

'A Record of Treuthe': Redeeming Words in Langland's *Piers Plowman*

Naomi Geraghty
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

"In Englissh," quod Pacience, "it is wel hard, wel to expounen,
Ac somdeel I shal seyen it, by so thow understonde."¹

At the heart of *Piers Plowman* lies the dreamer's desire for a language through which he can imagine and signify truth. To fulfil this wish would require an impossible act of translation, a conversion of the divine Word into the inadequate terms of a post-lapsarian tongue. The language of men is doubly compromised, at once too empty and too full of meaning; for although they are unable to express the full complexity of an infinite God, the polysemic nature of fallen words leaves them vulnerable to misinterpretation and misuse, leading their users even further astray. While God may condescend to accept 'the homage of the human voice', St. Augustine concluded that the inescapable gulf between an unstable human signifier and a transcendental referent could never be resolved 'disputatiously' but must instead be 'evade[d] ... silently'.² As Kathleen Hewett-Smith has observed, this semantic gap is made particularly prominent in the allegorical mode, the 'very need' to mediate meaning and figure abstract concepts in concrete terms affirming the 'irrecoverable rupture within [the sign]'.³ However, critics such as Mary Carruthers and Maureen Quilligan have argued that Langland's poem strives for and even achieves a verbal resolution for the very difficulties which its problematic form reveals: '*Piers Plowman* is an allegory which devotes its primary energies to redeeming its own *littera*'.⁴ Distinguishing between 'two different kinds of wordplay' – the disingenuous 'bad sort' as practised by Mede and its 'good' equivalent which 'points toward truth' – Quilligan describes what she calls 'the purging of puns', a process which in the B-Text reaches its climax during Passus 18.⁵ In the joust with Death and the Harrowing of Hell, 'man's language and therefore the language of the poem' are 'redeemed' by the verbal games of the incarnate Christ.⁶ Yet a close reading of

¹ WILLIAM LANGLAND, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-text based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd edition (London: Dent/Everyman, 1995), 14.278–79. All further line references to the B-Text (hereafter 'B') will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

² ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11, 10.

³ KATHLEEN M. HEWETT-SMITH, "'Nede ne hath no lawe': Poverty and the De-stabilization of Allegory in the Final Visions of *Piers Plowman*' in *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays* ed. Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001), 233–53: 235.

⁴ MARY CARRUTHERS, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 4.

⁵ MAUREEN QUILLIGAN, *The Language of Allegory: Defining The Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 63.

⁶ QUILLIGAN, *Language of Allegory*, 79.

Langland's grammar reveals a less assured approach to the redemption of the written word than Quilligan's argument would suggest. Even in this moment of triumph, the poet foregrounds the failings of human language and deliberately blurs the distinction between morally good and misleading puns. If Langland redeems his poetic idiom at all, it is a redemption achieved not by purging language of its problems but rather by suggesting how its limitations may themselves provide a productive way of imagining God. Paradoxically, it is precisely when we are most conscious of his words as words that they seem most capable of revealing the divine.

I

In *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, the protagonist's search for salvation takes the form of a quest to learn the basic statement of Christian faith. Although clearly indebted to *Piers Plowman*, this unflinchingly anti-fraternal satire is more instructive than meditative in mood and does not truly engage with Langland's Augustinian anxieties. Nevertheless, this anonymous text provides an illuminating contrast with *Piers Plowman's* linguistic ambivalence, both because of its confident association of spiritual rectitude with textual literacy and also because of the later poet's schematic juxtaposition of ethical and unethical forms of speech. Unlike Will, whose struggle to grasp the Dowel trinity is fraught with epistemological anxiety, the *Crede* narrator is always certain of the object of his search and the spiritual improvements it will provide for him. Within the first twenty lines, learning the Creed and learning how to be truly faithful become conceptually and syntactically elided. Concluding his description of the 'kare' his ignorance of the text will bring, the speaker resolves to 'lerne the byleve'.⁷ '[B]yleve' is a noun which could refer either to faith as an abstraction or to a specific body of doctrine, and it provides an obvious pun on the meaning of *credo*. When the Creed itself is finally spoken, Piers's translation transforms the opening declaration of personal faith into the imperative '[l]eve thou on oure Louerd God' (*PPC*, 795), affirming the text's utility. Where Will often despairs of ever turning the ambiguous guidance he receives into material action, this grammatical shift makes the *Crede* into a practical guide. The connection between good words and good living is thus clarified in a way never seen in Langland's *Piers*, the later poem's language both redeeming and redeemed.

More revealing, however, is the *Crede* poet's opposition of 'the graith' (*PPC*, 34) and 'the glose' (*PPC*, 515), a binary not unlike Quilligan's notion of 'good' and 'bad' puns. In his comprehensive survey of the trope's history, John Alford has detailed the medieval fondness for deploying grammatical metaphors in order to map moral or religious ideas.⁸ Here, the goodness of Piers is figured linguistically through his plain and logical speech, while the wickedness of the degenerate friars is conflated with their serpentine syntax and habit of excessive glossing. (The essential simplicity of divine truth was a commonplace in Wycliffite texts such as this.) Yet although an extended and more scholarly version of this kind of analogy appears in the *Piers Plowman* C-Text, unlike the *Crede* example it is resistant to straightforward interpretation and cannot be

⁷ *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, ed. James M. Dean (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), l. 8; l. 16. All further line references to the *Crede* (hereafter '*PPC*') will be given in the text.

⁸ JOHN A. ALFORD, 'The Grammatical Metaphor: A Survey of Its Use in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 57.4 (1982), 728–60.

used to resolve the poem's moral ambiguities (a fact which casts an interesting light on the more word-conscious passages of the B Version):⁹

Thus is mede and mercede as two maner relacions,
Rect and indirect, reninde bothe
On a sad and a siker semblable to hemsuluen,
As adiectif and sustantif vnite asken [...]

Any attempt to gauge the difficulty which a text may have posed to its original readers several hundred years after the time of its writing must inevitably be flawed. Nevertheless, this grammatical metaphor seems comparatively complex even to the characters themselves. Unlike the clear demarcation of 'graith' and 'glose', the basis of these antitheses is far from clear, the differences between the concepts both specific and small; evidently perplexed, the king asks Conscience to explain his terminology 'for Englisch was it neuere' (C.3.342). While this passage may indeed 'testify to Langland's deep interest in language' it is by no means self-evident that it also 'proves his faith in its validity as a guide to truth'.¹⁰ The argument certainly does little to alter the king's opinions about the marriage of Mede.

Although language here is of course not the subject but the simile, Langland's decision to use syntax to illustrate the proper relationship between human beings and God does provide some insight into his thinking about the morality of grammar. Conscience's analogy (C.3.343) opposes the 'record of treuthe' created by the syntactic unity of '[r]elacioun rect' with the chaos and disruption produced when a sentence's components conflict in number, gender or case. Broadly speaking, this contrast is itself analogous to a juxtaposition of monosemic and polysemic constructions. Direct relation occurs when parts of speech work co-operatively to communicate a single sense and so reflect the truth – the figure is dependable '*[q]uia ante late rei recordatiuum est*' (C.3.343a) – just as a person is 'rihte trewe' (C.3.354) if she or he 'acordeth' (C.3.355) and submits in all respects to the will of God, the 'graciouse antecedent' (C.3.353). Conversely, discordant indirect relations are semantically promiscuous, taking the good with the bad and forming phrases heedless of grammatical or moral propriety:

As relacoynes indirect receeth thei neuere
Of the cours of case so thei cache suluer. (C.3.387–88)

Notoriously 'vnstedefast' (C.3.386), an '[i]ndirect thyng' (C.3.362) actively and unrighteously pursues multiple connections without care for the integrity of either sentence or society; it will 'cache to and come to bothe nombres' (C.3.364) even though 'the kyng and the comune al the coest hadde' (C.3.384). Given the position of this discussion in the sequence of dreams, it is interesting to note that this kind of promiscuity is chief amongst Conscience's objections to the conduct of Mede. However, his attempt to construct a moralised grammatical binary is hampered by Conscience's own recognition that an indirect relation can sometimes be correct, a fact which for him makes the figure even more despicable. As Priscilla Martin observes, the potential

⁹ *Piers Plowman by William Langland: An edition of the C-Text* ed. Derek Pearsall (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 3.331–35. All further line references to the C-Text (hereafter C) will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

¹⁰ ALFORD, 'Grammatical Metaphor', 755–56.

mixing of proper and improper forms ‘further befogs the dense moral confusion of life’.¹¹ The ease with which these supposedly opposing categories might intermingle is implicit from the very beginning of the argument in the phonetic similarities of ‘mede’ and ‘mercede’ (C.3.290), the obvious audible and etymological relation of the words impeding Conscience’s efforts to distinguish between them. The latter term, a coinage unique to the C-Text ironically derived from Mede’s own name, is a futile attempt to clarify and strengthen the B Version’s parallel claim that ‘[t]her are two manere of medes’ (B.3.231). Ultimately its inclusion only emphasizes the limitations of Conscience’s metaphorical apparatus and the difficulty of separating good and bad terms.

Curiously, even Conscience himself seems unable consistently to maintain his own analogy. In his summary of this section Pearsall notes that ‘it does not always seem possible to identify *mede* with indirect, *mercede* with direct relation, or vice versa’.¹² Conscience’s moral point is thus lost in the confusion of his rhetoric; despite Alford’s claim that ‘[g]rammar was certain’, the struggle to navigate these unwieldy similes only impedes our attempts to grasp the distinction between just and unjust forms of reward.¹³ Along similar lines, God is initially described as a noun with which humans should agree like a concordant adjective; but only a few lines later he is himself given the role of an ‘adiectyf’ to be sought out by the noun: ‘*hic et hec homo*’ (C.3.403). If human syntax were truly a reliable reflection of the divine order it seems unlikely that there could be such fluidity in its terms, especially in light of the fact that nouns may be meaningful alone while adjectives are semantically dependent upon them. The point here is not only to illustrate that a grammatical metaphor cannot adequately map man’s relationship with the divine but also to suggest that any notion of an inherently good or bad syntactical construction is fundamentally flawed. Conscience’s ‘blueprint’ is ‘too simple and too static’ to be of use as a ‘guide to truth’.¹⁴ Even when he is explicitly discussing the virtues and failings of the written word, then, Langland makes no attempt to present any particular mode as the ‘truly Christian rhetoric’ which both Will and he seem to desire.¹⁵ Where the *Crede* poet first identifies and then contrasts ethical and unethical syntactical structures, Langland himself seems reluctant to establish the very binary on which so many descriptions of his redemption of language have been based.

II

Linguistically, the Harrowing of Hell represents a moment of great triumph and of profound anxiety. When Will states that ‘I drow me in that derknesse to *descendit ad inferna*’ (B.18.111) he is moving not only downwards into Hell but also inside the language of the Apostle’s Creed, a doubleness emphasized by the conflict between the dreamer’s ‘I’ and the third-person verb ‘*descendit*’. Through this text he sees ‘*secundum scripturas*’ and ‘soothly’ (B.18.112), the latter a term which serves punningly as both an

¹¹ PRISCILLA MARTIN, ‘*Piers Plowman*: Indirect Relations and the Record of Truth’ in *Suche Werkis to Werche: Essays on Piers Plowman In Honor of David C. Fowler* ed. Míceál F. Vaughan (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1993), 169–90: 178.

¹² PEARSALL, *C-Text*, 79, note to lines 332–405.

¹³ ALFORD, ‘Grammatical Metaphor’, 759.

¹⁴ MARTIN, ‘Indirect Relations’, 78; Alford, ‘Grammatical Metaphor’, 756.

¹⁵ CARRUTHERS, *Search for St. Truth*, 19.

asseveration and an adjective. Even Truth herself undergoes an epiphany and becomes true to her name, the transformation from false confidence to genuine understanding mapped by the corrective echo of an ironic pun; 'I, Truthe, woot the sothe' (B.18.147) becomes "'thow tellest us sooth, by Jesus!'" (B.18.418). However, although Carruthers and Quilligan have both argued convincingly that this dream sees Will at the height of his perspicacity and that one of Passus 18's 'major achievements' is the 'purging of puns', the language of revelation remains overtly problematic and resists being redeemed of its flaws.¹⁶ Initially, Christ's victory over Death and the devil is figured through and made synonymous with his reclaiming of words:

Thow, Lucifer, in liknesse of a luther addere
 Gete bi gile thyng that God lovede;
 And I, in liknesse of a leode, that Lord am of hevене,
 Graciousliche thi gile have quyt – go gile ayein gile!
 And as Adam and alle thorough a tree deyden,
 Adam and alle thorough a tree shal turne to lyve. (B.18.355–60)

Throughout this extended dialogue, each of Christ's antitheses features a series of grammatical inversions which embody the change to the New Law even as the careful repetitions ensure a feeling of congruence with the Old, reminding us that '[n]on veni solvere legem set adimplere' (B.18.350a). The past-tense 'deyden' gives way to the assertive future-tense 'shal turne' while the active 'gilours' are shifted into the passive voice and become themselves 'bigiled' (B.18.340). The preponderance of these highly schematized phrases suggests the supreme clarity of the divine plan; the system of commensurate retribution is itself mirrored in the new order of commensurate love. Developing the verbal patterns of the Old Testament – '*Dentem pro dente et oculum pro oculo*' (B.18.339a) – Christ's speech is dominated by syntactical symmetry and often pivots on a medial caesura, giving his words a distinctly performative quality: 'And that Deeth in hem fordide, my death shal releve' (B.18.346). So powerful is Christ's ability to re-signify language that his presence even inverts the words spoken by Satan, turning the devil's false claim that the 'lawe nyl noght lete hym the leeste' (B.18.284) into the truth. For Davlin, this punning constitutes a redemption of the polysemic language whose faults were embodied by Mede. Reversing the more usual association of truth with monosemy, she argues that the multiplication of meanings gives 'the freeing effect of wordplay [...] definitive value' and enables it to become a route to 'revelation'.¹⁷ When removed from the mouths of 'gilours', the pun thus becomes the perfect embodiment of Christ's true essence; as three persons contained in the singular Word, the Holy Trinity is perhaps the ultimate polyseme.

By its very nature, however, this kind of wordplay leaves the reader acutely aware of the limits of the human tongue. Conventional puns like the ones made on 'amendes' (B.18.328) and 'quyyte' (B.18.341) play on the often productive potential for confusion available within the extant vocabulary of Middle English. By combining separate but equally legitimate meanings, this figure successfully reconciles the seemingly contradictory demands of justice and mercy into a single term in a way which is immediately apprehensible to the eye. Yet this kind of pun is not representative of the passus as a whole. The majority of the verbal games played by Christ and the Four

¹⁶ CARRUTHERS, *Search for St. Truth*, 139,144; QUILLIGAN, *Language of Allegory*, 63.

¹⁷ MARY CLEMENTE DAVLIN, O. P., *A Game of Heuene: Word Play and the Meaning of Piers Plowman B* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989), 90.

Daughters of God actively work against human ideas of sense, revealing a vast and impassable semantic gulf between the fallen signifiers and the meanings available to the transcendental divine. As Carruthers observes, the words' 'ordinary connotative range is cut out from under them and replaced by one entirely contrary'.¹⁸ For example, Christ's re-appropriation of the word 'gile' completely overturns its familiar earthly definition, the very word used to describe Lucifer's deceit also representing the incarnation, the source of ultimate grace. Such a reversal is not entirely atypical of this highly paradoxical passus and might well have been contained by a chiasmic structure like 'that was tynt thorough tree, tree shal it wynne' (B.18.140). However, Langland deliberately emphasizes the interpretative difficulty by placing a dense build-up of cognate forms within a single line, an effect compounded by the alliteration: '[a]nd gile is bigiled, and in his gile fallen' (B.18.361). As in line 358 quoted above ('Graciousliche thi gile have quynt – go gile ayein gile!'), the oscillation of meaning within this concentrated repetition calls attention to the strain the word is under, the difficulty of extricating the various forms of 'gile' from one another emphasizing the inadequacy of the sign. Throughout this speech, 'gile' is alternately opposed to and equated with grace, producing an unsettling indeterminacy of meaning which underlies and undermines the triumphant tone. When combined with Langland's auditory patterns, this semantic slippage ensures that we are always conscious of the verbal medium and the partialness of any understanding we may achieve through it.

It is significant, too, that there is no grammatical difference between the punning of Passus 18 and the duplicity ascribed to Mede. Quilligan's 'good' and 'bad' wordplay can thus only be distinguished on the basis of the speaker's moral character, a notion hampered by Langland's fondness for ethically problematic characters like Haukyn and the error-prone Truth. As a result, the words seemingly conquered by Christ are never fully liberated from their potential for misuse, nor can they be purged of their negative or quotidian associations. Though the Harrowing of Hell ends with the harmony of voices raised in praise and the reconciliation of the antithetical Daughters of God, Langland's language remains unresolved and unredeemed.

III

Returning to Augustine, it seems evident that any attempt to purge language so that it might signify truth is inevitably doomed to fail; 'God is unspeakable. But what I have spoken would not have been spoken if it were unspeakable'.¹⁹ Words will always prove inadequate because the divine is by its very nature extra-lingual. Having often affirmed that *Piers Plowman* 'redeems language by redefining it through the Word', Carruthers herself acknowledges this limitation when she concludes that 'Passus 18 provides Will with a redeemed language, but not an expressible one', a 'solution' which ultimately makes the gulf between humanity and God even 'more apparent'.²⁰ An inexpressible language, of course, is not a language at all, nor can it be considered truly 'redeemed'. Yet Langland does not abandon his search for a 'truly Christian rhetoric' in which he can

¹⁸ CARRUTHERS, *Search for St. Truth*, 146.

¹⁹ AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Teaching*, 10.

²⁰ CARRUTHERS, *Search for St. Truth*, 143, 147.

think about, if not quite signify, his God.²¹ Through the figure of Peace, the poet pursues an alternative method of linguistic redemption, crafting an idiom whose non-referentiality is its principal strength.

In her study of the poem's form, Quilligan argues that Langland constructs a 'literal' or 'letteral' allegory, frustrating our desire to follow the 'imaginary action' so that we 'must look at the words on the page'.²² This model could equally describe the poet's approach to language itself. Just as the discontinuity of the plot prevents absorption in the metaphorical scenes, so the proliferation of visual and audible wordplay disrupts the narrative flow and foregrounds the verbal medium, ensuring that readers are always aware of language as the glass through which they see, however darkly. This cultivation of self-consciousness encourages active thinking about the way words mean and deters overconfidence. For time and again, *Piers Plowman* illustrates how the confusion of material and transcendental referents can lead the unwary away from the road to St. Truth:

'And so boweth forth by a brook, "Beeth-buxom-of-speche",
[Forto] ye fynden a ford, "Youre-fadres honoureth":
Honora patrem et matrem... (B.5.566–67a)

Despite the brisk confidence of his anaphorically paratactical syntax – 'And leve hem [...] And hold wel' (B.V.578-9) – Piers's map confuses the field of folk precisely because his mode of speech is deceptively referential; the cutpurse's rather bathetic observation that 'I have no kyn there' (B.V.630) is as much a product of the ploughman's idiom as his own spiritual inadequacies. By converting verbs into nouns and even into mundane objects like the 'stokkes' (B.V.576) and the 'croft' (B.V.573), Piers gives these moral principles a materiality which implies that they may be sought out as objects rather than performed as deeds. This effect is compounded by the deictic quality of his specific imperatives and realistically detailed directions such as 'leve hem on thi lift half' (B.V.578). Though this particular journey never comes to pass, the confusion of terms anticipates Will's own bewilderment during the search for Dowel, a term which he continues to treat as a noun, the object of his spiritual journey rather than a route to salvation. For Anne Middleton, the significance of this all important structural trinity is 'purely formal', an 'explanatory instrument' intended to allow thought 'free [...] from the merely contingent'.²³

If it is this habit of material thought which leads us away from truth, then Peace's speech in Passus 18 offers a brief glimpse of how this fault might partly be purged. Defining each of her terms as the absence or opposite of another, Peace weaves a tapestry of negation in which nothing is affirmed. Effectively non-referential, these fluid signifiers enable her to craft an epistemological scheme which reflects the polysemous nature of the divine, opposites reconciled as two sides of a single coin. By making us conscious of the flimsiness of these words as signs, Peace allows us to move beyond the binary thinking which they instil. For Langland, then, the redemption of the written word could never be achieved by purging its ambiguities; only by working through the limitations of his language could he begin to write a 'record of treuthe' (C.3.343).

²¹ CARRUTHERS, *Search for St. Truth*, 19.

²² QUILLIGAN, *Language of Allegory*, 67, 68.

²³ ANNE MIDDLETON, 'Two Infinities: Grammatical Metaphor in *Piers Plowman*', *ELH* 39.2 (1972), 169–88: 171.