

PEARL AS CONSOLATIO

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INTRODUCTION

When I was introduced to Pearl in a medieval narratives class, I immediately found its beauty and conciseness most appealing. Through my religious training as a School Sister of Notre Dame I have acquired some facility in the study of sacred Scripture, and I was pleased that Pearl was replete with references to the Bible.

Before I had begun any serious study into the background of Pearl, I was captured by its sensuous beauty, its conciseness, and its descriptions of garden, pearl-maiden, and New Jerusalem. The poem seemed to me to encapsulate the history of man's salvation by its portrayal of life, death, reconciliation to death, and finally the call to be faithful until man's Resurrection. The call that echoes from Pearl is an age-old call: God asks His people to be faithful until death. But this faithfulness is not an easy task; human lives are filled with sorrow and hardship, people are called upon to sacrifice constantly, and they lose their loved ones through wars and accidents and are even called upon to relinquish their young to death.

Treating these various problems of death, Pearl has a message for all mankind, a message of reconciliation and consolation. The thread that is woven skillfully throughout

the poem is the thread of consolation. The poet-narrator is moved by grief through vision to comprehension and consolation. Everything that transpires in the narrative leads the reader slowly and surely along the path of consolation until he is convinced that Pearl is concerned mainly with consoling the bereaved rather than with mourning the deceased. It is true that an element of consolation is often present in an elegy, but in Pearl consolation is the fundamental purpose that unifies the argument and determines its direction.

The reader listens carefully as the narrator moves from disbelief to acceptance. He wants the narrator to believe. Pearl does console, for by the end the reader feels consoled. More to the point, the reader feels exhausted and cleansed, as if the experience of the struggle itself has had a purifying effect. He has accepted the will of the Deity as the narrator has accepted it.

CHAPTER ONE

PEARL: DESIGN, PLAN, GENRE

History has preserved for us one of the finest poems of the fourteenth century, Pearl, in MS Cotton Nero A.x. in the British Museum. Since Richard Morris's first edition in 1864 Pearl has found an ever-increasing number of editors, translators, interpreters, and admirers. This paper will attempt to contribute to both an understanding of the poem and a recognition of the reasons for its appeal to many persons.

The more extensively one studies the poem, the more one is struck by the essential simplicity underlying the ornate language and intricate meter. In any study of a poem as complex as Pearl it is easy to become so involved with the parts that one misses the whole. The quickest way to come to the heart of the poem is to concentrate on the central figure, the narrator, whose progress from grief to understanding is the dramatic heart of the poem.¹ It is through his eyes that the poem develops. It is by watching his

¹ Charles Moorman, The Pearl Poet (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1968), p. 315.

reactions that one senses the message the poet wishes to impart: that one may receive consolation through a withdrawal from the secular world with its sorrows into a spiritual dreamworld which provides answers to those sorrows even as it explores and explains the mental state of the dreamer-narrator and honors the memory of a beloved child now deceased. Hence the poem, long recognized as both dream vision and elegy, possesses also the generic characteristics of the consolatio. Therefore the genre of Pearl may be designated dream vision-elegy-consolatio.

In establishing the genre within which he is working, the Pearl-poet uses his abilities as a poet and a layman seeking comfort rather than as one interested in the problems for their own sake. It is this fact that raises the poem above the excellent and places it in the realm of the immortal. One can read Pearl even today and find it speaks to him, for the theme of consolation in the loss of a loved one is universal, defying time and space.

The overall plan of the poem--and assuredly plan is a major element in genre--is simple yet challenging. The poem, masterful in its conciseness, is divided into 101 stanzas. The first twenty are devoted mainly to presenting the poet narrator's state of mind and to describing the dream country and the Pearl herself; the central sixty stanzas present the

lecture between Pearl and the narrator that includes instruction on basic theology. The end result of this lecture is that the narrator experiences acceptance and consolation. The last twenty-one stanzas contain description, this time of the New Jerusalem, and end with the poet's reflection.²

To comprehend the relation of the overall plan to message, one may well consider the elements of each genre contributing to this hybrid form. First, then, the study calls for consideration of material which places the poem within the dream-vision category, a category which lends itself to symbolism and the acceptance of supernatural forces.

Medieval man felt strongly that exterior forms of nature spoke directly to him; thus the snake shedding its skin spoke of the renewal of life when man changes his way from sin to repentance, and the lion cub sleeping three days after its birth reminded him of Christ's stay in the tomb. He felt that in the same way his dreams sometimes revealed to him truths beyond the ken of his waking intelligence and that a literary recording of a dream, whether real or fictional, might well consolidate those truths.

Because medieval readers demanded an authority for everything, the mechanics of the dream vision provided a

² Larry M. Sklute, "Expectation and Fulfillment in Pearl," Philological Quarterly, 52 (1973), 667.

means by which they could suspend, at least temporarily, their distrust of the purely fictional and could accept the fantastic images of the dream vision as having the authority of truth. The device of the sleep and the vision in field or wood was put to a great variety of uses in the fourteenth century.³

One cannot fail to notice that the dream vision is the vehicle the poet uses, but to describe Pearl as a dream vision and to say nothing more would reveal little about its plan or purpose. The poem supersedes the typical dream vision which was common in the late Middle Ages--the dream vision in which a dreamer, who is also the "I," or narrator, of the poem, falls asleep and experiences in a dream a series of events which are, in the thinking of certain critics, both fantastic and allegorical.⁴

The description of the marvelous landscape with which the account of the Pearl vision begins is interesting especially because the poet has freedom to indulge his fancy. In the later descriptions of the New Jerusalem he is tied closer to the letter of an authoritative text and so cannot be as imaginative as in the first description of his dreamworld.

³ Moorman, p. 36.

⁴ Moorman, p. 35.

Howard Rollin Patch describes the vision in Pearl as an otherworld reminiscence where in a dream the poet-narrator goes toward a forest in which are hills and towering crystal cliffs. Here are the fragrance of fruit, the singing of birds, and the beauty of a stream passing over precious stones. At the foot of the crystal cliff the narrator sees the maiden whom he is seeking. Later he also beholds the Celestial City, as he relates in lines indebted to the Book of Revelation. The jewels in the stream and the fragrant fruit remind one of the Garden of Eden, but the whole account is highly original.⁵

There is no disagreement, then, that the poet employed the dream vision. But critics have argued whether Pearl is an allegory or an elegy. I believe that the author of Pearl combined the dream vision with the elegy to form a hybrid genre, the dream-vision elegy, because neither genre alone could carry out his plan effectively. In support of interpretation of the poem as an elegy, Israel Gollancz states:

Whatever theological questions may be enunciated in the course of the poem, Pearl is to my mind, without a doubt, an elegiac poem expressing a personal grief, a poet's lament for the loss of his child, and in its treatment transcends the

⁵ Howard Rollin Patch, The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 190.

scholastic and the theological discussions of the time.⁶

Richard Morris, who prepared the first printed edition of Pearl for the Early English Text Society in 1864, saw the poem as an elegy on the death of the poet's daughter, an interpretation supported by a number of passages in the poem itself. The reader encounters certain personal references: the maiden herself refers to her having left the "world's woe" (761)⁷ at a "young and tender age" (412); the poet asserts that at her death she was not yet two years old and that she had learned neither Paternoster nor Creed (483-85); upon first seeing her, the poet recognizes her immediately (164) and asserts that she was "nearer than aunt or niece" to him (233). The conclusion that the poem revolves around the death of a child and that it is thus, on one level, an elegy is almost unavoidable.⁸

The poet-narrator would hardly have been moved to imitate the virtues of the child if she had not monopolized his affection while she lived in this world. He feels such desolation when he loses his precious pearl that only the

⁶ Israel Gollancz, ed., Pearl (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. xxvii.

⁷ Subsequent line references to Pearl will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁸ Moorman, p. 39.

possession of heaven itself will console him. It is also difficult to conceive of a poet's contriving the death of a two-year-old. Had he wished to contrive anything, he probably would have fabricated the death of an older child so that, when he met his pearl in the garden, readers could accept more readily the child's facility with the language.

In the total context of the poem the child's death is ultimately seen as a significant experience for the narrator, mainly insofar as it opens his eyes to the true and eternal source of his longing. The poet moves through his grief to a final consolation in his great sorrow. After his consolation he can finally be reconciled to her death and thereby draw closer to his own moment of salvation.

Albert C. Baugh speaks of Pearl as employing two distinct genres: the personal elegy, wherein a real loss is recorded and reacted to, and the medieval sermon which uses the vision as a vehicle for teaching or preaching on a given subject. Through a combining of genres the narrator is made to understand the meaning of Pearl's death and so to obtain freedom from the burden of his sorrow.⁹

There is a gentle interweaving of the two genres in the poem; the dream-vision mode provides a visionary setting and

⁹ Albert C. Baugh, ed., A Literary History of England (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948), p. 235.

accords with what the reader of that time would expect, and the elegy renders the narrative personal and believable and relevant to today's reader. The loss is real; the grief is real. Hence pure joy fills the stanzas which tell that the poet recognizes his lost pearl in the events of the dream.

One strong argument against allegorical interpretation is the fact that the poet seems to make the pearl-maiden herself provide exegesis wherever exegesis is necessary. Such internal explanation is rare in allegory. The intended meaning of each element in the parable, for instance, is expounded in the manner of a medieval sermon; after all of the explanation given by the maiden, it is unlikely that any hidden meaning is left.¹⁰

In introducing his edition of Pearl E. V. Gordon observes:

To be an allegory a poem must as a whole, and with fair consistency, describe in other terms some event or process; its entire narrative and all its significant details should cohere and work toward this end.¹¹

With Gordon's assessment I agree. To be sure, there are allegorical elements in Pearl. The parable of the workers

¹⁰ A. C. Spearing, "Symbolic and Dramatic Development in Pearl," Modern Philology, 9 (1962), 1.

¹¹ E. V. Gordon, ed., Pearl (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. xii.

in the vineyard (501-588) is at least symbolic and perhaps suggestive of allegory. In effect, the opening stanzas of the poem where the pearl slips through the poet's hand is allegorical of the child's death and burial. But an allegorical description of an event does not necessarily make that event allegorical. Neither does inclusion of such material render an entire literary work allegorical.

We have considered the dream vision and the elegy and have observed that the author of Pearl interwove these two genres to create a hybrid form called the dream-vision elegy. There is yet another genre at work in Pearl; a definition and an explanation of its purpose may be helpful.

The consolatio, or consolation, was recognized as a literary genre in its own right from the time of the Greek writer Cantor, who lived from 335 to 275 B.C. Among classical Latin authors who made important contributions to the genre of the consolatio mortis were Cicero and Seneca. The principal custom of the genre was the citation of solacia, loci communes or "topics" of consolation, which were handed down from one generation of practitioners to another.¹²

The pagan consolatio was traditionally divided into two sections, the first devoted to the afflicted person, the

¹² Ian Bishop, Pearl in Its Setting (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 16.

second to the cause of the affliction. Christian writers deviated from this form, and there are indications that even in the early centuries of Christianity Christian writers of the consolatio used it as a vehicle of instruction rather than in the original form of consolation.¹³

The element of consolation is to be found throughout Pearl. In the opening stanza the mourner is discovered in a state of rebellious and despairing grief, but by the end of the poem he has arrived at a state of resignation to the Divine will and has reached a mood of assurance and hope. This transition is effected through the vision in which he is assured by the maiden that she is saved and which indicates to him the way he too can obtain salvation.¹⁴

Several scholars have associated Pearl itself with the genre of consolation. The first of these is John Conley in a paper on "Pearl and a Lost Tradition," the tradition being the Christian consolation.¹⁵ Also V. E. Watts in a paper entitled "Pearl as Consolatio" compares the poem with some

¹³ Richard Tristman, "Some Consolatory Strategies in Pearl," The Middle English Pearl, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 273.

¹⁴ Bishop, p. 15.

¹⁵ John Conley, The Pearl and a Lost Tradition, "Journal of English and Germanic Philology," 54 (1955), 332-47.

Christian consolatios of the fourth century, all of them examples of the consolatio mortis.¹⁶

The narrator's immediate grief develops at the very beginning of the poem into a pondering of the universal problems of life and death. His constant questioning over his personal loss moves the poem along. As he struggles for understanding, the reader too receives the answers and is moved to understanding.

The narrator uses the dream vision as a means of bestowing consolation on himself and his readers. The mark of a great writer is his ability to get his readers or listeners involved and concerned with the problems that he is forced to encounter. The reader is hardly conscious of the method the Pearl-poet uses because he immediately becomes involved in the healing process. The dream vision makes the poem believable and important. The poet-narrator constantly quotes Scripture as his authority; the reader familiar with the source feels drawn into his vision. The Pearl-poet was conscious of using sources that his readers would be quite familiar with. The elegy makes the poem personal; the dream-vision makes the poem plausible; and the consolatio gives it its appeal.

¹⁶ V. E. Watts, "Pearl as a Consolatio," Medium Aevum, 32 (1963), 34-36.

Though the form of Pearl is influenced by medieval forms such as the elegy, the dream vision, and the consolatio and though the poem is thoroughly medieval in spirit and workmanship, as a whole it is unlike any other Middle English poem. To many readers the human emotion manifested in the poem appears to be its driving force and its motive.

It would seem that the poet-narrator has used theological writings (as Chaucer did) without being himself a theologian. He avoids technical language, and he uses his information as a poet and a layman seeking comfort rather than as one interested in the problems for their own sake.¹⁷ The poet-narrator was a religious man; arguments over whether he was a clergyman still continue, but whether he was or was not, the entire poem speaks of religious matters. Grief leads the narrator to see the mixed nature of the world. He comes to the realization that the decay of the body contributes to the beauty of nature. He ponders the nature of happiness, specifically false and true happiness. In losing his pearl he believed he had lost true happiness. He had mistaken false for true happiness because the Pearl-maiden reminds him he lost "but a rose."¹⁸ The use of frequent references to sacred Scripture and the final act of

¹⁷ Gordon, p. xxxi.

¹⁸ Conley, p. 340.

resignation to God's will following the poet's acceptance of his Pearl's presence among the elect both indicate an atmosphere of deep religious feeling.

Pearl communicates a distinct and poetically credible experience. The feeling results mainly from the poet's use of the process of visualization as the organizing principle of his narrative, a technique that allows the reader to experience the objects and the action of the poem along with the narrator.¹⁹ W. H. Schofield expresses the reader's feelings most succinctly when he says:

The poet of Pearl seems to us a man who in all probability by example as well as by precept made clearly manifest the beauty of holiness. He was a liberal minded and sympathetic man of God, endowed as few of his race with the power to embody lofty thought in fitting phrase.²⁰

Pearl then employs elements of at least three distinct genres: dream vision, elegy, and consolatio. That genre is in itself a consideration of rhetoric and particularly of that part of rhetoric which concerns itself with arrangement and organization of material indicates that the poet may well have understood the contributions of literary

¹⁹ Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 180.

²⁰ William Henry Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of Pearl," PMLA, 19 (1904), 203.

effectiveness which all elements of rhetoric might make.
With these contributions Chapter Two will concern itself.

CHAPTER TWO

RHETORIC IN PEARL

The Middle Ages were less dark than was once supposed. They were a time in which man sincerely pursued knowledge. They constituted an era of considerable creative activity in art and literature. Far-reaching changes in literature were taking place during the Middle Ages, among the more important being the change-over from the quantitative to an accentual system of verse, the development of the love-theme in literature, and the recognition of the vernacular as the normal literary medium. These changes brought forth much comment and many questions, questions relating, for instance, to the nature of poetry and the poetic art, or again to the process of translation and the proper methods of attaining an effective prose. These recurring problems called for attention and rendered discussion among scholars and schoolmen almost inevitable.¹

To understand the growth of a literary tradition in England, one must take into account the diverse efforts that had been made or were being made to pronounce on literature

¹ James J. Murphy, Medieval Eloquence (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 47.

and literary matters, whatever their origins or their immediate purpose.

Rhetoric signifies "the craft of speech"; in accordance with its basic meaning it teaches how to construct a discourse artistically. The works that appear previous to the fourteenth century did not conceive of poetry and prose as two forms of expression differing in essence and origin. On the contrary, both fall within the inclusive concept of "discourse." Rhetoric, the second of the seven liberal arts, takes us deeper into the world of medieval culture than does grammar. The art of the poet was first and foremost to prove himself in the rhetorical treatment of his material. There were not many formal works available to the Pearl-poet as he sought help to find ways to capture the essence of what he felt as he contemplated the loss of the beloved child. Most of the material available consisted not of formal works of rhetoric but of detailed and occasional comments on literature generally. There were still extant treatises such as the grammatical and rhetorical works of Bede and Alcuin or the thirteenth-century manual known as the Poetria nova by Geoffrey of Vinsauf.² Within the space of about a century--about 1175 to sometime before

² James J. Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 102.

1280--European teachers of grammar produced six Latin works about verse. These perceptive works are Matthew of Vendome's Ars versificatoria (c. 1175); Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Poetria nova (1208-13) and Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi (after 1213); Gervase of Melkley's Ars versificaria (c. 1215); John of Garland's De arte prosayca metrica et rithmica (after 1229); and Eberhard the German's Laborintus (after 1213, before 1280).³ Each of these rhetorical treatises attempts to provide advice for a writer wishing to compose verse. Each work distills the precepts born to experience and observation and transmits these as injunctions for discovery, order, plan, and wording. Yet, at the same time, it is clear that all the authors were teachers of the ars grammatica as well as the ars rhetorica. All looked to the production of written materials rather than the oratio as ancient rhetorics had done.

The Poetria nova was the best known of all the medieval artes poeticae undertaking to teach the principles of poetic composition in the Middle Ages. Poetria nova is a treatise on rhetoric as applied to poetry, an area of literature with which rhetoric had not previously concerned itself. The main points for consideration in Poetria nova are

³ Murphy, Rhetoric, p. 137.

abbreviation and amplification; arrangement and organization; and style and ornamentation.⁴ Using the suggestions given in the Poetria nova, the Pearl-poet constructed a moving account of his own personal sorrow.

The fourteenth century was the age in which English poets came to practice rhetorical verse, poetry adorned with all the colors of rhetoric, taught by rhetoricians like those already mentioned. These doctrines were not new to the fourteenth century; Poetria nova was two centuries old by the Pearl-poet's time, and Geoffrey himself had drawn on Horace and the Rhetorica ad Herennium long incorrectly attributed to Cicero. What was new and exciting was the fact that English too could be treated in the high style of medieval rhetoric.⁵

And so the stage seems set for the Pearl-poet's entrance. The whole method of composition of Pearl, including the planning of the poem, seems determined by the precepts learned from the rhetoricians and composers of manuals of this period. But it is not rhetorical doctrine but the

⁴ J. W. H. Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. 96.

⁵ Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and The Green Knight (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 124.

poet's artistic sense that is the basis for the poem's appeal.⁶

The Poetria nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf opens with a well-known passage about the necessity of planning one's work beforehand and of predetermining the limits of its subject matter. The ideal is diversity in unity. Now this ideal may tell us something of medieval poetry. When the poem has made its essential statement at the very beginning, then the task of the poet must be to restate the theme, refine it, and draw from it all its implications and meanings. We find that medieval poets are fond of such restatement; they repeat a single point as though to draw all possible meanings from it.

The Poetria nova contained useful precepts and was a very popular work. It was a metrical composition of more than two thousand Latin hexameter lines and was a success even in its author's lifetime. Useful precepts are briefly treated, whereas the chief place is given to a detailed treatment of such questions as, first, the different ways of opening a poem, elements of arrangement and organization; second, the methods of amplifying and abbreviating

⁶ Dorothy Everett, Essays in Middle English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 93.

expressions; and third, the proper use of style and ornamentation.⁷

We are just beginning to appreciate the richness of artistic invention which became available during the Middle Ages to poets, diplomats, preachers, linguists, grammarians, teachers, and anyone else interested in language or its uses in human affairs. Medieval rhetoricians had charged poets with the burden of adjusting language so that it would make men's emotions serve their reason. And so Geoffrey of Vinsauf preached that the most important point was how the poet used the material at hand, which probably was not original. The precepts laid down by Geoffrey assured the writer of at least variety in his work, and if he were a brilliant artist able to work through the rules with his own genius, of greatness. Nearly always, the rhetorical theorists seem to assume that an author will be working from an earlier source, and, therefore, what little they have to say about overall structure (*dispositio*) is concerned with ways of stripping out what is no longer needed (*abbreviatio*) and fitting in newly effective language (*amplificatio*). Poetry's business is one of persuasion, persuasion

⁷ Atkins, p. 99.

arrived at through the emotions aroused by figures and images rather than through logic.⁸

Let us briefly consider the main points of Geoffrey's Poetria nova. The artificial opening of any work, Geoffrey says, renders a mass of particular facts comprehensible. The poet can control the response to the material by focusing the subject matter as he wants the reader to use it. Poetry argues for a certain point of view. In addition to the artificial opening, the poet has another very effective means of controlling his subject matter: by amplification and abbreviation. Given a subject, one may either treat it at great length or dispose of it quickly. Amplification is achieved by lengthening material, spinning out that which is lucidly and succinctly expressed in the beginning. Abbreviation, on the other hand, is the condensation of lengthy material.⁹ As Geoffrey himself says, "Your way is twofold, either wide or narrow, a rivulet or a stream; you will either . . . check off an item briefly, or treat it in a lengthy discourse. The passage through each way is not without labor" (Poetria nova, 206-10). The alliterative method employed by the Pearl-poet lent itself well to the method the rhetoricians advised for being varied but

⁸ Payne, p. 45.

⁹ Murphy, Medieval Eloquence, pp. 80-81.

consistent. We find that the poets who are the most traditional and formulaic in their style are usually the most rhetorical.¹⁰

The rhetorical process did not stop with a particular definitive persuasion, but was rather a continuing interaction among what one man could see, what he could make others see, and how they in turn could repeat and amplify that seeing.¹¹

One of the reasons that the Poetria nova was so popular with the artists of this period was Geoffrey's recognition of the importance of orderly, planned composition in a narrative poem. He gave directions for ways of beginning a narrative poem with a didactic statement of theme, and he presented amplification and abbreviation as techniques of treating portions of narrative to develop the chosen theme. This concept of the role of amplification and abbreviation in literature was accepted and practiced by many poets who wrote during the Middle Ages.¹²

The Pearl-poet was able to use the theories expressed by his contemporaries in the various rhetorical manuals and to adapt those available or to formulate his own. Through

¹⁰ Benson, p. 125.

¹¹ Payne, p. 46.

¹² William Henry Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of Pearl," PMLA, 19 (1904), 188.

adaptation of the material available he was able to use his own genius and to create the works for which he is famous. It was his task to adjust his material by extending or shortening it as he saw fit. The success in performing this adjustment separated the great from the mediocre.

Description is a method of amplification. In this method the type of description which a poet uses can determine the length of the passage. The Pearl-poet carries his descriptions to such lengths that many times the description seems more integrated with the work than the handbooks and manuals suggest that it should be. When the poet-narrator describes the garden or the stream we see exactly what he is describing. Many times he uses conventional patterns of description but more often he elaborates and uses his own genius to add to our enjoyment. The handbooks emphasized description for its own sake; the Pearl-poet makes it an integral part of his work. To depict the landscape of the vision, for instance, the poet draws on the medieval tradition of describing the other world in terms of artistic objects of this world. Thus the reader sees the marvelous landscape and can identify immediately with the surroundings. The Pearl-poet is traditional yet original in the vividness of his descriptions.

In the discussion between the Pearl-maiden and the poet-narrator we see another means of amplification. Here

the poet-narrator in his choice of incidents and situations to relate makes the narrative short or lengthy. The decisions must be made on what to abbreviate or amplify. The ability of the artist was tested in such situations. It is to the poet's credit that although sixty of the 101 stanzas are devoted to a religious discussion, the discussion is not a digression. In fact, it is only by means of this doctrinal discussion--the tonic chord of the poem--that we arrive at an interpretation which makes the poem intelligible. To produce this effect from what could be considered one long amplificatio is a certain sign of greatness. The poet uses every method available to him to produce a poem that holds our interest. It has been established that the manuals did not mention the dream vision as a method of literary development in the Middle Ages, but we know that the dream device most certainly pertains to rhetoric.¹³ The medieval rhetoricians saw rhetoric as something conscious and planned, and the dream vision was most certainly a well-thought-out process. It had to be organized perfectly to appeal to the readers and hearers.

A major influence on the Pearl-poet's work was the native tradition of alliterative poetry in which it was

¹³ Lavon Buster Fulwiler, "Image Progressions in Chaucer's Poetry: Exposition of a Theory of Creativity," Diss. Michigan State University, 1971, p. 64.

written. This is an ancient tradition which goes back even in written form to the Anglo-Saxon period, much further than any of the social or literary influences of this time, for it remains the most powerful moulding force on the work of the fourteenth century poets.¹⁴

The alliterative poets found in the alliterative line a style that tended almost naturally toward a heavily adorned verse of the sort that the rhetoricians advocated. In Old English the basis of the diction and syntax of alliterative verse was variation, and the basis of the rhetorical style was also a kind of variation--expolitio, which Geoffrey of Vinsauf advocates when he advises his students to ". . . let the same thing be concealed in a variety of forms; be varied yet always the same."¹⁵

Pearl shows how well these traditional alliterative techniques fit the dream vision. The poet strictly maintains the dramatic point of view. No omniscient voice enters the poem to convince us of the reality of the vision or to explain what Pearl represents; the reader is led to wonder about the identity of Pearl just as he wonders about the identity of the Green Knight. Despite its unearthly setting,

¹⁴ Benson, p. 125.

¹⁵ A. C. Spearing, The Gawain Poet (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 18.

however, Pearl communicates a credible experience which results from the poet's use of the process of visualization as the organizing principle. This technique allows the reader to experience the vision along with the narrator. When the narrator first views Pearl in the dream the poet employs not only a physical process of seeing but also a psychological one. She is seen first at a distance; the narrator's eyes are drawn to her as they travel across the high cliff. Once he has noticed her, he focuses his attention on her and ultimately recognizes her.

The style of the Pearl-poet involves the use of various specific rhetorical devices. In particular, juxtaposition contributes to the effectiveness of the work. The setting of the conscious physical world against the dream spiritual world at once offers a meaningful contrast and provides the structural framework of the poem. The further opposition between living dreamer and deceased but newly living maiden underscores the distinction between the mortal life and the immortal life. For the Pearl-poet style is characterized by the concrete rather than the general.¹⁶

In choosing his verse form the Pearl-poet subjected himself to a double discipline. He chose the alliterative verse form and also an elaborate rhyme-scheme combining

¹⁶ Spearing, pp. 37-39.

stanza-linking by echo and refrain. Either of these mediums is exacting in itself; together they form a highly artificial meter. This artificiality in no way proves a barrier to the expression of deep emotion. The discipline of an elaborate verse form is severe; there is difficulty not in the artificiality itself but in the carrying it out. The type of artificiality to be avoided appears when a poet of inferior skill tries to follow what is popular at a specific time by relying on the technique itself rather than on a meaningful integration of technique with content. Only a very good poet can resist this temptation; especially was it difficult to resist during the Middle Ages and in the midst of the alliterative tradition, when the conventions provided stock phrases and ready-made formulas. The Pearl-poet is rarely guilty of using his techniques in mechanical or slovenly fashion; in his poetry can be seen the great virtues of the alliterative tradition.

The freedom permitted by the alliterative tradition allows the poet a more frequent use of the homely idiom. This at times strikes a note of simplicity--"I knew her wel, I hade seen hyr ere"--or vigor--"ne grauere her nie bor wyth no gyle." The alliteration can encourage concentration of meaning as in "to enke her color so clad in clot." Even alliteration, when used with discretion, can give an impression of strength without seeming overemphatic. When

the poet wants to be simple and direct, the alliteration is rarely obtrusive.¹⁷

The perfection of the stanza linking, which is made a complete circle by the echo of the first and last lines of the poem, itself suggests the perfect roundness of the pearl. It is difficult to separate the musical effects of poetry from the significance of the words, but perhaps the verse form plays a very important part in conveying the dreamer's grief and his relief from doubt and assurance of hope. The repetition and variation on the verbal theme drive home to us an emotional insistence on the different stages of thought and feeling through which the dreamer passes.

The harmony of the whole poem includes its musical quality; all rhymes are full rhymes, an almost unbelievable feat in a poem that is constructed with only three rhyme possibilities to a stanza, and those put in strict sequence. The technical demands which this form puts on the poet are immense. He must develop his theme within a structure which demands the same theme-word for five successive stanzas. He must rhyme and keep a four-stress line with a minimum of non-accented syllables; and where possible he forces himself to avoid run-on lines. These metrical restrictions often

¹⁷ E. V. Gordon, ed., Pearl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. xxxix.

govern his form of expression and powerfully condense his literal meaning and his use of figures.¹⁸

The rhetorical beauty of Pearl is undeniable. The poet used the methods and devices at his disposal in order to produce a well-wrought poem. The pieces that fit into the puzzle, however, are only a part of the puzzle's beauty. The poet had to have a framework and purpose in which to fit all the pieces. Chapter Three will consider the framework or genre that the poet used to enhance the beauty of his work.

¹⁸ John F. Crawford with Andrew Hoyem, trans., Pearl (San Francisco: Grabhorn-Hoyem, 1967), p. 116.

CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIOUS AND GENERIC CONSIDERATIONS

Although the principal source from which the material of Pearl is drawn is the Vulgate Bible, the poet displays a knowledge not only of the Apocalypse of St. John but of many other parts, allusions to which he weaves together with great deftness. In the central portion of the poem the poet makes constant appeal to the authority of the Bible, buttressing his argument by passages drawn from it. The ease with which he passes from one point of the Bible to another is an indication of his familiarity with his source.¹ The particular passages in the Bible that the Pearl-poet draws most heavily on are three: the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-6), the vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:10 and 22:7), and the procession of the 144,000 virgins (Revelation 24:1-5). In addition to these a large number of short unconnected scriptural passages are quoted or echoed in the numerous scattered allusions and images connected with the description of the maiden.²

¹ Dorothy Everett, Essays in Middle English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 91.

² Charles Moorman, The Pearl Poet (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), p. 49.

It was clearly the poet's intention to use scriptural authority as fully as he could, but in applying it to the theme of the poem he tends sometimes to color it with conceptions that are basically of his own time. We find the maiden that he sees in heaven wearing the white bridal garment; her costume is in the fashion of the poet's own day. When the poet describes the Heavenly City he seems to have in mind the typical manor house of the Middle Ages, and the book that the Lamb reads has square leaves; it is not the rolled scroll of ancient times.

The Pearl-poet quotes most extensively from the Book of Revelation, sometimes called the Apocalypse. Of the apocalyptic books in the Bible--the Book of Daniel, the Book of Ezekiel, and possibly the Book of Jeremiah--the vision of St. John is the only one which reveals an eternal city inhabited by those who have followed the Lamb. This vision fits in well with the hope-filled ending that the poet wants to present to his readers. The poet wants to assure those that have lived good lives that there is a Heavenly City where all their suffering will be rewarded after death. His particular reason for adhering to the text of St. John's Book of Revelation may also be that he wished to concentrate upon the aspect of Deity that is most relevant to this poem about a pure and innocent child who suffered an untimely

death. With the appearance of the White Lamb we are reminded of the One who voluntarily suffered an untimely death in order to redeem mankind; we can make the connection between the two "Innocents." The innocent young child who is now enjoying eternal bliss through the gift of baptism and the White Lamb represent the One Whose death made her baptism a redemptive act. Each has suffered an untimely death, but both now enjoy the Heavenly City.

The passages from Revelation used in the poem are treated for the most part in a different way from the other scriptural passages. The poet makes little attempt at symbolical interpretation of these passages. Instead he uses the scriptural details pictorially to illustrate a scene which is to captivate the dreamer with its beauties. In the latter part of the poem the poet seems not to need authority for doctrine; he is able to use the scriptural material more directly. One of the outstanding characteristics of the vision is its close adherence to the details as recorded in the Book of Revelation. The Biblical account is useful not only because it is authentic but also because it is familiar to medieval readers and listeners as well as to readers of our own time. The dreamer does not have to surmise what realm this is; he has been told and he is struck with wonder at its glorious strangeness and beauty.

Unlike his contemporaries, the Pearl-poet employs little apocryphal material and seldom draws from patristic embellishment or commentary. The scriptural sources are followed closely, and they are skillfully adapted to their purpose in the poem. In adhering to the sources, the poet resists the temptation to overload the symbolism already in the Bible or to take advantage of the allegory found there.

The main portion of the poem is drawn from the Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) and the Apocalypse of St. John. The Bible plays a very important part in the poet's total thought; of the total of 6074 lines in the author's four poems--Pearl, Purity (or Cleanness, as it is also called), Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight--about 2400 are quotations or paraphrases of Scripture.³

As we study the various sources of Pearl we can better appreciate how the sources helped the poet enhance the religious feeling of the poem. Pearl calls on a rich and varied tradition in order to help it fulfill its mission of consolation. The separate genres at work here--the elegy, the dream vision, and the consolatio--all contribute to the overall message of the poem. We have investigated how the

³ Charles G. Osgood, The Pearl: A Middle English Poem (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1906), p. xvii.

use of the Bible and particularly the Book of Revelation contributed deep religious conviction to the poem. There are other sources that may have influenced the poet; many of these can be traced back to ancient times.

Source studies of Pearl date from the late nineteenth century. In the early days of Pearl criticism, the poem was compared to Dante's Divine Comedy, the French Romance of the Rose, and Boccaccio's elegiac Olympia eclogue. Early critics thought they saw direct borrowing by the Pearl-poet and thought Pearl a re-worked version of Dante's Divine Comedy. Structurally the two are dichotomous--the work of Dante is a stepladder while Pearl is a circle. The action of the Divine Comedy consists of linear movement; Dante leaves us at the end of his great adventure. The Pearl-poet makes a circular journey, first out of this world and into an unknown dreamworld, then back to the cares and strife of the earth. The circular structure is indeed similar to the structure of a typical medieval romance, in which the knight rides out from his castle, sustains himself through a test, and returns ultimately to his own dwelling.⁴

The Romance of the Rose seems to share a few descriptive passages with Pearl. Many scholars see a close unity

⁴ John F. Crawford with Andrew Hoyem, trans., Pearl (San Francisco: Grabhorn-Hoyem, 1967), p. 108.

between the two works. One commentator states that the Pearl-poet's two sources of inspiration were the great storehouse of "dream pictures" in the Romance of the Rose on the one hand and the symbolic pages of scripture on the other.⁵ However, Pearl differs from the Romance of the Rose because it is not primarily allegorical. In the last analysis the conscious allegory of Pearl is no more than a minor element in the poem, and except for a Biblical parable or two, the allegory consists in little more than the use of the term "pearl" for a person, as the term "rose" has been similarly employed.⁶ Although Pearl and the Romance of the Rose do share the garden and dream themes, there is not much besides these commonalities that the two poems share.

The Olympia Eclogue by Boccaccio is similar to Pearl in plot development. The narrator discovers the ghost of his dead daughter, returned at night in a field aglow with light. He orders festivities to be prepared and attempts to give her gifts. She restrains him and begins to explain to him that by her death she has set aside worldly things. She describes where she is and the lord to whom she has gone, using both Christian and pagan motifs and names. She does

⁵ Israel Gollancz, ed., Pearl (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. xv.

⁶ Osgood, p. xvi.

offer the narrator hope that after his death he too may reach this land, especially if he practices charity. She vanishes, leaving him to grieve here on earth.⁷

The poem is an interesting analogue to Pearl, but no more than that because the narrator in Boccaccio's eclogue remains on earth. His estate, his servants, and his country estate all are still his throughout the poem. The vision is not a dream. The Christian intention of the poem is veiled in allegory. Through these devices Boccaccio has distanced himself from the kind of mystical intensity, Christian doctrine, or personal emotion we find in Pearl. Boccaccio's treatment of the theme is quite different from that of Pearl. His poem is cast in the more artificial form of an eclogue, severe, graceful; there is no rebellious grief, no fever of doubt, no theological argument. No one now claims to see any direct relation between the two poems. Yet the parallel is not without significance. As an illustration of medieval conventions found in different genres, Olympia is known to have lived on earth and to have died as an infant, and, like Pearl in her glorified state, she speaks as an adult and as one having authority.⁸

⁷ Crawford and Hoyem, p. 109.

⁸ E. V. Gordon, ed., Pearl (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. xxx.

The elegy and the dream vision have both influenced the form and structure--elements of genre--of Pearl. Chapter One has suggested that the Pearl-poet used both these genres as sources and deftly wove them together to form the dream vision elegy. Though its form is influenced by the familiar dream convention and the elegy and though it is thoroughly medieval in spirit and workmanship, yet as a whole it is unlike many other Middle English poems in that it employs both the dream vision and the elegy.

When the poet uses the dream vision he has a great wealth of descriptive tradition at his disposal. This tradition of description was not confined to the documents that have survived but was evident in the medieval atmosphere of faith and credulity and artistic interest and was transmitted by the channels of folktale and even popular rumor based on memory and long thoughts. Even if a vision recorded in a work of literature represented an actual experience, the vision may have derived at least in part from subconscious memories of what the poet had read or heard.⁹

The Pearl-poet certainly uses the dream vision convention, but he uses it in his own unique manner. In Pearl the

⁹ Howard Rollin Patch, The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Howard University Press, 1950), p. 80.

narrator has a vision which carries him out of this world, where he is lost in grief for a dead child, into the world beyond death, where the child has become his superior. He must learn that he has failed to understand or at least to realize the divine framework of human existence and that his mourning is based on false assumptions. To produce this effect the dream vision was the perfect tool. The loss of the precious pearl, that pearl so beloved of the aristocratic world of the fourteenth century, and the fact that the man who loses the pearl is one whose business is to evaluate previous jewels, a jeweller, suggest that we are in the realm of courtly literature and that the garden is the familiar romance setting. The garden has many features in common with the courtly settings.

The framework of the poem as a whole, a vision seen in a dream, is the form popularized by the Romance of the Rose. And the influence of that poem, on the school of poetry derived from it, is clear in the general conceptions of the heavenly region in which the dreamer finds himself, the flowery garden, bright, clear, serene. The most definite echo of detail and wording from the Romance of the Rose is in the following lines:

Py beauté com neuer of nature
 Pymalyon paynted neuer Py vys
 Ne Arystotel now per by hys lettrure
 Of carped Pe kynde pese properte
 Py colour passez Pe flour-de-lys
 (749-753)

But the direct influence of the romance is neither so clear nor so extensive as has sometimes been claimed.¹⁰

The elegy also had its influence on the poet. The narrator's immediate grief is developed at the very beginning of the poem into a pondering of universal problems of life and death. Throughout the poem there is constant reference to death and its consequences. The sorrow that the narrator feels is real; we are forced into viewing the action of the poem through his eyes.

In any discussion of the genres used by the poet some thought must be given to the occasion that prompted the writing of the poem. Most scholars believe that the occasion was the death of a child, presumably the poet's daughter, before she was two years old. In support of this belief, I would point out that sudden death in a family can be a time for much introspection and soul-searching. The bereaved questions himself concerning matters which he has never considered before. He may even initially reject the answers at which he has arrived. It is very probable that the

¹⁰ Gordon, p. xxxii.

autobiographical interpretation of Pearl is a true and valid one. This interpretation was challenged as long ago as 1904 by W. H. Schofield¹¹ and ever since there has been a debate between those--including E. V. Gordon--who regard it as an elegy and those who, following Schofield's lead, believe it to be basically an allegory.¹² Most modern readers probably accept Gordon's view, that the poem has a personal bereavement for its occasion and that it cannot be regarded as an example of "total allegory." But it does not follow that if one does not accept it as total allegory, one must accept it as an elegy.

The pearl-maiden's discourse to the narrator, which constitutes the bulk of the poem, is in the form of a consolation. To trace the tradition of consolation that appears in Pearl, one must go back to the beginnings of western literature.

In his Timaeus Plato provided a total view of the cosmic order; he also accounted for certain spirits, which he called daemones, who were believed to dwell in the heavens and who were occasionally sent to visit men and give them instructions

¹¹ William Henry Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of Pearl," PMLA, 19 (1904).

¹² His theories about the genre of Pearl are to be found in the introduction to his edition of Pearl.

in behavior appropriate to this earth.¹³ The connection between Plato's spirits and the figure of the Pearl is not easily traced, but the most convenient figure of a mediator to a medieval author is the neoplatonic daemone. This evasive spirit passes through many philosophers of the Late Latin period and shows up again as "angelology" in medieval times.

Cicero also helped promulgate this belief in daemones to medieval times and thought with his Dream of Scipio.¹⁴ After falling into a dream and meeting his departed grandfather, Scipio awakes and is determined to bear himself with uprightness on earth, hopeful of leading in the future such a life as his grandfather leads. These pagan concerns, the ability of man to live a fruitful life while on earth and hope in a future life as a reward for good deeds, were passed down to medieval times and were further colored by the otherworldliness and mysticism of Christianity. Medieval man had a morbid fear of death and decay; this fear often affected his thoughts of the afterlife.

¹³ Plato, Timaeus, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1949), pp. 34-35. On page xxiii of the introduction Glenn R. Morrow states, "Since the time of Aristotle the Timaeus has been regarded, and rightly so, as one of the most important of Plato's works. Aristotle refers to it more often than to any other Platonic dialogue."

¹⁴ Cicero, Three Books of Offices, trans. Cyrus R. Edmonds (London: George Bell and Sons, 1880).

From the Dream of Scipio two types of medieval consolatory literature developed. One involved the appearance of a figure of wisdom, in the form of a lady, dressed in symbolic garments designating her philosophical attributes, arguing with the dreamer and offering general consolation. Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy is of this type; the arguments employed in the poem may show its influence on the Pearl-poet. No figure of the late Roman period towers more completely over medieval education and culture than Boethius (c. 480-524). Nearly every major commentator on civilization who wrote between the sixth century and the sixteenth century quotes him with respect. He composed a number of works directly or indirectly influential in the development of rhetorical theory. Among them are several commentaries on the rhetorical works of Aristotle and Cicero, as well as treatises on the various elements of logic.¹⁵ His most famous work Consolation of Philosophy was written while he was in prison, where he was being held on a civil charge lodged against him by the Emperor. In the Consolation he found a practical use for the philosophical wisdom which his studies had acquired for him, and he portrayed the process by which he reconciled himself to his misfortune. The

¹⁵ Joseph M. Miller, Michael H. Prosser, and Thomas W. Benson, Readings in Medieval Rhetoric (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 69.

Consolation and Pearl have some similarities: in Pearl the maiden attempts to instruct the grief-stricken narrator and to offer solace to him in his bereavement; in the Consolation, Philosophy, represented as a beautiful woman, consoles Boethius by reminding him of all she has ever taught him and by making him compare his own sufferings with the sufferings of the universe.¹⁶

The second type of consolation is the consolatio mortis. The Christian double view of the rotting corpse on the one hand and the saved soul in heaven on the other dominated this death-centered type of consolation. In order to save his soul, the dreamer needed to learn of Christ's mission of salvation, to receive the Sacraments, and to patiently await his deliverance from the doomed flesh. Pagan writings often served as a means to the Christian end. Among the Christian consolations which were written are many containing a considerable amount of doctrinal and theological material.¹⁷

Early Christian writers adapted many of the solacia, or topics of consolation, to fit their own beliefs and added new ones of their own. The Christian era clung to the

¹⁶ Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, ed. William Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), p. 12.

¹⁷ Crawford and Hoyem, p. 111.

well-tried grounds of consolation supplied by pagan rhetoric. Only now they no longer enumerated in their consolations heroes or poets who had to die, but patriarchs and prophets.¹⁸ Such topics are to be found in English literature from the earliest times. Three of the commonest of the ancient solacia adopted by Christian writers are closely related: death is the common lot of all men; one must submit to the will of God; and nothing is gained by inordinate grief. The first of these topics is the oldest; most English readers recognized it as commonplace. Although this particular topic is not treated in Pearl, the poet uses the other two topics in close conjunction within the poem. The mourner comes close to despair after the maiden has told him that he cannot immediately cross the stream and be reunited with her. The maiden's reply combines the ill effects of inordinate grief and the benefits that one receives when one submits to God's will:

Hys comforte may þy langour lye
 And þy lurez of lyzly fleme.
(357-58)

Another topic that occurs regularly in consolations is that life is a loan. In stanzas twenty-two and twenty-three

¹⁸ Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), p. 80.

of the poem there is ample evidence from the thoughts conveyed to the narrator by the pearl-maiden that her life was not snatched away by an unfeeling God:

Sir ge haf your tale myse tente
 To say your perle is al awaye
 pat is in cofer so comly clente
 As in þis gardyn gracios gaye
 Hereinne to lenge for euer & play
 þer mys nee mornynge com neue here.
 (257-62)

The pearl-maiden tells the narrator that he should not feel the pain of separation too keenly because she is happy now and dwells in a place where mourning never comes. In stanza twenty-three she assures him again that what he lost was but a brief, transient happiness:

For þat þou lestez watz bot a rose
 þat flowred & fayed as kynde hyt gef.
 (269-70)

The poet realizes that the child was never his property; he rejoices that she is now in the possession of her rightful owner, the Prince of Heaven.

Two other topics of particular consolatory importance that are developed in the poem are the exhortation to the bereaved to imitate the virtues of the deceased and the argument that death occurred at the most opportune moment for the deceased. The latter point was particularly

appropriate if the deceased had been snatched away at an early age. All of these topics which had been developed in pagan consolatios were put to use by the Christian writers. The Christian thought at work here is that early death enables a man to avoid the risk of sin. The main idea in Pearl is that it was a positive advantage for the child to die while still in a state of post-baptismal innocence; as an innocent two-year-old she enters heaven immediately.

But innoghe of grace hatz innocent
 As sone as þay arn borne by lyne
 In þe water of baptem þay dyssente
 Þen arne þay borozt into þe vyne.
 (625-28)

The argument in the poem develops the exhortation to imitate the virtues of the deceased. This idea dates back to pagan times and was adopted, with appropriate modification, by the Christians. Within the natural progression of life the older person shows the way to heaven by his virtues. In Pearl, although the child died before she could practice any virtues, the author argues that we must strive to imitate her innocence; the only way to enter heaven is to become as a little child. It is obvious that the pearl-maiden has interceded with Christ on the narrator's behalf, for she states explicitly:

Thou may not enter wythinne hys tor
 Bot of þe lambe I haue þe aquylde
 For a syȝt þerof þurȝ gret fauor.
 (966-68)

The topic appears in *Pearl* in a somewhat unexpected form--the child leading the man--and is an example of how the poet uses his own genius on the well-used consolatory rhetoric.

Pearl contains a number of examples of the consolatory solacia known in pagan antiquity that were adopted by Christian writers. Some of the fourth-century consolatios were available in England during the fourteenth century. Many of the consolatory solacia were employed by the major poets of that century.¹⁹ Surely the *Pearl*-poet, like his contemporaries, drew on the solacia.

Several scholars agree with the basic premise that the most important genre at work in *Pearl* is the consolatio. John Conley discusses a lost tradition that is re-discovered in *Pearl*, the tradition of consolation. He states that the educated person of the Middle Ages would surely have recognized *Pearl* as a Christian consolatio. In his work he makes a comparison of *Pearl* with the Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius. The comparison is weak because the Boethian Consolation is not strictly a consolatio mortis. The article

¹⁹ Ian Bishop, Pearl in Its Setting (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), pp. 24-25.

does make a literary connection between the Boethian concept of the "greatest good" with the understanding of Pearl.²⁰ One critic compares Pearl with some Christian consolations of the fourth century, all of them examples of the consolatio mortis. Watts shows how Pearl and the consolatio are similar in theme, in the inclusion of doctrinal material and in the use of Christian topics of consolation.²¹

Another commentator states that he accepts as proved that Pearl is neither simple elegy nor simple allegory but consolation in the formal and thematic sense of the word. He makes the point emphatically that Christian grief is not pagan grief and that the Christian writers needed a new kind of consolation. This method of consoling leaned heavily toward the use of doctrine. He points out that the Christian consolatio manifests two purposes: first, to soothe the mere humanity; second, to awaken the spirituality of the afflicted.²²

Ian Bishop provides the most detailed study of the genre of Pearl. He supplies abundant evidence on the varied topics

²⁰ John Conley, "Pearl and a Lost Tradition," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 54 (1955), 332-47.

²¹ V. E. Watts, "Pearl as a Consolatio," Medium Aevum, 32 (1963), 34-36.

²² Richard Tristman, "Some Consolatory Strategies in Pearl" in The Middle English Pearl, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 272.

of the consolatio and describes in detail how the Pearl-poet wove them in his poem. He sums up by saying:

On the available evidence it is impossible to be absolutely certain whether or not the English poet was aware of the consolatio as a distinctive genre, although both internal and external evidence suggest that he very probably was. There can, however, be no doubt that it makes better sense of the poem to describe it as a consolation than an elegy.²³

The three scholars mentioned are just a few of the many who agree that there are elements of the consolatio in Pearl. The scholars leave little doubt that Pearl possesses the characteristics and the devices employed by the consolatio. The doctrinal material of Pearl is focused heavily on its main purpose of consolation. In this life all grief turns about the loss of those goods whose very loss proves their mutability; we grieve because we are imperfect creatures. In these terms it would be hard to conceive of a good Christian consoler who did not resort to doctrine in order to fulfill his charge. The good Christian consoler should turn men away from the mutable good toward the immutable good--God himself--for which they yearn. This act is performed admirably by the pearl-maiden, who through doctrine and with much love shows the narrator and the reader that

²³ Bishop, p. 26.

they must not grieve inordinately but must strive to do good and thus earn an everlasting reward.

Through a consideration of religious and generic influence it has been shown that the poet was influenced by his times and also by the environment in which he lived and worked. Within this environment, the occasion of a young child's early death prompted a poem that has never lost its sense of beauty or its appeal.

Chapter Four will concentrate on the poet's relation of technique to content and will examine the interrelationships between the literal statement and the technical means used by the poet.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RELATION OF TECHNIQUE TO CONTENT IN PEARL

In discussing the imagery and diction of Pearl one needs often to allude to both the work's organizational structure and its thematic structure in an effort to show how all these elements unite to make a whole. Pearl is perhaps as highly unified a poem as exists in Middle English. Everywhere it exhibits an interweaving of technique with content. One critic in particular has pointed out that the poem is a work of art in which art and meaning are one.¹

It is generally recognized that Pearl is the most highly wrought and intricately constructed poem in Middle English. Pearl is composed of twenty stanza groups which with one exception number five stanzas each, each stanza having twelve lines rhymed ababababbcbc. The last line of the first stanza of each group sets up a key phrase which is repeated in the first and last line of the succeeding four stanzas. The consistent use of the same word to end

¹ Wendall Stacy Johnson, "The Imagery and Diction of The Pearl: Toward an Interpretation" in The Middle English Pearl, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 32.

five (in one case six) consecutive stanzas along with the linking device of concatenatio, or the repetition, in each stanza's first line, of the last word from the preceding stanza, provides a tightly constructed form of twenty five-stanza groups. The perfection of this stanza linking, which is made a complete circle in part by the echo of the first and last lines of the poem, suggests the roundness of the pearl itself. The stanzas are unified as well as distinguished by this form.

Concatenation is maintained by the repetition of a freely varied refrain in the last stanza of each group, by the use of the same c-rhyme (in the tenth and twelfth lines) in all the stanzas comprising a group, and by the repetition, within the first line of each stanza, of some thematic word from the refrain in the preceding stanza. As a crowning touch, the refrain of the final group in the poem concatenates with the first line of the first stanza, thus fulfilling the self-imposed requirements of the perfect design.²

The device of concatenation contributes to the overall structure of the poem. The importance of the link-words

² Charles W. Dunn and Edward T. Byrne, eds., Middle English Literature (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), p. 339.

to the structure of the poem cannot be denied. E. V. Gordon gives the link-words a place in the thematic structure when he observes that the refrain of each stanza-group underlines the particular stage of thought with which that group is primarily concerned.³ Dorothy Everett expresses the same idea more strongly. Emphasizing that link-words are significant words, she says that the emphasis which certain words receive from so much repetition is rarely misplaced. Most of the reiterated words and phrases are so essential to the poem as a whole that, taken in order, they almost form a key to its contents.⁴ In an article that traces the link-words through Pearl and also shows the importance of the link-words to the structure of the entire poem, O. D. Macrae-Gibson supports Everett's suggestion that the link-words form a key to the whole structure.⁵ The link-words are systematically developed in Pearl and are, therefore, important to the structure and purpose of the poem. They do not represent an insurmountable difficulty to the poet.

Let us investigate how the link-words act as guides through the sermon itself. Through the early stages of the

³ E. V. Gordon, ed., Pearl (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 89.

⁴ Dorothy Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 89.

⁵ O. D. Macrae-Gibson, "The Link-Words and Thematic Structure," in The Middle English Pearl, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 219.

encounter between maiden and narrator, "jewel" and "jeweler" are the link-words; then as the maiden begins to argue with the narrator the word becomes "deme," a term that has several meanings--think; judge; say; expect. By stanza twenty-nine, when the maiden counsels him to give his will to God and to rave not against His justice, the link-word is "bliss." The word "bliss" does not aptly describe the narrator at this point because he is bewildered by death and the vision has filled him with care. He pleads with the maiden to describe her life for him so that perhaps he can understand. The maiden proceeds to describe her soul's marriage to Christ. This description introduces the second large phase of the argument which describes distributive justice; here the link-word becomes "courtesy." As this word is repeated, we are reminded that courtesy connotes a society based on a hierarchy of functions, and certain ideals of social justice. The narrator reminds the maiden that she did not suffer enough to deserve a marriage with Christ. This line of argument introduces the parable of the vineyard. The parable refutes the narrator's notion of justice and is another defense of the absolute nature of God's justice. The link-words here are "date" (time, day) and "more" and they emphasize the fact that it is quantity itself, not specific terms of number, that is being explored.

The healing word now becomes "grace" as the maiden argues that baptism gives grace enough to save the innocent. The Pearl-maiden gives her argument poetic life by linking it with the pearl; only the child-like are saved, or those who sell all they have and buy the spotless pearl--the kingdom of heaven. The pearl and all it represents now become a very integral part of the poem. The poet focuses all our attention on the pearl. Up to now it has been used to lead us through joys, sorrows, discoveries, and to teach us that we must die, seek grace, bend our will; now as we hear the link-word "spotless pearl" again and again we desire to share in its happiness in paradise.

The section of the poem that presents us with a vision of paradise begins with praise of the maiden's purity and beauty. As she describes her Spouse, the link-word becomes "Jerusalem." The use of this word assures us that this is indeed a true vision. It presents an experience that fuses the earthly realm with the heavenly. The poem now leads us beyond grief and sermon to a positive thirst for salvation. Stanzas seventy-seven to eighty-one do more than console us and instruct us; they arouse in us a desire for paradise. The link-words "John the Apostle" signal that this is vision literature. Twenty-one stanzas, one-fifth of the poem, describe the heavenly Jerusalem in John's dimensions. Stanzas ninety-two to ninety-six combine the physical and

spiritual modes of existence in an even more obvious way; they describe a procession of saints led by the Lamb to the throne of God. "Delight" becomes the link-word for this procession. As this delight grows in the narrator we reach the resolution to which the poem has been leading. The delight becomes the longing felt at the beginning of the poem and the narrator, "maddened" by his desire to leap the stream and join the unearthly joy to which all his griefs and discoveries have led him, attempts to leap the stream, and wakes. The link-word works through the final stanzas; the word "paye" comes to mean the dreamer's pleasure and will, both of which have been thwarted yet illuminated by the Prince's "paye," the Prince for whom the pearl had been worthy in line one.⁶

The link-words play an important part in the working out of the theme of Pearl. The poet employed the link-words as aids to guide us through the poem. There is a pattern here that cannot be overlooked; the link-words are not merely used as a stylistic device.

When one speaks of symbolism one usually means something that stands for something else. In Pearl the symbolism is centered in the parables and a few isolated allegories. The image of the pearl is an example of extended symbolism

⁶ Arthur Heisermann, "The Plot of Pearl," PMLA, 80 (1965) 164.

because this image can be traced throughout the poem. Imagery is closely linked with symbolism and can be compared to the part fitting into the whole. Imagery denotes the selection of words for their connotative appeal to the senses. Imagery is the essential characteristic of poetry and of figurative language generally.

The imagery in Pearl promotes the moral purpose of the poem. It is an integral part of the poem, and deals basically with the difference between heavenly and earthly values. The entire poem develops this dichotomy: the earthly, represented by the narrator who clings to the earthly values and must be instructed by the maiden before he realizes that he must relinquish those values and possess the pearl of great price; and the pearl-maiden who already possesses the heavenly values and rewards but wants the narrator to someday join her in her bliss. The entire sermon is filled with imagery depicting earthly and heavenly things, the cities of God and the cities of man. The imagery in Pearl relates closely with the moral values that the poet strives to advocate. A number of critics have simply abandoned both the elegiac and the allegorical approaches to the poem in order to stress the symbolism and the imagery.

For the most part the imagery of the poem can be divided into two groups. The first group contains images out of the

world of growing things, images of the garden and the vineyard, herbs and spices, all things that are associated with the dust of the earth. The second group contains images of light and of brilliant, light-reflecting gems free of any spot and associated with whiteness and with emblems of royalty. This contrast between earthly things and heavenly ones is made explicitly and implicitly. In images and also in stated contrasts the nature of the heavenly and the earthly are probed by the poet. If we consider that the poet's probable intention was to justify a position of reward 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 moves naturally to its conclusion.⁷

In its true definition a metaphor is a figure of speech making a direct comparison of qualities by a complete identification of two unlike things--something is something else. In a broad sense the term "metaphor" is frequently applied to the use of any figurative language. Most of the instances of metaphor in Pearl consist not so much of metaphor extended into a continuous, consecutive narrative as of strands visible only at certain times and places. So the effect is often one of sporadic, rather than of continued, metaphor. One such metaphorical thread results from the author's

⁷ A. C. Spearing, "Symbolic and Dramatic Development in Pearl," Modern Philology, 9 (1962), 8.

conceiving the Kingdom of Heaven as a medieval court and his thinking of Christ as a prince. The most important source of an extended metaphor is the parable of the pearl of great price. This parable found in Matthew 13:45-46 is one of the Gospel's shortest parables; it presents the thought, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it."⁸ The image of the pearl comes from this parable, as does the image of the merchant-man who is referred to as a "jueler." The metaphor of the pearl as representing the heavenly good that the narrator should sell all to possess is extended throughout the poem.

The Middle Ages produced many short religious lyrics. These short pieces tended to use the symbolic consciousness of the age as a total aid for what little power they possessed. They were not well-received and soon disappeared. But there were some long poems that were successful. These reconstructed current symbols within themselves and in so doing gave themselves permanent and unique validity. The outstanding example in Middle English is Pearl. The way in which this poem reconstructed symbols was to incorporate them in an extended dramatic narrative, so that we do not

⁸ The Jerusalem Bible (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966).

have to understand the symbolism immediately but can feel it being built up piece by piece over a period of time. The pearl symbol is not static but dynamic; it develops in meaning as the poem extends itself in time. The meaning evolves with the developing drama of the relationship between the narrator and the pearl-maiden. The whole force and feeling of the poem come from the encounter that involves this human relationship.⁹

Of all the images with which the poem deals the most prominent and the most immediately effective is that of the pearl itself. Just as the medieval bestiaries interpreted allegorically the characteristics of animals, medieval lapidaries interpreted the symbolic qualities of gems; and in these books the pearl, or margarita, is continually cited as a symbol of purity. As a symbol of purity it was often associated with virginity and with the Blessed Virgin herself.

The whole symbolic tradition comes to bear in Pearl; the pearl is here both the maiden whose name could have been Margery or Margarita and the symbol of her spotlessness. She is depicted as arrayed in pearls; she wears upon her breast the "pearl of great price" and upon her head a crown of pearls. At the height of her discourse with the narrator

⁹ Charles Moorman, The Pearl Poet (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), p. 46.

she implores him to renounce the world and to search for his own spotless pearl. In this way, the image of the pearl dominates the symbolism and enriches the perception of the place of the innocent in the hierarchy of heaven.¹⁰

The symbolic use of gems is older than Christian tradition. In St. Margaret of Antioch in Prisdia we find Margarita "pearl" already used as a woman's name in the third century. According to legend she was not born a Christian but her name and cult played a part in the Christian association of the pearl and virginity. Her cult itself was greatly reinforced by the medieval love of pearls and their symbolism; it reached its height in the West in the Middle Ages.¹¹

The image of the pearl acts as a magnet that draws together the various objects and concepts to which it is applied and relates them to the theme, which is the parable of the "pearl of great price." The parable makes the point that the pearl is the one object of supreme value for which the merchant is content to sacrifice all his worldly goods. The primary meaning of the pearl in the poem is that the pearl is the "greatest good" that the narrator must possess

¹⁰ Moorman, p. 47.

¹¹ Gordon, p. xxvii.

before he can enjoy eternal happiness. In this way the pearl is compared to the Boethian concept of the summum bonum. Besides representing the idea of the good itself, the pearl also represents beings who participate in the Sovereign Good such as the maiden. If the narrator can live a good life and practice charity, then when he dies he will be with his pearl and participate in the heavenly reward. This thought of finally seeing his pearl again brings the narrator final consolation and thus fits in well with the theme of consoling the bereaved.

The pearl-maiden wears on her breast the symbol of eternal life which was placed there by Christ. The arrangement seems correct when we remember that only through Christ's redemptive act could those who were without sin attain the pearl of eternal happiness. The relationship between the pearl-maiden and the "pearl of great price" is clearly expressed in the poem; only those who are pearls will obtain the pearl of eternal life. The pearl thus signifies not only innocence but also the innocent who dwell in the Celestial City. We arrive at the conclusion that the pearl typifies both the characteristics necessary to live in the New Jerusalem and that life itself.¹²

¹² D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Pearl as Symbol," in The Middle English Pearl, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 25.

Medieval symbolism has a distinctive character; it is preoccupied with vision and it has a poetic habit of looking through things to sense the eternal. Sensing the eternal through the earthly is the common ground of all medieval art. Modern symbolism lacks this appeal because poet and audience do not think in the same tradition. The medieval artist and his audience knew the same symbols. In modern symbolic poetry the persons and events may be of primary importance and the symbolism of only secondary importance. But in medieval poetry the symbolism may be the main intention. The medieval reader would hardly care whether the poet had lost an infant child to an untimely death. Symbolism was habitual in medieval conception and interpretation.¹³

Some scholars of the poem have sought the key to the meaning of the poem in the question of hierarchy and in the maiden's sermon. The poet uses specific devices to illuminate the doctrine he wishes to impart. It is almost impossible to come to grips with the poem without some understanding of the doctrine argued and the intensity with which it is carried on. The great issues of theology, like the one of the relative weight of grace and merit in the scheme of salvation, were far more alive in the Middle Ages than they are today. Scholar, priest, plowman, knight, and merchant

¹³ Moorman, p. 50.

all lived closely within the Church's sphere of influence; their problems were her problems and her arguments theirs. Medieval literature is filled with argument on theological issues. Medieval theology was by no means a settled question; one has only to read the writings of the Church Fathers at this time to see the amount of pure speculation indulged in by the hierarchy themselves.

When the sermon is examined closely, it appears that the doctrine advocated by the pearl-maiden is slightly heretical in nature. She claims that there is no difference in her reward for a short life and the reward one would receive after a long life that might have been filled with the practice of many virtues. Much has transpired in Church writings and teachings since the age in which Pearl was written. Many of the exegetical works written since then corroborate the doctrine that the pearl-poet puts into the mouth of the maiden. At the time that Pearl was written, however, her revelation was a shocking one, so shocking that the poet deemed it appropriate to devote much of his poem to clarifying that doctrine. The parable of the workers in the vineyard is inserted for just this purpose: to help the narrator to better understand how his pearl could be a "queene" in heaven at such a tender age. The Fathers of the Church agreed, although they differed somewhat in their interpretations, that the sacrament of baptism conferred

saving grace, as the maiden maintains. The baptized and sinless child could ascend straight to heaven and join the holy innocents and virgins who follow the Lamb. But this is quite different from becoming a "queene" and comparing oneself to the Blessed Virgin. Much of the confusion surrounding the theology can be dispelled if one recalls that the pearl-maiden's arguments about doctrine are part of a dramatic structure in the poem. She is presented by the poet as arguing actively in an attempt to break through the narrator's stubbornness and to force him to recognize the truth of the vision. It seems natural that she should to some degree overstate her case and overemphasize some doctrine in her eagerness.

It is difficult to make a clear distinction between allegory and symbolism. It might be useful to limit allegory to narrative, to an account of the events; and symbolism to the use of visible signs or things to represent other things. Pearls were a symbol of purity and innocence in the Middle Ages but this does not make a person who wears pearls or even one who is named Pearl, or Margaret, into an allegorical figure. It is important to make this distinction in Pearl. There are a number of precise details in Pearl that cannot be submitted to any allegorical interpretation; these details are of special importance since they relate to the central figure, the maiden of the vision, in

whom the allegory should be concentrated and without disturbance. The basis for any type of criticism must be the references to the maiden, and to her relations with the dreamer, and no good reason has ever been found for regarding these relations as anything but statements of "fact," the real experiences that lie at the foundation of the poem.¹⁴ The poem in its various allegorical interpretations has come to mean a great many things to a great many men. However, a lack of coherence and consistency marks all of the allegorical interpretations of Pearl. Above all other literary qualities allegory demands consistency. No critic has framed an allegorical interpretation that will function constantly and consistently throughout Pearl.

The poet's use of all these inherited traditions and his application of specific stylistic devices are only parts of the whole and must be dealt with as such. It is certainly not wise to overemphasize any one of them. This overemphasis would only distort the intentions of the poet and the effect of the poem.

The poet uses the narrator as the central figure; we are forced by the point of view that the poet adopts to accept the experience of the vision in terms of its relationship to him. The mind of the narrator in Pearl is the real

¹⁴ Gordon, p. xii.

subject under consideration. It is with the figure of the narrator alone in a garden that the poem begins and ends; it is he who controls the argument with the pearl-maiden; it is for his benefit that the maiden relates the parable of the vineyard and allows him to view the New Jerusalem. Within the dramatic framework--waking world, dream world, waking world--the entire poem is set and through it we are permitted to view the narrator's reaction to the happenings around him.¹⁵

Middle English versification reflects a wide range of tradition and innovation. Alliterative verse, inherited from the native tradition, is represented quite well by the Pearl-poet. The poet's use of intricate patterning and concatenations exceeds the strict Old English requirements. Middle English alliterative verse is sometimes referred to as long-line alliteration. Each long line is divided by a break, or caesura, into half-lines. Each half-line carries two beats and an unrestricted number of unstressed syllables. The half-lines are linked by alliteration between at least one of the stressed syllables in the first half and at least one stressed syllable in the second half. Alliterating consonants must be phonetically identical, no matter how they

¹⁵ Moorman, p. 51.

are represented in spelling; a vowel may alliterate either with itself repeated or with any other vowel.¹⁶

In Pearl the alliterative line is muted and compressed by the rhyme pattern; nowhere in the poem do we find a line ending with the common alliterative run-on word "there-after," which is used no fewer than fifteen times in the other three poems of Cotton Nero A.x. But patterns of alliteration appear in the development of certain passages of Pearl and seem to reinforce certain themes. A largely descriptive stanza, such as stanza ten, has a heavy pattern of alliteration and caesura and a lower alliterative value producing a thoughtful, balanced line.¹⁷

Poetic diction varies with the theme developed; praise of the pearl as jewelry uses the ornate description common to the language of the courtier or the goldsmith; the description of the Heavenly City brings forth the diction of the Apocalypse; the Parable of the Vineyard is rendered in the plain English style recalling Wycliffe's Bible; passages describing nature use an epic diction.¹⁸

Beauty of verse is quite conspicuous in Pearl. The poem is marked by an artistic sense of form, by a shaping

¹⁶ Dunn, p. 29.

¹⁷ Dunn, p. 28.

¹⁸ John F. Crawford with Andrew Hoyem, trans., Pearl (San Francisco: Grabhorn-Hoyem, 1967), p. 118.

of the whole, and by a delicate use of detail. In Pearl the poet rhymes on one sound six times in each stanza, and on another sound ten times in each group. This complicated metrical scheme is handled with the smoothness of high art. As one commentator has noted, no fourteenth century poet other than Chaucer had such wide and sure command of the metrical.¹⁹

There is another kind of unity at work in Pearl. This unity has to do with structure and symbolism. In combining structure with symbolism we produce a symbolic structure which is a stronger type of structure because it is based on some device found within the poem itself. The most typical of these structures is number symbolism, where the structure itself and not merely what is structured is symbolic. There is a numerical structure in Pearl; we do not find it improbable in view of the poet's liking for elaborate and artificial word patterns. In this view the poem would be based on a pattern of 3, 4, 12 reflecting the construction of the Jerusalem described in Revelation 21. Thus each stanza has twelve lines and three rhymes. Each line has four stresses and often three or four alliterating words. Of the hundred and one stanzas, ninety-nine are

¹⁹ Charles Sears Baldwin, Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (to 1400) (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 170.

divided into three groups of approximately equal length plus two as an epilogue. The 101 is made up of 33 in part I, plus 32 in part II, plus 34 in part III, which equals 99 plus 2 to equal 101. The threefold division can also be noted when we examine the mood and subject of each division: the vision, the dialogue, the vision, and all of this set beautifully within the overall framework of waking world, dream vision, waking world. These structural schemes may seem curious and even fantastic to the modern reader, but we must be conscious of them. During the Middle Ages there appear enough cases to call attention to them as exemplifying a distinctive kind of structure, one in which a symbolic concept such as number is used as a unifying principle.²⁰

The special stanza form that the poet chose was felt to be a fitting vehicle for a poem of sorrow and reflective thought; the other examples of this type of stanza form are all moral laments and deal mostly with death. The stanza we find in Pearl is heavily alliterated and contains many significant words. Each stanza increases the feeling of sorrow as each thought is repeated over and over again. Yet in Pearl it is not an actual mournful verse-form. It has a swifter movement and a greater elaboration of refrain and echo than do others produced at this time. The richness of

²⁰ Pamela Gradon, Form and Style in Early English Literature (London: Methuen Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 97.

the vision produces wonder and beauty; the elaborate verse-form lends an emotional excitement which lifts us above the emotional level of mournful sadness. The narrator is left to accept his immediate loss with faith and hope. The verse is so moving that we are carried away with the narrator to feel also that deep sense of consolation at the end of the poem.²¹

In respect to narrative technique the dream vision is somewhat the opposite of romance. A romance may take place in some remote past, and its narrator may be a clerk telling the ancient story "as the book tells it." The dream vision is usually a contemporary event, a personal event related by the narrator who saw everything with his own eyes. Such a narrator is necessarily naive, for the "eye-witness" convention requires that he report only what he has personally seen or heard. His vision is not of an entire history but usually of a limited segment of time that he comes upon in the middle. The poetic credibility of a dream vision depends to a great extent on the credibility and historicity which the poet is able to create for his narrator. The Pearl-poet tells us little about his dreamer; he concentrates instead upon the experience of the vision itself, using the alliterative tradition's method of specification and its use

²¹ Gordon, p. xli.

of a process for organizing these details to make his dream seem like a real experience. Pearl communicates a distinct and poetically credible experience.²²

In Pearl the poet uses twelve-line tetrameter stanzas which have both alliteration and a complicated rhyme scheme. Usually at least three but occasionally only two words in a given line alliterate. The alliteration is not that of classical Old English verse. In Old English verse the third stressed syllable or word is always one of the alliterative words; in Pearl the third stressed syllable or word may or may not be one of the alliterative words. Old English alliterative lines allow for considerable variation in rhythm; in Pearl the lines are quite regular, showing the influence of accentual or accentual-syllabic verse.²³

There is evident reliance in the poem on courtly manners as the ideal behavior, and the influence of courtly love on how men thought and acted. The poet must have been a man of polite education, probably of gentle birth, who knew his courtesy at first hand; the courteous tone of the conversation, the manner, the details of dress, the jewels

²² Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 181.

²³ John Gardner, The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 85.

belong to the aristocratic world of the time. "Cortaysye" to the poet, however, is a gentleness and sensitiveness of spirit pervading personal relationships. The ideas of "cortaysye" and those of religious thought were often interchangeable. Pearl affords an illustration of the basic conception of "cortaysye" which made the interchange natural. The Christian charity of the kings and queens of Heaven is "cortaysye," not only because of the symbolism of royalty, but because "cortaysye" expresses the ideal of gentle behavior which manifests divine charity. Using courtly images to describe devotional and theological aspects of the poem is courtly tradition. As the heavenly scene, in addition to the visionary elements, has all the splendor of the earthly court, so the devotional element gains from the use of the images of courtly love. Even the grief of the father for his child, "fordolked of luf-daungere," as if he were a lover separated from his mistress, gains in imagery from the courtly terms in which it is expressed.²⁴

The scholar who steeps himself in tradition tends to judge Pearl by the standards of the Middle Ages, while the less learned tend to measure it by more modern values and sometimes find it wanting. One must try to avoid both

²⁴ Gordon, p. xxxiv.

extremes. One should attempt to read Pearl with an open mind. To the person willing to take the trouble to acquaint himself with its language and tradition the poetry of Pearl should need no special pleading. The artificial setting is admirably suited to the richness of the jewel of which it speaks. The verse pattern lends a feeling of force to the argument; the refrain in each stanza-group underlines the particular stage of thought with which that group is primarily concerned. Above all is the emotional effect which the verse pattern adds to the feeling of consolation and assuring hope.

CHAPTER FIVE

PEARL IN RETROSPECT

Students and scholars of Middle English literature seem intent on concentrating on systems of symbolism, exegesis, and spiritual and liturgical exercise. All of these traditional methods of investigation convey ideas, and it is the ideas of medieval poetic works that often seem most valuable. Everywhere are found propositions and admonitions: society is corrupt, man is fate's victim, one should bend his will to God's will. Ideas about destiny, justice, and will seem fully comprehensible; they do not differ essentially from the ideas to be found in works of theology, philosophy, and preaching, for they are shaped by the same tools of rhetoric and dialectic that govern poetry. There is such a great concern for discovering the general ideas in a poem that sometimes the analysis leaves one frustrated and disbelieving. Those persons who believe that the key to Pearl is locked in what the word "pearl" meant for readers and writers of the fourteenth century are bound to be disappointed. They will soon discover that fourteenth century imagery could mean many things. There is no definite solution to the problem. Even if one could discover two parts of the

equation, the third part seems just beyond one's reach. One must remember that the poets themselves had to select from among the various ideas given them by tradition and that they might enrich the old symbols with new meanings.

This paper has made an effort to separate, for some sort of inspection, the various sections of Pearl. Now it must recombine the parts. Sometimes one must begin at the ending to see what the beginning actually meant. In analyzing a poem, any poem, it sometimes helps to begin at the total effect or theme and from that conclusion to interpret the separate parts of the poem.

The plan and design of Pearl are simple yet ornate and intricate. They balance the simple and the complex; many of the poem's simple images become complex as the plot advances.

The dream vision is the main genre for the presentation of the poem. Set in a framework of waking-world, dream-world, waking-world it transports us into otherworld. Ultimately the poem brings the reader back to the real world so that he can, with the narrator, struggle and work out his salvation. But two other genres also at work in Pearl are the elegy and the consolatio. The combination of these three distinct genres into a hybrid form is the work of an able and gifted poet. By using this hybrid form the author sets his poem in a framework that his contemporaries could recognize--the dream vision. Then by using the elegy he gives

credence to the doctrine that the Pearl-maiden uses to convince the narrator that she is saved. When he uses the consolatio he adheres to the solacia of many Christian writers of his age. The use of the consolatio affords the pearl-maiden the opportunity to refute the reasons given by the narrator for his inordinate sorrow. By using the three distinct genres he brings both the narrator and the reader a great sense of joy, peace, and consolation.

There is a great deal of controversy over the use of allegory in Pearl. Commentators have considered especially whether the poet intended to be allegorical. They have also attempted to determine how extensively he used allegory. There is allegory in Pearl, but Pearl is not primarily an allegorical poem. To be called purely allegorical the poem would have to sustain one allegorical idea throughout. Although the poem does not present any one allegorical idea, it does in various passages employ the allegorical mode. The first stanzas, in which the narrator laments the loss of his pearl and describes how it slipped through his hand and fell to the ground, are considered allegorical of the death and burial of the lost child. These incidents add to the mystery of the total poem; from their use one may conclude that the poet knew allegory and used it to his advantage.

Chapter Two of this paper concerned itself with rhetoric and the poet's use of the rich rhetorical tradition available

to him. Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Poetria nova was the best known and most widely used of all the manuals available during the fourteenth century. Rhetorical verse was flowering in the late Middle Ages; the poetry of the Pearl-poet, Langland, and Chaucer reflect the many ways presented by the manuals to elaborate poetry. The concerns of abbreviation and amplification, arrangement and organization, style and ornamentation were like building blocks that were used to create poetry that has lasted over five hundred years.

The blending of these elements into poetry called for a new mind and a new approach. The Pearl-poet and his contemporaries were risk-takers. They had discovered an intricate path to greatness, and they were not afraid to travel it. The richness of the images and rhetorical style were evidence of new and exciting attributes not possessed by many works of literature in the fourteenth century. The poetry produced by the Pearl-poet testifies to the thought, care, and creativity that went into its production.

The beauty of Pearl, much of which is attributable to the poet's appropriate application of rhetoric, is discovered not only in the words the poet used or in the doctrine espoused by the maiden. There is beauty in the stylistic conventions used in the poem's construction. The poet's use of technique and ornamentation contributes to the overall success of the poem. The link-words contribute to

the unity of the poem by blending thoughts and ideas. Carried forward partially by the link-words, the theme is apparent from the first line, from the earthly spot where the pearl was lost to the heavenly Jerusalem where that Pearl now dwells. The link-words play a very important role; they cause one to appreciate the intricate structure used by the Pearl-poet.

Symbolism, too, is closely aligned with rhetoric. The poet uses a great deal of symbolism in his poem. He weaves the images into a unified whole, thereby letting us feel the concentrated beauty of the figures. The poem is filled with individual images and image clusters of all kinds. It incorporates images that appeal to all the senses, images of flowers and growing things, of the harvest, of blood and water, of light, of music, of jewels, and of the wonderful comparisons of the city of God with the city of man. Throughout the poem the imagery differentiates between the earthly city and the heavenly city. Man lives in the earthly realm, but he must never forget that it is the heavenly city for which he strives.

The pearl symbolism overwhelms all other symbolism; scholars will trouble themselves forever over its meaning, for poetry deals with human emotions, which are innately mysterious. Most scholars agree, however, that whatever else the pearl means, one of its meanings hinges on the parable

of the "pearl of great price." To console the narrator the pearl-maiden reminds him that to enjoy the bliss that she enjoys he must possess the pearl of great price. He awakens from the vision determined to possess it and ready to do anything that the Lord might ask of him.

Yet again, narrative voice contributes to rhetorical effectiveness. In Pearl the central figure is the narrator. Because of his importance the reader is forced to accept his point of view and his position as rhetorical voice. Everything is seen through his eyes. One finds no omniscient being here to point out what is to be seen or what is to be felt. One travels through the poem experiencing the doubts, frustrations, anger, and final consolation of the narrator. This procedure adds to the mystery of the poem; it also adds to its appeal. The reader can associate freely with the narrator and understand his struggle; the reader can also participate in the consolation.

And yet another contributor to the effectiveness of Pearl is the device of alliteration. The poet's use of alliteration inherited from the native tradition reinforces the themes he has chosen. An alliterative poem differs from a nonalliterative work in vocabulary and meter. One must read Pearl with an awareness of its traditional meter and diction. The forms in which a poet casts his statements reflect the way in which he expects his audience to perceive them.

It bears reiteration that a major rhetorical concern of the Middle Ages was style. The influence of English poetic tradition on the style and technique of the poem is very clear. The tradition least influenced by French practice was the alliterative tradition reaching back to the Old English period, but modified considerably by material and forms of style acquired during the Middle English period. The meter of Pearl comes from the alliterative line modified by the use of rhyme. The poet uses the alliteration of the tradition though not all of the time. The use of alliterative tradition obliges him to adopt the diction peculiar to alliterative poems. This use of the conventions of the native alliterative technique plays an important part in determining the general style of the poem.¹ Through adaptation and creativity the Pearl-poet used his talents to adjust what he found in the manuals of the day, in tradition, and in the environment of his time to produce an orderly, planned narrative poem. He challenged himself by adapting a complicated verse-form that combines stanza-linking by echo and refrain. The highly artificial form required skill and finesse to bring it to fruition. It is to the poet's credit that the linking words not only unify the various passus but add to our enjoyment of the poem. In sum, Chapter Two

¹ E. V. Gordon, ed., Pearl (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. xxxv.

establishes the rhetorical consciousness of the Pearl-poet even as it analyzes his excellent employment of rhetoric. In addition, it suggests the role of genre in rhetoric.

The paper then begins to consider the sources of the poem and how the choice of source material influenced the poem. The full use of his sources indicates to the reader that the poet was conscious of a source's influence on a work. We look to the Pearl-poet's creativity to weave the source into the overall theme.

The dominant religious and generic influence on Pearl was the Book of Revelation. The principal source was the Vulgate Bible; the poet displays a knowledge of all parts of this version. There are three passages to which the poet pays particular attention: the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), the vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:10 and 22:7), and the procession of the virgins following the Lamb (Revelation 24:1-5).

The Apocalypse of St. John seems a favorite with the poet, who draws many allusions and images from the book. The poet uses scriptural authority as fully as he can. He uses direct quotations whenever he can; his frequent use of Biblical texts and authorities has tended to make some scholars believe that he himself was a cleric. There is argument for and against this supposition, but most scholars agree that although he was probably not a cleric he was a

deeply religious man. The poem reveals a true poet and true man, a person of warm response to physical beauty who was deeply religious and thoroughly human.

There are other sources that influenced Pearl. Some of these sources can be traced to ancient times and come with their own degree of creativity. Serious source studies of Pearl began in the late nineteenth century. Scholarship is such today that the reader understands more fully how and why the works of a certain period affected each other. The reader knows, for example, that borrowing was a means of complimenting a man's work and that an author needed to rely on tradition in order to convince his audience of his authenticity.

The genres that the poet used also acted as a source of influence. This paper sought to prove that the genre of the consolation had a great influence on Pearl. The Pearl-maiden systematically shows the narrator the way to consolation by dealing with each solacia, or topic of consolation, that the narrator brings to her attention. She leads him to a state of peace and consolation so that at the closing of the poem the narrator's thoughts are not of himself (as they were in the opening section) but of the whole body of his fellow-Christians. He wishes that not only his own pearl but all members of Christ's Mystical Body may be precious pearls to Him.

Medieval literature was filled with doctrinal material. It is to the Pearl-poet's credit that his doctrinal material never seems too heavy with doctrine. The use of doctrine was quite evident in Pearl, but it is never overbearing. The sermon that the Pearl-maiden preaches to the narrator in order to convince him of God's goodness is filled with doctrinal material. This doctrinal material is focused heavily on the poem's main purpose of consoling the bereaved. The pearl-maiden's arguments are based on Scripture and the theological teachings of the age. With great care and with much love she shows the narrator how he is at fault for giving up hope and grieving inordinately. She leads him toward consolation in his loss and shows him how he too can obtain eternal happiness.

The doctrine-filled sermon in which the maiden instructs the narrator may be divided into three parts. Between stanzas twenty-one and thirty-four the narrator is asked to accept certain general truths about God's justice, and he is told to be meekly reverent. Between thirty-five and sixty-two, he discovers that grace, earned and given, is the means by which God works His justice for men. Finally the lecture approach is dropped between stanzas sixty-three and ninety-six and the dreamer is shown, through a moving vision, the rewards of justice and grace.

The sermon which makes up the bulk of the poem is necessary because it pursues the doctrinal theme; it arises directly from the grief that the narrator experienced in the beginning of the poem. This grief imparts a deep feeling and urgency to the whole discussion. Without the theological argument the grief would never have risen above concern for earthly joys. Dramatically the sermon represents a long process of thought and mental struggle. It is through this sermon and the ensuing vision that the narrator is moved through grief to acceptance of his fate and finally to consolation. In the sermon ideas are introduced and challenged in ways that affect the narrator, and the reader, in both mind and heart. This sermon leads to the poetic climactic vision that confirms the doctrine.

The tone of the sermon is struck at once when the maiden says to the narrator, who thinks he has recovered his lost pearl: "Sir, *ge haf your tale myse tente*" (257). Here is to be no argument but rather an enlightenment from ignorance.

In her sermon the Pearl-maiden lays three charges against the narrator's question about her identity and the world in which she abides: first, it is folly to mourn those who are out of this world and in bliss; second, it is folly to grieve at the passing of that which is transient by nature; third, it is folly to call one's fate a thief because to do so would be to blame the cure of one's misfortune.

These ideas are basic solacia for the pagan consolatio. More specific Christian terms such as baptism, grace, innocence, and righteousness emerge later in the poem to complete the familiar foundation for a Christian consolatio. At first the narrator seems consoled as the maiden begins to speak to him, and he desires to rush across the stream to be by her side. She then tells him that to do so would be madness. His desire to be with her shows his lack of faith and his dependence on his own powers; he must ask for God's grace and remember that he must die before he can cross over. The narrator discovers a paradox here: to find the pearl is as painful as to lose it. Ideas and motions within the sermon move the reader toward the climactic desire that ends the vision--to leap the stream, all doctrine forgotten.

The narrator awakens from his dream still grieving and somewhat regretful that his leap prevented his learning more mysteries but still happy for the pearl. Doubts and misgivings commonly conclude dream-visions. By closing his action in the garden, where it began, the poet emphasizes the change that has taken place in the narrator. The narrator was desolated by the grief which began the poem; by going through the action he is consoled and strengthened. The reader feels that his health, his capacity to work out his salvation, has been restored by the experiences of the

vision. The poem's solace is the truth the narrator has learned: God is good, He is shown daily to us in the Eucharist, and He has granted us the destiny to be His servants, His pearls worthy of His "paye."²

It is not surprising that the major part of the sermon should concentrate on what is necessary for the narrator's own salvation. It is fitting that this Christian consolation should introduce at the climax of the sermon, and at the heart of the poem, not only an assurance that the maiden is saved but also an indication to the narrator of the things necessary for him to receive the ultimate consolation.³

I contend that the final "feeling" that one receives after a reading of Pearl is one of peace and consolation. I believe that the Pearl-poet used his talents and his gifts to slowly and methodically work toward that feeling of consolation. The narrator who comes to his senses and awakens from his dream is a totally different man from the bereaved figure one meets in the beginning of the poem. He is no longer the jeweler who complains about his loss and cannot understand what is happening to him. He no longer bemoans his state. He is consoled, he feels satisfied, he is ready

² Arthur Heisermann, "The Plot of Pearl," PMLA, 80 (1965), 15.

³ Ian Bishop, Pearl in Its Setting (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 48.

to do all that the maiden has suggested. He understands where she is, and most importantly where he belongs and how he should act. When a person is consoled by another as logical and as clear-thinking as the maiden he cannot help but feel at peace. Certainly the narrator is informed now, as the reader is, about mystical and even theological questions because he is assured that his pearl is not lost but that she enjoys the Beatific Vision.

General ideas, whether they appear in actions, symbols, or direct propositions, cannot be understood apart from the poem which introduces them. It is the art of the poet which controls and creates all the parts of the poem: its structure, action, argument, characters, language. All of Pearl's art is devised to urge acceptance of certain ideas about will, death, and justice. The poem carefully defines those ideas as it leads the reader slowly and methodically to accept them. One must concentrate on the control and movement of all the poem's parts if one is to understand how ideas as such help determine the action. Pearl's ideas come to us only with the speed and direction provided by the work as a whole; considered apart from the whole the ideas cannot be said to have any poetic existence at all. It is not fair to the poet when we ignore the poetic art that moves us in order to ponder the wisdom of the poet's ideas. All the

poem's parts should be considered before we evoke a judgment on the poem's effectiveness.

The various approaches to Pearl and the many articles written about the meaning of the pearl have illuminated many passages of the poem and have revealed one important fact: the pearl itself suggests multiple meanings. In spite of the pearl's ambiguous meanings, I believe there is something else at work in the poem, a general emotion that is created through discoveries and disappointments. There is a logical progression of action, character, and plot at work in Pearl. The poet makes a concerted effort to have all the ideas in Pearl work toward a feeling of consolation.

In the very beginning of the poem we observe that the poet does not attribute meaning to this pearl that he has lost. Since dream-visions conventionally begin with mysterious anxieties, it appears that the poet's mystery is deliberate. He gives us a reliable narrator who seems worthy of our sympathy but who withholds vital information about the cause of his grief. This withholding provides narrative suspense and leads the reader to feel along with the narrator and to wonder who the pearl might be.⁴

In stanza three of the poem the poet is already planting ideas about consolation.

⁴ Heisermann, p. 164.

Flor & fryte may not be fede
 Per hit doun drof in moldez dunne
 For vch gresse not grow of graynez dede
 No whete were ellez to wonez wonne
 Of goud vche goude is an by gonne

(29-33)

Thus the poet counsels: be consoled; decay feeds growth; the order of nature demonstrates that nothing good is lost forever. The pearl is such a good seed that nothing may wither in the garden where it fell and the narrator grieves. The poet begins to convey the sense of loss, and to pose the problems, from which the argument of the poem will arise. In successful works such as Pearl the poet presents strong emotions only obscurely justified by ideas or symbols; he might leave a residue of mystery that will intrigue but not annoy because the poetic argument is resolved within terms of the initial problem. In Pearl the problem is the sorrow of the narrator over the loss of a pearl. Its terms are more emotional than intellectual. The sorrow must be strong enough to affect the reader yet open enough to allow exploration. When the narrator is in need of vision, the reader will follow him to pursue the mystery. The reader comes across a scheme of character and action which evokes discoveries, and in these discoveries emotions are not separable from thoughts. The adventure ends when the narrator, having seen the cause and cure of his sorrow, accepts his fate.

Reason and idea play their roles in this resolution and lead grief to consolation.

There is a pattern in Pearl of joy and sorrow, discovery and disappointment, puzzled questions and consoling answers. The more specific poetic features of the poem--the figures of words and thought, the rhetorical devices, the ideas presented in symbols and allegories--are all governed by this thought: that the poem works as a whole.

The initial appearance of the Pearl-maiden presents another problem, the problem of whether the poem is an elegy. In Pearl the two functions of the elegy--to praise the dead and to console the living--are evident, but somehow the poem moves beyond that strict definition. Pearl consoles the living and praises the dead by showing the Pearl-maiden to be exalted in paradise. Her mourner is consoled not only by visions of her bliss but by direct instruction cast in the sort of sermon popular at that time. Pearl seems to bring changes in the principal elements of the elegy, and to treat them in the structure of a dream vision. We can appreciate the art which weaves together these two great strands of convention. Reading the poem we discover that the poem itself is less elegy than consolatio.⁵

⁵ Heisermann, p. 168.

In both his choice of form and his choice of subject the Pearl-poet is a traditionalist. To call a poet a traditionalist is not to call him unoriginal. It should be understood that, generally speaking, a poet of the fourteenth century wrote for an audience not for himself or for posterity. In practice poets frequently put together extremely familiar materials in new ways to produce new results. Thus the Pearl-poet relied on many sources to produce something strikingly new, Pearl.

Poetry speaks its own language and inhabits its own realm. Each poem, be it long narrative or short lyric, contains its own particular message. The message which Pearl contains may be as tiny as the pearl itself or as large and wide as the heavenly Jerusalem it describes so well. It is the story of a journey, as each man's life is the story of a journey. It is the story of two cities: the city of God and the city of man. It is the story of man's struggle to determine how he can live in one city in order to deserve to live in the other. It tells the story of man's endless struggle with death and grief and of the age-old struggle to leave the cocoon behind and fly away as the butterfly. The perfect circle of events and discoveries somehow clasps onto itself in the end to prove a point: man does not drastically change his attitudes in regard to sorrow; he only changes his perspective. The narrator who

willingly accepts his fate and the fate of his pearl is the same man who complained bitterly of his loss. He is the same man, but a change has taken place. He now understands much more about life and death and how they both work constantly for each human being. He has experienced the Paschal Mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus, in his own life; now he is consoled and content to wait out his turn in this earthly city.

The various components of the poem contribute to the highly effective structure. Each piece fits cohesively into another, completing the thought and the picture. The circle is complete when the narrator is content to accept his fate. I believe the message in Pearl has not changed with the centuries that have passed since the poem's creation. The message is eternal, just as the promise is eternal: when one has discovered the pearl of great price he should go and sell all to possess it.

Art. 102

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