



## The Idea of the Green Knight

Lawrence Besserman

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## The Idea of the Green Knight

BY LAWRENCE BESSERMAN

Was Caypor a good man who loved evil or a bad man who loved good? And how could such unreconcilable elements exist side by side and in harmony in the same heart? For one thing was clear, Caypor was disturbed by no gnawing conscience; he did his mean and despicable work with gusto.

—W. Somerset Maugham,  
*Ashenden, Or: The British Agent*

### I

A very large green man with long green hair and a long green beard, the Green Knight appears unbidden one New Year's day before Arthur and his courtiers at Camelot, riding on a very large green horse and holding a huge axe in one hand and a holly bob in the other. He tauntingly proposes an exchange of axe blows "game," survives decapitation, then rides off with his head in his hand. As even this brief and sporadic summary of his appearance and actions in the first fitt of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suggests, it is no overstatement to say that the Green Knight "positively bristles, bewilderingly, with suggestions and significances" or that he is "the most difficult character" in what everyone agrees is the best but also the most difficult of medieval English romances.<sup>1</sup>

Yet in spite (or in some measure because?) of how difficult it is to comprehend the "suggestions and significances" of this remarkable figure—whether at Camelot, at Hautdesert (where he appears in the shape of Lord Bertilak), or at the Green Chapel—most readers tend to agree with C. S. Lewis, who declared the Green Knight to be "as vivid and concrete as any image in literature" and proceeded to describe him, in his own inimitable way, as

a living *coincidentia oppositorum*; half giant, yet wholly a "lovely knight"; as full of demoniac energy as old Karamazov,

yet, in his own house, as jolly as a Dickensian Christmas host; now exhibiting a ferocity so gleeful that it is almost genial, and now a geniality so outrageous that it borders on the ferocious; half boy or buffoon in his shouts and laughter and jumpings; yet at the end judging Gawain with the tranquil superiority of an angelic being.<sup>2</sup>

Lewis's high-spirited and highly allusive words were obviously intended to evoke the Green Knight's paradoxical qualities rather than to delineate and interpret them definitively; nevertheless, they also comprise a cogent capsule interpretation of the nature and function of the character that is in itself sufficient, I think, to refute the numerous reductive and mutually exclusive interpretations of the Green Knight that scholars have occasionally proposed—that he is a dying and rising vegetation god, an archetypal Death figure, the Devil in disguise, or an allegorical representation of the Word of God or Christ.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in their excellent book-length studies of *Sir Gawain*, Larry Benson and J. A. Burrow (with differing emphases but a good deal of coincidence in their conclusions) have elucidated in minute and convincing detail the contrasting components of the Green Knight's character to which Lewis alluded in passing.

According to Benson, the Green Knight is best understood as a blend of two traditional figures in romance and other medieval narratives, "the literary green man" and "the literary wild man."<sup>4</sup> From the former come the handsome or merry aspects of the figure, signifying youth, natural vitality, and love; and from the latter come his grotesque aspects, signifying hostility to knight-hood and suggesting his connection with the demonic and with death. His green skin, "which occurs at the exact center [of his description, in line 149], allows the poet to unite the two antithetical figures in a single portrait. It carries the green of the costume into the green of the hair and the beard, and it thus transfers some of the wild man's frightening grotesquerie to the green man at the same time as it brings some of the green man's pleasant implications to the wild man" (92–93). When the Green Knight takes the shape of Lord Bertilak he continues to act with "churlish vigor" (94) and some physical features of the underlying wild man do show through his knightly exterior, but he is on the whole "generous and hospitable" (87–95). In the end the Green Knight proves to be entirely benevolent, a "representative of unromantic vitality," "indulgent forgiveness," and "laughing realism," the nec-

essary complement to Gawain's more austere and uncompromising world view (247–48).

Burrow, too, takes the Green Knight to be a fusion of contradictory elements, a cross between what he calls "the monstrous supernatural and the merry human" (13). While green skin suggests the devil, the dead, or fairies, the green and gold of the figure's attire represent gaiety, courtesy, and youth; and thus "the nature of the Green Knight is such . . . that he can be in harmony as well as out of harmony with the court on which he intrudes" (16). Similarly, Burrows asserts, the beheading *gomen* that the Green Knight initiates at Arthur's court is both a contribution to the Christmas festivities and a serious test of *traupe*—one of several examples of "the complicated game-earnest ambivalence of the Green Knight in the first fitt" (24). On the "earnest" side of the Green Knight's ambivalence are the resonances in his speech of "the traditional figure of Death in the moral allegories" (27), and his assumption at the Green Chapel of the role of an exemplary judge, who finds that Gawain's behavior demonstrates "grete traupe" (l. 2470) and not, as Gawain thinks, "þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed" (l. 2435) (Burrow, 136–37). In the latter scene the Green Knight has in fact become "like the Minos of Dante's *Inferno*. . . a 'type' or poetic surrogate of the all-seeing God of Judgment" (141). Applying Northrop Frye's taxonomy of modes, Burrow concludes that "Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight in the first fitt can be seen both as the encounter of the hero of romance with his magic adversary (the primary romantic mode) and as the encounter of an Everyman with Death the Summoner (the low mimetic, Christian mode)" (184–85). Although Gawain's "self-discovery and self-acceptance" (186) are achieved in an encounter at the Green Chapel that strongly evokes the Christian "ritual of Penance" and the Christian "myth of Judgment," the mysterious figure who mediates his self-discovery and self-acceptance "is not literally a Confessor any more than he is literally a Judge; and the poem invites us to see the peculiarly Christian cycle of righteousness, sin, penance and absolution in a generously wide human context. . . . Dogmas do not matter here: Bercilak can be God, priest, man and superego, all at once and without inconsistency" (186).

I have summarized Benson's and Burrow's interpretations of the Green Knight in some detail because to my mind they are the fullest, subtlest, and most convincing of the many readings avail-

able. Rarely in literary scholarship do “independent investigators” report “results” that coincide so closely. Through close textual analysis and judicious consideration of sources and analogues these two scholars have anatomized the Green Knight and “proved” his ambiguity or ambivalence (more on these terms later, however). Their consensual view of the Green Knight will by my point of departure in the present essay; but as I hope to show, both Benson and Burrow elide aspects of their respectively complex definitions of the Green Knight’s character when they work through to a unified reading of the poem as a whole.

My primary aim in this paper is to elucidate certain features of the Green Knight’s nature and function that emerge fully in the fourth fitt of *Sir Gawain* and to relate them to an underlying formal and thematic principle at work elsewhere in the poem. I hope to put forward and develop an “idea” of the Green Knight as we come to know him at the Green Chapel, to move inward from that idea and its medieval cultural implications to the larger mystery at the center of the poem, and then out again to some of the poem’s other characters and motifs.<sup>5</sup> I choose the Green Knight as my point of entry into *Sir Gawain* advisedly, for I fully agree with A. C. Spearing’s caveat: “there are dangers in beginning one’s study of *Sir Gawain* by asking ‘Who is the Green Knight?’ and expecting an answer to that question will somehow ‘solve’ the poem.”<sup>6</sup> I shall be asking, instead, what poetic function does the enigmatic Green Knight serve? And what formal or thematic principles of the work and its intellectual milieu can explain why he looks and acts the way he does?

## II

Gawain’s reunion with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, which constitutes the main action of the fourth fitt, is preceded by several significant repetitions with variations. The opening passage (ll. 1998–2005) recalls the famous description of the change of seasons from “wynter” through “lentoun,” “somer,” “heruest,” and back to “wynter” near the beginning of the second fitt (ll. 500–33). But here, as the last day of the hero’s one-year respite runs out, the poet narrows his focus to winter, evoking its bitter cold, snow, and wind with an ominously violent metaphorical and onomatopoeic intensity.<sup>7</sup> The crowing of the cock that Gawain hears while lying in bed as the dawning of the New Year ap-

proaches (l. 2108), a day after he has accepted the green girdle offered by the lady of the castle and concealed it from her husband, echoes the three cock-crows on the day of the second hunt and temptation in the third fitt, before his “treachery” (l. 1412), and thus reiterates an implicit biblical allusion to the crowing of the cock at Peter’s betrayal of Christ (Matt. 26:34).<sup>8</sup> The arming and departure of the hero from Hautdesert (ll. 2009–76) parallels the similar scene of Gawain’s arming and departure from Camelot (ll. 566–671)—but now, as the poet tells us, Gawain places his trust in the green girdle (ll. 2037–41).<sup>9</sup>

As our apprehension for Gawain’s safety increases, even while our sense of his true nature and quality is becoming less certain, the poet introduces a plot-motif that heightens our puzzlement about the true nature and quality of the Green Knight, even as it delays what we expect will be his imminent reappearance. The Guide who brings Gawain to the Green Chapel swears to him that if he flees he will never expose him (ll. 2118–25), thus tempting him, as Lady Bertilak did, “to break one agreement by entering into another.”<sup>10</sup> To impel Gawain to turn and run the Guide embroiders upon the terrors of the figure that Gawain and the reader encountered in the first fitt: he warns Gawain that the Green Knight is bigger than any four of Arthur’s knights (ll. 2102–03); that he loves to fight with and kill all kinds of people (ll. 2104–10); and that he has long inhabited the Green Chapel, causing much strife for all who venture there (ll. 2114–15). As Burrow points out, the latter claim would make the Green Knight “an ancient and well-known local hazard,” while the list of his alleged victims (“churl,” “chaplain,” “monk,” “mass-priest,” or any man “proud in arms”), because it covers the three estates of medieval society, seems to recall the Green Knight/Death analogy of the first fitt (120). Yet we know at once that the Guide is exaggerating about the Green Knight’s size, for the poet has told us previously that the Green Knight is *not* a giant but “the biggest of men” (l. 141), “taller by a head and more” (l. 333) than any of Arthur’s knights. And the Guide’s two other claims are later also proved spurious, for as we shall see the Green Knight himself explains that he is not “an ancient and well-known local hazard” nor an emissary of Death “summoning” Gawain but a nonce-wonder contrived by Morgan le Fay. In spite of the dire false information he has been fed, the hero rejects the Guide’s offer and rides on, to keep his tryst and stand the Green Knight’s return blow.

Soon after the Guide's abrupt departure, Gawain comes upon a grassy mound beside a stream. This, as he surmises, is "þe grene chapel" (l. 2186), though it seems not at all like a proper Christian chapel, but "an ugly oratory . . . a chapel of mischance . . . the most accursed church" (ll. 2190, 2195–96); a place, say Gawain, suitable for "the Devil himself to recite matins" (l. 2188) or for "the man in green to perform his devilish devotions" (ll. 2191–92). Gawain concludes (ll. 2193–94), as did the courtiers at Camelot (ll. 149, 681), that the Green Knight is the Devil or a diabolical agent out to destroy him.<sup>11</sup>

Gawain's major premise here (that the Green Knight is diabolical) is very soon to be borne out by the Green Knight himself, who reveals that his supernatural form is due to the black magic arts of Morgan le Fay; but Gawain's minor premise (that the Green Knight is bent on his destruction) is proved false when his antagonist refrains from chopping off his head and declares an entirely different set of motives for his actions. This paradoxical duality in nature and function of the Green Knight emerges fully in his two long "confessions" at the Green Chapel (ll. 2338–68, 2390–2406; 2444–70), matched in their irreconcilability by Gawain's initial self-denigrating confession (ll. 2369–89) and subsequent self-exculpatory antifeminist tirade (ll. 2414–28).<sup>12</sup>

In his first speech the Green Knight confesses that he has known about the girdle all along, since he himself sent his wife to test Gawain by wooing him, and that the two feints and single tap with his axe corresponded to Gawain's two faithful actions and single failure in the exchange-of-winnings agreement (ll. 2345–61). Here the Green Knight presents himself as an independent and self-motivating actor, master of his wife, judge, and sole arbiter of Gawain's destiny; and he proceeds to render his lenient verdict in the language of the Bible and Christian penitential theology (ll. 2362–68, 2390–94), then generously awards Gawain the green girdle as a memento (ll. 2395–99), and in conclusion (or so it would seem) invites Gawain back for more holiday feasting and a reconciliation with the lady of the castle (ll. 2400–06).<sup>13</sup>

But in his second speech the Green Knight further confesses that his name is really Bertilak de Hautdesert (ll. 2445);<sup>14</sup> that he is a shape-shifting familiar of the diabolical Morgan le Fay, "þe auncian lady" (l. 2463) at Hautdesert; and that it was she who sent him to Camelot in the form of the Green Knight to test the pride of the

Round Table, rob Arthur's courtiers of their wits, and frighten Guenevere to death. Here the Green Knight no longer claims to be a free agent; instead, he reveals that he and his beautiful wife are subordinate members of an unholy trinity ruled over by "Morgan the goddess" (l. 2452), Arthur's half-sister and Gawain's aunt, the one true begetter of the major action in the plot.<sup>15</sup> (The symmetry between the Green Knight and Gawain is thus revealed to be twofold: as Gawain is Arthur's emissary so the Green Knight is Morgan's; as Gawain was "bigyled" by Lady Bertilak, so the Green Knight has been enchanted into subservience by Morgan—a point to which I shall return.) Once again the Green Knight ends with an invitation to Gawain for more feasting and a reunion with the courtiers of Hautdesert (ll. 2467–70); but whereas in the earlier speech it was Lady Bertilak whom he singled out among those he wanted Gawain to see again (ll. 2404–06), in the present one it is Morgan le Fay whom he highlights (l. 2467).

Both of his invitations elicit Gawain's prompt and comically emphatic demurral (ll. 2406, 2471). Besides being psychologically implausible, Gawain's return to Hautdesert would simply not "group together" with the rest of the poet's matter. Gawain instead must be getting back to Camelot for the conventionally conclusive, crucial romance scene of the hero's reception and recounting of his adventure at his home court—the scene that closes the outer ring of the poem's narrative structure: Camelot–Hautdesert–Green Chapel–Camelot.<sup>16</sup> The irrelevance of the Green Knight's reiterated invitation nevertheless has important thematic significance. Having exposed himself to be the familiar of Morgan le Fay, the Green Knight has already been displaced as the primary mover in the testing and humbling of Gawain. Because he now *tries and fails* to shape the plot of the narrative by adding an anticlimactic lap to Gawain's quest and creating an otiose Hautdesert–Green Chapel–Hautdesert symmetry, both his potency as Gawain's antagonist and his role as the moving force in the narrative are even further diminished.

In his final encounter with Gawain the Green Knight is not killed, disenchanted, or converted and enrolled in the Round Table as he might have been if *Sir Gawain* were a more conventional medieval romance.<sup>17</sup> Instead, he and Gawain embrace, kiss, and commend one another to "the prince of paradise" (ll. 2472–73); he then rides off "whiderwarde-so-euer he wolde" (l. 2478), still a "grene gome" (l. 2239) and a knight in "enker-grene"



(l. 2477), apparently still subject to Morgan le Fay, and with the tensions in his nature between friend and foe of Gawain and the Round Table still not fully resolved. His identity remains a puzzle. Yet if the pieces of that puzzling identity are incompatible, their contours are now more clearly seen.

Most obviously, we now know the Green Knight's "right name" (l. 2443) and, as Burrow observes, "proper names, in romance and other medieval writing, are instruments of knowledge and power" (59). But exactly what knowledge have we gained? Bercilak, Bertilak, or Bernlak, as he has been called by various scholars, may derive his name from Celtic *bachlach* "churl" or *bresalach* "contentious," or from Old French *Bertolais*, rendered in the Middle English prose *Merlin* as "Bertelak."<sup>18</sup> The place-name element *Hautdesert* probably means "High Wasteland" but might also mean "High Hermitage" (Old French *haut* + Celtic *disert*).<sup>19</sup> It might even be an adaptation of the name *de la Desert* or a deformation of the term *desirete*, either of which the *Gawain*-poet could have picked up, along with the name *Bertolais*, from the Old French Vulgate cycle of Arthurian romances, in which Arthur's enemy Bertolais, twice described as *desirete* ("disinherited"), plays a role remotely similar to Bertilak's in *Sir Gawain*, and in which Claudas de la Desert appears as yet another of the numerous foes of the knights of Camelot.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the name Bertilak de Hautdesert evoked these or similar traditional, literary anti-Round Table associations for the poet's original audience. Perhaps, together with the cognomen "the Knight of the Green Chapel," it immediately brought to mind topical matters now for the most part irretrievable.<sup>21</sup> At all events a few of the poet's listeners would have remarked, surely, how appropriate it is that the *Bert*-element of the bright-green Green Knight's name means "bright" (as in *Bertram*, *Bertrand*, etc.); and that the *-lak* element, which may mean "lake," could also mean "play, sport, fun, glee" (and in the plural form, "games, tricks, goings on"), as well as "fault" or "disfigurement."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps, too, "High Wasteland" seemed to these same listeners a funny, ironically ill-suited name for Bertilak's castle, given that the religious observances, festive splendor, and lavish hospitality there surpass even what Camelot can offer.<sup>23</sup> We do not know. To be sure, the mere fact that the Green Knight has an "everyday" name gives him a social identity that scales him down to human (or at least chivalric-romantic) proportions; yet the name itself affords us no definitive key to his

paradoxical nature.<sup>24</sup> When he takes his leave of Gawain he is still in full costume, and we are left largely in the dark.

Earlier I pointed out how the Green Knight's disclosure of his subservience to and enchantment by Morgan le Fay unites him with Gawain, the emissary of Arthur and dupe of the Lady of Hautdesert. By revealing his right name the Green Knight takes another step toward equality with Gawain and the courtly society he represents. Furthermore, the fact that his name has uncertain and even contradictory associations brings him closer to Gawain in yet another sense. Repeatedly in the third and fourth fits the name "Gawain" is subjected to scrutiny and sceptical questioning. Does it identify a master of courtesy and courtly love, as Lady Bertilak and the courtiers of Hautdesert presume it should (ll. 916–26, 1226, 1293, 1481)? Or an unflinching, trustworthy, chivalrous knight, as the Green Knight presumes it should (ll. 2270–71, 2364–65)? Gawain does not fully live up to either of these definitions of "Gawain."<sup>25</sup> In a far more radical but analogous fashion the Green Knight also fails to behave in a way that would allow us to extrapolate a single identity from his words and actions as *either* the Knight of the Green Chapel *or* Bertilak de Hautdesert. From start to finish he is *both* godlike *and* demonic. At Camelot, where he appears to be both "lovely" (l. 433) and "ugly" (l. 441), he functions as a type of the slain and risen Christ, expunger of aristocratic pride *and also* as a demonic, beheaded-but-still-living wild man, driven by a witch's lust for mortal revenge.<sup>26</sup> At Hautdesert and the Green Chapel he acts as the familiar of Morgan le Fay, trying Gawain sorely with sexual temptations, the exchange-of-winnings game, and fainted blows, *and also* as a pious host and New Testament-quoting confessor who purges Gawain and praises him.<sup>27</sup>

Yet it is not entirely accurate to say that the Green Knight is both benevolent and malevolent or godlike and demonic. If we take the irrational sum of his antithetical parts he will appear so, but in the poem—his proper habitation and the only place where his names have their full significance—he is never equally *both/and*, nor is he for more than a moment exclusively one or the other. Unlike the lion in traditional exegetical symbolism, whose singular qualities—lordship, vigilance, ferocity, hunting prowess—enable him to stand *de bono* for Christ the King and *de malo* for the rapacious Devil, the Green Knight accomodates a cluster of antithetical attributes—ferocity and restraint, courtesy and rude-

ness, mastery and subservience, courtly artifice and natural wildness—that are in constant dynamic play.<sup>28</sup>

These unresolvable antitheses of his nature and function in *Sir Gawain* are thus very much like the elements in a double image. Though he is more complex and noteworthy than the cartoon of a duck/rabbit that E. H. Gombrich is discussing in the following quotation (and manifests in copiousness of detail and intricacy of design an artistic whole more akin to the double-image landscapes of Archimbaldo or the double-image drawings of Escher), the Green Knight can nevertheless be read in a similar manner: “we can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also ‘remember’ the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time.”<sup>29</sup> The double-image phenomenon is unique to visual aesthetic experience, but it has its close analogues in literature. Ambivalence, if it be taken to mean the presence in a character, symbol, or plot-motif of two conflicting elements both of which are intrinsic to the totality they constitute, is very similar indeed; but the normal psychological reference of the term is only partially, if at all, appropriate to the figure of the Green Knight.<sup>30</sup> Literary ambiguity—that is, a case of either/or but not both/and—is also similar; but the dichotomization that pertains in true cases of literary ambiguity is hardly applicable to the dynamic fluidity of the Green Knight’s “non-exclusive disjunctive” qualities.<sup>31</sup> Critics have regularly used the terms “ambiguity” and “ambivalence” when interpreting *Sir Gawain*. As I hope to show, however, applying the idea of the double image to the duality of the Green Knight and to other dualities in the poem, and relating that idea to relevant fourteenth-century conceptual parallels, will bring us a good deal closer to the thought world of the *Gawain*-poet and do more to elucidate his art. For medieval Christian thought offers at least three striking conceptual parallels to the modern aesthetic phenomenon of the double image. All three have in common what we may call the principle of Christian paradox. The first, to which I have already referred, is symbolization *de bono* and *de malo*. The second (which has recently been the subject of a book-length study of *Sir Gawain*) is the notion of *felix culpa* or “the fortunate fall,” through which the histories of Adam, Aeneas, Troy, Christ, Gawain, and Camelot may be linked because each hero undergoes a trial and suffers a defeat that is providentially vindicated as a kind

of victory.<sup>32</sup> Third, and offering the sharpest conceptual analogue to the double-image duality of the Green Knight, is the dogma of the hypostatic union.

### III

Presumably neither the *Gawain*-poet nor his aristocratic audience were conversant with the fine points of theological thinking from the fourth to fourteenth century on the dogma of the hypostatic union; there is nothing in *Sir Gawain* to suggest that they were. Yet we can safely assume that the essential points of the doctrine were vividly present to them from the Athanasian Creed, recited daily (according to the Sarum Use) at prime:

For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man. God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the substance of His mother, born into the world. Perfect God and Perfect Man, of a reasonable Soul and human Flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who, although He be God and Man, yet He is not two, but One Christ. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into Flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by Unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one Man, so God and Man is one Christ.<sup>33</sup>

This doctrinally orthodox view of two distinct natures united in the person of Christ is clearly implicit in the *Gawain*-poet's references to him, "Dryȝtyn for oure destyne to deȝe watz borne" (l. 996), "þe prynce of paradise" (l. 2473), and "He þat bere þe croun of þorne" (l. 2529). To be sure, these are simple biblical and liturgical formulas for naming Christ; to ascribe to them self-conscious theological weight would be a mistake. Yet there *are* theological motives in *Sir Gawain* whose presence is more than incidental; and in *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience* (assuming, of course, that they too are his work) the *Gawain*-poet's theological concerns and the learning, sophistication, and skill he exercises as he weaves these concerns into the fabric of deeply humane and moving verse narratives are established critical facts.<sup>34</sup>

In *Sir Gawain* the idea of distinct human and divine natures hypostatically united in the single person of Christ would have served the poet and his audience as an analogue of the united but

irreconcilable benevolent and malevolent natures that subsist in the Green Knight—that *coincidentia oppositorum* so memorably evoked in C. S. Lewis's anachronistic allusions to Dickens and Dostoevski. Pressing this analogy between Christ and the Green Knight any further would soon lead us far astray. The Green Knight is *not* a figurative representative of Christ. But the *idea* of Christ's divine/human nature provides a medieval conceptual framework that supports the poet's serious/comic account of the Green Knight's supernatural/human qualities and actions. On this view, the Green Knight's parodic connection to Christ by way of the dogma of the hypostatic union is just one of many religious analogies (rather than allegorical signifieds) that constitute the dramatically ironic underplot of the poem.<sup>35</sup>

For example, at Camelot on New Year's day, the Feast of the Circumcision, Arthur waits for a marvel or marvelous story. He and his courtiers ironically appear to be overlooking the miraculous events of the season and are caught up in the splendor of festivities that seem only faintly related to the religious motive that should inspire them—when the Green Knight suddenly appears, as if to play out an inversion of the Easter phase of Jesus's ministry, a violent death and resurrection that threatens to bring death without hope of redemption or resurrection to Gawain.<sup>36</sup> The Green Knight's intrusion upon the court is sufficiently motivated by the conventions of the poet's chosen genre—because Arthur waits for a marvel, and *Sir Gawain* is a romance, a marvel will occur. But the Green Knight's intrusion has a very strong Christian *post hoc* motivation as well: a lapse from piety into materialism and pride is followed at once by a supernatural rebuke, a deadly challenge and grotesque death and resurrection.<sup>37</sup> Later, when Gawain suddenly and unexpectedly comes upon the castle of the Green Knight/Bertilak, the event is similarly overdetermined: the romance genre allows for, even requires that, a knight wandering in the forest will “happen” upon the castle where a quest awaits him; yet the fact that Gawain has invoked Jesus and Mary for aid in finding lodgings so that he will be able to celebrate Christmas Mass, has prayed, lamented his sins, and crossed himself three times (ll. 753–63), when suddenly the castle appears, once again makes our sense of religious *post hoc* motivation very strong indeed. Gawain's pentangle, the beasts that Bertilak hunts, and the green girdle have even more sharply focussed ironic religious associations.<sup>38</sup> Although much less prominent features in the

landscape of the poem than the Green Knight himself, these too are secular/Christian double images that—in combination with straightforwardly Christian oaths, benedictions, and frequent references to Christ, Mary, various saints, Christmas and other feasts, etc.—give *Sir Gawain* its uniquely rich and subtly variegated religious texture.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV

In the superabundance of critical writing on *Sir Gawain* there is sharp disagreement over fundamental questions: is the poem primarily comic or serious in tone? religious or secular? pro- or anti-chivalric in spirit?<sup>40</sup> And even if there is a consensus of sorts on the pervasiveness of thematic and structural symmetries in its design, that consensus quickly breaks down into a bewilderingly plausible variety of counterpoised ingredients: grace and merit, celestial and terrestrial knighthood, nature and civilization, life and death, spring and winter, romance and realism, courtesy and villainy, realism and idealism, the ego and its “shadow.”<sup>41</sup>

Though all of these dualities are in some measure present in *Sir Gawain* (or can at least be logically abstracted from it), no single pair of terms is by itself sufficient to account for the paradoxical plenitude of the poem; nor are these or any other terms of duality synthesized or dramatically resolved in the course of its action. For critics err, I think, when they conceive of the poem as a narrative of conflicting dualities that ends with stasis or harmonic balance; and they err even more when they insist on adjudicating the victory of one term in any of the dualities over another. Even the subtlest of totalizing interpretations must belie the poem’s incessant and inconclusive movement. Thus, in order for Benson to demonstrate that *Sir Gawain* ends with “a characteristically Gothic acceptance of life both as it is and as it should be,” he must reduce the Green Knight to a representative of “laughing realism” playing opposite to Gawain’s “ceremonious idealism” (248). Similarly, to support his richly suggestive remarks about comic form and ritual gestures of reincorporation in the poem, Burrow must focus exclusively on the “God, priest, man and superego”-half of the Green Knight (186). In each case the Green Knight must be pushed out of focus (albeit in opposite directions) to facilitate the framing of an inclusive, harmonized view of the whole.<sup>42</sup>

Like the Green Knight, other double-image elements in the

poem resist any attempt to read them simultaneously. When one image comes clearly into focus the other vanishes. We may on occasion even look for the other image and not be able to find it, then suddenly (unless our critical predispositions have made us astigmatic) it comes into focus and we are unable to retrieve the first. And so on. The comic and serious in *Sir Gawain* alternate in precisely this way: the appearance and behavior of the Green Knight at Camelot are laughably wonderful, but on a second look frighteningly grotesque; the fabliau-like bedroom scenes at Hautdesert seem comical, but at a second glance we see that Gawain's life is at stake, not to mention his chastity and troth. The famous passage on the change of seasons (ll. 500–533) takes on additional significance when viewed in this light: it may well remind us of mutability and the threat of death that Gawain faces as he sets out from Camelot (as Silverstein has suggested), and may also indicate (as Green has proposed) “the passage of time from the First Coming to the Second, from man's undertaking the journey of life to the judgment which is its inevitable conclusion”; but most of all, it seems to me, it serves the *Gawain*-poet as a powerful metonym for the alternation of all the antitheses in his tale, including the “blunder” and “bliss” of Gawain's falling away from and striving back up toward the inherently contradictory, perfectionist goals of secular/Christian chivalric society.<sup>43</sup>

For Gawain, too, is a figure whom we read as a double image, embodying a dynamic interplay of shifting opposites, “glorious, and slightly ridiculous.”<sup>44</sup> He is the pentangle/girdle knight, the nephew of Arthur/the nephew of Morgan le Fay. And in the final scene at Camelot he can be read as unduly harsh with himself before Arthur and the court or as sad and chastened in the proper penitential way, just as Arthur and the knights of the Round Table can be seen as courteous and humane when they laugh at Gawain's self-denigration or as shallow and uncomprehending.<sup>45</sup> So too Morgan le Fay, who can be regarded as an irrelevant afterthought (the poet's fumbling attempt to close the circle of motivation for his marvelous narrative) or as the key to the work's moral import.<sup>46</sup> Most vivid and unforgettable of all the double images in *Sir Gawain*, the Green Knight remains to the end “a green man” and “a man in green” (ll. 2239, 2259); the devout and hospitable Lord of Hautdesert *and* the secret agent of diabolical Morgan le Fay; humane, forgiving, even Christlike in his behavior *but also* a fiend

whose evil intentions were foiled only by the hero's bravery abetted by a benevolent deity.

In the last stanza of the poem the Green Knight's parting gift to Gawain acquires a double-image significance: for the rest of his life Gawain will wear the green girdle as a reminder of his cowardice and covetousness, a "token of vntrawþe" (ll. 2508–10); but Arthur and his courtiers adopt the girdle as an emblem of honor, a sign of "þe renoun of þe Rounde Table . . . euermore after" (ll. 2513–20). The poem now draws to a close with references to Arthur, Brutus, and Troy mirroring the Troy, Brutus, Arthur references of the historical prologue with which it began.<sup>47</sup> But one last play of antitheses still remains. The concluding words of the poem are a prayer invoking the blessing of Christ "who wore the Crown of Thorns":

Now þat bere þe croun of þorne,  
He bryng vus to his blysse! AMEN.

(ll. 2529–30)

"Beginnings and endings," as the *Gawain*-poet has told us earlier, "are very seldom alike" (l. 499). With these final words the poet redirects our attention from the circular girdle-turned-sash (a double image of Gawain's "vntrawþe/renoun") to the circular Crown of Thorns (a double image of Christ's humiliation/triumph).<sup>48</sup> We are invited to step beyond secular British history, with its inexhaustible supply of tales of "bliss and blunder," and we are led into the domain of salvation history, where the ambivalences of Troy, Brutus, Arthur, Gawain, and the Green Knight all finally are resolved, in "His bliss."

*Hebrew University*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These are the verdicts on the Green Knight's "difficulty" of J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge, 1965), 4, and Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), 58, respectively; subsequent page references to these two highly influential studies are noted parenthetically in the text. Quotations from and line references to *Sir Gawain* in the present essay follow *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> "The Anthropological Approach," in *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Norman Davis and



C. L. Wrenn (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), 219–30; reprinted in *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame, Ind. and London: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 63.

<sup>3</sup> These are interpretations of the Green Knight put forward respectively by: John Speirs, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Scrutiny* 16 (1949): 274–300; A. H. Krappe, “Who Was the Green Knight?” *Speculum* 13 (1938): 206–15; Bernard S. Levy, “Gawain’s Spiritual Journey: *Imitatio Christi* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 6 (1965): 65–106; and Hans Schnyder, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: An Essay in Interpretation,” Cooper Monographs on English and American Literature, no. 6 (Bern: Francke, 1961).

<sup>4</sup> In what follows I am summarizing (and can hardly claim to have done full justice to) the argument copiously documented in Benson, 56–95 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> On the idea of an underlying “idea” of literary form in a medieval poem, see Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: Univ. of California Press, 1976), 1–20. Though I shall not be focussing on details of syntax and lexis, my approach is also very similar to that of Leo Spitzer, who has taught us to recognize that in any literary work there are details (of language, character, plot, or theme) that may be thought of as “points” on a “philological circle” (i.e., the sum of the work’s surface details). When properly understood these “points” lead us to the work’s “inward life-center,” then back again to other “points” on the work’s “circumference” (see Spitzer’s “Linguistics and Literary History,” in *Linguistics and Literary History* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1948], 1–40; esp. 10–20, 27–29).

<sup>6</sup> *The “Gawain”-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), 180.

<sup>7</sup> See Theodore Silverstein, “The Art of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 33 (1964): 258–78; reprinted in Howard and Zacher, 204–6.

<sup>8</sup> The allusion by way of the crowing cock to the story of Peter’s denying Christ is noted by Burrow, *A Reading*, 114, among others.

<sup>9</sup> Whether Gawain relies on the girdle *in addition to or instead of* the pentangle and image of Mary on his shield the narrator does not say. The only overt indication of Gawain’s beliefs about the girdle comes after the Green Knight tells him that he has known about it all along, at which point Gawain admits that he took it because he feared the Green Knight’s return blow (l. 2379). On this point, and on the shield/girdle parallelism in general, see Donald R. Howard, “Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*,” *Speculum* 39 (1964): 425–33; reprinted in Howard and Zacher, 159–73.

<sup>10</sup> Benson, 228. In “The Role of the Guide in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Neophilologus* 49 (1965): 250–55 (reprinted in Howard and Zacher, 227–35), Paul Delany makes the same point and also shows how the Guide and Lady Bertilak use similar phrasing in their attempts to convince Gawain to perjure himself.

<sup>11</sup> Krappe (note 3 above, 213) explains the Green Chapel as “simply a modified form of the fairy hill or elfin knoll, the abode of the dead ancestors.”

<sup>12</sup> Gawain’s second “confession” (ll. 2369–89) interrupts the Green Knight’s first (ll. 2338–68, 2390–2406); Gawain’s first and only confession before a priest is narrated in ll. 1876–84. His “two confessions” were first compared and their significance explicated in J. A. Burrow’s “The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Modern Philology* 57 (1959): 73–79. The term “confess” is used by the Green Knight himself in reference to Gawain’s speech (l. 2391). Although the word is not used in relation to the Green Knight, one of its primary senses in Middle English is “to admit (a fact, truth), to reveal (sth.)” (*MED* s.v. *confessen* 1b, c), and in this respect it is just as applicable to the Green Knight’s speeches as to Gawain’s.

<sup>13</sup> The religious diction of the colloquy at the Green Chapel has been analyzed by Burrow (“Two Confessions,” and *A Reading*, 104–10, 127–33). For the view that Gawain’s usage of the term “covetousness” implies an Augustinian theological framework

(*contra* Burrow), and for other instances of theological diction in the poem, see David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Review of English Studies* 14 (1963): 124–31. The Green Knight's charge directed at Gawain in l. 2368: "But because you loved your life . . ." echoes John 12:25; his words in the first fitt, "And so thou shalt never fail to find me if thou seekest me" (l. 455), are perhaps an echo of Matt. 7:7 (as suggested by Levy [note 3 above], 86).

<sup>14</sup> And not "the knight of the green chapel" as he had said back at Camelot (l. 454). About this earlier revelation Burrow writes: "Editors have not taken the phrase as a proper name; but Bercilak has previously promised to announce 'my hous and my home and myn owen nome,' and this is what he does in l. 454, 'The Green Knight' is a more convenient name, but it does not seem to be used as such in the text. (The phrase occurs twice, ll. 390 and 417; also, with inversion, l. 704)" (*Reading*, 26 n. 24). On the form and meaning of the name Bertilak de Hautdesert, see notes 18–22, below.

<sup>15</sup> Critics are deeply divided over the interpretation of Morgan's role, regarding her as either a thematically central figure or a lame afterthought. For the former view, see Mother Angela Carson, O.S.U., "Morgain la Fée as the Principle of Unity in *Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 23 (1962): 3–16 and Charles Moorman, "Myth and Mediaeval Literature: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medieval Studies* 18 (1956): 158–72 (reprinted in *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert J. Blanch [Bloomington, Indiana and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971], 225–28); and for the latter view, see Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Speculum* 35 (1960): 260–74 and Benson, 32–35. Burrow—who wishes to eliminate the negative side of the Green Knight's nature in order to advance his interpretation of the poem at the moral level as "a comic version of *Everyman*" (*A Reading*, 185)—writes: "Morgan and Bercilak inhabit the same castle; yet they hardly belong to the same world. . . . Bercilak is a brilliant, modern creation, and his relation with Gawain is splendidly convincing; but his relation with Morgan, so far as it can be made out at all, seems quite eccentric and unlikely. It is hard to think of such a character either sharing Morgan's malice or submitting to her magic" (169); and yet he does!

<sup>16</sup> On the poem's symmetrical narrative structure, see Dale B. J. Randall, "A Note on Structure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Language Notes* 72 (1957): 161–63; and on the clarifying function of the traditional romance scene of the hero's reception at his home court, see Reto R. Bezzola, *Le Sens de l'Aventure et de l'Amour: (Chrétien de Troyes)*, (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1947), 117–20. The reception of Gawain at Camelot, however, raises more questions than it answers (see note 45 below).

<sup>17</sup> On this aspect of the *Gawain*-poet's originality, see Benson, 35–36.

<sup>18</sup> On the various possible readings of the Green Knight's Christian name in l. 2445 of the manuscript (and a preference for Bertilak, which most students of the poem now accept), see *Sir Gawain*, ed. Tolkien-Gordon-Davis, note for line 2445. Possible Celtic etymologies of the name are discussed by Roland M. Smith, "Guinganbresil and the Green Knight," *Journal of English and German Philology* 45 (1946): 1–25 (he prefers Celtic *bresalach* "contentious"). The etymology from Old French *Bertolais* is proposed in James R. Hulbert's "The Name of the Green Knight: Bercilak or Bertilak," in *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1923), 12–19.

<sup>19</sup> "The name *Hautdesert* has been held to refer to the Green Chapel, and to mean 'high hermitage' because *disert* in Celtic languages had acquired the special sense 'hermitage'. But a specialized Celtic meaning is very unlikely to appear in so characteristically French a compound as *Hautdesert*. *Desert* is an extremely common element in French place-names, and it always means 'deserted or solitary place, wasteland'. . . . The name evidently applies to the castle, from which, rather than from the obscure mound, the lord would take his name" (*Sir Gawain*, ed. Tolkien-Gordon-

Davis, note for l. 2445). Burrow similarly maintains that “it would be very odd for both Bertilak’s nick-name *and* his right name to contain a reference to the chapel. One would expect the latter to identify his real ‘house and home’ or ancestral dwelling-place (cf. ‘Gareth of Orkeney’, etc.); and that is plainly not the Chapel but the Castle” (*A Reading*, 125, n. 17). Yet given the improbable mixture of motives in the poet’s depiction of the Green Knight, the possibility of a “cross-reference” to the Chapel in the name of the Castle, by way of a *desert/disert* pun, seems to me more felicitous than “odd.”

<sup>20</sup> See Hulbert, 15–16.

<sup>21</sup> For an interesting attempt to identify a real-life fourteenth-century “green knight” and a review of similar attempts, see S. R. T. O. D’Ardenne, “‘The Green Count’ and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 10 (1959): 113–26.

<sup>22</sup> See E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), s.v. *Bertram*, OED s.v. *Lake* sb<sup>2</sup> (and cp. *Lake* v<sup>1</sup>); and *MED* s.v. *lak* n. 2a and *lake* n. 4a. Interestingly, both Bertilak and his wife use the term *lakked* (ll. 1250, 2366) when talking to Gawain about his purported merits.

<sup>23</sup> See Moorman (note 15 above).

<sup>24</sup> For discussion of the significance of the discovery of the Green Knight’s name, see Burrow, *A Reading*, 125 (from which I have quoted several phrases, and drawn somewhat different conclusions).

<sup>25</sup> The fact that throughout the poem Gawain’s name appears in various forms (e.g., Gawayn, Gawen, Gauan, Wawan, Wowen, Wowan), some of which, as the alliteration proves, would call for differing pronunciations, also reinforces our sense of the hero’s unsettled and uncertain identity.

<sup>26</sup> On the connection between the beheaded Green Knight and the tradition of beheaded-but-living Christian saints, see Benson, 79; and Burrow, *A Reading*, 190–94.

<sup>27</sup> Burrow (“Two Confessions,” 257 n. 9) writes: “Criticism of the poem has sometimes failed to notice that the Green Knight, although he has only two *physical forms*, has three distinct *personae*—the ‘aghlic mayster’ (fit one, and fit four up to l. 2330), the genial host (fits two and three), and what I here call the ‘conoscitor’ (the latter part of the fourth fit).” But to call Bertilak a “genial host” in the second and third fitts is to ignore his orchestration of the deceptively easy exchange-of-winnings game, the bedroom temptations, and the Guide’s further trial of Gawain. We do better, as I have been suggesting, to recognize two “distinct personae” embodied in the Green Knight along with two “physical forms.” Neither of these personae is altogether hostile or friendly; one or the other is manifest, with different nuances and emphases, at different moments in the narrative, and neither corresponds exactly with either of the Green Knight’s physical forms (see sections III and IV below).

<sup>28</sup> On symbolization *de bono* and *de malo*, see *Saint Augustine: On Christian Doctrine*, trans. with an introduction by D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis and N.Y.: Bobbs Merrill, 1958), 99–101 (*De doctrina christiana* 4.25); and Robertson’s “Why the Devil Wears Green,” *Modern Language Notes* 69 (1954): 470–72 (about the green devil in Chaucer’s *Friar’s Tale*, understood in light of Augustine’s *de bono/de malo* idea of the symbol; Robertson asserts in passing [472 n. 6] that the Green Knight is not a comparable case).

<sup>29</sup> *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 2nd ed., Bollingen Series, 35.5 (New York: Pantheon, for the Bollingen Foundation, 1961), 5.

<sup>30</sup> This definition of ambivalence is my own. As a technical term in dynamic psychology, ambivalence is still generally used as it was defined by Freud (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey [1966; reprint, New York: Norton-Liveright, 1977], 428: “the direction toward the same person of contrary—affectionate and hostile—feelings.”)

<sup>31</sup> The definition of literary ambiguity as "the conjunction of exclusive disjuncts," which I have adapted for the not really "ambiguous" Green Knight, is from the fine study by Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), 12.

<sup>32</sup> See Victor Y. Haines, *The Fortunate Fall of Sir Gawain: The Typology of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982); and, by the same author, "Allusions to the *felix culpa* in the Prologue of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 44 (1974): 158–77. On the idea of *felix culpa* in Christian texts from the fourth to seventeenth century, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Milton and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," *ELH* 4 (1936): 161–79.

<sup>33</sup> Est ergo fides recta ut credamus et confiteamur: quia Dominus noster Jesus Christus Dei Filius Deus et homo est. Deus est ex substantia Patris ante secula genitus: et homo ex substantia matris in seculo natus. Perfectus Deus perfectus homo: ex anima rationali et humana carne subsistens. Aequalis Patri secundum divinitatem: minor Patre secundum humanitatem. Qui licet Deus sit et homo: non duo tamen, sed unus est Christus. Unus autem non conversione Divinitatis in carnem: sed assumptione humanitatis in Deum. Unus omnino non confusione substantiae: sed unitate personae. Nam sicut anima rationalis et caro unus est Christus.

*Breviarium ad Usus Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. F. Procter and C. Wordsworth, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1879–96; reprint, Gregg International, 1970), 2:47–48; translation from *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1910 ed., s.v. "Athanasian Creed, The." For the history of the dogma of the hypostatic union, see the articles in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* s.v. "Hypostatic Union" and "Theology: I. a. Christology"; and for important thirteenth-century developments, see Walter H. Principe, C. S. B., *The Theology of the Hypostatic Union in the Early Thirteenth Century*, 4 vols. (Studies and Texts, 7, 12, 19, 32) (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1963, 1967, 1970, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> In *Pearl*, for example, the logic of Christ's dual nature provides a strong analogy that finally confirms for the dreamer in that poem the equally mysterious dual nature of his lost child/queen (see esp. *Pearl*, ed. E. V. Gordon [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953], ll. 771–72, 806, 839–40, 1201, 1204). On the theological motives of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, see respectively: René Wellek, "The *Pearl*: An Interpretation of the Middle English Poem," *Studies in English by Members of the English Seminar of the Charles University* 4 (Prague, 1933): 5–33; reprinted in Blanch, 3–36; J. J. Anderson, ed. *Cleanness* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press; N.Y.: Barnes & Noble, 1977), introduction, 3–7; and Ordelle G. Hill, "The Audience of *Patience*," *Modern Philology* 66 (1968–69): 103–9. On theological motives in *Sir Gawain*, see notes 12–13, above; and Larry S. Champion, "Grace Versus Merit in *Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 28 (1967): 413–25.

<sup>35</sup> This analogy between the Green Knight and Christ is very much like that suggested to pertain between Beowulf and Christ by R. E. Kaske ("Beowulf," in *Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works: Beowulf through Paradise Lost*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and H. Baker [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1968], 3–40); as Kaske explains, there is "a connection . . . by which Beowulf is made not to serve as a figurative representation of Christ, but to remind us significantly of him in certain respects" (30).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the more thoroughly "exegetical" but similar interpretation of this scene by Levy (note 3 above), 73–75; and the important cautionary remarks (aimed specifically at Levy's analysis but relevant to any attempt to comprehend the "Christian content" of *Sir Gawain*) of Donald R. Howard, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *Recent Middle English Scholarship and Criticism: Survey and Desiderata*, ed. J. Burke Severs (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1971), 34–36.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur has been waiting for a tale "of some great marvel in which he might be-

lieve" (l. 94; emphasis added). The phrasing here seems to me to hint at some implicit moral censure of the king and his courtiers, as does the lavishly described dinner scene, which recalls in several details Belshazzar's feast in *Cleanness*, ll. 1401–19 (J. J. Anderson points out the correspondences in his edition (note 34 above) in his notes to lines 1041–13); but Burrow (*A Reading*, 4–8) has called attention to textual evidence that weighs against the view "that the author may be implying some moral judgment on an immature or blindly festive company" (5).

<sup>38</sup> On the pentangle, see R. H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," *ELH* 29 (1962): 121–39; reprinted in Blanch, (note 15 above), 185–89. The connection of the beasts to various sins was proposed by Schnyder, *Essay in Interpretation*, 63–66; and ironic religious associations of the girdle are considered in Lawrence Besserman, "Gawain's Green Girdle," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 22 (1982): 84–101.

<sup>39</sup> The religious texture of the poem is elucidated in detail in Ronald Tamplin's "The Saints in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Speculum* 44 (1969): 403–20.

<sup>40</sup> For analytical review of *Sir Gawain* scholarship, with all its deep and abiding divisions, see the following: Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," *PMLA* 76 (1961): 7–19; reprinted in his *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), 130–57; Howard (note 36 above), 29–54; and the (heroically) comprehensive *The Gawain-Poet: An Annotated Bibliography, 1839–1977* (New York and London: Garland, 1979), compiled by Malcolm Andrew.

<sup>41</sup> See respectively: Champion (note 34 above); G. V. Smithers, "What *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is About," *Medium Ævum* 32 (1963): 171–89; William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of *Gawain and the Green Knight*," *College English* 20 (1958): 61–65; Speirs (note 3 above); Burrow, *A Reading*, 46–47, 171–86; Benson, 240–48; and Stephen Manning, "A Psychological Interpretation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Criticism* 6 (1964): 165–77. Bloomfield (note 40 above) offers a fine conspectus of the unresolved antitheses in the poem: "I regard the poem as an aristocratic romance reflecting a many-faceted solidity which is both comic and serious. It is meant to entertain and to some extent teach a sophisticated audience. Its style is probably mixed and part of its humor lies in the juxtaposition of high and medium style. It is a combination of secularism and religion, of the marvelous and the real, of the subjective and the objective, of the decorative and the direct, of the vague and the clear, of courtesy and horror, of the elevated and the plain" (154). For a recent, different approach to some of the same dualities (or, as he prefers, "ambiguities") in *Sir Gawain* that I have dealt with in the present essay, see Robert W. Hanning, "Sir Gawain and the Red Herring: The Perils of Interpretation," in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts, 700–1600, Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature in Honor of E. Talbot Donaldson*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1982), 5–23.

<sup>42</sup> Note however that Benson implicitly restores the Green Knight's complexity when he recalls the juxtaposition in the poem of "churlishness and knighthood, of humility and laughter, of terror and comedy . . ." (248). And before Burrow unconvincingly reduces the Green Knight to the agent of Gawain's self-discovery and self-acceptance, he eloquently and succinctly defines the irreducible nature of Gawain and the poem as a whole: "The poem is both a lay of marvels and a moral tale; its hero is both a superior romantic figure, capable of prodigies of courage and endurance, and an Everyman figure, 'one of us'. This is the basic 'modal counterpoint' which gives rise to much of our sense of the subtlety of the poem" (*A Reading*, 184).

<sup>43</sup> See Silverstein (note 7 above); Green (note 38 above), 181; and on *Sir Gawain* and the inherent contradictions of Christian chivalric society, see Donald R. Howard, "Chivalry and the Pride of Life: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), 215–54.

<sup>44</sup> The phrase is from Denton Fox's fine introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Denton Fox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Benson, (240–48) and Burrow (*A Reading*, 156–59) view the court as humane and forgiving and Gawain as unduly severe; Green (note 38 above, 193) and Moorman (note 15 above, 234) view Gawain as properly “sad” and the courtiers as unduly mirthful. In *Ricardian Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), Burrow returns to this crucial scene and in order to account for the discrepancy between the court's view of Gawain and his view of himself extends his analysis beyond the limits of the narrative: “Gawain does not take the comfort or accept the congratulations [of the courtiers], still less join in the laughter; but in due time he may . . .” (121).

<sup>46</sup> See note 15 above.

<sup>47</sup> As noted by Randall (note 16 above), 161–62.

<sup>48</sup> The metonymic connection between the girdle and the Crown of Thorns was first noted, as far as I have been able to determine, by Levy (note 3 above), 105. The Crown of Thorns of course shares its double-image quality with the Cross, the instrument of Christ's defeat/victory, which Gawain invokes on two occasions earlier in the poem (ll. 762, 1949).