The Temptation of Novelty: Eccentricity Challenging Tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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The most obvious structure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the circle and its two most significant representations are the pentangle (paradoxically not shaped like a circle but conceived as a perfect circle since it has no beginning and no end), and the green silk girdle which must be defined as a broken circle since the knot materializes tying and rupture reflecting Gawain's human failure. Yet reading the circular structures woven into the fabric of the poem has perhaps toned-down critical interest for the *topos* of the centre. But giving precedence to the centre to the detriment of the circle would amount to lessening the lavish implications of both the circle and the centre. Two approaches to the centre, buttressed by two distinct perceptions of the circular figure, seem to challenge each other in the poem, leading to a commotion of conceptions upheld by king Arthur and lord Bertilak. The romance is thus established as a sort of poetical cosmography where the brilliant centre formed by the court of Camelot is, for the sake and time of the narrative, eclipsed by the both flamboyant and obscure centre of the court of Hautdesert.[1] These two centres are granted individual life and material substance through their geographies and architectures: on the one hand, possibly South Wales and renowned, albeit mythical, Camelot[2] and, on the other, Hautdesert, an elegant abode bearing a fairly negative name which is the last stage in Gawain's tentative "quest without a map"[3] towards the Green Chapel defined as a devilish subversive place, a "corsedest kyrk" / "a church so cursed" (l. 2196). The depiction of these two geographical places and abodes thus gives substance to these centres. Yet being utterly different, they also suggest that, as in the Breton lay *Sir Orfeo*, centring, order, oneness, explicitness challenge decentring, otherness, doubles, ambiguity.

Again, as in Helen Cooper's development on "Quests without maps", we come across a structure used in romance writing which James Simpson develops very clearly.[4] That structure

[1] In connection to this idea of a poetical cosmography, see Brian Stone's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1978, 153-154, for a discussion of the figure of Arthur as a sun figure. Particularly in the beheading scene at the Green Chapel, Bertilak is conversely linked with nature, vegetation, the earth and tellurian forces (see for instance, l. 2221, "And sythen he keveres bi a cragge and comes of a hole" / "Then out of the crags he comes, through the cave mouth"). All quotes in Middle and modern English are from the following edition: Anon. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A New Verse Translation by Simon Armitage. New York, London, Norton, 2008.

[2] Camelot was in fact situated in countless sites like Cornwall, Winchester, Glastonbury, to quote a few (*cf.* B. Stone, *ibid.*, 154).

[3] The expression "Quests without Maps" is borrowed from Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time. Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the death of Shakespeare*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, 67-68. H. Cooper explains that the term "quest", being specifically linked to the "root meaning" "quest", inevitably involves "a journey to an unknown destination". This was part of the game or of the challenge, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and increased the expectations of story-telling. At the same time, travelling in the Middle Ages was actually quite uncertain because distances were hard to assess, maps were few and the geographical layout approximate.

[4] See James Simpson, "Derek Brewer's Romance", in *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of Medieval English Literature. The Influence of Derek Brewer*, ed. Charlotte Brewer and Barry Windeatt, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2013, 168-171.

is essentially based on three states or stages: "integration", "disintegration" and "reintegration". Simpson posits that "[i]f the word 'romance' connotes wandering, the anterior word 'Rome', at the heart of the word 'romance', connotes return to centre."[5] Such a story structure inevitably involves "archetypal binary oppositions", amongst which Simpson mentions "human versus monster", "castle versus forest".[6] Should one, however, refer to these antithetic forms as radical oppositions or rather as complementary forms and figures that in fact make the complexity of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* more subtle? This argument is best illustrated by the figure of the Green Knight / Bertilak who cristallizes the oppositions mentioned by Simpson and clearly exemplified in the poem by the "holyn bobbe" / "sprig of holly" (l. 206) he held in one hand and the "ax […], a hoge and unmete" / "the mother of axes" he held in the other (l. 208). This ambiguous association of life and death may be seen as the expression of the uncertain outcome of the challenge offered by the Green Knight and which he calls a Christmas game. At the same time, and because the Green Knight rides into the court of Camelot at the end of the year, he may be interpreted as a Janus figure. For the Romans Janus signified origin, change whether good or ominous, opening and closure, hence his *bifrons* representation showing him two-headed, one face being that of a young man (beginning) and the other that of an old man (end).[7] Janus also held two objects, a key in his left hand (opening and closure) and a sceptre in his right hand expressing his control over everything since " [t]he world moved on its hinges at his command".[8] Beginning and end, opening and closure are indeed explicitly stated when the Gawain-poet first describes "An other noyse ful newe" / "a new sound" (l. 132) and then draws the listeners' attention towards the door, thus preparing the marvel, the amazing appearance: "Ther hales in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster" / "a fearful form appeared, framed in the door" (l. 136). This door is part of the narrative strategy as it dramatically reflects intrusion, as well as pleasurable expectation. But, as Gilbert Durand posits in his *Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*,[9] the door essentially symbolizes time, the past and events to come, the future.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Arthur stands for time, order, stability, immutable past (hence the long historical record at the beginning before the poet launches into the Christmas celebration at Camelot), whereas the Green Knight introduces novelty and uncertainty. Passage, change, evolution may be read in the unavoidable journey forcing Gawain out towards regions that are unclearly mapped out as if Christmas and the New Year were less a time of celebration than a time hinge which is there to shift the attention from the first panel of the diptych (Camelot) to the second (Hautdesert), from narrative order focussing on the celebration of the Christmas festivities to narrative decentring towards the pagan green chapel. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is thus based on disorientation, distorted centrality, and eccentricity. The issue of eccentricity will here be explored in ways that match the definition provided by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (unstable centrality as well as oddity) and the reflection on eccentricity will concentrate on three main aspects: convergence, divergence, and ellipse.

1. CONVERGENCE IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

[5] *Ibid.*, 168.
[6] *Ibid.*, 169.
[7] Alexander S. Murray, *Who's Who in Mythology. Classic Guide to the Ancient World*, London, Bracken Books, 1988, 132-134.
[8] *Ibid.*, 133.
[9] Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Dunod, 1992, 333.

A long historical chronicle opens *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and lays the foundations of the narrative. The beginning is structured by a series of concentric circles leading the poet to conjure up the memory of Troy, Rome, Britain to finally focus on the Arthurian legend. The final circle draws around Arthur's legends ("Arthures wonderes", l. 29) and history turns into story as the poet blurs this concentric structure and sheds light on one figure, one space, one time: "This kyng lay at Camylot upon Krystmasse" / "It was Christmas at Camelot—King Arthur's court" (l. 37).

The poet progressively fleshes out the context of the story by describing not warriors but noble beings, around their king, eager to celebrate the birth of the Christian king. He expatiates on life, on physical reality as he, at length, gives details on jousting, dancing, eating and drinking that whet the listeners' or readers'appetite as well. What is at stake here is unity, the gathering of the "most kyd knyghtes" and "lovelokkest" ladies (l. 51-52) around "the comlokest kyng" (l. 54), perceived as the very centre of a political system the power of which appears on this pleasurable occasion, far from the battlefields, as "thay woned ther samen" / "they gathered there as one" (l. 50). The poet reinforces unity by depicting collective events (jousting, carousing) and he stresses the essential cement of all communities that was conceptualized by Marcel Mauss: exchange, giving and receiving.[10] Giving is granted a special value because the act associates presents offered in a peaceful context and on the occasion of the Christian feast celebrating the birth of Christ who gave the most valuable of all presents, his life, to redeem the life of all. The poet emphasizes sharing and exchange as he shifts the attention from the revels to the description of the feast proper. A culmination in convivial court life, the feast duly reflects social hierarchy and table prescriptions.[11] The guests sat according to their ranks (l. 74, 109-115), but the image of the community is preserved as the generous head of the Round Table "wolde not ete til al were served" (l. 85), thus complying with the New Testament advising the true masters to humbly act as servants (Matthew 23: 8-12). This Christian context, however, syncretically vies with another, more pagan approach to the feast since Arthur expects to be first nourished with good food of another kind, "an uncouthe tale" (l. 93), or with the vision of "sum mayn mervayle" (l. 95). Eccentricity probably emerges there, when Arthur distorts the definition of food and, to some extent, breaks open the exclusive circle of Camelot and longs for what is bound to lie, to be encountered beyond the limits of the court's circle.

The poem thus confronts the circle of tradition and the margins around and beyond Camelot that are likely to introduce novelty, change, albeit for a short period of time. That the poem wavers between tradition and novelty appears in the poetic contention between unfamiliar perceptions ("An other noyse ful newe" / "another sound, a new sound", l. 132) and friendly voices happy to celebrate the Christmas tradition. The fellowship of the Round Table is described as a human(e) circle, all ready to come to the rescue of anyone threatened by adversity and the litany of Arthur's famous knights (l. 550-557) is explicit enough in that respect.

Likewise, the poet expatiates on the pentangle which is intended to protect Gawain and preserve the ideals he defends. The shield with the pentangle "depaynt of pure golde hwes" / "painted in pure gold" (l. 620) comes last in the arming scene, after the reference to his sword fastened with a silk belt (l. 589), no doubt proleptic of the magic silk girdle woven and given by Bertilak's wife (l. 2359). The shield, however, stands out as the only object in the poem which is not tainted with ambiguity. Like the pentangle, the structure of which cannot be dented, the shield's

[10] See Marcel Mauss. *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*. Paris, PUF, 2007.

[11] On codification and table manners meant to control the individual and the collective social body, see Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong, *Une histoire du corps au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Éditions Liana Levi, 2003, 151-152.

moral value cannot be questioned and its symbolic strength seems to defy the architectural perfection of Hautdesert, also characterised by perfect closure and impregnability (l. 781-784). Recalling the invulnerable line of a battlement, the unbroken, self-reflexive line of the pentangle with its five unassailable points conjures up the vision of a castle of an allegorical sort schematized and transposed into an apparently simple figure—the star representing guidance—to reflect the complex and ever multiplying entanglement of Gawain's five senses, five fingers, five virtues, Christ's five wounds, Mary's five joys, all interlocking perfectly without any rupture.[12] Readers of medieval literature will be reminded of *The Castle of Perseverance*, of a later date than *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1440), a morality play in which the castle is the centre of an allegorical battle between the forces of good and evil as the latter forces endeavour to assail the soul of man sheltering in the castle's centre. The centre in this morality play, but also in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, stands for moral safety. Being quiet, static in the centre of a political or moral shelter wards off doubt, danger, death, which lie in store in faraway journeys, in perilous quests.[13] As Gawain requests to "voyde [the] Table" / "take leave of [his] place (l. 345), distancing from the centre of the royal court looms ahead and the shield adorned with the pentangle painted gold represents a banner with the knightly virtues borne by the *miles Christi*, protected by the Virgin Mary whose "ymage" was painted inside the rampart-like shield (l. 649). The shield is no mere defensive piece. It is intended to protect Gawain against two threats, the combination of which in a literary text, Bernard Levy posits,[14] first appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and which only become obvious when the story unfolds until Gawain eventually reaches Hautdesert: the beheading game and "the temptation of the knight's chastity".

The strength of the fellowship, the material and symbolical power of the shield plead for the permanence of the Arthurian world whose unity seems unassailable in spite of the Green Knight's intrusion. The arming scene (l. 566-592) corroborates the objective of unity; through the description of one of the most significant rituals of chivalry, this particular scene celebrates the cohesion of Arthur's society gathered around their champion. The poet singles out Gawain first, a "stif mon" / a "stout knight" (l. 570) and then he focuses on the various items of the armour to suggest the complexity of the equipment and to conjure up the vision of human multitude before solitude experienced during the journey. The crowd of servants and squires are eager to participate in the ritual transforming a young man into a hieratic warrior and they cover his limbs and head—as the taxonomic enumeration of the different parts shows it well ("sabatouns", "greves", "cowters", "gloves of plate"…) The arming scene is explicitly based on a concentric pattern: Gawain stands in the centre on "a tulé tapit" and he is surrounded by the servants accurately performing the ritual; he is finally locked ("[v]mbeweved" / "encas[ed]") inside a sort of chrysalis of gold. The passage clearly details a ritualistic method

[12] On the issue of the five wounds and five joys as "popular themes in the 14th century", see Robert W. Ackerman, "Gawain's Shield: Penitential Doctrine in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"*, Tübingen, *Anglia*, vol. 76, 1958, 263.

[13] Commenting on movement away from the centre of the Castle of Perseverance, Jill Mann provides the following conclusion, which may well apply to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Camelot as a centre: "Moral regeneration is signaled by a retreat to the centre, to the stability of the Castle of Perseverance, where Mankind is defended by the Virtues from the attacks of the Seven Deadly Sins." (Jill Mann, "Allegorical Buildings in Medieval Literature", *Medium AEvum*, vol. 63, n°2, 1994, 200).

[14] See Bernard S. Levy, "Gawain's Spiritual Journey: *Imitatio Christi* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", Pittsburgh, *Duquesne Studies. Annuale Mediaevale*, vol. 6, 1965, 67. In order to further emphasize the Christian context of the poem, Levy recalls that the New Year also corresponds to the Circumcision of Christ (69), which links the wound received by Gawain during the parodic beheading game and circumcision "conceived by the medieval Christian to be a prefiguration of Christian Baptism, for both are initiations into the spiritual life, one for the Old Law, the other for the New Law" (70). For Levy, the wound inflicted at the green chapel represents a "spiritual circumcision" (76).

which is intended to thoroughly protect the flesh and to stress fastening, linking, tying (l. 590-591) that parallel "the perfect interlocking of the pentangle" and thus combine theological tenets and "interrelated social virtues".[15] Undoubtedly, this arming scene, a fine example of chivalric ritual, may also be interpreted as a faithful reading and enforcement of Ephesians 6: 10-17 in which wearing the armour of God (comprising the actual parts detailed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* including the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith, the sword of the holy Spirit), is the only protection against the dark forces of evil—the unknown green knight being probably excessively conceived as utterly evil. However, the armour as material and spiritual equipment is central in a romance which involves a Christian knight. Protection, material and spiritual, is essential in the quest, which implies returning with its different meanings. As Helen Cooper explains, a quest is outwardly linear but, in reality, it is a circular progress reflecting the plot of the quest and, above all, expressing the Christian plan at the core of salvation from exile to earthly life, death and to resurrection. This circular progress complies with a "mythic symmetry" in which a parallel is drawn between the romance story and the divine plan.[16] Mythic symmetry, the emphasis on strength, arming, account for the attention paid to surfaces and layers.

The spiritual aesthetics and the descriptive accuracy of the arming scene reveal three different skins or perceptions of the hero's skin: the flesh ritually covered at Camelot (and ambiguously laid bare at Hautdesert and the green chapel), the skin of metal Gawain asks for (l. 597) and the skin of gold the complete armour proves to be ("[t]he lest lachet other loupe lemed of golde" / "every link looking golden to the very last loop", l. 591). References to links and loops suggest that the knight's body was encased in the armour which looked like a reliquary the whole court both stared and sighed at. French historian Jean-Claude Schmitt recalls that reliquaries were sheathed with gold and the precious film hid the mortal remains inside to the sight, thereby transcending and transfiguring the saint's earthly nature promised to heavenly glory.[17]
However enticing these readings of the arming scene may be, jarring notes must also be taken into account. A film remains a surface and as Richard Green realistically comments: "[…] beneath the brilliant surfaces he [the poet] finds a dark world of potential failure, and subtly, sometimes comically, he warns of powers of evil which may corrupt even the most virtuous men and institutions."[18] This view may sound negative but recent criticism, while siding with it, have shown that for the defence of its ideology, "the civilized order […] must have commerce with, and enter into, everything that threatens it."[19]

2. DECENTRING: STRANGENESS BREAKING INTO THE CIRCLE OF GOLD

Hardly had Arthur asserted his "countenance" (l. 100) that "he wolde never ete" (l. 91) before a good story was told or a marvel happened when "[a]n other noyse" "neghed bilive" / "drew near" (l. 132) as if Camelot and the magic world were contiguous spaces, as if the noise inevitably signified a strange human presence whereas so far noises and sounds had been produced by instruments ritually introducing the feast's courses. That "noyse" was not part of a ritual; it was "ful newe" and it suddenly caused the court's harmonious circle and the encircling space beyond Camelot to telescope because a huge green knight, dressed up in green,

[15] These expressions are borrowed from Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights. A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1990, 208, 212.
[16] H. Cooper, *op. cit.*, 57-58.
[17] See Jean-Claude Schmitt, *le corps des images. Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 2002, 287.
[18] See Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Schield and the Quest for Perfection", Baltimore, *E.L.H. Journal of English Literary History*, vol. 29, 1962, 123.
[19] Quoted from J. Simpson, *op.cit.*, 171.

riding a green horse broke into the hall: "Ther hales in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster" / "a fearful form appeared, framed in the door" (l. 136). Arthur defines him as an "aventure" / a "curious occurrence" (l. 250). Such a lack of definition betrays the intentional ambiguity that suddenly pervades the poem. It also disrupts the vision of knighthood so far given while also preparing the issue of temptation since the court was both awestruck and fascinated by this attractive apparition. So far, the court had been engrossed in the traditional religious rites and had played the traditional games. The 's disorienting apparition arouses curiosity. That noise offered the opportunity to discard tradition for a while, to welcome difference even maybe subversion albeit limited in time, and be eccentric, on the side of strangeness and derision so typical of carnivals and festivals mocking authority.

Decentring then is expressed through a suddenly diverging approach to order, place and posture. Though eager to take up the challenge on Arthur's behalf, Gawain is only too ready to leave ("voyde") the table as if he knew he could expect more from spaces elsewhere. Whether exciting or threatening, the journey first insists on enticing otherness, on new spaces Gawain rode through: "Mony wylsum way he rode" (l. 689). Matthew Goldie focuses on the term "wylsum", found in Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, in *Eneados* by Gavin Douglas, of course in *Sir Gawain*, and that term is connected with a variety of meanings expressing wandering, loss, deceptive locations "that have moral connotations of being misleading".[20] "[W]ylsum" reflects the idea that progress can only be achieved through the experience of places other and through close, intimate contact with otherness which, obviously, the castle of Hautdesert is willing to offer Gawain.[21] The Court's relish as the green man's head rolls around the hall like a preposterous ball (l. 427) shifts the definition of game from courtly entertainment (Christmas games) to unruly treatment of the head, symbolizing political centrality, suddenly stumbling down to the low earth and rolling away in uncertain directions.

Through this challenge the green man blurs the definition of space, disrupts order, warps and distorts the perfection of the gold pentangle's line and later dissolves this line into the broken circle of the green girdle. He does not privilege one or the other, he just makes the two circles coexist, like two rings that, after a heuristic experience, may eventually be one as spiritual perfection acknowledges human weakness at the end of the quest.

The role of spaces other signalled by "wylsum" is further illustrated by the repetition of the adverb "where" (l. 398-400) which both questions the Green Knight's space and echoes the perplexity of all human beings wondering about their origin and future. Wearing no helmet, no hauberk (left at home…, l. 268), the duel—as in a morality—involves a different confrontation which in the poem opposes the civilized and the savage, the spiritual and the flesh, court and nature without ever giving precedence to one but making the combination of different focuses and centres convincing and fruitful. This view is developed by Gillian Rudd in her essay "Shifting Identities and Landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" and she concludes that "[t]he poem relentlessly refuses to come to rest on any single version", and if the end seems to circle back to the opening stanzas we may launch into various other readings of the poem which emerge as the story builds up.[22] Thus the storyteller keeps changing the focus of the narrative and, especially in the Green Knight's portrayal, he deceives the eye by changing his

[20] See Matthew Boyd Goldie, *Scribes of Space. Place in Middle English Literature and Late Medieval Science*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2019, 146. Goldie bases his development on the definition of "wilson" / "wilsum" in *The Middle English Dictionary*.
[21] M. Goldie, *op. cit.*, 191.
[22] See Gillian Rudd, "Shifting Identities and Landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", in *Medieval English Literature*, ed. Beatrice Fannon, London, Palgrave, 2016, 57.

appearance according to location. In a mimetic way, when appearing at Camelot, the Green Knight is elegant, well-proportioned and his fine garments reflect the expensive trend of the aristocratic class that sumptuary laws tried to repress.[23] His "strayt cote ful streght" (l. 152), his "wel-haled hose" (l. 157) emphasize his fair proportions as well as the patterns ("bryddes and flyyes" / "butterfies and birds", l. 166) neatly displayed on the "clene verdure" (l. 161) of his green silk garments—this, in other words, is nature seen and interpreted by an embroiderer for an amazing knight to look his best at Camelot. The portrayal shifts from refinement to outstanding physical strength at Hautdesert. The poet lays stress on the host's red beard, his "face as the fyre" (l. 847); the birds and butterflies have left the stage and the poem introduces the forest environment, ambiguously both wild and rationally controlled by Bertilak. When Gawain ultimately finds the answer to the Green Knight's location, he discovers a green chapel, a green man whose flesh only is mentioned (l. 2228), standing among hostile crags, making one with his axe described at length (l. 2223-2226). The story seems to circle back to the beginning, "as fyrst" reads the poem (l. 2227), but the poet actually disorients the reader or listener by playing with centres and decentring. The chapel scene does not reproduce the beheading at Camelot. Complete disorientation becomes explicit when Hautdesert is eventually reached.

A stone thrust into water causes concentric circles to appear, shiver away, and soon those circles become indistinct, as indistinct as the centre where the stone fell. Gawain's discovery of Hautdesert is reminiscent of this phenomenon. An amazing castle, complete with "abataylment", "garytes", "towres", "chymnees" (l. 790 ffg.), with a gorgeous hall inside the ramparts, loomed in the distance. Gawain first rode through a forest of "hore okes" (l. 743) in its periphery, then he caught sight of a moat, of a park with "a pyked palays" (l. 769) built in the midst of yet more trees. A fine palace indeed, constructed with technical competence. But it is such a wonderful vision that it almost seems artificial, mirage-like, as if the castle was "pared out of papure" (l. 802), and Gawain's eye fails to notice the concentric circles of the moat, park and palisade, not to mention the closed drawbridge soon to gape open. Why should exquisite Hautdesert be so well defended? On second thoughts, the place has a magnetic effect and the different circles evoke the inescapable progress into the memory of the mythological maze where, in the very centre, the Minotaur waited for his young preys, just like Bertilak finally leaving his chamber and ambiguously embracing Arthur's nephew (l. 841). If the castle is a deceptive structure, Bertilak's definition is even more misleading: should one deem him an avatar of the Minotaur of ancient times, a monster who terrified medieval men and aroused the fear of the other,[24] a gentle host, a "prynce withouten pere" (l. 873) or an ogre, so different from Arthur's table custom, eating just "a morsel" (l. 1690) before riding off to the quarry in the forest and its fragmented hunted beasts? Bertilak also recalls the trickster figure that appears in myths, in different civilizations, and have much in common with jesters and fools.

One episode during Gawain's stay at Hautdesert is quite puzzling in that respect. Bertilak has placed his hood on a spear, just to make merry: "Hent heghly of his hode, and on a spere henged" (l. 983). This is no doubt a game of his own meant to kindle the imagination of the guests who are implicitly challenged to cook up more joyful games. But this scene should also be read as a parody of the initial beheading game which Gawain witnesses with a literal eye, caught by the illusion of the warm shelter he prayed for. The hood mimicks the talking head held by the green man and, in a way, it also talks, it expresses something Gawain fails to

[23] On these points, see Danièle Alexandre-Bidon, Nadège Gauffre Fayolle, Perrine Mane, Mickaël Wilmart, *Le vêtement au Moyen Âge. De l'atelier à la garde-robe*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2021, III, "Codification, transgression, usages sociaux"; Jacques Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, Paris, Flammarion, 1982, 329-330; Jacques Le Goff, Nicolas Truong, *Une histoire du corps au Moyen Âge*, *op. cit.*, 156.
[24] *Cf.* J. Le Goff, N. Truong, *ibid.*, 163-165.

analyze. In this passage, and in the whole poem, Bertilak is a character of the plot but the hidden presence of Morgan, his transformations and his manipulations of magic, of multiple boxed-in games to the detriment of Gawain, tend to suggest that, though unknown, marginal, familiar with the forest, precisely because he lurks in the confines and shadows, he is the appropriate being to teach Gawain how to explore his profound nature. As such Bertilak belongs to the extensive category of useful, subversive, decentring figures, both evil and constructive (therefore close to the divine), like the trickster — "der göttliche Schelm" Jung devotes a chapter to in *Le fripon divin*.[25]

3. FROM CIRCLE(S) TO ELLIPSE AND ELLIPSIS

Circularity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an obvious structure on which conventional romances are based and it is also an ambiguous and polysemous pattern. The poem shifts from explicit centres where political order and tradition prevail to zones ruled by uncertainty and subversion which represent the core and salt of the story. So far, we have endeavoured to explore centre as opposed to decentring. Yet the position of the poet in relation to centre and decentring remains to be assessed since he is the storyteller of "an uncouthe tale […] that he [Arthur] myght trawe" (l. 93-94). A blending of originality, novelty and truth, plausibility, such is the requirement shaping the narrative food Arthur expects and the poet must meet this expectation while defending his art.

This part is concerned with the narrative construction of the poem which sometimes looks like a "mille fleurs" of clues that do not stand out first but eventually reveal the ropes of the plot and the poet's secrets of fabrication at a metatextual level.[26] If one considers decentring, distance from the court's circle to reach other less official centres in magic spaces set in the wilderness, in pagan nature, then this infers that reliable circles are distorted into more labile, elusive ellipses reflecting wavering exploration. The narrative construction must render this wavering exploration and, as a consequence, be elliptical. Ellipsis illustrates the uncertainty characterizing Gawain's adventure and it cannot be severed from the poet's stylistic exercise intended to reflect this uncertainty, as well as his own hesitations and choices as a creator.
First, how is the figure of the ellipse suggested in the poem? Having left the court, the *omphalos* of the political system, Gawain cannot be guided by sound indications even if identified locations crop up here and there (Anglesey, the Wirral, for instance).

The figure of the ellipse is progressively delineated in the romance space because the Arthurian centre is conversely deleted and replaced by various aspects of nature. Landscape is thus altered and dilated because the story stage leaves the Arthurian centre and stretches towards a second centre, the precise delineation of which is both mesmerizing and unreliable. Moreover, the poet's narration of Gawain's journey to the Green Knight's abode is far more detailed than the journey back, wrapped up in a few lines (l. 2479-2483), making the readers and listeners feel that the ellipse contracts, dissolves, resumes its initial circular form. This final change in the

[25] *Cf.* Carl Gustav Jung, Charles Kerényi, Paul Radin, *Le fripon divin*, Genève, Georg, 1984, "Contribution à l'étude de la psychologie du fripon", 177-199.

[26] See Martine Yvernault, "The Poet and the Weaver: the Inspiring Image of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", online on the AMAES site, https://amaes.fr

poem's structure somehow erases the distant adventure now turned into memory, a good story, and it blurs the second centre where the experience took place.
The ellipse appears, forms and begins to distend when Gawain rides away from Camelot towards the unknown, and "wyghtly went hys way" / "and went his winding way" (l. 688). The poet describes his acceptance of a fateful challenge through an impressive focus on Gawain's horse: "He sperred the sted with the spures, and sprong on his way / So stif that the ston-fyr stroke out therafter" / "Spiked with the spurs the steed sped away / with such force that the fire-stones sparked underfoot" (l.670-671). His disappearance, lightning-like, strangely echoes that of the Green Knight: "[…] the fyr of the flynt flawe fro fole hoves. / To quat kyth he becom knwe non there, / Never more then thay wyste fram quethen he was wonnen." / "so the hooves brought fire from the flame in the flint. / Which kingdom he came from they hadn't a clue, / no more than they knew where he made for next." (l. 459-461). The twin descriptions emphasize the swift entry of both knights into an unknown space; references to sparks under the hooves dispel Camelot's warmth and announce the blazing fires at Hautdesert. Without any direction, Gawain rides after his twin other self, "hys fere upon folde" / "his equal on earth" (l. 676).

That the initial court circle distends into an ellipse is marked by the depiction of imprecise expanses wandered through, now horizontal, now vertical (l. 691, 713), topographies in the plural ("frythes and dounes" / "forests and hills", l. 695), and change of seasons which no longer suggest a reassuring cycle but express unavoidable projection into an unreliable future. Solitude is increased by the scarcity of food. Gone are the days when he feasted at Camelot and when a good story was choice food. Excruciating loneliness is intensified by the silence in which the quest towards the elusive otherworld is steeped. Silence is a puzzling issue in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. An expected reaction when the Green Knight suddenly barged in during the feast and hushed Camelot's glee, a human feeling in one on his solitary way to meet his fate, silence is a problematic challenge for a poet gifted for words, rimes, sound patterns… As the poet follows Gawain's progress from one centre to the other and back, his style is in fact often elliptical, ambiguous, intentionally laconic, particularly when he contrasts the extremely violent and detailed hunting scenes and Gawain's inner turmoil.

Ellipsis is a timeless rhetorical figure which is both frustrating and fertile, rewarding. Ellipsis is based on intentional omission, truncation; expression is reduced to the essential and if rhetoricians like Pierre Fontanier posit that what is left in the rendering after suppression is sufficiently explicit and reliable,[27] ellipsis in fact stimulates thought and imagination thus tempted to supply or privilege the missing fragments. Ellipsis may contribute to emphasize liminality as the *Gawain*-poet reports an adventure which is only lived through by Gawain and the Green Knight, beyond the space of the audience and missing fragments increase the physical distance in a narrative based on the good will (sometimes suspension of disbelief) of the audience. Ellipsis thus enhances the impression of distance, of estrangement of one who is completely detached from his original abode and cannot be followed. Ellipsis does not just affect the textual formulation but also the meaning implied. Situations and objects tend to be invested with a literal value at first but they acquire greater depth and perspective as the unfolding of the narrative ultimately fills the blanks left by ellipsis through revelation and *dénouement*. *Dénouement* is particularly meaningful in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where "the method of knotting and unknotting [the] plot cannot pass unnoticed"[28]. To some extent, ellipsis may appear as a disappointing form of reduction which wounds the text and it is defined as "excision" or "amputation" by Gérard Genette.[29] Genette examines excision in the case of

[27] See Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, 305.
[28] Quoted from H. Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, *op.cit.*, 60.
[29] *Cf.* Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1982, 323-324.

editions. In the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, ellipsis, excision, amputation reflect the intricacy and hidden presence of games, plots, challenges. The magic world only unravels these intricacies at the end (l. 2338-2368): at the very moment when Gawain suffers a parodic beheading that leaves a symbolic cut in his neck, the Green Knight explains: "At the thrid thou fayled thore, / And therfor that tappe ra the." / "The third time, though, you strayed, / and felt my blade therefore." (l. 2356-2357).

Various examples of ellipsis or truncated description may be singled out in the poem. They emphasize ambiguity, double meaning, ironic lack of information. Thus, Gawain's journey is often flat, almost tedious as in l. 709 ("The knyght tok gates straunge" / He trails through bleak terrain"), which suggests a lack of interest for the progress again said to be "straunge" a few lines down (l. 713).

Brief remarks on the winding nature of the journey (l. 688) convey Gawain's bewilderment as he tries to find orientation. There are but few references to the typical romance elements; monsters, "wormes", "wolves", "bulles", "beres" (l. 716-723) are quickly mentioned as if the poet wanted to swiftly reach the more existential site of the Green Chapel.

But, among the eloquent, enigmatic and depictions like the ambiguous ring offered by the Lady, Gawain's bedroom and particularly its curtains represent an impressive example of ellipsis. In *L'art de l'amour au Moyen Âge*, Michael Camille explains with much subtlety that sexuality in medieval iconography was made more explicit by focusing on suggestive elements in the bedroom such as ambiguous folds, curtains arranged to obliquely evoke sexual organs or acts.[30] Likewise, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, curtains drawn or closed reflect the sexual unsaid, intensify the temptation while playing the role of poetic punctuations, poetic brackets that reinforce intimacy. The poet also keeps his narrative under control by resorting to these textile brackets in order to express narrative change, a shift from the private temptation scenes to the hunting scenes. Private scenes and hunting scenes apparently look separate but they actually pursue the same objective: placing the preys inside the moralised forest and the prey behind the curtains on the same parallel level.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as often in medieval texts, the poet reaffirms the role he firmly states at the beginning: "If ye wyl lysten this laye bot on little quile, / I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde, / with tonge" / "So listen a little while to my tale if you will / and I'll tell it as it's told in the town where it trips from / the tongue" (l. 30-32). Mesmerizing the audience like the Green Knight, the poet seems to be invested with similar magic powers. But while the Green Knight relentlessly pursues his aim, the poet's narrative is sometimes studded with formulas that, though conventional, tend to truncate the telling and through ellipsis imply that he is bored or loses his grip of his composition: "Now wyl I of hor service say yow no more" / "Now on the subject of supper I'll say no more" (l. 130); "The bok as I herde say" / "just as the story says" (l. 690); "Hit were to tore for to telle of the tenthe dole" / "to tell just a tenth would be a tall order" (l. 719). Does ellipsis mark a blunt, careless interruption in a story the poet carves carefully though, because he is performing his art and because stories for Arthur are dainty bits that feed the imagination more than mortal food? Or isn't he taking advantage of the season to upset roles, discarding the king whose presence fades away as Gawain takes up the challenge, and thereby reinforcing the task of readers and listeners who are expected to decipher a story heard in town? The context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* at the outset is clearly the Feast of Circumcision but there are also indications of noise, disorder, turbulent

[30] *Cf.* Michael Camille, *L'art de l'amour au Moyen Âge*, Köln, Könemann, 2000, 147-155.

merrymaking that point to other festive rites resting on inversion, on the burlesque, and evoking the tradition of the Feast of Fools.[31] The reader obviously is no fool subverting order and outplays Arthur who only pops up again on Gawain's return. In a story that is concerned with lack of guidance and missing directions, the poet introduces yet another illustration of decentring, as he shifts the focus from the aristocratic circle to the audience, listeners and readers who are invited to fill in the blanks he left. They are also expected to wind their way through the narrative and look for latent clues. And indeed, anyone carefully observing the description of Gawain's "urysoun" / "a colourful cloth to cover his neck" will notice a pretty yet enigmatic embroidery: "Tortors and **trulofes entayled**[32] so thyk" / "and turtle doves and **true lover's knots**, tightly **entwined** (l. 612). *The Middle English Dictionary* provides several entries for "truelofes" / "treu-love". Entry 4 refers to a plant with symmetrical flowers and leaves; it also suggests that maybe a "treu-loveknotte" is "a knot formed of two intertwined loops".[33] The definition in *The Middle English Dictionary* echoes the poem in associating an ornament (a flower) with the representation of "a knot formed of two intertwined loops", in other words a knot expressing reunion and symbiosis. The knot of the green girdle, a mark of failure but also of convivial reintegration, was in fact already visible at Camelot in the form of this ornament on the "urysoun" and, as for other signs and objects, it also combined opposites—the figure of the embroidered knot (that prefigures the green girdle of temptation) as well as truth and love.

Through playful interaction with the audience, the medieval poet introduces yet another game, of a literary sort, and another pact binding him to them in a heuristic and hermeneutic enterprise, centuries before Umberto Eco's concept of "*lector in fabula*".[34]

The figure of the circle is the organizing structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in a rich and complex way. This figure no doubt implies return, which is an essential and traditional component of romance based on spatial displacement. However, because the plot follows an eccentric course from Camelot to otherness and magic, the poem seems to emphasize the narrative and hermeneutic possibilities of decentring. Thus, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is also a reflection on storytelling. On his return Gawain's green belt knotted "abelef hym aboute" / "worn obliquely to the body" (l. 2517) is an eloquent visual account of his adventure which precedes the traditional narrative of the hero's experience. The text circles back to the beginning with the evocation of the historical chronicles (l. 2521-2528), eclipsed though by the final mention of "aunteres" / "stories". Stories have the last word in a narrative process which, as Helen Cooper posits, is "self-reflexive".[35] Based on multiple sources and analogues, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* from a theoretical viewpoint, expresses the quest

[31] On these points see Henry L. Savage, "The Feast of Fools in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", Urbana, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 51, 1952, 537-539.
[32] My emphasis in this passage.
[33] See entry "treu-love" *The Middle English Dictionary* (online) https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED27893/track?counter=1&search_id=25481538
[34] *Cf.* Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula. Le rôle du lecteur ou la Coopération interprétative dans les textes narratifs*, Paris Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1985, 63 : "Le texte est donc un tissu d'espaces blancs, d'interstices à remplir, et celui qui l'a émis prévoyait qu'ils seraient remplis et les a laissés en blanc pour deux raisons. D'abord parce qu'un texte est un mécanisme paresseux (ou économique) qui vit sur la plus-value de sens qui y est introduite par le destinataire […]. Ensuite parce que, au fur et à mesure qu'il passe de la fonction didactique à la fonction esthétique, un texte veut laisser au lecteur l'initiative interprétative, même si en général il désire être interprété avec une marge suffisante d'univocité. Un texte veut que quelqu'un l'aide à fonctionner."
[35] H. Cooper, "The Ends of Storytelling", in *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of Medieval English Literature*, *op.cit.*, 191.

for ever renewed stories, for stories that begin again after stemming from a previous source story, never ending (like the pentangle's line) but inspiring more narratives.[36]
Obviously Gawain was not bound to die. He had to return to comply with romance tradition and tell his "uncouthe tale" (l. 93) that [Arthur] myght **trawe**" (l. 94).[37] However, the poet never tells us what a true story is. Is there such a thing as a true story?

[36] H. Cooper, *ibid.*, 193, defines this as "the telling of stories within stories". Quoting *The Thousand and One Nights*, she further explains that there is a link between "mortality and storytelling […]. While the narrative continues, so does life." (193).
[37] My emphasis.