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“Wythouten Spotte”: Space (-) Time, and Corruption in *Pearl*
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The first five stanzas in the first section of *Pearl* commence start of the dream vision in a very traditional method: the narrator of *Pearl* is obsessing about the loss of that which he describes as his "pearl," a thing that he once possessed. He speaks quite emotionally and vividly about his lost object, as in line 24 when he describes the circumstances and season surrounding the loss of a "gem past praise" (Borroff 23). As the narrator single-mindedly returns to the "spot" of the loss of his "pearl wythouten spotte," one cannot help but notice the tension between the duality of the different kinds of 'spots' represented at the beginning and end of stanzas two through four. Within these repetitions of the word 'spot' three distinct connotations emerge: 'spot' as a geographic location, 'spot' as a position within space-time, and 'spot' as a blemish. The preliminary 'spots' in Section I provide an anchor for the audience as the narrator explores the concept of what it means to be (and cease to be) a finite creature in a spatial existence, subject to time and, ultimately, corruption.

The triple connotative meaning of 'spot,' as a locational, temporal, and corruptive situation is implied throughout the poem. The only questionable instance in which the word 'spot' might hold the singular connotation of 'blemish,' or 'sin' is in Section XIII, stanza 4, where, in the process of the maiden relating how the Lamb chose her and said "[c]ome hither, my dove without deceit / [f]or you are spotless, past compare" (763-764). In William Vantouno's parallel version of *Pearl*, the lines are "[c]ome, fair darling, do not fret / [n]o stain spoils your supremacy" (763-764). The Middle English is "[c]um hynder to me, my lemman swete / [f]or mote ne spot is non in þe" (763-764). It seems that 'spot' as blemish is used for emphasis with 'mote,' which according to the *OED* also means 'speck' or 'spot'. In fact, in the 2a *OED* definition for 'mote,' line 764 from *Pearl* is used as a supporting quotation for the definition "[a] spot; a blemish; (fig) a fault or drawback" (*OED*). So while it may be that 'spot' is used as
emphasis, the very fact that it is used in connection with ‘mote’ means that the locational and
temporal connotations can still be applied.

The phrase “wythouten spotte” occurs five times at the end of each stanza in the first
section of the poem. On the surface, the phrase seems to indicate purity or cleanness and could
even infer upon the maiden the religious context of a sinless state. In the essay, “Rethinking the
‘Corse in Clot’: Cleanliness, Filth, and Bodily Decay in Pearl,” Katherine H. Terrell observes that
“most Pearl criticism has tended to replicate the maiden’s heaven-centered viewpoint,” so that a
phrase like “wythouten spotte” becomes intrinsically related to purity and religion (431). Terrell
explores this scholarly oversight by arguing the importance of the image of the corpse and decay
in the poem, but if ‘spot’ only means ‘blemish,’ or ‘sin,’ then the narrator has no reason to ask
the Pearl-maiden what she is doing in Paradise in the first stanza of Section V. Also, his
“wretched will” most likely could not have prevented him from accepting the “comfort of
Christ” if he was assured of her purity and spiritual habitation. Instead he is consumed with the
place, moment, and physically damaging results of her death and burial. In fact, when he sees her
in Section V, he demonstrates disbelief combined with self-reflexive pity at seeing her. His
mourning in this situation seems to be shrouded in an attempt to cause her the pain of guilt:

O Pearl, said I, in pearls of price
Are you my pearl come back again,
Lost and lamented with desolate sighs
In darkest night, alone and in vain?
Since you slipped to ground where grasses rise
I wander pensive, oppressed with pain
And you in the bliss of Paradise
Beyond all passion and strife and strain.
What fate removed you from earth’s domain
And left me hapless and heartsick there
Since parting was set between us twain
I have been a joyless jeweler (Borroff 241-252).
If “wythouten spotte” meant that the narrator believed that Pearl-maiden was sinless, then he would have gladly accepted seeing her “demesne” as the strange and wonderful place into which he had stumbled and not the earth that “mar[s] a gem past praise” with a “cover of clay so coldly fraught” (23-24). The narrator expresses both criticism and blame for her joy and his depression instead of contentment upon seeing her in what he describes as Paradise.

The narrator’s demand to know why she is allowed the luxury of living in Paradise while he is in pain on earth is an odd reaction for someone who believed that the maiden was “wythouten spotte” in the context of being sinless. As seen in the above passage, the narrator seems to be both confused by her presence and upset by the fact that she is not miserable as he has been. In the first stanza of Section IX, he continues on to display near outrage at her station as a queen:

That courtesy too free appears  
If all be true as you portray;  
You lived in our country not two years –  
You could not please the Lord, or pray,  
Or say ‘Our Father,’ or Creed rehears –  
And crowned a queen the very first day! (Borroff 481-486).

Not only does the narrator question the Pearl-maiden’s integrity, “[i]f all be true as you portray,” he also further criticizes the Lamb’s generosity in dealing with her. In the narrator’s view of the world, the Pearl-maiden did not live long enough to deserve the reward she received. He continues to further condemn God for his choices and the Pearl-maiden for her seemingly scandalous claims:

I cannot well believe my ears,  
That God could go so far astray.  
The style of countess, so I would say,  
Were fair enough to attain unto,  
Or a lesser rank in heaven’s array,  
But a queen! It is beyond your due (487-492).
Based on the exposition of the narrator’s reaction to the maiden, it appears that the phrase “wythouten spotte” does not solely convey religious purity, but also indicates a lack of physical locality, in contrast to the narrator’s movement towards the ‘spot’ where the maiden died.

The *Pearl*-maiden, herself, uses this phrase to describe the Lamb, in Section XVI, stanza 3, line 945, the maiden states: “Pe Lompe þer wythouthen spotteʒ blake,” which is translated as “[t]he noble lamb, without stain or ache” (Vantouno 945). Borroff translates the line as “[t]he spotless Lamb of gracious mein” (945). The fact that the maiden takes the narrator’s phrase and uses it in reference to the Lamb not only shows the ‘unblemished’ or ‘sinless’ connotation of the phrase but also demonstrates her closer connection to him than to earthly matters. She is with him and they are “wythouten spotte” both in the narrator’s context of not having a space-time existence and as being without sin.

The logical question to ask is what exactly is a spot? A two thousand year old definition of the word ‘point’ from the Euclid’s mathematical work, *Elements*, might provide useful answers. According to Richard J. Trudeau, a mathematics professor at Stonehill College, Euclid defines a ‘point’ as “that which has no part” (295). Trudeau goes on to explain that Euclid’s definition means that a ‘point’ “has neither length, nor width, nor thickness” (295). Simply put, a ‘point’ is a dimensionally challenged, fixed position in space. Therefore, the mathematical term ‘point’ and the directional term ‘spot’ share connotative meanings that indicate a specific place of static locality. The narrator of *Pearl* views the place where he lost the maiden in much the same way: the ‘spot’ that he visits is fixed, yet he mournfully recognizes that the maiden herself has a “cover of clay…coldly fraught (Borroff 22),” and that she is “fairer yet, and all unseen” (45). The earthly body of the *Pearl*-maiden is buried and decaying and the distraught narrator can only focus on “[w]here pearl plunged deep in earthen tomb” (30), the geographic position of
her physical body. Terrell argues that the narrator “stays because he believes that his pearl is still there, under the ground, tantalizingly close, yet unreachable...the lost pearl is not merely lost in space but in time” and it is the narrator’s “own literal-mindedness in believing that the pearl is necessarily where he left it traps him by her graveside and prevents him from imagining any other fate, either for her or for himself” (433). The space-time conundrum that Terrell mentions seems to be the source of the narrator’s distress, for as soon as he sees the Pearl-maiden in his vision he states that upon recognizing her that “[s]uch gladness grew in my heart by grace,” demonstrating a need to visualize the maiden to understand her true location (Borroff 171).

The narrator’s lack of movement, even though his exists on a moving plane makes everything else around him seem in greater motion. The Pearl-maiden’s view is also stable: through the observation of time, she sees movement, mostly in terms of the narrator’s sadness and her earthly body’s decay. In Section V, stanza 3, the maiden states “[y]our care has set you a course unsound, / [a]nd cause of moment maddens your mood; / [y]ou lost a rose that grew in the ground (267-269),” and later in Section XV, stanza 2 she reiterates, “[o]ur bodies lie on earthen bier, / [a]nd you go grieving, sore distressed (857-858),” words like “course” and “go” as applied to the narrator indicates that she views him as active, and her old body as something that is stationary and with time causes new life and growth. One of the basic tenants of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity is that all perceptions of time and movement are valid. While the Pearl-maiden does not seem to view herself as motionless (except when she considers her dead body in the laying in the localized ‘spot’ in the ground, and even then her body is doing something by providing nourishment for growing plants) she also views the seemingly static narrator as being in motion. In contrast, the narrator sees himself in a static state but his memory of the living Pearl-maiden is of a child active in life, and not passive as he describes himself. Words like
“shot,” “sped,” “tumbling wide,” and even the admiration of her “grace” indicate the maiden’s constant movement while on earth. The narrator on the other hand, “often...watched and wished,” indicating his static state even during before her death (14). In fact, the maiden was so active in her life that it seems part of the narrator’s distress is that she is “so close confined (53),” a phrase which, as Terrell notes, not only speaks of the narrators frustration with the maiden as being physically close to him, yet unreachable, but it also demonstrates empathy and concern over the claustrophobic condition of the maiden’s body being buried and unable to move as it had in life.

Specifically, the maiden’s high mobility contrasts with his lack of movement: in fact he views her as moving “from” him “Purȝ gresse to grounde hit fro me yot” (Vantuono 11) and “Syſen in þat spote hit for me sprange” (14). In stanza 2 the narrator says that “often I watched and wished for that grace”(Borroff 14) in contrast to the first line which states “since in that spot it sped from me so” (13) the maiden was alive with movement but the narrator is always stagnant. Any movement in connection with the narrator is internal, he speaks of how the memory of her “clutches [his] heart in cruel throe / and causes [his] blood to rage and race” (17-18), so that motion is indicated inside of him but not something in which he is actively participating. In fact the only suggestion of movement on his part is in the fourth stanza where he states “to that especial spot I hied” (37). William Vantuono’s translation of the same line is “at that spot which in speech I expound” (4), which seems much closer to the Middle English “to þat spot þat I in speche expoun” (4) and also shows the narrator in a situation where he is not actively moving, but standing still and speaking about the situation of how he lost Pearl. It is not until line 38 of the poem that we see the narrator make any actual movement, when he actually enters the garden where he lost the maiden.
So the narrator’s return to a fixed point makes sense as he searches for mental and emotional stability and understanding after her death. Yet, as he notes in stanzas three and four of Section I the localized ‘spot’ that he visits is not completely static because it is affected by time, making it also a temporal ‘spot’. The narrator at first implies a spring setting in Section I, stanza 3 stating, “that spot with spice must spring and spread / [w]here riches rotted in narrow room; / [b]lossoms white and blue and red / [l]ift now alight in blaze of noon; / [f]lower and fruit could never fade / [w]here pearl plunged deep in earthen tomb” (25-30), but later, in line 38 of the next stanza states that he enters “that same garden gren / [i]n August at a festive tide” (38-39). Applying Einstein’s Theory of Relativity to the observations between the narrator and the maiden provide an even more apt description of his place in the poem: the narrator speaks of the changing of differing seasons in combination with images of death “tomb,” “die,” “scythe-edge” (which might be a more modern view of death, admittedly) in stanzas 3 and 4 – the very garden that he is in reminds him of how much time has passed since he lost the Pearl-maiden. Yet, in section II, stanza 1, when he finally leaves his ‘spot,’ the narrator becomes aware of the difference in the way that one would observe events on earth should that person, like the pearl maiden, be taken out of the context of time and into a separate dimensionality. The earthly speed of light no longer has any influence on the narrator as he is taken to where the maiden exists, and since the narrator’s bodiless form lacks mass, and the Theory of Relativity begins to fall apart. The lack of mass and the change in light (it seems to be more reflexive and refractive in his vision) indicates a change in dimensionality, perhaps bringing him closer to an eternal state. He is no longer on a ‘spot’ on the earth, but rather he is someplace where he can converse and debate with the dead, outside of the flow of space-time and corruption.
The *Pearl*-maiden talks about her view of the passage of time in section XV, stanza two and she seems to view the linear progression of the decay of her body as inconsequential and hints that it should be the same for the narrator.

Less of bliss none brings us here  
Who bear the pearl upon our breast;  
No mark of strife could ever appear  
Where the precious pearl is worn for crest  
Our bodies lie on earthen bier,  
And you go grieving, so distressed,  
But we, with knowledge full and clear,  
See in one death all wrong redressed.  
The Lamb has laid our cares to rest;  
We partake of his table in joyfulness;  
Each one’s share of bliss is best,  
Nor ever in honor any the less (Borroff 853-864).

The maiden describes herself and the others as “with knowledge full and clear” (859) and able to “[s]ee in one death all wrong redressed” (860) is both a religious and a relativistic statement. She is able to comprehend life and death better than the narrator because she is living in Paradise, but also, her position in a dimensionally different plane allows her to understand differently than the narrator does, he “go[es] grieving, so distressed” (858), but she is able to “partake of his table in joyfulness” (862) because her view is outside his temporal and linear framework.

Also, in the same stanza from section XV in line 856 the *Pearl*-maiden describes, “Of spotleʒ peralʒ þa beren þe creste,” a line which seems to indicate only cleanliness of her pearls (Vantuono 856). Borroff translates it as: “Where the precious pearl is worn for crest” (856). Vantuono writes instead, “our crown of pearls fulfills our quest” (856). Neither one focuses on the obvious phrase “spotleʒ peralʒ,” as it corresponds to the line; Borroff makes the attempt to connect the words by the translation of the previous line as “no mark of strife could ever appear” (855). The previous line in Vantuono does not even attempt to acknowledge the phrase.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* “beren” is a Middle English southern term for “to
bear” and also specifically translates “creste” in this line of *Pearl* as “the most excellent, the crown” (*OED*). So it would seem that the line could be ‘of spotless pearls that bears the crest,’ perhaps describing herself and the other women who wear the ornamentation “spotless pearls,” indicating that all of the maidens are both pure and outside of space and time. It is in this stanza that motion time and corruption connect completely: to be in a localized ‘spot’ as the narrator is, is to not see the entire situation clearly. It is only after death that one can understand what being ‘spotless’ and ‘spot’ truly mean.

Therefore ‘spotless’ carries the triple connotation as that without blemish, that without locality, and that without time, just as ‘spot’ means to be prone to the corruption of earthly three dimensional space-time condition. In the eighteenth section, in the third and fourth stanzas, the words ‘spot’ and ‘spotty’ are used to describe both those under the moon (earthly inhabitants) and the moon itself. In Section XVIII, stanza 3 the narrator finally seems to begin to understand the word ‘spot’ in its entirety, he states: “[n]o lock was set on gate or door / [b]ut evermore open both night and noon; / [n]one may take refuge on that floor / [w]ho bears any spot beneath the moon” (Borroff 1065-1068). He uses the three connotations of the word ‘spot’ without her prompting; he seems to be indicating a localized spot, a temporal spot, and spot as a blemish. In the very next stanza the narrator continues on to say, “[t]he moon has in that reign no right; / [t]oo spotty she is, of body austere” (1069-1070) meaning that the moon is too – blemished, (anyone can see it is pocked with craters), temporal (the waxing and waning of the moon is also a measurement of time), and locational (the moon is gravitationally attached to the earth). It is at this point that the word spot disappears from the Middle English text entirely. One difficulty with Borroff’s translation is that she uses the word once more in her translation as a launching point for the narrators sudden burst of movement towards the river. She writes “for just as I started
from the spot” (1169), echoing the importance of the word earlier in the poem even though it is no longer part of the Middle English verse. Her choice in this instance is interesting because if one simply knows that the word spot is not used again after section XVIII then it seems as if the narrator has learned or at least accepted something about his earthly existence – as the moon is ‘spotty,’ in the sense that it is blemished and subject to locality and time, then, likewise, the earth is also a ‘spot,’ a dimensionally challenged, static but temporal location, especially for someone in Pearl’s dimensionally greater perspective.

The narrator’s preoccupation with the word ‘spot’ demonstrates concern with the physicality of existence, the effect of time, and the duality of a corrupted physical yet stainless spiritual reality. Although not as obvious as the narrator of a work like Piers Plowman, the Pearl narrator seeks to comprehend individual words and the emotional and physical meaning therein. Instead of directly asking his question, however, the narrator of Pearl practically meditates on individual words in each section of the poem. In the case of the word ‘spot,’ it does not entirely disappear from the text until the narrator uses it in a way similar to the Pearl-maiden’s unification of the triple connotation.
Work Cited


