

KING ARTHUR'S SWORD  
OR  
THE MAKING OF A MEDIEVAL ROMANCE <sup>1</sup>

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ANY thoughtful reader of medieval romance finds himself sooner or later faced with a dilemma not unlike that which confronts the traveller in a fairy tale who comes to a cross-roads ; whichever way he may turn, not only dangers, but rewards lie ahead. He can enter the enchanted realm of popular fancy ; and as he travels along, at each step new vistas of magic lands will be revealed to him, new wonders and new mysteries. Or he may take the other way and find himself following the traces not of giants and magicians, but of the wielders of fine verse and prose, the masters of narrative art at its most delicate and most graceful ; he will then follow the road that leads to the discovery of a new marvel : that of the shaping spirit of man. Whatever he stands to gain in one direction he is apt to lose in the other ; such has been the fate of many, whether they knew it or not.

If for my present purpose I feel tempted to choose the less adventurous of these approaches, it is not through lack of natural curiosity about the intricacies of folklore, but because I am inclined to think that the authors with whose works I propose to deal would have considered this by far the wisest choice. They, who had all the wonders of the Isle of Britain at their command and all the mysteries of Brocéliande to call them out, applied their minds to the art of composing long and spacious poems and prose romances which bear only a superficial resemblance to popular tales. They drew, of course, freely and often indiscriminately upon the vast store of early tradition, written and oral ; but, faithful to the precepts of their native rhetoric, they were more interested in the way they handled their stories than in the

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 10th of October, 1957.

material they used. It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say with W. P. Ker that "there is a disappointment prepared for anyone who looks in the greater authors of the twelfth century for the music of the *Faerie Queene* or *La Belle Dame Sans Mercy*"<sup>1</sup>; the music and the magic are there, but they are incidental to the central design and interest of the work; they are not the qualities that make it what it is. Those who think otherwise are as a rule victims of a fallacy common in many fields of literary study: they confuse the origin of a thing with its import and forget that "significance" is often an adventitious value.<sup>2</sup> Whatever is artistically and historically significant in the medieval romantic tradition is contained in the romances, not in their antecedents. In surveying the development of the genre one is reminded of Paul Valéry's remarks on "the two stages of invention":

Il faut être *deux* pour inventer. L'un forme des combinaisons, l'autre choisit, reconnaît ce qu'il désire et ce qui lui importe dans l'ensemble des produits du premier. Ce qu'on appelle "génie" est bien moins l'acte de celui-là, l'acte qui combine, que la promptitude du second à comprendre la valeur de ce qui vient de se produire et à saisir ce produit.<sup>3</sup>

Valéry is speaking here of what takes place within a single mind; but the same process can operate between two or several minds separated in time and space. Their number may vary as much as the distances between them: the definition of "genius" remains valid, no matter how long and laborious the preparation. And once the principle is grasped, the traditional trend of medieval literary studies can be reversed, the flight into the realm of legend arrested: literary history, instead of retrogressing as it generally does towards the dark uncertainties of Valéry's "first man", can then begin to follow the light which illumines the path of the second—the path of genius.

It will take more than the story of Arthur's sword to demonstrate the truth of these propositions, but the story is none the less worth telling, if only because it is so different from what one would expect. Most legendary swords provide a splendid opening for "background" studies. Behind the magic and the

<sup>1</sup> *Epic and Romance* (London, 1922), p. 326.

<sup>2</sup> According to Susanne Langer (*Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1942), p. 248), it always is adventitious.

<sup>3</sup> *Tel Quel*, ii. 234.

luxury of the armour described in the Germanic and the Celtic epics lie fascinating vistas of cultural history: there is the Irish sword, Caladbolg, which in the hands of a great warrior could become the size of a rainbow and cut off the top of a hill;<sup>1</sup> and there is Beowulf's gigantic two-edged sword with a sumptuous gilded or gold-overlaid hilt upon which could be seen "interlaced serpents studded with gems".<sup>2</sup> Stark realism and unbridled poetic fantasy have an equal share in the description of these half-historical, half-legendary objects. And it is truly surprising how little realism or fantasy there is in what medieval writers have to say about Arthur's sword, Excalibur, how little room for speculation about its historical or legendary background. It is mentioned in the earliest known chronicle of Arthur's legendary reign, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, but all that Geoffrey says about Arthur's sword is that its name was Caliburnus and that it was made in the isle of Avalon.<sup>3</sup> Ever since Heinrich Zimmer in his review of Nutt's *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail* identified Caliburnus with the Irish Caladbolg<sup>4</sup> critics have taken the identification for granted,<sup>5</sup> but it is not clear what, apart from the first syllable of the name, the two swords have in common.<sup>6</sup> Of the three arguments used by Zimmer two are based on errors of fact and one on false reasoning. He says that the two swords have "the same name" ("ein solch berühmtes Schwert mit gleichem Namen", etc.), which is clearly not the case; that both come from Fairyland, which is equally incorrect since there is no reason to suppose that at the

<sup>1</sup> In the Irish prose epic *Táin bó Cúalnge* (*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*) it belongs to Fergus, the fugitive ruler of Ulster.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. T. Hatto, "Snake-swords and Boar-helms in Beowulf", *English Studies* (1957), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> "Accinctus etiam Caliburno, gladio optimo et in insula Avallonis fabricato", etc. (Edmond Faral, *La Légende arthurienne* (Paris, 1929), iii. 233).

<sup>4</sup> *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* (10 June, 1890), pp. 516-17.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. D. Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the beginning down to the year 1300*, 2nd edn. (Göttingen and Baltimore, 1926), i. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Caledwylch, the name of Arthur's sword in *Kulhwch and Olwen* and in the Welsh version of Geoffrey's *Historia*, is certainly related to Caladbolg and could be regarded as a link between Caladbolg and Caliburnus if it were established not only that Geoffrey knew the story of *Kulhwch and Olwen*, but that the name Caledwylch occurred in the version of the story which was available to him—a proposition clearly not capable of proof.

time when he wrote his *Historia* Geoffrey thought of the isle of Avalon as an enchanted island;<sup>1</sup> and finally that both swords are used in battle “in decisive moments” (“im entscheidenen Moment des Kampfes”)—a remark which, one would imagine, would be true of almost any sword. What Zimmer does not say is that Caliburnus has none of the supernatural features of Caladbolg: it was, Geoffrey tells us, an excellent sword (“optimus gladius”), but there is no suggestion that it could reach the size of a rainbow or that it was ever used to cut off the tops of hills. A more likely model is the Latin word “chalybs”, the poetical term for steel or sword,<sup>2</sup> which Virgil uses in the famous passage in the *Aeneid* describing “the melting in a vast furnace of the wound-inflicting steel” (“vulnificus chalybs”):

Fluit aes rivis aurique metallum,  
Vulnificusque chalybs vasta fornace liquescit.<sup>3</sup>

If, as seems likely, Geoffrey knew this passage, he must also have known that Aeneas’s sword was forged by Vulcan in the Lipari islands,<sup>4</sup> and there is no reason to suppose that he had any other story in mind when he said that Arthur’s sword was made on an island. Why he calls the island “insula Avallonis” is less clear. The name occurs again at the end of his chronicle of Arthur’s reign where he states that Arthur, mortally wounded in battle, was taken to the Isle of Avalon for the healing of his wounds.<sup>5</sup> In his *Vita Merlini* he describes the island as “insula pomorum”,<sup>6</sup> thus supplying a plausible etymology of Avalon,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is only in the *Vita Merlini* written some twelve years later that Geoffrey makes the island to which Arthur was taken for the healing of his wounds into a land of plenty where crops and trees spring up of their own accord (“Omnis abest cultus, nisi quem natura ministrat”). On the literary sources of this description see Edmond Faral, “L’Ile d’Avallon et la fée Morgane” in *Mélanges de linguistique et de littérature offerts à M. Alfred Jeanroy* (Paris, 1928), pp. 243-53.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Edmond Faral, *La Légende arthurienne*, ii, 266. For other examples see Ovid, *Fast.* iv. 405; Propertius, i. 16, 30; Seneca, *Herc. Oet.*, 152, *Thyest.*, 364.

<sup>3</sup> viii. 445-6.

<sup>4</sup> viii. 416 ff.

<sup>5</sup> “. . . ad sananda vulnera sua in insulam Avallonis evectus” (ch. 178).

<sup>6</sup> “Insula pomorum, que fortunata vocatur,

Ex re nomen habet, quia per se singula profert”

(ed. Parry, lines 908-9).

<sup>7</sup> Louis Cons and C. H. Slover (*Modern Philology*, xxviii. 385-94 and 395-9) have established the equation “avallo” = “poma” = “apples”, taking the nom. pl. “poma” in the specialized post-classical sense. One important piece of

and there is room for conjecture as to a possible alternative derivation of the name. But even if we adopted the most fanciful of all theories, that of Sir John Rhÿs, who constructed out of his head a "Celtic dark divinity" called Avallach,<sup>1</sup> Caliburnus would still remain what it is in Geoffrey: a good sword with an intelligible Latin name, carrying memories of Virgil, but possessing no magic virtues to distinguish it from any other good sword. Its known history is confined to literary texts, and what these texts have to tell us is of far greater moment than the uncertainties that lie beyond.

The very first mention of Arthur's sword in twelfth-century romance reflects one of the major developments in contemporary imaginative literature. The sword, now called Escalibor<sup>2</sup>—hence the English form Excalibur—is Arthur's no more. It belongs to his nephew, Gawain, one of the two leading characters in the last and longest romance of Chrétien de Troyes, *Li Conte del Graal*. When Gawain faces imminent danger he is re-assured by the thought that he has Escalibor with him, "the best sword that ever was":

La meilleur espee qui fust,  
Qu'elle trenche fer come fust.<sup>3</sup>

One of the sequels to the *Conte del Graal*, known as the "First Continuation", also says that Escalibor belongs to Gawain and adds by way of explanation that Arthur gave it to him:

evidence is the "Vienna Glossary" (first published by Endlichen in 1836 from a ninth-century manuscript) which gives "poma" as the equivalent of Gaulish "avallo" (Welsh "afal", Breton and Cornish "aval").

<sup>1</sup> See his *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 335-7 and E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London, 1927), p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> The addition of the "inorganic" prefix "es" is paralleled in Old French in such words as "escarboncle" (Lat. carbunculus), "eschafaut" (V. Lat.\* catafalicum), "eschalaz" (V. Lat.\* caracium) etc. The form "Escalibor" is found in some of the continental manuscripts of Wace's *Brut* (J, H and R), but the majority of manuscripts have the Galfridian form "C(h)aliburn(e)". Cf. *Le Roman de Brut*, ed. Ivor Arnold, p. 807.

<sup>3</sup> *Le Roman de Perceval ou le conte du Graal*, ed. William Roach, lines 5899-5904. The phrase "trenche fer come fust" is probably responsible for the curious etymology suggested by the author of the *Estoire de Merlin* about half a century later: "c'est un non ebrieu qui dist en franchois trenche fer et achier et fust" (*The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, ed. H. O. Sommer, ii, 94).

Escalibor, sa bone espee,  
Li a li rois Artus donee.<sup>1</sup>

That Arthur should thus abandon his sword, the emblem of his power, may surprise any reader of Geoffrey of Monmouth or, for that matter, of Malory, especially as neither Chrétien de Troyes nor his continuator takes the trouble to explain how this came about. But the substitution of Gawain for Arthur is in fact a natural consequence of the great change that occurred in French Arthurian literature when the chronicles were succeeded by the romances and the great hero of the chronicles took second place to his knights. The Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes are concerned not with Arthur, but with the brilliant fellowship of the Round Table. All that is left for Arthur to do is to preside over the court, encourage his knights to undertake deeds of valour and on occasions refuse to sit down to a meal until an adventure has been announced. No wonder, then, that the best sword that was ever made should be taken away from the benevolent but idle monarch and put into Gawain's hands. When in the third decade of the thirteenth century the age of prose romances began, most writers accepted the notion that Escalibor was Gawain's sword. It is thanks to Escalibor that in the prose *Lancelot* Gawain succeeds in standing up to twenty knights of the King of North Wales<sup>2</sup>; and when Lancelot has to prove Guinevere's innocence by fighting three redoubtable knights of Carmelide, Gawain comes forward and begs him to use his sword Escalibor :

So Sir Gawain girt his good sword Escalibor about Lancelot and prayed him to carry it for his love. And Lancelot said he would do so willingly.<sup>3</sup>

The gesture symbolizes the depth of Gawain's affection for Lancelot: once armed with Escalibor, Lancelot knows that

<sup>1</sup> Lines 12093-4 in MSS. *T*, *V* and *D*, 16203-4 in MS. *E*. See *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. William Roach and Robert H. Ivy. In his verse rendering of Geoffrey's chronicle Wace suggests no such development. He mentions Arthur's sword five times (lines 9279, 10083, 11547, 12910 and 12926), but only once without Geoffrey's support (11547), and always in the same terms as Geoffrey.

<sup>2</sup> *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, ed. H. O. Sommer, iii. 386.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* iv. 61: "Si li chainst mesire Gauvain Escaliborc sa boine espee et li proie que pour l'amour de lui la porte. Et dist qu'il le fera moult volentiers."

Gawain's love will save him from death and dishonour. But there is more to come. When in the final section of the prose *Lancelot*, the *Mort Artu*, Lancelot rescues Guinevere for the second time from the stake, he unwittingly slays the unarmed Gaheriet, Gawain's brother, and Gawain's love is turned to hate. In the ensuing struggle between Gawain and Lancelot, Escalibor appears once more in Gawain's hand, this time as an ironical reminder of the broken bond between the two best knights and truest friends. It is with Escalibor that Gawain strikes Lancelot in a fierce combat in which he himself is grievously wounded.<sup>1</sup> And although Lancelot refuses to take his friend's life, Gawain dies of his wounds. On his death-bed he bids Arthur send for Lancelot to save the kingdom from Mordred who has usurped the throne of Britain, but it is all too late; the "wicked Day of Destiny", as Malory will call it, is at hand: the day of the battle of Salisbury Plain, of Arthur's final encounter with Mordred and of the departure to Avalon. When all Arthur's fellowship has been destroyed and only one of his knights left to see him die, the King commands this knight to cast Escalibor into a near-by lake. A hand rises from the water, grasps the sword, and having brandished it three times vanishes into the depths of the lake.<sup>2</sup> From being a token of triumphant loyalty Escalibor becomes the instrument and the emblem of strife and disaster. It once failed to save Gawain; now it fails to save the noblest of all kings and the greatest of kingdoms.

This first flowering of the theme is an example of how certain thirteenth-century prose writers could make new values emerge from seemingly amorphous matter. Another variety of the narrative art of the period can be illustrated from the treatment of the same theme in one of the most widely read romances, the prose rendering of the story of Merlin originally written in octosyllabic verse by Robert de Borron.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes Robert de Borron from other Arthurian writers of his time is that he is primarily interested not in the romantic, but in the historical

<sup>1</sup> *La Mort le Roi Artu, roman du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Jean Frappier (Paris, 1936), pp. 170-1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> Of this poem only the first 504 lines are extant. They were published by Francisque Michel (1841) as part of the *Roman du Saint-Graal* (lines 3515-4018).

and dynastic aspects of the Arthurian tradition, and looks for inspiration first and foremost in the Arthurian chronicles : in Geoffrey's *Historia* and in its adaptation by Wace. But like so many writers of his time he treats his sources not as models, but as material to be amplified : elaboration and complexity are to him greater virtues than simplicity. In the chronicles Arthur's accession to the throne presented no difficulty : he was considered the legitimate son of Uther Pendragon, and only Merlin and Uther knew that he was conceived before Uther married Igera. Now in Robert de Borron's account the marriage takes place two months instead of a few days after the conception, with the result that as soon as Arthur is born Merlin has to remove him from the palace. No one else knows the child's rank, and when Uther dies Merlin has to use all his ingenuity to establish Arthur's claim to the throne. Hence the story of the sword in the anvil, of how the young Arthur alone succeeded in pulling it from the stone and how on the strength of this he was proclaimed king. When some twenty-five or thirty years later another prose writer took up Robert de Borron's story and expanded it into a long chronicle of Arthur's reign entitled *L'Estoire de Merlin*, he naturally gave due prominence to the sword which Arthur drew from the anvil. The name of this sword was, of course, Escalibor ; it shone as brightly as if it were illumined by candles, and it was to ensure Arthur's triumph in his numerous encounters with his enemies. A curious complication arose, however, from the fact that the author, in spite of his strictly "Arthurian" orientation, felt that Escalibor should not be left in Arthur's hands for long. At the time when he wrote his pseudo-chronicle most of the Arthurian romances in verse and in prose had already appeared, and everyone knew that in these romances Escalibor belonged not to Arthur but to Gawain. The author had ultimately to comply with this tradition ; but it was not enough to say that Arthur *gave* the sword to Gawain : to justify the gift a new episode, that of Gawain's investiture by Arthur, had to be added. Gawain is made constable of Arthur's kingdom, and the next day, in the palace at Logres, Arthur knights him with the sword which he once drew from the stone :

So King Arthur took the sword which by Merlin's design he had drawn from



the stone, and he girt it about Gawain, his nephew. And then he attached the right spur and King Ban the left.<sup>1</sup>

On no fewer than eight occasions<sup>2</sup> Escalibor will stand Gawain in good stead ; and it will never leave his side until the end of the *Estoire de Merlin*.

The implications of this new development are worth considering. The writers who originally placed Escalibor in Gawain's hands and those who imagined the part it was to play both in Gawain's life and in the scene of Arthur's death had used it as a symbolical expression of the rise of romantic chivalry, of the ties of loyalty between Gawain and Lancelot, and of the irony of the final disaster which befalls Arthur's kingdom. The author of the *Estoire de Merlin* set himself a no less ambitious task. Like Robert de Borron, he was primarily a *builder* of stories, anxious to expand the existing material in a coherent manner and to remove any inconsistencies and obscurities that might spoil his design. Faced with two seemingly conflicting traditions—the romantic tradition of Gawain and the chronicle tradition of Arthur—he endeavoured to reconcile them in a manner characteristic of his time. He knew that the sword with which a feudal lord armed his vassal was given, like all feudal privileges, in return for the vassal's reverence and faith ; that it was the vassal's duty, among other things, to go to the lord's rescue in battle if he saw him disarmed and unhorsed, and protect him by force of arms ;<sup>3</sup> and that the sword was not only a token of this obligation, but the means by which it was to be discharged. Hence Gawain's investiture, thanks to which Escalibor remains to the end the emblem and the instrument of Arthur's power and of the destiny of his kingdom. But it was not sufficient to *rationalize* the situation in terms of a feudal convention : it was necessary also

<sup>1</sup> Sommer, *op. cit.* ii. 253 : " Si prinst li rois Artus sa boine espee qu'il osta del perron par le conseil Merlin, si la pent a Gavaine son neveu al costé, et puis li caucha l'esperon destre et li rois Bans le senestre."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 306, 328-9, 340-1, 354, 356, 358, 362 and 369.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Assises de Messire Jean d'Ibelin*, ed. Beugnot, vol. i (*Assises de la Haute Cour*), ch. cxvii, pp. 315-16 : " Et chascun qui fait homage a autre est tenu par sa fei, ce il treuve son seignor en besoin d'armes, a pié, entre ses ennemis . . . de faire son leau poeir de remonter le et geter le de cel perill ; et c'il autrement ne le peut faire, il li doit doner son cheval ou sa beste sur quei il chevauche, c'il la requiert, et aider le a metre sur, et aider le a son pooir a son cors sauver."

to make it *structurally* significant. Just as Arthur became king through Escalibor, so through Escalibor Gawain had to become a knight; and the two incidents—the drawing of the sword from the stone and the dubbing of Gawain with the same sword—had to be placed symmetrically, one at the beginning, the other exactly half-way through the romance, so that the two phases in the fortunes of Escalibor should seem complementary and indeed essential to each other. This was precisely what the author of the *Estoire de Merlin* did, intent as he was on combining coherence and balance amidst all the complexities of his narrative. Both methods—the rational and the structural—are at the root of the development of the thirteenth-century cyclic romances, of their elaborate episodic sequences, of their prodigious expansion and growth; and significantly enough, the resulting convolutions of narrative patterns are reminiscent on the one hand of the constructive subtlety of certain types of scholasticism and on the other of the linear fantasy of Romanesque ornamentation.

But this is not the last nor perhaps the most remarkable phase in the history of Escalibor. Another continuation of Robert de Borron's *Merlin* appeared in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, a continuation known under the unimaginative title of *La Suite du Merlin*.<sup>1</sup> Both intrinsically and historically, it is a work of outstanding importance. It was written primarily with the object of elucidating and re-interpreting the two final phases of the Arthurian epic, the Grail quest and the fall of Arthur's kingdom. The theme of Arthur's sword as presented in the final section of the prose *Lancelot*, the *Mort Artu*, and the moving and majestic scene in which the dying king orders his good sword to be cast into a lake were among the features which naturally called for elucidation. That Arthur should wish to know his sword in safe keeping before he dies is understandable, as understandable as Roland's desire to break his Durendal lest it fell

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes referred to as the "Huth *Merlin*". Alfred Huth was the owner of the then only known manuscript published in 1886 by Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich (*Merlin, roman en prose du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, S.A.T.F.). A more complete manuscript, now in the Cambridge University Library, came to light in 1945. Cf. my "Genèse de la Suite de Merlin" in *Mélanges de philologie romane et de littérature médiévale offerts à Ernest Hoepffner* (Paris, 1949), pp. 295-300.

into the hands of the Saracens ; but was it not enough to let Escalibor sink to the bottom of the lake and remain there forever ? Why should a mysterious arm come out of the water and remove Escalibor into a world which lies beyond the boundaries of any human kingdom ? And if Escalibor was the sword which Arthur drew from the anvil before he became king, what connection, if any, was there between these two supernatural happenings ? There was something obscure and structurally incomplete in the story as the prose *Lancelot* had left it, and both the obscurity and the structural deficiency had to be removed if the story was to conform to more exacting standards of composition. The author of the new continuation of the *Merlin* set about this task with determination and skill. He realized that the first thing to do was to separate the theme of the sword in the stone from that of the sword thrown into the lake. With this object in mind he introduced a long series of incidents supposed to have taken place soon after Arthur's coronation. The newly crowned king, armed with the sword which he has taken from the stone, challenges a mysterious knight who dwells in a forest and compels all those who pass to joust with him. In a long and fierce combat Arthur is unhorsed and his sword splintered to pieces against that of his opponent. He is miraculously saved by the timely appearance of Merlin, but another sword must now be found for him, and it must be strong enough to last him all his life. Merlin leads Arthur to the edge of a lake ; from beneath the waters rises an arm in a sleeve of rich silk holding a sword. A mysterious lady then appears " par deviers la mer ", and using an invisible bridge to reach the centre of the lake she takes the sword and gives it to Arthur. It is this sword which will henceforth bear the name Escalibor.<sup>1</sup> And when Arthur's last hour comes the hand that held this sword above the water will receive it from him and restore it to the enchanted place it came from : the story of Escalibor will have come full circle.

<sup>1</sup> In a passage reproduced from the *Estoire de Merlin* in the Cambridge MS. of the *Suite* (Add. 7071), which probably represents an earlier version of the work than does the Huth MS. (B. M. Add. MS. 381 17), the sword drawn from the anvil is also called Escalibor (fol. 206 recto, col. 1). The inconsistency reappears in Malory's *Tale of King Arthur* which is based on a text very similar to the Cambridge MS. Cf. my edition of *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, pp. 19 and 65.

To find out how this story came to be composed all we need do is to think of it in purely structural terms, and of the author as being above all anxious to achieve as complete and as balanced a composition as his material would allow. For such an author it was essential that the theme of the sword thrown into the lake should be supported by a parallel theme, that of the sword which came from the depths of the lake, and this paramount necessity accounts for all his innovations. Some may feel that in his endeavour to correct what he thought was a deficiency in his original he deprived the story of a valuable feature : he removed the link between Arthur's first exploit and his death on the battlefield, for the sword which vanishes in the lake to mark the end of Arthur's reign is no longer the one which secured his accession to the throne.<sup>1</sup> But there is ample compensation for this in the invention of other, more important links, in the suggestive value of parallel situations, in the skilful repetition "in reverse" which is accompanied here by a significant change of key and a darkening of tone. Several famous examples of this type of structure come to mind, ranging from the *Chanson de Roland* to Dante and beyond. When Roland's confidence gives way to the certainty of defeat and he decides to sound the horn to call Charlemagne back, his dialogue with Oliver is an ironical *reprise* in reverse of the earlier scene in which he refused to call for help in spite of Oliver's well-reasoned insistence. A still more expressive parallelism runs through the story of Tristan and Iseult as told by twelfth-century French poets : Tristan's last message to Iseult, sent in despair across the seas, echoes the first disguised message from Iseult to Tristan—her golden hair carried by two swallows to Mark's court ; and when Tristan, dying of a poisoned wound, is waiting for Iseult's white sail to appear on the stormy sea, our minds go back to his journey in a rudderless boat to Ireland where he saw Iseult for the first time and she healed the wound inflicted on him by Morholt, a wound which she alone could heal. This is something different from the

<sup>1</sup> In the *Coming of Arthur* Tennyson makes an interesting attempt to restore the continuity :

I beheld Excalibur  
Before him at his crowning borne, the sword  
That rose from out the bosom of the lake.

rudimentary kind of parallelism that we noticed in the *Estoire de Merlin*: the change of key, the contrast of light and shade give meaning and movement to the pattern of parallel events and make the entire structure into a living thing. The only example of this method in the earlier history of Escalibor is the contrast between the two scenes in the prose *Lancelot*: that in which Gawain saves Lancelot's life by arming him with Escalibor and the fateful moment when he attacks Lancelot, his best friend, with Escalibor, thus bringing about his own undoing and the ultimate downfall of Arthurian chivalry. That Escalibor is not just a weapon which can rescue and destroy, but a symbolic expression of the great tragic theme of divided loyalties, is made apparent by the characteristic structural relationship of the two scenes, eloquently contrasted, and raised to a new level of meaning.

In the *Suite du Merlin* the same device is used with still greater effect. The hand which receives the sword and vanishes with it no longer represents, as it did in the earlier version, an occasional intrusion of magic upon Arthur's world. The sword which Arthur surrenders to those dark powers when his kingdom is lost is the one they once bestowed upon him to make his reign glorious; it stands for the continuity of his fate, his rise to greatness and his fall, for it is placed as it were within the enchanted circle irrevocably drawn around him and his kingdom. Whatever the reasons for the final disaster, all we are told is *how* it occurred, how the same mysterious power that brought Arthur and his knights to the height of their worldly fame wrought their misfortune and their doom. And just as Gawain's love for Lancelot gave true significance to their encounter on the battlefield, so the fairy tale with which the story opens when the Lady of the Lake walks over the invisible bridge to get Arthur's sword for him gives true meaning to the final surrender of the sword, when Arthur's last surviving companion, Grifflet, casts it far out into the lake. Neither of these phases of Arthur's unfathomable destiny would have been the same without the other: they amplify and enrich each other like contrasting voices in a choral fugue. And the import of the event is all the greater for being implicit in the contrast.

To single out a theme such as Arthur's sword and interpret it,

as I have attempted to do, with reference to so wide an issue is a hazardous enterprise, and some may feel that too generous a use has been made in these pages of the simple virtues of Excalibur. But the method happens to be consistent with the nature of the material. The fashion nowadays is to treat medieval romances either as the antecedents of the modern psychological novel or as survivals of a forgotten pre-literary civilization. What is seldom realized is that their authors thought of them neither as records of folklore nor as examples of "psychological characterization through action", but as narratives consisting of themes and patterns of themes, or, to use a phrase favoured by Ernst Curtius, "configurations and systems of configurations". Crystallized into a variety of structural designs, the narrative matter of romance grows in complexity and subtlety with each successive writer until it is caught in a movement reminiscent of the higher forms of musical composition. It is this movement that the novelists of our own century have for some time been endeavouring to recapture, and it was some such movement that Thomas Mann had in mind when he said that for him the art of the novel was the art of the fugue. The Arthurian fugue has barely begun to yield its secret. And any light thrown upon its inner mechanism and texture would mark an advance towards a better understanding of the deepest and least visible foundations of imaginative prose.