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Prayer and the Art of Literature in Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion*

WHAT WAS ANSELM THINKING WHEN he attempted to prove God's existence in the *Proslogion*? By the time he wrote the little meditation as a monk at Bec, sometime between 1076 and 1078, he had evidently already offended his teacher, Lanfranc, by "putting aside all authority of Holy Scripture" in advancing his arguments about the nature of God in his *Monologion*.[1] In the *Proslogion*, which contains what philosophers of later centuries would call the "ontological argument" for God's existence, he went further. Here, as the great twentieth-century Anselm scholar Richard Southern writes, "he was on his own, and he stretched out to the furthest limits of his powers. At the end, he trembled with the awe of a new discovery."[2] This new discovery was not the necessity of God's existence (of which Anselm was already convinced), but rather the methods of arriving at that certainty. In the *Proslogion* Anselm eschews, methodically, the evidence of the senses and the authority of the past in order to seek truth through introspection, thinking through the process of thinking itself and through the dynamic of desire that wants to know and feel the truth for and in itself. For this reason, Anselm figures heavily in modern historiographical narratives that posit a "discovery of the individual" and, relatedly, the advent of "affective piety" in eleventh- and twelfth-century Latin Christendom. According to these narratives, Anselm taught generations of late medieval and modern Christians how to turn inward to seek and to find God in the beliefs and desires of the heart.[3]

At the same time, because of what we know of the circumstances of Anselm's writing, as narrated by the author himself and by his biographer Eadmer, Anselm's discovery in the *Proslogion* plays a paradigmatic role in

ABSTRACT This article reads the *Proslogion* of the medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury as a drama of seeking and finding God. It guides the reader through a process of rhetorical *inventio*, with all of its attendant risks, pleasures, and discontents. The text opens a space or gap of desire, speaking in the voice of the soul who seeks anxiously to find (*invenire*) God but turns up only absence. The "I" who speaks and addresses itself to itself and to God learns not to close that gap but to inhabit it, affectively and intellectually, just as the monastic rhetor must, when he directs his inventive activity to God.

another influential historiographical narrative. In Mary Carruthers's indispensable studies of memory in medieval European literary culture, the process by which Anselm finds or "invents" his argument bears witness to the profound influence that earlier Roman rhetorical practices had on shaping medieval monastic intellectual and literary production in Western Europe. The activity of rhetorical and literary production (*inventio*) was, as Carruthers illuminates, an intellectual, affective, and bodily practice. It involved intense effort, time, good luck, and uncertainty. It could lead to frustration and exhilaration, and there was no guarantee that the one would eventually give way to the other. The story of Anselm's discovery of his argument in the *Proslogion* is full of such adventures. Yet it has not been fully appreciated, in the wake of Carruthers's work, how thoroughly the content of the theological meditation in the *Proslogion* reproduces the circumstances of its authorial production. That is, the *Proslogion*'s drama of seeking and finding God guides the reader through a process of rhetorical *inventio*, with all of its attendant risks, pleasures, and discontents. The text opens a space of desire, speaking in the voice of the soul who seeks anxiously to find (*invenire*) God but only turns up absence. Yet the drama of the *Proslogion* does not proceed from absence to presence, desire to fulfillment, but rather holds open the distance between them. The "I" who speaks and addresses itself to itself and to God learns not to close that gap but to inhabit it, affectively and intellectually, just as the monastic rhetor must, when he directs his inventive activity to God.

As Michelle Karnes puts it, with reference to the monk's *Prayers and Meditations*, "On the topic of distance, no one is more thoughtful than Anselm."[4] Indeed, Anselm is thoughtful on distance; he is the thinker in the history of Latin Christian thought who perhaps most precisely locates, within distance, the place of thought. Anselm's meditation on God's existence in the *Proslogion* models not only the way in which the gap between desire and fulfillment makes room for thinking and discovery but also the way in which the anguished, uncertain work of *inventio* can itself be a devotional practice, no less "affective" for its employment of grammatical and logical tools.[5]

Rachel Fulton Brown characterizes the aim of Anselm's prayers as "a starting point for compunction and fear," tools for producing in the meditant the emotions that the prayers express.[6] Simply to think of written prayers as tools to be employed in meditation or scripts to be performed, Fulton Brown argues, is insufficiently to appreciate monastic prayer as a skilled profession, a set of habits that took time and practice to develop. While it is a mistake to read Anselm's emotionally excited prayers as spontaneous expressions of interior experience (his own prefaces warn against such a misreading), this does not mean that medieval monastic tools of prayer—and the long hours spent learning how to use them proficiently—did not aim at producing affective experiences that were no less

authentic for being the product of effort and imitation.[7] In her analysis of Anselm's prayers, Fulton Brown frames the historiography of medieval devotional practices as itself a practical, rather than simply theoretical, challenge. How can one understand the function of a tool without some working knowledge of how to use it?

In recent work, Fulton Brown has written more explicitly about the limitations of modern scholarly approaches to medieval devotion. Her book *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought* opens with an invitation to the reader to take up the book and pray, to participate in the medieval devotee's love for the Virgin, "if only for the sake of experiment."[8] In Fulton Brown's estimation, historians of medieval devotion still suffer under the legacy of the nineteenth-century turn to the psychology of religious experience, with a resulting "loss of faith" that has rendered the most essential aspect of medieval Christian devotional experience—its divine referent—inaccessible.[9] Fulton Brown argues that historiography focused on the experience of prayer, or even the embodied practice of medieval prayer (to which her work has given much sustained and insightful attention), misses the point, or rather, the "object" of medieval devotion. "Over the centuries, ancient and medieval Christians developed various practices to help train their attention on God . . . always, however, with the conviction that it was not the practice as such that mattered, but rather the object."[10]

But the sharp divide she draws here between experience and object itself owes more to nineteenth-century assumptions than to medieval devotional practices. In the *Proslogion*, Anselm again and again directs attention to the practice of prayer that the book enjoins, in ways that ultimately undermine even an analytical distinction between practice and object. The English term "prayer" groups together a range of different activities, not only *oratio* but also reading/writing (*lectio*) and ruminative thinking (*meditatio/cogitatio*), a semantic range that brings into comparative view contemporary practices of writing and scholarship. For Anselm, learning to think well, to use logic appropriately and adventurously, is integral to the cultivation of prayer. The *Proslogion* models prayer as an activity akin to literary and artistic invention, aiming less to establish a definitive proof (even as it does, in the author's terms, succeed in this task) than to convey the affective and intellectual *habitus* of thinking and desiring God that constitutes the practice of prayer.

In Anselm's writing, that practice is above all directed at opening up the question of the devotional object, that is, at allowing the object of devotion to appear as a question for thought and meditation rather than as a given or even a starting point. I do not mean to deny that Anselm and his contemporaries believed in God, or to deny that they understood God as the object of their devotions. But an approach such as the one Fulton Brown calls for

in her putative participant-observation of medieval devotion to the Virgin risks taking for granted the very things scholarship is in a position to interrogate and illuminate. Anselm's own meditations make insistently clear that, if God's existence is logically self-evident, the relationship by which God might serve as object (of belief and of devotion) for the meditant is not at all self-evident, but must be rigorously excavated through introspection and exposed to the risk of thought.[11] Or, if such a task is not strictly necessary for proper devotion, it is at least worth a try, if only to see if it can be done. For all the anguish that the *Proslogion* performs, the author also registers delight at the ludic nature of his devotional experiment. Historians of medieval devotion should aspire to be as adventurous as our subjects in playing with the objects of our practice.

If, as many commentators have demonstrated, Anselm's *Proslogion* is best understood as both a devotional exercise and a scholastic argument, perhaps this is not because Anselm managed, against the odds, to integrate two divergent genres. The text might be understood, rather, to trace the practices common to the work of scholarship and devotion. Central to those practices is the work of rhetorical and literary invention, the slow, unpredictable, and experimental work of producing novel thoughts, images, and arguments. As I argue here, the process of literary *inventio* governs not only the circumstances of the *Proslogion*'s composition but also the logical-grammatical argument that is its centerpiece. As any writer knows, the process of shaping ideas into a written work requires devotion—a commitment to return, again and again, to a space of frustration, uncertainty, and sometimes even delight and a commitment to following a question through to a hoped-for conclusion that, were it known in advance, would hardly be worth pursuing.

Anselm and the Scene of Writing

By his own account as well as Eadmer's, Anselm's *Proslogion* is a text about the difficult and sometimes rewarding work of writing. Anselm recounts that he labored for a long time to come upon "a single argument"—*unum argumentum*—a demonstration sufficient unto itself to prove God's existence. He put aside the idea in frustration, only to later receive it in a flash of inspiration and a rush of joy. As Southern explains, "It was written in a state of philosophical excitement which (it is probably safe to say) had never before been experienced so intensely, and was probably never again to be repeated, in any Benedictine monastery."[12] From here, however, the story, as Eadmer tells it, gets weird: the wax tablets on which Anselm had written his argument and that he entrusted to the custody of

a fellow monk mysteriously disappear, forcing Anselm to produce a second draft. These tablets, this time in Anselm's own care, are subsequently shattered into pieces in the middle of the night. Persevering, Anselm "pieced together the wax and recovered the writing, though with difficulty," and immediately had it copied to parchment; it is from this twice compromised exemplar that the *Proslogion* was transcribed.[13] Whatever the value of this story as a historical record, it amplifies a central concern of the *Proslogion*: the unpredictability of the inventive mind (however divinely administered) and the contingencies of the temporal, material world in which it does its work.[14]

In Carruthers's studies of medieval mnemotechnics and literary composition, Eadmer's story of Anselm's "invention" of the *Proslogion* holds an almost paradigmatic status because of the rich information it provides about the practical and material conditions of textual production in medieval monasteries. Bracketing the theological motives of Eadmer's account, Carruthers reads it as a fairly typical (and unusually explicit) account of the medieval writing process centered on *cogitatio*: the ruminative, ascetic, and affectively engaged work of searching the memory for images with *intentio* or concentration. For Carruthers, what makes Eadmer's account so useful to historians is how unexceptional it is—there is no indication that Eadmer thought Anselm's writing process noteworthy in itself, apart from what it revealed about the chilly initial reception of Anselm's work.[15] This reading of Eadmer's account renders its purposes entirely exterior to those of Anselm in the *Proslogion*. Yet there is warrant to read Eadmer's biography and Anselm's theological project as more closely aligned. Southern goes so far as to claim that the passages in Eadmer's biography on the *Proslogion* "have almost the authority of autobiography, for there can be no doubt Anselm was their source, and he probably read, and at first approved, what Eadmer had written," before later distancing himself from Eadmer's efforts.[16] Whatever the arrangement that led to Eadmer's account, its foregrounding of Anselm's writerly process clearly amplifies and is echoed in Anselm's own text. In addition to Anselm's consonant (though less developed) account in his preface, many of the key terms in Anselm's *unum argumentum*—from the *cubiculum* into which he invites his reader to attempt to discover (*invenire*) the divine object of desire, to the proof's own logical passage from the object capable of being thought (*cogitari*), to the necessary being as necessarily *res*—implicate the process of literary composition in the argument at every key juncture. Moreover, in the monastic intellectual culture in which Anselm wrote, the work of literary composition was grounded in the monk's spiritual vocation.[17]

Carruthers's work shows that medieval monastic literary culture, profoundly shaped by ancient rhetorical arts, is incomprehensible without attention to memory work and meditation. Augustine, bringing his own

rhetorical training to bear on his introspective project in *Confessions* 10, provides a thumbnail sketch of the process. As Carruthers paraphrases, "We discover ('invenimus') such things as concepts and ideas when by the activity of thinking we collect ('cogitando quasi colligere')."[18] In ancient rhetorical manuals, this was the first stage in crafting an oration and, for the textual culture of Benedictine monasteries, the first stage in the process of literary composition. The first-century BCE *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, widely attributed to Cicero in its medieval monastic circulation, names *inventio* as the first of the five "faculties" necessary for the orator and defines it as "the devising of matter, true or plausible, that would make the case convincing."[19] But *inventio* is more than brainstorming arguments; it is an activity that governs the composition of the entire address—from the introduction, in which "the hearer's mind is prepared for attention," to the conclusion, "formed in accordance with the principles of the art." In other words, *inventio* refers to the entire process of oratorical composition.[20] For both ancient orators and medieval writers, the process of *inventio* was to be completed mentally before ever putting stylus to wax to produce the *res*, a term that referred primarily and properly to the mental product of invention and, secondarily and by extension, to the first material inscription of that product on wax tablets. The habits and postures that Quintilian prescribes for this process anticipate, not accidentally, medieval monastic guides to meditation and contemplation.

Though ancient rhetors often reserved the term *cogitatio* for the subsequent refining and shaping of the *res*, medieval Christian writers tended to associate cogitation with the earlier stage of invention.[21] Carruthers emphasizes the sensory, emotional, and fortuitous character of *cogitatio* (to be distinguished from the more orderly act of cognition or intellection).[22] And although *cogitatio* would seem to be more closely associated with images derived from corporeal things, for late ancient and medieval Christian authors this was not always the case—that is, the distinction between cogitation and intellection did not necessarily correspond to a difference in their objects.

In the *Proslogion*, *cogitatio* is the name of the distracting thoughts that Anselm invites his weary reader to put aside—"absconde te modicum a tumultuosis cogitationibus tuis."[23] But for Anselm this is not a matter of trading cogitation for meditation, but rather of bracketing one kind of cogitation in order to pursue another. He does not use the term *meditatio* to refer to the work of the *Proslogion*—that term appears in the preface only in referring to the *Monologion*, which he calls an *exemplum meditandi de ratione fidei*.[24] Why does Anselm prefer the term *cogitatio* in the *Proslogion*? Southern finds that Augustine and Anselm use the term *cogitatio* interchangeably with *meditatio*, but with one crucial distinction: *cogitatio* is the work of mulling over all manner of possible objects—good, wicked, or morally neutral—

whereas *meditatio* refers only to the activity of lifting the mind to consider the essences of things in God.[25] *Meditatio* sets out assured of its goal, but *cogitatio* is at the outset indeterminate; it proceeds without guarantee and is practiced by saints and fools alike. Thus the choice of the term *cogitatio* and its relatives further indicates, as I will argue, that Anselm's *unum argumentum* for necessary being is predicated, paradoxically, on the contingency of thought itself. The success of finding God is no more assured from the start than Anselm's success in finding the argument that would demonstrate God's existence.

It is worth pausing, then, over the opening of the *Proslogion*, since, as Carruthers points out, it inaugurates explicitly a scene of writing—or, more exactly, a scene of literary invention. The central figure in the opening appeal is the *cubiculum*, the little chamber of the soul into which the reader is beckoned and the theater in which the drama of seeking and finding will take place. The little chamber is without doubt also the nuptial bedroom of the Solomonic bride, since Anselm's invitation is uttered in the words of the Song of Songs (which in turn invites consideration of the eroticism of the ontological argument itself). As a place of *cogitatio*, however, the *cubiculum* also invokes Boethius's prison cell. *The Consolation of Philosophy* opens on a scene of invention, with Boethius lying restlessly in his bed, "in order to compose poems."[26] This is explicit in the text: when Philosophy appears, she discovers him polishing his composition, stylus in hand. For a medieval reader, Boethius's very posture indicates his activity just as clearly as the presence of the stylus. As Carruthers explains, "In classical as in monastic rhetoric, withdrawal to one's chamber indicates a state of mind, the entry to the 'place' of meditative silence which was thought essential for invention."[27] Anselm's further injunction to "rest" (*requiesce*) is a cue to assume the proper posture for the work of *cogitatio*.

Yet as in the scene of Boethius's poetic labors, the emotionally anguished thoughts that follow are anything but restful. The narrator plunges headlong into despair at his own unfulfilled desire for the divine vision. An agitated (and agitating) litany of questions concerning the possibility of seeing God gives way to grief over humanity's original loss of this vision: "What shall your servant do, anxious for the love of you, yet cast so far from your face? . . . He longs to find you, and does not know where you are [*Invenire te cupit, et nescit locum tuum*]."[28] This, too, conforms to ancient and medieval expectations about the disquiet that attends the work of invention. According to Carruthers, what for Quintilian was the regrettable tendency of orators to become anxious in their cogitations became for medieval Christians in the Boethian tradition the necessary, even desirable, spiritual preparation for the work of meditation.[29] Moreover, Anselm follows the affective arc of the *Proslogion*'s opening chapter through the memory palace of Christian salvation history to Adam as the archetypal human being: "Oh how hard and

cruel was that Fall! Alas, what has he lost and what has he found?"[30] The memory of human happiness in the presence of God before the Fall contrasts bitterly with the present misery of God's absence that the soul finds within. The retreat into the inner chamber of the soul surfaces feelings of loss and grief that involve the meditant in her memory, first individual and then collective, in order to take inventory of what can and cannot be found there.

The opening chapter of the *Proslogion* thus inaugurates a scene of literary and theological invention, which is in turn framed by the authorial scene of Anselm's discovery of the *Proslogion*'s central argument. That discovery, too, reads as a process of cogitation marked by studious intention and intense affective disturbance. Anselm narrates this scene himself in the preface he added to the work, complementing Eadmer's account. If the *Proslogion* itself is written *sub persona* of an earnest seeker of God's face, its preface foregrounds Anselm's authorial persona, opening with a reference to his body of work, in particular the *Monologion*. After completing that work at the request of his brothers, he explains that he embarked on the project of the *Proslogion* seemingly of his own writerly initiative: "I began to investigate whether perhaps [*forte*] it would be possible to find [*invenire*] a single argument" sufficient unto itself for the demonstration of God's existence.[31] Neither fraternal demands nor divine inspiration are credited with conceiving this project. No necessity compels it; only the chance (*forte*) of finding something that was not simply missing but had never previously been grasped.

The story unfolds, in hindsight, more or less predictably: no matter how much diligence Anselm applied to thinking it through, the thing eluded him, to his great distress, until one day the tables turned and what he had been seeking began to pursue him instead. This reversal allows Anselm to narrate his process of authorial invention as ultimately a matter of divine inspiration—the agency lies in the thought itself (or the thing that verifies the thought). Eadmer's account makes this point more clearly: in his attempt to find his argument Anselm loses his appetite, loses sleep, and, most disturbing, loses his ability to concentrate on his liturgical offices. This last consequence leads Anselm to suspect something diabolical at work. But the conflict proves to be divinely inspired when one night—during the liturgy, no less—"the grace of God shone in his heart, and the thing became clear in his intellect [*res patuit intellectui eius*], and immense joy and jubilation filled his whole inner being."[32] The great anguish in inventing that Quintilian took as a symptom of writerly immaturity stands here as a sign of divine inspiration, but the process would look familiar. Such ups and downs are to be expected in the work of thinking, the pursuit of the *res* by the inventive mind. The work of *cogitatio* comes with no guarantees. And yet, though it is beside Carruthers's point, there is a significant irony in the aleatory dimension of the *Proslogion*'s genesis: the incontrovertible logical

necessity of God's existence is found seemingly by chance. In the argument for God's existence, Anselm discovers a necessary relationship—in the absolutely singular case of the necessary being—between existence *in intellectu* and existence *in re*, or between *cogitatio* and *res*. But he arrives at that discovery, as the text narrates, only by the prolonged, uncertain, and chance process of *inventio*, in which the relationship between *cogitatio* and *res*—the work of thinking and the as-yet-unthought result of that work—is not assured.

Thinking God in Anselm's *Unum Argumentum*

The "ontological" argument as Anselm presents it turns on the question of thought (*cogitatio*): What is present to us when we are thinking?[33] What does it mean to say that "something than which a greater cannot be thought" *exists* in the intellect? Invoking the "fool" of Psalm 13 who says in his heart "there is no God," Anselm reasons that "when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought,' he understands what he hears and what he understands is in his mind [*et quod intelligit in intellectu eius est*], even if he does not understand that it actually exists."[34] Significantly, Anselm here draws an analogy to creative activity, arguing that a painter has the painting in his mind (*praecogitat*) before he paints it—before, that is, he understands it to exist in reality. At issue is the mind's capacity for *inventio*, the ability to hold in the intellect what is not (for either accidental or essential reasons) available *in re* to the senses or to the understanding. And so Anselm makes the point again, this time asserted as a general proposition: "Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind [*quidquid intelligitur, in intellectu est*]."[35]

The argument proceeds rapidly from this point: something than which nothing greater can be thought must be thought to exist in reality (*in re*) as well as *in intellectu*, since existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone. As Southern explains, the argument rests on particular assumptions about the relation of thought to being, and about the relation of thought to language.[36] Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for modern readers of the *Proslogion* is that we, even unwittingly, bring a representational theory of cognition to an argument for which such an idea is foreign. Anselm does not claim that the *concept* of God exists in the intellect, and so the *being* of God must be a reality. Some *thing* than which nothing greater can be thought is what exists in the mind, not the mental representation of

that thing. To exist *in intellectu* is, in fact, to exist, albeit in a lesser degree than that which exists also *in re*.

In his argument on behalf of the fool, the Benedictine monk Gaunilo of Marmoutiers presses Anselm further on the various ways something can exist in the mind. He begins with the most obvious objection: all kinds of chimerical and fantastical things exist in one's mind that clearly do not exist in reality. Hearing the name and definition of a unicorn, and understanding what one hears, is different from understanding that what the name signifies really exists. Likewise, the fool's ability to understand the name God and its definition does not necessarily lead to the understanding that God exists. Gaunilo then considers, as counterpoint, the possibility that the divine object of thought is absolutely singular in this respect, such that one cannot be said to have heard the name of God without at the same time experiencing the certainty of God's existence. This is what Anselm's own argument seems to suggest when he distinguishes the activity of thinking the mere sound of the word (*vox*) from understanding the thing that the word signifies. No one who has God in the mind in the latter sense is capable of denying his existence in reality. "But if this is so," Gaunilo objects, "first, there will be no difference between what comes first in time—having a thing in the mind—and what comes later in time—understanding the thing to exist."[37] Thinking works progressively, is capable of diverse outcomes, and only in time yields understanding. To claim that the divine object is understood to exist *as soon as* it is thought is to make the term "thought" equivocal when applied to God as opposed to all other possible objects—and thus in effect renders thinking about God impossible in the ordinary sense of the term. Gaunilo concludes, then, that the passage from thought to certainty must be neither inevitable nor instantaneous. Anselm's own analogy to the painter rules out any exceptionalism with regard to thinking the divine: a painter first conceives of the painting and subsequently produces it on canvas. Analogically, Anselm would seem to be claiming that it is possible to form a thought of God before understanding God to exist in reality.

In his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm concedes that this is precisely the point: he proposed the analogy only "to show that something exists in the intellect that is not understood to exist" in reality.[38] That is, it is possible for something to exist in the mind independent of a judgment about that thing's real existence. Though less concerned than Gaunilo with the precision of the terms themselves, Anselm affirms the difference, temporally and operationally, between thought and understanding.[39] The analogy to the painter makes this clear: theology is like artistic invention in one crucial way—the object of its art can be conceived in the mind before it takes shape in reality, and in fact must be first so conceived, in suspension of judgment, in order to arrive at God as *res*, that is, in order for the outcome of the art to take shape.

What is the time elapsed between possibility and impossibility, between thought and certitude, *cogitatio* and *res*? If the affective longing of the *Proslogion* extends the time in question into an indefinite, eschatological deferral, the *unum argumentum* itself condenses this time to an instant, an interval so slight that it never truly takes place. No firm and final conclusion of God's nonexistence is possible, but it is possible to form the thought in suspension, before a judgment has been reached, before the inexorable logic unfolds. Only a suspension of time can isolate the moment of indeterminacy, *after* the thought has been formed and *before* the thought reaches its destination in certitude. The *unum argumentum*, then, would be a tool not only for arriving at certainty but also for isolating the impossible moment of possibility, the moment when the destiny of thought is still open, when it could go any which way—what Jacques Derrida calls "the moment of atheism in the prayer," when the prayer risks making an address in the absence of an addressee.[40] Ronald Thiemann reads the *Proslogion* according to this Derridean moment of atheism, focusing on Anselm's opening recognition of God's absence, before the logical proof supplies the addressee ("And this is you, Lord our God").[41] But to read the text according to this structure would be to make the *Proslogion*'s animating questions merely rhetorical (in the contemporary, colloquial sense), and would impose a division of logic and rhetoric (in the medieval sense) that Anselm's text does not observe. Moreover, the *unum argumentum* works not only to close the indeterminacy announced in the opening of the text but also to locate it *in* and *as* the place of *cogitatio* and to place the reader within it.[42] If the *Proslogion* as a whole is a devotional text, the indeterminacy in which *cogitatio* takes place, in which the object is held in suspension, is itself the very practice of devotion, and not simply its prerequisite. The journey from *cogitatio* to *res*, traversed almost but not quite instantaneously in the argument for God's existence, is the itinerary of *inventio*, a condensed version of the fitful, prolonged process of literary invention that gave shape to the *Proslogion*.

The moment of indeterminacy in the ontological proof, in which the mind can think God in suspension of reality, might pass so quickly as to be without consequence. Yet the structure of the *Proslogion* lets that moment resurface again and again throughout the text, reinvesting the winnings of the ontological argument in further wagers. As soon as the text has unfolded the implications of the *unum argumentum* (affirming not only God's necessary existence but also confirming the indivisibility of God's perfections), the *Proslogion* turns back on itself, soliciting the logico-grammatical foundation that has just been so carefully laid in the preceding chapters. Turning now from God to self, the speaker asks, "Have you found, O my soul, what you were seeking?" The answer is equivocal:

You were seeking God, and you found Him to be what is the highest of all things [*summum omnium*], than which none better can be thought; and you found it to be life itself, light, wisdom, goodness, eternal blessedness and blessed eternity; and you found it to exist everywhere and always. If you have not found your God, in what sense is it this which you have found [*quomodo est ille hoc quod invenisti*], and which you have understood [*intellexisti*] with such certain truth and true certitude? But if you have found it, why is it that you do not feel [*sentis*] what you have found? Why, Lord God, does my soul not feel You if it has found You?[43]

The identity between God *in intellectu* and God *in re*, which seemed so assured upon the completion of the argument, is now thrown into doubt: How is God that which you have found? The certainty of God's existence is assured, but the value of the soul's *inventio* is made uncertain, an epistemological crisis occasioned by the awareness of a gap between thought and feeling. The meditant asks herself why she cannot feel what she has found, and then puts the question to God. The anxiety in these repeated questions points to an expectation that the project of finding God (*invenire*) should culminate in an intimate experiential awareness of God (*sentire*). Indeed, that expectation is voiced at the beginning of the *Proslogion* by the anguished soul who discovers she has not achieved the sight of God for which she was created. The soul, unable to find God, feels only emptiness and hunger where there should be plenitude, and begs God to teach her how to find him.

Yet the central demonstration of God's existence both does and does not satisfy this initial experiential demand. In one sense, it exceeds the meditant's expectations: not only does he find God in the mind but he also discovers, with complete certainty, that this God is the same God who exists in reality, and whose existence is absolutely singular in its necessity. But, at another level, the *inventio* fails; something is missing. God is not present to the soul in the way that the exercise initially seems to promise. However elegant and certain Anselm's argument is, it pales in comparison to the simplicity and certitude of God himself. And so the text sets out again on a project of seeking and finding, through a series of questions too lofty for logic to answer, in search of the full joy (*gaudium plenum*) that the meditant expects to find nowhere but in God.

Conclusion

In the self-inventory that opens the *Proslogion*, the seeker finds its object only as grieved loss and hoped-for recovery, even as the lonely interval constitutes the very place from which the absent God may be addressed. If the spiritual exercise that inaugurates the *Proslogion* recalls (deliberately, I suggest) the rhetor's process of oratorical invention, it also

anticipates in certain respects a modern scene of analysis, as Eileen Sweeney observes in her comparison to Freud's *fort-da* game.[44] Extending the analogy, we might see a parallel to the elaboration of that scene by the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, who analyzes the child's attempts to reckon with the reality principle that stands as a limit to—and frustration of— desire by incorporating or relocating the absent mother within the psyche. For Bion, if the child is capable of bearing (with) frustration, the mother's absence (the "no-breast," or the "bad breast" in the synecdochal logic of object-relations analysis) becomes a thought through a kind of psychic alchemy. The ability to internalize absence is, in this construal, not simply a mechanism for coping with or tolerating absence but the very condition of creative engagement with the world beyond the inner space of the psyche.[45] The interval between desire and its fulfillment is the very space of thought—that is to say, its condition of possibility. The process Bion describes is, in an analogous sense, the necessary precondition for Anselm's argument: before thought can arrive at the thing, the thing must become a thought through a recognition of one's own frustrated longing. As I have argued, if the ontological argument on its own is concerned with the passage from thought to thing (*cogitatio* to *res*), the *Proslogion* as a whole works to identify the intellectual and affective habits by which God as *res* might be an occasion for thinking, that is, by which devotion animates the work of theological invention.

Adam Phillips draws on Bion in attempting to think about frustration— the frustration of one's attempts to understand and be understood—as not inimical but rather integral to the sustaining of desire and as a condition for meaningful work. As Phillips writes:

Psychoanalysis tells us that we can understand satisfaction only by understanding frustration, and that we are prone to find frustration unbearable . . . . To take Bion seriously, if we can't think our frustrations—figure them out, think them through, phrase them—we can't seek our satisfactions. We will have, as they say, no idea what they are.[46]

The process that Bion describes in his developmental narrative, and that Phillips glosses to think about the ongoing negotiation of desire and frustration, echoes the practice that Anselm invites his reader to take up. Here memory work consists in mapping the presences and absences within the soul, so as better to dwell in the interval between desire and fulfillment.

That same interval might also be described, in terms central to Anselm's own explanation of the work, as the space between *fides* and *intelligendum*. If the *Monologion* is an example of meditation on the *ratio* of faith, the *Proslogion* is the project of "faith seeking understanding"—I believe in order to understand. On one level, the passage from faith to understanding is not to

be traversed in the space of the *Proslogion*: the completion of that passage would be the annihilation of faith at the hands of understanding. Thus, in the event of the failure to arrive at understanding, the interval between faith and understanding defines the space of *cogitatio*, the space where the idea, at least, if not (yet) the thing itself, can be found *in intellectu*. On another level, however, the passage is traversed repeatedly in the text, oscillating not so much between the poles of presence and absence as dwelling within the moment that distinguishes and connects them. The *Proslogion* neither allows the reader to rest in the logical triumphalism of the ontological argument, as though everything necessary had already been said, nor does it give the reader license to flee the work of thought altogether in order to take refuge in a reverential or ecstatic silence. Instead, the reader is brought back again and again to the moment of indeterminacy that appears, barely, as the condition of possibility of the *unum argumentum.*

The work of invention revolves around this moment of indeterminacy, enlarging and prolonging it, without ever dissolving it into an abstract and infinite deferral. The proper posture for praying the *Proslogion*, then, is neither calm assurance nor the desperate abandonment of the mind in God, but the anguished embrace of dissatisfaction as the goad to more and better thinking. The *inventio* that the *Proslogion* performs does not supply its author-reader with the satisfaction of its object, and its practice is not simply, or chiefly, a tool for training the mind and heart's attention on this object. Without hoping to close the gap between thought and feeling, between desire and fulfillment, the devotional practice of the *Proslogion* opens the space of indeterminacy in which to embrace, in the anguish of incompleteness, the risks and pleasures of thinking a thing through.

Notes

1. The phrase is found in the *Vita Anselmi* by Anselm's contemporary Eadmer, translated and quoted in Richard Southern, *St. Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990), 116.
2. Ibid., 118.
3. On Anselm's place in the development of medieval passion piety, especially his *Orationes sive Meditationes*, see Thomas H. Bestul, "St. Anselm, the Monastic Community at Canterbury, and Devotional Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England," *Anselm Studies* 1 (1983): 185–98; Bestul maintains that Anselm marks a turning point in medieval Christian devotion, though not an absolute beginning. See also Thomas H. Bestul, "St. Anselm and the Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Devotional Traditions," *Annuale mediaevale* 18 (1977): 20–41; and "St.

Augustine and the *Orationes sive Meditationes* of St. Anselm," *Anselm Studies* 2 (1988): 597–606.

4. Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2011), 117.

5. Interpreters have long insisted on the distinction in the *Proslogion* between logic (the arguments that seek to compel assent) and rhetoric (the prayers that seek to incite longing and desire). While not dispensing with this basic distinction, Eileen Sweeney demonstrates their close affinity, arguing that Anselm's proofs, the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, share rhetorical techniques and theological aims in common with his prayers and meditations. In each case, the meditant laments his distance from God and then proceeds to find relief from the pain of that distance, paradoxically, through an intensification of it. From this starting point, it is clear that Anselm's proofs, like his prayers, work to incite desire as "charismatic texts" that seek to reproduce, through artifice, the speaker's inner experiences (in this case, the love and fear of God) in the reader. Just as Anselm sets forth his prayers and meditations to Countess Mathilda as a model for her own and calls his *Monologion* an "example of meditation," so also in the *Proslogion*, Anselm writes *sub persona*, under the guise of one trying to raise his mind to contemplation and understanding. Sweeney cites and largely follows Louis Mackey in her use of the term "rhetoric" as, generally, "the use of language to persuade" and, more specifically, in a somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of the ancient and medieval *ars rhetorica*, the attempt to overcome the distance of speaker and addressee through persuasive speech. In this latter sense, prayer *is* a form of rhetoric. Sweeney's argument is that, because Anselm's logical proofs similarly posit a distance (in this case, between word and thing) that they seek, through language, to overcome, his proofs are themselves prayers. Eileen Sweeney, "The Rhetoric of Prayer and Argument in Anselm," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38, no. 4 (2005): 355. On Anselm's prayers as "charismatic texts," see Mary Agnes Edsall, "Learning from the Exemplar: Anselm's *Prayers and Meditations* and the Charismatic Text," *Mediaeval Studies* 72 (2010): 183.

6. Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York, 2002), 173.

7. Rachel Fulton, "Praying with Anselm at Admont: A Meditation on Practice," *Speculum* 81 (2006): 707.

8. Rachel Fulton Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought* (New York, 2019), xxv.

9. Ibid., xxix.

10. Ibid., xxvi.

11. On the face of it, of course, Anselm's *credo ut intelligendum* (I believe in order to understand) appears precisely to take belief for granted. The course of his inquiry, however (which I take up later in the essay), shows that belief is posited so that it may appear as a question or problem for understanding to interrogate. Moreover, in his exchange with the Benedictine Gaunilo of Marmoutiers he insists that one need not accept the truth of the proposition of God's existence in order to understand it (and as I will discuss, Anselm appears to believe that the success of his proof hangs on this point).

12. Southern, *St. Anselm*, 127.

13. Eadmer, *The Life of St. Anselm* (*Vita Sancti Anselmi*), 31, ed. and trans. Richard Southern (New York, 1962), 31.

14. In a different vein, Louis Mackey reads the story as confirming the necessary failure of written representation, a generative failure recapitulated in the textual afterlife of the argument in the interminable disputation with the skeptical Gaunilo and his many heirs. For Mackey, this paratextual story—the story of the strange circumstances of the text's genesis—reaffirms the status of the *Proslogion* as *écriture*. Louis Mackey, *Peregrinations of the Word: Essays in Medieval Philosophy* (Ann Arbor, 1997), 102.

15. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2008), 261.

16. Southern, *St. Anselm*, 116.

17. As John Protevi has shown, Augustine understood the rhetorical process of *inventio* to be itself a kind of contemplation, insofar as the activity of the mind was directed toward tracing words back to their proper metaphysical grounding in reality as directed by divine light. John Protevi, "*Inventio* and the Unsurpassable Metaphor: Ricoeur's Treatment of Augustine's Time Meditation," *Philosophy Today* 43, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 86–94.

18. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 245.

19. The importance of the Roman rhetorical tradition, and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* in particular, to the intellectual environment of Bec in the eleventh century is well attested. Anselm's Lanfranc likely wrote commentaries on the text, though, unlike those of his contemporaries, none are extant. See Ann Collins, *Teacher in Faith and Virtue: Lanfranc of Bec's Commentary on Saint Paul* (Leiden, 2007), 18–22.

20. Pseudo-Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA, 1954), 7–9.

21. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 250.

22. Ibid., 248.

23. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 1. Latin citations of the *Proslogion*, Gaunilo's *Pro Insipiente*, and Anselm's reply, *Quid ad Gaunilonem*, are taken from the critical edition of Anselm's works by F. S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1946). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

24. Anselm, *Proslogion*, preface.

25. Southern, *St. Anselm*, 79.

26. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 2000), 173.

27. Ibid., 174.

28. Anselm, *Proslogion*, 1.

29. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 174.

30. Anselm, *Proslogion*, 1.

31. Ibid., preface.

32. Eadmer, *Life of St. Anselm*, 28, my translation.

33. The "ontological argument" as taken up in philosophical classrooms is often identified with Anselm, though it owes more to René Descartes, who gave Anselm's proof a new life when he put forward a series of similar arguments in his *Fifth Meditation*, inspiring famous refutations by David Hume and Immanuel Kant, among others. No doubt reading Anselm through these early modern philosophical debates, as is now difficult to avoid, produces a lopsided picture of his theological enterprise. Yet if isolating Anselm's proof from the rest of the *Proslogion* is a distortion of the text, it is one that Anselm seems to have encouraged by appending his own correspondence with Gaunilo to the original work.

Indeed, as Toivo Holopainen notes, Anselm's own preface seems to treat the *Proslogion* as a vehicle for his "single argument" (*unum argumentum*) that, on its own, sufficiently demonstrates God's real and unsurpassable existence. On the history of these debates, see, for example, John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, eds., *The Many-Faced Argument* (New York, 1967); Alvin Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (Garden City, NY, 1965); G. E. M. Anscombe, "Why Anselm's Proof in the *Proslogion* is Not an Ontological Argument," *Thoreau Quarterly* 17 (1985): 32–40; Toivo J. Holopainen, "Anselm's *Argumentum* and the Early Medieval Theory of Argument," *Vivarium* 45 (2007): 1–29.

34. Anselm, *Proslogion*, 2.

35. Ibid.

36. See Southern, *St. Anselm*, 129–34.

37. "Sed si hoc est, primo quidem non hic erit iam aliud idem que tempore praecedens habere rem in intellectu, et aliud id que tempore sequens intelligere rem esse; ut fit de pictura quae prius est in animo pictoris, deinde in opere"; Gaunilo, *Pro Insipiente*, 2.

38. "Sed tantum ut aliquid esse in intellectu, quod esse non intelligeretur, possem ostendere"; Anselm, *Quid ad Gaunilonem*, 8.

39. As McGill writes, "In Latin the term *cogitare* has always suggested this element of inventiveness, of mentally fashioning something that is not actually the case"; "Recent Discussions of Anselm's Argument," in Hick and McGill, *The Many-Faced Argument*, 83.

40. David Shapiro, Michal Govrin, and Jacques Derrida, *Body of Prayer: Written Words, Voices* (New York, 2001), 63.

41. Ronald F. Thiemann, *The Humble Sublime: Secularity and the Politics of Belief* (London, 2014), 115.

42. For M. B. Pranger, the Fool's denial ("There is no God") functions as a falsification or negation that catalyzes the logical affirmation of God's self-evidence. This gambit structures what he sees as essential to Anselm's poetics—a dialectical poetics of absence and presence, removing and restoring, a "game of hope and despair" central to monastic intellectual and affective practice. M. B. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity: Essays on the Poetics of Monasticism* (Stanford, 2003), 111.

43. Anselm, *Proslogion*, 14.

44. Eileen Sweeney, *Anselm of Canterbury and the Desire for the Word* (Washington, DC, 2012), 173.

45. In Wilfred Bion's terminology, the child gradually learns how to transform "beta-elements" (external stimuli and the "raw" affective and somatic experiences they inflict) into meaningful, manipulable thoughts (alpha-elements). The process, which Bion calls "alpha-function," is, more or less, the work of thought. See Wilfred Bion, *Learning from Experience* (London, 1991).

46. Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (New York, 2012), 27–28.