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Like Nothing:
Lingua and *The Green Knight*

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In David Lowery's 2021 *The Green Knight,*[1] Gawain leaves on his journey to the Green Chapel under the protection of blessings in three languages, which accrue in an atmospheric montage. His mother and her coven chant over their needlework, a priest recites the Latin Salve Regina, and then the queen takes the center of the screen, speaking directly to camera and adding a Marian blessing in English. Meanwhile, Gawain's accoutrements are prepared: the Green Knight's axe is produced, aspersions are cast on Gawain's shield, painted with the Virgin Mary inside it, and Gawain's mother folds a piece of wood or bone, carved with Germanic runes, into the girdle that she and her ladies have created. If he wears the girdle, she promises him, he will come to no harm and return with his head intact. "Do not waste this," she adds, perhaps referring to the girdle, perhaps to the entire scenario.[2]

The film's layering of performative speech corresponds to the physical defenses detailed in the arming scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* The poem details Gawain's arms and armor—doublet, cape, shoes, greaves, cuisses, byrnie, braces, spurs, helmet, shield—and parses at length the meaning of the pentangle on his shield;[3] this Gawain will not get, or need, the magic girdle until he is brought to the moral-chivalric dilemma of the hunting game much later in the poem. The film's Gawain, by contrast, sets out with the girdle as well as the rest of his arms, but they fail—or he does—on the first encounter. A crew of scavengers who have laid a trap for him in the woods steal his sword and axe, cut the girdle, and break the shield. Given the attention the film pays to the ritual and magical language that sent Gawain on his way, we might expect these to be the more efficacious protections for Gawain's journey. But tied as those speech acts were to the material objects, shield and girdle, now destroyed, their status as the movie goes forward becomes doubtful at best. The film makes a point of its performative language, but that language is not, for the hapless Gawain, any more reliable a protection than armor.

The polyglot invocations leading up to Gawain's departure are in a way strikingly medieval: Latin running alongside the vernacular, blessings from religious and secular authorities intertwined, while pre-Christian magic is shaped outside the boundaries of the

[1] *The Green Knight,* directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021).
[2] *The Green Knight*, 00:36:03.
[3] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1987), 207-300, Fitt 2, lines 566-669.

official rituals; such may have been the multilingual medieval English world in which the poet wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. But, of course, it is even more striking as medievalism, with English centered rather than Latin. As M. J. Toswell points out, English has taken its place as the hegemonic pattern, the *lingua,* of twentieth and twenty-first century medievalisms; just as Latin underwrote the "basic linguistic worldview" of the Middle Ages, English, and especially the Arthurian traditions, have come to serve as the prototypical vehicle for medievalism.[4] That the Latin of the montage is almost immediately sidelined by English is indicative of the languages' relationship in modern, not medieval, culture: Latin is there for flavor, but the force of the content comes across in English.

And the particular *lingua* of the film, by which I mean the whole landscape of linguistic habits and motifs across which the movie's narrative unfolds—the idiom of Lowery's worldbuilding—is not only English, but pervasively dysfunctional English. Language references are regularly unreliable, which makes the speech acts in which they participate ambiguous and their stakes hard to parse; Gawain is himself linguistically obdurate, and the way in which language is deployed to describe or label the world around him only makes it persistently more obscure, clouding its relationship to history or intertextuality. Lingua, in this sense, thus becomes a core element of how the film is shaped in terms of not just medievalism, but neomedievalism, as the film's fractured habits of language contribute to an ahistory that evokes a kind of neomedieval romance-time more than it does the Middle Ages, or even the poem it is adapting.[5]

Gawain's participation in this landscape is largely as a kind of linguistic naïf. He has strikingly little to say for himself, bringing an air of taciturn befuddlement to interactions where others' language attempts the work of a medieval romance—telling histories, making threats, asserting desire. When his lover Essel tries to discuss their relationship before he leaves on his quest, he is so unable to give answers of any kind that she reaches out to move his mouth and ventriloquize what she wishes he'd say. His own

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[4] M. J. Toswell, "Lingua," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 117-124, 118.

[5] In raising the difference between medievalism and neomedievalism, I am especially cognizant of Lauryn S. Mayer's observation that while many medievalisms incorporate some degree of play or subversion, relatively few "question the possibility of accessing the 'medieval' itself." See "Dark Matters and Slippery Words: Grappling with Neomedievalism(s)," in *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s) I* (2010): 68-76, 70. For more on the differences between medievalism and neomedievalism, see two special issues of *Studies in Medievalism*, edited by Karl Fugelso: *Defining Neomedievalism I* (XIX, 2010) and *Defining Neomedievalism II* (XX, 2011). Particularly relevant are M. J. Toswell, "The Simulacrum of Neomedievalism," in *Studies in Medievalism* XIX (2010): 44-57, and KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, "(Re)producing (Neo)medievalism," in *Studies in Medievalism* XX (2011): 11-19. *The Green Knight's* persistent undermining of its own Arthurian setting and textual background strikes me as, at the least, sidling up on the boundary between medievalism and neomedievalism—but, of course, this evaluation depends in a somewhat circular way on how one defines the two terms and their relationship.

desires seem ambivalent: he wants to be with Essel, but (as we see in the narrative pathway the film suggests and then revokes, on his second confrontation with the Green Knight) also to marry a woman who will be a more obvious candidate for queen; he wants to stay where he is and forget the threat of the game, but also to be a knight, with stories to tell of himself, and to have a place among the chivalric legends of the court. Not knowing what he wants, he is routinely unsure of what to say.

The Gawain of the poem is impressive and impulsive, a knight at the height of his prowess and already famous among Bertilak's court. He makes rhetorically sophisticated speeches: when he asks Arthur to let him stand for the Green Knight's challenge; when he tells Bertilak about his quest, explaining the need to withdraw from his hospitality; and when he banters with Lady Bertilak, negotiating around her appearance in his bedroom and his bargain with her husband. The film's Gawain, by contrast, is something of a cipher, unformed as a person, much less as a knight, who most often struggles to parse how speech is shaping action around him. His singular complicating moment of really decisive action, stepping forward to challenge the Green Knight, is followed by a full year of storytelling, barfights, and procrastination, during which he grows evidently less and less able to make meaning of the choice that is, in its hesitant, delayed way, setting up to shape the rest of his life. Sometime during that year, Essel asks him what it felt like, chopping off the Green Knight's head, and he answers that it felt like cutting a melon. She pushes to know what *that* feels like, and he answers, the camera jump-cutting away: "Like nothing."[6] This second answer seems germane to any meaning Essel might have intended with "feel," the physicality of the act or the psychological fallout from it. He stepped forward, as the queen suggested, to take his place among legends, and yet doing it felt like nothing. He seems to feel—both characters use the present tense in this exchange—nothing about it now. No wonder he struggles to believe in the stakes of the Green Knight's game, or to rouse himself to pursue the next stage of it.

Gawain is not able to say what he is; he persistently turns instead to what he is not. As he collects his things in the brothel where he awakens at the start of the movie, we hear him asked, "Are you a knight yet?" and his answer "Not yet . . . I've got time."[7] At the Christmas feast, the king invites him to sit at his side and he answers "That is not my place"; when Gawin is asked to "tell a tale of yourself, so that I might know thee," he can answer only, "I have none to tell."[8] Gawain can identify what is not his place and confess the stories he lacks; he is not a knight, and not being a knight is the predominant way he presents himself. The scavenger child who robs him does so taunting, "Where are you off to? A knightly quest?" and Gawain answers, in evident panic, "I'm not a knight . . . I never

[6] *The Green Knight*, 0:26:05-34.
[7] *The Green Knight*, 0:03:47-54.
[8] *The Green Knight*, 0:08:46-0:09:52 and 0:11:47-0:12:08.

said that. You said that. I never said I was a knight."[9] He is happy to be perceived as a knight, temporarily; he cannot claim the social and martial power that knighthood would grant him. And when the Lady at the castle greets him, in tones melting with irony, as "the finest and most virtuous knight, seeking his destiny across these lands," he answers, "Perhaps you think that I am something I'm not."[10] He regularly tells his interlocutors, and the audience, what he is not; he never articulates what he is.

This self-conscious unformedness lays the psychological groundwork for Gawain's contest with the Green Knight, who arrives wrapped in not only his visual difference, but also in his profound linguistic strangeness. His challenge comes in the form of a letter, which then takes its expression through the queen's body, though in a voice that is not her voice. The physical body, the voice, the agency, and the text are thus all stretched in the production of the letter's illocution. Gawain's mother is evidently its author, but the Green Knight is the one who claims the *me* of the text, the one who is meant when it invites a knight to "land a blow against me" and "seek me out yonder."[11] The voice itself may be the Green Knight's, but it emanates—raspy and booming—from the queen's mouth. All of this amounts to a speech act that is both perfectly felicitous as a challenge and spread among at least three participants in its expression. This creates a situation in which Gawain can answer the challenge, but it is unclear what answering this challenge *means.* His own terse response, addressed first to the king and then to the Knight, "I will do it. I will meet him. I will meet thee," is met with a gentle nudge from the king, who asks if he is sure he knows what he is doing.[12] "I do. I think I do," Gawain replies, two different answers that suggest two importantly different things: he either knows what he is doing, or he knows that he only *thinks* he knows what he is doing.[13] If he only *thinks* that he knows, he is also conscious that he might not know what he is doing at all. But he does not pause to consider the language, the speaker(s), the performance, the magic; he simply steps forward and does what—he *thinks*—the language of the letter has instructed him to do, cutting off the Green Knight's head. "Remember," the king cautions or encourages him, "it is only a game."[14]

Part of the problem of this language is exactly this, that it is a part of a game, but the game is novel, not one with foregoing rules and procedures, and so it is unclear how it is played or what it means. Language used in a game is, of course, differently efficacious from language used in other contexts, in that its effects are generally not expected to

[9] *The Green Knight*, 0:47:00-44.
[10] *The Green Knight*, 1:16:15-17:09.
[11] *The Green Knight*, 0:17:10-18:23.
[12] *The Green Knight*, 0:19:27.
[13] *The Green Knight*, 0:19:43.
[14] *The Green Knight*, 0:19:55.

exceed the boundaries of the game (though the extent to which this is the case depends on a multitude of factors—the players and their relationships, the position of the game within the world around it). But Gawain does not seem to have initially entered the game with the intention of treating it as a game; he entered it because he was reminded that he had no story to tell of himself and saw the opportunity to gain one. He is not eager to follow up on the second half of the Green Knight's challenge, and so when the king comes and asks what he plans to do when Christmas comes, Gawain turns back to the label he dismissed before: "Was it not just a game?"[15]

The meaning of "game" is at stake here, but the words "only" and "just" are perhaps doing the really significant work in these utterances. With these words speakers suggests what the game is *not,* that is, something significant. If I hear a sound in my house at night and realize it is *only* my cat, or *just* the wind, then a part of what I have ascertained is that the sound does not come from something more dangerous. If the Green Knight's appearance and challenge is *just* a game, then it is not something more substantial, real, consequential. The king does not disagree when Gawain tries to turn his line back on him, but his response is further destabilizing: "Perhaps," he says, "But it is not yet complete."[16] Whatever the thing is that is only a game, it is also not yet fully that, only partially; whatever it is not, as a game, it is also not yet fully not that thing.

This sort of linguistic hesitation characterizes the poem's landscape by a concomitant lack of proper names. Here, again, comparison with the source text is revealing. The opening of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is rife with proper names: Troye and Ennias, Romulus in Rome, Ticius in Tuskan, and Langaberde in Lumbardie in the first stanza alone, and then we get the "French flod," Brutus, Bretayn and, of course, Arthur. As we move toward the more specific setting and the narrative, we read of Camylot and the Rounde Table; Guenore is there and, of course, Gawan, with Agrauayn, Bischop Bawdewyn, and Ywan. All these names set out a particular mythological background for, specific setting of, and array of characters who will participate in this story.

By contrast, *The Green Knight* opens by telling us which mythological history it is not. The asynchronous overture to the film begins with the camera tilting down from a large round window to find Gawain in a bare room, on a simple throne, holding a ball and scepter; a halo-shaped crown descends to his head, which (his head) then bursts into flame. The voiceover whispers in an increasingly harsh, strident timbre: "Look, see a world that holds more wonders than any since the world was born. And of all who reigned o'er, none had renown like the boy who pulled sword from stone. But this is not that king, nor is this his

[15] *The Green Knight*, 0:30:24.
[16] *The Green Knight*, 0:30:27-31.

song."[17] King Arthur is thus evoked but not named, as he never will be in the film; instead, this will be a "new tale . . . of an adventure brave and bold. Forever set, in heart, in stone, like all great myths of old."[18]

This is not a flashed-forward scene from later in the movie. We do briefly see Gawain take the throne, but only in a potential future that the story rejects, and even there his head is not on fire. We may be seeing a trajectory the story could take after the film ends, but even that is only extrapolation. So, this opening scene gives us imagery that perhaps describes the movie thematically—the solitude and violence of ritually signified power—but does not make any clear narrative reference to the film that will follow. And its language makes broad gestures to a world full of wonder, to the persistence of myth, but the only specific information we draw from it is that it is not the story Arthur—or, at least, not the story of the "boy who pulled sword from stone."[19] Moreover, glossing Arthur this way recalls a young, lively Arthur at the beginning of his monarchial story; the King we will meet soon enough is aging and pensive, near the end of his reign and life. The Arthurian background is inescapable from an intertextual stance, especially given a viewer who knows that the Gawain who is the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (a connection the title cards admit, if only piecemeal) is King Arthur's nephew and a resident of Camelot. But, from the outset, the film avoids those proper names, telling us what it is not while sidestepping any claim to what it is.

This elusiveness with proper names becomes a plot point, in fact, when Gawain goes out looking for the Green Chapel. The scavenger boy he meets gasps as if in recognition when he hears the name "Green Chapel," and then offers directions: "There's a stream yonder. It runs north-like. If I've got my bearing . . . if you follow that for a day and a half, you'll come to a chapel. At least I think it's a chapel. . . it's not green on the whole, but it's definitely greenish, with the moss and the rot and ruins."[20] This is something of an abuse of what a proper name is, though Gawain, of course, buys right into it. Proper names are supposed to pick out a single, discrete referent in the world, and the Green Chapel mentioned in the Knight's letter was presumably not just a chapel that happens to be green, but a specific site and entity in the world with that name. The child treats "green chapel" as a noun phrase, not a lexified name, and points Gawain north-*like,* to something that might be a chapel and is only in some sense green. A more linguistically adept subject than Gawain would perhaps not be surprised when the grove where he ends up ambushed turns out to be both green and, by a rather stretched metaphor, a chapel. After all, the boy never offered to direct him to a properly named Green Chapel, and Gawain is

[17] *The Green Knight*, 0:00:10-40.
[18] *The Green Knight*, 0:00:44-01:00.
[19] *The Green Knight*, 0:00:27.
[20] *The Green Knight*, 0:43:57-44:28.

only motivated to misunderstand him by his own heedless reluctance to be on this quest at all.

According to one theory of proper names, "the semantic sense of a proper name is exhausted by its referent;" that is, the meaning of a proper name is only referential, not bound to the sense of a word, as Gottlob Frege described it.[21] A proper name points to an entity in the world, but the word or words that make up the proper name do not carry any of the sense-meaning that inheres in common nouns. So, for example, "King Arthur" seems to include all the meanings associated with the word *king,* but I could name my hamster King Arthur, cancel those senses, and not be using the term in an ill-formed way that violates its semantic entailments. The play with the term "Green Chapel" works to undermine the proper reference of the term by re-introducing the senses of its components, in that, in the boy's description, it matters whether the site is actually a chapel, whether it is really green. But because the film most often leaves people and places unnamed and sets aside the proper names used in the poem, descriptive terms become all the more prominent. The names Arthur, Guinevere, Lord or Lady Bertilak, and Morgan le Fay are absent; the credits identify them as King, Queen, the Lord, the Lady, and Mother, respectively. In fact, it is unclear whether Gawain's mother is Morgan (who engineers the whole game and challenge in the poem) or Morgause (who is generally Gawain's mother in Arthurian literature); better said, in this film she is neither. Lacking a proper name which would, itself, refer her back to an Arthurian tradition, Gawain's mother emerges more forcefully as a particular character, and one who cannot be reduced to any foregoing instantiation of a character in this role. Of course, in the case of the King and Queen in particular, this choice offers an air of allegorical potential to the world; all the senses of the word *queen,* for example, are left at the forefront because the word is not incorporated into a name that is simply reference. But the queen's actions and relationships seem particular to this story, not to an allegorical expression of queen-ness. These figures are simply characterological inventions who do not participate in an ordinary landscape of linguistic reference and naming—which is to say, they participate fully in a film where reference and language habitually twist a little sideways.

The paucity of proper names in *The Green Knight* lends it a vagueness and disconnection, interrupting its connection to its source texts and cutting short the common desire of medievalism to be locatable in some kind of "real" history. This makes all the more strange

[21] Mark Textor and Dolf Rami, "Proper Names: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives," *Erkenntnis* 80 (2015): 191-194, 192. Gottlob Frege famously distinguishes between the referent of the word and its sense, which are respectively, and roughly, the thing or object it picks out in the world and the psychological effects or thought-content of the thing/object. See, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," in *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Philosophische Kritik*, reprinted in translation in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Peter Ludlow (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 9-30.

its inclusion of, among only a handful of named characters, Paris and Helen, who do not speak in the film, but appear in the credits.[22] These characters are the inverse of the king and queen (Arthur and Guinevere), who come with all the contextual indications of their identity but no names to settle the question; Paris and Helen, by contrast, appear to be just a man and a woman in nice clothes who hurry into a barnyard, take a horse, and trot off the screen at the beginning of the film. Absent their names appearing in the credits, there would be no reason to identify them as Paris and Helen, and indeed, their incongruous appearance in a medieval-ish northern European landscape raises the old analytic philosophy problem of whether these are *the* Paris and Helen, or simply two other people with the same names—or whether, given the mythological and historically inaccessible status of Paris and Helen, any two particular people could ever be co-terminus with the phrase "*the* Paris and Helen." Central characters go unnamed, but these two background extras are, at least in the peripheral corner of the credits, given names; the film consistently defers its Arthurian connections, while making this explicit gesture to the legend of Troy (notably, the mythological history that opens *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight)*.

Here as throughout, our expectations for language are deferred, and through that our expectations for history and textuality. The nostalgic and fantastical desires that medievalisms are so often crafted to meet are certainly available in the film's luminous cinematography and vibrant costumes; the visual elements of the film in many ways take a parallel role to the intricate formal poetics the source text. But the story and the language that tells us that story are vexed, at the basic level of worldbuilding, in a way that offers a consistent reminder of the medieval as less of an easily accessible past as it is a shaping of signifiers create it.

[22] Neither character speaks: Helen's name is called out by a third character offscreen, and the man is never named at all. The credits are arranged by a character's chronological appearance, and thus Paris and Helen are the first character names listed.