

Gallica

A Discourse  
for the  
Holy Grail  
in Old French  
Romance

BEN RAMM



*Gallica*  
*Volume 2*

A DISCOURSE FOR  
THE HOLY GRAIL  
IN OLD FRENCH ROMANCE

The Holy Grail made its first literary appearance in the work of the twelfth-century French poet, Chrétien de Troyes, and continues to fascinate authors and audiences alike. This study, supported by a theoretical framework based on the psychoanalytic works of Jacques Lacan and the cultural theory of Slavoj Žižek, aims to strip the legend of much of the mythological and folkloric association that it has acquired over the centuries, arguing that the Grail should be read as a symptom of disruption and obscurity rather than fulfilment and revelation.

Focusing on two thirteenth-century Arthurian prose romances, *La Queste del Saint Graal* and *Perlesvaus*, and drawing extensively on the wider field of Old French Grail literature including the works of Chrétien and Robert de Boron, the book examines the personal, social and textual effects produced by encounters with the Grail in order to suggest that the Grail itself is instrumental not only in creating, but also in disturbing the discursive, psychic and cultural bonds that are represented in this complex and captivating literary tradition.

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### **Already Published**

*Postcolonial Fictions in the 'Roman de Perceforest': Cultural Identities and Hybridities*, Sylvia Huot

A DISCOURSE FOR  
THE HOLY GRAIL  
IN OLD FRENCH ROMANCE

Ben Ramm

D. S. BREWER

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction: <i>Tant sainte chose</i> : For a New Discourse of the Grail	1
1. This is not the One: Identity, Abjection and <i>méconnaissance</i> in the <i>Perlesvaus</i>	31
2. Falling out with God: The Discursive Inconsistency of <i>La Queste del Saint Graal</i>	62
3. <i>Remissio Peccatorum</i> : Relocating the Sins of the Grail Hero	90
4. Dead to the World: Dreaming of Life and Death on the Quest of the Holy Grail	122
Conclusion: ‘Si avoit son tens trespassé’: The Final Sacrifice of the Grail Hero?	149
Bibliography	161
Index	177





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Cambridge, March 2006





## ABBREVIATIONS

Note that the short titles used in the footnotes are expanded in full in the Bibliography

The following abbreviations are employed when providing page and line references:

### *Medieval Texts*

- CG Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval; ou, Le Conte du Graal: édition critique d'après tous les manuscrits*, ed. Keith Busby (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993)
- JA Robert de Boron, *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal*, ed. William A. Nitze, CFMA 57 (Paris: Champion, 1971; repr. 1999)
- P *Perlesvaus: Le Haut Livre du Graal*, ed. William A. Nitze and T. Atkinson Jenkins, 2 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932–37)
- Q *La Queste del Saint Graal*, ed. Albert Pauphilet, CFMA 33 (Paris: Champion, 1923; repr. 1999)

### *Works by Jacques Lacan*

- É *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966)
- S1 *Le Séminaire, livre I: Les écrits techniques de Freud (1953–1954)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975)
- S3 *Le Séminaire, livre III: Les psychoses (1955–1956)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981)
- S4 *Le Séminaire, livre IV: La relation d'objet (1956–1957)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994)
- S7 *Le Séminaire, livre VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse (1959–1960)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986)
- S8 *Le Séminaire, livre VIII: Le transfert (1960–1961)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991)
- S11 *Le Séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse (1964)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973)
- S17 *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse (1969–1970)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991)
- S20 *Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore (1972–1973)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975)

*Works by Slavoj Žižek*

- Enjoy*     *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*  
(London and New York: Routledge, 1992)
- FTKN*     *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*  
(London and New York: Verso, 1991)
- LA*        *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular*  
*Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992; repr. 2000)
- Negative* *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of*  
*Ideology* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993)
- SO*        *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso,  
1989)

*Other Texts*

- PL*        *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221  
vols (Paris, 1844–64)
- Pouvoirs* Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (Paris:  
Éditions du Seuil, 1980)
- SE*        *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of*  
*Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The  
Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953–74; repr.  
1981–86)

## Introduction

### *Tant sainte chose*: For a New Discourse of the Grail

Écoutez, l'important, c'est que je ne me casse pas  
la gueule!<sup>1</sup> Lacan, *S11*

The closing years of the twelfth century witness the emergence of a new discourse in European, and especially French, vernacular literature. In about 1181 Chrétien de Troyes's final poetic work, known as the *Conte du Graal* or *Perceval*, introduces to the literary canon an object that, within that nascent discourse, comes to be known as the Grail or, later, the Holy Grail.<sup>2</sup>

To deem the emergent discourse of the Grail an entirely autonomous phenomenon during this period would not be entirely accurate however; the new literary object that appears so suddenly and enigmatically in Chrétien's poem grafts itself in a quasi-parasitic fashion on to an already established literary tradition, that of Arthurian courtly literature. Indeed, Arthurian literature subsequent to, and influenced by, Chrétien's unfinished text gradually accords ever more prominence to the theme of the Grail, and in doing so undergoes a marked Christianization. By the date of composition of the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal*, some forty to fifty years after Chrétien's poem,<sup>3</sup> the Arthurian milieu has

<sup>1</sup> 'Listen, the important thing is that I don't come a cropper!'

<sup>2</sup> All subsequent references to the *Conte du Graal* cite Busby's authoritative 1993 edition. On the dating of this originator of the literary Grail, see Lejeune, 'La Date du *Conte du Graal*'. Manifestations of the Grail in the different literary and historical sources are extremely disparate. The object is variously figured as the dish in which Joseph of Arimathea collected Christ's blood on the cross, the vessel containing the paschal lamb at the Last Supper, the Eucharist chalice, a kind of ark, a ceremonial relic forming the centrepiece of its own procession, and even as a stone (in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*). Most perplexingly of all, the Grail as represented in the *Perlesvaus* is an abstract concept manifesting itself in five different mutations, one of which is the chalice, but whose ontology remains fundamentally undetermined (*P*, 7223–6. All references to the *Perlesvaus* are to volume I of Nitzze's edition unless otherwise stated; line references in parentheses follow quotations in my text). For a survey of the various literary morphoses of the 'mysterious Talisman' of the Grail, see Weston's introduction to the medieval Grail tradition, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, pp. 1–2. A comprehensive survey of the Holy Grail, from its medieval origins to the modern day, has recently been accomplished by Barber, *The Holy Grail*.

<sup>3</sup> Page and line numbers are given in parentheses following quotations from the *Queste*. For some critical studies of the *Queste* not referred to elsewhere in this book, see Baumgartner, *L'Arbre et le pain*; Freeman-Regalado, 'La Chevalerie celestiel'; Hamilton, 'Interprétation mystique de *La Queste del Saint Graal*'; and Williams, *The Adventures of the*

become little more than the passive host for a militant evangelism built around the discourse of the Grail.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Thomas Kelly has observed, ‘during the period from 1180 to 1235 remarkable transformations occur in Arthurian romance’.<sup>5</sup> This half-century represents the chronological scope of this book, and the transformations that occur during this period can, I suggest, be largely imputed to the appearance of the literary Grail.

Since the late nineteenth century a sustained scholarly debate has sought to explore and elucidate the possible origins and sources of the Grail both as a cultural symbol and as a literary tradition.<sup>6</sup> The mythological roots of the phenomenon – be they located in Christian ritual, in Celtic lore or in more distant and esoteric Eastern rites – have been variously sought out, affirmed and repudiated by some of the most renowned scholars in the Grail business. My own study will, for the most part, abstain from an in-depth dialogue with this source scholarship and its findings, for I tend to concur with the view of Richard Cavendish that ‘arguments about origins and influences, though important and fascinating, sometimes obscure the stories themselves’.<sup>7</sup> For this reason it is the extant romances, their textuality and intertextuality, rather than their process of coming-to-be, that will provide the almost exclusive focus for the arguments of this book.<sup>8</sup>

*Holy Grail.* The precise dating of the *Queste* need not detain us unduly; scholars have generally agreed on a range of 1225–30; see Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> Or, as Brigitte Cazelles argues, ‘Chrétien’s work anticipates the development of a spiritual rather than secular assessment of chivalry’s mission in thirteenth-century romance’ (*The Unholy Grail*, p. 1). This is not to claim that *all* Arthurian literature subsequent to the *Conte du Graal* becomes colonized by the evangelism of the Grail; rather, a certain strand of the tradition is inflected with the values and ideology of the Grail discourse. The Grail has no part to play, for example, in *La Mort le roi Artu*, the text that sets itself up as the *Queste*’s sequel.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly, *Le Haut Livre du Graal*, p. 26. Cazelles concurs that ‘literary historians have long signalled the importance of [the *Conte du Graal*] as a turning point in the development of medieval romance’ (*The Unholy Grail*, p. 1).

<sup>6</sup> On the origins and etymology of the word ‘grail’ (‘graal’) see, *inter alia*, Nitze, ‘Concerning the word *Graal*, *Gréal*’; Roques, ‘Le Nom du Graal’; Jung and Von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, pp. 116–21; and Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes et le mythe du Graal*, pp. 5–12. The oft-cited reference in Helinand of Froidmont’s *Chronicle* designates the grail principally as a serving dish: ‘paropside in quo Dominus caenavit cum discipulis suis’ [‘the dish from which the Lord ate with his disciples’] (*PL*, CXCII, 814–15). Yet with a *terminus ad quem* of 1216, Helinand certainly postdates Chrétien’s text, and probably bases his description on the literary sources.

<sup>7</sup> Cavendish, *King Arthur and the Grail*, p. viii.

<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge some of the principal works of scholarship on the provenance of the Grail tradition. Opinion tends to divide along the lines of two, or possibly three, main theories regarding the origins of the legend: the Christian theory, the Celtic and the less supported speculation of a ritualistic origin. The Celtic origins of the legend are explored by Brown, *The Origin of the Grail Legend*, and Loomis, *The Grail*. See also Loomis’s *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, and Wales and the *Arthurian Legend*. Weston’s seminal volume exploring the link between the Grail and ancient fertility rites, *From Ritual to Romance*, could not pass without mention, nor should her general introduction to the

Notwithstanding this caveat regarding the search for sources, the work of one particular Grail scholar does merit special consideration at this early juncture, since it presents an atypical – but highly suggestive – strategy of attempting to ground the appearance of the literary Grail in a matrix of specific historical events, rather than simply within a mythological or folkloric framework. The originality of Helen Adolf's study, *Visio Pacis, Holy City and Grail*, lies in her questioning why it should be that the Grail appears in or around 1181 rather than at any other date.<sup>9</sup> The question as to what motivates the inaugural appearance of the Grail will clearly have wide-reaching consequences for the way in which we go about reading those texts that play host to the object, and encourages interpretation of the Grail as a grounded historical phenomenon rather than simply as a mythological symbol. In the context of the Crusades, and specifically the fall of the kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187, Adolf reads Chrétien's work as a literary response to the apostolic letter 'Cor Nostrum' issued by Pope Alexander III on 16 January 1181.<sup>10</sup> An entreaty to the Christian faithful, this epistle urged immediate reinforcements to be sent to the Holy Land, which, according to information gleaned from travelling Templars, faced impending disaster following repeated infidel incursions.<sup>11</sup> Given that the date of Chrétien's text remains uncertain to the point that he might barely have commenced the work in early 1181, Adolf suggests that this papal letter could have 'fired the poet's imagination'.<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not one subscribes to the notion that the *Conte du Graal* might be read thus as a *roman-à-clef*, or indeed to the suggestion that Chrétien's work was motivated by a single historical event, the most provocative of Adolf's insights is surely the suggestion that the Grail as literary symbol is produced at a specific and identifiable point of rupture in an ideological narrative (in this case, the narrative of the Crusade), the moment at which the subjects of that ideology begin to question the legitimacy and viability of the system within which they operate, and which operates upon (subjectivizes) them. In the

Grail literature, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. For one of the earliest excursions into the field of Grail scholarship, see Evans, *In Quest of the Holy Graal*. A succinct survey of the various scholars' positions can be found in Goetinck, 'The Quest for Origins'. For comment on some theories of origins diverging from the main strands of critical opinion (such as those of Pauphilet, Holmes and Adolf), see Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes et le mythe du Graal*, p. 201 n. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Frappier dismisses Adolf's theories as 'plutôt chimériques' ['somewhat chimerical'] (*Chrétien de Troyes et le mythe du Graal*, p. 201 n. 57). Indeed, Adolf's ostensibly demystifying approach to the appearance of the Grail does not sit comfortably with the insistence that her enquiry should not deplete the mysticism of the Grail: 'is there not danger of destroying the power of the symbol if research attempts to explain it? [. . .] Conducted in the right spirit of "reverence and irony," our analysis will not endanger the power of the Grail symbol' (*Visio Pacis*, p. 2). I make no apology for eschewing any such reverence and irony in my own approach.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander III (Pope), 'Cor Nostrum', *PL*, CC, 1294–6.

<sup>11</sup> Adolf, *Visio Pacis*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Adolf, *Visio Pacis*, p. 15.

context of the Crusades, this point comes with the crusaders' questioning of the divine will that supposedly underwrites their enterprise, as Adolf argues:

In the midst of the Crusades, at the moment when the blind trust in one's knowing God's will – 'Deus vult!' – yielded to an anxious and therefore more truly religious doubt – *Deus quid vult?* – a new piety was born. It was this new piety that produced the Grail symbol.<sup>13</sup>

The Grail would thus begin life as a symbol of doubt and high anxiety. In the course of what follows I shall seek to demonstrate that the Grail cannot simply be explained, as Albert Pauphilet so famously asserted, as 'la manifestation romanesque de Dieu' ['God's presence in romance'].<sup>14</sup> Rather, the Grail becomes the marker of ontological and epistemological anxiety, deep-rooted in those who embark upon its Quest, and for whom the Grail does not represent an epiphanic, holistic or organic (*pace* Weston) experience of plenitude and fulfilment, but is a symbol of ideological fracture, uncertainty and impossibility.

To speak of a discourse of the Grail might at first seem singularly inappropriate, for the Holy Vessel is often represented in the literary works as the point at which human discourse and reasoning fail. It is, to cite the oft-repeated mantra of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, 'ce que cuers mortex ne porroit penser ne langue d'ome terrien deviser' ['that of which the heart of mortal man could not conceive, nor the tongue of earthly man relate'] (*Q*, 19:25–6). This should not, however, be read as a description of the Grail as some transcendently extra-linguistic, ineffable entity, but rather as the paradoxical *mise-en-abyme* of its own discourse, a discourse that offers up the Grail as a patch to cover over the gaping hole at its centre. In the face of the Grail, the Quest knights are not bathed in the grace of God, as Étienne Gilson would have us believe,<sup>15</sup> but instead find themselves forced up against the impenetrable and unreadable desire of the Other: God is showing/saying this to me, *but what does he really want? Deus quid vult?* The Grail opens up this imperative to question – not only to question the status of the object itself, but also fundamentally to re-examine the discursive framework that supports its representation. I shall seek to advance Adolf's argument by demonstrating that the transition from *Deus vult!* to *Deus quid vult?* – that moment of discursive fracture and ideological uncertainty at

<sup>13</sup> Adolf, *Visio Pacis*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>14</sup> Pauphilet, *Études sur la 'Queste del Saint Graal'*, p. 25. All translations throughout are my own, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>15</sup> 'Le Graal, c'est la grâce du Saint-Esprit, source inépuisable et délicieuse à laquelle s'abreuve l'âme chrétienne' ['The Grail is the grace of the Holy Spirit, an inexhaustible and delicious spring at which the Christian soul sates its thirst'] (Gilson, 'La Mystique de la grâce', p. 324). The explicit link between the Grail and the grace of God supported by the *Queste* ('Fontaine si est de tel maniere que len ne la puet espuisier, ja tant n'en savra len oster: ce est li Sainz Graax, ce est la grace del Saint Esperit' ['The spring is such that it can never be exhausted, no matter how much one draws from it: this is the Holy Grail, this is the grace of the Holy Spirit'] *Q*, 158:33–159:2) had already been made in Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie* (see Chapter 3).



which the Grail bursts forth onto the scene – is never adequately performed by the medieval romances. Consequently, the Old French literature that hosts the earliest manifestations of the Grail is confined to an abject limbo somewhere between epistemic certainty and a fraught, hysterical questioning.

### Discursive Fracture: Continuing the *Conte du Graal*

Brigitte Cazelles's reading of the *Conte du Graal*, investigating first and foremost the social context in which the drama of the Grail unfolds, and particularly the failure of the chivalric world, shows strong parallels with Adolf's argument for interpretation of the Grail as a sign of social and discursive fracture, albeit in a different geopolitical domain. Whereas Adolf reads the *Conte du Graal* as a response to anxieties over the Crusades, Cazelles asserts that 'the *Conte du Graal* appeared at a moment of particular crisis for the Flemish aristocracy'.<sup>16</sup> Like Adolf, Cazelles tends towards reading the Grail as a marker, or indeed product, of this socio-ideological turmoil: 'the meaning of the Grail may be rooted in part in the predicaments of nobles who, like Philippe of Alsace, patronized vernacular romances'.<sup>17</sup> Cazelles goes even further in asserting that the bi-partite structure of Chrétien's unfinished romance is similarly indicative of 'a world fractured by factions in constant, unresolved conflict'.<sup>18</sup> The crucial step that Cazelles takes beyond Adolf's argument, however, is to assert that 'the variety of intratextual viewpoints concerning the value of the Grail points to its function as an ideological discourse sustaining specific lineal ambitions'.<sup>19</sup> Thus the Grail would not only be the *product* of a certain discursive fracture; it is now also construed as the discursive *patch* that attempts to knit together, to cover over, that very split.

As Cazelles argues, most critical approaches to the Grail literature, and especially to the *Conte du Graal*, have tended to overstress the sacramental aspect of the Grail, thereby deflecting attention away from the social milieu of the texts, in which Cazelles tentatively ascribes the Grail to the role of ideological patch,

<sup>16</sup> Cazelles, *The Unholy Grail*, p. 4. This was a period during which 'the power of the French kings steadily increased, allowing Philip Augustus (1179–1223) finally to reduce Flanders to a fief of the crown', a situation further compounded by 'the death of Philippe of Alsace in 1191 while accompanying Philip Augustus on the Third Crusade' (*The Unholy Grail*, p. 5). This death, according to Cazelles, 'marks the moment when the balance of power between monarchy and aristocracy tipped decisively, and irreversibly, in favor of the king' (p. 5). Chrétien's literary career 'evolved at the courts of some of the most powerful and virulent of Philip Augustus's opponents', indeed 'two if not three of Chrétien's noble patrons were linked to, or actively involved in, the movement of resistance to the Capetians' (p. 6).

<sup>17</sup> *The Unholy Grail*, p. 7. Philippe of Alsace, Count of Flanders, is of course the patron to whom Chrétien dedicates the *Conte du Graal* in the prologue to that work (*CG*, 13–15).

<sup>18</sup> *The Unholy Grail*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *The Unholy Grail*, p. 11.

or suture.<sup>20</sup> The traditional privileging of a devout reading causes the network of social relations underpinned by the Grail to become obscured.<sup>21</sup> My own discussion of a discourse of the Grail seeks to redress this imbalance, and in doing so my argument takes its first steps towards building a bridge between medieval narrative and the modern psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>22</sup>

Before setting out in any detail the parameters of my theoretical framework, the core proposition of a ‘discourse of the Grail’ requires further elucidation, and this might be achieved through examination of the portrayal of the Holy Vessel and its context in the continuations of the *Conte du Graal*.<sup>23</sup> That these lengthy continuations should have been commenced very shortly after Chrétien’s death, and continued to occupy poets until Gerbert de Montrieu composed his version in around 1230, surely points to a certain anxiety, a creative nervous energy, surrounding the incomplete story of the Grail. Chrétien had left unfinished business – itself a fractured discourse – which could not be allowed to lie, but which required immediate and sustained discussion from his (mostly anonymous) continuators.

In the *First Continuation*, Gauvain visits the Grail castle, home of the Fisher King, on two separate occasions, over ten thousand lines apart.<sup>24</sup> The experiences of these visits present a troubling encounter with a discourse of the Grail, a dialogic interaction that produces a subject (Gauvain) and a master (the Grail

<sup>20</sup> *The Unholy Grail*, p. 7. However, given the text’s lack of closure, Cazelles is reluctant explicitly to ascribe ‘any possible unifying function [to] the Grail motif’ (p. 7).

<sup>21</sup> *The Unholy Grail*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek’s astonishingly prolific writing establishes him not only as one of the most exciting (and accessible) commentators on Lacan’s abstruse and sometimes impenetrable psychoanalytic seminars, but also confirms him as a thinker in his own right, with an idiosyncratic brand of criticism combining comment on the high theory of heavyweights such as Kant and Hegel with readings of ‘low-brow’ popular culture (especially the films of Alfred Hitchcock). For a concise appraisal of Žižek’s writings, see Kay, *Žižek*.

<sup>23</sup> There are four surviving continuations: the first is completely anonymous; the second unattributed; the third names its writer as Manessier, of whom nothing else is known; the fourth is attributed to Gerbert de Montrieu. All references to the first three continuations will be to Roach’s five-volume edition (1949–83). Line numbers are given in parentheses following quotations. For the fourth continuation, see Gerbert de Montrieu, *La Continuation de Perceval*.

<sup>24</sup> The precise date of this text remains undetermined; Owen asserts that it was composed soon after Chrétien’s death (‘From Grail to Holy Grail’, p. 38). The text is sometimes referred to as the *Gauvain Continuation*, or the *Pseudo-Wauchier Continuation* (see Roach, *Continuations*, I, xv), but the numerical designation seems the least prone to confusion, and therefore the one that I adopt. The poem survives in twelve manuscripts (for descriptions, see Roach, *Continuations*, I, xvi–xxxiii), the different groupings of which display considerable textual variation. I refer mainly to the text of the group represented by MS *T* (vol. I of Roach’s edition) here, with additional reference to the group represented by MS *E* (vol. II) where appropriate. Gauvain’s two visits to the Grail Castle are located between lines 1194–1509 and 13141–13624 in MS *T*, and between 3631–3969 and 17227–17880 in MS *E*.

keeper, the Fisher King), and that emphasizes the imperfections of that subject whilst simultaneously offering the promise of future fulfilment, thus reasserting the very inadequacy or lack *in the discourse itself*. The Grail castle is immediately presented as a site of knowledge; its inhabitants are ‘Bien parlant et bien ensaignie’ [‘well spoken and well educated’] (1290). During the course of the feast that takes place there on the evening of his visit, Gauvain witnesses the mysterious Grail procession consisting of the Bleeding Lance,<sup>25</sup> followed by a ‘tailleoir d’argent’ [‘silver trencher’] (1347), two candlesticks, ‘Le Saint Graal a descover’ [‘the Holy Grail, openly displayed’] (1363), and finally culminating with a coffin, atop which lies a broken sword (1379). The sight of this enigmatic ritual provokes in Gauvain a burning desire to question what he sees, an impulse to decode the meaning or significance of his experience:

Molt estoit engrez et ardans  
 Mesire Gavains de l’enquerre  
 Quels gens ce sont et de quel terre. (1354–6)

[Sir Gauvain felt a burning impatience to ask who those people were and from which land they came.]

This compulsion to question is reprised a few lines later, with the assonance now stressing the nexus between quest and inquest; the notion of the quest is above all an inquisitorial, discursive one: ‘S’a molt bon talent de l’enquerre / Qui il sont et qu’il vient *querre*’ [‘He feels an urge to enquire about who these people are and what they seek’] (1391–2; my italics).<sup>26</sup> Gauvain is quite certain that he has encountered here, in the procession at the Grail castle, the very relics that he was seeking:

Bien croit et pense sanz doutance  
 Que c’est cil Graals et la lance  
 Qu’il devoit querre, c’est la some. (1417–19)

[He truly thinks and believes beyond any doubt that this is it: the Grail and the lance that he had to seek.]

However, any presumption that this encounter represents the culmination and fulfilment of his personal quest, that fullness of meaning has been located, is quite incorrect. Rather, having located the physical objects, Gauvain must now seek a corresponding *discourse* within which to construct the meaning (‘seneffiance’) of these objects: ‘S’en enquier la seneffiance / Et du Graal et de la lance’ [‘He asks about the meaning of both the Grail and the lance’] (1421–2).

The narrative stresses that the Grail is openly on display and fully available to perception at this point, as it had been in Chrétien’s poem: ‘Gavains le voit

<sup>25</sup> On this component of the procession, see Brown, ‘The Bleeding Lance’.

<sup>26</sup> This relationship between quest and inquest will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 3.

bien en apert' ['Gauvain sees it clearly and openly'] (1364).<sup>27</sup> And yet this clarity is undercut by a latent epistemological anxiety: 'Ne set dont vient ne qu'ele porte' ['He does not know from where she comes, nor what she carries'] (1367).<sup>28</sup> The dissonance here between the positive verb of seeing ('voit bien') and the negative correlate of not knowing ('Ne set') emphasizes a slippage between perception and understanding that gives way to what becomes the defining characteristic of the Grail discourse: misrecognition.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this assertion will be substantiated by the Grail procession itself, which, as we have already seen, culminates in a coffin adorned with a broken sword:

Avoit une espee couchie  
 Qui par miliu ert pechoïe,  
 Mais a malaise ert percheüe,  
 Se ce ne fust chose seüe,  
 Qu'ele ne samblast tote entiere. (1379–83)

[There lay a sword, cracked across the middle. Anyone who did not know that it was broken would have found it hard to see the break, for the sword appeared to be completely intact.]

This broken sword might come to figure as a metonym for the discourse of the Grail: the sword, like the discourse, appears, and is *perceived*, as a functional whole ('samblast tote entiere'). And yet, as the assonance linking the words 'percheüe' and 'seüe' underlines, both are scarred by a fissure, a fundamental gap that engenders an epistemological impossibility at the very core of the discourse.<sup>30</sup> Like the sword, the Grail discourse is fractured; the subject who encounters it must attempt to reconstruct the disparate pieces in order to *make sense*, to anchor and define his own subjectivity within that discourse (although the notion that the discourse could ever *not* be fractured is pure fantasy). The Fisher King's instructions to Gauvain portray this restructuring activity as a gateway to knowledge and surety:

Puis li dist li sires sanz glose:  
 'Se vos faites cest brant reprendre,  
 Et l'une pieche a l'autre prendre,  
 Si qu'ele resoit tote entiere,

<sup>27</sup> Cf. '.I. graal entre ses .ii. mains / Une damoisele tenoit' ['A maiden held a grail in her hands'] (CG, 3220–1). On the use of an indefinite pronoun here, see Chapter 3, p. 96 n. 29.

<sup>28</sup> The feminine pronoun ('ele') here refers to the maiden who bears the Grail in the procession. Concern over the agency behind the Grail is similarly expressed by Lancelot during an encounter with the Holy Vessel in the *Queste*; see Chapter 4, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> The Lacanian concept of *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) is central to the discussion in Chapter 1.

<sup>30</sup> A miniature on fol. 74v of MS *U* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds français 12577) depicts the final stages of the Grail procession, in which the sword curiously appears to be perfectly whole and undamaged.

Dont porrez savoir de la bierre  
 Et du Graal et de la lance  
 Le voir et la senefiance'. (1446–52)

[Then he said, without further explanation: 'If you can repair this sword, and make the two pieces knit together so that it becomes whole again, then you may know the true significance of the coffin, and the Grail and the lance.']

The assertion that the Fisher King speaks 'sanz glose' serves to perpetuate the false notion of a full, undifferentiated discourse. Yet far from being reassured, what the subject, as recipient and enactor of that discourse, in fact discovers is a terrifying paradox, a vicious circularity whereby the discourse that defines him, that allows him to *make sense* (of himself), is in fact revealed to be conditional and contingent, available to him only if he has already proved his worth to be accommodated within its economy, as the Fisher King's speech reveals:

Et cil qui fu plains de franchise  
 Li respont qu'il l'en dira voir  
*Se il est dignes du savoir.* (1430–2; my italics)

[And he who was full of nobility replies that he will tell him the truth, *if he is worthy of knowing it.*]

However, Gauvain fails to match up to this interpellation, and although the sword appears to be mended by his attempt – 'cil qui le veoient / Cuidoient qu'ele fust rejoynte' ['those who saw it believed that it was repaired'] (1458–9) – the fracture in fact remains. The Fisher King responds to this failure by suggesting to Gauvain that he is *not yet* able to embrace the discourse ('la senefiance') of the Grail fully, but that the possibility for future success remains open:

Fait li sires: 'N'avez tant fait  
 D'armes encore que le voir  
 Puissiez de ceste oeuvre savoir,  
 Car cil qui le voir en sara  
 Le pris de tot le mont ara  
 Et le los, je le vos affi.  
 Mais encor puet bien estre ensi  
 Que vos le voir en sariiez  
 Et que vos conquis ariiez  
 Du monde par chevalerie  
 Tos le los et la seignorie'. (1470–80)

[The king said, 'You have not yet achieved enough as a knight to be able to know the truth about this. For he who shall know the truth will earn the praise and esteem of the whole world, I assure you. But it may well be the case that you shall know the truth, and

that through chivalry you shall have won nobility and the praise of all men.']

The nefarious illusion that the subject and the discourse that awaits him *can* fully correspond, and that the discursive exile can thereby be overcome, is thus perpetuated.

Whilst listening to this ambivalent response, Gauvain is overcome by fatigue from the day's exertions and falls asleep at the table. He wakes the following morning to find himself in the middle of a swamp, his armour and steed attached to a nearby tree, the Grail castle and its mysterious inhabitants nowhere in sight. In the cold light of day, Gauvain's failure gives rise to a sense of introspection, and even to feelings of self-loathing:

Molt fu pe[n]sis et abosmez.  
Molt li poise et forment se het  
Por l'aventure qu'il ne set,  
Et molt li fait le cuer doloir. (1498–1501)

[He is greatly aggrieved; he truly hates himself for having failed at the adventure, and this causes a great sorrow in his heart.]

It appears that the abortive first visit to the Grail castle has caused Gauvain to develop a strong sense of his own inadequacy as a subject, his inability to match up to the discursive imperatives and requirements that awaited him within the walls of the Fisher King's castle.

Gauvain's second visit to the Grail castle shows strong similarities with the first, but also differs in several crucial respects. On the occasion of this second visit, Gauvain's exclusion from the discourse of the Grail is apparent from the very outset when, upon his arrival, the inhabitants of the castle receive him with a strong sense of bathos:

Si le regardent a merveille  
Et li uns a l'autre conseil:  
'Diex, que ce est? Ce n'est il pas.'<sup>31</sup> (13159–61)

[They look at him in wonderment, whispering to each other: 'By God, who is this? This is not the one.']

Having thus discounted the new arrival, the assembled company suddenly vanishes, leaving Gauvain alone in the hall. This frosty reception arouses not only feelings of anger, but also a strong sense of anxiety and uncertainty in Gauvain:

Grant ire et grant anui en a  
De ce qu'il est si remez seus,

<sup>31</sup> Compare MS *E*: 'Et cil li vont trestuit entor, / Et dient tuit: "Ce n'est il mie"' ['the people quickly surround him, and all say "This is not the one"'] (17248–9).

Et d'autre part est angoisseus  
 De che qu'il les vit conseilhier;  
 Si ne s'en doit nus merveillier  
 S'il ot paor ne s'il douta. (13170–5)

[He feels very angry and upset that he has been left alone like this. He also feels anxious at having seen the people whispering to each other. Little wonder that he felt afraid and concerned.]

However, Gauvain soon catches sight of a coffin at the far end of the hall, presumably the same that had featured in the Grail procession of his first visit. Faced with this coffin, or perhaps more specifically with the fragment of sword that no doubt reminds him of his earlier failure, Gauvain becomes ever more exasperated, 'ne set que il puist faire' ['he does not know what he can do'] (13212). In the text of the *E* manuscript this sense of bewilderment takes on a significantly apostrophic expression: 'Diex, fet il, ou porrai aler?' ['"God," he says, "where can I go?"'] (17276). Gauvain thus reveals his conviction that the truth of the discourse lies outside himself, embedded in the inaccessible and unresponsive domain of the Other, in God himself. Indeed, when Gauvain has witnessed the Grail procession for a second time, and is about to submit once again to the test of the broken sword, the Fisher King reasserts the notion that success will be divinely determined: 'Biax dols chiers sire, ceste espee / Ert, *se Dieu plaist*, par vos soldee' ['My dear sweet sir, this sword will be mended by you, *if it please God*'] (13381–2; my italics). Furthermore, success in the task will confirm Gauvain's status and identity as the best knight in the world (13387). He is, however, still unequal to this mandate, and once again fails to complete the ordeal.

The consequences of success or failure in the sword test have shifted in the interval between Gauvain's two visits to the Grail castle. On the occasion of the first visit, success would have afforded him knowledge of the Grail arcana. Now, during the second visit, it is said that successful completion of the test would have conferred a particular identity upon Gauvain (as the best knight in the world). Even more significantly, the Master and his discourse are shown to be mendacious, or at best inconsistent. For although Gauvain had previously been told that access to the Grail mysteries relied entirely upon his chivalric worth, now even in failure he is to be granted knowledge of the secrets, as the Fisher King promises:

Et des merveilles que veez  
 Tot vostre plaisir demandez,  
 Biax sire, et nos vos en dirons  
 Le voir, que ja n'en mentirons. (13431–4)

[And ask to your heart's content about the mysteries that you see here, dear sir; we shall tell you the truth about it, we shall tell you no lie.]



It seems clear that the broken sword, which previously figured as a metonym of the discourse of the Grail, can also be read as a figure for the lacking subject who attempts to locate himself within that discourse. Both are marked by a fundamental fracture, and the overlap of the two lacks is materialized in the broken sword.

Even in the *Second Continuation*, when Perceval submits to the same test of the broken sword at the Grail castle, and appears to succeed in the enterprise, his achievement is still not quite impeccable:

Et li aciers ansamble prant  
 Si bellemant et si a droit  
 Que lou jor qu'elle faite estoit  
 Ne sambla estre plus nouvelle,  
 Ne miauz forbie ne plus belle;  
 Mais que tot droit an la jointure  
 Fu remese une creveüre  
 Petitet[e], non mie granz. (32552–9)

[And the steel knits together so perfectly and flawlessly that it did not seem so new, well crafted, and beautiful even on the day that it was created. But right at the join there remained a notch, not large but tiny.]

There remains an almost imperceptible crack in the welding of the sword and also, by extension of the metonym, in the very discourse and in the subject that the sword represents. Finally, however, in Gerbert's continuation, the sword is repaired when Perceval returns it to its creator, the smith Trebuchet:

Si l'a reforgie si bien  
 Que onques n'i parut de rien  
 Que ele eüst esté brisiee. (I, 873–5)

[He reforged it so well that it would never appear to have been broken.]

Yet the smith's success in soldering the broken sword, and thus figuratively suturing the discursive/subjective fracture, has dire consequences for him as soon as Perceval departs:

Mais n'ot mie molt eslongié  
 Le chastel, quant il ot les cloches  
 Soner par totes les parroches,  
 Car Trebuchés fenis estoit  
 Qui s'espee refaite avoit  
 Qui bone ert et trenchans et dure. (I, 904–9)

[But he had not left the castle far behind when he heard church bells sounding throughout all the parishes; for Trebuchet, who had

repaired the sword that was so fine and sharp and strong, had died.]

The assonance of the verbs ‘estoit’ and ‘avoit’ here formalizes the link between Trebuchet’s demise and his success in mending his creation, thereby reiterating the notion that the subject is defined by, indeed can only exist as an effect of, the discursive fracture that he encounters. Once the sword is perfectly mended, and the discourse is figuratively sutured and undifferentiated, the subject (as an *effect* of discursive fracture) can exist no longer.

### The Algebra of the Grail

Describing the Grail as ‘both a discourse and a vision’, Cazelles’s reading of the *Conte du Graal* arrives at a radical conclusion:

The function of the *grail* is not a ‘holy dish,’ but an empty container bereft of intrinsic value. There, in a vacuity that discloses the function of the symbol as a receptacle whose meaning resides entirely with its holders and beholders, lies the enigma of Chrétien’s Grail.<sup>32</sup>

This description of a dynamically determined Grail, in itself a pure nothing and dependent for meaningful content upon the interventions of an agent (a ‘holder’) and an-other subject (a ‘beholder’), displays remarkable parallels not only with the presentation of the object by Chrétien’s continuators, as we have just seen, but also with the structure and communication of the linguistic message, taken up and analysed in Jacques Lacan’s theory of discourse.

The Lacanian discourse theorem, first elaborated in book 17 of the *Séminaire* (1969–70), proposes a formal schema with which to codify four fundamental relationships, each of which produces a specific *social bond*, an operation whose resonance we cannot fail to discern in Cazelles’s description of the Grail.<sup>33</sup> Each one of four discourse models identified by Lacan (the discourses of the Master, the University, the Hysteric and the Analyst) is presented as an algorithm consisting of four positions and four terms. The positions remain constant in each permutation, whilst the four terms are circulated depending on the particular discourse. The positions are arranged as follows:<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Cazelles, *The Unholy Grail*, p. 227.

<sup>33</sup> For a succinct and lucid explanation of the Lacanian discourses, see *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, ed. Bracher *et al.*

<sup>34</sup> The French terms used by Lacan in the matheme are ‘l’agent’, ‘l’autre’, ‘la vérité’ and ‘la production’ (see Lacan, *S20*, p. 21).



Each of these positions is then occupied by one of four terms, algebraic symbols relating to concepts which, for Lacan, define the subject as a social being and his relationship to language and desire: S1, the master signifier; S2, knowledge; *a*, the *plus-de-jouir* (or, ‘surplus enjoyment’); and \$, the barred subject. These four terms, the elemental and extraordinarily nuanced building blocks of Lacan’s thinking, will provide the basis for the theoretical framework that shapes my argument in the course of the following chapters. Any attempt to explain the terms in isolation as discrete concepts would be counterproductive, for their true analytical potential lies in the relationships between them; the terms must therefore be progressively elucidated through the complexities of their interactions.

Lacan’s discourse algorithm, or *matheme*, presents a structural model for basic linguistic communication.<sup>35</sup> The left-hand column of the structure represents the position of the sender/origin of a message, addressing the right-hand column, the position of the recipient/destination. Thus the agent addresses the other, whose task it is to act upon, or enact, the message he receives (or rather, the message he *perceives*, for the communication of that message is far from successful) in order to generate a product of the discourse (located in the position below the other). The remaining position, that of the truth, is in fact, as the name suggests, the driving force behind each discourse structure. The truth underpins or, more accurately, undermines, the agent, to such a degree that he ‘is only a fake agent, “*un semblant*,” a phoney’.<sup>36</sup> The fundamental point here is that the agent (the speaker) does not have access to, or rather misrecognizes, the motivating truth of ‘his’ discourse. As Mark Bracher stresses, the (hidden) truth ‘gives rise to the dominant factor, or constitutes the condition of its possibility, *but is repressed by it*’.<sup>37</sup> What should be clear even from such a cursory exegesis of the basic Lacanian *matheme* is that the very mechanism of discourse is fundamentally dysfunctional, or indeed duplicitous.

It is this crucial notion of social bonding and communication being based upon an impossibility (that of knowing the truth behind discourse), essentially being *misrecognized*, that I see rehearsed in four different but interconnected ways by the Grail texts that form the object of my study. The principal intention of this book is to show how the discourse of the Grail constructed by the Old French literary texts is, by turns, a discourse of the Master, then of the University, of the Hysteric and finally of the Analyst – and yet it is never fully any one

<sup>35</sup> Although, as Verhaeghe insists, ‘the Lacanian discourse theory has to be understood primarily as a *formal* system, i.e. independent of any spoken word as such’ (‘From Impossibility to Inability’, p. 80).

<sup>36</sup> Verhaeghe, ‘From Impossibility to Inability’, p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> Bracher, ‘Psychological and Social Functions’, p. 109; my italics.

of these. The problem of accounting for and locating the discourse of the Grail has already been articulated, albeit in a less theoretical idiom, by Jean Frappier's complaint that:

Toutes les fois qu'on veut interpréter le *Conte du Graal* à la lumière d'une seule des deux grandes théories, la celtique et la chrétienne [. . .], chacune d'elles paraît insuffisante en quelque endroit: toujours il reste quelque chose *en plus* dans la conception mise en oeuvre par le poète.<sup>38</sup>

[Whenever one seeks to interpret the *Conte du Graal* in the light of just one of the two great theories, the Celtic and the Christian [. . .], each seems inadequate in some way: there is always something *extra* left over in way that the poet conceived his work.]

As I intend to show, the discourse of the Grail is never a self-identical, functional discourse as such, rather it always already exceeds or surpasses its own parameters, generating a problematic excess/remainder that comes to be thematized as both the cause of discursive fracture and as a plug for this lack – ideas that have been formulated, in different ways, by Adolf and Cazelles.<sup>39</sup>

Each of the following four chapters explores the ways in which certain aspects of the Old French Grail narratives can be aligned with one of Lacan's discourse mathemes. Chapter 1 begins with an examination of the themes of identity, abjection and misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) in the early thirteenth-century prose romance *Perlesvaus*, a text whose discursive structure is aligned with Lacan's discourse of the Master. Chapter 2 focuses on the *Queste del Saint Graal*, a narrative that can be seen to illumine the discourse of the University. Chapters 3 and 4 adopt a comparative approach, anchored for the most part in the two texts already treated: Chapter 3 explores the narrative thematization of sin in order to rehearse the discourse of the Hysteric; Chapter 4 assesses a number of narrative episodes in which dreams and dreaming are presented in the medieval Grail texts as sites of suspended subjectivity, and which I see paralleled in the discourse of the Analyst.

### ***Perlesvaus*: The discourse of the Master**

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S1 & \rightarrow & S2 \\ \hline \$ & & a \end{array}$$

The discourse of the Master is, as the name suggests, the dominant discourse in the Lacanian theorization; it is in this permutation that terms and positions appear most congruously matched. The position of the agent is occupied by S1,

<sup>38</sup> Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes et le mythe du Graal*, pp. 203–4.

<sup>39</sup> As such, the very concept of a singular, identifiable 'discourse of the Grail' should perhaps be placed *sous rature* ['crossed-out'], à la Derrida.

the master signifier, a kind of linguistic anchor that has the role of making discourse meaningful or readable, and that pins the individual subject to the network of other signifiers (the Lacanian symbolic order), represented in the same algebra by S2. The master signifier is thus implicated in the production of the subject's identity; it is with this signifier that the subject makes his strongest identifications within the symbolic order (the domain of language and law), be these positive or negative. However, in this role, master signifiers are ideological in their promulgation of a false consciousness: their meaning is absolute and their hegemony unquestionable. The discourse of the Master is, says Lacan, a discourse that promotes synthesis and that valorizes a notion of self-identity, of 'égalité à soi-même' ('self-sameness').<sup>40</sup> This is captured in Lacan's homophonic pun 'm'êtré/maître à moi-même' ('being myself/my own master'), expressing the subject's need to feel 'himself', that is, to enjoy a cohesive sense of identity that defines him both for himself and for others.

In Chapter 1, I explore the ways in which the narrative of the *Perlesvaus* can be seen to perform some of the functions of a Master discourse. Here the master signifier (S1) in which the subjects (i.e., the characters) heavily invest is represented by the notion of a stable, consistent subjectivity – an *identity* that would adequately represent the subject to himself and to others within a complex network of signifiers. The subject's way of responding to the interpellation of the master signifier, of understanding the message addressed to him, is 'to accord full explanatory power and/or moral authority to the proffered master signifiers and to refer all other signifiers [. . .] back to them'.<sup>41</sup> The receiver of the message thus enacts the function of knowledge (S2), and in doing so produces *a*, the Lacanian *plus-de-jour*.<sup>42</sup> This suppressed excess of *jouissance* (violent, transgressive enjoyment) is crucially what is left out of the subject's symbolic identity, but is paradoxically the product of the subject's location between the articulation of S1 and S2.<sup>43</sup> We can thus see how the very impossi-

<sup>40</sup> Lacan, *S17*, pp. 79 and 91.

<sup>41</sup> Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions', p. 120.

<sup>42</sup> The *objet (petit) a* is perhaps the most notoriously difficult of Lacan's algebraic symbols to define (see, for example, Bowie, *Lacan*, pp. 165–78). Any attempt to pin down the *a* demonstrates a tautological acknowledgement, however unconscious, of the very concept of *a*. The question 'What is *a*?' contains in itself the implication that the essence of the object that we seek to define is *something more than itself*; it requires explanation in terms other than its own. Thus any endeavour to answer that question will necessarily result in a performative speech act, rehearsing the *a* in the act of enunciation. Or, as Bowie so persuasively avers, 'the *a* cannot not be at work, even in descriptions of the *a*' (*Lacan*, p. 175). The absolute centrality of this concept to Lacan's thinking is demonstrated by his locating the *a* at the centre of the Borromean knot, the topological figure joining together the three orders of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real (see Evans, *Dictionary*, pp. 18–20). In defining the concept of surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jour*), Lacan uses the *a* to figure the remainder of enjoyment (*jouissance*, the violently disruptive beyond of pleasure) that persists in the symbolic order, and that bears upon the real (see also note 60 below).

<sup>43</sup> This is expressed by the Lacanian formula for the relationship of the subject to the signifier, or rather the way in which the subject is produced between two signifiers: S1 represents \$ for S2.

bility of communication between the agent (S1) and the other (S2) generates a product (*a*) that is *both an excess and a lack*: it is simultaneously what is missing from the agent's message, and also, and *therefore*, that which is beyond it – fundamentally his *desire*.

The subject's relationship to this lack/excess that is the crucial constituent of his identity is identified by Lacan as one of fantasy, written in the Lacanian algebra as  $\$ \diamond a$ . The *poinçon* (lozenge) in this formula inserts a break between the lacking subject and the object that, he fantasizes, would fill out this lack and satisfy his desire – and yet that is precisely the cause of the lack/desire (the *want*).<sup>44</sup> One of the various designations of the slippery *a* is as the 'object-cause of desire', that is, the object that *causes desire as such*, rather than that towards which desire tends. That the terms  $\$$  and *a* should be relegated to the lower stratum in the structure of the discourse of the Master demonstrates that this discourse must suppress fantasy, and this suppression is particularly evident in the narrative of the *Perlesvaus*, where all desire is rigorously suppressed. As Francis Dubost observes, 'dans le *Perlesvaus*, le désir humain est traqué, proscrit, refoulé, toujours décrit comme source de malheurs et de violence' ['in the *Perlesvaus*, human desire is persecuted, prohibited, repressed, always portrayed as a source of misfortune and violence'],<sup>45</sup> The fantasy that the *Perlesvaus* is so anxious to deny is that of an unstable, fluid or dynamically produced identity – a subjectivity *not* dependent on identification with a master signifier (S1), but which, as is explained further below, has more in common with the subjectivity of the Analyst's discourse, a perversion of the Master discourse in which the subject is encouraged to articulate his non-identity.

The *Perlesvaus*'s oft-noted fascination with violent death and mutilation provides further evidence in support of the assertion that the narrative promulgates a Master discourse. The synthesis and self-identity promoted by this discourse (or, the hegemony of S1) are such that, paradoxically, the identity produced is static and lifeless. Lacan agrees that 'il n'y a évidemment pas de meilleure façon d'épingler le signifiant-maître S1 [. . .] que de l'identifier à la mort' ['there is clearly no better way to pin down the master signifier S1 [. . .] than to identify it with death'],<sup>46</sup> and I shall explore (in both Chapters 1 and 4) how death becomes the privileged locus, indeed the guarantor, of identity in the *Perlesvaus*.

<sup>44</sup> For a lucid explanation of Lacan's construction of the *poinçon* in the formulae of fantasy and perversion, see Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, pp. 32–5.

<sup>45</sup> Dubost, 'Le *Perlesvaus*, livre de haute violence', p. 186. See also Berthelot, 'Violence et passion'.

<sup>46</sup> Lacan, *S17*, p. 198.

*La Queste del Saint Graal: The discourse of the University*

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S2 & \rightarrow & a \\ \hline S1 & & \$ \end{array}$$

Rotating the terms of the *matheme* a quarter-turn anti-clockwise, we shift from the discourse of the Master to that of the University. This discourse is similarly implicated in the formation and regulation of the subject's identity, although the role of the master signifier (S1) as the truth of the discourse is now dissimulated behind a façade of objective knowledge (S2). The top level of this *matheme* can be explained in terms of the symbolic system (S2) awaiting and exceeding the subject; even before we are born we are anticipated (desired) in discourse as that 'something extra' (*a*) that is both absent and expected to fill out that absence. What is excluded from the agent's message in this instance is S1, the truth that the apparent agency of knowledge (with S2 in the position of the agent; a psychotic notion that language is in control) is still underpinned and configured by master signifiers. The response of the other to this message, that is, the enactment of *a* as a filler for the lack, effects the production of the split subject (*\$*). The fact that the subject is anticipated and preceded by a network of signifiers that constitute his identity, of which an essential element (S1) is nevertheless fundamentally inaccessible (hence, in this discourse, the absolute disjunction of S1 // *\$* on the lower level of the *matheme*), causes the very split that defines subjectivity as such.

The structure of this discourse seems singularly pertinent to the discursive operation of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, as is explored in Chapter 2. The way in which discourse both precedes and exceeds the subject is exemplified in the *Queste* by the annunciation and arrival of Galahad. Cast as the object-cause of desire, the *objet a*, by the companions of the Round Table, not least in the appellation 'le Chevalier Desirré' (*Q*, 7:25–6), Galahad's anticipation in discourse is further demonstrated by the multiple inscriptions around the Arthurian court that prophesy their fulfilment with his arrival. A graffito carved on the sword in the stone, which floats down the river and comes to rest at Camelot, typifies the way in which this inscription of the subject somehow short-circuits identity: 'JANUS M'OSTERA DE CI, SE CIL NON A CUI COSTÉ JE DOI PENDRE. ET CIL SERA LI MIELDRES CHEVALIERS DEL MONDE' ['None shall remove me from here, except the one at whose side I am to hang. And he shall be the best knight in the world'] (*Q*, 5:23–5). The knight who succeeds in drawing the sword from the stone will, by virtue of that feat, be known as the best knight in the world; but only the best knight in the world could perform the deed in the first place. Far from conferring a new, singular, identity upon Galahad, the notion of identity in the *Queste*, as in the *Perlesvaus*, is construed as an *always already*; identity awaits the subject, who must attempt to be equal to his interpellation by the symbolic order, to fit the mould that awaits him.

The manner in which the Arthurian court casts Galahad as the other of their



discourse, their *objet a*, might serve to deflect anxieties about their own role as the recipients and enactors of certain systems of knowledge (S2). This is particularly clear when Galahad is invested by Arthur with the power to resolve the kingdom's problems:

Sire, fet li rois, de vostre venue avions nos molt grant mestier por moltes choses, et por les granz merveilles de ceste terre mener a fin, et por une aventure mener a chief qui hui nos est avenue, a quoi cil de ceanz ont failli.  
(*Q*, 11:18–21)

[‘Sir,’ said the king, ‘we had a great need for your coming for many reasons; both to bring an end to the great mysteries of this land, and to complete an adventure that has befallen us today, and at which our own people have failed’.]

The anxieties thus expressed clearly project the inadequacies of the court on to Galahad, and are specifically generated by a conflict between different systems of knowledge, that is, an uncertainty about the agency motivating the narrative's ideological discourse, again pointing to the absence of the repressed master signifier. In addressing Galahad as the *a*, the quasi-mystical object that is invested with the ability to cover the speaking subject's lack, Arthur underlines the truth of the University discourse: the obfuscated need for the agency of S1, the master signifier.

The two principal conflicting systems of knowledge and signification (S2) that I identify in my reading of the *Queste* are those of two strands of knighthood, termed ‘la chevalerie terrien’ and ‘la chevalerie celestiel’ by the narrative. The former, the ‘earthly’ or ‘secular’ mould of knighthood, is that traditionally associated with the term chivalry – the knight's pursuit and mastery of adventures and damsels. However, the *Queste* is virulently evangelical in its debasement of this secular chivalry and promotion of a new model, the ‘celestial’ or ‘spiritual’ knighthood that must be espoused by all those undertaking the Grail Quest. The Christian values of abstinence, chastity and piety that are enshrined in this new code clearly do not tessellate at all well with the traditional chivalric ethos. Unbeknown to the subject (the knight), these systems of knowledge contain the very master signifiers that would allow him to make sense of the discourse that defines him, a fact that is inevitably unrecognized, for the subject in this discourse can have no access to the master signifier: S1 // \$. The narrative conflict that develops between these two antagonistic codes of comportment, what I term the ‘discursive inconsistency’ of the *Queste* – that is, its suppression of the master signifier and attribution of agency to a system of supposedly objective knowledge – produces a particularly violent split in the subject, providing the basis for my analyses in Chapter 2.

The conflict between opposing systems of knowledge, at first responsible for the subject's alienation, ultimately produces separation, the Lacanian operation whereby the subject perceives that the Other, the system of symbolic knowledge, is inconsistent and is therefore, like the subject himself, lacking. This

realization opens up the gap of the desire of the Other, a lack that we have already seen formulated in the crusader's angst-ridden demand *Deus quid vult?*, and that pushes the tyrannical discourse of the University ever closer to that of the Hysteric, articulated by the split in the subject.

### Sin and the discourse of the Hysteric

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \$ & \rightarrow & S1 \\ \hline a & & S2 \end{array}$$

The discourse of the Hysteric, dominated by the split in the subject who assumes the position of the agent, is articulated by a lack: that which has been left out of, or remains unsymbolized in, discourse. As such it is perhaps in this discourse structure, rather than that of the Master, that the terms and positions are most congruously associated, all discourse being fundamentally motivated by, and rehearsing, the impossible ex-pression of desire. The *objet a* at the position of the truth is determinant of the very being, or rather the lack of being, of the agent – that is, his absolute inability to articulate his desire. This notion of unspeakable desire provides the point of contact, in Chapter 3, between the discourse of the Hysteric and concepts of sin and the practice of confession in the Grail literature. In these narratives sin comes to function as the perfect manifestation of the *objet a* as *abject*: an excess that is also a lack, something that has been left out and that resists integration. As Paul Verhaeghe has pointed out, the hysterical discourse thus creates a model for the social bond that is founded upon impossibility: ‘hysteria as a social bond puts the impossibility of desire to the forefront’.<sup>47</sup> This impossibility is, paradoxically, the very condition of possibility of (this) discourse, as Lacan acknowledged with the later addition of two disjunctions to his discourse matheme (discussed further below).

The discourse of the Hysteric derives its designation from the fact that its most striking manifestation is found in clinical cases of hysterical neurosis. It is here that an intimate relationship between the signifier and the body reveals itself; the hysterical patient's physical symptoms constitute a site of resistance to the master signifiers that attempt to locate and contain/constrain him within language – the hysteric literally refuses to embody these master signifiers. It is this discourse that most accurately articulates the subject's symptom: the experience of excessive *jouissance* that results from the subject's non-coincidence with master signifiers. Rather than being construed entirely negatively (as proof of non-identity or lack), however, the subject's symptom can serve as a site of resistance, a protest against his sliding under and being consumed by the master signifiers of the Other, and it is this aspect of the hysterical discourse that we see played out in a number of episodes in the Grail narratives.

<sup>47</sup> Verhaeghe, ‘From Impossibility to Inability’, p. 92.

The third chapter begins by considering how the body is critically implicated in notions of sin. As a site of sexuality the body can be the cause of sin, specifically the sin of 'luxure' ['lust'] against which the *Queste* inveighs so bitterly; the body can also represent the site at which that sin is inscribed, as is seen in the early medieval ordeal by fire/water; it is also the means of absolving oneself of that sin with the performance of corporal penance. Sin (and its remission) is reconfigured and relocated during the early thirteenth century; no longer tied wholly to the body, sin now comes to be conceived of as a specifically linguistic concept. This is most abundantly clear in a shift away from the physical ordeal in favour of the practice of confession, which plays a vitally important role in the two texts from which I draw my analyses. It is here, in the practice of confession, that the discourse of the Hysteric comes fully into play, enacting the subject's refusal to embody the master signifiers that define him as a split or lacking subject, as a sinner.<sup>48</sup> For although the practice of confession was intended as a means of identifying and subsequently remitting sin, the *Queste* and the *Perlesvaus* both demonstrate that the linguistic/discursive conception of sin allows the subject to refuse the mandate imposed on him by the symbolic order: confession becomes an act of resistance rather than one of self-abasement or supplication.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, this resistance substantiates a conception of sin as abject – as that which adheres to language but is simultaneously the lack/excess of which language cannot fully conceive. This notion is explored in Chapter 3 through a reading of Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Armathie* (known also as *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal*).<sup>50</sup> It becomes clear that the act of confession is representative of the very impossibility (of desire) that defines the hysterical discourse.<sup>51</sup> This impossibility is not, however, a logical or linguistic aporia, rather it is ideologically charged in the Grail narratives, as can be explained by the hysteric's relation to, or rather demand for, the Master.

The way in which the receiver of the hysterical subject's message responds to that message is, as the structure of the discourse shows, to enact the master signifier. In terms of the conception of sin in the Grail narratives, this master signifier might be the notion of 'luxure' ['lust'] or the converse ideological notions of chastity and virginity, also the grace of God that those conditions earn. The purpose of these master signifiers is to overcome the anxiety expressed by the hysterical agent (\$), and as such the product of the discourse is S2, 'a system of knowledge/belief within which the master signifiers take their

<sup>48</sup> See Lacan, *S17*, p. 107.

<sup>49</sup> As Bracher notes, the discourse of the Hysteric is characterized by 'instances of resistance, protest, and complaint – from the plaintive anthems of slaves to the yearning lyrics of lovesick poets to the iconoclastic rhetoric of revolutionaries' ('Psychological and Social Functions', p. 122).

<sup>50</sup> For the sake of clarity, I opt to use the title *Joseph d'Armathie* when referring to this text.

<sup>51</sup> Žižek comments on 'the hysterical, "scandalous" kernel of Christianity, [. . .] obscured by its institutionalization of the obsessional ritual' (*LA*, p. 78).

<sup>52</sup> Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions', p. 123.

bearings and assume their force'.<sup>52</sup> The discourse of the Hysteric thus remains fundamentally in thrall to the Master discourse.<sup>53</sup> Lacan's famous retort to the hysteria of the 1968 student uprisings in France was to dismiss the desire of the protesters as nothing other than the desire for a new Master;<sup>54</sup> whether the same could be said of Lancelot and Perceval in the course of their pursuit of the Grail is a question that is addressed in this chapter.

### Dreaming the discourse of the Analyst

$$\begin{array}{ccc} a & \rightarrow & \$ \\ \hline S2 & & S1 \end{array}$$

In the discourses of the University and the Hysteric we have so far encountered two structures that are variations on the dominant theme, that of the Master discourse. The discourse of the Analyst, which overturns (i.e., flips over and reverses the terms of) the dominant discourse, is nevertheless also 'another discourse of the Master', rendering the movement from one discourse to another 'circular rather than progressive'.<sup>55</sup> If the discourse of the Master suppresses fantasy then here, in the discourse of the Analyst, the inverse of fantasy, perversion (written  $a \diamond \$$  in the Lacanian algebra), is promoted to the upper level.<sup>56</sup> The subject of the Analyst's discourse is thus to be identified with the pervert who offers himself as the object-instrument of the Other's *jouissance*. In this position the subject is fully able to accept himself as split, to embrace the very non-identity that defines his subjectivity – that which has been suppressed to a greater or lesser extent by the other discourses, but that is now *enacted*. The discourse of the Analyst thus illustrates the workings of the Lacanian concept of separation, the second operation defining the subject in relation to the signifier, after that of alienation.<sup>57</sup> As Bracher extrapolates:

It is only with the discourse of the Analyst that the subject is in a position to assume its own alienation and desire and, on the basis of that assumption, separate from the given master signifiers and produce its own, new master signifiers – identity and values less antithetical to its fundamental fantasy and the desires arising from that fantasy.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the ostensibly radical possibilities for allowing the subject to embrace his own de-centredness, it is crucial to note that the product of this discourse is

<sup>53</sup> See Lacan, *S17*, p. 107.

<sup>54</sup> Lacan, *S17*, p. 239.

<sup>55</sup> Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions', pp. 123–4.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Žižek: 'the matheme of the discourse of perversion is the same as that of the analyst's discourse' ('Four Discourses, Four Subjects', pp. 79–80).

<sup>57</sup> See in particular Lacan, *S11*, pp. 227–40.

<sup>58</sup> Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions', p. 123.

nevertheless S1 – a (new) master signifier which, with a simple quarter-turn of the structure, will re-establish itself in the dominant position, returning to the discourse of the Master. Thus to assert, as Bracher does, that ‘the discourse of the Analyst [. . .] offers the only ultimately effective means of countering the psychological and social tyranny exercised through language’ is perhaps prematurely optimistic.<sup>59</sup> Even if the master signifiers of this discourse are now produced *by* the subject rather than being imposed *upon* him, the circularity of the discourse *matheme* nevertheless ensures that the tyranny of the master signifier is never fully overcome, but forever anticipates its imminent return to hegemony.

In Chapter 4 I focus upon concepts of alienation and separation, the two operations which, for Lacan, define the subject’s relationship to the Other, as they are enacted in the Grail narratives. The narrative theme of dreaming provides the optic through which to view episodes of subjective destitution, moments at which the subject withdraws from the symbolic order, from both the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste*; episodes in which the subject’s assumption of his non-identity and his relation to master signifiers can be used to illustrate the workings of the discourse of the Analyst. Of particular importance to my readings is the agency ascribed to the *objet a* in this discourse, an agency that is ‘spectral’ and therefore menacingly abject. Just as the production of the *a* has the potential to destabilize the discourse of the Master (or, more exactly, the hegemony of the master signifier in that discourse, as is shown in Chapter 1), so the production of the master signifier in the discourse of the Analyst serves to prop up and reconfigure a discourse structure that would otherwise be beset by the uncanny dominance of the *a*. It is precisely this production of master signifiers that is enacted in the telling of the dream, where spectrality is gentrified by narrative symbolization.

Bracher contends that ‘by exposing the real that the system of signifiers, and particularly the master signifiers, fail to grasp, one can interpellate subjects to an activation of their alienated condition, their nonidentity with their master signifiers, and thus create an impetus for the production of new master signifiers’.<sup>60</sup> The assertion that a certain structuration of discourse might finally allow the subject to expose what lies behind the system of signification is undeniably

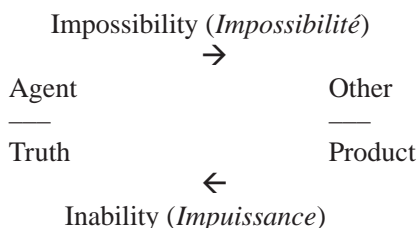
<sup>59</sup> Bracher, ‘Psychological and Social Functions’, p. 123.

<sup>60</sup> Bracher, ‘Psychological and Social Functions’, p. 126. It is crucial to note that the term ‘real’ here does not designate ‘reality’, but refers specifically to the Lacanian order of the real (see note 42 above), to ‘that which lies outside the symbolic process, and is to be found in the mental as well as in the material world’ (Bowie, *Lacan*, p. 94). The real might be thought of as a kind of undifferentiated plenitude, a fundamentally pre-symbolic absolute – although of course the fact that it comes so close to what is impossible, ineffable, renders the real fundamentally unrepresentable/unthinkable/unspeakable, and therefore traumatic (see Evans, *Dictionary*, pp. 159–61). The signifier introduces a cut into the real, and it is here that we see how the *objet a* oscillates between the real and the symbolic – it is at the same time that excess of the real that cannot be accounted for in the symbolic order, and also the very cut, the lack represented by the signifier.

appealing, but is somewhat attenuated by the bathetic conclusion that such a revelation can only lead to the production of new master signifiers – hardly an exposé of the Lacanian real. This production, however, attempts to obfuscate the truly terrifying otherness of the real that persists behind the screen of those four terms – S1, S2, \$ and *a* – that purport to delimit a closed system of signification accounting both for the pseudo-radical possibilities of the discourse of the Analyst and the hegemonic dominance of the Master.

### Beyond Four Discourses?

Perhaps the most crucial feature of Lacan's discourse structures – deemed by Verhaeghe to represent 'the most important and the most difficult part of the whole theory'<sup>61</sup> – is absent from the original elaboration in book 17 of the *Séminaire*, and does not appear until book 20. This deceptively simple development consists in the addition of two arrows to the discourse algorithm: the one on the upper level pointing from the position of the agent to the other, marked 'Impossibilité'; whilst that on the lower level, labelled 'Impuissance', points from the product to the truth (see *S20*, p. 21):



The impossibility that marks the upper level of the discourse *mathème* is caused by the agent's fundamental misrecognition of the truth; as we have already seen, his message to the other is driven by a desire (the truth of the discourse) of which he can never be fully aware (and which he actively represses). As such, communication between the agent and the other is always impeded by a core of desire that adheres to the message, but that can never be realized or released in the discursive exchange. The *impuissance* (inability) that besets the lower level of the structure is consequential to this impossibility, and defines the disjunctive relationship between the product and the truth of discourse that we have already seen at work, most notably in the discourse of the University. The other receives from the agent a message whose truth cannot be verbalized, and responds to that (misunderstood) message by generating a product. This product crucially results from *misrecognition*, and can therefore have no bearing on the truth of the discourse, since that was fundamentally

<sup>61</sup> Verhaeghe, 'From Impossibility to Inability', p. 84.

excluded from the agent's message. As Verhaeghe adduces, 'if it were possible for the agent to verbalise his truth completely to the other, this other would respond with an appropriate product; as this precondition is not fulfilled, the product can never match what lies at the position of the truth'.<sup>62</sup> The addition of the two disjunctions therefore completes the structure of discourse with its absolutely fundamental characteristic: its *a priori* failure. In the words of Verhaeghe, finally, 'each of the four discourses will unite a group of subjects through a particular impossibility of a particular desire'.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in spite of its claim to a certain self-containing circularity, Lacan's theory of discourse is anything but a hermetically closed system; it must constantly strive, at a meta-theoretical level, to recover and incorporate what has been left out, the *objet a* of discourse *as such*, not specifically of any one discourse permutation.

Indeed, Lacan's four discourse mathemes are by no means exhaustive of the possible permutations of that formal structure. With four positions and four terms, a total of twenty-four combinations is available, of which Lacan retains only a sixth. And yet, crucially, each of the discarded permutations locates a master signifier, S1, in one of its positions, thereby rendering that structure *readable*.<sup>64</sup> It is for this very reason that even the most radical discourse permutation, that of the Analyst, must continue to produce master signifiers in order to remain significant and intelligible. Lacan's theory thus appears to pass over many other permutations that are no less readable, and therefore no less significant, than the four structures chosen to illustrate the operation of discourse. Why, then, should only four be retained, and establish a claim to enclosed circularity?

Each of the four discourse structures expounded by Lacan is primarily intended to illustrate a certain social bond.<sup>65</sup> Could it then be inferred that the discarded permutations do *not* function in this way and do *not* foster socio-linguistic bonds but rather have been foreclosed in order to ensure the symbolic functioning of the four hegemonic discourses? The four named discourses function as the ideological-linguistic anchoring points, what Lacan calls *points de capiton* (quilting buttons), that ensure signification and that structure our relation to what we call reality (thereby establishing a social bond), arresting the constant slide of the signifier. An insufficient number of these anchoring points causes language difficulties characteristic of psychosis, as Dylan Evans notes: 'the lack of *points de capiton* means that the psychotic experience is characterized by a constant slippage of the signified under the signifier, which is a disaster for signification' – and we have already noted the

<sup>62</sup> Verhaeghe, 'From Impossibility to Inability', pp. 85–6.

<sup>63</sup> Verhaeghe, 'From Impossibility to Inability', p. 85; my italics.

<sup>64</sup> See Lacan, *S17*, p. 218.

<sup>65</sup> 'Cette notion de discours est à prendre comme lien social, fondé sur le langage, et semble donc n'être pas sans rapport avec ce qui dans la linguistique se spécifie comme grammaire' ['this notion of discourse should be taken as a social bond, founded on language, and therefore seems not unrelated to that which linguistics specifically terms grammar'] (Lacan, *S20*, p. 21).



makings of such a disaster in the discourse of the University, where the suppression of the master signifier (S1) allows the unchecked reign of language (S2) in the place of the agent.<sup>66</sup> What, then, are Lacan's four discourse mathemes if not *points de capiton*, master signifiers in their own right, preventing the slide of the signifier into the mire of psychosis, a state that unties the very social bonds that Lacan's four discourses strive to preserve, and that could be seen to persist in the unstructured remainder of discourse passed over by Lacan?<sup>67</sup>

If, as was suggested briefly above, the discourse constructed by the Grail literature is always somehow an *excess* that refuses containment within the terms that define it as such, then might it now be inferred that the discourse of the Grail pertains to that outside, to that otherness of discourse that threatens the slide of the signifier into psychosis? If so, how might the supplementarity of this discourse be thematized, or indeed gentrified, by its diegetic presentation in the Grail romances? My contention is that readings of the Grail as either a sign of abjection or as a sign of love offer two parallel interpretations for the persistent otherness of the Holy Vessel and its discourse, and for our enduring inability to account fully for its meaning. The latter position (the equation of the Grail and love) has, in a sense, been that traditionally espoused by those seeking a Christian meaning for the Grail, for whom it is nothing other than a proof of God's love, *agape*. Yet by approaching this question of love subsequent to positing the Grail as *abject*, I hope to provoke a reassessment of the unerringly positive cathexis of this symbol of God's grace in the discourse of Christianity.

### The Uncanny Discourse of the Grail

It is in the abject remainder of discourse, that which is never tied down to any one of the four discursive *points de capiton* but which continues to assert its readability as the unrepresented otherness of discourse, that a discourse of the Grail might be located. As such it is, in a sense, that which cannot be named. We have already seen that there is a fundamental failure of each discourse matheme to realize the desire inherent in the agent's attempt at communication – and yet the very structure of each of the four discourses offers itself as a means of masking, *whilst also drawing attention to*, its constitutive lack (i.e., the position of the truth in each discourse). Lacan's theory demonstrates how this lack can be *structured* – given a certain comforting configuration – and therefore *metaphorized* by each of the four discourse mathemes, and yet it also

<sup>66</sup> Evans, *Dictionary*, p. 156.

<sup>67</sup> This argument is further substantiated by the emphasis that we earlier saw placed on the formal, structural nature of Lacan's theory of discourse: as Evans comments, 'another way of describing this [slippage caused by lack of *points de capiton*] is as "a relationship between the subject and the signifier in its most formal dimension, in its dimension as pure signifier". This relationship of the subject to the signifier in its purely formal aspect constitutes "the nucleus of psychosis"' (*Dictionary*, p. 157).



continues to exist in an unmediated, uncondensed form beyond the ordering power of the *point de capiton*. It is this undifferentiated lack/excess that characterizes the discourse of the Grail, a discourse that responds to its fundamental lack (the very impossibility of sustaining discursive social bonds *per se*) not only by structuring itself as a metaphor of that lack, but also by going one stage further (than the four discourses discussed thus far) and producing a *metonym*, materialized as an object that is the *supplement* of that lack – the Grail itself.

This appearance of the Grail at a moment of crisis in the subject – as we previously saw to be the case argued by both Adolf and Cazelles – would appear to accord exactly with Lacan's basic conception of object relations, expounded in book 4 of the *Séminaire*. For Lacan, the object constitutes a rejoinder to a particular crisis in the subject, paradoxically serving both to mask and to expose the subject's deep anxieties over his relationship with the world around him.<sup>68</sup> Revisiting Lacan's work on object relations in her essay *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Julia Kristeva questions why the relation between fear and the object should be perceived as foundational: 'pourquoi est-ce la phobie qui permet le mieux d'aborder la question de la relation à l'objet? Pourquoi la peur *et* l'objet?' ['why should it be fear that best allows us to tackle the question of object relations? Why fear *and* object?'].<sup>69</sup>

Lacan had somewhat enigmatically suggested that the phobic object provides protection against a certain *nothing* – a lack that is in itself the root of fear, and that must be filled out by the object.<sup>70</sup> Kristeva appears to concur with this assertion, arriving at the conclusion, through a re-reading of Lacan's presentation of Freud's case of Little Hans, that the phobic object (in this case the horse) is produced first and foremost as protection against the unnameable. Hans is not necessarily afraid of horses *per se*, rather in his haste to name the world around him he quickly runs up against the fallibility of the signifier. The noise of horses in the street becomes a stand-in, a supplement, for what cannot otherwise be symbolized. The phobic object, Kristeva asserts, becomes a hieroglyph condensing all fears, whether nameable or unnameable, and as such acts as a metaphor of *lack itself*.<sup>71</sup> At this point there appears to be no distinction between Kristeva's notion of the phobic object and the Lacanian *point de capiton*; both effect a metaphoric operation of condensation and displacement. Indeed, the example of the *point de capiton* that Lacan provides to illustrate his thinking, a line from Jean Racine's *Athalie*: 'Je crains Dieu, cher Abner, et n'ai point d'autre crainte' ['I fear God, dear Abner, and have no other fear'], illustrates precisely this condensation of all particular content into a single referent.<sup>72</sup> It is this phobic metaphor that stands in for, that metaphorizes, an object for a fear that would otherwise remain unsymbolized.

<sup>68</sup> Lacan, *S4*, p. 22.

<sup>69</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 44.

<sup>70</sup> Lacan, *S4*, p. 23.

<sup>71</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 46.

<sup>72</sup> See 'Le Point de capiton' in Lacan, *S3*, pp. 293–306.

If Lacan's four discourse mathemes operate as *points de capiton*, can we then conclude that they similarly perform the function of phobic objects/metaphors, condensing and displacing the underlying source of anxiety? This hypothesis would certainly seem to be substantiated on the basis that the phobic metaphor is essentially the hallucination of a nothing, of a lack. If that lack is the fundamental characteristic of discourse (or, specifically, of the discourse of the Grail) itself, then what is the Grail if not the patch, the object, or the metaphor onto which that lack is displaced?<sup>73</sup> It is precisely, in the Kristevan formulation, 'l'hallucination de rien: une métaphore qui est l'anaphore de rien' ['the hallucination of nothing; a metaphor that is the anaphora of nothing'].<sup>74</sup>

### The Grail, Love and *Agalma*: Filling out Nothing

If, as posited above, Lacan's four discourse mathemes aspire to a quasi-hermeneutic circularity, and the discourse of the Grail is not a structured, fifth discourse, but rather is constructed out of the amorphous remnants of discourse that resist integration into this circularity of meaning, then where is the existence, or indeed the persistence, of this other discourse to be registered? Lacan concedes that there is indeed an in-between, an interval (whether temporal or spatial) between his mathemes, glimpsed at the points of transition between them, at moments of discursive hiatus (such as those at which the Grail often appears), when the transition from the register of one discourse into another is momentarily abated and the unchecked slide of the signifier temporarily resumes. This is the moment at which, according to Lacan, we are given a sign of love: 'l'amour, c'est le signe qu'on change de discours' ['love is the sign that we are changing discourse'].<sup>75</sup>

Love is, for Lacan, essentially a metaphor – more exactly still, a metaphor that, like the Kristevan phobic metaphor outlined above, is the bearer of a nothing, *anaphore de rien*. Lacan develops this conception of love in book 8 of the *Séminaire* through a reading of Plato's *Symposium*. It is here that the Greek term *agalma* (ἀγάλμα) is employed as a trope for Alcibiades' complex relationship to Socrates, based around a love that the latter is unwilling to acknowledge.<sup>76</sup> Alcibiades is well aware that the object of his affection does indeed bear a desire for him, but he nevertheless searches for the unforthcoming *sign* of that desire, which would be the metaphor of love.<sup>77</sup> Socrates' refusal to respond with

<sup>73</sup> For the notion of a patch applied to the *béance* ('gap') of discourse, see Benvenuto and Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan*, p. 145.

<sup>74</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 53.

<sup>75</sup> Lacan, *S20*, p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> See particularly Lacan, *S8*, Chapter 10. *Agalma* is 'a Greek term meaning a glory, an ornament, an offering to the gods, or a little statue of a god' (Evans, *Dictionary*, p. 125). The concept is usually glossed, in its psychoanalytic application, as the precious treasure hidden behind an unremarkable exterior.

<sup>77</sup> Lacan, *S8*, p. 165.

such a metaphor results from an ambiguous *consciousness* of his status as the object of desire;<sup>78</sup> Socrates refuses to concur with Alcibiades' perception that he, Socrates, is in possession of 'It', the thing that makes him worthy of Alcibiades' love – that something that is *in him more than himself* – 'cet objet, *agalma*, petit *a*, objet du désir' ['that object, *agalma*, small *a*, object of desire'].<sup>79</sup>

The terrible paradox of the situation, however, is that the *agalma*, that feature of the other that we cathect most powerfully, is ultimately a nothing, a pure semblance. As Žižek observes, 'I am "really," "sincerely" in love only insofar as I believe in your secret *agalma*, i.e. insofar as I believe that there is something behind the series of observable features',<sup>80</sup> or, in other words, I fall in love with what you are not and, in doing so, offer you what I do not have: 'l'amour, c'est donner ce qu'on n'a pas' ['love is the giving of what one does not possess'].<sup>81</sup> In this sense love, or rather its metaphor, is set up as a kind of snare for the *plus-de-jouir*, the *objet a* that the subject believes will offer him an absolute confirmation of his being, as Žižek avers:

The *object small a* designates precisely the endeavour to procure for the subject a positive support of his being beyond the signifying representation: by way of the fantasy-relation to *a*, the subject (\$) acquires an imaginary sense of his 'fullness of being,' of what he 'truly is' independently of what he is for others, i.e. notwithstanding his place in the intersubjective symbolic network.<sup>82</sup>

The Grail thus conceived of as *agalma*, the fantasy sign of God's love, fulfils the very purpose posited above, that of a patch covering the overlapping lacks of the subject and the discourse in which he is alienated or from which he is separated.

Lacan suggests the fantasy object can only ever be glimpsed, never apprehended it in its entirety, since it is heavily invested with the enigmatic desire of the Other:

Ne retrouvez-vous pas là quelque chose de la magie que je vous ai déjà pointée autour du *Che vuoi?* C'est bien cette clé, ce tranchant essentiel, de la topologie du sujet qui commence à *Qu'est-ce que tu veux?* En d'autres termes – Y a-t-il un désir qui soit vraiment ta volonté?<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Lacan, S8, p. 185.

<sup>79</sup> Lacan, S8, p. 177.

<sup>80</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 264 n. 3.

<sup>81</sup> Lacan, S8, p. 147. Cf. Žižek: 'In the case of true love, apropos of some feature which is in itself negative, i.e., which offers itself as reason against love, we say "For this very reason I love this person even more!" *Le trait unaire*, the unary feature which triggers love, is always an *index of an imperfection*' (*Negative*, pp. 125–6).

<sup>82</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 266 n. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Lacan, S8, p. 167.

[Do you not find some of the magic there that I already showed you around the *Che vuoi*? It is surely this key, this essential character of the subject's topology that begins with *What do you want*? In other words – Is there a desire that truly corresponds to what you wish for?]

We appear to have come full-circle back to our point of departure – the hysterical questioning of the desire of the Other – *Deus quid vult?* – that arises at moments of discursive fracture, such as present themselves in the Grail romances. The Grail as *agalma*, *objet a*, is produced as a kind of hysterical symptom, a figure of the *jouissance* that is excluded from its discourse.

Perhaps the most convincing connection between the Grail and the theoretical discourse outlined thus far, further elaborated in each of my four subsequent chapters, can be made if one accounts for the Grail, for its appearance and persistence in these medieval romances, as a kind of trap or lure (*leurre*). A phobic metaphor, the hallucination of nothing, the Grail represents the often chimerical structuring of the very lack that defines discourse, and the subject of discourse, as such, and yet at the same time promises itself as the patch that will cover that lack – materializing the ‘something else’ that the subject perceives as being missing from himself and from his ability to make sense of the world in which he exists. That ‘something else’ is, paradoxically, the desire of the Other, that which is *paré* (both displaced and embodied) by the Grail. As Lacan observes, ‘l’*agalma*, c’est aussi, quelque chose autour de quoi l’on peut, en somme, attraper l’attention divine’ [‘the *agalma* is also something with which one might, finally, attract divine attention’],<sup>84</sup> and it is this function of soliciting, luring and attesting to the desire of the Other that allows the Grail to be theorized as a fantasy-support for the split subject within the symbolic network or, more ingenuously, that purports both to pose and to answer the insistent, hysterically voiced question of God’s will: *Deus quid vult?*

<sup>84</sup> Lacan, *S8*, p. 171.

## This is not the One: Identity, Abjection and *méconnaissance* in the *Perlesvaus*

Méconnaissance n'est pas ignorance<sup>1</sup>

Lacan, *SI*

In spite of uncertainties surrounding the precise date of composition, the thirteenth-century prose romance known in the modern edition as *Le Haut Livre du Graal*, or *Perlesvaus*, is unquestionably contemporary with a period during which, as Caroline Bynum has commented, 'many different discourse communities [. . .] were newly and explicitly concerned with the question of change'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the very concept of change itself 'tended to change in the years around 1200'; the works of Aristotle, the keystone of medieval philosophy, were at that time in the process of being rediscovered, translated and enthusiastically

<sup>1</sup> 'Misrecognition is not ignorance.'

<sup>2</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, p. 21. Scholarship remains undecided on the date of the *Perlesvaus*; Levy's *Chronologie approximative* lists the romance under the rubric 'Datations non fixées', but suggests between 1203 and 1212 (p. 58). Much has been made of a dedication in the colophon of the *Br* manuscript (Brussels, Bibliothèque royale des ducs de Bourgogne, MS 11145) to Jean de Nesle, castellan of Bruges ('Por le seingnor de neele fist li seingnor de cambrein cest liure escrire' ['the lord of Cambrein had this book written for the lord of Nesle'], see *P*, II, 74–81), leading Nitze to infer from biographical evidence that '*P* was composed after 1191 and before 1212, presumably after 1200' (*P*, II, 89; see pp. 73–89 for full discussion of the date). Nitze's earlier survey of scholarship on the text fixes a date range of 1200–12 (*The Old French Grail Romance 'Perlesvaus'*, p. 103). Kelly asserts that the romance was 'composed most probably in the first decade of the thirteenth century' (*Le Haut Livre du Graal*, p. 15; see pp. 9–15 for discussion of the problem of dating the text), whilst Carman advances a slightly later date of 1213–23 ('The Relationship of the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste del Saint Graal*', p. 15). Among more recent additions to the debate, and suggesting a considerably later date of composition, Bogdanow is categorical that 'il est [. . .] hors de doute que le *Perlesvaus* a dû être rédigé après 1225' ['it is beyond doubt that the *Perlesvaus* must have been written after 1225'] ('*Le Perlesvaus*', p. 51). Dubost agrees, concluding that 'le *Perlesvaus* a pu être composé entre le traité de Jaffa (1229) et la chute de Jérusalem (1244)' ['the *Perlesvaus* may have been composed between the treaty of Jaffa (1229) and the fall of Jerusalem (1244)'] ('*Le Perlesvaus*, livre de haute violence', p. 199). Recent work reassessing the validity of Nitze's editorial judgements and constructing an accurate biography of Jean de Nesle has been undertaken by Grand, producing convincing evidence for dating the death of Jean to between September 1239 and January 1240, thereby establishing an absolute *terminus ad quem* for the romance (see Grand, 'A Work in Context' and 'Jean de Nesle and the *terminus ad quem*').

glossed by commentators.<sup>3</sup> The Philosopher's discussions of the nature of man, and of potency and act in the relationship between body and soul, were frequently at odds with the teachings of the Church, and the dissemination of his natural philosophy in any form of public or private lecture was banned in Paris by the Provincial Council of Sens in 1210.<sup>4</sup> However, the proscription was gradually eroded, so that by 1255 'all the known works of Aristotle [. . .] were required in the arts faculty of the University of Paris'.<sup>5</sup> The years around the composition and first readings of the *Perlesvaus* therefore represented a time of radical evolution in philosophies of change and the pertinence of such concepts to man and his identity.<sup>6</sup>

The question of change is of course intricately bound up with notions of identity. Indeed, as Bynum argues, change could be perceived as no less than 'the test, the limit, of all denotations of the term "identity"'.<sup>7</sup> Before embarking upon any theorization of modes of change, one must first have some degree of purchase on the ontology, the *identity*, of the entity subjected to that change. As Bynum asserts, 'if change is the replacement of one entity by another or the growth of an entity out of another entity in which it is implicit, we must be able to say how we know we have an entity in the first place'.<sup>8</sup> My intention in this chapter is to construct a reading of identity and change in the *Perlesvaus*. If for Aristotle a dead man is a man in name only, then I argue that the *Perlesvaus* demonstrates a marked departure from the doctrine of the *Organon*, to the extent of denying the existence of any form or essence (the Aristotelian *psyche*) that guarantees man his bodily continuity and identity.<sup>9</sup> The *Perlesvaus* offers an extraordinarily complex and nuanced portrait of identity formation which, in its obsession with notions of death, might be seen to anticipate certain modern psychoanalytic and philosophical concerns.

As we saw in the Introduction, the discourse of the Master is one of the four established by Lacan in book 17 of the *Séminaire* in order to explore how 'differently structured discourses mobilise, order, repress and produce [. . .] fundamental social effects'.<sup>10</sup> With agency accorded to the master signifier (S1), the discourse attempts to promote synthesis, stability and identity:

<sup>3</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, p. 21. See especially 'Aristotle in the Middle Ages', in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Kretzmann *et al.*, pp. 43–98.

<sup>4</sup> For a basic summary of Aristotle's propositions, see Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, pp. 95–7. A more sustained exposition is offered by Hartman, *Substance, Body, and Soul*, pp. 88–130.

<sup>5</sup> *Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Marenbon, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading on what she terms 'le scandale de la métamorphose au Moyen Âge' ['the scandal of metamorphosis in the Middle Ages'], see Delcourt, *L'Éthique du changement*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *The Categories; On Interpretation*, XI, 21a21–3.

<sup>10</sup> Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions', p. 109.

S1	→	S2
\$		a

As my reading of the *Perlesvaus* will show, the formation of identity is predicated upon the surplus enjoyment, the *plus-de-jour* (*a*), that is the product of this discourse structure and that, as something *in me more than myself*, represents a constitutive part of the subject that remains fundamentally inaccessible to him. In spite of the hegemony of the master signifier attempting to promote self-identity, the subject can never be fully self-identical, nor is he ever fully identified in the domain of the Other, and as such inhabits the very limbo of Kristeva's abject: 'Pas moi. Pas ça. Mais pas rien non plus' ['Not me. Not that. But not nothing either'].<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the precise chronological relationship of the *Perlesvaus* to the Vulgate *Queste*, both narratives are clearly structured around the ethos of the quest. In the *Perlesvaus* this drive is not so much channelled into a discrete object such as the Grail, which is markedly absent from the greater part of the narrative, but rather is represented by a constantly deferred and frustrated search for individuals – or for identities – that configures the narrative dynamic. Indeed, as if to underscore the elusive (non-)identity of the sought object, when the Grail itself makes a rare appearance in the *Perlesvaus* it has acquired a singularly plural nature characterized by metamorphosis:<sup>12</sup>

*Li Graaux s'aparut eu secré de la messe en .v. manieres* que l'on ne doit mie dire, car les secrees choses dou sacrement ne doit nus dire en apert, se cil non a qui Dex en a grace donee. Li rois Artus vit totes les muances.

(*P*, 7223–6; my italics)<sup>13</sup>

[The Grail appeared at the consecration in five forms which must not be spoken of, for the mysteries of the sacrament must not be openly revealed,

<sup>11</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> The metamorphosis of the Grail is clearly bound up with the question of Eucharistic change, or transubstantiation. Such a vast topic extends beyond the scope of the present discussion, although it may be helpful to note Delcourt's comment that 'contrairement à l'Eucharistie dans laquelle, nous dit-on, les substances restent apparemment les mêmes, tout en étant réellement changées, la métamorphose produit une transformation qui semble réelle tout en n'étant, au fond, qu'un effet de l'imagination' ['contrary to the Eucharist in which, we are told, substances seemingly remain the same whilst in reality they are changed, metamorphosis produces a transformation that seems real but that, ultimately, is only an effect of the imagination'] (*L'Éthique du changement*, p. 26). For further discussion of the polemics of the medieval Eucharist and the doctrine of real presence, see particularly Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 12–82; also, *inter alia*, Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, and Dutton, 'Eat, Drink, and Be Merry'.

<sup>13</sup> The idea of the Grail secrets' being unspeakable is also found in Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Armathie* as well as the *Didot-Perceval*, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. Both of these texts are dated to the early years of the thirteenth century, perhaps suggesting further circumstantial evidence for ascribing the *Perlesvaus* to a similar period, i.e., prior to the composition of the Vulgate Cycle.



except to those to whom God has granted his grace. King Arthur saw all the forms of the Grail.]

As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the narrative anxieties regarding plurality that are allowed more or less free rein in the *Perlesvaus* are rigorously suppressed, or rather, sublimated, in the oppressive atmosphere of religious paranoia that pervades the Vulgate *Queste*.<sup>14</sup>

### How to Count Two for One

In the concluding scenes of the *Perlesvaus*, the eponymous hero, his mother (the Widowed Lady) and sister are united at the reconquered Grail castle, in the chapel of which they assemble various relics that have been recovered during earlier episodes in the romance:

La Veve Dame i ot fet aporter le cors qui gisoit o sarqueu devant le chastel de Kamaalot en riche chapele que ele i ot estoree. Sa suer aporta le drap que ele prist en la Gaste Chapele, si le presenta la o li Graauz estoit. Perlesvaus fist porter le sarqueu de l'autre chevalier, qui estoit a l'entree de son chastel, dedenz la chapele autressi, e metre delez le sarqueu son oncle, ne onques mes ne le pot nus remuër. (*P*, 10119–25)

[The Widowed Lady had had the body which lay in the coffin before the castle at Camelot brought to the rich chapel that she had installed there. Perlesvaus's sister brought the cloth that she had taken from the Waste Chapel, and placed it where the Grail was. Perlesvaus had the coffin of the other knight, that which had been at the entrance to his castle, brought into the chapel as well, where it was placed next to the coffin of his uncle, and where it would henceforth remain.]

<sup>14</sup> I do not offer this hypothesis as concrete evidence for the anteriority of the *Perlesvaus* to the *Queste*, although this is indeed the position that I feel inclined to adopt. The relationship between the two texts has been the subject of much controversy, based for the most part around the question of dating, and summarized by Jean Marx as the opposition between those who insist on the anteriority of the *Queste* (particularly Douglas Bruce and Ferdinand Lot) and those for whom the *Perlesvaus* is the earlier text (Heinzel, Gaston Paris, Jessie Weston, Brugger, Nitze and Carman) (cited by Kelly, *Le Haut Livre du Graal*, p. 9). The position advocating the antecedence of the *Perlesvaus* has been lent greater overall support. Carman's article, 'The Relationship of the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste del Saint Graal*', explores episodes common to both texts, leading him to conclude that 'the *Queste* used the *Perlesvaus* as a source' (p. 8). See also Weston's comments in 'The Relation of the *Perlesvaus* to the Cyclic Romances'. However, Bogdanow's 1984 article 'Le *Perlesvaus*' contends that 'aucun des arguments allégués par les partisans respectifs des deux thèses n'emporte la conviction' ['none of the arguments put forward by the respective supporters of the two theories is completely convincing'] (p. 44). Bogdanow explores new lines of argument in support of an assertion that the *Perlesvaus* is posterior to *Queste* and that, owing to a discernible influence of Caesar of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum* (completed 1223–4) on the *Perlesvaus*, that text should be assigned to a date later than 1225 (p. 51).



The two coffins that are brought to the Grail castle have already featured in earlier episodes in the narrative, indeed they function as one of several motifs that, along with certain characters, are introduced and then threaded back into the narrative on several occasions, often hundreds if not thousands of lines apart, creating a kind of narrative *ficelle* and adding to the text's complex style of linking or interlace (*entrelacement*).<sup>15</sup>

One of the two coffins is brought to the Grail Chapel from Camelot, the boyhood home of Perlesvaus.<sup>16</sup> The enchanted tomb that stood outside that castle, of which much more remains to be said, had been opened by Perlesvaus to reveal the body within. This corpse is accompanied by 'une[s] letres seelees d'or' ['letters sealed with gold'] (*P*, 5237), which 'temoigne que cil qui el sarqueu gist fu uns de cels qui Nostre Seignor eda a desclofichier de la croiz' ['testify that he who lies in the tomb was one of those who helped to take Our Lord down from the cross'] (*P*, 5238–9). Inside the tomb are 'les tenailles toutes teintes de sanc, de quoi li clou furent osté' ['the blood-covered pincers with which the nails were removed'] (*P*, 5240–1). The identity of the cadaver at Camelot is thus subtly and elliptically established by the narrative; although no name is actually furnished, the reader can identify this figure, from the evidence of the accompanying epithets and paraphernalia, as Joseph of Arimathea, the Galilean to whom the body of Christ was entrusted by Pilate following the crucifixion.<sup>17</sup>

Almost a thousand lines later, Perlesvaus arrives at the Grail castle (the home

<sup>15</sup> For more detailed commentary on the technique of linking, see Lacy, 'Linking in the *Perlesvaus*'; also McCracken, 'Damsels and Severed Heads', and Ramm, 'Locating Narrative Authority in *Perlesvaus*'. On the technique of interlace, see in particular Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, pp. 68–98.

<sup>16</sup> This Camelot is not the same as the traditional home of the Arthurian court; see note 20 below.

<sup>17</sup> Nitze, however, asserts that the body is that of Nicodemus (*P*, II, 220–1). Although Nicodemus does indeed make a cameo appearance in the narrative as a paternal ancestor of Perlesvaus, this identification appears entirely erroneous on the basis of evidence from both the apostolic and apocryphal gospels. Both Mark (15.45–6) and Luke (23.52–3) concur that Joseph of Arimathea was responsible for removing Christ from the cross; Nicodemus is mentioned only in the gospel of John as assisting Joseph with the burial of Jesus (John 19.39). The apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus similarly confers on Joseph, and not its eponym, the role of removing Christ from the cross (*L'Évangile de Nicodème*, lines 321–5. See pp. 18–20 for discussion of the role of Nicodemus). In contrast to the single reference to Nicodemus, the figure of Joseph of Arimathea looms large over the *Perlesvaus*'s genealogies; Perlesvaus is his great nephew ('il fu du lignage Joseph d'Arimacie. Cil Joseph fu oncles sa mere' ['he was of Joseph of Arimathea's line. This Joseph was his mother's uncle'], *P*, 22–3), and the narrative is quite explicit as to the biblical role he played: 'Cil Joseph [. . .] ot esté soudoiers Pilate .vii. anz; ne ne demanda gueredon de son service autre que le cors au Sauveur despendre de la croiz' ['This Joseph had been one of Pilate's soldiers for seven years; he requested no reward for his service other than to take the body of the Saviour from the cross'], *P*, 23–5). Additional references to Joseph, or 'le Buen Soudoier' ['the Good Soldier'] occur in lines 1644, 1680, 2999, 3190, 5122, 5793, 5850, 6226 and 9566. Further consideration of this problem of identification and its bearing on the framework of the narrative is given by Ramm, 'Two for One?'

of his uncle the Fisher King), outside which, ‘a .ii. archies ensus dou pont’ [‘two bow-shots above the bridge’] (*P*, 6117), stands ‘.i. chapele autresi faite *com cele est a Kamaalot*, o il avoit .i. sarchou, e ne savoit l’on que dedenz avoit’ [‘a chapel constructed like that at Camelot, in which there stood a tomb whose contents were unknown’] (*P*, 6117–19; my italics).<sup>18</sup> The narrative appears at pains to establish the similarity or analogy of this chapel to the one at Camelot; the two are described as being physically identical, but nonetheless different. As soon as Perlesvaus approaches the sarcophagus it opens to reveal the body within, and the corpse is accompanied, once again, by written testimony of the cadaver’s identity: ‘Il troverent unes lettres qui tesmoignoient que cil chevalier avoit non Joseph’ [‘they found letters testifying that this knight was named Joseph’] (*P*, 6124–5). In contrast to its analogue at Camelot this body is named, albeit in an equally elliptical fashion invoking an instantaneous identification between this body and the one discovered at Camelot, and also a supplementary identification with Joseph of Arimathea.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, when the two bodies are brought together in the Grail Chapel at the end of the narrative *they both are and are not the same thing*; there appear to be two bodies sharing a single identity, and yet this single identity is never explicitly attributed to either corpse.<sup>20</sup> We seem here to be dealing with a particularly Aristotelian problem, one that is summarized by Edwin Hartman:

<sup>18</sup> Note that the same measure of distance, ‘.ii. archies’ [‘two bow-shots’] had already been used to describe Gauvain’s initial apperception of the castle at Camelot (*P*, 1007).

<sup>19</sup> Another Joseph plays an equally important role in the narrative: the Josephus who allegedly composed the original Latin text, or ‘le mist en remembrance par la mencion de la voix d’un ange’ [‘recorded it at the behest of an angel’] (*P*, 3–4; see Kelly, *Le Haut Livre du Graal*, pp. 15–24). This figure is identified by the narrative as Josephes, the first priest to celebrate the Eucharist (*P*, 3188–9), and to whom the text records some nineteen references (see *P*, II, 416). Yet this identification is far from unequivocal – as Bogdanow asks, ‘notre auteur désigne-t-il Flavius Josèphe, historien juif de la première ère chrétienne qui dit lui-même qu’il est *prêtre et le descendant d’une famille de prêtres?* Ou avait-il à l’esprit Josephés, le fils de Joseph d’Arimathie[?]’ [‘is our author pointing to Flavius Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian who himself says that he is *a priest and descended from a family of priests?* Or did he have Josephes, son of Joseph of Arimathea, in mind?’] (*Le Perlesvaus*, p. 66). Kelly is adamant that ‘Josephes in the *Perlesvaus* is never confused with Joseph of Arimathea’ (*Le Haut Livre du Graal*, p. 33 n. 36). However, Bogdanow concludes that ‘pour les érudits qui placent le *Perlesvaus* avant le cycle de la Vulgate, seul Flavius Josèphe entre en ligne de compte’ [‘for scholars who believe the *Perlesvaus* to be earlier than the Vulgate Cycle, only Flavius Josephus could be considered possible’] (*Le Perlesvaus*, p. 66), but adds that, for Bruce and Whitehead, ‘il ne saurait s’agir que du fils de Joseph d’Arimathie’ [‘it could be none other than the son of Joseph of Arimathea’] (*Le Perlesvaus*, p. 67), finally conceding that ‘il se peut très bien que notre auteur ait pensé à l’un et à l’autre’ [‘it could well be that our author was thinking of both one and the other’] (*Le Perlesvaus*, p. 67). This third possibility of a doubled or undecidable identity seems the most attractive for my own reading.

<sup>20</sup> There are also two different Camelots in the text. The narrative is assiduous in distinguishing between the familial seat of Perlesvaus and the location of the Arthurian court: ‘Seignor, ne cuidiez mie que ce soit cil Camaalos donc cil conteor content, la o li rois Artus tenoit si sovent sa cort. Cil Camaalos qui fu a la Veve Da[me] seoit au cief de la plus sauvage

Even at a particular time what occupies a certain space can be described from many different points of view and may therefore be thought to be a plurality of things, or even an indeterminate number [. . .] Are there then two or more things where it seemed there was one?<sup>21</sup>

In other words, how can we count two for one? Hartman proceeds to answer his own question: ‘the doctrine that form is substance permits one to answer that question, *or at least to avoid its force*: the road up and the road down are not precisely one and the same, but they are not precisely distinct’.<sup>22</sup> The *Perlesvaus* does not seek to avoid the force of the proposition that an overlap, a blurring or indistinction between entities, is precisely what configures identities. The implication that there is no such thing as an essence, no discrete soul guaranteeing the substance of the individual, is lent the fullest possible force in the *Perlesvaus*’s assertion that identity is intimately bound up with death, as is already becoming apparent in the problematic (in)distinction between the tombs at Camelot and the Grail castle.

As Donald Maddox has noted, medieval tombs were frequently ‘objects of intense fascination’ that ‘were often material signifiers of an invisible alterity, as well as a surface for inscription and a pretext for quasi-exegetical oratory’.<sup>23</sup> My intention here is to begin by reading the motif of the enchanted tomb in the *Perlesvaus* first and foremost as a signifier – that which, in the Lacanian formulation, represents the subject for another signifier. In its signifying role, this tomb opens up an investigation into the construction, doubling and confusion of identities – as well as the notion of alterity – that become prominent and problematic concerns of the *Perlesvaus*.<sup>24</sup> My argument derives a theoretical grounding from Žižek’s readings of Lacan and Hegel in *For They Know Not What They Do*, in particular his extrapolations of Lacan’s theorization of the subject’s representation within the signifying chain, a mechanism founded upon the very ‘invisible alterity’ commented on by Maddox in a different context.

isle de Gales, pres de la mer, devers Occident [. . .] Li autre Camaalot seoit a l’entree dou roiaume de Logres’ [‘Sirs, do not think that this Camelot is the one of which the storytellers tell, at which King Arthur so often held his court. The Camelot which belonged to the Widowed Lady stood at the head of the wildest island in Wales, near the sea, towards the West. The other Camelot stood at the entrance to the kingdom of Logres’] (*P*, 7280–5). Bogdanow interprets this as evidence for the posteriority of the *Perlesvaus* to the *Queste*, for the location of the Arthurian court at Camelot appears to be an invention of the Vulgate, and is virtually unknown in earlier texts (‘*Le Perlesvaus*’, pp. 51–2).

<sup>21</sup> Hartman, *Substance, Body, and Soul*, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> Hartman, *Substance, Body, and Soul*, pp. 57–8; my italics.

<sup>23</sup> Maddox, *Fictions of Identity*, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> With regard to the prominence of the tomb motif in the text, it seems apposite to signal the oft-noted relationship between the *Perlesvaus* and the Isle of Avalon – not a reference to the Arthurian otherworld in this case, but implying a geographical link to Glastonbury, putative site of the tombs of Arthur and Guinevere, allegedly excavated by the monks of the abbey in or around 1190. For further comment on this legend and its origins, see Nitze, *P*, II, 45–72. On the mythical-legendary associations of Glastonbury, see Robinson, *Two Glastonbury Legends* and Treharne, *The Glastonbury Legends*.

It seems that the *Perlesvaus*'s presentation of a doubled coffin containing an ostensibly single corpse might be read as an apposite metaphor for the distinction made by Hegel, and glossed by Žižek, between the One of quality and the One of quantity. As Žižek meticulously spells out, 'the One we are dealing with [. . .] is not yet the One of quantity, the First-One to which can be added the Second, the Third, and so on. It is for this reason that the correlate of One is not the Other but *the void*.'<sup>25</sup> A similar logic might, I argue, be applied to the *Perlesvaus*'s twin coffins.

Transposed into the Lacanian algebra of the signifier, the relationship between the One of quantity and the One of quality is to be found on the upper level of the discourse of the Master, representing the attempted communication between S1 (the master signifier, the One of quality) and S2 (the proliferation of the signifier as symbolic knowledge, the One of quantity) – and the relationship between these two terms crucially produces the (split) subject (\$). Subtending this relationship between the ones of quality and quantity is the repressed relationship between the two subordinate terms of the discourse of the Master, the juxtaposition of \$ and *a* that is replicated in the Lacanian matheme of fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ). Underlying the totalizing discourse of the Master is the truth of its production; the split subject is intimately bound up in an impossible relationship with the *objet a*, the very surplus enjoyment that evades symbolization but that is nevertheless prerequisite to it. The discursive production of identity that we see in the *Perlesvaus* is structured in a similar way to the discourse of the Master. Identity in an Aristotelian sense, predicated on the existence of the soul, is now a fantasy, and this is the unbearable truth that must be disguised by the suturing operation of the narrative's master signifiers. However, Žižek points out the paradox that '*the only thing that actually de-sutures is suture itself*',<sup>26</sup> and this is illustrated in the *Perlesvaus* by the de-suturing of identity that is ultimately effected by the master signifier, as will be discussed in the following pages.

In the opening chapter of *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek's discussion shifts the notion of doubling from the expected register of the Lacanian imaginary (i.e., the double as an image) to the register of the symbolic, thereby stressing the foundational relationship between doubling and symbolic identity:

When one deals with the opposition of the Imaginary [. . .] and the Symbolic [. . .], one usually fails to notice how the specific dimension of the Symbolic emerges from the very imaginary mirroring: namely, from its *doubling*, by means of which – as Lacan puts it succinctly – the real image is substituted by a virtual one.<sup>27</sup>

The argument centres on what Žižek discerns as 'a confusion, a contradiction even, in the Lacanian formula of the signifier ("that which represents the

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 52.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 10.

subject for another signifier”)<sup>28</sup>. This discrepancy concerns the precise designation of, and relationship between, the terms S1 and S2, the master signifier and the chain of knowledge respectively, between which the subject is produced or represented. Where the doxa (Žižek’s term) maintains that S1 represents the subject (\$) for S2, Žižek identifies an instance in which Lacan appears to state the precise converse. Although such terminological flux is by no means uncharacteristic of the recondite Lacanian idiom, Žižek nevertheless proceeds to ‘disentangle this mess’ with an analysis of the differential relationship of the signifier’s dyad.<sup>29</sup> The crucial passage of this analysis asserts that:

‘Differentiality’ designates a [. . .] precise relationship: in it, the opposite of one term, of its *presence*, is not immediately the other term but the *absence* of the first term, the *void* at the place of its inscription (the void which *coincides* with its place of inscription) and the presence of the other, opposite, term *fills out* this void of the first term’s absence.<sup>30</sup>

This construction of the differential relationship of the signifier to its opposite might offer an illuminating way of reading the duality of the *Perlesvaus*’s tomb(s) and its/their occupant(s), for it underlines the symbolic basis of doubling and, furthermore, requires us to question the precise inscription of the coffin as either S1 or S2, if indeed this binary can retain its legitimacy. Indeed, the hypothesis that I intend to pursue in this chapter takes Žižek’s argument a stage further: instead of simply arguing that the positions of S1 and S2 are to some extent interchangeable, it can be shown that the relationship between them, and the relative positions they occupy, is undecidable owing to the production of surplus enjoyment (*a*) in the construction of the subject, with the consequence that the subject (\$) who is the fallout of this differential relationship has an identity that is abject (neither here nor there; neither one thing nor the other).

Read as signifiers, the presence of the two coffins assembled at the Grail castle must correspond to the inscription of a void, and this is none other than the void of the subject, produced in the interval between S1 and S2, as Žižek extrapolates:

Within a signifier’s dyad, a signifier thus always appears against the background of its possible absence which is materialized – which assumes positive existence – in the presence of its opposite. The Lacanian matheme for this absence is of course \$, the ‘barred’, ‘crossed-out’ signifier: a signifier fills out the absence of its opposite – that is, it ‘represents’, hold the place of, its opposite . . . We have already thus produced the formula of the signifier, so we can understand why \$ is for Lacan also the matheme for the *subject*: a signifier

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 22. As Malcolm Bowie so dryly puts it, ‘self-consistency is not a virtue which Lacan particularly prizes’ (*Lacan*, p. 14).

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 22.

(S1) represents for another signifier (S2) its absence, its lack \$, which is the subject.<sup>31</sup>

The vital question that arises in the application of this analysis to the *Perlesvaus* is whether each of the two coffins as signifier (S) actually corresponds to the same or a different absence (\$), and thus to the same or a different subject. Can we, therefore, count two for one here?

In questioning the apparently reversible Lacanian formulation of the subject's relationship to the signifier, Žižek is asking whether *any* signifier (S2, or the One of quantity) represents the subject for one signifier, or if *one* signifier (S1, the One of quality) can represent the subject for all the other signifiers. It seems clear that in posing this question we must necessarily take account of the temporality of the relationship – is it synchronic or diachronic, that is, might it be possible for two signifiers *simultaneously* to represent the lack of the signifier that is the subject? Both Lacan and Žižek conceive of (the failure of) signification as a dynamic process: whilst Lacan refers to the signifying *chain*, Žižek writes of the 'movement of representation',<sup>32</sup> thereby evoking a process evolving over time, with one signifier constantly changing place with another in the task of holding the subject's place. This replacement-change of the signifier representing the subject accounts for the impossibility of full signification, for 'the subject has no "proper" signifier which would "fully" represent it'.<sup>33</sup> Or, in other words, since every representation is always already a misrepresentation, the signifying process continues in search of another, a different, signifier that will represent the subject more fully, more properly, than the last. The possibility that a temporal overlap of signifiers might affect/effect the representation of the subject will require our fuller attention later; for the moment it seems imperative not to overlook a crucial attribute of the *Perlesvaus*'s two coffin-signifiers, or rather, the tombs in which they are placed – their physical likeness.<sup>34</sup>

In order for the signifying chain (S2) to function as such, as a syntagmatic chain, there must be resemblance as well as difference between its links. As far as the concept of change is concerned, as Bynum observes, 'unless there is some connection, or nexus, between what was and what comes after, we tend to think we have not a change but merely two things'.<sup>35</sup> And yet, as Paul Rockwell's reading of the False Guinevere episode in the prose *Lancelot* has demonstrated, 'resemblance [. . .] has the potential to impede identification';<sup>36</sup> indeed, 'resemblance itself is presented as threatening the realm of Arthurian

<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> On resemblance as a trope in medieval texts, see especially Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*.

<sup>35</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*, p. 44.



identities and the identical'.<sup>37</sup> The double, which Mladen Dolar describes as 'the figure of *jouissance*',<sup>38</sup> is the perhaps the most striking instance of resemblance interfering with identity, since this figure retains surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jour*) once *jouissance* has been evacuated from the symbolic subject. It is, I suggest, for this very reason that the doubling narrative of the *Perlesvaus* becomes beset by misrecognition or, more precisely, by Lacanian *méconnaissance*. Since the transgressive pleasure of *jouissance* is forbidden to the subject of the symbolic order, *méconnaissance* arises as 'an imaginary misrecognition of a symbolic knowledge (*savoir*) that the subject does possess somewhere'.<sup>39</sup> Such a description acknowledges that *méconnaissance* might offer a tool that, mediating between the imaginary and symbolic orders, would allow the subject to look awry at *jouissance*. Lacan is at pains to stress that misrecognition is *not* the result of ignorance but is caused by a deflected cognition.<sup>40</sup>

La méconnaissance représente une certaine organisation d'affirmations et de négations, à quoi le sujet est attaché. Elle ne se concevrait donc pas sans une connaissance corrélatrice. Si le sujet peut méconnaître quelque chose, il faut bien qu'il sache autour de quoi a opéré cette fonction. Il faut bien qu'il y ait derrière sa méconnaissance une certaine connaissance de ce qu'il y a à méconnaître.<sup>41</sup>

[Misrecognition represents a certain organization of affirmations and negations, to which the subject is attached. It could therefore not be conceived of without there being a corresponding recognition. If the subject can misrecognize something, he must surely know what that function is operating upon; behind every misrecognition there must be recognition of what there is to misrecognize.]

This insistence that the lack of *méconnaissance* corresponds to a correlative *connaissance*, or that recognition is topical, is strongly reminiscent of the operation of the signifier whose opposite, as we have already seen, is not a second positive term but rather 'the *void* at the place of its inscription'.

Persisting with the motif of the enchanted tomb in the *Perlesvaus*, I wish to retain the notion of the double as an agent of *jouissance* in order to investigate how the *objet a* is implicated in the construction of identity in this text. For Dolar, if 'the object *a* is precisely [. . .] the part of the subject that has no mirror reflection, the nonspecular', then 'the double is that mirror image in which the object *a* is included', and this is precisely what we see occurring in the doubling

<sup>37</sup> Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*, p. 46.

<sup>38</sup> Dolar, 'Lacan and the Uncanny', p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Evans, *Dictionary*, p. 109.

<sup>40</sup> A similar distinction between knowledge that remains latent and knowledge that is enacted lies at the heart of Aristotle's discussion of potency and act as they relate to form and matter in the construction of the body and the soul. See *On the Soul*, 412a–413a.

<sup>41</sup> Lacan, *SI*, p. 190.

of the tomb.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, by blurring the boundaries between inside and out, the tomb also functions as a metaphor for Lacan's concept of *extimité* – his rendering of the Freudian uncanny – and as such we begin to see how the formation of identity in the *Perlesvaus* is in fact the formation of an abject non-identity, a terrifying *connaissance* that the narrative constantly attempts to defer through its manipulation of *méconnaissance* in the text.<sup>43</sup>

### Identity Entombed

A first mention of the *Perlesvaus*'s enchanted tomb is to be found in the opening branch of the narrative, when King Arthur hears the story of *Perlesvaus*'s boyhood from a maiden (who may be, but is not explicitly named as, the hero's sister).<sup>44</sup> At Camelot, *Perlesvaus*'s childhood home,

Avoit entre la forest e le recet une chapele petite qui seoit seur .iiii. colonbes de marbre; e estoit coverte de fust, e avoit dedenz un petit autel, e devant l'autel avoit .i. sarque molt bel, e estoit pardesus la figure d'un home escrete.<sup>45</sup>  
(*P*, 466–70)

[A small chapel stood between the forest and the castle; it was built upon four columns of marble, and had a wooden roof. Inside there was a small altar, in front of which was a beautiful tomb upon which the figure of a man was carved.]

When *Perlesvaus* enquired of his father who lay interred in the tomb, the response he received was one of uncertainty:

Certes, biax filz, ge no vos sé dire, car li sarqueuz i est ainçois que li peres mon pere fust nez, e onques n'oï dire a nului q'il seüst qu'il a dedenz, fors tant que les letres qi sont o sarque dient: qant li mielres chevaliers du monde vendra ci, li sarqueuz overra, e verra on ce qu'il a dedenz. (*P*, 471–5)

[To be sure, dear son, I cannot tell you, for the tomb has been there since my father's father was born, and I never heard him tell anyone that he knew what lay within, except for what the inscription upon the tomb says: when the best knight in the world comes here, the tomb will open, and its contents will be revealed.]

Many knights have passed by the chapel, but the tomb remains sealed.

<sup>42</sup> Dolar, 'Lacan and the Uncanny', p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> The usual French translation of the German term *unheimlich* is *l'inquiétante étrangeté*; Dolar's article provides a succinct account of Freud's exposition of the term. See also Miller, 'Extimité'. On the uncanny as a literary trope, see in particular Royle, *The Uncanny*.

<sup>44</sup> Nitzze's edition has the page heading 'Perceval's sister' at this point. She, however, refers to *Perlesvaus*'s parents as 'Ses peres e sa mere' ['his father and mother'] (*P*, 465), implying no direct familial connection.

<sup>45</sup> There is ambiguity here as to what precisely is meant by 'la figure d'un home escrete'; no clear indication is given as to whom this image or writing pertains.



It is clear from this initial presentation that the enchanted tomb is intimately bound up with the epistemology of identity in the narrative. As such, the tomb at Camelot is most probably derived from the well-known ‘cimetière futur’ [‘future cemetery’] found in Chrétien’s *Chevalier de la charrette* (*Lancelot*).<sup>46</sup> Here the as yet unnamed Lancelot is shown a cemetery of magnificent tombs whose inscriptions designate their future occupants:

Et s’avoit letres sor chascune  
 Qui les nons de ces devoient  
 Qui dedanz les tonbes girroient.<sup>47</sup>

[There was an inscription upon each one, which gave the names of those who were to lie in the tombs.]

One tomb in particular attracts attention and causes Lancelot to make enquiries to his monk-guide, whereupon he is informed that he will never see inside the tomb, since it is covered with a large ‘lame’ [‘slab’] that would require super-human strength to displace. Lancelot naturally succeeds in lifting the cover with minimal effort, but is then unable (or unwilling) to reveal his name to the astonished monk. A further example of such a tomb is to be found in the prose *Lancelot*.<sup>48</sup> At the castle of the Douleureuse Garde, Lancelot discovers ‘une grant lame de metal tres merueilleusement ouvree’ [‘a large metal sheet, beautifully worked’], bearing an inscription which declares that ‘ceste lame n’iert ja levee par main d’omme ne par esfors, se par chelui non qui conqueera cest doleros castel et de chelui est li nons escrits ci desous’ [‘this cover shall never be lifted by the efforts of any man’s hand, save he who shall conquer this sorrowful castle, and his name is written underneath the cover’].<sup>49</sup> Having opened the tomb with predictable ease, Lancelot reads his own epitaph inside: ‘chi gerra Lancelos del Lac, li fiex au roi Ban de Benoÿc’ [‘here shall lie Lancelot of the Lake, son of King Ban of Benoic’].<sup>50</sup>

It seems of paramount significance that ‘letres’, whether in the form of inscriptions or an actual epistle, should feature prominently in the presentation of the tombs in both the verse and prose *Lancelot* and the *Perlesvaus*. In this respect, the examples from the *Perlesvaus* and the prose *Lancelot* seem to be the

<sup>46</sup> See Chrétien de Troyes, *Charrette*, ed. Roques, lines 1829–1954. Nitze is of the opinion that ‘except for the general theme and the use of the word *letres*, this episode bears no resemblance to that of the *P*’ (*P*, II, 221); this comment identifies precisely the element of similarity – the importance of *letres* – that is most illuminating.

<sup>47</sup> *Charrette*, ed. Roques, lines 1860–2.

<sup>48</sup> *Lancelot*, VII, XXIVa 31–2. The exact chronological relationship of this text to the *Perlesvaus* remains undetermined.

<sup>49</sup> *Lancelot*, VII, XXIVa 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Lancelot*, VII, XXIVa 32. For comments on these other identity-tombs, see Maddox, *Fictions of Identity*, pp. 114–19. Maddox’s assertion that ‘medieval tombs [. . .] were sometimes represented as loci of communication or mediations of fundamental contradictions’ (p. 115) is of particular interest here. See also Méla, *La Reine et le graal*, pp. 385–6; Griffin, *The Object and the Cause*, pp. 24–33; and Binski, *Medieval Death*, pp. 92–115.

closest related insofar as both feature letters inside *and* outside the tombs. The usual association between tomb and text is made by the epitaph which, etymologically, is to be found upon, that is, external to, the tomb. The principal function of the epitaph is, of course, to identify the occupant of the tomb, and yet this signifying operation is somewhat derailed in these texts, firstly insofar as the epitaph, the identifying signifier, is concealed *within* the tomb, and secondly by the fact that the text on the exterior refers (obliquely) not only to the occupant of that tomb, but also to another subject who will legitimize the textual prophecy. Indeed, in the *Perlesvaus*, when the two tombs are eventually opened, the identity of the cadaver is again deferred to the accompanying ‘letres’ (*P*, 5237, 6124), and ultimately to the text of ‘li contes’ [‘the tale’] itself. The text on the exterior of the tomb does not identify the occupant, rather it refers to an-other who will effect this identification, and thus simultaneously identify himself: ‘qant li mielres chevaliers du monde vendra ci, li sarqueuz overra, e verra on ce qu’il a dedenz’ [‘when the best knight in the world comes here, the tomb will open, and its contents will be revealed’] (*P*, 474–5). The opening of the tomb will simultaneously reveal, or confer, two identities – that of the tomb’s inhabitant (whether current or future), and also that of the knight who corresponds to the designator ‘li mielres chevaliers du monde’. Yet there is always a possibility, and this is perhaps clearest in the example drawn from the prose *Lancelot*, that the two identities are in fact inseparable. This uncanny textual conflation of inside and out creates an abject identification between the subject and the inscription of his future void, his absence. Lancelot is, in a sense, already dead and buried.

The disarming correlation between the inside and outside of the tombs is imputable to the way in which the epitaph serves as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy; there is a tension between the vagueness of its referent (failing to specify the knight who will succeed in the *épreuve*), and the fact that there is only one possible referent (whether Lancelot or Perlesvaus), who is always already designated by this signifier. This paradox might be more clearly illuminated with a brief aside. Whilst searching for Perlesvaus, Clamadoz encounters two maidens waiting under a tree. When he enquires as to what they await he is told that ‘Nos vos atendomes [. . .] ou aucun chevalier qui aquitast cel destroit la ou nus n’ose passer’ [‘we are waiting for you, or for any knight who can pass through this defile that no-one dares to attempt’] (*P*, 3086–8; my italics). The oscillation between determinate (‘vos’) and indeterminate (‘aucun chevalier’) referents such as occurs here is further glossed by Rockwell’s reading of the slippage that certain terms and images undergo in the prose *Lancelot*. Particularly apposite is Rockwell’s commentary on the disorienting functions of language and reading, which engender a scenario in which ‘knowledge of letters is insufficient for understanding’, to the extent that ‘no longer can the reader assume that “li mielres chevaliers dou monde” indeed designates “li mielres chevaliers dou monde”’.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*, pp. 76 and 74.

The second character to encounter the *Perlesvaus*'s enchanted tomb is Gauvain, who arrives at Camelot where he discovers 'une chapele qi seoit entre la forest e le chastel, e ert assise seur .iiii. colonbes de marbre, e dedenz estoit uns sarqueuz molt biax' ['a chapel that stood between the forest and the castle, sat upon four marble columns, and inside which was a very beautiful tomb'] (*P*, 1030–2). A squire descends from the castle to greet Gauvain, and returns to inform the chatelaine (the Widowed Lady, *Perlesvaus*'s mother) and her daughter of the new arrival:

Atant se lieve la Veve Dame e sa fille e s'en vont deseur le pont du chastel, e voient Monseigneur Gavain, qi encore esgarde le sarque de la chapele. 'Or tost, fet la dame, au sarque porrons nos bien veoir se ce est il.' (*P*, 1045–8)

[So the Widowed Lady and her daughter get up and go to the castle bridge, where they see Sir Gauvain who was still contemplating the tomb in the chapel. 'Soon,' the lady said, 'the tomb will show us if he is the one.']

Realizing that the tomb has remained sealed, however, the Widowed Lady falls into a faint (*P*, 1050–2), and it is left to the daughter to explain her mother's adverse reaction to the hapless Gauvain: 'or voit bien que vos ne l'estes pas, si en est molt dolente; car cist sarqelz doit ovrir tantost com il [*Perlesvaus*] revendra, ne ne savra on devant ce qui gist dedenz' ['now she can see that you are not the one, and that grieves her greatly, for this tomb must open as soon as he [*Perlesvaus*] returns, and no-one shall know what lies inside before then'] (*P*, 1055–8). We might suspect something of a narrative inconsistency here, insofar as *Perlesvaus* has *already* visited the tomb (i.e., as a child, asking his father who lay within), which remained closed. This can of course be explained by the fact that *Perlesvaus* was not, *at that time*, 'li mielres chevaliers del monde' ['the best knight in the world'], the one whose presence would cause the tomb to open, this revealing the chronological dimension that is so crucial to identity and that also informs the episode of Gauvain's visit to the enchanted tomb.

Indeed, the Gauvain episode would not be particularly remarkable *per se*, were it not for a curious fact that ostensibly renders the whole ordeal of the tomb superfluous, or rather supplementary. It is only *after* she has acknowledged that the tomb remains sealed and revived from her faint that the Widowed Lady thinks to ask Gauvain his name (*P*, 1059), now in the certain knowledge that he is not *Perlesvaus*. This retroactive process of identification is attributable to the fact that Gauvain, usually only too ready to identify himself, had been reticent to confirm his identity to the reconnoitring squire, who consequently reported to his mistress that 'il me dist que nos savrions bien son non ainz que il parte de cest chastel' ['he says that we shall know his name before he leaves the castle'] (*P*, 1039–40).<sup>52</sup> This would seem to imply that the encounter with the

<sup>52</sup> Nitze, for example, points out that 'Gauvain's willingness to tell his name is one of his characteristic traits' (*P*, II, 241–2). Compare, for instance, 'mes nons ne fu onques celez par

tomb is significant (meaningful) insofar as it will determine who Gauvain *is*, only once it has been firmly established who he *is not* (Perlesvaus).<sup>53</sup> The test of the tomb thus provides Gauvain with an identity of ambiguous valency: he is (positive) not Perlesvaus (negative).

Gauvain's specular encounter with his own identity is repeated when he arrives at the castle of the Fisher King, the location of the second enchanted tomb that both is and is not the same as the one at Camelot. Here Gauvain is immediately greeted by a warning from a disembodied voice of indeterminate origin (the voice of the Other): 'Ne tornez pas au sarqueu, car vos n'estes pas li chevaliers par qui l'en savra qui dedenz gist' ['Do not touch the tomb, for you are not the knight who shall reveal who lies within'] (*P*, 2286–7). Here is a clear acknowledgement of the symbolic order's failure fully to signify the subject. Only now it is precisely this gap that allows the signifier to represent the subject *at all*; he is defined as what he is not, and self-identity can ultimately be nothing more than an imaginary illusion, or a symbolic *méconnaissance*. At the moment of his second encounter with the tomb, Gauvain's identity is already constituted (albeit negatively); he is, in a sense, no longer a *sujet-en-procès*, since his identity does not have to be put to the test. Conceived in terms of the signifier's differential dyad, Gauvain's second visit to the tomb thus appears to reveal the inscription of the void of his subjectivity (\$) – or, to paraphrase Žižek, his subjectivity appears against the background of its possible absence, assuming positive existence in the presence of its opposite. If a signifier fills out the absence of its opposite, then this is the very movement that produces the subject: 'a signifier (S1) represents for another signifier (S2) its absence, its lack \$, which is the subject'.<sup>54</sup>

We should now be able to perceive how the tomb can successfully be read as a demonstration of Žižek's proposal that S1 and S2, the master signifier and the chain of knowledge respectively, are inextricably implicated in one another. The tomb (or, more specifically, its ambiguous duality and the resulting need for knowledge about it) illustrates the working of S2, and yet it retains a crucial feature of S1 – its ability to contain, or rather to reflect, the void of subjectivity. In Žižek's terms, this master signifier is 'reflective', since 'in it, the very failure, the very impossibility of the signifier's representation is reflected into

moi, se on me le demanda' ['I have never concealed my name from anyone who asked'] (*P*, 1492).

<sup>53</sup> Compare also the episode of the Haughty Maiden ('Orgeilleuse Pucele'), who never deigns to ask any knight his name. She has prepared tombs for Lancelot, Perlesvaus and Gauvain, whom she hopes to entrap in her castle and execute using an ingenious hidden blade mechanism. Gauvain visits the castle and is shown his own tomb, but escapes without having been identified. The Haughty Maiden subsequently realizes her mistake: 'Ne jamés chevaliers ne gerra en mon chastel, ne ne parleré a chevalier estrange, que ge ne li demant son non' ['never again will a knight lie in my castle, nor shall I speak to any strange knight, without asking his name'] (*P*, 1523–5).

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 22.

this representation itself'.<sup>55</sup> The master signifier thus 'functions as the "signifier of the lack of the signifier", as the place of the reflective inversion of the lacking signifier into the signifier of the lack'.<sup>56</sup>

This discussion of the *Perlesvaus*'s doubled tomb shows how the relationship between S1 and S2, the vector of communication in Lacan's discourse of the Master, and which is also the dominant discourse of the *Perlesvaus*, is beset by undecidability precisely as a result of the product of that discourse, the *objet a*. The formula of the subject's signification, 'S1 represents \$ for S2', is thus entirely inadequate since, in presuming a stable relationship of the signifier's dyad (even if this is reversible, as Žižek avers), it discounts the fundamental element that defines the very impossibility of the subject's full signification: the *plus-de-jour* (*a*). Before returning to the notion of the (master) signifier that contains its own lack, I wish to explore the temporal dimension of identity, and thereby illustrate the way in which the subject (of the signifier) is condemned to exist in an impossible present where his subjectivity is always anticipated, and yet, paradoxically, where that anticipation is over-determined by the weight of the past.

### Identity Anticipated

The temporality of the signifying operation, by means of which an unending series of signifiers attempts to represent the subject, centres on a fundamental tautology that Žižek identifies as the paradox whereby 'all signifiers are in search of the subject for a signifier which has already found it for them'. The continual displacement of the signifier thus engenders a kind of logical vicious circle which, according to Žižek, 'is actually that of the old theological formula "you would not be looking for me if you had not already found me"'.<sup>57</sup> In this section I wish to posit an abject temporality of identity, the fallout of a tension between the subject's being dually constituted by, on the one hand, the notion of *always already* and, on the other hand, his anticipated formulation, or the awaited attainment of his full subjectivity (which is, of course, purely illusory). For Lacan, the future perfect is 'the tense *par excellence*' of the subject's formation:<sup>58</sup> the subject will have been what he always already is, and as such exists in a kind of temporal suspense. This limbo of subjectivity is described by Bowie as 'the point of intersection between an irrecoverable past and an unattainable future; its structure is that of a ceaseless cross-stitching, in language, between what-is-no-longer-the-case and what-is-not-yet-the-case'.<sup>59</sup> Rent between past and future to the extent of being entirely de-centred, 'the subject is always

<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 24.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 25.

<sup>57</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 25.

<sup>58</sup> Bowie, *Lacan*, p. 185. See Lacan, *É*, p. 808.

<sup>59</sup> Bowie, *Lacan*, p. 184.

where it is because it is always elsewhere, in two other places at once'.<sup>60</sup> A brief but apposite example from the *Perlesvaus* should serve to illustrate how the subject is trapped between the two temporal poles of his identity formation, before I go on to consider how this bears upon the operation of the signifier in this narrative, focusing on the function of the shield as a signifier of the knight's constantly deferred identity.

Whilst lodged at the Castle of the Griffins, Lancelot is invited by the lord of the castle to submit to the custom of seeking his daughter's hand. Once a request has been made, the aspiring suitor must undertake a sword-in-the-stone ordeal: failure to withdraw a sword from a stone column in the main hall of the castle leads to the supplicant forfeiting not only his prospective bride, but also his life. The lord of the castle couches the challenge to Lancelot in highly ambiguous terms: 'Rovez la moi; se vos estes tels que vos la doiez avoir, je la vos don[r]jai' ['Ask me for her; if you are the one who must have her, then I shall give her to you'] (*P*, 7426–7). The vicious circle of logic identified by Žižek is instantly perceptible here; on the one hand the identity of the knight who is to succeed in the test is still anticipated ('se vos estes tels'), and yet it is simultaneously an always already, a logical predetermination ('se vos estes tels *que vos la doiez avoir*'). This is the very same tautology of identity that has already been observed in the enchanted tomb where 'you shall succeed only if you are the one who is destined to succeed'. Henceforth I wish to stress the implications of this temporal rending for the subject, the one who finds himself in a limbo of identity, an abject non-time in which he must face the impossible injunction of the symbolic order: 'You shall be only if you already are!'<sup>61</sup>

The fundamental paradox implied by the type of identity-logic problem that we see in operation both at the enchanted tomb and at the Castle of the Griffins (i.e., 'You shall have/be X, but only if you are, already X') is that identity is presumed to be stable (i.e., the person who fulfils the prophecy will be the correct one – X *is* out there somewhere) whilst at the same time appearing fundamentally *unreadable* (is Lancelot/Gauvain/Perlesvaus *really* the correct one?). This illegibility must have dire consequences for the individual and his dealings with the symbolic order, and leads directly to the debilitating *méconnaissance* that beleaguers the *Perlesvaus*'s negotiations with concepts of identity.

The most revealingly naïve of the narrative's assumptions on this count is perhaps the belief that the knight's shield acts as the signifier and guarantor of his own (*propre*) identity. Various shields occupy particularly privileged positions in this narrative; the shield functions as one of the key linking devices that

<sup>60</sup> Bowie, *Lacan*, p. 184.

<sup>61</sup> Žižek concurs that 'the subject itself [. . .] exists only as a virtual point in the self-relating of the signifier's dyads; as something that "will have been", that is never present in reality or its "real" (actual) image. It is always-already "past", although it never appeared "in the past itself"; it is constituted by means of a double reflection, as the result of the way the past's mirroring in the future is mirrored back in the present' (*FTKN*, p. 15).



underpin the chronological organization of the text, and in doing so simultaneously serves as the signifier of a character's identity from both a synchronic and diachronic perspective, as will be discussed.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, as Norris Lacy observes, 'Perlesvaus is presented not as Perlesvaus, but as the knight who is destined to bear the shield that hangs on the column'.<sup>63</sup> In a narrative that experiences such difficulty in establishing and sustaining fixed identities, the chronology and logic of the shield become particularly apposite. As the narrative progresses, various characters (most notably Gauvain and Perlesvaus) exchange or upgrade their existing shield for one they have acquired as the result of some adventure or other narrative development.<sup>64</sup> However, owing to the temporal and topological complexity of the romance, these metamorphoses in the characters' defining attributes are not always universally perceived or acknowledged, giving rise to scenarios in which a character is misrecognized or misread. On certain occasions this misrecognition appears as a deliberate (or, we might say, 'conscious') diegetic element contributing to the furtherance of the plot. On other occasions, however, the narrative appears to experience a problematic difficulty in manipulating the operation of *méconnaissance* in such a fashion. An exemplary incidence of the 'conscious' manipulation of misrecognition by the narrative occurs when Perlesvaus and Lancelot joust, not having recognized one another, as a result of which the former is gravely wounded: 'Se Perlesvaus eüst porté son escu [. . .] de sinople a un cerf blanc, Lanceloz l'eüst bien coneü, si n'eüst pas esté li contens d'aus .ii., qu'il avoit oï parller de l'escu a la cort le roi Artu' ['if Perlesvaus had borne his shield of red with a white stag, Lancelot would easily have recognized him and there would have been no strife between the two of them, for he had heard talk of this shield at King Arthur's court'] (*P*, 3028–30).<sup>65</sup>

This *méconnaissance* is by no means exceptional; rather it becomes the defining limit of identity in the narrative. We should recall that, for Lacan,

<sup>62</sup> For comment on the narrative's heraldic schemas and use of colour, see Dubost, 'Couleurs héraldiques du *Perlesvaus*'. Dubost notes that 'cette oeuvre, qui se situe si souvent en position de rupture par rapport à la littérature du Graal, marque aussi sa différence dans la différence des couleurs' ['this work, which so often represents a break with the Grail literature, also marks its difference by way of its colours'] (p. 73).

<sup>63</sup> Lacy, 'Linking in the *Perlesvaus*', p. 175.

<sup>64</sup> Dubost notes that 'Perlesvaus dispose de deux écus et d'un double système chromatique assurant son identification: un écu chevaleresque et un écu sacré' ['Perlesvaus has available to him two shields and a double chromatic system assuring his identification: one shield is chivalric, the other sacred'] ('Couleurs héraldiques du *Perlesvaus*', p. 76). It is surely this doubling of the signifier that assures Perlesvaus's *misidentification*.

<sup>65</sup> There is potential for confusion over the term 'sinople' used to describe Perlesvaus's shield here; the word can mean either red or green in Old French (see Tobler-Lommatzsch, IX, 676–7). Although the heraldic term usually indicates the colour green, it seems logical to translate 'sinople' as 'red' here, given that Perlesvaus's shield had previously been described as 'un escu vermeil a .i. cerf blanc' ['a red shield with a white stag'] (*P*, 510; cf. 627–8). Nitze, however, appears to suggest that two *different* shields are implied (see *P*, II, 224), but does not expand on this hypothesis.

*méconnaissance* does not result from ignorance, but instead represents the sublimation of a certain knowledge, which might here be seen as the unpalatable certainty that the stable identities of which the narrative is constantly in search are ultimately unattainable fantasies. It is precisely through this instability of identity that the subject reaches towards the *jouissance* that the symbolic law denies him, and that must necessarily be misrecognized. Consequently, the master signifier (if we might read a shield as such) that appears to suture or assure identity will in fact be instrumental in its deconstruction. However, this deconstruction of identity is not always kept under control by the narrative, however much *li conte* might seek to profess its own authority. As will be discussed in greater detail below, it appears that the workings of *méconnaissance* have in fact exceeded the narrative's conscious, and the deconstructive work falls instead to the attentive reader/analyst.

Both Perlesvaus and Lancelot are inscribed in the text long before they make their first actual appearance on the narrative stage.<sup>66</sup> As subjects they are, to recall Bowie's proposition, always 'elsewhere'. Indeed, this can be clearly seen in the way that Perlesvaus's identity is simultaneously retrospectively and also anticipated in the narrative. The distinguished lineage of this 'buens chevaliers' ['good knight'] is recounted, in not inconsiderable detail, by the narrative voice at the very outset (*P*, 12–57). Without yet being explicitly named, Perlesvaus is thus firmly written into the historico-narrative framework of 'li contes' that in fact *exceeds* the diegesis of the *Perlesvaus* and pertains to a narrative pre-history.<sup>67</sup> The disembodied, quasi-transcendental voice of 'li contes' is the organizational device used to assert narrative verisimilitude; it is precisely the embodiment of what is referred to as 'l'autoritez de l'escriture' ['the authority of the writing'] (*P*, 58).<sup>68</sup> Thus, as Rockwell has it, 'the *conte* is both a "source" of authority located somewhere beyond the text and the speaking of that entity in or through the text'.<sup>69</sup> This assertion might be read as further evidence for the indistinction between S1 (the narrative authority as a master signifier) and S2 (the articulation of that authority within the text).

On the one hand, what we are dealing with in 'li contes', and in Perlesvaus's fundamentally *anonymous* inscription therein, is the chain of knowledge and signification, S2.<sup>70</sup> At the same time however, Perlesvaus's identity is contained, or rather, anticipated, entirely within the temporal and textual frontiers of the narrative framework (the text of the *Perlesvaus*), where it comes to be aligned

<sup>66</sup> Perlesvaus himself does not make his first appearance until line 2930. Lancelot, first mentioned by name in line 581, does not appear in person until line 2558.

<sup>67</sup> This is perhaps most evident in the narrative's reference to Perlesvaus's failure at the Grail castle, which clearly points back to Perceval's failure in the *Conte du Graal*.

<sup>68</sup> On issues of narrative authority in the text, see Ramm, 'Locating Narrative Authority in *Perlesvaus*'.

<sup>69</sup> Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*, p. 193.

<sup>70</sup> Thus Rockwell's assertion that 'to challenge the voice of the *conte* is to admit one's own insufficiency as reader' (*Rewriting Resemblance*, p. 228) could be glossed as an indication of the subject's alienation within the ceaseless flux of S2.



with S1, the One of quality, the master signifier. The distinction between S1 and S2 in the narrative becomes ever more muddied, as is apparent at the moment in Branch II when the Maiden of the Cart and her entourage arrive at the Arthurian court, where she prophesizes Perlesvaus's coming:

Sire, li escuz que ceste damoisele porte fu Joseph le buen soudoier qui Dieu descendi de la croiz, si vos en faz present, ainsi com ge vos diré: qe vos garderez l'escu avec un chevalier qi porec vendra, e le feroiz pendre a cele colonbe enmi cele sale, e li garderez; car nus no porroit oster se cil non, ne pendre a son col. E de cest escu conqerra il le Graal, e lera un autre escu ça dedenz, vermeil a un cerf blanc; e li brachez que ceste damoisele porte demorera ça dedenz, ne ne menra joie a nului devant ce que li chevaliers vendra.<sup>71</sup> (*P*, 622–30)

[Sir, the shield that this maiden carries belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, who took Christ down from the cross. I present it to you, and you must do as I say. You will look after the shield for a knight who will come here for it; you will hang it from this column in the middle of the room and keep it there; none will be able to remove it or hang it around his neck except for that knight. With this shield he will conquer the Grail, and he will leave another shield, red with a white stag, here. The little dog that this maiden is holding will remain here, and it will not show joy for anyone before the arrival of this knight.]

Perlesvaus is henceforth known almost exclusively as 'cil qui doit porter l'escu bandé d'argent [et] d'azur a la croiz vermelle' ['the one who must bear the shield of silver and blue bends with a red cross'] (*P*, 3098–9) – he is the only One (S1) who can do so, yet this Oneness is inscribed within the chain of signifiers (S2; the replacement-change of one signifier – or shield – for another). The supposed impenetrability of the signifier–signifier relationship of the knight and his shield is subject to erosion in this text, and I suggest that this is brought about by slippage in the temporality of the signifying operation. Or, in narrative terms, a knight bears the right shield at the wrong time, or vice versa.

Clamadoz is seeking Perlesvaus in order to exact revenge for the death of his father, the Red Knight. In Branch VII his peregrinations lead him to the encampment where the Queen of the Tents and her entourage are similarly awaiting the arrival of Perlesvaus, whom they know as the Good Knight: 'nos atendon la venue dou Bon Chevalier' ['we are awaiting the arrival of the Good Knight'] (*P*, 3167). Asked by Clamadoz as to whom this epithet pertains, the maiden replies that the Good Knight is 'li fiz a la Veve Dame des Vax de Camaaloth' ['the son of the Widowed Lady of the Vales of Camelot'] (*P*, 3169–70). Only the privileged position occupied by the reader of this romance

<sup>71</sup> There is a slight, but nevertheless significant, narrative inconsistency surrounding these prophecies: the little dog first reacts ('fet la joie') when Perlesvaus's *sister* arrives at court shortly before his own visit (*P*, 4041). For further discussion of the significance of the dog here and elsewhere in the *Perlesvaus*, see Ramm, 'Barking Up The Wrong Tree?'

allows the synchronic perception of the various attributes and epithets that combine to create the hero's identity; characters in the text are constantly in search of the subject who corresponds to their signifier. Even so, the privileged position of the reader in establishing or organizing identity is brought into question, as we shall see. The Queen and her maidens must continue to wait, for Perlesvaus does not arrive at the appointed hour, much to their consternation. However, when he does finally present himself at the tents some time later, the reception he receives from one of the maidens is less than rapturous: 'Sire, fet ele, a vostre honte e a vostre male aventure puissiez vos estre venuz ça dedenz!' [ "Sir," she said, "may your coming here be to your shame and misfortune!" ] (*P*, 3262–3). This maligning is explained by the fact that the maidens have recognized the new arrival (presumably by virtue of his shield, placed on rather ostentatious display) as the one responsible for the death of the Red Knight, who was also a relative of the Queen of the Tents. However, fortune would have it that the Maiden of the Cart, the guarantor (or the privileged reader/writer) of Perlesvaus's identity, is close to hand: 'La Damoisele del Char vient cele part et conut Perlesvax a l'escu qu'il portoit de sinople, et au cerf blanc' [ 'the Maiden of the Cart arrived and recognized Perlesvaus by the shield he bore, red with a white stag' ] (*P*, 3267–9). The Maiden of the Cart swiftly disabuses the Queen of her misrecognition:

Dame, fet la Damoisele del Char, vez ci le bon chevalier por coi les tentes furent ici tendues, et por qui vos avez mené la grant joie jusc'a cest jor. – A! fet ele, est ce donc li fiz a la Veve Dame? – Certes, oïl, fet la damoisele.  
(3274–7)

[ 'My lady,' said the Maiden of the Cart, 'see here the good knight for whom these tents were erected, and on account of whom you have been so joyous until this day.' 'Ah!' she said, 'is this then the son of the Widowed Lady?' 'Yes indeed,' said the maiden.]

The important point to retain from this incident is the 'not yet' of identity, the notion that the identity-constructing temporal strata of the narrative do not always successfully mesh in the seamless (or perhaps rather seamy) way implied by the formal device of interlace, an idea taken up at several reprises by the text itself with the formula 'n'en est ore pas leus' [ 'the time is not yet right' ] (*P*, 1977). Gauvain's frustrated complaint that it is impossible to locate Perlesvaus because 'trop souvent mue son escu' [ 'he changes his shield too often' ] (*P*, 4480) is precisely an impotent railing against the symbolic order itself – the inability to pin down the signifier becomes an expression of the subject's alienation in the constant flux of the chain of signification (S2).

### Identity Reflected

By Branch VIII of the narrative, Perlesvaus has collected the silver and azure shield that he is destined to bear from King Arthur's court, and departed without further ado. Gauvain sets out in search of him, and in due course encounters the Coward Knight ('li Coarz Chevaliers') fleeing from a knight whom he has been unable to identify. Gauvain rides on until he meets this figure himself: 'voit .i. chevalier armé sor un grant destrier, e avoit .i. escu d'or a son col a une croiz vert' ['he sees an armed knight on a large horse, carrying a shield of gold with a green cross around his neck'] (*P*, 4249–51). He enquires of this knight if he should by chance have 'noveles d'un chevalier qui porte .i. escu bendé d'argent et d'azur a une croiz vermeille' ['any news of a knight who bears a shield of silver and azure bands with a red cross'] (*P*, 4254–5), that is, Perlesvaus. The anonymous knight replies in the affirmative, informing Gauvain that his quarry will be attendant at a tournament to be held on the Crimson Heath ('la Vermelle Lande') in forty days' time (*P*, 4255–6). Content with this intelligence, Gauvain sets off for the appointed venue. He soon arrives at a castle maintained solely by an elderly vavasour and his valet. The vavasour informs Gauvain that he is under attack, and implores him for assistance. The assailant, he asserts, bears 'l'escu d'or a la croiz vert' ['a shield of gold with a green cross'] (*P*, 4288–9). Whilst Gauvain is probing his host for news of Perlesvaus, the offending 'Chevalier a l'Escu d'Or' ['Knight of the Golden Shield'] (*P*, 4299) approaches the castle. Gauvain rides out to meet him, but instead of coming under attack he simply finds himself locked out of the castle. The narrative then informs the reader that the presumed attacker 'ne venoit mie ilueques por le vavassor mal fere, mes por les chevaliers qui par iluec trespassoient qui aloient por aventure querre' ['did not come to do the vavasour any harm, but in order to meet with knights who were passing through there in search of adventure'] (*P*, 4306–8). The vavasour has deliberately misinformed Gauvain, and is denounced by a passing maiden as 'traîtres li plus que vos onques veissiez' ['the worst traitor that you ever saw'] (*P*, 4317–18). It transpires that the vavasour is in the habit of engineering a trick of misrecognition between knights, to which Gauvain has been subjected; the vavasour makes a collection of his victims' 'harnois et de lor che[vaus]' ['harnesses and horses'] (*P*, 4338), and has the aim of ensuring 'que tuit li chevalier s'entretuassent' ['that knights all kill each other'] (*P*, 4337). Before they part, Gauvain asks his erstwhile opponent's name, in reply to which he receives the request that 'ne me demandez mon non jusc'a icele eure que je vos demanderai le vostre' ['do not request my name until such time as I ask you for yours'] (*P*, 4344–5), a response that satisfies Gauvain. The knights separate, and Gauvain resumes his quest for Perlesvaus.

A careful reading of the episode outlined above suggests that 'li contes' is in fact playing exactly the same game of misrecognition as the vavasour, but at a meta-narrative level. Although we, as readers, are given to think that the knight whom Gauvain encounters is an unknown figure (i.e., we are duped by the narrative just as Gauvain is by the vavasour), we are simultaneously offered a

cumulative set of textual clues that suggest that the knight is in fact Perlesvaus, as indeed proves to be the case some time later. When Gauvain first encounters the knight, he rather pointedly wonders out loud whether he will make any advance in his search for Perlesvaus: ‘Ha! Dex, fet Misire Gavains, savroit moi cel chevalier dire novele de celui que je vois quere?’ [“Ah God!” said Sir Gauvain, “might this knight be able to give me any news of the one whom I seek?”] (*P*, 4251–2), and indeed the knight is surprisingly confident in his assertion that Perlesvaus will definitely be found at the Crimson Heath: ‘Iluec le trouverez sanz faille’ [‘you will not fail to find him there’] (*P*, 4258). Following their interlocution, the knight makes a hasty retreat to a boat: ‘se retrait vers la mer grant aleüre; mes Misire Gavains ne vit mie la nef en coi il entra, car ele estoit desoz la roche aancree’ [‘he retreats towards the sea with great speed, but Sir Gauvain did not see the boat he entered, for it was anchored below the rocks’] (*P*, 4260–2) – other than the air of furtive elusiveness here, the reader already knows that Perlesvaus has lately taken to a maritime existence (*P*, 4233–4). The single most important factor in suggesting that the mystery knight is *not* Perlesvaus (as Gauvain presumes to be the case) is, of course, his shield. Both the Coward Knight and the traitorous vavasour repeat that their assailant bears the same shield: ‘.i. escu d’or [. . .] a une croiz vert’ [‘a shield of gold with a green cross’] (*P*, 4250–1); ‘Il porte l’escu d’or a la croiz vert’ [‘he carries a shield of gold with a green cross’] (*P*, 4288–9). At the same time, Gauvain takes the unusual step of actually naming his quarry, ‘un chevalier c’an apele Perceval’ [‘a knight who is called Perceval’] (*P*, 4294), who carries a quite distinct shield, described in detail for good measure: ‘bendé d’argent et d’azur a une croiz vermelle et a une bogle d’or’ [‘of silver and azure bands, with a red cross and a golden boss’] (*P*, 4295–6). However, the narrative’s attempt to promote, or indeed to assert control over, misrecognition in this episode appears to backfire.

Continuing his pursuit, Gauvain lodges with a hermit who enquires whether he has any news of ‘Perceval le Bon Chevalier’ [‘Perceval the Good Knight’] (*P*, 4352). Gauvain replies that he does not, but that ‘uns chevaliers a l’escu d’or a la croiz vermelle me dist qu’il seroit en la Vermelle Lande’ [‘a knight carrying a shield of gold *with a red cross* told me that he would be at the Crimson Heath’] (*P*, 4354–5; my italics). This mistake of ‘vermelle’ for ‘vert’ could easily be attributed to scribal error, especially given that the word does legitimately appear again in the same sentence (‘la Vermelle Lande’).<sup>72</sup> Yet it seems highly significant for the discussion of *méconnaissance* that the text should permit such a slippage here.<sup>73</sup> Particularly important is that the hermit should rely on this erroneous description of Perlesvaus as grounds for identifying him to Gauvain: ‘Sire, fet li hermites, il vos dist voir, car ce fu il meïsmes a qui vos

<sup>72</sup> Nitze’s list of variants shows that MSS *Br* and *P* maintain ‘vert’ here. For details of the manuscript tradition, see *P*, I, 4–14.

<sup>73</sup> Regarding the difficulty of distinguishing green and red in the heraldic colour-scheme, see note 65 above.

parllastes' [ ' "Sir," said the hermit, "he told you the truth, for it was he himself to whom you were speaking" ' ] (*P*, 4355–6). The hermit goes on to explain that Perlesvaus is carrying this atypical shield because 'il se veult desconoistre' [ 'he does not want to be recognized' ] (*P*, 4363) – an aim that has clearly been achieved with much greater success than might ever have been anticipated, or indeed desired, by the narrative.

A final consideration of the signifying role of the shield in this text will extrapolate the contention that the shield is implicit in defining the very impossibility, or abjection, of the knight's self-identity. The episode of the Dragon Knight provides incontrovertible evidence for the notion of a reflective signifier that contains its own lack, and applies this in a singularly troubling manner to the representation of identity in the *Perlesvaus*. The Dragon Knight, an 'ome qui si cruelment oceïst chevaliers' [ 'man who kills knights most cruelly' ] (*P*, 5645–6), has been laying waste to Arthur's kingdom; he bears a terrifying shield, 'granz et noirs et hisdex' [ 'huge and black and hideous' ] (*P*, 5834), the boss of which consists of a fire-breathing dragon's head, 'qui gitoit feu et flambe a grant exploit, si laide et si orrible que tote la chanpaige en put' [ 'that belched out great quantities fire and flame, so grim and terrible that the whole countryside reeked of it' ] (*P*, 5835–6).<sup>74</sup> Perlesvaus agrees to assist the Queen of the Golden Circle ('la Roïne au Cercle d'Or') in ridding her land of this scourge, and duly meets him in single combat. What ensues is presented as a battle between the two knights' shields rather than their respective bearers; the Dragon Knight 'torne le chief del dragon et son escu vers l'escu Perlesvaus' [ 'turns his shield and its dragon's head towards Perlesvaus's shield' ] (*P*, 5854), but the latter's shield is protected by Holy Relics fortuitously sealed into the boss by Joseph of Arimathea, its original owner (*P*, 5850–1). The maiden accompanying Perlesvaus advises him that his adversary has only a single weak-point through which he can be overcome: 'L'on m'a dit par verité que li chevaliers n[e] puet estre ocis fors par .j. seul leu et par .j. coup, mes je ne vos sai dire comment ce est, ce poise moi' [ 'I have been told in truth that the knight can only be killed at a single point and by a single stroke, but I cannot tell you how, and this pains me' ] (*P*, 5871–3). The Achilles' heel is, of course, the dragon's head upon the knight's shield, the very marker of his identity that also proves to be his undoing. Perlesvaus strikes at the head with quite extraordinary results: 'La teste du dragon se torne devers son saignor par grant air, si l'art et broïst tot en poudre, et la teste del dragon s'en part autresi comme foudre' [ 'the dragon's

<sup>74</sup> The figure of the Dragon Knight also features in Gerbert de Montreuil's *Continuation*. For comment on the episode in this text, see Larmat, 'Perceval et le Chevalier au Dragon'. See Nitze, *P*, II, 144–51 for detailed comparison and analysis of the parallels between Gerbert and the *Perlesvaus*. Nitze's note on the mythical provenance of this figure is curious for my own reading: 'Originally the Dragon Knight was one of those creatures, known to folk-tales, who could only be killed with his own sword' (*P*, II, 150). In Gerbert's rendering of the episode, the Dragon Knight wounds Perceval with his (Perceval's) own sword, which he has dropped (see lines 9730ff).

head turned angrily back on its master, consuming him and burning him to ash; the dragon's head then vanished like a clap of thunder'] (*P*, 5888–90). The Dragon Knight is thus literally and graphically devoured by his own signifier.<sup>75</sup>

Žižek summarizes Hegel's conception of identity in the following terms: 'identity of an entity with itself equals the coincidence of this entity with the empty place of its "inscription"'.<sup>76</sup> Thus, in terms of the logic of the signifier, a logic that is clearly echoed in this description, the only possibility of self-identity would be the impossible coincidence of  $S = \$$ , the moment at which a signifier fully represents the subject, and is simultaneously consumed by its own void. A disturbing paradox emerges, whereby the subject can only achieve self-identity in the domain of the real, or in death – and this is the power of horror that we see borne out in the destruction of the Dragon Knight. It is only at the moment when the subject is consumed by his signifier that he finally achieves the fullness of self-identity.

### Perlesvaus is . . . Perlesvaus

Žižek's conclusion that 'identity is the surplus which cannot be captured by predicates' seems particularly problematic when applied to a text such as the *Perlesvaus* in which identity is presumed to be assured by these very predicates.<sup>77</sup> The problem that we have been dealing with all along is that of a distinction between identification (by others) and identity (with oneself), and the *méconnaissance* that comes about owing to slippage between the two. This slippage is brought to the fore in the *Perlesvaus* in the way that nomenclature is imposed along two different lines, either with the use of proper names, or else by employing predicates in order to define a figure metonymically.<sup>78</sup> Thus certain characters (Lancelot, for example) are referred to using only their proper name, whilst others are exclusively designated by their metonym (for instance, 'la Damoisele du Char'). A third group is designated using a combination of the two systems, and Perlesvaus himself belongs to this category.

Before returning to analyse the use of proper names in the narrative, let us briefly refer back to the episode of the Dragon Knight, or more specifically to the Queen's declaration once Perlesvaus has achieved his victory: 'Vos savez bien que il fu profetizié que li Chevaliers au Chief d'Or vendroit, et que par celui serions nos sauvé, et veez le ici elec ou il est venuz. *La profecie ne puet*

<sup>75</sup> The episode is further complicated by the fact that the grievously injured Perlesvaus can only be cured by applying the dead knight's ash to his wound: 'est molt bleciez en la destre espaulle, et la damoisele li dit q'il n'iert ja gariz se il n'i met de la poudre au chevalier qui morz est' ['he is gravely wounded in the right shoulder, and the maiden tells him that he will never be cured unless he rubs ash from the dead knight into the wound'] (*P*, 5891–3).

<sup>76</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 36.

<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 36.

<sup>78</sup> For a comprehensive list of proper names employed in the narrative, see Nitze, *P*, I, 410–22.



*estre fausee*’ [‘you know that it was prophesied that the Golden Headed Knight would come, and that we would be saved by him, and you can see that he has come here. *The prophecy cannot be false*’] (5898–5900; my italics). This is of course nothing other than a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the italicized phrase shows, of the class that we have already seen in operation in the text; the prophecy is legitimized only in the performative enunciation of its veracity. Once Perlesvaus is named, he is assigned to a role that is deemed to be, always already, his proper designation (here as ‘li Chevaliers au Chief d’Or’). What we see here is precisely the misrecognition of identity-for-others (symbolic identification) for the self-identity that pertains to the domain of the imaginary and that, as already asserted, also bears on the real.

We have seen that the identity of this narrative’s hero (let us deliberately avoid his name here) is frequently constructed using predicates, or metonymically: he is, among other appellations, the ‘Chevalier(s) au Blanc Escu’ [‘Knight of the White Shield’] (*P*, 4450, 10047), the ‘Chevalier(s) au Cercle d’Or’ [‘Knight of the Circle of Gold’] (*P*, 5912, 6031, 6360) and ‘fil a la Veve Dame’ [‘son of the Widowed Lady’] (*P*, 1685).<sup>79</sup> Yet he also has a proper name, although this is clearly a misnomer, for it is anything but proper.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, even the ‘proper’ name assigned to this character undergoes a remarkable degree of mutation throughout the narrative, imputable in part to scribal variance, but also symptomatic of a concerted narrative agenda. Two major variants on the name demand further attention: one the one hand the dominant form Perlesvaus (Perlesvax, Pellesvaus, Pellesvax, etc.) and, on the other hand, the hyphenated form Par-lui-fet (Par-lui-fez, Par-lui-fais, etc.).<sup>81</sup> Before the character makes his initial appearance, he is referred to in the text on several occasions using the hyphenated, self-reflexive form. The hermit Joseus asserts that ‘on l’apele Par-lui-fet’ [‘he is called Par-lui-fet’] (*P*, 1629),<sup>82</sup> whilst another hermit explains to Gauvain that ‘il s’est fez par lui meisme, et por ce l’apel ge Par-lui-fet par chierté e par amor’ [‘he has made himself, and for that reason I call him Par-lui-fet out of affection and love’] (*P*, 1672–3. See also lines 1647, 2403). At first glance, this name would appear to promote a notional self-identity, implying that the character *is (for) himself*. Indeed, we might discern here the ‘pure notional Unity’ crucial to Žižek’s deceptively parenthetical aside regarding proper names: ‘the One is what Lacan calls “pure signifier”, the signifier “without signified”, the signifier which does not designate any positive properties of the object since it refers only to its pure notional Unity

<sup>79</sup> See Nitze, *P*, I, 419 for the full complement of variants on the hero’s name.

<sup>80</sup> Especially in the dual sense of the French word ‘propre’, meaning one’s own and also clean (cf. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 10–12).

<sup>81</sup> Note that MS *Br* is unique in having the extended form ‘Par-qui-li-fez’ (‘ch’rs par qui li fez est’, *P*, 1647). The same MS also has the tantalizingly ironic form ‘Parfez’ [‘Perfect’] (*P*, 1673).

<sup>82</sup> The implication of the epithet ‘Par-lui-fet’ is that its bearer is self-determined, or self-made (although not, of course, in the modern sense of that term).



brought about performatively by this signifier itself (the exemplary case of it is, of course, proper names).<sup>83</sup>

Žižek discusses the tautology of identity at some length, and his conclusions seem singularly pertinent to the *Perlesvaus*. Using the example ‘God is God’, Žižek explains that ‘a doubling of the Universal’ occurs ‘when it is confronted with its particular content’, or again ‘confronted with its particular content, [the Universal] redoubles into positive and negative’.<sup>84</sup> In other words, ‘if the first God (“God is . . .”) is the positive God, the genus which encompasses all species, all His particular content, [. . .] then the second God (“ . . . God”) is the negative God, He who excludes all His predicates, all particular content’.<sup>85</sup> Thus Žižek delineates Hegel’s ‘identity of opposites’, explaining that ‘this identity designates the above-mentioned *self-reference of the Universal* – the Universal is the opposite to itself in so far as it relates to itself in the Particular; in so far as it arrives at its being-for-itself in the form of its opposite’.<sup>86</sup> Applied to the *Perlesvaus*, it seems that we are faced with a similar tautology, whereby the identity of the eponymous hero is set up in the position of the Universal, that which encompasses all of its particular content, that is, all of the different textual variants and metonymical designations of the hero’s identity.

This assertion might be more clearly substantiated with reference to two other characters in the narrative who are shown to double themselves. Having decapitated the Black Knight in Branch I, King Arthur is deprived of his grisly trophy by another knight. Demanding that the severed head be returned to him, the knight agrees to the king’s request with one condition, ‘que vos me dites qui le chevalier ocist dont ge port le chief que vos me demandez’ [‘that you tell me who killed the knight whose head I carry and that you are asking me for’] (*P*, 425–6). The king’s reply is somewhat duplicitous, but nonetheless effective: ‘Sachiez tot de voir que li rois Artuz l’ocist [. . .] Querez le tant que vos l’aiez [. . .] Je vos en é dite la verité; donez moi le chief’ [‘know in all truth that King Arthur killed him. Search until you find him. I have told you the truth of the matter, now give the head to me’] (*P*, 427–30). Returning to his companions, the knight informs them that ‘cil chevaliers qui la s’en va m’a dit que li rois Artuz ocist le Noir Chevalier’ [‘that knight who is going off over there told me that King Arthur killed the Black Knight’] (*P*, 436–7), and suggests that they seek out the king forthwith. The rest of the company are, however, aware of the knight’s mistake, and are not inclined towards leniency for his oversight: ‘Il s’eslessent ver lui e l’ocient e detrenchent, e enporte chascuns sa piece autressi comme de l’autre’ [‘they throw themselves upon him, kill him and chop him up. Each and every one of them takes away a piece’] (*P*, 441–2). This frenzied *sparagmos*, the dismembering and fragmenting of the unfortunate knight, is clearly deemed a fitting punishment for the misrecognition of a split identity.

<sup>83</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 52.

<sup>84</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, pp. 34 and 42.

<sup>85</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, pp. 35–6.

<sup>86</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 36.

In a similar vein is Gauvain's sojourn with the Maidens of the Tents in Branch V. The maidens are delighted at the prospect of entertaining as notorious a philanderer as Arthur's nephew under their canvas, but are sadly disappointed by an uncharacteristically frigid Gauvain, forthcoming only in courtesy: 'Messire Gavains ne leur respont autre chose que granz merciz, car il ne pense fors a dormir e a reposer' ['Sir Gauvain's only response was to thank them, for he could think of nothing other than rest and sleep'] (*P*, 1812–13). The maidens' reaction to this snub is to presume that this 'Gauvain' is in fact an impostor: 'Par Dieu, fet l'une a l'autre, se ce fust Gavains qui niés est le roi Artu, il parlast a nos autrement, e troivissions en lui plus de deduit que en cestui; mes cist est uns Gavains contrefez' [“By God,” said the one to the other, “if this were the Gauvain who is King Arthur's nephew then he would have spoken quite differently, and we would have had more entertainment than this one has given us. This is a false Gauvain”] (*P*, 1813–16). Both this and the previous example illustrate Žižek's conception of identity as 'this tedious point at which a set encounters itself among its elements, at which a genus encounters itself in the shape of its own species'.<sup>87</sup> Yet the doubling that we see in the *Perlesvaus* is effectively a splitting into positive and negative – Arthur and not-Arthur, Gauvain and not-Gauvain (just as we already saw *Perlesvaus* and not-*Perlesvaus* in the encounter at the tomb). Hence Žižek's refinement of his statement: 'instead of encountering itself, the initial moment comes across *its own absence*, the set comes across itself as *empty set*'.<sup>88</sup> This of course recalls the notion that the moment of pure identity, represented in terms of the signifying operation, is written as  $S = \emptyset$ , the point at which the subject coincides with its own absence, with the void of its own place of inscription.

Identity is thus precisely that which excludes all predicates, all particular content, from its own set. In relation to the *Perlesvaus*, then, we are still at the level of misrecognizing identity, as is clear when we consider how the notion of the eponymous hero as self-identical, literally as *Par-lui-fet*, is gravely undermined by the fact that this very designation is nothing other than a predicate, a name assigned to its bearer by other people, by the symbolic order itself. This has already been demonstrated in the above cited occurrences of the name ('on l'apel', etc.),<sup>89</sup> but is perhaps best asserted in the transparently nonsensical statement that 'il avoit non *Perlesvax*; mes li buens hermites, li bon rois, li avoit mis non *Par-lui-fet*, por ce q'il s'estoit fet par lui meïsmes' ['he was called *Perlesvaus*, but the good hermit, the good king, had given him the name *Par-lui-fet*, for he had made himself'] (*P*, 2930–2). The radical conclusion towards which we now move is that which Žižek accuses Derrida of having overlooked: 'what eludes him is the Hegelian inversion of *identity qua impos-*

<sup>87</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 35.

<sup>88</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 35.

<sup>89</sup> Compare the apparently self-determining formula of the modern French 'je m'appelle'.

*sible into identity as a name for a certain radical impossibility*,<sup>90</sup> and this must be the very misrecognition by which the *Perlesvaus* is also beset.

Perlesvaus's sister is quite categorical in her disagreement with the self-reflexive reference to her brother: 'Sire, fait soi la damoisele, mes freres n'a mie a non Par-lui-fais, ainz a a non Perlesvax en batesme' ['"Sir," said the maiden, "my brother's name is not Par-lui-fais; he was baptized with the name Perlesvaus"'] (*P*, 2404–5). We might concur with the sister's opinion that this second 'proper' name is in fact a much more accurate marker of the hero's identity, since it is a signifier that contains its own lack. The origin of Perlesvaus's name is explained to King Arthur by the hero's sister:

Sire, fet ele, il fu filz Julain le Gros des Vax de Kamaalot, e est apelez Pellesvax. – Por coi Pellesvax? fet li rois. – Sire, fet ele, qant il fu nez, on demanda son pere comment il avroit non en droit bautesme, e il dist qu'il voloit q'il eüst non Pellesvax, car li Sires des Mares li toloit la greigneur partie des Vax de Kamaalot, si voloit qu'il en sovenist son fil par cest non.<sup>91</sup>

(*P*, 457–62)

['Sir,' she said, 'he was the son of Julain le Gros of the Vales of Camelot, and he is called Pellesvax.' 'Why Pellesvax?' said the king. 'Sir,' she said, 'when he was born, his father was asked what name he should be given in baptism, and he said that he wanted him to have the name Pellesvax, for the Lord of the Fens had deprived him of most of the Vales of Camelot, and he wished his son to recall this through his name.']

From this it should be clear that the name *Perlesvaus*, the preferred designator of the hero's identity, is closely bound up with a lack – literally that associated with his father's territorial losses – inscribed at the heart of the subject's identity. The invocation of the *nom-du-père* here does not impose the prohibition of the father (and so, of the symbolic law) as much as it records his impotence. The name of the father does, however, retain its crucial function as 'the fundamental signifier that permits signification to proceed normally', but now with the certain knowledge that that normality of the signifying operation is fundamentally flawed, inscribed as a radical impossibility.<sup>92</sup>

What this chapter set out to demonstrate was that the *Perlesvaus*, in the way that the narrative deals with the formation and continuity of identity, can be said to represent a certain and radical departure from the Aristotelian doxa, which was already a site of ideological struggle in the early thirteenth century. If the fundamental tenet of the Philosopher's conception of man as substance is that 'a person is a (living) body whose identity remains intact through time as long as the soul (the form or essence) does', then the questioning of the essence that substantiates the individual engenders a scenario, and indeed a narrative, in

<sup>90</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 37.

<sup>91</sup> There is an untranslatable pun here; the name 'Pellesvax' implies 'Lost Valleys'.

<sup>92</sup> Evans, *Dictionary*, p. 119.

which there can be no such thing as personal identity or continuity.<sup>93</sup> The prominence, indeed agency, accorded to master signifiers in the *Perlesvaus* is always undermined by the truth of the narrative's discourse (a discourse of the Master): that the subject is fundamentally split, non-identical. This is of course particularly problematic when the master signifiers attempt, as they do in this text, to promote the contrary notion of a sutured, *recognizable and readable*, identity.

In the following chapter I shall argue that the *Queste del Saint Graal* can be seen to rehearse the discourse of the University, the structural model in which the master signifier replaces the split subject in the position of the (repressed) truth, and in which agency is accorded to the system of knowledge (S2). This repression of the master signifier, its concealment behind a façade of objective knowledge, is absolutely essential for the way in which the *Queste* strives to assert the viability of certain fixed identity-roles. Although there is no abiding consensus on the chronological relationship of the *Perlesvaus* to the *Queste* it would seem, from a purely ideological standpoint, that the latter narrative's almost paranoid obsession with the delineation of species and genus, and the assignment of individuals to determinate categories, might be read as a response to the failure of attempts to stabilize identity in the *Perlesvaus*.

<sup>93</sup> Hartman, *Substance, Body, and Soul*, p. 97.

Falling out with God:  
The Discursive Inconsistency of  
*La Queste del Saint Graal*

La Queste n'est mie de terrianes choses, mes de  
celestielx<sup>1</sup> *La Queste del Saint Graal*

Arriving at the castle Carcelois in the Scottish marches, the three companions destined to fulfil the Grail adventure in the *Queste del Saint Graal* (Galahad, Perceval and Bors) are warned by Perceval's sister, at this point travelling incognito, that they face imminent danger, 'por ce que len het çaienz le roi Artus plus que nul home' ['for here they loathe King Arthur more than any man'] (*Q*, 229:15–16). No sooner has she issued her caveat than the three companions are indeed challenged by the inhabitants of the castle, who engage them in a bout of intensive combat from which the Grail knights of course emerge victorious, due in no small measure to Galahad's legendary prowess. Confronted with the bodies of their slain adversaries, the Grail companions are suddenly afflicted by an uncharacteristic bout of introspection and doubt regarding their actions: 'si resgardent les cors qu'il ont ocis et se tienent a pecheors de cest ovraingne, et dient qu'il ont mal exploitié quant il ont ocis tant de gent' ['Looking at the corpses they have slain they consider themselves sinners, and think that they have acted very wickedly in killing so many people'] (*Q*, 230:25–8). Reassurance, however, quickly comes from a white-robed priest who affirms that the companions' actions in slaying the inhabitants of the castle were superlatively justified, indeed commendable: 'Sire, sachiez que vos avez fet la meillor oevre que chevaliers feissent onques mes' ['Sir, know that you have done the best work that any knight ever did'] (*Q*, 231:24–5). The reasoning behind this praise is extremely telling:

De cest chastel ou nos sommes orendroit estoit sires li quens Hernolx or a un an. Si avoit trois filz, assez bons chevaliers as armes, et une fille la plus bele que len seust en cest país. Et cil troi frere amoient lor seror de si tres fole amor que il en eschauferent outre mesure, tant qu'il jurent a li et la despucelerent; et por ce que ele fu si hardie que ele s'en osa clamer a son pere, l'ocistrent.  
(*Q*, 232:7–13)

<sup>1</sup> 'The Quest is not about earthly matters, but heavenly ones.'

[A year ago Count Ernol was the lord of this castle in which we stand. He had three sons, all skilled at arms, and the most beautiful daughter ever seen in this land. The three brothers loved their sister so outrageously that they were overcome with lust; they laid with her and deflowered her. And because she was brave enough to renounce them to her father, they then killed her.]

The three incestuous and sororicidal brothers were among those slain by the three companions when they unwittingly liberated the castle.

Thus, at a key moment in the text when the very ideological fabric of knight-hood is brought into question by those most intimately involved in its pursuit, we find an invocation of the two foundational pillars of social society – murder and incest, Freud’s totem and taboo, and which, for Kristeva, are also the dual facets of ‘le sacré bi-face’ [‘the two-sided sacred’].<sup>2</sup> The facet of this bi-polar sacred that is aligned with the incest taboo is akin to the Kristevan abject; the two are fundamentally concerned with the weakness of prohibition and the failure adequately to effect the imperative separation (from the mother):<sup>3</sup> ‘La fragilité – menaçante et fusionnelle à la fois – de la dyade archaïque, [. . .] la non-séparation sujet/objet sur laquelle le langage n’a de prise que tressé de frayeur et de répulsion’ [‘the fragility – both threatening and fusing – of the primal dyad, the non-separation of subject/object over which language’s only hold is crafted from fright and repulsion’].<sup>4</sup> This hypothesis of a two-sided sacred might, I suggest, offer a theoretical figure through which to explore the fundamental distinction held up by the *Queste del Saint Graal* between two species of knighthood, presented as the ‘earthly’ and ‘spiritual’ facets of chivalry.

The distinction between ‘la chevalerie terrien’ and ‘la chevalerie celestiel’, which we might already begin to flag as two competing systems of knowledge (S2, in Lacanian notation), can be seen as the primal dyad that provides a structural framework for the narrative’s ideological didacticism. An earthly or secular (‘terrien’) species of chivalry is constantly deprecated by the narrative of the *Queste* (and by the personified exponents of the narrative’s ideology, the ubiquitous hermits to whom we shall return later) as the guaranteed pathway to sin and decadence. The knight who behaves in the courtly manner of Chrétien’s heroes, even Perceval, is deemed to have strayed from the true trajectory of spiritual (i.e., ascetic, chaste and pious) knighthood, the path ordained when chivalry was instituted as a godly order. The disjunction of two species of chivalry and their divergent paths is literalized early on in the narrative when Meleyant arrives at a fork in the road, marked by a wooden cross inscribed with a caveat. Having selected his path unwisely, Meleyant’s presumptuousness is punished with a near fatal wound, as a hermit subsequently explains:

<sup>2</sup> Freud, *SE*, XIII; Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> See Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 72–3.

Et quant tu veis le brief, tu t'esmerveillas que ce pooit estre; et maintenant te feri li anemis d'un de ses darz. Et ses tu douquel? D'orgueil, car tu pensas que tu t'en istroies par ta proesce. *Et ainsi fus tu deceuz par entendement*; car li escriz parloit de la chevalerie celestiel, et tu entendoies de la seculer, par coi tu entras en orgueil; et por ce chaïs tu en pechié mortel.

(*Q*, 45:19–25; my italics)

[And when you saw the lettering, you marvelled at what it could mean; and at that moment the enemy struck you with one of his darts. Do you know which? It was the dart of pride, for you thought that your bravery would see you through. *And thus you were deceived by understanding*, for the writing referred to celestial chivalry, and you understood it to mean earthly chivalry, whereby you fell into the trap of pride, and from there into mortal sin.]

This foundational binary structuring the narrative ideology is, however, no more than a discursive construct and, as such, is intrinsically unstable: as the emphasis in the above passage suggests, one might paradoxically be *deceived by understanding*. A deconstructive reassessment is ultimately required, not only of the *Queste*'s own presentation of its narrative ideology, but also of the very enterprise of the Grail Quest itself.

### The University of Chivalry

The textual analyses that follow in this chapter will aim to show that the relationship between the two facets of chivalry, presented as mutually exclusive in the *Queste*, requires comprehensive rethinking. In order to do this, I propose to read the narrative as a structure similar to the Lacanian discourse of the University:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S2 & \rightarrow & a \\ \hline S1 & & \$ \end{array}$$

It was suggested above that the earthly and celestial facets of chivalry might be considered as two opposing systems of knowledge (S2), and we can now see how this knowledge, in the position of the agent, articulates the tyrannical discourse of the *Queste* in which, as in the discourse of the University, 'individuals are to act, think, and desire only in ways that function to enact, reproduce, or extend The System'.<sup>5</sup> The example of Meleyant cited above also signals the way in which this discourse structure produces the split or barred subject (\$). The product of this discourse is largely attributable to the dissimulation of the master signifier (S1) which, although the driving force behind the discourse of the University (in the position of the truth), is unavailable to the subject as the

<sup>5</sup> Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions', p. 115.



point at which he makes his symbolic identifications. It is for this reason that *méconnaissance* is once again rife in the text; thus Meleyant mistakes the path of celestial chivalry precisely because this master signifier is excluded from the system of knowledge to which he responds. The narrative trajectory followed by Lancelot, an archetypal example of the split subject who frequently falls victim to such misrecognitions and is forced into fraught negotiations with the chivalric code(s) that define his subjectivity, will provide an expedient route through which to explore and map the ways in which the competing codes of a putative celestial chivalry and its secular counterpart are set up as the systems of knowledge (S2) articulating the discourse of this narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Reading the *Queste* as a rehearsal of the discourse of the University will demonstrate how the subject, the knight, is compelled to respond to, and identify with, a master signifier that is in fact entirely unavailable to his cognition. This is never clearer than in the very notion of ‘la chevalerie celestiel’, which is at the same time both a system of knowledge (S2) and the point within that system (the master signifier, S1) that gives meaning to the entire semantic field. The moment at which the subject is interpellated by the call of a certain master signifier (here that of ‘celestial chivalry’) is also the *point de capiton* (‘quilting button’), by means of which the subject is sewn to the signifier, and which attempts to impose totality upon the field of meaning.<sup>7</sup> However, this point of symbolic identification (S1) – the node at which meaning is organized – is subordinated to the agency of S2 in the discourse of the University, requiring the subject to position himself in a system of knowledge within which he cannot make adequate identifications. The *Queste*’s austere regime of chastisement and penitence for its errant knights succeeds in compelling the subject to comply with a code, a law, that remains fundamentally unreadable and unintelligible to him. The occlusion of the master signifier in this discourse model generates a paradox whereby the subject, like Meleyant, is ultimately deceived by his own understanding. The *Queste* – and likewise the discourse of the University – is thus able to maintain the illusion that the symbolic order is in control; the added twist in the *Queste* is that the dominant ideology (‘le chevalerie celestiel’) is presented as being beyond the symbolic – this very inconsistency ultimately affords us the necessary critical foothold from which to begin the work of deconstruction.

<sup>6</sup> On Lancelot’s journey of spiritual awakening in the narrative, see Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, pp. 115–42.

<sup>7</sup> Lacan’s *point de capiton* is explained by Žižek as ‘a “nodal point”, a kind of knot of meanings’ – it is ‘the word which, as a word, on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity’ (*SO*, p. 95). Or, as Lacan himself explains, ‘[c’est] le point de capiton par quoi le signifiant arrête le glissement autrement indéfini de la signification’ [‘it is with the *point de capiton* that the signifier halts the otherwise endless slide of signification’] (*É*, p. 805).

### Abjecting Celestial Chivalry

It is essential from the very outset to dispel a fundamental misrecognition that the *Queste* relies on in order to impose its narrative ideology: the presumption that two facets of chivalry, that is, two competing systems of knowledge (S2) that underpin the narrative of the *Queste*, are just that – nameable and separable as two discrete, even mutually exclusive, constructs; ‘la chevalerie celestiel’ on the one side, ‘la chevalerie terrien’ on the other. A return to Kristeva’s notion of a two-sided sacred might help to extricate the argument from this blind spot. As was briefly suggested above, the two facets of Kristeva’s sacred (murder and incest, roughly correlating with Freud’s totem and taboo) might be mapped on to the division of chivalry into its earthly and celestial species – the fundamental point being that *both* species ultimately pertain to the same genus, in such a way that their separation becomes impossible.

One way of visualizing the relationship between the putative species of knighthood might be to conceive of them as mathematical sets. Thus it appears at first sight that there exists a full set, ‘chivalry’, of which the ‘earthly’ and the ‘celestial’ would be subsets, and between which there would be no intersection (that is, the two would be mutually exclusive). This is, however, already an impossibility, since the characters in the *Queste* who are rebuked for their failure, or misunderstanding of the concepts of chivalry – and Lancelot more than any in this respect – represent precisely the intersection between the two subsets. The narrative ideology aims for an altogether different conceptualization of the relationship, in which the full set would be ‘celestial’ chivalry, *which would also be a subset*, as would its ‘earthly’ opposition. This apparent paradox might be more clearly illumined with reference to Žižek’s reading, in *For They Know Not What They Do*, of Marx’s discussion of the political aftermath of the 1848 revolution in France, when the republican Party of Order comprised a coalition of two royalist factions, Orleanists and Legitimists. Žižek draws a Venn diagram in which the two royalist factions are represented as two sets, the intersection between which is ‘republican’:

‘Republican’ is thus [. . .] a species of the genus royalism; within the level of species, it holds the place of the genus itself – in it, the universal genus of royalism is represented, acquires particular existence, in the form of its opposite. In other words, the genus of royalism is divided into three species: Orleanists, Legitimists and republicans. We could also grasp this paradoxical conjunction as a question of choice. A royalist is forced to choose between Orleanism and Legitimism – can he avoid the choice by choosing royalism in general, the very medium of the choice? Yes – by choosing to be republican, by placing himself at the point of intersection of the two sets of Orleanists and Legitimists.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 34.

If we substitute the universal genus ‘royalism’ for ‘chivalry’ in general, and replace the opposing Orleanist and Legitimist positions with those of celestial and earthly chivalry, then we might begin to see how the logic of the *Queste* generates a ‘paradoxical element, the *tertium datur*, the excluded third of the choice’ – precisely the republican (a royalist who is not a royalist), or the knight who is not a knight. This point of exclusion is, for Žižek, ‘the uncanny point at which the universal genus encounters itself within its own particular species’, or the point at which ‘a doubling of the Universal’ occurs ‘when it is confronted with its particular content’.<sup>9</sup> The moment at which such a third option becomes possible, at which the knight is not a knight, is precisely the point of separation from the Other, written as  $S(\mathbf{A})$  in the Lacanian algebra. This crucial point, marking the inconsistency of the Other (which, like the subject, is also ‘barred’, incomplete), is conceived by Žižek as a ‘breathing space’ within which the subject might negotiate his position in the domain of the signifier. This recognition that the Other is ‘non-all’, and the process of separation that ensues, will prove essential to my readings in this chapter.

What we encounter in the specious distinction between earthly and celestial chivalry peddled by the *Queste* is in fact an identity of opposites, in the Hegelian sense of the ‘self-reference of the Universal – the Universal is the opposite to itself in so far as it relates to itself in the Particular; in so far as it arrives at its being-for-itself in the form of its opposite’.<sup>10</sup> This self-reference of the Universal is also the fundamental feature of the Lacanian *point de capiton*, in which all particular content is condensed into a single point of reference.<sup>11</sup> The same holds true of the concept of celestial chivalry and its operation as a master signifier in the discourse of the University. The fundamental function of the *point de capiton* is, as Žižek has it:

An inversion by means of which what is effectively an *immanent*, purely textual operation – the ‘quilting’ of the heterogeneous material into a unified ideological field – is perceived and experienced as an unfathomable, *transcendent*, stable point of reference concealed behind the flow of appearances and acting as its hidden cause.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, by setting up *celestial* chivalry as an ‘imaginary supplement’ to chivalry in general, the narrative succeeds in maintaining the mystical, transcendent quality of this master signifier by concealing it ‘behind the flow of appearances’ (objective knowledge,  $S_2$ ), thereby allowing it to function as the ‘hidden cause’, the truth of the discourse of the University ( $S_1$ ).

‘La chevalerie celestiel’, that which is both genus *and* species, particular *and* universal, could thus be aligned with a notion of the sacred that is fundamen-

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 34. See also the discussion, in Chapter 1, of the doubling of identity in the *Perlesvaus* (pp. 56–61).

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Introduction, p. 27.

tally abject, that is, characterized by a *failure of separation*. As has already been signalled, the term separation is fundamental to my analysis, in the different but nevertheless conversant theoretical senses in which it is employed; by Kristeva as the fundamental cause of abjection in its failure, and by Lacan as the operation that, along with alienation, defines the subject's relation to the Other. For Žižek, the Lacanian notion is 'the separation between I and *a*, between the Ego Ideal, the subject's symbolic identification, and the object: the falling out, the segregation of the object from the symbolic order'.<sup>13</sup> This separation of subject (the one who makes symbolic identifications) and object is also expressed by the Lacanian matheme of fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ), and I shall return to consider how the creation of a fantasy screen by the hermits of the *Queste* mediates the subject's relationship with the Other.

The central premise of my argument deriving from the theoretical positions presented thus far is that knighthood must indeed be considered as a sacred institution (or, in other words, the 'full set' of chivalry *can* be read as that of 'la chevalerie celestiel'), but that sanctity is in no way oriented towards the transcendental beyond asserted by the *Queste*. Far from serving as a pointer towards the celestial, and as a result of the suppression of the master signifier (S1), the notion of sanctity is now the abject support of the symbolic order, acting as a mask for the immanence of the network of social relations and their signifiers (S2). In the textual analyses that follow, I aim to show that the narrative sets up celestial chivalry as a paradox, pertaining at once to the field of the signifier (in its function as the organizing *point de capiton*, S1) and also to the domain of *jouissance*, insofar as its aim is to transgress the symbolic order – the Grail, the ultimate goal of celestial chivalry, is precisely 'ce que cuers mortex ne porroit penser ne langue d'ome terrien deviser' ['that of which the heart of mortal man could not conceive, nor the tongue of earthly man relate'] (*Q*, 19:25–6). However, as Žižek reminds us, 'enjoyment is what cannot be symbolized, its presence in the field of the signifier can be detected only through the holes and inconsistencies of this field, so the only possible signifier of enjoyment is the signifier of the lack in the Other, the signifier of its inconsistency'.<sup>14</sup> So, to a certain extent, the narrative strategy undermines itself; far from serving as the *trait unaire* (S1), the point at which meaning coagulates in order to give consistency to the entire field of the signifier, the notion of 'la chevalerie celestiel' in fact betrays the very domain of chivalry (that is, the field of the signifier) as 'inconsistent, porous, perforated'. What this ultimately allows the subject to perceive, through the process of separation from the Other, is the duplicity of the agent of discourse, the inconsistency of the supposedly totalized system of knowledge within which he must negotiate a subject position. The *jouissance* of the *Queste* should thus be read as a discourse of cynicism rather than as the expression of faith that the narrative attempts to promote. It is this very cyni-

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 122.

cism that pushes the subject ever closer towards the hysterical questioning of the Other's desire.

What is presented by the narrative as a transcendental ideal of celestial chivalry in fact reveals itself as the fallout, the remainder, of the bi-polar sacred to which it both belongs and from which it is (imperfectly) rejected. The concept of spiritual knighthood is rendered abject, and never more so than when, as in the *Queste*, it is objectified by the 'surplus-X, the object cause of desire';<sup>15</sup> the *objet a*, the Holy Grail. Tessellating his theoretical point with examples from popular culture, Žižek writes of 'that "unattainable something" which is "in Coke more than Coke" and which, according to the Lacanian formula, could suddenly change into excrement, into undrinkable mud'. Ultimately then, as Žižek has asserted elsewhere in an almost throwaway sound-bite, 'the sublime Grail will reveal itself to be nothing but a piece of shit'.<sup>16</sup>

### A Christian Chivalry?

The notion of a divided sacred necessarily brings into question the relationship between individual and community, as John Lechte has observed in his study of Kristeva's oeuvre: 'the "sacred" is another name for the divided foundation simultaneously giving rise to social and individual life' – once again, totem and taboo.<sup>17</sup> The very notion of chivalry must be read both as a code that defines the individual knight as such, and also as a pre-existing matrix that creates social bonds (a discourse structure), within which the individual knight must establish his subjectivity. As such, the knight is already constituted as the *a* of discourse, the one who must fill out a position by assuming the mandate that awaits him, the exemplary case of which is perhaps Galahad. An exploration of the sacred-abject nature of knighthood requires a rethinking of the relationship between the codes of chivalry and Christianity, bound together in the *Queste*'s assertion of a messianic knighthood that achieves its apotheosis in Galahad. This in turn requires illumination from the vast amount of scholarly work that has been undertaken to explain the provenance of the very concept of chivalry, and the ways in which it developed a uniquely ambivalent relationship with Christian doctrine and with the ecclesiastical hierarchy that ultimately caused it to operate, in the words of Jean Frappier, 'en marge de l'orthodoxie, non contre elle' ['on the margins of orthodoxy, not against it'].<sup>18</sup>

It has been argued that the notion of chivalry was a product of the

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Lechte, *Julia Kristeva*, p. 162.

<sup>18</sup> Frappier, 'Le Graal et la chevalerie', p. 210. On the history and development of the concept of knighthood and its relationship with religious doctrine and structures, Maurice Keen's *Chivalry* provides an authoritative and comprehensive overview. For perhaps the most thoroughgoing and exhaustive scholarly work on the subject, see Flori's *L'Idéologie du glaive* and *L'Essor de la chevalerie*.

mid-twelfth century, an epoch that witnessed such a degree of cultural and social development in Western Europe, and arguably nowhere more so than in France, that the term ‘Twelfth-Century Renaissance’ has been deemed appropriate.<sup>19</sup> This was a period during which, in the words of Maurice Keen, ‘shifting social and cultural forces [. . .] had given definition to a new kind of figure, called the knight, and to a way of life that was coming to be called chivalry’.<sup>20</sup> The emergence of this new designation for the individual and his social class could be seen to result from a conflict arising from the opening of new social possibilities in this ‘vigorous, mobile society which generated [. . .] both optimism and anxiety’.<sup>21</sup> What we are dealing with here is the appearance of a number of competing systems of knowledge (S2) that in turn produce a split subject:

Twelfth-century society was [. . .] disturbed by the rapid emergence of a whole new series of groups or classes, all of them requiring an ideal on which to model themselves and an ethic to guide them. They thus created a conflict of values [. . .] Such men as Abelard or St Bernard had to choose whether to be a knight, a monk, or a secular clerk.<sup>22</sup>

The choice must surely have been bewildering, especially given that there was not yet any clear ethos governing each of these ‘professional’ existences.<sup>23</sup> As Bynum has put it, ‘such awareness of choice [. . .] also entails anxiety – a need for limits, for knowing what is outside, other, different, as well as what is home and self’.<sup>24</sup> The sudden burgeoning of social possibilities for the individual (indeed, it could even be argued that such choice was instrumental in the definition of ‘the individual’ as such)<sup>25</sup> must be seen to be intimately related to the ‘rapid rise in individualism and humanism in the years from about 1080 to 1150’.<sup>26</sup> This, in turn, might be imputed to a growing sense of alienation or disorientation, a phenomenon quickly seized upon, from the tenth century onwards, by monastic reformers such as the Cistercians whose ethic occupies a

<sup>19</sup> As Morris has it, ‘France dominated the Renaissance of the twelfth century as Italy did that of the fifteenth’ (*Discovery of the Individual*, p. 48). See also Benson and Constable, *Renaissance and Renewal*. Further commentary on notions of individuality and subjectivity during this period can be found in Bérubé, *La Connaissance de l’individuel au moyen âge*; also, in a specifically literary context, see Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*.

<sup>20</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Bynum notes ‘trends that led individuals to a new sense of choosing where they were socially and culturally situated’ (*Metamorphosis*, pp. 26–7).

<sup>24</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> See Bynum, ‘Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?’, in *Jesus as Mother*, pp. 82–109. Bynum asserts here that ‘a new sense of self, of inner change and inner choice, is precipitated by the necessity to choose among roles, among groups’ (p. 107).

<sup>26</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, p. 7.

central place in the ideology of the *Queste*. Indeed, as Morris argues, 'it is not too much to say that [. . .] the monastic reformers offered to the aristocracy the one alternative way of life and system of values, and that through this conflict of roles some outstanding men found themselves as individuals'.<sup>27</sup>

Leaving aside for a moment the suggestion that individualism is the product of a certain conflict of interests, let us stress, along with Morris, the importance of the sense of alienation in this new society: 'the problem of alienation and order was central in the literature of the twelfth century, and the sense of alienation was expressed in one of the most powerful symbols which have been devised for it: pilgrimage'.<sup>28</sup> A new and very specifically militant form of pilgrimage became an option from the end of the eleventh century, that of the Crusade, first preached by Pope Urban II at Clermont in November 1095.<sup>29</sup> If, as I have already argued, the ideology of the Crusades might have been instrumental to the production of the Grail as a literary symbol, then it could now be suggested that what was initially intended as a means of overcoming the alienation of the new 'individual', a way of giving direction and focus to the otherwise disoriented subject, in fact generated a whole new discourse of anxiety and uncertainty, epitomized by the hysterical question *Deus quid vult?*, articulated in the period when the Crusades faltered and the subject began to see through the supposedly impenetrable and totalized system that produced him.

It could even be argued that the Crusades were instrumental in marking a transition from the subject's alienation to the subsequent (and specifically Lacanian) notion of separation. By exacerbating the subject's sense of alienation, the enterprise in fact impels that subject towards the hysterical questioning of the Other's desire, thereby allowing him to perceive that *the Other is also lacking*. In order to explore this hypothesis more fully, let us return to the notion of pilgrimage and its more militant manifestation in the Crusade, clearly of paramount significance to the ethos of the Grail Quest.

The impact of this new form of pilgrimage on the concept of chivalry has been variously interpreted. Jean Flori, for example, asserts that 'c'est la croisade [. . .] qui a transformé l'idéologie de la chevalerie' ['it was the crusade that transformed the ideology of chivalry'] and describes 'la formation d'une chevalerie chrétienne (celle des croisés) par Urbain II' ['the formation of a Christian chivalry (that of the crusaders) by Urban II'].<sup>30</sup> For St Bernard, writing in *De Laude Novae Militiae*, 'the crusader becomes virtually the exclu-

<sup>27</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, p. 32. Morris adds that 'the "converts", those who decided to make the break, provided the occasion for some of the early experiments in biography and autobiography', citing Peter Damiani, Odo of Cluny and Otloh of St Emmeram as examples.

<sup>28</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> For an account of the Pope's sermon, in which reference is made to the concept of 'knights of Christ', see Guibert de Nogent, *Gesta Dei per Francos*. Guibert acknowledges that this account reproduces only the 'spirit' of the sermon rather than a verbatim redaction.

<sup>30</sup> Flori, *Essor*, pp. 16 and 13.



sive type of chivalry'.<sup>31</sup> Note, however, Flori's contention that 'Bernard de Clairvaux ne valoris[e] nullement la chevalerie' ['Bernard of Clairvaux does not privilege chivalry in any way'], and his citing Ritter's opinion that the Church itself played little part in influencing the development of chivalry, even during the Crusades.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the First Crusade was launched at a time when the Church authorities wished to impose a degree of limitation, or certainly orientation, upon martial energies, whilst during the same period 'ecclesiastical legislation [. . .] sought to impose the Peace and the Truce of God'.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, as Richard Barber has concluded, 'the Papacy saw the crusades as a way of harnessing the concept of knighthood to spiritual ends'.<sup>34</sup>

As Keen has pointed out, there are 'strong crusading undertones in some versions of the Grail legend'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, historians of chivalry are quick to acknowledge the importance of Grail literature to their own enterprise. Thus Flori charts the development of chivalry against a chronology of the Grail romances:

Menacée de plus par la bourgeoisie, la chevalerie se ferme et se 'rêve' dans un idéal qui dépasse la vision chrétienne de la chevalerie de saint Bernard. Les étapes de cette exaltation mènent de Chrétien de Troyes à la *Queste del Saint Graal*, d'une chevalerie morale à une religion de chevalerie, accédant à la vie mystique par ses propres voies.<sup>36</sup>

[Threatened by the bourgeoisie, chivalry closes in on itself, and 'dreams' of itself as an ideal that surpasses St Bernard's vision of Christian chivalry. The stages of this exaltation lead from Chrétien de Troyes to the *Queste del Saint Graal*, from a chivalric ethic to a chivalric religion, reaching the mystical life along its own pathways.]

Keen also makes reference to the Grail romances, which he believes 'offer some of the most striking examples of the juxtaposition of the themes of bellicosity and piety in the whole of chivalrous literature'.<sup>37</sup> He adds, however, that 'the significance of the Grail legends lies not in any contrasting of worldly with religious chivalry, but in the way in which they carry us, through stories of martial adventure, on to something beyond', and it is against this point that I intend to set my own discussion of the *Queste*.<sup>38</sup> The Grail narratives, and especially the *Queste*, may attempt to assert that there is indeed such a 'beyond' but, as we have already seen, this very notion is produced as the fallout of the already

<sup>31</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Flori, *Essor*, pp. 340 and 24.

<sup>33</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 47. See Cowdrey, 'The Peace and the Truce of God'.

<sup>34</sup> Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry*, p. 254.

<sup>35</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 59. Keen draws particular attention to the opening sequences of the *Perlesvaus* (to which I return in Chapter 4) in this respect.

<sup>36</sup> Flori, *Essor*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>37</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>38</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 61.

specious distinction between supposedly opposed systems of chivalry in the text.

The link between Christianity and chivalry is a fundamental one, the origins of which nevertheless remain uncertain.<sup>39</sup> Many critical interpretations of the penetration of Christian doctrine into the ethos of chivalry are grounded in the notion of a beyond, the idea that mystical or ‘messianic’ knighthood sets its followers on the path to salvation. This is very much the position adopted by Keen, who asserts that ‘directed towards these twin ends [honour in the world, and eternal repose in paradise], chivalry becomes a Christian discipline, oriented more toward man’s highest goal, salvation’.<sup>40</sup> A necessary objection to this supposed chivalric trajectory towards transcendence is its reliance upon a goal that is fundamentally *exterior*, somehow alien, to chivalry as a social code or structure. We might usefully refer here to Lacan’s distinction between the aim and goal of the drive, and apply a similar logic to the mechanism of the Grail Quest as it is rehearsed in the *Queste*.<sup>41</sup> Žižek’s explanation of the distinction between aim and goal is particularly succinct:

The goal is the final destination, while the aim is what we intend to do, i.e. the way itself. Lacan’s point is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive’s ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal.<sup>42</sup>

This description of the drive could be applied to the circular, almost auto-telic, structure of the Grail Quest, more concerned with the replication of itself as its own aim than with the satisfaction of an identifiable goal. Such an assertion

<sup>39</sup> Flori analyses the history of the dubbing ceremony as a means of exploring the link between knighthood and religiosity. He contends that the ceremony evolved most markedly between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, situating ‘la christianisation des rites de la chevalerie aux alentours de l’an 1000’ [‘the Christianization of the rites of chivalry in around the year 1000’] (*Essor*, p. 13). Even so, Flori maintains that the dubbing ceremony right up to the thirteenth century ‘est religieux, mais ni symbolique ni liturgique’ [‘is religious, but neither symbolic nor liturgical’] (*Essor*, p. 11). It would appear that the Church’s infiltration into the structure of chivalry was given its first impetus by the disintegration of royal control and social order in France after the ninth century (see Cowdrey, ‘The Peace and the Truce of God’, pp. 42ff), as a result of which the newly emerging knightly class was expected by the Church to assume some of the protective duties that had previously been undertaken by the monarch (see Flori, ‘Chevalerie et liturgie’, p. 277). This shift from the monarchy to knighthood may help to account for the vestiges of the coronation ritual perceptible in the dubbing ceremony (see Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 73). Keen perceives Anglo-Saxon or Germanic roots to the link between the knight and the church (supported by Flori, *Essor*, p. 15), a suggestion that resonates in Barber’s observation that even as early as the eighth-century wars between the Carolingians and Saxons, ‘mass was said before battle, and saints’ relics accompanied the troops’ (*The Knight and Chivalry*, p. 249).

<sup>40</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> See Lacan, *SI1*, pp. 200–1.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *LA*, p. 5.

might, *prima facie*, seem absolutely contrary to the ethos of a Quest that ostensibly identifies a discrete object (the Grail) as its teleological goal. The crucial point, however, is that the Grail is not *external* to the Quest, but rather is always already a constitutive (insofar as it is fundamentally *absent*) part of it, in precisely the same way that celestial chivalry is not a beyond of earthly chivalry, but rather functions as the surplus *jouissance* that shows up the lack or inconsistency of the field of the signifier (i.e., chivalry).

The nexus between the concept of celestial chivalry and a discourse of the Grail again becomes apparent; the Grail is the abjected fallout that reveals the inadequacies or inconsistencies of its own discourse. The Grail's relationship to the Quest is thus exactly that of 'la chevalerie celestiel' to its 'terrien' counterpart. It may help to recall that, at the opening of the *Queste*, the Grail itself appears to the assembled knights of the Round Table, the direct consequence of which is the setting in motion not of a drive to *recover* it, but rather to obtain knowledge, in circumspect fashion, *about* it (as Gauvain declares, 'ne revendrai a cort por chose qui aviegne devant que je l'aie veu plus apertement qu'il ne m'a ci esté demostrez' ['I shall not return to court, no matter what befalls me, before I have seen it more openly than it has been displayed to me here'], *Q*, 16:21–3), an observation that essentially buttresses the suggestion that the Quest operates within a kind of hermeneutic circularity (i.e., is concerned with reproducing itself).

As Flori has insisted, the development of chivalry was principally towards a *closed* system, 'accédant à la vie mystique *par ses propres voies*' ['reaching the mystical life *along its own pathways*'],<sup>43</sup> This argument reflects Frappier's compelling assertion that, in the Grail romances, 'la religion n'a guère cessé d'être exaltée en fonction de la classe des chevaliers, et dans l'intention précise d'exalter cette classe elle-même' ['religion scarcely stopped being exalted in relation to the chivalric class, with the precise intention of exalting that very class itself'],<sup>44</sup> Frappier reasserts that 'la quête spirituelle paraîtra se dérouler dans un système clos' ['the spiritual quest will appear to unfold within a closed system'], observing how, through the figure of the hermit in the *Queste*, 'la chevalerie est tirée vers la religion, mais la religion est tirée elle aussi vers la chevalerie. On saisit de nouveau la tendance à les enfermer l'une et l'autre dans un système clos, ou très peu ouvert' ['chivalry is drawn towards religion, but religion is also drawn towards chivalry. We can again understand the tendency to place both within a system that is either closed, or barely open'],<sup>45</sup> This has been illustrated most clearly by the fact that the nascent fashion for 'knightly piety' was almost entirely divorced from the official ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>46</sup> Frappier comments on 'l'absence presque totale du clergé seculier' ['the almost

<sup>43</sup> Flori, *Essor*, p. 40; my italics.

<sup>44</sup> Frappier, 'Le Graal et la chevalerie', p. 165; cf. Flori, *Essor*, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> Frappier, 'Le Graal et la chevalerie', pp. 175 and 204.

<sup>46</sup> The term 'Ritterfrömmigkeit' was coined by Waas to designate this specifically chivalric piety (see Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 53–4).

complete absence of the secular clergy’] from the *Queste*, whilst Keen notes that, in the northern French *Ordene de chevalerie*, ‘the making of a knight is portrayed as an entirely secular rite which has no need for a priest or for the church’s altar for its accomplishment’.<sup>47</sup> An obvious point of comparison here is with the dubbing of Galahad in the *Queste*. Lancelot’s first encounter with his son takes place in ‘une abeie de nonains’ [‘an abbey of nuns’] (*Q*, 2:7), and Galahad himself is introduced by three nuns who bid Lancelot ‘que vos en façoiz chevalier’ [‘that you make him a knight’] (*Q*, 2:28). The dubbing ritual does indeed take place in the chapel (but probably only out of convenience, in order to satisfy the nuns’ request that ‘ce soit anuit ou demain’ [‘this should be tonight or tomorrow’], *Q*, 3:4), although the actual dubbing rites themselves have no requirement for the personnel or sacraments of the Church: ‘Cele nuit demora laienz Lancelot et fist toute la nuit veillier le vaslet au mostier, et a l’endemain a hore de prime le fist chevalier, et li chaüça l’un de ses esperons et Boorz l’autre’ [‘Lancelot spent the whole night there, watching over the young man in the monastery. Early the next morning he made him a knight, affixing one of his spurs, whilst Bors attached the other’] (*Q*, 3:6–9).

The key notion here is that which we have already seen advanced by Frappier, of chivalry operating on the margins of orthodoxy, not specifically within or against it, a position neatly paraphrased by Flori’s assessment of the *Queste*: ‘là, le clergé est absent: les valeurs religieuses sont toutes du côté de la chevalerie, qui développe sa mystique “en marge de l’Église, non contre elle”’ [‘there, the clergy is absent: religious values are all on the side of chivalry, which develops its mystique “on the margins of the Church, not against it”’].<sup>48</sup> So, the quasi-spiritual ascent of Perceval in Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal* (and similarly Galahad’s evangelism in the *Queste*) is effected entirely within the chivalric framework: ‘Perceval accomplit une ascension morale et politique qui, de rustre qu’il était, le fait devenir chevalier, puis chevalier courtois, puis enfin chevalier chrétien, mystique’ [‘Perceval achieves an ethical and political rise which, from the peasant that he was, sees him become a knight, then a courtly knight and finally a Christian, mystical knight’].<sup>49</sup> By operating as a closed system and ultimately becoming self-reflexive (always remaining within its own frames of reference) in its notion of transcendence, chivalry as it is presented in the *Queste* always already contains its own sacred – as such it does not have an object, but rather an abject, and never more so than when chivalry becomes celestial chivalry, and that object is the Grail.

In book 20 of the *Séminaire*, Lacan presents a diagram to explain the various objects that ‘fall out’ of the triangular relationship between the three orders of

<sup>47</sup> Frappier, ‘Le Graal et la chevalerie’, p. 199; Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Flori, *Essor*, pp. 39–40. It is interesting to note here that Keen points to the Church’s ambivalence to the entire tradition of the Grail, ‘leaving the whole matter in the limbo of legend’ (*Chivalry*, p. 61).

<sup>49</sup> Flori, *Essor*, p. 40. See also Maranini, ‘“Cavalleria” e “Cavalieri”’, and Le Rider, *Le Chevalier dans le ‘Conte du Graal’*.

the imaginary, the real and the symbolic. The matheme of separation,  $S(\mathbf{A})$ , representing the point at which the subject recognizes the inconsistency of the Other, is positioned as the point of fallout between the imaginary and the symbolic (that is, the remainder when the imaginary is imperfectly symbolized).<sup>50</sup> In what follows I shall explore how, in the *Queste*, separation can indeed be seen to result from the symbolization of the imaginary, and how this is to be located in an apparently paradoxical discourse of celestial chivalry, offered up as dream analyses by a plethora of hermits. The key question will be to assess the extent to which celestial chivalry can in fact be read as the (non-)signifier of enjoyment (*jouissance*), and to consider whether such a reading runs with or against the grain of the narrative ideology.

### From Alienation to Separation: Lancelor's Dream

The figure of Lancelot provides a particularly apposite case-study for observing the theoretical operations discussed thus far. As Pauline Matarasso points out, Lancelot is the character in the *Queste* who shows the most marked 'failure to measure up to his calling',<sup>51</sup> and as such most clearly reveals the failure in the interpellation of the subject that results, in the discourse of the University, from the dissimulation of the master signifier. In other words, it is through the character of Lancelot that the inability of Other's 'call to chivalry' to take account of the abject remainder of 'la chevalerie celestiel' is most abundantly clear; as Matarasso has it, 'Lancelot's relations with heaven are not of the happiest'.<sup>52</sup> The very opposite is of course true of Galahad, and I return to this point later.

Close analysis of an episode from the *Queste* will show how the fundamental operations of alienation and separation function in the action of sewing the subject to the signifier of chivalry. The passage in question concerns the second dream-vision experienced by Lancelot, following his failure to react to the appearance of the Grail in the ruined chapel, and the exegesis of that dream subsequently offered to him by a hermit (*Q*, 130:25–139:9).<sup>53</sup> In the dream Lancelot is rebuked, for the second time, for his failure to respond to the indices of 'la chevalerie celestiel', specifically the appearance of the Grail that he had witnessed at the ruined chapel. This dream, along with several other episodes in the *Queste*, reveals how chivalry appears, *prima facie*, to be a preordained,

<sup>50</sup> See Lacan, *S20*, pp. 87ff. For further elucidation of the diagram, see Žižek's commentaries in *LA* (Chapter 7, 'The Ideological *Sinthome*'); *The Plague of Fantasies*, pp. 175–6; and *SO*, pp. 182–5.

<sup>51</sup> Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 115.

<sup>52</sup> Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 168.

<sup>53</sup> For other critical interpretations of this dream, especially regarding its debt to scripture and biblical allegory, see Matarasso's comments in *The Redemption of Chivalry*, pp. 164–8. A short account, concentrating on the significance of numbers and other symbols in the dream, is also given by Jonin, 'Un Songe de Lancelot'. See also Marchello-Nizia, 'La Rhétorique des songes', p. 253.

closed structure in which the knight fails to negotiate his subjectivity: he is interpellated as the subject of chivalry, only to recognize in due course that his relation to this Other is one of radical alienation, resulting from ‘the fact that the subject is produced within the language that awaits him or her and is inscribed in the locus of the Other’.<sup>54</sup> This sense of alienation is succeeded by the subject’s recognition of the inconsistency of the Other, the fact that the Other is also lacking insofar as it too is desiring. This is a crucial realization that, as Žižek reminds us, ‘enables the subject to achieve a kind of “de-alienation” called by Lacan *separation*’.<sup>55</sup>

Arriving at a fork in the road at which stands a wooden cross, Lancelot lies down in order to rest. He quickly falls asleep, and begins to dream:

Quant il fu endormiz, si li fu avis que devant lui venoit uns hons toz avironnez d’estoilles; et avoit en sa compaignie set rois et deus chevaliers et avoit une coronne d’or en sa teste. (*Q*, 130:29–32)<sup>56</sup>

[When he had fallen asleep, it seemed to him that a man surrounded by stars appeared before him; this man was accompanied by seven kings and two knights, and he wore a golden crown upon his head.]

The dream continues with the assembled company praying to the Lord that he receive them, whereupon Lancelot looks to the heavens and sees the clouds begin to part, from where emerges ‘uns hom a grant compaignie d’anges’ [‘a man accompanied by many angels’] (*Q*, 131:8). This divine figure descends, blesses the assembly, and proceeds to address them: ‘Mes ostiex est apareilliez a vos toz: entrez en la joie qui ja ne faudra’ [‘My house is open to all: enter in the joy that will never end’] (*Q*, 131:10–11).<sup>57</sup> Yet this magnanimity does not extend to all of those present, and the godhead turns to ‘l’ainzné des deus chevaliers’ [‘the elder of the two knights’] and orders ‘Fui t’en de ci! car je ai perdu quan que je avoie mis en toi’ [‘Begone from here! I have lost everything that I put into you’] (*Q*, 131:13–14). At this the maligned knight departs from the assembly, begging for mercy, with the words of God ringing in his ears: ‘Se tu velz je t’amerai, se tu velz je te harrai’ [‘If you want me to love you, I shall; if you want me to hate you, I shall’] (*Q*, 131:18–19). The dream vision ends with the younger of the two knights being metamorphosed into a winged lion, circling over the assembled ranks of chivalry who marvel at the magnificence of his wings, and finally ascending to heaven.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Laurent, ‘Alienation and Separation’, p. 30.

<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 122.

<sup>56</sup> Matarasso sees the biblical vision of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28.10–22) behind this episode (*The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 164).

<sup>57</sup> ‘Celui qui leur parle paraît bien être le Christ, comme ses paroles paraissent avoir le ton de l’Évangile’ [‘The one who speaks to them certainly appears to be Christ, just as his words appear to have the tone of the Gospel’] (Jonin, ‘Un Songe de Lancelot’, p. 1056).

<sup>58</sup> See Jonin, ‘Un Songe de Lancelot’, for comment on the symbolic significance of the lion.

The narrative is very careful to demarcate the parameters of the events just recounted, asserting ‘Einsi avint a Lancelot qu’il vit ceste avision en son dormant’ [‘Thus it happened that Lancelot saw this vision whilst he slept’] (*Q*, 131:29–30). Yet the boundary between the dream and reality is in fact obscured, and the location of Lancelot’s subjectivity within these parameters is problematized. The seven kings and two knights assemble in front of ‘Lancelot’ in the dream: ‘Quant il estoient venuz devant Lancelot, si s’arestoient et aoroient la croiz et fesoient ilec lor afflictions’ [‘When they had come before Lancelot, they stopped and worshipped the cross, performing their adorations’] (*Q*, 130:32–131:1). But does the signifier ‘Lancelot’ here refer to the knight who has fallen asleep at the foot of the cross, to the dreamer or to the representation of Lancelot inside the dream? Similarly, the wooden cross is ambiguously located both inside and outside the dream.

These questions are further obfuscated by the exegesis of the dream that Lancelot obtains from a hermit some time later. In the course of this homily, it becomes clear that Lancelot was not only a passive viewer of the vision, but that he actively participated in it. Unbeknown to him, the entire vision pertained to his lineage, as the hermit explains: ‘Ha! Lancelot, la pois tu veoir la hautesce de ton lignage et de quel gent tu es descenduz’ [‘Ah, Lancelot! There you can see the nobility of your line, and those from whom you are descended’] (*Q*, 134:7–8). Moreover, it transpires that Lancelot is actually one of the figures represented in the dream, namely the elder of the two knights, the unfortunate who is chastised by the divine voice. Again, explanation falls to the hermit: ‘Or covient que je te die qui sont li dui chevalier qui erent en lor compaignie. Li ainznz de cels qui les sivoit, ce est a dire qui ert descenduz d’els, *ce est tu*: car tu issiz dou roi Ban qui estoit li darreains de ces set rois’ [‘It is right that I should tell you who the two knights in their company were. The elder of those who came after them, that is to say who was descended from them, *that is you*: for you were born of King Ban, who was the last of those seven kings’] (*Q*, 136:30–3; my italics). In the dream then, ‘Lancelot’ is produced as a split subject; he is rendered the object of his own gaze. This split subjectivity becomes ever clearer when we consider the polyvalency of the second person pronoun, ‘tu’, as employed in the hermit’s discourse. For example:

Quant il avoit parlé a l’ainzné des deus chevaliers et il li avoit dites les paroles dont tu te remembres bien, que tu doiz bien prendre sus toi come celes qui furent dites de toi et por toi, car tu es senefiez a celui cui eles estoient dites, il venoit au juene [*sic*] chevalier [etc.]. (*Q*, 137:16–20)

[When he had spoken to the elder of the two knights, and had uttered the words that you so clearly recall, and that you must take upon yourself as being addressed to you and for you, for you are signified by the one to whom they were spoken, he then came to the younger knight . . . ]

Within the space of four lines here we have one reflexive, three disjunctive and a further three subjective uses of the second person pronoun, all of which serve



to muddy the distinction between Lancelot as he is addressed by the hermit ('tu doiz', 'tu es'), Lancelot as the one who experienced the vision ('tu te remembres') and Lancelot represented by the elder knight within the dream ('tu es senefiez').

Further evidence of Lancelot's split subjectivity is provided by the sequence of narrative events themselves, not only in the way in which these are glossed by the hermit. For instance, once Lancelot has awoken from his vision and prayed for salvation, he recommences his journey and soon encounters a knight who, it transpires, is the former Wounded Knight whose cure by the Grail Lancelot had witnessed at the ruined chapel.<sup>59</sup> Once restored to health, and having rebuked Lancelot for his failure to acknowledge the presence of the Holy Vessel, the knight had appalled himself in Lancelot's armour, and departed on Lancelot's horse in order to join the Quest (*Q*, 60:3–5). As a result of these actions, it might be contended that this knight in fact becomes Lancelot's alter ego. Indeed, Matarasso asserts that he 'serves as a mirror-image, reflecting Lancelot, not as he is, but as he should be acting'.<sup>60</sup>

The double assumes the function of Lancelot's ideal ego image, by means of which he can appear likeable to himself, as indeed is implied in Matarasso's observation that 'Lancelot's victory over his erstwhile better, as well as the magnanimity he shows him (far from depriving him of his mount he thoughtfully ties it to a tree for future reference), serve to measure the progress he has made'.<sup>61</sup> And yet this moment of imaginary identification, allowing the subject to achieve self-identity through alienation, is itself an instance of *méconnaissance*, as Žižek elucidates: 'this imaginary self-experience is for the subject the way to misrecognize his radical dependence on the big Other, on the symbolic order as his decentred cause'.<sup>62</sup> The point is, of course, as Žižek continues, that 'imaginary identification is always identification *on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*' – that which is seen by the Other and is in me more than myself – so that, in the final analysis, 'it is the symbolic identification (the point from which we are observed) which dominates and determines the image, the imaginary form in which we appear likeable to ourselves'.<sup>63</sup>

The point in the Other to which Lancelot is responding in this instance of ostensibly imaginary identification is precisely that of the signifier 'chivalry'. He sees himself from the position in which he appears likeable to himself, that is, as the knight who successfully responded at the Grail chapel and as such comes to represent his ego-ideal. Thus what is being implied by the dream vision is that Lancelot is alienated in the Other, since he has failed to respond to the interpellation of celestial chivalry, but is still represented within that signifying chain by one signifier for another. This is the very cause of alienation, the

<sup>59</sup> Lancelot's Grail vision at the ruined chapel will return to our attention in Chapter 4.

<sup>60</sup> Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 120.

<sup>61</sup> Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 126.

<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 104.

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *SO*, pp. 106 and 108.

fact that ‘at the very moment at which the subject (\$) identifies with a signifier, he is represented by one signifier for another (S1 → S2)’.<sup>64</sup> Or, in the words of Lacan, alienation is the result of ‘la réalisation du sujet [de] sa dépendance signifiante au lieu de l’Autre’ [‘the subject’s recognition that his signification/meaning depends on the place of the Other’].<sup>65</sup> We recall that Lancelot’s interpellation is fundamentally misrecognized by him, and it falls to the hermit to explain that the vision pertained to Lancelot’s own lineage. In the dream, then, Lancelot is precisely a decentred subject.

This failed interpellation as the cause of alienation is played out much more clearly a few pages later in the *Queste*, on the occasion of the symbolic tournament in which black knights are pitched against white, allegorizing the struggle between good and evil. As an anchoress explains to the hapless Lancelot, even those participating in the tournament did not fully understand its significance: ‘car assez i avoit greignor senefiance qu’il meismes n’i entendoient’ [‘for it had much greater significance than they themselves understood’] (*Q*, 143:16–17). Compared to Galahad’s startled reaction on being made privy to the meaning of the adventure of the shield early on in the narrative (‘Et Galaad dit que molt i a greignor senefiance que il ne cuidoit’ [‘Galahad said that it had much greater significant than he had thought’], *Q*, 40:1–2), we see how both of these instances clearly imply that full meaning is never available to the subject’s cognition, and that there must always remain an excess of meaning that is wholly contingent on the Other. Read through the discourse of the University, this is structurally expressed by the hidden truth of the master signifier, and also by the fact that the position of the other in this discourse, the location at which the message of the agent (S2) is received, is occupied by the *a*. The intermediary role of the hermit or anchoress in the examples cited above is crucial, and we begin to perceive how the position assumed by that intermediary in this discourse is that of the other, the *a*.

However, to construe the interpellation of chivalry as the cause of symbolic alienation is itself nothing if not a misrecognition. Lancelot’s dream-vision in fact contains a second *point de capiton* (besides that of chivalry itself) that restructures the meaning of its signifying elements, or rather, that marks the subject’s move from alienation towards separation. The divine voice’s parting words to Lancelot, as the latter is instructed to depart from the assembly, are extremely revealing: ‘Se tu velz je t’amerai, se tu velz je te harrai’ [‘If you want me to love you, I shall; if you want me to hate you, I shall’] (*Q*, 131:18–19). The use of anaphora here shifts emphasis sharply away from the absolute impenetrability of the Other, and points instead to the inconsistency of the Other’s discourse; the repeated ‘Se tu velz’ betrays a wavering in the monologic message that the subject expects to receive from the Other. In Lacan’s words, ‘un manque est, par le sujet, rencontré dans l’Autre, dans l’intimation même

<sup>64</sup> Laurent, ‘Alienation and Separation’, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Lacan, *SI*, p. 230.

que lui fait l'Autre par son discours' ['the subject finds a lack in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him through its discourse'].<sup>66</sup>

What we are dealing with here is exactly the point S(A) at which the subject's relationship to the Other becomes defined by separation rather than alienation. As Žižek has it, "it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of "de-alienation" called by Lacan *separation* [. . .] the Other itself "hasn't got it", hasn't got the final answer – that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other".<sup>67</sup> We can now see how, in the discourse of the University, the split subject (\$) is produced by the failure of communication between the agent and the other (S2 → *a*). Or, in other words, the governing system of knowledge fundamentally fails to capture the *a*, the excess of its own discourse. Mapped on to the discursive operation of the *Queste*, that *a* would be precisely the beyond, the supposed spiritual ingredient of celestial chivalry that always remains outside the parameters of symbolic knowledge.

This anxiety-inducing notion of the desire of the Other is formulated by Lacan as the famous question 'Che vuoi?' Žižek characterizes this opening as 'the persistence of a gap between utterance and its enunciation', by means of which the subject recognizes the desire of the Other: 'you're saying this, but what do you want to tell me with it, through it?'<sup>68</sup> Thus the 'Che vuoi?' is precisely a rendition of the hysterical question, 'an articulation of the incapacity of the subject to fulfil the symbolic identification [which] opens the gap of what is "in the subject more than the subject", of the *object in subject* which resists interpellation'.<sup>69</sup> The subject infers that the message he receives from the Other has a content or meaning other than that which is immediately apparent, and that is troubled by the *a* (the object in subject), the site at which the message is processed. The hysterical question itself is nothing other than the excess of the process of *capitonnage* (the suturing operation of the *points de capiton*) whereby meaning is supposedly fixed; as such the 'Che vuoi?' gestures towards the field of *jouissance*. This remainder of *jouissance* in the hysterical question will require fuller attention in the following chapter, but we can immediately see how the discourse of the University is overturned when, at the point of separation, and with the introduction of the question of the Other's desire, the discourse of the Hysteric gives agency to the very split in the subject produced by the University.<sup>70</sup>

The hysterical question is never answered, rather it is filled out or temporarily plugged by the fantasy, a structure that maintains the gap between subject

<sup>66</sup> Lacan, *SI*, p. 239.

<sup>67</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 122.

<sup>68</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 111. Or, in Lacan's words, 'Que me veut-il?' ['What does he want from me?'] (*É*, p. 815)

<sup>69</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 113.

<sup>70</sup> In the discourse of the Hysteric, the top level of the *matheme* is occupied by the terms \$ and S1, which are relegated to the lower level in the discourse of the University.

and object (*a*, the desire of the Other) whilst appearing to elide that very distance: 'fantasy is an answer to this "*Che vuoi?*"; it is an attempt to fill out the gap of the question with an answer'.<sup>71</sup> The discourse of the University already inserts a bar between the subject and the object, between  $\$$  and *a*, which is maintained (but reversed) in the discourse of the Hysteric. Both discourses rely on fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) to maintain and plug the gap between subject and object. The way in which this fantasy is constructed in the *Queste* goes a long way towards explaining the role and function of the hermits who play such a vital role in the interpretation of the Quest knights' dreams and other visionary experiences.<sup>72</sup>

### The Hermit-Saint as Fantasy Screen

The hermit in Arthurian romance has been described by Kennedy as having a dual role, either as a 'utility-figure' with a limited and practical narrative function, or else as a 'didactic figure' who is either the 'exponent of Christian Chivalry' or 'the critic of Holy Church'.<sup>73</sup> It would seem that this double function in some ways anticipates the distinction between priest and saint that Žižek uses to illustrate the manner in which *objet a* might come to be embodied in a religious figure:

The idea of the *saint* [. . .] is the exact opposite of the *priest* in service of the Holy. The priest is a 'functionary of the Holy'; there is no Holy without its officials, without the bureaucratic machinery supporting it, organizing its ritual [. . .] The saint, on the contrary, occupies the place of *objet petit a*, of pure object, of somebody undergoing radical subjective destitution. He enacts no ritual, he conjures nothing, he just persists in his inert presence.<sup>74</sup>

If the saint is thus aligned with the function of the *a*, the priest would be the representative of S2, the absolute embodiment of the System in all its impersonal functionality.<sup>75</sup> Although the Arthurian anchorite is never reducible to the

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 114.

<sup>72</sup> Kennedy asserts that it is in the *Queste* that the hermit 'reaches the summit of his fortunes in Arthurian romance' ('The Hermit's Role', p. 71). See also Frappier, 'Le Graal et la chevalerie'. For a survey of scholarship on the figure of the hermit in Old French literature, see Deschaux, 'Le Personnage de l'ermite'.

<sup>73</sup> Kennedy, 'The Hermit's Role', pp. 55, 58 and 76. In Kennedy's analysis, the didactic function of the hermit changes over the course of time: he is deemed to be largely an exponent of Christian chivalry until the early decades of the thirteenth century, after which his role evolves into that of a critic of Holy Church. It is interesting to note that Kennedy explicitly takes the completion of the Vulgate Cycle (in around 1230) as the point at which this evolution in the hermit's role took place, and as such I suggest that we might see aspects of both didactic functions at work here in the *Queste*.

<sup>74</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 116.

<sup>75</sup> As Bracher puts it, 'bureaucracy is perhaps the purest form of the discourse of the University' ('Psychological and Social Functions', p. 115).

‘inert presence’ of Žižek’s saint, it is surely not coincidental that Kennedy should choose to refer to his object of study as the ‘Hermit-Saint’. It would indeed seem that the functionality of the priest and the pure-object status of the saint are conflated in this figure,<sup>76</sup> who thus represents the top level of the discourse of the University, at which the message is imperfectly communicated:  $S_2 \rightarrow a$ .

The vital role of the hermit, like that of fantasy, is to domesticate or gentrify the terrifying real of unsymbolized *jouissance*, creating a screen to mask the inconsistency of the Other.<sup>77</sup> This is precisely what is at work in the dream-exegeses that seek to present the hermit as the mouthpiece of the Other, and thereby to sustain the fractured discourse of ‘la chevalerie celestiel’. Indeed, the very paradox of a ‘discourse of *jouissance*’ aptly demonstrates the manner in which the hermit attempts to neutralize (or, indeed, naturalize) the abject surplus of ‘la chevalerie celestiel’ through the construction of a (discursive) fantasy-screen.

The many characters in the *Queste* who are party to this narrative’s particular species of allegorical dream-vision are, without exception, beset by a suspicion that the full meaning of their experience is not immediately available to them (a feeling of alienation in the Other), and that full significance can be revealed only by hermitic exegesis. Typical of this is a dialogue between Gauvain and Hector, betraying their confusion on awaking from their respective hallucinations:

Avez vos entendue ceste parole? – ‘Certes, sire, fet il, nanil, et si l’ai je bien oïe. – A non Dieu, fet messire Gauvains, nos avons anuit tant veu en dormant et en veillant que li mielz que je i sache a nostres oes, si est que nos aillons quierre aucun hermite, aucun preudome qui nos die la senefiance de noz songes et la senefiance de ce que nos avons oï. (*Q*, 151:10–16)

[‘Did you understand those words?’ ‘Indeed I did not, sir,’ said Hector, ‘even though I heard them clearly.’ ‘In God’s name,’ said Sir Gauvain, ‘we have seen such things whilst sleeping and waking this evening that the best thing for us to do, it seems to me, is to seek out a hermit or a man of God who might tell us the meaning of our dreams and of what we have heard.’]

The role of the hermitic homily sought by the knights of the Quest is clearly akin to that of the Lacanian *objet a*. As such, the hermit occupies the place of the other in the discourse of the University, the locus at which the porous message of the agent ( $S_2$ ) is processed and filled out with a meaningful content. The hermit creates a fantasy that operates as the screen of the desire of the Other, and as such functions as a mask for the lack in the Other, the fact that the

<sup>76</sup> As Kennedy asserts, ‘the Hermit-Saint is one of the most characteristic, recurrent and popular figures in mediaeval French literature’ (‘The Hermit’s Role’, p. 54).

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Žižek, *SO*, p. 123.

Other is itself barred.<sup>78</sup> The assertion that the hermit is to be identified with the object-cause of desire would seem to be reinforced by the notion that he frequently represents, for the knight-subject, something *in me more than myself*, as is abundantly clear in Perceval's dealings with his hermit-mentors in the *Queste*: 'Ha! Perceval, fet li preudons, je vos conois moult mielz que vos ne cuidiez' ['"Ah, Perceval!" said the holy man, "I know you much better than you think"'] (*Q*, 100:22–3, and again 105:27).<sup>79</sup> We recall also that the hermit who explains Lancelot's dream-vision in some respects grants Lancelot his identity when he designates him as the character in the dream (*Q*, 136:32).

As was briefly outlined above, the *objet a* is most deeply embedded into the signifier in the moment of the hysterical question, with which the subject voices doubt over his symbolic mandate. Although the figure of the hermit attempts to suture the cut between subject and object with his veil of fantasy, the gap between the two that this fantasy necessarily presumes also serves to open up the question of the desire of the Other, that is, the subject's *separation* from the Other pushing him towards a hysterical questioning: 'il me dit ça, mais qu'est-ce qu'il veut?' ['he is saying this to me, but what does he want?'].<sup>80</sup> The moment in the *Queste* when such an interrogation of the Other's desire is most forcefully articulated comes when, after twenty-four days, Lancelot awakens from his state of enrapt catalepsy at Corbenic, following his encounter with the Grail: 'Ha! Diex, por quoi m'aviz vos si tost esveillé? Tant je estoie ore plus aise que je ne seré hui mes!' ['Ah God! Why have you woken me so soon? I was in such a state of bliss that I shall never find again!'] (*Q*, 257:31–3). This desperate question, echoing Christ's demand to know wherefore he is forsaken, confirms Lancelot as the archetypal hysterical subject who never succeeds in closing the gap of the desire of the Other and thereby eliminating the 'Che vuoi?'

This of course betrays the inherent instability, the defining paradox, of the discourse of the University: the split produced by the agency of a system of knowledge (S2) in the subject (\$) pushes that subject towards separation from the Other. It is at this moment of separation that the subject perceives the inconsistency, the mendacity, of the agent behind the discourse by which he is

<sup>78</sup> Jonin expresses dissatisfaction with the role of the hermit, asserting that his homily is 'insuffisante et imparfaite' ['insufficient and imperfect'] ('Un Songe de Lancelot', p. 1060), and that as such 'l'ermite reste à la surface de l'explication' ['the hermit remains at the surface-level of explanation'] (p. 1058). This seems entirely conversant with my own designation of the hermit as a mask or screen, and yet I reject Jonin's concession, glossing over the flaws he identifies in the hermit's discourse, that '[l'ermite] comprend qu'il ne doit pas tout dire, tout expliquer, tout justifier' ['the hermit understands that he must not say everything, explain everything, justify everything'] (p. 1061). Simply substituting 'ne peut' ['cannot'] for 'ne doit' ['must not'] here would present a more perspicacious conclusion.

<sup>79</sup> The same dynamic is already at work in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, where Perceval is chastised by his cousin for his failure at the Grail castle: 'Je te connois mix que tu moi, / Que tu ne sez qui je me sui' ['I know you better than you know me, for you do not know who I am'] (*CG*, 3596–7).

<sup>80</sup> Lacan, *SI1*, p. 239.

subjectivized, finally turning the hegemony of knowledge into the privileged articulation of the split subject in the discourse of the Hysteric, to which the following chapter will turn.

### Galahad in Transference

Contrasting directly with Lancelot's hysteria is the certainty of the Perfect Knight, Galahad, who never displays the slightest doubting of his symbolic mandate as 'li mieldres chevaliers dou monde' ['the best knight in the world'] (*Q*, 12:31–2), and therefore appears to reassert the unchallenged hegemony of S2 as the agent of discourse. Galahad is presented by the narrative as the converse of Lancelot's failed interpellation and, to follow through Žižek's assessment of Lacan, he must therefore be seen to be in transference:

Transference is the obverse of the staying behind of the signified with respect to the stream of the signifiers; it consists of the illusion that the meaning of a certain element (which was retroactively fixed by the intervention of the master-signifier) was present in it from the very beginning as its immanent essence.<sup>81</sup>

Galahad is deemed, of course, to be *always already* the Perfect Knight; he is awaited by the narrative's discourse as its lack/excess *a*, and this is never more evident than in his appellation as the Desired Knight, 'le Chevalier Desirré' (*Q*, 7:25–6). It is, however, crucial to retain the crux of Žižek's analysis: this apparently essential meaning is nothing but an illusion supporting the tyranny of the System, the absolute hegemony of symbolic knowledge that confirms the cynicism of the *Queste*, if not at the level of the characters themselves (for Galahad is never cynical), then certainly at the level of the narrative as encountered by the reader. These issues might be more clearly grasped with reference to a number of inscriptions that occur in the opening episodes of the *Queste*, especially those carved upon the Perilous Seat at Camelot, which are crucial in establishing the legitimacy of Galahad's *always already*.

Examining the seats of the Round Table, Lancelot and his two cousins encounter a graffito on the 'Siege Perilleux' ['Perilous Seat'] (*Q*, 4:6–7), composed of 'lettres qui i avoient novelement esté escrites' ['letters that had been freshly traced there'] (*Q*, 4:7–8), and that reads '.CCCC. ANZ ET .LIIII. SONT ACOMPLI EMPRÉS LA PASSION JHESUCRIST; ET AU JOR DE LA PENTECOUSTE DOIT CIST SIEGES TROVER SON MESTRE' ['Four hundred and fifty-four years have passed since the passion of Christ; on the day of Pentecost this seat must find its master'] (*Q*, 4:9–11). Deeming this to be a 'merveilleuse aventure' ['marvellous adventure'] (*Q*, 4:12), the cousins decide that they should conceal the inscription for the time being; as Lancelot argues 'je voldroie bien que nus

<sup>81</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 102.



ne veist mes hui ces lettres devant que cil sera venuz qui ceste aventure doit escheoir' ['I do not want anyone to see this inscription before the one to whom this adventure must befall has arrived'] (*Q*, 4:17–19). Accordingly, 'si font aporter un drap de soie et le metent ou siege por covrir les lettres' ['they bring a silk sheet and place it over the seat to cover the inscription'] (*Q*, 4:20–1). What seems particularly curious about this episode, what is indeed 'merveilleuse' about it, is the sense of time being out of joint. That the letters have been freshly traced upon the seat would seem to imply that meaning is somehow struggling to keep up with the forward trajectory of the narrative; the gloss is, quite literally, still wet. And yet the characters' anxious reaction to discovering the inscription seems to suggest, on the contrary, that meaning has arrived too soon; it is, we might say, *avant la lettre*.<sup>82</sup> Whether meaning is running too early or too late, what is clearly placed in question here is the authority of the system of knowledge as perceived by the subject. There is a sense in which the subject can, indeed must, manipulate the very parameters that appear, at first glance, to restrain that subject within a non-negotiable, intransigent framework that always already awaits his arrival. Even when knowledge appears at its most impersonal absolute, as with the pre-(in)scriptions in the *Queste*, it still appears that agency rests, in part at least, with the subject.

Shortly after this first encounter, another equally graphic adventure awaits the knights of the Round Table. A large stone in which a sword is embedded has miraculously floated down the river to Camelot, where it comes to rest beneath the castle. Upon the hilt of this sword is carved a proscription: 'JA NUS NE M'OSTERA DE CI, SE CIL NON A CUI COSTÉ JE DOI PENDRE. ET CIL SERA LI MIELDRES CHEVALIERS DEL MONDE' ['None shall extract me from here, except the one at whose side I must hang. And this shall be the best knight in the world'] (*Q*, 5:23–5). What we should now be able to appreciate is the manner in which meaning that is deemed to be innate or essential is in fact quite clearly constructed. It should come as no surprise when, with the court reinstalled in the castle following their excursion to the riverbank, Lancelot ceremoniously unveils the Perilous Seat, to reveal the *point de capiton* itself, whereby the meaning of the preceding inscriptions is fixed: 'CI EST LI SIEGES GALAAD' ['This is Galahad's seat'] (*Q*, 8:12–13). As Žižek contends, 'naming is necessary but it is, so to speak, necessary afterwards, retroactively, once we are already "in it"'.<sup>83</sup> The fixing of meaning is retroactive, since the *point de capiton* intersects the vector of the signifier at a point posterior to that at which meaning is located on the same vector.<sup>84</sup> As Lacan writes: 'ce point de capiton,

<sup>82</sup> Griffin's *The Object and the Cause* makes fascinating points regarding the relationship between chronology and meaning in the Vulgate Cycle. Her analyses are founded on Lacan's essay 'Le temps logique et l'assertion de certitude anticipée' (*É*, pp. 197–213) and stress the importance of the future perfect tense, such as is employed in the inscriptions on the Perilous Seat (e.g., 'cil sera venuz').

<sup>83</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 95.

<sup>84</sup> For a useful visualization of these vectors, see Lacan's graphs of desire in the essay

trouvez-en la fonction diachronique dans la phrase, pour autant qu'elle ne boucle sa signification qu'avec son dernier terme, chaque terme étant anticipé dans la construction des autres, et inversement scellant leur sens par son effet rétroactif' ['you can see the diachronic function of the *point de capiton* in that very phrase itself, insofar as the meaning is only fixed by its final term, each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, their meaning inversely cemented by the retroactive effect'].<sup>85</sup> Or, in the Žižekian gloss, 'the vector of the subjective intention quilts the vector of the signifier's chain backwards', so that 'the effect of meaning is always produced backwards, *après coup*'.<sup>86</sup>

I wish to return, finally, to the designation of Galahad as 'li mielredres chevaliers dou monde', in order to consider how this tag might be read in the light of Kripke's notion of the 'rigid designator', a concept 'Lacanianized' by Žižek in Chapter 3 of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where he investigates the contrasting descriptivist and antidescriptivist responses to the question 'how do names refer to the objects they denote?'.<sup>87</sup> The thesis of antidescriptivist philosophy is that objects are nominated through an act of 'primary baptism', so that 'the link [between object and name] holds even if the original identifying description proves false'.<sup>88</sup> In this way, antidescriptivism is interested in 'the external causal link, the way a word has been transmitted from subject to subject in a chain of tradition'.<sup>89</sup> We are offered a signal instance of this very phenomenon in the *Queste*, in the way in which the symbolic mandate of 'li mielredres chevaliers dou monde' is inherited by Galahad from his father. Lancelot is deprived of the honour following the adventure of the sword in the stone when, significantly, he did not exactly fail the test, but rather refused to put his hand to it. The following day, a maiden arrives at court in order to convey bad news to the newly demoted Lancelot:

Vos estiez hier matin li mielredres chevaliers dou monde; et qui lors vos apelast Lancelot le meillor chevalier de toz, il deist voir: car alors l'estiez vos. Mes qui ore le droit, len le devoit tenir a mençongier: car mellior i a de vos, et bien est provee chose par l'aventure de ceste espee *a quoi vos n'osastes metre la main*. Et ce est li changemenz et li muemenz de vostre non, dont je vos ai fet remembrance por ce que des ore mes ne cuidiez que vos soiez li mielredres chevaliers dou monde. (*Q*, 12:31–13:6; my italics)

[Yesterday morning you were the best knight in the world; and whoever had called you Lancelot, the best of all knights, would have spoken the truth, for it was so. But whoever should say that now would be held as a liar: for you have

'Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient freudien' (*É*, pp. 793–827). Žižek works through Lacan's theory in *SO*; further commentary on the graphs is provided by Bowie, *Lacan*, pp. 188–9.

<sup>85</sup> Lacan, *É*, p. 805.

<sup>86</sup> Žižek *SO*, p. 101.

<sup>87</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 89.

<sup>88</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 90. See also Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 83–5.

<sup>89</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 90.

been surpassed, and this is proven by the adventure of the sword, *to which you did not dare put your hand*. And this caused the change and transformation of your name, to which I draw your attention so that henceforth you no longer believe yourself to be the best knight in the world.]

The crucial point here seems to be the fact that Lancelot did not fail the test as such, and thereby negate his identity as ‘li mioldres chevaliers dou monde’ by validating the inscription on the sword.<sup>90</sup> Rather, the point is precisely that made by Žižek, that ‘naming itself retroactively constitutes its reference’.<sup>91</sup>

The problem we are facing here is whether the name ‘li mioldres chevaliers dou monde’ can be conceived of as a ‘rigid designator’. Does it, in Žižek’s formulation, denote ‘the same object in all possible worlds, in all counterfactual situations’?<sup>92</sup> The answer of the text would seem to be affirmative, since the title of the best knight in the world is properly that of Galahad even when, in a ‘counterfactual situation’, it appears to designate Lancelot; but this of course overlooks the retroactive effect of naming. A way out of this logical impasse is offered by the maiden who censures Lancelot, in her assertion that ‘mellior i a de vos’ (*Q*, 13:2). This does not only convey the comparative notion that ‘there is one better than you’, but the particle ‘de’ also has a genitive inflection suggesting the idea that the better knight is precisely *what is in Lancelot more than Lancelot* – nothing less than the *objet a*. We can now understand Žižek’s assertion that ‘the “rigid designator” aims [. . .] at the impossible-real kernel, at what is “in an object more than the object”, at this surplus produced by the signifying operation’.<sup>93</sup> Galahad, it might be said, is what is in Lancelot more than Lancelot. Or, as the son himself explicitly declares, ‘vos estes comencement de moi’ [‘you are my beginning’] (*Q*, 250:24).<sup>94</sup>

We might ultimately assert then that the project of deconstructing the notion of celestial chivalry in the *Queste* has in some ways been akin to the philosophical strategy of antidescriptivism since, as Žižek argues, ‘the main achievement

<sup>90</sup> For further comment on the ambiguities inherent in the sobriquet ‘li mioldres chevaliers dou monde’, especially as it is applied to eponymous hero of the prose *Lancelot*, see Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*, pp. 60–76.

<sup>91</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 95.

<sup>92</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 94.

<sup>93</sup> Žižek *SO*, p. 97. The issue here is, Žižek argues, ‘the problem of the fulfilment of desire’, since ‘when we encounter in reality an object which has all the properties of the fantasized object of desire, we are nevertheless somewhat disappointed; we experience a certain “this is not it”; it becomes evident that the finally found real object is not the reference of desire even though it possesses all the required properties’ (*SO*, pp. 91–2).

<sup>94</sup> Comparison might be made here with a strikingly similar example from the *Mort Artu*, where Lancelot’s tomb bears the following epitaph: ‘CI GIST LI CORS GALEHOLT, LE SEGNOR DES LOINTAINES ILLES, ET AVEC LUI REPOSE LANCELOS DEL LAC QUI FU LI MIEUDRES CHEVALIERS QUI ONQUES ENTRAST EL ROIAUME DE LOGRES, FORS SEULEMENT GALAAD SON FILL’ [‘Here lies the body of Galeholt, lord of the Distant Isles, and with him lies Lancelot of the Lake, who was the best knight ever to enter the Kingdom of Logres, except for his son Galahad’] (*Mort*, ed. Frappier, §203:14–19).

of antidescriptivism is to enable us to conceive *objet a* as the real-impossible correlative of the “rigid designator” – that is, of the *point de capiton* as “pure” signifier.<sup>95</sup> The way in which the *point de capiton* performs its function of quilting the field of meaning is through an inversion, illustrated by Žižek with the example of Coca-Cola:

The point is not that Coca-Cola ‘connotes’ a certain ideological experience-vision of America [. . .]; the point is that this vision of America itself achieves its identity by identifying itself with the signifier ‘Coke’ – ‘America, this is Coke’ could be the wording of an imbecile publicity device.<sup>96</sup>

If, *mutatis mutandis*, we substitute ‘celestial chivalry’ for ‘Coca-Cola’ here, and ‘knighthood’ for ‘America’, we obtain a succinct condensation of my reading of the *Queste*. Thus the point is not that celestial chivalry ‘connotes’ a certain ideological experience-vision of knight-hood; the point is that this vision of knight-hood itself achieves its identity by identifying itself with the signifier ‘celestial chivalry’ – ‘Knight-hood, this is celestial chivalry’ could be the hermit’s cry.

However, the designation of celestial chivalry as the *point de capiton* that structures the meaning of all the other elements in the text is precisely an ideological–political strategy adopted by the narrative. And yet the process of interpellation, the *capitonage*, inevitably has its fallout, the surplus *objet a* which, to extend Žižek’s Coke analogy and ‘according to the Lacanian formula, could suddenly change into excrement, into undrinkable mud’.<sup>97</sup> The sublime object of the *Queste*’s celestial chivalry, that which occupies the locus of the abject fallout of interpellation, is nothing other than the Grail itself which, recalling Žižek’s astute formulation, finally reveals itself to be nothing but a piece of shit.

<sup>95</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 95.

<sup>96</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 96.

<sup>97</sup> Žižek, *SO*, p. 96.

*Remissio Peccatorum:*  
Relocating the Sins of the Grail Hero

Un sujet, comme tel, n'a pas grand-chose à faire  
avec la jouissance<sup>1</sup> Lacan, *S20*

Shortly before visiting the Grail castle in Branch VIII of the *Perlesvaus*, Lancelot is urged by a hermit to confess his sins; the passage is closely echoed in the *Queste*, where Lancelot is exhorted to repent the sins that have been revealed in his abortive encounter with the Grail at the ruined chapel (*P*, 3647–95; *Q*, 65:6–67:9). This chapter will take these parallel episodes as the point of departure from which to explore the complex relationship between sin and the Grail in the medieval romances, and the consequences of this relationship for the Grail hero in these texts. By focusing on the location of sin, or rather the impossibility of its ever being adequately locatable (and therefore fully policeable), I shall examine some of the practical methods available for handling sin in medieval society, in juxtaposition to some more theoretical approaches to the concept of sin from modern perspectives such as that of Kristeva.<sup>2</sup> Exploration of the manner in which the theory and practice of sin are represented in the Grail romances will demonstrate that the concept of sin might be conceived of as a religious thematization of the abject, as the condition of possibility of the very structures that seek to displace and finally to expunge it – most notably the act of confession. The fundamentally corporeal or sexual characteristic of sin that emerges from the Grail romances, or more exactly from Lancelot's adulterous transgressions in these texts, must be flagged from the outset. This crucial nexus between sin and the sexualized body, I will suggest, invites a reading through the theoretical optic of a discourse of hysteria, in which the central practice of confession no longer has the sole purpose of exposing the sinner's iniquity through self denunciation, but might also refocus attention on the presentation of the sinner's body as a site of resistance, a locus at which the subject refuses to accept alienation in the Other.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'A subject, as such, does not have much to do with enjoyment.'

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, especially pp. 135–54.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault famously discusses the relationship between sex and confession in the first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, describing 'le rite singulier de la confession obligatoire et exhaustive, qui fut dans l'Occident Chrétien la première technique pour produire la vérité du sexe' ['the singular ritual of obligatory and exhaustive confession, which

### Showing and Telling the Sins of the Flesh

In spite of the vexed issues of dating and antecedence surrounding the two texts, it is widely accepted that the *Perlesvaus* was composed in the early years of the thirteenth century, possibly predating the *Queste* by up to two decades. Both prose romances would thus postdate Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Armathie* (or *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal*), written at around the turn of the twelfth century.<sup>4</sup> This latter text is instrumental in establishing a detailed Christian provenance for the Grail, explicitly inflecting it with notions of sin and grace.<sup>5</sup> Although these concepts are most obviously contributed to the Grail tradition by Robert's work, and become absolutely central to the thematic framework of the later prose romances, they are also, to a certain extent, already prefigured in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, in which a link between sin and the Grail is first established.

The period in which the Grail romances were composed marked a crucial shift in the conception and practice of penance in the Western Catholic Church, leading up to the Fourth Lateran Council convoked by Pope Innocent III in November 1215.<sup>6</sup> One of the most important canonical developments promulgated by this Council was a shift away from the ordeal as the favoured means of determining and locating sin, and the privileging instead of the practice of confession. By canon 18 the Council explicitly proscribed the participation of the clergy in the performance of the juridical ordeal, that process favoured in both secular and devout contexts for the determination of sin or guilt; the oft-quoted canon 21 ('*Omnis utriusque sexus . . .*') laid down a requirement,

in the Christian West was the first technique for producing the truth of sex' (Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, p. 91; *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Hurley, p. 68. All subsequent translations of Foucault in this chapter are taken from this edition). However, Foucault largely bypasses discussion of the Middle Ages in favour of the nineteenth century's discourse of *scientia sexualis*. Judith Butler revisits some of Foucault's theories in her recent work *Undoing Gender*. In a chapter entitled 'Bodily Confessions', Butler examines the re-presentation of the body in confession that will be of particular interest here: 'Whatever is said not only passes through the body but constitutes a certain presentation of the body [. . .] the speaking is a sounding forth of the body, its simple assertion, a stylized assertion of its presence' (*Undoing Gender*, p. 172).

<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to his edition, Nitze draws attention to poem's dedication to one Gautier de Montbéliard, known to have taken part in the Fourth Crusade. Concluding that the work was most probably presented prior to Gautier's departure, Nitze ascribes its composition to a date of around the turn of the century (*JA*, pp. vii–viii).

<sup>5</sup> See also O'Gorman's combined edition of the verse and prose versions. I follow O'Gorman's decision to opt for the title *Joseph d'Armathie*, so as to avoid confusion with the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, the first 'instalment' of the Vulgate Cycle.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive study of the Lateran Councils, see particularly Foreville, *Latran I, II, III et Latran IV*. According to Baldwin, 'the Council was the largest and most influential to its time. It drew more than 400 bishops and 800 other clergy; its enactments and reforms set the course of the Latin church in the thirteenth century' ('From Ordeal to Confession', p. 191). For the text of the Council's canons, see *Concilium oecumenicorum decreta*, translated in *English Historical Documents (1189–1327)*.

now for laymen as well as clergy, for annual confession to one's own priest.<sup>7</sup> The decades during which the Grail poets and compilers were at their most prolific thus correspond to a period of dramatic shift in ecclesiastical thinking regarding methods of handling sin, a process that will inevitably be commented upon and reflected in this pseudo-pious literature. My intention in this chapter is to explore how the Grail narratives might be seen to respond to this pivotal shift in canon law, and in doing so to analyse the narrative thematization of sin as first and foremost a discursive construct.

The practice of penance in early medieval times, perhaps dating back to the Council of Toledo in 589, had been arranged largely around a system of tariffs, in which the punishment handed down to the sinner corresponded in gravity to that of the sin, according to formulae prescribed by the *libri penitentiales*, or 'handbooks of sin'.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary with the move from ordeal to inquisition came a 'shift of emphasis from outer penance to inner confession', which 'is appropriately witnessed, from St Boniface on, by the occasional use of the latter word as a synonym for the former'.<sup>9</sup> Following the Gregorian reforms of the late eleventh century, the practice of confession is thought to have become widespread, although prior to the specific instructions of Lateran IV canon 21, confession was not always necessarily made to the sinner's own priest.<sup>10</sup> This newly favoured and specifically verbal procedure for effecting the remittance of sin supplanted belief in *iudicium Dei*, faith in the absolute immanence of God's will in the dispensation of justice. Such a belief underwrote the practice of the ordeal (by fire, iron, water, etc.) that had previously extended from a purely forensic to a devotional context and usage.<sup>11</sup> The active participation of the clergy in such ordeals was explicitly outlawed by the Council of 1215.

The displacement of the weight of sin and penance from the body to

<sup>7</sup> *Concilium*, p. 245; *English Historical Documents*, p. 654.

<sup>8</sup> See Murray, 'Confession Before 1215'. Evidence of this gradation of sin is still to be found in the *Perlesvaus*, as when the hermit assures Lancelot that 'li [uns] pechiez est plus orible de l'autre' ['some sins are much worse than others'] (*P*, 3655), and the latter asserts that 'Je voil bien fere la penitance si grant com ele est estable a tel pechié' ['I wish to do such penance as is required for this sin'] (*P*, 3683–4). See also Anciaux, *La Théologie du sacrement de pénitence*, and Meens, 'Frequency and Nature of Early Medieval Penance'.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, 'Confession Before 1215', p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Payen, *Le Motif du repentir*, p. 51. See also Biller, 'Confession in the Middle Ages'.

<sup>11</sup> On the uses of the judicial ordeal, see in particular Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*. Berlioz notes documented cases in which the ordeal has a specifically devotional application. One such account tells of 'des hérétiques [qui] sont arrêtés à Cambrai [vers 1217]. Ils nient leur perfide par peur de mort. Un clerc est alors envoyé par l'évêque pour les "examiner" par le fer rouge et se prononcer sur les brûlures' ['heretics who were arrested in Cambrai in around 1217. They denied their crime on pain of death. The bishop sent a priest to "examine" them with the red-hot iron, and to pronounce on their burns'] ('Les Ordalies', p. 321). In another instance 'un incroyant qui méprisait les sacrements de l'Église fut traîné en jugement. Plus par crainte que par amour, il affirma sa foi [chrétienne] et pour le prouver demanda à subir l'épreuve du fer rouge' ['an unbeliever who scorned the sacraments of the Church was brought to justice. He affirmed his Christian faith, more out of fear than love, and by way of proof demanded to undergo an ordeal by iron'] ('Les Ordalies', p. 322).



language, from outside to inside, from action to enunciation, instated a culture of inquisitorial verbal violence, a form of *procès verbal* by means of which the sinner became subject to a discourse of sin, the marks of which were no longer inscribed upon his own body.<sup>12</sup> This transition from the subject-centred ordeal, in which the marks of sin denounce and yet preserve the integrity of the body, to the subject's induction into the discourse of the Other, the practice of confession in which the confessor purports to offer a mediated channel of communication with God would, for Kristeva, represent 'une énonciation qui équivaut à une dénonciation' ['an enunciation that equates to a denunciation'].<sup>13</sup> The ordeal-scarred body is still the sinner's own; no such individual autonomy remains once the discourse of confession takes hold.<sup>14</sup> The Church's grip on the subject is thus tightened, as canon 22 of the 1215 Council instructs – 'anima sit multo pretiosior corpore' ['let the soul be more precious than the body'].<sup>15</sup> Henceforth it is, paradoxically, the soul as a discursive construct that permits the Church to root its doctrine in the body of the sinner.

Exemplary literature of the period, such as Caesar of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum* (c. 1223), recounts instances in which the ordeal and confession operate jointly in the process of determining guilt.<sup>16</sup> Yet whenever this is the case, as Jacques Berlioz has pointed out, confession always triumphs in efficacy and import over the ordeal. The ordeal, for instance, may be followed by an act of confession that succeeds in effacing the marks of guilt inflicted by the hot iron upon the body of the accused;<sup>17</sup> conversely, confession sometimes precedes the ordeal, in which case it may afford the body protection from the burning iron.<sup>18</sup> It appears in cases such as these that the body's ability to signify is being drawn into question; much greater emphasis is now placed on the value of the

<sup>12</sup> The shift in canon law reflects lay jurisprudence; Bloch notes 'the replacement of the feudal procedure of trial by combat with the Frankish and canonical procedure of inquest. Monarchy undertook to substitute for the physical violence of an immanent ordeal the mediated verbal violence of disputation' (*Literature and Law*, p. 9). Baldwin observes that 'during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries an increasing amount of Roman law was incorporated into the legal system of the church. In the realm of procedure the canonists by 1215 had generally adopted the Roman emphasis on written instruments and witnesses as principal means of proof' ('Intellectual Preparation', p. 617).

<sup>13</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 152.

<sup>14</sup> As Foucault argues, 'l'aveu est un rituel de discours où le sujet qui parle coïncide avec le sujet de l'énoncé; c'est aussi un rituel qui se déploie dans un rapport de pouvoir [. . .] un rituel enfin où la seule énonciation, indépendamment de ses conséquences externes, produit, chez qui l'articule, des modifications intrinsèques' ['the confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship [. . .] a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it'] (*La Volonté de savoir*, pp. 82–3; *History of Sexuality*, pp. 61–2).

<sup>15</sup> *Concilium*, p. 246; *English Historical Documents*, p. 655.

<sup>16</sup> See also Barthélemy, 'Présence de l'aveu'.

<sup>17</sup> Berlioz, 'Les Ordalies', p. 321; Caesar of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Dist. III, c. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Berlioz, 'Les Ordalies', p. 323.

word over the testimony of flesh and blood, and this is further substantiated by the vital presence of a verbal component to the ordeal, in the form of the oath.<sup>19</sup> This juxtaposition of ordeal and confession appears to demarcate an unstable border between corporeality and symbolicity that, for Kristeva, represents the most potent locus of abjection.<sup>20</sup> It is, I will argue, at this site of struggle between body and word that the Grail hero's relationship to the Grail itself, a relationship governed by sin, is played out in the Old French romances.

The parallel confession passages from the *Queste* and the *Perlesvaus* ostensibly bear witness to the contemporary transition towards an inquisitorial or discursive mode of penance.<sup>21</sup> Yet at the same time these texts could be said to reinforce the ethos of the ordeal, constituting the Grail itself as a kind of red-hot iron, a physical test or manifestation of the hero's worth and probity. Indeed, both prose romances conceive a dual method for divining sin: in the *Perlesvaus* confession precedes an ordeal-like encounter with the Grail, and vice versa in the *Queste*. However, the efficacy of confession in both texts is foiled by a resistant core of sin that the ordeal might expose, but that confession can never disperse. Furthermore, as we shall see, Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* had already attempted to render the literary text itself a site of sin, inquest and possible repentance, insofar as it had instated the inquisitorial weapon *par excellence*, the question, as its preferred means of determining the hero's performance in the Grail ordeal.<sup>22</sup>

### The Hysteric-Sinner

The struggle between the physical body and the discourse of sin that we see played out in the Grail romances provides the basis for the hypothesis that these texts, in their preoccupation with sin and its remission, can be seen to rehearse the Lacanian discourse of the Hysteric:

<sup>19</sup> The oath is in fact a determining locus of guilt or innocence in the ordeal, the statement of 'truth' that is to be proven or contradicted by the process itself. Jane Burns therefore classes the ordeal among 'feudal institutions that depend on a one-to-one correspondence between words and things', since 'oaths pronounced in the juridical duel lead, ostensibly, to the discovery of truth in medieval jurisprudence' ('Quest and Questioning', p. 254). The interdiction made by canon 18 of Lateran IV seized upon this verbal aspect of the oath; as Baldwin points out, 'essential to the operation of the procedure was the presence of the clergy who provided the relics on which the oaths were sworn' ('From Ordeal to Confession', p. 196). The canonical prohibition of the clergy's participation effectively rendered the oath, and thus the whole ordeal, defunct.

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> For some instances of the presence of ordeals and confession in literary texts, see Baldwin, 'Crisis of the Ordeal'. Baldwin notes here that 'the ordeal functioned in the literary texts in ways congruent to those found in other historical documents' (p. 329). See also Bloch, 'Text as Inquest'.

<sup>22</sup> Bloch also discerns a parallel between the 'judicial and literary inquest, that of the courtroom and of the courtly novel' (*Literature and Law*, p. 209).

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 \$ & \rightarrow & S1 \\
 \hline & & \hline
 a & & S2
 \end{array}$$

The hysteric is essentially a sinner – s/he ‘feels an intense pleasure, an improper pleasure, that cannot properly speaking be allowed into experience’.<sup>23</sup> As such, the body of the hysteric-sinner provides the locus at which to display that which cannot be accounted for by the *discourse* of sin-hysteria. As Monique David-Ménard comments, ‘what is played out in the body takes the place of a discourse that cannot be uttered’.<sup>24</sup> This unspeakable pleasure, the desire of the Other that is the hysteric’s treasure, is located in the Lacanian discourse *matheme* at the position of the (repressed) truth, occupied by the *a*, the *plus-de-jour*. An affinity between sin and the abject can already be perceived here, for the hysteric’s quasi-sexual pleasure, unaccounted for in his/her discourse, is also somehow repellent – as Ned Lukacher puts it, ‘the theory of hysteria is Freud’s effort to describe an epistemology of disgust’.<sup>25</sup> The link between the unspeakability of sin and this feeling of revulsion would seem to be causal – although I suggest that sin is deemed disgusting (abject) precisely because it is unspeakable, and not vice versa.

The epistemology of sin is inextricably bound up with its location in the Grail romances, and it might be argued that the Grail knight becomes a model of the hysteric who, for Lacan, is ‘someone who rejects *jouissance* in the name of knowledge about *jouissance*’.<sup>26</sup> The violent *jouissance*, the transgressive pleasure associated with the Grail, is attenuated in these texts by a continual search for knowledge *about* the Grail, effecting a kind of cautious looking awry at that *jouissance*, or its accommodation within the symbolic order of language. It is in the hysteric’s search for knowledge that the fundamental role of the question comes to the fore, as is emphasized by the requirement to formulate and articulate the Grail questions in these texts. The moment of questioning represents the point at which the Grail knight is most forcibly required to interrogate (or indeed to acknowledge) the desire of the Other.

The desire of the hysterical question, as Lukacher points out, ‘is not simply the desire of a subject’, but instead attests to ‘the otherness of the hysteric’s divided subjectivity’.<sup>27</sup> The hysteric feels that his/her subjectivity is invaded, inhabited by a foreign body that would account for the agency of the Lacanian discourse of the Hysteric being a split subjectivity (*\$*). The notion of sin as a foreign body, a bone in the throat preventing the full articulation of the

<sup>23</sup> Lukacher, ‘Epistemology of Disgust’, p. vii. Mazzoni comments that ‘in the medieval Christian world view [. . .] from a medical metaphor, hysteria became a moral one’ (*Saint Hysteria*, p. 8).

<sup>24</sup> David-Ménard, *Hysteria*, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Lukacher, ‘Epistemology of Disgust’, p. viii.

<sup>26</sup> David-Ménard, *Hysteria*, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> Lukacher, ‘Epistemology of Disgust’, p. xiii.

hysteric's symptom, is ostensibly the cause of failed confession, the sinner appearing simply unable to get the words of repentance out of his/her mouth. Moreover, the success or failure of confession always relies on the intervention of the other, the discourse position at which the agent's message is processed, and which is embodied by the confessor, usually the priest or hermit who we have already seen (in the previous chapter) interceding in the process of subject formation. In the discourse of the Hysteric, the place of the other is assumed by the master signifier (S1), the anchoring point that makes sin readable by citing it within a discursive structure. In doing so, a new system of knowledge (S2) is produced in order to assuage the hysteric's anxiety and to mitigate the menacing power of the abject excess of sin, the *a* of the Other's desire, that must remain fundamentally unaccounted for. This chapter will conclude with an illustration of how, in the words of Lukacher, 'jouissance is an aesthetic text, an aesthetic-hysteric text'; it is through aestheticization that the Grail romances ultimately attempt to gentrify the power of horror that persists in the fascinatingly repellent concept of sin.<sup>28</sup>

### From *Un Graal* to *Li Graal*: Robert de Boron<sup>29</sup>

Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Armathie*, although by no means to be enumerated among the most poetically accomplished Grail romances, nevertheless represents a crucial milestone in the evolution of the legend – it is this text that establishes a detailed Christian provenance for the Grail.<sup>30</sup> Composed in the intervening years between Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* and the prose romances, the metrical version of Robert's text survives only in a single manuscript,<sup>31</sup> whereas a number of extant codices preserve a prose redaction.<sup>32</sup> Although it has attracted only scant attention from Grail scholars, Robert's work offers a

<sup>28</sup> Lukacher, 'Epistemology of Disgust', p. xx.

<sup>29</sup> Frappier observes the move from the designation of the Grail using the indefinite article ('un graal') in the *Conte du Graal* to the later definite concept of 'li Graal', or even 'li Saint Graal', commenting that 'ce glissement grammatical, le changement de l'article indéfini en article défini fait passer du plan profane au plan spirituel' ['this grammatical slippage, the replacement of the indefinite with the definite article, marks a move from the worldly to the spiritual'] (*Chrétien de Troyes: l'homme et l'oeuvre*, p. 206 n. 1). It is precisely this movement that is represented in Robert de Boron's text. See also Owen, 'From Grail to Holy Grail'.

<sup>30</sup> Robert is dismissed by Owen, for instance, as 'a pedestrian poet' (*Evolution of the Grail Legend*, p. 172). Adolf is somewhat more charitable in her description of Robert's work as 'not inferior to Chrétien's [*Conte du Graal*] if we consider influence rather than aesthetic achievement' (*Visio Pacis*, p. 73).

<sup>31</sup> MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds français 20047.

<sup>32</sup> All references are to the 1999 edition of Nitzze's text; line numbers are given in parentheses following quotations in the text. Owing to constraints of time and space, I deal only with the metrical version of the text in this present study. For full description of the MSS and a juxtaposition of the verse and prose versions, see O'Gorman's critical edition.

fascinating insight into the physical form of the Grail, and also raises questions regarding its function – questions that are liable to become occluded in the later prose romances from which the Grail itself is, more often than not, almost pathologically absent.

The physical appearance of the Grail as it is represented in Robert's poem is already subject to a certain degree of slippage.<sup>33</sup> The artefact is consistently described as 'un veissel' ['a vessel']; firstly that which Christ used at the Last Supper – 'un veissel mout gent / Ou Criz feisoit son sacrement' ['a most worthy vessel in which Christ performed the sacrament'] (*JA*, 395–6) – and then as the chalice in which Joseph collected blood from the crucified Christ:

Cist veissiaus ou men sanc meis,  
Quant de men cors le requeillis,  
Calices apelez sera.<sup>34</sup> (*JA*, 907–9)

[This vessel in which you held my blood, when you collected it from my body, shall be called a chalice.]

Use of the specific term 'Grael' is, however, crucially reserved for something quite distinct. As the narrator explains following the presentation of the Grail to Joseph by Jesus:

Ge n'ose conter ne retreire,  
Ne je ne le pourroie feire,  
Neis se je feire le voloie,  
Se je le grant livre n'avoie  
Ou les estoires sunt escrites,  
Par les granz clers faites et dites.  
*La sunt li grant secré escrit*  
*Qu'en numme le Graal et dit.* (*JA*, 929–36; my italics)

[I do not dare recount or tell the story – nor could I if I so wished, if I did not possess the great book in which the tales are held, written and recorded by the great scribes. *It is there that the great secrets are recorded that are known as the Grail .*]

The repeated assonance between 'escrit[es]' and 'dit[es]' here implies that the 'Grael' is not a physical artefact at all; it is nothing other than 'li grant secré' inscribed in the written language of 'le grant livre'. In stark contrast to this specifically linguistic construction, the opening lines of the above passage suggest that the Grail cannot in fact be disclosed in language and indeed resists integration into the text. Paradoxically, then, the Grail is both a fundamentally linguistic phenomenon, and also something unrepresentable or ineffable. It is

<sup>33</sup> A fascinating study of pictorial representations of the Grail in the MSS of the Vulgate cycle is offered by Stones's article 'The Grail in Rylands MS French 1'. See also Loomis and Loomis, *Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art*.

<sup>34</sup> The speaker here is Christ himself, who appears to the imprisoned Joseph.

around this very representational absence that the text is constructed, shown here by the Grail secrets' supposedly being inscribed in an extant volume ('le grant livre'), so that the narrative, like its object of representation, must ultimately be seen to have a *form* but no *content*. I will argue that sin gives a content to the narrative, to the Grail itself and, as we will later see, to the Grail questions, thereby serving as a kind of filler for the lack in both the subject and the Other. That this lack/excess (the truth of the hysteric's discourse) should be unlocatable, alternating between the subject and the other (the sinner and the confessor, for example), gives the hysterical question its fundamental characteristic of remaining forever unanswered and unanswerable.

Crucially, no explicit proscription is placed on the articulation of the Grail secrets in Robert's poem other than that enforced by the constraints of language itself; the narrator insists that he could not relate the secrets, even if he should desire to do so, without possessing the correct language (literally, possessing the book in which the Grail secrets are allegedly recorded). Close to the conclusion of Robert's poem an angel instructs Joseph as to what he must do with the Grail. Joseph is reminded of his visitation in prison by Christ:

Les seintes paroles dist t'a,  
 Ki sunt douces et precieuses  
 Et gracieuses et piteuses,  
 Ki sunt propement [*sic*] apelees  
 Secrez dou Graal et nummees. (JA, 3332–6)

[He revealed the holy words to you, which are so sweet and precious, full of grace and pity, and which are properly called the secrets of the Grail.]

The Grail keeper is thus the custodian of something much less tangible than the actual 'calices'. Indeed, the object itself appears to stand in for that other, unsignified and unsignifiable, aspect of the Grail ('li grant secré').

The paradox of the Grail's being both presented and absented by its own language is accentuated when the object is employed as a device for effecting separation, and when the specific division that it is called upon to perform is that of presence from absence – specifically the correlative presence of sin and absence of God's grace, negotiated in this text through the sin of 'luxure' ['lust']. Joseph and his followers, the company of the Grail, enjoy an extended period of prosperity and fertility when suddenly they are beset by hardship and famine:

Meis après ala malement,  
 Et si vous conterei comment  
 [. . .]  
 Par un tout seul pechié estoit  
 Qu'avoient entr'eus commencié,  
 Mout en estoient entechié:

C'iert pour le pechié de luxure,  
Pour teu vilté, pour tele ordure. (JA, 2373–4; 2380–4)

[But then things started to go badly, and I shall tell you why. The cause was a single sin, generated by the company and deeply entrenched in them: this was the sin of lust, a vile degradation.]

The vociferously condemned sin of 'luxure' which, as we later see, comes to haunt the heroes of the prose romances also lies at the root of the Grail company's misfortune.

Having prayed to God that the sinners be removed from the midst of the Grail company (JA, 2463–5), Joseph is given detailed instructions by the voice of Christ for how he must employ the Grail as a kind of divining-rod for sin:

Ten veissel o mon sanc penras,  
En espreuve le meteras  
Vers les pecheeurs en apert,  
Le veissel tout a descouvert. (JA, 2469–72)

[You must use your vessel, in which you held my blood, as a test. Place it, uncovered, in full view of the sinners.]

A meal is to be prepared for the entire company, with a fish caught by Joseph's brother Bron being placed next to the Grail upon the table (in a less than convincing attempt to account for the title of the so-called Fisher King, the hereditary keeper of the Grail). The Grail will then test the worthiness of all those present: as the voice of God has already decreed, 'Tout cil qui ten veissel verrunt, / En ma compeignie serunt' ['All those who see your vessel shall abide with me'] (JA, 917–18). The company is thus divided into those seated at the table, and those who remain standing at the periphery (JA, 2559–60); the latter group are those contaminated with the foul sin of 'luxure' and unworthy of receiving the grace of God. The Grail itself thereby functions in much the same way as the physical test of the ordeal, visually marking out those who are sinful from those who have grace. Yet this seemingly archetypal instance of belief in *iudicium Dei* is immediately undermined in Robert's narrative. Asked by those who are left standing (that is, those unworthy of the Grail/grace) what they feel in the presence of the Grail, the seated company reply that:

Cuers ne pourroit,  
A pourpenser ne soufiroit  
Le grant delit que nous avuns  
Ne la grant joie en quoi nous suns. (JA, 2609–12)

[The heart could not describe nor conceive our ecstasy, nor the enormous joy in which we find ourselves.]

This portrayal of the grace of God as an quasi-orgiastic overflowing, a sensual extravagance that cannot be contained, invites obvious comparison with



Galahad's later mantra when called upon to verbalize the Grail in the *Queste*: 'ce que cuers mortex ne porroit penser ne langue d'ome terrien deviser' ['that of which the heart of mortal man could not conceive, nor the tongue of earthly man relate'] (*Q*, 19:25–6). The polarization of sin and grace is made ever more chimerical, with the latter now figuring as an excess, in a discursive sense that is then translated into the abundant sensual (perhaps even sinful) delights of the Grail feast.<sup>35</sup> 'Luxure' might thus define sin itself as excess, the flipside of the dogmatic construal of excess as sin. Sin and grace are in fact entirely inextricable from one another, re-creating the overlap between surfeit and lack that is the (non-)locus of sin – the locus at which the Grail, in its inability to perform the act of separation required of it, is itself confirmed as undecidable and abject.

That sin and grace (as ineffable perfection) are always already part of the same economy is thus clearly intimated, albeit perhaps unconsciously so, by Robert's text. Indeed, the key to deconstructing this unstable binary might be seen to lie within the poem itself, in Robert's treatment of the parable of Christ's washing the disciples' feet (*JA*, 317–74).<sup>36</sup> The lesson derived from this analysis is that:

Si c'um connoistre ne pouroit  
 Le lavé, s'on ne li disoit,  
 Ausi les pechiez ne set mie  
 De nului devant c'on li die,  
 N'il des menistres ne sarunt  
 Devant ce que il les dirunt. (*JA*, 367–72)

[Just as one could not recognize who has been washed without being told, so it is that a man's sins remain unknown until they are admitted by him, and none shall know the sins of the ministers until they themselves reveal them.]

The crucial move reflected here is that from the position that sin and grace are black and white, either/or, concepts that can be *shown* (as the divisive ordeal of the Grail feast would have us believe), to the notion that they are first and foremost *known*, that is, epistemological rather than ontological in character. Indeed, we have already shown that the signifier 'Graal' does not always map onto the signified of the 'veissel' in Robert's poem, but rather pertains to the

<sup>35</sup> Compare the description of the Grail feast in the *Queste*: 'fu li palés raempliz de si bones odors come se totes les especes terriennes i fussent espandues' ['the palace was filled with such delicious smells as though all the spices of the world had been strewn there'] (*Q*, 15:22–4). The term 'delit' already has the ambiguous inflection of both delight and transgression at this date – with regard to Marie de France's lai of 'Laüstic' (c. 1189), Huchet comments on 'le glissement sémantique prochain du mot "delit" par lequel le plaisir devient faute' ['the semantic slippage in the word "delit", by which pleasure becomes misdeed'] ('Nom de femme', p. 417). On the same point, see also Leupin, 'The Impossible Task', p. 231.

<sup>36</sup> John 13.1–17. The episode provides commentary on the contemporary theological question as to whether a priest who is sinful is able to cleanse others of their sins.

epistemology of that object and its representation in language. The final couplet of the passage cited above ('sarunt' / 'dirunt') confirms this new emphasis on the nexus between epistemology and language in the locating of sin, hinting also at the dual function of that relationship: language can conspire to obfuscate sins just as much as it can expose them. With the sin/grace opposition thus displaced into language (that is, S2, the product of the hysteric's discourse), it is henceforth subject to the slippage of the signifier, leading to the mutual contamination of the two terms, and from there to the paradox that there is not necessarily a correlation between what is/can be known and what is/can be said.

The construal of knowledge as a site of sin has already been implicit in the condemnation of 'luxure', sexual knowledge, deemed to be the most dangerous of all sins precisely because it allows the 'sinner' to know 'too much'; desire is directed away from its 'proper' object, God, and becomes self-reflexive, as we shall see to a much greater extent in the *Queste*. Indeed, that the sin of 'luxure' should be seen to result from a misdirection, or from *méconnaissance*, is suggested by the synonymous terms 'convoitise' and 'cupidité', covetousness and greed. Matarasso deems covetousness or concupiscence to be 'the mean term of the antithesis *virginité-luxure*, for desire is of itself neutral, taking its nature from its object'.<sup>37</sup> Since the Fall, man's 'desire has been deflected from the only object capable of satisfying it and is self-directed instead of God-directed. This perverted love that has for its object self is variously called *concupiscentia*, *amor carnalis* and, in particular by St Bernard, *cupiditas*.'<sup>38</sup> Thus 'luxure' must be sinful only by virtue of its object, which I suggest might ultimately be seen as (self-) knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

The extent to which one might come to know one's own sin, however, remains contentious. Rather than privileging the procedure of the ordeal, Robert's poem places far greater emphasis, from the very outset, on the power of confession as the preferred mechanism for the identification and atonement for sins:

Que tantes foiz venist arriere  
 A confesse, quant pecheroit,  
 Li hons, quant se repentiroit  
 Et vouroit son pechié guerpir  
 Et les commandemenz tenir  
 De sainte Eglise; ainsi pourroit  
 Grace a Dieu querre, et il l'aroit. (JA, 186–92)

[However many times a man sins and returns to confession, if he wishes to repent and renounce his sins, and to embrace the commandments of the Holy Church, then he might seek the Grace of God, and it shall be granted to him.]

<sup>37</sup> Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Augustine: 'my heart [. . .] could not see the difference between love's serenity and lust's darkness' (*Confessions*, II.i.2).

Confession is thus somewhat glibly cast as a linguistic panacea, encouraging the rehearsal of sin and yet overlooking the fact that the repeated performance of confession can never be the perfect one; there will always remain an unresolved core of sin that resists enunciation and constantly threatens its return. A bond between the sinner and the hysteric can thus be cemented: the hidden truth (the desire of the Other, *a*) that articulates the discourse of the Hysteric and that formulates his/her unanswerable question is precisely the same as the abject lack/excess of sin that is constantly aimed at in the repetition of confession, but that must always remain unaccounted for by the discourse that attempts to annul it. It is these notions of confession as abjection, and of sin as an unlocatable remainder, that come to problematize mechanisms of repentance in the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste*.

### Lancelot's Sin

In Branch VIII of the *Perlesvaus*, Lancelot has taken leave of the young hermit Joseus and enquires of a group of knight-fishermen where he might find lodgings for the night. On hearing that he is in the vicinity of the Fisher King's castle, and arriving at a hermitage, Lancelot decides that he should seek confession from the resident hermit: 'Il se pense, puis qu'il doit aler en si haut ostel et en si riche conme cil est ou li Graax s'apert, il se confessera' ['he decides that, since he is to enter such a rich and worthy house as that in which the Grail appears, he will make his confession'] (*P*, 3647–9). This confession, however, remains conspicuously incomplete: '[il] se confessa au prodome et jehi toz ses pechiez, et li dist que d[e] toz estoit repentanz fors que d'un' ['he confessed all of his sins to the holy man, and said that he repented for all but one'] (*P*, 3649–50). Didactic literature contemporary with the *Perlesvaus*, such as Caesar of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*, stresses the fundamentally oral nature of confession;<sup>40</sup> the *Queste* similarly defines the procedure as 'veraie confession de bouche' ['true confession by mouth'] (*Q*, 65:25).<sup>41</sup> Yet what is immediately striking in Lancelot's case is the suggestion that the enunciation of sin in confession is not necessarily concomitant with its remission. For although Lancelot has articulated 'toz ses pechiez', there remains one for which he is resolutely not 'repentanz'; that is, of course, his love for Guinevere.

The postulate that sin can ever be completely dispersed through the discourse of confession is entirely illusory, since sin is precisely the lack-excess (*a*) that is the repressed truth of the hysterical sinner's discourse. It is for this reason that confession can never be allowed to succeed fully, for the effective separation of sin and sinner would release man from his mortality (or, the articulation of his desire), that which guarantees the Church's firm grasp on man's soul, and of

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Dist. III, c. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Murray notes that, 'like most medieval statements, confessions were spoken, not written' ('Confession Before 1215', p. 52).

which Kristeva's abject is the very condition: '*je suis abject, c'est-à-dire mortel et parlant*' [*I am abject, that is, mortal and speaking*].<sup>42</sup> The fantasy of a 'perfect' confession must, however, be sustained in order to conceal the fact that sin is fundamentally a symbolic (linguistic, ideological) construct. For this reason Lancelot is presented as believing himself to be in control of his own sin, which he locates specifically in his own body rather than in the impersonal, uncontrollable domain of the symbolic – in a sense, if Lancelot owns his sin, it cannot own him. Asserting that a resilient core of sin has taken root in his body – '*icel pechié vos jehira[i] je hors de la boche dont je ne puis estre repentanz el cuer*' [*I will cast out of my mouth this sin for which I cannot repent in my heart*] (*P*, 3656–7; my italics) – Lancelot's persistent refusal to repent the sin of 'luxore', his love for Guinevere, is imputed entirely to the disjunction between the body and the word: '*je ne vos voil dire chose a coi li cuers ne s'acort*' [*I do not wish to say anything to which my heart could not agree*] (*P*, 3682–3). A similar dichotomy is marked in the *Queste*, where Lancelot's sin acts like a bone in his throat: '*ne puet issir parole de sa bouche. Et neporec il le droit volentiers*' [*he cannot get the words out of his mouth, even though he would willingly speak them*] (*Q*, 65:33–66:1). The body is represented as posing an obstruction to successful confession, just as in the *Perlesvaus* it appears to figure a site of resistance to the power of that discourse. Such a corporal resistance to the signifier clearly invites diagnosis as a hysterical symptom.<sup>43</sup>

The confession sequences from both prose romances illustrate the crucial notion of volition, of the will to repent (or indeed to sin), and this is indeed a key term in the *Perlesvaus* passage, with the word 'volenté' itself and cognates of the verb 'vouloir' occurring on some fourteen occasions. Curiously, love is construed almost entirely as a matter of volition that is yet somehow beyond the control of the lover him/herself. As Lancelot tautologically declares of Guinevere, '*Je l'aim tant que je voil que ja ne me viegne volenté de guerpis s'amor*' [*I love her so greatly that I should never wish that the will to abandon her love should take me*] (*P*, 3685–6). This desire to remain forever at the mercy of love betrays a deeper problematic regarding the object of desire.

I argued above that the sin of 'luxure' is in some ways an instance of *méconnaissance*, misrecognition of the 'proper' object of desire, and this would appear to be borne out by the text of the *Perlesvaus* at this point in the narrative. The use of pronouns in the text, especially at the point when Lancelot speaks in defence of his transgression, becomes subject to a remarkable amount of slippage, not only in the convoluted syntax, but more interestingly still in disparities between the text of different manuscripts, which appear to rehearse the impossibility of determining whether Lancelot is referring to Guinevere (using a feminine personal pronoun), or to God (using the masculine form), when speaking of the object of his desire. This is perfectly illustrated in lines

<sup>42</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> Mazzoni observes the prominence of the hysterical symptom *globus hystericus*, 'the choking sensation of a lump or ball in the throat' (*Saint Hysteria*, p. 8).

3669–71, where the *Br* and *C* manuscripts alternate between the two pronominal determinants: ‘Ha! sire, fet Lanceloz, il [ele *Br*] a tant de beauté en lui et valor et sens et cortoisie que nus que ele [que le *C*] vousist amer ne le devoit lessier’ [‘“Oh, sir!” said Lancelot, “he/she has so much beauty and worth and wisdom and courtesy that none whom he/she chooses to love should ever abandon him/her”’]. Coupled with the fact that volition is equally applicable to sin and repentance, this would underline the notion that desire is of itself neutral, and that a sinful inflection derives entirely from the nature of the object of desire.<sup>44</sup> Our example here of undecidability being located in the *linguistic* object emphasizes that sin only exists once it is thematized *as such* by a given discourse.

The Lancelot of the *Perlesvaus* is keen to set himself apart from the exigencies of official doctrine on repentance. Largely unconcerned at his un-repented sin, he remains convinced that the dogmatic requirement for confession is entirely secondary, and that the love of God alone will ensure his salvation: ‘Dex est si douz et si plains de debonereté, si conme li prodome tesmoignent, qu’il avra merci de nos, que je ne fis onques traïson vers li ne ele vers moi’ [‘God is so sweet and full of kindness, as the holy men testify, that he will have mercy upon us, for I have never betrayed her, nor has she betrayed me’] (*P*, 3686–8).<sup>45</sup> In the *Queste*, however, Lancelot is shown to be decidedly more cautious in this respect; it is said that as regards ‘l’afere de lui et la reine, ne ne dira tant come il vive, se trop granz amonestemenz a ce ne le meine’ [‘the matter of himself and the queen, he will never speak a word of it for as long as he lives, unless the threat of severe admonishment should lead him to do so’] (*Q*, 65:31–2). The hermit’s ‘amonestemenz’ do indeed prove too much for Lancelot, and he subsequently relents. Moreover, it is precisely the power of words scorned by Lancelot in the *Perlesvaus* that leads to his capitulation in the *Queste*: ‘[li preudons] li promet la vie pardurable por le gehir et enfer por le celer. Si li dit tant *par bones paroles et par bons essamples* que Lancelot li comence a dire’ [‘the holy man promises him eternal life if he exposes his sin, and hell if he conceals it. He uses such *fine words and fine examples* that Lancelot begins to speak’] (*Q*, 66:5–7; my italics). When Lancelot’s confession does eventually ensue it is far from lacking in ‘bones paroles et bons essamples’ itself, employing a sophisticated vocabulary and literary devices such as anaphora (repetition of ‘ce est cele . . .’) that could be compared to the language of *fin’amors* used to describe Guinevere in the *Perlesvaus* (*P*, 3657–8). When, in the *Queste*, Lancelot is finally urged by the hermit to renounce the queen, along with all other women and all sinful acts, he readily agrees to do so: ‘et il li creante come loiaux chevaliers’ [‘he gives his promise as a loyal knight’] – an ambiguous oath worthy of Beroul’s Yseut.<sup>46</sup> Between the *Perlesvaus* and the

<sup>44</sup> This is substantiated by the doctrinal definition of sin as a deficient choice of object made by free-will, mistaking some transient good for the eternal good that is God. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II:84:2; *De Malo*, 3:2.

<sup>45</sup> A certain ambiguity again surrounds the referent of the pronoun ‘li’ here.

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, much further on in the *Queste*, it is ‘come loiaux chevaliers’ [‘as a loyal

*Queste*, then, the problematic remainder of sin appears to have been relocated more explicitly within language, emphasizing the discursive production *and* dispersal of that sin. That confession might be construed as either a performative speech act ('I confess . . .'), or inversely as a (fetishistic) acknowledgement of the very impossibility of that performance in language ('I cannot fully confess . . .') suggests that the enunciation of sin is always the enunciation of a lack, a spoken mask for what cannot 'really' be said.

For Kristeva, the subject's abjection is marked first and foremost by a symbolic lack, 'sa faute dans ses propres pensées et paroles' ['his absence from/failure in his own thoughts and words'].<sup>47</sup> The subject's symbolic identity is fundamentally lacking; scarred by *hamartia*, it is always already in debt.<sup>48</sup> The fundamental Christian tenet of man's debt to the God who sacrificed his son for our salvation is a recurrent theme in the Grail literature. Robert de Boron, for instance, reminds his audience that:

Nous racheta Diex nostres peres:  
Li Peres la raençon fist  
Par lui, par son Fil Jhesu Crist,  
Par le Saint Esprit tout ensemble. (JA, 90–3)

[God our father redeemed us: the Lord paid our ransom with himself, with his son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit, all as one.]

Indeed, the notion of 'se racheter' provides the foundation for a sustained economic metaphor used in relation to the mechanisms of repentance, as can be seen in the confession passages from both the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste*.<sup>49</sup> Lancelot's initial desire to confess in the *Perlesvaus* is motivated by the fact 'qu'il doit aler en si haut ostel et en si riche comme cil est ou li Graax s'apert' ['he is to enter such a rich and worthy house as that in which the Grail appears'], and the question of his 'valor', his worth (or lack thereof), is central to the passage, with the word 'valor' and cognates of 'valoir' ['to be worth'] occurring on some eight occasions.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the sin of which Lancelot is accused, his

knight'] (*Q*, 109:25) that Perceval pledges himself to a woman who is in fact the devil in disguise. The implication seems to be that the knight's oath binds him to the enemy rather than releasing him from his bondage.

<sup>47</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 139. Kristeva has elsewhere described biblical discourse as an attempt to fill the lack in the subject, which in doing so makes the subject aware of that lack, precisely as occurs to Lancelot in the *Queste* (see Kristeva, *Nouvelles maladies*, p. 179). This adds a crucial epistemic (but also fetishistic) dimension to the enunciation of lack – i.e., 'I know I cannot confess, but all the same . . .'. Biblical discourse thus perpetually holds open the lack whilst at the same time attempting to suture the split subject.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 142–3.

<sup>49</sup> The economic implication of the French 'buying oneself back' is not adequately translated into the English 'to redeem oneself'.

<sup>50</sup> As Murray notes, sins could often be commuted upon payment of a financial consideration ('Confession Before 1215', p. 61).

'luxore', is itself inflected with economic connotations, and this is condensed in the fiscal phraseology of the hermit's rebuke that 'Nule valor ne puet venir de tel luxore qui ne li soit vendue molt chiere' ['nothing of worth can come of such lust, unless it is dearly paid for'] (*P*, 3662–3). Similarly in the *Queste*, Lancelot's defence of his love for Guinevere is cast in the language of 'richece'; Lancelot recalls how the queen 'a plenté m'a doné l'or et l'argent et les riches dons que je ai aucune foiz donez as povres chevaliers' ['gave me an abundance of gold and silver and other valuable gifts that I distributed to poor knights'] (*Q*, 66:10–12). Indeed, the couple's love is depicted entirely in such terms: 'Ce est cele qui m'a fet venir de povreté en richece et de mesaise a toutes les terriannes beneurtez' ['it is she who raised me from poverty to riches, and from misfortune to all worldly happiness'] (*Q*, 66:15–16). Lancelot's economic metaphor here suggests that, as a subject, he is forever unequal to his debt, that he acknowledges his symbolic lack as a subject. Yet by transposing the concept of courtly love into a fiscal idiom Lancelot contrives an escape from the impasse of his symbolic subjectivity (that is, the fact that the subject as such is always in debt, founded upon the constitutive lack of the symbolic order). His relationship with the queen is presented not as being founded upon debt (lack), but based rather on exchange (an exchange of love, which for Lacan might be the exchange of two subjects' lacks), thus implying that the relationship is primarily ethical rather than metaphysical, and that this somehow waives the unpayable debt owed by Lancelot: 'je ne fis onques traïson vers li ne ele vers moi' ['I have never betrayed her, nor has she betrayed me'].

The idiom of wealth and material plenty favoured by Lancelot ostensibly conflicts with the doctrinal grain of the *Queste*, heavily imbued with the monastic spirit of the Cistercians.<sup>51</sup> The narrative's affinity with the monks of Cîteaux and their ascetic ethos is such that, in the words of Pauphilet:

La prééminence donnée par la *Queste* à Cîteaux sur tout autre clergé [. . .] n'est pas une fantaisie d'écrivain, ni un simple hommage rendu à un ordre puissant et vénérable: c'est la marque d'une parenté d'esprit. Les 'blancs moines' peuvent sans étrangeté présider aux aventures de la *Queste*: ils sont là chez eux.<sup>52</sup>

[The pre-eminence given by the *Queste* to Cîteaux over all other clergy is not some whim of the author, nor is it a simple homage paid to a venerable and powerful order: it is the mark of a shared ideology. The 'white monks' can preside over the adventures of the *Queste* without difficulty, for there they find themselves at home.]

The philosophy of the white monks was above all one of isolation and privation; they elected to be 'poor with the poor Christ [. . .] secluded from the world and

<sup>51</sup> See particularly Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*. Also Pratt, 'Cistercians and the *Queste*'.

<sup>52</sup> Pauphilet, *Études*, pp. 74–5.



having no interest in it; parsimonious in clothing and everything else they use; abstemious in food and drink [. . .] *approaching excess only in asceticism*'.<sup>53</sup> Again we have here the suggestion that 'less is more', that a lack can be figured as an excess, and this is never more so than with sin. Sin is, in Kristeva's formulation, an overflowing that is at the same time the fissure of *hamartia*; like Lacan's *objet a*, sin is *something in me more than myself*, an abject whose undecidable location is as troubling as, and indeed begins to undermine, its inscription in the Church's dogmatic discourse of damnation. If Cistercian doctrine abjures the material or sensual pleasures of the body, it displaces *jouissance* into a different sphere – that of language. Pauphilet notes that 'Cîteaux tient la première place dans l'histoire de l'éloquence religieuse' ['Cîteaux holds pride of place in the history of religious eloquence'].<sup>54</sup> For the Cistercian, it is 'par la vertu des mots' ['by the virtue of words'] that 'il transpose son propre personnage' ['he transforms his own being'],<sup>55</sup> and it is precisely such a subjective metamorphosis that underpins the discourse of the Hysteric, where it is by addressing a message to the master signifier (S1) in the place of the other that the agent (\$) seeks the reassurance of the master, who responds by effecting a change in that subject through the production of a new system of knowledge (S2).

This analysis accounts for only three of the four terms that operate within any (Lacanian) discourse structure. What remains unspoken is the *a*, the repressed truth of the knowledge produced by the hysteric's discourse, continually displaced between the subject and the other, and that forces *méconnaissance* to arise out of the misread message transmitted from the sinner-hysteric (\$) to the other (S1). For Kristeva, confession represents 'l'intériorisation ultime du péché dans le discours, par le postulat final qui supprime la faute du fait de son énonciation devant l'Un' ['the ultimate interiorization of sin in discourse, with the final postulate that the fault is suppressed by its enunciation before the One'].<sup>56</sup> The final suppression of sin in the face of the One must forever remain a symbolic chimera; the articulation of sin allows nothing more than its temporary repression, a displacement that holds open an invitation for its return, abject and uncanny (remission: Latin *remittere*, sending back, postponing). This is, I shall suggest later, precisely what occurs in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, a text in which the conception of sin as an unreadable excess in language, an excess that might be suppressed but never effaced, had already become a narrative concern. For the moment the dialogic aspect of the discourse of sin merits further discussion.

The apparent subjective autonomy promoted by the the *Queste*, whose ideology Pauphilet has termed 'un individualisme poussé à l'extrême' ['an individualism taken to the extreme'], masks the fact that the subject, weighed down

<sup>53</sup> Lekai, *Cistercians*, p. 25; my italics.

<sup>54</sup> Pauphilet, *Études*, p. 61.

<sup>55</sup> Pauphilet, *Études*, p. 63.

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 152.

with the burden of sin, has internalized the narrative's discourse of Otherness.<sup>57</sup> This is most abundantly clear in the fact that confession, unlike forms of penance such as attrition, is never monologic; its effectiveness relies on the presence of an other – be that the physical presence of the priest or the meta-dialogue with God effected through that intermediary (i.e., a mediation on behalf of the Other).<sup>58</sup> Penitential handbooks of the period reveal that authority to hear confession was not the strict preserve of the clergy; Robert of Flamesbury (c. 1210), for instance, asserts that 'no one but a bishop or one authorized by him may enjoin solemn penance, *except under necessity*: in that case even a layman shall have power to reconcile the penitent'.<sup>59</sup> The immediate implication of this non-specificity of the confessor would seem to strip confession of its claim to represent a channel for divine communication. Yet the ideological power of the discourse persists in the assertion of necessity, and this is precisely the irrecoverable excess of confession thematized, preventing the dialogue from ever being reducible to the (entirely symbolic) dimensions of an ethical relation with an other (indeed with the Other). Lancelot's argument in his defence that, as regards his love for Guinevere, neither one has betrayed the other (*P*, 3688), has already been foreshadowed by the hermit's own accusatory construal of the relationship, transposing the ethical relationship envisioned by Lancelot firstly into the parameters of feudalism, and then into the sphere of transcendental metaphysics: 'Vos estes traîtres a vostre segnor terrien et omecides au Sauveor' ['you are a traitor to your secular lord, and murderous to the Saviour'] (*P*, 3663–4).

Concerning the notion of tariff penance and its secular juridical equivalent of 'an eye for an eye', Joseph Turmel observes that 'ce qui importe à la justice, c'est qu'il y ait une satisfaction équivalente à la grandeur du péché. Que cette satisfaction soit offerte par le coupable lui-même ou par un autre qui se dévoue à la place du coupable, c'est là une circonstance indifférente à la justice' ['what matters to justice is that the magnitude of the crime is recognized. Whether this recognition comes from the guilty party or from another who stands in for the guilty one is of no consequence to justice'].<sup>60</sup> This is reflected in the *Perlesvaus* when the hermit promises to Lancelot that 'se vos estes repentanz et vrais confés; si en prendré la penitance sor moi' ['if you repent and make full confession, then I shall take the penance upon myself'] (*P*, 3680–1). Sin is given a discrete, almost autonomous, existence as a topological figure, not tied to a specific body or soul, but rather transferable and of indeterminate location. The dialogic relationship between confessor and confessee is based upon the trans-

<sup>57</sup> Pauphilet, *Études*, p. 53.

<sup>58</sup> Although see Lochrie's comments (in *Covert Operations*) on the importance of secrecy attached to confession. Note that, in the *Perlesvaus*, Lancelot is insistent that he will not confess his sin to any mortal man (*P*, 3667), implying perhaps that he considers himself answerable only to God.

<sup>59</sup> *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 353; my italics.

<sup>60</sup> Turmel, *Histoire des dogmes*, p. 448.

ference of sin and consequently becomes fraught with transference tensions such as those identified by Caesar of Heisterbach in the *Dialogus Miraculorum*. In one example, Caesar warns 'how a confessor ought not to make enquiries about unknown sins' lest he should tempt the confessee into further iniquity.<sup>61</sup> Elsewhere, he tells 'of a woman who was justifying herself in confession, and how a wise priest showed her that she had many mortal sins' – in this instance the priest puts sins into the mouth of the sinner.<sup>62</sup> The upper hand in the linguistic trade-off of confession is thus taken by the one who can locate sin, however ephemerally, in language – or, in a Lacanian context, the one who can arrest the revolutions of discourse, overriding the paradoxical notion of sin as a sign of love (which we have already construed as the abject hiatus of discourse – the locus of the Grail), and thereby reinscribe sin as the organizational *point de capiton*, the master signifier (S1) that gives meaning to and anchors that discourse.

Having taken leave of the hermit in the *Perlesvaus*, Lancelot is lodged in the Grail castle, where he eats with the Fisher King:

Mes li contes tesmoigne et dit que li Graax ne s'aparut mie a cel mangier. Il ne demora mie por ce que Lanceloz ne fust .i. des trois mellors chevaliers dou monde, *mes por le pechié de la roïne que il amoit sanz repentir*, car il ne pensoit onques tant a nule rien comme a li, ne n'en pooit son cuer oster.

(P, 3749–53; my italics)

[But the story asserts that the Grail did not appear at that feast. It was absent not because Lancelot was not one of the three best knights in the world, *but because of the sin of the queen whom he loved unrepentantly*, for he never thought about anything else so much, nor could he detach his heart from it.]

The fantastic ambiguity of the genitive here, 'le pechié de la roïne' (the sin relating to the queen? The *queen's* sin?), and that of the subordinate clause 'que il amoit sanz repentir' (does Lancelot really love Guinevere? Or does he love *sin* for sin's sake? *Peccatum gratia peccati*?) provides a perfect illustration of the constant displacement of sin in language as the aporia of the text: its playful, dynamic and irrecoverable excess.<sup>63</sup> As we see once again, sin is left floating freely in the discourse of the hysterical subject until it is anchored and made readable by the response of the other and his orientating master signifier (S1).

<sup>61</sup> *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Dist. III, c. 47.

<sup>62</sup> *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Dist. III, c. 46.

<sup>63</sup> The notion of 'sin for sin's sake' is a particularly Augustinian one. Compare, for instance, the famous episode in the *Confessions* recalling the adolescent misdemeanour of stealing pears: Augustine concedes that 'I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself', and that 'I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself' (*Confessions*, II.iv.9).

### Perceval's Sin

Functioning as a kind of linguistic shifter suspended between words and acts, sin is constantly displaced and deferred whilst being rehearsed in the mechanism of confession. My argument now turns from the position that there is always a remainder of sin in language (i.e., that confession can never be adequately or fully performed), to the inverse proposition that sin is precisely the excess of language, produced by the very procedures that purport to remove it. The textual manifestation of the abject status that I have ascribed to sin can be recognized in a fundamental *illisibilité* ['unreadability'] of that discursive excess, and this might be developed through Roland Barthes's designation of the text as either *lisible* ['readable'] or *scriptible* ['writeable'].<sup>64</sup> Whereas the former text purports to present a closed totality of meaning, the latter embraces semantic plurality, the very play of difference that renders the text fundamentally *illisible* and as such functions, I will argue, as the textual site of sin (as imperfection).

Sin might now be located either at the level of the questing character's failure to function as a producer rather than consumer of meaning, or indeed at the meta-textual level at which the reader of the romance is lured into precisely the same *méconnaissance* as the characters themselves.<sup>65</sup> In Barthes's formulation, 'le scriptible, c'est le romanesque sans le roman, la poésie sans le poème, l'essai sans la dissertation, l'écriture sans le style, la production sans le produit, la structuration sans la structure' ['the writeable is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, an essay that has not been written, production without the product, structuration without the structure'];<sup>66</sup> the *scriptible* is the universal without the particular, form without content, the Quest without the Grail. The *texte scriptible* is constructed around a central absence, the absence of the master signifier or *point de capiton* that anchors or fills out the discourse and provides the adhesive that binds the abject to language. Thus we return to the abjection of sin as both an overflowing and yet still a debt,<sup>67</sup> an oscillation between surfeit and lack that can now be described as fundamentally linguistic and epistemological in character.

The perception of truth in language rather than in any physical manifestation is not only consonant with the move that has been tracked from the ordeal to inquest and confession, but also with the vital importance that the Grail romances attach to the act of questioning. Fundamental to the argument here is the notion of the inquest, the interrogation, as a speech act that, like confession (the discourse that is perhaps set up as the structural antithesis of questioning), can never be fully effected – the hysterical question *Deus quid vult?* must remain unanswered and unanswerable. Jean Marx devotes a section of his

<sup>64</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>65</sup> Such as we already saw to be the case in the *Perlesvaus*; cf. Chapter 1, pp. 53–5.

<sup>66</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 142–6.

*Nouvelles recherches* to a survey of the Grail questions in the various romances, concluding that:

L'importance, le nombre et les conséquences des questions que pose ou que doit poser le visiteur ou le héros du château du Graal représentent certainement un problème capital pour la compréhension et l'interprétation de cette partie essentielle des romans ou poèmes traitant de la quête du Graal.<sup>68</sup>

[The importance, number and consequence of the questions that are or should be asked by the visitor or hero at the Grail castle surely represent a major problem for the understanding and interpretation of this essential aspect of the romances and poems dealing with the Grail quest].

Marx's account, however, largely overlooks the intimate relation of the Grail questions to sin in these texts. Furthermore, the simple but key assertion that 'il faut que le héros pose les questions *et qu'il reçoive une réponse*' ['the hero must ask the questions, *and he must receive a response*'] is surely to be contested.<sup>69</sup> The Grail questions do *not*, fundamentally, form a closed economy of question and answer, rather they betray the non-coincidence of question and answer (form and content), the disjunction between the performative and epistemic functions of language, thereby generating an abject excess at the moment of the linguistic performance, an excess that is then thematized by the narrative as sinful. The question would thus serve as a symbolic place-holder for sin.

The purpose of the Grail questions is primarily *effective* rather than *cognitive* – the result of asking the Grail questions would be the immediate cure of the maimed Fisher King and the restoration of the Waste Land to fertility; there is no logical link between the question and the 'answer' furnished. Consider the Grail procession as a phenomenon in which aspects of both the ordeal and the inquest are simultaneously present: the linguistic performance that the Grail knight must effect renders the act of questioning a kind of ordeal in itself. It is the very speech act, the asking or not asking of the question, rather than the answer to that question *per se* that tests and determines the hero's status in relation to the Grail. As Marx observes, 'toujours les questions liées aux épreuves' ['always questions linked with tests'].<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Marx, *Nouvelles recherches*, p. 85. An earlier, fuller version of the arguments presented here is found in Marx's 'Le Problème des questions du château du Graal'. The Grail questions form a somewhat heterogeneous corpus. In most instances the initiate knight, confronted by the Grail procession at the Fisher King's castle, is expected to enquire as to the function of the Grail and to seek an explanation of the bleeding lance (CG, 3552–72). These core questions are supplemented by others such as 'por coi la pucele pleure' ['why the maiden cries'] (*First Continuation*, line 1453. The 'pucele' ['maiden'] here refers to the Grail-bearer) and, curiously, a marked concern with the location of the Grail – as Perceval's cousin asks, 'Demandastes vos a la gent / Quel part il aloient issi?' ['Did you ask the people where they were going?'] (CG, 3568–9).

<sup>69</sup> Marx, *Nouvelles recherches*, p. 112; my italics.

<sup>70</sup> Marx, *Nouvelles recherches*, p. 94.

The *First* and *Second Continuations* clearly illustrate such a situation insofar as they elevate yet another symbol to the interrogative matrix woven around the Grail procession. The mysterious sword had first made an appearance in Chrétien's text (*CG*, 3133ff), and Perceval's cousin prophesies that it will break when first used (*CG*, 3661–2). As was discussed in the Introduction,<sup>71</sup> the *Continuations* establish the repair of this sword as one of the key tests for the Grail knight – as Marx notes, 'qui pose les questions sans souder l'épée ne réussit pas (Gauvain). Qui soude l'épée sans poser les questions échoue également (Perceval)' ['whoever asks the questions without repairing the sword does not succeed (Gauvain). Whoever mends the sword without asking the questions similarly fails (Perceval)'].<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the *First Continuation* implies that the physical ordeal of mending the sword will afford privileged access to cognition of the Grail mysteries, as the Fisher King insinuates to Gauvain (1447–52). Yet when Gauvain fails to mend the sword, even after asking the Grail questions, the explanation given is that 'N'avez tant fait / D'armes encore que le voir / Puissiez de ceste oeuvre savoir' ['You have not yet achieved enough as a knight to be able to know the truth about this'] (1470–2). It is the satisfactory accomplishment of physical acts that will give access to knowledge and there is, significantly, no inflection of sin to Gauvain's failure, which is imputed entirely to chivalric underachievement.

If the ordeal, then, gives access to knowledge (in its provision of a sign of guilt or innocence), the function of inquest seems, albeit counter-intuitively, not so much to obtain an answer (knowledge) as to effect a change in the ontology of the subject. Just as the Inquisition required its subjects to recant and *convert*, so the practice of confession also aims to realize a metamorphosis in the individual sinner. However, as Judith Butler has argued, the change in the subject that is produced by confession can have radical implications for the question of locating sin:

Confession not only 'changes the subject' from the misdeed in question, but can work as well to *occlude and rationalize a sense of guilt that is derivable from no deed of one's own* [ . . . ] The very speaking of the crime is thus another act, a new deed, one that either defies or submits to a punishing law, but which does not yet know how to subject that fantasy of the law to reflections.<sup>73</sup>

As we shall see, this observation will be particularly pertinent to Chrétien's Perceval, the character who assumes the burden of guilt for an act that may not have been committed, and the object of whose quest is, according to Maddox, 'not primarily a tangible object or a spatial place, but above all a *cognitive discovery*'.<sup>74</sup> Yet just as Robert's *Joseph d'Arimathie* substantiated the possibility that the Grail represents a signifier rather than a signified, so the hero's

<sup>71</sup> Pp. 7–13.

<sup>72</sup> Marx, *Nouvelles recherches*, p. 89.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 170; my italics.

'cognitive discovery' would be effected not at the level of the signified itself, but rather as a performance, an act of un-covering. The 'discovery' as such is not the teleological aim of the quest, but rather a compulsively repeated act of attempting to locate and recuperate that which is unreadable and abject in the narrative. Therefore Maddox's conclusion that, 'as Perceval's principal test, questioning entails cognitive access to knowledge of a higher order' must be subjected to close scrutiny.<sup>75</sup> More persuasive, perhaps, is the argument of Cazelles, who asserts that the question is an ideological tool with which the narrative can manipulate Perceval into the role of the abject *pharmakos*, the Derridean scapegoat representing the *degré zéro* of deconstruction, its aporetic function being that of both poison and cure at the same time. Perceval is thus deluded into believing 'that he caused the doom of the Grail and must therefore redeem himself by serving the Grail cause'.<sup>76</sup> Butler's contention that confession 'can work as well to occlude and rationalize a sense of guilt that is derivable from no deed of one's own' thus seems to be borne out quite explicitly by Chrétien's romance.

As Myrrha Lot-Borodine has argued, there is no reason why Perceval's horizon of expectation should recognize a link between the Fisher King's infirmity, the Grail procession and the requirement to interrogate. Rather, the cause of his silence is 'une secrète inhibition confinant à l'angoisse' ['a secret inhibition touching on fear'], and indeed Amelia Rutledge concurs on this point that 'Perceval does not "fail" but is, rather, "inhibited" by an insurmountable prior condition'.<sup>77</sup> Perceval's inhibition is most obviously perceptible in Chrétien's poem and in the prose romance known as the *Didot-Perceval*.<sup>78</sup> In the former text, mindful of Gornemant de Goort's caveat that 'Qui trop parole, pechié fait' ['he who talks too much sins'] (*CG*, 1654), Perceval holds his tongue during the Grail procession:

Si s'est de demander tenus  
 Coment ceste chose avenoit,  
 Que del chasti li sovenoit  
 Celui qui chevalier le fist,  
 Qui li ensaigna et aprist  
 Que de trop parler se gardast. (*CG*, 3204–9)

[He held back from asking how this came to pass, for he recalled the admonishment of the one who made him a knight, and who taught him that he should refrain from talking too much.]

<sup>74</sup> Maddox, *The Arthurian Romances*, p. 111.

<sup>75</sup> Maddox, *The Arthurian Romances*, p. 112.

<sup>76</sup> Cazelles, *The Unholy Grail*, p. 176.

<sup>77</sup> Lot-Borodine, 'Le Conte del Graal', p. 269; Rutledge, 'Perceval's Sin', p. 56.

<sup>78</sup> For comprehensive critical notes and a parallel edition of the two extant manuscripts (*D* and *E*) of the *Didot-Perceval*, see Roach's 1941 edition. Line references will be to the text of *MS E*, unless otherwise indicated.



The two extant manuscripts of the *Didot-Perceval* curiously disagree on the source of the hero's inhibition, and indeed the more complete manuscript (*E*) diverges from Chrétien's characterization of Perceval's mother as the one who nurtures her son's interrogative faculty, thus nevertheless underscoring his dependence on, or response to, an other's intervention. Perceval witnesses the Grail procession at the Fisher King's castle:

Et quant Percevaus le vit si le tint a molt grant merveille et l'eüst molt volentiers demandé, se il ne cremist son oste anoyer. Et molt i pensa toute le nuit, mais il li sovint de se mere [MS *D*: du prodome qui l'avoit confessé] qui li dist que il ne fust mie trop parlans ne trop demandans des choses.

(1224–8; MS *D*, 1086)

[And when Perceval saw it he beheld it with great amazement, and he would readily have asked about it had he not feared upsetting his host. He pondered it throughout the night, but often he recalled his mother [MS *D*: the holy man to whom he had confessed], who told him not to be too talkative, nor to ask too much about things.]

It would appear that the 'inhibition' afflicting Perceval is precisely the intervention of the Other in his discourse (Latin *inhibere*: to hold in or restrain), symptomatic of his being inhibited by the symbolic order (the narrative, the language of the Other) at precisely the moments when his insertion into that order is most at stake – that is, his visits to the Grail castle.

Since the quest(ion) is necessarily confined to language, the distinction notoriously peddled by the *Queste* between 'choses terrianes' ['earthly things'] and 'choses celestielx' ['spiritual things'] that we saw in the previous chapter can be sustained by a notion of 'added religiosity', that is, the religious thematization of the irrecoverable excess of language, and especially of devotional speech acts. The postulate that by asking the Grail questions the hero might accede to a higher plane of knowledge is of precisely the same order of fantasy as the doctrine that confession offers a one-to-One communication channel with God. And yet this claim to transcendence, founded upon the adhesion of the abject to language, is precisely what enables *communication*, if not *communion*.

Nevertheless, it seems incontrovertible that the Grail questions do allow cognitive access to one extremely important aspect of the Quest – by constructing a secondary discourse *around* the Grail questions, with the rebukes and advice of the Grail knight's several interlocutors, rather than ever having those questions themselves answered, they open up a privileged window on to the relationship between sin, language and knowledge. As Maddox asserts, 'the text invites its reader to ask the essential question that Perceval failed to ask during his sojourn at the Grail castle: "Who is served by the Grail?"'<sup>79</sup> Far from deciphering the text's enigmas, the reader is thus solicited to contribute to them, and indeed to share in the sinful silence of the Grail knight's *méconnaissance*.

<sup>79</sup> Maddox, *The Arthurian Romances*, p. 113.

For the reader's horizon of expectation, like that of the Grail knight, is frustrated by his misconstrual of the question as a form that requires a content (an answer) rather than as a site of difference around which meaning is constructed.

Just as Lancelot in the *Perlesvaus* is denied his Grail vision owing to the ambiguous 'pechié de la roïne' ['sin of the queen'] (*P*, 3751), so the hero of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* is censured by his cousin for having omitted to ask the Grail questions:

Ha! Perchevax maleïrous,  
 Comme iés or mal aventurous  
 Quant tu tot che n'as demandé!  
 Que tant eüsses amendé  
 Le buen roi qui est mehaigniez  
 Que toz eüst regaaigniez  
 Ses membres et terre tenist,  
 Et si grans biens en avenist!  
 Ma[i]s or saches que grant anui  
 En avenront toi et autrui.  
*Por le pechié, ce saches tu,  
 De ta mere t'est avenu,  
 Qu'ele est mort del doel de toi.* (CG, 3583–95; my italics)

[Ah, miserable Perceval! How unfortunate that you asked no questions. You could have cured the maimed king, who would have regained the use of his limbs and control of his land. Such good would have come of it! But you should know that great misfortune will befall you and others. *You can be sure that this is because of your mother's sin/the sin relating to your mother, who died of grief for you.*]

The text here underscores the notion of the question as a performative speech act, highlighted by the couplet 'demandé'/'amandé'. The same effective power of the question is represented (albeit somewhat less succinctly) in the *Didot-Perceval*, at the moment when the hero finally succeeds in asking the questions: 'Et tant tost com il ot çou dit, si se regarda et vit que li Rois Peschiere estoit müés de se nature, et estoit garis de se maladie, et estoit sains comme pissons' ['as soon as he had said this he saw that the Fisher King was changed; he was cured of his illness, and was as healthy as a fish in water'] (1838–40). Furthermore, the *Didot-Perceval* supports the reading of Perceval's inhibition as an ambiguous sin, his sister stating that when her brother left home, 'me mere en fu molt dolante, et tel duel en ot qu'ele en feri en tel maladie que ele en morut. Or sai bien que *li pecié de me mere l'a encombré*' ['my mother was greatly aggrieved, and such was her sorrow that she fell ill and died. Now I know well that *the sin of my mother has burdened him*'] (656–8; my italics. Compare lines 3593–5 highlighted in the above passage from the *Conte du Graal*). What, then, is to be made of this ambiguous genitive? Is the sin germane to Perceval or to his mother? Is Perceval's performance in the Grail castle

inhibited by a sin of his own *caused* in relation to his mother, or is his failure a direct *effect* of his mother's sin, translated on to her son? That sin should thus be constituted as a sliding signifier, given over to an undecidable location, allows the narrative to construe that sin as a kind of always already, a *sine qua non* of the romance that glosses over the question of precisely what sin – if indeed any – has been committed.

Critics seem to have experienced little difficulty in locating Perceval's iniquity in the *Conte du Graal* at the moment he abandons his mother at the Waste Manor, yet the notion of this sin as a prerequisite for the narrative function itself has been largely ignored. Sin in fact functions as a kind of abject linguistic aporia at the very core of the narrative that constantly attempts, unsuccessfully, to separate off that which in fact provides its very dynamic. When, at home with his mother in the Waste Forest, Perceval encounters a knight who instructs him in the terminology of chivalry and as a result vows to become a knight himself, his decision finally appears to win his mother's support in spite of her earlier misgivings: 'Chevaliers serez jusqu'a po, / Fix, se Dieu plaist, et je le lo' ['if God so wills, my son, you shall soon become a knight, and with my approval'] (CG, 531–2). And yet, when Perceval does finally take his leave, his mother's reaction is adverse in the extreme:

Quant li vallés fu eslongiez  
 Le get d'une pierre menue,  
 Si se regarde et voit cheüe  
 Sa mere al chief del pont arriere,  
 Et jut pasmee en tel maniere  
 Com s'ele fust cheüe morte. (CG, 620–5)

[When the young man had gone a stone's throw, he looked back and saw that his mother had collapsed at the head of the bridge. She had fainted, and it looked as though she had fallen down dead.]

It is precisely at this juncture that, for most commentators on the *Conte du Graal*, the narrative's sin becomes rooted in the character of Perceval. Yet the text explicitly designates the *mother*, and not the son, as 'cheüe' ['fallen'] (indeed, the word is repeated).<sup>80</sup> At the moment of Perceval's departure, argues M. Amelia Klenke, 'the three elements necessary for mortal sin are clearly present: grievous matter, sufficient reflection, full consent of the will'.<sup>81</sup> Rutledge and Lot-Borodine concur on the assertion that Perceval 'knows *unconsciously* that he has killed his mother', that he is precisely 'un fils matricide

<sup>80</sup> Poirion comments on the notion of the mother's sin, suggesting that the convoluted genealogy of the Grail family has led them into incest and that 'le silence de Perceval ne lui a pas permis de connaître l'inceste de sa famille' ['Perceval's silence has not permitted him to understand his family's incest'] (*Résurgences*, p. 209).

<sup>81</sup> Klenke, 'Liturgy and Allegory', p. 14.

sans le savoir' ['an unwitting matricide'].<sup>82</sup> Yet for the former critic Perceval cannot exactly have committed a mortal sin, for 'one cannot unknowingly commit a mortal sin; such sins require awareness of the deed and a willing refusal to follow God's laws'.<sup>83</sup>

Perceval himself does not have certain knowledge of his mother's fate until he is informed of her death by his cousin, 'Qui en terre metre le vi' ['Who saw her being interred'] (CG, 3617), and indeed on several occasions he expresses his anxiety to return to the Waste Manor to ascertain her fate. As he explains to Gornemant de Goort:

Sire, ne sai se je sui pres  
 Del manoir ou ma mere maint,  
 Mais je pri Dieu qu'a li me maint  
 Tant qu'encor le puisse veoir,  
 Car pasmee le vi cheoir  
 Al chief del pont devant la porte,  
 Si ne sai s'ele est vive ou morte.  
 Del doel de moi quant le laissai,  
 Chaï pasmee, bien le sai. (CG, 1580–8)

[Sir, I do not know if I am close to the manor in which my mother lives, but I pray God that he take me there whilst I might still see her, for I saw her fall in a faint upon the bridge at the entrance, and I do not know if she is alive or dead. I know well that she fell down in a faint out of sorrow for me when I left her.]

A similar explanation is given by Perceval to Blanchefleur upon his departure from Beaurepaire (CG, 2917–32), and it would thus seem difficult to comprehend how Perceval's sin can be imputed entirely to his lack of compassion on leaving his mother. What is, however, striking about each one of the passages in which Perceval's departure is recounted is the emphasis placed on the fact that his mother fainted (twice in the space of five lines in the last citation). Indeed, Perceval's mother does seem somewhat prone to fainting fits, and the first occasion on which she succumbs proves much more illuminating for our question of locating sin. Confronting his mother about the passing knights, Perceval adamantly refuses to believe that those knights were angels, as his mother would have him believe:

'Non ai, voir, mere, non ai, non!  
 Chevalier dient qu'il ont non.'  
 La mere se pame a cest mot,  
 Quant chevalier nomer li ot. (CG, 401–4)

<sup>82</sup> Rutledge, 'Perceval's Sin', p. 55; Lot-Borodine, 'Le Conte del Graal', pp. 269–70.

<sup>83</sup> Rutledge, 'Perceval's Sin', p. 55. Catholic doctrine stresses that 'imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance' (*Catechism*, article 1735).

[‘No mother, no, in truth, no! They said that they were knights.’  
Hearing this word, the mother faints at the mention of knights.]

It is quite explicitly the very word ‘chevalier’ that causes Perceval’s mother to pass out here; for Charles Méla ‘le nom seul, ainsi proféré, est meurtrier’ [‘the very name, thus articulated, is deadly’].<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the mother has gone to considerable lengths to repress this word and its connotations:

Biax dols fix, de chevalerie  
Vos quidoie si bien garder  
Que ja n’en oïssiez parler  
Ne que ja nul n’en veïssiez. (CG, 408–11)

[Dear son, I had hoped to protect you so well from chivalry that  
you would never hear speak of it, nor see anything of it.]

Perceval, his mother explains, was to have been knighted himself, following in the footsteps of his father and two brothers. Yet their tragic fates – both siblings were killed on the first day of their knighthood – made her protect her younger son from such ravages.

In this opening section of the *Conte du Graal*, chivalry is largely presented as a construct of terminology, as is clear in the comic disjunctions and associations of words and things in Perceval’s dialogue with the passing knight. Could it be that the sin of Chrétien’s narrative is to be located in Perceval’s mother’s foreclosure of a master signifier: chivalry? Although she is able to offer her son a fluent account of both religious practice and knightly conduct, even encouraging him to ask questions as often as possible (later causing Gornemant de Goort to curtail Perceval’s loquaciousness, and reduce him to his sinful silence), his mother’s eloquence would seem to exhibit the same characteristics recognized by Kristeva in the speech of the phobic, which ‘se caractérise aussi par une agilité extrême. Mais cette habilité vertigineuse est comme vidée de sens, roulant à toute vitesse au-dessus d’un abîme intouché et intouchable’ [‘is also characterized by an extreme agility. Yet this dizzying speech is almost emptied of meaning, turning at top speed over an untouched and untouchable abyss’].<sup>85</sup> Perceval’s mother has a clear phobia of the master signifier here, a signifier that, once foreclosed, renders discourse unreadable; that discourse is henceforth abject and loaded with sin, as Perceval later discovers for himself.

However, the characters of Chrétien’s poem consistently lend support to the position that sin is the *cause* of silence, rather than the contrary notion that silence (repression of language/foreclosure of the signifier) is sinful *per se*. Such is certainly the line adopted by Perceval’s hermitic uncle, who tells his nephew that ‘pechie[z] la langue te trencha’ [‘sin cut out your tongue’] (CG, 6409). Perceval is admonished for his failure at the Grail castle on three

<sup>84</sup> Méla, *Blanchefleur*, p. 22.

separate occasions – firstly by his cousin shortly after leaving the castle (CG, 3581–3611), then by the Loathly Maiden at Arthur’s court (4646–83) and finally by his uncle (6392–6433). The censures of Perceval’s cousin and uncle both make the explicit causal link between sin and silence, epitomized by the uncle’s declaration that ‘Por le pechié que tu en as / T’avint que tu ne demandas’ [‘Because of the sin that is in you, you did not ask’] (CG, 6399–6400) – and yet not one of the three indictments characterizes Perceval’s failure itself as sinful.<sup>86</sup>

His uncle impels Perceval to confess, and then expresses his willingness to ‘enjoindre et doner / Penitance de ton pechié’ [‘prescribe penance for your sin’] (CG, 6432–3). As part of this penance, Perceval is to remain with his uncle for a further two days, during which time he will endure the privations of the hermit. Furthermore, he is required to learn a prayer spelling out the names of God:

Et li hermites li conseille  
 Une oroison dedens l’oreille,  
 Si li ferma tant qu’il le sot.  
 Et en cele oroison si ot  
 Assez des nons nostre Seignor,  
 Car il i furent li greignor  
 Que nomer ne doit bouche d’ome,  
 Se por paor de mort nes nome.  
 Quant l’oroison li ot aprise,  
 Desfendi lui qu’en nule guise  
 Ne la deïst sanz grant peril.<sup>87</sup> (CG, 6481–91)

[The hermit confides a prayer to his ear, and repeats it until he knows it well. In this prayer were listed many of the names of our Lord, including the most holy ones which should not pass men’s lips, unless they are spoken in fear of death. When he had taught him the prayer, he forbade him to repeat it in anything other than the direst circumstances.]

This ceremony involves the acquisition of a kind of ‘linguistic icon’ that must then be suppressed (i.e., it must not be retold), and as such becomes an excess. Similarly in the *Didot-Perceval*, once Perceval has asked the Grail questions, ‘[Bron] li aprist les sacrees paroles que Joseph li avoit aprises, que je ne vous puis dire ne ne doi’ [‘Bron taught him the secret words that Joseph had imparted

<sup>85</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 52–3.

<sup>86</sup> Indeed, his two female accusers use the same term to denounce Perceval as ‘maleïrous’ (CG, 3583, 4662) – he is unfortunate or accursed rather than specifically sinful.

<sup>87</sup> Méla notes that one manuscript of the *Conte du Graal* (MS Copenhagen, AM 414 in–12) enumerates the holy names recounted to Perceval, and said to have been ‘écrits par saint Clément dans un “brief” dont le porteur n’aura plus à craindre la mort par glaive ne pendaison, ou, s’il est femme, perte d’enfant ni mort en couches’ [‘written by St Clement in a “letter” that would afford its bearer protection from death by sword or rope or, if a woman, the loss of a child or death in childbirth’] (*Blanchefleur*, p. 43 n. 1).

to him, and that I must not and cannot relate to you'] (1868–70).<sup>88</sup> The narrative thus corroborates the fundamental *illisibilité* of the text; silence is rendered the symptom of an unspeakable excess that resists assimilation into the symbolic order. Similarly, the silence engendered by Perceval's uncle's 'ouison' acquires a kind of positive valency; it is precisely a case of *not saying something* rather than of merely *saying nothing*.

Chrétien's Perceval is always already the scapegoat, and he confirms himself in this role after his silent failure at the Grail castle. Indeed, Cazelles believes that 'Perceval's silence *bespeaks* guilt and is the event from which the meaning of his story derives'.<sup>89</sup> This desire to attach meaning to silence, to fill the abject lack of desire with a readable signifier (S1) and thereby give it certain anchorage within the narrative, leads to the (mis)construal of the linguistic excess that silence masks as the sin of which silence is the guilty signifier.

### Sins of the *Queste*

The problem of *illisibilité* that is brought to the fore in both the *Conte du Graal* and the *Didot-Perceval* takes on an entirely different aspect in the *Queste*, that text which is supremely concerned with the readability and interpretation of signs and allegory. Biblical exegesis of the neophyte characters' allegorical visions, as provided by the seemingly inexhaustible supply of hermits, occupies much of the narrative space, as was discussed in the preceding chapter. And yet, paradoxically, at the very core of this narrative persists the repeated mantra of the unreadability of the Grail itself: 'ce que cuers mortex ne porroit penser ne langue d'ome terrien deviser' ['that of which the heart of mortal man could not conceive, nor the tongue of earthly man relate'] (*Q*, 19:25–6). Whereas the body and language had previously figured as separate sites of the symptoms of excess, they now become conjoined in this hendiadatic formulation of ineffability.

With regard to the *Queste*, Jean Marx's survey of the Grail questions observes that 'ici les questions tendent à disparaître [. . .] les épreuves demeurent, mais elles sont interprétées symboliquement' ['here the questions tend to disappear. The tests remain, but they are interpreted symbolically'].<sup>90</sup> The *Queste* might thus appear somewhat regressive insofar as it could be seen to privilege action over speech, reversing the contemporary movement from ordeal to inquest. And yet the absence of the Grail questions from the *Queste* could also be seen, almost paradoxically, to represent the successful and complete interiorization of sin within discourse. Any suggestion that the *Queste* promotes action over enunciation ignores the fact that every ordeal (usually in the form of

<sup>88</sup> Cf. MS *D*: 'les paroles segroies de nostre Seygnor que je ne vos puis dire ne ne doi' ['the secret words of Our Lord, that I cannot and must not relate to you'] (1534–5).

<sup>89</sup> Cazelles, *The Unholy Grail*, p. 175.

<sup>90</sup> Marx, *Nouvelles recherches*, p. 109.



a vision or hallucinatory dream in this text) is accompanied by its gloss, the exegetic discourse (offering a new system of knowledge to the sinner; S2, the product of his discourse) retrospectively woven around the experience by a hermit, and without which the ordeal is utterly meaningless for the one who has endured it. In one such instance, Gauvain is reproached for his sinfulness by a hermit, whom he then interrogates for the meaning of a vision he has recently experienced: ‘dites moi la senefiance, si que je la sache conter a cort quant je i vendré’ [‘tell me the meaning, so that I might have a story to tell when I arrive back at court’] (*Q*, 54:32–3). Gauvain is explicitly *not* seeking a didactic discourse by means of which to improve himself, but merely wants to hear a good story that he might subsequently retail at court. The allegorical exegesis, the ‘senefiance’ offered by hermits, could be seen to be useful more for its aesthetic *form* than for its pedagogic *content*. These narrative renditions of sin might thus be deemed to represent a mechanism for aestheticizing sin, for making it sublime – and thus sublimating it. We recall Lukacher’s postulate that ‘jouissance is an aesthetic text, an aesthetic-hysteric text’, and such a suggestion would now seem to account for the way in which the Grail romances, and particularly the *Queste*, go about attempting to rehabilitate the sinful excess of *jouissance* within discourse, so that it becomes none other than the *plus-de-jouir* (*a*), the remainder of *jouissance* that persists in the symbolic, and that is the repressed truth of the hysteric-sinner’s discourse.<sup>91</sup>

The Grail romances speak with a new discourse that offers their narrative sinners only what Kristeva calls ‘la joie de leur débordement mis en signe’ [‘the overflowing of their ecstasy, turned into a sign’].<sup>92</sup> The ultimate such sign must be the Grail itself, a perfect instance of ‘des signes qui n’ont pas de sens mais qui possèdent les sens’ [‘signs that have no sense, but that take over the senses’], signs that, for Méla, are nothing if not ‘de purs signifiants dont l’illisibilité même fait la jouissance’ [‘pure signifiers whose very unreadability gives rise to enjoyment’].<sup>93</sup> It is precisely through asserting the readability of such dangerously powerful symbols as the Grail, by asserting their function as master signifiers embedded within a discourse structure, that these narratives succeed in speaking the unspeakable.

The hysteric’s distrusting anxiety will always be met by the response of the master. It is only when the repressed desire that articulates the discourse of the Hysteric is accorded full agency, as it is in the discourse of the Analyst, that a more radical possibility for transgression is encountered.

<sup>91</sup> Lukacher, ‘Epistemology of Disgust’, p. xx.

<sup>92</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 154.

<sup>93</sup> Méla, *Blanchefleur*, p. 21.

## Dead to the World: Dreaming of Life and Death on the Quest of the Holy Grail

Tout commence par l'apparition du spectre<sup>1</sup>

Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*

Perhaps the most renowned of Freud's dream cases, and certainly that which has attracted the keenest attention from Freud's own interpreters, is the 'Dream of the Burning Child'.<sup>2</sup> For all the critical scrutiny that this dream, and the haunting rebuke of the eponymous child, 'Father, can't you see I'm burning?', has received, there remains a certain mysterious obscurity to the case, and especially its unexplained origin: the dream is recounted at several removes and Freud admits that 'its actual source is still unknown to me'.<sup>3</sup> The image of a dead child lying on a bed surrounded by candles, watched over by an elderly guardian whilst the father sleeps fitfully in an adjoining room undeniably carries strong resonances of a medieval death.<sup>4</sup> My intention in this chapter is to explore ways in which the scenario presented by Freud, and Lacan's response to it, can be transposed, through the Lacanian discourse of the Analyst, on to two dreams of 'suspended subjectivity' from the Old French Grail romances. Whilst the content of the dream can hold both interest and significance, I will argue that the *form* that the dream takes, particularly its retelling in narrative form, warrants particular attention.<sup>5</sup> Whilst the notion of 'suspended subjectivity' is explicitly presented through an encounter with the Grail in the *Queste*, the *Perlesvaus* is more circumspect in its depiction of a burlesque 'pre-Quest' offering incisive commentary on notions of identity, knowledge and power in the narrative, and especially as these are rehearsed in the dream.

Both scenarios from the Old French texts lend themselves to analysis through

<sup>1</sup> 'It all starts with the appearance of the spectre.'

<sup>2</sup> Freud, *SE*, V, 509–11, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Freud, *SE*, V, 509.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, images of deathbeds and funeral rites in Wieck, 'The Death Desired'. Wieck comments that the lit taper, which features so prominently in Freud's account, was a 'common motif' of the deathbed scene (p. 434).

<sup>5</sup> As Žižek observes, 'the theoretical intelligence of the form of dreams does not consist in penetrating from the manifest content to its "hidden kernel", to the latent dream-thoughts; it consists in the answer to the question: why have the latent dream-thoughts assumed such a form, why were they transposed into the form of a dream?' (*SO*, p. 11).

the trope of spectrality, as explored by Derrida in his 1993 work *Spectres de Marx*, critiqued by Žižek the following year in an essay entitled ‘The Spectre of Ideology’. The ‘precise distance’ from Derrida that Žižek seeks to assume in this essay stems from the ostensible incommensurability of the Derridean and Lacanian concepts of the spectre.<sup>6</sup> For Derrida, as Žižek sees it, ‘spectrality, the apparition of the Other, provides the ultimate horizon of ethics’ and the spectre is therefore owed a certain (symbolic) debt of responsibility.<sup>7</sup> Žižek himself is (unsurprisingly) adherent to the contrary Lacanian position that ‘our primary duty is not towards the spectre’, since that figure exists beyond any ethical gesture, bearing upon the radical freedom of the real.<sup>8</sup> It is the spectre’s potential to represent the ‘act of freedom *qua* real’ that appeals to Žižek (after Lacan), for in doing so the spectre ‘not only transgresses the limits of what we experience as “reality”, it cancels our very primordial indebtedness to the spectral Other’.<sup>9</sup>

As such, we can see how the spectre negotiates a central role in the interplay between the three Lacanian registers of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. Indeed, as Žižek continues, ‘there is no reality without the spectre [. . .] the circle of reality can be closed only by means of an uncanny spectral supplement’.<sup>10</sup> The spectre is thus attributed properties similar to the *objet a*, located by Lacan at the centre of the Borromean knot uniting the three registers.<sup>11</sup> Like the spectre, the *a* ‘fills up the hole of the real’ and, most importantly for the present purpose, occupies one of the positions in Lacan’s schema of discourse.<sup>12</sup>

Žižek argues that ‘Derrida brought into play the term “spectre” in order to indicate this elusive pseudo-materiality that subverts the classical ontological oppositions of reality and illusion’, and it is precisely this subversion of the ontological categories of reality and illusion that we shall see rehearsed in the dream state, supporting an analogy between spectrality and the dream-structure – although the exact relationship between the dream and the spectre will require more careful nuancing.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, the undecidable ontology of what we might call the quasi-spectral dreamer appears to accord agency to the *a*, and as such the dream suggests itself as an instance of the permutation of discourse that Lacan calls the discourse of the Analyst:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} a & \rightarrow & \$ \\ \hline S2 & & S1 \end{array}$$

<sup>6</sup> See also Kay, *Žižek*, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, pp. 26–7.

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, pp. 27–8.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> See Evans, *Dictionary*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, p. 20.

As Žižek points out, ‘what the spectre conceals is not reality, but its “primordially repressed,” the irrepressible X on whose “repression” reality itself is founded’.<sup>14</sup> This double cut or double repression, embodied in the spectre, is also at work in the dream, not least in the way that the repression/sublimation of the dream is subsequently subjected to a further stratum of repression/re-presentation in its passage through the sieve of the signifier, its conversion to narrative format (i.e., the *telling* of a dream). Is it, then, the dream *per se* rather than the subject (the dreamer) that is to be read as spectral?

If ‘the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality’,<sup>15</sup> holding open a gap between the order of the real and that which is perceived as reality, then to cast the dreamer himself as the spectre (*objet a*, the agent of the discourse) reveals a certain fetishistic bad faith: ‘I know that the dreamer is not fully accountable for his dream, but nevertheless . . .’. It is by means of this *méconnaissance* that *the spectrality of the dream itself* is obfuscated: the dream, not the *dreamer*, is the agent of the discourse of the Analyst. This important distinction will be further elucidated when I come to consider the slippage between the dream itself and its subsequent conversion into narrative form.

### The Ecstatic Dream

The medievals’ attitude towards the interpretation of dreams oscillated between contradictory scriptural standpoints. Whilst the Bible is sometimes seen to validate the ‘use of dreams as predictive tools’, explicit imperatives against oneirocriticism are also issued by the Holy Writ.<sup>16</sup> Antipathy towards dream-interpretation is also evinced by medieval thinkers such as John of Salisbury (c. 1115–80), who warns that ‘whoever involves himself in the deception of dreams is not sufficiently awake to the law of God, suffers a loss of faith, and drowns to his own ruin’.<sup>17</sup> The response from literary authors of the period to the notion of the dream as a locus of epiphanic revelation was equally one of considerable scepticism; Chrétien shows himself to be particularly cynical in this respect.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the medieval mind clearly retained a fascination with dreams, and the passion for oneiromancy is well documented by the enormous enthusiasm generated in the Middle Ages for dream-books, almanacs providing a methodology for the interpretation of dreams according to one of several systems available.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, ‘Spectre’, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Kruger, *Dreaming*, p. 7; cf. Deuteronomy 18.9–12.

<sup>17</sup> John of Salisbury, *Frivolities of Courtiers*, II.17.

<sup>18</sup> See Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*, pp. 225ff.

<sup>19</sup> See Kruger, *Dreaming*, pp. 7–16. Three main types of dream-book are enumerated: the ‘dream alphabet’ with which dreams could be interpreted according to meanings corresponding to letters of the alphabet perceived in the dream; the ‘dream lunar’, which

Certainly one of the most important dream-books disseminated during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would have been Macrobius's *Comentarii in Somnium Scipionis*,<sup>20</sup> of which two aspects are of particular interest here. Firstly, Macrobius divides dreams into five distinct categories, deemed to represent varying degrees of truth and therefore being of greater or lesser value to the interpreter. The second aspect that attracts attention is that the five categories of dream are aligned with equivalent value-judgements ascribed to genres of fictional works, to the extent that, as Kruger observes, Macrobius 'depicts dream and fiction as occupying parallel realms'.<sup>21</sup> Of Macrobius's five categories of dream, three (*oraculum*, *visio* and *somnium*) are deemed to offer 'true' revelations of varying degrees of divinity, whilst two (*insomnium* and *visum*) are 'false' portents that cannot be credited with any veracity.<sup>22</sup>

One of these 'false' dreams is of further interest still – the *visum*, a kind of in-between of waking and sleeping in which the dreamer perceives a type of spectral apparition, and which 'involves a movement (however slight) beyond the confines of the self'.<sup>23</sup> Macrobius defines this class of dream as 'a drowsy condition [in which] the dreamer thinks he is still fully asleep and *imagines he sees spectres* rushing at him or wandering vaguely about'.<sup>24</sup> This dream-state would seem to attest to a double spectrality – not only does the dreamer experience ghostly apparitions, but he himself is taken 'beyond the confines of the self', pushed to the very limits of his consciousness. The existence of a state, categorized as a type of dream, in which the subjectivity of the dreamer is somehow imperilled has also been noted by Jean-Charles Huchet, who describes two categories of medieval dream that reside somewhere in the interval between waking and sleeping.<sup>25</sup> The first, termed the *dorveille*, represents a relatively secure and creatively fertile zone of semi-consciousness: 'La *dorveille* définit un état de conscience intermédiaire entre le sommeil et la veille, durant lequel le chevalier errant sur son cheval compose une pièce poétique' ['The *dorveille* represents an intermediate state of consciousness between sleep and waking, in which the knight on horseback composes a poetic

determined the meaning of the dream according to phases of the moon; and what Kruger terms the 'dreambook proper', the only system to take account of the content of the dream as an index of meaning (and therefore the closest to Freudian dream interpretation). See also Fischer, *The Complete Medieval Dreambook*; Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*; and Bodenham, 'The Dream in Late Medieval French Literature'.

<sup>20</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, trans. Stahl. See also Peden, 'Macrobius and Medieval Dream Literature'.

<sup>21</sup> Kruger, *Dreaming*, p. 133.

<sup>22</sup> De Wilde notes that 'during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, doubts arise about the veracity of the great visions of the Otherworld [. . .] Above all, the departure of the soul constitutes a problem.' Of the solutions proposed for this problem, that of 'making the journey of the soul the subject of a dream had already been refuted by skeptics [*sic*] as unconvincing' ('Between Life and Death', p. 178).

<sup>23</sup> Kruger, *Dreaming*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, trans. Stahl, I.iii.7; my italics.

<sup>25</sup> Huchet, *Littérature médiévale et psychanalyse*. See especially pp. 43–63.

work as he wanders’].<sup>26</sup> In contrast, the *esbahissement*, the second intermediate state described by Huchet, represents a direct threat to the very being of the dreamer: ‘Dans l’*esbahissement* (l’extase, la *visio*, seconde catégorie de rêve chez les Pères latins) – autre “rêve éveillé” littéraire –, le chevalier, tout à sa contemplation, ne s’appartient plus. Il s’efface afin de n’être plus rien pour que l’objet regardé soit tout’ [‘In the *esbahissement* (ecstasy, *visio*, the second category of dreams for the Latin fathers – another literary “waking dream” –, the knight, in his contemplation, is no longer fully himself. He undoes himself to the extent of becoming nothing, so that the object of contemplation can become all’].<sup>27</sup>

It is precisely the subjective destitution identified by Huchet in the *esbahissement* – in which the dreamer becomes detached, or is alienated from himself – that can be seen enacted in two ‘waking dream’ episodes from the prose Grail romances. The dreamer is denied agency in these dreams – he is, to follow the analyst’s discourse *matheme*, the split subject (\$) in the position of the other, to whom the agent’s *a* is addressed. The dreamer experiences his own being as a lack/excess; he is both more than and less than himself, non-identical (\$). The ecstatic medieval dream can thus be seen as a locus of subjective destitution, defined by Lacan as the withdrawal of the subject from the domain of the Other.<sup>28</sup> This destitution might be configured as physical trauma, as it is in the *Perlesvaus*, or spiritual, as in the *Queste*. In both cases, the traditional *songe/mensonge* link is broken, and the waking-dream provides a structure through which to explore the constitution of subjectivity and identity, and above all to examine the codification of the dream as narrative.<sup>29</sup>

The narration of the dream can ultimately be seen as an unsuccessful or incoherent attempt to rehabilitate traumatic *jouissance*, which both Freud and Lacan identify in the dream, within the frame of reference of the symbolic social order. The remainder of *jouissance* in the field of the signifier is of course the *plus-de-jouir* (*a*), the agent of the discourse of the Analyst. The narration of the dream appears to offer a certain return to stability following the chaos of the dream proper; as Kruger observes, ‘dream theory, in its long history, may be read as an attempt to control the dream’s dangerous power through codification’.<sup>30</sup> As the textual analyses that follow will show, the traumatic otherness that the dreamer encounters *in himself* is subsequently structured and gentrified by the production of new master signifiers (S1), anchor points in the symbolic order that produce and assure meaning, making the subject, and the experience

<sup>26</sup> Huchet, *Littérature médiévale et psychanalyse*, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Huchet, *Littérature médiévale et psychanalyse*, pp. 48–9. Note that Huchet aligns this experience with the category of the *visio* (a ‘true’ dream) rather than the ‘false’ *visum*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Žižek, *Enjoy*, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Dubost comments that ‘le rêve avéré introduit brutalement l’idée que le songe n’est plus mensonge, mais réalité violente de sang et de mort’ [‘the dream-come-true brutally introduces the idea that the dream is no longer a lie, but a violent reality of blood and death’] (‘Le *Perlesvaus*, livre de haute violence’, p. 185).

<sup>30</sup> Kruger, *Dreaming*, p. 150.

of his dream, *readable* and therefore *narratable*. It is at exactly this point, with the codification of the dream as a narrative, that the discourse of the Analyst, characterized by the uncanny agency of the spectral *a*, makes its quarter turn and revolves into a master discourse, in which the hegemony of the master signifier is (re)assured.

The dreamer himself occupies an intermediate position in the discourse of the Analyst, somewhere between the spectral *a* of the dream's agency (principally residing in the imaginary, but bearing the pressure of the real), and the split subject of the dream's symbolic codification. The zone inhabited by the dreamer, the interval between the imaginary 'I' (the 'moi') and the barred subject (\$), is precisely that of the Kristevan abject: 'Pas moi. Pas ça. Mais pas rien non plus' ['Not me. Not that. But not nothing either'].<sup>31</sup> Both Freud's account of the dream of the Burning Child and Lacan's later revisiting of it establish the dream-state as a locus (both temporal and spatial) in which the boundary between the 'I' and the 'subject', between the one who *is* and the one who *has meaning*, is precarious, and where identity is constantly at stake – or rather, where identity teeters on the brink of *abjection*.<sup>32</sup> This very abjection might be located in the failure to separate the dream itself (as discourse of the Analyst) from its narration (a master discourse). Yet the very singularity of the dream, its resistance to the symbolic order, prevents its reduction to a model of discourse; it is in the dream, and in the failure fully to symbolize it, that we are afforded a glimpse of the abject in-betweens of discourse.

The undecidable status of the dream both imperils and empowers its subject since, as Mary Douglas has observed, the dream-state represents a particular 'disorder of the mind' that is nevertheless a locus of power given that one 'expects to find [in the dream] powers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort'.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the notion that the dream is a privileged platform of revelation, that it somehow touches on the Lacanian real, is essentially a fantasy.<sup>34</sup> The dream can only ever re-produce a secondary reproduction (the Freudian *Repräsentanz*) of the primary act of representation (Freud's *Vorstellung*); the dreamwork is, of course, precisely a process of symbolization – of displacement and condensation, metonymy and metaphor. A secondary repression, or double cut, is then performed when the dream is processed in the symbolic order, that is, when it assumes a secondary *narrative* form.<sup>35</sup> The sublimation of the dream might therefore be symptomatic of a missed encounter with the real, what Lacan calls the *tuché*, an epistemological trauma resulting from the inability to know the dream that remains unrecounted. The very singularity and narrative inaccessibility of this dream (as it remains in progress)

<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> See Lacan, *SI*, pp. 67ff.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 94.

<sup>34</sup> As Kruger puts it, 'dreams were often thought to foretell the future because they allowed the human soul access to a transcendent, spiritual reality' (*Dreaming*, p. 2).

<sup>35</sup> See Freud, *SE*, XIV, 152–3 and 177.



render it a privileged site of the real. Once recounted, a dream, like a secret, is no longer a dream but rather the *telling* of that dream – a retroactive attempt to accommodate the real within the symbolic order, an attempt that inevitably constitutes the dream as *a*, the *plus-de-jour*, the only remainder of *jouissance* in the symbolic field. It is perhaps here that Freud's strategy in analysing the dream of the Burning Child should be differentiated from Lacan's later approach. Whereas Freud's assessment is based upon a recounting at several removes of the dream-narrative (an emulation of the dreamwork itself), Lacan engages more directly with the structural repetitions of the dream, frequently reworking the motif of the child's rebuke into his own discourse: '*Père, ne vois-tu pas, je brûle*' ['Father, can't you see I'm burning']. The repetition of this motif confirms the status of the child as a harbinger of the real, repressed and constantly threatening its return; a place-holder for the traumatic missed encounter with what the dream can only ever gesture towards.

In addition to its aporia of knowledge, the dream-state also brings into question the very ontology of the subject. These compounded crises are well illustrated by the two examples from medieval Grail narratives that explore the status of the dreamer as a *sujet-en-procès*, as one who is fundamentally 'dead to the world'. The subject's identity might either be reasserted or further imperilled as a result of the dream, yet this dichotomy does not always map neatly onto a distinction between life and death. Thus, at certain moments, the subject's identity is paradoxically constituted precisely by that which un-does him – his own death.<sup>36</sup> This moment of pure self-identity is, for the subject, a moment at which, in Žižek's formulation, '*the conditions of possibility coincide with the conditions of impossibility*'.<sup>37</sup>

### Dreaming of Death on the Chapel Ride

The first branch of the *Perlesvaus* provides superlative illustration of the workings of the discourse of the Analyst, in which the *objet a* as agent addresses a message to the split subject (\$) in the position of the other, who then reacts to this interpellation with the production of new master signifiers, which in turn will assure a return to the hegemony of the master. Such a reading of the narrative is in no way inconsistent with the earlier discussion of the *Perlesvaus* as exemplifying the discourse of the Master; the two discourses are in thrall to one another in the production or agency of the master signifier. Furthermore, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter, comparative analysis of parallel episodes from different texts suggests that no single discourse can ever be fully in command of a narrative – instead a constant oscillation is produced between the

<sup>36</sup> Compare the episode of the Dragon Knight in the *Perlesvaus*, discussed in Chapter 1 (pp. 55–6).

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 171.

different configurations of discourse, a movement that suggests the very inconsistency of those discourses and offers a glimpse of their abject underside.

With a somewhat bizarrely telescoped chronology, the opening branch of the *Perlesvaus* tells how, after the Crucifixion, King Arthur enjoyed a prolonged period of success and renown, due in no small part to his fervent evangelism. Arthur's faith fortifies his earthly prowess, and his enterprises are blessed with God's grace: 'estoit rois poissanz e bien creanz en Dieu; e molt avoient de buennes aventures en sa cort' ['he was a powerful king who believed firmly in God; many fine adventures occurred at his court'] (*P*, 62–4). At this point, Arthur quite clearly has 'It', the divine assurance of success that might be identified with the *objet a*, the agency of Arthur's hegemony (i.e., what is in him more than himself). After ten years in this state of grace, Arthur's moon begins to wane, and 'une volentez delaianz li vint, e commença a perdre le talent des largescs que il soloit fere' ['he became neglectful, and began to lose the generous habits that he once had'] (*P*, 69–70).<sup>38</sup> Proof of this decadence is found in the king's failure to celebrate the rituals of Christian feasts – 'ne voloit cort tenir a Noël, ne a Pasques, ne a Pentecoste' ['he did not wish to hold court at Christmas, nor at Easter, nor at Pentecost'] (*P*, 70–1) – Arthur ceases to perform his symbolic mandate, to address the Other, or to return the message of his success in inverse form. From this point, the narrative itself assumes the role of the *a* of discourse, consistent with the agency accorded to *a* in the discourse of the Analyst. Arthur is addressed as the analysand, the split subject who has lost 'It'; that 'It' is now imbedded in the narrative itself, where it is construed as 'L'autoritez de l'escriture' ['the authority of the writing'] (*P*, 58), the legitimating factor that is in the narrative more than the narrative and that corresponds to the authority of the analyst.<sup>39</sup> In order to restore himself and his kingdom to the state of grace, Arthur must undertake a hazardous pilgrimage to the chapel of St Augustine, a kind of narrative therapy or gesture of appeasement to the Other, by means of which his faith and valour are to be reconfirmed. This episode has come to be known as the Chapel Ride.<sup>40</sup>

After a somewhat protracted discussion with the queen as to who should accompany him on this journey, a dialogue whose relevance only becomes clear much later on, acquiring meaning retroactively, Arthur agrees to be accompanied by a single squire by the name of Cahus.<sup>41</sup> The valet decides to sleep fully

<sup>38</sup> Note that MS *OAc* has 'desloiaulx uolentes' at line 69; Arthur is cast as actively disloyal rather than simply prevaricating.

<sup>39</sup> With reference to the prose *Lancelot*, Rockwell observes that 'the *conte* is both a "source" of authority located somewhere beyond the text and the speaking of that entity in or through the text' (*Rewriting Resemblance*, p. 193).

<sup>40</sup> *P*, 121–82. The episode is commented on in Zink's article 'Le Rêve avéré'. It is also the subject of a note by Marjorie Williamson ('The Dream of Cahus in *Perlesvaus*'), who posits an analogy between the *Perlesvaus* and two Irish *imrama*. The Chapel Ride also features in the surviving verse section at the end of an anonymous fourteenth-century prose romance, *Fouke Fitz Warin*.

<sup>41</sup> Dubost describes 'le jeune Cahus, personnage obscur, dont le nom est chargé de

clothed during the night preceding the outing lest he should oversleep and miss the appointed departure hour. No sooner has he fallen asleep, however, than Cahus begins to dream that the king has already left without him, and he immediately sets off in hot pursuit. The narrative insists upon the dream-state in which Cahus's adventure unfolds ('Il se pensa en sonjant' ['he thought to himself whilst dreaming'], *P*, 131–2), frequently repeating the formula 'ce li ert [or estoit] avis' ['it appeared to him'] (*P*, 124, 127, 131, 147). As Christiane Marchello-Nizia has noted, 'dès le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, se met en place dans les textes français une formule impersonnelle, *avis me fu / avis li fu* [ . . . ] *le rêveur est un lien où s'effectue un procès, et n'en est pas l'agent*' ['from the twelfth century, an impersonal formula is found in French texts: *it seemed to me/him* [ . . . ] *The dreamer is not the agent, but the link through which proceedings are effected*'].<sup>42</sup> This comment is signally pertinent to the operation of the discourse of the Analyst, identifiable in the dream where, as we have already suggested, the dreamer is not so much the agent (*a*), but the site at which the agent's message is received and processed (*\$*). Insistence on the term 'avis' in the presentation of Cahus's dream signals the imposition of a mindset upon the squire: he is 'advised' in a very determinate manner by the narrative.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it might be said that the narrative is doing Cahus's thinking for him at this point, and this suggestion acquires particular significance in the light of Mladen Dolar's conclusion that, as far as a Lacanian reading of the Cartesian cogito goes: '*it is not the same subject that thinks and that is; the one that is is not the one that thinks, even more, the one that is is ultimately not a subject at all*'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, whilst he is being thought *for* (by the narrative), Cahus *is* – his being acquires a kind of transcendent quality akin to the singularity of the real. The two poles of the Cartesian dichotomy might now be transposed on to Lacan's distinction between dreaming (being) and having dreamt (thinking/meaning), and indeed this can be extrapolated much further in relation to the Chapel Ride episode.

Cahus continues to dream that he has reached St Augustine's chapel alone, where he finds not the king but only an unidentified dead knight laid out in

connotations diaboliques et païennes' ['the young Cahus, an obscure character whose name is inflected with demonic and pagan connotations'] ('*Le Perlesvaus*, livre de haute violence', p. 191).

<sup>42</sup> Marchello-Nizia, 'La Rhétorique des songes', p. 247; my italics post-ellipsis. See Sargent-Baur, 'Avis li fu', for comment on a similar formula in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. The phrase 'avis me fu' has the implication of 'I was advised/informed' that does not translate easily into the English 'it seemed to me'.

<sup>43</sup> The dream is recounted almost entirely in the indicative mood, on which Marchello-Nizia comments that 'l'emploi de l'indicatif montre que les événements du songe sont présentés sur le mode de la *réalité*, de la *vérité*: ils ne sont donnés ni comme pure fiction de l'imagination du rêveur, ni comme opinion singulière' ['the use of the indicative shows that the events of the dream are presented as *reality*, as *truth*: they are offered neither as pure fictions of the dreamer's imagination, nor as one-sided opinions'] ('La Rhétorique des songes', p. 247).

<sup>44</sup> Dolar, 'Cogito', p. 19.

state, an image remarkably similar to that presented by Freud in the dream of the Burning Child:

Il n'i vit nului ne d'une part ne d'autre, fors un chevalier qui gisoit enmi la chapele deseur une litiere, e estoit coverz d'un riche drap de soie, e estoient .iiii. estavauz environ lui ardant, qui estoient fichié en quatre chandelabres d'or.  
(P, 134–8)

[He could see no-one around, except for a knight lying in the middle of the chapel atop a litter. He was covered with a sheet of precious silk, with four burning candles surrounding him, fixed into four golden candlesticks.]

Having purloined one of the golden candlesticks to present as a trophy to the king, and concealed it 'entre sa huese e sa cuisse' ['between his stocking and his thigh'] (P, 141–2), Cahus is making his getaway when he is challenged by 'un home noir e let' ['a dark and ugly man'] (P, 145–6) who, unable to recover the stolen artefact, proceeds to stab Cahus in the side.<sup>45</sup> At this precise moment, the squire awakens, mortally wounded, in the hall at Carduell: 'Li vallez, qui gisoit en la sale a Carduell, *qi ce ot songié*, s'esveilla e cria a haute voix: "Sainte Marie! le provoire! Aidiez, aidiez, car ge sui morz!"' ['the squire, who was lying in the hall at Carduel, *and who had dreamt this*, awoke and cried out loud: "St Mary! The priest! Help me, help me, for I am dead/I have died!"'] (P, 158–60; my italics). Awoken by the commotion, the king appears relatively unperturbed by his servant's impending demise: 'A! fet li rois, est ce dont songes?' ['"Ah," said the king, "was it just a dream?"]]. Yes, affirms the mortally wounded Cahus, 'Mes il m'est molt ledement averez' ['but it has come horribly true'] (P, 166–7).<sup>46</sup> The dying youth's complaints are curiously construed as signalling the *beginning* of King Arthur's adventure (as his chamberlain

<sup>45</sup> Douglas asserts that for 'persons in a marginal state', 'to behave anti-socially is the proper expression of their marginal condition' (*Purity and Danger*, pp. 95–7). Although this is ostensibly Cahus's mode of behaviour here, the dream is still clearly structured along juridical lines; Cahus's criminal behaviour precipitates a challenge, as is perfectly legitimate in medieval custom.

<sup>46</sup> Instances of an action that takes place in the dream having physical consequences in the waking state are well documented in medieval dream accounts. Guibert de Nogent's memoirs, *De Vita Sua* (edited as *Autobiographie*), recount several such occurrences. In one instance, a sinful nun of Caen has recently died, when one of her fellow sisters dreams that she sees her deceased colleague being struck by mallet-bearing demons. A spark flies from one mallet into the eye of the dreamer, causing her to wake up, whereupon it transpires that 'elle en avait vraiment subi l'atteinte physique: le témoignage véridique de sa blessure vint confirmer l'authenticité de sa vision' ['she had really suffered a physical assault, the truthful testimony of the wound confirming the authenticity of her vision'] (*Autobiographie*, pp. 196–7). Another similar account tells of a monk who dreams of demons that have taken on the form of Scots. Struck on the chest with a stone, he suffers forty days of pain afterwards, 'acsi Scotus vero eum lapide percussisset' ['as though the Scotsman really had struck him with the stone'] (*Autobiographie*, pp. 252–4). For further comments on these dreams in Guibert's writing, see Schmitt, 'Rêver au XIIe siècle'.

remarks, ‘Sire, vos poez bien movoir, il est jors’ [‘Sire, you can set off, for it is day’], *P*, 162) rather than announcing the end of Cahus’s expedition, and indeed his life. This is of particular relevance when we consider the function of Cahus’s dream-visit to St Augustine’s chapel in relation to Arthur’s actual visit, as will be discussed further below; only once the episode has been played out in the imaginary domain can its symbolization then take place.

The symbolic order restructures itself after a period of disturbance, during which time the king was also asleep, perhaps dreaming a dream himself. If Cahus’s adventure can be narrated *post factum* as a dream, accounted for within the parameters of the symbolic, then the episode is deemed less ominous or portentous; indeed both the king and the narrative itself are anxious to reiterate the status of events as a dream as/after they occur. Cahus’s dream thus provides an imaginary content to the narrative of pilgrimage, providing a support for the repetition of the narrative in Arthur’s own, subsequent visit to the chapel. As Michel Zink argues:

L’aventure du malheureux Cahus, qui meurt au bout de deux pages et dont on ne parle plus jamais par la suite, est assumée par Arthur, devient sienne, comme devient sienne la responsabilité du jeune homme. Il n’avait été recruté que pour vivre l’aventure d’Arthur avec lui. *Mais il en vit en réalité le début à sa place, et il en meurt.*<sup>47</sup>

[The adventure of the unfortunate Cahus, who dies after two pages and who is never mentioned again, is taken up by Arthur, who makes it his own, just as he assumes responsibility for the young man. He had been chosen only to experience Arthur’s adventure with him. *Instead he undergoes the start of the adventure in Arthur’s place, and dies as a result.*]

Cahus could thus be seen to reveal the perversion of the discourse of the Analyst (written  $a \diamond \$$  in the Lacanian algebra); in substituting himself for the king, he offers himself as the object of the narrative’s *jouissance*, and in doing so precipitates a return to safety-zone of fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ), a return to the hegemony of the master.<sup>48</sup> The telling of the dream thus pre-empts the return to a master discourse, it acts as a reassertion of identity by which the symbolic order is padded out with an imaginary content, but where the subject who says ‘I’ is in fact already absent, already dead. In the articulation of his own death, Cahus pinpoints the precise moment at which the (imaginary) ‘I’ of the dream becomes the symbolic subject of awakening. The logical paradox of Cahus’s dying statement, ‘Aidiez, aidiez, car ge sui morz!’, is proof of the subjectivization of the individual or, in Žižek’s words, ‘the pure-impossible thought, *cogito* qua the

<sup>47</sup> Zink, ‘Le Rêve avéré’, p. 138; my italics.

<sup>48</sup> The fantasy aspect of Arthur’s own visit to the chapel is brought to the fore when, on arrival, he is unable to enter the chapel, wherein he witnesses an apparition of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child, fantasy objects that remain beyond the subject’s reach (*P*, 286ff; cf. note 80 below).

point of thought bereft of being, qua nonexistent-impossible fantasy-gaze by way of which I observe my own nonbeing'.<sup>49</sup> For Cahus, the symbolic nothingness of the subject impinges on the 'I' of the dream state so that, upon awakening he 'reconstitutes' himself as absent, as already dead, able only to enunciate the subject's symbolic non-being: 'Aidiez, aidiez, car ge sui morz!'; 'Arthur, can't you see I'm dead!'

As the result of his dream-adventure, Cahus will henceforth be known as the 'vallet qui por le chandelabre fu ocis' ['squire who was killed for the candlestick'] (*P*, 181–2). This candlestick, which has become a potent imago of both his life and death, is deposited in 'Saint-Pol a Londres' ['St Paul's in London'] according to Arthur's desire that 'cele aventure merveilleuse fust seüe par tot, et que on priast en l'eglise por l'ame au vallet' ['this marvellous adventure be known by all, and that the squire's soul be prayed for in church'] (*P*, 180–1). These actions are designed fully to subjectivize Cahus, and to ensure his inscription as the symbolic subject of the signifier. It is this candlestick as a master signifier (S1), quite literally the fallout of the dream, that is produced by the discourse of the Analyst and that is so instrumental to the symbolization of the dream, ensuing the return to the stability of a master discourse. The inscription of a symbolic identity, for which the candlestick here functions as a metonym, reveals what Žižek terms 'the ambiguous link between the Symbolic and death': it is 'by assuming a symbolic identity, i.e., by identifying myself with a symbol which is potentially my epitaph, [that] I as it were "outpass myself into death"'.<sup>50</sup>

Not one but two material artefacts from the dream, the candlestick and the knife with which Cahus was stabbed, are carried over in the state of waking and thereby transgress the boundary between two 'realities'. As such these artefacts might be cast as what Žižek terms '*little pieces of the real*'.<sup>51</sup> These fragments of the real, if indeed such a description can be valid,<sup>52</sup> serve a somewhat ambiguous function: although on the one hand legitimating symbolic power,<sup>53</sup> the term '*little pieces of the real*' is also associated with the inconsistency of the Other (designated by the matheme S(A) in the Lacanian algebra), providing the plugs with which to fill out and legitimate symbolic lack.<sup>54</sup> As such these artefacts both shore up a symbolic mandate and simultaneously gesture towards the status of the Other as lacking, as non-all. This very ambiguity is borne out in

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 62.

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 76.

<sup>51</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 190.

<sup>52</sup> The expression is far from unproblematic, suggesting that the real is non-all or fragmented, and must therefore be subjected to Žižek's own tactic of 'instantaneous crossing-out' (*Negative*, p. 173).

<sup>53</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 190.

<sup>54</sup> See Kay, *Žižek*, pp. 54–6. The matheme is used by Lacan in his triangulation of the three orders (*S20*, p. 90) to express the inability of the symbolic fully to capture the imaginary, resulting in the subject's apperception of the Other's inconsistency (i.e., the subject's separation from the big Other).



the denouement of the Chapel Ride, in Arthur's response to the episode and particularly his attempt to recuperate meaning from it.

Having articulated his own death, Cahus reaches for the candlestick, his little piece of the real, which he offers to the king: 'Après met la main a sa huese o li chandelabres d'or estoit. Il le trest fors, e le mostra le roi. "Sire," fet il, "por cest chandelabre sui ge navrez a mort, dont ge vos faz present"' ['then he reaches into his stocking for the golden candlestick. Pulling it out, he presents it to King Arthur. "Sire," he says, "I have been mortally wounded for this candlestick, and I offer it to you"'] (*P*, 169–71). The syntax here invites an interpretation whereby Cahus is offering the king not only the candlestick, but also his *death*. The artefact itself, which clearly derives phallic significance not only from its form but also from the locus in which Cahus secretes it (between his stocking and his thigh),<sup>55</sup> is presented to the symbolic father, whose response is to accept and enact the death: 'Li rois meïmes li trest le cotel du cors, e l'enme s'en parti lués' ['the king himself drew the dagger from Cahus's side, at which moment his soul departed'] (*P*, 175–6). Cahus's act cannot rightly be construed as a symbolic suicide, a sacrificial act of radical freedom, for he *already knew* that he was dead – the offering of his objectified death therefore elevates the king to a godlike position of authority. There is no place here for 'the answer of the real', that divine stroke of grace that 'occurs at the very moment when we abandon all hope and cease to count on it',<sup>56</sup> since the *coup de grâce* is delivered by Arthur himself.

Having referred rather obliquely to Cahus's biological father, Yvains li Avotres (*P*, 191), the narrative returns its focus to the role of the king as the symbolic father whose authority had been at stake in the narrative, and for whom the Chapel Ride was offered as therapy. Arthur interprets the whole episode as a message from God, which he then codifies as the moral of the story: 'Vos poez bien savoir, par cele aventure qui avenue est, que Dex ne volt consentir que nus voist avec moi' ['you should understand from this adventure that has taken place that God does not wish for anyone else to accompany me'] (*P*, 185–7). Only now does the significance of his earlier discussion with the queen become apparent: by proposing to answer to the insistent question of God's desire, erasing the mark of inconsistency in the Other, the king attempts to mask the bar in his own subjectivity and thus to reassert his position within the symbolic order. The virtual (or imaginary) visit to the chapel of St Augustine undertaken by Cahus ultimately proves to be far more efficacious in its stated aim than the actual visit later performed by Arthur himself. Or as Zink avers, 'la réalité du rêve a pour effet à la fois la mort de Cahus et le retour du roi Arthur à la santé morale et mentale' ['the reality of the dream causes both the death of Cahus, and also Arthur's return to moral and mental health'].<sup>57</sup> The

<sup>55</sup> The phallic object ( $\Phi$ ) is the fallout between the real and the imaginary (Lacan, *S20*, p. 90).

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, pp. 168–9.

<sup>57</sup> Zink, 'Le Rêve avéré', p. 140.



king appears to regain his mojo; the divine 'It' is once again on his side, and the therapy of the Chapel Ride, performed by Cahus, his unwitting analysand-by-proxy, appears complete.

However, a further layer of complication adds to the matter. Having ostensibly restored Arthur to a position of symbolic hegemony, not least in the assertion that he is able correctly to interpret the desire of the Other, the narrative suddenly turns the tables, revealing the absolute inconsistency of that Other and reducing Arthur to an insignificant misperceiver of the narrative's 'true' message. Once he arrives, unharmed, at the chapel of St Augustine, Arthur is addressed by the resident hermit who informs him that the real cause of the kingdom's decay is *not* in fact the king's 'volentez delaianz' ['neglectfulness'], his withdrawal from the sphere of the Other. Rather, the decadence was caused (extra-diegetically, with reference back to Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*) by Perceval, when he failed to respond to the Grail on the occasion of his visit to the Fisher King's castle. As the hermit explains:

*Une granz douleurs est avenue novelement par un chevalier qui fu herbergiez en l'ostel au riche roi Pescheeur, si s'aparut a lui li sainz Graauz et la lance de coi la pointe de fer saine, ne ne demanda de coi ce servoit, ne cui on en servoit; por ce qu'il ne le demanda, sont totes les terres de guerre escommeeies, ne chevaliers n'e[n]conte autre en forest q'il ne qeure sus e ocie s'il puet. (P, 350–5; my italics)*

[A great sorrow has recently befallen us because of a knight who was lodged at the house of the rich Fisher King. The Holy Grail and the lance that bleeds from its iron tip appeared to him, but he did not ask either what they were for, nor whom they served. Because he did not ask, all the land is ravaged by war, and knights do not meet in the forest without trying to kill one another.]

The Grail, which ostensibly played no role in the Chapel Ride episode, now makes an eleventh-hour appearance as the organizing *point de capiton* that reconfigures the entire meaning of the first branch of the narrative and provides the dynamic for the remainder of the romance. The episode of the Chapel Ride is far less concerned with restoring Arthurian hegemony than it is with reinforcing 'L'authoritez de l'escriture', ensuring that the agency of *a*, the mystical 'It', remains embedded in the narrative. Indeed, the Grail disaster is cast as an 'always already', an *hors-scène* extending the narrative's frame of reference beyond itself.<sup>58</sup> Yet what this privileging of narrative authority belies, of course, is the absolute impossibility to account fully for the dream, that abject kernel of the real that persists as the underside of discourse – as was revealed in Cahus's dying words – and that constantly threatens its return.

<sup>58</sup> Perlesvaus's failure at the Grail castle is referred to by the narrative as an event that has already taken place, thereby implying an extra-textual reference to the *Conte du Graal*.

### Coming Back to Life . . . or Death

If the suspended subject of the dream presents an aporia of ontology, then the narration of the dream appears to offer itself as an epistemological patch with which to cover over that lacuna. As we have seen, following the *Perlesvaus*'s opening Chapel Ride, King Arthur seeks to assign a meaning to the incident, appropriating the narrative episode as an answer to the question of the desire of the Other whilst never actually analysing the ontological status of the events that lead to Cahus's bizarre demise. Similarly, as earlier chapters have shown, the *Queste* stresses the subject's frustrated desire for 'savoir', that is, for knowledge about the Grail, thereby deflecting attention away from the artefact's undecidable ontology. In the episode shortly to be discussed, Lancelot is rebuked for having 'failli a savoir la verité del Saint Graal' ['failed to know the truth about the Holy Grail'] (*Q*, 61:24–5), whilst another knight – who becomes a kind of alter-Lancelot – affirms that 'il ne finera ja mes d'errer devant qu'il savra coment ce est que li Sainz Graaux s'apert en tanz leux ou roiaume de Logres' ['he will not cease his wanderings until he knows how it is that the Holy Grail appears in so many places in the Kingdom of Logres'] (*Q*, 60:26–8).<sup>59</sup>

This latter declaration appears to betray a sublimated anxiety regarding the ontology of the Grail.<sup>60</sup> That this supposedly singular object in fact appears in so many different localities, that it is, in the words of Pauphilet, 'une ubiquité souveraine' ['a supreme ubiquity'], leads those who participate in the Grail Quest to doubt the very possibility of the Grail's singularity.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, in Branch X of the *Perlesvaus*, King Arthur is told that the Grail itself has five different morphoses ('manieres'), of which the final one is the form of the chalice (*P*, 7223–6).<sup>62</sup> Since singularity is unthinkable within a symbolic structure such as the Quest, the knights who seek out the Grail must begin to suspect that, in the same way that Derrida describes the spectre, 'il y en a plus d'un, il doit y en avoir plus d'un' ['there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them'],<sup>63</sup> and this would underscore the ontological undecidability, the very spectrality, of the Grail. Derrida conceives of a community or economy of spectres, and it seems that the medieval romances offer the very model of such an economy in the Grail Quest.<sup>64</sup> The plurality of the Grail in fact seems to reflect

<sup>59</sup> On this alter-Lancelot figure, see Chapter 2, p. 79.

<sup>60</sup> We recall that the Grail questions sometimes bear on the location of the Grail (cf. Chapter 3, p. 111 n. 68).

<sup>61</sup> 'Le Graal se montre en maint endroit et n'est point attaché à un lieu déterminé [. . .] C'est une ubiquité souveraine' ['The Grail shows itself in many places and is not attached to any one given location [. . .] It is a supreme ubiquity'] (Pauphilet, *Études*, p. 24).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Introduction, p. 1 n. 2; Chapter 1, pp. 33–4.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, *Spectres*, p. 36. All English translations of quotations from this work are taken from Peggy Kamuf's 1994 translation, *Specters of Marx* (here at p. 13). Note the untranslatable ambiguity in the phrase 'plus d'un' – more than one/no more one.

<sup>64</sup> 'Nous parlerons de la société ou du commerce des spectres entre eux, car il y en a toujours plus d'un' ['we will talk about the society or the commerce of spectres among

(or perhaps, create) the plural identities, or rather the non-identity, of those who seek (knowledge about) it.

We have returned here to the fluctuation between being and meaning discussed above, which led into the epistemological aporia of the dream. That the hinge between being and meaning should be *out of joint*, so that meaning offers itself as a patch for the deficiencies of being, results in the sublimation of ontological angst through its couching within a structure of epistemological uncertainty. What might thus be deflected by the narratives' epistemic focus (i.e., their need to establish knowledge about the Grail) is an ontological anxiety regarding the subject's being in his intermediate states, the in-betweens of dreaming and waking, or indeed of life and death. These intervals represent privileged loci in which to explore the constitution of subjectivity as it hovers precariously between a holistic self-identity that can only ever be meaningless (located in the real), and integration with the many that assures symbolic functioning at the price of singularity.

The spectral figure of the revenant, however, appears to have cheated the forced choice between being and meaning. The revenant, the thing that uncannily returns, comes back to life, but whose being *and* meaning remain fundamentally undecidable quantities, inhabits a transitional space between the one and the many, singularity and society, and as such provides a figure through which to explore further the frequently abject status of those who participate in Grail Quest. Before returning to consider how this is exemplified in a passage from the *Queste* that closely echoes the *Perlesvaus's* Chapel Ride, I want first to establish a medieval context for the notion of the revenant, and to make explicit the link between this figure of undecidable ontology and the status of the dreamer.

Chronicles such as Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* (c. 1182–92) and William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (1196) exhibit a fascination with revenants – cases of the undead in which a person who is thought to have died or been killed returns to torment the living and has to be 'finished off' a second time.<sup>65</sup> In one instance, Map recounts the tale of 'a Welshman of evil life [who] died of late unchristianly enough in my village [. . .] and will not desist from summoning [*non cessat euocare*] living beings who he proceeds to dispatch himself'.<sup>66</sup> Another such account tells of a knight who 'is said to have buried his wife, who was really dead [*sepellisse reuera mortuam*], and to have recovered her by snatching her out of a dance [*a chorea redibuisse raptam*], and after that to have got sons and grandsons by her [. . .] called "Sons of the Dead Mother"'.<sup>67</sup> What arouses interest in the first of these cases is that the undead man should be referred to as the 'summoner', as one who interpellates the

themselves, for there is always *more than one* of them'] (Derrida, *Spectres*, p. 28; *Specters*, trans. Kamuf, p. 8).

<sup>65</sup> See Marigny, *Vampires*, pp. 100–3.

<sup>66</sup> Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, Dist. II, c.27.

<sup>67</sup> Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, Dist. II, c.13.

living, recalls them from his own state of reality – indeed, as soon as the living are called they become infirm, that is, they begin to lose their stable hold on the ‘reality’ of the symbolic order and are drawn into the precarious intermediate zone visited by Cahus (and, as we shall see, Lancelot).<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the medieval accounts of revenants are concerned to ensure that the (semi-)dead person is ‘really dead’ – a concern that can still be traced in Freud’s work of dream interpretation, most notably in the well-known example of a man whose father had recently died.<sup>69</sup> Freud’s patient dreams that ‘his father was alive once more and was talking to him in his usual way, but (the remarkable thing was that) he had really died, only he did not know it’.<sup>70</sup> Knowledge of death again seems to be privileged over the ontological living/dead binary, the legitimacy of which is again drawn into question. Indeed, the blurring of the living/dead distinction entails the need for a third category – that of the *undead* – just as the indistinction between sleeping and waking in the *Queste* will require a tertiary ontological position of the subject who is ‘entransés’ [‘entranced’]. This very structuration is what characterizes Kant’s quasi-transcendental antinomy, a foil to logical contradiction. As Žižek has it, ‘in the case of logical contradiction, one of its poles is necessarily true [. . .] *tertium non datur*, the falsity of one pole automatically entails the truth of its opposite’.<sup>71</sup> Antinomy deconstructs this binary logic, drawing a crucial distinction between predicates and non-predicates (dead/not dead; and then, non-dead or *undead*) – so that ‘by saying “the Thing *is* non-phenomenal,” we do *not* say the same as “the Thing *is not* phenomenal”; we do not make any positive claim about it, we only draw a certain limit and locate the Thing in the wholly nonspecified void beyond it’.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the entranced subjected, in this third position, pertains partly to the ‘wholly nonspecified void’ that is precisely the Lacanian real.

The notion of the undead as an antinomy defying polarization necessitates a reappraisal of the binarism from which this third category is supposedly

<sup>68</sup> A comparable scenario of ‘living death’ is found in Heinrich von dem Türlîn’s medieval German Grail romance *Diû Crône* (see Nutt, *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail*, p. 203. The episode is translated by Weston in *Sir Gawain at the Grail Castle*, pp. 33–46). Here, the inhabitants of the Grail castle exist in a zombie-like state of living death: ‘the dead must abide in the semblance of life, and suffer bitter woe withal’ (Weston, p. 43; *Diû Crône*, lines 505–9). The Fisher King himself is in a particularly unenviable situation: ‘Dead I am, though I bear not the semblance of death, and this my folk is dead with me’ (Weston, p. 44; *Diû Crône*, lines 532–4). Of particular interest in Heinrich’s text is the recurrence of the word ‘schîn’, here meaning ‘semblance’ (lines 507, 532). Žižek observes that, in Kantian philosophy, ‘the subject of pure apperception – \$, the empty “I think” – necessarily lapses into the transcendental *Schein*, mistaking itself for a “thinking substance”’ (*Negative*, p. 171) – this ‘mistaken’ confluence of being and meaning is precisely what is represented in intermediate states of existence, such as that of the Fisher King in Heinrich’s narrative, and Cahus in the *Perlesvaus*.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, Dist. II, c.13.

<sup>70</sup> Freud, *SE*, V, 430–1.

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 110.

<sup>72</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 111.

abjected – that is to say, a resignification of the very notions of life and death. In book 7 of the *Séminaire*, Lacan develops the conception of the second death, derived from the Marquis de Sade's novel *Juliette*. Here, Sade lays out the System of Pope Pius VI, a theory according to which the drive of Nature is impeded, and an absolute annihilation – a 'second death' – is required in order for Nature to 'recommencer sa tentative, de repartir dans un élan nouveau' ['recommence her efforts, to start again with a new drive'].<sup>73</sup> This second death would engender an organic *tabula rasa* from which creation could be recommenced – an absolute death that ultimately feeds back into life. In the final analysis, birth and death can no longer be deemed polar opposites marking *arche* and *telos* since, as Sade argues: 'À cet instant que nous appelons *mort*, tout parraît se dissoudre [. . .] mais cette mort n'est qu'imaginaire, elle n'existe que figurativement et sans aucune réalité' ['at the moment we call death, everything appears to disintegrate [. . .] but this death is only imaginary, its existence is purely figurative and without any reality'].<sup>74</sup>

Ultimately then, in the Sadean theory adopted by Lacan, life and death can no longer be considered as discrete categories, rather, as the Marquis claims, 'il n'y a enfin nulle différence essentielle entre cette première vie que nous recevons, et cette seconde qui est celle que nous appelons mort' ['there is, finally, no essential difference between the first death that we receive, and the second, which is the one we call death'].<sup>75</sup> However, as Žižek is careful to point out, just as Sade questions our fundamental tenet of death as *telos*, so the very notion of 'the "pure life" beyond death' (the second death) is nothing other than 'the *product* of symbolisation, so that symbolisation itself engenders the surplus which escapes it [. . .] the Symbolic itself opens up the wound it professes to heal'.<sup>76</sup> Viewed through the optic of the Chapel Ride episode in the *Perlesvaus*, this formulation would appear to support the position that the very notion of death *and its beyond* is a fundamentally symbolic construct that functions figuratively to effect the dissolution of the imaginary 'I' (the 'moi') and has no bearing on the real – the presumed acquisition of singularity in death being reduced to a discursive strategy of the symbolic. Or, expressed in terms of the discourse of the Analyst, the notion of 'pure life' is the master signifier (S1) produced by this discourse, the signifier that assures meaning and renders the otherwise meaningless concept of death *readable*. With the presumption that, in death, we will regain the self-identity that has been denied us since our passage into the symbolic order, the symbolic in fact offers itself as the plug for the lack it has opened up. Conceived in Lacanian terms, as Žižek extrapolates, 'castration means that the Thing-*jouissance* must be lost in order to be regained on the ladder of desire, i.e. the symbolic order recovers its own constitutive debt'.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Lacan, *S7*, p. 248.

<sup>74</sup> Sade, *Juliette*, p. 174.

<sup>75</sup> Sade, *Juliette*, p. 174.

<sup>76</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 180.

<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 171. The quotation is taken directly from the final page of Lacan's essay 'Subversion du sujet' (*É*, pp. 793–827).

## Lancelot Entranced

Turning now to an episode in the *Queste* that closely parallels the *Perlesvaus*'s Chapel Ride, I want to consider how subjectivization, the act of 'recognizing oneself in interpellation, assuming an imposed symbolic mandate', constitutes what Žižek terms a kind of 'defense mechanism against an abyss, a gap, which is the "subject"', where 'what we call "subject" is ultimately a name for [an] economic paradox or, more accurately, short-circuit, whereby *the conditions of possibility coincide with the conditions of impossibility*'.<sup>78</sup> We shall want to reflect on how the economic paradox of subjectivity identified by Žižek can be seen as being rehearsed within the discourse of a dream, and how the trope of wounding and healing is employed in this romance to stage the spectrality of the dream and its discourse. For Žižek, 'there is no reality without the spectre [. . .] the circle of reality can be closed only by means of an uncanny spectral supplement'.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, the wound of subjectivity (\$) – the gap or abyss of the subject – can only be sutured by means of its being located within a discourse, specifically the discourse of the Analyst, that is articulated by the spectral, uncanny supplement of the *objet a*.

An episode in the *Queste* closely echoes the Chapel Ride in the *Perlesvaus*. Lancelot's peregrinations lead him to a ruined chapel in a forest, in which he perceives an array of 'beles choses' ['beautiful things'] (*Q*, 58:6). Keen to 'savoir qui i repere' ['know who lodges there'] (*Q*, 58:5), his progress is however impeded by an iron grille barring the entrance to the chapel.<sup>80</sup> Thus thwarted, Lancelot disarms and soon falls asleep upon his shield. He then perceives the arrival of a wounded knight, who ignores Lancelot but apostrophizes God, lamenting his affliction and begging for an apparition of the Holy Grail, by means of which he believes he might be cured. No sooner has he done so than the Grail issues forth from the ruined chapel and proceeds to cure the wounded knight, who subsequently falls asleep. Lancelot is perplexed by this vision, and no less so when a squire arrives and proceeds to arm the now cured knight with Lancelot's own equipment, so that he (the cured knight) might embark upon the Grail Quest. Left alone, Lancelot ponders his predicament and

<sup>78</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 171.

<sup>79</sup> Žižek, 'Spectre', p. 21.

<sup>80</sup> Further evidence of parallels between this episode and the Chapel Ride comes from the fact that King Arthur is similarly prevented from entering the Chapel of St Augustine, in spite of there being no physical barrier: 'Mes s'il deüst conqerre tot l'or du mont n'entrast il dedenz; e si ne li deffendoit nus, car li huis estoit overz, ne il ne voit nului qui li deffendist' ['even with all the gold in the world he would not be able to enter that place; and yet there was no bar to his entrance, for the doorway was open, and he saw no-one blocking his path'] (*P*, 286–8). The resident hermit later explains to the king that 'Par vostre pechié ne poistes vos hui entrer dedenz ceste chapele tant com on chanta la messe' ['because of your sin you could not, earlier today, enter that chapel for as long as mass was being sung'] (*P*, 330–2).



is rebuked by a disembodied voice for having failed to act in the presence of the Grail, at which point he begins to reflect upon the folly of his ways.<sup>81</sup>

What is most striking about this episode is its blurring of the distinction between waking and sleeping.<sup>82</sup> This confusion of reality and illusion recalls the spectrality of the dream and, in places, appears to suggest a narrative blind-spot rather than a deliberate strategy, thereby betraying the spectrality of the narrative itself rather than merely the undecidable ontology of the dreamer. Once Lancelot has fallen asleep, ‘si voit venir, en une litiere que portoient dui palefroi, un chevalier malade qui mout se plaignoit angoisseusement’ [‘he perceives the arrival of an infirm knight, carried upon a litter drawn by two horses, and lamenting most bitterly’] (*Q*, 58:15–17). The two knights do not communicate directly with each other, since the newcomer believes Lancelot to be asleep: ‘ne mot ne dit, car il cuide que il se dorme’ [‘he does not say a word, for he believes that he is sleeping’] (*Q*, 58:18–19). Lancelot’s own silence is determined not by the fact that he is asleep, in spite of what the narrative had previously suggested, but rather is suspended in an intermediate state, the borderland between perception and consciousness that characterizes Lacan’s *tuché*, the missed encounter with the real.<sup>83</sup> ‘Lancelot ne li dist mot, come cil qui ert en tel point que il ne dormoit bien ne ne veilloit bien, ainz someilloit’ [‘Lancelot does not utter a word, for he is neither fully asleep nor fully awake, but drowsing’] (*Q*, 58:19–21).<sup>84</sup> Since Lancelot is neither entirely awake nor asleep but ‘entransés’ [‘entranced’] (*Q*, 58:29), his dream can be presented *en cours* by the narrative. And yet there is another sleeper present in the scene whose dream remains entirely outside the narrative frame. Just as King Arthur slept at the same time as Cahus in the *Perlesvaus*, so the unidentified knight now falls into a slumber alongside Lancelot: ‘si gite un grant plaint et dit: “Ha! Diex, gariz sui!” et ne demora gaires que il s’endort’ [‘he lets out a great sigh

<sup>81</sup> Matarasso believes that ‘the whole purpose of this scene is to illustrate Lancelot’s inner state at the outset of the *Queste*, and it is dominated by the theme of spiritual blindness and spiritual torpor’ (*The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 118). Her assessment of Lancelot’s ‘trance-like state’ in which he sees ‘through a fog of unreality and is unable to trust the evidence of the senses he has abused’ (pp. 163–4) appears to overlook the fact the Lancelot’s symbolic awareness is *heightened* in the trance state – with regard to the wounded knight, it is said that Lancelot ‘le voit bien et entent ses paroles’ [‘sees him clearly and hears his words’] (*Q*, 58:29–30), whereas in the waking state he had been unable to decipher the inscription on the cross: ‘li tens ert si obscurs que il ne pooit conoistre que [les letres] voloient dire’ [‘it was so dark that he could not make out the meaning of the letters’] (*Q*, 57:25–6). Lot-Borodine (‘*Le Conte del Graal*’) draws parallels between this episode and Lancelot’s reverie on seeing Guinevere in Chrétien’s *Charrette*, and similarly with Perceval’s trance in the blood-on-snow episode from the *Conte du Graal*. I remain unconvinced that the same element of contemplation, characteristic of the courtly poems, can be discerned in the *Queste*.

<sup>82</sup> Compare the similar blurring that occurs in Lancelot’s second dream vision, discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Lacan, *SI1*, p. 66.

<sup>84</sup> A similar ‘continuity error’ occurs when the wounded knight has fallen asleep, and is then shown conversing with the squire, without ever having explicitly woken up – it is merely stated that ‘si se dreça li chevaliers de la litiere’ [‘the knight on the litter sat up’] (*Q*, 59:29).



and cries, “Ah, God! Now I am cured!”, before immediately falling asleep’] (*Q*, 59:17–18). This ‘background sleeper’, whose dream remains inaccessible to the narrative, and who thereby disrupts the readability of the scene (for his is a dream that remains untold, unsymbolized – a narrative blind-spot), is indicative of what was earlier described as a locus of both power and danger; ultimately eluding narrative control, he simultaneously allows the narrative to present its own (i.e., Lancelot’s) dream-story as *objet a*, the cause and aim of desire that constitutes the frame from which it has been cut out.<sup>85</sup>

The reinvigorated knight’s slumber is cut short by the arrival of a squire who proceeds to arm him with Lancelot’s equipment, during which time the two admonish Lancelot for his reaction, or rather lack of such, in the presence of the Grail: ‘li escuiers vient a l’espee Lancelot, si li baille et le hiaume ausi, puis vient au cheval Lancelot et li met la sele et le frain’ [‘the squire gave him Lancelot’s sword and his helmet, and also the saddle and bridle from Lancelot’s horse’] (*Q*, 60:13–15). It is only once Lancelot has awoken and noted the absence of his accoutrements that he presumes to ascertain the status of his vision: ‘Et quant il est venuz a la croiz, si ne troeve ne son hiaume ne s’espee ne son cheval: *si s’aparçoit maintenant qu’il a veu verité*’ [‘and when he reached the cross, he could not find his helmet, his sword, or his horse: *now he realized that his vision had been true*’] (*Q*, 61:28–30; my italics). This negative proof of the veracity of Lancelot’s vision, the fact that he should ascertain ‘qu’il a veu verité’ [‘that his vision had been true’] by means of an absence, places emphasis on the problematics of visual perception in this episode, and returns us again to the spectre and its implication in a complex economy of the gaze.

As Derrida asserts, the spectre is characterized by a certain invisibility: ‘La Chose est encore invisible, elle n’est rien de visible [. . .] Elle n’est encore rien qui se voie quand on en parle’ [‘The Thing is still invisible, it is *nothing* visible [. . .] It is still nothing that can be seen when one speaks of it’].<sup>86</sup> The notion of ‘la Chose’ here is not exactly identical to the Lacanian Thing, yet the spectre does occupy the same liminal position at the very limits of the symbolic, a locus that bears strong pressure from the real. Indeed, that the spectre’s invisibility should be so clearly connected to language use (‘Elle n’est encore rien qui se voie quand on en parle’ [‘It is still nothing that can be seen when one speaks of it’]) emphasizes that the spectre’s ontology is diminished in the symbolic, and that its ‘real being’ lies beyond the parameters of language. So the spectre is not only invisible, but this invisibility is the converse of a certain unspeakability – the spectre disrupts the symbolic use of language, as is strongly suggested by Derrida’s stuttering, tentative attempt to define it:

<sup>85</sup> We might recall here the role of the elderly guardian in Freud’s Burning Child dream. He sleeps, but his dream is left unaccounted for by the narrative. Cf. Žižek, ‘The Hitchcockian Blot’, *LA*, pp. 88–99.

<sup>86</sup> Derrida, *Spectres*, p. 26; *Specters*, trans. Kamuf, p. 6.

Voici – ou voilà, là-bas, une chose innomable ou presque: quelque chose, entre quelque chose et quelqu'un, quiconque ou quelconque, quelque chose, cette chose-ci, 'this thing', cette chose pourtant et non une autre, *cette chose qui nous regarde* vient à défier la sémantique autant que l'ontologie, la psychanalyse autant que la philosophie.

[Here is – or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing, 'this thing,' but this thing and not any other, *this thing that looks at us, that concerns us*, comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy.]<sup>87</sup>

The ultimate power of the spectre, Derrida argues, derives from its ability to see without being seen: 'ce *quelqu'un d'autre* spectral *nous regarde*, nous nous sentons regardés par lui' ['this spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it'], and yet 'nous ne voyons pas qui nous regarde' ['we do not see who looks at us'].<sup>88</sup> The ability to avoid the gaze is materialized by Derrida's epitome of the spectre, the ghost of Hamlet's father, whose armour assures his scopic superiority. Armour, posits Derrida, 'peut n'être que le corps d'un *artefact* réel, une sorte de prothèse technique, un corps étranger au corps spectral qu'elle habille, dissimule et protège, masquant ainsi jusqu'à son identité' ['may be but the body of a real artefact, a kind of technical prosthesis, a body foreign to the spectral body that it dresses, dissimulates, and protects, masking even its identity'].<sup>89</sup> More precisely still, it is the spectre's helmet that creates what Derrida terms 'l'effet de visière' ['the visor effect'], the visored helmet investing the wearer with 'l'insigne suprême du pouvoir: pouvoir voir sans être vu' ['the supreme insignia of power: the power to see without being seen'].<sup>90</sup> By removing his helmet before settling down to sleep ('[il] deslace son hiaume et le met devant soi' ['[he] unlaces his helmet and places it in front of him'], *Q*, 58:10–11), Lancelot makes himself visible (*se donne à voir*, in the Lacanian idiom), and thereby waives his protection against the gaze of the Other.<sup>91</sup>

That the power of the Other in this scene is located in the scopic drive is highlighted when, once the Grail has emerged from the chapel, Lancelot is

<sup>87</sup> Derrida, *Spectres*, p. 26; *Specters*, trans. Kamuf, p. 6; my italics. Note that the key phrase 'cette chose qui nous regarde' has the dual meaning in French of 'this thing that looks at us' as well as 'this thing that concerns us'.

<sup>88</sup> Derrida, *Spectres*, p. 27, p. 26; *Specters*, trans. Kamuf, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, *Spectres*, p. 28; *Specters*, trans. Kamuf, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, *Spectres*, p. 29; *Specters*, trans. Kamuf, p. 8.

<sup>91</sup> According to Blair, the visored helmet ('heaume a vissere') is first mentioned as late as 1298 in the will of Odo de Rousillin [*sic*] (*European Armour*, p. 47). To speak of a 'visor effect' in the *Queste* might thus attract the accusation of anachronism, but 'after c.1180 [helmets] were occasionally fitted with a face guard, in shape rather like a modern welding-mask' (*European Armour*, p. 30). Such a helmet with a moveable front-piece (or 'ventaille') is indeed worn by Lancelot (*Q*, 141:29), and King Arthur wears a similar helmet in the *Perlesvaus* (*P*, 208).

perplexed by the fact that he can see the *artefacts*, but not the agent bearing them: ‘il resgarde le chandelabre qui vient vers la croiz, mes il ne voit mie qui le porte, si s’en merveille trop’ [‘he looks at the candlestick which is coming towards the cross, but he cannot see who is carrying it, and he deems this a great mystery’] (*Q*, 59:1–2). The puppet master pulling the strings behind this spectacle remains invisible: ‘Lancelot ne sot ne a l’aler ne au venir par cui il i pot estre aportez’ [‘Lancelot did not know who could be carrying [the Grail] as it came and went’] (*Q*, 59:20–2).<sup>92</sup> The frequency of the verbs ‘veoir’ and ‘resgarder’ in this episode from the *Queste* is striking, as is the fact that the action curing the wounded knight, immediately preceding his own articulation of the cure, is described as a physical contact between the knight’s eyes and the Grail table:<sup>93</sup>

Il se prent a deus mains et se tire contremont et fet tant qu’il bese la table d’argent et la toche a ses euz. Et quant il a ce fet, si se sent ausi come toz alegiez de ses maus: si gite un grant plaint et dit: ‘Ha! Diex, gariz sui!’

(*Q*, 59:14–18)

[‘He pulled himself up with his two hands so that he could kiss the silver table and touch it to his eyes. And when he had done this, he felt as though all his ills had lifted; he let out a great sigh and said ‘Ah God! Now I am cured!’]

The emphasis that this Grail encounter places on vision and the gaze might help to illumine what Žižek deems ‘one of the most obscure points of Lacanian theory’, the question as to the role of the *objet a* in the drive as opposed to desire.<sup>94</sup> The function of the object *a* has already been aligned with the figure of the spectre – how then might this spectre, the one *qui nous regarde*, be implicated in the division of desire and the drive and how, more specifically, might this distinction be pertinent to the Grail Quest? The essential feature of the scopoc drive, the gesture of making oneself seen (*se faire voir*), is to be carefully distinguished from the notion of looking at oneself through the other, that is, from the point of the ego-ideal at which I appear most likeable to myself. As Žižek expounds, ‘what is lost when I “look at myself through the other” is the radical heterogeneity of the object qua gaze to which I expose myself in “making oneself seen”’.<sup>95</sup> Before Lancelot falls into his trance, before he makes himself visible (*se fait voir*), the narrative proceeds in the register of desire. As Žižek explains, ‘we remain within the register of desire as long as, by way of

<sup>92</sup> In a similar incident from the *Perlesvaus*, a golden crown suspended on a chain descends from the ceiling in front of Perlesvaus, a phenomenon that the narrative explicitly attributes to God the magician: ‘La chaenne descendoit par grant compas, e ne tenoit a nule rien fors a la volenté Nostre Seigneur non’ [‘the chain descended with great precision, and it was attached to nothing other than the will of Our Lord’] (*P*, 9598–9; my italics).

<sup>93</sup> See Schmitt’s comments on the use of verbs of vision in recounting dreams, ‘Rêver au XIIIe siècle’, p. 296.

<sup>94</sup> See Žižek, *Negative*, p. 196.

<sup>95</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 196.

assuming the merely inquisitive attitude of a voyeur, we are looking for the fascinating X, for some trace of what is hidden “behind the curtain” – and this is very much the attitude of Lancelot seeking entry to the Grail chapel.<sup>96</sup> However, once the Grail emerges from the chapel and perambulates about the scene, it is rather as if the picture exceeds its own frame – what should remain concealed ‘behind the curtain’ spills over onto the narrative stage. This is the point at which the narrative accelerates out of the register of desire and into the drive: ‘we “change gear” into the drive the moment we make ourselves seen to this stain in the picture, to this impervious foreign body in the frame, to this point which attracted our gaze’.<sup>97</sup> In his dream, Lancelot occupies the same position as James Stewart in Žižek’s analysis of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*: ‘he in a radical sense falls into his own picture, into the field of his own visibility. In Lacanian terms, he changes into a stain in his own picture, he makes himself seen in it, i.e., within the space defined as his own field of vision’<sup>98</sup> – whilst he remains ‘entransé’, Lancelot makes himself visible to the point from which he is gazed at.

The dynamic, indeed the logic, of the Grail Quest seems to be characterized very much by the circular, looping trajectory of the Lacanian drive. Žižek describes the curve of the drive as similar to the action of throwing a boomerang, where the aim of ‘hitting the target’ is converted into ‘making oneself hit’:<sup>99</sup>

When I throw the boomerang, its ‘goal,’ of course, is to hit the target (the animal); yet the true art of throwing depends upon being able to catch the boomerang when, upon our *missing* the goal, the boomerang flies back; the true aim is to miss the goal, so that the boomerang returns to us [. . .] The handling of the boomerang stages the elementary hysterical splitting: the subject’s catching of the boomerang hinders the realization of the true aim of its throwing, the ‘making oneself hit’ as a display of the death drive.<sup>100</sup>

Particularly apposite in the episode of Lancelot’s Grail vision in the *Queste* is the fact that the wounded knight, wishing to be cured so that he might depart on the Grail Quest, believes that his cure will be effected by ‘li Sainz Vessiaus’ [‘the Holy Vessel’] itself – the very artefact whose recovery the Quest ostensibly has as its teleological aim. The Grail thus appears to function as its own condition of (im)possibility, or rather as a rehearsal of the circularity of the drive, the throwing of the boomerang where ‘the true aim is no longer to hit the goal but to maintain the very circular movement of repeatedly missing it’.<sup>101</sup>

Judith Butler’s concept of the ‘valorization of unrealizability’ is singularly

<sup>96</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 196.

<sup>97</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 196.

<sup>98</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 197.

<sup>99</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 199.

<sup>100</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 199.

<sup>101</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 199.

pertinent to the assertion that the Grail Quest stages the loop of the drive: 'it is essential to this practice to remain, in some permanent way, unrealizable'.<sup>102</sup> Or, as Žižek has it:

God, in his infinite wisdom, limited our cognitive capacities in order to make us free responsible agents, since, if we were to have direct access to the noumenal sphere, we would no longer be free, but would turn into blind automata. Human imperfection is thus [. . .] the positive condition of freedom. The hidden implication here is the reverse of Kant's 'You can, because you must!', the paradoxical logic of 'You cannot, because you must not!'.<sup>103</sup>

Thus the freedom of the subject (here the Grail Knight) depends on the absolute impossibility of his succeeding in the Quest, of short-circuiting the drive and returning to the register of desire, wherein the symbolic order might hope to 'recover its own constitutive debt' and discover the Grail. It is for this reason that the desire for the Grail manifested in the Quest must be conceived as 'pure' desire. As Žižek explains:

Desire becomes 'pure' the moment it ceases to be conceived as the desire for a 'pathological' (positively given) object, the moment it is posited as the desire for an object *whose emergence coincides with its own withdrawal, i.e., which is nothing other than the trace of its own retreat*.<sup>104</sup>

Pure desire is thus 'confined to the paradox of the subject's finitude. If the subject were able to trespass the limitations of his finitude and to accomplish the pure step into the noumenal domain, the very sublime object which constitutes his desire as "pure" would be lost'.<sup>105</sup> It is for exactly this reason that the very possibility of the Grail Quest must remain its impossibility and why, within that economic paradox, the Grail itself occupies the position of the *objet a*, the object of pure desire *that is nothing other than the trace of its own retreat*.<sup>106</sup>

If, in the episode of Lancelot's first Grail encounter in the *Queste*, the Grail functions as the *objet a*, then the wound represents surplus enjoyment, the symbolic remainder of *jouissance*. This *jouissance* clearly persists in the narrative, and is not sublimated once the wounded knight is apparently cured by the Grail. That this wound, clearly symptomatic of castration, should be incurable, underlines the impossibility of the symbolic order recuperating its constitutive debt. Indeed, it transpires that the knight who visits Lancelot in his trance is not exactly cured by the Grail, rather his lack is merely displaced or re-inscribed; *jouissance* is transposed from the imaginary wound to the symbolic lack of the

<sup>102</sup> Butler, 'Dynamic Conclusions', p. 268.

<sup>103</sup> Žižek, 'Holding the Place', pp. 317–18.

<sup>104</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, p. 173; my italics.

<sup>105</sup> Žižek, *Negative*, pp. 173–4.

<sup>106</sup> As Žižek asks, 'does not this same absolute simultaneity of positioning and prohibiting define the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire?' (*Negative*, p. 173).

subject. The knight had originally expressed his desire to be cured so that he might ‘entrer en la Queste ou li autre preudome sont entré’ [‘embark upon the Quest, into which the other knights have entered’] (*Q*, 59:11–12); he expresses a wish to join the many, ‘li autre preudome’, and in doing so to replace an identity predicated upon lack (for he is given no name, designated only indefinitely as ‘un chevalier malade’) with a (symbolic) lack of individual identity (as one of the many). Conversely, Lancelot’s position as one of ‘li autre preudome’ (the many, those participating in the Grail Quest) is superseded by the acquisition of individuality, nonetheless characterized by lack (and indeed a sense of impossibility), as is indicated by the voice that names and then reproves him for his inaction in the presence of the Grail: ‘Lancelot, plus durs que pierre, plus amers que fuz, plus nuz et plus despris que figuiers’ [‘Lancelot, harder than stone, more bitter than wood, more naked and barren than the fig tree’] (*Q*, 61:15–16). As the wounded knight will lose his singularity by enunciating his cure and departing on the Grail Quest, so Lancelot, in his refusal to speak, paradoxically affirms his autonomy – as Derrida asserts, ‘dès qu’on parle, dès qu’on entre dans le milieu du langage, on perd la singularité’ [‘as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the domain of language, one loses singularity’].<sup>107</sup>

If the Other, the agency that manipulates the spectacle of the Grail, remains invisible in this episode from the *Queste*, then it is very much objectified by the voice, specifically the disembodied *voix acousmatique* that reprimands Lancelot for his failure to respond to the Grail. This invective against Lancelot is condensed into ‘trois merveilleuses paroles’ [‘three wondrous words’] (*Q*, 62:23–4 – i.e., ‘durs’ [‘hard’], ‘amers’ [‘bitter’] and ‘despris’ [‘barren’]), which, endowed with a quasi-mystical significance, function as master signifiers, produced by the dream and giving meaning to Lancelot’s very existence: ‘les trois paroles dont il a esté apelez n’a il pas oubliees ne n’oubliera ja mes tant come il vive, ne ne sera granment aise devant que il sache por quoi il fu ein si apelez’ [‘he has not forgotten the three words by which he was named, nor will he ever forget them for as long as he lives. He will not be at ease until he understands why he was named thus’] (*Q*, 61:25–8). Lancelot seeks out a hermit whom he implores to reveal the meaning of his vilification, which has now been transformed by the narrative into its exact opposite, a source of wonderment and even, explicitly, of desire: ‘Car je n’oi onques mes parole que *je desirasse* tant a savoir come ceste’ [‘for I never heard words spoken whose meaning *I desired* to know as much as these’] (*Q*, 67:14–15; my italics). Taking a quasi-masochistic pleasure in his own destitution, Lancelot submits to the perversion (of the discourse of the Analyst) whereby he locates himself in the position of the object (the voice). Yet the gloss that is offered to Lancelot by the hermit (*Q*, 67–70) is far from convincing, and is even subject to a certain degree of inconsistency that ultimately destabilizes the apparently monologic meaning of the Other’s message. Having explained why Lancelot is compared to a stone,

<sup>107</sup> Derrida, ‘Donner la mort’, p. 61.

the hermit goes on to concede ‘Et encore, qui velt, puet len bien entendre pierre en autre maniere’ [‘and also, whoever should so wish, might also interpret the stone in a different way’] (*Q*, 69:7–8) – the meaning of the message is far from absolute. It would appear that the grace of God, of which Lancelot is ostensibly shown to be undeserving in this episode, can thus be read as being the very product of its own symbolization – the very notion of grace does not exist *as such* until it is produced as the lack in discourse.<sup>108</sup>

The hermit curiously couches his assessment of Lancelot’s sin (as an absence of grace) in terms of an analogy with dreaming and waking:

Mes ausi come vos veez que li hons forsoivo aucune foiz en son chemin quant il s’endort et il revient arriere si tost come il est esveilliez, tout ausi est dou pecheor qui s’endort en pechié mortel et torne fors de la droite voie, et il retourne a son chemin, c’est son creator, et s’adrece a aler au Haut Signor qui crie toz jorz: ‘Je sui voie et veritez et vie’. (*Q*, 65:9–14)

[But also, just as you can see that man sometimes strays from his path when he falls asleep, and finds it again when he has woken, so it is with the sinner who falls asleep in mortal sin and turns away from the right way, and he returns to his path, that is his maker, and he turns to his great Lord who forever exclaims: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’.]

The implication here is that man is liable to deviance in his sleep (i.e., when dreaming), but that he returns to the right path upon awakening (‘il revient arriere si tost come il est esveilliez’). Or, with a more cynically discursive gloss, the dream appears to represent a locus of undecidability that is (re)secured and symbolized through its narration upon awakening, in the telling or interpretation of the dream, as is effected by the hermit himself – that is, by the production of master signifiers. Problematic in this particular homily is the parallel established with the sinner who falls asleep in a state of sin (‘s’endort en pechié mortel’) and is somehow righted (‘il retourne a son chemin’) thereafter – although whilst still asleep, or on awakening, is unclear. What *is* clear, however, is that the notion of the ‘right path’ is above all discursively constructed here – the sinner turns to God (indeed, a discursive verb, ‘s’adrece’, is used) from whom he elicits a response – ‘Je sui voie et veritez et vie’. The grace of God, implied in these words, is thus retroactively constituted as the filler for its own lack (that is, the sinner’s *lack of grace*), and the *Queste* can ultimately be seen to perform its own ideological staging of the tenet that ‘the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you’.

<sup>108</sup> The same, of course, can be said of the concept of sin (as the absence of grace), as we saw in Chapter 3.



## Conclusion

### ‘Si avoit son tens trespassé’: The Final Sacrifice of the Grail Hero?<sup>1</sup>

As I argued at the beginning of this investigation, the Lacanian theory of discourse is always problematized by its remainder, a remainder that lies both inside and outside the discourse structure, a remainder that is therefore undecidable and abject. One position in each of the four discourse mathemes set out in book 17 of Lacan’s *Séminaire* must be occupied by the *a* – the lack/excess, the abject leftover resisting integration into any totalized system such as that towards which the discourse theorem itself gestures. The problem of the remainder is further compounded at a meta-discursive level insofar as the very concept of discourse *per se*, the means by which we create the social bonds that bind us to the symbolic order, must also assume the function of the *a*. As we have seen, Lacanian discourse is dynamic, its terms constantly rotating from one position to the next in an attempt to provide the perpetual movement needed to maintain an illusion that the symbolic order, the Other, has a consistent and meaningful content. Discourse as such, then, is problematized not only by its own remainder – that for which it cannot fully account (that is, the *a* occupying one of its structural positions) – but also by *its own status as that remainder*, the status of discourse itself as *objet a*. By way of conclusion, I intend to examine the manner in which the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste* attempt to deal with the remainder of/as their own discourse through their narrative closure or, more exactly, their inability to effect adequate closure owing to the persistence of the discursive *objet a*.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to Camelot from Jerusalem at the beginning of the *Mort Artu*, Bors recounts to the Arthurian court the events with which the *Queste* had concluded, most notably the deaths of Galahad and Perceval: ‘Et quant il ot aconté le trespassement de Galaad et la mort Perceval, si en furent tuit moult dolent a court’ [‘and when he had related the passing of Galahad and the death

<sup>1</sup> The quotation is taken from the thirteenth-century *chante-fable Aucassin et Nicolette*, in which Count Garin de Beaucaire is described as ‘vix et frasles, si avoit son tans trespassé’ [‘old and frail; his time had passed’] (p. 44).

<sup>2</sup> As Payen comments, ‘la fin du *Perlesvaus* n’est pas adroite’ [‘the ending of the *Perlesvaus* is not accomplished’]; the author ‘a de la peine à conclure’ [‘has difficulty concluding’] (*L’Art du récit*, p. 575).

of Perceval, all at court were plunged into grief’].<sup>3</sup> The use of different terms for the passing of the two Grail Knights here flags an important distinction in the thematization of their respective deaths; whereas Perceval’s demise is a banal ‘mort’, the death of Galahad is described using the more ambiguous term ‘trespasement’. The use of this latter term is not restricted to signifying death (indeed, this meaning is only figurative or quasi-euphemistic); the same word is also inflected with the notion of transgression carried by the English ‘trespass’ and, more curiously still, in the sphere of pathology can mean the precise opposite of death, signifying recovery from an illness.<sup>4</sup>

This use of the ambiguous term ‘trespasement’ is indicative of the way that the death of Galahad in the *Queste*, like that of the eponymous hero of the *Perlesvaus*, cannot be reduced to the extinction of biological life.<sup>5</sup> The demise, or perhaps more exactly the apotheosis, of Galahad bears close comparison with that of Perlesvaus; both Grail heroes die a very similar ‘death’ inflected with strong sacrificial overtones, with the promise of new life or a new social order emerging from the narrative ruins.<sup>6</sup> The notion of ‘trespasement’ in this respect implies the passing over from this world to the next, within which lies the presumption of a pact with God (the Other); the Grail hero must die in order to receive, *in exchange*, eternal life in paradise. This is made explicit in the *Queste* when Galahad is assured that he can effect precisely such an exchange at the moment of his choosing: ‘de quelle hore que tu demanderas la mort del cors, tu l’avras et recevras la vie de l’ame et la joie pardurable’ [‘whenever you wish to leave your mortal body, this shall be granted to you, and you will receive the life of the soul, and eternal joy’] (*Q*, 274:2–4). However, this staging of a sacrificial exchange is taken to a much more problematic level in the *Queste*, requiring a reassessment of the very purpose of the Grail Quest and the discursive structures, the texts, within which it unfolds. As Jon Whitman comments, ‘the quest seems less to resolve the tensions of Arthurian romance than to reincorporate them’,<sup>7</sup> and precisely such a reinvestment of the tensions and ambiguities besetting the Grail Quest can be read in the conclusions of both the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste*.

<sup>3</sup> *Mort Artu*, §2:5–7.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Trespasser, *vi* depart; pass (of time); recover (from illness); (fig.) die; go too far’ (*Old French–English Dictionary*, ed. Hindley *et al.*). This is by no means the most authoritative Old French lexicon; I cite it here owing to the specific mention of recovery from an illness, a gloss that is not explicitly given in the superior Tobler–Lommatzsch dictionary.

<sup>5</sup> The character of Perceval in the *Queste* cannot be compared to Perlesvaus in this respect, since the two clearly perform quite different roles in their respective narratives.

<sup>6</sup> Compare the Sadean notion of the ‘second death’ discussed in Chapter 4, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Whitman, ‘Body and Struggle’, p. 32.

### The Interminable Remainder: *Perlesvaus*

The ending of the *Perlesvaus* is configured as a series of endings; closure is repeatedly deferred and the reader is left with a powerful sense of remainder, of unfinished business.<sup>8</sup> Following the death of the Fisher King, the surviving members of the Grail family – Perlesvaus, his mother and sister (accompanied by an unspecified number of ‘damoiseles’ [‘maidens’]), and the hermit Joseus (son of the Fisher King) – remain at the ‘saintisme’ [‘most holy’] Grail castle ‘tant que Dieu plot’ [‘for as long as God willed’] (*P*, 10129). The first to expire are the women: ‘sa mere devi[a], e sa suer, e trestot cil qui la dedenz estoient, fors que uns seus’ [‘his mother passed away, and then his sister, and soon all of those who were there, *except for one*’] (*P*, 10129–31; my italics). The identity of the sole survivor mentioned here, the exception, is never exactly disclosed; should we infer a reference to Perlesvaus himself, to Joseus, or indeed to an indeterminate remainder? In the light of subsequent events, it seems that the latter offers the best reading; in spite of any ambiguity, the narrative clearly draws attention to its own excess – the leftover one.

Perlesvaus subsequently receives instruction regarding his own impending demise from a disembodied voice that informs him that he is not long for this world and should therefore go about distributing various relics from the Grail castle among the sylvan hermits (*P*, 10134–9). Following this prophetic announcement, the material edifice of the Grail castle begins to crumble: ‘tot li sarqueu qi la dedenz estoient croissirent si tres durement que ce sanbla que la mestre sale chaïst’ [‘all of the tombs in the place cracked so violently that it seemed as though the great hall would fall down’] (*P*, 10140–1). This destruction of the Grail castle prefigures the foundation of a new socio-religious order constructed around the relics that Perlesvaus has distributed to the local hermits according to the divine instructions: ‘Il edefierent eglises e mesons de religion que on voit es terres e es illes’ [‘they built churches and religious houses that can be seen throughout the land and the islands’] (*P*, 10143–4). As Peggy McCracken argues, ‘the *Perlesvaus* represents social order in terms of a religious order symbolically enacted through sacrifice’,<sup>9</sup> and indeed the reconfiguration of social order that we see at the end of the romance is closely bound up with the polemics of sacrifice, as will become clear in comparison with the denouement of the *Queste*.

Perlesvaus’s own end is as enigmatic and inconclusive as that of the romance bearing his name. A beautiful boat displaying a red cross upon a white sail

<sup>8</sup> Even the ‘end’ of the story in Nitze’s edition (the text of MS *O*) is not the narrative’s last word: MS *Br* has a colophon that extends the boundaries of the text even further, so that the ending is actually configured as a new beginning: ‘Après iceste estoire commence li contes si comme briens des illes guerpi li rois artus por lanc’ que il namoit mie [etc.]’ [‘After this, the story begins to tell how king Brien of the Isles left king Arthur because of Lancelot, for whom he had no liking . . .’] (my italics). For further comment on the *Br* colophon, see *P*, I, 14; *P*, II, 73–81; and Kelly, *Le Haut Livre du Graal*, pp. 10–12.

<sup>9</sup> McCracken, ‘The Poetics of Sacrifice’, p. 153.

arrives beneath the Grail castle, crewed by a mysterious group of celebrants, 'tuit vestu en tel maniere [comme s'il deüssent messe chanter]' ['all dressed in such a manner as though they were to celebrate mass'] (*P*, 10149–50). Perlesvaus joins the ship's company and sails off into the unknown: 'Josephes nos recorde que Perlesvaus s'en parti en tel maniere, ne onques puis ne sot nus hom terriens que il devint, *ne li estoires n'en parole plus*' ['Josephus tells us that Perlesvaus departed in this way; no mortal man ever knew what became of him, *nor does the story say any more about him*'] (*P*, 10162–4; my italics).<sup>10</sup> The protagonist's end is thus presented less as a death than as the closure, or indeed the deferral, of a narrative. This somewhat non-committal and bathetic effacement of the narrative's central character is, I think, symptomatic of the way in which this text can deal only very tentatively with any notion of rigid closure.

From the irresolute disappearance of Perlesvaus, the narrative turns its focus to the hermit Joseus, who remains isolated at the Grail castle until his death, after which the building falls into a state of dereliction.<sup>11</sup> At this point the ruined castle acquires a reputation as a locus of some great mystery, a folkloric 'merveille' ['marvel', 'curiosity']: 'Qant il agasti, les pluseurs genz des illes e des terres qui plus prochien estoient se merveilloient que ce pooit estre en cel manoir' ['when it fell into ruin, many people from the nearby lands and isles wondered as to what could be in the manor house'] (*P*, 10170–2). The (ruin of the) Grail castle is thus mythologized, acquiring similar cultural significance to that of a haunted house. Those who dare to investigate the mystery further do so at their peril; their trespass is punished by expulsion from the symbolic order, a passing beyond human cognition that recalls the disappearance of Perlesvaus himself: 'Il i alerent, mes onques puis n'en reperierent, ne ne sot on noveles qu'il devindrent' ['those who went to that place never returned, nor did anyone hear what became of them'] (*P*, 10173–4). Even though the Grail has long since been evacuated from its sometime base, a trace of its menacing yet enticing presence still persists there.

There follows a final anecdote regarding two Welsh knights who undertake to visit the ruins, and who emerge from their adventure transformed into God-fearing ascetics:

Il i enterent par envoiseüre, mes il i demorerent puis grant piece, e qant il revindrent fors, si menerent vie d'ermite, e vestirent heres, e alerent par les forez, si ne menjoient se racines non, e menoient molt dure vie, mes ele leur plesoit molt; *e qant on leur demandoit por coi il se deduisoient ainsi, 'Alez, fesoient il a cex qui leur demandoient, la o nus fumes, si savez le porcoi.'*

(*P*, 10177–83; my italics)

<sup>10</sup> Note that the Josephes mentioned here is the supposed narrator. See Chapter 1, p. 36 n. 19.

<sup>11</sup> The Grail chapel itself, however, remains forever untouched by the ravages of time: 'la chapele n'enpira, ainz fu adés en son buen point, e est encore' ['the chapel did not deteriorate, but remained in fine condition, as it is still'] (*P*, 10168–9).

[They entered the castle in high spirits, but remained there for a long time. When they emerged they took to living as hermits, dressing in hair shirts and wandering through the forests, eating nothing but roots. They led a very hard life, but one that pleased them greatly; and when they were asked why they took their pleasure thus, they replied: '*Go to the place to which we went, and you shall know why.*']

That the pair should urge enquirers to repeat their journey implies not only that there is something fundamentally ineffable about their experience at the Grail castle, that *terribilis est locus iste*, but also that the cause of their transformation, the unspeakable Thing that they have witnessed, persists in the ruins of the castle *at the same time as having been transferred to their own beings* – 'It' is now in them as much as it remains in the castle ruins, hence their quasi-evangelical exhortation to repeat the experience.

This is illustrated more clearly in the crux of the anecdote, the assertion that 'Cil de cele terre les apelerent sainz' ['the people from that country called them saints'] (*P*, 10185). The experience of the two Welsh knights endows them with the grace of God, that spiritual dimension within man that Žižek has termed 'the divine spark'.<sup>12</sup> Or, more exactly, the sanctification of these two knights makes visible, *confirms*, the divine spark that already inhered in man and that, precisely, presents the impediment to his ever becoming self-identical, fulfilled *as man*. For Žižek, this spiritual dimension is 'a "bone in the throat" – it is something, that unfathomable X, on account of which man cannot ever fully become MAN, self-identical'.<sup>13</sup> Žižek turns to the example of Christ, alloy of man and God, with which to substantiate his position – 'Christ is thus not "man PLUS God": what becomes visible in him is simply the divine dimension in man "as such"'.<sup>14</sup> The 'divine spark' exists in all men; in Christ it finds its most indisputable exposition as the excess of subjectivity *that is also man's lack* (i.e., it is this spark preventing man from ever attaining full subjectivity) – as such it is none other than the *objet a*.

The crucial point, of course, is that within the tradition of the Grail literature, this lack/excess is thematized as the grace of God (as we saw particularly in Chapter 3) and then displaced away from the subject, objectified, made tangible and thereby made *other*, in the figure of the Grail. As I argued in the Introduction, this 'fallout' is then cathected as the phobic object, that *something to be scared of* holding the subject's fundamental anxiety at bay. The proposition that a 'divine spark' is always already a part of man thus has far-reaching consequences for the Grail Quest, the purpose of which is ostensibly to seek out and define man's spiritual dimension in the form of an object, thereby giving content (a signified) to the master signifier (S1).

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 90.

### Galahad the Pervert

To apply the argument developed by Žižek in *On Belief* to the *Queste*, the Grail Quest would represent the ultimate staging of the inauthenticity of the sacrificial gesture, exemplified in Galahad's self-sacrificing quasi-suicide at the culmination of the enterprise. Galahad is cast by the *Queste* as Christ's successor – as Pauline Matarasso concludes, 'in Galahad we have the man in whom the divine likeness has been perfectly restored'.<sup>15</sup> Or, as expressed by the narrative itself, 'len doit vostre venue comparer pres a la venue Jhesucrist, de semblance ne mie de hautece' ['your coming must be compared to the coming of Christ, in appearance if not in greatness'] (*Q*, 38:20–1).<sup>16</sup> In the figure of Galahad we see most clearly the 'divine spark' that both confirms and undermines his election as the Perfect Knight and his destiny to fulfil the Grail adventures.

In the closing episodes of the *Queste*, Galahad is under the illusion that he has established a suicidal pact with God:

Totes les hores que Galaad se couchoit et levoit, fesoit sa proiere a Nostre Seignor que de quelle hore qu'il Li requeist le trespassement de cest siecle, qu'Il li envoiast. Si fist tant cele proiere main et soir que la voiz devine li dist: 'Ne t'esmaier, Galaad, car Nostre Sires fera ta volenté de ce que tu requiers: de quelle hore que tu demanderas la mort del cors, tu l'avras et recevras la vie de l'ame et la joie pardurable.' (*Q*, 273:30–274:4)

[Each time Galahad rose or lay down to sleep, he prayed to Our Lord that whenever he should ask to pass on from this life, his wish be granted. He prayed thus so often, morning and night, that the divine voice spoke to him: 'Be not afraid, Galahad, for Our Lord will do as you ask: whenever you wish to leave your mortal body, this shall be granted to you, and you will receive the life of the soul, and eternal joy.']

This presumption of the Other's consistency, the faith that it will respond to the subject's entreaty, is however thwarted. Having been imprisoned in Sarras by King Escorant for a year (along with Bors and Perceval), Galahad decides that he has endured enough: 'A chief de l'an avint un jor que Galaad se compleint a Nostre Seignor et dist: "Sire, il me semble que j'ai assez demoré en cest siecle: s'il vos plest, ostez m'en prochainement"' ['when a year had passed, it happened that Galahad one day lamented to Our Lord, saying, "Sire, I feel that I have lived long enough in this world; if it please you, release me immediately"'] (*Q*, 276:32–277:1). Yet the response he receives is less the intervention of the Other than the answer of the real: it so happens that Escorant is at death's

<sup>15</sup> Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, p. 90. Köhler writes of 'Galaad, successeur du Christ' ['Galahad, Christ's successor'] (*L'Aventure chevaleresque*, p. 212).

<sup>16</sup> On Galahad as a figure of Christ, see particularly Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry*, pp. 38–95.

door that day, and begs his erstwhile prisoners for forgiveness, which they readily accord him. Immediately after the death of the tyrant, and on the advice of the divine voiceover, the people of Sarras decide to make Galahad their new king – ‘Dont il li pesa molt; mes por ce qu’il vit que fere le covint, l’otroia, *car autrement l’eussent il ocis*’ [‘This pained him greatly; but he saw that he would have to concede, and so he did, *for otherwise they would have killed him*’] (*Q*, 277:12–14; my italics). Why should Galahad fear death at the hands of the citizens of Sarras when only shortly beforehand he was pleading for his life to be terminated? The answer is precisely because such an unscripted death would reveal the inconsistency of the Other, which must at all times remain concealed. It is this gesture of concealment, of *duping the Other*, that is the defining characteristic of the sacrificial act, and that must ultimately be seen to be enacted in the Grail Quest.

The falsity of sacrifice derives from the duplicitous dialogue established between the subject and the Other. As we have seen, the basic premise of sacrifice is founded on an economy of exchange in which ‘I offer to the Other something precious to me in order to get back from the Other something even more vital to me’.<sup>17</sup> The workings of such a bilateral exchange appear in the final section of the *Queste* when King Mordrain, who has been condemned to exist in a state of undead limbo awaiting the arrival of Galahad, is finally permitted to die (‘trespasser’, of course) in the presence of the Grail Knight: ‘Biax peres Jhesucrist, or ai je ma volenté! Or te requier ge que tu en cest point ou je sui me viegnes quierre, car en si aesié leu ne en si avenant, se en cestui meismes n’estoit, ne porroie je mie trespasser’ [‘Blessed Father Christ, now my wish has been granted! I beseech you to come for me at this moment, for I could never die in a more pleasant and agreeable place than the one in which I find myself now’] (*Q*, 263:13–17). No sooner has Mordrain uttered his prayer than it is answered, with the narrative emphasizing that this is the response of the Other: ‘Si tost come il ot fete ceste requeste a Nostre Seignor, *si fu bien provee chose que Nostre Sires avoit oïe sa proiere*, car il en rendi tantost l’ame a Celui qu’il avoit si longuement servi, et trespassa entre les braz Galaad’ [‘No sooner had he uttered this request than *the Lord proved that he had heard his prayer*, for he immediately gave up his soul to the one in whose service he had been for so long, and he died in Galahad’s arms’] (*Q*, 263:18–22; my italics).

This episode further illustrates the dimension of sacrifice beyond the exchange, which for Lacan is the very nub of the sacrificial gesture. The subject solicits a response from the Other, thereby proving its existence (and, by extension, confirming the subject’s own being *qua* \$): ‘le sacrifice signifie que, dans l’objet de nos désirs, nous essayons de trouver le témoignage de la présence du désir de cet Autre que j’appelle ici *le Dieu obscur*’ [‘sacrifice signifies that we attempt to find, in the object of our desires, a sign of the presence of the desire of that Other which I call here *the dark God*’].<sup>18</sup> As Žižek continues, ‘even if the

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Lacan, *S11*, p. 306.



Other does not grant my wish, I can at least be assured that there IS an Other who, maybe, next time will respond differently'.<sup>19</sup>

However, the dynamics of sacrifice are taken yet a stage further; once the existence of the Other is 'proven' by its supposed response, the subject must at all costs prevent that Other from perceiving its imperfection, its bar. The subject thus assumes guilt by means of the sacrificial gesture, shielding the Other from 'the devastating knowledge of its inconsistency, impotence, inexistence'.<sup>20</sup> This looking awry from the Other's inconsistency is achieved through the staging of a dummy search operation by means of which we seek to convince the Other that it is *we* who are lacking, that we continue to seek out the secret *agalma*. We have already seen how this lack is written into the concluding episode of the *Perlesvaus*, with the assertion that any man can acquire the 'divine spark' himself through the performance of some (sacrificial) ritual, such as a visit to the ruins of the Grail castle. Since *jouissance* is prohibited to the subject by the symbolic law, the only way in which he can possibly find enjoyment is to 'feign that he lacks the object that provides *jouissance*, i.e. to conceal from the Other's gaze its possession by way of staging the spectacle of the desperate search for it'.<sup>21</sup> This casts a very different light on the workings of sacrifice, effected not so much as the means of receiving something from the Other, but rather as a way of convincing this Other that the one who performs the sacrifice is still lacking *jouissance*.

The logical conclusion of this, as far as the Grail Quest is concerned, is that the knights who set out in search of the Holy Vessel in fact always already possess it, and that the Quest itself is staged as a kind of *trompe l'oeil*, an illusory *leurre*,<sup>22</sup> providing a means of duping the Other into believing that the Grail Knights, as subjects, are denied the enjoyment that they seek. As Hector hears himself and Lancelot declare (in a dream vision), 'Alons quierre ce que nos ne troverons ja' ['Let us go in search of what we shall never find'] (*Q*, 149:33–150:1) – the point is that they cannot discover 'It' since 'It' is already within them, a part of the very structure from which 'It' is supposedly absent – lack and excess, presence and absence, *objet a*. And yet, is this apparent insight not in fact utterly in thrall to the dominant ideology of the *Queste*, the thematization of the *objet a* as the grace of God, permitted to some and denied to others? The postulate that the subject already has 'It' (the Other's *agalma*) is ultimately perverse, for it permits, even requires, that subject to offer himself as the patch for the Other's lack.

It is here that a distinction between the perverse and hysterical attitudes to the sacrificial gesture must be made; both the hysteric and the pervert perceive the lack in the Other, yet their responses to this perception differ. Whereas the pervert is only too happy to sacrifice his being in order to cover over the lack in

<sup>19</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy*, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Introduction, p. 30.

the Other, the hysteric's cynicism dictates that 'he is not ready to sacrifice the part of himself that would complete the Other, fill in its lack – this refusal to sacrifice sustains the hysteric's eternal complaint that the Other will somehow manipulate and exploit him, use him, deprive him of his most precious possession . . .'.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately then, only the hysteric can recognize the 'superfluous and fake character' of sacrifice; his/her anxiety serves as a resistance to the compulsion to sacrifice: 'I refuse to sacrifice the *agalma* in me BECAUSE THERE IS NOTHING TO SACRIFICE, because I am unable to fill your lack.'<sup>24</sup> And yet this hysterical resistance is, certainly, only ever a plaintive admission of the Other's lack – as Lacan reminds us, what the hysteric desires above all is a new master, a new signifier with which to identify.<sup>25</sup>

The fundamental disjunction (or inability, *impuissance*) of the hysteric's discourse is located between the product and the truth – *a // S2*. As such, within this configuration of discourse, no system of knowledge (language, meaning: *S2*) can possibly account for the *a* (the *agalma*, the Grail), *other than* as the repressed content of the message addressed by the hysterical split subject (\$) to the master signifier (*S1*). The hysterical question, formulated by Lacan as the *Che vuoi?*, and already anticipated in the Crusader's angst-ridden cry of *Deus quid vult?*, is perhaps the most prescient articulation of the remainder of/as discourse. The repressed content of this interrogation is the tacit acknowledgment that the desire of the Other cannot be accounted for by any system of symbolic knowledge – *a // S2*.

The Lacanian discourse of the Hysteric thus appears to be closely aligned with what I have been attempting, in the course of the preceding chapters, to define as a discourse of the Grail. Agency in this discourse is accorded to the split subject who sets off in search of the object that he believes can and will complete him, fill out his lack, but that is, of course, already a constitutive part of his (split) subjectivity – the hidden *a* that is the driving force, the truth behind the discourse. However, the truly abject character of this discourse (of the Grail) can only be fully understood with the insight that the hysterical interrogation, like the Grail questions that were discussed in Chapter 3, *always already contains its own answer*. The point is not that the question requires an answer in order to give positive content to a formal lack, but rather that the very act of questioning provides an answer: *Deus vult!* What the Other wants is to maintain the illusion (the fantasy screen) of desire, thus permitting the subject a degree of separation, and consequently causing him to perform the parody of masking the Other's lack, staging a perverse search for the very *agalma* (*a*) that in fact controls the discourse of the Grail Quest, leading the subject into the perversion that was latterly identified with the discourse of the Analyst.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 73.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, *S17*, p. 239.

### From Discourse to Ethics

I began my enquiry in this book with the postulate that a distance opened up between the discourse of the Master and that of the Hysteric is then inhabited by a discourse of the Grail that would be located in a limbo somewhere between the mastery of the *Deus vult!* and the hysterical anxiety of the *Deus quid vult?* What we can now perceive is that this distance is no distance at all; the distinction between the poles of mastery and hysteria is short-circuited so that finally, in the discourse of the Grail, there is no ground between the positions of the presumed question and its answer. Marked by a fundamental failure of separation, the discourse of the Grail is fundamentally abject rather than ever fully identifiable with any one of Lacan's four hegemonic discourse permutations.

If, as has already been suggested, the Grail Quest might be considered a kind of lure (*leurre*) for the desire of the Other, then this postulate might finally be enhanced by seeing the Quest as a *seduction*, in the philosophical/analytic sense of the subject's being 'susceptible to enigmatic signifiers – oracular utterances [. . .] which we can recognize as having a meaning – indeed, as having a special meaning *for us* – but whose content we do not understand'.<sup>26</sup> The Grail is precisely such an enigmatic/master signifier, retroactively structuring the lives, the field of meaning, and the discursive structures of those who encounter it, in much the same way that Aristotle, in first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, introduces the concept of happiness as the teleological goal of the virtuous life. As Jonathan Lear avers:

Once we have installed the idea of there being an end to all the things we do, life will thereby be so transformed that it will appear that there is (and always has been) such thing as *a life* having its own possible coherence and end. It will then appear that all possible choices occur in this field: within the context of a life. *This is an indication that we have already been seduced into a certain way of life, a way of life that has been structured by the introduction of an enigmatic signifier into it.*<sup>27</sup>

The conclusion at which we have finally arrived, then, is that the Grail must now be seen not so much as the product of discourse, or rather, of discursive fracture (as per the arguments of Adolf and Cazelles with which we began), but rather as *the producer of its own discourse*. The parallel with Aristotle is further substantiated here. To pursue Lear's exposition:

Ethical reflection is inaugurated with Aristotle's injection of the enigmatic signifier 'happiness.' An inquiry was then launched into what that 'happiness' could be. *By the end of the inquiry, though, we close that gap with a gap.* The answer to the question 'What is happiness?' is that it is a 'something'

<sup>26</sup> Lear, *Happiness*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Lear, *Happiness*, p. 26; my italics.

that lies outside the ethical life itself. Now the point of the ethical life is to get outside it.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of this inquiry into the discursive operation of the Grail Quest, what was initially perceived as a gap, a lack (in discourse), has been replaced with the product of that gap, *which is itself another lack* – the empty metaphor, *anaphore de rien*, that is the Grail.

In much the same way that Aristotelian happiness becomes the orientating *point de capiton*, the master signifier ‘in terms of which one’s entire life can and should be evaluated’, so the Grail functions as that enigmatic signifier by means of which the subject can occupy a place within the teleological order: his S1, the point of his symbolic identification.<sup>29</sup> And yet, as Lear continues, ‘the teleological order cannot account for its own inauguration. The establishment of a teleological principle – “happiness” – by which to evaluate human life itself lies beyond the teleological principle.’<sup>30</sup> The master signifier is ultimately revealed as the constitutive lack or outside of the symbolic order, that which instates the subject and the Other in their complex, fraught and irresolvable relationship of desire. The point of the discourse of the Grail, then, is perhaps not so much to get outside that structure, to confound human discursive capability in the way that the Grail oftentimes appears to do, but rather to recognize that very discourse *as* an outside, as a discourse of love that is fundamentally abject.

<sup>28</sup> Lear, *Happiness*, p. 53; my italics.

<sup>29</sup> Lear, *Happiness*, p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> Lear, *Happiness*, pp. 59–60.



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The following abbreviations are used:

CFMA	Classiques Français du Moyen Âge
CUERMA	Centre Universitaire d'Études et de Recherches Médiévales d'Aix
MLR	Modern Language Review
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
SEDES	Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur

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## INDEX

Anonymous texts are listed by title, authored works by author.

Where an index entry pertains to a specific romance, the title (or abbreviation) of that romance follows the entry heading.

Entries that are specifically Lacanian terms are preceded by an asterisk.

- Abject (*see also* Kristeva, Julia), 15, 33, 67, 69, 75, 94, 113, 114, 127, 129, 158  
and *Objet a*, 20, 39, 135, 149, 157  
and Sin, 90, 95, 96, 102–3, 105, 110, 118, 120
- Adolf, Helen, 3, 5, 15, 27, 158
- \**Agalma* (*see also* \**Objet a*), 28–30, 156–7  
Grail as, 29–30
- Agape*, 26
- Alcibiades, 28–9
- Alexander III, Pope, 3
- \*Alienation (*see also* \*Separation), 19, 22–3, 29, 52, 68, 70–1, 76–7, 79–81, 83, 90, 126
- Amfortas, *see* Fisher King
- \*Analyst, discourse of (*see also* Discourse theory, *under* Lacan, Jacques), 15, 17, 22–4, 25, 121, 122–4, 126–7, 128–30, 132–3, 139, 147, 157
- Antidescriptivism, 87–9
- Antinomy, 138
- Aristotle, 41 n.40  
and Identity, 31–2, 36, 38, 60–1  
*Nicomachean Ethics*, 158–9  
Prohibition of writings, 32
- Arthur, King, 19, 33–4, 37 n.24, 42, 58–9, 129, 131–5, 136, 141, 143 n.91
- Augustine, St (*see also* Chapel of St Augustine), 101 n.39, 109 n.63
- Aucassin et Nicolette*, 149 n.1
- Avalon, Isle of (*P*), 37 n.24
- Barthes, Roland, 110
- Bernard of Clairvaux, St, 71–2, 101
- Beroul, 105
- Black Knight (*P*), 58
- Blanchefleur (*CG*), 117
- Bleeding Lance (*see also* Grail Procession), 7
- \*Borromean knot, 16 n.42, 123
- Bors (*Q*), 62, 149, 154
- Broken Sword (*see also* Grail Procession), 7–13, 112
- Butler, Judith, 90 n.3, 112–13, 145–6
- Bynum, Caroline Walker, 31, 40, 70
- Caesar of Heisterbach  
*Dialogus Miraculorum*, 93, 102, 109
- Cahus (*P*), 129–35, 136, 138, 141
- Camelot (home of Perlesvaus, *P*), 35–6, 37, 42, 45–6, 60
- Camelot (seat of Arthurian Court), 36 n.20, 85–6, 149
- Carcelois, Castle (*Q*), 62–3
- Cazelles, Brigitte, 5–6, 13, 15, 27, 113, 120, 158
- Chapel Ride, *see under* Perlesvaus
- Chapel of St Augustine (*P*), 129–32, 134
- Chevalerie celestiel* (*Q*), 19, 63–5, 66–9, 74, 76, 88–9

- Chevalerie terrien* (Q), 19, 63–5, 66, 74  
*Che vuoi?*, see Hysterical question  
 Chivalry  
   Celestial chivalry, see *Chevalerie celestiel*  
   Earthly chivalry, see *Chevalerie terrien*  
   Ideology of, 63, 69, 89, 117–18  
   Origins of, 69–71  
   Relationship to Christianity, 69–76  
 Chrétien de Troyes, 72, 124  
*Le Chevalier de la charrette*, 43, 141 n.81  
*Le Conte du Graal*, 1, 5, 13, 50 n.67, 75, 91, 94, 96, 107, 112–20, 130 n.42, 135  
*Cimetière futur* (CG), 43  
 Cistercians, 70–1, 106–7  
 Clamadoz (P), 44, 51  
*Coarz Chevaliers* (P), see Coward Knight  
 Cogito, 130  
 Confession, 21, 90, 91–4, 96, 102–5, 107–8, 110, 112, 114, 119  
   and Ordeal, 94, 101  
*Conte*, 44, 50, 53–5, 129 n.39  
 Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*  
   *First Continuation*, 6–12, 112  
   Gerbert de Montrueil's *Continuation*, 6, 12–13, 55 n.74  
   *Second Continuation*, 12, 112  
   *Third* (Manessier) *Continuation*, 6 n.23  
 Corbenic (Q), 84  
 Coward Knight (P), 53–4  
 Crusades  
   First Crusade, 71–2  
   Fourth Crusade, 91 n.4  
   and Origin of the Grail, 3–4  
   Third Crusade, 5 n.16  
  
*Damoisele du Char* (P), see Maiden of the Cart  
 Derrida, Jacques, 59, 123, 136, 142–3, 147  
 Descriptivism, see Antidescriptivism  
 Desire (see also Other, desire of), 17, 20, 24, 144–6  
 Desired Knight (Q), see Galahad  
  
*Deus quid vult?*, see Hysterical Question  
 Didot-Perceval, 113–15, 119, 120  
 Discourse (see also Analyst; Grail; Hysteric; Lacan, Jacques; Master; University), 7, 11  
   Duplicity of, 9, 14  
   Fractured discourse, 5, 13, 30, 158  
   and Sin, 92–4  
*Dorveille*, 125–6  
 Douleureuse Garde (prose *Lancelot*), 43  
 Dragon Knight (P), 55–6  
 Dreambook (see also Macrobius), 124–5  
 Dreams (see also *Dorveille*; *Esbahissement*)  
   and Discourse of the Analyst, 15, 22–4, 122–4  
   Medieval interpretation of, 124–6  
   Narration of, 122–4, 126–7, 130, 132, 135, 136, 142, 148  
   in *Queste del Saint Graal*, 76–82, 83–4, 122, 140–8  
   and Spectre, 123–4, 125, 140–1  
 Dreamwork, 127  
 \*Drive, 73, 144–6  
  
 Epitaph, 44, 133  
*Esbahissement*, 126  
 Escorant, King (Q), 154–5  
 Eucharist, 33 n.12  
*Évangile de Nicodème*, 35 n.17  
 \*Extimité, see Uncanny  
  
 False Guinevere (prose *Lancelot*), 40–1  
 \*Fantasy, 17, 22, 38, 68, 81–2, 83–4, 127, 132, 157  
 \*Fantasy object, 29  
*First Continuation*, see under Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*  
 Fisher King, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 99, 109, 111, 112, 113–14, 115, 138 n.68, 151  
 Foucault, Michel, 90 n.3, 93 n.14  
 Frappier, Jean, 15, 69, 74  
 Freud, Sigmund, 27, 63, 66, 95, 126, 127, 138  
   'Dream of the Burning Child', 122, 126–8, 131, 142 n.85

- Galahad, 18–19, 75, 76, 80, 85–8  
 Death of, 149–50, 154–5  
 as Desired Knight, 18, 85  
 as *Objet a*, 19, 69  
 as Successor of Christ, 154
- Gaultier de Montbéliard, 91 n.4
- Gauvain  
 in *First Continuation*, 6–11, 112  
 in *Perlesvaus*, 45–6, 49, 52, 53–5, 59  
 in *Queste*, 74, 83, 121
- Gerbert de Montrueil, *see under*  
 Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*
- Gilson, Étienne, 4
- Glastonbury, *see* Avalon, Isle of
- Gornemant de Goort (*CG*), 113, 117, 118
- Grace (of God), 4, 21, 91, 98–100, 129, 148, 153, 156
- Grail  
 as Abject, 26, 69, 74, 75, 100, 157, 158  
 as *\*Agalma*, 29–30, 157  
 Agency behind, 8 n.28, 144  
 Appearances of, 7, 27, 33–4, 74, 76, 79, 84, 90, 97, 102, 109, 135, 140–1, 143–4, 145  
 and Christianity, 2, 26, 91, 96  
 and Crusades, 3–4, 71–2  
 Discourse of, 1, 2, 6, 8–12, 13–15, 26, 28, 74, 157, 158–9  
 Forms of, 1 n.1, 97–8, 100–1, 113, 136  
 and Grace of God, 4, 91, 98–100  
 as Historical phenomenon, 3–4, 5  
 Locations of, 136  
 and Love, 26, 28–30, 109, 159  
 Mysteries of, 11, 152  
 as Ordeal, 94, 99–100, 111  
 Origins of, 1–5  
 as *\*Phobic metaphor/object*, 28, 30, 153, 159  
 as *\*Point de capiton*, 28, 135, 159  
 Procession of, 7, 111–12, 113  
 Quest for, 7, 19, 71, 73–4, 110, 113, 136–7, 140, 144–7, 150, 153–7, 158–9  
 in *Queste*, 4, 68, 74, 76, 79, 84, 100, 120, 136, 140–8, 156  
 as Secret, 97–8  
 and Sin, 90, 91, 94, 98–100, 109, 111, 121  
 Use of definite or indefinite article for, 96 n.29
- Grail castle (*see also* Corbenic; Fisher King), 6, 7, 10–11, 34, 35–6, 37, 46, 90, 102, 109, 114, 115, 118, 120, 135, 151–3, 156
- Grail questions, 94, 95, 98, 110–14, 119, 120
- Gregorian reform, 92
- Griffins, Castle of (*P*), 48
- Guibert de Nogent, 71 n.29, 131 n.46
- Guinevere (*see also* False Guinevere), 102–4, 106, 108, 109, 141 n.81
- Hamartia*, 105, 107
- Haughty Maiden (*P*), 46 n.53
- Hector (*Q*), 83, 156
- Heinrich von dem Türlin  
*Diû Crône*, 138 n.68
- Helinand de Froidment, 2 n.6
- Hermit, 63, 68, 76, 78–9, 80, 82–4, 120–1, 135, 147–8  
 as Confessor, 96, 102, 105, 108, 118–20
- Hysteria (*see also* Hysterical question), *Globus hystericus*, 103 n.43  
 Hysterical neurosis, 20  
 Hysterical symptom, 20, 103  
 and Sacrifice, 156–7  
 and Sin, 94–6, 102–3
- \*Hysteric*, discourse of (*see also* Discourse theory, *under* Lacan, Jacques), 15, 20–2, 81–2, 85, 90, 94–6, 107, 121, 157, 158
- Hysterical question (*see also* Grail questions), 4, 20, 30, 69, 81–2, 84, 95, 98, 102, 110, 157, 158
- Identity, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 31–61, 137, 146–8  
 and Change, 32–4, 37  
 and Death, 17, 32, 37, 43–4, 56–7  
 and Discourse of Master, 38, 132  
 and Doubling, 38–42  
 and Dreams, 125–8, 132–5, 146–8  
 and Future perfect tense, 47  
 Identity of opposites, 58–60

- Temporal aspect of, 47–52  
 \*Imaginary (order of), 16 n.42, 38, 41, 46, 57, 76, 123, 127, 132, 134, 139, 146  
 Incest, 63, 116 n.80  
 Innocent III, Pope, 91  
 Interlace (*entrelacement*), 35  
*Judicium Dei*, 92, 99
- Jerusalem, fall of (1187), 3  
 John of Salisbury, 124  
 Joseph of Arimathea, 35–6, 51, 55, 97  
 Josephus (*P*), 36 n.19, 152  
 Joseus (*P*), 57, 102, 151–2  
 \**Jouissance*, 16, 20, 22, 30, 41, 50, 68, 74, 76, 81, 83, 95–6, 107, 121, 126, 128, 132, 139, 146, 156
- Kamaalot, *see* Camelot  
 \*Knowledge (S2), 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21–2, 24, 26, 38–40, 46–7, 50–1, 61, 63, 64–5, 66, 67, 68, 70, 80–5, 86, 96, 101, 107, 121, 157  
 Kristeva, Julia  
 and Abject, 33, 63, 68, 94, 105, 127  
 and Object relations, 27–8  
 and Sacred, 63, 66,  
 and Sin, 90, 93, 105, 107, 118, 121
- Lacan, Jacques, 6  
 Discourse theory (*see also*, Analyst; Hysteric; Master; University), 13–15, 20, 24–6, 26–7, 123, 149, 158  
 Graphs of desire, 86 n.84  
*S1*, 41  
*S4*, 27  
*S7*, 139  
*S8*, 28  
*S17*, 13, 24, 32–3, 149  
*S20*, 24, 75
- Lancelot  
 in *Chevalier de la charrette*, 43, 141 n.81  
 in *Perlesvaus*, 48, 49, 50, 56, 90, 102–6, 108–9, 115  
 in prose *Lancelot*, 43–4  
 in *Queste*, 8 n.28, 65, 66, 75, 76–80, 84, 86, 87–8, 90, 103, 104–6, 138, 140–8, 156  
*Lancelot* (prose), 40–1, 43–4, 129 n.39  
 Lateran Council, Fourth (1215), 91–3, 94 n.19  
 Loathly Maiden (*CG*), 118  
 Lord of the Fens (*P*), 60
- Macrobius  
*Comentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, 125  
 Maddox, Donald, 37, 112–14  
 Maiden of the Cart (*P*), 51, 52, 56  
 Maidens of the Tents (*P*), 59  
 Manessier, *see under* Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*  
 \*Master, discourse of (*see also* Discourse theory, *under* Lacan, Jacques), 15–17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 32–3, 38, 128, 133, 158 and Death, 17 and Identity formation, 17, 47  
 \*Master signifier (S1), 14, 15–16, 17, 18, 19, 23–4, 25–6, 32–3, 38–40, 46–7, 50–1, 61, 64–5, 67, 68, 76, 80, 96, 107, 109, 118, 120–1, 126, 128, 133, 139, 147–8, 153, 157, 158–9  
 \**Méconnaissance*, *see* Misrecognition  
 Meleyant (*Q*), 63–5  
 Misrecognition (\**Méconnaissance*), 8, 14, 15, 24, 41–2, 46, 48–50, 53–5, 56–7, 59, 65, 66, 79, 80, 101, 103, 107, 110, 114, 123  
 Mordrain, King (*Q*), 155  
*Mort Artu*, 2 n.4, 149
- Nicodemus (*P*), 35 n.17  
 \**Nom-du-père*, 60  
 \**Objet a* (*see also* \**Agalma*; \**Plus-de-jouir*), 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 29, 41, 47, 69, 80–1, 82, 83, 84, 89, 123–4, 126–8, 129, 130, 135, 140, 144, 146, 153, 156–7 as Abject, 20, 23, 96, 107, 149  
 Object relations, 27–8  
 One of quality (*see also* Master signifier), 38, 40, 51  
 One of quantity (*see also* Knowledge), 38, 40  
 Ordeal, 21, 91, 92–4, 112, 120–1

- and Confession, 94  
and Grail, 94, 111  
*Ordene de chevalerie*, 75  
\*Other (see also Symbolic), 11, 23, 33, 68, 79–80, 108, 114, 123, 126, 129, 143–4, 154–7, 159  
Desire of, 4, 20, 29–30, 69, 71, 77, 81–2, 84, 95, 96, 134–5, 136, 157  
Inconsistency of, 19, 67–8, 71, 76–7, 80–1, 83, 133–5, 147–8, 155–7  
and Sacrifice, 150, 154–7  
Voice of, 46, 141, 147
- Par-lui-fet, see Perlesvaus  
Peace and Truce of God, 72  
Penance, 21, 92, 94, 108, 119  
Perceval (see also Perlesvaus),  
in *Conte du Graal*, 50 n.67, 63, 75, 84 n.79, 112–20, 135, 141 n.81  
Death of, 149–50  
in *Didot-Perceval*, 114–15  
in Gerbert's *Continuation*, 12  
in *Queste del Saint Graal*, 62, 84, 149–50, 154  
in *Second Continuation*, 12  
Perilous Seat (*Q*), 85–6  
Perlesvaus, 34–6, 42, 44, 45–6, 49, 50, 51–2, 53–6, 151–2  
Forms of name, 57, 59–60  
*Perlesvaus*,  
Appearance of Grail in, 1 n.1, 33–4, 136  
Chapel Ride episode, 128–35, 136–9, 140  
Colophon of MS *Br*, 151 n.8  
Conclusion of, 151–53, 156  
Date of, 31, 91  
as Discourse of Master, 15–17, 33–4, 47, 61, 128  
as Discourse of Analyst, 128  
Dreams in, 122, 126, 128–35  
Identity formation in, 23, 32–4, 37–61, 128–35  
Relationship to *Queste*, 33–4, 37 n.20, 61, 91  
Perlesvaus's sister (unnamed), 34, 42, 45, 60, 62, 115, 151  
\*Perversion, 22, 132, 147, 156–7  
\*Phallic object, 134  
*Pharmakos*, 113  
Philip Augustus, 5 n. 16  
Philippe of Alsace, Count of Flanders, 5  
\*Phobic metaphor, see \*Phobic object  
\*Phobic object, 27–8  
Grail as, 28, 30  
and *Point de capiton*, 27–8  
Pius VI, Pope, 139  
Plato  
*Symposium*, 28  
\**Plus-de-jour* (see also *Jouissance*;  
*Objet a*), 14, 16, 29, 33, 39–40, 41, 47, 95, 121, 126, 128  
\**Point de capiton*, 25–8, 65, 67, 68, 80, 81, 86–7, 89, 109, 110, 135  
and Phobic object, 27–8  
Psychosis, 25–6
- Queen of the Golden Circle (*P*), 55–7  
Queen of the Tents (*P*), 51–2  
*Queste del Saint Graal*, 1  
and Cistercians, 70–1, 106–7  
as Discourse of University, 15, 18–20, 61, 64–5, 67, 76  
Discursive inconsistency of, 19  
Dreams in, 76–82, 83–4, 122, 140–8  
Grail in, 4, 68, 74, 76, 79, 84, 100, 120, 136  
Identity formation in, 18, 23  
Relationship to *Perlesvaus*, 33–4, 37 n.20, 61, 91  
Sin in, 21, 103–6, 120–1, 148
- Racine, Jean, 27  
\*Real (order of), 16 n.42, 23 n. 60, 24, 56, 57, 76, 83, 123, 127–8, 133–5, 137–9, 154  
Renaissance, Twelfth-century, 70  
Revenant (see also *Spectre*), 137–8  
Robert de Boron  
*Joseph d'Armathie*, 4 n.15, 21, 91, 96–102, 105, 112  
Robert of Flamesbury, 108  
*Roïne au Cercle d'Or*, see Queen of the Golden Circle  
*Roman de l'estoire dou graal*, see Robert de Boron, *Joseph d'Armathie*

- \*S1, *see* \*Master signifier  
 \*S2, *see* \*Knowledge  
 Sacred, 63, 66, 69  
 Sacrifice, 105, 134, 150, 151, 154–7  
 Sade, Marquis de  
   *Juliette*, 139  
 Saintliness, 82, 153  
 Sarras (*Q*), 154–5  
*Second Continuation*, *see under*  
   Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*  
 Second death, 139  
 Sens, Council of, 32  
 \*Separation (*see also* Alienation), 19,  
   22–3, 29, 67, 68, 71, 76–7, 81, 84,  
   157  
 Shield, 48–50, 51, 52, 53–6  
 Sin,  
   as Abject, 21, 90, 95, 102–3, 107,  
   116, 118  
   and Confession, 91, 94, 102–3  
   and Discourse of the Hysteric, 15,  
   20–2, 94–6, 102, 109  
   and Grail, 90, 91, 94, 98–100, 109  
   and Language, 92–4, 95–6, 101–5,  
   107, 109, 110–16, 118–20,  
   120–1, 148  
   Location of, 90, 91, 95, 108–9, 116,  
   117  
   and Volition, 103–4  
 Sinople, 49 n.65  
*Sire des Mares (P)*, *see* Lord of the Fens  
 Socrates, 28–9  
 Soul, 32, 60, 93  
 Spectre (*see also* Revenant), 23, 123–4,  
   125, 136, 140–4  
   as *Objet a*, 123–4, 127  
 \*Split subject (*\$*), 14, 17, 18, 19, 20,  
   38–40, 46, 61, 64, 70, 78–82, 84–5,  
   106, 107, 129, 140, 155, 157  
   in Dream, 126–7, 130  
   as Sinner, 21, 95–6  
 Suspended subjectivity, 15, 23, 122  
 \*Symbolic (order of), 16, 23 n.60, 38,  
   41, 46, 50, 52, 57, 60, 65, 68, 76, 79,  
   95, 103, 106, 114, 121, 123–4,  
   126–8, 132–5, 137–9, 143, 146–8,  
   149, 152, 156, 159  
 Templars, 3  
 \*Thing, 139, 142, 153  
 Toledo, Council of, 92  
 Transference, 85, 109  
 Transubstantiation, *see* Eucharist  
 Trebuchet (Gerbert's *Continuation*), 12  
*Trespasement*, 149–50, 155  
 \*Tuché, 127, 141  
 Uncanny, 42, 44, 127, 137, 140  
 Undead, 138–9  
 \*University, discourse of (*see also*  
   Discourse theory, *under* Lacan,  
   Jacques), 15, 18–20, 22, 24, 64–5,  
   67, 80–2, 83, 84  
   and Identity formation, 18, 76, 81  
 Urban II, Pope, 71  
*Visum*, *see* Macrobius  
 Walter Map  
   *De Nugis Curialium*, 137–8  
 Waste Land, 111  
 Waste Manor, 116–17  
 Widowed Lady (mother of Perceval/  
   Perlesvaus), 34, 45, 57, 116–18, 151  
 William of Newburgh  
   *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, 137  
 Wolfram von Eschenbach  
   *Parzival*, 1 n.1  
 Wounded Knight (*Q*), 79, 140–2, 144–7  
 Yseut, 105  
 Žižek, Slavoj, 6  
   *For They Know Not What They Do*,  
   37, 38–40, 46, 56, 58, 59–60,  
   66–8  
   ‘Holding the Place’, 146  
   *Looking Awry*, 76, 142 n.85  
   *On Belief*, 153–7  
   ‘Spectre of Ideology’, 123–4, 140  
   *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 85–9  
   *Tarrying with the Negative*, 128,  
   132–4, 138–9, 140, 144–6



