

## SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

It is a great honour to be invited to lecture in this ancient university, and under the illustrious name of W. P. Ker. I was once allowed to use for a time his copy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It showed clearly that he had – as usual, in spite of the enormous range of his reading and experience of literature – read this work with close attention.

It is indeed a poem that deserves close and detailed attention, and after that (not before, according to a too common critical procedure) careful consideration, and re-consideration. It is one of the masterpieces of fourteenth-century art in England, and of English Literature as a whole. It is one of those greater works which not only bear the trampling of the Schools, endure becoming a *text*, indeed (severest test) a *set text*, but yield more and more under this pressure. For it belongs to that literary kind which has deep roots in the past, deeper even than its author was aware. It is made of tales often told before and elsewhere, and of elements that derive from remote times, beyond the vision or awareness of the poet: like *Beowulf*, or some of Shakespeare's major plays, such as *King Lear* or *Hamlet*.

It is an interesting question: what is this flavour, this atmosphere, this virtue that such *rooted* works have, and which compensates for the inevitable flaws and imperfect adjustments that must appear, when plots, motives, symbols, are rehandled and pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time, used for the expression of ideas quite different from those which produced them. But though *Sir Gawain* would be a very suitable text on which to base a discussion of this question, that is not the kind of thing about which I wish to speak today. I am not concerned at this moment with research into the origins of the tale or its details, or into the question of precisely in what form these reached the author of this poem, before he set to work on it. I wish

to speak about his handling of the matter, or one particular aspect of this: the movement of his mind, as he wrote and (I do not doubt) re-wrote the story, until it had the form that has come down to us. But the other question must not be forgotten. Antiquity like a many-figured back-cloth hangs ever behind the scene. Behind our poem stalk the figures of elder myth, and through the lines are heard the echoes of ancient cults, beliefs and symbols remote from the consciousness of an educated moralist (but also a poet) of the late fourteenth century. His story is not *about* those old things, but it receives part of its life, its vividness, its tension from them. That is the way with the greater fairy-stories – of which this is one. There is indeed no better medium for moral teaching than the good fairy-story (by which I mean a real deep-rooted tale, told as a tale, and not a thinly disguised moral allegory). As the author of *Sir Gawain*, it would seem, perceived; or felt instinctively, rather than consciously: for being a man of the fourteenth century, a serious, didactic, encyclopaedic, not to say pedantic century, he inherited 'faerie', rather than turned deliberately to it.

Out of all the many new things, then, upon which one might hope to say something new – even now, when this poem has become the subject of several editions, translations, discussions, and numerous articles – such as the Beheading Game, the Perilous Host, the Green Man, the Sunlike mythical figure that looms behind the courteous Gawain, nephew of King Arthur, as certainly if more remotely as the Bear-boy lurks behind the heroic Beowulf, nephew of King Hygelac; or such as the Irish influence on Britain, and the influence of both on France, and the French return; or coming down to our author's own time: the 'Alliterative Revival', and the contemporary debate about its use in narrative, almost lost now save for brief echoes in *Sir Gawain* and in Chaucer (who, I think, knew *Sir Gawain*, and probably the author also) – out of all these and other matters which the title *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* might suggest I wish to turn to one, more neglected, and yet, I think, more fundamentally important: the kernel, the very nub of the poem as it was finally made, its great third 'fit', and within that the temptation of Sir Gawain and his confession.

In speaking of this matter, the temptation and confession of Gawain, I must rely, of course, on a knowledge of the poem as a

whole, in itself or in a translation. Where quotation is essential, I will use a translation which I have just completed, since I have made it with two objects (to some extent, I hope, achieved): to preserve the original metre and alliteration, without which translation is of little value except as a crib; and to preserve, to exhibit in an intelligible modern idiom, the nobility and the courtesy of this poem, by a poet to whom 'courtesy' meant so much.

Since I am not speaking of the poem as a whole, or its admirable construction, I need only indicate one point in this, which is for my purpose significant. The poem is divided into four fits or cantos; but the third is much the largest, much more than a quarter of the whole (872 lines out of a total of 2530): a numerical pointer, as it were, to the real primary interest of the poet. And yet actually he has tried to conceal the numerical evidence by attaching, skilfully yet artificially, part of what really belongs to the situation of the Third Fit to the Second Fit. The temptation of Sir Gawain really begins as far back as the beginning of stanza 39 (line 928) (if not earlier) and lasts for more than a thousand lines. All else is by comparison, even when highly pictorial, perfunctory. The temptation was to this poet the *raison d'être* of his poem; all else was to him scenery, background, or else machinery: a device for getting Sir Gawain into the situation which he wished to study.

Of what lay before, therefore, I need only briefly remind you. We have the setting, with a brief sketch of the magnificence of the Arthurian court in the midst of the highest festival of the year (to the English), the feast of Christmas. At dinner on New Year's Day there rides into the hall a great Green Knight on a green horse, with a green axe, and issues his challenge: any man in the court that has the courage may take the axe and strike the Green Knight a single unopposed blow, on condition that he promises after a year and a day to allow the Green Knight to give him one unopposed blow in return.

In the event it is Sir Gawain that takes up the challenge. But of all this I wish only to point out one important aspect. From this very beginning we can already perceive the moral purpose of the poet at work, or we can do so at a re-reading, after consideration. It is necessary to the temptation that Gawain's actions should be capable of moral approbation; and amidst all the 'faerie' the poet is at pains to show that they were so. He takes up the challenge

to rescue the king from the false position in which his rashness has placed him. Gawain's motive is not pride in his own prowess, not boastfulness, not even the light-hearted frivolity of knights making absurd bets and vows in the midst of the Christmas revels. His motive is a humble one: the protection of Arthur, his elder kinsman, of his king, of the head of the Round Table, from indignity and peril, and the risking instead of himself, the least of the knights (as he declares), and the one whose loss could most easily be endured. He is involved therefore in the business, as far as it was possible to make the fairy-story go, as a matter of duty and humility and self-sacrifice. And since the absurdity of the challenge could not wholly be got rid of – absurdity, that is, if the story is to be conducted on a serious moral plane, in which every action of the hero, Gawain, is to be scrutinized and morally assessed – the king himself is criticized, both by the author as narrator, and by the lords of the court.

One further point, to which we shall return later. From the beginning Gawain is tricked, or at least trapped. He accepts the challenge, to deal the blow *quat-so bifallez after* ('whatever the consequences') and in a year's time to present himself, without substitute or assistant, to receive a return blow with whatever weapon the Green Knight chooses. He is no sooner involved than he is informed that he must seek out the Green Knight himself, to get his 'wages' where he lives in some region unnamed. He accepts this onerous addition. But when he had delivered the stroke and beheaded the Knight, the trap is sprung; for the challenger is not slain, he picks up his own head, strides back onto his horse, and rides off, after the ugly severed head, held aloft in his hand, has warned Gawain to be true to his vow.

Now we, and no doubt many of our poet's audience, may not be surprised by this. If we are introduced to a green man, with green hair and face, on a green horse, at the court of King Arthur, we expect 'magic'; and Arthur and Gawain should have expected it also, we think. As indeed most of those present seem to have done: 'a phantom and fay-magic folk there thought it' (11.240). But this poet was as it were determined to take the story and its machinery for granted, and then examine the problems of conduct, especially as regards Sir Gawain, that arose. One of the things that he will be most concerned with is *lewte*, 'keeping faith'. It is there-

fore highly important from the outset to consider precisely the relations of the Green Knight and Gawain, and the exact nature of the contract between them, just as if we were dealing with a normal and possible engagement between two 'gentlemen'. Thus the poet is at pains, I think, to indicate that the 'magic', though it might be feared as a possibility by the challenged, is concealed by the challenger in the drawing up of the agreement. The king takes the challenge at its face-value, a piece of folly: that is, asking to be slain on the spot; and later, when Gawain is preparing his blow:

'Take care, cousin,' quoth the king, 'one cut to address,  
and if thou learnest him his lesson, I believe very well  
that thou wilt bear any blow that he gives back later.'

(17.372-4)

And so, though Gawain's good faith is involved – by his own words: *quat-so bifallez after* – his opponent has actually concealed the fact that he could not be slain in this manner, being protected by magic. And Gawain is now pledged to a perilous quest and journey the only probable end of which will be his death. For he has not (yet) any magic; and when the time comes he must set forth, the deliverer of his king and kinsman, and the upholder of the honour of his order, with unflinching courage and *lewte*, alone and unprotected.

The time does come at last, and Sir Gawain prepares to depart in search of the Green Knight and the Green Chapel where the tryst has been set. And then at least the poet allows no room for doubt, whatever you may think of my introduction of ethical considerations into the First Fit, and the fairy-tale scene of the Beheading. He describes the armour of Sir Gawain, and though we now may be caught rather by the contrast of his glowing scarlet and glittering gold with the green of the challenger, and ponder its possible inherited significance, the poet's interest is not there. He gives in fact all told only a few lines to all the gear and the colour red (*red* and *goulez*) is only twice named. It is the shield with which he is concerned. The shield of Gawain he uses indeed to blazon forth his own mind and purpose, and to that he devotes three whole stanzas. Upon the shield he imposes – and we may

deliberately use this word, for here beyond doubt we have an addition of his own – instead of the heraldic charges found in other romances, lion, eagle, or gryphon, the symbol of the pentangle. Now it does not greatly matter what significance or significances are elsewhere or earlier ascribed to this symbol.<sup>1</sup> Just as it does not matter greatly what other or older significances were attached to green or red, to holly or to axes. For the significance that the pentangle is to bear in this poem is made plain – plain enough, that is, in general purport<sup>2</sup>: it is to betoken 'perfection' indeed, but perfection in religion (the Christian faith), in piety and morality, and the 'courtesy' that flows therefrom into human relations; perfection in the details of each, and a perfect and unbroken bond between the higher and lower planes. It is with this sign upon his shield (and as we later learn embroidered also on his coat-armour), imposed there by our poet (for the reasons that he gives for the use of it are in themselves and in the style of their enumeration such as Sir Gawain himself could not possibly have had, still less openly asserted, for the adoption of this charge) – it is with this sign that Sir Gawain rides forth from Camelot.

His long and perilous journey in search of the Green Chapel is briefly, and in general adequately described. Adequately, that is, if in places perfunctory, and in others obscure to the commentators, for the purpose of the poet. He is anxious now to reach the castle of the temptation. We need not concern ourselves on this occasion with any further points until the castle comes in sight. And when it does, we shall be concerned with what the author has made of it, not with the materials, wholly different in purport, out of which he may be thought to have built it.

How does Gawain find the castle? *In answer to prayer*. He has been journeying since All Hallows. It is now Christmas Eve, and he is lost in a wild strange country of tangled forest; but his chief concern is that he should not miss Mass on Christmas morning. He was

troubled lest a truant at that time he should prove  
from the service of the sweet Lord, who on that selfsame night  
of a maid became man our mourning to conquer.  
And therefore sighing he said: 'I beseech thee, O Lord,  
and Mary who is the mildest mother most dear,

for some harbour where with honour I might hear the Mass  
and thy Matins tomorrow. This meekly I ask,  
and thereto promptly I pray with Pater and Ave and Creed.'  
(32.750-8)

It is when he has so prayed, and made an act of contrition, and blessed himself thrice with the sign of the cross, that he suddenly catches sight through the trees of the beautiful white castle, and rides on to a courteous welcome, and the answer to his prayer.

Out of whatever more ancient stones may have been built the gleaming but solid magnificence of this castle, whatever turn the story may take, whatever details may be discovered that the author inherited and overlooked or failed to accommodate to his new purpose, this much is clear: our poet is bringing Gawain to no haunt of demons, enemies of human kind, but to a courteous and Christian hall. There the Court of Arthur and the Round Table are held in honour; and there the chapel-bells ring for Vespers, and the kind air of Christendom blows.

On the morn when every man remembers the time  
that our dear Lord for our doom to die was born,  
in every home wakes happiness on earth for His sake.  
So did it there on that day with the dearest delights.  
(41.995-8)

There Gawain was to feel and be 'at home' for a short while, to find himself unexpectedly in the midst of the life and society that he most liked, and where his very skill and pleasure in courteous converse would ensure him the highest honour.

Yet his temptation has begun. We shall not appreciate it at a first reading perhaps, but any reconsideration will reveal it to us that this strange tale, this *mayn meruayle* (whether we believe in it or not), has been carefully re-drawn by a skilled hand directed by a wise and noble mind. It is in the very setting to which Gawain is used, and in which he has hitherto achieved the highest repute, that he is to be tested, within Christendom and so as a Christian. He himself and all that he stands for are to be assayed.

And if the pentangle with its touch of learned pedantry, at war it seemed with the artistic instinct of a narrative poet,<sup>3</sup> may for

a moment have made us fear that we were going to lose Faerie only to gain a formalized allegory, we are now swiftly reassured. 'Perfection' Gawain may have been given as a standard to strive for (for with no less ideal could he achieve a near-perfection), but he himself is not presented as a mathematical allegory, but as a man, an individual human being. His very 'courtesy' proceeds not solely from the ideals, or the fashions, of his imagined time, but from his own character. He enjoys the sweet society of gentle ladies intensely, and he is immediately moved deeply by beauty. This is how his first meeting with the fair Lady of the Castle is described. Gawain had attended Vespers in the chapel, and when they are over the lady comes forth from her private pew.

And from her closet she came with many comely maidens.  
She was fairer in face, in her flesh and her skin,  
her proportions, her complexion, and her port than all others,  
and more lovely than Guinevere to Gawain she looked.  
He came through the chancel to pay court to her grace . . .  
(39.942-6)

There follows a brief description of her beauty in contrast to the old and wrinkled and ugly lady that was at her side:

For if the younger was youthful, yellow was the elder;  
with rose-hue the one face was richly mantled,  
rough wrinkled cheeks rolled on the other;  
on the kerchiefs of the one many clear pearls were,  
her breast and bright throat were bare displayed,  
fairer than white snow that falls on the hills;  
the other was clad with a cloth that enclosed all her neck,  
enveloped was her black chin with chalk-white veils . . .  
(39.951-8)

When Gawain glimpsed that gay lady that so gracious looked,  
with leave sought of the lord towards the ladies he went;  
the elder he saluted, low to her bowing,  
about the lovelier he laid then lightly his arms  
and kissed her in courtly wise with courtesy speaking.  
(40.970-4)

And the next day at the dinner on Christmas Day he is set on the dais beside her, and of all the mirth and splendour of the feast the author (as he says himself) is concerned only to depict their delight.

Yet I ween that Wawain and that woman so fair  
in companionship took such pleasure together  
in sweet society soft words speaking,  
their courteous converse clean and clear of all evil,  
that with their pleasant pastime no prince's sport  
compares.

Drums beat, and trumps men wind,  
many pipers play their airs;  
each man his needs did mind,  
and they two minded theirs. (41.1010-19)

This is the setting, but the situation is not yet fully prepared. Though Gawain takes his ease for a while, he does not forget his quest. For four days he enjoys the merrymaking, but in the evening of the fourth day when there are now but three left of the old year before the appointed New Year's Day, he begs leave to depart on the morrow. He tells no more of his errand than that he is obliged to try and find a place called the Green Chapel and reach it on New Year's morning. Then he is told by the lord that he can rest at ease three days longer and complete the cure of all the hardships of his journey, for the Green Chapel is not two miles away. A guide shall be found to lead him thither on the morning itself.

At this point the author makes one of his many skilful combinations of elements of older fairy-story with the character of Gawain (as he is depicting him) to provide the machinery of his own version. In what follows we glimpse the Perilous Host who must be obeyed in every command, however silly or outrageous it may seem; but we see also that warmth, almost we might say impetuous excess, of courtesy that characterizes Gawain. Just as when he rehearsed the compact with the Green Knight he said largely 'whatever may be the consequences' and so landed himself in more than he bargained for; so now in delight and gratitude he cries:

'Now I thank you a thousand times for this beyond all!

Now my quest is accomplished, as you crave it, I will  
dwell a few days here, and else do what you order.'

(44.1080-2)

The lord immediately seizes on this, and holds him to his word: Gawain is to lie late abed, and then spend the days with the lady, while the lord goes off hunting. And then a seemingly absurd compact is propounded.

'One thing more,' said the master, 'we'll make an agreement:  
whatever I win in the wood at once shall be yours,  
and whatever gain you may get you shall give in exchange.  
Shall we swap thus, sweet man - come, say what you think! -  
whether one's luck be light, or one's lot be better?'  
'By God,' quoth good Gawain, 'I agree to it all,  
and whatever play you propose seems pleasant to me.'  
'Done! 'Tis a bargain! Who'll bring us the drink?'  
So said the lord of that land. They laughed one and all;  
they drank and they dallied, and they did as they pleased,  
these lords and ladies, as long as they wished,  
and then with customs of France and many courtly phrases  
they stood in sweet debate and soft words banded,  
and lovingly they kissed, their leave taking.  
With trusty attendants and torches gleaming  
they were brought at the last to their beds so soft,  
one and all.

Yet ere to bed they came,  
he the bargain did oft recall;  
he knew how to play a game  
the old governor of that hall. (45.1105-25)

So ends the Second Fit and the great Third Fit begins, about which I wish specially to speak. I will say little about its admirable construction, since that has often been commented upon. Indeed (once granted an interest in contemporary sport and its details, or even without that concession) its excellence is obvious enough to any attentive reader: the way in which the hunts are 'interleaved' between the temptations; the significant diminuendo from the herds of deer (of real economic value in winter) slain in the first hunt to the 'foul fox-fell' of the last day, contrasting

with the increasing peril of the temptations; the dramatic purpose of the hunts, not only in timing, and in preserving a double view with the three main actors kept all the while in sight, but also in elongating and making most weighty the three vital days out of the whole year of the general action: all this needs no elaboration.<sup>4</sup> But the hunts have also another function, essential to the handling of the tale in this version, that is more to my purpose. As I have already indicated, any consideration of 'analogues', especially the less courtly, or indeed any close examination of our text without reference to others, will suggest that our poet has done his best to turn the place of the temptation into a real chivalrous castle, no mirage of enchantment or abode of fays, where the laws of courtesy, hospitality, and morality run. The hunts play a significant place in this change of atmosphere. The lord behaves as a real wealthy lord might be expected to behave in the season. He must be out of the way, but he does not remain mysteriously aloof, or just vanish. His absence and the lady's opportunity are thus accounted for naturally; and this helps to make the temptations also more natural, and so to set them on a normal moral plane.

There would not, I think, and I am sure that the author intended that there should not, be any more suspicion in the minds of genuine first-time readers or hearers of his story<sup>5</sup> than in the mind of Sir Gawain himself (as is clearly shown) that the temptations were all a 'put-up job', just part of the perils and trials that he had been inveigled from Arthur's court to undergo and so be destroyed or utterly disgraced. In fact it is possible to wonder whether the author has not gone too far. Has not his contrivance a grave weakness? All – apart perhaps from unusual but not incredible magnificence – all is so normal in the castle that on reflexion the question must soon arise: 'What would have happened, if Gawain had not passed the test?' For we learn in the end that the lord and lady were conniving; yet the test was meant to be real, to procure if possible Gawain's downfall and the disgrace of his 'high order'. The lady was in fact his 'enemy keen'. How then was she protected, if her lord was far away, hallooing and hunting in the forest? It is no answer to this question to point to ancient and barbaric customs or to tales in which memory of them is still enshrined. For we are not in that world, and if indeed

the author knew anything about it he has wholly rejected it. But he has not wholly rejected 'magic'. And the answer may be that 'fairy-story', though concealed, or taken for granted as part of the machinery of events, is really as integral to this part of the narrative as to those where it is more obvious and unaltered, such as the incursion of the Green Knight. Only *fayryze* (240) will suffice to make the plot of the lord and lady intelligible and workable in the imagined world that the author has contrived. We must suppose that just as Sir Bertilak could go green again and change shape for the tryst at the Chapel, so the lady could have protected herself by some sudden change, or destroying power, to which Sir Gawain would have become exposed by falling to temptation, even in will only.<sup>6</sup> If we have this in mind, then perhaps the 'weakness' becomes strength. The temptation is real and perilous in the extreme on the *moral plane* (for Gawain's own view of the circumstances is all that matters on that plane<sup>7</sup>); yet hanging in the background, for those able to receive the air of 'faerie' in a romance, is a terrible threat of disaster and destruction. The struggle becomes intense to a degree which a merely realistic story of how a pious knight resisted a temptation to adultery (when a guest) could hardly attain.<sup>8</sup> It is one of the properties of Fairy Story thus to enlarge the scene and the actors; or rather it is one of the properties that are distilled by literary alchemy when old deep-rooted stories are rehandled by a real poet with an imagination of his own.

In my view, then, the temptations of Sir Gawain, his behaviour under them, and criticism of his code, were for our author his story, to which all else was subservient. I will not argue this. The weight, length, and detailed elaboration of the Third Fit (and of the end of the Second Fit which defines the situation) are, as I have said, sufficient evidence to show where at least the prime attention of the poet was concentrated.

I will turn then now to the temptation scenes, especially to those points in them that are most significant, as I believe, of the author's views and purpose: the keys to the question 'what is this poem really about?' as it is by him presented. For this purpose it is necessary to have fresh in mind the conversations of Gawain and the Lady of the Castle.

(Here the temptation-scenes were read aloud in translation).<sup>9</sup>

From these scenes I will select some points for comment. On December the 29th the lady comes to Gawain's room before he is fully awake, sits upon his bed-side, and when he arouses puts her arms about him (49.1224-5). She tells him that all is quite safe, and makes her all-out assault. It is, I think, here important to say that though some critics have held this to be a mistake on her part (which can in reality mean only a mistake on the part of the poet), they themselves are certainly mistaken. The lady is very beautiful indeed, Gawain was from the first, as we have seen, greatly attracted by her, and not only is he severely tempted on this occasion, but by the lady's declaration (49.1235-40) *that temptation remains in force throughout his dealings with her*. All their converse and talk slips perpetually towards adultery thereafter.

After the first temptation no private conversation between Gawain and the lady (except in his room) is reported – he is either with at least both the ladies together, or after the lord's home-comings in company – save only in the evening after the second temptation. And we may well consider the change that has occurred, contrasting the scene after supper on December the 30th with the untroubled air at dinner on Christmas Day (which I have already recited, page 80):

Much gladness and gaiety began then to spring  
 round the fire on the hearth, and freely and oft  
 at supper and later: many songs of delight,  
 such as canticles of Christmas, and new carol-dances,  
 amid all the mannerly mirth that men can tell of;  
 and ever our noble knight was next to the lady.  
 Such glances she gave him of her gracious favour,  
 secretly stealing sweet looks that strong man to charm,  
 that he was passing perplexed, and ill-pleased at heart.  
 Yet he would fain not of his courtesy coldly refuse her,  
 but graciously engaged her, however against the grain  
 the play. (66.1652-63)

This I believe to be a fair translation of a passage that contains some verbal, and possibly textual, difficulties; but neither this version nor the original must be misunderstood. Gawain's mood

is not that of one who has been 'put off' or disgusted, but of a man who does not know what to do. He is in the throes of temptation. All his breeding constrains him to go on playing the game, but the lady has already exposed the weakness of such 'nurture', that it is a perilous weapon in such a situation, as dangerous as a handful of pretty rockets near a real gunpowder-plot. Immediately afterwards fear or prudence suggests flight, and Gawain tries to get out of his promise to do the lord's bidding and stay three nights longer. But he is caught again by his own courtesy. He has no better excuse to offer than to say that it is very near the time for his appointment, and he had better start in the morning. This the lord easily counters by pretending to think that his own good faith is doubted, and he repeats that he gives his word that Sir Gawain shall reach the Green Chapel in good time. That this attempt at flight on Gawain's part is due to moral wisdom (to fear of himself, that is) and not to disgust is made clear by the sequel.

Apart from this hint, however, in the first two scenes the author has been content to report events and sayings without revealing Gawain's feelings (or his own views). But as soon as we come to the third scene the tone changes. So far Gawain has been engaged mainly in a problem of 'courtesy', and we see him using the wits and good manners for which he was renowned with great skill, and still (until the evening of December the 30th) with a certain confidence. But with stanzas 70 and 71 (lines 1750 ff.) we come to the 'nub' of the affair. Gawain is now in great peril. Wise flight has proved impossible without breaking his word and the rules of courtesy to his host.<sup>10</sup> His sleep has been dark and troubled with the fear of death. And when the lady appears again he welcomes her with sheer pleasure and delight in her beauty. On the last morning of the old year she came again to his room:

in a gay mantle that to the ground was measured  
 and was fur-lined most fairly with fells well trimmed,  
 with no comely coif on her head, only the clear jewels  
 that were twined in her tressure by twenties in clusters;  
 her noble face and her neck all naked were laid,  
 her breast bare in front and at the back also.  
 She came through the chamber-door and closed it behind her,  
 wide set a window, and to wake him she called,

thus greeting him gaily with her gracious words  
of cheer:

'Ah! man, how canst thou sleep,  
the morning is so clear!  
He lay in darkness deep,  
but her call he then could hear.

In heavy darkness drowsing he dream-words muttered,  
as a man whose mind was bemused with many mournful thoughts,  
how destiny should his doom on that day bring him  
when he at the Green Chapel the great man would meet,  
and be obliged his blow to abide without debate at all.  
But when so comely she came, he recalled then his wits,  
swept aside his slumbers, and swiftly made answer.  
The lady in lovely guise came laughing sweetly,  
bent down o'er his dear face, and deftly kissed him.  
He greeted her graciously with a glad welcome,  
seeing her so glorious and gaily attired,  
so faultless in her features and so fine in her hues  
that at once joy up-welling went warm to his heart.  
With smiles sweet and soft they turned swiftly to mirth,  
and only brightness and bliss was broached there between them  
so gay.

They spoke then speeches good,  
much pleasure was in that play;  
great peril between them stood,  
unless Mary for her knight should pray. (69-70.1736-69)

And with that we have the re-entry, for the first time since the pentangle and the shield of Gawain (that is here indeed alluded to), of *religion*, of something higher than and beyond a code of polite or polished manners which have proved, and are going again and finally to prove, not only an ineffectual weapon in the last resort, but an actual danger, playing into the hands of the enemy.

Immediately afterwards the word *synne* is introduced, for the first and only time in this highly moral poem, and so all the more emphatically; and what is more, a distinction is drawn, Gawain himself is forced to draw, a distinction between 'sin' (the moral law) and 'courtesy':

For she, queenly and peerless, pressed him so closely,  
led him so near the line, that at last he must needs  
either refuse her with offence or her favours there take.  
He cared for his courtesy, lest a caitiff<sup>11</sup> he proved,  
yet more for his sad case, if he should sin commit  
and to the owner of the house, to his host, be a traitor.  
'God help me!' said he. 'Happen that shall not!'

(71.1770-6)

The end of the last temptation-scene, with the lady's complete shift of ground after her final defeat on the major (or higher, or only real) issue, is, of course, an added complexity in this complex poem, which must be considered in its place. But we must from this point move at once to the scene that follows the temptation: Gawain's confession (75.1874-84).

Gollancz at least deserves credit for noting the confession,<sup>12</sup> which had previously received little or no attention. But he totally missed the point, or points, involved. These I wish now specially to consider. It is not too much to say that the whole interpretation and valuation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* depends on what one thinks of the thirtieth stanza of the Third Fit [stanza 75]. Either the poet knew what he was about, meant what he said, and placed this stanza where he wished it to be – in which case we must think about it seriously and consider his intentions; or else he did not, and was just a muddler, stringing conventional scenes together, and his work is not worth long consideration at all, except, perhaps, as a lumber-room of old half-forgotten and less than half-understood stories and motives, just a fairy-story for adults, and not a very good one.

Gollancz evidently thought the latter; for in his notes he makes the astonishing remark that *though the poet does not notice it (!), Gawain makes a sacrilegious confession. For he conceals the fact that he has accepted the girdle with the intention of retaining it.* This is arrant nonsense. It will not even endure reference to the text, as we shall see. But, first of all, it is quite incredible that a poet of high seriousness<sup>13</sup> who has already with explicit moral purpose inserted a long digression on the Pentangle and the shield of Sir Gawain, should put in a passage about *confession and absolution* (matters which he regarded with the greatest solemnity, whatever critics

may now feel) quite casually, and without 'noticing' such a minor point as 'sacrilege'. If he was such a fool, one wonders why editors trouble to edit his works.

Let us look then at the text. First: since the author does not specify what Gawain confessed, we cannot say what he omitted, and it is therefore gratuitously silly to assert that he concealed anything. We are told, however, that he *schewed his mysdedez, of þe more and þe mynne*, that is, that he confessed all his sins (sc. all that it was necessary to confess) both great and small. If that is not definite enough, it is made still plainer that Gawain's confession was a good one, and not 'sacrilegious', and the absolution effective,<sup>14</sup> by the statement that this was so:

There he cleany confessed him and declared his misdeeds,  
both the more and the less, and for mercy he begged,  
to absolve him of them all he besought the good man;  
and he assoiled him and made him as safe and as clean  
as for Doom's Day indeed, were it due on the morrow.

(75.1880-4)

And if even this is not enough the poet goes on to describe the consequent lightness of Gawain's heart.

Thereafter more merry he made among the fair ladies,  
with carol-dances gentle and all kinds of rejoicing,  
than ever he did ere that day, till the darkness of night,  
in bliss.

Each man there said: 'I vow  
a delight to all he is!  
Since hither he came till now,  
he was ne'er so gay as this.'

(75.1885-92)

Need I say that a light heart is certainly not the mood induced by a bad confession and the wilful concealment of sin?

Gawain's confession is represented as a good one, then. Yet the girdle is retained. This cannot be accidental or inadvertent. We are obliged therefore to come to terms with the situation deliberately contrived by the author; we are driven to consider the relation of all these rules of behaviour, these games and courtesies,

to *sin*, morals, the saving of souls, to what the author would have held to be eternal and universal values. And that, surely, is precisely why the confession is introduced, and at this point. Gawain in his last perilous extremity was obliged to tear his 'code' in two, and distinguish its components of good manners and good morals. We are now compelled to consider these matters further.

The first implication of the confession is seen thus to be that retention of the girdle was not a *misdeed* or a *sin* on the moral plane in the author's view. For there are only two alternatives: either (a) Gawain did not mention the girdle at all, being sufficiently instructed to distinguish between such pastimes and serious matters; or (b) if he did mention it, his confessor *lerned hym better*. The former is perhaps the less likely, since Gawain's education in this direction had, we might say, only just begun; whereas we are told that before he went to confession Gawain asked the advice of the priest.<sup>15</sup>

We have in fact reached the point of intersection of two different planes: of a real and permanent, and an unreal and passing world of values: *morals* on the one hand, and on the other a *code of honour*, or a game with rules. The personal code of most people was, and of many still is, like that of Sir Gawain made up of a close blend of the two; and breaches at any point in that personal code have a very similar emotional flavour. Only a crisis, or serious thought without a crisis (which is rare) will serve to disentangle the elements; and the process may be painful, as Gawain discovered.

A 'game with rules' may deal, of course, with trivial matters or with ones more serious in an ascending scale, as, say, from games with pieces of cardboard upwards. The more they deal with or become involved with real affairs and duties, the more moral bearings they will have; the things 'done' or 'not done' will have two sides, the ritual or rules of the game, and the eternal rules; and therefore the more occasions there will be for a *dilemma*, a conflict of rules. And the more seriously you take your games, the severer and more painful the dilemma. Sir Gawain belonged (as he is depicted) by class, tradition, and training to the kind that take their games with great seriousness. His suffering was acute. He was, one might say, selected for that reason – by an author who belonged to the same class and tradition and knew what it felt like from the inside; but who was interested also in

problems of conduct, and have given some thought to them.

It might be felt a fair question to interject at this moment: 'Is it not a *fault of art*, a poetic blunder, to allow so serious a matter as a real confession and absolution to intrude at this point? To force into the open, and compel the attention of a reader to this divergence of values (in which he may not be much interested)? Indeed to intrude such matters at all at any point into a fairy-story, to subject such absurdities as exchanging venison for a kiss to a serious examination?'

I am not at this time greatly concerned to answer such a question; for I am at the moment chiefly anxious to assert, to show (I hope), that this is what the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has in fact done, and that his operations upon his material will be unintelligible or largely misunderstood if that is not recognized. But if the question were raised I would reply: There is a strength and life about this poem which is almost universally admitted. This is more likely to be *due* to the greater seriousness of the author than to have survived in spite of it. But much depends on what you want, or think that you want. Do you demand that the author should have the objects that you would expect him to have, or the views that you would prefer him to hold? That he should, for instance, be an anthropological antiquarian? Or that he should simply devote himself to telling an exciting fairy-story well, in such a way as to produce literary credibility sufficient for entertainment? And how will he do that, in terms of his own time and thought? Surely, if that simple object was his only object (unlikely enough in the complex and didactic fourteenth century), he would in the process of giving life to old legends inevitably slide into the consideration of contemporary, or permanent, problems of conduct? It is by that consideration that he has vivified his characters, and by that has given new life to old tales – totally different to their former significance (about which he probably knew, and certainly cared, much less than some men of this day). It is a case of pouring new wine into old bottles, no doubt, and there are some inevitable cracks and leaks. But I at any rate find this question of ethics both more vivid for its curious and bizarre setting, and in itself more interesting than all the guesses about more primitive times. But then I think the fourteenth century superior to barbarism, and theology and ethics above folklore.

I do not, of course, insist that the author must have had, as a conscious purpose, any such object as probing into the relation of real and artificial rules of conduct when he began to deal with this story. I imagine this poem took some time to write, was often altered, expanded here and cut down there. But the moral questions are there, inherent in the tale, and they will naturally arise and present themselves for attention in proportion as the tale is realistically handled, and in proportion as the author is a man of thought and intelligence, something more than a tale-pedlar. In any case it is clear that before he achieved his final version the author was fully aware of what he was doing: writing a 'moral' poem, and a study of knightly virtue and manners under strain; for he put in two stanzas ('though it may tarry my story', and though we may not now like it) about the Pentangle, as he sent off his knight to his trial. And before he puts in the passage about confession at the end of the major trial, he has already drawn our attention to the divergence of values, by the clear distinction expressed in lines 1773-4; lines which place the moral law higher than the laws of 'courtesy', and explicitly reject, and make Gawain reject, *adultery* as part of courtesy possible to a perfect knight. A very contemporary and very English point of view!<sup>16</sup>

But by the open invitation to adultery of lines 49.1237-40, and that is no doubt one of the reasons why it is placed at the beginning, we are able to see the hollowness of all the courteous fencing that follows. For Gawain from that moment can have no doubt whatever of the lady's object: *to haf wonnen hym to woze* ('to allure him to love-making', 61.1550). He is attacked on two fronts, and has in reality abandoned from the outset 'service', the absolute submission of the 'true servant' to the will and wishes of the lady; though he strives throughout to maintain the verbal shadow of it, the gentleness of polite speech and manners.

By God, I would be glad, if good to you seemed  
whatever I could say, or in service could offer  
to the pleasure of your excellence – it would be pure delight  
(50.1245-7)

But I am proud of the praise you are pleased to give me,  
and as your servant in earnest my sovereign I hold you  
(51.1277-8)

All your will I would wish to work, as I am able,  
 being so beholden in honour, and, so help me the Lord,  
 desiring ever the servant of yourself to remain (61.1546-8)

All such expressions have become mere pretences, reduced to a level hardly above that of the Christmas games, when the *wylnyng* (1546) of the lady has been and is persistently rejected.

Sheer courtly practice in the game of manners and adroitness of speech enabled Gawain to avoid being openly *crabbyn*, to eschew 'vileinye' in words, that is expressions that were boorish or brutally outspoken (whether just and true, or not).<sup>17</sup> But even though he may do it with disarming gracefulness, the law of 'service' to the lady's wishes is in fact broken. And the motive of the breach, of all his adroit defence, can from the first only be a moral one, though this is not stated until 71.1773-4. Had there been no other way out Gawain would have had to abandon even his technical courtesy of manners and *lodly refuse* (1772). But he was never 'driven nearer to the line' than to say: 'Nay! lover have I none, and none will have meanwhile' (71.1790-1), which in spite of his 'smooth smile' is plain enough and *a worde þat worst is of alle* (72.1792). But the lady drives him no further, for undoubtedly the author did not wish the gentleness of Gawain to be broken down. He approved gentle manners and absence of 'vileinye' when allied to, founded on, virtue, the distillation of the courtesy in 'courtly love' without adultery.<sup>18</sup>

We must then recognize that the intrusion of Sir Gawain's confession and its precise placing in the poem was deliberate; and that it is an indication of the author's opinion that *games* and *manners* were not important, ultimately (for 'salvation', 75.1879), and were in any case on an inferior plane to real *virtue*, to which they must in the case of conflict give way. Even the Green Knight recognizes the distinction, and declares that Gawain is 'the most faultless man on earth' (95.2363) with regard to the major moral issue.

But we have not done with the interesting minor issues. The Green Knight proceeds: *Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wouted* (95.2366). What was this *lewté*? The word is not well translated by 'loyalty', in spite of the kinship of the words; for 'loyalty' is now chiefly applied to honesty and steadfastness in some

important personal or public relationship or duty (as to king or country, kin or dear friends). 'Legality' would be equally akin and better; for *lewté* might mean no more than 'sticking to the rules' of whatever grade or sanction. Thus our author can call the alliterations that occur in the proper places in a line, according to merely metrical rules, *lel lettres* 'loyal letters' (2.35).

What rules then is Gawain accused of breaking in accepting, keeping, and concealing the girdle? It might be *three*: accepting a gift without returning one; not surrendering it as part of the 'gain' on the third day (according to a jocular pact, definitely called a *layke* or game); using it as a protection at the tryst. It is plain, I think, that the Green Knight is considering only the *second* of these. He says:

The true shall truly repay,  
 for no peril then need he quake.  
 Thou didst fail on the third day . . . (94.2354-6)

For it is my weed that thou wearest . . . (95.2358)

It is as man to man, as opponents in a game, that he is challenging Gawain. And I think that it is plain that in this he expresses the opinion of the author.

For the author was not a simple-minded man. Those who take an ultimately stern and uncompromising moral view are not necessarily simple-minded. He might think the major issue clear in theory, but nothing in his handling of his tale suggests that he thought moral conduct a simple and painless thing in practice. And anyway he was, as we might say, a gentleman and a sportsman, and was intrigued by the minor issue. Indeed the *moralitas* of his poem, if complicated, is yet also enriched by this exhibition of a clash of rules on a lower plane. He has contrived or brought out a very pretty problem.

Gawain is induced to accept a parting gift from the lady. From the technical fault of 'covetousness' (taking without return) he has been explicitly acquitted: he had nothing he could give in return which would not by its disparity in value be insulting (72.1798 ff.); he had no thought of the beauty or monetary value of the girdle (81.2037-40). But he was led into a position from which he

could not withdraw by the thought that it might possibly save his life when he came to the tryst. Now the author nowhere examines the ethics of the Beheading Game; but if we do so, we shall not find that Gawain had broken any article of his covenant in wearing the girdle for that purpose. All he had promised to do was to come in person, not send a substitute (the probable meaning of line 17.384: *wyth no wy3 ellez on lyue*, 'in the world with none else but me'); to come at an appointed time, and then stand one stroke without resistance. He does not, therefore, on this count need an advocate; though one might quickly point out that Gawain was actually tricked into the covenant, before the Green Knight revealed that he was magically protected; and his promise might well be held ethically void, and even on the level of a mere 'game' a little private magic of his own could only be regarded as perfectly fair. But the author was not considering this case; though he was not unaware of the point, as we see in Gawain's protest:

But if on floor now falls my head,  
I cannot it restore. (91.2282-3)

We are thus merely considering the events in the castle, and the sporting pact with the lord. Gawain had accepted the girdle as a gift because of his dread of the beheading. But again he had been caught. The lady's timing was cunning. She pressed the belt on him, and the moment he weakened she gave it to him, and then closed the trap. She begged him not to tell her husband. He agreed. He could hardly do anything else; but with his characteristic generosity, indeed impetuous excess, which we have already noted, he vowed never to tell anyone else in the world.<sup>19</sup> Of course he desired the belt on the chance (he seems never to have rated it higher than that) that it might save him from death; but even if he had not, he would have been in a dilemma of 'courtesy'. To have rejected the belt, once accepted; or to have refused the request: neither would have been 'courteous'. It was not for him to enquire why he must keep the belt secret; presumably it was to save the lady from embarrassment, since there was no reason to suppose that it was not hers to give. At any rate it was quite as much hers to give as her kisses, and in that matter he had protected her already from embarrassment by refusing to say from whom

he had obtained them.<sup>20</sup> It is not said at this moment of acceptance and promise that Gawain recalled his game-compact with the lord at all. But he cannot be finally excused on that ground. For he could not long remain forgetful of the point. When the lord came home at night, he was bound to remember. And he did. It is not said so; but we see it clearly in stanza 77: in Gawain's haste to get the business over. 'This time I will pay first' he cries (as usual going further than he need, whether in making or breaking a promise), as he goes to meet the lord half way (lines 1932-4).

It is at this point then, and at this point only, that we may detect Gawain in a fault, such as it is. 'I shall first fulfil the compact that we made,' he says, and for what that compact was worth he does not do so. He says nothing about the girdle. And he is uneasy. 'Enough!' he cries, when the lord (with a significance that he cannot yet perceive, nor we until we have read the whole tale) says that a fox-fell is poor pay for three such precious things as these kisses.

Well, there it is. *Prid tyme þrowe best, but at þe þrid þou fayled þore*. It is not my part to argue that Gawain did not 'fail' at all; for neither was that the thesis of the author. But to consider in what degree and on what plane he failed, in the author's view, so far as it can be discerned; for with such points he was deeply concerned. There were for him, it seems clear to me from his handling of this tale, *three* planes: mere jesting pastimes, such as that played between Gawain and the lord of the castle; 'courtesy',<sup>21</sup> as a code of 'gentle' or polite manners, which included a special mode of deference to women, and could be held to include, as it was by the lady, the more serious, and therefore more dangerous, 'game' of courtly love-making, which might compete with moral laws; and finally real morals, virtues and sins. These might compete one with another. If so, the higher law must be obeyed. From the first arrival of Sir Gawain at the castle situations are being prepared in which such competitions, with dilemmas in conduct, will occur. The author is chiefly interested in the competition between 'courtesy' and virtue (purity and loyalty); he shows us their increasing divergence, and shows us Gawain at the crisis of the temptation recognizing this, and choosing virtue rather than courtesy, yet preserving a graciousness of manner and a gentleness of speech belonging to the true spirit of courtesy. I think it was his intention by

the confession also to show that the lowest grade, 'jesting pastime', was not an ultimately important matter at all; but only after he had amused himself, as it were, by exhibiting a dilemma which artificial courtesy could produce even on a lower level. In this case, since questions of sin and virtue did not arise, Gawain placed the rules of courtesy higher, and obeyed the lady, even though it landed him in breaking his word (though that only in a game of no seriousness). But alas! as I think our author would have said, the rules of artificial courtesy could not really excuse him, not being of universal overriding validity, as are those of morality, not even if courtesy alone had been his motive for taking the girdle. But it was not. He would never have been in the position where he was bound to secrecy, contrary to the games-pact, if he had not wanted to possess the girdle for its possible power: he wished to save his life, a simple and honest motive, and by means that were in no way contrary to his original pact with the Green Knight, and conflicted only with the seemingly absurd and purely jocular pact with the lord of the castle. That was his only fault.

We may observe that each of these 'planes' has its own court of judgement. The moral law is referred to the Church. *Lewte*, 'playing the game' when it is a mere game, as man to man, is referred to the Green Knight, who indeed speaks of the procedure in mock-religious terms, though (it may be noted) he applies these only to the game: the higher matters have been already judged; 'confession' and a 'penance' at the point of his edge. Courtesy is referred to the supreme court of such affairs, the Court of King Arthur of *kydde cortaysye*; and the case against the defendant is laughed out.

But there is yet another court: Sir Gawain himself, and his own judgement. Let us say at once that he is not competent to judge this case impartially, and his judgement cannot be held valid. He is not unnaturally at first in an emotional state of mind, greatly disturbed, after having not only his whole 'code' pulled to pieces, but receiving sore wounds to his pride. His first outcry against himself is hardly more likely to be just than his bitter generalization against women.<sup>22</sup> But it is none the less very interesting to consider what he has to say; because he is a very roundly drawn character, and not a mere vehicle of opinions and analyses. This poet had skill in character drawing. Though the lady, when she has

a reported speaking part, has only a simple role, and only one line to follow (directed by an unexplained 'enmity'), all that she says has an unmistakable tone of her own. Better still is Sir Bertilak, and greater the skill with which he is made to behave and speak credibly both as Green Knight and as Host, so that, if these two had not in fact been one, either would have been adequately drawn as an individual, yet at the end we are well able to believe that we have listened to the same character throughout: it is this as much as anything that makes a reader accept as unquestioningly as Gawain their identity without (in this poem) any disenchantment or change of shape after the revelation. But both these actors are secondary, and their main function is to provide the situation for Gawain's trial. Gawain has full literary reality.

His 'perfection' is made more human and credible, and therefore more appreciable as genuine nobility, by the small flaw.<sup>23</sup> But, to my mind, nothing makes him 'come alive' as a real man so much as the depiction of his 'reactions' to the revelation: here that grossly abused word 'reaction' can with some justice be used, for his words and behaviour are largely a matter of instinct and emotion. We may well consider the contrast between the stanzas in which these are exhibited and the lines in which his perilous journeys are described, lines at once picturesque and perfunctory. But this poet was not really interested in fairy-tale or in romance for their own sakes. It is also, I think, a final stroke of art in a poem that is so concentrated on virtue and problems of conduct that it should end with a glimpse of the 'reactions' of a man truly 'gentle', but not deeply reflective, to a fault in a part of his personal code that is not to a cool outside judge essential. That it should indeed end with a glimpse of that twofold scale with which all reasonably charitable people measure: the stricter for oneself, the more lenient for others.<sup>24</sup> *De kyng confortez þe knyzt, and alle þe court als lazen loude perat.*

What does Gawain feel and say? He accuses himself of *cowardise* and *couetyse*. He 'stood in a study' a long while

in such grief and disgust he had a grue in his heart;  
all the blood from his breast in his blush mingled,  
and he shrank into himself with shame at that speech.  
The first words on that field that he found then to say

were: 'Cursed be ye, Coveting, and Cowardice also!  
 In you is vileness, and vice that virtue destroyeth.'  
 He took then the treacherous thing, and untying the knot  
 fiercely flung he the belt at the feet of the knight:  
 'See there the falsifier, and foul be its fate!  
 Through care for thy blow Cowardice brought me  
 to consent to Coveting, my true kind<sup>25</sup> to forsake,  
 which is free-hand and faithful word that are fitting to knights.  
 Now I am faulty and false, who afraid have been ever  
 of treachery and troth-breach: the two now my curse  
 may bear! (95.2370-84)

Later, on return to the Court, he recounts his adventures in this order:<sup>26</sup> his hardships; the way things went at the tryst, and the bearing of the Green Knight; the love-making of the lady; and (last of all) the matter of the Girdle. He then showed the scar in his neck which he got as a rebuke for his *vnleuté*:

It was torment to tell the truth:  
 in his face the blood did flame;  
 he groaned for grief and ruth  
 when he showed it, to his shame.

'Lo! Lord,' he said at last, and the lace handled,  
 'This is the band! For this a rebuke I bear in my neck!  
 This is the grief and disgrace I have got for myself  
 from the covetousness and cowardice that o'ercame me there!  
 This is the token of the troth-breach that I am detected in,  
 and needs must I wear it while in the world I remain.'  
 (100-1.2501-10)

Two lines follow, of which the first is unclear, but which together (however interpreted or emended) undoubtedly express Gawain's feeling that nothing can ever delete this blot. That is in keeping with his 'excess' when moved; but it is true to the emotions of many others. For one may believe in the forgiveness of sins (as he did), even forgive oneself one's own and certainly forget them, but the sting of shame on morally less important or insignificant levels will bite still after long years as sharp as new!

Sir Gawain's emotion is thus one of burning shame; and the

burden of his self-accusation is cowardice and covetousness. Cowardice is the chief, for through it he fell into covetousness. This must mean that as a knight of the Round Table Gawain makes no claim against the Green Knight for the unfairness of the beheading-pact (though he has glanced at it in lines 2282-3), abides by his own words *quat-so bifallez after* (382), and elects to stand trial on the simple ground that this was a test of the absolute courage of a knight of his Order: having given his word he was obliged to keep it even with death as the consequence, and to meet that with straight unflinching human courage. He was by circumstance the representative of the Round Table and should have stood his ground just so, without aids.

On that simple, but very high level, he is ashamed, and as a result emotionally disturbed. He thus calls 'cowardice' his reluctance to throw away his life without striking a blow, or to surrender a talisman that might possibly have saved him. He calls 'covetice' his acceptance of a gift from a lady which he could not immediately repay, though it was pressed on him after two refusals, and in spite of the fact that he did not value it for its costliness. It was indeed only 'covetice' within the terms of the game with the lord of the castle: keeping back any part of the *waith* because he wanted it for himself (for any reason). He calls 'treachery'<sup>27</sup> a breach of the rules of a mere pastime, which he could only have regarded as jocular or whimsical (whatever lay hidden in the proposer of the game), since there could obviously be no real exchange between the gains of a hunter and those of a man idling at home!

And so we end. Beyond that our author does not take us. We have seen a gentle courtly knight learn by bitter experience the perils of Courtesy, and the unreality in the last resort of protestations of complete 'service' to a lady as a 'sovereign' whose will is law;<sup>28</sup> and in that last resort we have seen him prefer a higher law. But though by that higher law he proved 'faultless', the exposure of 'courtesy' of this kind went further, and he has had to suffer the final mortification of discovering that the will of the lady was in fact his own disgrace, and that all her flattering protestations of love were false. In a moment of bitterness he has rejected all his 'cortaysye' and cried against women as deceivers:

a gain 'twould be vast

to love them well and believe them not, if it lay in man's power!  
(97.2420-1)

But that has not been all his suffering as a knight: he has been tricked into 'not playing the game' and breaking his word in a sport; and we have seen him pass through an agony of emotional shame at this failure on a lower plane only really fitting to failure on the higher. This all seems to me vividly true and credible, and I am not making fun of it, if I say that as a final spectacle we see Gawain tearing off the School Tie (as unworthy to wear it), and riding home with a white feather stuck in his cap, only to have that adopted as the colours of the First Eleven, while the matter ends with the laughter of the Court of Honour.

But finally, how true it is to the depicted character of Gawain, this excess of shame, this going beyond all that is required in adopting a badge of disgrace for all to see always, *in tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute* (100.2488)! And how true also to the whole tone and air of this poem, so concerned with 'confession' and penance.

Grace innogh þe mon may haue  
þat synnez þenne new, 3if him repente,  
Bot wyth sor3 and syt he mot it craue,  
And byde þe payne perto is bent

says the poet in his *Pearl* (661-4).<sup>29</sup> After the shame the repentance, and then the unreserved confession with sorrow and penance, and at last not only forgiveness, but the redemption, so that the 'harm' that is not concealed, and the reproach that is voluntarily borne, becomes a glory, *euermore after*. And with that the whole scene, for a time so vivid, so present, even topical, begins to fade back into the Past. *Gawayn with his olde curteisye* goes back into *Fairyte*<sup>30</sup>

as it is written in the best of the books of romance.  
Thus in Arthur his days happened this marvel,  
as the Book of the Brut beareth us witness;  
since Brutus the bold knight to Britain came first,  
after the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy,  
I trow,  
many a marvel such before  
has happened here ere now.

To his bliss us bring Who bore  
the Crown of Thorns on brow!  
Amen.

(101.2521-30)

*Postscript: lines 1885-92.\**

In the above discussion it was said (p. 88) that Gawain's light heart was sufficient evidence that he had made a 'good confession'. By that I meant that gaiety proceeding from a 'lightness of heart' may be and often is a result of the fitting reception of a sacrament by one of the faithful, and that quite independently of other pains or cares: such as, in Gawain's case, fear of the blow, fear of death. But this may be, and has been, queried. It has been asked: Is not his gaiety due rather to having the belt, and so being no longer afraid of the tryst? Or it has been suggested that Gawain's mood is due rather to despair: let me eat and be merry, for tomorrow I die!

We are not dealing with a simple-minded author, nor with a simple-minded period, and it is not necessary to assume that only one explanation of Gawain's mood is possible (i.e. was in the poet's mind). Gawain is being drawn with understanding, and he is made to feel, speak, and behave as such a man would in his situation as a whole: consolation of religion, magic belt (or at least a belief that such a thing was possible), and approaching mortal peril, and all. But I think, nonetheless, that the placing of the lines describing his mood immediately after the absolution (*And syþen* 1885), and the use of the words *ioye* and *blys*, are sufficient to show that the author intended the confession to be the chief reason of Gawain's increased mirth; and was not thinking at all of a wild gaiety of despair.

But the belt requires more attention. I think it is significant that Gawain nowhere ever shows confidence in the girdle's efficacy, certainly not even *hope* in it sufficient to cause care-free joy! In fact his hope in it seems to have continually decreased from the time of his confession. It is true that, at the time of acceptance and before his visit to the priest, he thanked the lady abundantly and heartily for it (one so courteous could hardly do less!), but even at the moment when the idea of help in escaping from death first wakes in his mind (lines 1855 ff.) and is strongest,

\* Cited above in translation, p. 88.

before he has had time to reflect, all that the poet strictly reports him as thinking is: 'It would be a marvellous thing to have in the desperate business allotted to me. If I could somehow escape being slain, it would be a splendid trick.' It does not sound confident enough, as an explanation of his being merrier that day than ever before. In any case that night he sleeps very badly, and hears every cock crow, dreading the hour of the tryst. In lines 83.2075-6 we read of *þat tene place þer þe ruful race he schulde resayue* ('that grievous place where he is due to endure the dolorous blow'), which is plainly meant to be Gawain's reflexion as he and his guide set out. In lines 85.2138-9 he openly declares to his guide that his trust is in God, whose servant he is.<sup>31</sup> Similarly in lines 86.2158-9, with reference certainly to his confession and preparedness for death, he says: *to Goddez wyllle I am ful bayn, and to hym I haf me tone*. Again in lines 88.2208-11 he overcomes fear not by any thought or mention of the 'jewel for the jeopardy' but by submission to God's will. In lines 90.2255 ff. he is in great fear of imminent death, and is at pains to conceal it, but does not quite succeed. In lines 91.2265-7 he expected the stroke to kill him. And finally in lines 92.2307-8 we read: *no meruayle þaz hym myslyke þat hoped of no rescowe*.

Now all this fear, and this summoning up of courage to meet death, is perfectly consonant with the consolation of religion and with a mood of joy after being assoiled, but it does not accord at all with possession of a talisman that is *believed in* as a protection against bodily harm, according to the words of the temptress:

For whoever goes girdled with this green riband,  
while he keeps it well clasped closely about him,  
there is none so hardy under heaven that to hew him were  
able;  
for he could not be killed by any cunning of hand. (74.1851-4)

We may fairly say, then, that from the moment of its acceptance, certainly from the moment of his absolution, the Girdle seems to have been of no comfort to Gawain.<sup>32</sup> If it were not for lines 81.2030-40, where Gawain puts on the Girdle *for gode of hymself*, we might well have supposed that he had, after confession, resolved not to use it, though he could not now in courtesy hand

it back or break his promise of secrecy. From Gawain's setting out to his shame at the revelation the poet has at any rate ignored the Girdle, or has represented Gawain as doing so. Such comfort and strength as he has beyond his own natural courage is derived only from *religion*. It is no doubt possible to dislike this moral and religious outlook, but the poet has it; and if one does not (with or without dislike) recognize this, the purport and point of the poem will be missed, the point at any rate that the author intended.

Nonetheless it may be objected that I am here pressing the author too hard. If Gawain had shown *no* fear, but had been cheerfully confident in his magic belt (*no more mate ne dismayd for hys mayn dintez* than the Green Knight confident in the magic of Morgan le Fay), then the last scene, the tryst, would have lost all savour. Also granted magic, and even a general belief in the possibility of enchanted belts and the like, it would have needed a very lively faith in this particular belt to take a man to such a tryst without even a shudder of the shoulders! Well, let us concede that. In fact it only goes to strengthen the point that I put forward. Gawain is *not* depicted as having a very lively faith in the Girdle, even if that is only, or partly, for mere reasons of narrative. Therefore his 'joy' on New Year's Eve is not derived from it. Therefore that must be derived from the absolution, to which it is appended, and Gawain is shown as a man with a 'good conscience' and the confession was not 'sacrilegious'.

But quite apart from narrative technique, the poet evidently intended to emphasize the moral and (if you will) higher sides of Gawain's character. For that is simply what he has consistently done throughout, whether with complete appropriateness to his inherited story-material or not. And so, while Gawain does not accept the Girdle solely out of courtesy, and is tempted by the hope of magic aid, and when arming does not forget it, but puts it on *for gode of hymself* and *to sauē hymself*, this motive is minimized, and Gawain is not represented as relying on it at all when coming to the desperate point - for it, no less than the horrible Green Knight, and his *faierie*, and all *faierie*, is ultimately under God. A reflexion which makes the magic Girdle seem rather feeble, as no doubt the poet intended that it should.

We are meant then to look on Sir Gawain, after his last confession, as clear in conscience, and so able as much as any

other brave and pious man (if not as much as a saint) to support himself in the expectation of death with the thought of God's ultimate protection of the righteous. This implies not only that he has survived the lady's temptations, but that his whole adventure and tryst are *for him* righteous, or at least justified and lawful. We now see the great importance of the description in the First Fit of the way in which Sir Gawain became involved in the affair, and the purpose of the remarkable criticisms of King Arthur voiced in the court (in the Second Fit, stanza 29). In these ways Gawain is shown to have become imperilled not out of *nobelay*, nor because of any fantastic custom or vainglorious vow, nor because of pride in prowess or rating himself as the best knight of his Order – all the possible motives that from a strictly moral point of view might make the whole affair for him foolish or reprehensible, a mere wilful risk or waste of life for no sufficient cause. The wilfulness and the pride are cast on the King; Gawain is involved out of humility, and as a matter of duty to his king and kinsman.

We can imagine indeed the author inserting this curious passage after reflexion. After making Gawain's conduct in his adventure the subject of moral analysis on a serious plane, he would see that in that case the adventure must be for Gawain praiseworthy, as judged on the same level. In fact the author has taken this story, or blend of stories, with all its improbabilities, its lack of secure rational motives, and its incoherence, and endeavoured to make it the *machinery* by which a virtuous man is involved in a mortal peril which it is noble, or at least proper (not wrong or silly), for him to face; and is thus drawn into consequent temptations which he does not wilfully or wittingly incur. And in the end he survives all with plain moral weapons. The Pentangle is thus seen to replace the Gryphon on Gawain's shield as part of a deliberate plan throughout – throughout the final version which we have, at any rate. That plan, and that choice and emphasis, must be recognized.

It is another question whether this treatment is either justified, or artistically successful. For myself, I would say that the criticism of Arthur, and the making of Gawain a proxy of the king with wholly humble and unselfish motives, is for this poem<sup>33</sup> necessary, and successful, and realistic. The Pentangle is justified, and only

unsuccessful (at least to my taste, and to that I suppose of many of my period) because it is 'pedantic', very fourteenth-century, almost Chaucerian, in its pedantry indeed, and over long and elaborate, and (most of all) because it proved too difficult for the author's skill with the alliterative verse that he uses. The treatment of the Girdle, hesitating between belief and disregard, is reasonably successful, if one does not scrutinize this matter too closely. A degree of belief in it is necessary for the last temptation-scene; and it proves the only effective bait that the lady has for her traps, thus leading to the one 'flaw' (on the lowest plane of 'playing the game') which makes the actual conduct of Gawain and his near-perfection so much more credible than the mathematical perfection of the Pentangle.

But this belief, or hope, must be played down at the beginning of the last Fit, even if it were in a mere romance unconcerned with moral issues, for confidence in the Girdle would even in such a tale spoil the last scenes. The weakness of the Girdle, as a talisman able (or believed able) to defend a man from wounds, is inherent. Actually this weakness is *less* glaring than it might be, precisely because of the seriousness of the author and the piety which he has ascribed to his pattern of knights; for the disregard of the talisman at the crisis is more credible in such a character as the Gawain of this poem than in a mere adventurer. And yet I regret, not the flaw in Gawain, not that the lady found one little bait for her victim, but that the poet could not think of anything else which Gawain might have accepted and been induced to conceal, and yet one which would not have affected his view of his perilous tryst. But I cannot think of one; so that such criticism, *kesting such cavillacioun*, is idle.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains the best conceived and shaped narrative poem of the Fourteenth Century, indeed of the Middle Age, in English, with one exception only. It has a rival, a claimant to equality not superiority, in Chaucer's masterpiece *Troilus and Criseyde*. That is larger, longer, more intricate, and perhaps more subtle, though no wiser or more perceptive, and certainly less noble. And both these poems deal, from different angles, with the problems that so much occupied the English mind: the relations of Courtesy and Love with morality and Christian morals and the Eternal Law.

## NOTES

- 1 Of this name *pentangle* he is the first recorded user in the vernacular, the only user indeed in Middle English. Yet he claims that the English call it everywhere the Endless Knot. This much at least may be said: the lack of record must be accidental, for the form that he uses, *penta(u)ngel*, is one that shows already clear traces of popular use, being altered from the correct learned *pentaculum* by association with 'angle'. Moreover, though much concerned with the symbolism, he speaks as if his audience could visualize the shape of the figure.
- 2 The attempt to describe the complex figure and its symbolism was actually too much even for our poet's considerable skill with the long alliterative line. In any case, since part of its significance was the *interrelation* of religious faith, piety, and courtesy in human relations, the attempt to enumerate 'virtues' brings out the arbitrariness of their division and their individual names at any one time, and the constant flux of the meaning of these names (such as *pité* or *fraunchyse*) from age to age.
- 3 And why the pentangle is proper to that prince so noble  
I intend now to tell you, though it may tarry my story. (27.623-4)
- 4 Though actually it has, I think, tended to be over-elaborated in criticism. One point only has been neglected, as far as my knowledge goes: the author has taken care to show that the lord himself in person, not the hunt generally, slew and obtained the *waith* that he surrendered to Gawain. This is of course clear in the cases of the boar and the fox. But even in the first hunt it is indicated: 'When the sun began to slope he had slain such a number / of does and other deer one might doubt it were true' (53.1321-2). But (since there appear to have been no other persons of rank at the hunt) the lord of the castle is probably the *best* of 1325, who supervises the cutting up of his own selected 'quarry'. In this case *didde* of 1327 is one of the many errors of the MS, with plural substituted for singular according to the immediate suggestion of a context not wholly clear to the copyist. It was the lord who chose the fattest of his own 'kill' and gave orders for their proper dressing ready for the presentation of *his venysoun* (1375). This may seem a minute point, and remote from the things that are here being considered, but it is, I believe, related to the topic of *lewté* and keeping one's word which is to be examined.
- 5 Unless perhaps in the minds of those with too much literary experience. Yet even they must realise that we are supposed to see things with Gawain's eyes, and sense the air with his senses, and he has plainly no suspicions.
- 6 I mean, if we had posed the author with this question, he would have had an answer, for he had thought the whole thing out, especially all that had a moral aspect; and I think that his answer would have been, in the idiom of his time, the one that I am trying to give.
- 7 His resistance thus actually redounds all the more to his credit, for he is unaware of any peril save that of 'sin', and he resists on plain moral grounds, unaided by the fear of magic powers or even of discovery.
- 8 The text as typed had: 'could not attain. Or would not. For this [is] a mode of making felt the real tension that one should feel in a narrative of moral struggle.' When 'could not attain' was changed to 'could hardly attain' the following sentence was bracketed as if for exclusion. [Ed.]
- 9 This statement is the author's. On this matter see the Foreword. [Ed.]
- 10 Written in pencil on the typescript: 'a sacrifice he is not yet prepared to make' - to be placed either at the end of the sentence or after 'without breaking his word'. [Ed.]
- 11 A cad and a boor.
- 12 The reference is to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* edited by Sir Israel Gollancz, Early English Text Society 1940, p. 123, note to line 1880. [Ed.]

- 13 And one, it may be added, who beyond any real doubt also wrote *Pearl*, not to mention *Purity* and *Patience*.
- 14 Since the effectiveness of confession is wholly dependent on the dispositions of the penitent, and no words of the priest can remedy bad intentions, or the wilful concealment of recollected sin.
- 15 I do not assert, of course, that a *genuine compact*, even in sport, has never any moral implications, and never involves any obligations. But I do mean that in the author's view 'Christmas games' such as those played by the lord and Gawain are not of that order. To that point I will return.
- 16 That Gawain appends to *synne* a consideration that makes the sin more heinous or odious, the treachery of a guest to his host, is both ethically sound, and true to character. It is also very proper to this poem which is concerned with *loyalty* on every plane. Here we find Gawain rejecting a *disloyalty* that would really have been sinful, so that we may view the *lack of loyalty* of which he is after accused in its proper scale.
- 17 So Chaucer reports of his *perfit gentil knight* that *he neuer yet no vileinye ne sayde . . . vnto no maner wight*; and later defends himself speciously against a charge of *vileinye* (precisely low and coarse speech) that might be levelled against his ignoble tales and characters.
- 18 Whether he would have called the lady's invitation *vileinye* is another matter. The actions of the lord and lady are not in fact judged at all. It is only Gawain's conduct, as the representative of Courtesy and Piety, that is scrutinized. The deeds and words of others are in the main used solely to provide the situations in which his character and behaviour will be exhibited.
- 19 Which he later expiates, in the same spirit, by telling everyone.
- 20 Though we might feel, if we were disposed to subject this fairy-tale detail to a scrutiny it is hardly substantial enough to bear, that a kiss cannot be paid away, and at any rate if its source is not named, then a wife's kiss cannot rightly be said to have been surrendered to the husband. But even this point has not been unnoted by the author. The two fainted blows may have been *boute scape* (94.2353), as far as Gawain's flesh went, but they were painful to endure. The Green Knight (or Sir Bertilak) does not seem to have felt that taking kisses from his wife was a matter entirely negligible, even if 'courtesy' was the reason for their acceptance.
- 21 In the ordinary mundane senses. If our author also wrote the *Pearl* (as seems to me certain), he has complicated matters, for those who wish to consider his mind and views as a whole, by there using 'courtesy' in a more elevated sense: the manners not of earthly courts, but of the Court of Heaven; the Divine Generosity and Grace, and the unalloyed humility and charity of the Blessed; the spirit, that is, from which even mundane 'courtesy' must proceed, if it is to be alive and sincere, and also pure. There is probably a trace of this to be seen in the conjunction of *clannes* and *cortaysye* (28.653) in the 'fifth five' of the Pentangle which is concerned with virtue in human relationships.
- 22 This may appear at first to be a blemish, even if the only serious blemish in this poem. It is indeed, I think, put into a form hardly suitable to Gawain, so that it reads rather more like a sentence of *auctor*, a piece of clerkly pedantry. But fundamentally it is in character, true to the general character of Gawain as depicted, and credible to his 'reaction' at the particular moment. Gawain always tends to go a little further than the case requires. He only needs to say: many greater men than I have been deceived by women, so there is some excuse for me. He need not proceed to say that it would be vastly to men's profit if they could love women and yet never trust them at all. But he does. And that is not only very like this Gawain, but not unnatural in any 'courtier' whose very courtesy and pride in it has been made the means of exposing him to shame. Let it be a mere game and pretence, then! he cries - at that moment.
- 23 Though one may reflect that his near-perfection would not have been attained

- unless he had set before himself as an ideal the absolute or mathematical perfection symbolized by the Pentangle.
- 24 The more charitable, the wider often the divergence, as may be seen in the self-stern saints.
- 25 By the word *kynde* in the original the author may intend Gawain's natural character; but the less introspective sense 'my sort', the proper behaviour of members of his order (knights), is perhaps better.
- 26 The order is probably not significant (nor strictly possible), except the reservation of the Girdle to the last.
- 27 Not always so strong a word as now, however, when the association with 'treason' and 'traitor' (originally unconnected) has made it applicable only to acts of great baseness and serious injury.
- 28 Unless she herself obeys some higher law than herself or than 'love'.
- 29 In my father's translation of *Pearl* these lines are rendered:  
 Grace enow may the man receive  
 Who sins anew, if he repent;  
 But craving it he must sigh and grieve  
 And abide what pains are consequent. [Ed.]
- 30 Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 95-6. The passage in which these lines occur was (in part) the basis for my father's view, mentioned at the beginning of this lecture (p. 73), that Chaucer knew *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. [Ed.]
- 31 Though God's instrument could indeed be the Girdle, in a world where such things were possible, and lawful.
- 32 It is an interesting point, which cannot have been unintended on the part of the poet, that the belt for which Gawain broke the rules of his game, and so made the only flaw in the perfection of his conduct on all levels, was never in fact of any use to him at all, not even as a hope.
- 33 It might be regarded as regrettable in Arthurian Romance as a whole. Personally I do not think that belittling of the King (as *sumquat childgered*, and the like) does that any good at all.

## ON FAIRY-STORIES

I propose to speak about fairy-stories, though I am aware that this is a rash adventure. Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. And overbold I may be accounted, for though I have been a lover of fairy-stories since I learned to read, and have at times thought about them, I have not studied them professionally. I have been hardly more than a wandering explorer (or trespasser) in the land, full of wonder but not of information.

The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords. In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveller who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost.

There are, however, some questions that one who is to speak about fairy-stories must expect to answer, or attempt to answer, whatever the folk of Faërie may think of his impertinence. For instance: What are fairy-stories? What is their origin? What is the use of them? I will try to give answers to these questions, or such hints of answers to them as I have gleaned – primarily from the stories themselves, the few of all their multitude that I know.

### FAIRY-STORY

What is a fairy-story? In this case you will turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in vain. It contains no reference to the combination *fairy-story*, and is unhelpful on the subject of *fairies* generally. In the Supplement, *fairy-tale* is recorded since the year