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## Piercing the Corporeal Veil: The Extra Stanza of "Pearl" as Spiritual Focal Point

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**PIERCING THE CORPOREAL VEIL: THE EXTRA  
STANZA OF PEARL AS SPIRITUAL FOCAL POINT**

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Michael Blum

1996

## APPROVAL SHEET

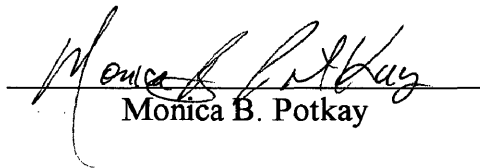
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Michael Blum

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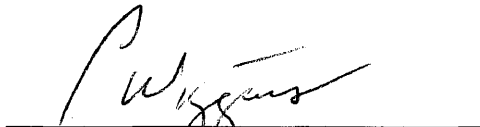
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Monica B. Potkay



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John Conlee



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Peter Wiggins

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Bella and my son Josh, who daily remind me that I must look past temporal concerns and seek the essence of life. Josh, may the force be with you always.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	v
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	vi
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	2
<b>PIERCING THE VEIL</b>	7
<b>NOTES</b>	30
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	36

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to explain the thematic significance of the so-called "extra" stanza in the Middle English poem Pearl.

Critics have long understood the stanza within a purely structural framework, allowing its extraneousness alone--avoiding both its language and context--to inform their critical interpretations of the stanza's function in the poem. I argue for its function as a structural manifestation of one of the poem's major themes: the idea that one must look into flawed material entities in order to perceive the spiritual perfection which resides within. The stanza itself is one such flawed material entities, and through a closer examination of the stanza and its language, the reader will be able to see the spiritual perfection residing within the stanza, as well as the poem.

The poet's use of wordplay within the extra stanza is a major indicator of the stanza's importance as a structural manifestation of the theme of spirituality hidden within the poem's materiality. This wordplay offers the reader two opposing interpretations of the stanza--one spiritual, the other material. It is the reader's responsibility to properly interpret the ambiguous portions of the text in order to glean spiritual significance from it.

**PIERCING THE CORPOREAL VEIL: THE EXTRA  
STANZA OF PEARL AS SPIRITUAL FOCAL POINT**



## Introduction

The Middle English poem Pearl, like Dante's Divine Comedy, recounts its narrator's search for spiritual awakening and Divine Love. Like Dante, the protagonist in Pearl, the Dreamer, can only hope to perceive God by overcoming his worldly passions and vanities. And just as Dante is led on the path toward Divine Love by the spirit of Beatrice, one he held dear while she existed corporeally on Earth, so too is Pearl's Dreamer aided in his quest by the spirit of his Pearl (or Pearl-Maiden), a recently deceased relative (perhaps his daughter), transformed into a Bride of the Lamb of God.

While the Pearl itself may signify many different things, it will suffice for the present to say that at the beginning of the poem, the loss of this Pearl represents one of the greatest losses the Dreamer can suffer; however, for the still spiritually uninitiated Dreamer, this loss is purely a material one, devoid of spiritual significance. He has yet to learn that all corporeal things possess an immaterial and spiritual significance, that true value derives not from an entity's temporal situation, but from that entity's spiritual component, which is both perfect and immortal.

The Dreamer, though at first unable to see the spiritual meaning which potentially lies within corporeal entities, comes by degrees to comprehend that there is a spiritual component within all material things. At the end of his journey he can finally look within his own flawed corporeal self to perceive Divine Love residing there as well. The Dreamer's vision throughout the poem is essential: He must progress from seeing material objects as ends in themselves, to using objects in the material realm as focal points, vessels

upon which he can reflect, in order to gain true sight, or insight, into the spiritual residing within them.<sup>1</sup>

This central theme, that focusing upon the material must ultimately lead one to true insight into the spiritual, is fundamental to our understanding of the poem. In my analysis, I will argue that this thematic concept must also be brought to bear upon our understanding of the poem's most elusive structural mystery, the so-called "extra" stanza. The extra stanza, I will argue, is best understood as a material object which the reader must learn to comprehend in terms of its physical existence in the text of the poem and as a sign of Divine Love. Thus, the reader's contemplation of the stanza parallels the Dreamer's examination of his Pearl.

In his discussion of Pearl, Bernhard Ten Brink was the first to alert readers to the poem's structural imperfection:<sup>2</sup> Pearl is meticulously divided into twenty sections, each consisting of five twelve-line stanzas, with the exception of stanza section fifteen, which contains six stanzas.<sup>3</sup> Thus, instead of the well-wrought, materially perfect one hundred stanza poem one might expect, Ten Brink argues, we are the recipients, for whatever reason, of a physically-flawed, unwieldy, one hundred and one stanza construction. Yet, whether or not one regards the poem's condition as a flaw is largely a factor of how one looks at the issue. Ten Brink, in his attempt to explain that one of these six stanzas must be somehow extra, assures the reader that the extraneousness "is certainly not due to artistic intention, but was either an oversight of the poet or an interpolation" (349, n.2).

His original formulation of the stanza as an unintentional flaw in a poem intended--as he perceives it--to be structurally perfect, is later accepted and expanded upon by several later critics.<sup>4</sup> This line of analysis concerns itself with projecting a perfect structure of one hundred stanzas onto the poem, failing to even briefly entertain the possibility of the stanza's intentional placement in Pearl.

Today, such arguments asserting some scribal defect in the manuscript have largely been abandoned by the myriad of critics now arguing for the stanza's intentional inclusion. The two major critical trends explaining the extra stanza as an intentional, important addition to the poem are what I would classify as the numerological and the symbolic flaw schools. The dominant assertion of the numerological critics<sup>5</sup> is that the stanza acts as a perfecting agent, regardless of the seemingly corrupting influence a six-stanza section might have on an otherwise uniform five-stanza pattern. P.M. Kean, for example,<sup>6</sup> assures us that neither the number of stanzas nor the regularity of the sections is important, but rather, the number of lines in the poem--1212--is the controlling factor in explaining the poem's perfection.<sup>7</sup> While the meanings certain numbers hold and the calculations used differ from one numerological argument to the next, the main idea remains constant: although the stanza may seem out of place as far as the poem's stanzaic regularity is concerned, it is really there to perfect the numerical structure of some other aspect of the poem.

A more recent analytical perspective, one ostensibly antithetical to the view held by the numerologists, is asserted by the symbolic flaw school. These critics adopt the opinion

that the poem contains a number of intentional defects, such as the extra stanza and the phantom line 472. For example, in his explanation of the extra stanza's symbolic function, David Carlson points out that such an excrescence speaks of "the superfluity, even risky excessiveness of human aspirations to perfection."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, John F. Crawford argues that with the omission of the phantom, or "missing" line 472, the poet "may have avoided formal perfection for fear of excessive vanity offending God."<sup>9</sup> All such defects, the symbolic flaw school adherents argue, are intended by the poet as a structural reflection of Pearl's themes of physical imperfection and the inadequacy of material pursuits: the numerical imperfection of the text is a figure for the inherent imperfection of all worldly matter.

While these two opposing avenues of interpretation separately have much to offer our understanding of the Pearl, I believe that more may be gained by integrating some of the key concepts advanced by each school. Although the differences between the numerological and the symbolic flaw schools are at first glance seemingly insuperable--the former asserts the stanza's perfecting capacity, the latter its flawed reality--they are not as irreconcilable as they appear. On the contrary, a marriage of these viewpoints would bring us closer to the stanza's real function as a "perfecting imperfection." The physical imperfection of the stanza, that is, its corruptive influence upon the poem's otherwise perfect, regular structure, insists on further examination. The stanza's physical prominence invites the reader to focus upon it, to contemplate how one is to understand such an overt

physical flaw within the context of a poem which aspires toward finding spiritual meaning in material things. Thus, just as the oyster creates a pearl--the poem's own symbol of spiritual perfection--out of a material irritant (an extraneous piece of shell or grain of sand), so too is the reader asked to create a spiritual pearl out of that which is perceived to be a physical extraneousness. More specifically, the reader must look into the physically imperfect poem, into the very stanza which lies at the root of the poem's material imperfection, and discover within it the spiritual perfection it contains. The hope is that by learning to find the spiritual residing within the material in the poem, readers will more easily be able to locate the spiritual perfection within themselves. The stanza, therefore, is important precisely because it challenges us to reexamine the relationship between physical imperfection and spiritual perfection. Readers should not discard the stanza as extraneous, yet they must confront its structurally anomalous position in the poem. Only by our contemplation of the stanza, and its place in the poem, are we able to glimpse its significance, both as an emblem of the status of the physical world in relation to spiritual reality, and as a statement of the relationship.

The stanza as a whole, furthermore, and more specifically the linguistic ambiguities within it conceal a spiritual message which, when properly interpreted, afford the reader the opportunity to perceive the spiritual perfection which resides within the physically flawed poem. In short, the extra stanza is nothing less than a structural manifestation of the poem's central thematic conflict: the Dreamer's struggle to reconcile the physical with the spiritual.<sup>10</sup> The stanza serves the same purpose for the reader: it attracts attention to

its physical presence in order to force us to look deeper into the poem, into its spirituality. In the course of the poem, the Dreamer comes to depend upon his increasing awareness that the corporeal world contains within it an intrinsic spiritual value, and is thus intended to aid humanity in our comprehension of the spiritual; so too is the reader expected to reach the same conclusions, using the extra stanza as one such material focal point into the poem's spirituality.

## Piercing The Veil

The reconciliation between the spiritual and the material is especially problematic in Pearl, since the poem presents the tangible world as simultaneously an aid and an obstacle to spiritual insight. The Dreamer needs to use the physical world as a lens through which he can perceive the spiritual, but he must avoid the danger of looking too superficially, of only seeing the material plane. In essence, materiality is the very thing which alternately obscures his vision of, and forces him to focus on, the true nature of spiritual perfection: the tangible world obscures the Dreamer's vision of the spiritual world in the sense that he focuses on the material manifestations of worldly wealth and beauty, and is thus hindered from concentrating on the spiritual world; however, by focusing upon manifestations of material wealth and beauty, the Dreamer is drawn into a deeper contemplation of these objects (e.g. the Bible and the New Jerusalem), and upon further scrutiny, the spiritual element--the Divine Love contained within those material focal points--becomes apparent to him. The poem's ultimate symbol of this power within the physical to both obscure and reveal the spiritual is the Pearl--or Pearl-Maiden--itself. The Dreamer begins by focusing on the Pearl's material value. Its exterior is too captivating to allow him to look deeper, to pierce the surface and see its spiritual component. However, his transitory, worldly idea of worth keeps his attention focused long enough upon the exterior for him to begin to recognize the possibility of real, spiritual worth within.

Of course, this central paradox, that the Dreamer must locate the spiritual by first focusing upon the physical which both conceals and reveals it, is not merely played out in

the central search for his lost Pearl. Rather, this need to refocus from external appearances to internal realities is a recurring theme in the Dreamer's education. From the dream's outset, the Dreamer intuits that he must meditate on what he sees in order to discover its true nature. He begins his quest by concentrating on his rediscovered Pearl, now transformed into the Pearl-Maiden, one of the 144,000 Brides of the Lamb of God:

On lenghe I loked to hyr þere;  
 Þe lenger, I knew hyr more and more.  
 The more I frayste hyr fayre face,  
 Her fygure fyn quen I had fonte,  
 Suche glandande glory con to me glace,  
 As lyttel byfore þerto watz wonte.<sup>11</sup>

At length I looked at her there;  
 The longer [I looked], I knew her more and more.  
 The more I scrutinized her fair face,  
 After I had perceived her excellent form,  
 Such gladdening glory did glide to me,  
 As shortly before [it] was also accustomed [to do].<sup>12</sup>

But while he may have some vague idea of the crucial role his vision must play in understanding his lost Pearl--as well as in his own existence--he is as yet unschooled regarding the proper focus of that vision. Thus, the Pearl-Maiden rebukes him for his lack of insight when she complains that he only loves her, so to speak, for her body:

Þou says þou trawez me in þis dene  
 Bycawse þou may with y3en me se....  
 I halde þat jueler lyttel to prayse  
 Þat leuez wel þat he sez wyth y3e.

(295-96; 301-02)

You say you believe me [to be] in this valley  
 Because you can see me with [your] eyes....



I consider that jeweler little to be praised,  
Who honors fully what he sees with eye.

With this reprimand, the Pearl-Maiden begins the Dreamer's education in expanding the scope of his vision from mere sight to true insight. Throughout the poem, he is first encouraged, then exhorted, by the Pearl-Maiden to contemplate what he sees, to pierce with his gaze those surface appearances, in order to glimpse the spirit of God which lies within. Thus, in the poem, physical vision is used metaphorically to illustrate spiritual insight. In this figuration, simply seeing the surface, material aspects of an object bespeaks a lack of spiritual insight, while the ability to see into, to interpret the physical, signifies the capacity to see spiritually into the nature of corporeal things.

A crucial early step in his spiritual education, the Pearl-Maiden informs the Dreamer, is to learn to read Scripture properly, to see into the physical text and embrace the spiritual message which lies within. "Ryztwysly quo con rede" ("Whoever can read correctly"), the Maiden assures the Dreamer, will "loke on bok and be awayed" ("look at [the] book and be informed" [709-10]). Here, the Pearl-Maiden formulates the act of reading specifically as looking at the physical book, and she emphasizes the necessity for the Dreamer to read, or look, "ryztwysly." Simply reading the words is merely another way of looking at, rather than into, the material, and is therefore not enough; he must interpret the words correctly by seeing into the text. This exhortation to read allegorically rather than literally, that is, to follow the spirit--rather than the letter--of the Bible, is crucial: the material confines of the book conceal a spiritual message which must be

extracted.

The Pearl-Maiden goes on to explain that not only must the Dreamer learn to identify the spiritual message within the physical text of the Bible, but that, given the proper perspective, he should also be able to look deeply and see her for what she truly is, not his lost Pearl, but rather a Bride of the Lamb of God, one of the 144,000 Virgins residing in the New Jerusalem. While at this point the reader knows that the Maiden is no longer a corporeal being, the Dreamer has yet to perceive her this way, since he still allows surface appearances to dictate his vision. Thus, until the Dreamer learns to see the Maiden as she truly is--a Bride of the Lamb of God--not only is he unable to see the spiritual possibilities inherent in material entities, but he even perceives wholly spiritual beings in wholly corporeal terms.

These two lessons--that he can use his vision both to read into texts and see into forms--merge in stanza section 15, the six-stanza section. Here, the Maiden advises the Dreamer to look into the Bible, specifically John's Apocalypse, to prove to him that what she is telling him about herself as one of the 144,000 virgins is true. She forces him to implement his newly acquired skill of reading into the text of the Bible to help him reach his next conclusion about her spiritual identity:

Lest les þou leue my talle farande,  
 In Appocalyppece is wryten in wro:  
 "I seghe," says John, "þe Loumbe Hym stande  
 On þe mount of Syon ful þryuen and þro,  
 And wyth Hym maydennez an hundreþe þowsande,  
 And fowre and forty þowsande mo."

(865-70)

Lest you should believe my splendid story false,  
 In [the] Apocalypse [it] is written in a passage.  
 "I saw," says John, "the Lamb himself standing  
 On the mount of Sion, very noble and steadfast,  
 And with him virgins, a hundred thousand,  
 And four and forty thousand more."

After this exhortation in stanza 73 that he must read the Apocalypse properly in order for him to properly perceive her, not as his Pearl, but as a Bride of the Lamb, the Dreamer, in stanza 76 (the last stanza in section 15), for the first time in the poem, is finally able to look past her appearance and focus on her spiritual perfection: At this point he becomes aware that she has been "to Krystez chambre...ichose" ("chosen for Christ's bridal chamber" [904]). Thus, stanza 76 represents a reversal in the Dreamer's perspective. No longer seeing everything as existing purely on the material plane, he is finally able to see that there is a spiritual component to the world. And while he has yet to come to the conclusion that his own form is also a vessel for such spirituality, this important first visual penetration into the spiritual, this movement from mere sight to real insight, occurs here, tellingly, in the extra stanza, the point at which the poem's materiality is most evident.

This stanza is a major turning point in the poem, not only because in it the Dreamer first makes known his newly realized awareness of the spiritual plane--such awareness being manifested in his dual accomplishments of seeing into the spiritual nature of both the Bible and the Pearl-Maiden--but also because stanza 76 is the spot where the Dreamer asks the favor, which, when granted, will ultimately lead to his realization that spiritual perfection can be found even within his own corporeal form. He implores the

Maiden, "let my bone vayl neuerþelese" ("let my plea avail, nevertheless" [912]), and in the following pentad, section 16, reveals his request to see the New Jerusalem.

In section 16, he asks the Maiden to show him the exact location--"þat myry mote" ("that excellent city" [936])<sup>13</sup>--of Jerusalem. The lesson has been learned: the Dreamer recognizes that he must locate the physical before he can extract the spiritual from it. In this instance, he focuses upon a physical location, a "mote," in order to test his vision. When the Maiden finally agrees to "vnhyde" ("reveal" [973]) the city, the Dreamer, now initiated in the art of seeing into the spiritual nature of material things, easily pierces with his gaze the material components of the city. He sees through the "beryl cler" (1011), the "jasporye, as glas" (1019), the "stretez of golde as glasse al bare" ("streets of gold, like glass, all clear" [1025]); he tells us that his vision penetrates "þur3 wo3e and won" ("through wall and city" [1049]), until his gaze rests on "Godez Self" (1054). The Dreamer, perceiving that God Himself lies at the very center of the New Jerusalem, recognizes once again that spiritual perfection is indeed contained within the material realm.

By the end of the poem, the now physically and spiritually roused Dreamer, adept at this point in looking--and reading--into the physical manifestations of God's love, has no trouble perceiving Christ Himself in the communion "bred and wyn" (1209).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps more importantly, though, at this point the Dreamer is able to look into himself, and observe that just as Christ resides within the material forms of bread and wine, so too does God reside within the Dreamer's own base, corporeal form. When perceived within a

spiritual context, he is not "mokke and mul" ("dirt and dust" [905]) as he believes in stanza 76, but one of many "precious perlez vnto [God's] pay" ("precious pearls to [God's] liking" [1212]). Like the Pearl-Maiden herself, the Dreamer is a potential Bride of the Lamb.

Just as the Dreamer is asked by the Maiden to see into the nature of material things in order to understand their true spiritual value, so too is the reader asked to look into the true nature of the physical poem--nowhere more appropriately manifested than in the extra stanza, the grain of sand in the oyster--in order to glean from the poem its larger spiritual message. The Dreamer must ultimately discover the spiritual, not merely in wholly spiritual entities, such as the Pearl-Maiden, nor even in materially perfect objects, such as the New Jerusalem, but more importantly, he must discover the spiritual that resides within the materially flawed, which category includes his own corporeal condition. The reader must similarly look into the materially flawed, in this case, the materially flawed poem itself, in order to perceive the spiritual perfection within. Thus, the stanza's materiality--its actual physical presence on the page--like the Book of Apocalypse, or the spot upon which the New Jerusalem stands, or the communion bread and wine, or the Dreamer himself, is a tangible focal point within which spiritual significance is simultaneously concealed and revealed. The stanza operates as a structural manifestation of the idea that there is an opportunity to locate the spiritual perfection within any physical entity, as long as the reader is willing to use spiritual insight rather than mere physical

sight. The Pearl's structure is developed and manipulated to inform its themes; as Sylvia Tomasch puts it, in the Pearl,

theme and structure finally appear as aspects of the same truth, facets of one whole.... The structure of Pearl, in its concatenation, stanza form and number, framework, circularity, and manifold repetitions of words and phrases, serves to lead the reader through a series of images and a sequence of ideas to an understanding of the place of this work within an overall scheme that the poet has not so much imagined as imitated. As self-conscious readers discovering the meaning of the poem in its structure, we become collaborators with the poet in his creation.<sup>15</sup>

While many critics have spoken eloquently about the connection of the poem's themes to its structure, this specific relationship, that the extra stanza functions as a structural indication of hidden spiritual perfection, has yet to be addressed. I believe a close contextual examination of the stanza and its place, not only in the stanza section but also in the larger framework of the poem, should demonstrate that the general correlation between theme and structure in Pearl is correctly extended to our understanding of the extra stanza and its role.

The fact that the structural manifestation of the poem's major themes properly extends to an interpretation of the extra stanza is alluded to throughout the entire six-stanza section. One of the section's pervasive messages, for example, is the notion that material increase cannot only do no harm to the spiritual, but it can only increase spiritual joy. This idea is developed thematically by the Pearl-Maiden's explanation of her situation as one of 144,000 Brides of the Lamb of God. She begins her explanation of her circumstances by assuring the Dreamer that there are presently 144,000 Virgins in the

New Jerusalem, the full complement mentioned in the Apocalypse:

De Lambes vyuez in blysse we bene,  
A hondred and forty þowsande flot,  
As in þe Apocalyppez hit is sene.

(785-787)

We are the Lamb's wives of renown  
A hundred and forty thousand in company,  
As it is seen in the Apocalypse.

Paradoxically, they are not waiting for more Brides to complete their ranks, but neither has the New Jerusalem been closed to worthy Brides. Indeed, the Maiden shows her regret that there are not even more new Virgins to join them. Extra souls will not add to-- nor will fewer souls detract from--the 144,000 virgins already in the New Jerusalem:

Forþy vche saule þat hade neuer teche  
Is to þat Lombe a worthyly wyf,  
And þaz vch day a store He feche...  
In compayny gret our luf con þryf,  
In honour more and neuer þe lesse.

(845-47; 851-52)

Therefore, each soul who never had guilt  
Is a worthy wife for that Lamb,  
And though every day he gathers a group...  
In [a] large company, our love does flourish  
With more honor, and never the less.

Here the Maiden assures the Dreamer that newly arrived Virgins do not create a glut, but rather add to the greater glory of all without adding to their prescribed number. New Brides will simply be assimilated into the constant 144,000 already there. These sentiments, that more is better but not really more, are particularly suited to a stanza

section with more than the usual five stanzas, since, if we are to extend the theme of material increase resulting in a spiritual constant to the poem's structure at this point, the message is clear: while there is an extra stanza in the physical sense, such material increase does not mar the stanza's, the stanza section's, or the poem's, spiritual perfection. Indeed, if we are to take the Maiden at her word--"þe mo þe myryer" ("the more the merrier" [850]), the extra stanza should increase our joy rather than diminish it; and if one extra soul will not cause a spiritual contamination to the 144,000 Brides, how can one extra stanza taint the spiritual perfection of the poem?

Besides this central theme, more subtle signals in the section imply that the Pearl-Poet is playing with structure here. The section's ambiguous linkword, "neuerþelese" (spelled variously in the section as "neuer þe lesse" [852], "neuer þe les" [864, 876, 888, 900], and "neuerþelese" [912]), helps develop the paradox of material increase translating into spiritual constancy. The term "neuerþelese" implies simultaneously both the inability to diminish and the prospect of increase: There can "neuer" be "lese," but this does not preempt the possibility that "more" is acceptable, even desirable, since "neuerþelese," as a conjunctive adverb, suggests that more will be admitted, at least verbally. Line 852 plays with this idea: "In honour more and neuer þe lesse." The linkword "neuerþelese" is used throughout the stanza section to signal the prospect, even inevitability, of addition to the brides of God, but more importantly, the term is used to stress the point that such increase is not truly seen as a numerical, material one, but a spiritual increase in the greater glory and honor of God and His Brides. By the same token, if we are to extend the argument to



the location of the extra stanza itself, we are alerted to its physical excessiveness--this stanza section certainly has no fewer, or "never less," stanzas than the other 19 sections--but we are asked to question what such physical excess really means to the possibility of spiritual perfection. In effect, the Maiden teaches that what is to be rewarded is not the mere ability to add or count--whether it be Virgins or stanzas--but rather, the ability to look past, or into, the numbers and see the larger message of spiritual completeness.

Until one has learned to see into the poem, and more specifically into the extra stanza, with a spiritual intent, simply focusing upon the text of Pearl as it manifests itself on the page is apt to lead the reader to a material, and therefore faulty, reading. Simply raising the numerical question, that is, focusing upon and lending credence to the importance of numbers, without first understanding the greater purpose material objects serve (as spiritual focal points), may itself lead the uninitiated reader toward a material, and therefore flawed, reading of the extra stanza, and thus of the poem itself. The Pearl-Maiden's ambiguous language regarding this numerical perspective further clouds the issue for the literal reader. Early in the stanza section, she tells the Dreamer that God brings "a store" (847) each day, and she expresses her wish that "vchon enle we wolde were fyf" ("we would wish each single one were five" [849]). While the passage does not explicitly state that this "store" consists of new Brides en route to the New Jerusalem, the spiritually-minded reader understands the implication. Thus, the Pearl-Maiden's wish that "vchon enle we wolde were fyf" merely emphasizes the idea that the addition of more souls would simply add to the greater glory and joy of God. From a structural

perspective, however, this statement, asserted at the beginning of a six-stanza section in an otherwise regular, five-stanza per section poem, seems to lament the structural aberration in progress. The materially-minded reader is thereby forewarned of the structural imperfection, since the ambiguity of "vchon" could refer to the individual stanza sections themselves. Thus, "vchon enle" could suggest the desire for structural perfection and a restriction of each of Pearl's twenty sections to only five stanzas per section.

While the rest of the section may verbally hint at the impending physical excrescence and its ramifications, the final stanza in the section, stanza 76, offers us a point upon which to contemplate the notion of hidden spirituality:

"Neuer þe les let be my þonc,"  
 Quoth I, "my perle þaz I appose;  
 I schulde not tempte þy wyt so wlonc,  
 To Krystez chambre þat art ichose.  
 I am bot mokke and mul among,  
 And þou so ryche a reken rose,  
 And bydez here by þys blysfyl bonc  
 Per lyuez lyste may neuer lose.  
 Now, hynde, þat symplenesse conez enclose,  
 I wolde þe aske a þynge expresse,  
 And þaz I be bustwys as a bose,  
 Let my bone vayl neuerþelese."

(901-12)

"Never the less let my thanks be,"  
 Said I, "my pearl, though I inquire.  
 I should not try your intelligence so superb;  
 You have been chosen for Christ's bridal chamber.  
 I am but dirt and dust together,  
 And you [are] so noble, a beautiful rose;  
 And [you] dwell here by this delightful shore,  
 Where life's pleasures can never fade.  
 Now, gracious damsel, in whom simplicity does reside,  
 I would ask you a thing directly,

And though I may be boisterous, like a blast of wind,  
Let my plea avail, nevertheless."

At this juncture in the poem, the Dreamer can only perceive his material baseness and the Maiden's spiritual perfection: "I am bot mokke and mul among, / And þou so ryche a reken rose" (905-6). The Maiden has succeeded in instructing him, as the poem attempts to instruct the reader, to extract the spiritual from the material, but he has yet to learn that all corporeal forms--including his own--conceal the possibility for spiritual perfection. It should be emphasized that the Dreamer first becomes aware of the world's spiritual component in stanza 76 itself, the very point at which the poem physically "sticks out," and thus the poem's most conspicuous point of textual physicality. Just as the Dreamer's body keeps him from seeing his own spiritual perfectibility, so too does the physical prominence of the extra stanza keep the unenlightened reader from immediately seeing the spiritual perfection in the poem. If looked at in purely physical terms, the stanza, as the Dreamer himself, may appear to the uninitiated reader as nothing more than "mokke and mul," ruining the "ryche [and] reken rose" of the otherwise structurally perfect poem. While the theme of discovering spiritual perfection within the physical body resurfaces at critical points in the Dreamer's own education, it is at this point in the text--upon encountering the physical realities of an extra stanza--that the reader can also personally wrestle with the issue. It is an interesting paradox, though, that so many critics, having accepted a basic premise of the poem--that spiritual perfection can lie within flawed material forms--have been unable, when challenged with the poem's own material flaws, to

see the perfection within the poem itself.

This structural manifestation of the poem's theme of the physical both concealing and revealing the spiritual is nowhere better expressed than in the final line of stanza 76. Here, the Dreamer asks the Maiden: "Let my bone vayl neuerþeese" ("Let my plea avail, nevertheless"<sup>16</sup> or "Let my prayer avail nevertheless"<sup>17</sup>). The favor, finally asked in section 16, is to see the exact spot the New Jerusalem stands upon, but the phrase which truly begins this request, "let my bone vayl neuerþeese," the last line of the last stanza of section 15, is, I believe, worth a closer examination. This passage offers a multivalent interpretation, one material, the other spiritual, which enforces the idea that the poem's structure mirrors its theme, and that we are to read stanza section 15 not as a physical flaw but as a material focal point from which we can explore the poem's spiritual message.

While the plea is ostensibly a simple request to see the New Jerusalem--something which will hopefully lead the Dreamer to a deeper understanding of how seeing the physical world can guide the spiritually interpretive viewer to perceive the spiritual within--I would argue that the plea does much more than this. Besides requesting assistance to see the spiritual within the physical, the words acknowledge that the Dreamer's physical preoccupation is interfering with his ability to see spiritual perfection in the first place. For the words themselves offer a duality of meaning that at once both thwarts and facilitates the Dreamer's attempt to break the bonds of the corporeal world.

The Dreamer here asks that his spiritual prayer ("bone") have power, or be

successful ("vayl"), but with these same words, he also suggests--that his physical being and symbol of his mortality ("bone")<sup>18</sup> continues to conceal, or veil ("vayl") his ability to see the spiritual perfection which resides within him. Contemporary metonymic use of the term "bone" to denote the body, or the material self in general, is widespread, as in the common phrases "bone and blood" and "flesh and bone."<sup>19</sup> Just as his own physical presence conceals his spiritual possibilities, so too does the material meaning of the phrase "let my bone vayl" ("let my body hide") enclose its spiritual ramifications. Thus, to fully explore the duality of the request: The Dreamer asks that the Maiden let his request to see the New Jerusalem avail, but he simultaneously informs us that his body will hinder his efforts and veil spirituality from his eyes. Not only is there a double meaning here, but the Dreamer's physical preoccupation can be said to conceal--or cover--his attempt to ask a favor which he hopes will lead him to greater spiritual understanding, just as the poem's theme of spirituality is covered by, or contained within, the physical objects and symbols that play throughout the poem.

What, however, allows for this dual interpretation of the words "bone" and "vayl"? First, given the Pearl-Poet's frequent use of wordplay,<sup>20</sup> such an interpretation is certainly in keeping with the poet's technique of using plays on words to expand meaning in the poem. The one issue which must be dealt with, though, is whether or not the ambiguities I suggest would be perceived as ambiguous to contemporary readers of the poem. My research leads me to believe that such an interpretation is not only possible, but probable.

First, let me deal with the word "bone." While "boon" ("prayer" or "plea") is

perhaps the word's primary meaning, there are many contemporary instances of the word being used to indicate a physical bone. Since the poem's dialect is Northwest Midland, and since the manuscript itself was written no later than 1400, other texts originating from that area and time frame are most appropriate for comparison. The Harley Lyrics,<sup>21</sup> written in a West Midland dialect, and dated somewhere between 1314-25, contains, for our purposes, the most intriguing use of the word "bone" with perhaps the same sort of double meaning I argue the Pearl-Poet uses.<sup>22</sup>

Lyric 15, "Suede Iesu, King of Blysse" (51-52), speaks at length of the physical manifestations of God's love and sacrifice, and how these are mirrored in the physical, bodily sacrifice of the narrator. Its themes closely parallel those of Pearl, and, as I will argue, like Pearl it puns on "bone." The poem's controlling theme, though, deals with the physical manifestation of spirituality: Christ has planted the root of the tree of faith in the speaker's heart, and the speaker is waiting for that root to spring--waiting for the spiritual seed in his heart to blossom into a tree. The narrator speaks not just of how Jesus' love has pierced his heart, but compares this piercing to the piercing of Jesus' own heart, His flowing blood redeeming the speaker:

Suede Iesu, Louerd god,  
 þou me bohtest wiþ þi blod;  
 out of þin huerte orn þe flod.

(37-39)

Sweet Jesus, Lord God,  
 You bought me with your blood;  
 Out of your heart ran the flood.<sup>23</sup>

Once he has properly thanked Jesus for His great sacrifice, the speaker goes on to seek God's intervention:

y preye þe þou here my bene....  
þat my bone be nou sene (emphasis mine). (42; 44)

I pray thee [that] you hear my prayer....  
That my prayer be now seen.

While the conventional meaning, translated above, must not be dismissed, we should consider two interesting points about these lines: First, the speaker specifically uses two variants--"bene" and "bone"--to mean prayer, and second, one does not usually speak of a prayer being seen. In light of the poem's theme that physical wounding is a necessary precursor to gaining salvation, I would argue that a double meaning is intended. The narrator talks about exposing his heart to Jesus, whose own heart was exposed in order to redeem mankind. Thus, while the speaker asks that his prayer for redemption be answered, he does so with the assumption that such request may not be granted without first, or in this instance, simultaneously, piercing his flesh--exposing his bone ("my bone be nou sene")--in order to get to the spirit that lies within. Again, as in the Pearl, the spiritual resides within the physical; the heart resides within the body and the body must be pierced in order to extricate the spirituality residing within.

While the above example is an interpretation of what I perceive as an intentional ambiguity in the text, there are several other contemporary usages of "bone" which can have no other meaning than the physical one, and so support my suggestion that in Pearl,

"bone" may also carry this meaning. In The Siege of Jerusalem,<sup>24</sup> written in the last decade of the fourteenth century, and probably originating in the Northwest Midlands as well (although there are seven extant copies ranging from the North to the East Midlands), there are several uses of the spelling "bone." One of these uses clearly means "prayer"-- "bayne me my bone, blessed lord" ("assist my prayer, blessed Lord" [181])--while another unquestionably refers to the physical bone. The passage describes Vespasianus's wounding by

an hande-darte,  
 Þat boot þrow þe bote & þe bone nayled  
 Of þe frytted fote in þe folis syde. (812-14)

a hand-dart,  
 That bit through the boot and nailed the bone  
 Of the wounded foot to the foal's side.

This conflation of the term within the same text suggests that at the time there was, at the very least, enough confusion surrounding the similarities of the words to permit a poet interested in producing such a pun to be reasonably comfortable in the knowledge that such wordplay would be understood by his more subtle readers.<sup>25</sup>

Not only does contemporary usage seem ambiguous enough to allow for the possibility that the Pearl-Poet's audience would have easily understood the pun on the word "bone," but the poet himself, from all we know about his manipulation of the language, seems an ideal candidate for using a pun that fits so well into his larger scheme. In fact, the word "bone" appears twice more in Pearl, and both instances may be worth



examining within the context of linguistic ambiguity. The second usage follows the first almost immediately, in stanza 77, when the Dreamer makes his request known:

Neuerpelese, cler, I yow bycalle,  
 If 3e con se hyt be to done;  
 As þou art gloryous wythouten galle,  
 Withnay þou neuer my ruful bone. (913-16)

Nevertheless, I call upon you clearly,  
 If you can see it be revealed;  
 Since you are glorious, without rancor,  
 You would never refuse my compassionate request.

Here the text's primary meaning illustrates the Dreamer's request that the Maiden, thanks to her perfection, should be merciful and not reject his piteous prayer to see the New Jerusalem. However, the passage takes on added potency when we read the word "bone" with the duality of meaning I suggest: The Dreamer is aware that his physicality--both his corporeal, flawed form and his material perspective--holds him back, and he does not merely ask that his request be granted, but also pleads with the Maiden not to reject his body; he wants her to take him, blemished and unworthy as he is, to see the New Jerusalem.

The poem's final usage of the term "bone" offers an odd juxtaposition of the word against a corporeal background:

For I dar say with conciens sure,  
 Hade bodyly burne abiden þat bone,  
 Þaz alle clerkez hym hade in cure,  
 His lyf wer loste anvnder mone. (1089-92)

Therefore, I dare say with positive conviction,  
 Had [a] mortal man experienced that revelation,  
 Though all [the] clerks took him in for treatment,  
 His life would be lost beneath [the] moon.

The poet's use of the term "bodyly" throws a peculiarly physical light upon the word "bone" here. That a man might bodily endure a "bone" certainly gives the term "bone" an unavoidable physical association. This symbolic placement of the word "bone" within the body, as it were, coupled with its ambiguous use discussed earlier, enables the reader to imbue the term with the duality of meaning I suggest, and see the "bone" paradoxically as both a spiritual prayer and a physical bone. The Dreamer still cannot help identifying the body's role in prayer and salvation, nor, perhaps, should he. The "bone" as something which is somehow within the body not only connects the physical sense of bone to the spiritual sense of prayer the word entails, but it also connects to the major theme the poet is trying to develop by using such wordplay. The prayer, the spiritual, is within, and must be extracted by pondering the physical. However, the reader must not forget the possibility of being led astray: there is also the physical within the physical, the bone inside the body, the physical pearl within the shell, which may distract the Dreamer, or the reader, from the spiritual.

Identifying the possible ambiguity of the term "vayl" is a good deal easier, since the Pearl manuscript itself, Cotton Nero A.x+4, uses the spelling "vayl-" to mean both "avail" and "veil."<sup>26</sup> Besides this cross-usage of the spelling "vayl-," the scribe also uses "awayl-" to mean "avail."<sup>27</sup> This more specific usage of a word which can only mean "avail," and

the concurrent use of a separate word with more ambiguous implications does not force us to read "vayl" here as intending a double meaning, but that there was a less ambiguous term available and not used certainly implies that a reader might realistically read such ambiguity into the line. The spelling "vayl-" is used interchangeably to mean "veil" and "avail" not only in the Pearl manuscript, but throughout the entire Middle English corpus.<sup>28</sup>

Stanza section 15 of Pearl, then, is more properly seen not as a flaw which proves human imperfection nor as a numerologically perfecting element, but as a physical focal-point wherein readers can discover the spiritual possibilities which lie within the stanza, just as the Dreamer uses physical bodies to help him focus not on their surface appearances, but on their inner spiritual beauty and perfection. In this pursuit, not only do the Dreamer's prayers avail while his bones veil, but so too do his bones avail (since it is through the physical that he becomes aware of the spiritual) and his prayers veil (they mask his physical preoccupation). Seen in that way, the stanza acts as a sort of physical irritant, a grain of sand encountered by the reader's eye and then his mind, one which the reader must ponder and look deeply into; in so doing, the reader begins, as does the Dreamer, to perceive the spiritual beauty which lies within the irritant itself. Only then can the reader, as the Dreamer does at the end of the poem, begin to use that perception of the spiritual perfection which lies within the materially flawed object, to coat the object itself, forming a spiritual Pearl out of baser matter. The possibility of spiritual perfection which

was once inside the physically flawed Dreamer, and inside the physically flawed poem, is finally tapped into, exposed for the spiritually aware reader to use.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most general studies of Pearl emphasize to some degree the importance of vision in the poem. However, for more detailed discussions concerning vision in Pearl, see Louis Blenkner, "The Theological Structure of Pearl," The Middle English Pearl, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1970) 220-71; Barbara Nolan, The Gothic Visionary Experience (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1977); Theodore Bogdanos, Pearl: Image of the Ineffable (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State Univ., 1983); John Finlayson, "Pearl: Landscape and Vision," Studies in Philology 71 (1974): 314-43; and Sarah Stanbury, Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1991) 12-41; and "Visions of Space: Acts of Perception in Pearl and in Some Late Medieval Illustrated Apocalypses," Mediaevalia 10 (1988): 133-158.

<sup>2</sup> In his History of English Literature (To Wiclif), trans. Horace M. Kennedy (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1889). Ten Brink sees perfection in the imperfect poem, but he does so by erroneously imposing upon it a structural perfection.

<sup>3</sup> While some earlier critics identify stanza 72, the second stanza in the section, as otiose, most recent critics, myself included, consider stanza 76 to be extra. See E. V. Gordon, Pearl (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953) 88; and Katherine L. Adam, The Anomalous Stanza of Pearl: Does it Disclose a Six-Hundred-Year-Old Secret? (Monograph: Fayetteville, 1976), for brief arguments about why stanza 76 may be considered to be the

extra one. In my estimation, the two main textual factors supporting stanza 76 as the extra one are the change in speaker from Pearl-Maiden to Dreamer and the inner circularity of the stanza implied by the linkword "neuer þe les" as the first word of the first line of the stanza and "neuerþelese" as the last word of the last line of the stanza--the only occurrence of this type of repetition in the section.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Osgood is the first critic to adopt Ten Brink's premise. In his Introduction to The Pearl: A Middle English Poem (Boston and London: D.C. Heath & Co., 1906), he indicates the desire to isolate--and the unwillingness to attempt to incorporate--the stanza (whichever stanza that may be) into the main text of the poem. He writes, "Ten Brink has suggested that one of these [stanzas] may be superfluous. I suspect the second (no. 72), whose inferiority is readily apparent....The stanza is, therefore, probably interpolated, or more likely was rejected in the original manuscript by the poet, but got copied into the line of succession of which the surviving manuscript comes" (xlvi, n.1). Also see Gordon, 88, for his explanation of stanza 72's extraneousness.

<sup>5</sup> C.O. Chapman, "Numerical Symbolism in Dante and the Pearl," Modern Language Notes 54 (1939): 256-59, basically initiates this critical school. Among the others who argue for the extra stanza's inclusion because of its numerically perfecting tendencies are Maren-Sofie Røstvig, "Numerical Composition in Pearl: A Theory," English Studies 48 (1967): 326-32; George Ovitt, "Numerical Composition in the Middle English Pearl," American Notes & Queries 18 (1979): 34-35; and Donald W. Fritz, "The

Pearl: The Sacredness of Numbers," American Benedictine Review 31 (1980): 314-34.

<sup>6</sup> P.M. Kean, "Numerical Composition in Pearl," Notes & Queries 12 (1965): 49-51.

<sup>7</sup> Kean's mathematical reasoning is this: The fact that there are 1212 stanzas allows us to multiply 12 by 12, which equals 144; 144 multiplied by 1000 (the number of universal perfection) equals 144,000, which is the number of Brides in the New Jerusalem.

<sup>8</sup> David Carlson, "Pearl's Imperfections," Studia Neophilologica 63 (1991): 63.

<sup>9</sup> John F. Crawford, The Pearl (San Francisco: Grabhorn-Hoyen, 1967) 118.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussions on this theme of the conflict between the poem's materiality and its spirituality, see A.C Spearing, The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970) 116; P.M. Kean, The Pearl: An Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967) 59-63; Cary Nelson, The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space (Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1973) 25-33; and Charles Moorman, "The Role of the Narrator in Pearl," The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays, ed. John Conley (South Bend: U of Notre Dame Press, 1970) 110-119.

<sup>11</sup> Pearl, The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1978) 167-172. All quotations from the text, unless otherwise noted, derive from this edition, hereafter Andrew & Waldron.

<sup>12</sup> All translations of the text, unless otherwise noted, are by William Vantuono, ed., Pearl, The Pearl Poems: An Omnibus Edition, Volume 1: Pearl and Cleanness (New

York: Garland, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> "Mote" here can signify more than just a city (literally "castle on a high hill")-- the word also means "spot," both a physical location and a blemish.

<sup>14</sup> The syntax of these lines makes it unclear whether the Dreamer sees Christ Himself or His "dere blessing" in the communion bread and wine, but most translators of the poem have interpreted them as emphasizing Christ's existence in these sacramental objects. Either way, however, I believe the general sense remains the same: the Dreamer once again sees the spiritual within the material.

<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Tomasch, "A Pearl Punnology," JEGP 88 (1989): 20.

<sup>16</sup> Vantuono, 912.

<sup>17</sup> Sister Mary Vincent Hillmann, The Pearl: Mediaeval Text with a Literal Translation and Interpretation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) 912.

<sup>18</sup> See Hans Kunrath, ed., The Middle English Dictionary (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1956) 1034-35, for the various contemporary meanings of "bone."

<sup>19</sup> Again, see The Middle English Dictionary 1034-35. Also, for an extensive index of the term "bone" in context, access the Chadwyck-Healey English Poetry Database at the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia. As of this writing, the http address is: <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/texts.html>

<sup>20</sup> For several perspectives on punning and wordplay in Pearl, see Tomasch; Louise Dunlap, "Vegetation Puns in Pearl," Mediaevalia 3 (1977): 173-88; and Morton Donner, "A Grammatical Perspective on Word Play in Pearl," Chaucer Review 22 (1988):



322-31, and "Word Play and Word Form in Pearl," Chaucer Review 24 (1989): 166-82.

<sup>21</sup> All quotations are from The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of MS. Harley 2253, ed. G.L. Brook (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1948; 3d ed. 1964).

<sup>22</sup> G.L. Brook, in the Introduction to The Harley Lyrics, suggests the possibility for wordplay (20-21), while Daniel J. Ransom, Poets at Play: Irony and Parody in The Harley Lyrics (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim, 1985) examines the wordplay in four of the manuscript's secular lyrics.

<sup>23</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations of this text are my own.

<sup>24</sup> Ed. E. Kölbing and Mabel Day (London: EETS, 1932). Again, all translations of this text are mine.

<sup>25</sup> There are several other contemporary examples wherein this spelling of "bone" denotes the physical bone. The Lincoln Thornton MS of Octovian, ed. Frances McSparran (London: EETS, 1986), also of Northern or Northern Midlands origin, but written perhaps as late as the second quarter of the fifteenth century, contains the phrase, "the childe hym hitt one þe schuldir bone" ("the child hit him on the shoulder bone" [891]). "Bone" is used interchangeably to mean physical bone and boon in Thomas of India, The Towneley Plays, ed. George England (London: EETS, 1897; rpt. 1907) 337-52: "Send vs, lord, thi blissid bone" (90), and "grope and fele flesh and bone" (98). Further, we find a comparable dual usage of the term in the Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 61 manuscript of Chaucer's Troilus & Criseyde (ca. 1400-25), reprinted in Troilus & Criseyde: A New Edition of "The Book of Troilus", ed. B.A. Windeatt (London:

Longman, 1984). In it, we find these two alternate usages: "an egle fethered whit as bone" (2.926), and "I naxe in guerdon but a bone" ("I do not ask [for anything] in reward except a favor" [5.594]). Translations in this note are my own.

<sup>26</sup> Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, speaks of "chalk-quyte vayles" (Andrew & Waldron 958), while Cleanness describes "vesselles...þat vayled in þe temple" ("vessels...that were effective in the temple" [Andrew & Waldron 1151]), and Saint Erkenwald, ed. Clifford Peterson (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1977) discusses "a vayne-glorie þat vayles so litelle" ("a pride that serves so little purpose [348]). My translations.

<sup>27</sup> Cleanness informs us that "no sprawlyng awayled" (Andrew & Waldron 408) those drowned in the Great Flood.

<sup>28</sup> Again, I would recommend the Chadwyck-Healey English Poetry Database as an extremely useful starting point here. Listed there are hundreds of contemporary examples of "vayl-" with the variations in meaning suggested here.

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