely in refraining from abolishing the secondary causes that we ourselves are. Instead, the First Cause opens up a space for us to act truly as secondary causes, breathing into us the force needed to do so. To Claudel, respiratory dilation is not some sort of privileged, exceptional, high point that is bestowed by God as an occasional and vivid moment to extraordinary man and women. It is the ongoing, daily condition of a truly human life (which does not mean that saints cannot know ecstatic and, so to speak, incandescent moments). Dilation is the daily place where the Cause gives me the capacity to become a cause, where Life gives me the capacity to be a source of life, where Pure Act gives me the chance to be a principle of action, where Beauty gives me

the capacity to bring about beauty. Respiratory dilation reaches its full truth in exhalation-contraction-expulsion-restitution.

There are so many passages in which Claudel affirms it, and indeed embodies it magnificently in his prose, that we cannot cite them all. "Then, under the impact of being closely embraced, of being called upon, of being powerfully, patiently, relentlessly and intelligently solicited, the Soul feels itself give way, little by little, and dilate. Its intimate essence, repressed, compressed and hardened for so long, now unfolds and exhales itself out . . . *Spiritus!* It is the spirit, the breath that I have received from God that I now deliver back to Him, for Him to breathe, impregnated with my name" (II, 38). Breath is *signed*. Elsewhere, the soul "bursts, it explodes, so to speak, into a melodious roar. . . . O Lord God, I hear myself answer Yes! I am no longer anything but the everlasting echo of Your good and best Word, I deliver to you all that is operative within me. Here I am in your presence as a Yes, an operator of your Word. . . . I transform sound into imperishable meaning. I acquit myself of the Fiat! that my Creator has delegated to me" (II, 79). Theology and poetics, once again, go hand in hand, in every sense of the term "poetics." Speech itself is, not the only, but certainly the highest fruition of respiratory dilation. In the furtive form of breath, Word and Spirit come into our flesh, into its most intimate core, in order that we be able to give back some word that is ours, some spirit that is ours, through speech and song.

We give back the immortality that we inhale in our breath in the form of meaning. The human body is where a measure of "imperishable meaning" is incarnated in sound. It is where the meaning of the world as a whole becomes recognizable, discernable, and welcomed with gratitude through a sonorous vibration in the world itself. Every time that we merely express ourselves, we come closer to animality, just as a dog's bark expresses its hunger, fear, or anger, but nothing more. In Claudel's philosophy of speech, a beauty that radically transcends the discipline that calls itself "Aesthetics" appears. It is "a beauty that generates beauty, a joy that generates beatitude, a life that generates life" (II, 80). Beauty is the fulfillment to which dilation tends. It is a fulfillment that is also the beginning of something absolute.

In a surprising description of how voice is physically produced, Claudel says about lips: "They contract, they dilate, they put themselves forth, they withhold themselves, they touch one another; and now, they separate, in order that something immortal may blossom at their detonation" (II, 234). If it is true that the highest sacrifice takes place in the order of spirit and truth, then the highest sacrifice is nothing other than speech, *sacrificium laudis*, "the sacrifice of praise," in which the world is sanctified: "It is the universe as a whole that we inhale through contemplation and intelligence. We then return it to God after transforming it into song, meaning and spirit. In one continuous draught of our lungs, we absorb the world, we fill our heart with it and

shape it into a musical speech in which all is consumed and consummated more perfectly than fat is consumed by the action of fire” (II, 305). Claudel shares with Rilke the idea that poetry internalizes the world and the earth. By articulating the meaning of the world, poetry gives it something that is imperishable. Moreover, the theme of praise and celebration matters powerfully for Rilke as well, but the basic difference (which changes the tone and scope of all the rest) lies in the expiatory, sacrificial, and sanctifying moment when the melodious wafer of our speech is lifted to God in the hope of being accepted, offering to God himself the beauty and intelligibility of the world that he has created.¹³ The poet’s solitude stems from the unique character of his mission, but the poet exists only in and through a universal communion of which he is but one member.

Unlike a number of other authors, including Christian authors, Claudel never contrasts the act of inhaling God with the act of inhaling the world — anymore than he separates the act of praising God from the act of praising the world. It is within the created world that we breathe and mutually inhale one another. Once again describing respiratory dilation, Claudel writes: “Would I deprive myself of the good that all of my fellow creatures surrounding me might do me, and which God through them might do me and through me do them? Everything communicates and communicates in God. God has put all of creation in my hands in order that I petition Him through it and be answered through it. . . . The universe is in want of God, and God has put Himself in the hands of each one of us, that we may give Him to it” (II, 483). It seems that, in God’s relationship to man as well as man’s relationship to others, there can be no punctiform exchange in which a particular good is given, separated from the whole. Every time an exchange takes place, the *milieu* where it takes place, which is really the whole world, must be brought into play as the very condition for the exchange to happen. When our praise erupts into being, we see the world in the auroral glow of Redemption, and we offer the world to God and God to the world. We both articulate and soothe the world’s mute groans, and we offer our exhalations to one another. There is no way to determine where one of these motions ends or where another begins, since they cradle each other and call each other forth without cease, so that the offering itself, strictly speaking, can be expressed as a receiving. We receive the world from God, and we receive God from the world, because the world is God’s work when we see it as such, and we receive each other and receive ourselves from each other.

As an aside: the whole puzzle that surrounds the notion of “gift” within certain sectors of French phenomenology might be rescued from its labyrinth if we take the identity of offering/reception into better account. Indeed if a

13 For a deeper exploration of this theme, see my *L’Arche de la parole* (Paris: PUF, 1998), chap. V.

call is heard only in the answer to it, then a gift is not recognized to be such except in its being received and in the gratitude that its reception provokes. Granted that no one is ever in a position to know whether he has truly given something or to boast that he has given anyone a perfectly pure gift, he is in a position, nonetheless, to describe that for which he himself says "thank you." Should anyone deny knowing what gratitude is, he evacuates the whole debate by passing judgment on himself. If a genuinely well-intentioned and generous person gives me something, to ask myself whether the gift is really a gift or a poison is to stand outside of the field of gratitude. *The only phenomenological access that we have to the gift is in the "thank you" of gratitude, just as the only access to beauty is in praise.* Everything else, as Verlaine would put it, is mere literature.

There is an especially noteworthy consequence of all of this for Claudel's description of dilation. Many poets and thinkers describe the expansion of worldly space and the dilation of the heart with the same words and in a single breath: I expand when the world expands, and the world becomes more spacious as I myself become more capacious. To Claudel, affirming cosmic expansiveness is primary and as though indubitable. Space has something oceanic about it. It beckons me to learn to be, to see, to breathe, and to move within its limitless expanse. This basic and primary boundlessness calls on me to shatter my own narrowness, to give my mean and stiff motions a green and tender suppleness, to stop being small and cramped. Dilation goes from the world to me, not the other way around. The same is true of the respiratory vector. Primacy belongs to the outside world.

After examining the general aspects of Claudel's view of dilation, we must look at some of its specific forms. One of the most important of these forms is that of *smell* and *perfume*. It stems immediately from respiration but imbues it with an olfactory and affective element.¹⁴ "The sense of smell is the sense that alerts us that the Holy Spirit is present, but without specifying anything further than proximity or distance. Its immediate effect is to dilate the heart and paralyze obstacles, to put us into a state of conception" (I, 396). After evoking the role of incense and holy chrism (perfumed anointing oil used in various rituals and sacraments), Claudel adds: "Smell, which is the aura that announces life, is also an ambient atmosphere of conservation. Our nostrils palpitate toward the future and collect themselves over the past." Philosophy traditionally draws a contrast between long-distance senses (sight, hearing) and proximate senses (touch, taste, smell). The contrast forgets that what is proximate can only give itself as proximate to the extent that the far-away also gives itself as far-away. The contrast also fails to take into account the fact that smell possesses an ambient, atmospheric dimension. A smell may well

14 On the sense of smell, see my *Symbolique du corps* (Paris: PUF, 2005), chap. IV.

start at a minuscule source point and spread out all the way to me, sometimes from very far away. Claudel recognizes it clearly: our sense of smell is also a long-distance sense, both temporally and spatially. Smell appeals to me in a way that is all its own. Before a joyous event unfolding to my eyes, I may or may not feel joy. The seduction of perfume, however, penetrates me right away, even before I have discerned its exact nature or source. In the sensorial order, perfume has the character of “prevenient grace” (or of immediate horror and repulsion!). As it spreads, it fills me and expands me, in perfect unison with the atmosphere surrounding me. Claudel rightfully insists on this ambient, “prevenient” aspect of smell, which is unlike a solid object to be grasped (“aura,” “atmosphere,”) and to insist as well on its promissory aspect (“conception”).

The “smell of fire,”¹⁵ as we are told in a biblical expression that fascinates Claudel, dissolves the bonds that constrain Samson and promises emancipation and liberation. A new relationship with the world starts with a pleasing smell. Nothing stops a smell from spreading since it penetrates everywhere. “The pleasing smell whose power of dilation cannot be repressed even by the high walls of a Carmelite convent! Enclosed gardens! Locked-up sources! Unknown sacrifices! Mute prayers! Hidden virtue! Strangled projects! All that we do not know and cannot see” (II, 54); all of it, nonetheless, spreads its smell of fire, which is to say of love, everywhere. To the essential nexus that ties smell to the past, so unforgettably described by Baudelaire and by Proust, Claudel, following in the steps of the Church Fathers, adds a bond that ties smell to the future, based on the kinship of perfume and hope. We already smell what is not yet here — what is about to come our way. “Perfume enables us to single out a given being by means of respiration, making it possible for us to absorb within ourselves the sign that he gives of his presence. Perfume results from a sort of decay, of disintegration of substance, whether the excipient is air, water or fire. Something never stops exhaling smoke from the fiery focal center that we are. We produce soul, if I may put it this way” (II, 82). All at once intimate and transmissible, smell is “a communicable presence, we might say a spiritual presence, of ourselves.” It seems, as Claudel actually asserts elsewhere, that the odor we form is, according to the Bible, “the creature’s supreme fruit, the essential communication that the creature is called to make of itself” (II, 106).

To the same extent as our nostrils, our intelligence must also dilate. “Just as a dog’s nose points toward a smell and goes forth to greet it, intelligence in us must go forth and greet what is intelligible, in that delightful moment in which our understanding-apparatus prepares itself to function when some

15 This lovely expression is found in the Vulgate (“*ad odorem ignis*”) but does not appear in modern translations of Judges, XV, 14. Cf. Claudel, I, 396, and II, 54.

object is present to it. *Gaudium de veritate*" (II, 107). It is precisely this "delight in truth" that Augustine cites as the definition of beatitude in a famous passage of the *Confessions*. Only a barbarian would laugh at Claudel's direct line from a dog's muzzle to the beatific vision. Plato typically compared philosophy to a hunt, a hunt for being — and hunts rely on odors and traces. We smell and we are smelled, since our thought and our prayers rise up to God like a "breathable soul" (II, 399). Through our labors and our hymns of praise, we are ourselves "living and palpitating roses" (II, 1022).

Another key figure of dilation in Claudel is the figure of wine and drunkenness. Wine is continuous with perfume, in a sense, since the first pleasure that wine gives is "the aroma that is unfurled at the limit between taste and smell" (I, 1320). Many philosophers have reflected upon "sober intoxication" and praised it, from Plato to Philo of Alexandria or Hegel. Mystics have been more numerous still, especially Muslim mystics, such as the great Persian poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Rumi and Attar. Claudel writes: "The effect of wine is like a liquid fire in us, it opens and liberates what was closed in us; it dilates what was cramped" (I, 516). These few words sum it up: "liquid fire," which is to say a fire that we are able to drink and incorporate — prefiguring the communication to us of divine fire, which is the fire of charity; secondly, "liberating dilation," thanks to which we are able to speak of the "time of wine" whenever dilation takes place as inspired and sudden, even if no alcohol has been poured. In the same passage, Claudel evokes the wedding feast of Cana, where Christ turned water into wine. According to Claudel, wine is most appropriate to those who are cramped and in darkness, not to those who are already emancipated, or to the highest faculties of the soul. "The Chalice is reserved for humiliated and penitent hearts" (I, 516). It is they who need "its beneficial warmth that invades our whole system, its flame that opens and illuminates the heart and the mind, that puts us in a state of overabundance and makes us expansive and generous" (I, 1320). The idea is not to promote alcoholism. Claudel clarifies that the power that is in wine to bring about "a dilation of ourselves" must not be sought exclusively and always in "the fruit of the vine." Over and beyond it, there is the fire of the Holy Spirit, which prompted witnesses of Pentecost to think that the apostles were intoxicated with wine.¹⁶ Claudel fully appreciates that the dilation that is brought about by wine may well be an illusion (cf. II, 1426).

If wine has the power to enlarge what is narrow and to illuminate what is dark, its power derives from a sort of sympathetic magic. Wine requires narrow confinement and darkness in order to turn into wine: "The cluster of grapes ripens in the sunlight, but wine, which comes from grapes, needs a cellar and obscurity for its power to dilate" (II, 1330). And it is because wine

¹⁶ Acts, II, 13. Cf. Claudel, I, 1321 and 516.

knows much about this fermenting process that it has the power to penetrate into our own dark cellar to trigger joy and light in it!¹⁷

If wine, in its many forms, has such a powerful ability to liberate and to dilate, it is because wine is akin to *fire*. Fire is as essential to Claudel's poetics and thinking as is wine — and, for that matter, as is water. Claudel lists a variety of ways in which fire works its effects, and cites among them “the work of ripening, to which everything that we read in the Bible about vines and vineyards refers” (I, 533). Wine is like a slower and milder fire, a fire that incubates, but it keeps in itself the violence of fire as such. To Claudel, fire characterizes divine action, both with regard to God's unicity and with regard to the persons of God's Trinity, most especially with regard to the Word and the Holy Spirit. Fire is the power of dilation *par excellence*. Christ acts “like fire.” “When the Word emanates, everything is born, opened, everything takes flight, everything dilates, everything unfolds, everything becomes conscious of its reason for being,” writes Claudel as he describes “the continuous action of our intimate dilation” (I, 989).

Be this as it may, dilation does not merely unfold us as a flowering blossom or simply prompt inner possibilities in us to become active. Fire also transforms us and gives us new possibilities, of which we ourselves had no inkling. Fire is one of the most ardent names for grace. It is the power of *apeiron*, of the limitless, struggling in us with limitation. Each and every time that the fire of grace approaches us, a trial is involved, a moment that is agonistic, either joyous or terrible, or joyous and terrible at once. “Fire is most supremely defined as what is incompatible with finite and partitioned life, and yet solicits it, puts it into motion, dilates it, destroys it, transforms it, glorifies it, tests it and torments it” (I, 1802). Each one of these verbs indicating the action of fire could be correlated without difficulty to one or more very precise descriptions throughout Claudel's *oeuvre*. The term “solicit,” however, which heads the list, is crucial: it evokes our freedom, now freed by grace, to cooperate with the divine freedom. On the one hand, “Artifice and the devil's action . . . are always something violent, heated, forced and full of effort: a hammer harnessing fire” (II, 760). God's art, on the other hand, Claudel explains, “acts through an intimate penetration, through a sweet solicitation of our virtues” (meaning our strengths and powers). “What better comparison is there but to compare it to morning dew, to a liquid dilation responding to the persuasive murmurings of light, to a degree of fervor, to an appetite for growth, clarity and creation?” As a matter of fact, morning dew is a recurrent figure of grace in the Bible, as it is in patristic writings. The notion of fire

17 In his article on wine in Claudel's *oeuvre*, J. Laurent cites a nice text by Schelling, explaining that wine is mediated, and that wine undergoes death and resurrection. See “Claudel et la tentation dionysiaque,” *Communio*, XIX, 1994, pp. 81–104. Schelling's passage is in *Philosophie de la Révélation*, leçon XIX, trans. Marquet et Courtine (Paris: PUF, 1991), pp. 294–295.

is again fully implied by the word “fervor.” The aim of dilation is always to introduce infinity into what is finite without destroying it. Its aim is to liberate the infinite that gestates within the finite without causing the finite to implode or dissolve.

We will thus not be surprised to encounter once again in this regard the symbol of the circle, with the notion of center and radiation. Evoking a circle of fire, Claudel remarks: “The circle is an emblem of perfection because it is closed and immutable in its geometric proportions with regard to its center, and it is also an emblem of infinity because it has no beginning or end” (I, 1802). He repeats the same remark elsewhere, adding that a circle is only “the dilation of unity” (II, 522). In the symbolism of circularity, radiation, which is dynamic, is the figure of dilation. “Every human being is a center of rays that propagate outward, criss-crossing and accommodating each other in order to form some kind of intelligible pattern — or so we may well believe” (II, 956–957). If this is the case, then we cannot know ourselves except through motion and dilation. Claudel greeted the theory of the *Big Bang* with joy when it was proposed by a Belgian priest. According to the *Big Bang* theory, “The Universe is not a static whole, but a system that is continually on its way to dilation, which is to say embarked on a continual search for its limits” (II, 995). Our own personal dilation expands through the dilation of others, just as it is destined to be continued without interruption into eternal life — which will be respiration still. “The successive borders that a circumference offers to radiation slow it down without exhausting it, like so many provisional thresholds. Where, however, is the point on the circle that is unfolding before our eyes that is independent of the center?” (II, 1198). What saves us from succumbing to vertigo and to dread when we are faced with the patient and violent activity of dilation is that the eternal center cannot be moved or lost.

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Index

- accumulation (*congeries*): Hugo and, 14–15; Quintilian and, 13, 14; Whitman and, 13
- action, 58, 71; dilation of heart and, 40, 41; divine, 63, 67; Holy Ghost and, 76
- Ambrose of Milan (saint), 72
- Amiel, Henri-Frédéric: aesthetics of dilation and, 123; Aristotle and, 113–14; Catastrophism of, 124; constriction and dilation for, 112, 117–18, 120–22, 124; dilation of heart and, 121–22; dilation of intellect and, 114, 117; expansion for, 112–13, 114, 123; intellectual transsexualism of, 114; *Journal* by, 110–11, 112–13, 117, 119, 123; joy and sadness for, 118–19; motto of, 117; *peras* and *apeiron* and, 110–11, 163; Poulet and, 124; Shakespeare and, 120
- amplification, 5; poetics of dilation and, 12–13, 14; poetics of excess and, 13, 14; Quintilian and types of, 13–14
- apeiron* (limitless), 11, 61, 125; Amiel and, 110–11, 163; in “Apparitions-Disappearances,” 65, 66; Claudel and, 169, 173, 178; fire and, 186; Hugo and, 14; Plato and, 111, 163; Traherne and, 135, 148; Whitman and, 161
- “Apparitions-Disappearances” (Michaux), 63; *apeiron* in, 65, 66; Far Eastern references in, 64–65
- Aristotle, 88; Amiel and, 113–14
- art, 16; dilation of perception and, 17; Proust and, 146
- Asselineau, Roger, 159–60
- Augustine (saint), 67; Bossuet and, 97–98; on capaciousness, 21, 23; on capacity, 33–34, 136; on charity, 20–21, 25, 26, 32, 34, 37; Claudel and, 173, 174, 176; commandments and, 37–38; *The Confessions* by, 21, 22–23, 27, 35–36, 185; on constriction and dilation, 31, 36, 41; desire and, 20, 23–24, 29, 30–31, 33, 100–101, 160; *dilatatio* and, 32; dilation of heart and, 40–41, 42; dilation of intellect and, 35; dilation of thought and, 34–35; *distensio* and, 29, 30; on evil dilation, 46; expansion for, 20, 35, 42; *extensio* for, 27, 28, 29, 33; on God entering us, 23–25, 26; Gregory and, 44; growth of Church and, 31–32; Guericc of Igny and, 74; heart and, 22; journey

- for, 84; justice and, 40; on loving our neighbor, 37; maturation and, 32–33; meditation and, 23, 24, 33; on memory, 21–22, 41; “On the quantity of the soul” by, 78–79; pride and, 30–31, 45, 172; Psalm CXVIII, 38–39; Rilke and, 22; running and, 39, 70–71; starting point of dilation for, 100–101; stylistic dilation and, 36; temporality and, 30; Teresa of Avila and, 83; terms of, 42–43; Traherne and, 143, 146; voice and, 134; will for, 86
- Bachelard, Gaston, 6
 “The Balcony” (Baudelaire), 2
 Balzac, Honoré de, 19
 Banville, Théodore de, 10–11
 Baudelaire, Charles, 113, 156; “The Balcony” by, 2; Banville essay of, 10–11; “Correspondences” by, 96; *Previous Existence* by, 110
 Benedict (saint), 60
 Bergson, Henri, 141; *Creative Evolution* by, 17–18; intuition and, 14, 15–16, 17; More and, 9–10; temporality and, 18; *Two Sources of Moral and Religion* by, 56–57
 Bernard of Clairvaux (saint), 80, 169; on circumcision, 77; dilation of heart and, 75, 76, 77–79; on Psalm 118, verse 32, 75–77; running and, 77; *Sermons on the Song of Songs* by, 78, 79, 87; space of charity and, 79
 Bible: dilation origins in, 3–4, 6, 35; heart in, 16. *See also specific topics*
 Binswanger, Ludwig, 55
 Bonnefoy, Yves, 5
 Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne, 4; Augustine and, 97–98; constriction and dilation for, 104, 105, 107; desire for, 100–101, 102; dilation of heart and, 103, 105; effusion of tears and, 106–7; extension for, 109; on fear and love, 98; freedom for, 106, 107; *Funeral Orations* by, 97; on holy love, 101, 102; on humility, 105; in *Littre Dictionary*, 97; “O!” for, 102–3; role of dilation for, 104
- Camus, Albert, 4–5
 capable of God (*capax Dei*), 33–34, 37, 136, 173
 capacity, 137; Augustine and, 33–34, 136; God entering us and, 34; infinity and, 136; Latin route of, 33–34; motions and, 41–42; Traherne and, 136
capax Dei (capable of God), 33–34, 37, 136, 173
 Caravaggio, Michelangelo Merisi da, 92
 Cassiodoru, 70, 71
 Chardon, Louis, 85; contemplation and, 92–93; infinity of God and, 94; on Virgin Mary, 91–92
 charity, 41, 58, 78, 84, 118, 121–22; Augustine on, 20–21, 25, 26, 32, 34, 37; constriction and dilation and, 49–50; Francis and, 88; God entering us and, 25, 26; Gregory on, 49–50, 56, 57, 58; heart and, 20–21, 26; Holy Spirit and, 38, 40; space and, 41, 79
 Chouraqui, André, 37, 62
 Church Fathers, 5, 46, 63, 72, 169, 176; earth and, 53; spiritual combat and, 60
 Claudel, Paul, 12, 27, 63, 81, 134, 136; *apeiron* and, 169, 173, 178; Augustine and, 173, 174, 176; *capax Dei* and, 173; circle for, 187; constriction and dilation for, 175, 176; desire and, 174, 178; on dilation of heart, 75–76; doors for, 169; emptiness and, 170–71, 172; exchange for, 169; *The Eye Listens* by, 177; fire and, 186; First Cause and, 180; on Foucault, 173; freedom and, 166, 167; French language and, 166; gaze for, 177–78; gift and, 182–83; mouth-to-mouth reference of, 167, 169, 174, 180; Paul and, 174–75; *peras* and, 169, 173; perfume and, 183, 184; pride and,

- 172; Psalm LXXX and, 173, 175; respiration for, 167–68, 169–70, 177–81, 182; rhythm and, 168–69; Rilke and, 182; smell for, 183–85; speech and, 171; Traherne and, 148; voice and, 181; on wine, 185–86
- command (*latum mandatum*), 37
- commandments of God, 63, 69, 83; love our neighbor as, 37–38; running along, 39, 62, 67, 68, 70, 74, 75, 77, 84, 99
- Condillac, Étienne Bonnot de, 8
- The Confessions* (Augustine), 21, 22–23, 27, 35–36, 185
- congeries*. See accumulation
- constriction and dilation, 22, 23, 24, 104; Amiel and, 112, 117–18, 120–22, 124; Augustine on, 31, 36, 41; Bossuet and, 104, 105, 107; charity and, 49–50; Claudel and, 175, 176; evil dilation and, 48; Gregory on, 45, 49–52, 61; Luther and, 54–55; narrowness and width and, 50, 61
- contemplation: as agonistic, 60; Chardon and, 92–93; goal of, 115; Gregory and, 50, 55–56, 59–60
- Contemplations* (Hugo), 3
- Cornelle, Pierre, 99
- “Correspondences” (Baudelaire), 96
- Courbet, Gustave, 151
- Creative Evolution* (Bergson), 17–18
- delectation, 6–7
- Descartes, René, 25–26; *extensio* and, 28; More and, 8–9; physical and metaphorical dilation split and, 8
- desire: Augustine and, 20, 23–24, 29, 30–31, 33, 100–101, 160; Bossuet and, 100–101, 102; Claudel and, 174, 178; freedom and, 20; God entering us and, 23–24; motion and, 37; renewing itself, 101; for Traherne, 127–29, 144; Whitman and, 160
- Dhorme, Édouard Paul, 37, 62
- Dictionary of Synonyms* (Condillac), 8
- dilatatio* (to dilate), 6, 32
- dilatatio cordis*. See dilation of heart
- dilation, 2; French, 152; philosophizing and, 15–16; positive and negative meanings of, 116–17. See also *specific topics*
- dilation, origins of: biblical source and, 3–4, 6, 35; in French, 4–5; in Greek, 6; in Latin, 3–4, 6–7; in *Littre* Dictionary, 4
- dilation-conversion, 17–18
- dilation of heart (*dilatatio cordis*), 3, 14, 24, 30, 31, 45, 183; action and, 40, 41; Amiel and, 121–22; Augustine and, 40–41, 42; Bernard and, 75, 76, 77–79; Bossuet and, 103, 105; Claudel on, 75–76; grace and, 40; Holy Ghost and, 76; Isaac Stella and, 73–74; joy and, 40; justice and, 41; love as key to, 100; Michaux on, 76; mystical summits and, 85; Paul and, 59; in Psalm 118, 63; running and, 75, 77; Traherne on, 75–76; voice and, 79
- dilation of intelligence, 14, 16; Amiel and, 114, 117; Augustine and, 35; Hilary and, 70; in *The Man Who Laughs*, 71–72; running and, 71
- dilation of thought: Augustine and, 34–35; visionary meditation as, 15
- dilation of will, 16
- distensio*, 29, 30
- Ellrodt, Robert, 130, 141
- The Emotional Experience of Space* (Kaufmann), 6
- enlargement (*incrementum*), 13
- evaporate, 94
- evil dilation: Augustine on, 46; constriction and, 48; emptiness and, 47; Gregory on, 45–49; Milton and, 45–46
- exaltation of mania, 11
- expansion, 111, 138; Amiel on, 112–13, 114, 123; Augustine and, 20, 35, 42;

- of Church, 32; Gregory and, 58, 61; of heart, 4, 8, 25, 26, 32, 97; joy and, 26; love and, 27; poetics of dilation and, 12; in Psalm 118, verse 32, 64, 65; shrinking and, 10; of space, 1–2, 5, 183; Teresa of Avila on, 80, 82; Whitman and, 11, 153, 155–56, 157, 158, 159, 162, 163
- extensio*: aspects of, 30; Augustine and, 27, 28, 29, 33; Descartes and, 28
- The Eye Listens* (Claudel), 177
- The Fall* (Camus), 4–5
- Ficino, Marsilius, 137, 143
- Flaubert, Gustave, 4
- Foucault, Charles de, 173
- Fourier, Charles, 144
- Francis of Sales (saint), 94; on charity and holy love, 88; *Introduction to the Devout Life* by, 85; meditation for, 85–86; perfume shop story of, 89, 90, 96; on pleasure, 89–90; rank of dilation for, 86; *Treatise on the Love of God* by, 85, 87–89; union for, 87–88, 89, 90
- freedom, 63, 83; Bossuet and, 106, 107; Claudel and, 166, 167; desire and, 20; Virgin Mary and, 174; Whitman and, 159–60
- Funeral Orations* (Bossuet), 97
- future, 1, 25, 28, 35, 52, 130, 171, 184
- God entering us, 27, 67; Augustine on, 23–25, 26; capacity and, 34; charity and, 25, 26; desire and, 23–24; Hilary and, 68–69
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 152
- grace, 40
- Gregory the Great (saint), 176; Augustine and, 44; Benedict and, 60–61; biblical image of, 59; on charity, 49–50, 56, 57, 58; on constriction and dilation, 45, 49–52, 61; contemplation and, 50, 55–56, 59–60; on evil dilation, 45–49; expansion and, 58, 61; heat for, 51–52; *Homelies on Ezekiel* by, 44; on inner space, 45, 52, 53, 57, 61; on Jacob and Angel, 60; loving your neighbor and, 55–57; meditation and, 51, 52–53, 61; polarities of, 44–45; on pride, 48–49; on Psalm IV, verse 2, 52–53; on sickness, 48; temporal dilation and, 57–59; thesis of, 45
- Guerric of Igny, 75; Augustine and, 74
- heart, 23, 29; Augustine and, 22; biblical notion of, 16; charity and, 20–21, 26; expansion of, 4, 8, 25, 26, 32, 97; thought and, 36. *See also* dilation of heart
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 19
- Heraclitus, 153, 154
- Hilary of Poitiers: dilation of intelligence and, 70; God entering us and, 68–69; Holy Ghost and, 68; Paul and, 69; on Psalm 118, 68–70
- Holy Ghost, 42, 168; action and, 76; charity and, 38, 40; Hilary and, 68; Virgin Mary and, 91
- holy love, 98, 100; Bossuet on, 101, 102; Francis on, 88
- Homelies on Ezekiel* (Gregory the Great), 44
- hospitality, 41, 42
- Hugo, Victor, 11, 31, 158; accumulation and, 14–15; *apeiron* and, 14; *Contemplations* by, 3; as dilated thinker, 15; *The Man Who Laughs* by, 71–72; visionary meditation and, 14–15; *William Shakespeare* by, 14–15
- Hyde, Edward, 49
- Ignatius of Loyola (saint), 142
- incrementum*. *See* enlargement
- infinity, 45, 92, 143, 149, 176, 187; capacity and, 136; Chardon on, 94; Traherne on, 135, 136–37
- inner space (*mentis spatium*), 21, 68, 153; external space compared to, 53;

- Gregory on, 45, 52, 53, 57, 61; Psalm IV, verse 2 and, 45, 53
- Insatiablenes* (Traherne), 145
- Introduction to the Devout Life* (Francis), 85
- intuition, 130; Bergson and, 14, 15–16, 17; philosophy and, 16–17
- Isaac Stella, 72; dilation of heart and, 73–74; plenitude and, 73; on Psalm 118, verse 32, 74
- Jansenism, 99
- John of the Cross (saint), 106; *Obscure Night of the Soul* by, 83–84; Psalm 118, verse 32 and, 83–84
- Joubert, Joseph, 164
- Journal* (Amiel), 110–11, 112–13, 117, 119, 123
- justice: Augustine and, 40; dilation of heart and, 41
- Kant, Immanuel, 71, 78
- Kaufmann, Pierre, 6
- Kennedy, Paul, 48
- Kierkegaard, Søren, 54, 123
- latitudo* (vastness of love), 27, 37, 56; joy and, 38–39
- latum mandatum* (command), 37
- Lawrence, D. H., 151; on Whitman, 161–62, 164
- Leaves of Grass* (Whitman), 153, 154
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 79, 145, 162
- Lemaistre de Sacy, Louis-Isaac, 37
- limit. *See peras*
- limitless. *See apeiron*
- Littré Dictionary*, 4; Bossuet in, 97
- Louis Lambert* (Balzac), 19
- love. *See specific topics*
- love our neighbor, 45; Augustine on, 37; as commandment of God, 37–38; Gregory on, 55–57
- Luther, Martin, 45, 52, 108; constriction and dilation and, 54–55; Psalm 118, verse 32 and, 62; Psalm IV, verse 2 and, 54; triple dilation of, 54–55
- Malicet, M., 166
- The Mansions of the Interior Castle* (Teresa), 80
- The Man Who Laughs* (Hugo), 71–72
- meditation, 80; Augustine and, 23, 24, 33; Francis and, 85–86; Gregory and, 51, 52–53, 61; Hugo and visionary, 14–15; Traherne and, 139, 143
- meditations: of Teresa of Avila, 80, 81
- Melody of Love* (Rolle), 95
- memory, 54–55, 57; Augustine on, 21–22, 41; Whitman and, 156
- mentis spatium*. *See* inner space
- Meschonnic, Henri, 37
- The Metamorphoses of the Circle* (Poulet), 112–13
- metaphysical poets, 126. *See also* Traherne, Thomas
- Michaux, Henri, 5, 21; “Apparitions-Disappearances” by, 63, 64–65, 66; on dilation of heart, 76; on Psalm 118, verse 32, 64, 65, 76, 82
- Milton, John, 45–46
- More, Henry: Bergson and, 9–10; Descartes and, 8–9; nullibilist and, 9
- “My Spirit” (Traherne), 139
- mysticism: anti-mysticism, 99; impossible suppositions of, 93; Rheno-Flemish, 78; sober intoxication and, 185; union in, 87. *See also* Chardon, Louis; Francis of Sales; Rolle, Richard
- neighbor. *See* love our neighbor
- Neoplatonism, 9, 58, 127; Traherne and, 139
- “News” (Traherne), 149
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 51
- Novalis, 137
- nullibilist, 9
- Obscure Night of the Soul* (John), 83–84
- “On the quantity of the soul” (*De quantitate animae*) (Augustine), 78–79
- Origen of Alexandria, 6, 34, 35, 53, 55; on Psalm 118, 66–67

- Paradise Lost* (Milton), 45–46
- Pascal, Blaise, 131, 133
- pathology of expansion, 112
- Paul (saint), 28, 33, 36, 37, 41, 55, 93, 160; Claudel and, 174–75; dilation of heart and, 59; Hilary and, 69; running and, 39
- Péguy, Charles, 144
- peras* (limit), 11, 61; Amiel and, 110–11, 163; Claudel and, 169, 173; Plato and, 111, 163; Schelling and, 111–12, 124–25; Traherne and, 148–49
- perfume, 95; Claudel and, 183, 184; Francis and, 89, 90, 96
- personal identification: of Whitman, 150; Zhou and, 150
- philosophy. *See specific topics*
- physical and metaphorical dilation split: Descartes and, 8; Thomas on, 7
- The Pilgrim: “Und das Dort ist niemals hier!” (And the there is never here!)* (Schiller), 1
- Plato, 40, 55, 65, 71, 89, 102, 115, 127, 154, 160; hunt and, 185; *peras* and *apeiron* and, 111, 163; voice and, 79
- Plotinus, 58, 113; Traherne and, 132
- The Poet and the Bible (Le Poète et la Bible)* (Malicet), 166
- poetics of dilation, 152, 155; amplification and, 12–13, 14; expansion and, 12; hyperbole and, 13–14; motion and, 12; Whitman and, 153, 164
- poetics of excess, 13, 14
- The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard), 6
- Poulet, Georges, 115; Amiel and, 124; *The Metamorphoses of the Circle* by, 112–13
- Previous Existence* (Baudelaire), 110
- pride, 68; Augustine and, 30–31, 45, 172; Claudel and, 172; Gregory on, 48–49; Whitman and, 152
- Proust, Marcel, 146
- Psalms 118: in “Apparitions-Disappearances,” 65; dilation of heart in, 63; God’s law and, 63; Hilary on, 68–70; Origen on, 66–67; Teresa of Avila on, 80–82
- Psalms 118, verse 32: Bernard on, 75–77; Cassiodorus on, 70, 71; Corneille on, 99; expansion in, 64, 65; Isaac on, 74; John and, 83–84; Luther and, 62; Michaux on, 64, 65, 76, 82
- Psalms CXVIII, 38–39
- Psalms CXXXIII, 41
- Psalms IV, verse 2, 55; Gregory on, 52–53; inner space in, 45, 53; Luther on, 54
- Psalms LXXX, 173, 175
- Pythagoras, 163
- Quintilianus, Marcus Fabius (Quintilian), 12; accumulation and, 13, 14; amplification types for, 13–14; enlargement and, 13; Whitman and, 13, 14
- ravishing, 94
- Rheno-Flemish mysticism, 78
- Rilke, Rainer Maria, 3, 169–70; Augustine and, 22; Claudel and, 182; transformation for, 96
- Rimbaud, Arthur, 60
- Rolle, Richard, 64, 85; on dilation of spiritual senses, 95–96; *Melody of Love* by, 95
- running: Augustine and, 39, 70–71; Bernard and, 77; along commandments of God, 39, 62, 67, 68, 70, 74, 75, 77, 84, 99; dilation of heart and, 75, 77; dilation of intelligence and, 71; Paul and, 39; Teresa of Lisieux and, 84
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph, 114, 152; *peras* and, 111–12, 124–25; *The System of Transcendental Idealism* by, 111–12
- Schiller, Friedrich, 1
- Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Bernard), 78, 79, 87

- Sévigné, Madame de (Marie de Rabutin-Chantal), 4
- Shakespeare, William: Amiel and, 120; *Troilus and Cressida* by, 5–6
- “Song of Myself” (Whitman), 150–51
- “Song of the Open Road” (Whitman), 156
- Spinoza, Baruch, 119–20
- Starobinski, Jean, 10
- Stoics, 153, 154, 161, 179
- Straw, Carole, 44
- The System of Transcendental Idealism* (Schelling), 111–12
- temporality, 52; Augustine and, 30; Bergson and, 18; Gregory and temporal dilation, 57–59
- Teresa of Avila (saint), 78, 91; Augustine and, 83; consolation for, 81; on expansion, 80, 82; journey for, 83–84; *The Mansions of the Interior Castle* by, 80; meditations of, 80, 81; on Psalm 118, 80–82
- Teresa of Lisieux, 84
- Thomas Aquinas (saint), 113; on delectation, 6–7; on physical and metaphorical dilation split of, 7
- Traherne, Thomas, 4, 126, 164; *apeiron* and, 135, 148; Augustine and, 143, 146; capacity for, 136; on child gaze, 129–31, 134, 149; *The City* by, 135; Claudel and, 148; conversion of sight for, 128, 139, 144; desire for, 127–29, 144; on dilation of heart, 75–76; dispersion for, 140; ego and, 131; glory for, 127; on infinity, 135, 136–37; on ingratitude, 146, 147; insatiability and, 143; *Insatiablenes* by, 145; love and, 140; meditation and, 139, 143; “My Spirit” by, 139; narrowness and, 128, 142; Neoplatonism and, 139; “News” by, 149; *peras* and, 148–49; Plotinus and, 132; on praise, 132–33, 146–48; on responsibility, 132; self-centeredness of, 131, 133, 146; vision for, 138, 142; *Wonder* by, 134
- Treatise on the Love of God* (Francis), 85, 88; complacency in, 89; natural and voluntary in, 87
- Troilus and Cressida* (Shakespeare), 5–6
- Two Sources of Moral and Religion* (Bergson), 56–57
- Valéry, Paul, 11
- vastness of love (*latitudo*), 27, 37, 38–39, 56, 78
- Virgin Mary: Caravaggio and, 92; Chardon on, 91–92; freedom and, 174; Holy Ghost and, 91
- visionary meditation, 14–15
- “Vocalism” (Whitman), 162
- voice, 12, 21, 171; Augustine and, 134; Claudel and, 181; Plato and, 79; Whitman and, 151, 158, 162, 165
- Wahl, Jean, 87–88, 126
- Wharton, Edith, 62
- Whitman, Walt, 4, 142; accumulation and, 13; adhesiveness for, 162; *apeiron* and, 161; centered universe and, 155–56; desire and, 160; efflux and, 157, 158; expansion of, 11, 153, 155–56, 157, 158, 159, 162, 163; freedom and, 159–60; Lawrence on, 161–62, 164; *Leaves of Grass* by, 153, 154; man as microcosm and, 153–54; memory and, 156; motion for, 156–57; panspermia and, 159; personal identification of, 150; poetics of, 153, 164; poetics of dilation of, 153, 164; pride for, 152; pulse for, 154–55, 157–58; Quintilian and, 13, 14; “Song of Myself” by, 150–51; “Song of the Open Road” by, 156; speech for,

- 158–59, 165; “Vocalism” by, 162;
voice of, 151, 158, 162, 165; voyager
of, 161–63
wicked dilation. *See* evil dilation
- William Shakespeare* (Hugo), 14–15
Wonder (Traherne), 134
Zhou, Zhuang, 150

About the Author and Translator

J.L. Chrétien is a French philosopher and poet. He is currently Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. He has published thirty books in French and received the Prix du Cardinal Lustiger from the Académie française in 2012 for his philosophical work.

Anne Ashley Davenport is a Lecturer in Philosophy at Boston College.