

5. SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN GIRDLE

At the beginning of the Christian era, voices were heard off the coasts of Greece, out to sea, on the Mediterranean, wailing: 'Pan is dead! Great Pan is dead!' [D.H. Lawrence, 'Pan in America']

Progress is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought. [Philo, 1st century AD]

Shield him from the dipped glance, flying in half light, that tangles the heels,
The grooved kiss that swamps the eyes with darkness.
Bring him to the ruled slab, the octaves of order,
The law and mercy of number. [Ted Hughes, 'Gog']

The horned god, the Lord of Life, was not dead, but beginning his long exile in the underworld, transformed by the early Christians into the Lord of Evil. So too the Mediterranean serpent goddess, the Great Goddess of abundant life, dressed, perhaps, in scarlet to symbolize her magical menstrual blood, became the Scarlet Woman, a witch and a whore. Anath became Anathema. Her serpent, symbol of undifferentiated life, of the power of life to renew itself, and of phallic potency, must have his head crushed under the Christian heel. The tree of life bears no longer the golden apple which is man's passport to paradise, but only the poison apple of sin and self-consciousness which ensures his eviction from it, his separation from nature and the sacred.

But the early Christian fathers knew that pagan beliefs and rituals and images which had become part of the lives of cultures and communities over thousands of years could not be eliminated overnight by edict. Some have survived even to this day: Easter eggs, maypoles, May Queens, Yule logs, Christmas trees, holly and mistletoe ... They knew that many of these images were what Jung was to call archetypes, deeply rooted in the racial unconscious. To attempt to eliminate them all would be to drive them underground and add to the energies of the many existing heresies. Therefore an effort was made to retain all those rituals and images which could be sufficiently Christianized (the slaughter and rebirth of the god) or desexualized (the goddess in the role of

Divine Virgin). The birthday of Christ, for example, was moved from its actual date in September to coincide with the existing pagan Yule, the feast of the midwinter solstice.

Some images were more easily accommodated than others. The Church must have agonized long over what to do with blatant fertility images such as the Lance and the Cup:

But Lance and Cup (or Vase) were in truth connected together in a symbolic relation long ages before the institution of Christianity, or the birth of Celtic tradition. They are sex symbols of immemorial antiquity and world-wide diffusion, the Lance, or Spear, representing the Male, the Cup, or Vase, the Female, reproductive energy. [Weston, 75]

In Christian symbolism, the Spear became the spear which pierced Christ's side on the cross, and the Cup became the vessel which caught his blood (and/or the dish of the Last Supper), the Holy Grail. The sword also became the sword of the questing or crusading Christian knight, riding out, perhaps, against the very serpent, now a dragon, which had coiled round the tree of life beside the Great Goddess (now a mere distressed maiden needing to be rescued from it). But these images retained too much of their former potency to be easily or totally transformed. Even in the hands of clerical writers such as the monk or clerk who wrote the *Queste del Saint Graal* the pagan elements and resonances could not be eliminated. For other writers these elements may have been the main attraction of the Arthurian material. Campbell goes so far as to say that 'the adventures, largely magical, are of the magic rather of poetry than of traditional religion, not so much miracles of God as signs of an unfolding dimension of nature':

The main purpose of the monk's *Queste del Saint Graal* was to check the trend of this reawakening to nature, reverse its current, and translate the Grail, the cornucopia of the lord of life, into a symbol no longer of nature's earthly grace, but of the supernatural - leaving nature, man, history, and all womankind except baptized nuns, to the Devil.

[*Creative Mythology* 566]

The *Queste* uses Gawain to point the inadequacy of the courtly ideals judged from a purely spiritual perspective. The unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* also finds them inadequate, but his perspective is very different.

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The *Gawain* poet, like any great imaginative writer, is capable of transcending the conventions of his time (the late fourteenth century), and of transforming mere emblems and allegories into symbols and myths; the difference being that symbols and myths do not depend on the reader having some conventional key to interpretation, but, as deep psychological and racial realities, are capable of communicating their essential meanings to any imaginatively open readers at any time.

In a way, the whole point of the story is that the Pentangle does have a specific simple allegorical meaning, which the poet spells out for us, but for that very reason cannot function as a complete code of conduct, since real life cannot be reduced to codes and concepts but will continually throw up situations which fall through the gaps between them or cannot be aligned simultaneously with all five points of the pentangle. The green girdle has no such precise meaning. Gawain does not know what it is, and neither do we, but that does not stop us responding to its manifold suggestiveness (and I use that word advisedly). Similarly, what Arthur's court stands for is clearly and simply spelled out at the beginning of the poem, but what Bertilak's Hautdesert stands for is ambiguous in the extreme. What the Virgin Mary, patroness of the Round Table, stands for is clear and simple, but what Morgan le Fay, patroness of Hautdesert stands for is shrouded in mystery. The poem dramatizes the conflict between man's attempt to live by imposing on life a grid of abstract codified values, and nature's determination that he should not. In this instance nature refuses to lie in man's Procrustean bed, and it is man himself who is, comically, in danger of losing his head.

The medieval Arthurian romances have, I suggest, three conflicting elements within them. Two of these are chivalry and Christianity, and these are overt. No serious writer could be unaware of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of fusing these two codes of values, as Arthur's Round Table claimed to do; and the strain generated by the attempt is a major part of the attraction of the material. The values of chivalry were essentially worldly, and many of them were strongly disapproved of by the church. For example, tournaments were banned by the Council of Clermont in 1130 as patently homicidal; and courtly love was of course seen by the church as simple adultery. Honour itself was mere vainglory in the eyes of the church.

The whole Arthurian venture was based on the doubtful premise that it was possible to combine the courtly chivalric virtues and the specifically Christian virtues, which meant that the Arthurian knight was obliged to

combine humility with the pursuit of glory, and chastity with courtly love! In one hand he carried the shield of meek Christian virtues, in the other the sword of aggressive masculine worldliness. The collapse of the Round Table can be attributed to these inward divisions; and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* they are the source of much of the poem's irony and wry comedy.

But there is a third, usually covert component, a component most of the Arthurian writers were, at least at the conscious level, unaware of, and that is a third value-system deriving from much older, pagan sources which themselves had derived from the natural world and its powers and processes. Already by the time of the romances this system of the ancient world had disintegrated, its myths reduced to folk-tales, its rituals to games, and its symbols to superstitions. This third element could not be excluded, since both chivalry and Christianity had evolved from it, and carried the traces not far below the surface. There is an unbroken line of descent, for example, from Heracles to Cuchulain to Gawain. And Christ was the last of a long line of crucified and resurrected man-gods. All his predecessors were fertility gods. The Green Knight virtually tells Gawain this when he reminds him that not only Arthur's blood flows in his veins, but also Morgan le Fay's, who was his aunt.

But there were at least two writers of medieval Arthurian romances who were not unaware of the pagan roots of both chivalry and Christianity, and who drew upon these half-submerged meanings in order to mount a searching critique of the Arthurian ideal of the Christian knight. They are Wolfram von Eschenbach in his *Parzival* and the unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I am not suggesting that these writers were pagans or anti-Christian; rather that they were disturbed by the extreme narrowness of orthodox Christian spirituality, its dualism, its unnecessary exclusiveness, particularly in relation to nature and the female, its bloody militancy. The retelling of Arthurian romances was one of the few methods available without danger of persecution of offering an alternative vision, a vision of wholeness rather than of impossible and ultimately undesirable perfection.

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Why does *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begin with the fall of Troy? Clearly we are intended to see a parallel between Troy and Camelot. But *all* civilizations and high enterprises are relatively short-lived and doomed sooner or later to collapse. To claim immunity either from internal weakness or from the inevitable processes of 'war and woe and wonder' is hubristic. The 'bliss' of Arthur's company in its 'prime' is doomed to destruction through treachery and

blunder and pride, had, indeed, as every reader knew, already long ago collapsed in precisely that way, the whole story having now passed into 'the lore of the land'. This introduction gives the poem not only a vast temporal perspective, but also the character of a cautionary tale. We are invited to begin by asking what in Arthur's court was vulnerable to these pressures from within and without. Though no mention is made of Helen, it cannot escape our attention that both Troy and the Round Table fell because of the adultery of a beautiful married woman, and this is precisely the temptation to which Gawain is to be exposed. The citadel of high masculine ideals is vulnerable not only to male treachery but also, since it is not a monastery or priesthood, to sexuality itself.

It is not just that the Arthurian code fails to take into account man's propensity to sin, that there will be a Mordred and a Lancelot in any group of a hundred men, and that there will be something of Mordred and Lancelot in every man; it excludes much more than that. In its preoccupation with armed conflict and the pursuit of the distant ideal it ignores and devalues the feminine in all its manifestations, including actual women. The women of Camelot are purely decorative. We hear nothing of children in any of the romances.

The third stanza, though it describes the knights as 'acknowledging Christ', gives otherwise a picture of heedless mirth and earthly delights and secular pleasure-seeking at Camelot non-stop for fifteen days, and it is still only New Year's Day. In fact in the whole poem we hear of no other activities at Camelot than feasting and revelry. The fourth stanza describes the luxury of the court, and of Guinevere in particular. Arthur himself, we are told, takes life lightly, is even a bit childish. His youth is clearly related to the youth of the year. Though the holiday tournaments at Camelot are merely jolly tussles, we are reminded of the real homicidal nature of jousting by Arthur's wish that some stranger might challenge one of his knights 'to join with him in jousting, in jeopardy to lay / Life against life'. The many references to Arthur's strength and nobility contrast somewhat with the picture of him 'trifling time with talk', and waiting passively for some adventure or 'momentous marvel' to come to him.

The feast is served, 'such freight of full dishes', twelve for every pair, that there is scarcely room on the tables. There is surely some irony in the line 'For all will acknowledge that ample was served'. But before the feast can begin, the handsome yet fearsome figure of the gigantic Green Knight rides on his green horse into the hall. He is by no means sinister or wild. His clothing and accoutrements are rich and comely, embellished with jewels and gold (treasures of the earth transformed into works of symbolic art). All the fabric is

embroidered and metal embossed with birds and flies in green and gold. One is reminded of Walt Whitman, speaking for the earth itself: 'I am stucco'd with animals and birds all over'. His horse's mane, tail and forelock are all plaited and ornamented, suggesting, as in the combination of colours, green and gold, a perfect blend of nature and art: nature and art working in harmony to produce images of richness and harnessed power. This power seems irresistible, yet is here manifested peacefully, since the Green Knight wears no armour and bears no shield or spear. In one hand he carries a holly-bob, a pagan symbol of the preservation of life, in the other a huge axe, symbol, in any eyes, of fell destruction - life and death in perfect balance.

When the Green Knight asks which is Arthur, the whole assembly is 'daunted' and 'dared not reply'. This is something their elaborate code of behaviour gives them no help with, and without it, they are at a loss. The code is applicable only within the artificial circle of courtly life. That circle has now been shattered by the eruption into it of a figure straight out of what they would have regarded as Pagan superstition, the Green Man, who is soon to demonstrate his characteristic magic, the ability to regenerate himself.

The Green Knight declares that he has come in peace, wishing for no peril or conflict, merely to propose some 'good sport' with this cream of chivalry. Arthur, apparently, has not listened to a word he has been saying, and replies:

If deadly duel's your whim,
We'll fail you not in fight.

Arthur behaves here with the mindless conditioned reflex of the knight - if you don't understand it, try to destroy it, and ask questions later, if at all. Asking the right questions is a very important theme in the Arthurian tales. At Arthur's court we see a denial of real feelings in the name of the code. Parzival, in Wolfram, does not ask Anfortas if his terrible wound hurts - he pretends not to notice it. Similarly Arthur 'let no semblance be seen' of his surprise at the Green Knight's appearance and behaviour, and does not ask him for any explanation. This slavery to the seemly can work against his declared dedication to 'truth'. Sir Gawain later asks the Green Knight's name, as part of the formula of combat. Apart from that, no-one asks him anything. The obvious questions, what sort of being are you? how do you come to be green? are conspicuously not asked. Nor, later, how can you live without your head?

The 'game' the Green Knight proposes is that one of Arthur's knights should chop off his head, and agree to allow his own head to be struck off in a

year's time by the Green Knight. If the Green Knight is mortal, this is murder, if not, suicide, yet Arthur unquestioningly accepts, exposing his youngest knight, Gawain. It is, as the Green Knight himself says, 'madly rash'. And Camelot itself comes round to the opinion a year later that 'It would have been wiser to have worked more warily', and that Gawain had been virtually sacrificed out of mere 'arrogance'. The Round Table is lured by its own code into putting itself at the mercy of supernatural forces mere chivalry is helpless against. Gawain decapitates the Green Knight, who picks up his head and rides away, the head calling back to Gawain not to forget their appointment in a year's time at the Green Chapel. Yet after the Green Knight's departure, the court simply resumes its feasting, with 'double portions of each dainty'.

Part Two begins with a wonderfully detailed description of the passing of the seasons, and there is no mistaking the seasonal significance of the Green Knight when, in spring, the fields and groves are described as 'garbed in green'. In autumn 'leaves are lashed loose from the trees and lie on the ground', like the head of the Green Knight.

The outside world does not play according to the rules of Camelot, which, as Gawain moves further from it, riding north in search of the Green Chapel, comes to seem more and more childish. Though Gawain is not going to fight, he goes, unlike the Green Knight, in full armour and elaborately caparisoned in resplendent chivalric gear, as if that could do him any good either against the pangs of winter or against the Green Knight. Gawain is said to be the best of Arthur's knights, yet being a worthy member of the Round Table seems to commit him to a perpetual performance, trying to work out what is the most fitting or seemly thing for him to do or say in any situation, regardless of his actual feelings. He is always, as we would say, projecting an image.

When Lawrence is looking for an image of self-conscious men who dare not risk themselves in relation to their own unknown selves, or woman, or the non-human world, he finds an image exactly like Gawain here:

They go forth, panoplied in their own idea of themselves. Whatever they do, they perform it all in the full armour of their own idea of themselves. Their unknown bodily self is never for one moment unsheathed. ... not for one moment does he risk himself under the strange snake-infested bushes of her [woman's] extraordinary Paradise. He is afraid. He becomes extraordinarily clever and agile in his self-conscious panoply. With his mind he can dart about among the emotions as if he really felt something.

[*Phoenix II*, 620-1]

In addition to the physical paraphernalia of chivalry, Gawain also draws to the full upon the spiritual resources of Christianity. He attends Mass, prays, and makes offerings. His colours are red and gold. The covers of his visor are embroidered with parrots, turtle-doves and true-love-knots, all emblems of courtly love. But it is his shield, which most fully symbolizes the values of Christian knighthood in which he and the whole court put their trust. On the outside is depicted the Pentangle, on the inside the Virgin Mary. Two whole stanzas are devoted to the Pentangle. It is a five-pointed star drawn in such a way as to constitute an Endless Knot. It is five times five. First, he is faultless in his five wits; second, his five fingers never fail him; third, his trust is in the five wounds of Christ; fourth, his prowess depends upon the five pure joys of Mary; fifth are the five virtues - liberality, fellowship, continence, courtesy and piety. It will be seen that these virtues are a strange mixture of the courtly and the Christian. The incompatibility of continence and courtesy is to be a particular problem for Gawain. These five interlocking fives are believed to be in themselves an impenetrable spiritual shield. But if the knot should be broken at any point, the efficacy of the whole is shattered. It is this Pentangle as much as Gawain himself, which is to be put to the test. Since the Pentangle is intended to be a talisman against ill-health or injury or demons, what need of the protective magic of the green girdle?

'At every bank or beach' Gawain is confronted by foul and fierce foes. He leaves a trail of corpses behind him:

He had death-struggles with dragons, did battle with wolves,
Warred with wild trolls that dwelt among the crags,
Battled with bulls and bears and boars at other times,
And ogres that panted after him on the high fells.

Why is every creature he meets, natural or supernatural, his enemy? Insofar as this is a psychic journey into the hinterland of the soul Gawain is projecting his fears of nature onto the face of nature, transforming it into something invariably threatening and monstrous (as Adonis is to look upon the lovely face of Venus and see only the fangs of Hecate and the boar). Ted Hughes chose these lines as his epigraph for *Wodwo*. Gawain is one name for the 'blood-crossed Knight, the Holy Warrior, hooded with iron':

The rider of iron, on the horse shod with vaginas of iron,
Gallops over the womb that makes no claim, that is of stone.

His weapons glitter under the lights of heaven.
He follows his compass, the lance-blade, the gunsight, out
Against the fanged grail and tireless mouth
Whose cry breaks his sleep
Whose coil is under his ribs
Whose smile is in the belly of woman
Whose satiation is in the grave. [Gog]

That is one way to encounter the world. The other, according to Hughes, is the way of the wodwo, open, sensitive, exploratory, flexible, aware of the other unknowable beings, and the unknowable depths of the self, ready to negotiate with whatever happens to be out there. It is also the way of the child:

It is also still very much the naked process of apprehension, far less conditioned than ours, far more fluid and alert, far closer to the real laws of its real nature. It is a new beginning, coming to circumstances afresh. It is still lost in the honest amoebic struggle to fit itself to the mysteries.

[*Children as Writers v*]

The warring little worries Gawain - 'worse was the winter'. The enemy he rides out against is Nature herself. 'So in peril and pain, in parlous plight' Gawain prays for shelter and a place to hear High Mass on Christmas Day. Immediately his prayer seems to be answered, as he comes upon 'the comeliest castle' he has ever seen. 'It shimmered and shone' like a mirage, as perhaps it was, conjured up by Morgan le Fay. 'By chance', he finds the entrance at the first attempt. He is expected. The porter tells him, before announcing his arrival, that he may stay as long as he likes. Though Gawain arrives fully armed, in contrast to the arrival of the Green Knight at Camelot, he is greeted with the most ceremonious respect and hospitality. They tell him to treat the place as his own. His host, Sir Bertilak, is a man of 'stupendous size', with a bushy beard and a jocular outspokenness, but none of this rings a bell for Gawain. He is still living in the world of appearances. All his wariness is put off with his armour when he thinks, after his ordeals in the great unknown, that he is back in the world to which he belongs, that of luxurious courtliness. Gawain is 'set up' as a paragon of courtly virtues, particularly by the two ladies of the castle - one the image of youth and beauty, excelling even Guinevere, the other of age and ugliness. Together they form a composite image of the goddess in her bright and dark, attractive and repulsive, aspects - Venus and Hecate.

There is surely some irony in the discrepancy between the opening of stanza xx, where we are told that on Christmas Day 'Ecstasy wells in all hearts for His sake', and the continuation, where Gawain and the lady find their 'solace and satisfaction' in 'dalliance':

Each soul its solace found,
And the two were enthralled with theirs.

Such lines remind us that we are dealing here with a great comic poem, in which the pretensions of Arthur's knights are deflated not only in the action of the story, but in the play of such tongue-in-cheek irony as this.

Gawain says he must allow himself at least three more days to search for the Green Chapel, but the castellan tells him it is but two miles away, so Gawain may stay until New Year's Day. The castellan intends to spend the three days hunting, but orders Gawain to spend them resting in preparation for his confrontation. He proposes that, at the end of each day, they should play a game of exchanging what each has gained that day. Vivid descriptions of the hunt alternate with those of the equally ruthless pursuit of Gawain by the lady. As much attention is given to the butchery of the deer as to the hunting of them. Davenport describes these scenes as 'a brilliantly precise demonstration of the real nature of knightly occupation in the late Middle Ages, a knightly life which has little in common with that romantic picture of knighthood which the lady keeps urging on Gawain'. On the first day she creeps into Gawain's bedchamber before he is up, and offers herself to him, hoping, no doubt, to catch him off his guard. She comes close to blasphemy:

But as I love that Lord, the Celestial Ruler,
I have wholly in my hand what all desire
Through His grace.

Gawain courteously parries her advances until, upon leaving, she questions whether such a courteous knight as Gawain could have stayed so long with a lady 'Without craving a kiss in courtesy'. Gawain, challenged on this sensitive point - his pride in his reputation for perfect courtesy, in whatever is 'becoming to a knight', consents.

The delicacy and squeamishness of Gawain in his comic dilemma, pretending to be asleep while the lady gets into bed with him, is forcibly contrasted with the unsparing detail of the butchery at the hunt - Gawain trying desperately to refine sex into courtesy while the poet reduces the delicate

sensitive hinds to their basic blood, bowels and bones. There is a comic discrepancy between the mounds of meat the castellan gives Gawain at the end of the day and the coy kiss Gawain gives him in return.

On the second day, while the castellan and his men pursue a particularly savage boar, the lady accuses Gawain of lacking the true ardour of courtly love. Again Gawain talks himself out of giving her more than a kiss. On the third day she comes to Gawain topless, and presses him so hotly that 'he felt forced / Either to allow her love or blaguardly rebuff her'. He cannot contemplate the former, not so much because of his commitment to chastity as because it would involve him in betrayal of his host. He chooses to rebuff her. She has, however, one last temptation. She tries to persuade him to accept at least a love-token from her - her green girdle, which, she says, has the property of protecting its wearer against anyone who tries to kill him. This, it strikes Gawain, would be 'a splendid stratagem to escape being slain' by the Green Knight, and he accepts it. This lapse in faith, in accordance with the indivisibility of the Pentangle, leads Gawain into several other faults: betrayal of his contract with the castellan to exchange winnings (he does not mention the girdle), and concealment of his fault from his confessor next morning. He emerges from confession 'so pure / That doomsday should have been declared the day after'. This is gallows humour, since the following day is literally Gawain's doomsday. It is hypocritical of Gawain to go to confession at all, since he intends to put his reliance not on being in a state of grace, or on the Pentangle, but on the green girdle.

There is a strong contrast between Gawain's departure from Camelot, with its emphasis on his shield with its Pentangle and image of the Virgin Mary, and his departure from Hautdesert, when there is no mention of either, all his faith being now pinned to the green girdle: 'For his own good, Gawain did not forget that!'

His guide, obviously under instructions from the castellan to undermine Gawain's courage as much as possible, gives him a fearful warning of what awaits him at the Green Chapel, a warning simultaneously comic (as we see Gawain blench) and a deeply serious reminder of the irresistibility and indiscriminateness of death itself:

You cannot counter his blow,
It strikes so sudden and sore.

Morgan knows that sex and death are the two chinks in Gawain's armour, as they are in the whole Arthurian enterprise. The guide undermines Gawain's

residual faith in the saving power of Christ by specifying that many of the victims of the 'grim man' have been churchmen.

The setting of the Green Chapel is nature at its most 'savage and wild'. The Chapel itself is pre-Christian, a 'fairy mound', filling Gawain with superstitious dread:

'At such might Satan be seen
Saying matins at midnight. ...
It is the most evil holy place I ever entered.'

Gawain has been tricked into a contract which, by its very terms, ensures that he has no physical defence. In fact, his helmet, the symbol of that defence, must be removed, and the most vulnerable spot, the nape of the neck, exposed to the biggest and sharpest axe he has ever seen. He shows a realistic scepticism when the moment comes, about the efficacy of either grace or girdle:

Not again
Shall I flinch as I did before,
But if my head pitch to the plain,
It's off for evermore.

The Green Knight makes clear what is at stake:

May the high knighthood which Arthur conferred
Preserve you and save your neck, if it so avail you!

The third swing slightly nicks Gawain's neck, breaking the skin and producing a merely symbolic shower of blood on the snow. Of this moment Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove (in an as-yet-unpublished additional chapter for *The Wise Wound*) write:

In Middle English, the poetry shows a free and easy relationship to nature, which often wears a loving aspect. Not always or immediately, though: Sir Gawayne has to bleed on the day of the Circumcision of Jesus under the fearful axe of the great figure of fertility, the Green Knight, and it has been said that this poem is the remnant of a liturgy of initiation of men into female fertility mysteries: becoming a feeling-being by shedding of his own blood peaceably. The axe is moon-shaped, like the Cretan labrys,

and Gawayne was made to bleed, like Dracula's victims, in the neck. As Francis Berry says, in his *Penguin Guide to Literature* essay on Gawayne, one must waste a little blood to win fertility, and this has always been the theme of fertility rites. In the nape of the Knight's neck, in this case, which, in possession cults like Voodoo, is where the divine horsemen ride.

The girdle is a blatantly sexual image. In the diseased Puritan imagination it marks the boundary between heaven and hell, between the bright and beautiful aspect of woman and her rank satanic sexuality. In Lear's words:

But to the girdle so the gods inhabit
The rest is all the fiend's. There's stench, corruption.

At Hautdesert the girdle is a rich ornament, effortlessly accommodated as a rudimentary life-symbol in a virtually matriarchal household. At Camelot sex can only operate destructively (as in Troy), destroying the Round Table from within. The Round Table excludes all the girdle includes. The girdle, as Shuttle and Redgrove point out in *The Wise Wound*, symbolizes not only sex, but also the womb and the magical creativity of woman:

She has the first original magic in her, which is that without her there would be no persons to consider magic; and that in her cycle is as nature that rhythmically dies to be reborn again in blood and through a descent into the underworld, a process which has been recorded in myths and rituals all over the world, and distorted into surrogate myths in which it is the man, hero not the woman, her, who bleeds and resurrects. But this may be the woman's gift to the man, to show him how to sacrifice and return, and he has forgotten the giver. [220]

Moreover, the Pentangle itself, like the Grail, had been appropriated as a Christian symbol from pagan fertility magic. It had originally symbolized woman's 'whole pentagram nature, her witch-nature, her magic'. Shuttle and Redgrove quote Kenneth Grant:

Five was the primal number of woman as the genetrix long before the stellar seven and the lunar twenty-eight. For five days woman was engulfed in darkness and eclipsed; from her issued the deluge that primitive man rightly identified as the substance which would later congeal and flesh forth progeny. Blood was recognized as liquid flesh and

the female expressed (through the number five) her nobility, which was the archetypal *nobility* because the only known lineage was of the blood of the mother alone. The male's role in the procreative process was at that time unknown. The five-day eclipse was the seal of woman's nobility, the nobility that wears the scarlet mantle of nature herself, the one unimpeachable rubric of her sovereignty. And because she was seen to renew life upon earth woman was likened to the goddess in the sky, who renewed herself through celestial cycles as a type of resurrection, a return to unity and ultimate perfection in the heaven and the hells. The number five thus became the seal of authority in the world of spirits; it was represented by the pentagram or five-pointed star, still used by magicians for establishing contact with and controlling transmudane entities. The origins of the magical pentagram can thus be traced to the first observed facts of elemental nature. [206]

The Green Knight reveals that he is also Sir Bertilak, and that the old woman at Hautdesert was 'Morgan the goddess' who had sent him to Camelot to 'put to the proof the great pride' of the Round Table. She is confident in her power. She warns the Round Table of the danger of pride, the inadequacy of its values, the need to acknowledge the nobility of woman and the power of her magic, which is also the nobility and power of the natural world. She reasserts her title to the Pentangle. She offers to heal the split, which will destroy the Round Table. She shows Gawain 'how to sacrifice and return', bearing with him as token of her 'original magic' the green girdle. Her method of healing is exactly what would be recommended by modern psychology. In Hughes' words:

A mentally sick person is sick, says the theory, because there is something in his mind which he refuses to face, which he has by some means or other cut himself off from and which he represses into the cellars of his mind, down into the nervous system where it plays havoc. And this devil of suppressed life stops making trouble the moment he is acknowledged, the moment he is welcomed into conscious life and given some shape where he can play out his energy in an active part of the personality.

[*Children's Literature* 58]

The archetypal quest hero rides out into the unknown, which is both the animal world and the spirit world, natural and supernatural. There he endures

exposure, privations, horrors, perils and conflicts. He confronts monsters, often female, undergoes an ego-death, but returns at last transformed, reconstituted in alignment with the way things are, bearing a healing gift or vision for his people. But *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a mock quest. Gawain completely misinterprets his adventure. As soon as he realizes that he is not going to die, he reverts to the posture of the knight 'audacious in arms' and 'bloodily resolute', essentially unchanged. Sir Bertilak compliments him: he has done as well as could be expected, his performance only slightly tarnished by his acceptance of the girdle:

But here your faith failed you, you flagged somewhat, sir,
Yet it was not for a well-wrought thing, nor for wooing either,
But for love of your life, which is less blameworthy.

Gawain's judgement on himself is much more severe, since he is still applying the impossible standards of the Pentangle. Sir Bertilak succeeds in persuading him to keep the girdle as a 'perfect token' of the whole adventure when he is once again 'in company with paragons of princes'. This is heavily ironic, since the girdle is a token of precisely the ways in which Arthur's knights are not, and could not in the nature of things ever be, the 'paragons' they think themselves, of what Lawrence calls 'man's irremediable being in sensuality' [*Studies* 396]. Their claim depends on leaving too much out of account - the claims of the feminine, including the feminine side of their own natures and of wild nature with its irresistible seasonal processes. Christmas itself, for example, is an appropriation of the pagan festival of the mid-winter solstice. Gawain admits that the great Christian heroes - Adam, Solomon, Samson and David - could not cope with women. Gawain learns the wrong lesson, simply blaming the wiles of women for his own incompleteness. The green girdle he regards simply as a token of the wiles, not of the incompleteness. Thus the Round Table learns nothing from his failed quest, and proceeds blithely on its way to destruction.

* * *

In Malory, Arthur has a dream which reveals the sexual abyss full of reptiles of the mind which lies beneath all the high ideals and 'noble felyship' of the round table (even as they are embodied in that 'hede of al Crysten knyghtes' Sir Launcelot):

And the kyng thought there was undir hym, farre from hym, an hydeous depe blak watir, and therein was all maner of serpentis and wormes and wylde bestis fowle and orryble. And suddeynly the kyng thought that the whyle turned up-so-downe, and he felle amonge the serpenties, and every beste toke hym by a lymme.

The great goddess, frustrated and rejected yet again, is transformed into a witch.

In other Gawain stories, it seems that Gawain has learned from, allowed himself to be corrected by, the adventure with the Green Knight. In 'The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell', Arthur's life is saved when a Loathly Lady, with a boar's tusks and snout, tells him the answer to the riddle (about the nature of woman) on which his life depends. But her price is Gawain for her husband. This time Gawain gets it right. By accepting the Loathly Lady, by dropping his insistence that only the beautiful and chaste is worthy of respect and love, by putting himself unreservedly in her hands, he is able to transform her into her true radiantly beautiful self. Similarly, Wolfram's Parzival is able to find the Grail only under instruction (in compassion) from Cundrie, a foul, tusked and snouted sorceress.

The Grail maidens bear, in addition to the Grail itself, 'two silver knives, like crescent moons ... like the tusks or horns of all moon-animals, signifying the full career of the moon's phases' [Shuttle 118, 202]. With these they draw hot poison from the sick king's wound.

These images of an enchanted woman with the tusks of a boar go back to the moon-goddess and Queen of Hell, Persephone, one of whose shapes was a boar. Persephone fought with Venus for Adonis, and killed him when he refused her, or had him killed by her male counterpart, Ares or Apollo, as a boar. But his death was only the prelude to his resurrection and apotheosis. The consort of the goddess is killed in order to be reborn as her divine child.

Birth itself is woman's secret magic. Jean Markale calls the Grail 'the uterus of the mother goddess' [Shuttle 203]. Shuttle and Redgrove call it 'the "goblet" full of blood, the menstruation that contains many redeeming secrets' [119]. It has the power to 'make the Wasteland bloom' [17].

What is the Grail then, but the inexhaustible vessel, the source of life continuously coming into being, energy pouring into creation, energy as creation, the unquenchable fountain of eternal being? [Baring 654]

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