

# ‘Walewein in the Otherworld and the Land of Prester John’

**Ad Putter**

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## Walewein in the Otherworld and the Land of Prester John

### *Ad Putter*

In the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* (c. 1385), Geoffrey Chaucer showed himself an orthodox eschatologist when he insisted on the inaccessibility of the Otherworld to mortal humans:

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle  
 That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,  
 And I acorde wel that it ys so;  
 But, natheles, yet wot I wel also  
 That ther nis noon dwelling in this contree  
 That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,  
 Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen  
 But as he hath herd seyde or founde it writen;  
 For by assay ther may no man it preve.

(F 1-9)<sup>1</sup>

The absence of direct experience ('assay') of heaven and hell certainly did not raise doubts in Chaucer's mind about their existence; on the contrary, it simply confirmed their existence in a dimension sealed off hermetically from ours. For Chaucer, the Otherworld is Other in the absolute sense of that word.

This, of course, was always the Church's official line. But while doctrine had it that the Otherworld was discontinuous with our own, the theology of doctrine (what people ought to believe) never seriously interfered with what most medieval people (theologians included) did in fact believe: that the borders between this and the other world were wide open, and that going from one to the other was possible not only in dreams or visions but also by travelling to one of a number of 'transit zones' where the lands of

1 *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L.D. Benson et al. (Boston, 1987).

the dead and the living intersected.<sup>2</sup> Thus St Patrick's Island in Ireland gave access to purgatory, the Far East was scoured for entrances to the Earthly Paradise, while hell could be entered through volcanic craters. And just as human beings visited the Otherworld, so visits from the Otherworld to earth (by demons, angels, ghosts of the deceased) were numerous. As Aron Gurevich puts it, in popular belief 'the boundaries between this world and the other were permeable in both directions'.<sup>3</sup>

Gurevich's general point about a medieval sense of the nearness of the Otherworld might seem out of place in a collection of essays devoted to a chivalric romance, were it not for the fact that Penninc and Pieter Vostaert's Arthurian world also appears to share an open border with the Otherworld. Through that border enter, for instance, a troop of devils who have come to claim the souls of the unrepentant robber knights; and angels who sing a glorious Kyrie Eleison for the Red Knight whose salvation Walewein ensures, and whose ghost later returns to earth to free Walewein from the dungeon. The busy traffic between the Otherworld and the ordinary world is perhaps facilitated by the conspicuous holes in *Walewein's* universe, through which the Otherworld comes flooding in. Thus at one point in this romance the hero finds his progress blocked by the river of purgatory, which, as the talking fox Roges explains, flows straight from hell:

'Dat verstaet wel ende besiet:  
Teen ende spruut uter hellen  
Daer die arme zielen quellen,  
Ende vallet in die lever zee.'  
(5952-55)<sup>4</sup>

(‘For understand and behold: the river begins in the depths of hell where wretched souls are tormented, and ends by falling into the Liver Sea.’)

To counterbalance the spillage from hell responsible for the purgatorial river and the Liver Sea (to which I shall return), Penninc also gives us a stream from Paradise, which happens to well up in the middle of Ysabele's pleasure garden:

Want uten ardschen paradise  
Comt ghesprongen een aderkijn,  
Ende sprintc inden bornen fijn.  
(3554-56)

2 On 'official' versus 'popular' beliefs about the Otherworld, see A. Gurevich, 'The *Divine Comedy* before Dante', in his *Medieval Popular Culture*, trans. J.M. Bak and P.A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 104-52.

3 Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 124.

4 The translations are based on Johnson's; substantial departures are justified in the notes.

(For from the earthly paradise itself flows a stream, which wells up in this splendid fountain.)

As the landscape in *Walewein* bears witness, paradise and hell literally leak into the ordinary world: its border with the Otherworld must indeed be permeable.

This essay examines Penninc's representation of the Otherworld in the light of his sources for it - Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier de la charrette*, visions of heaven and hell, and medieval writings about India - but before embarking on this comparative study, there is one issue which I should like to consider first. In some genres (e.g. visions) the presence of the Otherworld is self-explanatory, in other genres (such as Arthurian romance) it is not; and no amount of source-study can account for its rôle in *Walewein* if it begs the more basic question of what the Otherworld is doing here in the first place. What explains the attraction and usefulness of the Otherworld for a writer of romance?

In the case of *Walewein*, the answer may be found in a universal characteristic of the romance mode: its tendency to strain after the extraordinary and the superlative.<sup>5</sup> *Walewein* is paradigmatic in this respect. Its hero is the bravest knight in the world and obviously the most handsome one as well (3046-47); his feats of arms are the most wondrous ever recorded in writing (2220-21); the banquet laid out in his honour at Castle Ravenstene is more lavish than any banquet held before (3116-18); his lover Ysabele is the loveliest lady ever seen with eye, surpassing even Venus in beauty (3424-25). There is no need to multiply examples of the way *Walewein* heaps up the superlatives, for the point they make will readily be granted: romance *par excellence* is the mode of the superlative. In Pamela Gradon's words:

The superlatives of the romance technique ... remove the narrative from the realm of common experience ... And as they move from the realms of common experience the romance writers, of necessity, move into the realms of analogy: those realms in which, as in the realms of religious experience, actuality can be described only by metaphor.<sup>6</sup>

5 Obviously, the Otherworld can serve very different functions in romance. For example, D.D.R. Owen looks at some Arthurian romances in which visions of the Otherworld are invoked only to be comically deflated: *The Vision of Hell: Infernal Journeys in Medieval French Literature* (New York, 1971), pp. 201-14. C. Brinker argues that the Otherworldly motifs in Wirnt von Grafenberg's *Wigalois* aid its crusading propaganda: "Hie ist diu aventure geholt": Die Jenseitsreise im *Wigalois* des Wirnt von Grafenberg: Kreuzzugpropaganda und unterhaltsame Glaubenslehre?, *Simpliciana* 11 (1989), 87-110. In *Walewein* the Otherworld serves neither the purpose of burlesque nor that of crusading propaganda.

6 P. Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London, 1971), p. 226.

Gradon's own analogy for the extraordinary world of romance ('as in the realms of religious experience') is felicitous, for romance writers perhaps had no better way of removing their imaginary world from ordinary experience than by comparing it with the realm of the demonic or the realm of God - himself, after all, the greatest superlative: 'that thing than which nothing greater can be thought'.<sup>7</sup>

The usefulness of the Otherworld as an anchoring point for superlatives can be illustrated with some examples from *Walewein* and also with a famous incident in the *Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes, with whose *oeuvre* Penninc and Vostaert were well acquainted.<sup>8</sup> Brought up in the wilderness remote from all civilization, Perceval is one day brought face to face with creatures the like of which he has never seen - knights. The first thing Perceval notices as they approach is the noise of armour clanging against the branches of the trees, a sound so terrifying that Perceval concludes they must be devils, the ultimate in terror:

'Voir me dist ma mere, ma dame,  
qui me dist que deable sont  
plus esfrée que rien del mont.'  
(114-17)<sup>9</sup>

('My mother told me the truth when she said that devils are more frightening than anything in the world.')

But as the 'devils' come into view Perceval is struck by the extraordinary splendour of their appearance, and jumps to the opposite conclusion: their superlative beauty can only mean they are angels. This leaves just one knight unaccounted for, who is even more impressive than the others, and who is therefore identified as God himself:

'Ne me dist pas ma mere fable,  
qui me dist que li ange estoient  
les plus beles choses qui soient,  
fors Deu, qui est plus biax que tuit.

7 The famous definition is St Anselm's (*Proslogion*, ii).

8 J.D. Janssens, 'The Influence of Chrétien de Troyes on Middle Dutch Arthurian Romances: A New Approach', in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. N.J. Lacy, D. Kelly and K. Busby, 2 vols., Faux Titre 37 (Amsterdam, 1988), II, 285-306, deals with the influence of Chrétien on Middle Dutch Arthurian romances (*Walewein* included). L. Okken, *Das goldene Haus und die goldene Laube*, Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur 72 (Amsterdam, 1987), p. 87, detects an echo in *Walewein* of Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier au lion*. I believe that Penninc's presentation of animal helpers in *Walewein* also owes an important debt to Chrétien's comic humanization of the lion in *Yvain*.

9 *Conte du Graal*, ed. F. Lecoy, CFMA 100 and 103, 2 vols. (Paris, 1984). Subsequent references to *Perceval* are to this edition.

Ci voi ge Damedeu, ce cuit,  
 car un si bel an i esgart  
 que li autre, se Dex me gart,  
 n'ont mie de biauté le disme.'  
 (140-47)

(‘My mother did not tell me lies when she said that angels are the most beautiful things that exist, apart from God, who is more beautiful than anyone. I think I am looking at God right now, because I can see someone so beautiful that the others do not even have a tenth of his beauty, so God save me.’)

Perceval's mind works along the lines of a simple syllogism:

major premiss: these are the most terrifying/beautiful creatures  
 minor premiss: devils/angels are the most terrifying/beautiful creatures

which leads him logically to infer that he has stumbled on visitors from the Otherworld. However absurd the conclusion, Perceval's recognizable train of thought also suggests how easily the superlatives of chivalry are translated into the transcendentals of heaven and hell. When, later on in this romance, the monstrous Loathly Lady rides into the Arthurian court, the same kind of logic also leads Chrétien to declare that

onques riens si leide a devise  
 ne fu neïs dedanz anfer.  
 (4594-95)

(there was nothing so ugly even in hell.)

The *Roman van Walewein* is still richer than *Perceval* in episodes where the Otherworld figures in the hypothetical space of analogies. In his first fight in the romance, Walewein is pitched against a dragon, the most hideous monster ever:

Het quam bernende als een vier;  
 Hen sach nieman so lelyc dier!  
 (443-44)

(On it came, burning like fire; no one ever saw such a gruesome beast!)

As the superlative takes the animal beyond the ordinary world, it naturally begins to converge on the Otherworld, so paving the way for Walewein's exclamation that the dragon is the devil incarnate:

Walewein sprac: ‘Dit nes gheen dier;  
 Het es die duvel uter hellen

Die hier comt ende wille mi quellen,  
 Ende hevet mi desen anxt ghedaen.'  
 (552-55)

(Walewein spoke, 'This is no earthly creature; it is the devil from hell who has come to torment me, and who has caused me such tortures.')

The logic that here equates the supremely horrifying with hell elsewhere links the supremely good with heaven. Walewein, for instance, is virtually deified in this romance. Seeing him fight, King Amadijs praises him by saying he has never seen a more accomplished knight. The simile comparing Walewein with an angel follows in the same breath:

'Ic wane het es van hemelrike  
 Een inghel ende het heiftene ghesant  
 God omme thelpene den seriant;  
 Hen dede noyt rudder zulke daet.'  
 (2254-57)

('I believe he is an angel from heaven sent by God to help the young knight; never has a knight done such deeds.')

When, on the other hand, Walewein wreaks havoc in Assentijn's castle, supported by the invincible Sword with the Two Rings, Assentijn's men at arms are equally certain that their enemy is superhuman - this time demonic rather than angelic:

'Hier es die duvel comen voren  
 Die ons sal doden alle gader!'  
 (7094-95; cf. 6531-32; 7088-89; 9730; 9798)

('The Devil himself has appeared and he will slay us all!')

If the beauty of a romance location needs amplifying, otherworldly analogies are also ready to hand. The magnificence of the hall in Castle Ravenstene, for example, elicits a now familiar simile from the poet:

Dus zijn si comen in die zale  
 Die scone was als .i. paradijs.  
 (3074-75)

(And so they entered the hall which was as splendid as any paradise.)

The use of the Otherworld as the vehicle of metaphors or similes is typical of romance, which makes it its business to hyperbolize the natural world until it has become extraordinary. But while it is one thing to gesture towards the Otherworld analogically, it is clearly another to introduce the Otherworld and its denizens in the tangible form of devils, angels, rivers of

purgatory or streams of paradise. One important way in which Penninc outdoes his precursors in his hyperbolization of reality is by turning analogies with the Otherworld into the ‘real thing’, ways of speaking into hard facts.

To see precisely how Penninc does this we need to take up the story at the point where the Otherworld makes its most spectacular entry into the romance in the form of the stream of purgatory. Walewein sees only one way of crossing the river to get to Assentijn's castle, a bridge that is sharp as a razor:

So es die edel rudder comen  
 Daer hi vor hem hevet vernomen  
 Ene brugghe ligghende dwers  
 Der riviere; hen was noit scers  
 Ghesmet van ysere no van stale  
 Also scarp, dat weet ic wale,  
 Also die brugghe was upden cant  
 Die daer Walewein vor hem vant.  
 (4955-62)

(The noble knight came to where he saw before him a bridge spanning the width of the river. Never was there a razor wrought from iron or from steel so sharp - this I know for certain - as the edge of that bridge which Walewein found before him.)

Sensibly preferring to wade through, Walewein three times sticks his lance in the river to gauge its depth, but each time the lance catches fire. Walewein is disillusioned and falls asleep in an orchard, where a fox called Roges tries to steal his armour. He wakes up just in time to catch Roges red-pawed and presses the talking animal for an explanation of the adventure of the fiery waters. Roges explains that the river is a purgatorial stream and that the safest way across is through an underground passage.

Penninc's main inspiration for this passage was an episode from Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier de la charrette*. In Chrétien's romance, the Land of Gorre (its ominous epithet is the Land of No Return) can only be crossed by two means: either the perilous Sword Bridge (‘Pont de l'Espee’), consisting of the sharp blade of a huge sword, or the Underwater Bridge (‘Pont soz eve’). As Maartje Draak suggested, Chrétien's Sword Bridge lies behind the razor-sharp bridge in *Walewein* and Chrétien's oxymoronic ‘Underwater Bridge’ is rationalized as the underground passage in *Walewein*.<sup>10</sup> But the differences between Chrétien and *Walewein* are as

10 A.M.E. Draak, *Onderzoekingen over de Roman van Walewein* (Haarlem, 1936; enl. rpt. Groningen/Amsterdam, 1975). J.D. Janssens maintains, *contra* Draak, that Penninc did not know the episode directly from Chrétien's *Lancelot* but indirectly through the *Lancelot en prose* or a Middle Dutch verse adaptation of the *Lancelot en prose*. See his ‘Oude en Nieuwe Wegen in het “wout zonder genade”: terreinverkenning voor onderzoek van de Mnl. niet-historische Arturroman’, *Nieuwe Taalgids* 75 (1982), 291-312, and ‘The Influence of Chrétien de Troyes’. Janssens's proposition that Penninc ‘lacks all the shades of meaning of Chrétien's presentation’ conflicts with the evidence: only Chrétien's description of the Sword Bridge contains the analogies with the Liver Sea and the devil's river. Since both matters are developed by Penninc, his main source must have been Chrétien's *Lancelot* (which is not to say he may not also have known a later version of the *Lancelot*).

revealing as the similarities, for, comparing the two, one is struck by the way Penninc has literalized the Otherworld, which Chrétien hints at only by way of analogy. Here is Chrétien's description:

Au pié del pont, qui molt est max,  
sont descendu de lor chevax,  
et voient l'eve felenesse,  
noire et bruiant, roide et espesse,  
tant leide et tant espoantable  
con se fust li fluns au deable,  
et tant perilleuse et parfonde  
qu'il n'est riens nule an tot le monde,  
s'ele i cheoit, ne fust alee  
ausi com an la mer betee [variant reading: mer salee].

(3007-16)<sup>11</sup>

(At the foot of that bridge, which was very treacherous, they dismounted and saw the deadly water, black and roaring, tempestuous and thick, as repulsive and frightening as if it were the Devil's stream, and so dangerous and deep that there was nothing in all the world which, if it fell in, would not be lost as if it had fallen into the Liver Sea.)

Chrétien was in all probability himself indebted for the idea of the Sword Bridge to visions of the Otherworld, in which the moral fibre of visionaries is often tested by means of a perilous bridge, which is dangerously suspended above the river of hell and which only the righteous can cross successfully.<sup>12</sup> But if Chrétien drew on visions of the Otherworld, it is also

11 Ed. M. Roques, CFMA 86 (Paris, 1983). *Mer betee* is the reading of the Guist manuscript and also the *difficilior lectio*. The variant reading *mer salee* produces a better rhyme. Editors are divided on the question of which reading is Chrétien's original. The argument that follows, which corrects misinterpretations of *mer betee*, and which shows that Penninc had *mer betee* before his eyes, provides support for the authenticity of the Guiot reading. I intend to discuss this textual crux in the *Charrette* at length elsewhere.

12 In his important article 'Sur les sources de la *Charrette*', *Romania* 71 (1950), 345-58, A. Micha argued that Chrétien borrowed the Sword Bridge from Marie de France's *Espurgatoire de Saint Patrice*, but both Marie's French version (c. 1189) and her Latin source, *Tractatus de purgatorio* (c. 1184), postdate the *Charrette*, which is usually dated to the late 1170s. The motif of the perilous bridge, however, is also found in two other medieval 'bestsellers': *Tundale's Vision* (c. 1150) and the roughly contemporaneous fourth redaction of the *Vision of St Paul*, either of which Chrétien may have known. For a history of the motif in medieval literature, see P. Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenseitsbrücke im Mittelalter* (Vienna, 1973).

evident that he did not want the afterlife to obtrude too conspicuously on his secular story. A trace of the Otherworld remains in the line ‘con se fust li fluns au deable’ (as if it were the Devil's stream), but the simile effectively syphons off the Otherworld by transposing it from the ‘real’ world of Lancelot's experience to the immaterial realm of analogy.

It is important to note the direction of Chrétien's transposition of the Otherworld - from ‘fact’ to ‘figure’ - since it permits us to see clearly that Penninc's recasting of Chrétien is marked by a reverse process: the analogy of the otherworldly river in the *Charrette* becomes reality. It is no longer merely *like* an infernal river; it is now the real thing, as Roges explains to Walewein:

‘Hoerdi noit dit water nomen?  
 Teen es tgherechte vaghevier.  
 Alle die zielen moeten hier,  
 Als si versceden, comen baden,  
 Sullen si ter Gods ghenaden  
 Comen ende bliven emmermere.’  
 (5824-29)

(‘Have you never heard tell of this river? It is the true purgatory. All souls, having departed from the body, must come here to bathe if they are to attain to God's grace and remain there forever more.’)

Chrétien's simile has become fact.

The same thing happens to a second suggestive analogy that Chrétien uses: falling off the Sword Bridge into the river below, Chrétien writes, is *like* falling into *la mer betee*, literally ‘the coagulated sea’. Misunderstandings of the phrase *mer betee* by modern editors and translators, who wrongly gloss *mer betee* as ‘frozen sea’, have obscured the vital importance of this simile for *Walewein*, which should settle the question of Penninc's use of Chrétien's Sword Bridge once and for all. The misunderstandings appear to originate in a dubious entry in Godefroy's *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française*, which glosses *beter* as ‘geler’ (‘to freeze’). (Tobler and Lommatzsch's *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch* has the correct gloss ‘gerinnen’, ‘to coagulate’.) Following Godefroy, William Kibler translates ‘as if he had fallen into the frozen sea’,<sup>13</sup> which makes no sense (how does one fall into a *frozen* sea?), while other translators of the *Charrette* fudge the problem with woolly translations such as ‘icy sea’ or ‘polar sea’.<sup>14</sup>

13 *Lancelot*, ed. and trans. W.W. Kibler (New York, 1981).

14 ‘Icy sea’ is R.H. Cline's translation: *Lancelot or The Knight of the Cart* (Athens, GA, 1990). J. Frappier translates ‘mer polaire’: *Le Chevalier de la Charette* (Paris, 1962).

I believe Penninc understood the meaning rather better than we do today: Chrétien's *mer betee* actually refers to the mythical *mare coagulatum*, in English *Liver Sea*,<sup>15</sup> a bituminous sea so thick and sticky that all ships were believed to get stuck in its waters. Medieval writers traditionally located the *mare coagulatum* in the extreme northwest, where the devil was believed to have his abode (cf. Isaiah 14.13).<sup>16</sup> The hellish associations of the Liver Sea were probably still remembered by Milton, who in the far west of the biblical world imagined a 'plain, wherein a black bituminous gurge / Boils out from under ground, the mouth of hell' (*Paradise Lost* XII, 41-2; cf. VII, 238). Since falling into the infernal Liver Sea means being stuck in it for good, Chrétien's simile for dropping off the Sword Bridge is doubly appropriate: it conveys Lancelot's mortal danger, but also amplifies Chrétien's earlier diabolical analogy: 'con se fust li fluns au deable'.

The eschatological undertow in Chrétien's analogies becomes graphically explicit in Penninc's adaptation. Just as the figure of the Devil's Stream is transformed into fact, so the analogy with the Liver Sea is literalized when this sea is accorded a precise place in the geography of Penninc's world. As the fox Roges informs Walewein, the river of Purgatory comes straight from hell, and after traversing the earth for more than five hundred miles it flows into the *lever zee*, the medieval Dutch word for the *mare coagulatum*:

Die vos hi seide: 'God weet,  
 Waerwart so ghi ju wilt belenden,  
 Ghine moget niet comen ten enden  
 Al voerdi vijf hondert milen of mere.  
 Ende al waerdi ten ende, here,  
 Nodan ne leetdi twater niet.  
 Dat verstaet wel ende besiet:  
 Teen ende spruut uter hellen

15 The *Oxford English Dictionary* under *liver* n.(6) glosses 'liver-sea' as 'an imaginary sea in which the water is "livered" or thick, so as to impede navigation'.

16 In the Middle Dutch *Voyage of St Brendan*, Brendan and his crew arrive at the Liver Sea after being blown northwards by a storm; see *De reis van Sint Brandaan. Een reisverhaal uit de twaalfde eeuw*, trans. Willem Wilmink, introduced by W.P. Gerritsen (Amsterdam, 1994), 423-30. On the location of the Liver Sea, see R. Simek, *Heaven and Earth in the Middle Ages: The Physical World Before Columbus*, trans. A. Hall (Woodbridge, 1996), p. 68. Simek's account of the Liver Sea is partial (there is no mention of its bituminous waters), but his references are generous; for scholarship on the Liver Sea I refer the reader to the works listed by Simek in notes 76 and 77 (p. 144), to which should be added D. Blamires, *Herzog Ernst and the Otherworld Voyage* (Manchester, 1979), pp. 41-46, and G. Huet, 'La légende de la Montagne d'Aimant', *Romania* 44 (1915-17), 427-53, which gives examples of *mer betee* (translating *mare coagulatum*) in Old French.

Daer die arme zielen quellen,  
Ende vallet in die lever zee.’

(5946-55)

(The fox replied, ‘God knows, wherever it is you wished to travel, you would not come to the end of the river even if you were to ride five hundred miles or more. And even if you reached the river's end, my lord, you still could not cross it. For understand and behold: the river begins in the depths of hell, where wretched souls are tormented, and ends by falling into the Liver Sea.’)

With Chrétien's ‘ausi com an la mer betee’ properly understood, it becomes evident that Penninc took up the simile,<sup>17</sup> and the way he transformed it again brings into focus the differences between their approaches to the Otherworld: Chrétien is adept at making tantalizing suggestions, Penninc prone to make them real.

With the Otherworld materializing under his nose, Walewein naturally has difficulty believing the fox's eschatological commentary on his surroundings. But, literal-minded as ever, Penninc proceeds to allay Walewein's and our doubts by offering the hero ocular proof. A sceptical Walewein is invited to see the otherworldliness of the river for himself:

Ende die vos antworde mettien,  
Ende seide: ‘Here, ic saelt ju toghen.  
Ghi sult sien met uwen oeghen  
Dat ghi me niet sult heten lieghen.  
Siedi gone swarte vogele vliegen  
Die int water vallen tote over thovet?  
Besietse also dat ghijt ghelovet.  
Hoe ghedaen comen si weder uut?’  
Der Walewein sprac over luut:  
‘Vele wittre dan die snee.’  
‘Besietse wel no min no mee,  
Here, dat sijn zielen alle gader...’

(5836-47)

(And the fox answered at once, saying, ‘My lord, I shall show you; you shall see with your own eyes that you've no cause to call me a liar. Do you see those black birds flying yonder, that now dive head first into the water? Behold, that you may believe. How do they emerge?’ Walewein spoke clearly: ‘Much whiter than snow.’ ‘Look carefully, my lord, these are all souls.’)

17 The reason why Maartje Draak, who argued for Penninc's use of the *Charrette*, failed to make the connection between Chrétien's *mer betee* and Penninc's *lever zee* is circumstantial: the edition of the *Charrette* she used was W. Foerster's (Halle, 1899), which prints the variant reading *mer salee*.

The black birds constituting the hard evidence are the souls of sinners, who are cleansed of their sins in the river of purgatory and fly out to heaven spotless. The inhabitants of the Otherworld, too, have been evacuated to a place inside the world of the living.

The additions that Penninc made to Chrétien are, I think, consonant with the common medieval image of the Otherworld, and the notion that Penninc got them from esoteric Celtic legends needs to be abandoned. *Walewein* scholars once believed (and some still believe) that perilous bridges and bird souls must point to Celtic influence, and ingenious scenarios have been proposed to explain the dissemination of Celtic tales in thirteenth-century Flanders. Peter Dinzelbacher, however, has conclusively shown that the Celts had no monopoly on perilous bridges or bird souls.<sup>18</sup> The *Vision of the Monk of Wenlock* (c.716) by St Boniface has all the ingredients needed for Penninc's concoction. First Boniface tells of a perilous bridge across a fiery river in which sinful souls are submerged in order to be purified:

He also saw a pitch-black fiery river, boiling and glowing, dreadful and hideous to look upon. Over the river a log was placed as a bridge. The holy and glorious souls, as they left their assembly, hastened thither, anxious to cross to the other side. Some went over steadily without faltering, but others ... fell into the infernal stream ... And yet each of those who fell came upon the opposite bank far more brilliant and beautiful than when he fell into the foaming and pitchy river.

The souls of the damned are also seen by the visionary, and are figured as 'black birds':

He reported further that he saw, as it were in the bowels of the earth, many fiery pits vomiting forth terrible flames, and as the foul flame arose, the souls of wretched men in the likeness of black birds (*in similitudine nigrarum avium*) sat upon the margin of the pits ...<sup>19</sup>

We may suppose that Penninc went back to an otherworldly vision of this kind when he set about making the eschatological implications in Chrétien explicit. Indeed, all that is needed to get us from Boniface to *Walewein* is a change from 'souls *in the likeness of birds*' to 'birds' pure and simple, from similitude to fact. If that was indeed the change that Penninc made, we

18 Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenseitsbrücke*, especially pp. 17-19 and 57. It should be noted that souls are conventionally pictured as birds in early Christian art; see *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. M. Swanton (Manchester, 1987), p. 20.

19 St Boniface, Epistle 10, in *The Letters of St Boniface*, trans. E. Emerton (New York, 1940), pp. 27-28. The Latin text is quoted from *PL* 89, 717.

might again note Penninc's characteristic strategy of 'trumping the trope' by making it real.

The transformation of figures of speech into reality culminates in a comic misunderstanding between Walewein and the fox Roges. After the fox has assured Walewein that he will help him cross the purgatorial river, Walewein claims that he would 'go through hell' to reach the other shore:

Walewein antworde sciere,  
 Ende seide: 'Roges, lieve gheselle,  
 Al waert te vaerne dor die helle,  
 Ic reder dore mochtict liden.'  
 (6008-11)

(Walewein answered quickly, and said: 'Roges, dear companion, though I had to ride through hell, I would do so in order to cross it.')

The adverb *sciere* ('quickly', or 'hastily') suggests that Walewein is speaking on the spur of the moment, using the idiom 'I would go through hell' in the usual extended sense of 'I would do anything.'<sup>20</sup> But Walewein's immediate surroundings - the river 'uter hellen' is straight ahead of him - also activate the literal meaning of 'going through hell', and the fear that Walewein is intending to plunge into the infernal river in despair prompts the following rejoinder from the fox:

'Neent niet, here! Sijd metten bliden.  
 Ghi sult noch tavont wesen daer.  
 Dat seggic ju al over waer.'  
 (6012-14)

('On no account, my lord! Be of good cheer. You shall this evening be on the other side; this I say to you in all truth.')

<sup>21</sup>

Roges strongly urges Walewein against 'going through hell', and immediately cheers him up with the news that he knows of a secret underground passage which will be a safer alternative.

The 'real presence' of a river from hell has the power to revitalize clichéd tropes on hell, which is perhaps why Penninc uses them liberally at this juncture in his romance. When Walewein abandons his earlier resolve to 'go through hell' and refuses to follow Roges down a hidden trapdoor in

20 The figurative sense of hell as 'the utmost' or 'the worst' is well attested in medieval Dutch; see E. Verwijs and J. Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* (The Hague, 1927-52), under *helle*.

21 Johnson translates the fox's opening words as 'Fear not', which misses the joke. 'Neent niet' is an emphatic negative (certainly not) which makes sense if it is taken as the fox's refusal to countenance Walewein's proposal to 'ride through hell'.

the ground, it is Roges who vows he would 'go to hell' sooner than betray his lord:

'Mi dinct dat ic verraden bin,'  
Sprac Walewein, 'van ju geselle.'  
'So moetic varen in die helle,  
Here, oft ic ju verrade!'  
(6048-51)

('It seems to me you've betrayed me,' said Walewein, 'my friend.' 'May I go to hell, my lord, if I were to betray you.')

After Walewein finally agrees to descend into the underground passage, Penninc continues in this vein:

Dus ghinc der Walewein die milde  
Onder die aerde, ende sijn gheselle,  
Daert donker was als in die helle.  
(6082-84)

(And so Walewein the Mild went with his companion under the ground, to where it was dark as hell itself.)

The simile 'donker ... als in die helle' is undoubtedly conventional, but again the context makes the convention come alive. For not only does the tunnel 'black as hell' run underneath purgatory; it also goes down into the ground where hell was widely believed to be located. As the medieval world was often reminded, inferno is so called 'quia inferius jacet' (because it lies below), and even the learned Gregory the Great accepted on this basis that hell was just below ground.<sup>22</sup> Walewein may surely be forgiven for thinking twice before joining Roges on a subterranean adventure.

The strange topography of *Walewein* may reek to us of medieval superstition, but I would argue that Penninc's use of the Otherworld is far from unthinking. Like any other romance writer, Penninc needs the extraordinary; while otherworldly analogies à la Chrétien provide one way of satisfying this need, the ultimate in extraordinariness is to turn the analogy into reality, to make the romance world truly Other. Penninc's wordplay on dead metaphors - 'vaeren door die helle', 'vaeren in die helle' - essentially exploits the same technique of literalizing the figurative. Recognizing his wit leads us some way towards appreciating the self-consciousness with which he plotted the Otherworld.

I want to take a further step in that direction by considering the place that Penninc sets immediately beyond the river of purgatory: Assentijn's castle, which lies 'verre in gont Endi' (far-away in distant India, 3457). The local-

22 Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 130.

ization of Assentijn's castle in 'Endi' might be thought of as a gratuitous exotic detail, but the effort Penninc took to give Assentijn's castle its correct local colour suggests that he took his topography very seriously indeed. By speaking of 'correct local colour', I am trying to resist the temptation of dismissing details as fanciful which a medieval reader is more likely to have regarded as facts. With no reliable evidence to go on, medieval knowledge about India was largely based on the 'Letter' of Prester John, the supposed Christian emperor of the three Indias. The *Letter of Prester John* appeared in western Europe around 1165 and inspired a host of translations and adaptations.<sup>23</sup> The authenticity of the Letter (soon translated into French and German and incorporated into 'travel writings' such as *Mandeville's Travels*) remained unquestioned until well into the Renaissance.

For a serious poet, setting a castle in India may well have entailed some basic research on India's flora and fauna. An interesting example of such a poet was Albrecht von Scharfenberg, who wrote his Arthurian romance *Der jüngere Titurel* around 1270. In this romance Perceval travels to the East with his Grail-companions, and after a long journey arrives in India. Feirefiz comes to meet Perceval and treats him to a long exposition about India, which, as Friedrich Zarncke noted, is lifted straight from the *Letter of Prester John*, the authoritative guide to this continent.<sup>24</sup> In the case of *Walewein*, too, I think it is possible to demonstrate that the *Letter of Prester John* was read by Penninc, and that he conscientiously tried to harmonize his descriptions of Assentijn's castle with 'facts' about India as he and his audience would have known them.

One such 'fact' about Prester John's territory was that it harboured a Fountain of Youth, the waters of which streamed from the earthly paradise and gave eternal youth to all those who drank it:

This forest is situated at the foot of mount Olympus, where a clear spring wells up ... and it comes up from a place not further than a three day's journey from paradise, from which Adam was driven out. If anyone sips from this fountain three times on an empty stomach, he will from that day onwards have not a single infirmity, but he will always live as if he were

23 The original Latin text and medieval German adaptations have been edited by F. Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes*, Abhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Philologische-Historische Classe VII (1879), 827-1039 and VIII (1883), 1-186. For the French and Occitan versions see *La lettre du prêtre Jean. Les versions en ancien français et en ancien occitan*, ed. M. Gosman (Groningen, 1982). Passages from the *Letter* used in *Mandeville's Travels* can be found in an English translation in the appendix to *Mandeville's Travels: Texts and Translations*, ed. M. Letts, Hakluyt Society, 2 vols. (London, 1953).

24 *Der Priester Johannes*, ed. Zarncke, VII, 968-72.

thirty-two years old ... The people there, who live on heavenly bread, all live to the age of five hundred years but, truly, when a hundred years have passed they are all rejuvenated by thrice drinking from the fountain which wells up at the foot of the tree that stands on the above-mentioned island.<sup>25</sup>

The same well from paradise to be found in India adorns Ysabele's pleasure garden in Assentijn's Indian castle, and Penninc attributes similar medicinal properties to it:

Ene fonteyne staet daer claer,  
 Scone onder enen oliviere,  
 Die herde rike es ende diere.  
 Hets recht dat ik den borne prise,  
 Want uten ardschen paradise  
 Comt ghesprongen een aderkijn  
 Ende sprinct inden borne fijn,  
 Die scone es ende harde claer  
 ...  
 Al ware een man out .vc. jaer,  
 Ende nutte hi vanden borne een traen,  
 Sonder twifel ende waen  
 Hi worde alse staerc ende also jonc  
 Als hi was, upten selven spronc,  
 Als hi was doe te waren  
 Doe hi out was van .xxx. jaren.  
 (3550-57, 3586-92)

(There is also a clear, sparkling fountain beneath a most costly and splendid olive tree. It is right for me to praise this well, for from the earthly paradise itself flows a stream which wells up at this splendid and sparkling clear fountain ... Though a man were five hundred years old, if he were to taste but a drop from the fountain, he would surely and without a doubt become as strong and as young as if, at that very moment, he had become as he was when he was thirty years old.)

25 'Quod nemus situm est ad radicem montis Olympi, unde fons perspicuus oritur ... et progreditur itinere dierum trium non longe a paradyso, unde Adam fuit expulsus. Si quis de fonte illo ter ieiunus gustaverit, nullum ex illa diei infirmitatem patietur, semperque erit quasi in aetate XXX duorum annorum, quamdiu vixerit ... Isti homines, qui sic caelesti pane vivunt, omnes vivunt quingentis annis. Verumtamen in capite C annorum reiuvenescunt et renovantur omnes bibendo ter de quodam fonte, qui egreditur ad radicem cuiusdam arboris illo stantis' (*Der Priester Johannes*, ed. Zarncke, VII, 912-13). The interesting detail that the locals reach the age of five hundred is quoted in the E-interpolation.

Fountains of Youth are, of course, found elsewhere in medieval literature,<sup>26</sup> but the striking correspondences in numbers (five-hundred-year-olds become thirty-year-olds) and the location of the fountain in 'Endie' argue strongly in favour of Penninc's dependence on the *Letter of Prester John*.

A second parallel confirms this. According to Prester-John material, India's chief castle was built by King Quasideus ('God-like': so called because he was more powerful than all other kings put together). Like God's heavenly city, Quasideus's city has several foundations, each garnished with different exotic jewels; and like God's city, too, it has twelve gates. The requirement that quasi-divine places should command non-stop bird song is met by means of the latest in medieval high-tech:

And there is also a little enclosed garden, where there is a golden tree with branches and leaves. On it there are golden birds of all the kinds that are found in the Indies. The tree itself is hollow, as well as the branches and the leaves. For there is a cave under ground, where nearly sixty bellows are placed, skilfully made. And men enter this cave and pump air into the bellows, and so air is pumped into the tree, the branches and the leaves, and finally the birds, and so each one of them begins to sing according to its kind.<sup>27</sup>

Again Penninc confirms the 'Indianness' of Assentijn's castle by planting an exact copy of Quasideus's golden tree in King Assentijn's castle:

Noch es daer een ander praeyeel.  
Daer staet een boom es so ghedaen  
Als ic u mach doen verstaen:  
Hi es beneden herde groot,  
Ende al van finen goude root.  
Mi wondert hoet noit man ghedochte  
Dat hi den riken boom ghewrochte.  
Hi hevet also menighen telch van goude  
Als enich man ghesegghen soude.  
Elc telch es hol van binnen.  
Nu hort, ic sal u doen bekinnen

26 See H.R. Patch, *The Other World* (Cambridge, MA, 1950), pp. 161-66, and P.A. Underwood, 'The Fountain of Life', *Dunbarton Oaks Papers* 5 (1950), 43-148.

27 'Est etiam ibi plateola, ubi arbor aurea est cum ramis et foliis, super quam sunt aves aureae ex omni genere, quae apud Indos inveniuntur. Ipsa arbor concava est, et rami et folia. Ibi est etiam fovea, cui insunt folles fere 60 ex arte factae. Homines vero ingrediuntur foveam et inflant folles, et sic inflatur arbor et rami et folia, deinde inflant aves, et unaquaqueque incipit cantare iuxta genus suum.' The quotation is from the *Account of Elysaeus*, a late twelfth-century adaptation of the *Letter of Prester John*, edited in *Der Priester Johannes*, VIII, 126. It is also found in the D-interpolation of the *Letter*. See *Der Priester Johannes*, VII, 923, and Okken, *Das goldene Haus*, pp. 100-101.

Waer bi het es, ende doen verstaen:  
 Up elken telch, al sonder waen,  
 So staet een goudijn voghelkijn,  
 Dat zere proper es ende fijn.

...

Ooc esser an ghemaect daer,  
 Dat seide die gone diet wel wiste,  
 Behendelike ende met liste  
 Ene duwiere ende daer in staen  
 .Xvi. manne ende hebben bevaen  
 .Viji. blasebalghen die si verdraghen,  
 Ende den bome wint toejaghen,  
 Van beneden inden wertel up  
 Tote boven inden top  
 Met groter cracht, met groter pinen.  
 Ende daer hi bewaait die voghelkine,  
 Daer staen si recht ende beven  
 Inder ghelike of si leven.  
 Daer sinct elc voghelkijn zine stevene,  
 Zesse te gader ende zevene.

(3502-16, 3524-38)

(There is yet another arbor. Inside this one there stands a tree, which is of such a nature as I shall describe for you. It is very broad at the base and made entirely of fine red gold. It amazes me how anyone could have devised and fashioned such a magnificent tree. It has more branches of gold than any man may say; each branch is hollow on the inside. Listen now, and I shall explain why this is so: on every branch, without a lie, there is perched a little bird of gold, beautifully and finely crafted.... There is also fashioned - according to the man who knew - with skill and ingenuity, a hollow chamber in which there stand sixteen men who work eight bellows, with which they force a current of air through the tree, from its roots to its very top with great force and effort. And when the little birds are moved by the wind they stand up straight and twitch as if they were alive. Then each bird sings its song, six and seven in chorus.)

The close similarities between Assentijn's and Quasideus's tree again point to Penninc's knowledge of Prester-John material, though it should be said that the wide dissemination of golden trees and mechanical birds in medieval literature (documented in glorious detail by Lambertus Okken<sup>28</sup>) makes a categorical identification of Penninc's source impossible.<sup>29</sup> Even

28 Okken, *Das goldene Haus*.

29 In her *Onderzoekingen* Draak neglects the Prester John tradition, and claims that Penninc used some version of the Alexander romance *Historia de preliis*, but the closest parallel she offers (from a fifteenth-century interpolation of the *Historia*) is unconvincing compared with the parallel in the *Letter of Prester John*. This is not to deny the cultural importance of the *Romance of Alexander*, which set an important precedent for chivalric heroes venturing into India, and for incorporating 'realistic reportage' about the customs and marvels of this continent. For evidence of Alexander's appeal to Arthurian writers see B.N. Sargent-Baur, 'Alexander and the *Conte du Graal*', *Arthurian Literature* 14 (1996), 1-18. The memorable moment in the *Romance of Alexander* when the hero arrives at the Earthly Paradise only to be refused entry was borrowed by Gerbert de Montreuil, who opens his Arthurian romance

to think of them as ‘motifs’ may be misleading. The simplest explanation for the coincidence that many different medieval texts (*Walewein*, *Alexander* romances, the *Letter of Prester John*) should have put a Golden Tree in India is that their writers imagined that such a tree was actually there, and regarded it not as a literary topos but as common knowledge. Rather than seeing Penninc as a poet who cobbled together his romance from bits and pieces stolen from other writings, we perhaps do better to see him as someone who simply wished to get his geography right, and who, by equipping Assentijn's castle with a Fountain of Youth and a Golden Tree, was merely seeing through the implications of his decision to place this castle in India, the Land of Prester John.

But what does India have to do with the Otherworld? To medieval people the answer would have been perfectly obvious. India is where the Earthly Paradise *was*. Travel east, writes Gower in his *Confessio Amantis*, and sooner or later you will hit upon the gates of paradise:

Fro that into the worldes ende  
Estward, Asie it is algates,  
Til that men come unto the gates  
Of Paradis, and there ho.  
(VII, 568-71)<sup>30</sup>

The known facts of India's geography bore out its proximity to paradise: the rivers of paradise divided the continent into islands, the local tongue was Chaldean (Christ's supposed mother tongue), its one-time ruler was God-like (Quasideus), its great city looked like the heavenly city, and so on.<sup>31</sup> Penninc, too, made Assentijn's castle positively paradisaical. As we have seen, the fountain in the arbour has its source in paradise, the castle has twelve walls (‘daer gaen .xij. mure / omme’, 3460-61), and the twelve walls have twelve gateways, each of which Walewein must penetrate to reach Ysabele:

with Perceval breaking his sword on the gates of paradise; see Gerbert de Montreuil, *Continuation de Perceval*, ed. M. Williams and M. Oswald, CFMA 28, 50 and 101, 3 vols. (Paris, 1922-75).

30 Ed. G.C. Macaulay, *John Gower's English Works*, EETS 81 and 82, 2 vols. (London, 1900-1901).

31 *Der Priester Johannes*, ed. Zarncke, VIII, 121-3.

‘Al wilden si ju in hulpen staen  
 Alle die in die werelt sijn,  
 Al sulc es dat ghelove mijn,  
 So en mocti niet ghewinnen  
 Dien ene porte, noch daer binnen  
 Comen, here - des sijt ghewes;  
 Al sulc alser daer .xij. es!’  
 (5978-84)

(‘Even if all the men of the world were to lend you their aid (at least as I see it) you still could not win the first gate, nor enter in there, my lord - of that you may be sure; and there are twelve of them!’)

The details here have again led scholars to claim out-of-the-way influences where I believe Penninc was simply respecting the ‘facts’. Thus, Th. M. Chotzen claimed that the fountain linked to paradise and the successive gateways were derived from Celtic legends.<sup>32</sup> But the Fountain of Youth is a medieval ‘truth’ about India, not a Celtic marvel; and the twelve gates are reminiscent of the twelve gates of Quasideus's castle - ‘in eodem palatio sunt 12 ianuae’<sup>33</sup> - which are in turn modelled on the twelve gates of the Heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21.12: ‘And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates’. As for Penninc's idea of lining up the twelve walls with the twelve gates in succession, this neatly supplies the graduated series of obstacles which romancers always like to throw in their heroes’ way. If it needs sourcing at all, we must look again at medieval beliefs about the heavenly city, set at the bank of a river, furnished with twelve gates, and also often thought to be encircled by twelve walls. The authority for this is the *Vision of St Paul*, which, though apocryphal, was well known to medieval readers (including the likes of Dante and Chaucer), and which Theodore Silverstein justifiably described as their ‘Baedeker to the Otherworld’.<sup>34</sup>

I entered the city of Christ. It was all gold and twelve walls encircled it, and there were twelve towers inside it.... The angel answered and said to me: ‘The second is better than the first, and likewise the third is better than the second; for one excels the other right up to the twelfth wall.’<sup>35</sup>

In devising his own obstacle course for Walewein with its twelve walls and twelve gates, Penninc could have had no better designer than God himself.

32 Th. M. Chotzen, Review of M. Draak, *Onderzoekingen over de Roman van Walewein* (1936 edn), in *Museum* 46 (1939), 93-95; and Draak, *Onderzoekingen*, p. 247.

33 *Der Priester Johannes*, ed. Zarncke, VIII, 126.

34 Silverstein, ed., *Visio Sancti Pauli* (London, 1935), p. 5.

35 *St Paul's Apocalypse*, trans. M.R. James, in *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, ed. E. Gardner (New York, 1989), pp. 30-33.

I have in the course of this essay made a number of claims about Penninc's sources. For his purgatory episode, he made direct use of Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*, and probably also incorporated 'facts' about the Otherworld as recorded in visions like that reported by Boniface. The local colour of Assentijn's castle accords with common knowledge about India, which the *Letter of Prester John* helped to fix in the minds of medieval people. Even Penninc's presentation of Assentijn's castle as a veritable 'heaven on earth' appears less fanciful in the light of medieval beliefs that in India this world and paradise converged. But let me conclude by returning to the working hypothesis with which I began, that the Otherworld in *Walewein* is born in response to a basic need in romance for the superlative and the extraordinary. To this hypothesis, Assentijn's paradisaical palace also tests positive, for when Walewein sees the castle it is again with a superlative that our expectations are raised:

Doe dochte Waleweine dat beste  
 Dat hi noit hadde gesien.  
 (6104-5)

(It seemed to Walewein to be the finest that he had ever seen.)

Penninc certainly managed to deliver the superlative, and it is perhaps not surprising that in casting about for a design that would live up to expectation he found himself thinking of the Best Castle of All.<sup>36</sup> But while the Otherworld satisfies our basic craving for superlatives, it gives pleasure also to see how carefully Penninc has placed his heavenly castle in the otherworldly topography of his romance. For if we follow Penninc's logic and take the purgatorial river literally (and not, as Chrétien has it, as a manner of speaking), then the following question naturally arises: what can lie beyond the stream of purgatory, *if not paradise itself*? Penninc's location of Assentijn's castle in India, on the threshold of paradise, suggests that he thought of that question long before I did, and answered it well.

36 The poet of the English *Sir Orfeo* also lifts the Fairy Castle out of the ordinary by modelling it on the heavenly city in Revelation: 'Bi al þing him think þat it is / þe proude court of Paradis' (375-76), ed. A.J. Bliss (Oxford, 1966).