ІНОЗЕМНА ФІЛОЛОГІЯ *INOZEMNA PHILOLOGIA*
2009. Вип. 121. С. 269-276 *2009. Issue 121. P. 269-276*

ЛІТЕРАТУРОЗНАВСТВО

УДК 821.111-31.09'04

A KNIGHT'S JOURNEY INTO PURGATORY: THE MIDDLE ENGLISH *SIR OWAIN* AS A PENITENTIAL ROMANCE

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The 14th century poem of *Sir Owain* narrates the story of the knight's descent into Purgatory and Earthly Paradise through the legendary site in County Donegal, Ireland, called "St. Patrick's Purgatory." The poem conveys a vision and understanding of the Purgatory based on the official purgatorial doctrine of the Church, ancient Irish legends and popular didactic writings. The geography of the Purgatory is drawn with attention to descriptive details which, appealing to sensuous imagination, amplify the dogmatic and didactic meanings of the poem. Repulsive newts, snakes, dragons and beasts with sixty eyes inhabit the various fields of Purgatory to afflict the sinful. Mountains covered in smoke engulfed by stinking and boiling rivers make its tormenting landscape. The images are not just fantastical and sensational. Often, the type of torture assigned to the oppressed is reminiscent of the sin they are guilty of. Images of physical punishment become didactic *mementos* warning the reader (and Sir Owain) of the consequences of sin.

Sir Owain's journey is, like that of any romance hero, a journey of self-discovery. This unusual quest of "Knight Owayn" becomes a penitential pilgrimage of a sinner into purgation and then salvation as he enters the glittering world of Earthly Paradise. The chivalric and religious metaphors come together to produce a discourse that stands between the didactic tone of an explication of a religious vision and the curious extravagancy of the knightly romance.

Key words : Middle English Romance, *Sir Owain*, Purgatory.

> At last we touched upon the lonely shore
> that never yet has seen its waters sailed
> by one who then returned to tell the tale.
> (Dante Alighieri, *Purgatory*, Canto I, ll. 130-2)

Dante's poetic vision of the geography of the afterlife left a lasting mark on human imagination of the great beyond. *Divine Comedy* describes Purgatory as a terraced island-mountain situated in the southern hemisphere, on the antipodes of Jerusalem. The upward penitential journey to its top, where the entrance to Earthly Paradise was situated, metaphorised the soul rising from lowly sinfulness to the state of prelapsarian innocence. Though some Middle English authors, among them Chaucer, were certainly familiar with Dante, the image of the underworld found in 14th c. English literature follows a different topography. The English medieval tradition locates the entrance into the everlasting fires of Purgatory much closer to home, in Ireland, and imagines it as a landscape below the earth

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surface accessed through a cave entrance, thus closer to Hell than to Heaven. The English medieval vision of Purgatory was based on reports of one Owain, an Irishman or Englishman who, long before Dante, had visited the nether world and "then returned to tell the tale." The present paper reconstructs the map of the journey through this northern Purgatory on the basis of the 14th c. English poem known as *Owain Miles* (14), *St. Patrick's Purgatory* (5) or, in a more recent edition, as *Sir Owain* (6), and looks at how the penitential ordeal of its hero becomes metaphorised as a knightly quest for perfection.

The tradition of an entrance into the underworld being located in Ireland emerges from the mists of early Christian legends (10, pp. 7-43) surrounding the missionary work of St. Patrick (c. 389-c. 461). During the 12th century, the oral legends were endowed with the authority of writing and become part of church history. St. Patrick's Purgatory, as the Irish gateway into the underworld is traditionally called, is mentioned in the monk Joscelin's *Vita Sancti Patricii* of ca. 1180 (23), in Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hiberniae* of 1186-87 (8), and, most significantly, in the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sanctii Patricii* by Henry, a Cistercian monk of Saltrey (5) writing between 1179 and 1190. Joscelin identifies the locality of the entrance as the peak of Croagh-Patrick in County Mayo while Cambrensis and Henry both place the purgatorial entry on a lake island (19, pp. 17-21). Only Henry's *Tractatus* spells out the name of the famous sight as Station Island on Lough Derg in County Donegal. The association of Lough Derg with legends of Saint Patrick in the 12th century was most probably a result of the arrival of the Augustinians at Station Island in the 1130s. The church they built soon became a destination for penitent pilgrims, attracted to the shrine by stories of individuals entering the underworld and returning cleansed of their sins (6, p. 110).

Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii reports one such visit, of an Irishman named Owain, and uses its narrative framework to explain and teach what the medieval church believed about Purgatory. The serious theological and moral treatise is also responsible for introducing the traditional legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory into scholarly debate. The origins of the gateway into Purgatory are associated by the treatise with St. Patrick's missionary work among the Irish. Henry of Saltrey explains how the Irish saint found it difficult to persuade the stubborn pagans to accept the teachings of the new religion. They demanded a proof of the existence of the afterlife. To help his mission, in a dream or vision God led St. Patrick to a cave in the wilderness, which he identified as the entrance into the next world, and announced that whoever spent a day and a night in it would be cleansed of their sins. Owain's purgatorial visit, dated around the middle of the 12th c. by various sources, is one of the first recorded cases of a safe return from St. Patrick's Purgatory. According to the *Tractatus*, the journey was narrated by Owain himself to Gilbert, an English Cistercian monk, who in turn reported it to Henry of Saltrey, the ecclesiastical author of the treatise.

Even though Purgatory became part of the official teaching of the Catholic Church only at the Council of Lyon in 1274 and part of dogma only through the decrees of the Council of Florence in 1439 and the Council of Trent in 1563 (24, p. 17) the theme of the fate of the souls of sinners after death had been a subject of theological debate ever since the writings of the Fathers (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Origen; see 15, pp. 53-60). St. Augustine, whom Le Goff calls the father of Purgatory, coined the Purgatorial terminology that was still used in the medieval debate on the subject (15, pp. 61-3) while Gregory the Great further explained the functions of Purgatory and its implications for the living (9, p. 396). By the 12th century the Purgatorial debate and the devotional practice connected with it had become ripe. All Soul's Day was established as a liturgical feast at Cluny in the early 11th century and was now becoming popular throughout Europe as the Cistercians were teaching the efficacy of prayers for the dead (18, p. 488).

While theologians insisted that Purgatory is a process, a transitory state, through which the soul must pass before entering Heaven, the metaphorising tendency of religious writing often moved its readers to imagine Purgatory as a place. The three 12th c. Latin texts on St. Patrick's Purgatory mentioned above speak of the otherworldly experiences in spatial and geographical terms. The concept of Purgatory envisaged as a location on a map ushered the contingent metaphor of a journey to and through Purgatory and invited the sensuous and sensational images of physical suffering which the traveller encounters along the way. The metaphor of a journey as a means of purgation was close enough to that of a quest as a means to perfection and led to the growth of a unique genre of a penitential narrative clothed in the language of knightly romance. The physical ordeal of the questing knight became the metaphor of the penitent's spiritual trial

In the Middle English poem *Sir Owain*, the penitential traveller is an English knight from Northumberland. We meet him as a knight and watch his progress through Purgatory never forgetting that he is one. He is "A douhty man and swithe wight" (l. 173)[1]. For the present argument it is important that Owain receives a definite knightly identity and equally important that the poem was included in the Auchinleck manuscript[2], a book produced with a definite aristocratic and knightly audience in mind. The poem leaves out all of the theological debate and much of the sermonising and moral teaching so prominent in the *Tractatus*, though it does depend on the Latin work of Henry for most of its episodes. The 14th c. narrative clearly focuses on action rather than argumentation and persuasion, on Owain's endurance in his physical passage through the traps of Purgatory rather than the exposition of the Purgatorial doctrine. His journey reads like any other jaunt of a knight on a quest, studded with dangers and trials of the most sensational and often supernatural kind. Like any questing knight he must show strength and courage and keep loyalty to his pledge to complete the journey. If not for the fact that Owain is himself presented as a sinner we would read the poem primarily as a narrative of adventure. The narrator's exposition of Owain's numerous sins bringing him into danger in subsequent phases of his journey reminds the reader that his quest metaphorises a successful penitential process. The danger he faces is not only and not primarily the threat of physical torture. A much greater menace is that he should not complete the journey and thus bring final damnation on his soul. It is this other, greater threat, looming over every step of Owain's route, which turns the adventure narrative into a sort of attritional exemplum, and allows the reader to use the term *penitential romance* in definition of its unique genre. Let us follow Sir Owain into Purgatory to draw a map of the Middle English vision of the underworld and to see where along Owain's road the religious and the romance discourses meet to produce the unique concept of a penitential quest.

Already the beginning of the narrative suggests that we are entering a world of romance. As mentioned above, Sir Owain is introduced to the reader as a "douhti" knight who "wel michel [...] couthe of batayle" (l. 178) and who lived in the reign of King Stephen (1135-1154). The author's choice to identify the time of the narrative by a reference to an actual English king may be at first glance taken as a device authenticating the historicity of the narrated events, almost in the manner of a chronicle. But this impression of intended historical grounding is soon undermined by the way Sir Owain's author speaks about Stephen's reign. "... the king ful right, / That Ingelong stabled and dight / Wel wiselich in his time." (l. 160-171) As is well known, Stephen, the grandson of William the Conqueror could hardly be called a wise king - his reign was marked by instability and continuous civil war (2). This unfavourable image of Stephen was established by contemporary historians and chroniclers and must still have been remembered in the 14th c. The

[1] All quotations from *Sir Owain* come from Foster, Edaward E., ed. *Three Purgatorial Poems*. TEAMS Middle English Text Series. Medieval Institute Publications: Kalamazoo, Michigan 2004.
[2] National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1 (Auchinleck), fols. 25r-31v. (c. 1330-40).

Peterborough *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* speaks of the "nineteen long winters" of the king's reign as a time when "Christ and his saints were asleep" (quoted in 13, p. 1). The royal reference must then have a different function than historical authentication. It may be taken to reveal the author's literary background as that of knightly romance rather than historiography. "Bi Stephenes day, the king ful right" sounds like many an opening of a narrative of knightly adventure. We remember Chaucer beginning the Wife of Bath's tale with "In th' olde dayes of the kyng arthour, / Of which that britons speken greet honour" (1, ll. 857-8). The opening reference to Stephen is dictated by the need of a conventional beginning in the romance manner.

Right after the definition of his time and his feudal allegiance Owain's moral and religious attributes are presented. "swithe sinful he was saunfayle / Ogain his Creatour (ll. 179-80). But his "gode creaunce" (l. 186) persuades him to undertake Penance. He is shriven by the bishop of Ireland and demands the hardest penance to atone for his sins even if it were to be a descent into St. Patrick's Purgatory. The bishop vehemently warns him against the journey, but the contrite knight refuses to listen and gets ready for the trip.

Sir Owain's sins are not specified in the introduction – we learn of them only in the course of his journey through Purgatory - but his remorse is deep and his determination to an act of Penance serious. He passes through preparatory rites of "Fiften days in afliccioun, / In fasting and in orisoun" (ll. 223-4) - a practice confirmed in later reports of pilgrims visiting Lough Derg - and is then instructed by the Prior, "thou schalt under erthe gon" (l. 235). The geography of the underworld follows that of the *Tractatus*. The Prior's mention of a journey "under erthe" suggests a downward movement, but then Owain's passage is described more as a horizontal journey through a landscape of fields, hills, mountains and rivers. First Owain walks onto a huge field where he finds a hall of stone in which, in darkness, he is instructed by thirteen men wearing white habits, very much like the Augustinian Canons established on Station Island (see 6, p. 113). Owain learns that he must complete the journey or his soul will be lost, which is an obvious quest ultimatum in the romance tradition. Their advice to call out God's name when in danger is a kind of spiritual talisman that will save his life – yet another romance element of the narrative (see 6, p. 116).

The afflictions that Owain suffers are all described in highly hyperbolized language employing imaginative comparisons and metaphors. The first trial awaits Owain in the same hall of stone. He is exposed there to a rueful cry which the narrator describes as louder and more frightening than if the cosmic world fell from the firmament to the earth (ll. 307-312). Dante hears a similar cry, "le dolenti note" (3, Canto V, l.25) as he enters the second circle of Hell where carnal sins are punished, though his metaphor of the noise is the sea in a tempest combated by opposing winds. Like in Dante, the imagery of *Sir Owain*'s underworld is natural imagery mapping landscape (field, hill, valley, river, lake), weather (rain, mist, thunder, lightning, cold, hot), fire, and light and darkness.

The physical afflictions experienced by Owain are designed to oppress all of his senses, the experience of pain alternating between opposite sensations (hot vs. cold, light vs. darkness)[3]. The focus on Owain's physicality, put on trial in subsequent Purgatorial episodes, calls to mind Sir Gawain's five wits, listed as an attribute of knighthood in the poem's interpretation of the Pentangle. Physical endurance is an indispensable quality on Gawain's quest through the wilderness. The sufferance of the body appears an equally useful trait in Owain's journey through Purgatory and continues to construct his knightly identity.

[3] The tradition of extreme changing temperatures in Purgatory also appears in Beda Venerabilis, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Book 5, Chapt. 12, quoted in 16, p. 289)

Once Owain's ears are abused by the din of wailing voices his eyes are accosted by the sight of fifty ugly fiends, "Lothly thinges [...] Behinde and eke bifore" (ll. 317-8), showing him their "foule touten" – their foul arses and accusing him of lechery. This offensive gesture of the fiends may be meaningful in the context of the sin at stake. The devil's arse, as Chaucer's Summoner will tell us, is a place fit for the Friar, also a lecher. Moreover, the threat the devils shout at Owain - "To thee we shull our hokes thrawe" (l. 347) – we'll thrust our hooks into you – is mildly suggestive of the kind of punishment that the Chaucerian Nicholas suffered for his lecherous desire of Alison. The scene in the hall of stone, exposing punishment for the sin of bodily lust, closes, quite appropriately, with an image of torture afflicting Owain's sense of touch. The devils light a great fire and throw him into it, but Owain uses his word talisman for the first time and is freed. The idea of punishing lust by fire is not original to the poem and has its Biblical ultimate roots in God raining fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. Purgatorial fire is also envisaged by Dante as punishment appropriate for purging the fire of lust (3, Canto XXV). On occasion, the author of Sir Owain, Like Dante, attempts to create a symbolic relationship between sin and the form of its punishment. It is not as complete and as consistent as in Dante, but it is communicated much more decidedly in the poem than in its Latin source, the *Tractatus*.

As Owain leaves the hall of stone he finds himself in an open desolate wilderness where a cold howling wind pierces through his side. The movement from a description of scorching fire into an image of chilly wind makes it obvious that the author of Sir Owain thinks in terms of mortifying the reader with afflictions addressed to and felt by the senses. The abrupt change from cold to hot and hot to cold will recur several times in the story.

The next frightening sight that Owain sees is a field of naked men and women lying on their bellies, bound to the ground by iron bonds. The narrator informs the reader that these sinners are guilty of sloth, explained as slowness in the service of God. If there is a symbolic link between the sin and its punishment here (the sinners are pinned to the ground and unable to move) the author uses a converse way of thinking to that of Dante, where the slothful are punished by continuous running (3, Canto XVIII).

Another group of sinners, the gluttons, are seen lying on their backs, nailed to the ground. Instead of the delicious and unattainable fruit surrounding the gluttons imagined by Dante (3, Canto XXII) the Owain author pictures dragons, newts, adders and snakes sitting on the sinners' swollen bellies and biting them. Named a glutton by the fiends Owain is just about to be nailed to the ground when he utters the name of God and is freed.

The fourth field of Purgatory contains those guilty of lying, backbiting, false witness and theft. Owain is openly accused by the fiends of greed, "Thou hast ben covaitise aplight, / To win lond and lede" (ll. 518-19). He also recognises some of his acquaintances among the suffering souls in the fourth field which may be more than a suggestion of his personal guilt. It may be viewed as a unique instance of social satire in the poem, where political and courtly backbiting and the lust for worldly riches become charges levelled at the aristocracy as a group. The covetous man "hath never anough / Of gold of silver, no of plough" (i.e. land, ll. 514-15). Some of the sinners in this field hang on hooks by various parts of the body, by which the author again appropriates certain ways of punishment to the trespasses committed. He shows liars and backbiters hanging by the tongue. Thieves hang, less meaningfully, by the feet and the neck. Others hang on gridirons over a glowing fire or boil in caldrons full of lead and brimstone.

Owain moves on to come across an even more sensational vision of punishment for the covetous: a gruesome wheel of fire upon which a hundred thousand souls hanging on hooks turn at a speed that does not allow him to recognise anyone. The fire turning the bodies into fine powder is fed by a lightning coming from the earth. The stench that accompanies the lightning is there to mortify one more of the human senses, that of smell. Placed by the

devils on the wheel of fire, Owain is burnt fiercely and his body is torn by the hooks, but he again survives calling God's name for the fourth time.

The journey continues and Owain comes upon a mountain as red as blood with a river beneath it. The list of senses abused by the Purgatorial torture becomes complete when the fiends speak of a beverage that will be administered to the sinners in this field. The threat is fulfilled as a blast of wind throws all of them up into the air (almost to the firmament, says the narrator) and casts them into the river, stinking and cold as ice. We learn that this punishment is for malice and spite. Owain is himself drenched in the water and about to perish when he calls God to his mind.

Saved again Owain now sees a huge hall from which heat emanates and foul smoke rises. Sweating he enters the hall and sees pits in the ground filled with molten brass, copper and brimstone in which men and women stand, some up to their breasts, some up to their chins, which implies varying gravity of sin. Some wear bags of burning coins on their necks. These are usurers and misers who are often represented in medieval art with pouches of money hanging on their chests (see 22, pp. 142-3). A similar punishment for usurers is designed by Dante in the *Inferno* (Canto XVII).

About to be pushed into the molten lead Owain calls upon God and Mary and is saved for the sixth time. A sensational and frightening sight now appears before the eyes of Owain. He sees, rising from the earth, a flame of seven colours, though only four of them are mentioned: yellow, green, black and blue. The colours combine into a pattern that looks like the skin of an adder (ll. 631-36), an image symbolic enough to expect that hell is near.

Indeed the seventh trial is in what the fiends call the Pit of Hell, a dark and stinking hole into which Owain is thrown. The fiends speak of it as "our caghe" and "our castel tour" (ll. 643, 645) which echoes the common medieval image of Purgatory as a prison, *carcere purgatorii* (e.g. in John Mirk's *Festial*, 17, p. 269). But this is not Hell proper as Owain is still subject to the transitory trial of Purgatory. He is once more brought out of the Pit by divine mercy and stands before the Bridge of Paradise which he may now walk across. He is still threatened by the devils from beneath the Bridge – they throw stones at him and try to snatch him into actual Hell, but he finds the passage surprisingly easy. He has survived all seven trials – he has completed the quest and will now pass into Earthly Paradise. The seven trails of Purgatory, marked by the sevenfold use of the spiritual talisman of the name of God, are of course numerologically significant. They may correspond to the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins, though not all of them are named in the narrative. Dante's Purgatory is more consistently organised around the Seven Deadly Sins and, spatially, into seven terraces which the penitent climbs. As Foster (6, p. 168) suggests number seven may also be symbolic of the seven seals of Hell featuring in the influential *Apocalypse of St. Paul* from the 4th century, which received an English rendition in the 13th c. as *Vision of St. Paul* (7, pp. 179-182).

The seven trials have proved Owain's strength and courage as a knight and his faith as a Christian. The sensuously physical vision of his sufferings makes him a man of flesh and blood and the imaginative descriptions of the tortures often send shivers down the reader's spine. Sir Owain of the Middle English version of St. Patrick's Purgatory is not only a penitent pilgrim given a chance of atonement. He is a questing knight from a romance who strives for his honour as he strives for salvation and who shows fortitude as he exposes his unshaken faith. While the progression from sin to repentance and atonement belongs naturally to the domain of religious writing it is not alien to the tradition of the romance. In the 14th and 15th c. *Guy of Warwick* (11) and *Sir Isumbras* (20) are good examples of romance heroes whose careers follow the pattern (see 12, passim). Guy of Warwick, experiencing pangs of conscience for his violent early life, leaves his wife and makes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Sir Isumbras chooses a life of misery and piety to atone for his pride – working hard and wandering he waits long before he again puts on his knightly

armour. The penitential journeys of Guy of Warwick and Sir Isumbras may be seen as a variation of the exile-and-return paradigm found in so many romances in which the adventures and challenges of the exile serves the purpose of confirming the hero's inherent nobility. Sir Owain's purgatorial visit has a similar motivation – he decides to give up the "stable" world of King Stephen's England and puts himself through a trial "his soul to amende" (l. 219). The exile of the penitential heroes is self-imposed but its purpose is similar: to confirm or regain their moral nobility. The penitential romance does not always show its hero journey into Purgatory, but it always has him travel through hardships to re-establish his original values and worth. The addition of romance motifs and motivations to the religious and moral experience of the Irish Owain story translates the penitential message into a language that the aristocratic readers of the Auchinleck manuscript were more likely to understand and accept. The traditional ideals of *sapientia* et *frotitudo*, seen here as Owain's confident reliance on God and his physical endurance, bring the knight to the end of his knightly and spiritual quest. He is made "holy man" (l. 1164) by his successful penance which leads him to the beatific vision of Earthly Paradise.

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МАНДРІВКА ЛИЦАРЯ ДО ЧИСТИЛИЩА: *СЕР ОВЕЙН* ЯК РОМАН КАЯТТЯ У СЕРЕДНЬОАНГЛІЙСЬКІЙ ЛІТЕРАТУРІ

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Стаття подає детальний текстовий аналіз визначного зразка середньоанглійського релігійно-лицарського роману *Сер Овейн* у контексті варіативності парадигми заслання та повернення. Пошук моральних орієнтирів головного героя відбувається на фоні його уявлень про мудрість і силу духу та полягає у довіренні себе Богові та здатності витримати фізичні випробування. Подано широкі сюжетні витоки аналізованої літературної пам'ятки та описано особливості середньовічної інтерпретації гріхопадіння й спокути.

Ключові слова: середньоанглійський лицарський роман, *Сер Овейн*, Чистилище.

ПУТЕШЕСТВИЕ РЫЦАРЯ В ЧИСТИЛИЩЕ: *СЭР ОВЭЙН* КАК РОМАН РАСКАЯНИЯ В СРЕДНЕАНГЛИЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ

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В статье представлен детальный текстовый анализ выдающегося образца среднеанглийского религиозно-рыцарского романа *Сэр Овэйн* в контексте вариативности парадигмы изгнания и возвращения. Поиск моральных ориентиров главного героя происходит на фоне его представлений о мудрости и силе духа, и заключается в посвящении себя Богу и способности выдержать физические испытания. Поданы широкие сюжетные истоки анализируемой литературного памятника и описаны особенности средневековой интерпретации грехопадения и искупления.

Ключевые слова: среднеанглийский рыцарский роман, *Сэр Овэйн* , Чистилище.

Стаття надійшла до редколегії 22.01.2009 р.

Статтю прийнято до друку 15.04.2009 р.