The Self Mourning:
Reflections on *Pearl*

By David Aers

I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere

(Pearl 11)

But when I love you, what do I love?

(Augustine, *Confessions* 10.6.8)

... one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost.... This indeed might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him.

(Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia")

I wish to begin by recalling the treatment of mourning, melancholy, and suicide in the last two books of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The subject of that catastrophe was a chivalric hero whose identity, as I have argued elsewhere, involved a particular discourse of love. This discourse assumed models of gender, individual identity, and community which were intrinsic to ruling elites. It hinged on producing a sense of lack which was to be met by distinctive forms of erotic desire bound up with a complex web of courtly language and behavior. To this process a minutely organized construction of gender roles is essential, a topic whose analysis has been enabled and encouraged by wide-ranging developments in feminist scholarship over the last twenty years.

One of the most marked features in Troilus’s love, even before Criseyde has to leave Troy, is its combination of perpetual anxiety with a total dependence on the female as the one who could allay this disturbing lack. The masculine position becomes that of needy, hungry, and vulnerable person, the feminine that of nurturer and physician, the source of life-giving plenitude. So fundamental is this structure of desire and identity that even when Criseyde has become a prisoner of the Greek army it continues to determine Troilus’s perceptions. He still attributes to this isolated and deeply perplexed woman the

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power to give him health or sickness, life or death, demanding that she, a lone
woman, escape from the armed camp into which the Trojan males have traded
her. The reality of the woman's situation, and her well-grounded "distresse,"
the reality of her "otherness," these never become matters to which Troilus
attends. Solipsism, contrary to D. W. Robertson's view, is thus not a peculiarly
modern phenomenon.³

Troilus cannot mourn for the loss of Criseyde in a way that allows a detach-
ment from his idealized image of her, an idealization that has been one of the
traditional ways of controlling women in the interests of masculine self-identity.⁴
Fixated on the fantasy object he calls Criseyde and dominated by a memory
that refuses to accept the contingency of what is now the past, turning it into
a ghostly presence (for example, 5.512–616), his mourning turns to melancholy
and the search for "death in armes" (5.1717–18, 1805–6). Whether the spirit
of this suicide does well to laugh at those fulfilling the ceremonies of mourning
at his own death is something I doubt, but do not intend to pursue here.

Instead, I want to discuss the ways in which a contemporary poem handles
the self in mourning when the self is, unlike Troilus, a Christian, and the poem,
unlike Troilus and Criseyde, gives consistent attention to Christian teaching and
iconography in a Christian, rather than pagan, setting. When I began thinking
about this topic, I expected Pearl to provide a sharp contrast to the dynamics
of love, loss, mourning, and suicide figured forth in the courtly and chivalric
pagan hero of Troilus and Criseyde. I also expected it to provide a version of
community which would foreground specifically Christian ideas of the Church,
even, perhaps, the kind of mystical social body that certain religious historians
see as a hallmark of pre-Reformation Christianity.⁵

Before giving my own reflections on Pearl's treatment of loss and the self in
mourning, perhaps a brief indication of the main lines of critical interpretation
should be offered.⁶ A prominent strand has treated the poem as one, to quote
from a book published in 1990, that culminates in "a mystical union with God,"
a study in developing "desiderium for the Divine," of "human desire finding its
ultimate meaning in his [the narrator's] own espousal to God." Similarly a book
devoted to Pearl in 1983 treats it as a "sacramental" poem, "breaking out of
profane time and space and intruding upon absolute reality." It shows us, so
the work claims, "God in his apocalyptic form," while the narrator experiences

³ Troilus and Criseyde, for example, 5.1415–20 and 1594, in The Riverside Chaucer, gen. ed. Larry
D. Benson (Oxford, 1988): all references to and quotations of Chaucer are from this edition. For
an explicit example of Robertson's characteristic assumption that solipsism is a peculiarly modern
problem see his essay, "Some Observations on Method," in Ralph Cohen, ed., New Directions in

⁴ Aers, Community, pp. 139–40, 144–46; on courtly representations of women, see Kay (cited in
n. 2), and Joan Ferrante, Women as Image in Medieval Literature (New York, 1975).

⁵ The classic modern exposition of this is John Bossy's works, especially, "The Mass as a Social
Institution, 1200–1700," Past and Present 100 (1983), 29–61, and Christianity in the West, 1400–
1700 (Oxford, 1985). For some necessary correctives see Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: The Eucharist
in Late Medieval Culture (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), and "The Eucharist and the Construction of

⁶ In The Gawain-Poet (Cambridge, Eng., 1970), A. C. Spearing gave a lucid survey of criticism up
to the time of his own book (pp. 127–30).
"ecstasy" in his "unitive attempt," although he finally "fails in his quest to penetrate divine mystery as a fore-step to his union with God." This is the line taken in an edition and translation published in 1984, where readers are told that the "Beatific vision" is "eventually realized." Such recent readings have plenty of antecedents. But the poem has also drawn a different interpretive tradition. Its focus is on the dramatic and rhetorical movements of the poem, and it tends to make the "theological aspect" less prominent, seeing Pearl as a religious poem predominantly about "human love . . . in the light of death." This second tradition focuses on the narrator's "inability to relinquish old ties" and sees the poem's conclusion as an achievement of "practical consolation," of "acceptance" of death in which the narrator shows "selflessness and fatherly affection." A third line may be emerging, predictably enough, as 1988 saw the publication of a "deconstructive" reading—albeit one whose use of this term seemed to owe very little to the work of Derrida and his literary critical epigones. Although my own debts are most extensive to the second tradition of interpretation, especially to the works of A. C. Spearing, the teacher who introduced me to the poem, no one writing on the poem today will do so without obligations to many scholars from the first tradition who have furthered our ability to read this poem.

Death is a massive challenge to human identity, the disclosure of an utter powerlessness framing our will to control others, our environments, and our selves. Death shatters networks in which human identity is created and sustained: we mourn, inevitably, for our selves and the unwelcome reminder of the contingency of all that gives us a sense of identity, the reminder of the precariousness of all that we habitually take for granted. Pearl is a poem that confronts these challenges through the masculine narrator, unlike Troilus, a Christian participating in Christian traditions and, presumably, their institutions. If, as one of Pearl's most skilled readers observed, it is "explicitly a religious work, as none of Chaucer's poems is," what differences will this make to the interplay

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between love, masculine identity, mourning, melancholy, and suicide so brilliantly explored in *Troilus and Criseyde*?\(^{10}\) Will the differences be solely at the level of explicit doctrinal commentary, or will they be more pervasive, more intrinsic to the work's minute particulars?

The poem's opening presents a narrator identified as a mourner, his language one of intimate feelings. As a host of critics have demonstrated, this language is the conventional language of the courtly poetry of love evolved over the preceding two centuries.\(^{11}\) Using the present tense, the narrator tells us that he is pining away, grievously wounded through the power of his love ("I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere").\(^{12}\) He records that in the loss he mourns he has experienced such grief that he no longer finds any peace (51–56). Nor is this surprising, for the lost object, he remembers, used to dispel any discomfort he experienced while increasing all his well-being and happiness (15–16). In his memory she thus takes on exactly the meaning Criseyde had for Troilus. And just as Troilus blamed the imprisoned Criseyde for his grief, telling her she remains responsible for his survival, or for his death, even so the narrator in *Pearl* blames the dead human being, the ground of all his bliss, for abandoning him to his lonely mourning (330, 371–72, 241–48). In this familiar courtly language the lost object fulfills the traditional feminine role of nurturing life source; she is the man's essential physician without whom his life becomes a disease, a nightmare of emptiness and tormented dreams, the state which was explored by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* and in the *Book of the Duchess* and, in its more self-righteously violent outcomes, by Shakespeare in *Othello*.\(^{13}\)

But if the narrator's mourning is inextricably bound up with the courtly dynamics of masculine identity and desire, he is nevertheless presented as a very isolated figure, within and without his dream. Indeed, he can only be identified as belonging to a particular kind of community by his language, the language of a courtly elite. The time of year may be harvest time, the day a festival in August (39–40), but we have no sign of the writer participating in a corporate

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10 Spearing, *Dream Poetry*, p. 113.


12 *Pearl*, line 11: in future, line references in text. On this line see Gordon's note, p. 46, and Andrew and Waldron's, p. 54; for an interpretation that already spiritualizes the utterance by way of Song of Songs 5.7–8, see Kean, *Pearl*, pp. 16–18.

13 I have examined this aspect of *Troilus and Criseyde* in the essay cited in n. 1; on *Othello* in this connection see especially Coppelia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley, 1981), chap. 5, and P. Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories," chap. 7 in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson and others (Chicago, 1986). I can make no sense of P. M. Kean's assertion that "the poet of *Pearl* was, obviously, not concerned with profane love" (p. 236, n. 8): there seems to me no point at which the narrator's love is shown to be other than "profane"—were it already sacred love, the theological virtue and gift of charity, the poem would lack a subject! Nor is the narrator even on a Neoplatonic ladder of ascending love, the kind that fascinated Dante and Spenser.
act of any kind, whether sacred or profane. This isolation cuts him off from the past and present communities of the Church, communities in which traditional resources are encountered—and contested. It is as though the courtly language has become autonomous, a substitute for human communities. As with Troilus, such isolation begets a use of reason which readily can be turned against traditional religious orientations, led as it is by the individual's suffering will (53–56). This turn should not encourage critics to produce easy judgments that this is "sin," "stultitia," and "reprehensible," or to attack the narrator because "He wants pity, not bracing doctrine." Such judgments are likely to take one's attention off the crushing pain we experience in the loss of those we love, pain that is replete with complex psychological and theological implications which Pearl sets out to explore. Had the poets of Pearl or Troilus and Criseyde or Hamlet or Lycidas been content with homiletic commonplaces, we would not have inherited their profound and distinctive explorations of loss and mourning.

In Pearl the "I" mourns for one who has been wrapped in clay, imprisoned ("spenned") in earth (22–23, 53). As he does so, he falls on the grave where he thinks the lost pearl lies, identifying as closely as possible with her through the very prison that encases her (57, 59). In this action we see how we may try to become that which we mourn. This is the catastrophe of identification that for Freud was one of the signs that the work of mourning is failing and the dangerous state of melancholy being entered. Falling on the grave, the narrator falls into a deadly sleep ("a slepyng-slaȝte") on the precious and lost pearl (59–60). This sudden and overwhelming sleep is not the death that the melancholic Troilus seeks, the death of the suicide who has come to treat himself as the object, identifying the hostility he feels against the lost with himself, destroying

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14 On the "hys seysoun" see the note in Andrew and Waldron, p. 56; to this should be added J. P. Oakden, "The Liturgical Influence in Pearl," pp. 337–53, in Chaucer und seine Zeit, ed. A. Esch ( Tubingen, 1968), here p. 350.

15 If so, it may have affinities with Paul Zumthor's structuralist account of court lyrics, in Essai de poétique médiévale (Paris, 1972); but if it did have such affinities, in the overall movement of the poem they would be subjected to a very critical moral and spiritual vision.

16 Respectively, Nolan, Gothic, pp. 164, 178; Conley, Pearl, pp. 66–68 (reiterated by Cherniss, Boethian Apocalypse, p. 158) and pp. 53–54; Ann Wood, "The Pearl-Dreamer and the 'Hyne' in the Vineyard Parable," Philological Quarterly 52 (1973), 9–19, here p. 15. On this heavily judgmental line, see the excellent comments by Davenport, Gawain-Poet, pp. 9–11; Astell, "Mourning and Marriage," is especially helpful here in her treatment of St. Bernard's public weeping for his brother; see also Kean, Pearl, pp. 233–37.


18 See "Mourning and Melancholia," pp. 251–68, in Sigmund Freud, On Metapsychology, vol. 11 of the Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth, 1984), here especially pp. 258–61; for Freud's suggestive linking of narcissism and mourning/melancholy, which also seems relevant to the courtly material under discussion, see pp. 259–60; also of interest is Melanie Klein's "Mourning" in The Selected Melanie Klein, ed. Juliet Mitchell (Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 146–64, and the fascinating studies by Fradenburg and Sacks cited above in n. 1.
the choice of his desire but simultaneously showing that the lost object (of his fantasy) retains its power and overpowers him.\(^{19}\) Although the narrator's posture figures forth both identification with the lost pearl and death, it leads to a dream ("sweuen," 62) which gives him time, space, and provocation to change, to redirect his being from identification with the dead person, to redirect his love. It is a most gracious gift, an "auenture" for his spirit in God's grace (61–63). How does the mourner relate to this opportunity, one which the tortured dreams of Troilus never offered?

The landscape into which he is immediately thrown is consoling and stimulating, drawing him away from the fixation on death and the dead.\(^{20}\) Unfrozen, he begins to experience joy, to forget his grief as his memory's hold over him is loosened (see 85–88, 92, 101, 123–28, 133–36). Significantly, he feels nourished: "As fode hit con me fayre refete" (88). There may, then, be other sources of nourishment for him than the lost pearl. Yet this new, liberating state, with its strange refreshment, has some curious outcomes for the dreamer. Firstly, it does not involve attention to the creator of either the landscape or himself. Not for this Christian the dialogue with creation we find in the Confessions:

And what is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said: "It is not I." I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession (Job 28:12f.). I asked the sea, the deeps, the living creatures that creep, and they responded: "We are not your God, look beyond us." I asked the breezes which blow and the entire air with its inhabitants said: "Anaximenes was mistaken; I am not God." I asked heaven, sun, moon and stars; they said: "Nor are we the God whom you seek."\(^{21}\)

The dreamer is certainly not criticized for the absence of such questionings, and yet, in so explicitly a religious work, the absence is noteworthy: it tells us something about the dreamer's orientation and suggests that at this point he himself has no sense of being on a quest. It may, perhaps, also suggest a basic problem about religious art, one which worried many Christians across the centuries and was often made a topic for reflection. For while Christian art may move the hearer to devotion, as Augustine describes his responses to songs and hymns in Confessions 9.7.14, its form may also create a pleasure which is an end in itself, and then, Augustine writes, "the music moves me more than the subject of the [sacred] song; I confess myself to commit a sin deserving punishment, and then I would prefer not to have heard the singer" (10.33.50). Or, in the terms of a later elegy, art may "interpose a little ease," but this ease may actually entice "our frail thoughts to dally with false surmise."\(^{22}\) Be that as it may, the Pearl poet shows the dreamer enjoying a delight which seems not at all directed to God. Its function seems akin to the psychologically recuperative landscape entered by the melancholic narrator in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess (291–444),

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20 On the much-discussed landscape, see Kean, Pearl, pp. 89–113; Bogdanos, Pearl, chap. 3; Davenport, Gawain-Poet, pp. 29–32.
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a landscape received in a thoroughly secular way. Yet there is something tricky here. The landscape apparently destroys his grief (124) and offers him more bliss than he can tell: yet because of that ("Forby"), he begins to think of Paradise across the water, thought which begets new longing—"And euer me longed ay more and more" (121–44), the link-words in this section being "more and more." Bliss has generated a new sense of lack in the dreamer even though this has definitely not been in response to any theocentric yearnings, at least none that were conscious or identified by the poet. So much "loueloker" does the other side now become in his fantasy that he actually ceases to enjoy the blissful place he is in, and becomes restless and anxious (148–52). His desire has shifted from the lost object, detached from the missing pearl on whose grave his body still lies, and reattached itself to this unknown land across the water.23 In a way, this move encapsulates the deflection of desire that is necessary if the mourner is not to become the suicidal melancholic Chaucer figures forth in Troilus, driven by the obsessive will to identify with the lost love in a rejection of all mediations, a desire which, as we observed, therefore becomes one for the end of all mediations—death. The dreamer is now prepared to risk the dangers, and any unwelcome consequences, for the sake of increasing delight (149–54), although this desired joy is not at all specific and, still, not at all oriented to God—which is not to say, of course, that "Gode3 grace" (63) is not mysteriously at work.

At this moment of newly formed desire premised on a new sense of lack, the dreamer suddenly sees, beyond the water, a bright cliff and at its foot a human, both child ("a faunt") and a "mayden of menske, ful debonere" (155–63). He recognizes her immediately: "I knew hyr wel," and as he gazes he knew her "more and more" (165–68). Here, so it seems, is direct encounter with the lost subject of his mourning, she who could annihilate all sorrow (15), she who can now make his joy in the landscape vanish into a new longing bound up with new joy and fresh anxiety (165–83).24 What precisely is the new "dred" (186) he now feels even as he finds the lost object, a dread that, he writes, grew greater even than his longing (181)? The fact that it is "so strange a place" (174–76) in itself cannot be the answer, for his earlier response to the strange world he entered was a pleasure which liberated him from his memory of her death and his loss. What troubles him now is the combination of change and continuity as his quiescent memory is reactivated. For the vision of the child/honorable maiden has immediately catalyzed a regression to the old longing. With this resurgence of the old desire, inevitably, comes a double fear—the fear that "so strange a place" may signify unknown changes and, decisively, the fear of loss, the fear that she on whom he now gazes will elude him again:

23 On this land as the earthly Paradise, see Kean, Pearl, pp. 89–113.
24 Bogdanos, Pearl, p. 73, reads the simile which compares the anxious, confused, and stunned dreamer with a hawk in a hall (lines 183–84) as one designed to emphasize the "unblinking stance of the bird" and its "predatory" nature—thus stressing the dreamer's "rapacious possessiveness toward the Maiden." This seems to be based on a misunderstanding of what happens to hawks when they are in halls: the point of the simile is to highlight not the power of the creature but its confused, dazzled, controlled impotence—hawks in human halls have been turned from birds of prey into either domesticated upper-class fowl (under the falconer's control) or targets. So the dreamer notes, "More ben me lyste my drede aros" (181).
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I dred onende quat schulde byfalle,
Lest ho me eschaped þat I þer chos... . . 
(186–87)

But just as Criseyde graciously unfroze the male paralyzed with anxiety in *Troilus and Criseyde* (3.1123–34), so the female figure here takes the initiative which will free the male from his anxious fixity, moving towards him in a gesture which seems to confirm his previous identity in relation to her (189–240).25 He responds with joy to the person who “watʒ me nerre þen aunte or nece,” never pausing to wonder about possible symbolism in her crown or “royal” clothing, or of the “wonder perle wythouten wemme / Inmyddes hyr brestʒ” (191–224). Nor does it cross his mind to relate this strange encounter, the maiden or himself, to God: the experience of recovering the lost object of his memory seems, for him, total and sufficient.

The ensuing dialogue has been analyzed by Spearing in two superb studies of *Pearl*, and the following comments on this part of the poem are set within the framework of understanding he has established.26 My particular concern is with the way the dreamer’s identity in the dialogue entails certain strategies in relation both to the female figure and to time, time past, time present, and time future.

In noting how extensively critics have demonstrated the foundational role of the courtly discourse of love in *Pearl*, I pointed out that this discourse served as one of the markers required in the cultivation of masculine identity in the dominant social classes. It is now in terms of just this discourse, and the relations of power it carried, that the dreamer seeks to shape the dialogue with the maiden. This design turns out to present him with considerable difficulty. First he must address the strangeness of the situation and what he registers as her new and very superior social status. In accord with her royal dress (191), he finds her manner appropriate to duke or earl, everything about her indicating a member of the court’s own elite.27 He deals with this by asserting continuities with the past and invoking the received structure of gender relations to subvert her apparent superiority to him. He reasserts his possession of her (“my perle,” 242: cf. 24, 48), and quite as readily as the males in *Troilus and Criseyde* perceives female being purely in terms of male needs.28 He also assimilates the present moment to his previous lonely mourning in a way whose striking resentfulness has been commented on by most readers:

Art þou my perle þat I haf playned,
Regretted by mnyn one on nyste?


26 Spearing, *Gawain-Poet*, pp. 134–66, and *Dream-Poetry*, pp. 119–26. Also see Wilson, *Gawain-Poet*, p. 21; I have much sympathy with Astell’s reading of St. Bernard’s grief here (see n. 7 above); Kean, *Pearl*, p. 235, also used St. Bernard here.

27 On these social issues see Spearing, *Gawain-Poet*, pp. 154–58, 162–65; Gordon too is helpful, *Pearl*, pp. 56, xxxiv.

This memorial passage sets up the version of the past at the core of his mourning, a memory of a longing for the time when “we wern at on” (378). His strategy is to draw her into acknowledging the reality of this memory. Once she does so, the fantasy of the past can frame the present relationship in a way that will allow him to continue the familiar masculine role that combines rhetoric of worship with the practice of controlling female identity to fit the idealizations and demands of male language. As in *Troilus and Criseyde*, issues of identity, gender, and power are inseparably linked in the discourse of love.

We also find, as in the case of Troilus in the last book of Chaucer’s poem, that memory can bestow a kind of pseudoeternity on the past and on the individual who is remembering that past. Displacing the remorseless passage of our own lives, memory can ward off the recognition of irreversible change. So here the female who, in her own words, “wat3 ful song and tender of age” (412; see, too, 483), can be frozen into a subordinate dependency on the narrator, whose own identity is, in turn, confirmed as substantially unchanged. She remains “my perle,” and he remains the controlling jeweler, the man whose identity is bound up with appraising and setting gems. For such a memory, that the pearl has actually come from processes of generation in an ocean beyond all human control is something that does not impinge. After all, “*Margarita . . . haþ þat name margarita* for it is yfounde in schellis and in schellefishe of þe see. It bredib in fleissh of schellefissh and is somtyme yfounde in þe brayn of þe fissh, and is ygendred of a dewe of hevene þe which dew schellefish fongeþ in certeyn tyme of þe þere.”29 It is this mysteriousness, the beyondness of her genealogy, that the dreamer’s memory cannot recognize.

This is, plainly enough, an issue with considerable theological consequences. It seems that the way the dreamer seeks to use his memory is as a defense against our awareness that we are continually verging on nonbeing, a defense against our real acknowledgment of change, a defense against our own fragile contingency.30 Memory can console us by fixing the past in a present which offers us the illusion of our own timelessness, a pseudoimmortality in which we seem to control space, time, and those whom we summon up in remembrance of things.

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Using memory in such ways may encourage a consoling denial of our transience, which is at the same time a denial of our creatureliness and, necessarily, of God as understood in Christian traditions, "Creator of all things." This defensive use of memory is probably familiar to everyone, while the illusions it can foster may also be recognizable to most of us. And yet, the memory is crucial in the search for God, as St. Augustine displayed in his own dazzling meditations on its nature, that "vast and infinite profundity," that "awe-inspiring mystery" which he called "the very seat of my mind." The problem then is, how could one come to renounce the illusions fostered by the defensive uses of this "power of profound and infinite multiplicity," uses (abuses) so natural to us and the disassociations intrinsic to our condition? This is a puzzling question which I shall take up—it is one Pearl could not avoid.

At the moment, however, the dreamer's defensive use of memory is resisted by the female he has encountered, one more akin to Shakespeare's Paulina than Chaucer's Criseyde. She refuses to collude with his memory of a lost state of harmonious union and rejects his invitation to re-create it: "Sir, se haf your tale mysetete" (257). She insists on the reality of change and loss but presents them in processes of transformation which are essential to the individual's teleology (258–76). In doing so she looks to a state where there is no longer "mys nee mornyng" (262). This may seem a utopia that anyone would want, but it does not much impress the dreamer. Tenaciously he reasserts his memories and defines final bliss as life with the maiden in lovely groves, a life he now hopes to begin. His fantasy here is like the ancient and defeated Lear's vision of an eternity spent with the daughter he though he had lost, one where they will be "two alone." This is a fantasy of total possession, as many commentators on Pearl have observed. Once entertained, it negates the otherness of the loved person and encourages a stance which denies the other as a distinct subjectivity with whom differences exist, ones to be negotiated as between fellow creatures. This kind of negation, with the male in the dominant position from which to negate the other's subjectivity, is, in fact, endemic to the courtly and romance traditions of love, ones that pervade Pearl.

Once more the female figure strongly resists the man's fantasy: "Wy borde

I echo Shakespeare, Sonnet 30.

Quoting Ambrose's hymn used by Augustine in Confessions 11.27.35; see, too, 10.6.9–10.


See Confessions 8.10.22.

On the image of rose and pearl, Kean, Pearl, part 2, chap. 3; also Bogdanos, Pearl, pp. 74–81.

King Lear 5.3.8–19, in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and others (Boston 1974). On this aspect of King Lear there is an illuminating study by C. Kahn, "The Absent Mother in King Lear," chap. 2 of Rewriting the Renaissance (see above, n. 13).

For example, Wilson, Gawain-Poet, pp. 32, 35–36; a movement away from this state is argued by most critics, like Davenport, Gawain-Poet, pp. 16, 18; and Spearing, Dream-Poetry, pp. 122–28. I myself cannot detect clear marks of such a movement—though not through lack of trying.

This can be seen across the centuries, across massive economic and social changes, from Troilus and Criseyde, to Othello and Jacobean drama, to Mills and Boon! Useful here is Toril Moi, "Desire in Language," in Aers, ed., Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History (Brighton, 1986).
3e men? So madde 3e be!” (290). With this she sets out to give him a lesson in the discourse not of the courtly lady he insists on seeing but of the clerical tradition, the magisterium. Her teaching includes an attack on the dreamer’s empiricism and on basic assumptions which, in her view, unself-consciously deny both creation and fall, together with the fruits of that catastrophe (291–324). It is along these lines that the poem will answer the question I posed earlier—namely, how can the memory’s defensive and illusionist practices be reformed? The answers will be both psychological and theological. Not yet, however; for the dreamer does not want to go down the paths she is preparing. He interrupts her, hoping to reestablish the courtly discourse of love she has so rudely disrupted. He tries to induce a sense of guilt in her, trying to make her see herself as a failing female, one whose refusal to fill the received role of female love object causes him great pain. As he does so, like the mourning Troilus and like Lear, he insists that he will fulfill his fantasy of reunion with the lost female (325–36). But instead of taking up this discourse she warns him that it could lead to greater loss than any he has so far suffered. She spells out his obligations to God and, in the voice of clerical authority, tells him to shift his desire from her and from his fantasy of the past onto God and the mercy that, she insists, are the sole comfort for his sorrows, the sole adequate response to his “languor” (337–60: cf. 11). But her orthodox teaching demands a transformation in her listener that teaching alone cannot bring about. No homily, however forceful, can bend the will of another. And so the narrator continues his resistance, prefacing it by a moving confession of the crushing weight of loss in his heart (361–65). Doggedly he reasserts her role as both love object and symbol of his own completion. Putting all responsibility for his grief onto her, in an idiom that is the one deployed by Troilus or Othello, he identifies the woman as the source of all his joy and all his grief (368–77). Once again memory has an important role. He invokes his memory of their previous harmony, striving to control the present and the future through this move (378–82). In the face of this, and of his observation that the woman is “grounde of alle my blysse” (372), his claim that Christ’s mercy, Mary, and John are “be grounde of alle my blisse” (383–84) seems a purely tactical concession, a formulaic compromise to facilitate both the continuation of the conversation and his own concerns within it. Nevertheless, it does lead into a question that did not occur to Troilus, to Palamon and Arcite, to Othello, or to Leontes: a question about her life, “What lyf 3e lede” (389–96). Whatever his difficulties, whatever his much-discussed limitations, this signifies a shift towards a recognition that the female figure has an

39 It seems to me that the neo-Jungian readings in Paul Piehler, The Visionary Landscape: A Study in Medieval Allegory (London, 1971), chap. 8, and Astell, “Mourning and Marriage,” occlude the traditionally masculine, rational, and authoritatively theological nature of her discourse: they dissolve this since they foreground her apparent femininity in a Jungian framework where she represents the allegedly denied feminine “anima” of the dreamer, one who thus represents a split off “animus.” This, ironically, imposes the sexual stereotyping of Jungianism, a system that remorselessly duplicates traditional sexism even as it seeks “integration,” onto a poem that actually resists and supersedes that system: I recommend more attention to Galatians 3.28 and less to Jung or the dreamer’s fantasies on this matter. For a powerful study of the male difficulties here, see Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World (London, 1976).
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existence beyond his fantasy and, especially important in the terms of the earlier discussion of memory, an existence beyond his memory. Given the pressures of the discourse of love that shapes his identity and his perceptions, this shift is not nothing. It could lead to a recognition of the female as a fellow creature, recognition that men have traditionally found difficult to make. It is not surprising that this shift elicits approval from his teacher (397–408). She celebrates her changed circumstances, changes which highlight the distorting effects of the mourner's fixation on his past in a memory that would control her present. She does acknowledge their shared past, but places it in a context which is necessarily alien to his memory.

However, the dreamer is now not happy with this celebration of her changed life. The comedy in his responses to the maiden's attempts to accommodate her beatific experience to his (our) assumptions has been well analyzed by Spearing, and here I only wish to recall the social and cultural dimensions which he discussed. The dreamer displays another basic constituent of his identity—a competitive individualism which was basic to the culture of honormen and their courts. So deeply rooted is this outlook that he confidently rejects her vision of a noncompetitive Christian community, unaffected by the fact that it is a vision St. Paul had prepared him for (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12.5–10; Eph. 4.4, 5.29–30; Col. 1.18–20) and one that his own Church celebrated in its central Eucharistic symbolism (409–92). The dreamer automatically projects onto the City of God the realities of social and political life among the elites of his world, ones crisply summarized by royal Arcite's comment to his best friend become rival:

... at the kynges court, my brother,
Ech man for hymself, ther is noon oother.
(The Knight's Tale 1181–82)

This refracts what Richard Green's indispensable study of literature and the English court in the late Middle Ages describes as "the cutthroat competition for household advancement." It may also be relevant to see the dreamer's response to his celestial teacher's use of Christ's vineyard parable (590–600) as displaying the kind of individualistic and rebellious assertiveness with which ecclesiastic authorities associated Lollardy and its effects on lay Christianity: did not Lollard use of Scripture, and talk about the priesthood of all believers, suggest that the only criterion for sound exegesis was individual conscience? If this was so, as Archbishop Arundel and orthodox clergy maintained, "the logical outcome of such a view in practical terms is anarchy." After all, he tells her that he finds her unusual

42 Green, Poets and Princeplesers, p. 134.
but orthodox use of Christ’s parable “unresonable,” insisting that it would make Scripture “bot a fable” (590, 592). Against both her and Christ’s parable itself he produces one verse from the Psalms, a verse whose profoundly threatening aspects he confidently ignores (595–96), displaying just the kind of egetical individualism and subjective willfulness the hierarchy feared.

His teacher continues her effort to deal with his desire and the lack it seeks to fill, always trying to direct him away from his fantasy of herself to a different source of nourishment (607–8, 645–56). It is at this stage, in the face of apparently intractable resistance, that she offers the poet’s distinctively theological answer to the question about how the memory could be freed from its attempts to create a pseudoeternity from the past and a pseudoimmortality for the anxious ego. Only through God’s grace, through divine activity in particular histories, can these specious consolations be renounced. Only with the help of grace can human creatureliness, mortality, and death be truly remembered and confronted. In this memory the Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection are the only past that is always present in a way that reflects, not illusion, but ontological reality: “pe grace of God is gret innoghe” (601–12, 636–60). This turns memory into a perpetual recollection which becomes a radical, Christocentric, and openly future-oriented reorientation of the self. It is in such a theological vision that Augustine’s meditation on memory in the Confessions concludes with the death of Christ, the redemption in his death, and its perpetual memorial in the sacrament of the Eucharist (10.43.70).

On the basis of this teaching she presses him to accept the symbolic meaning of the term he has chosen for her. This is a major move in her struggle to encourage a transference of his neediness and desire from his memory of her in some lost unity with him towards the pearl in Christ’s parable (Matt. 13.45–46). This transference, according to her, involves the most challenging threat to his identity, one akin to death itself: namely, to “forsake pe worlde” (729–44). No wonder the teacher’s teacher emphasized the role of “fear” in blocking reception of the parable and its vision (Matt. 13.15). And no wonder then that the poet should continue to focus on the forces of psychological resistance to the maiden’s teaching. It is shown that he still insists on maintaining his courtly figurations, ones in which he can remain in the comforting security of his familiar identity as courtly poet of love, keeping her in the equally reassuring and equally familiar role of unavailable love object (745–56). So internalized is this structure of perception that he naturally projects it onto the City of God, just as he still projects courtly and competitive individualism (769–80).

The struggle between teacher and narrator continues along these lines, with her trying to dissolve his version of the self, of community, and of the City of God (781–936). In this sequence the poet gives one of the more comic indications of the intransigence underlying the dreamer’s increasing humility to her when he describes redeemed souls as “So cumly a pakke of joly juele,” all courtly


45 Once more I find Spearing’s commentary the most persuasive: Gawain-Poet, pp. 162–63.
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ladies needing walled dwellings and manor houses (913–32). The dreamer's identity and discourse seem fixed in a structure solid enough to resist the maiden's analysis and persuasion to radical change. Despite this, he is given a new showing, "bur3 gret fauor" (968), of the Christ mediated by the maiden. He is enabled to reach an implicit identification with St. John (985–86, 996–98, 1008–89, 1019–21, 1032–34, 1053–54), a "fauor" that is emphatically not a matter of merit but an eloquent reminder that "be grace of God is gret innoghe" (section 11). Here the poet suspends dialogue and with that the exploration of the dreamer's inferiority (977 ff.). Instead of this inferiority we are given a spectator whose specific subjectivity is suspended, the "fleschly hert" (1082, 1090–92) so prominent in the poem temporarily and miraculously set aside. The poetic mode in this version of the New Jerusalem becomes static, schematic, diagrammatic, and, mostly, impersonal, a stylistic shift that seems perfectly appropriate for this spectatorial sequence. Even though the link-word in section 19 is "delyt," this is represented in an externalized mode that contrasts sharply with the treatment of the dreamer's earlier mourning and joy.

This mode is disrupted in the final stanza of section 19. Having just seen a vision of Christ as the wounded Lamb of God (1110–12, 1129–44), the dreamer suddenly catches sight of the lost object with which his poem began, the memorial source of all his "blysse" (371–72; see also 330, 373), she who "wont wat3 whyle deuoyde my wrange / And heuen my happe and al my hele" (15–16). Yet this is also she who had labored to transform his memory and convert his identity. Nevertheless, as soon as he sees this teacher in the heavenly procession the iconic, spectatorial mode is exploded. The dreamer reclassifies his celestial teacher as "my lyttel quene," feels the familiar "luf-longyng" (1147, 1180; cf. 11), and considers crossing the forbidden water (1145–52). The possessive pronoun and the adjectival diminutive in "my lyttel quene" are certainly terms of "affectionate" intimacy. But in the contexts established by the poem, they are also expressions of his will to control her form of life, his will to fulfill his own fantasy, and to reverse the long passages in which he has been the "lyttell" one receiving catechistical instruction from one of the redeemed, a generous Bride of the Lamb. The self that has mourned for her in such grief has not, it turns out, made a conversion of desire to the Lamb. As P. M. Kean observed: "The Dreamer's eyes, however, soon leave the Lamb, to focus on his following, and then on one particular figure." It was certainly not when he saw the Lamb that he tried to cross the prescribed boundary. On the contrary, his former identity reaffirms itself and with this his desperate desire for the untransformed object of his mourning. Just as the poem opened with his courtly mourning—"I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere" (11)—so now the sight of the person he can only see as "my lyttel quene" caused ("gart") him to resolve to

46 Finely discussed by Spearing, Gawain-Poet, pp. 162–65.
47 The exception to the "mostly impersonal" is at lines 1138–40.
48 Kean, Pearl, p. 221.
49 Kean, Pearl, p. 21; see pp. 221–22, 227–30.
50 This fact seems oddly overlooked in readings that argue for the dreamer's ecstatic quest for union with God at this stage, as is done in the studies of Bogdanos, Astell, and Blenkner cited in these notes (see 7 and 8 for references to the works).
wade into the forbidden water, for “luf-longyng” (1149–52). Written with great sympathy, this passage nevertheless represents the power of the unregenerate memory, one quite unaffected both by the maiden’s lengthy teaching and by the more immediate vision of the Passion he so recently pitied (1135–40).

In this regression the poet figures forth a movement that involves a failure to complete the work of mourning. Here his celestial guide proves no more able to help him than the very worldly Pandarus was able to help Troilus. Ignoring the Eucharistic vision and its divine center, and ignoring, too, the female’s new reality, the dreamer is driven by a blinding psychological compulsion (1153–70), one that in retrospect the narrator describes as frenzy, as madness (1154, 1165–67; compare 1170 with 346). The melancholy Troilus, cut off from the woman whom he experienced as the source of his life, had sought death: suicide was the only conclusion to a mourning he could not develop into any form of relative detachment from the Criseyde of his memory (5.1697–99). The Pearl lover, too, determines that either he will possess “his” pearl (certainly he is not pursuing the symbolic pearl of Matthew 13 to which she had tried to lead him) or risk death in the attempt, “To swymme þe remnaunt, þas I þer swalte” (1160). His longing is to terminate desire in the full possession of its (fantasy) object, a possession that dispenses with all mediations, all negotiations, and all language. It is a longing that dispenses with God and the tradition into which the maiden sought to steer him. The defiant readiness to die in his transgression of boundaries so clearly given him by that tradition signifies a kind of suicide, an analogue to Troilus’s, one that the tradition he defies would treat as a sin against Justice.\(^{51}\)

For the man in Pearl, however, his actions, like Eve’s defiant exultation in book 5 of Paradise Lost, took place in a dream, a “veray avysyoun” (1184) which is a gift “in Gode3 grace” (63). And although a dream may well manifest anxieties and overwhelming wishes to transgress divine commands, as Adam says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Evil into the mind of god or man} \\
\text{May come and go, so unapproved, and leave} \\
\text{No spot or blame behind}.
\end{align*}
\]

(5.117–19)

When the narrator wakes on the grave where he had dreamed, his response seems thoroughly penitential (1171–1200). How does this penitential development relate to his recent mode of being, to the memory and desire which drove him so compulsively?

Most commentators write about a new acceptance of loss and of God’s inescapable will, although some see no marked change and a few, as noted earlier, attribute a state of mystical enlightenment to him, an attribution it will be plain enough that I have not found plausible.\(^{52}\) Interpretations which focus on the

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51 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II–II.64.5; Augustine, *City of God* 1.17, 1.20.

narrator's new resignation imply that the poet imputes to him the deflection of desire and the reconstitution of memory he had been unable to achieve either before his dream or within it. Had he continued in this state his fate would have been that of Chaucer's Troilus or Ovid's Narcissus. Now he seems to abandon the fantasy of unmediated possession of the lost object, an achievement which it is one of the purposes of all elegies to facilitate. In Spearing's words, "Now at last he can give his pearl to God, with a father's blessing" (1207–8), entering a state in which his "thoughts are not of himself (as they were in the opening section) but of the whole body of his fellow-Christians" (1211–12). So although he still experiences a "longeyng hevy," still laments, and still feels imprisoned in sorrow (1180–81, 1187), he accepts human limitation and the maiden's lessons concerning God's will (1189–1200).

Coherent and justified as such interpretations undoubtedly are, I wish to comment on one particular strand in the poem's penultimate stanza. Here the narrator maintains that visionary joy and knowledge of God's mysteries was removed from him because he, like humankind in general, coveted more happiness than he was entitled or able to have (1189–90, 1195–98). However correct this generalization about our inability to accept limits to pleasure, it is a little off the mark as a description of his own motivation as we have been shown it. For the motivation in question was not simply that he refused to accept limits on his delightful insights to "mysterys." As we have seen, right up to the end he was choosing to set aside the revealed Lamb of God and to choose, instead, her whom he still classified as his own "lyttel quene," the object of his old "luf-longyng" buried in his memory. This is not a matter of boundaries or of degrees on some kind of ladder of perfection. It is rather a question concerning the form of memory and kind of desire. By assimilating his choice to a generalized problem of human insatiability the narrator has made the nature of his dream transgression less disturbing. It is, after all, far more worrying to discover that despite all the careful efforts of benevolent guides we have chosen a destructive way than it is to find that although our impetuosity has tripped us up, we are on the right path. Discovering the former may lead us towards Augustine's powerful meditations on the theological implications of the destructive habits of the will in the eighth book of the Confessions. For example:

I sighed after such freedom, but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another (hence my term a chain), a harsh bondage held me under restraint.

53 For a relevant medieval definition of elegy, see John of Garland, Parisiana poetria, ed. and trans. Traugott Lawler (New Haven, 1974), lines 366–67, pp. 102 and 103; and see Sacks, English Elegy (above, n. 1), preface and chap. 1.
54 Spearing, Dream-Poetry, p. 129; similarly, Wilson, Gawain-Poet, pp. 32–33, 38, 45.
55 For reflections on this burying alive, see Fradenburg, “Voice Memorial” (above, n. 1), pp. 174–75, 181–85.
56 8.5.10; see, too, 8.9.21–8.11.27.
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From this moving and characteristically acute analysis of the difficulties of self-transformation, the theological path to Augustine’s later anti-Pelagian stress is open. As for Pearl, it is a poem centered on sustained resistances of the mourner’s “wretched wylle” to the “kynde of Kryst” (55–56), resistances we have observed him sustaining into the final section (20). If any poetic exploration of the will leads back to the work of the mature Augustine, this one could. And yet by displacing the particular problems of the narrator’s memory and will into a statement about humankind’s general inability to accept limits to happiness, the poet turns away from the path to Augustine, simultaneously displacing the searching problems his own text has raised and explored so brilliantly. This apparently enables him to proclaim that those who strive against God’s will are simply “mad” (1199–1200), and more stunningly, that to please God or be reconciled to him is very easy for the good Christian:

To pay þe Prince oþer sete sa3te
Hit is ful eþe to þe god Krystyn.
(1201–2)

This seems theologically superficial and psychologically superficial.57 The reassuring invocation of “þe god Krystyn” not only sets aside theological issues but also searching difficulties the poem itself has raised. If even after lengthy instruction from one of the saints a Christian showing no signs of unusual viciousness turns away from a direct vision of the Lamb of God in an act of defiant rebellion, what sense can it make to talk of “good” and “easy” in this context? The poem has done more to make a reader turn to comments such as St. John’s: “If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth” (1 John 1.8). These are some of the difficulties so troubling to Will in Piers Plowman as he comes to recognize how the “soþest word þat euer God seide was þo he seide nemo bonus” and that there “is noon wiþoute defaute.”58

Pearl’s final ten lines offer an intimate confession of faith in the gracious benevolence of God (“a frende ful fyin”) and an assertion that the work of mourning and its transference of desire to God, the transference we did not see in the vision, is completed. Finally the narrator turns to Christ, whom the “preste vus scheweʒ vch a daye” in the Eucharist, enabling all to become his “homly hyne / Ande precious perles vnto his pay” (1208–12).59 It is this final turn to the Eucharist and the Church that prompts Spearing’s observations about the narrator’s thoughts now being “not of himself (as they were in the opening section) but of the whole body of his fellow-Christians.”60 Yet this observation actually highlights the extreme individualism that has been part of the narrator’s identity not only “in the opening section” but throughout the poem. Some of the relevant aspects have been noted above, such as his incor-

57 I am aware that many learned commentators have responded differently here—for example, Kean, Pearl, pp. 231–32.
59 Spearing, Gawain-Poet, pp. 169–70.
60 Spearing, Dream-Poetry, p. 129; see, too, on the Eucharist, Bogdanos, Pearl, pp. 145–47.
rigibly individualistic and competitive version of the City of God, his version of the loving self, and his extraordinarily confident and individualistic exegesis of Scripture. At no point in the poem did the narrator show any awareness of the Church, let alone belief in it as the sacramental form of Christ’s body, the Christian community. As we saw, he briskly discounted St. Paul’s famous depiction of variety and unity in the community that is the Church, overruling the maiden’s own experience of the New Jerusalem in favor of the competitive individualism he seems to know so well (457–92, 771–80). Even when she reminded him of Christ’s parable of the vineyard, one he encountered every Septuagesima Sunday, he showed no interest in the way the vineyard traditionally figures the Church. Instead he simply reasserted his habitual individualism, here in terms of God’s obligation to reward labor (590–600), a breathtakingly confident Pelagianism. In fact the poem displays a mental universe that is far removed from Langland’s persistent concern with Christian community and the networks of obligations he seeks to recall in the face of contemporary forces that put them in question. Unlike Piers Plowman, this poem (and not just its dreamer) does not pay attention to the way that the individual’s encounter with Scripture and Christ takes place within the Church, a Church that is both bestower of sacraments and historical institution belonging to the contemporary social fabric (compare, for example, Piers Plowman B 11.115–24). This seems part of a pervasive individualism which contrasts not only with the traditions of Christian Aristotelianism, in which the political and social nature of humankind is seen as basic, but also with Augustine, who remarked:

We give a much more unlimited approval to their idea that the life of the wise man must be social. For how could the city of God (concerning which we are already writing no less than the nineteenth book of this work) either take a beginning or be developed, or attain its proper destiny, if the life of the saints were not a social life?

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61 See the study of the changing conceptualizations (and religious experience) here by Henri de Lubac, Corpus Mysticum: L’Eucharistie et l’Eglise au moyen âge, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1949). There is an extensive bibliography of relevant material and important discussion of late-medieval developments in Rubin, Corpus Christi (above, n. 5).


64 Although the judgment is based on a seriously misleading view of the Church and patristic authority in the Reformation, as well as on a strange oversight of the role of liturgy, traditional exegesis, and iconography in Pearl, it is interesting to recall the impression of one of the outstanding literary critics of medieval poetry that the Pearl poet shows “a flavor of protestantism in that his overt theology is not much a matter of the Church, the Fathers, and the Doctors, but rather depends much on Scripture”: Charles Muscatine, Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame, Ind., 1972), p. 40; for liturgy and Pearl see especially Oakden (cited in n. 14).

To agree that *Pearl* is concerned with particular loss and mourning does not
dissolve the issue I raise here since there are many different ways in which the
human self may mourn and relate, in mourning, to the community in which
she lives. Indeed, as Ann Matter observes in her fine study of medieval exegesis
on the Song of Songs, an exegesis traditionally preoccupied with forms of love
and individual response, “the love between Christ and the soul is intimately
connected to the life of the Christian community; even Mariological readings
never forget that the figure of the Virgin Mary is the type of the Church.”  

Do the stanzas on the New Jerusalem qualify the perspective offered here?
One might expect that a poem making such dazzling use of traditional Christian
iconography would involve the Church in its symbolism of the Bride of the
Lamb and the “cyty of grete renoun, / Jerusalem so nwe” (986–87). As Augustine
and Matter remarked in the passages just quoted, the life of the saints is social;
“the love between Christ and the soul is inevitably connected to the life of the
Christian community.” Yet *Pearl*, even in its representation of the life of the
saints, does not devote attention to this traditional understanding. The Church
continues to be a haunting absence. Of course, we do hear the visionary’s
concretely empirical questions about manor houses for the redeemed, ones
worthy of Milton’s materialist heaven in *Paradise Lost.* But to the poem’s end,
the dreamer’s “luf-longyng” shows no sense of relatedness to anyone but the
object of his desire—and that, as observed earlier, is not the processing Lamb
of God on whom he bestows three lines of pity before turning away (1138–40).

After the dreamer’s desperate bid to reach the maiden is frustrated, four
stanzas remain. In these the narrator draws a moral from the recent crossing
of his will (1174–1206). This moral also remains in a markedly individualistic
framework where relations to God are unmediated by the Church, in its ter-
restrial or celestial form. Even the strange claim that it is “ful epe” to be
reconciled to God as a good person is made without reference to the Church’s
mediation of grace, traditionally seen as central in Christian processes of re-
generation and redemption, tradition fiercely defended by a Church under
challenge from Lollardy in the late fourteenth century. Only in the last five lines
does the poet explicitly invoke the Church and the body of Christ in the Eu-
charist, moving, as Spearing wrote in a passage just quoted, from his habitual
“I” to an unusual “us,” a pronoun at last linking his spiritual life with that of
the community in which he encounters sacraments and Scripture. But coming
at this point in such a diminutive way it is no part of an attempt to give belated
attention to his Church, or to the relations between individual, the communities
shaping his identity (especially the court, with its discourses of love), and the
sacramental institution. So although the haunting absence I have discussed is
now brought into the story, it cannot, in the poem’s totality, be other than

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66 E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*
(Philadelphia, 1990), p. 86; Astell unfortunately lacks this perspective altogether in her *Song of Songs
in the Middle Ages* (above, n. 7).

67 For examples of Milton’s materialist heaven, see his angels’ digestion, 5.432–46; his angels’
sexual practices, 8.618–29; and the description of war in heaven in book 6. For his theological
defense of this view, and his related mortalism, see his *Christian Doctrine* 1.13 and 1.7, translated
Reflections on Pearl peripheral. (Nor is it possible here to make the familiar moves which would show the pervasive force of that which is supposedly marginal, thus superseding these terms, moves which, in certain contexts, are politically essential.) A sharper contrast to *Piers Plowman*, once more, is hard to imagine, for there the Church, its sacraments, and its contemporary practices are pervasive and passionate topics for reflection. This comparison, in my view, can help us appreciate that despite the closing reference to Eucharist, to priest, and to our potential participation in the communion of saints, the poet's preoccupations have been thoroughly individualistic, and his invocation of Corpus Christi extraneous to his shaping concerns—psychological, spiritual, and theological. So it is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This does not in any sense comprise a criticism of his Church, and it certainly bears no relation to Lollard attacks on the Church. Yet its silent marginalization of the Church in such a profoundly Christian exploration of loss, mourning, memory, and the grave difficulties in any transformation of the self may, perhaps, have posed a deeper challenge to traditional Catholicism in the long run than Waldensianism or Lollardy. But whether any such large-scale ecclesiastical, theological, and cultural issues should be discerned and analyzed, whether the absence I have commented on has more in common with the very different Christian forms of Lollardy than with the diverse orthodoxy of Nicholas Love, Margery Kempe, or *Piers Plowman* remains, for me, a very open question.

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