Defamiliarizing Melancholy: The Functions of Eco-Aesthetics and the *Pearl-*poet

The Cotton Nero A.X manuscript, currently held at the British National Library, contains four of the most highly wrought poems written in Middle English. Various analyses of its unique Northern dialect have determined that each of the poems share the same anonymous author, often called the *Pearl-*poet or the *Gawain-*poet. *Pearl,* an allegorical dream vision, tells the story of a melancholic jeweler that falls asleep in a garden and awakens in Heaven. He speaks to a Maiden shrouded in pearls, whom he identifies as his deceased daughter, revealing that his original sadness was not, in fact, due to a lost pearl, but rather to his infant’s death. Alternatively, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* depicts the trials of a knight in King Arthur’s court after being challenged to a cryptic game by the frightening Green Knight. The settings and spaces created by the poet are a combination of medieval conceptions of nature, and theological notions of Beauty; recognizing both Nature’s defamiliarizing potential, and its inherent divinity. *Sir Gawain’s* Natural world, and its abrupt intrusion into the civility of Arthur’s court, provides a framework for the poet’s views on the defamiliarizing potential of nature, and furthermore, reveals that there is more at stake for the Natural world in *Pearl* than simply creating a pretty space. The Heavenly Garden inhabited by the Dreamer in *Pearl* is not simply a passive *locus amoenus* but, in medieval aesthetic conceptions of the Beautiful also functions as an intellectually active setting—a space with agency—which has the potential to free the Dreamer from his melancholy.

Medieval Eco-criticism has tended to focus on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* as Carolyn Dinshaw observes, “Because of its vegetal villain, geographical realism, precise picture of the seasons, and detailed account of hunting animals (359). In her own analysis Dinshaw draws a parallel from the Green Knight to the “utterly familiar and totally weird, grimacing,
smiling, sneering faces [which] peer down from the cloister ceilings of Norwich Cathedral” and make many more appearances throughout England’s medieval religious sites, proclaiming them to be “one of the most—if not the most—popular decorative motifs in medieval ecclesiastical sculpture” (347). Proving that these Pagan-esque figures were not always seen as contrary to English Christian identity (although it is true that many of them have been destroyed over the centuries), but rather as moralized representations of the intersections between man and nature. Significantly, this identifies that the Pearl-poet recognizes “in these vegetable men the most basic conceptual boundary in the process of being deconstructed” (351). In the same way that it is nearly impossible to determine if the foliate heads in the cloisters are “leaves transforming into man, or man transforming into vegetation,” it is equally ambiguous if the Green Knight who barges into Arthur’s court is a plant animated into a man, or a man turning into a plant, “the resultant creature is both and neither man and plant” (350).

Gillian Rudd, in her recent book Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval Literature, continues Dinshaw’s line of inquiry and identifies the figure of the Green Knight as an autonomous representation of wilderness saying, “[w]here he is not actually composed of vegetation, he is wreathed in leaves and branches, or devours or disgorges them,” much in the same way the cloister heads are both done and un-done by vegetation (110). These heads, and their animated counterpart, the Green Night, reinforce the 9th century Irish theologian and Neoplationist, John Scottus Eriugena’s claim that “Nature is a theophany,” (Eco 23) a manifestation or appearance of God to man. Functioning both as a synecdoche for Nature and as an individual entity the Green Knight requires the humans of Arthur’s court to engage intellectually with the non-human world. The game the Knight imposes results in Gawain leaving the walls of Camelot and immersing himself in the wilderness of western England, a
journey which ultimately leads to God through (at least one) profound confession and pleas for salvation.

The *Pearl*-poet, depicting in *Sir Gawain* the potential of Nature to defamiliarize the human world, joins this with the Thomistic interpretation of Beauty as a “transcendental” attribute of being in the *Pearl* poem, taking it beyond the theophanic potential of simply seeing and intellectually participating with Nature, into the realm of consolation. Nature’s deconstructive properties, augmented by the transcendental Beauty of the spaces in *Pearl*, are meant to do work on the *Pearl*-Dreamer, allowing him to abandon his individualistic notions of property, possession, and hierarchy, and recognize the heavenly garden of his dream as a potentially consoling environment. Without viewing his surroundings as Beautiful the Dreamer remains incapable of understanding the subsequent conversation with the Maiden, and is blind to the true cause of his melancholy.

The poet’s first construction of nature in this work is the Earthly garden, which serves mechanically as a walled and protected *locus amoenus*. The poet goes to great lengths to create a garden that is as real for the reader as it is for Dreamer, describing the smells and the colors, giving specific names of flowers. Gillian Rudd, in response to the poet’s description of the garden says: “The effect is altogether different from the beautiful, but essentially literary, one of the typical romance setting in which plants are often left unspecified (*for example wilderness in Sir Gawain*). The end result is an entirely credible, actual garden which is not only easy to envisage but is also a readily accessible space” (174). The Dreamer’s lack of participation and engagement with his elaborate Earthly surroundings constitute his initial failure in the text. For him the beauty of the place is subordinated to his own melancholy, “every element within it [has] meaning only in so far as it [refers] back to the lost pearl” (Rudd 176). By subjugating the beauty
of the natural space around him the Dreamer has confined the garden’s purpose to simply “convey[ing] suffocating limitation” and removed from a theophanic relationship with God (Palti 32). He has projected his own mental state onto the non-human world around him, and as a result, transformed the *locus ameonus* into a space that makes consolation impossible.

Even though this Earthly garden is maintained by humans, the natural world is still first and foremost a product of God. Without recognizing the agency and inherent Beauty of God’s natural world the Dreamer finds himself a victim of his own narrow conceptions of the boundaries between human and non-human. By closing himself off to “the created world as a revelation” the Dreamer remains oblivious to the inherent value of nature as a theophany in which “objects are symbols, disclosures, and indicators [whose] nature is to point toward God” (Eco 24). The Beauty of the Earthly garden is meant to allow the Dreamer a gateway to the transcendental salvation of God, something Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century theologian and philosopher, argues is inherently present in all beings.

When the Dreamer fails to actively participate in the Beauty of the Earthly garden he succumbs to the overwhelming sensory experience of sights and smells, is drawn into a “swooning dream”1 and “[his] soul [soars] from that spot to the sky”2 (*Pearl* 59, 61). Crucially, David Aers claims, the dream “gives him time, space, and provocation to change, to redirect his being from identification with the dead person, to redirect his love” from problematic Earthly conceptions of the lost relationship, to a transcendental appreciation of Christ as salvation (Aers 59). As the Dreamer enters his dream-state he takes in his Heavenly surroundings, immediately recognizing “no man-made finery or frill / Was woven with such wonderment!”3 (64, 71-72). All five stanzas of the second section are dedicated to describing the un-Earthly setting; blue trees

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1 “slepyng-slaȝte” (59).
2 “Fro spot my spyryt þer sprang in space” (61).
3 “For wern neuer webbez þat wyȝez weuen / Of half so dere adubemente” (71-71).
with their silver lace leaves, the crystal cliffs in the distance, the pearls, gems, and jewels scattered around the forest floor, the smells of the fruits, the sounds of the perfectly paired and harmonious birds, and the Heavenly river with its “banks of beryl, bold and bright” (110). As the Dreamer walks through the awe-inspiring and utterly defamiliarizing place he claims to have “set [his] sorrows all aside / And soothed [his] grinding grief and gall” (123-124).

However, it becomes clear in the second stanza of section three that the recognition of his surroundings has been all too ephemeral and “the bliss has generated a new sense of lack in the dreamer even though this has definitely not been in response to any theocentric yearnings, at least none that were conscious or identified by the poet” (Aers 60). The Dreamer’s engagement with the Beauty directly around him is transitory; he almost instantaneously moves on from the peace of mind brought to him by the Beauty of the Natural surroundings and replaces these feelings of comfort with feelings of masculine, earthly longing which, as the Maiden later attempts to explain, have no place in the Heavenly construction of being. {Casey Finch has translated these lines as: “I pined and longed to penetrate / That fine fresh abode” (146). Although other translations do not make this quite so suggestive.} Here again, the Dreamer fails to recognize his environment as Beautiful—his limited encounter with the transcendental aspects of Beauty indicates that he recognizes the area not as concretely Beautiful, but rather, as good.

In the Summa Theologiae Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between the good and the beautiful by saying: ‘Beautiful’ adds to ‘good’ a reference to the cognitive powers; ‘good’ refers simply to that in which the appetite takes pleasure.” (Eco, Aesthetics, quoting Aquinas, 36). In this sense of both words it becomes quite clear that the Dreamer has seen the Heavenly garden as
“good” insofar as it brought him pleasure, momentarily easing his melancholy. However, the immediate switch from pleasure to earthly longing indicates that the Dreamer has not contemplated his surroundings as Beautiful and failed to intellectually engage with the defamiliarizing Heavenly plain. Appetitively, the Dreamer has enjoyed the trees, and the gems, and the birds around him as figures which, at the level of base sensory experience, please his primal notions of what he deems to be good. But, he has failed to remove them from their place and corresponding connotation within the Earthly hierarchy and recognize them instead as active agents of Beauty in a Heavenly sphere.

Aquinas’ abstract conceptions of aesthetic Beauty find a home in the Pearl-poet’s work as a vehicle with the potential to disrupt the melancholy of the Dreamer by constructing a transcendental by-way of sorts to the salvation of God. Of course, such a successful resolution must be achieved through a rigorous cognitive engagement with both, the Natural world as a sphere of agency, and as a space where Beauty connects the human world with the Heavenly. The interconnectivity of the human and non-human worlds plays an integral role both in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Pearl poem, but in different ways. While the Green Knight, as an active and anthropomorphized version of wilderness serves to disrupt the cultivated civility of Arthur’s court, the more traditional Nature of the Pearl poem acts as a less intrusive, more nuanced, and unfortunately for the Dreamer, less effective deconstructive tool to break down his individualistic and bifurcated notions of being to which he so desperately clings. The poet’s quest for the Pearl-Dreamer is ultimately to reconcile his melancholy and engage with the transcendent salvation of God. In ignoring the deconstructive potential of his natural surroundings the dreamer necessarily fails, and as a result retains his stubbornly individualistic notions of self, denying any kind of alternate relationship with his Lost Pearl, and remaining in
his melancholic state. The poet’s relationship to Nature, as evidenced in Sir Gawain, and its Beauty, as it’s created in Pearl, undoubtedly call for the Pearl-dreamer to enter into direct participation in the world around him, which he was ultimately unable to achieve.
Works Cited


Palti, Kathleen. "The Bound Earth in Patience and Other Middle English Poetry."


