The Sounds of the Green Knight

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1. Sound and / as sense in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

"In some very elemental way, the story and the sense of the poem is directly located within its sound." (Armitage 2021, 12) Armitage's claim that sound is sense is an age old one. The Gawain poet already suggested it in his *ars poetica*:

> As hit is stad and stoken
> In stori stif and strange,
> With lel letteres loken,
> In londe so has ben lange. (l. 33-37)

> and it has been inked
> in stories bold and strong,
> where loyal letters linked
> have lasted loud and long. (l. 33-37)

Putter and Stokes noted that "the alliteration cannot help but render **With lele lettres loken** metrically mimetic of its content" (Putter & Stokes 606) in their gloss of the passage. In his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), poet and satirist Alexander Pope also claimed that "The sound must seem an echo to the sense" (Pope 10). Closer to us, Basil Bunting, who wrote *Briggflatts* (1965), a poetic synthesis of the North from medieval Northumbria to the 20th-century North-East, warned the readers: "The sound of the words spoken aloud is itself the meaning, just as the sounds of the notes played on the proper instruments is the meaning of any piece of music." The idea that sound is sense is probably the rallying cry of all poets, and therefore somewhat of a truism.

When he made that claim about his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Armitage had two very specific aspects in mind. First, he wanted to maintain the alliterative metre and the bob-and-wheel, two characteristic features and poetic innovations of the original text. Ad Putter brilliantly demonstrated that even though Armitage proved his formal and lexical skills

in upholding the alliteration without stifling the line, his command of verse structure is not flawless and the transition from one type of meter to the other may feel anticlimactic at times. This is partly explained by the difference in nature between the two works. Indeed, while the medieval poem was recited and performed in front of an audience, the translation is meant to be read silently and in private. The difference is plainly seen in the genres ascribed by the narrator to his romance: "If ye wyl lysten this laye bit on little quile / So listen a listen while to my tale if you will" (l.30). A *lai* is indeed intended to be sung while a tale can be written or orally recounted. The two settings at least partly justify the different handling of verse structure. Besides, Armitage makes another bold assertion about alliteration in the poem when he says that it is "the warp and weft of the poem, without which it is just so many fine threads" (Armitage 2021, 11). Indeed, the metaphor, taken from the textile industry, recalls the use of interlacing as both a theme and a writing device in the poem. It sounds formulaic due to the alliteration (and, at least for Armitage's aficionados, because it is also used in "Padlocks gripping" from his 2017 *New Cemetery* collection and in "Lockdown", one of his 2020 Laureate poems). The word "warp" in particular, which means "to utter" in Middle English, is used at least four times in the original text (l. 224, 1423, 2045, 2253). It is as if the words of the poem had woven their sounds into Armitage's own voice.

The second aspect that justifies the "sound is sense" claim is due to the proximity between the linguistic variety used by the Gawain poet and Armitage's own regional version of English as he was born in Marsden, Yorkshire, slightly further North and East from where Gawain travels in his quest for adventures, but close enough for him to recognise the sounds the words in the poem make and the peripheral reputation that goes along with it. There is a general agreement that the poem is written in some North-West Midlands dialect, which "differs from the London English of Chaucer" (Putter & Stokes xvii-xxi). In their footnotes, Putter and Stokes pointed at a few northern grammatical features in the poem, like the use of "mas", "*a*

northern contracted form of makes" (266). Tom Shippey, in an article on Tolkien's translation, focussed on pronunciation:

> At one point in *Sir Gawain* the Lady, flirting with Sir Gawain, tells him he ought to be eager to teach "a yonke thynk" (1526) about love. The addition of an extra"g/k" sound in words like "young, thing, ring, finger" is still common in areas of the North-West Midlands; it is however a feature which ambitious parents and school teachers try hard to stamp out.

His descriptive list of some words that clearly indicate a regional accent that is quite reminiscent of today's Midlands accents is doubled by a prescriptive comment on such words today that sheds light on the social prejudice against this dialect, a form of glottophobia that Armitage fights against by making these words the "warp and weft" of his poetic wordhoard. In his introduction, the Poet Laureate gives a list of the words he recognises as belonging to his own variety of English:

> And even more so to a northerner who not only recognizes plenty of the poem's dialect but who detects an echo of his own speech within the original. Words such as "bide" (wait), "nobut" (nothing but), "childer" (children), "layke" (play), "karp" (talk), "bout" (without), "brid" (bird), "sam" (gather up), and "barlay" (truce) are still in usage in these parts, though mainly (and sadly) among members of the older generation.

Admittedly, there are very few northernisms in Armitage's text. There are even fewer in the revised American edition published by Norton in 2021 than in the original English edition published by Faber in 2007. This is not only due to the choice of American orthography, which is at odds with the very British material, but also to some lexical revisions. For instance, the Faber edition had "the dogs **pogged** out / on liver" (l. 1359-60), "pogged" meaning full, replete in Yorkshire English. The dialecticism was standardized into "**pigged** out" in the Norton edition, which is slang for overeating. The original text has "fede" for "feed", which is informal but not familiar. Whether Armitage's 2021 translation is compared to its medieval original or to its 2007 version, the homogenizing tendency which consists in relocalizing geographic variation into register rather than place goes hand in hand with a

closer attention to the poet's trademark colloquialisms. It could be argued that what he recognizes as familiar in the text is perhaps less its location in the north than its position away from concepts of standard norms. Indeed, both the alliterative meter and the northern dialect can be characterised as stemming from a provincial tradition and that is probably what Armitage responded to. In spite of the fact that provincial does not mean the same thing in pre-Britain England and in post-Brexit Britain and that dialect does not encompass the same array of meanings before and after the rise of Standard English in the 19th century, both the Gawain-poet and the Poet Laureate are unapologetic in their provincialism.

However, some dialecticisms remain in the latest version of the poem, most of which are located in the Green Knight's speech, "bairns" (l. 280), the Northern English and Scottish word for "children", being a case in point, a word so popular it has its own Wikipedia page. It is used by the Green Knight to speak of Arthur's knights and participates in the construction of his character as both outlandish and strangely familiar, someone who may be deemed a bit patronising here, but who nevertheless follows the code (the linguistic code but also the social code) only with a slight twist. These non-standard words are part of the Green Knight's soundscape. While a lot of critical attention has been given to the Green Knight's outstanding visual appearance, the sounds (verbal and non-verbal) he actually makes do not seem to have garnered as much scrutiny. And yet, when he crashes Arthur's Christmas party and when Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight is first described as a sound even before he is actually seen:

> An other noyse ful newe neghed bilive (l. 132)
>
> Because another sound, a new sound, suddenly drew near. (l. 132)
>
> Thene herde he of that hyghe hil, in a harde roche
> Biyonde the broke, in a bonk, a wonder breme noyse (2199-2200)
>
> Then he heard on the hillside, from behin a hard rock
> and beyond the brook, a blood-chilling noise. (2199-2200)

Hearing a “new sound” (l.132) or “a blood-chilling noise” (2200) before it materializes into a “fearful form” (l.136) is what cinema-goers experience when watching horror movies – a jump scare. This is heard against a backdrop of many other sounds, some of which are totally different while others are quite close, creating a contrapuntal melody. What this article purports to do is to focus on the sounds of the Green Knight, his specific soundscape, and to show how this tapestry of sounds, their “warp and weft”, participates in the aesthetic of the poem.

2. Sound as characterisation

The Gawain-Poet describes the sonic appearance of the Green Knight as the intrusion of a “noyse” (l.132), for which Armitage has the more neutral word “sound”. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the word “noise” as “loud or unpleasant sound / disturbance, perturbation / report, rumor, scandal, accusation”, but a more complete description is provided by Bartłomiej Błaszkiewicz in “On the formulaic context of the aural experience vocabulary in Middle English Poetry”:

> In such a context the word “noyse” was used most frequently to denote any continuous loud sound which either does not contain a rationally comprehensible component, or its potential existence is less relevant to the listener than is the emphatic expansive formation of an acoustic space that it entails. The chief feature of this kind of acoustic phenomenon is its negative, intrusive character which causes it to expand by imposing itself unduly upon the person’s attention, to the effect of obscuring, or obliterating, other sonic stimuli. (Błaszkiewicz 160)

The very word used to describe the Green Knight’s intrusion implies a violation of rational meaning and rationality, and an imposition of a new sonic regime, which, in this case, is silence – the music stops, nobody speaks, the scene becomes awfully quiet for a few pages, as all the attention is focussed on the Green Knight’s physical appearance. One sound that is heard though is the sound of bells. Bells were one of the components of the traditional

soundscape in medieval times – they indicated the time of the day, when to work, when to pray, when to hide from danger. Yet, the first of the very few bells mentioned in the text is not a church bell, but a decorative one, one meant to scare the enemy:

> Sychen thrawen wyth a thwong, a thwarle-knot alofte,
> Ther mony belles ful bryght of hrende golde rungen. (l. 194-195)
>
> And a long, tied thong lacing it tight
> where bright and burnished gold bells chimed clearly. (l. 194-195)

That bell is worn by the Green Knight. This is the one and only time the word is used in the Middle English text. It is not so Christian in the poem but connotes a form of violence. It is associated with the word "rungen", which is used two more times – once to announce evensong at Hautdesert (l. 931) and once for the boar-hunting scene. Thus, Armitage has successfully used the word "bell" to characterise the Green Knight as a scary character and give the readers hints of a fine thread with Bertilak. Indeed, when the character speaks for the first time, his voice is described through the word "bellows" (l. 224-225), which extends or expands the martial bells into a beastly roar. Armitage repeats the words "bell" (l. 930-932) to describe the sounds of the prayer at Hautdesert. Nevertheless, in Armitage's version, the Green Knight is wearing "stockings" (l. 160) and "baubles" (l. 162), as if he were a Christmas tree, while the words "leggings" (l. 157), "stripy silk" (l. 159), and "thong" (l. 194) most probably ring a polysemic bell for the contemporary reader. Therefore, the sound of brutality and the presence of ludicrous or drag images do not match perfectly and provide a complex portrayal of the Green Knight.

This is related to an "imaginaire linguistique", which, according to Anne-Marie Houdebine, attaches a series of subjective indexes to linguistic data. Burton Raffell gives us evidence of how linguistic imaginings participate in portraying the character of the Green Knight:

> No one can produce, in Modern English, exact sound equivalence of the Gawain poet's rugged Northern speech.
>
> Quat! hit clatered in pe clyff, as hit cleue schulde,

As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a sype.
What! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne;
What! hit rusched and ronge, rawpe to here.

What! It clattered on the cliff, as if
To split it, like a grindstone grinding a scythe.
What! It whirred like water at a mill.
What! It rushed and it rang, and it sang
Miserably.

(Lines 2201-2205)

> The Modern English is inevitably more effete: we have lost one kind of music, and learned another.

The words “rugged” and “effete” in the comments framing the quotations are extremely connoted and prejudiced. They are used to set a contrast between the supposedly muscular language of the Middle Ages and the gentle sounds of contemporary English and in doing so they set a contrast between two versions of the Green Knight: a medieval “macho man” and a contemporary “softie”. And yet, there is nothing rugged about Northern English or Middle English in itself, nor is there anything particularly soft about standard English or contemporary English. The way we perceive the language used in a speech, this “imaginaire linguistique”, nevertheless participates in the characterisation of the speaker. Because the Green Knight uses the word “bairns” and because he “bellows” early in the text, the reader may imagine he is more of a blood-thirsty warrior than he actually is.

There is extensive research in the Green Knight’s dual nature as a warrior and a courtier, some of which focus on his rhetoric. When he first addresses the court, the king, and Gawain, his challenge is couched in linguistic and paralinguistic signs. For instance, he resorts to insult:

Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes?
Now is the revel and the renoun of the Rounde Table
Overwalt wyth a worde of on wyyes speche,
For al dares for drede wichoute dyne schewed!"
Wyth this he laghes so loude that the lorde greved;
The blod schot for scham into his schyre face
and lere. (l. 311-318)

> "Where's the fortitude and fearlessness you're so famous for?
> And the breathtaking bravery and the big-mouth bragging?
> The towering reputation of the Round Table,
> skittled and scuppered by a stranger – what a scandal!
> You flap and you flinch and I've not raised a finger!"
> Then he laughed so loud that their leader saw red.
> Blood flowed to his fine-featured face and he raged
> inside. (l. 311-318)

According to the Green Knight, who belittles his opponents to put himself forward, the knights do not live up to their reputation because they do not respond to his challenge immediately. The words are disparaging and so is the tone. Indeed, the use of a rhetorical question enhances the sarcastic dimension of his comment, while the exclamatory sentence highlights his disappointment. The reader can almost hear the sneer through the punctuation. The *coup de grâce* comes with his booming laughter that puts the knights to shame. Armitage enhances the boastful dimension of the Green Knight by resorting to a modernised version of the art of flyting, that is to say an exchange of insults in verse as a prelude to a battle, such as can be found in many cultural productions from the Old English poem *Beowulf* to the blockbuster *Eight Miles* featuring Eminem for instance. Indeed, the Green Knight engages in what he terms "big-mouth bragging" (l.312), not only in Arthur's court but also at the Green Chapel, especially on lines 2270-2279. The Green Knight's speech, though mostly courteous, contains words of abuse that aim at humiliating the hero for not living up to his street cred. For instance, he uses "thee", a form of *tutoiement*. He accuses Gawain of being scared and of trying to run away. He blames him for his "cowardise" (l. 2273), which is exactly what Gawain blames himself for, and what his pentangle's fourth pentad should have prevented him from. In the 2021 version, Armitage translated the line almost word for word, but he went much further in the use of debasing words of abuse as in his 2007 translation since the Green Knight calls out Gawain for being "namby-pamby", a phrase meaning silly or emotional for a person but also affected, weak and maudlin for verse, after a poem written in 1725 by Henry

Carey. In other words, this is not an attack against Gawain's virtues but against his masculinity. The verbal attack will be repeated when the Green Knight refers to Gawain's "pretty neck" (l. 2298), given that the adjective has been used twice before to describe Bertilak's Lady. This has also been erased from the 2021 edition. On the contrary, he brags about his own courage as evidenced by his lack of physical reaction to harm through a long list of verbs ("budge", "blink", "carp or quibble", "flap"). Armitage enhances the opposition between the two men through the verbal joust. The bob ("so feeble / and frail") works like a hyperbaton since the Green Knight adds one more insulting slur to the pile. At this point, Gawain, who is now appropriately "goaded", throws himself into the verbal joust and intimates the Green Knight to proceed with his action.

The soundscape of the Green Knight is therefore identified through an "imaginaire linguistique", but also by contrast with other soundscapes. The sonic backdrop against which the Green Knight's soundscape is inscribed is carefully staged to enhance the theatricality of his apparition.

3. Contrapuntal landscapes

Arthur's court at Christmas is presented through the sounds of festivities. There are jousts and carols, which were songs that focused on the Virgin Mary and the Christmas holiday:

> Ther tournayed tulkes by tymes ful many,
> Justed ful jolile thise gentyle knightes,
> Sythen kayred to the court, caroles to make. (l. 41-43)

> Time after time, in tournaments of joust,
> they had lunged at each other with leveled lances
> then returned to the castle to carry on their caroling, (l. 41-43)

This is the sound of merriment.

> Such glaum ande gle glorious to here,
> Dere dyn upon day, daunsyng on nyghtes; (l. 46-47)

> The hubbub of their humor was heavenly to hear:

pleasant dialogue by day and dancing after dusk, (l. 46-47)

Much glam and gle glent up therinne (l.1650)

and a din arose as they reveled in a ring (l.1650)

The medieval text has a formulaic phrase, “glaum ande gle”, in the first line (the phrase is used again to describe the festivities at Bertilak’s castle). It indicates a blending of voices and music, which is echoed in the following line with the “dyn” for a more general sound and the dancing to some kind of music again. The sounds of music and voice are balanced, either around “and” or a comma. Everything is harmonious. The soundscape in Armitage’s translation does not have that same balance. There is on the one hand the word “hubbub”, a sort of onomatopoeic word to describe a loud chaotic noise, the noise of business, and on the following line, “pleasant dialogue”, a hyponym that refers to the courtly art of making conversation. Somehow the music seems less present in Armitage’s translation, even though he does maintain the contrapuntal sounds of music and words. When the king arrives in the hall, there is yet another opposition:

Fro the kyng was cummen with knyghtes into the halle,
The chauntre of the chapel cheved to an ende.
Loude crye was ther kest of clerkes and other,
Nowel nayted onewe, nevened ful ofte; (l. 62-66)

And as king and company were coming to the hall
the choir in the chapel fell suddenly quiet,
then a chorus erupted from the courtiers and clerks:
"Noel," they cheered, then "Noel, Noel,"
"New Year Gifts!" the knights cried next (l. 62-67)

The opposition between the “chauntré” and the “loud crye” is transcribed as an opposition between the heavenly music of the choir and the noise of the anonymous guests of inferior rank. Here, Armitage compensates for the previous lack of music by turning the “choir” into a “chorus”, so that the reader hears the voices as having a melody of their own, even though the sonic closeness of the two words tends to tone down their difference in nature. All this festive atmosphere is encapsulated in a word that is repeated across the hall: “Nowel”. Armitage uses

the old-fashioned literary word as a mode of setting the scene and the sounds in the olden days and he also uses more direct discourse than in the original text where the repetition is described but not made. Thus, the individuals repeating the cheer can be heard, whereas in the medieval text, the cheer seems to be passed around and shared by the community. Other sounds, like the sounds of laughter and of pleasant conversations ("Talkkande bifore the hyghe table of trifles ful hende" / "chatting away charmingly, exchanging views", l. 108) can be heard.

Yet the sonic world of civility and festivity does contain martial music with the trumpets and drums, which are set in opposition with the "noble pipes".

> Then the first cors come with crakkyng of trumpes,
> Wyth mony baner ful bryght that therbi henged;
> Nwe nakryn noyse with the noble pipes,
> Wylde werbles and wyght wakned lore,
> That mony herr ful highe hef at her towches. (l. 116-120)

> The first course comes in to the fanfare and clamor
> of blasting trumpets hung with trembling banners,
> then pounding double-drums and dining pipes,
> weird sounds and wails of such warbled wildness
> that to hear and feel them made the heart float free. (l. 116-120)

The word "noyse", which contrasts with the kettledrums, reintroduces the idea of contrapuntal music, this time to enhance the dual nature of the scene, which is both knightly and courtly. Armitage's text is particularly effective in rendering this dual nature as can be seen through the many repetitions of the structure "noun 1 and noun 2" ("the fanfare and clamor", "pounding double-drums and dinning pipes", "weird sounds and wails"). Against this backdrop of ritual merriment and merry sounds, the Green Knight is going to impose his own soundscape: "An other noyse ful newe neghed bilive," / "Because another sound, a new sound, suddenly drew near" (l. 132). His soundscape is introduced by the jarring noise of something hardly recognisable, something "new" that contrasts with the customary sounds of the court. That sound is not further characterised but its function is clearly given: it is the

sound of the story that will allow Arthur to have supper, more or less like the French *trois coups* before the beginning of a play. Even though the scene becomes surprisingly silent as the poet describes the physical appearance of the Green Knight at great length, a few words, at least in Armitage's version, are related to sounds. Some of them are metallic (the belt hooks and buckles), some evocative of nature (the birds that are embroidered but also the horse's snort), there may also be the shuffle of clothes… yet these are sounds the reader has to infer from the description of the Green Knight, at least until the bells "resoun[d] and sh[i]ne". Until the Green Knight leaves, no other sound is mentioned but the soundscape is hinted at through the many objects being moved around (the axe slashing the Green Knight's head and the blood spurting are particularly evocative). This is also beautifully transcribed in Lowery's movie.

As for the knights, they remain stunned, in awe, for fear but also because the courtly ritual demands that the king should speak first.

> Therfore to answare was arwe mony athel freke,
> And al stouned at his steven and stonstil seten
> In a swoghe sylence thurgh the sale riche: (l. 241-243)

> Yet several of the lords were like statues in their seats,
> left speechless and rigid, not risking a response.
> The hall fell hushed, (l. 241-243)

The Green Knight not only imposes his presence, but also a form of silence until Arthur speaks. The rest of the scene is mostly verbal. In the dialogues, the medieval poet mainly uses the word "quoth" whereas Armitage uses a series of hyponyms, especially for the Green Knight: "bellow" as mentioned earlier, but also "scoffed" (l. 309), which indicates derision, and "spoke, growled at Gawain" (l. 377), another animal sound. The Green Knight also "coghed ful hyghe" (l. 307), a word which Tolkien explains at length:

> This verb seems to have denoted a wider range of vocal sounds than modern *cough*. Cf. Chaucer, *Miller's Tale*, A. 3697-8:
> And softe he cougheth with a semy soun,
> What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun?' ---

> words which can hardly have been 'coughed'. In the present passage a cough is too discreet a sound for so fierce a character as the Green Knight – a scornful cry, almost a crow, would suit better. The direct ancestor of the word does not occur in OE., but the frequentative *cohhetan* appears once, in *Judith* 270, where it describes the noise made by Assyrian troops outside Holofernes' tent as they try to wake him: 'ongunnon cohhetan, cirman hlude'. This must mean rather 'cry out, shout' (so C.T. Onions in Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 10th edn. (Oxford, 1946)) – the variation with *cirman*, which is used of birds, implies a continuous outcry. (Variant forms such as *cowed* in some ME. Texts suggest possible association with cou, a variant of 'chough'.)
>
> (Tolkien and Gordon 85)

In spite of his having read Tolkien, Armitage translates the phrase as "cleared his throat", as if the Green Knight was embarrassed, which is not totally in character. The phrase more likely suggests a guttural sound, especially since guttural sounds are associated with non-standard dialects, as Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes and Tony Harrison have demonstrated, and with animals, along with other speech verbs used in the translation, like "bellow" and "growl". Therefore, the speech verbs participate in characterising the sonic world of the Green Knight as one of otherness, of uncourtly manners, of misrule. After he leaves, the soundscape of the final stanza of the first fitt is not different from that of stanzas 3 to 6 in terms of sounds, as if nothing had happened in between (except maybe that the smile has turned into a grin in "At that grene thay laghe and grenn", l. 463).

The second apparition of the Green Knight is as theatrical as the first one and the soundscape just as contrapuntal except that this time, instead of courtly festivities, it is the silence of the green chapel that is suddenly broken by the booming sound of his axe.

> Thene herde he of that hyghe hil, in a harde roche
> Biyonde the broke, in a bonk, a wonder breme noyse.
> Quat! hit clatered in the clyff as hit cleve schulde,
> As one upon a gryndelston hade grounden a sythe.
> What! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne.
> What! hit rusched and range, rawthe to here. (l. 2199-2204)
>
> Then he heard on the hillside, from behind a hard rock
> and beyond the brook, a blood-chilling noise.
> What! It cannoned through the cliffs as if they might crack,

like the scream of a scythe being ground on stone.
What! It whined and wailed, like a waterwheel.
What! It rasped and rang, raw on the ear. (l. 2199-2204)

"The blood-chilling noise" is described through three comparisons. The first one is threatening as it refers to something akin to an earthquake fissure ("hit clatered in the clyff as hit cleve schulde", l. 2201), but the other two tend to refamiliarise the sound and make it more innocuous: the sound of a scythe (l. 2202) and a waterwheel (l. 2203). In spite of this, the five verbs evoking repetitive, shrieking sounds suggest a form of latent violence. Armitage chooses to use "whine and wail" on line 2203, which suggests a lament, as if the sounds of the Green Knight's victims could reach the reader's ears. The highly rhetorical structuring of the passage, with the anaphora of "Quat! Hit…", the comparisons, the expressive punctuation indicating a change of tone, clearly deconstruct the staged nature of fright here. Here again, the reader is invited to play-pretend with fear, which is why it is not surprising that Gawain, probably in an attempt to brace himself, refuses to be scared by these sounds ("My lif thagh I forgoo / Drede dos me no lote" / "I might well lose my life / but freak sounds hold no fear", l. 2210-2211).

These sounds are no longer new. Indeed, if the audience paid attention to the tale, they will have heard the sonic words used in that description in other parts of the poem.

4. Interlacing sounds

The image of the cliffs for instance is already used in the first hunting scene, when the hunters blow their horns (l. 1165-1166), and again with the fox (l. 1722), along with the word "clater" which was also used in the description of the sound at the Green Chapel. It is mentioned again in the hunting of the deer but this time the cliffs are not associated with any sound because part of them has already collapsed (l. 1431-1432). The word "breme", which can be translated as vigorous and is used to suggest force and resistance against attacks from human beings and

natural elements, can also be tracked in the text – it is part of the description of the bridge to Hautdésert (l. 781), of the dogs (l. 1142), of the bucks (l. 1155), of the boar (l. 1580), that is to say, of Bertilak's realm. "Brem/bremly" is used later to describe the foreboding valley where the Green Chapel is located (l. 2145) as well as the Green Knight's ominous face (l. 2231-2233) but also his words (l. 2319). Therefore, there is an interlacing of sounds that unites all the forces of nature into the Green Knight. The repetition of this word prepares the listener for the final revelation: the Green Knight is Bertilak, and had we paid attention to the tale as the poet asked us to do at the very beginning, we probably would have guessed by ourselves.

Interlacing is a decorative technique that is found pretty much everywhere in medieval art. One example of this technique is the Lindisfarne Gospels, which Basil Bunting claims as the epitome of Northumbrian art, so much so that this method of composition is used as a structuring device for his masterpiece and ode to the North, *Briggflatts* (1965). More precisely, according to Bunting, the Lindisfarne Gospels provide a warning against the risk of over-interpretation: "Follow the clue patiently, and you will understand nothing" (Bunting 73).

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we can follow a word throughout the poem, study how it works in context, and elaborate a complex theory, but most of the time, one occurrence will put the whole enterprise down. For instance, "breme" is also used to describe the birds that resist against the cold, as opposed to those that sing pitifully (l. 509), and to describe Gawain himself (l. 779) … There is nothing greenknightish in this and rigid hermeneutics can only take the reader so far. This dissonance may also be an invitation to accept that just as the Green Knight can be courteous when addressing King Arthur, there is a little bit of the Green Knight in everything. In other words, the interlacing technique may show that everything is made of the same fabric, beyond any differences.

The interlacing technique may also have been used by Armitage as a translatory device to mingle his contemporary text with the medieval text. For instance, the translation of "worlde" as "world" on line 505, may not be a mistranslation, but an attempt at homophonic translation:

> By transposing the sound qualities of a source text into another language without initially addressing that text's meaning, homophonic translation may act as a challenge, or a provocation, or even a hoax, in the sense that it deliberately ignores the traditional demand for transparency and questions our utilitarian relationship to language. (Broqua 8)

As Armitage says in his introduction, his translation is not a research in forensics but the work of a poet, trying to « coax Gawain and his poem back » into the North. Armitage does not translate word for word but strives to keep the sonic materiality of the translation. Therefore, if we read Armitage's text as a translation, then it won't stand the test of time as translations are time-bound. If we read it as a poetic experiment based on a good story, then it stands a chance to last loud and long.

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