

JOHN STEVENS, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches*. London: Hutchinson, 1973.

II

The consideration of 'images' takes us straight to the heart of the matter. We could have begun an analysis of the way romance works by thinking of character or plot or rhetoric. But the images force us towards the differences, towards those features which most clearly distinguish romance from other fictions. To a large degree the greater importance of images in romance results from the lack of a sense of

space and time. Virginia Woolf wrote of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, 'He was travelling in France, indeed, but the road was often through his own mind, and his chief adventures were not with brigands and precipices but with the emotions of his own heart.'⁷ This could be said of many of the heroes of romance; they live, move and act in a faceless landscape. It is not a *nameless* one; but the names themselves are liable to tell us more about the spiritual adventures of questing knights than about a countryside (Le Chastel de Pesme Aventure, Le Pont de l'Espee, and so forth). Since the lords and ladies of romance inhabit a land without a precise geography, the 'places' they visit, the objects they encounter and the creatures they meet take their meaning not from their relation to one another in a coherent landscape but from their relation to the experience being conveyed.⁸ Even a group of images, such as those constituting Calogrenant's *aventure* in *Yvain*, do not genuinely constitute a scene—the Monstrous Herdsman, his wild animals, the Stone, the Fountain, the Storm and the liturgy of birds are an imaginative sequence, not landmarks in an itinerary.

Not only geographically but temporally, romance tends to be non-realistic. Living in an eternal spring, with 'such a day tomorrow as today', the characters scarcely seem to notice the seasons go by. In Chrétien's *Perceval* it snows, but chiefly so that the three drops of blood will have an appropriate background.⁹ Gawain's famous winter journey is indeed wintry:

For werre wrathed hym not so much that wynter nas wors,
When the colde cler water fro the cloudes schadde
And fres er hit falle myght to the fale erthe.
Ner slayn wyth the slete he sleped in his yrnys,
Mo nyghtes than innoghe, in naked rokkes
Theras claterande fro the crest the colde borne rennes
And henge heghe over his hede in hard iisseikkles. (726–32)

But, exceptional though this is, the landscape is not, even here, purely a physical environment. And, indeed, one might be hard put to it to find any storytelling of any age of which this statement could unreservedly be made.

It is clear that the absence of space-time connections makes other connections more important; the kind of objects and happenings which in other fictions are the necessary background and ordering of human

werre fighting *fres* froze *fale* colourless *yrnes* armour *Theras* where
rennes runs

experience have, in typical romance, other functions. The point need not be laboured. Nothing could be further from romance than the concept of *vraisemblance*, verisimilitude, so beloved of seventeenth-century French critics:

Vraisemblance, on which the new argument for the unities was essentially based, marks a way of thinking which found change of scene improbable and therefore objectionable because the stage was small and could never be anything but the same stage, and rejected extension of time because of the brevity of the performance. This notion of *vraisemblance* is typical of cultivated society. It combines the arrogant rationalism that refuses to be taken in by imaginative illusion with contempt for the *indocte et stupide vulgaire* which is perfectly willing to be taken in.¹⁰

There is only one observation here that one might quarrel with. The notion of *vraisemblance* was not typical of the highly cultivated societies of the Middle Ages (and 'cultivated' indeed were the courts of Henry II and Richard II of England, of Marie de Champagne and of Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia, to name no others). It is worth asking why this was so. The answer is that the habits of writers and the assumptions of readers are intimately bound up with metaphysics. Medieval romances have to be read in a different way from nineteenth-century realist novels because the people who wrote them had different views about the visible world.

In Chapter 1 I described the medieval way of looking at phenomena as being, in the widest sense, symbolic and quoted a verse from Alan of Lille:

Omnis mundi creatura
quasi liber et pictura
nobis est in speculum.¹¹

The visible world is a book, a picture or a mirror in which the viewer can see an adumbration of the truth and glory of the divine. We shall never become good viewers, or good readers of medieval texts, while such an exposition as the following appears merely ludicrous to us; it comes from a medieval bestiary:

UNICORN: The unicorn is a very fierce beast with only one horn; to capture it, a virgin maid is placed in the field. The unicorn approaches her and, resting in her lap, is so taken. By this beast Christ is figured; by the horn his insuperable strength is expressed. Resting in the womb of a Virgin, he was taken by the hunters; that is, he was found in the form of a man by those who loved him.¹²

The medieval writer did not need exhorting to 'connect, only connect', because he inhabited a mental world in which all physical, mental and spiritual phenomena were enmeshed, woven together into a huge web of connections whose beginning and ending was in God. This way of looking at things is not simply a theological exercise; to allegorize from the nature of an object is both to describe and to *explain* it. Since the establishment of modern methods of empirical scientific enquiry from the seventeenth century onwards we have found it harder and harder to take other kinds of explanation seriously. We may be helped, I think, if we ponder Basil Willey's dictum that 'explanation is re-statement in terms of current assumptions'.¹³ The current assumptions of the bestiary compilers were very different from those of twentieth-century zoologists.

One of the inevitable effects of the medieval type of explanation was to reduce the degree of attention given to 'things as they are', to *actual* phenomena, as we should (perhaps too sweepingly) call them. So, for example, a medieval writer wishing to describe the Blessed Virgin would not ask himself what a young Jewish working-class woman at the beginning of our era would have looked like. He might, perhaps, have envisaged her as an idealized courtly lady of his own century, thus relating her to a known ideal. But, most likely of all, he would have described her by *analogy*, or by a series of analogies relating her to objects in the natural world and in revealed truth. Thus, he would say she was like a bee, both chaste and fruitful; that she was like the fleece of Gideon, on which the dew fell when he called for it (representing the grace of God in the Annunciation); that she was like the burning bush in which Moses saw God (because in her womb God was made flesh); that she was like the ever-closed door which Ezekiel saw in a vision (she was 'closed', and no man could enter her).

This type of approach to phenomena, intellectual as it must appear, can accommodate more than one emotional attitude. Briefly, whilst believing in the interrelatedness of the created world and the Divine Reality, you can either take a Platonic view or a sacramental. According to the first (Platonic or neo-Platonic) 'the world of phenomena is only a shadow' (*umbra*, a favourite medieval metaphor); it is worth contemplating simply for what it can reveal to us of eternal truth. The second view, the sacramental, seeing the same parallels between time and eternity, insists that the single event, the single object, has inherent worth because of this; the fact that a human marriage reflects the spiritual marriage between Christ and his Church gives the human

marriage not less but more validity. The Platonic view of the world leads one away from it. We ascend and kick away from beneath us the worthless ladder with its foot in the mire and clay. The sacramental, more centrally Christian, view leaves us rootedly in the everyday world where the Word was made flesh and

Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces. (Hopkins)

A special term is sometimes used to denote a type of sacramentalism which is special to the Middle Ages—*figura*.

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, whilst the second encompasses or fulfils the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but *both, being real events or figures, are within time*, within the stream of historical life.¹⁴

Thus Adam 'figures' Christ (so do Isaac and Samson, for different reasons); Eve 'figures' the Blessed Virgin; Noah's Flood 'figures' the Judgment; and the raising of Lazarus, the Resurrection. Erich Auerbach distinguishes the figural view of the world from the allegorical, on the one hand, and the more widely symbolical on the other. The tendency of allegory, he argues, is to strip events, natural phenomena, texts, of their concrete reality, whereas the figural interpretation depends on our experiencing them in their full actuality. The symbol, on the other hand, differs by being 'a direct interpretation of life, and originally no doubt for the most part of nature' whilst 'figural prophecy relates to an interpretation of history'.

It stands to reason that a way of looking at the world that linked all things visible and invisible into one great interlocking pattern, that reads sermons in stones, etymology and boat-building, would have an effect on the way people read books and listened to stories. 'Art', Emile Mâle has observed, was, in the Middle Ages, 'at once a script, a calculus, and a symbolic code.'¹⁵ So, if the world itself is a Book, where he who runs may read, how much more must a book be a Book, in which lessons may be read which are not obvious to the casual observer.¹⁶ One book in particular, it has often been said, should be our guide, and all others should be read in the same spirit—namely, God's own writ, the Bible:

*Litera gesta docet; Quid credas Allegoria;
Moralis quid agas; Quo tendas Anagogia.*

(The literal sense teaches you the story; the allegory, what you should believe; the 'morality', what you should do; and the 'anagogical' sense, your spiritual destiny.)

It is certainly interesting to know about three- or four-fold interpretation, interpretation on three or four 'levels of meaning', as we should say. But attempts to apply the method systematically to medieval vernacular poetry have only been muddling. The important thing is to be familiar with the varying ways in which medieval writers expressed their sense that there is always more to a story than a story:

Fedeil deu, entend l'estorie: asez est clere e semble nu, mais pleine est de sens et de meule. L'estoire est paille, le sens est grains; le sen est fruit, l'estorie raims. Cist livres est cum armarie des secreiz Deu.

(Faithful soul, attend to the story: it is quite straightforward and seems bare, but it is full of meaning and matter. The literal story is the chaff, the meaning is the wheat; the meaning is the fruit, the story is the branch [that bears it]. This book is like a treasure-chest containing the secrets of God.)¹⁷

So, the author of a twelfth-century *Livres des Rois*. Besides wheat and chaff, fruit and branch, another image is frequently used to describe the relationship between story and meaning, *littera* and *sensus*—the image of the nut: 'the external shell of falseness having been cast away, the reader may discover within the sweet kernel of truth'.¹⁸ Some kind of antithesis is implicit in most of the metaphors used, but the sharpness of this one—shell false/kernel true—is neither necessary (except in its context, a defence of the 'fictions' of poets) nor representative.

Some comments from Reto Bezzola's book, *Le sens de l'aventure et de l'amour* will serve to sum up the foregoing argument and will also state more persuasively than I can its relevance for the reading of medieval romance. He writes that, in order to grasp the essence of a medieval work, we must extend our feeling for the symbolic nature of the world to every object and every action; and yet at the same time we must remember that these objects and actions still retain their full validity in the world of our senses—they never become *de simples images transparents*. There will be moments during a story when we can give ourselves up entirely to the charm of the narration. But suddenly there may come a passage in which things appear in an unexpected light and there is a sense of mystery; the medieval reader, accustomed to look for the reality behind the veil (*la réalité derrière le voile des phénomènes*), would pause, baffled but thoughtful, and gradually let himself be permeated by the deeper meaning of what he was reading, hearing or seeing.¹⁹

We may not necessarily agree with all the 'deeper meanings' that Professor Bezzola senses. In Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, for instance, he argues that the romance as a whole is an initiation, by three stages, into the nature of *la vie du chevalier et de la dame*: the fight for the self (*le 'moi'*), the fight for the other (*le 'toi'*) and the fight for the courtly society (*la communauté*). Erec and Enide have to learn that their happiness is not an end in itself; the true happiness of love cannot be limited to their private experience but must become 'la Joie de la Cour', the happiness of the whole community.²⁰ This account may come to seem too precisely generalized, too tidily conceptual. On the other hand, I find it impossible to go along with Professor Vinaver, who, impressed with the difficulty of interpretation, has concluded that there is not only a distinction in romance between the *matière* and the *sens* but a positive and deliberate discrepancy, a 'duality and semi-obscurity', 'a constant tension between *conte* and *conjointure*'.²¹ This, he asserts, 'offends the logic' of some modern readers but was accepted quite naturally by the learned, medieval, courtly poet. The 'duality' is not the result of incompetence, because 'while on the courtly level the coherence of the story is above reproach, on the mythological level there is simply no need for any coherent sequence'.²² So far from believing with Bezzola that the magic and the marvels have a symbolic value in *la grande aventure de la vie*, we are to accept that 'incidents occur and magical objects appear at random'. This is to say, for example, that the moving description of the enchanted garden in 'La Joie de la Cour', the third and last *aventure* of Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, is imaginatively irrelevant, has nothing whatever to do with Chrétien's courtly purposes.

Ultimately, the point at issue cannot be resolved by scholarship, though scholarship may illuminate it. It comes to this. Do we experience in reading 'La Joie de la Cour', and other memorable episodes in medieval romance, a sense of imaginative, of *poetic*, coherence? If so, we should not be easily put off from believing in our experience, and attempting to find words for it, either by the seeming inadequacy of past explanations, or by scholarly arguments external to the text. I hope the passages discussed in the remainder of this chapter will do something to show that centred in the 'images' of medieval romance we can find that 'lovely conformitie, or proportion, or conveniencie between the sence and the sensible' which appears to distinguish great poetry in all ages.

III

Let us start by considering an 'image' or 'images' of a quite different kind from those in the poems of Chrétien and Marie de France. The episode is from Malory's *Morte*. In the final stages of the Quest Sir Galahad, Sir Percivale and Sir Bors embark (not for the first time) in a conveniently moored Magic Ship.

And wan they com thyder they founde the shippe ryche inowghe, but they founde nother man nor woman therein. But they founde in the ende of the shippe two fayre lettirs wrytten, which seyde a dredefull worde and a mervaylous:

'Thou man whych shalt entir into thys shippe, beware that thou be in stedefaste beleve, for I am FAYTHE. And therefore beware how thou entirst but if thou be stedfaste, for and thou fayle thereof I shall nat helpe the' . . .

And whan they were in, hit was so mervaylous fayre and ryche that they mervaylede. And amyddis the shippe was a fayre bedde. And anone Sir Galahad went thereto and founde thereon a crowne of sylke. And at the feete was a swerde, ryche and fayre, and hit was drawyn out of the sheeth half a foote and more.²³

In the subsequent chapters Percivale's sister, who is with them on board, tells them the history and the meaning of the sword and the scabbard. These we must pass over. The symbolic *pièce de résistance* is the building of the ship itself and, especially, the history of the tri-coloured spindles on the canopy of the bed. As Malory's version is, despite its compression from his French source (or, sometimes, because of it), not easy to follow and still of considerable length, I quote for convenience Jean Frappier's summary of the symbols and their meaning in his discussion of Malory's 'French book'.

[The symbolic treatment of Solomon's ship] is founded on the traditional comparison of the Church with a ship: *Ecclesia est navis*. With this have been combined the memory of self-propelled vessels described in Breton *lai* or Arthurian romance and the strange legend of the wood from which the cross was made. Solomon, builder of the Temple, the Church of the Old Law, is the builder of the ship. Eve took with her from Paradise a branch of the Tree of Knowledge and planted it; originally white, it turned green when she lost her virginity, and turned red when Cain committed the first murder. From this tree at various times were cut the three spindles which Solomon placed in the ship in the form of a cross . . . The sword, according to the epistle to the Ephesians, is the Word of God, the Scriptures. The hempen

girdle attached to it indicates the inferior inspiration of the Old Testament; the new girdle, made of a virgin's hair and worn by the messianic figure of Galaad, is of course the New Testament.²⁴

In the compressed form of a summary these symbols and their explication read somewhat drily, to say the least. But the dryness is not all in the compression. The whole thing smells of the lamp. The passage, created by the author of *La Queste del Saint Graal* and taken over by Malory, is an elaborate example of what one may call 'retrospective allegorizing'. The archetypal symbols of Ship, Bed and Sword are not allowed to accrue their own meaning (i.e. a meaning of the kind that Marie de France's nightingale accrues, one built up from the context); instead they are 'explained' in the terms of the extraordinary legend (itself a product of the medieval synthesizing imagination) which traces the wood of the Cross back through Solomon's temple to the Tree of the Fall. In this case much of the residue of permanent meaning has been squeezed out of the symbols by the sheer intellectual complexity of the commentary needed to explicate them. Indeed, Frappier's terms 'intricate' and 'ingenious' are those that come most readily to mind. The whole thing is an extended allegorizing *after the event*—the event in this case being Chrétien's *Perceval* and the Grail stories built round it by 'continuators'.

The strength of the exegetical tradition is abundantly apparent here. Intellectual, textual commentary based on the study of the Bible is here 'applied' to another purpose. The purpose is not, in fact, so very 'other', since the mind at work is that of a Cistercian monk intent on writing a Christian gloss on the courtly gloss on the Celtic images and stories: under the knightly quest for that *sainte chose*, the grail, is hidden the eternal search of man for God and for his salvation.

Some scholars would have us believe that all medieval symbolism is of this exegetical kind, whether or not the author himself gives an exposition of his meaning. 'Between their symbolism and ours there is a great gulf, because in their case the image is in the service of the intellect and not, as in ours, of the sensibility. The symbol does not serve the purpose of expressing a sort of unique revelation such as would elude the rational intellect; rather, it simply veils a truth which has been completely grasped and which can easily be formulated in plain language.'²⁵ In so far as this is held applicable to medieval literary symbolism, the symbolism of medieval romance, it is far too sweeping. The danger lies in mistaking the conscious theorizing of any age, however impressive, as an ultimate guide either to their writings or to our

reading of them. The existence of an exegetical tradition of a certain kind does not prove an intention on the author's part, nor should it constrain our approach. That is to say, we can, as they did, *reason about* symbols and 'explain' them intellectually, but this reasoning does not exhaust and may not even cover their original intention. 'Huge cloudy symbols'—the garden, the tower, the fountain—are certainly present in many medieval poems and their meaning is not limited to what theological exegesis can make of them. Because they are, indeed, 'cloudy' and in them we see, as it were, in a glass, darkly, the images of medieval romances present us with difficulties. But the prime difficulty is certainly not one of constructing an intellectual significance—Dante's procedures in *La Vita Nuova* and the adventures of some modern commentators remind us how fatally easy that can be. The difficulty is precisely the opposite—to be able to rest in our doubts and teasings and uncertainties without any irritable searchings after fact and reason.

The way the author of *La Queste* used images, in his 'retrospective allegorizing', must be distinguished from two others which we may call 'radical allegory' and 'symbolic story'. The term 'radical allegory' I borrow from C. S. Lewis's *The Allegory of Love*, and with it his definition—'a story which can be translated into literal narration . . . without confusion, but not without loss'. The principal medieval example of this, C. S. Lewis finds, is the first part of the *Roman de la Rose*:

The inner life, and specially the life of love, religion, and spiritual adventure, has therefore always been the field of true allegory; for here there are intangibles which only allegory can fix and reticences which only allegory can overcome.²⁶

The distinction between 'radical allegory' and 'retrospective allegorizing' lies in the degree of coherence between the story and the signification; in 'radical allegory' they fit like hand and glove, like a man and his reflection in a mirror, whereas 'retrospective allegorizing' can hardly be achieved without duress—story and signification fit, indeed, but like a man with his straitjacket, not with his glove, much less his reflection.

In the first part of the *Roman de la Rose* we feel that the experience and the story which will fully convey it are one creation, one act of the imagination. The main outlines of the story have already been given (p. 52 above); the close examination of a single episode will, I think, show what I mean. The Lover is wandering in the garden of love full of natural delights:

And so befyl, I rested me
 Besydes a wel, under a tree . . .
 And on the border, al withoute,
 Was writen in the ston aboute,
 Letters smal, that sayden thus,
 'Here starf the fayre Narcisus'.

Narcisus was a bachelor
 That Love had caught in his danger . . . (1455-70)

The story of Narcissus and Echo follows; we hear how she died of love for him, of his coldness, and of her last prayer that he might suffer in love as she had suffered; he fell in love with his own 'shadowe' in the well and 'atte last he starf for woo'. The Lover feels inclined to withdraw, but he overcomes his reluctance:

Unto the welle than wente I me,
 And doun I loutede for to see
 The clere water in the stoon . . .
 In world is non so cler of hewe.
 The water is evere fresh and newe . . . (1553-60)

At the bottom of the well he sees 'two cristall stonys'. When the sun shines, the 'crystal stoon' (now singular) takes on all the colours of the spectrum. Moreover 'the merveilous cristall' has, like a mirror,

Such strengthe that the place overall,
 Both flour, and trec, and leves grene,
 And all the yerd in it is scene . . . (1580-2)

This is the mirrour perilous
 In which the proude Narcisus
 Saw all his face fair and bright,
 That made hym sithe to ligge upright.
 For whoso loketh in that mirrour,
 Ther may nothyng ben his socour
 That he ne shall ther sen somthyng
 That shal hym lede into lovyng. (1601-8)

This is the Well of Love in which all, even the wisest of men, are caught. Venus's son, 'daun Cupido', has sown the seed of love there.

Allway me liked for to dwelle,
 To sen the cristall in the welle,

befyl it happened *al withoute* on the outside *starf* died *bachelor* squire
danger power *loutede* bent *sithe* to *ligge upright* afterwards to lie face upwards
 [i.e. dead] *nothyng ben* . . . nothing can prevent him seeing something there

That shewide me full openly
 A thousand thinges faste by.
 But I may say, in sory houre
 Stode I to loken or to poure;
 For sithen have I sore siked;
 That mirrour hath me now entriked . . .

In thilke mirrour saw I tho,
 Among a thousand thinges mo,
 A roser chargid full of rosis
 That with an hegge aboute enclos is. (1635-52)

The 'savour of the roses swote' intoxicates him and he longs to pick one. One rose-bud attracts him more than all the rest but he is deterred from putting his hand to it by the 'thesteles sharpe . . . netles, thornes and hokede breres'. Whilst he is in this plight, the God of Love takes an arrow,

And shet att me so wondir smerte
 That thorough myn ye unto myn herte
 The takel smot, and depe it wente. (1727-9)

C. S. Lewis, writing nearly forty years ago, was a little on the defensive when he asked his readers 'whether this passage, despite a little elaboration, is not well handled by the poet'.²⁷ Indeed it is. It contains a wealth of suggestion and of insight into the experience of 'falling in love' that even a lengthy analysis could not do justice to. Let us begin with a few obvious 'meanings'. The two crystals at the bottom of the well are, surely, the lady's eyes; they reflect all the beauties of the garden. These beauties, natural and artificial, have been described at length (culminating in the dance of Beauté, Richesse, Largesse and the rest); all that is best in courtly life seems 'in her summed up, in her contained'. Most marvellous of all, in her crystal eyes the Lover sees not only beauty in general (the 'roser chargid full of rosis') but something which seems particularly to invite him ('Among the knoppes I ches oon/So fair . . .'). So much for the bare bones of the allegory; but there is a lot more to it than that. There are the suggestions of the Well image itself—deep and dark, a tunnel into which he might fall, but focussing light and eternal vitality at its bottom, where the gravel

faste by close to *poure* gaze steadily *sithen* . . . since then I have sighed
 heavily *tho* then *roser* rose-bush *shet* shot *wondir smerte* marvellously
 briskly *ye* eye *takel* arrow *knoppes* buds *ches* chose

shines 'as silver fyn' and the springing grass 'ne may in wynter dye'. The almost unnoticed shift from two crystal stones to one 'merveilous cristal' prevents our dwelling unnecessarily on the physical parallel; it is now the 'magic' (in every sense) of that first look which holds us with its gift of vision enlarged (all beauty is seen in it) and yet more concentrated too. The associations of the Rose are too well known to need comment; but there is one subtlety that could be overlooked, the Lover's choice of a bud that is not yet fully open. There are, finally, two or three aspects of the 'mirroure perilous' which suggest a psychological depth which the author might not have been able fully to formulate in abstract terms: love is, indeed, perilous, as well as inevitable (you fall in love at your own risk—even if you seem to be pushed); it is a 'mirroure', a glass, in which you see not reality but its reflection; and, most profound of all, the reflection you see in your lady's eyes is *your own*. The choice of the Narcissus myth, superficially, serves as a moral *exemplum*: pride in love (or, rather, in not loving) comes before a fall. But, more deeply considered, and combined as here with the *Fontaine d'Amors*, it shows how in this profound experience of love we may be looking not for another but for the image of ourselves.²⁸

I said earlier that the mechanical process which I have called 'retrospective allegorizing' would have to be distinguished not only from 'radical allegory' but also from 'symbolic story'. Some lengthy discussion of the difference between allegory and symbol might seem to be called for in a study like the present one. We may be able to circumvent this if we proceed immediately with another example, the *lai* of *Guigemar* by Marie de France.

Guigemar is a young prince, wise, virtuous and popular. He has only one fault—he is impervious to love. One day he goes out hunting and shoots a White Hind. The arrow, rebounding from her, wounds him in the thigh. The dying hind wishes that his wound may never heal until some woman suffers unbelievably for the love of him and he in return for her. Guigemar, with his incurable wound, wanders off alone. In an inlet of the sea is moored a ship with ebony rails and sails of silk. It is quite deserted. He goes aboard and finds a bed luxuriously appointed with all the magnificence of King Solomon. He falls asleep in it, and when he wakes up he is out at sea; there is nothing he can do about it (*suffrir li estut l'aventure*). The ship carries him to an ancient city where his wound will be cured. The lord of the ancient city is an old man with a young wife, whom he guards jealously in an orchard (*en un vergier suz le dongun*). It is enclosed on three sides by a thick wall of

green marble and on the fourth by the sea. The person who keeps the key is an old priest, a eunuch (*les plus bas membres out perduz*). Guigemar's ship drifts ashore, or rather is invisibly steered ashore, by the orchard. The lady and her maid board it timorously. Guigemar is asleep and they think he is dead. He awakes, however, and they exchange their sad life-stories; then, with some encouragement from the maid, they declare their love for one another. Guigemar stays secretly for a year and a half. Then Fortune's wheel turns and they fear discovery. They exchange sureties—that is to say, she ties a magic knot in his shirt and she wears an impregnable chastity-belt. When attacked by the *viel gelus*, her husband, Guigemar ably defends himself with a handy clothes-horse. But he is put back, nevertheless, into his magic ship which carries him off home. The Lady remains imprisoned and miserable until one day she finds the gate unlocked. Making her way to the shore she discovers the ship attached to a rock whence she had intended to drown herself. She goes on board and is whisked away to the land of a king called Meriadu.

All the local ladies have tried unsuccessfully to undo the knot in Guigemar's shirt; now King Meriadu and his knights try unsuccessfully to loosen the Lady's belt. Eventually Guigemar finds himself summoned to Meriadu's court, for reasons of war. In a scene of some length Guigemar and the Lady unfasten their respective love-bonds and tell their tale to the company. Meriadu objects to giving up the Lady to Guigemar, but the latter collects a great army together and compels him.

A grant joie s'amie en meine;
Ore ad trespassee sa peine.

(In great delight Guigemar leads his sweetheart away; now his misery is completely over and finished.)

The principal 'images' of this *lai* are those of the white hind, the incurable wound, the magic ship, the enclosed garden. They are the common stuff of fairy-tale, folk-tale, and romance. The hero of the anonymous *lai* with similar title, *Guingamor*, chases a white boar; and in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* King Arthur proposes as a courtly pastime the traditional hunting of the *blanc cerf*. It is usual for the white hart to turn into a fairy being. The magic ship with its luxurious bed we encountered earlier in the chapter. And so forth. There is no need to go into the history and usage of these images; it is in any case irrelevant. The point is that the tale is dominated by them; it is from them that it gets its particular atmosphere, mysterious yet meaningful. We need to consider not where they come from, but of what kind they are, what they do in their context, and of course how their context gives them

meaning. We need, in fact, to find their *sens*, *sententia*, 'sentence', significance.

Guigemar provides a striking instance of images constituting a 'mental landscape'. We considered earlier the way of medieval romancers with space and time; the sense of an actual landscape, a firmly realized locality, is very slight. We are told that the incidents of this *lai* took place in 'Britain the less', i.e. Brittany; but it does not matter and we soon forget it. The landscape is, one might almost say, 'interior'. But this is perhaps to prejudge the very question we ought to leave open for the time being. If the imagery were wholly 'interior', if it existed only to delineate 'the road through [Guigemar's] own mind', then surely we ought to call the tale an allegory? But can the tale be so translated? Or does it have an obstinately untranslatable existence of its own? Let us try it out.

Translating into abstractions we should say perhaps that Guigemar, a young man impervious to sexual attraction, becomes involved with a girl (the White Hart) whom he hurts so deeply that she dies. In misery and remorse he drifts aimlessly around (hence the Magic Ship without a steersman) hoping for the load of guilt to be removed (the wound caused by the arrow rebounding from the hart). He is lucky enough to find a woman whose husband's love is so jealously possessive (the enclosed *vergier* with the marble wall) that she longs to escape from it. This love is respectable and essentially sexless (the guard is a eunuch priest). After a mysterious encounter (the Magic Ship drifts in) and a period of secret happiness (her prison is now her seclusion) Guigemar and the Lady are separated. She contemplates suicide but is miraculously saved from it (the Magic Ship, again). And so we might go on, but with increasing difficulty—or, rather, with increasing unease and sense of dissatisfaction. The abstracted meaning seems not only too explicit but also inadequate. Perhaps no poem perfectly exemplifies continuous allegory. But the *Roman de la Rose* and *Piers Plowman* at least come a great deal closer to it than does *Guigemar*.

Yet this 'allegorization' of it is not totally absurd and contains part of the meaning of the poem. As Northrop Frye has shrewdly observed, 'It is not often realized that all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery.'²⁹ What ideas, then, may we properly attach to *Guigemar*? *Guigemar*, as it seems to me, is about a courtly experience between two young people eminently suitable to receive it. Or, to put it more precisely, it is a courtly *exemplum* about the nature of true love demonstrated by two idealized

types. The lessons we have to learn about love (which is presented absolutely, unquestioned, as the supreme earthly experience) are that it is inevitable, that it may not be forced, that loyalty raises it above the vicissitudes of fortune. Marie de France has other things to say elsewhere about the *granz biens* which is her one and only subject; the 'experience of fine feeling' has many facets and each *lai* presents a different truth about the experience. But these are the truths (or truisms) that she concentrates on here. Unlike some of the *lais*, *Guigemar*, one of the longest, finds room for discourse, general statements, about love both from the characters and from the author herself; and these, when related, give extra precision to the images. For example, one of the most memorable moments is the encounter between the hero and the white hind which culminates in Guigemar's thigh wound. This wound is later identified with the wound of love which can only be healed if it is shown:

Mes ki ne mustre s'enfermé
A peine en peot aver santé. (481-2)

(But he who never exposes his infirmity can hardly receive a cure for it.)

The passage continues with rehearsed commonplaces and proverbs of love:³⁰

Amur est plaie dedenz cors
E si ne piert nient defors.
Ceo est un mal que lunges tient
Pur ceo que de nature vient. (483-6)

(Love is a wound within the body and never shows itself on the outside. It is long-lasting pain because it has a natural origin.)

They are nicely turned, but what gives them imaginative force, I suggest, is the memory of the earlier scene:

En l'espeise d'un grant buissun
Vit une bise od un foïin;
Tute fu blanche cele beste. (89-91)

(In the heart of a big thicket he sees a hind with a fawn; she was white all over.)

(Guigemar shoots her, the arrow rebounds and wounds him in the *quisse*—thigh, sexual part?)

La bise, ke nafree esteit,
 Anguissuse ert, si se plaincit;
 Après parla en itel guise;
 'Oï, lase! jo sui ocise!
 E tu, vassal, ki m'as nafree,
 Tel seit la tue destinee:
 Jamais n'aies tu medecine!
 Ne par herbe ne par racine
 Ne par mire ne par pocium
 N'avras tu jamés garisun
 De la plaie ke as en la quisse,
 De si ke cele te guarisse
 Ki suffera pur tue amur
 Issi grant peine e tel dolor
 Ke unkes femme taunt ne suffri,
 E tu referas taunt pur li
 Dunt tut cil s'esmerveillerunt
 Ki aiment e amé avrunt
 U ki pois amerunt après.
 Va t'en de ci! Lais m'aver pes!' (103-32)

(The hind, wounded, was in great pain and lamented her lot. And then she spoke in these terms: 'Alas, I'm killed! And you, sir, who have wounded me, this be your destiny—may you never be cured! You will never find healing, neither in plant, nor root, neither by doctor, nor medicine, for the wound in your thigh, until a lady heal you who shall suffer for love of you such misery and grief as never woman ever suffered—and until you in your turn do as much for her as will cause all lovers, past, present and future, to be filled with wonderment. And now, go away! Leave me in peace!')

It is a mysterious encounter and baffles precise explication. The main feeling behind the passage seems to be of the integral connection between love and suffering. We can be sure that there is no feeling here for the sanctity of animal life or the cruelty of hunting. And yet at the same time we are aware of senseless pain, of something beautiful destroyed. The emotional logic holds us. Guigemar's insensitivity to love was such that everyone held him to be a lost soul (*peri*, 67). In a strange way this fault in him is made manifest in the killing of the hart (her whiteness might suggest beauty, defenceless virginity?). The innocent suffers and Guigemar's guilt can only be redeemed by love.

I should not wish to argue that the whole poem maintains this imaginative level—the knotted shirt and the chastity belt seem to me a prosaic sort of magic—but the balance between the 'image' and the

doctrine of love in this part of the courtly *exemplum* which is *Guigemar* is surely a triumph. The white hart provides one of those images, so characteristic of romance at its best, that concentrate and deepen meaning.

To return to the problem shelved earlier—*Guigemar* may more usefully be described as 'symbolic story' than as allegory. Northrop Frye maintains the validity of the traditional distinction between 'symbolism' and 'allegory' developed by nineteenth-century criticism and still employed, as for instance by C. S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love*. Professor Frye writes:

The contrast is between a 'concrete' approach to symbols [i.e. thematically significant imagery] which begins with images of actual things and works outward to ideas and propositions, and an 'abstract' approach which begins with the idea and then tries to find a concrete image to represent it.³¹

This is lucid and helpful. The only danger is that we may push the idea of 'contrast' so far that we find ourselves thinking of allegory and symbolism as 'opposites'.³² They are opposites only in certain limited and obvious senses. If anything is abundantly clear from meditating in succession on these two passages (the Well of Narcissus and the shooting of the White Hind), it is that the two have a great deal in common—far more in common than either has with the procedures of, say, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, *Moll Flanders*, or *Pride and Prejudice*. The problem is to a large extent a terminological one; and it matters far more that we should be responsive to the texts in front of us than that we should be able to put them into our, at best, rough-and-ready categories.

Both 'radical allegory' and 'symbolic story' (to name the roughest-and-readiest) are deeply dependent on 'images', in the sense I have been using the word—that is, to denote any 'sensible' object or person or action endowed with a significance beyond that of everyday and seeming to concentrate in itself the meaning of an episode or theme. Of both forms we could say, with Sidney, 'the sense is given us to excite the mind'. It is perhaps chiefly the amount of scholarly energy which has been put into making the necessary distinctions that has inclined us to think of the two as poles apart. On the contrary, they are neighbouring countries on the map of fiction. They both use, for the ends of romance, as well as for other ends, a vocabulary of 'images' including (to confine ourselves for the moment to the category of objects) the tower, the ship, the bird, the castle, the rock, the well, the rose, the garden, the ring, the sword, and so on. These are, of course, the every-

day objects of the medieval world. But we are struck principally not by their medievalness, nor indeed by their timelessness; rather, by their capacity to act as centres for different aspects of romantic and courtly experience, by their readiness (to adapt a fine phrase of Fulke Greville's) 'to turn the barren Philosophy [even love-philosophy] precepts into pregnant images of life'.

1. These remarks apply equally to Chrétien's *Lancelot*, though not to Malory's telling of Lancelot's story in the *Morte Darthur*.
2. I take the substance of this analysis from my essay in Lawlor, Ed. *Patterns of Love*, pp. 1-25.
3. cf. Yvain instead of *Le Chevalier au Lion* and *Lancelot* instead of *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*.
4. Trans. Loomis, *Medieval Romances*, p. 58.
5. *ibid.*, pp. 58-9.
6. *ibid.*, p. 64.
7. V. Woolf, *The Common Reader* (Second Series, 1953), p. 80.
8. Exceptions will occur to the reader of a fairly obvious kind, where the locality is named and recognizable—Gawain's journey through the Wirral; Tristan's to Cornwall; the siege of Windsor and other local references in Chrétien's *Cligés*. A totally different approach to landscape is evident in, for example, Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. Egdon Heath is a massive geographical and temporal presence in the novel, dwarfing the merely human characters. 'The great, inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. . . . The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.'
9. See p. 96 above.
10. Auerbach, 'La Cour et la Ville', in his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (1959), ch. 4, p. 158.
11. See p. 27 above for the whole verse, translation and further comment.
12. Raby, *Christian-Latin Poetry*, p. 357, from Honorius, *Speculum Ecclesiae*.
13. B. Willey, *The Seventeenth-Century Background*, p. 2.
14. Auerbach, 'Figura', *op. cit.* (note 10 above), ch. 1, p. 53 (my italics).
15. Mâle, *Gothic Image*, p. 22.
16. On the image of the Book, see Curtius, *European Literature*, ch. 16.
17. The quotation is from Vinaver, *Works of Malory*, i, p. lxxvi.
18. This is Nature's reply to an enquiry about the 'fictions of poets' in Alanus de Insulis, *De planctu Naturæ*: 'exteriori falsitatis abjecto putamine, dulciorem nucleum veritatis secrete intus lector inveniatur' (Migne, *PL*, 210, p. 451).

19. Bezzola, *Le sens*, p. 9.
20. Bezzola, *op. cit.*, *passim*, pp. 135-226.
21. It would be presumptuous of me to enter into the scholarly controversy concerning the much-debated term *conjointure*. The reader should consult Vinaver, *Romance*, pp. 34-7, for a detailed discussion and the persuasive suggestion that Chrétien's *bele conjointure* (*Erec*, 13-14) is modelled on Horace's *callida junctura*, 'artfully devised arrangement'. For present purposes it is enough to note that Vinaver identifies *conjointure* with the *sens*; but, significantly, he sometimes uses terms like 'superimpose' and 'add' (p. 37), whereas Chrétien speaks of 'drawing out' (*tret d'un conte d'avanture/Un mout bele conjointure*); but see Vinaver's more precise translation on p. 34.
22. Vinaver, *Romance*, p. 42.
23. Vinaver, *Works*, ii.984-5.
24. Frappier in *Arthurian Literature*, Ed. Loomis, p. 304.
25. Marrou, *St Augustine et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris, 1938), p. 490, cit. B. F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson, *Fruyt and Chaf* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 6-7.
26. Lewis, *Allegory*, p. 166.
27. Lewis, *Allegory*, p. 129.
28. As C. S. Lewis pointed out (p. 128, note 2) the image had been tellingly used by the troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn in his song, *Can vei la lauzeta mover*, st. 3: the poet describes how he has lost himself and power over himself, ever since he looked into his lady's eyes—*C'aissi.m perdei com perdet se/Lo bels Narcissus en la fon* (I lost myself just as did beautiful Narcissus in the well). See also F. Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (USA, 1967).
29. Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 89.
30. See, for example, *Cligés*, 687-8—the wound that does not appear on the outside.
31. *Anatomy*, p. 89.
32. Graham Hough, 'Allegorical Circle', an article to which I am much indebted, clarifies the point.