

# Time, Horror, and Iconoclasm: Creative Responses to *SGGK*

Presentation for: Tradition and Innovation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

University of Lorraine, Nancy | 22 November 2024 by Dr Michael Eden.

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## Representing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Origins and basis of the project.

## What is at Stake in Representations of *SGGK*?

The complex subject and threats to interiority.

## Time – Horror – Iconoclasm

The proposed relationship: Landscape as a metaphor for traumatic representations of time (with implications for the subject); and horror as an aesthetic vehicle for Iconoclasm.

## Two Directions of Iconoclasm

1. Demolition: of gendered authority and its rationalizing agent, the tragic hero.
2. Reconfigurations: the separation of the subject from mytho-heroic, idealized configurations.

## Final points and close

- Role of nature in subjectivisation.
- The implications of constructive monstrosity.
- The fate of the subject.



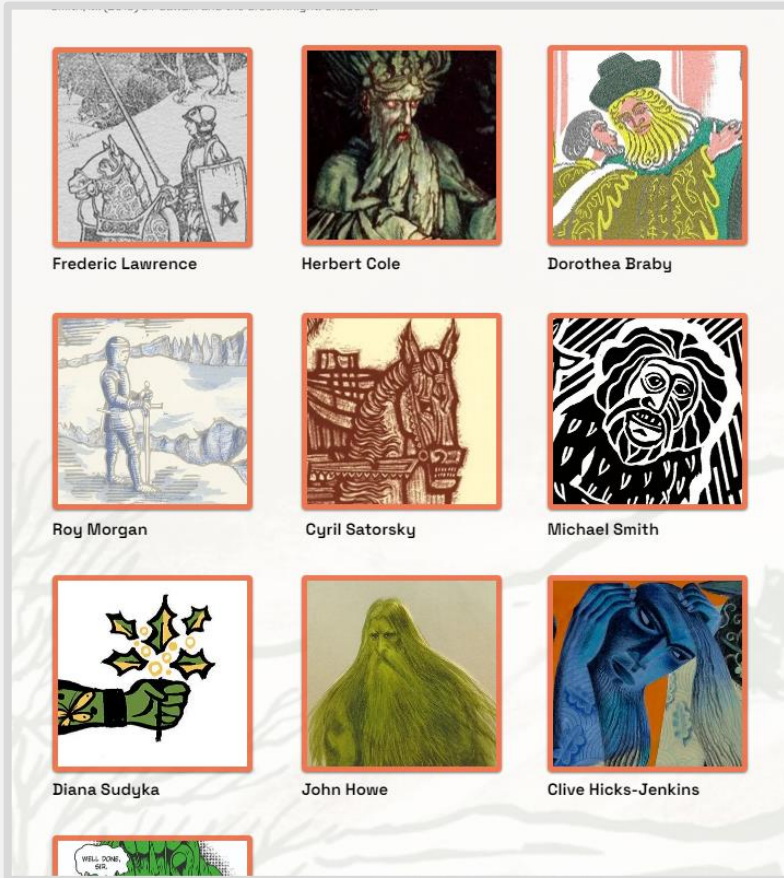
# Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight





# Website & Research Hub

Illustrations form an established visual language.



Frederic Lawrence

Herbert Cole

Dorothea Braby

Roy Morgan

Cyril Satorsky

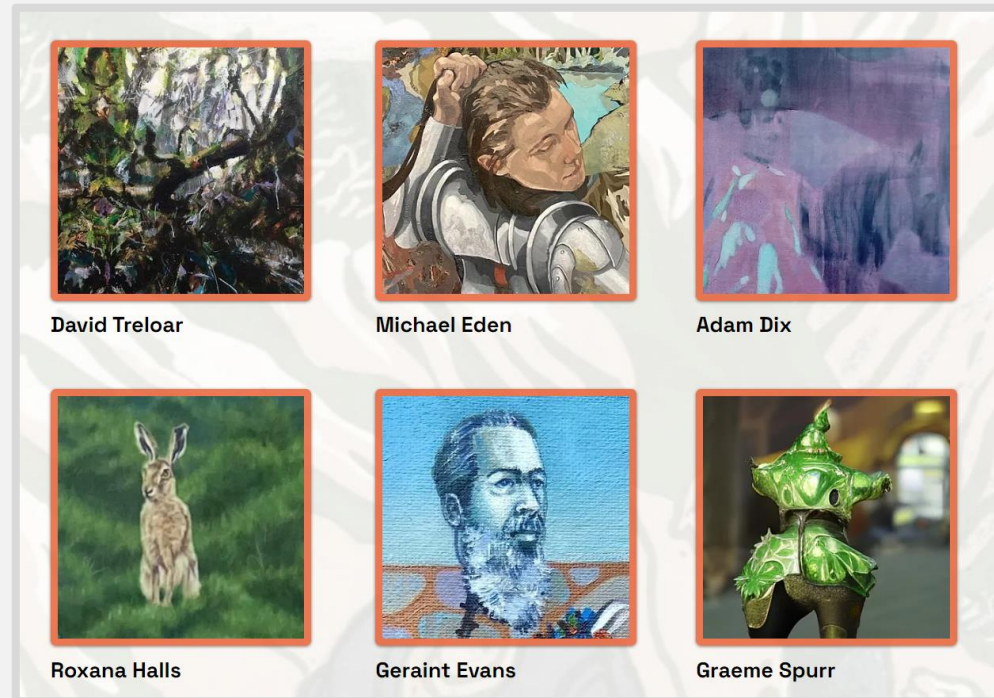
Michael Smith

Diana Sudyka

John Howe

Clive Hicks-Jenkins

Fine art responses extend themes.



David Treloar

Michael Eden

Adam Dix

Roxana Halls

Geraint Evans

Graeme Spurr



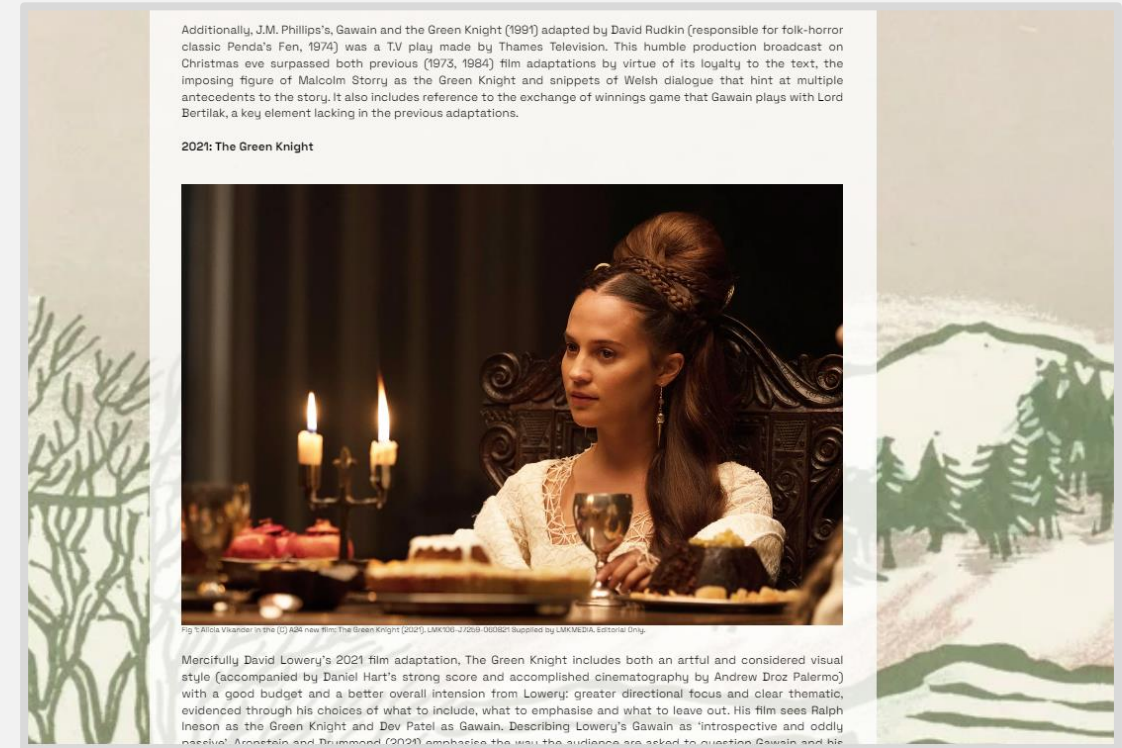
Screen shots from the website Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 2024.



# Understanding & Contributing to the 'Fifth Text'

Paul F. Reichardt (1997) coins the term 'fifth text', regarding the illustrations of the original codex, suggesting that we should consider the illustrations as an additional text with its own meanings. Building on this idea I embrace Angela Florschuetz's (2019) observations of *SGGK* as inherently intertextual and constituting—in its various translations and adaptations—an expanding archive defined by diverse interested parties.

- The 'fifth text' is an important commentary on the poem.
- The 'fifth text' is an extending archive that attaches the poem to the contemporary.



Screen shot from the website Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 2024.

## Illustrations from Translations

Herbert Cole (1906/1913)

Frederic Lawrence (1912)

Dorothea Braby (1952)

Roy Morgan (1956)

Cyril Satorsky (1971)

John Howe (1995)

Diana Sudyka (2008)

Michael Smith (2018)

Clive Hicks-Jenkins (2018)

Mark Penman (2021)

## Established Visual Language

## Contemporary Fine Art Responses

Michael Eden (2019-present)

Graeme Spurr (2019)

David Treloar (2020)

Adam Dix (2021)

Roxanna Halls (2022)

Geraint Evans (2023)

## Extending the 'fifth text'

# Publication with *Arthuriana* 2024

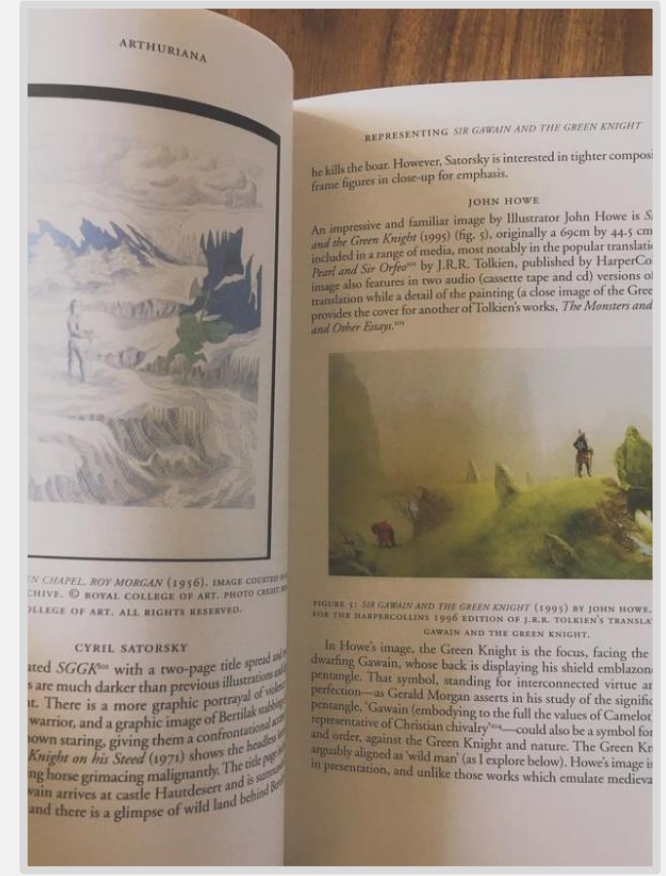
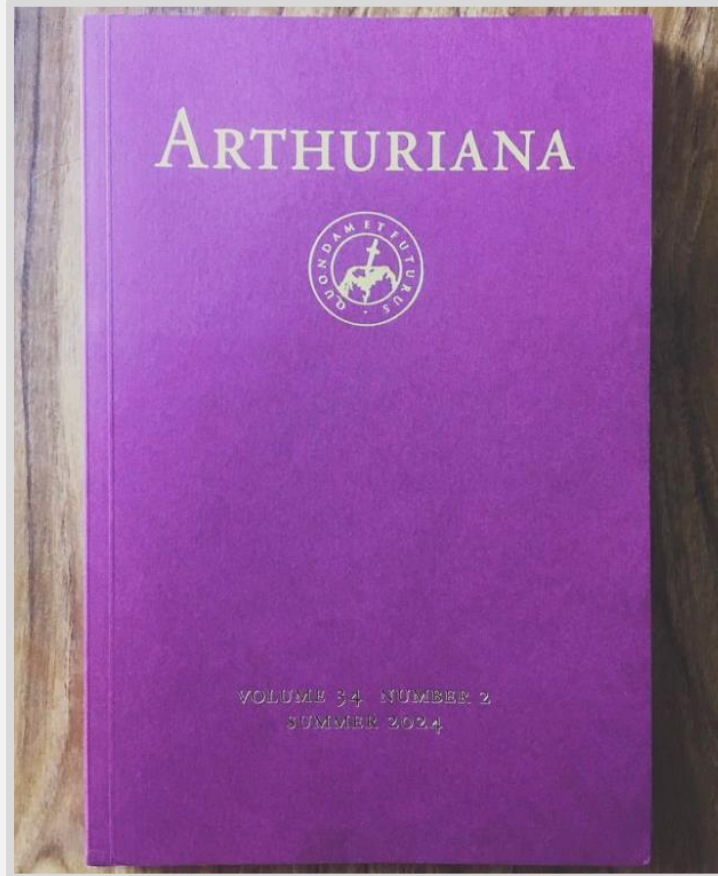
The publication of the same name charts what I have called the established visual language and seeks to address the privation of attention from fine artists, extending the 'fifth text' with commissioned works.



Project MUSE  
archive.



Arthuriana  
publication archive.



Eden, M. (2024) Representing: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. *Arthuriana*, 34(2), pp.16-61.






# What is at Stake in Representations of SGGK?



# Agency & Selfhood

- The tension of a subject caught between iconic constructions, in this case the idea of the ideal knight; and a burgeoning sense of self knowledge and personal development (framed by Gawain as failure).



George Hartley in *The Abyss of Representation* (2003), drawing on Althusser (2001), describes the sense in which interpellation calls into being the egoic/imaginary/sense of self (as in Lacanian thinking) as a constantly renegotiated gap between the Real and the Symbolic. 'Subjects are produced by interpellation, which is precisely the function of ideology: the injunction for us to take upon ourselves our symbolic mandate, to assume the subject-position provided for us by the ideological call' (Hartley, 2003:8).



**How we become a subject as opposed to a manipulated and system-functioning object.**

# The Role of Nature

- Time and nature as traumatic, evidenced by a growing emphasis in the 'fifth text' on landscape features, that are used to represent different registers of temporality present in the poem.

## Agent of Nature's Implications for the Subject

The Green Knight, is described as a green-skinned and green-adorned 'half-giant' (Armitage, 2007:11): giants are linked to the parent, to time and space, and as ones 'gone before' (Timberlake, 2018), while also being figured as a returned vegetation god (Keetley and Tenga 2016).



Eden, M., 2023. The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight: Exploring the eerie, liminality, deep time and duration in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, 16(1), pp.55-80.

(Left) *Reproachful Head of the Green Knight* (2020) by Michael Eden.





# Time – Horror – Iconoclasm



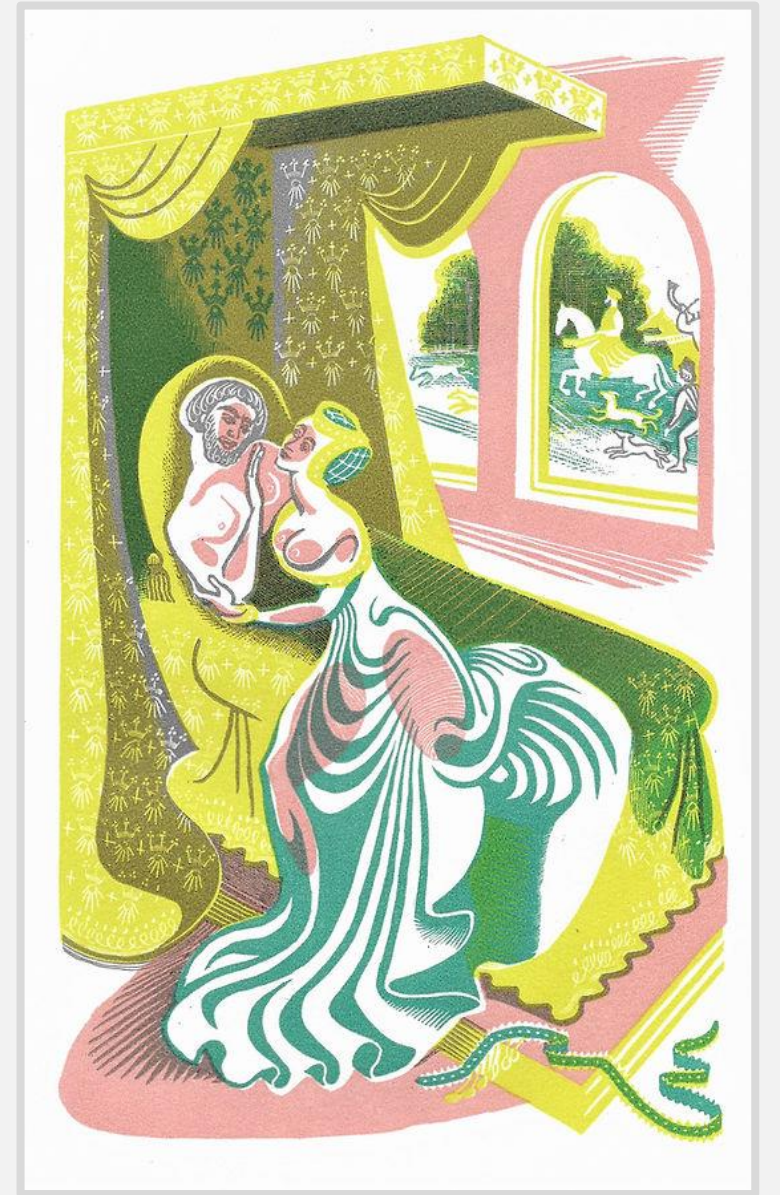
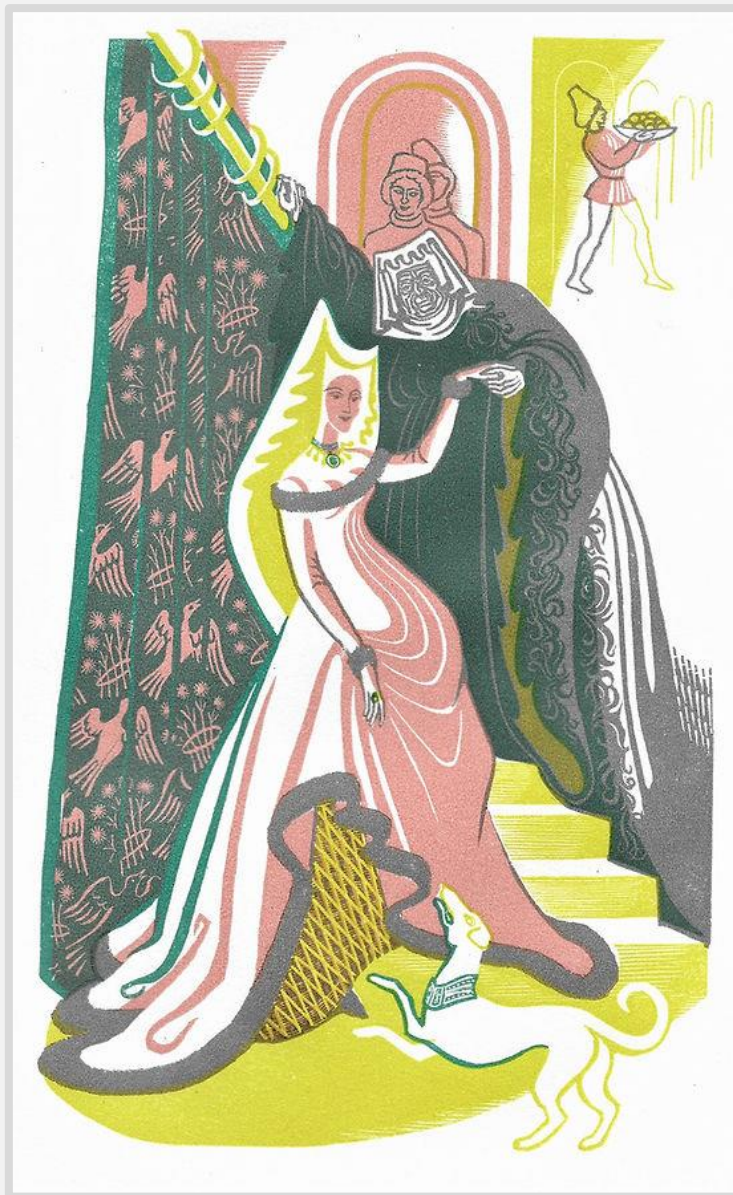
# Time as a Causal Prompt (a Trauma) for Subjectivisation

- **Frozen time**, in the dumbfounded knights that are silent as the Green Knight enters the hall and the image of Camelot as a still life, ‘their idealized vitality dwindles to the equivalent of a still life’ (Woods 2002: 210).
- **Linear time**, in Gawain’s anticipation of the confrontation in a year and day from his beheading of the Green Knight.
- **Cyclical time**, in the changes of seasons; and spiralling time, as Jeffery Jerome Cohen states: ‘the poem insists that seasons spiral rather than circle back or merely repeat.’ **Spiralling time** emphasizes a dread of the end of nature. Morton Bloomfield (1961) in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal,’ writes of the layering of cyclical and linear time and hints at, but does not name, the idea of spiralling time: ‘the winter to come is not merely the same as last winter but different’. A ‘decaying, often hostile, world [nevertheless]...serves as the setting for the emergence of the poem's protagonist’ (Clark and Wasserman, 1986:15).

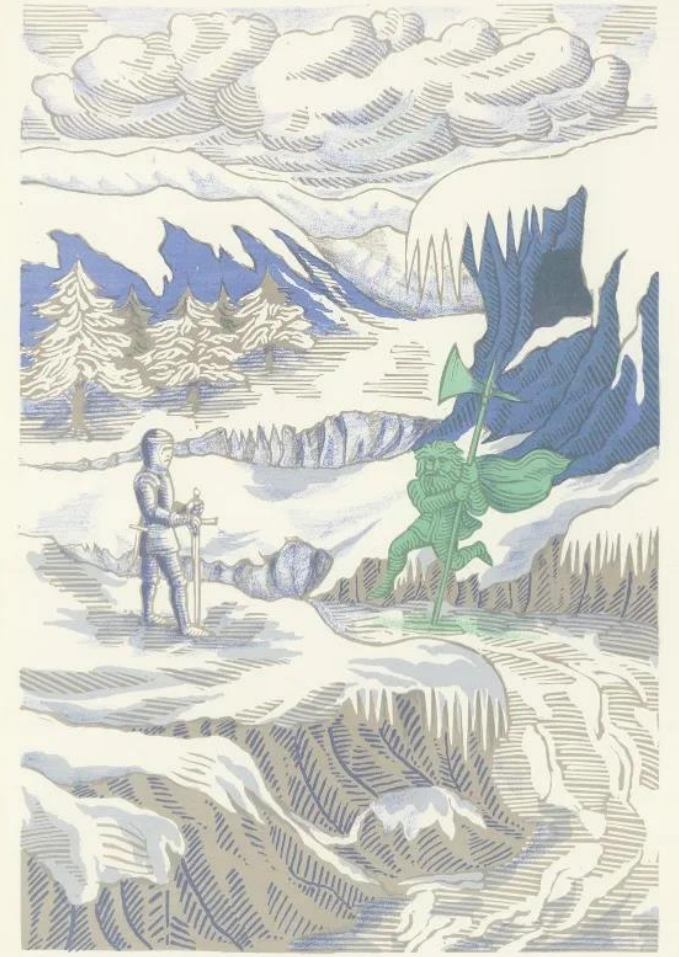
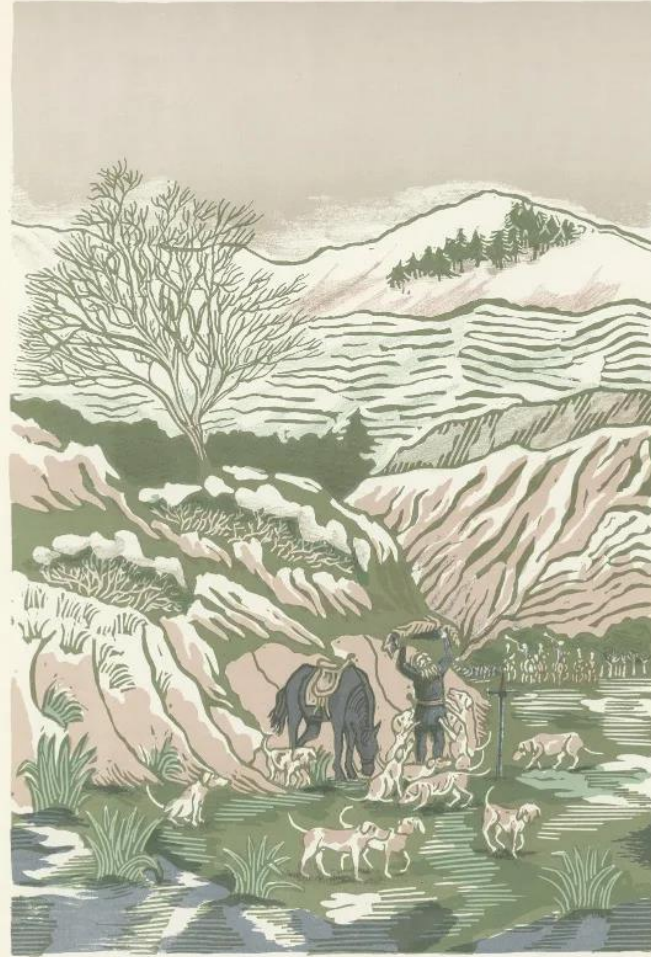
# How does time manifest in the established visual language?

- Layers of other events.
- Landscape/Meaningful backgrounds.
- References to the hunt and animal life.

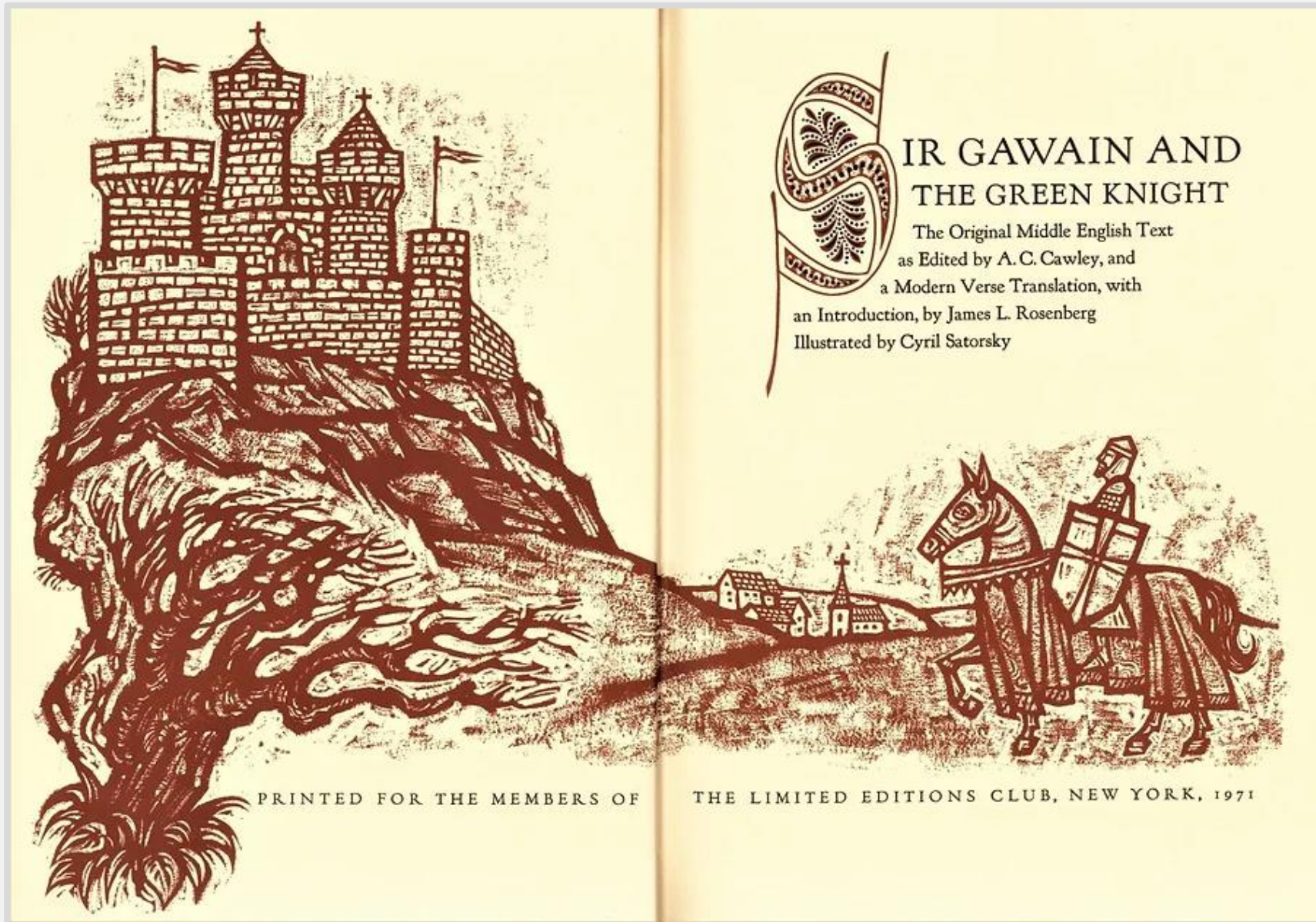












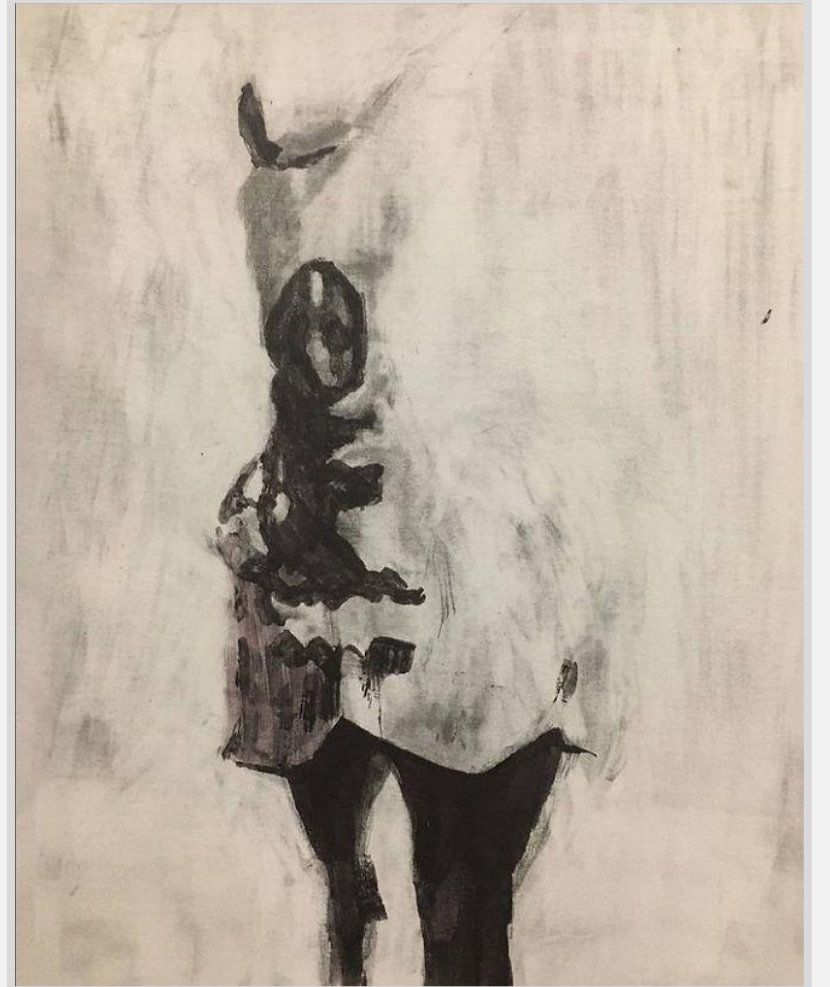
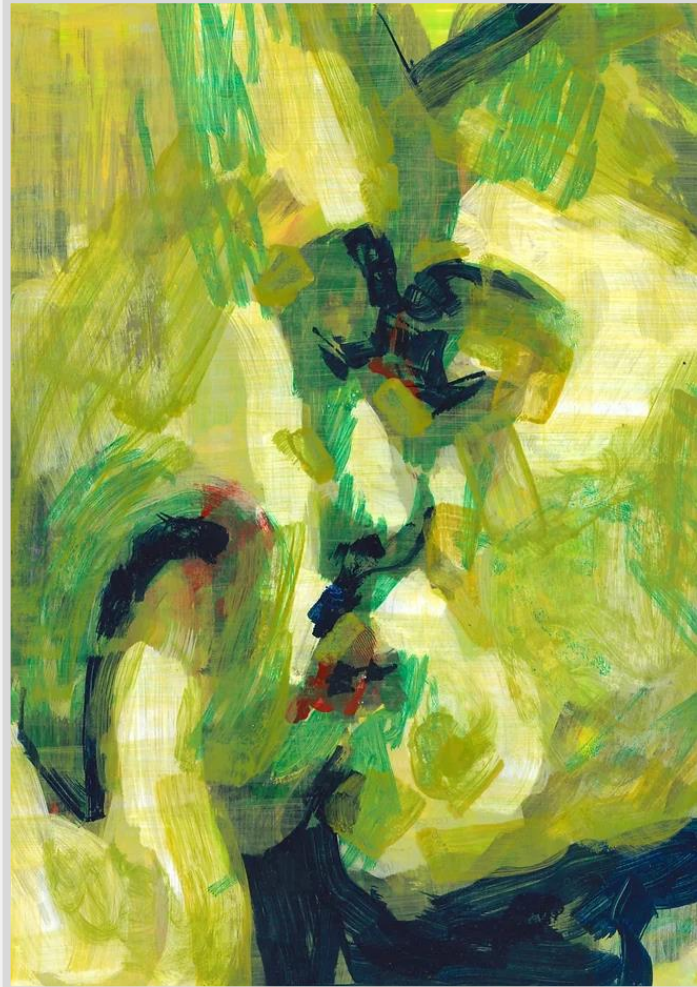




# How does time manifest in the fine art responses?

- Series of works that allude to memories, imagined and personal, and travel.
- Juxtaposition of landscape and the figure, immersion.
- Conflations of the Green Knight with landscape.









*The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* (2021) and *Green Chapel* (2021) by Michael Eden.





*Temporal Landscape I* (2020) by Michael Eden.

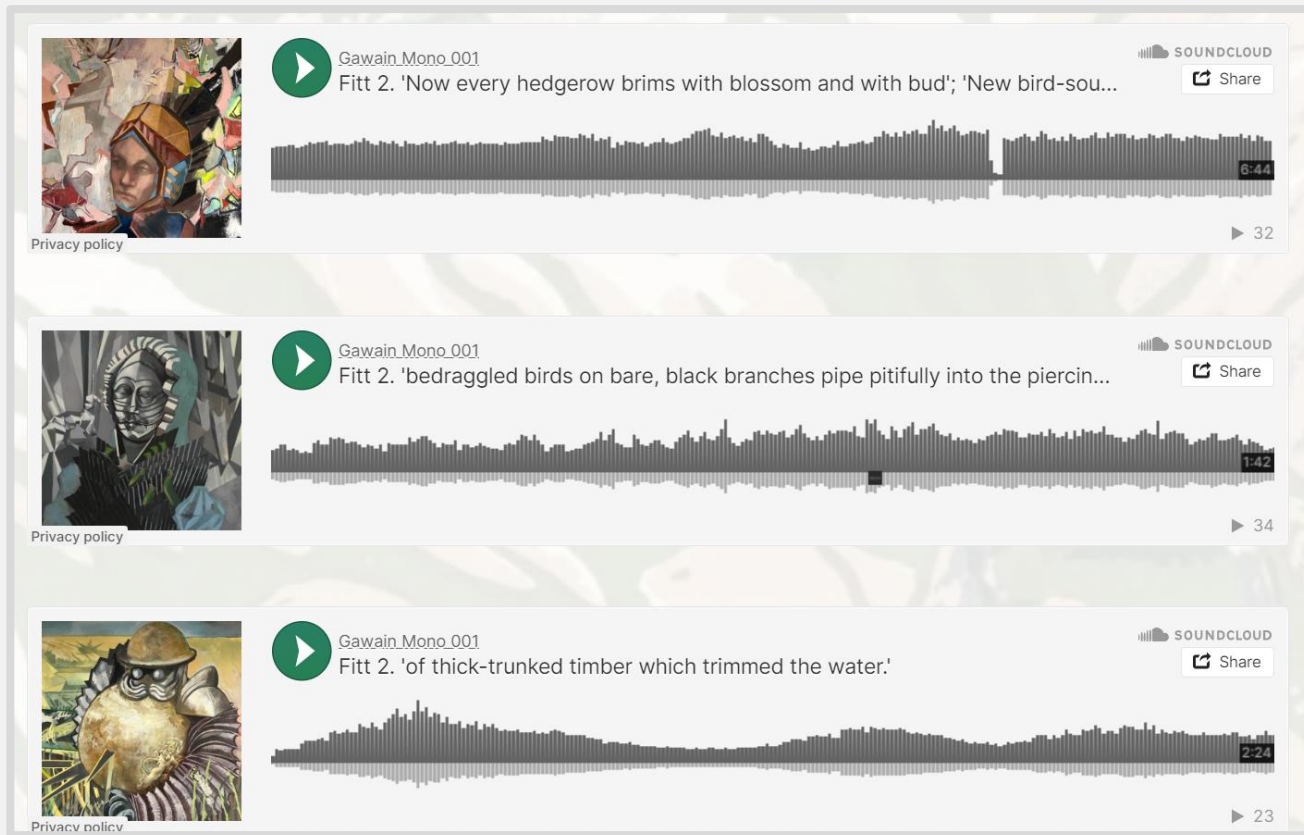




*Temporal Landscape II* (2020) by Michael Eden.



The soundscapes include layers of real noises: birdsong, weather events, moving through landscape for example (recorded by Spurr in outings into the countryside and from his local residency) combined with synthesised music rendered on a computer. These works came about following conversations with Spurr regarding the themes of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the role of atmospheric film scores in creating a sense of immersion and narrative.



The image displays three SoundCloud audio player snippets for the track 'Gawain\_Mono\_001'. Each snippet includes a play button, the track name, a description, a waveform visualization, and a share button. The first snippet is titled 'Fitt 2. 'Now every hedgerow brims with blossom and with bud'; 'New bird-sou...' and has a duration of 6:44. The second snippet is titled 'Fitt 2. 'bedraggled birds on bare, black branches pipe pitifully into the piercin...' and has a duration of 1:42. The third snippet is titled 'Fitt 2. 'of thick-trunked timber which trimmed the water.' and has a duration of 2:24. Each snippet also features a small thumbnail image and a 'Privacy policy' link.



# Aspects of Horror in Representations of *SGGK*

- Increased emphasis on monstrosity.
- Depictions of violence.
- References to horror tropes and symbolism.



*The Green Knight's Head (point of no return) (2024)* by Michael Eden.

# Complexity, the Layered (Imperfect) Subject

‘Unfortunately, when reason is valorized in our theories and clinical practices, phallogentrism is secured because the categories “men” and “women” are presumed to be self-evident and transparent. **Femininity and masculinity** not only become dichotomized, but they also become naturalized and normalized. Instead of being viewed as **parts of the self that are unconscious and have become split off**’ (Cosgrove, 2007:20).

The **‘valorization of rationality’** (Cosgrove, 2007:21) serves a dual purpose, it privileges patriarchal hierarchies in the social world, and it reveals an inner attitude seeking **‘subjective certitude’** (17).

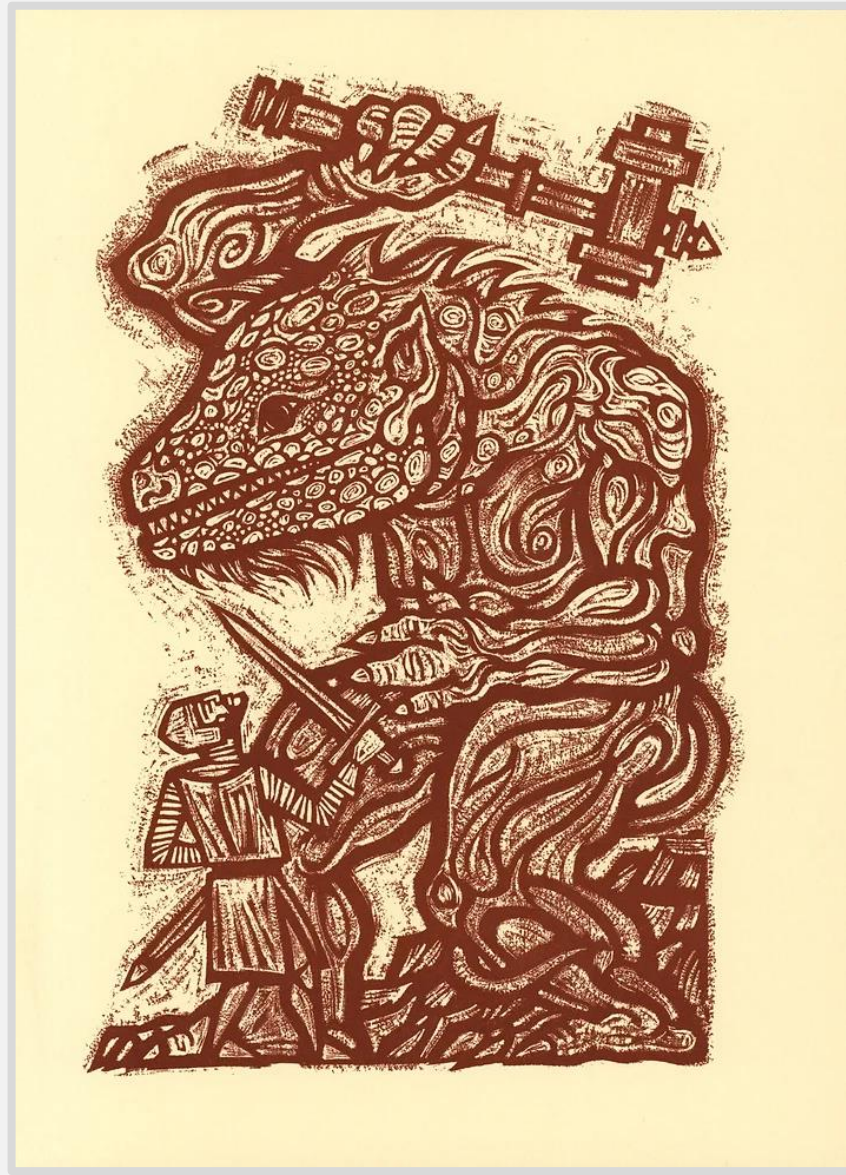
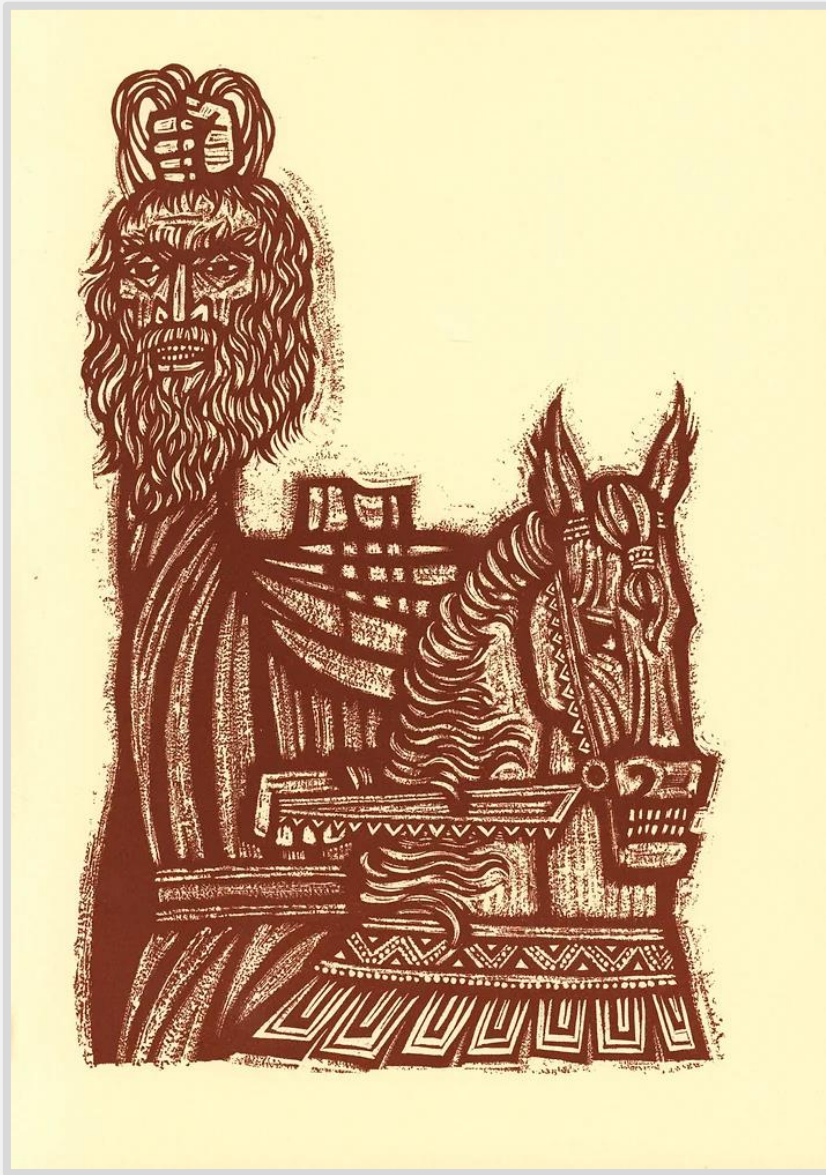
‘Suppressing contradiction promotes a view of identity as coherent and stable, **fragmentation and contradiction** come to be seen as failures of identity, as pathos, rather than **an inevitable part of what it means to be human**’ (Cosgrove, 2007:18).

Privileging rationality means that ‘gender [is seen] as a binary and stable trait’ (Cosgrove, 2007:18).

Coherence is preferred and the ‘unconscious becomes superfluous’ (Cosgrove, 2007:18).

**‘Conflict and contradiction are at the heart of what it means to be human**, they are not pathological modes of being-in-the-world (Cosgrove, 2007:18).









*Gawain and the Wodwose* (2018) by Michael Smith.







# 'Constructive Monstrosity'

## **Constructive Monstrosity:**

constructive monstrosity refers to the concept of monstrosity as not merely a destructive or frightening force but as a catalyst for transformation, self-awareness, or growth. It challenges the traditional view of monsters as purely antagonistic or threatening, instead framing them as entities that provoke reflection, disrupt normative assumptions, and reveal deeper truths about identity, morality, or society.

**Produces a doubting and/or changed subject.**

- **Monsters as Mirrors:** They reveal hidden fears, suppressed desires, or unresolved conflicts within the subject. In SGGK, the Green Knight functions as a mirror to Gawain's insecurities and inadequacies within the chivalric code.
- **Challenges to Normativity:** Monsters expose the arbitrariness or constraints of societal norms. In SGGK, the rigidity of knightly ideals is problematized through Gawain's failure and the Green Knight's enigmatic test.
- **Agents of Change:** Monsters disrupt the status quo and provoke transformation. For Gawain, the Green Knight becomes an agent of self-knowledge, forcing him to renegotiate his identity.

# 'Agonistic Monstrosity'

## Agonistic Monstrosity

Agonistic monstrosity refers to the concept of monstrosity as a force of conflict, opposition, or destruction, embodying antagonism without a transformative or constructive outcome. It positions monsters as external threats that reinforce boundaries between self and other, good and evil, civilization and chaos, without challenging the status quo or encouraging growth. This view sees monsters as embodiments of fears and dangers that must be confronted and defeated, rather than engaged with or understood.

**Produces a hero or heroic legacy.**

- **Monsters as Adversaries:** Monsters in this framework are symbols of externalized fears or dangers that must be vanquished. They represent a clear opposition to the protagonist's goals, existing primarily to highlight the hero's courage or moral superiority.

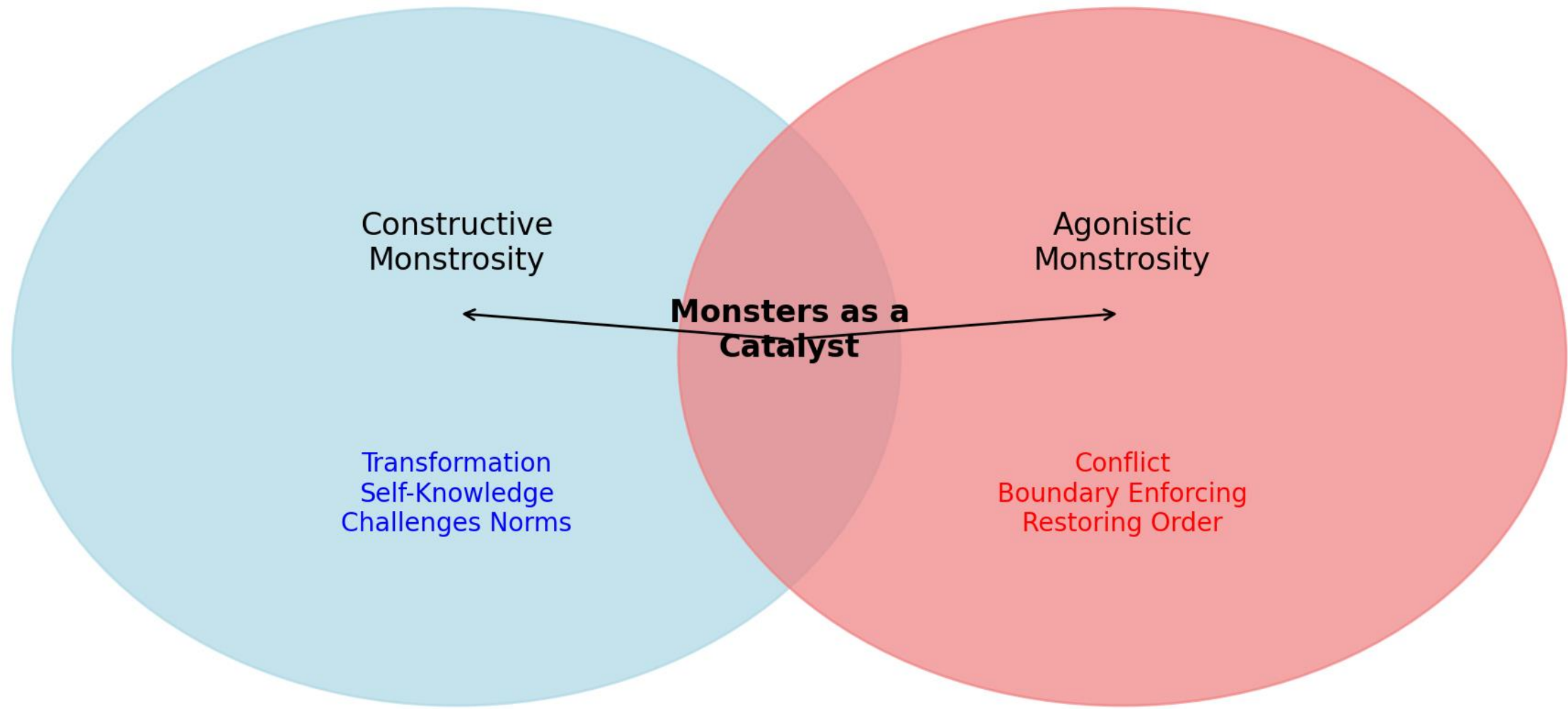
**Example:** Grendel in Beowulf, who serves as a straightforward representation of chaos and destruction, existing to be defeated and thus affirming Beowulf's heroism.

- **Reinforcement of Normativity:** Agonistic monstrosity upholds societal norms by positioning monsters as "the other" that threatens order, morality, or identity. Their defeat restores the status quo and reaffirms the values and boundaries they threaten.

**Example:** The Cyclops in Homer's Odyssey represents savagery and barbarism, reinforcing the idea of Odysseus as a hero embodying cleverness and civilization.

- **Obstacles to Change:** Rather than provoking self-awareness or growth, agonistic monsters block transformation. They are seen as barriers to be overcome, functioning primarily as challenges to the hero's strength or willpower.

**Example:** The dragon in Beowulf's final battle serves as a destructive force that leads to Beowulf's demise but does not provoke personal or societal reflection.



Constructive  
Monstrosity

Transformation  
Self-Knowledge  
Challenges Norms

**Monsters as a  
Catalyst**

Agonistic  
Monstrosity

Conflict  
Boundary Enforcing  
Restoring Order









## Horror as a Vehicle for *SGGK*'s Implications, and Horror Studies as Guide

Barry Curtis' thesis, that haunted houses mediate between 'geological time and human time' (Curtis, 2008:33) and Anthony Vilder (1987) describing the 'paradigmatic haunted house' as a 'repository of centuries of memory,' and 'tomb[-like]' or 'crypt[-like],' can help us understand the potency of the Green Chapel as a site for psychic tension.

Robin Wood's (1978) observation that haunted houses represent 'the dead weight of the past crushing the life of the younger generation' (Wood, 1978:31) offers a way to see Gawain's armouring-up problematically, those scenes which are so beautifully described become an ideological straight-jacket when we think of the absurdity of Gawain dying for a flawed ideology with the blessing of the whole of Camelot: society sacrificing its young for the continuation of faltering ideas.

'Their idealized vitality dwindles to the equivalent of a still life' (Woods 2002: 210).

(The Court of Camelot is also effectively a haunted space).



## German polymath, geographer, naturalist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt on Landscape,

All that the senses can but imperfectly comprehend, all that is most awful in such romantic scenes of nature, may become a source of enjoyment to man, by opening a wide field to the creative powers of his imagination. Impressions change with the varying movements of the mind, and we are led by a happy illusion to believe that we receive from the external world that with which we have ourselves invested it (von Humboldt, 1850:26).

## From a correspondence with the ecologist and writer Don Gayton, regarding the von Humboldt quote (which he shared with me),

What he (von Humboldt) is saying is: we think we project our aesthetics into nature, and nature then reflects them back to us. No, Humboldt asserts, our aesthetic responses originate from nature itself. So, the sensation of peaceful detachment I feel as I sit on this hillside was actually *created* by this hillside, and I happen to be its privileged and receptive audience of one (Gayton, 2024, original emphasis, see Appendix 1).



# Nature Personifies Us?

Reflecting on the von Humboldt (1850) quote and Gayton's (2024) elaboration of it, we can see the Green Knight as: nature reaching into us, opening in us an ambiguity that makes change possible. The Green Knight's intrusion into Camelot is such a gesture, there nature interrupts the sated, and illusory, permeance of the court initiating a psychically transformative process for Gawain. This is first a spatial intrusion, the figure of the monster, in this case nature's agent, into the civilised territory of the court, undermining the stabilising function of ideology. Second, upon finding its 'privileged audience', Gawain, to lend Gayton's (2024) phrasing, the gesture becomes more intimate, directly affecting Gawain's personal worldview and sense of self. Gawain changes, becomes a subject.

## Understanding 1: Projection onto Nature

Humans project their concerns onto nature, interpreting nature's symbols as mirrors of their own anxieties and desires.

**(Closed symbolic loop)**

## Understanding 2: Nature as Agent

Nature disrupts human constructs by introducing ambiguity and transformation. It acts as an independent force.

**(Opens ambiguity/change )**

Green Knight as Nature's Gesture:  
Intruding into Camelot's ideological stability,  
and provoking Gawain's personal transformation.





Symbols  
of Nature

Green  
Knight

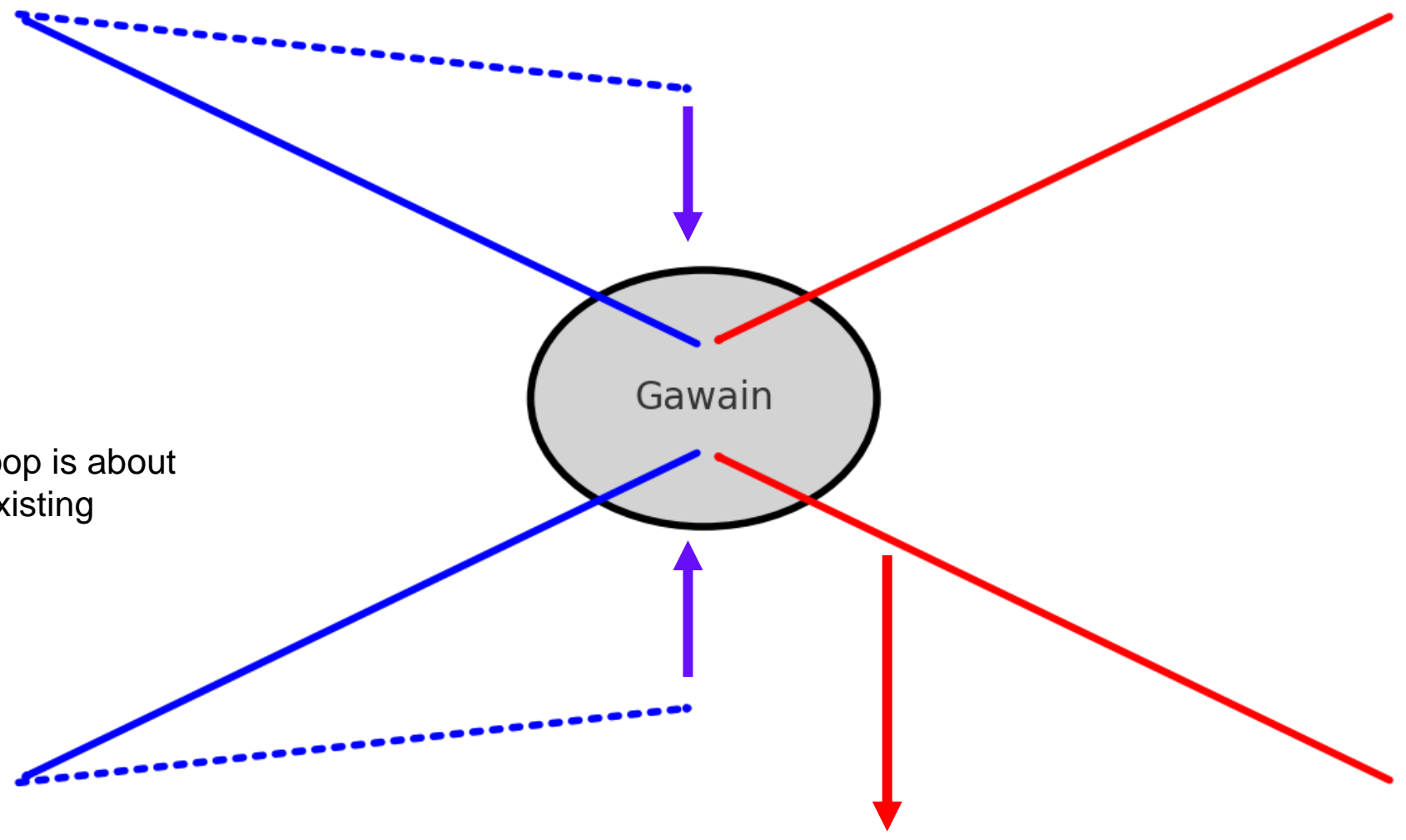
### 1. Projection onto Nature

Closed symbolic loop is about  
reinforcement of existing  
subjectivity.

### 2. Nature Intrudes

Reflection  
of Concerns

Agent of  
Nature



Psychic Transformation:  
Gawain becomes a Subject



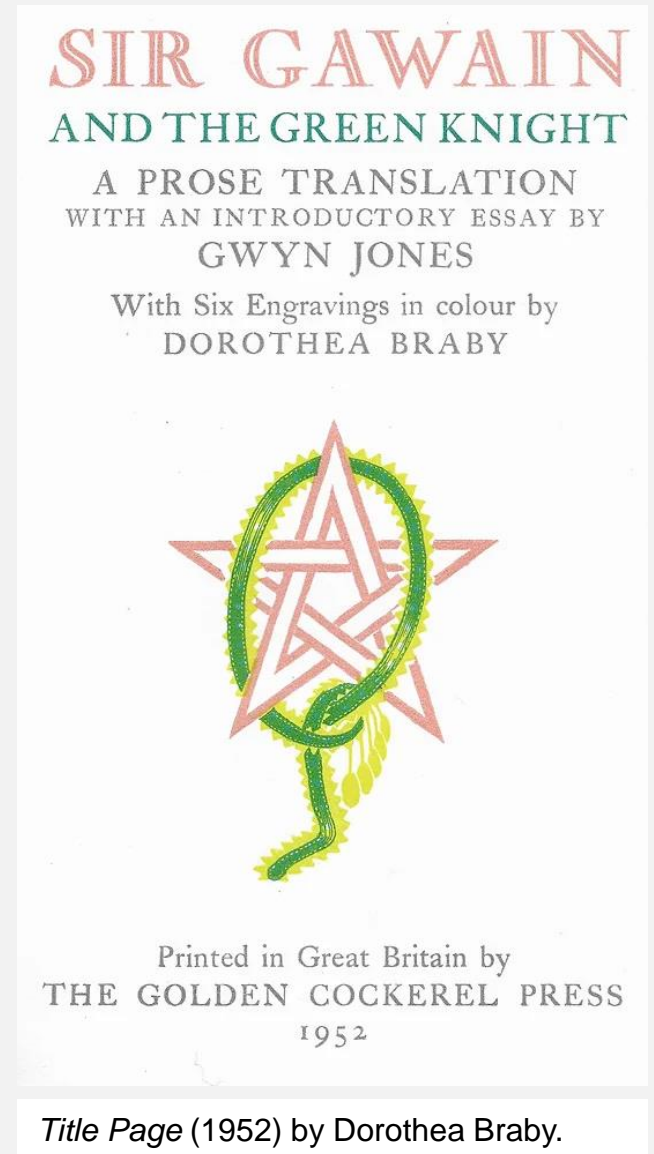
# Two Directions of Iconoclasm



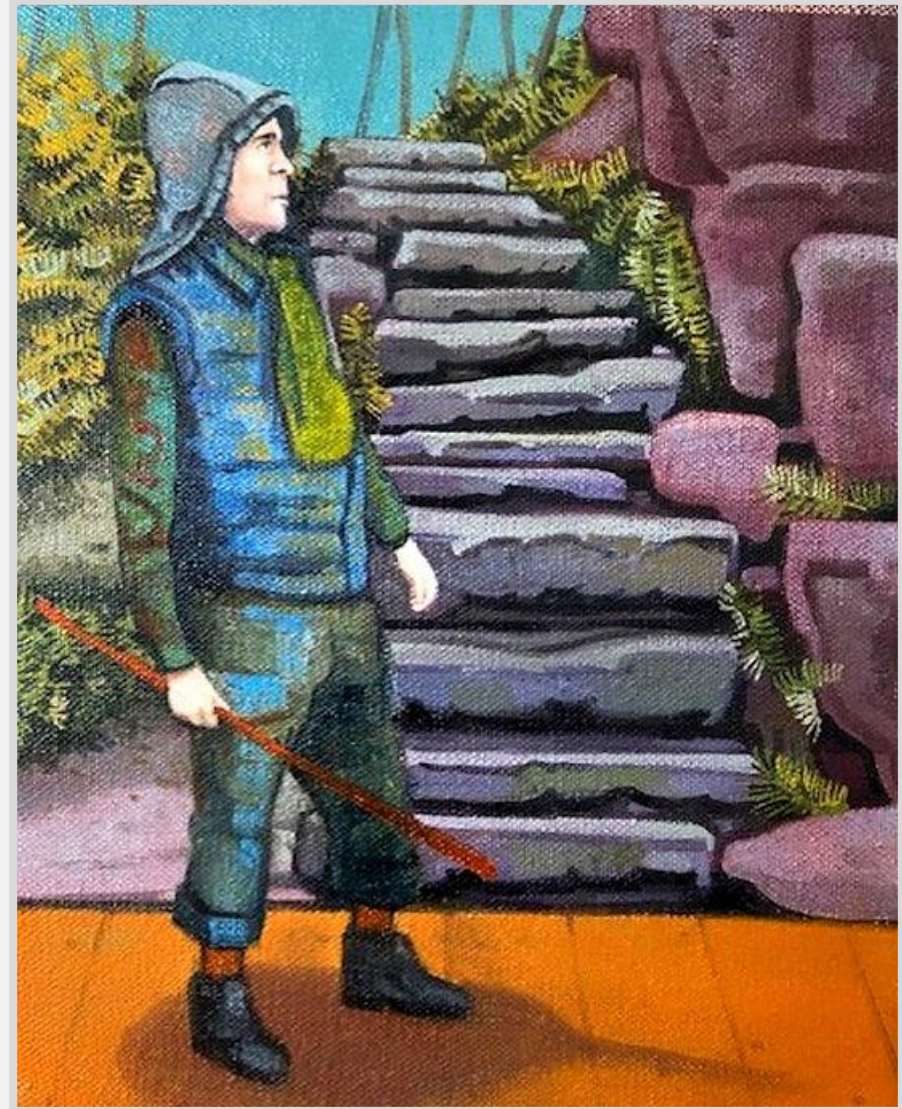


# Direction One: Critique

- Collapse of authority.
- Gendered critique that sees Gawain as proxy for power dynamics.
- References to humour/satire.



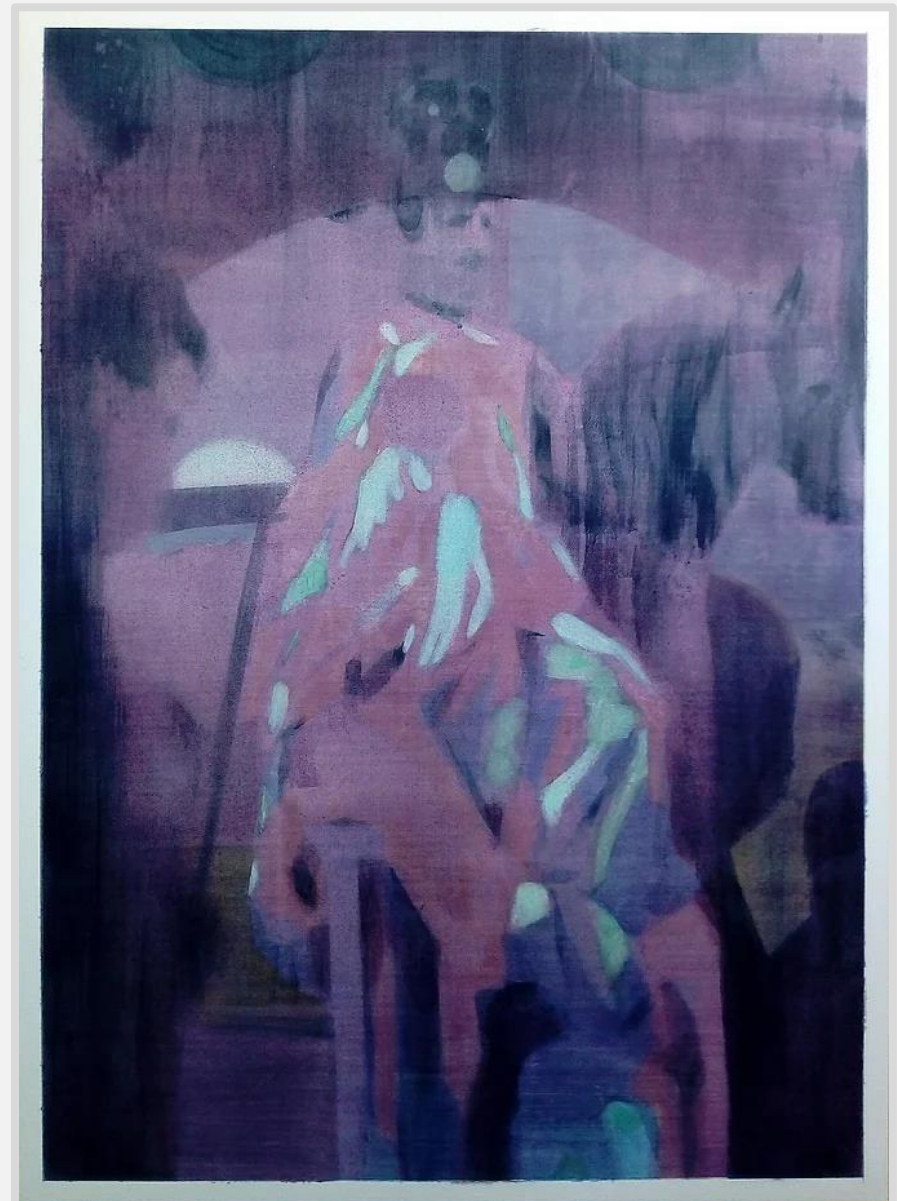














# Direction Two: Truth (where truth is the becoming of the subject).

- Collapse of false self.
- Universalism that sees Gawain as proxy for the complex subject.
- References to threshold experiences, redemption, self-knowledge.



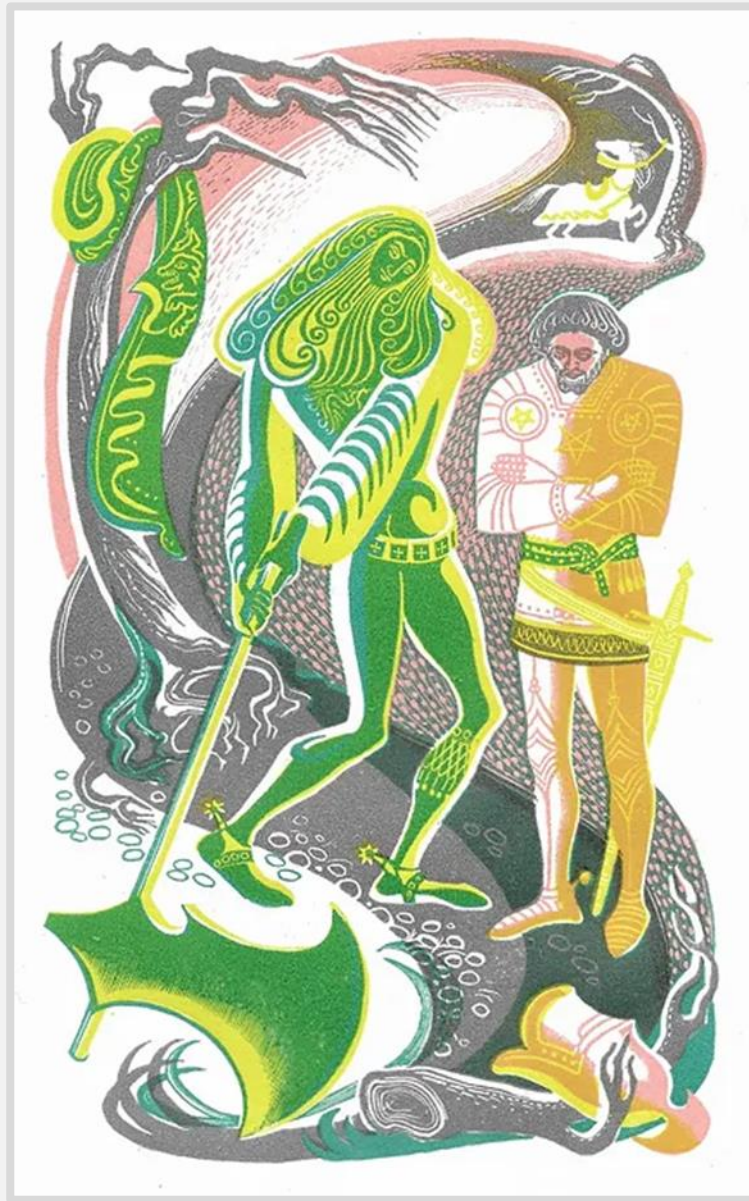
*Gawain at Court* (2019) by Michael Eden.



Attendants dressing and armoring Gawain, 2m x2m, oil on canvas (2021) by Michael Eden.

\* Gawain's armour as a symbolic burden, aligning with critiques of ideological rigidity.





Gawain at the Green Chapel awaiting the return blow (1952) by Dorothea Braby.









# Final points and close



# Final points

- The role of the natural environment in subjectivisation.
- The potential of ‘constructive monstrosity’ as a way to understand Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight, but moreover horror studies to help in drawing out the monstrosity of Camelot and the knight, of being armoured, of being made operational in a system.
- The fate of the subject: is it worth fighting for? Or is the subject in *SGGK* so associated with rationalising masculine power and a degraded ideology that it should simply be moved away from.
- Abiding between two deaths is a renegotiation between the real and the symbolic.



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# Appendix 1

## Email correspondence with the writer and ecologist Don Gayton.

**Sent:** 21 August 2024 9:59 PM

**To:** Michael Eden <m.h.eden@fashion.arts.ac.uk>

**Subject:** landscape and the condition of being

Hello Michael,

Wow, that goes a long ways back. Had to remind myself.

I had a quick look at your intriguing artwork. I am currently working on an essay where I'm drawing on Alexander von Humboldt (quote in italics):

*Impressions change with the varying movements of the mind, and we are led by a happy illusion to believe that we receive from the external world that with which we have ourselves invested it.*

What he is saying is: we think we project our esthetics into nature, and nature then reflects them back to us. No, Humboldt asserts, our esthetic responses originate from nature itself.

So the sensation of peaceful detachment I feel as I sit on this hillside was actually *created* by this hillside, and I happen to be its privileged and receptive audience of one.

Sounds like there is some correspondence between this and your work.

Saludos,

**Don**

**Don V. Gayton, M.Sc, P.Ag(ret.)**

**Ecologist and Writer**

**Summerland, BC**



# Thank you

[arts.ac.uk](https://arts.ac.uk)