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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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GAWAIN and Gawain: the Solitary Self

'The forme to the fynismment foldes ful selden.'¹
'mon al hym one'²
'we bot oure one'³
'we ar in this valay verayly oure one'⁴

We tend to approach medieval literature as if it were written for and about people as different from us as the inhabitants of another planet. This is understandable, because so many divergences of belief, attitudes and outlook separate the so-called Middle Ages and our own time. My purpose here, however, is to show that, although the world of the late 14th century was very unlike that of the late 20th century, Gawain undergoes experiences that we can recognise and understand, experiences that create a bridge between two worlds - for us, as well as for him.

My title uses a device that has often been employed to distinguish between a literary figure whose name is the title of a narrative, and the life given to such a figure through externalised and interior aspects of the experiences narrated: for example, *Hamlet*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*.

Does the formula work in the same way with the Gawain poem as it does with these later works? *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the story of Gawain, whose solitary self becomes more and more evident as the narrative unfolds; but while the names in the title

1 Line 499: 'the beginning is very seldom like the end'. All the quotations and most of the translations here are from Barron's edition, but with Middle English thorn and yogh regularised in accordance with the modern orthography used in Burrow's edition (Penguin Books).

2 Line 749: 'a man all alone'.

3 Line 1230: 'we are quite by ourselves' (i.e. entirely alone).

4 Line 2245: 'we are utterly on our own in this valley'.

certainly correspond to characters in the story - one called Gawain, one called the Green Knight - this correspondance is ambiguous in a way that is not so with the later works that I've cited.

It is far from clear just how a medieval story-teller saw the concept of a fiction. There is nothing in this poem that corresponds to what we regard as the fictitious or 'invented'. Indeed, the poet makes it clear at the onset that he sees his story as historical: an account of something that actually happened. Shortly after the opening, we are told that although Arthur likes to be told strange and unfamiliar stories, they must be stories 'that he myght trawe'⁵, accounts of credible occurrences. We should remember, in passing, that Chaucer presents his Canterbury pilgrims and his Troilus and Criseyde as 'real' and the tales told by the Canterbury pilgrims as reported events. We should think too about the unambiguous implications of a historical moment in the traditional opening phrase that has now come to signal an invented or 'fairy' story: 'once upon a time...'

The two concepts, reported reality and invention, are relevant to our understanding of the expression in the literature of this later medieval period of the concept of the individual, and of the changes that this concept was to undergo in the centuries that follow. Modern readers take it for granted that each human being is unique and essentially solitary, and that the individual is a being whose ultimate responses and decisions are based on choices. These choices are seen by us as arising from each person's own inner nature, or what we call 'the self'. Our perception of the individual makes it possible to set up certain polarities: in contrast with the 'self' in isolation is the 'self' as part of a group; in contrast with the behaviour of the inner self is that of the social self.

None of these assumptions is in any way expressed at the start of this poem but, I suggest, they are evident by the end. My distinction between *Gawain* and *Gawain* reflects my view that the 'self' of *Gawain* changes gradually but fundamentally during the course of the poem. *Gawain* begins as a generalised social being, defined by the group to which he belongs; he becomes, increasingly, a solitary self. Unlike this phenomenon in post-medieval literature, the change that takes place is not one of character: at the beginning of the story, when *Gawain* is in the midst of the Camelot community, he has no character. Then, as the story unfolds, changing circumstances give rise to an

emergent 'self'; *Gawain* can be said to develop an interior life, askin to what we expect to find in later narrative and drama.

Look at the four quotations that I began with.

The first (line 499) refers to the cycle of the year, which passes and brings about inevitable changes, never returning to the point where it started. The beginning, says the poet, is rarely like the end: He could have said that the end is rarely like the beginning, but his word order heightens our awareness of beginnings and alerts us to the fact that nothing will ever be the same again.

The other three quotations emphasise the theme of isolation. At line 749, the poet reminds us that *Gawain*, when he leaves Camelot, is a totally solitary man: 'mon al huym one'. At line 1230, when he is in Bertilak's castle, the lady reminds him that they are entirely alone: 'we bot oure one' - this is a dangerously disarming form of isolation, because it is with another person, an experience that is to prove severely testing for *Gawain*. Then, at line 2245, at the long-sought chapel, the Green Knight reminds him that the landscape contains nobody but the two of them: 'we ar in this valay verayly oure one'.

I have referred to our tendency to see medieval literature and its audience / readers as far removed from the sensibility of our own time. This tendency is partly attributable to certain assumptions that consistently characterise this writing, particularly the view of man as innately sinful, as in need of guidance and correction, as aspiring to salvation. Implicit in such writing is a predisposition to generalise rather than particularise. While such a way of seeing does not necessarily deny the existence of an inner life, medieval christian moral teaching addresses a generalised inner self: the spirit, or the soul. It is here that the didactic imagination locates conscience, guilt, remorse, and the will to repent, emphasising what makes human beings alike and not what distinguishes them from each other. A preacher, roughly contemporary with the *Gawain* poet, reflects this difference between the medieval and the modern view of human nature when he declares forcefully that the individual sinner 'may not hide himself withinne himselfe'⁶, asserting that nothing may be concealed and that, because everything is known to God, everything must be revealed to his earthly representative, the priest. In our own time, most people believe that it is entirely possible to hide oneself within oneself.

⁶ *Lollard Sermons*, ed. Gloria Cigman, E.E.T.S. Volume 294, (Oxford 1989): Sermon of Dead Men, p. 226 / line 665.

⁵ Line 94: 'which he could believe [i. e. to be] true'

Nevertheless, despite the seeming certainties of didactic writings, much of what has survived from the later medieval period reveals instabilities and inconsistencies that discourage the notion that people believed what their spiritual mentors wanted them to believe. The generalised view of man expressed in sermons and treatises is, in imaginative writing, coming more and more to reflect an inclination to particularise, to think in terms of individual states of mind. This shift was described by the late C.S. Lewis as:

'that great movement of internalisation, and that consequent aggrandisement of man and desiccation of the outer universe, in which the psychological history of the west has so largely consisted.'⁷

It is to this emerging movement of 'internalisation' that the Gawain poem belongs, along with much of the other writing of this period. The poem is in many ways very different from Langland's *Piers Plowman*, but one of the things that they have in common is that in each the central character undergoes an external journey which is a metaphor for an inner, spiritual progress from one moral state to another; also, in each poem the central character does more than undergo, he voluntarily undertakes a journey. There is an essential difference, however: while Langland's dreamer-traveller remains a representative of generalised mankind, Gawain becomes more and more sharply isolated and more and more sharply individually defined by what he experiences.

I want now to offer some readings of aspects of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in support of this view that the movement between the opening and the end of the story encompasses a mutation from a generalised being to the emergence of a solitary self.

Just what sort of being is the Gawain of Fitt One? We meet him first as part of a group, one of many people in a busy crowd scene. What do we know about this crowd? It is almost entirely anonymous, made up of generalised, stylised 'londes and ladies', uniformly young, beautiful, noble, courtly, joyful. When Gawain is singled out for named mention, it is as one of a smaller group within that larger group: the Round Table - the very geometry of which is designed to obscure any distinction between its members.

⁷ *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 42.

The scorn that the intruder Green Knight expresses so rudely is not directed at any individual, but at the values and beliefs of a group, or community. When Arthur angrily takes up his bizarre challenge, he does so as 'gouverneur' ['ruler'] of that community. His anger is a response to the insults hurled at his community, not at himself. Gawain's subsequent movement from the group-within-the-crowd to the front of the stage is motivated by his concern for the reputation of that community. The alliteration here reflects the denial of the self, the dominance of the authority of the community:

Then *comaunderd* the *kyng* the *kryght* for to ryse;
And he... *kneled* doun before the *kyng*...⁸

But a paradox arises at this very point of the poem, when Gawain seems most totally subservient to the group: the Green Knight isolates and individualises him by expressing particular pleasure that it is none other than Sir Gawain who is to take on the challenge;

'Bigog... Sir Gawain, me lykys

That I schal fange at thy fust that I haf frayst here'⁹

Why is he so glad that it is Gawain? We are never told, but from now on, at first imperceptibly, Gawain is to be increasingly set apart from the group, even though we never lose sight of the conspicuous, if ambiguous, universalities transmitted by the story. As Gawain and the Green Knight meet again as adversaries, we wonder what they 'stand for': a confrontation between civilisation and nature? Or between the christianity of Camelot and what we come to see as the vestigial paganism of Hautdesert? I don't reject either of these polarities, but the one that is relevant to the discussion here is that increasingly experienced within Gawain himself: the 'solitary self' who must struggle to reconcile the desire for physical survival and the desire to uphold the rules of conduct that seem to place this survival at risk. Gawain, the representative of Camelot, is impressively and gloriously attired; but it is Gawain the solitary being who has to confront experience equipped with rules and values that are inadequate when the individual is separated from the social group. He finds himself intensely vulnerable, compelled to rely on the unknown and untested resources of the solitary self that reside within his outer social self. Paradoxically, our sense of this inner self is awakened by long

⁸ Lines 366... 368: 'Then the king commanded the knight to rise... and he... knelt down before the king...'

⁹ Lines 390... 91: 'By God, Sir Gawain... it pleases me that I shall receive from your hand what I have asked for here.'

descriptive passages in which the poet emphasises Gawain's outer self. We see him at the start of Fitt Two, arrayed in elaborate trappings and trimmings for his journey. We see him again at the start of Fitt Four, similarly elaborately arrayed for the last stage of his journey. Each time, his horse is ornately arrayed as well. Together - man and horse - they make a flamboyant assertion of worldly material splendour and a triumphant assertion of man's supremacy over nature.

Gawain's shield bears the image of the pentangle, an outward and visible symbol of spiritual and moral attributes that are inward and invisible but nevertheless universal. This duality serves to intensify our growing awareness that beyond the ambassador of Camelot, the ritualised figure who carries the symbol, is the being whose existence the poet, like the preacher, is well aware of: the self within the self.

A lot of what we come to understand in this poem reaches us retrospectively. Details and episodes that we respond to on first reading often come back into our minds later, reinterpreted, or shedding light on something that happens subsequently. So it is that, as we move through the poem, we find ourselves looking back and realising that as early as the end of Fitt One the poet had been preparing us for the separation of Gawain from the group. The focus there appears to be on Arthur, who suppresses the unease that he feels 'at hert', making light of the beheading episode to comfort the queen, and encouraging everyone, including Gawain, to return to the merrymaking. But look again. What does the poet do then? Having pushed Gawain *back* into the festive crowd, he immediately isolates him again by addressing him directly, urging him not to forget what he has undertaken:

Now think wel, Sir Gawain,
For wothe that thou ne wonde
This auntere for to frayn
That thou has tan on honde.¹⁰

His words here introduce a change of tone and atmosphere which is all the more chilling and menacing because this moment follows so swiftly and so contrastingly on the rejoicing and well-being of the entire court. Outwardly Gawain appears to be back with the crowd; inwardly he is to be more and more isolated from now on.

¹⁰ Lines 487-90: 'Now take good heed, Sir Gawain, that you do not shrink because of danger from pursuing this adventure which you have undertaken.'

Fitt Two opens with a swift passing of the seasons. The year has almost completed the cycle that, as we were told at line 499, rarely returns to its starting point. Time moves on to November, All Saints' Day which, like the festive occasion that opens the story, brings a change of mood, from 'glad' to 'heuy'. Gawain seeks to dispel the anxieties of the court, reassuring them and himself by moving swiftly from the personal 'I' to the externalised, impersonal 'mon':

'Quat schuld I wonde ?
Of destinés derf and dere
What may mon do bot fonde ?¹¹

A similar process of retrospective insight colours our understanding of Gawain's experiences on his journey. The hazards and deprivations that he confronts seem to demonstrate a kind of heroism. We are told of his total isolation and of the strange and hostile creatures vanquished by him:

Now rides this renk thurgh the ryalme of Logres,
Sir Gauan, on Godes halue, thagh hym no gomen thought.
Oft leudles alone he lenges on nyghtes
Ther he fonde nocht hym byfore the fare that he lyked.
Hade he no fere bot his fole by frythes and dounes,
Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp...
... mon al hym one.¹²

Gawain's journey is harsh and rigorous, he survives vivid and spectacular encounters, and yet the telling arouses no anxieties in the reader / hearer; it is compressed and dispassionate, with no indication of terror. We are told at line 724 that he avoids death in the face of so many hazards because he is brave, unflagging and God-fearing, but what kind of bravery is it when someone is not afraid? I suggest that, at this very early stage of his journey, Gawain embodies the ideal of

¹¹ Lines 563-565: (I offer here an alternative to Barron's translation) 'why should I falter [or hesitate]? What can one do but confront all that destiny brings, whether grievous or gratifying?'

¹² Lines 691-696... 749: 'Now the knight goes riding through the realm of Logres, Sir Gawain rides in God's name, though no mere game it seemed to him. Often, companionless, he spent the night alone where he found no food to his liking set before him. He had no company but his horse among the woods and hills, and no-one but God to talk with by the way...
... a man all alone...'

heroism as an admirable human aspiration; but there is no evidence yet of his isolation from human society as an interior experience.

When Gawain arrives at Hautdesert, the poet sustains this externalised view of him. He is welcomed with warmth and enthusiasm by the people there, but their welcome is not extended to the man they see: it is extended to the man they expect him to be. Although they are meeting Gawain for the first time, they have very clear expectations based on the renown and reputation of the knight from Camelot:

Vche segge ful softly sayde to his fere:

'Now schal we semlych se sleghtes of thewes

And teccheles termes of talking noble;

Wich spede is in speche vnsperd may we lerne,

Syn we haf fonged that fyne fader of nurture.

God hath geuen vus his grace godly for sothe,

That such a gest as Gawain grauntes vus to haue,

When burnes blythe of his burthe schal sitte

and synge.

In menyng of maneres mere

This burne now schal vus bryng;

I hope that may hym here

Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.¹³

And what about Gawain? What is he experiencing? After the cold, the discomforts, the dangers of his journey, Gawain is aware above all of the comfort, the warmth and the welcome of Hautdesert. He has no suspicion that this place, which he perceives as a safe refuge, is to subject him to the most profound and rigorous testing of his life. It is here that the poet drops the first hint of Gawain's growing distance from Camelot - when we, like Gawain, are most totally disarmed and unsuspecting. Remember that in Fitt One, the poet's voice has interpolated an aside following his description of Guinevere:

A semlokter that euer he sye

¹³ Lines 915-927: Each one said quietly to his neighbour, 'Now we shall have the pleasure of seeing masterly displays of good manners and hearing the polished phrases of courtly discourse; we can learn without inquiry what profit there is in the art of conversation, since we have welcomed here this perfect master of good breeding. God has indeed graciously favoured us, in permitting us to have such a guest as Gawain, at the season when men are to sit singing with joy at His birth. This man will now instruct us in the appreciation of refined behaviour; I believe that whoever has the opportunity of hearing him will learn something of the language of love.'

Soth moht no mon say.¹⁴

In Fitt Two, the beautiful lady at Hautdesert, the nameless wife of the (as yet) nameless host, is portrayed as far more sensual-erotic than Guinevere. The poet tells us how Gawain sees her:

'Wener then Wenore, as the wye thought'¹⁵

The significance of this is surely that Gawain, separated from Camelot, is beginning to exercise his own individual judgement, but that he is not seeing the truth. Instead, the falseness and the alien values of Hautdesert are distorting his perceptions. Our unease should begin here. If outward perception is susceptible to change in this way, what may happen to Gawain's inner perceptions, the repository of his judgments and his values?

The story moves on and Fitt Two culminates with a second agreement, a second undertaking by Gawain. Our enquiry into the changing impact on Gawain of what he experiences calls for answers to two questions: in what way are his undertakings alike? in what way are they different? They are alike in that each involves an agreement to exchange: firstly, blows with an axe; then, the winnings of each day. But there is a striking difference. The second 'forwarde' (line 1105) is offered to Gawain the person; the first (lines 378, 409) was offered to the social group that he chose to step forward to represent. We learn later that both were devised as a testing of Camelot, but the motives of Bertilak are of less interest to the reader than the poet's depiction of Gawain's involvement in the unfolding events. The two tests together demonstrate that the values of a group can only be verified through the individuals within that group. Hence the disparity at the end of the poem between the specious moral verdict of both Bertilak and Camelot, and the authenticity of the insights that experience makes accessible to the self.

As we move on, we find that the Gawain of Fitt Three is more and more a being in a state of transition. His isolation from Camelot leads, through the three bedroom scenes, to his emergence as a totally solitary self. He still belongs to Camelot, but his unpreparedness for the unexpected reveals a newly-discovered separate identity.

The first bedroom encounter finds Gawain uncertain how to behave. Three times, in rapid succession, his actions disguise his true

¹⁴ Lines 83-4: 'no man could truthfully say that he ever saw a lovelier lady.'

¹⁵ Line 945, 'lovelier than Guinevere, so the knight thought.'

state of mind. When the lady comes towards his bed, he pretends to be asleep :

the burne schamed,
And layde hym doun lystly and let as he slepte.¹⁶

When he eventually reveals that he is awake, he pretends to be surprised to find her there :

to hir warde he torned,

And vnloked his ye-lyddes, and let as hym wondered.¹⁷

When Gawain then crosses himself, it is not the pious gesture that is puzzling, but the poet's words:

[Gawain] sayned hym, as bi his saghe the sauer to worthe, with hande.¹⁸

If my reading of this line is right, Gawain does this 'as (if)' to protect himself. The uncertainty implicit here suggests that Gawain's behaviour is not that of a man in control of what is happening, but of one seeking refuge in ritualised behaviour, a man whose conduct is insincere. This very disparity between actions and feelings alerts us to the inner being that is being suppressed - but not entirely eliminated.

The poet repeatedly reminds us of the contrast between the outer and inner self of Gawain. When the lady speaks to him, it is clear that she, like the court earlier, is addressing the idea of Gawain: the reputation, not the person:

'I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wouen ye are'¹⁹

She goes on to list some of the things that she has heard about the romantic and dashing knight, honoured far and wide:

'Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely prayned
With lordes, wyth ladyes, with alle that lyf bere'.²⁰

¹⁶ Lines 1189-90: 'the knight was embarrassed, and lay down artfully and pretended to be asleep.'

¹⁷ Lines 1200-1201: 'he... turned towards her, and opened his eyelids, feigning to be surprised.'

¹⁸ Lines 1202-1203: 'crossed himself with his hand as if by his prayer to protect himself.'

¹⁹ Line 1226: 'I know very well you are Sir Gawain.' Barron's translation here loses the impact of the poet's choice of verb: 'wene' is a verb of hearsay, opinion or supposition (I 'believe, suppose'), rather than a verb of *knowing by experience*.

²⁰ Lines 1228-1229: 'your honour, your courtly reputation are handsomely praised by lords and ladies, by all men whatsoever [i. e. by everyone everywhere].'

We never see this glamorous Gawain ; but the audience within and beyond the poem, like the lady, knows of Gawain's reputation. The Gawain who comes to Hautdesert finds her praise gratifying, but feels bound to renounce this image of himself :

'Thagh I be not now he that ye of speken'²¹

Why does he say 'now' ? What is he telling her about the distinctive nature of the present circumstances ? The lady, given no explanation, and frustrated by his resistance, tries to goad him by twice casting doubt on his true identity :

'Bot that ye be Gawan, hit gos not in mynde'²²

'if ye be Wawen...'²³

This, of course, is the ploy that the Green Knight had used earlier to humiliate and embarrass Camelot :

'What, is this Arthures hous... ?

Now is the reuel and the renoun of the Rounde Table

Ouerwalt...'²⁴

It is one of the lady's tactics for provoking Gawain into succumbing to temptation. But nothing is what it seems. The lady's apparent sexual goal masks her true goal, which is to make Gawain betray his own integrity, to lure him into violating Camelot's most deeply-held beliefs about what is right. His behaviour to the lady in each of the bedroom scenes is dutiful and courteous, but it is ritualised behaviour, not an authentic emotional response. The rules by which Camelot lives are of little use to Gawain in this situation, where the fundamental conventions for which they were devised are inverted. The lady's expectation is that someone with Gawain's reputation for courtliness and courtesy would most certainly have 'craued a cosse'²⁵. But instead of entreating a kiss, Gawain offers to 'kyssse at your comaundement'²⁶.

The kiss is a duty performed, an act of acquiescence and obedience, not something bestowed from the heart. Although the notion of who gives the kisses is ambiguous in these encounters, Gawain later treats

²¹ Line 1242 : Barron translates this as 'even though I may not be now the man you speak of. I prefer 'even if I am not now... etc'

²² Line 1293: 'But that you are Gawain is hard to believe.' (i. e. 'whether you are *really* Gawain...')

²³ Line 1481: (again)... if you are really Gawain'

²⁴ Lines 309... 313-4: 'What! is this Arthur's house...? Now the revelry and the renown of the Round Table have been overthrown...'

²⁵ Line 1300: 'begged for a kiss'.

²⁶ Line 1303.

each one as 'chevisaunce' or 'winnings' to be given to his host in accordance with their agreement.

Gawain's courteous treatment of the lady never wavers. In public, he appears to be in control of the situation, tactfully steering a difficult course between neither encouraging nor rejecting her flirtatiousness. In private, however, he grows more and more anxious about the ordeal ahead, so that when the lady comes to his room on the third morning, he is deep in troubled dreams. At a time when the literary dream is so often a stylised vehicle for allegory, it is further testimony to what Lewis called 'internalisation' that troubled dreams are here a realistic, psychological indication of the innermost anxiety of a man in isolation. On this third day, when the lady's presence, and the very fact of waking up, dispel Gawain's fears:

"Wight wallande joye warmed his hert"²⁷

Gawain's relief here is delusory and ephemeral, unlike the moving effervescence of the joy that we shall see after his encounter with the Green Knight in Fitt Four. At this moment, he is shutting his mind to the reality of his impending journey and concentrating on aspects of experience that he can control. His behaviour continues to be constrained by the principles of courtesy and correctness by which he lives until the moment of the final exchange of winnings, when he breaks his word and gives his host the kisses that he had 'received' - but not the green girdle.

From now on, Gawain's interior experience increasingly dominates the narrative. At the end of Fitt Three, we contemplate his state of mind as he sleeps:

'If he ne slepe soundly say ne dar I,
For he hade muche on the morn to *myne*, if he wolde,
in thought."²⁸

The spotlight is on Gawain at the end of the third bedroom scene but the light is sinister and hinting, not illuminating. We know of two reasons why Gawain is not sleeping peacefully: guilty conscience and deep unease about the appointment at the Green Chapel.

²⁷ Line 1762: 'joy ardently welling up warmed his heart'.

²⁸ Lines 1990-1993: 'Whether or not he slept soundly I should not like to say, for he had much to reflect on in his thoughts.' Barron's translation loses some of the tautology signalled here by the use of italics: i. e. Gawain had a lot to ponder on in his *mind*, if he were so inclined.

Fitt Four opens in the bedroom again, at the eerie moment between night and daybreak. The lady does not return and the atmosphere is permeated with Gawain's awareness of intense solitariness. He is alone with his fears, aware of the wild, harshness of the world outside of his room. This is the world that he must now face, isolated from all human community, uncertain now about both his own inner resources and whether he can trust the promise of the protective power of the green girdle.

Gawain's outward attire as he sets off, is that of the courtly world; but the concealed girdle represents the solitary man. And yet this isolation is momentarily and misleadingly camouflaged. At the start of this final stage of his journey, Gawain's host has given him a companion: the guide, who reminds Gawain and us that the Green Knight is huge and menacing, who tells him that he stands no chance of defending himself against such an adversary, who urges him to turn back, promising to conceal the cowardice that he is encouraging. By proposing a doubly dishonourable course of action, this man turns out to be neither guide nor companion; he serves only to emphasise and intensify how alone Gawain is.

As twentieth-century people, sensitive to the human capacity for self-deception and the gulf that can exist between motivation and conduct, we are perhaps sceptical of Gawain's avowals of courage and integrity and his scorn and contempt for the suggestion that he turn back and be a coward:

and I here passed,

Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme that thou telles,
I were a knyght kowarde, I myght not be excused.²⁹

Does he or does he not believe in the protective power of the green girdle? If he does, what is so courageous about his insistence on seeking out the Green Knight?

While I think that Gawain's trust in the power of the girdle dwindles rapidly as he approaches the Green Chapel, so that by the time he flinches from the Green Knight's blows he no longer believes that he is protected in any way, it is not until Gawain stands firmly and without flinching to take the third blow that he attains the true courage that he has been moving towards throughout the narrative.

²⁹ Lines 2129-31: 'if I passed by this place, took to flight out of fear, in the way that you suggest, I should be a cowardly knight, and there would be no excuse for me.'

The key word here is 'true'. Much has been written about the moral attribute of 'trawthe' in this poem³⁰; the truth attained by Gawain at the end of his travels, temptations and tests is an internalising of the schematized and formulaic code of chivalric conduct which was his starting point and which, to some extent, may be said to have proved inadequate in the face of experience.

The Gawain of Fitt Four is quite unlike the stylised hero of Fitt Two. The Gawain of Fitt Two was the man whose reputation was known at the court of Bertilak; the Gawain of Fitt Four is a vulnerable and frightened man who, despite this, has the courage to confront his adversary as he had promised. The extent of his joy at finding himself alive after the blow has been struck emphasises the extent of the fear that has not merely passed but has been surmounted. This is true, energising joy, unlike the joy that we saw in the bedroom on the third morning:

'He sprit forth spenne-fote more then a spere lenthe'

.....

'Neuer syn that he was burne borne of his moder

Was he neuer in this worlde wye half so blythe.³¹

This is no longer the Gawain of Fitt One, who did and said what the code of Camelot expected him to do and say, as when he offered to take on the Green Knight's challenge with formulaic self-effacement:

'I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,

And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes the sothe'³²

The accepting and concealing of the green girdle, that is condoned by the Green Knight and by Camelot as understandable in the face of death, is rejected contemptuously by the Gawain of Fitt Four as prompted by crass cowardice.

³⁰ See especially J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1965).

³¹ Lines 2316... 2320-21: 'He sprang forward, feet together, more than a spear's length... never since his mother bore him had he ever been half so happy as then'. Barron's translation retains the force of the reduplicated 'neuer... neuer', but loses the emphasis on the concept of a man in the Middle English reiteration 'he... burne... he... wyghe.'

³² Lines 354-55: 'I am the weakest, I know, and the most deficient in understanding, and my life would be the smallest loss, if truth be known.'

At the end of the poem, two Gawains return to Camelot: the man of renown and the man of remorse. The Gawain of renown is the man admired by Camelot: the knight who has upheld the honour and reputation of the Round Table. The Gawain of remorse is a solitary man, isolated by a deep awareness of culpability that nobody around him recognises as such. Gawain the solitary man knows that confession must be far more than mere outward verbal acknowledgement: it must be a deeply-felt inward state. He acknowledges his guilt publicly and experiences shame and humiliation, even though his peers do not condemn or even reproach him. This Gawain has attained both 'truth' and 'trawthe': he refuses to hide behind the trappings of Camelot; he has learned, through experience, what a man is when these trappings are removed. His understanding now is akin to that of King Lear, who watches the ranting, naked figure of 'Poor Tom', and asks wonderingly, 'Is man no more than this?' - then answers his own question:

'thou art the thing itself... unaccommodated man is no more

but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art...'³³

Lear's 'unaccommodated man' is man without 'the superimposed apparel of civilisation, man reduced to 'the thing itself', a creature whose nature is weak, vulnerable, pathetic, lacking in dignity. Gawain's experience teaches him something less despairing, more optimistic: that without external trappings man can learn to recognise and confront the flaws of his own interior nature and strive to surmount them. At the end of the poem, Gawain is both in the midst of Camelot and apart from it. He swears to wear the green girdle for the rest of his life, humbly as a token of his shame. The knights and ladies of Camelot undertake to wear the girdle too, but for them it is to be worn proudly as a token of honour.