The Green Girdle and the Narrative Circularity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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By 1988 there was already a declaration that "it is practically a critical solecism not to document, let alone suspect...complicated problems [of intention or meaning] in [*Sir*] Gawain [*and the Green Knight"]" (Reed 140). If it is my intention in this paper to demonstrate yet another source of the poem’s complication that has not hitherto been discussed as such—that is, the poem’s narrative circularity. One of the most striking features of all four of the poems by the Gawain-poet is that the endings—the last stanza or the last lines—reflect the beginning.1 In *Sir Gawain*, the hero returns to the place of departure, Arthur’s court, and the larger frame of the story repeats the story of Troy at the end. For a long time, this so-called circular structure has been one of the popular bases of arguments for the secure closure of the poem. Scholars have generally accepted that because the circle (or sphere) was a symbol of perfection—thus completion—during the Middle Ages, the formal circularity is a confirmation of the poem’s conceptual conclusiveness. It is my contention, however, that these readers, in their eagerness to recognize and account for the most conspicuous formal element of the poem, have neglected another important, and equally traditional and authoritative, figure of the narrative, that of line. My arguments about multiple judgments resulting from multiple points of view and the thematic inconclusiveness reflected in the formal structure in spite of the traditional symbolic meaning of the poem’s circularity will be presented as

1As far as authorship is concerned, I agree with the growing critical consensus that *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* share common authorship; see for example, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Waldron, pp.15-16. All the references to the poem are from this edition as well.
part of the poem's overall tension between the linear and the circular.²

One prominent example in the poem of the tension between circle and line is found in the two different views of time at work in the poem. Morton Bloomfield identifies such tension as follows: "Cyclic time or the time of nature is superimposed on linear time or the time of history, in order to contrast the two and to point up Gawain's dilemma"(18). The poem is, indeed, built around the passage of one year and the progression of the seasons, but at the same time the poet explicitly punctuates his description of the passage of seasons with statements such as "A þere þernes full þerne, and þelde neuer lyke, / þeforme to þefynisment foldeþ ful selden"(ll. 498-99). The winter to come is not the same as last winter. However, the unfortunate fact about the various critical interpretations on the issue of time is that ultimately they opt for either one or the other as the poem's governing view, and more often than not, they incline toward the cyclic view. It has received more attention as part of the poem's much-discussed symmetry and circularity, as Don Howard's explanation well represents:

The poet treats the events as being unique and having a specific duration, occurring over a certain number of days or years within the movements of time from Creation to Judgment; but time may be telescoped or ignored because the meaning of all unique events is reducible to a finite number of truths...[Sir Gawain] represents a single cycle or revolution in which the end recapitulates the beginning....Thus [this] poem returns us to a starting point, suggests a new beginning and an unpredictable future. We have passed across one stretch of time to another, none of it ever to be retraced; yet all of it is arranged in cycles which repeat a fundamental and predisposed pattern.... And this effect helps to create the comic resolution at the end. (264-66)

The compounding of the linear and cyclic views of time has prompted W.R. J. Barron to elaborate further upon its significance:

...the poem's return to its starting point... may remind us that though the life of the individual is linear the life of the race is cyclic and mankind may learn from experience. Here, as elsewhere in Sir Gawain structure and meaning are one. (22)

²The historical model for these figures and the similar concerns for Pearl were discussed in Kang.