

The Enchanted World of *The Green Knight*

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Introduction

In the past two years a fair number of papers have been written on Lowery's adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*¹, and the one thing they have made it clear is that *The Green Knight* is an extremely smart reinterpretation of the medieval poem, especially in the way it shines a light on certain aspects of medieval culture which remain in the shadow in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – usually because they would have been in bad taste to write about it in romances (but which feature in other types of medieval texts, for instance fabliaux and morality plays). A couple of examples will suffice here. The poem highlights, in the sequence of events taking place at Hautdesert, the moral dilemmas which arose from some of the most controversial aspects of courtly love. Gawain, who is presented as a paragon of courtesy, is subjected at Hautdesert to the assaults of a very determined lady, who happens to be married to his host, so that he cannot simply tell her to leave him alone, and he only manages to stave her off by abiding to a strictly platonic understanding of *fin'amor*.

The film, however, opens on Gawain frolicking in a brothel, and confronts its audience to the fact that such a platonic version of courtly love could only work in a world where unmarried men who spent time courting married

¹ Hereafter written *SGGK* (in italics) for short.

women were supposed to find release with prostitutes or scullery maids, something that is never mentioned in courtly or chivalric romances. Yet damsels did get ravished at times by knights, in reality, and this is featured occasionally even in chivalric literature, something the film also pictures in the sequence devoted to Winifred's ghost, "A Meeting with St. Winifred." Lowery gives such women a voice, and his film also depicts other aspects of medieval society which hardly feature in courtly romances, for instance the ravages of war and the chaos that follows in its wake in the passage devoted to the robbers, "A Kindness." He also lays emphasis on the imperialistic nature of the Arthurian dream, and underneath it, of the English kingdom, by having Gawain, his mother and her attendants played by actors with darker skin tones than is usually the case in films belonging to that genre.

Another example would be the way Lowery emphasizes, in his presentation of the medieval world his character evolves in, as poisoned by various forms of toxic masculinity, the discreet charge against distempered aggressiveness led by the poet in *SGGK*, and which only appears in oblique, but repeated, fashion several times in his poem, first in his distinctly unimpressed description of Brutus's descendants as a bold race who loved to "fight and make trouble"² (ll. 21-2). Then there is his portrayal of Arthur as the kind of warrior who is quick to see death as the solution to a conundrum (which is why he instructs Gawain to strike hard and get rid of the Green Knight and his game in one sweep, ll. 372-4) even though he could have played the game

² "Bold bredden therinne, baret that lofden, / In mony turned tyme tene that wroghten" (ll. 21-2), two lines which Armitage aptly translates as "a bold race bred there, battle-happy men / causing trouble and torment in turbulent times" (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. A New Verse Translation by Simon Armitage*, New York, London, W.W. Norton & Company, bilingual edition, 2007, p. 21).

for laughs, as the Green Knight was shrewdly inviting him to³. The cunningly disguised criticism of mindless manly prowess reappears in the description of Gawain's armour, which is magnificent and designed to present the man wearing it as a paragon of knightly virtues to the world, yet proves all but useless against the kind of enemies he has to fight on his way to the Green Chapel⁴, as well as against the Green Knight – because he is not allowed to fight him (at least not until the creature has dealt him the blow he agreed to receive without defending himself). And it is quite possible that the person who wrote "HONY SOIT QUI MAL PENCE" at the end of the poem, and who may or may not have been the poet himself, thought that it encapsulated what the poet makes a point of showing in his romance, namely if the various male characters (Bertilak, who always keeps his wits about him) used analytical thinking instead of reacting in anger whenever they are presented with a problem or a mystery, they would come out of the story in far better shape.

Lowery has no difficulty adapting the poem to modern concerns regarding the place attributed to women in society, or the problems caused by the kind

³ Firstly by calling his challenge a Christmas game or pastime ("A Crystemas gomen") l.283, and then by giving Gawain the choice between striking him wisely (i.e. lightly) so that he would be able to tell him where the Green Chapel was afterwards, or hard, which would – in theory – prevent him from saying anything at all (because he would be dead) ll. 412. In the original text the word used for "wisely" is "smothely" and is not often found in that sense, but the *Gawain*-poet's makes use of it again in *Cleanness* l. 732 in combination with the same verb. Its meaning is unambiguous there, as it occurs in the passage devoted to Abraham's efforts to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, with God promising to let them go "al unsmyten smothely at ones" if fifty of them were found to be pure. In that case, the people of these cities will be allowed to leave peacefully and unscathed.

⁴ While it may have protected him against the assaults of wolves and outlaws, thick leather clothing, and a fur coat, would have done as much and proved far more useful against the cold, which, as we are told, proves the most formidable foe (l. 729).

of brutality usually associated with manliness – and embraced by increasingly disenfranchised segments of Western society today. Yet, there is one particular strand of *SGGK*'s narrative which does not lend itself easily to the kind of aforementioned approach, and which proved more complex to adapt: the poem's focus on the notion of salvation, and what it means to be a good Christian. Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel can be (and has frequently been) seen as a religious allegory. This is why it has been defined as an "alternative romance"⁵, one which had better be read after *Cleanness* and *Patience* (and could be the reason why it comes last in the Cotton A.x manuscript). Indeed, the romance appears to extol the same virtues as *Cleanness* does: prudence, temperance, courage and justice⁶. Those were the four cardinal virtues according to Thomas Aquinas⁷, whose ideas seem to have held sway over the *Gawain*-poet (more than any other Christian

⁵ See Hatt, Cecilia, *God and the Gawain-poet: Theology and Genre in Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2015. She devotes a fascinating chapter to the idea of *SGGK* as an alternative romance p. 168 et seq., in which she shows how the "quality of being so definitely and joyously *in the world*," which has often been used as an argument for the secular rather than religious nature of the poem, is "what makes the work of this poet so interesting and so distinctive", because it is always "illuminated [...] by a strong sense of the accompanying presence of God" (p. 170).

⁶ Virtues the *Gawain*-poet insists on in *Cleanness*, for instance in his retelling of the Biblical story of Abraham's meeting with God and the Sodom and Gomorrah episode that follows it from l. 601 onwards.

⁷ Although one must say here that the *Gawain*-poet's insistence on making temperance the most important virtue (Pittman, Josh, "The Most Important Virtue? The Surprising Recurrence of Temperance in the Pearl Manuscript", *Renascence* 71.1 (2019): 57-75) contradicts the Thomist conclusion that prudence was really at the foundation of all virtues, since it allowed one to get a true understanding of one's place in God's creation (see for instance Beauregard, David N., "Moral Theology in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Pentangle, the Green Knight, and the Perfection of Virtue", *Renascence* 65.3 (2013): 146-62 for a discussion on the poet's views on moral theology and what perfection really means).

theologian, at least)⁸. Thomas also laid out in his *Summa Theologiae* what he considered the five moral precepts one should follow: protecting and defending innocent lives, living in a society in which order is the overarching principle, worshipping God, learning and teaching (about God), and taking care to reproduce in order to allow God's creation to continue. Those precepts were obviously close to the heart of the *Gawain*-poet, as he wrote about some of them at length⁹, but the Thomist influence is also visible on another, less immediately visible level: the importance given to rational thinking, which explains the rather ambiguous use the poet makes of the marvelous elements of his story. While central to the unfolding of the plot, those elements are nevertheless presented in a way that minimizes their preternatural quality. The Green Knight's appearance, for instance, awes the people assembled at Camelot, but when one examines his description in detail, one realizes that he is merely very tall, with green hair and a green beard (which could easily be fake), and a cynical reader (or listener) might have been tempted to ascribe his ability to speak after having been beheaded to a clever trick¹⁰. A reluctance at ascribing supernatural powers to anything

⁸ *Agrégation* students, who are not expected to be well-versed in matters of medieval theology, might want to read the following article by Shawn Floyd, which sums up in very clear fashion – an impressive feat – the moral philosophy of the Christian thinker: <https://iep.utm.edu/thomasaquinas-moral-philosophy/> (Accessed 10 December 2024).

⁹ Not only did he try to teach his readers about God and about observing the kind of morals that would ensure their salvation in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, he also seems to have found the loss of innocent lives extremely distasteful, judging from the pathos with which he imbues his retelling of the Flood (l. 373 onwards), and his criticism of the bloodthirstiness exhibited by Adam's first descendants (l. 273 onwards), which echoes the aforementioned criticism of Brutus's race one finds in *SGGK*.

¹⁰ After all, some of the mummers who entertained guests during the Christmas celebrations at Edward III's court in 1347 wore fake heads placed on top of masks, in a manner similar to medieval parade helmets. Those helmets were surmounted with ornamental crests made of *papier mâché* and leather and sometimes represented animals (see for instance the miniature by Jehan de Grise in a 14th-century manuscript of the

not related to God also contributes to explaining why the *Gawain*-poet decided to end his poem on a decidedly flippant note, when the enchantment is revealed to have been the work of Morgan Le Fay, a sorceress who only wanted to terrorize Guinevere, and if at all possible, to make her die of fright (ll. 2549-62) – a very silly reason, and one that has perplexed scholars for decades¹¹, but which can be explained by the fact that the poet, a deeply religious but also very intellectual man, would have found it impossible to believe in the existence of anything supernatural that did not emanate from God, which explains why the magical elements of his story are carefully downplayed: while Bertilak's transformation into the Green Knight is said by him to have been the result of a spell cast by Morgan the magician and half-sister to Arthur, the Green Knight's striking appearance is offset by his even more striking (and lackadaisical) manners.

The Green Knight as an alternative take on the fantasy genre

Lowery has a very specific and rather unusual approach to the supernatural in his film as well, but one that is radically different from the poet's. It appears early on in the movie, with the reimagining of the enchantment as the work of Gawain's mother that takes place in an extended sequence in which the focus is on the various aspects of the spell's creation, with the use

Romance of Alexander, which represents a knight receiving a helmet with a swan on top at https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=31950 (accessed 10 December 2024). Could Bertilak have worn an elaborate costume including a fake *papier mâché* head and got away with it in the dim lights of a medieval hall? While the hypothesis seems preposterous, we have the feeling that the poet was definitely toying with his audience here.

¹¹ Invoking Morgan le Fay as a *dea ex machina* at the very last minute, having Bertilak call her "Goddess" only to portray her as a vindictive woman intent on getting her revenge on her rival seems quite deliberate. Some of these reasons the *Gawain*-poet may have had for doing so may be political rather than religious – but unfortunately the scope of the present study does not allow us to dwell on them.

of assistants, runes and magical invocation¹². Unlike the Gawain-poet *Gawain*-poet, Lowery does not merely offer his audience the product of the spell, i.e., the Green Knight, he allows them to see it unfold, first when Gawain's mother, aided by her assistants, creates (or perhaps merely invokes) the Green Knight, and then when the Queen becomes the voice of the creature.

The spell itself is not developed so much as its material preparation. The scene insists on the objects and rituals used, such as the runes and the creation of the letter, announcing Morgan's magical ministrations on Gawain's belt later in the movie. The use of artifacts as well as the implication of a small group of muttering women is reminiscent of the kind of magical practices commonly found in post-medieval literature and popular culture from *Macbeth* onwards. But magic here is hinted at rather than portrayed – what matters is the fact that it is shown to exist, not its esthetic or pyrotechnics. The floating and burning letter is the most obvious sign that something supernatural is happening; other than that, the scene relies on the material *suggestion* of the supernatural instead. As regards the carved runes that appear in the ritual, while they have regularly been used in fantasy to create magical spells, historically they had purely practical uses in Northern and Germanic countries prior to the adoption of the Roman alphabet¹³.

What is particularly striking about that sequence, and also rather odd, is the way Lowery mixes pagan artifacts and images from different cultures, thus insisting on their strangeness, instead of rooting magic in a particular

¹² *The Green Knight*, 7min54s onwards.

¹³ Cf. Guffroy, Yohann, "Les runes, de l'écriture d'hier à la magie d'aujourd'hui", in Laurent Di Filippo (ed.), *Vikings !*, Bordeaux, Les Moutons électriques, 2022, 167-89.

tradition. Such a stylistic choice produces an inability in the viewers to identify it at first glance. It is in opposition to one of the key elements of the fantasy genre, from the Middle Ages onwards, which is that a tale must embed the story it tells in easily identifiable traditions¹⁴, even though it may tweak or combine them: the Northern or Celtic *legendarium*, for instance, or (more recently) African or Middle-Eastern mythologies¹⁵; but the rule is that the various mythological corpuses should remain distinct¹⁶, because part of the pleasure that arises from reading a tale is recognizing some of its components, and even knowing how it will unfold (in the case of popular tales, for instance fairy tales, which are regularly given a new spin). Thus, the familiar quality of the elements that compose a fantasy tale can rightly be seen as a founding principle¹⁷, together with the presence of the marvelous¹⁸.

¹⁴ Something the *Gawain*-poet carefully – if somewhat hypocritically – does ll. 25-35.

¹⁵ See for example N. K. Jemisin's *Inheritance Trilogy*, S.A. Shkraborty's *Daevabad* series or Jonathan Stroud's *Bartimeus Trilogy*.

¹⁶ Which is why so many fantasy narratives take place in an imaginary world that is more or less closely modelled on the real one, with various imaginary peoples and cultures resembling those found in various corners of the real world (one medieval example would be *Childe Horne and Maid Rinnild*, which adapts the story told in *King Horn* and transposes it in a vaguely historical Northern England during the Scandinavian invasions, or for an early example of modern fantasy, William Morris's Germanic romances.

¹⁷ See on the topic Brewer, Derek, *Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature*. D.S. Brewer, 1980, Longman 1988.

¹⁸ Yet what we are given to see is something that creates unease, and therefore belongs to the fantastic genre instead, as Michel Zink recently explained: "le merveilleux est un donné qui est admis dans le pacte de lecture. C'est celui des contes de fées. Le fantastique n'est pas un donné. Il est introduit comme un malaise ou une incertitude qui laisse soupçonner un phénomène hors de l'ordre de la nature mais ne permet pas de décider de sa réalité. La possibilité qu'il existe relève de l'illusion, de l'imagination, de l'état psychique du personnage ou du narrateur ou de l'auteur ou du lecteur" ("La merveille, la nature et l'humanité", in *Merveilles et Miracles à l'époque romane, Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* LIII (2022): 5-12, 5-6. (Heartfelt thanks here to Olivier Simonin for sending us this very interesting paper.)

But Lowery entangles tropes and images from various traditions in a way that makes them largely, and purposefully, illegible – at least at first glance. For instance, the runes are manipulated by three women under Morgan’s supervision. While the image of the three women performing dark arts can be found in Northern and Classical mythology and would be recognized as such by the audience, the women’s dark skin tones are more reminiscent of India or the Middle East than the Northern countries, and do not seem to be the result of colour-blindness (if that were the case, the film’s parts would have been distributed to actors of various ethnicities in a random manner, which is not what we have here). The immediate effect on the viewers of such a casting choice combined with elements from distinctly Northern traditions, is that it makes any straightforward geographical and ethnological interpretation that could be made of this ritual impossible. It therefore remains voluntarily strange and out of place in the Arthurian *legendarium*¹⁹, which means that in order to understand it, viewers must use their intelligence to make sense of what may be a way for the director to remind his viewers that the first inhabitants of England, who built Stonehenge, came from Anatolia (by way of Iberia)²⁰, thus suggesting that Gawain and Morgan descend from ancient stock, one that is even older than the English or Breton ones. However, if that was the case, he cannot have expected most of his

¹⁹ Especially given the fact that the blindfolded woman, who reappears in older form later on in the film, could be seen as the allegory of the Synagogue, as seen, for instance at Notre Dame in Paris – something which was pointed out to us by a student, who we want to thank here.

²⁰ See Paul Rincon’s article on the BBC website at <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-47938188> (last accessed 06 January 2025), which deals with this topic and comes with a picture the Whitehawk Woman, an old Neolithic woman who lived (and died) in Sussex 5,600 years ago and whose facial reconstruction may have served as a source of inspiration for Morgan and her attendants.

viewers to have been apprised of the fact. But what he could expect was that most of them would see the different skin tones of the characters as a reminder of the imperialistic nature of the Arthurian dream (and with it, the English kingdom it represents in an idealized manner)²¹.

Lowery also combines familiar elements in a distinctly idiosyncratic way with his reinterpretation of the Green Knight. Indeed, while the film's supernatural creature does not look at all like the handsome, if emerald-hued, warrior of gigantic proportions portrayed in the poem, he does look like a descendant of the European Green Man²² and, closer to us, like one of Tolkien's Ents. But here again the inscription of the creature within a specific mythological or literary tradition is prevented by certain jarring elements, first of all the fact that he is part of an enchantment that involves using another person's body (the Queen's) to voice his challenge: a disturbing moment that uses horror to puncture the fantasy. And while he clearly is a preternatural creature, his mossy, tree-like, quasi-realistic appearance has a kind of gritty realism²³ – in the sense that he *feels* and looks real and not magical, which makes him all the more troubling for the characters and the viewers²⁴.

²¹ Rodriguez, Angeline, "The Green Knight doesn't have to discuss race to make its racial messages clear", *Polygon*, 20.08. 2021, at www.polygon.com/22632726/green-knight-color-decoding-race. (Last accessed 6 January 2025.)

²² Also present in Slavic mythology as the Leeshi.

²³ Georgina Anderson, "Masculinity, Monstrosity, and the Uncanny in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021)", in Jonathan Fruoco (ed.), *Unveiling the Green Knight*, Paris, Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2024, p.115-39; et Tatjana Silec-Plessis et Justine Breton, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Neuilly, Atlante, 2023, 81-5 and 155-7.

²⁴ By insisting on his material, elemental presence, Lowery's Green Knight takes after other contemporary creatures of fantasy, such as *Game of Thrones*'s White Walkers who appear to spring from ice. In both these recent audiovisual representations, the

There is very little else in the rest of Lowery's film that seems to be caused, or moved, by magic (apart from the Green Chapel's scene). While there is many an eerie or fantastical moment elsewhere in the rest of the film, it can often be explained away as mere hallucination. The focus is firmly on Gawain once he has left the castle, and is often out of his wits, either because he is ill after eating poisoned mushrooms, or under the influence of psychedelics. To instill doubt Lowery contextualizes the sequence ("An Interlude"), in which Gawain interacts with giants directly after ingesting strange-looking mushrooms, which clearly makes him sick. The reality of his interaction with the giants can be questioned, especially since it implies no physical contact, but only visual and auditory stimulations for the character. But instead of merely calling into question the existence of magic (as Lowery's reinterpretation of the Green Knight makes clear that magic and the supernatural are real in his film), the filmmaker seems to invite the audience to analyze what it is that they are seeing and, beyond that, to see the journey undertaken by the protagonist from a new perspective, and that includes what they see as the borders between the supernatural and the natural realms.

Indeed, depicting supernatural creatures that move on the same plane of existence as humans, rather than in an otherworld, does not seem to be mere coincidence as such a belief is at the foundation of a type of spirituality which was weaned out of Christianity from the tenth century onwards, but is still very much present in many parts of the world. Anthropologists (along with

environmental threat is given a tangible presence, which partly erases their magical status and reminds us of our own contemporary struggles.

some historians with an anthropological bent²⁵) call it the *immanentist* view, as opposed to the transcendentalist one which is a fundamental principle of most (but not all) of the monotheistic religions²⁶, including the Christian faith.

We have seen earlier how cautious the *Gawain*-poet was in his use of the supernatural elements in his romance, and how his carefulness seemed grounded in his spiritual beliefs. The poet even exhibits a certain reluctance to consider the possibility of God meddling with human affairs other than by answering the prayers of Christians or protecting them discreetly from afar: while the benevolent actions of the Virgin and a number of saints is emphasized in the poem, they are never shown to take action on a literal level. There are no miraculous apparitions, no immediately recognizable interventions of the divine, contrary to what one finds in the medieval *Lives* of saints, for instance in Jacques de Voragine's extremely popular compendium *The Golden Legend*²⁷. The poet's obviously strong views on the matter of divine intervention, which would have been largely shared by the theologians and philosophers of the period but not necessarily by the uneducated populace, derived from the profound changes that started

²⁵ As exemplified by Alan Strathern's recent book called *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019. Its reading proved invaluable for the present study, as was Walther Sahlin's *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe. An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*, Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2022 (in which we found the reference to the article by Peter Brown which was also used for this article).

²⁶ Strathern, *op. cit.*

²⁷ As happens during the Game of Winnings in the poem. The readers are led to believe (although it is not said explicitly) that Gawain (and the Lady) come out of it with their virtue largely intact because the Virgin protected her knight (ll. 1767-9). Yet he obviously was fascinated by the idea of God speaking directly to humans, as it is the subject of all the Biblical stories he weaves into his two verse sermons, *Cleanness* and *Patience*.

occurring in Christendom in the tenth century, and ended with the Enlightenment, something anthropologists have come to call "the Second Axial Age"²⁸. A brief summary of what unfolded as a seismic shift in Western spirituality is probably necessary here before we get back to *The Green Knight* to show how Lowery used his narrative to present a "snapshot" of contemporary spiritual trends in the Western world.

SGGK and the Second Axial Age

In the eleventh century advances in technology (and the clearing of woodland) made it possible to create new settlements, thus releasing some of the pressure that had previously compelled the tight-knit communities of the early Middle Ages to find solutions to conflicts that protected the status and dignity of their members, via the summoning of an omniscient tripartite deity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), who was tasked with making their opinion clearly known, for instance in the ordeal²⁹. Once such pressure was released, it became preferable for theologians not to "tempt God" to meddle in human affairs, and the divine was relegated to a different plane of existence, to an Otherworld which could still be accessed (mostly through

²⁸ The first one being the period 900 to 300 BC, when the main religions seem to have appeared in Europe and Asia.

²⁹ In an old but still fascinating article that combines historical and anthropological perspectives ("Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change", *Daedalus, Wisdom, Revelation and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium BC*, vol. 104: n° 2 (1975): 133-51), Peter Brown studies the period going from the 10th to the 12th century as one during which "experimentation in new forms of social organization", "a probing of modes of self-expression" and "the reevaluation of traditional religion" took place on a large scale, "redrawing [of] the boundaries of the sacred and the profane". The ordeal "import[ed] into the ceremony a singularly brisk expectation of the miracle", which was meant to prevent "conflict" from "spilling out". As Brown wryly comments, "God might be believed to speak in an ordeal, but the human group took an unconscionably long time getting Him to get a word in edgewise" (p. 137).

visions and/or death) but was removed from this earth, while the supernatural in its positive aspects (i.e., God and all the spiritual forms related to him) became the repository of the values of the group³⁰. Magic³¹, in that perspective, became nothing more than illusion while the existence of demons was redefined as superstition³². This explains why, in the poem, the hand of God and those who belong in Heaven (angels, saints, the Virgin) can still be felt, rather than seen, while the actions of Morgan "the Goddess," which are quite visible, are described in the way that makes it possible, should one be so inclined (and the poet no doubt hoped his readers would be), to see it as nothing more than an elaborate party trick which only works

³⁰ In Brown's words, "the holy, being invisible, was sensed to be kinder than man"; it becomes "an enabling device carefully (if unconsciously) ground into a tool to resolve otherwise unbearable conflicts" (*op. cit.*, p. 141). This is why it had to be seen as radically other.

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To the point that even miracles accomplished by saintly figures became problematic in the eyes of Rome in the centuries that followed. A good example would be the way it dealt with the relatively recent case of a French nun, Mère Yvonne-Aimée de Malestroit (1901-1951), a mystic who was said to have been endowed with supernatural powers but was accused during World War II by a priest of being a fraud, and probably denounced by him (or another member of the Church) to the Gestapo. She survived and received the highest secular honours after the war, but when she died the Vatican forbade to write about her or her achievements and halted her beatification process in 1960, fearing that it would foster illuminism. (see Didier Le Corre, "Miracles inexplicables, Résistance ... Qui était la mystérieuse Mère Yvonne-Aimée ?", *Ouest-France*, 22.06.2024, at <https://www.ouest-france.fr/culture/histoire/miracles-inexpliqués-resistance-qui-était-la-mystérieuse-mère-yvonne-aimée-067903ac-2ed9-11ef-b70d-a349109d0370> (Last accessed 06.06.2025).)

³² Keitt, Andrew, "Rethinking with Demons: The Campaign against Superstition in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe from a Cognitive Perspective", *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2017): 236-77. See also Brown, Peter, *Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages*, London : New York, N.Y. : Sydney : Tavistock publications, 1970.

on Bertilak/The Green Knight's audience at Camelot, because of the latter's credulity and foolishly superstitious beliefs.

In an anthropological perspective the Christianization of Europe corresponds to a move from an animistic/immanentist view of the world, in which the dead, together with spirits of all kinds, roam the earth alongside living beings and live lives very similar to those of their breathing counterparts, to a transcendentalist one in which God and all spiritual forms are removed from this earth, leaving it as the sole province of man³³. Such a shift took a very long time to unfold and lasted from the High Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. This is why the medieval period has been characterized as hybrid, with many of the immanentist traits³⁴ that had originally been an essential part of the Christian dogma slowly identified with superstition before being discarded altogether. Thus the mental map of the *Gawain*-poet was one in which the action of the divine could only be seen through signs that had to be interpreted correctly, rather than in direct manifestations of its presence in the world. This would have been the correct view shared by educated people and propounded by religious scholars, at least, but not the only one³⁵.

³³ It was a seismic shift in the definition of the world and what it encompassed: "gods [who had been] the creators of culture as well as the source of power by which it [was] realized" gave way to a transcendentalist perspective in which humankind became the sole purveyor of culture. The shift produced, by the end of the Enlightenment period, the categories of religion, politics, science, and economy, "each a differentiated formation, an autonomous domain ... articulated with the others metaphorically and functionally" (Sahlins, *op. cit.*, 5).

³⁴ But not all, as exemplified by the ceremony of the Eucharist for instance.

³⁵ As suggested by the deep-seated belief in the power of saintly relics and more generally the cult of saints. See on the topic Brown, Peter, *The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

***The Green Knight* and the "Enchanted universe"**

The spiritual map of the film is quite different, and so is the role the supernatural plays in it as well. While in the poem, preternatural creatures are evoked only to be discarded because it would take too long to describe Gawain's adventures in the wild (ll. 718-9), in *The Green Knight* Gawain's travels, and travails, out of Arthur's castle unfold as a spiritual journey as much as a physical one, and one which exposes him to a world inhabited by vengeful ancestors, talking animals, as well as other, more remote, if humanoid, forms of life: in short, a world in which the supernatural is immanent rather than transcendent. The direction taken by Lowery, via Gawain, therefore, is one that runs counter to the view that is generally found, even among respected anthropologists such as Sahlins, of a Western world that has definitely turned his back on immanentism. However, the recent rise of new, and protean, forms of religiosity, which are often inspired by shamanism or paganism, is clearly showing that such a view is becoming obsolete³⁶; in fact, as Strathern points out, "the norms and values of the secularized stretches of the modern world are in many ways closer to immanentism than they are to those of transcendentalism"³⁷.

³⁶ Something Lowery seems to hint at, when he has Gawain going from the right to the left of the screen at the beginning of the movie. Gawain moving from right to left runs counter to the rule in movie-making, which is to have characters going from left to right. This may merely be a way for the film-maker to signal the protagonist's reluctance to choose the life his peers would like him to embrace, or that he is stuck in a state of "arrested development". It may also indicate, however, that the movie is going to make the case for a different perspective on the spiritual; one that predates the Christian outlook on the matter, and one which, therefore, constitutes a return to the origins of the supernatural, rather than a progression.

³⁷ Strathern, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

According to a survey made by the *New York Times* in 2016³⁸, "60 % of percent of Americans believe one or more of the following: psychics, astrology, the presence of spiritual energy in inanimate objects (like mountains or trees) or reincarnation"³⁹. But instead of understanding these findings, as Sahlins does, as constituting the "rearguard of immanentism"⁴⁰, they should really be seen, in our (and in Strathern's) view, as exemplifying its resurgence in America, and indeed everywhere in the Western World, – a resurgence that began in the counterculture of the 1960s, and is now reaching mainstream culture (judging by the number of recent articles published in newspapers that often quote recent anthropological studies on the role played in our Western societies by "ghosts", "invisible forces" or other forms of "awareness"⁴¹).

What differentiates the immanentist culture from the transcendentalist one is that, in the first place, spirits are seen as walking the earth alongside humans and animals, something anthropologist-turned-philosopher David Abram sums up in his characteristically poetical manner:

³⁸ And one which is quoted by Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁹ Bennett, Jessica, "When Did Everybody Become a Witch?", *The New York Times*, 24.10.2019. (Last accessed 06 January 2025).

⁴⁰ Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

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To give just a few very recent examples in French newspapers (as the shift is global, not just limited to the US): Frédérique Roussel, "Grégory Delaplace, anthropologue : 'Tout concourt à ce que notre époque soit éminemment spectrale'", *Libération*, 18.09.2024 ; "Grégory Delaplace, chercheur de l'au-delà : 'Les morts n'attendent pas l'autorisation des vivants pour se manifester'", *Le Nouvel Obs*, 24.08.2024 ; Marion Rousset, "Starhawk, la sorcière de l'écologie qui inspire de jeunes collectifs : 'Ma spiritualité n'a rien à voir avec la foi'", *Le Nouvel Obs*, 21.07.2024, or a collection of *Le Monde* articles called "Nouvelles spiritualités des jeunes" which appeared in August 2024.

Our strictly human heavens and hells have only recently been abstracted from the sensuous world that surrounds us, from this 'more-than-human' realm that abounds in its own winged intelligences and cloven-hoofed powers. For almost all oral cultures, the enveloping and sensuous earth remains the dwelling place of both the living *and* the dead⁴².

In animistic cultures the spirits of the dead go about with their lives in much the same way as they did when they were breathing, which is the case with Winifred's ghost in the film – to a certain extent at least.

Gawain's encounter with Winifred's spirit, which occurs in the middle of the movie, represents a turning point in the young man's journey. She is depicted as some sort of ghost, but one whose tangible presence makes her suffering more palpable. Her spirit is clearly tethered to her dwelling-place by the trauma she experienced there. Following the traditional motif of the haunting, which is frequent in US cinema⁴³ and where a ghost is confined to their dying space to eternally relive a deeply distressing experience, Winifred is condemned twice: first by the evil knight who murdered her because she refused his advances, and then by her own need to understand her suffering. But Lowery does not present her as a vengeful spirit, whose quest for her own head would then be dictated by unhinged emotions⁴⁴, nor does he make her angelic. Even though tradition has her as a saint whose shrine Gawain passes by in the poem⁴⁵, the movie presents her instead as the kind of

⁴² Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage Books Editions, 1996, 2017, p. 15.

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But not only, of course, as exemplified recently by author Emil Ferris, who explains in a very interesting interview that she feels that the United States themselves are a haunted house: "Les États-Unis sont une maison hantée", *Le Nouvel Obs*, 7.12.2024.

⁴⁴ Which is the topic of many horror stories.

⁴⁵ If indeed the "Holy Hede" of l. 700 is the place that was more widely known as Holywell in Flintshire, where the 8th-century saint had been venerated since the 12th century at least.

ancestral spirits studied by Sahlins or Abrams. They are locked in another state of being but their attitudes and behaviours are neither better nor worse than when they were alive. In the cottage sequence for instance, Winifred, who still dwells in her old house, is obsessed, and rightfully so, by her trauma and by the events that led to her unfair death. Yet, once the first moments of surprise and shock are gone, her attitude becomes rather matter-of-fact, and the encounter turns into a rationalized experience, where Gawain is faced with the logical workings of another mind: Winifred needs to find her head in order to be whole again. Her status, being alive or dead, is of no concern to her. When Gawain asks if she is a spirit, she merely answers: "What is the difference? I just need my head"⁴⁶. Lowery therefore chooses an animistic approach in picturing Winifred over a traditionally horrific one, although he lets the viewers figure out his perspective by themselves.

His choice contributes to creating a connection between Winifred and Gawain, but also to inserting Gawain in a natural, and never-ending, cycle of life and death. Winifred is just another mind trapped in doubt and one who mistakes Gawain for her assailant at first. It is both her need for her head and her confusion that convince Gawain to help her⁴⁷. In Winifred, Gawain is faced with a vision of himself: Winifred is just as stuck as he is, and her lack of a head, though through no fault of her own, is similar to his own lack of brains, which he, on the other hand, is very much responsible for. In typically self-absorbed fashion, he inappropriately asks for a reward in exchange for

⁴⁶ *The Green Knight*, 60 min.

⁴⁷ More than by a knightly duty to help a lady in distress, Gawain is moved by empathy and the similarities between their plights: he sees her as a reflection of himself, threatened by his own possible beheading at the end of the year: "As will I before the year is out" (*The Green Knight*, 60 min), and lost in doubt as to his opponent's motivations (which Winifred is not).

retrieving Winifred's lost head from the pond, but the experience in the water unfolds as one of the (partly achieved) progressions – or false starts – of the hero in the story.

The true nature of the dive in the pond is made explicit by the changing colours of the water, which go from dark blue-green to deep red once Gawain decides to act, or, more precisely, to take the plunge. Throughout the movie, Lowery plays on the symbolic value of colours, and here the red liquid could represent Gawain's return to an unborn state. By accepting this secondary quest, he is rewarded with a partial rebirth, one that is made possible by another woman – thus ascribing the symbolic role of the mother to Winifred⁴⁸. But this aquatic scene is an ambivalent form of rebirth, as it is combined with death – clearly marked by the retrieval of Winifred's severed head, which is reunited with her skeleton in the cottage. Gawain's existence appears at this point in the movie to be a very small part of "a world that is the breath and bones of our ancestors"⁴⁹. This sequence is inserted in a wider circle of death and renaissance, when his symbolic rebirth in Winifred's pool is followed by a vision of his dying on the cold ground of the forest after his encounter with the robbers in "A Kindness".

⁴⁸ And this explains her sibylline parting words ("Now I can see thee, and I will strike thee down with every care I have for thee. The Green Knight is someone you know", *GK*, 1h3min), which seem to be pronounced by Gawain's mother rather than Winifred. The sorceress could indeed have possessed the young woman's ghost, just as she possessed the Queen in "The Christmas Game". (One should note here that a strong filiation is established in Lowery's film between all the female characters. Gawain is led and controlled by women rather than men in the film, even if he fails to recognize their hold on him, which is largely benevolent – with the exception of the Lady, whose actions are decidedly ambiguous and who does not seem to care for the main character.)

⁴⁹ James Lovelock, quoted by Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 16.

Where "The recuperation of the sensuous [becomes] the rediscovery of the earth"⁵⁰

The rest of Gawain's journey in *The Green Knight* is marked by encounters with other types of beings who seem to be travelling, like him. As with the spirit of Winifred, the interaction with the giants⁵¹ in "An Interlude" forces Gawain to take a step back and to reconsider his own place in the world. With their considerable height, their refined appearance and their delicate sing-song language, the giants have an alien appearance, but their otherness is offset by their humanoid aspect and the fact that one of them carries a baby, which highlights their need for generation renewal and their maternal quality. More importantly, they travel as a group. Gawain tries to interact with one of them, and mostly fails because communication proves impossible: the giants speak an unknown language, and their attempt to grab him results in Gawain's scared recoil.

It is the fox, another one of Gawain's doubles, who acts as an intermediary. The fox's howling is echoed by one of the giants as she breaks into song, then by all of them harmonizing. While Gawain does not understand the meaning of the song, he (and the viewers) cannot fail to see that the harmony that permeates the group's actions is itself a form of communication.

One may consider all the supernatural creatures Gawain encounters as facets of his own character. But if this were the case they would not have their own agendas. And yet they do: Winifred as an ancestor, the fox as a totemic

⁵⁰ Abram, David, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 62.

⁵¹ *The Green Knight*, 70-72 min.

animal⁵² or possibly a psychopomp⁵³, the giants as another community of beings that one only sees and interacts with in certain circumstances (i.e., when one is high on drugs⁵⁴). This is why another, more satisfying interpretation than a purely psychological one is needed here.

At the beginning of the movie, Gawain is aloof and apparently withdrawn into himself. He treats Essel dismissively whenever she tries to connect with him on another level than the purely physical in “A Too Quick Year”, and he is just as arrogant with the scavenger in “A Kindness”. It takes his dangerous encounters with the robbers, Saint Winifred and the Lord and Lady for him to slowly realize that he is not alone, but also, and more importantly, that he is not superior to all these people, or even to other forms of awareness, as suggested by his companionship with the fox. Master Renayrd is only present in the poem as the victim of one of Bertilak’s hunts,

⁵² A totem is an animal or object endowed with spiritual qualities and believed to be the guide of a tribe or simply a person. While the term was originally found in the beliefs of Amerindian tribes (specifically, as far as the word itself is concerned, the Ojibwe tribe), the concept itself (and belief) is now found in a wide array of contemporary forms of religiosity or spirituality, as well as ecopsychology (see for instance Abram, David, *Becoming Animal. An Earthly Cosmology*, Vintage Books, 2011). See also, by the same author, "The perceptual implications of Gaia", *ReVISION*, vol. 9, n° 2 (1987): 7-15, and by Parham, John, "Bewitched by the *Spell of the Sensuous*: A Disenchanted Ecological Imagination", *Nature, Culture and Literature* 6 (2010): 243-73.

⁵³ The fox can be seen as a psychopomp of sorts, insofar as he appears not long after Gawain’s symbolic rebirth to a different level of awareness in Winifred’s pond. Animals playing the part of psychopomps regularly appear in the fantasy genre. For a particularly popular example, see Duranton, Charlotte et Muller-Thoma, Laura, "La place du chien psychopompe dans les littératures de l’imaginaire. L’exemple de *Harry Potter*", in Viviane Bergue (ed.), *Amazing Beasts, Fantasy Art and Studies* 9 (2020). URL: <https://fantasyartandstudies.wordpress.com/journalrevue/fantasy-art-and-studies-9-amazing-beasts-animaux-fabuleux/> (Last accessed 10 December 2024).

⁵⁴ Which may be Lowery’s playful take on Carlos Castaneda’s writings on shamanism as seen through the lens of Jungian theory (see on the topic Williams, Donald, *Border Crossings: A Psychological Perspective on Carlos Castaneda's Path of Knowledge*, Inner City Books, 1981).

and is generally considered as having been used by the poet in a traditional way as a symbol of everything that is despicable in man⁵⁵. But the film's fox is of a very different breed. While he clearly becomes an extension of Gawain at times, as his trapping by the Lord clearly suggests, he is more than that. The fox follows the hero for a long time; man and animal establish a rapport (which is made easier by the fact that the animal can talk) during their peregrinations in the wild, finding comfort in each other's presence, sharing food, warmth, and security. Left to himself, Gawain struggles with others as well as with his environment in "The Journey Out", and his journey is not just one during which he learns about himself, or how to survive on

⁵⁵ Even though one may wonder here why the killing is giving the hunters and their dogs such pleasure (l. 1908 onwards), given that, as Bertilak says later, they only caught a "foule fox felle" l. 1940 ("a foul-stinking fox" in Armitage's translation). The fox represents man's desire for life in the poem, even one that is deprived of all that is good or noble, – the same desire which prevents Gawain from behaving as he should. Such an impulse – or "covetousness" – should therefore be scorned (as Gawain does at great length at the end of the poem), and it comes as no surprise that the poet should have chosen the fox, who was consistently presented in medieval bestiaries as vicious and perfidious (on account of his reddish coat) to symbolize it (cf. Michel Pastoureau, *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2011, 2020, pp 159-61). This would have been the correct, orthodox, allegorical stance on the subject. But, as has been expressed before (notably by Cecilia Hatt in her aforementioned book), the *Gawain*-poet had hardly orthodox views on a number of topics, and his use of allegory in *SGGK* is not always straightforward or by-the-book. Indeed, one may even consider that there might be a warning against viewing reality in purely allegorical terms in the poem. One example will have to suffice here: Gawain fails to really pay attention to Morgan because she is the ugly counterpart to the Lady in a description that presents as the traditional allegory of Woman, young and old ll. 943-69. Had he bothered to look beyond the picture that the two women painted, go past his revulsion for the old hag, and give her the attention she deserved, he may have realized that things were not what they seemed at Hautdesert. Bertilak, who has sometimes been described as God's instrument, or even as a "Word-of-God" figure, forgives him readily for his lies, because they spring from his "love of life" rather than from any kind of innate "wickedness" ll. 2366-68, so what does it make of the fox's own determination to stay alive? Could some measure of pity be reversed for the animal behind the allegory? (One should probably mention here that the poet devotes several lines to the plight of all the animals of the earth in his depiction of the Flood in *Cleanness*, picturing them as they try to stay alive until the very last moment and joining the humans in their cries for help and mercy ll. 387-94.)

his own in the wilderness; he also learns, painfully and very slowly, to connect with his environment.⁵⁶ The fox becomes the main vector of Gawain's interaction with the natural world, since the animal guides him, helps him communicate with the giants, and in the end at the beginning of "A Beheading at the Green Chapel", tries to prevent him from entering the Green Chapel⁵⁷.

Conclusion: *The Green Knight* represents "the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences" – and multiple viewpoints

As a creature evolving between worlds and cultures (for here again Lowery carefully combines different cultural strands⁵⁸), the fox helps the knight and with him, the viewers, to see magic and supernatural occurrences in a radically different, but also far simpler, way:

that which we call 'magic' takes its meaning from the fact that humans, in an indigenous and oral context, experience their consciousness as simply one form of awareness among many others. [...] Magic, then, in its perhaps most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences [...]."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Which could have been what his mother had in mind all along.

⁵⁷ An event which does not necessarily mean that he is playing the Devil's part and trying to prevent Gawain from doing what is right (which would be the traditional medieval interpretation), but rather that, as a non-human being, he does not see the point of Gawain's return to civilization, or indeed, of Gawain's existential woes.

⁵⁸ Tatjana Silec-Plessis and Justine Breton, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Neuilly, Atlante, 2023, 266-8.

⁵⁹ *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 9, 16. In this book Abram offers a new definition of magic based on what he calls its "ecology" (cf. chapter 1: "The Ecology of Magic), which he derived from his study of shamans and magicians in Asia, notably Bali. Abram compares animistic cultures and the growing attention paid to environmental concerns in his books, finding deep similarities between the two.

This also explains why familiarity is inextricably combined with otherness in Gawain's experience of those other forms of awareness⁶⁰.

Lowery's Gawain seems to become fully human (and fully grown-up) by increments once he leaves the castle at the beginning of "The Journey Out" and is brought in contact with those other sensibilities⁶¹. According to Abram, "the task of the magician" is "to startle our senses and free us from outmoded ways of thinking"⁶². Even though Lowery has said that the character he felt the deepest kinship with was the Lady, one could rightfully argue that he plays the part of Morgan the magician (or perhaps she should more rightly be called a shaman here⁶³), as the director of a film which

⁶⁰ "This cycling of the human back into the larger world ensures that the other forms of experience that we encounter – whether ants or willow trees, or clouds – are never absolutely alien to ourselves. Despite the obvious differences in shape, and ability, and style of being, they remain at least distantly familiar, even familial. It is, paradoxically, this perceived kinship or consanguinity that renders the difference, or otherness, so eerily potent." (Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, *op. cit.*, p. 16).

⁶¹ One could argue that those other sensibilities include the outlaws (or "wild men"), who in the poem are casually thrown in with wolves and giants 1.721, as if they were mere animals – which would have been in keeping with the beliefs of the medieval period, and Gawain's attitude towards them in the film.

⁶² Abram, David, in London, Scott, "The Ecology of Magic: An Interview with David Abram", <https://scott.london/interviews/abram.html> (Last accessed 3.10.2024). "When a magician is successful making a stone vanish, and then plucking it back into thin air, or making a coin float from one hand to the other hand, it leaves us without any framework of explanation. We are suddenly floating in that open space of direct sensory experience, actually encountering the world without preconceptions, even if just for a moment. The magician is one who frees the senses from the static holding patterns that they are held in by assumptions, by outmoded ways of thinking, and by the styles of speech and discourse". (*Ibid.*)

⁶³ Abram says we should not see the dimensions of awareness that the shaman/magician reaches for through trance as neither "supernatural" nor merely "internal to the personal psyche of the practitioner": "For it is likely that the 'inner world' of our Western psychological experience, like the supernatural heaven of Christian belief, originates in the loss of our ancestral reciprocity with the animate earth. When the animate powers that surround us are suddenly construed as having less significance than ourselves, when the generative earth is abruptly defined as a determinate object devoid of its own sensations and feelings, then the sense of a wild and multiplicitous otherness (in relation to which

questions the prominent place traditionally given to transcendentalism in Western society, where more and more people are turning to animistic beliefs (without necessarily realizing it). Lowery's strategy here, as elsewhere, emulates the *Gawain*-poet's, in that he eschews the pitfalls of dogmatism and didacticism by weaving what can rightly be seen as a political⁶⁴ and spiritual⁶⁵ commentary into the story. Like the *Gawain*-poet, Lowery makes a deft use of the tropes of the genre his work is supposed to follow to alert viewers to the fact that there is more to the story than what it purports to tell. Indeed, both the poem and the film can be seen as using the marvelous in eminently idiosyncratic ways to reflect on the profound changes in attitudes towards the spiritual affecting the societies and cultures they come from: Northern Europe in the Middle Ages for the *Gawain*-poet and, for David Lowery, contemporary Western societies, more specifically American society, in which a stridently conservative type of Christianity⁶⁶ is pitted

human existence has always oriented itself) must migrate, either into a supersensory heaven beyond the natural world, or else into the human skull itself – the only allowable refuge, in this world, for what is ineffable and unfathomable" (*The Spell of the Sensuous*, *op. cit.*, p. 10).

⁶⁴ For instance, the imperialist message underlying the Arthurian dream, which has already been alluded to at the beginning of the present paper, and the inclusion of actors who are not white in the cast. See on the topic, Rodriguez, Angeline, « *The Green Knight* doesn't have to discuss race to make its racial messages clear », *Polygon*, 20 août 2021, URL: www.polygon.com/22632726/green-knight-color-decoding-race, and Baker, Chrishaun, « *The Green Knight* : How Gawain's Race Change Updates & Improves The Story », *ScreenRant*, 29 septembre 2021, URL: screenrant.com/green-knight-movie-gawain-race-indian-change-good/, or Chhibber, Preeti, « Finally, a Seat at the Round Table », *Elle*, 25 août 2021, URL: www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a37385781/the-green-knight-representation-dev-patel. All three articles were last accessed on 15 January 2025.

⁶⁵ As we tried to show in the present paper.

⁶⁶ Which could be symbolized in the film's "Christmas Game" sequence by the presentation of an old royal couple who, with their rather lifeless, pale skin and golden crowns, closely resemble Orthodox icons.

against renewed forms of immanentism, the latter being, in a large part, by-products of environmental and animal advocacy movements.

Gawain begins his journey with seemingly nothing more than a deep-seated, if largely unconscious (or at least non-verbal) refusal to accept a destiny that has already been written (literally so, as his stay at Hautdesert makes clear to him⁶⁷). But he reaches a point during his journey where he seems to realize that he must turn his back on the human world (as he knows it at least), because, in order to survive, the latter must necessarily "condemn [...] other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction". What Gawain learns in the wild is that he must embrace the fact that "[w]e are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human",⁶⁸ which is why he becomes more human, more empathetic, as he progresses in the wilderness and encounters its scarce inhabitants. Accepting the Green Knight's stroke at the end of the journey means he is willing to die to escape his original fate. This is represented in the dream-vision he has at the Green Chapel in "The Voyage Home". But death in this instance need not be physical (and indeed, since the spell was woven by his mother, it seems hard to believe that this is what she had in mind). It is enough for it to be symbolical, as was the "nick on the neck" received by the character in the poem. Gawain, by refusing to become the next king, and to do what was always presented to him as inevitable, steps out of history. In the same movement, he stops being the protagonist of his own tale, even as the Green Knight dubs him a knight – a title which

⁶⁷ First at 76 min, in "An Exchange of Winnings" when the Lady tells him that he will eat because "You are brave Sir Gawain, come to face the Green Knight", and then two minutes later, when he sees the fox's hunt painted on the walls of the castle).

⁶⁸ *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 22.

sanctions the courage he is finally exhibiting at the very moment when he refuses the status that comes with it, once and for all⁶⁹.

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⁶⁹ Bravery and the ability not to fear death being the conditions necessary to becoming a knight – together with a noble birth, of course. However, unless one considers the Green Knight's stroke as the equivalent of the accolade which was received by the man who was to become a knight during the dubbing ceremony, Gawain does not become a knight here. He is persuaded he is about to die, which releases him from having to decide whether or not he wants to be a knight – and later on, a king – and the Green Knight's ambiguous last words, despite the gentle tone in which they are uttered ("Now, off with your head", *GK*, 124min), must have convinced him that he was right to think so.

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