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Shaping idealisms : studies in Middle English romances and the literature of the Medieval Revival

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SUMMARIES OF DUTCH ARCTICLES

Pearl and the foundations of the Heavenly Jerusalem (no. 8)

Pearl is a dream-allegory, written by the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* during a period of debate in scholastic circles about whether salvation is to be achieved by 'grace alone' or by 'works'. The dreamer-narrator visits the grave of his daughter who died at the age of two, allegorically represented as a jeweller who lost a pearl in a natural landscape. In his dream he finds himself in a landscape of crystal rocks, blue trees with silver leaves, pebbles of pearl, fragrant fruits and birds singing. He comes to a river that he cannot cross, beyond which lies paradise, it seems to him. Beyond the river he sees his daughter, dressed in white and covered in pearls. A long conversation ensues across the river. The girl tells him she is a bride of Christ and queen in Heaven, and that his grief is unreasonable. He does not understand. The debate culminates in the Parable of the Vineyard, by which she explains that God's grace is always sufficient, irrespective of good works. Finally the girl shows the dreamer the Heavenly Jerusalem, as seen in the Apocalyps. The dreamer tries to cross the river, but wakes up.

For the description of the Heavenly Jerusalem elements of the Apocalyps are combined with Psalm 48, Giacomo da Verona's *De Jerusalem Celeste* and St Augustine's *City of God*. However, the descriptions of the landscapes and the city remain an unusually personal perception of the dreamer-narrator. The vision is determined, not by a conventional ideal, but by his point of view.

Structurally, the three stages of the poem's development reflect three viewpoints: the 'realistic' mourning of the girl's death, then the 'somnia' of the doctrinal debate, which is, finally, sublimated in the 'visio' of the Heavenly Jerusalem. The imagery from the lost pearl into the pearl-maiden, then into the pearly gates of the Heavenly Jerusalem, suggests a theme of how to achieve entrance into that city, supported by the idea that a seed must first die, then be buried/planted, before it will bear fruit. The girl's speech is metaphorical, the dreamer's reactions remain human-rational. Mutual understanding remains problematic, because the dreamer, reasoning from earthly categories, cannot 'see' the metaphors from beyond.

The alienation of the 'stranger in paradise' is marked, on the one hand, by the polysemy of the terms used in the debate and, on the other hand, by the landscape-descriptions. The landscapes and the city are built up out of paradise-commonplaces, but the gradual revelations (Revelations) do not add up to an Apocalyps in this poem: with their supernaturalness they exclude the dreamer. His sensual perception makes the conventional 'pleasance' impenetrable to him; only faith would gain him access. The road from the sensual world of seasons and seeds and harvest-time, through the 'enlightened' teaching of doctrine, to the final acceptance and contemplation of the

mystical vision, is represented in full. The point of the poem is, however, not a vision of heaven, but a roadmap from darkness to illumination.

The evidence of the medieval English and German lapidaries shows that the twelve layers of precious stones that form the foundation of the Heavenly Jerusalem could be read as four times three steps that signify Faith, Hope and Charity on increasingly advanced levels; literally the way to gain entrance into the city. So, the originally anagogical (what to hope for) Apocalyps or Revelations of St John has, in this poem, become an allegorical text (what to believe).

Not of this world: Fantasies of professors of medieval literature (no. 13)

C.S. Lewis' fantasy-novel *Perelandra*, vol. 2 of his space-trilogy, is set on the planet Perelandra (Venus), a younger planet than Earth, on which the first man and woman are still innocent of Original Sin and the Temptation is about to begin. At the time of writing (1943) Lewis had just completed his *Preface to Paradise Lost* and *The Screwtape Letters*, both concerned with the Devil and the temptation in Paradise.

The sea, which figures large in *Perelandra*, is not given, except on one occasion, the metonymic/symbolic signification of chaos, exile, fate or separation between one world and an 'other', as in Tolkien's works or in the medieval romances, but mostly it has the metaphoric/allegorical significance of the separation of the waters and the land as in the story of the creation in Genesis, and the baptismal symbolism of death and rebirth. The sea is largely an allegorical vehicle for a large number of sensations, ideas, perceptions and experiences, which are still fluid in this new creation that is as yet unfixd as long as the outcome of the temptation has not been decided. Behind this is a concept of the universe as indeterminate, continually in motion as a Cosmic Dance, set in motion by Maleldil (God) and supervised by angelic forces. The Temptation on Earth had been successful millennia ago, and is attempted on Perelandra by a satan-figure in the body of an earthly physicist. The 'angels' have transported an earthly philologist to help the Perelandral Eve to resist. After many days of argument and counter-argument, the situation is resolved when the philologist physically beats up the physicist and, after a long pursuit, throws him into the subterranean fire. The parallel with Frodo and the Ring in Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring* is striking.

Lewis and Tolkien have their dissatisfaction with the modernist canon of the Interbellum in common. They both wanted a more idealistic literature that recognises unknowable forces. Unlike the magic-realists, they postulate these forces as higher powers, much as in the medieval romances (Tolkien) or in the early classicism of the Renaissance (Lewis). In "On Fairy-stories" Tolkien claims that fantasy-stories are a form of religious myths, renderings of the story of salvation and resurrection. Lewis may be more didactic and morally black-and-white in his presentation than Tolkien's

much more literary myth-making, but in contrast to Tolkien's matter-of-course abhorrence of industrialization, Lewis' text is rather more 'dialogic' in its debate between industrial-physical aspirations and religious ideals.

The fantasy-critics consider both Lewis and Tolkien to be conservative and sentimental, but allow that the experiences that both of them had had of the horrors of the two World Wars may have led them to recreate an older form of heroic or romantic idealism.

An academic romance: David Lodge, *Small World* (no. 14)

Small World is about the adventures of a number of literary scholars at and between a series of academic conferences all round the world. These adventures are presented as a parody of the quest of the Holy Grail, in the manner of the romance and with many echoes of medieval and modern romances (Holy Grail romances, Ariosto, Spenser, Shakespeare, Keats) and of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. The main theme of the analysis is repetition with variations: echoes, mirrorings, enacting of literary models.

A poststructuralist lecture about the impossibility of interpretation of texts is repeated at every conference. Since every decoding is another encoding, the lecture claims, significations are continually postponed and displaced (*différance*), never possessed. This concept of *différance* constitutes a critical metatext to the romance-narrative.

The idea of the text as an infinite striptease, ultimately overshooting its purpose, is dramatized by repeated instances of peepshows and escort-services; the overshooting of its purpose is also the answer to 'the' question finally asked at the Grail Castle/the MLA Conference in New York at the end of the academic round, where a UNESCO-endowed Chair of Literary Criticism proves to be the 'siege perilous' of the Round Table. The original lecture on the impossibility of interpretation is repeated there, with differences specific to the romance-genre, by a young lady who had functioned throughout as the Grail (with an Irish accent: girrl) for the main character, an Irish Perceval-type. When they, finally, meet again there, the many doublings and mirrorings come to their climax with the young man making love to the lady's twin sister and the girl marrying the Perceval's namesake. The young man realizes then and there that he is really in love with someone else, who then appears to have disappeared. Similar overshootings of the purpose happen to a dozen or more professors and lecturers attending these conferences.

The title of the book, *Small World*, already suggests that the 'academic romance' is one of microcosms in which the whole reality of the universe is mirrored or repeated endlessly. But with David Lodge the 'ewige Wiederkehr' or 'éternel retour'

becomes, paradoxically, a constant eluding. The MLA Conference comes to an end with the chairman/Grail King concluding that “to win is to lose the game”. This appears to liberate all the characters from the formal narratological compulsiveness of their actions, instead of disillusioning them. The Waste Land is, temporarily, restored to fertility. By taking the grail-quest for its narrative structure, the content of the story parodies the form. The book is not a satire in the manner of the campus-novel after all, but a romance parodying poststructuralism.