

"FRO SPOT MY SPYRYT ðER SPRANG IN SPACE":
MAPPING CONVERSION IN *PEARL*

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In his inconsolable grief at the loss of his "perle wythouten spotte," the Dreamer in *Pearl* sinks to the ground in anguish, but instead of encountering the deep sleep and oblivion he seeks, he recounts a vision of spiritual conversion from one realm into another:

Fro spot my spyryt ðer sprang in space;
My body on balke ðer bod. In sweuen
My goste is gon in Godez grace,
In auenture ðer meruaylez meuen. (61-64)¹

The Dreamer's narration of this experience in these lines deliberately marks his movement away from the "spot" of the earth and body toward the figural representation and heavenly landscape of God's grace. Such a movement, however, does not yield an immediate transformation of spirit or consolation for the Dreamer; rather, it only signifies a step in his journey toward spiritual understanding. In her translation, Marie Borroff glosses the word "aaventure" as "quest," further highlighting the uncertainty, the progressive nature, or even, as Charlotte Gross suggests, the possible "fabulous landscape of chivalric romance" within the Dreamer's experience (79). Sarah Stanbury also focuses on the journey in *Pearl*, claiming that the poem could qualify as "travel literature" and especially as a "pilgrimage narrative" (13). However, J. Allan Mitchell has suggested that the poet has "reconfigured the traditional courtly quest motif by pressing it into the service of a *vertical quest* for truth about the afterlife" (98, emphasis mine). This notion of a "vertical quest" seems especially fitting for a Dreamer who "sprang in space"—a reference, I would argue, to the Dreamer's psychological movement through time as well as to his movement through physical space. Even more, this passage reveals that the dream initiates a journey that will continue beyond the borders of the dream

itself, a journey that, although set on a spiritual terrain, will begin and end on solid earth.

To describe this fourteenth-century dream vision as a text inspired by Christian doctrine, imagery, and structure is hardly original, yet the progression and embodiment of Christian belief within *Pearl* has gone somewhat unexplored. Scholars have examined the *Pearl*-poet's doctrinal didacticism; use of Christian allegory and language; presentation of Christianity in contrast to worldly gain or loss; and adherence to parable and scripture,² but all of these observations remain quite static, ultimately implying that the Christian body is an ever-equivalent, essential presence rather than one that may be in continuous flux or transition throughout the poem. Gregory Roper perhaps comes the closest to acknowledging the process the Dreamer undergoes, suggesting that the visionary experience reflects a penitential confession with the Pearl-maiden acting as confessor. Through such a model, Roper contends, "the maiden slowly takes the dreamer through the process of self-discovery: she offers him pictures of himself, definitions of who he is, so that he may recover himself" (168). These "pictures" of who the Dreamer is allow him to make steps towards understanding "other jewelers he could be" (174) or, more precisely, other Christians he could be. I would extend Roper's argument to claim that the Dreamer, often conflated with "the Christian," not only receives instruction, counsel, and confession from the Pearl-maiden, but also goes through a conversion. Such conversion is not marked by one precise event such as baptism or blinding light, but by an ongoing process that involves varying levels of literal and spiritual understanding. Even the dream itself, although often identified as an individual site of instantaneous revelation, does not provide a single marker of conversion but rather numerous sites and spaces for initiated conversion. The Dreamer does not inhabit only one space throughout the poem but moves among various spaces that God and the Pearl-maiden (as well as the *Pearl*-poet) provide for him. Thus, while incorporating past critical notions surrounding *Pearl*, we can develop a new map of spiritual terrain and identify points where particular phases of conversion occur for the Dreamer.

The *Pearl*-poet presents sites—including the Dreamer and Pearl-maiden themselves—where worldly pursuit, economics, gender, and spirituality intersect and where spaces are created for conversion. The Pearl-maiden, in her simultaneous roles as female, child, Queen of Heaven, and even trafficked commodity, presents within herself such

an intersection of aspects, and this phenomenon provides an appropriate if seemingly unconventional space for the conversion of the Dreamer. The interaction between the two—as well as the Dreamer's own narrative—exposes traditional binaries of female/male, letter/spirit, and literal/figural, although the Dreamer and the maiden shift their roles and complicate the divisions between these binaries. Conversion is, again, an ongoing process throughout *Pearl*, not existing at any one point on a continuum—yet these two characters either inhabit, host, or provide particular spaces where incidents of conversion can be mapped.

To map multiple appearances of the conversion process rather than to identify a solitary instance of the phenomenon indicates that continual, gradual steps toward spiritual understanding exist for the Dreamer within and beyond the dream itself. Although this notion of process may seem plausible and relevant amidst modern-day, multiple-step programs of conversion for body and mind, medieval writers often featured anecdotes of “one-step” conversions, most clearly evidenced in traditional accounts of Paul's supposedly immediate transformation on the road to Damascus. In descriptions of other incidents such as baptism, mass conversions, or individually recorded confessions, certain accounts made use of the word “conversion” to indicate one swift movement of the individual from a prior belief system into Christianity. Accounts of conversions, including those of the early British in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* or mass conversions of witnesses in medieval apocrypha, emphasize instantaneous crossover for converts but neglect any “follow-up” information (that is, what happened in the individual's spiritual life after such conversion). In his work on the nature and metaphor of conversion, Karl Morrison suggests that such accounts are often unreliable because they depict conversion, or “something felt,” in writings, or “things made.” The contrast between the experience and the written account of that experience is marked by Morrison's observation “that the experience of conversion is beyond thought or words,” yet, he maintains, “there has been no lack of efforts to express the inconceivable and ineffable” (*Conversion and Text* vii). This issue may give reason to question the implied truth of spiritual narratives: Does the actual convert even have sufficient authority to write such phenomena? Personal experience perhaps grants the authority, but if real conversion is “beyond thought or words,” then how can one distinguish an actual happening from narrative embellishment?

Answers to the conversion enigma lie in how one interprets the idea and nature of conversion itself. Morrison provides a framework for interpreting what characterized conversion during the early Middle Ages, and in turn, this framework helps promote a study of a possible conversion process for the Dreamer in *Pearl*. The definition that Morrison provides for “conversion” presents a key facet of theological inquiry, namely that by the twelfth century conversion was viewed as the type of process I argue is present in *Pearl*. In Morrison’s words, “Conversion was normally understood as a continuous process, although a highly predictamental one, with a beginning, development, and end. . . . In fact, all of life, rightly lived, was conversion” (*Understanding Conversion* xii). In light of his definition, individual events that marked religious turnings, including Paul’s experience, were only steps in a “gradual process of adoption, or transformation” (xii). Although historical writers such as Bede exploited one-step conversions of pagans to convey nationalistic power, more personal accounts tend to display the notion of conversion as a process not resulting from force but from “Godez grace” and intervention.

More specifically, the prototype narrative of conversion exists in Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine’s experience—like Paul’s—is often perceived as an immediate transformation with his climactic emotional and spiritual moment occurring in a Milanese garden. However, to view Augustine’s conversion as just one moment in his life negates the very progressive nature and goal of his text as a whole. Written approximately fifteen years after Augustine’s conversion to Christianity, the *Confessions* narrate the gradual, struggling development of his soul as it slowly moves toward God. His is a movement of much intellectual turmoil and debate, especially within himself. He writes,

As to me, when I was deliberating about entering the service of the Lord my God, as I had long intended to do, it was I who willed it and it was I who was unwilling. It was the same ‘I’ throughout. But neither my will nor my willingness was whole and entire. So I fought with myself and was torn apart by myself. (8.10)

Such intense deliberation finds itself rooted in both Augustine’s mind and his body—it remains a physical fight for and against his own conversion to Christianity. His struggles, while primarily mental, also

display the emotional impact he endures as he gives “free rein to tears” under the fig tree when the pinnacle of his conversion occurs (8.12). However, this turning point, as Massimo Leone observes, does not nullify the process Augustine has experienced and described to bring him to this point (82). While the story of Paul, itself, certainly acts as a “stepping stone” for Augustine’s own narrative, neither should be seen as a one-step conversion but rather as what Morrison calls an “enduring predicament” (*Conversion and Text* 18, 3). Additionally, it is divine intervention and a form of “Godez grace” that summons and “turns” Augustine, over time, to arrive under the tree in the garden:

But you, Lord . . . were turning me around so that I could see myself; you took me from behind my own back, which was where I had put myself during the time when I did not want to be observed by myself, and you set me in front of my own face so that I could see how foul a sight I was—crooked, filthy, spotted, and ulcerous. (8.7)

Augustine is indeed “spotted”—sinful and carnal and also bound to an earthly “spot” like the Dreamer in *Pearl*. Both are turned by grace to face themselves and God—but it must be emphasized that their journeys do not begin and end at this turning point between heaven and earth.

And such grace was not available to all. As Morrison relates, “by the hidden mysteries of predestination and election, only divine intervention could graft that strategy into a human Heart . . .” (*Understanding Conversion* xii). Thus a person may turn to God, but that “turning to” may not be reciprocated, a harsh result in contrast to the more progressive definition of conversion as identified by Morrison. In *Pearl*, however, the Dreamer is allowed to experience conversion only because “Godez grace” first summons him through a dream—not because *he* avidly seeks God. The Dreamer’s overwhelming despair prevents him from encountering the consolation of Christ, but through a sort of divine election, the Dreamer, much like Augustine, is permitted to encounter that which will trigger—or, as Morrison states, “graft a strategy” for—a personal conversion process (xii).

To consider *Pearl* as a poem of personal conversion, however, is not possible unless one examines Morrison’s concept of the “poetics of conversion.” As mentioned, writers often created highly questionable accounts of conversion as they attempted to translate “things felt” into

“things made.” Morrison argues that there were distinctions among the following: 1) the actual experience of conversion; 2) the name given to those experiences; and 3) the methods or processes writers used to transform the spiritual into the written literal (*Understanding Conversion* 3). Hence, the name or label “conversion” is dramatically different from the experience or the written account of that experience. Thus, following Morrison, I would argue that any writer’s attempt to create a “poetics of conversion” maintains the dichotomy of letter/spirit, privileging the one (letter) over the other (spirit) by developing words for what is, in the end, word-less. Encountering *Pearl*, readers become dependent upon the words that act as substitute for or literal representation of spiritual, intangible events, as is the case with most dream-vision narratives, accounts of ascetic experiences, or even spiritual autobiographies like the *Confessions*. Although readers receive no indication that the poetics of *Pearl* is based on the autobiographical as in Augustine, the *Pearl*-poet creates a written text that details a religious vision of an “inconceivable and ineffable” nature, forcing readers to bridge a schism between a “thing made” and a “thing felt.”

How can *Pearl* be read as a poem of conversion if such a gap exists between spiritual experience and written text? In exploring Augustinian theory in relation to *Pearl*, Anne Howland Schotter has examined the poet’s awareness of the inadequacy of words as representations of the Word of God. In denying the sufficiency of verbal communication, clergy often sought to prevent their audiences from becoming distracted or wooed by words; such a situation, according to Augustine, led to idolatry. Although the poet does not explicitly reveal such a belief—largely based on Augustine’s contention that words are not capable of expressing or interpreting the nature of God—Schotter notes that the poet’s use of both a “naïve narrator” and the rhetorical device known as the “inexpressability topos” (so labeled by E. R. Curtius) demonstrates how the poet downplays the descriptive language while simultaneously presenting it to the reader (25, 28). Thus, a work such as *Pearl*, I would suggest, increases in credibility concerning spiritual matters and conversion by *confessing* a reliance on human language. Furthermore, the *Pearl*-poet does not imply that his work will convey spiritual truth applicable to all; instead, the setting for his work is a dream landscape within his own cosmology. Set on a terrain that is celestial and unreal, *Pearl* is not a journal of purportedly real religious visions, such as Julian of Norwich’s *Book of Showings*, nor a

spiritual autobiography, like that of Margery Kempe or even Augustine. Rather, it is a dream, staged and performed in a space where, Sarah Stanbury observes, "all of the locations are presented as constructs of the narrator's visionary, and visual imagination" (2). Although such description is vivid and precise, it is a creation of a poet who is aware of his own limitations as well as those of his narrator. Because he draws attention to these limitations, however, his capacity to write and construct such a map for conversion is all the more possible.

Many are intrigued by this poet, a figure Stanbury deems the most "impressively fictional persona" in medieval English poetry (1). Although countless critics have posed the question "who is the *Pearl*-poet?" a no less important question is "who is the Dreamer?" Unlike the quiet, bookish narrators of Chaucer's dream visions, the Dreamer in *Pearl* is not so much a reconstruction of the poet's self as he is a vessel containing varying levels of despair, misunderstanding, and eventually, hope. In this way, the Dreamer does exhibit allegorical qualities of a Christian, but it is an unseasoned, worldly Christian he represents. Instead of attempting to draw a conflation of the Dreamer and the poet, it proves more fruitful to examine brief parallels between the Dreamer and characters from other Cotton Nero A. x. poems. Like Jonah in *Patience*, the Dreamer must realize that with despair comes comfort: "Thay ar happen also þat for her harme wepes, / For þay schal comfort encroche in kythes ful mony;" (*Pat* 17-18). Although sacrifice and bearing burdens or tribulation often mark characters as Christ-like, the Dreamer and Jonah are not such depictions. Jonah is obstinate and unyielding or, as John Friedman labels him, "querulous, cowardly, argumentative, and devoted to *temporalia* far in excess of his biblical counterpart" (100). The same could be said of the Dreamer, who finds himself unable to cope with grief, who quarrels with the Pearl-maiden, and who disobediently attempts to trespass the boundaries set for him by God. The Dreamer, then, is a Christian "in fact" but not "in faith."

With the appearance of the Dreamer comes the appearance of "the Christian" in *Pearl*, but he is a Christian unclearly marked, blurring the literal and spiritual in one mind. To accept the Dreamer as Christian is initially a dangerous acceptance, akin to interpreting language as an accurate representation of spiritual phenomena. At the beginning of *Pearl*, readers are presented with a literal thinker in the Dreamer, one who cannot see beyond the arbor and must describe his lost daughter in terms of a tangible, worldly object. Because the Pearl-maiden's physical body is gone from his sight, the Dreamer can express his loss

only by equating her with that which he can see or visualize clearly. The Dreamer admits that not even the consolation of Christ can reach him in his dejected state: "Þaȝ kynde of Kryst me comfort kened, / My wreched wyllle in wo ay wraȝte" (55-56). He exhibits an inner, spiritual blindness in his description; unable to depict and mourn Pearl as a human girl, he must turn his plight into a parable he can understand. In losing a "pearl of great price," the Dreamer becomes a "joylez juelere" (252), conflating his role as Christian with that of a hapless merchant who has lost a trafficked gem within a secular economy—much like the Christian representatives in dramatic texts such as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* and even Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.

As the Dreamer further identifies himself in such tangible terms, he bears resemblance to the *Play of the Sacrament*'s Aristorius, a Christian merchant who exhibits similar confusion concerning the literal and spiritual. In an immense geographical catalog, Aristorius enumerates the places where his business takes him, firmly attaching himself to material communities just as the Dreamer attaches himself to the arbor by describing its many flowers and its vegetation. Aristorius's devotion is not to a young girl but to commerce and wealth, which, as Sarah Beckwith observes, "is cast in the vaunting terms of all late-medieval villains" (69). Although the Dreamer is neither a villain nor even an actual merchant, he and Aristorius both translate the spiritual into literal or material objects. In Croxton, this point becomes most evident when Aristorius blatantly commodifies the sacramental host in the transaction with Jonathas the Jew, an act that removes the host from its sacred space and implants it in the secular economy. Tracing further the implications of this commodification, Beckwith explains, "It is not just the horrific possibility that the host can be bought that is at stake here, but that it becomes subject to a different economy of representation" (69). The Dreamer, while not selling his pearl or bargaining over her, does position her in a "different economy of representation" that is not spiritual but earthly and marked by his own selfishness. Aristorius, in comparison, may possess greater attachment to and selfishness in his secular market, but the Dreamer, too, can only communicate despair by translating Pearl the maiden into Pearl the "goods," a physical item he can see and mourn.

The similarity between these two characters reveals not a mere literary echoing in the Croxton play but what might be interpreted as a universal tendency towards the trafficking of sacred objects or

phenomena to avoid contemplating their mystery. The Dreamer, in contrast to Aristorius, knows that he can find consolation in Christ, but in lines 55-56 where he expresses this knowledge (cited above), it is the Dreamer's mind rather than his heart that turns to Christ. Modern translators of these lines emphasize how the intellect and reason fail the Dreamer in his time of personal grief: Borroff glosses the lines as "Comfort of Christ might come to mind / But wretched will would not forbear" while Casey Finch translates "(I knew of neither wisdom nor) / The consolation Christ had bred. / My saddened soul still showed its sore." Although Finch provides reference to the Dreamer's soul-suffering, the general theme is that of fallibility of mind during times that require keener spiritual insight. The Dreamer acknowledges that more sight and understanding are required if he is to pierce the curtain between his world and Pearl's, but he cannot yet bridge the gap between intellect and vision.

Morrison clarifies this distinction between intellect (letter) and vision (spirit) as being integral to the process of conversion by paraphrasing the twelfth-century writer Caesarius of Heisterbach who described conversion as "a turning of the heart . . . not to Christianity or to the Church but to Christ" (33). The Dreamer is not able to turn toward Christ voluntarily, but while asleep, he appears to be chosen or "turned" by God to endure what Morrison would describe as "not self-fulfillment but self-emptying" (38). Although his apparent role as some sort of "chosen one" is troubling and questionable, I would claim that the Dreamer, in not being able to think on Christ, is provided with only the strategy for conversion that replaces the mind's malfunction with a heart's motion toward God. The Dreamer is not redeemed nor necessarily destined for salvation but given the tools necessary for conversion. Describing the conversion process in terms of "tools" is not an improper venture for, according to Morrison, the word "conversion" is borrowed from the language of arts and crafts, as in the process of "converting copper and tin into bronze" (*Understanding Conversion* xiii; *Conversion and Text* vii). I would suggest that this metaphor becomes especially relevant in regard to the Dreamer, a man whose understanding of the literal would allow him to comprehend a conversion of copper and tin but not a conversion of his own soul or spirit. Morrison elaborates on the figural aspect of the relationship between artist and work: "Fundamentally, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, conversion was an artist's idea, an understanding of how a work of art—in this case, the soul—was formed in the image of

God, and how after a period of deterioration (through sin), its maker restored it" (*Understanding Conversion* xiii). Thus, for the Dreamer, the first movement in conversion is that from literal to spiritual, a step that must be initiated by the Dreamer's "maker."

If the Dreamer is to escape from the literal world—the arbor—he inhabits, then he must experience a vision that will sustain his conversion when he returns to earth. Stanbury, in her analysis of the visionary experience in *Pearl*, cites numerous three-step "contemplative programs" by such thinkers as Augustine and Bonaventure. She claims that "the Dreamer's progress can be mapped as a movement from without the *erber* to the vision above, the New Jerusalem that descends from the sky" (15). However, Stanbury gives little account of life—earthly life—after such movement toward the spiritual occurs. Once a subject attains spiritual vision and achieves revelation, what then? The Dreamer harshly wakes, back on a terrestrial plane, to live with new understanding of spiritual matters perhaps, but not, we can assume, in perpetual existence on a transcendental plane. His progress, rather than being mapped through abstract stages, is mapped through the spaces he inhabits, including his own physical/spiritual body as well as the space provided by the Pearl-maiden.

After experiencing figural removal from his arbor, the Dreamer travels from his earthly spot to his visionary landscape. His description moves from the expansive cliffs and forests to the smallest bird and flowerbed, finally resting at the celestial riverside where he encounters the Pearl-maiden. Although he presently occupies a spiritual space, he is not yet able to interpret spiritual matter. His immediate response is to read the maiden's presence literally and corporeally: "'O perle,' quoth I, 'in perlez pyzt, / Art þou my perle þat I haf playned, / Regretted by myn one on nyzte?'" (241-43). Noting the physical and even possibly erotic nature of the Dreamer's address to the maiden, Catherine Cox claims, "The dreamer eroticizes the gesture and the framing encounter by recognizing her not only as his pearl, but as a woman, a sexual being whom he believes is apparently not averse to being identified as such" (383). Bodily and material images are used to define the Pearl-maiden as a particularly female body. The Dreamer continues to address the Pearl-maiden as not only a physical human but also a physical object even though neither of them occupies an earthly body. This phenomenon illustrates how the Dreamer, moving among spaces or steps toward conversion, is a site of secular economics or materialism (seeing the

Pearl-maiden as an object apart from spiritual realms) as well as a site of conflicting spirituality and even gender.

Although religious understanding is key to the Dreamer's "becoming" or conversion, his movement toward the spiritual also conflicts with notions concerning gender, thus further complicating the spaces he and the Pearl-maiden occupy throughout the poem. Patriarchal medieval Christianity tended to "feminize" those who were not Christians, primarily Jews and Muslims, and these groups were thought to be linked together in what Steven Kruger terms a "heretical conspiracy" against Christianity (21, 24). Such a "feminization" aimed at non-Christian bodies emphasized the belief that to read or interpret literally was to read carnally, and such corporeality was associated with the feminine. Carolyn Dinshaw clarifies: "A defining characteristic of the female, in both classical and Christian exegetical traditions, is her corporeality, her association with matter and the physical body as opposed to the male's association with form and soul" (19). Thus, learning to read spiritually or allegorically was learning to read "like a man." However, Kruger points out an apparent paradox in this Christian pattern, explaining that "too vigorous an embrace of poverty, too stark a renunciation of worldly powers, too strong a movement out of the realm of 'masculine' authority, could come to be viewed with suspicion, even as heretical" (28). In light of these patterns concerning gender and conversion, the Dreamer risks possible "feminization" if he continues to read literally, but if he renounces the physical entirely, fellow Christians may perceive his conversion as heretical, thus also feminine. The Dreamer occupies a space where the masculine and feminine intersect just as he occupies a space where the spiritual and literal intersect. Although readers cannot assume that the *Pearl*-poet considered such issues of gender when composing his work, Kruger notes that because Christianity emphasized gender differences in other religions, the issue must have produced much concern, especially among converts. "Indeed," Kruger continues, "we might suppose that a certain avoidance of the body in the texts of converts was itself a response to anxiety about gender and the gendered body" (30).

If the Dreamer, as a convert within Christianity, moves among spaces of economics, religion, and gender, then it is the Pearl-maiden that creates or makes possible such spaces for him. Elements of gender, age, class, economics, and religious instruction all intersect during the interaction between the Dreamer and Pearl-maiden. After

the Dreamer first addresses her, the maiden gives her first of many verbal chastisements:

Sir, 3e haf your tale mysetente,
To say your perle is al awaye,
Pat is in cofer so comly clente
As in þis gardyn gracios gaye . . . (257-60)

She proceeds to correct the Dreamer's literal thinking by pointing out his spiritual blindness and his privileging of the physical world. Cox observes how the maiden functions within the tradition of *consolatio*, joining such female figures as Boethius's Lady Philosophy and *Piers Plowman*'s Holy Church (380). However, her role as teacher of Christian theology is complicated, especially in terms of gender, because if the Church considered the female as corporeal, then her spiritual agency and authority becomes compromised. As suggested, such a stereotype of corporeality exists in the Dreamer, and it is he who exhibits the "feminine" through his literality. Thus, the binary is reversed, not obliterated. In his study, Morrison characterizes conversion as a tradition featuring "male predominance," and throughout, he finds that "few women figure as interpreters and transmitters . . . and none was accepted into the canon as an author of texts or an innovator in vocabulary or cognitive process" (21). The Pearl-maiden complicates the "female" stereotype by instructing the Dreamer, transmitting Scripture and allegorically interpreting it for him.

To what degree, then, can readers consider the Pearl-maiden as a "feminine" representation within this tradition? Is she female, spirit, or both? Clearly the Dreamer may be troubled by such a conundrum, and he is certainly surprised by what he sees as her sudden acquisition of power and prestige. As a two-year-old child and queen of heaven, she represents a phenomenon that the Dreamer cannot reconcile: "Bot a quene!—hit is to dere a date" (492). Clearly, as has been discussed by numerous critics including Cox, "the multiple roles taken up by the maiden—daughter, lover, virgin, bride—connect her figuratively to the Virgin Mary, a polysemous feminine construct . . ." (383). In order to convince the Dreamer that "more and less are one" in heaven, she recounts the Parable of the Vineyard, a tale of human labor and economics that even the Dreamer will understand. By telling a story that emphasizes the concreteness of an economic system, the maiden is able to predict the Dreamer's initial, literal interpretation and use this to

her advantage to move him, albeit slowly, from the literal to the spiritual realm. Although the maiden continues to be objectified by the Dreamer—he constantly calls her his “gem” or “jewel” even after she tells him that she is “spirit”—she anticipates this reaction, therefore choosing spiritual matter that will first feed him on a literal plane. She instructs via the prior knowledge of her pupil, slowly moving or converting the Dreamer from the physical to the spiritual. All of the interaction between Dreamer and maiden provides a space for the Dreamer’s conversion because the Pearl-maiden is able to “read” the Dreamer’s values and ways of thinking before counseling him.

The representation of the Pearl-maiden as an actual pearl is also a teaching tool for conversion because of the pearl’s significance in both physical and figural terms. Interestingly, the pearl-as-object is not confined to this one work in MS Cotton Nero A.x. but also appears in *Cleanness*, where the pearl metaphor represents how subjects should appear before God:

For þat schewe me schale in þo schyre howsez,
 As þe beryl bornyst byhouez be clene,
 Þat is sounde on vche a syde and no sem habes—
 Withouten maskle oþer mote, as margerye-perle. (Cl 553-56)

For one to be accepted into the presence of God, he must be “sounde on vche a side,” perfect and pure. The narrator of *Cleanness* cautions, however, that “In þe fylþe of þe flesch þat þou be founden neuer” for God will not look upon anything impure (547). Later in the poem, the narrator adopts a more hopeful tone, urging followers to do penance for their sins and seek God’s mercy:

Pou may schyne þurȝ schryfte, þaȝ þou haf schome serued,
 And pure þe with penaunce tyl þou a perle worþe.
 Perle praysed is prys þer perré is schewed,
 Þaȝ hyt not derrest be demed to dele for penies.
 (Cl 1115-18)

Such passages in *Cleanness* provide further indication that conversion within Christianity is necessary and that even penance may be a continual process. Although a full analysis of *Pearl* in relation to the other poems in the manuscript is beyond the scope of this present work, this appearance of the pearl-as-object in both poems suggests an

echoing of conversion as a Christian's progressive movement away from the sins of the flesh toward becoming a pearl of penance.

As the Pearl-maiden instructs the Dreamer throughout the poem, readers perceive that becoming a pearl of penance is his eventual goal, but he assumes various roles in the process, many of which, as Paul Reichardt illustrates, are not even human although still quite carnal. According to Reichardt, the images of hawk, doe, and quail, presented at the poem's beginning, middle, and end respectively, emphasize the Dreamer's spiritual blindness (24). In medieval bestiary tradition, the hawk (184) illustrates the "pride and rapacity in human nature," Reichardt observes, while the doe that "daunces" (345) is equated to the Dreamer's inability to deal with misfortune (19-20). The final animal presented in *Pearl* is the quail:

Anvnder mone so gret merwayle
No fleschly hert ne myzt endeure
As quen I blusched vpon þat baly,
So ferly þerof watz þe fasure.
I stod as styllle as dased quayle. (1081-85)

The bird has an especially interesting resemblance to the Dreamer because of its figuration of carnality and flesh. Because quail were provided to the Israelites in the desert and because of their inability to engage in sustained flight, Reichardt views them as a "scriptural sign of ingratitude and self-indulgence" that cannot separate from an earthly habitat (22). Although Reichardt may overdevelop these similes as he maps the characteristics onto the Dreamer, the phrase "dased quayle" seems quite relevant to the description of the Dreamer's plight at the end of *Pearl*. When the Dreamer receives the vision of the New Jerusalem, the procession of virgins, and the Lamb of God, he cannot contain his elation and attempts to swim the river and join the maiden. His attempt lands him squarely back on earth:

Of raas þa3 I were rasch and ronk,
3et rapely þerinne I watz restayed,
For ryzt as I sparred vnto þe bonc,
þat brathþe out of my drem me brayde. (1167-70)

More importantly, his desire is to cross the river and join Pearl, not just the procession of the Lamb. Although she has described to him all that

lies beyond the physical world—"For dyne of doel of lurez lesse / Ofte mony mon forgos þe mo" (339-40)—he still desires her more than all of celestial Jerusalem. Once he acts on physical desire, he can no longer receive the vision of the spirit, and the dream ends. Thus, the Dreamer's "fleschly" impulse still takes precedence over the spiritual realm.

Because it is the Dreamer's earthly nature that sends him back to his arbor, the poem is clearly framed by the sensory rather than the spiritual. Although the Dreamer gains revelation and hope from the dream, he has been denied further vision because of his love for Pearl. Much in the way that Gawain is tempted and nearly defeated by his human weakness and desire to please Bercilak's lady, the Dreamer, too, is overcome by what the poet terms "luf-daungere" (11) at the poem's beginning and "luf-longyng" (1152) near the poem's end. In examining the Dreamer and his abbreviated vision, Sandra Pierson Prior explains, "The dreamer's efforts to become an apocalyptic visionary fail; he stumbles in his spiritual development, and his vision is finally cut short by the rashness of his *luf-longyng*, the same *luf-longyng* that impels him to have the vision in the first place" (163). Such observations draw clearer parallels between the Dreamer and Gawain. Both characters undertake quests—Gawain's, an external encounter within a natural, geographical environment and quite literal in the romance tradition, and the Dreamer's, an internal journey through a visionary terrain. Although both quests are initiated by fierce human loyalties to King or child, they also progress through mystical or spiritual realms that provide spaces for inner conversion, such as Bercilak's castle or the celestial riverbed. Primarily, the obstacle for each is "luf-longyng," or a need for human love or acceptance. To detail such a kinship between the Dreamer and Gawain requires deeper investigation, yet parallels such as these again imply that progressive conversions of the heart are featured prominently in the manuscript.

To consider *Pearl* as a "poem of conversion" is not to ask whether or not the Dreamer is fully "converted" at the poem's end. Rather it is to trace how the Dreamer moves among spaces that allow, complicate, address, or even deny a process of conversion. The main conclusion that Morrison draws about conversion is that it changes a human life from "a movement toward the grave into a transit toward endless life" (*Conversion and Text* xii). Although the poem itself begins and ends at the same earthly "spot," the dream landscape and framework allow for endless possible spaces through which the Dreamer can move, but not

remain. When he wakes, back in the arbor, a change has certainly occurred. No longer in despair over Pearl's death (yet still thinking of her), he states,

Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laȝte,
For pyty of my perle enclȝin,
And syþen to God I hit bytaȝte
In Krysteȝ dere blessyng and myn,
Þat in þe forme of bred and wyn
þe preste vus scheweȝ vch a daye. (1205-10)

The Dreamer, while depicting his newfound walk on the straight and narrow, still indicates a reliance on mortal desire and vision. He will always connect his experience to the Pearl-maiden more so than to God because she was the source of his grief and the provider of the spaces for conversion. Whether this is an especially important detail remains to be proved, yet his desire for the Pearl-maiden threads through the poem, beginning to end. In addition, the Eucharist takes on the literal "forme of bred and wyn" here, the Dreamer explaining its importance as something that can be seen on earth rather than figurally understood or spiritually transformed. Thus, the Dreamer has changed his degree of perception but continues, like all humans, to rely on the sensory or physical world. Although the poem, like the other three in MS Cotton Nero A.x., ends like a prayer with "Amen," there is no real ending to *Pearl*, and the Dreamer's life beyond his vision, readers may imagine, will continue. Morrison states, "All of life, rightly lived, was conversion" (xii), and readers can consider such an idea to be at the heart of *Pearl* and possibly of the other poems in the manuscript. Overall, what remains of interest is the poem's movement from a singular spot to expanded spaces, or the process of conversion that develops through physical and spiritual spaces rather than through a mere beginning and ending.

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Notes

¹ All passages from the works of the *Pearl*-poet are quoted from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 3rd ed. (Exeter, England: U of Exeter P, 1996).

² Scholars who examine one or more of these topics include, for example, Denise N. Baker, "Dialectic Form in *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*," *Viator* 15 (1984), 263-73; Priscilla Martin, "Allegory and Symbolism" in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, *Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1997), 315-28; Theresa P. Reed, "Mary, the Maiden, and Metonymy in *Pearl*," *South Atlantic Review* 65.2 (2000): 134-62; Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited* (New York: Macmillan, 1994) and *The Fayre Formes of the Pearl Poet* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1996); and Richard Newhauser, "Scriptural and Devotional Sources," in Brewer and Gibson, 257-75.

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