

## Such Joy at the Heart:

### Lord Berners' *Huon de Bordeaux*

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“It is the supreme and splendid triumph of looking shallow and being deep,” writes G.K. Chesterton, of “all French literature and philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> He may or may not be right about the French, but precisely that, looking shallow and being deep, is the triumph of the two great masters of English prose at the end of the Middle Ages, Thomas Malory and John Bouchier, Lord Berners. Both shared, appropriately enough, a passion for French literature, and that was not all, for they both wrote in that spirit that Richard Hooker articulated, memorably, years later, “that posterity may know we have not loosely through silence permitted things to pass away as in a dream.”<sup>2</sup> A world was passing away before them. They longed to capture and recreate imaginatively what they cherished in it, and where they succeeded in that intention, there their work runs deepest. So, at least, I will argue about *Huon de Bordeaux* in this paper, *Huon* being the first of Berners’ two great literary achievements. In making my argument I will look at Berners’ language, at aspects of his narrative, and at the surprising things he affirms with his jaunty and hard-edged materials.

Berners, like Malory, was not an original writer, but a translator and adapter. He produced a large body of work from French sources—*Arthur of Little Britain*, *The Castle of Love*, *The Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius*, *The Book of Duke Huon de Bordeaux*, and Froissart’s *Chronicles*<sup>3</sup>—and in his translations he follows his sources so

faithfully that the very style of his English is shaped by them. Take, for example, this description of a feast from *Huon de Bordeaux*:

[T]hen they sat downe at the table / & when they had denyd, the kynge and Huon satte togyder on the ryche carpettes / then Mouflet the mynstrell apoynted his vyall, and played so melodyously that the paynyms that herde him had grete meruayle therof / for the vyall made so swete a swonde / that it semed to be the mermaydes of the see / kynge yuoryn & all his lordes had so gret ioye that it semed to them that they were in the glory of paradyce, so that there was no paynyme but that gaued him gownes & mantelles & other iewelles.<sup>4</sup>

This is a translation of the following passage from the 1454 prose version of *Huon de Bordeaux*, in its printed edition of 1513:

Alors se asseirent a table[.] le roy yuoirin feist asseoir huon empres luy pour le plus honnourer / apres ce que ils eurent mangie les tables furent leuees / le roy yuoyrin et Huon demourerent seant sur les riches tappis de soye. Alors moufflet le menestriel appointa sa vielle par laquelle il feist gecter vng si melodyeux son que les payens qui louyrent furent tous esmerueillez / car vng si doulx son faisoit la vielle que il sembloit que ce feussent seraines de mer qui illa chantassent dont le roy yuoyrin & tous ses barons eurent si grant ioye au cueur que aduis leur estoit que rauys feussent en la gloire de paradis parquoy illa ny eust payens qui ne luy donnast robes / manteaulx et beaulx ioyaulx.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes Berners elides the French of his source, and sometimes he modifies its syntax as well (*par laquelle il feist gecter vng si melodyeux son* becomes “and played so melodyously”). Whenever he changes the syntax he characteristically replaces his source’s hypotaxis with parataxis or coordination, the marks of the syntax of speech in English.<sup>6</sup> They are evidence of his ear for spoken English and his aim to root his *Huon de Bordeaux* in that medium. His changes are not radical, however, because the French original itself uses hypotaxis sparingly and joins its clauses regularly with parataxis and coordination.

Malory’s style too stays close to that of its sources. “Malory,” writes C.S. Lewis, “turns out to have not a style, but styles.” The style of his Roman War, he argues,

which is inverted and alliterative, is quite unlike “the limpid, unobtrusive prose in which we follow the adventures of the knights errant.” The reason is that the first copies the style of the Alliterative *Morte* and the second the style of the French prose romances. “Malory writes such a style as he has most lately read,” Lewis argues, and does it right to the end, for in the Death of Arthur, “as soon as the Stanzaic *Morte* comes before him, the tell-tale features, the tags, inversions, and alliterations, creep into his prose: ‘while we thus in holes us hide’—‘that was wary and wise’—‘droop and dare’—‘shred them down as sheep in a fold’ (*C* xx.19; *W* 1211-12).”<sup>7</sup>

Lewis overstates the case. His examples come from one short passage in the death of Arthur, and his tell-tale features occur with no great frequency in the section as a whole. Inversions like “while we thus in holes us hide,” which dramatically disrupt the normal word-order of speech, are rare. Besides, the alliterated words he cites—*holes, hide, wary, wise, droop, dare, shred, sheep, fold*—illustrate how scrupulously Malory favoured the Teutonic lexis of our language. That and a speech-based word-order are defining features of the “limpid, unobtrusive prose” that was Malory’s best. Ian Gordon notes that Malory “uses a sequence of words that are often monosyllabic for whole sentences at a time. His vocabulary is predominantly Anglo-Saxon. Latin borrowings are rare and French words infrequent. His sentence-structure is paratactic or co-ordinate, with ‘and’ as the favourite link.” The language is neither that of Malory’s own day nor that of an earlier period, Gordon argues, but a deliberate artefact that is “extraordinarily successful,”<sup>8</sup> as indeed it is in the following sample:

Then the kynge gate his speare in bothe hys hondis, and ran towarde sir Mordred, cryng and saying, “Traytoure, now ys thy dethe-day com!”

And whan sir Mordred saw kynge Arthur he ran untyll hym with hys swerde drawyn in hys honde, and there kyng Arthur smote sir Mordred undir the shyld, with a foyne of hys speare, thorowoute the body more than a fadom. And whan sir Mordred felte that he had hys dethys wounde he threste hymselff with the myght that he had upp to the burre of kyng Arthurs speare, and ryght so he smote hys fadir, kynge Arthure, with hys swerde holdynge in both hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne. And therewith Mordred daysshed downe stark dede to the erthe.<sup>9</sup>

The passage shows no traces of a prentice infatuation with the style of the Stanzaic *Morte*. It is free of Lewis' "tell-tale features," except for the alliteration of "And therewith Mordred daysshed downe stark dede," which is Malory's own and not the *Morte*'s. It points in fact to the source of the grand cadence of Malory's mature style: the two-stress patterning of English speech, which, heightened and regularised, is the metrical standard of alliterative poetry. Malory's styles, in short, were part of a process of experimentation that may have produced some unsatisfactory results but ultimately led to the stylised speech-based prose that is Malory's great achievement.

Berners had styles too, but they give no impression of experimentation. Here is how he translates the formal style of Berthault's *Livre Doré*:

A manne that is always wel occupied, ought euer to be reputed as good: and the ydel man with out further enquerie, ought to be condempned as nought. Shewe me nowe, I desyre you, what nouryssheth the corrupte and fowle wiedades, the nettelles that styngge, and the briers that prycke, but the erth that is untilled, and waxen wyld, and the felde fulle of thystelles, whyche is not wyded, and visited with the plowghe?

O Rome without Rome, that nowe as unhappy hast but onely the name of Rome, bycause thou art so dere in vertues, and makest vices good cheape. Yea yea, and I shall tell the, knowest thou wherfore thou art so? bycause thou haste unpeopled the lanes and stretes of werkemen and offycers, and haste peopled it all aboute with infinite vacabounds.<sup>10</sup>

Berners has transformed his latinate original into genuine English. Its formal rhetorical texture is all there—the polished vocabulary, the dense syntax, and the proliferation of tropes and schemes, especially schemes: antithesis and isocolon, apostrophe, exclamation, epizeuxis, rogatio. The impression it leaves is of Berners' competence, if not virtuosity.

The style of his Froissart is dramatically different from this:

Than they concluded by the sonne rysynge every manne to be armed, and on horsbacke, and a foote, to departe out of the towne, and to go to Octenbourge, to fyght with the Scottes. This was warned through the towne by a trumpet, and every man armed theym and assembled before the bridge. And by the sonne rysynge they departed by the gate towards Berwyke, and

tooke the waye towardes Octenbourge, to the nombre of tenne thousande, what afoote and a horsebacke. They were nat gone paste two myle fro Newecastell, whan the Scottes were sygnified that the bysshoppe of Durham was commynge to theymwarde to fyght: this they knewe by their spyes, suche as they had sette in the felde.<sup>11</sup>

The passage has none of *The Golden Book's* self-consciousness. It is a speech-based prose like that of *Huon*: the diction is unfussy, stresses are unpatterned, and the syntax, apart from a couple of uncomplicated subordinate clauses, is paratactic and coordinate.

It differs from the prose of *Huon* in a crucial way, however, as the following passage from *Huon* illustrates:

then incontynent she rose & made her redy / and preuely she toke a torche of wax in her hand and lyghted it, & yssuyd out of her chaumbre as preuely as she coude: it was abought mydnyght, and euery man was aslepe in the palayes. she went straye to the prison, and came at so good a tyme that she found the Jayler aslepe / then she stole awaye the kayes, and wente & openyd the prison dore; and when Huon saw the candel lyght & the dore of the prison open, he was in grete fere leest they wold take hym out to put hym to dethe, or to do hym sum dyspleasure (125.11-22).

The difference between the two passages can be demonstrated from their segmentation patterns. The terminal junctures in the Froissart occur at regular intervals (where its editor, W.P. Ker, has put his colon and periods), while those in the *Huon* do not. Our ear interprets regularity of terminal junctures as a mark of planned discourse and a tacit invitation to be silent, where in the irregular junctures of unplanned discourse it hears an invitation to interact.<sup>12</sup> The story that is told in the Froissart comes to the reader's ear as a piece of formal instruction might, and the voice of the story-teller is distant, like that, say, of a lecturer—distant in comparison at least to the narrator's voice in *Huon*, where the cadence is that of an interactive conversation and the narrator seems to be just at the reader's ear.

What is most remarkable about the *Huon* passage is the simplicity of its syntactical links: *then — and — and — and — || — and — || — and — that — then — and — and — when — or* (where || marks parataxis without a conjunctive adverb). This is

the syntax of unpremeditated speech, like Margery Kempe's ambling words to her amanuensis:

& ther sche preyd hir felawshep to helpyn hir up on-to þe Mownt. & þei seyde nay, for þei coud not wel helpyn hem-self. þan had sche mekyl sorwe for sche myth not comyn on þe Hille. And a-non happyd a Sarazin, a wel-faryng man, to comyn by hir, & sche put a grote in hys hand, makyng to hym a token for to bring hir on-to þe Mownt.<sup>13</sup>

Berners' achievement in *Huon* is to have created literary language out of speech like this, the speech of direct, vulgar living. His model is the conversation not of an austere visionary giving dictation, however, but that of an accomplished talker, one who knows exactly how to keep listeners listening. And that is the brilliance of his *Huon*: in its very style one hears the *jongleur*, the story-teller whose art is vulgar, oral, interactive, whose eye is always on his audience and who pitches his words to their mood, who does nothing but to effect. "Thus they lay together in one bed," Berners writes of Huon and his brother Gerard:

but the traytoure Gerard had no lyst to slepe, for the great desyre that he had to be reuenged of his brother, who neuer dyd hym ony trespas / alas! why dyd not Huon knowe his entente? if he had, the mater had not gone so to passe / at laste the houre cam that the cockes began to crow. then Gerarde a-woke Huon and sayd / "brother, it were good for vs to aryse, for anone it wyl be day. it is good to ryde in the coole" / a! the yll traytoure / his thought was other wyse (226.29-227.5).

The language of informal conversation offers a writer a wealth of resources. Along with intimacy of interaction, it has a rhetorical range and flexibility that surpasses that of formal English, and it has its own lively way with dialogue. Berners mines these resources to glorious effect in *Huon*.

He can heighten his style comfortably and competently whenever he needs to. "[T]hen he harde suche a brute so great and so horryble," he writes, "that yf the thonder had fallen fro the heuen, and that all the ryuers of the world had fallen downe fro the rockes / coud not haue made so hydeouse a noyse / as the tempest made" (441.12-16). He can be plain too, and often is, radiantly so. Stylists more

formal than he would never stoop to the incidental detail that everywhere engages his imagination: “[T]hen he layde hym down on the gras to refresshe hym or he wolde drynke, he was so hote / and when he was well colyde he came to the fountayne and dranke a lytyll and wasshyd his handys and fase” (483.10-14). These are the simplest of words, yet they give a savour to the most ordinary actions and sensations: “[And] in the mornyng when he saw the sonne ryse, and that his beamys spred abrode on the erthe / then he arose and blessyd hym / and so wente forth in to the deserte” (483.22-24). The action and the human response are so simple, but so natural: the sun appears, its beams spread over the earth, Huon rises, he gives thanks, he goes forth. The words express a spontaneity that is a small thing on its own, but occurring countless times in countless different situations, it infuses the book as a whole with its light, and that light is a welcoming openness to mere existence, a pleasure simply in being, despite any hardship or misfortune that being brings in its wake. And that is no superficial thing. It is an orientation to life whose roots reach very deep.

The rhetorical flexibility of Berners’ style bears reflection too, but for other reasons. In the following passage Huon meets his betrothed, Esclaramonde, after being long and violently separated from her. The mood of the prose moves with an almost miraculous ease from the loathsomeness of war, to the excitement and pleasure of the lovers’ greeting, and to battle again in all its anguish:

& whan that Gerames & Huon saw how they were strong ynough for them in the cyte / they went in to the stretes & cryed “saynt Denys,” & slewe all they met, as well olde men as women & chyldren / so that within a shorte space they had clene wonne the towne / many paynymys fled & lept downe in to the dykes, & brake neckes, armes, and legges / then they went in to the palays, and there they founde the fayre Esclaramond. and whan Huon saw her, he dyd of his helme / & ran & embraced her, & whan the lady sawe that it was Huon / the ioy that she had was so grete that it was meruayle to se it / ther was suche ioy made at there metyng that it can not be recountyd / Huon and the lady enbrasyd and kyssyd other many tymys / and she sayd / “A, Huon! ye be ryght hertely welcome / for I went I sholde neuer haue sene you.” “Lady,” quod Huon, “I ought greatly to loue & to cherysse you, & I am ryght ioyfull that it hath pleasyd our lorde Iesu Cryst that I haue nowe founde you in good helth and prosperyte / for a more

trewer than ye be, there is none lyuynge” / whan all the company had made there salutasyons one to an nother, they went to dynere, & were rychely serued / for there was greate plentye in the cyte / and the sarazyns were without the cyte, where as they fought and slew eche other / there was suche sleynge on bothe partes that the feldes were coueryd with deed men and sore woundyd; manye a horse ranne aboute the felde, & there maysters lyenge deed / these two kynges fought one agaynst the other, pusaunce agaynst pusaunce (200.16-201.1).

Perhaps the mood shifts a little too swiftly for modern readers. Huon and his companions are fighting for their lives in the opening incident, however, and the rules of war allow them to secure without mercy the fortification that will save them.<sup>14</sup> Accepting that expedient as a fact of life, Berners and, he assumes, his readers sense nothing indecorous in the easy transition to the lovers' embrace. To accept such a thing may well be thoughtless, but thoughtlessness of exactly that kind is a necessary condition of Huon's existence and a guarantee in a sense of his authenticity. Without it, he and his companions could not live long as men of war. The foundation of their authenticity is set before the reader's eyes continually through the book, never more beautifully than in the defeat of the Admiral of Dorbrye. The Admiral is a giant. He slays Huon's horse in the midst of a battle, plucks Huon up “as lyghtly as thoughe it had bene but a fether,” throws him across the pommel of his saddle, holds him there with one hand, and continues fighting. He has pushed his mount too hard, however, and it stumbles:

[W]hen Huon saw that, he was lyght and quycke, and rose vp on his fete / and when he sawe the gyaunte fallen downe & began to releue / he hastyd hym and lyfte vp his sworde with bothe his handys and gaue the gyaunt such a stroke on the helme that he claue his hede to the brayne so therwith he fel dede to the erthe / and then Huon sesyd the mare by the rayne and lepte vp vp on her and had great ioy, and so had the Persyans (510.14, 511.1-10).

Catching his opportunity, Huon seems to explode into activity, the explosion like a triumphal dance, like a ritual celebration of the suppleness, the strength, and the endurance of the human body. There, in the sheer vitality of physical combat and victory, is where Huon's being as a man of war—and that of his enemies and companions—is rooted.

Today, a distinguishing feature of conversational English is the frequency of its use of quotation, direct and indirect.<sup>15</sup> Evidence from *The Book of Margery Kempe* suggests that conversational English in the fifteenth century used quotation just as often:

And neuyr-þe-lesse yet sche lowly & mekely schewyd hym for trust þat sche had in hym how it was owr Lordys wyl þat sche xulde be clad in white clothyng. & he seyde “God forbede it,” for sche xulde þan make al þe world to wondyr on hir. And sche seyde a-gen, “Ser, I make no fors so þat God be plesyd þerwyth.” Than he bad hir comyn a-gen to hym & be gouernyd be hym & be a good preste hite Ser Edwarde. & sche seyde sche xulde wete first gyf it wer þe wil of God er not, & þerwyth sche toke hir leue at þat tyme. &, as sche went fro-hym-ward be þe wey, owr Lord seyde to hir sowle, “I wil not þat þu be gouernyd be hym.” & sche sent hym worde what answer sche had of God.<sup>16</sup>

Kempe moves naturally back and forth between direct and indirect quotation, and she uses her direct quotations less to convey information—matters having been made clear in the indirect quotations and the narrative itself—than to embody an attitude, as in her respondent’s “God forbede it,” her own “Ser, I make no fors so þat God be plesyd þerwyth,” and Christ’s secret “I wil not þat þu be gouernyd be hym.” Thus personified, the attitudes are charged with an interesting emotional energy, especially when they rub so sharply one against the other. Kempe has used her direct quotations to produce precisely the effect that makes drama dramatic: a tension between a situation, interesting in itself, and the possibly disquieting situations to which it could lead.<sup>17</sup> In this she is typical. Ordinary speech has a dramatic potential that, brought into play by an able talker, can produce memorable results.

Berners tunes the voices of his characters with a fine sense of dramatic unpredictability and reserve. Huon comes to a plain and sees “a tonne made of the hart of oke, bound all about with bandys of Iron,” rolling and turning “without sease lyke a tempeste.” It passes near him, and he hears a voice inside “sore complaynyng.” He approaches and asks it to speak. It is silent. He assaults it with a high-flown invocation: “what so euer thou art,” he says, “I coniure the by hym that creatyd all the worlde, and by his sone our lorde Iesu chryst, whom he sent downe to suffer dethe and passyon on the tre of the crosse to redeme his frendys, who by the synne of

Adam and Eue were in lymbo." The voice answers, drily. "[T]hou that hast coniueryd me," it says, "thou doeste great yll to cause me to shew the the trouthe." Then, "[K]nowe suerly," it says, taking Huon and the reader quite by surprise, "that I haue to name Cayme, and sone I was to Adam and Eue." Surprising too is the chastened tone in which he speaks: "[I] am he that slew my brother Abel by false and cursid enuy that I had to hym." More interesting still, he warns Huon—but with the same impassivity—of a fiendish threat. "[A]none thou shalt se come heder," he says, ".ii. deuyls of hell, fowyll and howdeous to behold, and they shall strangle the & bere thy sowle into hell." Huon shudders in terror: "O, verye god...humbely I requyre the to saue me fro this tourmente." And so they continue, Berners managing the tension between them with a droll and sometimes poignant irony. Huon promises to free Cain if Cain will tell him how to escape the fiends. Cain keeps his part of the bargain. Huon is suddenly circumspect. Who was it that put you into this tun, he asks. Cain, uncomprehending as ever, walks into the trap. "[G]od of heuen set me here," he answers, "bycause I had dyspleasyd hym for sleyng of my brother Abell." If that is so, says Huon, God forbid that I should free you. "I had rather be pariuryd," he says, "then to fordo that thyng that god wylle haue done to punyssh the for the ylls that thou haste done / I knowe well as for the yll that I haue done as in brekinge of my promyse to the, god wyll lyghtly pardone me for it" (484.1-487.24). And Huon is on his way, triumphant again.

The impertinence of Huon's last words is the impertinence of the young, and the lightheartedness that runs through Berners' prose is the lightheartedness of youth, a youth that is untutored in malice, that is all ingenuousness, that is thoughtless indeed, imprudent, even negligent, but spontaneous and irrepressible, that walks with an assurance that is at once admirable and foolhardy. If the wonder of Berners' style in *Huon de Bordeaux* is the art of the *jongleur*, the wonder of his imaginative engagement is the pleasure he takes in youth as the warmth of life. "Huon, of god be thou cursed," says Oberon early in the book, exasperated. He is Huon's patron and protector, the king of the fairies, the most beautiful creature in the world, cursed in his childhood to grow no higher than his three feet tall. He has given Huon two priceless gifts: a chalice that will fill with wine if signed with the cross, though only for those who are true and without lie, and a horn that, when blown, will summon Oberon and a hundred thousand men of arms to the summoner's aid if he is in dire need, to his misery and loss if he is not. Huon has blown the horn thoughtlessly, just

to test the virtue of it, he says. “[H]old your peace,” he says to his companions, who are terrified by the sight of Oberon and the hundred thousand men of war who are galloping towards them. “[L]et me speke to hym.” He says to the furious Oberon:

“[A], syr...we were syttyng ryght now in the medow, & dyd ete of that ye gaue vs / I belyue I tooke to mych drynke out of the cuppe that ye gaue me / the vertu of the whiche we well assayed / than I thought to assay also the vertue of the ryche horne / to the entent that yf I shulde haue any nede / that I myght be sure therof / now I know for trouthe that all is trew that ye haue shewyd me / wherfore, syr, in the honour of god I requyre you to pardon my trespas / syr, here is my sword, stryke of my hede at your pleasour / for I knowe well without your ayde I shall neuer come to acheue myne enterpryse” / “Huon,” quod Oberon, “the bounte and grete trouthe that is in the constreynyth me to gyue the pardon / but beware fro hense forth be not so hardy to breke my commandement” (80.18-81.6).

It is a supreme gesture, “stryke of my hede at your pleasour,” a gesture that exhibits an inner strength and the faith in which it is grounded, faith literally in Oberon’s goodness and bounty, figuratively in the goodness and bounty of life. That strength and that faith lie beneath all Huon’s recklessness and bravado. They are his “bounte and grete trouthe,” the valour and integrity for which Oberon can forgive him anything. Faith in the ever-renewing bounty of life runs deep through the book. The old Abbot of Cluny takes an apple Huon has brought from the East, he eats it, and:

his whyte berd fell away & a new berd come / his iowes that were lene & pale, the fesse grew again new quycke fesse, so that he became a fayre man & wel fornyshyd of body and membres / a farer man can no man se, nor lyghter, nor lustyer / wherof he had suche ioye at his harte that he ran and embrasyd Huon, and kyssed hym more than x. tymes (554.25-555.1).

Berners’ artless sentences thrill with the miraculous resurgence of life, as the coarseness of age falls away from the Abbot and he is whole again, body and soul.

The miraculous return to youth is a recurrent figure in *Huon*. It is emblematic of the transformation—non-miraculous, but just as wondrous in its way—whereby a youthful delight in being releases Huon’s elderly and more cautious companions from their stiffness of age and office. “[W]hiche so euer way ye take, it shall not be

without me," says Gerames, warming to the challenge of Huon's quest, though he is "an olde aunsyent man with a longe whyte berde, and hys heyre hangynge ouer hys shulders," a relic of thirty years in the desert as an exile and hermit (64.26-27, 60.24-26). But the book's transformations are emblematic, too, of deeper mysteries. It is true that Oberon has far too motley an identity to be read as a consistent allegory (for all his loyalty to "very God" and "our Lord Jesus Christ," he was sired by Julius Caesar on the Lady of the Secret Isle, Caesar arriving there en route to Thessaly to fight Pompey, the lady having returned from deserting her lover, the despondent Florimont of Albany). Nevertheless, at some moments in the narrative, Oberon seems to stand unmistakably for angelic grace, at others for priestly or sacramental grace, and at still others for the saving personal presence of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> The magical transformations also at times point beyond themselves, and that quite explicitly. "[S]yr," Huon says to the Admiral of Persia, "ete of the appyll that I haue geuyn you / and then the people that be here assembelyd shall see what grace our lord god shall send you." The admiral eats and is "clene chaungyd, & his beautye and strenthe as he was when he was but of .xxx. yerys of age," and all the people present "with one voyce cryed & requyryd to be chrystenyd" (465.1-11). The bright book of *Huon de Bordeaux* draws its readers into an encounter with youth as a joyous openness to life, and it presents that openness, that youth, as a gift of God.

The import of the gift becomes clearer when one sets these transformations from *Huon* against one from Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. Early in Malory's telling of the Grail story, Sir Launcelot stands outside a lonely chapel in a forest. Inside, he sees "a fayre awter full rychely arayde with clothe of clene sylke," and on it is "a clene fayre candyllstykke" of silver, with six great candles. He tries to enter, but cannot, even though the door of the chapel is "waste and brokyn." Overtaken with fatigue, he stretches out on his shield by a stone cross near the chapel, and "half wakyng and half slepyng," he dreams. In his half-dream he sees a sick knight being borne to the chapel on a litter. "A, sweete Lorde!" the knight says. "Whan shall thys sorow leue me, and whan shall the holy vessell com by me wherethorow I shall be heled? For I have endured thus longe, for litill trespasse, a full grete whyle!" The candlestick with the six tapers comes mysteriously to the stone cross and with it the Holy Grail, the object of Launcelot's quest. "Fayre swete Lorde, whych ys here within the holy vessell," says the sick knight, sitting up and holding out his hands, "take hede unto me, that I may be hole of thys malody!"

And therewith on hys hondys and kneys he wente so nyghe that he towched the holy vessell and kyst hit, and anone he was hole. And than he seyde, "Lorde God, I thanke The, for I am helyd of thys syknes!"

So whan the holy vessell had bene there a grete whyle hit went unto the chapell with the chaundeler and the lyght, so that sir Launcelot wyst nat where hit was becom; for he was overtakyn with synne, that he had no power to ryse agayne the holy vessell. Wherefore aftir that many men seyde hym shame, but he toke repentaunce aftir that.

The sick knight arises and kisses the cross. "Thorow the holy vessell I am heled," he says to his squire. "But I have mervayle of thys slepyng knyght that he had no power to awake whan thys holy vessell was brought hydir." "I dare well sey," returns the squire, "that he dwellith in som dedly synne whereof he was never confessed." The squire arms the knight, and the knight, putting on Launcelot's helmet and sword, mounts Launcelot's horse ("for he was bettir than hys") and rides off. Launcelot awakens, unsure whether what he has seen was a dream. He hears a voice. "Sir Launcelot," it says,

"more harder than ys the stone, and more bitter than ys the woode, and more naked and barer than ys the lyeff of the fygge-tre! Therefore go thou from hens, and withdraw the from thys holy places!"

And whan sir Launcelot herde thys he was passyng hevvy and wyst nat what to do. And so departed sore wepyng and cursed the tyme that he was borne, for than he demed never to have worship more. For tho wordis wente to hys herte, tyll that he knew wherefore he was called so.

Launcelot goes to the cross, and he finds his helmet, sword, and horse gone: "And than he called hymselff a verry wrecch and moste unhappy of all knyghtes" (II.893.33-895.37).

These chastening words are darker and more pensive than anything in *Huon de Bordeaux*, grounded as they are in a profound conviction of the moral ambiguity of human existence. Launcelot, so close to the fulfilment of this highest quest of the Round Table, lies like a man entranced, immobile, impotent of spirit, shadowed over by his guilt, unable even to stretch a hand toward the gift that is offered. Yet this mordant picture of spiritual stasis is the setting for an affirmation of spirit, a robust,

even muscular, rebirth, the sick knight now inching weakly ahead on hands and knees, now whole and strong, riding away with Launcelot's horse, helmet, and sword for his own. Launcelot, in all his strength and goodness, has been passed over, for he has compromised his spiritual integrity, not indeed with positive evil, but with the yearning for Guinevere that remains deep and stubborn in his heart, a motive in which the desire for good is as strong as the desire to rebel. What we see in these paragraphs is a moral experience that can be defined doctrinally. Human beings are unwhole at their very centre. Sin cannot be escaped, only constantly forgiven. The human spirit is capable of powerful revival, and it comes through faithful adherence to that greater being whom it knows, mysteriously yet through personal experience, as the consolation of the afflicted and the end of all human endeavour.<sup>19</sup> To Malory, however, the experience is not a set of precepts that he applies to his story from the outside. It works, instead, as the sense of fitness through which he creates his story.

The imaginative source of the spirited transformations of Lord Berners' *Huon de Bordeaux* can be defined doctrinally too. The God incarnate in Christ is the God of creation, his gift the miracle of life, manifest in every created thing, his power the power to renew, not least the power suddenly to lift failing human flesh to the fullness of life. In the incarnation of the Creator God all creation itself is renewed, and human life in its depths is lived in gratitude and joy, at heart the gratitude and joy that greet the resurrected Christ at Easter, triumphant in the *Exsultet* of Holy Saturday, *O felix culpa, quae talum ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem!* Such is the deep sense of fitness that informs not just the miraculous transformations but the whole of Berners' *Huon de Bordeaux*. One cannot put a name to it as neatly as one can to the more severe Augustinianism that lies within *Le Morte Darthur*, though its presence is as surely felt in the world that was passing away before Berners' and Malory's eyes. It is at work in the splendid vision of the Redemption in Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, where the world's very elements renew themselves at the return of a star-like maiden, Nature herself, to the earth.<sup>20</sup> And it is at work in the brightness and warmth of the Nativity of Fra Angelico and Fra Lippo Lippi's glorious tondo (now in the National Gallery in Washington), where an ecstasy of joy sweeps along a chequered crowd come to pay homage to their God incarnate, while around them the world is coming to life, the sterile rock wilderness behind them transformed into the gorgeous meadow at the feet of the holy family.

From this source, ultimately, comes the delight that wells up continually, if often unaccountably and sometimes paradoxically, in the harsh and brutal existence of Berners' coarse-grained men of war. "Huon ranne at hym that sholde have hangyd the mynstrell," Berners writes, in a passage that is an epitome of the whole, "& strake hym with his spere clene throwe, & so fell downe deed." Huon and his companions are rescuing the minstrel Mouflet from the paynims, who have set up a gibbet under the walls of Huon's castle. Huon cuts the hangman's rope, and away Mouflet runs, "his vyall about his necke. he that had sene hym flye a-way coude not a kept hym selfe fro lawghynge, for he ranne so fast that he semyd to be no olde man / but rather of the age of .xxx. yere." A horde of paynims attack the rescue party "cryenge and howlyng lyke dogges." Huon and his men turn and defend themselves, striking the enemy until "the place ran lyke a ryuer of blode." Huon gets his companions into the castle, all but his uncle Garyn, who has been detached from them and slain. "A, dere cosyne," cries Huon, "who for the loue of me haue left your wyfe and chyldrene and londe and syngnoryes! I am sory of your deth." He is inconsolable. But old Gerames, after the company has dined, approaches Mouflet and says:

"frende, I pray the take thy vyall, and geue vs a songe to make him mery" / the mynstrell tooke his instrument and gaue them a swet songe, the whiche was so melodyus to here that they all beleuyd they had been in paradyce / and they all made great ioy with suche a ioyfull noyse / that the paynims without dyd here it / & sayd amonge them selfe, "A, these frenchemen are people to be fearyd and doughtyd" (205.12-207.9).

Ah, "these frenchemen" indeed! They have the secret of eternal youth.

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### Notes

1 "On Foch," in *Selected Essays of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. Dorothy Collins (London: Methuen, 1949), p. 86.

2 *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Christopher Morris, Everyman's Edition, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1963), 1.77.

3 Berners' French sources were the anonymous *Artus de Bretaine* for *Arthur of Little Britain*, a French version of Diego de San Pedro's *Carcel de Amor* for *The Castle of Love*, René Berthault's *Livre Doré de Marc Aurele*, itself a translation from the Spanish of Guevara, for *The Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius*, Jean Froissart's *Des croniques de Fraunce, d'angleterre, d'escoce, despaigne, de bretaine, de gascongne, de flaunders*, for *Sir John Froissart: of the Chronicles of England, France, Spain, Portugal, Scotland, Britany, Flaunders* and the 1513 prose version of the chanson de geste *Les prouesses et faitz merueilleux du noble duc Huon de bordeaul* for *The Book of Duke Huon de Bordeaux*.

4 Sir John Bouchier, Lord Berners, *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeaux*, ed. S.L. Lee, Early English Text Society, c.s. 40, 41, 43, 50 (London: Trübner, 1882-87; rep. Millwood, New York: Kraus Reprint, 1973), p. 190, lines 13-23.

5 *Les Prouesses et Faictz Merueilleux du Noble Huon de Bordeaux Per de France* (Paris: Michel le noir, 1516), p. 47v.

6 See Ian A. Gordon, *The Movement of English Prose* (London: Longman, 1966), and David Crystal and Derek Davy, "The Language of Conversation," in *Investigating English Style* (London: Longman, 1969), pp. 95-124.

7 C.S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*," in *Essays on Malory*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 7-28, p. 23.

8 Gordon, *Movement*, p. 67.

9 *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), III. 1237.1-22.

10 *The Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius*, [trans. John Bouchier, Lord Berners] (London: Wynkyn de Word, 1535), L2r-L2v.

11 *The Chronicle of Froissart*, ed. William Paton Ker (London: David Nutt, 1902; rep. New York: AMS Press, 1967), V.229.

12 See Martin Joos, *The Five Clocks* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967), especially chapters III and IV.

13 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech, Early English Text Society, o.s. 212 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), 74.10-16.

14 See M.H. Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), chapter 8.

15 Crystal and Davy, "Language of Conversation," p. 112.

16 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 103.14-25. I have changed yogh to y or g, according to the spelling of the word in modern English.

17 See S.R. Dawson, *Drama and the Dramatic* (London: Methuen, 1970), chapters 2 and 3.

18 Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 152.

19 I have drawn the formulation, including some of its phrases, from Edward Norman, "Christianity and Politics," in *Conservative Essays*, ed. Maurice Cowling (London: Cassell, 1978), pp. 69-81, at pp. 76-77.

20 Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, translation and commentary by James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), pp. 109, 108, and 49-50. I am grateful to Douglas Wurtele for (among many other good things) leading me to Alain de Lille's moral and theological writings.