

NATURE'S *FARTHEST VERGE* OR LANDSCAPES BEYOND ALLEGORY  
AND RHETORICAL CONVENTION? THE CASE OF *SIR GAWAIN AND  
THE GREEN KNIGHT* AND PETRARCH'S *ASCENT OF MOUNT VENTOUX*

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ABSTRACT

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Petrarch's *Ascent of Mount Ventoux* have both been held up as marking pivotal stages in the development of naturalism in landscape descriptions. This article attempts to gauge to what extent non-referentiality (both in figurative and formalistic terms) is sustainable in representations of landscapes in these two late-medieval texts. On close inspection, the portrayal of landscape in these two works suggests that proto-modernity has little purchase on their topographic verisimilitude, which functions not so much as a harbinger of proto-modernity but as a naturalistic signifier operative in conventional figural situations.

Somewhat optimistically, perhaps, the title suggests that certain medieval artefacts, both literary and non-literary, invoke landscapes that are immune to allegorical interpretation and can withstand the rigours of rhetorical conventions. This statement, in turn, rests upon the sweeping assumption that medieval art and literature are invested with the potentiality to navigate beyond these symbolic and formal requirements. And, once again, this assumption stems from yet another underlying hypothesis, namely that art and literature, whether medieval or not, can operate independently of the restraints made on it by symbolism and formal demands. And even this brief list of assumptions cannot stand without clarification: how canonical or non-canonical are my definitions of "art" and "literature", what is my understanding of "allegory" and "symbolism"; surely, they are not the same, just as little as "rhetorical convention" and "formal demands" are not equivalents in any narrow sense. Besides, there is the question of just how transferable terms are between the two disciplines of art and literature. There are other qualms, too: what, for instance, do I mean by "landscape"? For the purpose of my argument, let us just make the leap of faith that, at least

theoretically, strictly nominalist and non-referential discourse is possible in both art and literature, i.e. that no alter egos or signifieds stand behind the verbally or visually depicted and that such artefacts can survive in a formalistic vacuum.

But before I lay my cards on the table, a handful of definitions beg consideration. To begin with, my understanding of “allegory” is a narrow one: in essence, I see it as a compound metaphor where events and dynamic actions can take the place of both vehicle and tenor. As concerns “rhetorical convention”, I restrict myself in the context of landscapes to that of *descriptio loci* and ancillary conventions. By “landscape” I mean not so much the generic classification employed by historians of art, but simply the depiction of an outdoor scene.<sup>1</sup> A final clarification surrounds the term “naturalism” which I shall regard as synonymous with “verisimilitude”.

The question, as I would like to propose it, is to gauge to what extent non-referentiality (both in figurative and formalistic terms) is sustainable in representations of landscapes in late-medieval texts. This is, of course, a considerable shortfall with regard to the title’s ambition, and to add injury to insult, I will restrict myself to a small sample by probing the portrayal of landscapes in two narrowly defined literary locales.

What I have just surrendered in terms of scope, I hope to recover in terms of relevance: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Petrarch’s *Ascent of Mount Ventoux* have both been held up as marking pivotal stages in the development of naturalism in landscape descriptions. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* this verisimilitude is regularly labelled “realistic”, “naturalistic”, or “cinematographic”;<sup>2</sup> and it cascades down the poem to its various instances. One such instance is the belligerent topography against which Gawain’s struggle is cast. This pairing of the knight’s plight with his hostile surroundings is itself not free of bias: for one, it aligns the landscape with Gawain’s predicament and it renders the his adventure a topographical struggle even before he is given an opportunity to be tested by his designated opponent:

At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed  
He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,  
And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode.

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<sup>1</sup> “Landscape” only entered English in the seventeenth-century via the Dutch *landschap*. Gombrich identifies the application of this term in a phrase jotted down by the Venetian humanist Marc Antonio Michiel when describing the collection of Cardinal Grimani in 1521: *molte tavolette de paesi*. Michiel also refers to Giorgione’s *tempesta* as a *paesetto* (Gombrich 1966b: 109).

<sup>2</sup> The list of critics who have employed these phrases is almost as long as the list of *Gawain* scholarship. The following are just some of the more recent instances: Putter (1996: 54-56), Fitter (1995: 209), and Chism (2002: 76).

...  
 Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez and with wolues als,  
 Sumwhyle wyth wodwos þat woned in þe knarrez,  
 Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,  
 And etayneþ þat hym aneledede and þe heze felle

(*Gawain*: 715-17, 720-23).

The intimate intertwining of the landscape with its harmful outgrowths is a function of the unchecked enmity it harbours toward Gawain. Every turn, every line presents new difficulties that cannot be separated from the terrain they inhabit: generic “wodwos” are said to live in “þe knarrez” and nameless giants assault Gawain from “þe heze felle”. Unlike so often, this effect cannot be blamed on the writer’s quest for material that would alliterate: “knarrez” appears in a line where the alliterant is “w”. And in the case of “þe heze felle” from which the giants emerge, the topography even teams up with Gawain’s opponents by increasing their already existing advantage of ground in what is a thoroughly uncourteous gesture: as one would expect of this rampaging wilderness, it does not play by the rules of chivalry.

Whilst the odds in this uneven contest with the forces of *fayerie* relegate the nonpareil knight to the status of underdog, the hostile landscape assumes an agency in defining Gawain as an outsider: “Fer floten fro his frendez, fremedly he rydez” (*Gawain*: 713). And when we follow the solitary knight through the “nyztez” as he rides through the “frythez and dounez” where he has no one but God and where he would have been “ded and dreped ful ofte” were it not for Christ’s presence, we are entering the landscape of Psalm 22: 4 (23 in the *KJV*): “For though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evils, for thou art with me”.<sup>3</sup> It is the archetypal emotional landscape of the Christian soul in spiritual adversity.

And then there is winter. However dangerous Gawain’s encounters may be, we are not left in any doubt as to who may be his true foe in this wilderness: “For werre wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors” (*Gawain*: 726). It only takes a passing glance at Calendar images in Books of Hours to realise that Gawain is riding through a generic winterscape. This similarity had been noticed as early as 1973 when Pearsall and Salter pointed out that “calendar motifs should have some life in this romance” (Pearsall – Salter 1973: 147). In their assessment “the action is intimately related to the cycle of the seasons and their festivals – beginning with a January feast, and ending in January snow” (Pearsall – Salter 1973: 147). Pearsall and Salter recognise cognates in the fifteenth-

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<sup>3</sup> I use the Douay-Rheims translation (rev. Challoner 1971). *The Vulgate* has “nam et si ambulavero in medio umbrae mortis non timebo mala quoniam tu mecum est”.

century *Très riches heures* of the Duke of Berry which the Limbourg brothers furnished with miniatures so well-known that they no longer require an introduction (Pearsall – Salter 1973: 147). Yet in Pearsall and Salter’s larger argument the *Gawain*-poet is said to transcend the generic expectations of seasonal vignettes which are demoted to rhetorical exercises in this poem. The peak of what Pearsall and Salter call the “most powerful effect of visual realism” is located in the boar hunt and Gawain’s approach to the Green Chapel (Pearsall – Salter 1973: 180). Now, one may quibble over whether the boar hunt is not precisely such a calendar set-piece (one only needs to think of Brueghel’s *Hunters in the snow* which also forms a link in the long development of calendar vignettes), but it is difficult to deny that the *descriptio* of the winter landscape with its hard icicles and hoary oaks does not capture a number of types: the calendar set-piece of merciless January, the beckoning wilderness of romance, and the spiritual wasteland where only few dwell who “wyth goud hert louied” Christ (*Gawain*: 702).

Although this landscape may be a combination of archetypes, it is still a far cry from talking of an allegorical landscape replete with decodable signifiers. Or is it? Allegory relies on a metonymical relationship between the signifier and the signified. The former stands for the latter and operates as an instance of the archetypal. In this code, the signified or tenor is the type, event, or idea recognisable yet slowly shifting like a grammatical word in its lexical context; whereas the signifier is merely the aggregate list of criteria that permit an identification with the signified. In other words, the signifier is the particular which stands for the general or archetypal. The unwelcoming winterscape through which Gawain rides is an instance of and a signifier for the merciless conditions archetypal of the season; the hostility it shows the knight is characteristic of the enmity between the kingdom of *fayerie* and Arthur’s realm.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as has been said time and again, relies to a certain degree on verisimilitude to achieve its celebrated poignancy. A stock example is the pathetic image of the birds that pipe for fear of the cold, itself emblematic of Gawain’s plight which finds articulation in Gringolet gliding underneath the bare twig on which the birds perch, so that the reader is invited to behold the knight through the lens of the miserable birds. It is the very same naturalistic attention to detail that allows the writer to scatter topographical pointers such as “Anglesey”, “North Wales”, “Holy Head”, and “the Wirral” throughout the narrative. But these pointers appear to counter readings of the poem’s landscape as archetypal or even allegorical. If the landscape is archetypal, then how are we to understand repeated attempts to comb the West Midlands in search for the landscape of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? In his book, *The “Gawain” country*, Elliott (1984) painstakingly examines these geographical hints as forensic evidence and identifies virtually the entire topogra-

phy of the poem, complete with the Green Chapel and Bertilak's castle. Elliott repeats his findings in Brewer's *Companion to the "Gawain"-poet*, where he even supplies photographs of the alleged location of the Green Chapel, Ludchurch in the Staffordshire Roaches (Elliott 1997: 105-117). Building on the notion that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is "in many ways a fourteenth-century detective fiction", Elliott concludes that "like any good writer of detective fiction the *Gawain*-poet is careful to drop a clue now and then to help the reader or listener towards solving whatever mystery is enshrined in his narrative" (Elliott 1997: 113).<sup>4</sup> Not for a moment do I wish to question Elliott's findings; they are valuable in our understanding of how a fourteenth-century English writer may have interacted with his local surroundings. But to suggest that the poet is leaving clues for his readership strikes me as symptomatic of a hyperliteral tendency to prize naturalism, whenever it appears in medieval art or literature, at its modern value.

A number of critical readings have enlisted this naturalism and verisimilitude in the service of what has been identified as "realism" in the poem. I am thinking here of the views advanced by W. P. Ker (1955) and those who followed his line of thought. In the context of this work, the term "realism" is often taken to be the effect on the reader of the poet's verisimilar descriptions. This realism, then, is regularly pitched against the generic expectations of romance. This binarism of reality-romance (and the dislodging of naturalism as a functioning component of romance) is by now a fundamental component of *Gawain*-studies. The argument, if I may simplify it here, runs thus: broadly speaking, romance is improbable and therefore unrealistic. If it employs naturalism, then only in the service of realism, which, in turn, contradicts the expectations we have of romance. In his *Introduction to the "Gawain"-poet*, designed for students who are new to the poem, Putter perceptively locates the critical crux as lying in our expectations of romance:

... anyone who attributes to romance what he or she denies to reality – fictitiousness, wonder, playfulness – will be ill-equipped to deal with *Gawain's* paradoxical blend of the verisimilar and the marvellous. The *Gawain*-poet's descriptions of castles, of manners, of feasts, of human emotions and interaction, are so detailed and so probable that readers often fancy themselves to be in the real world of the fourteenth century; but equally it is in this plausible world that Gawain, a perfectly sensible knight, spends much of his time questing for a knight who is green all over and who can put his own head back on (Putter 1996: 47).

Putter's antidote to readings which elevate the realistic above romance is to propose, sensibly it would appear, that the *Gawain*-poet "teases us with the

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<sup>4</sup> Elliott cites Stanbury's remark about fourteenth-century detective fiction (Stanbury 1991: 109).

question of whether his world is verisimilar or fabulous, real or artificial” (Putter 1996: 54). He then speaks of a “rich confusion” of the real world and the world of romance (Putter 1996: 55). Far from denying the dichotomic stand-off between romance and realism, Putter’s model embraces the poem’s representational diversity by proposing that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* thrives on this tension between these two apparently antithetical poles. In the label-speak of contemporary publishers, we would be dealing here with a forerunner of *magical realism*.

On closer scrutiny the neat distinction between the verisimilar and the marvellous begins to show considerable cracks: the naturalistic landscape contains inalienable monstrous elements, the mythical knights of the Round Table show fear and embarrassment (and, worst of all, imperfection), and the Green Knight is described with a nuanced attention down to even the most minute ornamental butterfly on his saddle. To one unfamiliar with twentieth- and twentyfirst-century critical camps, as the poem’s first audience surely was, this would not suggest that we are dealing here with two worlds; rather, the poem presents us with one naturalistically observed albeit unnatural world. This is because the world and the landscape of the poem have been modelled on fourteenth-century nature and social life in the same way in which thirteenth-century sculptors modelled their flowers and plants on those of early spring.<sup>5</sup> Surely, we do not talk of a similar “rich confusion” in Gothic art and architecture. Perhaps I am denying the existence of vital categorical distinctions between verbal and visual modes of representation but there is a bulk of evidence – from Horace’s *ut pictura poesis* over Alan de Lille’s *Anticlaudianus* to Panofsky’s *Early Netherlandish painting* – that testify to the cognate relationship of literary and artistic modalities.

The Achilles heel of all theory is that whilst it pretends to bring us closer to the text it often drives us away from its centre: by definition, the process of abstraction moves away from the object under scrutiny. A return to the poem’s first scene, if I may continue to abuse the visual/verbal analogy, will quickly reveal the limitations of readings that run along or seek to embed such binaries. In many ways, the finely crafted description of Guinevere forms the visual climax of Arthur’s yuletide court. It is this detailed close-up of the Queen that sets the audience’s expectations for the naturalism to come:

Whene Guenore ful gay grayped in þe myddes,  
Dressed on þe dere des, dubbed al aboute:  
Smal sendal bisides, a selure hir ouer  
Of tryed tolouse, of tars tapites innoghe

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<sup>5</sup> Mâle attributes this observation to Viollet-le-Duc (Mâle: 1913 [1958]: 52, n. 1).

Pat were enbrawd and beten wyth þe best gemmes  
 Pat myȝt be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye,  
 In daye.  
 Þe comlokest to discrye  
 Per glent with yȝen gray;  
 A semloker þat euer he syȝe  
 Soth moȝt no mon say

(*Gawain*: 74-84).

From Guenevere herself the eye of the beholder moves to the “sendal” or silk, then to the beautiful canopy above her, where it lingers on “þe best gemmes” that money can buy, only to close in once more on the Queen whose grey eyes are locked into this composition as its centre-piece: “Þe comlokest to discrye / Per glent with yȝen gray”. Through the directed “roving of the eye”, as Pearsall has called it in a recent article (Pearsall 2001: 467), it becomes almost impossible to separate the setting from Guenevere herself: the contours of the Queen vanish against the sumptuous tapestries and canopy above her. This visual tour-de-force is at the same time verisimilar in its intricate, almost tangible detail and yet it is artificial as the physical blends with the ideal.

What this signifies for our discussion, I suppose, is that the verisimilar is merely a technique or mode which, in the first instance, does not automatically herald the arrival of realism at the expense of allegory. In this passage, the technique is that of vivid naturalism yet the image it summons prefigures those quintessentially Northern Gothic representations of the Virgin Mary, complete with *baldacchino* and yards of flowing velvet. Its ultimate visual articulation can perhaps be found in the Madonnas painted by Jan van Eyck: the 1436 *Suckling Madonna enthroned* (now in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt) [Fig. 1] and the central panel of his Small Tryptich in Dresden's Gemäldegalerie (1437) [Fig. 2]. Both these Madonnas have in common with the Queen of Arthur's court the dais, the lavish materials, the embroidered tapestries, the canopy, and the jewels. Where the images diverge, of course, is the presence of the infant in the paintings of the Virgin and the grey eyes in the portrayal of Guenevere, but as these two attributes concentrate the beholder's gaze, the analogy remains intact. One can draw many similarities between the two that would invite allegorical readings: whether as archetypes of two different kinds of love, whether as queens over ideal realms or as two champions of female perfection; one physical, the other spiritual. What remains unaffected by the interpretative path we choose is that both types of image are exponents of a visual rhetoric that enlists, beside *enarratio*, verismilitude to fulfill its potency, leaving the signified undiluted.

Whereas the narrative balance is unhinged by the arrival of the Green Knight some 45 lines later, the technique with which he is introduced confirms the

verisimilar modality already present in the description of the Queen. We must not confuse the manner of the Green Knight's interruption: the intrusion is narrative not stylistic. And so, the uninvited guest is scanned from head to toe with the same minute attention to detail. Of the catalogue of superlatives that make up the Green Knight, the elaborate account of the saddle has always struck me as one of the most stunning:

... his sadel, vpon silk werkez;  
 Þat were to for to telle of tryfles þe halue  
 Þat were enbrauded abof, wyth bryddes and flyzes,  
 With gay gaudi of grene, þe golde ay inmyddes (Gawain: 164-67).

By the time one reaches the fourth line of this description, one has to pinch oneself to remember that we are still looking at the surface of a saddle. In other words, the poem expresses its fictitious and symbolical elements, be they allegorical or not, by means of naturalism. And so, Pearsall and Salter's observation that the landscape is "local, identifiable, and more generally symbolic of states of mind, of emotions" (Pearsall – Salter 1973: 152) can be refined by adding that the "local" and "identifiable" are only two aspects of the naturalistic particular which expresses the general, abstract signified.

Surely, we could object and argue that Guenevere is part and parcel of the imagined here and now, whereas the Green Knight belongs to the world of *fay-erie* which is the complementary Other to Arthur's Britain. But if we then return to the high artifice employed in the portrayal of the Queen, we will not be faced with the description of an everyday aristocrat but with that of the archetype of beauty as expressed in the idiom of romance. Of all the internal features of this poem, the Green Knight may be the least credible but, then again, Guenevere and the Green Knight, or Gawain and the Green Knight, for that matter, are only separated by degrees of fictionality. Now, it is certainly true that Gawain's relative failure at the end of the poem lowers the stakes somewhat: he behaves realistically in an unrealistic world. But even that should not make us question the mutual independence and compatibility of naturalism and allegory or realism and romance, for Gawain's humiliation becomes a *synecdoche* for the value of Arthur's court, itself expressed by Arthur's order that all knights wear the girdle as a token of their debt to Gawain. It is within this framework that I would like to view the landscape representations in the poem, not as non-referential *daguerrotypes* of nature or naturalism at the expense of allegory and symbolism, but as verisimilar signifiers that act as instances of archetypes themselves locked into wider networks of meaning.

Having hopefully, at least for the time being, nudged the landscape of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* away from our modern understanding of non-

referential naturalism, I would now like to transfer this understanding of landscape to a very different work, Petrarch's (not necessarily missive) letter to his friend Dionisio da Borgo San Sepolcro about his ascent of Mount Ventoux. I call it a "work", implying that it is a work of literature, but it is by no means certain that this letter was destined for a wider audience or for Dionisio, for that matter. Of the many texts that have reached us from the Italian *trecento*, Petrarch's letter seems to have been particularly savaged by repeated attempts to locate the Petrarchan face of the "new Renaissance humanism" as lying in the alleged authenticity of the ascent. Ever since Rossi questioned the notion that Petrarch had made the ascent (Rossi 1932), scholars have leapt to the rescue of the old view. First and foremost among these was perhaps Wilkins, who went as far as suggesting that it was "probable" that the letter was "written at the time of the ascent" (Wilkins 1951: 312, 317). The current truce between the allegorists and the authenticists has been erected on the compromise view suggested by Billanovich according to whom the *Ascent of Mount Ventoux* is an allegory but one that is underpinned by Petrarch's experience of a real ascent (Billanovich 1966). The miracle seems perfect: the dusty medieval allegorism of the text has been contained and Petrarch's status as a Renaissance pioneer remains intact.

But what is so *Renaissance* about the letter? Apparently it is Petrarch's motivation to climb the mountain in the hope of enjoying the view. But that would be tantamount to taking a certain Florentine at face value when he tells us that he found himself in a dark wood in the middle of his life. And it is not a matter of the amount of precise references Petrarch includes in his letter and Dante does not in his poem, for, as we have seen in the description of Queen Guenevere and the Green Knight's entrance, verisimilitude and symbolism are compatible with each other without having to be patched up by such concepts as *confusion* or *paradox*.

Let us therefore have a closer look at the line on which so much hinges, the narrator's express wish to enjoy the view from Mount Ventoux. Actually, the Petrarch-persona does not say that. His words are "sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate ductus" (Rossi 1933: 153) [nothing but the desire to see its conspicuous height was the reason for this undertaking (Gouwens 2004: 26)], which is not quite the same as speaking of looking forward to a vista. Now, it can mean "the view" but it does not have to mean that. The great elevation might have spiritual connotations and, indeed, this is where he miraculously produces his pocket-size copy of Augustine's *Confessions* to understand his experience.

Once he reaches the summit, we can catch a glimpse of the kind of view Petrarch is experiencing:

Dirigo dehinc oculorum radios ad partes italicas, quo magis inclinatur animus;  
 Alpes ipse rigentes ac nivose, per quas ferus ille quodam hostis romani nominis  
 transivit, aceto, si fame credimus, saxa perrumpens, iuxta michi vise sunt, cum  
 tamen magno distent intervallo. Suspiravi, fateor, ad italicum aerem animo potius  
 quam oculis apparentem (Rossi 1933: 157).

[From there I turned my eyes in the direction of Italy, for which my mind is so  
 fervently yearning. The Alps were frozen stiff and covered with snow - those  
 mountains through which that ferocious enemy of the Roman name once passed,  
 blasting his way through the rocks with vinegar if we may believe tradition. They  
 looked as if they were quite near me, though they are far, far away. I was longing,  
 I must confess, for Italian air, which appeared rather to my mind than my eyes  
 (Gouwens 2004: 29).]

He turns towards Italy because his heart tells him to do so and he observes the  
 skies of over Italy with his mind. This is anything but a physical experience of  
 seeing or of enjoying the view, rather, Petrarch is, as he writes himself shortly af-  
 terwards, shifting his thoughts from a “contemplation of space to that of time”  
 (Gouwens 2004: 29) [for the Latin text, see Rossi (1933: 157)].

And already during the cumbersome ascent, Petrarch explains the allegory  
 behind his own laziness and self-deception as he reflects on having, three times  
 in a row, selected an apparently gentler route, only to find himself cut-off from  
 the remainder of his party:

Sic sepe delusus quadam in valle consedi. Illic a corporeis ad incorporea volucris  
 cogitatione transiliens, his aut talibus me ipsum compellabam verbis: “Quod  
 totiens hodie in ascensu montis huius expertus es, id scito et tibi accidere et mul-  
 tis, accendentibus ad beatam vitam; sed idcirco tam facile ab hominibus non per-  
 pendi, quod corporis motus in aperto sunt, animorum vero invisibiles et occulti.  
 Equidem vita, quam beatam dicimus, celso loco sita est; ‘arcta’, ut aiunt, ad illam  
 ducit via. Multi quoque colles intereriment et ‘de virtute in virtutem’ preclaris  
 gradibus ambulandum est; in summo finis est omnium et vie terminus ad quem  
 peregrinatio nostra disponitur” (Rossi 1933: 155-156).

[So often was I frustrated in my hopes that at last I sat down in a valley. There I  
 leaped in my winged thoughts from things corporeal to what is incorporeal and  
 addressed myself in words like these: “What you have so often experienced today  
 while climbing this mountain happens to you, you must know, and to many others  
 who are making their way toward the blessed life. This is not easily understood by  
 us men, because the motions of the body lie open while those of the mind are in-  
 visible and hidden. The life we call blessed is located on a high peak. ‘A narrow  
 way’, [Matthew 7:14 (Sermon on the Mount)] they say, leads up to it. Many hill-  
 tops intervene, and we must proceed ‘from virtue to virtue’ with exalted steps. On  
 the highest summit is set the end of all, the goal toward which our pilgrimage is  
 directed” (Gouwens 2004: 28).]

All this, of course, does not say anything about whether Petrarch actually ascended Mount Ventoux. But even if he did, what difference would it make when his experience, like the West Midlands landscape of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, becomes a signifier for a spiritual or generic archetype? In the end, this search for geographical authenticity in the Middle English poem and the Latin letter has no purchase on our understanding of these works of literature. To enlist the analogy with art once again, it would be analogous to trying to understand Rodin's sculptures solely by consulting the birth registers of nineteenth-century Paris in search of his models.

Nothing can be more problematic for those theories that declaim a paradigm shift in every nook and cranny of fourteenth-century Italy than an instance of the old epistemology in a private letter, written away from the public eye. Even here, especially here, an early-modern identity is hard to construe for Petrarch. But this has not deterred speculations about whether he had indeed climbed the mountain, not so much to put the writer's biography in order but to somehow document that Petrarch's landscape is a *real* landscape beyond the artifice of the "Middle Ages".

I realise, of course, that I have given preference to allegory over rhetorical conventions and the *descriptio loci*. I also realise that I have balanced naturalism against allegory and fictionality, encouraging the impression that I am not distinguishing between the latter two. For the first shortcoming I make no apology: rhetorical conventions have been intrinsic to writing and painting during the fourteenth century, and the visual landscapes of the *Gawain*-poet and Petrarch do suggest the presence of rhetorical models compatible with naturalism: *enarratio* and *descriptio loci* in the case of the former and the *explicatio* of the vista in the case of the latter. As for the second objection, both allegory and romance fictionality are forms of referentiality that are defined as antithetical to naturalism in the context of the critical viewpoints against which my argument is directed.

At the surface, this might bear a resemblance to the nowadays much-dreaded Robertsonianism, and whilst I do not hold that one hermeneutical matrix will explain all medieval art and literature, as D. W. Robertson, Jr. did, I find it increasingly difficult to accept readings where literature and, to some extent, art, Carrier's assault on allegory in van Eyck is only one such example (Carrier 1987),<sup>6</sup> stand, by definition, in opposition to political hierarchies and religious orthodoxy. This notion, which drives much of the now fragmented New Historicism,<sup>7</sup> places too much stock in apparently objective judgements of medie-

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<sup>6</sup> Carrier's article was quickly followed by a determined response from Robert Grigg (1987).

<sup>7</sup> Pearsall offers an interesting overview of the main strata of historical readings of medieval English literature in his 2004 MHRA Presidential Address (Pearsall 2004).

val society: that it was conservative, orthodox, chauvinistic, and repressive. Certainly, from our viewpoint this may have been true, but do we not gain this viewpoint by comparing medieval society to other alternatives known to us? But exactly how aware were medieval Europeans of the judgement that they lived in (what we would regard) a repressive society. Were they aware of any available alternatives? Robertsonianism erred in that it attempted to force a single interpretation of shared values onto the artefacts of medieval society but this does not mean that the values at the heart of that society were not widely shared among its constituents. This may be also the reason why so many medieval reform movements are home-grown and do not refer to outside alternatives. And even where these alternatives are invented, such as in *Mandeville's travels*, they do not abandon the Christian network of referents outside of which no discourse was possible in the Middle Ages.

Both Gawain and the Petrarch-persona seek truth, unawares, whereas the critical quests that have ensued have brought us closer to what we consider to be important today. We may not want to admit it but the secret appeal of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* cinematographic qualities and Petrarch's ascent lies in the promise of (proto-)modernity. Our readings of these two texts as an usually realistic romance or the first glimpse of a real landscape, respectively, are, at the end of the day, attempts to assimilate difference. Perhaps it is an unavoidable corollary of our own socialisation that as critics we continue to subject medieval literature to readings that reveal as much about the elusive alterity of literature and art as about the vanity of our own modernity.

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