

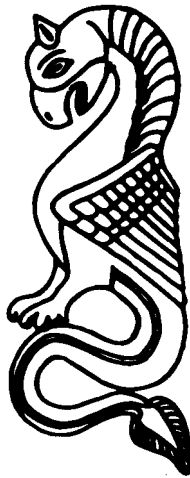
Leeds Studies in English

Article:

E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Apocalyptic Style in Piers Plowman B XIX-XX', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 14, (1983), 74-81

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Leeds Studies in English
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APOCALYPTIC STYLE IN *PIERS PLOWMAN* B XIX - XX

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It is probably redundant to try to add anything to the elegant icing that Robert Adams has placed on Morton Bloomfield's well-baked apocalyptic cake,¹ but at the risk of being supererogatory I should like to consider briefly the possible relation of St John's Revelation to the last passus of Langland's poem. There are many ways in which the style of the ending of *Piers Plowman* does not resemble that of the Apocalypse. Langland, as has often been observed, is the least visual of poets,² while St John is intensely pictorial, even though it may be hard to adjust on the screen of one's imagination such an image as that of "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars" (xiii.1, King James Version), or to sort out the anatomy of the destroying locusts and various other beasts. But the images, while opulent to the point of extravagance, tend to be static and hence discontinuous in action, like a number of still photographs of a fast-moving event flashed successively on the screen. This has its own nightmarish effectiveness, as can be seen in the account of the woman clothed with the sun (xii 1-7):

And she being with child cried, travailing in birth,
and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another
wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon,
having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns
upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of
the stars of heaven, and did cast them to earth: and
the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to
be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it
was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was
to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child
was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the
woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place
prepared of God, that they should feed her there a
thousand two hundred and threescore days.

A huge dragon in violent motion stood (? quietly) before a woman in labour, waiting to devour her child. The child was born, and was to rule all nations, and was caught up to the throne of God. The woman fled to the wilderness, where they (who?) should feed her for a long period in a place that God has prepared for her. It is as though some of the stills were out of sequence, while others have been lost. Yet, partly because of the dislocation, one feels that one has been given glimpses of events of awful importance - made,

perhaps, more awful by the fact that, despite the clarity of some of the individual pictures, one only half understands what is going on.

Instead of a series of clear but discontinuous pictures, Langland presents the reader with a series of half-formed images pursuing one another with enormous, seemingly uncontrolled speed. With this technique he achieves very much the same effect as the Apocalypse does of violent events rushing toward a dreadful resolution. Thus in Passus XX.121-39 Covetousness, fighting for Antichrist, performs at top speed a bewildering number of actions which are presumptively military at base, but often merely violent, and sometimes only subversive. He armed himself - most unpictorially - in avarice and "lived hungrily",³ using as a weapon "all wiles to win and to hide"; he beguiled the people with deceits and lies, and was asked by Simony to assail Conscience; the two of them "pressed on the pope" and made prelates to hold with Antichrist in order to preserve ecclesiastical revenues. Then Covetousness came to the King's Court like a keen baron and "knocked" Conscience in court before them all, caused Good Faith to flee and False to remain, and boldly "bore down with many a bright noble" much of the wit and wisdom of Westminster Hall. And after that (134-7)

He Iogged to a Iustice and Iusted in his eere
 And ouertilte al his trupe wiþ "tak þis vp amendement."
 And tornede Cyuyle into Symonye, and sippe he took þe
 Official.

One must feel sympathy for scribes (and editors) who have to make up their minds whether the two scoundrels "pressed on the pope" as in the C-manuscripts or, as all B-manuscripts agree, "preached to the people", and also whether Covetousness "knocked" Conscience (C-MSS) or "knelt to" him (B-MSS). There is no underlying pattern of visual imagery in Covetousness' actions: they hardly seem to be seen, and are related mostly by the spirit of violence, which receives its impulse from the presumptive image of warfare. The quoted lines, in which the poet modifies the original idea of a battle between armies into one of a tournament, do begin with a visual image, but it would take the imagination of a Bosch to visualize Covetousness riding up to a justice and jousting in his ear; and if the tournament imagery is continued in *ouertilte* (as OED suggests),⁴ it is difficult to imagine what the overturning of a justice's integrity by the offer of a bribe looked like in the lists. The turning of Civil into Simony scarcely seems a half-image, and the "taking" of the official so little an image that I have not the least idea of what it means. Yet amid the furious energy of Langland's context few readers are probably bothered by the lack of fully formed images, any more than they are when the woman clothed with the sun in the Apocalypse suddenly flies with the wings of a "great eagle" away from the serpent, whose attempt to drown her is foiled when the earth swallows the waters he casts from his mouth. While the techniques of the two writers differ, they both convey so great a sense of urgency that the reader assumes it to be natural that he is not given the opportunity to impose his own logical analysis on the narrative. Both achieve the same sense of a world

in violent dissolution, doom not only impending but in process - though, within the scope of each prophetic work, necessarily postponed.

Indeed, the repeated deferment of the dreadful end seems, both in the Apocalypse and in Langland, to make its coming the more imminent. To the cursory reader, the avenging angels of the Apocalypse may seem to have destroyed so many third parts of creation before the end of the book as to leave intact a very small fraction for the Last Day, but of course in the interstices between the acts of destruction humanity and its evil seem able to reproduce with great fecundity. Reprieves and tergiversations are characteristic of Langland's last passus as well. In XIX, Pride and his forces are about to overwhelm Unity when the repentance of the commons turns it into a fortress capable of withstanding the assault. In Passus XX, just as Antichrist's army is about to defeat Conscience's forces, Kind, responding to Conscience's summons, decimates the besiegers: the famous passage (80-6) describing the dreadful ailments Kind visits upon Antichrist's followers is Langland's most distinctively apocalyptic piece of writing, matching the cosmic sweep of St John's imagination. But after Kind's fearful victory over erring humanity, "those few that were alive" continue the attack until Elde is summoned to repel them again. Then the assault is renewed in an altered form until Unity is finally taken by the subversions the Friars practice.

The urgency of impending events is heightened in both works by their violation of time sequence. In the passage from the Apocalypse quoted above we are told that "the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, and they should feed her there"; the second two verbs here suggest a transition from vision to prophecy. Similarly, the woman's child who was to rule all nations with an iron rod is caught up to God's throne, but whether before or after his rule is not clear. One of the prophecies of the Apocalypse is that "there should be time no longer" (x.6), and the action is suited to the word: prophecy of the future fulfills itself by becoming a vision of the past, and vice versa. Thus the vision of the locusts (ix.3-6) shifts suddenly from preterite to future: the locusts were commanded to hurt those persons "who have not the seal of God in their foreheads", not killing them, but tormenting them for five months. "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them. And the shapes of the locusts were, etc." The five-month torment leaps out of a narrative of the past to become a prophecy of the future, though the locusts that perform it revert at once to the past. Similarly, the angel with the book prophesies the death and non-burial of two witnesses, but the prophecy suddenly becomes a past event (xi.10-11): "And they that dwell upon earth shall rejoice over them [the unburied bodies]. And after three days and a half the spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet" - and the prophecy continues as preterite narrative. Of course, St John was in actual fact prophesying a number of events that had already occurred in history. But this does not alter the effect produced by the mingling of past and future, a foretaste of eternity

and, in context, an eternity of chaos. One wonders whether Milton might not have been making a bow to this aspect of prophetic vision when in Book XI of *Paradise Lost* he has Michael give Adam a vision of future history through the Flood, and then in Book XII has Michael prophesy subsequent history in his own words - thus dividing, as it were, prophetic vision into its elements of vision and prophecy.

At one point Langland directly imitates this technique of mixing time elements. He is describing how Life (i.e., erring humanity) recovers from the onslaught of Kind (XX.148-51):

Thus relyede lif for a litel fortune
 And priked forþ wip pride; preiseþ he no vertue,
 Ne careþ noȝt how Kynde slow and shal come at þe laste
 And kille al erþely creature saue conscience oone.

The first two verbs in the passage are simple preterites expressing past action in the narrative: thus, for a bit of good luck, Life rallied and rode forth with Pride. But the second verb of the second line, while possibly an historical present, seems more like the true present of a universal generalization, as does the first verb of the third line: Life praises no virtue nor does he care how Kind slew (earlier in Langland's story), nor - moving on to the future of prophecy - how Kind shall come and kill every earthly creature. As in the Apocalypse, the narrative time frame breaks under the pressure of prophecy.

Another kind of manipulation of time occurs more strikingly in Langland than in the Apocalypse, though it is not alien to the latter. This is the yoking of verbs expressing quickly accomplished action with those presupposing duration. Thus Life "leapt aside" and took a mistress, upon whom he begot Sloth, who grew "wonder yerne" and was soon of age, and who married one Wanhope, a wench of the stews. All this occurs within the space of thirteen lines, and one would not be surprised if Life and his mistress became grandparents in the fourteenth, though the attack on Unity is nowhere made to appear like a leisurely siege of Troy. A similarly licentious use of time occurs in the line referred to above that introduces Covetousness to the army of Antichrist: Covetousness armed himself in avarice and "lived hungrily". To put on that piece of the armour of Antichrist, avarice, is the work of a moment, but to live hungrily implies long duration. That the effect is one that Langland strove for is suggested by his modulation here of his earlier introduction of Covetousness, back in Passus V.188-9:

Thanne cam Coueitise; I kan hym naȝt discryue,
 So hungrily and holwe sire heruy hym loked.

There would have been no temporal disturbance if Langland had written that Covetousness armed himself in avarice and *looked* hungrily and hollow.

Failure to keep separate the literal and metaphorical levels of his allegory is something that Langland has, of course, often been criticized for,⁵ and it may be observed sporadically throughout

his work, but most frequently in his last, most apocalyptic passus: indeed, all the stylistic practices I have noted here imply, if they do not always clearly represent, such a failure. But the mixture of levels has its precedent in the Apocalypse, and is seen most strikingly in St John's most influential and most famous allegory, his description of "the great whore that sitteth upon many waters", a woman "arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication" (xvii.4). Like her descendant in *Piers Plowman*, Lady Meed, the Scarlet Woman is a personification allegory imagined in purely physical terms. Yet the cup she is holding, while it is as concrete as the purple and scarlet and gold and jewels with which she is adorned, is filled with abstractions, "abominations and filthiness of her fornication". It is as though St John, even though he had introduced the woman as a "meretrix magna", feared that her physical allure might charm the reader, as Will was "ravished" by Lady Meed when he first saw her, and in order to forestall such a reaction St John filled her cup with the abstractions that the concrete allegory is supposed to body forth. He apparently felt that even to fill the cup with "blood of saints, and with blood of martyrs of Jesus", with which, several verses later, he says she was drunk, would not make the primary meaning clear enough. The pressure exerted by the primary meaning on the allegory causes a momentary abandonment of it.

As I said, Langland's tendency to abandon the allegory - or, to put it in another way, to mix the levels of reality of the allegory - is particularly noticeable in his last passus. One may note the following, referring to a group (? of priests) from Ireland who join the assault on Unity: they (XX.225-6)

. . . shotten ayein wip shot, many a sheef of oþes,
And brode hoked arwes, goddes herte and hise nayles.

A tidier allegorist might have finished the first line with "many a sheef of arwes," and then in the next line given the arrows their allegorical oath-names: one recalls the Lover in de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose* who was shot with the arrows of Beauty, Simplicity, Courtesy, etc. In this case, Langland's mixing of the levels was perhaps partly induced by the common doctrine - expressed by Chaucer's Pardoner⁶ - that oaths sworn on the parts of Christ's body physically tear Christ's body apart. Tradition may also have influenced the mixture in this example (XX.304-6), in which Conscience calls for

. . . a leche þat koude wel shryue:
"Go salue þo þat sike ben and þoruȝ synne ywounded."
Shrift shoop sharp salue and made men do penaunce

Again, we might have expected Conscience to call for a leech that could well salve, since that is what doctors are supposed to do. But of course the body's leech and the soul's leech, cure of body and cure of souls, are inextricably blended in New Testament tradition, and Langland would probably have found it hard to understand a complaint that the last verb of the first line should have

logically been interchanged with the first verb of the second line. The mixture of levels is reinforced by the alliteration, which makes the joining of the two appear almost seamless. For Dr Shrift it is alliteratively natural to perform the medical act of shaping (creating) sharp salve, in order to fulfill the implications of his name, which is that of one who makes men do penance. When Shrift gives way to Friar Flatterer, Unity falls, and the allegory breaks down: Contrition, a personification, forgets to weep and wake for his sins, and (371-2)

For confort of his confessour Contricion he lafte
That is þe souerayne salue for alle synnes of kynde.

The scribal capitalization of *Contricion* here dramatizes the breakdown: the character Contrition has abandoned the quality contrition on which his being depends, and allegory has turned its back on allegory, while the salve image receives its fullest definition in its very act of dying. Both Langland and St John come close to the fallacy of imitative form in their allegories of the coming of chaos.

The most extreme confusion of levels of reality in *Piers Plowman* occurs at the very beginning of Passus XX when the waking Will encounters the allegorical personification Need. This is the only example of such a mixing in the B-text, though there is another example in the "autobiographical" passage added by the C-poet before the confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins (C VI.1-104 in Skeat). Here the waking Will is accosted by Conscience and Reason, who have come out of his dream vision to visit him in Cornhill. Both of these passages effect an identification of the living poet with his allegorical poem, of the author with his work. I believe Chaucer makes the same kind of identification in the prologue to the Parson's Tale, where the hurried termination of the tale-telling seems to reflect Chaucer's sense of his own impending termination.⁷ In the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, Will's response to the personifications Conscience and Reason serves as a wry apology and justification of the poet's own erratic way of life, considered (and criticized) within his poem. In the B-text passage, Need, whom the waking Will encounters, is, according to Adams' fascinating interpretation, the immediate precursor of Antichrist; as the Noonday Devil he comes just before Antichrist, and here he comes to offer a final temptation to the spirit of the narrator, who in his waking guise is virtually identified with Will Langland. This final temptation involves him in the apocalypse which he is describing - makes him part of his poem - and does so with an authority that it would not have had if it had been made within the dream. The decay of the narrator's body through the operation of Elde will be described within the dream; but Need's temptation of the poet's spirit has the authority that real life imparts.

In the Apocalypse, it is one of "the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues" who shows St John the heavenly Jerusalem (xxi.9-xxii.5) and then gives him God's instructions, telling him that "the time is at hand" for "the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (xxii.10). It is characteristic of Langland that the authority vouchsafed his vision of

apocalypse comes not from an avenging angel but from the Noonday Devil. Yet the real authority of both writers arises from their extraordinary stylistic urgency that rushes us relentlessly toward the Last Day.

NOTES

- ¹ Robert Adams, "The Nature of Need in 'Piers Plowman' XX", *Traditio* 34 (1978) pp.273-301.
- ² See, e.g., Rosemary Woolf, "Some Non-Medieval Qualities of *Piers Plowman*", *Essays in Criticism* 12 (1962) p.115.
- ³ References to Langland are from *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E.T. Donaldson (London, 1975).
- ⁴ See OED, *jug*, v.4
- ⁵ The *locus classicus* is probably John M. Manly's comment in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, Vol. II (1908), p.27, about B XVIII in which Langland describes the crucifixion simultaneously in terms of the allegory of the Christ-Knight and in literal terms: "instead of the [expected] jousting, we have an account of the crucifixion".
- ⁶ *Canterbury Tales*, VI (C), 472-5.
- ⁷ See my discussion in *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1975) pp.1112-14.