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JAMES DONELAN

In a summer season, when soft was the sunlight,
I shook on some shreds of shepherd clothing,
And habited like a hermit, but not a holy one,
Went wide in this world, watching for wonders.
But on a May morning, on a Malvern hill-top,
A marvel befell me, as might a fairly tale.
I was weary and far-wandered and went to rest myself
On a broadish bank, by a running brook,
And as I lay leaning and looking in the water
I slipped into a slumber, it slid away so merrily.
Then I began to move into a marvellous dream...¹

THE setting is familiar: a dreamer on a hillside in the merry month of May. So begins *Piers Plowman*, and the student of literature coming to it, as he usually does, fresh from the *Romance of the Rose*, the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Confessio Amantis* quite easily assumes that he is still moving in that same light, fantastic world of romance. And as he crosses the threshold of the dream-vision, he expects to see before him a panorama of pinnacled castles and fair fields, the world of the *Très Riches Heures* lying golden in the dawn of the Renaissance. Instead, he finds himself in quite

¹ *Visions from Piers Plowman*, translated into modern English by Nevill Coghill (Phoenix House, London, 1949). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Piers Plowman* are taken from this translation.

another world. For the mists of the Malvern hills are northern and gloomy, and through them the dreamer passes into the forgotten Nordic world of old England in whose great halls the *scop* sings of the death of the *heorthwerod* and of *Götterdämmerung*. This is the spirit that runs through *Piers Plowman*, the brooding, elegiac melancholy of the ancient north, as we find it in the meditations of the Wanderer and the Seafarer, as they question the mystery of faith and the transience of mortal things.

Hwaer cwom mearg, hwaer cwom mago? Hwaer cwom
maththumgyfa?
Hwaer cwom symbla gesetu? Hwaer sindon seledreamas?
Eala beorht bune, eala byrnwiga,
eala theodnes thrym! Hu seo thrag gewat,
genap under nihthelm, swa heo no waere!²

This is the spirit of *Piers Plowman*; however, it is not its problem. For William Langland, who wrote *Piers Plowman*, was a Christian, and he knew the words of eternal life. He knew why "lif biþ laene" and where the sparrow went that flew through King Edwin's great hall.³ What he did not know, and what his poem cries out to know, is how to attain the eternal reward his faith promised. This is the age-old question of Matthew's gospel: "Master, what good must I do to win eternal life?" But in *Piers Plowman*, we hear it asked in a voice that is authentically English, the voice of Saxon England, of Alfred and Cynewulf and Byrhnōth. This is the England whose sovereignty died with Harold and his house-carls at Hastings, but whose faith and language continued to live in the hearts of the common people of medieval England. These are the people, the sons of the Angles, the Saxons and the horned-headed Vikings, for whom Langland speaks. He is their *scop*. Not

² "Where has the steed gone, where the warrior, and where the giver of treasure? Where is the place of feasting, where the joys of the great hall? Alas for the shining chalice, alas for the warrior in his armor, alas for the glory of the prince. How far away that day seems now, how obscured it has grown under the shadow of night as if it had never been."—*The Wanderer*, lines 92-96.

³ *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation by the Venerable Bede*, (Everyman Library, 1930) book ii, chapter xiii.

even for Chaucer, so often thought of as the typical fourteenth-century Englishman, can we make such a claim. For as English as Chaucer is, his mind and art have been formed by the traditions of continental culture. He is the prototype of the Renaissance man, the tolerant, broad-minded humanist who watched the world go by and smiled at it because he found it good. Langland, looking at that same world, could only cry.

For William Langland was neither courtier nor literateur, but a man of the people, who, like the beggars he wrote about, knew what it was to go "breadless to bed", to be a "wet-shod wanderer" in the winter time, "frozen and famished and foully challenged by the rich." His is the voice of the poor, unique in the pages of English literature for the power and poignancy of its demand for social justice in the name of Christ:

For on Calvary, from Christ's Blood, Christendom sprang;
Blood-brethren we became there, bought of one body,
Not a beggar boy among us but for our sins.
Let us be brothers and love, laughingly together,
And everyman help another, for we must all go hence.⁴

It is also the voice of the man who has totally dedicated himself to the cause of Christ and whose indignation runs hot at the corruption and sacrilege he sees in cloister and sanctuary. From Langland's pen we get a scathing indictment of the abyss between preaching and practice in his picture of the fat theologian, "the bottle-bellied, bulging jordan" preaching in St. Paul's the "penance that is profitable to the spirit" then sitting down to a gluttonous meal, while the poor eat sour bread in cold doorways. But Langland is no Calvinistic crank. His concern was with the spirit, to cleanse the medieval church of the vice that lay against its heart like a cancer—accidie or spiritual sloth. In his vision of the Seven Deadly Sins, the poet has Sloth make a public confession in the character of a parish priest:

I am not perfect in my Pater Noster as the priest sings it.
I know rhymes of Robin Hood and Randolph, Earl of
Chester,

⁴ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

But of our Lord and our Lady not the
least ever written.

I have made forty vows but they vanished by morning,
I performed no penance as the priest enjoined me,
And have never sincerely sorrowed for my sins.
What I tell with my tongue is two miles from my heart.⁵
God's pain and passion I seldom ponder.
I have visited no feeble folk, fettered in prison;
I'd rather hear harlotry, or a lie to laugh at,
Than all that Mark ever made, Matthew, John or Luke.
And I lie about in Lent with Lizzie in my arms.
I have been priest and parson thirty years past,
But can neither sol-fa,⁶ nor sing, nor read Saints' lives.
If any man does me benefit or helps me at need,
I am unkind toward his courtesy and cannot understand it,
For I have, and long have had, something of a hawk's way.
I am not lured with love unless there is a bribe.⁷

"I am not lured with love." This is how Langland explains why the Church of fourteenth-century England, so rich and so powerful, seemed so spiritually ineffective. It lacked that charity without which its words and works were as sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. "Truth," says Langland, is "to love our Lord better than you love yourself. It is knowledge instinctive, stirring you at the heart." It is the first of all virtues:

Chastity without charity will be chained in hell,
It is as lazy as a lamp that has no light in it.
Many a chaplain⁸ is chaste but has not charity
And none are greedier when advanced to greatness.⁹

These are not the words of a narrow-minded zealot, shouting jeremiads from the roof tops, but of a prophet, chosen from the people, preaching the new testament of Love. For what Langland saw through the mists on the Malvern hillside was an apocalyptic vision of hope in which he beheld the City of God rising white from the green fields and crofts of the English

⁵ To "tell with the tongue" is to say the Rosary.

⁶ To "sol-fa" is to sing the scales.

⁷ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁸ The term "chaplain" here refers to priests in general.

⁹ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

countryside where Christ walked along the hedge rows in the work-worn garb of Piers the Plowman. And this would be accomplished by love. In one of the most sublime passages in medieval literature, unequalled by anything in Chaucer or the English mystics, Langland describes the Incarnational source of the Love that must vitalize the Church if this vision of hope is to be realized:

On all that the Lord labored He lavished His Love.
Love is the plant of peace, most precious of virtues;
All heaven could not hold it, so heavy in itself,
It fell in fulness forth on the field of earth,
And of the folds of that field took flesh and blood;
No leaf thereafter on a linden tree was ever lighter,
No needle point so piercing or nimbler to handle,
No armour can withhold it or high wall hinder.
Therefore is Love leader of the Lord's folk in heaven,
And to know its nature, it is nurtured in power,
And in the heart is its home and fountain head.
Instinctively at heart a strength is stirring,
Flowing to the Father that formed us all,
Looked on us with love and let His Son die,
Meekly, for our misdoings, to amend us all.¹⁰

It is this identification of Langland with the common people of England, of whom he is one, and his insight into the mystery of the Mystical Body of Christ that makes Langland what Christopher Dawson has called "the Catholic Englishman *par excellence*, at once the most English of Catholic poets and the most Catholic of English poets: a man in whom Catholic faith and feeling are fused in a single flame."¹¹

If this statement is true, and Professor Dawson is not a man to use superlatives carelessly, it would hardly seem that any serious student of English literature, or for that matter, of Christian culture, could prudently slight the work of William Langland. Like the first of our "slighted poets," and to a much greater degree and in matters more important, he explains his

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹¹ Christopher Dawson, "The Vision of Piers Plowman", *Medieval Essays* (Sheed and Ward, New York, 1954) p. 213. (Page reference is to the Doubleday Image Book edition).

times. In our apologia for John Skelton¹² we stressed the idea that our study of English literature in the Philippines is more than a language discipline. Its role in our educational processes is much like that of classical studies in the schools of the Renaissance. More than any other of our scholastic disciplines it develops and enriches the adolescent mind by bringing it into contact with a great culture—not in its more accidental nationalistic aspects, but as regards those greater truths and ideals *quae pertinet ad humanitatem*.

This emphasis on literature as the study of a culture does not, of course, imply any neglect of its artistic quality. For literature is not history, and it differs from history in its expression of a culture precisely in that it uses the medium of art to heighten the meaning and significance of the experience it relates. Therefore it must not only instruct but delight. As important as *Piers Plowman* is as a sociological, religious and historical document of fourteenth-century England, its greatest value is its excellence as a poem. True, Langland is no Chaucer. His scope is limited, his matter unoriginal, even hackneyed, his art undeveloped and undisciplined. But there are moments when his language catches fire, when his faith and his poetry burn in a pure white flame which, for a brief moment, like a jagged streak of lightning across the sky, illuminates the heart of things.

¹² James F. Donelan, "Some Slighted Poets: I. John Skelton". *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* (April, 1960) p. 243. For a very articulate exposition of the purpose of the study of English literature in the University read Helen Gardner, "The Academic Study of English Literature", *Critical Quarterly* (Summer, 1959) pp. 106-115. Her credo: the study of the English authors provides as good an intellectual training and discipline, as much enriches the imagination, as strongly fortifies the moral life and purifies the feelings as the study of the authors of antiquity. A School of English Language and Literature produces not only well educated men and women to go out into the professions, but also scholars who find in the subject the same profound intellectual reward as the classics offered: the deep satisfaction of intellectual inquiry pursued for its own sake, in pursuance of the mind's desire to attain truth and enlarge its knowledge.

At this point the reader may well suspect that he is being given what the gentlemen on Madison Avenue call the "hard sell." He may wonder how it is possible for Langland to have been all the things we have said he was and still have remained so neglected. This is a problem we might as well face before going any further, and the only honest way to face it is to admit right from the start that there are difficulties — some of them quite formidable — in appreciating Langland.

For one thing, Langland wrote in a West-Midland dialect which is archaic enough to present more of an obstacle to appreciation than, for example, Chaucer's London English. But I dare say that those who follow the counsel of perfection, and I refer mainly to teachers and students of literature, and who have a go at *Piers Plowman* in the original, will find their efforts amply rewarded. The difficulty should not be exaggerated. Langland's language is much closer to our own than it is to Old English, or even the more difficult dialects of the north. The following lines, one of Langland's description of the pathetic poor, is a rather typical passage:

Ac pore peple, thi prisoneres, lorde in the put of
 myschief,
 Comforte tho creatures, that moche care suffren
 Thorw derth, throw drouth, alle dayes here,
 Wo in wynter tymes, for wantyng of clothes,
 And in somer tyme selde, — soupen to the fulle;
 Comforte thi careful, Christ in thi ryche
 For how thow confortest alle creatures, clerkes bereth
 witnesses.¹³

¹³ B Text, *passus* XIV, ll. 174-179. Most scholars agree that Langland wrote his poem at three different periods of his life. The manuscripts of these stages are referred to as the A, B, and C texts. The A text was probably written around the year 1362, and contains thirteen *passus* in all. Due to spiritual and intellectual difficulties Langland broke off writing the poem at this point and did not resume it until some fifteen years later. The B text contains not only an expanded and improved version of the matter of the A text, but adds ten more *passus* describing the Incarnation, the Passion and Death of Christ, the Harrowing of Hell, Pentecost, and the attack of Anti-Christ. This text contains the best poetry of the three and nearly all the references in this paper are to the B text. The

Another difficulty is that Langland wrote in the alliterative accentual metre of the Old English *scops*, with which the modern reader is unfamiliar. And since it depends so much on the natural rhythm of the language rather than on any artificial measurement, the non-native English speaker runs into further difficulty. Yet it was fortunate for Langland that he chose to write in the tradition of his English forebears. For, as was mentioned earlier, Langland's imagination is Nordic, and the alliterative, unrimed line is an ideal vehicle for his heavily charged, masculine idiom and sporadic impetuosity.

His choice of metre was fortunate on another count. At the time Langland wrote, the structure and form of the English language was in a state of flux. Inflexions were being dropped and the quality and quantity of vowels were continually changing, and in these respects even dialect differed from dialect. But the alliterative accentual beat depends very little on any of these things. It is scanned by stress rather than by any syllabic count, and the stress depends on the sense, that is to say, the stress falls on the key words in the sentence or phrase, and it falls there quite naturally. These key words are alliterated so as to carry the rhythm. Thus, for all the changes that have taken place in the English language since Langland's day, his lines are relatively unchanged and for that reason should offer little difficulty, except strangeness, to the uninitiated reader. If you know what the line says, you will know how to read it. To take a simple example, in the first line of the poem:

In a *somer season* — whan *soft* was the *sonne*

the key words are stressed quite naturally. The line is divided metrically into two half-lines, and the pause between them, which is a pause in sense as well as in metre, and therefore also occurs quite naturally, is bridged by the alliteration which falls only on the stressed words. Anyone familiar with *Beowulf* will immediately recognize that the metre has lost much of the aristocratic power and gravity that made it so suitable for heroic poetry. The poets of the fourteenth-century alli-

C text, written some twenty years later—its exact date is difficult to determine—contains no significant additions.

terative revival were no longer capable of such stately lines as the famous "Vergilian" passage of *Beowulf*:

Hie dygel lond
warigeath wulfhleothu, windige naessas,
frecne fengelad, thaer fyrgenstream
under naessa genipu nither gewiteth,
flod under foldan.

By allowing two alliterations in the second half of the line and the infiltration of dactyls, the poets of the revival sapped the strength of alliterative verse, and in the case of Langland, who was surely no painstaking craftsman, there are additional faults. Nevertheless, it remains that the metre is peculiarly effective for Langland's message, and, as difficult as it is to write, it is not hard to read. *Solvitur ambulando*.

Unfortunately, the peripatetic approach does not get us very far in solving our next problem: how to see the world as Langland saw it. But unless we have some idea of his "world picture" or *weltanschauung*, we will never understand or appreciate his poetry. For the modern reader this requires adjustment on two levels: first, in the intellect, conceiving the world as a thought of God realized through the Word: *et mundus per ipsum factus est*; and then in the imagination, seeing every creature as a shadow of truth and life: "*plena sunt caeli et terra maiestatis gloriae tuae*. The first adjustment, which is an awareness¹⁴ of the theological doctrine of divine exemplarism and the philosophical postulate of the analogy of being, brings the modern mind into contact with the thought background of medieval literature; the second adjustment is the key to its poetic structure and imagery.

Langland as a medieval man saw the world, for all its variety and diversity, as a great single tapestry woven through

¹⁴ I say "awareness" because it would be quite unrealistic to expect the ordinary over-burdened teacher to take a course in medieval philosophy just to appreciate Langland. But they could quite easily and profitably read a popular presentation such as Father Copleston wrote for the Home University Library series. Frederick C. Copleston, S.J., *Medieval Philosophy* (Methuen, London, 1952).

with many threads of meaning. He saw that everything that exists somehow holds in its depths the image of God because it is the word of God, and that therefore the mind can ascend through all the visible orders of perfection until it reaches that ultimate Perfection which alone explains Itself. Thus all being is integrated. Everything we know helps us to understand everything else better. Knowledge proceeds upward and downward along the chain of being in which there are no islands. And as with being, so with action. Experience on one level interprets experience on another, and all creation acts as a magic looking-glass through which man can see into the past or the future. He knows something about life by watching a blade of grass break through the ground, or a bud unfold; he knows something about death by watching the fall of leaves, the embers of a fire or the setting sun. He learns something about the inexorability of time by watching the waves hurry toward the pebbled shore, and of the transiency of worldly glory by reading the sneer on the face of Ozymandias. And the higher the level on which he experiences truth, the wider and deeper his knowledge. In this life, as in the next, the Trinity is the key to all knowledge, and in so far as the human intellect is able to comprehend the operation of the Trinity in the material world, to that degree will it understand that world.

This explains why the number seven occurs so frequently in a mystic context and why the Fathers thought of it as the most mysterious of numbers. For as the product of *three* (which represents the Trinity) and *four* (which, as the number of the elements, represents the material world) it symbolizes the great mystery of contact between the spiritual and material worlds, the operation of the Trinity in material things. Man's life is thus divided into seven ages, each sustained by the seven virtues which in turn are nourished by the seven sacraments whose function it is to keep man free from the seven deadly sins. This mystic number not only expresses the harmony of states within man but also his relationship to the world outside. Thus there are seven planets, each one of which influences man's seven ages, thereby integrating man with the universe. God gave us the key to these mysteries in the seven

days of creation, and the church fittingly praises His work in the seven hours of the breviary and in the seven tones of the Gregorian chant.

It is not surprising, then, that Langland tells us in the very beginning of the poem that Christ taught men Truth by teaching them the Trinity.¹⁵ If any single line offers a clue to the meaning of *Piers Plowman*, it is this. For, as we shall see, Langland's poem is offered as an answer to the most fundamental question of life: What must a man do to save his soul? And the answer it gives is that the Christian, in this life, must participate, according to the grace granted him, in the life of the Trinity.

God, the poet tells us, is One, and everything that proceeds from Him, that is, all of spiritual and material creation, will, in its very existence and in the quality of that existence, reflect the unity of God. But God is also triune and creation must also of necessity reflect the threefold operation of the Godhead: of the Father who creates, of the Son who redeems and of the Holy Spirit who inspires and directs. The medieval mind saw this tri-unity reflected in many different ways in life, but especially in the three ways of Christian perfection which form the subject of three of the four visions in *Piers Plowman*: the Life of Do Well, which is the active life and reflects the creative activity of the Father; the Life of Do Better, which is the priestly life which redeems by teaching, healing and suffering, and reflects the messianic mission of Christ; the Life of Do Best which is the Life of Authority that governs the Church and reflects the mission of the Paraclete.¹⁶

Once we have grasped this medieval concept of the world as a prism of the Trinity, we have a key to the working of the

¹⁵ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁶ These three "lives" should not be confused as they sometimes have been, with St. Thomas' active, contemplative and mixed lives. Though both concepts reflect a common tradition, St. Thomas is thinking in terms of a specifically *religious* life or vocation, Langland in terms that refer to the total activity of the Christian community.

medieval imagination and the poetic idiom in which it is expressed.

To the question: what is the world, the medieval poet replied that the world was a sacrament and that he was its priest. The vocation of the poet was not only to give shape to the forms of things unknown, as Shakespeare would say but to be able to read in the book of time the secrets of eternity. And because the Trinity had sacramentalized the things of time, they were holy. To medieval man, the world was not an allegory but a sacrament, a symbol. This is the foundation for Langland's Incarnational approach to the problems of the human situation. At the start of his poem he asks Lady Church not only how man may save his soul, but follows that question immediately with another on how human society can best order its affairs so as to help its members gain that end. The theological problem cannot be solved without reference to the social problem. According to Langland, the answer to both problems lies in an understanding of the sacramental nature of the world, in being able to interpret the symbol of Nature, which is God's creation, and History, which is man's journey through it.

Nowhere is this mystic symbolism more graphically expressed than in the poet's interpretation of Nature. The sun and the moon and the stars, the birds of the air, the animals of the forest, the flowers of the field, the interchange of night and day, the pageant of the seasons, all these things contained the word of God and illuminated the drama of life and death. As it rose in the sky, the sun was a symbol of the great Son of God, who called himself the Light of the World, just as the Spring-time, which witnessed the rebirth of the world, was a symbol of the rebirth of man in baptism, and Autumn, season of harvest, the symbol of the Last Judgement. The Western imagination has, of course, continued to express itself in these terms, even as their philosophical and theological background has grown more remote. It is this sensitivity to the symbolic or metaphorical quality of all creation that most characterized the imagery of Western poetry until the time of the Enlightenment. The pre-Enlightenment poet could "amalgamate disparate exper-

iences" precisely because he could ultimately discover a level on which disparity disappeared. Mr. Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" then is merely the literateur's way of expressing a much more profound dissociation which the philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries introduced between Man and Nature.

But to return to the fourteenth century, what made the system of symbols so intriguing for the medieval mind (and so puzzling for the modern) is the power of many symbols to function on several different levels. The sun, for example, had a wealth of references: the Godhead, the Son of God, divine revelation, divine love, the king and so forth. Even so delicate an object as the lily had several symbolic references. It connoted the Saviour, the saints, chastity and the glory of heaven, depending on the context in which it appeared. An excellent example of this highly symbolic system is had in the interpretations the medieval mind conjured up for the four symbols of the Apocalyptic Christ, as we find them represented in the tympanum of the western portal at Chartres. It should prove worthwhile to delay here for a moment and see how these symbols operate, for it will condition us for the multi-functional role of Piers in the dream visions of Langland.

Each of the creatures that surrounds Christ in this apocalyptic tableau has three symbolic references: to the Evangelists, to Christ and to the Christian virtues.

The figure of the man represents St. Matthew, for it is his gospel which begins with the genealogical tables of Christ's ancestors; the lion is the emblem of Mark, for his gospel speaks of the voice crying in the wilderness; the ox symbolizes Luke whose gospel begins with the sacrifice of Zacharias; John is represented by the eagle, for alone of all living creatures the eagle can look directly into the sun, and it is John's gospel that brings us closest to the brightness of Divinity.

Secondly, these figures refer to Christ Himself. The figure of the man recalls the fact of the Incarnation, the ox that Christ was a sacrificial victim, the eagle that Christ rose to heaven. The symbolism of the lion is not quite so apparent.

In the Bestiaries the lion is pictured as sleeping with open eyes and thus is a figure of Christ in His tomb, asleep in His human nature but, in virtue of His divinity, living and watching.

Finally, the four creatures symbolize the Christian virtues necessary for salvation. The Christian must act rationally, he must be ready to sacrifice himself, he must act without fear "for the righteous are bold as a lion," and he must aspire to ascend the heights and look into the sun of eternity.

Such symbolism came quite naturally and spontaneously to the medieval mind, and where the modern mind is puzzled at its presence, the medieval mind would be more puzzled at its absence. The medieval cathedral is a case in point. There is hardly a piece of stone or glass in it that does not have some symbolic meaning. The medieval churchgoer, for example, saw nothing incongruous in the great north rose window at Chartres where the four Evangelists are shown riding piggy-back on the shoulders of the four major prophets. Even we would have little difficulty interpreting that symbol. But what would we make of the famous symbolic window of Lyons, where a young girl, holding a flower and seated on a unicorn, is juxtaposed to the scene of the Annunciation;¹⁷ and why should the burning bush and Gideon's fleece be related to the scene of the Nativity? And the difficulty is compounded when the symbolic or allegorical figure assumes several roles. We shall see that in the course of the pilgrimage to Truth the figure of Piers the Plowman operates at different levels. He is not only a figure of Moses and Abraham, but also of God the Father, the Mes-

¹⁷ This is a good example of how the medieval writer or artist used the Bestiaries as a source book for his symbols of nature, or what Vincent of Beauvais called the Mirror of Nature. The Bestiaries taught that the unicorn could be captured only by a maiden. When the animal sees her he comes and lays his head submissively in her lap and then is captured by the hunters. (Recall the hunting of the unicorn in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*.) The symbolism is clear. The unicorn is Christ and the horn in its forehead is the symbol of His power as the Son of God. By taking human nature in the womb of Mary he submits to the maiden, and then can be captured by those who desire to possess him. The flower in Mary's hand is the sign of her purity.

sianic Christ, the Holy Spirit and Peter the Apostle. At another point in his poem, Langland elucidates the three essentials of the sacrament of Penance by comparing them with the three ways of life: Do Well, Do Better and Do Best. Our reaction to this is annoyance. We feel it would be better for the sake of dramatic unity not to use these titles so loosely, nor does it seem prudent to imply that the relationship of these states to one another is similar to that of the three essentials of the sacrament. But to find fault with this, Pope would say, is to cavil not to criticize. As we read medieval poetry, look at medieval paintings or enter a medieval cathedral our mind and imagination have to be always on the alert, now qualifying, now restricting, now amplifying and at times even dismissing the allegory or symbol completely.

Therefore, the modern reader who wishes to appreciate medieval art must not only be aware of the medieval use of symbol and allegory,¹⁸ but he must also train his mind to be sen-

¹⁸ I have used the terms *allegory* and *symbol* as Professor C. S. Lewis has defined them in his book *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford University Press, 1936) pp. 43-48. An allegory is a "mode of expression", a "figure of rhetoric" which presents to the observer "what is immaterial in picturable terms." The allegory, therefore, is an invention of the imagination and has no reality in itself. Typical, well-known examples of allegory are Plato's cave, the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, the personifications of the seven deadly sins (as in *Doctor Faustus*), the story of *Everyman* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. In our poem Piers is an allegorical figure of the three ways of Christian life. A symbol, on the other hand, is a way of thinking in which one level of reality, the visible, physical world, is conceived of as a copy of another higher level of reality, the invisible world of the spirit. Both symbol and "symbolized" are therefore real, but the first is only a mirror of the second, a finite reflection of the archetype. Thus the washing with water in baptism is a visible symbol of the spiritual cleansing that takes place in the sacrament. But the reader should be warned that these terms are used quite loosely by the authors. For example, though Professor Lewis says that allegory "belongs to the form of poetry and is a mode of expression", J. F. Goodridge in his preface to the Penguin *Piers Plowman* (p. 12) says that "allegory is not a poetic device but a way of thinking." Emile Mâle also speaks of the Old Testament types as allegories, and yet they surely have a reality of their own. Even Spenser

sitive to the various levels of interpretation and the ambience they enjoy. The medieval reader, taking up a professedly religious and didactic poem such as *Piers Plowman*, would quite naturally expect to find the poem operating on several different levels of meaning, and this without any strain or even conscious effort. It would all come quite naturally, for he has been conditioned to think this way by many centuries of meditation, biblical exegesis and pulpit oratory based on the quadruple interpretation of Sacred Scripture and a rich use of symbol and allegory. The sermons of Honorius of Autun are a good example of this type of sacred oratory in its early stages. Honorius would begin with a passage from the New Testament proper to the feast or occasion, then turn to the Old Testament for types and to Nature for symbols, and conclude with a moral reflection.

By the thirteenth century, four definite parallel lines of interpretation had been established: the literal meaning, or straight narrative; the allegorical meaning, or the story considered as a parable pertinent to the reader's or listener's personal situation, or in some cases (as happens often in Langland) to a social or historical situation; the moral meaning stated as a general truth applicable to all men; and the anagogical or theological meaning which is the knowledge of God derived from the story. As an example of this type of quadruple interpretation let us take one of the four favorite New Testament allegories of the Middle Ages,¹⁹ and one which Langland himself uses in a very important context: the story of the Good Samaritan.

The first level of meaning or *sensus literalis* is the story of the man who fell among thieves, was ignored by priest and

had his own idea of allegory, as everyone knows who has tried to read the *Faerie Queene* as a medieval allegory. The reader would be well advised, therefore, to make sure how his author defines his terms and whether he is speaking as a rhetorician or as a philosopher before he starts drawing any conclusions.

¹⁹ The other three are the parables of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the Prodigal Son, and Dives and Lazarus. These are the only parables represented in the stained glass and stone of the medieval cathedrals.

levite, and finally rescued by a kind Samaritan. The second level, or *sensus allegoricus*, is the reference of the story to the reader's own situation. The story should prompt the reader to ask himself, for example, if he has acted as levite or Samaritan towards his own unfortunate neighbors. The third level of interpretation is the *sensus moralis* which enables the reader to arrive at an understanding of some general moral truth, in this case an insight into the virtue of charity. The fourth meaning is derived from an interpretation of the story at its highest possible level: the story of the Fall and Redemption of Man. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is the road from grace to sin; the traveller is Man himself (in the Good Samaritan window of the cathedral at Sens he is explicitly labeled *Homo*); the priest and levite are images of the Old Law, which was powerless to help humanity; and the Good Samaritan is, of course, Christ Himself. In *Piers Plowman*, Langland can assume complete familiarity on the part of his readers with this parable, and, with this as a background, he introduces Piers in his life of Do Better as the Good Samaritan, informing us through this identification of the nature of the life of Do Better and of Pier's new role as Christ.

Before proceeding to the poem itself it might be well to establish as clearly as possible the four levels of meaning which run through the poem.

Langland's poem is first of all the story of the poet himself,²⁰ the dreamer, in his life-long search for Truth, and the

²⁰ Although it is not entirely correct to identify poet and dreamer, since in medieval dream-visions the latter is often fictitious to some degree, nevertheless the dreamer's pilgrimage seems to be a fairly accurate record of Langland's life. The facts of that life are few. He was born about the year 1333 in Shropshire near the Malvern Hills. It would seem that he was the illegitimate son of one Stacy de Rokayle, a landowner under the Despencers, and because of this connection received some education and theological training at the monastery of Great Malvern, and quite possibly due to the death of his father, and he went to London to earn his living saying prayers and singing the Psalms for benefactors. This explains both his close familiarity with the Bible and why his poetic style reflects the abruptness and looseness of the Psalter. We know from the poem that he often

scene of the pilgrimage is the actual world of Langland's own day—fourteenth-century England. On the allegorical level the pilgrimage has many references. Piers may be taken as a figure of the ordinary Christian, through whom the dreamer, and the reader as well, may ask questions of life. Or in considering Langland's three lives as corresponding to the three phases of Sacred History, we may see Piers as the key figure in each phase. Thus as he leads the multitude in working the half-acre he is both Moses and Abraham; with the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the life of Do Better on earth, Piers becomes a figure of Christ. In the third and last phase of Sacred History, what St. Peter himself calls "the last days" in his Pentecostal sermon, Piers is a figure of St. Peter and of the Popes who govern the Church in the life of Do Best.

On the moral level the poem quite clearly is an investigation of the structure of the life of Christian perfection, which Langland divides into the life of Do Well, Do Better and Do Best.

The theological or anagogical reference of the poem has already been discussed. Langland conceives his three lives in reference to the "three lives" of the Trinity.

We have noted earlier in this paper that a certain amount of elasticity, of vagueness, if you will, is necessary for a fluid operation of the levels of meaning. The only result of an attempt at exact analysis will be frustration. The threads of meaning that run through the poem cannot be separated and catalogued. Allegory is not so much a product of the intellect as of the imagination. It is not a way of thinking but of expressing, and we should be satisfied—in fact, we have to be—with perceiving it imaginatively rather than dissecting it intellectually.

The following outline of the poem is neither an analysis nor a criticism but an effort to present certain highlights in the

lived as a beggar in extreme poverty, that he was no respecter of persons and was considered an eccentric by those about him. He died close to the turn of the century.

poem with a view to interesting the reader enough to have him take up the poem and read it for himself.

Piers Plowman is divided into a prologue or induction and twenty *passus*, but it is more in accord with the rather summary nature of this outline to consider the poem under four main divisions, corresponding to the four visions: the Vision of Piers Plowman (prologue to *passus* 7): the Vision of the Life of Do Well (*passus* 8 to *passus* 15); the Vision of the Life of Do Better (*passus* 16 to *passus* 18); and the Vision of the Life of Do Best (*passus* 19 and 20).

The Vision of Piers Plowman: this first section of the poem begins with the vision of the dreamer on the Malvern hill-top. He looks out over the vale of the Severn and sees the world as a field full of folk, bordered on the East by a splendid high tower (heaven) and on the West by a deep dark dungeon (hell). It is the world of the poet's own day, and the timeless world of the unchanging human situation. The people in the field pay little attention to either tower or dungeon and, with but few exceptions, are intent on the things of this world. The reader who is familiar with the Spiritual Exercises immediately thinks of the FIRST PRELUDE for the meditation on the Incarnation. *Dominus de coelo prospexit. . . non est qui faciat bonum.* No class of society escapes Langland's censure, but here, as throughout the poem, his anger runs hottest against the shepherds of the flock who have betrayed their trust.

I found the Friars there, all the Four Orders,
Preaching the people for their private profit,
Babbling about the gospel as it seemed good to them,
Their money and their merchandise on the march
together . . .

There preached a pardonor as if he were a priest
Dragging out documents with bishops' affidavits
And saying he himself would absolve them all . . .
Were the bishop awake or worth his two ears
His seal would never sanction the deceit of the people . . .

Like Chaucer, Langland was aware of the holiness in the land, and some of the folk in the fair field

To prayer and to penance many put themselves,
All for the love of our Lord, living austerely.

But there was too much corruption in high places:

Bishops and bachelors and doctors of divinity
Curates under Christ with the tonsure for token
(Showing that they should be shriving their parishoners,
Preaching and praying for them and feeding the poor)
Lodge lazily in London all the long year . . .
Their masses and matins and many other services
Are undevoutly done and I dread that at last
Christ at His coming may curse the whole lot of them.²¹

Langland was deeply concerned and disturbed over what he saw about him and feared that, unless the spirit of the clergy was reformed, the seamless robe of the church would be torn apart. And he predicted:

Unless they and Holy Church hold closer together
The worst misery of man will mount up quickly.

A "lady of great loveliness" then appears to the dreamer and tells him that she is "Holy Church" and in terms again reminiscent of the Foundation and Principle of the Spiritual Exercises She explains to the dreamer the allegory of the field of folk. The things of this world are created by God and are good: "He built the world and bade it offer you its bounty"; but the bounty must be used "in measure and moderation." Then the dreamer, moved by grace, falls on his naked knees and asks the question that lies at the heart of the poem:

²¹ As Professor Dawson remarks, Langland's harsh indictment of the clergy, especially the four orders of Friars, is likely to prove shocking to those who know the Middle Ages only in a modern bowdlerized form. Like most reformers Langland emphasized the evil he saw at the expense of the good, but he did not exaggerate the evil. Dom David Knowles, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, gives us an historian's account of the abuses Langland was striking at: "All controversies apart, therefore, it is not surprising to be told, when the first enthusiasm had passed, that they [the Friars] are gossips and meddlers, that they live like lords at the charges of others, that by wheedling and *bonhomie* they filch penitents from the local clergy, and pocket dainties and comforts from the housewives of the parish, to say nothing of the inevitable charges of a more serious nature." Dom David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge University Press, 1957) vol. ii, p. 91.

Teach me no treasure, I said, but tell me truly
How I may save my soul, O you that are held sacred!²²

This is the plea of the Salve Regina, the cry of the Christian *viator* plodding his way through the vale of tears. The Lady answers the dreamer and tells him to seek Truth who dwells in the high tower. It is really at this point that the dreamer is committed to the pilgrimage, for his search for Truth will lead him to seek out the lives of Do Well, Do Better and Do Best. But the dreamer has a difficulty. With so much corruption and hypocrisy masquerading as goodness he finds it difficult to distinguish Truth from Falsehood. His question brings the poem down from the abstract level of ascetical and theological speculation to the actual world of human affairs. As a poor man and as a spokesman for the poor, Langland was convinced that the people in the fair field would never look up to the tower, or even fear the dungeon, until they were first freed from the fear of want. Lady Church answers that he can find Truth in the world by finding Charity which is the treacle of heaven and the plant of peace. Where Charity lives, Lady Meed is driven out, and it is Lady Meed who is the cause of the corruption, venality and injustice in society.

Langland's vision of Lady Meed is a straightforward piece of allegory. Meed is the personification of the wealth of this world, the Lady Munera of the *Faerie Queene*. As the scene opens she is to be married to Fraud (the union of money and bribery) and the marriage has the blessing of Sir Civil-Law and Father Simony, the figures of state and church. But Sir Conscience warns the king of the impending marriage and he prevents it. Fraud escapes and is given refuge by the Friars, while two of his friends, Guile and Liar, join the ranks of the merchants and pardoners. The King then attempts to persuade Sir Conscience to marry Lady Meed himself. But Conscience, recalling the story of the camel and the eye of the needle, refuses to jeopardize his own salvation, and prophesies a new world is which Reason, Love and Loyalty will rule in the place of Lady Meed.

²² Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

No more shall Meed, as she is now, be mistress,
 But love and loyalty and humbleness of heart;
 These shall be sovereigns on earth, for the saving of Truth.
 And he who trespasses against Truth, or takes what's not
 his,

Shall be laid by loyalty under the law.

But loving-kindness shall come yet, and Conscience, too,
 And make of law their labourer; such love shall arise,
 And such peace among the people, so perfect a truth,
 That Jews shall imagine, with joy and amazement,
 That Moses or Messiah are among us on earth.²³ ,

The power of Meed is finally broken when Peace comes to court and complains to the king of the injustices of Wrong, who is obviously a personification of the nobles and royal purveyors who pillaged the countryside. When Meed attempts to buy Peace off and keep the case from being tried the king is enraged and drives her out. He then takes Reason and Conscience as his permanent counsellors and asks them to help him rule his kingdom. To effect the necessary reform in all strata of society, Reason, with the help of Repentance, preaches a mission to the people in the fair field. This results in a series of public confessions by the Seven Deadly Sins, and in dealing with this commonplace of medieval preaching and drama, Langland is at his vivid best. Even Chaucer's pilgrims pale before the boisterous vulgar humanity of Langland's gallery of rogues. His hatred of Meed shows in his portrait of Covetousness, the inordinate attachment to creatures, which he considered the root of all evil in society.

He looked as hungrily and hollowy as old Sir Harvey;
 He was beetle-browed, and blubber-lipped also,
 With two bleary eyes, like a blinded hag;
 And like a leather purse his cheeks were lolling
 Lower than his chin, and chittering with age;
 His beard, like a bumpkin's, bedraggled with bacon,
 A hood upon his head with a lousy hat above it.
 He wore a tawny tunic, twelve winters old,
 All tattered and filthy, and full of lice, creeping,
 And unless a louse could have leapt a little
 She could never have walked on so threadbare a weave.²⁴

²³ *Ibid.* p. 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 40.

On his way to church to be shriven, Gluttony passes by the tavern, weakens and goes in, and this *felix culpa* occasions one of the most vivid descriptions in medieval literature, rivaling Dryden's portrait of round-globed Og and the canvases of Hogarth. It begins with a catalogue of Gluttony's cronies:

Then in goes Glutton and Great-Oaths with him;
Cissy the sempstress sat on a bench,
Robin the rabbit-catcher, and his wife with him,
Tim the tinker and two of his apprentices,
Hickey the hackney-man and Hodge the huckster,
Clarice of Cock's Lane and the clerk of the parish,
Parson Peter Proudie and his Peronella,
Davy the ditcher and a dozen others,
A fiddler, a rat-catcher, a Cheapside crossing-sweeper,
A rope-maker, a road-man, and Rosy the dishwasher,
Godfrey of Garlick-hithe, and Griffin the Welshman,
And several salesmen of second-hand furniture,
All greeted Glutton with a glass of good ale.²⁶

At the conclusion of the confession, Repentance preaches a message of hope founded on the Charity of Christ, and the final lines of this passage are worth quoting in the original for they are a fine example of Langland's word magic, especially the sound effects achieved through a controlled use of the Latin scriptures:

Thanne hent Hope an horne: of *deus, tu conversus*
vivificabis nos,
And blew it with *beati quorum: remissae sunt iniquitates*
That alle seyntes in heuene: songen at ones
Homines et jumenta saluabis, quemadmodum
multiplicasti misericordiam tuam.
A thousand of men tho; thrugen togyderes;
Criede vpward to Cryst: and to his clene moder
To haue grace to go with hem: Treuthe to seke.²⁷

But good will alone is not enough to find "Treuthe" and the pilgrims without a guide "blustreden forth as bestes over bankes and hilles". They need a wise man to direct them on the right road to the shrine of Truth and suddenly one comes forth in the person of Piers Plowman. Here Piers is the figure

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 41.

²⁷ B Text, *passus* V, 11. 514--521.

of the ordinary Christian, the man who Does Well by keeping the commandments. As a poet, though, he is, at the beginning, rather dull and uninspired and his allegory of the ten commandments shows Langland, and allegory, at their worst. The pilgrims are directed by Piers to cross a stream called "Be-gentle-in-your-speech" and a ford called "Honour-thy-father-and-thy-mother" after which they will arrive at a place called "Swear-not-without-necessity-and-above-all-take-not-the-name-of-t h e-Lord-in-vain." When Piers finishes his direction, some of the pilgrims complain that the way is grim, and the reader, having suffered through Langland's uninspired allegory of the commandments, is quite likely to agree. Piers is then moved to volunteer to guide them himself, but on one condition, that they first help him plough and cultivate his half-acre before they set off.

This insistence of Langland that society itself must be reformed and that economic and social justice must be established before the Christian community can achieve its corporate salvation is one of the basic principles of his spirituality. His social consciousness is not anthropocentric but Christocentric. The question he asks is not what Society must do to achieve Utopia here, but what it must do to help its members achieve the life hereafter. This is a fourteenth-century prelude to *Rerum Novarum*.

At this point in the poem—the seventh *passus*—Piers faces a crisis, and so do most of the critics who have dealt with the poem. Things have not been going well in the half-acre. Nor is it Pier's fault. His hope for harmony in the half-acre has been founded on sound principles of social justice and an efficient economy. He is not a revolutionary. His politics are as orthodox as his dogma. He accepts the traditional hierarchical structure of society, but, like the true Englishman, he combines this respect for class-consciousness with a strong sense of the integrity and independence of even the lowest member. But in the midst of his troubles he rather unexpectedly receives a pardon from Truth for himself and his heirs. Not being able to read the pardon, he quite naturally accepts it as valid, that

is, as an absolution from the temporal punishment due to sin.²⁸ The Pilgrimage to Truth which would have merited such a pardon is no longer necessary. But the pardon is not what it seems to be. A parish priest construes the text and tells Piers that it is not the kind of pardon he thinks it is. What it offers is not the loving mercy of the New Law but the cold justice of the Old Testament.

*Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam aeternam,
Qui vero mala in ignem eternum.*

When Piers hears this, in sheer rage he tears the pardon into pieces, leaves his plow in the half-acre and goes off saying:

I shall cease my sowing, said Piers, and sweat no longer,
And be no longer busy about my belly-joys!
Of prayer and penance my plow shall be hereafter
And weep when I should sleep, though wheaten-bread
fail me.

Who loves God loyally, his livelihood is easy,
Unless Luke was a liar who learnt from the birds.
We should not be too busy about the world's bliss,
*Ne sollicite sitis...*²⁹

How shall we interpret this? There are almost as many solutions as there are critics, though some of the solutions are only counsels of despair. While it may be doubtful that even Langland knew exactly what he meant, it would be well to recall here what was said earlier about feeling allegories imaginatively rather than analyzing them intellectually. The poem is a fugue, not a set of scales played in four different octaves.

²⁸ A pardon is an indulgence which remits in whole or in part the temporal punishment due to sin. But here the pardon must be taken allegorically and its meaning will depend on the precise allegorical context in which we place it. For example, if we consider Piers and the people of the half-acre as an allegory of the Old Testament community then the "pardon" they seek is the redeeming grace of Christ; if we consider Piers and his flock as a Christian community of the New Testament, then the "pardon" they seek is a call to the perfection of the counsels, which, as it turns out, is the life of Do Better. Therefore, the actual "pardon" they received, a statement of Divine justice from the Athanasian Creed which offered neither of these graces, was completely disappointing.

²⁹ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

At the risk of offering an over-simplified solution I should like to suggest that we apply a principle set down earlier in this paper to the effect that the Trinity is the key to the poem. For Langland's master idea is that salvation, both individual and corporate, will be achieved by participation in the life of the Trinity. Let us apply this principle to the present difficulty.

First, let us take Piers as a figure of the ordinary Christian striving for perfection. To achieve this he has to reproduce in his life the full image of the Holy Trinity: the creative life of the Father (Do Well), the messianic life of the Son (Do Better) and the inspirational life of the Holy Spirit (Do Best). It is evident from what we know of Piers thus far that he has achieved the first phase of this triune life. He has kept the Ten Commandments, worked hard and shown justice to his neighbor. But he cannot rest there. All these things he has done from his youth and he now feels the call to something higher. He desires the life of *Ne solliciti sitis*. When the pardon is given to him, he thinks, at first, that he can remain in the half-acre and grow in perfection, but when the pardon is translated he sees that it actually means nothing

But do well and have well and God shall have your soul,
And do evil and have evil and hope for nothing better
Than that after your death day the devil shall have your
soul.³⁰

Piers then tears up the pardon, not because it does not offer a safe guide to salvation, but because it does not satisfy his desire for full Christian perfection. He leaves his half-acre and goes off on a pilgrimage to find the life of Do Better—the life of the counsels.

Or we may consider the half-acre as the first phase of the triune partition of Sacred History, and Piers as a figure of Moses. Here the pieces fall into place quite nicely. The world of the half-acre is the world of the Old Testament, the spiritual world of Do Well, in which the commandments are the summit of perfection, and obedience is motivated by fear. Like Piers in the

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 58.

half-acre, Moses too, soon realized that the life of Do Well was not enough to keep his people from sighing for the flesh-pots of Egypt, and his breaking of the stone tablets of the Law, which St. Paul called the law of death, neatly parallels Piers' tearing of the pardon. The analogy with Moses sheds further light on Piers' action, for Piers, like Moses, has a corporate responsibility. He cannot rest in the half-acre. Experience has taught him that Do Well needs Do Better. Even the just fall seven times daily. Therefore he must go on to the life of Do Better not only to achieve his own perfection, but the salvation of every Christian. Only as Do Better can he keep harmony in the half-acre, save the fruit of the tree of charity and wash Haukyn's coat clean of the seven sins.³¹

The Vision of the Life of Do Well: these are the words that Langland himself used to describe this section, and they may cause some confusion. If, as we have just seen, Piers has been living the life of Do Well in the half-acre and is now off on a pilgrimage to find the life of Do Better, why does Langland spend the next seven *passus* talking about the life of Do Well? The reason is that Langland is not quite sure yet what direction his poem will take. Remember he is not writing a planned, self-conscious work of art. He is, as it were, thinking out his poem as he goes along. In other words, he is not writing about a pilgrimage to truth that is over and done with, and which he now looks back upon, but a pilgrimage which is actually going on and of which his poem is a sort of diary or log. Much of the poem's vitality and drama derives from this immediacy of situation. Piers' dissatisfaction with the life of Do Well is shared by Langland, but the latter wants to investigate the whole structure of the spiritual life a little further and so he has the dreamer part company with Piers who disappears into the life of *Ne solliciti sitis* but which significantly Langland has not yet called by the name of Do Better. It is during his own search for knowledge of Do Well that Langland learns about Do Better and Do Best. Thus the first four *passus* of this section form a series of discus-

³¹ That is, the ordinary Christian community (which leads the life of Do Well) needs the priesthood (the life of Do Better) to attain its salvation.

sions with the personified faculties of the soul and various disciplines on the nature of the spiritual life. These discussions lead Langland into intellectual difficulties he is unable to solve and, or so he would have us believe, for the next fifteen years he leads a life of sin and dissipation. Then, an older and wiser man, he returns to the poem, revises some of the earlier *passus* and picks up his story where he left off. This section (*passus* 8 to *passus* 12) provides most of the ascetical and dogmatic theology of the poem and it is here that "the men are separated from the boys." But in justice to Langland we have to admit that this is no mere theological *tour de force*, but a true to life morality play. Langland's difficulties were real enough to overwhelm him and drive him into the company of Concupiscentia and Covetousness for fifteen years. Nor are these *passus* without their flashes of poetic fire. The lengthy discussion on poverty and charity in *passus* 11 in which Langland again restates the Christological basis for his social order is one of the finest things in the poem. And his vision of the mountain called Middle-Earth establishes his lineage with the elegiac poets of the Northland:

All this I saw in sleep, and suddenly Nature
 Came herself and called me that I might take account
 Of the wonders of world, to bear them witness;
 And I moved upon the mountains of this Middle-Earth
 As she fetched me forth, to fathom by the example
 Of every kind of creature, how to love my Creator.
 I saw the sun and the sea and the sand along it,
 And where the birds and the beasts made towards their
 mating,
 The wild-wood creatures and the wonderful wild-fowl,
 With their flecked feathers, fancifully coloured.
 Man and his help-meet I beheld also,
 Poverty and plenty, peace and war,
 Bliss and blight, I saw both together,
 And how men took money and refused mercy . . .
 But what most moved me and altered my mood,
 Was that reason rewarded and ruled all animals
 Save man and his mate. . . .³²

At the end of *passus* 11 we enter on a new phase of the Vision of Do Well. The dreamer meets a stranger who rebukes

³² Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

him for his intellectual pride and then, in *passus* 12, defends Clergy (i.e. Learning) and explains the problems that have so long bothered the dreamer. The stranger is called Imaginative, the medieval term for the faculty of memory. By recalling to Langland's mind all his past life, Imaginative is able to show him where he erred and to help him to use Reason correctly. This prepares the dreamer's soul for the operation of Conscience, who will direct him towards the higher life of virtue, and Patience, who will give the restless dreamer the gift of quiet endurance so necessary for spiritual progress. It is at this point, then, that the dreamer resumes the pilgrimage to Truth which was interrupted fifteen years earlier. And it is a striking example of Langland's dramatic sense that the first person he meets on his path is Haukyn, the Man of the Active Life. The dreamer's failure has made him conscious of the insufficiency of the life of Do Well in his own particular situation. Meeting up with Haukyn reminds him that this is a corporate failure. The Christian community, as a Mystical Body, needs the life of Do Better and Do Best not only to satisfy the aspirations of those who are called to the perfection of the counsels, but also to safeguard the spiritual health of those who are called only to the life of Do Well. Haukyn is one of these. Unless he has the help of Do Better and Do Best he cannot keep his coat clean of the seven deadly sins. It is towards the end of this *passus*, in an exhortation on poverty by Patience, that we have the moving description of the poor wet-shod wanderers who stand and plead in doorways and go breadless to bed.

At the end of this exhortation Haukyn breaks down and cries in sorrow for his sins and the hardships of life. His wailing awakens the dreamer who admits before falling to sleep again that he now knows "inwardly" the nature of the life of Do Well. His first objective has been achieved. But he still needs further instruction on the nature of Charity before he can come to the life of Do Better, and he receives this instruction in *passus* 15 which is really an introduction to the life of Do Better. His lecturer is Anima, that is, the soul and all her faculties. Anima prefaces her discourse on Charity with an attack on "the lust for knowledge that robbed mankind of im-

mortal life." Here Langland reflects the anti-intellectualism of the English mystics of the fourteenth century, especially Richard Rolle. His complaint, to which there is some truth, is that the Friars and theologians are so busy arguing abstrusely about the Trinity and questions beyond the reach of reason that no one any longer preaches the Ten Commandments or the Seven Deadly Sins.³³

Then follows the lecture on Charity, the longest in the poem, in which the dreamer is told that "only Piers the Plowman, *Petrus, id est Christus*" can help him find Charity. For Piers is now living the life of Do Better, which is the life of Charity, and it is as a figure of the life of Do Better that he will be identified with the Good Samaritan and with Christ (*Petrus, id est Christus*) without, however, ceasing to be Piers the Plowman.

The Vision of the Life of Do Better: in the sixteenth *passus* the dreamer finally catches up with Piers in the vision of the life of Do Better. This begins with an allegorized statement of Piers' function in the life of Do Better, which is to guard the tree of Charity (i.e. the Church) with its fruit of holy lives. In other words, the vocation of Piers, and of all who are called to the Life of Do Better, is to heal, to teach and to suffer, to be priest, prophet and victim, and thus to participate in the messianic mission of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Piers' role, therefore, is now merged with that of Christ, and when the fruit of the tree begins to fall into the devil's hands (the plight of the souls in the Old Testament) and the moment has come for the Life of Do Better to begin on earth in the second phase of Sacred History, we move into the most sublime part of the poem: the story of the birth of Christ, His jousting on Calvary in the armour of Piers (i.e. in His human nature, *formam servi accipiens*), and the harrowing of Hell. It begins:

And then spake Spiritus Sanctus, in Gabriel's mouth,
To a maiden named Mary, a meek thing she was,

³³ cf. W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1955) pp. 132-133; 251-252.

That one Jesus, a judge's son, should in her chamber
gently

Rest Himself and feed there, till the fulness of time,
When Piers' fruit should flower and fall to ripeness. . . ³⁴

When Piers goes off to joust with the devil for possession of the fruit of the tree, the dreamer awakes. He is not yet ready to participate in Piers' great act of Charity on Calvary. First his faith must be confirmed, and this is done by a meeting with Abraham, who teaches him Truth by telling him about the Trinity. He next meets Hope in the person of Moses and this meeting is worth describing in some detail.

Hope is carrying a writ of the two great commandments: love God and love thy neighbor. But the dreamer refuses to accept the second, and with good reason, for without Charity he cannot hope to obey it. At this point Charity makes an entrance in the figure of the Good Samaritan and the whole scene shifts to that of the parable. Faith and Hope represent priest and levite and, as the virtues of the Old Law, they are powerless to help the man (humanity) who has fallen among thieves and who lies along the road "naked as a needle." The Good Samaritan (Christ) brings the fallen man to the hamlet of *Lex Christi* and he promises the innkeeper to return for him after the joust at Jerusalem. How nicely the poet weaves his own story in with the parable! It will be the victory of Christ in the joust on Calvary that will win Him the right to restore fallen man to grace by paying the price. "We were bought by one body." The dreamer is so moved by this act of charity that he runs after the Samaritan and joins his company. The Samaritan excuses the unkindness of Faith and Hope in not assisting the poor wretch:

Have them excused, said he, little their help avails him;
There may no medicine in the world help him to his health
But the blood of a babe, born of a virgin³⁵

and adds his own development of the parable. He tells the dreamer that in three days (i.e. after the crucifixion) the thief

³⁴ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 93.

who lurks in these woods will be put in fetters. *O mors, ero mors tua.*

Then faith shall keep the forest and the firth shall be free,
 Taking care of the common man who doesn't know the
 country,
 And Hope shall be host at the inn, where the man lies
 healing,
 And all that are feeble and faint and that Faith cannot
 teach
 Shall be led in love by hope. . . .³⁵

Then the Samaritan lectures the dreamer on the need for Hope as well as Faith, and of Charity above all and then "he spurred his horse and went away like the wind."

The dreamer then continues on his lonely way, and in the season of Lent falls asleep again and has a vision of Christ's passion and death. It begins when he sees a barefoot figure riding along on an ass, and at first he thinks it is the Good Samaritan, and then he thinks it is Piers. Puzzled, he asks Faith who it is, and Faith tells him that it is Jesus who jousts in Jerusalem for the fruit of Piers Plowman. But the dreamer, like the modern reader, is a bit slow on allegory and so Faith has to spell it out for him:

This Jesus of gentle breed will joust in Piers' armour,
 In his helmet and his hauberk, *humana natura*.
 That Christ be not comprehended as *Consummatus Deus*
 In the Plowman's appearance He rides forth proudly,
 For no dint shall daunt Him in *Deitate Patris*.³⁶

Langland's description of the passion is restrained, as we would expect of a northern poet writing in the tradition of the *Dream of the Rood*. It is not a sacrificial Lamb that goes to the slaughter but a Knight who mounts his charger and speaks his *gilpcwaeth*:³⁷

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 95.

³⁷ In the *Dream of the Rood* the Cross speaks:

Then the young Warrior, God, the All-Wielder,
 Put off his raiment, steadfast and strong;
 With lordly mood in the sight of many
 He mounted the cross to redeem mankind.

Translated by Charles W. Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry* (Hollis and Carter, London, 1952) p. 94.

Life says that Death's a liar, and lays his life in pawn,
That, for all that Death can do, within three days
He will fetch from the fiend the fruit of Piers Plowman
And lay it where Love would have it, and bind Lucifer,
And beat away and bring down death and bitterness for
ever:

*O mors, ero mors tua!*³⁸

The Passion ends with a powerful curse on the Jews:

Yet when this darkness is done, His death will be avenged;
You, lords of the world, have lost; for Life shall have
mastery;

You that were free shall fall into thralldom,
Churl as you are, and your children, you shall achieve
nothing.

Your great days now are done, as Daniel prophesied,
When Christ shall come, the crown of your kingdom shall
cease.³⁹

The dreamer then descends into the lower world and stands and waits in the darkness like the faithful at the Easter vigil waiting for the Lumen Christi. In the scene that follows, Langland takes a commonplace of medieval preaching and drama, the Harrowing of Hell, and with sublime thought, inspired music and breathtaking imagery changes it into one of the most powerful and beautiful passages in English literature. The devils, hiding behind the gates of hell, hear the voice of the herald announcing the coming of Christ:

Princes of this place, Open! Undo the doors,
For here comes crowned He that is King of glory.
Then Satan sighed and said to them all,
Such was the light that against our leave fetched
Lazarus forth;
Care and calamity has come upon us all.
If this king come in He will capture mankind
And lead it whither He likes and lodge us in bondage.⁴⁰

Lucifer answers Satan and complains that if Christ takes the souls from hell He will be violating His word: "For He Himself

³⁸ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 101.

said that if Adam ate of the apple all were to die." Then, in a burst of blinding light, Christ breaks through the bars of Belial and declares by what right He frees the souls in hell:

You, Lucifer, in the likeness of a loathsome adder,
Got by your guile those that God loved;
And I in likeness of a leader, that am Lord of heaven,
By Grace have beguiled you, go guile against guile!
And as Adam and all through a Tree took their death
Adam and all, through a Tree, shall turn to life.⁴¹

And then He declares for what reason He does so:

For I, that am Lord of life, Love is my drink,
And for that drink, today, I died upon earth.
I fought so, I thirst still, for the sake of man's soul;
No drink may moisten or slake my thirst
Until the day of vintage in the vale of Jeosaphat.⁴¹

The Vision of the Life of Do Best: in this last section we enter into the last phase of Sacred History, the founding of the Church, and its corresponding phase of Christian perfection, the Life of Do Best. It begins, therefore, with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, for the life of Do Best is the operation of the Holy Spirit in and through the Church. In this section Piers is no longer the figure of Christ, but of Peter and the Popes of the Church. And at long last he has the pardon he sought so long ago in the half-acre:

And when this deed was done, He⁴² taught Do Best,
And gave Piers Plowman power and pardon
For all manner of men, mercy and forgiveness,
Authority to absolve all sinners from their sins. . . .⁴³

Then Grace gives Piers four oxen—the four Evangelists—to plow men's souls, and the seeds of the four virtues to plant there, and four horses—Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory and Jerome—to harrow the Sacred Scriptures. Grace then tells Piers to build a Barn (the Visible Church) for his harvest and offers him the necessary materials: the wood of the Cross, and a mortar made from the blood and water that flowed from the side

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 103.

⁴² The Holy Spirit.

⁴³ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

of Christ. A great moat (Holiness) is dug around the Church to protect it from the assaults of Pride, the Lord of Lust, and his great army. And to sustain the folk under Siege a new manna is sent from heaven:

Here is bread, blessed and God's Body there under,
For Grace, by God's word, has given Piers power
And might to make it, and man to eat it,
In help of their health, once in a month,
Or as often as they have need, that is, those who have paid
To the pardon of Piers their *redde quod debes*.⁴⁴

But this is not the *parousia*. The fourteenth century is the autumn of the medieval spirit, and the time for young men's visions are over—and old men dream only dreams. And that is what Langland's apocalyptic vision of hope turns out to be—a dream that fades like the Malvern mist before a wind. A century earlier Langland might have written a happy ending to his poem, for the century of Aquinas and Francis of Assisi and St. Louis had achieved the fullest expression and integration of the Christian spirit the world had ever known, and it was even richer in promise. Had he written then, Langland's poem might have sounded a final note of triumph, instead of another call to battle, like Roland's horn at Roncesvalles. For in the last *passus* of the poem we seem to be back again in the world of the half-acre. True, Piers has now the pardon he sought, but it is valid only for those who fulfill its condition: *redde quod debes*. But Covetousness has too strong a hold on society, especially on those who have been called to the life of Do Better and Do Best. Their spiritual strength has been sapped and, having lost their own vision, they can no longer lead men on the pilgrimage to Truth. Dom David Knowles places the "great wealth of the religious" first among the causes of the decline in their religious spirit and says that it was "the parent of luxury, of strife and of worldliness."

When once a religious house or a religious order ceases to direct its sons to the abandonment of all that is not God, and

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 115. Note here that the one requisite Langland insists on is restitution for social injustices. And it is asking too much of a community so steeped in covetousness. It refuses to *redde quod debes* and is thus exposed to the attacks of the World.

ceases to show them the rigours of the narrow way that leads to the imitation of Christ in His Love, it sinks to the level of a purely human institution, and whatever its works may be, they are the works of time and not of eternity.⁴⁵

Thus when anti-Christ (the spirit of the world) comes and attacks the Church, he is welcomed by those who should oppose him.

In every country he came he cut away Truth,
And got guile to grow there as if he were a god.
Friars followed that fiend for he gave them gifts,
The Religious revered him and rung out their bells,
There came out of the convents a world of welcome. . . .⁴⁶

In this grey twilight Piers Plowman disappears, and Conscience, who has driven the dreamer on to each stage of perfection, now insists that the pilgrimage continue until Piers be found again. The historical reference of the allegory is clear, for the fourteenth century witnessed the scandal of the Papacy translated to "la peccherouse cité d'Avenon" and the great schism when no man knew who Peter was.

But we should not be too quick to agree with Professor Dawson that the poem ends on "a note of defeat and despair—with the vision of a final battle for a lost cause against the unloosed hosts of hell."⁴⁷ Disillusionment and weariness, perhaps. But neither defeat nor despair. The dreamer never questions that Piers is still in the world and that he can be found, for he had once heard Grace say that "I make Piers my vicar and deputy, my plowman and provider" and he knew that not even "the unloosed hosts of hell" could prevail against that promise.

⁴⁵ Dom David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge University Press, 1959) vol. iii, p. 468.

⁴⁶ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁴⁷ Dawson, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

Note: For those who are professionally or otherwise interested in Langland I should like to propose this brief bibliography in addition to the general secular and religious histories of the fourteenth century. For sheer enjoyment of Langland's poetry I recommend Professor Coghill's translation (*op. cit.*) which has been used throughout this paper. Though it is an abridged version of the original, 't

And as for himself, he can still find Piers within his heart, for Piers is Charity. This is Langland's great virtue, his great exhortation, and he is redeemed by it. In many respects he is a bitter man, untutored, coarse and sardonic. He has little sense of humour and no tenderness. He is unbalanced in his hostility to the Friars and narrow-minded in his anti-intellectualism. But he loves Christ and he loves Christ's poor. His poem is a challenge to the imitation of Christ in His Love. He sees in Love — human and divine — the solutions to the problems of society and church, and the only effective weapon against Lady Meed, whose love has caused so much social injustice and has paralyzed the spirit of the cloister.

When he was a young man, just setting out on his pilgrimage, the dreamer had asked Lady Church what he must do to save his soul. Now in the winter of his life, having followed Piers, *id est Christus*, down the valleys and across the plains and up the heights, he knows the answer and it is a simple one:

"Learn to love."

deals with all the important passages of the poem and conveys Langland's poetic power and spirit. It would serve as an ideal text for a short study of Langland. For background reading, I would recommend the introduction and prose translation in the Penguin edition: J. F. Goodridge, *Piers the Ploughman* (Penguin, 1959); Professor Dawson's essay on *Piers Plowman* (*op. cit.*); the chapters on Langland in R. W. Chambers, *Man's Unconquerable Mind* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1939); the chapter on the criticism of religious life in the fourteenth century in the second volume of Dom David Knowles' *The Religious Orders in England* (*op. cit.*). For a further bibliography see the notes to the Penguin edition.