Resisting Chrétien's Grail: Some Analytic Footing

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This much has not changed for readers of *Perceval*: in the Middle Ages, as in our own time, the death of Chrétien de Troyes is said to occur before the book is ever finished.[1] I want to bypass the widely held belief that Chrétien dies before the completion of his work. My general point is that talk about the way *Perceval* ends is about a great deal else than Chrétien dying.

All the insistence on the death of Chrétien, on the sudden interruption of the narrative, loses its force in the absence of archival and biographical evidence. Since the existence of Chrétien is by no means certain, explaining away the end of the text is, for some, quite simply a matter of the life and death of the author. Moreover, especially for those who put biography aside and insist most strenuously on the poetics of the name, the search for a Chrétien de Troyes lends an overriding narrative purpose to the act of reading: in the story of the grail everything from the prologue to the last sentence may serve an interpretive quest for the significance of the writer's name.

Some preliminary comments need to be made about this problem. First, it is crucial to maintain a distinction between the pagan and the Christian, a tension that is inscribed in the name of Chrétien de Troyes. By taking the fundamental opposition between Christian and Troy as the point where the name becomes problematic, it may be seen that Chrétien de Troyes is a source of confusion not just for would-be biographers of the writer but for readers of his texts. The substitution of the antique city of Troy for the twelfth-century French city of Troyes produces an effect of contradiction, as the secular remains of one come up against the Christian content of the other. With the substitution of cities in mind, the name of Chrétien de Troyes may resonate not only with Chrétien as bound up with Troyes, but also with the place of this medieval writer as neither Troyes nor Troy but disturbingly both.[2]

So Chrétien's name may be linked to a certain stress, where one line of belief has been fused or confused with another. In a structurally similar way in *Perceval*, the Christian signifier (in the form of the holy grail) is spliced with the secular or non-Christian signifier. The story of *Perceval*

works on a complicated series of transformations and conversions, centering on conflicts between the "diabolic" adventures of Arthur's Table and the spiritual quests of Christianity.[3] It would take far too much time to trace these complexities here. The salient point for my purposes is that Perceval's quest for the grail enacts a spiritual ascent already present in the name of Chrétien de Troyes. But, just as the pagan content of Troy contradicts the spirituality of Chrétien, something remains to unsettle Perceval's conversion. This is the sense (especially present in medieval continuations of *Perceval*), in which the quest for the grail demands more story or the narrative itself demands closure. For instance, it remains to be seen whether Perceval ever recovers the grail, and the lasting effect of this deferral is to cast doubt upon his conversion. Nowhere does this impression of an incomplete quest appear more overwhelmingly than in the writer's name, where it is the impression of the Christian subject himself.[4]

On a different tack, I want to consider the narrative of *Perceval* against the background of medieval approaches to language and signs. In looking at the primacy of the signified and the idea of the Book—these are the central predicates attributed in the Augustinian tradition to writing, reading and exegesis—it will become clear that the story of the grail operates against the dominant, theological model of narrative.

There are, of course, powerful objections to the assertion that Augustinian thinking is everywhere and in everything. A consideration of some of the effects of medieval sign theory on vernacular texts, such as *Perceval*, brings up the problem of adopting a basically one-sided, theological view of literary operations, which in turn may lead to a simple causal nexus. Thus, there is clearly an element of risk in considering theology as a prime mover in medieval literature. The whole recent emphasis on medieval semiotics becomes largely a matter of identifying theological concerns in literary texts.[5]

This is not to argue—or not to make the claim on behalf of a "traditional" wing in medieval studies—that the kind of semiotic interest that is claimed, say, for Saint Augustine should not be seen as associated with developments in vernacular literature. Instead, I should insist that Chrétien, far from breaking with Christianity, is an example of someone who continues to write within the theological terms handed down by his age. That tradition of Christianity shows up in his name as a condition inherent in his language. For there is simply no writing—and certainly no writing in the twelfth century—that can claim to step completely outside the discursive limits of Christianity. The very desire to uproot Christian models of language and narrative ends up by repeating them in a manner which constantly betrays its Christian lineage. To this problem, central to my discussion of *Perceval*, I shall have occasion to return.

With Chrétien's relationship to Christianity in mind, I can begin to examine what kind of signifying practices are at stake in *Perceval*. There is no great difficulty in looking at Chrétien against the horizon of theology, but, as I suggested above, there is obviously a question of the extent of Christian influence on the narrative form itself. By way of a response, one needs to point to the desire of the Church Fathers to put signifying practices within the formal and semantic bounds of Christianity. The attempt to make their version of the history of language persuasive was handled by letting the story tell itself, by anticipating the whole range of pragmatics with Eden, Babel, the Fall and the Incarnation.

The guiding emphasis of this all-encompassing narrative is of course to return believers and non-believers alike, through the light of the Incarnation, to a prelapsarian state. This point, obviously crucial to the entire project of medieval Christianity, explains why theologians pay careful attention to language and literature. When it comes to language the stakes are high, since it is through the Word that humans can lay claim to the transcendental order they have lost.

In the Christian view, language should be used to elevate the (transcendental) signified over the signifier. From this, it becomes obvious that literature poses a threat to the dominant representations of language. With an emphasis on the signifier and the autonomy of the sign, literature is in a position to challenge the theological conception of language. A deep unease about the signifying possibilities of language is therefore apparent in much of the thinking of medieval commentators. But, more to the point here, fear of the signifier comes through in the theological reflex which valorizes the signified. Generally speaking, this may be taken as a move to bind literature to the semantic field of Christianity. Literature would then seem to lack any specificity of its own and would be subject to its signified or Christian message.

Theologians, such as Augustine, serve as a kind of touchstone for determining the powers and the limits of literary language. The signifier is treated as something to be suppressed; it cannot be divorced from the Christian order of meaning it is bound to convey. Augustine provides the general rule in his *De Trinitate*, by declaring that a sign brings forth the presence of "something else"—something else, of course, already constituted by and within the theological framework of a final signified-God. "No sign, writes Augustine, can be said to be known perfectly unless it be known of what it is a sign."[6] Yielding from the outset to Augustine's police-action, to the constraints of its theological conceptualization, literature is compelled to, in Derrida's words, "efface itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches."[7] For mainstream Christian orthodoxy, all the way from Augustine to the height of Scholasticism, the specificity of literature should rest on this shortening of the signifier.

One of the aims of such a program is to foreclose the act of reading. This is really what is at stake in, say, Augustine's exegetical teachings, where readers are directed to hold out against "wicked meanings" (in other words, against the seductive powers of the signifier), for the sake of the Truth. Thus, in *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine writes that, "By following certain traces, the reader may come to the hidden sense without any error, or at least he will not fall into the absurdity of wicked meanings."[8] To go along with Augustine is to avoid an entanglement with the signifier, to avoid "falling" for the contingencies and "errors" of reading. To read with Augustine is to know such errors for what they are; to believe that reading in the end can break free of the temporal and seductive character of language so as to reveal its "hidden" truth. For Augustine, reading is nothing but this transcendental reading in "search of the signified."[9]

It is here, especially in Augustine's guidelines for reading, that a connection is forged between the reading of literature and the mode of its writing. For it is precisely by securing the signifier, by cutting off its semantic range, that the Augustinian tradition would regulate the practice of writing. On the semantic level, it amounts to overdetermining the meaning of a book, to deciding that it is meaningful insofar as it coincides with Christian views.

And this leads on to a wholesale appropriation of the very notions of the book and of writing. As far as language is concerned, medieval theologians took over its being-in-the-world by placing the story of its origin and Fall within the realm of Christian history. In this respect, what is true for language is even more so for writing and the book. The latter are seen as more than mere instruments of the truth; with the Bible, the figure of the book is rooted in the emergence and the history of Christianity. As Curtius shows in his work, *European Literature*, figures of the book and of writing appear throughout the history of literature, but the book received its categorical status in Christianity: the belief that the Bible reveals the trajectory of Salvation history, from the beginning to the end of the world, and the further belief that it constitutes an absolute authority and an origin of meaning, sanctioned the use of the Book as a metaphor for signifying systems.[10]

For medieval theologians, the assertion of a relationship between the "world" and the Book is not to be exclusively understood as a topos or central trope. The Book is involved in a more crucial operation. The emphasis is on literalizing the metaphor, taking it as an outright and complete account of the course of human history. Given the Book's teleology,

Christian orthodoxy is able to invest in its claims to the point of forgetting that it is, after all, a species of metaphor or fiction. (Such forgetting is doubtlessly the enabling moment of all teleologies).

The idea of the Book raises some far-reaching questions about the way Christianity worked to establish its foundational truth-claims. Although these questions merit much wider discussion, from the little said here a few important points can be gathered. Jesse Gellrich has carefully noted the link between political imperatives and the emergence of the Book.[11] It is by way of this political turn that one can see the construction of a rhetorical position.[12] Closely bound up with teleology, the Book is used in the Middle Ages as a containing image, a closed narrative that exercises a totalizing function with regard to the world.[13] It accounts for events as such, and, at the same time, transforms them into texts reflecting those of Scripture and theology. By acknowledging the limits placed upon the world by the Book, Christianity could hope to preserve its conception of history.

In the case of literature, the idea of the Book is linked to another totalizing project—that is, to allow Christianity, as I suggested earlier, to circumscribe literature and master the meaning or signified of the literary text. Faced at all points with the infinite space that the Book occupies, the literary text has only to proclaim the stillbirth of the signifier. The idea of the Book could therefore provide, in Derrida's words, "an encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism" against the vagaries of the literary signifier. For example, Hugh of St. Victor's contention that "the whole universe is a book written by the finger of God," makes *writing* synonymous with the work of God—an activity now worthy of the sacred, one from which all traces of the fallen realm of the signifier have been suppressed.[14]

Let me put the problem in another way. If vernacular writing could be represented as rooted in the Book, one might then demonstrate that all texts, including, notably heretical ones, originate in the Word of God. Contained within the totality of the Book, heretical texts lose purchase upon the world—the telos that is the Book already accounts for heresy and transgression.

This point needs to be developed a bit more. The idea of the Book as it is articulated by Hugh of St. Victor marks an ultimate point of reference, where all possible narrative forms, all possible heretical stands on the totality of Christianity, may be measured. These considerations are of particular relevance when the Christian subject is brought face to face with the Other, with a Christian from Troy—and perhaps even more satisfactorily brought out in an epic song, such as the *Roland*, when the Saracens appear. The point is that notions of otherness or a transgressive beyond to

the Book are disarmed and made into inevitable stages in the unfolding of the Truth. By including, in the classical language of philosophy, the moments of negativity (for instance, heterodoxy, heresy, etc.), no other negative stands are possible, and the totality or the Book is thus complete.[15]

With this, of course, narrative reaches its completion and its end. Derrida describes this completion in philosophical thought—and what may be true of the telos of philosophy, it is suggested here, may also apply to the end of theology. In an essay on Hegel and Bataille, Derrida comments on waking from "le sommeil de la raison,"

> Car au bout de cette nuit quelque chose s'était tramé, aveuglément, je veux dire dans un discours, par quoi s'achevant la philosophie comprenait en soi, anticipait, pour les retenir auprès de soi, toutes les figures de son au-delà, toutes les formes et toutes les ressources de son dehors. Par la simple prise de leur énonciation.[16]

In order to achieve its totality philosophy must, as Derrida argues, include in its system, both identity and non-identity (the latter being the beyond, "l'au-delà" of philosophy). What is outside philosophy, straying beyond the bounds of reason (for example, the irrational), is to be taken in and domesticated within the limits of philosophy. By the same token, any literature that would offend the principles of Christianity should already be anticipated and written off in the Book. In this sense, nobody need worry if literature comes up with forms or fictions that question the established truth: the absolute authority of the Book should enable Christianity to brook any kind of dissent. Indeed the teleology (be it theology or classical philosophy) can only benefit in the long run from such dissent, since the eventual taming of the problem is supposed to help bring about teleology's ends.

Now, it should be asked again, what are the implications of all this for literature in general and *Perceval* in particular? Does literary writing actually follow the theological order to smother the signifier in the interest of the signified? Or does Chrétien question the theological horizon in which he writes, and challenge the possibility of ever mastering the meaning of his texts? However powerful the idea of the Book might be, however sweeping its teleology, it does not go unopposed in *Perceval*. This questioning occurs by invoking a teleology, a final term toward which to steer the narrative, only to suggest that the narrative is not a complete thing in itself, not really continuous, not really destined to reveal a final signified.[17] The gesture towards totality and the possibility of narrative

closure go along with subversion, one of the very conditions that enables *Perceval* to find its foothold within the logic being undercut.

The entire narrative of *Perceval* is symbolically shaped by a transcendental signified, figured by the holy grail, which imposes, on the adventure, expectations of order, closure and revelation that are not borne out. In the story, the holy grail disappears, a mere thing of the past and the future, and Perceval, in turn, acts out the absence of the grail. With the appearance and disappearance of the sacred object, the narrative points itself in the same direction as Perceval who, having remained quiet about the grail and its alluring promise of revelation, situates himself between an unattainable future and what is assuredly only a past dream of presence.[18] The narrator's decision to distance himself from Perceval and begin an account of Gauvain's adventures is based on the very impossibility of Perceval's quest for presence. The narrative breaks off before Perceval and the grail are spoken of again. What remains is the promise that the story of Perceval will continue later:

> De Percheval plus longuement
> Ne parole li contes chi,
> Ainz avrez molt ançois oi
> De monseignor Gavain parler
> Que rien m'oiez de lui conter.
>
> Ici de Perceval le conte ne parle plus. Mais vous m'aurez assez entendu parler de Messire Gauvain, avant que vous m'entendiez raconter quelque chose de lui [Perceval] (6514-6518; my translation).

The suspension of Perceval's story ought to be affirmed without looking into the problem of Chrétien's untimely death. To answer "yes" or "no" to the existence of Chrétien would only have the effect of suppressing the possibility that, in and of itself, the narrative does not come to a definitive end. A space is opened, as it were, a gap in the narrative that enables one to see that the grail quest is not simply incomplete, not simply left open by the death of an author, but a way of preserving what had passed away from the finality of the Book.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Pierre Gallais, *L'imaginaire d'un romancier français de la fin du XIIe siècle*, 3 vol. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988) 1: 7-11. Gerbert de Mon-

treuil's *Continuation of Perceval* is cited by Gallais as evidence that Chrétien dies before finishing his text. Montreuil writes, "Crestïens de Troie/qui de Percheval commencha/mais la mors qui la devancha/ne li laissa pas traire affin (l. 6984-6987).

2 The idea that the name of *Crestïens de Troies* resonates with Troie is based on a contingency in Old French, a connection made initially on a phonemic level. The full implications of the name have been developed by Roger Dragonetti, where it is suggested, on historical evidence, that the French city of Troyes is associated with Troy. Dragonetti points out that Chrétien's name draws upon the medieval imaginary, expressing the popular belief that the Gauls were the descendants of Troy. See Roger Dragonetti, *La vie de la lettre au Moyen Age: Le Conte du Graal* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) 21-22. For a comprehensive discussion of medieval legends of French descent, see Edmond Faral, "Comment s'est formée la légende de l'origine troyenne des Francs," *La Légende arthurienne*, 2 vol. (Paris: Editions Champion, 1969) 1: 262-93.

3 The adventures of the knights of King Arthur cannot readily be separated from the pursuit of personal glory. For a recent discussion of "errances diaboliques," see Dragonetti 22.

4 The question for readers of Chrétien de Troyes is whether the second term of the name, taken as the antique city of Troy, is, in some exaggerated sense, the condition of possibility of Christianity. The logic that asserts the dominance of Christianity and the contrary logic that brings up the presence of the pagan are at work in *Perceval*. My thinking is that the name of Chrétien de Troyes is a condensation of this logic or structure.

5 See, for example, Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney, eds., *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse university Press, 1989).

6 Saint Augustine, *On The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1963) 292.

7 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 160.

8 Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 34.

9 Derrida writes of "the entire history of texts, and within it the history of literary forms in the West," that it "has almost always and almost everywhere, according to some fashions and across very diverse ages, lent itself to this transcendental reading, in that search for the signified." Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 160.

10 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 303-319. For a thoroughgoing discussion of this topic, see Jesse M. Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the*

Middle Ages: Language Theory. Mytholoay and Fiction (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[11] In this connection, see Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book.*

[12] In casting the idea of the Book in this light, I am simply reiterating a commonplace of medieval history—that the activity of representing narrative according to the theological notion of the Book is ideologically motivated. For example, see Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 18; Stephen 6. Nichols, Jr., "The Light of the Word: Narrative, Image and Truth," *New Literary History* 11.3 (Spring 1980): 535-544; Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 322-325.

[13] For medieval references to the Book, see Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 13; *Confessions,* trans. F.J. Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945) 259-90. Alanus de Insulis, *The Plaint of Nature,* trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980). Hugh of St. Victor, *The Didascalion of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts,* trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

[14] Hugh of St. Victor, *The Didascalion* 121-22.

[15] Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic,* trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1969) 611.

[16] Jacques Derrida, *L'ecriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 370.

[17] From this, the reader cannot hope to draw any final conclusions about the significance of the grail. The search for a final signified is presented at every turn with the disappearance of the grail. Perhaps the strongest indication of this frustration comes from a remark made by Pierre Gallais to L'Institut d'Herméneutique: "Et la conception du Graal comme objet de quête est l'un des plus énormes contresens de toute l'histoire des littératures." See his *Perceval et l'initiation* (Paris: Institut d'Herméneutique, 1973) 25. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine a medieval exegete making the same statement.

[18] Despite wanting to know "who uses the grail," and "why the lance bleeds," Perceval guards against asking these questions. This is because Gornement had advised him to remain silent until called upon to speak. Later, Perceval learns that if he had actually inquired about the grail, the wounds of the Fisher King would have been healed and the captives of the castle liberated. See Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal,* ed. William Roach (Geneva: Librairie Droz; Paris: Librairie Minard, 1959) l. 2976-3421 and 4603-4815. Subsequent quotes will be from this edition.

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