

The Person and the Place—VIII:

The Grail Castle

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The Middle Ages, says Emile Mâle, glorified what they most admired—the courage of a hero, joined to the abnegation of a monk. As a typical instance of this feeling, he describes a monument which existed in the church of Saint Faron at Meaux until the Revolution, the tomb of Ogier and Benedict. These two, who were in fact monks of Saint Faron, were buried in the sanctuary at Meaux where they excited the curiosity of the faithful who came, mainly from Paris, to venerate the relics of the patron saint. During the course of the eleventh century the custodians of the place tended more and more, for the benefit of their visitors, to embellish the identity of these two, until it was eventually taken for granted that they must be the very Ogier and Benedict of the *Song of Roland*. Ogier the Dane, it was claimed, who had (in the romance) been one of Charlemagne's finest soldiers, renounced the world at Saint Faron, together with his groom, Benedict. Their story was sung by the jongleurs at the abbey gates, and here they were, in person. So, by the end of the twelfth century, it is not surprising to find that their tomb had been surmounted by a sculptured arch, and hemmed in by rows of statue-columns representing Roland, and Aude his sister, and Olivier to whom Aude was betrothed, Bishop Turpin, Charlemagne, and possibly his queen, Hildegarde. A sword of damascene work ornamented with an eagle and a golden lion, was also exhibited as a holy relic, since there was really no reason why it should not have belonged to Ogier. Thus as Mâle says, 'France represented the personages of its epic poems, not only at the church door, but in the very sanctuary and choir'.

This was true, indeed, not of France alone, but of every place where the influence of chivalry was felt. Along the *via Francigena* which the crusaders took as the first stage of their voyage to the Holy Land, from Verona to Brindisi, Mâle gives further instances of how the *chansons de gestes* were immortalised in the churches. Roland, Turpin, Olivier with his sword Durandal, King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, all found a permanent place along the road where Robert

Curthose 'showered wealth into the laps of the singers and strolling players' who came to entertain and inspire the soldiers on their way to the Holy Sepulchre.

On the face of it, we might simply conclude that the popularity of the songs of chivalry is sufficient to explain why, for instance, the knights of the Round Table go riding up the archivolt of Modena Cathedral to free Guineoie from the Dolorous Tower. But we must remember that these figures, in the popular mind, were more than life size. The ideal here was not mere bodily prowess, any more than the purpose of the crusades was merely to safeguard the prosperity of the colonies of Outre-Mer. The knights went on crusade for the good of their souls. The motive was primarily spiritual, and as Richard de Fournival reminded the stay-at-homes in 1147, the wounds of Christ would be a lasting reproach to them. *En paradis y a place généreuse*. The crusaders were courting death in order to defend the holy places, and to defend truth against the infidel. Mâle himself connects the Modena archivolt with the knights who fight on the cathedral at Angoulême, under a large relief of the apostles going out to spread the good news of the gospel. He does not consider the juxtaposition merely fortuitous.

At Modena, admittedly, there is no parallel subject from sacred history to point a spiritual significance into the archivolt. On the contrary, there is only another and more profane subject depicted, that of Reynard the fox pretending to be dead, and so killing the two cocks. Many scholars register surprise at these profane subjects in cathedrals and churches, wondering, like Loomis, 'how a subject utterly without religious significance found a place in the decoration of the house of God'. Mâle is content to accept the obvious reason that these are the subjects commonly sung on the cathedral square in the twelfth century. The sculptor, painter or mosaicist recalled the most popular ballads of the day. But the interesting suggestions and parallels which Mâle's incredible familiarity with medieval art enables him to summon up, have tempted other scholars to draw a few conclusions for themselves.

The exact significance of much of twelfth century art must, of course, always be a problem. The carved and painted form is all too often an enigma. In such works as Suger's at Saint Denis, or the tympanum of Vézelay, or the façade of Notre Dame la Grande, everything finds its meaning in belonging to an ensemble, a series, or a pattern. But at times one is baffled to find how arbitrary the medieval mind can be, mingling detached motifs with no clear reason, and setting a real problem as to the artist's intention. Is he instructing, or entertaining,

or just filling an empty space with a virtuoso flourish?

Medievalists quarrel between two poles of opinion. Either all is significant, or all is random. Either we must hold, with Félicie d'Ayzac and M-M Davy, that even the simplest work of art contains the most complex symbols, or we ask Loomis' question how a subject 'utterly without religious significance' can be incorporated into the decoration of a church. Mâle steers a most valuable middle course, reminding us how so many decorative elements came into the Romanesque from the Byzantine tapestries with their sacred *hom* birds and fighting lions, which are not even connected with the moralized bestiary, and have no purpose other than decoration. But he does encourage us, by means of such discoveries as the tomb of Ogier and Benedict, and his comments on related works of art, to entertain some interesting hypotheses, even when he is too careful to suggest conclusions. The work of Holmes and Klenke, for instance, recently published as *Chrétien, Troyes and the Grail*, owes much to Mâle's observations, and even though their speculative use of symbolism often seems too ingenious to be completely under control, they put forward some intriguing theories, particularly in connection with the religious significance attached to chivalry in the twelfth century.

The position of Holmes and Klenke is that 'we do *not* find examples of subjects "utterly without religious significance" carved over cathedral portals in medieval Europe. That the Arthurian legend worked itself into the archivolt of the Porta della Pescheria is proof itself that by the twelfth century, the Arthurian theme had a symbolism which Christians understood'. The sculpture in question is carefully analysed. Arthur and his knights with pennants flying from their lances are riding up the gradient on either side of the arch, each with his name engraved . . . Isdernus, Carrado, Galvagin, Galvarium and Che. At the highest central point of the arch, the focus of the composition is a square keep, with a great shield hung from its battlements. Above the walls, two women are visible. Leaving the castle, on either side, to meet the advancing knights, go a knight called Caradoc, and a dwarf, Burmaltus, with a hatchet. There is no doubt of the literal significance of the episode. This is the last stand of the wicked Caradoc, as recounted in the Romance of Lancelot. The castle is the Dolorous Tower. In the castle, an old woman, even more evil than her son Caradoc, keeps Winlogée (Guineoie) prisoner. The correspondence is perfect, except that instead of Lancelot, we find Gawain, and in the romance, Gawain is also Caradoc's prisoner. In the *Chevalier aux deux épées* Guineoie is

in fact the beloved of Gawain, and one can conclude that the Lancelot romance (which is early thirteenth century) and the archivolt (c. 1160) are based on some previous version of the tale.

Sister Klenke, O.P., is convinced that Winlogee is to be identified with Truth, and her captors, Burmaltus, Caradoc and Mardoc, would of course be Falsehood, Deceit, and Injustice. On the *via Francigena* it would seem perfectly logical that there should be some such representation of Christian knights going to release Truth in the Holy Land, since the ostensible aim of every crusader was the liberation and diffusion of truth. King Arthur certainly seems to have become, during the twelfth century, a figure of this Christian ideal. He was popularly identified with Charlemagne, and in Otranto, where the crusaders finally embarked, he is actually represented as a figure of Christ, in the tree of life, surrounded by motifs connected with the creation and the last judgment, mounted, and confronting an apocalyptic beast. This curious and interesting scene occurs in a mosaic pavement dated as done between 1163 and 1166.

In *Chrétien, Troyes and the Grail*, the iconography of chivalry, if we may call it so, is used to help in solving literary problems. If one often feels that the speculations go too far, it is interesting to consider Eugene Frappier's investigations into the social phenomena involved in the romances of chivalry, because here again we find a definite development in the idea of the knight as a Christian symbol. These romances—Lancelot, Perceval and the others—testify to a nostalgia for the past, 'when knights were bold'. The twelfth century was not a good time for the knights, in fact. The nobility were losing their power as the monarchy and the bourgeoisie came more and more into their own. They kept to a moral and symbolic form of defence, shutting themselves into their own mode of life, defending the prestige of true *chevalerie* with a great deal of protocol. They had given up so much of their traditional activity that the only alternative was to find consolation in imaginary episodes. There was real poverty among the noble families. The idea of knight errantry began simply because the younger sons of the greater families, moneyless and landless, could only wander from tournament to tournament in the hope of finding a fortune somewhere. Like Eliduc in the celebrated *lai* of Marie de France, their only hope was for a prize in feats of arms, or ransom from a prisoner. At the worst they became Robin Hood characters, or mercenaries, mere *soudoiers* offering their arms to anyone who could afford to pay them.

Since merit had invaded the domain of caste, the privileges of blood and birth counted for less. A knighted vavasour could become the equal of a baron. This may be why, in the Grail stories as told by Robert de Boron, the secrets of the Grail are confided to the lineage of Joseph of Arimathea by Christ himself, which amounts to Christ setting his own seal on the nobility of the true *chevalerie*. At the time when the *Song of Roland* was written, the knight was a strong, courageous and upright soldier, nothing more, although the fact that he was fighting the Moors already gave him an aura of religion. By the time we get to the cycle of Arthurian stories, the imaginative element has come to the fore, and the straightforward military exploit has become a quasi-mystical affair. Allegorical factors enter, and the kind of romantic warmth that makes it evident that these are tales to be listened to by ladies in the solarium, rather than by the general public in the main hall. The next step from there is to the romances of the end of the twelfth century, in which the crowning adventure of the Grail quest is seen as the religious perfection of knighthood. The characters lessen in importance before the overwhelming mystery that is holy, other worldly. 'The Grail legend, as it has reached us, shows us religious values as the crowning of an apprenticeship in knighthood, or as a moral ascent of the knight'.

Chretien's knight, Perceval, is ignorant of Christ, and there is no religion in his Grail castle. He had to be taught by the hermit he met on Good Friday, after five years of wandering since the day when he saw the Grail, the lance and the silver paten, and failed to ask their meaning. But in the final version of the story, the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach, the conflict between religion and chivalry in the hero is fully resolved. From the fusion of the two, we get not so much an idea of knighthood in the service of religion, as a true religion of chivalry. Wolfram's ideal is of a knightly, theocratic élite, in direct contact with God. His knights are Templars, whose concern is to look after the Holy Grail, and these Templars represent precisely that synthesis of the knightly and the monastic that Saint Bernard idealistically visualised in his *de Laudibus Novae Militiae*. Wolfram admired the Templars because they resolved the antinomy between the two states, worldly and godly, and could in theory produce a perfect Christian with a foot in both worlds.

There is a kind of romantic suitability in the fact that we know almost nothing about Wolfram, and what little we do know about him seems to fit of itself into his poem. He was poor, proud and noble.

He served the count of Wertheim, and lived long enough at Wildenberg for the place to be transmuted in his imagination into Munsalväsche—Mont Salvaiges—the hill on which the Graalsburg materialised. The climax of the poem was composed at the Wartburg, where he served the Landgrave of Thuringia with Walter von der Vogelweide, in 1203. He took the basis of his material from Chretien de Troyes and the Provençal Kyot, but he added far more from his own experience and his own invention, and the story as he told it was full of the question that was being asked by the best spirits of his time, 'How can I be a knight, and a Christian too?' It is not only a question of one's membership of the Church. In the development of Parzival's inner life, an individual is striving to reconcile opposites, living contrary experiences through to the bitter end so that he may make his own synthesis and prove its worth. To unify one's activity in the world, in society, with one's service towards God and the Church, is something which every Christian must approach in a way that belongs to himself alone, at least in some degree. The core of the problem is his alone to solve. Wolfram, in his castle which is at the same time a temple, is an embodiment not only of that Gothic *Streben* that lifts every pointed arch and pointing spire, but of the situation of every man who becomes aware that this world is the place where the next world must be won.

Lay Spirituality

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In these days when the part to be played by the laity in the revitalising of the life and apostolate of the Church is becoming increasingly emphasised, it may be of some value to examine lay spirituality in its present form, in order to analyse the extent to which the spiritual life of lay men and women is in fact being formed in the Church, to discover how far defects in this formation exist and how far they are remediable, and to make some suggestions for the leading of at least a section of this vast potential of men and women to a deeper personal contact with God, and consequently to a more fruitful service of their brethren.