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THE IMAGERY AND DICTION OF *THE PEARL*: TOWARD AN INTERPRETATION

By WENDELL STACY JOHNSON

Since its first publication in 1864 the fourteenth century poem *The Pearl* has been the subject of considerable research, theorizing, and dispute: problems of textual emendation, of origin, sources, and above all of symbolic interpretation have engaged and sometimes vexed scholars for these many years, not always with clearly positive results. A record of such engagements and vexations is given by René Wellek in his study of the poem, and Professor Wellek concludes:

> All these debates, we feel, about dialect, authorship, elegy versus allegory, theology, symbolism, etc., though they have been almost the only occupation of scholarship, say very little about the Pearl as a work of art. We may grant that a rigid conception of the poem has cleared the way for an artistic appreciation, but the actual study of the artistic value of the poem is still in its beginnings.[1]

The difficulty of this, we are tempted to reply, is that there is in fact no " rigid conception " yet, as Professor Wellek's own survey of scholarship indicates. But the intention of these remarks is certainly a good one, and it may be that they do point in the right direction. For it proves almost impossible to investigate the artistic value of the poem without turning back to the subject of meaning. What, after all, is the poetic art other than meaning—pure sound or visual " decoration " or an inconceivable manner without matter? And the very investigation of what might be called " artistic " elements in the poem leads, perhaps on a new and better path, to the central problem of symbolism and sense, the problem of interpretation.

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[1] "The Pearl: An Interpretation of the Middle English Poem," in *Studies in English* (Prague, Charles University, 1933), IV, 28.

Interpretations previously made can be summed up briefly. Such early scholars as Sir Israel Gollancz, Carleton Brown and C. G. Osgood agree in seeing the poem as primarily, if not entirely, elegiac, but this idea is attacked by W. H. Schofield, who, in two articles, insists upon its allegorical nature.[2] The Schofield position is maintained by most subsequent writers on the subject, and the fantastic and wholly unwarranted biographies of the poet built up by Gollancz and others to explain his relationship with the Pearl-maiden are repudiated at the same time that new and sometimes equally unwarranted readings of the allegory are evolved and published. W. H. Garrett takes the poem to be an allegorical representation of the Eucharist;[3] Jefferson B. Fletcher sees the pearl as a symbol of innocence and of the Virgin Mary, but considers it possible for the poem to be at once an allegory and an elegy;[4] and according to Sister Mary Madaleva the pearl is the poet's own soul, and the poet is a mystic writing his own spiritual autobiography.[5] There are other points of view: W. K. Greene believes that the parable of the vineyard workers represents the poet's major theme and that the pearl-maiden is simply a poetic device.[6] René Wellek suggests that the poem's symbolism is subtle and shifting, the pearl coming to represent not only a single pure maiden but the whole realm of heaven.[7] Not inconsistent with this, there is the moderate view expressed by J. P. Oakden, who holds that the poem is about a real child who gains heaven " by innocence through the rite of baptism," and that this innocence is the pearl of great price which she advises the poet to buy: as *Purity*, probably by the same author, has it, " through shrift and penance [the sinner] may become a pearl, [that is, he may] regain his former innocence." [8] Finally, a recent note by D. W. Robertson, Jr. discusses the symbolism of the pearl on four levels, taking it to represent both innocence and the kingdom of heaven.[9] These last three views seem most reasonable, if only on the grounds of the close reading of text which Professor Wellek urges.

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[2] See I. Gollancz. ed. (London, 1891); Carleton Brown, " The Author of the Pearl . . .," *PMLA*, XIX (1904), 115-153; C. G. Osgood ed. (Boston, 1906); and W. H. Schofield, " The Nature and Fabric of the Pearl," *PMLA*, XIX (1904), 154-215.

[3] *The Pearl: An Interpretation,* University of Washington Publications in English, IV, 1 (Seattle, 1918).

[4] *JEGP*, XX (1921), 1-21.

[5] *Pearl: A Study in Spiritual Dryness* (New York, Appleton, 1925).

[6] " The Pearl: A New Interpretation," *PMLA*, XL (1925), 814-827.

This paper, while largely in agreement with the expressed views of Professors Wellek, Oakden, and Robertson, attempts to go further in the examination of specific details than their remarks do, and at the same time to avoid forcing the details into a too esoteric allegory. The result is an emphasis upon a ubiquitous sense of contrast between the nature of heaven and the nature of earth, the revelation of which seems, for our present reading, to be the poem's main purpose. This new emphasis—not a complete interpretation, but the basis for one—depends primarily upon internal evidence, upon a significant imagery and a closely related form and plot.

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The plot situation of *The Pearl* is a perfectly familiar one, for the poem is basically a dream or vision allegory in the popular medieval tradition. We are introduced to our poet's subject in the opening stanza, an apostrophe to the pearl which he has lost " in an *erbere*," in a garden; [10] and the next two stanzas elaborate on this obviously symbolic gem's virtues, as well as the poet's pain in his loss. Then the story begins:

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[7] In *Studies in English*, IV, 17-28.

[8] *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English: A Survey of the Traditions* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1935), p. 75.

[9] The " Heresy " of *The Pearl*," MLN, LXV (1950), 152-154. Robertson points out that the parable of the vineyard is not heretically misinterpreted, defending the *Pearl* poet's consistent orthodoxy.

[10] The text used is that of C. G. Osgood. Quotations from it are identified simply by line numbers in parentheses.

on a certain festal day in August, on the very spot where the pearl was lost, our narrator falls into a sleep as he is complaining of his bereavement. Quickly his spirit " sprang in space " (IV): and so we enter the second and central part of the poem. The poet wanders in a paradise of crystal and jewels, refreshed by the beauty of this magical realm in which he finds himself, until he comes to a stream, its banks paved with precious stones. It appears that even in paradise there is discontent, for the dreamer longs to cross over to the other side of the water, where the land is even more bright and fair. At this point his desire is only increased by the discovery of a maiden standing on the other side, a pure maiden all in white, crowned and decked with pearls, whom he identifies as his real pearl, the very subject of his plaint. Now at least one level of allegory is clarified, whether the pearly maiden is only a literal person or another symbol. The pearl recognizes the poet (as her "jeweler"), but she chides him for his sorrow: if he loved her, he would rejoice in her present state, although they are parted. She counsels him, if he wishes to join her in that place across the river, to wait patiently, with faith—which he avows, faith in Christ, Mary and John, now, rather than in the maiden, as " grounde of alle my blysse." The maiden expounds the blissfulness of her present state, calling herself bride of the Lamb, and Queen. At this the dreamer is surprised. Is not Mary the Queen of Heaven? Yes, replies the maiden, she is Queen of Courtesy; but there are many Queens here where all are noble. And if this seems strange, it is because the standards of eternity are not those of the temporal world: there is no quarrel between more or less in heaven. St. Matthew's story of the workmen in the vineyard illustrates this contrast between the judgments of heaven and those of earth, the difference between God's grace (manifest in the sacrifice of Christ) and man's justice. Jesus called the children, the pure and spotless, to him; and so this child-like maiden is one of his band of brides in the New Jerusalem. The new city is itself a pure and divinely perfect structure, and it contrasts with the old Jerusalem as God's eternal grace does with man's temporal standards, and as the pearl in her present state does with the mortal " rose " which she was (on earth). The dreamer is fascinated by all that he is told, and particularly by the idea of the new city, the abode of the Lamb, which he longs to see. He is allowed to gaze upon it briefly, then, from across the river; and he describes this Jerusalem in the imagery of St. John's Apocalypse, as a city of precious jewels, with a throng of virgins proceeding toward the throne of the Lamb Himself, the throne surrounded by Angels and Elders singing His praises. This ecstatic and genuinely moving descriptive passage, the climax of the vision, is broken off as the poet returns to the mound where he has fallen asleep. Then, still under the effect of his experience, he declares his fealty to the God " þat, in þe forme of bred & wyn,/ be preste vus scheweȝ vch a daye " (1209-1210).

This synopsis suggests the three-fold division of the poem into a very brief introduction, in the garden (five stanzas); a major section, the vision (some eighteen times as long); and a (five stanza) conclusion. The consistent use of the same word to end five (in one case six) consecutive stanzas, along with the linking device of *concatenatio*, or the repetition, in each stanza's first line, of this last word from the preceeding stanza, provides a tightly constructed form of twenty five-stanza groups.[11] The stanzas are unified, as well as distinguished, by this form, which is complementary to a three-fold division of the matter. In discussing the imagery and diction of *The Pearl* it will often be necessary to allude to both the work's formal structure and its thematic structure, in an effort to show how all these elements unite to make a whole. For this is a poem whose nature is at least largely revealed by itself: it is not so much a *secret* allegory as a work of art in which art and meaning are one.

As the following paragraphs are intended to show, the imagery of the poem can in the main be divided into two groups: on the one hand, images out of the world of growing things, images of the garden and the vineyard which are associated with the dust of the earth; on the other, images of light and of brilliant, light-reflecting, gems, free of any spot (dust) and associated with whiteness and with emblems of royalty. These two groups are directly and explicitly opposed to each other, sometimes in the manner of an obvious symbolism and sometimes only in implied contrasts. In either case the opposition is significant both for the sake of meaning and for its aesthetic effect, which contributes to the meaning.

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[11] See Osgood on stanza construction, in the introduction to his edition.

The first five stanzas, which constitute the first stanza group and the first " plot " division, in the *erbere*, deserve a good deal of attention because they introduce the work's basic imagery and because they offer certain significant verbal problems. We begin with the description of the pearl " plesaunte to prynces paye " (this phrase will be echoed and will take on great importance at the end) : it is small, round, smooth, and *reken*, noble or radiant. Here, as throughout the poem, there is conscious ambiguity, for ideas of both radiance and nobility are to be attached to the gem. The first eight lines of this opening stanza, describing the unique and precious object, are in dramatic contrast with the final four lines (the final four lines are indented, as in all stanzas, by Gollancz), which tell of the pearl's falling into the common earth. The speaker pines for the loss of " þat pryuy perle wythouten spot "; and the idea of purity (" wythouten spot " = without blemish) is strikingly opposed to that of the pearl's being now in the (pearl-blemishing) ground. The possibility of an ambiguous reading, again, associates the gem's disappearance with its purity: " wythouten spot " could also mean without location or place. *Spot* in the rest of this stanza group has only this meaning. The phrase is an important one, since *spot* is the key word for this first part of the poem, occurring in the first and last line of the next four stanzas; further, it represents the major and recurrent theme of unearthly purity and brilliance. But it gives some difficulty: the poet, in III, speaks of *þat spot* where the gem was lost, where spices and brilliant flowers must bloom, " þer such rycheȝ to rot is runne " (26) ; and if one accepts the reading " wythouten spot " = without place, then it is paradoxical that the pearl's decay should enrich *this spot*. However, the paradox becomes a quite meaningful one for us if we consider that the poet's phrase is intended to signify what the poet *as a dramatic figure* could not know before the vision, and that the very opposition of these two ideas, the expressed one of the pearl's decay in the earth and the implied one of its being without worldly location, is a first aspect of the contrast upon which the poem's construction and meaning depend.

To elaborate upon the imagery of the first several stanzas: we have first the clear contrast of a perfect gem with the ground of a garden, the unique and individual with the common, the pure and shining with the literally earthly. The pearl's " color " is " clad in clot ": " O moul, þou marreȝ a myry iuele " (22-23); and so mould and clay stain the jewel's bright beauty. The products of this earth are, themselves, beautiful: in this harvest season (" Quen corne is coruen wyth crokeȝ kene "—40) the garden spot is covered with lovely flowers giving off a fair fragrance. Yet, even in the midst of this beauty, the poet is not comforted, but longs for the precious jewel he has lost. Earth at its best—an earth which that jewel's decay must, as the bereft man supposes, enrich—offers no loveliness to take the place of the pearl. The images of vegetable life—flowers and fruits and herbs, all growing things—pale beside the image of perfectly pure and simple sphere, the gem *wythouten spot.* For the symbols of life are also those of death: the garden mound is like a grave, the pearl's grave. " Vch gresse mot grow of grayneȝ dede " (31). And the minor fact that this is harvest season adds to a sense of the life-death cycle in this place.

So, using these images of unearthly purity and of earthly nature, the poet must imagine that his spotless gem is mortal, that it returns to the common earth, and he grieves for its destruction in spite of Christian teaching, " þaȝ kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned " (another ambiguity: *kynde* = both nature and kindness, or mercy). While faith points beyond, the poet's understanding, in this first part, is limited to the spot, to earth which is a grave. The rest of the poem is an extending of this vision (through *a* vision) toward its outer limits, to include and reconcile this world and another world.

Falling into a deep slumber, the poet remains on the flower-covered grave, but his spirit springs forth *from the spot* into space. The region where, by God's grace, he finds himself—" I ne wyste *in þis worlde* quere þat hit wace "—is fantastically bright and gorgeous, a wonderland which is much more intriguing to all the senses than the beautiful *erbere* where he has been. The key word in the second stanza-group is *dubbement, splendor,* with the participial form meaning *arrayed,* and the imagery presents transfigured phenomena, the world arrayed in a strange glory: all is shining, shimmering, gleaming, glowing, flaming, bright; the colors have an incredible brilliance; and the very gravel on the ground is pearl. The effect which the poet describes is that of supremely intense light cast upon all natural objects, the basic image being one of *reflected* brilliance. The dreamer sees the *array,* the clothing of that very world he has left, the world of " þe playn, þe plontteȝ þe spyse, þe pereȝ/ & raweȝ & randeȝ " (104-105), by supernal light. Compared with this, natural light is dim: " þe sunnebemeȝ bot blo & blynde/ In respecte of þat adubbement " (84). At last, when the wandering dreamer approaches a river, the passage reaches a climax: " I wan to a water by schore þat schereȝ;/ Lorde, dere watȝ hit adubbement! " (107-108). Certainly the river is extraordinary enough. It flows with a kind of music, and it is paved with glowing jewels. According to Howard Rollin Patch, this " river barrier suggests something of the Latin visions [of the other world], and the jewels in the stream and the fragrant fruit remind one of the Garden of Eden. . . ." [12] The land on this side of the river, that is, bears a considerable resemblance to the Earthly Paradise of the medieval accounts. And the stream as a barrier *and* a way to heaven is a familiar means of separating the Earthly and the Celestial lands. But, as both C. G. Osgood and Professor Patch point out, the *Pearl* poet's treatment of these motifs is not entirely a stock treatment; it is original in several details as well as in omissions of traditional accessories to the vision of paradise.[13] Water could properly be associated with the natural world, with its fertility and its cyclical nature; but this river, shining bright and paved with gems, is obviously allied, too, with the other images, those of spotless brilliance. The river of gems is a common part of the literary vision, but it fits significantly into the scheme of this uncommonly subtle poem.

On this side of the stream is a natural land of fruits and plants and hedgerows, of wonderful birds: a land in which nature is transformed by light, but in which the source of light does not appear. On the other side is the even more wonderful realm of light itself. The more he follows the stream, the more is the dreamer's joy, and yet the more he longs to pass over to the other side. *More* is repeated until the word has an almost hypnotic effect in establishing the intensity of the desire. To live on this side of the water is to experience this ever-increasing desire to cross into greater beauty, greater brightness: the feeling is, in fact, the mystic's wish for union with the perfect, the desire to attain to a state of perfection. That highest state is conceived of aesthetically as pure light; psychologically as *royal*:

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[12] *The Other World* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 190.

[13] See Patch's chapter on Allegory, pp. 175-229.

> I seȝ byȝonde þat myry mere
> A crystal clyffe ful relusaunt;
> Mony ryal ray con fro hit rere. (158-160).

In these, the grandest terms he can command, the poet describes the apparently perfect place.

Beneath these " royal rays " sits a bright maiden, like ivory and dressed in pure white, glowing as a light, and " as glysnande golde." This maiden, whom the dreamer quickly recognizes, is explicitly identified as his pearl, and she is appropriately adorned with pearls. In the section which describes her, the fourth, *pyȝt* (adorned) is the key word; and the adornment is plainly significant. The ideas of whiteness, purity, and light are associated with her nature, as with the pearls. Now *perle* has taken on several senses: the appropriate decoration, the person, and the " wonder perle wythouten wemme / In myddeȝ her breste " (221-222), obviously a symbol, to be associated with all the lesser pearls and with the pearl-maiden. The poem has passed from the vision of nature arrayed in (reflecting) light to one of a land and a person set in gems and adorned by an " inner " brightness, of which gem and crown are radiant symbols.

When he speaks to her, the bereaved man repeats the theme of his opening lines: he has lost this very pearl, and is now a " joyleȝ juelere." The maiden replies that he is mistaken, and she proceeds to explain why. Here, in her contrast between the earth-flower and vision-jewel sets of images, we come to a crucial point in the poem's symbolism. The pearl calls this *cofer,* in which she now dwells, a " gardyn gracios gaye " (260) ; and the symbolic contrast between earthly garden and (heavenly) jewel seems to break down with this fusion. But the similarity between *erbere* and *gardyn* is consciously utilized here. The emphasis is to be put upon *this* garden (as opposed to the first one in the poem) which is a *coffer,* and hardly garden-like in any literal sense: not an earthly flower—or fruit—garden but a place of gems (*cofer* = jewel case or strongbox) quite unlike the normal kind. It may seem to be forcing a point to declare for a mild irony in the word, but the descriptions of the land across the river, as well as the conjunction of *cofer* and *gardyn,* indicate at least that there is an important distinction to be made between the garden of flowers and the garden of jewels. The maiden's declaration that she was on earth *not* a pearl, but a perishable flower, only strengthens and clarifies the distinction. It is through the poet's imagination that the mortal maiden has seemed to be a gem: the true pearl could not, did not, decay; but the rose, part of the garden-grave world, did. What the poet commenced by imagining—the perfection of his loved one—comes, in the vision, to be true. And so we see that the *erbere* world is one where perfection is an appearance only, while this vision-land, according to the maiden, is the perfect gem's rightful home.

If the earth-heaven contrast is imagined here in the images of the flower and the pearl, it is also implied in the closely associated imagery of natural or reflected light and the brilliance of this land. Only through the nature of that *kyste* or coffer did the rose become more than a reflection of light—become a part of the realm of light, a pearl. Earth's flowering, through *kynde* (both the heavenly *nature* and *kindness*), is proved (" put in pref ") a " perle of prys " (272). (Again in the same stanza, *kynde* is used to mean both *grateful* or *loving* and *natural:* if you complain about your own pearl's being proved truly a pearl, says the maiden, then " þou art no kynde jueler.") Thus the distinction between the *erbere* and the land of light and of brilliant gems is made explicit, with some implied transition from one to the other. Plainly, the antithesis is one between mundane and spiritual realms. The spiritual is infinitely brighter and better. And the jeweler who can rightly judge the nature and the value of a gem (as the poet has failed to do) will see this, not literally but by faith.

Further carrying out the contrast, the poem now makes clear a difference between the earthly body and the soul in that realm across the river:

> þou wylneȝ ouer þys water to weue;
> Er moste þou ceuer to oþer counsayl;
> þy corse in clot mot calder keue;
> For hit watȝ forgarte at paradys greue (318-321)

The significance of " this water " is intensified by its association with the water imagery of later sections. Now, however, the emphasis is upon the two lands, and the idea is extended in the seventh stanza grouping, where the key word is *blysse,* and the repeated phrase (in the last line of each stanza) *grounde of alle my blysse.* The earthly maiden (the pearl or rose) has been the ground of the poet's bliss; now her heavenly estate is this *ground.* So, as they can help him to be with her in this estate, are the mercy of Christ, of the Virgin, and of St. John. And, on a higher plane, she espouses " My Lorde þe Lamb " as the unearthly " rote and grounde of alle my blysse " (420). *Blysse* here suggests not only joy but also blessedness. The mortal and divine *grounds* represent the two realms, the one of *tok* and *ston* in which man is " bot mol," only dust (and where joy's grounds are mortal), and the one in which the (transfigured) maiden, whose blessedness is grounded in Christ, can be made the Bride of the Lamb and be crowned a queen.

The pearl can be crowned because of divine *cortayse,* graciousness (or simply grace, theologically speaking), of which quality the blessed Virgin is the epitome. This is appropriate, this and the association of *cortayse* with the crown and symbols of royalty pertaining to the pearl, in view of the word's origin and connotation: it describes the virtue of the court, of royalty (here, in conferring royalty). And so the images of this (eighth) part are those of nobility and rank; an importance of all the body's parts in the unity of the body (Christ) makes each part noble. The psychological effect of the idea of royalty must be a great one for the mediaeval poet. Royalty is consistently associated with his images of light and jewelry, and we recall the natural association in the opening phrase " Perle plesaunte to Prynces paye," as we come to think of Christ as a Prince.

The image-structure thus far represents a progression toward the fuller understanding of this symbolic picture: the contrasting impressions of earth and of another place associated with jewelry, brightness, royalty. Now a new aspect of the contrast between these image groups is introduced with Matthew's parable of the vineyard workers. In this, the ninth group of stanzas, bodily labor is opposed to royal reward, and earthly time to divine timelessness. *Date* is used in the senses of *position, limit* (" þer is no date of hys goodnesse "—493), *season, goal, time.* In God's mercy there is no limit, time, or season (the rich ambiguity of the word here is exploited by the whole passage), while human judgment is based upon these earthly limits. In the vineyard, a place of vegetation comparable with the garden-grave, the sense of *more* is possible (the desire for more reward or for more bliss and beauty, as in the land just this side of the river), but in the divine sense the *more* is freely given: not limited by the standard of time, but demanded by the quality of mercy, which is infinite. So

> Queþersoeuer he dele nesch oþer harde,
> He laueȝ hys gyfteȝ as water of dyche,
> Oþer goteȝ of golf þat neuer charde (606-608).

God's mercy must always be enough.

Innoghe is the key word in the eleventh stanza-group. The water imagery, picturing divine grace as a never-exhausted fountain, is reinforced with the traditional symbols of the water and the blood: grace given in the form of baptism and of the saving sacrifice. Through baptism the maiden has attained grace:

> Innoghe of grace hatȝ innocent;
> As sone as þay arn borne, by lyne
> In þe water of baptem þay dyssente;
> Þen arne þay boroȝt into þe vyne (625-628).

For

> Innoghe þer wax out of þat welle,
> Blod & water of brode wounde:

> þe blod vus boȝt fro bale of helle,
> & delyuered vus of þe deth secounde;
> þe water is baptem, þe soþe to telle,
> þat folȝed þe glayue so grymly grounde,
> þat wascheȝ away þe gylteȝ felle
> þat Adam wythinne deth vus drounde (649-656).

When we consider the emphasis upon baptism in this passage, a possible symbolic importance of the water flowing before the crystal cliff comes to mind; the river may be associated with the baptismal water, and thus not only mark the boundary between the land of *reflected* light (the Earthly Paradise) and heaven, but also represent, in a sense, the means of passing even into the realm of light. This river, we see later, is apparently identified with the river of the water of life which flows from the Lamb's throne. And of course the water of life is represented by the water of baptism. Further, there is some precedent for this interpretation. While the river barrier between earth and heaven is a familiar motif in mediaeval and classical lore, the application of Hebrew symbolism to the Styx is neither rare nor surprising: for one example, in the *Pelerinage de Vie Humaine*, Guillaume de Guileville, using the dream framework, sees the very heavenly Jerusalem which our dreamer is to see, and on his way toward it he must be plunged into the " River of Baptism." [14] Finally, the water as a symbol for baptism is perfectly consistent with later details and with the whole sense of the poem, and, according to this reading, would be the appropriate passage from an earthly to a heavenly state.

By the means of grace—Christ's sacrifice and the subsequent salvation of the baptized—all is made right, and men are justified. *Ryȝt* is used in both the sense of *privilege* and *justice* in the twelfth group: compare " þe innosent is ay saue by ryȝte " and " by innocens & not by ryȝt." The state of perfection symbolized by the pearl of great price could be attained either by simple baptism of the child or by the virtue of the man who is faithful in confession and in receiving communion. The water and blood are closely associated, then, with baptism and eucharist. But *perfection* is a loose term as used here. Professor Oakden speaks of a sinner's regaining *innocence* when he calls attention to the significant first and second stanzas of the thirteenth group, where the maiden first says that no one can come to Christ who is not as morally spotless as a child, and then identifies her own child-like spotlessness—or innocence—as the biblical pearl of great price.[15] But neither word is entirely satisfactory, due to a shift in the symbolism in these stanzas. Because of this shift and because these are crucial lines for interpretation, the only lines which specifically provide meaning for the symbol of the pearl, we may as well look at them a little more carefully. The maiden reminds us that Jesus would have us child-like, " Harmleȝ, trwe, & vndefylde, / Wythouten mote oþer mascle of sulpande synne " (724-725). To the person with these qualities (or negatives!) the gate of heaven is unbarred; and there, in heaven, is the *blys* which the biblical jeweler sought when he sold all his goods to purchase a spotless pearl: for heaven is like that pearl,

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[14] Patch, p. 188.

> Wemleȝ, clene, & clere
> & endeleȝ rounde, & blyþe of mode,
> & commune to alle þat ryȝtwys were (737-739).

And, the maiden continues, the Lamb set it, this pearl, in her breast. Depending on whether the antecedent of *hit* (in lines 737, 740, and 742) is the symbolic pearl of great price or literally the realm of heaven—and it could be either—the large pearl is symbolically or actually heaven itself. So, when she bids the " jewler " to " porchase þy perle maskelles," the pearl maiden is telling him to buy heaven, the pearl of great price. If she has heaven set in her own breast, it is because a part of heaven is *heavenliness*.[16] Obviously, this purity, perfection, innocence, whatever else the quality can be called, is available to a grown man as well as to the baptized innocent, although it is equated, since the pearl herself seems to be a child, with the spotlessness of childhood. It is common to all who are

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[15] Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry* . . ., p. 75.

[16] According to Robertson (" The Pearl As A Symbol," *MLN*, LXV [1950], 155-161), the pearl may represent both the soul that attains innocence, or the freedom from sin, and life in the Celestial City.

ryȝtwys, righteous, or set right, including both the innocent, who are baptized, and shriven sinners. The pearl means, then, both heaven and the personal freedom from sin which is salvation and heaven within and which reflects the heavenly nature. Both child and adult are saved by *ryȝt*, one by *privilege* and the other by *righteousness*; and the two senses are included in *ryȝtwys*, so that the pearl of heavenliness belongs to both.

The objection that, from an earthly point of view, there must be only one bride and queen, brings about a final and climactic reiteration of the earth-heaven contrast. When the poet calls her *makeleȝ* as well as *maskelleȝ*, the maiden takes the word to mean *mateless* rather than *matchless*, and she replies that she is not without mate: she is one of the bride's of the Lamb, described by St. John's Apocalypse, in the New Jerusalem. Then she speaks of the crucifixion of her Lamb in the language of courtly romance (" in Jerusalem watȝ my Lemman slayn ") , describing Him " as trwe as ston," a phrase which recalls the symbolic overtones of jewel-stone imagery in the poem. And she compares this old Jerusalem, in which the most exalted was humbled, to the new Jerusalem, where all, like the Lamb, are spotless white, where there can be no such thing as negative, and no strife, all being " in honour more & neuer þe lesse " (852) . In the new city of God there is no sense of lesser degree, and this is emphasized by the repetition of the word *less* (in stanza-group XV) .

> " Lasse of blysse may non vus bryng
> þat beren þys perle vpon oure bereste,
> For þay of mote couþe neuer mynge,
> Of spotless perleȝ þat beren þe creste " (853-856) .[17]

The city, of course, is the heaven we have been told about before, the city symbolized by the pearl. In it everyone has the qualities of the gem: all the maidens in the train of the Lamb are like him in hue (white) , are individual pearls (as contrasted with the clay of their earthly corpses), and " vchoneȝ blysse is breme and beste,/ & neuer oneȝ honour ȝet neuer þe les " (863-864) . In a psychological sense, theirs is a new world. So, externally, the flawless Jerusalem is not a physical city like the old one.

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[17] Note that Osgood believes this passage to be an interpolation. See his edition, p. xlvi.

The dreamer can hardly understand what is meant by Jerusalem, and, still confused, asks about the difference between this abode of the Lamb and the old Jerusalem of the Jews. " I am bot mokke & mul among,/ & þou so ryche a reken rose." The distinction between his own earthbound nature and her *reken* one is the reason for his obtuseness, for it is hardly easy to ascend at once from an earthly to a clearer understanding. Although he calls her *rose* here, he refers to all the brides in this place a few lines later as " so cumly a pakke of joly juelez " (929) who must have a wonderful dwelling. And this dwelling, fit for such jewels, the maiden describes: it is a *mote* (city on a hill) both without *mote* (blemish) and without *moote* (moat) (948), a city unlike the earthly place symbolized by old Jerusalem; and the contrast between the two is expressed in imagery throughout this passage. The antithesis is between crowned and pearl-decked maidens and earth-stained bodies; the radiant gems and " mokke and mul," white shining objects and dirt. The heavenly city, according to St. John, is a place of ineffable brilliance. Going toward the water's source, the poet sees this city, across the river from him: it is described as being constructed of gems; the supreme source of light is here; and all details bear out the idea of whiteness and brilliance. From the eighty-third through the eighty-seventh stanzas there is a parable devoted to the ennumeration and description of the precious stones of which the city is built, all suggested by the Apocalypse. Section eighteen, repeating the comparison of divine with natural light, shows the moon itself as *spotty* and *grym* beside the stream flowing from God's throne, presumably the stream which the poet has followed.[18] All beneath the moon is blemished; all in Jerusalem is pure. The climax of this, and of the poem, is the ecstatically described procession of virgins, headed by the Lamb himself, the divine Person, described as a *Lantern,* the source of light. This emotional climax is epitomized in the repeated word *delyt.* And in delight the vision ends.

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[18] Stanza XC describes the twelve trees which bear the fruit of life, or time, growing " aboute þat water " (1077). These trees are to be associated with the earthly and mortal world of the garden rather than with the city of gems, and they might seem to be out of place here. But " aboute þat water " is a vague phrase, and the trees probably are intended to stand on the stream's edge but not in the heavenly city. The idea that the life of earth proceeds from this stream is perfectly fitting, particularly if one remembers the association of baptismal water with fertility myth.

3

The contrast between heaven and earth is made explicitly, as well as through the sets of images which can be traced through the poem, for it is not only a physical and symbolical one. The repetition of the words *more* and *less,* for instance, and the maiden's insistence that earthly ideas of degree are not valid for heaven, all point to this distinction. In fact, the concepts of degree and judgment are the specific ones in which the poem's intellectual content centers. The idea that there is degree in heaven only in that there is *greater* blessedness is of course illogical: the maiden seems to be saying that the least one in this realm has enough grace that there *may* be superiority but *can* be no inferiority; that perfection, heavenliness, admits of increase and yet that no one can have *less* of it than another. This appears to be perfectly meaningless unless we suppose that the maiden is representing the feelings and attitudes of the blessed, the pearl-like: unlike the person who is aware of inferiority in earthly society, the pearl could have no sense that another's blessedness detracts from her own. In any case, this heavenly negation of negation is difficult if not impossible to understand, and the poet is quite conscious of presenting a paradox when he makes the divine ideas of degree only positive; the paradox is beyond our limited and human understanding.

In the same way divine and human judgment differ. In the beginning of the sixth stanza the maiden condemns, as false and blind, the man who believes only what he sees: God's word, she says, conveys a larger and truer vision than what man's unaided sense reveals. The idea of a vision beyond earth is emphasized in these lines, contrasting the good judgment of an ordinary man with the judgment of God and of the true jeweler. Man judges only on the basis of his erroneous impressions, but God judges men perfectly, with complete knowledge. Thus the two senses of *deme* are played upon, *to deem* and *to judge* or *doom.*

So, in symbol and also in stated contrasts, the natures of the heavenly and the earthly are probed. If we consider the poet's probable intention, to justify a position of blessedness for a person whose loss grieves him, for a soul departed from earth before it could labor long in the vineyard, we find the poem's development perfectly natural. The vineyard is the earth (as the mound or grave is); and according to the understanding of men who remain at work in it, remain on earth, the innocent infant could hardly deserve a place with saints and martyrs or even with those who lived and suffered long: her position must be inferior. But the biblical parable of the vineyard itself refutes this belief, and the poet turns to that parable to justify his faith that heaven does not discriminate against the infant. And how can the idea of what heaven *is* like for the innocent maiden be communicated graphically, poetically? The vineyard parable presents no actual vision of reward, but only the application of divine judgment to earth and to men. Because he needs a positive means of symbolizing the celestial life, the poet uses the most vivid one accessible, the one found in the Apocalypse. And from these two biblical passages—the parable of the vineyard and the Apocalyptic description of the heavenly city—the poem draws its imagery and substance.

Thus the basic image-scheme of *The Pearl:* the vineyard with its vegetation, its cyclical nature, its beauty and fertility purchased only by toil and by death, symbolizes the earthly nature; the city, with its jewels, its perfect hardness and constancy, its brilliance and purity—the very opposite of dust—all associated with royalty and with light, symbolizes the heavenly. But there is a third set of images which becomes increasingly important near the end of the poem: that which includes water and blood. In the water and blood, liturgical symbols which are, again, drawn from the Bible, the poet imagines the connection between heaven and earth. The link is the saving blood of Christ symbolized in the water of baptism and the wine of

Eucharist.[19] It was the baptismal water which brought the maiden to salvation, and this water is shown as the boundary between earthly and heavenly realms; it is the blood of Christ which saves all men, and which, in the form of wine, must be accepted by them as a way to heaven: and so, appropriately, the poem ends with an allusion to the Lord " þat, in þe forme of bred & wyn,/ þe prests vus schewe vch a daye " (1209-1210).

The central symbol in the poem, the pearl itself, can best be understood as a part of this whole scheme. It may stand for a righteous person, for the perfect or *potentially* perfect soul (the poet pledges his own pearl to the Lord), or, in its largest sense, for the kingdom of heaven. Further scholarship in the background for this symbolism may augment these levels of meaning and supply a full interpretation—answering the problems of the pearl's possible use to represent the poet's own soul, or the Virgin Mary, or particular qualities—but it must take into account the complete scope of the imagery, of gem, earth, and water images, which makes *The Pearl* a picture of two worlds and the means of transition between them, a vision embracing heaven and earth.

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[19] Garrett suggests that the Eucharist is the basis for the allegory of the poem, but a more convincing starting point for its symbolism, and one which has never been much emphasized, is the rite of baptism. Whiteness and purity have always been associated with this rite; and the poem's specific concern with the fate of a baptized child, as well as its specific mention of the baptismal water which flows from the dying Christ, are tied up with these ideas. The poet's use of both white and shining garments and light for symbols of purity could be derived in part from the use of both symbols in the ancient Catholic rite: the baptizing priest gives the infant a veil, saying " Receive this white garment, which mayest thou carry without stain before the judgment seat of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou mayest have eternal life "; and a candle, saying " Receive this burning light, and keep thy baptism so as to be without blame." See " Baptism," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1907), II, 273. Furthermore, the pearl's allusion to Christ's words, " Of such is the kingdom of heaven," is appropriate to the baptism service; the passage quoted from (Mark X, 13-16) is used in the Anglican baptism, and may well have been so used in the fourteenth century. Finally, the poet's naming of John (along with Christ and Mary) as ground of his future bliss might intend John the Baptist rather than Saint John the Divine (in spite of his use of the latter's Apocalyptic City): in a very early sixteenth century *Ritus Baptizandi*, part of the York manual, the passage John I, 1-14, is prominent, and this passage is full of light imagery connected with John and with the idea of baptism: " And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehend it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe " (1611 version). See *Manuale et Processionale ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Eboracensis*, in the Publications of the Surtees Society, LXIII (Durham, 1875). The use of these verses might well extend back to the fourteenth century in various parts of England. In any case, all these associations make plausible the notion of the poet's starting to justify the salvation and high estate of a child saved by baptism with the use of imagery suggested by this rite: the water of life, the brilliant Light as divine symbol, and so on. Then he may have been led naturally into the parabolic and Apocalyptic use of appropriate and allied imagery.

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