‘I wol, by processe of tyme,/ Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme’: Literary Confrontations with Death in Medieval Dream Vision Poetry.

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‘Thurgh noyse and swetnesse of hir song’ (Chaucer 297)

Elaborating on Freudian dream interpretation, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan proposes that the dream is analogous to the structure of language, a rebus 'in which the signifier is articulated and analysed in discourse' (424). The notion that dreams and their content are inherently literary did not originate in a Parisian seminar room, however; fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writers were aware of the dream's poetic fabric and seized upon it as an entryway for exploring the human condition. It is therefore unsurprising that the dream form was commonly adopted within the popular *consolatio* genre which sought to provide both didactic advice and emotional consolation in the wake of death (Phillips 378). Though death was a salient fact of medieval life, reconciling with loss was a fraught experience, all the while the dead remained elusively present within individual and collective memories. I demonstrate this in three texts: Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, the anonymously authored *Pearl*, and Hary's *The Wallace*. The imaginative spaces these works construct, I argue, create porosity in the temporal barriers between the living and the dead. Intrinsically poetic, inflecting both the potentialities and shortcomings of language, the dream becomes a locus for consolation and commemoration.

Understanding the functionality of the dream as a literary space is crucial for discerning its appeal to medieval writers of elegiac and commemorative works. Chaucer's despondent, sleepless narrator in the opening lines of the *Book of the Duchess* not only laments his state of insomnia, but also the 'sorwful imaginacioun' (14) that consumes his mind. His inability to sleep is an inability to dream, thwarting his propensity for poetic craft. Representing 'an aesthetic liberation' (Hardaway 168), the dream is conducive to literature itself, a space latent with poeticism. Aside from immersing the reader in the sensuality of the dream vision, the lush dreamscapes constructed by medieval writers serve to emphasise the literary qualities of the setting. Both *Pearl* and the *Book of the Duchess* incorporate birds into their dreamscapes, similarly describing their 'swete' song (*Pearl* 94). Birdsong awakens

Chaucer's narrator into the dream, 'Thurgh noyse and swetnesse of hir song' (297); their singing both acting as a natural metaphor for poetry and stimulating the poetic meditation on death that ensues. Lisa Kiser usefully draws a connection between this and writers of the *arts poetriae* genre, who used imagery of the garden and birds as 'nature's poets' in their treatises (8). If the bucolic setting of the dreamscape is an allegory for literature itself, then these texts are primarily concerned with the capacity for art as an aid in articulating the inexpressible, or at the very least, constituting a 'transformative ontology' (Hardaway 165) that allows for the translation of incomprehensible loss into creativity.

That the dream is literary means responding to it becomes a hermeneutic task, an idea which texts engage with through metafictional components. Chaucer's narrator commits himself 'to putte this sweven in ryme' (1332), demonstrating the value ascribed to the process of relaying and subsequently interpreting the content of a dream. This draws upon the long history of dream interpretation which traces back to the biblical and classical traditions, notably Joseph and Macrobius, to whom the Chaucerian narrator both refers (272-284). A continuity arises between these ancient conceptions of the dream and Lacan's modern psychoanalytic model. As he postulates, 'the dream is a rebus', comprehending the meaning of which requires exposition of its content (424). Hary's *The Wallace*, as a larger text in which the dream vision is just one section, lends itself to this self-awareness that the dream is a poetic space. Wallace entreats his clerk to interpret his dream vision and its symbolism, situating him, as Helen Phillips suggests, in the position of the reader 'advancing watchfully through [the] narrative' (381). Following Lacan's dream theory, which stipulates that 'dream images are to be taken up only on the basis of their value as signifiers' (424), this act of interpretation, or the promise of it, is almost as important as the dream itself. Though drawing upon biblical and classical models, the clerk's method of interpretation resonates with Lacanian concepts, as he takes the images within Wallace's dream and identifies what they

metaphorically, or metonymically, represent. Without this, the book given to Wallace by the Virgin is just that; it is only through the act of recording and interpreting the dream that it becomes 'this brokyn land' (7.141), that is, a metaphor for Scottish history and Hary's commemorative task. Just as Wallace must understand his dream, so too must the narrators of the elegiac *Pearl* and the *Book of the Duchess* in order to access their consolatory potential.

Dream visions enable literary resurrections of the dead, insofar as language permits. In *Pearl*, this is quite literal; the narrator's lost daughter, or rather an unconscious manifestation of her, lives within the dream, able to speak with her father and mitigate his grief, if only within the liminality of the space. Her resurrection relies on the fact that the dream is a setting which suspends temporal reality, hence why, despite having lost his daughter in infancy, when she 'was full yong and tender of age' (412), the narrator's immediate response to seeing her is 'I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere' (164). His ability to recognise as an adolescent the girl he lost as a child, and the dialogue that follows, are made possible by the dream in which, as Peter Brown argues, 'there are dislocations of place and space' (49). Building on this, I posit that a third dislocation occurs, that of time, and that this is most significant in the dream's ability to transverse the boundaries between the living and the dead. *The Wallace* substantiates this, the dream vision permitting the interaction between Wallace and St. Andrew, synecdochally between present-day Scotland and its history. It is through the temporal displacement in which these two figures, centuries between them, meet, that Hary stages the transference of the sword which establishes a spiritual lineage between Wallace and Scotland's patron saint (Ash-Irisarri 20).[1] Medieval writers therefore employ the dream vision as a means of making the impossible possible, creating a communicative space in which the living can converse, across space and time, with poetic reconstructions of the dead.

[1] Forthcoming publication, pagination given from draft copy.

While the dead are active participants in *Pearl* and *The Wallace*, the Black Knight in the *Book of the Duchess* grants his lost love, Whyte, a 'kind of rhetorical apotheosis' (Fumo, 'The Consolations' 127), reviving her only in language. Encountering him in his solitary state of lamentation, the narrator overhears the Knight reciting verses that are 'Withoute note, without song' (472), that is, devoid of poeticism. Replacing this with a dialogic exchange, the narrator, whether through a communicative error or a deliberate ploy – a matter that continues to divide critics – prompts the Knight to figuratively speak life into Whyte. As he recalls how '[he] saw hir daunce so comlely,/ Carole and singe so sweetly,/ Laughe and pley so womanly' (848-850), so too does she, in the mind and immortally on the page. But if the Knight, as Jamie Fumo gently puts it, 'suspends the duchess warmly in life' (*Making Chaucer's Book* 61) through this poetic performance, the resurrected duchess is spectral, obscured by the insufficiency of language to truly capture her existence. Attempting to describe her face, the Knight complains, 'Me lakketh bothe Englissh and wit/ For to undo it at the fulle' (898-899). His problem has two components: the lexis to accurately reconstruct Whyte's attributes do not exist, and he lacks the poetic craftsmanship to attempt to do so. It is pertinent that it is her 'visage' (895) that he 'ne can descryven' (897), as her most distinguishable, personal feature remains elusive, preventing her from materialising fully. The literary resurrection enacted through the Knight's dialogue is therefore incomplete, 'a fantasy … doomed to fail' (Fumo, 'The Consolations' 128). Chaucer uses the Knight to highlight the inadequacies of language in the elegiac task of preserving a lost life, the very task demanded in the commissioning of the poem as a memorial to Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster following her death from plague in 1368.

The dream's correspondence to language means that its capacity to resurrect the dead is an artifice, only possible within the ephemeral poetic space. Reid Hardaway contends that this 'does not, however, preclude the consolatory potential of art' (164). This is a compelling

reading of *The Book of the Duchess*; the narrator himself suggests as such to the Knight that 'it may ese [his] herte' (556) to share his grief, speaking to the capacity for language to translate pain into consolation. More puzzling is the final dialogue between the narrator and the Knight in which the revelation that 'She is deed' (1309) dissolves the communicative barrier between them and the dream abruptly ends. This moment is critically divisive, with some understandably finding these lines bathetic and others proposing that they contain 'a poignant simplicity and human honesty' (Fumo, *Making Chaucer's Book* 51). I assume the latter view, and suggest that the directness of this revelation is what renders it consolatory. The plain communication here creates a communality between the Knight and the narrator, who simply but effectively consolidates his loss through the 'ennobling avowal' (Fumo, *Making Chaucer's Book* 52) that comes from his articulation of pity, 'By God, it is routhe' (1310). The unpunctuated manuscript of the poem better illustrates this, as the Knight and the narrator truly speak as one (Fumo, *Making Chaucer's Book* 51). Consolation, in this sense, is not about curing grief or undoing an irreversible loss; instead, it is realised in the simple exchange in which the Knight is able to plainly verbalise what has happened and is met with understanding and sympathy. Therefore, Hardaway's suggestion that literature, and dreams, hold consolatory power despite their inability to dissipate grief entirely, is demonstrable in Chaucer's poem.

Pearl opens with a grief-stricken father in desperate search of consolation after the death of his daughter, 'That wont was whyle devoyde my wrange' (15). Having lost she who was his source of consolation, he languishes, 'fordolked of luf-daungere' (11) without his pearl. This precursory narrative framing is crucial for an understanding of the dream vision that follows as, beyond an exposure to universal truths, a reframing of what constitutes emotional consolation. Awakening within the dreamscape, the narrator is instantly consoled by its beauty, which 'Forbidden [his] stresse, dystryed [his] paynes' (124); even before

reuniting with his daughter, he is soothed by the poeticism of the space. Unlike Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, however, *Pearl* is not content to '[give] voice simply to the beauty' (Fumo, *Making Chaucer's Book* 57). Its lofty theological preoccupations mandate that the consolation it offers calls upon a higher power than poetry. Pearl attempts to console her father by assuring him of her salvation, homiletically guiding him through an apocalyptic vision of the afterlife in which she dwells as a bride of Christ, who 'thurgh Hys Godhede/ He toke [her] to Hys maryage' (413-414). Drawing upon the Boethian model of consolation, the dream serves to reorient the narrator into a state of reason and spiritual enlightenment.

A dissonance arises between the intense eschatology of *Pearl*'s dream vision and the narrator who, exuding humanity at every point, grapples with earthly loss. Overcome by desire to be with his daughter, he throws himself into the water that divides them, 'That brathe out of my drem me brayde' (1170). Emotionally driven by his notably physical feelings of 'luf longyng' (1152), the innate humanness of the narrator causes the dream to collapse, leaving him alone once again 'in that erber wlonk' (1171), without his pearl. Rather than awaking in a consoled state, his loss is doubled, 'A longeyng hevy me strok in swone' (1180). It is only after he swoons, his body and mind overwhelmed by this renewed grief, that he reflects upon the content of the dream, concluding the poem with a conventional, but somewhat unconvincing, meditation on Christ's mercy. Between numbly invoking the liturgical practice of holy Communion, and his final utterance 'Amen Amen' (1209-1213), Pearl's speaker no more successfully convinces himself that he has been consoled than he does the poem's audience. Fumo's assessment that this consolatory mode 'denies grief a voice' ('The Consolations' 123) is appropriate; if there is consolation here, it simultaneously inflicts pain whilst abating it, offering no respite in the immediate moment. *Pearl* leaves its narrator the same hapless father as at the start, only with new soteriological insight that promises consolation in a distant, intangible future. His human, temporal grief is only

suspended for the interlude of the dream and thus the poem leaves a residual hollowness in its inability to console the narrator in his present response to a devastating, unfathomable loss.

Unlike the deeply personal, emotional cadence of *Pearl* and the *Book of the Duchess*, Hary's *The Wallace* employs the dream for a collective, political purpose, encouraging the commemoration of Wallace as an historical figure and a Scottish national hero. Wallace's dream, in line with Brown's view, acts as 'a point of entry into new levels of perception otherwise inaccessible' (36), displacing chronological history and becoming a locus in which past, present and future all converge. This is achieved through the two poles of dream imagery identified by Lacan, metaphor, and metonymy, which together 'spell out the "proverb" presented by the oneiric rebus' (424). As mentioned, Wallace's interaction with St. Andrew metaphorically represents his inheritance as Scotland's symbolic heir; beyond this, the dream is replete with signifiers that crystallise the poem's nationalistic sentiment. The sapphire with which the Virgin blesses Wallace, as Kate Ash-Irisarri notes, may be a metaphorical nod to the saltire (20), indicating the potentiality for dream interpretation beyond that of the clerk, who reads it as a symbol of 'lestand grace, will God sall to thee fall' (7.140). In keeping with the idea of the dream as literary, neither of these views are essentially correct or incorrect, nor are they mutually exclusive; the fluidity of the dream as a poetic space enables its presentation to a collective of readers who are free to apply to it their own notions of identity, placing it in a state of constant renewal and maintaining its applicability to both present and future moments. The dream, therefore, is an interactive space through which 'Hary entreats his audience … to use his narrative as a support for their own memories of what being Scottish might mean' (Ash-Irisarri 22).

Consolidating his text's memorial purpose, Hary has the Virgin in Wallace's dream give him a book, which metonymically stands in for his text and Scottish history more broadly. Just as Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* engages with ideas of text and textuality

within itself, *The Wallace* does so even less obliquely. If the book in Wallace's dream 'acts as a memory-aid for what was at stake in Scotland's struggle against the English' (Ash-Irisarri 24), so does Hary's text in the hands of its fifteenth-century audience. While the clerk interprets the book's 'thrynfald' (7.141) segments in terms of each one's metaphorical signification, I posit that the tripartite structure also invokes the three strands of past, present and future, which coalesce within the dream. Hary uses the dream not only to establish Wallace as a paragon of Scottishness by connecting him to its patron saint, but also to prompt the commemoration of him by the reader, looking to posterity to immortalise him in Scotland's collective memory. Thus, just as *Pearl*'s speaker is awoken when he tries to swim across the stream physically separating him and his daughter, Wallace's attempt to read the book results in the dream's collapse; its immateriality is essential to its role as a signifier of the memorial task at hand, materialised in Hary's 'worthi buk fullfillit of suthfast deid' (12.1451). Wallace's dream vision therefore equips Hary with the ability to self-referentially assert his poem's function as 'a textual *aide memoire*' (Ash-Irisarri 3) for the people of Scotland, at the time he is writing and in years to come.

Lacan's comment that 'the letter … produces all its truth effects in man without the spirit having to intervene at all' (423) articulates what medieval writers already knew: that the unconscious contained profound truths only accessible when the mind was at its most insensible. The dream, untrammelled by the limits of temporality, thus became a space that the living and the dead could synchronously occupy. In the *Pearl* poem, a father's lost daughter becomes a spiritual guide through a vision of the afterlife, providing enlightenment but falling short at consolation; Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* fails to resurrect the Black Knight's dead love or rationalise his grief, but its poeticism has a consolatory effect. Wholly different in purpose, Hary's *The Wallace* uses the dream to his commemorative end, enshrining Wallace's position as a Scottish hero who transcends history. As a site of

consolation or commemoration, the literary qualities of the dream made its form ideal for medieval writers exploring the relationship between the living and the dead.

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