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The Cycle of the Seasons in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Essay and Excerpt from my Translation, Lines 491-535

In the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the eponymous hero faces three principal adversaries. There's the Green Knight himself, of course, whose macabre challenge to the knights of King Arthur's court sets Gawain on a path where he must choose, seemingly, between life or honor. Then there's the lady of the castle, who each morning goes on a hunt for Gawain's fidelity while her husband hunts for wild game. But the third adversary is not so obvious, though Gawain faces off against it repeatedly when he leaves Arthur's court on his quest, and again when he leaves on the final leg of his journey to find the Green Chapel: the third adversary is the natural world itself.

Gawain must journey over rough terrain, overcome beasts of woodland and legend, and endure violent and deadly weather before he finally finds shelter in the castle in the wood. Likewise, when he ventures back out of the castle, Gawain rides on a treacherous path through the snow among barren crags, only to discover that the Green Chapel is itself a natural mound of earth covered in grass. Like the Green Knight and the lady of the castle, the natural world is an adversary that puts Gawain's character to the test—it humbles his pride and pushes the limits of his fortitude. How easy, though dishonorable, it would be to turn back at any moment, to quit his quest and call it a day, and return to Arthur on the pretense that at least he tried. Thus each of Gawain's adversaries tests his honor, in one way or another.

The three adversaries have something else in common: they aren't so adversarial, in the end. The Green Knight spares Gawain's life and sends him off warmly. The lady never turns against Gawain, despite the fact that he repeatedly spurns her advances; as it turns out, she was merely testing him anyway, and she reports faithfully that his actions were (mostly) true. And the natural world was never out to get him—it is as it always was, forever evolving in the cycle of life and death; winter passes, and spring will come again. Thus all three adversaries are associated with the color green: the color of the Green Knight, the color of the lady's lace that she gives to Gawain, the color of spring—and the color of hope.

The passage I've translated below is taken from the beginning of the second part of the poem, before Gawain encounters the natural world as an adversary in the manner described above. Nevertheless, the passage forebodes the adversarial character of the natural world while yet exemplifying the hope inherent in its cyclical nature—ever recurring, yet ever in flux (or in the words of the poem, "an entire year turns, and never returns the same"). It opens with drinking and reveling, right after the Green Knight has left King Arthur's hall on New Year's Day, then proceeds to describe the changing of the seasons. We pass from the deadened cold of winter, to the living hope of spring, to the warm abundance of summer, and finally to the hard harvest of autumn; and although the narrative picks up again in autumn, the passage completes the cycle of seasons by noting that "Michaelmas moon / forebodes the winter early." Then the stage is set for the rest of the story: "then Gawain thinks quite soon / of his arduous journey."

Roughly speaking, my translation follows the global "rules" of the structure of the original Middle English text, without necessarily matching the local structure of a particular line. That is, the main body of each stanza is written (of course) in alliterative verse: in every line, at least two strongly stressed syllables must alliterate, excluding the final stressed syllable. Alliteration on the final stressed syllable is optional, but the alliteration cannot hinge upon it. For example, "but then the weather of the world is at war with winter" is valid, whereas "but then the weather of the earth battles with winter" is not. The typical line has four stressed syllables, but can have five or (more rarely) six, or even (much more rarely) three. The patterns of alliteration are variable and often complex: a few lines barely alliterate, some are heavily alliterative (all stressed syllables alliterate), and some have interweaving patterns (e.g. an ABAB alliteration pattern on stressed syllables). While metrical patterns often emerge in the alliterative lines, there is no fixed metrical structure; we're free to use iambs, or dactyls or what have you, as the

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context demands. Each stanza concludes with what has been termed the "bob and wheel," five lines with an ABABA rhyming pattern and strict metrical structure. The "bob" is the first of the five lines, consisting of a single iamb; in this poem, the bob is often (but not exclusively) somewhat redundant or extraneous, mainly serving to set up the following lines. The "wheel" consists of the remaining four lines, written in iambic trimeter. There are occasional variations in the iambic structure of the bob and wheel (e.g. there are a handful of cases where the bob is an anapest instead of an iamb), but these are the exception rather than the norm, and they often serve a poetic purpose. Alliteration is common in the bob and wheel section, but not strictly required.

These rules are established by the original Middle English text, and I adhere to them in my translation; however, in any given line, my metrical and alliterative structure might differ from the metrical and alliterative structure of the original (this is what I mean when I say that I follow the global rules without necessarily matching the local structure). This gives me the freedom to present the poem in its original form without being tied down in places where the Middle English cannot be reproduced sensibly in modern English. That said, in lines where I feel that the specific structure makes a significant contribution to the meaning or feeling conveyed by the poem, I do try to emulate the structure as closely as possible (alternatively, I may use alliterative and metrical structures that convey a similar effect). In the bob and wheel section, I allow myself one additional freedom: I use slant rhymes, whereas the original text uses exact rhymes. The bob and wheel section, with its short lines, strict rhyme scheme and tight metrical structure, can be difficult to reproduce in translation, and allowing slant rhymes gives me a little breathing room to make the lines sound more natural and interesting.

The passage below is a good example of everything I've written about here. The form of the poem—the alliterative verse followed by the bob and wheel—is integral to the passage; it wouldn't have nearly the same effect in prose. Moreover, the passage is a fantastic image of the natural world: the cycle of the seasons and the concurrent cycle of emotional states that all of us feel at some time or another in our lives.

Excerpt of my translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 491-535:

Arthur was given this gift of adventure on the first
of the young year, for he yearned to hear yarns of great feats.
Though words were wanting when they went to sit down,
now they are run through with brave deeds, brimming their hands.
495 Gawain was glad to begin those games in the hall;
but if the end is heavy, have no wonder,
for though men be merry of mind with a strong drink,
an entire year turns, and never returns the same—
the outset and the ending seldom align.
500 So this Yule, and the year beyond it, passed,
and each successive season pursues another:
after Christmas comes crabby Lent,
which tests the flesh with fish and food more plain;
but then the weather of the world is at war with winter,
505 the cold cowers down, and the clouds lift,

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and warm showers shed the shimmering rain,
falling on fair flatlands, where flowers appear,
and ground and grove alike are clothed in green,
and birds prepare to build, and brightly sing
510 for the solace of the soft summer that follows,
on slopes.
Blossoms blow into bloom
in rich and fragrant rows,
and lovely little tunes
515 are heard in gallant groves.

Next, the season of summer with its soft winds,
when Zephyrus himself sighs over seeds and herbs—
pleasant is the plant that sprouts from that,
when the dampening dew drops off the leaves,
520 biding the blissful blush of the bright sun.
But then the harvest hastens in, and hardens it quickly,
warns of the coming winter, to wax and ripen it fully;
it drives the rising dust with drought,
flinging it into flight from the face of the earth;
525 and the wrathful wind of the world wrestles the sun,
and leaves break loose from limbs to light on the ground,
and all the grass grows gray, which was green before;
then all ripens and rots which had risen at first.
So the year yearns for distant yesterdays,
530 and winter returns again, as the world demands,
so surely,
till Michaelmas moon
forebodes the winter early;
then Gawain thinks quite soon
535 of his arduous journey.

Original text in Middle English:

THIS hanselle hatz Arthur of auenturus on fyrst
In ȝonge ȝer, for he ȝerned ȝelpyng to here.

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Thaȝ hym wordez were wane when þay to sete wenten,
Now ar þay stoken of sturne werk, stafful her hond.
495 Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gomnez in halle,
Bot þaȝ þe ende be heuy haf ȝe no wonder;
For þaȝ men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk,
A ȝere ȝernes ful ȝerne, and ȝeldez neuer lyke,
Þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden.
500 Forþi þis Ȝol ouerȝede, and þe ȝere after,
And vche sesoun serlepes sued after oþer:
After Crystenmasse com þe crabbed lentoun,
Þat fraystez flesch wyth þe fysche and fode more symple;
Bot þenne þe weder of þe worlde wyth wynter hit þrepez,
505 Colde clengez adoun, cloudez vplyften,
Schyre schedez þe rayn in schowrez ful warme,
Fallez vpon fayre flat, flowrez þere schewen,
Boþe groundez and þe greuez grene ar her wedez,
Bryddez busken to bylde, and bremlych syngen
510 For solace of þe softe somer þat sues þerafter
bi bonk;
And blossumez bolne to blowe
Bi rawez rych and ronk,
Þen notez noble innoȝe
515 Ar herde in wod so wlonk.

After þe sesoun of somer wyth þe soft wyndez
Quen Zeferus syflez hymself on sedez and erbez,
Wela wynne is þe wort þat waxes þeroute,
When þe donkande dewe dropez of þe leuez,
520 To bide a blysful blusch of þe bryȝt sunne.
Bot þen hyȝes heruest, and hardenes hym sone,
Warnez hym for þe wynter to wax ful rype;
He dryues wyth droȝt þe dust for to ryse,
Fro þe face of þe folde to flyȝe ful hyȝe;
525 Wroþe wynde of þe welkyn wrastelez with þe sunne,
Þe leuez lancen fro þe lynde and lyȝten on þe grounde,
And al grayes þe gres þat grene watz ere;

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Þenne al rypez and rotez þat ros vpon fyrst,
And þus ȝirnez þe ȝere in ȝisterdayez mony,
530 And wynter wyndez aȝayn, as þe worlde askez,
no fage,
Til Meȝelmas mone
Watz cumen wyth wynter wage;
Þen þenkkez Gawan ful sone
535 Of his anious uyage.

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