Time, Horror, and Iconoclasm: Creative Responses to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Abstract

The original illustrations of *SGGK* have experienced intermittent academic reappraisal since their dismissal by Fredric Madden in his 1839 publication; this relates to their quality, meaning, and their potential multiple authorship. Those reappraisals stress the importance of the illustrations as not simply decorative, but as critical and interpretive. Prompted by those insights I have been interested in what can be learned from the images that accompany the poem, those of the original codex, but moreover those of subsequent translations.

In 2022 Middlesex University funded the website 'Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' which brings together illustrations from translations of the poem for comparison, including criticism that demonstrates their importance; both as supporting the texts they accompany aesthetically, and in creating emphasis on certain themes from attitudes independent of the translator. The project also enlisted six contemporary artists, asking them to respond to the poem, with a view to extending the visual language and redressing the privation of attention paid to the text from the fine art canon. In addition, there is analysis of the recent film by David Lowery, its tone and symbolism, making the project a fulsome account of the *SGGK* visual lexicon.

In this paper I will explore the developing visual language, and its tensions around Gawain and what he embodies. I suggest that there is a growing emphasis on landscape features, that are used to represent different registers of temporality, and on horror motifs, both helping to bring the disturbing implications of the poem to modern audiences. The contemporary art responses develop these themes, grappling with subjectivity as it relates to power and status. I suggest two distinct categories—that speak to the legacy of the poem—become apparent, treating Gawain as either a site of development and becoming, or as a construct in need of demolition.

Author bio

Michael Eden is a visual artist and researcher at the University of Arts London exploring relationships between monstrosity, subjectivity, and landscape representation. Eden employs theories and representations of eeriness and flux as critiques of returning fascistic right-wing ideologies, identified in overt political discourse and implicit in much popular culture. Eden obtained his PhD from Middlesex University where his project ranged across various disciplines: contemporary art criticism, and its relationship to histories of modernism, medieval literature, theories of landscape and space, notions of national myth making, and monster studies: bringing these together through the lens of art practice.

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Introduction

The project *Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* highlights the rich visual and creative legacy surrounding the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Funded by Middlesex University and the University of Arts London, it serves as a research hub focusing on the artistic and interpretative responses to this late medieval text (see Eden, 2022). A publication of the same name appeared in the journal *Arthuriana* (Eden, 2024) which details key insights and offers criticism of the creatives involved. Below is a concise summary of the project.

The project brings together critical and creative works inspired by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, exploring its representation in visual media across history. It is structured around four key areas:

1. The original medieval illustrations: examining the imagery within the *Pearl Manuscript* codex, where the poem is housed alongside other works (*Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*).
2. The *established visual language*: analysis of notable artistic interpretations accompanying translations and publications of the poem, which form a shared vocabulary of recurring motifs, themes, and aesthetic choices.
3. Exploration of the film and television adaptations: including works like David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021), which interpret the poem's narrative in new cultural and visual contexts.
4. The production and contextualisation of contemporary artistic responses: showcasing new works by modern artists like Roxana Halls, Geraint Evans, and Adam Scovell, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of the poem.

The project draws attention to the interplay between text and image, suggesting that illustrations and adaptations are not merely supplementary but integral to how the poem has been understood and reimagined.

Key concepts drawn on in the project, and referred to here, include the idea of the *established visual language*: This term refers to the collective imagery and stylistic conventions that have historically accompanied the poem in its various published forms. These images—such as depictions of the Green Knight, Camelot, and the Green Chapel—constitute a recurring iconography, shaping audience expectations and interpretations over time. Secondly, the notion of the 'fifth text' Coined by Paul F. Reichardt (1997), the *fifth text* proposes that the original codex illustrations of the *Pearl Manuscript* function as an independent text, carrying their own interpretative weight. Building on this, the project positions the *fifth text* as an evolving archive. Angela Florschuetz's (2019) intertextual view sees each new adaptation or artistic response as extending the poem's relevance, connecting it to contemporary audiences and their concerns. By exploring these dimensions, the project underscores the dynamic and dialogic relationship between medieval literature and its modern interpretations, while problematizing how we engage with cultural heritage. This research provides critical insight into how visual and textual narratives intersect, shaping cultural memory and contemporary identity.

What is at stake in representations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?

Through the study of what I am referring to as *the established visual language* and the extending *fifth text*, as well as responding myself to the themes of the poem artistically, I have come to see a key motor of tension in *SGGK* as that of a subject caught between iconic constructions, in this case the idea of the ideal knight; and a burgeoning sense of self-knowledge and personal development (framed by Gawain as failure). Adherence to normative ideals is still a factor of contemporary life—be they professional, cultural, or social—the experience of grappling with perceived failure or inadequacy becomes deeply relatable. Gawain's journey defined as a protracted confrontation with one's limitations is an essential step toward self-knowledge and transformation. This dynamic continues to resonate in a modern context, where the interplay between societal roles and personal identity often creates dissonance.

George Hartley in *The Abyss of Representation* (2003), drawing on Althusser (2001), describes the sense in which interpellation calls into being the egoic/imaginary/sense of self (as in Lacanian thinking) as a constantly renegotiated gap between the Real and the Symbolic. 'Subjects are produced by interpellation, which is precisely the function of ideology: the injunction for us to take upon ourselves our symbolic mandate, to assume the subject-position provided for us by the ideological call' (Hartley, 2003: 8). The notion of pre-determined subject positions is an inevitability, it is a part of what we inherit from the past and provides necessary frameworks to attach us to reality. However, the power, and the opportunity, to negotiate and renegotiate relates to what I suggest is at stake in *SGGK*, in short how we become a subject as opposed to a manipulated and system-functioning object.

For Cosgrove the modern subject's interiority is complex and naturally fluid where 'conflict and contradiction are at the heart of what it means to be human… [rather than] pathological modes of being-in-the-world (2007: 18). Cosgrove warns against the 'valorization of rationality' (2007: 21) which privileges patriarchal hierarchies in the social world and reveals an inner attitude seeking 'subjective certitude' (2007: 17). An individual might choose to suppress contradiction, which 'promotes a view of identity as coherent and stable', often combined with a positionality that sees 'fragmentation and contradiction…as failures of identity, as pathos, rather than an inevitable part of what it means to be human' (2007: 18). Gawain seems to me to be a conflicted individual sporting symbols of coherence and rationality, the pentangle of this shield; and he is simultaneously a figure profoundly disappointed with his own contradictions at the close of the poem. This has physical and psychic implications, his 'stomach churned' (lines 2370-2373, Armitage, 2007: 108) at his failure, he considers that he has 'totally failed' (line 2383, Armitage, 2007: 108); later resigning to wear the girdle as 'a sign of my sin' (line 2433, Armitage, 2007: 111) culminating in his palpable and sustained discomfort,

> He grimaced with disgrace,
>
> he writhed in rage and pain.
>
> Blood flowed towards his face
>
> and showed his smarting shame (lines 2501-2504, Armitage, 2007: 113).

This makes Gawain an acceptable proxy for a relatable subject under tremendous pressure.

This argument is based on the idea that Gawain's initial positionality as a young knight, with the established expectations of the broader society, represents something at least as monstrous as what Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight represent. To be clear, monstrosity is not limited in *SGGK* to external threats from the other. Rigidity, normalcy, and duty pertain to monstrosity when the spontaneous and burgeoning mind is totalized by ideology. As Garland-Thomson observes, regularizing forces operate as ruthless mechanisms, forcing individuals to conform to idealized forms in the mode of 'Cinderella's stepsisters [squeezing] their feet into her glass slipper' (1997: 8). With that brutal image in mind, consider Bahr discussing Gawain: 'he seems to be measuring himself against the pentangle on his shield, which…is defined by the kind of perfection that can inhere in geometry, but not in humans' (2017: 303). The illustrations and artworks have been key in illuminating the context, mechanisms, and implications of this constellation of pressures on Gawain, a figure I treat as a proxy for the idea of a nascent complex interiority. I will attempt to demonstrate how looking at the creative responses to *SGGK* and producing artwork has helped to draw attention to the temporal aspects of the poem as a foundational motor of destabilization to ideology, secondly of horror as a way to 'puncture the fantasy,' as Justine Breton has described (see Silec and Breton, 2024), and deliver the consequences of that destabilization to the audience, and thirdly on what I have categorized as two directions of iconoclasm in artistic responses: one that allows for a renegotiation of identity (personal change and growth) and one that looks to do away with rationalizing masculinities altogether.

Time as a causal prompt (a trauma) for subjunctivization

A key aspect of this constellation of pressures as it is highlighted in the creative practices are attitudes or modes of framing time in the poem, Weaver has observed that 'there has been general agreement that time in the poem is multiple and elusive' (Weaver, 2024: 287). Each articulation of time has implications for the subject Gawain and for various readings. Frozen time, for example in its positive presentation in the poem brings to mind the detailed and iconic description of Guinevere as an epitomic personification of Camelot's culture and values (Woods, 2002: 209). In negative iterations of frozen time, we can bring to mind the dumbfounded knights who are silent as the Green Knight enters the hall,

> Yet several of the lords were like statues in their seats,
>
> left speechless and rigid, not risking a response.
>
> The hall fell hushed, as if all who were present
>
> had slipped into sleep or some trance-like state (lines 242-245, Armitage, 2007: 15).

This adds to the image of Arthur's court as static and immutable, as Wood's comments '[Camelot's] idealized vitality dwindles to the equivalent of a still life' (2002: 210). Gawain, through his taking up of the Green Knight's challenge, is cut away from this 'still life' by Guinevere's side and is initiated into other registers of time.

The first, and most obviously pressuring of these is the role of linear time, in Gawain's anticipation of the confrontation in a year and day from his beheading of the Green Knight (line 298, Armitage 2007: 17). This pertains to intertwined concepts of the self, of his duty and commitment to his society, that has privileged him conditionally; but also, to his ideas about himself and how he frames his world. Readings that embrace this temporality emphasize the

fulfilment of his oath and the idea of the pentangle as a motivating symbol in that regard 'a fixed point' (see St John, 2016: 263; 266). We might problematise this relationship to time as one that through its focus on past expectations and future anticipation of death, prevents a satisfactory condition in the present from emerging and predetermines a mechanistic approach to life, one that the pause at Bertilak's castle and the final confrontation at the Green Chapel addresses, delivering Gawain into the present and confronting him with various choices (see Eden, 2023a: 144 and Eden, 2023b: 65).

Cyclical time is also apparent in the poem, in the changes of seasons and the idea of death and rejuvenation processes. A cyclical reading of Gawain's journey might see his leaving and returning to Camelot, as a cycle that mirrors a rite of passage and incorporation, where Gawain as 'neophyte' crosses through a liminal 'threshold' to return as an initiate of the established order (Van Gennep, 1960: 18). in this case incorporating the green girdle and its meaning for Camelot. Cycles of time combined with reference to Van Gennep are key in readings of *SGGK* by Mackley (2016: 344) and Vitto (1998: 25) for example. These interpretations show a recognition of nature's importance to society but one that is potentially in denial of nature's indifference and unpredictability, preferring instead nature as renewal and rebirth. We can be sure as Weaver explains, that 'linear progression and cyclical stasis jostle uncomfortably [in *SGGK*] next to one another' (2024: 296).

Spiralling time is perhaps the most disturbing register of temporality in *SGGK*, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen states: 'the poem insists that seasons spiral rather than circle back or merely repeat' (2019: 39). Spiralling time emphasizes a fear of the end of nature and reveals deep abyssal registers of temporality that undermine human identity and symbolic structures (see McPhee, 1981: 20, 104, 127, 128). For example, Morton Bloomfield (1961) in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal,' writes of the layering of cyclical and linear time and hints at, but does not name, the idea of spiralling time: 'the winter to come is not merely the same as last winter but different'. For Clark and Wasserman, a 'decaying, often hostile, world [nevertheless]…serves as the setting for the emergence of the poem's protagonist' (1986: 15). I would suggest that spiralling time is also apparent in the interruption of the Green Knight at Camelot, an evidently singular and shocking event, the result of which is the unfolding of the rest of the poem, and again perhaps most tantalizingly is the idea of Gawain not cycling back into Camelot but going off on a spiral and taking up the offer to be with his aunt Morgan le Fay and his friend Lady Bertilak following the ordeal at the Green Chapel (line 2400 and 2467, Armitage 2007: 109; 112). Gawain does not accept this offer, yet its potentiality as an uncoiling timeline lingers in the mind, suggesting the contours futures not taken.

How does time manifest in the established visual language?

Aesthetic references to time in the *established visual language* often manifest through the inclusion of layered events within the imagery that extend beyond the immediate foreground subject. This layering creates a visual tension: the foreground aims to deliver a specific, focused representation tied directly to the narrative, while the background either shifts attention away from that primary subject or looms in a way that diminishes its prominence. This dynamic interplay between foreground and background underscores a complex relationship between narrative immediacy and the broader temporal or thematic context the imagery seeks to evoke.

For example, in Dorothea Braby's *Frontispiece, showing the exchanging of gifts* (1952) (see fig. 1) There are at least two ways to read the secondary background elements. The central

moment pertains to the final exchange of winnings: where Bertilak offers the fox to Gawain, and Gawain kisses the lord, but does not present the green girdle. Gawain, reaching up to the solid and upright Bertilak, is displayed on the diagonal, leaning on and into the lord, to deliver his winnings. The colour coding, gold yellow, on Gawain's clothing is picked up in both the fox—quarry caught out so to speak—and in the dog, staring covetously at a bone, in the lower front of the image: both could be read as Braby's authorial judgement on Gawain's deception in keeping the girdle. Moreover, the inclusion of the lute player in the right half of the background is an intriguing atmospheric touch, as a visual referent for music, but may also be Braby's commentary on her role as an illustrator, since 'the lutenist's work primarily involved the adaptation and transformation of… [existing] compositions' (Zecher, 2000: 771). While the two women in discussion on the left might be read as members of the court gossiping about the intrigue surrounding their master's guest. This first reading emphasises the illustrators use of the background to offer some metatextual commentary that supports or propels forward the central image. However, it is also possible to read the background as synchronous separate moments: people talking (about something else), a musician practicing his craft, and a dog entirely disinterested in the central drama taking place. This image, in that reading, becomes a snapshot of a busy environment with competing points of focus, in which Gawain's story and perspective is but one of many that move off in different directions, and evoke different modes of behaviour—talking, playing music, anticipating food—and draw us away from the central action into questions of what else is going on in that imagined space.

Figure 1: *Frontispiece, showing the exchanging of gifts* (1952) by Dorothea Braby. Courtesy of the Braby estate.

To strengthen this second reading we might think of Braby's depiction of Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay (fig. 2). In this image a sense of spatial and narrative divergence is present through the inclusion of multiple unrelated background figures. The central figures—Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay—are emphasized by their juxtaposition, yet the composition disperses attention with several other focal points. Behind the women, three male figures emerge. These men, based on Braby's series, appear distinct from the primary characters like Gawain or Bertilak, suggesting peripheral members of the court engaged in unrelated activities. They function as male counterparts to the earlier depicted women, representing the unremarkable bustle of the court. Most notably, in the top-right corner, a servant carrying a dish is poised to exit the frame entirely, suggesting a continuity of action outside the depicted moment. This servant's diminutive form, heading toward a distant, unseen destination, reinforces a layered temporality: their task is disconnected from the immediate scene, directing the viewer's imagination toward events that occur before or after this moment. Architectural archways behind that servant further emphasize a sense of movement and multiplicity. Those diminishing arches suggest intersecting spaces and narratives, highlighting the network of lives and events within the broader courtly environment. Together, these elements diminish the primacy of the central pairing, evoking a fragmented, multifocal scene where unrelated actions and directions coexist, drawing attention away from the core narrative.

The other works of Braby's series continue this tension, most obviously *A temptation juxtaposed with hunt* (1952) which follows the text in interweaving Bertilak's hunting with the lady's temptation of Gawain. In Braby's image the prone knight resists the lady while we see a vista behind them opening onto hunting dogs, riders, and a servant blowing a great horn, which not only directs attention to the hunt but also serves as a reminder of the broader courtly world that exists beyond the intimate space of temptation.

In *Gawain at the Green Chapel Awaiting the Return Blow* (1952), a seemingly minor yet telling detail is the depiction of Gringolet, Gawain's horse, tied to a tree in the background. Gringolet's posture—looking off to the left and away from the scene of Gawain's final test—adds an intriguing layer of tension. While Gawain confronts the Green Knight in the culminating trial of his virtue, Gringolet's indifference to the drama seems to gesture toward an alternate path, physically and metaphorically. The horse's disengagement represents both a way out of the central conflict—a path away from the Green Chapel that Gawain might have taken but chose not to, and the horses more primal and basic desire to escape a dangerous situation. Suggestively in *The Green Knight issuing his challenge to the court* (1952) Braby subtly underscored the dynamics of protagonism and agency by showing Gawain emerging from the background, reminding us that this might have been a story about Arthur but for Gawain's intervention whereby he foregrounded himself consequentially.

Figure 2: *Lady Bertilak accompanying Morgan le Fay* (1952) by Dorothea Braby. Courtesy of the Braby estate.

Time and nature rendered as disturbing

I would now like to explore the other way that the temporal is introduced in *the established visual language*, perhaps more traumatically, and linked directly to nature, than it was in the layering of events that we just explored. For example, in *Gawain in the Landscape* (1956) by Roy Morgan (see fig. 3) Gawain, small and seemingly fragile, is shown in a vast wilderness that emphasizes the potency of nature against the fleeting endeavors of knights and chivalric ideals. The landscape's dominance in the composition—the sheer cliffs, snow-covered ground, and dense trees—invites reflection on *deep time*, a term borrowed from geology, to highlight the inconsequentiality of individual human actions when measured against the scale of natural processes. Morgan's depiction resonates with Lupack's observation that the landscape 'dwarfs the world of knights and chivalry,' suggesting not just a physical but also a temporal subordination of human activity to the ancient and immutable forces of nature (2008: 6). Similarly, Cyril Satorsky's *Gawain approaches the castle* (1971) also evokes this dynamic, placing Gawain low on the right loomed over by castle Hautdesert which is set in a harsh environment atop steep crags and framed by wind disturbed trees.

Figure 3: *Gawain in the Landscape* (1956) by Roy Morgan. Images courtesy of Royal College of Art archive. © Royal College of Art. Photo credit: Royal College of Art. All rights reserved.

The seasonal imagery—part of the poem's narrative and five of Morgan's twelve lithographs—further links the temporal with the natural. As Gawain journeys to the Green Chapel, enduring the wilderness and winter's hardships, Morgan's lithographs evoke the poem's acknowledgment of human vulnerability within the grand, ongoing passage of time. The snow-laden scenes of *At the Green Chapel* and *Gawain in the Landscape*, and the brooding freighted sky of *Lord Bertilak hunting the boar*, along with the undulating hills of *Temptation scene with a hunt behind* speaks to the transience of human endeavors. Similarly, the damp barren environment described in *Lord Bertilak with the fox*, juxtaposes skeletal, leafless trees with clusters of evergreens, creating a vivid portrayal of the transience of human activities amidst nature's multifarious sets of flows. These seasonal settings reinforce the themes of testing and perseverance central to Gawain's quest. Morgan's use of landscape as both temporal and symbolic underscores the unrelenting progression of the seasons as a counterpoint to the fleeting nature of human constructs, suggesting that Gawain's journey is not just physical but existential, a reflection on the finite scale of human struggle within the infinite rhythms of the natural world.

Time and nature as monstrous

I would now like to explore how nature, increasing in disturbing potential, becomes represented as monstrous and what the role of that monstrosity is.

In the figure of the Green Knight nature, encompassing the temporal, is given tangible form and agency: this is reflected in *the established visual language*, and across representations in the broader *fifth text*, as it is the poem, by way of the knight's colour, green, and by way of his association with the Green Chapel, an ambiguous and remote natural fissure in the hillside, which is the site of Gawain's ultimate testing. I would suggest that the association of the Green Knight with nature is so fundamental in the poem, it could be said to be his defining feature. Michael W. George (2010: 39) belongs to the tradition of scholars that treat the Green Knight as 'a direct symbol of the natural world' and he identifies: Speirs (1957), Goldhurst (1958), Benson (1965), and Woods (2002) who also place an emphasis on this relationship (see George 2010: 30). Additionally, Keetly and Tenga (2016: 61) emphasize the relationship of nature to the Green Knight, submitting that the monstrous figure catalyzes change, causing Gawain to undergo a 'transformative experience' and that as a result people are 'neither separate from nature or above it' (55). The argument I make here based on the *established visual language* and *fifth text* belongs to the above mentioned lineage and I suggest that the strategic use of horror motifs that I identify are attempts by the creatives to bring the transformative pressure, that Keetley and Tenga (2016) associate with the Green Knight as active agent, to bare on modern audiences retaining the existential seriousness of nature's implications for the subject.

A subject changing or coming into clear contrast with the 'other'

I would like to introduce two terms and a possible framework to help to understand the role of the monstrous in the creative responses, most obviously of the Green Knight but also of the *wodwose* (Wildman), a figure that is only briefly mentioned in the text but occurs in various representations. Gawain is said to confront 'serpents…snarling wolves' (line 720, Armitage, 2007: 38) and have 'tangles with wodwos' (line 721, Armitage, 2007: 38). Through these monstrous elements I hope to elucidate the role of horror and of nature in the poem as well as the creative responses. The first term is *Agonistic monstrosity* which I define below and

understand as producing a hero or heroic legacy. The second is *Constructive monstrosity* which I understand as catalyzing a doubting and/or changed subject.

Both readings are possible of the Green Knight for example, depending on what the interpreter wishes to emphasize. However, I would place the Green Knight as an example of *Constructive monstrosity* since I identify Gawain at the close of the poem as a doubting and changed subject. Furthermore, I see the Green Knight as a highly ambivalent figure rather than definitively malevolent.

Agonistic monstrosity

By *agonistic monstrosity* I am referring to the depiction of monstrosity as a force of conflict and opposition, embodying antagonism without yielding transformative or constructive outcomes. This framework positions monsters as external threats that reinforce clear boundaries—between self and other, good and evil, civilization and chaos—while leaving the status quo unchallenged. In this view, monsters represent fears and dangers to be confronted and defeated, rather than engaged with or understood. For example, in Michael Smith's *Gawain and the Wodwose* (2018) (fig. 4), the wodwose, or wild man, is rendered as a grotesque figure: a primal brute covered in hair, embodying uncivilized savagery in stark contrast to Gawain's armoured and heroic figure. The text indicates that in these circumstances Gawain is 'bound to use force' (line 717, Armitage 2007: 38) an indicator of a confrontational mindset. The pentagram on Gawain's shield reinforces his alignment with moral virtue and perfection, emphasizing his identity as the ideal knight. Gawain is shown driving away the bestial, zoomorphic wodwose, effectively solidifying his civilizing role. Similarly, in Clive Hicks-Jenkins' *The Travails* (2016) (fig. 5), a serpentine, demonic fiend claws maliciously at Gawain's shield, symbolizing an external threat intent on destruction. Gawain, once again, is framed as the human hero resisting the monstrous other—a stark dichotomy that positions the audience's sympathy firmly with the knight.

A defining function of *agonistic monstrosity*, as I see it, is its role in reinforcing societal norms: by framing monsters as the externalized "other," these depictions uphold order, morality, and identity. Their defeat reaffirms the values and boundaries they threaten, while discouraging introspection or re-evaluation of normative frameworks.

Figure 4: *Gawain and the Wodwose* (2018) by Michael Smith.

Figure 5: *The Travails* (2016) by Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

Constructive monstrosity

In contrast, *constructive monstrosity* reimagines monsters not as mere antagonists, but as catalysts for transformation, self-awareness, and growth. This framework challenges the rigid dichotomy of good and evil, instead portraying monstrosity as a force that disrupts assumptions, provokes reflection, and reveals deeper truths about identity, morality, and society. For instance, Hicks-Jenkins' *The Green Knight Bows to Gawain's Blow* (2016) (fig. 6), presents the Green Knight as ambiguous, passive, and even vulnerable. Positioned low in the composition and shadowed by Gawain's imposing figure, the Green Knight calmly accepts the axe blow, a striking contrast to Gawain's grim and stony demeanour. Notably, Gawain is visually aligned with two grotesque stone guardians—a Green Man caryatid and a griffin-like figure guarding a crypt. These elements reflect Gawain's rigid adherence to knightly duty, suggesting a kind of moral ossification. The Green Knight's composed acceptance of death, juxtaposed with Gawain's mechanical resolve, invites the viewer to question the true nature of courage and morality in the poem. This challenges normative assumptions central to chivalric ideology: is Gawain's heroic violence a mark of virtue, or does it obscure the brutality underpinning his role? The Green Knight's later refusal to retaliate further unsettles the dichotomy between good and evil, prompting a re-evaluation of Gawain's—and Arthurian society's—moral framework.

This framework also casts new light on Smith's *Gawain and the Wodwose*. In the image, Gawain appears aggressive and armoured, raising questions about his role: is he defending himself from the wodwose, or attacking it in an attempt to destroy what it represents? The wodwose, with its grotesque and untamed features, exists outside societal norms, offering an alternative to Gawain's constructed identity as the ideal knight. However, Gawain is ideologically compelled to resist this alternative, framing the wodwose's escape as a threat rather than an opportunity for understanding. This ambiguity underscores a central tension: Gawain's identity is defined in opposition to monstrous otherness, but this identity also projects its own brutality outward. Both Smith and Hicks-Jenkins highlight this tension in their depictions of Gawain: armoured, weapon raised, and hermetically sealed within armour: standing metaphorically for the rigid ideals of chivalry. This sealed identity denies the fluidity of human complexity. As Cosgrove explains, coherence is preferred and the 'unconscious becomes superfluous' (2007: 18): rather than an opening to otherness, including our own, violent agonism is used to perpetuate societal expectations and retain a 'dichotomized…[and] split off' sense of self (Cosgrove, 2007: 20) where the value of the other cannot be incorporated. In this sense, monstrosity arises not only from deviation but also from rigid conformity, a point poignantly illustrated through Gawain's interactions with the wodwose and the Green Knight.

Figure 6: *The Green Knight Bows to Gawain's Blow* (2016) by Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

Horror as a vehicle for *SGGK's* implications, and Horror Studies as guide

The increased emphasis on monstrosity in the *established visual language*, as demonstrated in the reference to *agonistic monstrosity* and *constructive monstrosity* above, emphasizes depictions of violence—the beheading, the threatened beheading, and Gawain's journey through the wilderness— and makes use of references to contemporary horror tropes and symbolism. Through the figure of the Green Knight and his connection to nature, the full range of temporality is brought to bear on Gawain's sense of self; that this should be figured in a monstrously ambiguous form is already justification for the use of horror, and horror tropes, to represent this figure. Furthermore, justifying the related disciplines of horror and monster studies as ways to contend with the themes of the poem in contemporary culture.

This might have subversive interpretive potential. For example, Barry Curtis's thesis that haunted houses mediate between 'geological time and human time' (Curtis, 2008: 33), and Anthony Vidler's (1987) description of the 'paradigmatic haunted house' as a 'repository of centuries of memory,' resembling a 'tomb' or 'crypt,' provide valuable frameworks for

understanding the Green Chapel's potency as a site of psychic tension. The Green Chapel is described as a 'haunted house' in Armitage's translation 'This is a haunted house – may it go to hell' (Armitage, 2007: 101). Like the haunted house, the Green Chapel becomes a liminal space where temporal scales converge, unsettling the boundaries between past and present, permanence and flux. This convergence creates a space that challenges Gawain's constructed identity, forcing him to confront the weight of the ideologies he embodies. Robin Wood's (1978) assertion that haunted houses symbolize 'the dead weight of the past crushing the life of the younger generation' (Wood, 1978: 31) has offered me a provocative lens for viewing Gawain's ceremonial armouring-up (see fig. 7). These scenes, so meticulously and beautifully described by the Pearl Poet (line 568, Armitage 2007: 32) take on a more troubling significance when read as an ideological straitjacket. The armour, intended as a representation of Gawain's chivalric ideals, becomes an emblem of the oppressive demands placed upon him by a flawed social system.

Figure 7: *Attendants dressing and armouring Gawain* (2021) by Michael Eden.

I have tried to convey this in *Attendants dressing and armouring Gawain*, showing Gawain's armour as a symbolic burden, aligning with critiques of ideological rigidity (Hartley 2003; Garland-Thomson 1997; Bahr 2017: 303). In the painting Gawain is assisted and framed by two surreal figures, both jarring intrusions of artifice on his naturalistic presentation. The use of multiple registers of painting casts abstraction as a form of dehumanization in which Gawain's armor, carried by a third crumpled figure, is implicated: staring judgmentally at its owner, who is presented to us by a knight wearing cuckold horns like a sacrificial victim. This reading draws attention to the absurdity of Gawain's willingness to die for an ideology that is itself faltering, a sacrifice endorsed by the entire court of Camelot. It does not seem too great a leap to consider Camelot as a haunted space freighted with expectations.

How can horror work for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?

The significance of horror tropes and symbolism as a mode of delivery for *SGGK*'s implications, I understand as a bridge to challenge our—the reader of the texts—comfortable removal from the imagined action: I am arguing that *SGGK* is best experienced where the implications directly reflect on the reader, rather than simply enjoying an escapist fantasy replete with decorative descriptions. Horror does not affect us because we believe in monsters (Carroll, 1990: 53), but rather because its mode of delivery returns the repressed (Clemens, 1999; Wood, 1979), overturns the normalised, and appeals to our primal somatic responses to imagery. Without this embodied, existential element, that I believe *is* an aspect of the poem, the text's narrative and images would be nothing more than a complex crossword for enthusiasts concerned with Judeo-Christian moral intricacies, albeit presented in a wonderfully elaborate way by a skilled artist. The inclusion of the grotesque, the absurd, and the marvellous in the form of the Green Knight, and importance of a space, the Green Chapel, which is so psychically disturbing, is proto-horrific in ways that echo our relationship to modern horror; this accounts for why it is a referent for the various illustrators including those I have discussed, Satorsky, Hicks-Jenkins, and Smith as well as others such as Mark Penman and for those creatives contributing to the *fifth text* such as Adam Dix (see Eden 2024: 36 and 41 respectively).

Figure 8: *The Green Knight's Head (point of no return)* (2024) by Michael Eden.

In another attempt to contribute to the *fifth text*, and explore the potential of horror symbolism, I have produced a series of works that respond to the Green Knight's beheading and subsequent reanimation. For example, in *The Green Knight's Head (point of no return)* (fig. 8) the use of body horror and grotesquery is useful in delivering a visceral impact. The use of an expressive painterly register is intended to convey a raw energy and turbulence. The use of layered greens with shadows and highlights gives the figure an organic, almost plant-like quality, reinforcing the theme of nature in flux, while the neck's wound is rendered vaginal with thorned tendrils hanging down, hinting at the background figure of Morgan le Fay, the authority that commands the Green Knight. This image responds to the text, but also to the *established visual language*, in particular Hicks-Jenkins *The Green Knight's Head Lives* (2016) which includes a

grotesquely formic blood spurt that blossoms out like a sentient growth, more akin to John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) than to what is described in the poem. These strategies allow for 'categorical violations' (Carroll, 1990:191), so important for horror (see also Cohen, 1996); and which exist in the text's presentation of the Green Knight as 'ambiguous' (Ashton, 2005: 52; Coley, 2020: 211; Poris-Sanz, 2020:366), to be aestheticized visually. In this case I have attempted to increase the dissonance of the figure by giving the face as much pathos as possible, showing a simultaneously vulnerable and otherworldly figure.

What is so horrific anyway? Nature reaching into us

Looking at examples of *SGGK*'s *established visual language* and *fifth text* I have outlined how temporality, as a transformative and potentially traumatic force for the subject, is represented visually, and specifically at the ways monstrosity in the person of the Green Knight acts as an active agent for its effects. I have also suggested a rationale as to why horror motifs and theory can help to bring these themes to a contemporary audience, acting as an incubator and delivery system for the existential themes in the poem, related to identity and ideology.

I would now like to explore the towing and froing of identity conditions in our relation to nature, which is highlighted by the role of aestheticization, and which I suggest accounts for what is traumatic about nature, temporality, and what is originally traumatic in the codex's Green Knight. A key factor of our understanding of nature is understanding it, as a mirror for our projections: this places the subject, and culture, in a position of secure power. The Green Knight in that case becomes a signifier for any number of interpretive projections that pick out one of the many conflated layers of the figure and go on to show us how this figure reflects back to us our concerns around that specific aspect, which is used to accent the other events of the poem. While discussions generated by that interpretive manoeuvre are entirely valid, it seems to me that the underlying movement of the Green Knight as a representation of temporal nature, from the outside to the inside, becomes strangely agentic in the forming of identity in ways that fundamentally undermine ideological constructs of society and the self. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the intervention of the ecologist Don Gayton regarding my attempts to represent the wodwose and the Green Knight. In a discussion regarding those images, he generously offered the following quote regarding nature's role in subjectivisation, from the 19th century German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt.

> All that the senses can but imperfectly comprehend, all that is most awful in such romantic scenes of nature, may become a source of enjoyment to man, by opening a wide field to the creative powers of his imagination. Impressions change with the varying movements of the mind, and we are led by a happy illusion to believe that we receive from the external world that with which we have ourselves invested it. [Gayton then writes] Sounds like there is some correspondence between this and your work (von Humboldt, 1850: 26).

In this correspondence Gayton expanded on the meaning of the passage and explained to me that,

> what he [von Humboldt] is saying is: we think we project our aesthetics into nature, and nature then reflects them back to us. No, Humboldt asserts, our aesthetic responses originate from nature itself. So, the sensation of peaceful detachment I feel as I sit on

> this hillside was actually *created* by this hillside, and I happen to be its privileged and receptive audience of one (Gayton, 2024, see Appendix 1).

In von Humboldt's terms, the 'creative powers' of nature do not merely offer aesthetic pleasure; they also provoke profound discomfort, and more fundamentally *they* determine the very categories we use to understand them, 'opening' in us new possibilities for comprehension and subjective development. This parallels the Green Knight's dramatic intrusion into the structured, 'civilized' world of Camelot bringing nature's ambivalent transformative power to the court. His disruptive presence challenges the illusion of permanence and stability that defines the court's ideals; and Gawain becomes his 'privileged and receptive audience of one.' More than a test of physical courage or chivalric virtue, the Green Knight's arrival then serves as a direct confrontation with Gawain's normalised adherence to the ideals of honour and heroism that he has internalised. Acting in nature's agentic mode, the Green Knight causes Gawain to confront his own limitations and question the fragility of human constructs.

The subject as nature's pathetic fallacy

This encounter can be understood as nature reaching into us, signifying not only a literal confrontation but also, following Gayton (2024) and von Humbolt (1850), an internal rupture caused by nature's force. The wilderness, symbolized by both the Green Knight and the Green Chapel, transcends its role as an external landscape. Instead, it becomes a metaphorical interior space—one that prompts personal transformation. This transformation arises not from Gawain's attempts to master nature or impose his ideals onto it, but from his direct engagement with nature's raw power and unpredictability. Gawain's initial understanding of himself collapses, forcing him to embrace a more complex and reciprocal selfhood. Understandably, this is a disorientating reversal where personification and pathetic fallacy, are not simply literary strategies that have direct equivalents in illustration and fine art, but descriptions of human consciousness at a moment of apprehension of its own contrivance.

Two Directions of Iconoclasm

There is something withering in being confronted with such a moment, it occurs to me though that the Green Knight while a representation of nature, rupturing the symbolic and constructed world, is also a 'knight' and as such there is a constructive bridge between what we contrive and traumatic reality. It is possible therefore to interpret the Green Knight's testing as a demand for Gawain to undertake a renegotiation of the symbolic (constructed world), which he is too attached to; and the real (what he suppresses in himself and what the nature): this accounts for my categorization of the Green Knight as a constructive mode of monstrosity, *constructive* in relation to the initiation of a complex interiority capable of change. This brings me to a fork in the road in terms of the creative practices that have represented Gawain, including approaches that I understand as primarily satirical, identifying the knight as a symbol of institutional, and gendered, power, revealed as ridiculous, faltering, or irrelevant; and those where the iconoclasm is less final, a necessary part of a process of personal transformation.

Direction One: Irony and Critique

This mode applies humour and satire, presenting a ridiculous sight to the audience that aims at a collapse of the image of authority. For example, in The *Green Chapel* (2023) (fig. 9), a painting by Geraint Evans, Gawain appears as a deluded contemporary suburban gardener, positioned as self-aggrandizing before the steps of the 'Green Chapel' which might be an outré rockery: one that imitates but falls short of grandeur. Evans seems to be involved in a meta-process, implicating the bourgeois literature enthusiast who vicariously frames their domestic endeavours through a highly flattering and romantic narrative, while actually risking nothing other than revealing their bad taste. Other readings are possible but must take account of the staged aspect of the image and the heightened sense of ridiculousness this gives the subject matter.

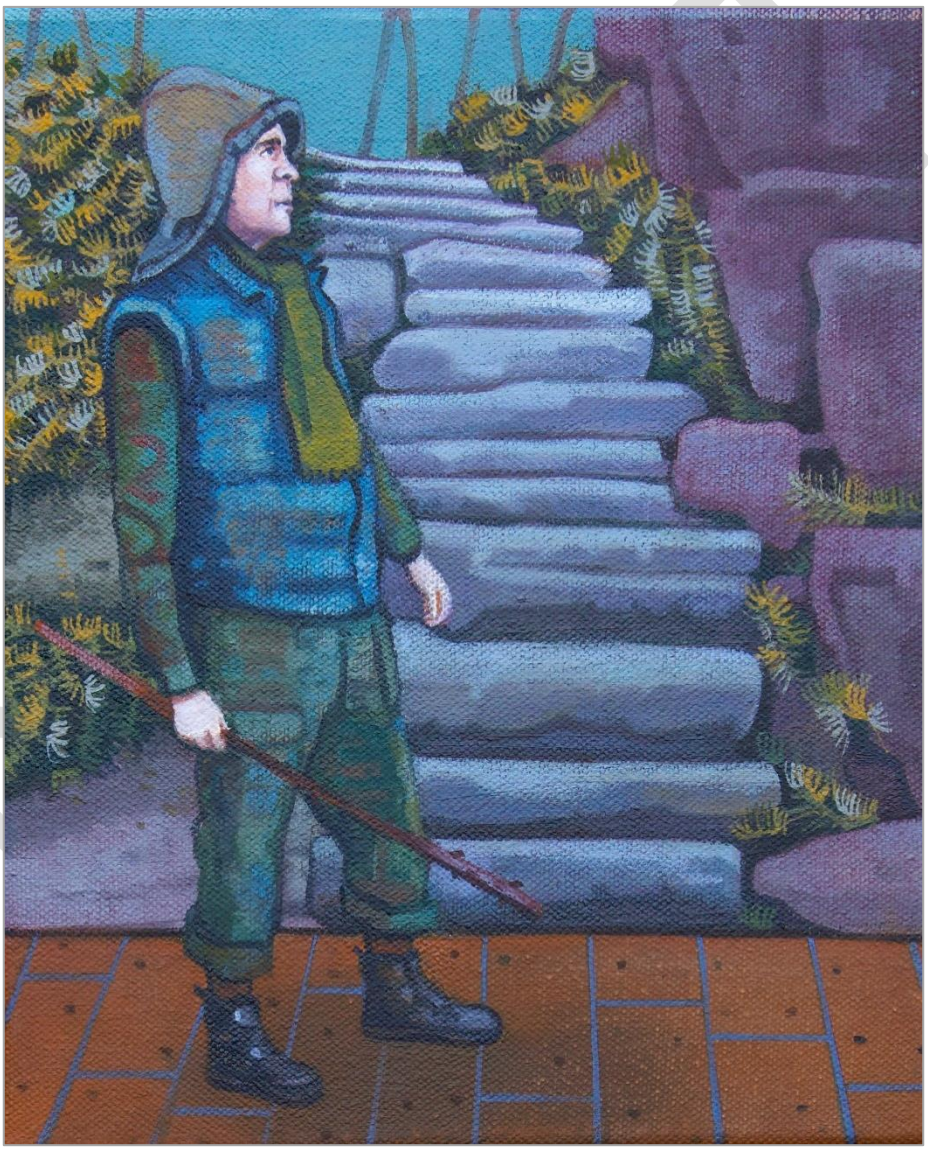

Figure 9: *The Green Chapel* (2023) by Geraint Evans.

A satiric sense of enactment is also an aspect Adam Dix's *Study for Sir Gawain* (2021) (fig. 10) which draws on the folk tradition of traveling entertainers, or mummers, to inform a

decidedly performative knight. The image also includes reference to Gringolet as a tourney variation of a hobby horse. Tourney horses resemble a person riding a small, caparisoned horse, as seen in medieval jousting depictions. An oval frame is strapped to the rider's waist or chest, covered by a draped skirt that reaches the ground. The frame includes a carved wooden horse head, often with movable jaws controlled by a string, and a tail at the opposite end. The rider may wear a cape to conceal the frame (Cawte, 1978: 187). Reference to the mummers play and *SGGK* is present in Reed, explained as a way to explore 'the complexity of life' with humour (1988: 156); and in Pettitt to understand the ludic aspect of the Green Knight 'he looks like a mummer, and behaves like a mummer, in the sense of proposing to join in pastimes with the assembled company - as mummers at this time demonstrably did' (2002: 70). Dix's image is of Gawain, but is green saturated, a sign of the youth's naivety or feelings of being overcome by his challenge perhaps, in this form he brings to mind the knights of Monty Python's *Holy Grail* (1975) who clap together coconut shells to imitate riding. I suggest that in these images the heroic gives way to the ridiculous and idea of the knight representing something sympathetic is untenable.

Figure 10: *Study for Sir Gawain* (2021) by Adam Dix.

Direction Two: Truth (where truth is the becoming of the subject).

In the second mode I identify in the *fifth text*, the heroic gives way to complex interiority or becoming. This mode retains an existential seriousness and develops the idea of threshold experiences where the journeying knight is a proxy for the subject. For example, David Treloar used Gawain's trials as a way to reflect his struggles through the COVID pandemic using his daily allocated walks in local woodlands to immerse himself in nature and evoke a sense of exploration and dread, 'my COVID nightmare made me think about Sir Gawain and his confrontation with death' (Treloar in Eden, 2022) portraying the woodland of Gawain's travels as a psychic as well as a physical labyrinth 'psychological spaces and a tangle of ideas and intentions' as Treloar commented (see Eden, 2022) (fig. 11). In one of this series *Looking out for Others* (fig. 12) Treloar evokes castle Hautdesert making a personal link to the sense of desperation and longing for others that for Gawain is answered by his disorienting sojourn with Bertilak and the lady. Treloar intersperses personal imagery with direct reference to the poem in this series, *Giving the stolen kiss back* (2020) and *Gringolet* (2020) for example, investing his locale with layers of meaning from the text and using the process of making as a self-reflexive exercise.

Figure 11: *Through the Woodland* (2020) by David Treloar.

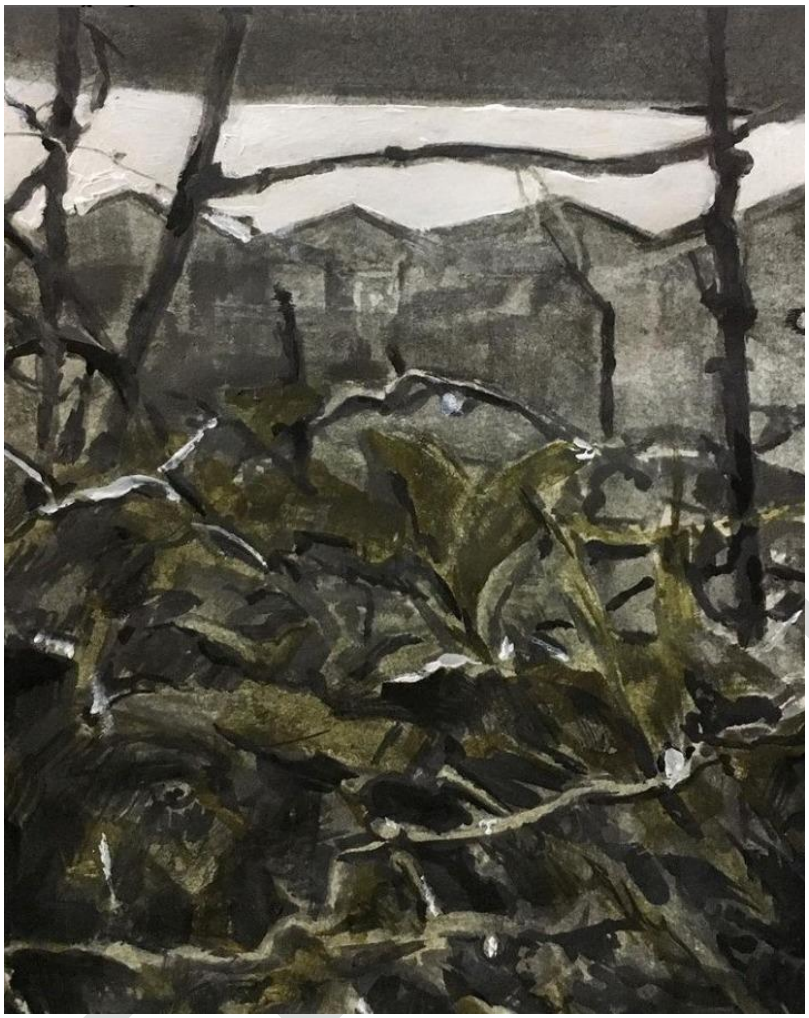

Figure 12: *Looking out for Others* (2020) by David Treloar.

Drawing on the images of the *established visual language* that I have interpreted as evoking themes of redemption and self-knowledge; notably *The Stain of Sin* (2016) by Clive Hicks-Jenkins and *Gawain at the Green Chapel awaiting the return blow* (1952) by Dorothea Braby. I feel more drawn to this second mode of iconoclasm in the *fifth text*. For example, *Gawain at Court* (2019) (fig. 13) conflates Gawain with his armour presenting a sombre reticent figure, the helmeted visage of Gawain, detailed with metallic and reflective textures, was intended to bring out an automaton-like quality, reinforcing the alienation of chivalric ideals. The fractured forms in the background evoke artifice and are interrupted by a symbol with ancient and contemporaneous meaning, a unicorn, a mythical creature associated with purity and truth wanders through a diagrammatic woodland: clearly informed by the origami portent left by Gaff (Edward James Olmos) in Scott's, *Blade Runner* (1982). Gaff's unicorn has become synonymous with the questioning of agency and the reliance of subjectivity on memory. I include it here to foreshadow the subjective journey that Gawain begins at court.

Further developing the theme of Gawain's struggle with ideology, the sculpture *Gawain Sleeping in Armour* (2020) (fig. 14) presents an anthropomorphic, larger-than-life suit of segmented armor evoking both human and insect forms. Drawing inspiration from the woodlouse, its shell-like structure and articulated joints are intended to contrast sharply with its imposing steel material. Reclining in a vulnerable pose, the figure is caught between motion

and rest, underscoring Gawain's dependence on armor not only as protection but as a fragile construct of identity, a nightmare perhaps that he attempts to wake up from. The visible rivets and whimsical assembly highlight a tension between the grandiose symbolism of knightly ideals and the playful, almost childlike process of its creation. The work explores a duality: Gawain as uncomfortably human and machine, struggling with fixed ideals under the force of inner transformation. These works are concerned with the collapse of a false self so a more authentic, less rigid individuality can emerge.

Figure 13: *Gawain at Court* (2019) by Michael Eden.

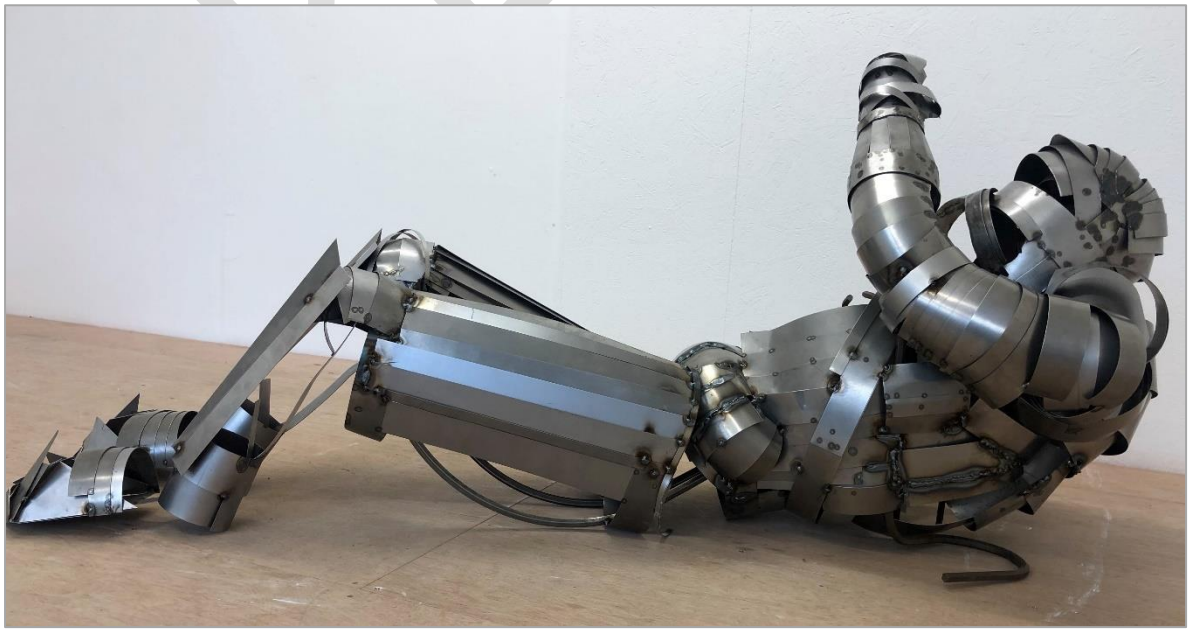

Figure 14: *Gawain Sleeping in Armour* (2020) by Michael Eden.

These related modes of the *fifth text* reflect critically on one another, irony distances the artist/interpreter from the implications of the poem, treating its themes and events as melodramatic, desperate stuff, lampooning imagined figures of authority from a supposed superior position: the postmodern present. Does *SGGK* need to be utilized in such a way when so much contemporary culture provides us with fuel for satire? On the other hand, what does it mean to take such a fantastical text seriously, earnestly appropriating its concepts to defend or sustain an idea of subjectivity, that might be seen, in the person of Gawain bound up with gendered hierarchical authority: and therefore, constitute a defensive rationalization? In other words, are those of us who take *SGGK*'s existential themes to heart something like Evans's absurd backyard adventurer, still fighting for a long-outmoded archetype? The text itself refuses to settle those issues. Scholars will also often acknowledge this dichotomy and emphasize either 'existential' (Sadowski, 1996: 18; 52; 89: 160) or 'ironic' as defining approaches (see Hunt, 1976). Since both modes are aspects of Lowery's film adaptation *The Green Knight* (2021) I predict that *SGGK* will continue to fuel both modes for creatives looking to assimilate its potent imagery and symbolism.

Conclusion

I will now attempt a staggered conclusion that firstly takes account of what I have claimed about the *established visual language* and the *fifth text* in relation to time, horror, and iconoclasm; and secondly, I will venture an interpretation of the text based on what making that account has led me to emphasize in the poem.

In this analysis, I have explored how *the established visual language* and the *fifth text* engage with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through the lenses of time, horror, and iconoclasm. Time emerges as a traumatic force intertwined with nature, a dynamic that resonates within the poem and is increasingly emphasized in visual adaptations through the shifting tension between background and foreground. I have claimed that horror, as a modern interpretive lens, is an apt delivery system that allows contemporary audiences to grapple with the existential dimensions of the poem, exposing the subject's frailty in the face of nature's raw power and unpredictability. I have argued that monstrosity in the poem serves as a mediator for these tensions, presenting nature's paradoxical relationship to humanity. The figure of the wodwose and The Green Knight's ambivalence—as both agonistic and constructive—embodies the paradox of being reduced to a 'pathetic fallacy' of nature, while bearing responsibility for how we respond to this destabilization.

Finally, I suggest that iconoclasm is the inevitable result of this interplay, as the time-nature-horror dynamic dismantles inauthentic constructs of self and society. The *fifth text* thus offers two trajectories: one ironic, deconstructing outdated power dynamics through satire, and the other reconstructive, portraying Gawain's journey as one of reflexive subjectivity and self-awareness. Together, these interpretations have underlined the role of *the established visual language* and *expanding fifth text* to confront and transform our understanding of the poem.

This way of exploring the poem and its contemporary life have led me to my current interpretation below.

Conflict between the courts of Arthur and Morgan le Fay represent an opposing parental dynamic, the tension of which opens a gap in the smooth ideological functioning of identity conditions in liner time. As those forces wrestle for possession of Gawain's soul, the consistent

framing of ideology is fractured, exposing him to the vast temporal reality of the present moment. This is understandably a fraught and uncertain experience marked by the twin specters of fear and mortality. However, Gawain faces two distinct forms of mortality: physical death, represented by his trials, culminating in his potential beheading, and a living death as the flawless embodiment of chivalry—a system-serving object, with power, but stripped of personal agency. That dilemma accounts for the Green Knight's ambivalence as a figure. When he commands Gawain to 'abide,' even as the young man protests to hasten the ordeal at the Green Chapel, the call is profound: to remain in the tension of the moment. '"Abyde!" quob on be bonke abouen ouer his hede' (line 2217).

> "Abide" came a voice from above the bank,
>
> You'll cop what's coming to you quickly enough (Armitage 2007: 102).

Its meaning is radical—this pain and self-awareness are life itself, situated between two deaths: the comfortable ideological death of Camelot and the physical death awaiting him. Only now, in this liminal state, has Gawain truly come alive, and the Green Knight's injunction to abide insists that he remain there, in that present space of raw self-awareness and existence.

This state of suspended self-awareness, demanded by the Green Knight's command to abide, symbolizes the essence of transformation: the painful confrontation with the contradictions of identity and the instability of ideological constructs. In abiding, Gawain steps beyond the binary oppositions of heroism and failure, chivalry and dishonor, Camelot and the wilderness, and into an uncharted realm of mature, complex subjectivity. It is a space where the individual, untethered from the comforts of societal roles, must grapple with the unsettling realities of mortality and agency. The horror of this experience lies in its ambiguity: it is not a resolution but an exposure to the fragile and fragmented nature of selfhood and of reality? In this way, the Green Knight becomes less a figure of judgment and more an agent of existential revelation, forcing Gawain—and by extension the audience—to confront what it means to have agency. The question remains, have we, and will we ever, abide in the space between two deaths?

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Appendix 1

Email correspondence with the writer and ecologist Don Gayton.

Sent: 21 August 2024 9:59 PM
To: Michael Eden <m.h.eden@fashion.arts.ac.uk>
Subject: landscape and the condition of being

Hello Michael,
Wow, that goes a long ways back. Had to remind myself.
I had a quick look at your intriguing artwork. I am currently working on an essay where I'm drawing on Alexander von Humboldt (quote in italics):
Impressions change with the varying movements of the mind, and we are led by a happy illusion to believe that we receive from the external world that with which we have ourselves invested it.
What he is saying is: we think we project our esthetics into nature, and nature then reflects them back to us. No, Humboldt asserts, our esthetic responses originate from nature itself.
So the sensation of peaceful detachment I feel as I sit on this hillside was actually *created* by this hillside, and I happen to be its privileged and receptive audience of one.
Sounds like there is some correspondence between this and your work.
Saludos,
Don
Don V. Gayton, M.Sc, P.Ag(ret.)
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