The Poet and the Weaver : the Inspiring Image of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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The following study is based on the assumption that the Gawain-poet may have been inspired by a tapestry he saw in a castle and which provided matter for his poem. Indeed text and physical representation, the spiritual and the material, could not be severed in an age when seeing meant using sight at two levels which Saint Augustine distingued as the corporeal eyes and the inner eyes, the eyes of the soul. In other words, a work of art was both a material object and an object which was invested with a specular, performative, discursive function. It was, to quote Jerôme Baschet, "un objet agi et agissant". In this paper, I will concentrate on the lavish use of textiles references in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to suggest the possibility that the poem may be read as a dream or rather a daydream the anonymous Gawain-Poet had as he was looking at a tapestry in the castle of an aristocratic patron whoever he was, just the sort of tapestry lining the walls of Gawain's room at Hautdesert (l. 858). In suggesting to read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a daydream, I hope to show that dreaming here should not be (entirely) defined as a creation of the unconscious as will be posited by Freudian psychoanalysis. Rather, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the reference to daydreaming reflects a creative process, a poetic activity, a way of giving another version and vision of a story read or depicted on an art work which then becomes its source of inspiration. In his collective study of dreams in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, Peter Brown questions "the boundary from wakefulness to sleep" crossed by a narrator. His conclusion is that,

> […] the boundary is not an absolute division but a party wall within the same house, a wall with a connecting door […] which is to say that the dream world is not to be thought of as wholly different from waking experience, but in some measure a different account of it, although the connections are not always immediately obvious.

Bearing the aim of exploring « a different account » in mind, my development is based on three main points:

1. Decoding the poem's fabrics
2. Fleshing out an art work into a fateful story
3. The secrets of fabrication

1. DECODING THE POEM'S FABRICS

The idea of a tapestry as a likely inspiration and interpretation for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may find a justification l. 27 which corresponds to the passage where the poet shifts from chronicle, history (the brilliant ancestry of Britain) to a marvellous story situated at Camelot at Christmas: "Forthi an aunter in erde I attle to schawe". In his translation Armitage uses the verb "spin" to express the act of telling. "Schawe" and "spin" sound ambivalent verbs as they are related to the visual for one, and to fabrication for the other. The Middle English Dictionary mentions the entry "sheuen", another morphology of "schawe", 7, d, meaning "to narrate a history" but the verb is also related to displaying, to exhibiting (4, a). "Spin" is likewise connected to telling while also belonging to the lexicon of weaving. In relation to weaving and to the production of tapestries in particular, many examples are available to illustrate the use of famous historical figures or medieval scenes as subjects for weavers. Thus "The Heroes Tapestries" (ca 1400-1410) displayed in the Cloisters / Metropolitan Museum of Art represent outstanding figures such as Alexander the Great, or Charlemagne, Arthur (figures that provided the matter of the various romance branches). Like all the five surviving Heroes Tapestries, the hanging devoted to Arthur shows him sitting in a stately manner, on a dais, in a gothic architectural frame also comprising seven other canopies with high rank Church figures. The composition and framing echo the scene of the feast in the poem. The poem describes a "dere des" (a beautiful dais), with a "selure" (a canopy) covered with costly fabrics and rich tapestries. The disposition of the royal figures and members of the Round Table in the anonymous text enhances their nobleness, suspends time and invests the scene of the feast with a pictorial quality which emphasizes the ekphrastic nature of the poem. Likewise, the hunting scenes may be connected to the Flemish Devonshire Hunting Tapestries depicting the hunting of

boars, deer, bears displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum of London. The three animals hunted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – the deer, the boar, the fox – no doubt play an allegorical role which reflects Gawain's behaviour, but both the poem and the Heroes Tapestries document the organization of the hunting rituals and their dramatic visual quality.

The poem is suffused with colours which are either implicit through evocation (the seasons, the earth, for example) or explicitly mentioned like green and red, ambivalent colours with a wide range of hues (Bertilak's beard, for instance, is "bever-hwed"/"as red as a beaver's", l. 845), and their ambivalence appears in the branch of holly, a peaceful pagan symbol of Christmas time and of ever-returning nature but also vying with the ax the Green Knight holds. The poem is equally saturated with references to clothes and fabrics of multiple sorts which conjure up the vision of the text as a dressed up object: for instance, the "des", the "selure" covered with tapestries and studded with jewels (l. 75-80), the curtains and silk panels enclosing Gawain's bed at Hautdesert, the rich "covertores"/"coverlets" covering the bed (l. 853-859), the garments which are always described as "[r]yche robes":"costly clothes" (l. 861-862), Gringolet's "apparayl"/"apparel" (l. 601) matching Gawain's "wlonk stuffe"/"costly clothes" (l. 581) and suggesting also that Gringolet is Gawain's double and his only companion (l. 695). This list of examples may be completed by the "tulé tapit"/"rug of rare cloth" spread on the floor at the beginning of the first arming scene, where Gawain stands as on a textile pedestal, singled out of the rest of the Round Table, a magnificent knight threatened by the game he has accepted. So one tends to first conclude that fabrics in the poem reflect the taste for display and exhibition of wealth which characterized the reign of Richard II, ruling when the Gawain-poet was writing, and which are strongly marked in the descriptions of both Camelot and Hautdesert. The rug where Gawain stands stresses the objective of making the royal household appear exceptional, almost turning them into sacred beings. Conversely, absence or paucity of fabrics is an eloquent indication which may point diversely to the plain truth of nature as opposed to the wealth of the court, or to the obscure intentions of the magic world, of Bertilak's wife whose " bryght throte bare " / " bright bare throat" (l. 956) contrasts with the accumulation of textile layers at Camelot. Obviously lack or accumulations of fabrics, covering or discovering, show

that the poem, explicitly or not, plays with surface uncertainty and hidden meaning, and that play is part of the game structure characterizing the poem and involving the reader in a reflection on the process of encoding and decoding.

This process enables the Gawain-poet to use his text to tell a striking story that he "in toun herde"/ "as it's told in [the] town" (l. 31), both "some mayn mervayle" / "the tallest of tales" (l.94) and a story expected from a Ricardian poet to cater for the literary taste of the aristocracy and merchant class. As in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, in *The Man of Law's Tale*, the references to distant, sometimes exotic places where the fabrics were made and bought (Tars, Tulé / Tolouse, Turkistan) may be read as disorientation intended to carry the audience away from commonplace sites while bringing them back to their close context and to their comfortable homes furnished with these costly fabrics. In one of her very convincing studies on Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, Sarah Stanbury rightly posits that the enumeration of faraway production sites transforms the traded fabrics into "visual maps" connecting into a vast "textile geography" or "geographic work" reflecting the intensity of English merchant activities at the end of the 14th century. While Gawain rides his way towards the Green Chapel with no specific bearing to orient his quest, fabrics make up a textile geographic mosaic, familiar and reassuring for the well-to-do audience.

One must also take into account all the textile borders or different sorts of borders that are recurrent in the poem: Gawain's "aventayle" (l. 608), a neck-guard, namely a rich cloth attached to his helmet and covering his neck, is a "brode sylkyn borde" / a "broad silk border" (l. 610) with precious embroideries; the coverlets of his bed at Hautdesert also display embroidered borders (l. 856); Bertilak leads the hunt and takes the hunters through the edge of the forest (l. 1158), a natural, geographical border between the court and woodland. Although medieval tapestries, especially the "mille fleurs" had not proper borders apart from representations of walls, of enclosed gardens, architectural elements and borders later added during restoration work, references to textile borders may express the poet's preoccupation with neat composition, framing, and organisation reflecting a conservative ideology. Indeed Camelot's order is suddenly upset when the Green Knight coming from nowhere, breaks into Arthur's hall or when Gawain leaves the dismayed court and heads for an unknown destination. Behind the

reference to textile borders lies the reality of geographical borders. Trespassed borders suggest the ominous prospect of losing political integrity or simply the reality of border culture, the existence of other regions, other provinces peopled with beings not necessarily related to "fayryye" (l. 240), the other outside the reassuring microcosm of Camelot whose knights are only too happy to see Gawain reingrate the fellowship. From a poetical viewpoint, references to borders positively point to liminality, to the imaginary travels from organized reality to multifaceted fiction and back.

2. FLESHING OUT AN ART-WORK INTO A FATEFUL STORY

This part aims at showing that Gawain's journey parallels the poet's own fictive travel from a source of inspiration to the space of the story, from a static inspiring image like a tapestry on a castle wall to the narrative space, the mental workshop, beyond existing figurative references and borders, elsewhere, where adventure is not given all at once as on a tapestry but discovered progressively as the narrator-poet accompanies his protagonist. Poetical progression also infers that the story, contrary to a story woven into a tapestry, depends on uncertainty, narrative hesitation and setbacks. A tapestry is said to be finished when the initial pattern has been perfectly represented, translated into the fabric. Not so with a story which paradoxically benefits from narrative failure to take shape, to acquire its own flesh. Chinks in the armour, flaws in the fabric, disruption and dislocation, the obverse side of Camelot's ideal world will now be considered.

The starting point of a story seems to be related to the moment when the poet achieves emancipation and detaches himself from a source or an influence to give – as Peter Brown puts it – "a different account of it". Departure from initial inspiration, or alteration of an inspiration, is often marked by a moment of stasis, a sudden break in the story which triggers a secondary story turning the latter into the main narrative. In Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* an old man standing at the door of a wedding-feast suddenly picks one guest and stops him:

> It is an ancient Mariner,
> And he stoppeth one of three.
> "By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
> Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"
> The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
> And I am next of kin;

[…]
He holds him with his skinny hand,
[…]
He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child,
The Mariner hath his will.

Coleridge, in a story so strongly reminiscent of Jonah's or Rimbaud's *Poète maudit* in his *Bateau Ivre*, begins his poem by detaching the ancient Mariner and the young guest from the wedding-feast as if the guest had no other choice. Long before the 19th century, the Gawain-poet resorts to a similar narrative introduction. The Christmas feast was being served in a joyful and noisy atmosphere but Arthur "wolde not ete"/ "would not want to eat" (l. 85). The king abstained because he wanted to be told "an uncouthe tale" / an "outrageous fable" (l. 93), a "mervayle" (l. 94). Arthur's behaviour and decree, a mark of royal courtesy, may in fact appear as a form of festive abdication as he shifts the interest from political power to the power of narration, handing over his authority – for the time of the nourishing story – to a fledgling and to a poet who tells a story heard not on a famous battlefield but in town. Such a parody of abdication is part of the ludic quality of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in which games, both comic and tragic, are intricately entwined. The context of the "mervayle" is clearly one of subversion as the poet disrupts his story with personal comments and advice given to Gawain (l. 487-490, 1994-1997, for instance), or seems to be vanishing from the court to follow Gawain, creating elsewhere a fairy world which is the inverted double of Arthur's court. He, too, like the ancient Mariner "hath his (or the others') will", just like the Green Knight has the will of the knights and somehow hypnotizes them (l. 228). Disruption then may be analyzed as an expression of subversion. Disruption, breaks, breaches, deceptive situations make up the weft of the chaotic and fateful journey toward the monstrous Green Chapel which is the obverse representation of Camelot's sleek and trimmed aristocratic tableau.

In a tapestry, the depicted story forms a static whole. The characters remain in the definite position the weaver reproduces from the pattern and which corresponds to their ascribed role. The weaver creates the illusion that the hero or main protagonist

travels because he represents him or her in different places, constantly visible to the observer whose field of view is superimposed on the art work. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* challenges this optical reality by imposing the principle of distance or detachment. One of the gems of the Round Table, Gawain, starts disappearing from sight, even before he goes away from the court, at the very moment when he bids to leave his place in the aristocratic frame: "Bid me bowe fro this benche and stonde by yow there, / That I wythoute vylanye myght voyde this table"/ "to rise from my seat and stand at your side, / politely take leave of my place at the table" (l. 344-345), Gawain courteously requests. In spite of the highly visual quality of the first arming scene (l. 568-598), Gawain begins to disappear as he leaves his place on the bench and detachment is stressed by the reference of his spurs: "he sperred the sted with the spures"/ "Spiked with the spurs the steed sped away" (l. 670). The poet willingly forgets that he has previously moralised Gawain's spurs by linking them to gold and pride (l. 587). Debased to the level of trivial practical things, the spurs accelerate Gawain's dissolution into spaces beyond Camelot and physical distance is further increased by the court's fear that the young man might vanish not only from their eyes but from life and memory, "britned to noghte" / "battered into oblivion" (l. 680). The departure scene thus imposes distance and dislocation as Gawain's seat is suddenly left vacant and it further suggests that the story is bound to be perceived as a series of articulated albeit uncertain sequences and spaces. Leaving for other spaces, articulation as well as uncertainty express the possibility of otherness and of plural worlds that, in the poem, are often related to chaotic natural depictions and to ambiguous vistas and openings challenging Camelot's flat and static order without for all that proving reassuring or preferable. Openings may in fact be read as forms of closure coupled with a dangerous horizon. The poem thus oscillates between nature and nurture, the civilized and the primitive, the familiar and otherness, and in wavering between opposites the text implies that opposites may be reconciled in the end. That several worlds and realities may coexist – the political and the fairy, the surface and the depths, social behaviour and the individual psyche – appears in the references to articulations and hinges, to ties explicit and implicit, to couples and doubles. Thus the drawbridge, the gates, the walls of Hautdesert, a fortress that could resist the strongest winds (l. 781-784), may be seen as

yet another construction reflecting aesthetic performance serving the cause of political ideology (l. 790-799) and as the drawbridge is lowered (l. 817) with the porter joyfully (and ambiguously) invoking Saint Peter, the well-known ritual of hospitality comes as the final evidence that Hautdesert may be a replica of Camelot. But this construct is soon discovered to be its inverted double and Bertilak a blurred remanence of a previous green intruder… Likewise the drawbridge resembles a huge mouth which swallows up Gawain and the vision of his polite admission signals his entry into a sphere of voracity, of animals ripped open, of flesh and skin displayed, quite the opposite of Arthur's courtly refusal to eat. Verbs expressing tearing, opening, ripping open (the realism of which is reinforced by alliterations), trespassing (for instance the bed curtains which the lady "parts", l. 1476) announce and foreshadow revelation of the self while contributing to replacing the meticulous tableau of Camelot by a strange household ruled by a hairy lord, the master of a court driven by the pleasure of hunting and the owner of a castle Gawain reaches after a long lonely ride through an entangled primitive vegetation.

Though welcomed as an honourable guest, Gawain goes through a premeditated treatment which is a test intended to ensnare him and reveal his flaws. Fights with dragons and lethal beings as in traditional romances are few, mentioned in passing as if the poet wanted to politely comply with the tradition. Instead, the narration of the stay at Hautdesert ends on the hellish vision of the Green Chapel which Gawain, lacking the right words, likens to an "ugly" "oritore"/ "a ghostly cathedral" (l. 2190). His journey to this chapel which can only lead to the devil's abode (2192) boils down to a chaotic progress, snaking through an unclear topography ("Mony wylsum way he rode", l. 589, translated as "snaking paths" by Simon Armitage). Steep landscapes, crossings, together with the uncertainty lying beyond the drawbridge gaping open, and the cracks and holes that saturate the final discovery of the Green Chapel suggest danger in store for the young knight and a fateful descent into other imaginary realities the exploring poet also gropes his way through. And indeed Gawain seems to be swallowed up into spaces he had yet prayed to find (l. 763-764). Likewise the poet himself seems to be taken into a tubular description, with open spaces that are, in fact, only an illusion of free displacement, and his narrative progress is bound to end with the depiction of the voids

in the chapel surroundings. What is left of the poet's creative project in such a landscape resembling more a huge mesh, a cobweb where he himself could get trapped? A close reading, however, tells us that Bertilak's elegant fortress "**schemered and schon** thurgh the **schyre** okes."/ "as it sparkled and shone within shimmering oaks" (l. 772) at the far end of the forest and that it looked like a paper cutting (l. 802), an allusion to paper decoration that used to be placed on served dishes. This is an explicit indication that the poet intends both to tell a good, tasty story and show it in the making with its clues that may or may not trap the audience, with its flaws and gaps waiting to be filled, completed and solved. He plays with his narrative as one folds and unfolds paper into enigmatic shapes in order to finally reveal an object which, after all, is but a *trompe-l'œil* fabricated by the voice. The Gawain-poet constantly plays with the "reality" of a romance adventure, or rather the illusion of an adventure as it is essentially a narrative told and altered over and over again by a conjuror.

3. THE SECRETS OF FABRICATION

I would now like to address the issues of poetical fabrication and focus on the metatextual elements involved. This is a dimension other than the plot / story that must be explored and which discloses much in relation to the status of the place of the poet, both in physical and in theoretical terms. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is made up of many sources and influences. The sources that are most currently identified are Celtic sources and motifs, connected with the beheading game, with similar pacts with magic creatures. These motifs appear, for instance, in *La Mule Sanz Frain*, *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, *The Turk and Gawain*, *Humbaut*…

In relation to the issue of weaving, to strings being pulled, to the ambiguous monstrous figure of the Green Knight, it may prove relevant to go back to the myth of the Minotaur and to Dedalus's construction of the labyrinth where the Minotaur – a hybrid creature like the Green Knight – had been imprisoned. Like the Minotaur, the Green Knight is an uncertain creature, both attractive and repelling, looking like an "etayn" / a "giant" (l.140), quite massive, bulky, yet with a pleasant appearance ("And alle his fetures folwande in forme that he hade, / ful clene" / "In fact in all features he was finely formed / it seemed" (l. 146-147). Uncertainty also emerges in the location itself which

emphasizes the question of borders, of margins, of realities beyond the familiar. The Minotaur was pent up at the far end of a maze; likewise the Green Chapel seems unattainable, the last stage in a long journey leading to a dead end. The Minotaur's labyrinth conceived by Dedalus was a literal construction but it also involved a questioning, reflected in its architecture, on the enigmatic nature of man both human and apt to behave like a monster. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains the same questioning: no one on earth ("upon folde", l. 196) had ever come across such a creature and his destination as he dashes away from Camelot is far from clear (l. 460-461). He cannot be located precisely, his nature cannot be clearly assessed. One can, however, link the Green Knight to the medieval conception of monstrosity. Monsters were contrived by the imagination to show, to embody an ideology, a standpoint whether positive or negative. Categories of monsters appeared in Pliny, were later used by Isidore of Seville, Thomas of Cantimpré, and Mandeville's *Travels* followed in their wake mostly to express the idea that monsters are there to show that social, religious and political order could be disrupted and should be protected against the other, elsewhere. But the Green Knight does more than just puzzle the minds and show the dangers of the margin. He also forces the court to look differently, to change their point of view, to consider other directions, to look elsewhere and be curious, which Daniel Arasse claims in *On n'y voit rien* should be the aim of art and creation.

The myth of the Minotaur, told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 8, went through a long transmission. In late medieval English literature it appears in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* which describes Theseus's expedition bound for Thebes displaying his banner bearing the figure of the Minotaur, and John Gower in Book 5 ("On Ingratitude") of his *Confessio Amantis* mentions the "hous" / maze of the Minotaurus. This myth may prove useful to read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and to explore the treatment of the invisible, the hidden, as well as images of the double both antithetic and complementary. Just like Theseus who finally finds his way to the end of the maze, Gawain is mysteriously led towards Hautdesert and the Green Chapel. Ariadne's thread guiding Theseus in and out of the maze has replicas in the clues which are elucidated at the end of the quest as if in his final revelation (l. 2358-2466) the Green Knight was pulling out all the threads of the poem conceived as a weft. To some extent, the poet

himself **is** the thread as he follows Gawain all through his narration, while, in a sort of narrative *trompe-l'œil*, remaining close to the circle of his audience. The conclusion, the arrival at the Green Chapel, echoes Theseus reaching the far end of the maze, relying on Ariadne's life thread. This thread of life could have been cut as by the agency of Atropos but, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is given "a different account" in the symbolic cut sparing Gawain's life (l. 2498), in the green belt as well which is a symbolic thread tying Camelot and the fairy world.

More threads and textile motifs are woven into the poem which resembles a geometric fabrication displaying circles, broken structures, links and lines as if the poet had wanted to disclose its architecture while suggesting that exploring these phantom threads clarifies the intricacies of the story.

The first geometric pattern one encounters is the pentangle. It is an emblem of perfection the poet expatiates on at the beginning but which ironically is never mentioned again afterwards as the green belt usurps a vantage space in Gawain's testing. The pentangle occupies the whole descriptive space at the beginning because it binds together Christian tenets and moral values, and its structure reflects perfection as it is an infinite *alpha omega* line with no beginning and no end, nor breach or interruption ("Withouten ende at any noke noquere" / "but unbroken in its being from beginning to end" at l. 660). Yet unstable patterns and structures, in relation to the "mervayle" Arthur wants to hear, stand out as more useful agents for the story. Mentioned as part of the arming, a "silk sayn" / "silk belt" tying Gawain's sword (l. 588-589) challenges the spiritual pentangle, and the belt imagery runs through the whole poem, from Camelot to Hautdesert. The poet devotes a long passage to the pentangle which, as a symbol of perfection, "bytoknyng of trawthe" (l. 626) cannot be modified. But its immutability is counterbalanced by the belt that is forced on Gawain by Bertilak's wife. The knight's attributes recall his dubbing by Arthur; they represent the memory of the ritual that attaches him to his lord who chose him for his outstanding qualities. Not so with the green belt, a feminine gift, associated with lying and secret. The Gawain-poet takes pains to transform the gift of the belt into a ritual of a sexual kind. Once finally accepted by Gawain, the belt passes from the lady's body to Gawain's and the poem insists on terms which reinforce the act of untying, tying ("laght" / "unbuckled", "halched" /

"buckled", 1830, 1852) suggesting that the belt is an unstable object that both provides protection but is also invested with unclear intentions. Its uncertainty particularly appears in the repetition of the verb "knit" / "knitted" / "fastened" (1831, 1849) and Armitage uses the same verbs in his translation. These verbs mean joining, tying, combining different fabrics, materials and ornements, and, being so close to the noun "knot", it may imply the opposite, detachment, breach, in all senses, unlike the pentangle, a symbol of truth. The pentangle epitomizes the defense of Christian values and of a glorious past. Conversely, the green belt expresses the weight of a pagan subtext in the poem as well as the reality of human failure and transgression. Yet, the distinctions between the pentangle and the belt are not so radical as the green girdle is said to suit Gawain's splendid red clothes (l. 2036) while dispelling the initial vision of the glorious pentangle set against Gawain's "ruby red" shield (l. 663). An object containing the possibility of detachment, failure, transgression, the green girdle, in a syncretic way, stitches together the fairy world and the world of chivalry, a combination romance poets cannot dispense with in the fabrication of a "mervayle". In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the poet indeed invents two arming scenes: one refers to the knight's metal equipment; the other privileges a sort of textile magic armour, the silk of which – worn on the skin – reflects the fragility of man.

Knots, hinges, links and lines, broken or not, are thus woven into the poem (l. 576-577, 590-591, for instance), enhancing the notions of articulation and possible manipulation of the hero's will as he is guided to the Green Chapel, as if he was drawn by an invisible thread pulled by a force that is invisible until Bertilak's revelation. Part of the ambiguity of those ties, however, lies in the ambivalent links with the fairy world. Bertilak and Gawain are often represented embracing (l. 840-841) and the covenant, though binding, brings them together (2242) on terms that are both ominous and friendly. Anthropology posits that ties, threads (for example relied on in a labyrinth) are of a lethal or threatening nature as they are often manipulated by magic beings. Conversely, the knot of the green girdle, the girdle itself, may be interpreted as an *omphalos* and an umbilical cord, and as such may express the new life granted after a rite of passage to the "berdles chylde" / "bum-fluffed bairn" (l. 280) Gawain is at the beginning.

Threads form the weft of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* both in a literal sense, if one accepts the idea that a tapestry may have been one of the poet's sources of inspiration, and in a metaphorical sense. From a literal viewpoint, weaving and embroidery often involve feminine figures. This function is mentioned in the poem line 613 which describes Gawain's "urysoun"/ "colourful cloth" (l. 608), an embroidery that is so refined that it must have taken "burde" / "women" (l. 613) seven winters to make it. In other words, the embroidery was a long, almost endless task very much like Penelope's and we discover that the girdle was woven by Bertilak's wife. But my final point, though, concerns the textile quality of nature itself. A large part of the poem is devoted to Gawain's journey through Wirral and it is a journey which contains landmarks and well-known locations while being also blurred and very satisfactory for the imagination for this reason. Beyond the journey through diverse landscapes, the hunting scenes and the arrival at Hautdesert are crucial passages to better understand why the poet engages with a specific treatment of nature. When applied to nature, the textile metaphor leads to conceiving the whole landscape as a rhizome, in other words not just as a surface reality but as a vegetal weft, both natural and magic, that runs underground through the poem from the beginning to the end. The hazel and the hawthorn were "harled al samen" / "interwoven" (l. 744), the poet tells us; the ground is just "misy and myre" / "mud and marshland" (l. 749), a damp topography masking unreliable depths; the forest is "wylde" / "densely overgrown" (l. 741). Unkempt nature conjures up the memory of primitive times and contrasts with the refined fabrics displayed at Camelot. Weeds and moss spread their filaments like tentacles, poke through the ground and the text as Gawain reaches Hautdesert, then disappear and crop up again when the Green Chapel, "overgrowen with gresse" / "matted with weeds and moss" (l. 2181) bars the knight's tubular progress and transforms the quest into a dead end. "Rotes" / "roots" (l. 2294) increase the impression of a nightmarish experience, both external and internal. In such an endemic and contaminating landscape, Gawain turns green himself and seems to transform into a "stubbe" / "tree stump" "with rotes a hundreth"/ "a hundred roots" to resist the fatal blow (l. 2293-2294). When the Green Chapel is finally disclosed, one feels that the underground rhizomatic natural weft has totally subverted the historical organization described at length at the opening of the poem. It usurps and almost stifles

the narrative creation until the poet eventually dispels his poetic illusion and, after the expected revelation (l. 2444-2467), he decides to free his hero from the weft and dispatch him back to Camelot.

CONCLUSION

Does this mean that the story is over for the hungry audience or isn't the poet in fact reasserting his power which was about to be usurped by all the magic figures of romance fiction that form an evil hierarchy paralleling and challenging Arthur's order (Morgan, Merlin, Bertilak, his wife)? The real magician no doubt is the poet himself who pulls all the plot's strings and weaves all the threads together. And he tells us by suggesting that nature is at times too shimmering to be true (l. 772) and that Bertilak's castle seems to be "pared out of papure" / "cut from paper" (l. 802), or by causing the mist, like a veil of poetical illusion, to clothe the whole landscape as Gawain leaves for the Green Chapel. Like the minstrels who praise their art at the beginning of a lay, the poet displays and discloses his transforming powers. In so doing, he presents himself as a "tregetour", one of these illusionists who, if we trust *The Franklin's Tale*, conjure up an incredible event or thing "and whan hem lyked, voyded it anon" (Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Franklin's Tale*, l. 1150). Acting as a "tregetour", the poet – long before the invention of the movie – performs a technical trick as he transforms the poetical cloth into a pictorial backcloth and makes his own location in the work quite diverse. We tend to imagine that storytellers face the audience, just like Arthur and his glorious court face us. But as the poet follows Gawain, he turns his back to the audience and embarks on his own narrative journey. Seen from behind as he leaves, "un homme de dos" as Georges Banu puts it, the poet creates the illusion of depth and distance and invents the illusion of liminality which is indispensable to movies: opening and entering the picture.