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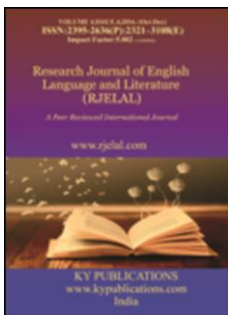


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UPROOTING THE CROP OF TRUTH AND THE ROLE OF *CONSCIENCE*:
THE DISSOLUTION OF ORDERING PRINCIPLES IN *PASSUS XXI* AND *XXII* OF LANGLAND'S *PIERS
PLOWMAN* C-TEXT AS SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF THE TEXT'S *PROLOGUE* AND *PASSUS I*

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ABSTRACT

Modern critical responses to William Langland's fourteenth century dream vision *Piers Plowman* have often struggled with the text's difficulty, apparent disunity, and convoluted thematic development, or attempted to clarify its development of ideas and narrative through comparison with the theological, political, and artistic issues of Langland's contemporary world. However, an analysis of the text's concluding two sections, or *Passus*, in reference to the *Prologue* and first *Passus* of the poem provide the reader with indications of Langland's unified purpose in asking and answering questions about the possibility of social and spiritual unity in a troubled world. Additionally, by focusing on the allegorical personification of *Conscience* and that character's role in the redefinition of meaning and subjective spiritual struggle in the text, the reader is able to understand that what appears as a lack of unity or focus in Langland's "thesis" is actually symptomatic of a desire to create a wholly subjective and independent experience of the spiritual journey with which Langland's narrative concerns itself.

Key Words and Fields including English Literature, Medieval Literature, and Critical Theory

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In *Passus XXI* of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the protagonist Will falls asleep during an Easter church service and experiences his seventh dream-vision of the text. In it, he witnesses what we might assume is an allegorical narrative depicting the establishment of a "better" church for a "new" world, illustrated by a community planting a crop of Truth, building a barn called Unity, and then being suddenly attacked by Pride and other members of the military retinue of Antichrist. The community seeks refuge in the barn, at the urging of *Conscience*, only to devolve into petty squabbling and, in the eighth dream-vision of *Passus XXII*, to be infiltrated by friars compacted

with Antichrist himself. The scene turns into utter mayhem. While our hope at this point—so late in Langland's narrative—would be for a final rally and victory of the forces of "good" over the forces of "evil," we are confounded by a dissolution of the besieged community and the decision of *Conscience* to pack up and hit the road in search of *Piers Plowman*; at which point, the dreamer Will awakens and the poem simply ends:

"By Crist," quod Conscience tho, "y wol bicom
a pilgrime, And wenden as wyde as the world
regneth To seke Peres the ploughman, that
Pruyde myhte destruye, And that freres hadde

a fyndynge, that for need flaterenAnd
countrepledeh me, Consience. Now Kynde
me avenge,And sende me hap and hele til y
haue Peres ploughman."And see the he grade
aftur Grace tyl y gan awake. (Passus XXII. 380-
86)ⁱ

While lines 382 and 384-85 indicate a hope that "*Peres the ploughman*" will be able to defeat Pride, it is simply a suggestion of a sequel which we never receive. Putting to one side the vague possibility that Langland's C-Text is an incomplete and radical revision of his earlier B-Text, as B was of A, and keeping in mind that the last two *Passus* of both the B-Text and C-Text are relatively similar, it is more likely that what we encounter at the conclusion of C represents some form of intentional openness in Langland's narrative, in keeping with both the consistency and alterations which differentiate his C-Text from his B-Textⁱⁱ. What we are left with then, is not an unfortunate lacunae, but a frustration of our expectations of the text.

Central to the reader's negotiation of Langland's deconstruction of stability, and the key to the utter collapse of the fledgling agrarian New Eden at the text's conclusion, is established in the interdependent journey of Will in the text's beginning (*Prologue* and *Passus* I) and the characterization and role of the allegorical figure of *Consience*. If we can accept that our confounded expectation is an indicator of a break in pattern—a pattern *not* subscribed to by any single text but rather imposed from outside the text by one ascendant cultural norm or another—then it becomes possible to encounter breaks in pattern as an opportunity to learn a new way of reading; Langland's break with expectation is a textual moment where the text calls to the reader to realign their *readerliness* in order to learn once more how the text teaches us to read it. Additionally, the notion of realigning the lack of closure in relation to occurrences earlier in the text is not an invalidation of *Piers Plowman's* autonomy, but quite the opposite. It is exactly the practice of close and reflexive reading one might expect from students of English composition, who, having lost their way in an essay under scrutiny, are encouraged to return to the text's introduction and consult its thesis statement.

Of course, this approach to understanding the poem presumes a degree of confusion arising as the average reader of medieval texts—if such a person

exists—comes to the tumultuous conclusion of Langland's poem. This requires no stretch of the imagination; especially in light of the tendency of scholars in the last century to devote so much energy towards developing approaches to Langland's text which either illustrate his failed structuring of narrative and theme, as in the cases of C. S. Lewis (1936) or John Lawlor (1957), or to seek clarification of the poem's success through reference to intellectual or cultural traditions outside the text, such as those accomplished by D. W. Robertson Jr. and Bernard Huppé (1951), or David Aers (1975), to name several of the most influential studies. In each case, the aesthetic and intellectual analysis of Langland represents an attempt on the part of scholars to uncover Langland's meaning—his truth—or to determine that he was less than successful in clarifying what that truth was.

In his interpretive summary of scholarship on the structure and meaning of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, John A. Alford (1988) argued that the concept of "truth" occupies a central place in Langland's design:

Thus the Prologue announces the entrance of the poem into one of the liveliest and most important discussions of the day. Truth as a social ideal is the dominant, one might almost say the characterizing, concern of late fourteenth-century poetry. Though typically truth finds its highest expression in the order of knighthood...it is a virtue to be observed by all orders of society...Again and again writers of the period extol truth as the political virtue *par excellence*. And again and again they lament its decline. (33)

It is therefore no surprise that the *Prologue* of Langland's C-Text should begin with the polarizing vision of a field full of folk, juxtaposed as it were, between a tower—"Treuthe was there-ynne" (Pro. 15)—and a deep valley which is the liar of "Deth" (Pro. 17). It is also appropriate that some 6500 lines later, the preparations for a New Eden involve the allegorical figure Grace giving Piers a team of oxen, named Luke, Mark, Matthew, and John, along with various seeds named "*Spiritus prudencie*" (Passus 21. 276) and "*Spiritus temperancie*" (Passus 22. 281), and the like, in order that Piers might "*tulye treuthe*" (Passus 21. 261), to literally cultivate truth in the soil of

Earth. As stated earlier, this agricultural experiment will serve as the setting for Langland's grand apocalyptic Domsday scenario, where the planting process, harvest, and storage in the newly constructed barn of Unity are attacked by Pride and other the forces of darkness and discord, all soldiers in the army of Antichrist. Like the terrified protagonists of George Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, the workers in the New Eden project scramble to an isolated farmhouse for protection from the zombie hordes:

Quod Consience to alle cristene tho, "My
consayl is that we wende Hastiliche to
Unite and holde we us there.
Preye we that a pees were in Peres berne
the ploughman, For witterly y woet wel we
be nat of strengthe
To goen agayn Pruyde bute Grace were
with us." (*Passus* 21. 356-60)

Of course, just like any solid zombie apocalypse narrative, the Christians hunkered down in the barn called Unity begin to argue and back-bite and subvert their own united chance for survival. While it is safe and simple to experience this narrative twist as one of the many ironic moments in Langland's dream-vision, the final assault on truth which occupies the last two sections of *Piers Plowman* is really the final instalment in a process of undermining, warping, and blurring the truth and intentionality of the poem.

Throughout the edificatory dialogues initiated in *Piers Plowman*, the dreamer is confronted with a variety of possibilities for the reception and interpretation of information; time and time again, however, the external interaction and the data it provides gives way to an internalized interpretative life which personalizes its experiences in hopes of answering the text's central—and ultimately very personal—question: "How y may saue my soule?" (*Passus* 1. 80). As readers of this text, we may in turn absorb this personalizing dynamic as authorial intention, an indication of directed reading offered to the serious and searching devotees of the text. Yet this personal mode, if viewed as an alternative to some more focused, didactic, structure mode of reception and understanding—such as the edificatory process created by the medieval sermon or the essay form—functions as a counterpoint or a reaction to the

impersonal, stabilized modes of communication and interpretation. It therefore leads the seeker, by way of answering the question of personal salvation, away from stable discourse and towards an indictment of traditional notions of educational dialogue and the didactic formulae of communication typical to the *consolatio* genre, popular sermon, homiletic discourse, or so-called "wisdom literature." In writing the various recensions or revisions of his allegorical dream vision, Langland moves beyond such restrictions of mode and meaning, and as such, his narrative moves and changes, rather than matures and learns; the statements made in *Piers Plowman* grow and have effect, but the objective truth with which the text wrestles is ultimately uprooted and the "signs" through which its signifies its meaning are re-evaluated. Thus, even as Langland fragments the subjective self of his text—*Will*—into the dozens of components which make up his "allegorical" landscape, illustrating in part what Frederic Jameson intimates in his essay *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* (1984),ⁱⁱⁱ the manner in which his text works with the mutability of form and the mutation of signification, displays the symptomatic tendencies of the postmodern as "the effacement of the older categories of genre and discourse" (Jameson 165).

Within the many *Passus* of *Piers Plowman*, throughout the development of the text's allegorical discourse and its use of concrete imagery, the meaning of terms and symbols, of signs and their content, become blurred or inconsistent, thereby realigning all of their potency and value from the predictability of objective meaning and the stasis of exclusive referential stability, towards something more open and non-linear. For a poem which hopes, it is supposed, to offer the "dowel", "dobet", and "dobest" plan for salvation, this pattern paradoxically leads to the poem's deconstruction of narrative stability. The poetry of the text, its malleability, seems to swallow its theology—at least the sort of "theology" which its many discussions and considerations would seem to offer. Theologically, then, we may say that the poem is a failure; relinquishing its claim to dogmatic and didactic predictability in favour of a mode of mystical resonance. Langland's text suggests more than it means, and hints at more than it confirms. This is not so much a case of poorly managed "theological didactic poetry" as it is the

result of Langland's visionary masterpiece growing beyond the convenient scope of allegory, homily, and sermon.

In the *Prologue of Piers Plowman*, a programme of developmental interpretation is initiated as the narrator embarks on a pilgrimage, a participatory journey into the world of wonder, only to find his desire being refocused, from the acquisition of the miraculous, to the attainment of the mysterious. The action of acquisition implies a capturing of that which is desired; an opportunistic programme enhanced by the narrator's association of himself with semblances, with appearances, "*as y a shep were*" (Pro. 2), lending the process an air of covert reconnaissance. That the object of desire is the "wondrous," or miraculous, indicates that the goal is that which leaves us dumbfounded and casts our perceptions into a state of amazement. As Stephen Greenblatt points out in his essay *Resonance and Wonder*, the collecting of wondrous objects was "as much about possession as display" (86); he in turn identifies the acquisition of wonder not with an appreciation of otherness, but of a heightening of the wonder associated with the possessor: "with the evocation not of an absent culture but of the great man's superfluity of rare and precious things" (86). While Langland's protagonist does not search for "objects" but for "stories" of wonder--for "*wondres to here,/And say many sellies and selkouthe thynges*" (Pro. 4-5)--because, as Greenblatt points out, these "stories" functioned in much the same capacity as objects, in some ways as greater than objects:

The experience of wonder was not initially regarded as essentially or even primarily visual; reports of marvels had a force equal to the seeing of them. Seeing was important and desirable, of course, but precisely in order to make reports possible, reports which then circulated as virtual equivalents of the marvels themselves. The great medieval collections of marvels are almost entirely textual: Friar Jordanus' *Marvels of the East*, Marco Polo's *Book of Marvels*, Mandeville's *Travels*. Some of the manuscripts, to be sure, were illuminated, but these illuminations were almost always ancillary to the textual record of wonders, just as emblem books were originally textual and only subsequently illustrated. (50-51)

Will's desire to possess wonder, and hence to become wondrous himself--indeed his very name, Will, bespeaks of how he is defined, named, for his desire--is related to a covertness, a secrecy of action, which paints the process, as was stated above, with a decided dubiousness. This dubiousness is, in turn, related to the composition of the text itself, to the role of storyteller, recorder, possessor of wonder.

Will moves out into his world--into the text--with the expressed desire to acquire miraculous, wondrous things: "*In abite as an heremite, vnholy of werkes,/Wente forth in pe world wondres to here,/And say many sellies and selkouthe thynges*" (Pro. 3-5). The generation of disguise implied by "*as y shep were*" is repeated with the narrator's statement of "*In abite as an heremite*," both making use of the word "*as*" to evoke a sense of disguise, of crafty use of verisimilitude. The narrator's disguise is multiplied within the landscape of the poem, by his identification with false hermits, people "*In continance of clothyng in many kyne gyse*" (Pro. 26), and three semblances, or surfaces, are mentioned: "*continance*," "*clothyng*" and "*gyse*," all suspicious by virtue of their craft or cunning, compounded by the addition of the descriptive "*kyne*," which implies a cleverness, an "artistic proficiency" in the alteration of appearance. Like Will, these "disguised ones," these "false hermits," manifest a technical adeptness which indicates their calculated subversion of appearance and meaning. Like Will, who "*wente forth in the world*" (Pro. 4), these "disguised ones" demonstrate a considerable geographical mobility which, as the narrator implies, is akin to a suspicious social mobility. They are juxtaposed, defined by opposition, to the hard workers who stay put and do not desire excessive pleasure: "*Coueyten nozt in contreys to cayren aboute/For no likerous liflode here lycame to plese*" (Pro. 31-2). The easy life of "*plese*" is here placed in opposition to the holy life "*swythe harde*" (Pro. 28) of the toilers, workers, and tillers of the soil admired by the protagonist Will.

The manifestation of the disguised ones multiplies yet again, encompassing the slothful social class of minstrels who, like the false hermits, are seen as un-workers, socially mobile, and professing a false appearance:

And summe murthes to make as mynstrels
conneth, Wolleth neyther swynke ne swete,
bothe sweren grete othes, Fyndeth out foule
fantasyes and foles hem maketh And hath wytt
at wille to worche yf pei wolde. That Poule
prechede of hem preue hit y myhte; Qui
turpiloquium loquitur is Luciferes knaue. (Pro.
35-40)

The process of disguise, and the search for "plese" which it facilitates, has now transcended to the level of composition, to the creation of wonders, to a poetry which, within the context of *Piers Plowman*, wrought by those who "sweren grete othes,/Fyndeth out foule fantasyes," is created by poets who make fools of themselves. While Will recognizes the slothful and deceitful nature of disguise and mobility yet at the same time participates in it at the inception of his search for wonders, has now suffered a critical separation from that with which he previously identified himself. The narrative aim of the acquisition of "wondres" has degenerated into the "finding" of "foule fantasyes"; the recording of the miraculous has become the "werkes" of he who does not work, of *Qui turpilo quium loquitur*: He who speaks filth.

Immediately following the narrator's indictment of minstrels, the description of the folk on the field takes on a greater dimension, one of activity, space, depth, and mutability of meaning. The various fixtures of the landscape become animated, and then move off in some direction. Here, god's plenty are depicted rather than stated, and a paradoxically cautious and benevolent vision of mobility and tale-telling is indicated: "*Wenten forth on here way with many wyse tales/And hadde leue to lye aftir, al here lyf-tyme*" (49-50). This cryptic statement, at once evocative of the apostolic mission as mobile wonder—a travelling revival tent-show, freak show, or wagon of curiosities, and the professional pilgrims whose journeys were financed through the hypocrisy of others, become indicative of the more serious and moralizing mode which shapes the remainder of the text. Will has left behind the self-serving acquisition of wonder, of the miraculous, and, without overtly indicating the transition, redirects his pilgrimage towards the more ethical and philosophical "attainment", "earning," or "realization," of the mysterious. But this is a redefining which begins much earlier in the poem, when he states that "*Me biful for*

to slepe, for werynesse of-walked" (Pro. 7), indicated that already he is tired of the "outward" journey, the search for "wondres" "in the world," and will now initiate the inward journey towards the mysterious. The marvels or "wondres" he sought to acquire, and amplify himself with, do come to him, but through the intangible substance of dream: "*And merueylousliche me mette, as y shal telle*" (Pro. 9).

The narrator's own incomprehension of the "redefinition" of his journey is evident by his perception of the dream as a "marvel," but, as his own actions indicate, the realization of his own desire has transcended "wonder," that is, the state of amazement, and towards the "mysterious," that is the state of continual inquiry. He implies the presence of meaning in the concluding fable of the *Prologue*, but pushes it into deeper mystery with his refusal to interpret it (217-8). He reinstates the state of continual inquiry at the opening of *Passus I*, with his implication of and then deferment of the meaning of the people in the field: "*What the montaigne bymeneth and pe merke dale/And pe feld of folk y shal zou fair shewe*" (l. 1-2). The personification *Holy Churche* approaches Will, calls him by name, "*And sayde, 'Wille, slepestou? seestow pis peple,/Hou bisy pei ben aboute pe mase?'*" (l. 5-6). The world, in *Holy Churche's* words, has become a maze, filled with busy people. The woman's face deepens and frightens Will: "*Y was afeered of here face, thow she fayre were,*" (l.10). This fear, no doubt associated with Will's sudden realization that there is a "meaning" beyond the surface of the field, behind the veil of wonder, heralds Will's embarkation through the maze of mystery, in search of truth: "*And sayde, 'Mercy, madame, what may this be to mene?'*" (l. 1).

Conscience is the first conventionally allegorical personification to appear in the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, as well as the one whose "*gradde aftur grace*" (XXII. 386) causes the narrator to awake and bring the poem to its abrupt conclusion. *Conscience* functions in the capacity of a judge of morality and truth, as a spiritual guide and, in a more general sense, his arrival at the beginning of Will's dreams and his shouting the narrator awake at its close, frames the text and helps to round out its thought. He dresses Will's intellectual and spiritual development within a more personalized framework,

providing a "conscientiousness" of structure, as well as offering the reader contact with one of many convenient focal points for textual inquiry and narrative interpretation. In light of this, it is not accidental that *Conscience* offers us the first example of coherent textual exegesis, when he uses the tale of *Ophni and Phinees* to discuss the "Ydolatrie" and "vntrewe sacrefice" of the covetous clergy presented in *Prologue*, lines 65-94.

The thematic progression which leads towards the appearance of *Conscience* begins with depiction of a "pardoner" who, for a price, will provide absolution of his clientele's sins: "Sayde pat hymself myhte assoylen hem alle/Of falsnesses of fastynges, of vowes ybrokene" (Pro. 69-8). The pardoner performs his duties upon a landscape rooted in the soil of decay; his peddling of absolutions are seen as an appendage of a society which is already quite corrupt:

Lewed men leued hym wel and lykede his words
Ans comen and knelede to kysse his bulles;
A bounchede hem with his bulles and blered here yes
And raughte with his rageman rynges and broches. (Pro. 70-3)

The vivid humour of the image, made all the more masterful for its economy of phrase, intensifies our sense of the pardoner's mechanical proficiency within his morally bankrupt culture; the unworthy move forward, he taps their head with the scroll in a gesture of absolution and deftly sweeps up their jewellery with his papal document. His role as "appendage" or "apparatus" is elaborated upon again, a few lines later, with the disclosure of shared wealth amongst the clergy: "For pe parsche prest and pe pardoner parten pe seluer/ That pe peple in parsches sholde haue," (Pro. 79-80). Thus, the sloth of secular society utilizes the pardoner, who, as the above lines imply, is also a cog in a much larger institutionalized mechanism of greed and corruption present within "non-secular" society.

On another level of interpretation, the environment depicted is one in which "ideas" have lost their "value"; a world where the "sign" has lost its "meaning." The spiritual power which supposedly gives the papal "bulle" its authority is undermined by hypocrisy; society does not mean what it "says," because it permits "falsnesses" and "vowes ybrokene," the document is devalued, becomes worthless. The

worthlessness infects the succeeding passages like a plague, devaluing everything: the parishes "were pore sith the pe pestelence tyme" (Pro. 82), and the Bishops and educated members of the church "That han cure vnder Crist and crownyng in tokene" (Pro. 1.86) travel to London, which becomes a focal point for bogus Lenten indulgences--a vacation resort, if you will, for the morally and spiritually decayed.

It is at this point in the text that *Conscience* appears, his opening statement solidifying the diagnosis enforced by the narrator's descriptions; an infectious greed for concrete images, which heralds the loss of meaning and the devaluation of the token, the symbol, the word, the sign:

Conscience cam and cursed hem--and pe comune herde hit--And seide, "Ydolatrie ze soffren in sondrye places manye And boxes ben yset forth ybounde with yren To vdertake pe tol of vntrewe sacrefice" (Pro. 1.95-98)

"Ydolatrie," the worship of "false idols," is permitted everywhere, *Conscience* says, and boxes bound with iron are set up to contain the payments for "vntrewe sacrefice"--of empty symbols and hollow rituals. The dynamics of the passage lie in the juxtaposition of the decay of meaning with its use of concrete imagery: the worship of "false idols" stirs visions of pagan totems and graven "images," the vivid "boxes bound with iron" made even more effective by the highly tangible physicality of "yset"; all of this is contrasted with the decay of purpose, hollowness of ritual, and the dissolution of meaning brought about through hypocrisy and through the decay of the sign. The reader will note the masterful paradox with which the narrator uses the "value" of silver to "devalue" quality of "faith." Seen in this light, *Conscience's* appearance is more than just a chastisement against hypocrisy and covetousness, it is an attempt to revitalize the sign, to re-invoke meaning through the active interpretation of the signifier and signified contained within the narrative.

Conscience's revitalizing of the sign begins with his enforcement of "as holy writ telleth" (Pro. 104), evoking the power of narrative to communicate, and then proceeds to relate a story within a concise narrative progression, a progression concluded with the threateningly powerfully manifestation of "belief"

in "action"--meaning manifested in sign--: "*Fro his chayere per he sat and brake his nekke atwene*" (Pro. l.114). While the image is harsh, perhaps even authoritarian in its violence, *Consience* imparts to us, through its violence, a sense of words having force, of laws having power, of belief being manifested in the actions of human beings.

Consience then proceeds to relate the "meaning," the application of his tale, and does so in this way to attempt to reiterate, solidify, or ensure, the value of the sign:

"Forthy y sey ze prestes and men of holy churche That soffreth men do sacrefyce and worschipe maumettes, And ze shulde be here fadres and techen hem betre, God shal take vengeance on alle suche prestis Wel hardere and grettere on suche shrewed faderes Than euere he dede on Offines and Fines his fader, For zoure shrewed soffraunce and zoure oune synne." (Pro. 118-24)

Consience interprets the tale, with a methodical specificity which highlights the "act" of interpretation, being careful to draw lines of similarity between the signs of the tale and their parallel referents in the "real world." Statements of "*ye shulde*," "*alle suche prestis*," "*suche shrewed faderes*," "*youre shrewed soffraunce*," and "*youre oune synne*" draw analogies from the text outwards, into the world, from sign to meaning, from ideal to action, charging both with the forceful act of reference. Closing the passage with the dynamically specific "*youre oune synne*" indicates an intentionality which is unmistakable. The meaning of the sign has been driven outwards from the narrative *Consience* considers—driven outwards in much the same way as the renewed pilgrimage which closes the text in *Passus XXII*--to lodge firmly in both the resonance of his audience, the people of the field, and to the narrator's audience reading the text itself.

Consience also contrasts the wicked, irreligious and hypocritical practices of the clergy, and other teachers who neglect to practice what they preach, with his own active interpretation of narrative, "*And ze shulde be here fadres and techen hem betre*" (Pro. 120). These words, these signs, are spoken for the edification of the masses, "*and the comune herde hit*" (Pro. 95). In this way, then, we see that the appearance of *Consience* is a calculated attack on the

devaluing of signs upon a variety of different levels: through word, ritual, interpretation, and behaviour. He exposes the self-destructive effect of such devaluing and hypocrisy within a community which, by virtue of its foundations in ritual and belief demonstrated by the "actions" rather than the "motivations" of clergy and the faithful, should have a vested interest in the maintenance of meaning. *Consience* attempts to revitalize the sign through an elaborate demonstration, a demonstration which is intentionally not probing or exhaustive in its nature, but rather a simple gleaning of meaning from narrative, and an imparting of this meaning, through textual exposition, outwards to a variety of receptive targets. The resonance which occurs is, likewise, various. In this sense, he not only returns value to the sign, but reinvents the meaning of the sign by drawing on the alternatives of meaning inspired by interpretation and direction; our experience of the sign will necessarily be different from the experiences detailed within the text, and even those resonances not detailed. *Consience* not only revalues the sign, but multiplies its value as well.

An interesting juxtaposition to this episode occurs at the end of the Prologue, with the overt political allegory of "The Belling of the Cat." In this instance, the concrete realism, previously used to augment the devaluing of the sign in the *Ophni and Phinees* episode, invades the text and metamorphoses the narrator's intentional deferment of interpretation into an "opening" of meaning, an intensification of the "force" of the sign and, at the same time, an evocation of ambiguity and a dissolution of textual structure. The scene is initiated by the entrance of *Consience* and "*the kyng*" into a court containing a hundred or so lawyers who argue their cases and "*nat for loue oure lord vnlose here lypes ones*" (Pro. 162). Thus, while the court contains a great number of men ("number" being related to the "quantitative" foundation of secular notions of value) who grasp the secular merits, or value, of words, these words are devoid of "spirit," of its *λοξος*, its "true meaning." Our attention is drawn away from this scene of human courtly life by the intrusion of rats and mice, "*Than ran per a route of ratones as hit were/And smale muys with hem*" (Pro. 165-6); upon catching our eye, the narrative telescopes downwards towards this minuscule diversion, and our field of vision is suddenly filled by

the alternative scene. Here too, there is value or importance in numbers, as the narrator tells us that there are "*mo then a thousand*" (Pro. 166), and that they are organized into a group, like a parliament: "*Comen til a conseyl for here comune profyt*" (Pro. 167). The tale which follows at lines 168-216 is generally agreed to indicate the futility of attempting to curb the power of the abusive aristocracy (Bennett 1943), with the cat representing John of Gaunt, and the rodents representing the upper and lower houses of parliament (Kellogg 1935; Owst 1961). When we reach the termination of the fable, however, the narrator refuses any attempt at interpretation; an action which stands out all the more strikingly juxtaposed to *Conscience's* "rescuing" of meaning less than one hundred lines before: "*What this meteles bymeneth, ye men that ben merye, / Deuyne ye, for y ne dar, by dere god almyhten*" (Pro. 217- 18). Upon closer examination, however, the narrator's statement is not so much a denial of meaning or value, as it is a refusal to participate in it. Once again, expectations are thwarted and the comfort of predictable and sanctioned closure is denied.

Michael Murrin, in *The Veil of Allegory* (1969), states that often a curious incompleteness present in allegory acts as an indicator that meaning exists beneath the surface; an item made conspicuous by its absence (147). This notion would seem to apply here, as the narrator confirms the presence of meaning through his refusal to participate in it, while the fear which is associated with interpretation, "*for y ne dar, by dere god almyhten*," takes the narrator out of the picture, so to speak, and places the responsibility of locating meaning within the text upon the reader. But why is this use of absence as "indicator" accompanied by fear and foreboding, rather than simply silence or redirection? As Pearsall (1978) has noted in his edition of Langland's *C-Text*, the fable "was a favourite exemplum" (38), and this of course raises the question of what would inspire the narrator to such a fearful refusal to interpret a well-known political allegory? A partial answer can be located in the lines that follow the narrator's refusal.

The narrator does indeed redirect our attention, the attention of "*ye men pat ben merye*," and explains that his appetite is more readily whetted for "*barones and burgeys and bondmen of thorpes, / Al y say slepyng as ye shal here heraftur*" (Pro. 220-1).

The narrator attempts to escape from the requirements of interpretation, to defuse the dialectic initiated by *Conscience*, and does this with a "promise" of things to come, things he saw when he was "asleep." The irony of "seeing" while "asleep", and the enforced ambiguity of meaning which accompanies it, acts to indicate deeper meaning and, in light of the "favourite" or well-known status of the fable, to imply some alternative meaning--a meaning perhaps well worth the inspiration of fear. The narrator's redirection would imply that he is incapable of interpretation, perhaps suggesting that he is still on a lower level of development than *Conscience*, which would be in keeping with the role of self-deprecation explained in the earlier section of this work. This also provides an escape from the requirements of interpretation which, ultimately, create the diversion which permits the invasion of concrete images into the narrative, shattering its coherence, and providing an escape from the requirements of text as well.

Bothe bakeres and breweres, bochers and other, Webbesteres and walkeres and wynnners with handes, As taylers and tanners and tulyers of pe erthe, As dykers and deluers pat doth here dedis ylle And dryueth forth here days with "Dew vous saue, dame Emme." Cokes and here knaues cryede, "hote pyes, hote! Goode gees and grys! ga we dyne, ga we!" Tauerners til hem tolde pe same:

"Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoyne, Of pe Reule and of pe Rochele the roost to defye!" Al pis y say sleping and seuyne sythes more.

If we pause, and allow ourselves to be affected by the "texture" of this narrative moment, we are enriched with a sense of overwhelming but very specific variety, of a luxuriousness which bends and changes and folds through one image of a street vender to the next; we are confronted with their wares and their cries. Although the passage is not overloaded with actual concrete detail, it seems to evoke aspects of the marketplace that are more audible and olfactory than tactile. We sense the coldness of the wind more than the ground under our feet, so to speak. It seems as if the text has utterly dissolved, as if its coherence was suddenly usurped by these street vendors and petty bourgeois--but it has not; its criterion has simply

changed, its foundations and point of focus have switched to something else...to somewhere else.

There is an evocative power and elusive wit at work here, and it has utilized concrete imagery to disrupt the previously conceived textual dialectic--the authority of interpretation as established by the text--to emancipate the sign from specificity and offer the reader a plurality of meanings and frames of reference. The act which previously revitalized the sign now sets it free and allows it to metamorphose. The probing thought of the text has not been usurped by the hallucinatory quality of the dream, it has been opened by it; and the seemingly formless dream-imagery of hallucination, prefaced as it was by the rescue of the sign through *Conscience's* interpretation, becomes probing and thoughtful. The tradition target of revaluing through interpretation, the fable or story, has been replaced with society itself; the dream-world about us has become quite literally the text under consideration--and a consideration which allows a greater openness of meaning than previously afforded by the conventional *exemplar* or fable. But what does this openness yield? To nail down one specific meaning would be to negate its affect, but let it suffice to say that its range of meaning has expanded from the simplicity of *Conscience's* exegesis; it has fled the king's court and the confines of the conventional fable and its moralizing. It has flown out into the streets and melded with the voices of the people of the streets. The air itself is now charged with the possibility of meaning.

William M. Ryan, in *William Langland* (1968), defines effects such as those described above, within the context of Langland's role as creative entity, and the way in which this temperament affects the individual reader. Langland, he says, presents a richly imaged world of sounds and colors and contrasting shapes. He gives us what our human nature craves so strongly, change and variety, leaving no space to protracted moralising or over-elaborated explanation but always moving on--new faces, new encounters, digressions, broad leaps of imagination. Monotony is no fault in his writing; rather, we complain that he makes us nervous, this probing, darting, and malleable mind (127). With these disrupting effects, aptly characterized by Ryan, the final lines of the prologue draw to a close, and in its brief 232 lines, the sign has risen from decay and hollowness to renewal and

specificity, and from this state to that of denial and ambiguity, and finally to possibility.

To return to the *readerly* frustration with the conclusion offered in *Passus XXII*, we may see how Ryan's notion is one way of bringing peace to our search, but as sensitive and insightful as it is, are we not substituting one justification for another--instead of insisting the text is poorly concluded we are simply watching a creative mind "working through" ideas and modes of expression? In a similar fashion, David Mills (1969) suggest that the incongruity is the result of Langland's need to communicate "the relationship between the finite and the infinite on a number of inter-related levels" (183). Does even this provide relief from the suspicion, aptly noted by Elizabeth Salter (1963) as the "weight of failure" (104) present at points in various versions of Langland's project? I suggest that what Langland does in frustrating our expectations, especially in his bewildering devaluing of signs and meaning in the episodes involving *Conscience*, are part of a larger, systemic analysis of the very process of cultivating or uprooting the truth, whatever that truth may be. In Judith Anderson's *Growth of a Personal Voice* (1976), she describes what touches on the dynamic that I have tried to suggest in my reading of *Piers Plowman*:

The narrator undertakes a bewildering search for truth, in every sense a search for the reality of the word. This is not just a search for words, still less for dogmatic answers, but for awareness, the ability to know what words and traditional answers can mean, given human nature and the nature of this world. (14)

Coupling this with the notion of the renewed pilgrimage which provides the un-closure of the text's un-conclusion, famously contextualized by Morton Bloomfield, in his *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (1961), as a search for Piers as "both the model and the norm of human existence....He will lead them back so that they may go forward to their proper destiny" (107), we notice a directionality outwards towards the reader and backwards to the beginning. *Conscience's* deconstruction of signs, and the re-initiation of pilgrimage now in the hands of *Conscience*, as opposed to Will, the poem's end and beginning meet. Just as

the Prologue mirrors the intellectual and spiritual development of the entire poem in microcosm, framing the great quest for the verifiable meaning which both shapes and eludes the poem, our *readerly* eye is finally directed towards a single word: *Grace*. We are left with this single word, as it tumbles from *Conscience's* mouth, and then we sit in silence with the Dreamer, who is now awake--perhaps for the first time-- and we, like the Dreamer, will no doubt wonder what our next step will be and where it will take us.

NOTES

ⁱ All citations of Langland's *Piers Plowman* are drawn from Derek Pearsall's edition of the C-Text (University of California Press 1978). Note that the current article takes the liberty of normalizing the spelling of Pearsall's edition in one case, substituting a simple "th" for the Middle English "þ" to facilitate reading. Also note that parenthetical references denote *Passus* and line numbers in Pearsall's edition.

ⁱⁱ As George Economou (1996) notes, "Contrary to its popular reputation for fussiness, C may be viewed as the product of an older, wiser poet who knows how to cut, sometimes with alarming but purposeful relentlessness. He shifts scenes and speeches for greater clarity and effect and introduces fresh material that lends a new unity to his lifetime work" (xviii).

ⁱⁱⁱ "Not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it never really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type. Rather, this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they "had" individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity" (Jameson 168).

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