

THE PROMISE

My soul went into the wilderness to cry
 Where none could see her tears, to groan and moan
 Like a wing-shot Eagle, dying in despair,
 Eyes dim with stabs of pain and growing haze,
 Blotting the fiery vision of all the things
 He loved and sought in life. Despair is dumb.
 She now feels like a straw flailed by the wind
 Sees no more His light, but a thousand shapes
 Of vicious snakes, temptations of all sorts,
 The world turned to a handful of grey ashes
 Surrendering to the Enemy without hope.
 In such a miserable state of fallen pride,
 The wing-hurt Eagle shuts his weary eyes
 To die alone and see no more the world
 He loved to soar above on steel-borne wings,
 Till, suddenly, a wind from the Paralytic Lake
 Stirred the stagnant waters in the Pool
 Of High Despair. An Angel from God's court
 Drew with a sword of fire a cleansing Flame
 Shaped like a mighty cross with the hanging body
 Of Jesus asking God forgive his enemies.
 My soul, beholding the shrunken face of Jesus
 Austere, unsmiling and profoundly sad,
 Burst into tears: 'Let me not perish!'
 She sobbed, 'Spare those I love the pain and shame
 Of degradation. God, forgive once more –
 Another chance for another trial of strength.
 Right now I make this promise in all solemnity:
 Never to let the Foul Snake drag me down,
 To stand eternal sentinel by Your Cross.
 I call your Mother witness to this pledge.
 So help me, Mary, keep it all my life;
 Refuge of sinners, hold me to my promise
 Now and forever in life and after death.
 Your hands will mend my broken wings and raise
 my drooping spirit from dark despair.

*Custodian Angel, invisible friend,
 Be you no less my witness to this pledge
 And you, St. Joseph, whose holy name I bear:*

* * *

*My soul is sad, but she no longer cries
 Nor moans nor groans, a prey to vile despair.
 She knows, that is her Faith, that loving God
 will heal the wounds and mend the broken wings
 And rouse the drooping spirit for a new flight,
 the one true final flight into His Arms.
 Behold the Hound of Heaven at the door;
 Remove the rusted bolts, let Him come in
 To take sovereign possession of my will,
 And make of me a Kingdom of True Love.*

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J. AQUILINA

SOUL'S ANGUISH

*'Tis frightening to feel emptied heart and mind
 Of God, to be an animal, alone
 With tortured conscience gnawed at like a bone,
 The world a mocker, cynical and unkind.
 If God is in me, why am I so blind
 That I see not His face but writhe and groan
 Like one whose chest is crushed by heavy stone,
 Hating himself, and sick in heart and mind?*

*Yet how I yearned unheard for God to fill
 The shattered spaces in my emptied soul
 With all the loving presence of the Cross!
 Do not desert me, Jesus; Come back to kill
 The filthy Snake, the Robber Snake, that stole
 My Youth and Manhood – Avenge the loss!*

*And yet 'tis strange, and very strange indeed
I always loved God in my foolish way;
Stopped to chat with Him during the busy day
And during sleepless nights; prayed for His lead,
Telling Him how I wanted to be freed
From Satan's heavy chains of Sin which weigh
On my free will filling me with dismay:
Sin in God's Garden is the killing weed.*

*Come, Jesus, save me from the grave again;
Enter into my body with your glory.
I am unworthy, but Your Word can heal
The many wounds that kill me with dull pain.
The moment has now come; repeat the story
of Lazarus! Yes Lord, remove Death's seal.*

*O God, how can so many live and die
Without You and Your Son, doubt your Divinity,
Reducing the absolute and Infinity
To a pseudo-metaphysical verbal lie?
I need You in my mind; I need You nigh
And far, through Time and through Eternity;
I need You for a Meaning and Serenity;
I need You down on earth and when I fly¹;*

*I need You here, everywhere, at home, in town;
I need You undivided, Perfect Whole:
I need the Holy Ghost to shape my mind.
I need You most when Satan drags me down,
Extinguishing Your lamp to hide the Goal,
Then torture me with cruelty most refined.*

J. AQUILINA

¹Written on the 10th July 1966, while flying back home from London.

THE 'UBI SUNT' THEME AND 'SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT'

by J.S. RYAN

ALTHOUGH the central meaning of this romance is the testing of a Christian Knight, its rich fabric contains much material from contemporary and traditional literature, as well as from folklore. It is the intention of this note to draw attention to the possible presence in the whole of an elegiac strand which is suggested unobtrusively.

In the poem Gawain is first shown on the level of Courtly Love, to be

pat fyne fader of nurture (l.919)¹

and, as a Christian

Carande for his costes (l.750)

(i.e. religious observances). He is also capable finally of a perfect confession,² as Bertilak points out,

*pou art confessed so clene, beknown of þy mysses,
And hatz þe penaunce apert.. (ll.2391-2)*

And yet he is only one knight, albeit the paragon of the Court, and that body may still have imperfections, despite the testing of Gawain on the three levels or on the three sets of values, the rules of the pastime or courtly game, the rules of 'courtoisie' and the rules of the moral law, based on the Catholic faith.

It is possible to detect in the poem a certain note of doubt as to the present moral quality of the court and the behaviour of Gawain does not really dispel this. The suggestion of mutability, a falling off from an earlier ideal, is contained in a number of questions, and, occasionally, answers, which make use of the 'ubi sunt' formula, so favoured by mediaeval writers.

The initial question which is interesting in this context is that put by the Green Knight upon his entrance:

*þe fyrst word þat he warp, 'Wher is', he sayd,
'þe gouernour of þis gyng?' (ll.224-5).*

Although an answer comes later (ll.252, ff.), there is a distinct pause,

¹All quotations are from the edition of the poem by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (O.U.P.), 1925, etc.

²Burrow, John: 'The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Modern Philology*, Vol. LVII, No. 2, Nov. 1959, pp. 73-79.