

Gawain and the Nonexistent Knight

Joshua Bernatchez

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ABSTRACT**Gawain and the Nonexistent Knight****Joshua Bernatchez**

This thesis examines Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Italo Calvino's The Nonexistent Knight as texts in which the protagonists are engaged on unique quests that force them to choose either physical dissolution or the dissolution of their sense of personal significance. The impossible decision suggests that human life and the significant "self" as a constructed idea are inextricably linked and of comparable value but may have contradictory survival conditions. Contextualized with reference to Charles Taylor, "selfhood" is necessarily linked to moral "horizons" against which such concepts become meaningful. The protagonists of the literary texts in question justifiably manifest a desire for their systems of self-interpretation to be stable and transcendent. However, such identity-conferring systems are problematic because they are subject to inherent indeterminacy and fluctuation. Consequently, the characters in both texts are forced to recognize the inaccessibility of perfectly stable meaning and the need for paradigms to be adaptable. Calvino's text dramatizes the importance of the paradigm personified by the nonexistent knight Agilulf. The model he represents, despite his inevitable dissolution, provides intelligible form to an otherwise empirically real but meaningless existence feared by the other characters and embodied by his squire Gurduloo. Similarly, Gawain is ultimately faced with the need to interpret the significance of his life in relative terms due to his inevitable inability to make his infallible chivalric reputation and his finite human character coincide. The texts, together, situate any surviving rational agency within the interpretative capacity for dealing with inherent paradox.

DEDICATION

For my father, and for the sake of irony.

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Chapter I: Conflicted Identity

I have an affection and a talent for picking losing battles. The battle that gives rise to this project is one that I have not been able to extricate myself from, or lose with any finality: I would, very humbly, like to know how to be, how to live, in the world. I call this a losing battle because I already exist and am living in the world, and I am forced to act and make choices, to be, to manifest a presence without any certainty that I am doing any of this properly, or even, really, what “this” is. This quickly becomes a vast problem because deciding how to live is related to an understanding of what it means to be, to have presence and identity in relation to the world at large; the problem of living is the product of a seemingly infinite succession of relationships that continue expanding outward until I can see no end. Its complexity begins to threaten the sense that there is any utility or significance in my, as a finite individual, even pursuing the problem. It occurs to me that I would be a lot more comfortable if I could leave the question alone. But to ignore the problem leaves me with the sense of an undefined, meaningless relationship with the world whose form is determined by accident and caprice. I find this image as disquieting as pursuing the problem directly. The problem of living, in the way in which I am interested in the problem, is ultimately one of signification, the way personal significance and self-identity is at once an individual issue and also inescapably a function of the relationship between individuals and the cultural, communal and semiotic structures in which they manifest and articulate themselves.

This personal losing battle gives rise to this literary project because I want to make a case that in exemplary texts of self-annihilating metaphysical quests we are given

a way of, if not solving the problem of being, then at least creating a conceptual space in which to explore its nature and consequences. Self-annihilating metaphysical quests are characterized by a tension between the empirical concerns and transcendent aspirations faced by their protagonists. Characters in these quests face a conflict between the desire for physical survival and the desire to maintain a self-image that they feel is significant and stable, rightly or wrongly, because it derives meaning from an abstract, unequivocal, value system. The protagonists find themselves in situations where they are forced to choose either physical dissolution or the dissolution of their sense of personal significance. The manifest difficulty of choosing between the options suggests that physical being and the “self” as a constructed (even if self-authored) idea are inextricably linked and of comparable value, but also that they have potentially contradictory survival conditions. I will examine the postmodern Italian novella The Nonexistent Knight by Italo Calvino and the Middle English romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as paradigmatic examples of self-annihilating metaphysical quests.

Perhaps the most evident similarity between these two texts is that they both involve knights engaged in chivalric quests. This is useful simply because it provides us with characters on missions with ostensibly clear goals that place them in mortal danger. However, the complexity arises precisely because adherence to the image of the chivalric knight, in each story, becomes problematic. In the case of Gawain, much critical work has been done anatomizing the specific nature of the chivalric ideal to which he ascribes. For example, Wendy Clein in Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has done much to situate SGGK in terms of historical context. She writes that “the hero [. . .] defines his vocation in terms of religious, military and courtly ideals, synthesizing the

modes of chivalry current in the fourteenth century” (37). The full complexity of historical chivalry, or the many aspects of chivalry expressed by Gawain’s representative pentangle, cannot be dealt with here. What is of interest is an image that is compiled from many potentially conflicting elements such as “the emphatic union of sacred and profane values” (Aers 161). Given the subject of self-annihilation, one conflict stands out:

The warrior code calls on [knights] to defy death in acts of heroism and thereby gain worldly fame. Christianity warns them to reject worldly things and to accept death as the passage from this imperfect world to eternity. Finally, chivalry demands that knights somehow reconcile these opposing responses. (Clein 55)

In the face of such conflict, characters like Gawain try to conform to certain essential models. Much of Gawain’s quest is motivated by the desire to adhere to the “essential chivalric attribute of fidelity to one’s word” (20). Also, Gawain is the knight “who defined himself publicly and privately by a symbol connoting perfection” (122), in a sense assuming not only that there is a single, unified model of the chivalric knight, but that he can be precisely that.

J. J. Anderson isolates another critical conflict: “[T]he [SGGK] poet is asking us to consider the idea of chivalry as code or game. On the one hand, chivalry as such is polished and confident, and on the other hand arbitrary and amoral” (348). The implication is that “codes of behavior, however apparently honorable, are likely to have a dehumanizing effect on those who practice them” (348). This conception of chivalry as a “dehumanizing” and potentially “arbitrary” code of behavior is probably closest to how

the ethos is addressed in The Nonexistent Knight.¹ In Calvino's text, the image of the chivalric knight is, if anything, a collage of different versions articulated by Agilulf who frequently cites maxims as though from an authoritative manual that has only a superficial relationship to anything outside the world of the text.

The problem of the metaphysical quest initially looks like one of Cartesian dualism, where the mental or spiritual self, that which is inherently verifiable, is distinct and hierarchically superior to the physical being. Or, even prior to Descartes, Christianity has conceived of the body as something to be sacrificed in favor of the good of the soul. However, while the protagonists of our exemplary texts predicate their identities on images of nobility and spiritual excellence, the issues over which they are put to the test are games or technicalities of code, subtleties which put them to the task of reestablishing the validity and stability of their relationship with their ideals. The "self," which is sometimes conceived of as unproblematically self-evident, is forced to be reexamined as a relative concept, the product of negotiated relationships.

Wittgenstein once said that his goal was to reach the point of rest. "The real discovery," he says, "is the one which enables me to stop doing philosophy when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question" (Philosophical Investigations 1.133). Wittgenstein presents philosophy as the pursuit of stability, a state of rest, in a world in which questions are inescapable. However, the discovery he is after is not one which answers, finally and absolutely, all questions, but one which achieves an understanding of the

¹ Critics like McLaughlin argue that the Nonexistent Knight is an analogy for "the contemporary 'organization-man' in consumer society" (44), making a case for arbitrariness of the system to which Agilulf adheres.

parameters through which we interact with the world so that it becomes possible to limit questions to those that can be answered meaningfully. “Certainty,” for Wittgenstein, is the product of a language-game which makes significance and meaning possible, and is patently not an absolute value that arrests the game as if it were a solvable puzzle.

Italo Calvino expresses a similar sense of imperative interrogation in the face of uncertainty in the following passage from Invisible Cities:

“Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls. You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.”

“Or the question it asks of you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx.” (44)

The dialogue concerns the nature of man in relation to his contextual community (symbolized by city). The question famously asked by the Theban Sphinx is the riddle whose answer is “man” who changes over time. In Calvino’s brief formulation, the sphinx is the embodied voice of “the city,” with which the individual is locked in a reciprocal dialogue. The city may answer a question, provide an individual a place within it, but it also interrogates the individual. The ontology of the city, and interestingly its own epistemological self-knowledge, is uncertain. It can either be the product of “mind,” that is to say created intentionally, giving form to an idea, or it can be the product of “chance,” its form being the result of random contingency. The factual attributes of the city are secondary to the way in which they appear to answer a question, whether they seem to be evidence of a plan or of happenstance. The city “also believes” (that is to say,

like the individual, the “you” of the next sentence) that it is a product of mind or chance, or to put it in terms of the myth it invokes, destiny or free will. Oedipus is at once presented with the inescapability of fate (by his inability to escape the oracle’s prophecy) and at the same time manifests a sense of guilt that indicates culpability and responsibility that, in turn, can only exist when his actions are freely self-determined. The possibilities of originating from design or caprice has been related to questions about how we live practically; the question of “what suffices to hold up [cities’] walls” is parallel to the question of how to sustain meaningful existence and integrity, and is related to the questions asked of, and answered by, individuals about their own nature. The answer seems to be that neither empirical fact nor abstract ideal is sufficient to the task of producing meaningful existence.

I begin in this difficult way, with two quotations that initially seem wildly unrelated because together they begin to evoke a predicament. They share a sense that we do not ask questions because we want to, but because they are inescapable and also because the drive to answer is motivated by the desire to escape, as in Wittgenstein, the torment of the uncertainty that they represent. They share, also, the idea that the act of questioning and discovering answers leads only to other questions which in turn destabilize the system, the frame of reference according to which questions are formulated and answers are sought. In the quotation from Wittgenstein, philosophy contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of this system, as in Calvino the issue is broadened to encompass human existence as a social relationship (represented, in Calvino, by the city). In Wittgenstein we are given the expression of torment in contrast to the desired peace and stability; in Calvino we are given an alternating, reciprocal

dialogue that counters an answer with a question posed, perplexingly, by the source of the original answer. The image that these two quotations, together, evoke is that of the quest to derive stability and certainty through exploration within a system whose existence is predicated on fluctuation and is altered by any act of deciphering.

The major premise of the present investigation is that this struggle to derive meaning in the face of fluctuating foundations has consequences for the individual, for whom it causes personal crisis. In Sources of the Self, Charles Taylor sets out to create a sketch of the “modern identity” (3), which he describes as a complex of tension between freedom (the positive aspect of a system in flux, the fact that it admits input and alternate possibilities) and necessary pragmatism (the need to have some grounding to maintain a meaningful structure). In his introduction, Taylor announces:

I want to explore the various facets of what I will call the “modern identity.” [. . .] This means tracing [. . .] strands of our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person or a self. But pursuing this investigation soon shows that you can’t get very clear about this without some further understanding of how our pictures of good have evolved. Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes. (3)

My purpose here is not to digress into an argument about the nature of “the good” or to debate the fundamentals of ethics, but to identify the locus of agency, ethical or otherwise. This problematic concept of “the good” can be rephrased with the aid of another of Taylor’s texts, The Ethics of Authenticity, where he describes the necessity of frameworks in the creation of significant, self-defining choice and action:

Things take on importance against a background of intelligibility. Let us call this a horizon. It follows that one of the things we can't do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny horizons against which things take on significance for us. This is the kind of self-defeating move frequently being carried out in our subjectivist civilization. In stressing the legitimacy of choice between certain options, we very often find ourselves depriving the options of their significance. (37)

The desire here is not to immunize the framework, the horizon of intelligibility, from criticism or even to elide the fact that there are other frameworks of equal validity, but to remember that the assertion of choice for its own sake, the denial of an external frame or reference, challenges the significance of any choice. What is important for Taylor is that we recognize that “when one makes choice the crucial justifying reason” (38), then identity-conferring choices are “put on the same level with any other preferences” (38) and “the original goal, which was to assert the *equal value* of [an] orientation, is subtly frustrated. Difference so asserted becomes *insignificant*” (38). Taylor's argument is that it is not possible to have individual value without reference to a framework that transcends the self; even if we idealize individual free will and an authentic, that is to say self-authored, conception of self (as we might well want to), “the ideal of self-choice supposes that there are other issues of significance beyond self-choice” (39).

Taylor's work is concerned specifically with problems of modern identity, but he consistently manifests a resistance to the trends of contemporary culture that lead toward a dangerous subjectivism and atomization:

The “post-modernism” of Lyotard turns out to be an over elaborated boost for the first spiritual profile of modernism,¹ in the name of unrestricted freedom. The work of Derrida and Foucault, albeit weightier—in Foucault’s case, incomparably so—also fits within this first profile. The offer charters for subjectivism and the celebration of our own creative power at the cost of occluding what is spiritually arresting in this whole movement of contemporary culture. (Sources 490)

What is “spiritually arresting” for Taylor is the movement towards a relativism that becomes narcissistic, even solipsistic. He writes that “to the extent that people are seeking a moral ideal [. . .], this self-immuring is self-stultifying; it destroys the conditions in which the ideal can be realized” (Ethics 40). This is to say the ideal of a self must extend beyond the individual; it must acknowledge “the demands of society, or nature [or . . .] the bonds of solidarity” (40). Taylor notes a contradiction in what he sees as the postmodern resistance to moral judgments. He writes the following:

The very claim not to be oriented by a notion of the good is one which seems to me to be incredible [. . .]. But it also reflects the underlying ideal in some variant of that most invisible, because it is the most pervasive of all modern goods, unconstrained freedom. (Sources 489)

Taylor disagrees in principle that a conception of “self” can be achieved without thought to “the good,” or that any resistance to conceiving of the self in terms of “the good” in favor of “unconstrained freedom” is anything other than a disguised assertion that freedom is the ultimate moral good, and a disguise that serves to protect this ascribed

¹ For Taylor, modernism manifests “an even higher estimate of the unrestricted powers of the imagination than the romanticists had” (Sources 489).

value from being questioned, or at least qualified. It should be noted that Taylor draws heavily on Wittgenstein's discussion of language-games for his characterization of the "self" as a necessarily moral entity in his chapter "The Self in Moral Space" from Sources of the Self. So while Taylor rejects "post-modernism," he nevertheless shares one of the primary sources drawn upon by the thinkers he cites as examples, such as Lyotard, whose work also draws heavily on Wittgenstein.¹

Taylor does not try to construct, or even call for the construction of, a universal metaphysics in the traditional sense. His interest is not to oppose what he calls the ideal of authenticity, the conception of self as the product of self-authored definition, but to save the ideal from an irrational inarticulacy wherein it would become impossible to "argue in reason about ideals and the conformity of practices to these ideals" (Ethics 23), at which point both ideals and those who hold them are above reproach and can avoid responsibility. The problem that motivates Taylor's insistence that it is impossible "not to be oriented by the notion of the good" is that to pretend otherwise is to deny that assumptions and assertions are implicit in action. To avoid partiality in terms of ethics would put us in an impossible position. In "The Politics of Recognition" Taylor writes:

Liberalism can't and shouldn't claim complete cultural neutrality [. . . .]
The hospitable variant I espouse, as well as the more rigid forms, has to draw a line. There will be variations when it comes to applying the schedule of rights, but not [Taylor refers specifically to the fatwa declared against Salman Rushdie] where incitement to assassination is concerned.

(62)

¹ For a discussion of Lyotard's use of language-games derived from Wittgenstein see William Rasch's "In Search of the Lyotard Archipelago, or: How to Live with Paradox

That is to say, it would be irresponsible to pretend that one can live and act as a moral agent without holding some set of moral assumptions, and it is irresponsible, both in terms of eliding motive and shirking responsibility, to pretend otherwise. The effect of enshrining choice would be to erode accountability.

Taylor opposes the idea that one can act from a point that precedes assumptions. His argument is similar to that which Wittgenstein mounts against those epistemologists who attempt to define certain knowledge as being beyond doubt. In On Certainty he writes: “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (115). Any action, moral or otherwise and including the attempt to doubt everything so as to trace our assumptions to stable roots (like Descartes for example), requires that we make a whole host of assumptions that are not founded in any absolute certainty. Wittgenstein’s point, however, is not that we have no access to certainty, but rather that certainty begins at the point where doubting stops being meaningful. Functionally, we have access to the only certainty that we need. The goal of tracing our rational understanding of the world back to fundamental, *a priori* principles is impossible, but this does not mean we need to, or even can, dispense with reason. His point is that we cannot escape the difficulty of life by accessing *a priori* principles or absolutes. The only certainty that we have access to as justification for our actions is the product of our communal language-games: “[G]iving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not a certain proposition’s striking us immediately as true; i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (204). We have truth and

and Learn to Like It.”

certainty in the sense that we have systems that are larger than the individual, language-games within which we exist and that cannot be subordinated to the will of a single individual. “If the true,” writes Wittgenstein, “is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false” (205), meaning that we have not obliterated the concept of certainty, but only limited it, recognized that even certainty exists only within a context. Our systems of value and signification, the sources of meaning, are not derived from *a priori* facts or absolute values of true or false or right and wrong, but rather are grounded in shared language-games wherein certainty and “truth” are defined and assigned relative meaning.

Wittgenstein’s primary concern in On Certainty is not with ethics or conceptions of the self, but with curtailing the endless debate between materialists and idealists that dominated much of his contemporary philosophical discourse. For example, the text begins as a response to Moore’s assertion that his hand is, certainly, a hand. Wittgenstein says that “If you do know that *here is a hand*, we’ll grant you all the rest” (1), and then, at great length, explains that we cannot infer from that statement the objective existence of the hand, only that Moore believes it to be there, and that it would not make sense if he were to say that it was open to doubt. Statements of doubt or confirmation make no sense, as we cannot extrapolate from the language-game (wherein we do not question that Moore has a hand) that there is, in fact, a hand. Wittgenstein likens the problem to mathematics, saying that an assertion like Moore’s would equate to saying, “we cannot have miscalculated in $12 \times 12 = 144$,” but this does not mean anything more than “ $12 \times 12 = 144$ ” (8). “We got to the nature of calculating by learning to calculate” (45) and we can describe “how we satisfy ourselves of the reliability of the calculation” but “no rule

emerges when we do so.—But the most important thing is: the rule is not needed. Nothing is lacking. We do not calculate according to a rule, and that is enough” (46). What we learn about is not the objective world of the realist, but the functioning of the language-game wherein we are engaged. Certainty is not absolute, it is a function related to the currency of the language-game. In this sense, any conceptions of “truth” or the related “right and wrong” are not products of necessary calculation, but are conditions that exist within a language-game that can shift.

I accept Wittgenstein’s description of certainty, but this does not, for my purposes, answer questions like how identity is maintained over time when the language-games within which we exist fluctuate, or how we can act in accordance with our ethical ideals in a case when we are faced with another language-game that manifests contrary ideals and opposing interests grounded in their own, equally valid, tradition. How, given that we are the product of the language-games we are socialized in, do we retain integrity in the face of multiple language-games without behaving like conquering tyrants? Similarly, how do we avoid becoming tyrants or fundamentalists without suffering a catastrophic crisis of identification? The fear of arbitrariness and the danger of narcissism are not removed, and the fear and danger still create in us the desire, if not the need, for an overarching metaphysical paradigm. The ideas that our ethical models are not the result of discursive reasoning and that identity is not an essential characteristic of a person but rather the fluctuating construct of a living language-game are discomfoting. Even Wittgenstein considers ethical investigation at once as being ungrounded and necessary. In “A Lecture on Ethics,” he says:

I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk of Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. [. . .] Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable [sic], can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (11-2)

Alec McHoul notes that “‘any tendency in the human mind’ which is so deeply respected is presumably, in itself, a good” (388). Wittgenstein is clear on the point that meaning is still accessible, but it no longer has the same stability that was perceived in a tradition that assumes metaphysical authority.

We seem to be left trapped between two poles: a disquietingly perishable sense of contingent meaning, or the tyranny of absolute meaning. In his concluding chapter to Sources of the Self, “The Conflicts of Modernity,” Taylor sets out to “tie [. . .] into the portrait of the modern identity” (495), the evident “conflict in our culture over the disengaged and instrumental modes of thought and action” (495). His “modern identity” is a complex of competing tensions polarized, on the one hand, by a failure of significance, the loss of recognition and validation and, on the other hand, the dangers of metaphysical systems that present inhuman and unattainable models. Interestingly, even though he has been emphasizing throughout his work the danger of a descent into narcissistic individualism, Taylor’s final articulation of his sketch of the conflicted “modern identity” emphasizes the danger that “the highest spiritual aspirations must lead to mutilation or destruction” (520-1); that “there is a question [. . .] whether morality

doesn't exact a high price from us in terms of wholeness" (499). That is to say, that to be sustainable the idea of authentic identity has to admit a compromise between the desire to maintain a consistent form of life, and the need for that form to recognize its contingency and to remain adaptable and fluid.

What Taylor's sketch provides us with, in conjunction with the images provided by Calvino and Wittgenstein, is the motivation and danger of self-annihilating metaphysical quests. The motivation, ironically, is to preserve the integrity of one's identity, one's self-definition and sense of significance, by appealing to a relationship with an ideal paradigm, a fixed horizon. The quest takes the form of the pursuit of a metaphysical ideal, the desire to be a literal embodiment or instance of the ideal, even when the pursuit of that ideal creates the risk of physical death or where the attempt to protect the integrity of the relationship with the ideal against change, erosion or fluctuation makes its application in the world at once dehumanizing and insufficient for dealing with the full complexity of the adventure of living.

In Italo Calvino's The Nonexistent Knight the title character, Agilulf, the paragon of a given moral system, avoids what Taylor has called the mutilation of the human by the only possible means: by never being human. He is capable of being the perfect *embodiment* of the chivalric code precisely because he has no *body*. Agilulf is physically nonexistent; his presence is marked only by a vacant suit of armor held together "by will power [. . .] and faith in [the] holy cause" (Calvino, Nonexistent 7). The character faces two problems. First, whether or not he has a character at all is open to debate; it is uncertain whether his "will" is that of a free agent in any meaningful sense. In so far as he has one, Agilulf's character is adorned with a novelistic array of internal thoughts and

feelings, but fundamentally he is nothing but a manifestation of the chivalric code. He has all the aspects, good and bad, of an instance of a Kantian metaphysics of morals: he is, on the one hand, devoted to duty for its own sake and his will is concerned only with honoring the law, and on the other hand, his adherence to the code is impersonal, devoid of compassion. Agilulf's second problem is that, even if he does not exist, he is still trying to apply an absolute ideal in the "real" world (the world of the text) and he faces unforeseen complications. He is ultimately undone by the mere suggestion that he may not technically be a knight. The quest that he undertakes begins with the suggestion that his status as a knight is questionable and is played out as a quest to demonstrate that the real world can be reconciled to his code. Ultimately, as is the hallmark of this type of text, he succeeds but nonetheless ceases to be, he fails and succeeds simultaneously. Even the possibility (not even an actuality) that he could outlast the breach of his own ideal image creates enough of a vacuum to consume his essence. He is an embodiment of technicality that cannot maintain a presence in the face of even the possibility of a discrepancy between the ideal and its manifestation.

In contrast to Agilulf, an instance of (dis)embodied law, is his squire Gurduloo who is afflicted with a form of madness wherein he is incapable of any self-definition at all. Faced with a duck, he thinks he is a duck: "He thinks ducks are him. Gurduloo's like that, a bit careless [. . .]" (25). Given a bowl of soup, he becomes terrified it will drink him. The designation of madness is resisted by a wise peasant who describes him as follows: "[M]aybe mad's not quite the right word for him. He's just a person who exists and doesn't realize he exists" (28). It seems that the failure to recognize existence threatens one's existence as a consciousness, or as a moral agent. Gurduloo manifests the

threat of the opposite pole: if self-definition is not anchored in relation to a consistent ideal that transcends the individual, then the individual lacks human self-consciousness. Gurduloo seems to have basic language skills, but not a subject position upon which to initiate stable interpretation. Any self-image is arbitrary to the point where self-definition is thwarted. It is impossible for him to distinguish between himself and the external world, and he lacks the ability to construct a significant, persistent identity. He is a consistently identifiable character to the reader only as a symbol for fluctuation and to the other characters as a recognizable physical presence.

Each character lacks what the other embodies: a persistent self-image derived from an ideal paradigm, on the one hand, and the ability to persist in the absence of absolute, metaphysical values, on the other. We are given the incomplete, code-driven demi-human and the fluidly creative but indefinable, amorally insane demi-human. Take them as a single unit rather than as distinct knight and squire and you approach a merger of the poles that comprise Taylor's image of a complete human subject.

Taylor provides a sketch of the human subject in terms that connect it to the crisis I have been trying to develop, relating the fluidity of systems of meaning to the risk of a loss of significance and "wholeness." However, I differ with him on two related issues. First, while I do not want to dismiss the fact of a uniquely contemporary problem in practice, I do want to challenge the idea that the current crisis of self-definition is the result of the contemporary trend to valorize unrestricted choice and unqualified freedom. I share his distrust of the predicament this creates for ethics, and the loss of significance this can create for the individual, but I resist the idea that even in a world-view that urges a homogeneous ethical culture, endorses metaphysical ideals and assumes the existence

of absolute values, the individual is free from the “mutilation” Taylor describes. Secondly, I want to resist Taylor’s dismissal of postmodernism as the irresponsible endorsement of “unconstrained freedom.” On the contrary, I would cite Thomas Docherty who writes that “postmodern characterization [. . .] advanced an attack on the notion of identity, or an essential Selfhood which is not traduced by a temporal dimension which threatens that Self with heterogeneity” (60). Moreover, in specific reference to Calvino,¹ Docherty notes that “the reader of postmodern narrative [. . .] is fully implicated in the proliferation of narratives [the heterogeneous, conflicting versions of a character]” (64) and “in order to read postmodern narrative at all, the reader must give up [. . .] a singular position” (65). Similar to what Taylor phrases as a crisis of inarticulacy, Docherty acknowledges the threat of a “fall into incoherence” (60), but insists that “postmodern narrative lures a reader into a ‘disposition,’ a translation of the Greek *ethos*” and that “to this extent, the category of the ethical is introduced” (65) as something that can be meaningfully discussed. The redeeming advantage, for Docherty, is that while postmodern narrative still “involves the reader in the search for ‘the good,’” the act of ethical investigation is divorced from a “mere subscription to a monotheistic truth” (65). Rather than valorizing freedom, or imagining that we can persist without ideal paradigms, the goal is to understand these paradigms for what they are: systems of value that are grounded in language-games, subject to fluctuation and free play and, ultimately, something for which we are communally responsible and accountable.

¹ In fact, Docherty refers to Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. However, critics, such as Constance Markey in *Italo Calvino: A Journey Toward Postmodernism*, note *The Nonexistent Knight* as Calvino’s first distinct move into postmodern narrative.

Taylor's issue with "postmodernism" is comparable to that described in Alec McHoul's "Analytic Ethics." McHoul writes that because "postmodernism's ethical dilemmas stem from its unique onto-epistemological positioning" (389), postmodern thought appears to be condemned to "hover or flicker between certainty and uncertainty over questions of the good, just as much as over any conceptual domain" (391). Unlike Taylor, however, McHoul argues that "on the contrary, [postmodernism] has a very different position on the relation between objects and concepts generally" (389) and that the problem really lies in the mistake of assuming that ethics requires a conceptual purity in order to facilitate decision making. "Rather this ethical requirement of conceptual purity is itself merely one of the over-valued positives of the traditional metaphysics which 'postmodernism' opposes" (395). McHoul argues for an "affirmative ethics-in-struggle" (394) and tentatively concludes that the crisis "postmodernism" brings to ethical discourse "is no more and no less [than] a return to ethics itself, against mere morality and its associated legislation" (402).

In short, many of the postmodernists that Taylor dismisses categorically are interested, precisely, in investigating the problem he outlines as the conflict of modernity as it relates to individual identity. That is, as Cannon writes in Postmodern Italian Fiction: The Crisis of Reason in Calvino, Eco, Sciascia, Malerba, writers are concerned with the idea "that there is a crisis of knowledge, that there is no way to legitimate certain heuristic models, that there is no absolute knowledge." Because this crisis "permeates contemporary philosophical and scientific thought," "the question of indeterminacy" has

become “synonymous with the postmodern condition” (11). The interest, however, is precisely in the question, in negotiating the crisis, and not in escapist answers.¹

To further defend this departure from Taylor’s model, I want to resist the idea that there was a time before the problem he outlines. Taylor does not advocate a restoration of the past, but he nostalgically suggests that there was a time when the problem he frames did not manifest itself as a problem. I would suggest, rather, that the problem presented itself in a different way. To justify this I turn to my first example of a self-annihilating metaphysical quest. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight initially seems external to the problem, but it is the text that most distinctly characterizes the issue to be investigated and demonstrates that metaphysical ideals create problems even before they come to be questioned as such. Gawain’s quest to deliver himself to his own beheading is undertaken with the explicit assumption that the journey’s end is annihilation of self. Furthermore, the main action of the story is dominated by accusations that Gawain is not Gawain and by tests (administered by shape-shifting interlocutors of undefined motivation) of his status as knight and the stability of his relationships with his various heraldic emblems. Gawain begins his journey understanding himself to exist in a one-to-one relationship with his emblem, an idealization of perfect balance and unity that is unattainable outside a state of divine grace.

Gawain, having given his word in a game whose gravity he did not comprehend, sets out on a quest whose success will be, according to the terms of the contract he has entered, measured by his death. He cannot maintain his conception of himself as a knight

¹ For an in-depth account of the multiple constructions of postmodernism see Brian McHale’s Constructing Postmodernism where he writes that “postmodernism exists discursively, in the discourses we produce about it and using it” (1).

if he does not undertake a quest that must lead to his literal mutilation and death. He is spared this fate, but only after he has tried, and recognizably failed, to maintain his monolithic sense of self. His self-image is so bound to his image of the chivalric ideal that it can accommodate no deviation from it. In the face of being accused repeatedly of “not being Gawain,” he tries to incorporate all possible interpretations of the ideal until, unable to reconcile conflicts, his self-definition is critically altered. The character sets out on his quest with faith in his ability to perfectly represent his icon, the pentangle, and to live flawlessly according to the code that defines his life, but he returns with the conviction that he is beyond redemption. This may, for the reader, reflect nothing but the character’s humanity, but for Gawain it becomes a crisis of identity. His status as a fallible human is revealed to him as he attempts to live up to multiple conflicting definitions of what it means to be “Gawain” as dictated by other characters. While Gawain’s distress at the revelation that he is not the Gawain he thought he was is comforted by Arthur’s assurance that that simply makes him human, the conclusion is rendered ambiguous by the laughter of Arthur’s court, which seems to connote unease, uncertainty and confusion as much as it denotes genuine mirth and reconciliation.

What does it mean if the hero of medieval romance lives the same crisis of identification enacted by the Nonexistent Knight and his pluralistic squire in a postmodern novel? I do not want to suggest SGGK as a direct source for Calvino’s work. SGGK is significant for the project precisely because it is produced outside of the context of the postmodern endorsements of freedom and creativity that The Nonexistent Knight could be accused of endorsing. Nonetheless, Gawain and Agilulf encounter an interestingly similar identity crisis and undertake a similar quest. A comparison of the

two characters highlights an important difference. Gawain, unlike Agilulf, cannot maintain the integrity of his character by sheer force of will. To oversimplify, one might even say this is the moral of the story: Gawain's mistake is in thinking that he can be flawless in his own right when he is imperfect due to the fallen nature of man and can only approach redemption through divine grace. The issue I have with that standard interpretation is precisely that it is conventional, and returns the text to a state of acclimatized interpretation when the text pushes against the inevitable limits of even the most detailed, all-encompassing and stable interpretative frameworks.

In the essay "Whom Do We Write For?" Calvino imagines books being written to "take [their] place on a hypothetical bookshelf" (81) and a writer's work is important because the bookshelf he is trying to add to is one "containing books that we do not usually put side by side, the juxtaposition of which can produce electric shocks" (82). What is gained by reading Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Nonexistent Knight alongside each other is that we arrive at the same problem from opposite ends. The texts form a chiasmus: in one we have the actual trying to escape into the stability of the metaphysical, and in the other we have the metaphysical trying to justify itself by interceding in actuality. From different directions, both texts arrive at a similar crisis: the intersection of the actual and the metaphysical in an individual who is trying to achieve or maintain self-definition in the face of a potential loss of signification. The texts, together, negate the binary opposition between metaphysical absolutes and significance-eroding unconstrained freedom by demonstrating the inherent destruction or effacement caused by retreating toward either pole. As Derrida writes in The Gift of Death,

responsibility requires two contradictory movements. It requires one to respond to oneself and as irreplaceable singularity, to answer for what one does, says, gives; but it also requires that, being good and through goodness, one forget or efface the origin of what one gives. (51)

Singular identity is necessary for ethical agency, but that agency is only meaningful when it comes into contact with notions of “goodness” that are defined as generalities by a community.

The import of the negation wrought by the conjunction of the two texts is to demonstrate the insufficiency of metaphysical apparatus for dealing with the complexities of the world while, at the same time, demonstrating the reality and immediacy of the threat from what in Radical Hermeneutics John Caputo calls “the flux.” “The flux” is the inherent uncertainty of the human world, our inability to separate our consciousness from the work of signs, and the slippage inherent in the relationships of signs. In specific reference to Derrida, Caputo writes:

[Signs] are at work at the most primordial levels of transcendental consciousness, where consciousness gives birth to objectivity, both the immanent objects within the stream and the transcendental objects without. There is no prelinguistic stratum, no private sphere of self-consciousness in which the self is in naked contact with itself. (135)

Taylor similarly writes that “there is no way we could be inducted in to personhood except initiated into language” (Sources 35), and so our personhood is subject to the same tendency for fluctuation as language and the same indeterminacy as the signs that constitute it. Authenticity, then, is a function of a language-game (Taylor specifically

references Wittgenstein on this subject), and self-authorship, if there can be any, must be negotiated within a community. Individual identity loses its status as the central feature of a human subject.

Caputo's project is to understand how we live in this predicament. He sets out to create an image of a "new hermeneutics," to reformulate hermeneutics as

an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not to betray it with metaphysics [. . . because] metaphysics always makes a good show of beginning with questions, but no sooner do things begin to waver a bit and look uncertain than the questions are foreclosed. The disruptive force of the question is contained; the opening it created is closed; the wavering is stilled. (Radical 1)

According to Caputo, metaphysics is, essentially, an attempt to find "a fast way out the back door of the flux" (1); it is an irresponsible way to escape the problem. Caputo shares with Wittgenstein the idea that certainty can only be tentative and is not metaphysically authorized. Caputo's project departs from Wittgenstein in that it continues to try and imagine a rational process in which we can investigate questions that Wittgenstein would consider outside the purview of philosophy (though nonetheless a field of inquiry that he admits to "respecting deeply" (Wittgenstein, "Lecture" 12)).

The difficulty is not so much in demonstrating the illusory nature of metaphysical stability, but in imagining any stability or ordered significant life in the absence of metaphysical guides and aspirations. In the chapters "Toward a Postmetaphysical Rationality" and "Toward an Ethics of Dissemination" Caputo tries to demonstrate that ethics, and the rational grounds ethics tries to found itself on, must function in conscious

relation to the flux and not in an attempt to will it out of existence. The purpose is to alter our conception of rationality and ethics from one that imagines rational systems as ideal forms, to one that understands systems as provisional guides to deciphering a world that is always more complicated than our limited conceptions of it. In “The End of Ethics” from More Radical Hermeneutics Caputo writes, “When one makes a decision, and it is a wise one, one will have taken a more or less empty schema and made it dance, rather than to have taken some perfect ideal and adapted it to limited circumstances” (182-3).

We will return to these ideas, but to move toward dealing directly with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight I want to place the text in dialogue with Caputo’s arguments. As I have suggested above, what is interesting about SGGK is that the text manifests the problems taken for granted in postmodern theory even though it is the product of a radically different worldview. Both SGGK and the Nonexistent Knight access romance legends. Even in the medieval world, romance manifests a nostalgic relationship with an idealized past. Romance imagines a world with a direct, uncomplicated relationship between word and deed, a feudal system that defines roles and responsibilities for everyone, without exception, where the chivalric code and an unproblematic faith together provide prescriptions and prohibitions for all actions. Stable identities and absolute values seem possible. The world of romance is the world of the superlative, where characters tend to be described as the best, unconditionally good, or conversely as the worst, irredeemably evil. The distinction between either pole can hinge on a single action. In SGGK however, this idealized world is already lost, the imagined black-and-white distinctions are already problematic. Even in the world of the medieval text, Gawain (by all accounts at any point in the text, the best of all knights) is faced with

complexities that undermine his ability to live in perfect accord with his ideals. In “Holy Hermeneutics versus Devilish Hermeneutics” from More Radical Hermeneutics, Caputo tries to reconcile faith in a perceived hierarchical system with the recognition of the flux, the uncertainty and instability of the conscious human world. He writes that his “devilish hypothesis” still stands,

that we do not know who we are, and that we have no access to The Secret, even and especially when it comes to divine revelation, which is precisely where one would think we actually *do* have a Heavenly Hook to bail us out and lift us above the flux of undecidability. What else does “revelation” mean if not that The Secret has been “revealed” to us, has been handed over to us courtesy of a very “Special Delivery?” here if anywhere, surely something *has* dropped out of the sky, so to speak, the heavens have opened up and given us a Hint that we are on the right track. (193)

Caputo redefines faith in an established system as a process of interpretation. Faith, in this sense, is not an escape from, or denial of, the flux, but precisely the skill of living well, responsibly and creating meaning within the flux. Caputo writes:

Deferral and undecidability do not destroy the tradition of the common faith but make us *responsible* for them in a way that is not otherwise possible. “Undecidability” does not spell chaos and confusion, but the non-programmability of an under-determined situation that requires judgment and human determination. (199)

God is that which, precisely, can never be contained within human-constructed systems that imagine the world as a metaphysically guaranteed, wholly knowable place. The flux is not a threat to faith, it is its precondition. The simplicity that metaphysics offers is an unhealthy trap.

In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein presents the idea that in a perfect world where ideals represented stable, attainable states, conscious existence as we know it would not be possible. He provides the following analogy: “We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (1.107). Conceptual movement requires the friction of challenge and instability. Derrida expresses a similar sentiment more concretely grounded in the realm of human action. In “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” he writes:

A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this experience and experiment of the undecidable. (116)

It is in this conceptual climate that I want to turn, finally, to a direct discussion of the self-annihilating metaphysical quests, beginning with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Chapter II: Gawain and Inaccessible Ideals

As a self-annihilating quest, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight helps delineate the defining criteria of the pattern. Gawain undertakes a quest because defaulting on his commitment would contradict his self-definition as a perfect knight, but paradoxically the quest to which he has committed himself turns out to entail a different kind of self-effacement: complicity in his own beheading. In relation to the framework provided by C. Taylor's sketch of "the modern identity," the text engages with the problem of inadvertently fleeing the self-effacing uncertainty of a fluid identity only to face literal mutilation by the moral hierarchies one subscribes to as a basis for meaning. The text clearly dramatizes the problems of constructing and maintaining an identity that are under investigation: a tension between the unconstrained freedom of a mutable and loosely defined identity and the mutilating rigidity of a moral system that defines a "good" person in such a way that does not allow for conflict, contradiction or evolution. Gawain attempts to live at one pole of Taylor's human subject: he conforms to a rigid moral code that requires inhuman perfection and does not acknowledge the possibility that situations could arise where distinct imperatives of the code could contradict each other. SGGK is useful, furthermore, for exemplifying the link between identity and semiotic signification.

Kenneth Burke's discussion in "Human Actor: Definition of Man" provides an analogy to a similar pattern I want to examine in SGGK. By way of explaining the last "wry codicil" of his definition of the human that states that "Man is [. . .] rotten with perfection" (70), Burke writes that

the principle of perfection is central to the nature of language as motive. The mere desire to name something by its 'proper' name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically 'perfectionist.' What is more 'perfectionist' in essence than the impulse, when one is in dire need of something, to so state this need that one in effect 'defines' the situation?

[. . .] There is a principle of perfection implicit in the nature of symbol systems; and in keeping with his nature as symbol-using animal, man is moved by this principle. (70- 71)

Burke incorporates this characteristic drive for perfection into his definition of "man" as "the symbol using (symbol-making, symbol misusing) animal/ inventor of the negative" (70) to illustrate the inherent irony of trying to impose precise definition upon oneself and one's world. The world takes on meaning only through sets of "terministically directed insights" (74)¹ by which he means that the terms by which we categorize and interpret data preferentially select which information is considered. For example, a psychologist will see a dream about a lamb where a priest will see a vision of God; both will interpret the images of the dream/vision, but according to a different lens. The psychologist, trained to see dreams as windows on the working of the psyche, and with a specific methodology, will draw certain conclusions. The priest, with different training, and a different set of terms through which he engages the world, will notice different aspects of the images and draw different conclusions. The issue is not which interpretation is correct, but that both interpretations may be correct but according to different activities. The interpreter's role in the world defines, in part, the nature of the situations he or she

¹ Burke describes in detail what he calls "Terministic Screens" in "Language as Action: Terministic Screens."

encounters. Generally speaking, this is not a problem, except when a priest cannot see neurosis, or when the psychologist cannot see anything else. In a sense the psychologist would become a perfect diagnostician and the priest a prophet, but neither would necessarily lead healthy lives or serve positive functions.

Burke writes that there seems to be “no principle of control intrinsic to the ideal of carrying out any such set of possibilities to its ‘perfect’ conclusion” except, he writes, for the fact that “the schemes get in one another’s way, thus being to some extent checked by rivalry with one another” (74). Though he does not state it explicitly, Burke’s definition of “man” incorporates a consciousness of irony into our understanding of ourselves and our world. Humans, as animals “separated from [our] natural condition by instruments of [our] own making” (70), are capable of creating a conscious check against our self-defeating tendency to make ourselves and our world knowable by limiting our observations to such an extent that we become blind and unresponsive to anything that is not acknowledged as relevant by a given “terministic screen.” Burke’s discussion can help clarify the nature of the confusion caused when the Green Knight enters Arthur’s court. The Green Knight represents an insurgence of irreconcilable data into the symbolic system of Arthur’s court. He is recognizable and courtly enough to enter but immediately begins to destabilize the interpretative framework of the court which grasps at a means of containing him within stable systems of signification and conduct. The Green Knight is thus able to lure an exemplary figure, Gawain, to enter into a rule-driven “gomen” (SGGK 273)¹ which in turn defies stable interpretation. Gawain’s attempt to resolve the “gomen,” and thus re-stabilize the court, ultimately tests the limitations of his own

¹ All quotations from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are taken from the edition by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon.

strategies of self-definition and symbol-using. Read through this lens, the text explores the tension between the pragmatic demand for a stable interpretive framework for perceiving self and world, and the limited applicability of any such framework by the mutability and fluidity inherent in the construction of meaning.

When the Green Knight enters Arthur's court it is as though in response to a specific request. The narrator tells us that Arthur, described as "childgered" (86) (a quality that later earns him some rebuke), insists that,

[. . .] he wolde neuer ete
 Vpon such a dere day er hum deuised were
 Of sum auenturus þyng an uncouþ tale,
 Of so mayn meruayle, þat he myȝt trawe
 Of aleres, of armes, of oþer auenturus,
 Oþer sum seqq hym bisot of sum siker knyȝt
 To joyn with him in iustyng, in jopardé to lay,
 Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchonother,
 As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayer to haue. (91-99)

Arthur's demand produces an interesting scenario wherein he will accept, as entertainment befitting a holy day, either an "uncouth tale" or a real test of arms wherein knights will risk "lif for lyf." Arthur's desire to experience a very loosely defined marvel creates an opening for the entry of the Green Knight. Arthur's "childgered," and perhaps dangerous or at least irresponsible demand, establishes a vector for an ambiguous, unchecked interpretive mutability to enter the court and the text. Arthur's request defines a need, but does not provide a stable definition of that need, or, by extension, what

conditions will fulfill it. Is he requesting real danger, or merely stories, tokens and games that simulate danger? Is he asking for bloodshed on a holy day? More importantly, does he recognize that his request may result in something more than a conventional response? Critics like Finlayson in “Sir Gawain, Knight of the Queen, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” note that Arthur’s request reflects a custom wherein the knights respond by dedicating themselves to causes. Finlayson notes one analog where Gawain dedicates himself to the protection of the queen. In SGGK, however, Gawain becomes an inadvertent tool in a plot to destroy her. The Green Knight’s appearance in response to Arthur’s request can be seen as his first subversion of convention.

In “Gawain and the Godgames,” Tison Pugh establishes a distinction between “play” and “game” that might elucidate the discrepancy between what Arthur asks for and what Arthur seems to have wanted. Pugh writes,

By distinguishing between game as structure and play as attitude, we see the dynamics of the Green Knight’s game much more clearly. Simply put, although game and play often complement each other, games are not always fun if the stakes become too high (such as life or death); play, on the other the hand, should always contain an element of such whimsy.

(526)

The all-encompassing “childgered” tone of Arthur’s request prior to the entrance of the Green Knight suggests the whimsy of play, but while the Green Knight seems to exemplify this, he does so in contrast to the seriousness with which both Gawain and Arthur treat their interactions with the mysterious green man. Gawain for example arrives at the Green Chapel assuming the mortal seriousness of the game, but is met by the Green

Knight who, to cross a stream, “hypped ouer on hys ax” (SGGK 2232), vaulting playfully on the weapon Gawain assumes will end his life. Further, as we shall see, he mocks the seriousness with which Gawain takes their game. Arthur and Gawain, understandably, take the proceedings seriously and remove play from their interpretation of events. The ensuing game, as interpreted by Arthur and Gawain, is an opportunity to designate absolute values of “winner” or “loser” as equivalent with life and death, and this structured experience of the world (a process for definitive interpretation, perhaps in line with an alternate use of the word “gomen” indicating a process) seems to be what Arthur originally wanted. The Green Knight, true to his status as a “wonder,” seems bent on troubling any stable interpretative structure by being at one moment whimsically playful, and distinctly aggressive.

Insofar as the Green Knight can be said to serve any stable thematic function, he manifests the uncertainty he introduces into the court, and, as such, is a marvel that seems to be a fitting response to all the interpretive possibilities latent in Arthur’s request: a marvel who challenges the court to a “gomen” that may or may not require bloodshed or mortal risk. The narrator’s own description of the “aghlich mayster” that appears in Arthur’s court presents the Green Knight explicitly as an interpretive problem: the narrator reports, “half etayn in erde I hope that he were,/ but mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,/ and that myriest in his muckel that myzt ride [. . .]” (140-42). The passage demonstrates a need to reconcile the terrifying aspects of the figure that classify him as an “etayn” (a race of beings associated with the descendants of Cain and the frost giants of Norse myth) with the fact that, on closer inspection, the Green Knight must be classified as a man, and a courtly man at that. The normalizing classification only

functions up to a point; the narrator makes little attempt to explain why horse, clothes, equipment and man are green. “The Green Knight” is a type of moniker that is fairly common in romance, like the Red Knight that Percival defeats in Chrétien De Troyes’ “The Story of the Grail.” One would expect the title to refer simply to a knight *armed* in green. In defiance of conventional interpretation, the Green Knight is *literally* green. The Green Knight is a kind of image-pun that subverts clear meaning by, ironically, imposing literal meaning. The narrator merely notes dryly that this marvel has caused men to have “wonder of his hew” (147).

The subsequent detailed descriptions of the Green Knight’s dress serve at once to display the courtliness, fashionable style and recognizable propriety of the figure, and also to draw implicit attention to the strange green hue that seems to insist that the character occupies a specific symbolic function.¹ As Piotr Sadowski writes in The Knight on His Quest, citing the presence of dragons and other marvels on Gawain’s journey, “the knights of romance tradition [. . .] are generally accustomed to confronting and fighting all sorts of [. . .] monsters, often fantastic, supernatural characters” (81). It is therefore strange that the “basically human creature” (81) should so affect the assembly of veteran knights that the sight of the Green Knight “stupefies and paralyzes” them (81). It is, perhaps, precisely because of his “basically human” nature that the Green Knight poses such a problem. He is both man and monstrosity, social and anti-social, courtly yet rude. He must be classified under contradictory categories.

¹ Bachman notes the Green Knight as predominantly green representing impulsive (though positive) tendencies as apposed to Gawain’s predominant association with the reserved artifice represented by gold. Goldhurst notes the extensive color imagery in the text, as well as potentially negative associations in the case of green.

Compounding his ambiguity, the Green Knight enters the hall mounted but unarmed and “in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe,” (SGGK 206) but with “an ax in his oþer [. . .] of grene stele and of golde hewen” (208-211), presenting himself at once as decidedly non-combative (the lack of armor and the holy bob), but peculiarly menacing (brandishing a giant axe). He aggressively, “Driuande to þe heze dece, dut he no woþe,/ Haylsted he never one” (222-3), which suggests the possibility that he would be received as a threat and evoke a dangerous response from the court. He then rudely asks the whereabouts of the “þe gouvernour of þis gyng” (225).

Arthur’s initial response is to say, “wyze, welcum iwys to þis place/ [. . .]. List luflych adoun and lenge, I þe praye,/ And quat-so þy wylle is we schal wyt after” (252-5). This is at once a courteous welcome and a request that the Green Knight abide by social convention as a condition of admittance to the court. Taking the text as a whole, the Green Knight serves to test Arthur’s court, and Gawain as its representative, and educate them who are in their “first age” (54)¹ with a didactic, if ambiguous, moral. If we assume that the test begins with the Green Knight’s entry, then perhaps Arthur’s request that he conform to convention and declare his purpose clearly, combined with the Green Knight’s immediate refusal to comply, suggests something about the nature of the test. He at once displays consciousness of convention and refuses to conform to its dictates. In short, he creates an unprecedented, singular, situation that demands the multifaceted interpretation of apparently conflicting signs: a situation that requires creative interpretation, rather than the mechanical application of a stable code.

¹ There is some consensus that this term refers not simply to youthfulness but potentially also to the immaturity of the court. See, for example, Lepow or Dove.

The Green Knight provides a contractual arrangement to confine the manifest uncertainty within the limits of a “gomen,” and the rules are promptly agreed to by an enraged Arthur and a similarly brash Gawain. They then, predictably, interpret the rules in such a way that allows them to bring a definitive end to the situation and, so they think, to the Green Knight himself. The Green Knight and the “gomen” he introduces to the court both seem to exist within the rules of courtly conduct but they exceed, and create conflicts within, the rules and therefore serve as means to test the limitations of the court’s interpretive models.

The Green Knight’s conduct, such as referring to Arthur’s knights as “but berdlez chylder” (280), among whom there “is no mon [. . .] to mach” him, succeeds in enraging the king. Arthur is the first to accept the guest’s challenge, and he “sturnely sturez [the axe] about” (331), creating a striking contrast between the seriousness with which he takes the challenge and the lightness with which the Green Knight, bemusedly stroking his beard, prepares to receive the blow. Even after the game is given over to Gawain, the king encourages his cousin to brash action, saying, “þat þou on kyrf sette,/ And if þou redez hym ryzt, redly I trowe/ þat þou shal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after” (372-4). Gawain then proceeds to decapitate his opponent, which seems reasonable when the game’s initiator “his long louelych lokkez he layd ouer his croun,/ Let the naked nec to þe note shewe” (419-20). Furthermore, as demonstrated in Brewer’s compilation of similar scenes in From Cuchulainn to Gawain: Sources and Analogues of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, decapitation is always (except in SGGK) this kind of game’s explicit objective. For example, Brewer provides an excerpt from “The Story of Carados – First Version” where the challenger says:

‘King, I say to you that without the least doubt, if there is a knight here who can cut my head off with a single blow with this sword, and I can after the blow recover my health and strength, he can be sure to have without fail, a year from today, a similar blow in exchange if he dares wait for it.’ (15)

The beheading game scenario becomes more complex in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Significantly, the game does not, ultimately, result in the death of either character. And, unlike many of the analogues Brewer provides us with, the “forwarde” (SGGK 378) proposed by the Green Knight omits several key details. There is no suggestion whatsoever that the knight in green is capable of surviving a beheading, nor is there any mention whatsoever of the nature of the blow to be delivered. A blow befitting the game could range anywhere from initial decapitation to the ceremonial scratch Gawain finally receives. The ambiguity makes the propriety and morality of Gawain’s actions, at the very least, questionable. In contrast to other games lightheartedly played in the hall where “ladies lazed ful loude, þoz þay lost haden” (69), Gawain’s attempted homicide imposes mortal seriousness on the nature of the game. We should ask, however, if a beheading is an appropriate conclusion to a “Crystemas gomen” (283). The attempted homicide might be an understandable course of action, but it would be incorrect to conclude that the act is demanded by the contract. There is enough room for interpretation of the contract that a decision to kill his opponent is a choice for which the moral agent, Gawain, is responsible, rather than being the inescapable dictate of the

contract of the “gomen” or the chivalric code that guarantees Gawain’s obligation to abide by its rules.¹

Whether or not Gawain’s action is appropriate is a real question that eludes a simple answer. The text also provides evidence that allows Gawain’s action to be interpreted as self-defense. The Green Knight bares his neck, the game takes place in lieu of combat, and the contract is also ambiguous about what, if any, restrictions limit the nature or type of the return blow. If Gawain does not make his blow deadly, he opens himself to the possibility of being killed. In the analogue quoted above, we are shown a proposal where one decapitation will be repaid by another. A similar assumption that the blows should be equivalent in SGGK seems implicit in the contract, but this also imposes an interpretation on the contract that is more stable than is supported by its text.

There are several differing recitations of the “forwarde” agreed to by Gawain, two of which provide no stipulation that the exchanged blows must be equivalent. The first recitation of the contract is spoken by the Green Knight to Arthur:

If any so hardy in þis hous holdez hymselfen,
 Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
 þat dar stiffly strike a strok for an oþer,
 I shal gif hym of my gyft þis giserne ryche,
 þis ax, þat is heué innogh, to hondele as hym likes,
 And I shal bide þe first bur as bare as I sitte.
 If an freke be so felle to fond þat I telle,
 Lepe lyztly me to, and lach þis weppen,

¹ Victoria L. Weiss advances the idea that Gawain acted improperly in “Gawain’s First Failure: The Beheading Scene in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.”

I quit-clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his auen,
 And I schal stoned hym a strok, stif on þis flet,
 Ellez þou wylt di3t me þe dom to dele hym an oþer

Barlay,

And 3et gif hym respite,

A twelmonyth and a day;

Now hy3e, and let se tite

Dar any herinne o3t say. (SGGK 285- 300)

As discussed above, the contract, rather than suggesting a beheading, leaves the nature of the blow to the discretion of whoever accepts the challenge.¹ Given that the axe is both massive and well-balanced to the extent that its user can “hondele [it] as hym likes,” the subtle handling later demonstrated by the Green Knight does more to display martial prowess than a beheading: with such a huge weapon a single controlled nick displays more skill and precision than a mortal hack. More to the immediate point, the “forwarde,” generically legalistic in other respects, such as the precise stipulation of a year and a day for the duration of the agreement, says only that the blow will be traded for “an oþer” of equally undesignated gravity.

The contract is recited a second time: “Gawan I hatte,/ þat bede þe þis buffet, quat-so bifallez after, and at þis tyme twelmonyth take at þe an oþer/ Wyth what weppen so þou wylt, and with no wy3 ellez/ on lyue” (381-85). Here, again, “quat-so bifallez after” the nature of the first blow is left uncertain. The reciprocal blow is similarly

¹ Criticism on SGGK is full of disagreement on what is to be made of this ambiguity. Some argue that Gawain is justified, by convention or even contractual obligation, to behead the Green Knight. Others argue that Gawain is morally obliged to find an alternative to a killing blow. See Haines and Nuis as examples of the respective positions.

undefined. The choice of weapon is left to the will of the Green Knight and, one might reasonably infer, the nature and gravity of the blow to be dealt. The Green Knight accepts this recitation, saying that Gawain has “redily rehersed, bi resoun ful trwe/ Clanly all þe couenaunt þat [he] þe kynge asked” (393), except, as he says to Gawain “þat þou shal seche me þiself [. . .] and foch þe such wages,/ As þe deles to me to-day” (395-97). The Green Knight makes the incorrect assertion that the return of “such wages,” implying reciprocation by an identical blow, was explicitly part of the original contract recited to Arthur. Gawain agrees, saying, “I shal ware alle my wyt to wynne me þeder,/ And þat I swere þe for soþe, and by my seker trawep” (402-3). Gawain’s agreement to the amendment is contingent on the Green Knight teaching Gawain his name and the location of his court, and does not include a repetition of the subject of “wages.” Gawain has either failed to recognize or understand or, more interestingly, does not explicitly agree, to this aspect of the Green Knight’s amendment. Further, the Green Knight refuses to teach Gawain his name, saying, “þat is inoghe in New 3er, hit nedes no more” (404) unless he survives the blow.¹ The contract is thus left incomplete and Gawain’s attempt to negotiate the precise terms of the contract is curtailed by the Green Knight. The severed head, lightly converting victory to defeat, begins to speak as if to exhibit the fact that Gawain has failed to understand the nature of the situation. The head reminds Gawain of his obligation to search him out “to fotte/ such a dunt as [Gawain] hatz dalt” (451-2), again connoting a reciprocal equivalence of blows that is omitted from the protagonist’s formulation and suggesting a variant interpretation of the terms of the

¹ Paul Taylor notes the impropriety of the Green Knight’s refusal here, stating even that “to know an opponent’s name while he is ignorant of yours is to have a kind of magic power over him” (173). Blanch notes a similar inequity between Gawain and his host and hostess later in the text.

contract. Gawain makes no response at this point and the Green Knight leaves the court having created a binding contract that resists stable interpretation.

At the termination of the contract there is continued attention given to the possibility of varying interpretations. After delivering the blow, the Green Knight states that events have played out in accordance with the contract: “No mon here vnmanerly þe mysboden habbez, Ne kyd bot as couenaunde at kynges kort schaped. I hyzt þe a stroke and þou hit hatz, halde þe wel payed” (2339-41). The initial insistence that his actions were shaped by the covenant is in response to Gawain’s assumption of a defensive posture and his declaration that he will defend himself against further attacks because he deems the contract complete: “but on stroke here me fallez--/ þe couenaunt schop ryzt so,/ Fermed in Arþurez hallez--/ and þefore, hende, now hoo!” (2327-2330). Gawain’s speech suggests that any blow whatsoever, whether it is equivalent to the one he dealt or not, fulfills the covenant as he understands it. The Green Knight initially seems to confirm this assessment both in speech, as quoted above, but also by having delivered a blow that is substantially different than that dealt by Gawain. The Green Knight immediately adds, “I relece þe of þe remnaunt of rytes all oþer” (2342). The statement “I relece þe,” might seem to be a response to Gawain’s insistence that the covenant has been fulfilled, again suggesting that the contract implied that the blows exchanged be the same. However, the Green Knight’s follows this statement with a discussion of the property (the girdle) that Gawain retains in contravention of the exchange-of-winnings agreement. The significance of the resolution of the original contract is obscured by the fact that a second, distinct contract is being simultaneously concluded. Critics like Friedman in “Morgan Le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” argue for the

complete isolation of this game, and the temptation of Gawain, organized by Bertilak from the original covenant arranged by Morgan Le Faye. Friedman argues that this arrangement was fulfilled at the moment Gawain presents himself. However, even the Green Knight himself justifies the repeated feints by reference to the original beheading scene, suggesting a deeper relationship between the two cycles of story.

The fluidity of definition and signification exemplified by the Green Knight and his contract permeates the entire narrative of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The two feints and the final nick delivered to Gawain by the Green Knight are linked to the three days of temptation by Bertilak's wife. Gawain's defaulting on the agreement made in Bertilak's hall is punished as part of the completion of the contract made before Arthur. The exchange-of-winnings agreement made no mention of punishment, or that it would extend beyond the day of the exchange. The conjunction of the two contracts would seem to stem from Gawain's agreement to search out the Green Knight. If the quest to find the Green Chapel is part of the "gomen," everything, including the exchange-of-winnings game, is incorporated within the confines of the original "crystemas gomen." Both games, at this point, form an economy that is more complicated than that of simple one-for-one exchange. The original "gomen" becomes the framework that orders and encompasses the majority of the story's action and Gawain's entire life for that contained year. In terms of how they provide a framework for the tests Gawain undergoes, the scope and limit of either contract is ambiguous.

Both characters at the Green Chapel make reference to the covenant's function as a means of giving intelligible form and shape to an otherwise unpredictable situation. However, the text juxtaposes Gawain's willingness to defend, by force of arms, his

specific interpretation of the contract with the Green Knight's joke, "[I]f I deliuer had bene, a buffet paraunter/ I couþe wroþeloker haf waret, to þe haf wrozt anger" (2343-4). The Green Knight notes here that he would have been within his rights to inflict a more serious blow, but the statement seems intended to mock Gawain's seriousness as a means of accentuating the contrast. The scene contrasts Gawain's singular interpretation of the contract's meaning with the Green Knight's apparent awareness of the many possible interpretations of the contract and his ability to manipulate those interpretations. The "forwarde" agreed to at the beginning of the story, while it shapes the action of the narrative by motivating Gawain's quest, fails to align the outcome of the encounter with the Green Knight with any stable prediction. The meaning of the contract, in spite of the generic expectation that it places predictable limits on the situation, fluctuates according to the interpretations of the parties involved. The outcome of the game is determined by the free actions of the interpreting agents because even if the code defines limitations and creates obligations, it does not take the place of moral agency.

Similar to the interpretively fluid nature of the contracts in the game, the scene at the Green Chapel suggests that varying interpretations of Gawain's character are also put to the test. When Gawain flinches in response to the first feint, the Green Knight says, "þou are not Gawayn [. . .] þat is so goud halden,/ þat neuer arzed for no here by hylle ne be valle,/ and now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!/ Such cowardice of þat knyzt cowþe I neuer here" (2270-3). This comical denial that Gawain is really Gawain stems from an assumption that Gawain's absolute identity is not defined by his presence but rather his conformity to Arthurian stereotype. According to the Green Knight's assertion, if Gawain departs from the constraints of his established reputation, he ceases to be

himself. The implicit interpretation of Gawain's reputation, put simply, is that he is a brave knight and therefore must, by his definition, never fear or display even a reflexive response to a physical threat.

Gawain responds to the Green Knight's assertion that he is not Gawain with a sardonic remark, saying that he will not flinch again even though, if his head is severed, he "con not hit restore" (2283). The seriousness and anger with which Gawain responds to the accusation of not being himself accords with other less grave occasions when he also takes the accusation seriously. In the first temptation scene, Lady Bertilak says "pat ze be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde" (1293), and when Gawain asks her to justify the assertion it is because, the narrator states, he is concerned that the Lady's complaint might be legitimate as he "ferde lest he had fayled in forme of his castes" (1295). The lady explains, saying that the "real" Gawain would have "craued a cosse, bi his courtaysye" (1300). Gawain does not question the lady's interpretation of his reputation for courtesy that dictates that the kiss is the only correct action, nor does he question whether her interpretation of the implications of his reputation is authoritative and not compromised by being motivated by a physical desire (or, as we learn, a plan to entrap the hero). Gawain merely acquiesces to the lady's argument and attempts to reconcile any suggested gap between himself and his reputation. During the second bedroom scene, the lady again uses her interpretation of Gawain's reputation as a means of manipulating him. She creates a situation where his identity as "Gawain" is contingent on his conformity to the lady's interpretation of what the name "Gawain" and its corresponding reputation signifies. In this instance, her characterization again dictates that he should kiss her. She says, "sir zif ze be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez" (1481). Gawain responds saying, "If hit

be sothe þat 3e breue, þe blame is myn awen” (1488), and finally resolves the situation by insisting to the lady, “I am at your commaundement, to kysse quen yow lykez” (1501). His conformity to her desire here is an admission that the veracity of his identity is linked to conformity to his own reputation as much as it is a simple manifestation of his courteousness.

Gawain’s kisses in both these scenes seem to be, apart from a simple concession to the lady’s request, a means of consolidating the relationship between his reputation as a knight and his sense of self. In the first instance Gawain responds to the lady’s request by saying, “Iwysse, worþe as yow lykez;/ I schal kysse at your commaundement, as a knyzt fallez” (1302-3). His speech could connote joy and eagerness to receive the kiss or merely resignation to the order because it is a way to seal the gap between him and his status as a knight according to her definition of knighthood and the image she has from his preceding reputation. Gawain and his reputation are thus united in an interpretation of his composite character as the knight “þat all the worlde worchipez” (1227), a conventional superlative, but a role that sets him the unrealistic task of conforming to everyone’s abstract definition of him. Each of the subsequent kisses, as Heng writes, that the Lady “wins from Gawain is engineered within a drama of identity-in-crisis” (116). Therefore, the kisses “to which Gawain promptly agrees (thus sealing an implicit if temporary bargain to close the matter) is hence completed by him under the formal aspect of a proof (‘I kiss, therefore I am Gawain’)” (114).

As the entrance of the Green Knight is a fulfillment of Arthur’s request for a wonder, so to is the challenge to Gawain’s identity a response to a fault presented by Gawain in his otherwise untroubled conception of the equivalence between his ideal

model and actual self. The first mention of the discrepancy between Gawain's public image and his private integrity comes from his own mouth. On the first morning at Bertilak's court, in response to the lady's praise and the offer of her body, Gawain says "I be not now he þat 3e of speken" (SGGK 1242)¹. This attempt at defusing the morally precarious situation creates a problem similar to that created by Arthur's request for a marvel: he leaves himself open to uncontrolled interpretation. As R. A. Shoaf notes in The Poem as Green Girdle: "[T]his assertion of character is a subversion of identity. In having to distinguish his 'Gawain' from the Lady's 'Gawain' [. . .], Gawain must face, quite abruptly, the fact that he is not his own, that someone else can lay claim to his identity in a world of relative values" (36). Gawain succeeds in extricating himself from the immediate threat of an adultery (which would compromise his virtue), but the assertion, as seen in the repeated challenges to his identity, places him at a disadvantage, requiring him to make repeated attempts to recover a stable self-definition by compromising his right to interpretive authority over his own identity.²

The Green Knight and the covenant that arbitrates his game defy stable interpretation, but they seem to serve a function in revealing the inherent instability of definition and interpretation associated with living characters in the world of the text. For critics like Ross G. Arthur, there is an inherent problem in the way Gawain attempts to associate himself with, and construct, representative signs. Arthur writes in Medieval

¹ Liuzza in "Names, Reputation, and History in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" goes so far as to relate this, and the subsequent challenges to Gawain's identity, to the difficulty of accessing truth expressed in language.

² Heng notes that "the admission of a prior identity, now supposedly defunct, at once renders the prospect of future identities, further reconfigurations, less than improbable" (114).

Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight that the Gawain poet addresses a problem in epic where heraldic devices are “not the man but may be taken for the man” (51), where the relationship between sign and referent allows for no real distinction (the text already plays games with this idea, for example, by giving us the Green Knight, a title referring not only to his identifying armor but also his actual person). Arthur continues:

The Gawain poet seems to me to be operating within this romance tradition but to have a subtler approach to the problems it faces. Instead of simply abandoning the epic assumption about the equation between the man and his heraldic sign, he is able [. . .] to experiment with the traditional assumptions and their parallels in logical sign theory in order to express an even fuller notion of the identity of his hero. (51)

In the subsequent chapters of his book, Arthur goes on to stress the limitations of Gawain’s association with the pentangle. The specific attributes represented by the pentangle are discussed at length, but ultimately Arthur says that “both the pentangle and the word *trawþ* [. . .] signify Absolute Truth” (46) and are signs for God. The fact that the pentangle also functions as an appropriate sign for Gawain is not necessarily a problem because, in spite of the fact that Gawain is only a man, when he is armed before his journey he is, in a special sense, god-like by virtue of partaking in a state of grace. “The pentangle,” writes Arthur, “as a sign for God can [. . .] also signify a man only if he is in a state of grace and only by transference” (73). Arthur’s discussion is relevant here because it helps establish the contingent, mutable nature of the relationship between Gawain and one of his primary devices of self-identification.

The Gawain that leaves King Arthur's court is one associated, by virtue of grace, with absolute, divine "trawþ." He enters the Green Knight's game in an attempt to constrain and quell the random, unmanageable phenomena the Green Knight's presence exemplifies. While on his quest to fulfill the dictates of that game's contract (and so preserve his "trawþ") Gawain admits the mutability of his own identity and then tries to reclaim authority over the stability of his identity by conforming to Lady Bertilak's interpretations of what the "real Gawain," of whom she has heard stories, would do. During the second day, Gawain's attempts to secure his status as the definitive Gawain results in much difficulty. During the second bedroom scene, the narrator tells us "he defended hym so fayre þat no faut semed,/ Ne non euel on nawþer halue" (SGGK 1551-2). This indicates that Gawain tries to control the interaction with Lady Bertilak to such an extent that neither could be interpreted as being at fault by an observer. However, later in the day when the Lady persists in behavior that could be fodder for incriminating interpretation, Gawain becomes "wroth with hymself" (1660). The line can be read simply as evidence of the breadth of personal responsibility Gawain feels, but it also suggests that Gawain believes he can and should control all variables, even the behavior of others, so as to preserve the integrity of his public identity. Heng notes this description as evidence of Gawain's "frustration at his own helplessness" (131) as the illusion of his ability to outmaneuver successive assaults on his identity is "all but hopelessly abandoned" (116).

Gawain's response to the denial of his identity after the Green Knight's first feint must be considered in the context of the earlier instances of the pattern. After his bitter remark about the real mortal threat he faces, Gawain displays anger and impatience,

insisting, “bring me to þe point” (2284) and saying, “I schal stonde þe a strok, and start no more/ Til þyn ax haue me hitte: haf here my trawþe” (2287). Gawain is able to keep still for the second stroke of the Green Knight, who has used the same strategy as the Lady Bertilak to press Gawain towards a rigid conformity to his public image. Gawain has thus kept his “trawþ” with respect to this specific instance. However, this “trawþ” is neither absolute nor divine, as Ross Arthur defined its possible significance. Gawain seems to be able to conform to any one single interpretation of what he should do, but with each concession he becomes more constrained and conflicted by varying interpretations. The imagery associated with Gawain at this point suggests a dubious success: “Gawayn grayþely hit bydez, and glent with no membre,/ Bot stode stile as þe ston, oþer a stubbe auþer/ þat rapeled is in roché ground with rotez a hundreth” (2292-4). The poet makes a potentially positive comparison between Gawain and the stone, suggesting his stability, but then shifts the image to the stump of a tree attached to rocky ground. Gawain, about to receive an axe-blow to the neck from an overgrown green man (who we soon find out is capable of sustaining two independent though conjoined identities), stands like the stump of a tree that has already been cut down. Gawain becomes an image of stability, but one that is severed at the trunk and already dead. The figure demonstrates that the stability toward which Gawain aspires has already done the destructive work that the axe blow is no longer required to do.

Gawain is figuratively beheaded prior to being wounded. The Green Knight’s assertion that Gawain is not the Gawain of repute because he showed fear seems to be proven correct. Gawain is no longer *that* Gawain; he ceased to be able to maintain the public façade of perfection at the moment of the flinch, even if he could previously hide

his fear under the guise of acquiescing to the Lady's desire to give him a gift as in the case of accepting the girdle. The flinch viscerally demonstrates what has been suggested throughout the text: the fear that compromises Gawain's affiliation with the ideal of a fearless knight. Regardless of his public conduct, fear is attributed to Gawain's character throughout the text. Notably, on the morning of his appointment the narrator relates that "in dreȝ droupyng of dreȝe draueled þat noble" (1750).¹ Cowardice, furthermore, is one of the failings Gawain confesses to as the reason for withholding the green girdle. It is not that the flinch represents, in itself, a critical failure or an act of cowardice; its importance is that it is a physical sign of Gawain's actual, rather than ideal, nature and it is a sign that is consistent with the act of accepting and concealing the girdle.² The initial feint merely ends the illusion that Gawain-the-man could be one and the same as his name, reputation and public image.

For all that Gawain displays real contrition for what he understands as his sins, he does not seem to have learned anything about the limitations of his strategies of self-definition, nor the conflict between his private self and his image and reputation. To return to Ross Arthur's discussion of the relationships between Gawain and his representative signs, Gawain seems to continue to confuse his sense of human "trawþ" with its absolute divine form. Gawain continues to try to impose untenable values on both himself and the signs he uses to represent himself. Arthur writes that Gawain does not

¹ Sanderlin comments on his dream, holding it up as evidence that Gawain feels throughout the text that his presumed execution is perpetually imminent.

² Aers notes the fact that Gawain does not feel the need to confess the acceptance of the girdle, nor mention the public exchange of winnings agreement as a reason for refusing the Lady's gifts. Aers argues that these facts represent a "split in domains and spaces" (165), between public and private realms, that in turn "generate a split in forms of consciousness, a split in 'obligations,' and [. . .] division in the knight's identity" (165).

even try to use the green girdle “as a sign for the frailty of the flesh or for his particular sinful act. Rather, he now declares that it is a sign of permanent *untrawep* – in effect, the inverse of the pentangle as a sign of endless *trawp*” (111). Arthur quotes the following as evidence: “Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,/ And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last” (SGGK 2509-10). Gawain tries to use the girdle to represent permanent *untrawep*, a sign of his permanent state. Gawain, writes Arthur, fails to impose the rigid value of permanent personal “untrawep” on the green girdle because “just as the fact that he is not God prevents him from being considered endlessly true, so the fact that he is not Satan prevents him from being endlessly untrue” (Arthur 112). Since Gawain “is alive, his condition is temporary and mutable, whether he recognizes it or not” (118).

What Gawain fails to recognize is the limitation of his method of assigning value to his self-definition. Since Gawain loses his association with the pentangle, he declares himself the opposite, a shift from one half of a binary (absolute “trawp”) to its opposite (permanent “untrawep”), demonstrating thinking limited to the classifications of absolute value. Gawain’s binary thinking blinds him to the acceptance of the relative value the Green Knight assigns him, saying he is “as perle bi þe quite pese” (SGGK 2364). Gawain’s failure in both cases is to refuse systems of signification that take into account human mutability. It is with some irony that the Green Knight explains the root of Gawain’s fault by telling him “ye lufed your lyf” (2368). Gawain may indeed love his life, and seek to stabilize the significance of that life, but the framework he uses to establish that meaning is so rigid that Gawain becomes death-like as a stump, incapable of further growth.

What does it mean to say that Gawain loves his life too much? Many critics have investigated Gawain's fault with respect to moral and religious values. V. Weiss for example notes that Gawain's concern for his own life provides a useful contrast to how he aggressively disregarded the value of the life of an other when he was so "quick to chop off an opponent's head" ("Gawain" 365). However, departing from this kind of judgment, I would submit that, whatever the moral implications of the text Gawain's "loving his life" refers to, the "love of life" refers to his desire that the story of his life contribute to a faultless self-image as much as it does to his physical life. Gawain's desire to make his life and its significance eternal and absolute requires a stability that is impossible to attain as a living, changing being. To return to Burke: the irony of Gawain's desires is that the attempt to perfect his identity, to conform to the image of a perfect knight, compromises its vitality, his ability to live as a human being that is a knight. If Gawain were successful he would purge himself of "play" in the linguistic sense, but also of all the liveliness and whimsicality exemplified by the interpretively flexible Green Knight who is both a concerted threat to the court and a positive, perhaps benevolent, didactic influence. To assume one can maintain an absolute and unchanging identity is to isolate oneself from the challenges and alterations of life, not to meet them with courage. To aspire toward perfection is different from attempting to *be* perfect. One can only achieve sainthood posthumously (that is to say, a saint's perfection is only revealed retrospectively when he or she has completed a faultless life), but this does not mean one can become a saint by seeking an excuse to die dramatically.

The interaction of the figures of Gawain and the Green Knight dramatizes a tension between the absolute values assigned by rigid but stable interpretive frameworks,

on the one hand, and the sheer mutability of life that demands more malleable interpretive strategies, on the other. The framework in which Gawain's identity is put into question seems to suggest ways of resolving the situation. For example, Gawain's inflexible and ultimately fragile self-identification is contrasted with the more versatile Green Knight, who can occupy more than one role (assassin, but also teacher of morality and humility). However, the text's complexity seems to elide the problems with such a resolution of Gawain's crisis. If the Green Knight is to be the model for a quality that complements Gawain's aspiration to integrity, one must ask who, and what, the Green Knight is. When it is revealed that the Green Knight is Gawain's magnanimous host in disguise, he seems to become a benign figure, but only if we ignore the fact that this magnanimous figure is also the servant of Camelot's enemy, "Morgne þe goddess" (SGGK 2452), who sends him to terrify and thereby murder the queen. This may be mitigated by the fact that Guinevere is destined to betray Arthur, except that Morgan, whatever we can imagine her immediate motives to be, in the larger cycle of Arthurian stories, is sometimes a devastating enemy. The versatile Green Knight is able to change his shape, but the shape-shifting seems to correspond to fluid loyalties and moral standing. His only consistent loyalty is to Morgan Le Faye, and he is by extension a member of the Arthurian nobility. However, Morgan's own loyalties to Arthur's court are difficult to decipher. She is, at once, engaged in a hostile plot against Arthur's queen and yet her vassal is serving a didactic purpose and judging Gawain's moral standing. Thus, even though we can conclude that to Gawain and the court he represents the need to learn to be more adaptable and creative with their interpretative faculties, the model through which this is expressed also has a dark edge. Neither Bertilak/the Green Knight nor

Morgan represents absolute values except, perhaps, the absolute possibility of occupying many conflicting roles. In the sense that we want Gawain to be able to survive by understanding that he fulfills multiple roles, we also want him, as a hero, to be more morally consistent than either the Green Knight or Morgan.

Gawain's struggle resists internal resolution or resolution imposed externally by the audience. For example, even if Gawain cannot reconcile himself to anything but a binary shift from "perfect" to "irredeemable," the conversion of the girdle he wears from a reminder of his failure into a sign of his reintegration into the court and the communal humility and nobility of its members, could offer the audience a resolution wherein Gawain has simply been taught to temper his excellence with manifest humility.

However, the conversion of the girdle from a sign of shame to one of honor is an unnervingly swift process. We are told that "þe king comfotez þe knyzt, and all þe court als/ lazen loude þerat" (2513-4), but we are given no indication of *how* the king comforts Gawain or why, exactly, the court is laughing. In "The Play World and the Real World: Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," V. Weiss comments on the unsatisfying conclusion, saying that "the result is a disheartened Gawain whose grief over his failing is as excessive as the courtiers' rejoicing is glib [. . .]" (416). The ending's "ambiguity is [. . .] augmented by the [. . .] laughter occurring throughout the poem which very often frustrates our attempts to interpret the action" (416). The laughter and the decision for everyone to share the sign of the green girdle as a sign of their brotherhood takes place in lieu of any sign from Gawain himself that he has understood the lesson, and the conclusion leaves some problems for interpretation even though the reader may be able to extract a simple moral from the story.

David Aers writes that “the poem simply does not show Gawain being ‘reincorporated’ at its conclusion” (175). On the contrary, Aers argues, the ambiguity of the ending results in “reactivating the split between the public and the private” (177) that the poem already evoked by detailing the “private and inner spaces opened out at Hautdesert” (177) which pose dangers “to heroic virtue and the honorman’s identity” (177). Aers notes that the split returns in “a particularly disconcerting form” wherein “Gawain will pursue the public goals of ‘renoun’ and ‘prowes of armes’ but apparently his public identity will coexist with a shadowy private self bearing judgments and language which contradict public identity and public world” (177).

Gawain’s identity, his sense of value, is linked directly to the moral framework to which he subscribes for his sense of personal truth and his image of what it is to be a “good” knight.¹ Gawain holds the reputation of being the perfect knight and, as exemplified in part by his relationship to his heraldic device, he begins the story believing that he is capable of perfection and equivalent to his reputation. As the text progresses, however, a wedge is driven between himself and his reputation. Since he is reputed² to be the perfect embodiment of the image he has of “the good,” this divergence also severs Gawain from his self-image, since he correctly concludes that he is not only not perfect, but not as good as he believed. Gawain is, in a sense, beheaded.

It is perhaps true that Gawain has never been one with his emblem, his name or his reputation, but it is also true that this has been, until the moment he receives his cut,

¹ Aers notes that “without [this heroic identity associated with his ‘traupe’] neither he [Gawain] nor heroic virtue would be conceivable” (160).

² Aers writes, for example, that Gawain is received in Hautdesert “as an ideal model stepping out of a courtesy book” (162).

how he has seen himself. When, for example, his guide to the Green Chapel offers to let him escape and conceal his flight swearing the he will “lance neuer tale/ þat ever 3e [Gawain was] fondet to fle for freke þat I wýst” (SGGK 2124-5), Gawain responds, “And þat lelly me layne I leue wel þou woldez” (2128). Gawain, then, having confirmed that his reputation would not be altered, still refuses, saying that if he were to commit such an act “[he] were a knyzt kowarde, [and he] myzt not be excused” (2131). Gawain, nobly, refuses to allow for a divide between his actual actions and his reputation. Gawain’s conflation of his public and private self is interesting because it suggests that he believes, at least until the point immediately preceding his final encounter with the Green Knight and the flinch, that he is equivalent with his perfect reputation.

Calling Gawain a coward for flinching may seem excessive, but there are other examples of such small matters carrying great weight. To cite one example, Chrétien’s Lancelot hesitates momentarily before jumping into a cart to pursue the abducted queen and this action, and the hesitation for which he must redeem himself, becomes the defining moment of the story “The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot).” In the SGGK text itself, the seriousness of Gawain’s flinch is defined by the assessment given to it by the Green Knight, who says that he “fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!/ Such cowardice of þat knyzt cowþe I neuer here” (2272-3), “þat knyzt” being the knight Gawain is reputed to be. Interestingly, this cowardice is a characteristic only of the actual Gawain, not the Gawain of renown.

The Gawain that is represented by the pentangle, that is, as Stephanie Hollis writes, “a symbol of trawþe, which is equated here, in accordance with its ancient signification, with perfection,” is also perfect. “Being constant in five ways and five

aspects of each, was *recognized* as being purely virtuous” (273). Hollis further asserts that “Gawain’s distinguished identity appears to have a separable existence” which “is equivalent to his reputation” and worn “as extraneous adornment, just as a knight wears on his armor a heraldic device which enables him to be distinguished from other knights” (273). Consequently, when Gawain is made to recognize the inherent discrepancy between himself and his ideal reputation, he loses his sense of positive value and is left with only a sense of failure. What is, for the Green Knight, a relative value is amplified in Gawain’s self-assessment as is demonstrated in his lamenting admission, “Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyis boþe” (SGGK 2374), uttered as he acknowledges the coextension between his punishment (the cut on his neck), his acceptance of the girdle, and the flinch (as a sign of the first instance of more easily recognizable cowardice). Gawain goes even further with his confession, saying, “Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf been euer/ Of trecherye and vntrawþ” (2382-3), insisting on a categorical statement of his faithlessness. Hollis notes that “because Gawain’s conception of his identity is restricted to the attributes of knighthood, it is inevitable that, once he believes his seamless perfection has been pierced, he regards his whole nature as converted to contrary attributes” (275).

Hollis goes on to conclude that “the ultimate irony of the poem is that Gawain never really comes to terms with the cause of his failing,” which is the fact of the “inherent weakness of all humanity” (278). Hollis states that in spite of “accepting pejorative attributes as part of his knightly identity [. . .] the recognition of human weakness is forgotten.” Gawain is “too busy defending his knightly integrity to acknowledge, more than passingly and somewhat distortedly, that it is an incomplete

definition of his nature” (279). Hollis’ assertion that Gawain does not truly learn a lesson at the conclusion of Sir Gawain is a Green Knight is highly debatable and will be examined in more detail later. However, the idea of “an incomplete definition” of a character’s nature provides an excellent point of departure for the next chapter discussing a curiously inverted quest in Calvino’s The Nonexistent Knight.

Chapter III: The Failed Quest of the Abstract Knight

It is, perhaps, no great revelation that human beings are incapable of absolute perfection. There is, however, some room for debate as to whether this is a fact by virtue of corruption inherent in human nature, the pervasiveness of sin as a reality of the fallen human world, or rather a problem inherent in ideal models themselves. Gawain understands his failure to maintain his fidelity to his perfect image, his reputation, to be a function of the inherent limitation of “flesche crabbed” (SGGK 2435). In the text and its inescapable context, this is in many ways the only viable explanation. Many critics have made excellent cases for reading the text as a lesson in the virtue of humility, which are no doubt valid. How humility is to be reconciled with the drive to heal, to improve, to overcome flaws, is however a complex issue.

Calvino’s The Nonexistent Knight offers us another example of a self-annihilating metaphysical quest that parallels that of Gawain. Agilulf, like Gawain, is compelled by the system according to which he defines himself to undertake a quest that, by its nature, threatens him with annihilation through the destabilization of the terms of his self-definition. There is even a remarkable similarity in how the events and challenges met on the quest parallel those met by Gawain. The Nonexistent Knight is engaged on a mission to maintain the parameters of his self-definition. However, the test of the integrity of his identity reveals not that the nature of human existence necessarily corrupts our ideals, but, on the contrary, that ideal forms, metaphysical paradigms, themselves cannot sustain a meaningful, autonomous presence outside a human community. The interest of this comparison is to isolate the key difference between the two stories, the point at which

Agilulf's quest mirrors Gawain's quest and provides an avenue to explore the nature of what are perceived as the transcendent frameworks by which the characters articulate their own value. Calvino's book provides a textual world and context in which it is possible to criticize the limited applicability of an actual metaphysical model. In Calvino's text we have another knight who attempts to, and in this case can and does, exist in perfect relation to his heraldic device. The knight Agilulf is represented very appropriately by a shield on which

a coat of arms was painted between two draped sides of a wide cloak, within which opened another cloak on a smaller shield, containing yet another even smaller coat of arms. In faint but clear outline were drawn a series of cloaks opening inside each other, with something in the center that could not be made out so minutely was it drawn. (Calvino, Nonexistent 5-6)

This time, the equivalence of the individual with the meaning of his representative device can be perfectly maintained because he has no crabbed flesh to corrupt his will, but on the contrary asserts "his conviction that an unchangeable state – even that of nonexistence – is superior to any other" (Jeannet 23). However, instead of Gawain's shield that depicts an emblem that represents a perfect chivalric ideal, we have the image of identifying symbols that represent only themselves, that cannot be traced to a stable source, or in fact any foundation that does not refer to yet another more remote iteration of the same image. The system to which Agilulf adheres lacks any semblance of an objective foundation other than itself. The chivalric community in which the rules define Agilulf's conduct is described, for example, by Byrne as being composed of people who

“like bureaucrats everywhere, whether in Kafka, Dickens, Parliament or Congress [. . .] see whenever it is convenient, ‘sermons in stones, and good in everything’” (51). The rules clearly derive from no authority beyond the community in which they are articulated.

The distinction between SGGK and The Nonexistent Knight is that Calvino’s text simplifies the problem of trying to access a transcendent identity by omitting the perishable facet of the primary character. In SGGK we have a living character confusing himself with his reputation and the ideal, metaphysically guaranteed, model to which he tries to conform. In The Nonexistent Knight the living, empirical character is omitted. In a short story called “World Memory,” where the speaker of a dramatic monologue discusses what transcends the mortal completion not only of individual life, but the life of a global community, Calvino experiments with a distinction between two distinct aspects of the absent (deceased) character Angela. There is the “transitory-Angela” and the “information-Angela” (140). These aspects can correspond to the living-Gawain and the reputation-Gawain. In The Nonexistent Knight we have a title character who is absent because he is being described retrospectively by the narrator “Sister Theodora,” but is also absent to the narrator’s coextensive counterpart, Bradamante (and the other characters with which he interacts), because he, literally, does not exist. Thus, the title character Agilulf is always only the “information-Agilulf.” If, as in SGGK, the pursuit of metaphysical perfection is impossible because of the mundane flesh of the individual, absolute value should, in this case, be achievable. Nonetheless, Agilulf’s quest to maintain a consistent, absolute presence fails.

What Calvino offers us is an individual that, being liberated from mundane concerns, should be able to adhere to a metaphysical abstraction but nonetheless fails in its struggle to be. Agilulf attempts to manifest a presence in the world that is not grounded in flesh, presenting himself as the manifestation of an autonomous metaphysical logic liberated from phenomenality. In Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature, Eugenio Bolongaro writes,

In a Kantian vein, we could say that, unencumbered by the inertia of the sensorium and its beguiling inclinations, Agilulfo is nothing but pure will, pure practical reason, a transparent gaze upon the material world over which it exercises a near perfect sovereignty. (138)

That is to say, Agilulf, like Gawain, appeals to a universal order upon which to model himself and structure his social interactions. Agilulf's appeal to order takes the form of trying to exert control over his world. Unlike Gawain, his will is not confused or compromised by the sensory input of the material world, the whims and inclinations of a physical body or self-interest. Agilulf is thus able to succeed where Gawain failed: he can maintain perfect conformity to the information-self. However, we shall see that the abstraction of the will from empirical concerns creates its own set of problems. Calvino notes in "Two Interviews on Science and Literature," that "the most rational and all-embracing ethical construction ever attempted—that of Kant—demands that in every situation we should start again from scratch" (36).

Bolongaro's invocation of Agilulf as an example of a Kantian conception of pure will indicates one of the things that Agilulf, in contrast to Gawain, symbolizes: the theoretical capacity to *be* a universal paradigm. Indeed, Agilulf's actions are determined

according to principle rather than consequence, which is in line with Kant's categorical imperative from the Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals that one "ought never to act in such a way that [one] could not also will that [one's] maxim should be a universal law." Actions should be initiated by a will that is categorically good, that defines itself in conformity to universal laws because "strict conformity to law as such [. . .] serves the principle of the will, and it must serve as such a principle if duty is not to be a vain delusion and chimerical concept" (18). It is the universality of the law that gives it a coherent, meaningful form and saves it from the unintelligibility of capriciousness. This meaning and value are conferred, by extension, on the individual who instantiates the law. Agilulf's actions, accordingly, are divorced from caprice or expedience. For example, irrespective of the immediacy of his quest, "Agilulf, who gave to every beggar he met the regular sum of three centimes, drew in his horse and rummaged in his purse" (Calvino, Nonexistent 92), in order to maintain the universality, the consistent logic, of his actions. He acts without emotion or concern for the specific beggar and contrary to his desire to complete his quest as swiftly as possible. It is, further, the same compulsion to obey an imperative derived from his codified sense of chivalry that makes him disregard the beggar's advice to avoid the adventure where he must save Priscilla from the bears. He says, "It may be as you say, brother, [. . .] but I am a knight and it would be discourteous to reject a formal request for help made by a female in tears" (92). Agilulf disregards personal danger, or possible consequences, in favor of adhering to the general principle. In Kantian terms, Agilulf's actions embody those that have moral worth, because "to have genuine moral worth, an action must be done from duty. [. . . and] an action done from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose which is to be

achieved through it but in the maxim whereby it is determined” (Kant 15-16). Agilulf has no specific concern for Priscilla or the beggar except as opportunities to enact the dictates of the chivalric code.

It should be noted that Kant is not calling for, or positing the possibility of, the effacement of emotion even if he is asking for the sovereignty of reason. He does assert, however, that moral consideration should extend beyond human concerns. He writes that “unless we wish to deny all truth to the concept of morality and renounce its application to any possible object, we cannot refuse to admit that a law is of such broad significance that it holds not merely for men but for all rational beings as such” (408). This does create some confusion, as some of his exemplary maxims involve human emotions. For example, he writes that “pure sincerity in friendship can be demanded of every man, and this demand is not in the least diminished if a sincere friend has never existed” (24). In a sense, Agilulf should be that which is capable of exercising the maxim even if others cannot, as he lacks any distractions to his reasoning.

Agilulf might not be what we consider a “man,” but he is undeniably a being capable of reason. We should, then, be able to apply Kant’s law to Agilulf, and demand of him sincerity in friendship. But what do Agilulf’s relationships look like? He lacks the capacity for emotional involvement and is therefore incapable of reciprocating sincerity. An interesting parallel between SGGK and The Nonexistent Knight is that, rather than focusing on encounters with monsters, or battles, the most elaborately described event on both their quests takes place in the bedroom. We have already looked at Gawain’s encounters in detail and the focus was centered on the conflicting dictates that create an impossible dilemma for Gawain, but it can be further stated that the struggle is between

emotion and reason. What allows Gawain to place himself in an irreconcilable situation is the confusion over motivation. He is finally accused of loving his life too much, indicating that (to apply Kant's terms which we have been using here) he confused inclination with duty, and this confusion is exploited in order to lead him into a predicament with no obvious solution. Agilulf's bedroom encounter also manifests a tension between reason and the inclinations of flesh and the emotions that inform much of human existence, but the encounter takes on a distinctly different character. Agilulf attempts, by pure will and mastery over code, to satisfy the physical and emotional desires of another. Agilulf in a sense succeeds where Gawain fails: he is not misled by temptation. This is because Agilulf faces no conflict, there is no commandment that requires him to resist Priscilla and he cannot be physically tempted. And yet he avoids her advances because his only objective is to hide his inherent incapacity, to avoid revealing any inferiority to those who actually exist.

Agilulf seems to have to work equally as hard as Gawain to defer an intimate relationship with his would-be seducer. Agilulf's struggle is to demonstrate that, as a purely rational entity, he can function as well as or better than an empirically real counterpart. Thus, while Priscilla "took a leap and clamped herself to Agilulf, entwining her legs and arms around his armor" (Calvino, Nonexistent 101) in an attempt to experience physical intimacy, Agilulf, like Gawain, is concerned with deferring the situation, drawing it out and so delaying the moment when the threat becomes actualized. Whereas Gawain's actions, however flawed, are motivated by a sincere will to maintain propriety, the honor of both parties, and to adhere to code, Agilulf acts completely without sincerity in an attempt to hide his incapacity. Gawain can conceivably be accused

of being more interested in code and his image than in the lady, but this is a categorical fact of Agilulf's encounter, since he is a being comprised entirely of information patterned by code. Agilulf can apply the code, as when he says that "naked ladies are advised [. . .] that the most sublime of sensual emotions is embracing a warrior in full armor" (101), but this merely elides the fact that he cannot remove his armor, that is to say, he is not meaningfully "in" his armor.

Similarly, while his actions satisfy Priscilla to some extent, they take on the form of a continual deferral of intimacy. Agilulf undertakes the task of keeping the lady in the best possible light, thus "Priscilla was happy. But the sun was rising fast and to follow its rays Agilulf continually had to move the bed [. . .] posts and all" (103). The result is that Agilulf has technically succeeded in functioning as a courteous knight. However, when asked to describe the encounter, Priscilla says "a man . . . a man . . . a knight . . . a continuous . . . a paradise . . ." (104), suggesting that his success is an illusion that will be revealed with time and reflection. It might be that we are to take the ellipses as Priscilla being speechless from emotion after her profound intimate encounter, but they also stand in for complete sentences that would recount actual content if there were any in the unconsummated "intimate" encounter. Even if we understand the encounter simply to have taken a more emotional rather than physical turn, the intimacy which Priscilla seeks is necessarily lacking in terms of reciprocity. Agilulf feels no desire, compassion, attraction or intimacy of any kind. For him, the exercise is a technical one, and is devoid of sincerity. He may want to make her happy, but only to maintain the suspension of disbelief that his information-self requires.

While Agilulf ostensibly satisfies her, the encounter lacks what Priscilla was seeking. When prompted further by the question “but has he got everything?” (104), Priscilla answers, “I simply wouldn’t know now . . . So much . . .” (104). Here, the ellipses clearly take on a different character, representing not that which is inexpressible, but the elision of the lack of actual content. Complete sentences would force the realization that she was distracted from achieving the encounter she wanted. Priscilla, like Agilulf, is forced to defer the question or admit that the experience was, in fact, empty. As Bencivenga writes of the Nonexistent Knight in “Philosophy and Literature in Calvino’s Tales,” concerning the tactic of “saying very little and claiming it to be all that matters”: “The more abstract you become, the more you lock life in the shackles of triviality” (216). We could say the information-content of the encounter is identical to what Priscilla wants, but this would be like saying that reading about a relationship is meaningfully the same as having been in a relationship.

Agilulf seems to be in a unique situation that is not covered by Kant’s maxim. He is a rational being that is, by virtue of the conditions of his existence, incapable of executing the actions required of him in the situation he finds himself in with sincerity. By these standards, Agilulf’s attempt to apply any code universally represents, because of his unique situation, a critical, almost violent, lack of respect for the singularity of the situations he encounters; he attempts to apply a code that belongs to an institution to which he cannot belong, which assumes a kind of existence he does not have, that governs conduct in situations that were never considered.

However, a different law, universally applicable in identical iterations of that situation, could then be constructed. Agilulf is not a man, and thus sincerity cannot be

demanded of him even though his is granted parity with other men. The problem here is that this would not, paradoxically, constitute any guiding structure. The maxim may be universally applicable, but only to that individual in that situation (as noted earlier, Calvino makes precisely this assertion about the limited pragmatic value of universalized constructs). Agilulf's example is useful only to Agilulf, and does not occupy an absolute metaphysical function that overrides unique contexts, or that can guide other, less perfect, knights.

In "Toward a Postmetaphysical Rationality," from Radical Hermeneutics, Caputo writes that "we ought to be wary of a clean and decidable opposition between a confined reason and a reason set free [. . .]. [It] is impossible to have a reasonable discussion about reason if we do not recognize that it has been institutionalized" (229). Taking issue with Kant's idea of a realm of pure reason outside all applications, Caputo says that

Kant spoke of "pure" reason and the "autonomy" of reason. But that is a dangerous abstraction, for reason is always already embedded in systems of power. To a great extent what "reason" means is a function of the system of power which is currently in place, and what is irrational is what is out of power. (229)

Reason may be applicable to all rational beings, but beings can only be rational within a given language-game and cannot be autonomous from it.

One could conclude that Agilulf should avoid any relationships that would require sincerity. This prohibition would encompass any relationship that involves interaction with emotional beings, resulting in his exile from the human community and even Kant's "kingdom of ends." Indeed, much of the text supports the fact that Agilulf is already

estranged from human community. This fact is a source of continual frustration; for example, rather than interacting with others when the interaction could not be defined by the obligations of code, “he stood uncertainly behind this or that knight without taking part in their talk, then moved aside” (Calvino, Nonexistent 7). In “The Nonexistent Knight: Fantasy and Self-Creation” Albert Howard Carter III writes “that the struggle to become, rather than simply to be, is presented as the struggle to achieve an individuality that is intrinsically related to social solidarities (the companions-in-arms, the lover)” (143). Both these social relationships, which Carter mentions parenthetically, fail for Agilulf. Bolongaro comments that existence is characterized by social activity (rather than an innate state) and the inability to engage in this kind of activity is detrimental to Agilulf’s attempts to achieve parity with, let alone superiority to, others. I would argue that Agilulf’s failed quest constitutes an attempt to demonstrate a superiority to and autonomy from the mundane, physical, experiential, contextually dependent world from which he is excluded. Speaking of a general tendency that extends even beyond the scenes describing the interaction of Agilulf and Priscilla, Bolongaro notes that, “in sum, from beginning to end, Agilulfo’s mission in life seems to be to subjugate the body—the most perfectly subjugated body being precisely one that does not exist” (143). Bolongaro is in a sense correct, but I would submit, further, that Agilulf desire to subjugate the body is indirect; his real motive is to exercise sovereignty over what he sees as a corruption of pure reason, that is to say anything that would require an empirical element, or place it under the administration of institutions, subject to material evidence. His goal is to attach himself to a community by exercising sovereignty over existing rational beings (e.g., the other knights, Sophronia, Gurduloo, the Emperor, etc.). He can only reconcile the need to

sustain social solidarities (to be part of an institution) with his sense of superiority if he understands the institution not to be the arbiter of reason, but rather the necessary manifestation of an objective, autonomous rational order wherein all individuals merely conform without introducing conflict or variation.

The goal here is neither to refute Kant's conception of moral worth, nor to deny the precise internal logic of abstract reasoning. What is important is that we remember that reason is a faculty that exists in language, and cannot have autonomy from language nor the communities that use and are formed by language. It is in this vein of acknowledging that reason is engaged with the constitution of communities that Caputo writes that "reason is always already embedded in systems of power."

Kant would no doubt argue that institutional reason is, precisely, not reason at all, but we have already seen part of Caputo's objection to this assertion. Caputo further argues that what is valuable in Kant's philosophy is his "notion of a kingdom of ends, of the worthiness of all of us to be included in the community," but he has conferred this dignity on each person by declaring each individual to be "an end itself" because they are "an instance of the law" (Radical 266). Caputo's critique is that the essence of this community is in conflict, precisely, with metaphysics:

There is no denying that Kant nearly buried this experience [that of universal dignity of individuals] under an avalanche of metaphysical dualism and that he badly misstated his case by treating each individual as an instance of the law, so that it is the law—which the individual both authors and instantiates—which endows each individual with his worthiness for respect. He would, of course, have done better to say that it

belongs to his experience and ours that persons of themselves inspire and command respect [. . .], that we do not treat them or ourselves as means to an end. But, in terms of Kant's foundationalist anxieties, that would have given morals an empirical rather than a rational footing. (266)

Caputo's critique is that the purely rational conception of respect requires that we have respect for the law, not the individual in isolation, and that this confuses the truly positive insight of Kant's moral philosophy: that the worthiness of individuals is universal and derived from their ability to both instantiate and re-create the communally negotiated law. The drive for a metaphysical universality merely complicates the issue by stressing an illusory and hierarchical distinction where the law is prioritized over the individual.

Correspondingly, Agilulf's success or failure in upholding a moral system does not confirm or deny the validity of any universal moral maxim that Kant would have us hold. Indeed, while Agilulf may be, as Bolongaro suggests, an example of a Kantian pure will, he very clearly does not uphold what Kant would consider a universally applicable morality. The salient feature of Agilulf's repeated failure to exercise sovereignty over the experiential world of Charlemagne's court is that he justifies this sovereignty by the false assumption that he (being a pure will) is different in kind, and autonomous from, the will of the community that administers the application of chivalric law. Our ability to reason, and the language in which we reason, depend on the consistency of community. Even in the case of something such as mathematics that we consider to exist in a purely abstract space, we do not have access to objective facts, but the relative certainty of communal agreement made possible by a language-game. To illustrate, in Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language, Saul Kripke writes,

There is no objective fact—that we all mean addition by “+”, or even that a given individual does—that explains our agreement in particular cases. Rather our license to say of each other that we mean addition by “+” is part of a “language-game” that sustains itself only because of the brute fact that we generally agree. (97)

Further, “the set of responses in which we agree, and the way they interweave our activities, is our *form of life*” and “someone would be said [. . .] to follow a rule [only] as long as he agrees in his responses with the [. . .] responses produced by the members of *that* community” (96). Reason, therefore cannot be abstracted from, given autonomy from, the reasoning community. Agilulf’s struggle in Calvino’s text, and his ultimate failure to overcome it, dramatize the failure to achieve an illusory sovereignty. In this light, Agilulf’s quest can be characterized as the attempt to exert, and thereby demonstrate, his sovereignty over the administering community of the chivalric code by subjugating the capriciously ordered physical/experiential world to metaphysical (autonomously rational) order.

As in the case of Gawain, the event that sets Agilulf’s quest in motion takes the form of a disruption at the feast table that exploits a weakness in a system of interpretation. In SGGK, the Green Knight enters in response to an ultimatum delivered by the king that is taken as a literal demand. In The Nonexistent Knight, the challenge exploits the discourse that is underway at the feast table and preys upon the limited parameters the court has for assigning worth to actions. The gathering is already uneasy because of Agilulf’s tendency to challenge the veracity of the personal exploits of which the other knights boast. The other champions resist Agilulf’s limited interpretation by

saying, “‘I don’t see why you must niggle so Agilulf,’ [. . .] ‘the glory of our feats tends to amplify in the popular memory, thus proving it to be genuine glory, the basis of the titles and ranks we have won’ (Calvino, Nonexistent 77). This is, however, precisely Agilulf’s problem. Like Gawain, he can admit no discrepancy between reputation and actual fact. As a basis for social organization (ranks and titles), the feats have to be catalogued in order to form a stable groundwork. Agilulf insists that this is possible: he says, “Every title and predicate of mine I got for deeds well asserted and supported by incontrovertible documentary evidence!” (78). Given the distaste for Agilulf voiced by the other paladins, the obsession with facts and code might appear to be limited to Agilulf, but the narrative resists this simple dismissal. The world of the text, or at least the social group exemplified by Agilulf and the other paladins, is utterly determined by code. Even Charlemagne, the chief crusader and sovereign, is denied personal opinion and autonomy in favor of the dictates of law. The other knights appeal to Charlemagne to give them exemption from Agilulf’s scrutiny, but he can only offer “an opinion of a sort [. . .] in such matters Charlemagne’s wishes counted for little. He had to stick to the issue at hand, judge by such proofs as were given and see that laws and customs were respected” (77). The emperor’s only defense against Agilulf’s relentless pursuit of incontrovertible truth is to hide behind the vagueness of generality: “[W]hen asked his opinion he would shrug his shoulders, keep to generalities, and sometimes get out of it with some such quip as, ‘Oh! Who knows? War is war, as they say!’” (77). The emperor’s evasion seems to demonstrate the superior validity of Agilulf’s method of engaging with the world (absolute adherence to a preconceived order) over that of the boasting, story-telling human characters. The Nonexistent Knight’s insistence that he

“offend[s] no one” because he limits himself “to detailing facts, with place, date and proofs!” (78) seems to be valid and it is therefore deferred to, however unwillingly, by the court.

It is precisely Agilulf’s strictness in conforming to laws and custom that creates a vector for his undoing. He is attacked precisely on the grounds of the laws he seeks to impose upon his community. When he asserts that his status is founded on incontrovertible evidence, thus giving him a superior stability with respect to the other knights, he is countered with the exclamation, “So *you* say!” (78). The tone is comically childish, but the content of the attack is to challenge Agilulf’s interpretation of events by calling it *an* interpretation, *a* version of events, one that vies among other interpretations and is therefore subject to the same subjective indeterminacy.

What is revealed by Torrismund’s criticism is that Agilulf’s defining moment (that of saving a noble woman from rape) rests on a whole host of assumptions extrapolated from a specific interpretation of events rather than “incontrovertible evidence.” The point that is specifically contested by Torrismund is that the woman saved, being by then his mother, could not have been a virgin. The woman’s status at the moment of Agilulf’s act has profound consequences for his current status:

The code of chivalry then holding prescribed that whoever saved from certain danger the virginity of a damsel of noble lineage was immediately dubbed knight. But saving from rape a noblewoman no longer a virgin only brought a mention in dispatches and three month’s double pay. (78)

What this means practically is that all of Agilulf’s subsequent achievements will be retroactively annulled:

His deed in defense of Sophronia had given him the right to be an armed knight. The knighthood of Selimpia Citeriore being vacant just then, he had assumed the title. His entry into service, all ranks and titles added later, were a consequence of that episode. If Sophronia's virginity which he had saved was proved nonexistent, then his knighthood went up in smoke too, and nothing that he had done afterwards could be recognized as valid at all, and his names and titles would be annulled, so that each of his attributions would become as nonexistent as his person. (79-80)

The result is that the emperor "can take no account of [him], even to make good arrears of pay" (82). Agilulf will be returned to his state prior to his name-conferring act: he will neither exist nor, more critically, be acknowledged as someone that has the rights of one who exists.

The issue of boasting is a point on which Agilulf's attempts to demonstrate that the purity of will that motivates his actions are in contrast with the impurity of the other knights who are moved only out of compulsion: knights like "Astolfo, Rinaldo. . . Roland," who once set out to "do deeds which later entered the epics of poets" even though, now, "the same veterans would never move a step unless forced by duty" (86). Their motivation was, previously, to achieve glory and now, to avoid the dishonor of losing it. In terms of moral worth, as Kant put it, doing one's duty for the sake of duty "is entirely different" from doing what corresponds to one's duty "out of a fear of untoward consequences [or for the sake of reward] for in the former case the concept of the action itself contains the law [. . .] while in the latter [one] must look about to see what results

may be connected with it” (19). The famous knights do things to avoid consequences or previously only to achieve glory and not, as Agilulf, for the sake of duty in and of itself.

However, while it is explained as part of his duty as a knight, Agilulf does “act and acquire glory for himself” (Calvino, Nonexistent 34). He seems to do this in order to fulfill an expectation of his station rather than for personal gratification, but he does nonetheless act for personal benefit. When other knights “boast as usual” (75), Agilulf is concerned with his ontological status; he “has nothing to sustain his own actions, whether true or false. Either they are set down day by day in verbal reports and taken down in registers, or there’s emptiness, blankness” (76). The scene, in fact, highlights the fact that Agilulf, the information-being, is dependent on boasting and glory. Agilulf, like the knights of romance, has no reality outside the information made memorable by boasts and fanciful tales. Moreover, the other legendary knights are, at least in the conceit of the narrative, physically grounded and are in a sense less dependent on boasting than is Agilulf. Information is more critically dependant on recognition for its ontological security than any physical object.

This act of scrutinizing Agilulf’s claims as boasts provides the impetus for the narrative’s primary quest, his pursuit of confirmation of Sophronia’s virginity. The quest does not immediately seem as foreboding as Gawain’s, but on closer analysis the quest is equally self-defeating. Agilulf sets out to find her in order to verify her virginity, but the question is raised as to whether any positive evidence could be gathered: how could one “expect to find her the same fifteen years later [. . .] breastplates of beaten iron have lasted less” (81). Even if, as Agilulf counters, she “took the veil immediately” (81) after the rescue, “in fifteen years [. . .] no convent in Christendom has been saved from

dispersal and sack, and every nun has had time to de-nun and re-nun herself at least four or five times over” (82). Agilulf, in desperation, sets out to find evidence from the least reliable source; he declares, “[V]iolated chastity presupposes a violator. I will find him and obtain proof from him of the date when Sophronia could be considered a virgin” (82). What evidence could the violator offer except his word, and what weight can the word of a rapist carry? Success seems impossible and, since his titles are the only things that anchor his presence in the existent world, Agilulf’s seems to be a journey towards failure and dissolution.

What I would argue, moreover, is that the quest has already failed at its inception because it inherently requires that Agilulf predicate his status on evidence contained in unstable, subjective accounts rather than objective facts. Agilulf himself is immune to the corruption of flesh, but his information-self only takes on meaning as such when it intersects with the transitory world. Torrismund’s accusation is that Agilulf’s status, and existence, do not rest on evidence but rather the assertion of contestable versions of events, assumption and, precisely, the vagueness that Agilulf abhors and seeks to quell through strict adherence to a predefined paradigm. Part of Torrismund’s accusation, and really the salient point, has already been proven correct: Agilulf cannot offer provable evidence, let alone incontrovertible evidence, to support his claim. The need for the quest demonstrates the inherent instability of Agilulf’s position: he founded himself on the assumption, rather than the fact, of Sophronia’s virginity. Even if Agilulf can prove Sophronia’s virginity, his assertion that he occupies an absolute value has been contradicted. Agilulf’s quest, like Gawain’s, seems to be the unrelenting process by which the prearranged end of the character is played out.

Furthermore, rather than marking an instance of Agilulf's failure to implement the code of chivalry, the introduction of conflicting evidence demonstrates the impossibility of the code attaining autonomy from the communal, phenomenological world. Like Gawain's quest, Agilulf's becomes one that undermines the assumptions about the character's fundamental nature. Because Agilulf's identity and existence are conferred by his conformity to a metaphysical paradigm, when his identity is in question the universal status of the paradigm itself is also put into question. It is impossible to imagine that Agilulf, who is granted existence only as a manifestation of this code, would neglect it. Thus, Agilulf's presence represents the code's inherent imprecision, its capacity for internal aberration because it is contingent, necessarily, upon interpretation and consensus. The code is *a* language-game, and as such is subject to indeterminacy. Embedded in the story of Agilulf's coming to being, his achievement of recognizable status equal to someone who exists, is the fact that the code accepts assumptions rather than evidence:

Before battling for Sophronia when she was attacked by bandits, and saving her virtue, he had been a simple nameless warrior in white armor wandering around the world at a venture, or rather (as was soon known) empty white armor, with no warrior inside. (79)

The key point here is the fact that Agilulf's nonexistence was unknown: it was "soon known," that is to say it was known after his name-conferring action was recognized. The code of chivalry granted that "whoever saved" a virgin noblewoman would be dubbed knight. Agilulf was not a "whoever" or even a "whatever" until he acquired identity. The code presupposes a preexistent identity and therefore does not require that existence be

verified. Thus Agilulf, a nothing, was assumed to be a “whoever,” granted name and title and then became, by default, a “whoever.” Agilulf uses the code to retroactively testify to his functional presence. As already noted, this interpretation of the text is supported by Charlemagne’s instance that he cannot take account of Agilulf even to make retroactive corrections: to correct accounts would be to bestow upon Agilulf an inappropriate level of recognition for one who, without legal name and title, has no existence. This interpretation is borne out, further, by Agilulf’s statement, “My name is at my journey’s end” (89), which indicates that his status as a “whoever,” an identity-carrying individual, is suspended until his identity-conferring act can be confirmed. Thus Agilulf, the manifestation of a chivalric code which applies even to the emperor, seems to be equally dependent upon vagueness and imprecision as the opinion-less Charlemagne.

The import of the universal dependence on indeterminacy indicated by the text is that, rather than conceiving of imprecision as a human fault, it is re-conceptualized as an operating requirement for any value-conferring system. The model by which to know the particular instances of a form is necessarily general. Agilulf’s fault, what drives him to criticize the other boasting, human knights, is his belief that every individual practitioner of the code should be an exact replica of the ideal. In reality, the other knights’ statuses *as* knights are produced by interpreting unique situations and modeling their actions in such a way that adapts a general model to specific demands.

Agilulf’s mistake is imagining that the ideal can exist autonomously from phenomenal experience because he, so he believes, does so. The other knights are such by virtue of the fact that, in spite of their irregularities, they persist in being recognizable variants of the paradigm defined by the code. They are knights even though they may

lack specific attributes that make knights recognizable; they are specific interpretations of what the code fundamentally attempts to recognize. In fact, these Rolands, Astolfos and Rinaldos (the legendary knights that the stories derive from) correspond, in total, to the information-paradigm of knighthood.

Agilulf, on the other hand, must be *everything* the code itemizes as an exemplary characteristic in order to elide the fact that he occupies a point of ambiguity in the code. When asked about whether Agilulf exists, the superintendent of duels says, “Take it easy! No one said that in Charlemagne’s army one can etc., etc. All we said was in our regiment there is a knight who’s so and so. That’s all. What can or can’t be as a matter of general practice is of no interest to us” (17). The code, for the other knights, is a matter of pragmatism rather than of metaphysical significance. It is not granted the status of a universal, autonomous abstraction even in the face of Agilulf.

Agilulf, because he is spared the irregularities of existence can, and evidently does, embody every characteristic itemized by the code and thus demands that he be interpreted as its exemplary model according to the code’s internal logic, but he cannot erase the need for an external reality in which that model can be meaningful. He succeeds in achieving the ostensible goal of his impossible quest: proving Sophronia’s virginity. The motivation for Agilulf’s quest was not to seek out the truth, but to demonstrate that it has already been revealed. He fails according to his underlying motive: to prove that his status as a knight was necessarily correct, that his status transcends perishable, material concerns.

The fact that Agilulf, who “succeeded in doing all things as if [he] existed,” nonetheless suddenly surrenders betrays the fact that a metaphysical paradigm, no matter

how internally stable, cannot confer incontrovertible significance. Seeking the Nonexistent Knight after it is revealed that Sophronia was in fact a virgin when rescued by Agilulf, the apprentice knight Raimbaut asks, “Knight, you have resisted so long by your will power alone, and succeeded in doing all things as if you existed, why suddenly surrender?” (132). Agilulf existed as an extension of the chivalric code and his presence was verified by his ability to execute the code, so why, indeed, does his nonexistence overcome him even though his status turns out to be secure? It is precisely because his will power is compromised. When it is reported, “Sire, the virgin is lying in the embrace of a young soldier” (128), Agilulf admits defeat, saying, “I have no longer a name! Farewell!” (129). He does this, importantly, even though catching the lovers does not disprove his assertion that she *was* a virgin. In fact, he had a contingency plan that outlined a course of action to follow even if it turned out she was no longer a virgin, but he dismisses this potential solution and succumbs. What Agilulf’s very particular undoing demonstrates is something specific about his status: his presence is not made untenable by objective inconsistency; Sophronia *was* a virgin at the time of Agilulf’s rescue. His presence as an instance of an objective will is undermined by the fact that it is subject to how the community interprets his status and cannot, therefore, be objective. What ensues in the Nonexistent Knight’s absence is a sequence of interpretations and counter-interpretations that attempt to contain the situation in relative values. Referring to the status of the lovers, Charlemagne says “it is incest, of course, but that between half-brother and sister is not the most serious” (130). Finally, the “truth” is uncovered, and Charlemagne says, “all seems to be working out for the best” (131). What Agilulf cannot admit, and must be absent in the face of, is the relation of “truth” to what “seems to be”

the case. What *is*, is only what stands until some previously unknown fact, or new variable, requires the complete reinterpretation of the situation.

Similarly, Agilulf becomes subject to the interpretations of other knights who have been looking for a way to will him back to nonexistence, who think correctly as Agilulf sets out on his quest, “At last we’ve found a way of getting rid of this bore!” (82). Agilulf’s functional existence is not only a manifestation of the code, but also an example of the impossibility of that code autonomously directing will without being subject to the fluctuating realm of human interpretation and consensus.

The nature of Agilulf’s lauded will is put into question. For example, Agilulf thinks, “Many things I managed to do better than those who exist, since I lack their usual defects of coarseness, carelessness, incoherence, smell” (56), implying, to him, that his will was greater. But, as in the case of Priscilla’s temptation, his will is not challenged because he is subject to no temptation or distraction. His status relative to the other knights can be phrased as the absence of defect. The other knights can be caught in positions where they would not be recognized; they can, for example, be filthy and smell when they should be immaculate emblems in order to embody the image that is associated with the status. In fact, to ever embody the image of knighthood requires, for them, supreme concentration and discipline.

Agilulf consistently confuses recognizability for superior stability of status. Whereas the other knights can lack the appearance of knights, Agilulf is immune to smell and to fatigue (which can cause carelessness). Moreover, his armor is consistently immaculate because he is immune from error and thus sustains no dents or blemishes as the result of receiving blows. In a real sense, he faces no challenges. He is recognizable

as a knight at any time and is thus assumed to be a knight. However, Agilulf's conception of his superior embodiment of knightly status deriving from his recognizability elides the fact of his nonexistence: he is not a knight because he *is not*, "Agilulf with all his armor [is] pierced through every chink by gusts of wind, flights of mosquitoes, and the rays of the moon" (13). Rather than granting him superior status, the absence of "imperfection" in Agilulf simply reestablishes his total absence.

Torrismund's accusation, and the quest undertaken thereafter, represents the first real test of Agilulf's will to be in spite of his nonexistence. His actions thereafter represent the effort to suppress the challenge to his will power, to insist that the code supersedes the arbitrary facts of reality and alone confers significance. Agilulf wants the paradigm that he embodies to be an absolute, meaningful presence that overrides and subordinates the undefined, capricious and arbitrary facts of the physical world and the interpretive whim of its inhabitants. Facts are important only when they determine status: one saves a virgin noblewoman; she is a virgin; therefore, her savior is granted knighthood. Facts are dismissed when they do not inform the variables of logical equations: the code does not ask that someone exists before that someone performs an action; therefore, Agilulf's nonexistence does not contribute to his status according to the chivalric code.

Similarly, the quest to prove Sophronia's virginity is not undertaken in order to uncover the material truth of the matter, whatever it might be, but rather to vindicate the infallibility of the conclusions arrived at by the procedures of chivalric code. Agilulf responds to accusations of illegitimacy by asking, "How can you sustain that, which is an affront not only to my dignity as knight but to the lady whom I took under the protection

of my sword?" (78). This states that the accusation should be viewed as an impropriety. The accusation cannot be ignored or willed out of existence because Torrismund places his own status at risk by declaring his own illegitimacy (in that his account of his conception puts his paternity in question) and thereby opening another gap between attributed status and objective facts.

That Agilulf's quest to maintain his presence (his functional existence) fails even though he is ultimately vindicated by facts, then, becomes the key point of interest. What this fact suggests is that the objective material world does not corrupt status-conferring frameworks, but that the frameworks themselves are equally subject to variation, indeterminacy and caprice and only take on meaning when they are actively integrated into the world. Agilulf's metaphysical apparatus for negotiating the world is put in jeopardy not by inconsistency itself, but by the possibility of inconsistency: he realizes that a mistake *is* possible; the code is not self-interpreting and only exists as an extrapolation of the fallible, changing community that brought it into being. The incursion of a potential discord between the material data and the ostensibly metaphysical order has served, as we have seen, to demonstrate that Agilulf's code is dependent on interpretation. The Nonexistent Knight's failure to sustain his presence does not mark an individual failure of his particular metaphysical system of definition because it rests upon false assumptions; it represents the categorical failure of all such paradigms if they, like Agilulf, do not account for the fact that they rest on *any* assumptions. The paradigms by which meaning is attributed necessarily exist within language-games.

This apparent instability of our guiding models might make us all the more susceptible to the temptation of subscribing to metaphysical systems that claim to order

the entire world according to an abstract paradigm and provide a stable horizon against which to confer values that are free from fluctuation. However, the lesson we learn from Wittgenstein is precisely that the inaccessibility of an objectively verifiable world does not deny either the existence of a material world or the possibility of certainty.

Wittgenstein's project is to understand the parameters within which we negotiate the world, the way meaning becomes significant as such. We must, and do, act with certainty within the confines of language-games, but that does not mean that the game is not subject to alteration over time or fluctuation as it comes into contact with other such games.

It is at this point that SGGK and the Nonexistent Knight mirror each other conceptually. Their respective quest narratives culminate in the destabilization of the assumption of the protagonists. However, the texts are conceptually inverted on the following issue: whereas Gawain fails to achieve perfect conformity to a metaphysical paradigm by virtue of being corrupt flesh, Agilulf, a composite of will and idea that can function as an automaton programmed by the code, fails to achieve parity with those who actually exist while maintaining an incontrovertible status. He consequently dissolves as the illusion of his incontrovertibility dissolves.

In this context, the ideal to which Gawain aspires and Agilulf in a sense *is*, can no longer be conceived of as a perfect model corrupted by human imperfection or caprice, but rather as a framework for interpretation that, in order to be of positive use, must be adaptable and integrated into the living, fluctuating, world. In "The End of Ethics" from More Radical Hermeneutics, John Caputo argues that those frameworks which give form and structure to human lives only become meaningful when they move into the world of

actual human existence. He writes, “The movement into the concrete practice (praxis) is an enhancement, a filling out, giving flesh and blood and detail to what was in the beginning only a vague or general idea” (182). The exploration of this idea will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter IV: Necessary Failures and Paradoxical Successes

My readings of SGGK and the Nonexistent Knight lead to an interesting predicament. In the case of SGGK, the interest was in contrasting the faults of a living character with the perfection of an ideal model. What makes Gawain's story so striking is that his name at once refers to an individual and also signifies the idealized model of a knight that the same individual is reputed to be. Gawain's definition of his own self-worth and personal significance is constructed in relation to adherence to the same model that defines the function of his reputation as a superlative example. Derek Pearsall writes that Gawain's status as a "perfect knight" is anchored in the fact that he "proclaims himself united in himself in the pentangle and equally in the inside and the outside of his shield" (359). As a result, Gawain's self-definition admits no distinction between the ideal image of himself offered by his reputation and his actual self. In this reading of the text, the quest he undertakes drives him towards the axe-head which symbolically severs the unifying link between his ideal and actual selves. The necessary gap between Gawain and any ideal abstraction is viscerally demonstrated. Gawain, a man of flesh, cannot be a pure ideal.

The Nonexistent Knight presents us with a similarly thwarted quest. Agilulf assumes and embodies the hierarchical predominance of the abstract over the actual in a way that seems consistent with our understanding, derived from SGGK, that human weakness undermines an individual's access to perfection. Although uniquely capable of ideal form due to its immateriality, Agilulf nonetheless discovers over the course of his

quest that he is unable to maintain a significant presence in the world without a physical, perishable, aspect.

My interest has been in demonstrating contradictions in the character's strategies for establishing self-definition, and to demonstrate that, and analyze how, the texts themselves invite this post-mortem dissection of the characters' construction of identity on the foundation of metaphysical paradigms. Both characters attempt to construct identities in strict conformity to codified systems of conduct. Their quests, as we have seen, are undertaken in order to maintain and defend their constructed identities. Their conformity to fixed paradigms extrapolated from their respective chivalric codes is both (in the case of Gawain) inhuman and unattainable and (in the case of Agilulf) still insufficient for sustaining meaning autonomously from a fluctuating language-game.

The success of these readings is also their weakness. In the context of SGGK Hollis notes the "preponderance of literature postulating the inherent weakness of all humanity" (278). Conversely, Agilulf, as the personification of an ideal form, seems to be, at worst, a dogmatic function or, at best, an aggravating triviality. Agilulf is easy enough to dispel, being nonexistent. In Italo Calvino and The Compass of Literature, Bolongaro goes so far as to call Agilulf "a mere grammatical subject, a mere ability to say 'I' in a sentence, but this 'I' has no depth, no thickness, no history other than a sequence of events" (138). It is as though, as Krynski writes, the "sign, in a way understood as a referential and as an indicative social interrelational force, is a protagonist" (196) for Calvino. In this light we can dismiss him, seemingly, without having to consider him as a person. On these grounds, this entire project risks the threat

of triviality. What is of interest now, after we have seen how these quests fail, is to understand why they are still, in a sense, necessary failures.

To understand the significance of these quests we need to understand fully what is staked on them. In reference to SGGK, Hollis writes that, “inevitably, the view that all men are basically alike by virtue of their shared, and flawed, human nature, turns individuality into a superficial matter.” Hollis also notes that this kind of self-analysis is “curious [. . .] to the modern reader” (278), presumably because we live in a culture that valorizes individuality (a fact of modern culture, as discussed earlier with reference to C. Taylor). This, perhaps uniquely modern, obsession with individuality is taken up in The Nonexistent Knight. It becomes impossible to dismiss Agilulf when we examine why the character comes to manifest a presence in the world of the text, and what universally necessary function he provides for other characters. It is possible that Calvino’s text mocks the need for order, but it only “mocks, while understanding [. . .] the human desire for order, unambiguousness, and permanence” (Jeannet 23). The following passage describes, if not how Agilulf comes to *be*, how he begins his failed act of *becoming*:

World conditions were still confused in the era when [Agilulf’s story] took place. It was not rare then to find names and thoughts and forms and institutions that corresponded to nothing in existence. But at the same time the world was polluted with objects and capacities and persons who lacked any name or distinguishing mark. It was a period when the will and determination to exist, to leave a trace, to run up against all that existed, was not wholly used since there were many who did nothing about it— from poverty or ignorance or simply from finding things bearable as they

were—and so a certain amount was lost into the void. Maybe too there came a point when this diluted will and consciousness of self was condensed, turned into sediment, as imperceptible water particles condense into banks of clouds; and then maybe this sediment merged, by chance or instinct, with some name or family or military rank or duties or regulations, above all in an empty armor, for in times when armor was necessary even for a man who existed, how much more was it for one who didn't. Thus it was that Agilulf of the Guildivern had begun to act and acquire glory for himself. (Calvino, Nonexistent 33)

According to the text, we have a real stake in Agilulf's quest for becoming and there is the potential for a profound loss in his failure and dispersal. In the passage above, the stakes are diffuse, global and difficult to define. Though he functions as the sedimentation of a lost multitude's cumulative need for recognition, it is perhaps difficult to see what he does for the individuals that comprise that multitude. To get at Agilulf's specific function and what consequence his loss has for us, we can examine the positive functions he serves for individual characters.

The passage above that describes Agilulf as the condensation of will lost to the void by the existentially disenfranchised is reinforced by his protective attitude towards characters in a state of crisis, an attitude related to his (as we shall see false) sense of immunity from their plight. In response to Raimbaut's confusion and despair, the narrator reports that "states of confusion or despair or fury in other human beings immediately gave perfect calm and security to Agilulf. His immunity from the shocks and agonies to which people who exist are subject made him take on a superior and protective attitude"

(21). Further, Agilulf's presence does in fact seem to be a remedy: "The iron gauntlet of white armor had settled on the young man's hair again. Raimbaut hardly felt it weighing on his head. It was like an object that didn't communicate human warmth, proximity, consolation or annoyance—and yet, he felt a kind of tense obstinacy" (22).

Raimbaut's crisis, which Agilulf's presence relieves, is phrased in terms of a desire to act meaningfully (as Agilulf is perceived to do) so as to avoid the threat of occupying a meaningless void:

Raimbaut realized that all this moved by ritual, convention, formulas, and beneath it there was . . . what? He felt a vague sense of discomfort come over him at knowing himself to be outside all these rules of a game. But then his wanting to avenge his father's death, his ardor to fight, to enroll himself among Charlemagne's warriors—wasn't that also a ritual to prevent plunging into the void, like the raising and setting of pine cones by Sir Agilulf? Oppressed by the turmoil of such unexpected questions, young Raimbaut flung himself on the ground and burst into tears. (21)

The passage reinforces what we have already discovered about Agilulf: that his presence is a function of those arbitrary conventions he enacts. The fact is recognized as a possibility by Raimbaut. More interestingly this passage adds to the picture Raimbaut's simultaneous recognition of the necessity of those conventions and the terror he feels at the possibility of their being arbitrary, as they are what prevent both characters from "plunging into the void."

But what is the void? What absence defines it? Agilulf already lacks physical presence, and yet resists, suggesting that the void in question is not an absence of

material. Further, Raimbaut has physical presence, but still fears the void. In the instance noted above, Raimbaut's fear is evoked by the suggestion of a coextensive relationship between the minute trivialities of an arbitrary game and the rules of order and conduct of the entire world of Charlemagne's court and even the struggle against their "heathen" counterparts in which Raimbaut's and his father's life, death and actions take on significance. One solution to this threat is to posit a system that extends from a transcendental authority to the minutest details of mundane existence. Agilulf sustains his will by "faith in our holy cause" (7), that is to say, faith in the holiness of the cause of Charlemagne's court: the war with the "infidels." The procedures of Charlemagne's court extend to defining the proper conduct for eating. Agilulf's behavior in this forum emphasizes the order and cleanliness befitting a knight, in contrast to the disorder of the other knights:

At the corner of the table where Agilulf sat [. . .] all proceeded cleanly, calmly and orderly. But he who ate nothing needed more attendance by servers than the whole of the rest of the table. First of all—while there was such a confusion of dirty plates everywhere that there was no chance of changing them between courses and each ate as best he could, even on the tablecloth—Agilulf went on asking to have put in front of him fresh crockery and cutlery [. . .]. (73-4)

Agilulf “served himself a little of everything,” stripped “the last little bone of its finest and most recalcitrant shred of flesh” and “poured and repoured [wine] among the many beakers and glasses in front of him” (74).¹

The problem created by invoking a coextensive relationship between, say, table setting, the order of battle, and the “holy cause,” is that soon everything is in danger of appearing arbitrary. While it does not really matter (and cannot matter) what knife Agilulf uses to go after that “recalcitrant shred of flesh,” it does matter that the cause, the war against the “infidels,” is justified in order for the characters to be righteous. The problem is that the “right” action in both cases seems to be a matter of caprice unless the order can be legitimized by an *a priori* point of departure that justifies its significance. It is true that, even if we give up on the idea of an *a priori* point of departure, or a metaphysical order, the world does not immediately come crashing down around us. But

¹ Before we dismiss this connection between minutiae and divine order as a peculiarity of Agilulf, Calvino’s book, or postmodern obsessions, we would do well to recall a similar scene occurs in SGGK:

Seggez hym serued semly inno3e
 Wyth sere sewes and sete, sesound of þe best,
 Double-felde, as hit fallez, and fele jyn fischez
 Summe baken in bred, summe brad on þe gledez,
 Summe soþen, summe in sewe sauered with spyces,
 And ay sawes so sleze þat þe segge liked.
 Þe freke calde hit a fest ful freely and ofte
 Ful hendely, quen all þe hapeles rehayted gyn at onez,
 “As hende,
 þhis penaunce now 3e take,
 And eft hit schel amende.”
 þat monmuch merþe con make,
 For wyn in his hed þat wende. (888-900)

This passage demonstrates the importance of such things as table service as an example of how skilled, “hende,” the characters are at observing courtly propriety. The excerpt deals specifically with the food he is served, all fish coinciding with the religious observance of a fast-day, and yet the joke is that he is feasting on excellent food and being served constantly refilled double-portions. Such small details are thus linked to proper observance of religious and social obligation.

just because a person can be one of the many people who do nothing with “the will and determination to exist” because of “finding things bearable as they are,” it does not mean that “a certain amount” of one’s being is not “lost into the void” as a result.

The void, as we are beginning to see, is a kind absence of standards resulting from a paralyzing ethical indeterminacy that prevents individuals from achieving significant action or manifesting meaningful identities. This is most concretely suggested in the text by the most condensed source of Raimbaut’s terror: Agilulf’s polarized counterpart, Gurduloo. The salient feature of Gurduloo’s character is that he lacks the capacity for any individuation; he is completely permeable with respect to both his physical and linguistic context. Unlike Gawain or Agilulf, who have only one name that may be revoked, Gurduloo has so many names that his presence cannot be tracked over time unless one could recognize all of his possible names. He is called, variously, “Gurduloo—Omoboo,” “Martinzoo” (27), “or Ben-Stambul [. . .] or Omobestia [. . .] or Wild Mand of the Valley or Gian Paciasso” (28), etc. It becomes, in a sense, difficult to speak about him. As Agilulf puts it, “He is a man without a name and with every possible name” (53). One person will call him by one name, and the only response can be: “He doesn’t come from our parts, maybe she calls him that” (27). In the absence of Gurduloo himself, he cannot be referred to with any authority. It is easier to recognize Agilulf by name even though he does not actually exist. Gurduloo is recognized in each context, but he is consistent only in his inconsistency. The old peasant that introduces him to the court reports:

I’ve also noticed that his name changes from season to season everywhere.

I’d say every name flows over him without sticking. Whatever he’s called

it's the same to him. Call him and he thinks you're calling a goat. Say "cheese" or "torrent" and he answers "here I am." (28)

Gurduloo, then, does not have Agilulf's problem: no one name can contain him, and so the loss of one is of no consequence to him, but his inability to individuate himself makes it impossible to interact with others or to take part in any ordered system. He does not even, precisely, have access to language. He is able to formulate words, even sentences, but he has profound difficulty in using language with authority, for performing a coherent action, or for maintaining a consistent grammatical subject. For example, the first time he speaks the following is reported:

The noblemen around, who had only heard him produce animal sounds till then, were astounded. He spoke very hurriedly, eating his words and getting all entangled, sometimes passing, it seemed without interruption, from one dialect to another or even one language to another, Christian or Moorish. Amid incomprehensible words and mistakes, the meaning of what he said was more or less, "I touch my nose with the earth. I fall to my feet at your knees. I declare myself an august servant of your most humble majesty. Order and I will obey myself!" He brandished a spoon tied to his belt. "And when your majesty says, 'I order command and desire,' and do this with your scepter, as I do, with this d'you see? And when you shout as I shout, 'I orderrr commanddd and desirrrre!' you subjects must all obey me or I'll have you strung up, you first there with that beard and silly old face." (29)

Gurduloo here confuses himself with the emperor, and while some of his utterances have recognizable meaning in the strictest sense, they misfire¹ because he misunderstands his relationship to his context. Gurduloo represents an undermining counterpoint to a hierarchical system that we may not respect, but imagine for an instant if Gurduloo's utterance carried weight, if they were not treated as complete misfires? What would happen if we granted him the same respect as we do an emperor? Agilulf declares the emperor's power to be defined, in part, by his capacity to perform speech-acts. He states: "A verbal statement by the emperor has the validity of an immediate decree" (32). Thus, Gurduloo's rambling would then have to be complied with after being decoded. Even if we imagine a different community, any decision-making agency attributed to Gurduloo would have to be highly selective and subject to the whimsical interpretation of others. Otherwise, when he shifts, as Gurduloo does, to "jumping and skipping and waving splayed arms, with little yelps of laughter and 'Quà! . . . Quà . . .,'" because "he thinks ducks are him" (25), these displays would have to be given equal weight and authority. Imagine, for an instance, trying to respect Gurduloo's right to contribute to the decision-making process in a democracy: given the lack of a common language within which to decipher Gurduloo's antics, interpreting them is much closer to augury than actual communication. Interpretations of Gurduloo's utterance say much more about the will of his interpreters than that of Gurduloo himself. His authority would be subordinated to the will of whoever is the most convincing interpreter.

¹ I borrow the term from J. L. Austin who, in How to do Things with Words, describes certain articulations of speech, in certain contexts, as being tantamount to an action. Gurduloo becomes Agilulf's squire purely because the emperor declares it, and the change in status literally only exists as a function of the declarative statement. The same statement made by another character that does not have the emperor's authority, like someone pretending to be the emperor for the purposes of a joke, would be a misfire.

The locus of ethical/political agency does not seem to be in the material fact of existence, but in membership in a community. Gurduloo's authority is not revoked because he is externally denied it; it does not exist because of his failure to recognize its, or even his, existence. The text, interestingly, stresses that Gurduloo's problem, for all its appearance of madness, is not madness. Again, the peasant who characterizes Gurduloo says that "mad's not quite the right word for him. He's just a person who exists and doesn't realize he exists" (28), and that this is the result of Gurduloo being "a bit careless" (25). Gurduloo's defect is an inability to maintain a distinct identity, or a stable subjectivity which results in a lack of moral agency.

We have already seen the failure to maintain a coherent linguistic subjectivity in his "discussion" with Charlemagne, but the problem, as is hinted at by his confusion over the ducks, extends to his ability to differentiate himself from the material world. The most distinct example of this is Gurduloo's response to soup. When Gurduloo is fed at the emperor's order, he retires to eat and is soon found enacting the following scene:

He was thrusting his head into the mess tin which he had put on the ground, as if he were trying to get into it. The good gardener went to shake him by a shoulder. "When will you understand, Martinzoo, that it's you who must eat the soup, and not the soup you! Don't you remember? You must put it to your mouth with a spoon."

Gurduloo began lapping up spoonful after spoonful. So eagerly did he brandish the spoon that sometimes he missed his aim. In the tree under which he was sitting there was a cavity just by his head. Gurduloo now began to fling spoonfuls of soup into the hole in the tree.

“That’s not your mouth! It’s the tree’s!” (30)

How Gurduloo survives is something of a mystery. Until this point, Gurduloo’s state has seemed harmless, even superior to Agilulf’s, who must constantly concentrate and exert himself, but it now becomes impossible to consider it a positive state or even relatively desirable. His carelessness is such that he loses the ability to conceive of himself as an independent entity, leaving him utterly defenseless and challenging even his ability to feed himself. The few successfully placed mouthfuls must come from the prompting of those who do have a stable subject, an individuated sense of self. The necessity of an external voice, which must be consistently present or Gurduloo will immediately start feeding a tree he thinks is he, means that even Gurduloo, who lacks all self-definition, cannot live outside a community comprised of self-defined individuals.¹

Gurduloo not only confuses the external world for himself, he also confuses himself for the external world. After his moderately successful struggle with the soup, a hedgehog comes to investigate the spilled food. Gurduloo, having fallen asleep in the interim, is woken up by the pain of his foot resting against the prickles of the hedgehog. Gurduloo has, however, forgotten how to move his own foot. He cannot recognize it as a constitutive part of himself and begins to address it as a distinct entity saying, “Hey foot, I’m talking to you! What are you doing there like an idiot? Don’t you see that that creature is tickling you? Oh f-o-o-o-t! Oh fool! Why don’t you pull yourself away? Don’t

¹ Marilyn Migiel argues that the theme of nourishment “is used in almost all cases to indicate the main characters’ (sometimes futile) struggle to affirm their own existence” (58). Migiel cites Agilulf “going through the motions of preparing food for consumption, though he is unable to consume it” as an example (58). In the case of Gurduloo Migiel writes that he “dramatizes his lack of consciousness not only in his inability to attach himself to any name, but also in his inability to eat correctly” (58).

you feel it hurting?” (31). His inability to properly understand himself creates a potentially mortal danger.

Gurduloo’s problems with soup recur later in the text, when Agilulf and Raimbaut find that the camp cooks have donated all the leftover soup to Agilulf’s many-named and no-named squire:

“All is soup!” exclaimed Gurduloo, bending over the pot as if leaning over a window sill, and taking great sweeps with his spoon to bring off the most delicious part of the contents, the crust stuck to the sides.

“All is soup!” resounded his voice from inside the vat, which tipped over at his onslaught.

Gurduloo was now imprisoned in the overturned pot. His spoon could be heard banging like a cracked bell, and his voice moaning, “All is soup!” Then the vat moved like a tortoise, turned over again, and Gurduloo reappeared.

He had cabbage soup spattered, smeared, all over him from head to toe, and was stained with blacking. With liquid sticking up his eyes he felt blind and came on screeching, “All is soup!” with his hands forward as if swimming, seeing nothing but the soup covering eyes and face, “All is soup!” brandishing the spoon in one hand as if wanting to draw to himself spoonfuls of everything around, “All is soup!” (53-4)

The scene begins as a reiteration of Gurduloo’s dependence on charity, further indicating that his survival depends upon a community to which he, in turn, does not seem to contribute. What is more significant, though, is that after we get over the slapstick

absurdity of the situation we are called to imagine the terror of actually confusing oneself, and the world, with an obfuscating mass of soup that interferes with one's perceptual faculties. Gurduloo's distresses are pronounced by his "moaning" and "screeching," but the most concrete articulation of the significance of his confusion is manifest by other characters.

Agilulf already responded negatively to the first instance of Gurduloo's encounter with the soup: "From the beginning Agilulf had followed with attention, mingled with distress, the movements of the man's heavy, fleshy body, which seemed to wallow in existing, as naturally as a chick scratches. And he felt slightly faint" (30). In the second scene, Raimbaut responds similarly:

Raimbaut found this so disturbing that it made his head go round, not so much with disgust as doubt at the possibility of that man in front of him being right and the world being nothing but a vast shapeless mass of soup in which all things dissolved and tinged all else with itself. "Help! I don't want to become soup," he was about to shout, but Agilulf was standing impassively near him with arms crossed, as if quite remote and untouched by the squalid scene, and Raimbaut felt that he could never understand his own apprehension. The anguish which the sight of the warrior in white armor always made him feel was now counterbalanced by this new anguish caused by Gurduloo. This thought saved his balance and made him calm again. (54-5)

These two scenes describe "the void" that both Raimbaut and Agilulf fear as the dissolution of form into the impersonal external world, or a faintness, a failure of

presence on the part of the characters. “The void” is, then, not a material void but an absence of distinctions, a void of signification that erodes both the perceptual world of the characters and their self-defined subjectivity. In that Raimbaut finds “his balance,” by checking the opposing theoretical poles embodied by Agilulf (rational order that claims metaphysical autonomy and disengagement from the material world) and Gurduloo (physical existence but conceptual disorder) against each other, we are beginning to see C. Taylor’s complete subject that is, on the one hand, mutilated by an illusory moral certainty (Agilulf) and, on the other, threatened with non-meaning because of a lack of persistent structure (Gurduloo). Beno Weiss writes that “the combination of the squire’s realism and the knight’s idealism represents the complete man” (58). We are beginning to see that aspects of being represented by both poles are equally necessary and that either pole, on its own, is a precipice.

In the two preceding chapters on the quests of Gawain and Agilulf, respectively, we have already seen the crisis of reason and self-definition created by trying to invest one’s actions with a metaphysically autonomous moral certainty. Now we are beginning to characterize the equally disturbing alternative to dispensing with all assumptions of distinction: a perceptual world that cannot be navigated due to the lack of all distinguishing or determining markers of signification. This world is defined by the void where subjects lack individuation, are amoral, universally permeable and relative, and lack the criteria under which coherent self-authorization of the subject becomes possible.

That Gurduloo’s state is the result of the absence of the metaphysical paradigms that confer stability on the subject is further demonstrated by Agilulf’s ability to act as an antidote, to function as a model by which Gurduloo can begin to “learn to be.” Watching

Gurduloo with the soup and wanting to contain the disquiet it evokes within him, Raimbaut asks Agilulf, “Why don’t you make him realize that all *isn’t* soup and put an end to this saraband of his?” (Calvino, Nonexistent 55), to which the Nonexistent Knight replies, “The only way to cope with him is to give him a clear-cut job to do” (55). The job to which Gurduloo is immediately applied is that of aiding in the fulfillment of Agilulf’s charge from “the Superintendency for Inhumation and Compassionate Duties to provide for the burial of those killed in yesterday’s battle” (55). The choice of this task reiterates the coextension between duty and emotion by invoking compassion, the empathic sharing of suffering, an act which Agilulf is inherently incapable of fulfilling, as a duty. Agilulf treats this obligation as he does all things, as a ritual to stave off the void, such as arranging pine-cones in geometrical patterns. When the task is complete, Agilulf “had traced out a whole little cemetery, marking the verges of rectangular graves, parallel to the two sides of an alley” (59), suggesting, again, the coextension between the most basic inclination to instill geometrical order and the choice to conform to duty and obey the dictates of religious propriety.

As we shall explore shortly, Gurduloo’s state does not immediately improve because of Agilulf’s presence, but a change in Gurduloo wherein a conscious, persistent presence begins to develop can be marked over the course of the narrative. Gurduloo becomes enmeshed in the same quest Agilulf takes by virtue of being the Nonexistent Knight’s existent squire. He undergoes a parallel to Agilulf’s bedroom scene with Priscilla’s maids in which he is at once received with interest in his physical presence and yet as completely irrelevant as anything other than the object of desire when the girls treat him, in the end, as a non-presence. When asked by Priscilla, “What about you, with

the squire . . . ?” the girls reply, “Oh, nothing, no, did you? No, you? I really forget . . .” (104), thus Gurduloo fails to leave any trace of a meaningful presence in a nuanced contrast to Agilulf’s ineffable presence.

The first real indication of a conscious presence in Gurduloo occurs when Agilulf is lost at sea, and says to his squire, “We’ll meet in Morocco! I’m walking there!” (109). The evidence of conscious will is that Gurduloo actually shows up at the meeting. He latches on to a sea turtle and “partly letting himself be drawn along, partly guiding it by pinches and prods, he and the turtle near the coast of Africa” (110). Gurduloo, here for the first time, demonstrates the ability to sustain an understanding of his situation over time (marked by his reiterating concern for the direction he follows) and also the ability to act as a conscious agent that exerts control in the external world to which he understands that he is, in part, distinct.

The clearest indication of a persistent consciousness in Gurduloo presents itself after the quest is completed and Agilulf is lost to the void, “dissolved like a drop in the sea” (132). He continues “searching for Agilulf: Gurduloo, who every time he saw an empty pot, cauldron or tub would stop and exclaim, ‘Oh *sor* master! At your orders, *sor* master’” (136). The scene initially looks to be a continuation of Gurduloo’s antics, but it is reasonable (if we can use the word “reason” here) to assume that a nonexistent entity is as likely to give itself form inside a pot as in a suit of armor. Gurduloo is soon discovered by Torrismund and takes part in his most coherent conversation of the text:

“What are you seeking inside there, Gurduloo?” [. . .]

“It’s my master I’m looking for,” says Gurduloo.

“In that flask?”

“My master is a person who doesn’t exist, so he can not exist as much in a flask as in a suit of armor.”

“But your master has dissolved into thin air!”

“Then am I squire to the air?”

“You will be my squire, if you follow me.” (136-7)

Gurduloo has overcome the grammatical confusion that was manifest in his conversation with Charlemagne. He displays that ability to reason and asks what really are reasonable questions in this specific context. He confuses neither the pots nor Torrismund for himself. He recognizes that a change in the external world (Agilulf’s disappearance) has consequences for him personally as a differentiated “I,” and, by choosing to follow Torrismund, he demonstrates the desire to maintain some kind of social relationship with those he now seems to recognize as individual “others.”

Thus Agilulf’s failed quest, to sustain his individual presence, is marked by a measure of success. He dissolves into the world, but his departure is nonetheless marked by the same process which brought him into existence; he dissolves only when a “diluted will and consciousness of self was condensed” into a version of Gurduloo that is recognizably capable of “learning to be.”

There is, however, something disturbing and abortive in this becoming, and I would submit that the simultaneity of the success and failure indicates that the one is predicated on the other. “Being” is a mixed blessing. Just as Gurduloo begins to learn to be an individuated subject, he is also being contained in a position of servitude, a state of “poverty or ignorance” that, among many other causes, is one of the contributing factors to the dilution of will and loss of consciousness of self. It is interesting that Gurduloo is

accepted as Torrismund's squire just as the latter is returning to Koowalden to occupy the position of count. When Torrismund first encountered the people of Koowalden, they were undergoing another example of a crisis of will and identity. These peasants had neither Gurduloo's nor Agilulf's problem. They had coherent grammatical subjectivity, unlike Gurduloo, and did not suffer from Agilulf's insubstantiality, and yet they had to "learn to be" (138), that is, to learn to conceive of their own existence as independent from the feudal social structure which they took to be coextensive with natural order.

The world inhabited by the people of Koowalden has a continuity that Gurduloo's lacks until the intervention of Agilulf's influence. Continuity is provided by a similar relationship by the inhabitants with an ideal in the form of The Order of the Grail. It is precisely this model which Torrismund, the incidental liberator, seeks in order to stave off the threat of arbitrariness, absurdity and the void which he sees as permeating Charlemagne's court. He sees the court as lacking meaning; it is where "the names are false" (70). He imagined the Order of the Grail to be the only stable order, drawing its meaning from a pure, divine origin. When he is disillusioned by the Order, he descends to the same position of the anxious Raimbaut after avenging his father: "Till now he had despised every honor and pleasure, his sole ideal being the Sacred Order of the Knights of the Grail. And now that ideal had vanished. To what aim could he set his disquiet?" (126). What is interesting is that the members of the Sacred Order of the Grail imagine themselves as accessing divine authority, but by ostensibly accessing this authority, they achieve precisely that state of complete permeability that Gurduloo already inhabits and which is similar to the void to which Agilulf is lost. One knight of the Order, describing their task and goal, relates the following instructions: "Try and stand quite still and stare

at the drop on that leaf, identify yourself with it, forget all the world in that drop, until you feel you have lost yourself and are pervaded by the infinite strength of the Grail” (119). Gurduloo cannot differentiate between himself and a drop, the ocean or the world, and Agilulf, when he loses his will and has no body to anchor him to the world, dissolves “like a drop in the sea.”

The worst we could call Gurduloo is amoral, but the Knights of the Order, proceeding consciously to try to divest their consciousness and responsibility onto a transcendental authority must be called immoral. The knights say that “love of the universe can take the form of great frenzy and urge us lovingly to pierce our enemies” (121), but they confuse the poor peasants who cannot pay tribute for violators of divine order. The knights attempt to lose “all residues of human will” (131). Then, with “the Grail always moving them, they indulge [...] in all sorts of loose habits while pretending to be ever pure” (122). These loose habits extend to persecuting the uninitiated through intimidation and extortion, through stealing crops and through destruction and outright murder. In a world that lacks distinction, where all the chaos in the world is contained under the divine rubric, anything can be justified, just as in a world without order nothing needs to be justified. The drive to find a sovereign, metaphysical authority becomes essentially the same thing as the drive to shirk all responsibility for one’s will.

While the people of Koowalden do not need to learn to differentiate the drop from the sea, or themselves from the drop, what they need to overcome is not different in kind. The battle they enact against the Order is to exert an individuality, to occupy a position that can oppose the assumption that everything is contained within a single order, that their plight as peasants is the manifestation of destiny. The peasants report that “we knew

nothing either, even if we were human, before this battle. . .” (125). For the people of Koowalden, “learning to be” is the act of learning to conceive of themselves as distinct agents in a world marked by fluctuation and difference, rather than predetermined order.

As already noted, Torrismund’s decision to take on Gurduloo as a squire corresponds to his return to Koowalden, as he has been given the territory by the Carolingian court. What are we, then, to make of the parallel acts of becoming where the newly aware individuals are subjected to a new sovereign? Are we to understand the servitude of the people of Koowalden to Torrismund as being categorically different to oppression under the Knights of the Sacred Order? Is the order that Torrismund represents, that of the divinely ordered hierarchy of Charlemagne’s court and the “holy cause” which previously solidified Agilulf’s will, somehow superior in kind, closer to a metaphysical Truth which will save it from the corruption that the Order of the Grail fell under? To answer affirmatively to these questions would be to miss the lesson of Agilulf’s failure, his inability to solidify his presence by appealing to an external verification, a holy cause, or metaphysical autonomy.

Furthermore, the text provides ample evidence of the interchangeability of the different hierarchies, and their equally unethical application by their proponents. Referring to the Christian and Infidel camps in The Nonexistent Knight, Woodhouse notes that “honor and chivalry motivate the Christians” and the infidels alike, “but remove the trappings which constitute honor, make them discard their armor, and the two opposing forces are virtually identical” (24), each group having a common humanity “broken by alienating notions of creed, patriotism, and chivalry, which they assume as soon as they [. . .] put on their armor” (25). In the specific case of Agilulf and the code he

represents, the text demonstrates the incapacity for accepting or dealing with “otherness” in a compassionate or ethical manner. Agilulf’s duty to aid those in need does not extend to anyone outside the protection of his order. For example when the pearl hunters ask him to help them so as to avoid being “whipped” (Calvino, Nonexistent 111) by the Sultan he says,

Knights do not join enterprises with lucre as their aim, particularly if conducted by enemies of his religion. I thank you, O Pagan, for having saved and fed this squire of mine, but I don’t care a jot if your Sultan cannot present a pearl to his three hundred and sixty-fifth wife tonight.

(111)

Further, he is equally antagonistic to those whom he deems to be opposed to his project: “When the eunuchs came to announce the Sultan’s arrival they were put to the sword one by one” (113). This is done under the guise of saving Sophronia. However, she does not want to be saved, as evidenced later by the scene where she responds to Torrismund’s advances by saying, “Have no scruples” (127), and the frustration she exhibits at constantly being interrupted by Agilulf. Moreover, the text stresses the symmetry and the interchangeability of “Christian and Infidel” (9) in a war that is summarized as being “after all, but [the] passing of more and more dented objects from hand to hand” (38). Gurduloo’s own face represents a “mingling of Frankish and Moorish characteristics” (29). Thus Agilulf is different in kind from neither the ideal of the Sacred Order of the Holy Grail, nor from the Infidels, those who are unfaithful simply by virtue of being faithful to a different conception of order.

The model of existence that places the individual at the service of a higher, hierarchical order, which makes Gurduloo and the people of Koowalden subjects who belong to a feudal order, is resisted. The people of Koowalden have declared a kind of democracy. They say, “We cultivate the land, have put up artisan shops and mills, and try to get our laws respected by ourselves, to defend our borders, in fact we’re moving ahead and not complaining.” They invite Torrismund to stay with them, “but as equals” (138). Torrismund’s only complaint is that this implies that he and Gurduloo have the same status. He asks, “Am I to consider myself an equal to this squire of mine, Gurduloo, who doesn’t even know if he exists or not?” (138). The people’s spokesman replies to Torrismund, “He will learn too . . . We ourselves did not know we existed . . . One can also learn to be . . . ” (138).

These three phrases, each ending in ellipses and avoiding concrete conclusion, have weighty implications for what we understand “existence” and “being” to mean in the text. “Existence” is perhaps inherent in the object, but “being” is something accrued by responsible action. The state of Koowalden, such as it has become, has resisted the grand hierarchies (feudal and divine orders) but that does not mean it has given up on order or reason altogether. They still have laws, and seek to defend themselves against those who would deny their right to self-authorship. Further, while they insist Gurduloo is “equal” to Torrismund, this does not imply a lack of distinction or interchangeability. They are equal in kind, but perhaps not in quality. The people say to Torrismund, “If you stay here as equals with us and do no bullying, maybe you will become the first among us just the same” (138), suggesting that there is still a meritocracy and leadership. The alternate model for existence that this posits is not existence that dispenses with order

(Gurduloo) so as to stave off bullying (Agilulf) but simply an existence where order exists to serve individuals, rather than individuals serving some transcendently guaranteed order.

What Calvino's text is beginning to evoke, I would argue, is what Caputo phrases as a "postmetaphysical ethics" (Caputo, *Radical* 238). In the chapter "Toward an Ethics of Dissemination" Caputo writes,

The function of an ethics of dissemination is not to try to level all institutional arrangements or discourage the formation of new ones [. . .] but to *intervene* in ongoing processes, to keep institutions in process, to keep the *forms* of life from eliminating the *life-forms* they are supposed to house. It means to disrupt hardened shells, to practice the Socratic art, to be a gadfly and sting ray—but always in the *polis*. There is no human life outside the *polis* or in a solitary, free subject. [. . .] The ethics of dissemination operates only in a community and in the ongoing conversation of mankind. (263)

An "ethics of dissemination" as Caputo describes it, stems from the impossibility of being able to live in any one homogenous ethos (either the Christian or Infidel camps, for example). This creates an apparent crisis as the usual, conventional markers for determining moral behavior dissolve. It threatens us with Gurduloo's void, the loss of presence and the guarantor of a stable consensus over meaning and value that is feared by Agilulf. Caputo's argument is that this is not the end of ethics, but the beginning:

If we have lost agreement about the practice of virtue within a single paradigm, there remains the virtue of dealing with that loss—for that loss

is our sociology in the time of need. Moreover, that ‘loss’ is also—by reason of the undecidability which infiltrates everything—a gain, particularly if you were a slave or a woman or a Jew in the old sociology, if fate had assigned you a humble spot in the old teleological scheme. If the Aristotelian *polis* demanded *phronesis*, that is, the skill to apply the agreed-upon paradigm, the modern mega-*polis* requires civility, which is a kind of meta-*phronesis*, which means the skill to cope with competing paradigms. Civility is the virtue of knowing how to like and live with the dissemination of *ethos*. (262)

Caputo’s argument is in many ways unsatisfying as, by his own admission, “radical hermeneutics does not lead us back to safe shores and terra firma; it leaves us twisting slowly in the wind” (267). It is worthwhile, he contends, in that it forces us to recognize at once the positive potential as well as the difficulty of contending with “the play of the mystery [of existence] which metaphysics is intent upon arresting” (267).

Caputo’s argument about ethics is predicated on the processes by which meaning comes into being as such, and is predicated on the fundamental insight of Deconstruction wherein that process cannot be traced back beyond the structure of language to an *a priori* point of genesis or, even, to any stable instance of structure. Meaning cannot be anchored in a point that exists outside of the world as it is. Even in the practical sense of structuring appropriate action, we cannot determine meaning by appealing to any foundation that is not, in itself, tentative and subject to the flux. In “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology” Derrida writes:

This irreducible difference is due to an interminable delaying (*différance*) of the theoretical foundation. The exigencies of the life demand that a practical response be organized on the field of historical existence and that this response precedes any absolute science whose conclusion it can't await. The system of this anticipation, the structure of this interrupted response, is what Husserl calls *Weltanschauung*. One might say, with some precautions, that he sees in it the situation and meaning of a "provisional morality," whether it is personal or communal. (161)

To illustrate, we could tentatively say that the process by which Agilulf determines his own significance works by deferring all authority onto the structure of the chivalric code and he attaches himself to that spectrum of meaning by being an instantiation of the code's structure. By contrast, the attempt to project upon Gurduloo names and identities is an example of the assumption that his significance, his inalienable right to personhood, is conferred on him by virtue of the biological, factual nature of existence. However, this sense of his status necessarily appeals to his genesis as part of an ordered world, even though he displays none of the characteristics of human consciousness. Meaning, in the sense here of the parallel problem of self-authorized identity, only comes into being at the intersection of structure and genesis. Meaning is the function of the relation of the two, and remains viable so long as the relationship does not become hierarchical, so long as one pole does not appeal to the other as some kind of external, *a priori* justification, as Agilulf wants the structure by which he lives to be validated by holy authority.

Caputo argues that ethics begins at the point where it sheds the stability of a consensus formed by a single overarching paradigm. He argues that metaphysics attempts

to remove the concept of “otherness” from ethical considerations. Metaphysics attempts to establish a universal paradigm, to contain the world within all that is known, and thus, by necessity, quells all exploration or even acknowledgment of the unknown. Caputo continues his argument in “The End of Ethics” from More Radical Hermeneutics where he contends that dealing reasonably with the otherness of individuals is the basis of ethical activity. He writes:

The wholly other takes still another twist that is captured in a famous phrase by Derrida which is trickier in French than English, “tout autre est tout autre,” “every other is wholly other.” That is a way of signaling the unfathomableness of the singular, or singularities, if we may pluralize the singular. The singular, we recall, is not a specimen of a species, a case that falls under a general rule, a particular subsumed under a universal, an individual member of a class. It is rather marked by its idiosyncrasy, its idiomaticity, its uniqueness, its anomaly, its unclassifiability, its unrepeatability. (179)

The importance of this ethical consideration for “the other” is to be found in the relationship “otherness” has to the formulation of meaning and significance at the most fundamental level. In “Force and Signification” Derrida writes,

Does not meaning present itself as such at the point at which the other is found, the other who maintains both the vigil and the back-and-forth motion, the work, that comes between writing and reading, making this work irreducible? Meaning is neither before nor after the act. (11)

Thus articulated, any personal significance requires a relationship with the “totally other,” a singular and distinct (if multiple) other.

The phrase “*tout autre est tout autre*” that Caputo borrows from Derrida is discussed at length in The Gift of Death as the starting point for an investigation into ethics. The interest of the phrase, for Derrida, is that it is apparently tautological while at the same time indicating “a radical heterology” (84). It is, therefore, useful for demonstrating the reciprocal permeability of generality and singularity. Derrida writes that “ethics is also the order of and respect for absolute singularity, and not only that of the generality or of the repetition of the same.” He goes on to say that “the concept of responsibility, like that of decision, would thus be found to lack coherence or consequence, even lacking identity with respect to itself, paralyzed by what can be called an aporia.” He describes this aporia as the irreconcilability of the singular and the need to stabilize “a chaotic process of change in what are called conventions.” “Chaos refers precisely to the abyss or to the open mouth, that which speaks as well as that which signifies hunger” (84). He argues that the tendency is that “one simply keeps on denying the aporia [. . .] and one treats as nihilist, relativist, even poststructuralist, and worse still deconstructionist, all those who remain concerned in the face of such a display of good conscience” (85). Derrida’s point is that this perpetuates the danger of the “abyss.” The danger is not relieved by the enshrinement of convention. At the base of “everyday discourse” or “the lexicon concerning responsibility” is “a concept that is nowhere to be found” (85). The only responsible course of action is to recognize the abyss; otherwise its effect has the potential to be more volatile. Derrida’s abyss is not a void comprised simply of the absence of generality, of consensus, of agreed-upon convention; it is the

point at which the need for convention and the impossibility of securing the stability of those conventions meet.

We have, so far, been conceiving of “the void” as a space defined by an absence of signification, and we have been conceiving of it specifically according to the route by which it is accessed, namely through a paralyzing relativity, an indeterminacy, that prevents individuals from achieving significant action or manifesting meaningful identities. Gurduloo has been our chief example, and we have seen how his state prevents, by failing to make any distinction of “otherness,” the formation of relationships with others as such. But the permeability of the individual is not the only door to the void. It is also, we have been seeing, a symptom of Agilulf’s state that his relationships with others fail because he cannot acknowledge the validity of an “other” as a singularity. His impermeability, his dismissal of singular contexts, makes him solipsistic. As noted earlier, in “The Nonexistent Knight: Fantasy and Self-Creation” Carter writes that Agilulf seeks an “individuality that is intrinsically related to social solidarities” (143). Carter goes on to assert the following:

Agilulfo is not in search of a radical difference on which to base his singularity—in fact, he already possesses such a difference—but of individuality through relatedness. The distance of the thematic from some contemporary discourses of identity is well worth noting. (143)

Agilulf and Gurduloo, who appear to be binary poles, can be seen to border on the same void that is defined by solipsism and the failure of signification. This assessment is further supported by the fact that, as discussed earlier, the order expressed by Agilulf and the Knights of the Holy Grail hold equivalent ethical validity and, moreover, that the

Grail Knights and Gurduloo fall victim to a similar collapse of meaningful distinctions. Absolute objectivity (Agilulf) and absolute relativity (Gurduloo) both lead to solipsism and the collapse of meaning. Neither structure, nor innate existence, is enough for a meaningful existence. Attempts to escape one threshold to the void by fleeing in the opposite direction, as we have been repeatedly witnessing, invariably undermine themselves by driving toward an alternate threshold to the same abyss.

What are we left with, then, when these self-annihilating metaphysical quests fail? Does the failure to attribute metaphysical autonomy and authority to the frameworks that give form and significance to human lives mean that all existence plunges into the formless void? Bolongaro writes:

Calvino insists on the reciprocal relations between cognition and ethical commitment: “if the logic [la ragione] of the universe triumphs over that of man, it is the end of human doing, of history. The glimmering logic of the universe is enlightening when it sheds light on the limited and obstinate story of man; but when it takes the place of that human story, it is a return to the indistinct original crucible.” In short, the universe becomes comprehensible only against an ethical horizon, and it is precisely that relationship between responsible action and the emergence of a human world that literature must keep bringing into focus. (152)

This formulation, which mirrors the assumptions of C. Taylor regarding the inescapability of ethical frameworks for significant self-definition, would seem to place ethics and reason in a state of perpetual conflict. But, the critical vision here is that of distinct operations of reason. Reason is responsible for outlining grand structures, but

reason itself is committed to a reciprocal relationship with “otherness” or, to put it another way, with the free play that prevents the form-giving structures from stifling the life they house. Derrida expresses, again, the simultaneous necessity and danger of structure. In “Force and Signification” he writes:

If there are structures, they are possible only on the basis of the fundamental structure which permits totality to open and overflow itself such that it takes on meaning by anticipating a telos which here must be understood in its most indeterminate form. This opening is certainly that which liberates time and genesis (even coincides with them), but it is also that which risks enclosing progression toward the future—becoming—by giving it form. That which risks stifling force under form. (26)

Caputo argues that the operation of reason must take place without the backing of metaphysical authority and, as such, cannot be reduced to mechanically auto-interpreting structures which would override individual interpretation. In a chapter called “Toward a Postmetaphysical Rationality” he uses, by way of analogy, the following example derived from cybernetics:

If the digital processor can capture the work of signs, it cannot capture its play. If it can reenact the formalizable and structural features of signs, its a priori grammar, it cannot reenact the play of signs, cannot exploit the phonic, graphic, semantic linkages, cannot learn the slippage, the disseminative drift, the free play. We can teach the computer to work but not to play (it can only play rule-governed games). We can teach it anything that is rule-governed, any logic. We can teach it *ratio* as

calculative thinking. We could teach it onto-theo-logic, but we could never teach it how to read Glas (or write Glas). (Radical 227)

There is some irony in the choice of this example as Calvino is one of the few writers who appears to disagree. In “Cybernetics and Ghosts” Calvino writes of, and endorses, “the theoretical possibility” of “having machines capable of conceiving and composing poems and novels” (12). Calvino’s exuberance at the possibility is, however, precisely in line with Caputo’s initial assertion about reading. Calvino writes:

Once we have dismantled and reassembled the process of literary composition, the decisive moment of literary life will be that of reading. In this sense, even though entrusted to machines, literature will continue as a “place” of privilege within human consciousness, a way of exercising the potentialities contained in the system of signs belonging to all societies at all times. The work will continue to be born, to be judged, to be destroyed or constantly renewed on the contact with the eye of the reader. (15-16)

The salient point that rises out of this series of quotations is that while structure creates the environment in which meaning can arise, it is not the sole contributor. Free play, and the continual interpretation it demands, is also a critical ingredient that must be recognized as such.

Agilulf and Gurduloo are polar opposites that represent, respectively, on one side absolute objectivity and morality reduced to computational, auto-interpreting logic and, on the other, material existence and absolute, subjective indeterminacy. Both of these poles leave much to be desired and are not enough to constitute, in either case, a living subject. In the critical scene in where Agilulf, Gurduloo and Raimbaut are burying the

dead of the day's battle, both poles are expressed as states equivalent to death for the individual. In the case of Agilulf, where the singular individual is dismissed by objective structures, the material component is equated to and left to the grave:

As Agilulf dragged a corpse along he thought, "Oh corpse, you have what I never had or will have: a carcass. Or rather you *have*, you *are* this carcass, that which at times, in moments of despondency, I find myself envying in men who exist. Fine! I can and truly call myself privileged, I who can live without it and do all; all, of course, which seems most important to me. Many things I manage to do better than those who exist, since I lack their usual defects of coarseness, carelessness, incoherence, smell. It's true that someone who exists always has a particular attitude of his own to things, which I never managed to have. But if their secret is merely here, in this bag of guts, then I can do without it. This valley of disintegrating naked corpses disgusts me no more than the flesh of living human beings." (Calvino, Nonexistent 56-7)

In Gurduloo's indistinct thoughts, we find an inverse parallel where individual consciousness is lost to the earth in favor of the continued, cyclical life of the material body:

As Gurduloo dragged a corpse along he thought, "Corpsey, your farts stink even more than mine. I don't know why everyone mourns you so. What's it you lack? Before you used to move, now your movement is passed on to the worms you nourish. Once you grew nails and hair, now you'll ooze slime which will make grass in the fields grow higher toward

the sun. You will become grass, then milk for cows which will eat the grass, blood of the baby that drinks their milk, and so on. Don't you see you get more out of life than I do, corpse?" (57)

Gurduloo then climbs into the grave and is buried alive, saved only by Agilulf and Raimbaut.

The strategy of resignation to the void (Gurduloo), and the opposite quest to erect structures that contain the flux that voids intelligible meaning, arresting the fluctuation, by appealing to metaphysical authority (Agilulf), both result in states that are expressed as being equivalent to death. As Guardiani writes in "Optimism without Illusions," Calvino is observing that "man is [. . .] immersed so meaninglessly into his reality that he may either cease to exist or cease to be" (57). Guardiani expresses a distinction between these two types of nonexistence:

In the first case [a person] may follow principles, codes and rules without understanding the sense of them; in the other case he could identify himself with objects and substances of the world, thus losing his own identity. These two concepts are the "things" of his novel as symbolized by the two chief characters, the cavalier Agilulf, and his groom Gurduloo. (56)

What is hopeful in Calvino's text, and even in Gawain's parallel quest, is that the protagonists seem to survive even when the metaphysical quest is revealed to be self-defeating. They persist even in a world where the threat of death, or non-meaning which is tantamount to death, is everywhere. Gawain, clearly, survives after being released from his obligations. Agilulf, also, seems to survive in a peculiar way.

Agilulf's quest is not shared only with Gurduloo, but also with Bradamante, who follows Agilulf because "he alone knew the secret geometry, the order, the rule, by which to understand its beginning and end!" (Calvino, Nonexistent 85). "It," here, being undefined, one might suppose "it" to refer to everything, the meaning of things.

Bradamante, in turn, is followed by Raimbaut who, we have seen, shares in the belief that Agilulf knows "the secret" which gives meaning to everything. Raimbaut, however, is also following Bradamante because she also represents, for him, a source of meaning.

The text reports:

Thus does a young man always hurry towards his woman. But is he truly urged by love for her, and not by love of himself? Isn't he looking for a certainty of existing that only a woman can give him? A young man hurries, falls in love, uncertain of himself, happy, desperate, and for him his woman is the person who certainly exists, of which only she can give the proof. But the woman too either exists or not. There she is before him, also trembling, and uncertain. How is it that the young man does not understand that? What does it matter which of the two is strong and which weak? They are equals. But that the young man does not know, because he does not want to. What he yearns for is a woman who exists, a woman who is definite. She, on the other hand, knows more things, or less, anyway things that are different. What she is in search of is a different way of existing [. . .]. (64)

This slightly tangential goal of romantic involvement results in the couple sharing in what is a distinctly arbitrary game: "Together they have a competition in archery" (64).

Raimbaut consistently demonstrates his prowess in the game, but for Bradamante, nonetheless, only Agilulf can invest the game with significance. She says to Raimbaut, “You hit the target all right but it’s always by chance!” (65). He protests that he does not “put an arrow wrong” (65), but she continues to insist that “if you didn’t put a hundred arrows wrong it would still be by chance!” (65). Only when she involves Agilulf in the game does she admit that will presides over chance and caprice:

His movements were not those of muscles and nerves concentrating on a good aim. He was ordering his forces by will power, setting the tip of the arrow at the invisible line of the target; he moved the bow very slightly and no more, and let fly. The arrow was bound to hit the target.

Bradamante cried, “A fine shot!” (65)

Bradamante’s hope that Agilulf will imbue her existence with stable meaning is, as we know, crushed by his eventual dispersal. The only part of him that survives (the armor) attracts Bradamante and returns her to a relationship with Raimbaut and the confines of the games in which they interact. Agilulf’s final action at his dispersal is to leave a note that says “I leave this armor to Sir Raimbaut of Roussillon” (132). Raimbaut dons the armor and carries it into battle from which he emerges “victorious and untouched, but his armor, Agilulf’s impeccable white armor, was now all encrusted with earth, bespattered with enemy blood, covered with dents, scratches and slashes, the helmet askew, the shield gashed in the very midst of that mysterious coat of arms” (133).

Agilulf, in this sense, survives his own dispersal by integrating himself into the relationship of Raimbaut and Bradamante, finally discovering a way to exist in relation to social solidarities, in a way that acknowledges singular individuals as “others.” Agilulf

functions “as a donor [...]: what really matters is what he leaves” behind, that is, “his spiritual and material gifts” (Bacchilega 91). The “spiritual gift” is a persistent sense of form represented by his “material gift,” his armor. The armor’s previous immaculate state demonstrated Agilulf’s immunity from physical concerns but now, donated to Raimbaut, the armor represents the fact that even the consistency of an abstract form is subject to the alterations of time and experience. Even prior to Agilulf’s dispersal and continuation as Raimbaut’s armor, Raimbaut represents the synthesis of, and balance between, the two void-bordering poles. He (and Bradamante) are, as Guardiani writes, characters “with principles as well as senses” (57), that is to say, entities that are both ideal and empirical. In the same grave-digging scene where Agilulf and Gurduloo commit elements of the human subject to the grave, Raimbaut compellingly evokes a middle ground that represents the continuation of life:

As Raimbaut dragged a dead man along he thought, “Oh corpse, I have come rushing here only to be dragged along by the heels like you. What is this frenzy that drives me, this mania for battle and for love, seen from the place where your staring eyes gaze, and your flung-back head that knocks over stones? I think of that, corpse; *you* make me think of that: but does anything change? Nothing. No other days exist but these of ours before the tomb, both for us the living and for you the dead. May it be granted me not to waste them, not to waste anything of what I am, of what I could be: to do deeds helpful to the Frankish cause; to embrace and be embraced by proud Bradamante. I hope you spent your days no worse, oh corpse. Anyway to you the dice have already shown their numbers. For me they

are still swirling in the box. And I love my own anxiety, corpse, not your peace.” (Calvino, *Nonexistent* 57-8)

Raimbaut’s speech is interesting because it recognizes the necessity of Agilulf’s framework but, finally (and like Gawain being compared to a stump), equates complete stability with death. He mitigates the needed structure with Gurduloo’s talent for adapting to varied contexts. He recognizes a fellowship with the corpse in that he imagines his position seen through its “staring eyes,” but simultaneously sees this as an impetus to not waste what is singular to him, “anything of what [he is], of what [he] could be.” His sense of what he could be is linked to the same “Frankish cause” that Agilulf serves, but without the connotation of “holiness” that Agilulf would have tried to invest it with.

Raimbaut’s soliloquy represents the reconciliation of the poles embodied by Gurduloo and Agilulf. It embodies a drive “towards an understanding of man’s condition in order that he [. . .] may become an active and conscious component of reality” (Guardiani 59), a project that Guardiani identifies as a general theme in Calvino’s oeuvre. Furthermore, Raimbaut’s speech demonstrates an acknowledgement that “not wasting” the possibilities of one’s existence involves the need to “embrace and be embraced” by another. That is to say, meaningful existence is predicated on the formation of reciprocal relationships with others (an activity of which Agilulf and Gurduloo were incapable), in this case specifically Bradamante. The relationship is not actuated until much later, when the characters have developed. In the archery scene, the idealization of the other occurs while continuing the pursuit of metaphysical ideals. The two characters then follow Agilulf on his quest and only after his dissolution do they come together. Bradamante initially confuses Raimbaut for Agilulf (as he is now wearing his armor) and is

disappointed and horrified by the confusion. However, the text concludes with Bradamante, revealed to be the narrator, writing “I’m hurrying to you, Raimbaut” (Calvino, Nonexistent 141), a resolution that coincides with the concluding articulation of her project:

From describing the past, from the present which seized my hand in its excited grasp, here I am, O future, now mounting the crupper of your horse. What new pennants wilt thou unfurl before me from towers of cities not yet founded? What rivers of devastation set flowing over castles and gardens I have loved? What unforeseeable golden ages art thou preparing—ill-mastered, indomitable harbinger of treasures dearly paid for, my kingdom to be conquered, the future. . . (141)

Perhaps the defining characteristic of The Nonexistent Knight is the use of the ellipsis. Descriptions of characters, situations, relationships, classifications of significance tend to trail off. In trying to imagine her future, created out of her text, the narrator can write only, “It will be. . .” (141). This concluding passage offers no conclusion. Instead, we are given an unknown future that is created out of the attempt to describe, to give form and a sense of teleological progression to the past. The meaningful sign, in this case the personal “I” of the narrator has continuity over time, but it persists in a state of perpetual becoming. If we take this “I” to be a word, a bearer of meaning like any other, and we understand “authorship” in the sense of “self-authorization,” the word’s consistency over the course of historical time (the undetermined future context) can be expressed by Derrida’s formulation: “The history of the word is not only its past, the eve of the sleep in which it precedes itself in an author’s intention, but is also the impossibility of its ever

being present, of its being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness” (“Force” 14).

The two metaphysical quests that we have examined, Gawain’s and Agilulf’s, have been marked by a movement toward self-annihilation, as the parameters according to which the character’s identities are defined become increasingly destructive to their constructed senses of self. However, the development of the characters, in so far as the characters develop, cannot be characterized by a movement toward acceptance, or a recognition of either mortality, or the tentativeness of their concepts of personal significance. While the quest figures are aware of what is at stake on the journey, the characters persist in the endeavor because they retain the hope of cheating their fate, even in the case of Gawain who explicitly understands himself to be proceeding to his own execution. He believes that some trick will allow him both to remain within the bounds of the code, and to save his life. Gerald Morgan points out in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Idea of Righteousness*, that “we cannot say [. . .] that Gawain goes to confession in a state of knowledge” (134) regarding the sin of accepting the girdle. But it should be noted that he has full knowledge that he is trying to change the parameters of the game when he makes, what Morgan insists, is a pious confession even though he retains the girdle afterward. There is no sin, it is interesting to note, in trying to re-interpret the parameters of the “gomen.” When he is told the nature of the green girdle, he thinks “þe slest were noble” (*SGGK* 1858). However, while Morgan notes this moment as the beginning of a potentially life-saving tactic, critics like Pearsall single out this moment as the beginning of the end of Gawain’s unified sense of self. In accord with Morgan, Pearsall writes that “once he accepted the girdle, he behaved with noble

courtesy and courage that was customary to his public self and that constructed also his private self” (360). However, after being criticized by the Green Knight, the same moment is recalled except that Gawain is now “aware of the gap between the two [public and private selves] that had existed all the time, of the lies that he has told himself, of the disunity of his personality” (361).¹

By contrast to Agilulf and Gawain, Raimbaut and Bradamante’s existence seems to be predicated on temporary stability and the assumption of fluctuation and change. Bradamante’s future contains rivers of devastation as well as treasures, and Raimbaut’s soliloquy is expressed to a corpse that he distinguishes primarily by the fact that for it “dice have already shown their numbers. [But for him] they are still swirling in the box.” Raimbaut’s affirmation of the potentialities of his life does not seek to rest on stability, the “peace” sought by Agilulf that is here conflated with death. Instead, the emphasis is placed on his “anxiety.” Raimbaut’s conception of himself does not posit a formulation that transcends time and change, but rather acknowledges the impossibility of resolving the question of who he is. This reflects, in Derrida’s formulation, a correct assessment of the situation in which meaning arises:

The question of the possibility of the transcendental reduction cannot expect an answer. It is the question of the possibility of the question, opening itself, the gap on whose basis the *transcendental I* [. . .] is called upon to ask itself about everything, and particularly about the possibility

¹ It has been noted previously that Aers also characterizes the moment of Gawain’s confession, and later his recognition of the error of concealing the girdle, as demonstrating a critical split in Gawain’s self-identification.

of the unformed and naked factuality of the nonmeaning, in the case at hand, for example, of its own death. (“Genesis” 167-8)

The critical difference between Agilulf and Gawain, and Raimbaut and Bradamante is that the pairs represent, in the first case, the denial of fluctuation and the absolute negativity of nonmeaning, and, in the second case, the acceptance, even the necessity of these conditions. The difference, in terms of the development of the characters, is precisely that one pair has the capacity to develop adaptable, tentative structures rather than develop structures that collapse in the face of slight fluctuation. The novel The Nonexistent Knight recounts the development of Raimbaut and Bradamante, in relation to the poles expressed by Agilulf and Gurduloo. By contrast, the characters of Agilulf and Gawain are marked by the tenacious preservation of convention, and the only change in their characters is marked by a shift to a completely opposite value. Agilulf goes from constituting “the most solid presence” (Calvino, Nonexistent 19), to losing any pretence of presence. Similarly, Gawain moves from being symbolized by a heraldic device that signifies geometrical balance and perfection to the green girdle. The girdle is a “þe token of vntrawþe” (SGGK 2509), that is to say, the binary opposite of “trawþ.” Gawain is now represented by a symbol that contradicts what he has been professing as the source of his self-definition for the entire text.

Agilulf, as we have seen, survives his dissolution by attaching his legacy to that of an existent and, as we have just characterized it, developing character. Given the parallel we have been outlining, what are we to understand as the new parameters of Gawain’s identity? Gawain survives in his own right, having conceded to the accusation of cowardice that compromises his “trawþ,” but he still faces a problem of how to proceed.

His cowardice is attributed to two coextensive acts, the flinch and the acceptance of the girdle. In the case of the flinch, Gawain displays the capacity to overcome the reflexive reaction. In the case of the girdle, he could have simply not accepted it. If Gawain is to learn from this experience and improve himself, it seems that he may be in reasonable danger of a repeated attempt at perfection given the fact that “correct,” faultless, performance seems to be attainable. As Anderson notes, “The fundamental quality which sets Gawain’s chivalry apart from the court and Bertilak is his idealism. The pentangle passage points to his sense of chivalry as a kind of secular religion, offering as it does a way of perfection on earth” (249). However, the scene that comprises Gawain’s punishment at the Green Chapel and where the Green Knight and Gawain retrospectively analyze the protagonist’s performance does not only conclude the exchange-of-winnings contract. The same scene at the Green Chapel also concludes the first “crystemas gomen.” Logically, Gawain’s punishment and cowardice are the consequence of his performance in both games.

When we examine all that is revealed at the Green Chapel, we find that Gawain has, from the beginning, been culpably enmeshed in a problem that goes beyond the acceptance and concealment of an illicit love-token. In our previous discussion of Gawain, the motives and loyalties of “Morgne la Faye” (SGGK 2446) and, by extension, those of her vassal the Green Knight/Bertilak de Hautdesert, were questioned. The full complexity these characters bring to the story is revealed when Bertilak recounts the nature of his original mission, which was to,

Assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were
 þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Round Table;

Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,
 For to haf greued Gaynor and gart hir to dyze
 With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked
 With his hede in his honed before þe hyze table. (2457-2462)

The plot was designed to test the pride of the Round Table and to murder the queen by scaring her to death. It is only here that Gawain's fault, as the representative of the Round Table, is explicitly linked to the sin of "surquidré" (pride), but this fault extends back to his performance at the original encounter with the Green Knight where the court in general is accused of the same sin. Further, this act of "pride" is the defining characteristic that was to be exploited in order to draw out Gawain's act of attempted homicide, his beheading of the Green Knight. This attempted execution was the sought-after reaction, and a key element in an (admittedly failed) plot to murder the queen, the lady by whom Gawain sits at the Christmas table and is obligated (regardless of any eventual betrayal of the court) to defend.

Gawain's pride, whatever it precisely consists of, has allowed him to be controlled by the Green Knight and Morgan Le Faye, and made him inadvertently complicit in a murder plot. On the quest that he thereafter follows, he becomes the guest, and sworn servant, of Bertilak (as his host), his Lady, and Morgan (as Bertilak's superior). Gawain's predicament, the web of conflicting obligations, his cowardice, his pride, and his punishment can be traced back to his involvement in the original "crystemas gomen."

We have already examined Gawain's actions as he takes up the Green Knight's Christmas game in great detail. The discussion focused primarily on one key point: the

omission of the precise nature of the blow from the contract agreed to by Gawain and the Green Knight. This omission results in the possibility of the open interpretation and the indeterminacy of the contract. Through the Green Knight's subtle scratch, the text demonstrates (as discussed earlier) the undetermined nature of the kind of blow to be dealt with the axe, the possibility that the contest need not have been elevated by Gawain to one of mortal consequence. Indeed, given the further evidence that this action was the sought-for response designed as an attack on Guinevere, this seems to be the only categorically wrong action. Even if the Green Knight's reciprocal blow was to be life-ending, that scene would occur away from the court, and not endanger the queen by forcing her to witness a shocking incident. Gawain inadvertently chose the preservation of the court's interpretive stability, its form of life, over the life-forms (invoking, again, Caputo) of the Queen and the Green Knight.

What is distinct about this characterization of Gawain's attempted execution of the Green Knight, the moment of Gawain's mistake, is that even if we understand it to be an error after the fact, this recognition does not enable us to retroactively identify a correct course of action such as not accepting or hiding the girdle, or not flinching. We might have the corresponding "do not cut off the head of the Green Knight," but it is not enough to counteract the wrong action with a non-action. The Green Knight would not simply vanish because Gawain did not cut off his head; he would still have to be dealt with, and a quest would still have to be undertaken. The indeterminacy, the destabilization caused by the interpretive problem the Green Knight introduces would not be solved. Gawain's choice to attempt to impose a definitive interpretation that justifies

the homicide and forecloses the issue commits him to a position where his actions can be predicted and controlled by the Green Knight.

Gawain's fault, thus, is not so much that he interprets incorrectly, but that he tries to foreclose the adventure, to remove that which requires interpretation. As Sharma writes, "Gawain certainly does not fail according to chivalric norms governing conduct in matters of honour and shame. Rather, what we encounter here is a carefully hidden crack in the ideological sphere within which the poem [. . .] is encapsulated" (11). Gawain's problem, even if it is a problem that is only acknowledged by the text in the form of a "discontinuity that can only be hidden, not erased, by ideologically motivated revisionism" (11), is that he seeks to avoid interpretations of situations that are not mechanically decoded by the rules of chivalry; in this case a situation that requires an independent, singular interpreter engaging with the singular otherness of a specific context. Sharma argues that "despite his ideological commitments, the poet demonstrates some awareness of the possibility of an 'outside' beyond the sphere of chivalry and its associated economy of honour and shame" (11). Gawain's underlying mistake is that he does not even get this far; he consistently seeks to foreclose a situation in which "good" and "bad" actions are such by virtue of interpretation, in which they are relative values rather than the binary, absolute values that can be dictated mechanically by the rules of chivalry and propriety.

Gawain's concept of perfection really represents the divestment of his agency and responsibility onto the code. He wants to be like one of the knights in Calvino's text, who persist by "only just keeping within the sacrosanct rules which they have sworn to follow and which, being so firmly fixed, take away any bother of thinking" (Nonexistent 62). He

would, thus, live in a world where, again as in Calvino's text, "every skirmish and duel [is] conducted according to the rules so that it [is] always known beforehand who would win or lose, be heroic or cowardly, be gutted or merely unhorsed and thumped" (5). When the code fails to carry the weight of Gawain's responsibility, he tries again to divest it onto others, uttering a desperate, and uncharacteristically bitter, diatribe against women:

Boþe þat one and þat oþer, myn honored ladyes,
 þat þus hor knyzt with hor kest han koyntly bigyled.
 Bot hit is no ferly þaz a fole madde,
 And þurz wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorze,
 For watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,
 And Salamon with fele sere [. . .]. (SGGK 2412-17)

The diatribe goes on, but the content consistently insists that the fault lies not with Gawain, but with women in general as beguilers and perpetrators of the original fall and all subsequent misdirection and sin.¹

Gawain's attempt to shift the blame, omit his own responsibility, is consistent with his initial attempt to avoid the responsibility of tentative, uncertain interpretations. However, this second avoidance comes after he has already been called to account for shirking his moral responsibility. To avoid action in this sense is revealed to be, in itself, a culpable action associated with cowardice and pride. Gawain's pride, and that of the court, consist in believing that all that is unknowable in the world can be brought into conformity with a system set up to interpret what is already known. The radical alterity of

¹ Many critics such as Clark & Wasserman and De Roo have commented on Gawain's attempt to defer his guilt by lapsing into this diatribe.

the Green Knight, a figure that is simultaneously alien and courtly, threatening and courteous, teacher and antagonist, stands out as a counterpoint to the pride of Gawain (as the representative of the Round Table) by demonstrating that, even in the relatively known world of the extended court (Morgan is Arthur's sister and Gawain's aunt), the indecipherable and unknowable are present.

Both SGGK and The Nonexistent Knight are stories which stress the need for individuals to interact responsibly with the framework from which they derive meaning. Even in the case of an order that ostensibly proceeds from divine ordination, hermeneutic interpretation is required. As Caputo puts it in "Holy Hermeneutics versus Devilish Hermeneutics,"

The word of God, the mind of God, what God wants, what God has said, [is] a matter to be settled in fear and trembling, with *timor castus*, Augustine said, a chaste and healthy fear. The word of God, as a word, is marked by difference and wavers in undecidability, as a mark or trace [one] can never hope perfectly to retrace, as if it were a code [one] could decode. (More 207-8)

Caputo's argument revolves around a reading of the gospels that characterizes Jesus as providing a lesson to the apostles in, essentially, hermeneutic interpretation. Caputo writes that at the "crucial point in the formation of the new church" (194), "Jesus did some hermeneutics for [the disciples]: 'and beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted (*diermeneusen*) to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' (Luke 24:27)" (194). Caputo continues,

The skies did not open up, the heavens did not sound forth [. . .]. No uninterpreted fact of the matter was lowered on a cloud. Instead, Jesus took the Scripture in hand and offered the disciples a *hermeneutic* of how the coming of the Messiah can be found in the Book, if one knows how to read. (194)

It is at this point, Caputo argues, that scripture itself demonstrates the relationship between interpretation and faith,

Just at that moment [. . .] of recognition and inspiration, when they finally knew how to view what was transpiring, Jesus disappeared before their very eyes. He became “invisible,” a-phantic (*aphantos*), a spirit, divesting himself of every trace of phenomenality, trusting now that the disciples, who had been taught to read and given new hermeneutic skills, would be able to make it in his absence on faith and reading. (195)

The interest of Caputo’s discussion is that it attempts to reconcile the responsible recognition of the flux with the assumption of a transcending ethos. “The point [. . .] is that the deferral and undecidability surrounding the Origin does not have the effect of destroying or undermining the tradition of the traditional faith [. . .]. Rather, it *produces* it by necessitating a constant rereading and reinterpretation” (198). Caputo is careful to reiterate that

Deconstruction does not demolish authority and the “force of law,” but divests the authority of the law of the trappings of absoluteness, thereby making the bearers of the tradition responsible for the forms the tradition assumes and the formulae in which the faith is cast. (199)

Caputo argues, moreover, that trying to make authority absolute is undesirable even in the context of religious horizons:

If everything in the tradition of the Book simply dropped into our laps, ready-made and self-interpreting, unambiguous and authoritative, we would have no decisions to make, no need to rethink or think at all, no need to read or interpret. Everything would have been done for us [. . .].

There would be no advantage in that, because the tradition would then be as dead as a doornail. (199)

The point here is not to challenge the idea of faith, but merely to remember that faith in transcendent meaning does not remove the fact of flux in mundane existence, even when that existence is contained within traditional forms. Whatever one's belief system, the challenge of living in a changing world and maintaining a persistent but adaptable sense of personal identity is inescapable.

What we are left with, at the end of our self-annihilating metaphysical quests, is the idea that the disturbing possibility of non-meaning, or in the terms of one of our characters, non-presence, is a requisite for the production of meaning even in the case of self-authorship. Derrida writes:

If the anguish of writing is not and must not be a *determined* pathos, it is because this anguish is not an empirical modification or state of the writer, but is the responsibility of *angustia*: the necessarily restrictive passageway of speech against which all possible meanings push each other, preventing each other's emergence. ("Force" 9)

The performance of presence, and the production of meaning, are contingent on the space for expansion provided by their absence. Even the desire to speak, to create meaning, to manifest presence, is predicated on absence:

The consciousness of having something to say is the consciousness of nothing: this is not the poorest, but the most oppressed of consciousnesses.

It is the consciousness of nothing, upon which all consciousness of something enriches itself, takes on meaning and shape. (8-9)

Without the void, without an absence, there is no space in which the new, the singular other, can come into being without being oppressed and stifled by all that is known, that already is.

In the case of the Nonexistent Knight, this seems to be an incongruous conclusion. The characters seem to be lost to the void: Agilulf is empty armor whose will does not keep him from dissolution, and Gurduloo is a physical human presence that nonetheless seems to lack personhood. But what is achieved at the end of the text is a kind of equilibrium between the will to presence and manifest non-presence. Gurduloo begins to exhibit personhood through his association with the abstract structures imposed on him by Agilulf. Similarly, Agilulf's sense of structure is forced to contend with the flaws and irregularities that he struggled against because they undermine his sense of consistency. He persists after his dissolution, but only by being linked symbolically to Raimbaut, who physically dons his armor and subjects it to dents, scratches and the changes of time and context. Raimbaut's relationship with Agilulf after the merger is no longer naïve; it does not represent a categorical absolution from uncertainty or variance.

He cannot fail to recognize that the external structure (symbolized by the armor) bends and changes in response to its interactions with the world.

Gawain's final relationship with the flux is less clear. In a sense, it remains unscripted by the text, but his options seem limited. He can continue to understand himself as holding an absolute moral value, in which case he will be forced to maintain the depressing conclusion that he is irredeemable. His only other option is to accept that the code by which he lives, even if guaranteed by a divine source, is not auto-interpreting and does not absolve him from the need to make choices that define the situations in which he finds himself rather than passively applying a code. He cannot be all possible perfect images of Gawain; he can only enact what he considers to be the best possible option in any given context even if it does not allow him to manifest perfection.

Both texts frame choice and self-authorship similarly. C. Taylor's "unconstrained freedom" is avoided by stressing the necessity of frameworks and structures for meaning to be possible. However, whatever meaning or value that characters find for themselves in relation to the code will have to be actively creative. Caputo's flux must be recognized, the systems in which meaning is articulated must remain adaptive so as not to fracture under their own weight. Characters must make decisions by asserting what they consider to be significant and meaningful, rather than expecting the code to deliver pre-made, absolute answers.

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