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Literature in an Apocalyptic Age; or, How to End a Romance

No literature of the Middle Ages has so successfully captured the imagination of recent times as has the medieval romance. Indeed, as "post-moderns," we are hardly original in this taste, for it has increasingly been the preference of latter-day readers, especially since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Part of the reason usually given for this recurrence of medieval romance in modern times is to be associated with popular connotations of the word itself: romance. Yet another, less discussed, aspect of medieval romance is in fact germinal to modern appreciations of this old form, namely, its intensive preoccupation with prophetic imagination and the whole question of meaning in history. This question becomes focussed with particular clarity when we consider the way in which romance writers bring about an ending to their entertaining compositions.

Most of us, perhaps, will have reflected on contemporary literature which, uncertain of the question of meaning in history, develops its own *problématique* concerning the business of ending.¹ That an actual if subliminally realized sense of the world itself ending could have some reflection in the way books deal with the matter of endings seems reasonable enough.² In fact expressions of a sense of impending or possible *terminus* might seem an ordinary place to begin examination of literature in an apocalyptic and prophetic age. But we are also accustomed to the idea that books—works of creative literature in particular—not only reflect the world in which they are written, but, to the degree that they are good books, interpret and criticize that world as well. Strategies for closure, and the critique and interpretation which endings provide, may offer a point of departure for some of our most delicate questions about literary consciousness itself.³

At the most mundane level, we see that a psychology which despairs altogether of a form for conclusion can produce extravagant effects, but often a limited plot. Contemporary writers are often obsessed with this limitation. The novelist Margaret Atwood, for instance, suggests

to us that the typical plot of the 'modern romance' goes as follows: Boy meets Girl. Boy and Girl 'get it together.' Girl then gets cancer of the cervix and Boy is run over by a truck.⁴ At the story's end no interpretation need be offered nor surmised. Yet we see that this 'romance,' of course, is actually charged with a yearning for its opposite. In fact, one hardly needs to be a psychologist to perceive that the yearning for another story is what motivates creation of the story that is told. The relationship between these two attaches itself readily to the formation of endings, occasioning an illumination of the way in which historical narrative is defined and transformed in the presence of a prophetic impulse. The resulting quest for resolution is as venerable as that explored in the writings of the biblical prophets, as new as contemporary film fantasy, and yet it receives its most memorable and "imaginary" literary expressions in the prophetic "voice" of medieval romance.

The Medieval Age of Progress

The prophetic context of the late medieval romance needs to be appreciated in terms of its spirituality and philosophy of history. The first element we associate with the cultural spirit of the time of the medieval romance is an anticipation of the mood of the Renaissance. Its spirit is humanistic, liberal, optimistic and intellectual, and its remarkable achievements and aspirations are often generalized under the denominations "Twelfth Century Renaissance," or, "The Flowering of Late Medieval Christian Humanism." It includes the phenomena of new cathedral schools and the development of the universities, the recovery of Aristotle and other Greek writing by way of the Arabs, a renaissance of Roman models in every sphere from architecture to politics and ethical theory; and, in the triumph of Latin as the vehicle of trans-European literacy and diplomacy, the suggestion of a 'revived' and spiritually transformed Roman Empire, with religious boundaries far exceeding the archaic political influence of the Caesars. Here was a time of great confidence—confidence in the progress of history and in the 'evolution,' as we would say, or the 'elevation,' as they said, of reason and wisdom.

It is at this point that political theory really became a factor in the medieval philosophy of history, and the elevated status of rational discourse and structure soon brought about a fundamental revision of earlier (Augustinian) thought about the relationships between earthly statecraft and the design of the heavenly kingdom. Whereas Augustine had thought of the secular state as ultimately the product of man's fallen condition as 'redeemed' only to the degree that it was subservient to the ultimate City of God,⁵ twelfth and thirteenth century 'readers' of

Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* took a much more 'progressive'—that is to say, temporally optimistic—view. Whereas before this time, the state had not been conceived as "an independent, self-sufficient, autonomous body of citizens" living "on its own substance and on its own laws,"⁶ in the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas could write, "The city is, in fact, the most important thing constituted by human reason."⁷ Expressing a view that had been growing for more than a century, Thomas argued the authority of reason, and spoke of secular statehood as the highest goal of human wisdom, the supreme expression of all human association, the consummation of other unions, aiming at the *summum bonum* itself.⁸

But the old idea that political authority was founded on sin, and only redeemable through submission to divine authority, was much too firmly fixed in the spiritual tradition for the weight of any new university authority to shake it loose altogether.⁹ Hence, a subliminal challenge: the liberal optimism which sought an ethically responsible rule of reason in temporal terms was most often still wedded to an Augustinian spirituality, as well as to an Augustinian notion of universal history. The fusion of politics and historiography in Otto von Friesings' *The Two Cities*, as in parts of John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* and a famous book of kingship (by an anonymous Norman writer) written at the beginning of the twelfth century, all reflect the quest for a temporally perfect order whose sense of progress depends on granting to earthly statehood attributes of the heavenly kingdom.¹⁰ The *conscious* thought of these (progressivist) writers was essentially Utopian.

Camelot in Crisis

But there is another spirit, a second valent in late medieval sensibility. It owes not only to theory but to the practical fact that the late Middle Ages is also a time of grave, even radical contradictions — contradictions between aspirations to an ethically responsible rule of reason, to an ordered society in the here and now, and the hard facts of a disordered and disintegrating political and spiritual world. This is also a time of cataclysmic upheaval in the structure of Church and society, a period in which heresies flourish and nearly destroy the continuity of Western Christendom, where the hierarchy of the Church is itself under tremendous strain. This strain eventuates, in the infamy and confusion of the Great Papal Schism and Babylonian Captivity, a split in which the Western Church struggles under the schizophrenic leadership of popes at Avignon as well as at Rome. Clerical abuse throughout this period is rampant, especially in the Latin West, and the once almost academic issue of authority is battered about in the tempestuous arena of worldly praxis: "The churches are without preachers,"

writes Bernard of Clairvaux, "priests aren't respected, the sacraments are mocked, men die in their sins without recourse to penitence...." "Where is the Catholic," writes Sigebert of Gembloux, "who would not be grieved at the beauty of the Church being turned to folly...? churchmen are the object of public derision and persecution, they are even castrated and mutilated... as evident testimony to the not inconsiderable wisdom of their chastisers."¹¹ Chaucer's Pardoner, Summoner and Friar descend from a venerable line of "wolves in sheep's clothing" who had been ravaging against Church and society with unhappy effect for a long time, and they, as much as the Papal Schism, are expressions of a breach in the chain of authority that had once seemed to promise to medieval Europe real security under the aegis of a spiritual kingdom.

This is also a period of wars and rumours of wars, of re-emergent nationalism. Just when there seemed to be a possible community of nations, united by a Latin literacy and common belief, the rise of nationalism (and with it, of vernacular languages) seemed to make of this dream an old story—Babel—and men at arms who had been united in the Crusades returned to line up against each other, nation against nation.

We can hardly be surprised that in a period of such confusion and anguish some should have begun to despair of political strategies for temporal order, should have yearned for an apprehension of authority outside time and reason alone. There are, in fact, probably more attempts to fix the date of the Apocalypse in this period than any other, and a more heightened biblically literalist consciousness of "the end of all things" as felt need than in any other (sustained) Western epoch down to our own time. 1200, 1233, 1260, 1300, 1333, 1366, and 1400 are only some of the most specific dates that were calculated, written about, and fervently longed for by men and women who saw no hope at all in the *city*, the *societa*—or even in the temporal *societas Cristianorum*.¹² For them history and the societal idea of historical progress had radically failed. If the political thought of men in this period was essentially utopian, their psychology was increasingly oriented to the catastrophic.

So in the same culture at the same time we get a fundamental contradiction. Initially we find a myth of progress, with intellectual aspiration to appropriate the authority of history and to create an ethically responsible rational and political order. Then follows an emotional challenge to that order in which temporal authority is seen as bankrupt and sinful, where historical contradiction and the arbitrariness of time's immanent foreclosure argue a radical skepticism

toward history, permitting a hope for order that can only depend on eternal or divine authority.

Both spirits have their part in the creation of late medieval literature, and both have their bearing on the prophetic character and sense of conclusion which the romance expresses.

Kingship and Family History

The medieval romance is, in its genesis, a phenomenon of twelfth-century renaissance humanism. It represents a typical inspection of classical history for models granting authority (as well as form) to contemporary cultural aspirations. The first full examples of the medieval romance are thus expansions or transliterations of classical epics from the Latin—the old Roman stories which gave the *romans* their name, and with which they have so much in common. These transliterations include: the *Roman de Thèbes* (1150) from Statius' *Thebiad*, the *Aeneas* (1155) from Vergil, and Benoît de Saint-Maur's *Roman de Troie* (1160). Through these translations, the essential genre characteristics of their forebears are transmitted, nearly intact, to the medieval romance.

The chief features are familiar: we see a representative hero; a period of exile, with wanderings over the sea, if possible, to exotic places; at least one fight with a dragon or supernatural humanoid monster, *de rigueur*; a burial in a holy place, or visit to such a place, or holy occasion. Stylistically, the exotic subject matter will be accompanied by marvellous description, mysterious symbologies, and a courtly social aura.

Structurally, as Professor Gibbs has noted, the characteristics are almost as adequate to describe the Germanic epic, such as *Beowulf*, or the *Chanson de Roland*, as later medieval romances.¹³ But this model is to be found elsewhere—not only in modern literature, but in foundational (biblical as well as classical) sources. As studies of the David myth in western literature helps to make clear, the biblical story of David in I and II Samuel is here proto-typical.¹⁴ There are, however, in addition to the stylistic colour of the later medieval romance, two additional characteristics found only marginally developed in the Roman models, but which are significantly developed in medieval poems. These are, first, that the hero is *founder of a family*—or will be by the end of the story; and secondly, that the unprecedented space given to *love* episodes (the feature, which, along with the exotic, we usually think of when we use the term 'romance') actually involves a heavy thematic emphasis on *marriage*. In short, those aspects of the classical Roman epic which are associated with family or tribal history are, in the medieval romance, actually *magnified* and *made the psy-*

chological centre of interest in a preponderance of stories. But these upgraded elements in the medieval romance are in fact proportionate to their correspondent emphasis in that biblical literature which represents the 'progressive' and historical period of the Davidic kingdom.

Initially, these biblical features have much to do with that other quality we tend to associate with the romance: *optimism*. The evolution of each romance plot toward its crowning marriage, toward the consolidation and regeneration of the family history, speaks as clearly as anything in twelfth century philosophical literature of felt history as progress, and articulates a confidence in the family history commensurate with the elevation of its ideals as poetry. This is an evident feature of the Anglo-Norman ancestral romances, but we can also see it clearly in a more beautiful Arthurian poem, *Erec et Enide*, by Chrétien de Troyes.

In this romance, a compelling story of conjugal relation and mutual education toward a realization of the highest human ideals, a young prince of great potential and a young princess of faith and great beauty make their hard journey, questing toward a moment of full recognition—a knowledge of self through mutual understanding—in which wisdom (*sapientia*) and love (*amor*) no longer contest. To abbreviate the explication, when prudence is no longer forced to ride too far ahead of action, and their mutual progress draws toward its destination, the form of conclusion for Erec and Enide is as a *matriculation*, a reaffirmation of their marriage and a coronation which fully secures the kingdom.

We see in the coronation scene just how hopeful such a tale can be. Chrétien shows us his educated prince reunited with the family, at Christmas (the season of the New Man), and the 'Joy of the Court' is completed when Erec takes up his emerald sceptre and dons a marvelous coronation robe on which we see visually depicted the real progress of his education: the design represents the *quadrivium*, as described by Macrobius, and it shows that Erec has mastered not only the significance of words but the ultimate realities which words and the world signify. There follows a further suggestion that the princely matriculation is not merely literal or allegorical, but also anagogical. In the great coronation banquet which follows, a thousand knights serve white bread, and another thousand red wine, all of them dressed in white ermine. And of that court, says Chrétien, the joy was that at last "they all had enough, without wanting more."¹⁵ It is a scene in which the idealized temporal society takes on aspects (as opposed to mere prospects) of the heavenly kingdom.

In the earlier Middle Ages, it had been thought a dangerous thing to confuse the categories of *things* and *signs*: as Augustine put it, "in our mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native [heavenly] country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it [in the sense "ultimately," or "for its own sake"] so that the 'invisible' things of God, being understood by the things that are made, may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual."¹⁶ But even as careful a writer as John of Salisbury, in his great work of twelfth century political theory, *Policraticus* (1159), could signal the way in which such distinctions could, in an optimistic age, be blurred: rejecting the excessive Augustinianism of those who say "it is impossible both to prosper in this life after the way of the world and also to attain eternal joy with Christ," John expresses an almost North American enthusiasm for the opposite ambition: much as in *Erec et Enide* he finds that:

it is truly within the power of kings to prosper here and at the time to pluck the sweetest flowers of the world and the most precious fruits of eternity. For what happier fortune is there than if princes are translated from riches to riches, from delights to delights, from glory to glory, from things temporal to things eternal?¹⁷

This exuberance might well seem an imagination of having one's cake and eating it too: the sentiments embody a confident sense of relationship between evolving human statehood and the kingdom of God whose potential extravagance is merely more apparent in its *précis*, the well-known concept of theocratic kingship. The models here are really David and Solomon, but the deterioration of the modelling is, ironically, akin to the later history of the Jewish kingdom down to the time of the Babylonian captivity. Here we see how the context of kingship could become more ambiguous: no longer was the earthly king the sadly necessary taskmaster of Augustine; he was now, in an appropriation of the biblical models, *rex et sacerdos*, a man with a divine mission, with sacred and apostolic as well as kingly qualities, the *rex Dei gratia* before whom churchmen chanted the *laudes regiae* in a liturgical service emphasizing the divine origin of his power. His coronation ceremony was an anointing and consecration resembling that of a bishop, modelled on the anointing and consecration of King David. In the famous Norman *Anonymus* (1100), what Professor Kantorowicz has labelled Christocentric kingship argues for the view of the king as earthly type of Christ. As the twelfth-century writer puts it:

a twin person, one descended from nature, the other from grace...one through which, by the condition of nature he conformed with other men; another through which, by the eminence of his deification and the power of the sacrament of consecration he excelled all others. Concerning one personality he was, by nature, an individual man; concerning his other personality, he was, by grace, a *Christus*, a god-man.¹⁸

Here we see a kind of apogee of the medieval psychology and philosophy of temporal progress. In such sentiments about literal kingship we are far from Augustine's dour reservations about the secular state, and indeed, close to certain aspects of the romance characterization of Arthur of Britain.

Yet not, of course, in all respects. In the twelfth century we are also confronted by another element: a radical disillusionment with the limitations of the earthly kingdom. It arises when the intellectual spirit of 'enlightenment,' proclaiming its hopes of a rational and comprehensive order (whether in theology, natural philosophy or political theory) tries to confront spiritual (and political) experience fraught with individual and social propensities for the irrational, and in which lurks the shadowy presence of original sin, broken law, and the spectre of an Augustinian conscience. The love of order, as the hope for an ethically responsible rule of reason—a kind of heavenly kingdom in the here and now—is regularly confronted with the persistence of human sin and human failure. The result is a sense of frustration (in some cases defeat) that can be expressed as a tragic lack of fulfillment.

The main Arthur story hardly begins to develop before it embraces not only the historical and political optimism of the twelfth century, but also its growing and apocalyptic sense of frustration, irrationality and despair. In the ambiguity of events like those which led to the excommunication of the German Henry IV by Pope Gregory VII, the sack of Rome by the Normans in 1084, the conflict between Thomas à Beckett and an English Henry and the loss of Jerusalem in 1187, there were presumably hard doubts to set against the high temporal and historical ideals. One suspects that such events might have had a part in shaping the history of England which *Lazamon* was writing (1200) in which the age-old connection of Britain with Brutus is made more specifically now with the theme of the *fall* of Troy. In the incorporation of the Arthur story from earlier French tellings, *Lazamon* shows himself hostile to its courtly and 'romantic' elements, and "in his paraphrase, he alters the emphasis very considerably."¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, it is to the collapse of the Round Table and the defeat of Arthur that *Lazamon* gives crucial attention.

The story of 'the passing of Arthur' even as it is told by *Lazamon* offers one of the most moving passages in all our secular literature.

Here we meet Arthur, the unlikely king who has captured each imagination with his dream of the Round Table, the institution to end all strife—now beleaguered and driven to the end of every hope. In a tent, in the last darkness before the morning and the battle, he has a terrible nightmare. As its content is slowly uttered to the fateful messenger, unwittingly come to confirm the reality, we cringe at the ground and vista of his despair: for the nightmare reveals an unfaithful wife Guinivere and incestuous nephew and court adviser Mordred, joined against him in unholy alliance, body and mind, bent on destroying the dream of the Round Table, the nation, the idea of future itself. For Arthur, the terror is not the coming battle, but his own involvement in a dream which defeats the larger dream, the executions which, in his nightmare, he wreaks on his wife and his “kinsman most dear.” And to all this is added the deaths in his family of knights, the breaking up of the Round Table. At the last of his telling, in his nightmare the carnage finished, his voice is filled with pain:

and al mi uolc riche, sette to fleme.
 þat nuste ich under Criste, whar heo bicumen weoren.
 Buten mi-seolf ich gon atstonden, uppen ane wolden.
 I ich þer wondrien agon, wide ȝeond þan moren.

[My folk, they had fled away,
 And I knew not, by Christ that day
 Where they had all gone -
 but I dreamt I stood alone
 Lost on a moor-land, bleak and cold.]²⁰

From the ideal of perfect communion to utter alienation, Arthur's nightmare merely advances the reality the messenger has come before him, trembling, to announce. It is easy for us to sympathize with the heart-cry of Gawain:

Ældrihten Godd, domes waldend.
 al middel-ærdes mund. whi is hit iwurðen.
 þat mi broðer Modred. is morð hafueð itimbred.

Why almighty God? You who judgement and doom
 award and this middle earth guard
 How did this thing begin?
 Why hath Mordred my brother built this house of death?²¹

The sin, like the doom, defeats reason. The irrationality of sin overcomes the rational ideal. In other versions, Mordred weeps and curses his destiny too.²² No one escapes. Temporal order is seen as having been doomed to collapse. When to Gawain's cry no answer comes from the crowd, he raises his sword aloft in a desperate rage that, almost inadvertently, triggers the last battle. The enlightened

ideal of the Round Table has utterly failed. The light of reason has gone out. (But not, one is tempted to say, all at once. In the prophetic spirit of this poem we are meant, I think, to appreciate that the light of reason had begun to weaken from the very moment it was first taken to be sufficient light.)

To appreciate the prophetic quality of this story one should remember not only the trauma but the parenthesis. Consider for a moment the conclusion of the Arthur poem itself. At the end of the battle there stagger from the bloody field only two survivors—Arthur, mortally wounded, and his last faithful retainer Constantine. As they go down to the waters, and the mysterious boat approaches through the mist, the English reader is very likely to be reminded of another scene. In the older poem a ship burial had set an atmosphere of foreboding from the very beginning; at the poem's ending, Beowulf dies, with a charge on his lips to his lone faithful retainer. Yet the sense of tragedy—and thus the form of conclusion—in these poems, is not the same. For Arthur the end has not been the inevitable last dragon from without, but rather the experience of a vision destroyed from within by an irrational and virtually Oedipal disintegration of the family core from which the temporal political progress had been projected. The problem is mankind itself—even at the level of the self and one's own most dear kin, those closest to the ideal. Mordred is Arthur's nephew, yes, but also his son, through an incestuous liaison with his half-sister, perpetrated on Arthur while in a deep sleep. And the incestuous offspring had now coupled with his own stepmother to destroy his father the king. If the tragedy for Beowulf, as Tolkien has said, is that for all his prowess he was but a man,²³ as Arthur's little boat slips into the Celtic gloom it is more than the limitations of mere mortality which we feel. What we mourn in the passing of Arthur is rather the death of a dream, the almost incomprehensible loss of a possibility of a perfect peace, a rationally ordered society, a heavenly kingdom in the here and now. For "all the king's horses and all the king's men," according to the story, prove to be incapable of reshaping the dream, of finally redeeming the time. The virtue of the classical *romans* story, with its Virgilian ethos and progressive historicism, proves insufficient for the spirituality of an ambiguous age.

Despite being overwhelmingly weighted with apocalyptic despair, the story still strives, of course, for one last word—a word beyond the temporal destiny of Arthur's ideal, and it is a word which attempts to transform what might otherwise be a terminal and deterministic despair toward some category of hope: *rex quondam, rex quae futuris*: "that Arthur shall come again once more over Britons to reign."²⁴

Wistful more than prophetic, this last note is the hope out of history beyond history, out of poetry beyond poetry, and as a kind of last gasp of liberal optimism it constituted for the Middle Ages, as much as for our contemporary world, by itself an unconvincing apologetic. But it is, in that, a fitting introduction to the last phase of literature in the medieval "apocalyptic age."

It is in the perspective of the challenge to a liberal and progressive view of human history afforded by a time of confusion and ambiguity that we can best appreciate the original Arthurian story. Arthurian romance, even after the Middle Ages, reemerges to telling in times of despair over history and profound skepticism with humanist ideals. There is a great difference between Elizabethan or eighteenth-century uses of Arthurian motifs and the character the story bears for, let us say, *Lazamon* or T. H. White. In this sense, we appreciate that the true companion piece to White's retelling in prophetic cultural criticism of our own time would be something like George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle*, with its horror at the holocaust and critique of the moral impotence of nineteenth and twentieth-century traditions of progressivist and liberal optimism in the face of the dark side of human nature. Or Camus' *The Rebel*. The apocalypse these writers fear is really an obliteration of any transcendence for the human spirit. At the end of White's tale, a kind of critical interpretation of its medieval forebearer, we see the medieval romance reminding us that a "kingdom of ends" (Lenin) is not human, that "Might for Right" (Hitler) is uncontrollable, and yet that an ideal of Justice ("A Just Society") is not enough for our mere mortality. At the end of White's book, as Arthur passes on his flickering light to little Thomas of Newboldrevel, we see his wishful traditioning as a resignation, a playing for time. The action is hopeful, still questing for perfect community and communion, a sense of closure. But it speaks much of medieval romance, for this is a faint candle, not a torch: the gesture is not in the confidence of hope *per se*.

The Once and Future King is an example of criticism turned into *poesis* itself, a book written out of nostalgia—a tenuous and wishful longing, unfounded on any certainties, or any premise of a more-than-human agency that could transcend the obsessive human problem which the Hebrew prophets and medieval romanticists portray. It is, like *Lazamon's* tale, a story of aspiration—but, even more, of frustration. There is thus, even in the interpretation, no final transformation, no metamorphosis, no conversion of the heart's desire. The closure is suspended, transfixed upon a wishful star.

The Arthur story, both in its medieval and modern formulation, is genuinely apocalyptic literature. It is thinking always about the ending. Yet filled with a sense of our limitations, it can end by becoming,

according to how its interpreters choose to read it, either a treatise on the fearful sadness of our plight or an escape into castles in Spain, an overt evasion. Essentially, it remains inconclusive despite its valiant attempt at conclusion. As prophetic voice it is thus incomplete. Which takes us back to where we started.

The great strength of apocalyptic literature of this second phase of ambiguity is that it wrestles with the questions. Though it does not usually round down toward any closure or healing of its own, it tends to point instead toward another literature, or another language. We notice, that the pointing is not to the *romans*, not to statecraft, not to the glory that was Rome. Confusedly, ambiguously, prophetic romance in the later Middle Ages struggles to reach back through that to another story, a parable: out of history a meaning for history which is more than history—the prophetic vision of the Bible: a once and future king.

A Psychology of Prophetic Literature

If one of the most important contexts for prophetic voice in literature is the historical context, it is often true that prophetic literature emerges in the second and third stages of a series of those psychological phases which may be described in images of *progress*, *ambiguity*, and *crisis*.²⁵ In biblical literature, for example, we would locate I and II Samuel in the first phase of progress, when the establishment and achievements of the Davidic and Solomonic kingdom is at its height. Later, in the material contained in I and II Kings, and in the time down to the period just before the Babylonian captivity, we move into a phase of ambiguity, and then, with the collapse of the nation, to crisis. This pattern in history, so engagingly commented upon by Paul Ricoeur, is not in literary history merely an analogue to the biblical pattern: there it is often directly informed by it.²⁶

At the risk involved in all such simplifications, it can nonetheless be useful to think of the literary history in late medieval romance represented by our first two poems, *Erec et Enide* and *Lazamon's Arthur*, as being shaped in two of Ricoeur's modes, or phases.²⁷ In a time of growing confidence in reason, history and law (that is, in a phase of progress), it may be that literature tends toward the utopic. In a phase marked by an overpowering awareness of irrationality, death and disorder (that is, in a period of ambiguity), it would seem that literature tends toward a catastrophic sensibility. Here then, are two levels of engagement, two ways of understanding and receiving meaning, an abstract level of progress and an existential level of ambiguity. But we know that a catastrophic psychology is itself never without ambivalence. Therefore, it will almost certainly give way to a third stage: crisis

will eventually try to resolve itself in a commitment based either on hope or on despair. The third phase, then, is truly apocalyptic and comes with a heightening of crisis. Whether in Judaism of the sixth century B.C., Roman culture of the fourth century A.D., late medieval culture (or, we might say, the 'psychosis' or our own time), we see that as the abstraction Progress is more and more overpowered by confusion and ambiguity, literature is moved to take on a prophetic voice: it becomes, as in the writings of the Hebrew prophets, a literature about the failure of literature, a literature of *warning*.

Hebrew Prophets

We see this modelled very clearly in the writings of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Zechariah, Daniel and Ezekiel. Poised at the end of their national history, extremely aware of time's immanent foreclosure and charged with speaking to a people as dedicated to approach-avoidance and to recognizable forms of intellectual and spiritual anesthesia as any other, the prophets represented by these works first warn their audience; they use discursive method and homiletical castigation to recall to them the moral lessons of their history. With little success. The prophets then take up forms which might gain them better attention: symbolic action and parable. Precisely because their audience has become inured to it, they abandon discursive, rational and historical analysis. When their audience has "ears to hear and hear not" and has become hard-hearted, then the prophets escalate their warnings by means of parables and tales of mystery. Ezekiel, for example, is told by Jahweh to "speak to the Israelites in a *riddle*."²⁸ The term here is *mašal*, which signifies almost any figural discourse, be it parable, allegory, proverb or even "sign"—in short, the word signifies indirect and puzzling speech. At this point in the narrative Ezekiel's warning takes the form of enigmatic and proverbial discourse, such as the historical allegory of the great eagle who flies away with the top branch of the cedar of Lebanon. Subsequently, Ezekiel's speech is more and more parabolical, as it moves away from chronological time and allegory toward an envisionment of the fullness of time and apocalyptic parable.

The literary form *mašal* ('riddle,' 'proverb,' or 'enigma') appears whenever ordinary warnings are no longer heeded (cf. Matt. 13:10). It is a form to use for those 'who are without.' Yet its application in Biblical literature extends through images of ambiguity and beyond the desperate analysis of the 'earlier' form, the first warning parables. At the point when the writing on the wall, so to speak, is so clear that temporal futures cease to have meaning, then it is this form which, as apocalyptic, most articulately speaks the ultimate category of interpre-

tation by which biblical hermeneutic is always marked—its enigmatic eschatology. In the Hebrew prophets when discursive warning fails, we observe two predominant uses of the “enigmatic” form: first, historical allegory and, when this too fails, “history” is passed over in favour of another use of enigma, *parables of consolation*.

The most memorable figurative discourse in Ezekiel is the famous chapter 37, Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones, which at the word of Jahweh, come clanking mysteriously to life, the scattered and dismembered representatives of Jewish history miraculously resurrected and reassembled as a great army, ready for the last battle. It initiates a conclusion to Ezekiel in which, in the vision of the New Temple and New Jerusalem, there is an ultimate restoration, ultimate fulfillment and interpretation, a hope for resolution beyond the ambiguity and natural despair of the history which has been lived. Its parallel in Isaiah is a movement from the stark, imperative “witness” of Solzhenitsyn-like prophecy (*adah*) to the optative and subjunctive witness (*teudah*) of an Isaiah looking forward to the Messiah promised, the ultimate deliverance—the emergence of which we translate as the future tense.²⁹

Old Testament Prophecy and Medieval Hermeneutic

It is of more than passing interest to readers of medieval literature that the old Testament prophetic books, and their New Testament successor, the Apocalypse of St. John the Divine, have, with their respective commentaries, exerted a great influence on the late development of medieval romance. Perhaps because of the traumatic effect of the final loss of Jerusalem in 1187, and other apocalyptic events, the prophets get more and more attention from the late twelfth to fourteenth century. In the work of the most important late medieval commentators on Scripture, for example Nicholas of Lyra, or Wyclif, we apprehend the strength of these connections not only for symbol and image, but for changes in literary form as well.³⁰ In looking at such commentaries, we can be much instructed by the insights they afford into the transformation of classical and historical narrative by what amounts to an “eschatological” hermeneutic.

In the late medieval flux between progress and ambiguity, “warning” literature first appears in a discursive form in the *ars praedicandi*, the homilies and treatises of men such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Sigebert of Gembloux, or later, Bradwardine and Wyclif. But the warning also takes on parabolical form: important works of poetry, such as the Arthur story itself or Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Hous of Fame*, are prophetic warning literature in this sense. Ironically, the plot and narrative substance of these parables are provided

by that very genre, the classical epic stories of the *romans*, in which the medieval confidence in reason, history and law had been vested. Yet in these later uses of the stories, it is irrationality, death, and disorder which prevail. Ambiguity has overcome progress. Utopia gives way to catastrophe.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the two elements of tension which create the ambiguity as themselves embodying the alternative which the third experience, a real crisis, presents. If that were the case, the existential realities could induce nothing but despair. Yet for Nicholas of Lyra in the fourteenth century, as for Paul Ricoeur in the twentieth, crisis can discover another way of speaking to the problem. As Lyra puts it, it is the saying "Fear not!" which is the prophetic word actually confronting the history we live. Despair, more than mere fear, is countered by the *evangelium*, the "good news." The true contrary of hope is not simply a failed theory of progress: the contrary is 'un-hope,' what Chaucer called *wanhope*.³¹ Accordingly, what prophetic literature in the biblical tradition offers finally is not merely castigation or warning but, as in the book of Isaiah, a future prospect and a consolation. This is a crucial feature of a medieval Christian analysis of an apocalyptic age which, derived from an appreciation of the Hebrew prophets, is often better grasped by the medieval poets than by the philosophers and theologians, by Chaucer than Wyclif, or by the Orfeo poet than Occam or Bradwardine.

Resolution: Apocalypse as Consolation

In turning to the romance, *Sir Orfeo*, to illustrate the last phase in narrative transformation of the medieval romance, one must acknowledge, of course, that this poem is more than merely the product of an apocalyptic psychology.³² A fourteenth-century telling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and one of the most beautiful poems of its time, it reminds us that the tensions which propel consciousness toward ambiguity in historical terms are often analogous to the same tensions experienced in personal terms, and that apocalyptic crisis may be only a more generalized and extravagant form of the personal crisis which lies behind every desire for poetry. But this is precisely what makes it applicable: clearly a poem of its own age, *Orfeo* is also a poem which touches a moment in every personal history, reminding us that personal histories are microcosms of those older and larger fluctuations of progress, ambiguity and crisis which we find so much easier to study.

Orfeo is also enigmatic: a parable. Unlike the Arthur story, however, its narrative matter is not pseudo-historical and specific to community, but purely mythographic, hence more personal. Here, the

classical tale of *Orpheus* is categorically a statement concerning man's universal existential ambiguity, and it was so well known to fourteenth-century readers of medieval literature (Ovid, *Ovide Moralisé*, Boethius, etc.) that it had become for them a standard figure for life's most persistent apprehension: that to frustrate all our longing after closure comes ever the irresistible backward glance, the plight of memory, ironic prophet of our obvious fate. That death cannot be cheated—this surely, is the natural end of Orpheus and Eurydice which eclipses all other propriety in the story, and it has appeared as definitive to Ovid and Boethius, as, in our time, to Anouilh or Cocteau. The second death of Eurydice—when Orpheus cannot resist looking back to see if she is still there—has been the blunt instrument of defeat for many a theory of rational progress, or of the ultimate victory of the humane and Orphic arts.

The beginning of the medieval poem is thus *elegiac* in tone. Recalling the nature of the genre, the poet nostalgically reminds his audience how it was when the Britons, when they heard adventures of old times, used to take their harps and make them into a *lai*, the sung variant of the *romans*. Then he announces his own subject, the plangent story of the mythic harper Orfeo, or Orpheus. He makes him, however, like Arthur, a knight and a king.

The story unfolds according to the familiar Ovidian plot. Eurydice, asleep under the garden tree at midday, is rapt away by the king of the underworld into the realm of the dead, and Orpheus mourns disconsolately. One day, in his ten years of exile, he meets her ghost, which then almost immediately fades before his agonized gaze and disappears into the ground. Resolved at last, he takes his harp and follows, playing enchantingly before the underworld court until granted his bargain: the promise of her release if only he will not look back on the journey out.

We know what to expect. Indeed, we are prepared to see once again in this poem the commentary that mortality always offers to the vain hopes of history. As one of the poem's courtiers puts it: "þer is no bot for mannes deth (no remedy for man's death)." ³³

Yet suddenly, against all expectation, the poet allows Orfeo and his bride to slip up into the light of day: in four short lines the plot is changed, and the audience, we may be sure, are wonderfully amazed. (Modern critics, especially of the 1950s and 60s, were as often as not, terribly chagrined.) ³⁴ Why, we might ask the poet: why did you make the change? Here we are offered not precisely an argument, but an hypothesis. It comes when Orfeo, in a masterful conditional clause, reveals himself to his people:

ȝif ich were Orfeo be king,
 & hadde y suffred ful ȝore
 In wildernisse mich sore
 & hadde y won mi quen o wy
 Out of þe lond of fairy,
 & hadde y brouzt þe leuedi hende
 Rigt here to be *tounes ende* ...
 (ll. 558-564)

then what? Then, in short, at the 'tune's end,' or the 'city's edge,' has appeared a remedy for "mannes dep̄" after all. Slowly the audience reconstructs the subtle typological suggestions that have been there in the story all along—among them Eurydice's abduction from under a tree in the garden by the god of the underworld, and her pursuit as a lost bride by her royal husband, who like King David, is a harper and so associated with the spiritual powers of the *citharae locutionis*, the 'healing' word which in medieval references invokes both the poet's word and the Word incarnate. Eurydice's release becomes a suggestive harrowing, Orfeo's harp an entuner of the 'new song' of human redemption in which despite all reasonable expectations to the contrary, normal laws of causation are confounded: death *may* become life. The archetypal experience one expects, occasioned by the first story of man, and confirmed in history, is suddenly redeemed by another story. Moreover, its time is redeemed by another kind of time. For the new lease on narrative in *Sir Orfeo* is not simply more of the same kind of time—a *chronos* as in history. It is a new kind of time—in prophetic terms, a *chairos*—a fullness of time, a time when interpretation becomes possible.

The genius of the Orfeo poet's parable is that he keeps both the tragic ambiguity of history and the hope of eschatology (final interpretation) alive in his poem. The allegorical and biblical transformation of the narrative is artfully prepared for, but so is the traditional classical ending. The magic is thus surprise, and when the happy conclusion is snatched entirely unexpectedly from the "gullet of despair," it is the conclusion which retrospectively interprets the transformation of the poem. We see, as in the biblical prophets, apocalyptic literature becoming a literature of consolation, turning despair to hope. The Orfeo poet, like Isaiah or Ezekial, does not at all deny the existence of crisis and failure, either in language or in the lives of men and women. He does deny, in the face of much evidence, universal final defeat, and in so doing creates a category of hope like that consolation which Professor Tolkien tells us is also the gift of the true fairy tale: "*evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."³⁵ If the perpetual story of classical roman narrative is one for which mortal endings overtake conclusion, then the

added biblical and prophetic voice is perhaps intended to carry us toward another story, one which affords us a future for the imagination.

Conclusion

This exemplary transformation of classical narrative by biblical story and hermeneutic in the romance affords us, by way of conclusion, useful insights into the question of closure itself. Here is a question of evident interest to medieval poets too. Apocalyptic literature in the later Middle Ages discarded much of its own idea of progress, and formally expressed a lack of confidence in historical conclusion. Yet here, as elsewhere, the characteristically "prophetic" voice of the 'romantic' imagination offers reassertions of the old parable of hope, creating a literature which is reconciled to an experience of the present as ambiguity, yet which sees this dark history as imbued with another history in which meaning is *not* inaccessible, and which may at last be understood.³⁶ Often, such literature turns to old models. Just as the romance writers reached back through classical Roman story to the Hebrew Prophets, so some modern writers have reached back to medieval poets, and through them, if not directly, to the same prophets. It seems that the writer in this tradition is encouraged, no less than the author of *Sir Orfeo*, to embrace the terms of a hopeful philosophy of history, at least as an hypothesis—a hypothesis in which ironically, it is enigmatic discourse in which the possibility of an ultimate interpretation still exists.

The voice of such a work is not declamatory or merely prophetic in the imperative sense. That is, it is not merely analysis, or a projection of despair based upon diagnosis. It is instead capable itself of the future tense—a future made poetically and personally rich because it incorporates and transforms, not merely transmits the past. The prophetic voice of *Sir Orfeo* is in this case like the voice of the later Isaiah: it is optative, subjunctive, playful, yet not, in fact, escapist. It sees the terror, and draws us not into evasion but into frank confrontation with the inevitability of death and an ultimate foreshortening of interpretation. *Orfeo* is not merely pastoral. It does not content itself with mere wishful projection toward a 'romantic' conclusion and resign itself (as is *required* in such cases) to a gentle despair. Rather, its vision comprehends that possibility of closure which comes from an attempt to participate in the integrity of a larger enigma, so imagining itself as becoming legible beyond its own writing, even before (long before) the present script has concluded.³⁷ *Sir Orfeo* becomes more hopeful than *Lazamon's Arthur* precisely because the possibility of hopefulness is less to be expected and is without any necessity or desert in the narrative itself. The conclusion is accordingly both more audacious

and, genuinely, a more gracious enigma awaiting personal solution. Orfeo is thus, at the level of interpretation too, a "parable of consolation."³⁸

If the ending of Arthur can be more satisfying than that of *Erec & Enide* (in nothing else than that it appears to us now to be less narrowly 'romantic') so the ending of Orfeo can become more satisfying still. Both of the later two romances are "unfixed." The ending of Arthur, shrouded in wistful ambiguity, remains in most of its readings and interpretations perhaps more hopeless than hopeful with respect to the largest questions of interpretation. One thinks of Tennyson. The very features of the story which compel us leave us at the ending unsatisfied with the fuzziness, the retrospective aura of irresolute imagination. Yet in ambiguous times this can be more attractive than the almost determinist historicism of Chrétien, which more resembles the certain ideologies of a Vergil or Marx, and for which interpretation has so much less possibility of a realized personal dimension. For Arthur's ending there is always the possibility of a *sequel*, a second version. *Orfeo*, on the other hand, is a poem for a time of crisis, when the inevitable has been measured at closer range, and there appears to be less probability of revisions. Both possibilities have to be allowed for in a single, puzzling word—death, and life—and (any) interpretation risked as hypothesis.

The medieval chapters of our literary history suggest that the value of a prophetic form for conclusion is simply this: that such a form is still open to interpretation; it can have personal meaning. The medieval romance, as a response to all the psychological and historical turmoil that its genre mirrors is, on this account, transformed from mere analysis to a prospect on remedy, and becomes timeless. A poem like *Orfeo* is psychopharmical; it recreates the future.

Gode is þe lay, sweete is þe note
þus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:
God grant us alle wele to fare! Amen.³⁹

A *gode Lai*, or a *god spellum*, as it would have been called in Anglo-Saxon, is a prophetic poem rooted in the ambiguous chaos of a recognizably fallen history, yet whose goodly aspect is *evangelium*, hope which can project a conclusion based upon the hypothesis of faith. It dares to imagine that history at the last, really *is* transformed by poetry, becoming more than mere history. The simplest gift of such a literature is that it envisions a future for literature. It is in this aspect above all that the third phase of medieval romance, like the consolatory phase of prophetic biblical literature, offers a pleasing prospectus

to the reception and study of literature of any period, even that of our own time.

NOTES

1. Concern with this theme has produced considerable critical interest in the subject, beginning especially with Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967). But one thinks here of numerous examples of modern fiction in which the problem of conclusion is a major feature: Samuel Beckett's *Fin de Partie* (*Endgame*) where things are always dying, always coming to an end, but which (as in Xeno's paradox) never quite reach a last divide. In the novel, Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* asks the reader to choose, pasting on whichever of two endings he prefers. Richard Brautigan's famous "Mayonnaise" chapter in *Trout Fishing in America* is another example, as is the one hundred and eighty-six thousand possible endings per second he allows for in his *Confederate General of Big Sur*—to indicate his abandonment of any temporal form for conclusion at all.
2. D. L. Jeffrey, "Conclusion and the Form of the Personal in Modern Poetry," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XLIII (1975), pp. 153-163.
3. This is a point pursued by Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1968).
4. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).
5. Augustine, *City of God* XIX. 15-17.
6. Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 17.
7. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*, lectio I. See A. P. d'Entrèves and J. G. Dawson, *Aquinas, Selected Political Writings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), pp. 195-199.
8. Aquinas, *Politics* I, 1-2; II, 6.
9. Thomas Gilby, *The Political Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 146.
10. See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962). See also Walter Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship* (London: Methuen, 1969).
11. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistle* 241, in Migne, *PL* 182:434; Sigebert of Gembloux, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, L.L., 2:436.
12. See M. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse* (New York, 1963); Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); and D. L. Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality* (Lincoln: Univ. of Neb., 1975), pp. 71-2; 119.
13. E. A. Gibbs, ed., *Middle English Romances* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1966), 4-7.
14. See Raymond-Jean Frontain, and Jan Wojcik eds., *The David Myth in Western Literature* (Purdue, 1979).
15. Ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1968), p. 62 (ll. 2010-2017); Foerster, ed. (ll. 6944-5); tr. W. W. Comfort, *Arthurian Romances* (London: Dent, 1965), p. 90.
16. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.4
17. *Polieraticus* 4.10.
18. Kantorowicz, p. 46.
19. Eds. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, *Lazamon: Brut II, E. E. T. S.* 277 (Oxford, 1978): 664-6.
20. *Brut*: 734 (ll. 14002-005).
21. *Brut*: 738 (ll. 14077-079).
22. E.g., the *Alliterative Morte d'Arthur*.
23. See J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. L. E. Nicholson (South Bend: Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 51-104.
24. *Brut*: 750 (l. 14297).
25. See Paul Ricoeur, "Christianity and the Meaning of History," in *History and Truth*, tr. C. A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 81-97. (Ricoeur calls the third stage, in the Christian context, hope.)

26. Cf. the opening paragraph in C. G. Jung's *The Undiscovered Self* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958).
27. Cf. Ricoeur, pp. 82-92.
28. Ezekiel 17:1.
29. For a useful discussion of *mašal* see W. M. Cane, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 31-3; but for a more extended treatment, accessible to the literary scholar, G. H. Von Radd, *Wisdom in Israel* (London, 1972).
30. See my forthcoming study *Chaucer and Wyclif: Hermeneutic and Narrative Theory in the Fourteenth Century*.
31. *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1957), especially "The Parson's Tale," p. 250.
32. D. L. Jeffrey, "The Exiled King: Sir Orfeo's Harp and the Second Death of Eurydice," *MOSAIC IX* (1976), 45-60.
33. Ed. A. J. Bliss, *Sir Orfeo* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1966), 1.552.
34. Reviewed in "The Exiled King," p. 45-6.
35. *Tree and Leaf* (London, 1964), p. 60.
36. Ricoeur, p. 95.
37. See "Recovery: the Meaning of Name in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*," in Rose Zimbardo, ed., *Tolkien and the Critics II* (Notre Dame: South Bend, 1981). The allusion here is also to Northrop Frye's *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), whose theme is different, although Frye's chapter 5 bears indirectly on this essay.
38. Herrnstein-Smith reminds us that closure is more than a temporal ending, but in fact is "a function...of the perception of structure" (pp. 2-4).
39. *Orfeo*, 11.597-604.