Willing to Know God

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Worldly Attachment and Visionary Resistance in *Pearl*

The conclusion of the fourteenth-century English dream poem *Pearl* has long been something of a puzzle. Critics are divided on the question of whether the dreaming Jeweler—who has been described both as “hopelessly literal-minded”\(^1\) and as an “Everyman” whose difficulties mirror the human mind’s inability to comprehend the divine\(^2\)—achieves a real spiritual transformation at the end of his vision. The expectation that the dreamer will undergo such a transformation comes from our understanding of how dream visions work. As Margaret Bridges remarks, the anticipated closure brought about by the dream, be it “love’s consummation” in the love vision or the “mystic marriage to the Lamb” in the apocalyptic, is usually “the cue for the dreamer . . . to wake to the reality of the initial setting.”\(^3\) Whether we read *Pearl* as a religious vision or, as some have suggested, as a love vision, its expected closure seems thwarted: the poem’s troubled dreamer neither achieves union with Christ nor manages to rejoin his love, the Pearl-Maiden.\(^4\) After the dreamer awakens, instead of the unitive experience that we might anticipate,

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the dreamer’s acceptance of his consignment to the sublunary world seems little more than a resigned acquiescence to God’s law. The tenor of his return to the waking world stands in marked contrast to the edifying joy depicted in most purportedly authentic visionary texts or to Dante’s euphoric vision at the end of Paradiso.

To read Pearl with the expectation that it will show the dreamer achieving unio Christi, however, may not be appropriate. While the poem is plainly focused upon the Jeweler’s encounter with a representative of the divine, it also echoes the conventions of secular love visions, and its treatment of the mystical component of the vision is accordingly ambiguous. The Jeweler is not, in fact, unequivocally invited into a unitive experience of the divine; the Maiden is encouraging him to surrender to God’s will, and their dialogue concerns his difficulty in comprehending and accepting her message. Understood thus, the apparent limitations of the dreamer’s visionary experience are not a failure of the poem, but rather the poem’s point. Instead of focusing upon what message the dreamer “should have” received from the Maiden—a reading that underscores his shortcomings and implies that a vision “fails” if the dreamer is not converted to the point of view of his otherworldly interlocutor—I will argue in this chapter that the poem stresses the limitations on visionary understanding inherent in the human mind itself. Pearl’s primary concern is not the heavenly vision, but rather the difficulty of transcending worldly attachment in order to gain knowledge of the divine.

Pearl thematizes a major theological issue of its time: the incompatibility of human love and total absorption in Christ. Roughly contemporary theological writings, such as The Cloud of Unknowing, Meister Eckhart’s sermons, and Gertrude of Helfta’s Legatus, make it clear that to obtain divine knowledge (and, eventually, union) one must subordinate all merely human loves to the love for God. This stricture has its origins in Biblical tradition and is elaborated in Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana, a work that was highly influential throughout the Middle Ages. But although mystics such as Gertrude are shown to have hearts unfettered by the bonds of mortal attachment, Pearl suggests that the ordinary layperson cannot easily renounce such human loves—even at the bidding of a heavenly messenger. The Jeweler’s unwillingness to abandon his love for the Maiden—his persistent attachment to her physical form—illustrates the difficulty of

5. See María Bullón-Fernández, who argues that Pearl is characterized by the fusion of mystical and courtly love and that romance and religion cannot be separated in the poem (María Bullón-Fernández, “‘By3ond þe Water’: Courtly and Religious Desire in Pearl,” Studies in Philology 91.1 [1994]: 37).
following this injunction. Through the opposing figures of the Jeweler and the Maiden, *Pearl* dramatizes both the importance of renouncing worldly attachment and the near impossibility of doing so. The poem thus questions revelation’s ability to instill knowledge, as the Jeweler’s revelatory experience does more to illustrate the obstacles in the way of his visionary knowing than to clarify the Maiden’s transcendent message.

To compare *Pearl* to the *Commedia*, then, is not really apt. Where Dante’s poem presents the reader with a vision of heaven, *Pearl* is concerned with the obstacles that our all-too-human will and affections place in the way of visionary knowing. This argument does not, however, depend upon the *Pearl*-poet’s having known the visionary and mystical works mentioned above. The concern with non-attachment evident in these texts—and in late medieval mystical literature more generally—indicates a widespread understanding of worldly renunciation as an essential step on the way to knowledge of the divine and as a key component of visionary knowing. Reading *Pearl* alongside visionary literature of the period, as a work that interprets and comments on the standards of that literature, illuminates both the Jeweler’s situation and the outcome of his vision. Rather than concerning itself exclusively with the success or failure of the dreamer’s transformation, *Pearl* exposes the limits of such a transformation’s possibility. The Jeweler’s revelatory experience leads to a conversion that is only partial and does more to illuminate the obstacles in the way of his visionary knowing than to illuminate the Maiden’s transcendent message. The poem thus articulates a response to the necessity of mystical non-attachment by illustrating the obstacles to knowing that arise from the dreamer’s love for the Maiden.

The likelihood that the Jeweler’s love for the Maiden is familial rather than sexual is significant. As we saw in chapter 1, *Le Roman de la rose* illustrates the capacity of lust to lead the dreamer away from reason and the potentially edifying effects of the vision, but this is not obviously the problem in *Pearl*. The precise nature of the relationship between the Jeweler and the Maiden has been a source of debate since at least the nineteenth century, and I have no hopes of resolving the issue here. Like many readers, however, I favor the view that their relationship is a family connection and that they are probably father and daughter. The relationship between the two characters is couched in familial terms—she is “nerre þen aunte or nece” (233)—and the girl seems to be quite young—she “lyfed not two Žer in oure þede” (483). While these passages have been used in arguments

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6. All references to *Pearl* are from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 52–110. References to the poem appear in
both for and against the Maiden’s familial relationship to the dreamer, most critics agree that the Maiden is most likely a child, and probably the child of the dreamer;7 there is little strong evidence to suggest that the Maiden is the Jeweler’s lover or wife.8 Centering the text upon a filial relationship allows the poet to explore the way that attachment to another person can obstruct the dreamer’s relationship with the divine without implicating the problem of sexual love. The poem thus indicates that even a seemingly benign attachment can impede visionary knowing, as a father’s love for his daughter inhibits his ability to surrender to the divine will. Nevertheless, the Jeweler’s love for the Maiden and his concomitant attachment to the material reality of her body ultimately inhibit his visionary capability, as his unwillingness to renounce his desire for her physical presence prevents him from realizing—or even desiring—a unitive experience of the divine. His desires are therefore in conflict with the Maiden’s wish that he abandon his grief over her death and surrender himself to Christ. The poem exposes this conflict in the dreamer’s word play, which reveals his determination to keep the Maiden at the center of his dream by reconfiguring the terms of her discourse. In this chapter, I will first analyze the dreamer’s attachment to materiality and its reflection in his linguistic play. I will then argue that, in its exploration of the conflict between worldly renunciation and visionary experience, Pearl presents a response to mystical texts such as Gertrude’s Legatus, Eckhart’s writings, and The Cloud of Unknowing, all of which stress the incompatibility of earthly love and divine union.

7. More recently, Lynn Staley has raised the question of whether the Maiden is actually dead, arguing that she may represent a girl who has entered a convent and that the poem commemorates her death to the world rather than her literal death (Lynn Staley, “Pearl and the Contingencies of Love and Piety,” in Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall, ed. David Aers [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000] 83–114). Even if she is only figuratively dead, however, she is as fully removed from her earthly existence as though she had died.

8. The most commonly accepted interpretation of the Jeweler’s relationship to the Maiden is that he is the girl’s father. Jane Beal (“The Pearl-Maiden’s Two Lovers”) and Mother Angela Carson (“Aspects of Elegy in the Middle English Pearl,” Studies in Philology 62 [1965]: 17–27) argue that the Maiden is the dreamer’s beloved, but few critics adhere to this view. Other interpretations have included the theories that the Maiden is an illegitimate child or a “heathen” bride who converted to Christianity two years before her death; criticizing these speculations, René Wellek argues that they “cannot be deduced” from the text (René Wellek, “The Pearl: An Interpretation of the Middle English Poem,” in ‘Sir Gawain’ and ‘Pearl’: Critical Essays, ed. Robert J. Blanch [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966] 21). While the question is not definitively resolved, the father-daughter reading is generally accepted as the most plausible.
1. Materiality, Desire, and the Limits of Reason

The Jeweler’s vision functions dually: it is intended to correct his perception that the Maiden is lost and also to instruct him in the importance of abandoning his grief and believing faithfully in God’s justice. The vision itself is not the site of a mystical union, as it becomes evident that the Jeweler will not be able to remain in the heavenly garden while he is alive: “Pur3 drwry deth boz vch man dreue, / Er ouer þys dam hym Dry3yn deme,” the Maiden says (323–24). But the vision does seek to alter his relationship with the divine. When the Maiden enjoins him to “forsake þe worlde wode” (743), she is entreating him to demonstrate “a willingness to live in uncertainties and darkness,” accepting his distance from her and thereby assenting to God’s will. Yet the Maiden also emphasizes the importance of the Jeweler’s renouncing worldly attachment. Her advice resonates with the Cloud-author’s instruction to “put a cloude of for3etyng bineþ þee, bitwix þee & alle þe cretures þat euer ben maad.” Only by leaving behind—indeed, forgetting—all created beings can one hope to attain true love for and knowledge of God. Similarly, the Jeweler is called to engage in a gradual movement towards the divine by leaving behind his attachment to worldly love-objects and living more fully a life of faith and renunciation.

The Jeweler’s difficulty in understanding the Maiden’s message can be seen as a conflict between educative and revelatory modes of visionary understanding, both of which are apparent in the poem. This conflict reveals the limits of the ratio in comprehending divine truth, but also presents the ratio as a rhetorical tool that the dreamer can use against his visionary interlocutor. By adhering to a debate structure that is inconsonant with the revelatory aspect of the vision, the Jeweler resists those sides of the Maiden’s message that do not cohere with his desires. Yet the vision is clearly revelatory. The conclusion of the poem depends upon a revelatory moment: the sudden unveiling of the kingdom of heaven and the apocalyptic vision of the Lamb surrounded by his adoring brides, images that are drawn from Revelations. This is the part of the vision that has a significant emotional impact on the dreamer; the “gret delyt” that overwhelms him as he watches the procession of the Lamb (1128) contrasts with his intellectual grappling with the Maiden’s earlier speeches. Despite his resistance, the glimpse of

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the heavenly city transforms him emotionally in a way that her discourse does not. The contrast between these two modes of instruction reflects the differences between educative visions that rely upon the ratio and revelatory visions that lead to a sudden understanding and are characterized by the use of the intellectus. The poem’s culmination in a revelatory moment that prompts the climax of the narrative reinforces revelation’s presumed effectiveness as a means of immediately transforming the dreamer in contrast to the earlier, instructive passages.

The revelation is disrupted, however, by the Jeweler’s insistence upon the vision’s confirming his own desire for the Maiden’s presence rather than upon the lesson that she intends him to learn. Up until the revelatory moment, the poem is largely didactic, with the dreamer arguing with the Maiden over various points of Christian eschatology. This didactic section of the narrative focuses on an educative mode of visionary instruction that bears a structural resemblance to Boethius’s De Consolatione. First, the appearance of a consoling figure of authority in the dreamer’s moment of distress recalls the arrival of Lady Philosophy; the poem also draws on Boethian models, Michael Cherniss argues, in the central place that it accords to the narratorial consciousness. Because the poem is centered upon the narrator’s consciousness, Cherniss asserts, following the Jeweler’s development is essential if we are to grasp the meaning of the poem as a whole. In other words, we cannot understand Pearl without understanding the Jeweler—at least, insofar as any changes in his perception and character are revealed to us through the first-person narrative. Both Cherniss and Kathryn Lynch take Boethius’ text as the prototypical dream vision, and Pearl at least superficially conforms to the Boethian model in its use of the first person, the presence of a single figure of authority, and the frame story of a narrator who is initially distressed by a psychological problem but who is “cured” through the experience of the dream. While the narrator of Pearl bears a surface relationship to the protagonist of De Consolatione, however, he does not fit neatly into this model. Most importantly, his development is not linear and does not culminate in a true understanding of the vision’s lesson. Gregory Roper notes that the dreamer slips back into sin almost immediately following the penance performed in his dream; Pearl, Ropes argues, shows “what happens after the sinner emerges from confession.”  

12. Ibid., 157.
13. Ibid., 163.
Jeweler does in fact fall short of a full understanding of his vision, nearly all critics seem to agree that the ending is ambiguous and that the Jeweler’s path to visionary knowing is anything but straightforward. In contrast, the narrator of *De Consolatione* follows a clear, well-ordered philosophical trajectory, progressing through a structured and linear argument to achieve the knowledge towards which Lady Philosophy wishes to guide him. But the Jeweler appears to misunderstand the Maiden’s words (e.g. 744, 780), accuses her of exaggeration and falsehood (e.g. 423–44, 471–74), and argues that her claims are “unreason able” (590). While the broad outlines of *Pearl* parallel those of a Boethian dream vision whose narrator attains the desired level of understanding, within those parameters it troubles the ascent to knowledge by foregrounding a narrator who cannot seem to keep to the path laid before him by his visionary guide.

The Jeweler’s problem is not thick-headedness, however, but an unwillingness to let go of his attachment to the girl he loves. His difficulty in achieving the spiritual transformation desired by the Maiden is not the result of her message’s obscurity or of his inability to comprehend it but of his refusal to accept her terms. Throughout the poem, he resists moving beyond the material being of his daughter and renouncing the world in favor of divine union, and his unwillingness is reflected in his insistence upon regarding the Maiden’s words, which she intends to signify heavenly matters, so that they refer only to their earthly meanings: to borrow Augustine’s phrase, he is “enslaved under signs,” unwilling to move beyond the literal signification of the words that she utters. Far from being incapable

15. To cite just a few examples of critics on both sides: Cherniss argues that the dreamer achieves at least some measure of enlightenment by the end of his vision, characterized by a “new mood . . . of positive resignation rather than despair” (162). More optimistically, Jane Chance states that “The ‘vision’ has educated the dreamer away from his literalism: he understands figura, a non-literal sign, in the communion wafer as pearl” (Jane Chance, “Allegory and Structure in *Pearl*: The Four Senses of the *Ars Praedicandi* and Fourteenth-Century Homiletic Poetry,” in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman, and Julian N. Wasserman [Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Company, 1991] 48). On the other side of the debate, Steven Kruger declares that the dreamer’s “naive, uncomprehending questions prevent the poem from ever fully transcending earthly perspectives” (Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992] 129). Spearing feels that the dreamer is changed by his vision, but that the change is “precarious” (*Gawain-Poet*, 168), and Bridges sees the poem’s ending as “pervaded by a feeling of disappointment and loss” due to the dreamer’s “frustration that the vision was so incomplete” (86–87). Bullón-Fernández puts this perspective bluntly: by the end of the vision, “the dreamer has not learned much” (48).

of recognizing figurative language, however, the Jeweler insistently misunderstands her lessons, reinterpreting her words so that they refer back to the reality that he prefers—the reality in which he can enjoy the living presence of his daughter. Both of these behaviors stem from his affectionate attachment to the Maiden, which binds his heart and prevents him from dedicating himself fully to Christ. These traits are an impediment to the visionary process; fundamentally, it is his attachment to a material form—the living Maiden—that prevents him from comprehending the salvific message of his vision. The Jeweler’s grappling with these obstacles is the overriding concern of Pearl, and their merely provisional resolution at the end of the poem reflects the difficulties of that struggle.

The Jeweler’s commitment to the workings of the sublunary world and his reliance upon rational argumentation indicate his attachment to the Maiden as a living, physical being. Throughout much of the poem, he implicitly privileges what is reasonable in this world, and this inhibits his ability to understand either the salvific message of his vision or the Maiden’s current status in Heaven. By insisting on understanding the Maiden’s lessons in earthly terms and maintaining a narrow view of the signifying possibilities of her speech, he strives to situate her within the worldly realm. His constant recourse to earthly reasoning, perception, and mores signifies his refusal to grasp her transcendent message.

The Jeweler’s insistence on material perception and worldly reasoning is pointed out, in fact, before he even has a chance to act on it. The Maiden notes his perceptual problem and develops its implications early in the poem when she articulates three errors in the Jeweler’s understanding (291–99). The first of these, that he “leuez noþynk bot [he] hit syЗe[ς]” (308), or that he depends too much upon his senses, explicitly accuses him of excessive reliance upon material evidence in the discernment of divine truth. To require the testimony of the senses for belief, she adds, is a

\[\ldots\] poyn
t o sorquydrý3e,
\[\bar{\text{bat vche god mon may euel byseme,}}\]
\[\text{To leue no tale be true to try3e}\]
\[\text{Bot } \bar{\text{bat hys one skyl may dem. (309–312)}}\]

The Maiden conflates sight and “skill,” or the ability to reason. By relying upon the evidence of his eyes, she suggests, the Jeweler is also relying on his mental faculties and refusing to consider that some truths might lie beyond his sensory and rational discernment. In other words, he has too much confidence in his rational capabilities, and depending too much on one’s own reason is, in effect, the sin of pride. In the passage above, the Maiden is
quite clear in her condemnation of those who would depend on their reason alone to tell them what is true. Though this is just one of the three ways in which the Jeweler has erred in his speech, it is the first, suggesting that it lies at the root of his later inability to understand the lessons that she would impart to him. Its primacy underscores the fallacy of adhering too closely to human understanding and perception. Like Gertrude in the Legatus, the Maiden is skeptical of the faculties’ ability to discern transcendent truth without the assistance of the divine, suggesting that revelation will be necessary for the dreamer to truly understand his vision.

In spite of the Maiden’s warnings, however, the Jeweler persists in using ratio in his attempts to understand his vision, and this can be seen in his insistence upon worldly standards in his interpretation of the Maiden’s speech. When he argues that the Maiden’s share of heavenly bliss is too great, for instance, he calls her position in Heaven “vnresounable” (590), highlighting the disharmony between divine rule and what passes for reasonable in the mortal world. Despite her lengthy disquisition on theparable of the vineyard, the Jeweler protests that two lines from the Psalter contradict all of her explanation (595–96) and implies that, moreover, the proposition that “þe lasse in werke to take more able, / And euer þe lenger þe lasse þe more” (599–600) is frankly unjust. His inability to transcend his worldly understanding of justice and merit prohibits him from grasping the workings of divine reward. What appears materially unfair to him—that a man who works for only an hour should be paid as much as one who has worked all day—cannot, as far as he is able to judge, have any deeper allegorical meaning or justice; his logic remains bound to a narrow set of assumptions that are grounded in the rules of human society. This disagreement between the Maiden and the Jeweler suggests that a commitment to mortal standards can prohibit the individual from recognizing those truths that lie beyond the human sphere.

The dreamer’s insistence upon interpreting the Maiden’s parable in terms of earthly justice enables him to continue conceiving of the dead girl in worldly terms and is thus an aspect of his attachment to her physical being. In applying earthly logic to the parable of the vineyard, he is refusing, one could argue, to encounter the transcendent meanings offered by the Maiden—thereby effectively refusing to see her as having moved beyond the worldly realm. Such an interpretation of this passage is tricky, however, as various other interpretations also suggest themselves; for example, it seems at least as likely (if not more so) that this part of their dialogue is used to highlight the differences between divine and human justice and to point out the incomprehensibility of the divine. Moreover, the apparent
conflict between the vineyard parable and the passage from the Psalms quoted by the Jeweler (“Þou quytez vchon as hys desserte, / Þou hy3e Kyng ay pertermynable,” 595–96) underscores a very real doctrinal conflict and is pertinent to the debate over whether works are necessary for the soul to reach heaven—a question that is central to the Maiden’s dialogue with the dreamer. Thus, the example of the parable cannot be used conclusively to demonstrate the dreamer’s desire to re-inscribe the Maiden within the worldly sphere.

His misunderstanding of her use of the term “queen,” however, does suggest such an interpretation. When he accuses her of setting herself “in heuen ouer hy3” by making herself “quen þat watz so Þonge” (473–74), his incredulity stems from an understanding of “queen” in terms of its earthly referent—that is, as the woman of highest status within a particular group. A child could never be queen of heaven, he reasons, because there are so many other worthy women who should, by rights, be placed above her. The Jeweler retains this interpretation of the word despite the Maiden’s explanation that everyone who arrives in heaven is either a king or a queen (447–48). By ignoring her explanation of the meaning of queenship in the heavenly sphere and insisting instead upon its earthly signification, the Jeweler seems to be retaining an image of the Maiden within this world that resists her inscription into the transcendent terms that she describes.

Yet his attachment to the terms of this world and the rational process that it entails need not prevent the Jeweler from understanding the Maiden’s speech. Reason is not inherently averse to visionary knowing, as we have seen. At the beginning of the poem, moreover, the Jeweler presents reason and faith as two different but equally viable routes to consolation for the Maiden’s death. The Jeweler’s acknowledgment of reason’s proper use occurs in an early stanza, where he sees himself as incapable of consoling himself for the Maiden’s loss. In the last stanza of group 1, he reflects,

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\begin{align*}
A \text{deuely dele in my hert denned,} \\
þa3 resoun sette myselfen sa3t. \\
I \text{playned my perle þat þer watz penned,} \\
Wyth fyrce skyllez that faste fa3t. \\
þa3 kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned, \\
My wreched wylle in wo ay wra3te. (51–56)
\end{align*}
\]

Reason, according to the Jeweler, is not opposed to Christian comfort: it is in fact perfectly in accord with it. While it has been argued that this passage indicates the Jeweler’s belief that reason alone is inadequate to pro-
vide him with comfort, it is not clear that the narrator is making any such distinction. Instead, by presenting reason side by side with Christ—and implying no causal or contrasting connection between the two—he seems to be saying, quite simply, that *neither* reason nor Christ could comfort him in that moment, though either one should have sufficed. The implied equivalence between human intellectual faculties and faith is important, for it suggests that at this early point in the poem the Jeweler is neither aware of their proper hierarchization nor willing to accept that either one can provide him with the comfort that he craves. The Jeweler believes that both reason and Christ ought to be able to provide him with the solace that he desires, but his will remains opposed to both. The reasonable thing to believe, in other words, is Christian doctrine—that the pearl is now in God’s hands and that death is necessary for life to begin anew. The change in the representation of reason from a possible means of consolation to a tool for refuting the Maiden’s arguments suggests that his use of the *ratio* can be willful and intentional: by using his reason to argue with the Maiden, the dreamer is able to persist in his attachment to her physical form. The proper use of reason would be to affirm the Maiden’s permanent absence from the physical world, but instead the dreamer uses it to argue against his separation from her. This initial recognition that reason should be able to effect consolation for her death thus establishes the conflict between the *proper* use of reason and his use of it in his vision.

The Jeweler’s suggestion that reason and faith are simply two alternate means to the same end gestures towards a connection between the two modes of understanding that would enable them to work together for the dreamer’s enlightenment. The possibility of *ratio*’s working *with* faith rather than against it is touched on in Jane Chance’s analysis of the poem: rather than positing the Jeweler’s investment in rationality as simply a hindrance to his spiritual development, she sees it as pointing him along the proper path to spiritual transformation—as containing “the seeds,” in her words, “of his own spiritual edification and faith.” Similarly, the “rational understanding of his loss,” whose absence he perceives at the beginning of the poem, “suggests the spiritual direction he must now pursue.” In order to come to terms with his loss he must absorb and understand the lesson that his rational mind teaches him—namely, that he ought to accept the Maiden’s death as a part of the higher order of both the natural and spiritual

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17. See Despres, who writes, “The poet stresses that humankind’s intellectual faculties, ‘resoun’ alone, cannot provide the comforting knowledge of spiritual regeneration beyond empirical proof. The dreamer must have faith before he . . . can interpret those vestiges of God’s order in nature” (102).
worlds. Chance’s reading of *Pearl*’s opening stanza group provides a way of looking at the Jeweler’s development along the lines of the educative/revelatory schema. The problems that he encounters in his attempt to reconcile the Maiden’s lessons with worldly logic may arise at least in part from the absence of any figure of authority who can connect the revelatory message of his vision to his usual way of thinking. Dante, we should recall, was not afforded a vision of Beatrice until he had spent considerable time with Virgil undergoing an education in those elements of the afterlife that are comprehensible to human reason. Perhaps the Jeweler’s difficulties in understanding the Maiden stem in part from the absence of any identifiable Virgilian figure in the poem. He has not been adequately prepared for the eschatological vision before him; his mind, entrenched in worldly ways of knowing, cannot readily make the leap from the limited perspective of rational logic to symbolic and faith-based understanding.

II. The Jeweler’s Language of Resistance

The Jeweler’s refusal to move beyond the logic of the human world and to accept the difficult message offered him by the Maiden can be seen most clearly in his attitude towards language. Throughout the poem, he persists in understanding the Maiden’s words in terms of their mundane rather than their transcendent referents. One illustration of this problem is the Jeweler’s flawed understanding of the heavenly court. In his persistent challenging of the Maiden’s new position as queen, the Jeweler insists upon the worldly referents underlying her speech, thereby keeping the physical body of the girl at the center of their discourse. It may be that this misunderstanding is inevitable, the inescapable outcome of using human language and imagery to describe the transcendent. As Stephen Russell argues, “*Pearl* attempts to bring human discourse to bear on a subject, only to discover human discourse to be inadequate as a medium.”

When the Maiden describes what it means to be royalty in heaven—that everyone who arrives in the “reme” is a king or queen under Christ (448)—the dreamer seems incapable of grasping her meaning, repeating his protest that she is too young to be exalted so highly (474), as I have discussed above. Committed to earthbound notions of what it means to be a queen, he cannot conceive of a land in which everyone holds the position of greatest power and glory. Understood in earthly terms, her language is meaningless to the dreamer,

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who can only muster objections which are equally meaningless from her perspective.

On Russell’s view, this meaninglessness is essential. The poem, he claims, “undermine[s] the discourse of eschatology through an exposition of its dependence on human language and human reason,” which in turn “encourage[s] in place of such notional comprehension of Heaven a simple relationship with God based on faith and trust, not on thoughts and words.” If Russell’s contention is correct, then we must ask whether the poem succeeds in conveying to the Jeweler its intended challenge to a language-based understanding of the divine. I would argue that, at least in the middle section of the poem, it does not. Throughout this section, the dreamer retains a materialist (as opposed to transcendent) understanding of the Maiden’s declaration that she is a queen; this is evident in his assumption that the Maiden’s status as queen is in conflict with Mary’s position in heaven (421–28) as well as his assertion that she is too young to be queen—“[þ]ou lyfed not two 3er in oure þede. . . . And quen mad on þe fyrst day!” (483, 486). Even when he does absorb the fact of the Maiden’s new stature, Spearing notes, he misunderstands its source, seeing it in terms of a disparity in their respective social, rather than spiritual, positions. His newfound sense of the social distance between them can be detected in the contrast between his plainspoken protest against the parable of the vineyard—“Me þynk þy tale vnresounable” (590)—and the deferential tones in which he addresses her three hundred lines later: “I schulde not tempte þy wyt so wlonc, / To Krystez chambre þat art ichose” (903–4). The latter lines indicate his acceptance of her position as Christ’s bride and queen. But this change in his reaction to her claims of royalty does not mean that he truly understands how she is using the title “queen.” Indeed, he retains a conception of “queen” that applies to worldly courts and social stature; his deference reveals his perception of a difference in their respective social standings which does not acknowledge the Maiden’s insistence that everyone who is admitted to heaven becomes a king or a queen (448). In this instance, at least, the Jeweler seems bound to a notional interpretation of the Maiden’s words. Although the Jeweler’s understanding of what the Maiden means by “queen” shifts and the problems that he encounters

20. Ibid., 161.

21. This is not to disagree with Russell’s primary thesis. As far as the reader is concerned, the poem may still promote the type of relationship with God that he proposes, at the expense of a reliance on the language of eschatology. But the reader’s understanding of this message in no way entails the Jeweler’s grasping it, and it is the Jeweler’s understanding of language that interests me here.

vary, he is caught in the image: he cannot escape its earthly signification or see it as having alternate meanings deriving from heavenly discourse.\(^{23}\)

The word play that recurs throughout the poem reveals the Jeweler’s unwillingness to relinquish his attachment to the Maiden. It is this unwillingness, in turn, that prevents him from achieving the spiritual transformation that she describes. His failure to fully grasp her message is not the result of the obscurity of her speech or his inability to comprehend it but of his refusal to accept her terms. Contrary to critics who have cited the Jeweler’s difficulties in understanding the Maiden’s transcendental message as evidence of his thick-headedness, I do not believe that the Jeweler is irredeemably literal-minded in his understanding and use of language.\(^{24}\) His word play suggests a measure of sophistication when it comes to metaphorical linguistic usage, as throughout the poem he toys with the Maiden’s words, refusing to adhere to the meanings that she attaches to them. His reworking of the Maiden’s speech demonstrates a knowing unwillingness to interpret her words and phrases in the Christological sense that she intends. The difficulties that he encounters in grasping her meaning are not, therefore, due to an inability to understand metaphor but to his attachment to a particular, different set of meanings—perhaps reminiscent of Amant’s renunciation of Raison in the *Roman de la rose*. The Jeweler’s insistent reconfiguration of the Maiden’s language is a vivid illustration of his willful resistance to her transcendent message.

The Jeweler’s appropriation of the Maiden’s words indicates his determination to stay focused on her, not God, in a way that emphasizes her physicality and his proprietary relationship to her. Examples of such appropriation can be found in many of the concatenating link words that are repeated from stanza to stanza within each of the poem’s twenty stanza

\(^{23}\) Bullón-Fernández attributes the Jeweler’s inability to understand the transcendent signified behind the Maiden’s mundane signifiers to the Maiden herself: “Throughout the poem the maiden tries to appropriate the language of courtly love and to give it an exclusively religious meaning. However, the end of the dreamer’s vision is witness to her failure” (49). I find this reading to be a bit less charitable than is perhaps called for; like accusing the dreamer of being too dense to understand the Maiden’s discourse, placing the blame for the breakdown in communication squarely on one party neglects the fact that, inadequate though it may be, this was the kind of language used (and still used today) to talk about things divine. Russell’s interpretation strikes me as being more apt in that it acknowledges the necessity of using human language to describe otherworldly matters, despite its limitations.

\(^{24}\) Numerous critics have stated or suggested that the dreamer is too obtuse to understand his vision; for example, in addition to the rather blunt assessments cited above, Frances Fast calls the dreamer “a bit of a fool,” adding that he represents “the human inability to comprehend or express the heavenly” (Frances Fast, “Poet and Dreamer in *Pearl*: ‘Hys Ryche to Wynne,’” *English Studies in Canada* 18.4 [1992]: 371).
groups. As he repeats the Maiden’s words, the Jeweler frequently invests them with a new meaning, usually one that is more congenial to his desires. When, for example, he concludes a speech to the Maiden with a description of himself as a “joylez juelere” and begins the following stanza with a reference to her as a “juel” (252–53), or when the Jeweler picks up on the Maiden’s phrase, “[þ]ou art no kynde jueler,” to again refer to her as a “juel” (276–77), he emphasizes his sense of their relationship through the play on words: they are naturally linked to one another, the jewel being rightfully the property of the jeweler. As Heather Maring notes, however, jewels do not remain the property of jewelers; although they are shaped by jewelers, they ultimately pass out of their hands and into the hands of others. Yet the Jeweler “wants to hoard his jewel” — in his insistence upon his relationship to the girl, he sacrifices the implications of his own metaphor. Elsewhere in the poem, his linguistic play is clearly used to keep the Maiden at the center of their discourse. In the thirteenth stanza group, he echoes her use of the word “maskelles”—which she utters in reference to the “pearl of price” and to the pearls in which Christ has clothed her (744 and 768)—but employs the word to describe her purity (745 and 769). Echoing her terms in this way has the effect of conflating the Maiden with her message and foregrounding her as the subject of their dialogue. Such play enables him to elide her intended message, maintaining his focus upon the presence of the Maiden and, importantly, on her close relationship to him.

The dialogue following the parable of the “pearl of price” most clearly demonstrates the Jeweler’s determination to adapt the Maiden’s language and to bring it back to his preferred meaning. This example is particularly telling because the Maiden makes it quite clear what she means by the “maskelles perle” at the center of the story, and yet the Jeweler reinterprets this phrase as referring to the Maiden herself. He thus reconfigures the lesson of her parable so that it coincides with his interest in reuniting with her. The Maiden first relates the story of the jeweler who “solde alle hys goud, boþe wolen and lynne, / To bye hym a perle watz maskelles” (731–32). She is fairly explicit about what she means by this “perle”:

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25. The word play in the poem is, of course, actually the product of the poet, who plays with the link words on a larger scale throughout the text. However, the Jeweler serves as the mouthpiece for much of this word play, working like the poet to invest the imagery of heaven with the earthly meanings that suit his desires.
27. Maring, 7.
This makellez perle, þat bo3t is dere,
þe joueler gef fore alle hys god,
Is lyke þe reme of heuenesse clere—
So sayde þe Fader of folde and flode—
For hit is wemlez, clene, and clere,
And endelez rounde, and blyþe of mode,
And commune to alle that ry3twys were.
Lo, euen inmyddez my breste hit stode:
My Lorde, þe Lombe, þat schede Hys blode,
He py3t hit þere in token of pes.
I rede þe forsake þe worlde wode
And porchace þy perle maskelles. (733–44)

Although the meaning that the Maiden ascribes to the pearl is complex, she clearly articulates the basic concepts to which it refers: it is the realm of heaven, it belongs to those who live rightly, and it is a spotless token of peace—in short, it signifies the renunciation of worldly living (the “forsak[ing of] þe worlde wode”) and the pure, virtuous life of worship. Some critics have read the Maiden’s explanation of the parable as her imposition of a transcendental interpretation upon her hapless father. O. D. Macrae-Gibson argues that this stanza is a part of the Maiden’s attempt to correct her father’s original misunderstanding of the meaning of the pearl-image: while the Jeweler thinks of the child’s body as a pearl—a material object to be possessed—the true pearl is the soul, which can only be possessed by God.28 Edward Wilson makes a similar argument, noting that throughout Pearl the Maiden “take[s] the narrator’s imagery and give[s] it different referends, supernal for earthly.” The progressive increase in the Jeweler’s understanding of her discourse can thus be measured by his “giving heavenly referends to images which earlier had earthly ones,” as he does in his use of the image of the rose in lines 905–6.29 Like Macrae-Gibson, Wilson sees the Maiden as controlling the terms of the dialogue, infusing the Jeweler’s earthly language with transcendent signification.30

Macrae-Gibson’s and Wilson’s readings make sense until we consider the lines that follow the Maiden’s explanation, where it becomes apparent

30. Spearing implicitly asserts the Maiden’s role as a corrector of the dreamer’s mistaken ideas when he notes that “the Pearl Maiden meticulously unpicks and corrects the dreamer’s misunderstandings about the nature of the heavenly kingdom and the means of gaining it” (Textual Subjectivity, 161).
that this is more than a one-way correction. When the Jeweler responds to
the Maiden’s parable, he makes no reference to the transcendent content
of what she has said. Instead, he takes the phrase “perle maskelles” and
applies it, not to the heavenly kingdom to which the Maiden refers, but
to the Maiden herself: “O maskelez perle in perlez pure, / Þat beres . . . þe
perle of prys,” he begins (745–46). In the stanza that these lines introduce,
he dwells on the beauty of her form and asks who created her to be so radi-
ant, clearly appropriating the key phrase of her speech in order to subvert
her meaning. By referring to her as the “maskelez perle” of the parable, he
suggests that she, not heaven, is the prize to be won. In fact, the Maiden’s
use of the metaphor of the pearl opens the way for the Jeweler’s willful
reinterpretation. She is wearing pearls, and she has been given the perfect
pearl “inmyddez [her] breste,” making the Jeweler’s return to materiality—
to the pearls on her clothing (746), to her clothing itself (748), and finally
to her own beauty (749)—altogether natural. That he turns the conversation
away from transcendent matters and back to the physical body of the girl
he loves, then, need not be a sign of stupidity or literal-mindedness, but
indicates his unwillingness to renounce his attachment to her.31

Second, Wilson’s argument that the Jeweler’s use of the rose image
indicates his newfound understanding of the transcendent referends under-
yling the Maiden’s speech does not hold up to scrutiny. The image of the
rose first appears early in the poem, when the Maiden uses it to signify her
mortal body: “For þat þou lestez watz bot a rose / Þat flowred and fayled
as kynde hyt gef,” she says (269–70). She sets the rose in opposition to the
pearl, which signifies the immortality of her soul. Wilson sees the dreamer’s
later use of the rose image as evidence of his increasing facility with sym-
bolic language. However, the Jeweler’s use of the image actually suggests
that he does not fully understand the Maiden’s meaning: “I am bot mokke
and mul among, / And þou so ryche a reken rose, / And bydez here by þys
bylsful bonc / Per lyuez lyste may neuer lose” (905–08). Where the Maiden
uses the rose as an image of temporality and the impermanence of the flesh
that contrasts with the purity of the pearl, the Jeweler still sees her as the
rose. His use of the image is indicative not of his acceptance of her mean-
ing but of his persistence in identifying her with her physical form. The
mere fact that he is employing her imagery, then, does not mean that he has
absorbed—or consented to—the meaning with which she has tried to imbue
it.

31. It is, moreover, strange to consider him “literal-minded” when even the fact of his
associating the pearl with the Maiden is evidence of his metaphorical inclinations.
At other points in the poem, as well, the Jeweler illustrates his unwillingness to relinquish the Maiden in his repetition of the link words, which enables him to shift the terms of her discourse away from God and the heavenly kingdom and back to the girl herself. His linguistic play allows him to create meanings that are congenial to his desires by keeping the Maiden at the center of their discourse. For instance, in the sixth stanza group, the dreamer adapts her use of “deme,” or judgment, to foreground her judgment of him, rather than the divine judgment to which she refers. The Maiden emphasizes the impossibility of the Jeweler’s remaining on the far bank with her before he has suffered death and earned God’s permission when she says, “Þur3 drwry deth boz vch man dreue, / Er ouer þys dam hym Dry3tyn deme” (323–24). She stresses God’s judgment as that which will determine the Jeweler’s fate. His response to this, however, is to ask, “Demez þou me . . . ?” (325). His words echo the terminal “deme” of the preceding line but apply it to the Maiden, shifting the focus of the discussion from God’s judgment to the girl’s. His appropriation and reinterpretation of her speech evoke his ongoing preoccupation with the Maiden rather than an engagement with the content of her speech and the submission to God’s will that she continually enjoins him to undergo. Again, later in the poem, the Maiden’s description of the company of virgins in which she finds herself—“þe meyny þat is withouten mote” (960)—gives way, in the Jeweler’s reply, to the singular figure of the Maiden herself: “Motelez may so meke and mylde,” he addresses her in the subsequent line (961). The dreamer’s insistence on her singularity, rather than on the blessed collectivity that she is trying to evoke, keeps her in the foreground of their conversation. The Jeweler thus repeatedly borrows from the Maiden’s speech not to affirm her message but to deny it. With his appropriation of her language, he insists upon her presence when she wishes him to think of God and reduces the company of virgins to the single figure of the girl. In each of these examples, he inverts her meaning, interpreting her transcendent messages as reflections of his worldly desire.

III. The Will as Obstacle

The Jeweler is an active participant in the visionary dialogue. By reinterpreting the terms of the Maiden’s speech, he insists upon his ongoing attachment to her physical form and her relationship to him despite her insistence that he leave these behind. From the beginning of the poem, it is evident that this resistance to her instructions is a function of his will. “A
deuely dele in my hert denned / ða3 resoun sette myseluen sa3t. . . . ða3 kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned, / My wrecch'd wylle in wo ay wræ3te” (51–52, 55–56), he laments, indicating the dominance of his will. Theodore Bogdanos asserts that the poem depicts “a violent splitting of the self into two antithetical voices”: reason and the “kynde of Kryst” on the one hand and the dreamer’s will on the other.32 Where fourteenth-century mystical texts stress the importance of subordinating one’s will to the divine will as a necessary step on the way to divine union, the Jeweler’s willful attachment to the Maiden illustrates the difficulty of following this injunction, and his unwillingness to accept her terms is ultimately the greatest obstacle to his fully understanding her message.

Although the Jeweler’s resistance to the Maiden comes from the stirrings of his will, the fact that he is not in control of his vision prohibits him from fully acting upon his desires. Potentially, it would seem that the Jeweler could fall into the trap to which Amant succumbs in the *Rose*: his will, rebelling against both reason and religion, could lead him down a path that is in harmony with his desire to remain with the Maiden. And that is what he attempts to do when he resists the Maiden’s transcendent meaning in his word play. But an essential difference between *Pearl* and the *Rose* prevents this from coming to fruition: where the *Roman de la rose* is populated with conflicting authorities—Raison and Amor prominent among them—in *Pearl* there is only the Maiden. No alternative path presents itself; the dreamer is compelled to obey the Maiden and, through her, Christ. Moreover, the Maiden is not a mere player in the world of the dream—as Raison is in the *Rose*, where she competes on equal terms with Ami, Amor, and the others—but is a part of the controlling force behind the vision. As a God-given revelatory experience, the vision limits the courses of action that are available to the dreamer; it is, for example, implausible that the Jeweler could have snuck across the river while the Maiden’s eyes were turned.33 His behavior within the dream is constrained by the rules dictated by Christ and voiced through Christ’s mouthpiece, the Maiden. The problem of the wayward will is not, therefore, as pernicious as it is in the *Roman de la rose*. Because it cannot result in successful action, the Jeweler’s resistance to the Maiden’s speech is largely internal and manifests in his linguistic play.

But the Jeweler’s unruly will hinders his acceptance of the Maiden’s terms, preventing him both from drawing comfort from God and from absorbing the spiritual message of his vision. That his will continues to struggle despite his seeming awareness of the consolatory powers of both
reason and Christ (“My wreched wylle in wo ay wra3te”) demonstrates his reluctance to abandon his grief regardless of the distress that it causes him. This attitude, which is made explicit at the outset of the poem, illustrates his commitment to a material attachment to the Maiden as a living girl—an attachment that will undermine his visionary experience, impeding him in his understanding of the divine message that it is intended to transmit. Further, this attachment entails his inability to truly experience Christ’s presence. As Cynthia Kraman argues, lines 51–56 reveal the Jeweler’s purely intellectual understanding of Christ; he is not yet capable of genuinely “feeling Him as a presence.” She writes, “The narrator is tied to the literal body, longing for the supernal one, but unsure of the ultimate transference of self that will happen when he surrenders to the comfort of Christ. This possibility of Christ’s comfort, and the willful dismissal of it, is captured” in lines 55–56. The Jeweler’s attachment to the Maiden is an attachment to the world and represents his alienation from the comforting presence of the divine.

The Jeweler’s attachment to the material form of the Maiden is even reflected in the material terms in which he understands the visionary landscape. From the outset of the vision, the poem establishes him as vividly interested in the concrete elements of the world, and his reaction to the dreamscape—his preoccupation with visual details and the emotional effect that these details have on him—demonstrates that he is unprepared to turn away from the physical in favor of the supernal. Upon finding himself in the otherworldly landscape of his dream, the Jeweler compares many of its features to ordinary things, such as weaving (71), music (91–94), jewels (82), and precious metals (77, 106). The use of mundane items to describe the supernatural may signify nothing more than the necessity of employing images of the familiar to describe the new. However, the second stanza group’s link word—“adubbement” and its variations—indicates a preoccupation with physical adornment and beautification. This preoccupation exposes the Jeweler’s significant investment in materiality. Moreover, the capacity of his setting’s physical beauty to console him (“The dubbement dere of doun and daele, / Of wod and water and wlonk playnez, / Bylde in me blys, abated my balez, / Fordidden my stresse, dystryed my paynez,” 121–24) demonstrates its power over the dreamer. What the thought of Christ could not do in the earlier stanza is achieved by the beauty surrounding him. Far from being prepared to renounce the world, the Jeweler is thoroughly entrenched in its beauties, comforts, and temporal rewards. This

preoccupation with the material limits his ability to look beyond the Maid- en’s physical form. His focus on the beauty of the vision’s setting, argues Jim Rhodes, “indicate[s] his attachment to the physical world and point[s] to his sensitivity to human finitude, change, and the problem of death.”\

Where there is physicality, there is its demise: indeed, the Jeweler’s attachment to the Maiden is first introduced in the description of her body moldering underground. In the second stanza of the poem, prior to the onset of his vision, the Jeweler reflects on the physical reality of her dead body, introducing a theme that will resurface—albeit in less literal terms—throughout the work: “To þenke hir color so clad in clot! / O moul, þou marrez a myry juele, / My priuy perle withouten spotte” (22–24). The dreamer’s preoccupation with her physical presence attains its most striking realization in the poem’s final sections, when it contrasts with the extravagance of the heavenly procession. At the height of his apocalyptic vision, the Jeweler persists in thinking of the Maiden in terms of her worldly relationship to him: she is a queen, but remains “my lyttel quene” (1147). Even at this stage he retains his attachment to her.\

Pervading the poem is the narrator’s longing to rejoin the physical body of the girl even after he has come to understand that she is now a queen in heaven. Finally, the Jeweler’s impetus for crossing the stream clearly evinces his ongoing desire for physical proximity to the girl that he loves, indicating that even by the end of the vision he has not renounced his desire to be with her again. The timing of his decision to attempt the crossing strongly suggests that it is not Christ but the Maiden that the Jeweler wishes to reach. At the end of the procession of the Lamb, he sees his “lyttel quene” rejoicing in the presence of Christ (1147). It is explicitly this sight that prompts him to consider crossing the stream: “Þat syЗt me gart to þenk to wade / For luf-longyng in gret delyt” (1151–52). The “love longing” that he feels is not for Christ, but for the Maiden. It is she that he is drawn to rejoin, she—not Christ—for whom his soul yearns.\n
Significantly, his delight is expressed in terms of sensory (and therefore physical) pleasure—“Delyt me drof in yЗe and ere, / My manez mynde to maddyng malte” (1153–54)—phrases that underscore the physical quality and origin of his

36. Cherniss, 162.
37. Sarah Stanbury makes a similar argument, noting that the Jeweler “yearns to join not the Lamb, not Christ, but his Pearl.” His focused attention on her, and the description of himself as perceiving the Lamb and the Maiden, is a reminder of the fixity of his body in space, and of its distance, perhaps, from the divine. (Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991] 24.)
pleasure, even in the face of the heavenly scene before him.\textsuperscript{38} The reference to the physical senses and his “man’s mind” recall, as well, the Maiden’s first criticism of him—that he depends too much on his faculties of reason and perception—as well as the words with which she introduces her criticism of his speech: “Wy borde 3e men? So madde 3e be!” (290; my emphasis). The thematic and verbal echoes between these two passages suggest that the Jeweler has not progressed at all since that first rebuke. That it is the overwhelming of his mind and senses that pushes him to cross the stream graphically illustrates the physical terms in which he experiences his vision. He cannot, or \textit{will} not, perceive it in any way other than through human eyes. To the very end, his desire remains fixed upon the Maiden, driving him to the madness (“maddyng”) that leads him to plunge into the stream despite the knowledge that he will not be able to cross. By fixing his will upon the Maiden and essentially refusing to abandon his attachment to her, the Jeweler remains almost static: his emphasis upon her physical body and his desire to possess it hinder his understanding of the content of even the most revelatory moment of his vision.

\textbf{IV. Mystical Renunciation and the Jeweler’s Desire}

The idea that attachment to created things prevents one from uniting with the divine is not new. An obvious Biblical root of this sentiment is found in Luke 14:26: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” In \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, Augustine provides an elaborated theological explication of the renunciation of loving attachment, as his careful distinction between “use” (\textit{usi}) and “enjoyment” (\textit{frui}) is explicitly applied to the love between human beings. He writes,

\begin{quote}
\textit{Praeceptum est enim nobis ut diligamus inuicem; sed quaeeritur utrum propter se homo ab homine diligendus sit an propter aliud. Si enim propter se, fruimur eo; si propter aliud, utimur eo. Vide tur autem mihi propter aliud diligendus. Quod enim propter se diligendum est, in eo constituitur beata uita, cuius etiam si nondum res, tamen spes eius nos hoc tempore consolatur.}\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} Stanbury notes that this passage shows that the Jeweler’s crossing the stream is “a response to sensory and especially visual stimuli” (\textit{Seeing}, 13), underscoring his attachment not simply to the physical, but to the specifically visual.

\textsuperscript{39} Augustine (Sancti Aurelii Augustini), \textit{De Doctrina Christiana. De Vera Religione}, Corpus Christianorum, vol. 32 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1962) I.22, 20; italics in original.
(We have been commanded . . . to love one another; but the question is whether people are to be loved by others for their own sake, or for the sake of something else. If it is for their own sake, then they are things for us to enjoy; if for the sake of something else, they are things for us to use. Now it seems to me that they are to be loved for the sake of something else, because if a thing is to be loved for its own sake, it means that it constitutes the life of bliss, which consoles us in this present time with the hope of it, even though not yet in its reality.40)

The objective of earthly love, according to Augustine, is not love of the particular individual, but love of God. Being attached to the corporate being, the human love-object, is tantamount to being “enslaved under signs” (“sub signo . . . seruit”)41—that is, failing to recognize the divine referent that underlies the signifying word. Love, for Augustine, follows much the same rules as language in that in its proper manifestation it points beyond its earthly incarnation and towards the divine.

The fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing*, an English text roughly contemporaneous with *Pearl*, articulates a similar view of affective attachments to created beings as an obstacle to the soul’s union with God. A work of apophatic mysticism,42 *The Cloud of Unknowing* repeatedly enjoins its readers to forsake worldly attachment—to “for3ete alle þe creatures þat euer God maad & þe werkes of hem”43—in order to truly love God. The *Cloud* resonates with Augustine’s prohibition on “enjoying” the love-object rather than properly “using” it as a means of reflecting on and honoring God; indulging in an affectionate attachment to another human being is an impediment to knowing the divine. Thus the *Cloud*-author directs the reader to “Lift up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue; & mene himself, & none of his goodes . . . so þat þi þou3t ne þi desire be not directe ne streche to any of hem, neiþer in general ne in special.”44 One should orient one’s loving attention towards God, in other words, and not towards his “goods”—which includes human beings as well as material objects.

The terms of the Jeweler’s attachment to the Maiden imply a rejection of the detachment advocated by the *Cloud*. *Pearl*’s ending does not depict the translation of a previously worldly dreamer into a state of spiritual

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44. Ibid.
enlightenment, as the Jeweler’s declaration that “my joye watz sone tori-uen, / And I kaste of kythez þat lastez aye” (1197–98) indicates a confusion between his attachment to the Maiden and his desire to comply with God’s will. Given that it was the sight of the Maiden, and not of the Lamb, that spurred him to attempt to cross the river, it seems clear that his “joye” is her, not Christ. In the same stanza, his professed submission to God’s will is also confused: his desire to obey God is intermingled with his love for the Maiden. The lines “To þat Pryncez paye hade I ay bente, / And 3erned no more þen watz me geuen. . . . To mo of His mysterys I hade ben dryuen” (1189–90, 1194), so often cited as evidence that he has undergone a spiritual transformation, suggest a failure of understanding: there is no indication that he would have been allowed to cross the stream in his mortal lifetime even if he had been obedient to Christ’s will, as the Maiden makes clear (“Þur3 drwry deth boz vch man dreue, / Er ouer þys dam hym Dry3ten deme,” 323–24). Moreover, given that his attachment to the Maiden remains the motivating force behind his desire to stay in the world of his vision, there is something disingenuous about his stated interest in following the strictures laid down by God.

The obstacles to divine knowledge raised by the Jeweler’s love for the Maiden situate *Pearl* within a broader tradition of mystical literature that posits the renunciation of worldly attachment as necessary for divine union. A major proponent of non-attachment is Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), a Dominican preacher and scholar who taught laypersons and religious alike in Germany and France. Eckhart’s theology emphasizes the importance of emptying oneself of all forms of attachment, including the attachment to images and divine favors such as visions, as a prerequisite for true knowledge of God. The divine, argues Eckhart, is present in the grunt (ground) of the soul, which is of the same nature as God. But union with God is possible only if the soul is free of all worldly attachments—in what he calls a juncvröuwelich, “virgin” state. A virgin soul is a soul that “von allen vrem-den bilden ledic ist, alsô ledic, als er was, dô er niht enwas” (is free of all

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45. In his 2005 study, Spearing argues that this conclusion shows that the Jeweler “subsequently recognized that he must submit to God’s will and commit her to God with a father’s blessing” (*Textual Subjectivity*, 152). This conclusion coincides with his 1966 argument that this passage reveals that “the Dreamer’s visionary experience has a significant effect on his life in the waking world. . . . [S]ubmitting to God’s will, he now accepts positively the loss of the pearl” (A. C. Spearing, “Symbolic and Dramatic Development in *Pearl*,” in *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert J. Blanch [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966] 118). Gregory Roper has also noted that by the end of the poem the dreamer “realizes that it is his own attitude towards God’s grace that opens or closes the door to higher things,” teaching him “to give even his closest possessions . . . to God” (Roper, 183).
foreign images, as free as he was when he was not). Conceding that this state of total detachment is not easy to attain, Eckhart nonetheless insists that it is a necessary precondition for union with Christ, who, being innocent and free himself, can only join with a soul that is equally so. The Jeweler’s soul is not, in Eckhardian terms, juncvrőuwelich. Resisting the Maiden’s injunction to surrender her to the afterlife, he remains focused on material attachments and the corporeality of her body. Until he gives her up, Christ cannot be “born” in his soul—he cannot enjoy true union with, or knowledge of, the divine. The Jeweler’s inability to remain in the city with the Maiden is consistent with Eckhart’s theology of non-attachment: by repeatedly turning away from the Maiden’s transcendent message and towards the Maiden herself, he consigns himself to a worldly existence.

In contrast, a lived example of the Eckhardian “virgin” soul can be found in Gertrude of Helfta, who, in her Legatus Memorialis Abundantiae Divinae Pietatis, similarly asserts the necessity of uniting one’s will with God’s. Twice, the Lord tells Gertrude that her knowledge of divine matters is predicated upon her volitional union with Christ. The basis for this union is her freedom of the heart, or libertas cordis: her renunciation of all attachment to ideas, affections, and even the self. By emptying the soul of earthly attachments, libertas cordis “make[s] room for the in-dwelling of the divine.” According to her biographer, it is because Gertrude manifests this quality that Christ chooses to grant her his favors. Like Eckhart’s concept of spiritual virginity, libertas cordis entails a detachment from the world that enables the divine to manifest itself in the soul and leads to the union of one’s will with God’s. The Legatus repeatedly emphasizes this characteristic as the trait that makes Gertrude’s visionary experiences possible and enables her to understand the transcendent knowledge that those experiences reveal.

The fact that such disparate works as the Cloud, Eckhart’s sermons, and Gertrude’s Legatus all stress detachment from worldly ideas, desires, and other creatures as an essential prerequisite for the soul’s union with Christ suggests the idea’s widespread purchase in thirteenth- and fourteenth-

century Christian thought. Based upon a consideration of even these few sources, it becomes clear that the Jeweler is incapable of fully comprehending the transcendent knowledge imparted by his vision. He does not renounce the Maiden by the end of the poem; clinging to her as much as he ever did, he openly regrets that his hasty impulse has prevented him from remaining with her in paradise. The lesson that he was meant to learn—to let go of his attachment to the Maiden and submit himself entirely to God—has not been fully absorbed even by the closing lines of the poem. But this ending need not be read in an entirely pessimistic light. The \textit{Cloud of Unknowing} provides a way of interpreting worldly attachment as a common but surmountable obstacle to mystical union. Understood thus, the closing stanzas of \textit{Pearl} suggest that the Jeweler has learned something—even if it is not the whole of the lesson that was intended for him—and that his plight is not altogether hopeless.

Several passages in the \textit{Cloud} acknowledge that worldly renunciation is not easy to accomplish and that an attachment to another created being does not irrevocably prevent one from knowing the divine. In fact, the author suggests, even the purest souls occasionally find themselves embroiled in loving attachments to other creatures:

\begin{quote}
I say not bot he schal fele som-tyme—Зe! ful ofte—his affeccion more homely to one, two, or þre, þen to alle þees oþer; for þat is leueful to be for many causis, as charite askiþ. For soche an homly affeccion felid Criste to Ihonn, & vtto Marye, & vtto Petre bifoire many oþer. Bot I say þat in þe tyme of þis werk schal alle be iliche homly vnto hym; for he schal fele þan no cause bot only God. So þat alle schul be louyd pleynly & nakidy for God, & as wel as him-self.\end{quote}

In this passage, the author admits that even Christ sometimes developed powerful attachments to specific individuals. Such “homly affeccion” is not to be taken as an irremediable failing; it is human and natural for even the holiest to experience it. The mere fact that the Jeweler feels a particular love for the Maiden—a love that distracts him from his love for God—does not mean that he is hopelessly obtuse, or irredeemably bound to the things of this earth.

50. These three texts are by no means the only examples of medieval Christian literature that emphasize the importance of renouncing earthly attachment in order to obtain a perfect knowledge of the divine. The theme is, in fact, quite prevalent; Walter Hilton’s fourteenth-century \textit{Scala Perfectionis}, for example, repeatedly underscores the necessity of detachment from the world and its creatures in the ascent to divine union.

51. \textit{Cloud}, 60.
But even these attachments must be overcome through a combination of individual striving and divine grace. Although the *Cloud*-author recognizes the inevitability of developing the occasional affectionate tie to an individual creature, the text emphasizes that surmounting such affections is the work, or “travayle,” of the virtuous soul:

Sekirly þis trauayle is al in tredyng doun of þe mynde of alle þe creatures þat euer God maad, & in holdyng of hem vnder þe cloude of forZetyng namyd before. In þis is alle þe traueyle; for þis is mans trauayle, wiþ help of grace. & þe toþer abouen—þat is to sey, þe steryng of loue—þat is þe werk of only God. & þerfore do on þi werk, & sekirly I behote þee it schal not fayle on hym.\(^{52}\)

The author thus enjoins the reader to “do þi werk”: to strive continually for the suppression of earthly attachments and ideas and by such renunciation to move ever closer to God. Importantly, however, the soul’s movement towards God is not the work of the soul alone. This “steryng of love” is “þe werk of only God.” It is our task, in other words, to place the things of this world into a cloud of forgetting—a continual work, as new attachments will inevitably rise up throughout our lives—and leave the development of love for God at least partially in God’s hands. This depiction of the soul’s progress towards God is similar to that laid out by Eckhart, who describes the emptying of the soul and its return to a “virgin” state as characterized by constant vigilance, work, and activity. The realization of God’s love in the soul then comes from God, who is “fruitful through” the soul (“vruht-bærlich in im”).\(^{53}\) The soul is not, therefore, wholly responsible for its movement towards the divine. Grace explicitly plays a part in the development of one’s loving relationship with the godhead.

In *Pearl*, the vision can be read as a part of the Jeweler’s education, pushing him towards the work of renunciation that may eventually lead to divine knowledge. Applying to the poem the *Cloud’s* joint stress on human labor and divine grace therefore yields a more forgiving interpretation of his spiritual trajectory. It is true that his attachment to the Maiden impedes his progress towards Christ by disrupting his vision and, more importantly, distracting him from love for the divine. But by the end of the poem he seems to be on the road to understanding. Recognizing that “ay wolde man of happe more hente / þen mo3te by ry3t upon hem clyuen” (1195–96), he sees, at least, that grasping at more than he has been granted by trying

\(^{52}\) Cloud, 61–62.

\(^{53}\) Eckhart, 28.
to remain with the Maiden before his time is not in harmony with God’s will. Whether this means that he has begun suppressing his attachment to the Maiden is unclear, but the lesson that he has learned—that he must renounce the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake and subjugate himself to the will of God—suggests that he has at least a theoretical understanding of the work that lies before him if he is ultimately to achieve union with Christ. In the absence of an unfettered heart and mind, the Jeweler cannot truly conform to God’s will, but he can understand what he needs to do to live a virtuous—if perhaps unexceptional—life.

Like the *Roman de la rose*, then, *Pearl* illustrates how the human will can interfere with visionary knowing. In *Pearl*, however, the will is not an agent of lust, as it is for Amant, but rather follows the dictates of a presumably familial love. The Jeweler cannot truly learn what his vision aims to teach him because his heart is clouded by earthly attachment. Yet he is nonetheless able to amend his life, and the final stanzas of the poem suggest that he has at least begun to recognize that he has clung too fiercely to the Maiden’s physical presence. In this sense, the vision has achieved its aim. Because the Jeweler’s initial failing is his continued attachment to the Maiden as a living girl, it makes sense that one of the poem’s major themes is how such attachment interferes with the soul’s union with and knowledge of Christ. *Pearl* can therefore be read as an exemplum of the Cloud’s theology of detachment. By failing to put the Maiden behind a “cloud of forgetting,” as the Cloud-author instructs, the Jeweler is prevented from reaching Christ or the heavenly city and of learning what greater truths his vision might have imparted had he been more patient.\(^\text{54}\) The sense of regret that pervades the poem’s ending suggests that the Jeweler at least recognizes this, although it is less clear whether he understands the whole cause of his failure. His refusal to accept the Maiden’s terms seems to have abated as he recognizes the futility of persisting in his attempt to regain her presence.

One further point bears mentioning in a consideration of how a loving attachment to another human interferes with the possibility of divine rev-

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\(^{54}\) Spearing argues that his plunge into the stream excludes the dreamer from the culminating moment of the vision, in which, perhaps, “the Lamb and the pearl would be identified, and the Dreamer would see in the precious stone the ground of its own preciousness; or, to put it differently, would recognize in the human soul the image of God” (*Gawain-Poet*, 170). In his more recent study, he supports this earlier reading when he posits that the dreamer’s inability to resist joining the Maiden “brought the vision to a premature end” (*Textual Subjectivity*, 152). Although Spearing’s reading is largely speculative, it is possible that—within the world of the narrative—the vision would have continued had he refrained from attempting to cross the stream; the fact that his attempt at crossing is what wakes him up supports this theory.
relation: such love can, in fact, enable divine revelation to occur. Two lines in the final stanza point to a surprising turn away from the via negativa that is implied by the Jeweler’s need to renounce his love for the Maiden. In the narrator’s final summing-up of his vision, he notes, “Ouer þis hyul þis lote I la3te, / For pyty of my perle enclyin” (1205–06). In these words, he reminds the reader that the vision came about through “pyty”—a usage of the word which the Middle English Dictionary glosses as “Sorrow, grief; misery, distress; also, remorse.” While pity can be an attribute of God, in this instance its quality of expressing grief makes it a human emotion stemming from a loving attachment to another human being. And this pity is the source of his vision. His love for the Maiden is what enables him to have the vision of divine truth; attachment therefore can lead to a glimpse of the divine. Such a use of earthly love is, in Augustinian terms, a form of usi, whereby one’s thoughts are turned to God by means of an appreciation of and love for another created being. The Jeweler’s “use” of the Maiden, while it is problematic in that he does not initially consent to it, focusing on her instead of the divinity that is perceptible through her, suggests one way that love for another human can both impede and enable visionary knowing.

Yet the dreamer remains limited—by his corporeality, by the difficulty of transcending his attachment to earthly beings while still in the living world. Gazing upon the heavenly city, the dreamer remarks that it is such a great marvel that “No fleschly hert ne my3t endeure” its sight (1082). This phrase has particular resonance in the context of his attachment to the dead girl’s material presence. His love for the Maiden—for her physical body—cannot endure the detachment necessary for a true union with the divine. And his heart, which continues to love the girl despite her repeated injunction that he turn away from her and contemplate the divine alone, cannot make the movement of renunciation that his heavenly vision demands of him. As a fleshly being, a purely human being who remains attached to the loves and pleasures of the world, the sight is not his to endure. Perhaps, as a result of his overwhelming desire to remain with the girl that he loves, the Jeweler did awaken before his vision had revealed the totality of its apoca-


56. It is significant that the Jeweler’s compassionate feeling for the Lamb arises out of a similar feeling of pity—“Alas, þo3t I, who did þat spyt?” he wonders when he sees the wound in his side (1138). This echo of the pity that he feels for the dead Maiden unifies the two figures in his affective response to them, further implicating the Maiden in his understanding of Christ’s suffering; it also emphasizes the predominance of this very human response in the dreamer’s emotional state.
lyptic message, but the conclusion of the poem leaves us with the sense that he has learned all that he can learn at this point in his spiritual development. Understanding that he must submit himself to God’s will despite his ongoing love for the dead girl is enough for now—and is, perhaps, the limit of what his “fleshly heart” can endure in this life.