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# Counterintuitive Comfort in the Consolation Tradition: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Ideological Frameworks in Pearl and Endo's Silence

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Counterintuitive Comfort in the Consolation Tradition: the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of  
Ideological Frameworks in *Pearl* and Endo's *Silence*

The roots of the consolation literature tradition grow deep. From the book of Job to David's more desperate Psalms of lament, to the Roman *consolatio*, to Medieval elegies, to modern works like C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed*, writers have both sought and dispensed comfort for centuries, concerning themselves with topics such as the inscrutable prosperity of the wicked, the untimely death of the young and innocent, and the apparent silence of God. In these works generally, and more specifically in the medieval dream-vision *Pearl* and Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*, several common elements stand out: the presence of an observer of (and reader of) the lamenter's grief; dialogue between the lamenter and the observer, through which the lamenter receives instruction and wisdom; and the destruction of the lamenter's previous frameworks of belief to make way for the new perspectives needed to bring consolation.

Written in the late fourteenth century by an anonymous poet, *Pearl* addresses themes common to the consolation tradition through a conversation between a grieving father (referred to in the text as "the jeweler") and his dead daughter (referred to as "the pearl maiden") who appears to him in a dream. When the jeweler first encounters the pearl maiden he asks her to confirm that she is, indeed, his lost pearl. As he does so, he implies that his pain is her fault, a result of her desertion of him. The pearl maiden rebukes this claim, and the rest of their dialogue follows this form as well. Their conversation exhibits the scholastic style typical of medieval

philosophical/theological discussion and teaching, with “the wrong answers first so that they may be refuted by the child/teacher” (Hatt 20).

Like *Pearl*, Endo’s *Silence* addresses common themes of consolation literature like suffering and questioning the divine, and includes the necessary elements of an observer and lamenter, dialogue between the two, and the radical reworking of intellectual frameworks. Endo’s novel takes place in seventeenth-century post-feudal Japan. Under the shoguns of the Edo period, Japanese Catholics are persecuted for their faith. The first four chapters of the novel are told from the perspective of a Portuguese priest, Father Rodrigues, who hopes to minister to the hidden churches of faithful Japanese Catholics while investigating the rumored apostasy of his former mentor, Father Ferreira. As Rodrigues notices the amalgamation of Christian beliefs into the Japanese culture, he questions the extent of the Japanese Christians’ theological understanding, and as he witnesses the suffering of the Japanese peasants under oppressive taxes, watches the inglorious martyrdom of two peasants Mokichi and Ichizo, and observes the groveling apostasy of his guide Kichijiro who readily tramples on the *fumie* (an image of Christ) whenever he is pressured by Japanese officials, Rodrigues questions why God does not lend strength and deliver those who cry out to him. He frequently notes that “men are born into two categories: the strong and the weak, the saints and the commonplace, the heroes and those who respect them” (Endo 82), but he struggles to place himself in either category. “In times of persecution the strong are burnt in the flames and drowned in the sea; but the weak, like Kichijiro, lead a vagabond life in the mountains. As for you,” Rodrigues asks himself, “which category do you belong to?” (82) He wonders if he has avoided apostasy thus far only because of his priesthood and his pride and, if so, how God can fault those who apostatize under torture when God made them so weak and while others keep their salvation only because they’ve never endured persecution. Eventually, Japanese officials capture Rodrigues. The officials bring

Rodrigues to meet with Father Ferreira, now called Sawano, who persuades Rodrigues that the religion of Christianity cannot take root in Japan. In the climax of the novel, Rodrigues learns that several Christians undergoing torture will not be released until he apostatizes. Desperate to end their suffering, Rodrigues tramples on the *fumie*.

As observed in these brief summaries, *Pearl* and *Silence* offer the opportunity for the expression of grief. An unheard lament provides little comfort to the mourner. Consolation requires a listener, a witness to grief. Sometimes this observer is an actual character in the work, however, even works without characters that respond to a lamenter (such as Medieval elegies) find an observer of grief in the reader or audience of the text. In *Pearl*, the jeweler addresses both the pearl maiden and the reader throughout the poem. In *Silence*, Christ himself observes Rodrigues' suffering as Rodrigues reciprocally envisions (or observes) Christ's suffering, a meditation practice of Ignatian spirituality. The presence of these observers facilitates the method through which instruction, and thus consolation, is delivered: dialogue. Through dialogue, the lamenter outlines his or her "complaints" and the listener responds, sometimes offering rebuttals and sometimes by pointing out the lamenter's misplaced desires and offering more secure frameworks for hope. This leads the sufferer from a myopic viewpoint to a broader perspective concerning suffering and its place in the universe. In both works, the suffering characters must abandon their preconceived notions of how God operates in the world; their consolation requires the destruction of old perspectives and the construction of new frameworks of understanding. These new frameworks are informed by the wisdom imparted to the mourning characters through their suffering and resulting conversations with the observer.

As the jeweler listens to the heavenly existence of the pearl maiden, he questions why the pearl maiden should be instated as a "queen of courtesy" when she has done so little compared to

those who have lived through hardships on earth for so much longer, to “purchase bliss in heaven on high” (line 477). He continues:

That courtesy too free appears  
 If all be true as you portray;  
 You lived in our country not two years—  
 You could not please the Lord, or pray,  
 Or say “Our Father,” or Creed rehearse—  
 And crowned a queen the very first day!  
 I cannot well believe my ears,  
 That God could go so far astray.  
 The style of countess, so I would say,  
 Were fair enough to attain unto,  
 Or a lesser rank in heaven’s array,  
 But queen! It is beyond your due. (lines 481-93)

The jeweler cannot comprehend that God would bestow such a reward on an infant who did so little. The jeweler reveals two mistaken beliefs in this claim. First, he doesn’t grasp the abundance of grace Christ lavishes on all, regardless of the religious duties each one has or hasn’t done. Secondly, he doesn’t realize that his religious merit amounts to little more than the earthly pearl maiden’s. The pearl maiden addresses the jeweler’s flawed perspective through the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, found in the Gospel of Matthew. Before she begins, the pearl maiden notes that this parable precedes “the mass that blesses the bread and wine,” linking the story to the practice of communion (line 499). While seemingly irrelevant at this point, this association informs our interpretation of the jeweler’s statements at the end of the poem. The pearl maiden recounts the Biblical parable told by Jesus. A vineyard owner sets out in the early morning to find workers to labor in his vineyard, promising them each a penny for a day’s labor. He continues to find laborers throughout the day, employing workers even in the late evening. When the vineyard owner grants to each worker the promised penny at the end of the day, the

workers who labored all day protest that the workers who only labored for an hour are receiving reward beyond their due. The vineyard owner replies that the workers who labored all day should be satisfied; they are receiving their promised wage, and further, the owner is at liberty to give as he desires.

The pearl maiden uses this parable in the same way Jesus does: to upend the preconceptions of his/her audience. In her book *God and the Gawain-Poet*, Cecilia Hatt writes that “there can be little doubt that the parable as told by Jesus was meant to puzzle and offend, in order that his hearers should rid themselves of comfortable and predictable notions about God’s dealings with humankind.” After outlining the various contradicting statements Jesus made in the presence of the Pharisees, Hatt continues, “it is surely clear, then, that Jesus was deliberately confounding his audience’s accepted notions of measure and order, and this not to demonstrate the arbitrary choosiness of God but God’s appalling generosity” (47). The pearl maiden uses the parable in the same manner: to demonstrate the abundant and confounding grace of God.

Once again, the jeweler protests, quoting from a Psalm of David that God renders to each his or her just reward. This objection reveals the jeweler’s assumption that he does not fall into the category of one who will receive more than his work deserves; his objection to all receiving an equal reward indicates that he believes he has fulfilled the metaphorical “full day’s labor.” Again, the pearl maiden addresses the jeweler’s flawed viewpoint, telling the jeweler that no person can be pious enough to deserve eternal bliss through his or her own merit. In this section, the phrase “the grace of God is enough for all” is repeated at the end of each of the five stanzas. The relentless repetition of this line parallels the extreme abundance of God’s grace, grace that exceeds the deserved reward of even the longest laborers. This leads the jeweler to accept the pearl maiden’s new status as queen of heaven and to recognize his own place as a laborer

receiving a full reward, despite his undeserving work. This perspective change is evident in the final lines of the poem:

To content that Prince and well agree,  
 Good Christians can with ease incline,  
 For day and night he has proved to be  
 A Lord, a God, a friend benign.  
 These words came over the mound to me  
 As I mourned my Pearl so flawless fine,  
 And to God committed her full and free,  
 With Christ's dear blessing bestowing mine,  
 As in the form of bread and wine  
 Is shown us daily in sacrament;  
 O may we serve him well, and shine  
 As precious pearls to his content. (lines 1201-12)

The jeweler notes that “day and night”—in other words, whatever time one begins work in the vineyard—“he has proved to be / A Lord, a God, a friend benign.” The jeweler also emulates the pearl maiden in linking the parable of the vineyard to sacraments of bread and wine. Like communion, the grace of God is available to all, regardless of the number of good works one has performed. With this abundant grace in mind, the jeweler exhorts the reader to join him in serving Christ well. In the context of communion, this statement holds a second meaning—in the sense that one can also “serve Christ” by doling out the bread and wine—that once again emphasizes the abundant grace of Christ over religious works. Though the jeweler originally questioned and raged at the inscrutable judgement of God in taking away the pearl maiden, he

now is able to see that this very same incomprehensible judgement offers him grace beyond his due. This transformation in understanding is the jeweler's consolation.

While the instruction of the pearl maiden directly deconstructs the jeweler's mistaken perspectives and informs the new perspective that brings him consolation, Rodrigues' meditations on and conversations with Christ inform his framework more subtly. Christ does not lead Rodrigues away from his ego-centric perspective by addressing it directly, as the pearl maiden does. Instead, Rodrigues gradually recognizes that Christ shares in his suffering even as Rodrigues questions divine absence. Through his acknowledgement that Christ suffers with him, and has suffered more in his crucifixion than Rodrigues ever will, Rodrigues realizes that his efforts will never measure up to the standard set by Christ. Like the late vineyard workers in the parable in *Pearl*, Rodrigues experiences reward beyond his due, and he recognizes this boundless grace in his meditations on the compassionate face of Christ, who empathizes in Rodrigues' suffering.

These meditations align with the spiritual training of the Jesuit order. As a Jesuit priest, Rodrigues would have practiced the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order. Ignatius wrote the exercises, as a series of reflections and meditations, which generally began with a preparatory prayer, had several points to guide the exercitant's reflections, and then concluded with a colloquy in which Ignatius recommended the exercitant address God "in the way one friend speaks to another" (Ignatius 138). Perhaps most notably for this essay, Ignatius considers "consolations and desolations" as the spiritual motions of the soul that indicate one is being moved by different spirits, and exhorts directors giving the Exercises to look for these in the exercitant as proof of spiritual growth (Ignatius 122).

The influence of these exercises on Rodrigues is clearly evident in the frequency and manner of his meditations on the face of Christ but, more importantly, these meditations



demonstrate the breaking down and reconstruction of Rodrigues' perceptions of God's work in the world. Through his "consolations" and "desolations"—the alternating experiences when Rodrigues feels the presence of Christ and is filled with overwhelming love for him in one moment and then gives in to despair at the ostensible indifference of God in the next—Rodrigues gradually releases his grip on the tenets of Christianity he inherited from the Western institutional church to accept new ones offered to him through Christ's revelations to him.

The most important of these revelations occurs when Rodrigues finally apostatizes, which happens when his former mentor, Father Ferreira, tells Rodrigues that there are Christians hanging upside down over a pit, whose suffering will not end until Rodrigues steps on the *fumie*. Ferreira claims Rodrigues elevates his salvation over ending the Christians' intense suffering, out of fear of the judgement of the institutional church. "Is your way of acting love?" Ferreira asks him. "A priest ought to live in imitation of Christ. If Christ were here . . . certainly Christ would have apostatized for them" (Endo 181).

Ferreira then brings him before the *fumie*. The face appears ugly to Rodrigues, crowned with thorns and nothing like the victorious, European face he used to envision. Presented with the *fumie*, Rodrigues addresses Christ as he might in a colloquy for the *Spiritual Exercises*:

'Lord, since long, long, ago, innumerable times I have thought of your face. Especially since coming to this country have I done so tens of times. . . . Whenever I prayed your face appeared before me; when I was alone I thought of your face imparting a blessing; when I was captured your face as it appeared when you carried your cross gave me life. This face is deeply ingrained in my soul—the most beautiful, the most precious thing in the world has been living in my heart. And now with this foot I am going to trample on it.' (Endo 182).

As Rodrigues places his foot on the *fumie*, the face of Christ speaks to him, saying “Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into the world. It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross” (182).

This moment defies all Rodrigues’ expectations. When God appears to be most silent, unresponsive to Rodrigues’ pleas to end the Christians’ suffering, he is actually most present, speaking to Rodrigues through the voice of Christ. Additionally, Rodrigues is simultaneously acknowledging his inability to perfectly imitate Christ and imitating Christ’s self-sacrifice in the same act. According to Lyle Enright, Rodrigues’ apostasy is *kenotic* (self-emptying); being more concerned with the suffering of the Christians than with the status of his own salvation, Rodrigues emulates the self-emptying sacrifice of Christ. Through this act of paradoxical salvific apostasy, Rodrigues ruptures the categories “by which he maintains distinctions between weak and strong, saint and sinner, faith and doubt” (Enright 120). It’s not enough to say this moment shifts Rodrigues’ perspective from one extreme of a binary outlook to the other, that while he might have once considered apostasy to be completely wrong, he now has a more nuanced view. Instead, Rodrigues’ original assumptions are completely destroyed, making way for the consolation that comes by realizing there can be piety in apostasy, a voice in silence, presence even in absence (Enright 121).

As the novel draws to a close, Rodrigues reflects on his apostasy from his continued imprisonment, remembering the “tremendous onrush of joy that came over him at that moment” (Endo 203). In one of few instances after the novel’s transition to third person narration, Rodrigues describes his experience in his own voice, this time revealing the conversation that took place between Christ and Rodrigues just after he placed his foot on the *fumie*:

“Lord, I resented your silence.”

“I was not silent. I suffered beside you.”

“But you told Judas to go away: What thou dost do quickly. What happened to Judas?”

“I did not say that. Just as I told you to step on the plaque, so I told Judas to do what he was going to do. For Judas was in anguish as you are now.” (Endo 203)

This conversation reveals Rodrigues’ newfound, intimate relationship with Christ.

Though Rodrigues has debased himself in the eyes of the institutional church, his apostasy has broken the former frameworks that hindered him from receiving consolation through the compassion and forgiveness of Christ. As he continues to reflect on his apostasy, Rodrigues notes that he doesn't care that he has betrayed the expectations of his fellow priests, because “he was not betraying his Lord. He loved him now in a different way from before. Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love” (Endo 203).

As the jeweler recognizes his place as a laborer receiving a reward beyond his due, Rodrigues recognizes himself as a forgiven betrayer, allowing him to see Christ’s abundant compassion. The two characters are not comforted, as one might expect, by the restoration of previous losses or even the promises of future, eternal reward, but by the radical new perspectives they’ve adopted. Defying their preconceptions of justice and religious obligation, of piety and suffering, the new perspective that brings consolation for both the jeweler and Rodrigues is this: that “the grace of God is enough for all,” enough even for late-coming workers and apostate priests.

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