

**SYMBOLISM, ALLEGORY,
AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN
THE PEARL, PP. 585-675**

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WILLIAM HENRY SCHOFIELD

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SYMBOLISM, ALLEGORY, AND AUTO- BIOGRAPHY IN *THE PEARL*.

In 1904 I ventured to write an article entitled "The Nature and Fabric of *The Pearl*,"¹ in which I advanced opinions at variance with those previously held on the subject. Since then have appeared a new edition of the poem, five new English translations of all or a large part of it, and several articles on various aspects of the work.²

¹ *Publ. Mod. Lang. Ass.*, XIX, 154-215.

² Ed. C. G. Osgood (*Belles Lettres Series*), Boston, 1906; trans. (in part) S. Weir Mitchell, N. Y., 1906—reprinted, with additions, in *The Bibelet*, Portland, Maine, 1908; trans. G. G. Coulton, London, 1906; trans. (in prose) C. G. Osgood, Princeton, N. J., 1907; trans. Marian Mead, Portland, Maine, 1908; trans. Sophie Jewett, N. Y., 1908. Professor Gollancz has announced a reprint of his edition and translation, to appear in *The King's Classics*.

See also C. S. Northrup, *Mod. Lang. Notes*, XXII (1907), 21 ff.; G. G. Coulton, "In Defence of 'Pearl,'" *Mod. Lang. Review*, II, (1907), 39 ff.; I. Gollancz, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, I, (1907), 320 ff.; J. J. Jusserand, *Literary History of the English People*, 2d Eng. ed., I, 351, n. A. Brandl, *Anfänge der Autobiographie in England*, in *Sitzungsberichte der Kgl. Preuss. Akad. der Wissenschaften*, XXXV (1908), 731-2; K. L. Bates, *The Dial*, Dec. 16, 1908, pp. 450 ff.

In no one of these documents has my point of view with regard to the symbolism, allegory, and autobiography in the poem been fully accepted. To be sure, the chief part of former, fanciful speculations regarding the author's life and incentive to composition have not been repeated;¹ but all who have recently *written* about the poem have clung tenaciously to the pleasant belief that *The Pearl* is a personal lament of the poet for a daughter of his own, and therefore strictly elegiac and autobiographical. This belief would be fairly harmless if (because of the primary stress always laid upon it) it did not inevitably obscure the true significance of the poem; but on this account it should not be allowed to establish itself more firmly without frank protest.

If I have been tempted to write again about *The Pearl*, it is because I am afraid that in my previous article I did not make my argument clear enough for those who are unacquainted with mediæval literature, and who could hardly be expected to judge of its conventions without more illustration; and because I recognize that my attitude on certain possibilities was not sufficiently explicit to preclude misunderstanding on the part of scholars whose opinion I highly respect. Besides, I should like to point out certain plain errors in recent discussions of the subject. I have gone over the whole matter again, reluctantly but conscientiously, considered every serious criticism carefully, examined the poem anew from different aspects, and if my further studies have not resulted in any considerable change in my point of view, but only in a somewhat different statement of it, this has not been because I have begun

¹ Save in the case of Professor Gollancz, who has revived his "hypothetical biography" of the poet in the *Cambridge History*, I, 330 ff.

with *parti pris* or proceeded without an open mind. I must confess, to be frank, that I have restudied the poem with scholarly method, though doubtless this will be again imputed to me as a reproach; but my main object has been to examine it as a work of pure literature, which does not, however, mean impressionistically, looking only on the surface, or without historic sense, as if it were a creation of to-day. I write "in defence of *Pearl*" as "a lover of the poem," and I earnestly pray, as Chaucer did long ago of *Troilus*:

"And red whereso thou be, or elles songe,
That thou be understonde, God I besече."

I.

Before coming to the main questions to be discussed in this article—Symbolism, Allegory, and Autobiography in *The Pearl*—I would ask the reader's indulgence while we consider together at some length the meaning of the opening stanza of the poem, which is naturally regarded by critics as giving its key-note. A correct translation of this stanza, I venture to say, has never been printed; and upon the misunderstanding of the text by the various translators has rested part of the false bias they have received themselves, and conveyed to every new reader, concerning the nature of the elegiac and autobiographical elements in the poem.

The opening stanza is as follows:¹

"Perle—pleasaunte to princes' paye
To clanky clos in gold so clere—
Oute of Oryent, I hardyly saye,

¹ There is no punctuation in the manuscript.

Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.
 So rounde, so reken in vehe araye,
 So smal, so smoþe her side; were,
 Queresouever I jugged gemme; gaye
 I sette hyr sengeley in syngl[e]re.
 Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere;
 þur; gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.
 I dewyne, fordolke of luf-daungere,
 Of þat pryuy parle wythouten spot."

These lines quite literally mean:

"Pearl—pleasant to princes' pleasure
 To (en)close cleanly in gold so clear—
 Out of the Orient, I hardily say,
 I never found its precious peer.
 So round, so radiant in each array
 So small, so smooth its sides were,
 Wheresoever I judged gay gems,
 I set it singly in uniqueness.
 Alas! I lost it in an 'arbor';
 Through grass to ground it went from me.
 I dwine, pierced with love's power,
 For that privy pearl without spot."

It will be observed that, if my interpretation of these lines is correct, there is no indication in them of what the poet's real loss is. We may surmise that the pearl he *represents* himself as losing is not to be taken literally, but we are as yet given no hint of what it may betoken. The author's plan is to let the symbolism of his poem disclose itself slowly.

The first mistake that has frequently been made in translating this stanza is to regard "princes" in the first line as a singular noun in the possessive case, the prince mentioned being taken to refer to the Prince of Heaven—whereby a picture has at once been evoked of Christ rejoicing in paradise in the possession of a pearl that He

has received. The early translators of the passage, Dr. Morris¹ and Professor Gollancz,² rendered the line accurately, though Professor Gollancz remarks in a note (p. 107) that "the phrase probably implies 'for *the* Prince's (i. e., God's) delight.'" Dr. Osgood, on the other hand, frankly capitalizes the noun in his text and glossary,³ and says that it means Christ, though admitting that "perhaps as a secondary meaning any prince is implied." In his (prose) translation, Dr. Osgood writes unhesitatingly: "O Pearl, delight of Christ the Prince," introducing the word Christ to establish the supposed meaning.⁴

Dr. Osgood was apparently led into error by the note of Professor Gollancz just quoted,⁵ and by his references to five refrains in the last section of the poem, especially to the last lines of all:

"He gef vus to be His homly hyne,
Ande precious perle, vnto His pay"—

"May He grant us to be servants in His house, and precious pearls unto His pleasure"—to which passages Dr. Osgood also refers in his notes. But both scholars have failed to notice that these supposed parallels are not exact;

¹ *Early Eng. Allit. Poems*, London, 1864, etc., EETS., I, p. ix.

² *Pearl*, London, 1891, p. 3.

³ Edition, pp. 53, 170.

⁴ The translations of Mr. Coulton ("pleasant to princes' pay") and of Miss Mead ("pleasing to prince's will") do not reveal very clearly what the author's ideas on the point were. Miss Jewett's, on the contrary ("Pearl that the Prince full well might prize"), shows agreement with Dr. Osgood's rendering, with still further straining of the sense.

⁵ Be it said, however, to Professor Gollancz's credit, that, as he himself emphasizes (p. 107), he "carefully avoided" translating it so in the text, giving as his reason that "the allegory should reveal itself gradually."

for in no instance in them is there any possibility of misunderstanding the meaning, a preceding "my" or "that" always definitely determining the sense: Pearl in paradise speaks of "*my* Prince" (1164); the dreamer, of "*that* Prince" (1176, 1188, 1189)¹—whereas it lies in the very intent and structure of the poem that "pearl" in the first line should be purely literal, and in the last purely symbolical.²

But if the first line is misleading in most of the translations, the second is still more so. The phrase "to clanyl close" has troubled editors and translators persistently, though it is in fact only a "split infinitive," meaning "to (en)close cleanly."³ Dr. Morris (p. 108) made the "to" augmentative, meaning "very"; cf. "most neatly set in gold so clear" (p. ix). Professor Gollancz writes in a note (p. 107): "lit. 'too cleanly enclosed' (i. e., for earthly existence)"; but in his translation he puts "so" ("so deftly set in gold so pure"), apparently not because

¹ Cf. the description of Lady Meed in *Piers Plowman* (Text A, passus II, ll. 11-12):

"Alle hir fyue fyngres . weore frettet with rynges,
Of the precioucest perre (gems) . that *prince* wered euere."

Dr. Osgood himself cites (pp. 54, 53): "The gentileste jowelle
ajuggede with *lordes*" (*Morte Arthure*, 862); "Coral yeud wip
cayser and knyht" (Böddeker, *Altengl. Dichtungen*, 145. 7).

² See below, pp. 612, 623 ff., 636.

³ "The author uses "close" (with silent "e") as an infinitive in the following line: "þur, kynde of þe kyste þat hyt con close" (271). There is extreme freedom in the scribe's use of final "e" in the text. The past participle of the verb is "closed" in *Cleanness*, l. 310 ("a cofer closed of tres, clanylch planed"); also "clos" in l. 12 ("if þay in clannes be clos þay cleche gret mede"). In the *Destruction of Troy* (ed. Panton and Donaldson, EETS., 1869) it is *closet* (*closet*), 268, 1509, 1634; in the *Wars of Alexander* (ed. Skeat, EETS., ES. 47, 1886) it is *closid* (*clozyd*), 383, 1378, 2012.

he regarded the "t" as a scribal error. Dr. Mitchell has "right cleanly housed in gold so clear"; Mr. Coulton: "so daintily dight in gold so clear"; Miss Jewett: "so surely set in shining gold"—all of these being variants of one of Professor Gollancz's interpretations, but conveying very dim meaning. It was reserved for Dr. Osgood to depart altogether from the text and to put in his translation something totally at variance with what the author wrote: "O Pearl, delight of Christ the Prince; now safe, afar, in his clear regions of pure shining gold"!

It is an interesting study to see how Dr. Osgood arrives at this extraordinary result. Having discussed Professor Gollancz's interpretations of "too" and "so" (the infinitive being always taken for a past participle), he remarks (p. 53): "But *clanly clos* is a common alliterative phrase and *clanly* may thus be used here rather for alliteration than meaning. *To* may thus belong to the more significant *clos*, the sense being 'too fast (though decently) enclosed for my present happiness.' Or *clanly* may mean 'completely,' in which case *to* could modify it." Furthermore, Dr. Osgood is troubled about "the intended figurative meaning of the whole line"¹ and decides that "*golde*

¹ In support of the "intended figurative meaning" discovered in this line, Dr. Osgood quotes as follows a passage from the *Love-Runes* of Thomas de Hales (*Old Eng. Miscellany*, ed. Morris, EETS, 1872, pp. 23 ff.):

"þe ymston [Mary] of þi bur,
He is betere an hundred folde
þan all þeos in heore culur.
He is idon in heouene golde,
And is ful of fyn amur."

I was the first to bring the *Love-Runes* into connection with *The Pearl*, to show the striking resemblance of the latter, in substance and phraseology, to a purely allegorical poem. But I am at a loss to understand how Dr. Osgood could gloss, as above, the "gem-