Granite Journal

The University of Aberdeen Postgraduate Interdisciplinary Journal

HUMAN BEINGS AND HUMAN DOINGS

Accounting for Being: Marginal Resistance in the Luttrell Psalter

Conny Bogaard, School of Divinity, History, Philosophy, and Art History, University of Aberdeen

https://doi.org/10.57064/2164/26065

Abstract: The Luttrell Psalter, renowned for its extraordinary marginalia, has been studied for its vibrant images of daily life in Britain's medieval countryside, alongside grotesque imagery typically associated with sin and evil. It is also considered one of that period's most personal illuminated manuscripts. A distinctive feature is the references to its patron, Sir Geoffrey Luttrell, who appears in the margins of the text together with his family, clergy, and the people under his care. While much is known about the Psalter's social context, medievalists still seem no closer to understanding the meaning of the grotesque within this sacred text. This article seeks to establish a theological-aesthetic framework for understanding the role of the grotesque as it relates to the Luttrell Psalter and its patron. Drawing from the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, Bogaard argues that the juxtaposition of the ugly and the beautiful found in the grotesque serves as a visible representation of medieval theology and is meant to elicit a spiritual response from the viewer. Significantly, Bakhtin's notion of the loophole serves to establish an ethico-aesthetic paradigm connecting the social and the spiritual. The absence of the grotesque, on the other hand, suggests a space for deeper spiritual reflection, a liminal space in a spiritual journey leading to redemption. Lord Luttrell's remarkable preparation for his death, to which this Psalter attests, signifies a new awareness of life after death and the preservation of body and soul

Keywords: grotesque, loophole, ugly, beautiful, redemption

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

1 Introduction

> *The Death of Satan was a tragedy for the Imagination. A capital Negation destroyed him in his tenement. And, with him, many blue phenomena.*
>
> From: Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942)

The Luttrell Psalter is an illuminated manuscript created between 1330 and 1345 AD for Sir Geoffrey Luttrell, Lord of Irnham in Lincolnshire, by unknown scribes and artists.[1] It is considered one of the treasures of the British Library where it is shelved under Add MS 42130 and is commonly known as the Luttrell Psalter.[2] Alongside the psalms (fols. 13r.-259v.), this manuscript includes a calendar (fols. 1r.-12v.), canticles (fols. 259v.-283r.), Mass (fols. 283v.-293r.), five collects (fols. 293v.-295v.) and an antiphon for the dead (fols. 296r.-309v.). The 309 high-quality vellum pages display variety in their illumination; many are richly adorned with decorated text, marginal images of saints and biblical themes, and scenes of rural life. It is regarded as one of the richest sources for visual depictions of everyday rural life in medieval England, albeit a highly idealised one. The pages measure 350 x 245 mm, indicating it was not meant to be a hand-held book, but rather a memorial to Lord Luttrell and likely intended for communal use in the Luttrell family household.

The Luttrell Psalter stands out among illuminated prayer books for the strong presence of its patron, Lord Luttrell, who is depicted alongside his family and the people under his care. It is also known for the hundreds of grotesques that populate the margins of the text. These striking images defy easy interpretation, yet they draw the reader in, urging them to meditate on the spiritual content. As Connelly (2012, pp. 2-3) has argued, the grotesque cannot be defined through traditional art historical categories of style or subject, rather it is a cultural phenomenon that uses ambivalence and change as its

[1] Richard K. Emmerson and P.J.P. Goldberg offer an overview of issues concerning dating the Luttrell Psalter.
[2] The British Museum acquired the Psalter in 1929 with financial support of American banker, J.P. Morgan.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

currency. Building on Connelly's view that the grotesque is best understood by what it does, not by what it is, this article argues the grotesque in the Luttrell Psalter sets in motion the donor's spiritual journey, leading him from temptation to redemption. The redemptive power lies in the space between two opposites, Luttrell's desire for self-definition and his need for self-reflection. It is this tension that makes the grotesque worth studying, as it holds up a mirror of the paradox of the human condition.

Significantly, as it relates to Lord Luttrell and this Psalter, the notion of redemption has not received much scholarly attention. Camille (1998, p. 141), in his monograph on the Luttrell Psalter, makes a connection between the grotesque and sin, emphasising the role of King David in the context of Christian penitence and preparation. However, Camille does not assign to King David a special role as it relates to Lord Luttrell's spiritual journey. The role of King David in the history of salvation is well represented in the medieval Psalter tradition. David's journey of redemption from shepherd and sinner to divinely chosen king was meant to elicit a spiritual response in the reader, inspiring medieval Christians to follow in David's footsteps toward salvation.[3] In the Luttrell Psalter, the grotesque plays a critical role in the donor's personal journey of salvation, i.e., when it serves as a gloss of Lord Luttrell's donor portrait (fig. 1).

This is not to say that all grotesques in the Luttrell Psalter are spiritual. Some are mostly witty, ornamental, or rowdy, and subversive carnivalesque. There is a vast variety of grotesques depicting many manifestations of the human condition. Any attempt to define the grotesque and attach one specific meaning to it is doomed to fail. Carruthers (2013, p. 35) has observed, as images are in flux, the grotesques represent the medieval idea of the self as non-autonomous, malleable, and constantly influenced by external forces. This characterisation evokes the familiar description offered by Bakhtin of the grotesque body: "in the act of becoming [...] never finished, never completed. It is continually built, created and builds and creates another body" (1984, p.317). In this

[3] For example, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2009 exhibition: From Temptation to Salvation, The Psalms of King David (Retrieved July 31, 2025). https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/psalms/#:~:text=The%20Psalms%20and%20their%20illustrations,in%20his%20footsteps%20toward%20salvation

view, the grotesque is mostly subversive as it invades the space outside its own body and disrupts boundaries between high and low.

2 Self-definition

The colophon at the end of Psalm 108 states, "D(omi)n(us) Galfridus louterell me fieri fecit (...) Sir Geoffrey Luttrell caused me to be made."[4] Below, we find a portrait of Lord Luttrell mounted upon a horse accompanied by his wife, Agnes Sutton, carrying his banner and handing Lord Luttrell his helmet. His daughter-in-law, Beatrice Le Scrope, holds his shield. Both Agnes and Beatrice are dressed in heraldic gowns (fig. 1). This freestanding miniature offers a glimpse into the aspirations of this English landowner. Brown (2006, p. 12) noted that Lord Luttrell "straddled the borderline between baron and knight" and that his social status was on the rise around the time the Psalter was made.

Figure 1. "Sir Geoffrey Luttrell caused me to be made," (fol. 202v). On the opposite page, a historiated initial opening Psalm 109 shows King David at the right hand of God ruling the universe, (fol. 203v).

[4] The Luttrell Psalter is written in Vulgate Latin and the psalms follow the Vulgate numbering system; here and elsewhere, English translations are given in Douay-Rheims.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Lord Luttrell's claim to lordship becomes apparent when his portrait is viewed against the historiated initial belonging to Psalm 109 on the next folio. This image shows King David, long considered the author of the psalms, with crown and sceptre seated at the right hand of Christ who holds a globe. The attributes of the heavenly and earthly king parallel the attributes of Sir Geoffrey who is armed by his female attendants. According to Camille (1998, p. 57), the donor portrait between Psalms 108 and 109 likely served as self-affirmation, a visual presentation of Lord Luttrell's claim to legitimacy.

Although the Psalter was not included in his will, it is tempting to believe that Lord Luttrell intended it to be used after his death to redeem him from Purgatory.[5] Luttrell left a large sum of money for his funerary rites. These rites included instruction for masses to be held five years after his death and is one of the most generous allocations of its type.[6] This may suggest that Lord Luttrell was keenly aware of his shortcomings, social status, and power (Brown, 2006, p.29). Lord Luttrell's conscience and fear for his soul may be represented by the monsters that populate the margins of the Psalm to which his portrait belongs.[7] Hybrid monsters are generally considered emblems of sin and evil and the ominous looking creatures accompanying Psalm 108 do justice to the Psalm's chilling curses (fig. 2).

[5] By the time of the patron's death, in 1345, the Psalter was unfinished, which may explain why the work is not included in Sir Geoffrey's will (Emmerson & Goldberg, 2000, p.48).
[6] An abstract of Luttrell's will can be viewed online at https://archive.org/details/earlylincolnwil00gibbgoog. Retrieved 6 September, 2025.
[7] Psalm 108 is considered an imprecatory (cursing) psalm where King David calls on God to judge and punish his wicked enemies who have attacked him with lies and hateful accusations.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Figure 2. Grotesque at the bottom of Psalm 108, (fol. 200v).

There is another, possibly related, narrative in the Luttrell Psalter worth considering. Emmerson and Goldberg (2000, p. 54) have argued that the Psalter was to display an idealised version of society – one where there was order, where Sir Geoffrey was the ideal Christian knight and the father of his community, where everyone carried out the roles ordained for them by God, and where no one challenged the nature of society. Support for this interpretation can be found in two other cultural artifacts that testify to Luttrell's legacy: his will and his tomb.[8] Commentators have also noted the Luttrell banquet scene (fol. 208r) where Lord Luttrell is seated at the centre of a table surrounded by members of his family and spiritual counsellors. The image shows a striking similarity with the Last Supper scene also featured in the Psalter (fol. 90v), suggesting a sacerdotal status (figs. 3 and 4). The design and symmetry of the two illustrations are almost exact. Sir Geoffrey sits at the centre of his family just as Christ sits at the centre of his disciples. Luttrell is the focus of this scene. There is another similarity to the Last Supper. A servant stands to one side waiting to serve him, just as

[8] Lord Luttrell's tomb, an Easter Sepulchre tomb, was likely used for storing the eucharist elements. It can be found in St. Andrews parish church in Irnham, Lincolnshire.

Judas kneels before Christ. One notable difference is that at the table of the Last Supper Jesus is offering the chalice to Judas whereas Sir Geoffrey is preparing to drink himself from the cup which he holds in his right hand. According to Emmerson and Goldberg:

> [...] the visual allusion to the chalice of salvation and the possible invocation of the Lord's name further underscores the eucharistic allusions and the entire scene's association with the Last Supper (2000, p.53).

Despite these unusual claims to divine Lordship found in the colophon (fig. 1) as well as in the banquet scene (fig. 3), the Luttrell family saw significant social, economic, and political transformation happening during their lifetime. The decline of feudalism and the rise of the middle class threatened their existence, while the Hundred Years' War, the Peasant's Revolt, and the Black Death further corroded the era's social stability.

Figure 3. Luttrell Banquet Scene, (fol. 208r).

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Figure 4. Last Supper Scene, (fol. 90v).

Chivalric anxiety was real in fourteenth century England which may explain the small, grimacing creature swimming in the line right above the donor portrait (fig. 1). Is it challenging Lord Luttrell's claim to legitimacy as Camille has proposed? (Camille, 1998, pp.56-57). The fish creature recalls an important characteristic of the grotesque defined:

> as something that creates meaning by prying open a gap, pulling us into unfamiliar, contested terrain (Connelly, 2012, p.2).

Like many of the grotesques in the Psalter, its form grabs the reader's attention and challenges preconceived notions and ideas. It is in this psychological space where Camille's social reading begins to reveal a weakness. Here and elsewhere within the Psalter, social contexts alone cannot account for what seems complex and contradictory in medieval spirituality.

3 Loophole

The unusual placement of Lord Luttrell's portrait following Psalm 108 (fig. 1) is critical for understanding its role in the context of medieval devotional practice.[9] In the order of the Divine Office, Psalm 109 was recited during Sunday Vespers. During this

[9] Typically, a donor's portrait would be placed beside Psalm 119 (Emmerson & Goldberg, year, p.55).

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

time, the Luttrell family would have glanced at the image of Sir Geoffrey that seemingly rivalled the almighty power of the Lord, while seeking God's favour. To dampen this act of hubris, the Luttrell Psalter artist inserted a fishy grotesque. This is a visual representation of what Bakhtin (1987, p. 232) would have referred to as a "word with a sideward glance [...] a word with a loophole".[10] Bakhtin (1987, p.232) explained the loophole is a deliberate attempt to erase the desire "to appear the hero in others' eyes (and in his own." Significantly, the loophole is dialogical as it elicits a response from the viewer. The viewer who is being addressed here is not only the one reading and contemplating the text, but also none other than the Almighty God. Bakhtin wrote "The hero who repents and condemns himself actually wants only to provoke praise and acceptance by another (1987, p. 233).

Bakhtin's epistemology offers a level of complexity to the problem of language that often goes unnoticed. In Bakhtin's view, dialogue does not only involve a speaker and a listener, but also a "super-addressee" suggesting a broader, more ethical context of understanding Lord Luttrell's attempt to self-definition.[11] The dynamic process of dialogism helps understand what Emmerson and Goldberg (2000, p.54) observed – that Luttrell's portrait cunningly links secular, biblical, and divine lordship. At the same time, the fishy grotesque thwarts these efforts, countering his pride with humility.

Pride was considered the worst of the seven deadly sins and the most demonic one. Pope Gregory (d. 604) in his *Moralia in Job*, envisaged the soul falling into a downward spiralling descent into mortal sin from Pride to Wrath, Envy, Avarice, Sloth, Gluttony, and lastly, Lust (Heath, 2020, p.14). Teaching the virtues and vices was one of the primary concerns at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. As Buck argued (2009, p. 49), the Council addressed the importance of sacraments for achieving salvation and made annual confession mandatory for lay people. As a result, Lord Luttrell's time saw a rise of confessional religiosity that likely structured his spiritual life. Camille (1998, pp. 135, 143) pointed at the popularity of Robert Mannyng's penitential manual for the laity

[10] Bakhtin's theory of the loophole occurs in several of his works but most notably in his treatment of Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* (Bakhtin, 1987).
[11] For a discussion of Bakhtin's notions of the loophole and super-addressee, see Morson & Emerson, 1990, pp.135.

Handlyng Synne that had special warnings for the sin of nobility. However, while Camille provides information about medieval self-analytical devotional strategies, his interest is mainly with the "spectacle of sin" (p.124) rather than with Lord Luttrell's personal journey toward salvation.

Building on the pioneering work of Carruthers and Sandler, Camille is at his best when unravelling "word-pictures" and "memory-images" as a strategy for interpretation. The illumination of an angry bird-monster hybrid attacking a figure holding up a mirror (fig. 5) serves as a playful illustration of Psalm 77:66, (fol. 145r):

> Et percussit inimicos suos in posteriora obprobrium sempiternum dedit illis. And he smote his enemies on the hinder parts: he put them to an everlasting reproach.

As Camille (p.44) explained, the "hinder parts" are depicted as the wattle of the bird but may also reference the verb "to wattle", meaning "to beat" in the dialect of Lincolnshire where the Luttrell Psalter originates. The comical effect of the beast's grossly exaggerated body combined with the wordplay creates what Clark and Holquist referred to as a "merry loophole" (1984, p.318), a temporary release from the seriousness of the text, not unlike the fishy grotesque above Luttrell's donor portrait (fig. 1). For Bakhtin (1990, p. 40), the loophole is more than an escape; it offers a glimpse into the paradox of the human condition. The loophole recognises that human consciousness is never completed, that no word is final, and not even one's last confession has the final word. The loophole is a useful metaphor for studying the intersection of chivalric pride and piety in the Luttrell Psalter, which according to Camille (1998, p.123), serves as the best evidence of Lord Luttrell's "complex and sometimes contradictory spiritual commitments".

4 Subsection Ugly Beauty

Lord Luttrell's contradictory spiritual commitments are visually expressed in the ugly beauty that characterises many of the grotesques in the Luttrell Psalter. To explain what this means it is helpful to return to *Figure 5*. This is not merely a comical image to help the reader memorise the text. Upon closer inspection, the creature represents a basilisk, the most lethal of medieval monsters. According to a thirteenth century

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

encyclopaedic manuscript, Brunetto *Latini's Book of Treasures*, the basilisk was considered the "King of Serpents" and the image of Satan himself. It had the head, chest, and feet of a rooster, and the body and tail of a snake. As Moral has argued (2021, p.13), the only way humans could escape death was to use a mirror to avert its deadly gaze and breath. The mirror established a barrier of purity to protect individuals from the power of evil. The language of evil confronts the viewer with the temptation of sin that must be overcome within themselves as well as in the world.

Figure 5. Basilisk attacking a figure with mirror, (fol. 145r.).

To interpret the ugly grotesque images in the Luttrell Psalter, Camille points at contemporary sermons that stress the sacrament of penance. A story told by Mannyng shows how God reveals to the priest the ugly sins of his parishioners who were filed up to the altar, mouths wide open, to take communion. It might help to understand, Camille (1998, p.159) wrote, "some of the extremes of ugliness intended in the Luttrell Psalter monsters". Yet, the representation of the mouth as the origin of evil speech can take on different forms. For example, a historiated initial showing a tongue extraction on fol. 97v. (fig. 6) is not "monstruous" per se, but its ugliness was likely meant to evoke a spiritual awakening in the viewer.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Figure 6. Initial with tongue-extraction scene, (fol. 97v).

What is striking about many of these images is the discrepancy between the formal characteristics of the image that appears beautiful and the subject matter that is ugly. Cook has provided a helpful framework for artworks intended for Christian purposes that elicit this experience. Writing about works of art that are both ugly and beautiful, Cook refers to artworks that attract attention. According to Cook, the viewer is "drawn into a conscious response [...] in such a way as to say that the work elicited an experience, a memorable experience, of the beautiful" (1997, p.126).

Apart from formal characteristics that appear beautiful, the experience of the beautiful that is especially interesting in this context is when the nature of the subject matter – in this case, evil– is contrary to beauty. According to Cook (p. 126), without the ugly factor, the artwork would not be complete, and therefore, not be considered beautiful.

Cook (1997, p.127) made a distinction between the grotesque and the ugly in art. He wrote: "That which is grotesque in art usually has to do with imagery that appears odd, unnatural, bizarre, or absurdly incongruous." The "ugly grotesque", on the other

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

hand, “is visual imagery that is repulsive, shocking, and difficult to imagine” (ibid.). Cook (p.136) pointed to the Last Judgment panel from *The Garden of Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (fig. 7). Painted ca. 1510, Bosch’s vision of Hell is ‘grotesque ugly’ in that it is repulsive and strangely attractive in its depiction of human suffering. It has been suggested that it belongs to the traumatic strand of the grotesque aesthetic (Connelly, 2012, p.84). Significantly, as Cook (p.140) observed, Bosch’s Hell represents a vision that is not scriptural. Rather, it is a visual gloss; a reference and interpretation of Scripture that expands on the concepts to which it refers. The importance of the ugly beauty found in the grotesque, Cook (ibid.) contended, is that it complements, extends the message, and serves as a spiritual tool for developing Christian consciousness.

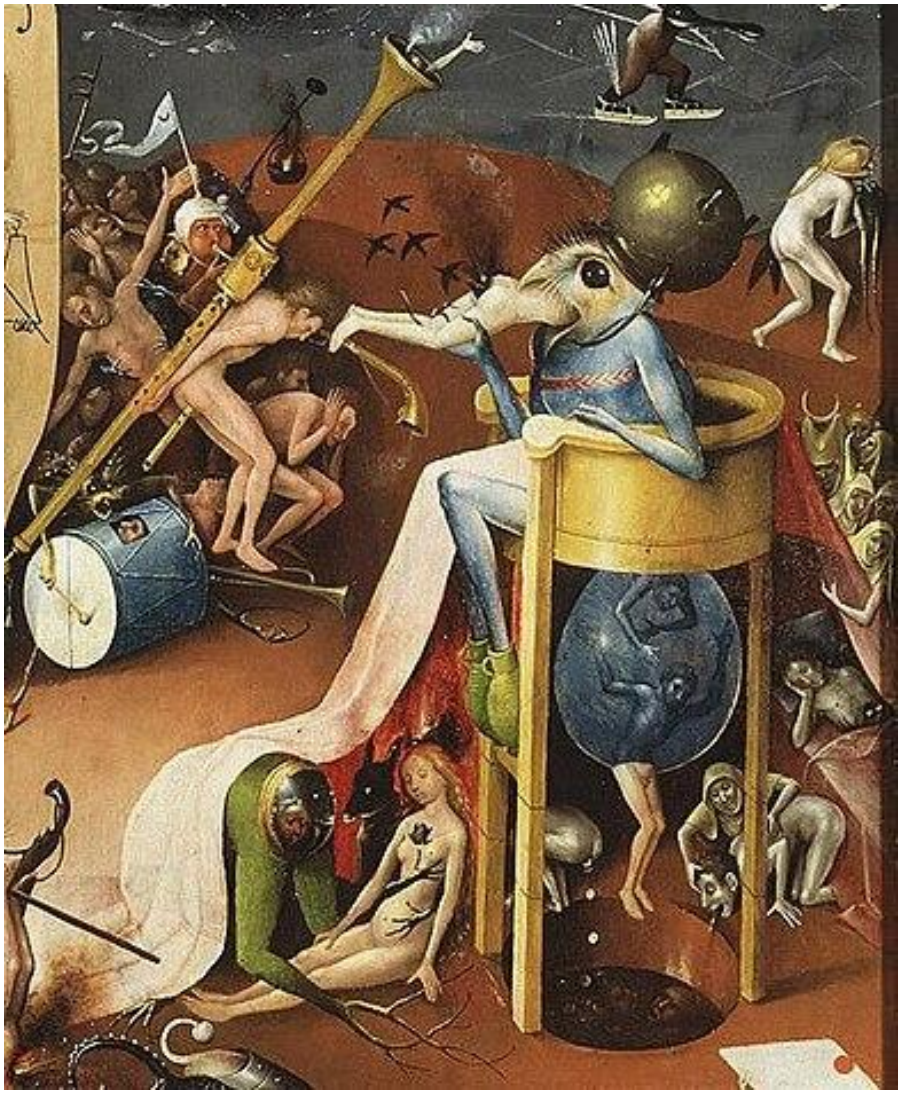

Figure 7."Musical Hell," detail, Last Judgment Panel, The Garden of Earthly Delights, by Hieronymus Bosch, ca. 1510. Museo Del Prado, Madrid.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

The pleasures derived from seeing evil remains paradoxical and it is worth noting what medieval theologians have to say. The creators of the Luttrell Psalter met an important requirement of medieval Christian doctrine. From an intellectual perspective, the representation of monsters aligns with the definition of art given by Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas wrote that "art requires the right reason in regard the making of things (...) ars est recta ratio factibilium," (*ST*, I-II.57.4c). In other words, medieval artists needed knowledge of the forms God had placed in nature, which were essentially good and beautiful. At the same time, imitating nature did not involve a servile copying of nature. Artists used their imagination to invent or rework the forms found in nature, thus serving as an extension of nature (Eco, 1988, pp.164-5). Monsters found in medieval Bestiaries and Psalters were seen as the product of right reason because they represent the reality of sin and evil. Similarly, thirteenth century theologian Bonaventura of Bagnoregio asserts that the devil appears beautiful when it is a good portrayal of his ugliness (Eco, 2007, p.20). Building on Neoplatonic thinking – where all phenomena relate to God as the ultimate 'form' and 'idea' – medieval theologians approved the representation of devils (and ugliness) in religious art.

From a theological viewpoint, the existence of evil cannot be denied, but it can be justified. As Thiessen (Thiessen, 2004, p.29) has argued Augustine, writing in the fourth century, developed a justification of evil linked to God's grace and the promise of a vision of God who embodies beauty and truth. According to Augustine, evil and ugliness were not part of God's divine plan. When sin entered the world, it represented a loss of value but not a complete deprivation. To claim that evil is part of creation, Augustine asserts, would render God's goodness meaningless. Significantly, God still provides. Augustine wrote:

> [...] to us is promised a vision of beauty, the beauty through whose imitation all other things are beautiful, and by comparison with which all other things are unsightly (Thiessen, 2004, p.29).

To better understand how good and evil correspond to beauty and ugliness, it is important to grasp Augustine's view of the good. In his *Confessions*, Augustine argued that God is the ultimate good (summum bonum), and "the beauty of all beautiful things" (*Confessions*, III.6.10). Building on Plato's *Theory of Forms*, Augustine held that God's

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

goodness is unchangeable and fundamentally different from anything in the material world (Of the Nature of Good, ch.1). Unlike created beings, God not only possesses beauty, but God is beauty. Augustine maintained that inferior human beings cannot fully comprehend God's goodness; at best, they can only see the shadows of God's perfection. However, by God's grace and through meditation and prayer, the human soul can rise from the sensual beauty of the created world to the ultimate beauty of God (Tietz, 2018, p.336).

The ascent from sensual beauty of the created world to the ultimate beauty of God, formulated by Augustine, helps to understand why the Luttrell Psalter illuminators took great care to make the monsters appear beautiful. As Carruthers has theorised, medieval notions of 'ordinary beauty' are rooted in sense perception (Carruthers, 2013, p. 165). Colour was an important indicator of sensory beauty as it creates an effect. It leads the viewer to an experience that gives it meaning. Aquinas sums it up when he argued that those things are called beautiful which, in being seen, are pleasing (*ST*, I-II.27.1). Aquinas thus recognised both the objective qualities of the beautiful object and the subjective experience of the viewer. At the same time, medieval theology insisted on making a distinction between the beauty of God and ordinary beauty found in nature. It maintained that even while God had passed on His divine beauty to the world in the act of creation, the beauty found in nature is but a dim reflection of the divine idea (Carruthers, 2013, p.198).

Augustine's Neoplatonic idea of beauty led him to explain how a beautiful God relates to ugly, non-harmonious experiences, suffering and pain. Since all existing things are somehow good and beautiful, though not to the same degree, Augustine developed the idea of the "parasitic character of evil" (Tietz, 2018, p.337). In other words, evil does not exist as such or as the opposite of good. Augustine vehemently rejected dualistic, pagan thinking (i.e., Manichaean dualism), which viewed good and evil as opposing forces.[12] Instead, in Augustine's view, evil is a departure from good (*City of God*, XI, ch.9). Since all created beings were made from nothing (*ex nihilo*), they must suffer to some

[12] Augustine's doctrine or privation theory of evil is laid out in his Confessions and On the Morals of the Manichaeans. See Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy Archive. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/concept-evil/#DuaPriTheEvi

extent from losing their goodness. As Tietz (2018) explained, Augustine's ontology of evil does not deny the reality of evil and is clear that evil does exist. However, he insists that evil is the result of free will. This distances God from the ugly aspects of this world; as Tietz stated, "God is related to them only in a permitting manner" (p.337). It allowed Augustine to conclude that God has ultimate power, yet evil can still exist.

Figure 8. Battle between Virtues and Vices. British Library, Harley MS 3244 (fols. 27v-28r).

The question remains to what extent Augustine's radical view of evil (in which evil has no reality of its own) is represented in the Luttrell Psalter. The grotesque's ability to objectify evil and denote alterity is well addressed by Camille (1998) and others.[13] Camille made an important connection between the Psalter's grotesques and "the most vociferous peasant voices" (1998, p.234), as well as real or perceived enemies of order, stability, and the Christian faith. Similarly, in her study of a collection of thirteenth

[13] For example, Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages,* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) and Debra H. Strickland, *Saracens, Monsters and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art,* (2003).

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

century theological texts (British Library, Harley MS 3244), Heath proposed a narrative of the spiritual journey of a nameless knight (fig. 8). The knight battles against his own temptations, his own reflected monstrosity, his sins, and the imagined corruption within his own body, all represented by the grotesque depiction of deadly sins (Heath, 2020, p.33). The importance of the grotesque, Heath asserted, lies in the way they speak not only to Christian sinfulness but also to the perceived enemies of authority, which included Jews, Muslims (often pejoratively called 'Saracens' in the Middle Ages), and heretics (p.12). Heath's argument aligns with Carruthers's observation about the category of ugly in medieval art. Apart from being the opposite of beauty, Carruthers asserted, ugly denotes "things unnatural, alien, and thus fearsome and dreadful, like monsters" (2013, p.177). In the Luttrell Psalter, a plethora of vilified enemies of authority are shown in a denigrating manner, including dark-skinned Scots who Lord Luttrell fought during his military career and women (figs. 9 and 10).

Figure 9. Woman Beating a Man, (fol. 60r.)

Figure 10. The Dark Scots Attack, (fol. 162v.)

There appears to be a gap then between what Augustine was teaching and what the Luttrell artists were creating. The Luttrell Psalter presents a dualistic world view, claiming that good and evil are always in conflict with each other. Keller argued that this worldview has long challenged Christianity and still plagues western thinking today (2013, p.109). Western secularism is like ancient polytheism in that it sees the world as

the product of violent and uncontrolled forces. In western secularism, humans are part of an evolutionary cycle of violent eruptions, and this is how they continue to exist – without a purpose. The answer to this dilemma is a more nuanced, multidimensional understanding of sin (Keller, 2013, p.109). Christianity gives neither dualism nor monism; instead, it presents an actual devil. Christianity also has a God who can and will overcome demonic forces which terrorise this world (Keller, 2013, p.115). Seen from this perspective, the Luttrell Psalter testifies to the tension between a pagan world view visually expressed through the monstruous grotesque, and the Christian message of redemption and salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

5 Redemption

If the grotesque confronts the reader with the face of evil, it can also engage in the process of redemption. As Camille (1998, p.145) argued, spiritual self-analyses was a critical part of contemporary sermons and penitential instruction. For example, Rolle's *Myror of Synneres* stressed the need for "inwardly beholding thy-self bifore thy-self", which is relevant for the self-analytical devotional strategies set up by the images in the Psalter (ibid). Camille pointed at the depiction in the Luttrell Psalter of a Franciscan monk offering a nun absolution (fol. 74r), noting that Rolle wrote mostly for nuns (p.146). At the same time, Camille noted a parallel drawn by Rolle between the knight and the Christian believer who is made right before God through battle. Rolle asked the believer to "have very great joy when we be tempted with diverse temptations for just as a knight in battle is proved good; right so is a man by temptation proved for good" (Camille, 1998, p. 146).

Texts like these may explain how the variety and splendour of temptingly sinful things in the Luttrell Psalter serves a useful penitential purpose. However, while Camille (p. 146) interpreted the emphasis on penitence as an effort by the Church to control subjectivity, it appears there is agency in Lord Luttrell's attempt to take control of his spiritual destiny.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Figure 11. Opening pages for Psalm 88 (fols. 159v and 160r)

Evidence of Luttrell's effort to demonstrate his righteousness may be found in the illustrations belonging to Psalm 88 (fig. 11). Comprising fifty-two verses, it is one of the longest in the Book of Psalms.[14] And, as Camille has noted, it is also one of the most challenging Psalms to understand, reflecting the troubled relationship between King David and God (1998, p.163). Notably, in the illustrations on the two opening pages, Lord Luttrell is seen, who can be recognised by the same distinctive hat worn in the banquet scene (fig. 3), depicted as a man rowing upstream. Why, out of the 150 Psalms, did he choose to associate himself with this Psalm? Brown has suggested that it may be a statement regarding his views on authority and service (2006, p.17). Brown's interpretation is based on two marginal illuminations of a snail and a bull, which feature on the bas-de-page. The snail was viewed as a symbol of humility, retracting its horns

[14] Psalm 88 in the Vulgate translation corresponds to Psalm 89 in modern Bible translations. Only Psalms 78 and 119 are longer.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

when touched by the proper authority. The bull, symbolising strength, represents the right authority. According to Brown, the proper use of such authority would lead to elevation, symbolised by the monument held up by the strongman – something Lord Luttrell could identify (2006, p.17). In true medieval polyvalent fashion, the notion of authority could refer to God's authority as well as worldly authority, not unlike the appeal to Lordship in the colophon between psalm 108 and 109 (fig. 1). Likewise, the meaning of the Latin word for horn (*cornu*), which is referenced twice in verses 18 and 25, has two different connotations. The first time it serves as a symbol for God, the second time it refers to King David. This dual meaning reinforces the idea that Lord Luttrell sought to identify himself with King David and God, as found throughout the Psalter.

Figure 12. Lord Luttrell with his distinctive hat and other oarsmen, detail from Psalm 88 (fol.160r), The British Library Board.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

A theological exegesis of Psalm 88 – most notably verses 7-19 – connects this psalm with Augustine's view of the justification of evil discussed earlier. The Psalmist's complaint—what happened to God's commitment and faithfulness, expressed in the first half of the psalm—can be compared to the problem Augustine sought to resolve: how does a beautiful God relate to an ugly, non-harmonious world marked by human suffering and pain? More importantly, how can God's beauty be redeemed? After all the disturbing grotesques that dominate the Psalter, the reader now arrives at a sacred place – a liminal space – without worldly distractions and is invited to press deeper into their own spiritual state.[15] The absence of the grotesque in folios 159v and 160r indicates that the devout reader is urged to contemplate and adopt a change of heart (Camille, 1992, p.30).[16]

That moment of transformation happens in the verses 7-16. In verse 7 the Psalmist praises God's greatness and power; no one can be compared to God in the heavenly realm. All creatures acknowledge him with praise and reverence. The miniature at the top of folio 159v indicates that even the lesser holy creatures, like this innocent-looking cow-dragon, are part of God's creation (fig. 13). This aligns with medieval aesthetics of proportion, which states that everything in creation reflects the beauty of God. As Eco explained (Eco, 1988, p.90), in Aquinas's philosophy, God's attributes, like "goodness" or "love," are reflected in natural creatures, albeit imperfectly, as they exist in God. Theologically, the cow-dragon may be associated with biblical prophesies, for example Isaiah 11:6, which pictured the age of the Messiah as a time when the wild beasts became tame and docile.

[15] For the gloss as liminal space and zone for transformation, see Camille, 1992, p.16 and Connelly, 2012, p.6.
[16] Camille refers to a Book of Hours now in the Morgan Library with a depiction of the *Arma Christi* – the implements used in the Crucifixion.

Figure 13. Miniature cow-dragon (fol. 159v)

Turning to verse 15, the reader finds imagery which has been highlighted by other commentators as a critical moment in the Luttrell Psalter: "Justice and Judgment are the preparation of thy throne. Mercy and Truth shall go before thy face" (Ps. 88:15). The pair "Justice and Judgment" summarises the essence of God's will for the world, while "Mercy and Truth" represent His fundamental qualities. As Brown noted, Lord Luttrell's desire to associate himself with this significant statement about God leads to this visual allegory (2006, p.19). Here, Luttrell is seen in the margin of the text, positioned at the front of a small boat alongside other rowers, while two figures propel the boat forward (fig. 12). It has been observed that the rowers are not advancing but instead dragging the oars back, as they face forward in the direction the boat is traveling (Camille, 1998, p.168). The image of rowing against the tide implies that Lord Luttrell is moving spiritually, against the forces that pull him in the wrong direction. Lord Luttrell's spiritual struggle becomes clear when we compare this illumination to the ones on the subsequent folios belonging to Psalm 88 (fols.161v-163r), which allude to worldly affairs and earthly pleasures. There are symbols of chivalric pride including, heraldic family emblems, a warship, fighting, hawking, and bear baiting. These distractions prevent Lord Luttrell from connecting with God. Significantly, while Psalm 88 speaks of an unresolved tension between King David and God, Lord Luttrell concludes positively. The focus here is not on the challenging second half of the psalm but on the section that speaks of God's power and might. God promised King David truth and mercy, blessings Lord Luttrell also relies on. Nevertheless, in a rare display of humility, Luttrell seeks the help of Mercy and Truth to guide him in the right direction, toward God.

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Lord Luttrell's journey of faith is visually represented by the descent and ascent of the marginal imagery alongside Psalm 88: 7-16, beginning with the boat on the right and moving downward (fig. 11). The boat is drawn toward a snail at the bottom of the page, symbolising Lord Luttrell's humility and sin. The insignificant snail contrasts with the mighty bull on the next page, which symbolises God and the direction it points. The bull, in turn, guides the eye upward to the strongman holding up the tower, representing God's strength. Instead of functioning autonomously, as is often the case with the grotesque images elsewhere in the Psalter (Sandler, 1996, pp.93-94), the snail and the bull create movement from top to bottom and right to left, inviting the reader to engage with Lord Luttrell's journey while contemplating the meaning of the text. The Psalm's message is visually enhanced: If we let go of pride and obey God, we will find true happiness. This journey is emphasised by this folio's concluding verse: "Blessed is the people that knoweth jubilation. They shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance" (Psalm 88:16).

The image flow alongside the verses 7-16 illustrates this spiritual sensibility, although it is not the only instance in the Psalter where the illuminator employs this innovative storytelling technique. The Luttrell Psalter exists within a broader tradition of using the Psalms as a "mirror" for one's personal experiences and struggles (Camille, 1998, p.107). However, this manuscript is unique for its strong personal references to its patron, his life, and his world. It stands at the crossroads of a new era marked by heightened awareness of life's transience, which informs contemplation of mortality. According to Bynum, from the twelfth century onward, people became interested in preparing for their death (1998, p.591). Typically, medieval death was a communal event; individuals rarely died alone. However, an account of St. Francis of Assisi illustrated a different trend. Bynum noted that St. Francis "performed" his death, choosing costume and setting: "Francis insisted on taking off all his clothes to die, lying naked as he was born, while he prepared for re-birth" (p.590).

The extensive preparations made by Lord Luttrell for his death reveal a similar tendency. In his will, Lord Geoffrey allocated a fortune for masses, prayers, candles, and substantial sums for holy sites. This suggests a profound concern for his soul and the continuation of the family name. At the time of his death in 1345, his son Andrew and

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

daughter-in-law, Beatrice Le Scrope, did not have children. This must have been a significant source of anxiety, even while the Psalter was being made. This may explain why Beatrice appears alongside Lord Luttrell and his wife Agnes in his equestrian portrait (fig. 2), and why we find the Scrope coat of arms repeated in the margin of Psalm 88:25 (fol. 161r).

6 Conclusion

This article has addressed what Camille (1998) identified as "the complex and conflicting spiritual commitments" of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell, patron of the Luttrell Psalter. While King David's role model in the history of salvation is well understood, the role of the grotesque in this context has received less scholarly attention. Through applying a narrative interpretation, it has been demonstrated that the grotesque plays an important role in Luttrell's attempt to self-definition and journey to redemption. This insight derives from medieval theological aesthetics, most notably the writings by Augustine and Aquinas who sought to reconcile the two opposing forces of good and evil in the world. It has been argued that the "ugly beauty" found in the grotesque is a visual representation of their theology. Significantly, ugly and beauty do not negate each other, rather, they align with the idea of ascent found in Neoplatonism. According to this view, the Christian believer is to be confronted with sin and evil, through a deep reflection on the sensual beauty of the created world to discover the ultimate beauty of God.

Yet, the Psalter is not the final word on Lord Luttrell's journey of salvation. It serves as a representation of the patron's struggle against sin and evil, and the temptations of pride. The grotesque objectifies evil, vilifying groups other than the self. The emphasis placed on the sacrament of penance following the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) triggered a production of penitential texts – like the Harley 3244 -that projected evil onto others. The resulting image tradition and vernacular literature held a powerful grip on the medieval imagination. The Luttrell Psalter's aesthetic of ugly beauty testifies to a dualistic worldview, while at the same time revealing a new spiritual sensibility. This is evident from the folios belonging to Psalm 88. Here the absence of the grotesque creates a liminal space for transformation and reconciliation. This section of the Psalter suggests that the purpose of the grotesques was to enhance the reading experience of

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Lord Luttrell in his flawed attempt to fix a broken world and reflecting his personal salvation journey.

7 References

1. Aquinas, Thomas (2006). *Summa Theologica*, Part I-II (Pars Prima Secundae). Available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/17897/pg17897-images.html (Downloaded July 31, 2025).
2. Augustine (2023). *Confessions*. Available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm (Downloaded July 31, 2025).
3. Augustine (1999-2008). *Of the Nature of Good*. Available at: https://www.logoslibrary.org/augustine/good/index.html.
4. Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press.
5. Bakhtin, Mikhail (1987). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
6. Bakhtin, Mikhail (1990). "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity", in *Art and Answerability,* (pp. 4-256), Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, (eds.), transl. by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
7. British Library. Harley MS 3244 https://www.imagesonline.bl.uk/search/?searchQuery=Harley+f.+3244
8. British Library. Luttrell Psalter, Add MS 42130 https://www.imagesonline.bl.uk/search/?searchQuery=luttrell+psalter+
9. Brown, M. P. (2006). *The World of the Luttrell Psalter*. London: The British Library.
10. Buck, Lawrence P. (2009). 'Review of Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation'. *The Sixteenth Century Journal*. Volume 40, No. 1: pp.48–52.
11. Bynum, Caroline Walker (1998). "Death and Resurrection in the Middle Ages: Some Modern Implications." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 142, No. 4, pp.589-596.
12. Camille, Michael (1992). *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. London: Reaktion Books.

13. Camille, Michael (1998). *Mirror in Parchment*. The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
14. Carruthers, Mary (2013). *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
15. Church of England. Early Lincoln wills: an abstract of all the wills & administrations recorded in the Episcopal registers of the old diocese of Lincoln: comprising the counties of Lincoln, Rutland, Northampton, Huntington, Bedford, Buckingham, Oxford, Leicester, and Hertford, 1280-1547. Church of England, Diocese of Lincoln. Accessed July 31, 2025. https://archive.org/details/earlylincolnwil00gibbgoog
16. Clark, Katerina and Michael Holquist (1984). Mikhail Bakhtin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
17. Connelly, Frances S. (2012). *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture*. *The Image at Play*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
18. Cook, John W. (1997). 'Ugly Beauty in Christian Art'. Adams, J. Luther & Wilson Yates (eds.). *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. *Theological Reflections*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, pp. 125-141.
19. Eco, U. (2007). *On Ugliness*. London: Random House.
20. Eco, U. (1986). *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
21. Eco, U. (1988). *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
22. Emmerson, R.K. and Goldberg, P.J.P. (2000) '"The Lord Geoffrey had me made": Lordship and Labour in the Luttrell Psalter', in J. Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg, and W.M. Ormrod (eds.) *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*. Boydell & Brewer, pp. 43–64.
23. Heath, Diane Elizabeth (2020). 'Boundary Blurring between the Monstrous, the Marvelous, and the Miraculous: The Battle between Virtues and Vices in a Thirteenth-Century Theological Miscellany.' *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* , Vol. 9, No. 1, *Special Issue: Mearcstapa: Ten Years of Teratology* (2020), pp.11-52. Philadelphia, PA: Penn State University Press.

24. Keller, T. (2013). Encounters with Jesus. Unexpected Answers to Life's Biggest Questions. New York: Riverhead Books.
25. Piñero Moral, Ricardo. (2021) 'Aesthetics of Evil in Middle Ages: Beasts as Symbol of the Devil'. *Religions* 12, no. 11: 957. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110957.
26. Sandler, L. F. (1996). 'The Word in the Text and the Image in the Margin: The Case of the Luttrell Psalter.' *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, 1996, Vol . 54, Essays in Honor of Lilian M.C. Randall, pp.87–99.
27. Thiessen, Gesa E. (2004). *Theological Aesthetics*. London: Canterbury Press Ltd.
28. Tietz, C. (2018). 'The Beauty of God'. *Modern Theology*, 34 (3): pp.331-334. https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12420

8 List of Figures

Figure 1. "Sir Geoffrey Luttrell caused me to be made," (fol. 202v). On the opposite page, a historiated initial opening Psalm 109 shows King David at the right hand of God ruling the universe, (fol. 203v). 4

Figure 2. Grotesque at the bottom of Psalm 108, (fol. 200v). 6

Figure 3. Luttrell Banquet Scene, (fol. 208.r). 7

Figure 4. Last Supper Scene, (fol. 90v) 8

Figure 5. Basilisk attacking a figure with mirror, (fol. 145r.). 11

Figure 6. Initial with tongue-extraction scene, (fol. 97v). 12

Figure 7."Musical Hell," detail, Last Judgment Panel, The Garden of Earthly Delights, by Hieronymus Bosch, ca. 1510. Museo Del Prado, Madrid. 13

Figure 8. Battle between Virtues and Vices. British Library, Harley MS 3244 (fols. 27v-28r). 16

Figure 9. Woman Beating a Man, (fol. 60r.) 17

Figure 10. The Dark Scots Attack, (fol. 162v.) 17

Figure 11. Opening pages for Psalm 88 (fols. 159v and 160r) 19

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025

Figure 12. Lord Luttrell with his distinctive hat and other oarsmen, detail from Psalm 88 (fol.160r), The British Library Board..... 20

Figure 13. Miniature cow-dragon (fol. 159v) 22

Article © **Conny Bogaard**, 2025