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## ***Bot Wothes Mo Iwysse Ther Ware:* On the Nightmarish Bliss of the *Pearl* Vision**

Since its first modern edition in 1864, the Middle English *Pearl* has been subject to a heated critical debate, allowing Charles Moorman to declare in 1955 that the poem had “already been done almost to death by its interpreters” (Moorman 1970: 103). Directing critical interest in the *Pearl* towards the person of the Dreamer, Moorman opened a door which allowed him to “waive entirely all questions of allegory and symbolism” (Moorman 1970: 104), which had marked earlier interpretative attempts, and to direct his scrutiny to the personal side of the narrator’s experience. While the earliest critics, such as Sir Israel Gollancz, saw the poem as elegiac, most critics before the 1950s held that the key to the understanding of *Pearl* lay in its allegorical structure, following the assertions of a seminal article by W.H. Schofield (Johnson 1970: 28).<sup>1</sup> Moorman’s bold move inaugurated a new and prolific mode of criticism, which prompted scholars to focus on the elegiac and psychological aspects of the text which had often earlier been dismissed or otherwise taken for granted and passed upon in various attempts at further interpretation. Since the problem of allegorisation has not ceased to inspire critics to this day and one cannot hope for a final resolution of the issue<sup>2</sup>, Moorman’s perspective does not seem to have lost any of its validity in trying to uncover the meanings that the text holds.

This paper does not aim to introduce a radically new interpretation of the poem, but instead investigates the structure of the *Pearl* to shed new light on the poem’s patterning and its relation to what is acknowledged to be the work’s main concern — the irreconcilable

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief historical outline of the criticism of *Pearl* from the 19th century to the 1950’s, see: Johnson 1970: 28–29.

<sup>2</sup> Moorman quite succinctly summarises the critical confusion of his time by citing various allegorical interpretations of the Pearl-Maiden — as “clean maidenhood, the Eucharist, innocence, the lost sweetness of God, the Blessed Virgin [and] heaven itself” (Moorman 1970: 103–104). Recent criticism has put forward a number of new interpretations, which, to use Moorman’s words, “while undeniably of great interest and value in opening up new avenues of critical insight, [are still] nevertheless fragmentary, in that [they are] all too seldom directed (...) toward exploring the total meaning of the poem” (Moorman 1970: 104).

gulf between earthly-minded thought and the divine wisdom of the enlightened.<sup>3</sup> It offers a psychological reading that sees the peculiar kind of dream vision the poem is based on as a critical constituent feature of its didacticism. My aim is to investigate the emotional states of the poem's narrator and to trace the aesthetics of nightmare in his otherwise blissful state of mind. With close attention to the drives and impulses that motivate the Dreamer prior to his debate with the Pearl Maiden and during the vision of the New Jerusalem which she secures for him, the paper attempts to foreground an apparent contradiction between bliss and nightmare and relate it to other contradictions which permeate the text.

To gain an insight into the dream vision, it is first worthwhile to establish the main psychological forces that motivate the narrator. Barbara Kowalik argues that much of the poem's momentum springs from the Dreamer having a "curious and searching spirit," which she sees as "a predominant trait of his character" (Kowalik 1994: 18). She notes:

In his dream we see him as a curious traveller always ready to explore new spots, never satisfied or exhausted (...). When he reaches the stream that separates him from further regions, he tries at any cost to find a way of crossing it; his efforts being in vain, he (...) can hardly overcome his unrestrained curiosity (...) The motif of insatiable curiosity is strongly emphasized (...) by the recurring phrase "more and more" (stanzas 11-15). (Kowalik 1994: 18-19)

Curiosity, however, necessarily implies an intrinsic drive to experience, a conscious desire that springs from one's being the agentive source of an exploratory incentive, and while the Dreamer may indeed possess a curious and searching spirit, his actions in the dream cannot be brought to bear on the assumption. This is because he is oneirically overwhelmed by subconscious forces which determine his particular actions; a conscious need to explore remains, as I hope to show, in the shadow of other impulses. To quote John Gardner, the text of the *Pearl* "incorporate[s] to an unusual degree elements of realistic dream psychology" (Gardner 1975: 10).

As the narrator falls asleep on the "floury flaght" (I.5.9)<sup>4</sup>, with a "devely dele in [his] hert" (I.4.3), there seems to be little hope of comfort for him, the first five stanzas clearly promising no solace of any sort with their emphasis on his grief and their continual dirge-like recounting of the moment when the pearl "doun drof in moldes dunne" (I.3.6). Yet, the moment the dream begins, the focus of the Dreamer's attention radically changes as he frees himself of the burden of grief, drawn to the details of the unearthly landscape: "The adubbemente of tho downes dere/Garten my goste al greffe foryete" (II.3.1-2). There can be no logical explanation for this other than that he is simply overwhelmed by what he sees, his senses transfixed and overrun by the overabundance of visual stimuli and his mind literally taken over by the operations of the dream itself. In fact, "[p]erhaps the broadest generalisation is that the characteristic of dream activity is that it takes place irrespective of any conscious effort or direction on our part" (Hadfield 1961: 17).

The dream vision as used in the *Pearl* is definitely more than just a neat conceptual literary convention, and it utilises realistic dream psychology. In *Dreams and Nightmares*, J.A. Hadfield explains the difference between ideation and dreams:

<sup>3</sup> This has been a longstanding view on the basic concern of the poem — see: Johnson 1970; Gardner 1975; Prior 1994; Anderson 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from the *Pearl* are identified by the number of each set of concatenated stanzas (Roman numeral), the number of a particular stanza within a set, and finally the stanza's line number (Arabic numerals).

The difference (...) is that whilst the former is deliberate, rational, and logical, dreams are spontaneous, automatic and dramatic. Ideation or thinking things out has the advantage over dreams in that by such means we can work out by the cold light of reason the logical chain of cause and effect with much greater accuracy and in much greater detail. But what dreams lack in precision they make up in vivid representation. (Hadfield 1961: 71)

'Vivid' is still an understatement for what the dream landscape appears to be for the narrator in the *Pearl*, who openly states that he could hardly fathom, or bear, a tenth of its intensity (III.2.3-4). As logic disappears, it is the aesthetics of dreams that takes over, allowing the vision to achieve its quality of a dazzling oneiric marvel.

Much as the soothing and comforting quality of the dream is beyond questioning, there are certain clues, however, that it may, in fact, be bordering on the experience of a nightmare. The vision begins with the narrator finding himself right in the middle of what seems to be a land of plenty. Looking around, he sees crystal cliffs, birds of diverse colours or trees with indigo-blue trunks and silver leaves, all shining with a light no man could believe (II.1.9). Thoroughly comforted and "in wely wyse" (II.3.5), he then starts to walk on, ignorant, just as the readers, as to why he found himself at that particular spot, or where exactly he is heading; as it has been observed earlier, the mechanics of action in a dream do not usually provide any formal reasoning, and they do not operate on the basis of causal relations. As he walks through the land, everything begins to intensify: "The fyrre in the fryth, the feier con ryse/The playn, the plonttes, the spyse, the peres,/And rawes and randes and rych reverses" (II.3.7-9). A certain anxiety rises in him, as although he is now free from grief, he begins to feel the strain of the sensual stimuli on his perception: "The fyrre I folwed those floty vales,/The more strengthe of joye myn herte straynes" (III.1.7-8). He wanders on, ever desiring "more and more," ever being unable to reach whatever it is that he yearns for, the situation resembling the common nightmarish experience of chasing after something that inexorably escapes the dreamer, who, try as he or she might, always remains a step behind.

Reaching the water, the Dreamer feels an urge to wade across, but he simply moves on, totally lacking the agentive power to do so. With every step he takes, the vision becomes more charming and the wading more problematic and dangerous, all this amounting to a dreadful horror of having to make a decision before it is too late:

More and more, and yet wel mare,  
Me lyste to se the broke beyonde;  
For if hit was fayr ther I con fare,  
Wel loveloker was the fyrre londe.  
(...)  
Bot wothes mo iwysse ther ware,  
The fyrre I stalked by the stronde.  
And ever me thocht I schulde not wonde  
For wo ther weles so wynne wore. (III.3.1-4, 7-10)

What is more, logic fails him, and his conjectures as to what there might be beyond the water prove impossible to validate:

Beyonde the broke, by slente other slade,  
I hoped that mote merked wore,  
Bot the water was depe, I dorst not wade,  
And ever me longed ay more and more. (III.2.9-12)

Finally, when he comes to a halt, looks around, and is just about to make the dreaded decision, he is suddenly denied choice with the coming into view of a “newe note,” the Pearl Maiden herself, whose appearance suddenly undoes the tension, refocuses the narrator’s thoughts and attention and shifts the dream into an altogether different setting — that of a debate. Thus, the Dreamer becomes much of a victim of a cat-and-mouse game, presented with anxious choices and denied them at the same time, with no logic to come to his aid and no agentive power to enforce his decisions to take eventual action. In this, the dream vision again appears very close to a nightmare.

That it was no mere curiosity but an innermost possessive drive that pushes the Dreamer forward in his journeying is evident through animal imagery employed by the Pearl-Poet. This is how he has the narrator describe himself at the sight of the Maiden:

I stod ful styлле and dorste not calle;  
 With yyen open and mouth ful clos  
 I stod as hende as hawk in halle. (IV.1.2–4)

Paul F. Reichardt argues that the term *hende* would here “seem to be something like ‘attentive,’ thus suggesting a domesticated bird’s habit of intently watching the movements of those around it” (Reichardt 1991: 18). In his article on animal similes in the *Pearl*, he notes that “[t]he typical Latin designation for a hawk is *accipiter*, which is derived from the verb *accipere*, ‘to take or seize’” (Reichardt 1991: 18), thus seeing the hawk simile “ultimately poin[t] toward the dreamer’s own temptation to seize the object of his desire (i.e. the Pearl) just as a hawk would seize its prey” (Reichardt 1991: 19).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the use of the hawk image brings into mind a dream feature characteristic of nightmares. Though the bodily form of his “goste” finally comes to a stop, the Dreamer’s spirit wanders restlessly on, desperately trying to reach his Pearl on the other shore, yet to no avail, just as in the common nightmarish experience of being driven forward by fear or desire (being pursued in the former case, or in the process of pursuing someone or something in the latter) with no apparent movement of the body, which drags behind. The hawk image takes oneiric helplessness, so typical of nightmares, to the extreme.

The debate that ensues between the Dreamer and the Maiden after they meet shifts the focus from the oneiric to the rhetorical, as the two characters engage in an argumentative struggle. For a number of stanzas they try to reconcile their two distinct perceptions of reality and to bridge a gap between the apparently irreconcilable perspectives of the quick and the dead, with the Maiden appealing to the faculty of reason and the Dreamer struggling to abandon his emotional, fatherly language and accept her terms of discourse.<sup>6</sup> Still, the very end of the dream-vision once again strikes the note of a true nightmare. As

<sup>5</sup> Reichardt provides evidence from St. Isidore of Seville, Hugh of St. Victor and Rabanus Maurus that points to the hawk being authoritatively seen as “a thieving and predatory bird,” whose “aggressive and predatory instincts” had an allegorical bearing on the understanding of “the world of human motives” (Reichardt 1991: 18–19).

<sup>6</sup> In this, the Dreamer is only partly successful — while formally conforming to the language of the Maiden, his discourse is still informed by his longing. This is only superficially apparent, however, and does not undermine the rhetorical, unemotional quality of the debate, which contrasts with the dynamic character of the nightmarish beginning of the vision. For a detailed study on the Dreamer’s language in this part of the poem, see: Anderson 2005: 31–63.

the Dreamer is provided with a vision of the heavenly city and notices his daughter among the throng of virgins accompanying the Lord, his passionate longing to be reunited with her returns.

J.J. Anderson notes the moment when the Dreamer's desirous will, put to sleep by the rhetorical reasoning of the debate, awakens fiercely in section XIX of the poem, in the five stanzas organised around the link-word "delyt" (Anderson 2005: 70). While initially the word refers to the delight and joy of the inhabitants of heaven, it is later used by the Dreamer in reference to himself and acquires an additional layer of meaning. Anderson points to two specific passages (Anderson 2005: 70):

Al songe to love that gay juelle.  
The steven moght stryke thurgh the urthe to helle  
That the Vertues of heven of joye endyte.  
To love the Lombe his meyny in melle  
Iwysse I lught a gret delyt. (XIX.3.8–12)

Lorde, much of mirthe was that ho made  
Among here feres that was so quyt!  
That syght me gart to thenk to wade  
For luf-longyng in gret delyt. (XIX.5.9–12)

In the former, the Dreamer longs to join in the communal experience of praising the Lamb, while in the latter he expresses his longing in terms clearly reminiscent of the courtly love tradition, with "luf-longyng" harking back to the "luf-daungere" (love-dominion) of the poem's first stanza (I.1.11), where it expressed the narrator's earthly-minded possessiveness (Anderson 2005: 71). In both passages "delyt" clearly connotes desire; seeing the joy of heaven, the Dreamer feels an urge to join in the divine concord of New Jerusalem. The city "draws him in," and just "as when he walked through the paradise landscape, his delight in what he sees leads to desire for still greater delight. He is in the grip of *more and more* again" (Anderson 2005: 71).

This moment is marked by another animal simile, in which the Dreamer compares himself to a "dased quayle" (XVIII.5.5). It comes just before section XIX with its change in the meaning of "delyt," and it prefigures and communicates this change with its twofold symbolism. By contrast with the hawk, the quail is a bird lacking inner strength and power, and "it conveys the dreamer's view of himself (...) as drained of all power, transfixed like a quail blinded by bright light" (Anderson 2005: 67), marking the transition from the debate to a new oneiric setting with this image of nightmarish paralysis. As Paul F. Reichardt observes, quails were traditionally seen as rather immobile, unable, "due to weight and weak wing structure, to raise themselves much above the ground," thus becoming "emblems of a fleshly and carnal mind" (Reichardt 1991: 22).<sup>7</sup> "Dased" could at the same time convey a meaning not so much of immobility as of confusion, "mirroring the quail's tendency to be easily frightened and therefore (...) erratic in movement and flight," and "this same sort of

<sup>7</sup> Paul F. Reichardt notes that this traditional perception of the quail springs from the biblical passages in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11, where it is revealed that God sent quails to the Israelites traversing the desert in response to their "complaints about the quality of food provided during the wilderness journey. (...) The quail thus becomes a scriptural sign of ingratitude and self-indulgence, and these themes are elaborated more than once by biblical exegetes who treat these passages" (Reichardt 1991: 22).

frantic, compulsive behaviour is evident in the dreamer's attempt to cross the river to possess his pearl" (Reichardt 1991: 22). Thus the quail image communicates a kind of oneiric paralysis and its transformation into a nightmarish longing for what cannot be reached.

The Pearl cannot be reached indeed, for the moment the Dreamer attempts to cross the stream, he wakes up:

Delyt me drof in yye and ere,  
 My manes mynde to maddyng malte.  
 Quen I sey my frely, I wolde be there,  
 Byyonde the water thagh ho were walte.  
 I thocht that nothyng myght me dere  
 To fech me bur and take me halte,  
 And to start in the strem schulde non me stere,  
 To swymme the remnaunt, thagh I ther swalte.  
 Bot of that munt I was bitalt.  
 When I schulde start in the strem astraye,  
 Out of that caste I was bycalt;  
 Hit was not at my Princes paye. (XX.1.1–12)

His longing is unchecked by reason, and he discounts the possibility of drowning or being stopped in the act until he actually awakens. It seems that the Maiden did not succeed at all in trying to make him see his plight from a new perspective, for he acts no differently than at the beginning of the vision when his desire carried him impetuously forth across the dream-like landscape. A moment later he wakes up "in that erber wlonk/(...) Ther as [his] perle to grounde strayd" (XX.2.7, 9), the experience being quite uncomfortable and not at all welcome: "Me payed ful ille to be outfleme/So sodenly of that fayre regioun" (XX.3.1–2). At this point the dream ends, like a true nightmare, with an unexpected and brutal termination of the vision.

Looking at the structure of the poem, one may discern a certain pattern. The vision appears to have a tripartite structure, with the rhetorical debate (sections V–XVI) being preceded and followed by brief but intense and emotional moments of oneiric passion in which bliss intertwines with suffering (sections II–IV and XVII–XIX). From a broader perspective, the dream vision itself is as a whole embedded within the garden setting: the first and last sections of the poem, which take place in the "erber," provide a frame for it (Anderson 2005: 19). In a similar vein, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, the two poems of the Pearl manuscript that share the greatest number of connections and "parallels of detail" and may indeed "be seen as reciprocal" (Anderson 2005: 5), occupy the middle leaves of MS Cotton Nero A.x., preceded by *Pearl* and followed by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The nightmarish elements must not thus be seen as something contingent, but they are in fact a coherent part of the textual superstructure.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the apparently contradictory quality of the vision's nightmarish bliss is not the only paradox to be found in the *Pearl*. There are more, all informed by the main contrast underlining the entire poem — the clash of the earthly-minded narrator and the heavenly-enlightened Pearl Maiden. Thus, for instance, the Dreamer's desire to see all experience as discrete and limited, which renders him unable to comprehend the Maiden's true position

<sup>8</sup> For more insights into the structural patterns in the manuscript, see Condren's *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet: Beyond Phi* (2002).

in Heaven, is juxtaposed with the idea that when it comes to God, “Ther is no date of hys godnesse” (IX.2.1). In an analogous way, the notions of earthly hierarchy and proportion are found invalid with the Maiden pontificating that “ever the lenger the lasse, the more” (X.5.12), since, as Wendell Stacy Johnson has it, “there may be superiority, but can be no inferiority” in Heaven (Johnson 1970: 46), which is a concept ungraspable for an earthly-oriented mind. The bulk of the poem constituted by the debate between the two main characters is an apparent contradiction in itself, as it turns traditional hierarchy upside down through inverting the parental roles and having the girl speak with the full array of divine wisdom to her confounded father.

Seen in this light, the peculiarly dual quality of the vision falls into the general textual strategy of contrast that serves to accentuate the gulf between the two kinds of wisdom, perception and attitudes that the Dreamer and the Maiden embody. For although the narrator finds himself in the marvellous landscape which allays his pain, deep inside he is still driven by the longing for what he lost, and this longing does not only make it so difficult for him to fathom the true meaning of his daughter’s words, but it also mars his bliss. Thus the nightmarish quality of the vision is consequential upon the Dreamer’s insatiable desire to possess his Pearl.

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