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LANGLAND'S POETRY: SOME NOTES IN CRITICAL ANALYSIS

By A.C. SPEARING

My choice of subject is governed partly, but only partly, by nostalgia. When I was working on *Piers Plowman* in Cambridge under Elizabeth Salter's supervision in the late 1950's and early 1960's, I was convinced that one of the most urgent needs if Langland studies were to make further progress was not so much scholarly as critical: it was for a closer and more sensitive reading of the texture of Langland's verse. In Cambridge at that time the tradition of "practical criticism" established by Mansfield Forbes and I.A. Richards still dominated English studies; F.R. Leavis was still lecturing on "critical analysis"; and yet medieval poetry remained virtually untouched by the techniques of "close reading". As I saw it then, "the criticism of medieval literature is still largely in a pre-twentieth-century phrase",[1] and I was determined to do something about it, at least so far as Langland was concerned. Looking back now, nearly a quarter of a century later, I realize that, for all the fine sensitivity of her own response to medieval poetry, Elizabeth Salter probably did not fully share my enthusiasm for "practical criticism" of fourteenth-century literature, and later in her own career, with her deepening engagement in meticulous literary-historical scholarship, she would have shared it still less; but, with characteristic grace and generosity, she gave me every encouragement to do what I could. As it turned out, the Ph.D. dissertation on which I was working grew and grew without ever being completed, and, though I published some work comparing the C-text of *Piers Plowman* with the B-text which involved a sort of "close reading", "Langland's kind of poetry"[2] proved more elusive of analysis and definition than I had hoped.

The situation now may seem scarcely favourable for a renewed attempt. Twenty years ago I was already aware that, if "close reading" could be done on medieval poetry, it must not be directed by the expectations of density of texture, subtle precision of meaning, and richness of metaphor associated with a critical technique that had grown from the study of English poetry of later periods, from Shakespeare to Eliot. Nowadays it is clear that "practical criticism" itself is not the natural and innocently unprejudiced technique that it could still seem in 1960; we cannot practise it without implying a theory, without becoming involved, albeit unconsciously, in issues of cultural and even political analysis and the phenomenology of reading. Nevertheless, it remains the case that little close attention has been given to Langland's practice of words, and that this is a situation fraught with danger

for the interpretation of his poem. In particular, a very large amount of *Piers Plowman* study involves attempts to interpret his allegory unsupported by any understanding of the roots of that allegory in the way he uses words. No amount of supplying of the historical and intellectual context of Langland's work is likely to be profitable in the absence of a concern with his habits as a poet, a meddler with makings. After all, Ymaginatif's accusation - Langland's self-accusation - was that he did *not* spend all his time saying his psalter, but instead occupied himself with composing poetry. One would never guess that from reading much published work about *Piers Plowman*. I persuade myself, therefore, that I am not merely being nostalgic in offering some small-scale attempts at detailed analysis of Langland's verbal practice. Moreover, in one respect at least, the situation has become more favourable for such an endeavour. When I was attempting to establish that the C-text consistently intensified the B-text's use of verbal repetition, I realized that, by relying on Skeat's editions, I might unwittingly find myself discussing "a difference between specific manuscripts" and establishing only that "the scribe of Huntington Library MS HM 137 was, in a minor way, a creative artist".[3] So indeed it has apparently proved; but the new editions of *Piers Plowman* which indicate this - the B-texts of Kane and Donaldson and of Schmidt, the C-text of Pearsall - also provide a sounder basis for another attempt. The words that Langland actually wrote may be in many instances lost beyond recall, but the massive labours of textual scholars, even when account is taken of occasional eccentricities of conjecture, have undoubtedly brought us closer to them than anyone has been since the fourteenth century.

The first passage I wish to examine is chosen for its ordinariness: passages illustrating the same methods and habits of composition might be found almost anywhere in *Piers Plowman*. It is the closing section of Passus I of the B-text, in which Lady Holichirche comes to the end of the speech she has made in response to the Dreamer's request to her to tell him not about worldly treasure but about the means to save his soul. The theme of her answer is that Treuthe is the highest treasure, and that Treuthe in man means love - love in action, shown above all in giving to others.

For though ye be trewe of youre tonge and treweliche wynne,
180 And as chaste as a child that in chirche wepeth,
But if ye loven leelly and lene the povere,
Of swich good as God sent goodliche parteth,
Ye have na moore merite in Masse ne in houres
Than Malkyn of hire maydenhede, that no man desireth.
185 For James the gentile jugged in hise bokes
That feith withouten feet is feblere than nought,
And as deed as a dorenail but if the dedes folwe:
Fides sine operibus mortua est &c.
Forthi chastite withouten charite worth cheyned in helle;
It is as lewed as a lampe that no light is in.
190 Manye chapeleyns arn chaste, ac charite is aweye;
Are none hardere than hii whan hii ben avaunced:

Unkynde to hire kyn and to alle Cristene,
Chewen hire charite and chiden after moore -
Swich chastite withouten charite worth cheyned in helle.
195 Manye curatours kepen hem clene of hire bodies;
Thei ben acombred with coveitise, thei konne noght out crepe,
So harde hath avarice yhasped hem togideres.
And that is no truthe of the Trinite, but trecherie of helle,
And lernynge to lewed men the latter for to dele.
200 For thise ben wordes writen in the Euaungelie:
'*Date, et dabitur vobis* - for I deele yow alle.
And that is the lok of love that leteth out my grace,
To conforten the carefulle acombred with synne.'
Love is leche of lif and next Oure Lord selve,
205 And also the graithe gate that goth into heven.
Forthi I seye as I seide er by sighte of the textes:
Whan alle tresors ben tried, Treuthe is the beste.
Now have I told thee what truthe is - that no tresor is bettre -
I may no lenger lenge thee with; now loke thee Oure Lord!
(B I 179-209)[4]

These lines are to a large extent an amplification of the text quoted from the Epistle of James, chapter 2: Faith without works is dead. The whole of the second half of that chapter is concerned with driving home this simple yet hard doctrine, which it states three times over (verses 17, 20, 26) - faith without works *is dead* - and Langland's own method of writing here has much in common with that of the epistle, being simple, repetitive, and enforced with concrete *exempla*. It is the method of much of *Piers Plowman*, admirably described by Elizabeth Salter herself in the chapter on "The Art of *Piers Plowman*" in her *Piers Plowman - An Introduction*. There she notes the absence from *Piers Plowman* of "high rhetoric", the diction "simpler, more prosaic" than that of other alliterative poems, the "almost unbelievable naturalness in vocabulary and rhythm", the "dramatic freedom of phrasing", the reliance on *figurae verborum* involving different kinds of verbal repetition, and the "graphic directness . . . of the popular preacher" in the choice of simile and metaphor.[5] One may well be puzzled at first to see how Langland can possibly achieve poetry by using such methods.

The language is that of everyday life, though not by any means the *cherles termes* of low life: there are plenty of educated words such as *merite*, *chapeleyns*, *avaunced*, *curatours*, *acombred*, and so on. But there are no examples here of the diction peculiar to alliterative poetry: compared with any extract from, say, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this passage is notably plain and ordinary in its diction, not far distant, one may suppose, from prose or educated speech. *Trewe of . . . tonge* (179) is a commonplace collocation in Middle English; *as deed as a dorenail* (187) is illustrated by *The Middle English Dictionary* only from alliterative poems, including the earlier *William of Palerne*, but its survival as a cliché in modern colloquial English suggests that it may also have been a common tag in fourteenth-century speech. In many lines, the words that carry the alliteration are already linked in sense

and etymology, and must therefore have required little ingenuity or effort of imagination to choose. Examples are: *trewe . . . treweliche* (179), *good . . . goodliche* (182), *unkynde . . . kyn* (192), *gate . . . gooth* (205), *seye . . . seide* (206), *lenger lenge* (209). The sequence *lernynge . . . lewed* (199) offers only a slight grammatical variation on the familiar pair of opposites, *lered/ lewed*. Line 194 is an all but verbatim repetition of line 188. The same sound is used for alliteration in many different lines: six lines use *l-* (181, 189, 199, 202, 204, 209); five lines use *ch-* (180, 188, 190, 193, 194); four lines use *t-* (179, 198, 207, 208); and four use *c/k-* (192, 195, 196, 203). Yet these repeated sounds do not seem to be there for some expressive purpose, as for example in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1178-1207, a stanza in which the nine lines (out of thirty) alliterating on *l-* clearly help to evoke the quiet, stealthy atmosphere of the bedchamber by contrast with the violent noise and movement of the previous hunting scene. Nor are they there to display the poet's virtuosity or to mark off specific sections of the poem, as for example in many passages in *Morte Arthure* where the poet "hits on the idea of running groups of lines on one alliterative letter when describing episodes of violence and excitement".[6] In this *Piers Plowman* passage, it is worth noting how the continuation of *m-* alliteration over lines 183 and 184 gives a special cumulative emphasis or "attack" to the derisive sentiment being expressed (and perhaps something similar is true of lines 195-6); but apart from that the repetition of alliterative sounds seems to be merely the concomitant of an emphasis diffused throughout the passage on certain ideas and a certain message.

Specific words are repeated several times in the positions marked out by stress and alliteration: *charite*, *chast(ite)*, *trew(th)*, and so on. Repetition of this kind, as Elizabeth Salter noted,[7] is a characteristic feature of the art of the medieval sermon, and its presence is no doubt one sign of Langland's debt to the *ars praedicandi*. At first sight, it may seem a somewhat crude art; but even on the phonetic level it is worth noticing how often the manifest pattern of repeated alliterative sounds is only one part of a more complex auditory pattern. Thus in line 197 the alliteration on *h*/vowel- is accompanied by a whole series of *-a-* sounds: "So h*a*rde h*a*th *a*v*a*rice yh*a*sped hem togideres". In line 203 both alliterating words in the first half have a second syllable beginning with *f-*, and all three alliterating words include an *-r-* sound: "To *c*on*f*o*r*ten the *c*a*r*e*f*ulle a*c*omb*r*ed with synne". In line 205 all three alliterating words are monosyllables beginning with *g-* and ending with the similar sounds *-t* or *-th*, so that these words differ significantly only in their vowels. This may be thought of as an example of verbal play such as is also present in line 182 (*good/God*) and line 186 (*feith/feet*). The auditory patterning of Langland's verse, though rarely ostentatious, is often subtly pleasing.

Little progress, however, can be made in discussing the sound of a passage of verse without passing on to its content. In this passage, the chief means by which Langland gives life to Holichirche's message is a means characteristic of alliterative poetry generally,

and also of the medieval sermon - the concrete realization of abstract ideas in terms of scenes and objects belonging to daily experience. The most noticeable here are the similes of the weeping child, of Malkyn and her virginity, and of the lamp without a light. None of those is in itself a learned comparison; though there may be Latin analogues, each belongs in its primary significance to common life and the common language; but each of them is strikingly and subtly related to the theological message that Holichirche wishes to convey. The weeping child is weeping in church, and therefore is presumably, as Skeat suggested, a baby howling as babies so often do when splashed with water at their christening: what could be chaster than a newly-baptized infant, restored for an instant to man's original innocence? Malkyn is introduced suddenly and with pungent effect; the coarse saying rams home the argument unanswerably: what could be more unmeritorious than virginity retained only because no-one desires to take it? But for any reader who recalls the passage from James's epistle that underlies this part of the poem, the allusion is subtle as well as coarse. James mentions as an *exemplum* of justification by works the harlot Rahab, whose story is told in the book of Joshua;[8] though a prostitute, she nevertheless showed courage and generosity in defying the king of Jericho to protect two spies sent by Joshua. Langland's Malkyn, claiming a merit in the very virginity she has been unable to lose, is precisely the opposite to Rahab, chastity without charity as opposed to charity without chastity. Finally, the lamp: anyone can immediately see the uselessness of a lamp that fails to serve the only purpose for which it is intended, to give light. But here too there is a Scriptural allusion intertwined with the everyday comparison - an allusion, as editors have noted, to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins of Matthew xxv 1-13. The foolish virgins who had no oil for their lamps were unable to light them to greet the bridegroom Christ and were refused entrance to his marriage; that is, they were denied salvation and were thus "cheyned in helle". An image taken from a parable about virgins is obviously an appropriate *exemplum* to illustrate the theme of *chastite*.

As the passage proceeds, we find more metaphors than similes, and these add even more forcibly to its concreteness. Some of them belong to trains of imagery that recur thematically throughout *Piers Plowman*. One such is that of treasure and keys, here developed unexpectedly from the imprisoning and fettering power of an avaricious desire for earthly treasures to the "lok of love" (202) that sets free the spiritual treasure of divine grace.[9] Others are the images of love as a doctor and as a road in lines 204-5. There are also some startlingly concrete local metaphors, often in the form of verbs indicating powerful or violent activity. In line 193 the clergy who have gained advancement as chaplains or chantry priests, and in Langland's view are selling spiritual services for material reward, "*Chewen* hire charite": charity has now changed momentarily from what they ought to give to what they are greedy to receive; they gobble it up and swallow it down, and clamour for more.[10] Again, there is the group of verbs used to convey the oppressively cramping force of covetousness and avarice in lines 196-7: covetousness of others' goods is such a heavy burden to the parish priests that they cannot crawl out from underneath it, and avarice has clamped them up

tightly, as if they were their own locked treasure-chests. Only God's grace can release them from their spiritual prison.

In the passage as a whole then, simple and repetitious as it may seem, there is a genuine poetic creativeness in the solidity the poet's imagination confers on his doctrine; but what is important to grasp is that it is, as it were, an unstable solidity. It is not a matter of the building up of a single image through a whole paragraph, but of a rapid movement from one forceful realization of the underlying doctrine to a second and then to a third. In general, Langland does not strike the reader as at all a Shakespearean poet, but in this one respect there is a real ground for comparison with the mature Shakespeare's manner of "telescoping" one image into another. Given that Langland, in devoting all his energies to the creation of a single moral allegory, is doing something radically unShakespearean, this fact gives his allegory a most unusual and baffling nature: it feels solid yet it will not stay still: it is at once earthy and dreamlike. We cannot possibly understand the nature of Langland's allegory without fixing our attention with the greatest closeness on the way he uses words. "His task is the exploration of the spiritual unknown. The poet works his way into this unknown, laboriously and self-doubtingly, and his words do not merely express the outcome of a search, but are essential instruments operating within the search."[11] I hope this will emerge more clearly from my second example.

This is the opening lines of the confession of Wrath:

135 'I am Wrathe,' quod he, 'I was som tyme a frere,
And the coventes gardyner for to graffen impes.
On lymitours and listres lesynges I ymped,
Til thei beere leves of lowe speche, lordes to plese,
And sithen thei blosmede abrood in boure to here shriftes.
140 And now is fallen therof a fruyt - that folk han wel levere
Shewen hire shriftes to hem than shryve hem to hir persons.
And now persons han parceyved that freres parte with hem,
Thise possessioners preche and deprave freres;
And freres fyndeth hem in defaute, as folk bereth witnesse,
145 That whan thei preche the peple in many places aboute,
I, Wrathe, walke with hem and wisse hem of my bokes.
Thus thei speken of spiritualte, that either despiseth oother,
Til thei be bothe beggers and by my spiritualte libben,
Or ellis al riche and ryden aboute; I, Wrathe, reste nevere
150 That I ne moste folwe this wikked folk, for swich is my grace.
'I have an aunte to nonne and an abbesse:
Hir were levere swowe or swelte than suffre any peyne.
I have be cook in hir kichene and the covent served
Manye monthes with hem, and with monkes bothe.
155 I was the prioresse potager and other povere ladies,
And maad hem joutes of janglyng - that Dame Johane was a bastard,
And Dame Clarice a knyghtes doughter - ac a cokewold was hir sire,
And Dame Pernele a preestes fyle - Prioresse worth she nevere,
For she hadde child in chirie-tyme, al oure Chapitre it wiste!

160 Of wikkede wordes I Wrathe hire wortes made,
Til "Thow lixt!" and "Thow lixt!" lopen out at ones
And either hitte oother under the cheke;
Hadde thei had knyves, by Crist! hir either hadde kild oother.'
(B V 135-63)

It is often held that one of the great merits of Langland's presentation of the Seven Deadly Sins is the method of "dramatic personification",[12] and at first sight that seems to be the case here. Wrath, unusually personified "as the stirrer-up of anger in others, as a diabolical sower of discord, rather than as if he were the embodiment of anger",[13] describes his career in the last place that sin ought to be found - in the ecclesiastical world, ranging through friars, parish priests, monks, nuns - and he speaks of himself as having held three different positions in that world. First he was gardener to a house of friars; then, in lines 145-6, he appears momentarily in a grander role, as a teaching friar like the Doctor of Divinity met by the Dreamer in B XIII; and after that his role is as cook to a house of nuns. In principle I suppose it is possible that the same person could have held all three positions in the course of his life, though it is highly unlikely; but Langland's aim is clearly not to provide Wrath with a consistent realistic life-history. Anger, like the other sins, is a failing found in men and women of all conditions - indeed in the C-text Wrath himself makes just this point when he says that "Amonges alle manere men my dwellyng is som tyme" (C VI 115).[14] Thus no particular manifestation of anger can be allowed to exclude all others. The ecclesiastical world is chosen as the setting here, but the only other link among Wrath's roles lies in the image of vegetables: what he grows for the friars as gardener, he then feeds to the nuns as cook.

The first section of the passage, lines 135-41, contains an ingeniously worked-out but tightly compressed allegory. As gardener, Wrath grafts shoots of lying on to the friars themselves (an idea acceptable only because it is *not* given any pictorial development). By means of this grafting process, the friars first bear leaves of humble speech, with which they flatter lords, and then "blossom abroad" in the practice of hearing ladies' confessions privately in their "bowers". Blossom and bower, besides their alliterative link, are words which associate naturally together to suggest a courtly paradise or garden of the rose, but one which is seen here as the setting for distinctly furtive behaviour. This is partly a matter of confession not to the parish priest along with the other parishioners, but to the venal friar, who will impose an easier penance. But the following half-line - "And now is fallen therof a fruyt . . ." - at least hints that what is going on in the bower is something more than shrift, and that its outcome is pregnancy. (*Fallen* combines two senses, abstract (ensued) and concrete (dropped from that which bears it); and later, in line 159, an illegitimate child is associated with the fruit season.) In terms of the original allegory, the fruit is the widespread preference for confessing to a friar rather than to the parish priest. And so at last, by this indirect and paradoxical route, we get from flattery to anger, in the form of the general enmity between friars and beneficed clergy as they compete for the profitable right to hear confessions.

Then, in lines 142-4, Langland moves from allegory to literal social description: the mutual slanders of parsons and mendicants are part of the reality of his time, and the elaborate gardening-allegory, that in another poem might have occupied a whole book, has already dissolved after only five lines. The utter prodigality is typical of Langland, and we shall misunderstand the very structure of his poem if we fail to grasp that its segments of allegorical narrative do not form a continuous whole. Processes of growth and revision are constantly taking place, not just between the A-text and the B-text, or between B and C, but within each text. Langland may have hoped ultimately to arrive at a final and complete vision of life - a D-text or E-text or Z-text - but in practice that is not what he offers in any of the texts we have. Every allegorical formulation is merely provisional; every text is already a palimpsest, with one formulation inscribed on top of another. It is not so much a matter, I think, of his "deliberately frustrating the desire for allegorical tidiness",[15] as of the poem's very language having a flexibility, an unmechanical irregularity and changefulness, that leads the work as a whole towards something quite different, whatever Langland may have wished or planned. I think it likely enough that he wished or hoped for "allegorical tidiness", but he could only follow the bent of the life that his mind and body actually lived in language, and that was towards something other than the programmatic and the prescriptive.

In the second section, Anger as master and even perhaps prelate accompanies the friars as they wander about preaching, and teaches them from the books that mark his new status. The multiple meanings of *spiritualte* in these lines have been explored by editors,[16] but may perhaps still be clarified (or complicated) further. The friars and priests "speken of spiritualte" (147): one would naturally take this to mean "spiritual matters" (compare *OED*, sense 3: "The quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests"), but the context insists that its real meaning must be almost exactly opposite: "ecclesiastical property or revenue held or received in return for spiritual services" (*OED*, sense 2). The two parties are quarrelling about the income to be gained from confessions, and in this way their *spiritualte*, the endowment they live on (and also perhaps the spirit they live by) comes to be that of Wrath himself. Thus friar and parson reduce each other to the same condition - both beggars (with the priest reduced to the same contemptible state as the friar, begging for gifts from lords and ladies), or both rich men riding on horses (with the friar having totally abandoned the poverty claimed by his order); perhaps too beggars so far as spiritual qualities are concerned but rich in anger. There is a further pun on *grace* (150): it is Wrath's chance or vocation (the grace granted to him by virtue of his very allegorical identity) but also the "grace", such as it is, that he bestows on these ecclesiastics, to stick to them like a leech. The puns on *spiritualte* and *grace* both derive from the paradox, deeply troubling to Langland and to many of his contemporaries, of a Church which exists to serve as the channel for spiritual truth and divine grace, but which has come to be a temporal institution of great wealth and

power. In my laborious exposition, they lose their felicity; in Langland's text, they do not appear to be worked out systematically, but to be seized on the wing. This tendency to pun, in Langland as in Shakespeare, is one sign of the poet's reliance on the multi-dimensionality of language itself.

In the third section (lines 151ff.) Wrath is cook to the nuns, though it is mentioned in passing that he has served in the same capacity with monks. After the satirical comment on his aunt the abbess, with her horror of any form of mortification of the flesh, the cook image looks as though it is going to be developed into another local allegory, like the earlier image of the grafted shoots. Wrath made the nuns "joutes of janglyng" (156), stews or broths of gossip (leading on to the other sense of *janglyng* as "squabbling"); but then the development takes a different direction, with no further unfolding of the suggested allegorical narrative, but a literal presentation of the malicious gossip that leads on to a further manifestation of anger. The parody of the sisters' spiteful whispers about each other is a little masterpiece of comedy; and one notes how readily alliterative verse, with its closeness to the rhythms of spoken English and "dramatic freedom of phrasing", lends itself to mimicry of speech. Here the lines lengthen with additional, idiomatically slurred, unstressed syllables, to give a perfect imitation of the nuns' eager whispering. In line 160 yet another example of wordplay marks a brief revival of the allegory: the *wortes*, or vegetable soup, that Wrath makes for them naturally consists of malicious *wordes*. And then the allegory is fractured once more, and takes a sudden jump in yet another direction: the nuns' actual outbursts of angry words - "You're a liar!" and "You're another!" - are momentarily personified with sufficient energy to leap forth. That this is, at least potentially, a case of vigorous though very small-scale personification is confirmed by the revised form of the lines in the C-text:

> Thus sytte they, þo sustres, sum tyme, and disputen
> Til 'thow lixt' and 'thow lixt' be lady ouer hem alle.
> (C VI 137-8)

Here "thow lixt" becomes "lady" over all the sisters: that is, becomes mother superior of the convent. (The earlier gossip about who might be prioress prepares us to read the line in such terms.) There is of course no character in the poem called "Thow Lixt", though there is one called Lyere, who at B II 216 "leaps" as "Thow lixt!" does at B V 161. But even the dividing line between what does and what does not count as a character in *Piers Plowman* is blurred by the insistent tendency of Langland's poetic idiom towards momentary humanizations, and the coexistent rapidity and fluidity of movement that leaves them behind as soon as they are created. Almost every line has a new charge of dramatizing energy; and the power to create dramatic fictions is not focused on the level of overall design so much as it is diffused throughout the poem on the level of the sentence and even of the line.

This passage ends with a line which soberly states the outcome of gossip that began by looking merely amusing: a murderous

anger that would lead even nuns to kill each other, if they had the means. "By Crist!" (163) is surely not merely an expletive to fill out the metre and the alliteration, but carries a significant reminder of the supposed purpose of life in a religious order.

My third example can be treated more briefly. It is intended to illustrate the characteristic juxtaposition of opposite extremes in Langland's verse - the prosaic and the wildly imaginative, the satiric and the sublime - and the way in which it proceeds by imaginative association rather than by logic. This passage is extracted from a long and apparently rambling discourse by Ymaginatif in which, as he explains in the lines following those I quote, his purpose is to correct the Dreamer's earlier assertion that the ignorant are more likely to be saved than the learned. In these lines he distinguishes between the natural philosophy of the ancients which, being based merely on physical observation, can bring no man to salvation, and the revelation of Christ's birth, which came equally to the shepherds and to the wise men from the east - men whose learning rather than their natural intelligence is emphasized, and who are described as *poetes* (149) as well as *magi*.

  Olde lyveris toforn us useden to marke
The selkouthes that thei seighen, hir sones to teche,
And helden it an heigh science hir wittes to knowe.
Ac thorugh hir science soothly was nevere no soule ysaved,
135 Ne broght by hir bokes to blisse ne to joye;
For alle hir kynde knowyng com but of diverse sightes.
  Patriarkes and prophetes repreveden hir science,
And seiden hir wordes ne hir wisdomes was but a folye;
As to the clergie of Crist, counted it but a trufle:
Sapiencia huius mundi stultitia est apud Deum.
140 For the heighe Holy Goost hevene shal tocleve,
And love shal lepe out after into this lowe erthe,
And clennesse shal cacchen it and clerkes shullen it fynde:
Pastores loquebantur ad invicem.
  He speketh there of riche men right noght, ne of right witty,
Ne of lordes that were lewed men, but of the hyeste lettred oute:
145 *Ibant magi ab oriente.*
(If any frere were founde there, I yyve thee fyve shillynges!)
Ne in none beggers cote was that barn born,
But in a burgeises place, of Bethlem the beste:
Set non erat ei locus in diversorio - et pauper non habet diversorium.
  To pastours and to poetes appered the aungel,
150 And bad hem go to Bethlem Goddes burthe to honoure,
And songe a song of solas, *Gloria in excelsis Deo!*
Riche men rutte tho and in hir reste were,
Tho hit shon to shepherdes, a shewer of blisse.
(B XII 131-53)

The progress of the thought here, as in the whole of Ymaginatif's speech, is difficult to follow in detail, and it seems really to reflect the movements of Langland's ruminating mind as he puzzles

over the problem of the value of learning, to which he returns again and again in this part of the poem. Once more it may be helpful to be reminded of the mature Shakespeare's habitual movement of thought, especially as described by Coleridge in a contrast between Shakespeare's mode of composition and that of some of his contemporaries. "Shakespeare's intellectual action," Coleridge is recorded to have said,

> is wholly unlike that of Ben Jonson or Beaumont and Fletcher. The latter see the totality of a sentence or passage, and then project it entire. Shakespeare goes on creating, and evolving B. out of A., and C. out of B., and so on, just as a serpent moves, which makes a fulcrum of its own body, and seems forever twisting and untwisting its own strength.[17]

Langland's method of procedure is often like Shakespeare's as Coleridge describes it. On the intellectual level, his serpentine motion seems sometimes to depend on mere sophistries, such as the argument that Jesus was not born in a place of total poverty but in an inn, "and a poor man has no inn". (Langland is evidently taking sides in the controversy as to the absolute poverty of Christ and the claim of one branch of the friars that they alone achieved Christian perfection by imitating that poverty.) But the real progress of the passage takes place not on the level of propositions linked by logic but on that of images linked by action. It begins with some lines of prosaic and somewhat grumbling argument asserting the ineffectiveness of the accumulated knowledge of which the pagans were so proud; but then, with the quotation from I Corinthians, the verse takes a quite unexpected leap into sublimity, a leap which enacts the suddenness of the Christian revelation itself. Its visionary quality is conveyed by the use of the future tense for what has already happened (though there is also a sense in which, as an event in the individual soul, it can happen at any time); it is as if an angel prophesies to us as one did to the shepherds. The Holy Spirit splits open the heavens, love leaps from the height to the depth, and this personified and active love, which is also the incarnate Christ, is caught as it falls by *clennesse* and found by *clerkes*. In that characteristic pairing of abstract with concrete, *clennesse* is the Blessed Virgin, who "catches" Christ in her womb, and the *clerkes* evidently include the shepherds (here figures of the priesthood, *pastores*, in Langland's fragmentary reminder of Luke's Nativity narrative) as well as the *magi*.

After this, the verse relapses once again to a more prosaic level, muttering unedifyingly of who was and was not present and the material circumstances of the birth. The exalted vision of the very moment at which God became man does not exclude this, nor does it exclude satirical familiarity. Langland's sardonic "If any frere were founde there, I yyve thee fyve shillynges!" (146), promising a larger tip than even the most optimistic friar could expect, has something of the effect of a grotesque misericord carving in a noble choir. Favourite themes for such carvings included antimendicant satire, such as the fox as friar preaching to a congregation of geese; and yet what Langland is depicting here - a conspicuous and

derisible absence - is beyond the scope of pictorial or plastic art. As the attack on the claims of the friars continues in the next lines, Langland seems to have lost the sublime vision that he grasped briefly in lines 140-2; and then, equally unexpectedly, it returns in the closing lines of the extract, and especially in the last two. Everyday life is drenched in brilliant light, which discloses heaven in its very midst. In this extraordinarily compressed little scene, the grotesque becomes part of the sublime instead of being merely placed alongside it: the radiance of the star announcing the Nativity shows us not only the watchful shepherds as they glimpse the bliss of heaven, but the rich men manifesting their sloth and ignorance by their snores.

The passages I have been discussing illustrate, of course, only a small part of Langland's achievement as a poet, and my discussion of them has been only fragmentary. This is inevitable, and also desirable, for no reader wishes to have a great poet read for him by someone else. In the course of writing about them, I have found myself referring more often than I intended or expected to Shakespeare. Langland, I repeat, is in most respects not a Shakespearean poet; but the comparison may be of use if it acts as a reminder of the need to recognize in *Piers Plowman* an activity of mind deeply embedded in the English language (and also of course in the interaction of Latin with English), and not capable of being interpreted solely in terms of preconceived systems of ideas.

NOTES

[1] A.C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London, 1964) p.5.

[2] The phrase is borrowed from Nevill Coghill, "God's Wenches and the Light that Spoke (Some notes on Langland's kind of poetry)", in *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Norman Davis and C.L. Wrenn (London, 1962) pp.200-18.

[3] A.C. Spearing, "Verbal Repetition in *Piers Plowman* B and C", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 62 (1963) pp.722-37; p.723.

[4] Here and elsewhere I quote the B-text from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London, 1978). In the present passage, in preference to Schmidt's punctuation of lines 181-2, I have adopted that of George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson in *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London, 1975).

[5] *Piers Plowman - An Introduction* (Oxford, 1962) pp.21, 22, 35, 37-40, 41.

[6] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge, 1977) p.103.

[7] *Op.cit.*, p.29; see also my article cited above and *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*, pp.88-92.

[8] James ii:25; Joshua ii.

[9] Compare for example the supreme enactment of release from prison in the Harrowing of Hell in B XVIII, supported by metaphors such as *unspered* (86) and *unjoynen and unlouken* (257).

[10] Jill Mann, "Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman*", *Essays and Studies*, n.s. 32 (1979) pp.26-43, writes admirably about the relationship of this passage to other food-images and about the difficulty of separating the literal from the metaphorical in Langland's references to food. See also A.V.C. Schmidt, "Langland's Structural Imagery", *Essays in Criticism* 30 (1980) pp.311-25; p.316.

[11] John Holloway, *The Proud Knowledge* (London, 1977) p.65. Holloway is writing about Wordsworth, with reference to the early books of the 1805 *Prelude*, but the description is strangely apt to Langland.

[12] The phrase is used in connection with Wrath's confession by Elizabeth Salter and Derek Pearsall in *Piers Plowman* (London, 1967) p.82. Derek Pearsall, however (*Piers Plowman* (London, 1978) p.109) notes that much of the circumstantial detail in Langland's personification of the sins as sinners "goes beyond the possible experience of a single individual".

[13] *Ibid.*, p.114.

[14] I quote C from Pearsall, *ed.cit.*

[15] Priscilla Jenkins, "Conscience: The Frustration of Allegory", in *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches*, ed. S.S. Hussey (London, 1969) p.128.

[16] E.g. by J.A.W. Bennett in *Piers Plowman* (Oxford, 1972) p.161 and Schmidt,

ed.cit., p.316.

[17] S.T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 5 March 1834.