Margaret, Bottom, Paul and the Inexpressible
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The work done by words is remarkably complex, and includes the work of describing what they themselves do. That seems to generate a kind of self-limitation on language, since we cannot discuss it by stepping outside it; but it is not that limit which this study investigates. Instead it begins from the fact that we speak about the failure as well as the success of language. Many people hold that words, though equal to most occasions, falter when faced with the task of describing certain special experiences. Religious believers in particular may argue that there are experiences which can be known and recognized, but which cannot be expressed, uttered, or communicated. Union with the divine, revelations of glory, the moment of self-enlightenment—such experiences are full of meaning but utterly resistant to expression.

Now I do not propose to examine this belief directly. Rather, my aim is to investigate kinds of inexpressibility by exploring three very different authors who present from a common source some limits on our knowing and speaking. Margaret and Bottom are poetic and dramatic characters who experience difficulties over what can be said. We begin, however, more prosaically with Paul and the inexpressible.

I. PAUL AND THE INEXPRESSIBLE

It is not appropriate to develop here a general view about Paul’s pronouncements which may bear upon the theme of the inexpressible. There are passages in which he deals with a person’s inability to comprehend God or to speak adequately about him, such as Romans 11:33: “how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” Paul also stresses the limits of language in his personal experience of revelation in which he “heard things that cannot be told, which a person may not utter” (2 Cor 12:4), and in the more common experience of inarticulate response to God: “we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).

Here, however, for a reason shortly to make itself known, I have chosen only one text in which Paul makes strong claims about the lack of human ability to enter into things divine. Set in the context of his critique of worldly wisdom in the first part of 1 Corinthians, the text reads:

But, as it is written,
“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man conceived,
What God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Cor 2:9)
Two things are immediately obvious: first, the text is not a sentence, but only a fragment; and second, it is itself a quotation from something else. Before we comment on this second point (the first must wait until near the essay’s end), perhaps we should see what prompts Paul to insert these words into his argument. In the opening chapter of this letter to the Corinthians, human cleverness and strength are starkly opposed to God’s wisdom, seen in the foolishness and weakness of the cross—so opposed that the wise in debate, the mighty, and the well-placed are incapable of coming to know God. This looks like an attack on certain kinds of people or attitudes rather than a condemnation of reason *per se*; and indeed for reasons not here recounted I take Paul’s target to be intellectual conceit. Nevertheless, in chapter 2 Paul does take on human reason itself, claiming that it lacks the power to know certain things about God. God has his secret wisdom, hidden from the powerful of this world (2:8) but also from all human beings. Just as human things are known to human types of knowers, so divine things are available only to the Spirit of God (2:11). None of us knows the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him (2:16, from Isa 40:13; cf. Rom 11:34). So it is in the context of these strong claims about human cognitive equipment that Paul draws on our three lines. The things prepared by God for those who love him are not available to observation by eye or detection by ear, nor are they the possible products of the heart’s conceiving. And since neither experience nor imagination yields these divine things, we have every reason to suspect that they lie beyond human expression.

But where did Paul find the lines which form our text? That he is quoting from a source is beyond doubt. Further, his introductory words *kathos gegraptai* (as it is written) are a signal that he quotes from Scripture. But which scriptural passage? A common view among commentators is that, since the lines are reminiscent of phrases in two separate verses in Isaiah (64:4 and 65:17), Paul must have had a text of Isaiah very different from anything we know, or else (as C. K. Barrett has it) he was quoting from a very inaccurate memory.¹ A glance at the relevant phrases in the Anchor Bible translation will show something of the difficulty. In Isaiah 64 we find “no ear has heard, no eye has seen a God except you who acts on behalf of those who wait for him”; and in chapter 65, “the past will not be remembered, it will not enter your mind.” If Isaiah is Paul’s source,

¹C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 73. Barrett points out that Origen thought Paul to be quoting from the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, but that we have evidence neither for that nor for any other extra-scriptural source.

he has taken this last phrase about entering the mind (that is, the heart), turned it into the past tense from the future, sandwiched it into the middle of the second phrase from chapter 64, and changed that phrase’s final verb from “wait” to “love.” Recently A. T. Hanson has strengthened the proposal that Paul did not himself do this cutting and pasting: he had a midrashic source which had changed the verb tense and inserted “has not entered into the heart of man” into the phrase of chapter 64. As evidence Hanson points to just such a conflating midrash in the Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities* which, though it cannot be confidently dated, is independent of Paul.² This is not the place to pursue the question of Paul’s source. I want merely to remark on the mild irony in the fact that, at present, eye has not seen the actual source from which Paul prepared the lines which form his text—though speculations about it will undoubtedly continue to rise in the collective scholarly heart.

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Whatever it is that Paul cites, his formulation has economy and both poetic and religious power. It is probably his text which reappears several times in the early Christian era to refer to the inexpressible joys of heaven.3 That, however, belongs to another story; we for our part must move to the title’s second name, and a very different setting for a discussion of the inexpressible.

II. BOTTOM, MARGARET, AND THE INEXPRESSIBLE

I can have in mind only one Bottom—and in the light of my choice from among Pauline texts, only one speech from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. So, in an abrupt change of scene, we go from Corinth to a wood near Athens, where Bottom has just awakened from sleep, the “transformed scalp” of an ass removed from his head by Puck. He had gone to sleep in the arms of Titania, Queen of the Fairies, who through the magic of her jealous husband had been caused to fall in love with “some vile thing”—Bottom himself, as it turned out, transmogrified by Puck’s mischief into an ass-head. Titania’s doting ceased when her eye was cleansed by “Dian’s bud” and she saw in true light the loathsome visage she had loved. Bottom’s own reaction upon wakening is entirely different, however. At first he remembers the Pyramus and Thisbe play he and his fellow mechanicals had been rehearsing in the wood before he fell asleep. But then he stops.

*I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was—and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called “Bottom’s Dream,” because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.*

(IV.i.203-17)

3Hanson cites occurrences in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Acts of Peter*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and 1 and 2 Clement.

What Bottom’s speech means for the inexpressible will occupy us shortly; for now, a word about its scriptural source and the tone in which it mangles that source. (1) For our Pauline text misechoed here, the 1557 Geneva New Testament has 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 as follows:

*But we preache as it is written, Things wc eye hath not sene, & eare hath not heard, nether entred into mans mynde, which things God hath prepared for the that loue him. But God hath opene them vnto vs by his Sprite, for the Spirite searcheth all things, yea, the botome of Goddes secretes.*

(2) As for its tone, it seems entirely appropriate that Bottom should garble these lines: his malapropian way with words is established the first time he opens his mouth, mistaking
“generally” for “severally” (I.ii.2; cf. III.i.78; IV.i.38); and his last words exchange the objects of sound and sight for each other (V.i.339f.). Indeed, this “confusion of perceptual functions” is carried over into Bottom-as-Pyramus: he sees a voice, hears Thisbe’s face (V.i.190f.), and dies crying “Tongue, lose they light” (V.i.293). So it is natural to ask whether Bottom’s perceptual confusions in our Shakespearean text are to be seen as one more example of his verbal maladroitness. Is he only a mixed-up mouther of Paul? That is how he may be played, and how Brian Bedford portrayed him in the 1984 Stratford, Ontario, production. Or is there more sitting below the surface of his words?

The question may be pondered while I make a final introduction: it is time to meet Margaret. This requires a change of scene again, this time from a wood outside Athens to a wood anywhere—but a yellowed wood, its autumn leaves almost gone. Observing the trees “un-leaving” is a “young child,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins calls her in his poem “Spring and Fall.” Though young, she is not carefree. She grieves because of the death she senses around her. The poet, past spring himself, suggests a deeper source for her sorrow and—though she can now neither see nor say it—another, closer, reason for her tears.

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grow older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow’s springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:

4This seems to be the version Shakespeare was most familiar with; cf. R. W. Dent, “Imagination in A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” Shakespeare Quarterly 15 (1964) 121, n. 12. But the Bishop’s Bible may be a better source for line 213 of Bottom’s speech, since it has the “heart” of man rather than “mans mynde”; cf. the comment of Harold F. Brooks in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, ed. H. F. Brooks (The Arden Shakespeare; London: Methuen, 1979) 99.


It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Hopkins wrote “Spring and Fall” on 7 September 1880 while in the Lancashire countryside away from his parish duties in the slums of Liverpool. The poem was included by Robert Bridges in an anthology called The Spirit of Man circulated among officers in World War I, and in this way F. R. Leavis was first introduced to Hopkins’ work—he was later to call the
poem “compellingly successful.” That was not always the judgment of I. A. Richards’ students at Cambridge in the 1920s, who were given the piece as one in a series of anonymous unannotated poems on which Richards solicited commentary as an experiment in practical criticism. Rather than follow their complaints or confusions,7 we may simply remark on the fact that none of them is reported as having caught the Pauline allusions in lines 12-13. That may not be surprising; the critics do not always note the source of Hopkins’ echo here either.8 And we have moved some distance from Paul’s three lines. The Corinthian quotation has three negatives denying the ability of human organs (eye, ear, heart) to grasp God’s preparations, ascribing that function to the Spirit of God alone. Hopkins speaks of neither eye nor ear; he makes an unPauline distinction between mind and heart; and his “ghost” is Margaret’s own spirit rather than the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Paul’s pattern of denial and affirmation remains: the inadequacy of human faculties is stressed, and is then followed by a reference to revelation. And although the mouth replaces eyes (strikingly, since Margaret has been looking at leaves), Paul’s language survives in the three negatives of line 12 and the hearing of the heart if not the ears in line 13.

That completes the introduction of this study’s three names and its three texts, all versions of a basic scriptural text related to phrases in Isaiah, but not presently available to us in the form that it must have been known in Paul’s time. Paul adapted it to his Corinthian context by speaking of things inaccessible and inconceivable prepared for those who love God. His version of text was torn


7I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1930). Among the more memorable comments: “a doughy, heavy, obscure, indigestible and unsustaining piece of whatever it’s meant to be” (p. 85); and “I looked up both ‘wanwood’ and ‘leafmeal’ in four dictionaries, and I cannot find their meanings” (p. 87).

8The only comment on Hopkins’ source which my limited investigation has disclosed is from Peter Milward: “This spring, the poet continues, is a tragedy of human life and human origin that no mouth has ever adequately expressed, nor mind ever aptly conceived. Here he seems to reverse the application of Isaiah’s similar words to the joys of heaven, which ‘eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.’...,” Landscape and Inscape: Vision and Inspiration in Hopkins’ Poetry (London: Paul Elek, 1975) 73. But (1) as we have seen, the quoted words are more from Paul than directly from Isaiah (though Paul does not say “entered into” the heart of man); and (2) the poet, as we will see, does not claim that no mouth or mind has ever adequately expressed or conceived the tragedy—only that Margaret’s abilities are still too immature for that task. (3) As we will see near the paper’s end, Paul was not himself speaking of the “joys of heaven,” though this is a common assumption. Cf. Paul A. Olson’s comment that Bottom “echoes confusedly St. Paul’s account of the ineffable nature of the heavenly vision” in his essay “A Midsummer Night’s Dream and the Meaning of the Court Marriage,” English Literary History 24 (1957) 98. Whether Hopkins made that assumption cannot be decided from the poem.

like hay by Bottom, all the sense apparently taken out of it as he stumbles on about the unhearing eye and the unseeing ear. Hopkins restored the poetry by keeping to the formal aspects of Paul’s citation, though there is more echo than substance from 1 Corinthians 2 in his words to Margaret. Our three texts thus ring their own peculiar changes on a basic text eluding our grasp—but after these curious historical relations are explored, there remains the more puzzling question of how our texts bear upon the theme of the inexpressible. They deal with the limits of what can be
known or said; but do they share a common understanding of those limits? And perhaps more to the point, do they offer anything of interest to the religiously inexpressible with which we began?

III. KINDS OF INEXPRESSIBILITY

Undoubtedly the proper approach to such questions would be a sustained philosophical investigation into the inexpressible, the results of which could be used to interrogate our three texts. Instead of that, we must rest content with only a couple of comments before returning to the texts to allow them to contain our discussion. First, it may help to locate the concept of the inexpressible in its family of related terms. Its closest relative is the *ineffable*, distinguishable from it only insofar as there may be a significant difference between what cannot be spoken and what cannot be expressed. Other like terms include the *unutterable*, the *unspeakable*, the *unmentionable*, the *indescribable*, the *inexplicable*, and so on. While there is a rough core of meaning in common for these words, they cannot be used interchangeably. To pick the least of the examples: one’s *unmentionables* are not at all things which are beyond language, but only things that shouldn’t be referred to by explicit name in polite company. Again an *unspeakable* horror or atrocity may be describable in words or even explicable, but one which we are nevertheless reluctant to recount, perhaps for moral reasons. *Inexplicable* suffering may be described with poignancy, and the inadequacy of proposed explanations discussed at length even though its true purpose escapes us. The *inexpressible* or the *ineffable*, however, seem to involve stronger claims about the limits of language. If someone labels a certain object as ineffable, or a certain experience as inexpressible, then he is confessing more than a reluctance to speak about it in this or that company: he is announcing a failure on the part of language itself.

This brings us to the second comment. It seems to me that failures to speak and failures of language may happen in different ways, ways important to distinguish for this project. (1) As just explained, sometimes language fails only because speaking is forbidden. This kind of *unutterable* is like the *undesirable*: just as people are capable of desiring some things but shouldn’t do so, so some unutterables can be spoken but oughtn’t to be. Perhaps Paul’s personal revelation belongs to this category of the inexpressible, for in 2 Corinthians 12:4 the emphasis is on that which a man is not permitted to utter (*ha ouk exon anthropo lalesai*). But there are other failures. (2) I may be unable to speak because I have *failed my language*. My vocabulary may not be sufficiently rich, or the proper word may be there “on the tip of my tongue,” inexpressible until recalled. There are limits to language in such cases—but they are limitations of particular knowers and speakers, removable by learning and remembering. (3) Someone might suggest at this point that these limitations can be extended past particular people to encompass all human knowers. That there are limits to our knowledge and experience we may take for granted. Assume some object never encountered by humans, some experience never entered upon by any of our race; then that object or experience cannot now be described in human language. It is, however, odd to speak of this as a *failure* on the part of language, since it has not even been asked to take on the tasks of describing or expressing in such cases. Further, it must not be merely assumed that, if human limits were to be stretched, human language would necessarily break in the stretching. (4) It is nevertheless sometimes believed that our language does fail before the limits of experience are reached even now. The usual candidates for the ineffable in its
strong, undiluted form are religious experiences like those alluded to at the beginning, or perhaps aesthetic experiences, in which people claim knowledge which cannot be talked about by anyone, no matter what their linguistic skill. Of course, the ineffable-in-principle has held considerable fascination for philosophers, who tend to see in it a dilemma. For the more one specifies a particular ineffable experience, identifying and marking it off from other experiences, the more one has to use language; but if less is said, then less is known—and the less known, the more ineffable recedes back into our third category, outside the range of experience.9

I propose then four kinds of inexpressibility to carry back to our three authors: (1) the inexpressible because forbidden; (2) the inexpressible in practice (the remedial kind); (3) the inexpressible because unknown; (4) and the undiluted inexpressible in principle.

IV. MARGARET, BOTTOM, AND THE INEXPRESSIBLE

Come back then to the failure of the language and expression in Margaret. It is not that she is struck dumb by her experience, unable to express her grief. By word, tear, gesture (exactly how we are not told), she has succeeded in communicating her distress about the fall and decay of leaves. Nevertheless there is something her mind has not fully grasped, something not yet spoken. So the poet voices it for her. Her particular grief will seem to diminish as she matures, until she will be able to look unmoved on much more paleness and decay in nature. Nevertheless, like a subterranean spring her sorrow will accumulate and well up: she will weep, and come to understand why.10 For we are all as grass, our beauty like the flower of the field (Isa 40:6); we have all withered like leaves,

10This reads “you will weep and know why” in line 9 as future. I. A. Richards felt that, although this reading is understandable, Hopkins’ own emphasis requires the line to use “the present tense of the verb ‘to will.’ She persists in weeping and in demanding the reason for the falling of the leaves, and perhaps also for her grief,” Practical Criticism, 83. Were that so, there would be little point to the “And yet” which begins the line. Hopkins’ emphasis seems to be that Margaret will weep in spite of her colder heart. Norman H. MacKenzie puts it this way: “The older Margaret will weep at the Fall as she does in her childhood now; she will then be weeping for herself just as she really is now; but with a colder heart will come a clearer mind so that she will be consciously identifying her own fate with the withering nature,” A Reader’s Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981) 144.

and our iniquities sweep us away like the wind (Isa 64:6). Ever since another fall in another garden, there has been blight in the bud at each birth. So Margaret will come to speak the name of her sorrow’s true object. And the name will be her own.

Note that Margaret’s present inability to speak does not come from a complete failure to know the reason for her grief. The poet does not claim that she has made a straightforward mistake in explanation or identification; it is not that she is utterly wrong to care in her fresh thoughts for leaves. Nor does the poet try to cure her depression by arguing that she has misconstrued its source.12 Our Pauline echoes in lines 12-13 save us from such misunderstandings, for they stress that within Margaret herself there is a nascent preverbal awareness of the connection between those leaves and this life. She has not yet appreciated the interconnectedness of all blighted things, but as that realization grows she will understand how narrow the focus of her youthful sorrow. And that realization will grow, for it is already present,
if dimly. The heart has heard, the ghost has already guessed. These terms are consciously juxtaposed with mouth and mind, and they so bear the meaning F. R. Leavis easily exposes: “‘heart’ here is the apprehending that precedes words, and the force of ‘ghost’ defines itself in turning (as it seems to do) into ‘guessed’: it is the spirit that intuits what the mind hasn’t yet thought.”

So inexpressibility in Margaret’s case stems from the limitations of her present understanding, and therefore reflects her failure with words—not with limits of language itself. Her apprehensions and intuitions may lie on the threshold of speech. But we understand that fact precisely because the poet has found the right words for her. Were that not so, we could have no notion of what Margaret heard or guessed. Hopkins could not otherwise have written the poem he did write, nor commentators written what they have about it. Margaret, I conclude, exemplifies the inexpressible in practice. But what of Bottom?

A few pages back we asked whether Bottom is only a fool who mangles Paul’s text for comic effect, or whether there is another point to his verbal confusions. It is time now to argue for serious purpose, even pathos, in his speech. That is not to deny its humour: the fool can tell what is “past the wit of man”; the subconsciously dictated choice of the word “ass” over against the sevenfold repetition of “man”; the garbled quotation itself. Nevertheless Bottom must not be played in this speech merely for humour. Three considerations sober the comical approach. First, Bottom has been changed by his experience. Until his encounter with Titania, his confidence was as unbounded as it was groundless. He fancied himself the most knowledgeable, the best able to direct the play, most suited to take on any role, to act in every manner, even in any colour.

beard. Yet here his speech is of his inabilities; he has been so humbled by his experience that he surrenders the writing of his ballad to Peter Quince. For Bottom, that concession is as rare as his vision. Secondly, there is the layered meaning of his calling the ballad “Bottom’s Dream” because it “hath no bottom.” Apart from the play on “bottom” as a weaver’s skein, “no bottom” suggests both no foundation and unfathomable depths—and the notion of profundity is strengthened by the phrase from 1 Corinthians 2:10 quoted earlier, “the botome of Goddes secretes.” Third is the puzzling last sentence of the speech. Although Bottom’s memory is returning to the play he is supposed to be rehearsing, he remains in the afterimages of his vision. So he links his ballad with a play, and adds, “Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.” Whose death? Harold Brooks’ answer is compelling: Bottom “has forgotten Titania, and does not yet remember Thisbe; but something deep in his mind transfigures the rising image of the one with emotion proper to the lost image of the other.” A line of such ambiguous forgetting and foreboding belongs to tragedy, not comedy—which is perhaps why Brian Bedford emended the text of the line in his 1984 Stratford performances to “Thisbe’s death.”
Such considerations then lead us to listen more carefully to Bottom’s confession that human senses and conceptions cannot capture his vision. It is not, as Jan Kott thinks, that Bottom does not want to admit his dream in the cold light of waking experience. Were that so he would not contemplate a ballad written for him to sing. The truth lies the other way round: Bottom cannot retain what recedes so quickly from his consciousness.

What is the quality of that experience which has so transfigured Bottom? He cannot say in these lines, but we ourselves have more privilege. We remember, as he does not, the last words spoken to him: a queen, and no mortal, had entwined him in her arms whispering, “O how I love thee! How I dote on thee!” (IV.i.44). Titania’s love was of course the product of magic’s madness, rejected as repulsive when she later came to her true senses; but Bottom experienced that love as tender concern, a ministration of unnatural beauty. In fact, I want to suggest that of all the love relationships in the play, only one is untainted: Bottom’s experience of Titania. The other relationships all seem to have their clouded side in which faith has been broken. This is clearly so with the four young lovers at the play’s beginning. It is true as well of Theseus and Hippolyta, who come to marriage from a dark past in which Theseus wooed with a sword, doing Hippolyta injuries (I.i.16f). In that past the one had been lover to Titania, the other to Oberon (II.i.70ff). And in the fairy world, Oberon is “passing fell and wrath” over the young Indian boy who is the object of his wife’s attentions—jealous not of her displaced care, but because he wants the boy for himself.

15Ibid., cxii.
16I am indebted to Professor A. Patenall for his verification of this point.

Bottom’s experience with Titania is on a different plane. No jealousy, no rivalry, no quarrel. There is rather the ministry of flower and music to sight, smell, sound; of food to taste; of fairy fingers and Titania’s arms. If his own desires are transformed into the asinine, he has no awareness of that: he knows only kindness and courtesy as the “gentle joy” of a queen. So it is appropriate, in searching for a term to characterize the uniqueness of Bottom’s experience, that we should come upon a theological word: grace. This Athenian mechanical is, in Paul’s words, really from Corinth—one of the foolish, lowly and despised to whom is revealed a glory beyond his imagining. As Frank Kermode has it, “Bottom is there to tell us that the blindness of love, the dominance of the mind over the eye, can be interpreted as a means to grace as well as to irrational animalism; that the two aspects are, perhaps, inseparable.”

Bottom calls this experience a most rare vision and a dream. He has just awakened. But we know he did not literally dream up Titania in sleep. Nor was his seeing turned into a vision, as was Titania’s, by ocular anointing. But if he saw truly, why are his memories not as good as ours? The experience of fairy grace was so unlike his normal life, so discontinuous with his waking reality, that he cannot incorporate it into his consciousness, and he wakens at a loss.

Notice how he puts that state of being at a loss. At first it is the inability to say or expound what the experience was. This inability is not, however, like Margaret’s failure with words. Bottom’s claim is a strong one: it is past the wit of any man to put his dream into words.
This is a generic failure, not a specific lack on his part. The reason for this comes next, in his burlesque of the Pauline quotation. Though Bottom heard Titania’s whispers, it was not exactly with human ear; he looked, but not quite with human eye, on her doting face. But it is not as though some other human could have taken that all in. By mixing perceptions and organs, Bottom places his dream beyond human experience entirely. Just as eyes cannot hear or tongues conceive, so (he claims) no human being can enter into the vision he has enjoyed.

Now this looks very much like the undiluted inexpressible in principle. Bottom has undergone something which just cannot be put into words: his tongue has tasted what it cannot report. That, at least, is what he seems to


19Though it would be difficult to claim that Shakespeare intended this, the unscrambling of Bottom’s mismatchings shows two functions for the tongue. In the speech, five organs are mismatched with five functions, but in an intriguing pattern. Rather than randomizing the associations, Shakespeare has Bottom work in pairs with the first and last two sets. Eye has not heard, ear seen; tongue cannot conceive, or heart report. In each pair the second function properly belongs to the first organ, the first function to the second organ. But this pairing leaves the middle set without a corresponding half for mismatching, since there is no sixth organ and function. So one’s hand is not able to—touch should be the proper function, but of course that does not appear in the list. Instead Shakespeare links the hand with taste—and thereby leads into the last pair of organs, for this is the true work of the tongue. The tongue thus has two functions, reporting and tasting. Schematically the right matchings look like this:

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eye         heard
ear         seen

hand            taste
tongue
heart          conceive

report
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believe. But alas, it is not that simple. For he also apparently believes something incompatible with that. “I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream,” he adds, and, “I will sing it at the latter end of a play.” Yet how—the question asks itself—how will Peter Quince know what are the right and wrong words to rhyme? Someone—Bottom himself—will have to tell him something, to express reservations, to suggest revisions. So if Bottom contemplates a ballad from Peter Quince, he cannot regard his dream as strongly inexpressible. Quince will play Hopkins to Bottom’s Margaret.

Is this an example of comic inconsistency in Bottom? Partly it is. But we can say a little more about it. There is in this inconsistency a mixture of inexpressibilities, but I suggest that none of them turns out after inspection to be the undiluted variety. Look at it this way. Suppose Bottom had merely forgotten the dream-like attentions of Titania. Then his vision would be now inexpressible because unknown at present. Suppose, on the other hand, that he had been radically and completely changed by Puck, so that (as he implies) his was not a human experience. Then Bottom could not have incorporated whatever that experience was into human categories or spoken of it in language, and we would still have the inexpressible because unknown, though this time the unknown would be unknowable to humankind. As things are in the play, neither of these alternatives is quite right, in spite of Bottom’s musings on the matter. For it was Bottom himself who lay in Titania’s arms. His perceptions were subtly assified, and what he saw was beyond normal human ken, but it was a stretching and not a destruction of human experience. That is why he can remember that if not what he dreamed. I said before that stretched experience will
not necessarily break language. So if Bottom could be helped to remember his vision, perhaps his reconceiving heart could unloose his tongue. He is right to think of a ballad, for his dream need not be inexpressible in principle. In fact, we ourselves have managed to say quite a bit about it. If we and the critics have been but foolish expositors of the dream, there is always Peter Quince.

All this means that our literary texts, though very different mutations of our basic scriptural quotation, have not required us to posit the undiluted inexpressible. Margaret failed in her practice with words. Though Bottom offered us a strong inexpressibility, we have watered that down by providing some content for his unusual experience. Only Paul remains on our list. Will we find in his Corinthian use of our quotation something closer to the religiously ineffable?

V. PAUL AND THE INEXPRESSIBLE, AGAIN

We purposely left inconclusive our initial consideration of Paul’s quotation and it is time to return to 1 Corinthians 2. There Paul places the things prepared by God for those who love him outside the limits of human viewing and conceiving; and this drawing of a distinct boundary between humanity and God would at the start make the divine inexpressible because unavailable to knowledge. Paul, however, goes on from there. As we noted earlier, our text is not only a quotation but also a fragment. Paul completes his text significantly: these unviewable, inaudible, inconceivable things “God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (2:10). It is in receiving the Spirit that human beings are given what otherwise would be completely inaccessible to them (2:12); but this does not in itself settle our concerns over the inexpressible. For it seems still a possibility that the Spirit is experienced in non-communicable ways, perhaps ecstatically or mystically. Revelation may extend human experience without having expressible content—or so some may believe, especially where the experience is a glimpse of eschatological bliss, the ineffable wonder beyond the limits of the present. Shall we expect here at last the religiously inexpressible which began this study?

No, for Paul does not espouse this, or any, brand of religious ineffability in 1 Corinthians 2. Two features of his argument are decisive, and a third important. First, whatever the process of revelation maybe, its result is not inexpressible experience but a content which is comprehensible. Although commentators work out in different ways the meaning of Paul’s claims in 1 Corinthians 2, it is beyond doubt that he himself seeks the goal of revelation to be understanding (2:12) that which God graciously gives. Worldly wisdom, though religiously inadequate and dangerous, is not replaced by non-rational enlightenment or mystical vision, but by wisdom true and proper. Three times Paul refers to what is revealed as sophia, wisdom (2:6-7), something comprehensible under the right conditions even though neither the rulers of this age (2:8) nor the foolish natural person (2:14) understand it. It is the believer who has the mind of Christ (2:16). The intelligible character of revelation bears directly on its expressibility. But in case any should persist in thinking that Paul’s revealed wisdom still defies expression, let me point to the text’s second feature: it claims that revelation is communicable as well as comprehensible. Three times in the chapter Paul refers to speaking: divine wisdom is not a silent pool for mystical bathing, but the subject of discourse. Nor is it enjoyed through private
enlightenment, for it is communicated in words which are taught by the Spirit (2:13). To prevent anyone from assuming at this stage that these words express a non-rational religious emotion (an assumption ignoring Paul’s strictures on glossalia in chapters 12-14), Paul adds that these words are the objects of interpretation (2:13), investigation (2:14), or judgment (2:15). We must therefore conclude that for Paul what is revealed is not inexpressible.

I mentioned a third feature of his argument. It concerns the supposition that Paul intends in his quotation from Scripture to refer to eschatological bliss, the preparing by God of the future for those who love him. Were Paul to mean that, he would not thereby commit himself to the view that heavenly glory is undilutedly inexpressible; he could claim that what is not yet known is not yet expressible in practice. Nevertheless, Paul’s reference is not in fact to the future. As we have seen, the context of the quotation stresses that the inconceivable has already been revealed, understood, and communicated. While his ultimate source in Isaiah was indeed eschatological, speaking of new heavens and a new earth which will obliterate the past from man’s mind, Paul has turned this around by announcing that the new thing has already happened. As A. T. Hanson explains, “the incredible, unheard-of element is not the joys of heaven or the furniture of the world to come, but the glory (nature) of God manifested in the cross. This is the way in which God’s design has exceeded all our expectation, not in its unimaginable splendour but in its unimaginable humility.” So in our text there does not seem to be even the practical inexpressibility of future glory, in spite of the fact that from early days this has been a common assumption about Paul’s formulation in 1 Corinthians 2:9. Now that God’s revelation has become available, there is for Paul no problem of religious inexpressibility—at least in the text examined here.

From all of this we cannot conclude that belief in the undiluted inexpressible is a radical confusion, or that the topic is not worth serious discussion. Our accomplishments have been less ambitious. We have looked for strong inexpressibility in Paul and in two texts which are dependent upon Paul’s source—but the search has failed to find that quarry. Paul himself uses Scripture about the humanly unviewable and inconceivable to announce that divine truths are now knowable and discussible. Bottom and Margaret have had their difficulties to which Paul’s phrases have been applied, but in neither case did we find ourselves concluding that they were experiencing something that fiercely and successfully defied all speaking. Although words may fail in many ways, they have not been utterly impotent to express the experiences we have considered. Whether there is yet some religious experience which lies mutely and immovably beyond the reach of words we have not determined. Instead we have, appropriately, said nothing about it whatsoever.

For some discussion of the difficulties in sunkrinontes and anakrinetai, see C. K. Barrett, Commentary, 76-77.
second would ask whether there could be any knowledge or experience without concepts, stressing the role of language in structuring consciousness.

24 A version of this paper was read on 15 March, 1985, to the University of Toronto’s Centre for Religious Studies. I am grateful for the Centre’s invitation, and to Pauline Thompson for discussion on literary interpretations.