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## THE QUESTION OF THE HOLY GRAIL

One does not have to be a specialist in religious history or the science of symbols in order to yield to the fascinating variations on the meanings of the Holy Grail. This strange vessel was undoubtedly already imbued with secret traditions when from the end of the 12th century to the end of the 13th century it was briefly resplendent with all the glory conferred by legend, before disappearing into the semi-darkness of mystery until Wagner's *Parzifal* brought it back to light by drawing from it the redemption of the suffering inflicted by Schopenhauer's world.

### THE TRADITION OF THE GRAIL

According to a medieval legend, borrowed by Robert de Boron around 1190 from the apocryphal gospels, the wealthy Joseph

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of Arimathea was at the origin of the cult of the Grail. He was purported to have used the vessel of the Last Supper to receive the blood of the crucified Christ, before being accused, as owner of the Holy Sepulchre, of having stolen Christ's body. In his hiding place he was comforted by the apparition of the resurrected Christ, who initiated him into the sacrifice of the Mass and fed him in a strange manner: a dove came every day and deposited the Host in the sacred vessel. Freed, then exiled by the Emperor Vespasian, Joseph fled beyond the seas to England where he founded a church of the Grail at Glastonbury, dedicating it to the Virgin Mary. The ritual gathered twelve disciples around a table similar to that of the Last Supper; a fish occupied the place of the Lord, but the thirteenth place, that of the traitor, was left vacant. From this legendary gathering was born a second, then a third, story, by this time inscribed in the courtly world, in which the companions of King Arthur substituted the quest for the Grail for the homage it was rendered. Placed in an inaccessible castle, the vessel acquired a new dimension that went beyond the topography of knightly adventure by conferring a deeper spiritual sense to it.

Chrétien de Troyes made the nature of the vessel as a relic secondary: the quest for the Grail is at the center of his unfinished *Conte del Graal*. A mysterious cup is presented to the ailing Fisher King, but it is not enough to put an end to his suffering, because his deliverance requires the intervention of one who can ask the right question. The story then became interested in Percival, the Knight errant never abandoned by divine grace: the story of his quest thus became the story of an entire life. The scribes of Cluny, who edited the *Queste del Saint Graal*, and their successors, give three different versions of the quest with an always greater affirmation of symbolism. Into the cult of the Grail they introduce the image of an idealized earthly love, nourished with oriental, Islamic tradition, especially the Sufi mystique. Thus Mary, the receptacle of the divine incarnation, becomes materially identified with the Grail so that those who take up the quest are called on to serve the pure Virgin and the fertile Mother of God at the same time.

But the oriental dimension of the Grail is also a reminder that it has the lost paradise at its origin and paradise regained as its

future. It is in the Orient that it must find its final sanctuary, and around 1720 Albrecht von Scharfenberg described the castle of the Grail with such precision that archaeologists could believe to have found it in Persia, on the sacred mountain of Schiz where Zarathustra was born and where Khosro II built a palace in the form of a geometric labyrinth in the 7th century.

Thus the Grail glows in the light of a sacred fire that runs from Mazdaism to the Manicheans of the first century and as far as medieval Catharism. In fact, the Cathares believed the redeeming work of Christ was unfinished, original sin was none other than a spiritual death, so that the mission of the initiate was to find the purifying way that would lead to the celestial light. The same epoch saw the flourishing of a mannered court culture in Provence and Languedoc that elevated Cathare devotion and an art of elegant living marked by the ritual kiss of welcome and fraternal agapes. Incited by the French crown, the Roman Church preached the crusade against the Cathare heresy, new versions of the legend had the Grail disappear at Montségur after having put it at the center of the merciless combat led by the community of believers.

So what is the Grail? A caldron of Celtic witches, a Greek mixing jar, the goblet from which the Neophyte of Eleusis drank during his initiation into the mysteries; it is the inexhaustible bosom of Mother Earth and the inverted cup of heaven whose vault is displayed above her. It is the chalice of the transubstantiation that receives the blood of the Savior, the Holy Mass and the blasphemous mass, the casket of the Lord's body over which the dove flies and the funerary urn from which the phoenix will be reborn from its ashes. It is the pure womb of the Virgin Mary and the overflowing womb of the Universal Woman, the fountain from which the blessed drink the water of eternal youth and the table that awaits a magic word to be prepared. It receives the essence of the Spirit and the froth of intoxication. It is the universal crucible from which man can draw his well-being and look for his salvation, find his paradise—and it is exactly as a *Mixtum compositum* that it is the Unique, the All and the Salvation. Wolfram von Eschenbach designates it simply as the “Object”, and could just as well speak of a “non-Object” since all the logical contradictions cancel each other out, by which we are kept

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aware of the sentiment of our final destiny: "There is something called the Grail which dispenses all blessings." Devotion and heresy are side by side in this superabundance of meaning just as the felicity of its quest and the despair it arouses are associated. The Grail celebrates the feminine principle at the same time as it reproves it; it radiates the light of the world to which however it remains hidden. Its message is universal, but the initiates are rare, and only the elect are its guardians. The Grail transmits the true gospel, the good news, but the Church cannot hear it and does not want to know it. It affirms the wisdom of the pagans, but no one can see it if he is not baptized. What is the Grail then, to be all that?

In the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach the "Object" is a stone. It bears, written in bad Latin, a name as enigmatic as itself: *Lapsit exillis*. Does this mean the *lapis lapsus ex coelis*, the stone fallen from the sky, akin to the meteorites, of the Kaaba in Mecca? The hermit Trévrizent teaches his nephew Percival that the stone, an emerald, became detached from Lucifer's crown during his combat with God before it was deposed on earth by angels who gave it into the keeping of a community of initiates. The Grail, last vestige of the divinity of Satan: a fragile account of an origin that Trévrizent himself partially refutes before Percival, called to search for the Grail, in his turn goes beyond this retraction. Is the *Lapsit exillis* really *Lapis exillis*, the "insignificant" stone, the alchemic stone of the sages reputed insignificant because it dissembles to the uninitiated eye, similar from then on to the biblical stone rejected by the builders, before the right architect makes it the cornerstone of the Kingdom of God? Or the *Lapis exulis*, the stone of exile? This bad Latin would thus be speaking the language of the cabala and the stone would be the Schechina, the mystic figure of God chased from Eden with Adam and forced to roam with him in this world until the light of wisdom takes him back to the Garden of Eden.

Wolfram von Eschenbach affirms to have the authentic account of the Grail not from Chrétien de Troyes but from a Provençal troubadour named Kyôt, who obtained it in Toledo from an Arab source whose author was a Jewish astronomer named Flegetanis. A fascinating itinerary, when we think that the Jew represents the cabala, the Arab astrology, Toledo the school of alchemists

and Kyôt the Cathare heresy. The one with a practiced ear can hear each of these sources rustle and murmur in *Parzival*, but they would all mock him if he attempted to systematically orient himself by following their wake. And to finish he may, here again without the slightest guarantee, consider along with the majority of the specialists on Wolfram von Eschenbach that the entire genealogy of Kyôt is just an invention of the author, the defense of a poet whose audacity no doubt gives some reason for protecting himself behind an authority, as he also takes refuge behind the illiteracy of the knight he is—“*ih kan deheinen buochstab*—I do not know one single letter!” We are only the more surprised to see that his Grail is more than anything else a support for characters, a medium on which appear the names of the elect—thus they must be able to read so as to know what is awaiting them. The object of this study will thus not be the Grail as such but as code and support of a complex literality, that which is disengaged from the work of art that is *Parzival*. More than an alchemistic formula, this major work is a piece of great literature, set down at the beginning of the 13th century by a vassal of the minor nobility in a middle-high German dialect in eastern Franconia. Hidden in this language it preserved all its original freshness. What thus leads us to evoke it by letting ourselves be drawn along its various turnings is a too human interest for a possible totalization, not in Man, who does not exist, but in man and woman, in the always troubling and salutary ambiguity inherent in each sex; an interest also for the serenity of Wolfram, barely the shadow of a despair that he allows to hover over this original tearing apart of humanity.

## WOLFRAM'S LAUGHTER

Laughter and suffering are mixed from the beginning, from the moment of Percival's birth. Herzeloide dreamed that she would give birth to a dragon who would mangle her; but what she brought forth was a healthy infant whose virility had no need to be hidden under the fig leaf of modesty. The little Adam could strut about in all his nudity and be celebrated by women as a lucky charm. This good fortune had certainly not been brought by the

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father of the child. He abandoned the mother when she was pregnant to die in the Orient, where he left a second wife—or a first? — a pagan queen and her child (Feirefiz). It is not surprising that Herzeloide wanted to keep her son from all that concerned chivalry and bring him up in solitude. But her very words betrayed this intention and destroyed the virginal paradise. She described her God as pure light to her adored son: at the first brilliant appearance he encountered in the forest, the child imagined himself to be in the presence of God. Actually, it was a knight, but this degraded image of God was enough to irresistibly draw him toward the universe of the fallen creation. Under the illusion that the mockeries of the world would quickly bring back her child, the mother disguised him as a fool, in a desperate ruse.

Percival leaves and does not notice that the one he leaves behind has a broken heart; it is terrible and ridiculous, the extravagant way in which he follows to the letter the strange advice of his mother. From the first woman he meets at the river's edge he wrests a kiss and her ring, as well as the fastening of her gown. The attentive reader will understand the seriousness of the scene: it is a rape, even if Wolfram treats it in veiled terms so that Percival can later invoke the innocence of the lady. As for the boar spear with which Percival kills the Red Knight, whose armor and horse he covets, it is a perfectly ridiculous weapon. For this murder, the simpleton is guilty a second time in the eyes of this world of strangers, and he has to atone for many things before becoming himself the Red Knight whose trappings serve him as costume. In spite of that, a woman's laughter again welcomes him at the court of King Arthur. This laughter is not a mockery but a grace accorded to him; Dame Cuneward, who had never laughed, does it for the first time when she sees him, and the marshal punishes her for her lack of manners. But Percival feels so obliged to her that he sends one after another of the knights that have been conquered to the lady who laughed so that she can give them back the life they lost. This mending of each offense, thanks to which the hero each time sees more clearly into himself, may be considered as exemplary of his progress and also of the progress of the story.

In this series of variations that are as audacious as they are full of humour, we also find many familiar motifs of the Sacred

History. Percival, “almost” born of a virgin, having grown up “almost” in paradise, falls headlong into the world of mortal sins to which even in the most delicate cases the laughter of the romance reserves the clemency of the “almost”, which absolves them.

In calfskin boots, Percival roams the courtly world which receives him only “almost”—the laughter of the Dame replaces for him the knighthood to which he aspires—and he mounts the stolen horse that he cannot master but which is often able to find the way, when no mastery would have been of any help, to lead him to Gurnemanz, his preceptor, who will finally teach the young fool how a knight should live. Percival learns the career of a knight in only one day, and that is a choice in favor of laughter. It is funny and sad at the same time that the instruction received was not at the service of a lady whose success the preceptor had counted on: Percival only “almost” loves the beautiful Liaze and does not remain at Grahaz either as son or son-in-law. The next woman will be the right one, Condwîr âmûrs, whom he delivers from her undesirable suitor in the miserable castle of Pelrapeire, so that he himself is loved. The tale must again first eliminate all trace of the violence with which this fool approached the lady on the river bank, just as the memory of abandoned Liaze calls for justice, so that Percival spends two chaste nights with Condwîr âmûrs, during which he expresses such sentiments that she believes herself to be already his wife before actually becoming so on the third night. This quasi-virginal marriage is surrounded in the story with all the signs of an unhallowed sacrament. To begin with, Percival, the liberator, lies in the glow of many candles, as a miraculous image on the high altar, while the lady beseeches him on her knees at his feet. But what follows when, confused, he asks her to come into his bed, is a merry game that in the most human tones does not at all compromise the purity of the scene.

## THE WOUND OF AMFORTAS

The vast motif of the alliance is still far from being achieved, and conjugal happiness does not yet retain Percival. First he must

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feel himself at the lowest point of his quest, to the point where the human species suffers the most, to the deepest of its contradictions. Percival thinks he will go and see his mother and gets lost, finally arriving at the castle of the Grail, which is only found when it is not looked for and where laughter seems extinguished forever. There lives Amfortas, the Fisher King and guardian of the Grail, dying from a wound. Instead of waiting to see what was written on the stone, which would have designated the true queen to him, he blundered into a violent love, believing he saw a turtledove of Venus in the dove of the Holy Spirit that the Order of the Grail bears on its escutcheon. At the service of the *belle dame sans merci*—the romance devotes an entire chapter to her—he had been marked with a stigmata ridiculously analogous to the wound in the side of the crucified Christ, and of a matchless horror. Because a poisoned lance pierced him in the testicles, at the very heart of his masculinity, the only thing to soothe him would be the incadescent point of the lance constantly penetrating his ailing flesh so as to extract the mortal cold. He would long ago have died, which was his hope, if his courtiers did not come unceasingly to show him the Grail, the bearer of an inexhaustible life but which brought only torment to him. The androgynous symbolism of this obscene suffering is impressive. Amfortas sought the feminine element in the confusion of his impulses; this penetrates into his flesh with the aspect of a horrible nuptial wound. He is extended there, on a sumptuous couch, the caricature of a complete man, who awaits from his visitor the liberating question that no one has the right to utter if it is to be effective: “What is making you suffer?” But the visitor had learned from his preceptor that a knight does not ask questions when he can see for himself, and Wolfram’s desire was that Percival should see not only the sensitive point of Munsalvaesche, the castle of the Grail. He should also see its magnificence, the splendors of the ceremonial, the generous forms of the young girls serving the Grail, only one of whom, the most beautiful, is worthy of the greatest bliss, to carry the “Object.” There is a plethora of mulberry wine, roasts and fish: what more could one wish for the success of this setting? That he himself, Percival, was not good enough would not be told him until the next day, and he is bluntly chased away like a wild goose into the desert of a disenchanted



world. Percival then falls into the abyss that appeared in creation when it detached itself from God; he must learn to suffer like Amfortas, or “almost” so, to be able to cure him on a still distant day. The original wound of the human species must appear also to him, this profound doubt with regard to the exact meaning of creation and the fidelity of its creator. God must cease to shine in the garb of a knight so as to be revealed in the shadow and nudity of man. Percival abandons his service after having been transfixed in the court of King Arthur by the curse of the messenger of the Grail. From then on his own body is pierced by the poisoned spear and this wound will ripen in him the question that was premature for the young man of no experience. Because the expected one was not a pitying spectator but a man who had also been affected in his deepest being.

For Wolfram this also means that his hero must have felt his separation from his wife as strongly as he felt that from God. In the suddenly wintry forest her image appears to him in the snow, fallen from the sky with drops of blood from a goose killed by a falcon. This goose was formerly himself, and he still “almost” is at the instant in which all his thoughts are absorbed in this trace. It is here, on the cold earth, that he reads what he was not able to see at Munsalvaesche: plunged into the mystery of separated love he understands the mission of the Grail and of what it speaks. He must still come out victorious from exemplary combats before admitting that it is he himself that he meets in his adversaries; only then will he discover all the grace of relationship and be able to ask the question of the Grail with the familiarity that already holds the answer: “My uncle, what is causing your suffering?”

But laughter has never been lacking in this romance, especially at the worst moments in the life of its hero. The falcon that sends the wild goose from the sky is at the same time shown as a frozen companion and already the shared sufferings have less effect on the amused reader. The scene of the drops of blood, whose sacred nature blocks the verse at the appearance of the name of *Condwîr âmûrs*, is interrupted by two troublemakers who knock Percival off his horse as in a dream before Gawain, the merciful and the man of experience, covers with his cloak the proof of the sorrow of love in the snow. Humor remains alive

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in the romance, even with regard to the messenger of the Grail who it transforms into a monstrous animal, without caring about the seriousness of his message; even more, in her bizarre garb it permits the appearance of the woman who, at a better time, will lift the curse and generously distribute the grace she also needs.

### PERCIVAL AND HIS DOUBLES

Nevertheless, Percival was not entirely in error when at Munsalvaesche he could not find the sensitive point and was only interested in what was presented to his senses: the fable gives proof of this with his half-brother Feirefiz, in a sort of ironic retrospective. Gone to search for his father, the pagan king spotted with black and white arrived in the West, as Percival, looking for his mother, arrived as far as the Grail. After the two brothers recognize each other during a duel the pagan accompanies the elected on the royal road that leads to Munsalvaesche. Unfortunately, he can only see the young girl carrying the Grail, not the Grail itself. For that he must be baptized. Which is what happens but with the sole aim of being able to carry off the lady, with whom he was immediately smitten. Wolfram considered this a reason worthy to figure in the story of the Grail, as is shown in the continuation of the romance, because the son the girl gives to the converted pagan is none other than Prester John, whom legend designated to reunite the East and the West. A union of the true faith, of course, but as the preceding story shows, not in defiance of a more human passion: this is not only equivalent to the Grail but can replace it. Feirefiz is Ishmael, formerly fallen from the sacred history to roam in the desert, now deemed worthy to take his treasures back to paradise, as the Queen of Sheba brought hers from Arabia. He is at the same time the king of the Orient who placed his treasures before the manger of salvation. He shares with Percival the explosive secret according to which the Grail was guarded so exclusively only because its message was as little exclusive as its origin. The East and the West, Christ and the pagans, God and Lucifer, at the beginning and at the end: man and woman are equally sheltered in this vessel, in happiness and grace. As his title indicates, the unlimited power of the Priest-King is

spiritual as well as temporal; the cross is a symbol of cosmic universal love and opens a way beyond Golgotha, in a world order that governs the movement of the stars.

Naturally, this is not the true faith for which the crusades were fought. In his other great romance, *Willehalm*, Wolfram, in a tragic case of conscience, combats with the part of the world that has a different faith. Tragic because the historical gravity of this theme provides no issue toward the neutral zone of utopia: Gyburg, the converted pagan woman, whose love forces her to separate from her lineage, is herself the victim of the war, and her words are desperate: "Listen to the advice of a foolish woman/ Spare the one created by the hand of God." Just as more than a formal compassion was demanded at the castle of the Grail, in *Willehalm* more than simple tolerance seems to be demanded. Such a demand perhaps explains why the romance remained unfinished. Only in *Parzival* was the devotion to the world shown in a light as cheerful as in this blasphemous compliment with regard to Belakane, queen of the Moors: "Her kindness was pure frivolity."

Appropriate to the formal rule of the romance, the Grail can designate only one person as king, but its secret is revealed in several, if not in all, and each always discovers it at the same time as he does his family. Sigune, whom Percival calls for the first time by her name, is his maternal cousin, on the side of the Grail. Like a statue placed on Percival's way to measure the road covered, she always appears associated with her dead lover and in this martyrdom expiates the mortal sin that in the eyes of Wolfram is failure in a love she could not grasp. For not having been united in life the couple cannot be separated by death: the motif of the Grail here appears in the ironic and sad rupture of a double negation, but even around these strange descendents of the same line hovers the laughter of a deep respect. Like her cousin Liäze before her, Condwîr âmûrs must be fraternally united with Percival before becoming his wife; only this double process makes her worthy to become queen of the Grail. Thus the ties of family have a value of sacrament in *Parzival*. They confer all the powers of a priest to Trévrizent, the laic, and allow him to deliver Percival from his sins; they render the latter able to accomplish the miracle of Amfortas's cure, just as earlier he brought about

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marriages or reunited separated couples. Thus Percival atones for the wrong he did to the world by establishing family ties between his separated elements. So that from the hero of the story he becomes the director of this state of hope inherent in the romanesque form. And this hope is present at every critical moment in the form of the power of laughter, which transforms everything.

Let us return to Feirefiz, who already lends himself to laughter as the magpie-knight and in a way incarnates the duplicity and ambiguity of this world that, in the romance, needs to be saved. From his first words, the romance evokes him in the traits of the magpie; here appears the first of the birds Herzeloide tries to chase away from her harmonious paradise, after its singing had driven the infant Percival to tears. This latter had himself changed into bustard, falcon and goose to become what he was: but it was as a magpie that he had to, when it caught him in a brotherly form, realize his masterpiece, like Wolfram, in the duel with Feirefiz, himself produces his masterpiece of structural humor and laughing wisdom. Because it is Feirefiz who “almost” comes out the winner in the fight, just as Percival “almost” succumbs to it: that is what he had been lacking until then. It is as though the poet had considered that the ambiguous subject matter of his work had to impose its symbolic value against the utopia of a perfect formal order. Feirefiz almost triumphs over the brother that he did not yet know, to the point of breaking the sword he held in his hand, that instrument of sin acquired from the murder of the Red Knight. But afterward, as a true knight, he throws his own sword down in turn, and as the two brothers recognize each other, neither of the two sons of the same father has need of victory. Thus Percival receives the knighthood owed to him by King Arthur. After the acquittal by Trévrizent, after the miraculous apparition of the beloved wife in the snow, the duel between the brothers—a duel with himself—is the last step that consecrates him as king of the Grail. Only at this moment does he appropriate his shadow and solve the enigma of the other and thus is able to deliver the Fisher King Amfortas. The romance may have a happy ending, like a fairy tale, because he is related to himself.

But Wolfram goes on to construct his romance around another hero: the knight Gawain who, first, succeeds in telling Percival

that in him he met only himself. Gawain is not a personage of the legend of the Grail; he is one of the knights of the Round Table, a ladies's man, a "child of the fairies." It is as such that he takes up the story at the moment Percival leaves it: the husband cannot offer to the romance the adventures with which it must be nourished. For a long time, the Germanists had the custom of treating this replacement as a secondary personage, deploring the absence of German profundity in his adventures with ladies. In truth, a paltry reading, because what leads Gawain from one lady to another—toward the unforgettable adolescent Obilot, the swift Amazon Antikonie, the touching Bene—is always the search for the unique woman, Orgeluse. And it is with much more relief than for his first hero that Wolfram here shows that a man must be at the same time more and less than a man to conquer the woman he needs and render justice to the feminine part of himself. Gawain's bravura has something of the devotion of Virgil's Eneas, and the court he pays to Orgeluse is a true laic martyrdom. How many humiliating slanders for a knight of the 13th century he had to allow to be attached to his name: counterfeiter and charlatan, among others. He is different; his chivalry is indulgent. He cures the woman he loves of her hatred for men—in modern terms, of her neurotic fixation on her deceased husband. By helping her to again find confidence he disposes her in his favor, the new companion. The magic bed on which, St. Sebastian of courtly love, he delivers through his heroic passivity the four hundred women prisoners of the castle, makes us laugh. It is no less invested with dignity than the test at the castle of the Grail, however. Gawain renders a service to the romance for which Percival is indebted, to discover in erotic plurality the fidelity toward the one thing he lacks, this same more intense humanity to which the Grail invites those who have undertaken its quest.

The perspicacious reader can discover another therapeutic symmetry in the romance. It is through Gawain alone that we learn that the *belle dame sans merci* to whom Amfortas owes his wounded masculinity was in her turn wounded by a man. She is delivered thanks to Gawain of what lies heavily on her, just as Amfortas is delivered thanks to Percival. So that the division of labor between the heroes reunites Amfortas and Orgeluse, who

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do not even meet in the romance, in a fraternally reconciled couple.

It is Percival himself who allows his cousin to put himself totally at the service of the ladies. It is better to confide oneself to them than to God, he gives him to understand in his despair. In courtly love, Gawain holds to this declaration with blasphemous overtones with in addition the trusting certitude, worthy of Wolfram von Eschenbach, that it could in fact be agreeable to God to hear less rude words from the mouths of women. If, in the end, the phrase expressing despair is nonetheless deviated from its meaning, it is that it evokes two things that actually constitute one act. Percival finds the way to his salvation as a husband extolling marriage, Gawain as a lover *quia absurdum*. But no one can choose the better way. Each follows his legitimate course "so that man learns to lend his help to God," as Eckhart defined the goal to be achieved in an unforgettable way.

### WISDOM OF THE ROMANCE

The *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach is an invention, an artistic universe, a land of never again. At the beginning of the 13th century, the historical knight was already far along on the way leading to Don Quixote. The dominant model of the epoch resembled a Flemish merchant, a Venetian businessman or a reigning prince surrounded by his court. The loss of reality that crept into the castles of the old nobility made it receptive to the compensating plots but also gave it up to the cultural imaginary of its historical successors who, in cities and monasteries, played at being knights. It became material for art and literature. But under the anachronistic costume of the knights was also dissimulated an immediate interest, the quest for a new legitimacy. The historian of civilization will easily see in the Grail the stubborn demand for a new piety, profane, and temporal, that at the very heart of the Roman Church twists and contradicts the dogma according to which "there is no salvation outside the Church." In *Parzival* religious traditions play hardly more than a decorative role; the heroes have their own Good Friday, their own Easter; the narrative network that relays a content formerly considered the

monopoly of the Church runs along beside it so naturally that this romanesque and courtly religion has no need to demonstrate anything whatever.

For the historians of politics and law, the organization of the community of the Grail recalls not only the knightly orders at the time of the Crusades but also the administrative reforms that breached feudal rights by giving priority to the officers invested with a charge over those who claimed it by birth. Thus Frederick II, the prodigy of the medieval world, proceeded radically on the lands of Sicily, where the machinery of imperial functionaries developed to the point of resembling that of a totalitarian state. The one who sees in the castle of the Grail a sort of machine for celibates destined to produce private virtues will find nothing more to say but will consider the Grail as the symbol of an astonishing movement of secularization.

However, there still remains material for an abundant commentary. The reader infatuated with the esoteric can read the romance as a sacred writing reserved for initiates and literally venerate another Messiah in its hero, founder of an ethereal kingdom, to which will be erected a temple similar to that of Dornach, the Munsalvaesche of Rudolf Steiner at the foot of the Gempenfluh. As for me, I am only a modest practitioner of literature who does not scent any depth in the contradictions of a romance except a perfume of humour and the supreme art of a human wisdom rich in experience. Because all are at the same time right and wrong: Gurnemanz, who makes Percival lose his taste for asking questions; all those who at the castle of the Grail feel the imperious need of it; Percival who nevertheless does not interrogate; Trévrizent who tells him the question he should have asked with the sad certainty that it is in any case already accomplished; and then Percival who nonetheless asks it again but slightly differently—and up to Lohengrin to whom on the contrary one does not have the right to ask who he is or where he comes from. What is true, what we can question, depends on the situations that the romance and its author inscribe in the double game of relative and relation, human relations or relations internal to the narrative structure. The narrator is only interested in the most important trait of a great adventure. The Grail incarnates the utopia of a divine labor that associates the creator and his creatures,

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the narrator and his characters, all partners. Wolfram is lucid enough to show with a smile the limits of this utopia which is no more and no less than a work of art. But the limits of a creature define all its form, in which are expressed its interior truth as well as the traits given by God, who desired and loved this form enough to create it. The work of art affirms: I have limits and I hold them sacred, as man must consider his own, not as a simple burden, error and original sin but man or woman, as an inexhaustible appeal, a bridge to humanity. And it is precisely this smile by which the work of art declares its limits that makes them so fluid and allows it to go beyond them in the direction of the reader, inviting him to consider the joy in the story of *Parzival*, as possible if not real, as necessary if not accessible. The necessity of the work of art resides in the radicality of its action; in it we foresee the balance between the created and the engendered, between art and nature, and on this terrain the romance and the reader rejoin each other. "The real," said Goethe, "must not be taken too seriously but one must rise above it in the irony that preserves its problematic." Wolfram's *Parzival* takes the bet that it is not necessary for us to solve the problem of Man or rather of man and woman, in order to experience their union as a grace. And this grace is expressed in the bounty of the Grail, on which Wolfram had imposed no other restraint than that of his art. The one who finds in him the effect of the "Object" has no more need to ask himself what it is. It is the unique object of the romance, in the multiplicity and wealth of the correlations that structure it; it is this substance that is dissolved in a human form. The Grail is an Object of which nothing finally remains but the glow it diffuses on a topography of laughter invented by the very serious quest that each sex pursues, of itself in the other and the other in itself.

Adolf Muschg  
(Zurich)

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson