

Title: The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight

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My fine art PhD title is *The High Wasteland: Scar, Form & Monstrosity in the English Landscape*. My research, which comprises both theory and art practice, is concerned with the relationships between the subject, landscape and monstrosity with a view to explore and critique proto-fascistic notions of Englishness. For example, the false universal of the pastoral landscape tradition and the hierarchical image of an industrious and clearly stratified society.

In particular, I will present on one central theme of my research, sharing the made and thetic strategies I have used in relation to the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (circa 1380 see Armitage, 2007) a 14th century chivalric romance concerned with the testing of the Arthurian knight Sir Gawain by the fantastical Green Knight. In particular an exploration of, and representation of the eponymous Green Knight.

In my research, this figure is accounted for as a monster with a particular relationship to landscape, explored utilising Mark Fisher's (2016) concept of the 'eerie' and additionally 'liminality' drawing on Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969). I consider the figure of the Green Knight as the agent of a natural and 'liminal' space; the Green Chapel, an ominous fissure in a remote landscape and the site of Gawain's testing. This entity is one of the only figures vividly described in his physicality in the poem and yet remains elusive and indeterminate in his actions, motivations and his textual function (Besserman, 1986). Scholars have emphasised both demonic qualities (Krappe, 1938; McCarter in Mittman and Hensel, 2018) concerned with horror, violence and the uncanny; while others see in his actions a Christ-like function (see Halverson, 1969:138; Besserman, 1986:220 for discussion) in line with Christian notions of fall, redemption and transfiguration; still others have highlighted the pagan qualities of this figure as a kind of returned vegetation god (Keetley and Tenga, 2016) due to his regenerative qualities. The fact that these interpretations are possible attests to the indeterminate nature of the figure and I deny none of these. However, in my thesis, I propose that 'deep time' (McPhee, 1981) and temporality 'duration' (Bergson, 1911) are key features of the Green Knight who as an agent of nature actualises the radical potential of being in time, to change.

Slide 1

Today I will discuss the conceptual and practical antecedents to my representation of the Green Knight. The eponymous antagonist of the alliterative medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (circa 1380). The poem is an essential source in my project and as such it will aid the listener to have a basic knowledge of its themes and plot. The poem is concerned with the testing of the knight Gawain by the Green Knight, a monstrous and surreal figure. During a winter feast at the court of King Arthur celebrations are interrupted by the Green Knight who issues the exchange of blows challenge. That being, should any man have the courage to strike him and receive a strike in return or else the court and the king are found wanting. The court is dumbfounded and before Arthur is forced to accept the challenge due to their silence Gawain, his nephew takes up the axe and beheads the Green Knight as he calmly kneels. After a short and hasty celebration the court is horrified as the body of the Green Knight retrieves its severed head and further horrified that the head speaks reminding Gawain that in one year he must come to the Green Chapel (an indeterminate space in the wilderness) to receive the return blow from the same axe. The poem follows Gawain as he travels outside of his known kingdom to a location thought to be the modern area of northern England known as The Wirral, to a second court where he is greeted as a guest ahead of his ultimate challenge at the Green Chapel where he must offer his neck to the axe.

Slide 2

This project is concerned with the relationship between landscape, subjectivity and monstrosity and centres on the contrast between two distinct spaces: the controlled and constructed space of hierarchical and normative society and the landscape mode associated with it (the pastoral mode); contrasted with the liminal temporal space of nature.

The Green Knight is viewed as an agent of repressed nature returning to confront the court of Arthur (a symbol in my practice of hierarchical societal ordering). Gawain is considered as

the subject who is changed by the encounter. Thus, repressed nature and its manifestations in representation (art, poetry and so on) is seen as a means of escape from the normative pressure of hierarchal society and its oppressive subject positioning.

Slide 3

Key concepts that I draw on to explore the spatial and psychological features of the Green Chapel and its active agent the Green Knight include: 'Deep Time', the phenomenon of abyssal eons as a defining aspect of our reality, one that we often suppress especially as its observed in the geological landscape, of 'Duration' as defined by Henri Bergson, that is the condition of being in the lived present embodied and defined by sensation and memory. On this idea, Bergson explains that failure to enact duration results in a limited and thwarted relation to reality, quoting Bergson 'Hence our life unfolds in space rather than in time; we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we "are acted" rather than act ourselves. To act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back into pure duration' (Bergson, 2008:231-2).

Slide 4

Furthermore, Liminality is a key idea, described as an ambiguous state, indeterminate and as Turner points out 'it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships (Turner, 1969:372). Liminality describes a destabilising process which opens up the possibility for change.

Slide 5

Finally 'Eeriness' as a concept developed by Mark Fisher has become a useful way to account for the destabilising effects of moving outside of totalised space and its defining aspect in relation to the subject. Abberley (drawing on Fisher, 2016) refers to England as having a particularly powerful eeriness because of this Abberley states 'Although the eerie is not an English phenomenon the landscape of England is a potent conduit for it because of its many layers of human history and the violent struggles of ownership and access' (Abberley, 2018). Eeriness is the glimpse of what is there through the illusion of totalised

space; liminal nature. Eerie is the spectre of that liminality or flux which remains after being covered over by other modes of seeing the landscape.

Slide 6-7

Deep Time and Duration in the Green Chapel

Destabilization then (referred to optimistically as liminality here) occurs due to the effects of deep time (McPhee, 1981) and its representation; such as the Green Chapel, followed by the spiritual (or simply subjective) change, made possible by the monstrous presence, in this case the Green Knight. Various terms are used to describe the Green Chapel: 'bald knoll' and 'bizarre hill' (Armitage, 2007:100), 'strange abyss' (101) and in fitting with its moniker 'a ghostly cathedral overgrown with grass' (Armitage, 2007:101). The clearest description comes on Gawain's approach,

'it had a hole at one end and at either side,
and its walls matted with weeds and moss,
enclosed a cavity, like a kind of old cave
or crevice in the crag' (Armitage, 2007:100)

Despite this description it retains a quality of the indeterminate. As the poet tells us in direct reference to the Green Chapel, 'It was all too unclear to declare' (Armitage, 2007:100).

What is clear, is that this space is a natural one defined by 'crag' that appear to cut the passing clouds, and a cave, since the Green Knight enters through a 'cave-mouth' (102). Real landscape spaces as inspiration have been suggested by various scholars, these include: 'Wetton Mill and Ludchurch' (see Hill, 2009:103) as well as Thirst Hole at 'Deepdale Cave' (108) among others.

Slide 8-9

Furthermore, the artist and author Michael Smith has proposed that such spaces form a 'conflation' of realities. Smith explains 'it is most likely that the Gawain poet, who knew well these lands, in all probability combined the features of Wetton Mill *and* Lud's Church; much in the way of a modern film maker in creating a complete, morphed, sensation for the viewer' (Smith, 2017). Each of these potentially inspirational spaces combined with the content of the poem give us loose parameters of the Green Chapel, which emerges as a distinctive natural space where geological forces over many hundreds of thousands of years have wrought a focal point made from features that exist in various registers of time: the green aspects which flourish and die, and the rock itself representing geological time or 'deep time' (McPhee, 1981). Deep time refers to the reality of 'abyssal eons' (128) of change and development evident in the land and its topology, that which is so great as to undermine and affect one's sense of self (McPhee, 1981:20:104:127:128). Furthermore, describing geological field research and the way it informs attitudes McPhee explains 'that above all else [it] is physio-graphic, a journey that tends to mock the idea of a nation, of a political state, as an unnatural subdivision of the globe, as a metaphor of the human ego sketched on paper and framed in straight lines (1981:15).

Slide 10

This image shows an early attempt to represent landscape defined by deep time.

Slide 11-12

Reconfiguration via the Idealizing-Sign: Deep Time as a Context for Duration

For Van Gennep the monstrous guardian guarantees the 'spiritual passing' (Van Gennep 1960:21) which is effectively subjective change. In the case of the Green Chapel this is achieved in the maximum tension of impending death, prompting self-reflection and the activation of memory. Malcolm Quinn describes 'institutional automata...lacking a condition in the present because their members project their will into the future according to the rules that were established in the past' (2017:43). At the close of the poem Gawain pictured here trudging through the temporal landscape is acquiring a 'condition in the present'. The process can be elaborated by evoking Bergson's concept of flux and duration which undermines linear clock time and any understanding based on it Bergson states 'What is duration within us? qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number' (Bergson, 2012:1).

Instead there is a call to the present moment. 'To be conscious, at least in the sense in which the finite individual is conscious, is just to be in time' Bergson explains, (2012:526). This call implies what is explicit in Quinn's (2017) thought. Gawain is taken out of automata time by his encounter with the Green Knight and brought into duration, into subjective time. Gawain's perception is affected and automatic action is interrupted by thought. In Bergson we also see a caution against what can be described as the self acted-out as received subject position, such as that Gawain has assumed in relation to chivalry, as Bergson explained 'we "are acted" rather than act ourselves'(Bergson, 2008:231-2).

Slide 13

Visible here is a recent attempt to represent the eerie liminality of the Green Chapel.

Slide 14-15

Conflation, Figure and Space: Representing the Green Knight

Taking these theoretical explorations into account I searched for a way to represent the monstrous figure of the Green Knight. Auguste Rodin's *Head of Saint John the Baptist* (1887) struck me as a fitting antecedent (fig--). The severed head of the Baptist served as a symbol of rebuke to the corruption of Herod's court. Moreover, Rodin's humanistic aesthetic offered a contrast to the construction methods used to represent Arthur's knights.

Rodin depicts the saint's head narratively in time rather than as a traditional bust, as in he presents a fragment of an inferred narrative. It is as if the head has been placed on the platter following beheading and brought to Salome as per her demand lying on its side where it slumped; the flesh of the neck indicating the wound. This activation of the biblical account of the saint's beheading and the representation of the head as it may have been in the moment of presentation to Salome was attractive given the Green Knight's connection to time in my thesis. Rodin was known to work with a solid lump of malleable clay (see V&A Museum. 2021a) in concentrated bursts of energy often observing a model and revising as he proceeded.

Slide 16

Following this as best I could I sculpted the head of the Green Knight, first deciding on one third larger than life size, then modelling and forming by hand the general shape of the head and wounded neck from grey clay. Lacking a suitable model I kept images of the saint to hand including Rodin's representation as well as *St John the Baptist* (1457) by Donatello (see V&A Museum. 2021b) (fig--).

Slide 17

Additionally, I obtained an image of Caradoc, *Caractacus at the Tribunal of Claudius at Rome* (1792) (fig--). This etching by Andrew Birrell depicts the defiant 1st century chieftain of the Catuvellanui (Celtic tribe) delivering a speech to the Roman senate following his capture. Caradoc's speech celebrated his stubborn defiance of their authority and surprisingly saved his life (see, print | British Museum, 2021).

Caradoc's face is depicted as a fierce, wild-eyed prince challenging a supposedly superior court; this helped with the intimidating aspect of the monster's expression (fig--).

Slide 18

In the language developing across the body of work that accompanies this project, contrasting an expressive form of sculpture to construction helps create a tension between works; the constructions emphasize surface while the Green Knight's representation emphasizes form, time and the touch of the artist.

Slide 19 -20

However, the most beneficial occurrence was a chance result of the firing process; unlike Rodin who often had casts made by technicians of his work, I opted to hollow the original sculpture somewhat and fire it. During the firing, the sculpture broke dramatically, in so doing it formed a cavity reminiscent of the Green Chapel, also producing pleasing fault lines around the cranium which further made reference to rough landscape features by revealing the textures of the material under the surface (fig--). The appropriation of chance (or failure) helped produce a conflation 'complete, morphed, sensation for the viewer' (Smith, 2017) between the figurative and the spatial.

Slide 21

To take ownership of this occurrence I decided on the red silk to indicate the blood of the knight and to emphasize the drama of the moment represented.

Thank you for listening the following slides include references for texts and images.