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THE GUIDE CONVENTION IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*

By Barbara Palmer

Since T. S. Eliot's 1922 revival of the wasteland and Grail motifs, the quest has again assumed its medieval role as a literary genre. Frequently, however, scholarly attention is focused on the object or destination of the quest rather than on the author's method of presentation. Almost basic to that method, particularly in the medieval allegorical quest,[1] is the guide-leader convention, a structural device which helps to unify both the quest and the reader's comprehension of it. My chief concern here is to show how inconsistent use of this guide convention reduces the coherence of *Piers Plowman*; but first I have attempted to establish several characteristics of the guide-leader figure, using *The Pearl* and *La Divina Commedia* as representative models.

In simplest terms, the quest is a narrative with an educational purpose, the elevation of its protagonist through a journey. Although almost always oriented towards a goal,[2] this journey can and does take many forms. It can be geographical, spiritual, or psychological; the goal can be political, social, or metaphysical, ranging from the need for individual salvation to love of picaresque adventure. But regardless of what quest or goal the author chooses to portray, he still must concern himself with structural coherence. Basically his problem is to convey a character with moral or spiritual deficiencies through unfamiliar territory to an unrecognized goal, without losing his hero or his reader in a forest of unknowns.

Some standard of conduct, some measure of progress, must accompany the quester, and that requirement frequently is met by a character who functions as a guide or leader to the protagonist. The primary characteristic of the guide is his knowledge; he is the one who knows, as opposed to the quester, who does not know. Especially suited to his task by some authority he possesses, whether derived from divine inspiration or previous experience, he serves to educate the hero. Using particular methods of motivation and direction, the guide figure elevates his ward to new awareness and under standing, while often also giving the quester a model worthy of imitation.

That model may be isolated in a single figure or it may be cumulative. One form of the convention is the primary guide, a character who accompanies the hero throughout the quest. Another form is the guide series, with one guide passing the quester on to a second and so on, with each figure responsible for his own geographical and metaphorical sphere. The third form is the secondary or auxiliary guide, who supplies a particular limited need of the quester, like a dream interpretation, a prophecy, or physical transportation.[3] Within each of these forms the guide figure may take on various aspects, the most basic being the true guide and the false. True guides, whose advice the quester should heed, lead towards the predetermined moral and physical goal; while false guides deter the quester, frequently through sensual temptation and geographical misdirection.

The guide motif is not solely a thematic device, restricted to the expression of particular theological and ethical concepts, but a structural device, an ordering technique. Educative quests often are divergent and complex, portraying a multitude of situations and personages; the guide figure is one means of ordering or relating this diversity. His reactions provide a consistent internal moral standard, thus reducing the need for direct authorial comment. He supplies the reader with a trustworthy evaluation of events which the quester's imperfect perception cannot provide. The guide figure, whether false or true, also may produce dramatic tension, the conflict and potential resolution of the plot, by the interplay between the moral level which he embodies and that represented by the quester. By observing this interplay and the shifting relationship between quester and guide figure, the reader gains a standard to measure the protagonist's progress towards his spiritual goal.

Apart from the narrative and thematic functions already suggested, the guide exists as an artistic creation in his own right, on the allegorical level, the representational level, or on both. He may personify a particular virtue or institution, as does Holicherche in *Piers Plowman;* figure an abstraction through an historical personage, as does Virgil in *La Divina Commedia;* or participate dynamically, as does Harry Bailly in *The Canterbury Tales.* In other words, the guide figure may be as fully developed as the author's powers and intentions dictate, and the guide indeed does range from the statically symbolic to the dramatically complex.

One of the more static and symbolic guides is the figure of the pearl maiden in *The Pearl,* a dream vision concerned with the dreamer's salvation.[4] She represents a state of mind and soul, an elevated level sought by the dreamer. Exhausted by grief and worry, the jeweller-dreamer enters his garden, an introductory symbol of the dream world. He swoons, and as his spirit ascends he sees the stream which separates the real world from the spiritual. Initially, then, he needs a guide to explain this dream world's meaning and to help him find his lost pearl.

The radiant pearl maiden appears to serve these functions, as well as to point out the spiritual deficiencies of which he is unaware. Chosen as a guide because of her temporal relation to the dreamer and her pristine spiritual state, Pearl is concerned to save his soul and give him peace, to help him find the way. She chides him for attending to the mundane; taunts him; advises him; explains the nature of salvation, grace, and the New Jerusalem; and finally brings about his spiritual regeneration. Her literary functions are primarily thematic, for she is an embodiment of purity and an interpreter of scripture for the medieval poet.

Through the amount of guidance and correction she must administer, the pearl maiden indicates to the reader the dreamer's progress. Initially his understanding is solely temporal; he assumes the maiden will remain with him because his grief is great, thinks it unfair that she has gained grace so early with such slight effort, and views her role as Christ's bride in competitive courtly terms. Eventually he gains some understanding, evidenced by his editing of his own questions and his meek acceptance of her answers. This more elevated level is signified by the maiden's offer to guide him within sight of the New Jerusalem, but his failure to reach spiritual perfection is made equally clear by his attempt to cross the stream and the vision's consequent end.

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The jeweller then measures his own progress as he realizes how quickly rapture fades and how, had he patiently awaited the pearl maiden's instructions, he would have been able to cross the stream. His quest has been successful, insofar as any mortal can approach the godhead before his appointed time, and the dreamer shows his gratitude and awareness by dedicating his intercessor, the pearl maiden, to God.

The *Pearl* poet thus bends the guide convention to his imaginative and narrative needs. When he requires theological explication, the pearl maiden explains; when he wishes to contrast the eternal with the mundane, the maiden's radiant figure illustrates the division; when he must make the dreamland seem credible and traversable, the pearl maiden is his cartographer. In *La Divina Commedia*[5] Dante makes an equally skilful and versatile use of his guide figures, but where the *Pearl* poet uses a single, primary guide throughout the poem, Dante uses a guide series, each guide leading to a higher level of spiritual development.

The first guide, Virgil, is a figuration of pagan moral perfection; he comes to stand for the ultimate achievements of his spiritually unenlightened age. Sent by divine authority, Beatrice, to guide Dante the pilgrim, he is qualified not only by the exemplary life he has led but by his poetic gifts. First, Virgil serves as a physical guide, for he knows the terrain of Hell; in this capacity he physically carries, leads, and defends Dante over the crags, up the steps, and away from the demons. As a resident of Limbo, Virgil also explains its etiquette to Dante: whom he should meet, what he should notice. He controls whom, why, and how much Dante may see and question. He sets the pace.

Secondly, Virgil is a spiritual and intellectual guide, as he explains, interprets, and sermonizes. Dante's ignorance of the lintel of Hell, the Harrowing, the hierarchy of sins, the hemispheres, the nature of prayer and love is at least partially remedied by Virgil's knowledge.

The most important aspect of Virgil's guidance, however, is the attitude of Virgil himself, for he serves as a standard against which to measure Dante's regeneration. Virgil's changing attitude towards the dreamer symbolizes the dreamer's spiritual progress which runs concurrently with the physical. Initially, Virgil suggests, Dante is not fit for the journey and he chides his impatience to proceed. He criticizes his lack of precision in speech, as a superior poet to an inferior, suggests that he has forgotten his philosophy, and warns him against misdirected pity. When Virgil later approves of Dante's attack on Pope Nicholas III or of his request to speak to Ulysses, a regenerative step has been made. The growing reciprocity of their relationship also indicates Dante's progress; he urges Virgil to be quiet so that he can hear where Cianfa lingers, and suggests asking the way when they are lost. As Dante grows more spiritual, Virgil grows more human in his reverence for Statius, in his physical exhaustion, and in his embarrassment at Cato's scolding them for lingering to hear Casella.

As Dante himself says, Virgil is his master, leader, lord, father, herdsman, and teacher—a very inclusive guide figure. In artistic terms he functions as an explicator, an interpreter and, especially, as a standard of the moral perfection for which Dante the pilgrim strives. To some extent he is also a character in his own right, insofar as the author reveals a pagan's activities in Purgatory and Limbo, his reactions, and his deficiencies. But Virgil's qualifications are not sufficient to accompany Dante throughout his quest. His

pagan origins, his geographical restrictions, limit his usefulness. As he says to the souls who have newly arrived on the shore of Purgatory, "Ye think perchance that we have experience of this place, but we are strangers even as ye are" (*Purgatorio,* II, 63), and so he must convey Dante to someone more familiar with this unknown physical and spiritual territory.

Although Virgil accompanies Dante through Purgatory and acts as his protector, both need auxiliary guides for the unfamiliar terrain. These the poet supplies through a guide series, with one figure directing them through his own country and then passing them on to the next figure. Cato, Sordello, Statius, and Matilda are the major characters in this series, with such figures as Lucy, Humbert Aldobrandesco, and the angels of the cornices supplementing their direction for a short distance. Thus Virgil's function is diminished in Purgatory; he remains Dante's ethical guide and emotional comforter, but hands over his geographical guidance to more knowledgeable figures.

The first figure to assist Virgil and Dante in Purgatory is Cato, who guards the approach to Mount Purgatory. He tells Virgil to clean the grime from Dante's face and then permits them to proceed. The second figure in this guide series is Sordello, who forbids them to climb the mountain by night and leads them to the Valley of the Rulers. Next, Lucy physically carries Dante to the gate of Purgatory, with Virgil following behind. Statius then takes over, accompanying them through the Pass of Pardon. Virgil has reached his limits at this point, and he disappears, leaving Dante in Statius' care. Matilda, handmaiden of Beatrice, becomes Dante's guide through the earthly paradise, and after purifying his soul she relinquishes him to Beatrice herself, in whom the physical and spiritual functions of the guide again coalesce.

Beatrice, the second primary guide figure in *La Divina Commedia,* initially appears in the character of a courtly lady but almost immediately becomes a figuration, an abstraction, of divine purity. Like Virgil, she physically guides the dreamer, but her spiritual function is far more refined. Since she is nearer to divine authority, her theology more closely approximates to the Word of God. She, like Virgil, tests the dreamer's religious concepts and beliefs, but she also serves as an intercessor, a gradual accommodation to God. Beatrice's literary function is narrative, thematic, and stylistic; she explicates and interprets the dreamer's observations, she justifies the ways of God to man, and she is the radiant image of the *Paradiso.*

The final guide figure, Saint Bernard, functions almost solely as a narrative device, in that he interprets the Rose to the dreamer and reader and allows Beatrice to leave her role as guide without abandoning the graceless Dante. As in the Grail quest, the vision of the symbol of the godhead—the Grail for Galahad, Beatrice for Dante—signifies that the hero has reached his goal, has achieved the salvation he sought. In *La Divina Commedia,* then, the guide figures operate primarily as exemplary spiritual states which man should imitate, as the highest possible standards of thought and action.

Dante's *La Divina Commedia* and Langland's *Piers Plowman* share several characteristics, the primary one being a complex and diversified narrative fabric. Both works portray a multitude of figures, incidents, and settings. Both works, too, are instructional: Dante's intention is to stress that we reap in the afterlife what we sow in the present; and Langland's, apparently, to fashion

a Christian layman in a Christian society. A similar theological and ethical framework, a spiritually-ordered world fraught with omnipresent temptation to evil, surrounds each poem. Both include quests, journeys to save the quester's soul and to perfect him in virtue. Each poem likewise uses the allegorical modes of personification and figuration to present its virtues, its vices, and its hero's internal conflicts.[6]

The comparison, however, between *La Divina Commedia* and *Piers Plowman* ends with these similarities. Whereas Dante's treatment and techniques are highly sophisticated, Langland's often are naive, far removed from the belletristic tradition to which Dante belonged.[7] *La Divina Commedia* has a clear thematic development, with Dante's major themes amplified rather than obscured by less important ideas. In *Piers Plowman* Langland observes no hierarchy of themes; thus a minor digression frequently overshadows the broader concept which it was invented to illustrate. Dante's characters maintain a consistent value; although ramifications of their natures emerge as they are placed in new situations, the abstract concepts which they embody do not shift throughout the narrative. The meaning of Langland's characters, however, often contains ambiguities and contradictions; one character may personify several internal qualities which are not necessarily compatible with or logically related to each other. Finally, *La Divina Commedia* is structurally coherent, unified by the quest motif, the hero, and the guide figures. The structure of *Piers* is episodic, often without thematic or narrative connectives; its quest, hero, and guide figures often fragment rather than unify the narrative structure.

The preceding comparison implies the major difficulty of *Piers Plowman*, its diffuseness. Diversified in theme, time, space, characterization, plot sequence, and the metaphorical or figurative level of meaning, the poem lacks a coherent and consistent narrative structure. Ironically, the remedy for this diffuseness is available within the poem itself in the structural motifs which Langland introduces and in the figures of Holicherche and Piers. Both characters suggest some knowledge on Langland's part of the guide convention. Had he managed his use of that convention to provide structural unity, as the *Pearl* poet and Dante did, *Piers Plowman* undoubtedly would have been a more sustained and comprehensible poem.

My contention that the primary difficulty of *Piers* is structural rather than thematic or textual has not been shared by the critics, most of whom have approached the poem in terms of meaning, text, or genre. After defending their interpretations these critics also have felt impelled to prove through their approach the poem's inherent unity. The frequency with which this unity is asserted only serves to reinforce one's suspicions about its actual and pervasive presence.

Dunning, for example, believes that Langland has organized his work around the concepts of the active, contemplative, and mixed life; while Robertson and Huppé see the entire poem as a patterned contrast between an ideal and its medieval corruption. That contrast is embodied in the dreamer, Wille, "one of the chief means by which the poet achieves coherence in *Piers Plowman*. In what Wille does and in his reactions are developed the progressive contrasts which contribute materially to the structural integrity of the poem."[8] Coghill, who agrees with Dunning that the poem's theme is the three modes of life, sees the character Piers as the unifying agent because "to be Piers is to

do well or to do better or to do best . . . once this is recognized and applied to the visions as a whole, the poem becomes harmonious and consistent, declaring itself logically, as well as psychologically, a unity."[9] Wells, in a careful and informative study, attempts to give the poem structural unity by establishing parallels between sections of the *Visio* and *Vita*, each of which he divides into three corresponding units. He is left, however, with the lack of linear progression in Wille's search for Do-Well, a structure which does not parallel its *Visio* counterpart; his specious explanation that Wille's circular arguments are necessary to prevent the reader's being bored by didacticism somewhat reduces his thesis. Lawlor's argument is equally fragile. He notes that *Piers* has no formal structural unity, but contends that it has an "imaginative unity" through the dreamer's persistent attempts to ratiocinate instead of simply to live the Christian life; that is, the poem's unity lies in Wille's *not* getting any answers.

Several critics too have approached the problem of unity through genre, hoping that an identification of Langland's literary model will aid interpretation. Robertson and Huppé believe that Langland's method was based on Biblical exegesis with its four levels of meaning, and thus freely interpret most episodes allegorically, historically, tropologically, and anagogically. Frank suggests, with much validity, that a long allegorical narrative would be vague and complex enough without the burden of four additional interpretations. Coghill calls it an "organic" allegory, a term which escapes definition. Finally, in one of the more constructive recent studies, Bloomfield suggests that *Piers* is in the apocalyptic genre but shares elements of the dream vision and quest motifs. He does not delve very deeply into how Langland actually uses these forms—his stylistic and structural methods—but his approach is a necessary first step into unexplored territory.[10]

Little of the criticism, then, is devoted to a detailed analysis of the structure of *Piers Plowman*. And yet that neglected structure is responsible for much of the contradictory speculation about the poem's meaning, much of the almost frenetic search for hidden meanings, when the primary problem is that Langland's structure has obscured the salient meaning. I do not intend to suggest that the preceding studies, among others, are irrelevant; on the contrary, they are most helpful in thematic and historical interpretation, but we need to analyze further *Piers'* narrative structure and the lapses in it.

As it stands, the poem is a two-part quest undertaken by a semi-literate rustic. The first section, or the *Visio*, is a dream vision of various forms of temporal corruption, with the dreamer in quest for Truth.[11] Moving from the fair field full of folk to Westminster, to court, to church, to the fair field, and to a banquet hall, this quest is earth-centred. The second section, the dreamer's search for Do-Well, Do-Bet[ter], and Do-Best, includes the same area but also portrays Jerusalem and Hell. Although temporal abuses are presented, this second quest is concerned primarily with the dreamer's salvation and, through him, that of society.

The structural pattern of *Piers Plowman* is formed of three elements: the dream vision, the use of personification, and the quest. Like *The Pearl*, much of the poem's action occurs within the dreamer's unconscious, thus liberating the author from logical transitions through time and space.[12] This freedom of movement is initiated in the poem's first lines, a conventional opening for a dream vision. The May morning, the stream which separates natural

from supernatural experience, and the dream itself all are traditional elements of a dream vision. They serve to "cue" the reader that what follows may be foreign and dislocated because it takes place within the dreamer's mind and is a spiritual rather than sensible perception.

The second structural element is Langland's use of personification and figuration, a process of externalizing abstract, interior qualities. Wille's internal conflicts and characteristics, as well as those of society at large, are made visible to the reader by attaching these conceptual entities to "bodies," or acting, speaking characters.

Thirdly, Langland uses the quest motif, the spiritual education of an individual in a journey through space. Although the significance of this quest and its extensiveness have been questioned by the critics, no one has doubted its presence. In his initial dream on the Malvern Hills, Wille sees a vision of the Tower of Truth, the Dungeon of Hell, and the earth's "fair field"; the alternatives, salvation and damnation, which follow from earthly abuses and over-indulgences are made clear to him. His reaction to this vision and consequent plea to Holicherche,

> Thanne I courbed on my knees and cryed hir of grace,
> And preyed hir pitousely prey for my synnes,
> And also kenne me kyndeli on criste to bileue,
> That I mi3te worchen his wille that wrou3te me to man;
> "Teche me to no tresore but telle me this ilke,
> "How I may saue my soule that seynt art yholden?"
>   (i, 79–84)

suggest the purpose and direction of his quest.

These three elements, the dream vision, personification, and quest motif, are the potential basis for structural unity in *Piers Plowman*. Langland, however, maintains none of the three patterns which he has introduced, and the difficulties of *Piers Plowman* evolve precisely from his failure to keep to the structure.

The first hiatus is in the dream framework. Evidently Langland intended most of the poem to be a dream vision, but there are disconcerting lapses in its chronology. Although Wille falls asleep ten times and awakens eleven, Langland confuses the proper order to awaken him when he already is awake and put him to sleep when he already is asleep. He apparently has used dreams within dreams and waking dreams, but the divisions are never clear. After Wille first falls asleep in the Malvern Hills (Prol., 1–12), he dreams until the procession reaches court, where he awakens to listen to Reason and Conscience preach before the king. He awakens a second time,[13] only to fall asleep to dream of a second sermon by Reason (v, 1–12). The proper order of waking and dreaming then is followed until Passus xi, 4–7, when Wille, who has not awakened, falls more deeply asleep, perhaps indicating a dream within a dream. Following his dream tour of Middle Earth he is awakened twice (xi, 395–397; xiii, 1–4), presumably because of the double dream. In Passus xvi, 18–21, there also seems to be a dream within a dream. He already is asleep, but the sound of Piers' name induces a deeper sleep:

> "Piers the Plowman!" quod I tho and al for pure ioye
> That I herde nempne his name anone I swounded after,

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> And laye longe in a lone dreme and atte laste me thou3te,
> That Pieres the Plowman al the place me shewed.
>
> (xvi, 18–21)

However, Wille awakens only once from this double dream (xvi, 167–171), and the normal alternation of awakening and sleeping continues until the poem's conclusion. The reader is even more confused than Wille, which is unfortunate, because the ability to discriminate between reality and fantasy is basic to the poem's theme. Unless one knows what Wille saw and what he imagined, unless one can distinguish earthly observation from divine vision, the poem's spiritual import is blurred.

This confusion in the dream framework also adds to the poem's geographical difficulties and, consequently, to the physical progress of the quest. Because we cannot distinguish between Wille's waking and dreaming states, we cannot determine which settings are perceived by the senses and which imagined. *La Divina Commedia* and *Paradise Lost* are cartographers' masterpieces compared to *Piers*' haphazard localizations. Langland has set the poem variously in a field, court, church, banquet hall, "middle earth," road, Hell, and Jerusalem—the known universe. Some of the settings are vivid; one does not forget Gluttony's lair or Piers' tree. But other localities, like Hell and the fair field, are vaguely pictured and, because related through a dream framework, may or may not have any more external reality than such metaphorical sites as Meekness or Gentle Speech. For example, in Passus i Wille sees a tower, which Holicherche identifies as the Tower of Truth located within his own heart. In Passus v, 517–519, Piers tries to lead a thousand-member throng to Truth. Apparently a figurative location, the tower nevertheless is sometimes external and visible, sometimes internal and invisible. Since Langland does not describe such settings as Hell, the fair field, and the Tower of Truth, it is even more difficult to gauge Wille's progress; he mysteriously progresses from one place to another, spanning the globe and boggling the reader's mind.

Langland, then, has within his grasp a method of unifying the poem, a method compatible with his eclectic and ingenuous perception. The dream vision, in its dislocation from temporal and spacial logic, gives him greater scope and freedom than any other form; and yet he fails to adapt its flexibility to his purposes.

The second structural element which Langland uses is personification, and this technique also fails to work to his benefit. The first problem is to determine which personages are representational, which allegorical, and which both. The second problem is to determine which exist internally, which externally, and which both, in relation to the dreamer. Langland, in other words, has mixed his allegorical modes and methods. To him, no gulf exists between the concrete and the abstract; his mind switches from one to the other without transition. He has created personifications, which are visualized concepts, but endowed them with representational qualities by the use of a non-metaphoric name, such as Robert the Robber, who apparently figures the repentant sinner. He has given the same name to a figure, a personification, and an unembodied abstract, without distinguishing when each aspect is in question. He has personified both simple and complex concepts; the effect is a levelling of both concepts, as the simple kind gains an unsubstanti-

ated complexity of meaning and the complex kind loses its diversity of reference. Finally, Langland apparently has given two names and "bodies" to one idea, or else he has changed names in midstream: "Soothnesse" and "Truth" share the same metaphoric value, as do "Falsenesse" and Fals."

The following examples are a brief illustration of the confusion which results from Langland's merging one allegorical mode into another without a conscious use of rhetoric. Reason first appears as an external personification riding with Conscience to court (iv, 24). He next is robed like a pope, preaching before the king on proper behaviour (v, 11). From this social and public role Reason next moves inside Wille, telling him to mind his own business and control his tongue (xi, 419), and then completely disappears from the poem. Langland apparently has used one term, "reason," for both a personification and an unembodied abstract quality, and he does not distinguish one from the other. He also has tried to include all the applications of Reason, in its public, private, external, and internal aspects, but makes none of them concrete or visual. Because we are not sure of Reason's inherent value, we cannot tell if he is a valid authority for Wille; if he changes during the quest and thus indicates Wille's progress; or, through his absence from the last eight passus, if he suggests the chaos of society and the disorder within the dreamer.

Conscience produces similar confusion. In Passus i Holicherche defines Conscience as the natural knowledge in Wille's heart, yet Sir Conscience appears in Passus iii as an external reality. The externalization of Wille's personal state cannot be the only aspect of Conscience, however, since the figure also appears to the king, the court, other personifications, and society at large, completely independent of Wille. Obviously Conscience shares the dual public and private aspects of Reason, but these aspects and their alternations within the poem are not clarified. Since individual consciences and the conscience of society at large seldom concur, the reader cannot tell which of the many consciences in the poem to trust as a moral guide. Not just a faculty of the individual soul, conscience is an attitude towards life and provides a variety of responses to a variety of situations. Conscience, by its very flexibility, thus might have made an excellent guide figure for Wille and still allowed Langland as much scope and diversity as he desired.

One figure's serving various functions is a consistent interpretative difficulty. Langland often intends a single personification to embody several concepts, but does not provide a standard to identify which idea he represents at which point in the narrative. Thus grouped under the general abstract of faith is Good Faith in Passus xi, who tells Wille to preach on church abuses; Abraham (xvi), a figure who historically illustrates faith; and Faith in its linkage with Hope and Charity (xviii). These three aspects cannot be embodied in one figure; the Faith who is Abraham in Passus xvi cannot be the same Faith who explains Christ's entry to Jerusalem in Passus xviii, since the entrance precedes the Harrowing of Hell and Abraham is still in Hell.

Likewise, Truth moves from being a tower, to a castle, to an abstract unembodied ideal, to a personification. At various times it is a body which interacts with other figures, a place which they visit, or an idea to which they refer. One also faces the problem of Anima, who appears as Wille's soul. Anima defines itself as life, soul, mind, memory, reason, sense, conscience, amor, and spirit (xv, 23–39); some of these ideals have appeared earlier as

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personifications, some are only abstracts, some embody various other concepts.

In short, Langland has used different personifications to represent the same abstract or else has shifted the internal value of his personifications, a process which is bound to produce confusion. In some instances the internal value remains the same but is given different outward forms; in other instances this value seems to change while the outward form and name remain the same. When a personification, through its name and initial actions or speech, suggests one concept, we expect it to hold that concept whenever it reappears; thus Holicherche's transformation from a lady to a disembodied concept and Truth's movement from a tower to a personage—alterations accomplished without any transition—merely perplex the reader instead of enhancing abstract meaning. The solution is either to use historical figures or else to limit the meaning of the personifications, as Dante did. Virgil, as an historical figure, can stand for several abstract concepts without producing contradictions in his metaphorical value; he is the enlightened pagan, the unredeemed heathen, the ideal artist, and the moral man.

We can infer from the preceding discussion what effect Langland's failure to maintain his dream framework and personifications has on the quest motif. The usual linear progression and its resultant structural order dissolve, since we do not know the quester's location, his state of consciousness, or the value of the figures whom he meets. Bloomfield senses this deviation from the quest pattern, but he attributes it to Langland's intention rather than to his mismanagement. He sees Wille's quest as a theme or a dominant image and concludes that "Part of the problem of Will is actually to find an authority, and his quest is not only for perfection but for someone who can lead him to perfection, until finally he realizes that only Piers himself can."[14]

I rather think that Wille is questing for perfection and Langland for an authority to guide his poem. The element he needs to unify his structure and to heal the breaks in his framework is the guide convention, a device which would provide episodic continuity and thematic coherence. Langland has approached this structural remedy in the figures of Holicherche and Piers. Both embody aspects of the guide convention, both are suited to instruct the dreamer, but neither is crystallized as a figure nor maintained throughout the poem.

In the *Visio*, or first six passus, Wille dreams of a fair field of folk and seeks an interpretation of his vision. In accordance with the dream convention, a guide or interpreter appears in the person of Holicherche, described only vaguely as a lovely lady clothed in linen. She explains part of his dream,

> Sone, slepestow? sestow this poeple,
> How bisi thei ben abouten the mase?
> The moste partie of this poeple that passeth on this erthe,
> Haue thei worschip in this worlde thei wilne no better;
> Of other heuene than here holde thei no tale. . .
>
> (i. 5–9)

but then goes on to teach him how to distinguish true from false:

> Leue not thi likam for a lyer him techeth,
> That is the wrecched worlde wolde the bitraye.
> For the fende and thi flesch folweth the to-gidere,

This and thát sueth thi soule and seith it in thin herte;
And for thow sholdest ben ywar I wisse the the beste.

(i, 38–42)

When Wille asks her how he can save his soul, one assumes that his spiritual
quest with Holicherche as his guide has begun. Not at all, however, for after
she has given him Christian rules to live by, she tells him to look to the Lord
and disappears without specifically entrusting his quest to a second guide.

Although not a very imaginative creation, Holicherche is a personifica-
tion and a possible guide figure, qualified by her divine authority. The only
information Langland gives about her is her lovely countenance, her linen
clothing, and her parentage as a daughter of God; she consequently does not
become a vivid character to the reader, but since she belongs to the Virgin-
Beatrice-Pearl maiden archetype, Langland's sparse details probably are
enhanced by association. In many respects she functions as a guide, for she
interprets the dream, advises a course of life, reproaches and ridicules the
dreamer, answers his questions, and tells him where to go and how to behave
to receive further knowledge. She also has the authority, scope, and, pre-
sumably, the power, to supervise any number of Wille's activities; since the
influence of the Roman Church extends throughout the universe and
throughout time as well, she has no territorial or temporal limitations.

The problem with Holicherche, however, is her very scope. Langland
stresses the abuses of church power and the fallibility of institutional authority;
since he has chosen to treat these negative aspects of Holicherche, he must
somehow separate the divine institution from her minions in order to make her
a reliable, worthy guide. This separation apparently is beyond his power, for
the unresolved duality of Holicherche begins as early as Passus i, 20, when
she displays a most mortal and female jealousy of Lady Meed. Ambiguity
is expected in personifications like Nature or Fortune, ambiguous in their
basic character; but Holicherche, created directly from the godhead, must
reflect her origins or explain her deviation from them. If her speech or
behaviour lapses into the mundane, if her nature is divided between theory
and practice, if in her corrupted state she is a false guide, then some deline-
ation of these conflicting aspects must be supplied to preserve the personifica-
tion's value. This Langland fails to supply. Perhaps realizing his potential
problem and unwilling to sacrifice his satire of church corruption, he aban-
dons Holicherche as a figure. By the end of the second passus the personifica-
tion has been reduced to its abstract value; any further reference Langland
makes to Holicherche apparently is to the institution, not to the personifica-
tion, and we do not see her as a figure again.

Thus Wille's quest is halted as soon as begun, for throughout the Lady
Meed incident he is only an observer. With the return to the fair field full of
folk in Passus v, a second possible guide figure enters in the person of Piers
the Plowman.[15] Inspired by Reason and Hope to seek Truth, the folk ask a
passing pilgrim to guide them, but he has never heard of Truth. Piers has
knowledge of Truth through Conscience and Natural Wit (v, 544) and thus
is qualified and willing to be their guide, after they have ploughed his field.
Piers not only is called a guide but fits many of the criteria. Suited by both
prior experience and divine authority, he can direct the pilgrims physically,
although through allegorical locations; and he can devise an improved way
of life for the wasters.

Several major problems, however, present themselves with Piers as guide:
he consults Hunger at length (vi, 204), whereas the guide usually needs
little advice to carry out his purpose, and then from a source more spiritual
than physical; he gradually fades into either Christ Himself or Saint Peter
(xvi), whereas the guide figure usually is a mortal intercessor to the divinity;
and the dreamer Wille apparently is an observer of the group of sinners
rather than the active participant he should be if he were following Holi-
cherche's advice. Unless one can come to terms with a character who vacil-
lates between being a plowman, a knight, and a deity, unless one can resolve
the problem of a deity who follows Hunger's advice, Piers is not a reliable
figure either, in terms of the quest's continuity. Langland again has mixed
his modes without providing any transition. Like Dante's Virgil, Piers is a
figure, a type of Christ or Peter, as well as a representational character, a
plowman named Piers. He also is a generic or class personification of the
honest labourer. Langland's failure to clarify which aspect is uppermost in
Piers at a particular time further confuses our perception of Wille's spiritual
progress.

The *Visio*, then, includes a dream vision of the fair field, the character of
Wille the dreamer, his alleged quest to save his soul, and two possible primary
guide figures, Holicherche and Piers. Like Statius' entrusting Dante to
Matilda and Matilda's leading him to Beatrice, we might expect Holicherche
to introduce Wille to Piers, Wille to join the company of pilgrims, and Piers
to lead them to Truth's castle. If such is Langland's intention, we know it
only by vaguest implication. Holicherche becomes the institution; Piers is
Christ; and Wille sets off on a personal quest for Do-Well, Do-Bet[ter], and
Do-Best where he is participant as well as observer.

In this search for a Christian way of life, which occupies the remainder of
the poem, Wille has no guide, but is left to ask questions of a variety of personi-
fications. Langland, however, does not organize these embodied abstracts into
a guide series, with one figure leading Wille to the next. There is no apparent
thematic order to the characters he meets: Thought follows the Friars; Nature
and Reason frequently interrupt; Lust-of-the-eyes comforts him after Scrip-
ture. Some attempt is made to get one personification to lead Wille to a
second, but the connections are not psychologically or theologically under-
standable; and when a character rejoins Wille, as often happens, it need not
have the same qualities it did on their first meeting. The relation of the
characters either to each other or to Wille's education is not clear. In these
last fourteen passus of *Piers*, the guide series is almost completely dropped in
favour of the dialogue and debate form, with Langland using a multitude of
characters and situations. The result is interpretative chaos, for the reader
has little means of determining what Wille has understood and what value
it holds for his quest.

The primary effect of Langland's failure to maintain the relationship
between Wille and the possible guide figures is on the dreamer himself and the
thematic concerns he represents. Unlike Virgil, who reveals Dante the pil-
grim's nature, progressive spiritual development, and ultimate maturity,
Langland's guide figures throw the character of Wille into greater flux.

First, the lapses in the guide series further obscure the shifting relation
between Wille's role as dreamer and his role as commentator. Langland
has not isolated the narrative point-of-view function in a separate voice;

instead he combines poet-narrator-quester-dreamer in Wille. Wille's percep-
tiveness and intellectual competence remain protean throughout. In the
Prologue a portrait of the dreamer as a hermit-shepherd, a lean lunatic fellow
in the crowd, is initiated. The dichotomy which plagues the entire poem is
also established: at one point long Wille is the astute political commentator,
self-assured in his analysis; and at other points he is the dreamer who under-
stands nothing he has seen or heard. In Passus i this dual role continues; a
single character, Wille, obviously here functioning as narrator, offers to
explain his dream to the reader, yet the same Wille must look to Holicherche
a few lines later for the explanation he before has claimed to possess. These
roles alternate throughout *Piers Plowman*, with Wille fluctuating between nar-
rator, dreamer, observer, participant, and spiritual authority.

With this confusion between Wille the dreamer and Wille the narrator
comes a confusion in tone. The reader is seldom certain whether an assured
homily by Wille should be believed and, if so, what meaning this assuredness
has for Wille's spiritual quest. Such a homily could indicate an interjection
by Langland, a plateau of knowledge reached by the quester, or a serious
breach of humility by the spiritually degenerate Wille. Thus we do not know
whether Wille's jesting to Anima in Passus xv, 40-49 signals his impiety or
the author's attempt at humour, or both. We do not know, because the narra-
tor and dreamer are not separate, whether Wit's lecture to Wille on the value
of marriage in Passus ix, 107-198 and the domestic quarrel between Wit and
his wife Study juxtaposed in Passus x, 4-141 are to be taken as irony. We
do not know what relevance the interspersed passages on church and political
abuses hold for Wille's personal quest, nor whether his perception of this
corruption indicates progress or simply a move into the narrator's role.

Another effect on the dreamer of Langland's inability to adhere to the
guide convention is our complete inability to gauge his progress; the coherent
linear movement of a quest has disappeared because of the absence of any
consistent standard of direction and measurement. Dante and the *Pearl*
poet "build" their quests through the guide figures, who measure each suc-
cessive action of the quester, alter or approve it, and then pass him to the
next test; their allowing the quester to continue thus gives an impulse to the
forward movement of both narrative structure and theme. But without a
guide, Langland's dreamer does not steadily move from a state of spiritual
degeneracy to a state of grace and illumination. Instead, he vacillates, at
times totally oblivious to his errors, at times totally convinced of his theolo-
gical authority. In Passus i he desperately asks, "How can I save my soul?"
and is at a loss how to proceed. By Passus iii he has interrupted the lesson he
was instructed to observe for the purpose of charging readers not to be im-
modest and officials not to abuse lucre. Still self-confident in Passus vii he
passes judgment on the value of pardons as opposed to a life of Do-Well,
but qualifies his judgment with the statement that he does not understand
what he has observed and does not expect clarification in the future. This
unlearned man, having resolved the weighty question of church authority
versus personal integrity by Passus viii, cannot fathom man's need to employ
free will and intelligence. After forty-five years of corruption in following
Lust-of-the-eyes, he feels competent to lecture a friar on burial fee abuses.
Cleansed and restored in Passus xviii by a vision of the Passion, he immediately
falls asleep during Easter Mass.

Instead of the dreamer's absorbing knowledge and then moving to a new sphere of ignorance, we find him observing a series of events, confessing lack of understanding, wandering without direction for a number of years, and then observing similar events, apparently unenlightened by his vision. In various passus the dreamer cites his ignorance, his idleness, and the corruption of the world as causes for his journey, but at no time is the reader certain how far Wille has come in solving each of these problems or how far he yet has to go.

The preceding interpretative difficulties could have been resolved had Langland maintained his initial use of the guide convention. A consistent guide figure's evaluation of various speakers and their statements would give the reader a standard. A qualified guide could also be used to measure the dreamer's spiritual journey; were Piers, for example, to approve of Wille's dissatisfaction with Thought, one would know how much progress Wille had made in distinguishing the truth. As the poem stands, one has little idea what Wille has absorbed, how much improvement he has made, or whose theological interpretations to accept. A guide would provide a needed synthesis to the divergent theses and antitheses.

Theoretical and unconstructive as the preceding criticism may be, in terms of interpreting the poem's meaning, the fact that Langland was familiar with the guide convention is significant. From internal evidence we can conclude that he must have had some slight contact with two aspects of the guide figure: first, the guide as interpreter of visions; and, second, the guide as leader of pilgrims. One suspects that the former had a Biblical source and the latter its roots in folklore or actual practice. If Langland was using a Biblical model for the guide figures, and here one is on shaky factual ground, it was probably the book of Revelation. He is prone, like John, to use voices from heaven or convenient personages wherever theological or narrative gaps appear. When Langland wants to discuss the Trinity, he makes Faith appear to the dreamer; when John wants to see the Whore of Babylon, an angel appears to convey him.

In other words, Langland's use of the guide figure is peripheral rather than central to his narrative structure. Had he continued the line of the *Visio* with the questing dreamer, Holicherche, and Piers, the poem would contain fewer obstacles for the reader. For all practical purposes, *Piers Plowman* ends where it began, its only consistent progress being from personal chaos to cosmic turmoil.

NOTES

[1] An allegorical quest is a journey which operates on two levels, one the literal level of physical-geographical progress and the other the metaphorical level of spiritual growth.

[2] One is forced to consider quests without goals in the twentieth-century novel; for example, John Barth's *The Floating Opera* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, where the goal is the protagonist's recognition that no goals, no meanings, no conclusions exist.

[3] An interesting variation of the auxiliary guide is the animal guide, whose primary function is to provide transportation, carrying the quester in his arms or on his back, such as Balaam and his ass.

4 *Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. A. C. Cawley (New York, Everyman's Library, 1962). Guide figures seem to be almost essential to the dream vision since the dreamer-quester can have no prior knowledge of the dream territory nor receive direction from anyone in the waking world. Thus the author frequently employs a "resident" of dreamland to meet and guide the dreamer.

5 Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. H. Oelsner, trans. J. A. Carlyle, Thomas Okey, P. H. Wicksteed (New York, Modern Library, 1932).

6 By personification I mean making the word flesh, giving a body to an idea or abstract concept. Figuration is the reverse technique, for it consists of endowing a specific figure with abstract qualities. One also may have spacial and object figurations, where the location or object takes on abstract, diagrammatic correspondences.

7 As George Kane notes, Langland "was a man of immense natural talent who practised poetry not as a painstaking and conscious process of construction upon models, as did for instance Chaucer in the course of learning his craft, but by ear, as it were . . ."; "The Vision of Piers Plowman," *Middle English Literature* (London, 1951), p. 235.

8 D.W. Robertson, Jr., and Bernard F. Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 244.

9 Neville K. Coghill, "The Character of *Piers Plowman* Considered from the B Text," *Medium Aevum*, II (1933), 112.

10 See T. P. Dunning, "Structure of the B Text of *Piers Plowman*," *Review of English Studies*, VII (1956), 225–237; and *Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the A-Text* (London, 1937); Henry W. Wells, "The Construction of *Piers Plowman*," *PMLA*, XLIV (1929), 123–140; John L. Lawlor, "The Imaginative Unity of *Piers Plowman*," *Review of English Studies*, VIII (1957), 113–126; Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "The Art of Reading Medieval Personification–Allegory," *ELH*, XX (1953), 237–250; and *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest* (Yale University Press, 1957); and Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (Rutgers University Press, 1962).

11 References to *Piers Plowman* are to William Langland, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman together with Richard the Redeless*, ed. W. W. Skeat, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1886), B-text, passus and line numbers. Skeat's capitalization of abstract concepts is not based on the manuscripts and thus cannot be considered a reliable indication of whether Langland means to suggest the concept or the personification of it.

12 Although the dream vision allows the author much freedom of movement, it does not remove his obligation to secure structural and thematic clarity. *The Pearl* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, for example, are dream-visions yet they are coherent to the reader in a way *Piers* is not. For this reason, I disagree with Elizabeth Salter's attempt to excuse some of the confusion in *Piers* resulting from Langland's use of the dream vision; see Elizabeth Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1962), p. 9.

13 This first awakening, Passus vi, 1–5, of the C-text, is Skeat's emendation; the passage dovetails with Passus iv and v of the B-text and is not repeated in the B-text.

14 Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Piers Plowman* as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse," *Centennial Review of Arts and Science*, V (1961), 294.

15 Note the perplexing problem which appears in Passus vi of the C-text; the situation of dreamer asking for spiritual guidance is repeated as in Passus ii of the B-text, but Reason instead of Holicherche here serves as the guide figure. Reason and Conscience have not been considered as possible guide figures for the reasons stated above; their presence in the poem is relatively constant, but the question of whether they are internal or external, reliable or unreliable, public or private is too tenuous for interpretative purposes.