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MEDIEVAL CONCEPTIONS OF REASON AND THE MODES OF THOUGHT IN PIERS PLOWMAN

Michael David Gulliksson Peverett Ph.D. Thesis 1987

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to shed light on the related questions of how we should read *Piers Plowman* and of what kind of book its author was trying to write.

In the first chapter it is argued that feminine line-endings are an important feature of Langland's metre, and consideration is given to how they affect our reading of the verse. It is suggested that the verse demands a slow and meditative reading, and that Langland's text emerges as a list of items not easily related to each other; the reader is challenged to work out connexions and thus in a sense to compose his own poem.

The second chapter is an examination of the medieval conceptions and modes of thought that are associated with the word "reson". The term "reasonable" is later used to refer to these. In the last part of the chapter it is argued that Langland's aim is to make his readers seek salvation, and that he is aware of certain difficulties with the traditional, "reasonable" approaches of other moralists. His own book is "unreasonable"; its mixture of modes of thought, and hence of the thought-worlds they project, makes narrative consistency and definiteness of argument impossible.

In the rest of the thesis some of the juxtapositions between modes of thought are examined. The third chapter deals with "positive" juxtapositions, which create in the reader's mind a sense of satisfying, but nevertheless "unreasonable", illumination; the speech of Wit and the vision of the Passion and Crucifixion are discussed in detail. The fourth chapter deals with "negative" juxtapositions, which provoke a sense of bewilderment and dissatisfaction; discussion centres on Ymaginatiyf's speech in the C text, Need's speech, and the confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins.

MEDIEVAL CONCEPTIONS OF REASON AND THE MODES OF THOUGHT IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*

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DECLARATION

No portion of this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other university or institute of learning.

MEDIEVAL CONCEPTIONS OF REASON AND THE MODES OF THOUGHT IN PIERS PLOWMAN

by

Michael David Gulliksson Peverett

A Thesis submitted to the University of Durham in candidature
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

1987

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in memoriam

RUTH PEVERETT

(5th December 1897 - 10th September 1985)

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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago A.C. Spearing made the following observation about Langland criticism: "despite the great quantity of scholarly work that has been done on it (i.e. Piers Plowman), it appears that we are still at the stage of having to make up our minds what *kind* of poem it is."[1] This, I think, is still true. The great debates in Piers Plowman criticism - about multiple authorship, the significance of the Three Do's, exegetical readings, or the vexed question of "unity" - can all be seen as registering uncertainty on precisely this point. After Spearing wrote these words, the uncertainty took on a new form. Priscilla Martin presented it like this:

> Whatever their personal religious beliefs, critics have tended to align themselves as orthodox or agnostic readers of Piers Plowman. In contrast, however, to the apparently crude, anti-Catholic reading of Crowley's sixteenth-century edition, this has not resulted in ideologically simple Christian and non-Christian approaches. Rather, it has produced critics who see conflict in the poem and critics who deny it. The former argue from their impression of the texture of the poem and the conduct of its argument - an impression of confusion, changes of direction, lack of controlling form - to theological uncertainty and vexation of spirit in the author. The latter claim unity and coherence for the poem, usually by demonstrating that it can be fitted into the Christian schemes of faith and thought of its period."[2]

Martin's own book vigorously took up the "agnostic" position, and P.M. Kean's review is an equally forthright defence of the "Christian" position.[3] But most critics do not like to feel that they can be easily categorized, and since 1979 few have wished to pursue the discussion in these terms, which is not to say that it is resolved. John Norton-Smith has written the best recent book on Piers Plowman;[4] it is certainly neither "agnostic" nor "Christian", but it is as much preoccupied with Spearing's question as ever, although Norton-Smith's contribution is

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[1] A.C. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), p. 131. The first edition was published in 1964.

[2] Priscilla Martin, Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 32.

[3] It appears in the Review of English Studies, n.s. 32 (1981), pp. 202-04.

[4] John Norton-Smith, William Langland, Medieval and Renaissance Authors, 6 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983).

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exceptional, as I shall explain later.[1]

I am not sure, however, that Spearing expresses the problem in the most useful way. If we ask ourselves directly: "Well, what kind of a poem *is* *Piers Plowman*?" we are likely to start thinking about genres, and the results are not very helpful, as Elizabeth Salter, who made more progress with this approach than anyone else, has admitted.[2] But we can put it differently: What was Langland trying to do? How should we read *Piers Plowman*? If we have an opinion on any one of these questions, we have committed ourselves to opinions on the others, so I do not think that they are really distinct from each other. But the re-expressions have the virtue of disengaging a historical approach from a literary-critical approach. This thesis is predominantly concerned with the latter, and hence with the question about how *Piers Plowman* should be read.

I must confess that this re-expression is not entirely satisfactory. We do not usually decide what kind of reading we shall adopt before sitting down to a book; although Randall Jarrell had a nightmarish vision of someone saying "I'd just never *read* 'We are Seven' till I got So-and-So's analysis of it for Christmas!" It is not true, of course, that there is no variation in our readings. Our relationship with a poem does change, involuntarily. However, it remains recognizably the same poem, so there is continuity between the readings we make at different times. I do not think it is over-optimistic to suppose that the same continuity underlies the reading experiences of critics whose expressed views are in sharp conflict. The critical disagreement seems to be about which features of that reading experience should be attended to. In the passage I quoted from Priscilla Martin's book, it is made clear that the controversy is about salience. *Piers Plowman* may reflect traditional thinking, but does it matter? *Piers Plowman* may look chaotic, but should we make anything of it?[3]

---

[1] Cf. below, pp. 158-63.

[2] See Elizabeth Salter, *Fourteenth-Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 99-102.

[3] This argument is borrowed from "Literature in the Reader", an essay by Stanley Fish first published in 1970 and reprinted, with later articles, in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 21-67 (see pp. 51-52). The book charts Fish's descent into relativism; his increasing preoccupation with literary theory may have made that course inevitable, but I am not convinced that it is for the rest of us.

What matters more than everything else, I suggest, is what happens to us when we read; and what happens is a great deal more complicated than would appear from the few features that we subsequently recollect and come to think of as crucial. It follows from this that if we present a "reading" of Piers Plowman it ought to be as inclusive as possible, thus reflecting a little more accurately the reading experience that it purports to describe. The function of such a "reading" is to help fellow-readers to be less selective in their meditations on that experience; not to help us when we read, but to help us when we try to remember.

Obviously a "reading" of the whole of Piers Plowman along these lines would be impossibly laborious, and I have not attempted it here. Instead, I have selected a very few passages, usually short, and have tried to give them a degree of attention that is impossible when the whole text needs to be dealt with. But from these passages broader conclusions do emerge, as will become clear.

This is hardly an original way to tackle a long poem; yet, surprisingly, it does not seem to have attracted students of Piers Plowman very often. Most of the great debates mentioned previously concern the poem as a whole. One must stand back from it in order to form an opinion about unity, about incoherent structure, or about the significance of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. And although concentration on short passages is, of course, frequent, what concerns the writer is usually something other than the reading experience itself. Consequently I am in the fortunate position of rarely having to disagree with other critics; we do not seem to be arguing about the same things.

Most of the third and fourth chapters are devoted to the kind of close analysis that has so far been discussed. In the first chapter I reconsider Langland's metre and try to draw some general conclusions about the kind of reading that his verse demands. Langland's verse has a very distinctive flavour and it is with aspects of this "Langlandian" quality that I am concerned here. The second chapter is preparatory too. It is an attempt to convey what I mean by the term "reasonable", which I use freely in the later chapters. It has been necessary to develop several specialized terms in order to present my argument; the most important ones are "reasonable", "juxtaposition" (subdivided into positive and negative), and "mode of thought". None of these terms is used naturally; the natural use is too vague. The meanings that I give them are relatively precise, but not always easy to define. "Reasonable" in particular does not have a meaning that can be communicated in that way; it describes a collection of modes of thought - something that our language does not cope with very well - and since I cannot explain the term I have had to use the slower method of familiarizing the reader with it. When, later on, the reader encounters the word "reasonable", he will not be able to define it, but he will be able to understand it, if only as "the kind of thing that I was reading about in Chapter Two".

Although I concentrate on the B text of *Piers Plowman*, I also discuss passages from other texts. Use is made of the following editions:

Rigg-Brewer	A.G. Rigg and Charlotte Brewer, eds., *Piers Plowman: The Z Version* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983).
Kane	George Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1960).
Schmidt	A.V.C. Schmidt, ed., *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text* (London: Dent, 1978).
Kane-Donaldson	George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1975).
Bennett	J.A.W. Bennett, ed., *Langland: Piers Plowman. The Prologue and Passus I-VII of the B Text as found in Bodleian MS. Laud Misc. 581* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).
Pearsall	Derek Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman by William Langland: An Edition of the C-text* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).

Where line numbers are given, they refer to Rigg-Brewer (Z), Kane (A), Schmidt (B), and Pearsall (C). The quotations also come from these editions, although occasionally an archetypal reading is restored in place of editorial conjecture. This is always pointed out in a footnote.

There is a more far-reaching modification: all quotations of Middle English verse are unpunctuated. As my thesis is largely concerned with the reader's response to the verse, it seemed essential to omit punctuation, which is there precisely to guide the reader in his response.

This makes the verse a little harder to read, but at least one can be certain that the response one makes is one's own. To punctuate is to present an interpretation sometimes of content and always of verse movement; this is a legitimate editorial practice but it would beg questions in the present context.

I accept the Rigg-Brewer hypothesis that the Z text was written by Langland and pre-dates the A, B and C texts. This has been much discussed and cannot yet be regarded as established, but I shall not defend it here as this would only mean repeating what has been said before.[1] Those who reject the hypothesis will, as a consequence, regard some of the statements in this thesis as untrue, but they will not find that the main lines of argument are affected. Where I contrast one of the other texts with Z, they will see this as a contrast between Langland and a scribal redactor rather than between an older Langland and a younger Langland; less interesting, but no less valid.

Reference is sometimes made to these modern translations of the B text of *Piers Plowman*:

Goodridge	J.F. Goodridge, trans., *Piers the Ploughman*, Revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).
Tiller	Terence Tiller, trans., *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1981).

Chaucer references are to F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (1957; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1966). For the *Gawain*-poet I use Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). Quotations are from these editions but, as noted above, all punctuation has been removed. Biblical quotations are taken from the Vulgate and references are to this version, not the King James Version.

---

[1] All the most telling arguments are presented by Rigg-Brewer in their edition. These have been supplemented by Charlotte Brewer, "Z and the A- B- and C-Texts of *Piers Plowman*," *Medium AEvum*, 53 (1984), 194-219; Hugh White, "The Z-Text: A New Version of *Piers Plowman*?" *Medium AEvum*, 53 (1984), 290-95; A.V.C. Schmidt, "The Authenticity of the Z-Text of *Piers Plowman*: A Metrical Examination," *Medium AEvum*, 53 (1984), 295-300; M.L. Samuels, "Langland's Dialect," *Medium AEvum*, 54 (1985), 232-47; Hoyt N. Duggan, "The Authenticity of the Z-Text of *Piers Plowman*: Further Notes on Metrical Evidence," *Medium AEvum*, 56 (1987), 25-45. George Kane argues against the hypothesis in "The 'Z Version' of *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum*, 60 (1985), 910-30.

Chapter One

LANGLAND'S FEMININE ENDINGS

I

It was long ago observed by Dr. Mabel Day that in the *Parlement of the Thre Ages* and in *Winner and Waster* the authors showed "a distinct preference for feminine endings";[1] that is, for lines that end with an unstressed syllable, producing a repetitive closing rhythm of / ∪ or occasionally / ∪ ∪ . It does not seem to have been equally recognized, or at least not continuously, that the same preference is observable in other alliterative poems, and that in at least some (including the various versions of *Piers Plowman* and, probably, the *Morte Arthure*) a feminine ending to a line can be regarded as requisite, one of the rules of the metre.

The reader who wishes to test this contention for himself will no doubt turn to an edition of *Piers Plowman* and examine the line-endings there presented to him. The evidence is clearest in the Schmidt and Kane-Donaldson editions of the B text, because the scribe of Ms Trinity College, Cambridge B.15.17 (W), chosen by the editors for his regular spelling, also shows himself aware of the "feminine ending rule" and is thus generally careful to include the necessary final "-e"s where metre demands their presence. This, admittedly, is to assume what is yet to be demonstrated; and it should be added at once that the scribe's spelling habits are not very decisive for our purposes. He does indeed display a noticeable tendency to add a final "-e" at the end of a line, but he does not always add it where the rule requires it:

> And though justices juggen hire to be joyned with Fals
> (B II 137; but we find "False" at
> the end of B II 4,54,151 etc.)
>
> With bedeles and baillies brought bifore the Kyng
> (B III 2; but "Kynge" at the end of
> B III 170,188, B IV 98)
>
> Thanne weex that sherewe in wanhope and wolde han hanged hymself
> (B V 279, but "hymselve" as direct
> object at the end of B XIII 312,
> "hymselven" at B XI 387).

---

[1] Quoted in M.Y. Offord, ed., *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, EETS, O.S. 246 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. xxix.

He also adds final "-e" where the rule does not require it (because the preceding syllable is unstressed anyway):

> Of scornyng and of scoffyng and of unskilful berynge
> (B XIII 276)
>
> Ootherwise than he hath with herte or sighte shewynge
> (B XIII 278).

The scribe's general tendency to add "-e" at the end of a line could be explained as mere ornamentation, a sort of final flourish. So it is the words, not the spelling, that concern us.

Some familiar difficulties arise when we start to assess the evidence. Inevitably the problem of textual unreliability becomes more serious as our scrutiny of the text becomes more minute. Then there is the question of how many exceptions to a rule we shall allow before deciding that there is no rule at all; for Langland does not seem to find any rule so binding that it can never be broken. Fortunately the "feminine ending rule" seems to be kept with unusual strictness, so this question is not too pressing. Later I shall give an example of where I think Langland does break the rule. For the moment I shall merely draw attention to some lines in which Langland seems to break the rule but does not:

> But Crist kyngene kyng knyghted ten
> (B I 105)
>
> Peter quod a Plowman and putte forth his hed
> (B V 537)
>
> A Bretoner a braggere abosted Piers als
> (B VI 154)
>
> Haveth the same absolucioun that sent was to Piers
> (B VII 63).

In all these cases we are fortunate in being able to compare the reading of the Z manuscript, written in a dialect remarkably close to the poet's but by a scribe who is not very scrupulous about the addition of final "-e"s for purely metrical (or, it may be, ornamental) reasons.[1] If we do this, we find that the pronunciation of the final word should be disyllabic in all these lines: "tene" (Z I 51), "heued" (Z VI 13), "alse" (Z VII 138), "Perus" (Z VIII 67).

---

[1] On the dialect of the Z text see M.L. Samuels, "Langland's Dialect," Medium AEvum, 54(1985),232-247.

Here the evidence from Z is reassuring. Sometimes however we must simply accept what may seem the less likely stress-pattern, if the "feminine ending rule" is to hold:

> This shewynge shrift quod Repentaunce shal be meryt to the
> (B V 379)
>
> Bothe foryyve and foryete and yit bidde for us
> (B XVII 245)
>
> The water witnesseth that he was God for he wente on it
> (B XVIII 241).

In these lines the stress must, apparently, fall on the preposition.[1]

But the most far-reaching concession we are required to make is the pronunciation of final "-e" at line-ends, not only where there is historical precedent for it but even where the pronunciation seems clearly artificial (e.g. "hym that ten mnames haddë" (B VI 242)). Modern readers are not much attracted by special linguistic conventions in poetry, and I am sure that many readers of *Piers*, including myself, have been apt to take advantage of Langland's apparently licentious metre and to pronounce his words as nearly as possible as if they were modern English. Hence it is tempting to conclude that the evidence for the "feminine ending rule" is indecisive, and to reflect that almost any line can be given a feminine ending if we are permitted to add (and pronounce) "-e" whenever it suits.

And certainly if there are *no* words or phrases with which Langland could not end a line while still keeping the rule, then there can be no decisive evidence. But conversely, if we can identify common words or phrases that cannot be so positioned, decisive evidence is close at hand. Now such identification can only come from the text itself, and this may seem to make the argument circular. If I am allowed to say that what I do not find at line-ends cannot be pronounced in the desired way, but anything I do find at a line-end can be so pronounced, is there any force in the conclusion? The answer is yes, because if the "feminine ending rule" does not operate, then presumably the distribution of common words within the line ought to show no otherwise unaccountable variation.[1]

---

[1] Compare Chaucer's rhyming of "to me" with "Rome" (*CT* A 671-72), or "fro ye" with "Troye" (*TC* I 2,5).

But there is such variation. One instance of it I reported in an earlier paper without then being able to explain it, namely the absence of "quod he" or "quod y" from the end of lines, and the use instead of a less favoured expression, such as "he seide".[2] More decisively we can examine the usage of the words "Crist" and "Jesu(s)". Apparently Langland does not consider "Cristë" an acceptable pronunciation, and it will perhaps be conceded that if the monosyllabic "Crist" appeared at the end of a line, it would almost inevitably be a stressed syllable. Hence if Langland is indeed adhering to the rule, we should expect "Crist" to appear rarely, if at all, in final position. "Jesu(s)" on the other hand should appear frequently in final position. And so it proves. "Crist" is used more than a hundred times in the B text, but not once at the end of a line; "Jesu(s)" is used more than fifty times, eighteen times at the end of a line.[3]

Again, we can examine the use of the word "God". This appears some 225 times in Schmidt's edition of the B text; on three occasions only it appears at the end of a line (B IX 154, B XV 393, B XVI 224). Furthermore, the first two of these appearances are due to modern editorial reconstruction that most readers will want to reject anyway (Schmidt is one of the minority who accept the Kane-Donaldson thesis that Langland did not permit the a a x a alliterative pattern, and he reconstructs accordingly). There remains one really exceptional line, which I am prepared to interpret as such; a deliberate breaking of the rule for rhetorical effect. It concludes Abraham's account of the Trinity:

> Which is the Holy Goost of alle and alle is but o God
> (B XVI 224).

---

[1] One must be very wary here. For example one must obviously avoid words like "at" or "and" which are hardly likely to appear often in final position, but will be very common elsewhere. In these cases, and in others that are much less obvious, statistical peculiarities prove the wrong thing.

[2] "'Quod' and 'Seide' in Piers Plowman," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 87(1986), 117-27. Cf. p. 119.

[3] "Crist" appears at the end of a line once in the Z ms (V 147). This may be an error, since the line also scans a a x a. In any case A revises (or restores) to produce regular alliteration and a feminine ending.

The really strong evidence for the existence of the "feminine ending rule" can thus be stated quite briefly, but I do not believe any further statistics are required (naturally they could be multiplied by analysis of other words). I make no apology for assuming from now on that Langland did observe this rule, and did so with unusual thoroughness. It should be added that I have not undertaken the same sort of surveys for other alliterative texts; my impressions are that the rule is operative in e.g. the Morte Arthure, rather less so in the long lines of the Gawain-poet, and not at all in The Destruction of Troy. But these impressions do not amount to much. The difficulty is that the line-structure in these poems is so formulaic that it is hard to find a way of testing the "feminine-ending rule" that is sufficiently unaffected by other factors. For example, in Gawain and the Green Knight the word "Gawayn" (including all spelling variants) appears six times at line-ends within the "wheel", but none of its seventy-odd appearances in the long lines of the poem is in final position. This is certainly significant of something, and could be presented as an argument for the presence of the "feminine ending rule" in the poem, if we assume that "Gawayn" is always stressed on its second syllable. Unfortunately the argument has no force at all, because the Gawain-poet, like the author of the Morte Arthure, practically never uses proper names at the end of long lines, whatever their stress-pattern, but virtually always as alliterative stave-words. Only once does the word "Gawayn" appear as a non-alliterating word in the alliterative sections of Gawain. This is in line 1624 where "Syr Gawayn" is used in a line alliterating on s. I suspect that when composing these writers made the initial presumption that the human referent of a line would be referred to by an alliterative stave-word, and decided almost simultaneously what alliterating sound to use and what epithet to employ ("Gawayn", "Wawen", "renk", "burne", "freke", "segge", etc.). It is only in the much freer and more flexible context of Langland's verse that observation of the "feminine ending rule" is easily discernible.

The reader may wonder why a poet who permits himself to use, say, the form "kyngë" should baulk at the form "Cristë". It seems to be merely a matter of personal taste; at least there is no easily discernible logic to it. The author of the Morte Arthure seems to observe the "feminine ending rule" just as carefully as Langland does, but because he allows the form "Cristë" he frequently uses the word at the end of a line.[1] The word "lorde" is an interesting case. Most alliterative poets who seem to observe the rule use the word in final position, either to be pronounced "lordë" or perhaps in the old way represented by a spelling like "louerd".[2] In the Z manuscript the word appears about twenty times, three times in final position (Z I 132, Z VI 2, Z VI 46). This suggests that Langland, perhaps with some hesitation, considered a disyllabic pronunciation of "lorde" as acceptable. But later he seems to have changed his mind; the last two of these lines are altered,[3] and there are no new occurrences of the word at the end of a line, so that in the B version, while "lord" is used about eighty times, the only line in which it appears last is the survivor from Z which ends Passus I:

> I may no lenger lenge thee with now loke thee Oure Lord
> (B I 209).

I suspect that this change may relate to Samuels' contention that the dialect of _Piers_ becomes noticeably less provincial and more cosmopolitan in the later versions.[4]

II

The rest of this chapter will be concerned with how recognition of the "feminine ending rule" affects our understanding of Langland's poetry. We shall thus move closer to the central themes of this thesis, namely the difficult questions of how we should read _Piers Plowman_ and of how, in consequence, we should conceive of this curious poem. But it would be wrong to proceed without briefly noting the implications for editors.

---

[1] Lines 257, 296, 308, 320, etc. References are to Edmund Brock, ed., _Morte Arthure_, 2nd ed., EETS, O.S. 8 (London: Oxford University Press, 1871).

[2] e.g. _Morte Arthure_ 234, 700, 813; _Cleanness_ 410, 489, 612; _Winner and Waster_ 124, 285.

[3] Probably. The textual history of the half-line that appears first as "ant fro the sepulcre of oure lord" (Z VI 2b) is hard to reconstruct. This becomes a minority reading of the A mss, disappears altogether from the B mss, and reappears triumphantly in some of the best mss of C.

[4] Cf. p. 8, n. 1.

It has already been remarked that on two occasions editorial reconstruction has resulted in the word "God" appearing at the end of a line, thus producing a line that is more eccentric than the one it is intended to correct. There are at least seven reconstructions in the Schmidt edition that must be rejected because they violate the "feminine ending rule":

> And al for thei wroghte ayein [the wille of God]
> (B IX 154, Bx = "goddes wille")[1]
>
> By this day sire doctour quod I thanne [in Dowel be ye noght]
> (B XIII 105, Bx = "be ye noght in Dowel")
>
> And we lered and lewed [bileveth in oon God]
> (B XV 393, Bx = "in oon god bileveth")
>
> As a recchelees renk that [reccheth of no wo]
> (B XVIII 2, Bx = "of no wo reccheth")
>
> And right as thorugh [gilours] gile [bigiled was man]
> (B XVIII 159, Bx = "þoruȝ gile man was bigiled")
>
> Gregori the grete clerk and [the goode Jerom]
> (B XIX 272, Bx = "Ierom þe goode")
>
> Shulle come out and Conscience and youre [caples two]
> (B XIX 347, Bx = "two caples").

All of these reconstructions replace the pattern a a x a - or something even less appetizing - with the pattern a a a x, but all are more or less certainly incorrect. More often than not, however, such reconstructions do not obviously infringe the "feminine ending rule". Nevertheless, now that the dangerously simple procedure of re-ordering a a x a lines turns out to be not so simple after all, a general suspicion hangs over all reconstruction that is justified by nothing other than the presence of the a a x a pattern. Perhaps, indeed, reconstruction of the B archetype on purely metrical grounds is altogether a dangerous practice. I should not wish to see the few masculine endings in Bx removed by reconstruction, even though I am sure that these are exceptions to a rule and have no such confidence in the exceptional status of *a a x a*. I do not believe that Langland considered any rule absolutely unbreakable; which does not mean that his poetry has no rules.

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[1] **"Bx" readings are those imputed to the B archetype, usually because shared by all extant B mss.**

The more far-reaching consideration for editors is whether the base manuscript of an edition should be regularized in spelling so as to indicate feminine endings that would otherwise be obscured (usually because a final "-e" has been omitted, but sometimes because of dialectal variation as in the examples on page 8). Obviously this depends on the purpose of the edition; one cannot tamper with manuscript readings if it is the manuscript evidence that one aims to represent. But if the intention is to provide a text of *Piers* for readers, then regularization of the endings would seem an inevitable task; it is a nuisance to remember that one must say "aboute" when one reads "about", or "bothe" when one reads "both", or "heved" when one reads "hed". Naturally this would entail a much fuller investigation of how Langland pronounced and stressed certain words than I have been able to undertake here. The question also needs to be faced of whether the archaic or artificial pronunciations required at the end of a line are also required elsewhere. My impression, like that of Dr. Day with respect to other alliterative poems,[1] is that they are not; but no doubt it is a question that can be resolved more definitely if appropriate tests can be designed. There may be advantages in having a special pronunciation at line-ends.

Langland keeps the "feminine ending rule" rather strictly; many other alliterative poets keep it less strictly or not at all. On the other hand in comparison to other poets of the revival Langland is a more casual adherent to the principle of frequent and emphatic alliteration. True, there are those who have argued that apparently "light" lines in the received texts of *Piers* must actually be blamed on scribal interference or ineptitude.[2] But even if such arguments are accepted it must be allowed that the nature of Langland's alliteration is such as to encourage scribal failures. If he invariably keeps the letter of the other poets'

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1. Cf. p. 7 ,n. 1.
2. Kane-Donaldson edn., pp. 131-40.

law (which I doubt), he certainly flouts the spirit of it.

> I shal seken truthe erst er I se Rome
> (B V 461)
>
> Many tyme God hath ben met among nedy peple
> (B XI 242)
>
> Ac it is fern ago in Seint Fraunceis tyme
> (B XV 231)
>
> That is sooth seide Piers so it may bifalle
> (B XVI 60)

On examination at least two of these lines alliterate in the most orthodox manner (*a a a x*). But it could hardly be contended that the alliteration, except in the present context, is at all striking. Langland's intention seems to be (not always, but in these cases and many others) to slip the alliteration past with it having only a relatively subliminal effect on us, just like the sound-patterns in other (non-alliterative) poems, which most readers, unless they are poets themselves, are likely to be affected by without observing them directly. Compare this:

> When hit þe scrypture hade scraped wyth a scrof penne
> As a coltour in clay cerues þe forȝes
> þenne hit vanist verayly and voyded of syȝt
> Bot þe lettres bileued ful large vpon plaster
> (*Cleanness* 1546-49).

The reader of this passage cannot but observe how the lines alliterate; this is an activity inseparable from his sensing first the hard contact of chisel-pen on stone and second its sudden dematerialization. To put it another way, the reader not only reacts to the alliteration, he also notices it. And surely the same would be true if one were a listener rather than a reader; one would inevitably notice the alliteration first on *scr*, then *c*, then *v*, then *l*. Each line would have an immediately perceptible "colour", making it easily distinguishable from those before and after; in effect the listener could, if he wished, visualize the layout of the words on the page.

By contrast, I used to imagine that a listener to whom *Piers* was being read would find it very difficult to separate one line from the next. There would be no time to analyse non-obvious alliteration, and Langland's comparatively unstereotyped syntactic structures tend to produce unpredictable running on of the sense from one line to another:

> Ac if ther were any wight that wolde me telle
> What were Dowel and Dobet and Dobest at the laste
> Wolde I never do werk but wende to holi chirche
> And there bidde my bedes but whan ich ete or slepe
>
> (B XII 24-27).

These lines, I believed, would become a continuous segment of natural, prosaic conversation; and that is how I have always read them. But if we take care to pronounce the final words as "tellë", "lastë", "chirchë", "slepë", these repeated rhythms, generated by pronunciations that are perhaps archaic and may sometimes be sheerly artificial, sufficiently indicate to the listener where one line ends and the next begins. Hence Langland's strict adherence to the "feminine ending rule" in this respect compensates for his rather unusual alliterative practice. It may of course be objected that I am wrongly assuming that it is a good thing for listeners to be able to identify each line as a separate unit. After all, when we attend a modern production of Shakespeare we often cannot distinguish the individual lines of verse unless we already know the spoken passage very well. Despite the remark, approvingly quoted by Dr. Johnson in his _Life of Milton_, that "Blank verse seems to be verse only to the eye", most people are not much troubled by this; and we should certainly not imagine, because we are usually readers not listeners, that to hear poetry is somehow a second-rate mode of receiving it, the aim of which is to "see" the text with the mind's eye. This I concede; nevertheless it remains likely that in _Piers_ as in other alliterative poems the line is an important quantitative unit, indicating the rate at which the audience (whether reading or listening) may expect to encounter developments of argument or action.

III

This suggestion will be taken up later in the chapter. But first I want to point out that the new picture of Langland's verse form that is emerging makes sense in the wider medieval context. This picture differs from more traditional ones in placing less emphasis on the keeping of alliterative rules and more emphasis on the staple unit of a long line with a medial break and a feminine rhythm at the end. Seen thus, Langland's poetry exemplifies a kind of "international long line".

Strictly speaking, I admit, this term stands for an abstraction, **and is** perhaps best presented by illustration. Granted their manifest differences from each other, the metres in the following extracts are similar enough, in "feel" more than in detail, to give some meaning to this notion of an "international long line":

> Li **quenz** Rollant / se jut desuz un pin
> Envers Espaigne / en ad turnét sun vis
> De plusurs choses / a remembrer li prist
> De tantes teres / cum li bers **conquist**
> De dulce France / des humes de sun **lign**
> De Carlemagne / sun seignor **k•il nurrit**
>
> (Chanson de Roland 2375–80)
>
> Dô sprach der videlaere / Volkêr der degen
> **versmâhetez iu niht Hagene / sô wolde ich mit iu pflegen**
> der schiltwahte hînte / unz morgen fruo
> der **helt** vil minneclîche / dancte Volkêre duo
>
> (Nibelungenlied St. 1830)
>
> Fincadas son las tiendas / e parecen los alvores
> a una grand priessa / tañién los atamores
> alegravas' Mio Cid / e dixo "Tan buen día es oy"
> Miedo á su mugier / e quiérel' quebrar el coraçón
> assí fazié a las dueñas / e a sus fijas amas a dos
> del día que nasquieran / non vieran tal tremor
>
> (El Poema de Mio Cid 1657–62)
>
> Annd sone anan ðeȝȝ ȝedenn forþ / Till Beþþleaemess chesstre
> Annd fundenn Sannte Marȝe þaer / Annd Iosaep hire macche
> Annd ec þeȝȝ fundenn þaer þe child / þaer itt wass leȝȝd i cribbe
>
> (Ormulum fol. 33r, cols. 85–86)
>
> and þus seide þe kinge / sorhful on mode
> Wa worðe þan monne / þe lond haueðe mid menske
> and bi-tachet hit is childe / þe while þe he mai hit walden
> for ofte hit ilimpð / þat eft hit him of-þincheð
> Nu ich wulle hunne faren / forð-rihte to Cornwalen
> ȝernen ich wulle raedes / to Regau mine dohter
>
> (Laȝamon's Brut 1677–82)

A traitor quaþ þis Iustice / erto icome herto
Ich ssel tormenti al þi body / fram toppe to þin ho
Hastou ihud atom þane þeof / þat doþ us such ssame
And pultest forþ þisulue þou cheitif / to deþe inis name

(*South English Legendary*,
"Alban" 35-38).[1]

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1. I quote from the following editions: F. Whitehead, ed., *La Chanson de Roland* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1942) (p. 69); Karl Bartsch, ed., *Das Nibelungenlied*, revised edn. by Helmut de Boor (Wiesbaden: F.A. Brockhaus, 1956) (p. 288); Ian Michael, ed., *The Poem of the Cid* (1975; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) (p. 108); G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie, eds., *Laȝamon: Brut*, EETS, O.S. 250, 277 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963, 1978) (I, 86; I use the version edited from BM Ms. Cotton Caligula A. ix); Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, eds., *The South English Legendary*, EETS, O.S. 235, 236, 244 (London: Oxford University Press, 1956, 1959) (I, 239; hereafter referred to as D'Evelyn and Mill). The *Ormulum* quote is taken from J.A.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers, ed., *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) (pp. 178-79).

What these various extracts have in common is, most obviously, a medial break and "something special" at the end, whether this be rhyme, assonance, or (as in Langland) a rhythmic pattern. There are also non-universal features, which affect the individual "feel" of each; for example the strict syllable-counting of the Chanson or the Ormulum, as compared with the relaxed ramble of the Cid. And of course the origins of these extracts are very disparate. I could have extended my sample yet further; an important minority of the manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales (including Ellesmere and Hengwrt) indicate a medial break in Chaucer's lines.[1] Most readers will probably agree with A.C. Spearing's judgment that Chaucer "in his decasyllabic verse ... was struggling to overcome the strong tendency of the native English line to fall into a pattern of two two-stress phrases separated by a pause"; but, as he also notes, "most of his English disciples, including Lydgate, ... allow the native English pattern to reassert itself."[2] Middle English alliterative poetry in general may also be related to this broader tradition, except that we usually think of the "something special" as the alliterating staves and not the non-alliterating one. The attempt to combine alliteration with rhyme occurs in The Awntyrs off Arthure, where it produces an effect of almost cloying ornateness; this is a form in which only a very limited range of tones is possible. Langland's mixture, on the contrary, allows the poet considerable freedom.

The most important thing to observe from our extracts is that the international long line is by nature an instrument for narrative. All of the extracts quoted are from poems that consist almost entirely of pure narrative, granted that this may be "framed" in various ways. It is interesting to reflect that the bulk of Middle English alliterative verse, sometimes characterized as moral and philosophical in its inspiration,[1] is also narrative; *Cleanness* and *Patience*, as well as *Sir Gawain*, are mostly taken up with telling stories. It is true that the two early poems that seem most likely to resemble the English poetry that Langland knew (if indeed they do not form part of it) are significantly exceptional.[2] Neither *Winner and Waster* nor the *Parlement of the Thre Ages* are narrative poems in the sense that they recount legendary or actual histories; instead they are dream poems.

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[1] For details see Ian Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody: A Study of the Middle English Verse Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 138-40.

[2] A.C. Spearing, Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 342.

Clearly to describe *Winner and Waster* as recounting an adventure that befell the narrator is to have the poem a little out of focus. It seems more apposite to divide the poem into various segments. First, a prologue outside the fiction, cast in the present tense and of the nature of a complaint; second, a prologue outside the dream, descriptive; third, a prologue within the dream, again descriptive; fourth, the debate between Winner and Waster, culminating in the judgment of the king. This debate is, naturally, mostly in the continuous present, as the first of the three prologues is, and consists predominantly of attack. Hence there seem to be two main modes of speech in the poem; description and diatribe. But further, the diatribe is frequently descriptive; Winner describes Waster's life, then Waster describes Winner's life. It is possible to take passages from all parts of this poem, and the *Parlement* too, and to observe how similarly they are constructed:

> The throstills full throly they threpen to-gedire
> Hipped vp heghwalles fro heselis tyll othire
> Bernacles with thayre billes one barkes þay roungen
> þe jay janglede one heghe jarmede the foles
> þe bourne full bremly rane þe bankes by-twene
>
> (*WW* 37-41)

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1. e.g. G.T. Shepherd, "The Nature of Alliterative Poetry in Late Medieval England," *PBA*, 56 (1970), 57-76.

2. *Winner and Waster* is traditionally dated 1352, therefore earlier than the Z version of *Piers*. The doubts raised by Elizabeth Salter ("The Timeliness of *Wynnere and Wastoure*," *Medium AEvum*, 47 (1978), 40-65) do not make a later date more compelling. There is no certainty about the date of the *Parlement*, although one is naturally inclined to date it later rather than earlier, for the not particularly good reason that its author gives the impression of wanting to try his hand at a variety of styles, which seems to require that the styles are already established.

For here es alle þe folke of Fraunce ferdede be-syde
Of Lorreyne of Lumbardye and of Lawe Spayne
Wyes of Westwale þat in were duellen
Of Ynglonde of Yrlonde Estirlynges full many
þat are stuffede in stele strokes to dele

(*WW* 138-42)

The bores hede schall be broghte with plontes appon lofte
Buk-tayles full brode in brothes there be-syde
Venyson with the frumentee and fesanttes full riche
Baken mete ther-by one the burde sett
Chewettes of choppede flesche charbiande fewlis

(*WW* 332-36)

I tighte owte my trenchore and toke of the scholdirs
Cuttede corbyns bone and keste it a-waye
I slitte hym full sleghely and slyppede in my fingere
Lesse the poynte scholde perche the pawnche or the guttys
I soughte owte my sewet and semblete it to-gedire
And pullede oute the pawnche and putt it in an hole

(*PTA* 79-84)

For there Sir Porus the prynce in-to the prese thrynges
And bare the batelle one bake and abaschede thaym swythe
And than the bolde Bawderayne bowes to the kyng
And brayde owte the brighte brande owt of the kynges hande
And Florydase full freschely foundes hym aftir
And hent the helme of his hede and the halse crakede

(*PTA* 368-73).[1]

Some of these extracts are in fact narrative; but it will be seen that all of them fall into a more general category that we can describe as "accumulative". The method of progression is to list related items, whether these be a series of features existing simultaneously (description) or a series of events, one following the other (narrative). It is this more general concept of "accumulation", rather than "narrative", that most accurately characterizes the content of those writers who employ variations on the international long line. Hence *Winner and Waster* and the *Parlement* are not really so exceptional as they may at first appear; it is true that the authors are not so uniformly intent on narrative as some of their predecessors, but the content of their poems is still predominantly a series of lists. Reading with this in mind, one can almost sense the poet jumping as quickly as possible from one list to the next. Once into his list, however, the pace slows and the poet becomes expansive; for the reader the interest lies in the inventiveness by which the accumulation is prolonged. Winner's tremendous description of Waster's dinner parties best displays the kind of entertainment that is on offer. (I shall continue to use the term "list" to describe, in general, the characteristic product of "accumulative" versifying; in my terminology a sequence of actions or events - that is, narrative - is a kind of list.)

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[1] All quotations are from Sir I. Gollancz, ed., *A Good Short Debate between Winner and Waster: An Alliterative Poem on Social and Economic Problems in England in the Year 1352*, Select Early English Poems in Alliterative Verse, No. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1930); and from Offord, *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* (Thornton text). Punctuation has been omitted, and Gollancz's emendations have normally been replaced by the ms. reading.

Above all it is the increase in pace that immediately differentiates Langland's verse from that of his contemporaries.

> And now are þaire brydells vp-brayde and bown one þaire wayes ...

This line is in fact from *Winner and Waster* (208), but taken out of context (not otherwise) it looks Langlandian. Why? Mainly, I think, because of the slightly elliptical syntax, because the reader has to infer that the subject of "bown" is the riders and not the bridles. The "Langlandian" rapidity is not a matter of short syllables and single consonants; it is an illusion created in the reader's mind by the greater amount of work that is required of him if he is to make sense of the lines. Syntactic short-cuts, as here, are a very simple means of generating this sensation of speed; we feel that there is not enough time, or only just enough time, to cope with the words as they arrive. Gollancz thought that a scribe had missed out a "they" before "bown" and that is quite likely; in *Winner and Waster* the line is untypical. In *Piers Plowman*, however, syntactical ellipsis is one of a number of features with this effect, and cannot usually be ascribed to faulty copying. Langland's tendency is to escape from the "list" framework, or else to retain it and fill it up with elements whose relationship is somewhat less than self-evident. For the reader the same questions are always arising: "Why do I feel that this element does not quite fit with that element?" Or even, "What on earth *does* this element have to do with the last one?" These half-conscious questions are central to our experience of *Piers*; in many ways they replace other kinds of interest, such as the fascination of watching a story develop or of watching a scene being depicted, and we are induced to read on primarily in the hope of intellectual enlightenment. This is not, of course, to say that the poem is a mere puzzle; but the other good things in *Piers*, the comedy and sublimity and satiric precision, are all of them intermittent and so do not supply a continued motive for reading on. Readers who admire only these splendid features are apt to remark on their difficulty in maintaining this impetus; Professor Norton-Smith has memorably described the central part of the B text as "a depressing sequence of false turnings, cul-de-sacs, and miles of boot-sucking mud."[1]

Let us turn to a passage from the earliest version of the poem, still with these themes of "narrative" and "accumulation" in mind, and observe Langland's method at first hand. Here is how Holy Church deals with the fall of Lucifer:

> Lucifer wyth legyounes lerned hit in heuene
> Ant was the louelokest of lyght after oure lord syluen
> Tyl he brak boxumnesse torw bost of hemsylfe
> Thenne fulle he wyth ys felawscipe ant fendes bycome
> Out of heue into helle hobeled they faste
> Somme in eyr somme in herthe somme in helle depe
> Ac Lucifer lowest lyth of hem alle
> For pruyde that hym pulte out ys peyne hath non ende
> Ant apostata of that place ant pelour of helle.
>
> (Z I 57-65).

The elliptical syntax discussed above recurs in the last line of this passage. The impression in general is that Holy Church has too much on her mind to linger over this cataclysmic event; there is an obvious contrast with the account in *Cleanness* (205-34). But this lack of interest in the full narrative treatment is the source of the passage's strength. There is no single word in it that is there merely to paint a picture; even "depe" in line 62 turns out to be making a point about where Lucifer comes to rest. Nevertheless, every reader feels that this is no mere inert reference to legendary history. Nor is it, but not because (as in *Cleanness*) we are caught up in a visionary re-enactment. Instead of presenting one rich and consistent scene, Langland has implied three scenes in the most concise manner possible; this is an example of what I mean by the compilation of slightly discordant elements into a list. The first is the obvious picture of the angels falling downwards involuntarily; as it is so obvious, only the word "fulle" in line 60 is necessary to evoke it. The second is a close-up picture of the fiends hobbling into hell. This is more like the way the action would have been portrayed in a mystery play; the significance may be cosmic but the action is comic. In Middle English (just as in Modern English) hobbling implies a wavering, indirect movement, roughly horizontal in tendency, directly opposed to the image of a straight plunge. The third picture shows the fiends at rest, suspended in various regions of the universe. Again there is ellipsis here, so that for a moment one might take line 62 as continuing to qualify "hobeled" in line 61; but it rapidly emerges that the true verb is implicit and must be simply "arn" or perhaps **"lyen"**. This third picture in fact blanks out the notion of movement altogether. That could be harmonized with the first picture by inferring that it represents a later state, but I doubt if such rationalization is appropriate. I think Langland intended to suggest an instantaneous fall, after which the angels suddenly found themselves, by the power of God, in these various spots.

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[1] John Norton-Smith, *William Langland*, Medieval and Renaissance Authors, 6 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), p. 23.

In truth Langland is not concerned with what the fall of the angels looked like, but with the moral significance of the action, and especially the question of agency. They "became fiends", he says, an amusingly naive-sounding expression which could mean either that God made them so, or that they made themselves so, or that there is no change at all but in terminology - we make them fiends because when an angel goes down to hell we call him a fiend. All these interpretations are defensible in their own ways, so there is a point to the uncertainty. Similarly, the contradictory pictures I have described suggest both the agency of Lucifer himself and of God, for we hear that the fiends hobble into hell, which sounds like voluntary (but hampered) movement, and we also hear that they fell and that Lucifer lies in the deepest region of the earth, verbs that suggest an involuntary surrender to the motive power of God.[1] Hence we perceive the action as illustrative both of Lucifer's free will and of God's omnipotence. This multiple way of looking at the matter has its effect on the stature of the sinner: is he an ass, comically hobbling into hell, or is he as awesome in his degradation as he once was in his glory, supreme at least in being first and worst? Some of these speculations probably owe more to *Paradise Lost* and to Shelley than to Langland; but his lines admit them. They even admit the possibility of seeing the punishment as nothing other than the sin itself in metaphorical terms; a modern theologian's interpretation of hell. Langland himself cannot, I suppose, have seen things in exactly that light.

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[1] "Lyth" does not necessarily imply lying prone, but it certainly implies inactivity, probably enforced, as to lie in prison (OED Lie, v., 3; MED lien , v. (1), 4b).

The details of the passage are very traditional, so that in different treatments we find the same images reproduced almost as a ritual duty. Line 62 in our passage, for example, equates to

> And bi þe eorþe we fleoþ aboute and bi þe lift also
>
> (*South English Legendary*, "Brendan" 201)[1]

> þan fell þai depe or lesse or mare
> Sum in þe air sum in the lift
>
> (*Cursor Mundi* 494-95).[2]

And Langland's moral concerns are likewise traditional; the author of the *Cursor Mundi* takes pains to inform us that Lucifer will not receive mercy because he will not ask for it (477-90). He too, in other words, is preoccupied with the question of agency and moral responsibility. But to observe this is only to underline the difference in treatment. The brevity of Langland's exposition, as I have suggested, is the result of jumping very swiftly from one idea or image to the next, leaving gaps which perplex and challenge the reader. There is no such intellectual pressure when we read the account in the *Cursor Mundi* (411-510); its author tells us a great deal, but if some of his explanation had been omitted we should hardly feel the lack of it, and while he may be preoccupied with agency and responsibility it cannot be claimed that the reader is. But the form of Langland's verse, and the "list" framework (a simple-looking chain of "ant", "thenne", "ac", etc.), mislead us into imagining that what we are reading ought to be a steady, easily digestible accumulation of materials. When these connectives in fact lead to slightly unexpected developments, when the verse never settles down to the gradual construction of a scene as we find it in _Winner and Waster_, the pressure mounts to make for ourselves the best we can of it. We are being prodded into composing our own poetry about the fall of Lucifer, or at least into composing our own thoughts.

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[1] D'Evelyn and Mill, I, 186.

[2] I quote the version from British Museum Ms. Cotton Vespasian A iii, in Richard Morris, ed., *Cursor Mundi*, EETS, O.S. 57, 59, 62, 66, 68 (London: Oxford University Press, 1874, 1875, 1876, 1877, 1878) (I, 36).

There is a third pressure on us to "make sense" of the passage, and that is its location within a sermon. Holy Church's theoretical pretext for the mention of Lucifer seems to be as an illustration of the downfall of knights who fail to "serue trewth" (Z I 44ff.). This pretext is not indeed explicit, although it is the conclusion we are likely to draw from the unexplained shift of subject at line 51, and this is confirmed by the reference to "apostata" in the last line of our passage (a line that is subsequently removed), which seems to refer back to the earlier use of the word at line 50. It can hardly be said that the illustration is a necessary one; on the contrary, if all we are talking about is knighthood then Langland seems to be explaining the commonplace by reference to the unknowable. But of course this quasi-logical setting _is_ a pretext; Langland's intention is not to write a real sermon, but something more like an ideal sermon. Holy Church's discourse differs from real sermons in having no limited and exclusive theme; for as to truth being the best treasure, that is neither demonstrated nor even, if we are sticklers for precision, defined. It stands in a general way for all themes, and _Deus caritas_ (line 31) for all texts, and the sermon for all sermons. To exaggerate the point once more, the reader is cajoled into reading out his own sermon from this rich collection of sermon-like statements, illustrations and images. Later, in the B text, Langland will add some famous lines on the "fall" of Christ at the Incarnation, but without directing us - this is characteristic - to relate the new passage to the one about Lucifer.

I have begun by identifying the passage as "not really narrative" and ended by seeing it as "not really exemplum". It fails to bring before us the detailed and consistent picture that we expect from "accumulative" narrative; instead it has the brevity of an exemplum. But on the other hand it has a power of suggestion that quite supersedes any simple illustrative function that we might suppose Holy Church intends it to perform.

This twilit world between fully fictive presentation and illustrative exemplum is one that Langland's poetry very frequently, if not predominantly, inhabits.[1] The lines about the fall of Lucifer are part of a speech - Will is only being told about it - but soon, with the appearance of Meed, discourse becomes vision (just as later, in the B text, Will actually witnesses the crucifixion). In a dream world, however, actuality is a relative term; and Holy Church seems unwilling to surrender control of the vision. Despite her assertion that "Y may no lengur lenge the wyth" (Z I 132), she lingers a while yet, as if in order to ensure that Will takes the meaning of his vision - or to ensure that we do. The implication is that it will have a reasonably straightforward "point", like a true exemplum, and in Z the poet confirms this:

> Yf ye wyl weten of Wrong Y wyl you fayre schewe
> Bothe of Fauel ant Falsede that myche folk apeyreth
>
> (Z II 2-3).

These lines are cancelled in later versions, "presumably", as the editors of Z suggest, "because they are unnecessarily intrusive"; although I am not sure they would appear so in any other medieval poem. There are quite a few structural pointers of this kind in the Z text, but later Langland seems to have decided not to be so helpful, and some of these are removed.[2] Surely the editors' sense of intrusiveness is due to their coming to the Z version from later versions, which are notably lacking in aids to the reader. Passages like the one quoted are not especially rare in Z, but as the poem expands they shrink in numbers so that those few that there are, like B I 1-2 and the unexpected B X 117 (which falls in the middle of a speech), look curiously un-Langlandian. True, there are at least two narratorial voices, that of Will, garrulous and far from omniscient, and another authoritative preaching voice that appears at intervals, usually to address "ye lordes" or "ye prelates" directly. As a rule the first of these voices is to be regarded as sound only when recounting his experiences, but the second is to be taken seriously when speaking imperatively too. (No doubt the situation is actually less clear-cut than this, as it always is once we start to differentiate between voices.) Unfortunately no narratorial voice is particularly good at explaining the form of the poem. Will is interested in telling his story, but seems unable to interpret it; the preaching voice has authority, but is focussed on matters outside the poem, on fourteenth-century society. Typically this voice does not refer to any person or event within the fictional framework.[1]

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[1] Cf. Derek Pearsall, John Lydgate, Poets of the Later Middle Ages (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 128.

[2] Cf. also Z II 163-70, Z VII 230-32, and the reference to "apostata" in Z I 65, discussed above.

The point I am making is that although most of Piers Plowman is composed of verse that seems a little like plain narrative, but that also seems to require interpretation, Langland is remarkably reticent about providing any interpretation himself. Holy Church tells us that the Meed episode is to be an extended exemplum, and so too does the poet (in Z), but after Holy Church has disappeared, never to return, the exemplum proves to be a good deal more formidable than we were led to expect. Indeed it changes as it goes along, so that what seems at first to be an elaborate but static allegorical analysis (a bit like those of Deguileville, only incomparably more vivid) threatens unexpectedly to turn into a novel of manners ("Lady Meed at Westminster") and then becomes a rambling debate. Meanwhile it emerges that although

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1. One reason why the ruminations at the end of the Pardon scene (B VII 144-201) have been found so irritatingly unhelpful is that the two narratorial voices are here mixed. The speaker refers to his dream and to people within it (as "Will" does), but he also addresses "you renkes that riche ben ... ye maistres, meires and jugges" (as the "preaching voice" does). This makes it impossible to decide what authority we are to accord to his words.

Meed's betrothal to False is apparently iniquitous, the marriage of Meed and Conscience would be equally insupportable. This at least is the position we shall arrive at if we attempt to interpret the episode as a single self-consistent allegory; but probably we should learn from the poet's reticence, and not try to draw conclusions about the action in one passus from the way things were in a former passus.

Langland's reticence, when it comes to direct guidance or commentary on the poem's content, can be illustrated in other ways, a reassuring indication that it represents a deep-seated reluctance to be definite and is not a simple matter of inept craftsmanship. There is, for instance, the question of Will's thoughts about his own dreams. Not all writers of dream-poems are interested in the dreamer's reaction after waking, and in some, like the _Roman de la Rose_, the poem just ends when the dream ends, so that we have no idea of what the recipient of this enormous communication might have felt about it. Other dreamers have a more concrete waking existence but their reactions are quite clear and unproblematic. "Geoffrey", for example, simply returns to his books or starts writing, as in the _Legend of Good Women_ or the _Book of the Duchess_:

> Thoghte I thys ys so queynt a sweven
> That I wol be processe of tyme
> Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
> As I kan best and that anoon
> This was my sweven now hit ys doon
>
> (_BD_ 1330-34).

Will, characteristically no doubt, is not always so uncomplicatedly spurred to action, although he is sometimes - at B XVIII 428ff., and at B XIX 485 where (like "Geoffrey") he sets about writing up his dream experience. But at other times he ponders and worries (B VII 144ff., B XIII 1-4), wishes he had dreamt more (B V 3-4), becomes reckless and distracted in his wits (B XV 1-9, B XVIII 1-5). There is no doubt that Will is obsessed with his dreams; evidently he considers that they contain matter of great import, and evidently, too, he does not find it easy to decide what that matter of great import is. This naturally constitutes a challenge to our powers of interpretation; but it is no guide to an interpretation.

Even without these unilluminating epilogues, the dreams would be challenging. Because a dream is separate from the waking world, the question arises of how the dream relates to it. Langland multiplies such questions by multiplying dreams, for that creates the problem of how one dream relates to another; and this is not a merely theoretical problem, for personages who recur in more than one dream (notably Piers) usually turn out to have changed in the interim. To go still further, the variety of literary modes within a single vision leads us to ask how different parts of one dream are related to each other (it will be recalled that Langland tries his hand at dreams within dreams too). Clearly we could narrow our focus progressively until we arrive back at the point where I started, the relation of one item in a list to the next; once we realize this, the whole poem can be identified as a massive accumulation, not articulated but cemented together by parataxis on the grand scale.

At first it may have occurred to the reader that the feminine endings to Langland's lines would make the verse seem more formal, and therefore more reassuring, than we have come to suppose it. In this section I have tried to show that although there may be a promise of straightforwardness held out by the steady sequence of lines with the same closing rhythms, this promise is not kept. The effect is the opposite of reassuring; instead, it is to provoke us into a peculiarly active kind of reading. We ourselves must extract (or make) the sense that we are persuaded the poem makes.

IV

I suggested earlier that exception would be taken to the way in which attending to the feminine endings in our reading seems to break up the natural, conversational flow that we have become accustomed to finding in Langland's verse. To begin with the effect may well seem stiffer and more distant than we are used to. In this section I shall argue that although recognition of the feminine endings does have important implications for readers (to be discussed in Section V), they are not quite so catastrophic as they may initially appear to be.

My first point is the obvious one that at first we shall inevitably overstress the final rhythm of each line, because it is not yet automatic for us and the extra emphasis is necessary to protect us from slipping back into familiar reading habits. Indeed at first one will probably experience the phenomenon of being unable to concentrate both on the semantic content of a line and on its correct enunciation; just as when, for example, one first tries to read classical Latin verse. Even when this stage has been passed, there may still be a residual tendency to feel that the last word in the line is the most important; plainly an over-reaction against the more usual habit of taking the stave-words as the most important. For while it is wrong to imagine that Langland typically does all the work in the first half of a line (an observation true enough of some of his contemporaries), it will nevertheless be clear upon examination that the last word or phrase in Langland's lines is often stereotyped and hence presumably not very significant. The following are examples: "nevere" (frequently used where "noght" would have served), "bothë", "-selvë", "oother", "after" (or "therafter"), "therinnë", "thannë", "allë", "bettre", "onë" (only), "oftë", "togideres", "at the lastë", "as I levë", "so me God helpë". Small wonder that the sense gets lost if one's enunciation throws such words into an unaccustomed prominence!

This is an understandable tendency that will be overcome in time. I also suspect that in general we are too apt to **emphasize the formal** endings of lines in medieval verse (the "something special" mentioned earlier, e.g. rhyme, assonance, repeated rhythm). It is natural that we should do so, with our reading habits nurtured by the heroic couplet (in which the rhyme-words usually do carry weight) and blank verse (in which there is no "something special", thus encouraging us to mark its appearance elsewhere with a special emphasis). But to overstress the formal endings is to build up high expectations about the execution of the poet's self-imposed task. A glance at the supposed assonantal endings in the passage quoted from the Cid (p. 17) should warn us against expecting perfection in this case, hence against stressing the endings too much; and although the repeated assonance in the Chanson de Roland is effective, this seems to be connected with the relatively light stress of the language. What works in Old French does not work so well in Modern English, as is revealed by Dorothy Sayers' translation in the Penguin Classics; the assonance becomes tiresome and distracting because we cannot help placing full stress upon it.

As for rhyme, in post-medieval poetry it has seemed to receive an ever-increasing amount of stress. Expectations have risen accordingly, and they are magnificently satisfied in Pope, for example:

> Rufa, whose eye quick glancing o'er the park
> Attracts each light gay meteor of a spark,
> Agrees as ill with Rufa studying Locke,
> As Sappho's diamonds with her dirty smock;
> Or Sappho at her toilet's greasy task,
> With Sappho fragrant at an evening mask:
> So morning insects, that in muck begun,
> Shine, buzz, and fly-blow in the setting sun.

(*Moral Essays* II 21-28).

If our expectations of rhyme are such, we shall be disappointed even by Chaucer. True, one can find occasional couplets with this sort of crispness and unexpectedness (for one of the things we expect is the unexpected), for example in that most concrete of his poems, the *Miller's Tale*:

> Wynsynge she was as is a joly colt
> Long as a mast and upright as a bolt

(*CT* A 3263-64)

> To clymben by the ronges and the stalkes
> Unto the tubbes hangynge in the balkes

(*CT* A 3625-26).

But these are exceptions. Rhyme in Chaucer is usually unexciting even where it obeys Popeian rules; and often it does not, unless the reader is prepared to distort Chaucer's language. Most modern readers have assumed that Chaucer, like later writers of heroic couplets, did not allow trochaic inversion of the fifth "foot"; but this assumption compels the reader to wrench words out of their natural stress-pattern:

Al were it so she were of smal degree
Suffiseth hym hir youthe and hir beautee

(*CT* E 1625-26)

That yow shal lette of youre savacion
So that ye use as skile is and reson

(*CT* E 1677-78).

Such lines are very common in Chaucer, and sometimes Chaucer's normal accentuation of the final word is genuinely in doubt; words of recent French origin such as "envye" or "fraunchise" may initially have retained a French stress. But this argument does not apply in the cases I quote, and in fact we know from their appearances elsewhere that Chaucer's normal accentuation of "beautee" and "reson" was with the stress on the first syllable, as ours is.[1] The natural conclusion that Chaucer in fact allowed inverted stress at the end of a line (which, if one could but accept it makes Chaucer sound a good deal less quaint and naive) is opposed only by the great difficulty we have in accepting fifth-foot inversion as metrical. But if we make the effort to read Chaucer with less strongly marked stresses in general, and especially with a less ruthless emphasis on the syllables that carry the rhyme, even where they are stressed, the trochaic inversion becomes much less jarring. There are other benefits too. We no longer have to exaggerate the value of final syllables in "weak" lines:

The lustes of youre wyf attemprely
And that ye plese hire nat to amorously

(*CT* E 1679-80).

(The modern reader's temptation here is to lengthen the last syllable, presuming that Chaucer intended an artificially emphatic pronunciation.) Again, we may never be able to recapture the taste for homonymous rhyme:

But after mete as soone as evere I may
I wol myself visite hym and eek May

(*CT* E 1913-14).

But an attempt to reduce one's stress on rhyme syllables does at least soften the jarring anticlimax that we conscientiously try not to feel.

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[1] For full discussion see Ian Robinson, *Chaucer's Prosody*, pp. 109-31.

Attempt to remove emphasis on rhyme can also ease the difficult task of making sense of late medieval English metre.

> All worldly welth for hym to lytell was
> And now without measure he shal have hunger and colde
> Lo syrs thus I handell them all
> I counsayle them beware of adversyte
> I vysyte them somtyme with blaynes and with sores
> With botches and carbuckyls in care I them knyt
> And from that they love best some I devorse
> Some with the marmoll to halte I them make
> Of some I wrynge of the necke lyke a wyre
> And some I make in a rope to totter and walter
> And some I vysyte with batayle warre and murther
> An all is for theyr ungracyous lyfe

These lines are selected; I quote one line from each successive couplet in a passage from Skelton's Magnificence (1892-1915).[1] Rhyme being absent, there does not seem to be any real difficulty with the metre; we take variation in our stride, dropping naturally into a rhythm rather like that of much alliterative verse, with medial breaks separating half-lines with (usually) two points of main stress. But if the missing lines are restored, we are apt to be in difficulties again, I think because we place a too heavy stress on the rhyme-words, are conscious of the parallelism, and mistakenly try also to discern a parallel rhythm in the lines.

Although most English rhymed verse between Chaucer and Wyatt is difficult for us to read, the difficulties are not the same throughout. Magnificence comes from the end of the period, when there really does seem to be a metrical crisis; metre becomes irregular and licentious because the poets are unable to perceive a fixed pattern in the work of their predecessors. No doubt the reason is a change in the English language, a change far more fundamental than "loss of final -e". Chaucer's immediate successors, however, seem to be writing regular metre; the difficulty for us (and, I suspect, for Skelton too) is deciding how the lines are supposed to be read. In Hoccleve's verse, for example, we can nearly always count ten syllables (ignoring, as in modern verse, the second syllable of a feminine rhyme). But it is fatal to try and read lines such as the following as English iambs;

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[1] References are to John Scattergood, ed., John Skelton: The Complete English Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

there is a limit to the number of stress-inversions the iambic pentameter can take:

> Than yt was a lewde occupacion
>
> To dido that queen of Cartagë was
>
> With holsum hete of the Sonnës warmnesse[1]

The existence of a regular metre can be deduced by syllable-counting; but knowing that there is a regular metre, if we are unable to hear it, is no help towards reading. It would seem that Hoccleve's lines could only work if it does not matter at all where the stressed syllables appear in the line; but we cannot make ourselves believe that it does not matter. The obvious solution is that in Hoccleve's English, as in French, the distinction between a stressed syllable and an unstressed syllable is much smaller than it is in Modern English.

This supposition is confirmed by Lydgate's metre. Lydgate's lines are if anything even more difficult to read than Hoccleve's, because Lydgate varies the number of syllables between nine and eleven. His practice is nevertheless governed by rules and it is easy enough to analyse what type of line we have just read once we have read it.[2] Having made the identification, we can then retrace our steps and read the line again with an acceptable stress-pattern; but by then, of course, it is too late. It is intolerable to have to read every line twice - especially when the poet is Lydgate. Evidently his contemporary readers cannot have needed to know in advance which of Lydgate's line-types they were about to read; which implies in turn that the allocation of stress was not affected by it. So the stress must have fallen naturally, as if the words were not poetry but prose. To put it another way, there is virtually no formal stress-pattern in Lydgate's verse, nor in Hoccleve's; which seems an incredible state of affairs unless stress in general was considerably less emphatic in their language than in ours. Upon reflection it is hard to see how these poets could have ignored the comparative regularity of the stress-pattern in Chaucer's verse, from which they copied so much else, unless this

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1. *Letter of Cupid*, ll. 282, 311; *Balade and Roundel to Master Somer*, l. 34. References are to F.J. Furnivall and I. Gollancz, eds., *Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems*, rvsd. ed. by Jerome Mitchell and A.I. Doyle, EETS, E.S. 61, 73 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) (pp. 83, 85, 60).
2. For details see Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, pp. 60-61.

was so.

This speculation has considerable interest for the **reader of Langland** (there is a suggestive analogy between the irregular stress-pattern in the post-Chaucerians and the separation of stress from stave-word that is a distinguishing mark of Langland's alliterative practice). I am content to limit the conclusion of this section to the statement that the feminine endings to Langland's lines should not be over-accentuated; the repetition of rhythm was probably only just perceptible. Hence, no doubt, the failure of some scribes to notice it is there at all, and the consequent loss of final "-e"s.

V

Having said all this, it may appear as if I am arguing that observance of the feminine endings should not make any discernible difference to our reading, except to make it more difficult; as if we have to make the sounds, but quietly, and then pretend we have not heard them. In fact I am only anxious that they should not make the wrong kind of difference; they do not turn Piers Plowman into a rhythmic chant. Obviously the changed sound does make a difference, a difference specific to each line, about which there cannot be much useful generalization. However there is one aspect about which we can generalize.

The natural effect of any kind of formal ending to a line is to encourage a pause in reading. When, as in Piers, the line ends with an unstressed syllable (and especially if the following line begins with a cluster of unstressed syllables too) this pause is almost inevitable. Sometimes, when he wants to run on the sense without a break, Langland deadens the effect by beginning the following line with a stressed syllable:

> He eet manye sondry metes mortrews and puddynges
> Wombe cloutes and wilde brawen and egges yfryed with grece
>
> (B XIII 61-62)

> It is noght foure dayes that this freke bifore the deen of Poules
> Preched of **penaunces that Paul the Apostle suffrede**
>
> (B XIII 64-65).

Here one can picture the emphatic speed of Will's critique, and the sequence of "p"-sounds beginning in line 64 characterizes the angry contempt in Will's voice. No doubt the Doctor deserves this treatment; but a few lines later on we meet the more usual end-of-line pause, provoked by unstressed syllables at the beginnings of lines:

> Ac this Goddes gloton quod I with his grete chekes
> Hath no pite on us povere he parfourneth yvele
> That he precheth he preveth noght to Patience I tolde
> (B XIII 77-79).

Here Will is much less convincing, and the pauses caused by the unstressed syllables at changes of line play a part in betraying him and making him sound defensive.

In general attention to Langland's pauses encourages close attention to the strictly temporal aspect of the reading experience, a similar approach to that pioneered by Stanley Fish in his books on seventeenth-century literature.[1] Thus we can pause to examine our responses and expectations in just the places where Langland's delivery pauses. I am by no means convinced that all the evanescent impressions discovered by Fish in mid-sentence are in fact realized in the reader's experience, but here the approach seems justified, and the more so because what we find knits well with other aspects of the text.

Let us pause then at the end of the first line quoted:

> Ac this Goddes gloton quod I with his grete chekes ...

This is powerfully abusive, but it is all subject and no predicate, and for it to be justified some equally powerful accusation ought to follow, probably one that picks up on the physical detail of the "grete chekes" and gives it a symbolic function. We have seen that kind of thing often enough in the poem, notably in Dame Study's speech:

> Thus thei dryvele at hir deys the deitee to knowe
> And gnawen God with the gorge whanne hir guttes fullen
> (B X 56-57).

It is true that the Doctor's fat face is in itself evidence of gluttony, of course, but that alone is not a sufficient basis for Will's intemperate outburst; it is the wrong kind of sin for this kind of reaction. Our expectation is therefore of some really crushing charge, colourfully expressed. But after the pause we get only this:

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[1] Stanley E. Fish, Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost (New York: Macmillan, 1967); and Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

> Hath no pitee on us povere ...

This is trebly inadequate. First, it fails to make any symbolic use of the detail in the previous line, and so identifies that detail as merely splenetic, the uncontrolled flailing of anger rather than the precise stab of criticism. Second, it is a negative accusation. To "leave undone" is no doubt fully as deserving of rebuke as to do the wrong thing, but it has the defect in poetry of evoking no convincing image of wrongdoing. It sounds like a whine, in default of any concrete accusation. Finally, the expression "us povere" seems to betray an attitude very unlike the lowly humility espoused by Patience; instead it resembles the grumbling, embattled attitude of Haukyn, a man competing unsuccessfully in the world rather than one who has abandoned the world's values. One doubts whether Patience would thump a tub for "us povere".

Another pause, in mid-line, is indicated by the syntax, and then we have:

> he parfourneth yvele ...

These three words could be linked either with the beginning of the next line or with the previous three of this one. It is only in the context of the whole passage that we see they must stand alone; syntactic uncertainty, along with the multiplicity of pauses, conspires to give the impression that Will is speaking more to relieve his feelings than because he has anything much to say. The threadbare nature of the accusation that "he parfourneth yvele" is obvious. So long as Will remains at this level of generality, his criticisms are (as a logical positivist would say) unfalsifiable and thus quite insubstantial. Another syntactic break, and a cluster of unstressed syllables, indicate another pause before the next line:

> That he precheth he preveth noght to Pacience I tolde ...

Granted that this is a serious charge, it still lacks the exemplification that we would like. The word "tolde" in Middle English appears to share much the same connotations as "told" in Modern English; it directs attention to the informative content of what is said rather than to the mere words. Thus in Modern English

"It's over there," I said to him

"It's over there," I told him

"Grr-r-r!" I said to him

are all acceptable, if dull. But

"Grr-r-r!" I told him

looks odd, directing attention to the paucity of factual content in the speech. So too in the line we are considering, the use of the word emphasizes the fact that Will has actually conveyed very little in the way of information to Patience - not much more than if he had said "Grr-r-r!"

In this passage, then, attention to the feminine endings and consequent pauses can underline characteristics of the lines that seem intentional because other factors point in the same direction. The natural, prosaic style of reading would not here be disastrous; it would only make the drift of the passage a little harder to discern, not alter its course. I now turn to another brief excerpt, in which the "natural" reading almost conceals the interest of the lines; attending to the feminine endings, on the other hand, improves the verse.

I were noght worthi woot God quod Haukyn to werien any clothes
Ne neither sherte ne shoon save for shame one
To covere my careyne quod he and cride mercy faste
And wepte and wailede and therwith I awakede
(B XIV 329-32).

"Improvement" may seem a paradoxical thing to claim, since the pauses consequent upon the endings run clean counter to how we imagine the sentence should go. At first glance it looks as though Haukyn's statement ought not to have any pauses in it, and if we read prosaically we shall not provide them. The verse movement, however, causes a fragmentation into half-lines:

> to werien any clothës
> ne neither sherte ne shoon
> save for shame onë
> to covere my careyne

Read like this, the words cease to constitute a statement; instead they dramatize an experience. No longer do we hear Haukyn volubly and easily elaborating on the correct approach to clothing. Instead each phrase comes out as a weary afterthought, the mind continuing to ponder after the sentence was due to conclude. It is as if Haukyn first, in an agony of repentance, wants to tear off all his clothes, then painfully recalls that even in misery there is no perfect freedom, for he is still bound to the laws of decency and, in effect, must continue to live in the world. This surely is the reading that makes the better sense, especially in a context that commentators have seen as rather unexpectedly miserable.[1] It is instructive that in this case the supposedly less natural delivery produces the more vivid and dramatic reading, perhaps too the more unorthodox one (it is obviously at the other extreme from those in which Haukyn's tears are purely "religious" and must be understood as primarily figurative). This should warn us against theorizing too quickly about the effect of the feminine ending in general; like every other poetic feature, it can be exploited in a wide variety of ways.

This is not to say, however, that there is nothing that can usefully be said about how ignoring this feature - and reading prosaically - is likely to distort our experience of *Piers Plowman*. But we are not entitled to claim that this general statement will have no exceptions, and if there are very few exceptions that will likely be a victory gained at the expense of presenting a statement that lacks specificity or excitement. At a first venture, I should say that observation of the feminine endings, by slowing down and breaking up the flow of the language, directs a closer attention to the individual fragments, provoking us to dwell upon the separate character of each. The question of how one line or half-line relates to the last will be likely to preoccupy us. Difficulties that can be slid over and forgotten, if we read naturalistically and conversationally, will become much harder to ignore.

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[1] Cf. Priscilla Martin, *Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 31.

I shall take as my example a passage from a little earlier in the confrontation between Haukyn and Patience. Patience, it will be recalled, has much to say about the contrast between riches and "pacient poverte"; and his special emphasis is on the near-inevitability of the rich man falling into sin, and the special powers of resistance to sin that he attributes to patient poverty. In order to demonstrate the latter, Patience has recourse to the scheme of the Seven Deadly Sins, which he presents one by one as being practically irrelevant to the patient poor (B XIV 201-72). The passage I want to focus on comes from this sequence.

> And though Coveitise wolde cacche the poore thei may noght
> come togideres
> And by the nekke namely hir noon may hente oother
> For men knowen wel that Coveitise is of a kene wille
> And hath hondes and armes of a long lengthe
> And Poverte nys but a petit thyng apereth noght to his navele
> And lovely layk was it nevere bitwene the longe and the shorte
> And though Avarice wolde angre the poore he hath but litel
> myghte
> For Poverte hath but pokes to putten in hise goodes
> Ther Avarice hath almaries and yren-bounden cofres
> And wheither be lighter to breke lasse boost it maketh
> A beggeris bagge than an yren-bounde cofre
>
> (B XIV 238-48).

It is the wrestling match between Coveitise and Poverte that will be the subject of my discussion, but I have extended the quotation for the sake of the context; and in fact we shall need to travel a good deal further afield still.

It will be observed that this passage is one of those, quite frequent in Piers, where a series of successive lines begin with a simple connective such as "and", "ac", or "for". I shall have more to say about this device in later chapters, but for the moment I merely want to reiterate the point that if the reader does not stress the connecting word, he will need to pause between lines. He does indeed have the option of an alternative strategy; he could give a special stress to the words "And" and "For" in our passage. But whichever of these methods is chosen, whether a pause is introduced or the connective thrown into prominence, the result is to draw attention towards the fact of the two lines being placed together by the poet. We shall find ourselves critically scrutinizing the lines to see for ourselves what connexion there should be, or how the second line can properly be said to relate to the first. Hence, instead of cantering headlong through the lines, noting only the surprising vividness and warmth in so very moral a setting, we are drawn into dwelling on the details of Patience's argument. When we do so, we can see that it is not very easy to make sense of. Like the betrothals in the Meed episode, the wrestling match is not an allegorical figure that can be easily translated into a literal statement.

"Coveitise" and "Avarice" might be two ways of saying the same thing, but it is appropriate, as Pearsall noted (C XVI 86n.), to apply the distinction made by Chaucer in the *Parson's Tale*:

> And the difference betwixe Avarice and Coveitise is this: Coveitise is for to coveite swiche thynges as thou hast nat; and Avarice is for to withholde and kepe swiche thynges as thou hast, withoute rightful nede.
>
> (*CT* I 744).

With this distinction in mind, Patience's point about Avarice is quite easy to understand. It is not of course true to say that one needs to be wealthy if one is to be a hoarder, although that argument is tempting. Patience takes a more subtle, psychological line. For him the avaricious attitude is one of luxuriating in the consciousness of possession, and in the feeling that security in one's possessions is possible. To be able to experience this feeling, it is a prerequisite that one has "almaries and yren-bounden cofres" (246); poverty, on the other hand, is likely to preclude it.

This argument seems to be a good one, significantly differentiating the purely material states of wealth and poverty. Patience's treatment of some of the other sins, for instance Pride, Lechery and Gluttony, takes a similar form. These sins, as understood by Patience, are less likely to afflict the poor, who have less reason or opportunity to indulge in them. But equally, we may reflect that some other sins, and notably Envy and "Coveitise", are more likely to afflict the poor than the rich. Perhaps Patience is being disingenuous, discreetly omitting Envy from his list and dropping into allegory in a desperate attempt to slip past us the improbable contention that the poor will not easily be enthralled by Coveitise.

If we read the lines on Coveitise in a flowing, conversational manner, we shall possibly conclude that the deception is rather successful; for the lines about the wrestling match do carry conviction - they are the most memorable lines in the whole sequence - and it is easy to leave the basis of that conviction unexamined. But if, on the other hand, we read more slowly, as the pauses created by the feminine endings direct us to do, we shall have to say that the deception does not work; we cannot help trying to make a valid sense out of what we read. In fact I believe that there is no attempt at deception and that this way of interpreting Patience's argument is fundamentally misconceived.

First, a point about Envy. If by this is meant, in general, desire for other people's good things, their honours, riches and bedfellows, this would certainly make Envy a sin to which the poor might be especially prone; and it would also be hard to distinguish interestingly from Coveitise. But normally in medieval accounts of the sins Envy is nothing so rational. Instead it is seen as a persisting psychological state in which the fortunes of others have a quite inexplicable effect on the emotions of the sufferer; inexplicable, that is, because the rejoicing for which he sorrows, or the sorrow for which he rejoices, need have no material bearing at all on his own fortunes. In that sense Envy is as unselfcentred as sympathy. Langland's portrayal (B V 75-132) is explicit on this point. Envy finds other people's misfortune more delectable to contemplate than his own fortune (B V 91-92). He longs for Heyne's coat, but only so Heyne should not have it; Heyne's loss, no matter how, is what he dreams of (B V 108-112). The distinction I am making is turned to comic effect in the Confessio Amantis, where Genius defines Envy in this strict sense, but the lover's confession reveals only desire to possess his lady (Book II, 1-78 etc.).[1] Langland, understanding Envy in the strict sense, need not have found himself especially embarrassed by the need to dissociate this sin from poverty; although I admit I have no other explanation for its absence from the sequence.

Patience's treatment of Sloth is a clue to the deeper understanding of his procedure. Nothing would have been easier than to argue that Sloth is a sin by which the materially poor are unlikely to be troubled; the need to work for subsistence would see to that. But Patience takes quite a different line (B XIV 253-40). He is concerned exclusively with that most-discussed branch of Sloth, despair of salvation. He argues that consciousness of poverty should give a man added confidence in salvation, and, more interestingly, that misfortune will teach him to develop a special faith in God as "his grettest help" (255). The assertion that "Meschief" is the adversary of despair is at first glance paradoxical.

However, it makes more sense when we recall that Patience's "poverte" is also specified as "poverte ther pacience is" (B XIV 217). Indeed this conception of patient poverty is evidently the key to the whole passage, and will help us not only here but in the section about Coveitise. But what does Patience mean by patient poverty? A psychological state rather than a material one, assuredly, but not, I think, simply a state of virtue. If that were so it would naturally be true that it is a fine defence against all manner of sin, but that would hardly be worth saying. Anyway it is clear that the people whom Patience has in mind do sin; they may fall into Gluttony (231-34) or fail in their duty to God (253). Likewise, the wrestling image introduced to illustrate encounters with Wrath and Coveitise suggests that the patient poor will not be allowed to remain in saintly aloofness from these sins. They are, in fact, quite ordinary people, like Haukyn; and it is Haukyn's way of life, as it has been presented to us in B Passus XIII, not that of the rich, which provides the most relevant contrast to patient poverty. If we are to explicate the lines

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1. References are to G.C. Macaulay, ed., The English Works of John Gower, EETS, E.S. 81, 82 (London: Oxford University Press, 1900) (I, 130-32).

on Coveitise, we cannot leave Haukyn (to whom they are addressed) out of account.

Haukyn appears to be something of a shape-shifter, as is appropriate to his allegorical function as Activa Vita (B XIII 224), the exemplar of ordinary secular life; although it may be that Langland is portraying a genuine mode of fourteenth-century life that is hard to categorize in traditional terms. At first Haukyn appears as "a mynstral" (i.e. a functionary) and "a wafrer" (224, 226), but later he is seen as an entrepreneur with substantial concerns abroad (391-93). At another point we hear that he is poor, although he tries to give the impression that he is not; and this is evidently "impatient poverty":

> Povere of possession in purs and in cofre
> And as a lyoun on to loke and lordlich of speche
> Boldest of beggeris a bostere that noght hath
> (B XIII 300-02).[1]

Haukyn's defiantly inflated sense of his own position comes over in the easy terms in which he speaks of the pope, for whose difficult position he has some sympathy (255-59). Contrary to the simple view that poverty and pride do not go together, it appears that they may well do so where consciousness of social position is a factor, notably among attendants on the rich (Patience in the later section tells us that pride may dwell "or in the maister or in the man" (B XIV 216)).

Haukyn's uncertain income does not prevent him from falling into most of the deadly sins; we see his pride here, later his lechery, finally his sloth. His coat, also,

> Was colomy thorugh coveitise and unkynde desiryng
> Moore to good than to God the gome his love caste
> (B XIII 355-56).

In subsequent lines we find a list of grabbing tricks to match those of Sir Hervy in the earlier account of the Sins.

Haukyn is hasty and energetic, and hates idleness:

> Al ydel ich hatie for of Actif is my name
> (B XIII 238)

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[1] Note the feminine ending in line 302, with the stress on "noght".

> And thanne wold I be prest to the peple paast for to make
> And buxom and busy aboute bread and drynke
>
> (B XIII 250-51)

> Quod Actyf tho al angryliche and arguinge as hit were
>
> (C XVI 114).

Some readers have taken a hint from the first of these quotations and interpreted this characteristic as merely emblematic of Haukyn's allegorical function, hence having nothing to do with psychological verisimilitude (cf. Pearsall, C XVI 144n.). But it makes sense in psychological terms too. We have seen that Haukyn is ever dissatisfied, fretfully poor, and this state of mind is likely to result in exceptional busyness. In Haukyn's case the energy is expended both in his outer life and in his inner life, for Haukyn is an active fantasist, presenting a highly-coloured view of himself to the world (no doubt to himself too), full of advice that will never be given and dreams that will never be realized. The absurd scenario in which he sees himself writing to the pope for a miraculous blessing and then using it to halt the Black Death is worthy of Oblomov.

Haukyn's **covetousness partakes of both kinds of restlessness. It is of** course a matter of active acquisitiveness, but prior to the deed there is the state of mind that precipitates the deed, an imaginary fantasy about owning the desired good. The long limbs of Coveitise in the wrestling match express both aspects of the sin, both the longing and the grasping. This is to understand by "Coveitise" the sinful activity rather than the tempting agent that reaches out to grasp its human victims. While the latter interpretation might at first seem more logical, the former is, I think, correct.

> For men knowen wel that Coveitise is of a kene wille
> And hath hondes and armes of a long lengthe
>
> (B XIV 240-41).

If "Coveitise" stands merely for the temptation, this is only a way of saying in personified terms that it is extremely tempting. But if "Coveitise" stands for the sinner, we can see this as an acute expression of the nature of covetousness, its ingenuity, energy, and tendency to encroach upon other people's space both imaginatively and actually. In fact we can see the lines as describing someone very like Haukyn. Against this there is the argument that it makes more sense to interpret the wrestling match as a conflict between the poor man and temptation than as a conflict between the poor man and the covetous man. However this sensible interpretation has serious weaknesses. Even granted that a long reach is conceivably a disadvantage in a wrestling match, and granted that it may not be special pleading to select wrestling for one's analogy (rather than, say, a sword-fight, which would tend to favour the long-limbed), it is surely ridiculous to argue that the "kene wille" of one of the adversaries is likely to prove a defect. Furthermore, if the wrestling is an image of temptation, Patience ought to argue that Coveitise would lose. But this is not claimed; all he says is that

> lovely layk was it nevere bitwene the longe and the shorte
> (B XIV 243).

"Good sport", as Schmidt glosses it. The contest would be inharmonious in an unsatisfactory way for the spectator. Patience's image in fact expresses incompatibility, an unhappy marriage. That should make us turn back to the alternative interpretation of Coveitise as a sinner and not a temptation. The wrestling match would then illustrate with some precision the fundamental incompatibility of two kinds of temperament: that of the patient poor, and that of Haukyn. I realize that in saying this I have wantonly extended the application of the metaphor, which is specifically tied to Coveitise. My excuse is that, as I pointed out earlier, these are the most memorable lines in the sequence, and they represent an escape from concrete particulars into allegory. Rather than attribute this change of mode to evasiveness, I prefer to see it as amounting to an encapsulation of the whole point of the episode, namely the crucial contrast between Haukyn's way of life and the new way of life that Patience recommends to him. But we have yet to lay bare the heart of this contrast.

Haukyn is interested in a cure for the plague, and significantly so, for he suffers from a moral plague himself. Indeed the relationship between physical sickness and moral sickness is always a close one in the middle ages, and hence we find that Haukyn's state of mind actually makes him ill:

> And whan I may noght have the maistrie swich malencolie I take
> That I cacche the crampe the cardiacle som tyme
> Or an ague in swich an angre and some tyme a fevere
> (B XIII 333-35).[1]

I am not about to argue that Haukyn actually has the plague. Nevertheless, there is a nightmarish analogy to be drawn. In a world without effective medicine, the first sign of the plague is an inevitable promise of more to come. Likewise Haukyn's coat, which cannot be kept clean for even an hour, demonstrates an inevitability built in to Haukyn's way of life. From that first spot follows a multiplicity of others, and Haukyn believes that this is a state of affairs from which he cannot escape. In our own culture the state of the addict offers another parallel.

Langland's presentation of Haukyn mirrors this frightening descent into sin. At first we only hear him speak (B XIII 224ff.). Haukyn is anecdotal and opinionated, and "wafreres" had a poor reputation (cf. Pearsall, C VII 285n. and C XV 199n.), but he could almost be mistaken for a legitimate contributor to the collection of sound teaching that Will receives throughout the poem. After all, Dame Study is anecdotal and opinionated too, and it is not immediately that we can distinguish such a passage as the following from much that we have heard before:

> Ac if myght of myracle hym faille it is for men ben noght worthi
> To have the grace of God and no gilt of the Pope
> For may no blessynge doon us boote but if we wile amende
> Ne mannes masse make pees among Cristene peple
> Til pride be pureliche fordo and that thorugh payn defaute
> (B XIII 255-59).

After some fifty lines we are told that Will and Conscience have been observing Haukyn's coat (B XIII 273ff.). Presumably this has been going on all the time, but as the reader's experience is sequential he receives the impression that Will takes a while to notice the betrayal of Haukyn's moral state that is displayed there. Even so, he does not yet see it fully. It is another fifty lines before Haukyn turns around to reveal that

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[1] Cf. also the sin of Envy discussed earlier. This resembles a disease both in issuing in irrational feelings and in being a sin that the sinner does not enjoy committing. See B V 75-84, 117-27.

> It was fouler bi fele fold than it first semed
>
> (B XIII 319).

The account of Haukyn's sinfulness becomes increasingly intense, for so far we have only seen his pride, and while Pride may be the deadliest sin, it is also the most widespread, least criminal and most socially acceptable. Now, as sins proliferate, each one seems more sinister because it is seen as forming part of an ever-growing family. Will and Patience are so overwhelmed that they seem to be unable to take in everything at once:

> I waitede wisloker and thanne was it soilled
> With likynge of lecherie as by loking of his eighe
>
> (B XIII 342-43)
>
> Thanne Pacience parceyved of pointes his cote
> Was colomy thorugh coveitise and unkynde desiryng
>
> (B XIII 354-55)
>
> Yet that glotoun with grete othes his garnement hadde soiled
> And foule beflobered it as with fals speche
>
> (B XIII 399-400).

This alarmingly extended accumulation of detail is, if you will, merely the inevitable consequence of being unable to say more than one thing at once. But it suggests too the gradual clearing of Will's vision; and also, I think, the way in which Haukyn's disease spreads. The final transition to Sloth is not presented as something newly perceived but as something that follows from Haukyn's other failures. Langland has by now attained such acceleration that we have no option but to quote from half-way through a sentence:

> Swoor therby swithe ofte and al biswatte his cote
> And moore mete eet and dronk than kynde myghte defie
> And kaughte siknesse somtyme for my surfetes ofte
> And thanne I dradde to deye in dedlich synne
> That into wanhope he worth and wende noght to be saved
> The whiche is sleuthe so slow that may no sleightes helpe it
> Ne no mercy amenden the man that so deieth
>
> (B XIII 402-08).

For Haukyn, sin leads to more sin; and that is the critical difference between his state of existence and patient poverty.

For as I have already noted, the subjects of Patience's praise do sin, but when they do, they recover themselves. They are in a state of stable equilibrium, and if they are knocked slightly askew, a counter-movement restores them to virtue. But Haukyn is like a book balanced on its corner; the slightest movement must quickly lead to total collapse, and in fact he has no chance of staying upright at all.

These are the contrasting modes of existence that cannot come together even in a wrestling match. Despite the length of my analysis, I have left untouched many important issues, not least of which is the question of how Haukyn is to alter his behaviour; can nothing effect the change but sheer miraculous grace? A full treatment ought also to take account of the important contrast between the provisions that Haukyn retails and those offered to him by Patience, a contrast we can see to be intentional from the abbreviated version of the episode in C (cf. C XV 233-37). But I have pursued the point far enough for my present purpose, which is to show that there is reason to pause over the passages that our slower style of reading present to us as problematic, and that the results will not necessarily be fruitless. Langland's image of the unsatisfactory tussle between Coveitise and Poverte, in which neither adversary can really come to grips with the other, crystallizes the idea of utter incompatibility between the psychological states that the adversaries denote. For Haukyn, this is a reassurance that if he could only become "patient", there would be no inclination to fall back into the old spiral of disaster - Haukyn's nightmare. But then, since he is not patient, this reassurance may make redemption in the first place seem more inconceivable than ever. It is not surprising that Will's dream ends in the passionate and equivocal way discussed earlier.

VI

Two important points about Langland's verse have emerged during the course of this chapter.

The first is that Langland's style is a development of the "accumulative" style. We noted that Langland is quite capable of breaking free altogether from the tendency to compile lists. But even when Langland's format is traditional, his lists are full of surprising leaps of thought and rapid switches of focus; often the materials that Langland yokes together are not uniform enough to compose a single localized picture, a single historical chain of events, or even perhaps a single well-defined argument. The result is, I suggested, a poem in which the reader finds himself doing much of the work. The question of why Langland might have wanted this will be taken up in Chapter III.

The second point is that Langland's feminine endings usually have the effect of inducing a pause between lines. In this, as in other ways, they could be regarded as lending to the verse a certain formality or even stiffness which impedes what readers have taken to be the attractively natural-sounding garrulousness of the poet. But more importantly, they cause us to dwell upon difficulties in Langland's lines which are apt to be shrugged off if we ignore this aspect of the metre.

Placed thus side by side, these two observations are clearly related. According to the first, close examination of Piers Plowman reveals a myriad of different modes of thought and language mingled together in successive lines; and according to the second, we are intended to notice this and to concentrate our attention on these puzzling details. Hence as readers we shall neither career onwards without noticing anything that happens, emerging at the end only with some general notions of what ought to have happened - like Priscilla Martin's "Christians"; nor shall we career onwards sensing only some unexamined confusion in our own minds, which we shall later objectify as Langland's reflection of a century in crisis - like the "Agnostics". I am being unfair, of course; but all the same it is reasonable to suppose that if too much twentieth-century criticism has resulted in portraits of the poet that cancel each other out, the cause is likely to be quite fundamental, a matter of going wrong before we have read a page through. This is merely to repeat Spearing's assertion that we have yet to decide what kind of poem we are dealing with; which is the same thing as saying that we have yet to settle with confidence upon a way of reading that seems to produce the right sort of results. Naturally my own contentions can only be verified (and then with no certainty) by trying them out in practice. This challenge will be taken up further in later chapters.

First, however, I intend to make a major deviation. In the following chapter I shall become immersed in that dangerously escapist study, "medieval background". More even than most other explorations of the kind, it may not infrequently appear to be of dubious relevance. Certainly the object I pursue is nothing so concrete as a literary source, or even a group of recondite ideas with which Langland might be supposed to be familiar. There is, on the contrary, nothing recondite about my subject at all; it consists simply of certain related habits of thought that Langland's poem both exemplifies and, in various ways, supersedes (for Piers Plowman is an abundant source of just the materials we require in order to highlight, by contrast, the prevailing drift of the poem). Every medievalist is basically familiar with these "habits of thought"; nevertheless it seems worthwhile to attempt a relatively deliberate engagement with the issues. Even supposing my subject a dead one, it would still require formal presentation. Ultimately I want to suggest something of what Langland is rejecting by his unique modification of the "accumulative" style. Rather than start with this question, however, I begin simply by considering the word "reson". This term, although it provides a label for the chapter, does not define the scope of my subject; I could perhaps have begun from, say, "kynde", and arrived in much the same place, although from a different direction. However, "reson" (as it is conceived by medieval people) is an obviously inviting topic for our scrutiny.

Chapter Two

REASON

I

The *OED* first records the word "reason" in the *Ancrene Riwle*, written about 1200. Its direct relations are "raison" in Old French and "razon" in Provençal; behind these lies the Latin "ratio". The word seems always to have had many senses, and these senses can be said to form a natural group. It is not quite a static group; different senses are uppermost at different times. In early Provençal and Old French texts the most common uses of the word are those that approximate to "speech" or "speech content".[1] This group of senses made its way into English along with all the others, but by the year 1200 senses associated with argument and the reasoning part of the mind had become more central.[2] This is a gradual change of emphasis; one or other sense may become more popular and more active as time passes but all remain alive, perhaps because of the international influence of "ratio" (whose senses are almost innumerable in medieval Latin). Besides, the various senses are not unconnected. Thus, "reason" signifies certain principles or rules enabling the mind to acquire truth; hence it is the psychological faculty that employs these principles; hence, also, the word can stand for the class of truths that are acquired by one who attends to these reasonable principles (these three senses correspond to *OED Reason*, sb., 10 and 11). To reason is therefore to employ the aforementioned faculty, either internally, by thinking, or in public, by argument (cf. *OED Reason*, sb.,

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[1] Cf. *La Chanson de Sainte Foy de Conques* (Provençal, early twelfth century), l. 558: "Con fo ant lui, mes l'a razon"; and *La Chanson de Roland* (Old French, late eleventh century), l. 193: "Li empereres out sa raisun fenie." References are to E. Hoepffner, ed., *La Chanson de Sainte Foy: Tome Premier*, Publications de la Faculté de lettres de l'université de Strasbourg, 32 (Paris: Société d'Edition, 1926) (p. 331); and Cesare Segre, ed., *La Chanson de Roland*, Documenti di Filologia, 16 (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1971) (p. 34).

[2] *La Chanson de Guillaume* (possibly from the first half of the twelfth century) three times contains the line "Cors as d'enfant, e raiſun as de ber" (ll. 1481, 1639, 1980). Tobler-Lomatzsch record this as the first use of the Old French word in the sense of a mental faculty or quality. References are to Hermann Suchier, ed., *La Chançun de Guillelme*, Biblioteca Normannica, VIII (Halle: Niemeyer, 1911) (pp. 59, 65, 76).

19, and Reason, vb., in general). Various linguistic activities may thus be called reasons: arguments, explanations, discourses or statements (OED Reason, sb., 1 to 4). To explain or account for something is to provide a ground or cause for it; so "reason" can also mean a ground or cause (OED Reason, sb., 5 to 9).[1]

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[1] Cf. also MED resoun, n. (2), where the definitions are arranged rather differently.

In this way (that is, in a quasi-logical fashion) it is possible to link together all the main senses of the word; no doubt by juggling the elements in this progression we could come up with several other ways of doing the same thing. These progressions are not attempts to explain why the word developed as it did, but only to show that the various senses are harmoniously related. Indeed my point is precisely that if we have the word at all, we shall have all or most of the senses; they become possible simultaneously. Certainly the author of the Ancrene Riwle, although he does not use the word very often, nevertheless provides the earliest example of "reason" in a number of senses.[1] These verbal acrobatics suggest that even if a listener were not very familiar with the word he would have no difficulty perceiving how each meaning was an extension of the others; or in other words he, not being a student of language, would not have noticed the semantic shifts at all.

A certain inevitability in this group of senses is also suggested by their being shared almost exactly with the word "skille". Like "reason", this probably entered the English language proper at some time during the first 100 years after Hastings.[2] It too can be used in all the senses noted above, which for brevity's sake I shall label "faculty" (1), "principle" (2), "something perceived by reason" (3), "statement"(4), "argument" (5), and "cause" (6). "Skille" never has the exalted bearing that "reason" sometimes adopts, but was plainly regarded as being effectively synonymous with it. It would be unwise to seek a distinction in the elegant variation of Chaucer's Parson:

> I woot wel ther is degree above degree, as reson is; and skile is
> that men do hir devoir ther as it is due.
>
> (CT I 764)

"Reson" and "skile" evidently have a common meaning. It is not very easy to say exactly what the common meaning is, or even whether we ought to interpret these words as adjectives or nouns; taking the sentence as a whole, however, it is clear that the preacher is identifying these propositions as members of the whole body of true things that are, or ought to be, discerned by the faculty of reason. Therefore we should see this sentence as exemplifying the third of the six senses listed above.

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[1] Cf. OED entries for Reason sb., 1, 2, 5 and 10.

[2] Eric Björkman, Scandinavian Loan-words in Middle English, Part I (Halle: Niemeyer, 1900), pp. 126-27; and see also the general comments on pp. 3-7 of the same work.

But we can be sure that Chaucer himself never tried to make this choice. These definitions are the fruit of a detached analysis that does not much resemble the thought-process that accompanies the act of speech. It is always dangerous to take a single word out of its context in a sentence and insist on it yielding paraphraseable content, especially when it is firmly embedded in a common phrase ("as reson is"). If we do, we shall get into trouble with the words of another preacher:

> And þat we are bondon to goye here in þis world and not to reste but to traveyll, I may shewe yowe by skille and reson.[1]

Does "skille and reson" refer to the powers of reasoning (sense 1), or the principles of reasoning (sense 2), or their embodiment in verbal argument (sense 5)? It seems a fruitless question for three reasons. First, we can be sure that the preacher had no single one of these notions in his mind to the exclusion of the others. Second, a decision here (if a decision is possible) would not affect the overall meaning or "gist" of the sentence. Third, it leaves untouched the real problem, which is precisely the overall meaning.

It is easy to conclude too quickly that we have grasped this. "He means just what he says; he means that he will show by reason that we are bound to walk and not to rest, etc." No doubt; but my ability to recast the sentence does not prove that I know what it means. Perhaps I am like Hobbes' divines, who "think they understand ... when they do but repeat the words softly, or con them in their mind."[2] If we were set to translate the passage into a genuine modern idiom, we might choose "by rational argument" as an appropriate equivalent for the phrase we are interested in; it is certainly what might be said in an equivalent context today. But

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1. Woodburn O. Ross, ed., Middle English Sermons: Edited from British Museum Ms. Royal 18 B. xxiii, EETS, O.S. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), Sermon No. 14, p. 74, ll. 10-12.

2. C.B. Macpherson, ed., Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 109 (Part I, Chapter 4).

what is the preacher's argument? "Walk as children of light, says St Paul: therefore we must walk." Obviously if we preface this by promising "rational argument" we shall arouse false expectations and end by drawing the reader's attention to those expectations not being fulfilled. Yet we cannot say that the preacher is illogical, given his premisses. If we feel, nevertheless, that this sort of thing ought not to be described as "rational argument", it must be because the modern phrase promises other things in addition to logicality. It says something, also, about the nature of the assumptions; it even partially specifies the subject of debate.

In other words, we have a certain conception of rational argument. Naturally there is some variation in our individual ideas, but it **is not** senseless to talk about a single conception to which individual ideas more or less approximate, just as it is not senseless to compile a list of standard definitions into a dictionary although individually all speakers of a language speak more or less eccentrically.

"Skille and reson", also, stand for a conception shared by the preacher and his audience that harmonizes with the argument that follows, as our conception of "rational argument" does not. Unfortunately it cannot be stated definitively. This conception is not to be identified with any or with all of a word's definitions; dictionary definitions are intended to isolate logically distinct meanings, but a conception (in the sense I am developing here) has no specific logical status and indeed no absolute stability. Every writer knows that the conception that is evoked in a reader's mind when a particular word is used can be altered by the context of that word; a skilful writer can purge a word of certain associations it might typically suggest, or force an association into prominence when it would normally be submerged and unregistered. And if words do not invariably call forth a stable idea, it is even more obviously true that our ideas are independent of specific terminology. Not perhaps that it is wise to say that one idea may be evoked by different words, because it seems unlikely that a distinguishable mental event ever recurs exactly; so when I talk about "one" idea this is really a conveniently inaccurate way of indicating a recognizable group of mental habits. If I speak in this chapter of a conception of "reason", this is not intended to limit its subject either to a single word (at the linguistic level), or to a single notion, still less a single transient experience (at the mental level). It is intended only to suggest the approximate location, not the extent, of the ground covered.

"Idea", if it is used to signify something that has a continued residence in the mind, is an admittedly suspicious-looking word. My use of it is only a little more precise than that of old-fashioned writers who speak of a people caught up by a "fixed idea", or of a man with a "vision". Such terms defy analysis and are thus especially prone to be challenged, the existence of their referents questioned. But what is opaque to analysis and nebulous when we try to isolate it need not be obscure or imperceptible to those who recognize it. This, however, constitutes an appeal to personal experience - as did my assertion that the preacher's discourse does not fit comfortably with our conception of rational argument - and that kind of appeal has a poor reputation as a proof because the grounds it adduces are admitted to be external to its sense and are thus inscrutable to linguistic analysis; also it may seem to browbeat the reader into confessing the existence of something which, he is persuaded, probably must exist, the question having been so confidently posed.

All this must be conceded; and yet this form of demonstration is unavoidable. Indeed, the only reason for taking an example from modern English ("rational argument") is in order to be able to make this appeal, an appeal that cannot be made when the subject is medieval.

Our difficulty here is analogous to the well-known metaphysical problem of "other minds". If I examine human behaviour from outside, I can see nothing which looks as though it could not be explained by a mechanistic theory of stimulus and response. If I refuse to take into account my own experience, there is nothing to make me doubt the conclusion that human beings are compact and sophisticated computers. It is a superfluous hypothesis that these mechanisms are self-conscious or sentient. Nevertheless I know, at least as regards my own case, that the conclusion is false; a philosophical problem arises because this inside information is non-communicable. It does not follow from any line of reasoning or any record of experimentation that I could present to public scrutiny; it is therefore unfalsifiable and not, without apology, to be admitted as evidence in scientific papers. Taking modern English as our subject, and having determined to ignore our special status as speakers of the language, we could attempt a similar sort of examination to that which I shall attempt in this chapter, and we should no doubt find that "rational argument", for instance, is limited in its application; in one class of circumstances it will appear almost automatically, in another it will always be avoided. In fact we could establish its usage - but no more. To assert further that speakers of modern English would respond to a misapplication of the phrase not just by identifying this as abnormal linguistic behaviour but by saying that the expression does not really mean what it is being used to mean; that would be wholly unjustifiable, but for the fact that, as we are speakers of modern English, we know it is true.

In order to make clearer the relation between the "usage" of a word and what it "really means", let us take as simple material the adjective "olive". This is defined by the OED as "a dull, somewhat yellowish green". But someone who knew only that (and who had never heard of olives) would be likely to transgress English usage. For example, many wine-bottles are made of glass that is certainly olive in colour; yet it is not quite natural to refer to them as "olive" without qualification. Again, there are some types of khaki that are olive-coloured, but we do not call them "olive"; we call them "khaki". On the other hand "olive" may appropriately be applied to, among other things, the bark of certain trees, or the upper plumage of many birds; and English writers frequently refer to certain skin complexions as "olive", although no-one has green skin (the OED provides a separate definition of the word to account for this peculiarity). So much for English usage; now for the "real meaning", about which I should venture to say this: that although "olive" is a colour-word, it also has the power to evoke, in a lesser degree, other aspects of the unripe fruit from whose name the adjective is derived - smoothness, roundness, homogeneity, lack of gloss, opacity. More specifically, it is the skin of the olive which provides us with the term, and I am sure that when we read of an oriental heroine's olive complexion, the writer means to evoke not only the colour but the roundness and smoothness of her face; in short, a certain kind of beauty. In other contexts a latent association with olive oil can be activated; for some writers olive skin is a natural symbol of foreign villainy. By multiplying such observations we could approach the "real meaning" of "olive", and perhaps recognize a degree of justice in our account (for I am contending that speakers of English do know the "real meaning"). Of course all of this is too subjective; I am unwilling to compile a careful statistical survey of English usage and I doubt whether it would be gratefully received. Nevertheless such a survey is a practical possibility, and results could be obtained which resemble mine in kind if not in content.

It will be observed that "real meaning" and "usage" are very closely related. It would hardly be excessive to say that my own conception of "olive" is derived from nothing but its usage; yet it would be difficult to deny that a word's usage takes the form it does because individual speakers have had a particular conception of its meaning. I should prefer to say, without assigning any priority, that language and mentality reflect each other.

"Reason" in the middle ages is a much larger subject than "olive" in present-day English, and the conception that we shall examine is one that, for the most part, we must approach by the external route, taking usage as evidence without being able to check our results against direct knowledge. But this material is not entirely alien, especially to readers of old literature, and perhaps the greatest difficulty comes not from being too far away from medieval people but from being dangerously close and so tending, as I suggested earlier, to assume too quickly that we understand.

The main difficulty is, however, unaffected by cultural distance. This is the unfortunate matter of never quite being able to define the very thing we are talking about. The "real meaning" of "olive" can never be set down precisely, unless we resort to the simple expedient of repeating the word "olive". I did make some attempt to avoid this, mainly by focussing not directly on the idea represented by "olive" but on its links or associations with other ideas (smoothness, opacity, etc.); and that, more extensively, will be my method of approaching a late medieval conception of "reason". Thus, in the next section, I shall begin by considering the relation of this idea to that of moral rectitude: How can reason be perceived as virtuous? And how can goodness be perceived as reasonable? What kind of reason, or what kind of goodness, do such perceptions entail? As we proceed, the network will become more intricate; justice, order, good manners and tradition will gradually be brought into a relationship with "reason" (the inverted commas now being necessary to distinguish the medieval conception that, slowly, will diverge from any modern equivalent). I am not trying to "locate" the object of the search by this method; that would imply a misleadingly spatial analogy. The structure of the mind is not like a chemist's model of molecular structure made out of straws and polystyrene balls, in which ideas are suspended in space by their "links". We have already seen that conceptions do not have the required stability or singleness for this kind of image to be appropriate. "Location" is another (metaphorical) way of saying "definition", which has already been rejected. But if lingering on the associations of our subject is not a way of achieving definition, it is at least a way of talking about it, and I think it is possible to make ourselves understand by this reiterative process, just as children learn their own language by listening to people use it. We do not refuse to talk to children because they are less than fluent; we pay them the compliment of assuming a knowledge that they do not yet possess in order to pass it on to them. And every student of medieval literature teaches himself by the same method; he reads old books in order to become, one day, a good reader of them. The next **section** consists, in effect, of a collection of brief readings.

At the end of the previous chapter I noted that to discuss "reason", as a means of providing a background for my discussion of Langland, was only one of several options. But given the initial choice, the direction from which I approach "reason" is not a further piece of arbitrariness. The narrowness of my discussion is a consequence of the specificity of its purpose. Langland's own concern with "reason" is overwhelmingly a moral one, like his concern with everything else. We may infer that he cares about truth (truth in the modern sense) but to place the primary emphasis here is to misrepresent Langland's own view of his program; his expressed concern is with salvation, a morally just salvation (Langland never forgets that God is good). Hence it is obviously appropriate to begin with the moral dimension of "reason" rather than with its relationship to geometrical conceptions of straightness or regularity, or with arithmetical calculation.[1]

To examine "reason" from the moral point of view is naturally to stress the embodiment of "reason" in "reasonable" people and "reasonable" behaviour. That too is appropriate when our aim is to shed light on Piers Plowman. Will is always portrayed as an outsider to the world of "reason"; he meets people who represent "reason" in various ways, but he is not represented as their equal, and when he reasons for himself the results are amateurish and even absurd (for instance, the ridiculous argument about staves at B XVII 38-48). The effect is that "reason" in Piers Plowman becomes as much a subject under debate as a method by which debate proceeds. Whenever one of Will's teachers is speaking, no matter how unexceptionably, the reader remains aware of Will's eager, sceptical observation, his desire (often, alas, ill-considered) to participate, his readiness to judge rather than to submit. Will is not Langland, but I think here he reflects his creator, for while Langland is of course the true author of all the sermons and discourses in the poem, he is not exactly the author of a reasonable book. Reasoning there is in abundance, much of it borrowed and not a little of it invented, but the whole collection is not articulated into a structured progression of thought. Langland seems to reason not in order to construct but in order to see what happens; he maintains a philosophical disengagement from the business of reasoning, like someone who is too interested in the activity of construction ever to build anything substantial himself. Also, his undoubted fascination springs from very mixed feelings. In Piers Plowman Langland praises Reason but has much to say against learned men, which is not inconsistent in itself; obviously the litterati who speculate about conflict within the Trinity (B X 51-55) are not truly "reasonable" at all, emphatically not so in the medieval sense of the word, even if they are reasoners. But in the third section of this chapter I shall suggest that Langland was also uneasily aware of valid objections he could make to the category of "reasonable" discourse as a whole.

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[1] Cf. Alexander Murray, Reason and Society in the Middle Ages, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 205: "In the metropolis of medieval reckoning, Italy, from the thirteenth century on, the word ragione was normally used, outside the study, to mean 'account'. Ragionare meant 'to calculate'; and Libro della Ragione not 'Book of Logic', but 'Ledger'." English dictionaries, reliant on written (and indeed "literary") sources, possibly cause us to underrate the strength of this association (in Piers Plowman it is variously relevant at B I 22, B IV 157, B V 271, B XI 131, B XVII 261-62, and C XIII 34).

II

> That o kyng cam with Reson covered under sense
> The seconde kyng siththe soothliche offrede
> Rightwisnesse under reed gold Resones felawe
> Gold is likned to Leautee that laste shal evere
> And Reson to richels to right and to truthe
>
> (B XIX 86-90).

The gifts that the three kings brings to Jesus are used, as Derek Pearsall notes, to symbolize attributes of Christ (C XXI 83n.). More specifically they represent the natural, human **strengths** that Conscience associates with the name "Jesus" - Jesus the king of the Jews, not "Christ" the transcendent conqueror. The Magi, in whom resides "al the wit of the world" (82), are in effect proffering their own high attributes, the sum of natural perfection: "Reson and Rightwisnesse and Ruthe", that is (83). In this particular formulation Langland ties all three of his terms together with alliteration; in the more extensive passage that follows, however, "Ruthe" becomes "Pitee" and is somewhat set apart, whereas the other two are treated (in the lines quoted above) not successively but simultaneously. They are "felawes", as Conscience remarks. Readers of line 90 in Skeat's text, denied the ingenious conjecture of "richels" for "ryche golde" that is adopted by both Schmidt and Pearsall in their editions, would have found the distinction between reason and righteousness breaking down altogether. Even as it stands, the syntax supporting "right" and "truthe" in the second half of the line is so uncertain that I can feel no confidence in identifying "right" with "Rightwisnesse" and "truthe" with "Reson". Both "right" and "truth" cross the boundary between rational and moral so inevitably that here it hardly seems worthwhile to insist on confining them to one side or the other. "Truth" in Piers Plowman, when it signifies a human quality, generally translates better as loyalty or perseverance than as accuracy; it is also one of Langland's words for God, but the further association between virtue and holiness is so ingrained in Western tradition that this calls for no additional comment, except perhaps to reiterate that in Piers it is never questioned. As for "right", even in modern English we can talk equally idomatically of "getting a sum right" and of being uncertain whether a proposed course of action "can be right" (the context making it plain that this is moral uncertainty). It would not be difficult to find the word used (in political editorials, perhaps) in a way that we cannot firmly define as either "rational" or "moral"; to the unsympathetic reader the ambiguous sense appears deliberate, calculated to ensnare both pragmatists and idealists.

How Langland handles his account of the three gifts is of course the result of an artistic choice. But Conscience, the speaker here, is not typically one of Langland's most innovative speakers; his big speeches, here and in the debate about Meed, are orthodox in every sense. I want to make only two points about this passage. First and most relevantly, the basic association of reason and righteousness; second, the tendency for reason to side more with justice than mercy - or in this case, more with "Rightwisnesse" than "Pitee".

"An eye for an eye" is a thoroughly reasonable dictum; it "makes sense". When God smites the wicked king Antiochus with an "invisible wounde" in the guts, Chaucer's Monk comments:

> And certeinly the wreche was resonable
> For many a mannes guttes dide he peyne
>
> (CT B 3793-94).

"Wreche" means "revenge", which is justice when exercised by God. Vengeance at the human level is wrong; yet unlike other sins it is usually felt to be right by the man who contemplates it, and there is no difficulty in defending its reasonableness, as Melibeus does:

> For right as they han venged hem on me and doon me wrong right so shal I venge me upon hem and doon hem wronge ...
>
> (CT B 2471).

But in this tale the best arguments are given to Dame Prudence:

> Thanne lat us considere also if the conseillyng of hem that conseilleden you to taken sodeyn vengeaunce, wheither it accorde to resoun. And certes, ye knowe wel 'nay'. For, as by right and resoun, ther may no man taken vengeance on no wight but the juge that hath the jurisdiccioun of it, whan it is graunted hym to take thilke vengeance hastily or attemprely, as the lawe requireth.
>
> (CT B 2567-70)

The fascination of Melibee, so far as we are able to recapture it, lies in its heroine's irresistible triumph, using no other weapon than reason itself, over the weaker and cruder "reasons" that we are at first disposed to accept as the logic of the story, expecting it to be a tale of violence following violence. Prudence interrupts the story in more ways than one, insisting that her husband pause, deliberate, and allow hard argument into the foreground.

The result, as everyone knows, is that Melibee is not much of a story; but there is something refreshing about this spectacular exhibition of good sense. "Good sense" is perhaps insufficiently specific, for it would also be good sense to cry out against murder and sedition, to advise the idle to labour and the passionate to marry. That is reason against folly, and it too can be pleasurable to contemplate, but Prudence begins where this reason stops, and allows the reader to witness and enjoy its development. The implied contrast here is not with obvious folly but with what passes as reasonable; and Melibee is therefore a fruitful text for inquirers into what may pass as reasonable, vengeance in the present instance.

We could put it this way: there is a natural attraction of reason towards justice and even vengeance, but a natural revulsion of reason from pity. Reason exemplifies what a Victorian writer would describe as the masculine virtues. In Piers Plowman we find

> Reed me noght quod Reson no ruthe to have
>
> (B IV 113)

and a little later

> Ac Reson shal rekene with you if I regne any while
> And deme you bi this day as ye han deserved
>
> (B IV 177-78).

It is true that Langland's presentation of "pitee" is not overly sentimental (we do not hear of how it "renneth soone in gentil herte") but special pleading is still required to make the alliance of "pitee" with reason seem natural and not just a clever paradox. This is a challenge to which Langland rises in B Passus XVIII. When he does so, significantly, it is not by dismissing the Old Law as senseless (a possible argument today but surely an unimaginable one in the fourteenth century). Instead he makes an ingenious use of it. Christ explains:

> the Olde Lawe graunteth
> That gilours be bigiled and that is good reson
> *Dentem pro dente et oculum pro oculo*
> *Ergo* soule shal soule quyte and synne to synne wende
> And al that man hath mysdo I man wole amende it
> Membre for membre by the Olde Lawe was amendes
> And lif for lif also and by that lawe I clayme
> Adam and al his issue at my wille herafter
> And that deeth in hem fordide my deeth shal releve
> And bothe quyke and quyte that queynt was thorugh synne
> And that grace gile destruye good feith it asketh
> So leve it noght Lucifer ayein the lawe I fecche hem
> But by right and by reson raunsone here my liges
> *Non veni solvere legem set adimplere*
>
> (B XVIII 339-50a).[1]

So even this *tour de force* in a way testifies to the natural tendency of reason to side with justice. To bring reason to bear at all, Langland has to argue that what seems mercy is really justice, which is why (considered as theology and not as poetry) his treatment of the Atonement is unsatisfactory; it comes close to denying that man ever merited damnation in the first place. But all logical treatments of the Atonement fail.[2]

The *Destruction of Troy* gives us many examples of "an eye for an eye" in action. Ajax makes the appropriate comment when he addresses Paris, from whose arrow he is himself dying, before slaying him:

> Hit is reason and right for þi Ranke loue
> Þat þou part now with pyne fro þi prise Elan
> þat is cause of þis care and this cold angur
> And mony doghty ben dede of Dukes & Knightes
>
> (10715-18).[3]

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1. I have restored the Bx reading of line 343.

2. I am making the general assumption that "mercy", "pitee" and "ruthe" are synonymous terms. They would appear to be interchangeable in the passage from B Passus XIX (cf. 83, 92, 93), and are obviously closely related.

3. References are to George A. Panton and David Donaldson, eds., *The "Gest Hystoriale" of the Destruction of Troy*, EETS, O.S. 39, 56 (London: Oxford University Press, 1869, 1874).

We might translate the opening phrase as "it is just", or "it is fitting", or "it stands to reason". This last expression is a reminder that we have not wholly emancipated ourselves from the old association between reason and justice. In modern English "it stands to reason" may with equal ease bolster a purely rational statement ("If you touch the pan you will burn yourself") or a judgment ("If you touch the pan you deserve to burn yourself"). This is a clear case of usage reflecting the shape of our thoughts.

There are other passages in this poem that show how irresistible the pairing of "reason" and "right" was to alliterative poets. It is thus, for example, that Agamemnon offers his resignation:

> Syn hit is Reason & right þat renkes so mony
> Noght ay obaye to on buerne ne his bone kepe
> þat are so mony & mighty & more of astate
> Now is tyme in this tru or any toile rise
> To discharge me as cheftain & chaunge my lif
> That have maintenede with monhode mony yere past
>
> (8935-40)

(as this is politics, and "Syn hit is Reason & right" means little more than "since we are all agreed", we can see some continuity between this speech and those modern newspaper editorials). Later, the author chides Homer for his partiality towards Achilles:

> How be reason or right or rewle may þou preue
> To deme hym so doghty in dedis of armys
>
> (10316-17).

In Piers Plowman, too, we find the automatic use of this alliterative pairing. The second verse of Psalm 14 is

> Qui ingreditur sine macula et operatur justitiam.

Langland translates:

> Tho that entren of o colour and of one wille
> And han ywroght werkes with right and with reson
>
> (B III 238-39).

It would obviously be a mistake to seek for much distinction between "right" and "reason" here; the poet is simply filling up a line. The same can be said of their reappearance in a passage from the latest and most technical version of the speech:

> Mede many tymes men ȝeueth bifore þe doynge
> And þat is nother resoun ne ryhte ne in no rewme lawe
> That eny man mede toke but he hit myhte deserue
>
> (C III 292-94).

I do not find this the most convincing of Conscience's criticisms of Meed. Even if the validity of his attack on advance payment is granted, which is doubtful, its relevance is suspect; Meed is a slippery concept, but I cannot believe that Conscience is getting to the heart of the matter when he makes it a question of timing. In fact this line of argument soon loses its way in a crowd of exceptions and qualifications so numerous as to make us doubt whether there is anything left of the original proposition (314-31); a fitting end for a contention that depends upon the undefended contradiction that one ought not to pay for work that might never be done (302-03) but ought to work for a wage that might never be paid (295-97).

I am not commending this as a good way of reading Langland in general; to think only of how we would shout him down if anyone were so foolish as to say the same thing today is the easiest and least rewarding approach to any medieval text. But it is worth stepping outside the fourteenth century for a moment, and reflecting that in this case the contention praised as reasonable and right is in fact neither; its only defender is tradition (hence Conscience's appeal to the laws of all realms). The word "reason" may be a convenient substitute for reasoning, and that is how it is used here; the point is worth making in the present context because, although "reason" still has this use today, its power as a rhetorical instrument is clearly enhanced if it carries exalted connotations of moral goodness and religious orthodoxy as well as mere rationality. It is hard not to be swayed by such a potent mixture.

As I suggested at the end of the previous section, there is another argument for reading slightly against the grain here, which does not apply to the passages that I quoted from the _Destruction of Troy_. These lines, like those with which I began this section, are spoken by Conscience, and that is more than coincidence. He is not really an individualized character, but there is a consistency in his viewpoint, one aspect of which is his untroubled assumption that reason and right go together. I would not wish to argue that Langland does not mean what Conscience says, but the correlation between a particular speaker and the most overt expressions of a particular worldview does suggest that the author is aware of it *as* a worldview, no matter how highly he may regard it. In other words Langland is not always using Conscience's vision to see with; sometimes it is itself the object of his scrutiny, as it is the object of ours in this section. Langland too had the capacity to step outside of fourteenth-century thought-forms, at least those exemplified by Conscience.

Conscience's ethics are legalistic; the picture is of a man fenced around by a series of injunctions. Bad men transgress them; good men do not. It sounds severe when Conscience presents it to us, but that is not inevitably the case. It could be taken to imply that men are capable of living calmly within the frontiers of the moral law, as for the most part they keep within the civil law, and that if they do so the law need not trouble them; so long as what you do is not positively wrong, you may do as you please.

That is certainly the inference that Haukyn makes; it is presupposed in the question he asks Patience:

> Wheither paciente poverte quod Haukyn be moore plesaunt to Oure Drighte
> Than richesse rightfulliche wonne and resonably despended
> (B XIV 101-02).

In this case "rightfulliche" and "resonably" are not to be taken as synonymous, although their appearance together is still significant. "Rightfulliche" evidently means something like "honestly";[1] that is to say, the riches are gained without transgression of the law. But laws typically relate more to how money is come by than to how it is spent, and "resonably" suggests expenditure that is recognizably proper and moderate, not, for example, directed towards the "synful costlewe array of clothing" that Chaucer's Parson is so bitter against,[2] but perhaps towards the adequate remuneration of poor clerks (not a random example, as will appear shortly). Haukyn in fact imagines, like the confident young man in Matthew 19:16-22, that if our lives are law-abiding and do not flout received ideas of propriety, nothing more is required of us. But Patience, like Jesus in the Gospel passage, denies that there is ever a point at which we can truly say that God's claims upon us have been adequately satisfied. Jesus responds:

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[1] As it is rendered in Goodridge's translation and Schmidt's gloss.

[2] *CT* I 412-31.

> Si vis perfectus esse, vade, vende quae habes et da pauperibus,
> et habebis thesaurum in caelo; et veni, sequere me.
>
> (Matthew 19:21)

The implication is that we cannot in fact rest short of perfection, although perfection is apparently unattainable; the obedience to one moral imperative only induces new imperatives to present themselves to us, either to be grappled with or to be consciously defied. Hence Patience replies:

> I wiste nevere renk that riche was that whan he rekene sholde
> Whan he drogh to his deeth day that he ne dredde hym soore
> And that at the rekenyng in arrerage fel **rather than out of dette**
>
> (B XIV 105-07).

For Patience the moral life cannot be understood as a fixed state determined by its obedience to a limited number of stable precepts. Instead, it is a process; in the words of the preacher quoted earlier, "I say þat we shall goyne, for here to stonde is to vs inpossible".[1] But the close association between reason and morality tends to evoke the static picture that Patience rejects. It suggests a seductive analogy between the life of a good Christian, which obeys the precepts of reason in its ethical aspect, and the immutable validity of a solution in mathematics that obeys the precepts of reason in its logical aspect.

The dynamic view of virtue presented by Jesus and Patience also has a tendency to contradict the notion that virtue is something moderate, a notion that seems in practice to accompany the static view (moderation was one of the ideas in Haukyn's mind). Langland expresses this conflict when, earlier in the poem, he quotes the Gospel passage we have been discussing:

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1. See above, p. **54.**

Although Salomon seide as folk seeth in the Bible
Divicias nec paupertates &c
Wiser than Salomon was bereth witnesse and taughte
That parfit poverte was no possession to have
And lif moost likynge to God as Luc bereth witnesse
Si vis perfectus esse vade et vende &c

(B XI 268-72a).

Pursuing the point, Langland[1] arrives at this apparently uncompromising position:

If preestes weren wise thai wolde no silver take
For masses ne for matyns noght hir mete of usureres
Ne neither kirtel ne cote theigh thei for cold sholde deye
And thei hir devoir dide as David seith in the Sauter
Iudica me Deus et discerne causam meam
Spera in Deo speketh of preestes that have no spendyng silver
That if thei travaille truweliche and truste in God almyghty
Hem sholde lakke no liflode neyther lynnen ne wollen

(B XI 281-87).

But here Langland seems on the point of contradicting himself amusingly, that is if we take the defence of his life in the C text as autobiographical and seriously intended. In that passage Will sees nothing wrong in accepting some sort of payment. Clerks, he thinks, should

synge masses or sitten and wryten
Redon and resceyuen þat resoun ouhte to spene

(C V 68-69).

In fact there is no absolute contradiction. Firstly, it is evident that Langland has in mind two rather different groups of men; Will is a clerk of sorts, but not a parish priest. Secondly, "spene" in the C passage does not necessarily imply financial outlay, and perhaps means no more than the provision of food, which is apparently all that Will receives (C V 48-52). Finally, it emerges that in the passage about priests Langland is not attacking payment as such but the acceptance, and no doubt the encouragement, of gifts that are over and above the stipend that is provided, or ought to be provided, by the bishop. The two pictures are therefore somewhat different: the one of a poor clerk meekly accepting alms, the other of an acquisitive priest. It is not so clear that there is a significant logical distinction, and one may legitimately feel that Langland is using the more moderate and "reasonable"

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1. It is not clear whether the section from which these lines are taken is to be thought of as authorial comment or as spoken by one of the characters, e.g. Trajan or Lewtee.

ethic when he wants to defend the continuation of current behaviour (for this is a "static" view), but he finds the extremist, "dynamic" ethic a more powerful and dramatic instrument when he is advocating a change in current behaviour.

Mention of moderation in an ethical context is likely to bring Aristotle to mind. In fact John Norton-Smith has shown that, if Chaucer had an adequate understanding of Aristotle's doctrine, he was about the only person in the middle ages who did.[1] Strictly speaking, Aristotle's use of the mean as a tool of ethical analysis does not imply that virtue is anything short of perfection: "from the point of view of its essence and the definition of its real nature, virtue is a mean; but in respect of what is right and best, it is an extreme".[2] Furthermore, what is good is not defined by general laws, but is dependent entirely on specific circumstances: "every knowledgeable person avoids excess and deficiency, but looks for the mean and chooses it - not the mean of the thing, but the mean relative to us."[3] Aristotle's mean is not an easy target to hit. He quotes with approval from an unknown author:

> For men are bad in countless ways, but good in only one.[4]

In general, the fact that Aristotle uses the concept of the "mean" as a way of analysing the essence of virtue does not necessarily indicate that he has a particular vision of the good life as, say, moderate, sober, restrained or commonsensible. But the precise meaning of Aristotle's arguments, although clear enough to an Aquinas,[5] are not of much significance to us. Ockham, who seems to have thought of himself as an expounder of the true Aristotle, was in this respect more representative of medieval thinkers as a whole; he borrows Aristotelian notions such as the virtues or "right reason" ("for right reason is included in the definition of virtue in the second book of the _Ethics_"), but proposes a moral philosophy that is wholly different in spirit from that of his master.[1] This is the sort of way in which Aristotle is used in less technical writings:

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[1] John Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer, Medieval Authors (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 226-60.

[2] Ethics 1107a7. Translations are from J.A.K. Thomson, trans., The Ethics of Aristotle, rvsd. ed. by Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

[3] 1106b6.

[4] 1106b35.

[5] Cf. Summa Theologica I-II q. 64 arts. 1-3. References are to T. Gilby et al., eds., St Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, 61 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964-1980) (II, 50-55; hereafter referred to as the Blackfriars edn.).

> And He that was kyng of Heuene, of eyr, of erthe, of see, and of alle thinges that ben conteyned in hem, wolde alle only be cleped kyng of that lond whan he seyde, _Rex sum Iudeorum_, that is to seyne, I am kyng of Iewes. And that lond He chees before alle other londes as the beste and most worthi lond and the most vertuouse lond of alle the world, for it is the herte and the myddes of all the world; wytnessynge the philosophere that seyth thus, _Virtus rerum in medio consistit_, that is to seye, The vertue of thinges is in the myddes.[2]

Jerusalem, of course, is situated at the centre of medieval _mappae mundi_. It is this kind of idea, not precisely specified and thus very widely applicable, that concerns us: "the best is in the middle".

When it is quantity and not position that is at issue, this is transmuted into "not too much not too little", which is evidently what the Water Miller means by "reasonable" in these lines from the sixteenth-century

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1. _Quaestiones Variae_, no. 7., formerly referred to as _Commentary on the Sentences_ III q. 12, after the Lyon edition of 1494-1496. My references are to Gedeon Gál et al., eds., _Guillelmi de Ockham Opera Philosophica et Theologica_, Editiones Instituti Franciscani, 15 vols. (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: St. Bonaventure University, 1967-1984) (Opera Theologica VII, p. 362). Ockham seems to be referring to _Ethics_ 1107a1. On "right reason" in Ockham see Frederick Copleston, _A History of Philosophy_, Volume III ("Ockham to Suárez") (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1953), pp. 105-09, from which I quote; and Janet Coleman, _English Literature in History 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers_ (London: Hutchinson, 1981), pp. 245-47, where she argues that the notion is relevant to Langland's Reason.

2. M.C. Seymour, ed., _Mandeville's Travels_ (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 1. Compare C.S. Lewis' remarks on the "philosophically humiliating" contributions of Plato and Aristotle to the medieval model in _The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 19.

author John Heywood's interlude, the *Play of the Wether*:

> If rayne come reasonable as I requyre yt
> We sholde of your wyndemylles have nede no whyt
> (708-09).[1]

Holy Church makes a similar use of "reson" here:

> And drynke whan thow driest ac do noght out of reson
> That thow worthe the wers whan thow werche sholdest ...
> Mesure is medicine though thow muchel yerne
> (B I 25-26, 35).

But it is also possible to distinguish another kind of moderation here, for which the word "sobriety" inevitably suggests itself. It is easiest to illustrate by its opposite, which in this case is typified by Lot's relations with his daughters (27-33). This is drunken behaviour; it also falls into a larger class of behaviour that is insane, wild and without restraint, attributes of the bad life that we can find as early as St Paul, or St Augustine, who connects them with heterodoxy, the "deadly madness of impiety".[2] In the A text Langland tells us that drunkards are "wantoun & wilde wiþoute any resoun", and "ben braynwood as bestis". "Thanne", he continues, "haþ þe pouk power *sire princeps huius mundi*

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[1] References are to Peter Happé, ed., *Tudor Interludes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) (p. 163).

[2] *De Civitate Dei* XI 4. References are to B. Dombart and A. Kalb, eds., *Sancti Aurelii Augustini: De Civitate Dei*, Corpus Christianorum, series latina, XLVII-XLVIII (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955) (XLVIII, 504-505). Translations are taken from Henry Bettenson, trans., *Augustine: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) (p. 432).

Ouer such maner of men miȝt in here soulis" (A X 55-63). So, in the earlier passage about Lot, we read that he "Dide by hise doughtres that the devel liked" (B I 28). Malory, without the same depth of moral disapproval, speaks of the overexcited Sir Gareth in similar terms: "And the more he loked on her, the more he brenned in love, that he passed hymself farre in his reson."[1] The spatial analogy suggested by this expression, and still current in such modern ones as "keeping to the straight and narrow" or "being led astray", is all but irresistible; and the most powerful of all images of this kind of immoderation is in fact a journey in space, the "mad flight" of Ulysses beyond the bounds set by Hercules.[2] It is, ironically, a journey that Ulysses commends to his men on the following grounds:

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[1] Eugène Vinaver, ed., Malory: Works, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 204, ll. 23-24. See p. 341, l. 41, for another example of Malory's moral neutrality. Morgan le Fay is a bad character, but "she made grete sorow oute of reson" merely means that she grieved bitterly, just as anyone else would do in the same circumstances.

[2] Inferno XXVI 90-142. References are to Natalino Sapegno, ed., Dante Alighieri: La Divina Commedia, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Florence: "La Nuova Italia" Editrice, 1968) (I, 292-95). Dante's innovative extension of the Ulysses story is a variant on the myth of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). The designs of Nimrod and his followers were "a fole conseil" according to the Cursor Mundi (2219), an act of arrogant impiety according to Augustine, who rationalizes the story by presuming that their deliberate aim was to challenge God (De Civitate Dei XVI 4). In any case the desire to build a tower to the sky is another graphic image, in spatial terms, of the transgression of imposed limits.

fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.

(*Inferno* XXVI 119-20)

But it appears that Ulysses lacks the "reasonable" sense of virtue and knowledge as restrained by limits beyond which one should not pass. He has this much in common with Jesus and Patience, as discussed earlier: his vision is a dynamic one, expressing itself in an action as quixotic in its own way as those that Jesus suggests to the young man.

We have encountered beasts twice in the preceding paragraph. For Wit in A Passus X they typify folly; Ulysses, on the other hand, presumably alludes to their unenterprising conformity to habit. Elsewhere in *Piers* these somewhat contradictory ways of interpreting the behaviour of animals are duplicated, except that Will admires what Ulysses despises. He observes their ordered, repetitive, temperate ways of life:

Reson I seigh soothly sewen alle beestes
In etynge in drynkynge and in engendrynge of kynde
And after cours of concepcion noon took kepe of oother
As whan thei hadde ryde in rotey tyme anoonright therafter
Males drowen hem to males amornynge by hemselve
And femelles to femelles ferded and drowe

(B XI 334-39).

This natural moderation is in stark contrast to man's behaviour:

Y se non so ofte sorfeten sothly so mankynde
In mete out of mesure and mony tymes in drynke
In wommen in wedes and in wordes bothe
They ouerdoen hit day and nyhte and so doth nat oþer bestes
They reule hem al by resoun ac renkes ful fewe

(C XIII 186-90).

But Anima betrays a quite different view:

Hethen is to mene after heeth and untiled erthe
As in wilde wildernesse wexeth wilde beestes
Rude and unresonable rennynge withouten keperes

(B XV 457-59).

The complex relationship of reason and nature does not concern us here. What is relevant is the conception of reason that Will and Anima share, in spite of their disagreement about animals. For Anima, unreasonableness is expressed by a frenzy of undirected movements; for Will, reasonableness is expressed by a serene, ordered procession, above all a slow one. His vision apparently takes in all the seasons at once, and he focusses not on the individual runnings and jumpings of beasts but on the gradual regroupings of whole populations (cf. B XI 338-39). It is also an exceedingly quiet picture, one of the few Middle English descriptions of nature to make no reference to the singing of birds. This peacefulness constitutes a reproof to the immoderate speech of men (C XIII 186); a rather unfair one, since beasts cannot speak.

This brings us to a final, psychological manifestation of the moderate, namely the calm attitude of a mind unswayed by emotional tumult. May, in the Merchant's Tale, uses the word "resoun" in this connexion:

> And she answerede sire what eyleth yow
> Have pacience and resoun in youre mynde
>
> (CT E 2368-69).

This momentary adoption of the style of Dame Prudence is of course used as the prelude to a monstrous deceit, and it is for similar tactical reasons that the Wife of Bath pays this compliment to one of her first three husbands, the ones that were old and rich:

> Oon of us two moste bowen doutelees
> And sith a man is moore resonable
> Than womman is ye moste been suffrable
>
> (CT D 440-42).

"Skille", which so often shadows "reason", can also be used to signify an unruffled attitude. One of the attributes of the man who eats the seed of Spiritus Temperancie is

> Ne sholde no scornere out of skile hym brynge
>
> (B XIX 286).

The association between reason and good temper is obviously not arbitrary; it is a medieval truism, and almost a modern one, that we are most likely to be rational when we are unaffected by powerful feelings. This is one point where the spheres of reason and virtue naturally touch. Thanks in large part to the regrettable influence of Stoicism, medieval moralists had a similar antipathy to emotion. Like Marcus Aurelius, they thought at once of mean emotions - anger, concupiscence, envy, violence - not the generous emotions of pity, kindness, or hatred of injustice. Such passions did of course exist, and were approved, but they were not usually called passions. They would be categorized under the cool headings of the Cardinal Virtues;

Justice, Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence. It is the Sins that have the passionate-sounding names; Wrath or Avarice, for example. Gluttony and Sloth are immoderate in the more obvious sense of referring to excessive indulgence in activities that are otherwise blameless.[1]

In its various forms, therefore, moderation is to be commended on moral grounds. But moderation is also desirable for other reasons. If it means conformity to normal behaviour, it increases our chances of being accepted by society and lessens those of being ridiculed or cast out. Also, moderation is often common sense, if we value health or financial security. Holy Church's observation that being drunk will affect your work is one that cannot be lightly disregarded even by those who do not care about their duty to society. It may be difficult, therefore, to decide whether the reasonableness of an action is meant to indicate conformity with virtue, convention, or self-interest. Even when we can so decide, the fact that the same word is being used in all these connexions suggests that differentiation between them was not an automatic process.

To some extent the same breadth of reference can be discerned in modern usage, as C.S. Lewis points out: "It is true that we still have in our modern use of 'reasonable' a survival of the old sense (i.e. the ethical sense), for when we complain that a selfish man is unreasonable we do not mean that he is guilty of a non sequitur or an undistributed middle." But, he goes on to say, this survival "is far too humdrum and jejune to recall much of the old association."[2] No doubt that is true if we compare it with the Reason of the poets that Lewis disinters so splendidly; but many of the appearances of "reason" with which this chapter deals are themselves fairly humdrum. Nevertheless, there is a difference even at the more mundane level; it is not simply the case that the summit has been eroded.

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[1] These crude definitions are of course frequently elaborated by extension and analogy, or refined by meditating upon the psychological state of one whose behaviour typically manifests itself in eating or sleeping too much. Purgatorio and the Parson's Tale, in their different ways, provide substantial examples of this kind of development; and see also the discussion of Envy in the previous chapter (pp. 42-43).

[2] Lewis, The Discarded Image, p. 161.

For example:

> The tyme cam that resoun was to ryse ...
>
> (*CT* E 1768).

Is this an appeal to conventional standards, or to pragmatism, or even to moral values? The latter is certainly possible; the Parson considers the question of lingering over meals, specifically in connexion with fasting, but he surely implies that both the length and timing of meals ("resonable houre for to ete") are matters that ought to be taken seriously in every season.[1]

The speaker is the Merchant, and the scene is January's wedding-feast, which, like the ceremony itself, is very proper, although the union it seals is actually (if not technically) very improper - "For we han leve to pleye us by the lawe." The whole passage reflects January's desire to believe himself acting in accordance with reason; his susceptibility to the magic word is exploited later by May, as we have seen, and no doubt Justinus' assurance (although sarcastically intended) that January need be in no fear of his salvation

> So that ye use as skile is and reson
> The lustes of youre wyf attemprely
>
> (*CT* E 1678-79)

speaks straight to his heart.

The Merchant, on the contrary, is disgusted by the event, as we are, but he has a suspicious tendency to adopt the hearty participatory stance traditional to medieval narrators, only occasionally interrupted by a sharp withdrawal of consent; rather as if he enjoyed revolting himself. The line that we are examining comes from one of his moments of empathy; either with the guests themselves or with January, who is eager to get the formal business over and is doing all he can to implant "in subtil wyse" the reflection that it might not be a bad idea to move on to the next stage in the proceedings.

This reflection is one that is just as likely to occur to modern dinner-guests as to medieval ones, and would very naturally be expressed in the words I have used. Furthermore, the modern guest might be as nonplussed as the medieval one if asked to specify the standard by which rising from the table was judged to be "not a bad idea". In the end he might reply that he was only responding to early signs of restlessness whether observed in himself or inferred from the behaviour of others. He would hardly expect to be picked up on this point. But if someone today were to announce that "it would be reasonable to leave the table now", the question of why it would be reasonable would instantly occur to everyone present. It is not at all a natural idiom, although it could perhaps be explained. Are we, for example, in a crowded restaurant where other people are waiting to dine? The word "reasonable", in fact, refers us to something that we ought to do, as a moral duty, or had better do, as a matter of expediency. There is, indeed, another kind of setting for the sentence: the speaker and his companions have been impatient to leave for some time past but have been prevented from doing so (perhaps it would not have been good manners). Now, it is suggested, they are at last free to leave; that would no longer be "unreasonable". In the first of these two scenarios, "reasonable" has a compulsive force, while in the second it has a permissive force; in both, however, the statement is about influences on our conduct that may conflict with our emotions, either binding us or releasing us to rise from the table. It does not mean merely that we want to, although to obey the promptings of desire is, other things being equal, reasonable; that, quite literally, goes without saying.

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[1] *CT* I 1051.

The scene in the Merchant's Tale is different from either of the two I have outlined. The guests are not impatient to depart (it is January who is impatient) and they do not have a duty to do so, not at any rate one that is obvious to us. We must try, therefore, to imagine a way of conceiving the world that could result in this slightly different way of speaking. It would appear to be either the case that "reason" had an additional meaning in Middle English, so that to describe an action as reasonable could simply mean that we want to do it, or that medieval people were conscious of certain factors, which we no longer recognize, dictating the proper duration of a meal. Either they used the word "reason" differently, or they thought differently. But usage and thought reflect each other, as was noted earlier, and the likelihood is therefore that both are slightly different. I cannot in fact imagine a world in which the same word is often used to mean both "what we want to do" and "what we don't want to do, but had better do". Nor can I imagine a world in which the disagreeable spectre of Compulsion was complaisantly invited to dinner. The truth must lie somewhere in between; that is, medieval people did feel some sort of continuity between, let us say, attending church and not idling over a feast, but they must also have felt these obligations as somewhat less intolerable than we are apt to imagine. Our own sense of the difference between what we are obliged to do and what we want to do is, it would seem, exceptionally acute.

It may of course be the case that this other world that I find at January's wedding-feast never existed outside old manuscripts; in other words, that it is an idealized world, the literary creation of writers who, just because they were writers, cannot in any case be said to constitute a representative cross-section of their society. The theory is difficult to argue about, since most of our evidence for "what it was really like" is literary, and if we deny ouselves the use of any of it (on the grounds that this would be begging the question) we do not have very much to discuss. Nevertheless the theory is probably true to an extent; to paint an ideal picture as if it were not ideal, but merely typical, is a good way of encouraging readers to bring their lives into line with what they read. This is indeed hardly a relevant speculation as regards the Merchant's Tale; but perhaps even here there is a certain idealistic colouring present not because intended by author or narrator but because it is assumed to be entailed by the very act of storytelling, like a certain tone of voice or physical posture. Undoubtedly this ceremonious vision often conflicted with fourteenth-century realities, as Langland shows us. Maybe it never existed; in which case this chapter is about a medieval dream rather than about ordinary medieval life. The distinction is critical for the historian, but it does not matter very much for the student of Piers Plowman, who is concerned with the shape of its author's thoughts and not directly with their correspondence to some past golden age. In general I shall speak as if that golden age did exist, not because I believe in it but because it is easier to say that X was true than it is to say that some medieval text presents us with a vision of X as true which suggests authorial belief in X having once been true although I do not know if it ever was. Strictly speaking, however, it is the more convoluted statement that I intend.[1]

The Merchant's words, then, suggest a continuity between the most profound truths of religion or morality and the most trifling matters (this being a modern judgment) of social conduct; and we should add that this continuum also includes rational truth, to which the modern use of "reason", at least in academic discourse, is generally restricted. For us it is virtually automatic to distinguish at least four separate kinds of excellence here (it is significantly difficult to find a term that naturally applies to all four): religious orthodoxy, moral uprightness, good manners, and validity of argument. We discern a difference between the kinds of truth available, varying from the purely relative (in the third case) to the demonstrably unassailable (in the fourth). Lack of this discernment has the effect, of course, of dissipating the scepticism against which moralists and preachers often have to contend today; but it can also support scepticism about the claims of the "philosophre". Mathematics, indeed, was recognized as having a special logical status;[2] but the same was not perceived as applying to natural sciences. In general "philosophres" neither sought nor expected to attain a degree of conviction beyond that aimed for by their contemporaries in what we what we would consider less exact disciplines.

The word "preve" does not have the binding force that we are accustomed to give to the word "prove". In the middle ages to "prove" something often appears to mean reducing the audience to silence, as False-Semblant does in the Romaunt of the Rose:

> False-Semblant soproueth this thyng
> That he (i.e. Wicked-Tonge) canne none answering
>
> (7665-66).[3]

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[1] Cf. Stephen Medcalf, "On Reading Books from a Half-alien Culture", in The Context of English Literature: The Later Middle Ages, ed. Stephen Medcalf (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 1-55: "We easily suppose that, because some person or culture is firmly persuaded that a thing is or ought to be so, therefore it was so. Yet an ideal is often asserted with particular vehemence just because it is not much fulfilled: that is, it is asserted in a compensatory spirit" (p. 28).

[2] Cf. Alexander Murray, Reason and Society in the Middle Ages, p. 204.

[3] References are to Ronald Sutherland, The Romaunt of the Rose and Le Roman de la Rose: A Parallel-Text Edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967).

No doubt False-Semblant is perfectly satisfied by Wicked-Tonge's reply:

> Sir it maye wel be
> Semblant a good manne semen ye
>
> (7669-70).

To us, however, "it may well be" seems an inadequate assent to a proof; we could not feel that we had succeeded until we extorted the admission that "it _must_ be". But False-Semblant's argument is, to say the least of it, not a proof in the modern sense. Nor, in the _House of Fame_, is the eagle's "proof" that Fame hears everything; but it is, I think, intended to be overwhelming, and I doubt whether this speaker was equally content with Chaucer's response:

> A good persuasion
> Quod I hyt is and lyk to be
> Ryght so as thou hast preved me
>
> (872-74).

A "persuasion", then, is all that this impressive display amounts to. The eagle has persistently commended it to us in the most forthright terms:

> Oh yis yis
> Quod he to me that kan I preve
> Be reson worthy for to leve
> So that thou yeve thyn advertence
> To understonde my sentence
>
> (706-10)
>
> Now herkene wel for-why I wille
> Tellen the a propre skille
> And a worthy demonstracion
> In myn ymaginacion
>
> (725-28)[1]

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[1] The word "worthy", which appears in this quotation and in the one preceding it, is worth pausing on. We, who have split up the medieval continuum into discrete regions, have also tended to confine within these regions words that once ranged freely. In modern English "worthy" is used (a) in a sporting context, as of a "worthy winner last time out" or of "worthy opposition"; (b) when trying to sound Johnsonian, as when we wonder aloud if something is "worthy of perusal", "worthy of our attention", "worthy of being explicitly refuted"; (c) to describe someone or something as achieving a high reading on a moral scale that (we imply) is archaic, unrealistic, irrelevant or insensitive. In sum, it refers to moral (or quasi-moral) appraisal of human (or quasi-human i.e. equine) feats. It would not be natural for us to apply it, as Chaucer does, to rational argument, for which we reserve such terms as "sound" or "valid", in recognition of its independence from the region in which praise or blame is appropriately ascribed.

And whoso seyth of trouthe I varye
Bid hym proven the contrarye

(807-08).

For all this, however, he can expect no more than provisional assent; he might indeed expect more than Chaucer's rather unenthusiastic surrender, but the most he can ask for is belief (cf. "leve" in line 708), which admits of degrees, not the certainty that we express as "seeing" that something is true. The lack of any sense of absoluteness in proof is betrayed by the form of the eagle's argument, leaving his audience aside. We, who have that sense, see little point in the multiplication of arguments; if an argument is valid, and the proof established, anything more is superfluous. But the eagle, as if doubting the possibility of that kind of argument (but more probably never considering it), offers a dazzling variety of "skilles" - not so much fully-fledged arguments as "points". Everything draws toward its "propre mansyon", he says, fortifying the edifice he is building with numerous examples and authorities:

Loo this sentence is knowen kouth
Of every philosophres mouth
As Aristotle and daun Platon
And other clerkys many oon

(757-60).

This makes for colourful poetry, a "list" in the sense defined in the previous chapter (pp. 20-21); but no amount of this kind of accumulation could add up to the kind of proof in which geometers deal. Even after Geoffrey's submission, the eagle's lack of absolute security prevents him from letting the subject go. A further proof is promised:

Be God quod he and as I leve
Thou shalt have yet or hit be eve
Of every word of this sentence
A preve by experience
And with thyne eres heren wel
Top and tayl and everydel
That every word that spoken ys
Cometh into Fames Hous ywys
As I have seyd what wilt thou more

(875-83).

If this were not a dream, the answer would of course be "Nothing". By experience Geoffrey can see that the eagle's contention is true, not metaphorically but literally. But the possibility that there might be another kind of seeing, as sure in its own way as the sensible variety, is not considered.

This observation needs also to be borne in mind if we are to understand Roger Bacon's defence of experimental science. It is necessary to quote at length.

> ... there are two modes of acquiring knowledge, namely, by reasoning and experience. Reasoning draws a conclusion and makes us grant the conclusion, but does not make the conclusion certain, nor does it remove doubt so that the mind may rest on the intuition of truth, unless the mind discovers it by the path of experience; since many have the arguments relating to what can be known, but because they lack experience they neglect the arguments, and neither avoid what is harmful nor follow what is good. For if a man who has never seen fire should prove by adequate reasoning that fire burns and injures things and destroys them, his mind would not be satisfied thereby, nor would he avoid fire, until he placed his hand or some combustible substance in the fire, so that he might prove by experience that which reasoning taught. But when he has had actual experience of combustion his mind is made certain and rests in the full light of truth. Therefore reasoning does not suffice, but experience does.[1]

At first glance this is a strange argument. It is surely false to assert (as Bacon subsequently does) that we cannot wholeheartedly credit a proof in geometry - say, that a triangle in a semicircle is right-angled - until we have seen it drawn out. On the contrary, no matter how many times we constructed such triangles, this would amount to no more than steady confirmation of the likelihood of their being invariably right-angled. Only when we grasp the proof do we know beyond any doubt that they must be so. Indeed it is obvious that no general truth (that is, one applying to all the members of an infinite group) can ever be known from the experience of the senses, since it is impossible to examine every member of the group. Bacon's venture into mathematics is therefore ill-judged, and his preceding example of the fire is poorly expressed; the assertion that a man who has proved "by adequate reasoning" that fire is destructive would nevertheless not avoid contact with it appears somewhat of an overstatement. His point is a good one, however, if the kind of reasoning he has in mind is that exemplified by the eagle's lecture (and not that exemplified by a proof in geometry). There are a number of indications in the quoted passage that this is the case. We may note, for example, that the man who surrenders to the argument is apparently compelled to do so despite having reservations; he is "preved" in the sense, suggested earlier, of being reduced to silence.[1] It is also significant that Bacon speaks of "having the arguments relating to what can be known", suggesting that these arguments are not newly originated but constitute a sort of common treasury that has existed for a long time; in other words, they come from authority. Subsequently Bacon strongly criticizes reliance on the statements of past writers, and he gives several examples of received opinions that have either been misinterpreted or are false *simpliciter*. In general it seems that what Bacon calls reasoning, without qualification, is what we should describe as an abuse of reasoning, or a credulous substitute for it.

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[1] Opus Majus VI 1. Translation taken from R. Burke, trans., The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1928).

Perhaps it would be kinder to see it as a celebration of truth already agreed. Certainly this type of reasoning could play a part in festivities:

> On holy days the masters of the schools assemble their scholars at the churches whose feast-day it is. The scholars dispute, some in demonstrative rhetoric, others in dialectic. Some "hurtle enthymemes," others with greater skill employ perfect syllogisms. Some are exercised in disputation for the purpose of display, which is but a wrestling bout of wit, but others that they may establish the truth for the sake of perfection. Sophists who produce fictitious arguments are accounted happy in the profusion and deluge of their words; others seek to trick their opponents by the use of fallacies. Some orators from time to time in rhetorical harangues seek to carry persuasion, taking pains to observe the precepts of their art and to omit naught that appertains thereto. Boys of different schools strive one against another

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1. Cf. Adeimantus' complaint in the *Republic*: "Of course no one can deny what you have said, Socrates. But whenever people hear you talking like this ... they feel your arguments are like a game of draughts in which the unskilled player is always in the end hemmed in and left without a move by the expert. Like him they feel hemmed in and left without anything to say, though they are not in the least convinced by the conclusion reached in the moves you have made in the game you play with words" (487b-c). Translations are from Desmond Lee, trans., *Plato: The Republic*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

> in verse or contend concerning the principles of the art of grammar or the rules governing the use of past or future.[1]

It sounds an enjoyable display, but one suspects that new truths are as unlikely to be established in this context as in a modern debating society.

To "prove by reason", while it may be a less high-spirited activity than that indulged in by these London clerks, is usually just as inconclusive. Another of Chaucer's birds, the tercelet in the *Parlement of Fowls*, says bluntly:

> Ful hard were it to preve by resoun
> Who loveth best this gentil formel heere
> For everych hath swich replicacioun
> That non by skilles may be brought adoun
> I can not se that argumentes avayle
>
> (534-38).

Here the situation has arisen where no one is reduced to silence, so there is no conclusion. Where strict demonstration is not attempted, it is always likely that arguments will rumble on interminably, unless some other kind of authority lends weight to one side.

I have already quoted from the debate of the two millers in *The Play of Wether*. Here the two opponents employ the formal manner and technical terms of clerks to argue for the superiority, or inferiority, of water to wind and watermills to windmills. This debate is offered as public entertainment too, but it is meant to excite ridicule rather than admiration. It is eventually terminated when Mery Reporte (a sort of licensed jester who acts as Jupiter's doorman) intervenes:

> Stop folysh knaves for youre reasonynge is suche
> That ye have reasoned even ynough and to much
>
> (710-11).

He points out (with the help of a scurrilous proof from experience) that the argument is profitless, since

> both myllys may serve in place

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[1] From William Fitzstephen's description of London in his biography of Thomas à Becket (c. 1175). Translation from Jeanne Krochalis and Edward Peters, eds., *The World of Piers Plowman* ([Philadelphia]: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975).

Betwene water and wynde there is no suche let
But eche myll may have tyme to use his fet

(715-17).[1]

The obviousness of this point testifies to the millers' stupidity, but there is a more fundamental objection to their argument, and this is the fact that it takes an outsider to notice the senselessness of the argument. The combatants themselves are too busy fighting to pause and examine the basis of their disagreement; but granted its weakness, what can be gained? Victory, certainly, yielded out of exhaustion or lack of invention; and that might be a "proof" in the older sense. But plainly no proof in the modern sense, or anything like it, is attainable - both standpoints are equally absurd - and the debate in which the millers have engaged, intended as a means of establishing the truth, is in fact likely to prevent it from being observed. The author of this play, John Heywood, who is an urbane and humanistic writer associated with More's circle, is beginning to reveal the impatience with old-fashioned styles of "reasoning" that Francis Bacon will later formalize in his attacks on the syllogism. The increasing specificity of these critiques reflects the increasing emancipation of the authors from the modes of thought they criticize.

"Preve" is a word with confusingly various applications in Middle English. We have already encountered the "preef" by reason and the "preef" by experience or experiment. Although the former is more characteristically associated with medieval thought, it does not follow that the latter is an uncommon extension of the language; on the contrary, other meanings of the word ("put to the test", "taste", "reveal to examination", etc.) suggest that the association with sense experience is, if anything, the most natural one. In Piers Plowman Clergie tells us that

hadde nevere freke fyn wit the feith to dispute
Ne man hadde no merite myght it ben ypreved
Fides non habet meritum ubi humana racio prebet experimentum

(B X 247-48a).

The first of these lines seems to indicate that Clergie is thinking of the kind of reasoning that Bacon opposed to experiment. But perhaps Clergie is not really conscious of this distinction, because it is plain from Gregory's Latin that in the second line Clergie means to say that Christian truth is not discoverable by experience; we cannot deduce the existence of Christ from a survey of the night sky. Presumably it is the same point that is made by this fourteenth-century preacher:

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[1] Peter Happé, ed., Tudor Interludes, pp. 163-64.

> It happed at þat tyme þat Barnabas þe apostle preched in Rome: and þe hethen philosofres skorned hym, for our feyȝthe may not be preved by reson; and þei, þe philosofres, granteþ no þinge but þat resone enformeþ hem.[1]

If that is so, to "preve by reson" here means almost the opposite of what it has been used to mean in passages discussed earlier.[2] When, as in this case, the implicit contrast is between reason and revelation, reason signifies something down-to-earth, sense-orientated, certain but limited in its range. Yet when Roger Bacon contrasts reason with experience, he means something theoretical, fanciful, never certain and often wildly mistaken; in short, a secular equivalent to revelation, hallowed by convention and tradition rather than by the church.

But these are cases where the meanings are unusually specific; Bacon was an exceptional thinker, and the construction I have placed on the preacher's words is admittedly imported from what I take to be the ultimate source of his statement, namely in patristic tradition.[3] It is by no means so certain that the preacher himself meant anything so exact;

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1. Ross, Middle English Sermons, Sermon No. 1, p. 6, ll. 19-23.

2. Cf. House of Fame 707-08 (above, p. 80) and Parlement of Fowls 534 (above, p. 84).

3. Cf. Gregory, as quoted on the previous page by Langland (from the 26th Homily on the Gospels) - J.P. Migne, ed., Patrolooiae Cursus Completus, series latina, 221 vols. (Paris: J.P. Migne, 1844-1890) (LXXVI, col. 1197); Aquinas, Expositio in Symbolum Apostolorum, a.1 - references are to Divi Thomae Aquinitatis Opera, 28 vols. (Venice: Simon Occhi, 1775-1788) (VIII, 50-54); and see Pearsall's note to C XI 160a.

and nor, in general, did most medieval speakers, otherwise the extreme meanings that I have just described could hardly co-exist.

It is easy to complicate the issue even further, as I shall show by three further examples. Ymaginatif repeats the arguments we have just been discussing:

> Olde lyveris toforn us useden to marke
> The selkouthes that thei seighen hir sones to teche
> And helden it a heigh science hir wittes to knowe
> Ac thorugh hir science soothly was nevere no soule ysaved
> Ne broght by hir bokes to blisse ne to joye
> (B XII 131-35).

In other words, they acted in the way commended by Roger Bacon. But Ymaginatif denies that they achieved certain knowledge:

> Ac kynde wit cometh of alle kynnes sightes
> Of briddes and of beestes of blisse and of sorwe
> Of tastes of truthe and oft of deceites
>
> (B XII 128-30).

My second example, which comes from another sermon, also refers to the wise heathen. The preacher tells us that

> by reson a man shuld chese vertew aboven all erthly þinge. And so all þe chefe philosophres tauȝte vs.[1]

After quoting Augustine on the Stoics, Peripatetics and Platonists, he concludes:

> Thise were most resonable men þat men shall rede of in old tyme, and þise all tauȝthe to wurchippe and loue vertewe. And he þat doþ oþur weys doth aȝens reson.[2]

My third example is probably by the same author as the second. Here he is discussing the birth of Christ:

> His ennombred wisdom was shewed in þat, þat he shewed a stere, þat is an vnresonable creature, to men of vnresonable feyȝth, to paynyms, as þise kynges were; bot to þe sheperdes, Iewes, þat were resonable of beleue, he ordeynt angels, þe wiche þat ben resonable, to tell hem of is burthe and of is goodnes.[3]

The subject of the pagan philosophers, like the subject of vengeance discussed earlier, was much debated; in both cases there is a problem because reason appears divided against itself. In the former, the insidious reasonableness of vengeance conflicts with the belief that vengeance is wrong (and therefore unreasonable). Now we are faced with the difficulty that although the old philosophers in many ways epitomize reason, they were not Christian; and because of the strong association between reason, virtue and true religion, to divorce reason from Christianity is unthinkable. The collection of views I have quoted is inviting material for the synthesist; at the highest level, Aquinas'

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1. Ross, Middle English Sermons, Sermon No. 42, p. 267, ll. 17-19.

2. Ibid., ll. 22-25.

3. Ibid., Sermon No. 39, p. 225, l. 35 to p. 226, l. 3.

distinction between philosophy and theology is a response to this problem. But it is the problem, not the solution, that concerns us. In brief, the middle ages inherited a Semitic religion and a classical culture; they could not always be easily reconciled, and even when that was not obvious, the fact of this twin inheritance could be embarrassing. Naturally the benefits outweighed the defects, however, and difficulties could sometimes be put to good use. The outstanding achievements of the pagans, which nevertheless failed to earn them salvation, could provide a salutary reproof to those who placed excessive trust in learning. Again, when pagan philosophers did accord with Christianity, for example by commending virtuous behaviour, their testimony might pacify sophisticated sceptics whose easy acquiescence with revealed truth, at least as traditionally interpreted, was in doubt.

This consideration is relevant to the second and third of the extracts given in the previous paragraph. Although neither the author nor the setting of this group of sermons is known, we are evidently dealing with an accomplished performer and exceptional audiences; in one of these sermons the king is stated to be present.[1] Both content and presentation are distinctive. We hear, for example, about intellectual presumption, the wickedness of wars between Christians, and the worthiness of the priesthood; not matters that have much practical import for an ordinary parish congregation.[2] Even on more familiar ground the examples relate specifically to those with a considerable degree of worldly success:

> I sey þe prowde man lokes farre from hym desirous vn-to worldly worshippes, not only content to loke vn-to his on cites and lordshippes, but in-to dyvers kyngedoms he desireþ besely to be proferred.[3]

This moral teaching - very polite, in general - is surrounded by a

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1. Ross, Middle English Sermons, Sermon No. 39, p. 224. The group referred to is Nos. 39-42.

2. Sermon No. 39, pp. 220-24; Sermon No. 41, p. 255; Sermon No. 42, pp. 280-83.

3. Sermon No. 42, p. 263, ll. 29-32.

delectable variety of illustrative devices. Biblical authorities are of course numerous, as are gleanings from the church fathers (with untranslated quotations in Latin and references to works cited); but we also find Horace, Aristotle, Seneca and Varro.[1] The author displays his knowledge of church history, planetary movement, and the bestiary;[2] his analogies and exegesis are invariably fresh and fanciful (his point about the star and the angels is a typical example). It is as if the credibility of the church rather than the heart of the sinner is on trial. This, I think, is why the preacher stresses the reasonableness of the Christian faith. He is not intending to disparage the pagan philosophers, but he is anxious to imply that respect for them is naturally accompanied by an even greater respect for orthodoxy.

This preacher's audience was both powerful and learned, like "the noble and wise kynge Salomon" who is one of his favoured biblical authorities.[3] In many ways Solomon, although a biblical author, can be compared with Aristotle and Plato. Some of the works attributed to him - the "wisdom literature" of the Old Testament - are more closely akin to the writings of classical moralists than is anything else in the bible; or perhaps we should say that in the middle ages the classical heritage was treated rather as if it was an extended book of proverbs to be used piecemeal by such as Dame Prudence. Langland is rather unsympathetic to this material. He is not afraid of criticizing Solomon, just as he criticizes Cato, by reference to more Christian teachers;[4] and he is interested in the theory that Solomon, like Aristotle, is in hell, which could be justified from the account of Solomon's apostasy in 3 Kings 11.[5] One of the recurrent themes in *Piers Plowman* is that intelligence is a possession, like material wealth. The possessor has special

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1. Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, Sermon No. 39, p. 224; Sermon No. 40, p. 229; Sermon No. 42, p. 268; Sermon No. 42, p. 279.

2. Sermon No. 41, pp. 252-54; Sermon No. 41, pp. 249-50; Sermon No. 40, p. 238 and Sermon No. 42, pp. 262-63.

3. Quoted from Sermon No. 42, p. 261, l. 31.

4. B XI 268-72a (quoted above, p.69); B VII 71-79.

5. B X 376-93; C III 323-27.

responsibilities and special temptations;[1] Solomon's legendary wealth and wisdom make him a convenient **exemplum of the corruption that all** too often results. In general, however, it is Solomon's life and not his writings that Langland disparages. Janet Coleman notes that Robert Holcot's commentaries on the Old Testament wisdom literature, in which he presents an Ockhamist moral philosophy, were apparently best sellers, and more generally she adds that "the Wisdom literature had ... come into vogue as the source for homilies and sermons in the later thirteenth century".[2] But throughout the middle ages these books were much more popular than they are today. No doubt our diminished taste for plain didacticism is one cause; and the reformers banished Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus to the Apocrypha, and so from ordinary readers; but I think there is another aspect of this literature that made it especially congenial to the middle ages.

Plato proposed, as a basis for his ideal society, a community of philosophers. This society is to exemplify the cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, self-discipline and justice, all of which proceed directly or indirectly from the philosopher rulers. They are themselves wise; they will educate the armed forces so that they possess "the power to judge ... what and what sort of things are to be feared", which is courage; self-discipline will be imposed on all by the dominance of the philosophers, for they have "simple and moderate desires, guided by reason and right judgement and reflection"; and justice too will be administered by them, for they will inevitably follow just principles.[3] In short, the philosophers are themselves good men and will propagate virtue in society if they are in power. Plato in fact draws no clear distinction between knowledge and goodness. The word "wisdom" perhaps suggests something of the sort of unity he must have taken for granted. We could describe an evil man as intelligent or knowledgeable but

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1. In addition to the passages that refer to Solomon, cf. B XII 55-58 and B XVII 261-71.

2. Janet Coleman, English Literature in History 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers, pp. 263-67.

3. I am summarizing from Republic 427d-34d. Quotations are from Lee's translation, as before.

hardly as wise. For a man to be a philosopher, it appears that he requires such qualities as truthfulness, indifference to physical pleasures, and greatness of mind; he must be "neither mean nor ungenerous nor boastful nor cowardly".[1] And the true philosopher inevitably acts justly, as we have seen; he cannot, for example, refuse the burdensome but just demand that is to be made of him to take a part in education and government.[2] We ought not to ask whether Plato imagines that it is possible to be good without being wise, or wise without being good; these questions presuppose a distinction that Plato would not have recognized. At any rate Plato does not consider the possibility. He conceives on the one hand of a group of people who are just, temperate, intelligent and graceful; on the other, of a larger group who are enslaved by ignorance and the limitless desire for illusory pleasures such as wealth and physical gratification. Despite variation in detail, we can discern the same conception in Aristotle and in most of the subsequent classical schools.

And granted differences in the kind of wisdom and the kind of moral rectitude that are presented to us, it is a similar conception that greets us in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. In Proverbs 4 we read of the path of wisdom (via sapientiae); it is opposed not to the path of folly but to the path of wickedness (via malorum). The following verses all refer to the same two classes of the population:

> Egestas a Domino in domo impii;
>   habitacula autem justorum benedicentur.
> Ipse deludet illusores,
>   et mansuetis dabit gratiam.
> Gloriam sapientes possidebunt;
>   stultorum exaltatio ignominia.
>
> (Proverbs 3:33-35)

Again, we should not seek a distinction between knowers and doers in this verse:

> Sapientia, et disciplina, et scientia legis apud Deum.
>   Dilectio et viae bonorum apud ipsum.
>
> (Ecclesiasticus 11:15)

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[1] Republic 484a-487a.

[2] Republic 519e-520e.

True wisdom is distinguished by study of the law.

> Beatus vir qui in sapientia morabitur,
> et qui in justitia sua meditabitur,
> et in sensu cogitabit circumspecionem Dei ...
>
> (Ecclesiasticus 14:22).

When the wise man's activites are as edifying as this, there is perhaps nothing very surprising in the identification of wisdom with virtue. The material of his studies comes from God, and is therefore good and holy. More directly, it comes from his elders:

> Conserva, fili mi, praecepta patris tui,
> et ne dimittas legem matris tuae.
>
> (Proverbs 6:20)

Plato's philosophers were not engaged in conserving the past; on the contrary, Socrates was a rebel against tradition, and Plato himself has little respect for the traditional lore that is preserved in the words of the poets. But although this is an important difference between Plato's vision of the wise and that found in the Old Testament, it should also be noted that the classical tradition becomes more respectful of the past as time goes by, for the obvious reason that Plato and Aristotle come themselves to be venerated as patriarchs. To people in the middle ages, thinking of the old philosophers primarily as men who taught virtue rather than free thought, they must have seemed rather like the wise men of the Old Testament or the doctors of the church, symbols of that traditional teaching in the light of which men should live.

This is to anticipate my next point, which is that Christendom in the middle ages in many ways resembled the community of the wise that is variously portrayed by the classical philosophers and in Solomon's books; formally, at least. In almost all medieval writing we can discern a naive ideal, a unity between religion, virtue, learning and nobility - as in the exemplary figure of Saint Catherine. So far as reality is concerned, the detailed picture is admittedly complex and constantly changing. It can be examined in Alexander Murray's Reason and Society in the Middle Ages (to which I make frequent reference in this chapter), the theme of which is the growth, from the eleventh century onwards, of a class who represent rationalism and intellectualism within medieval society. This class, often bourgeois in its origins, typified by such men as Jean de Meun, is from a modern point of view more obviously representative of "reason" than the monastic wing of the church, or the nobility; but that is not so clear if one is an outsider to the controversies (as most medieval people were), nor if "reason" is taken in a more medieval sense, the sense being debated in this chapter. Besides, there is much blurring of the divisions and redrawing of frontiers as time goes by. In the group of sermons mentioned earlier we glimpse a portentous disunity; religion and virtue are in fear of being deserted by learning and nobility.[1] Earlier on, bourgeois intellectuals were as often as not in ideological conflict with a proudly ignorant nobility. But Murray shows that, unexpectedly, the link between nobility and devout piety has some historical validity as well as being an imaginary ideal (see especially pp. 331-49). To ordinary people the relationship of ideal to actuality must have appeared quite close, for all the divergence in detail. Compared to his illiterate flock, the ordinary medieval churchman would, in general, have appeared to excel in virtue and wisdom. The nobility were better educated than serfs, at least in fourteenth-century England if not in eleventh-century Germany.

But even the socially inferior, secular Christian could in some sense think of himself as belonging to the community of the wise. In comparison with the heathen or the reprobate, he could derive a certain satisfaction from his superior wisdom. To be a good churchgoer a degree of knowledge is requisite:

> Seinte Marie day in Leinte among oþer dawes gode
> Riȝt is forto holde heiȝe wo so him vnderstode
>
> (South English Legendary, "The Annunciation" 1-2).[2]

The good Christian could also congratulate himself on his prudence,

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1. The sermons date from the early fifteenth century. See W.O. Ross, Middle English Sermons, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.

2. D'Evelyn and Mill, I, 127.

which is a kind of wisdom.[1] He was, for example, taking into account the imminent judgment of his soul. With such a prospect in mind, to lead a virtuous life is the merest common sense; indeed it may seem that if a man's belief in the judgment was sufficiently firm and literal, there would be nothing very virtuous about acting virtuously. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, Saint Martin parting his coat or Saint Julian bearing the leper across the stream are models of policy. Yet these acts were, correctly of course, perceived as heroic (although some versions of Saint Martin's life emphasize that he was not yet baptised at the time of his famous deed, as if to underline his pure selflessness[2]). Accounts of suffering in hell or joy in heaven are preeminently examples of what cannot be "seen" to be true; Roger Bacon's observation that "many have the arguments relating to what can be known, but because they lack experience they neglect the arguments, and neither avoid what is harmful nor follow what is good"[3] applies *a fortiori* to the present subject. This knowledge is not certain. If it was, we should not find any comedy, and still less anything admirable, in the brewer's dismissal of the Cardinal Virtues:

> Ye baw quod a brewere I wol noght be ruled
> By Jesu for al youre janglynge with *Spiritus Iusticie*
> Ne after Conscience by Crist while I kan selle
> Bothe dregges and draf and drawe at oon hole
> Thikke ale and thynne ale that is my kynde
> And noght hakke after holynesse hold thi tonge Conscience
> Of *Spiritus Iusticie* thow spekest muche on ydel
> (B XIX 399-405).

This could only be interpreted as disastrous tomfoolery, and we should have to regard Conscience's response as a crushing reproof:

> But thow lyve by loore of *Spiritus Iusticie*
> The chief seed that Piers sew ysaved worstow nevere
> (B XIX 408-09).

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[1] Cf. William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), I, 34: "The terms honour, justice, rectitude or virtue, and their equivalents in every language, present to the mind ideas essentially and broadly differing from the terms prudence, sagacity, or interest". But in the middle ages the meaning of "prudence" can vary between both extremes and there must have been a considerable tendency to assimilate these apparently disparate ideas. Cf. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, pp. 132-36.

[2] Cf. *South English Legendary*, "Martin", l. 22, where the Lord exults: "Martin þat is heþene ȝut hermid me haþ biweued" (D'Evelyn and Mill, II, 483

[3] Cf. above, p. 82.

But that is certainly not our natural way of reading the exchange; to us Conscience sounds desperate, not authoritative, and the brewer's voice seems to us to have a confident ring that does not encourage us to pity him. I suspect that a fourteenth-century reader would not have responded very differently from ourselves. "Thanne is many leode lost", the "lewed vicory" remarks to Conscience (412), the word "thanne" meaning "in that case", or "if what you say is true"; perhaps there is even an implication that the extremity of the consequences forms a good argument for the proposition not being true. In other words, Conscience's statement, although it is orthodox and familiar, and would be tacitly affirmed by all Christians, does not really have the status of a truism. For most people at most times it was felt merely as a current intellectual position, an intriguing subject upon which to speculate. No doubt Will's history was recognizably typical then as it is among traditional Christians today; for years on end the uncertain destiny of Will's soul is forgotten and unconsidered; only occasionally, and momentarily, does scripture or sermon breathe life into the doctrine, so that

> Al for tene of hir text trembled myn herte
> And in a weer gan I wexe and with myself to dispute
> Wheither I were chose or noght chose ...
>
> (B XI 115-17)

A significant, but no doubt extreme, contrast to this agonizing foresight may be found in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, where Chaucer's belief in any concrete idea of heaven or hell is implied to be of much the same kind as his belief in, for example, the stellification of Alcestis.[1]

Most medieval Christians might not go so far as this, but a degree of uncertainty, preventing their belief from ever quite becoming knowledge, is inevitable. And precisely because virtue can never quite be "seen" as reasonable, the reasonableness of virtue is endlessly reiterated in medieval sermons, rather as the eagle was compelled to argue his point repeatedly, because absolute proof was unattainable. The unpleasantness of hell is just one of six reasons that Chaucer's Parson offers in order to move us to contrition (CT I 133-290), although it is, admittedly, the one he has most to say about (CT I 157-230). The good

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[1] Lines 1-9, 517-26 (F version).

Christian could regard himself, therefore, as enrolled in the community of the wise simply because he is good.[1]

Furthermore, as has already been pointed out, virtuous behaviour is frequently wise in the most obvious ways.[2] The Parson tells us that "the hevene is yeven to hem that wol labourn, and nat to ydel folk" (CT I 716); but it is not only heaven that eludes the idle, as the Second Nun points out:

> And though men dradden nevere for to dye
> Yet seen men wel by resoun doutelees
> That ydelnesse is roten slogardie
> Of which ther nevere coomth no good n'encrees
>
> (CT G 15-18).

But is Christian morality really reasonable? According to the Parson it is:

> if it were reson that man sholde haten his enemy, for sothe God nolde nat **receyven us to his love that been his enemys.**
>
> (CT I 523).

This argument must of course stand if reasonable behaviour means merely how God behaves. But surely hating one's enemies could with less effort be admitted to be very reasonable; as we saw at the beginning of this section, reason has a tendency to side with justice, and the just and equitable response to an enemy's malice is presumably malice in return.

Here is one aspect of the subtle disharmony between the "reasonable" morality outlined in this section and the Christian morality of the New Testament. I have suggested that the image of the "community of the wise" that can be discerned both in Solomon and in Plato was one with which medieval Christendom found itself much at home. But the New Testament presents a different and contradictory image. Briefly, in the Old Testament we see godly, righteous, wise old men, and set against them the foolish, the arrogant, the wicked; in the New Testament we see the rich, the respected, the hypocrites, the holier-than-thou, and set against them the poor, the innocent, the children, the outcasts, those who speak by the Spirit. Instead of the paternalism of the Old Testament we see the flouting of family ties:

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[1] For further discussion of a pervasive (though partial) "rationalism" in the middle ages, and its manifestation in e.g. scepticism about miracles, see Alexander Murray, Reason and Society in the Middle Ages, pp. 6-13.

[2] Cf. above, p. 75.

> Si quis venit ad me, et non odit patrem suum, et matrem, et uxorem, et filios, et fratres, et sorores, adhuc autem et animam suam, non potest meus esse discipulus.
>
> (Luke 14:26)

The earliest recorded action of Jesus himself, when he disappears to the temple in Jerusalem, shows scant regard for parental authority (Luke 2:41–51); it also shows, significantly, the intellectual might of the doctors being overwhelmed by a child.[1] Later Jesus exults:

> Confiteor tibi, Pater, Domine caeli et terrae, quia abscondisti haec a sapientibus et prudentibus, et revelasti ea parvulis.
>
> (Matthew 11:25)

Much of his own teaching is striking in its unreasonableness; that is, in its perverse commendations of behaviour that by most standards is unnatural and unjust. He compares the kingdom of heaven to a vineyard in which the calculation of payment is based neither on productivity nor on hours worked;[2] his preference for Mary rather than Martha has often seemed monstrously unfair; he forgives sins for which no restitution has been made (the context of _redde quod debes_, Langland's favourite tag in this connexion, is a surprising one). When the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit in the second chapter of Acts, their behaviour is far from being sober or moderate – _Quia musto pleni sunt isti_. Paul is fully in accordance with the spirit of his master's teaching when he glories not in wisdom but in foolishness:

> Scriptum est enim: Perdam sapientiam sapientium, et prudentiam prudentium reprobabo. ... Quoniam et Judaei signa petunt, et Graeci sapientiam quaerunt: nos autem praedicamus Christum crucifixum, Judaeis quidem scandalum, gentibus autem stultitiam ...
>
> (1 Corinthians 1:19, 22-23).

Paul is being sarcastic; he does not really think his preaching is foolishness. Nevertheless, it is not a mode of expression that we see much of in the middle ages; not, that is, until Langland's time. In

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[1] The author of the _Ludus Coventriae_ portrays the doctors as learned in medieval university subjects, but ignorant compared to the child Jesus, who explains the Trinity and the Incarnation to them. See K.S. Block, ed., _Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi_, EETS, E.S. 120 (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 178-87.

[2] The dreamer in _Pearl_ responds to this story by saying "Me þynk þy tale vnresounable" and quoting Psalm 61 in support of this judgment (590–600).

Piers Plowman foolishness as a virtue has returned triumphantly:

> Freres folwede that fend for he gaf hem copes
> And religious reverenced hym and rongen hir belles
> And al the covent cam to welcome that tyraunt
> And alle hise as wel as hym save oonly fooles
> Which fooles were wel gladdere to deye
> Than to lyve lenger sith Leute was so rebuked
> And a fals fend Antecrist over alle folk regnede
> (B XX 58-64).

Langland's poetry coincides in time with the appearance of the devotio moderna, with its emphasis on the affectionate heart rather than the illuminated intellect. His paradigmatic Christian is not a clerk or a king but a ploughman. His priests and doctors frequently bear a closer resemblance to the scribes and pharisees of the New Testament than to the "community of the wise". Of course it would be a mistake to see only the aspects of Piers that anticipate Blake or Dickens; coexistent with them is much that illustrates and approves the image of society that was described above, and much - from Conscience, for example - in defence of the old unity between reason and righteousness. Even in the passage just quoted, Langland's mention of "Leute" suggests a longing for the sobriety and decorum of the "reasonable" world, the stable, legalistic ethic discussed earlier. But I would argue that the multiplicity of viewpoints expressed in the poem, its disorderly variety (like a synthesis in reverse), is itself "unreasonable", even if most of the viewpoints purport to be, each in its own way, "reasonable". This leads us into the next section.

III

If I said that this section was about the shortcomings of "reason", I could be referring to quite a number of different kinds of defect. Not all of them are equally relevant to Piers Plowman, but to a surprising extent even the less significant objections to "reason", or those of which Langland himself was less conscious, can be discerned as criticisms latent within the text; latent because I suspect that the poet had a frustrating sense of dissatisfaction with "reason" that went further than those shortcomings that he had the analytical power to isolate or define. It is obviously much harder to supply a critique of "reason" than to feel discontented with it; the former requires one to be objective about assumptions that themselves form the basis of one's own habits of speech and thought, in other words to cultivate the kind of objectivity that modern philosophers favour. I shall not attempt to demonstrate the existence of that kind of fully conscious critique in Piers; the shortcomings of "reason" are felt, and the pressure of them is communicated to the reader, but they are not examined. Indeed that was neither possible nor part of Langland's program, as I shall show later.[1] For the moment I shall concentrate on summarizing these shortcomings, adducing Piers whenever appropriate. I will begin with "what reason argues for" and then move rapidly on to the more important question of "the way in which reason argues".

The first of these subjects may appear impossibly wide and dependent entirely on whatever matter is being debated. When we are thinking of Piers Plowman, however, there is one kind of "reasonable" discourse that preoccupies us almost exclusively, namely that which deals with matters of religion and morality. Whether it is thought of as spoken (a sermon) or written (an ethical treatise in the widest sense) is not an important distinction; indeed what is spoken within the poem is written so far as the reader is concerned. In the area of morality certain predominant tendencies have already been indicated. For example, "reason" has a characteristic drift in the direction of "common-sense" justice or "fairness". But this drift causes it to collide with revealed truth in a variety of ways. Hence some of the most elaborate and intense exercises in medieval reasoning are in fact attempts to elude conclusions that "reason" in its natural state seems likely to arrive at. We have already seen one example in the Tale of Melibee, where the argument is directed against the apparently reasonable course of violent retribution.[2] Then there is the question of salvation for those who die in infancy. Reason might here point to a variety of answers unaided; discussions appear in Pearl (409-744) and in Canto XXXII of Paradiso (40-84).[3] Closely allied to this is the problem of the virtuous heathen (Paradiso XIX 40-90;[4] Piers Plowman B XI 140-58, B XII 266-95). The Summa Theologica is

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1. Cf. below, p. 156.

2. Cf. above, pp. 62-63.

3. Sapegno ed., III, 403-06.

4. Sapegno ed., III, 239-42.

presented as a massive sequence of arbitrations between different arguments; and Aquinas constructs his articuli so that "reason" usually appears at first glance to favour the proposition against which he will subsequently pronounce.

In this last case the author's participation in such controversies often has a clarifying effect; but Langland had never read the Summa. He fears that controversy is vain and cannot in fact provide the knowledge that God did not see fit to reveal directly:

> Alle the clerkes under Crist ne kouthe the skile assoille
> (B XII 216).

This is obviously true when applied (as it is) to the question of why one of the two thieves yielded to salvation while the other did not. But Langland means it to have a wider application. Such questioning is vain not only because the answer is obviously undiscoverable. It reveals an attitude that is morally dubious. It is presented as reasoning against Reason and is associated, in the C text, with the third of Saint John's temptations, "pruyde or presompcioun of thy parfit lyuynge" (C XIII 229).[1] It is clear that Reason with a capital R stands in fact for the body of revealed or otherwise authoritative truth that one ought simply to accept. In fact to adduce this personage is a substitute for reasoning and an implicit rebuke to any who would indulge in it.[2]

Pointing out these views does not show Langland to advantage; he appears narrowly orthodox and afraid of the power of fearless critical enquiry. At least he would if Will were not such an unintelligent critic. For if Langland here makes Saint Thomas seem progressive, that is not because he is afraid of the power of analytical reasoning, but rather because he does not know about the power of analytical reasoning. He thinks reasoning is futile; and there is some justification for that view if we consider the sort of repositories of "reason" with which Langland would have been familiar; sermons and florilegia, for instance.

To modern eyes there are three areas where medieval reasoning - say, in

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1. Cf. 1 John 2:16.
2. Cf. above, p. 66.

a sermon - appears open to criticism. They are, first, excessive use of argument from analogy; second, uncritical reliance on authority; third, the attempt to apply reasoning to subjects with which even at its best it cannot really cope (e.g. the meaning of the Atonement, the ultimate fate of those who die in infancy, etc.). Certainly these are the causes of much bad reasoning but they can also, I think, be seen as symptoms of the lack of any more foolproof method of arriving at the truth. As for the inappropriate subject-matter, it follows that if one's powers of reasoning are no more equipped to deal with any one area than any other, one will gravitate towards the largest and most interesting questions, those that naturally preoccupy human beings. There is no counter-force, no discouraging reflection that on such-and-such a matter we shall not get very far. Or rather, that discouraging reflection arises with the same degree of insistence out of all contexts. As for the second-rate methods, it must be admitted that in default of anything else authority and analogy have a certain persuasive force. Even today, when a scientist forms guesses about some question that temporarily resists experimental analysis, his guesses will be essentially superstitious notions derived from an authority or analogy whose relevance cannot presently be demonstrated; the difference, of course, is that he usually recognizes that his guesses are only suppositions. But for ordinary medieval thinkers there is no chance of guesses ever being verified in the way that our scientist sees to be necessary; their faith in analogy and authority is thus needed, regardless of whether it can be considered justified, because without it the activity of groping towards understanding could not proceed at all.[1] That is a slightly different thing from thinking analogical argument stronger than it really is. Whether to judge something as weak or to misjudge something as strong one must have an independent measure of strength, such as is provided in this case by the recollection of more recent and more exact exercises in reasoning. It is true that medieval

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[1] The same argument has recently been proposed as a means of justifying inductive reasoning. We must accept inductive reasoning as valid regardless of whether it really works or not, as without it we could not generate any determinate hypotheses at all (George N. Schlesinger, Metaphysics: Methods and Problems (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 230-45).

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people did have the standard of everyday inference from induction, which was then, as it always is, the unquestioned basis upon which most ordinary judgments were formed. But to assume that what "reasonable" discourse provided had that kind of irresistible force would surely have been a psychological impossibility. We should not overrate the influence of possibly deluded beliefs in, for example, the infallibility of scripture, or the existence of patterning in the created universe such as would support the validity of argument from analogy. Neither those beliefs nor any of the multitude that seem to depend on them can be held with the same kind of certainty that we have about it raining outside when we hear the sound of raindrops.

Besides, Langland himself shows us how rickety the construction of arguments from scripture can be. Everyone remembers Meed's use of scripture torn from its context so insensitively that its meaning is all but reversed (B III 330-53). This abuse, because it is plainly illegitimate does not really cast doubt on the worth of support from scripture. But more seriously, scripture can be honestly deployed in support of contradictory views. Thus, on a subject very relevant to this chapter, Will says:

> And yet have I forgete ferther of fyve wittes techyng
> That Clergie of Cristes mouth comended was it nevere
> For he seide to Seint Peter and to swiche as he lovede
> *Dum steteritis ante reges et presides &c*
> Though ye come bifore kynges and clerkes of the lawe
> Beth noght abasshed for I shal be in youre mouthes
> And yyve yow wit at wille with konnyng to conclude hem
> Alle that ayeins yow of Cristendom disputen
>
> (B X 439-45).

But against this Ymaginatif says:

> Ac yet is clergie to comende and kynde wit bothe
> And namely clergie for Cristes love that of clergie is roote
>
> (B XII 70-71).

This was shown when Christ saved the woman taken in adultery from her punishers:

> A womman as we fynden was gilty of that dede
> Ac Crist of his curteisie thorugh clergie hir saved
> For thorugh caractes that Crist wroot the Jewes knewe hemselve

Giltier as afore God and gretter in synne
Than the womman that there was and wenten awey for shame
The clergie that there was conforted the womman

(B XII 76-81).

Most readers will agree that we are expected to endorse Ymaginatif's argument and that poetically it is the more convincing. Yet so far as the use of scripture is concerned Will's reference to it is equally valid and probably more apposite.

Scripture, therefore, does not really help to make "reasonable" discourse achieve certainty. It provides material to be heaped up in the cause of persuasiveness, along with classical quotations, traditional etymologies, bestiary lore and famous historical acts. But the opponent to an argument does not usually turn a critical gaze on its supports. Conscience can do that to Meed because her case is so transparently faulty, but in general medieval powers of analysis are insufficiently developed (the answers to objections in the *Summa Theologica* are a sign of Aquinas' tremendous confidence; he can afford to tackle opposing views directly). The more common approach is to reply by presenting an even more imposing collection of points in one's own favour. Essentially that is how Ymaginatif answers Will. In B Passus XVIII the debate between the Four Daughters of God proceeds in the same way. Again, both sides of this debate can find support from the scriptures (B XVIII 149-49a; 185-86).

So far in my discussion of the limitations of "reasonable" discourse as Langland knew it, I have concentrated on limitations from a modern view. In particular, I have emphasized that it is not a very precise or efficient instrument for establishing the truth about something. But while I have tried to show that an awareness of such shortcomings is discernible in *Piers Plowman*, it is questionable whether Langland was primarily interested in that kind of truth. The search for Saint Truth in this poem is after all a search for the salvation of society rather than for intellectual enlightenment. Langland's ideals are not those of the *litterati*. In the previous section I quoted William Fitzstephen's description of the competing students who dispute among themselves, some merely "for the purpose of display", but others "that they may establish the truth for the sake of perfection".[1] This was two centuries before Langland wrote, but if we imagine him transported back in time to these festivities, we can feel at once how he would have scorned the speakers and their aims. He would have regarded their higher aim as meaningless and argued that only the lower aim was operative. Disinterested pursuit of truth in a purely intellectual sense is a conception that Langland either does not grasp or else regards as a sham.

The term "salvation" remains the obvious description for what Langland was looking for, particularly as its vagueness permits us to extend it as required. Its origin is in the early, emphatic request:

> Teche me to no tresor but tel me this ilke
> How I may save my soule that seint art yholden
>
> (B I 83-84).

In the original context the reference is clearly to individual salvation. Whether this really indicates a program that we can see carried out in the rest of the poem is doubtful. Since Will does not die in his dreams (unlike the dreamer in Deguileville's poems) we cannot really tell if he can be said to have gained salvation or not, and it is perhaps making too much of Will's seemingly less unregenerate behaviour in later waking episodes to infer that anything akin to a conversion experience has taken place. That Will continues to be oppressed by a need for something is clear enough, but the nature of that something is left unspecific and it is hinted that there is considerable disparity between what Will thinks he wants and what he needs. Nevertheless, Will's search does provide the means by which the poet explores what preoccupies him, and "salvation" is a good word for that. If we identify it with "doing well", taking a hint from the text of the Pardon, we are then able to use the same term to cover both individual salvation and the regeneration of society, since Langland plainly sees the latter as determined by nothing other than the well-doing of individual members. By the term "salvation", therefore, I shall refer both to the reformation of the individual and to the reformation of society.

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[1] Cf. above, pp. 83-84.

What part has "reasonable" discourse to play in this desirable project? Presumably every moralist who writes or preaches imagines that it has some beneficial effect. Ymaginatif puts the common-sense case: the aim is to provide the requisite knowledge for informed well-doing, and in fact this has been achieved so perfectly by others that no further literary endeavours are really necessary

> for ther are bokes ynowe
> To telle men what Dowel is Dobet and Dobest bothe
> And prechours to preve what it is of many a peire freres
> (B XII 17-19).

This is not exactly easy for the dreamer to frame an objection to, but his subsequent remarks suggest that somewhere at the back of his mind an objection is lurking nevertheless:

> Ac if ther were any wight that wolde me telle
> What were Dowel and Dobet and Dobest at the laste
> Wolde I nevere do werk but wende to holi chirche
> And there bidde my bedes but whan ich ete or slepe
> (B XII 25-28).

Momentarily, it will be noted, the dreamer Will is also Langland the poet. Perhaps the latter, when he wrote these lines, was proposing a challenge to himself: if I succeed in writing something that really does leave Will no option but to reform, I shall stop tinkering with my poem. Perhaps (but this is pure speculation) he had just composed the vision of Christ, after which Will does set off to church, and hence was temporarily optimistic about his own powers. But if so, that optimism waned again. Neither the poem nor the author's work on it end with B Passus XVIII.

The difficulty is that although "reasonable" discourse can teach Will everything there is to know about Dowel, it cannot apparently make him do well. The knowledge it provides is not sufficiently immediate to be realized instantly in action. Most of us would accept that as an inevitable limitation of all writing or preaching. It cannot take away the free will of the audience to ignore what is said; we may even feel that it ought not to try, and describe overt attempts to direct the reader's behaviour as "rhetoric" in a pejorative sense. But Langland seems to be worried by the limitation that we take for granted. It is as if Will is a test case, representative of all ordinary readers and congregations. He may seem to us exceptionally resistant, but he is hardly the only character in the poem to ignore moral guidance.

At one simple extreme we have those who appear to understand but explicitly reject what they hear. The brewer, quoted earlier, is an example ("Of Spiritus Iusticie thow spekest muche on ydel").[1] A number of other characters seem to want to reform, but suggest by what they say that they cannot actually grasp the full implications of what is required of them. Some of the Sins seem to be in this worrying state; so is Haukyn, until our last glimpse of him. Then there are those whose self-satisfied consciousness of being learned appears if anything to be a hindrance to them; the Doctor of Divinity, notably. We can make use of Ymaginatif's analogy here (although it is actually offered in defence of learning):

> Tak two stronge men and in Themese cast hem
> And bothe naked as a nedle hir noon sikerer than other
> That oon hath konnynge and kan swymmen and dyven
> That oother is lewed of that labour lerned nevere swymme
> Which trowestow of tho two in Themese is in moost drede
> He that nevere ne dyved ne noght kan of swymmyng
> Or the swymmere that is saaf by so hymself like
> Ther his felawe fleteth forth as the flood liketh
> And is in drede to drenche that nevere dide swymme
>
> (B XII 161-69).

If we are to make a useful sense of this illustration we have to translate quite carefully. In line 163 it is better to think of the phrase "kan swymmen" as "knows the theory of swimming" than as "can swim" (i.e. is easily capable of reaching the bank). Otherwise Ymaginatif would too obviously have answered the question he asks Will to answer, as Priscilla Martin objects.[2] We should also note that the question is strictly not "Who is most likely to drown?" but "Who is most afraid of drowning?" No doubt Goodridge and Tiller are right to assume that the

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1. Cf. above, p. 94.

2. Priscilla Martin, Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower, p. 94.

distinction is not intended, but if we drop the illustration and consider how it is applied (i.e. to the business of confession, contrition, etc.) it becomes significant. May not the learned man's consciousness of knowing how to deal with his own sinful state be a potential danger to him? It may keep him from despair, but wouldn't "drede" be an appropriate and even desirable emotion in such circumstances? Knowledge is after all no substitute for action; a reflection that would be obvious in the middle of the Thames but perhaps less so in the middle of one's own life as a Christian. Langland's poem is full of contented members of the "community of the wise". When, in the next passus, Conscience announces that

> Me were levere by Oure Lord and I lyve sholde
> Have pacience parfitliche than half thi pak of bokes
> (B XIII 200-01)

he implies a potential opposition between learning and seeking salvation that Ymaginatif has not sufficiently attended to. The trouble is that "bokes", although they teach us about how to behave in our active lives, also take us out of those lives and onto a different ontological plane while we are reading; rather like Will's dreams. Reading about Dowel is often more agreeable than doing well and can be an effective escape from responsibility.

Will cannot easily be called complacent - on the contrary, he seems to be permanently worried - but he does fall into this trap. His continuing desire to fall asleep and have another dream can be seen as admirably committed, but I am not sure if it is being over-literalistic to reflect that it could also be diagnosed as a chronic case of sloth.

The Pardon in B Passus VII is a very brief example of moral teaching. Its content is of course impeccably "reasonable":

> Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam
> Qui vero mala in ignem eternum
> (B VII 110a).

Before we are presented with this text, we have already been offered a detailed commentary on it, showing concretely how it is to be applied and responded to by individual members of society. Nevertheless, the priest proposes to offer his own thoughts about it:

> thi pardon moste I rede
> For I shal construe ech clause and kenne it thee on Englissh
> (B VII 105-06).

That sounds unobjectionable, coming from someone whose business it is to preach virtue, who knows Latin and can read (although it turns out that Piers is "lettred a litel" too). But in fact his intervention directs us away from the matter of our personal salvation and towards the purely formal question of whether the Pardon can properly be considered a pardon:

> Peter quod the preest thoo I kan no pardon fynde
> But do wel and have wel and God shal have thi soule
> And do yvel and have yvel and hope thow noon oother
> That after thi deeth day the devel shal have thi soule
> (B VII 111-14).

The priest is conscious of his own learning, and from the lofty standpoint that he feels himself to occupy is able to aim some witty thrusts at Piers. But his learning is not useful at this moment. He cannot be accused of not sticking closely to the text, but he regards it as a text to be assessed rather than acted upon; it is like a motorist weighing up the style of a roadsign. The priest postpones, and makes more difficult, the journey back from text to reality. He prefers to keep us in the world of the text, to wander about in it evaluating and depreciating what is on display. I like the idea put forward by Judson Boyce Allen that this episode represents the criticisms that someone had levelled at the Z text.[1] If so, Piers tearing up the Pardon can be seen autobiographically, as representing the author's own dissatisfaction with Z and his determination to try again. But we could also take it as representing the ideal response to a text, in contrast to the priest's response. That ideal response would be to take the meaning to heart but decisively to turn away from the world of the text; in effect, to reject it in the very act of putting its precepts (or whatever else it might offer) into practice. Allen decodes the scriptural references in the passage and finds the theme of detractor uppermost; but at a more fundamental level I think Langland would

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1. Judson Boyce Allen, "Langland's Reading and Writing: Detractor and the Pardon Passus", Speculum, 59 (1984), 342-62. The suggestion is made on pp. 351-52.

object to literary appreciation just as much as literary depreciation - a chilling thought for the student of Piers Plowman. He does not portray Piers as responding to the priest's invitation to debate the merits of the Pardon, not even on the positive side; Piers in fact makes no reference to the document at all, immediately expressing his commitment to a drastic course of action. It is the dreamer who accepts the priest's invitation, and he subsequently emerges as, of all the characters in the poem, the most persistent evader of moral consequences.

This is to put the blame for any failure of "reasonable" discourse on the recipient of it. But a third, more pessimistic, view of the tearing can also be advanced; it could also be seen to indicate the shortcomings of the Pardon itself. Since the Pardon is only efficacious if acted upon by those who receive it (like any other moral text, but unlike a truly unconditional pardon, which only needs to be possessed), does that not mean that the Pardon itself is to blame? For a would-be universalist like Langland, the fact that there are any people at all who will not take it in the right spirit is enough to make him deeply dissatisfied; and is it realistic to expect ordinary people to make the perfect response? It is not a question that seems much to disturb earlier writers, but in Piers as in the Canterbury Tales the author always has an ear for what the audience are saying in the background. In Chaucer's poem their response is usually enthusiastic, sometimes naive, always passionate; in Langland's poem their tone is more often sulky, uncomprehending, obstreperous. The contrast in response of course derives from the contrast in the material to which the audiences are exposed; a worldly tale is a very different thing from a sermon with palpable designs on us. It would have been interesting to know what the pilgrims thought of the Parson's contribution. By the time that we reach the end of that long sermon, however, all thought of pilgrims on a road to Canterbury has evaporated. Chaucer's ascent out of that earthly context is possibly inspiring, but one may also reflect that perhaps Chaucer did not dare to show us the pilgrims' reaction; the Parson's tale might not have survived the treatment.

> I moste sitte seide the segge or ellis sholde I nappe
> (B V 387)

> Ȝe *villam emi* quod oen and now y moste thedre
> To loke how me liketh hit and toek his leue at Peres
>
> (C VII 292-93)
>
> Forthy y pray ȝow Peres paraunter ȝif ȝe meten
> Treuth telleth hym this þat y be excused
>
> (C VII 297-98).

As Holy Church concludes, early on in *Piers*,

> The mooste partie of this peple that passeth on this erthe
> Have thei worship in this world thei wilne no bettre
> Of oother hevene than here holde thei no tale
>
> (B I 7-9).

But does the fault lie with the discourse or with the audience? The latter, no doubt, inasmuch as they are not saints; but if they were saints there would be no need to preach. Let us pursue the suggestion that "reasonable" discourse is itself defective.

Will's most characteristic complaint about it is that it fails to give him "kynde knowynge":

> Yet have I no kynde knowynge quod I ye mote kenne me bettre
> By what craft in my cors it comseth and where
>
> (B I 138-39)
>
> I have no kynde knowyng quod I to conceyve alle thi wordes
> Ac if I may lyve and loke I shal go lerne bettre
>
> (B VIII 58-59)
>
> Ac yet savoreth me noght thi seying so me Crist helpe
> For more kynde knowynge I coveite to lerne
> How Dowel Dobet and Dobest doon among the peple
>
> (B VIII 110-112).

It is hard to say, without being able to assign a precise meaning to Will's term, how justified these complaints are. Probably there is a considerable element of evasion involved. If there is a real criticism, in other words, it lies rather in the fact of Will's objecting than in the validity of his objection. We are entitled to take "kynde knowynge" as meaning knowledge that is so immediate that it does not merely inform but actually reforms; knowledge that would turn Will into a good person and thus silence his complaint. Consciously, Langland's search for that potent level of communication leads him increasingly towards the familiar idea of teaching, dramatically, by example. Anima deals with this theme in detail; if the church is to affect the lives of ordinary people, the lives of its clergy must be reformed:

> As holynesse and honeste out of Holy Chirche spredeth
> Thorugh lele libbynge men that Goddes lawe techen
> Right so out of Holy Chirche alle yveles spredeth
> There inparfit preesthode is prechours and techeris
>
> (B XV 92-95).

We are drawing towards the conclusion that martyrdom is the ultimate teaching aid:

> In savacion of the feith Seint Thomas was ymartired
> Amonges unkynde Cristene for Cristes love he deyede
> And for the right of al this reume and alle reumes Cristene
> Holy Chirche is honoured heighliche thorugh his deying
> He is a forbisene to alle bisshopes and a bright myrour
>
> (B XV 521-25).

Here we are beginning to look forward to the comparatively beneficial effect on Will of his vision of Christ's Passion.

As a writer, restricted to the use of words, Langland's attempts to circumvent the limitations of "reasonable" discourse naturally take a different form. This will be the subject of my next two chapters. I shall argue that his poetry employs strategies to turn "reasonable" discourse itself into a subject that is scrutinized by the poem, so that it is both the the medium by which things are said and also one of the things about which Piers Plowman speaks. More positively, Langland's poetry is designed to affect the reader in ways that "reasonable" discourse does not attempt; that is, it produces effects in our mind that cannot be expressed in purely rational terms as the apprehension of definite statements. If Langland had lived in a later age we might talk of "poetic truth", the kind of communication that modern poetry excels at and modern textbooks eschew. But our author had no such mental category as the "poetic" in the sense that we give it today.

The next two chapters will proceed mainly by close readings of selected passages from Piers Plowman. These aim to avoid contentiousness, and I make no attempt to argue for a particular interpretation or "reading" of the poem as a whole, thus hoping to avoid conflict with anyone's pet theory of what the poem means. I am interested in how we should read rather than with what we should read off. However, one important and possibly contentious aspect of my approach to Piers Plowman should be announced explicitly.

Much of Piers Plowman, especially in the central part of the poem, is composed of long speeches made by the characters that Will meets in his dreams (and occasionally outside them). It is obviously a question of some importance whether we are free to exercise our own judgment about the validity of what is said in these speeches, or whether we are to take them (perhaps with a few exceptions) as authoritative. Most of us begin with a predisposition in favour of the latter view; it is safer, if we are not to read anachronistically, to suppose that speakers not clearly labelled as unsound must be regarded as "honest" spokespersons, to be understood in the same way as the characters who represent good influences in a morality play. That might seem the only sensible course for a writer to take if he wants to preach morality in a straightforward way. However, there are difficulties with this view. If we demand that every speaker be simply right or wrong, we find ourselves driven to argue the case on a large number of occasions. We encounter "wrong" speakers who occasionally talk sense, such as the Doctor of Divinity, Haukyn, Will himself, and in the C text his alter ego Rechelesnesse. We discover arguments between characters whom, in general, we should call "right"; Clergie and Conscience (B XIII 179-214), or the Four Daughters of God. We find, if not arguments, at least sharp interruptions; for instance Dame Study's silencing of Wit (B X 5-8) or Trajan's impatient intervention into a conversation between Will and Scripture (B XI 140ff.). Piers himself changes his mind (B VII 118-21), which ought to be impossible if he is simply and perfectly "right" the whole time. A character like Study, obviously "right" on her own ground, is confessedly at a loss when she moves further afield (B X 182-90). Similarly, Conscience is obviously "right" when debating with Meed in B Passus III, yet in the final episode of the poem we see him deceived by "Sire Penetrans-domos". Then there are speakers whose status is thoroughly controversial, such as the two Minorites (B VIII 8-62), the "lewed vicory" (B XIX 412-61) and Need (B XX 4-50). Holy Church, Ymaginatif and Anima survive this summary untouched mainly, I suspect, because they do not encounter any of the other speakers except the dreamer himself. In all of these cases the problem for the reader is exacerbated by the absence of explicit guidance from the wings. As I noted earlier, there is no narratorial voice in Piers that has both the capacity and the inclination to inform us of how we are to judge events in the poem.[1]

I am not concerned here to discuss any of these various complexities individually. Some (e.g. the debate between the Four Daughters) are not really "problems" at all; everyone is familiar with the medieval notion that there are various levels of truth, some more powerful and complete than others. However, the cumulative effect of my list is, I think, to cast doubt on the "morality play" interpretation of the speaking characters in Piers Plowman. Although their allegorical names may suggest otherwise, they prove to be too human a collection to be granted the absolute authority that they would have if they were the creations of an orthodox peddler of moral and doctrinal substance with a naive literary approach. In fact we have no choice but to attend to them as critically as Will does, although preferably with more intelligence.[2]

This is not to claim, what would indeed be anachronistic, that Wit and Clergie are designed and poised by Langland in the way that Sludge and Blougram are, as a challenge to work out which half of what they say they really ought to believe. I do not think that the poet, in these instances at least, deliberately incorporated revealing vaguenesses or tactical lapses in logic. It is more probable that, as he wrote, Langland was trying as hard as he could to make the specific speech on which he was working as effective a contributor to his objective of "salvation" as possible. But Piers contains a multiplicity of such efforts, usually set in a context that in some way reveals the author's own disbelief in his achievement. Each new speech that Will dreams appears to raise new questions, to create the need for new speeches and indeed new dreams.

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1. Cf. above, p. 27.

2. Cf. Mary Carruthers, The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 36: "Will's dullness with respect to Lady Holy Church is shared by the poem, which insists on making its own journey to St. Truth rather than accepting her teaching ... we should not see the fault simply in Will's stupidity".

This is usually thought of as revealing the limitations of the dreamer rather than his dreams. Priscilla Martin puts it this way:

> The debates of medieval literature can be generally divided into 'horizontal' and 'vertical'. The horizontal debate, as in Winner and Waster, The Owl and the Nightingale, The Parliament of Fowls, is between evenly matched speakers, where each tries to win support for his view but none is conclusively victorious. The vertical debate, as in The Divine Comedy or Pearl between characters unequal in understanding, shows the inferior profiting, despite emotional and intellectual handicaps, from the counsel of the superior. We can account in formal terms for the frustrating effect of the Dreamer's enquiries about Dowel: as well as mistaking the nature of the subject, he keeps turning a vertical debate into a horizontal one.[1]

My argument is that Langland himself is honestly trying to write vertical debate but does not really believe in its validity himself. He judges his own attempts to compose the superior side of the vertical debate and finds that they cannot expect the perfect submission that the inferior party ought to offer.

Will's own objections stand for the possible objections of any Christian reader or auditor. Anne Middleton has suggested that his obtuseness is necessary as a formal condition for the poem to continue; if Will ever responded correctly the poem would end.[2] I would add to this that Will's interventions are sewn into the fabric of the poem as a kind of acknowledgement of the difficulties under which an ethical writer labours and as a perpetual challenge to the author. How this challenge affects Langland's artistry will be considered in the next chapter.

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1. Priscilla Martin, Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower, p. 50.
2. Anne Middleton, "The Audience and Public of 'Piers Plowman'," in David Lawton, ed., Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background: Seven Essays (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), pp. 101-23 and 147-54; see especially pp. 115-16.

Chapter Three

"AND": POSITIVE JUXTAPOSITION IN PIERS PLOWMAN

I

The extent to which Langland worked over his own previously-composed poetry would be remarkable in any age, even in our own century, when such factors as wide availability of scrap paper, frequent republication of the work of successful poets, and the guaranteed attention of a small but dedicated audience, make revision of one's own work an understandable and easy pursuit (Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell were notably addicted to revision). But when we consider Langland's behaviour as a writer in the context of his own age, it is tempting to describe it as obsessional. It is true that Deguileville, Chaucer and Gower also revised poems, but their revisions are quite unlike the thoroughgoing rewrites that Langland undertook. It now appears that he produced no less than four versions of his poem,[1] seemingly without ever being justified in supposing that his work as a reviser would be observed. For, as N.F. Blake has acutely observed, distribution of Middle English works was so haphazard that no writer in Middle English was entitled to expect that his readers would be familiar with any other specific Middle English text; hence parody is only possible where what is parodied is a genre rather than one poem in particular, and verbal echoes or quotations that are meant to be recognized are out of the question.[2] For this reason Langland can never have anticipated his modern audience of scholars equipped with parallel texts, alert to every slight train of thought that passes through the reviser's mind.

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[1] The doubtful case is not the Z text but the C text, whose intricate but often trivial rewordings of earlier passages are entirely different in character from the kind of revision undertaken at earlier stages. That does not mean in itself that Langland is not responsible, and all the substantial new passages in C are far more like Langland than anything in any medieval poem that is not a version of Piers Plowman. I am therefore persuaded that a late phase of authorial revision (perhaps several late phases) does underlie the C text. But at the same time, many of the smaller changes in C are perplexing, and the fact that Langland has evidently not brought the revised text into a state ready for "publication" does not go far towards explaining this. The considerable labour that must have gone into this rewording frequently appears unmotivated by any purpose that I recognize as preoccupying the poet of the earlier texts. I believe I would accept more of the C revision as Langlandian than John Norton-Smith, but he may be close to the truth when he says that "Some of the augmentations seem to belong to Langland, but the revisions, most often elucidationes of the argument of the B-Text, cannot be laid at Langland's door but must be attributed to an unidentified 'editor'" (William Langland, p. 11).

[2] N.F. Blake, The English Language in Medieval Literature (London: Dent, 1977), pp. 21-33.

This obsession can be interpreted in various ways. One solution is to see it as marking a self-absorbed, egotistic poet, akin to Blake or Whitman, hostile or indifferent to literary tradition (for Langland there was effectively no literary tradition), motivated primarily by an unexamined desire to publicize his own self-communion. Another is to see Langland as an evangelist with a terrifying sense of the importance of what he communicates; which would reasonably describe Blake and Whitman as well, suggesting that this description is closely related to the previous one.

These speculations are interesting, but dangerous in as much as they encourage us to look away from the poem and select only those remembered details that support the hypothesis we are considering. The more relevant point is that, whatever the explanation, Langland is a persistent reader of his own work. As a reviser, he is both reader and writer, and the alternation of the two stances is perhaps the most obvious generator of the multiple viewpoints present, sometimes simultaneously, in the poem. Langland the reviser, like Will the listener, is sceptical, uncommitted, and more concerned to qualify, relocate or alter his previous positions than to ornament, elucidate or progress from them as one who still wholeheartedly assented to them might do. In short, his revisions are often more reflective of his position as a critical reader than as a confident writer. Perhaps this partly explains the temporary popularity of the "multiple authorship" theory, enabling it to thrive in spite of the obvious presence of a highly distinctive and personal style throughout the various texts of the poem.

The process of revision is, then, one of the main methods by which Langland generates a complexity of textual surface; the matured versions of the poem, the B text especially, are made in rather the way a gardener makes compost, by superimposing multiple layers of commentary and then leaving them to interact. One reason for sometimes examining earlier versions of a passage before coming at it directly is to trace the progress of this mode of composition. A second is that, partly as a consequence of it, Langland's poetry becomes more personal and more profound as we pass from one stage of revision to the next, so the earlier version often usefully highlights the distinctive features of the later one. Hence, while my aim in the next section is to make some general observations about Langland's most developed style, using the B version of a passage from the speech of Wit as my example, I shall begin by looking briefly at the earlier version of the same passage in the A text.

II

What calle ȝe þat castel quaþ I þat kynde haþ ymakid
And what kenis þing is kynde conne ȝe me telle
Kynde quaþ he is creatour of alle kenis bestis
Fadir & fourmour þe ferste of alle þing
And þat is þe grete god þat gynnyng had neuere
Þe lord of lif & of liȝt of lisse & of peyne
Aungelis & alle þing arn at his wille
Ac man is hym most lik of mark & of shap
For þoruȝ þe woord þat he warp wexe forþ bestes
And al at his wil was wrouȝt wiþ a speche
Dixit & facta sunt &c
Saue man þat he made ymage to himselue
Ȝaf hym gost of his godhed & grauntide hym blisse
Lif þat ay shal laste & al his lynage aftir
Þat is þe castel þat kynde made *caro* it hatte
As muche to mene as man with his soule
Þat he wrouȝte wiþ werkis & with wordis boþe
Þoruȝ miȝt of þe maieste man was ymakid
Faciamus hominem ad ymaginem nostram

(A X 25-41a)

With a view to what I intend to say later about the revised version, I want to characterize this passage as "reasonable" in the sense discussed in the previous chapter. That is a relative statement that will have greater point when I contrast this passage with the revised one. But it is certainly all too "reasonable" in content; Wit's argument, which I shall outline in the next paragraph, has everything that could be asked from a "reasonable" argument: a noble conclusion that we already believe to be true, a happy and decorous compatibility with other beliefs that we already hold, a pervasive impression that Wit is making out a pattern in the history of a world that we expect to be patterned in this kind of way. Everything, in fact, but logical force; in itself it is no more than a fancy, to which we might respond by saying "How inspiring!" or "How eloquent!" or even "How true!" but certainly not by saying "Yes, that follows." The form is "reasonable" too; the passage follows a clear path in which each element bears a reassuringly firm relation to what has preceded it. The dreamer poses two linked questions that correspond neatly to Wit's much more extensive reply and consequently have, in hindsight, the faintly artificial air familiar to readers of Platonic dialogues. Wit answers both questions, beginning one answer at line 27 and the other at line 38. It is true that he reverses the order, but this causes no difficulty and has a symbolic meaning. The dreamer begins with the visible object - the castle - and is only peripherally interested in Kynde; facts about Kynde are background material. But from a true perspective it is man that is the peripheral factor, and he can only be satisfactorily explained by reference to his creator. Wit, like any good scholastic, must begin with God, in the traditional way of medieval encyclopaedias and summae.

Wit proceeds with unemphatic clarity. His argument can be paraphrased thus: "Kynde is the creator of everything, and is God. Everything is 'at his wille' (a phrase that contains many meanings), but man is most like him (and is therefore a special kind of creation). For everything was created by word - 'he commanded, and they were created' - except man, whom he made in his own image, giving him a spirit and immortality. And that is what the castle of Caro means; a special kind of creation, 'man with a soul'. When he made that, he used 'works' as well as 'words'. Man was made with his 'might'; 'let us make man in our image'." Langland, or his source if he had one, was obviously anticipating the material description of man being made out of dust in Genesis 2:7 ("Formavit igitur Dominus Deus hominem de limo terrae, et inspiravit in faciem ejus spiraculum vitae, et factus est homo in animam viventem"). Biblical scholars now recognize that Genesis is a compilation that presents two different creation myths in its first two chapters; for Langland, however, the apparently peculiar mode of Adam's creation reflects and explains what makes man a different kind of creature from any other, sharing some features with the "bestis" but also, uniquely, embodying the image of God.

This paraphrase does not do justice to the passage, but its sins are only sins of omission. The sense of the argument is undeniably present and the reader picks it up easily, despite the brevity of Langland's exposition. This brevity is, in fact, one of the aspects of Wit's speech that differentiates it from a typical medieval discourse. I am not referring to the bad reputation that medieval writers have for verbosity and ruthless reiteration, but to their being, as a rule, singlemindedly bent on delivering their argument. Here there is hardly a line that serves that purpose alone. Even line 33 ("For þoruȝ þe woord þat he warp wexe forþ bestes") is more than merely necessary; it is a characteristic variation on Langland's ever-present "incarnational" theme, the fusion of the abstract or immaterial ("woord") with the concrete ("bestis"), achieved, as so often, by a vigorous use of verbs and forceful alliteration. Much of the work, so far as presenting the argument is concerned, is done by small but critical words such as "For" in line 33 and "Saue" in line 35. Another feature of the passage that might be described as "unreasonable" is its relation to what surrounds it. Langland has proposed an architectural allegory, but Wit proceeds by discarding it rather than by elaborating on it; God is not presented as building a castle. Consequently the subject of Wit's discourse cannot be associated, in the mind's eye, with a single poetic image. And while there is no conflict between this section and that which precedes it, the two cannot be visualized in relation to each other, but only understood so. Hence the truth is referred to by Wit's words, but is not contained or limited by them.

My point can perhaps be made clearer if we consider the effect of the first "þat" in line 29 ("And þat is þe grete god þat gynnyng had nevere"). Both Goodridge and Tiller understandably translate it as "he", and in so doing raise the question of why Langland did not write "And he is þe grete god ..." If he had done so, the effect would, I think, have been to convey the absolute identity of Kynde and God; as if "Kynde" were just another way of saying "God". The impersonal "þat", however, seems to refer only to the preceding epithet, "þe ferste of alle þing", and so has the effect of distancing the two in the very act of linking them. We are struck by the inappropriateness of the impersonal pronoun to the personal God. Langland, in fact, suggests that in a sense Kynde is not

God; it is only a way of talking about him, appropriate to a special sort of intellectual context. Of course Langland's audience did not need to be told that the creator of all things was God, but after the first three words of line 29, this truism suddenly seems an illumination, even a slightly paradoxical one. Langland gives us a sense of the complexity of God by forcing us to attend to the different modes of thought in which he can be considered. Similarly (to return to the previous point) this section as a whole stands beside the "castle" allegory but does not continue it. Both represent ways of talking about the nature of man; but placing the two of them side by side has the effect of suggesting to us that the nature of man is too large a subject to be adequately contained by any single mode of discourse.

Having said this, however, I repeat that my main intention in quoting the A version of this passage is to emphasize its "reasonableness", its neat equation between a special act of creation and a special kind of creature. We can very easily imagine a medieval _auctor_ assuring us: "Reason demands that man, who was made in the image of God, would not be brought into existence in the same way as beasts or stones." Wit's argument is in itself entirely of a piece with the world of balance, order and decorum that was explored in Chapter Two.

Let us turn now to Langland's development of the passage in the B text. A difficulty here is that both Kane-Donaldson and Schmidt err, I think, in presenting it too much as an attempt at the same sort of straightforward argument that we find in the A text. To make sense of a passage is an editorial obligation, but in this case the editors try, in my opinion, to make the wrong kind of sense, disrupting the form of the poetry by imposing a logical structure on a speech that actually proceeds by other means, such as accumulation and repetition.[1] Consequently the text as I quote it here is based on Schmidt's, but I have removed his paragraphing and punctuation, and I have restored a number of archetypal readings.[1] Schmidt, of course, has emended because he thought the B archetype corrupt, and I do not wish to claim that the version of the passage that I give here (which is essentially Bx) is likely to be exactly what Langland wrote. But I hope to show that it does "make sense" on its own terms, and that we find problems only if we try to get out of it the same kind of progression that was discernible in the A version of the passage.

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[1] "Reader-response" criticism of the sort attempted here seems fated to conflict with certain editorial procedures. Cf. Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the _Variorum_," _Critical Enquiry_, 2(1976), rpt. in _Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism_, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 164-84. Here, commenting on similar "tidying" of one of Milton's sonnets, Fish remarks: "Editorial practices like these are only the most obvious manifestations of the assumptions to which I stand opposed: the assumption that there _is_ a sense, that it is embodied or encoded in the text, and that it can be taken in at a single glance" (p. 172).

What kynnes thyng is Kynde quod I kanstow me telle
Kynde quod Wit is creatour of alle kynnes thynges
Fader and formour of al that evere was maked
And that is the grete God that gynnyng hadde nevere
Lord of lif and of light of lisse and of peyne
Aungeles and alle thyng arn at his wille
Ac man is hym moost lik of marc and of shape
For thorugh the word that he warp woxen forth beestes
Dixit et facta sunt
And he made man likkest to hymself one
And Eve of his ryb bon withouten any mene
For he was synguler hymself and seide *Faciamus*
As who seith moore moot herto than my word oone
My myght moot helpe now with my speche
Ryght as a lord sholde make lettres and hym lakked parchemyn
Though he koude write never so wel if he hadde no penne
The lettre for al the lordshipe I leve were nevere ymaked
And so it semeth by him as the bible telleth
There he seide *Dixit et facta sunt*
He moste werche with his word and his wit shewe
And in this manere was man maad thorugh myght of God almyghty
With his word and werkmanshipe and with lif to laste
And thus God gaf hym a goost of the godhede of hevene
And of his grete grace graunted hym blisse
And that is lif that ay shal laste to al his lynage after
And that is the castel that Kynde made *Caro* it hatte
And is as muche to mene as man with a soule
And that he wroghte with werk and with word bothe
Thorgh myght of the mageste man was ymaked
(B IX 25-52).

We observed while discussing the earlier version that much of the work of presenting the argument devolved upon connectives like "Saue" and "For".

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1. In particular this is true where emendation was on grounds of sense. There is no need to resurrect readings, like "spak" instead of "warp" at B IX 32, that have no bearing on meaning and that seem obviously scribal. My text differs from Schmidt's at lines 33, 38, 39, 41 and 42.

The most noticeable connective here is "And", and Langland proceeds by a series of statements that are linked more by a common subject than by logical relations. The argument of the A version is still present, but it no longer seems the primary motivation behind the poetry. Rather, Langland seems anxious to explore in a general way his central theme of of the nature of man and of man's special relation to God, but has become less interested in constructing precise formulae and drawing up lucid equations. The end has begun to dominate the means.

If we insist on trying to abstract a patterned argument from this passage, it becomes frustrating. For example, both Schmidt and Kane-Donaldson are disturbed about the apparent lack of a one-to-one correspondence between the elements of the "writing" metaphor and the modes of creation. Schmidt inserts a "no" before "parchemyn" in line 38 (altering the sense so that now the lord does have parchment), and is then able to parallel God's "wit" (cf. line 43) with literacy (cf. line 39), the "slime of the earth" of Genesis 2:7 with "parchemyn", and "the active exertion of his power" with the "penne".[1] This seems to me an attempt to impose too neat a structure upon the flow of Langland's thought. The lines are in fact coherent as they stand, if we interpret Wit as making the same point twice over: "Just as if a lord wanted to write letters but had no parchment, even though he knew how to write - or suppose he had no pen - then the letter would never get written for all his lordship."[2] In a sense, because there are no precise correspondences such as Schmidt discerns, my rendering says less; it is certainly less ingenious. Langland's aim is simply to explore the question of how the omnipotent God could be bound by the limitation implied by "moot" in lines 36 and 37. But although this more general meaning may appeal less to the "crossword-puzzle" aspect of the reader's mentality, it has, I think, more interesting resonances.

In the first chapters of Genesis we see God at his most awesome and

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1. Schmidt, *B-Text*, pp. 327-28. See also A.V.C. Schmidt, "Langland's Pen/Parchment Analogy in *Piers Plowman* B IX, 38-40", *Notes & Queries*, n.s. 27(1980), 538-39.

2. This kind of construction, with its conversational reiteration of a point that logically need be made only once, is not unusual in *Piers* (e.g. "Thouh he falle for defaute þat fayteth for his liflode / Reche ȝe neuere ȝe riche thouh suche lollares sterue" (C IX 100-01)).

transcendent, the God with whom it seems most absurd that we should claim any kind of relationship. Consequently this is the picture of God stressed by Langland at the start of his brief account of creation; the "grete God", the "Lord of lif and of light". By the time we return to this picture at the end of the passage, the link between God and man has been made, and the line

> Thorgh myght of the mageste man was ymaked

reminds us that the affirmation of a special kinship between mere "man" and "the mageste" is an extraordinarily bold one. The reminder is necessary, for in the intervening lines God has appeared in a touchingly human form. Just as the focus in the second chapter of Genesis narrows from the universal to the local, just as Augustine stressed the creation of Adam as an individual in contrast to the animals of whom "he commanded many to come into existence at once",[1] so Langland now sketches an intimate picture of a God who is alone, silently engaged in a private endeavour, like the lord at the writing-desk, even talking to himself (as we do at such times), humbly accepting what are in a sense limitations by the mere fact of setting himself the problem. Of course I am overstating the case, but the effect that I overstress is really there, in words like "one" (line 33) or "synguler" (line 35), in the specific mention of Eve and perhaps of Adam,[2] in God's care and concern for his work, which brings to life the "grete grace" of line 47. The passage as a whole conducts an elaborate dance in which God comes down to man's level and man is exalted to God's. The representation of God as a "lord" in the human sense is notable in English writing of this period. Julian of Norwich makes frequent use of the analogy, perhaps hardly even thinking of it as an analogy, especially in Chapters 7 and 51 of her Revelation, the former about God's "homlyhede" and the latter containing her famous portrayal of the lord and his servant.[3] Seeking precise

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1. De Civitate Dei XII, 22 (Dombart and Kalb ed., XLVIII, 380; Bettenson, p. 502).

2. Some B mss have "Adam a man" for "man" in line 33.

3. References are to Marion Glasscoe, ed., Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1976); this is the longer account of her visions. See also the comments by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron in their introduction to The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript (p. 18).

theological correspondences to the details of Langland's picture of the nobleman at his desk seems to me to make it too purely intellectual and so to stifle other resonances that the image might, left to itself, provoke.

Langland is in fact uninterested in the complicated patterns of analogy that "reasonable" authors typically provide. An author of that kind would have explained to us that God's "werkis" corresponded to man's rational powers, building up a neat analogy between the new ingredient in the creation of man and that aspect of man that sets him apart from the beasts. Langland's text noticeably and perhaps frustratingly refrains from building up a clear network of relationships between his terms. The poet refuses to disconnect work from word,[1] which is the first thing that a dissecting analyst would do, preferring simply to reiterate the point that word and work are linked (in lines 43, 45, and 51), a reiteration that is logically superfluous but that each time draws in new ideas until the reader is made to experience the doctrine and interpret his world in its terms. The connotations of the lines affect the reader easily enough, even where denotatively the lines are barely translatable. Thus there is nothing prior to line 49 ("And that is the castel that Kynde made Caro it hatte") for which "that" can stand, logically; but the effect of this string of "And"s is to associate, loosely but convincingly, God's act of creation, the image of God, the soul, immortality, bliss, grace and finally the castle of Caro. It is a characteristic stroke of Langland the allegorist that he first offers a concrete and material image for his subject (a castle) and then proceeds to stress exclusively its metaphysical dimensions.

This simplicity or absence of denotative argument is essential in order to unleash the full range of connotative meanings. We can see this when Schmidt, who thinks Langland is trying to expound a comparatively intricate argument, is compelled to chide Skeat and Goodridge for sensing a reference to the Trinity in line 35 ("For he was synguler hymself and seide *Faciamus*"). From Schmidt's point of view the line is part of his argument and this tends to exclude any other logically significant meanings: "The point here is not that *Faciamus* is a plural verb ... but that it means 'Let us *make*' (implying for Langland an action) in contrast with *Dixit* ..., the (merely) verbal command that created the beasts."[1] Of course I would be as averse to imposing a Trinitarian argument on the text as I am to imposing Schmidt's argument on it, but from the intermediate position that I believe Langland encourages us to take up, it is possible to attend to both without feeling that the controlling power of one necessitates rejection of the other as an optical illusion. It is difficult to believe that Langland's line does not reflect the venerable argument that derives from the mixture of singular and plural forms in the first chapter of Genesis;[2] and it would be a pity to ignore the reference in this context, when the image of God is our theme, for this image was traditionally understood as being of the Trinity,[3] and this is an important element in Wit's many-sided meditation on the nature of man.

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[1] There is probably something wrong with the majority B reading at lines 41-42, but the editors' substitution of the Faciamus quote (from MS Corpus Christi College 201) for the less logical Dixit seems to me unjustified. The argument would indeed be more coherently structured if Langland here emphasized the making and not the saying, but line 43 shows that he wished to stress both, and this is what Dixit et facta sunt, with Langland's explanation in mind, now does.

This passage is typical of many in *Piers Plowman* in becoming frustrating if it is approached with the expectation of an intricate but explicitly stated series of propositions. Schmidt and Kane-Donaldson respond to this by trying to minimize the difficulties through judicious editing and, in Schmidt's case, translations that stress only the appropriate meanings.[1] Another response is to accept the frustration gladly and to regard it as a significant feature of Langland's style, reflecting his own mental turmoil, his sceptical reaction to the archaic certainties of a disappearing world-view. My own argument is that the frustration is of our own making, and needs neither to be emended away nor welcomed. If we approach the text without stipulating that we should be provided with the elaborate pattern of analogies and mnemonic devices of which "reasonable" discourse is so often composed, we find a calm, cumulative flow of verse, made vivid by rapid changes of tone and style, but maintaining an emotional continuity because none of the various modes of expression is ever fully realized. Here it may be added that this is one reason for Langland's brevity, the brevity that reduces the essence of Deguileville's enormous *Pelerinage de Vie Humaine* to a mere fifty lines at the start of B Passus XI; more of an allusion than a treatment. No mode of style or thought is ever allowed complete dominance. The contrast with Chaucer, the master parodist, is inevitable; the unpleasant shock that many readers feel as they approach the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* is attributable not to the ending considered in itself but to Chaucer's rigorous confinement, up to this point, of his style and subject within certain boundaries, which have held so consistently and for so long that it has become for the reader a breach of contract when they are crossed.[2]

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[1] Schmidt, *B-Text*, p. 327.

[2] See e.g. Augustine, *Confessiones* XIII, 22. References are to L. Verheijen, ed., *Sancti Augustini: Confession~~em~~um Libri XIII*, Corpus Christianorum, series latina XXVII (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981) (pp. 260-61); English translation by R.S. Pine-Coffin, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), pp. 331-32.

[3] Augustine, *De Trinitate* X, 11-12. References are to W.J. Mountain, ed., *Sancti Aurelii Augustini: De Trinitate Libri XV*, Corpus Christianorum, series latina L-La (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968) (L, 329-32). See also Barbara Raw, "Piers and the Image of God in Man," in S.S. Hussey, ed., *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 143-179, especially p. 150ff. The comparison between the three parts of the soul and the three Persons of the Trinity was such common knowledge that it appears even in *Cursor Mundi* (lines 553-80). An Augustinian sermon on the subject is to be found in several mss that also contain the *Cloud of Unknowing* (BM Ms Harleian 2373, Cambridge University Library Ms Ii.vi.39, Ms Kk.vi.26), for details of which see Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, EETS, O.S. 218 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. x, xiii, xiv.

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[1] Cf. line 43 ("He moste werche with his word and his wit shewe"). Schmidt insists that "with" means "'along with, in addition to' *not* 'by means of'" (*B-Text*, p. 328). This is unarguably true if we are to settle on a single denotative meaning, but it puts all the weight on "werche" and none on "word", when the poet is surely impartial in his emphasis.

[2] I hope that the apparently flagrant contradiction between what I say here and Elizabeth Salter's remarks about the "great tonal richness" of *Troilus* and about its "many different points of vantage and of persuasion" will be recognized as no more than apparent (*Fourteenth-Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 8, 9). Great variety of tone and style there is, but within certain limits nevertheless; the same contrast exists between *Troilus* and *Piers* at the stylistic level as between their settings; the doomed city, hemmed round with invaders, of *Troilus*, and the limitless, unpredictable landscape of Will's dreams.

My justification for asking the reader to surrender expectations of an argumentative structure is that the text itself encourages such a surrender. The sequence of "And"s that begin lines 46 to 51 invites us to fall into an attitude of passive receptivity, as statement follows statement with no explicit definition of the relationship of each one to its predecessor.

> And thus God gaf hym a goost of the godhede of hevene
> And of his grete grace graunted hym blisse
> And that is lif that ay shal laste to al his lynage after
> (B IX 46–48).

It has the surface form of a simple "list", and could be compared to a typical extract from the Parlement of the Thre Ages, where "And" is used frequently, indeed excessively, at the start of a line. But Langland's lists tend to contain awkward elements.[1] Logically the link between lines 46 and 47 is quite different from the link between lines 47 and 48. Line 47 continues the narrative of line 46; God did x and he also did y. Line 48, however, interrupts the narrative to provide an explanatory gloss; God did y and, by the way, y is z. But because all the lines are constructed so similarly, these logical distinctions make a minimal impact, so that we are inclined to fuse all these statements together and to see each one as related to the others in a way that is not simply definable either as narrative continuation or as explanatory gloss, but as an indefinite association that has features common to both. Thus, comparing lines 46 and 47, we feel that the two actions of giving man a spiritual soul and of granting him bliss are almost one, yet distinct. Certainly both are munificent gifts, and it would be difficult to conceive of bliss without a soul; nor, we might speculate, does God create anything without ordaining that his creation should end in bliss. Perhaps from a superlunary perspective God's act of creation is as single and simple as he is himself. It is a measure of Langland's achievement that he can provoke this thought while avoiding the reduction of his subject to a mere abstraction. It is worth pausing briefly to set this achievement in a wider context.

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[1] Cf. the discussion in Chapter I (pp. 19–22).

The difficulty, when we talk about God, of steering a course between unintelligibility and untruthfulness was much discussed in the middle ages, but by philosophers more than poets. The findings of reason on the subject of God - natural theology, in the broadest sense - appear meagre and arid; God is simple, perfect, pure being. According to Aquinas, to speak of God as _esse_ is to indicate a superabundance of riches. To those who object that, as God is "simplex", it cannot be said that "in Deo sunt perfectiones omnium rerum", Saint Thomas replies in the _Summa Theologica_ (I q. 4 art. 2).[1] Anthony Kenny suggests that the _esse_ of something might be taken not as indicating merely what is left when all other properties have been subtracted but "the totality of all the episodes and states of its history". But even so, he concludes that "the notion of pure being is as empty as the notion of pure life or pure history. There could not be a life which consisted of nothing but just living, or a history uncontaminated by anything actually happening. The attractiveness of this way of taking 'esse' was that it allowed us to conceive it as a rich totality rather than as an impoverished common factor. But if 'esse' is taken thus, then pure esse is a totality which has no parts, and its 'richness' is its entire lack of any property."[2] Certainly the affirmation that God is possessed of the perfection of an elephant, for example, does not apparently permit us to assert that there is anything in our knowledge of elephants that can helpfully be applied to theology. In fact Aquinas says roundly that nothing can be predicated of God in the same sense in which it might be predicated of one of his creatures.[3] Nevertheless he maintained that it was possible to talk about God, but all statements must be understood as analogical; for example, it is true that God is wise, not in the sense that a man could be said to be wise, but not in a sense so unrelated as to make the affirmation meaningless. Whether this is a genuine escape from silence has been frequently questioned, not least in the middle ages.[1] Duns Scotus, for example, reckoned that analogical speech ultimately rested on the prior assumption that certain things could be univocally predicated of God, which (if true) would make analogical speech superfluous.[2] In fact Scotus did believe that certain terms could be applied univocally to God, for example *esse*.[3]

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[1] Blackfriars ed., II, 50-55.

[2] Anthony Kenny, _Aquinas_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 59.

[3] _Summa Theologica_ I q. 13 art. 5: "Nullum nomen univoce de Deo et creaturis praedicatur" (Blackfriars ed., III, 64). Cf. _Summa Contra Gentiles_ I 32.

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1. For a typical modern attack on the theory, see Humphrey Palmer, *Analogy: A Study of Qualification and Argument in Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1973). For a more positive account see Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Volume II ("Mediaeval Philosophy: Augustine to Scotus") (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1950), pp. 394-97.
2. *Ordinatio* I. 3, par. 27. References are to Carolo Balić et al., eds., *Ioannis Duns Scoti Opera Omnia* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950-) (III, 18).
3. *Ordinatio* I. 8, par. 83 (Balić ed., IV, 191-92).

Furthermore, Duns has his own methodological tool for extending our speech about God, the distinctio formalis a parte rei; that is, a distinction that is neither real, as between two separate objects, nor purely mental, but occurs "when the mind distinguishes in an object two or more formalitates which are objectively distinct, but which are inseparable from one another, even by divine power."[1] Reference to the formal distinction enables Duns to speak intelligibly of such divine attributes as beauty and wisdom. But the net effect of these new formulations is to render God more distant and unimaginable than he seems in Saint Thomas' writings. Duns is among the first of the medieval philosophers to stress the indeterminacy of God's ways from the point of view of reason. The most striking feature of Duns' system, according to Gordon Leff, is "the discontinuity which it introduced between the natural and the supernatural".[2] And some forty years before Langland began to write, William of Ockham, in Leff's words, "rejected metaphysics and with it natural theology".[3] The God of the philosophers grew simultaneously awesome in his transcendence of all our mental capacities and unimportant because so impossibly distant.

But in some respects the influence of Ockham and his contemporaries was a positive one even in the religious sphere. In ethics, for example, to turn away from the investigation of the good in itself, or of why a certain act is good and not bad, is to throw into greater prominence the more immediately practical questions that are debated at such length in Piers; what, in short, the ordinary Christian should do if he means to do well.[4] Again, in speaking about God, the abandonment of attempts to say anything intelligible or interesting about the transcendent God

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1. Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Volume II, p. 509.

2. Gordon Leff, Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham (1958; rpt. London: Merlin Press, 1959), p. 271.

3. Gordon Leff, Medieval Thought, p. 281.

4. Cf. Janet Coleman, English Literature in History 1350-1400, p. 241: "If we go beyond the methodology of many of the modern fourteenth-century theologians, we find that one of the interesting characteristics of their theology in general was its tendency to treat moral issues at the expense of dogmatic theology. This tendency was peculiar to England. The focus of their discussions was the active and passive role of the Christian pilgrim or viator as he persevered through life as a member of civil society and of God's Christian society, the Church. 'What', it was asked, 'was required of man to conform to God's reward of justification and acceptance?'"

may be linked with the concrete and human portrayals of God that we find in so much late medieval English literature.[1] It may also be the case, of course, that mere distance from the academic environment is a factor; Julian of Norwich for obvious reasons did not attend university, the _Gawain_-poet "shows no sign of a university education",[2] and John Burrow has suggested that authors who wrote in English may have felt themselves permitted, if not compelled, to employ relatively concrete and immediate modes of expression - "High abstract thought had its own language: Latin."[3] But against this, the general impression to be gained from reading fourteenth-century theology is that it has become, in comparison to earlier medieval thought, deistic. The continuing vein of affective meditation on the Passion (whose sources, according to J.A.W. Bennett, were not "fundamentally different in spirit from scholasticism in its earliest flowering"[4]) seems to inhabit an entirely different world from the logic, politics and ethics of Ockham.

It does not seem a promising context in which to find "the most Christocentric poem ever written",[5] nor writing that we have become used to describing as "incarnational" (cf. above, p. 119). Perhaps it would be truer to say that _Piers_ is the most overtly, because most deliberately, Christocentric poem ever written. The energy and individuality of its expression suggests a dissatisfaction with the modes of expression that Langland knew, or perhaps a failure to appreciate them. Reading that, it has been suggested, consisted so largely of books of quotations is not likely to foster a sophisticated appreciation of genre, but rather, in a thoughtful reader, a sense of frustration, a desire to generate some unity from the plurality of styles and mental habits that are rightly felt to be present. The

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1. Cf. above, p. 123.
2. Derek Brewer, _English Gothic Literature_ (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 175.
3. J.A. Burrow, _Medieval Writers and their Work: Middle English Literature and its Background 1100-1500_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 87.
4. J.A.W. Bennett, _Poetry of the Passion: Studies in Twelve Centuries of English Verse_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 34.
5. J.A.W. Bennett, _Poetry of the Passion_, p. 85.

refusal to permit the Latin and English traditions referred to by Burrow to lead separate lives is expressed in an obvious way on every page of Langland's poem.

But whatever the causes, Langland's religious poetry cannot easily be allocated to any of the discrete traditions of speaking about God that, with the hindsight of a historian, are visible in fourteenth-century England (Langland's own historical sense was poor, we are told[1]). If we are sometimes reminded of the Meditationes Vitae Christi, it is an approach that Langland only alludes to; he does not follow it ("The absence of a Bonaventuran strain in Langland is noteworthy"[2]). On the other hand his presentation of God, in this passage for example, is far from being abstract or arid; on the contrary, it gives the vivid impression, which may be a false one, of having a direct significance for us. What Bennett writes of the Passion in Piers Plowman has a more general application. The Passion, he says, is never "presented - as sometimes in devotional writings of the period - as an isolated event, or in abstract theological terms, but always as the sublime and culminating expression of God's love for man; so that it is related directly - even forcibly - to the concerns of every day."[3] The sceptical note is necessary because this impression is after all beyond rational formulation; or below it. There is no easy way to respond to John Norton-Smith's complaint (again, the specific subject is the Passion):

> Exactly how, as an object of devotion or as an example for active imitation in the conduct or our lives, this vivid image of Christ the Redeemer is meant to operate as a transforming agent, is never made clear in the process of the poem. Or at least I can find no sustained or convincing connecting arguments. Perhaps Langland intended the Imago Christi to exist in our imaginations as if it were a Platonic Form: 'recognition' alone would be sufficient to bring about reformation or 'correction'.[4]

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1. Cf. John Norton-Smith, William Langland, pp. 4-9.
2. J.A.W. Bennett, Poetry of the Passion, p. 86.
3. J.A.W. Bennett, Poetry of the Passion, p. 86.
4. John Norton-Smith, William Langland, p. 9.

It is difficult to reply to this satisfactorily, except with the partial rejoinder that Langland's confidence might not be in the _image_ of Christ at all, nor in anything else incorporated in his text. If Langland unwittingly escapes the Christian philosopher's problem about theological speech, it is because he is no philosopher; Wit's lines on Creation are not definitive in meaning - they express, and are intended to invoke, wonder and desire. It is perfectly true that Langland has no complete program of reform, that his book does not, for all the teaching it contains, explain how to do well. But as Will agrees, there are "bokes ynowe" of that kind. His own insistence (in defiance of grammar) on seeking Dowel as a person, rather than treating it as an imperative, suggests more the nature of Langland's poetic aims.

To return to the passage that prompted this digression, and to Langland's employment of a repetitious sequence of "And"s. One way of describing the effect would be to say that the sequence of "And"s here lulls to sleep the logical faculties of the reader. As I have already pointed out, line 49 ("And that is the castel that Kynde made _Caro_ it hatte") cannot be given a precise meaning at all, but there is no pressure on the reader to seek one out. In this case I do not think that "lulling to sleep" should carry a pejorative overtone, although modern critics are as a whole suspicious of poetry that aims to loosen the reader's hold on rationality and seems to affirm more than it really does. I have striven to show that there is a good deal happening in the reader's mind here, even if it is not exactly expressible in logical terms. But undoubtedly Langland does sometimes yield to the incantatory tendency. He is especially apt to resort to the loose sequence of "and"s in those passages where modern readers find him least convincing, the vaguely portentous prophecies:

> And er this fortune falle fynde men shul the worste
> By sixe sonnes and a ship and half a shef of arwes
> And the middel of a moone shal make the Jewes torne
> And Sarsynes for that sighte shul synge _Gloria in excelsis &c_
>
> (B III 325-28).

Nevertheless, the very fact that we bristle at the invitation to sit back and let those meaningless images wash over us suggests that the device does not have the power to lull our faculties to sleep in any literal sense.[1] When there is nothing being said, Langland cannot delude us into believing that there is. By contrast, the reader's receptiveness to Wit's speech is based on a belief in the significance of what is being expressed; a belief that I have tried to show is justified.

The development of this passage in the transition from the A text to the B text is not an isolated one. The strategy of replacing straightforward argument by a looser and more associative structure that is less apt to exclude overtones and unexpressed thematic links is carried through in the rest of Wit's speech too.

The B version of the speech can almost be said to have become the classical example of Langland's incoherence and digressiveness. Nevill Coghill described it as "perhaps the least well-managed passus in the poem"[2] and Elizabeth Salter used it as the foundation for her discussion of Langland's structural vagaries.[3] John Norton-Smith sees it as initiating a depressing sequence of passus in which the poet's magnetic attraction towards satiric moralizing gets in the way of an intended exercise in self-analysis that the poet was not really up to;[4] I would agree with his judgment of B Passus X but I am more content with the rest than he is, perhaps because I have given up trying to make anything out of the psychological allegory that purports to govern this part of the poem.[1] An unsympathetic paraphrase of B Passus IX, one that refuses to modify its expectations of argumentative form, might run thus:

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[1] Compare, for example, David Aers on B III 284-94, in Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 64-65: "The use here of the passive tense, without agency being specified ('Dauid shal be diademed'), and abstract nouns acting as historical agents ('loue and lowenesse/ and leautee', with 'Leaute shal don hym lawe'), are both generally revealing grammatical features. They allow a writer to convey a sense of purposive human actions and processes while he fails to provide vital information about the agents enacting the processes - who will crown David? Who, precisely, will do what to whom?"

[2] Nevill Coghill, "The Pardon of Piers Plowman", PBA, 30 (1944), 303-57; this quote from p. 324, and cf. p. 339.

[3] Elizabeth Salter, Piers Plowman: An Introduction (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), pp. 55-56.

[4] John Norton-Smith, William Langland, pp. 108-09.

"Wit is asked where Dowel is (B VIII 126). He replies to the letter rather than to the spirit of the question by describing in considerable detail the castle of Caro in which Dowel is said to live (B IX 1-24). Wit has already started to drift away from his theme when the Dreamer makes matters worse by catching up the idea of "Kynde" and asking for Wit to elaborate on it (25). Kynde, it emerges, is the creator, and Wit proceeds to describe the creation of man, who is represented by the castle (26-52). At this point we move back one step in the path of digressions, to the subject of the castle's inhabitants (53-59), but we step down again into a discussion of those who abuse their "Inwit" by drinking too much (60-66a) and thence to the educational duties of the Church (the link being made by the description of the ignorant as those who lack Inwit in line 67). Wit passes on to a brief mention of the duties of godparents (75-79), which is a permissible narrowing of focus, but then proceeds to attack Christian authorities in general for failures in their duty to the poor, especially in relation to almsgiving (80-92a). The theme of "Inwit" has now disappeared altogether. At this point, when logically we are at a whole series of removes from the principal subject, Langland returns unexpectedly to the theme of Dowel, not by the proper method (of retracing his steps up the path of digressions) but by taking an illegitimate short cut, announcing that those whom he has just been attacking are failing to Do Well (93).

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[1] At any rate I am sure that it is futile to try and work out a "real-life" psychological narrative that corresponds to Will's allegorical adventures. Cf. Stephen Medcalf, "Inner and Outer", in Stephen Medcalf, ed., The Context of English Literature: The Later Middle Ages (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 108-171: "The poets do not usually seem to be exploring actual experience but rather to be creating ideal patterns of experience. It is not wholly easy, indeed, to make the connection between the actual experience of persons, real or possible, and Langland talking to Reason and Imaginatyf in Piers Plowman, Chaucer meeting Cupid and his Queen Alcestis in the Legend of Good Women or Gower meeting the court of love in Confessio Amantis" (p. 124).

We have, in fact, a circle of digressions.[1] Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest are now "defined"; that is to say, each is associated with an aspect of good behaviour (95-98a). There is some sense of a significant pattern in the definitions of Dowel and Dobet, but Dobest's specific association with not wasting words or time has no overt inevitability. Perhaps the effect of arbitrariness is here caused by our historical ignorance, but that cannot excuse the next digression, an attack on idlers and drinkers (99-104). The "trewe tidy men" of lines 105-07a are evidently in opposition to these last, but they bear no one-to-one relationship to any of the definitions that preceded. A threefold scheme has been replaced by a twofold one: the familiar Langlandian opposition between the true labourer and the incontinent waster. Wit now introduces the theme of marriage (108-18), the marriage of the true folk who have momentarily become the subject. But this diverts him almost at once into a discussion of those conceived either out of wedlock altogether or as a result of improper unions: the false folk (observe how the parallel is weakened since the true folk are considered as parents and the false as children). Cain now enters the picture, initially because Cain exemplifies those born "in yvel tyme", but thereafter because of forbidden relations between Seth's progeny and Cain's. This allows Langland to discuss the flood and the question of hereditary wickedness (119-54), and, by a haphazard route, the subjects of marriage for money (155-78), marriage as a defense against unchastity (179-83a), and the right time for conception (184-92); returning finally to the subject

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1. E.g. Dowel - Anima's Castle - Inwit - Drunkards - Fools - Teachers - Authorities who fail in their duty - they do not Do Well. Elizabeth Kirk, in The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), remarks on a similar "progression" in the speech of Holy Church, commenting that "the angles by which the lady veers from topic to topic seem to add up to 360 degrees ..." (p. 31). Probably Kirk has in mind B I 85-137, where the succession of subjects is: Truth is the best treasure - Kings and knights should uphold it - David made them swear an oath to do so - Christ had knights too - Lucifer was one of them - but he fell - and all who do evil shall dwell with him - but those that do well and end in Truth shall be saved - so Truth is the best treasure. It is perhaps even clearer in this case than in B Passus IX that the "digressions" may in fact consist of highly pertinent material (e.g. the Fall of Lucifer) and that consequently the reader's difficulties are only a matter of disposition.

of bastardy, the false folk who act against Dowel (193-99). Langland has dealt, loosely, with marriage for nearly a hundred lines, but his movement from sub-topic to sub-topic is apparently without method, and marriage is not one of the subjects about which Wit was asked. However, we have returned, probably by chance, to the subject of Dowel, and Wit concludes triumphantly with two further sets of definitions that bear no exact relationship either to each other or to those that were presented earlier, only certain tantalizing resemblances that seem to challenge us mockingly to attempt an impossible synthesis (200-07)."

Perhaps no-one would make quite such a wilfully dogmatic reading of the passus as I have outlined here, but it is evident that those who see incoherence in Wit's presentation are at any rate aware of the possibility of such a reading. The assumptions on which it is based are essentially those with which we approach any piece of discursive prose. First there is an assumption about the content of the discourse. We expect that the writer is going to say something, and that this something will not be a collection of unconnected statements but a single "point", or series of transparently related "points", that constitutes the "theme" of the discourse. The second assumption is about the form. Such parts of the work as bear directly on the theme make up the main "thread" or "drift", and it is usually accepted that the theme will be readily identifiable, perhaps from the first thing that is said, or by being explicitly named; digressions, matters that are subordinate or not strictly germane to the theme, are permitted but should be clearly recognizable as digressions. A final assumption is that if something seems "off the point", then it is a digression unless specifically stated not to be so.

Bringing such expectations to Wit's discourse is not anachronistic, and they must have been shared by Langland's fourteenth-century audience. After all, they are impeccably fulfilled even by something as distant from us as two-thousand-year-old Buddhist controversy:

> Hard to discern, Sariputra, is the hidden teaching of the Tathagatas. And why? Because they reveal dharmas and their causes by employing various skilful means, based on their cognition and vision. They show up causes, adduce reasons, give explanations, point to objective facts, define their terms, and use various concepts. These are the kind of skilful

> means which they employ to release beings who have got stuck here or there. The Tathagatas have reached the highest perfection in vision, cognition, and skill in means.[1]

The main theme is plainly announced as being the teaching of the Tathagatas, and no doubt is subsequently cast on this. Subordinate matters, such as the beings who need their help, do not disturb us; we recognize them as being subordinate, and feel no surprise - quite the contrary, we are reassured - when the next sentence proves to have nothing to say about them.

It seems then that the expectations that I have described are universal, at least once the text is identified as discursive exposition (and when we begin to read Wit's speech such an identification is virtually automatic). Perhaps the conditions that we expect to be met are necessary for certain kinds of communication to be effective. Certainly when we find that Wit's speech does not satisfy these conditions we have no choice but to look for a different kind of communication, or else dismiss the speech as incoherent. If we continue to think in terms of a main theme and of "digressions", the number of digressions becomes insupportable; it is like trying to read a sentence that contains half-a-dozen unmatched left-hand brackets.[2]

It comes as a considerable surprise to turn back from B Passus IX to Langland's first version of the speech in A Passus X. For although there has been little restructuring and the sequence of topics is much the same in A as in B, the argument in A is for the most part unexpectedly lucid. We have already seen how the briefer account of the creation of man is clearly subordinated to a general interest in the castle and its inhabitants. In A the subsequent emphasis on Inwit is justified because of his central role in the castle's operations, shown first of all in a medical passage omitted from B (A X 52-57). The best way of illustrating what Inwit is, however, is to draw our attention to people whose behaviour manifests its absence; drunkards, children and "folis" are brought in as examples.[1] But Langland, in saying this, is conscious of a distinction, and explains that the devil is in control of drunkards, but that children and fools are not at the stage where they are capable of moral action, whether good or bad (A X 62-65). This, however, is no excuse for failure to instruct them or to provide them with the material needs of life (A X 66-70). Holy Church, in fact, must enable them to become moral beings. But once a man has understanding, he is responsible for his own actions, "For werche he wel oþer wrong þe wyt is his owene" (A X 75). It will be seen that in A this section is perfectly comprehensible in itself and is also explicitly related to the theme of Dowel; Langland is exploring, under the name of Inwit, the prerequisites for any kind of moral "doing", whether well or ill. It is only when Inwit is working properly that Dowel's role becomes active:

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[1] Edward Conze, trans., Buddhist Scriptures (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 198.

[2] Cf. Mary Carruthers, The Search for St. Truth, p. 20: "The so-called digressions in this passus are not really digressions at all but different angles of vision producing modified or new understanding of its key term." I am much indebted to Carruthers for her sense of (in Spearing's words) "what *kind* of poem" Langland wrote, as it comes over in a remark such as this.

> þanne is dowel a duc þat destroyeþ vices
> And sauiþ þe soule þat synne haþ no miȝt
> To routen ne to resten ne roten in þin herte
> (A X 76-78).

I shall not go through the rest of A Passus X in detail, but the reader will find that it relates to B Passus IX much as this part does; what in A are stages in a continuous argument become disconnected segments of discourse that we must either regard as digressions or, better, give up any idea of analysing in the conventional way. For example, the A

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1. Inwit has been much discussed by students of Piers Plowman in spite of the apparently large measure of agreement between all parties. See e.g. Greta Hort, Piers Plowman and Contemporary Religious Thought (London: SPCK, [1938]), pp. 94-97; Randolph Quirk, "Langland's Use of Kind Wit and Inwit," JEGP, 52 (1953), 182-88; A.V.C. Schmidt, "A Note on Langland's Conception of 'Anima' and 'Inwit'," NQ, n.s. 15 (1968), 363-64; B.J. Harwood and R.F. Smith, "Inwit and the Castle of 'Caro' in Piers Plowman," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 71 (1970), 648-54. Possession of "inwit" is a prerequisite for informed moral action; hence in this passage it is lacked by drunks. But, as Gloton finds, it gradually returns when the alcohol wears off, more often than not bringing with it a guilty conscience (cf. C VI 421). Similarly, Reason and Conscience arrive to berate Will when he is "In hele and in inwitt" (C V 10). Inwit is thus not conscience itself but a more general sense of mental alertness or of "having one's wits about one". In the South English Legendary ("Michael", ll. 430-36; D'Evelyn and Mill, II, 416) we are told that "inwit" is what gives people the freedom to act against temperamental aptitudes that they owe to planetary influences.

version contains an interesting discussion of social stability and of the various manifestations of Dowel, depending upon the doer's role in society (79-130). Marriage and childbearing have an honourable and fundamental part in the social structure, and thus the discussion of marriage (which in B appears so abruptly and inconsequentially) is in A firmly tied to what precedes it. The loss of this passage also affects the final definitions of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest (A X 216-18; B IX 204-07), which refer back to it. In A they are something like an adequate summing-up of the speech; in B they seem to come out of nowhere.

It will be seen that B Passus IX for the most part retains the content of A Passus X, but removes the argumentative structure that places one passage in a definite relation to its neighbours. The easy explanation is that Langland (or even, for it is tempting here to revive Manly's theory, the B-poet) has forgotten what his earlier version was saying, or has bungled it in revision. The weakness of this case is, primarily, its excessive strength. There is too much bungling. If the B-reviser had provided some substitute argument of his own, we might reasonably suspect misunderstanding, but as it is we must conclude that whether he discerned A's argumentative structure or not, he did not have (or had ceased to have) any interest in duplicating it; and if this is so, there is no reason for assuming that his failure to do so was accidental. On the contrary, there is an air of purposefulness about the revision, noted by Elizabeth Kirk: "the B poet would appear to be deliberately 'spoiling' the A poet's scene precisely because it was too good for the function it must now serve"[1] (Kirk suspected that this appearance might be an illusion of Skeat's text, but newer editions have not caused it to vanish, in spite of the editors' efforts).

Kirk is quite right to say that the A Passus is "too good", but we must not take this to mean that Langland is trying to portray Wit as an inarticulate or confused teacher; that would be to treat the speech anachronistically as a revelation of character.[2] Rather, the A passus is good in the wrong way; the poet does not value, or no longer values, its kind of achievement. Its meanings, I would suggest, are now felt as being too denotative and hence too restrictive. Because in A "what the speech is about" is too closely identified with its lucid argument, we are discouraged from seeking for meanings that are not explicitly spelt out. In the B version those meanings are released, and in the search for them the reader is less edified but more involved.

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[1] Elizabeth Kirk, The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman, p. 122n.

[2] Cf. above, p. 113.

If we stand back from the B passus and view it as a whole, the themes of the speech begin to emerge. It will be observed that the sources of the ideas that I shall bring out now are scattered through the passus and although I am not flying in the face of the logical structure (such as it is), I do not have any logical warrant for what I extract.

We can begin by noticing that the speech contains two major passages where parts of Genesis are discussed. The first is the section about the creation of man that we have been considering (B IX 26-52); the second is the account of Cain's descendants and the flood (B IX 119-55). These two passages correspond, very roughly, to Genesis 1-2 and Genesis 4-7 respectively.[1] The themes of these sections are frighteningly contrasted; the first describes God's loving creation of Adam and the second his virtual annihilation of Adam's descendants. Not that the effect is frightening while we are actually reading; indeed we are unlikely, until afterwards, to observe the relationship of the passages, despite even line 130 ("That I makede man now it me forthynketh"), so strong is what C.S. Lewis called "the insulating power of the context". Stanley Fish would say that there is no relationship, therefore; but this is where my approach would modify his. Retrospective meditation on Langland's poetry is part of the total experience of reading Langland, in my view, and consequently I regard retrospective insights such as this as genuine aspects of the poem's meaning.

How can these two pictures of God's relationship with man be reconciled?

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[1] As Goodridge was the first to note (Piers the Ploughman, p. 282), the biblical background may be fleetingly alluded to as early as line 3: "Of erthe and eyr is it maad medled togideres" (cf. Genesis 2:7).

The answer, of course, lies in the chapter of Genesis that Wit does not allude to; the fall of man. One is led to suspect that the fall is somehow central to the speech, even though it is not described directly. And as one of the themes that we noticed in A was the question of responsible moral action, the first evil action in human history is undoubtedly a relevant consideration. Nevertheless, Wit prefers not to concentrate on the dramatic manifestation of sin in individual acts. The theme of this passus is the physiological aspect of sin; it is treated throughout as a disease with material causes and material effects. Wit's approach is not that of an ethical philosopher; he shows little interest in questions of motive or of abstract moral decision. Thus Dowel is represented as a faculty of the body, an internal organ that prompts us to good; sin is a disease that disrupts the working of that organ, and causes a perversion of material nature. It is for this reason that Wit stresses the onset of Care that began with the untimely conception of Cain rather than the moral drama of the fall. For Wit the cause of sin is an emphatically unnatural act, illicit intercourse, and the result is that nature itself is tarnished; Cain's descendants are a distortion of God's image. Langland interprets the mysterious marriages between the sons of God and the daughters of men (Genesis 6:1-2) as forbidden relations between Seth's descendants and Cain's,[1] but there is no distinction in Wit's eyes between the unlawful and the unnatural, and these unions are compared with the "uncomly" couples of Langland's own day, brought into being through a corrupted scale of values:

> For som as I se now sooth for to telle
> For coveitise of catel unkyndely ben wedded
> As careful concepcion cometh of swiche mariages
> As bifel of the folk that I bifore of tolde
>
> (B IX 156-59).

"Unkindness" is the notion that links this passage to earlier parts of the passus. Wit's emphasis is always on the unnaturalness of sin; it is something that, if all went according to nature, should never exist.

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[1] This is a traditional interpretation (cf. Schmidt, B-Text, p. 329).

> Allas that a Cristene creature shal be unkynde til another
> (B IX 84).

It is outrageous that anything should act against Kynde:

> Allas that drynke shal fordo that God deere boughte
> And dooth God forsaken hem that he shoop to his liknesse
> (B IX 65-66).

In the A text the poet had tried, not very successfully, to work out a distinction between drunkenness, which disrupts Inwit, and other sinful states that (in order to have any moral status at all) presuppose the presence of Inwit; but in the B text the drunkard is put to use as a concrete and characteristic image of man infected by sin, as visibly so as by a disease.

For the ethical philosopher, the primary focus is always on the individual, on the causes and effects within his own soul. Wit, however, considering sin in its material aspect, persistently emphasizes the external consequences, whether for society, or family, or nature itself. Thus the failings of godparents and prelates are considered primarily from the point of view of the harm they do to others:

> The commune for hir unkyndenesse I drede me shul abye
> (B IX 89).

Wit's treatment of sin tends, therefore, to emphasize undeserved suffering; sin, like a disease, strikes down all in its path. Thus Wit, having first described the creation of animals along with man, then stresses their unmerited destruction:

> Beestes that now ben shul banne the tyme
> That evere that cursed Caym coom on this erthe
> (B IX 137-38).

One reaction might be that God is very unfair to permit man's actions to have such indiscriminate consequences, but Wit shows no interest in determining responsibility. Similarly we are inclined to object that it is hardly just that Cain and his descendants should have been cursed before they were born. Wit does anticipate this objection to his uncompromising belief in hereditary wickedness (B IX 143-52a), and some have felt that he does not meet it very effectively.[1] But it is understandable that Wit, with his concern for the material consequences of sin, should emphasize its infectiousness, and the full extent of the catastrophe when Care came into the world. Langland's desire is, I think, to inspire us with a kind of dread of not doing well; our nature is to do well, according to the blueprint for Anima's castle, and when we do not the effects are, disproportionately it may seem, spread out in space and time, like the pestilence that Langland's audience knew so well, or like the unnatural conceptions that are Wit's main images for sin in the second half of the passus.

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[1] See, for example, Pearsall's note to C X 240 (C-text, p. 190).

Dread is, of course, the keynote of two of Wit's definitions of Dowel, of which this is the first:

> That dredeth God he dooth wel that dredeth hym for love
> And noght for drede of vengeaunce dooth therfore the bettre
> He dooth best that withdraweth hym by daye and by nyghte
> To spille any speche or any space of tyme
> _Qui offendit in uno in omnibus est reus_
>
> (B IX 95-98a).

Compared to the equivalent passage in the A text, where the three Do's are set in a social framework, this set of significations seems unconnected with what precedes it and not compellingly neat in itself. In hindsight however we can see that all of these actions are responses to the world that Wit presents, a world in which the consequences of sin are disastrous. The modern connotations of "withdraweth", if unknown to Langland, are a happy accident, for the emphasis even in the definition of Dobest is on a purely negative avoidance of sin. There is some irony in this, because the specified sins - timewasting, idle talk, failure in educational and charitable duties, are themselves negative. Wit, however, is so acutely aware of their consequences that he seems to conceive of Dowel as a matter of avoiding any consequences at all; he risks giving the impression that we should do as little as possible.

This is unquestionably a limitation in Wit's speech. In scripture we read that

> Timor non est in charitate; sed perfecta charitas foras mittit timorem, quoniam timor poenam habet; qui autem timet, non est perfectus in charitate.
>
> (I John 4:18, cf. B XIII 163a).

Wit seems to forget that Dowel is itself an active life, with powers beyond those of sin; instead Dowel is seen as a passive state, something to be preserved. In this respect, Wit's gloss on the crucial term in Piers' Pardon is inadequate. But after all, his contribution comes early in the long sequence that culminates in Will's vision of the Harrowing of Hell. By that stage, Langland will have built up for us an unusually energetic conception of Dowel, aptly represented by Saint Thomas of India or the Good Samaritan or Christ himself, whose role in Passus XVIII is presented a little archaically as that of the heroic and dynamic "lover-knight".[1]

It may be felt that despite my insistence on the puzzling and individualistic techniques of Passus IX I have drawn out of it a reassuringly straightforward set of themes. And this is quite true, precisely because it is I who have produced the exposition just given, not Langland, and the result, whatever its value in other respects, inevitably distorts the experience of reading Wit's speech. This must be so, just because it is an exposition, couched in exactly the terms that Langland eschews; it is, in fact, a fair example of the kind of thing that we might have expected to get from Wit, but don't.

A comparison with *Cleanness* may be helpful. Here, as in B Passus IX, there is a treatment of the flood story, and the *Gawain*-poet like Langland emphasizes the deviation from nature that is its cause.

> Þer watz no law to hem layd bot loke to kynde
> And kepe to hit and alle hit cors clanly fulfylle
> And þenne founden þay fylþe in fleschlych dedez
> And controeued agayn kynde contraré werkez
> And vsed hem vnþryftyly vchon on oþer
> And als with oþer wylsfully upon a wrange wyse
>
> (*Cleanness* 263-68).[2]

It is interesting too that both *Cleanness* and Wit's speech express an unusually positive view of natural sexuality (*Cleanness* 697-708; *Piers Plowman* B IX 179-92). Most importantly, though, there is in *Cleanness*

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1. Cf. J.A.W. Bennett, *Poetry of the Passion*, pp. 99-112.

2. The powerful effect of this poet's "And"s, each of them driving the narrative forward, should be contrasted with that of Langland's "And"s at B IX 46-51.

something of the same limitation that we found in B Passus IX. "Cleanness", like Wit's "Dowel", is too passive, too much defined only by what it is not: "The stated intention of the poet is to 'acclaim Cleanness in becoming style', but in fact his overwhelming achievement is to dispraise uncleanness ... nowhere else in his work does he leave the reader suffused with such an agonized sense of the evil in man".[1] This is perhaps unfair, but it is significant that the recent editors of the _Pearl_ manuscript, defending the poet's positive vision, argue that he presents "a broadened concept of _clannesse_ as 'reverence for what is sacred to God'".[2] I think that both poets are affected by the ethos of their common source, the Old Testament, which is still halfway between a fully moral outlook and one of taboo, the _pax deorum_ which is to be maintained primarily by the avoidance of certain acts that are often morally neutral in themselves.

These are interesting parallels, but one cannot consider _Cleanness_ and Wit's speech together without being reminded of their great dissimilarities. Once more it is the brevity of Langland's style that is noticeable. _Cleanness_ is over eight times as long as B Passus IX, yet only a small part of the latter is devoted to Old Testament paraphrase; we cannot say that Wit ever approaches fully-fledged narrative, and consequently the reader's imagination is not wholly engaged. In fact Wit, after presenting a version of God's words to Noah (B IX 132-42), sees no reason to proceed with the narrative; everyone knows what happened next. In other words Wit is no storyteller; for one of the premisses of _Cleanness_ and most other medieval narrative poems is that it is worthwhile to rehearse the events of the past, no matter how well-known they are. The reader of _Cleanness_ gets as near to the primeval waters as anyone now can and feels, to the fullest extent that fiction allows, the emotions of a participant. Wit, by contrast, does little more than allude to the possibilities of emotional response:

> Alle shul deye for his dedes by dales and hulles
> (B IX 139).

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[1] 1. Brian Stone, trans., _The Owl and the Nightingale; Cleanness; St Erkenwald_ (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 71-72.

[2] 2. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, _The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript_, p. 23.

I suggested above that fear was an appropriate response to Wit's world; but Langland does not try to frighten us. Indeed if we take the view, as Philomena O'Driscoll does, that Wit has not really recognized the universality of the fall - and he certainly implies that sin can be side-stepped, though with difficulty - we could almost accuse him of being too optimistic, rather than too pessimistic.[1] And as sin is, for Wit, only a regrettably widespread but not inevitable phenomenon, the role of grace is accordingly comprehensible only as a promise of material wellbeing:

> To alle trewe tidy men that travaille desiren
> Oure Lord loveth hem and lent loude outher stille
> Grace to go to hem and ofgon hir liflode
> *Inquirentes autem Dominum non minuentur omni bono*
> (B IX 105-07a)
>
> I am *via et veritas* seith Crist I may avaunce alle
> (B IX 161).

Wit's speech is in fact as uncommitted to a specific emotional "point" as it is to an argumentative one. On this level too it requires interpretation; and it is my interpretation, not Langland's poetry itself, that is reminiscent of *Cleanness*. There are two reasons, I think, why Langland in this passus and elsewhere is generally content to play lightly on our feelings. The first is that any powerful appeal implicitly encourages us to take the world of the text as reality, because we could not justify any emotional reaction to ourselves unless it was based on something other than an illusion. The second is that if poetry tries to produce an emotional impact, it is in a sense soliciting a testimonial to its own excellence. We, who are so familiar with fiction that transports the reader, are unlikely to feel that there is anything very troublesome about these observations. Nor am I accusing the *Gawain*-poet of vanity (there is nothing cheaply rhetorical about his work); but it is easy to see why a poet like Langland, troubled by mixed feelings about the moral status of his "makynges", might take pains to avoid involving our passions too continuously, for fear of producing the kind of mutually admiring relationship between poet and reader that I have outlined.

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[1] Cf. Philomena O'Driscoll, "The *Dowel* Debate in *Piers Plowman* B," *Medium AEvum*, 50 (1981), 18-29, especially p. 25.

The most obvious difference between Cleanness and Wit's speech - namely, that the former is a complete poem - again distinguishes the poet who confidently accepts the conventions of the public speaker (whether bard or preacher) from the poet who deeply distrusts them. Because Cleanness stands on its own it implicitly affirms, or at any rate does not explicitly disclaim, its own adequacy. Wit's speech, from the mere fact of its being part of a larger composition, does disclaim this. Furthermore, it appears near the beginning of a sequence in which most readers feel some sense of a progress, and it is allocated to a speaker whose authority is uncertain (he looks foolish in B Passus X). Finally, the silent presence of the dreamer, that eager controversialist, is always likely to infect us with his own unreceptive and critical attitude.

III

If B Passus IX is read in the kind of way that I have illustrated, the distinction between main argument and digression disappears. For this reason it seems to me unhelpful to look for a source of this aspect of Langlandian style in the medieval sermon. The sermons are perceived to digress because there is something to digress from, a conspicuous argument that may be presented competently or incompetently but is always the focus of our attention. The university-style sermon, with its fixed and elaborate structure, is only a formalization of the discursive habit that is invariably present. Even if we take a passage from a sermon that unquestionably wanders, we see that it retains a sense of "reasonable" proportion within its parts, although the sermon as a whole is not developed into a single structure. In this case the preacher, having arrived at the subject of the commandments, does not attempt to say a little about each of them (as a sense of formal perfection might require); probably he was bored with the commandments, and he tackles only the third and fourth. His treatment of these, however, is wholly different from the concise, suggestive approach of Langland, who always seems to be talking of several things at once:

> God blessed þe halyday and halowid itt, and all þo þat trewly kepe itt ben blessed of God for þer buxumnes. And so þei be made holy in þer good fey3th, for God seiþ, "Estote sancti quoniam ego sanctus sum, Dominus Deus vester - be 3e holy for I am holy, þe Lorde youre God." But we be so vnbuxum and so vnkeend þat on

> þe halyday þat God halowid and rested hym-selfe to teche vs to reeste from synne - but þat day is most synne done of all þe daies in þe weke, of swerynge, of pride, of boost, of slowȝthe, gloteny, and lechery, and evill playes, and suche many oþur synnes. For þan men take lesure inowȝ to serue þe feend of hell in chydynge, in bacbytyng, in couetize and ydell speche, þe wiche in oþur daies with traveyll þei put þise synnes a-vey. And þer-fore seis Crist, "Filios enutriui et exaltavi; ipsi autem spreuerunt me - sonnes I haue norshid and mad þem hie, and for-sothe þei haue dispisid me." And þer-fore make not youre halyday a cursed day þorowe youre evill werkes, but kepe you youre haliday in clennes, as þe children of God shuld do, þat he may call you with is holy blissynge to þe halyday of euer lastynge ioy.[1]

The passage is not indeed as logical as its "therefore"s suggest; it is little more than a series of reiterations. Nevertheless it is wholly to the point, elucidated by a clever use of parallel and antithesis, and neatly wrapped up by the conclusive last sentence. It is devoted entirely to the third commandment, as what follows it is to the fourth. The sequence, although not causal, is perfectly clear; there is no danger of the reader losing his way. The beginning of the next section illustrates the order to which the writer aspires:

> The iiij Commaundement is "Honora patrem et matrem ut longeuus sis super terram." þat is to sey, "Worshippe þi fader and þi modere, and þou wilt live longe vppon erthe," þat art bounden to worshippe iiij faders. þe firste is oure Fadere þat is in heven, þe second is euery old man, and þe iij ys he þat hase cure of þi sowle, and þe iiij is þe fadere þat gat þe in-to þis world. þise faders we awȝ to worshippe. Alse þer been moders þe wiche þat we shall worshipp, þe wiche holychurche is þe firste, and þi modere þat bare þe.[2]

Although there is obviously some point in distinguishing between the triumphant fulfilment of formal obligations that we find in the university-style sermon and the opportunistic drift from topic to topic that contents this preacher, for our purposes this sermon can be taken as representative in its contrast to the sermon-like discourses of Piers Plowman. There is no sense here of a significance that is not contained in the denotative meanings of the words themselves, nothing corresponding to the themes that we have found pervasively expressed, although never stated, in Wit's speech. One reason for this is the

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1. W.O. Ross, Middle English Sermons, Sermon No. 20, p. 118, l. 27 to p. 119, l. 10.

2. Ibid., p. 119, ll. 11-20.

modal uniformity of the sermon; but in Piers Plowman the bringing together of different modes of thought is Langland's most characteristic method of drawing the reader's attention away from the strictly denotative meanings of his words and towards that uncircumscribed world that is outside any of the worlds that are defined by these modes of thought. In the medieval sermon, as in other more august realms of medieval discourse, the untroubling stability of the modes of thought is quietly but constantly encouraging us to believe that the text we are reading is an adequate reflection of reality and that meaning is naturally to be sought within it; indeed we are expected to accept an identification of the thought-world with the real world and to forget the existence of anything outside it. Here, then, is a world in which digression is possible. In Langland's poem there is properly no digression as there is no broad highway to digress from; unless the whole poem is seen, as Langland often does see it, as a kind of digression from reality.

We observed earlier that at B IX 46-52 Langland makes repeated use of the word "and" to encourage the reader to associate, imprecisely, a series of statements that seem as a result to blur into an affirmation that amounts to more than anything that can logically be inferred from the words themselves.[1] These lines illustrate in miniature the method that Langland uses throughout the speech, but linking passage to passage rather than statement to statement. In so far as the result is affirmative, it is comforting to the reader, except that in order to feel that comfort the reader is compelled to sacrifice his ordinary expectations; that is, of witnessing the author building up an attractive structure of premisses and arriving at a conclusion that we can hold in our minds for a moment to convince ouselves that we have not merely enjoyed ourselves. In this sense, but in this sense alone, Langland's poetry is frustrating.

To argue that such is the method that Langland employs is, however, to

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1. Cf. above, pp. 126-27, 132.

raise another question: what is the point of this indirection? If Langland has something to say to us, why does he not just set it down plainly, in his own voice, as a preacher would do? We may be inclined to dismiss this question as the kind of thing that unliterary people are always demanding of poets, betraying in the process a failure to appreciate the special virtues of poetry and the sphere to which it properly confines itself. But, as Judson B. Allen has forcefully argued, the very distinction between poetry and other kinds of ethical discourse hardly exists in the middle ages, and our own understanding of the significance of poetry is an anachronism if it is imported into the earlier period. Instead, there is a different category, which Allen terms "ethics", that happens to include most of what we define as poetic along with many other things that we would not regard as literary work at all.[1] Allen's sources are for the most part the work of academics, but what they state with precision undoubtedly reflects more widely held perceptions. If Langland thought of himself as contributing to "ethics" (of course he did not use the term, but he must have assumed the existence of some kind of pre-existing category into which his work would fall), then the question I have raised is not at all impertinent; indeed it is a question that Langland asked himself, if my interpretation of the brief discussion with Ymaginatif about books that "telle men what Dowel is" is correct.[2]

Allen quotes Aegidius Romanus, the author of a _De regimine principium_:

> We do not undertake a moral work for the sake of contemplation, nor that we might know, but that we might be made good. The purpose of this science therefore is not knowledge of its material, but action; not truth, but the good.[3]

The traditional way to meet this challenge is by rhetorical persuasion and the clothing of truth in delectable figures. The weakness of this approach is that it drives a wedge between the imaginative world within

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1. Judson Boyce Allen, _The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction_ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 3-50.

2. Cf. above, p. 105.

3. Judson Boyce Allen, _The Ethical Poetic_, p. 15.

the work and the world of reality - although defenders of allegory will not accept that it is merely a weakness. Nevertheless, it does seem that what appears the most justifiable of reasons for putting pen to paper involves a turning away from truth, distracting the reader from the one world, the real world, in which all his moral actions will in fact take place. For Langland such an approach could never prove altogether satisfactory. This is one explanation for the persistent discontinuities, the shifts between modes of thought, that prevent the reader from becoming absorbed either in a developing story or in a developing argument. He must never be allowed to forget that he is reading.

Aegidius is well aware that in order to make men good, it is not enough to teach them about virtue. The object, as he puts it, is action and not knowledge. Those writers who sought to make virtue delectable knew that the emotions as well as the intellectual powers must be engaged. Langland goes further than they do, however, in his recognition of man's ability to segregate one area of his experience, in this case the reading experience, from another. What are accepted facts while under the influence of one mental habit need not be seen as having any implications once we have fallen out of it. It is easy to feel saintly while reading a saint's life; less easy to carry what we know while reading out into the overfamiliar and seemingly undramatic world of actuality. This convenient ability to compartmentalize experience is displayed in _Piers_ by the dreamer, who has to seek salvation although he has already learnt and, in a sense, believes all that is necessary; his difficulty is to "realize" his knowledge and his temptation is to indulge in an infinitely protracted search from which no action ever issues. This, in my opinion, is the significance of the dreamer's rueful observation that "Slepynge hadde y grace/ To wyte what Dowel is ac wakynge neuere" (C XIII 215-16). Recognition of a widespread failure on the part of students of virtue is common in Langland's time; in the _Vox Clamantis_, for example, Gower says:

> O res mira nimis! legit et studet ipse scolaris
> Mores, dum vicia sunt magis acta sua ...
>
> (Book III, Chapter 29).[1]

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[1] References are to G.C. Macaulay, ed., _The Complete Works of John Gower: The Latin Works_ (London: Oxford University Press, 1902) (p. 165).

Hence Clergy's frustration in A Passus XII:

> Ȝif I wiste witterly þou woldest don þerafter
> Al þat þou askest asoylen I wolde
> (A XII 10-11).[1]

That his dreams do correspond to the reader's self-immersions in the worlds of his books - although they could stand for many other activities too - is made explicit in the conversation between Will and Anima. Will's lust for knowledge is indeed infinite:

> Ye sire I seide by so no man were greved
> Alle the sciences under sonne and alle the sotile craftes
> I wolde I knewe and kouthe kyndely in myn herte
> (B XV 47-49).[2]

No doubt this love of curious knowledge was shared by Langland's readers, the same readers (on manuscript evidence) who were attracted to *Mandeville's Travels*.[3] Consequently Langland, through Anima, is quick to come down upon it, associating the Dreamer's desires with the fall of Adam and Eve, and reminding us of what seemed the accidental resonances of Will's request to "Kenne me by som craft to knowe the false" (B II 4). While rebuking the dreamer, Anima makes precisely my point:

> The man that muche hony eteth his mawe it engleymeth
> And the moore that a man of good matere hereth
> But he do therafter it dooth hym double scathe
> *Beatus est* seith Seint Bernard *qui scripturas legit*
> *Et verba vertit in opera* fulliche to his power
> (B XV 57-61).

For Langland, therefore, it is not enough to teach the reader what Dowel is ("good matere"), nor even to make him, while he is reading, feel impelled towards it. It is crucial finally to narrow the gap between poetry and reality, so that the dreamer is able to "awake" with the knowledge of Dowel still in his mind and in a form applicable to the non-fictional world. Mere exhortations, like that of Anima, may do much, and consciously Langland had perhaps no deeper thoughts on the matter. His call (a few lines further on from the previous quotation) is for a return to unadorned, uninventive moralism:

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[1] The theme is very explicit throughout this passus, this summary explicitness suggesting an author in a hurry to conclude.

[2] The suggestion that Will here expresses the reader's "Faustus-like ambition" was first made by Elizabeth Salter and Derek Pearsall, eds., *Piers Plowman*, York Medieval Texts (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), p. 37.

[3] For details see Anne Middleton, "The Audience and Public of 'Piers Plowman'," p. 105.

> Freres and fele othere maistres that to the lewed men prechen
> Ye moeven materes unmesurable to tellen of the Trinite
> That oftetymes the lewed peple of hir bileve doute
> Bettre it were by many doctours to bileven swich techyng
> And tellen men of the ten comaundements and touchen the sevene synnes
> And of the braunches that burjoneth of hem and bryngen men to helle
> And how that folk in folies mysspenden hir fyve wittes
> (B XV 70-76).

But Langland's practice is far more complex than his theory. As I have argued, his poetry is as different from ordinary preaching as it is from ordinary storytelling. The "other world", the world defined by the speaker's mode of thought, is as dangerously proposed in non-narrative discourse as in the most elaborate fictions; perhaps more so, as its world is a mental one, not a matter of geography and plot, and is therefore less likely to be recognized as an inadequate representation of truth. In fact *Piers* contains both story and argument, but in neither does Langland aim at perfection. Completeness of argument, or carefully mimetic narrative, are no doubt in their own ways "truer" than bad argument or unnaturalistic fiction; and all the more likely to be mistaken for the truth. Langland moves in the opposite direction. He leaves narratives sketchy, and toys with ideas instead of building with them, in order to remind us constantly of the merely provisional status of the book. That way we may be left with our minds trained on reality and not lost in the world of the imagination. Both the intellect and the emotions must indeed be engaged, but they must also often be disengaged and redirected towards that true drama in which we are the actors.

In this respect there is much to be said for associating *Piers* with the "self-consuming artifacts" defined by Stanley Fish.[1] Its success depends, in a sense, upon its being rejected; the reader must turn away from the book and seek the answers to its questions in his own life rather than in it. I see Conscience's undertaking, expressed in the last lines of the poem, as one that the reader is invited to make his own; but he is not to set about this search for Piers by turning back to the poem as if Piers was a fictional personality to be encountered only in literature. That would be to fall into the perrenial trap set, necessarily, by allegorical writing, and to adhere stubbornly to the sufficiency of the sign.[1]

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[1] Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 4: "A self-consuming artifact signifies most successfully when it fails, when it points *away* from itself to something its forms cannot capture. If this is not anti-art, it is surely anti-art-for-art's-sake because it is concerned less with the making of better poems than with the making of better persons." The connexion with *Piers* has been made by Robert Adams, "The Nature of Need in 'Piers Plowman' XX," *Traditio*, 34 (1978), 292; and Denise Baker, "The Pardons of *Piers Plowman*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 85 (1984), 471.

Piers Plowman differs, however, from most of Fish's seventeenth-century texts in the strength of its positive affirmation. Some of them - Bacon's _Essays_ in their final form, for example - seem to discard altogether any thought of communicating directly through language. Milton's prose - in its very antirationalism - is more intellectual, more abstracted and more ruthless than Langland's writing ever is. Milton condemns human reasoning but there is only a handful of bare imperatives to take its place.

In _Piers_, however, a twofold movement can (at least for the purposes of exposition) be discerned; a series of positives and a series of negatives. On the one hand, there are the affirmations that Langland is intent on making, his vividly literal belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity; on the other, the qualifications and negations that remind us that all speech is limited by its contexts and assumptions and that a poem that praises God is something of a contradiction in terms, since every poem that competes for our attention must be a good deal preoccupied with commending itself. By distinguishing between these aspects of _Piers_ I am not proposing a "divided" Langland. The two processes are related by a common method, the juxtaposition of different modes of thought. This juxtaposition, which is characteristic of the poem at many levels, from adjoining visions _down_ to neighbouring words, is a device for which Langland has an extraordinary variety of uses, but it is possible to discern a common strategy behind them all. When two instances of different modes of thought are driven together, the reader is made aware of the limitations of each. Even when one seems clearly inferior to another, the victory is not usually quite clear-cut; some critics have felt that weight must be given even to the Doctor of Divinity's leaden rebuke of Patience (B XIII 172-78).[1] If the two parties in this collision reveal weaknesses in each other, the truth cannot be identified with either of them; it is something beyond words. So much, I believe, is common both to Langland's affirmative and to his negative passages. The difference is that in the former this truth that cannot be formulated is perceived by us with a special and satisfying directness, unmediated by language. In the latter, the truth is hidden; we only see that it is not here or there. As to which of these effects occurs, it depends upon how the two elements react with each other; their conjunction may be surprisingly fertile or blankly antipathetic.

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[1] Cf. my discussion of the Pardon (pp. 107-09).

We observed in the sermon discussed a few pages ago a modal consistency that contrasts with Langland's approach. Such consistency is in fact essential in "reasonable" discourse. Construction of argument is only possible in this stable environment, where each proposition, although it has a different meaning, has the same kind of meaning as all the others; for a conclusion does not derive solely from its stated premisses but also from assumptions about their nature. In the strict syllogism the premisses at least are explicitly stated and so are seen to be questionable. The cloudier and more deep-seated beliefs that underlie much medieval reasoning may be wholly invisible to someone who naturally assumes the appropriate frame of mind. Nor will it be possible for him to see them until his vantage-point is shifted; until he is able, momentarily, to stand upon a different peak and contemplate the form of this one. It was because of this that Francis Bacon pressed the claims of experimental science; here was a means of attaining knowledge that did not arise from and therefore confirm the assumptions of the thinker,

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1. E.g. Priscilla Jenkins, "Conscience: The Frustration of Allegory," in S.S. Hussey, ed., Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches, pp. 125-42 (see pp. 133-34); David Aers, Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination, pp. 25-26; Elizabeth Salter, Fourteenth-Century English Poetry, p. 111.

and that might well reveal the received ideas (explored in his Essays) as without any adequate justification. Langland, observing (as Chaucer did) the immense variety of modes of thought already available in his own culture, used them to initiate an examination of each other. The business of examination is the reader's, not Langland's; as I have argued, the poet did not possess the analytical tools to produce any detailed critique of his own. All he can do is, by placing his materials in troubling juxtaposition, to make us share the sense of doubt that he himself suffered from. We do not react to anything in Piers quite as we would if we met it on its own. Langland is at one with other Ricardian poets who characteristically, as John Burrow notes, make complex poetry out of straightforward or unpoetic elements.[1]

I shall refer to Langland's positive and negative juxtapositions as, respectively, "and"s and "ac"s. The first of these labels alludes to passages like Wit's lines on creation, an example of Langland's affirmative poetry. The second refers to another favourite Langlandian connective that, like "and", is in some places used to link together a long sequence of statements or phrases. I shall postpone further discussion of Langland's "ac"-type juxtapositions until the next chapter.

It would be quite impossible to produce anything resembling a survey of positive juxtapositions in Piers Plowman. There are too many of them and they are of too many different kinds. It should be stressed that from now on I shall employ my term in an extended sense; I am no longer talking specifically about Langland's use of the word "and", and it will not necessarily be present in a passage where I discern an "and"-type juxtaposition. There are as many ways of juxtaposing different modes of thought as there are modes of thought; for this term strictly refers to the effect in the reader's mind, and could therefore be used to designate modes of expression, genres, narrative loci or anything else that determines what mental attitude the reader adopts in relation to the words before him. The juxtapositions I am discussing need not even be between two adjacent phrases or passages. If we are permitted to understand a single phrase in two ways that imply two different mental attitudes, then that phrase is a juxtaposition in itself. And there is also the possibility of juxtaposition at a distance; for example, between two widely separated references to a single character, such as Piers, which may be (and probably will be) modally quite dissimilar. But I do not want to make much of this kind of juxtaposition, although Langland had a formal precedent for it in the Bible, in which Old Testament scenes and prophesies refer to events described in the gospels, and although such cross-referencing is common in Dante's very beautifully structured Commedia. It does not seem to me a device that Langland employed very often or very interestingly. Explicit cross-referencing is noticeably rare.[1]

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[1] J.A. Burrow, Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain Poet (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 35-36.

Another way of putting it would be to say that in Piers Plowman "long distance" juxtaposition is typically negative juxtaposition; and what makes it negative is precisely the nagging suspicion that it is not intended to be significant. Since Langland's instrument is the reader's mind, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he intended a juxtaposition to be noticed and also intended it to communicate nothing tangible.

This is to imply, what I think is true, that the predominant effect of juxtaposition in Langland's poetry is negative rather than affirmative. Passages such as Holy Church's lines on the Incarnation (B I 148-58), the prayer of Repentaunce (B V 481-506) and much of Will's vision of the Passion and Harrowing of Hell (B Passus XVIII), all of them built up by means of "and"-type juxtapositions, are recognizably exceptional and seem to stand apart from the rest of the poem, not only because of their Christological content. In the next section I shall discuss the last and longest of these passages. I shall concentrate on the first part of B Passus XVIII, in which the trial and crucifixion scenes are depicted, since it is here that Langland works hardest to reach a new level of sublimity, which he can then maintain not easily but with relative ease until the end of the vision.

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[1] Cf. below, pp. 167-68, on the "short memory" of the text.

IV

The handful of pages devoted to Langland in C.S. Lewis' The Allegory of Love are undoubtedly the most important in the critical history of Piers Plowman.[1] Lewis' standpoint was not exactly new; on the contrary, many people felt it to be archaic and looked about for different approaches that would yield different results. Hence its importance; Lewis' position, here as elsewhere, is a Bradleyan one, and almost all subsequent criticism of the poem sets out, implicitly or directly, to confront it.[2]

About Piers Plowman Lewis advanced the following propositions. First, it is really quite an ordinary kind of poem: "in Piers Plowman we see an exceptional poet adorning a species of poetry which is hardly exceptional at all. He is writing a moral poem, such as Gower's Miroir de l'homme or Gower's Prologue to the Confessio Amantis, and throwing in, as any other medieval poet might have done, a good deal of satire on various 'estates'" (p. 158). This second sentence introduces two more of Lewis' views. Langland is a moralist, addressing himself to an audience consisting mainly of clerks, with no unusual or unorthodox message to deliver; he is no radical. The most important of Lewis' propositions is the one implied by "throwing in ... a good deal of satire"; Langland, in other words, did not feel himself much bound by formal constraints. True, Piers might nevertheless have attained a formal unity that its author never struggled for, but this, in Lewis' opinion, did not happen. Piers contains poetry of exceptional

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[1] C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 158-61.

[2] Recent critics of sixteenth-century poetry and prose seem often to have charted their course by a simple reversal of Lewis' judgments: Wyatt and Gascoigne become "major", Sidney or Spenser or Hooker are "dislodged", and so on. Prominent critics who like to take the opportunity, when discussing the literature of the past, to recommend their own system of moral values (for example Christopher Ricks or John Carey) are often more easily seen as reacting against C.S. Lewis than as responding to the seemingly more imposing figure of F.R. Leavis.

"sublimity", but Langland "is confused and monotonous, and hardly makes his poetry into a poem" (p. 161).

It is this last point, commonplace among writers on Piers prior to the publication of The Allegory of Love, that has been most denied, although it is also true that not everyone has found Langland's poem so easy to categorize as Lewis does, and there have been a number of attempts to show that Piers does express, or at least register, some uncertainty about traditional religious or political beliefs.[1] But it is the formal question that is paramount. Lewis enjoys the satire and wonders at the great Christological passages; but on his view the rest of the poem can be dispensed with. He does not try to rescue it because, there being no formal unity to Langland's poem, he stands to gain nothing by making the attempt. Much, perhaps most, of subsequent work on Piers Plowman has been preoccupied with the problem of how, if at all, it can be regarded as a unified work of art. The simplest solution, conceptually, might be the discovery of a "key" to the apparently motiveless progression; the key, perhaps, lies in patristics or in some other area with which ordinary readers are unacquainted. (The danger of this approach is that it will prove the poem's unity but make the poem seem boring.) More generally, there is a widespread "desire to evolve a descriptive and analytic vocabulary which will demonstrate the existence of a successful unity in the poem", as John Norton-Smith puts it. "By and large," he continues, "Langland's twentieth-century academic critics have tried (not with conspicuous success) to 'save appearances'."[2]

In view of the difficulties and the lack of conspicuous success, it is worth examining the causes of this desire. Why do we find it so difficult to live with Lewis' simple judgment - that Piers Plowman contains much great poetry but has no formal unity and is the product of confused improvisation? Obviously it springs from affection for the poem and by extension for its author. If the narrator's statements can be trusted as autobiography, Langland had the reputation of being mad; and perhaps we feel the suspicion is still in the air. We should not wish to see Piers classed with Jubilate Agno as a literary curiosity, an unintelligible jumble with odd scraps of poetry in it. Not that this was Lewis' view, of course; indeed it only needs to be expressed to be seen as a position no-one is altogether likely to take up. Lewis, no doubt, intended the monotony and confusion to testify, if anything, to Langland's sanity; in his scheme of things the very faults of medieval poetry constitute an implicit rebuke to more unbalanced times: "When medieval literature is bad, it is bad by honest, downright incompetence: dull, prolix, or incoherent."[1] The medieval writer's faults, in other words, are not deliberate and are unrelated to his goal, which is (we may assume) quite unexceptionable in itself.

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[1] E.g. Charles Muscatine, Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), pp. 71-109; Priscilla Martin, Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower, passim; David Aers, Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination, pp. 1-79.

[2] John Norton-Smith, William Langland, p. 21.

We can all appreciate the contrasting pictures - myths, we might call them - that Lewis is invoking here. On the one hand we have the poetaster, the belletrist, misguidedly engaged in the triumph of style - the detachable sort - over content, or the egotistic expression - too often an exposure - of his own personality. On the other hand we have the "honest" versifier, who straightforwardly pursues the natural objectives of instruction and delight, and whose very failures in execution testify to the essential validity of his goals. His bad writing, unlike that of his opposite, tells us almost nothing to his discredit as a person. If anything it reveals his essential ordinariness, the fact that he, like most people, has no special imaginative gift or cannot express it in his writing. Whether it is appropriate to see the former kind of badness as distinctively post-medieval and the latter kind as distinctively medieval does not concern us here. What does concern us is whether Langland can properly be viewed as an honest versifier of the kind just described; like the authors of Cursor Mundi or Sir Beves of Hamtoun, for example. Must we, when reading Piers, adopt for the most part the slightly condescending, voluntarily uncritical attitude with which we

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1. C.S. Lewis, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century excluding Drama (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 24.

approach, and are then able to enjoy, so many of the other works published by the Early English Text Society? It makes us uncomfortable; perhaps the ardour with which we respond to the great passages in Piers would seem misplaced unless we were able to conceive of the author as a profound visionary and a great craftsman. Lewis would have told us that we underrate the potential of ordinary humanity, and are wrong to find unacceptable the notion that something can be "a great sermon" yet not "a great poem".[1] Granted the higher intellectual level at which Langland operates,[2] he remains, Lewis tells us, a writer with an essentially commonplace brief – the most profound sort, he would have added – whose failures are simply those of carelessness or incompetence, nothing more needing to be said about them. They are mechanical inadequacies that call for no more attention than the dullness of any other medieval preacher; they are not disturbing eccentricities like those that trouble the reader of Donne's sermons. In fact Lewis' view, could we but accept it, dissolves away the problematic side of the poem, which has however acted as the main impetus for writing about it; studies of Piers Plowman are apt to be apologetic in form, tacitly assuming that there is something in the poem that requires a special effort of elucidation or concentrated attention.

What Lewis provides us with (and this is why he is so challenging) is what we might term the "obvious" view of Piers Plowman. It is obvious that Langland's account of the Seven Deadly Sins is tremendous; it is obvious that his lines on the Incarnation are outstanding; and it is obvious that the "Dowel" section of the B text goes on far too long and offers the reader no reward commensurate to his efforts. Such would be, I imagine, the natural judgments of most first-time readers, and I do not mean to disparage them by calling them obvious. On the contrary, that is their strength; for the obvious reading must always have a certain primacy, and will be simply right, except in details, unless we can show that something serious has been missed. To develop a reading that goes beyond the obvious one, while still being based on it, is nevertheless not too difficult. To contradict it entirely, to argue convincingly that the poem before us is a special case and that the natural reading is entirely mistaken, is almost too much of a challenge. But even if we attempt it we must still give some weight to the obvious reading because, if our argument is to hold water, one of the things it must not contradict is the observable fact that the work tends to produce just this kind of misreading and not some other kind.

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[1] Cf. John Norton-Smith, William Langland, p. 140.

[2] A point that Lewis emphasizes (The Allegory of Love, p. 159).

The most important of recent studies of Piers Plowman is a powerful restatement - more elaborate and more carefully argued - of Lewis' views. This is John Norton-Smith's William Langland, to which I have already referred on numerous occasions. The author has many good things to say about Langland, and some dismaying ones; dismaying because they are, in the sense defined above, obvious and thus authoritative. There is no question of placing Langland on an equal footing with Chaucer. The great achievements in Piers are for the most part either satiric or "Christological", but the latter are much rarer and more valuable than the former, excellent though Langland's satiric poetry is; this is Lewis' view presented more helpfully because in greater detail. When Langland is writing neither satirically nor about Christ he is apt to be boringly repetitive and not very clear. I have already quoted Norton-Smith's amusing characterization of the central part of the poem.[1] This is Lewis' charge of "monotony" again. As for "confusion", he asks how the vision of Christ is to resolve Will's ceaseless wanderings, and how this event in the poem can be translated into mundane terms, and he concludes: "Frankly, I do not think Langland had understood the nature of his literary and philosophical problem" (p. 122). Elsewhere we read that "the formal process, the narrative control, has plainly been undermined by the ultimate religious and moral implication" (p. 23), and he ends his book by quoting with approval Lewis' assertion that Langland "hardly makes his poetry into a poem".

Norton-Smith's book is exceptionally useful because it provides us with an extremely honest and detailed account of what Piers Plowman seems like to one whose reading is not distorted by any particular bias towards any particular view of Langland or his work. This is not a reading we can ignore; other readings may be dismissed as growing out of bad theories about literature, but this one must be taken into account. In this section I want to examine one part of the obvious reading; the feeling that Will's sixth vision (I do not count the inner dreams), in which he witnesses the Crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell, is climactic. Any reading of Piers Plowman that does not accept that recognition as valid is almost impossible to defend; one cannot cut oneself off from the common reader, and especially not from such good readers as Lewis and Norton-Smith.

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[1] Cf. above, p. 22.

Why is it obvious that B Passus XVIII is a supremely effective climax? We might start by pointing out that it is about Christ, and that Langland's imagination quickens whenever he draws near to this subject.[1] But this would not be a sufficient explanation. It is sometimes difficult to recall that already, in B Passus XVI, there has been a long passage summarizing the life of Christ (B XVI 90-166). This former passage, despite some memorable lines, never causes the reader to reflect that what he is reading is in some sense climactic.

This is curious, the more so if we reflect on the meaning of "climax" as a literary term. Normally it is applied not to form or style but, in the first instance, to content. Thus the final canto of the Commedia is not the climax because it comes last but because in this canto the poet has his vision of God. Of course he writes well too, and if he had not done so we should criticize him by saying something like "Dante signally fails to make his vision of God as climactic as it ought to be". The poet must rise to the occasion, but the occasion is a matter of content. The place where it ought to come is indicated by the logic of the narrative; and perhaps it is best to regard the climax of, for instance, the Merchant's Tale as inherent in the story rather than in Chaucer's poem. The recovery of January's sight would always be the climax, no matter whose account we were reading.

Langland's poem, however, hardly contains the sort of narrative construction

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1. Cf. John Norton-Smith, William Langland, p. 68: "The figure of Christ in humana natura seems to concentrate and focus the poet's poetic creativeness: image-clusters form associative sequences of sustained lyrical resonance which convey dramatically and immediately the central significance of all of Christ's activities."

that would indicate a climax of that kind. Perhaps we mean something different. And indeed the term is sometimes used in literary criticism to point, not primarily to a change of content, but to a heightening of temperature that is due mainly to a change of style. Probably there is, at the back of our minds, an analogy with music, as if the closing pages of Sir Thomas Browne's Hydriotaphia can be compared with the closing pages of a symphony. This type of climax is what, in a less generous mood, we call a purple passage. Modern readers typically suspect it of being factitious and manipulative, usually unsuccessfully. Often the stylistic climax is intended to coincide with content of an especially grave or solemn variety, and it can be a nuisance. The death of Septimus Harding in The Last Chronicle of Barset is, although less so than many Victorian death-scenes, marred by the intrusion of stylistic tricks that we perceive (too easily) as intended to invoke a sense of climax. Punctuation becomes heavier; sentences start with "And" in order to suggest inevitability; slightly unidiomatic or archaic expressions multiply:

> At this time Posy came to him ... her eyes never beheld the old man again ... It was but a short journey from his bedroom to his grave. But the bell had been tolling sadly all the morning ... Painful as it was for them, the two women would be there, and the two sisters would walk together - nor would they go before their husbands.
>
> (Chapter 81)

Clearly we do not have this kind of modification of style in B Passus XVIII. Trollope's style here becomes distressingly un-Trollopian, but the style throughout Piers is always more or less Langlandian, never more so than in B Passus XVIII (it is sometimes muted elsewhere). To talk of a change of tone in the direction of greater solemnity is also, I think, the wrong way of putting it. Langland's tone has a certain consistency throughout because it is in a state of permanent oscillation between a large but limited number of positions, of which sarcasm, exaltation, and pathos are among the more easily definable. It does not seem to me that this tonal variation is significantly modified in B Passus XVIII.

Let us try a third tack. I suggested earlier that in Piers the reader's interest is maintained not by an unfolding narrative but by a desire for illumination; formally, that is to say, the poem resembles a riddle rather than a tale.[1] If that is so, perhaps the reader's sense of a climax should be identified as a sense of illumination rather than as a sense of having arrived at a narrative crux.

Certainly this goes some way towards explaining why the narrative of Christ's life in B Passus XVI does not bring with it a sense of momentousness in the way that the later passus does. It begins quite suddenly in the middle of the increasingly chaotic activity that surrounds the tree of Charity.

> And Piers for pure tene that a pil he laughte
> And hitte after hym happe how it myghte
> Filius by the Fader wille and frenesse of Spiritus Sancti
> To go robbe that rageman and reve the fruyt fro hym
> And thanne spak Spiritus Sanctus in Gabrielis mouthe
> To a maide that highte Marie a meke thyng withalle
> (B XVI 86-91).

Langland's allegorical elaborations have been becoming so extravagant that for the space of one crazy line (90) it seems that the archangel Gabriel has now joined the populous scene around the tree of Charity. As we read on it becomes clear that there has been a decisive switch of narrative mode and we are now embarked on an account that, by comparison with what we have just been reading, must be described as literalistic. The preceding scene has been rolled up like a curtain, and apparently it has taken the dreamer with it; at least, he is no longer an actor in the drama and it is difficult to see how he can even be an onlooker, since the narrative that follows does not read like an account of what anyone saw. Will himself seems confused, and on waking looks around for Piers, as if he is muddled in his own mind about the various planes of existence that have superseded each other so rapidly (B XVI 167-71). To put it another way, the juxtaposition of this summary account of the life of Christ with its surroundings is of the "ac" variety, in my extended sense; it bewilders but it does not illuminate. If we wish to interpret psychologically, perhaps it is best to see the passage as representing Will's own obscure realization that this is a vision that he ought to have; but it is not a vision in itself.

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1. Cf. above, pp. 21-22.

B Passus XVIII, on the contrary, begins in such a way that we are almost at once convinced that a crucial and dramatic breakthrough has been made. The first five lines, it is true, do not on the surface suggest anything new:

> Wolleward and weetshoed wente I forth after
> As a recchelees renk that of no wo reccheth
> And yede forth lik a lorel al my lif tyme
> Til I weex wery of the world and wilned eft to slepe
> And lened me to a Lenten and longe tyme I slepte
>
> (B XVIII 1-5).[1]

"Wolleward and weetshoed" indicates a penitent pilgrim, and in hindsight this can be seen as an important sign of progress, but at the time that we read it its significance is countered by the disparaging similes in the next two lines. Here, as in line 3 of the Prologue (which this passage recalls) Langland exploits the ambiguity of "as" when describing outward appearance in an allegorical narrative: must this mean (allegorically) that the dreamer _is_ a "recchelees renk" and a "lorel", or does he merely look like one? These are "ac"-type juxtapositions of a "literal" statement with metaphors that relate to it in an unspecified manner. To add to the indeterminacy, we recognize that to be "recchelees", to be indifferent to physical discomfort, to be "wery of the world", might describe either someone very saintly or someone very degraded. The equivocation is by now familiar and a bit discouraging; Will has been compared to a "lorel" in the introduction to the previous vision as well (B XV 5). The realization that this is not just another dream arrives in the next few lines:

> And lened me to a Lenten and longe tyme I slepte
> Reste me there and rutte faste til _ramis palmarum_
> Of gerlis and of _Gloria laus_ gretly me dremed
> And how _osanna_ by organye olde folk songen
> And of Cristes passion and penance the peple that ofraughte
> Oon semblable to the Samaritan and somdeel to Piers the Plowman
> Barefoot on an asse bak bootles cam prikye
>
> (B XVIII 5-11).

There is a strong sense of convergence here, created by a variety of backward references; to the Samaritan, to Piers, to the liturgical scheme first indicated at B XVI 172, and to the Jerusalem that the Samaritan was making for in the previous vision and that is entered by this ride "on an asse bak".

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[1] I restore the Bx reading of line 2 (Schmidt emends to "reccheth of no wo"). The C text has "recheth nat of sorwe", thus regularizing the alliterative pattern without losing the feminine ending.

Backward reference is rare enough in Piers Plowman to be remarkable in itself.[1] Langland's attraction towards narrative discontinuity, juxtaposition of literary modes, and incompatible schemes of chronology and topography, means that his text has (so to speak) a short memory; an event that is perhaps only a few lines old sometimes ceases to exist (as in B Passus XVI) because the imaginative world in which it occurred has completely evaporated. When summarizing the action of the poem we are always apt to be misleading, since modal discontinuity strictly speaking negates the possibility of summary. For instance, a few pages ago I referred to the "tree of Charity" (the phrase is not Langland's, although it is based on B XVI 9). This is a convenient term for students of the poem, but in fact the tree has no single name and its features seem to be constantly changing. To speak casually of the "tree of Charity" is to imply that the object referred to has a much more solid and stable existence than it has in Langland's poem. Very often names are only loosely and momentarily attached to characters or things. Langland sometimes re-uses names, but it is usually hard to say decisively whether we are meeting a character we have met before. For example, the name "Pees" is attached to the plaintiff in the court battle that proves to be Meed's downfall (B IV 47-103); a little later "Pees" is one of the seven porters in Piers' account of the Tower of Truth (B V 622); later still "Pees" is one of the four ladies who argue the rights and wrongs of the Atonement (B XVIII 166-427); and in the last lines of the poem "Pees" is the name of the porter to the House of Unity (B XX 331-80). No one of these figures is the same as any of the others, even though the connexion may be manifest; the figures do not even exist in the same frame of reference. But Langland does not bother to sort out the confusion; he could not do so without making an explicit reference back to previous worlds that have now been forgotten, by the poem if not by the reader. Chaucer, by contrast, is famous for his backward references in such phrases as "this Troilus", "this Dorigen", "This monk bigan upon this wyf to stare"; he is drawing attention to the consistency of his narrative framework, and encouraging us to exercise our memories and thus appreciate to the full what is about to be revealed. It is a setting in which the significance of events is enhanced for us by long acquaintance with the individuals involved; a setting in which dramatic irony becomes possible.

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[1] Cf. above, pp. 26-27, on the lack of structural pointers in versions of the poem subsequent to Z.

Langland's quite different approach, in which the poem's past is always being wiped away to leave the narrative present devoid of features, and the writer free to introduce whatever he likes, seems to me a fundamental characteristic of Piers Plowman; critics who seek out verbal parallels in order to establish structural links between widely separated parts of the poem are in my opinion doing the poet a disservice. But it is all the more necessary to attend to sections such as the one quoted, in which the mists seem suddenly to clear. The effect is one of purposiveness; the implication is that this new vision will start, not where the other visions started (that is, from nowhere in particular), but from where they left off. We arrive at the coalface very quickly; the decisive syntactic break between lines 9 and 10 tells us that, already, we have passed from summary narrative into particular narrative, this time strongly visualized. The significance of the narrative, heralded by hymns as if by a fanfare, is something of which the reader is already convinced. Nevertheless, Langland's artful disposition is not the most important source of our sense of occasion. That, I believe, comes down to the cluster of "and"-type juxtapositions that appear in these lines and will continue to appear as the Passus proceeds. I am not now referring to the use of the word "and" in this passage; I am using my term in the extended sense to refer more generally to juxtapositions that are satisfyingly suggestive although not explicitly articulated. This would describe, for example, the relationship of the Samaritan on "lyard" to Christ "on an asse bak"; they are brought into relationship not here by local proximity but by being described as "semblable". That the dreamer was "weetshoed" and Christ "bootles" is a resemblance that the poet does not point out, but when we notice it the juxtaposition between the two figures exists in our own minds even though this juxtaposition has no physical existence on the page (unlike those in B IX 46-50, which supplied my terms).

Another type of juxtaposition is noticeable here, that of one stave-word with another. This is of course a device that Langland exploits everywhere, usually unemphatically. In fact one of the poet's most common devices is to link a powerful word with a colourless one so as to neutralize its effect:

> Deeth seith he shal fordo and adoun brynge
> Al that lyveth or loketh in lond or in watre
>
> (B XVIII 29-30).

"Deeth" could be a monstrous figure and other alliterative poets would not have lost the opportunity to portray him sensationally threatening a type of carnage that we can visualize. But too much colour would be disruptive here and Langland contrives to sound serious without making us feel pleasantly appalled.

A closely related habit is to alliterate nouns with verbs expressing physical activity. Other alliterative poets like to build clusters of alliterating nouns, adjectives and past participles to invoke in the reader a strongly visual or tactile sensation, which depends, however, on the subject appearing to remain very still.

> Bot in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe
> þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare
> And an ax in his oþer a hoge and vnmete
> A spetos sparþe to expoun in spelle quoso myȝt
> þe hede of an elnȝerde þe large lenkþe hade
> þe grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen
> þe bit burnyst bryȝt with a brod egge
> As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores
> þe stele of a stif staf þe sturne hit bi gripte
> þat watz wounden wyth yrn to þe wandez ende
> And al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes
> A lace lapped aboute þat louked at þe hede
> And so after þe halme halched ful ofte
> Wyth tryed tasselez þerto tacched innogh
> On botounz of þe bryȝt grene brayden ful riche
>
> (_Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_, 206-20).

No doubt it would be true to say that this is beyond Langland, but then Langland does not try for this. The alliteration of noun with active verb gives a much more mobile impression:

> Tho putte hym forth a pelour bifore Pilat and seide
> This Jesus of oure Jewes temple japed and despised
>
> (B XVIII 40-41)

A cachepol cam forth and craked bothe hir legges
(B XVIII 73).

These figures flash past us, obviously alive and yet visible only when in action. Appropriately enough both the life and the brevity of Langland's pictures can be illustrated by a very short life indeed:

Dede men for that dene come out of depe graves
And tolde why that tempeste so longe tyme durede
For a bitter bataille the dede body seide
Lif and Deeth in this derknesse hir oon fordooth hir oother
Shal no wight wite witterly who shal have the maistrie
Er Sonday aboute sonne risyng and sank with that til erthe
(B XVIII 62-67).

Even the central figure in our scene is almost bereft of visual characteristics:

Oon semblable to the Samaritan and somdeel to Piers the Plowman
Barefoot on an asse bak bootles cam prikye
Withouten spores other spere spakliche he loked
As is the kynde of a knyght that cometh to be dubbed
To geten hym gilte spores on galoches ycouped
(B XVIII 10-14).

Like the Green Knight, and indeed like the other characters in the lines just quoted, he seems to come out of nowhere. The Green Knight has, however, an aggressively substantial appearance; although, oddly enough, he is probably a kind of phantom. The Christ-figure does not exactly seem insubstantial; but what Langland tells us, to put it only a little unfairly, is that he looks like a knight looks when a knight does not look like a knight. This rather convoluted information sets our imaginations to work without tying them to any specific details.

Amid all the frenzied movement of the trial and crucifixion scenes this central figure is somewhat elusive. We are told that he is a knight come to joust, and that truly expresses the underlying significance of the events; but considered as a visual image it is in stark contrast to what we see. In a joust the knight is active and the spectators are motionless; but here it is Christ who is passive while all around him is tumultuous activity. When the poet finally focusses on this central figure, the alliteration of noun with verb is again prominent; but there is an arresting contrast in the effect. While the poet's narrative rushes on as fast as ever, the reader's sensation of speed is suddenly accompanied by an equally strong sensation of almost complete stillness.

> Consummatum est quod Crist and comsede for to swoune
> Pitousliche and pale as a prison that deieth
> The lord of lif and of light tho leide hise eighen togideres
> (B XVIII 57-59).

The effect of these lines (rather lost out of context) is so complex that I shall not yet attempt to say anything more about it. Some other threads need to be picked up first.

Let us consider another variety of stave-word juxtaposition, one that is especially notable in this passus; namely, the juxtaposition of Latin with English, as in some of the lines already quoted. Incorporation of Latin into the metrical scheme is not, of course, peculiar to B Passus XVIII. Elsewhere Langland employs the device casually because the Latin happens to be metrically convenient; thus in B Passus XI "Concupiscencia Carnis" is a ready-made half-line all on her own (but her younger companions are more conveniently named in English), and later on, when the Trinity is under discussion, Langland often uses "Filius" because it can either alliterate with "Fader" (B XVI 88) or, in final position, provide a feminine ending (B XVI 186), or both (B XVII 228) - Langland does not permit himself a disyllabic pronunciation of "sone". Up to this point, then, the opportunity to sprinkle the English lines with Latin has been welcomed when it is convenient but has not been deliberately sought. But at the beginning and end of the passus that we are discussing the poet's use of liturgical and scriptural phrases in Latin, embedded in the verse, has unmistakably become policy. The presence of music to open and close the passus (B XVIII 7-8, 424-28) is evidently part of the same program.[1] Let us concentrate on the specific effect of a line such as

> Thanne was Feith in a fenestre and cryde A Fili David
> (B XVIII 15).

Compare that with an example of Langland's interlineal use of scripture:

> I have but oon hool hater quod Haukyn I am the lasse to blame
> Though it be soiled and selde clene I slepe therinne o nyghtes

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[1] Cf. the combination of music and Latin at B V 507-09a.

> And also I have an houswif hewen and children
> Uxorem duxi et ideo non possum venire
> That wollen bymolen it many time maugree my chekes
>
> (B XIV 1-4).

The scriptural juxtaposition here implies that Haukyn's life can be seen as reflecting the scriptural situation (the Latin comes from one of Christ's parables).[1] Langland underlines the relationship between the world that we see and the world that exists in our imaginations when we read the Bible. Nevertheless, the Latin does look a little like an interruption, as if our world is a consistent entity in itself and awareness of scriptural analogies enables us to see a pattern of resemblances between two worlds that are essentially different; the first of them secular, visible, and with a reality that is grasped immediately, the second of them spiritual, confined, a marginal world that demands the assent of faith and an imaginative effort before it can acquire anything like a comparable degree of reality in our minds.

In B Passus XVIII the distinction between the two worlds outlined here begins to collapse. Will's dream is a vision of a scriptural story, but the poet extends scripture both in the direction of allegory and in the direction of realism. Thus "A Fili David" is scripture, "Feith" is an intellectual concept, and a "fenestre" is a part of everyday life. The suppressed argument is that the world in which Christ enters Jerusalem, and in which Faith applauds eternally, is just the same world as that in which "fenestres" indubitably exist and have meaning, namely our own. The lesson is not lost on the dreamer, who on waking finds his world momentarily transfigured, so that he calls to his wife and daughter:

> Ariseth and reverenceth Goddes resurexion
> And crepeth to the cros on knees and kisseth it for a juwel
>
> (B XVIII 430-31).

It is the same cross that bore the weight of "Goddes blissede body", and its spiritual power of scaring off the fiend is perceived by him as having the same mode of existence as the cross itself; it is in fact part of the same world. We are entitled to describe Will's identification of the spiritual with the visible world as either insight or delusion, or (if we are unhappy with these alternatives), as something like the high state of aesthetic excitement with which we occasionally respond to a work of art, although not so aimless.

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[1] Luke 14:16-24.

It is common to see the later Middle Ages as characterized by religious conceptions that tend towards "ultra-realism". Huizinga emphasizes what he thinks is an excessive demystification of the spiritual world:

> If, on the one hand, all details of ordinary life may be raised to a sacred level, on the other hand, all that is holy sinks to the commonplace, by the fact of being blended with everyday life. In the Middle Ages the demarcation of the sphere of religious thought and that of worldly concerns was nearly obliterated. It occasionally happened that indulgences figured among the prizes of a lottery.[1]

That last detail would not seem too out of place in the Prologue of Piers Plowman, and yet Langland takes a quite different view from that of the historian. It is Langland's aim precisely to bring the holy and the commonplace into relationship with each other, as if for him the difficulty is that his sense of spiritual reality is not strong enough. Perhaps this implies that Will is not quite such a characteristic Everyman as the author may have thought; his problem being too sophisticated and intellectual to be typical. Langland's attempt to yoke the spiritual and the secular together might seem superficially to be directly opposed to the efforts of Protestantism to separate the spiritual world from any taint of worldly grossness. There is no such direct opposition; we are ignoring social context and being very free with the meanings of our terms. Nevertheless, that Piers Plowman was a popular book among English Protestants does indicate how successfully the author avoided sinking the holy to the level of the commonplace. One would have to be very puritanical indeed to detect in Piers Plowman anything like the overfamiliarity, bad taste and irreverence that Huizinga portrays in his account of "religious thought crystallizing into images".[2]

"Ultra-realism" suggests an imagined world that is detailed and self-consistent, terms that I might have used to describe the picture of Haukyn and his family at the start of B Passus XIV (although even

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1. J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, trans. F. Hopman (1924; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 151.

2. J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, pp. 147-71.

there we find a symbolic coat, and the Haukyn section as a whole, like any other passage in Piers Plowman that exceeds about six lines, is far from maintaining an illusion of self-consistency). The term is especially inapplicable to B Passus XVIII. Langland does not present the scriptural story in a demystified, naturalistic mode; rather, his narrative seems to encompass several modes at once. The reader's consciousness of their juxtaposition, not in series but in a harmonious parallel, does not make the spiritual commonplace; it makes everything mysterious. The brief passage during which all these levels of narrative become perceptible at once is probably Langland's greatest achievement as a poet. There was much medieval theorizing about multiple levels of meaning in narrative, but it always seems to require a good deal of mental application to discover them in a text. I do not know of anywhere else, even in the Commedia, where they are received by the reader as effortlessly as they are here; so effortlessly that the experience is attested even by those who have described for us the "obvious" reading of Piers Plowman.[1]

Two narrative dimensions that exist uninterruptedly throughout the first hundred lines of the passus are of particular importance. One is the story recounted in scripture, of a man being tried and put to death. This is in itself a narrative that moves on two planes, since the man is in fact God and a cosmic drama - the salvation of mankind - is taking place simultaneously with this painful earthly drama of unjust degradation and execution. Langland of course does full justice to both these narratives.

> The wal waggede and cleef and al the world quaved
> (B XVIII 61)

directs our attention mostly to the former; but

> Ave raby quod that ribaud and threw reedes at hym
> (B XVIII 50)

refers mostly to the latter.

The other narrative dimension is perhaps best described as an acting out of the Passion sequence; it is unemotional, commonplace, rather like a ritual. We could relate it either to the Easter liturgy or to a performance of a mystery play.

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[1] See, for example, John Norton-Smith's references to the kaleidoscopic use of time and "intercalation of episodes and dimensions" (William Langland, p. 81).

Multi-dimensional narrative is almost as hard to discuss as it must be to write, because we can never do justice to it unless we are prepared to be intolerably expansive. I shall therefore concentrate on one narrative dimension only, the second of the two just mentioned. I choose this one because it seems to me that although every reader must subconsciously register its presence it is not so easily labelled as, for instance, the scriptural story, or the story of the Christ-knight at the joust (which is much stressed by Langland but is not as continuously present to our minds as the two narrative dimensions outlined above).[1] For convenience I shall refer to the narrative dimension that I want to discuss as the "theatrical" dimension.

Of course it is not really separate from the other dimensions. A joust is a theatrical occasion with a variety of audiences: ordinary spectators, a formal judge of the contest (Pilate, in this case) and a herald who understands the intricate rules (Feith).[2] Again, there is already an element of theatre in the scriptural account. When Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on an ass, he is playing to the galleries; he may have been deliberately acting out an Old Testament prophesy (Zechariah 9:9). Even his death is in a sense a performance, since it is voluntary (J.A.W. Bennett has drawn attention to the implication of the word "wol" in B XVIII 22),[3] although it appears to the mob to take place in deference to its will, not anyone else's. And, although I am courting heresy by putting it this way, there is an analogy to be drawn between God putting on the costume of humana natura and an actor dressing up to play out a role.

When we go to see a new production, say of King Lear, we have an idea of the story already, and yet we adopt the mental posture of someone seeing the events as if for the first time - as if, in fact, they are real events, which can only ever be seen once. That is very much the position that we find ourselves in when we read this passus; the events are after all extremely familiar, but Langland presents them not summarily, as something in the past, but as fully fictionalized and occurring before our very eyes.

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[1] J.A.W. Bennett, who has written the best account of those parts of the passus the allude to the Christ-knight, notes that this motif drops out of sight during the Passion and Crucifixion (B XVIII 38-63); Cf. Poetry of the Passion, pp. 104, 108.

[2] Cf. J.A.W. Bennett, Poetry of the Passion, pp. 103, 109.

[3] J.A.W. Bennett, Poetry of the Passion, p. 101.

Will, as always, is analogous to the reader, and he shares the paradoxical mental attitude I have just described. Faith starts to explain the plot to him before it has been enacted - not the scriptural plot, but the story of the Christ-knight (B XVIII 22-26). But Will, it seems, is not unacquainted with the scriptural story, and he tries to show this by putting an intelligent question:

> Who shal juste with Jesus quod I Jewes or scribes
> (B XVIII 27).

The crudity of Will's attempt to relate the two stories comically reveals his limited grasp, but we can nevertheless infer that he does in a sense know the story of the Passion. But later on, as a spectator, this prior knowledge is forgotten, and his account becomes straight reportage (which naturally makes it more exciting):

> The Jewes and the justice ayeins Jesu thei weere
> (B XVIII 38).

This is presented as reality, not drama; that is, we understand that they happened to be against Jesus, but might conceivably not have been. Yet in the next line the theatrical dimension reasserts itself:

> And al the court on hym cryde *Crucifige* sharpe
> (B XVIII 39).

We are able at this point to see how rapidly Langland is going to treat the Passion. The complex legal machinery of the Gospels becomes a single hearing. In Langland's presentation of the scene, as in a mystery play, the passage of time is speeded up and only selected events are dramatized, notably those with a high dramatic content such as the shout of "*Crucifige*". Pilate will not be permitted to speak; the accuser's words will turn imperceptibly into mocking and torture, as if judgment is irrelevant - as if, in fact, events could not have been otherwise. There is an element of choreography; in the line just quoted it would be appropriate if "sharpe", although its primary meaning must be "loudly, shrilly, angrily", also connoted something like "right on cue". As in a play, there are no pauses in which nothing much is happening; a new participant immediately captures our attention:

> Tho putte hym forth a pelour bifore Pilat ...
> (B XVIII 40).[1]

He in turn is displaced by a sort of orchestrated crowd-scene; selected members speak in turn, so that the spectator is able to catch what they say:

> _Crucifige_ quod a cachepol I warante hym a wicche
> _Tolle Tolle_ quod another and took of kene thornes
> (B XVIII 46-47).

If Langland were writing a novel, these speeches would be anglicized and colloquialized, but it is not his intention to offer us a fully consistent naturalistic illusion. One effect of the Latin - not the only one, but the one I am bound to emphasize in the present context - is to suggest that the speakers, like actors, are not using their own words but are delivering lines written by someone else; quotations, in short.

A final "theatrical" aspect of the passage is its staging. There is no reference to place (other than Jerusalem). The gospel narratives indicate a confusing series of changes of locality; here, it seems, everything happens in one place, a place definable only as where Will happens to be looking - a stage, in effect. In the gospels Jesus is brought before Pilate in the _praetorium_ (John 18:28); but Langland brings Pilate to us:

> Thanne cam _Pilatus_ with muche peple _sedens pro tribunali_
> (B XVIII 36).

I have pointed out that the trial turns imperceptibly into the scourging, mocking and finally execution of the Christ-figure. There is no long trudge to Golgotha; the cross is here already:

> _Ave raby_ quod that ribaude and threw reedes at hym
> Nailed hym with thre nailes naked on the roode

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[1] The Bx reading is "pilour", which J.A.W. Bennett makes something of (_Poetry of the Passion_, p. 106), but Schmidt, following Kane-Donaldson, has preferred to adopt "pelour", the reading of the C text.

And poison on a poole thei putte up to his lippes
And beden hym drynken his deeth-yvel hise dayes were ydone
And seiden if that thow sotil be help now thiselve
If thow be Crist and kynges sone com down of the roode
Thanne shul we leve that lif thee loveth and wol noght lete thee
deye

(B XVIII 50-56).

There follows the climactic passage quoted earlier:

Consummatum est quod Crist and comsede for to swoune
Pitousliche and pale as a prison that deieth
The lord of lif and of light tho leide hise eighen togideres
The day for drede withdrough and derk bicam the sonne
The wal waggede and cleef and al the world quaved

(B XVIII 57-61).

These lines continue and yet modify the "theatrical" procedure followed until now. We have been witnessing a series of choreographed speeches and actions, a simple sequence with a dramatic impetus not dissipated by awkward pauses or a confusion of people saying different things at once (the previous speech is apparently made by several people in unison). Now it is Christ's turn, and his entirely private speech - Consummatum est - sounds momentarily like a conversational reply (a riposte, maybe). The total effect of the lines is far from being colloquial, of course, yet there is a vein of colloquial briskness running through them that I associate with the theatrical dimension that I am discussing. I have noted elsewhere how the word "quod" in line 57 seems curiously - yet most effectively - at odds with the dramatic situation.[1] This sprightly, commonplace word hardly suggests a great cry or a barely audible movement of the lips; it could quite well describe an actor speaking his lines. The word "comsede" is equally businesslike; losing consciousness is one of the most involuntary of all activities, yet "comsede" when paired with "quod" suggests a deliberate faint, an actor's gesture. So too does the word "tho" in line 59; it is as if the moment when the Christ-figure closes his eyes is carefully chosen, something done on cue. This gesture, although it is a physical movement of sorts, is too tiny to be perceptible to an audience, unless that audience is (like Will) transfixed by the figure on the cross -

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1. Michael Peverett, "'Quod' and 'Seide' in Piers Plowman", p. 127.

it is at this moment that Will sees him as something more than a man, indeed nothing less than "the lord of lif and of light". Yet this movement, small as it is, puts out the lights and shakes the theatre to its foundations.

One effect of "quod", "comsede" and "tho" - the vein of commonplace, unemotional expressions - is naturally to increase the poignancy of Langland's description. J.A.W. Bennett points out that "of Christ's sufferings he says nothing",[1] but this must not be taken as meaning that he does not express them. What is understated in line 58 (which I have deliberately excluded from discussion because of my emphasis on the theatrical dimension) is present in the reader's mind throughout; in Langland's time the suffering of Christ had long ceased to be a suppressed aspect of the Passion story. The refusal of the text to mention it directly only makes us feel it more powerfully, and feel too the isolation of suffering, the callous indifference of the mob.

I have mentioned three narrative dimensions in the first part of B Passus XVIII: the scriptural, the chivalric and the theatrical (on which I have concentrated). That is an oversimplification, since each of these dimensions is itself multiple. To a medieval Christian the scriptural narrative is not a simple story; nor is it to us, unless we succeed in putting aside all its resonances in pursuit of historical objectivity. Centuries of meditation, controversy, commentary, apocryphal elaboration and popular recasting had made the Passion narrative naturally polysemous; most of all, perhaps, its incorporation into the religious practices of the Christian community. The chivalric dimension has likewise been perceived as multiple by some recent commentators;[2] and what I have called the theatrical dimension can also be subdivided so as to distinguish liturgical elements from those that suggest a more secular and more fully dramatized rendering. What I have said about the colloquial or commonplace expressions in this passage belong to the latter subdivision and not the former.

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1. J.A.W. Bennett, Poetry of the Passion, p. 107.
2. Anna Baldwin, "The Double Duel in Piers Plowman B XVIII and C XXI," Medium Ævum 50(1981), 64-78; J.A.W. Bennett, Poetry of the Passion, pp. 103-05.

When these complexities are taken into account, my separation of the narrative threads into three cords starts to appear too tidy. Langland did not, we can be sure, compose the passage by layering one narrative dimension upon another, since it is impossible to reverse the process and skim off the layers by crossing out words or phrases; the layers exist in the reader's mind but have no visible boundaries on the page. Langland's compositional methods must have been much more instinctive than is implied by this notion of layering. I think we come nearer to describing it if we revert to the term "juxtaposition"; the narrative dimensions come into being, in the reader's imagination, because of the poet's continuous, bold yet tactful use of juxtaposition. The boldness of Langland's procedure leads to a mixture of modes that is profoundly "unreasonable"; that is, we can pick out numerous logical and emotional contradictions (e.g. if the Christ-figure is performing he cannot really be suffering, but he is suffering). The poet's tact is what enables us to describe his method as, more specifically, "and"-type juxtaposition. Random juxtaposition would as likely as not produce effects that are harshly cynical or disturbingly ambiguous; the crucifixion could become a shabby irrelevance if, for instance, the suggestions of popular drama had been used (as they might have been) to hint incredulously that what Will is seeing is merely a fraudulent pantomime. Instead, our simultaneous vision of the central figure both as Christ himself and as a fourteenth-century man acting the part of Christ encapsulates beautifully Langland's deepest feelings about the meaning of the Incarnation; his belief, several times hinted at elsewhere, that ordinary people are in a sense capable of becoming Christ (cf. B I 90-91, B XV 212). I have already pointed out how easily Langland's strong "incarnational" impulse could have drawn him into a distinctively late-medieval kind of irreverence; an "ultra-realistic" portrayal of a Christ that is all too incarnate. The juxtapositions are not reductive, in other words; one imaginative "world" (the religious, for example) is not cancelled out or undercut by another (the secular, for example). Rather, each gives a deeper significance to the other, which is one way of stating (but not communicating) what Will apprehends.

The statement, after all, is made by me, not by Langland; it is a response to a response.[1] It is more or less "reasonable" (that is, it is a real statement with some paraphraseable content). Obviously the "and"-type juxtapositions I have been discussing are not statements; but that is their strength. Let us return to the association, early on in the passus, of Christ with the Samaritan, the dreamer, and Piers.[2] We already know that Christ has something to do with charity (the Samaritan); we also know that Christ has some special relation to the poor and the outcast (Will in his waking guise). Piers is here to remind us of a link between Christ and the diligent worker, the good servant. None of these statements is made by Langland and when they are made they just look trite. But Langland's text permits them all to exist in potentiality, together with many others of the same kind, in readiness for the meditative reader. I have already suggested that the reader of Piers Plowman is invited to make his own sense of the materials that Langland provides him with (p. 25); in this case the subject proposed for us is, what most preoccupies the author, God as a man - or man as God.[3] But it is not the extraction of implicit statements about Christ that itself gives us the satisfying sense of illumination that I am considering. Langland presents us with the subject (Christ) unmediated by any particular interpretation and uncircumscribed by any particular mode of expression; and thus, I think, creates the illusion that Christ himself - not statements about Christ - is somehow presented to us as we read. The illusion is that we are able, as we read, to acquire "kynde knowynge" in the sense I suggested earlier: knowledge so immediate that it does not merely inform but actually reforms.[4] Presumably an actual encounter with Christ would provide such knowledge, if anything would. It remains, when all is said, an illusion, a semblance of "kynde knowynge"; reading Piers Plowman does not, unfortunately, guarantee salvation. But we can be grateful for it

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1. Cf. Stanley Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, pp. 409-10.

2. Cf. above, pp. 166-68.

3. Langland makes use of the Anselmian compound Deus-homo (B XI 205, C III 401a). See John Norton-Smith, William Langland, pp. 66-67.

4. Cf. above, p. 110.

as readers of poetry. Even Langland must occasionally have felt that he had achieved something that was beyond the reach of "reasonable" discourse, although he would not have had a term to describe his achievement. In fact it supremely exemplifies what we call Christian art.

Chapter Four

"AC": NEGATIVE JUXTAPOSITION IN PIERS PLOWMAN

I

The OED laconically gives the signification of Ac as "But", but of the various significations of OED But, conj., only one or two are relevant to Ac, in particular 25: "Introducing a statement of the nature of an objection, limitation or contrast to what has gone before; sometimes, in its weakest form, merely expressing disconnexion, or emphasizing the introduction of a distinct or independent fact ..."[1] "Ac" and "but" are used along with "and", "for", "then", "so" and similar words by that class of medieval writers who like to begin almost every sentence (if that is what we should call these units) with a connective - the style formalized and perfected by Malory. They are very often in their "weakest form" and are sometimes no more than verbal tics that could easily be omitted. The word "ac", which fell into disuse in most of England not long after Langland wrote, is often replaced in Piers Plowman mss., and in some (e.g. Cambridge University Library MS Dd. 1. 17 and Cambridge University Library MS Ll. 4 14, as well as Robert Crowley's editions) the word substituted is most commonly "and" rather than "but".

It is generally true that the adversative force of "ac" will be less than we are apt to suppose. Even in the Ancrene Wisse, whose author is a very precise stylist, "ah" (i.e. "ac") must sometimes be given less than its full logical weight. In order to show this I must begin my quotation some way back:

> Iudas Macabeu hwa stod aȝeín him? Alswa i Iudicum. þat folc þa hit easkede efter Iosues deað? hwa schulde beon hare dug ant leaden ham i ferde. Quis erit dux noster? vre lauerd ham ondswerede. Iudas schal gan biuoren ow. ant ich chulle ower faes lond biteachen in his honden. lokið nu ful ȝeorne hwet tis beo to seggen. Iosue spealeð heale ant Iudas schrift as Iudith. þenne is iosue dead? hwen sawle heale is forloren þurh eani deadlich sunne. þe sunfole seolf is þe unwihtes lond þe is ure deadliche fa. ah þis lond ure lauerd bihat to biteachen i Iudase honden? for hwon þat he ga biuoren.[2]

The words following "ah" certainly do not contradict or qualify anything that has just been explicitly stated. "Ah" is, however, loosely appropriate because it marks a change at the emotional level. The soul seemed doomed in the previous sentence, but God now indicates (allegorically) a means of salvation. Whether the last part of the passage can therefore be said to qualify what precedes it by denying one of its apparent implications is debatable; the main function of "ah" is certainly to point an emotional contrast.[1] In Malory's works, two and a half centuries later, "but" is very often used in the same way, as here:

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[1] See also MED ac, conj., 4.

[2] J.R.R. Tolkien, ed., Ancrene Wisse: Edited from MS. Corpus Christi College Cambridge 402, EETS, O.S. 249 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 154-55 (fol. 81b, ll. 18-28; M. 300), with abbreviations expanded.

> So whan dame Eleyne was brought unto the quene aythir made other goode chere as by countenaunce, but nothynge wyth there hartes. But all men and women spake of the beauté of dame Elayne.[2]

Here the two statements have no logical relation to each other at all; the contrast is solely between a sentence that disturbs us and one that slightly restores our equanimity.

This way of using "but" is a natural one in pure narrative, and Malory's usage is very consistent. In some parts of the South English Legendary, however, we find "ac" used in a way that is more reminiscent of Langland:

> For wiþoute sorwe of heorte no sunne nis forȝiue
> A mon were betere for is sunne beo sori and vnssriue
> þanne issriue wiþoute sorinesse & bet ssolde beo forȝiue
> For it is iwrite þat seinte Peter þrie oure Louerd forsok
> He ȝeode out & sore wep inou & gret deol to him tok
> Ac we ne findeþ iwrite in no stude þat he were þerof issriue
> Ac naþeles as ȝe witeþ al is sunne beoþ forȝiue
> Ac for þan ne beo noman so tristi þerto
> þat he for al is sorinesse ne beo issriue also
> Ac monimen ar hi beo scriue sori beoþ inou
> Ac after þe ssrift doþ swuþe lite ac me þincþ þat is wou
> ("Lent" 90-100).[3]

The passage proceeds by making a series of approximations to the writer's views. His first aim is to stress the importance of sorrow, using Saint Peter's tears after his denials as an example. This first attempt, however, has gone too far in seeming to suggest that sorrow is both

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1. Again, it is hard to be certain whether the "ah"s at fol. 48b, line 14, and fol. 107b, line 15, should be interpreted as introducing a contradiction of what some readers may have taken as a suggestion, or as indicating a structural break.

2. Eugene Vinaver, ed., Malory: Works, p. 486, ll. 14-16.

3. D'Evelyn and Mill, I, 131-32.

necessary and sufficient, leaving no room for shrift. A correction is needed; no man should be so sure of himself as to dispense with shrift. But there is more to be said still, because the author, like Langland, is aware that sorrow can mean many things ("I am evere sory quod Envye I am but selde oother"),[1] so he needs to point out that the transient and inconsequential sorrow of some sinners has no share in his praise.

This exposition continues to advance by making increasingly fine corrections for a further twenty lines or so. The method is artless but far from ineffective; by the end a quite complex group of ideas has been plainly presented, without unnecessary and distracting explanation. The very imprecision of "ac" is helpful to the writer here, as it enables him to alert us to a further point without needing to explain how it can be related to what precedes it. Consequently it is the reader who, if he feels inclined to, must do the work of defining exactly the roles of sorrow and shrift, or distinguishing the various senses of sorrow; the author has released himself from a duty that the writer of modern prose would be hard pressed to avoid. As it was certainly no part of his intention to become immersed in such matters, this limitation in what the passage says can only be enviously admired.[2]

The word "ac" is here used to bring together a series of different statements without relating them definitively. They are, however, capable of being related, and for this reason the passage is, in the everyday sense, communicative. That description cannot be applied so easily to the extract from Piers that follows, in which Langland's own characteristic use of "ac" is displayed.

> I am Ymagenatyf quod he ydel was y neuere
> Thogh y sete by mysulue suche is my grace
> Y haue folewed the in fayth mo then fourty wynter
> And wissed the fol ofte what Dowel was to mene
> And conseyled the for Cristes sake no creature to bygile

---

1. B V 126.

2. From a different point of view, we can see this style as compensating (unconsciously, of course) for the limited use of the subordinate clause in Middle English, and the consequent difficulty of expressing "qualification, doubt and other factors which temper the pure statement of fact" (N.F. Blake, The English Language in Medieval Literature, p. 145).

Noþer to lye ne to lacke ne lere þat is defended
Ne to spille no speche as for to speke an ydel
Ne no tyme to tyne ne trewe thyng tene
Loue the and leue forth in þe lawe of holy chirche
And thenne dost thow wel withoute drede ho can do bet no force
Clerkes þat conne al y hope they can do bettere
Ac hit soffiseth to be saued and be such as y tauhte
Ac for louye and to lene and lyue wel and byleue
Is ycalde *Caritas* Kynde Loue an Engelysche
And þat is Dobet yf eny suche be a blessed man þat helpeth
That pees be and pacience and pore withoute defaute
Beacius est dare quam petere
Ac catel and kynde wit acombreth fol monye
Wo is hym þat hem weldeth but he hem wel despene
Scientes at non facientes variis flagellis vapulabunt
Ac communlyche connynge and vnkynde rychesse
As loreles to be lordes and lewede men techares
And holy chirche horen helpe auerous and coueytous
Druyeth vp Dowel and distruyeth Dobest
Ac grace is a graes þer-fore to don hem efte growe
Ac grace ne groweth nat til gode-wil gyue reyne
And woky thorw gode werkes wikkede hertes
Ac ar such a wil wexe worcheth god sulue
And sent forth the seynt espirit to do loue sprynge
Spiritus vbi vult spirat
So grace withouten grace of god and also gode werkes
May nat be be þow syker thogh we bidde euere
Ac clergie cometh bote of syhte and kynde wit of sterres
As to be bore or bygete in such a constillacioun
That wit wexeth therof and oþer wordes bothe
Vultus huius seculi sunt subiecti vultibus celestibus
So grace is a gifte of god and kynde wit a chaunce
And clergie a connynge of kynde wittes techyng

(C XIV 1-34).

This passage illustrates the distinction I made above when I applied the adjective "frustrating" to Langland's poetry, but only with reference to the reader's search for denotative meanings (p. 149). That restriction is clearly appropriate here. Ymaginatif's demeanour is in general reassuring, calm and rational; indeed it is part of Langland's intention at the start of this passus, I think, to establish Ymaginatif as a speaker who, precisely because he does not claim to be omniscient, has considerable authority. He is more of a conversationalist and less of a preacher than Wit or Clergy, and Will, who has woken "aschamed" from his inner dream, leads us in an attitude of polite submissiveness. Ymaginatif's ability to mediate between the extreme views with which we have been bombarded earlier in the third vision is another factor in our positive response. In disputes where deadlock has apparently been reached, the way forward is often through redefinition, and this is provided by Ymaginatif when he firmly distinguishes between "clergie" and "kynde wit". Such rehandling of the materials always induces a refreshing sensation of progress, even if it is an illusory one. On the subject of "clergie" itself, Ymaginatif takes a middle course, denying that learning is itself a sign of grace but defending its value as an aid to salvation. The same tendency to reconcile different views is manifested in Ymaginatif's comments on the troublesome cases of Trajan and the good thief. The former was (initially) damned, yes, but hardly so; the latter was saved, yes, but hardly so. Ymaginatif's play with the word "hardly" itself (vix) is characteristic;[1] he will extract a moderate and commonsensical meaning from the most unpromising texts. When I was discussing "reason", in Chapter II, Ymaginatif (like the Samaritan) could have provided me with plenty of illustrative material if I had been short of it.

Langland's revised version of the Ymaginatif section in C seems intended to underline the speaker's reasonableness. Passus XIV is one of the most successful and most complete parts of the C text; and Langland's aim is evidently to clarify further what was already a comparatively lucid part of Piers. For example, in B Passus XII Ymaginatif begins by treating "clergie" and "kynde wit" together:

> Ac yet is clergie to comende and kynde wit bothe
>
> (B XII 70).

There is no absolute contradiction when "kynde wit" is subsequently compared unfavourably with "clergie" (B XII 105ff.), but it is unexpected, and the reader uncharitably suspects Ymaginatif (and Langland) of setting off without having planned in advance what to say. In the C text, however, that suspicion is not aroused; the line just quoted becomes:

> And ȝut is clergie to comende for Cristes loue more
> Then eny connyng of kynde wit but clergi hit reule
>
> (C XIV 35-36).

These lines come directly after the opening of the passus that I quoted above, and they illustrate the more discursive and connected style of the rest of the passus; it will be observed that the "ac" of B XII 70, expressing disconnexion, has become the "and" of C XIV 35, expressing connexion.

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[1] B XII 279-80; C XIV 203-04.

It is this opening, however, which is the most radically revised part of the passus.[1] Like the rest, it has a relaxed and confident tone; but unlike the rest it does not follow a smooth and continuous course. This applies especially to the section between line 13 and line 29, which is dominated by the word "ac" and is consequently similar in appearance to the extract I quoted from the South English Legendary. I do not think the ease of tone and difficulty of form are contradictory phenomena; together, they express a casual, conversational manner. Nevertheless, there is a great difference between this opening and the rest of the passus. I have extended the quotation to include lines 30 to 34 in order to illustrate this. It will be seen that they propose a three-fold scheme (grace, "clergie", "kynde wit") and carry it through; they are "reasonable" not only because what is said is sensible and moderate but because this neat resolution of a proposed scheme suggests a stable mode within which the three terms have fixed meanings and the constructive activity of "reason" can therefore be undertaken without fear of disruption. All of this is in sharp contrast with the disorientating progression of the first twenty-nine lines, which I shall now examine in greater detail.

Ymaginatif begins obliquely but confidingly by speaking of himself, thus establishing the intimate manner that has already been noted.[2] His rapid modulation into didactic advice is not, however, unexpected (we know that he is in fact only one of the dreamer's internal faculties). His advice in the first twelve lines, although uncompromising, comes as

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1. Langland removes the famous passage in which the dreamer tries to justify his dabblings in poetry, although there is still some echo of it in C XIV 4-9, where the advice given seems particularly relevant to someone, like Langland himself, who writes about society.

2. Will has asked him his name, but there are many ways of replying to such questions. We might contrast the distant responses of Liberum Arbitrium, who takes every question as the cue for a general dissertation and persistently shrugs off Will's efforts to establish a more informal style of intercourse, until he is finally driven to take more particular notice of his questioner, whereupon he leads him into a trap and reasserts his authority with a stinging rebuke (C XVI 157-212a).

a great relief to the reader who seeks (as we naturally do) for a straightforward meaning from a purportedly ethical text. It is simple to understand, does not sound too hard to obey, and (best of all) tells us that we need not bother with the difficult issues that have emerged in the turmoiled writing of previous passus. The first "ac", at line 12, is fully in accord with the reassuring content of this opening; it is used to return us from a momentary digression (in line 11) to a conclusive restatement of the main theme.

How has such lucidity and reasonableness been achieved? The answer, surely, is that Ymaginatif places extreme limitations on the subject under discussion; he discourages interest in Dobet and speculation about whether clerks are likely to achieve it. But in Piers Plowman such rigidly defined frameworks do not usually last very long, and this one is no exception. Ymaginatif leads us at once down a path that has just been specifically closed off (lines 13 to 16a). It is the word "ac", used untranslatably to make a forceful shift from one viewpoint to another, that enables the barrier to be overcome.

The difficulty in these lines on Dobet is not that they are hard to understand in themselves (despite curious syntax in lines 13 and 16), nor that what they say is objectionable or even novel. It is merely that their presence in this context negates the finality of lines 1 to 12, and replaces conclusions with questions. There is no problem here with the progression from Dowel to Dobet; the former definition, recalling those of Wit, is couched entirely in terms of avoiding sin and obeying rules, while the latter displays a far more energetic and concrete understanding of virtuous living. Ymaginatif seems then to be sketching the familiar progressive pattern of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest. The trouble is that he has just told us not to worry about Dobet, and we have no wish to, since the main subject has been readily identified as the dreamer and his need to do well, and digressing from a main subject always requires extra concentration. Moreover, line 11 had seemed somewhat dismissive of the clerkly life, but these lines present it in an ideal form; and while this ideal is doubtless rarely achieved it certainly seems a worthy one to aim at.[1] The subject that we have been told to ignore is rapidly becoming both more complex and, formally, more central, while the original boundaries of Ymaginatif's exposition are being forgotten or ignored. This transition is completed when the next "ac" diverts us into a consideration of the dangers of "catel and kynde wit" (lines 17 to 22).

The abruptness of this second change of tack may be partially attributable to careless revision; the corresponding passage (prefixed by "so" rather than "ac") is far more obviously tied to its context in the B text (B XII 55ff.). However, it is only one of a series of sharp deviations in the revised version, and may therefore be considered appropriate and intentional, because of its very inconsequence. It is not, as Pearsall points out (C XIV 17n.), entirely unconnected with what has gone before. The pitfalls of clerks have already been hinted at in line 11, and the charitable use of earthly goods is one of the features of Dobet as described in lines 13 to 16a. Furthermore, line 22 hints that the evils described here are peculiarly related to Dobet; they are the vices that most endanger this kind of virtuous life (the clerkly life of line 11). Such connexions can be perceived in retrospect; what is felt in reading, however, is a marked sense of discontinuity. The clerks of line 11 were clearly recognizable as a digression; the main subject was the dreamer and his need to do well. But now they have usurped this position, and they bring with them a corresponding change in the mode of expression - the vox clamantis of Gower's poem, which recurs periodically throughout Langland's poem and which is used for impassioned commentary on the ills of the age. Such a general and public style seems inconsistent with the original emphasis on pragmatic advice addressed to an individual case; the "ac"s have precipitated a rapid shift of focus, and the reader becomes uncertain whether the passus is really about Will or about the role of clerks.

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[1] I take these lines to refer particularly to the religious life, partly because of the "blessed man" of line 15 and partly because it seems reasonable in view of the references in lines 10 and 11 and the later implication of line 22 to assume a loose identification between Dobet and the clerkly life throughout this section. The fact that Caritas cannot really be contained in this way reveals, I think, the limitations of Ymaginatif's viewpoint. The lines "unintentionally" foreshadow later developments in the poem that transcend the level of this passus.

That uncertainty has a significant relationship to the content of the rest of the passus, which proves to be about both; that is, Ymaginatif seeks to re-establish order by "placing" both the dreamer, who is not a clerk, and the clerks themselves. It was Will who originally usurped the role of the clerks, by dismissing the value of learning and substituting for it his own undisciplined researches:

> Ac why þat on theef vppon þe cros cryant hym ȝelde
> Rather then þat oþer thogh thow woldest apose
> Alle þe clerkes vnder Crist ne couthe hit assoille
> Quare placuit? quia voluit
> And so y sey by þe þat sekest aftur þe whyes
> How creatures han kynde wit and how clerkes come to bokes
> And how þe floures in þe fryth cometh to fayre hewes
> Was neuere creature vnder Crist þat knewe wel þe bygynnyng
> Bote Kynde þat contreuede hit furst of his corteyse wille
>
> (C XIV 153-60)

Ymaginatif, in pursuit of order, tries to disentangle this confusion and confine the dreamer, "clergie" and "kynde wit" within their proper boundaries.

An answer to the question raised earlier concerning the difference between this opening and the rest of the passus can now be attempted. Ymaginatif does not begin directly with straightforward exposition but first impresses upon us the insufficiency of our own understanding. His manner promises illumination, but it is not delivered at once. Instead, the formal difficulties of these lines reflect the the confusion of the dreamer and even mimic his own tendency to dwell on subjects that do not concern him. Ymaginatif must follow him in this, simply in order to return him to the proper way forward, which is to do well. Will had no business to raise the question of learning, but since he has done so, something must be done to quiet him. The passage I have quoted briefly recapitulates aspects of that question. The clerkly life is, seen from one point of view, admirable (lines 13 to 16a); yet it can go terribly wrong (lines 17 to 22). Our own difficulty, as readers, is to synthesise these different ideas into a single consistent set of beliefs; and Ymaginatif makes us conscious of this difficulty in order to alert us to the necessity of the kind of exposition he proceeds to deliver.

In the passage from the South English Legendary we saw the repeated use of "ac" to link together a series of statements each of which qualifies the previous one. Ymaginatif uses "ac" to link passages that are impossible to reconcile, and thus to express a problem rather than to refine an answer. One reason for the impossibility of reconciliation is that different modes of thought operate in the different passages. The lines about Caritas offer ideal prescription; the lines that follow offer a picture of sad reality. Clearly a proper judgment of "clergie" cannot be attained from either standpoint.[1] The one takes no account of how the clerkly life may actually be embodied; the other completely ignores the teleological dimension, the reason why there are clerks in the world at all. "Ac" deprives us of certainty because it is, in Piers Plowman, a word that can be followed by anything, and this includes ideas that we presume to be material but that cannot be accommodated because they inhabit an entirely different thought-world.

Ymaginatif plays with fire in so deserting his habitually discursive manner, and he gets burnt. Ironically the unresolved possibilities evoked by this passage are broader in scope than the reasonable resolutions that follow. I am thinking in particular of the lines on grace (23 to 29), which I have not yet discussed. Here an ill-judged "ac" opens up areas that Ymaginatif himself will not be able to encompass. It will have been observed that in an otherwise prosaic passage the appearance of grace coincides with a small poetic climax. A slight rise in emotional temperature begins with the declamatory stance taken up by the speaker at line 17, but his language, though passionate, is colourless until the welcome appearance of the natural imagery that begins at line 22. This crescendo is, it seems, one that Ymaginatif regrets, for he immediately takes steps to damp it down by a series of qualifications that diminish the promise of grace that he has incautiously hinted at (line 23). The conclusion in lines 28 to 29 is anticlimactically reasonable, and Ymaginatif's incorporation of grace into the three-fold scheme of lines 30 to 34 may be taken as a

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1. I am making the medieval presumption that there is such a thing as a "proper judgment" that transcends any particular set of criteria. Pure relativism was scarcely an available philosophy in Langland's culture. There is always a supreme standpoint from which, for example, God can pronounce his creation "good"; not good in one way or another, but good simpliciter.

symbolic imprisonment of the forces that he has unintentionally released. Grace is a dangerous concept; dangerous in particular to the reasonable world that Ymaginatif presents, because it is a disrupter of hierarchies. It can make meaningless the moral progression of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest, because the grace that follows repentance can make saints out of those who have not performed any of the activities listed under the the headings of Dowel or Dobet; for example, Saint Mary Magdalene or Saint Mary of Egypt (who is, naturally, the favourite saint of Father Zossima in _The Brothers Karamazov_). The orderly world of Ymaginatif is really antipathetic to these miraculous transformations, which is why he so drastically minimizes God's part in the striking stories of Trajan and the good thief; the marginal comment in line 27a is "_Spiritus vbi vult spirat_", but Ymaginatif regards the Holy Spirit as following a strict code of conduct. The contortions of line 28 reveal the trouble he has in reconciling this notion to his own point of view. Orthodoxy requires him to believe that grace is prior to good works, but his natural tendency, based on an ordinary sense of what is fitting, is to see it as a consequence of them. Langland himself does not regard grace as quite the arbitrary and omnipotent force that the Calvinists posited; one's own position in the moral hierarchy is not dismissed as sheer irrelevance. Nevertheless I think he takes it more seriously than Ymaginatif is able to, and by the end of the poem we shall see the virtuous life as involving repentance and recommitment as well as the good works and law-abidingness envisaged by Ymaginatif.

The way that the "ac"s are used in this passage, to provoke in us a sense of the inadequacy of our understanding, is an appropriate metaphor for the negative juxtapositions that form the subject of this chapter. From now on I shall be using my terms in their extended sense - the units to be considered will be sections rather than lines, and the word "ac" will not necessarily be present - but my point about the material under discussion will remain substantially the same. I shall be arguing for a repeated sequence of the following kind: first, we are presented with the sort of truth that is attainable within the limits defined by a chosen mode of thought, just as we are in the first twelve lines of C Passus XIV; then, Langland unsettles us by moving outside those limits, so that initial satisfaction is replaced by dissatisfaction with a truth that can only be had on those terms. In this way Langland seeks, among other things, to free us from the illusion that salvation (the supreme "Truth" that is God) can be fully embodied in any mode of discourse, and to teach us that no authority, no preacher, and no poem - not even this one - can give us what must be sought in the activity of the Christian life, which only recommences when we cease from our reading.

II

Thanne as I wente by the way whan I was thus awaked
Hevy chered I yede and elenge in herte
For I ne wiste wher to ete ne at what place
And it neghed neigh the noon and with Nede I mette
That afrounted me foule and faitour me called
Coudestow noght excuse thee as dide the kyng and othere
That thow toke to thy bilyve to clothes and to sustenaunce
Was by techynge and by tellynge of *Spiritus Temperancie*
And that thow nome na moore than nede thee taughte
And nede ne hath no lawe ne nevere shal falle in dette
For thre thynges he taketh his lif for to save
That is mete whan men hym werneth and he no monye weldeth
Ne wight noon wol ben his borugh ne wed hath noon to legge
And he cacche in that caas and come therto by sleighte
He synneth noght soothliche that so wynneth his foode
And though he come so to a clooth and kan no bettre chevyssaunce
Nede anoon righte nymeth hym under maynprise
And if hym list for to lape the lawe of kynde wolde
That he dronke at ech dych er he deide for thurst
So Nede at gret nede may nymen as for his owene
Withouten conseil of Conscience or Cardynale Vertues
So that he sewe and save *Spiritus Temperancie*
For is no vertue bi fer to *Spiritus Temperancie*
Neither *Spiritus Iusticie* ne *Spiritus Fortitudinis*
For *Spiritus Fortitudinis* forfeteth ful ofte
He shal do moore than mesure many tyme and ofte
And bete men over bittre and som body to litel
And greve men gretter than good feith it wolde
And *Spiritus Iusticie* shal juggen wole he nel he
After the kynges counseil and the commune like
And *Spiritus Prudencie* in many a point shal faille
Of that he weneth wolde falle if his wit ne weere
Wenynge is no wysdom ne wys ymaginacion
Homo proponit et Deus disponit

God governeth alle goode vertues
And Nede is next hym for anoon he meketh
And as lowe as a lomb for lakkyng that hym nedeth
For nede maketh nede fele nedes lowe-herted
Philosophres forsoke welthe for thei wolde be nedy
And woneden wel elengely and wolde noght be riche
And God al his grete joye goostliche he lefte
And cam and took mankynde and bicam nedy
So he was nedy as seith the Book in manye sondry places
That he seide in his sorwe on the selve roode
Bothe fox and fowel may fle to hole and crepe
And the fissh hath fyn to flete with to reste
Ther nede hath ynome me that I moot nede abide
And suffre sorwes ful soure that shal to joye torne
Forthi be noght abasshed to bide and to be nedy
Sith he that wroghte al the world was wilfulliche nedy
Ne nevere noon so nedy ne poverer deide

(B XX 1-50).[1]

A negative juxtaposition occurs when two or more ideas or statements are presented to the reader as associated, but cannot in fact be connected in a straightforward or logical way, and when the reader's experience is better described as a sense of perplexity than as a sense of illumination. The word "ac" need not be present (that is just a label), and it will be observed that in Nede's speech, which is my next example of negative juxtaposition, "ac" does not occur at all. On the contrary, the syntax is dominated by the words "and", "so" and "for", suggesting a close argument in which the various points arise naturally out of each other and are therefore harmoniously related. Yet the effect is, paradoxically, a negative one, because the statements that we are being encouraged to take together are only acceptable if we keep them apart. Their juxtaposition hints at conclusions that disturb us because we cannot believe that the author is commending them to us.

The history of Piers Plowman criticism reveals how thoroughly ambiguous Need appears. Some scholars have taken his advice as unexceptionable;

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[1] There is no consensus in either B or C mss. about the reading of line 48, some having "bide" and others "bidde". Skeat's text has the latter, which may well be right and which explains the reference to begging in Goodridge's note, to be discussed shortly.

an almost equal number have been deeply suspicious of it.[1] The editors too give a divided impression. Schmidt tries to elucidate the passage and show its orthodoxy; so does Pearsall, but with less enthusiasm: "The authority of Need as a witness in this episode is in fact thoroughly debatable" (C XXII 37n.). There is a discernible pattern in all this. Need certainly does appear a suspicious character, especially if the speech is set in context (as Frank and Adams, in particular, have shown), but it is difficult to point to anything Need actually says that would substantiate this criticism. If we take Need's arguments in isolation (both from the rest of the poem and from each other) we shall probably find him innocent. I shall not be arguing that Need is innocent, nor that he is guilty; it is my intention to show that the problem Need poses for us is insoluble and that he has tended to make an ambiguous impression on readers because he is ambiguous.

This is in effect to argue that all interpretations of Need are broadly correct; but one that I think is wrong is proposed by J.F. Goodridge, and accepted by the other recent translator of *Piers Plowman*, Terence Tiller. Goodridge tells us that "The king of the last Book" (i.e. B Passus XIX) "was wrong in claiming to be entirely above the law; but Will who is in real, physical need, goes to the other extreme - he is over-scrupulous and immoderately self-denying. His discussion with Need represents his own self-questioning about this point. He now has nothing worse to reproach himself with than that he is too meek, and unwilling to beg for his food - a trivial fault compared with the presumption and despair which he gave way to earlier."[2] This transfers all our attention to the character of the dreamer, as if Langland meant to illustrate a stage in

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[1] The following are examples: D.W. Robertson, Jr., and B.F. Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 227-29 (approving); R.W. Frank, Jr., *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 113-14 (disapproving); Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), pp. 135-37 (approving); Mary Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth*, pp. 160-62 (disapproving); Robert Adams, "The Nature of Need in 'Piers Plowman' XX," *Traditio* 34 (1978), 273-301 (disapproving).

[2] J.F. Goodridge, *Piers the Ploughman*, p. 313.

Will's spiritual progress. I have already argued against trying to discern a conversion narrative centred on Will in Piers Plowman, and this seems to be a case in point.[1] The one line

> For I ne wiste wher to ete ne at what place
> (B XX 3)

does not necessarily imply that Will's income has (for some unknown reason) dried up and that he is reduced to considering beggary or stealing. We do not really know the position. But whatever we imagine it to be, it is impossible to read the whole speech allegorically as an account of the dreamer's conscientious self-communion. That might do as an explanation of the first third of the speech, but one of the things that makes Need ambiguous is that he is talking not about one specific situation but about a variety of situations, not all of which could be relevant to Will. It is better, I think, to see the passage as deliberately reticent about Will's material condition, in which the poet is not really interested, as the end of the passage makes clear. It provides a setting for Need's speech, but has no other function. The reticence, however, is functional; because we know that we do not know whether Need's arguments can properly be applied in Will's case, we more easily discern the nature of these arguments, and in particular their limited application.

Need begins by asking:

> Coudestow noght excuse thee as dide the kyng and othere ...
> (B XX 6)

and he offers the orthodox argument that in extreme circumstances "nede ne hath no lawe" and it is permissible to take whatever one requires in order to survive, no matter to whom it belongs. From what I have said above, it will be clear that I do not think we know the answer to Need's opening question. Nor do we know whether it means "Doesn't this argument legitimately apply to you?" or "Couldn't you bring yourself to use this argument for your own benefit, even if it doesn't really apply?" The mention of the king suggests the latter, if anything; for the king's argument is that everything in the realm is his for the asking (B XIX

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1. Cf. above, p. 104.

469-79), and while this would have been assented to, in a general way, by everyone, it is not a principle to be exploited at will, and properly relates only to a national crisis. As M.H. Keen explains: "The expense of campaigning meant that, if war broke out, the king had inevitably to look to his subjects for grants of taxation. There was no real question of their refusing to aid him: it was an acknowledged principle that subjects were bound to aid their ruler when necessity and the common interest demanded."[1] But no recent king, not even Edward I, had found his subjects as willing to hand over their possessions as he would have wished, and certainly not at a time when no crisis threatened. Langland's king, of course, says nothing about these special circumstances; his reading of the common law is flagrantly selective and motivated only by self-interest. Need's question could well be interpreted as inviting Will to adopt the same strategy: seize on a principle that, in theory at least, everyone accepts (i.e. "Need has no law"), and use it, regardless of your actual circumstances, to justify any action that suits you. But I am not arguing that Need's question does mean this; I am arguing that it is ambiguous.

The speech that follows falls naturally into three parts. In the first (lines 6 to 22) it is argued that one has a basic right to the three necessities of life: food (lines 12 to 15), clothing (lines 16 to 17), and drink (lines 18 to 19). This right has priority over all other laws, and thus even permits the desperately needy to cheat or steal if there is no other alternative but to die; these acts would be sinless. All this is true, but to whom exactly does this argument apply? Preeminently to those who have, through no fault of their own, fallen on hard times, and who are genuinely unable to find any other means of self-preservation.

So far the argument has been clear enough, but the second section (lines 23-34) does not have much to do with it, although the references to Spiritus Temperancie in lines 8 and 22 make the transition seem smoother than it really is. Need now claims that Temperance is superior to the other Cardinal Virtues, on the grounds that they easily go wrong; presumably he implies that Temperance cannot, as Schmidt explains

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[1] M.H. Keen, England in the Later Middle Ages (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 8.

(B XX 23n.), although this is not actually stated. Need's case is not very strong, for a variety of reasons. Need does not seem to know what Fortitude really means, although Langland has defined it in the previous passus (B XIX 291-98). It means cheerful endurance; but Need, apparently influenced by the lord of B XIX 462-67, who employs the term to mean brute force, interprets it as an aggressive impulse. Need's criticism of the other two virtues is also open to objection. *Spiritus Iusticie*, he says, will inevitably follow the lead of temporal authority (even if it is unjust). This remark shows the influence of the king's speech that Need referred to earlier, but it has already been made clear that *Spiritus Iusticie* should in fact be unabashed by authority:

> For counteth he no kynges wrathe whan he in court sitteth
> To demen as a domesman adrad was he nevere
> Neither of duc ne of deeth that he ne dide the lawe
>
> (B XIX 306-08).

All Need is saying, therefore, is that very often Justice is not achieved. He makes almost the same point about Prudence, namely that it is very difficult to anticipate everything and one will inevitably make mistakes. It is not clear why these observations should reflect upon the virtues themselves, and of course it would be easy to make exactly the same point about Temperance: people often fail to be temperate. This denigration of other virtues should perhaps make us feel suspicious of Need. Besides, it is not true that "is no vertue bi fer to *Spiritus Temperancie*". The Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity are superior to it, the last of them especially. This has been made clear earlier in the poem (e.g. B I 148-205), and Need will shortly be over-ruled again:

> Lerne to love quod Kynde and leef alle othere
>
> (B XX 208).

However, it is also permissible to take Need's words as a wrong-headed but right-hearted commendation of Temperance, essentially rhetorical and not intended to be too closely examined. Need's arguments may be poor, but he is not arguing for anything vicious and there is no reason to judge the passage as unacceptable.

The third part of the speech could be entitled "In Praise of Need". Again, the link is somewhat factitious; God has been brought in because "*Deus* disponit" and hence man cannot have perfect foresight, and we are now told, casually enough, that Need is close to God because he makes people humble. This is a familiar argument; material well-being has frequently been presented as dangerous:

> Sapience seith the Bok swelleth a mannes soule
> Sapiencia inflat &c
> And richesse right so but if the roote be trewe
>
> (B XII 57-58).

Poverty is much safer:

> Poverte is the firste point that Pride moost hateth
> Thanne is it good by good skile al that agasteth pride
>
> (B XIV 279-80).

Later on in the last passus Kynde will attack Pride with a fearful collection of diseases, apparently with the approval of Conscience and the author. Philosophers sought to be needy, the speaker continues; so did God when he became a man. Need concludes by telling Will not to be ashamed of being needy, since God was "wilfulliche nedy". This third section is, in itself, uncontroversial and fully compatible with the prevailing views expressed elsewhere in the poem.

It is while reading this section that we are likely to feel most attracted towards the speaker. Langland is very skilled at making over-familiar ideas appear fresh again by adopting a naive yet unexceptionable mode of expression:

> And God al his grete joye goostliche he lefte
> And cam and took mankynde and bicam nedy
>
> (B XX 40-41).

Later, he expands Christ's words (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58) to include a recognition of the double aspect of the Crucifixion as apparent defeat and ultimate triumph, lines that seem in this context to hold out an obscure but thrilling promise for the needy:

> Bothe fox and fowel may fle to hole and crepe
> And the fissh hath fyn to flete with to reste
> Ther nede hath ynome me that I moot nede abide
> And suffre sorwes ful soure that shal to joye turne
>
> (B XX 44-47).

He means the world's joy, but the syntax does not prevent us from interpreting it as his own joy, which is the more relevant reading in so far as Need offers him to us as representing ordinary people in desperate circumstances. It is interesting to observe how completely Langland has altered the sense of the gospel speech. That was an exile's lament: even animals have homes, but Christ has not. Here, with the words transferred to the cross, as they often are in the middle ages, the point is almost the opposite: animals can fly or "crepe" or swim, but Christ can only remain where he is and suffer.[1]

As this account shows, the three parts of the speech are essentially unconnected, although they are physically proximate and seem at first sight to share a common theme. They also exemplify three rather different modes of discourse. The first part is casuist and thus limited in its application, although valid within those limits; the second part is a quasi-logical (or rhetorical) commendation of *Spiritus Temperancie*; the third part is more warmly and convincingly expressed, setting the purely material state of need in a spiritual dimension. The syntactic structure of the speech, as noted above, invites us to relate its three parts together; however, it is when we do so that Need's speech becomes unsettling. It is at this point that the "ac"-type juxtaposition becomes operative because the materials resist combination.

Each of the three sections seems to deal with a different kind of poverty. The first, as I have already pointed out, refers preeminently to a condition of extreme adversity to which, we imagine, the sufferer has been reduced by sheer ill-fortune. He is deprived of any normal means of subsistence, and will starve if he does not take whatever comes to hand. The second section does not deal specifically with poverty at all, but the idea of temperance naturally suggests the patient toilers that Langland has often praised elsewhere. He seems to have such people in mind when he writes about *Spiritus Temperancie* in the previous passus:

> He that ete of that seed hadde swich a kynde
> Sholde nevere mete ne meschief make hym to swelle
> Ne sholde no scornere out of skile hym brynge
> Ne wynnynge ne wele of worldliche richesse
> Waste word of ydelnesse ne wikked speche moeve
> Sholde no curious clooth comen on his rugge
> Ne no mete in his mouth that Maister Johan spicede
>
> (B XIX 284-90).

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[1] For a contrasting adaptation of the passage, see the Towneley Crucifixion play, lines 255-60 (George England, ed., *The Towneley Plays*, EETS, E.S. 71 (London: Oxford University Press, 1897), p. 266.

Despite what Need seems to imply, temperance so defined is not obviously related to the most extreme kind of poverty. One cannot refrain from demanding unreasonable wages unless one is able to earn a wage; one cannot resist fancy clothes unless one is able to afford clothes. Temperance is in fact a "reasonable" virtue, associated with the moderation, law-abidingness and social decorum discussed in Chapter II (see especially pp. 67-75). It is only marginally relevant to the kind of poverty presented in the first part of the speech, and virtually in contradiction to the kind presented in the third part, to which I now turn. This is voluntary poverty (cf. line 49), as exemplified by the "philosophres" who renounce wealth and by a God who renounces an eternally blissful existence for the helpless suffering of the cross. To describe such behaviour as temperate would be to abuse language, even granted the wider meaning that the term would have possessed for medieval moralists; it might more naturally be described as intemperate (intemperately virtuous, of course), a dynamic response to an "unreasonable" inner prompting.[1]

The relationship of the second section to its surroundings is a little disharmonious. The relationship of the third section to the first is even more problematic. Taken together, these two legitimate arguments seem to point to an illegitimate conclusion. We are told that it is a good thing, if you are well off, to become needy (the third section); and we are told that "nede ne hath no lawe" and that if you are very needy you may regard any method of acquiring the necessities of life as permissible (the first section). The conclusion that we seem called upon to make, but feel we must not make, is that someone who is currently working honestly for a living should give up his means of subsistence, become needy, and then beg or even steal in order to stay alive. This conclusion would be wholly at odds with everything we read elsewhere in _Piers Plowman_; it is a friar's argument cynically expressed, and is explicitly attacked later in the passus (B XX 230-94). Conscience tells the friars, in effect, to become organized and to work for a "wage", not money in this instance but material necessities (B XX 246-49, cf. B XX 269). It is wrong, he says, to obtain what other men have laboured for (cf. B XX 291-94). Need himself plays a characteristically ambiguous part in this later episode. He argues that since the friars have chosen poverty, they should be merely poor and undertake no spiritual duties (B XX 234-41). He concludes:

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[1] Cf. above, pp. 96-98.

> And sithen freres forsoke the felicite of erthe
> Lat hem be as beggeris or lyue by aungeles foode
> (B XX 240-41).

Conscience, as we have seen, does not take this advice. It is difficult to say whether it is intended flippantly or seriously; in either case Need speaks derisively of the friars, presumably because he thinks that they are not sincerely forsaking the world's goods. If they were, he ought to approve.

It would be incorrect to say that in the earlier episode Need has seriously offered the friar's argument just mentioned. He has not offered it at all; yet the reader is compelled to contemplate it, because Need fails to distinguish between the three kinds of poverty that he refers to during the course of his speech. I repeat that Need's position is essentially ambiguous, because the three parts of his speech are all in their own ways acceptable, and it is only the apparently fortuitous juxtaposition of the three parts that unsettles us. Since the figure of Need remains equivocal even after close analysis, it is not possible to arrive at a conclusive summation of his speech. There is no single statement that can be said to epitomize, however inadequately, his viewpoint, since there is no single viewpoint. These juxtapositions, like all those that I discuss, are not resolvable because we adopt a different mental attitude in order to read each of the three passages that are juxtaposed. In that sense they exemplify different modes of thought.[1]

Yet I ought to say something conclusive about Need's speech, even if it is only to explain why Langland chose to present us with an inexplicable speaker. I am not sure if he could have told us. The last two visions, between which Need appears, portray Christendom as a Utopian social structure, erected by Piers under the guidance of Grace, increasingly beset by the forces of Antichrist. The preparations are elaborate and at first inspire confidence, but this has begun to deteriorate by the time B Passus XIX ends, and in the following passus Antichrist's followers will be largely successful in their attacks on "Unitee". By the end of the poem there does not seem to be a mundane course of action open to Conscience, whose closing statement therefore becomes comprehensible as well as admirable. Although so much space has been devoted to moral prescription in Piers Plowman, the predominant effect of these final passus is to clear from our minds anything we may have learnt and to leave us in a state of self-conscious ignorance. This authorial strategy is puzzling in itself, although it must be admitted that in such a context the wholly ambiguous Need makes a certain amount of sense; our local problem is to that extent resolved but only because it becomes absorbed into a greater one.

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[1] Cf. above, pp. 156-57.

The theme of "need", in a broad sense, is certainly relevant to the final passus of Piers Plowman. Langland himself underlines for us the connexion between this opening speech and the debate about the friars' way of life; that is, the connexion is plainly intentional although it is also puzzling. "Need" in a wider sense (desperation, say, or conscious lack of any mundane resource) is a dominant presence throughout the passus. The beleaguered Conscience and his companions are at length left with no practical course of action and no sense of security, even within "Unitee", which has been breached by Frere Flaterere, also known as Sire Penetrans-domos. When Conscience decides to become a pilgrim and "walken as wide as the world lasteth" (B XX 382), he envisages a life of voluntary poverty, like that espoused by the "philosophres", but what provokes this commitment is itself a desperate position analogous to the state of extreme material poverty discussed by Need in the first part of his speech. The episode, earlier in B Passus XX, in which Will experiences the ravages of Elde and observes how "deeth drogh neigh me" (B XX 200) is a counterpart to the main narrative. Will discovers the traditional truth that death deprives earthly resources of any value they might have seemed to possess, and all he can do is to cry out for help. The reader, also, ends up in a state of conscious deprivation; not material, but intellectual. As I have pointed out, anything we have read earlier, and may have construed as useful advice, fades from our minds as we read the last part of the poem, leaving only a brief and generalized exhortation: "lerne to love". This narrative of disaster amounts to a confession on the author's part; he does not in fact have a far-reaching solution to the ills of society or a short cut to personal salvation up his sleeve. Indeed, the myth of Antichrist implies that the social solution, at least, does not exist: the ruin of Christendom is inevitable. Langland perhaps thought that since a book cannot provide salvation, the next best thing is to make us conscious of the need for salvation, since

> God governeth alle goode vertues
> And Nede is next hym for anoon he meketh
> And as lowe as a lomb for lakkyng that hym nedeth
> (B XX 34-36).

This argument could be extended to justify not only the way the poem ends but the strategy of negative juxtaposition in general.

III

So far as we know the Need episode was written once and never revised. Nevertheless, if we did not recognize Langland's strategy of negative juxtaposition as intentional, we might well explain the mixture of modes and consequent lack of coherence as caused by shoddy or unsympathetic revision. When Need leaps unexpectedly into a critique of the Cardinal Virtues, this looks like interpolated matter that a reviser has incorporated into a text about something else. One might compare the effect of the many interpolations in the Pepys version of the *Ancrene Riwle* (a version from Langland's own time).[1] On page 395b of the manuscript, for instance, we find this:

> *Pernoctauit in oracione*. Wakeþ and biddeþ by niȝth he biddeþ vs. And as he tauȝtt he dude hym seluen boþe in techynge & in dede. And so schulde euerych goode techer do in dede þat he techeþ. and namelich Men of ordre þat þe Mister taken on honde. Ac ich am adradde it fareþ now by many of hem as god seide to þe clerkes of Iewrie þe grete Maisters...[2]

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1. References are to A. Zettersten, ed., *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle: Edited from Magdalene College, Cambridge MS. Pepys 2498*, EETS, No. 274 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

2. Zettersten, pp. 60-61.

The theme of this part of the Ancrene Riwle (M. 144) is that we should be wakeful; but when the Lollardish reviser's eye lights on the statement that Christ taught this both by word and deed, a statement originally present purely for emphasis, he at once thinks of those modern-day teachers who so signally fail to match deeds to words, and hence embarks on one of his many analyses of their behaviour. The relationship between this interpolation and what precedes it is very similar to the relationships between the different sections of Need's speech.

It may be that at this late stage in Langland's career as a writer he could achieve the effect of intrusive revision without actually going through the process of revising. Indelicate revision is, however, a method that Langland used, and it is responsible for many of the negative juxtapositions that appear in the later texts of Piers Plowman. The last example of negative juxtaposition that I want to discuss is the account of the Seven Deadly Sins in the B text. This deservedly famous passage is, at least, a revision of a revision; and to trace Langland's development of the passage from its earliest form is one way of attempting to isolate its peculiar properties. That earliest form is in the Z text, about which some general points need to be made before proceeding.

The Z text of Piers Plowman is much shorter and simpler than the later texts. It consists of two visions whose action is, however, consecutive. The narrative is indeed surprisingly lucid and continuous; surprising, that is, if one is thinking of subsequent versions of the poem. It is also well-proportioned, as if composed by someone who felt his story to be adequate in itself to convey his meaning, and not in need of extensive departures or elaborations.

Yet this narrative, which is presented us to us so plainly and to which, therefore, we are bound to attend, is a perplexing one. In the first vision Will sees a field full of people, clearly representing fourteenth-century society. After some commentary from Holy Church, Will witnesses the emergence of Meed and her company, their dispersal, Meed's trial and expulsion. The vision ends with an alliance being formed between Reason, Conscience and the king. Will wakes and falls asleep instantly, like the dreamer in Deguileville's poems. In the next vision Conscience appears before the people, urging them to seek "seynt Trewthe" (Z V 71). They confess their sins and set off, encountering a palmer, who does not understand what they are looking for. At this point Piers breaks in, and describes an allegorical itinerary. He also offers to guide them, but will not do so until the "halue aker" has been ploughed and sown. The delay is a protracted one, and Piers has labour troubles, temporarily eased by the arrival of Hunger. In a final episode Truth sends a message to Piers, telling him to continue with his agricultural work and including various promises of salvation to the various classes of society. At this point the Z text, as we have it, ends.

The difficulty with this narrative is that it repeatedly hints that the regeneration of society will result in something, namely in eventual arrival at the Tower of Truth. It is cast in the form of an ideal fiction, showing a society grappling with its problems and presumably achieving ultimate success, or possibly ultimate failure. But since Langland's subject at the start, and throughout, is in fact the fourteenth-century society that he knew, it is strictly impossible for anything at all to happen, unless the author is prepared to enter the realms of fantasy. The logic of the narrative leads us to expect that the pilgrimage will lead somewhere, but when we reflect on what Langland is talking about, we realize that it cannot lead anywhere and strictly speaking ought never to have started off. There never was a nationwide revival of the kind Langland describes; since his subject is simply the present state of affairs, there can never really be any change either for better or for worse. Hence the account of the folk when working under Piers really deals with exactly the same state of society as the account given at the start of the vision. The various discourses of Holy Church, Reason, Conscience, Piers, Hunger and Truth (in the Pardon) all apply to this same state of society. The Pardon is presented as something newly received, but in reality its conditional promises have always been available; what is offered to us as a new event with a temporal beginning is only new to the reader. The event does not correspond, or purport to correspond, to a historical event affecting Langland's own society.

In terms of subject matter, the Z text can be seen as a more expansive version of contemporary complaints such as The Simonie.[1] But whereas the latter poem is essentially static, Langland enlivens the former by imposing on it a forward narrative movement. He certainly succeeds, but at the cost of seeming to promise some extraordinary event, which will take place within the narrative of the poem and perhaps outside the poem too. This promise he cannot keep; the end of the narrative, whether or not it really occurs at the point where our text breaks off, must inevitably be inconclusive.

Despite the difficulties, Langland must have been attached to his ideal narrative since it is retained in all the later texts of the poem. He does not, however, continue it. The later parts of the A and B texts do not provide further episodes in this communal adventure; not at least until the last part of the B text, which like the Z text ends inconclusively but more deliberately so. In that part of the later texts that equates to the Z text the author does not so much resolve the problems raised by his ideal fiction as accept them and show himself more conscious of them.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the later accounts of the Seven Deadly Sins. In the Z text, this episode is presented briefly and without much naturalistic detail. We are apparently supposed to interpret it as representing the sincere repentance of all English society. But as no such event has ever occurred or is likely to occur, this piece of narrative is a mere fantasy without any application outside the poem in which it appears. In the later versions Langland has realized that since he cannot finish his ideal fiction, there is no longer much reason to keep it looking ideal. He can include all his meditations on what might really happen if all the members of society went to confession (which they more or less did, although not all at once) without worrying if this casts considerable doubt on the enterprise achieving anything universal. This discovery had already been made in the long seventh passus of the Z text, in which Langland had portrayed life on Piers' half-acre as far from ideal; this passus pleased the author so much that he made very few revisions to it in any of the later texts.

The Sins episode, by contrast, is vastly expanded. In the Z text this episode is so short that I can quote almost all of it. It begins, as the A and B versions do, with the brief confessions of "Pernele proud-herte" and "Lecherye" (Z V 76-90). The rest of the Sins are presented as follows:

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[1] Edited by A. Brandl and O. Zippel in Mittelenglische Sprach- und Literaturproben (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1917), pp. 184-202.

> Enuye ant yre ayther wep faste
> Preyude furst to Pouel ant tho Petur alse
> To geten grace for here gult of God that hem boughte
> That nere wyked wylle ne wrath hem ouerecome
> But sende hem grace to suffre ant synne to lete
> Ant for to louye ant be byloued as Charite wolde
> Thenne com Couetyse knoked ys brest
> A haued a Northfolk nose Y noem ful god hede
> Ant swor by so the yk that synne scholde he lete
> Ant nere wolle to wey ne worstedes make
> Ne morgage manere wyth monye that he haued
> But wenden to Walsingham ant my wyf alse
> Ant bydde the rode of Bromholm brynge vs out of dette
> Thenne gan Gloten to grete ant gret sorwe made
> Al for ys luyther lyf that a lyued hadde
> Ant a voued faste for eny hungur or furste
> Schal nere fysch vpon the fryday defyen in my wombe
> Ar Abstinence myn aunte haue yf me leue
> Ant yut hath he hated me al my lyf tyme
> Sleuthe for sorw ful down y swowe
> Til *Vigilate* ant veyles fette watur at ys eyus
> Flatted hit on ys face ant faste on hym cryed
> Ant seyde War the fro wanhope wolde the to-traye
> Ych am sory of my synnes sey to thyselue
> Ant bete thysylf on thy brest bydde hym of grace
> For his no gult here so gret that his godnesse ne his more
> Thenne sat Sleuthe vp seyned hym faste
> Ant made a vow tofore God for ys foule synne
> Schall no sonenday be thys seuen yer but syknesse yt make
> That Y ne schal do me ar day to the dere chirche
> To here masse ant matynes as Y a monek were
> Schal non ale aftur mete halde me thennes
> Tyl Y haue hensong yherd Y byhote wyle Y lybbe
> Quod ye nan yelde ayeyn yf Y so myche haue
> Al that Y wykedely wan senes Y wyt haued
> Thouȝ me lyflode lake leten y nelle
> Than vch man schal haue hys ar Y hennes wende
> Ant wyth the residue ant the remenaunt by the rode of Chestre
> Seken seynt Trewth therewyth or Y se Rome
> Or James or Jerusalem by Jesus of euene
>
> (Z V 91-130).[1]

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[1] "Quod ye nan" in Z V 124 is meaningless. Rigg-Brewer provide two speculations about what the author originally wrote.

The episode concludes with the appearance of "Robert the robbere" (Z V 131-50), similar except in details to the corresponding lines in the A and B texts, but appearing much more prominent here because the episode as a whole is so much shorter.

In total, the Z version of the episode occupies only seventy-three lines. Each of the sins is allotted a comparable amount of space: Pernele has nine lines, Lecherye four, Enuye and Yre (combined) have six, Couetyse seven, Gloten six, Slewthe twenty-one and Robert twenty. Of this version, as of none of the later ones, one may say that it is elegantly proportioned. Other descriptions also suggest themselves. It is "reasonable", because it is fitting that, as the seven sins are a group of parallel concepts, they should be given roughly parallel treatment. Perhaps it is even fitting that the last of them should receive a little more attention than the others; not much more, but just so as to indicate the conclusion of a sequence. The form of the Z version is also predictable, in the sense that when the reader has seen how the first sin is presented, his expectation of how the rest of the passage might go will prove to be fairly accurate. This is not to imply that what follows is boring, since there is a lively series of variations (joint confessions and so on), but we do not find anything that is disruptively unexpected. We do not, that is, encounter juxtapositions.

In the Z text the confessions are not autobiographical, and the speakers are not very personalized. We learn that Slewthe has difficulty getting to church and that Gloten has long hated abstinence, but these unsurprising details emerge incidentally, since the speeches of the Sins are concerned not with the past but with present concerns; they plead for grace and forgiveness, they delineate the penances they mean to undertake and the new lives they mean to lead. Often the effect is poignant (Robert's speech brings this to a head) but we perceive all the speeches as being sincere and are not made to worry too much about the futures of these impersonal speakers. We recognize the sequence as ideal fiction and assume that Langland has represented a general reformation of the folk.

To present the Sins in action (but in the action of repenting, not sinning) naturally makes the passage much more entertaining than if it had been cast in non-narrative form, as an analytical enumeration of the Sins; the kind of thing we find in the Parson's Tale and in dozens of other medieval texts. I have already argued that the narrative form causes difficulties of its own. But there are difficulties with a non-narrative exposition of the Sins as well. The author may repeatedly inform us of the relevance of the Sins to our own lives, but the chosen method of exposition is constantly hinting to us that the Sins are, so to speak, "over there"; we are invited to take up the attitude of students, and the Sins are the objects of study.

I have already written a good deal about the shortcomings of "reasonable" exposition (e.g. above, pp. 98-114). Fundamental among these, from Langland's point of view, is that exposition necessarily distracts us from our engagement with everyday life and places us in the attitude of a disinterested observer. That is essential if we are to comprehend the reasoning to which we submit; but to comprehend is only the first part of our program. We also have to cease observing and return to the world of human activity that we have been invited to ignore for a while. The temptation that Will succumbs to is to remain fixed in the comfortable attitude of study and not to return at all, or only with great reluctance.

> Than waked I of my wynkyng and wo was withalle
> That I ne hadde slept sadder and yseighen moore
>
> (B V 3-4).

Another temptation is to fail to perceive that the subject of our studies is, in part, ourselves. We take a different view of things when we stand back and try to see our subject from a clear and illuminating perspective. For example, if our subject was the solar system, we would be likely to visualize a large bright sphere with other smaller spheres quite slowly circling it. This image makes manifest certain important points about the solar system, namely that the planets circle the sun and do not get in each other's way. But it is an unreal picture in various respects; inevitably our planets will be too large and bright, our sun too small and dim. Everything will be too close together. Planetary movement will be perceptible and hence much too fast. Most importantly, our point of observation will be somewhere in deep space and not on the the third circle out from the sun. The reason for this relocation is obvious: what we actually see from the earth does not immediately reveal a heliocentric system; on the contrary it strongly suggests a geocentric system. It is to free ourselves from this delusion that we cultivate the other image; but the other image is also a delusion if it makes us forget that we inhabit the earth and cannot really look down on it with sublime detachment. Here my analogy breaks down because this mistake is not very likely; but what if our subject is not the solar system but the Seven Deadly Sins? Even if our text is wholly abstract in its expression and does not ask us explicitly to visualize the Sins, we shall in fact do so, although we may not be aware of this. We may imagine a row of persons, or seven labels in a column, or even seven labels in a ring (although not without prompting, since that would not reflect the text's sequential treatment of the categories). All these visual representations seem to imply that they represent phenomena from which we, as observers, are separated by a considerable intervening space. The groupings make it possible for us to grasp certain salient features of the recommended analysis; for example, the Sins form a completed set of parallel conceptions, no one of them including another but each of them a sub-category of Sin in general. Unfortunately there is also a danger that we shall forget that the topic of discussion does not look like that in real life. It does not look like anything at all; it works invisibly within us and manifests itself through our actions. While our intellects are engaged in tracing out the ingenious patterns of the _Parson's Tale_ or the _Miroir de l'homme_ we may be learning, above all, what a good method this is of escaping from the probably painful self-consciousness that the authors would like to promote.

Langland's aspirations were, ultimately, the same as those of any other writer who delineates the Seven Deadly Sins. He wanted to make us good Christians: to become aware of our own sin, to repent and reform ourselves. In that sense his ideal fiction does represent something; not an event that has already occurred nor one that could ever occur in a final and universal manner, but the potential reformation of his readers. With such aspirations as criteria, the Z version of this passage remains a little too schematic. These confessions represent real confessions, but they are not very like real confessions; we contemplate them but from a distance.

The developments that will appear in later texts are, however, hinted at in the earliest version of the passage, especially in the lines on Couetyse. His Norfolk background particularizes him, and we learn a little about his sharp practice (Z V 100-01). That there is a psychological continuity between the old sinner and the new penitent is expressed by his manner of speech (Z V 99), which does not change although the content of the speech is presumably new. This psychological continuity is troubling; is it really possible, we are bound to ask, that such a man can change his ways so absolutely? His self-chosen penance is also, on closer inspection, worrying. To select a literal pilgrimage as appropriate penance seems to miss the point of Conscience's sermon, and the details (journeying to Walsingham and taking his wife along) disquietingly recall the frivolous travels described in the Prologue (Z Prol. 47-52). This penance seems appropriate not so much to the sin for which it is undergone as to the unaltered thought-forms of the speaker. They will pray, he tells us, to be brought "out of dette" (Z V 103).

Can a leopard change its spots? What chance is there that the same man who has lived a sinful life until now can suddenly live a redeemed one? Medieval people should have been less troubled by such doubts than we are. They believed in miraculous conversions and knew many instances of them. Sin was something done in consequence of a wholly voluntary act of will; it is therefore a separate thing from the personality or psychology or innermost self of the sinner (it is necessary to employ modern terms), neither determined by it nor affecting it. A murderer is a potential saint, and vice versa. Corso dei Donati could have been in Paradise if he had acted differently; Piccarda dei Donati could have been in Hell.[1] It is a dignified view of mankind, grave because it allows no complacency about good works nor excuses for bad ones, uncondescending because the future life of the sinner is not believed to be fatally determined by his past behaviour; he is not an incurable. Yet it is difficult to imagine anyone holding this view except in a very dilute form. Medieval people also knew from common experience that sin is habit-forming and that, in fact, it is much more like a disease than like a series of wrong decisions made in the past that will not make it less likely that today's decision will be right. Dante had never been to Hell, but he did not find it difficult to paint compelling portraits of the damned, whose psychology will prevent them from ever arriving at a state of self-knowledge, so that God's eternal condemnation of them will never come to seem unjust. Dante's enlightened interpretation of Purgatory as a place where sinners undergo a painfully slow process of psychological transformation confirms, what Langland repeatedly tells us, that for the sinner it is not (barring an exceptional infusion of grace) an easy matter to become a good Christian:

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[1] Cf. Purgatorio XXIV 84 (Sapegno ed., II, 269); Purgatorio XXIV 13-15 (Sapegno ed., II, 263).

> Thei ben acombred with coveitise thei konne noght out crepe
> So harde hath avarice yhasped hem togideres
>
> (B I 196-97).

"Synne seweth us evere", says Haukyn despondently (B XIV 323), and he himself suffers from a seemingly incurable "moral plague", as has already been discussed (pp. 46-49).

In Langland's revisions of the Sins episode, this problem of the difficulty of personal reformation becomes increasingly prominent. (Although the theme can be discovered in the Z text, it does not force itself upon our attention unless we are thinking of the later revisions and thus actively looking about for traces of it.) The increased prominence is natural, for Langland is nothing if not an honest poet, and necessary. The final concern of the author is the personal reformation of his readers; they themselves will encounter this problem directly. But it is only a part of the wholesale investigation of sin and repentance that Langland will make of this episode, using the framework outlined in the Z text, which at times threatens to buckle.

The two stages of revision in which I am interested are easy to summarize, although together they constitute an enormous expansion of the episode (73 lines in Z, 206 lines in A, 416 lines in B excluding the prayer of Repentance). In the A text, the confessions of Envye, Coveitise and

Gloton are developed into satiric portraits; the first two give us extended accounts of their unredeemed lives, while Gloton is shown in action, making an abortive attempt to come to confession prior to his successful arrival (whereupon he delivers the same speech as in the Z text). In the A text Wrathe (called Yre in Z for metrical reasons) is accidentally omitted. In the B text the process of expansion is carried further. Wrathe is restored, with a full confession; the confession of Coveitise is further expanded; Sloth receives a full confession. Langland also adds the prayer of Repentance. The first two Sins in the sequence, however, remain unchanged, so that in the B text we have a striking variation in scale, Lechour's confession occupying four lines and Coveitise's confession occupying 111 lines. Whether this disproportion should be regarded as a deliberately chosen effect is, admittedly, open to doubt. One is bound to speculate that the author of the A and B texts always intended to develop all the Sins, but was content, on two occasions, to publish "work in progress". If that is so, one should perhaps regard the C-text rendering of the episode as the final realization of this long-term scheme, since in that rendering the first two Sins are finally expanded. Unfortunately, the decision was taken to "borrow" this material from B Passus XIII, where it originally applied to Haukyn. The reviser takes a discourse on the branches of Sloth from the same source. The effect of these further additions and of some experiments with ordering is very damaging; the dramatic impetus maintained so brilliantly in the A and B texts is dissipated, and because of this the vast accumulation of detail rapidly becomes, what one would least expect after encountering the same material in the B text, tiresome. Genuinely careless and insensitive revision is, it seems, a different thing from the calculated intrusion of new material that we find in the A and B texts, in effect if not in superficial appearance. It is on the B version of the episode, therefore, that I shall concentrate. Langland did "publish" the B version of the passus, after all, and this amounts to admitting that the projected scheme of developing all the Sins, even if there was one, did not really need to be fulfilled. It was less important for him to provide a complete catalogue of all the varieties of sin (the program of a "reasonable" moralist) than to explore the nature of sin and repentance in general; or rather, to make his readers do so.

If one can question whether features of the B-text rendering are intentional by reference to the later version, one can also do so by reference to past versions. The juxtapositions I shall discuss are, in part, created by the insertion of new material. But are they not, in that case, sufficiently explained by their history? The revision is deliberate, but perhaps the modal juxtaposition is something that just happens, an unintended side-effect. Against this I would reply first by repeating the argument of the last paragraph. Genuinely sloppy revision is likely to have a damaging effect on the poem, as it does in the C text; but what I have called indelicate revision does not - very obviously not in the present case. Secondly, I have argued earlier that Langland is a critical reader of his own text, and his revisions more often spring from dissatisfaction with it than from enthusiasm for it.[1] But if one senses that the earlier text is inadequate, one may deliberately make additions to it that are modally dissimilar to the original; it is the new mode of thought that justifies the addition, both revealing and compensating for the limitations of the earlier text. It is this dissatisfied intrusion, like a question-mark in the margin, that I have referred to as indelicate. But it is not accidentally awkward; it is supposed to be provocative. All of the major additions to the Sins episode are questions, forced out of the author and passed on to the reader, about the action outlined in the Z text.

I have described the Z version of the Sins episode as "predictable", because the treatment of the first Sin enables us to forecast correctly how the rest of the passage will be handled. In the B text the treatment of the first two Sins is unchanged, but if the same expectations are aroused they will prove to be false, because we cannot anticipate the much closer scrutiny that the action will later receive. We are introduced to the dramatic situation that will be given seven times over, namely the confession of a Sin, but we do not realize yet how detailed or how varied the treatments will be. That variation in treatment is not, I think, intended to highlight the differences between the seven categories of sin. If anything, it blurs the differences, since a variation in treatment will always make the subject look different even if it is not. It seems to me that in the B text Langland exploits the traditional seven-fold division, using it as a framework in which to place juxtaposed examinations of a single subject: the sinner and his struggles to arrive at a state of grace. Langland, as always, is thinking of his reader. He does not know which sins an individual reader may have committed, and one of the lessons we learn is that it does not much matter. Although sin may manifest itself in different ways, Langland is mainly preoccupied with what all sinners have in common. Hence, while each of the full-length confessions has, so to speak, its own flavour (or rather, its own set of flavours), the lives that are described are not, when analysed, as distinctive as the names of the Sins seem to promise. Wrathe's confession, for instance, deals with various kinds of sinful behaviour. They are, in general, bad-tempered, but we are far from seeing a single sin isolated from its fellows. The pictures are much more intriguing and naturalistic than that; the "possessioners" and friars preaching against each other, or the ill-disciplined convent run by Wrathe's aunt, are plainly infected not by one sin in particular but by a complicated mixture; or, like Haukyn, by sin in general. Again, the confessions of Envye, Coveitise and Sleuthe differ in many ways (I shall consider some of these differences shortly), but the lives of the three characters have surprising resemblances. We might have expected Envye to live in abject poverty and Coveitise to be extremely wealthy, but Langland makes no such contrast.[1] Both lead lives that are mean and sordid, and we have little idea of how much each is worth. But when we read

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[1] Cf. above, p. 116.

> Amonges burgeises have I be biggyng at Londoun

it is Envye who is speaking (B V 128), and it is Coveitise who admits that he is "as hende as hounde is in kichene" (B V 257). Sleuthe, likewise, frequently resembles his predecessors. He tells us:

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[1] Spenser could not resist it; his Avarice rides "Vpon a Camell loaden all with gold", and behind him rides Enuie: "Still as he rode, he gnasht his teeth, to see / Those heapes of golde with griple Couetyse" (The Faerie Queene I.IV.27, 31). References are to Thomas P. Roche, Jr., and C. Patrick O'Donnell, Jr., eds., Edmund Spenser: The Faerie Queene (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) (pp. 85, 86).

> And if I bidde any bedes but if it be in wrathe
> That I telle with my tonge is two myle fro myn herte
>
> (B V 401-02)

and this reminds us of Envye's prayers (B V 103-07), although "wrathe" is the term used (cf. B V 429). Sleuthe's indifference to the sick and the imprisoned (B V 406) recalls Coveitise's attitude to the indigent (B V 254-55), and we discover later that he has been equally acquisitive (B V 456-57). It seems to me that these confessions are all treatments of one thing - the sinful life - but that each approaches this uniform subject from a different point of view. The prayer of Repentaunce is another attempt to further the investigation; but as I have said, it is the reader who is provoked by the juxtapositions into carrying out the investigation (the poet only provides the materials). In the rest of this section I shall briefly point out a few of the juxtaposed viewpoints, but I shall not try to be exhaustive.

> Envye with hevy herte asked after shrifte
> And carefully _mea culpa_ he comsed to shewe
>
> (B V 75-76).

From the moment that Envye "with hevy herte" comes forward, there is a question whether the events we witness should be interpreted optimistically or pessimistically. As Envye's misery is analysed, it becomes clear that it is a complicated mixture of truly repentant sorrow for sin (a good emotion), unhappiness with his state of life (a natural and neutral emotion), and sorrow arising from other people's achievements and good fortune (an evil emotion). If this complexity raises a doubt about whether the penitent is in the right state of mind, at least it cannot be said that he is complacent. The second of the three kinds of sorrow is the dominant one: Envye does not enjoy being envious.

Coveitise has a much harder exterior. Envye begins by saying "I wolde ben yshryve ... and I for shame dorste" (B V 90); Coveitise reveals no such shame.

> I have ben coveitous quod this caytif I biknowe it here
>
> (B V 196).

The past tense foreshadows a confession that is much concerned with sins of former days; the speaker is now old, but he recalls scenes in which he figures as someone younger and less established. There is an element of celebration in this account of youthful enterprise:

> Ne hadde the grace of gyle ygo amonges my ware
> It hadde ben unsold this seven yer so me God helpe
> (B V 203-04).

This is a way of saying that the wares were of poor quality, but there is also a perceptible note of indulgent self-congratulation.

> Rose the Regrater was hir righte name
> She hath holden hukkerye this ellevene wynter
> (B V 222-23).

We already know that Rose is as dishonest as her husband, but regrating or huckstering are not themselves crimes, however dubious their connotations, and if we met this remark in Deloney or Defoe we should think its tone admiring.

If the keynote of Envye's speech is misery, the keynote of this one is energy. Coveitise arrives at his announcement of repentance very precipitously (B V 224-27). I have argued that it looked doubtful even in the Z text; it looks even more doubtful here, and Repentaunce, the confessor, refuses to let Coveitise get away with it. The interrogation that follows soon reveals the state of ignorant indifference in which Coveitise has arrived at confession, and Repentaunce refuses to absolve him at once. Then, in response to this harsh treatment, "weex that sherewe in wanhope and wolde han hanged himself" (B V 279). We understand that Repentaunce succeeds in consoling him (cf. B V 280), but Langland cuts away from the scene so that we hear nothing more from Coveitise himself. This is not surprising, because since he last spoke there has been a striking change in the kind of poetry we are reading. It now looks like this:

> Have mercy in thi mynde and with thi mouth~~e~~ biseche it
> For his mercy is moore than alle hise othere werkes
> *Misericordia eius super omnia opera eius*
> And al the wikkednesse in this world that man myghte werche or thynke

> Nis na moore to the mercy of God than inmiddes the see a gleede
> Omnis iniquitatis quantum ad misericordiam Dei est quasi scintilla in medio maris
> (B V 281-84a).[1]

It is difficult to see how Coveitise would reply to this; but although Langland is capable of writing faultlessly naturalistic dialogue, I doubt whether that is his intention here. Repentaunce's speech is juxtaposed with the hardboiled survey of sin presented by Coveitise, but the characters are not so much talking to each other as to the reader. When we read the speeches of Coveitise, we are shown a world in which sin is so universal that "Sire Hervy" and his wife are capable of leading what seem like full and contented lives without ever ceasing to be sinful or mixing with anyone who is less sinful than themselves. In this world God does not seem very relevant; this is the society that prompts Holy Church's comment:

> Of oother hevene than here holde thei no tale
> (B I 9).

Langland had seen this society with his own eyes; but he also believed in the image that emerges from Repentaunce's weighty lines: the sea of God's mercy, and sin a mere gleed. There is, I think, a difficulty in reconciling these two pictures, because what is envisaged as sin seems to vary so wildly in significance, but the difficulty is not exactly easy to formulate as a question; the juxtaposed ideas belong to such very different modes of thought. This does not mean that the difficulty is unreal, although it does explain why it is so hard to resolve; there is no solution that can be worked out and expressed as a simple statement, thus terminating any further consideration of the matter. It is by passing on such open-ended difficulties to the reader that Langland provokes us into meditating on the nature of sin.

With Gloton's appearance there is an obvious shift in the mode of presentation, since for the first time we are given a picture of the Sin in action, rather than an autobiographical confession. This is appropriate, since there is a psychological discontinuity between the drunken Gloton and the sober, repentant Gloton, which negates the possibility of self-understanding. Gloton's repentant speech is convincing enough; that is, we are very sure he feels repentant:

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[1] I restore the correct ordering of lines 282-82a, which were wrongly printed in Schmidt.

I Gloton quod the gome gilty me yelde
That I have trespased with my tonge I kan noght telle how ofte
Sworen Goddes soule and his sydes and so helpe me God and halidome
Ther no nede was nyne hundred tymes
And overseyen me at my soper and som tyme at Nones
That I Gloton girte it up er I hadde gon a myle
And yspilt that myghte be spared and spended on som hungry
(B V 368-74).

But the speaker is sober, and therefore fatally cut off from his drunken alter ego. Gloton can criticise his own behaviour because it is not altogether his own behaviour. It is someone else's. No-one would swear so much or eat so much if they were so clear about why this behaviour is wrong; the drunken Gloton, however, does not make these reflections. But if this sober and repentant Gloton does not, at the moment of confessing, even understand the desire that led him into a debauch the previous day, this makes him terribly vulnerable to his besetting sin. No amount of present contrition will serve as a defence against future lapses. (Even today it is generally accepted that alcoholics cannot be expected to resist temptation; they can only be taught not to encounter it.)

This episode, therefore, introduces a disturbing new theme: irresponsibility. Gloton wins the indulgent sympathy of both the reader and Repentaunce (B V 379); but the dreadful implication of this indulgence is that Gloton is incontinently sinful. He is bereft even of the dignity of sinning by choice, as Coveitise seems to. In that respect, the image of God in Gloton is even more degraded.

All of this makes the episode sound distressing, but of course it is not. Gloton prior to his debauch is in just the same penitent state of mind as afterwards, which is worrying if we stop and think about it; but such considerations are not encouraged by the touching and comic account of Gloton's decidedly feeble struggle with temptation:

Now bigynneth Gloton for to go to shrifte
And kaireth hym to kirkewarde his coupe to shewe
Ac Beton the Brewestere bad hym good morwe
And asked of hym with that whiderward he wolde
To holy chirche quod he for to here masse

And sithen I wole be shryven and synne na moore
I have good ale gossib quod she Gloton woltow assaye
Hastow quod he any hote spices

(B V 297-304).

This is hardly the kind of comedy that we associate with moral fervour; it is far too gentle. (I think the funniest thing in the exchange is that Gloton's Christian name turns out to be "Gloton".) This is a striking switch of mode on Langland's part; we are being invited to adopt a new mental attitude that permits us to share Gloton's irresponsibility and to take a holiday from the serious business of shrift - it has been very serious in the latter part of the section devoted to Coveitise. But it is not in the end a holiday for us; Langland's exploration would not be complete if he did not make us see sin in its fairest colours. Here there is nothing that can easily be described as evil, except by a preacher; only a natural desire for a rather sloppy sort of togetherness. In the line

Thanne goth Gloton in and grete othes after

(B V 307)

I interpret the "grete othes" as sociable greetings. What Gloton is attracted to is "glad chere" and "good ale", and if he is to be believed the former has priority over the latter:

For love of tales in tavernes into drynke the moore I dyved

(B V 377).

Love of any kind is not something we associate with the other Sins, but Gloton seems, momentarily, to be motivated by a kind of love for his neighbour, or at least love of his neighbour's company.

The reader soon ceases to take such a sentimental view of the tavern scene. We are not given much evidence of real affection; the laughter is accompanied by "louryngе" and impatient shouts of "Lat go the cuppe" (B V 337). The occasional bursts of song (B V 339) suggest that each of the drinkers is ceasing to be aware of his colleagues, except when someone farts too horribly (B V 343-45). The company does not in fact epitomize companionship; as each drinker becomes more drunk he becomes more isolated from his fellows. The suggestion becomes more emphatic when the poet focusses on Gloton getting up to leave:

He myghte neither steppe ne stonde er he his staf hadde
And thanne gan he to go like a glemannes bicche
Som tyme aside and som tyme arere
As whoso leith lynes for to lacche foweles
And whan he drough to the dore thanne dymmed hise eighen
He thrumbled on the thresshfold and threw to the erthe

(B V 346-51).

This is meticulously observed, but it is Langland, not the company, who observes Gloton's wandering motion. He is compared to a solitary figure in line 349, and we infer that he is a solitary figure; he is leaving on his own. Gloton's movements would be neither so observable nor so unhampered if others were making their departure too.

In the end, therefore, we cease to be attracted by the convivial gathering in Beton's alehouse. The sloppy togetherness proves to be a matter of vomiting up "a cawdel in Clementes lappe" (B V 355). But although this may be said to reveal the "true nature" of Gloton's love, it does not altogether cancel the attitude that we were invited to share at the beginning of the episode. Gloton's sin, which brings "al the wo of this world" on his household, is a real sin after all, but this does not mean that what Gloton loves is not, from his own point of view, attractive; and it is difficult to feel outraged if someone loves what is attractive. It seems to me that we are made to adopt, momentarily, the serene perspective of Marco Lombardo:

Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia
  prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla
  che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,
l'anima semplicetta che sa nulla,
  salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,
  volentier torna a ciò che la trastulla.
Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore;
  quivi s'inganna, e dietro ad esso corre,
  se guida o fren non torce suo amore.

(Purgatorio XVI 85-93).[1]

Because Gloton's personality has two states - a drunken one and a sober one - his sincere repentance is psychologically plausible; that is just what we should expect from Gloton in State B. The psychological consistency is not unrelated to the sympathetic but condescending attitude towards the sinner that the reader is made to adopt in this section. If the Sins episode as a whole is seen as a compilation of

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1. Sapegno ed., II, 179.

possible viewpoints, then this one is closest to the viewpoint that predominates in our own society; it is behaviourist, and places little emphasis on free will or, in consequence, on moral culpability. But we must not look for this approach elsewhere. When Sleuthe becomes unexpectedly penitent, for example, this is not because Langland is trying to portray a psychologically complex personality but because there is a juxtaposition of modes, which entails narrative inconsistency.

Sleuthe's arrival at confession is less than half-hearted. The seventh Sin must be there, of course; but from his first querulous remark he makes it plain that he feels entitled to special treatment simply for having turned up:

> I moste sitte seide the segge or ellis sholde I nappe
> (B V 387).

His mechanical efforts to rise to the occasion soon cease:

> He bigan Benedicite with a bolk and his brest knokked
> Raxed and rored and rutte at the laste
> (B V 391-92).

He is woken up, but now pleads ignorance as an excuse for his indifference to the charade:

> If I sholde deye bi this day quod he me list nought to loke
> I kan noght parfitly my Paternoster as the preest it syngeth
> (B V 394-95).[1]

It will later emerge, shockingly, that he is a priest himself. He is no stranger to confession, although he tries to avoid it (B V 410-15), but his attendance has been uniformly futile:

> I have maad avowes fourty and foryete hem on the morwe
> I parfournede nevere penaunce as the preest me highte
> Ne right sory for my synnes yet seye I was I nevere
> (B V 398-400).

Here surely is an incurable if ever there was one. Sleuthe has many defences against efforts to redeem him. He is quick to forget inconvenient facts (B V 423-25). Efforts to help him make him angry, and he cannot comprehend why anyone should be disinterested on his account (B V 430-31). The cynical implication is plain. When he goes to confession he speaks without thinking (B V 415); perhaps Langland means us to think that he makes up the sins he confesses to, thus avoiding any real self-examination.

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[1] I restore Bx "me list" for Schmidt's conjectural "I desire" in line 394.

And yet, after we have heard all this, we witness Sleuthe eagerly crossing himself and making his repentant speech (the same speech, essentially, as in the Z text), and we feel that we are expected to believe that something positive has been achieved; and we do believe it, although not without misgivings. We do so not because the progression is made psychologically convincing but because Sleuthe's final confession perceptibly requires a change of mental attitude on the reader's part. One part of the reader's mind has been assailed by doubts concerning the practical usefulness of confession, but there is another part, which was exercised throughout our reading of the episode in Z, that accepts the ideal picture of sincere repentance as a kind of true myth that expresses what sometimes really happens and what perhaps always happens in an indefinable, spiritual sense, so that the mere act of going to confession can be believed to be mysteriously beneficial even when the sinner's enactment of the penitent's role is unaccompanied by any inner conviction.

I am here making some attempt to resolve this negative juxtaposition into a positive one, which is the mental process that the reader is challenged to undertake. In the prayer of Repentaunce, which Langland tacks on to the episode in the B text, the author himself provides some assistance, by invoking the daring, although traditional, proposition expressed by the words "O felix culpa! O necessarium peccatum Ade!" Narrowly interpreted, the paradox merely alludes to man's sinfulness as a setting for Christ's act of redemption; but Repentaunce's words hint at a way of regarding that sinfulness as itself part of a finally glorious design and thus of perceiving humanity as glorious even in its sinful state.

> Now God quod he that of thi goodnesse gonne the world make
> And of naught madest aught and man moost lik to thiselve
> And sithen suffredest hym to synne a siknesse to us alle
> And al for the beste as I bileve whatevere the Book telleth
> *O felix culpa O necessarium peccatum Ade*
> For thorugh that synne thi sone sent was to this erthe

> And bicam man of a maide mankynde to save
> And madest thiself with thi sone us synfulle yliche
>
> (B V 481-87).

Logically or not, Repentaunce's words seem to me to justify retrospectively the enjoyment with which we sometimes participate in the hearty though corrupt activities of Coveitise and Gloton, and to alter the nature of our concern for those Sins that appear most incurably afflicted by this universal sickness; it becomes more pitying but less despondent. For Langland, who wishes to spur his reader into actively pursuing salvation, despondency is not a state of mind that it is desirable to provoke.

CONCLUSION

In this last account of juxtapositions in Piers Plowman I have felt able to dispense with the detailed examination of the reader's response that I have attempted earlier. In other words, I have pointed to a variety of juxtapositions in the B version of the Sins episode, but have not always tried to describe the kind of effect that each juxtaposition has. After all, the descriptions that I have offered earlier are only attempts to present as accurately as possible my own reactions to Langland's poetry, and it would be wrong to put them forward as anything more than suggestions that ought to be, in the end, ignored; or rather, they can influence one's way of reading, but what happens when one reads cannot be outweighed by anything else. If Langland himself does not prescribe what poem the reader shall make for himself, the critic of Piers Plowman certainly should not do so. Hence, although I have pointed out, for example, the juxtaposition between the sin-dominated world portrayed by Coveitise and Repentaunce's image of sin as a coal being quenched in the sea, I have not tried to suggest what ought to happen in the reader's mind when he tries to achieve a satisfactory reconciliation between such very different pictures. What ought to happen is, I suppose, as much as possible; but that will depend on how deeply the reader is engaged in his reading, and that in turn is mostly a matter of chance.

By ceasing to seem to prescribe what the juxtapositions that I point out shall convey, I hope to reveal, finally, the crudity of my own distinction between negative and positive juxtapositions. Of course there is a difference between our response to the juxtapositions in B Passus XVIII, which I have called positive, and our response to those in Need's speech, which I have called negative, and to one aspect of the difference my distinction alludes. But every juxtaposition differs in effect from all the others, just as every line of verse differs in effect from all the others. It is useful to impose categories, but it is equally useful to recall that they are imposed and not innate.

Besides, it has constantly occurred to me that when I confess that a juxtaposition such as that between the two pictures of sin referred to above is, for me, a negative one (I am conscious of a difficulty I cannot resolve, rather than of a sense of illumination I cannot analyse), it may for someone else be a positive juxtaposition; for someone, that is, who is able to perceive the world portrayed in the speeches of Coveitise as manifesting, in its own way, the goodness of God and of the universe seen from a timeless perspective. For someone granted that kind of exceptional insight, neither juxtapositions in *Piers Plowman* nor anything else in the world will have a negative effect. But Langland was not expecting that kind of audience, and he would, I think, have felt that if his poem provoked nothing more than the consciousness that one lacks insight, it would still be justified as a corrective to the confident sense of security that one feels while negotiating the intricacies of a "reasonable" text. Of course it does provoke a good deal more than that, which is why the verse of *Piers Plowman* is not infrequently recognizable as great poetry.

It is because of that remarkable fact that we remain interested in Langland's work. But I think we must see the poetry as produced accidentally or instinctively. It is sensible to assume the author never read Virgil or Ovid or Chretien de Troyes or Dante; and although he must often have experienced something like the pleasure we gain from reading poetry, from the liturgy for example, he does not seem to have been primarily motivated by the desire to produce a fair and beautiful artefact.

I began this thesis by arguing that Langland's verse demands a response that is rather unlike the quiet receptiveness - not mentally inactive, but not overly troubled, either - with which we contemplate the west front of a great cathedral, or *Veni, creator Spiritus*, or *Parzival*, or the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. That seems to me just the kind of response that we make to other alliterative poems, in which the poet's method is accumulative; that is, he compiles "lists" that create in the reader's mind wonderfully detailed and consistent scenes - a banquet, a battle, or a natural setting. Langland's poem is a compilation too, but the items in his lists are typically much harder to resolve into a single picture, narrative, or statement. In some ways the most obvious analogy is with Abelard's Sic et Non, a collection of juxtaposed authoritative statements that are apparently contradictory. But that is a textbook for students of philosophy, and the contradictions can presumably be resolved (or confirmed) by the exercise of logic. What Langland gives us, in verse that is slow-moving and that encourages us to be reflective, is "lists" of items that are not usually logically contradictory but are in a way even harder to reconcile: the items exist in different thought-worlds, and our mental attitude shifts accordingly as we read. They do have something to do with each other, if only because we were able to adopt both mental attitudes, but our meditation on this sequence of experiences is likely to be open-ended and to become as much about ourselves and our own beliefs as about the text that provoked it.

I do not think that Langland would have been able to think of himself as a poet in the sense that we give to that term. Consequently, when considering why Langland wrote as he did, I have found it more productive to dwell on problems that we know he did face, not as a poet but as a Christian moralist. I have argued that he was aware of certain shortcomings in the "reasonable" approach to attacking sin and promoting salvation; in particular, he was acutely conscious of how the audience responds to such discourse. His own method, as outlined above, is instinctively "unreasonable"; it has to be, because it is intended to have an effect on the reader that "reasonable" discourse is not especially likely to have. The latter is always asking us to say: "How true!" but we can easily make that response without feeling inspired to seek salvation, which is the final aim shared by every moralist. Lay the book aside, and seek salvation; "Lerne to love quod Kynde and leef alle othere" (B XX 208).

Langland's juxtapositional method is an attempt to provoke some such reaction; or at least, it results from having that final aim very much in mind. It often produces great poetry, but I am not sure whether it was bound to; whether, that is, this exceptionally subtle and sensitive approach to a moralist's problem amounts to nothing less than a personal re-invention of what we recognize as poetry. The power to break out of one mode of thought and switch to another is certainly one of the intellectual powers that we allude to when we use terms like "imagination" or "creativity", and perhaps the most fundamental. But I doubt whether "imagination" or "creativity" or "poetry" bear the kind of meaning that can be expressed as a definition, so I am afraid that this question is unanswerable.

However, if poetry is our god, it is entirely natural that we should ask unanswerable questions about it, although clearly Langland would not approve, and the receptive reader of Piers Plowman might come to feel guilty about it. It is interesting to speculate about

> why that oon theef on the cros creaunt hym yald
> Rather than that oother theef
>
> (B XII 214-15)

but it is probably not the most immediate concern, which is, no doubt, to emulate the "oon theef".

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