

LEO CARRUTHERS, *Pearl/Perle suivi de « Tolkien et Perle »*
(Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, 2024)

Leo Carruthers' translation of the Middle English anonymous poem *Pearl* into Modern French is faithful to the original, easy to read, and does justice to the theological depth and literary skill of the medieval poet. The volume is not just a translation (the first one into French); the introduction, and the afterword focusing on Tolkien are important contributions to scholarship *per se*.

Pearl is found in a unique manuscript alongside three other Middle English compositions: the famous Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is twice as long as *Pearl*, and two other poems which resemble sermons or treatises, called by editors *Purity* and *Patience*. *Pearl* opens the manuscript, and *Sir Gawain* concludes it. Although literary historians generally ascribed their authorship to one individual, Leo Carruthers joins recent scholarship in arguing that *Pearl's* author may be distinct (8).

This anonymous author displays wide biblical knowledge: he quotes or alludes to Genesis, the Psalms, the Book of Revelation, and of course the Gospels – specifically the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, and the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13 and 20).

The doctrine of grace is beautifully explained in part XII of the poem. The maiden makes the case for the salvation of the innocents by touching on the doctrine of grace: *Two men to save is god by skylle/ The ryghtwys man schal se hys face,/ The harmles hathel schal com hym tylle* (ll. 674-676) – “Il est bon et raisonnable de sauver deux catégories:/ l’homme juste le verra [Dieu] de face,/ l’homme innocent y parviendra aussi” (81). The young lady compares the innocents with the children that Jesus called to Himself, when His followers scolded them lest they should inconvenience Him.

The elegy is divided into twenty sections: each section comprises five stanzas, except for part XV, which contains one more; there are 1212 lines in total. Alliterative verses function in an original system, absent from other Middle English works, known as “concatenation” (10). As Carruthers explains, “l’emploi du vers allitéré, doublé par une rime complexe (ab x 4, bc x 2, dans chaque strophe), impose des exigences en matière de poésie” (9). One can imagine how difficult it was to translate a rhymed poem with such a complex structure, and with a rich, complex, and often elusive vocabulary.

A translator's greatest joy is to find the exact equivalent of a word in the target language. Although it is more difficult to translate Middle English verse into Modern French than into Modern English, at times there are advantages. For example, Carruthers was able to match Middle English pronouns with their Modern French counterparts – a feat no longer possible in Modern English (29). Thus, he translated *thou* by *tu*: *That cortaysé is to fre of dede,/ Yhf hyt be soth that thou cones saye./ Thou lyfed not two yer in oure thede* (ll. 481-483) becomes “Cette courtoisie est vraiment

trop généreuse,/ si cela est vrai, ce que tu viens de dire./ Tu n'as pas vécu deux ans en notre monde" (69). Conversely, *ye* becomes *vous*: *My blysse, my bale, ye han ben bothe* (l. 373) – "Ma joie, ma tourmente, vous les avez été à la fois" (61). Also, the relative overlap of Middle English and French makes the translator's work slightly easier (*damyselle/ demoiselle, myserecorde/ miséricorde*, 60-61).

So far as the subject matter is concerned, the speaker of the poem laments the loss of his precious pearl while searching for it in a garden. Sorrowful and dejected, he falls asleep on a clod of earth. He wakes up in a vision, in a far more beautiful garden where he sees a young woman whom he recognizes to be his daughter or granddaughter lost in infancy. She speaks to him not like a child, but as a noble and wise lady; she even chides the man for his continuous mourning, when in fact he should rejoice at the peace of Heaven which awaits him. The pearl he has been seeking represents the lady who now lectures him on basic Christian doctrine.

The young woman wearing a crown of pearls calls herself queen, and the man is astounded. How can she have such a high status in Heaven when she was lost to him at such a young age? How is she appreciated, compared to people who dedicated their entire lives on earth to growing in Christian virtue? She attempts again and again to persuade the dreamer of God's boundless grace, by explaining the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, and other passages from the Bible. The lives lost in innocence have a particular place in Paradise (of course, as long as the infants were baptised, which she was, according to Catholic dogma). Eventually, the dreamer concedes and asks her if he could join in the joys of Heaven. She tells him that the only way to get there is by dying, but condescends to show him a view of Paradise – a favour which she obtained from the Lord. The dreamer cannot content himself with a mere glimpse, and so becomes guilty of hybris. He wants to cross the river separating him from Pearl, Paradise and Christ. This is unacceptable, and sends him back to real life; the dreamer wakes up on the clod of earth on which slumber had overtaken him.

What makes the present volume even more compelling is the introduction and the afterword that accompany this first translation into French. Carruthers makes at least two important claims regarding the poem.

In the introduction, he argues that the speaker is not a "projection fictionnelle" (17), or the author himself, but is intended to represent John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster who laments the early loss of his granddaughter Blanche. He arrives at this conclusion by carefully examining the dialect of the poem, and hence the geographical area where it may have been written, and finally by identifying the castle where an aristocrat could have employed a poet to write such a poem. That place is Tutbury castle in Staffordshire. John of Gaunt (Jean de Gand in French), the son of King Edward III and the father of King Henry IV, lived between 1340 and 1399. The earl of Richmond and duke of Lancaster is a singular figure in English history due to his famous relations with Geoffrey Chaucer and John Wyclif. Chaucer wrote *The Book of the Duchess* to commemorate the loss of John's wife, Blanche, to the Black Death in September 1368. Out of this union came Philippa, whose firstborn, Blanche, died in infancy. Last but not least, "le rapport avec la blancheur éclatante de la perle ne fait aucun doute; en effet, le blanc est la couleur la plus évidente dans le poème, réitérée sans cesse dans la description de la « petite reine » (sa peau, ses habits, sa couronne)"

(21). Could this Blanche, granddaughter of John of Gaunt, and daughter of Philippa and King John I of Portugal be the *pearl* whose loss the dreamer laments? Is the dreamer John of Gaunt? This is the question that Leo Carruthers answers by examining numerous and intricate details that reveal his close knowledge of medieval English history.

In the afterword, Carruthers produces another theory never formulated before: “dans les nombreuses études consacrées à l’Anneau de Tolkien, personne, à ma connaissance, n’a fait le rapprochement avec la précieuse perle du poème médiéval” (134). J. R. R. Tolkien, who had been working on a Modern English translation of *Pearl* since 1920, may have drawn his inspiration for Gollum’s appellation “my precious” from *Pearl* (Carruthers identifies fifteen occurrences of the adjective in the poem). Here is the argument, *in extenso*: “À première vue, l’Anneau de Tolkien, objet maléfique et infernal, serait tout l’opposé de la perle du poème médiéval, symbole transcendant du bien (la beauté, la pureté, la joie du Ciel). Mais la perle représente aussi la jeune fille morte, dont le narrateur ne peut tolérer la disparition. C’est dans la mesure où le rêveur transforme sa chère enfant en possession, en trésor, en objet, en une chose qu’il voudrait récupérer pour soulager sa peine et renouer avec son propre bonheur, que la perle se rapproche de l’Anneau. Ce faisant, le rêveur humain rassemble un peu à Gollum ; et tout comme ce dernier, il appelle, lui aussi, la chose perdue sa « précieuse » (v. 330). Mais dans l’échelle de la grandeur d’âme, il se trompe de son « prix » : la perle de grande valeur à laquelle il devrait s’attacher, d’après la leçon du poème, est le Christ qui promet la joie éternelle au Ciel, non pas le bonheur terrestre. Hors la grâce de Dieu, un tel objet ne peut s’obtenir” (133).

To conclude, Leo Carruthers shows exceptional skill in translating a fourteenth-century poem that is profoundly psychological and theological, and challenging in terms of rhyme and prosody. Additionally, Carruthers does not shy away from formulating his own theories, and labelling them as such. *Pearl* remains an object of academic interest, and Leo Carruthers demonstrates that there are still precious literary pearls awaiting to be (re)discovered.

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