**Key words: pilgrimage, vernacular, slow ecopoetics, slow walking, co-writing, landscape, textscape, contingency, medieval poetry**

To show the intellectual roots of environmental citizenship, this essay transverses literary and ecological paths by focusing on medieval pilgrimage poems. While design seems integral to the concept of pilgrimage—wayfaring from one’s home to a sacred shrine—in actuality pilgrims not infrequently wandered from the official path. Contingency, rather than randomness, acts as a dynamic agent in affecting the meanderings of the pilgim-walker.

Pilgrimage practice entailed reading the landscape through slow walking. Slow pilgrimage manifests itself in major ways: the slow change in the vernacular language of fourteenth-century pilgrimage poems; the slow amendment pilgrimage is meant to spark spiritually; the slow somatic travail on the road itself; and the act of slowly reading as a form of textual wayfinding. The pilgrimage road, which amends over time, itself works within a diverse ecotone, replete with various pilgrims and pilgrimage works.

Literary pilgrimage poems self-consciously commit themselves to promoting the vernacular. The ecopoetics of a specific “landguage,” the living and resilient vernacular used by medieval pilgrimage writers, sparks amendment—the spiritual change pilgrimage was meant to kindle. Amendment recurs thematically, indicating material change in the actual path walked on by historical pilgrims.

Pilgrim readers undertook textual wayfaring, as do pilgrim-writers through variant texts amended by the poet himself. A strategy of slow ecopoetics authorizes the reader to co-perform the text, making author, reader, and text all kin. Just as the pilgrim presses ahead through a new space, creating the “edge effect” with each step, the pilgrim reader advances alongside the writer, co-creating a resilient literary work.

**Slow Pilgrimage Ecopoetics**

“And you should understand that at each of these steps there is a pause. For this reason it is a great pity and heart-break for the soul that it can only move so slowly, and experience so much pain, and it moves toward God so ponderously. It takes such tiny steps.”

Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) (Petroff 255)

In describing her spiritual pilgrimage, the Blessed Angela of Foligno relates the interior pain she endures. She must sustain and suffer each small stride forward in her laborious endeavor. Theologically, pilgrimage was a ritual adhering to the belief in spiritual amendment. Medieval Christians like Angela believed that contrition and confession for a sin could be satisfied in part through the arduous task of pilgrimage. The time-intensive commitment which Angela’s trial demands corresponds to physical pilgrimage. Chrisopher Howard points out, “While pilgrimage has played a central role in the history of human mobility, it also represents a paradigmatic form of slow travel” (Howard 17). The materiality of place pilgrimage infuses the metaphor of life pilgrimage.

Ecological exploration and environmental citizenship have intellectual origins extending back into the Middle Ages. Understood within an ecocritical context, pilgrimage literature, an inherently allegorical genre, can be read as an ecopoetics. The materiality of the spatial practice of pilgrimage—long exercised by devout religious of various faiths on paths trod upon by historical individuals—intersects with literary conjurations of such rituals. In a pilgrimage text, the poet argues for the reader's contrition and subsequent penitential satisfaction. By engaging emotionally and spiritually with the literary work, the reader undergoes, sees, and memorializes pilgrimage. Slow pilgrimage manifests itself in major ways: the slow change in the vernacular language of fourteenth-century pilgrimage poems; the slow amendment pilgrimage is meant to spark spiritually; the slow somatic travail on the road itself; and the act of slowly reading as a form of textual wayfinding.

This special issue focuses on design and randomness. While design seems integral to the concept of pilgrimage—wayfaring from one’s home to a sacred shrine—in actuality pilgrims not infrequently wandered from the official path. The time for walking is slow, responding to unexpected events. “The random, the unscreened, allows you to find what you don’t know you are looking for, and you don’t know a place until it surprises you” (Solnit 11). The word “contingent,” stemming from a Latin word meaning “to touch,” seems more apt than “random,” whose origin means “at speed.” Touch suggests a slower, more intimate process of change than the hurried or frantic imposition of acceleration. “Slowness is really the opposite of *haste*” (Gros 36). While design urges on speed into the future, contingency slows things down, allowing for care time, nurturing “the unexpected changes, the events, that other than human creative agencies bring to happen” (Puig de la Bellacasa 214). For the slow ecopoetics of pilgrimage and pilgrimage texts, a leisurely touch—linguistic through the tongue of common people, physical on a path, spiritual and intellectual between poem and reader—suggests mindful engagement. Just as pilgrimage ideally kindles spiritual and medical healing, it sparks physical transformations in the landscape. A slow ecopoetics—slow to write, slow to walk, slow to read—versifies the glacial change fashioned by pilgrimage on the material “living landscapes through which pilgrims travel” (Eppig 50), spaces keenly responsive to amendment over time.

Physical pilgrimage acts as one “conceptual domain to reason about another domain”—that of the soul’s amendment and improvement on its journey to inner healing (Pellizzoni 78). Pilgrimage

was a strong experiential reminder that the unpredictability of human life is not adequately represented by a sedentary lifestyle. Travel over dusty countrysides, steep and slippery mountain passes, through woods, and over hills and valleys was a more accurate representation of human life. Different geography created awareness of the diverse landscapes of the soul, the rocks, sunlight, green growth, and the dust of emotional life (Miles 169).

Landscape influences textscape. The speed at which modern transportation now allows us travel over and around the earth has damaging consequences even beyond those of carbon emissions and noise pollution. Acceleration impels us to lose touch with the earth’s cyclical rhythms, suggesting human actors can control earth’s forces. “Walking is the best way to go more slowly than any other method that has ever been found” (Gros 2). The material pilgrimage path, the vehicle as it were for the metaphor of spiritual pilgrimage, modifies over time, as dirt compacts and landscape incrementally alters. Humans’ relationship to landscape, of finding one’s self in the landscape, informs the slow pace of reading, a form of poetic wayfaring. The “’love of slow’” seeps from fourteenth-century pilgrimage poems (Northcott 232), inculcating a “learned dependence…” (Northcott 228) on the environment.

Several late medieval works written throughout Europe root this essay to explore the slow ecopoetics of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage, a traditional ritual practice in the Christian West, increasingly facilitated affective piety, an important spiritual mode in late medieval Europe. Vernacular religious practice as seen in the popularity of physical pilgrimage intersects with late medieval pilgrimage poems. The years between Dante’s *Comedy*, set during Holy Week in 1300, and Geoffrey Chaucer’s death in 1400 witnessed the creation of numerous long poems using pilgrimage as a structural and thematic device. What language articulates this explosion of literary pilgrimage output? Fourteenth-century pilgrimage poems find fertile resonance with the vernacular, the language used to ideally trigger an affective response by a wide audience. A network of texts—including Guillaume de Deguileville's *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de Buen Amor*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer's *The* *Canterbury Tales—* self-consciously promotes the vernacular, the living linguistic organism under constant amendment. Amendment or change works metaphorically on numerous levels: spiritual, poetic, and even material in terms of soil on a path. The pilgrimage road gives vernacular voice to a shared pilgrimage experience. Local landscape and language intermingle. By promoting vernacular tongues undergoing continual change, slow pilgrimage ecopoetics addresses spiritual, social, and poetic matters.

**The Ecopoetics of “Landguage”: The Living and Resilient Vernacular**

“[F]inding a language/ in which you feel/ at home” (Cockburn and Finlay 127)

In the Middle Ages, Latin functions within an official, ecclesiastical, and orchestrated linguistic landscape, while the vernacular persists as organic, resistant, and insistant, “significantly [extending] the verbal range” of medieval pilgrimage poetry (Ramazani 17). As a "dead" language—though hardly dead in the confines of the official church—Latin monumentalizes God's Word. In contrast, “’speaking subjects’” dynamically catalyse sociality in the vernacular (Alworth 75, citing Latour 1996 viii). The vernacular, a medium facilitating change in the self, spurs a change in the relationship with the authority of written language. Within this model, Latin acts as a language of design, while the vernacular vibrantly sprouts from contingency. Just as the dirt pilgrimage path alters due to countless footsteps grinding it down, contingent changes in languages occur over long periods, even “over lithic time” (Oppermann 2018 8).

While Latin carried cultural capital in the late Middle Ages, Dante’s *Comedy* establishes the vernacular precedent for pilgrimage poetry in the fourteenth century and enhances its status for poetic and learned discourse.

This vernacular of mine joined together my parents, since they spoke to each other in it...For this reason it is clear that my vernacular had a part in my generation, and so was one of the causes of my coming into being (Dante, *Il Convivio* 1.13.4 qtd in Copeland 260).

Dante characterizes Latin as wheat bread and the vernacular as oaten. Latin—eternal, pure, and noble—sits in opposition to the vernacular—changeable and corruptible. Choosing to write in Italian instead of Latin despite its tradition of being ‘universal’ (at least for Western Europe), Dante suggests that this vernacular possibly exists “as it were, in exile, on a pilgrimage, among the humble and throughout the Italian peninsula: ‘our illustrious vernacular wanders like a stranger and finds hospitality in lowly refuges’” (Ascoli 60 qtd Dante I, xviii, 3). The vernacular wanders along with the pilgrim. The vernacular successfully achieves its preservation by securing “itself greater stability, and greater stability it could gain only by binding itself with meter and with rhyme” (Lansing 32). Pilgrimage poems, bound by meter and rhyme, adhere to what Dante contends would help secure a much-needed resilience for the vernacular.

A dead language reflects an extinct, unsustainable world. Jonathan Hsy suggests that we view language as “a living organism with its own agency. We might even conceive of any contact zone, such as a city or even its extended trade network, as a linguistic ecosystem” (Hsy 2013 57). The vernacular resiliently functions as a tongue with ecological reverberations. After meeting Nimrod deep in the *Inferno* (*Inf.*XXXI.67ff.),[[1]](#endnote-2) Virgil tells the pilgrim that a single language cannot suffice (*Inf.* XXXI.76-81). Adam reveals how his tongue became extinct even before Nimrod, telling the pilgrim, "[F]or never/ has any thing produced by human reason/ been everlasting…Such change must be:/ the ways that mortals take are as the leaves/ upon a branch—one comes, another goes" (*Par*. XXVI.126-138). No human construct can last—not even linguistic ones, imagined by Dante as organs helping vascular plants thrive. Chaucer explicitly acknowledges the vernacular’s persistent modifications when he directly addresses his own poem *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Go, litel bok, go….

And for ther is so gret diversite  
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,  
So prey I god that non myswrite the,  
Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge. (*Troilus and Criseyde* V.1786; 1793-96)

Despite worries that his poem may one day be badly transcribed, the poet seems to suggest that some aspect of the poem will remain familiar, even if its meter is ruined. Its resilience can prevail with God’s help—and that of a good scribe whose linguistic knowledge is rooted deep in the development of the English language. Vernaculars modify, suggesting resilience through variation. The vernacular, a vibrant ecology, never crystallizes into one form. Heteroglossia—multiple languages living in diversity—fertilizes poetic imaginations and helps God’s creation thrive.

The vernacular proves a means to link the pilgrim reader with the poetic text and its spiritual intention. Guillaume de Deguileville’s goal, he proclaims, is to help all pilgrims, emphasizing all classes and genders in the opening of the poem. His narrator asserts:

This vision concerns the mighty and the humble, without exception. I have put it all in [French], so that laymen can understand it. Everyone can learn from it which path to take and which to leave and abandon. This is something very necessary to those who are pilgrims in this wild world. (3) [[2]](#endnote-3)

The dreamer argues for the importance of his text being in the vernacular specifically so layfolk can have access to it. After all, he points out, everyone is a pilgrim on earth—men and women, noble or peasant, cleric or lay. The narrator in the English prose *Pilgrimage of the Soul,* whose source isthe verse *Âme*, excuses himself for his poor translation. “I haue not translated worde for word as it was in the frenche…I am but litel expert in that langage…” (Peters and Kablitz 34, n.35). This narrative intrusion confirms what so many pilgrimage works at the time do: translate a work into the vernacular of the readers (in this case, French to English). Pilgrimage poetics insist on vernacularity. William Langland, whose West Midlands English differs from that of Chaucer’s London, conjures up a quintessentially English world that ranges from the bowels of hell to Jerusalem. When the humble Everyman named Haukyn requests that Patience explain what Poverty is, the response includes a long Latin quote (XIV.275a). ‘”I kan noght construe al this,” quod Haukyn, “ye moste kenne me this on Englissh.”/ “In Englissh,” quod Pacience, “it is wel hard, wel to expounen,/ Ac somdeel I shal seyen it, by so thow understonde”’ (XIV.276-279). After Haukyn asks for an explication in English, he receives one, leading to a scene of contrition, one catalyzed through the vernacular. Vernacular poetry can amend even the humblest of souls.

John Mandeville in his prose *Travels* makes his work available in the vernacular. The Cotton manuscript articulates his “authorial intentions,” where he claims to translate from Latin to French and thence to English “so that ‘euery man of my nacoun may vnderstonde it’” (Yeager 110 citing Seymour 3/36-4/2). Like other fourteenth-century pilgrimage writers, Mandeville suggests a link between amendment and the vernacular.

And ȝee schuƚƚ vndirstonde þat I haue put this boke out of latyn in to frenscℏ & translated it aȝen out of frenscℏ in to Englysscℏ þat euery man of my nacioun may vnderstonde it… (Hamelius 1:4, also 1:80).

The vernacular is necessary so that the imagination and devotion of potentially everyone could be affected (Bale 126, n.7). In these pilgrimage poems, the vernacular acts both as a nonhuman actor and as the spark for sociality.

Everything in this world has “a specific word that corresponds to it” (Gros 62). Sten Pultz Moslund coins *topopoetics* “as a *lang*scaping of literature or a reading that maps the work as a *land*guage” (Moslund 30). Indeed, the

vocabulary of a text is affected by, or sometimes produced by, the environment of its setting…[A] topopoetics within a language like English will be particularly sensitive to the presencing of place through the untranslatability of local varieties of English, or englishes: how a variety of English…may … speak of earlier or coexisting languages of emplacement (Moslund 35).

Toponyms, sensitive to the decay of the native ecology, matter as names fall away from use or get warped by colonized linguistic practices or misunderstandings (Finlay 10). For Alec Finlay, “place-awareness” becomes a key means to revealing “a hidden history” (179). Even quotidian terms accrete new meanings when rooted in a specific place (see, for example, Cockburn and Finlay 98, 116). Chaucer’s *General Prologue* references “shires” (I.15), a peculiarly English division of the land with roots in Old English. Engrained in the pilgrimage langscape of English, Chaucer utters a topospecific *landguage* (Moslund 36).

Tim William Machan in his exploration of Middle English carves out a sociolinguistic model to argue for language as an ecology (Machan 9). An ecotone, the border zone between adjacent communities of vegetation, creates an “edge effect” of biodiversity. The collision of English, French, and Latin works as an ecological “’edge-effect’” where “two ecosystems meet.” As John Elder points out, such “zones’ [have a] special richness,” with “greater biotic density” and “larger numbers of species than are in either adjacent habitat” (Elder vii). As applied to language, this metaphor suggests the living, dynamic vernacular as a fertile means for understanding a specific place. Each vernacular uniquely germinates from its specific Umwelt (Berroth) of land, culture, and space, a linguistic environment to be charted in a poem alongside a path plotted cartographically. In Chaucer, the pilgrims pass “the Wateryng of Seint Thomas” (I.826), a brook close to London and specifically named to identify and distinguish it from other streams. The link with “Seint Thomas” suggests how the brook was an inevitable crossing for pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, a location dedicated to that saint’s shocking murder and subsequent sacralization.

The vernacular, a vibrant ecology, never crystallizes into one form. Words, palimpsests of historical variation, suggest environmental dynamism: “[A] name opened/ to reveal the hidden/ seed of its meaning” (Cockburn and Finlay 115). When we unearth the etymology of our vernacular lifeblood, we perceive past iterations of a signifier and, though extension, its future development, should the language thrive. The ideal language in which to express our life peregrination is the vernacular, a linguistically dynamic actor (Hsy 2013 25). Vernacular speakers respond to others, not in a hermetic vacuum, but a living linguistic biosphere.

**Material Pilgrimage Practice: Reading the Landscape through Slow Walking**

“[F]inding a pair of sticks/ that fit your stride/ and a walk” (Cockburn and Finlay 125)

Pilgrimage converges organically with ever-evolving vernacular languages used to voice pilgrimage texts. Vibrant living languages of the people stand in opposition to Latin, the official and language of authority. Refering to more than just linguistic usage, the vernacular extends to material practices (Minnis xi). Rob Nixon has pointed out the adverse effects that orchestrated and intentional landscapes can force on organic and unprocessed ones, when the “official landscape is forcibly imposed on a vernacular one.” Nixon continues to indict this imposition as socially and ecologically deleterious.

A vernacular landscape is shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features. A vernacular landscape, although neither monolithic nor undisputed, is integral to the socioenvironmental dynamics of community…By contrast, an official landscape…is typically oblivious to such earlier maps; instead, it writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental. (Nixon 17)

An example of this tension between vernacular and official landscape can be found in Chinua Achebe's short story, "Dead Men's Path," in which the new headmaster of a school is “scandalized” at seeing an “old woman from the village hobble right across the compound, through a marigold flower-bed and the hedges. On going up there he found faint signs of an almost disused path from the village across the school compound to the bush on the other side.” Upon learning that “it connects the village shrine with their place of burial,” the naïve young man, ignoring a priest’s wisdom of years, barricades the village people from traversing their familiar ground (Achebe 228). He ultimately gets his comeuppance when a young woman dies in childbirth. The villagers, believing his dogged restrictions caused the tragedy, destroy the school grounds in retaliation. Using Nixon’s argument, we can see that “imposed official landscapes typically discount spiritualized vernacular landscapes” (13). Here, the young headmaster’s official landscape attempted to encroach on a familiar, even stratigraphic, one of years.

Achebe's example proves suggestive within a medieval context, where vernacular paths spring up in response to ritual performance. A subset within the chronotope of the road (Bakhtin 85, 98, 252), the pilgrimage road is one mode of spatial practice. The concept of ‘life as pilgrimage’ as promulgated by the official medieval church and through literary texts shapes desires. Human actors not only see their own lives in terms of the metaphor of pilgrimage, but also enact somatically the physical act of pilgrimage by walking or riding to local and distant shrines. This way varies—whether through hell to heaven (Dante’s *Comedy*), from Southwark to Canterbury (Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*), or from the Malvern Hills to London (Langland’s *Piers Plowman*). Chaucer’s Parson, Dante’s pilgrim, and Langland’s Will and Piers are grounded in “real” locations—Jerusalem, Florence, London. Dante lodges his fellow Florentines in various levels of the *Inferno*, his specific, local representatives for the generic pilgrim (Westphal xiv). The sacred geography of pilgrimage intersects with dirt paths, built urban spaces, and hallowed shrines—all “socio-ecological landscapes” (Eppig 50). Chaucer’s Host comments on the close-lying towns of “Depeford” and “Grenewych” (I.3905-6), urging the telling of tales to pass the time.

While the increasingly prevalent practice of enclosure straightened out a road system’s natural tendency to undulate, medieval roads tolerated, even encouraged, tarrying or loitering (Allen 2013 21). As opposed to being linear and teleological, the actual practice of pilgrimage consists of stops and starts, even retracing one’s steps as with Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, who practiced "wandrynge by the weye" (*The Canterbury Tales* I.467). An ecotone, the border zone between adjacent communities of vegetation, creates an “edge effect” of biodiversity. The pilgrim presses ahead on the pilgrimage road, itself an “edge” or diverse ecotone, replete with various pilgrims and pilgrimage works, creating the edge effect with each step.

The genre of medieval pilgrimage poetry –its "specific literary elements and conventions" (Bracke 226)— affects the depiction of the nonhuman world. Textscape parallels physical landscape. The braiding of poetry, material road, human, and nonhuman actors suggests how pilgrimage texts literally altered landscapes. While Astrid Bracke sees the “meandering stories and relatively slow pace of [Graham Swift's] *Waterland*” as stemming from the “oozing and meandering nature of one its most important nonhuman characters: the river Oose” (227), I see a parallel movement with the pilgrimage path in the pilgrimage ecopoetics. The healthy ecopoetics of local language meshes with the sustainable vibrancy of the land we traverse. The pilgrimage path, continually amending, indicates how human and nonhuman intersect. Walking on medieval roads inscribes the landscape (Allen and Evans 1) as a form of physical narrative paralleling how pilgrimage manifests itself in written narrative. Masses of pilgrims inscribed their marks on pathways to shrines; “human movement naturally leaves a trace,” most readily witnessed on non-paved surfaces (Miles-Watson and Miles-Watson 330). Causing landscape erosion, the grinding down of the pilgrimage track, reflecting the "slowness of flat ontology," occurs over vast expanses of time (Yates 207). We don't see dirt evolving, because its changes occur so slowly.

Shaping the ‘real world’ through textual representation, pilgrimage poetry, as environmental poetry, intimately entwines with the landscape through which a pilgrim passes and becomes part of. The Host knows the time by noticing how “the shadwe of every tree” is as long as his own body (II.7). The pilgrimage road itself was “a strategic point of interaction between human and environment” (Allen and Evans 26), where human and nonhuman agencies interact (Allen 2016 82). It is not simply the human creating the road (Allen and Evans 3); pilgrims and landscapes affect each other. As Frédéric Gros has argued, “The body becomes steeped in the earth it treads. And thus, gradually, it stops being in the landscape: it *becomes* the landscape” (85). At the start of *Piers Plowman*, Will, exhausted from traveling—“wery of forwandred”—goes to rest “[u]nder a brode banke bi a bornes side” (*Prologue* 7-8). The water in this brook mesmerizes him, whereupon he falls asleep, dreaming—with brief moments of wakefulness—the subsequent thousands of lines of text. In this instance, the path and its environs dynamically function as co-author or “narrative agenc[y]” (Oppermann 2018 13).

Walking occurs at a lingering pace, allowing for unexpected encounters. Contingency permeates pilgrimage texts. The hazardous journey into hell affects Dante’s pilgrim emotionally. As he begins his way down into hell, the pilgrim swoons at the suffering of Paolo and Francesca, swirling in the buffeting winds in the second circle. Geoffrey Chaucer the pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales* accidently falls into the company of pilgrims at a hostelry in Southwark. The sudden appearance of an “alestake” (VI.321), indicating the presence of a tavern, sparks the suggestion of his fellow pilgrim, the Pardoner, to eat and drink in the *Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale*. While Chaucer’s pilgrims stop to imbibe alcohol at the Pardoner’s insistence, they also unexpectantly indulge in a sojourn of rest along the way to Canterbury. The route acts in tandem with the human actor. As such, the landscape can be “a palimpsest of human and nonhuman movements: a communally intersecting biography” (Tsing 237). In *Piers Plowman*, lazy peasants replete with food refuse to work, whereupon Hunger invades and attacks them. The land rises up against human actors, neglecting their duty to the soil and, in turn, their own existence.

Medieval pilgrimage literature proves suggestive for insights from cognitive ecocritical theory. As Nancy Easterlin argues, "an understanding of humans as wayfinders suggests a complex and dynamic interest on the part of humans in the environment, the surround itself is complex and dynamic and is frequently in a state of change as the individual or group moves through it" (261). We see this when De Guilleville’s hapless pilgrim must choose which path to take—that of the honest laboring peasant or of the pretty girl playing with a ball. These moments halt the impetus forward, slowing down the action, pooling into moments of physical privation, desire, and even indecision. Slow physical pilgrimage shapes slow poetics.

One of the slower—if more disturbing—of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Clerk’s Tale* lies rooted in the landscape of Italy. The Clerk acknowledges how the original poet (Petrarch) invoked “Pemond and of Saluces the contree,/ And speketh of Apennyn, the hilles hye,/ That been the boundes of West Lumbardye,/ And of Mount Vesulus in special,/ Where as the Poo out of welle smal/ Taketh his firste spryngyng and his sours,/ That estward ay encresseth in his cours/ To Emele-ward, to Ferrare, and Venyse” (IV.44-51). The specific topological and geographical features place the story in a particular environment. The tale goes on to depict a human actor’s attempts to manipulate the more than human actors he encounters. Ecocatastrophic practices includes the predatory exploitation of nonhuman actors; within misogyny, women embody this position (see Gaard 40). Here, the nobleman Walter transplants the peasant Griselde. He plucks from her father’s humble cottage, literally translating her into rich clothes (see IV.385). After years of resiliently enduring her husband’s cruelty—falsely making her believe their children have been killed by his orders—she finally burst forth into full flower, warning him not to inflict the same cruelty on his next wife. Her vernacular protest transmutes the vicious brutality she has endured into a—seemingly—happy ending.

*Piers Plowman* likewise takes its time. Each section is called a *Passus*, Latin for step. Langland draws out a wild kaleidoscope with snippets from Abraham’s suffering to Christ’s crucifixion, and even looks forward to the Apocalypse. All this is embedded in the little life of one Will, a late fourteenth-century Englishman. Aging from randy—“yepe” [“yeasty” (XI.18)]— youth to impotent old man over the course of thousands of alliterative verse, Will bears witness to the nonhuman world, including animals who mate more reasonably than human (XI.327-372). The poem agonizingly draws the reader along a pilgrimage from the creation of Adam and Eve through Judeo-Christian history. The slowness of physical pilgrimage infiltrates the action, matter, and plot of this pilgrimage poem.

The pilgrim might be what Catrin Gersdorf dubs an "environmental phenomenologist," decelerating into a slow promenade or amble (Gersdorf 44-5). This slowness allows the human actor to pay attention to her surroundings. As Alec Finlay observes referencing Frédéric Gros’ *The Philosophy of Walking*, “[T]he only way slower than walking is *looking*” (Finlay 248). The narrator of Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* marks and identifies each little aromatic plant, from the “lycorys and the cetewale,/ And many a clowe gylofre,/ And notemuge to putte in ale” (VII.761-3). Pilgrimage, a “*time* dependent” phenomenology of perceiving and interacting with the world, enables the pilgrim to focus not (just) on the arrival but also the meander there (Northcott 223-4). The resistance to speed helps the human actor pay attention to nonhuman actants: from language and path to little herbs and even poetry itself.

**Textual Wayfaring: Slow Walking through Textscape**

“[A] walk is a path for two” (Finlay 96)

Pilgrimage is slow. Pilgrimage poetry is slow poetry. Very slow. Michael Northcott has pointed out how walking in traditional pilgrimage “involves slow organic movement through a landscape such that the rhythm of movement mirrors the rhythm of the Earth” (Northcott 215). This rhythm of peregrination extends to the imaginative “terrain,” causing “a repetitive, spontaneous poetry to rise naturally to the lips, words as simple as the sound of footsteps on the road…” (Solnit 70; Gros 212). Just as walking carves a path in the dirt and gravel, so too writing inscribes a poetic line. The material pilgrimage poem shapes pilgrimage practice, catalyzing transformation to affect not a bodily, but a spiritual cure. Pilgrims (historical and imagined), fictive tales, and more than human entities like the path itself work together, as “we enter a landscape through the arch of language” (Finlay 18). Physical ordeal, creative act, and reading show resilience through the slow actions and responses of the pilgrim-walker, pilgrim-writer, and pilgrim-reader.

A key concept for slow pilgrimage ecopoetics, literal amendment can be seen in the evolving literary artefact itself; post-Dantean poems exist in multiple versions. Just as roads have detours, medieval pilgrimage literature remains unfinished, fragmentary, or multiple. JuanRuiz revises his 1330 work, *Libro de Buen Amor*,in the 1340s. Deguileville himself amends *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* from the 1330s, with a reworked iteration appearing in 1355 (Clasby xv). At the end of the fourteenth-century, Langland edits *Piers Plowman* over twenty years, resuling in the A-, B-, and C-versions. Chaucer aims at a prolonged poem with *The Canterbury Tales*, so huge it remains incomplete and in fragments—discrete chunks—at his death. Each mutable, textscape replicates landscape. The ever-evolving state of land on which physical pilgrimage was imprinted reflects the ever-evolving state of the pilgrimage poem.

The fragmentary or multiple text intimates how each poem alters depending on the reader. Recognizing that the self is not whole or finished but under constant revision, much like a text or pilgrimage path, vernacular pilgrimage poems, invite—even insist—on the reader’s involvement (Moslund 38). Vernacular writers envision collaboration with readers, urging them to improve on or amend the writerly text. As Jan-Dirk Müller argues, "no author ... controls the shape of his texts once they are distributed” (Müller 148). The pilgrimage genre forces the reader to become a textual pilgrim. The very meaning of the text is its *variance* among recipients. As the narrator declares in *Mandeville's Travels* concerning his readers: “Y make hem [them] partyners' (2850-53)" (Cohen 159). This co-writing functions as a penitential exercise by the reader, just as the writing of the poem is for the poet.

Amendment suggests resilient evolution, the ability to thrive through both resistence and change. In ecological terms, an organism evolves within a specific biosphere to prosper; in literary terms, the poems amend by interacting with other organisms—in this case, readers. In fact, a poem can increase its liveliness through the response readers enact with it. At the end of his poem, Deguileville asks for the reader's/listener's aid.

If I have not dreamed this dream well, I pray that it be corrected by those who can dream better or who can make it better. (185-186)

In Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de Buen Amor,* the Archpriest allows the reader agency over his text: “Anyone can amend it who pays tribute to good love,/ Since error and wrong-doing do not preclude amendment” (1507). He uses the word *amend* in the sense of correcting his poem (*emiende*) and then in the sense of correcting one’s deeds or acts (*emienda*). “Any man who hears the book and knows how to write verse/ May add to it or amend it, if he wishes” (1629). Ruiz, by leaving the text "open and open-ended" (Reiss 134), argues for an active reader and readership through the act of amendment. We readers perform poetic penance through interpretation.

In Langland's *Piers Plowman*, amendment, appearing dozens of times as word and concept, remains an unfinished process. The allegorical personifications of Contrition, Confession, and Satisfaction teach how to scrub away filth from Haukyn’s coat, an allegory for his soul. Dye this coat, he is told, with good will and “Goddes grace to amende the” (XIV.20). The dirty Haukyn stands for every fallen soul, each one of us, as witnesses or readers of Langland’s poem. The good work of the poem is realized if it succeeds in affecting Haukyn—and us. We each have a role in that amendment, spiritual and poetic. The narrator in the English prose *Pilgrimage of the Soul* addresses his reader: “I beseche you all to amende it. Which that haue kunnyng in that matier more thann haue I, for myn is simple and of litel value” (Peters and Kablitz 34, n.35). Asking the reader to correct the work demonstrates how amendment of a poetic text remains no mere theme, but emerges as agenda for the active participation, even collaboration, of reader with writer. Mandeville also bids the reader to amend his text: “And ȝif I err in deuisynge for forȝetynge or eƚƚ þat þei mowe redresse it & amende it” (Hamelius 1:4, also 1:80). Readers, through multiplicity, contribute to the diversity and resilience of the unfinished poem itself.

The dynamic interchange among author-text-reader creates an animated network. Co-writing on a slow poetic journey functions ecologically as we become interwoven in the environment of words. This environment of the literary work exerts agency with and against the reader (see Bastian 106-107). Vibrant actants, “not merely as inert objects but as things with dynamic agency” (Hsy 2018 298), pilgrimage poems thrive. Donna Haraway’s assertion that “making kin” (160) works as “life-saving strategy for the Anthropocene” applies to us in our continually dynamic linguistic pilgrimage (Oppermann 2017 3). Even the animal skin upon which the medieval manuscript was inscribed participates in “a collective (the embodied network of the author, parchment, and scribe, as a trio of participants interacting over time)” (Hsy 2018 297-8). The human and manuscript “share equal status as co-participants (nodes) in such networked web of agentive relations” (adapted from Hsy 2018 299). The strategy of “slow poetics” authorizes the reader to co-perform the text, making author, reader, and text all kin.

The pilgrim writer pushes the edge forward along with the reader, mapping a local and vernacular language. Continually dynamic, pilgrimage poems—literary works of slow process, indeterminacy, and non-closure—correspond to an understanding of the world where “[h]uman beings live in the world, not on it” (Ingold 333). Pilgrimage poems, sanctuaries of linguistic diversity, much like nature preserves reserved to foster and protect biodiversity, enact radical resilience (Haraway 162). Just as the historical pilgrim presses ahead through a new space, the pilgrim reader advances alongside the writer, co-creating a resilient literary work.

**“As you walk, you make your own road.”**

Antonio Machado, “Traveler, your footprints”

The Middle Ages anticipate a constructive, non-hierarchical engagement with the world through pilgrimage and pilgrimage literature.Rather than a reading of mastery, the pilgrim-reader’s “flashes of understanding” in “the active work of reading” only “come by chance, or by accident” (Bastian 107). Rejecting mastery suggests a more ecologically-friendly way of reading, acting as a sign of what Michel Serres calls tenancy (Serres, 85-86). We are tenants of the language we voice, sustaining the vitality of speech.

We also are mere tenants on the material pilgrimage path and as readers of a pilgrimage poem. The pilgrim poet's slow verse cures spiritually, forcing the reader to de-accelerate and make “oneself at home” in the world (Bergmann and Sager 1). Allowing for welcoming and caring hospitality—even tenderness (Solnit 21)— on the part of the reader, contingency vibrantly textures and thickens the design of physical and literary slow pilgrimage. Like the deliberate walker, the slow and mindful reader adjusts her pace to her breath, becoming aware of the poetic space into which she is integrated. The receptive reader, open to amendment and change, resiliently adapting, thrives. Slow pilgrimage ecopoetics represents a dynamic way we may increasingly come to perceive the world itself.

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1. All citations from Mandelbaum. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Clasby. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)