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Inmyddes: The Place of Form in Middle English Poetry

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INMYDDES: THE PLACE OF FORM IN MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

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Abstract

This dissertation re-evaluates the basis of formalist analysis in the study of Middle English poetry. Attempts to contextualize early English poetry and poetics face an immediate challenge: medieval English literature did not produce any poetic statements comparable in scale to the numerous medieval treatises on versification in Latin and other vernacular languages. This absence, I propose, stems in part from a systemic suspicion of poetic form as "strange," a position distinctive of a persistent discourse in 14th and 15th century English poetry. As a consequence of the misunderstanding of this discourse and the poetics it masks, Middle English poetry has been relatively neglected in the modern discourse of poetics and formalism. But as I seek to show, the English tradition contains works of poetry that themselves present complex theories of literary form and structure. Carefully brought back to light, this lost English poetics will present a new perspective on the contemporary study of poetics, formalism, and even the philosophy of language.

My introduction establishes the peculiar Middle English discourse (marked by the phrase "strange English") that simultaneously rejects received concepts of poetic form and betokens an alternative, one that harnesses the perceived otherness of form to reflect on poetry's exemplary spatial-temporal signature, which I identify as a sense of *middleness*. Each of my three chapters offers a reading of a major poetic work in Middle English that articulates a facet of this sense in its self-theorizing artifice. My first chapter offers a reading of *House of Fame,* in which Chaucer presents a radically unconventional definition of "poetic voice" in order to forge a new basis for the vernacular poetry he proposes to begin. As my second chapter aims to show, the Middle English poem *Pearl* relates the act of composing (*devising*) and the gulf (*devyse*) that separates the temporal world of language from the divine world that language seeks to imagine, exposing

the ontological rift that complicates the poetic mode of *figura*. Finally, my third chapter explores how *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers its three central props—pentagram, girdle, axe—as a simple critical language of continuity, fold, and division to illustrate the incoherence of its several senses of ending.

Dedication

To Nanna.

Table of Contents

Abstract		iii
Dedication		v
Introduction.	Middle English and Strange English	1
I.	Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the Secret Life of Voice	45
II.	The Figure of *Pearl*: Dream Vision and Division	109
III.	The Folded Ends of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*	184
	Works Cited	241

Introduction:

Middle English and Strange English

This dissertation takes its title, *Inmyddes*, from a simple locative phrase that holds a significant place in each of the three long poems I discuss in the chapters that follow. In *House of Fame*, Chaucer locates the source and destination of all poetry "in myddes of the wey" between heaven and earth. The *Pearl*-maiden is envisioned wearing the iconic, formally perfect pearl "inmyddes hyr breste" (IV.222). Echoing this language, *Sir Gawain in the Green Knight* presents Guinevere's harmonious presence "ful gay, grayþed [set] in þe myddes" (74) of Arthur's court; soon afterward the ornate armor of the disruptive Green Knight is described as green with "gold ay inmyddes" (167). All three of these poems isolate the middle as a crucial component in discourse that is as much about poetry as it is in poetry. What makes *the middle* such an important place?

The second half of my title anticipates an answer of sorts. I will argue that, in several important senses, the *middle* is the place of form in Middle English poetry. But the relationship between this ambiuously spatial and temporal position is radically oversimplified by the copular *is*; the middle also occupies, complicates, invokes, represents, emerges from, and gives rise to Middle English poetic consciousness. And as the basis and subject of this consciousness, usurping the place of beginning and ending, the middle marks the exemplary limit of poetic

form. A more pertinent point of departure might then be a different formulation: to understand how Middle English poetry thinks and talks about its own form, we must begin not at the beginning or end, as much medieval literary theory would compel us to do, but rather, as Horace famously enjoins, *in the middle* of the matter.

Taking its own advice, this introduction will work through the terms of this title, what is at stake in their juxtaposition, and why the middle is an unexpected but apposite focus for a theory of Middle English poetic form, by starting with the term "the place of form." To explain the significance I posit with this phrase, I will explore first how "poetic form" is understood and applied in recent literary criticism of Middle English literature, then how and why a discourse about poetic form is largely absent or "estranged" from literary theory *in* Middle English. Only then will it make sense to explain why I believe the middle is so crucial to the understanding of Middle English form, which I will do through an example of the kind of reading I mean to pursue in the chapters ahead. My final task in this introductory chapter will be to plan the itinerary through my three long chapters, which dwell in much greater depth on the ways in which Middle English poetry articulates theories of form. The three texts I will study at great length in these chapters, Chaucer's *House of Fame, Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, each sets its protagonitst on a quest through the features of the poetic text: Chaucer's Geffrey seeks a new beginning in the center of the universe; *Pearl*'s dreamer seeks a reconciliation of his past and his present—the end of one life and the beginning of another; Gawain, in his quest, pursues the ultimate but elusive end. All of them arrive, instead of the destination they expected, at a sort of middle. By shadowing their wanderings I mean to make a start, if not an end, of charting the singularly complicated poetic topology of Middle English poetic middles.

Form Before Meaning

Before we can approach the question of form in Middle English literature, it might first be of benefit to situate the place of form and formal analysis in the scholary work that frames the discussion of Middle English literature. Seth Lerer has recently called for a restitution of formalist analysis in Middle English studies, invoking the following defense of concern for form from Franco Moretti's book on the European Bildungsroman, *The Way of the World* (Lerer "The Endurance of Formalism," *passim*):

> Formal Patterns are what literature uses in order to master historical reality, and to reshape its materials in the chosen ideological key: if form is disregarded, not only do we lose the complexity (and therefore the interest) of the whole process – we miss its strictly *political* significance too (Moretti xiii).

As Moretti's definition suggests, form is far from the ahistorical object of New Criticism that has now come into disrepute, and somewhat less distant from the complex of linguistic codes and tensions studied by the still influential Russian Formalists, epitomized by Roman Jakobson. Lerer's purpose in his short but poignant essay is to expose, as his title announces, "the endurance of formalism" in recent literary criticism of medieval literature, even among the work of scholars who gather under the banner of New Historicism. But he also aims to promote new formalist procedures that distinguish themselves from the shortcomings of the New Critics and

Formalists—a mode of formalist analysis that "needs to be seen as the place where aesthetics and ideology may come together" (Lerer "The Endurance of Formalism," 3).[1]

What then are the characteristics of this place that formalist analysis lays open or occupies? What, moreover, can we know of Middle English "aesthetics" and "ideology" and how do these terms correspond to "formal patterns" and "historical realities"? Such questions, it seems to me, persistently circumscribe the place of formal analysis, whose limits, especially as they are posed in definitions like Lerer's and Moretti's, rest on the presupposition that *poetic form* is part of a recoverable historical process. But I would suggest that when the lens of reading Middle English poetry is focused on the nuances of verse design, rhyme, sound, metrics and spatial structures of the text—the features that distinguish poetry from prose—the relationship of poetic artifice to historical realities becomes radically complicated.[2] Or, in the words of certain Middle English poets, the relationship becomes "strange," as we will see. But for now, what can be said about the transaction whereby "formal patterns" undertake the mastery of "historical realities?" And is it possible to disentangle these terms to find the anterior place, in which the mastery is in progress or has not yet gotten underway? That is to say, can we ever see or know Middle English poetic form in itself, and not in the aftermath of this reaction of fusion with historical circumstances?

Lee Patterson at least admits the possibility of such knowledge. In his career-long work to expose problems with unskeptical philological practices in Middle English studies, he finally concedes that "[i]n grounding the text in a carefully reconstructed past, [philology] can reveal meanings that would otherwise remain hidden; in attending to the verbal structures of the text *prior to the meaning it produces*, it can recognize the literary strategies that produce meaning" (*Temporal Circumstances* 9; my emphasis).[3] The place indicated by philology thus holds in

suspense a curious temporal aspect of the reading process and perhaps of the text itself: a time in which the phenomenon of language has not yet resolved itself into meaning.[4] The target of Patterson's philology appears to swerve from Lerer's/Moretti's formalist analysis, shifting the focus to a moment before the mastery of historical reality is achieved, when formal "strategies" have yet to be executed, or are in progress, and can still be witnessed in their activity. Such a place would seem to correspond to the poetic "topology of joy" that Giorgio Agamben seeks to explore in *Stanzas* (where the division of concern is not between philology and historicism but poetry and philosophy): the peculiar "unreal" poetic space of a discourse (of *fin'amors*) "that at once enjoys and defers, negates and affirms, accepts and repels" (xviii). For Agamben, such an active but paradoxical discourse constitutes an enjoyment of knowledge whose posession, however, is infinitely postponed in poetry. If this attainment of knowledge, indefinitely deferred in and by poetry, can be related to "meaning," then the poem naturally steers this hestiation between form and matter toward a moment of crisis that Agamben situates at the end of the poem, "the ultimate formal structure perceptible in a poetic text" ("The End of the Poem" 112), where the schism of sense and sound are finally resolved in the meaning event.[5] But even so, some order of "meaning" must arise to meet the gaze of philology, or what else would be the object "that would otherwise remain hidden" *before* the end of the poem, but that is nonetheless revealed by philological scrutiny of this strange place-time? One curious medieval poetic tradition—but one with too limited a range of influence to affect the Middle English poets I am concerned to understand—posited such a space prior to the meaning (if the event of meaning is truly postponed unto the end of the poetic text) and yet substantial in itself. In the Medieval Latin text of Aristotle's *Poetics*, much corrupted by repeated translations through Averroes' Arabic and various Latin redactions, Hermanus Alemanus' translation is perhaps the most corrupt with

respect to the Greek original. But what are mistakes for some, for others are innovatinos. A crucial section on the parts of the tragic poem advocates for the priority of the middle in interpretation in a way that resonates with my questions here: "medium autem est ante et cum; ipsum ergo melius est utrisque extremis, cum sit medium in loco qui est inter id quod est ante et inter id quod est post" (B 212), "The middle is both 'before' and 'with' [the main subject matter]. So it is more important than either end, for the middle is found in the place which is between 'that which precedes' and 'that which is placed after'" (Minnis and Scott 297). Both "with" and "before" the *res* of the poem, the *middle*, in at least this isolated case, takes a special place in poetic formal considerations.

Situating the formal priority of this poetic middle with respect to the "historical realities" that merge within it is a difficult proposition. A more rigid formalism would maintain that Patterson's "reconstructed past" (or "historical realities" or "ideology") remains hidden in all events, or worse. Medieval poetry forces us, Paul Zumthor writes, "to confront a most disturbing historical phenomenon, to consider in a void, a fortuitous void caused by the lapse of time and gaps in our documentation, but even so to consider in a complete experimental vacuum, the phenomenon of the appearance, development and decay of a meaning" (xx). If this directive leads us to attend first to the Middle English poetic text itself, and ultimately to the moment of form "prior to the meaning it produces" (meaning which time has anyway decayed), then we come to face still another void, emptier even than the one Zumthor contemplates, lying between the modern reader and the place of Middle English poetic form. For Middle English poetry is almost unique among its contemporary literatures in its lack of an attending theoretical apparatus. That is to say, there are no fully-fledged (or even half-fledged) treatises or works on poetics or versification in Middle English, or in any other language *about* Middle English poetry,

to compare to the Occitan *Leys D'Amors,* Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia,* Deschamps's *L'Art de Dictier*, or even the several Icelandic and Irish treatises on metrics and poetics that help situate and historicize poetry in other medieval vernacular literatures. Nor is there any indication that such a treatise ever existed. Without this crucial context, how are we to assemble the temporal realities that circumscribed and were mastered by Middle English form, or evaluate the strategies of this mastery that we find operative in that moment prior to the event of meaning?[6]

In the absence of such a context, what has been ignored, undervalued or entirely lost in the placement and re-placement of form in readings of Middle English texts have been the peculiar Middle English attitudes toward form. If it is possible to excavate statements corresponding to the concerns of modern literary theory from medieval prologues, commentaries, and other formerly marginalized constituents of medieval literature,[7] it is equally possible, I maintain, to reconstruct a sense of the scene of Middle English poetic form from comments that have been generally disregarded as mere repetitions of topoi common to all medieval literature. But as I hope to show in the next part of this introduction, these apparent commonplaces are far from unexceptional.

By citing a "scene" in the singular I present a difficult claim: that it is possible to make any statements about *a* Middle English attitude or theory toward form as if such a thing could be isolated in any period in Middle English literature. The assumption that no accessory texts exist to clarify this scene has been an obstacle in at least one attempt to define a distinctive period of Middle English letters by stylistic criteria. J.A. Burrow writes in his *Ricardian Poetry*, "It would be easier to grasp some unity in this diversity if the writers themselves were more ready to help, with comments on their own aims and principles…The age had, of course, no organs of critical opinion, and it produced no cardinal critical document" (3). Yet within poetic texts stretching

well beyond the period that Burrow dubs "Ricardian," one can find, if not "cardinal" organs, then at least significant tissues of critical opinion. It is the hypothesis of this dissertation that certain works of Middle English poetry, read through a formalist analysis carefully attuned to strategies Patterson might rather call the concerns of philology, can be shown to amply document certain critical perspectives on poetic form, and that when juxtaposed, these tissues begin to appear more dense and complex, if not more organic. Disclosed in its full complexity, this Middle English discourse in poetry *on poetry* reveals significant advances in the understanding of formal problems that haunted contemporary Romance, Celtic and Scandinavian poetics: namely the definition of poetic form, poetic divisions, and the distinctive topology of poetry as opposed to other modes of discourse.

From here then I would like to trace the persistence of certain attitudes toward form and the unrealized value of a poetics in the period of Middle English Literature that embraces at its center—in this study, roughly the end of the fourteenth century—the three works that I will study closely in the ensuing chapters. The traces I will follow, in the hunt for a Middle English formal poetics, come in the unlikely form of some of the commonest *topoi* in Middle English literature: those of humility, anxiety, and inexpressibility that appear most often at the beginnings of work. D. Vance Smith has noted the "strange" way that the medieval poem "define[s] its own inception as something external to it;" and that "[t]he peculiar impasses that surface in its conception of beginning show the very strangeness—the alien character—of the rhetorical beginning, a beginning that is integral to the work's structure, meaning and completion, but a beginning that does not appear in the work itself" (*The Book if the Incipit* 68). Middle English poetry also, and even more explicitly, recognizes the "strangeness" and "alien character" of the English language itself when it falls under the influence of poetic form. The estrangement of form and material—

pattern and history—supposed in such statements as I turn to now allows for, perhaps, precisely the kind of pause anterior to the production of meaning that Patterson proposes as the site and goal of formal analysis (in so far as it can be assimilated to "philology"). Only, in this place of hesitation before making the meaning of the text, Middle English poetic form, I will argue, makes a meaning of its own.

Strange English: A Poetics of Scarcity

In the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Lancastrian poet laureate John Lydgate does not conceal his anxiety as he considers the difficulty of mastering history with the available formal patterns of English. In the prologue to *Troy Book*, he describes his materials, in an extended agricultural metaphor, as the volumes of literary texts by foreign "auctours vs be-forn" who have already done the work of winnowing "the verreie trewe corn / So as it fil seuerid from the chaf" (150-151). Past masters were able to accomplish this task,

> For in her honde they hilde for a staf
> The trouthe only, whyche thei han compyled
> Vn-to this fyn, that we wer nat begyled
> Of negligence thoruȝ forȝetilnesse (152-154).

As a farmer reduces the materials of his harvest into its nutritive components, so past authors have done the work of "compiling" the truth from the beclouded manifestations of truth that appear in the events of human history.[8] They have done so, according to this metaphor, with a *staf*. This term had a relatively rare but suggestive application in Middle English poetical discourse where it designated "line of verse," and this usually in the context of foreign poetry.[9] If

we can admit any shade of this sense here in Lydgate's lines, the image that emerges becomes more detailed: the ancients have beaten the truth out of history with the essential formal unit of poetry as their instrument. Here the term *compile* takes on a curious sense in excess of its more routine literary-critical usage, meaning not only to "gather" and "translate" but also "to put into poetic form." For Lydgate, as the action of *compyled* is already in the past tense, the work of using formal patterns to master historical reality has already and long since been accomplished. In which case, what is left to do for English poetic form?

In answer, Lydgate points out a perceived deficiency. Extending his agricultural metaphor, he reprimands "oure elderis," presumably English writers of the past, for not having "cerched out and souȝt / The sothefast pyth, to ympe [graft] it in oure thouȝt" (*Troy Book,* Prologue 163-4). His accusation seems keyed to remind the reader of a passage in the work of one specific "elder," for in Chaucer's prologue to his *Legend of Good Women*, Lydgate's master has this to say about his poetic intention:

> For wel I wot that folk han, herebeforn
> Of makynge ropyn and led awey the corn.
> I come aftyr, glenynge here and there
> And am ful glad if I may findon er
> Of any goodly word that they han left (G version, 61-65).[10]

For Chaucer, the encounter with the already winnowed "verreie trewe corn" is more foraging than farming or grafting.[11] In other contexts this same image presents old things as good news for the modern writer ("For out of olde felds…cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere, / And out of olde bokes…cometh al this newe science that men lere" *The Parliament of Fowls* 22-3).

But here, Chacuer stands before the same field of already harvested historical realities, decades before Lydgate admires it, and despairs.

Something of the same embarrassed resignation does affect Chaucer's successor, the poet laureate, as he comes again to face the challenge of translation as a problem of English poetic form. In the envoy of his *Fall of Princes* Lydgate concedes the difficulty of translating "straunge materys that were hystoral" (9.3326-7) into English, which "in ryme hath skarsete" (9.3312), a statement that belies his just having composed tens of thousands of rhyming English lines. This self-deprecating language, so thoroughly contradicted by the poet's extensive accomplishment, may represent simply another instance of the common medieval *topos* of humility, but I suspect that even so, Lydgate's comments belong to a larger discourse: they contribute to a Middle English poetics of scarcity, with which Middle English literature excuses itself of producing a poetics.

For the terms of this discourse arise often when a Middle English poet, decades before and after Lydgate, situates himself at a self-consciously late stage in literary production and, from this cynical perspective, denigrates the tools of his mastery over his historical realities. These realities, as the literary inheritance from French, Latin, and Italian texts, Lydgate and Chaucer suggest, have already been mastered by the formal patterns of past authors. And so, long since "compiled" by foreign, and presumably superior forms, the already well-formed materials of poetry become the circumstances of the English poet's resistance to form.

In "Making and Poetry in the Age of Chaucer," Glending Olson draws out the technical distinction between vernacular making and learned poetry that Chaucer and Lydgate seem to adumbrate: "poetry is classical lore, making the creation of verses which may incorporate poetry in one way or another" (278). To contextualize this distinction, Olson emphasizes "the historical

separation during the age of Chaucer between treatises on vernacular versifying, with or without music, and treatises on poetry," noting that in the former category, exemplified by Deschamps's *Art de Dictier* and John of Garland's *Parisiana Poetria*, "delineating formal structures and substance becomes of primary concern," replacing the narratological concept of *fictio* on which Dante based his earlier definition of poetic art (279). But as we attempt to understand how English poetry reflects on its tools of making—its formal patterns—as strategies of incorporating poetic material, we are unable to make any similar generalizations *in English* as those Olson derives from continental poetic treatises; for Middle English literature, as I have mentioned, produced no treatises on either category, poetics or versification. Seeking to situate the language of Chaucer and Lydgate's poetics of scarcity into a context of English poetic reflection, we find ourselves standing beside the narrator of Chaucer's *House of Fame* when he turns from the Temple of Glass and the English translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* it houses at the end of Book I to face a desolate emptiness: the scarcity of English poetics.

The absence of any fully developed theory of poetic form in English, and, I hope to show, the aversion to producing such a theory may be outlined by the history of the terms posed in Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. At issue in the poet's excessively apologetic envoy to his patron, Duke Humphrey, is the incommensurability of his source's "Frenssh unkouth [strange, unusual] compendyously *compyled*" (9.3329) and the resources of Middle English—"my tounge," as Lydgate calls it, which "was not affyled [filed, or polished]" (9.3330). Lydgate's adjectives suggest that the distinction here is one of form, not language; it is not just French that complicates the transition, but *that* this particular French is *unkouth* and already *compyled*. And as we saw already, "compilation" can be considered (at least for Lydgate) as much a function of

rendering poetic form as translating and gathering textual sources. As to this formal function, Lydgate elaborates (as I've partially quoted already):

> The profunde processe was so poetical,
>
> Entirmyedlyd with chaunges of fortune
>
> And straunge materys that were hystoral. (9.3325-7)

On this basis, Lydgate has already, several lines earlier, excused himself from competence as a translator, "seyn howh that Ynglissh in ryme hath skarsete" (9.3312). But how does he measure this "scarcity of rhyme" such that it has not been disproven by the voluminous adequacy of his now completed *Fall of Princes*? Even if he had written the envoy before composing the body of the work, it is still positioned at the end of the text, where its criticism rings hollow. Lydgate's evaluation of "English in rhyme" closely echoes *but significantly reverses* Chaucer's own estimation in his envoy of his *Complaint of Venus*, translated, he says "word for word" from the French poet Graunson:

> And eke to me hit ys a gret penaunce,
>
> Syth ryme in Englissh hat such skarsete,
>
> To folowe worde by worde the curiosite
>
> Of Graunson, floure of hem that maken in Fraunce (79-82)

Where Lydgate's "Ynglissh in ryme" designates a sub-section of the language limited by form, Chaucer's "ryme in Englissh" designates the opposite: a section of the possibilities of the form, limited by the resources of the specific language. Lydgate's change is subtle, but significant, in that it directs our attention not to what form can do within the limits of English, but what English can do within the limits of form.

A further Chaucerian echo resonates in the text of the later poet. Lydgate's remarks are partially at odds, but partially consonant with the closing prayer near the end of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde,* that the work's scribe not "myswrite" or "mysmetre" the poem "for defaute of tonge" (5.1795-6) and "for ther is so gret diversite / In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge" (1793-4). On the one hand, the danger to the transmission of Chaucer's 'historical' poem is not the scarcity of English, but its diversity. And yet, the crucial facet of the poem's formal pattern—its meter—is threatened by a Lydgatian "deficiency of language." The apparent contradiction in simultaneously claiming "diversite" and "defaute" for English was not lost on Chaucer, but subtly and comically annotated by the juxtaposition of the uncommonly sloppy repetition of the rhyme word, "tonge," twice in a row (1794 & 1796) and the uncommonly elaborate rhyme of "diversite" and "non myswrite the" (1795). Chaucer, in typical fashion, raises more questions about his stance on English form than he answers, and his responses to the question of poetic form as a simultaneously limiting but empowering medium, as we will see in my chapter on his *House of Fame*, are greatly multiplied.

But Lydgate is hardly alone in his attitudes toward the strange problem of English form, or rather, I might rephrase (anticipating myself), the problem of *strange* English form. We can trace the terms of his criticism of English form in Middle English writing back to some of the first English works of the previous century. Written in the early 1300s, Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle* "offers itself as an attempt to repatriate a historical narrative that has too long been the property of readers of French—that is, the aristocracy" (*Idea of the Vernacular* 19),[12] but also presents its own form as a starkly simplified (re)version of the complexity of his Latin and French sources:

I mad noght for no disours,

Ne for no seggers, no harpours,
Bot for þe luf of symple men
Þat strange Inglis can not ken;
For many it ere þat strange Inglis
In ryme wate never what it is;
And bot þai wist what it mente,
Ellis me thoght it were alle shente. (1.75-82)

Mannyng expands here on what he meant in his opening when he claims to write "not for the lerid bot for the lewed" (8). We could, as some commentators do, register the author's deprecation of his language and his audience as an instance of the common rhetorical *topos* of humility.[13] But the divergences from the commonplace are what make this specific text so interesting. Repetition in close proximity underscores the term "strange Inglis," which resonates across the gulf of a century with Lydgate's "straunge materys." In addition to senses related to "alien," "foreign," and "unusual," the *Middle English Dictionary* records several contexts in which *straunge* signifies "recondite," "obscure," and "elaborately wrought" when used to describe language.[14] Thus, when Richard Rolle maintains in his prologue to his translation of the Psalms, "In this werke, I seke na *straunge ynglis*, bot lyghtest and comonest and swilk that is mast lyke til the latyn" (4) we do not sense the influence of the commonplace to the extent that we detect it in Mannyng's prologue. Rolle's intentions seem more straightforward, though his terminology is the same; his translation will not stray, anymore than English requires, from the syntax and disposition of Latin word order.[15] Unlike Rolle, Mannyng's "strange Inglis" appears to be less a matter of linguistic inflection—less the tendency of English to become *syntactically*

"lyke til the latyn" or the French of his source, and therefore "foreign"—and more a matter of poetic form.

If Rolle's rejection of "strange English" is qualified and demonstrated by his practice of word-for-word translation, Mannyng complicates his similar rejection of the "strange" by positing it, ironically, in intriguing poetic settings. His phrase "strange Inglis / in rhyme" is poised to attract unusual attention. First, the phrase is sharply enjambed, cutting its syntactic coherence across two poetic units, a relatively rare phenomenon in Mannyng's verse. Even more strangely (or perhaps very appropriately), the word "strange Inglis" is literally *in rhyme* here, paired with "what it is," which figuratively connects, in the associative disposition of the form, what Mannyng denies to the understanding of "symple men," namely knowing what strange English—English in rhyme—*is*. And yet rhyme is precisely what makes English *strange* to the English ear. Mannyng elaborates:

> If it were made in ryme couwee,
> Or in strangere, or enterlace,
> Þat rede Inglis it ere inow,
> Þat couthe not haf coppled a kowe,
> Þat outhere in couwee or in baston
> Som suld haf ben fordon,
> So þat fele men þat it herde
> Suld not witte howe þat it ferde: (85-92)

Here Mannyng paints the same picture in smaller, more articulate strokes. This short passage contains one of the most diverse lists of rhyme terminology in all of Middle English literature, which serves to indicate the paucity of Middle English poetic discourse. By "ryme couwee,"

Mannyng refers to an Anglo-Norman form of short tail-rhyme stanzas;[16] by "baston," something similar to the poetical term "staf." In Anglo-Norman, *rime entrelacée* or *rime croisée* indicates the rhyme scheme *abab* (and Mannyng's use is the only instantiation of the word listed in the *MED*).[17] What is meant by "strangere" is less clear, but Mannyng seems to indicate, again, not "foreign" so much as "elaborate" or "obscure." In any event, the term represents the product of formal manipulation of English that would render it both "strange" and "impenetrable" to English understanding. And here again, an oddity in Mannyng's versification punctuates the sense: the rhyme-word "couwee" is made to pair with "enterlace," which forces a metrically awkward "French" stress to fall on the final *e* of enterlac*e*, *estranging* the word from its English context. The effect is to showcase the expressive potential of precisely the kind of poetic form that the sentence claims to eschew. And indeed Mannyng's self-criticism goes to great lengths to emphasize the strangeness (blending several shades of meaning: "foreignness," "elaboration" and "obscurity") that form imposes on English. He continues to broaden the usage of the term "strange," and to elaborate on his rejection of it, applying "strange" as an adjective more generally to modify "speche" and "rhyme" before generalizing it entirely as a noun:[18]

> Þerfore henyed wele þe more
> In strange ryme to trauayle sore,
> And my witte was oure thynne
> So strange speche to trauayle in;
> And forsoth I couth[e] noght
> So strange Inglis as þai wroght,
> And men besoght me many a tyme
> To turne it bot in light[e] ryme;

Þai sayd, if I in strange it turne,

To here it many on suld skurne; (111-120)

Mannyng's final gesture is to sweep the specific poetic-formal qualities (from elaborate poetic "speche" to poetic sound-effect or "rhyme") that he has progressively associated with the term "strange" all into one genus in order to expose and exclude poetic form in a word. But his vociferous campaign against the "strange" has a curious consequence: it announces and names the limits of a Middle English poetics. The discussion of Middle English poetic form begins, in these lines, by denigrating its object as a stranger. That is to say, under the pretense proposing to dispense with its use, Mannyng traces a concept of "poetic form," albeit in negative space. Thus for all its pejorative baggage and its scape-goat function, Mannyng's "strange" endures as one of the few operative terms in the vocabulary of Middle English literary critical vocabulary that seems to signify "poetic form" in its widest range of meanings.[19]

"Strange" continues to outline this negative territory long after Mannyng's *Chronicle*. Thomas Usk, contemporary of Chaucer and London civil servant, modulates the common topos of repudiation, but again in some of the same Middle English terms. He begins his prose book *The Testament of Love*, with ridicule for those English men who "speken their poysye-mater in Frenche" giving French listeners a "fantasye" (a hearty laugh). Writing in one's second language is a foolish gesture, he claims, for "the understandyng of Englysshmen wol not stretche to the privy terms in Frenche, whatsoever we bosten of straunge langage." Here the sense of "straunge" approximates that of Richard Rolle's usage: however far English may lean toward French, the latter's "privy ["recondite"] terms" lie beyond the language barrier, and out of English reach. It would be possible to paraphrase simply, "English will not become French," except for the poetic undertones that have now been invested in the term "straunge." Like Rolle's *Psalter* translation,

Usk's *Testament* has access to a simple, natural defense against being labeled "strange"; it is in prose. But Usk nonetheless formulates a more elaborate commentary.

Similar to Dante's distribution of different accomplishments to the three different romance languages in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Usk proceeds to divide the different labors of the linguistic arts between Latin, French and English: [20]

> Let than clerkes endyten in Latyn, for they have the propertie of science, and the knowinge in that facultie; and lette Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes. And let us shewe our fantasyes in such wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge (45).

By this account, Latin is for learned treatises; French, for poetry "in elaborate termes;" English for the unspecified products of English imaginations ("fantasyes").[21] "Terms" for Usk begins to take on a markedly poetic connotation, perhaps in the word's frequent association with the figures of rhetoric. The "strangeness" he rejects appears to include as much the rhetorical register of poetry as its form. But his prolific and adroit use of many such "termes" of rhetoric in his *Testament* (such as, of course, the recurrent topos under discussion) does not efface or qualify his choice to *show* in the prose of his mother tongue, rather than to *poeticize* quaint terms, as the French do.

Leaving aside the politics of translation in order to elucidate the Middle English attitude specifically toward poetic form and poetic discourse, what emerges from these fragments taken from various periods of Middle English literature, is the recurrent association of "form" and "foreign." Strange English is the product not of any specific linguistic influence, but of virtually any formal pattern elaborate enough to attract attention away from the "symple speche" of English, as Mannyng puts it (*Chronicle,* Prologue, 73). "Simple" and "strange," as extremes on

the spectrum of linguistic elaboration, seem to correspond to the categories Trevisa calls "prose " and "ryme" in his *Dialogus inter dominum et clericum*: "comynlich prose ys more cleer þan ryme, more esy and more pleyn to knowe and understonde" (lines 147-8).[22] *Strange* then is an ethnographic metaphor for the proportional relationship of formal artifice and epistemological difficulty. And Middle English authors were careful to marginalize this qualification on either ground, though not without occasional stints of ironical meta-commentary, such as Mannyng's. What is so noteworthy about Mannyng's irony, however, is that it complicates the marginalization of what he renounces as *strangeness* precisely by exemplifying and therefore incorporating it into his form—that is, by estranging his surface structures from their content, dilating the moment of hesitation between form and matter, as it were, right in the midle of the matter.

By the end of Lydgate's century, the anxiety with which Middle English authors paused to renounce the "strangeness" of form, even in the middle of remarks on the "scarcity" of English poetic forms, had dissipated. In the prologue of the late fifteenth century *Amoryus and Cleopes,* John Metham pays tribute to "my mastyr Chauncerys [Chaucer]," who "longe dyd endure / in practyk of rymyng" until he "rymyd naturally" (2189-2191). This appraisal comes at the expense of John Lydgate, who "endytyd with termys off retoryk / and halff chongyd Latyne" (2193-4). By Metham's account, Chaucer (if no one else) had *naturalized* rhyme. That is to say he succeeded in brining forth "rhyme in English" and not "English in rhyme," the strange "half-changed" product of Lydgate's apparently strange, transitional art. Metham's astute comment on Chaucerian style thus registers the opposite pole of an integrative impulse to that of earlier renditions of French structures in English; as Thorlac Turville-Petre has observed, "The poets of the love-lyrics [in MS Harley 2253] show how English verse can now [c.1314-25] respond to

European lyric traditions and yet remain thoroughly English…the structures are French, but the verse itself is English" (*England the Nation* 205). With Chaucer, in Metham's eyes, this duplicity is resolved: "English in rhyme"—English verse that retains a sense of estranging difference in so far as it is 'accented' by what are still perceptible as foreign structures—has given way to a confluent "rhyme in English."

In order to describe Metham's criticism in Franco Moretti's terms, to return to the point of this discussion's departure, we must reverse the force of his definition of form. In the eyes of John Metham, Lydgate failed to master his historical realities with English formal patterns, hence the uncomfortable otherness of his verse. Chaucer's success would then be measured by the degree to which he mastered strange formal patterns and integrated them into the context of his historical realities. But there is still a distinction to be made. At the end of the fifteenth century, Metham looks back on the success of Chaucer over the problem of making "rhyme in English" rather than the problem of making "English in rhyme." In the period between Mannyng and Lydgate, as in the "Ricardian" poetry I am concerned with in the following chapters, poets regard "English in rhyme" with skepticism. And this deeply skeptical stance toward "strange English," whether it derives from rhetorical topoi or reflects some more involved consideration, is what I suspect is responsible for the scarcity of Middle English poetics. No other contemporary vernacular literature expressed quite the same sort of anxiety, but most of them were quite comfortable producing an abundance of treatises on poetics and versification.[23]

"English in rhyme," "making," "strange matters:" these then are the nearest Middle English equivalents of the terms of Moretti's definition, "Formal Patterns are what literature uses in order to master historical reality." But the Middle English paraphrase, "English in rhyme is what making uses in order to master strange matters," would overstate Middle English poets'

confidence in their formal medium. Mannyng, Usk, Chaucer, and Lydgate, each in their own ways, all present their poetic situation as standing before a field of poetry that is *already well formed*. From their self-consciously "late" arrival on the scene of vernacular poetry, even the historical realities of the English poet have already been mastered by foreign poetic powers. English poets like Mannyng received their own nation's history from French or Latin authorities. The reception of these literary monuments of foreign mastery over poetic form is what constitutes the historical reality of Middle English literature. We may understand the strange poetics that arose sporadically to describe this encounter as the attempt of Middle English literature to understand its failure, or refusal, to master the strange (foreign/complex/obscure) formal patterns with which other literatures have already mastered their own, but also English historical realities.

Posited as a stranger to itself, Middle English form (and we now see that this phrase would be a sort of oxymoron in the minds of these writers), offered a uniquely self-reflective context in which to formulate precisely the kinds of problems of poetics that they saw circumscribed in any use of form—conceived as any departure from "symple spech" or "naked words."[24] The same underlying politics of literary tradition, the same historical realities, that compelled poets to hedge their use of poetic form in a frame of strategic xenophobia and made Middle English poetic reflection unnecessary or unpopular, also pushed the poetic theory into the realm of poetic practice. Unshackled from the implicit understanding that prose should serve as the meta-language for poetry (and that verse, such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Latin-language *Poetria Nova* and some redactions of the *Leys D'Amors* should serve to elucidate the poetics of other languages), Middle English poetry was enabled to advance a powerful meta-language

about form *in the middle of making form*. This empowering consequence of the tradition of "strange English," was available to any poet within the period I am describing, though this was perhaps not universally recognized or exploited.

Whether the potentiality of form-reflective form was ignored or—as in the works I will treat in this dissertation—fully harnessed, the formal circumstances of Middle English literature demand a revision of Moretti's definition in order for it to apply at all, for we must conclude that formal patterns are what Middle English poetry uses in order to master (in the sense of comprehend, circumscribe) other formal patterns.

Formal patterns in Middle English, developing along currents of alternating strangeness and naturalization, occasion, for some poets, an extensive degree of self-consciousness in their use of form. In such works, the poetry itself constitutes its own working poetics, and simultaneously the test case of that poetics, practice and theory each revising the other as they go in tandem. In the chapters that follow, I will look at three longs works—the anonymous *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* and Chaucer's *House of Fame*—each of which, in the consistency of its attention to its own structural dynamics, comprises a more-or-less complete theory of poetics of form and a simultaneous consideration of the viability of this poetics both for itself specifically and for Middle English poetry in general. But the length of the works I will consider more fully does not presuppose that the Middle English poetic function could not also manifest in very small places. As an example of the lower degree of the Middle English poetic topography, I would like to chart the place of form in one of its smaller but no less significant instances before looking at thee three much larger regions of the map. These smaller places will also bring us back, finally, to the first component of the title, the *middle,* and its importance to the place of form in Middle English poetry.

An Illustration of Form in the Middle

The place of form in this example is also a node of translation. The last stanza of Chaucer's only complete long poem, *Troilus and Criseyde* V.1863-1865, incorporates Dante's lines from *Paradiso* XIV.28-39. I will set Chaucer's stanza beside its partial source for comparison:

Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,
That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,
Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscrive,
Us from visible and invisible foon
Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon,
So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy, digne
For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne. (V.1863-1869)

Quell'uno e due e tre che sempre vive
E regna sempre in tre e'n duo e'n uno
Non circunscritto, e tutto circunscrive
(*Paradiso* XIV.28-39)

Here Chaucer translates Dante in a degree of closeness that has hardly been surpassed, leaving Dante's meter, rhymes, and much of the vocalic and consonantal soundscape of the original passage intact. In the discursive terms of "strange English," Chaucer maximally *stranges* his English to the point that the boundary between English and Italian are dramatically extenuated. But the boundary between Dante's signature formal pattern, *terza rima*, is carefully circumscribed. As Chaucer failed to do in his other experiment with *terza rima* in *A Complaint To His Lady*, here he integrates—naturalizes—the form into English. This example thus

witnesses the passage from estranged "English in rhyme" to a fully integrated "rhyme in English."

The similarities of form and language between Chaucer's re-purposed translation and Dante's original stanza, in fact, are what dissolve the Italian form-language continuum and *re*form a new pattern in English. Dante's verse simulates the trinity it invokes. In arranging the numerical components, *one, two* and *three*, first to suggest a procedure of multiplication, then a regression back to one, the syntax of the two opening lines, Chaucer was well aware, enacts the Plotinian-Boethian neo-platonic metaphysics of emanation and return. For Boethius, *intentio naturalis* ("natural entencioun" in Chaucer's translation; *Boece*, 3p11, 154-155) binds all of creation to perform a circular pilgrimage in the course of its being: away from and finally—inevitably—back to the origin, the *summum bonum* of God, "the begynnynge of alle thynges" ("omnium principium," 3p10.100) and the "oon ende of blisfulnesse" ("unum…beatitudinis finem," 3p2.8). The "intention" that drives this recursive machinery manifests as a kind of Christian love for the joint beginning-ending of existence; "this charite and this love" ("sui caritas" 3p11.175-178) is what motivates progress toward "[t]he ende of alle thinges that ben to desire, beyonde the whiche ende ther nys no thing to desire." ("expetendorum finem quo nihil ultra est" 4p2.165-167).[25] Chaucer's careful translation in *Boece* glosses his attraction to specifically these lines in the *Paradiso* as a portrait in miniature of the poetics of Boethian cosmology.

But these two lines also comment on the shape of the *terza rima* and its relation to this ontological principle. For, this chiastic figure, stretched across two lines, also annotates the rotating interlace of the "rhyme in threes" in its highest symbolic significance. Manipulating the polarity of the horizontal current of syntax to comment on the spiraling vertical permutations of

rhymes, Dante interlaces his poetics and his metaphysics. The resultant poetic-ontological figure comments optimistically on the third line's message of limitation, showing, as one commentator notes, that "[f]or all the inadequacies of human language to describe the ineffable experience of beatitude, the scattered leaves of Dante's poem are still those of God's Book, bound into one volume at the end of the vision and at the end of our reading" and that "it is possible to describe (or at least circumscribe) such a universe and such a conversion in the incarnational language of the *Commedia*" (Taylor 202). The historical reality that Dante's elaborate formal pattern presumes to master here is nothing less than the ineffable, eternal pattern of God's reality.

Chaucer's translation is not concerned to repeat this mastery, but to represent it. The fluid immersion of the tercet in the Rhyme Royal stanza of *Troilus and Criseyde* demonstrates how strange forms dissolve in new formal contexts. In the absence of neighboring *terza rima* stanzas in the English to complete the interlace, Dante's signature is lost in translation. The circumscribing figure of the syntactic *chiasmus* (one-two-three/three-two-one), so meticulously preserved in Chaucer's English, rises to the surface of attention, but detached from much of its original value. Karla Taylor comments on the remainder of meaning: "Circumscription for Chaucer means something very different from Dante's circumscription…His final prayer uses Dante's words to set limits on the place of poetry in this world; for Chaucer, these limits cannot be circumscribed by any inexpressibility topos or by any analogical, allegorical mimesis. The final certain truths of religion cannot be captured by poets, Chaucer though they may be" (202). But this does not paint the complete configural picture. For as much as Chaucer's English figure of Dante's Italian figure no longer *shows* the expressive effectiveness of the formal pattern (since the "rest" of the *terza rima* is missing in the English verse), and as much as Chaucer's prayer calls on Jesus to supplement the deficiency ("make us [poets]…digne"), nonetheless the same

chiastic figure becomes a source of rich poetic productivity elsewhere in Chaucer's work. And more specifically, it becomes an emblem of form's potential to 'express' the ineffable, a Chaucerian *expressibility topos* embodied in poetic form, that accompanies but circumvents topoi of *in*expressibility.

For example, in the Prologue of the so-called G version of *The Legend of Good Women*, by the time Chaucer renounces the ability to describe the daisy ("Fayn wolde I preysen, if I coude aryght. / But wo is me, it lyth nat in my myght," 59-60)—consequently, right before launching into the metaphor of the cornfield we looked at above (lines 61-65)—he has already circumscribed his message of inexpressibility in a familiar formal pattern. This pattern configures his praise of the flower, how it opens in the morning "thanne closeth it and drawith it to reste" at night, in two ways: first, in the match of the rhyme-pair "flour"/"honour" in lines 55-56 with the same pair in reverse at the end of the speech, "honour"/"flour" in lines 69-70, opening then drawing to a close the passage; in thie way his refusal to describe the daisy ironically approximates the form of the flower in poetic space-time. Second, he deploys the same syntactic chiasmus we find in *Troilus and Criseyde*:

> For trustyth well, I ne have nat undertake
> As of the lef agayn the flour to make,
> Ne of the flour to make ageyn the lef,
> No more than of the corn agen the shef; (71-74)

As the component phrases, "the lef," "agayn" and "flour to make" reverse their order in the next line, the pattern conducts precisely the operation that the sentence denies. The language of "flower" and "leaf" pertain to a rich tradition of poetry devoted to these metaphors.[26] But Chaucer's significant departure consists in his translation of the terms of the tradition into the

figural landscape of a miniature poetics, commenting on its own, strange refusal to concede to merely expressing inexpressibility and instead to *figure* the daisy without *expressing* it.

Chaucer plays on the same figural trope in the *House of Fame*, which my third chapter will analyze in much greater detail. The poet begins the introduction to his dream vision by renouncing any knowledge of the "signifiaunce / the gendres, neyther *the distaunce / Of tymes"* of dreams (17-19; my emphasis). The meaning of "distaunce of tymes" is teasingly uncertain. The Riverside editors gloss the phrase as "the interval between dreams, or perhaps, between a prophetic dream and the event it prophesies" (978). But considering that the poem likens the dream state to poetic formulation—a claim I will support in my chapter to come—I suspect there is more to the interval than prophetic fulfillment or stages of sleep. This distance, I believe, corresponds to the lag between experience (a central theme in *House of Fame*) and poetic form, which is reversed in the process of reading.

The poem describes its own disposition of time as a function of *time* and *rhyme*. The interdependent reciprocity of these two poetic modalities is captured in the rhyme pairing "tyme"/"ryme," which appears only twice in *House of Fame*: once in the proem of Book II, and again in a narrative aside in Book III. Neither word appears in a rhyming position without the other, so ineluctably compounded are these two concepts in Chaucer's poetics.[27] The first instance is in the proem of Book II, where Chaucer invokes Venus and the Muses to assist him:

> Now faire blisfull, O Cipris,
> So be my favour at this tyme!
> And ye, me to endite and ryme
> Helpeth, that on Parnaso duelle, (518-521)

The phrase "this tyme" holds us in that same sense of punctual presence that recurs in the multiple beginning-formulas in the first two books of the poem, which I will discuss at length. Meanwhile, the inversion of terms in the two invocations (Venus, favor me || Help, Muses) calls to mind the chiastic syntax in the above excerpts from *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Legend of Good Women*. Here, in the fourth beginning of the poem, the present moment of *re*-beginning is evidently also the time in which it is most needful to rhyme.

The next instance of the "tyme"/"ryme" couplet expands on this proposition, showing that time itself is bound in rhyme, and likewise rhyme in time. Arriving at Fame's house in Book III, the narrator finally meets with the "ymages" promised him earlier, only he finds himself unable or unwilling to versify all of them. He resorts instead to a variation of the inexpressibility theme, the common topos of abbreviation known as *occupatio*:

> There saugh I sitte in other seës,
> Pleyinge upon sondry gleës
> Which that I kan not nevene,
> Moo than sterres ben in hevene,
> Of which I nyl as *now* not ryme,
> For ese of yow and los of tyme.
> For tyme ylost, this knowen ye,
> Be no way may recovered be. (1251-1258)

Doubting the reader's dedication, the narrator promises not to bind up too much of his time unnecessarily in rhymes. This generous gesture is based on an interesting commensuration: the quantity of rhymes is proportional to the "los of tyme." The proverbial reminder about time's irrecuperability in lines 1255-6 is meant to reinforce this principle, but if we take these lines

more literally for a moment, we find it is somewhat difficult to maintain this position considering how the reaction of history and form is meant to work. For is it not precisely through rhyme (formal pattern) that lost time (historical reality) is recovered? And is the recovery of lost time with rhyme not the basis of a poet's relationship with Fame—that is, with the enduring archival memory of literary tradition?

Let us take a closer look at what this passage is saying and how it is saying it. The dense formal elaboration of these lines serves (as we might now come to expect) as a counterargument to the proverb it embellishes. The narrator's refusal to rhyme is underscored with the heavily alliterative line "I *n*yl as *n*ow *n*ot ryme." This consonant entanglement of negative and temporal particles is followed in the next two lines by a complex chiastic pattern of assonances and chiastic word order, which I graph as follows:

For *es*e of y*ow* and *los* of *tyme* / For *tyme* y*los*t, this kn*ow*en y*e*,

A B C-D / D-C B A

Though the transience of the elusive "now" of writing and reading is figured in the grammatical flip of attribute and subject when "los of tym" becomes "tyme ylost," the inverted word order and the inverted return of the first line's vowel sounds in the next—as well the visual/aural echo of "now" in "k*now*en"—all contrive to counterbalance the idea of an elusive present with an image of continual poetic recovery. The significant formal limits of these lines ensure that "tyme ylost" in the reader's reality is conserved poetically. For formal repetition activates a reversal in poetic time. Rhyme of course works in similar fashion; an end rhyme is not properly a rhyme at all until the occurrence of its match, which, when it comes, recovers the previous or "lost" sound in our memory and activates the two words—one present, one past—as a single rhyme event, binding the present moment of reading with a read past. This dreamlike "distaunce of tymes" is

crucial to and definitive of the pleasing measuring effect of rhyme, as well as the irritation of rhyme gone wrong. So it is that when Chaucer's narrator in *The Canterbury Tales* exhausts the company's patience with the "rym dogerel" of *The Tale of Sir Thopas,* the host interrupts him:

> "By God," quod he, "fir pleynly, at a word,
> Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!
> Thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme.
> Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme." (VII. 2119-2122)

Rhyme is not for wasting time; Harry Bailey's censure makes this clear. Here the purpose of the tyme/ryme pair is to foreclose bad poetry and press the narrator to continue in prose, and he does precisely this in the ensuing *Tale of Melibee.*[28] But even here, in the midst of blaming rhyme, we detect a glimmer of the same impressive chiastic structure buried in the acoustics: the strangely repeated phrases "at a/o word" bracket off a strange anti-couplet (lines 2120-2121), in which *rymyng…toord* in the first line rhymes obliquely and inversely with *doost…tyme* in the second. These reflecting echoes bind together the two non-rhyming lines, *demonstrating* the end of rhyme that the next line demands, but doing so by stretching the possibilities of line-internal rhyme.

Returning now to *House of Fame*, the final line of the passage cited above offers a sort of emblem of this time-recuperative principle, condensing the chiastic structure of the previous lines into its minimal limit:

Be no *way* || *may* recovered *be*.

Organized around the line's caesura (marked ||) is another reverberation of assonances, demonstrating the nearest and the farthest positions two rhymes can take in a single line: namely,

immediate adjacency (*way*/*may*), and disjunction at the initial and final positions (*Be*/*be*). The form mirrors itself and doing so, mirrors (that is, inverts) its content.

If such artifice is meaningful, what is poetic form trying to tell us here? The message of this line and the message of its form would efface each other, except that the highly involved configuration ensures itself against effacement. Form seems not so much to win the argument as to effect a reconciliation by adding its own provision to the content's message: rhyme loses time precisely so that it may be recovered. The point where it begins to be recovered is, in all events, an emphatically and meticulously expressed sense of *middle.* In this last case, the middle is the *caesura* of a single line. In the other cases, the division between one line and the next. Such junctures are more commonly understood as "beginnings" or "endings" of prosodic units of measure, but the strong chiasmus that is inscribed in the sound of the verse re-evaluates these *termini* as extremes that take their position relative to a divisive midpoint at which a flip of polarity is detectable. The meaning of these lines, furthermore, emerges as one considers the "distaunce of tymes" stretching from that midpoint to what are now not so determinately called "beginnings" and "endings," but what seem far less distinguishable limits.

If it were only a quaint configuration and not also a formal mode of self-reflection, this microstructure would not signify, as I believe it does, a new sense of orientation in Chaucer's poetics. Here Chaucer simultaneously uses and naturalizes strange formal patterns (Dante's *terza rima*, but also Machaut's roundels) to recover a sense of poetics from the obscuration of the inexpressibility and humility topoi that are so pervasive in fourteenth and much of fifteenth century poetic self-reflection in Middle English poetry. But the absence of a strong tradition of poetics in Middle English, seemingly paved over by recourse to these topoi, poetic form itself amply compensates with a very expressive vocabulary of significant configurations, which can

articulate complex statements about poetic time, poetic space and the form that lives at the nexus of these two axes. It also appears that Middle English form is concerned to imagine at least one poetic space-time that may best be described not by a poetics whose "ultimate formal structure" (to repeat Agamben's words) is the end, but by a poetics that seeks to take up the work that the corrossive/innovative translators of Aristotle's *Poetics* left off: to chart the potential of the *middle* as the exemplary place of poetic form.

With this extended example it was my intention to demonstrate how small such significant configurations in Middle English can be, and also to demonstrate my method of close reading, which I find highly productive, but which does not necessarily fit into the model of formalist analysis that neo-formalist critics have propounded. I advance this method of close formal reading further in this dissertation precisely in order to question the pertinence of procedures of formalist analysis that attempt to adapt a synthesis of formalism and new historicism to the circumstances of Middle English studies. In the context of the problematic of "Strange English," and in light of the fact hat Middle English poetry is encoded with elaborate statements on its own poetics, I believe that a re-evaluation of the role of formalism in Middle English studies is again in order.

Each of the chapters of this dissertation exposes a different perspective on the prospect of such a re-evaluation; each presents also a different set of problems. For detached from any common, guiding sense of poetics to contextualize them, the three long poems I study—Chaucer's *House of Fame* certainly, but even the two that are generally supposed to share common authorship, *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—seem to locate the place of poetic form in three very different but surprisingly analogous ways. Corresponding to their

difference of approach and development of what amounts in each case to a sort of private poetics, each poem has what might be called a truly unique form, taking form to mean the complex interplay of structure, division, acoustics and prosodic artifice. But it is precisely the strange formal landscapes mapped by these poems—or better, of which these poems are themselves maps—that offers the space with which to articulate (to perform rather than assert) strong and coherent statements of poetics. What unifies these works, what justifies their juxtaposition in this dissertation, is: first, that the remarkably coherent theories of their own poetic form ironically express the varieties of incoherence to which poetic form is naturally inclined; and second that each work posits as a prominent feature of its poetic space as well as its poetic theory a highly developed sense of *middle* as the place of a significant emergence, if not an emergency, in medieval poetics.

This unique topology emerges perhaps most clearly in the text that is the subject of my first chapter, Chaucer's *House of Fame.* In this ambitious but "unfinished" work, Chaucer returns to the genre of dream vision to reflect on the anxiety of beginning a poetic career in English. Pressed on one side by the compulsion to repeat the stories and themes of literary history, and on the other by the demand to offer something new, Chaucer's avatar "Geffrey" dreams of a quest to find a place where these concerns are reconciled. Led through highly allusive and fantastic environments, the narrator reaches his nominal goal, Fame's echo chamber-like house in the middle of the universe, only to discover that the object of his quest, the *tydynges*—the units of literary tradition that are sorted there—is a most difficult and duplicitous basis for poetry. Ambiguously true and false, the *tydynge* makes its passage through Fame's clearinghouse of rumor and literature without observing any clear distinction between these modes of language. The poem breaks off without resolving the doubtful state of Geffrey's quest. But, I argue, it is

not the end of the quest that defines its object in this case, but the *middle*. My analysis of the poem uncovers a carefully constructed, chiastic circumscription of the poem's middle by numerous structural features of the poem's form. These features isolate an important moment in the text—in my view, the most important—in which Chaucer repeats a common example from the classical and medieval traditions of *grammatica* and *musica*: the visual simile likening the dispersion of sound to the multiplying rings of disturbed water. Geffrey's interlocutor uses this dexample to prove that all sound expands toward the middle of the universe, where Fame assigns arbitrary values to poetry, before the sounds are parsed or fused and then recycled. Concealed in the details of this example lies a deeper significance. Here, I argue, Chaucer offers nothing less than a new and radically divergent definition of voice: a voice that is coeval with poetic form and defined—like the Boethian cosmology—by a physics of emanation and return. This new voice is also the basis for a model of literary influence that makes each receiver of this voice-form continuum a new potential origin of poetic voice. What is so remarkable about this image of the poetic multiplication of voice, aside from its essential synonymy with a theory of poetic form, is that it presupposes the anteriority of poetic form with respect to the range of categories in the traditional disciplines that study them: grammar and music. The secret life of voice that Chaucer exposes in the middle of the *House of Fame* thus constitutes a poetics unlike any other in medieval literature.

My second and third chapters study the first and last poems uniquely preserved in the manuscript known as British Library Cotton Nero A.x.: *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* These titles, though arbitrary, are no less provisional than the names given to the anonymous author, presumed by many scholars to have composed all four poems: the *Pearl*-poet or the *Gawain*-poet, but never the *Patience*-poet or *Purity*-poet. Their similarly elaborate

structural features are just one of many reasons that these two poems have received the majority of scholarly attention, overshadowing their two sister poems. Along with common style, imagery, and theme, the form of these poems, as Sarah Stanbury puts it, "create[s] a sense of authorial presence, a sense of a writer confronting through difficult issues" (*Seeing the Gawain Poet* 1).[29] But even such an authoritative proponent of single authorship as A.C. Spearing still voices his doubts, noting that the style and even the "common units of subject-matter or 'themes'" of alliterative poetry are anonymous indicators of participation in a tradition (*The Gawain-Poet* 32-33). Still, the prospect of a single poet has been attractive to many, and leads Charles Moorman to close his 1968 study *The Pearl-Poet* with a call for scholarship "devoted to establishing the central themes and techniques of the poet, to demonstrating not only the mechanical unity of the poems, but also their organic unity, which is the poet's vision of life" (113).[30]

The wording of this now forty five-year-old call to action is still suggestive, but perhaps not as Moorman intended. He sees a disjunction between the four poems' "mechanical unity" (by which I assume he means what I am calling "formal patterns") and "organic unity" (perhaps the complete meaning event in which form produces meaning) but the synonymy of the latter unity and the poet's "vision of life." But the "difficult issues" that the poet of *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* confronted concerned, in my view, the possibility of the "unity" in either mechanical or organic aspects. In this sense, my discussions of these two poems constitute a *re*vision of the poet's vision of life, provided that that "life" is synonymous with its only remnant, the poems themselves. I begin with the poem most absorbed into the category of vision: *Pearl*.

Pearl may be the most formally complex poem in the English language. Despite the wealth of scholarship devoted to the intricacy of its design, I find that a case has still not been

made for the *reason* it is so artfully crafted. I begin with the assumption that the poem's meticulously arranged qualities and quantities are entangled in the meaning of the poem. *Pearl* involves the process of poetic creation as the grounds of the exceedingly complex formal structures of the poem. But it is not historical realities, narrowly idenitified with an author's experience, that its formal dimensions are measured to enclose and master, but rather its super-realities: the eternal world that lies beyond time (the medium of language) and human imagination (the essential faculty of poetry). The poem thus represents two categorically different experiences, which are nonetheless forced to simultaneously occupy the same poetic space: the dream vision of the afterlife, and the act of retelling it in poetry. For all its marvelous artifice, the poem cannot sustain the pressures of the two opposing currents of intention. On one hand is the will of a grieving father to represent a vision of inexpressible consolation, on the other, the need of the poet to admit the inexpressibility of mystical experience. Vision and revision ultimately collapse in the ontological gulf between poetry and its divine object, but this gulf itself is itself represented in the poem from the beginning of the vision, as the watery "devyse" that separates the dreamer from the spirit of his daughter and interlocutor. But in its homonymy with the important poetic term "devise," ("to compose poetry") this medial *devyse* between vision (of the eternal afterlife) and re-vision (in temporal life) comes to represent precisely the limit that poetic form faces (and exploits) in mastering the ultimate divine reality.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight stages a similar confrontation between poetry and its limits, but in the context of Romance motifs and in a very different formal construction. But more explicitly even than *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain* contains the elements of a discourse on poetics. In my final chapter I elaborate on observations about the poetic value of two objects in the poem: the pentangle that adorns Gawain's armor, and the green girdle, which is the instrument of

Gawain's survival and therefore (in his eyes) the failure of his quest—to confirm the fame of Arthur's court by dying. Recent readings of these items have set them in a discourse of rich metaphoric significance, construing them to represent semiotic categories of determinate and indeterminate meaning. But to these two elements I add a disuptive third: the Green Knight's axe, which appears in the text, and in the manuscript's illustrations, as a symbolic representation of the poem's several different kinds of ending. The critical vocabulary given by the poem then translates into three functions: knotting (pentangle), folding (girdle), and cutting (axe). I show how these principles manifest throughout the poem, providing a concurrent subtext to the narrative: a coterminous and simultaneous construction of a poetics that the text uses to conduct a running commentary on itself. Can a poem, I ask in my reading, comprise both itself and its other—both poetry and its own poetics? As Gawain approaches the end of his quest—the end of the text—only to find himself at a beginning, this relationship is at once negated and affirmed.

Each chapter to follow thus presents a different perspective on Middle English form, evincing the multiplicity of more-or-less complete "theories" of poetic form contained in Middle English poetry. All of these works, however, share in common their unease with the strangeness of their own forms. It is perhaps this sense of strangeness that pushed the concern of poetics out of the margins into the place of form itself, the strangely self-conscious surface of Middle English poetry.

Notes to Introduction

[1] Lerer's essay responds largely to New Historicist discussion and perhaps most directly to the terms of this discussion as set in motion by Lee Patterson, who has more than once traced "the war between philological pedantry and literary philosophy" that has been "virtually coterminous with Western culture itself" (*Temporal Circumstances* 7). See the first part of Patterson *Negotiating the Past* 3-76, which narrates a history of Chaucerian studies, showing how the opposing critical forces recently channeled and isolated in the camps of New Criticism and Historicism emerged from and essential reiterate18th and 19th century critical disputes. But more recent Chaucerian studies have tried to re-orient this seminal opposition, reconciling divisions between Historicism and the close study of linguistic features of Chaucerian texts, including psychoanalytical procedures. See Wallace, Fradenburg, Turner. And see Matthews for a review of some of these and other recent revisions of the limits Patterson defined as "New Historicism and its discontents" (*Negotiating the Past* 41-76 passim).

[2] Against the tendency to avoid the important distinction between modes of poetry and modes of prose in recent Middle English studies, Derek Pearsall recently reminds us that "poetry, as a form of 'literature', exploits potentialities in language, especially metaphorical potentialities, that are not exploited in other forms of discourse" ("Towards a Poetics of Chaucieran Narrative" 100), a distinction I mean to underscore.

[3] And see Patterson's exemplary proof of the claim in his first two chapters of the same book, "Putting the Wife in Her Place: The Place of Philology," 19-35.

[4] This place of linguistic "strategries" prior to the making of meaning seems to hearken back to important texts in classical and medieval semiotics. Augustine's remarkable account in *Confessiones* of his own first mastery of words, the passage with which Wittgenstein begins his *Philosophical Investigations,* speaks of a similar time in the formation of language prior to the event of meaning, when the infant begins to recognize that words gesture toward things (*Confessions* I.viii).

[5] I borrow the term "meaning event" from Michael A. Sells' discussion of apophatic discourse in texts of medieval negative theology; Sells, citing Paul Ricoeur's important book *Interpretation Theory*, contrasts "the well-lnown distinction between meaning (as sense and reference) and event (as predication)" (*Mystical Languages* 9). "Meaning event" then "indicates that moment when the menaing has become identical with the act of predication. In metaphyiscal terms, essence is identical with existence, but such identity is not only asserted, it is performed" (ibid).

[6] Twentieth century medieval studies produced a rich body of work that begins to fill this gap. Robert Payne's 1963 *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* inaugurated the reconstruction of a rhetorical poetics sufficient to Chaucer specifically and Middle English literature by a presumably simple extension. Payne's work was further developed in J.A. Burrow's 1974 essay "Towards a Chaucerian Poetic" and associated with the project of Zumthor's *Toward a Medieval Poetic.* These works study the form of poetry as an inheritance of rhetorical categories, especially those found in Quintilian.

[7] I refer mainly to the recent anthology, *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* which has brought together dozens of fragments of poetical statements derived, for the most part, from Middle English prologues. This resource is invaluable

for the study of the ethical dimension of medieval poetry and the developing notions of authorship, much like the similar anthology of Latinate sources compiled by A.J. Minnis and A.B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*. But the blurred distinctions of different literary modes that allow the editors of *The Idea of the Vernacular* to incorporate such a wide variety of texts is, for my purposes, a weakness. Lerer's essay cites the latter anthology's criteria of inclusion as an illustration of the profound shift toward "a [*sic*] overwhelmingly historicist enterprise" (Lerer, "The Endurance of Formalism" 2). Thinking, perhaps, of this deficiency, Copeland and Sluiter, in the introduction to their 2009 anthology, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory,* isolate the "artificial surface" of a poetic work as "the completion of a process of artifice that…culminates in the technical control of effective language" (33). From this view, both "rhetorical" and "ethical" in scope, "the articulation of form" is "a dimension of representation, not…a separate process" (40). This definition begins to propose a concern for formal pattern as, in itself, a meaningful dimension of poetry and not a technicality to be overlooked.

[8] To this sense of "copyled" may be compared Chaucer's claim in the introduction to his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*: "But considre wel that I ne usurpe not to have founden this werk of my labour or of myn engyn. I n'am but a *lewd compilator* of the labour of old astrologiens, and have it translatid in myn Englissh oonly for thy doctrine" (59-64; my emphasis). On this sense of "compile" as simultaneously culling and translating in the tradition of medieval literary theory of *compilatio* see Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* esp. 94-117 and 190-210. On possible Wycliffite sources of the Chaucer's (and through, him Lydgate's) conceptions of translation and compilation see Cole 1128-1167.

[9] See *Middle English Dictionary Online*, *s.v.* "staf," accessed September 1, 2013, definition 2b. Some texts that witness this meaning are as follows: c1475 *Þe tyme approcheþe* (Hrl 2251) p.309: "All be it the frenssh in foure staves be, The ynglissh sevyn kepith in degree. For this metre wil non other applie But in staves seven ben sette redilye. a1500 *Partenay* (Trin-C R.3.17) 6555: As ny as metre can conclude sentence, Cereatly by rew in it haue I go Nerehande stafe by staf. a1500 *Partenay* (Trin-C R.3.17) 6581: The frensh staffes silabled be More breueloker and shorter also Then is the english lines."

[10] All quotations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. unless otherwise noted.

[11] And here too is a usage of the important poetical term *makynge*, famously defined by Glending Olson as as opposed to *poetrie*, in a sense that seems to complicate the distinction made by Olson and developed further by Anne Middleton. Here *makynge* indicates not the lyrical, vernacular trifles of public court performance, but apparently precisely the authoritative, winnowed texts of literary tradition. See Olson, Middleton.

[12] See Turville-Petre, "Politics and Poetry" passim, and *England the Nation* 27-70; also Moffat.

[13] See Helen Phillips's note in *The Idea of the Vernacular* 19. On the prevalence of modesty topoi in medieval poetry, see Curtius 83-85.

[14] *Middle English Dictionary Online*, *s.v.* "straunge" accessed October 26, 2013, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/. In either field of senses, "straunge" is often used in discourse about language. See, for example, John Trevisa's introductory *Dialogus* to his translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*: "Seþthe þet Babyl was ybuld, men spekeþ dyvers tonges, so þat dyvers men buþ straunge to oþer and knoweþ noȝt of here speche" (lines 1-3); see Waldron, "Trevisa's

Original Prefaces on Translation" 289. "Straunge" refers far more to the people who are separated by language difference, as in Trevisa's dialogue, than to the languages that make the difference, which makes Mannyng's use appear somewhat exceptional.

[15] Ronald Waldron provides examples of Rolle's literal style of translating the Latin Psalter; for example, *Ego dormiui et soporatus sum, et exurrexi quia dominus suscepit me* becomes "I slepe and am soaked, and I rase, four oure Lord uptoke me" ("John Trevisa and the Use of English" 186-7).

[16] *Rime couée* was apparently characteristic specifically of Anglo-Norman poetry. See Jeffrey and Levy 17-27.

[17] See *Idea of the Vernacular* 23; also Jeffrey, and Levy 25-26.

[18] See Turville-Petre. *England the Nation* 36-37.

[19] I exclude the prominent candidates "making" and "poetry," first distinguished by Glending Olson as neither of these terms, nor the negative referential space prised open in their distinction, pertain to *poetic form*, but rather mark social and ethical categories of the poetry's intentions and production. See Middleton 35-49.

[20] For Dante, in distinction to Usk, French (*lingua oïl*) "claims as its own whatever is written in or translated into vernacular prose, such as the Biblical compilations with accounts of the deeds of the Trojans and Romans and the wonderful stories of King Arthur as well as other writings on history and doctrine" "quicquid redactum est sive inventum ad vulgare prosaycum, suum est: videlicet Biblia cum Troianorum Romanorumque et Arturi regis ambages pulcerrime et quamplures alie ystorie ac doctrine" (I.x.2).

[21] Thorlac Turville-Petre points out that, earlier still than Usk, William Herebert and the Harley 2253 MS also evince "recognition of the distinctive character and function of each language;" see *England the Nation* 191 and 181-217 *passim*.

[22] see also Waldron, "Trevisa's Original Prefaces" 29.

[23] In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, it is precisely Italian's proximity to Latin that is the criterion of its selection above French or Occitan as the "illustrious vernacular" Dante seeks.

[24] On the development of the concept of the "naked text" in Middle English literary and translation theory, esp. in Chaucer, see Delany, *The Naked Text*; and on the possible influences of Wycliffite translation theory on Chaucer's own, see Cole, 1141-48.

[25] On the prevalence of this particular Boethian configuration in Chaucer's thought, see Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* 73-74.

[26] See Phillips and Havely 287.

[27] One near exception is the word "tymes" in the couplet at Book III, lines 2121-2: "And, Lord, this hous in alle tymes / was full of shipmen and pilgrimes." Besides being plural, not singular, this instance is adverbial and does not refer to time in the abstract sense.

[28] On possible references to rhetorical topoi here see Camargo 91-107.

[29] On the common authorship of the poems, see Vantuono 37-69 for a discussion of these similarities; also see Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet* 32-40.

[30] And at least one exceptional study, Lynn Staley (Johnson)'s *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet* answered precisely this call.

Chapter One:

Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the Secret Life of Voice

Midway through the *House of Fame,* Chaucer's talking Eagle entertains his passenger's questions about their destination and explains the reason behind their journey to this place in particular in the quest for *tydynges*, or new material with which to make a beginning in English poetry. Folded into the eagle's circuitous response, Chaucer quietly articulates a re-definition of voice (*voys/soun*) that diverges radically from the traditional grammatical and musical definitions. Here he expands on the ancient comparison of travelling sound to ripples in water, seizing on the problems and implications of this image that had yet to be explored, and using it to reflect on the anxieties of the new English poet, pressed between obligations to foreign literary tradition and the desire to make *newe thynges* in English. The voice that comes into view in Chaucer's English version of the ancient trope is not so much a discreet entity in itself as an embodiment of a formal dynamic, simultaneously emerging from and returning to the *middle* at the heart of a cosmos of poetry defined by these movements. By emphasizing the exemplarity of the *middle,* at once the origin and destiny of all voice, in acts of poetic creation (*makynge* as well as *poesie*), Chaucer reorients the relationship of the individual voice and *litteratura* (tradition or Fame) as, alternatively, the original and the terminal moments in the perpetual life cycle of form that poetry sustains. Thus the *House of Fame*, long viewed as a discourse on literary tradition,

influence and received poetics, is, in my reading, better understood as the demonstration of a remarkable theory of poetic form, whose chief gesture is the integration of the terms: *voice, form,* and *middle*.[1]

The two most immediate facts of the poem are its genre and its fragmentary state. With the first line, "God turne us every drem to goode!" (1),[2] the poem enters the flexible but indeterminate realm of dreams, where the value of a dream—whether it is *goode* or bad—remains in question. In ending so abruptly mid-dream, the text declines to awaken from this indeterminacy and offer some interpretation or conclusion, but leaves us in doubt as to whether the first line's prayer will be answered. The indeterminate edges of the text turn out to be precisely what make the *House of Fame* so perfectly suited to accommodate a poetics of the middle.

As Lady Philosophy says in Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, humans ("erthliche beestes"), "dremen alwey your bygynnynge, althoughe it be with a thynne ymaginacioun," though "many maner errours mystorneth yow therfro" (*Boece* 3p3, 1-6). The opening of the *House of Fame* literalizes Lady Philosophy's pessimistic anthropology with a curious twist: the narrator dreams his beginning precisely by beginning with the subject of dreams, about which he claims to know nothing and for which he invokes anyone who "of these miracles / the causes knoweth bet then I" (12-13).[3] There is a great disparity, however, between the narrator's proclaimed lack of theoretical knowledge and the immense detail with which he remembers one particular dream: "Ne no man elles me beforn, / Mette [dreamed], I trowe stedfastly, / So wonderful a drem as I / The tenthe day now of Decembre" (60-63). This "now" and the absence of any designation of the year in the otherwise precise date grounds us in the present time of the narrator, at which time we expect the narration of the dream immediately to

begin. But suddenly another beginning abruptly intervenes: "But at my gynnynge...I wol make invocacion" (66-67). This second beginning follows the first with an invocation to the *god of slep* (69), whose presence comically threatens to induce upon the reader a more sleep-like state than even the author of a dream-vision might wish of his audience.[4] Several lines later, the poem seems to begin yet again (111). The multiplication of beginnings, in fact, occupies much of Book I and even extends into Book II, making it difficult, as in a real dream, to discern what is real and what is dream—what is the framing narrative and what is the vision. Unlike a real dream, however, a clear sense of ending is also withheld.

In place of any sign of closure, narrative and vision end together, drawn to an abrupt halt in a line that seems to reach beyond the text for the same figure of authority who is invoked in the opening lines, but who never arrives. Thus finitude, in the form of an unambiguous beginning and a conclusive ending, likewise never arrive in the text of the *House of Fame*—the text is, in a sense, *all middle*. And if form is, as D. Vance Smith has recently written, "nothing other than the conditions of finitude," and "the sign of a finitude that has not yet arrived" (Smith 140), then we might say that the *House of Fame*, as a prolonged suspension of finitude's conditions and signs, is *all form*, or at least that it is intensively concerned with the limit of the relationship of these terms as poetic properties: middle and form. But without the geometric definition of these traditional boundaries, how can we stably locate the middle of the poem where, I claim, we find the eagle's discourse on voice and its relation to the ultimate middle—the middle of the world?

The poem *is* bounded, in a way, by the sense of absent authority that it invokes. The search for the identity of the "man of grete auctoritee" will remain as inconclusive as the poem, but Chaucer integrates the texts of numerous authoritative antecedents into the allusive matrix of the poem: prominent translations from Vergil, Boethius, Dante, and Ovid soon join numerous

other more subtly registered influences, each looking inward and admitting a different discursive perspective on the subject of the poem as a whole, which, in my reading, is the dilation of the primal scene of poetic creation clearly imagined in the eagle's speech. It is there, in the middle of Chaucer's journey to Fame, where the allusive fibers of the poem are most densely plied and interwoven. The calls to *auctoritee* in the beginning and provisional end of the *House of Fame* thus appear to reach not outward beyond the text, but inward.

Maura Nolan's recent observations on Ovidian subtexts in Gower's *Vox Clamantis* may then equally apply to Chaucer's multi-plied text: "Allusions to Ovid puncture the surface of the poem, producing openings in the text through which readers can access Ovid's verse in all its complexity and multivalence," so that the text alluded to "makes available an alternative way of seeing…revealing a space in which different rules apply and different freedoms are available to poets."[5] In Book II of the *House of Fame,* not one but many texts, belonging to several different medieval discourses, contribute facets to the intertextual reflective surface that regards itself. Chaucer's richly allusive poem is not a superficial screen laid over a layered foundation of authoritative subtexts. Rather, it assumes a position of mediation between these various texts, reconciling their often carefully selected contradictions. Representing again the *middleness* on which its form insists, the *House of Fame* assumes a mediating position in the intertextual web it weaves.

It is within these contexts that we must situate the middle of the poem, which takes its place not as a factor of geometric or numeric measure—not as the point equidistant between a beginning and ending (though, in its unfinished form, it does fall roughly at this point)—but as the *telos* of the text's allusive matrix and formal intention. Before we come to this telos, it seems necessary first to understand how the beginning and the end fail as determinative limits of the

poem's *intentio* and form, but refer the sense of authority notably absent at these extreme moments to the interior of the text.

The Beginnings and the non-Ending

The beginnings of the *House of Fame* are implicated in complex intra- and intertextual folds. One may scan the various categories of conventional beginning summarized by Davidoff in her book *Beginning Well* without placing *House of Fame,* though its several beginnings present features that resemble qualities from each category.[6] But one beginning seems more determinate than the others: 111 lines after the opening prayer, "God turne us every drem to goode," the account of Chaucer's dream finally begins, almost reluctantly, with the reiteration of the precise date of the night in question. This time it is rephrased in a chiastic reversal of the original word order, "Of Decembre the tenthe day" (111), as though to close off or fold over the digressive invocation to Morpheus.[7] We rejoin the narrator presumably in his temporal present to enter into the matter of his dream, which takes the form of a *temple ymad of glas* (120), filled with *ymages... portreytures... figures* (121-126), and most importantly, with a brass table, on which the dreamer finds inscribed a familiar text,

> 'I wol now synge, yif I kan,
> The armes and also the man' (142-3)

Here is still another beginning, this time the beginning of another work entirely, namely Vergil's *Aeneid*. Here the famous first hemistich, *Arma virumque cano* is either translated from Latin by the narrator for our convenience, or found already rendered with its half-hexameter resolved into rhyming English couplets—Chaucer leaves this question suggestively open to dispute.[8] In this

encounter of one beginning text (that of Chaucer's narrator) with another (Vergil's) Chaucer frames a complex power play of authority and submission. The tentativeness with which the narrator-translator approaches the authority of the original Latin is inscribed in his translation: the interpolated phrase, "yif I kan," conserves a phonetic echo of Vergil's assertive *cano*, but conveys the opposite of the confidence that resonates in the assertive "I sing" of the original.[9] The translator handles Vergil's text with great deference, allowing even the sound of the Latin to penetrate into the soundscape of his English, and yet it can also be noted that with his placement of "kan" at the end of its line, he transposes not only the sound of *cano* but the negative poetic space of the caesura that followed it in Vergil's hexameter line into the rhyming environment of English poetry, the chief locus of the vernacular poet's artistry. And in translating the Latin caesura into the place of English rhyme—distributing one Latin hexameter into two four-stress English lines—Chaucer has flipped Vergil's opening *ordo* of words and images on this prosodic axis, postponing his translation of the grammatical objects of "I sing," *Arma virumque*, to the second line of the text that he "sees," thereby reversing the sequence of Vergil's Latin to accord with English syntax. In the process he foregrounds the interpolated parenthetical question of the adequacy of the resources of English to sing (or in the Bodley and Fairx MSs, to "say") the matter of Vergil's epic. This clash of sound and sense between translation and original, Latin and English, participates in a duplicitous playfulness that brings back into question the balance of authority between classical *auctor* and English *maker*. Even in so careful a translation as this, Chaucer admits the priority of at least some aspects of English to Latin, positing only himself as a judicious mediator between the two. Chaucer's translation of Vergil, in other words takes its place in a space implicitly forfeitted by the *matter*—the events—that might have populated Geffrey's very personal and specifc dreamscape, had his mind not given way to the *Aeneid*'s

pressing authority. But by the license taken in the translation, Chaucer prises open the joint where Latin "poetrie" is transmuted into English "makynge," forcing attention to fall, however momentarily, on the authority of the new poet's mediating role.

A long ekphrasis on the plot of the *Aeneid* follows Vergil's famous *incipit*, now only the latest in the succession of beginnings in the *House of Fame*, and a dangerous choice for the writer seeking authority of his own. For as Edward Said observes, "although quotation can take many forms, in every one the quoted passage symbolizes other writing as encroachment, as a disturbing force moving potentially to take over what is presently being written" (Said 22). Or again, in Chaucer's version of this thought, his hero remains "daswed at another book" (658).

Through the lens of his narrator, Chaucer gives his condensed English version of the *Aeneid* using the rhetorical device authorized for the medieval poet primarily by the several ekphrases in Vergil's epic, but suggested especially by the ekphrasis in Book I, in which Aeneas *sees* the contents of the *Iliad* portrayed on a Carthiginian mural. This ekphrasis, punctuated by the recurring phrase, "y saugh" (redolent of Chaucer's own translation of the *Romance of the Rose*), dominates the *House of Fame*'s first book. And yet one part of Vergil's text the translator does not see, or at least that he does not tell, is precisely the scene in which Aeneas, made invisible by his mother Venus, stands before that mural. Side-stepping this scene, Chaucer "frees himself from the need to juggle two overlapping ekphrases...and six tiers of representation: his own, his narrator's, the pictures of Vergil's narrative seen by the Chaucer's narrator, Vergil's narrative itself, the pictures of the Trojan War in Vergil, and the narrative of the Trojan War that these pictures represent" (Naer vii). Perhaps Chaucer's declines to coordinate these many focal centers, whose conflicting interests are represented—made visible—in the *Aeneid* precisely by the figure of the temporarily invisible witness, transposing the theme of transparency onto the

Temple of *Glass* in order to provide contrast for the very visible narrator of *The House of Fame*. With Bennett, who relates the glassy substance of this temple and the icy foundation of Fame's Palace in Book III, we begin to doubt the substantiality of these structures and what they represent, but cannot avoid the presence of the narrator, whose obvious side-stepping of this ekphrastic abyss demonstrates the unavoidable centrality of his perspective. At the same time, it re-hearses again the thematic back-reaching toward some authoritative presence prior to his own beginning, a more original space. All the beginnings of Book I, in some way or another, look back, "past" itself to locate a true origin elsewhere.

The theme of insubstantiality soon becomes far more substantial. At the end of the first book Chaucer turns from his reading/sight-seeing only to find beyond the temple of glass nothing but a wasteland. In stark contrast to the image-filled temple, he sees now a field void of any feature at all, that "nas but of sond [sand]" (486). Since the poem insists on the dream's specificity to its dreamer (by the exactitude of its dating if nothing else), we might interpret this image of imagelessness as a failure of the dreamer's imagination, or, somehow, his allegorical transcendence of the image. But an image imported from Dante's *Paradiso* soon enters the scene. High above this empty land, the narrator sees the form of a golden eagle, and the first book abruptly ends there, having presented little more of the dream than a series of interrupted beginnings and the work of another poet. The second book begins with a new proem and a reaffirmation of its own narrative presence:

> *Now* herkeneth every maner man
> That Englissh understonde kan
> And listeth of my drem to lere, (509-11, my emphasis)

At this point, with apparently the fourth beginning, the reader may begin to wonder if anything but new beginnings will follow. But this *final* beginning is notably different from its failed predecessors. First, as the first line of the second book, it marks the end of the beginnings of the poem, but also the beginning of the middle of the poem, effecting in a very different sense a beginning *in medias res*, and this by sheer force of delay (which, as the Latin concept of *mora*, also happens to be a signature of Vergil's historical ethos). This beginning is also boldly English, specifying its audience as those who can "listen" to the poem *as English*, and thus departing from the domain of the visible and textual. The firmly English "man" / "kan" rhyme of the couplet here looks back in a revisionary posture on the "man" / "kan" in lines 142-143, where Chaucer "saw" and translated the text of the *Aeneid*'s incipit with uncertainty, adding of his own sense only his diffidence as an English writer, "yif I kan." This new, expressly English beginning illustrates, by the sheer volume of the preceding attempts it brackets, the immense difficulty, but also the necessity of beginning in English.

Despite the plurality of the poem's beginnings, the *House of Fame* has no clear ending. The last lines of the poem necessarily assumes the role then, frustratingly but suggestively, of the work's final opening—that is the opening of what is to remain unwritten—forever held in suspense of the immediate conclusion they seem to announce:

> Atte laste y saugh a man,
> Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan;
> But he semed for to be
> A man of gret auctoritee (2155-7)

The introduction of such a man has invited more than one scholar to address the question, "What was the 'man of grete auctorite' about to say?" (Stevenson 10), a formulation that has the

unfortunate effect of immediately diverting attention *beyond* the ending itself to a domain of supposition.[10] Weighing in on the importance of a project that sets determining the end of the poem as its goal, Muscatine opines that, in absence of such an ending, "there is no possibility of a secure interpretation," but then concedes that "[i]t is hard to conceive of any ending at all that could consistently follow from what we have" (114). In other words, the tendency is to treat the man's silence as the jagged edge of a fragment—not an end but the sign of another beginning. The question that is posed but postponed by the appearance of this man, and the expectation of what he is about to say is not then "where does the poem end?" but "to where does the poem tend?" If one demands that the destination marked by this question be identical with *the* end of the poem—namely, the point of closure facing and opposing the beginning from the other boundary of the written text—then one consigns oneself to trying to catch glimpses over the shoulder of the "man of grete auctorite" of what *might have* come after, and there one will find nothing more determinate than the featureless wasteland that confronts the narrator upon leaving the *temple ymad of glas* in Book I (lines 482-91). In a way, however, the poem's aporetic sense of *dis*closure at the end is a fitting counter-balance to the beginning, where the narrator begins by admitting that "hyt is wonder…to my wyt, what causeth swevenes" (2-3)—that he does not know how a dream vision (such as the present one that has just begun) begins. In his wit's *wonder,* the narrator summons the presence of a man who has authority in such matters ("whoso of these miracles / the causes knoweth bet then I," 12-13), and his invocation, like all voice, we soon learn, must eventually travel to the whirling labyrinth of twigs situated at the end of Book III, where such a man arrives, but like the echo of the beginning, a new beginning. Is the *House of Fame* then entirely a book of *incipits*? To what end does Chaucer so boldly abandon the

popular and normative Horatian paradox of beginning *in medias res,* "in the middle of things" or "in the middle of the matter" (*De arte poetica* 148)?

To approach this question, I will pose another: to what do the end and the beginning refer? The last lines of the poem, whether an intentional non-ending or an unintentional ending of the *House*, offer several senses of conclusion that may yield some answers to our questions. These lines rehearse many of the themes of introduction, invocation, and inconclusiveness that we have already seen in the numerous beginnings of the poem. The phrase *atte laste* declares that the end of something is imminent. Having read through Book III, we might expect that this is only the end of the long parade of authors and historical and allegorical characters that populate Fame's house. But Chaucer gives us the opportunity in this temporal marker to perceive at least an intention to conclude, if not the poem, at least some important aspect of it. The verb phrase, "y saugh," acts as an index to the ekphrastic formula Chaucer employed so abundantly in his literal-visual translation of the *Aeneid* in Book I. Likewise, "a man," especially in the significant line-final position, could be said to refer to "the man" of Vergil's epic in Chaucer's rhyming English version. The narrator, however, neither can name ("nevene") nor does he know ("kan") this last man. The feeling of suspense in which we are left at this uncomfortable ending and the suggestion of an unfulfilled continuation rests primarily on the failure of this man to appear in the text. But was it ever possible for him to breach the limit of the poem and become manifest in its presence?

First, as to the words themselves, the rhyme words of the second to last rhyming couplet of the extent poem, "man" and "kan" respectively, mirror two sets of couplets we have already seen: first in an inversion of this order, "kan" / "man" in the final position of lines 142-3, then in the same order in the beginning of Book II, with "man" / "kan" in the final position of lines 509-

10. This is, to be fair, a common and almost an exclusive pairing of rhyme words; in the *House of Fame*, "man" in the rhyming position, otherwise only appears coupled with "began" (a fact which may, however, be significant in itself).[11] But these particular instances seem to cast glances at one another, as if to index significant moments in the openings and closing of the poem, or as though to close the circuit between them.

Thus these last lines give the poem a sense of formal circularity by responding to the beginning's numerous beginnings in a structural chiasmus of vast scale. Seemingly bereft of closure in its linear narrative, the poem thus nonetheless achieves a complex formal unity by coordinating its conspicuously pluralized openings with its de facto ending in a series of nested, circular patterns, not different in essence from those I studied in my introduction or from the chiasmus in the dating lines.

Between Sleep and Dream

In place of an ending, the poem returns to the words, themes, and temporal presence of the numerous beginnings that beguile us, in which we see that the distinction between these beginnings and endings becomes less pronounced. A certain reciprocity or balance is achieved despite the disproportionate ratio of beginnings (at least four so far) to endings (perhaps none). In a strictly narrative sense, we might even say that the bewildered psychological status of the dreamer at the end (*atte laste*) returns to its original condition, in close and desperate proximity to an absent authority figure who is needed to supplement the knowledge that our mediator, apparently still diffident, still lacks. Structurally and narratologically, the beginning and the ending of the poem, considered in this way, become increasingly less distinguishable as linear

opposites, but become rather like identical limits of the dreamer's understanding, a border or brink of uncertainty encircling the matter of his particular dream and his subjective experience of it, over which he cannot transgress. It is not then the plurality of openings nor the absence of a conclusion that is necessarily of concern, so much as the similarity of the beginnings and the ending of the poem as a single, unifying enclosure, a sort of circular encapsulation of the matter of the poem. The architectural shape of the poem, if the *House of Fame* may be likened to a house (or, as we will see later, to *the* House of Fame itself), appears to be that of a bound space closed in between two excluded authorities, with the sheltered narrative in between filtered through the subjective experience of the very opaque, obtuse narrator. A sense of nervous, uncertain centrality permeates his doubt, just as it shapes the structure of the text. The poem claims to be entirely medial—its beginnings trivialized by multiplicity; its end undefined. How then *could* it have begun, or how could it have *only* begun *in medias res*, if fundamentally it is a "middle thing," or a matter of middles? And where then is its middle? And what then is the middle-matter of the poem?

The dreamer's nocturnal pilgrimage is certainly not without its stated purpose. From the wasteland beyond the temple of glass and the ekphrastic translation of the *Aeneid*, the narrator, who acquires in Book II the name "Geffrey" (729), is swept up in the claws of the Dantean golden eagle and born toward the House of Fame. Most of the second and middle book of the poem is devoted to explaining why they should be going there and not somewhere else. Again we arrive upon a new beginning, one charged with a purpose and a destination, but one which ultimately takes the form of a dilation of a middle ground—or rather, quite the opposite of a ground; a middle air.

Geffrey, it seems, has earned the attention of Jupiter, the eagle's master, for his service to "Hys blynde nevew Cupido / And faire Venus also" (617-8). Jupiter has decided, therefore to reward Geffrey with "some disport and game, / In som recompensacion / Of labor and devocion / That thou hast had, loo causeles / To Cupido" (664-8), but has become concerned that the poet has recently had "no tydynges / Of Loves folk yf they be glade, / Ne of noght elles that God made" (644-6), with which to make more poetry. The term *tydynges* might be considered the keyword of the whole poem, but no easy matter to define. It is often equated simply with *newe thynges* (with which it forms a handy rhyme-pairing), with much the same field of meaning as Latin *res*, but with an added sense of temporal currency, of novelty. To complicate matters, it is made explicit that the news or matters signified by *tydynges* have ambiguous veridical value; they are either true or false: "Both sothe sawes and lesinges [lies]" (76); or even, remarkably, both true and false at once: "tydynges, / Both of feir speche and chidynge, / And of fals and soth compouned" (1027-9). This duplicitous object is indeed a curious grail for a poetical quest. We will return to the ambiguity of *tydynges* later. For the moment, it only matters to Geffrey that his lack of a *res*, a matter with which "To make bookys, songes, dytees, / In ryme or elles cadence" (622-3), has become shamefully ovbious to his celestial patrons. The poet has been shirking his divinely-sanctioned poetic duties and has allowed himself to become exhausted in his mundane employment:

> In stede of reste and newe thynges,
> Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
> And also domb as any stoon,
> Thou sittest at another book,
> Tyl fully daswed ys thy look; (654-8)

What is striking in this passage is its insistence on the opposition of novelty to reading. *Tydynges* is here glossed as and rhymed with *newe thynges* and the imperative to acquire them is contrasted with the activity of reading quietly *as any stoon*, a practice that leaves one's look dazed and one's mind dulled. The ethical activity of reading and by association the doctrine it transmits is here put into question. The eagle seems to suggest that the use of books is more passive than active, and without any useful objective; the inspirational value of literature, its ability to engender new literature, is also set in doubt. We remember that Geffrey, after simultaneously translating and *seeing* the *Aeneid* in Book I, turned away from one abyss (the ekphrastic vortex) only to behold another, the waste of sand—like the pulverized remains of the too delicate temple of glass—from which the eagle rescues him.[12] Geffrey, in short, has been too long asleep on the job, and even the genre of *dream* vision of which this poem is a masterpiece implicates the dozing author.

Perhaps it is with a tone both ironical and immensely appropriate then that the talking eagle's first word to Geffrey, who is at the time *asweved* ("dazed" 549) and incapacitated in the birds clutch, is this most squawk-like, avian utterance, "Awake!"

> Til at the laste he to me spak
>
> In mannes vois, and seyde, "*Awak!*" (555-6, my emphasis)

The position in the verse of the eagle's first speech is significant. Strongly emphasized at the end of the line, *awak* stands out not just as a grammatically valid word (however subject to irony in its birdlike resonance), but as a word partaking in a most peculiar modality of poetic speech, namely rhyme. The bird is thus doubly surprising as a creature at once of perfectly grammatical speech and also of poetic capacity. That an irrational animal could speak is an impossibility insured by medieval grammar, which demands that articulate voice contain a rational intention;

and yet as we saw, *tydynges* such as the appearance of a talking eagle need not be true, and perhaps even need to be a little bit false. The eagle's is a voice that sounds, at first, as though it were merely an inarticulate cry, and indeed its purpose—to startle the listener from his swoon—would be served by any loud noise, with or without meaning attached to it. It is worth noting the obvious fact, though, that "awak" must not be entirely successful in its communicative purpose, since to awaken the dreamer prematurely would defeat the eagle's purpose—it would end the poem. It must awaken the narrator, but only partially.

But from what state and into what state is the narrator then to awaken? The poet, it seems, is supposed to enter into a consciousness somehow between dream (the poem so far, or perhaps the sleep within sleep that overcomes him when he is snatched by the eagle) and the sleep induced by literature. Perhaps this difficult mediation is not unlike the one held between the patently false absurdity of a talking bird and the perfectly valid poetry he very fluently speaks. What the value of this dimension might be remains, for now, uncertain. The status of a dream within a dream is more of a problem for Chaucer than for Dante, whose persona sleeps and dreams in the course of his pilgrimage; for the *Commedia* never explicitly calls itself a dream, but poses as a history of true events. Chaucer's eagle invokes and recommends a most unusual state and matter of active consciousess, one between truth and falsity and in the middle of dream and sleep.

To arrive at this middle ground in order to give Geffrey access to the *tydynges* he needs, the eagle has been sent to deliver the poet to a unique location, the House of Fame. The bird reassures his still airborne, still reluctant passenger, "trust wel that thou shalt here, / when we be come there I seye, / mo wonder thynges...moo tydynges" (672-675). His list of "moo thynges" to

be heard proceeds to multiply in a crescendo of subjects and topics for the next 23 lines, of which the following is a sample:

> Mo discordes, moo jealousies,
>
> Mo murmures and moo novelries
>
> And moo dissymulacions...
>
> And eke moo holdynge in hondes
>
> And also moo renovelaunces
>
> Of olde forleten aqueyntaunces,
>
> Mo love-dayes and acordes
>
> Then on instrumentes be cordes. (685-7, 692-6)

This list resembles the collection of *moo ymages...moo curiouse portreytures* that populated the temple in Book I (121-7), only here is enumerated topics of narrative and speech; topics of gossip. Line 696, given here as it is edited in the *Riverside Chaucer*, conserves the reading from the Pepys 2006 (P) manuscript of the *House of Fame*. The other two manuscripts, Bodley 638 (B) and Fairfax 16 (F), give a different, and I think more interesting reading of the line:

> Than on instrumentz be *acordys* (696)

With the equivocal rhyme on "acordys" at the end of this anaphoric list of multiplications upon multiplications, we find the levels of discourse have also quietly multiplied.[13] The identical rhyme words pun on two meanings of accord: "reconciliation," as between lovers, and "harmonic interval," respectively (Phillips and Havely 154), but the form of this equivocation also alerts us to the presence of a third meaning of the word, namely "rhyme," for which it was a technical term of widespread currency in contemporary poetical treatises. In this sense, "acordes" works retroactively to resuscitate its antonym in "discordes" a few lines above, where it notably

does not fall in the rhyming position. In the moment of these self-commenting rhymes, the text becomes re-valorized and beset with ambiguity, no longer simply enumerating the topics and content of poetry but evoking the language of poetry itself, a language that is attuned at least as much to such aural resonances as it is to images (though as we will see, imagination will come into play even in this most aural book). Beneath the eagle's voice, or perhaps within its form, we begin dimly to perceive another voice, quietly alerting us to the presence of a discourse on poetic form as well as poetic content. Poetic form, as well as content, appears on the menu of the feast that awaits Chaucer on his way to the House of Fame.

The Place of Fame and Ovid's *Domus Famae*

We first glimpse the full scope of the poem's formal architecture in two resonant couplets translated from the *Metamorphoses*, which signpost Ovid's influence and bracket Chaucer's discourse on voice, its place, and its form. Here the eagle addresses the second of his two claims, namely that all things naturally *intend* toward the center of the universe, where, the bird shows by recourse to Ovid's book ("And so thyn oune bok hyt tellithm," 712), Fame keeps her residence. Geffrey, the poem's "obtuse" narrator, is doubtful that anyone in any place could collect all the *tydynges* that are supposed to be housed with Fame, though that person had "alle the pies [informants] / In al a realme, and alle the spies" (703-4).[14] In response the Eagle presents to his still airborne, still reluctant passenger a quasi-logical demonstration that has two objectives: first, to show that Fame's house occupies the exact center of the universe; second, to show that every utterance ever spoken naturally travels to congregate there by virtue of what he

calls sound's "kyndely enclynynge" (734). The bird's first task is the most easily discharged. He locates Fame's palace as follows:

> First shalt thou here where she duelleth:
> And so thyn oune boke hyt tellith,
> Hir paleys stant, as I shal seye
> Ryght even in myddes of the wey
> Betwexen hevene and erthe and see,
> That what so ever in al these three
> Is spoken, either privy or aperte,
> The way thereto ys so overte
> And stante eke in so just a place
> That every soun mot to hyt pace;
> Or what so cometh from any tonge,
> Or spoke in suerte or in drede.
> Certeyn, hyt moste thider nede." (711-24)

Here we come to the titular matter of the poem, the House, which is in fact the source of all poetic subjects, or *tydynges*. The House of Fame collects all the voices uttered in the universe by virtue of its centrality—or *middleness* ("in myddes of the wey"), but the force that governs this position must not be confused with any modern ideas of gravitation; one travels *up* and *outward* not *down* and *inward* toward this center. The journey from earth or heaven, through air and towards Fame is a trajectory shared by every sound that is made, the itinerary of Geffrey's pilgrimage, and also therefore the narrative of the *House of Fame*.

The book the eagle references is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 12, and the pertinent passage contains Ovid's own triangulation of the *domus Famae*:

Orbe locus medio est inter terrasque fretumque
caelestesque plagas, triplicis confinia mundi;
unde quod est usquam, quamuis regionibus absit,
inspicitur, penetratque cavas uox omnis ad aures:
Fama tenet summaque domum sibi legit in arce,
innumerosque aditus ac mille foramina tectis
addidit et nullis inclusit limina portis;
nocte dieque patet: tota est ex aere sonanti,
tota fremit uocesque refert iteratque quod audit;
nulla quies intus nullaque silentia parte,
nec tamen est clamor, sed paruae murmura uocis,
qualia de pelagi, siquis procul audiat, undis
esse solent, qualemve sonum, cum Iuppiter atras
increpuit nubes, extrema tonitrua reddunt.
atria turba tenet: ueniunt, leve uulgus, euntque
mixtaque cum ueris passim commenta uagantur
milia rumorum confusaque uerba uolutant;
e quibus hi uacuas inplent sermonibus aures,
hi narrata ferunt alio, mensuraque ficti
crescit, et auditis aliquid nouus adicit auctor.
illic Credulitas, illic temerarius Error

vanaque Laetitia est consternatique Timores
Seditioque repens dubioque auctore Susurri;
ipsa, quid in caelo rerum pelagoque geratur
et tellure, uidet totumque inquirit in orbem. (*Metam.* XII, 39-63)

Picture a space at the heart of the world, between the earth
the sea and the sky, on the frontiers of all three parts of the universe.
here there are eyes for whatever goes on, no matter how distant;
and here there are ears whose hollows no voice can fail to penetrate.
This is the kingdom of Rumour, who chose to live on a mountain,
with numberless entrances into her house and a thousand additional
holes, though non of her thresholds are barred with a gate or a door.
Open by night and by day, constructed entirely of sounding
brass, the whole place hums and echoes, repeating whatever
it hears. Not one of the rooms is silent or quiet, but none
is disturbed by shouting. The noise is merely a murmuring babble,
low like the waves of the sea which you hear from afar, or the last faint
rumble of thunder, when storm-black clouds have clashed in the sky.
The hall is filled by a crowd which is constantly coming and going,
a flimsy throng of a thousand rumours, true and fictitious,
wandering far and wide in a turbulent tangle of language.
They chatter in empty ears or pass on stories to others;
the fiction grows and etail is added by each new teller.

> This is the haunt o credulity, irresponsible error,
> groundless joy, unreasoning panic, impulsive sedition
> and whispering gossip. Rumour herself spies every occurrence
> on earth, at sea, in the sky; and her scrutiny ranges the universe.[15]

Chaucer translates and incorporates Ovid's authoritative text into his own poem much in the same manner of liberal attentiveness with which he adapts Vergil's *Aeneid* to decorate the *Temple of Glas* in Book 1, only from Ovid he borrows not only the matter but figural elements of the form.[16] Furthermore, his appropriation, translation, and reconfiguration of Ovid's Latin text into English exhibits far more confidence, and far less subservience, than he exhibited (overtly) in his more direct translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* in Book I. Ovid's text illustrates its content in its self-reflexive structure and versification in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is the repetition of the same word, *orbe...orbem*, at the beginning and ending of this segment. This recurrence at once brackets off the vignette on Fame's house and mimics the cosmological centrality described in the text. The word *orbis* ("globe," "sphere," "world") is therefore doubly significant: it at once expands the reader's imagination to a universal scale, and at the same time shapes this image into a global or spherical form. As in Chaucer's version, Ovid's *Fama* is triangulated with respect to three regions or confines (*confinia*) of the threefold universe (*triplicis mundi*), namely, and in this order: the land (*terras*), the sea (*fretum*) and the heavens (*celestiasque plagas*). Here we find a second circular structure that organizes the passage and configures the text to resemble the centric cosmology it describes; for an inversion of this list of the elemental domains is repeated at the end of the passage, where Fame is said to see, from her privileged vantage point, all that happens in the heavens (*caelo*), the sea (*pelago*), and the earth (*tellure*). Ovid diversifies his vocabulary, but preserves the same sequence of localities only in

reverse order. Grouped with the alternately opening and closing repetition of *orbis*, these terms figure a long-distance chiastic pattern (ABCD // DCBA)—a portrait in text of the nested spheres of the Fame-centric world.

Chaucer copies not only the matter but also the pattern of his source. His translation from Ovid in line 715, "Betwixen hevene, erthe, and see" is echoed very near the close of his description of Fame's position in line 846, "Heven, erthe, and eek the see." This repeated text, though lacking Ovid's variety of diction, serves much the same bracketing purpose as in the original, and serves as well to offset a passage that both describes and spatially figures Fame's situation. But Chaucer is not without his own resources of permutation. Consider the couplets in which these lines appear:

> Betwixen hevene, erthe, and see;
>
> That, what-so-ever in al these three (715-716)

and,

> Is set amiddes of these three,
>
> Heven, erthe, and eek the see, (845-6)

Across the 129 lines between them, these two couplets signal to each other in their repetition of the same rhyme words in reverse: *see*/*three* // *three*/*see*. The first couplet, at the beginning of Chaucer's passage, translates not the first lines of Ovid's text, but the last; the phrase "what so ever in al these three" translates Ovid's "*quid* in caelo *rerum* pelagoque...etc" (62-53). The reverse can be said of line 845, where the phrase "is set amiddes of these three" renders Ovid's "orbe locus medio est inter...etc" (39-40). In this way, Chaucer translates Ovid's inversion into his own poetic idiom, demonstrating his consciousness of the transpositional properties of his source text by reversing the order of their opening and closing markers, and underscoring this

demonstration with an inverted figure of his own, only not in word-order but in the sequence of rhymes. This kind of inversive repetition, a prominent Chaucerian mode of rendering a circular figure in linear text and thereby organizing related material, is far from an isolated instance in the *House of Fame*. Later we will investigate some more examples.

Chaucer's classical authority is far from defeated in this poetic contest (*aemulatio*), nor has Ovid's Middle English translator finished flaunting his tools of creative interpretation. Ovid's text contains numerous examples of what might be considered incipient rhymes, some of which are used to adumbrate complex circular structures. If we look more closely at lines 43-45 of Ovid's text we find an important architectural characteristic of Fame's palace described in a suggestive pattern of verse:

> Fama tenet summaque domum sibi legit in arce,
>
> innumerosque aditus ac mille fora*mina* tec*tis*
>
> addidit et nullis inclusit li*mina* por*tis*; (*Metam.* 12, 43-45; emphasis added)

The innumerable entrances and thousand openings of Fame's house ensure that "whatever exists anywhere" (*quod est usquam*) and "every voice" (*uox omnis*) can find easy ingress. Technically, these phonetic recurrences do not satisfy the classical rhetorical definition of the device, *homoioteleuton*, or, similar sounds at the end of clauses. No clauses are closed by the similar sounds I have underlined in the text—the enjambment of "addidit" makes this overly clear—and yet their obvious phonetic affiliation serves an ambiguous function. They seem to echo each other, as the many voices flooding through fame's doors would—not a bustling clamor of whole words, but only, as Ovid puts it, the "murmur of a small voice" (*paruae murmura uocis*; 49). These proto-rhymes also seem to serve as an illustration of what Ovid calls confused words:

> mixtaque cum ueris passim commenta uagantur

milia rumorum confusaque uerba uolutant. (*Metam.* 12. 54-55)

For each of the thousand openings of Ovid's house of Fame, there are thousands of these curious vocal objects, "fictions mixed with truths" (*mixta cum veris commenta*), which are obviously the source of Chaucer's "tydynges...of false and soth compouned" (1027-9). We come one step closer to discovering the nature of this elusive creature, the *tydynge*—if disclosing the influence of Ovid, the most duplicitous of poets, can be counted as progress towards understanding. Ovid's mixture of truth and falsity in this "small voice" of "confused words," again manifests in the design of the verses that describes it, which are even more suggestive of rhyme and even more involved in a circular configuration. We see the same line-end features exhibited in both of the following four-line segments:

increpuit nubes, extrema tonitrua redd*unt*.

atria turba tenet: ueniunt, leve uulgus, e*unt*que

mixtaque cum ueris passim commenta uag*ant*ur

milia rumorum confusaque uerba uolut*ant*; (*Metam.* XII. 52-55)

and,

illic Credulitas, illic temerarius Err*or*

uanaque Laetitia est consternatique Tim*or*es

Seditioque repens dubioque auctore Sus*ur*ri;

ipsa, quid in caelo rerum pelagoque gerat*ur* (*Metam.* XII. 59-62)

These lines make use of the ambiguity of the final foot of the hexameter line, which may be either a spondee, comprised of two long syllables (— —) or a trochee (— v), comprised of a long and a short syllable. Compared with Chaucerian verse, this foot corresponds roughly with

the difference between a masculine and a feminine rhyme. Here, in the endings of the first four lines we see that this alternation disguises a concealed rhyme pattern:

–***unt***	A
–***unt***que	A
–***ant***ur	B
–***ant***	B

Likewise in the next set we find the same pattern:

–***or***	A
–***or***es	A
–***ur***ri	B
–***ur***	B

As indicated in these diagrams, two different schemes can apply to these 4-line proto-stanzas. The first scheme, AABB, reflecting the buried rhymes, is apparent if the last syllable of the middle two lines are overlooked. The second pattern, ABBA, reflects the position of the words with endings in excess of the rhyming segment. In these ambiguous, self-inverting arrangements, Ovid not only experiments with the organizational potential of rhyming verse, but perpetuates his own tendency to make verse the medium of geometric designs; for these "spherical" figurations of verse further emblematize the spherical nature of the universe defined by Fame at its center. None of Ovid's figural devices in this passage, I suspect, were overlooked by Chaucer.

Between these two passages, like stanzas, there appears on Ovid's scene of Fame a character very important to Chaucer's version. The Latin text tells us that "to the things he hears, each new author adds something of his own" ("et auditis aliquid nouus adicit auctor"; 58). Could this "new author" correspond to the missing "man of great authority" that guards from without

the end of the *House of Fame*? The postponed question at the end of Chaucer's text invokes the presence of such an *auctor* in its designation of both "an author" and "an augmenter." Or is this new author more like the one that Chaucer's Geffrey is meant, after his pilgrimage, to become? In this line lies the kernel of Chaucer's purpose in his own poem, the moment of transmutation—governed by an assiduous, liberal fidelity—of the old into the new, which is exactly what Chaucer achieves in his treatment of Ovid's text. The rudiments of rhyme scarcely discernable in Ovid's text become more pronounced when compared to Chaucer's creative reception and renovation of them. It is this reception, therefore, that situates Ovid's text in the tradition of rhyme configurations and the figural poetics of Fame of which Chaucer's was the latest statement. Fame, as literary tradition, supplies material to the new author, who defines the tradition behind his text in and through its *re*presentation in his new text—a mutually defining, mutually empowering circulation of tradition and novelty, fittingly without a clearly defined beginning or ending. But the *centrality* of this *auctor*—author and amplifier of tradition—and the foundation of this model of perpetual circulation has still to be located.

Chaucer's translation process actively responds to the features of Ovid's linear *dispositio*, reconfiguring the Latinate syntactical inversion to accommodate his own poetic idiom. But English's more rigid syntax is supplemented by rhyme, and Chaucer uses this resource to his advantage. His flip of the order of Ovid's bracketing lines add to the chiastic effect of the inverted rhyme pairs. This kind of inverse repetition of rhymes is a common Chaucerian mode of rendering a circular figure in linear text and a means of organizing and indexing related material; and it is far from an isolated anomaly in the *House of Fame*. In fact it may be considered one of his signature formal devices. But only the *House of Fame* provides a reasoning or figural *etymon* for this configuration, as we will see.

The Place of Voice

Now, awakening the *asweved* ("dazed" 549) poet by name ("Geffrey," 729) into what must be a curious medial state of consciousness between the sleep of the dream vision and some kind of embedded wakefulness, the eagle launches into what he calls a "logical argument:" "a propre skille, / and worthe a demonstracion / in myn ymagynacion" (726-728) in which he articulates, disguised as a theory of sound, what I hope to show is a strange but coherent theory of vernacular poetics pertinent to the situation of English language poetry. The eagle proceeds to lecture his literally captive audience on the Boethian metaphysical principle that everything is prone, "thorgh his kyndely enclynyng" (734) to move towards "his propre mansyon" (754). Following closely the definition of voice given by the Latin grammarian Donatus, "vox est aer ictus" (*Grammatici Latini* 367), the eagle asserts that sound is "noght but eyr ybroken" (765). It is therefore a "lyght" substance, and is therefore inclined "upwarde to meve" (825) towards the ultimate upward (and therefore, middle as we learn in the Ovidian bracket-couplets) limit of all locations. There Fame's mansion "stante eke in so juste a place / That every soun mot to hyt pace (719-20).[17]

Aiming to "teche / How every speche, or noyse, or soun, / Thurgh hys multiplicacioun...Mot nede come to Fames Hous" (783-6), the eagle curiously abandons his mode of logical proof in favor of an appeal to Geffrey's "experience" (788). Thus the dubious context of Geffrey's own knowledge, already called into question, frames the rounded image of voice that is the centerpiece of the eagle's demonstration:

yf that thow

Throwe on water now a stoon,

Wel wost thou hyt wol make anoon

A litel roundell, as a sercle,

Peraunter brode as a covercle –

And ryght anoon thow shalt see wel

That whel wol cause another whel,

And that the thridde, and so forth, brother,

Every sercle causynge other

Wydder than hymselve was;

And thus fro roundel to compas,

Eche aboute other goynge

Causeth of othres sterynge

And multiplyinge ever moo,

Til that hyt be so fer ygoo

That hyt at bothe brynkes bee. [...]

As I have of the watir preved,

That every cercle causeth other,

Ryght so of ayre, my leve brother:

Everych ayre another stereth

More and more, and speche up bereth,

Or voys, or noyse, or worde, or soun,

Ay through multiplicacioun,

Til hyt be atte House of Fame (787-803, 814-821)

As water ripples outward from a stone tossed in a pond, so does air. In actuality the image does not arise entirely from experience, but borrows much of its language from grammatical commentaries.[18] "Experience" here turns out to be equivalent to reading, but reading filtered through Chaucer's apparently unreliable reading practice: the eagle has already reprimanded him for reading in a near-sleeping state, "Thou sittest at another book / Tyl fully daswed ys thy look" (656-7). In this way, however, Chaucer grants himself the license to manipulate the terms of his sources more freely than he had in the previous section.

The image of sound as disturbed water derives ultimately from Boethius, who used the metaphor of the stone-splash to describe the physics of sound in his *De Musica*, I.14. The phenomenon of voice (*vox*), the first object of definition in canonical grammatical texts, is here clarified with recourse to an important text on musical theory, thus distancing the "experience" of voice even further from the narrator. This convergence of grammatical and musical discourse in the definition of the *vox* offers an important conceptual context to Chaucer's creative manipulations of the image, though it is impossible to know if he was aware of its Boethian provenance. The *Promisimus,* a late twelfth-century gloss on Priscian that Chaucer may well have known, justifies the construal of an aerial phenomenon in aquatic imagery, arguing that water is air's "closest element" (Irvine 865). But Chaucer interpolates unique details in his translation, superimposing new meanings over the now well-worn Boethian image. First, his choice of terminology generates (and multiplies) undertones of poetical and metrical significance, moving the general discussion of sound towards the more specific topic of poetics and poetic form. The grammatical commentary tradition, which was accessible to but not necessarily used by Chaucer, offers several words for the circular ripples that Chaucer says resembles the embodiment of every utterance: "circulatio" (*Tractatus super Priscianum*),

"circulum" (*Promisimus*), and "orbis" (*Glosule super Priscianum*).[19] Each of these texts, perhaps in order to be as precise as possible, elects to use only one term to refer to the spreading circle. This stricture reinforces a key concept in the generation of voice, that its waves generate larger, but formally identical, waves. In the example, not synonymy but identity is a necessary provision if the vehicle of the metaphor is to match its tenor. Voice must be shown not to change as it multiplies, but only to expand. Otherwise it would be a different voice and not the original one that reached the listener; oral tradition, even between two interlocutors, would be effectively impossible. An image meant to affirm the possibility of real human communication would turn into an argument for skepticism. This is the basis of a concept of critical importance in the commentaries, that "discourse is whole and complete but it arrives at the ears of various people: that is, the unity of the spoken utterance produces a multiplicity of acoustic images in multiple auditors" (Irvine 866).

Chaucer, however, chooses not to reproduce faithfully the commentaries' emphasis on the unity of utterance. Instead, he amplifies the vocabulary used to name the original shape of utterance, giving not one but five different terms for the expanding waves: *roundell, sercle, covercle, whele,* and *compas*. Each term, only loosely synonymous with the others, introduces a separate image, and it is significant that most of these terms, poised at the heart of Chaucer's theory of voice, have alternate poetical values in addition to their several geometric ones. We will explore these secondary meanings shortly, but first it is important to understand what this terminological multiplication entails for the premise of sound's "kyndely enclynynge" and its supposed constancy of nature.[20]

Already in naming the first emanation a "roundell," Chaucer refuses to settle on a single word, but complicates his image immediately by supplementing this term—itself strongly

distracting in its suggestion of the poetic genre of the roundel—with the simile "as a sercle" and qualifier "brode as a covercle [a cup lid]." Before the example can demonstrate the multiplication of the circle, it has itself already undergone multiplication in the words that designate it—words that imply still more images, and those images still more and different words. The perfect geometric conformity in the grammatical commentaries' presentation of this topic is thus replaced in Chaucer's version by an image of spontaneous diversification of forms.

The confusing plethora of different voices used to describe the source of voice itself constitutes a new image—an image that reinforces precisely Book One's subtending theme of questioning and decentralizing literary authority, most evident in its repetitions of invocations and its free translation of the *Aeneid*. Even in the case of the most fundamental material of poetry—the elemental *vox* with which grammatical speech begins—a new author cannot engage with the literary tradition without altering it. Literary reception, even in its most minuscule, auditory dimension entails immediate change. Simply by diversifying the vocabulary of the voice's incipient circles in his quasi-technical exposition of vocal production, Chaucer envisions an alternative to the normative, grammatical model of communication that relies on the accurate transmission of voice, once it has been articulated, from source to receiver without significant alteration. The Latin grammarian Donatus, whose *Ars Maior* serves as the theoretical basis for much of medieval grammatical science, divides *vox* into two categories: "articulate, which can be comprehended in letters, and confused, which cannot be written" (*articulata est quae litteris comprehendi potest, confusa quae scribi non potest*, I.1).[21] Chaucer seems here to be interested in extenuating the boundary between these two categories. Even though he is not interested in representing Donatus' distinction between *vox articulata* and *vox confusa*, Chaucer allows a sense of confusion to persist in the diversification of circular vocabulary. Nevertheless the visual

shape of Chaucer's voice, resembling the *figura* (visual form) of the letter, seems to invoke the great successor of Donatus, Priscian, and his second distinction between *vox literata* and *vox illitterata,* voice that can and voice that cannot be transcribed, respectively. Thus a hint of the key analytical component of grammar, the *littera*, vaguely subtends the figural simile of expanding sound rings. Or perhaps more accurately, the Chaucerian voice coopts the figural aspect that grammar reserves for the letter in order not so much to *transcribe* as to *configure* the voice.

Chaucer's characterization of voice seems at once to emerge from grammatical definitions, and immediately to mark its distinction from them. Chaucer's voice is thus not the same *vox* that marks the common point of entry into the disciplines of *grammatica* (as described by Donatus and Priscian) and *musica* (as described by Boethius). Grammar, for instance, explicitly equates poetic language and meter, and so delays the definition of poetry until a development that appears later in the standardized order of grammatical discourse, with the introduction of the tools necessary for metrical analysis represented by the terms *littera* and *syllaba.* For Chaucer, however, key components of poetic language emerge simultaneously with voice: diversification and configuration, or poetic form. And the direct connection between these two properties is soon exposed as Chaucer develops the eagle's theory of sound into a theory of poetics.

Chaucer sets a tangible but problematic limit on the diversification of circles posited at the very center of his poetics. The circles spread, "multiplyinge ever moo / Til that hyt be so fer ygoo / That hyt at bothe brynkes bee" (801-3). The colorful mental image painted by the phrase "bothe brynkes," presumably the shores or banks of the imaginary body of water, responds to several texts in the large corpus of grammatical commentaries on the late Roman grammarian

Priscian (e.g. *sic usque ad ripam* "thus all the way to the bank,") (Irvine 865). In this theoretical context, *brynkes* seems simply enough to represent the listener or audience of the voice, but the image may be more complicated. The idea of brinks is notably absent in the parent-text of this topic, Boethius' *De Musica* I.14. For Boethius, the outward motion of sound-waves proceeds until, "exhausted by the spreading out of waves, [it] dies away" (*defatigatus motus ab eliciendis fluctibus, conquiescat* 1.14; translation by Bower). Chaucer's eagle would of course be reluctant to suggest that voice's range is naturally limited, as his argument demands that voice have enough impetus to reach the midpoint of the universe. Chaucer knew well this opposing view of a naturally perishing voice; he parodies it in his *Summoner's Tale*, in which a fart, a very special case of sound, is reductively defined as being nothing "but of eir reverberacioun / And evere it wasteth litel and litel awey" (III. 2233-4).[22]

Why would the eagle emend his source and threaten the legitimacy of his proof—meant to show, after all, that every voice makes its way to Fame's palace—by multiplying the obstacles in the way of the voice's journey? If it had been only one *brynke* (*ripa*), one could construe it as representing the place of Fame, which serves as the ultimate goal and limit of an author's range of influence. But why two brinks? I would like to entertain the possibility that something else is at work in the seemingly unnecessary detail of these *two* limiting factors. Boethius, unlike the grammarians, writes about the possibility of interference: "If something should impede the spreading waves, the same motion rebounds immediately, and it makes new circles by the same undulations at [or, "towards"] the center whence it originated" ("Quod si quid sit, quod crescentes undas possit offendere, statim motus ille revertitur et quasi ad centrum, unde profectus fuerat," 1.14). The ambiguity of Boethius's *ad centrum* leaves it unclear whether he means that voice returns to the center when it strikes an obstacle, or whether the obstacle becomes itself a

center of new circulation. By either interpretation, for Boethius interference does not curtail the spread of voice; it multiplies its horizons, what Chaucer might call its *enclynynges*. The object of interference may even become a new center and a new source of utterance. Mapped onto Chaucer's double-discourse of authorship and sound, this simple detail develops into a fascinating image of the creation of new authors—new authorities—as points of interference and mediation in the course of others' voices and authority, rebounding *tydynges* back again from new perspectives. Chaucer's explanation of what happens when the voice reaches "bothe brynkes," however, adds a new dimension to the topic. The following passage occupies the ellipses I left in the text cited above:

> Til that hyt be so fer ygoo
> That hyt at bothe brynkes bee.
> Although thou mayst hyt not ysee
> Above, hyt gooth yet alway under,
> Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder.
> And whoso seyth of trouthe I varye,
> Bid hym proven the contrarye.
> And ryght thus, every word, ywys,
> That lowde or pryvee yspoken ys,
> Moveth first an ayr aboute,
> And of thys movynge, out of doute,
> Another ayr anoon ys meved; (802-13)

Under the visible surface of water, the motion that we might expect to stop at the *brynkes* is in fact not limited at all, but reverberates perpetually ("alway"), and, as the eagle reports with

noticeable excitement, in a truly marvelous fashion. Chaucer seems to admit, if only in this one detail, that he departs from his sources ("of trouthe I varye"). Indeed it is a detail that self-consciously stretches the limits of the "ymaginacion" which now asks of Geffrey to imagine a non-image: what "thou mayst...not ysee." In passing from the visible (the water's surface) to the invisible (what carries on beneath), the image includes reference to its own metaphoric operation—metaphor in the true etymological sense of "translation"—figuring a sort of meta-image that captures the transition from the visible vehicle (water) to the audible tenor (air), carried out in the lines beginning "and ryght thus…" that immediately follow.

What does the image of unseen but unceasing underwater circulation represent in the physical operation of the voice? For one, it would seem that the limits of the voice, here as perhaps also in Boethius, confine but do not arrest its potential. In this detail, Chaucer gives voice a new dimension not found in the commentary tradition: a space of some sort that subtends the voice, bound by limits which are apparent on its surface, but whose imposition of limitation engenders unbounded movement beneath. That is to say, Chaucer adds to the grammarians' image a secret life of voice, closed between its brinks, and resonant in some space "under" language characterized as wonderful.[23] This secret motion is linear in vector but circular in compass; characterized at once by interference and recurrence; illogical in its trespass from the domain of "skille" to that of "wonder;" circumscribed by its brinks but infinitely regressive within these limits—in short, this internal, secret motion within sound discloses the existence of a theoretical dimension of voice prior to the definition of grammatical *vox*. In a sense prefiguring the comical scene at the end of the *Summoner's Tale* in which the clever squire devises a means of dividing a sound ("the rumblynge of a fart") into twelve parts, the supposition of a diversification of movements *within* voice posits a multiplication of the actions or qualities of

voice, before the grammatical "differences" of *vox litterata, illterata, articulata* and *inarticulata* (Priscian 1.1), and long before the truth and falsehood of a voice is to be judged. This new, pre-grammatical activity of voice that Chaucer isolates and articulates so powerfully in the eagle's speech is an object as ambiguous and suggestive as the pre-logical (or a-logical) *tydynge*. It visualizes the meaning of the participle used to suggest its indistinguishable conjunction of truth and falsehood: *compouned*, "mixed," but also "complex," and in numerical contexts, "resulting from *multiplication*."

The addition of this aquatic image of wonderful, interior confluences of voice, as well as the amplification of its symbolic importance, may have been suggested to Chaucer by the most present source of influence on the poem—Dante's *Commedia*. In Canto XIV of *Paradiso*, Dante is audience to a dialogue between St. Thomas, hovering among a ring of theologians, and Beatrice, poised at the center of this ring. As he listens, the following image "dropped into his mind" (*ne la mia mente fé sùbito caso*, *Paradiso* XIV.4) as though it were Chaucer's vociferous, circle-stirring stone:

> Dal centro al cerchio, e sì dal cerchio al centro
> movesi l'acqua in un ritondo vaso,
> secondo ch'è percosso fuori o dentro: (*Parad.* 14.1-3)
>
> From the center to the circumference, as from the circumference
> to the center, the waters moves in a round vessel,
> accordingly as it's struck from without or from within.

As expansions of interfering waves, Beatrice's voice reacts to the influx of speech sent from St. Thomas at the rim of the circle that surrounds her—the "banks" of Dante's take on the Boethian

image. Dante stands beside Beatrice, not quite at the center of the circle of discourse, but near enough to intercept the fluctuations of either argument, and to him it seems their vector is unimportant or else indistinguishable, one from the other, so stable is the consonance of thought shared among the interlocutors of this inspired dialogue. The patent truthfulness of either position obfuscates the point of origin of the voices. This is why Dante's image obscures itself by preserving an ambiguous sense of the water's motion, to or from the center of the circle that the vessel describes. Commenting on this passage, Georges Poulet adduces a popular formula for the definition of God in 12th century compilation, of which the *Liber XXIV Philosophorum* is representative of the general trend: *Deus est sphaera cuius centrum ubique* "God is the sphere whose center is everywhere" (xi). In a universe governed by spherical centrality and the simultaneous identity of center and circumference, the motion towards God is ambivalently towards the periphery and towards the center. As Dante's pilgrimage continues it becomes clear that this is precisely the paradoxical geometry in which his itinerary is charted. The final achievement of the vision that constitutes the *Commedia*, the attainment of which also forces the pilgrimage's conclusion is to see the essence of God:

> Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza
> de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri
> di tre colori e d'una contenenza
> e l'un da l'altro come iri da iri
> parea reflesso, e 'l terzo parea foco
> che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri. (*Parad.* XXXIII 115-12)
>
> In the deep and clear substance

of the lofty light there appeared to me three circles
of three colors and of one continuity
and one appeared reflected by the other
as rainbow by rainbow, and the third seemed to be fire
which from this one and that one equally was breathed.

The involution of rainbow-circles that Dante imagines when in proximity to the trinity echoes in the numerical situation of the final Canto (XXXIII) and the *terza rima* form. Here we find a comparable circulation to that which inspires the "wonder" in Chaucer's image—not only wonder, but miracle, and one that defies the powers of Dante's imagination to continue any farther. The miraculous, divine geometry that encircles Dante's final moments in the *Commedia* joins itself to a tradition of rendering the trinity as a circular (and, strikingly, not triangular) essence, alongside such figures as Heinrich Suso, who brings the spherical shaping of the trinity full-circle, back towards the Chaucerian image from which we departed, writing: "wenn jemand mit einem schweren Stein fest in ein stillstehendes Wasser würfe, so enstünde ein Ring im Wasser. Und der Ring macht aus seiner Kraft einen anderen, und der abermals einen anderen ... Das bezeichnen die drei Kreise: Vater, Sohn, heiliger Geist"; "If a heavy stone is thrown with great force into a sheet of still water, a ring is formed in the water. And of itself this ring makes another, and this another, a third...The three circles represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" (cited in Poulet xvi; 352). While Dante's pilgrimage and Suso's meditations lead towards the simultaneously encompassing and interior trinity of God, Chaucer's journey leads towards the equally difficult-to-imagine, both external and internal source of literature. Dante's multifaceted image of the confluent motion of thought and speech in the reciprocal action-and-reaction of harmonized souls in *Paradise* appropriately becomes, in Chaucer's literary universe

(where theological objectives are replaced with poetical ones), an equally complex visualization of elemental poetic properties.

Like the implicitly poetical *tydynge* (the content of the poetry that the Eagle commissions), this pre-grammatical activity of voice is also immediately formal and poetical in character. It is not without reason that Chaucer calls the first circle to appear at the origin of voice a *roundell* (791) and describes the full scope of vocalic multiplication as *fro roundel to compas* (798). Included in the primary meanings of the word *roundell* in the Middle English Dictionary (MED) are: "an ornamental ball or knob; a round slice of leek or onion; a round loaf of bread; the iris of the eye; a ripple resulting from a stone's being cast on water; the top of a hill; a halo; a circular piece of metalwork on which to lay a fire; a crescent in an arc."[24] For the meaning of "a ripple," however, the only witness is this passage in the *House of Fame*. The secondary meaning of *roundell,* however, refers to the French roundel, a short lyric form that approximates "rondure" by repeating a refrain at the beginning, middle and end with very little non-refrain text in between. This definition of *roundell* bears directly on Chaucer's image; for the roundel form itself resembles a poetic crystallization of this rippling configuration of voices. The genre is all the more pertinent in that Chaucer may have been the first to import it into English, making him the author—the point of origin—of the English roundel. Indeed, according to the MED, most of the instantiations of the word *roundel* in Middle English occur in this sense, and in Chaucerian texts.[25]

What about this form, so closely linked to Chaucer, lends itself to his theoretical model of voice? In its usual form, a roundel, as I mentioned, is recognized by a refrain that repeats at the beginning, middle, and end of the poem. Robinson's note supplies a convenient generic schema:

"abb abR abbR (in which R represents one or more of the first three lines)" (796). We might generalize the form even further to RxRxR, where "R" represents the refrain material, and "x," non-refrained material. Generalized in this way, we have a schematic that represents precisely the expanding waves of multiplying voice. If the middle refrain (R) can be taken to represents the voice at the point of origin, then first and last iterations of it the refrain (the outer two R's) represent the identical, radiating rings of voice at the full *compas* of its multiplication, there where it meets *bothe brynkes*, namely the limits at the beginning and end of the poem. Skeat defines the relationship of *roundel* to *compas* as the difference between "a very small circle" and "a very large circle" (*Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* 260). A compass can indeed be quite large. In *The Second Nun's Prologue*, the Nun praises Christ as he who "of the tryne compas lord and gyde is" (VIII 45). The *tryne compas* is none other than the threefold universe of earth, sea and heavens of which Fame, in the *House of Fame*, is conceived as the pole.

Compas is also implicated in poetic discourse. In the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women*, upon seeing the daisy whose qualities represent the courtly and poetic decor that is the subject of the poem, the court of the God of Love "wenten in compas, / Daunsynge aboute this flour an esy pas, / and songen, as it were in carole-wyse, / this balade" (G 199-201), thus affiliating the term *compas* with another newly-Englished lyrical genre: the ballad, an example of which follows in the *Prologue*. But what is more significant for our purposes is what comes before: Chaucer's praise of the daisy, in a familiarly "rounded" passage enclosed by the chiastic rhyme figure in the section's opening and closing couplet, which I already discussed in my introduction (G 55-56; 69-70)s. Not coincidentally, in the lines between the "opening" and "closing" rhymes that celebrate the daisy, itself a symbol of ever-renewing, living poetry,

Chaucer constructs one of his most memorable metaphors on the difficulty of making a poetic beginning in English, which I cite again:

> For wel I wot that folk han here-beforn
> Of makyng ropen, and lad awey the corn;
> [And] I come after, glenynge here and there,
> And am ful glad if I may fynde an ere
> Of any goodly word that they han left. (G 61-65)

The pun on "finding an ear" (of corn or an audience), highlights the latent poetic potential of English, limited, however, by the precedence of those who have already "reaped" the materials even of *makynge*, which seems to reference the field of English poetry as much as the Latin literary inheritance.[26] This brief, floral poetic *compas* is thus grafted into the field of Chaucer's thinking about English beginnings as re-beginnings, once again poised significantly in a formally designated middle.

Elsewhere even in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer uses *compas* in various senses to describe the ornate architectural features of the House: at line 1170, *compaces* means "designs," then quickly shifts in 1188 to mean "devices," then recurs in line 1302 in the meaning of "images." These images, devices and designs all have a circular quality, and since the ornament of Fame's house all has something to do with the craft of poetry, then these circular embellishments too embody some kind of circularity inherent in Chaucer's poetic language. The manifold images of the roundel and compass in their generic and geometric senses thus underscore Chaucer's theory of the shape of sound with poetic and structural overtones. Roundel and compass—representing the full span of breadth from the smallest circulation of sound to the largest cosmological

circumference possible—may then represent the two limits or brinks of the *House of Fame*'s poetic universe. But there is still more at work here than simply a clever metaphor.

This circulation of infinitely interfering but mutually enriching circulations, the "wonder" that is "under" the poetic voice, may be affiliated with another English discourse about itself. A passage in John Trevisa's translation of Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon* (ca. 1387) that acknowledges the multiplicity of English's dialects uses some familiar language: "Hit semeþ a greet wonder how Englische, þat is þe burþe tonge of Englysshe men and her owne langage and tonge, is so dyuerse of sown in þis oon ilond" (2.161).[27] As much as the various collisions and interferences of circular utterances in Chaucer's model seem to graph a topology of literary influence among languages, the wonder Trevisa and Chaucer share at their common English voice's internal diversity suggests that as much interference and interetextual (intravocal) play may transpire within the field of English poetic creation as between English and classical/European sources. The contagious, self-reflexive wonder at this fact obtains even among those within the closed system of English; that there can be "one language and tongue" that is at the same time nonetheless "diverse of voice" implies the vast discursive potential available to English poets. Trevisa's translation then maps this diversity onto the compass-points of the English geographic territory, repeating the familiar vocabulary. Recognizing the variety even among the "Saxon tonge" (English, as opposed to Anglo-French or Celtic), Trevisa still registers "greet wonder" that,

> for men of þe est wiþ men of þe west, as it were vndir þe same partie of heuene, acordeþ more in sownynge of speche þan men of þe norþ wiþ men of þe souþ; þerfore it is þat Mercii, þat beeþ men of myddel Engelond, as it were parteners of þe endes, vndurstondeþ

> bettre þe side langages, nortþerne and souþerne, þan norþerne and souþerne vndurstondeþ eiþer oþer (2.163)[28]

By this account, the territory of England becomes a sounding chamber, resonant with dialectical communities which, though they are all *under* the same heaven, *under*stand each other diversely—their voices are accordant in relationships defined by their being at the edges ("parteneres of þe endes") or in the "middle," which mediates between the mutually unintelligible "brinks" of the linguistic-geographic range of English. This cluster of vocabulary common to Trevisa's and Chaucer's texts ("wonder," "under," "accord," "soun") need not point to any direct influence of one text on the other, but is perhaps more intriguingly suggestive of a discourse with which English understood itself, its diversity in sounds and intelligibility, and its relation to other languages. For just as English is internally diverse, Trevisa notes in an interpolation, "Neuerþeles þere is as meny dyuers manere Frensche in þe reem of Fraunce" (2.161). What distinguishes England in Trevisa's account—and here lies the striking similarity with Chaucer's unique model of poetic voice—is in the shape of the space wherein consonant resonances (an overtone admitted in "accordeþ") and differences interact. This space is charted in terms of middles (the Midland dialect?) and ends, the center (of England and English) in distinction to its brinks. Trevisa and Higden's dialectical divisions of English make distinctions based on sound and comprehensibility. And yet, despite its internal multiplication of a variety of sounds and senses, English remains unified as one distinctive "language and tongue," and it is *under* and in the *middle* of these wondrous circumstances that an English poet must make his beginning, but a beginning naturally reflective and interpretive of its ends.

The Place of the Poet and the Place of Fame

By using a shape derived from a poetic form to imagine the generation of voice Chaucer, makes the voice and its first form conceptually inseparable. This conjunction has significant consequences for his English *ars poetica*. Form, and more precisely, circular form is a fundamental component of speech and sound, and its expansion into larger and increasingly differentiated forms is therefore pictured as a natural and organic process. That the vocal activity that exists prior even to grammatical distinction is, or is likened to, poetic form, calls into question grammar's, and therefore also Latin's, totalizing authority over language. For grammatical discourse presupposes its possession of the domain of values and definitions of *vox*, and assumes further that its corpus of analytical tools (including metrics, figures, devices) is sufficient to exhaust the field of poetry. Chaucer, however, opens up a new horizon in the understanding of the poetic voice, outside and prior to the domain of grammar—in several important ways, an English horizon. He thus literally reprioritizes the place of the English poet with respect to grammatical authority. His exposition of the primal motion of voice's hidden energies is indeed a strong statement toward a theory not just of a vernacular poetic, as Katherine Zieman claims in her essay, "Chaucer's *Voys,*" but a theory of the poetic nature of all speech and sound. Far from being, in Zieman's words, "derived from *litteratura*" (Zieman 80 and *passim*) we see that Chaucer's vernacular poetics is based on the irreducible point of origin of the voice itself.

In what ways does this poetics of the vocal undercurrent, founded on circular contours and defined by two brinks, manifest in the surface structures of the poetic text, and how does it contribute to the meaning of the text? To approach these questions, I would like to consider a

few examples of small, local Chaucerian structures in which the circular form of the versification, considered as more than mere adornment, but as a kind of "significant form," can itself serve to construe or shape the meaning of the text.[29] I make no claim that these examples are reflective of larger structural features (such as, for instance, the nested frames of the *Canterbury Tales*); quite the contrary, I mean to exemplify some of Chaucer's smallest meaningful structures, those similar to what Barry Windeatt has called his "blocks of discourse," isolated packets of meaning, much like the components of Gothic architecture, coordinated by a larger verse design (214-232). The first example comes from the passage we have already been closely scrutinizing.

Consider these two couplets that face each other from either side of the rippling pool example in *The House of Fame*:

> And that thridde, and so forth, brother,
>
> Every sercle causynge other (795-6)

and

> That every cercle causeth other,
>
> Ryght so of ayre, my leve brother: (815-6)

Though separated by eighteen lines, these couplets show a chiastic pattern (AB/BA) in the disposition of their identical rhyme-words, similar to the one already seen in Chaucer's translation of Ovid. In content as well as form they serve to bracket a segment of text, for these pairs of lines concisely convey the two essential pieces of information of the argument at hand, the tenor and the vehicle of the aquatic metaphor of sound, respectively. In the first of the two near identical lines, line 796, *sercle* is still within the aquatic context of the metaphor, and summarizes the image. With the second *cercle* of line 815, the water metaphor having

evaporated, the text now concisely articulates the argument of the comparison, that struck air functions just like struck water. Do these couplets mark the *brynkes* of a Chaucerian ring structure? If so, they are not quite balanced brinks, for all their similarities. The lines 796 and 815, in their metrical discrepancy (815 lacks one syllable, held by "that" in 796), serve to illustrate a point Chaucer makes in his invocation to Apollo in the beginning of Book III:

> Nat that I wilne, for maistrye,
> Here art poetical be shewed,
> But for the rym ys lyght and lewed,
> Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,
> Though som vers fayle in a sillable; (1094-8)

Chaucer's self-deprecating remarks have been read as participating in a more or less systematic discourse of irony that characterizes his self-fashioning, a practice ranging from "light" instances of the medieval modesty-topos, as here, to his comically grotesque self-portraiture in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas* in the *Canterbury Tales*. Yet in these couplets, false-modesty aside, we do see that line 795, especially in its proximity to the more perfect 4-stress line 815, does obviously "fayle in a syllable." The text, however, refuses to let this particular failing escape the semblance of intentionality. It appears to be subtly noted and accounted for in the line preceding, that is, if it is justifiable to register a counting pun in the words "and that *thridde,* and so *forth* [fourth]." Since the basic verse of *House of Fame* is constructed of four stressed syllables, line 196 seems to have failed in the first foot, making the meter break in the "thridde." If this pun is admissible, then a second metaphoric mapping may take place, whereby the "thridde" and the punning "forth" waves of sound represent metrical feet, radiating as it were from the break of the caesura to the "brinks" of the line's two ends. Stretched though this interpretation may be, I

mean only to suggest with it that perhaps Chaucer's ironic modesty has a secondary twist of double irony. The "art poetical," which Chaucer claims to eschew, usually refers more to rhetorical ornaments, such as those described by treatises like Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*, than to metrical operations. Chaucer attempts to distract us from registering his rhetoric, but what about his versification? In the balance of these two wave-like couplets, themselves subtly demonstrating features that we might call facets of their circularity, there is what seems to be a larger, more complex circulation at work, one in excess of even conventional poetical technics. For if these chiastic couplets correspond to "bothe brynkes," we might ask what is in the middle of the frame. The exact midpoint between the couplets falls on lines 805-6, precisely the lines I have isolated as carrying the crucial novelty in Chaucer's unique refashioning of the sound-wave topic: "Above, hyt gooth yet alway under, / Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder." Under this image—presented to Geffrey as a proof "by experience" (788)—itself multi-faceted and self-referential, as we have seen, there move deep currents of complex structures, which are nothing else but the expression of Chaucer's poetical experience in form as opposed to a reflection of literary authority.

This circulation is contained, as we have already seen, within another set of radiating brackets, not concentric, but of the same pattern, that is, a distanced retrograde pattern of rhyme-words in a couplet reiterating the same message. The lines 715-716, which we examined above in Chaucer's lose translation of Ovid, "Betwexen hevene and erthe and see / That whatsoever in al these three..." recur with slight variation and in reverse, 130 lines later, near the conclusion of the demonstration:

> Ther as Fame lyst to duelle,
>
> *Ys set amyddys of these three*:

Heven, erthe and eke the see

As most conservatyf the soun.

Than ys this the conclusyon...(844-8, my italics)

This is an organizational barrier, not perfectly but nearly coordinated with the beginning and end of the discourse on voice. Rather than providing hard and fast structural punctuation, this encircling pattern serves to mark off at once an allusive territory and the domain of a cosmological model. That is, on the one hand, these portals mark the boundaries of Ovid's influence. At the same time, however, the explication of the physics of voice is enclosed within a cosmological discourse. The "shape" of Book II, is explainable by the same formal principles that govern both the voice and the cosmos; this fact presents us with a somewhat ironic reversal. The discourse that tells us that Fame resides in the center of the three elemental regions structurally presents this detail at the margins, the brinks, of a speech whose central concern is the demonstration of the physics of the voice. It follows, since we are in the center of the *House of Fame,* that the House of Fame is not at the center of the poem; at least, not exactly. The verse shows that at the center of the poem, literally and conceptually, we find, instead of Fame, the poet's urgent prioritization of the vernacular voice. We now have the complete but paradoxical model of the literary universe that Chaucer's pilgrim traverses. It is a universe in which voice, in Boethian fashion, proceeds from its point of origin outward and upward, and yet somehow moves simultaneously back to the center whence new voices, in the form of "newe tydynges," originate and descend.

Between *Soth* and *Fals*

We have seen how the *House of Fame* describes and embodies, both in its content and form, an unusual topicality, a middle ground or center between two mutually untenable demands (for old things and new) that compel the medieval poet, in fashioning a beginning for himself, to grapple with what is essentially a self-sustaining paradox. In formulating the definition of the poet's place within this emergency, in his own poetic terms Chaucer isolates and dilates the infinitesimal, ephemeral moment of poetic beginning. A new category of authorship emerges from this tension, and posits the possibility that the poet can—indeed must—occupy this place of mediation, this impossible centrality. The several different moments in the text we have surveyed so far could each be read as a staging of this pause in the caesural scene of original poetic action.

This topos is first hinted at in the poem in its insistence on a state of consciousness (or unconsciousness) between sleep and dream, a state to which, after the re-beginning of Book II, the eagle awakens the speaker Geffrey (it "spak / In mannes vois, and seyde 'Awak!'; 555-6). This paradoxical condition of the poet—half-conscious, half-unconscious—is represented in both in the dream landscape and in the poetic form of the text: Geffrey's journey traverses the distance between two centers of two overlapping cosmological circles (on the one hand, Fame's universe and on the other hand, the expanding sphere of the individual voice's influence); Chaucer's text figures this double-frame as the distance between two rhymes, two brinks of harmonious utterance that anticipate and recall one another from either side—the before and the after—of the present moment of reading. In this way, Chaucer's text and Geffrey's dream world exhibit their tangency; the poem stretches along the seam in between.

In so far as it succeeds in combining a theory of poetic form and a theory of authorship, the *House of Fame* demonstrates how English poetic concerns can be expressed and articulated in English poetry. But the picture of this remarkable relationship is not yet complete. It remains to be seen how the strange object of Geffrey's quest, the *tydynge,* fits into the double-theory. Chaucer addresses this issue directly at the end of Book III.

Geffrey ultimately passes through and leaves the destination appointed for him in Book II. The House of Fame proves to be only a pit stop on his way to the true source of *tydynges*, whose existence as an object no less physical and medial than the voice is withheld from the reader until the last possible moment before the abrupt end of the text. In stark contrast to the fortified castle of Fame, the structure beyond it (in a complicated analogy with the literally unimaginable wasteland beyond the Temple of Venus in Book I) is a house of twigs, compared to which, the narrator tells us, the Labyrinth, or "Domus Daedaly" "nas mad so wonderlych, ywis, / Ne half so queyntelych ywrought" (1920-3). An important source of this Labyrinthine structure is in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* of Boethius*,* Book III, prose 12. Here Lady Philosophy's interlocutor is made to confront the confusing proposition that evil is in fact *nothing*. Amazed, he complains to Lady Philosophy about what seems to him like rhetorical mind games. Chaucer translates this passage:

> playestow of disseyvistow me, that hast so woven me with thi resouns that hous of Didalus, so entrelaced that it is unable to ben unlaced, thow that otherwhile entrist ther thow issist, and other while issist ther thow entrest? Ne fooldist thou nat togidre by replicacioun of wordes a manere wondirful sercle of envirounynge of the simplicite devyne? (*Boece* 3p12, 1154-162)

The "hous of Didalus" in Philosophy's argument seems to Boethius's prisoner like a Gordian knot of such intricacy that its beginnings and endings seem impossible to disentangle. Its architectural convolutions are such that its entrances and exits are likewise indistinct: one may issue forth (*issist*) from an entrance, and enter by an exit. Most suggestively for our purposes, when Boethius's persona leaves behind the metaphor, he accuses Philosophy of folding together by "replicacioun of wordes" a "wondirful sercle of envirounynge." These now familiar phrases are used in the service of describing—negatively—the careful management and conservation of words in the related verbal practices of rhetoric and logic. But Lady Philosophy has already anticipated the prisoner's complaint, and earlier presented her defense of this form of reasoning—tellingly—in meter: one must gather the "moevynges of his thoughtes" by "enclynynge [them] into a compas" (*Boece* 3m11, 1-9). And she has also still earlier described God's creative process in very Platonic language, imagining the relationship between human thought, when it is bent towards truth, and divine will as "a moevynge into two rowndes" that "gooth to torne ayen to hymself, and envyrouneth a ful deep thought and turneth the hevene by semblable ymage" (*Boece* 3m9, 24-32). These "two rounds" and the strange architecture of the Labyrinth clearly resonate with the double-framed construct of Chaucer's theory of poetry in the *House of Fame,* and with one final example from the poem to which I now turn.

In the last strong image of the poem, Geffrey witnesses a comical sight; two characters, "Fals" and "Soth," presumably anthropomorphized speech-beings like those the speaker meets at the end of Book II, are involved in a scuffle. By chance, Soth and Fals find themselves exiting at the same small window ("A lesynge and a sad soth…gonne of aventure drawe / Out at a

wyndowe for to pace," 2089-91). Their solution is not, as reason might dictate, to pass through each in turn, but to "medle" together and depart together as one *tydynge*, "fals and soth compouned." Several indices in this passage point to earlier parts of the poem. The final couplet of the passage ending in *yrouned* / *compouned* echoes the couplet at lines 1029-30 by inverting its rhyme words, *compouned* / *rouned*.[30] The next rhyme, *tydynge*, in line 2109 also reflects the rhymes in the lines 1027-8: "In Fames house, ful of tydynges - / Both of feire speche and chidynges." Despite the balanced formal architecture that this passage completes, Chaucer's comical dramatization here of the logical paradox of the *tydynge* ("of fals and soth compouned"), is more an entrance to doubt than an exit from it.

Earlier we learn that "Aventure...is moder of tydynges" (1982-3), and in proper familial fashion, *Fals* and *Soth*, who meet by chance, chose to become literally affiliated. One of them (we are not told which one is speaking, and since one of the two is the personification of lying, it would be very important to know whether it is he or *Soth* who formulates their plan) promises he will "never fro the go, / But be thyn owne sworen brother. / We wil medle us eche with other." The *brother*/*other* rhyme pair reappears at this significant denouement. The important bracketing role it performed in Book II is not encored. Instead, the rhyme embodies a position of thematic centrality, capturing the moment of the confusion of *Soth* and *Fals*, who become, like the emanating circles of sound, correlated as siblings born of the same source. The accident of their meeting by *aventure* becomes transferred to their genetic essence, and for a moment they are twin sons of *Aventure*, who if she is indeed the same deity as "dame Fortune," is, as Geffrey learned earlier, Fame's sister (1546). This sudden genealogical flourish illuminates a network of conceptual relationships, but only for a moment. For unlike with the multiplying family of circles, the brothers' affiliation is no sooner declared than dissolved as all sense of otherness

among them disappears when they are meddled into something indivisible. Integrated, they depart as one, and, presumably, are ready in this ambiguous state to serve English poets such as Geffrey and Chaucer as the material for new poetry. A *tydynge* is, in perhaps not a trivial way, like the single stone that strikes the still pool of a poet's otherwise unaffected thought. It is the catalyst of poetic creation and the source of form, despite, or perhaps because, it resists definition. The assimilation of *Soth* and *Fals*—of the values of poetic content—is therefore very appropriately indexed (by the repeated rhyme pair) with the multiplication of form at the point of origin of a voice.

What is imagined in all of these scenes—the pond, the temple of glass, the air between sleep and dream, the houses of Fame and twigs—is the primal scene of poetry in the moment between intention and authorship. In their mutual drive to grasp this scene, Geffrey and Chaucer—the poetic construct and the reality veiled by it—become themselves meddled together and difficult to distinguish. This implicates Chaucer in a poetic involvement Vance Smith, commenting on this scene, would reserve for his contemporary and countryman, William Langland, for whom "poetry is dangerous not because it is made of truth and falsehood, 'medled' together, but because *he* [Langland] becomes a compound, that is to say confused, being by meddling *himself* and poetry." And yet what Smith sees as the Chaucerian response to this sustained ambiguity nonetheless seems still to apply: "For Chaucer, however, meddling is simply what we begin with, a mixed relation between truth and falsehood that we encounter whether we turn to the primal scene of poetry, language, or fame or to the larger world."[31]

If meddling is what we begin with, both in poetry and the foundation of the poetic self, then what is it that is meddled? With this question, we return to the challenges of making a beginning *and* an ending in English that cause Geffrey and Chaucer so much anxiety throughout

the poem. It is a spatial and a temporal problem of poetic form (Where and when to begin? Where and when to end?) as much as it is a logical problem of how to reconcile the truth of doctrine with the falseness of ornament. The *House of Fame* is ultimately a meditation on these challenges, challenges that inhabit and shape every corner of the *House of Fame*.

One more Boethian influence may supply us with a good point of closure. Consider the last lines of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* Book III, metrum 2—the passage that immediately precedes Lady Philosophy's diagnosis of the "beastly" human condition to dream its beginning. I give in the original Latin and in Chaucer's translation:

> Cedit Hesperias Phoebus in undas,
>
> Sed secreto tramite rurs**us**
>
> Currum solitos vertit ad ort**us**.
>
> *Re*petunt proprios quaeque *re*curs**us**
>
> *Re*dituque suo singula gaudent
>
> Nec manet ulli traditus **or**do
>
> Nisi quod fini iunxerit **or**tum
>
> Stabilemque sui fecerit **or**bem. (*De Cons.* 3m2, 31-8, my emphasis)

> The sonne, Phebus, that falleth at even in the westrene wawes, retorneth ayen eftsones his cart, by a pryve path, there as it is won't t'aryse. All thynges seken ayen to hir propre cours, and alle thynges rejoysen hem of hir retornynge ayen to hir nature. Ne noon ordenaunce is bytaken to thynges, but that that hath joyned the endynge to the bygynnynge, and hath make the cours of itself stable. (*Boece* 3m2, 36-45)

Boethius exemplifies his message in the form of his text. In "rec*ursus*" is buried a near return of the adverb "r*ursus*" several lines before, emblematizing the return to "proper courses" that all things seek. The three lines 32-34 in fact all end in the rhyme *–us*, which is mirrored by the last three lines 36-8, whose last words all share the first syllable, *or-* (indicated in bold in the text). These words revolve around the unrelated, medial axis of "gaudent," which is an appropriate verb to govern this revolution of rhyming beginnings and endings of words. This effect is reinforced by the repetition of *re-* in "*Re*petunt," "*Re*cursus" and "*Re*ditu," words marking the ends and beginnings of lines. Chaucer renders these lines in English prose, and so is unable to preserve the same verse effects. He does however install a potential pun in the words "rejoysen" and "joyned," translating "gaudent" and "iunxerit" respectively, a pun that does not respect etymology, but which captures perfectly the assimilation of divine joy and the joining of beginnings and endings.

Such a joining is imagined in the *House of Fame*. It is the dream of lingering in the moment of inchoate authorship, in which form is burgeoning and content not yet distinct, but both arise mysteriously together. Here beginnings are still indistinct from endings, truth from false, and form alone achieves the unity that sustains the work. So it is not so much the case that the work "transcends even its own form," as Stephen Russell has written, but quite the opposite: the continuum of *form-voice-middle*, in its precedence even to the letter, transcends the work.[32]

The poem is also a parody of this dream, an unfinished, tangled fragment of poetry that is capacious but open. Its architecture thus resembles superimposed blueprints of different incipient structures. On one stratum of its design is inscribed the elaborate, stable fortifications of the House of Fame, flaunting all the supposed permanence of the Latin literary tradition, its overbearing presence taking possession of even the title of the work, which is the beginning of a

work that comes before its beginning. On the other stratum however spins the knotted, unstable, but thoroughly English labyrinth of twigs, a flimsy and volatile structure, subject to chance and change, but one whose openness leaves passage for the *newe thynges* that distinguish an author from a compiler or a commentator. It is this English house's formless capacity and myriad of openings that occupy the end of the poem. It is also this mediating capacity to fuse the disparate—even things as disjunctive as logical opposites, literary modes (*poetrie* and *makynge*) and languages (Latin and English)—a capacity shared by the author, that allows the ending and the beginning of the poem to be so joyfully joined.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] This essay will thus serve to submit a dissenting voice to the scholarly consensus that the *House of Fame* may be called an *ars poetica* without qualification, its relationship to other medieval *artes poeticae* being, in my view, too tenuous to generate any meaningful interpretations. Robert M. Jordan has offered one such qualification: "As a thematic key to a poem which has so long eluded unitary interpretation, *ars poetica* is as reductive as any other, and reductive interpretation seems especially inappropriate for a poem so obviously expansive and encyclopedic in its range" ("Lost in the Funhouse of Fame" 107). Karla Taylor, however, reaffirms the label, seeing the poem as "a sustained examination of [Chaucer's] craft of poetry and an enthralling statement about the nature of poetic influence" (20). For prominent expressions of the *ars poetica* reading most relevant to my essay, Payne 129-137; Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame* passim; Howard, "Chaucer's Idea of an Idea" 46-50; Boitani, "Chaucer's Labyrinth" 197-220; Zieman 70-91; Steinberg 182-203.

[2] All quotations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987) unless otherwise noted.

[3] It may not have been a complete surprise to Chaucer's contemporaries that the question of authority rises immediately in the dream vision. A.C. Spearing refers to the dream vision genre as "a device for expressing the poet's consciousness of himself as a poet" (*Medieval Dream-Poetry* 6). And see *Poetic License* and her essay "The Writing on the Wall" 95-115. On the connection of dream visions to self-reflection on genre and on itself *as poetry,* see Kruger 135ff; and more recently, Quinn.

[4] See Bevington 288-298 on the relation of the poem's seeming incompleteness to the narrator's comically incompetent appropriation of French and Italian poetic discourse as well as the experiences he encounters on his journey to fame—experiences that slowly and painfully lead him to knowledge.

[5] Maura Nolan, "The Poetics of Catastrophe: Ovidian Allusion in Gower's *Vox Clamantis*," in Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan, eds., *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature* (Cambridge, 2011), 113-133, at 115.

[6] See Davidoff esp. 25-35. For a more theoretical discussion of Middle English beginnings, see Smith *Book of the Incipit.*

[7] A similar chiastic configuration marks the termini of the "The compleynt of Anelida" in *Anelida and Arcite*; the repetition of a line translated from Dante opens and closes the section: "so thirleth with the poynt of remembraunce" (211, 350). This line, Lee Patterson writes, "is in the first instance a recollection of Dante, and then of itself" an emblem of how "the poem witnesses to and represents the workings of a memory that is at once compulsive and incomplete" (*Chaucer and the Subject of History* 65). The compulsive, rigorous detail in the line in *House of Fame*, unwound soon after in its chiastic reversal, performs a similar function on the image of memory, but one that alludes even more strongly to the incompleteness of the poem.

[8] Though Deanne Williams asserts, "Chaucer makes it clear that inscribed on the brass tablet is an English translation of the Latin original" (157).

[9] An observation shared with me in conversation with Tom Stillinger, June 2013. See also Taylor 28.

[10] With this phrase Stevenson begins his survey of the most important statements in the tradition of hypothetical solutions as to the identity of the "man of grete auctorite" and its relationship to the poem's sense of unity. See also *The Riverside Chaucer* 990 for a listing of the various suppositions.

[11] A pair of couplets ending in the rhyme words "man" and "kan" appear, in addition to these three instances, at I.333-4 (man/kan), I.477-8 (kan/man), II.865-6 (can/man), and III.1323-4 (man/can).

[12] See Koonce 99, Bennett 11 n1 and Coley 60-61 on the significance of the fragility of the glass structure.

[13] On the musical contexts possibly alluded to here, see Colvert 239-241.

[14] See Bevington on Chaucer's "obtuse narrator," and the relation of the poem's seeming incompleteness to the narrator's comically incompetent appropriation of French and Italian poetic discourse as well as the experiences he encounters on his journey to fame—experiences that slowly and painfully lead him to knowledge.

[15] Translation in Raeburn 466-7.

[16] It is in this sense that the structure of Chaucer's cosmological exposition owes more to Ovid than, for instance, Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Macrobius commentary on the *Somnium Scipionus*, or Chalcidius' translations and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. On these influences, which I have diminished here in order to stress the presence of Ovid, see North and Grennen.

[17] The analogous lines in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are: *unde quod est usquam, quamuis regionibus absit, / inspicitur, penetratque cavas uox omnis ad aures* (XII.41-2). Chaucer ignores the visual

characteristics of Fame's privileged vantage point, reinforcing his *image* of a cosmology dominated not, as in Dante's *Paradiso,* by the physics of light but by properties of sound.

[18] See Irvine, an invaluable resource for situating Chaucer's understanding of grammar in contemporary grammatical traditions. For more on the scope of basic grammatical definitions that might have been available to Chaucer see Brother Bonaventure, Thomson, and more recently, Mooney and Cannon, "Langland's *Ars Grammatica*."

[19] Medieval grammatical texts cited and discussed in Irvine 865-6.

[20] In reproducing itself, Chaucer's terms imply, the incipient circle of sound does not multiply uniformly, but creates new and different forms as it grows. One might understand the ambiguous line, "every sercle causynge other," to mean just this: *an* other, not of like kind, but rather something *else* marked in its difference, like the "sercle" that cannot make more "sercles," but instead "wol cause another *whele*." The manuscripts and early editions of *The House of Fame* show evidence of great doubt surrounding this line, 794. In the *Riverside Chaucer* the line is edited as above, "That whel wol cause another whel." In the manuscripts Fairfax 16 and Bodley 638 and the edition by William Thynne, however, we find instead the hypermetrical and incomprehensible phrase, "That whele sercle wol cause another whele." The manuscript Pepys 2006 and Caxton's edition offer little help, omitting the line entirely. Skeat comments here that a gloss on "wheel" must have crept into the text in an earlier version; see *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* 260. And yet, this does not entirely account for why the first copyists and editors of the poem either resigned themselves to preserving the metrically and syntactically awkward hyperbole "whele sercle," or else deleted the line entirely. Whatever the reasons behind

the anomaly, it falls in the perfect place to reinforce with its absurdity the almost chaotic proliferation of different varieties of circle, multiplying too fast for meter and sense to keep up.

[21] See also Irvine 854ff.

[22] For a particularly pertinent study of the Summoner's *ars-metrik* see O'Brien, Harwood, "Chaucer on 'Speche" and Cannon, "The Language Group of the *Canterbury Tales*."

[23] For an interesting context for this "life," see Cannon "*The Owl and the Nightingale* and the Meaning of Life." Cannon sees the avian interlocutors of the poem as manifestations of living qualities of voice, citing medieval conception of the "life" of words as evinced in John of Salisbury's analogy in *Metalogicon* II.4, "just as the soul animates the body, so, in a way, meaning breathes life into a word" (255). By contrast, voice, in the *House of Fame*, acquires its life not from the inspiration of meaning, but in and from its essential form and motion.

[24] *Middle English Dictionary Online*, *s.v.* "roundell," accessed September 1, 2013, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/

[25] *Roundel* most often appears in generic lists of complaint forms composed by pining lovers (e.g. in the *Knight's Tale*, A 1529; in the *Franklin's Tale,* F 948; in the *Prologue* to the *Legends of Good Women*, version G 423), and at the conclusion of the dream vision that is perhaps most similar to Book II of the *House of Fame*, his *Parliament of Fowles,* in which a small choir of *chosen foules* is formed "to synge a roundel at [Nature's] departynge" (673-5). In addition to the birds' roundel that follows this introduction (which sadly suffers from a problematic textual tradition), Chaucer also seems to have invented the "triple roundel" with his short poem *Merciles Beaute*.

[26] On the distinction of vernacular, courtly *makynge* and ancient, authoritative *poetrie,* terms indexed in a significant stanza in the closing envoy of *Troilus and Criseyde*: V. 1786-1792, see the seminal study by Olson. On the Chaucerian reconciliation of these terms in the concept of "enditing," see Middleton 35-49.

[27] The original Latin text of this passage is: "Ubi nempe mirandum videtur, quomodo nativa et propria Anglorum lingua, in unica insula coartata, pronunciatione ipsa sit tam diversa."

[28] Notice that Trevisa significantly interpolates a repetition of the "gret wonder" that is not present in the original Latin: "orientales cum ociduis tanquam sub eodem coeli climate lineati plus consonant in sermone quam boreales cum austrinis. Inde est quod Mercii sive Mediterranei Angli, tanquam participantes naturam extremorum, collaterales linguas arcticam et antarcticam melius intelligant quam adinvicem se intelligant jam extremi."

[29] This term from Suzanne Langer's *Feeling and Form* is usefully applied to the question of Chaucer's *theme* in the *House of Fame* by Sheila Delany which is a quesiton I implicitly respond to in this essay. Delany, however, issues the caveat: "While I fully agree with the premise…that the *House of Fame* has a theme and that has what Suzanne Langer calls "significant form," I do not think that its theme and form can be adequately defined as a single topic, such as fame, glory, love, wisdom, or even the art of writing poetry. Theme and form are rather to be apprehended in the structure of each part of the narrative in which these and other subjects are taken up. In that repeated structural pattern is the meaning of a poem" (*Chaucer's House of Fame* 3 footnote 2).

[30] Chaucer insists upon this illogical admixture ("of fals and soth compouned") twice (lines 1029 & 2108), and each time pairs this strange conjunction via rhyme with another quality that revises itself significantly from the first iteration to the second: first, that "hyt is not rouned" (1030), and

later, that it no longer matters whether it is "cried or stille yrouned" (2107). The primary meaning of *rouned* evoked here is "whispered" (from the verb *rounen*, "to whisper, to murmur"), but not inaudible in either instance is a pun on the homonym *rouned*, past participle of *rounden*, "formed in a spherical shape."

[31] D. Vance Smith, "Chaucer as an English Writer," in Seth Lerer, ed., *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* (New Haven, 2006), 87-121, at 11.

[32] Stephen Russel comments: "The poem ends, not with the reawakening of the dreamer and the consequent return to the lyric mode, but with an ellipsis within the dream, making the poem quite literally the dream vision from which we do not awaken" (193). This claim only hold if the work is seen as complete as it stands. But J.A. Burrow, in his essay "Poems Without Endings" reflects on the possible meaninglessness of the apparently fragmentary Chaucerian texts. See also Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances* 9ff.

Chapter Two:

The Figure of *Pearl:* Dream Vision and Division

The Middle English poem *Pearl* consists of two visions. In one, a grieving father experiences a dream vision of the heavenly Jerusalem and one last conversation with the spirit of his lost daughter. He *only* sees, however, being blocked from embracing the girl's blessed spirit or entering the eternal city by a body of water that transects the landscape of his dream. Concurrent with this drama of consolation and frustration is a second vision: a poet, who self-identifies with the father, struggles to represent the dream in poetic form. The poet is similarly blocked in his desire, forbidden either to proceed farther than the dreamer could, even in his narrative *re*vision of the dream, or to simulate the eternal perfection and beauty of the heavenly Jerusalem in human language. His extraordinary efforts manifest as the poem's unprecedented and unmatched formal structures. Considering the interlocking concatenations and meticulously coordination in all parts of the poem, the single quality most advanced by the formal complexity of *Pearl* could be said to be "continuity." Continuity in form, theme, and narrative give this sense of resemblance to the divine world of perfection envisioned in the dream narrative. That is, the poem's form too is a vision; its likeness to the *perfect* dimensions of the heavenly city's architecture is neither a symbolic nor a mere technical flourish. Rather it is an integral part of the poem's *figural* purpose. What the father cannot grasp, the poet means to figure.[1] But the

continuity of vision and revision is carefully broken with the utmost precision, in a rift that runs through every aspect of the poem. To the two visions, then, I add a third crucial fact of the poem: division. With this third element between them, the two visions enter into a relationship with one another that can best be described, I will argue, as *figural*. And yet the relationship is complicated. For *Pearl,* perhaps the most intricate mediation on the poetics of *figura*, both presents and represents *figura's* ultimate failure at the limit of this division.

In her 1968 Gollancz Lecture, "Medieval Poetry and the Figural View of Reality," Elizabeth Salter first observed that *Pearl* is more responsive to readings that employ figural methods than those that assume the poem is only allegorical. The basis of her discussion is Erich Auerbach's celebrated essay on *figura*, which provides a definition of this pervasive interpretive mode that will be most useful as a point of orientation and departure:

> Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life. Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions; these are quite secondary, since promise and fulfillment are real historical events, which have either happened in the incarnation of the Word, or will happen in the second coming (53).[2]

Citing Eric Auerbach's definition, Salter reminds us that "[m]edieval views of history, concepts of time and timelessness, concepts of reality were based figurally upon a philosophy of promise

and fulfillment, most completely described and illustrated by Scriptures" (125), and thus "the central power of [*Pearl*] draws upon an essentially figural concept: upon an acceptance of the reality of an earthly relationship between dreamer and Pearl maiden, which is not rejected but fulfilled in spiritual terms" (129). Responding to Salter in a recent essay, J. Allan Mitchell reformulates her New Critical orientation in neo-formalist terms in order to complicate and nuance the poem's relationship to *figura*. Where Salter expected continuity between the two worlds, Mitchell finds discontinuity as he explores "the way in which *Pearl* reflexively engages in resisting typology or *figura*, inasmuch as the figural aesthetics within which typology operates presupposes and preserves a stable continuity between eternity and the human historical continuum that the poem contests" (88). Thus Mitchell calls into question the presence of the essential ingredient of *figura* in *Pearl*: fulfillment. The disjunction between the incommensurate otherworld of *Pearl* and the temporal world of human language ensures that both less and more than a successful figural representation is at stake. The question of representation in *Pearl* had been a contentious issue in *Pearl* scholarship, especially in its most productive decade, the 1980s. Where Sarah Stanbury, in her 1981 book *Seeing the Gawain-Poet,* sees the text's vision as governed and limited by the narrator's human perspective, Theodore Bogdanos, in his 1983 book *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable*, argues that *Pearl* embodies and designates a failure to represent Heaven on a human level. In a more recent reading, Teresa P. Reed has further complicated the issue, suggesting that, though the narrator does not envision himself as entering the heavenly landscape of the poem, he nonetheless is the source of its production, making the landscape not so much a representation of divine perfection as an articulation of its limits (139). But what these readings do not take into account is the double-ness of the vision: the simultaneous presence of a narrator *in* the vision, and the narrator *of* the vision—voices that are

not dialogic so much as overlapping: sometimes self-cancelling, sometimes mutually reinforicing.

With the recognition of the poem's two narrators and their two separate but coordinated perspectives comes the recognition of the poem's two times. For in the time in the vision and the time after the vision (and the complex involvement of these two times with the poetic form) we have the ingredients of promise and fulfillment that enable a different kind of figural reading of the poem. This reading seeks "success" or "failure" in very different terms to those, for instance, of Stanbury and Bogdanos, by seeing the poem itself as a landscape produced by a poetic process that the poem incorporates as part of its narrative: the poet's and not the dreamer's narrative *fictio*.

Unlike Scripture, whose readings simultaneously figure future events (in the Old Testament) and fulfill past promises (in the New Testament), the *Pearl* seeks to simulate both fulfillment and promise in the scope of a single, linear span of text. It deploys every poetic resource in the effort to do so. Numerous studies of the poem's form, especially Cary Nelson's chapter, "*Pearl*: the circle as figural space," demonstrate that "[f]orm and content in *Pearl* are not simply parallel or complementary—they are the same" (26).[3] Considering the continuity of form and content that *Pearl* everywhere insists upon, I argue that the poem does not so much contest the discontinuity of the human and divine worlds (this distontinuity being precisely the precondition of *figura*) as stage the poetics of *figura* at work. The failure of *figural* parallelism at the point of division that cuts through each "layer" of the poetic text—letter and sense—becomes itself inscribed in the text's unique form; for the rupture to which Mitchell alludes is incorporated in the poetic text at every tier of its vision: at the sole break in the formal concatenation of link-words (between parts XII and XIII), at the watery *devyse* that separates the

dreamer from his daughter and her eternal city, and finally at (and as) the wound of the lamb that reigns in that city, the dream's symbolic representation of precisely the division between eternity and the temporal human continuum rent by Adam and later embodied and healed by Christ.

In this chapter, then, I argue a strange position: that *Pearl* succeeds in figuring the failure of *figura*. Though it never mentions the figural or typological mode of biblical understanding directly, the poem is nonetheless powerful incorporates the poetics of figural reading in its exposure of its own production. This intensive self-scrutiny is cleverly focused on the significant pun that offers the title of this chapter: among its many senses, *devyse* can mean "division," or "dividing line" but also "cogitate," describe" and "compose poetry."[4] The poet employs this homonym in all its values, referring to the body of water that divides the dream landscape as *devyse* and naming his process of describing and understanding what he sees across the water, also, as *devyse.* The pun cunningly associates the divided landscape of the vision, the image of the wound (first seen as a disembodied source of blood-flow, before being reified in the presence of the Lamb), and the various divisions of the poetic text: into lines, stanzas, the twenty groups, and its concatenated beginning and end. The relationship of *devyse* to the mode of academic and biblical interpretation known as *divisio*, is suggestively excluded.[5] In so far as *Pearl* gives little ground to associate its "division" with the widespread medieval mode of reading, it is all the more remarkable in elaborating a separate mode of reading, specific to poetic form, around such a similar terminology. Perhaps the most striking major point of difference between *devyse* and *divisio* is the indeterminacy that seems to result of the former. Whereas *divisio* at least posits its own functionality as a means of reaching an interpretation of a text in prose or poetry, the *devyse* marks the crucial point at which such an achievement is impossible in a poem like *Pearl*. The sense of perfection expressed in the coordination of the various formal components in an array

around this mark is complicated by a variety of strategies, which I will proceed describe in great (I hope not too great) detail. If my reading follows a curving path through the twists and turns of the text in a prominently formalist analysis, it is because I believe that this is not only the kind of reading the text invites, but the best way to expose the poetics of *figura*—the *devyse*—that the poem envisions.[6]

A reading informed by mutually-reinforcing perspectives on the poem's symbolic values, the landscape and action of the dream-vision, and the poetic form in which these facets are set, once they are superimposed, will disclose a way of interpreting the *Pearl* as a poetic meditation on Christian time. Composed on its own formal idiom out of diverse senses of division and consolidation, *Pearl* is both the product and the description of the making of an image of Christian time, a *figural* articulation of the space-time of individual salvation as it bends around the ontological division. To understand the significance of this *devyse*, I turn finally to philosophy for help. In *The Time that Remains*, Giorgio Agamben reflects how creating what he calls a "time-image" of messianic time—precisely the wounded/healed time the *Pearl*-poet grapples with—is a process of infinite deferral, which perpetually approaches but fails to reach a definitive representation. He imagines this process by likening it to the myth of the "cut of Apelles," in which a seemingly discreet boundary is show to possess breadth by the fine brush-stroke of a master artist. The mastery of the *Pearl*-poet manifests in the precision with which he finds breadth in the boundary between human and divine, time and eternity, form and theme. Water, with its naturally metamorphic quality, fills the role of the cut of Apelles in the time-vision of *Pearl*; and the running, standing, deep but discreet *devyse* of water, which separates the father from his daughter no less than the poet's revision from the father's vision, displaces the

symbolically laden pearl as the masterstroke of *Pearl*.[7] The time of the visions and the formal space of the poem warp around and fuse in the image of its *devyse*.

Pearl's Structure: Rules and Exceptions

To begin with, it will be helpful to summarize, as completely but as succinctly as possible the general formal conditions of the poem, which, to borrow terminology from the poem itself, can be seen to serve as the "setting" of its jewel-like symbolism.[8] The most extraordinary aspect of its artifice is that, despite the clear and emphatic announcement of a proposed symmetry—the unavoidable sense of a prosodic purposiveness in the construction of the various formal layers—*Pearl*'s tendency towards balance and numerical completeness is interrupted by several significant exceptions to its otherwise well-observed structural rules. The formal aspects of the poem may then be divided into two categories, which I will call rules and exceptions. And the complex interaction of rule and exception is what gives a shape to the form that is *like* the form of the dream.

As a rule, then, moving from largest to smallest divisions, the poem consists of 20 sections, each of which contains 5 stanzas of 12 lines each. These lines bear 4 stresses and are often heavily alliterated. The rhyme scheme is ABABABABBCBC, where the C rhyme repeats at the end of all five stanzas in each section. This is because the last word of each stanza, the second C-rhyme, is also a refraining word-rhyme. Furthermore, this key word concatenates the end of each stanza with the beginning of the next, where it is repeated at or near the beginning of each ensuing stanza's first line. This applies even to the breaks between sections, with the last line of the first stanza of each section introducing a new link-word. This principle of

concatenation links even the last line of the entire poem with the first. In addition, there is usually a pronounced tendency to include not just a rhyme-word, but a refrain phrase or line in the twelfth line of every stanza, but this rule is not observed consistently throughout. The repetition of either a word or phrase, however, has given some scholars the impression that the 20 link-words are significant as keys to the thematic structure of the poem.[9] Others, like W.A. Davenport, observe that "the patterning according to repeated sound and repeated concept does not…always correspond to the development of the sense, but runs counter to it" (42). My interpretation will incorporate both views.

Considering the intricate convolution of the *Pearl's* formal elements by these rules, tying securely the strata of lines, stanzas and sections to a global latticework, it is significant that there are so many and such obvious exceptions. These revise the rules as follows. Of the twenty sections, 19 contain 5 stanzas. Section XV contains 6. Thus the total stanza count of the poem transgresses past the count of a perfect 100, reaching instead, the very un-round 101. With the addition of twelve lines, however, the poem's total line-count would attain the aesthetically pleasing final figure of 1212, but for the next exception. In Section VIII, the last stanza appears to be missing its fourth line (the deficiency of the rhyme scheme tells us which line is missing); thus the poem lacks its 472nd line, and the total line count drops to an uncomfortable 1211. There is one final exception, this time to the rule of concatenation: between sections XII and XIII there is no concatenation. That is the link-word of section XII (*ryȝt*) does not appear in the first line of section XIII. Some editors, E.V. Gordon in particular, appear to have been scandalized by these exceptions, excusing them as scribal errors, and developing elaborate ways of diminishing their value.[10] Whether intentional or not (and I will be offering ways of considering traces of plausible intentionality) they remain permanently embedded in the text as a part of the only

manuscript that preserves it, and are thus unavoidable complications to any reading that would champion the poem's formal perfection.

These rules and exceptions share a relationship with the dialectical development of the poem's rich symbolism. This relationship, in turn, figures the relationship of the father's dream vision narrative and the frame narrative of the poet's remembrance. A formalist analysis of these related relationships, attentive to form's configuration of symbolic and narratological movements will expose the flawed crystallization of eternity the poem stages.

The Pearl's Symbolism: A Divisive Geometry

The poem itself presents a compass with which to graph this complex configuration—a simple geometry of circular and linear relationships.[11] This geometry is embedded in what I have called the dialectical developments of its symbols. Readings, such as Ian Bishop's, in the *Pearl in its Setting* take for granted that the perfectly circular shape the poem itself celebrates is represented in its form and symbols. But Marie Borroff has more recently complicated the issue by identifying one of the poem's most powerful convergences of symbolism and meaning in her essay on the simile of the rising moon in section XIX. This image, introducing a procession of virgins through the heavenly Jerusalem (whose miraculous architecture was just described in the previous section), is the last in a series of circular images including a crown, a penny, and the pearl set in the breast of the dream-maiden. With these representatives of the perfection and "endless" continuance of the circle, Borroff contrasts the very end-oriented figure of the line, which plays a pronounced role in the amplifying translation and commentary of the Parable of the Vineyard (from Matthew 20.1-16) told by the maiden in sections IX-XI. Following Matthew,

the maiden relates how the lord of the vineyard calls different sets of laborers to work at different times of the day, but when it comes time to pay, the lord commands his reeve to,

> Set hem alle vpon a rawe
> And gyf vchon inlyche a peny.
> Bygyn at þe laste þat standeȝ lowe,
> Tyl to þe fyrste þat þou atteny. (X.545-548)[12]

> Set them all in a row
> And give a penny to each one alike.
> Begin with the last one that stands low,
> Until you reach the first one.

Borroff comments, "The Lord's decree on the order of payment reverses the expected order of both time and space. The line of laborers is to be read 'back' in time, from later to earlier, and 'backward' in space, as if, in terms of Western culture, a line of print were to be read from right to left" (Borroff, "Pearl's "Maynful Mone"" 163). The linear "row" of workers may thus be read as an image of both space and time, as the relevance of the workers' sequence lies in its spatial representation of temporal values, the fraction of a day's labor each worker accomplished. Only by virtue of the spatial linearity of the "row" of laborers is the conception of such a temporal reversal possible, enabling as it does the figuration of a fold in the spatial-temporal axis that in turn permits a revaluation of either modality of worldly existence. Such a reassessment of mortal existence is precisely the process the dreamer is urged to undergo in and through his vision.

The circular pearl, as a symbol of endless perfection, eternity, and thus salvation, strongly offsets the image of linearity introduced in the vineyard parable. But Borroff shows how the

poem effects a closure—or synthesis—of this dialectical relationship in the procession of heavenly virgins introduced by the simile of the *maynful mone* ("brilliant moon") in section XIX. The procession, though linear, is instantly everywhere (the city is *sodanly ful*: XIX.1098) and the equal value of its blessed participants in the eyes of the Lamb at the procession's head is emphasized by the fact that the lines they form have neither beginning nor end. The relationship of the poem's meaning and structure rests on the juncture and reconciliation of these simple geometric configurations. The *Pearl*'s projection into itself of these transposed shapes, however, is also made the locus and subject of an investigation into the poetic geometry of salvation, a geometry that arises repeatedly in the network of the poem's interior symbolism as well as its exterior formal configurations, thus complicating the difference between "interior" and "exterior." Borroff mentions only in passing the circular semblance of the poem's structural pattern and the strong interjection in the plot of the linear river (though perhaps not so linear as Borroff suggests) that stands between the dreamer and his daughter—contrasting forces that are designed to mediate between the form and the message of the poem. But despite Borroff's insightful reconciliation of the apparent contradiction of the two symbolic topologies, the *endeles rounde* pearl and the two-ended row of laborers, the task of finishing a full picture of the poem's form and its collusion with the content to create a meaning that transcends the sum of these two aspects on their own, remains incomplete.

In addition to its contrastive rondure and linearity, *Pearl* both exhibits and expresses involvement in several other symbolically significant spatial-temporal dimensions, all of which, I will argue, must be indexed to the global complex of such symbols that mediate between content and form and thus construe the poetical and theological—the figural—core of the poem's meaning. Not least of these spatial dimensions is the middle, or the center (loci marked in their

difference with regard to the difference of the line and the circle, respectively). The speaker's lost pearl/daughter, now the immaculate spirit-interlocutor in his vision, tells her father that she wears a pearl, "inmyddes hyr breste" (IV.222). The site of this symbol of perfection in the perfect middle of the maiden's chest is presented in the 13th section of the poem, not coincidentally, site of the poem's strongest formal exception. Section XIII's concatenation-word is *maskeles* or the near-homophone *makeles*, meaning "without flaw" and "without match" respectively. Moreover, a sort of refrain phrase is regularly carried over between section XIII's stanzas: the chiastic alternation of *perle...mascelles* and *makeles perle* (732-733) or *perle mascelles* and *maskeles perle* (744-745). The last line of the section, line 780, dispenses with the reiteration of *perle*, which appears with the link-word at the end of every other stanza, and instead places side-by-side the two words that the rule of concatenation has until now compelled us to consider as one word: "A makeles may and maskelles," "A matchless and flawless maiden." The substitution of *may* for *perle* confirms the identification of the dreamer's lost pearl with the girl of the vision more directly than elsewhere (Davenport 45-6). Meanwhile, the insistence here on the difference of *maskelles* and *makeles*, emphasized by the attribution of both to the maiden without a sense of redundancy, calls into question the validity of the concatenation between stanza-final line 732 and stanza-initial line 733: "To bye hym a perle watȝ *mascelleȝ*. // 'This *makelleȝ* perle, þat boȝt is dere," "to buy for himself a pearl that was flawless. // This matchless pearl, which is bought at high cost." This concatenation, to function properly, asks us to consider these words to be identical, which they are in neither form nor sense.[13] We begin to see that the concatenation rule can be used to create meaningful instabilities in the form-meaning continuum, calling into question the permanence of this relationship, which elsewhere in the poem serves as the rules' basis.

This image of flawless and matchless roundness set in a perfect middle (reiterated in each concatenation of section XIII), is, however, complicated and contradicted by two features of the circumstances in which it is announced: first, that in a poem of twenty sections, the thirteenth is hardly the obvious place to set the *central* image of the poem. And second, the division between sections XII and XIII is unique in the poem, as we saw, for being the only division that lacks concatenation. One could say that section XII's concatenation-word, *ryghte*, does not find its "match" in the first line of section XIII—it is itself *makelleȝ.* Maren-Sofie Røstvig, in a very short note on the *Pearl's* numerical qualities, has suggested that this visible seam in the poem represents the impermeable divide between the mundane and the superlunary worlds, a division which Borroff sees construed in the introduction of the simile of the *maynful mone*—the boundary, according to Ptolemaic astronomy, of the terrestrial and celestial spheres—rising in that function at the beginning of section XIX (Røstvig 329; Borroff "Pearl's "Maynful Mone"" 168). It could be said, then, that the poem, which otherwise strives to efface its beginning, middle, and end by means of its conjunctive rule in earnest effort itself to become *endeles rounde* like a *maskelles perle*, is marred by this singular blemish: a middle that is in no way symmetrically medial. This strong sense of middle, affirmed in form and—as we will see—in the narrative as well greatly complicates readings that propose a more symmetrical division of the poem and arrange relationships of themes, in Britton J. Harwood's term, a *diptych* (Harwood "*Pearl* as Diptych" 61-78).[14]

If *Pearl* is a diptych, then it is one that folds most evenly. The ostensible lack of global symmetry is not without important precedents. We can compare the "break" in the Bible, between the much larger Old and relatively sort New Testament; perhaps also the corresponding break in messianic time, into a longer stretch before Christ than after. In this case, the off-center

division that unbalances the poem's uniformity, is in fact a very appropriate point of orientation for the image of time it aims to figure. Applied to both *comparanda*, the figural mode of reading presupposes that the obvious failure of superficial symmetry belies deeper and more profound analogies. In this sense, the point of division takes on key significance as the hinge of an uneven fold that simultaneously conceals and enables the perception of meaningful relationships.

I would also suggest that the failure of concatenation that marks this division is itself expressive and crucial in its role as this hinge. The word that fails to concatenate at this juncture, *ryȝte*, is indeed "without match" in the first line of section XIII. Figuratively speaking, divine righteousness (that is, Christ's) can also be so described. The failure to match the final "right" expresses this singular presence, the kind of singularity enunciated at the beginning of the poem, where the lost pearl is praised *sengeley in synglere* ("distinct in its uniqueness:" I.8). This breakage of the formal regularity of the poem then mediates between the two meanings of the ambiguous concatenation word of section XIII. If the strong break between these sections—the missing match—is to be considered a blemish, then the formal-semantic pivot of *maskelles-makelleȝ* revolves around a semantic contradiction. For we are assured by the strong sectional hiatus that something, specifically Christ's righteousness and the *Pearl*'s *ryȝte*, can indeed be called *masceles* "without blemish" precisely by being *makelleȝ* "without match."

Another significant feature of this very un-medial middle of the poem is numerical. The poem, as I said, consists of 101 stanzas divided into twenty five-stanza sections with the exception of section XV, which has six stanzas. This near miss of a perfect century of stanzas enables the poem to approximate the powerfully symmetric end-line 1212. The extra stanza in section XV, whose concatenation word *neverþeles* "nevertheless" appears to comment ironically on its formal excessiveness, constitutes yet another matchless blemish. The poem's numerical

disposition seems to be the product of an uneasy transposition of structures based on the numbers 10 (or 5), and those based on 12 (or 6), which conducts into the numerical stratagems of the poem a dialectic opposition of quantities analogous perhaps to the opposition of the circular and linear qualities of its form and imagery. Considering the numerical tensions, the placement of emphasis on the division between sections XII and XIII becomes more clearly intentional (or rather, *con*tentional), as the completion of the first twelve sections, rather than the first ten, falls in line, according to the double-logic of the poem, with the strategic of extending the poem past 100 stanzas in order to reach 1212 lines. These tensions in the numerical structure of the *Pearl* transpose a sort of algebraic facet over the geometric facet of its dialetical curvature, *figuring* the incommensurability of the human and divine worlds in both mathematical models.[15]

In addition to these spatial considerations, as the number of months in the calendar year, twelve symbolizes the end of a temporal cycle before the return to a new beginning, not identical but analogous to the previous beginning. Section XIII, it is true, shares with the beginning of the poem the concentration on the singular qualities of the pearl itself, but there is little else to render a sense of cyclical return. On the other hand, the strong break in form corresponds to a strong shift in tone. From the elegiac envelope of the first three-fifths of the poem, section XIII introduces topics concerning the heavenly city the maiden now inhabits, its architecture and adornment. The subject of the poem thus takes the step over this unbridgeable division in form, from two different forms of existence, the mortal and linear to the eternal and round. The catchphrase of this new beginning in section XIII, *maskelles-makelles*, perhaps responds contrastively to the catchword of section I, namely, *spotte,* the cyclical return to which it patently refuses. That is from the singular "spot," the definite terrestrial *locus amoenus*—the *topos* or

commonplace—in which it begins, the poem now turns to the non-space (a kind of *utopia*) of the otherworld.

In the opening section, the strophic links play on an alternation of two senses of *spotte*, "flaw" and "place." The dreamer returns to the hill, the spot, on which he says he lost his *perle wythouten spotte*. Each stanza of the section closes with this complete phrase, using the unambiguous sense of *spotte* as "flaw." But the first line of each stanza except the first (as well as the first line of section II), conjoins to this meaning of *spot* the other sense, "place," often specifying this sense with the spatial demonstrative *þat spot*, namely the location and monument of his loss, the burial mound. On the one hand, this repeated conjunction of the two senses of *spot* reinforces the narrative of the dreamer's painful encounter with a place of collapsed presence and absence, where his lost pearl both is (in memory and in burial) and yet no longer is (in life). The place itself is thus a blemish on the not-yet-dreaming dreamer's memory, and yet his meditation on the significance of this semantic conjunction, here mirrored in the formal conjunction of the two senses of *spotte*, also becomes a source of poetry:

> Yet Þoȝt me neuer so swete a sange
> As stylle stounde let to me stele.
> Forsoþe þer fleten to me fele,
> To þenke hir color so clad in clot!
> O moul, þou marreȝ a myry juele,
> My priuy perle withouten spotte. (I.19-24)

> Yet it seemed to me that there was never so sweet song
> As the one a quiet hour let come to me.

Truly many songs flowed to me there,

To think her complexion was so covered in dirt!

O earth, you ruin a fair jewel,

My own pearl without spot.

It is uncertain whether these "many" songs that "steal" and "flow" to him as he contemplates the almost catalytic reaction of the lost jewel with the spot (in both its senses) corresponds to the poem at hand. The resonance of *fleten* with the watery presences in the vision suggests this is so, while the narrative order would suggest otherwise. The oscillation from one sense of *spot* to the other between each stanza sketches a metaphoric development of thought, moving the poet back and forth from the painful insistence of the "place" where the pearl was lost to the continual reemergence of the *perle wythouten spot* in his memory just as it rehearses itself in the soundscape of his poem. It is a vicious and unhealthy cycle of remorse from which only sleep rescues him. The second section conducts him away from that place, in a literal metaphorization (in the sense of "bearing beyond") of his mind:

Fro spot my spyryt þer sprang in space;

My body on balke þer bod in sweuen.

My goste is gon in Godeȝ grace

In auenture þer meruayleȝ meuen. (II.61-4)

From that place my spirit leaped after a time;

My body stayed there asleep on the mound.

My spirit is let go by way of God's grace

On an adventure to where marvels happen.

Formally, the alternation of *spot* "place" and *spot* "flaw" is duplicitous as a concatenation in the same way that *maskeles* is, even more strongly so, in section XIII. Only in section XIII is this doubt made manifest (in line 780 already cited), but the poem invites us to question the value of a joining-device that *matches* in sound but not in sense. It is significant that these two words, *spotte* and *ma(s)kelles*, at what we might call the two beginnings of the poem are antonyms in one of their senses, and in their ambiguity both partake in this duplicitous alternation of sense between their respective section's stanzas. The concatenation thus is simultaneously being formally reinforced, by showing that despite difference in sense, the phonetic links may still persist, while at the same time being broken down semantically, since identity in sense proves to be no criterion for their effectiveness as formal joints. Likewise, the possibility of considering the unmedial middle at XII-XIII as the start of a refreshed formal cycle is simultaneously denied by the formal break, but confirmed by the likeness of the synonymous catchword phrases, *perle wythouten spot* and *perle ma(s)kelles*. We are given to accept that with section XIII, the poem begins again, but not as it began before. The poem *Pearl*, unlike the emblematic jewel it describes in sections I and XIII, is not itself *endeles rounde*, but constitutes a continuous aggregation of disparities between form and sense, as well as beginnings and endings, in significant convolution. The theological significance of this extended query is analogous. Cary Nelson comments on the first section: "The poem's use of "spot" as both "flaw" and "place" elaborates the image of our violated earthly sphere: before man was banished from it, Eden was his whole; endless and indivisible, it *was* the human sphere. But when Adam spotted the apple, Eden itself became not simply flawed but, literally, a spot—merely a location, a bounded space" (32). While these two super-sections, or parts, may represent the pre- and post-Fall conditions of

the world, the poem represents in its form the vacillation between the two extremes of these temporal and spatial theological dimensions. Through concatenation it presumes to be endless and indivisible, and yet through its many partitions—into stanzas, sections, and now the two parts—incorporates divisibility as a formal and conceptual imperative. In this way the play of rules and exceptions in form, in their largest and smallest configurations, begin to build and complicate a poetics of figural *devyse* even before the imagery of the dream landscape confirms its prevalence in the artifice of eternity the poem seeks—and fails—to construct.

The Divisive Landscape of the Vision

As a line without end, the circle could be considered an adequate symbol of the poem's highly involved structure, if it weren't, of course, for the off-center flaw between sections XII and XIII. Such a remarkable barrier, mediating and yet prohibiting passage between the linear and the circular, as between the mundane and the eternal, is figured in the dreamer's dream as the body of water, the *meruelous mereȝ* (XX.1166), that separate him from the maiden, his pearl. The importance of the landscape and topography of the scene of the dream to the form and sense of the poem cannot be overstated, though this relationship, as far as I know, has not yet been fully spelled out.[16] I offer my attempt to do so here.

The dream-river is a very real boundary in the dreamer's vision-journey: it may not be crossed. To do so, as the dreamer discovers in the final section (when he tries to wade across it), is to dissolve the dream as well as the fabric of the poem itself, which ends very soon after after a few frustrated comments by the poet. When the dreamer violates this important division, he is returned to the same spot where he fell asleep, though not, significantly, at the same time. We

rejoin the poet at the *later* time in which he reflects on his memory of the dream. Still, spatially, the form of the poem simulates the dreamer's return, concatenating he final line and the first with the catchword *pay*, a second and now more direct return to the beginning.

But though at this last-first juncture we are turned back to the beginning, we are left there to consider a relationship: of the divisive body of water and the off-center but medial flaw of the poem, which has just presumed to perfect and renew itself.

In section II the dreamer falls asleep on the mound where he lost his pearl and finds himself transported, in spirit, from one *locus amoenus* to another: a *locus ameonissimus*, replete with crystal *klyfeȝ*, a *foreste*, and *rych rokkeȝ* (II.66-67). He passes through this rustic ornamentation, the *adubbement* ("adornment") signified by the catch-word of section II, but despite the seeming vastness of the scenery, his forward momentum is soon brought to a halt by the obstacle of a river bank: *I wan to a water by schore þat scherez—* | *Lorde, dere watȝ hit adubement!* ("I reached a water by a shoreline that cuts | Lord, its adornment was precious!" II.107-108). Though his dream-journey has only just begun, this shore transects the dream-landscape and so marks the limit of his forward mobility. His voyage thus begins and ends in section II, which encompasses therefore the complete spatial progress of his journey. The *vision* of the dreamer will continue, but he may not 'physically' cross this body of water. Such an important territorial boundary-marker is suitably adorned, with a virtual lapidary of stones enumerated in a catalogue that lacks only the precious subject-'stone' of the poem. The closing-stanza of section II depicts the scene:

> The dubbemente of þo derworth depe
> Wern bonkeȝ of beryl bryȝt.
> Swangeande swete þe water con swepe,

Wyth a rownande rourde raykande aryȝt.

In þe founce þer stonden stoneȝ stepe,

As glente þurȝ glas þat glowed and glyȝt,

As stremande sterneȝ, quen stroþe-men slepe,

Staren in welkyn in wynter nyȝt;

For vche a pobbel in pole þer pyȝt

Watȝ emerad, saffer, oþer gemme gente,

Þat alle þe loȝe lemed of lyȝt.

So dere watȝ hit adubbement. (II.109-120)

The adornment of the splendid deep,

were banks of brilliant beryl.

Swirling sweetly the water swept by,

flowing straight with a murmuring sound.

In the bottom stood bright stones,

that glowed and glimmered like a beam of light through glass,

As streaming stars, when men of earth sleep,

shine in the sky on a winter night;

For each pebble set in the pool

was emerald, sapphire, or a noble gem,

so that the whole pool gleamed with light.

So precious was its adornment.

Beautifully adorned but impassable, this *pole* ("pool") becomes the principal medial feature of the narrative landscape. It remains inexorably in between the dreamer and his interlocutor, whom he is now poised to meet. And it is only with the appearance of this other person that the water attains its medial aspect. That is, though the dreamer's motion is circumscribed by the river, he is given no incentive to consider it a boundary between the space he is wandering through and some other space, until the appearance of something desirable on the opposite shore. This appearance (of maiden and city) then is what draws his attention, along with his desire, away from the body of water as an object of interest in itself—as marking the limit and extent of the one dream-space and not cutting it into two—towards what now becomes significant as the *other side*. It is at this moment, then, that the promise and the possibility of fulfillment enter the poem, and a figural reading of the narrative becomes enabled.

At the beginning of section III, the dreamer seems content not to test the limit on his progress finding that, *Þe more I folȝed þose floty valeȝ, | þe more strenghþe of ioye myn herte strayneȝ* ("The more I followed the stream-filled vales | the more a force of joy excites my heart" III.127-128). Though the dreamer's expanding sense of joyous increase as he explores his surroundings is further emphasized in section III by the concatenation-phrase *more and more*, he soon finds that the source of this spiritual increase is also its limitation:

> Forþy I þoȝt þat Paradyse
> Watȝ þer ouer gayn þo bonkeȝ brade.
> I hoped þe water were a deuyse
> Bytwene myrþeȝ by mereȝ made;
> Byȝonde be broke, by slente oþer slade,
> I hoped þat mote merked wore.

Bot þe water watȝ depe, I dorst not wade,

And euer me longed ay more and more. (III.137-144)

So I thought that Paradise

was there opposite, over the broad banks.

I supposed the water were a division

between delights, made by pools;

Beyond the brook, by a slope or valley,

I suppose that a walled city had been stood.

But the water was deep, I dared not wade through,

And continually I desired ever more and more.

The intimations of paradise that so strengthen the dreamer's heart with joy are constrained and transformed by the realization of the pool's prohibitive depth into a growing urgency of desire for *more and more*, an increase that is no longer able to be achieved but only more and more longed for. The difference between the attainment and the alluring promise of the sight of paradise is captured in the last quatrain of the first stanza, an unexpected aside on the goddess Fortune:

As fortune fares þer as ho frayneȝ,

Wheþer solace ho sende oþer elleȝ sore,

Þe wyȝ to wham her wylle ho wayneȝ

Hytteȝ to have ay more and more. (III.129-132)

So fortune behaves, where she makes her trial

whether to send solace or pain,

The man to whom she sends her good will,

chances to have ever more and more.

We are thus given cause to doubt whether it will be *solace* or *sore* that proceeds from this vision, which we now know will be *only* vision: the dreamer will see what is across an impermeable limit, but not trespass into it. The *more* he attempts to attain *more*, the more quickly his efforts are matched with a sense of failure and peril:

To fynde a forþe faste con I fonde.

Bot woþeȝ mo iwysse þer ware,

Þe fyrre I stalked by þe stronde.

And euer me þoȝt I schulde not wonde

For wo þer weleȝ so wynne wore.

Þenne nwe note me com on honde

Þat meued my mynde ay more and more. (III.150-156)

Eagerly, I tried to find a ford,

but there were more perils for sure

the further I stumbled by the shore.

And ever more I thought I should not hesitate

for fear where there were so many precious things.

Then a new matter came upon me,

that moved my mind ever more and more.

Thus after having met so soon with the limit of his progress in section II—for all its "adornment"—he recognizes the limit as such only here in section III, and is content to observe it until section XX, where he trespasses the boundary and dissolves the vision. The refrain of *more and more* here then takes an ironic tone, much as the refraining link word of section XV, *neuerþeles*, ironically comments on that section's unique possession of an extra stanza.

The jeweled banks of this sometimes round, sometimes straight body of water are prominent not only in the text of the poem, but in three of the four illustrations that precede it in its only manuscript. The second full-page picture portrays the dreamer beside a pool, occupying the bottom right corner of the page, in which fish (not present in the text) have been interpolated, presumably to confirm that the wavy lines at his fate represent water and not earth. The next page shows the dreamer speaking with a white-clad woman and a well-stocked river runs between them. The final illustration depicts a scene very similar to the prior one, only the woman now seems somewhat more distant and stands beside an architectural structure. What appears to be an eel has joined the fish in the river, which has now established itself as the principle feature of the landscape of the illustrations. Central in all aspects of the poetic text—visual and literal—this body of water, along with the emblems of symbolic circularity in the poem (the pearl, the crown, and the moon) and of linearity (the row of laborers), serves as a narrative reflex of the poem's limits, specifically the indistinctness of its beginnings and endings and its middle. And more and more, the form and narrative begin to resemble both each other, and an image of the figural basis of messianic time.

Despite the clear depiction of this water and its situation with respect to the poem's speakers in the manuscript illustrations, it is difficult to form an accurate image of it from what is given in the text. Is it a river or a pond that divides the dreamer and his pearl? The water appears

definitely to be mobile, a river at once swirling in eddies (*swangeande swete þe water con swepe*: II.111), and moving straight (*raykande aryȝt*: II.112), but it is also described, almost in the same breath in the last stanza of section II, as a *pole* (II.117), a *loȝe* (II. 119), and later as a *mere* (III.140, 158) or *mereȝ* ("pools" XX.1166) and a *dam* ("artificial pool" VI.324), terms which usually imply standing water,[17] all with intermittent references to it as a *strem* (III.125; XX.1159,1162) and *borne* ("stream" XVII.974). Though its appearance modulates back and forth between the semblance of a pool and a stream, it nonetheless remains clear enough to see through to the treasury of gems that lines its bed. The only stable attribute of it is thus that it is a volume of clear water, but it shows characteristics alternately circular and linear, just as the poem's form and major system of symbolic imagery does. If the row of vineyard laborers represents the line of human hierarchies and human life, and the pearl, moon, and crown represent the circularity of eternal non-hierarchical equanimity (under Christ, at least), then this water represents the curious reconciliation of the two configurations that the poem strives to embody. What this topography might tell us about the meaning-generating nexus of form and sense that is such a prevalent feature of the *Pearl* deserves most careful attention.

Section III adds a *nwe note* "new note" (ambiguously meaning "matter of discussion" and "musical note," as at line 879, "A note ful nwe I herde hem warpe" "I heard him utter a completely new note," speaking of John's vision of the Lamb) to the symphony of vivid symbols and poetic acoustics, which captures the dreamer's attention "beȝonde the myry mere" (III.157), and anticipates the fuller variation on this new theme in the next section. He sees across the water the pearl he lost, now personified in the form of a lovely maiden. The doubt that has lingered from the beginning, as to whether the mode of his lament for a "pearl" was literal or allegorical, quickly resolves in the immediate snap of our reaction to the maiden's appearance,

first as the pearl transformed, then rightly as the referent of the always metaphoric pearl. With the addition of this second persona to the drama, and the resultant generic conversion of the poem from elegiac monologue to theological dialogue, the significance of the catchphrase of section III, *more and more*—in what we now must consider a characteristic gesture in the poetics of this work—is multiplied. It becomes at once an ironic commentary on the intervention of the water between the dreamer and his goal, creating a *here* and a *there* in a previously unified landscape, and on the addition of a new speaker, which applies true *solace* to the mourning father's primary *sore*. But attending this *solace* must remain the *sore* of recognizing that an unbridgeable barrier of water lies between them.

The relationship of this new *solace* to the dreamer's old *sore* is caught subtly but with unmistakable design in a curious parallelism. In the second stanza of section III, in the passage cited above, the dreamer recognizes that the banks of the water *were a deuyse* (III.139), a "division" from the Paradise he supposes must exist on the other side. Section IV is devoted to the description of the maiden, the pearl, whom he sees on the opposite bank. This is emphasized by the repetition of the word *perleȝ* in conjunction with all but two instances of the catch-word, *pyȝt*, and by the setting of *perle* in the rhyme position in the third and middle stanza of the section (lines 205-216), which *uniquely here* in the entire poem. This significant rhyme figures both the singularity and the spatial situation of the "perle wythouten wemme" "pearl without flaw" (IV.221) which we learn in the fourth stanza,

> inmyddeȝ hyr breste watȝ sette so sure;
> A manneȝ dom moȝt dryȝly demme,
> Er mynde moȝt malte in hit mesure.
> I hope no tong moȝt endure

No sauerly saghe say of þat syȝt,

So watȝ hit clene and cler and pure,

Þat precios perle þer hit watȝ pyȝt. (IV.222-228)

was set securely in the middle of her breast;

A man's faculty of judgment could continually be damned,

before the mind could melt in [comprehend] its measure [worth].

I believe no tongue could suffice

to say an adequate utterance about that sight,

So shiny, clear and pure it was,

that precious pearl that was set there

If the pearl's aspect is not quite as J. Allen Mitchell dilates upon it, "essentially non-cognitive and unrepresentable" (92), it is at least beyond measure and proportion expressible in human language.[18] The value, significance, and proportions of the pearl may elude the grasp of human standards of measurement (*dom*), but the maiden's body and the structure of the section of the poem that describes her are made, by the artistry of the very human poet, to exhibit formal, and therefore spatial, approximations. Teresa P. Reed has recently observed how the substitution of pearls for pearls in such an array of metonymic an metaphoric "becomes the focal point for a new context," in which continually revised characteristics of the pearl aggregate into an image of the ineffable in which "the ideal is being *articulated*, not transparently *represented*" (149). The processes of "articulation" in the "aggregation" of metonymic layers has its reflection in form.

The unique instance of the *erle*-rhyme in the middle-stanza of the section, by phonetically "evaluating" the *perle* as at least acoustically and rhythmically equivalent with the words *gyrle*

"girl," *werle* "garland," and *erle* "earl," gives account in poetic measure of the pearl, an image of immeasurability, that serves as the centerpiece of the maiden's costume. Thus while the sense of the text expresses the inexpressibility of the pearl, the form of the text is configured to show what words claim to fail to represent. Mitchell argues that, faced with the inexpressible object, "we confront negativity (or traditional apophasis) in the poet-dreamer's analogical discourse, which suggests that there are constraints on what can be said or thought about the spiritual facts one encounters" (93). This may be true of the speaker's encounter within the dreamscape, but in the parallel and embodying poetic landscape, we find no such admission of inadequacy, but rather a confirmation of the elasticity of poetic measurement to encompass spiritual proportions. The apophatic sentiment of the dreamer is contradicted or compromised by the kataphatic properties of the form; what the dreamer retreats from representing, the architect of the poem's structure strives to present.[19] The limited internal perspective on the revelation of the vision is thus supplemented by the poetic form, which becomes itself another meaning-making aspect of the text almost as miraculous as the vision it contains. The more it draws the reader's attention to its own divine equivalences and proportions, however, the more it endangers itself with becoming just as elusive as the visions it is disposed to resemble.

Another, more subtle, gesture of poetic measure balances a locus in section IV, which describes the body of the maiden, with a commensurate locus in section III, which introduced the divisive seam of the landscape. Here we find what is, in my view, the crucial pun of the entire poem. In the second stanza of each we find these lexically parallel passages (here I give the line numbers with respect to the stanza):

> Forþy I þoȝt þat Paradyse
>
> Watȝ þer ouer gayn þo bonkeȝ brade.

I hoped þe water were a *deuyse*

Bytwene myrþeȝ by mereȝ made; (III. 137-140; lines 5-8 of stanza 2)

[emphasis added; translated above]

to which compare:

Quen þat frech as flor-de-lys

Doun þe bonke con boȝe bydene.

Al blysande whyt watȝ hir beau biys,

Vpon at sydeȝ, and bounden bene

Wyth þe myryeste margarys, at my *deuyse*,

Þat euer I seȝ ȝet with myn ene.

...when that person like a lily,

came directly down the bank.

All brilliant white was her linen gown,

open at its sides and fastened

with the most delightful pearl, in my opinion,

that I ever saw yet with my eyes.

(IV. 195-200; lines 3-8 of stanza 2)

The pairing of imagery and lexical parallels (*bonkeȝ-bonke, myrþeȝ-myryeste*) is organized around the repetition of the rhyme-word *deuyse* at the identical position in each stanza and section. As though in a redemptive gesture, however, the word's sense has changed. The "division" that halts the dream-pilgrim's forward progress in section III is transfigured verbally

in this parallel stanza into a simple qualifying aside in his description of the maiden's costume: "in my opinion" or "in my conceiving," that is, a faculty of conception which, as we have seen, is repeatedly called into doubt in the text.

In spite of this seeming mollification, the *deuyse* of water remains an impenetrable obstacle between the dreamer and the maiden, and marks the distance and difference between their two sundered sides, of mortal life and eternal life respectively. Water, pure but obstructive (like the pure, clear, but intellectually obscure pearl), mediates their dialogue, which constitutes the bulk of the remainder of the poem and which is characterized by a repetition of a narrative formula: statement of opinion (by the dreamer) and correction (by the maiden). With the introduction of the *nwe note* of this second voice, which will offer counterpoint to the dreamer's *deuyse* (opinion), the emphasis of our attention effectively shifts from the medial obstacle to its two opposing sides. The bank or *syde*—formerly the conceptual ground on which the figure of the water was traced—becomes itself a figure, and one I think that has not yet been integrated into the understanding of the poem's spatial design.

The water and its two banks, we conclude, represent an absolute ontological and epistemological boundary between the mortal and eternal worlds: a *devyse* ("division") of *devyse* ("cognition"). In the exchange of his opinions and the maiden's corrections of them that begins in section V, the dreamer assumes the oscillating roles of "gentyl/joyful jueler" and "no kynde jueler," terms with which the concatenation links articulate the catechistic movements of the argument. The dialogue moves from one mortal blunder to the next, beginning with the fact that the dreamer "sadly miscalculate[s] the possibilities of his circumscribed visionary perspective" (Mitchell 95). His first mistake is to underestimate the clear limit of the water:

Now haf I fonde hyt, I schal ma feste,

And wony wyth hyt in schyr wod-schaweȝ,

And loue my Lorde and al his laweȝ

Þat hatȝ me broȝt þys blys ner.

Now were I at yow byȝonde þise waweȝ,

I were a ioyful jueler. (V.284-288)

Now that I have found [the pearl], I will rejoice,

and dwell with it in bright groves,

and love my Lord and all his laws

that have brought me near this blis.

I if I were with you across these waves,

I would be a joyful jeweler.

Transitioning into the next section, the maiden reprimands him and corrects this faulty opinion:

I halde þat iueler lyttel to prayse

Þat leueȝ wel þat he seȝ wyth yȝe

. . . . . .

ȜeSetten hys [Christ's] wordeȝ ful westernays

Þat leueȝ noþynk bot ȝe hit syȝe. (VI.301-302, 306-307)

I consider that jeweler deserves little praise

who believes what he sees with his eyes.

...

You take His words all backwards

if believe nothing unless you see it.

Settling, if nothing else, by virtue of her speaking last, the negative sense of *jueler* in its final concatenation appearance, the maiden locks the argument against the dreamer, showing him his misinterpretation of the vision of the water, which though it appears transparent and easily crossed, represents the ultimate obstacle. Indeed the critical division that is distinctive of mortal existence and wisdom defines itself with respect to its acceptance of this limit, death. Here, "death...becomes metonymic of the peculiar epistemological hiatus between 'here' and the otherworld" (Mitchell 95). The bank represents then the basic antinomy of the poem, the fact that "revelation is always compromised by reception, condemning the visionary to reproduce fictions...that declare the existence of a spiritual presence while failing to admit that presence wholly into the *present*" (Mitchell 91). With this observation, Mitchell would support his thesis that the poem exhibits a "conspicuous insistence on radical transfiguration and discontinuity" that resists and contests figural typology in so far as it "presupposes and preserves a stable continuity between eternity and the human historical continuum," but rather is "parabolic instead of figural in its presentation" (88). To be sure, the maiden could be considered to instruct the dreamer in precisely the error of the proposition, which he assumes quite literally in the vision, that figural (much less actual) connection is possible between the eternal and the perpetual world. The difference and distance between the eternal and temporal had been well established, at least since Boethius, who compares eternity, "the whole, perfect possession at once of unending life" and those things that live in linear temporality, which "proceeds in the present from the past to the future" (*De Consolation* V.6).[20]

And yet, the poem exists (or presumes to exist) in a space between these categories, and does a remarkable job of integrating the spatial dimension of the spiritually charged and

symbolic landscape of the vision with the temporal dimensions it cross-wires. And more pertinently, the poem investigates the problem of describing spiritual experience in language with tools than the dreamer's misunderstood doctrine, whose failure is assured by the disparity of the two interlocutors; for the maiden has direct knowledge of God.

The waking poet however is privileged in his position of exteriority to the vision. In many ways he is made synonymous with the dreamer, as when in section one, the doleful speaker is flooded with poetry of its own accord, but also distinguished in the marked difference in his state of consciousness. That is to say, there is another and no less important division in the poem represented by the water besides death, and that is the division between wake and sleep. Indeed not death, the dreamer ultimately finds, but wakefulness is the result of crossing this English Lethe. There is still another distinction marked by the water: between dreamer and poet, between revelation and its expression, vision and revision. And it is this division, I will, argue, that is bridged with remarkable success.

The Wound of *Pearl*

The absolute ontological-epistemological division represented by the mysterious body of water does not so much limit the possibilities of the poem's message, as *figure* the poem's message of limitation. Having shown how the poem charts themes of incommensurability (in the antagonistic geometry of circle and line) and ontological difference (in the divisive landscape of the vision), I would like now to approach the ways in which the poem crystalizes these themes in a flawed formal jewel whose central facet and symbol is the wound of the Christ-Lamb who appears in the center of the heavenly Jerusalem. This wound, which figuratively tears through

every layer of the poem's form-matter continuum, does not so much *represent* the absolute *midpoint* of Christian time and the axis of the figural reading of both scripture and history, as *present* it directly. That is to say, the wound of the Lamb is not a symbol at all; it graphically envisions the *real* wound of Christ. And it inflicts itself on the text of *Pearl* in a number of significant ways.

As we began to see above, the maiden calls into question the value of *vision* itself, the relationship of sight to belief that the dreamer holds too firmly. This may be a cue to suspect and question the validity of the ensuing parade of visions that the dreamer watches from afar across the water. The maiden's warning draws the attention of the dreamer not to what he will see, but to the fact that he can *only* see, and that seeing is not enough for belief.

Returning now to the narrative where we left off, the maiden has accused the dreamer of taking Christ's words *ful westernays*. Gordon comments that this *hapax legomenon* must derive from *besternays* "turned round, reversed," altered under the influence of *west*, but having the same meaning (Gordon 57). Considering the importance of the "east" in the poem, first in the original estimation of the lost pearl as *oute of oryent* (I.3), and later in the rise of the *maynful mone* (XIX.1093), it seems that the dreamer's misunderstanding of scripture becomes allied with an error in geographic orientation. This is a curious mistake to make considering that the dreamer's journey along the landscape of his vision is accompanied throughout by the cadence of the concatenation links, which often involve a chiastic alternation of word order, as we have seen, for instance, in *perle maskelles / maskelez perle* (section XIII). The form of concatenation itself could then be called a "setting" of *wordez ful westernays*.

The maiden's reprimand continues into the next stanza of section VI, where she further defines the impermeability of the boundary the dreamer has tragically underestimated:

Þou wylneȝ ouer þys water to weue;

Er moste þou ceuer to oþer consayle:

Þy corse in clot mot calder keue.

For hit watȝ forgarte at Paradys greue;

Oure ȝorefader hit con mysseȝeme.

Þurȝ drwry deth boȝ vch man dreue,

Er ouer þys dam hym Dryȝtyn deme. (VI.318-24)

You wish to cross over this water;

Before that you must take a different approach:

your body most sink, colder, into earth.

For it was ruined in the grove of Paradise;

our forefather abused it.

Each man must press through cruel death,

Before the Lord allow him over this water.

Dam: "a body of water" (Gordon qualifies, "in conduit or artificial pool," 125), another disharmonious synonym in the lexicon of words designating the divisive water. It's near identity with the catch-word of section VI, *dem(e)* "judgment," further emphasizes the central disjunction of temporal and eternal life, cloven by the limit of death and final judgment, which the dreamer, burdened as he is by the *clot* of his body, may not transgress. The spatial boundary thus becomes temporal as well; not *until* the dreamer dies and receives judgment may he cross to the other side.

Though the dreamer is forbidden passage across the partition of his vision, he is afforded a deeper spiritual vision into the city that lies beyond the water, which seems unimpaired in its

scope by his spatial constraint (Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals* 137ff). In section II, he dimly perceived a walled city (*mote*) in the distance at the beginning of the dream, immediately after recognizing the *devyse* of the water (*Byȝonde þe broke, by slente oþer slade, | I hoped þat mote merked wore.* "Beyond the brook, among slope or valley, I supposed a city was situated" (II.141-2). In Section XVII, introduced by the last appearance of the typically-punning catchword *mote* "blemish" or "city," the maiden gives the dreamer allowance to proceed further, not over but along the banks of his side:

> 'If I þis mote þe schal vnhyde,
> Bow vp towarde þys borneȝ heued,
> An I anendeȝ þe on þis syde
> Schal sve, tyl þou to a hil be veued.' (XVII.973-6)

> 'If I shall show to you this walled city,
> walk up toward this stream's head,
> And I shall follow you, opposite
> on this side, until you are brought to a hill.'

The parallel but never intersecting journeys of the two characters follow this body of water, now more clearly imagined as a river than a pond. The shifting imagery of the watery division, sometimes circular and pond-like, at other times linear and river-like, may now be seen as another characteristic of the concerted blending of discordant imagery that is just as typical of the poet's integrative style as his favoring play with words of several antonymic senses. Such blending occurs in the image of the city that is the final destination of the vision, the outward

appearance of which he sees and describes with the remainder of section XVII, whose final stanza and statement begins:

> As John deuysed ȝet saȝ I þare:
>
> Þise twelue degres wern brode and stayre;
>
> Þe cyté stod abof ful sware,
>
> As longe as brode as hyȝe ful fayre;
>
> Just as John described it, I saw there:
>
> These twelve steps were broad and steep;
>
> The city stood above square in shape,
>
> Perfectly as long as it was broad and high; (XVII, 1021-4)

With the catchword of this section, *John*, the poet cites his source for the city as *Revelations*, from which he gleans the detail of its perfect cubical uniformity. "Human eyes," Borroff comments, "cannot see a cube as such; we can see without distortion only one side of an object that we know has five other sides of the same width and height. Here again the dimensions of the city are not so much seen as apprehended: he "saw" them as Saint John saw them measured" (*Traditions and Renewals* 136). The mystical vision of this dreamer, like that of the book of *Revelations*, exceeds the limitations of normal human perception, a restriction that would seem to be embodied and enforced in the poem by the body of water. But the shape of the division itself defies any stable conception, shifting as it does back and forth between circularity and linearity. Similarly, the heavenly city of the vision, already demonstrated to be the object of a more-than-human vision, undergoes a shift in its dominant imagery. As Borroff again notes, "The image of the round moon at or approaching the full [at the beginning of the penultimate

section XIX], which introduces the vision's final phase, is implicitly superimposed on the city, which is thus imagined as framed by a circle, though it is imagined earlier as a cube. The two shapes have equal symbolic validity, and the poem demands that we consider the equally 'true'" (Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals* 137-8). And as she had summarized this quality in an earlier essay, "the rules of geometrical or positional space do not apply to the heavenly kingdom" (Borroff, "Pearl's "Maynful Mone"").

The blending and shifting of spatial and geometrical qualities of the imagery, as we have seen, is even reflected at the lexical level, in which punning words move between different senses, often enabling wordplay across crucial formal junctions in the text, as at the off-center "middle" of the poem between sections XII and XIII. This oscillation to and from different permutations of one object, however having "equal symbolic validity," or truth-value, does not entirely explain the urgency for caution with which we have been told to treat the divisive water that marks numerous crucial differences: dream and wake, vision and presence, life and afterlife. The *devyse* of the river has subtly returned in the dreamer's citation of *Revelations* in line 1021: *As John deuysed ȝet saȝ I þare*. This *þare* points ambiguously to the two locations of the vision, either the spot from which he sees, or the object of his vision on the other side. The changing attributes with which he describes what he sees, the failure of temporal, linear language to adequately figure the continuity of the eternal city, owes to the distortion of the ontological and epistemological distance between these two *theres*.

Though a symbol of mediation, the body of water that separates uncertain vision from certifiable presence is paired—following a trend of blending and comparing symbols in the poem—with an apposite image within the heavenly city. At the center of the cubical-spherical structure, the dreamer notices a throne, and from that throne, a river flows:

A reuer of þe trone þer ran outryȝte

Watȝ bryȝter þen boþe þe sunne and mone.

/

Sunne ne mone schon neuer so swete

As þat foysoun flode out of þat flet;

Swyþe hit swange þurȝ vch a strete

Wythouten fylþe oþer galle oþer glet.

A river ran directly out from the throne

was brighter than both the sun and moon.

/

Neither sun nor moon ever shined so sweetly

As that copious flood out of that city;

It swirled swiftly through each street

without filth or gall or slime. (XVIII.1055-60)

Unlike the river-pond that runs *aryȝt* (112) and marks the middle of the spatial environment of the vision and the limit of the dreamer's spiritual pilgrimage at the immediate *there* where his forward progress stops; the other river running *outryȝte*, at that distant *there* where it emanates from the divine throne, designates no boundary in space or time, but on the contrary represents the boundlessness of the city in space and time. Simultaneously accompanying this river, a procession of virgins, all, like the pearl-maiden, married to Christ, moves in against the outward flow, toward the Lamb, traversing but already filling the space of the city: both departing from

and arriving at the central Throne. Such impossible ambiguities are effortlessly reconciled—or not an issue at all—in the other-world of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

The River of Life, emanating from the Lamb, and the River of Death that divides the viewer from the viewed, share two qualities. First, they occupy prominent middles in the vision: one symbolizing spatial indifference and the integration of middle, beginning and end, the other, a symbol of the middle as an absolute difference, a division rather than a consolidation of kinds of being and knowing. Second, they are both ambiguous in their spatial aspect. The River of Life both traverses its course and already occupies every point. The River of Death that flows between the dreamer and the blessed river, also exhibits both dynamic and static qualities. In light of these similarities, one might ask what the dreamer does not: whether these two bodies of water might not flow from the same *heued* ("source") and represent the same kind of temporal and spatial understanding; and whether the divisive water is not after all, an epistemological encumbrance, a limit to vision, but the clue to its fulfillment.[21]

After a lengthy statistical analysis showing that verbs of the "dynamic" grammatical category increase in proportion to "stative" verbs as the poem progresses, Borroff concludes, I think somewhat uninterestingly however convincingly, that this shift mirrors the progress of the dreamer's understanding from delusion to clarity—a clarity which, however, is abruptly lost when the dreamer violates the aquatic boundary in the final phase of the vision in a manic effort to reach the other bank. Borroff does however invoke a very helpful paradigm from Jakobson's linguistic analysis of poetics. Citing his famous definition of the poetic function as a projection of "the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination," she postulates an intriguing geometrical image of the formal dimension of the poem's structure with respect to its content:

> We can think of the totality of the poem's 101 stanzas, identical in rhyme and meter, as overlaid or "stacked" on one another and thus as exemplifying the vertical line of paradigmatic and metaphoric equivalence. At the same time, the variety of rhyme-sounds and rhyming words which is a feature of the poem's language represents a complementary principle of expansion or amplification, thus exemplifying the horizontal line of syntagmatic and metonymic extension. The contents of the sections are similarly stacked, in that they reflect stages of a single spiritual progression toward a single goal, yet they too extend onward and outward in their discursive, narrative, and descriptive variety. (Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals* 150)

A most attractive proposal; in fact, a sort of genetic formula for the poem's whole complexity seems patent in this model. But is this image of "stacking" of the various structural components, narrative segments, and images entirely appropriate? Are the arbitrarily discrete divisions of the poem so congruous as to sustain conceiving them as overlapping. I would argue, rather, that the poem strongly invites the kind of analysis that Borroff has accomplished, but that it ultimately frustrates the same.

Formally, as we have seen, the poem complicates the formal equivalences we assume it creates by inserting singular "faults" in the otherwise smoothly contiguous whole. The off-center "middle" of the poem at sections XII and XIII divides the poem into two "halves" that only stack upon each other with much unbalance. Likewise, the one hundred *and one* stanzas interfere with an even overlap of any cut of them, except a one-to-one correspondence, and even that is troubled by the fifth and final stanza of section VIII, which infamously lacks its fourth line. And yet, this omission is not completely unexpected. Considering the many structural interruptions

that destroy one symmetry of the poem only to complete another, this missing line—the true 1212th line of the poem—is not unexpected, but it is, however, harder to integrate into any kind of numeric or imagistic program. What it does accomplish is to defiantly subtract one stanza from the otherwise clean "stack" of symmetrical stanzas, just as section XV, with its one *extra* stanza, causes a "blemish" in the smooth stacking of the twenty sections. If the formal equivalences of the poem are meant to exemplify "the vertical line of paradigmatic and metaphoric equivalence," it does so only with the provision of these irksome complications.

The various exceptions to the seemingly intended numerical symmetries of the poem could be seen as flaws or blemishes that arise despite all of its insistence on flawlessness. But if we assume that these features do not compromise the form but enrich it, we might consider that the recurrence of such anomalies as the lack of linkage between sections XII and XIII, and the superfluous (but numerically perfecting) stanza in section XV as adding a nuance to the topography of the poem. To its circularity and linearity, its mystical compromise of multiplicity and singularity—dynamism and staticity—it now receives something analogous to volume, in the form of two uneven sides that manifest in each attempt to divide the poem into discreet units.

Incidentally, these two instances, of diminution (the missing line in section VIII) and extension (the extra stanza in section XV), may be not only marked in their anomalousness, but correlated with each other. In section VIII, the dreamer wonders how his maiden could achieve what seems to be a position as high (or higher) in Christ's esteem as Mary's, and how the complement of virgin's in heaven can stand as equals and yet all as queens and kings. The maiden corrects his erroneous thinking:

> Alle þat may þerinne aryue
>
> Of all þe reme is quen oþer kyng,

And neuer oþer ȝet schal depryue,
Bot vchon fayn of oþereȝ hafyng,
And wolde her corouneȝ wern worþe þo fyue,
If possyble were her mendyng.

Everyone that arrives there
is queen or king of all the realm,
and will never deprive another,
but each is glad of the other's possession,
And would wish their crowns were worth five times as much,
If it were possible to better them. (VIII.447-452)

This mystical transposition of the many and the one—multiplicity and unity—in the court of heaven (the catch word here being the courtly ethical ideal, even in paradise, *cortaysye*), treats every courtier equally as *a Krysten sawle, | a longande lym to þe Mayster of myste* "a Christian soul, a limb belonging to the Master of mystery" (VIII.461-2). Yet, the sentiment of equality is expressed, somewhat paradoxically, by a hope for increase. The maiden wishes that their crowns (*corouneȝ*), another symbol of "endless" circularity were worth five times what they were (*worþe þo fyue*). Why this desire to increase the unincreasable? And why by a factor of no more and no less than five?

The maiden rehearses this curious desire for fivefold multiplication one more time in the poem: in the first stanza of section XV. The sense of the stanza very nearly repeats that of the one just quoted from section VIII:

Forþy vche saule þat hade neuer teche

Is to þat Lombe a worthyly wyf;
And þaȝ vch day a store he feche,
Among vus commeȝ nouþer strot ne stryf;
Bot vchon enlé we wolde were fyf—
Þe mo þe myryer, so God me bless.
In compayny gret our luf con þryf
In honour more and neuere þe less.

So each soul that never had a stain
is a worthy wife to that lamb;
and though he bring a store [of people] every day,
no competition or strife ever comes between us;
but for each one, singly, we wish there were five—
The more the merrier, God bless me.
In a great company, our love may thrive
In greater honor and never the less. (XV.845-852)

Here not the crowns, but the souls themselves would wish to be five times as many. The excessive specification of *vchon enlé* re-emphasizes the difference of singularity and multiplicity continually thematized in the poem. It is noteworthy in these two passages that it is nothing so general as multiplicity that is invoked, but specifically the quantity of five. It cannot be merely coincidental that the two positions in the poem that make mention of the number 5, especially considering the structural lattice of twenty 5-stanza sections, are the only two that interrupt this numerical uniformity? The last stanza of section VIII, lacking one line, cannot properly be

counted as a *fifth* stanza, ruining both the "stack" of five-stanza sections, and that of 12-line stanzas. The last stanza of section XV is not, as it should be, the *fifth* but the *sixth* stanza of that section, both *more* and *neuer þe less*. While it ruins the perfect stack of sections, the extra stanza adds a kind of numeric rondure to the formal recurrence of multiples of 12, and also, of course, enables the completion of the poem at line 1212—it would, that is, except for the one missing line.

On the contrary then, the overlapping, or stacking, of discrete and continuous forms is a project that the poem perpetually invokes and cancels. However near the imagery and form come to collaborate in figuring an accurate image of the divine unity and continuity within the time-space of the poetry, they confront these knots of interference—emblems of frustrated symmetry—which the poet has entangled in the fabric of the poem's form. The poem continually announces a plan to bring about some perfect symmetry, only at length to disengage from one trajectory, towards a perfect 100 stanzas for instance, in favor of another; towards a perfect line count of 1212, itself, in turn, ultimately interrupted. From so many balancing acts results a remarkable number of imbalances. The "stacks" finally appear lop-sided, just as the two sides or *banks* of the prohibitive body of water appear to the dreamer to be fundamentally unequal.

Delight (*delyt*) is the concatenation word for section XIX, and may be called the last catchword of the poem, since we have already been introduced to that of section XX, *paye*, in the opening line of the poem, which completes the formal circle. With rising fervor, emphasized by the repetition of the link-word, *delyt* overcomes the dreamer's senses as he gazes on the city, whose spatial oddities in the design are excelled only by the opulence of the procession of maidens and the lamb they lead, all of which he now witnesses at once. A familiar term reenters the rhyme scheme at the crescendo of his marveling at this scene.

> Delit þe Lombe for to deuise
>
> Wyth much meruayle in mynde went.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> His lokeȝ symple, hymself so gent.
>
> Bot a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse
>
> Anende hys hert, þurȝ hyde torente.
>
> Of his quyte syde his blod outsprent. (XIX.1129-30, 1134-1137)

In all the senses of the word, this is the last *devyse* of the poem. In the meaning of "describe," "see," or "understand," this is the last sight the dreamer beholds before delight overcomes him entirely. In the next and last stanza of the section, he succumbs to temptation: "Þat syȝt me gart to þenk to wade / For luf-longyng in gret delyt" "That sight caused me to think to wade | for love-longing in great delight" (XIX.1151-1152). *Luf-longyng* to reach the wounded Lamb, echoing the love-power (*luf-daungere*) that had "wounded" (*fordolked*) him at the beginning of the poem (I.11), drives him mad enought to attempt to "wade" across the divisive water (XX.1153-1154), itself so much like a wound on the landscape of the dream. At the moment of this transgression, without delay he awakens (XX.1170).

With the appearance of the Lamb the dreamer begins to see the imagery of his vision coalesce. The animal's whiteness is compared to that of a pearl: "as praysed perleȝ his wedeȝ wasse" (1112); Spearing comments,

> Surely we have here a pointer towards the potential culmination of the visionary experience, in which the pearl would be identified with the Lamb, and the Dreamer would recognize in the precious stone the ground of its own worth; or, to

> put it differently, would recognize in the human soul the image of the perfection of God (Spearing, XXX 128)

But the dreamer does not make the spiritual leap to arrive at this recognition, but rather makes the all-to-physical leap into the water. Departing from Spearing's observation, Borroff maintains that the merger of these two symbols, the Lamb and the Pearl, "exemplifies an aspect of the poem's singleness or continuity...its every section points in some way toward Christ," concluding that "the presence of Christ underlies the changing content of the successive sections of *Pearl* as a ground bass in music underlies a series of changing melodies and harmonizations" (*Traditions and Renewals* 146,148). And indeed, if the imagery of the pearl, now fused with that of the Lamb, bears with it into this symbolic crucible the various shades of color and the geometric qualities that ally it with the maiden's skin, her crown, the moon etc., then this complex of images suffuses the entire text.

But the characteristics of the Lamb also, perhaps more opaquely, map onto the landscape of the dream itself, and onto the essential qualities of the form that encapsulates it. We notice in the passage of the Lamb's *deuise* cited above (XIX.1129-1137) several more important terms that have arisen before. When the maiden instructed the dreamer to follow her, each on their respective sides of the water, she promises, *I anendeȝ þe on þis syde | schal sve*, "I will follow you across from you on this side" (XVII.975-976). For the Lamb, the terms I have put in bold are used to designate the position of the wound, figuring the wound on Christ's side. Furthermore, the image of the flowing blood resembles what now, in hindsight (the perspective from which much of the imagery and architectonics of the poem are made manifest), cannot be anything but a symbol of this same wound: the river that flows from the center of the heavenly city. With the introduction of the off-center cut on the Lamb—the most important "blemish" in Christian

symbolism, we arrive finally at a symbolic representation within the content of the poem that may serve to shed some light on the inexplicable off-centeredness of the poem's form.

Unlike the maiden's *perle wythouten wemme*, which the dreamer first noticed *inmyddeȝ* her breast (IV, 221-2), and likewise unlike the river whose source is the central throne of the new Jerusalem, the wound lies significantly off to the side of the Lamb's heart. The central characteristic of the lamb, so similar in other respects to the pearl, is, strikingly, remarkable precisely in its asymmetry. If the symbolic values of the pearl and the Lamb are to be integrated, it seems this important divergence must first be addressed.

Here we can return to Auerbach's definition of a figural relationship as one that "establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first." *Pearl* renders these "events" and "persons" of figural interpretation as significant aspects of the vision's landscape and interlocutors. These aspects accumulate into fields of related qualities and quantities that mirror—sometimes with significant distortions—there likeness across the meticulously observed *devyse*, around which the poem coordinates these details in what can now best be described as a *figural* relationship. What makes this figural model so strange and exceptional, and so divergent from the assumptions of *figura* as defined by Auerbach, is that *Pearl* posits the division *itself* as a dynamic field of activity rather than a discreet point of distinction. Like the river-wound, it bears unexpected volume. I will explore this volume in the last section of this chapter. But for now, it remains to be seen how the functions of promise and fulfillment operate across this boundary as if it were discreet.

The seven-fold repetition of the word *delyt* in section XIX (the link that gathers the strophes of that section just as it draws to ever-greater intensity the dreamer's desire to be in the presence of the Lamb) labels the fulfillment of an earlier promise. In section XI, the maiden reminds the dreamer of the apple and the Fall at once from innocence and delight:

Inoȝe is knawen þat mankyn grete
Fyrste watȝ wroȝt to blysse parfytæ
Oure forme fader hit con forfete
Þurȝ an apple þat he vpon con byte.
Al wer we dampned for þat mete
To dyȝe in doel out of delyt
. . . . . .
Bot þeron com a bote astyt.
Ryche blod ran on rode so roghe
And wynne water þen at þat plyt:
Þe grace of God wex gret innoghe.

Innoghe þer wax out of þat welle,
Blod and water of brode wounde.
Þe blod vus boȝt fro bale of helle
And delyuered vus of þe deth secounde;
Þe water is baptem, þe soþe to telle,
Þat folȝed þe glayue so grymly grounde,
Þat waschеȝ away þe gylteȝ felle

Þat Adam wyth inne deth vus drounde.

It is well known that noble mankind
was first made for perfect bliss;
Our ancient father forfeited it
through an apple that he bit.
We were all damned for that food
to die in grief, away from delight.
...
But for this a remedy came straightaway.
Precious blood ran on a cross so rough,
and precious water at that hard plight:
The grace of God had grown great enough.

Enough grew there out of that spring,
blood and water from a broad wound.
The blood redeemed us from the pain of hell
and rescued us from the second death;
The water is baptism, to tell the truth,
That came from the spear so cruelly sharpened,
that washes way the many sins
with which Adam drowned us in death. (XI.637-642, 645-656)

Line 641 marks the departure of delight from man at the moment of original sin, as well as the disappearance of the word *delyt* from the poem until its return in section XIX. Its position in the rhyme-scheme here further strengthens the relationship with the later section. Here, the loss of delight at the Fall is instantaneously mollified by the appearance of a remedy (*bote*), whose appearance, described as coming immediately (*astyt*) after the Fall, simply folds over the entirety of Old Testament history. But in the timeless dimension of paradise, no finite length of intervening time is sufficient to offset the force of Christ's redemption, since, as the maiden reminds the dreamer in the refrain in the 12th line of each stanza, "þe grace of God is gret innoȝe." This "enough," restorative of innocence (a relationship captured in the punning play of line 625: "Bot *innoghe* of grace hatȝ *innoce*nt"), is figured in the abundance of blood and water that flowed from Christ's broad wound. The word *wounde*, like *delyt,* appears here and nowhere else until the dreamer sees the actual wound of the Lamb in section XIX. These two words, prominent in the framework of rhyme-words of section XI, are more than enough to create an index that points to the last phase of the dream; an anticipation of the return of delight to the dreamer, which was lost to him personally in the death of his Pearl, and lost to man generally in the "death" of Adam. Delight is also lost to mankind, the maiden explains, in the departure of Christ; the final stanza of section XI concludes:

> Now is þer noȝt in þe worlde rounde
> Bytwene vus and blysse bot þat he wythdroȝ,
> And þat is restored in sely stounde;
> And þe grace of God is gret innogh. (XI.657-660)
>
> Now there is nothing in the round world

between us and bliss, except that he departed,

and that is restored a blessed hour;

and the grace of God is great enough

These lines draw a map of the geography of salvation that bears a striking resemblance to the landscape of the dream and the primary characteristics of the persons and symbols that populate it. The world, here depicted as round, is the only other object in the poem explicitly given that attribute other than the pearl itself, which the father remembers being "so rounde" in his lamentations before the dream (I.5), and which he sees within the dream as *endeleȝ rounde* (XIII.738). It is no coincidence that these two other sites of roundness occur in the first sections of the two "parts" of the poem with respect to its one clean break: namely sections I and XIII. In section XIII, we are reminded that this round pearl is placed "inmyddeȝ [the maiden's] brest," by the "Lorde þe Lombe, þat schede hys blode" (XIII, 741).

To this increasingly convoluted cluster of words and images that circumscribe the message of salvation formulated and reiterated with such multiplicity in the poem, we add the spatial detail here, in its clearest expression, that *something* stands yet "between us and bliss:" the absence of Christ. Christ is alluded to indirectly through his attributes: "ryche blod ran on rode so roghe" (XI, 646), perhaps the most alliterative line of the poem, does not name the body from which the blood flows. The dominance of *r*-words seems to foreclose even the possibility of naming *Ch*rist or *L*orde, or even *L*amb. The wound too seems to bleed blood *and water* on its own, and technically it is not Christ but the blood "delivered us from the second death" (XI, 652). Thus by the time we learn that "he" has withdrawn, he has already always been absent from the scene. In his place, however, what does remain between us (here, both the reader and

the dreamer) and *blysse* is the body of water—likened to blood—which interrupts and bisects the otherwise perfect rondure of the dream as it does the "round world."

Is it any wonder then, remembering these words, that the dreamer rushes the water when he sees quite clearly before him the return of "delight" in section XIX. The redemptive, bodiless wound of section XI elaborately prefigures the wound of the Lamb. The later scene in turn encompasses and fulfills this absence, and literally fills it in with the presence of the Lamb's body. The off-center wound of on the body of the Lamb is neither an imperfection nor is it a barrier to the Lamb's delight, and it causes the dreamer some wonder that:

> The Lombe delyt non lyste to wene
> Þaȝ he were hurt and wounde hade,
> In his sembelaunt watȝ neuer sene (XIX.1141-1143)
>
> No one desired to doubt the delight of the lamb,
> though he was hurt and had a wound,
> it was never seen in his demeanor.

Not only is this imperfection, the source (*welle* XI.649) of blood and water, no barrier to its *delyt*, but it is in fact the source. This steady gathering together, by lexical tags and interwoven imagery, of the poem's symbols—as Spearing and Borroff rightly notice—bears its meaning simultaneously to us and to the dreamer. For the dreamer it provides a logical framework with which to justify his decision to attempt to cross the water, though even he attributes this, his only strong action in the poem, to sensual madness (*maddyng* XX.1154) rather than reason. To what other conclusion about the intervening river could one come, however, except that it is itself that blood that delivered man from the second death, and the water that is "baptem...þat waschеȝ

away þe gylteȝ felle," and that there is quite literally nothing between him and bliss, but a permeable distance that seems so easily foreshortened?

The test of this logic proves it to be erroneous, and anyway it was not logic but sensory delight "in eye and ear" (XX.1153) that drove him to enter the divide. The dreamer plunges into the stream and is flung out (*outfleme,* XX.1177) of the dream to be returned to the exact "spot" from which, in the first line of section II, his "spyryt...sprang in space" (II, 61). His first wakeful words to himself express gratitude for the vision of his lost pearl (XX. 1182-1188). But his second thought is to speculate self-accusingly about what the vision might have offered had it continued:

> To that Pryncеȝ paye hade I ay bente,
> And ȝerned no more þen watȝ me gyven,
> And halden me þer in trwe entent,
> As þe perle me prayed that was so þryuen,
> As helde, drawen to Goddeȝ present,
> To mo of his mysterys I hade ben dryuen.
> Bot ay wolde man of happe more hente
> Þen moȝte by ryȝt vpon hem clyuen.
>
> If I had obeyed that prince's wish,
> and wished for no more than was given,
> and kept myself there in honest purpose,
> just as the pearl had asked me, she who was so fair,
> likely, drawn to God's presence,

I would have been brought to more of his mysteries.
But always, as it happens, man wishes to take more
than by right is able to belong to him. (XX.1189-1196)

These final thoughts lead the dreamer, now again the poet, to expand on his specific transgression in order to generalize on the common conundrum of man, whose reach would exceed his grasp. Yet in a final, and seemingly unintentional demonstration of hypocrisy (which is apparently also typical of man), the dreamer faults mankind for demanding *more* just after himself expecting that he might have seen "more" of God's mysteries and even been admitted into God's *present*, an objective that he just admitted was expressly forbidden him from the start. Spearing, as I mentioned, sees buried in these final sections a hint of where the vision, had it continued according to the dreamer's frustrated desire, might have led: "towards the potential culmination of the visionary experience." As to the failure of this culmination, he goes on to suggest that "such a perception would scarcely be expressible in words or images, and from that point of view too it is appropriate that the vision should break off before arriving at a goal which poetry could hardly encompass" (Spearing XXX).

According to Spearing, the poem *indicates* an end that it cannot help but fail to attain. It thus falls into a peculiar condition of ending prematurely, or ending before it closes. In the terminology of Aristotelian medieval literary criticism, it could be said then that the form (of treatment and of the treatise) indicates but does not achieve its intention or "final cause," "the ultimate justification for the existence of a work, the end or objective (*finis*) aimed at by the writer" (Minnis 29).[22] But this terminology adds a complication. For if it was the intention of the poem all along to express precisely *this* inexpressibility, then its intention is remarkably well achieved.

This critical dilemma enters as a factor in the rhetorical situation of the poem. As we have begun to see, the form of the poem in a sense *understands* the message to which it molds itself better than the dreamer does. The poem's ingenious form appears to be the product of the dreamer-poet's ingenuity post-dream. We remember that the waking mediations of the mourning father came, in section I, in the form of poetry (I.19-22). When we return to this conscious figure at the end of the poem, he seems to perceive the vision's significance in a way that the dreamer did not and to incorporate them in al the formal patterns I have been describing. The end of the poem thus compels us revise the vision as *already* a revision, and as a linguistic reconstruction—that is, as a poem.

Even this possibility is refracted in facets of the formal artifice of this jewel-like poem (we remember that the poet-dream refers to himself as a "jeweler"). For in addition (perhaps in culmination) to the numerous perfecting imperfections we have examined, consider the stanza that contains the description of the dreamer's final dream-ending transgression in section XX (I have broken the stanza into its two halves):

> Hit payed hym not þat I so flonc
> Ouer meruelous mereȝ, so mad *arayde*.
> Of raas þaȝ I were rasch and ronk,
> Ȝet rapely þerinne I watȝ *restayed*.
> For, ryȝt as I sparred vnto þe bonc,
> Þat brathþe out of my drem me *brayde*. (XX.1165-1176, my emphases)
>
> Þen wakned I in þat erber wlonk;
> My hede vpon þat hylle watȝ layde

Þer as my perle to grounde strayd.

I raxled, and fel in gret affray,

And, sykyng to myself I *sayd*,

'Now al be to þat Pryneȝ pay'.

The end of the dream and the return to wakefulness is captured at the midpoint of the stanza, a joint regularly marked by syntactic closure in *Pearl*. This stanza's middle joint is the strongest of its kind in the poem, inversely reflecting the onset of the dream, which occurred in the division strongly emphasized at the section break between I and II. This stanza is significantly more entangled, however, with two previous locations of the poem, and this by way of its rhyme-words and their disposition. The four rhyme-words I have italicized are shared by the final stanza of section XII, precisely the stanza that closes the first uneven "half" of the poem:

'Ryȝtwysly quo con rede,

He loke on bok and be awayed

How Jesus hym welke in areþede,

And burneȝ her barneȝ vnto hym *brayde*.

For happe and hele þat fro hym ȝede

To touch her chylder þay fayr hym prayed.

His dessypeleȝ wyth blame let be hem bede

And wyth her resouneȝ ful fele *restayed*.

Jesus þenne hem swetely *sayde*:

"Do way, let chylder vnto me tyȝt.

To such is heuenryche *arayed*" :

Þe innocent is ay saf by ryȝt. (XII. 709-720, my emphases)

This fourfold repetition is therefore one-word stronger than the repetition of three words that Marie Borroff has identified as linking the first stanza of section XIX and the last of section IX (*doun-boun-sumoun*). Here, in section XII, the maiden continues to prove the *right*ness of her place in heaven. The passage, considered abstractly from its purpose *in situ*, becomes a comment on two important ingredients of the dreamer's final transgressive gesture. First, it encompasses the desire to be touched by Christ, a desire which the disciples here would interdict with their faculty of reason, but of which Jesus himself approves (for the special case of children, at lest). Second, and inversely, it portrays the desire to embrace children. Both are motivations that compel the dreamer to cross the water. The injunction against contact with Christ and with the maiden is here placed and removed by no less authority than Christ himself. But then, as though to treble the emphasis on the sense of the passage, we have here the most poignant division and interruption in the poem's structure.

What does it mean then that the interruption of the vision—the seam between the poet's wakefulness and the dreamer's sleep—invokes so strongly the crucial break in the poem's form from which it is removed by the distance of 400 lines? Before we consider this question, we might notice that the rhyme-words of the stanza under consideration in section XX seem to attract our attention, with somewhat less magnetism, to still another significant stanza; the first of the poem, in which the verb *saye*, and the nouns *pay* and *araye* seem to oppose the participles and verbs *arayde, sayd* and the non-rhyming *payed* in section XX's second stanza as though they were present tenses to their past forms. Indeed, it is section XX that brings us closest to the true present of the poet's voice, there when the events of the beginning of the poem are the farthest

removed, but to which the final concatenation, joining line "1212" to line 1, effects a cyclic return.

These two "ends" are thus strongly coordinated both by formal and thematic bonds. The end of the vision is lexically coordinated with the interior, formal "end" (the off-center middle at XII-XIII) which is itself mapped onto the divisive middle of the landscape of the vision.

The culmination of symbolism in the vision, which Spearing sees as interrupted by the dreamer's rash action, continues to influence the poetic work of the awakened dreamer, now again the poet. Section XX is concerned with the reciprocity of due action and obligation in the relationship of the "Prince," and the dreamer, now fully awake to his responsibility to preserve the balance of the transaction between them. This economy, violated by the dreamer's attempt to wade across the hinge of this balance, is captured in the punning alternation of senses that plays out in the concatenation word, *paye*. The word's primary sense as a noun and verb of "pleasure" or "to pleasure" develops in the course of the poet's mediations in the final section towards something closer to its principle modern sense, "to compensate." He recognizes that his transgression was, "not at [his] Prynceȝ paye" (XX, 1164), and therefore, the reaction was not at all pleasurable to him: "me payed ful ille to be outfleme" (XX, 1177). In reflecting on his mistake, his thoughts turn to reconciliation, and it is with the recognition of his debt that the poem concludes:

> To pay þe Prince oþer sete saȝte
> Hit is ful eþe to þe god Krystyin;
> For I have founden hym, boþe day and naȝte,
> A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin.
> Over this hyul this lote I laghte,

For pyty of my perle enclyin,
And sythen to God I hit bytaghte
In Krystes dere blessyng and myn,
That in the forme of bred and wyn
The preste uus schewes uch a daye.
He gef uus to be his homly hyne
Ande precious perles unto his paye.

To pay the prince or be reconciled
it is easy to be a good Christian;
for I have found him, both day and night,
to be a God, a Lord; a fine friend.
Upon this mound I received this experience,
lying there for grief of my pearl,
and then I committed it to God,
in Christ's and my precious blessing,
which in the form of bread and wine
the priest shows us each day.
He granted us to be his humble servants
and precious pearls for his pleasure. (XX, 1201-1212)

As the poem ends, the poet enjoys a clarity of thinking that results from a more complete culmination of the dream's symbols than was achieved in the interrupted dream, realizing as he finally does that he did not so much lose his pearl as "commit" it to God, and that mankind,

himself included, is nothing other than "precious pearls" owed to God. The final word of the poem embraces fully the dual sense of *paye*: the desire (almost, "will") of the Prince, and the debt owed to him for each of our lives, envisioned as the individual but equable values of so many pearls. The poet has thus taken a step that the dreamer could not, to move from the specific case of his own loss and desire to the general condition of humanity, whose value is set by the desire of the Prince. This final meditation is, in effect, a reinterpretation of the poet's psychological condition at the beginning of the poem, a reevaluation of the pearl's worth, which is not diminished by its loss, but rather finally spent according to its most proper use in the system of spiritual currency.

Thus the poem concludes, but still the account is not closed, for the end concatenates smoothly with the beginning, as if the first line occupies two points in the poem's formal space, serving as line 1 and as the "missing" line 1212. The formal "closure" of the poem—only complete at its end—is commented on in the (re)beginning, where the symbol of the pearl, now (or rather, from the perspective of the end, *then*) strikes us as depleted of the symbolic and metaphoric values it accrued in the course of the poem:

> Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye
> To clanly clos in golde so clere,
> Oute of oryent, I hardly saye,
> Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.
> So rounde, so reken in vche araye,
> So small, so smoþe her sydeȝ were,
> Quere-so-euer I jugged gemmeȝ gaye,

I sette hyr sengeley in synglere.

Pearl, pleasing to the delight of princes
to set radiantly in gold so bright,
Even from the Orient, I boldly say,
I have never found her equal.
So round, so fresh in each setting,
So slender, so smooth were her sides,
Wherever I judged bright gems,
I set her apart in uniqueness. (I.1-8)

This first stanza, re-read in light of the end, also undergoes a reevaluation. We find many of its terms, originally so full and vivid, upon re-reading to be empty vessels that will be filled with meaning by the dreamer's vision and by the poet's closing recollection of it. The first lines respond to the circular closure of the poem whose perfection is only apparent upon return to the first line from the last. The roundness and smoothness attributed to the pearl and its "sides" is thus confirmed with the completion of the poem—that is, in hindsight. The last stanza of the poem, in which the poet has found, in every soul, his own pearl's *precios pere*, thus becomes a corrective answer to the first. But the uniformity of past-tenses in the narrative and the general temporal assumption, along with the formally-implemented revolution from the end to the beginning compels us to consider that the poem, composed by the voice of its speaker, is an event that follows the vision; we are reading, in effect, the meditation of the poet on the experience of the dreamer—a reflection of the time of the vision coerced into poetic spatial form. Thus even while the poem is first read, it is already presenting as a *re*-reading of the event. In

this way it is possible to consider that the culmination of the poem's symbols, though their progress towards integration may seem to fail at the interruption of the dream vision, is recuperated and achieved precisely in the beginning of the poem, and in the arrival of the poetic form itself. In our second reading of the poem, we infer quotation marks around the entire text.

While the argument elaborated by Elizabeth Salter, that *Pearl* invites "the typological or figural method" described by Auerbach, has been called into question, as we have seen, by Mitchell, who shows that the poem insists rather on "radical transfiguration and discontinuity" and the active resistance of typology and *figura*, I think the latter's analysis is too firmly aligned with the dazzled perspective of the dreamer *in the dream*. The form of the poem, which implicitly reflects the thought and work of the awakened poet, re-validates *figura* and typology as interpretive methods. The poetic structures I have labored to shed some light on may well be described as a figural rendering and reading of the time of the dream.

***Pearl* as a Time-Image**

In order for *figural* reading to enable the coordination of promise and fulfillment, there must be some division to mark the temporal *ordo* of this distinction. In Christian time, the break between old and new is the messianic event of Christ's resurrection. But, far from the absolute temporal limit this event may seem to represent, it has a remarkably dense interior topology. In the "Third Day" of *The Time That Remains*, Giorgio Agamben confronts a common misconception of Paul's universalism. By dissecting the messianic event, he reveals that a complex transposition of multiple divisions defines Christian time, rather than a single divisive break marking but uniting a "before" and "after" in history. Paul's letters describe not a single

cut of humanity and history, but a division of a division, which Agamben compares to the "cut of Apelles." The semi-mythical artist Apelles, in competition with another artist who drew a line so thin it seemed impossible that a human drew it, bisected the line lengthwise with a still finer one of his own. Likewise, Paul cuts the division of mankind into Jew and non-Jew with a finer cut of his own, the distinction of flesh/breath, which creates a division within the division. This division creates a sort of remainder, a peculiar volume carved out of what would seem to be a division without dimension. Paul's apostolic profession distinguishes itself from prophecy according to this remnant, which "no longer consists in a concept turned towards the future," but "concerns a present experience that defines the messianic 'now'" (Agamben, *The Time That Remains* 55).

Agamben's reading of Paul seems, on the surface, to be immensely pertinent to the form-narrative division so vigorously investigated in *Pearl*. The dreamer's dream marks a point of division between the before and after of his life, but marks with Apellian precision a division of this division. The ambiguous river-pool that bisects the dream and defines the limits of the dreamer's perception reifies the sort of unexpected volume in what should be discreet division that Apelles's cut makes visible. Its critical quality is as a line of prohibition—a limit without breadth used to identify a forbidden act of transgression—and yet the ambiguities that lie in its description, sometimes imagining it as linear, other times as circular and possessing area and volume, climax in the dreamer's entering the *deuyse* itself. His dream ends as he reaches the middle of this division in the middle of a stanza—that is, it ends (and so begins, as we've seen) at the cut of Apelles.

One might explain these comparisons as nothing more than superficial features born of the exigency of representing a conceptual border in spatial imagery, but it is in the way that

Pearl imagines this division in language, and in the way that this division enters as a controlling factor in almost every facet of *Pearl's* poetic crystallization of time, that the divided *devyse* becomes such a powerful figure of *figura.* In the "fourth day" of his study, Agamben addresses the difficulty of representing the "caesura" of Apelles' cut in language, or schematizing it spatially. Here he draws on the linguistic work of Gustave Guillaume to elucidate the difficult idea of the temporal remnant. "The human mind," Agamben paraphrases Guillaume, "experiences time, but it does not possess the representation of it, and must, in representing it, take recourse to constructions of a spatial order" (*The Time that Remains* 65). Guillaume refers to these constructions as "time-images." But the common representation of time as an infinitely extending line made of a past and a future segment cleaved by the present is inadequate, according to Guillaume, "precisely because it is too perfect:"

> It presents time as though it were always already constructed, but does not show time in the act of being constructed in thought. In order to truly understand something, Guillaume says, considering it only in its constructed or achieved state is not enough; you also have to represent the phases through which thought had to pass constructing it...Guillaume defines "operational time" as *the time the mind takes to realize a time-image*...Languages do not organize their own verbal systems according to the previous linear schema...but rather by referring the constructed image back to the operational time in which it is constructed. In this way, Guillaume is able to complicate the chronological representation of time by adding a projection in which the process of forming the time-image is cast back onto the time image itself. (Agamben, *The Time that Remains* 65)

Agamben compares Guillaume's model of recursive transposition, which results in a three-dimensional rather than linear representation of time, with messianic time, which he now re-defines, in relation to operational-time, as "the time that time takes to come to an end" (*The Time that Remains* 67). Applying Guillaume's definition of operational-time to Paul's sense of time, the "end" of this messianic time would correspond to the time-image, simply a spatial representation of time. The circling process of deferred convergence between these two components, however, seems to mark off precisely this end as unattainable. Agamben refers to the lag in "operational" lag in the time it takes to bring an end to representations of time, which implies that "the messianic *ho nyn kairos* can never fully coincide with a chronological moment internal to its representation;" "As an image devoid of time, [the end of time] is itself impossible to seize hold of, and, consequently, tends to infinitely defer itself" (*The Time that Remains* 67).

And yet it is precisely this relationship, of operational-time to the "end," that enables Paul's concept of typology or *figura*. In exposing how typology operates on the basis of the relationship of operational time to the time-image it constructs, Agamben turns to Auerbach's contribution to the study of typology, but subtly modifies and redirects the latter's definition of *figura*. Whereas Auerbach only afforded *figura* the power of coordinating two "real" events, in which the first "signifies not only itself but also the second," and the second "encompasses or fulfills the first," Agamben inverts these values in order to construe a more reciprocal relationship. For Agamben, in a figural relationship "the past (the complete) rediscovers actuality and becomes unfulfilled, and the present (the incomplete) acquires a kind of fulfillment" (Auerbach 53; Agamben, *The Time that Remains* 75). Auerbach insists on the past ("the first") as a double-signifier, of itself and of something else. While it waits for this second thing, it is held

in suspense of completing its purpose. The arrival of the signified event in the second, or present, fulfills and somehow includes the first and past event.

In place of this sense of a long-overdue message whose delayed arrival brings a sense of closure, Agamben alters our perspective, forcing us to consider the past as that which was first fulfilled and "becomes unfulfilled" in the present. It is this present then, and not Auerbach's past, that is perpetually held in suspense (being incomplete), but that achieves fulfillment in the past. Together, these two models of *figura*—Auerbach's (on which figural readings of *Pearl* have largely been based) and Agamben's—seem to strain together towards the construction of a time-image adequate to represent this folding of past and presence that figural reading entails. Agamben's inversion of the vector of emphasis in his adaptation of Auerbach's definition exposes the eternal encircling of definition itself around the operation of *figura*, which refers the past to the present, and that again to the past in its restive construction of temporal reflection. Just as the repeating images of an object set between two facing mirrors, a *figura*, like the time-image or the end of time, is an infinite process, "impossible to seize hold of" and tending to "infinitely defer itself."

This dual-model of *figura* might serve well to describe the relationship of form and meaning in the *Pearl*. The narrative of the vision—in actuality, the poet's *re*vision of the vision—may be said to embody the "operational time" in which the poem, as a spatial representation of the time of the poem, undergoes its construction. Realizing the time-image of the dreamscape, which, we have seen, is reflected in the formal space of the poem, is both the subject and the unachieved object of the poem. The end of the forward progress of the vision, we have seen, happens almost immediately; in Section II, the dreamer reaches the water and the limit that bars him from any kind of presence (*presente*; VII.389; XX.1193) with what lies

beyond it. Thus the *devyse* draws to a close the spatial "past" of the dream. Since its end has already happened (the poet is *remembering* the dream), what remains of the dream but, in a sense, the time that the dream's time takes to come to an end? The divisive water, identified symbolically with the wound of Christ and the salvation it affords—that is, with the messianic event—has always already been reached and breached. If we can coordinate this complex bundle of symbols that manifests itself in the crucial *deuyse* of the poem with the messianic *ho nyn kairos* Agamben is concerned with pinpointing, it becomes clear why the water, though it is symbolically linked to Christ's death and resurrection, is an absolute limit, impossible to seize hold of, and yet still permeable.

If, as Agamben says, this presence can "never fully coincide with a chronological moment internal to its representation"—a new version of the same dilemma that Augustine so vigorously struggles with in Book XI of the *Confessions*—the truth of this statement seems to manifest itself in the poem by the way the water eludes representation as either circular or linear. As a river, it encircles the dreamer, significant as an absolute line of division without admitting the possibility of being divided itself. As a pool, however, it admits of volume and a circular-form susceptible to being split by even a very blunt cut of Apelles. It is fitting then that the dream does not finally end the moment the dreamer reaches the water—this might have taken place at a more significant structural division, for instance after the last line of section XIX and before the first line of section XX—but rather when he is midway through the water (and in the exact middle of the second stanza of section XX) that is, when he has precisely bisected the division.

With the installation of this most significant division in both its narrative and form, *Pearl* is self-sufficiently figural. When the poem begins, the still wakeful poet dwells in his past. As

the *vision* begins, we are encouraged to consider *this,* the body of the dream, as a present. When the vision has ended and the dreamer returned to his wakeful state as the poet, we understand that the we have been following his recollection from a separate present of which we were kept unaware, from the perspective of which the dream is past. At the end, we perceive the operational-time in which the *Pearl*, the poem, has been constructed. These several reflexive axes of time are rich with figural possibility, and I think it is not unreasonable to suggest that the division at section XII-XIII may be treated as the axis, or fold, across which a complex weave of figural ties is stretched; *Pearl* is essentially a loom of Christian time. The soundscape and the imagery of the poem are all coordinated in their reflection across this limit.

Agamben concludes his "fourth day" lecture on Paul's typology with an unlikely but intrigue suggestion: that rhyme "issues from Christian poetry as a metrical-linguistic transcodification of messianic time and is structured according to the play of typological relations and recapitulations evoked by Paul" (*The Time that Remains 85*). The troubadour poetry Agamben adduces to support his claim is, in my opinion, rather unconvincing. But nowhere is this possibility suggested more elaborately than in *Pearl*. We have seen how the "lesser" interruptions in the poem's form at sections VIII and XV signal their relationship to one another across the *deuyse* by repeating "five" in the rhyme position; and we have seen how the formal division itself at section XII-XIII is announced by a series of four rhyme words that recur in precisely the moment that the dreamer reaches the center of the divisive water. The similar coordination in rhyme-patterning (*doun, boun,* and *summoun* in the last stanza of section IX, and the first of section XIX, respectively) of the vineyard parable and the simile of the moon joins in counterpoint. Even the off-centeredness of the XII-XIII break seems to point to the unbalanced division of Christian time, where the long past is condensed and recapitulated in the Christian

present. And yet whereas the form of the poem is numerically off balanced in a ratio of 3:2, the "other" or "present" side of the water in the dream is laden with the great majority of its imagery and significance. Hence, another axis across which figural interpretation is validated arises, that of form and content.

The form of the poem encompasses and fulfills the vision, substituting its intricacies, as though consolatory measure, for the *mysterys* (XX,1194) unattained in the interrupted dream, which, with its complex layering of images, symbolizes itself and also the form to come. By expressing the relationship of form and content in this way, I am of course suggesting that Auerbach's definition of *figura* seems to offer a convenient picture of the poet's method. But the form and the content can never be extricated from each other as present and past; the form does not only encompass the vision, it embodies it. And yet, as we follow the progress of the poet as he labors to construct an image of the eternal world, the signifying structural modalities of the form "rediscover actuality" and become "unfulfilled" in that we realize we are witnessing their intrication-in-progress in the vision. At the same time, the vision, which insists that it is incomplete, "acquires a kind of fulfillment."

With almost inconceivable attention to detail, the *Pearl*-poet succeeds in representing a snapshot of the mechanics of *figura* as the making of a time-image, though not by reflecting historical events external to the poem, but by conceiving of one's personal meditation on the messianic event as an internal, personal, but eminently poetic affair. The limit set on the representation of the division implicit in the nature of messianic time is not only accepted by the poet, but integrated into his poetics. It is the basis of the formal poetics constructed by *Pearl*, which captures in its figural technique, its numerical balances, and the layering of its imagery, precisely the infinite self-deferment of the image of eternity it seeks to represent. *Figura* is thus,

paradoxically, employed to figure the imperfection of *figura*. And so, equally paradoxically, the several imperfections in the poem *are* its perfection. They bring the operational time as close to coinciding with a moment internal to its representation as may be possible in language. Form and vision in infinite orbit around one another, both strive towards this impossible integration. As a real pearl takes its form from the successive increase of concentric layers that grow around and encase a wounding irritant, so does the poem encompass the wound of messianic time in beautiful poetic impossibilities.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] I stress the difference of these two characters, for interpretive purposes, against the grain of at least one recent and influential reading who presumes to represent a concsense, seeing in the opening stanza "a narrator identified as a mourner, his language one of intimate feelings. As a host of critics have demonstrated, this langauge is the conventional language of the courtly poetry of love evolved over the preceding two centuries" (Aers 57). See also Pilch; Bogdanos 17-20, 38-46, 68-70; Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet* 139-142; Davenport 29. But Riddy calls Aers' claim into question, noting that "the language of the jeweller's craft and trade precedes that of courtly lover (145).

[2] Auerbach 53.

[3] For some of the more prominent discussions see esp. Bishop, who compares *Pearl*'s structure against other medieval vision texts as well as contemporary discourses of preaching rhetoric

(*artest praedicandi*) and theology. See also Davenport esp. 39-50, Bogdanos, Milroy, and Chapman.

[4] *Middle English Dictionary Online*, *s.v.* "devise" and "devisen" accessed October 26, 2013, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/

[5] On the prominent place of *divisio* among medieval modes of reading, see Allen 127-128; Minnis 151 and passim; Copeland 206-220; Stillinger 73-79.

[6] See Howes on the curvature of time and narrative itineraries in medieval English works responding to similar patterns in the layout of medieval towns and gardens.

[7] On the complex pearl symbolism of the poem see Robertson, Jr.; Spearing, "Symbolic and Dramatic Development in *Pearl*;" and Bogdanos, esp. 27, 33-34, 42-43, 103.

[8] While derived from my own analysis, much of these strucutral features are summarized in Gordon 87-91. See also Andrew and Waldron 29-36.

[9] Dorothy Everett comments "the emphasis which certain words receive from so much repetition is rarely misplaced; indeed, most of the reiterated words and phrases are so essential to the poem as a whole that, taken in order, they almost form a key to its contents" (89). For a fuller discussion of the link words, see Macrae-Gibson.

[10] For speculation on the meaning or non-meaning of the extra stanza, see Gordon's edition, 88. See also Chapman 256.

[11] In the essay, "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry," Roman Jakobson brings to light some scarcely discernable traces in medieval thought leading to an increasing recognition of the correspondence between geometry and language: "The abstractive power of human thought…superimposes simple geometrical and grammatical figures upon the pictorial world of

particular objects and upon the concrete lexical 'wherewithal' of verbal art, as was shrewdly realized in the [early] thirteenth century by Villard de Honnecourt for graphic arts and by [Geoffrey of Vinsauf] for poetry" (Jakobson 133).

[12] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from *Pearl* are from Gordon. Translations are mine.

[13] Gordon notes, "the poet may well have deliberately utilized the similarity in sound of the two epithets to make play on the two aspects of pearl symbolism—the purity of innocence and the peerlessness of the heavenly state…the final union of them both in the last line of the stanza group…gives the impression of conscious stylistic purpose in the alternation" (71).

[14] On the chiastic architecture in *Pearl* that some have seen erected on the keystone of the X-XI division, see also Milroy 195-208 and Chapman 256-259.

[15] The most imaginative treatment of the poem's numerical relationships is Condren.

[16] Sarah Stanbury in her book *Seeing the* Gawain-*poet* has made headway, studying *Pearl* in the context of medieval "pilgrimage narrative," a methodology which, by focalizing the narrative through the vision of the narrator, accounts for "the extraordinary control the narrator's senses exert over the poem's presentation of spatial relationships" (13) and see 17-21; Sarah Stanbury, "Space and Visual Hermeneutics"; Piehler. John Finlayson has also studied the landscape, seeing parallels in its features to the spiritual movmeents of the narrator and the dramatic development of the pearl imagery, (on which see Spearing, "Symbolic and Dramatic Development in *Pearl*"). More recently Ralph Elliott has claimed that the landscape of *Pearl,* "however surreal, is still composed of familiar topographical features called by familiar names" (110). Elliot notably does not mention the water in his survey of these features, which I find neither typical nor familiar.

[17] For example, as in the Wycliffite Bible, 2 Mac.12.16: "The pool of stondynge water…with blood was seen to flowe."

[18] And see Bogdanos, passim.

[19] On the relevance of negative theological themes of inexpressibility, as inherited from the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius, see Reed 134-162.

[20] My translation. The original Latin text of this passage: "Aeternitas igiture est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio, quod ex collatione temporalium clarius liquet. Nam quidquid vivit in tempore id praesens a praeteritis in futura procedit nihilque est in tempore constitutum quod totum vitae suae spatium pariter possit amplecti." For discussion of the Boethian context of *Pearl* see Conley, "Pearl and a Lost Tradition" 50-72; Cherniss 151-168.

[21] On the relationship of these two rivers in the context of contemporary apocalypse visions, see Field 7-17. And for discussion of the apocalyptic theology of *Pearl* in general, see Blenkner, Baldwin, and Rhodes 73-167;

[22] On *intentio* and *causa finalis* in medieval commentary and "Aristotelian prologue" see Minnis, esp. 20-21, 29 and Minnis and Scott 1-11. On the medieval mark of the content-form dichotomoy in the terminology of form of treatment (*forma tractandi*) and form of treatise (*forma tractatus*), see Allen 67-178.

Chapter Three:

The Folded Ends of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

the forme to the fynisment foldes ful selden

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the story of a knight who fails to realize the end of his quest. Gawain seeks one sort of ending—his own ultimate end—but the poem gives him another, far stranger sort of ending, one in which death can be confronted and survived. That is to say it posits that there can be *an* end that is not *the* end. As one reader has put it, the poem "is a narrative of transition, entailing multiple entrances and exits" (Stanbury, "Space and Visual Hermeneutics" 485) and hence it is a poem without a single conclusion to the quest it narrates. Gawain's reluctance to recognize that his adventure may not end with any satisfying sense of closure reaches its point of maximum intensity in the final scene of the quest-narrative, where he has just survived the fall of the green axe by virtue of the green girdle he secretly wears. Here the Green Knight brands the adventure, and perhaps the poem itself, with a title: "þe chaunce of þe grene chapel" (2399).[1] And as if this gesture were not enough to secure a happy ending, the Green Knight offers the girdle to Gawain as "a pure token" of its outcome, having "polished" and "purified" him of any fault in wearing the girdle that saved him from the axe, and thus from the ultimate end he had sought in the first place.

The text that follows the last drop of the axe takes on a sense of remainder or epilogue, and in its space Gawain has time to reflect pensively on his survival. He undoes the tidy, conclusive knot the Green Knight ties on his quest by immediately reinterpreting the significance of the girdle, wearing it into Arthur's court, striped across the pentangle that adorns his chest-plate as a token, now, of his failure to observe the virtues symbolized by its five points: "In tokenyng he watz tane in teche of a faute" "to show he was touched by the stain of a fault" (2488). Distraught and unsatisfied, Gawain thus returns to the Round Table as though he had merely circled its rim and come around to the situation of the adventure's beginning, before the Green Knight had challenged the "renoun of þe Rounde Table," (a phrase significantly repeated in the first court scene, at line 313; in the middle of Gawain's trial by sexual temptation at 2458; and in this final scene, at 2519). In such a situation Arthur would again demand "some adventurous matter" (92) to break the monotony, and Gawain would come forward to defend the five virtues emblematized by the pentangle, and would again fail to reach the quest's conclusion. The ultimate sign of this cyclicality, of which Gawain alone seems to be painfully aware, is inscribed in the romance's meticulously coordinated form, whose most obvious feature is the repetition of the poem's opening in its last alliterative line, which sets "The Adventure of the Green Chapel" in perpetual historical ambiguity in relation to that distant time when "þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye" (1, 2525).

At the end of the poem, we are thus left with the beginning of a strange controversy: has the poem ended at all? And, what are the conditions under which we expect that a romance such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* a text that undergoes continual repetition as it is retold and reread, can ever be said to come an end? These questions, I propose to show in this chapter, are dramatized in the narrative as it unfolds, symbolized in its most prominent objects, and not so

much represented as articulated concurrently with the narrative in and by way of its surface structures. These three layers of my interpretation (narrative, symbolism, form) are clearly relatable from a critical perspective such as the one I am privileged to take as a reader and re-reader of the text, but they are already closely integrated in and by the text itself. Thus what I hope to accomplish here is not so much to devise a theory of the poem's several senses of frustrated ending, but to expose the language with which the poem itself already devises such a theory. Simultaneously as it weaves the story of the quest, the form of the quest presents itself as a discursive surface that reflects on its own incoherence and the subtly incommensurable relationship of its form and matter. The terms of this formal discourse, corresponding to the three senses of ending I find explored in the text, are: knots, folds, and divisions. These sense are in turn related, but with important complications, to the three significant items in the narrative: pentangle, girdle, and axe. In my reading, I will attempt to show how the scenes in which theses items are bestowed and put to use coordinate with many other important passages in the text as well as with the material sufrace of the text's unicum manuscript; the echoing patterns of sound and the text's larger organizing structures interact with the illustrations of these structures inscribed and illuminated on the parchment page. The idea that a single organizing intention exerts totalizing control over the of the narrative, the poetic language, and the material of the text is, however, immediately compromised by the complex, chess-like game that plays out in the interaction of precisely these several senses of ending in the variety of their representation. These ultimately reduce any initial projection of the text's "perfection" (a fraught term) to the admission of indeterminacy, much as Gawain's quest for the end leads him into troubled continuance and enduring self-doubt. And in similar fashion, the text, while in some ways it seems "like" (another fraught term in this context, as we will see) the "endless knot" of the

pentangle, it is also like the green girdle, a very ended decorative lace that incorporates a "knot" in its circular fold, and it is even also like the decisive and divisive axe—and it is my addition of this last completing and complicating element to this meaning-matrix that constitutes my chief contribution to the understanding of this complex poem. In the numerous studies that have developed a comparison of the pentangle and the girdle into a sort of symbolic system (a common trope in *Gawain* scholarship, I have yet to find any comparison of either or both to the axe. But the complex picture of the narrative, symbolic, and formal horizons of the poem (tangent horizons), is incomplete without careful consideration of all three.[2]

If the shifting meaning of each of these three objects is entangled in a nexus of interactions that is best located, as I believe, in the jointly formal and narratological structures of the text, then a close, formalist analysis will best bring elucidate how this tremulous surface of poetic form folds, knots, and divisions the narrative. The method with which I propose to explore the meaning made by these structures is chosen not in a gesture of denying the validity of historicist contextualization, but because I believe there is still so much meaning packed into the formal and self-referential design of the romance. Thus while I agree with what one scholar writes in the beginning of his study of *Sir Gawain*, that "[p]oems always mean more and other than themselves," I do not believe that further formalist analysis of this poem will make it "isolated and impoverished in Procrustean beds of self-referentiality" (Shoaf vii). The intricate meaning-generating mechanisms I hope to expose in *Sir Gawain* show that the poem is quite capable of opening meaning that is "more and other" than itself; for it provides its own contextualizing, complicating meta-commentary that remains irreducibly estranged from the poem it comments upon. My study thus relies on numerous scholars' careful observations about the poem's formal artifice, which it would take too long—and anyway not be of much benefit—

to survey in full, for such studies have tended, in general, to emphasize the magisterial quality of the poem without getting to the bottom of its contradictions.[3]

But before I begin to strip and reassess some of the meaningful formal layers of the poem's edifice, I must discuss how the poem's self-reflective and self-complicating qualities have been construed by the text's most careful readers, and to be clear about what I mean by the plurality of the term "*senses* of ending." In his 1970 study *The Gawain-poet*, A.C. Spearing observes how this "open-ended" poem "offers its own detailed commentary on the story it tells, a commentary which both elaborates and interprets, in such a way as to make the story at once more specific and more general in its significance" (236; 173). Spearing's claim that the poem's form is a feature of its internal commentary on its traditional Arthurian material confronts an obstacle in the intensely specifying effect of *Sir Gawain*'s unprecedented and never-repeated form. The most outwardly visible structural feature of the poem's intricate design, the near verbatim echo of the first and last alliterative lines, seems to close off the text, and its anomalous form, from its ties to the traditions of Romance. But at the same time as this circularity marks off the space of the specific text, it remarks upon the recursive temporal circumstances of Gawain's quest story. That is, it frames, perhaps ironically, the specificity of the story—a quest whose success would be its hero's end—as already a repetition. Gawain's failure (to die), re-enacted each time the story is told, is itself inscribed in the circular configuration of the text like a poetic image of the ever-renewing tradition of Arthurian Romance. In this sense, the form, however specific to the *this-ness* of this unique instance of Sir Gawain's quest for an ending, does respond critically to the story in such a way as to emphasize, while at the same time complicating, general features of time and recurrence in the Arthurian world.[4]

Spearing later came to reject his earlier description of *Sir Gawain* as "open-ended." In a more recent essay, he revises the poem's self-absorption as a function the author's "sense of an ending." Noting again that the poem is "so intricately wrought that everything in it connects with everything else, and it is endless in the sense that its end leads straight back into its beginning" (200), he relates the poem's own revision of the sense of ending to the two important figures in the narrative: the pentangle embossed on Gawain's armor and green girdle given to him for protection by the Green Knight's wife. "I now recognize," Spearing writes, "that [the poem] is open-ended in the same way as the girdle, infinitely flexible and adaptable," and the girdle "is a reminder of the necessary imperfection of all human structures…by contrast with the static perfection of a figure like the pentangle, where energy constantly travels round in a single circuit" (201). By inscribing the discussion of the poem's form in terms derived from the symbolic equipment of the story, Spearing opened a passage of mutual reflection between form and matter, text and quest. Thus moments of this dynamic interaction take on meaningful associations with either of the two dominant pieces of apparel, whose altercations in the story constitute an important subtext. When Gawain, having failed (in his eyes) to meet his end, ties the girdle over his armor, "so the girdle is also like a diagonal stroke crossing out the pentangle" (203), we read a triumph of its supple (folding) but *ended* form over the pentangle's (the knot's) rigid but *endless* form.

And yet, as Ralph Hanna III had already showed in the interval between Spearing's two contributions, the girdle eludes any such simple assignment of meaning to it, whether imparted by the characters of the text or by its reader:

> In the character's persistent effort to assert meaning, they manage only to draw the reader's attention to the difficulty of defining both what the girdle is and what Gawain's

> acceptance of it signifies. And this is, of course, the major point. The pentangle promises a world where Trawþe is a primary value, where identity is secure, and where unity defines a real relationship. Once Gawain fails by accepting a girdle he does not intend to exchange, he has denied his identity as previously constituted, has ceased to be the knight of Trawþe. His world becomes filled with the possibility of mistake, illusion, or magic, a place where values lack that clarity they had before (Hanna III 298).[5]

For Hanna, the pentangle and the girdle remain indexical tokens, though they represent not attitudes to formal perfection, but rather the stability and instability of signification, respectively. "The poem," he concludes, "approximates a process of discovery or exploration, the process of recognizing the persistent intractibility of experience, its potential variousness, and the often self-filled limitation of human efforts to comprehend that variousness" (Hanna III, "Unlocking What's Locked" 302). The reader is not merely a witness to this exploration of variousness as it transpires among the characters of the poem; he is also a participant. Jill Mann in her important essay "Price and Value in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" sets these shifting symbolic values in the context of economic exchange as a means of conflict resolution, reaffirming Hanna's supposition about the girdle by comparing it to the medieval-Aristotelian category of "subjective value," as opposed to the "objective value" represented by the pentangle.[6] I would stress, however, that one might strip the economic framework and still find a system of 'equivalences' and 'non-equivalences' in operation. The green girdle, as a representative of the arbitrariness and mutability of a sign, takes its meaning—albeit a changing meaning—with reference to the other signs that constitute the "language" of the text's formal-narratological index, namely the pentangle and the axe. With its prominent knot, the girdle seems at first equivalent to the "endless knot" of the pentangle as a defensive mark of virtue, but as it undergoes the *chaunce* of

the green chapel and the divisive fall of the axe, it comes either to supplant the pentangle as a superior token of virtue (in the Green Knight's eyes), or to cancel and negate the pentangle in its stark non-equivalence (in Gawain's eyes), only to be reassigned by Arthur's court (where the first axe has *already* been enshrined as the token of the adventure) as a sign of precisely the irony of Gawain's mis- or re-interpretation. Thus the arbitrariness of meaning that Hanna and Mann correctly ascribe to the girdle, while responsive to medieval economic and semiotic discourses, also engages in an equally complex series of exchanges in and with the text. For, as I've said and as many studies have shown, the qualities of the pentangle and girdlen resemble certain formal facets of the poetic text. But these facets can themselves be seen as configurations of twists and folds in the narrative, which, still again, can be said to be *like* the form. As the priority of these aspects of the text remain irreducibly indeterminate, they remain poised like facing mirrors. But the potentially infinite multiplication of meanings in the repetition of the *chaunce* is not without change.

The story may conclude in a state of conflict, ambiguity and radical meaning-reassignment (exemplified by the crossing-out of the pentangle with the girdle), but the form of the poem, like the girdle in some ways and like the "endless" pentangle in others, leads the quest narrative along a strange loop of return to its beginning. Like the girdle, however, this circuit is knotty. The second beginning is never again the same as the first, but one whose meaning is distorted and informed by the circumstances of its end. In this way, the form of the poem compels the text not so much to loop at all, but to *fold*, creating numerous points of meaningful tangency (in echoes of sound and recurrent phrases), interminably multiplying. The girdle is not so much an arbitrarily shifting sign—a free radical—as the placeholder of a nexus of meanings

defined by the relationships that accumulate in the perpetual unfolding and re-folding of the poem, without limit.

And yet, as I have already stressed, Gawain's quest is a quest for the ultimate end, represented by the hero's death. Something has been missing from the picture of the complex formal interaction of these figures and the poem's form that Spearing has framed and Hanna and Mann's observations have nuanced. The circular text does not draw the process of exploration to a close at the end of the poem, with the recognition of the variousness of human structures, but returns us again to the opening situation, where meaning is as stably fixed as the rigorously constituted order of Arthur's court. And in this scene, when the "comlokest kyng" Arthur (53), perhaps feeling *locked* in the perpetual repetition of his story, calls for "sum auenturus þyng," some *chance* occurrence to alleviate the tedious boredom of recurrence, what he invokes, in my view, is the unrecognized third figure of the symbolic language of form. For what responds to Arthur's request is also the object of Gawain's quest: the Green Knight's axe, which represents and distinguishes (divides) the variousness of the poem's senses of ending. Here perhaps some of the ambiguity of the term *devyse* ("to relate," "to compose poetry," and "to divide"), which I have studied in the previous chapter on *Pearl*, comes again into play. For when Arthur refuses to eat, as is his custom, "before some adventurous matter would be *devised* to him" (92-93), it is precisely the entrance on the scene of the Green Knight's starkly *divisive* axe that answers to his desire.

In what follows from here I propose to flesh out and examine the discourse built by these *three* figures in the nexus of form and content. In my view they constitute the language of an incipient theory of kinds of poetic ends and limits that are not terminal but mediating. The terms

of this analytical language are, to repeat: *knots, folds,* and *divisions,* figured in the pentangle, the girdle, and the axe, respectively. As the separate and related significances of these items develop in the complex narrative network, so to do they build a poetics that presumes, I argue, to describe the intricacies of the poem's structure as it unfolds (and unravels the determinacy of its significance) then folds (and reestablishes this determinacy) again. The plot of this story written in form and figure, hinges on the question of whether such an internal language of self-commentary can present a consistent image of the poem from within, even as the poem proceeds to revise itself constantly in the cycle of reading and re-reading it urges.

Critical self-reflection is not restricted to formal aspects along, but is also absorbed into certain important scenes in the narrative. The tropes and images of romance—its courtly trappings, aristocratic scenery, and heroic ethics—are called to account for themselves through processes of examination (e.g. the Green Knight's disturbing arrival and lingering circumspection over the opening scene in Arthur's court) and ironic juxtapositions (e.g. Gawain's un-heroic dalliance in Bertilak's castle while its lord leads the hunt). The various reflective facets of the poem's artifice seem to conspire with these scenes of reflection within the story to render a sense of inextricable interdependence, despite the carefully observed distance, between the appearnaces of the two axes in the form-sense dichotomy. Successive re-readings of the full circuit of the poem, exposes a seemingly inexhaustible cross-wiring of concepts, images, and sound play, that generates meaning as through a network of overlapping and self-referential nodes.

What the poem says of natural time in the beginning of its second of four *fitts*, that "the forme to the fynisment foldes ful selden" (499), leaves open (with "selden" [seldom]) a small crack of opportunity that the poem's crystallization of the linear narrative in cyclical poetic form

exploits: its *form(er)* folds to its end *perpetually*. The axe, however, figures the accumulative change that distinguishes each instance of the poem—each exploration of the event of meaning—from one reading to the next.

The Poem as Endless Knot

I would fist like to try to outline in greater details the senses of endings in the poem as they are introduced in the elaborate description of the pentangle. A reading from as recently as 1991 presupposes, without hedging, that the pentangle "constitutes an extremely dense, microcosmic emblem at the core of *Sir Gawain's* symbolism" (Marti 161). Dense, yes, but the pentangle constitutes only a third of the microcosmic emblem, whose density is largely a result of the semiotic interference generated by the play of the three items in their collusive network. Nor does the pentangle alone symbolize this network any more than the girdle or even the axe. Each element offers a different map of the movement of energies in the poem and in its form, but like the pentangle, each does also contain elements of the other three.

The figure is composed of five overlapping lines joined at five points, in such a peculiar way that neither its construction nor its deconstruction appear possible at all: "ne samned neuer in no syde, ne sundred nouþer" "nor did they ever come together, nor come apart" (659). Never broken or connected, the pentangle's being is without beginning. By its nature, it appears to lack a moment of becoming, or at least a time of assemblage from separate pre-existing parts (which are, however, still distinct enough to demand mention). This seems to presuppose for the symbol an impossible state of endlessness, associating the pentangle with the eternal time of God rather than with temporality of the world, to return again to the central temporal theme of *Pearl*. And

yet despite its apparent timeless perfection, the pentangle is placed historically, as "a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle / in bytoknyng of trawþe," "a sign that Solomon once established to represent truth" (625), which posits for the design a definite point of origin in time. Like the truth it represents, the pentangle is absolute, incorruptible, and so not properly created by Solomon, but assigned its symbolic value, and devised in its visual form by him. The two senses of *form* in this case—the geometric form of the pentangle and the ideal form of truth—though either can be said to possess an eternal essence impermeable to time, are placed in chronology at the moment of their juncture. As a figure, it endures without beginning or ending. And just so, as the scrutinizing poet must conclude, it is:

> Withouten ende at any noke I oquere fynde
> Whereeuer þe gomen bygan, or glod to an ende. (660-661)
>
> without and at any end point I could find,
> wherever the game began or came to an end.

Already, these lines complicate the singularity of "sense" in Spearing's idea of the poet's "sense of ending." First, there are two distinct meanings of *ende* at play here. In line 660 *ende* seems unmarked in its relationship to any beginning; it is "*an* end" merely, like one end of a rope, or as in the phrase "at either end of the line." At the end of line 661, *ende* includes the polarity absent in the previous line. This *ende*, aptly placed, is "*the* end" that is, opposite the beginning, at the close of a linear process. The first end mentioned is the *genus* of which the second is a *species*, and the differential factor is the sense of sequence or time that defines one end as a beginning, and the next/later end as *the* end.

When the pentangle is called an *endeles knot* (630), both meanings are invoked and locked in ambiguity; both are at once negated by the suffix *-les*. The five *sybez* (another ambiguous word, meaning "times," "conjunctures," and apparently "sides") of the design are thus called into presence only in order to affirm the spatial *and* temporal absence of such divisions in the figure.

Seeing this playful procedure of signs in alternating affirmation and negation one might wonder what motivates the curious choice of the word *gomen* here. In what way can the pentangle, or the poet's perusal of it (as though with his finger), be considered a kind of "game?" If the object of this game is to find *an* end—in running one's finger along the lines of the design—then it is an endless game, and one that cannot be won, only stopped. And yet though the playing-field of the game is the endless pentangle, the game itself is distinct from its object for its possessing a clear beginning, and a clear end to glide towards. The answer to the question of *gomen* may be that this word is poised to activate one of the poem's overarching similes. Just as the poem could be reductively described as a series of interminable games (of beheading, of traded winnings, of courtship and evasion), so it could be said, and has been often said, that the poem is in some ways *like* the pentangle.

However, this simile is ultimately inadequate. For the framing game of double-beheading that is played out to its improbable conclusion in the course of the poem corresponds to the poem's continually renewed interrogation of its own beginnings and endings, towards which it is persistent in drawing our attention.[7]

The most famous and attention-grabbing instance of this interrogation is also the most figuratively similar to the beheading game; the beginning and the end of the poem, which attempt to *fold* together and obscure their status as two separate ends with resort to a common

device of concatenation. At one point, the poem seems almost to comment on this grand, but unexceptional (because it is so common) gesture, when the temptress and Lady of the castle refers to "summe tryfle at sume talez ende" (1301).

The last alliterative line falls, as I have mentioned, on line 2525, calling to mind the "perfect" 1212 lines in *Sir Gawain*'s manuscript-neighbor, *Pearl*. Though a common figure of circular structure (compare *Pearl* and *Patience* in the same manuscript), this particular instance of the poetic "game" or "trifle" is special for several reasons. The numerical situation of these lines must have been anticipated by the poet well in advance, and serves to reinforce the poem's emphasis on the number 5, as in the pentangle the "five fives" it represents. But the echo of line 2525 and line 1 is not actually perfect. Compare:

> Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye, (1)

and,

> Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, boȝed hider fyrst,
> After þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye (2524-2525)

If the intention was to represent perfection, why not repeat the line verbatim? Perhaps the first line is dilated into the final two to create a chiastic effect that reiterates the matter of the first whole stanza compactly. But as it stands, the slight offset in the repetition, as we will increasingly see, is characteristic of the poem's masterfully narrow evasion of potential perfections.

One very pronounced obstacle lies in the way of declaring this a "secure and genuine" movement of closure as Spearing does ("Sense of an Ending" 196), and it must be addressed, though its importance is often minimized by critics. The poem does not end on line 2525, but this

line is followed by one final bob-and-wheel stanza, which pushes the tally of lines to 2530. This uncomfortable remainder is as follows:

iwysse,
Mony aunterez here-biforne
Haf fallen such er þis.
Now þat bere þe croun of þorne,
He bryng vus to his blysse! Amen. (2526-2530)

indeed
Many similar adventures before now
Have happened in the past.
Now may he that bears the crown of thorn
Bring us to his bliss! Amen

There are many ways one can choose to overlook or diminish the importance of this stanza. Among them, the easiest is probably to say that it seems to function like an envoy or coda, as it turns away from the matter of the poem and invokes Christ in one final benediction to the imagined audience. That is, this end seems to be exterior to the poem it binds off, both part and not part of the text, like a knot at the end of a lace. Its post-dating temporal markers, *here-biforne* and *er þis*, seem to support the claim for its exteriority and separateness. But this argument has the adverse effect of admitting that the poem suffers at least this one radically uneven division. This is the last iteration of what is otherwise a consistent alternation back and forth from stretches of long alliterative lines to five short, rhyming lines that draw a formal and syntactic

close to each stanza. Thus this last bob-and-wheel cannot be expelled from the formal unity of the poem without destroying it.

It has also been suggested that the repetition of the first line must also occur in the last *alliterative* line, since reformulation into the short, rhyming bob-and-wheel lines would be impossible. This is, of course, very true. But can this disqualify the final five lines as a numerical part of the poem? If it did, then every other bob-and-wheel stanza (especially the first, lines 15-19, which allude to the last in its echo of *blysse*) would have to be considered somehow separate from the numeric plan. Yet all but the last must be counted in order to arrive at the 2525 total.

By virtue of its extension past the mark of perfection—past the line that locks the knot, as it were, of the poem's circularity—this bob-and-wheel represents a very damaging imperfection and superfluity. And yet, without it to complete the final section, the 101st "stanza" (*Pearl*, as we saw, also concludes with 101 stanzas), the poem would remain very prominently incomplete: unlocked. It could then be said that, if the last five lines are to be set "outside" the poem, that the final stanza, in lacking its "head" (or "tail"), is not properly a stanza at all, and that the 100th stanza is indeed the last "true" stanza. We need not of course decide that this or that element is aberrant from a design, which, ultimately, seamlessly includes these imperfections as purposive elements. And it may be that the difficulty and ambiguity of this extension merges into the formal landscape precisely as a mirror of the uncomfortable extension of Gawain's life and quest: the time *after* the chance of the chapel in which the tokens of the adventure—like the two contending tokens of ending figured here in the form—are subject to radical indeterminacy.

The ambiguities surrounding the formal sense of perfection and imperfection resemble the generalizing abbreviation of British history captured in the last two lines of the poem's first bob-and-wheel:

And oft boþe blysse and blunder

Ful skete hatz skyfted synne (18-19)

And often both joy and turmoil

have rapidly come in alternation ever since

Similarly, the poem's perfect linear symmetry (2525) is recognized alternatively as ruined or achieved by the arrival of perfect stanzaic perfection (101). These two imperfect perfections remain locked as if in binary orbit, 'shifting' around one another: the perfection of one is the imperfection of the other. Ultimately, the two ends of the poem are made to fold over each other, but in no way succeed in "locking" and rendering the poem "endless," except very problematically. The beginning and ending of the poem are as much cut apart as joined together by this *tryfle at talez ende*. By so closely relating beginning and ending without closing them off, the incomplete concatenation has only served to diminish the gravity of *the* end as such, showing how it might be considered merely *an* end as well as any other, or, that an end can be surprisingly similar to a beginning. And, multiplying rather than effacing the poem's divisions, these two joints have far from exhausted the set of "ends" in the poem.

The Axe and The Stiff Sense of Division

As we begin to consider divisions, we enter directly into the realm of the axe and the notion of cutting discrete segments from once-continuous wholes. Projected into the story, the segment corresponds to the two knights' heads and the whole, their bodies. In the game of exchange of these segments, the axe is at once the instrument and the wager. As such it too

enters the poem's economy of exchange and sign-switching, for it too is replaced in the role of prize and token by the green girdle. In still other ways it is an image that stands in contradistinction to the two "knots," the pentangle and the girdle, and as such functions not entirely unlike Alexander's famous solution to the problem of the Gordian Knot.

As metonymically representative of the Green Knight as of Sir Gawain—who are both wielder and wounded—the axe performs its own important functions in the complex formal interactions that are as much of divisions as sutures. These two qualities are early expressed in the voice of the narrator. In the bob-and-wheel concluding the second stanza, the poet famously announces his plan to tell a "laye...as I in toun herde" "a lay that I heard in town" (31):

> As hit is stad and stoken
> In stori stif and stronge,
> With lel letteres loken,
> In londe so hatz ben longe. (32-36)
>
> As it is set down and fixed
> In bold and strong story,
> Locked in loyal/true letters,
> As it long has been in this land

This programmatic announcement figures the poem as the product of an amalgamation of two concerns. The "stiff" and "strong," and thus implicitly hard-to-fold narrative meets "faithfully locked letters" (presumably a double-reference to the alternation of alliterative lines and rhyming stanzas) that will metaphorically contain and guard it. In a sense, this statement of poetics closely parallels the plot-internal concern with Gawain's "structural" (that is, his bodily) integrity but

also his moral integrity, both of which are put to the test in the course of the game. Just as the "endless knot" of the pentangle (whose "vche lyne vmbellapez and loukez in oþer" "each line overlaps and *locks* with each other," 628), resonates with the language of the poet's reflection on his own blueprint, so might the axe, which is after all is perhaps the object most closely involved in the beheading-game, also itself present a crucial focus of insight on the poem's structure. Cutting and severing plays as much a part in the intertwined formal and thematic structures of *Sir Gawain* as locking and knotting. But cutting of what?

In *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet*, Lynn Staley [Johnson] has shown that, underlying the beheading scenes and the tests of Gawain's virtue and intellect that fill the interval between them, a temporal framework based on the liturgical calendar subtends and controls Gawain's intellectual and spiritual progress (52-69). The model of time that gives temporal shape to *Sir Gawain* seems to involve the dualistic notion of time as functioning at once in linear and cyclical, or, in Staley's terms, "decaying" and "regenerative" dimensions.

The divisions of the poem's time may either be said to unfurl in linear and non-repetitive progression (analogous, perhaps, to the indefinite passages of alliterative lines), or else recur periodically and at even intervals (analogous to the isometric bob-and-wheel stanzas). An accurate model of the poem's formal and temporal landscape, however, must simultaneously take both models into account, especially in respect of the way the form of the poem masterfully embraces and integrates indeterminate lengths of alliterative line and the determinate patches of rhyming stanzas into its meticulously calculated numerical program.

Thus in general terms, the prosodic structure of the poem may be aptly described (though somewhat less aptly than *Pearl* perhaps) as a prolonged tension between linear segmentation and recursive encirclement. For the cutting of the alliterative passages by the bob-and-wheel stanzas

into irregular segments separates the text into smaller, but unequal units. While at the same time, the regularity of the rhyming stanzas sharpens their own sense of comparability and commensurability, and allows for the recognition of equivalences in the larger formal divisions. In other words, the presence of ends is precisely what enables the sense of the poem as a circular, unending "knot" and the intratextual "folds" that are so remarkably manipulated in the poem, a sense which does not deface but emerges in the medium of the poem's internal ends. That is to say, the stanza endings are cuts that join, or joints.[8]

The linear aspect of poetry here strains towards the circular property of regenerative time. And this integration, characterised by at once tension and reciprocity, is variously construed. For instance, as we saw, the poet's *description* of the alliterative line comes in a bob-and-wheel stanza. It is curious to consider that the short rhyming line is not only able, but in fact quuited well-suited to describe the poem's long alliterative line.

The bob-and-wheel lines are regularly of three stresses each, and assiduously follow the rhyme pattern ABABA.[9] They sometimes also, but not necessarily, feature alliteration. Somewhat less frequently still, two consecutive wheel-lines will alliterate the same letter. The second rhyming stanza, perhaps not coincidentally, is the first stanza to demonstrate the most intense degree of this optional sub-constraint: featureing both rhyme and alliteration. Ignoring the manuscript's lineation for a moment, I would like to recopy these lines in another way, disentangling the bob-and-wheel's rhyme pattern to emphasize the alliteration:

> As hit is stad and stoken in stori stif and stronge
>
> With lel letteres loken in londe so hatz ben longe. (33-36)

Set in this way, the lines become less distinguishable from the long alliterative lines. There is even an excessive alliterative consonance in the short lines. Considered in this way, these lines demonstrate not only how the formal template *shows* what they describe, namely *lel letteres loken*, but they also demonstrate the potential compatibility, or translatability, of alliteration into rhyme and vice versa, a compatibility fully actualized in the versification of the poem *Pearl.* In *Sir Gawain*, however, the repetition of so many letters loyally locked in alliteration is interrupted—unlocked—by the recurrences of rhyme and often non-alliterating short lines in the bob-and-wheels. The short stanzas cut and fold the longer passages into the units that constitute the numeric totality of 101 stanzas, units impossible to discern without these interruptions. Thus rhyme is what is responsible for segmentation of the alliterative text and also for enabling the recognition of its symmetries.

The principle of cutting is thus as vital to the formal and narrative design of the poem as "locking." We might say the two forces exert exactly equal and opposite value, as though controlled by a law of conservation of their formal energies. Reflecting this thematic balance in the structure of the text, the beheading scenes in the beginning and end of the narrative, *fitts* I and IV respectively (the domains of the axe), are balanced by the acquisition of the integrative objects in the sections II and III (domains of the pentangle and girdle). The two axes that appear in the first and last sections are poised to respond to the symbolic values of the "knots" that occupy such significant positions in the middle two. What then can the axe tell us about the text's formal ends?

The axe's introduction in the text follows a series of similar images connected to the Green Knight's clothing and mount. The weapon is the third object and its description is the last

of a set of three similarly detailed passages of rhetorically-influenced *descriptio* and *amplificatio*. The first is devoted to the dress of the Green Knight himself, another to his green-accoutered horse, and the last to the axe. Each occupies all or most of a section—the 8th, 9th, and 10th respectively, making for a sizeable digression from the action, in which the moment of the audience's bedazzled observation is dramatically dilated. This simulates, perhaps, the pause from merrymaking in Arthur's court as it stands stupefied by the same apparitions that occupy the reader. All three objects are characterized by coiled, twisting ornaments and designs of vivid green and gold. The knight's clothing is covered in *tryfles* (1301; a term notable now in its anticipation of "tryfles at tales ende") that are embroidered "with gay gaudi of grene, þe golde ay inmyddes" (165-167). The green mane of the horse is,

> Wel cresped and cemmed, wyth knottes ful mony
> Folden in wyth fildore aboute þe fayre grene,
> Ay a herle of þe here, an oþer of golde; (188-190)
>
> Well curled and combed, with very many knots
> Folded/plaited in with golden thread around the lovely green,
> Always a strand of the hair, another of gold;

This terminology of knotting and folding in the description of the horse's braided mane folds this image into the bivalent discourse that weaves the imagery of ornamentation into the pattern of the text's own rhetorical and structural adornment. With this exquisite description, the knight's axe immediately secures a prominent place:

> Bot in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe,
> þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare,

And an ax in his oþer, a hoge and vnmete,

A spetos sparþe to expoun in spelle, quoso myȝt.

Þe lenkþe of an elnȝerde þe large hede hade,

Þe grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen,

Þe bit burnyst bryȝt, with a brod egge

As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores,

Þe stele of a stif staf þe sturne hit by grypte,

Þat watz wounden with yrn to þe wandez ende,

And al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes;

A lace lapped aboute, þat louked at þe hede,

And so after þe halme halched ful ofte,

Wyth tryed tasselez þerto tacched innoghe

On botounz of þe bryȝt grene brayden ful ryche. (206-220)

But in his one hand, he had a holly cluster,

That is most green when groves are bare,

And an axe in his other hand huge and monstrous,

A cruel axe to describe in words, if anyone can.

The large head was the length of an ell-rod,

The stock entirely shaped of green steel and gold,

The blade polished bright, with a broad edge

Well formed to cut like sharp razors,

The stern man gripped it by the handle of a stiff staff

Which was wound with iron to the staff's end,

And all carved with green in graceful designs;

A lace was wound about it, which was knotted at the head,

And so wrapped around and around the handle,

With fine tassels attached to it

On buttons of that bright green, richly embroidered.

The somewhat knotty syntax of line 209 introduces the *sparþe* (a rare Old Norse borrowing) as "spetos...to expoun in spelle." This is one of the few lines that Tolkien and Gordon thought difficult enough to provide with a full gloss: "A cruel axe to describe in words, if anyone could."[10] That is, it is not only *difficult* for the poet to describe for all its ornament, it is actually "harmful" (*spetos*, from *spyt* "doing harm" < OFr *despit*) to treat of it in words. The sharpness and potency of the weapon to effect physical damage bleeds into its textual being, as though handling it were as much a hazard for the poet as for Gawain. It thus presents itself as an object of cutting singularity both in the narrative and the textual realms, which at this point have a particularly hard time reaching a compromise. As a narrative prop, the ax has been understood as an "instrument of justice," at once threatening and judging the fame of the court of Camelot.[11] Its edge looms dangerously over the most emphatically *Round* Table.

For all its menacing sharpness, however, the axe's handle receives more descriptive attention than its blade. It is a *stif staf,* a "stout handle." The next and last appearance of the word *staf* in the text is in the bob-and-wheel of stanza 85 in section IV, in which Gawain refuses one last temptation to run away from the game of the Green Knight, "Þaȝe he be a sturn knape / To stiȝtel, and stad with staue," "though he be a grim fellow to handle and armed with a staff" (2136-2137). Here *staf* may mean "club" and, according to Tolkien and Gordon, refers generally

to a threatening situation, but it may also stand in metonymically for the axe itself. In both instances of the word, the *staf* seems to supplant the blade as the most pivotal aspect of the weapon.

Meanwhile, the adjective *stif* resonates with the first instance of the word in the poem: in the poetic manifesto in the wheel of the second stanza, where the "stif and stronge" story is consolidated with "lel letteres loken." The *stif staf* of the axe joins in a ready-made symphony of the frequent repetitions of *stif* throughout the text, which together seem to function as corroboration of the original statement of the text's poetics. Forms of *stif* appear no fewer than 22 times in the poem. But their distribution in the text according to fitt is notably irregular, as follows:

I: 11

II: 5

III: 4

IV: 2

The diminishing frequency of *stif* in the text may correspond to the progressive disappearance of some sense of stiffness from the narrative, or of the inflexibility of its themes, as though these ever less frequent landmarks measure a trajectory away from the kind of stiff entanglement of the pentangle and the world it represents—where, as Ralph Hanna III put it, "meaning is clear and exemplary" ("Unlocking What's Locked" 290)—and towards the supple and "slippery" signifier of the girdle and a world of pliable values and ends that are not ends at all.

The clear relevance of the adjective *stif* to the prosodic program of the poem enables us to focus some extra attention on its complementary noun, *staf*. The primary definition of the word, as given in the Middle English Dictionary, is "stick of wood, rod; stem," but the secondary

meaning, reflecting an ambivalence conserved from Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse, is (as we saw in the Introduction) "an alphabetic character, a letter; an engraved character or image; a line of verse."[12] Through its attribute, *stif*, *staf* is tangentially associated with *letteres*. If it is possible that the sense of "engraved image" or "line of verse" could still be detected by the author and/or audience of *Sir Gawain*, then the Green Knight's *staf* expands the field of discourse alluded to in this scene to include some reference to both the formal fabric of the poetry, and even the visual layout of the manuscript page on which it appears.

Meaning "a line in a design," *staf* appears in an apposite arming scene in the early Middle English poetic chronicle *Brut* by Layamon. The scene, telling of the dressing of Arthur's father Uther Pendragon, resembles the description of the Green Knight's apparel in terminology, but perhaps more resemble the imagery of the Gawain's arming scene in fitt II. On Uther's shield, we are told,

> þer wes innen igrauen
> mid rede golde stauen
> an on-licnes deore
> of drihtenes moder. (Calig.A.IX, 21153-21156)
>
> Within it was engaved
> in red-gold lines
> a precious likeness
> of the Lord's mother.

Similarly, Green Knight's *staf* is "al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes," (216) only the latter's stave serves as the ground and not the figure of the design. In addition to the similarity of this language to the axe, there is a further connection between this shield and Gawain's, whose "inner side" features "hir ymage depaynted" (649). Uther's shield seems thus double relevant. And, as to the ambiguity of *staf*, the sense of an "ornamented letter" is not distant from the present text, and is in fact quite relevant to a poem that is attested in one beautifully illustrated manuscript. Manuscript Cotton Nero A.x, *Sir Gawain*'s only home, contains four poems, whose separations are clearly marked by page-sized illustrations. Each text is opened by a large initial colored capital. The illustration that precedes *Sir Gawain* is divided into two horizontal panels (see figure 1).



(figure 1: MS. Cotton Nero A.x 90v and 91r)

The smaller upper panel shows what appears to be Gawain, having accepted the axe, speaking with Arthur (or else it is the Green Knight, mistakenly colored red, addressing the King). The larger lower panel shows the decapitated body of the Green Knight, astride his green horse, lifting up his head. Facing him, a man in red and blue, presumably Gawain, wields the axe upright. This illustration is on the verso side of page 90. Opposite it on page 91 recto is the beginning of the poem's text with its lavishly decorated initial *S*. Unlike the opening initials of the other three poems in the manuscript, however, the top of this initial S is set several inches down the page, leaving a large empty gap above it. Why the unused space?

I propose that the colored capital *S*, with its long flourishing vertical stem descending down the left margin, is set lower on the page in order to mirror the axe on the facing illustration, which is almost perfectly level with it on its page, its large curved blade sitting atop a long descending handle. In addition to its placement, the color of the initial *S* is not green and gold as the axe is described, but red and blue. This discrepancy would evidently dissociate the capital letter from the axe except that the color of the axe's blade as it is portrayed in the illustration is also tinted blue—though the handle may be green—and the red shirt and blue pants of its handler appear to be in the same shades of ink.

If my interpretation of the text's *mise en page* is at all permissible, then we may say that the lexical range of the word *staf* is augmented by the visual associations of the manuscript's coloring and design, and the reader is doubly encouraged to consider that the semantic envelope of the axe may be more than a show-piece of rhetorical *descriptio,* but a meta-rhetorical statement commenting on the poetics of the text *and the manuscript*.

Even without this apparent coordination of illustration and decorated initial letter to corroborate it, the description of the axe seems to overlap with the language of poetic artistry the text uses to explain itself and its material appearance. The illustration's alignment with the decorated capital of the text enters into a structure of suggestive play with the indicators of textual divisions in the manuscript. After the larger *S* initial, three more large initials divide the text into the four generally acceepted sections or "fitts," and an additional five smaller colored capitals present what some scholars have taken to be five more, or five internal divisions.[13] Whatever the disposition of these divisions, the axe seems to stand within the text as a metaphoric reflection of their function, cutting the text into parts, but not disintegrating it, just as the axe separates bodies from heads without killing the man. While the pentangle and the green girdle emblematize the poem's structural tendency towards formal convolution and ring-shape, as well as the dynamics of regenerative time that characterizes the narrative, the axe represents a counterforce, the inclination of the text to announce its divisions. These two opposing operations clash frequently in the poems' temporal imagery and at its formal seams, while the text works simultaneously to annotate and to fold over its many ends.

The Axes, The Girdle, and the Sense of the Fold

As the object Gawain carries away from the survived final encounter, the girdle takes the place of the prize of the second beheading scene. The original prize, as stated in the first beheading scene, was to be the axe. The Green Knight promised to whichever knight of the Round Table is bold enough, "that he dares sternly strike a stroke for another, I shall give to him as my reward this valuable axe" ("Þat dar stifly strike a stroke for an oþer, I schal gif hym of my

gyft þys giserne ryche," 286-287). Here again we find the repetition of *stif*, carrying with it the remembrance of the poetical values now attached to it. Accompanying the intrusion of the Green Knight, this line-like object presents a challenge to the "roundness" of a text characterized by a formal desire to circumvent its ends, and a story concerned with the moral code of the *Round* Table. It is precisely the axe's stiffness that interpolates its danger—stiff, linear and intractable to the work of perpetual folding-back and knotting that otherwise seems to be the desire of the text. *Stif* infiltrates the text and tries to proliferate virus-like to every corner of it, just as the axe threatens to breach the joints of the pentangle (literally by dismantling the body beneath the armor) and what it represents (figuratively, by testing the five virtues of its carrier). Soft, pliant and foldable, the green girdle is apt to represent the defensive counterforce, which seems to win out insofar as it replaces the weapon in the role of prize and token.

After the first beheading scene and by the time of the second, the original axe seems to have remained behind at Arthur's court hung over the Round Table, to be a source of marvel and tales of wonder (478-480). In the final beheading scene, another similar axe seems to appear in its place, but shows several signs of being identical if not the same:

> A denez ax nwe dyȝt, þe dynt with to ȝelde,
> With a borelych bytte bende by þe halme,
> Fyled in a fylor, fowre fote large—
> Hit watz no lasse by þat lace þat lemed ful bryȝt—
>
> A Danish axe newly prepared to the deal out the strike,
> With a massive blade curved down along the handle,
> sharpened on a whetstone, four foot across—

Hit was no shorter with the lace that shined brightly— (2222-2226)

In this unsettlingly eerie scene in the Green Chapel, this suspiciously familiar axe is the first part of the Green Knight to appear, preceded by his disembodied voice, and followed, only after the description, by the Knight himself. That the present axe is "Danish" and "newly prepared" distinguishes it from the first axe, but the similar attention to its size and the presence of a "lace," (indexing the pun of *lasse/lace* that accompanies the girdle), suggest more similarity than difference between the axes, comparing these two emblems of division *by way of* the lace.[14] This "new" axe is no less bound to the girdle than the first. Still, the presence of this lace attached to a second axe adds a minor hitch to the previous association of the axe and the girdle. The slight shifts in the description of this axe at first seem to confuse the network of associations carefully established up till now. But this complication is not necessarily dissonant with the thematic function of the axe, which represents a disruptive influence wherever it appears. As an element of disturbance as well as an instrument of magic in the narrative, it eludes stable definition. In this way, it remains like the girdle, which, in its shifting signification as a sign of the arbitrary sign, undergoes repeated and radical re-definition.

The test that this relationship of cutting and folding undergoes in the course of the text is foreshadowed in the appearance of a *lace* in the first beheading scene, already *lapped aboute* the axe (217).[15] After its first appearance in line 217, the term *lace* will lie dormant in the text until its important reemergence in the last encounter—the final exam in a test of a different order of courtly love—between Gawain and the seductive wife of the lord, Bertilak, his host. There the lady presents Gawain with her girdle, a "lace...þat leke vmbe hir sydez" (1830). When Gawain accepts—and his acceptance is a sort of consolation prize to the temptress—he "sets the love-lace safely away" ("Lays vp þe luf-lace," 1874) seemingly without paying it much attention. But

our attention may be drawn in more deeply: is it possible to hear in the prominent initial position of the word *lays* in this line a hint of *laye*, the generic qualifier the poet uses for the poem? Though tenuous, the possible connection would not be out of place in a text that tends to confirm Spearing's hyperbolic assessment: "everything connects with everything else."

Whether the girdle is the same *lace* that is twisted around the axe is unclear. But, being identical in its color-scheme to her husband's axe (though their marital relationship has not yet been disclosed), this lace is presented to Gawain as a defensive measure precisely to prevent the infliction of a beheading strike, a fatal wound, which, of course, both knights survive.[16] The presence of the lace in both non-fatal beheading scenes is at least conspicuous, but perhaps also deeply significant. To begin to flesh out this curious relationship of the two laces and the two axes, it may be of use to study the girdle's first description in the poem before turning back to observe its several significations.

Gawain refuses the first gift the lady offers, a "riche rynk of red golde werkez" (1817) that resembles more the pentangle in its color and formal closure ("schapen watz þe knot...wyth red golde," 662-3), or even the design on Uther Pendragon's shield, than the girdle. But he excepts the latter, "lesser" gift in its place. The narrator shares the duty of describing the girdle with its giver, in whose voice its powers are detailed:

> 'I schal gif yow my girdel, þat gaynes you lasse.'
> Ho laȝt a lace lyȝtly þat leke vmbe hir sydez,
> Knit vpon hir kyrtel vnder þe clere mantyle,
> Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped,
> Noȝt bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngerez;

. . . . . .

‘Lo! so hit is littel, and lasse hit is worþy;

Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,

He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture;

For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,

While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,

Þer is no haþel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt,

For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe.’ (1829-1833; 1848-1854)

‘I will give you my girdle, which is worth less to you,’

She quickly grabbed a lace that was tied around her sides,

Knotted over her gown, under the sheer robe,

It was fashioned of green silk and plied with gold,

Embroidered only at the trim, worked by the fingers;

. . . . . .

‘Look! It is so little, less worthy;

Whoever should know the values that are knitted in it,

would likely praise it more highly;

For whatever man is girded by this green lace,

While he has it closely wrapped about him,

There is no man under heaven that could cut him,

For he could not be killed by an any trick on earth.’

Several of the technical metallurgical terms describing the axe are repeated here, but with their meanings altered to suit the textile object. These terms serve as indexes linking the two contexts. The girdle is *schaped* in its soft finery, where the axe's edge was *schapen* (213) to shear things far less delicate. Ironically it is the pliant shape of the girdle, and only it, that is empowered to divert the stiff shape of the axe's edge. If one wears it "hemely halched aboute," the lady tells Gawain, then it renders the wearer impervious to damage. The lace on the axe, by contrast, had been wound tightly around its handle, "louked at þe hede," and "þe halme *halched* ful ofte" (217-218). If it is the same girdle that is wrapped around that first axe, then it would seem that its effect is to cancel out the axe's cleaving potency: to negate the negation that the axe would deliver on its victim, and on the quest itself.

Whether it is the same lace or not, and whether it is the same axe or not, the echo of vocabulary related to the axe in the portrayal of the girdle looks forward to the collision of these two objects in the second beheading scene. When the attuned reader reencounters the lace on the eve of Gawain's entrance to the Green Chapel, this preview will have prepared a tension in anticipation of the paradox that awaits: the encounter of an edge hard and sharp enough to cut anything, and a soft silk band "shaped" to be impervious to any edge.

The unexpectedness of the lace's hidden strength against any "slyȝt vpon erþe" is emphasized by the twice-repeated pun of *lace* and *lasse*, "less." As I mentioned, the lady offers the girdle to Gawain only after he has refused the gold ring. We assume that, had he accepted the seemingly more valuable item, he would have proven his virtue fallible and thus failed the test of courtly love to which the Lady had for several days subjected him. By comparison with the ring, the lace seems hardly a consolation prize for Gawain that his receiving it is for the lady. It "gaynes yow lasse" (1829) and "is littel, and lasse hit is worþy" (1848). And yet, this lace gains

for Gawain much more than the end*less* knot, or it might be better to say, it gains him both *more* and *less.* For the lace not only is the "noble sleight" that saves his life in the second beheading scene, but it becomes for Gawain a reminder of what he sees as his threefold failure, first in accepting the girdle from the lady and concealing it from her husband, and second in flinching from the Green Knight's first blow, and third in using it to survive the contest.

And although Gawain seems most disheartened by these two relatively mild discrepancies in his moral fabric, his only incorrect move according to the terms of the game occurs when, in the second beheading scene, he flinches from the "other stroke." In the pivotal moment of his flinch, notice the verbal resonances that are concentrated into the poetry: the phrase *gyft þys giserne* from the presentation of the terms of the game (288) is echoed in the first line of the flinch:

> Bot Gawain on þat *giserne glyfte* hym bysyde
> As hit com glydande adoun on glode hym to schende,
> And schrank a lytel with þe schulderes for þe scharp yrne. (2265-2267; my emphasis)
>
> But Gawain glanced around at that axe
> As it came gliding down towards the ground to destroy him,
> And flinched a little with his shoulders under the sharp iron.

The next line not only echoes but rhymes with the end of line 661, in which the hypothetical player of the "game" of the pentangle could not find an end, no matter where he began "or glode to an ende." Rhyme, before associated with the axe's devisive sectioning of the text, here helps bring into direct and powerful conflict the forces of the pentangle and the axe at the moment of their starkest difference. The endless knot and the cut of the ultimate end (captured in *schende,*

"destroy, disgrace, punish") forced into deliberation. Gawain's shrinking just *a lytel* will be picked up in the Green Knight's mild rebuke of this momentary cowardice (2366), but significantly recalls the *littel*-ness of the girdle (1848), which enters the symbolic negotiation like a mediator, adapting the demand for meaningful conclusion (axe) and the formal impulse to continue. These lines also index several relevant scenes. Recalling the first axe, now enshrined over the Round Table, reminds us that the Green Knight did not shrink. Recalling the endlessness of the pentangle may emphasize that the perfect virtues it symbolizes are severed at this point from Gawain. But it is precisely by *not* being cut by the axe that Gawain is cut from his virtues.

But Gawain *is* cut, not by the first stroke, nor even with the second, which the Green Knight stops mid-swing (he later explains these three strokes are intended as reciprocation from each of the three days he was tempted by the Lady of the castle, his wife). It is the third that penetrates the protection of the girdle just enough to nick the knight's skin. The Green Knight,

> Þaȝ he homered heterly, hurt hym no more
> Bot snyrt hym on þat on syde, þat seuered þe hyde.
> Þe scharp schrank to þe flesche þurȝ þe schyre grece,
> Þat þe schene blod ouer his schulderes schot to þe erþe; (2311-2314)

> Though he hammered fiercely, he hardly hurt him
> But nicked him on that one side, so that he severed the skin.
> The edge sank in the flesh through the shiny fat,
> So that the bright blood over his shoulder dripped to the ground;

With this, the terms of the game are complete, the "other stroke" dealt. Two features of the poetry here are striking. First, in the precise line of the cut, we find a most unusual instance of internal rhyme, *syde* with *hyde,* made more pronounced by the caesura that marks the cut after *syde* between the hemistiches. In the same line, a slight contest in the alliteration plays out, between the *h*'s of *hym* and *hyde*, and the *s*'s that overpower their number, finally, with the word *seuered*. I submit that these effects are intentionally laid to compare the one wound of Sir Gawain, to the "wounds" of the alliterative body of the poem, namely the rhyming stanzas that cut the alliteration at intervals. This oscillation seems represented in miniature in this line by the congestion of both rhyme and two alliterating letters locked in a sort of conflict. The analogy of the governing structural principle of and the narrative arch thus collapses the form-content dichotomy, projecting the terms of the quest *mutatis mutandis* onto each level.

The second remarkable feature of the poetry is the vivid imagery of Gawain's almost animal-like skin (*hyde*) and the subcutaneous fat (*grese*) briefly seen underneath. These words connect this scene to a passage near the exact midpoint of the poem, where a hunted deer is gruesomely dissected. I turn now, or allow this last scene to turn me, toward this imporant scene.

The Cut Down the Middle

If the poem and the form can be seen, reductively, as participating in a game of paradoxically cooperative cutting, joining, and folding, then one of the most important aspects of the game has yet to be examined. I have explored the way that the instruments of the game interact in a network of relationships, much as the poetic elements of the versification interact to

construe the complicated hybrid form so carefully negotiated in *Sir Gawain*, but we have only grazed the surface of the function of cutting.

In the second beheading scene, thanks to the presence of the green girdle and the full force of the Green Knight's blow leaves only a scrape on Gawain's neck. His body is thus spared from disintegration; the poem, however, is not.

The two beheading scenes at either end of the poem are spatially mediated by an extended *amplificatio* on the subject of cutting. This scene falls not quite at the middle of the poem, and before we approach this off-center thematic middle, it might be beneficial to linger for a moment on the problem of identifying the poem's middle and its center if these are not synonymous. The overall circular form the poem adumbrates in the near perfect echo of line 1 in line 2525 posits these two points as the locked ends of the poem's diameter. They are ends that, in conjunction, become marks of an endlessness revolution like the points of the pentangle. But if this circle is also anything *like* the girdle (though likeness, as we have seen, is a thorny issue), then perhaps there something like a knot at its middle. In *Sir Gawain's* sister poem *Pearl*, the concatenation that fuses the twenty sections does not fail at the end which links to the first line of the poem; but the concatenation does fails most remarkably in what may be considered that poem's off-center middle. Something similar occurs in *Sir Gawain*.

Taking 2525 (and not the true ending at 2530) as the length of this "girdle's" circumference, we expect the midpoint to fall at line 1263. If we look for signs of conscious planning in the situation of this line we are not disappointed: 1263 happens to be the first line of stanza 51, which is precisely the middle stanza of the total 101. This midpoint does not fall, however, congruently against the fourfold division of the poem indicated by the large capitals—it is the sixth stanza of section 3—nor does it fall at the beginning of one of the 5 smaller sub-

sections marked by the smaller capitals. Thus this perfect numerical middle is not commensurable with the other pronounced middle between the two pairs of season-like fitts, which seem coordinate with much more pronounced narrative moves (nothing of particular gravity happens at line 1262 or in stanza 51). But considering the complicated offsetting of the different divisions and perfections of the poem, such as the extension of the stanza count past the perfect and 5-divisible 100 and the 5 lines of the last bob-and-wheel that are necessary but disruptive of the perfect finale at 2525, this subtly registered incommensurability hardly comes as a surprise. And yet, as in the other sites of obstructed perfections, the poet (or at least the scribe responsible for the illustrated capitals), has left a trace of some hidden organization: after the capital that opens section III (at the 46th stanza), five stanzas come before stanza 51, and exactly five follow it before another, smaller capital letter intervenes in the manuscript at line 1420 (stanza 57). In this way, in addition to its numerical mediation of the poetic text, stanza 51 is circumscribed as a middle of a different order, between the divisions chosen by these curious, axe-like staffs, cut into the material text.

The current of the story is doubled at this point into two parallel strands. Constrained by linear text, the narrator may only follow one strand at a time, oscillating back and forth between scenes. Within the castle a hunt of words transpires between Gawain and the lady of his host, while outside in the woods, the lord leads a hunt of flesh.[17] The first transition between these scenes is accomplished with the simple phrase, "And ay þe lorde.."; "And all the while, the lord..." (1319, Stanza 53). By this temporal adverb we are made to understand that the lord's hunt is contemporaneous with the lady's, and that the time that has transpired while the Lady and Gawain began their verbal lunges and parries folds cleanly over the chase in the woods. The numerical midpoint of the poem, falling in the midst of this fold, thus undergoes a suggestive

temporal multiplication, as the two strands of narrative at work here are braded together into a complicated referential manifold, figuratively very much like the *lace* of the girdle and the axe.

The ensuing field dressing scene in stanza 53, which catches the reader's attention with its vivid imagery and gruesome detail, is concurrent with the middle, temporally (in the time of the story) if not spatially (in the time of the story's textual narration). This passage could also be seen as the thematic middle of the text. It follows between the two beheading scenes, and comes at the focus of the adventure's most pressing engagements. For while Gawain undergoes the challenge of courteous conversation against the lady's constant advances (it was in the stanza before that Gawain worried about the "fourme of his castes"), the narrative focus follows the lord—we do not yet know it is the Green Knight—out on the first day of his hunt, which has been framed as another game of exchange with Gawain. The setting down of the rules of this game resemble the terms of the beheading game:

> 'ʒet firre,' quoþ þe freke, 'a forwarde we make:
> Quat-so-euer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez,
> And quat chek so ʒe acheue chaunge me þerforne. (1105-1107)
>
> 'But first,' said the, 'let us state the condition:
> Whatever I win in the woods goes to you,
> And trade with me what fortune you get.'

Forwarde links explicitly to the formulation of the terms of the beheading game in fitt I, and the reciprocity of the quarries of the two "hunts," within and without the castle, allow us to anticipate that the trophies of the lord's hunt will be assimilated in some way to the courtly victories of the lady's tests.

By the numerical midpoint, the first day of the double-hunt has begun—for Gawain in the castle, and deer in the woods. Outside, many deer are killed quickly and the bodies are piled up. The following passage describes how the corpses are skinned and dismantled:

Syþen þay slyt þe slot, sesed þe erber,
Schaued wyth a scharp knyf, and þe schyre knitten;
Syþen rytte þay þe foure lymmes, and rent of þe hyde,
Þen brek þay þe balé, þe bowelez out token
Lystily for laucyng þe lere of þe knot;
Þay gryped to þe gargulun, and grayþely departed
þe wesaunt fro þe wynt-hole, and walt out þe guttez;
þen scher þat out þe schulderez with her scharp knyuez,
Haled hem by a lyttel hole to haue hole sydes.
Siþen britned þay þe brest and brayden hit in twynne,
And eft at þe gargulun bigynez on þenne,
Ryuez hit vp radly ryȝt to þe byȝt,
Voydez out þe avanters, and verayly þerafter
Alle þe rymez by þe rybbez radly þay lance;
. . . . . .
Syþen fonge þay þer flesche, folden to home,
Strakande ful stoutly mony stif motez. (1330-1343, 1363-1364)

Then they sliced the breast-slot, seized the gullet,
scraped it with a sharp knife and tied the fat;

Then they severed the four legs and tore the hide,
then they opened the belly, and took out the guts
carefully, so as not to undo the ligature of the knot.
They grabbed the throat and quickly separated
The gullet from the windpipe, and tossed out the guts.
Then they carved out the shoulders with their sharp knives,
Pulled them through a little hole, to keep the sides in tact.
Then they broke upon the breast and divided it in two.
And after that, one man begins at the throat,
Rips it quickly up to the fork of the legs,
Empties out the organs and right after that
they quickly cut all the membranes by the ribs.
. . . . . .
Then they took their flesh and turned back towards home,
Sounding most stoutly man stiff/loud notes.

Mixed in with the technical terms for the deer's anatomy are many of the keywords we have been following, enough to suggest that more than a straightforward, literal *descriptio* is at work underneath the deftly divided skin of this passage. The dressers even conclude their work by "folding" homewards, and sounding "stiff notes." Notice too the metrical and verbal resonance between the first line of this long passage and the first line of the poem:

Syþen þay slyt þe slot, sesed þe erber, (1330)

and,

Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye (1)

Something of a recapitulation or re-beginning is implicit in this passage. I submit that this is among the most crucial *folds* in the poem, and that it allegorizes in miniature the poetics of the text itself. Here we find in high concentration a number of the themes we have been following. The sense of linear order in the work of the dressing is emphasized by the fivefold anaphoric repetition of *syþen/siþen* in these two stanzas, four of which come at the beginning of their lines. This uniquely high frequency of the word in the initial-position recalls the powerful *Siþen* that opens the poem, and also the *syþen* slightly displaced from the echo of that opening, in line 2524. Knives, whose sharpness is doubly stressed, apply themselves to the task of loosing what is locked in the deer. The body, much like the pentangle, consists of *sydes* (cp. 632, where it is also line-final, and 659) and, most significantly, a *knot* (cp. 630, 661 line-final in both positions). Other resonances serve to cement this similarity: *lappez* recalls *vnbellapez* (628) and *samen* recalls *samned* (659).

In the process of the corpse's dissolution into its constituent parts, however, the language becomes more and more reminiscent of the girdle. The violent line, "lystily laucyng þe lere of þe knot" anticipates Gawain's own violence against the girdle ("he kaȝt to þe knot, and þe kest lawsyz," 2376), but shows the workers carefully avoiding such violence themselves. The deer's breast is then "brayden...in twynne," looking again towards Gawain's mistreatment of the girdle (which he *brayde broþely*, 2377), and also his later ameliorative reverence toward it as a symbol of his fault ("For þer hit onez is tachched *twynne* wil hit neuer," 2512).

Similar but shorter scenes follow the two ensuing hunts on the next two days, which continue according to the same braiding pattern of shifting narrative focus. A boar is caught on the second day, which a man "wise in the ways of hunting practices,"

> To unlace þis bor lufly bigynnez

Fyrst he hewes of his hed and on hiȝe settez (1606-1607)

Eagerly begins to dismember the boar

First he hues off its head and sets it up high

The intratextual cross currents are dense in these two lines. First, the juxtaposition of *unlace* and *lufly* looks forward to the designation of the girdle as a *luf-lace* in lines 1874 and 2438. The triumphant decapitation and displaying of the boar's head obviously ties in to the undercurrent of the framing plotline, but at the same draws on a familiar moralistic convention from medieval Romance, creating, as J.D.Burnley describes it in comparison with the contemporaneous temptation scene, "associations of a conflict with a formidable and wicked antagonist whose destruction represents...a triumph of good over evil" (8). This further intertwines the action outside the castle and within, where a moral battle of a different order is taking place.

The braiding of the narrative threads becomes more complex as the section progresses. The first day was described in a single, unbroken block of text. The next days' hunts are broken up into two parts, each by a turn of the focus from the outdoor chase to the temptation of Gawain within the castle, creating a sort of montage effect. The boar-hunt, so redolent in the motifs deeply installed in the medieval poetic representations of power and nobility, is interrupted by a scene in which the lady makes explicit reference to the textual materials and matter of Romance, which I will turn to shortly (Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet* 9-10).

On the third and final day of the hunt, the lord hunts the *wylé* fox, whose crafty evasion of the hunters draws us away from courtly Romance and into the realm of satirical beast epic, where *Reniarde* (1728) the fox ever outwits, eludes, and often flays other beasts, especially the wolf. J.J Anderson comments that foxhunt provides the most obvious comparison with the lady's

"hunt" of Gawain, for "the fox's defensive maneuvers suggest those of Gawain on all three days" (*Sir Gawain etc.* 311). The foxhunt is charged with significance in the interior monologue of the poem's formal self-consciousness. At the junction between the two narrative ends, the time and space of the two scenes seems curiously to overlap:

> And ȝe he lad hem bi lagmon, þe lorde and his meyny,
> On þis maner bi þe mountes quyle myd-ouer-vnder,
> Whyle þe hende knyȝt at home holsumly slepes
> Withinne þe comly cortynes, on þe colde morne. (1729-1732)
>
> And you, lord and retinue, he led by the heals,
> In this way by the mounts until mid-afternoon,
> While the gentle knight at home sleeps peacefully
> Within the lovely bed-curtains on that cold morning.

The meaning of the rare phrase *bi lagmon* remains still somewhat uncertain. Tolkien and Gordon devote a note to it, citing its use in western dialects for "the last of a line of reapers" (120). Andrew and Waldron suggest translating the phrase, "led them in a string" (270 note to 1729). The sense thus implies a curvilinear trajectory and, in a typical image typical in the comic *Renard*-tradition, we seem to be meant to envisage the fox leading the chase in a circle, the pursuers coming around to pursue themselves. The once linear hunt begins to resemble a circle: one whose sense of an ending is absolute (that is, when the fox and the hunters meet the chase is over), but whose beginnings and endings in the progress of the chase, in the *gomen,* remain indistinguishable.

The spatial displacement of hunter and hunted is accompanied by a jarring shift in time announced by the equally unusual and difficult phrase, *myd-ouer-vnder*. The compound seems to mean simply "afternoon," but its elements figure a contortion of spatial relationships, which suggests: first, the fox's erratic course; second, the braiding maneuvers of the text itself. Just such a turn of the braid occurs in the next line, where the double iteration of *quyle/whyle* has transported our attention through space, back to the castle, but also in time, from afternoon to cold morning. Turning back time and joining ends to beginnings, the narrative shows itself again capable of its own brand of foxlike convolutions. It is fitting then that the scene we turn to here is precisely the final temptation put before the equally wily Gawain and the introduction of the girdle. And only after this convoluted item appears, and after we've crossed another of the sub-dividing smaller illustrated capitals, we return to the hunt for *Reynarde* the fox just in time to witness his capture. Compared with the preceding field dressing scenes, the fox's preparation is radically condensed, falling (uniquely among the animal dressing scenes) in a bob-and-wheel: "And syþen þay tan Reynarde | And tyruen of his cote" (1920-1921). Here the flayer becomes the flayed, in two rhyming lines assiduously unalliterated that close the hunt before the two strands of the narrative rejoin to inaugurate the opening of the final fitt.

In these hunts, both inside and outside of the language of divisions of wholes developed throughout the poem is first made to collide with the equal and opposite language of closure. The *knot,* reminiscent of the perfect pentangle of Gawain's virtues as well as the potential for perfect poetic closure, is here vigorously untied. At the same time, we must understand that Gawain's resolve is undergoing a metaphorically similar deconstruction in the castle, where the lady tests him with an equivalent, sexual vigor. This scene then may be said to represent the difference and

the distance between the pentangle and the girdle. The possibility of a whole so seamless as to efface its parts—just as the possibility of a Gawain inhumanly pure of virtue—is figuratively dismantled along with the three dissected animals; and it is a sharp blade that severs the ideal from the reality.

The network of ambiguous terminology in the parallel scenes of hunting and temptation, especially the deer scene, involves them both in the subtending discourse of structural divisions, folds and ends. This terminology speaks to at least two purposes throughout the poem. The *foure lymmes* of the deer thus invite comparison to the four fitts, and the physical analysis of the deer's "sides," "folds" and "knot" seems to conduct its operation also on the poem.

Some of the specific anatomical terminology seems to enter the word play as well. For instance, though the flayers have already once torn open the hide, cut the ligatures, and emptied the guts, the text seems to repeat these actions: in lines 1340-1345, the hunter makes one grand, sweeping slice, *beginning* at the throat ("at þe gargulun bigynez") and cutting all the way down the middle to end at the haunch ("euenden to þe haunche"). And what is exposed in the middle between these termini—a beginning and an ending—is the animal's *avanters* and *rymez*. Though these terms may primarily refer to the vital organs and membranes of the deer, it seems impossible not to hear in them, an undertone of "adventures" and even "rhymes," terms which by now we recognize as indicators of poetic anatomy.

As a demonstration of the latter homophone's plausibility here, I might offer an unexpectedly similar context. In the beginning of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* Book III, Criseyde has been tricked by Pandarus to go to the bedside of Troilus, where he has been feigning love-sickness, to proclaim her love to him as a remedy. Much in the same ways as

Gawain lies somewhat unheroically in bed while the castle's lord hunts, subjected there to the entreaties of the lady, Troilus listens to Criseyde with some shame,

> But whan his shame gan somwhat to passe,
> His resons, as I may my rymes holde,
> I yow wol telle, as techen bokes olde. (*Troilus and Crisseyde* III.89-91)

> But when his shame began to pass a little,
> His way of thinking, as I preserve then in my rhymes,
> I will tell you, as old books recount them.

This not-so-randomly selected example will, in addition, serve to remind us that simultaneously as the Lord's men are stripping the dear, Gawain is being metaphorically flayed at his bedside back in the castle. In Stanza 49 (lines 1208ff), concurrent with stanza 53 in the temporal fold, the lady begins and ends her pursuit by surprising the late-sleeping knight in his bed. Her playful greeting emphasizes the likeness of the two simultaneous hunts:

> 'ȝe are a sleper vnslyȝe, þat mon may slyde hider;
> Now are ȝe tan as-tyt! Bot true vus may schape,
> I schal bynde yow in your bedde, þat be ȝe trayst.' (1209-1211)

> 'You are am unwary sleeper if someone can sneak in here;
> Now you are caught at once! Unless we can make a truce,
> I will keep you in your bed, be sure of that.'

The *sly* language of her gambit glances ever so slightly toward the pair's final interview, in which the lady offers her girdle, superior to any other "slyȝt vpon erþe" (1854), and after which

Gawain decides, much to his later chagrin, that "myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sleȝt were noble," "if he were to slip away without being killed, it would be a noble sleight" (1858). But the prize of her catch ("þe pleasaunce of your prys," 1247) is not explicitly love, but speech and language, which she craves of Gawain in several passages: "I schal...karp wyth my knyȝt þat I kaȝt haue, "I will speak with my that knight I have caught" (1224-1225); I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez | with tale," "I will spend my time well, while it lasts, with speech" (1235-1236); "to daly with derely your daynté wordez," "to play/make courtly love pleasantly with your courteous words" (1253). Though Gawain is the quarry in place of the deer in the wood, speech is the prize of the Lady's hunt, as the meat and edible organs of the dear are the prize of the lord's hunt.

Nor is it only speech that the Lady craves, but exactly the kind of courtly text that we are reading. Nothing so much as the bob-and-wheel stanzas seems to be referred to when the lady compares Gawain's reserve to other men's kiss-earning strategy of speaking "sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende" (1301), a line that seems to contaminate double-alliteration with a quasi-internal triple-rhyme in "sum...summe...sum," perhaps reflecting the three A-rhymes of the bob-and-wheel stanza. The invocation of poetic speech becomes even more explicit in the second day of the hunts, when the lady asks Gawain to tell of his character and adventures, explaining that,

> ...of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed
> Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;
> For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe knyȝtez,
> Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkez,
> How ledes for her lele luf hor lyuez han auntered,

> "of all chivalrous things to choose from, the most praised
> is the loyal practice of love, the lore/literature of arms;
> for in telling of the labors of these true knights,
> Hit is the authoritative token and text of their works,
> How they have risked their lives for their loyal love." (1512-1516)

The highly textual language of this passage convokes the network of passage, which, as we have seen, relate objects and elements *in* the poem to elements *of* the poem. The twice repeated *lel*/*lele* here responds, of course, to the prosody of the text in the language of the poet himself. But here too is an echo of the *trwe tytel* of the axe at the end of fitt I, where it has been enshrined as a symbolical *lettrure of armes* representing the action of fitt I; as well as a foreshadowing of the repurposing of the girdle as a *token,* or representation, of the completed adventure. Without speaking too facetiously, we may say that what the lady exacts from Sir Gawain is precisely *Sir Gawain*: as she enables the invention of the poem by participating in its content, she invokes its presence as a completed text, as though foreseeing from its middle, the outcome of its end. It is probably only coincidence, however, that the line so representative of the poetic text falls at 1515, numerical cousin to the self-styled total, 2525.

To summarize and simplify, "rhymes" and "adventures" are as much objects of the lady's hunt as *avanters* and *rymez* are of the lord's. Subtending both ambivalent sub-adventures is a discourse about the composition (and decomposition) of a poetical knot-work, whereby the text encircles itself within itself. And perhaps not unintentionally, the vanishing point of this complicated self-reflection is situated at the narratologically knotty midpoint of the poem, the

most critical structural division which is, however, forbidden from enunciating a separation, but is buried in narrative and formal folds.

It is then both antithetical and yet concordant with the poet's strategy of formal compromise that, while the field dressing of the deer consists of an ambiguous vocabulary that might apply equally as well to procedures of formal analysis of the text into its discrete elements as to the dissection of an animal into the components of its anatomy, all the while the temporal currents of the narrative are allowed to latch and fold together into a single woven fabric, as though stitching back together the ends of the deer's severed hide and ligatures. And yet the poet's stranding-technique, shifting as it does back and forth between the scenes of the two hunts, could be seen as an act of violent separation. What connects these two scenes, however, is ultimately the plausibility that the quarry and stakes of both hunts are reciprocal (as the terms of the game state) and perhaps even identical (as the Green Knight admits later on). That is to say, the object of both hunts is to test Gawain's virtue. And furthermore, Gawain's speech, body, and equipment embody the poem's progressively more complicated structure, and the resulting interference of its senses of endings, which are equally undergoing trial.

The End of the Poem

That there are several senses of ending at work in *Sir Gawain*—some far less conclusive than others, some simultaneous and in many ways synonymous with beginnings—is a fact on which the poem continuously insists. The poem's continuousness is affirmed not only at the moment that its end is folded to the beginning by the prominent acoustic echo of the last line in the first, but also wherever such a fold is not fortuitous and creates, in "layering" the text,

complex meaning-clusters or indices linking one locus in the poem to another. The continuity of end and beginning alone would present a challenge to what Giorgio Agamben has announced as the crisis at the end of the poem. "If poetry lives in the unsatisfied tension between the semiotic and semantic series alone," he asks, "what happens at the moment of the end, when the opposition of the two series is no longer possible?" (*The End of the Poem* 114). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* as well as *Pearl* and any poem that places a pronounced sense of refrain in the poems two spatial limits, these limits become assimilated and mark moments more of folding, as I have said, than ending. For what constitutes a "moment" in poetry but the reaction of the time-sensitive mind of the reader to the temporal constant of the poetic text before it? At the "moment" of the "end" of *Sir Gawain,* the reader presides over two nearly identical lines of text: an end and a beginning—or rather the promise and fulfillment of a long-distance rhyme whose function becomes pivotal in the polarized poetic space of the poem. The reader's knowing pause at line 2525 is a moment of remembrance, where re-beginning is not only possible but almost compulsory. Only by continuing through the 5-line bob-and-wheel extension—the invocation of the super-poetic "messianic event" of Christ—does the reader meet an ending of the sort that faces Agamben's crisis, and the text's answer is to meet this crisis directly with the hyper-metric, extra-poetical *Amen* that refers the conclusion of the poet's work, in a simple, pious prose utterance, to a higher power.

But assuming the reader takes the opportunity offered by the echo of line 2525, to allow the end to become a re-beginning, he will find again that the crisis of endings has been internalized, brought into the middle of the poem and away from the knotted ends. The poem's continuity is thus not itself conclusive or determinative of form; rather, the sense of endlessness itself—symbolized by the endless knot—travels along one of several braided currents where it

interacts with the other senses of ending I have tried to develop here. While for Agamben, "[e]verything is complicated by the fact that in the poem there are not, strictly speaking, two series or lines in parallel flight" but "one line that is simultaneously traversed by the semantic current and the semiotic current," in my view *Sir Gawain* internalizes even this parallelism into its formal contrapuntal pulse. That is to say, the single linear flight that Agamben would restrict to the "semiotic current," *Sir Gawain* dilates and extends into a surface that is traversed by the crossing paths of its several senses of ending, much as the voice, in Chaucer's *House of Fame,* is a medium of a myriad fluctuations, and much as *Pearl*'s texture is run through with two visions regarding each other as they approach but never reach integration. In *Sir Gawain,* the oscillation of alliterative line and rhyming bob-and wheel punctuates one such series of intervals; the manuscript divisions of fitts and sub-sections marks another; the long-distance rhyming folds mark still another. In their complex braid, the crossings and interferences of these currents fly not parallel to the semantic current, but rather they intersect, fuse with, and complicate it. Such endings as do occur within the text are never absolute, but, like *the* ending, are variously complicated: folded, knotted, cut, or acted upon by some combination of these senses.

Ultimately, the poetic form of *Sir Gawain* is distinguished not by its polarity but by its complexity. If, as Agamben writes, "poetic *mechane*" consists of the obstinate maintenance of "the sharp interval" between the two currents he distinguishes, wherein lies the poetic *mechane* of a text whose form seems to produce such intervals on its own? In such a text as *Sir Gawain,* and likewise also *Pearl* and Chaucer's *House of Fame*—all texts which, in their various ways, construe poetic form in self-conscious and self-complicating ways—the crisis of poetry is pulled in from the edges, and takes its place in the only determinative moment that remains when beginnings and endings are no longer critically meaningful or distinguishable: in the meaning

event of the middle of the poem. I would suggest that this moment—as an ending that is only another beginning—is dramatized in the fall of the second axe, where Gawain expects to meet *the* end of the poem. Barbara Smith, in her seminal study *Poetic Closure* defines closure as that which "allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing" (34,36). In the *chance* of the Green Chapel Gawain stands in the place of this reader, anticipating the end, and disappointed with the arrival of only another in a series of ends determinative of nothing but a prolonged expectation of more poetry proliferated by the interaction of the poem's three senses of ending. In Smith's sense of the word, the closure of *Sir Gawain* remains an ongoing process, still incomplete even at *the* end of the poem, which, by the time it comes, has only been confirmed in its *in*distinctness from the beginning, which precisely here loses its coherence as such. The numerous folding ends of the poem reverberate and return us to other and still other, ever more distant ends within the text, and ultimately we are left, in the middle, with the uncertainty of poor, confused Gawain in his world of insecure meaning closed loosely in insecure forms. The end of Gawain's quest is only and nothing less than the perpetual middle of the poem; it is in this interval that we find *mechane* of the poem's formal art.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, direct quotations from the text come from J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, eds. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* 2nd Edition, Norman Davis, ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967; 1972.

[2] This is not to diminish the importance of these studies in the formation of my ideas are. See especially Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*" and Hieatt, but also Ackerman, Green, Lass, Silverstein, Kaske, Farrell, and more recently Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the* Gawain-*poems* 178-184 and 198-208. More recent studies have compared the pentangle in the girdle in a feminist context: see Heng, Batt, and Ashton. (Shoaf 1984)

[3] Studies of the poem's formal design have been most useful to me in forming my formal reading have been Silverstein; Howard, "Structure and Symmetry;" Renoir; Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study*; Condren; Davenport; Duggan.

[4] On the relationship of cyclical time in the poem to medieval representation of recursive history in the computation of the liturgical calendar, see Staley Johnson 52-69.

[5] This represents an advancement from J.A. Burrow's earlier statement that "Unlike the pentangle, the belt is not, so far as the poem is concerned, a 'natural' symbol. It does not, that is, have any particular symbolic value on the strength simply of its intrinsic natural properties. So while the pentangle is necessarily a token of 'trawþe' and could not possible, in the poet's view, be otherwise, the belt is a token of untruth only because it happened to play the part it did in Gawain's adventure" (*A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 158). Hieatt would oppose Burrow and Hanna's view, arguing that the poem does in fact suggest that the *lace* has natural

symbolic significance. More recently, Helmut Nickel has unconvincingly tried to excuse the poem as an aetion for a supposed "order of the green knight."

[6] On the commercial aspects of the poem's gift-exchange scenarios, see also Shoaf *passim*.

[7] For a discussion of the provenance of the beheading game see Benson 11-37.

[8] W.A.Davenport comments that these joints reflect the poet's intention "for a feeling of fluid continuity" (138). For the definitive study of the usage and meaning of the bob-and-wheels, see Chickering.

[9] For extensive considerations of these metrics and rhyme schemes, see Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study*.

[10] Tolkien and Gordon, 82.

[11] Lynn Staley Johnson suggests the axe, and the stroke for a stroke game it introduces, recalls Old Testament judicial logic, comparing also a New Testament passage, Matthew 3:10: "For now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that doth not yield good fruit, shall be cut down, and cast into the fire" (170).

[12] *Middle English Dictionary Online*, *s.v.* "staf," accessed November 5, 2013, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/

[13] For discussion and debate over the value of these illustrated capitals and the legitimacy of the fourfold-divison of the poem, see Lyttleton Hill, Bloomfield, Howard, "Structure and Symmetry," and Tuttleton.

[14] For discussion of the lace and the implications of the possibility that the same lace appears on both axes, see Malarkey and Toelken; Andrew and Waldron 288 note to 2225f.

[15] The relationship of this lace and the lace on the Green Knight's is suspected, but too quickly dispensed with by Malarkey and Toelken.

[16] Donald R. Howard notes that, in its defensive function, the girdle becomes a substituted for the shield, not necessarily "its painted allegory," concluding that "the symbolism of shield and girdle is symbolism of a different kind from that of the pentangle," in that the pentangle enters the poem *as a symbol*, while the girdle and shield are "real objects" within the narrative ("Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*" 426). I prefer to see these objects on the level surface of the text; a reader might observe this distinction, but he might just as easily ignore it. Still, Kevin Marti's more recent study stresses the importance of such "real objects" as clothing in the framing of space in the Gawain poet (131-156).

[17] For a discussion of the relationship between the hunting scenes and the battle of words in the castle in terms of traditional material of the Romance genre, see esp. Burnley 1-9.

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