2 / The Blank Check

ACCOUNTING FOR THE GRAIL

THE INFINITELY LARGE gift and the free gift (one given gratis, without intending to obligate the recipient to reciprocate and without making him feel obligated to do so) may well be impossible in everyday exchange.[1] Hypotheses of such gifts, however, serve much thought about exchange and production as boundaries that define the ordinary world of contractual obligation through their extraordinary opposition to, or difference from, that world. The hypothesis of the infinitely large gift, for example, appears as the cornucopia, and the hypothesis of the free gift, as Pauline grace.[2] Such topoi are still abundant in our own myth of the "affluent society,"[3] but they were even more important towards the end of the medieval era. At that time the first widespread vernacular literature told of a cornucopian grail,[4] an extraordinary gift both infinitely large and free, which was said to be able to lift men out of the ordinary world of exchange into a world in which freedom and

1. For the first position, see Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts" (in *Essays*, Second Series [Boston, 1885], p. 156): "We do not quite forgive a giver." For the second, see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. M. J. Oakeshott (Oxford, 1946), p. 87.

2. On grace in this context see especially Saint Bernard, *De gratia et libero arbitrio* 6. 16.

3. Modern theorists of affluence include the Marquis de Condorcet, William Godwin, Charles Reade, Edward Bellamy, James A. Patten, John Ruskin, and John Kenneth Galbraith.

4. On the grail as a cornucopia, see Alfred Nutt, *Studies of the Legend of the Holy Grail* (London, 1888), pp. 74ff.; Helaine Newstead, *Bran the Blessed in Arthurian Romance* (New York, 1939), pp. 86–120; R. S. Loomis, *The Grail* (Cardiff, 1963); R. S. Loomis, "The Origin of the Grail Legends" in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford, 1959), pp. 274–94; D. D. R. Owen, *The Evolution of the Grail Legend* (Edinburgh, 1968); and Arthur C. L. Brown, *The Origin of the Grail Legend* (New York, 1966), esp. p. 367 on the Irish *criol.*

totality were possible. The Holy Grail was the free source of everything. The grail legends depict a wasteland to which the limitless production of material and spiritual goods stands as a defining and conceptually unique limit.

In the Pauline economy of truth God is said to dispense or disseminate truth to his steward.[5] This steward must then further disseminate truth according to the ability of ordinary men to germinate it. Appropriate dissemination by the steward (*oikonomos*) and germination by ordinary men are major problems both in the economy of Christianity and in the economies of such apparently Christian writers as Chrétien de Troyes. In the Prologue to Chrétien's *Account of the Grail* (ca. A.D. 1190) what is dispensed or disseminated alternates between the true spiritual nourishment that the grail gives to some men and the contents of a unique book (*livre*) that a count gives to the poet, a book of which the poet plans to deliver (*delivre*) a rhymed account (*conte*).[6] The *Account* begins with a version of Jesus' parable of the sower: "Whoever disseminates little, gathers little, and whoever wishes a fair harvest scatters his seed in such place that it returns fruit to him a hundredfold, for in land which is worth nothing seed dries and fails."[7] Chrétien is a poet-sower who must consider the relationship of the fertility of his seed both to the relative spiritual sterility of his audience and to the material sterility of the wasteland of which he would tell them. Spiritual fertility varies from person to person, so that Chrétien must speak on several levels at the same time. His account of the grail thus involves an inevitable esotericism. "No one," writes the author of the *Pseudo-Prologue*, "should speak or sing the secrets of the grail."[8] All the grail tales claim the status of riddle.

5. For *oikonomia* in the New Testament, see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964–76), s.v. "*oikonomos*" and "*oikonomia*." For the term "economy of truth" see Cardinal Newman's study of the *disciplina arcani* (Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* [London, 1919], pp. 65–77) and Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 104–7. According to Paul, "we must be regarded as Christ's underlings and as stewards [*oikonomoi*] of the secrets of God" (1 Cor. 4:1, cf. 1 Pet. 4:10).

6. References are keyed to *Der Percevalroman von Christian von Troyes*, ed. Alfons Hilka (Halle, 1932); here, 61–68. For the translation see Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of The Grail*, trans. and ed. Robert White Linker (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1952).

7. *Percevalroman*, 1–6. For the proverb see J. de Morawski, ed. *Proverbes français, antérieurs au XVe siècle* (Paris, 1925), no. 2074. Cf. Luke 8, Matt. 13.

8. *Pseudo-Prologue*, 4–5, in *Percevalroman*, 417.

Corresponding to this alethiological economy, whose ineffable center is truth (*alētheia*), there is in the grail tales a strictly linguistic economy, whose center is a marvelous word or its meaning. The word *grail* itself operates, in two complementary ways, as the center of this "linguistic economy of abundance."[9] First, the sound of *graal*, associated with that of *kor*, is heard to give rise to such key terms as "horn" (*cors*), "body" (*cors*), "court" (*cors*), "heart" (*cuer*), and *Corbenic*.[10] Clever etymology—or logic of verbal production—establishes the linguistic production of these words by pretending to work from them back to *graal*, their common primordial etymon. Second, the etymological process is reversed in such a way that the interpreter works from *graal* to older, historical etymons or contemporary cognates. Thus Hélinand says that *graal* comes from *gradatim*, because one puts food on it, as onto a dish; or from *gratus*, because it is pleasing to everyone. The grail, he explains, is a cornucopian dish that produces pleasing things. Similarly, Robert de Boron explains the grail as "the platter that serves to satisfaction (*à gré*)" and calls it "the grail that pleases [*agrée*]." The Didot *Perceval* makes the same etymological association: "We call it *Graal* because it is so pleasing [*agrée*] to worthy men." Finally *Merlin* calls the grail "grace" itself: "And these people call this vessel from which they have this grace [*grâsce*]—Grail [*Graal*]."[11] Like the apos-

9. On the cornucopian aspects of language in general, see Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine* (New York, 1967), esp. "The Linguistic Economy of Abundance," pp. 94–97.

10. On some of the interrelationships of these words and the sounds *graal* and *kor*, see Newstead, *Bran the Blessed*, pp. 86–120; R. S. Loomis, "The Origin of the Grail Legends," pp. 287–90; and Jean Marx, *La Légende arthurienne et le graal* (Paris, 1952), pp. 124–25. Even such works as the *Livre de Caradoc*, Robert Biket's *Lai du Cor*, and the "Joie de la Cort" episode in Chrétien's *Erec* have been connected to the resourceful *graal*.

11. Hélinand is quoted in *Patrologiae cursus completus* [Series Latina], ed. Jacques Paul Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–64), vol. 212, col. 814. For Robert de Boron, see his *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal*, ed. William A. Nitze (Paris, 1927) and Albert Pauphilet, *Etudes sur la Queste del Saint Graal* (Paris, 1921), pp. 17 and 18, n. 2. For the Didot and *Merlin*, see Emma Jung and Marie Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, trans. Andrea Dykes (New York, 1970), p. 118. Giulio Evola, *Das Mysterium des Grals* (München, 1955), pp. 87–88, discusses many similar sentences in other grail tales, including *Perceval li Gallois*, *Grand St. Graal*, *Queste*, and *Perlesvax*. Modern students of the etymology of *graal* include Leo Spitzer, "The Name of the Holy Grail," *American Journal of Philology* 65 (1944): 354–63 on *cratis* (a "wooden basket"); W. Nitze, "Spitzer's Grail Etymology," *American Journal of Philology* 66 (1945): 279–81 on *crater* (a "mixing bowl"); and Henry and Reneé Kahane, *The Krater and the Grail* (Urbana, Ill., 1965).

tle's inkhorn (*cornu*) in figure 8a, the word *graal* operates in the grail tales as a "cornucopia of words,"[12] just as the grail itself operates as a plentiful cornucopia of nourishing food.

Dearth and Plenitude

In the grail tales the royal courts of the world (*corts reals*), such as those of King Arthur and even of Chrétien's patron, the count, are centers of wastelands. They are sterile deserts in comparison with the fruitful grail, which alone confers spiritual as well as material legitimacy on a brotherhood or a state. (In the Prologue to the *Account*, *graal* is thus rhymed—both identified and opposed with—*corts real* [61–68].) Courtly men are driven to seek out (or hypothesize) the grail by the need to make sense of and to demarcate conceptually the boundaries of earthly exchange and production and, once these boundaries are established, by the impulse to satisfy or overcome material desires (hunger and sex).

At the beginning of Chrétien's *Account*, for example, the hero Perceval is presented as a typical hungry adolescent who seeks food from his mother, expects food at the tent he mistakenly believes to be a chapel, demands food from the God he believes to live in the tent-chapel, and finally receives earthly food. Only divine nourishment, however, can satisfy the desire of this questing man. Perceval learns about the kind of food God provides when a hermit tells him on Good Friday that the food he failed to ask about at the grail castle was "real." The king of that castle is nourished by the grail:

> With a single host, which is carried [*porte*] to him in this grail, the holy man sustains and comforts his life. So holy a thing is the grail, and he is so spiritual, that to his life nothing more is needed than the host which comes in the grail.[13]

In the part of the *Account* that he completed, Chrétien merely hints at the marvelous qualities of the grail. The continuers of his unfinished

12. The phrase is used by Johann G. von Herder and Jean Paul. See *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, ed. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (Leipzig, 1854–1960), s.v. "Füllhorn."

13. *Percevalroman*, 6422–28. This passage may have been added by an acute interpolator. See Brown, *Origin of the Grail Legend*, p. 121; and "Did Chrétien Identify the Grail with the Mass?" *Modern Language Notes* 41 (1926): 226.

text, however, added a cornucopian grail serving food and wine, in order to avoid making Chrétien, who in their opinion implies the conceptually necessary existence of such a grail, a liar.[14]

In Wolfram's *Parzival* (ca. A.D. 1215), too, the grail is a spiritual as well as a material cornucopia.[15] It is the talisman that provides all things to the knightly community: the *wunsch von paradîs* ("perfection of paradise").[16] The knightly brotherhood and even Sigune are served food by this "power of the grail" (471). But the material wealth that the grail provides has been purchased by the "living death" of the royal Frimutel (230). The *wunsch* is the wish for the grace that may finally redeem the sick king and kingdom, the wish that God ultimately invests in the antiknight Parzival (148, 250). The transformation of physical into spiritual gifts in *Parzival* is hinted in the description of the dove that brings a wafer from heaven on Good Friday and places on it a stone associated with the "perfection of paradise" (470, 496). Like the continuers of Chrétien's *Account*, Wolfram insists on the necessity of the existence of this grail. If the grail did not exist, he says, there would be no source of all the things that we know: we would not only be unable to eat food, we would also be unable to speak words without lying (238). The grail is a hypothesis that must exist, because it alone allows access to truth.

With the *Quest of the Holy Grail* (ca. A.D. 1225) cornucopian material and spiritual production by the grail is already the explicit theme. "Because the grail serves to satisfaction [*à gré*]," says the *Quest*, "it should be called the Holy Grail [*Graal*]." Food from the grail seems to the courtiers of the wasteland to be merely physical, but that is because

14. See Manessier, in *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes* (Pseudo-Wauchier, Wauchier de Denain, and Manessier), ed. William Joseph Roach (Philadelphia, 1949); and Jean Marx, *Nouvelles recherches sur la littérature arthurienne* (Paris, 1965), pp. 107–8, 180, 239–59.

15. On the cornucopia in Wolfram see M. F. Richey, *Studies of Wolfram von Eschenbach* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 147; Manfred Brauneck, *Wolfram von Eschenbach: Parzival* (Bamberg, 1967), pp. 45–52; and Otto Springer, "Wolfram's Parzival," in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Lewis (Oxford, 1959), p. 231.

16. Quotations are keyed to Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Ernst Martin (Halle, 1900–1903); here, stanza 235. For the translation see Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, trans. Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York, 1961). Of *wunsch von paradîs*, Loomis (*The Grail*, p. 211) writes that it is "a phrase not easily translated but presumably suggested by the paradisal plenty of food and drink supplied by the talisman."

they "are so blinded and beguiled that [they] could not see it plain, rather is its true substance [*semblance*] hidden from [them]."[17] But not to see "the mysteries and hidden sweets of God" is not to be truly fed. Some impure men (Bors) realize that their earthly vision is inadequate to see the good in its spiritual form (167). Pure men (Galahad) can see the spirit, but what they see cannot be spoken about. The source of all things, like the answer to a perfect riddle, is unspeakable.

The *Quest* uses analogues to help explain the unlimited source that is the defining limit: the table on which Joseph was supposed to have reenacted Jesus' miracle of multiplying loaves and fishes (75), for example, and the manna that nourishes the repentant Lancelot in the same way that it nourished the Jewish wanderers in the desert. An inexhaustible fountain where the heart (*cuer*) of the repentant man finds sweetness,[18] "the grace of the Holy Vessel" (15) flows into the wasteland in which wander we hapless men.

By the end of the *Quest* we readers, nourished by the literary spring that is the *Quest*, come to understand a little of "the grace of the Holy Vessel." The trope of tropes, however, is a trope barely heard by the ears of ordinary men. In Acts, men learn to speak in tongues;[19] but in the *Quest*, as in Chrétien's *Account*, the appearance of the grail strikes men dumb. ("Sin cut off your language/tongue" is the hermit's explanation of why Perceval failed to ask the all-important question at the grail castle [6409].) The appearance of the grail in the *Quest*, like food, stops the mouths of those who see it. (Only its disappearance unstops their mouths and allows them to thank God in words.) The kind of men who do not have good food to go into their mouths do not have good words to come out of their mouths. Luckily for us, the narrator of the *Quest* believes himself so well nourished with the truth that he can use words to deliver the goods to his auditors.

Promise and Delivery

Chrétien's *Account of the Grail* is structured by several series of barter-exchanges of material items, each one of which elucidates the way from

17. Quotations are keyed to *La Queste del Saint Graal*, ed. Albert Pauphilet (Paris, 1967); here, p. 16. For the translation see *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trans. P. M. Matarasso (Baltimore, 1969). Cf. Robert de Boron, line 725.

18. Cf. John 4:14.

19. Cf. Acts 1:1–4, 3:4. On the phrase "la grâce dou Saint Vessel," see Etienne

a limited economy to an unlimited one. The episodes in which Perceval confronts the Red Knight (834–1304) and in which he considers three drops of blood (4162–602), taken together, provide a good example.

In the first episode, called "The Red Knight," Perceval discovers a Red Knight gainsaying Arthur's fief by the traditional seizure of a cup from the court. Perceval believes that his mother promised him armor, and he demands that King Arthur give him the armor of the Red Knight.

> Give me the arms of [the Red Knight] whom I met outside the door [*porte*], who is carrying off [*porte*] your golden cup. (998–99)

The relationship between "arms" and "cup" is established by an often repeated linguistic commensuration (the pun/homonym on *porte*), which suggests an equal material exchange. He who regains the gainsaid cup will receive armor as recompense.[20]

Perceval "does not prize worth a chive" anything Arthur has to say about the theft of the cup and about the possible kinship of the Red Knight to Perceval (and to Arthur). Arthur's words are seeds that fall on infertile, or at least unwatered, land. Because he took the cup, the Red Knight loses his arms and life to Perceval. (In *Parzival*, too, the narrator hints that there is some kind of commensurability between the knight's armored life and the cup [161].) When he cannot easily remove the armor from the body of the dead knight, Perceval complains of King Arthur, whom he mistakenly believes to have given it to him. He asks Arthur's messenger to "give" him the armor at once and to carry (*portez*) the cup to the king. The cup is returned (*raporte*) by the gate (*la porte*) near which Perceval first espied the armor.

In the court Perceval's acquisition of the cup is described by the messenger as a kind of sale. To Arthur's question "Does the Red Knight like Perceval and prize him so much that he rendered the cup to him of his own will?" the messenger responds, "Rather the youth sold [*vandue*] it

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Gilson, "La Mystique de la grâce dans la *Queste del saint Graal*," *Romania* 51 (1925): 321–47.

20. The exchange may be plotted thus:

OBJECTS EXCHANGED	WORDS ASSOCIATED WITH OBJECT
cope	*porte*, as "carry"
armes	*porte*, as "gate"

If *armes*:*porte*::*cope*:*porte*, and if *porte* = *porte* by homonym or pun, then *armes* = (or is exchangeable for) *cope* in the exchange relationship.

to him so dearly that he killed him." However, one of Arthur's courtiers, Keu, wickedly misled Perceval by telling him that Arthur gave (*donner*) Perceval the Red Knight's armor. *Don* means both "gift" and "promise"; Arthur conflates these two meanings, and arguing that "promising without giving" is villainy, he rebukes Keu for foul, uncharitable language. Soon after his uncharitable "gift" of armor to Perceval, Keu manifests in deed his lack of charity when he "gives a blow [*cop*]" to a maiden who speaks well of Perceval. This blow (*cop*) recalls the cup (*cope*) that played a role in the exchange of the Red Knight's armor for his life, and the *coup douloureux* from which the kingdom suffers. Perceval promises that he will repay Keu for this injury to the maiden, and the fool rejoices that Perceval will take revenge, which he associates with a commercial accounting: "The blow that he gave the maiden will be dearly sold and well paid for [*chier vandue*] and returned." As the *Account of the Grail* unfolds, the prediction of the fool comes true.

In the second passage, called "Three Drops of Blood on the Snow," some of the exchanges that began in "The Red Knight" are replayed with differences. Keu demands that the meditating Perceval come to the king: "You will come indeed, by my faith, or you will pay heavily for it." As the fool predicted, Perceval wounds the impolite Keu. When the polite Gawain is successful in his bid to communicate with Perceval, Keu accuses Gawain of selling words, as does a sophist, for coins. "Well do you know how to sell your words which are very fair and polished." By a trope that plays against the theme of merchantry, we are reminded of previous sales (1228, cf. 1265) and of Perceval's evaluations of words, which in this scene he has refused to speak. (When the charcoal burner told Perceval about Arthur's castle, Perceval did "not prize worth a penny" anything he heard [859–60, cf. 968–69].) The money metaphor in the *Account* reminds us that coins are useless in a wasteland, just as in a land of uncivilized or naive savages.

When Gawain has brought Perceval to Arthur, we learn that Perceval will now be measured against the "polite" and supposed "merchant" Gawain, and also that his new life as a worldly knight will be short-lived. Arthur senses divine destiny in the naive young man who distrusted King Arthur's own words (4566–75). This man will solve the economic problem of the wasteland by discovering the perfect gift,

which only the divine King can give. That gift will rise, as in a perfect circle of simultaneous purchase and sale, above the taliations and retaliations that inform the earthly economy of the Knights of the Round Table.

An Exchange Contract

The purifier of a wasteland, like Jesus in the fallen world and Oedipus in plague-ridden Thebes, must be willing and able to give all. This will and ability to give develop rarely, if ever, in ordinary human beings. In the grail tales, however, certain exchanges seem to make such sacrifice possible. One such series of exchanges and contracts is associated with the motif of the broken sword.

The sword motif is a popular one in the grail tales. In Chrétien's *Account of the Grail*, for example, one sword is given to Perceval after he fails to ask the all-important question at the grail castle (a "blurred reminiscence of the common account in which a young man is presented with the fragments of a sword and is asked to unite them"), and another, the "Sword of the Strange Ring [*Renge*]," is the object of a crucial quest.[21] (The sexual aspect both of the "broken sword" or "wounded thigh" of the probably emasculated fisher king and of the "ring" that encloses the sword suggests the problem of sterility.)

Similarly, in the continuation by Pseudo-Wauchier the invalid king alludes to an unhappy blow (*coup*) from which the kingdom suffers and then tells Gawain that he will receive answers to his questions about "the sword broken in two" if he unites the two pieces. Gawain tries, but he cannot do it. Only Perceval, with the help of the blacksmith Trebuchet's sacrifice or exchange of his life, is able to re-solve, or solder together, the broken pieces of the sword.[22] The blacksmith's sacrifice solves both quest and question, and by some sort of retribution (life for *coup*), or balancing of the spiritual books, helps to redeem the wasteland.

21. This is the quest announced by the woman at Montesclaire. See R. S. Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes* (New York, 1949), pp. 407, 414. Other swords include those of Gornemont and Gawain ("Escalibar," which is given to Perceval by Arthur).

22. In Manessier's continuation of the *Account of the Grail*, "the broken sword which Gauwain attempted to repair in the Grail Castle and which Perceval did repair becomes not only the instrument of Bran's death . . . but also the instrument of retribution upon his slayer" (Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition*, p. 413). This retribution,

In the *Quest of the Holy Grail* the sacrifice is carefully delineated. Here the sword is associated explicitly with swords mentioned in the Bible, and according to the "interpreters" who speak in the *Quest* itself, they represent writing or the Holy Word.[23] The written inscription on the scabbard of the sword in the boat announces that the sword is an agent of redemption, a kind of bill of exchange, and states the conditions under which the exchange can be made:

> The belt of the scabbard must not be unfastened save by a woman's hand, and she the daughter of a king and queen. She shall exchange [*fera eschange*] it for another, fashioned from that thing about her person that is most precious to her, which she shall put in this one's stead. (205–6)

Perceval's sister fulfills these conditions. Exhibiting a rare charity (*chierté*), she "changes" the ring (*renges*) of the sword for something dearer or better (*plus chiere*), her hair (226–27). Then she exchanges her life's blood. The tale has prepared us to expect this blood sacrifice: the inscription on the scabbard is written in letters red as blood (203, 206), the scabbard itself is named "Memory of Blood" (227), and when Perceval's sister meets the servants who seek to bleed maidens into a "blood dish," the servants' description of the maiden they seek coincides with the description inscribed on the scabbard (239).

In the *Quest*, then, the original sin (associated with Eve and Guinevere) is overcome by the spiritual union of Perceval's virgin sister with Galahad at the moment Galahad agrees to serve her. Lest we forget Perceval's sister and her sacrifices, the author reminds us of them at the end of the *Quest*. The boat in which Perceval, Galahad, and Bors laid the body of Perceval's sister floats up to greet them as they enter the holy city (275), a charitable City of God that rises above the cupidinous exchanges of the earthly cities of this world. The free sacrifice of a woman helps to resolder the broken sword of the realm. The sister helps to resolve the brother's question about and quest for the Holy Grail.

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however, is another form of vengeance; it does not so much make up for past sins as add a new one to the books, to which new tribute must be paid. As Joël H. Grisward, "Le Motif de l'épée jetée au lac: *La Mort d'Artur et La Mort de Batradz*," *Romania* 90 (1969), esp. pp. 302, suggests, there is in many stories this identity of sword and person.

23. Cf. Rev. 1:10, Eph. 6:17, and Heb. 4:12.

Ideal and Real Estate

The grail tales were most popular during the historical transition from an ideology of royal largesse (in which one king visibly dispenses political rights and material goods in return for the obligation of his subjects) to two interrelated ideologies united by their difference from the ideology of largesse. These are the otherwise competing ideologies of charity (in which one man is said to dispense goods invisibly) and of democratic merchantry (in which two or more men exchange goods visibly).

FROM LARGESSE TO CHARITY

Largesse had been praised in the "olden times" (during which were composed the *chansons de geste*) when "material gift giving by a wealthy [royal ruler] had been part of the economy of an age of migration and conquest."[24] This chivalrous virtue of largesse, "the queen which illuminates all virtues," was associated with Charlemagne and with Alexander the Great, "the ideal type of feudal seigneur, who distributed . . . to his followers the lands and riches which he had won with their aid."[25] The period between the end of the Carolingian empire and the eleventh century, however, "was marked by . . . the gradual disappearance of the royal institutions which served to . . . provide a legal basis for the maintenance of social order."[26] By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries many feudal seigniors had lost their wealth, material gift giving had ceased to fulfill its political and economic function of ensuring obligation, and the feudal seignory was reworking the old ideology of chivalrous largesse to suit its new condition (and to decry the merchant class to which it was losing its wealth). Writers of this period emphasized that Alexander was a pagan. The large giver, they argued, cupidinously demands a countergift, or is assumed by the re-

24. Marian Whitney, "Queen of Medieval Virtues: *Largesse*," *Vassar Medieval Studies*, ed. Christabel Forsyth Fiske (New Haven, Conn., 1923), p. 185. See also Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy* (London, 1978), esp. "From Gift Economy to Profit Economy."

25. Paul Meyer, *Alexandre le Grand dans la littérature française du moyen âge* (Paris, 1886; rpr. Geneva, 1970), 2:373.

26. Howard Bloch, "Wasteland and Round Table: The Historical Significance of Myths of Dearth and Plenty in Old French Romance," *New Literary History* 11 (Winter 1980): 270–71.

cipient to expect a countergift; largesse, as the new movement conceived it, is merely a species of cupidity.[27]

The commonplace of real royal largesse thus gave way to the topos of ideal charity. The tales about a freely flowing grail attempt to turn, or convert, their auditors from an economy of cupidity, such as that described by Guido del Duca in Dante's *Purgatory*, toward a free and infinite economy of grace, such as that described in *Purgatory* as one where there are no private possessions to separate individuals and where the enrichment of each charitably enriches all.[28]

Such a transition or conversion affects the economy of the poet. Poets sing for their supper; the *Account* has to provide Chrétien's listeners with spiritual nourishment in order to become Chrétien's own meal ticket. The poet seeks to beget in his listeners the truth of God, and to get from them a material reward; he wants to give spiritual charity ("God is charity," says the Prologue [47]) and to receive material charity. In order to earn a material return on the ideal "investment" that is his poem, Chrétien flatters his audience by implying that it is a fruitful and rich one (not a wasteland): his hearers are able to grow fruit from the seed of the truth that he dispenses, he says, and they are rich enough to pay him for his labor. Like Paul, who formulated the Christian theory of the apostle as a stewardly economist, Chrétien hopes that by distributing spiritual goods to others he will reap material goods.[29]

27. In the grail stories every action and relation partakes either of charity or of its opposite, cupidity. St. Augustine writes: "Charitatem voco motum animi ad fruendum Deo propter ipsum, et se atque proximo propter Deum; cupiditatem autem, motum animi ad fruendum se et proximo et quolibet corpore non propter Deum" (Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 3. 16 [10]). See D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach through Symbolism and Allegory," *Speculum* 26 (1951): 24–49. Medieval doctrines of charity concern corporeal and spiritual alms (or corporeal and spiritual acts of mercy). St. Thomas writes (second part of *Summa Theologiae*, Question 32) that acts of charity can be alms given to the needy out of compassion or for the sake of God.

We might note that, even in acts of charity, expectation of reward is not always lacking. Georg Ratzinger (*Geschichte der kirchlichen Armenpflege* [Freiburg, 1884]), G. G. W. Uhlhorn (*Die christliche Liebestätigkeit in der alten Kirche* [Stuttgart, 1882–90]), Leon Lallemand (*Histoire de la charité* [Paris, 1902–12]), and W. Leise (*Geschichte der Caritas* [Freiburg, 1922]), agree that most medieval almsgiving seems to lack "genuine" altruism. Cf. the discussion of the *Decretals* of Gregory IX by Brian Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law: A Sketch of Canonical Theory and Its Application in England* (Berkeley, 1959), p. 141.

28. Dante, *Purgatorio* 14:82–86 and 15:46–82.

29. Paul suggests that he and his fellow apostles are distributors of the "liberal gift"

(Chrétien writes that Phelipes' material charity does or should differ from Alexander's largesse according to the tenets of the proverb "Let not thy left hand know the good that thy right hand doeth." The invisible heart [*cuer*], not the visible hand, is the touchstone by which giving is to be measured: "God sees all secrets and knows all the secret places in hearts [*cuers*] and bowels [*corailles*]."[30] Since the heart is invisible to all but God, charitable giving is a counterpart to esoteric writing and cannot confer on the giver the kind of public power or guilt-ridden obligation that largesse was once thought to have conferred.)

In the Christian economy, one facet of the truth to be revealed is charity. In *Purgatory*, for example, Virgil says that the questioning Dante will understand the paradisiacal economy only when he understands charitable giving.[31] Charity in much medieval literary theory is the divine truth that is revealed by interpretation of the surface meaning (*sensum*) of written works.[32] When Chrétien tells his book-distributing patron that "God is charity" (47), however, he reminds his larger audience, with some irony, that DEUS CHARITAS EST is the inscription on the face of a coin[33] like the tax penny Jesus suggested might be rendered to Caesar,[34] like the coins that the author of the *Account of the Grail* hopes the count will transfer to the poet.

FROM HOARD TO GRAIL

The connection between quests for the Holy Grail and for the Nibelung's Hoard fascinated Richard Wagner. In Wagner's operas this connection is suggested by similarities between Alberich, who in the *Rhinegold* forswears spiritual love in order to gain access to the Rhine-

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or "relief of the saint" (2 Cor. 8–11), but at the same time Paul tries to convince the Corinthians to be as materially generous to him and to others as were the Macedonians (the countrymen of the *large* Alexander!). "There should be no reluctance, no sense of compulsion; God loves a cheerful giver" (9:6–7), he reads into the parable of the sower. Although Paul suggests that he distributes to men the "gift of God beyond words," then, he asks for material gifts, if not for himself, at least for others (8:10–24). It is not Paul but rather John (2 John 4:16) who spoke the words that Chrétien (47–50) attributes to Paul.

30. For *corailles* instead of *antrailles*, see *Percevalroman*, note on 36.

31. Dante, *Purgatorio* 14:76–78.

32. On charity and interpretation, see D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Some Medieval Literary Terminology with Special Reference to Chrétien de Troyes," *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951): 691.

33. For the motto see Stuart Mosher, "Coin Mottoes and Their Translation," *Numismatist*, May 1948, p. 329.

34. Matt. 22:17–21. Cf. Luke 20:21–25 and Mark 12:14–17.

gold, and Klingsor, who in *Parsifal* forswears bodily love (castrates himself) in order to gain access to the grail. These operas are Wagner's most famous treatments of the Nibelung's Hoard and the grail, but an early prose work (which does not deal with the renunciation of love), *The Wibelungen: World History as Revealed in Saga*, lays the mythological groundwork for a more acute social theory, which Wagner never followed through.[35]

In the *Wibelungen*, Wagner argues that the medieval topos of the Nibelung's Hoard combines ideal and real historical qualities. The gradual disappearance of the myth of the Nibelung's Hoard, says Wagner, corresponds to the appearance of the ideal topos of the Holy Grail, on the one hand, and to the real foundation of capitalist economy, on the other. He further argues that the myth of the Nibelung's Hoard is a German version of the primordial myth of the sun god. In this version the sun god, who captures the cornucopian sun for men, is replaced by a hero who captures the Nibelung's Hoard—the source of immeasurable power (*unermessliche Macht*), the cynosure (*Inbegriff*) of all earthly rule. Wagner found the cornucopian qualities of the hoard already described in the medieval *Nibelungenlied*: "Even if one had paid all the people in the world with it, it would not have lost a mark in value! . . . In among the rest lay the rarest gem of all, a tiny wand of gold, and if any found its secret he could have been lord of all mankind!"[36] The powers conferred by this hoard include the ability to dispense material things to every man and hence to rule all men. (The latter power is a consequence of the former insofar as dispensation leads to gratitude or obligation.) The topos of the grail, as Wagner discovered, is an ideal response to the waning of real feudal powers.

Wagner considers the historical relationship between the ideal right and the real power of the Frankish kings by studying how Chlogio, the first Frankish royal authority (fifth century A.D.) came to hold the real power and the ideal right to rule. Chlogio captured a treasure hoard from the Roman "Caesar" and became the German "kaiser." This treasure included a war chest containing both real matter (*realen Stoff*)

35. Richard Wagner, *Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Sage* [1848], in Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 4th ed., 12 vols. (Leipzig, 1907), vol. 2. References are keyed to sections. Translations are adapted from Wagner, *The Wibelungen: World History as Told in Saga*, in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. W. A. Ellis, 8 vols. (London, 1892–99), 7:257–98.

36. *Das Nibelungenlied*, nach der Ausgabe von Karl Bartsch, ed. Helmut de Boor (Wiesbaden, 1965), Âventiure 19:1123–24; translated as *The Nibelungenlied*, trans. A. T. Hatto (Baltimore, 1965), p. 147.

and insignia of power (*Machtzeichen*) with ideal import (*ideale Bedeutung*) (5). George Bernard Shaw and other critics have argued that the Nibelung's Hoard in Wagner's thought is merely money in its real, material aspect.[37] However, the hoard and money should be allied only insofar as money, like the hoard, is an ideal sign as well as a real thing. Not in the material power that money seems to be, but rather in the numismatic knot of material ingot with sign is the power of the hoard to be explained: the ruler's ring (*Herscherreif*) of the Nibelungen includes both the "metal bowels of the earth" and the true sign (*Wahrzeichen*) on it, both the real ("substructural") and the ideal ("superstructural") means of justifying it (6).[38]

The union of real and ideal, or physical and spiritual, occurred a second time in history, in the person of the Frankish King Charlemagne, during whose reign as the first Holy Roman Emperor (A.D. 800–814) the secular ruler and the religious ruler were reunited "as body and spirit of mankind" (9). Thereafter the union of material and ideal gradually dissolved: "the real embodiment [*reale Verkörperung*] of the hoard . . . fell to pieces" (10). Wagner argues that "as the landed property of the king was diminished, so the authority of the king was invested with a more and more spiritual meaning." "As the worldly order of the kingship lost in real estate [*reale Besitz*], it approached a more ideal development" (10). By the time of Frederick Barbarossa, who ruled during the period just preceding the writing of the grail tales (his reign ended in A.D. 1190), the kaiserhood had become little more than a pure idea (*reine Idee*). Frederick tried to bring the material aspect of the empire into line with the ideal aspect by enforcing the old claim (*Ansprach zur Geltung*) of the kaiserhood that, just as the sun is the source of all light, so the emperor is the source of all rightful possession. Frederick fought for the principle that:

> there can exist no right to any sort of possession or enjoyment, in all this world, that does not emanate from the king and need his hallowing by his feoffment or sanction: all property or usufruct

37. George Bernard Shaw, "The Perfect Wagnerite," in *Selected Prose*, ed. Diarmuid Russel (London, 1953); cf. Robert Donington, *Wagner's 'Ring' and Its Symbols* (London, 1963). Shaw notes that Fafnir, who might have become a "capitalist" after winning the treasure, remains a mere "hoarder."

38. The jewel ring in the story of the Nibelungen is a signet ring. A signet ring is composed of valuable metal and a seal, and the coin that it mints with its impress is likewise composed of a "real" thing (the metal ingot) and an "ideal" one (the politically authoritative seal).

> not bestowed or sanctioned by the king is lawless in itself, and counts as robbery; for the kaiser enfiefs and sanctions for the good, possession, or enjoyment of all, whereas the unit's self-seized gain is a theft from all. (11)

But the kaiser was unable to overcome the developing urban merchant classes of northern Italy, who needed economic and legalistic freedom. Frederick Barbarossa, "the last emperor," eventually ceded independence to the commercial republics; having thus given up the hoard, he set out on a crusade for Asia, where he had heard that a divine priest-king governed through the nurture of the Holy Grail (12).

> The legend of the Holy Grail . . . makes its entry into the world at this time when the kaiserhood attained its more ideal direction and the Nibelung's Hoard accordingly was losing more and more in material wealth, to yield to a higher spiritual [*geistliche*] content. The Holy Grail . . . ranks [*gelten*] as the ideal [*ideele*] representative or follower of the Nibelung's Hoard (12).

The ideal aspect of the hoard thus "evaporated" into the realm of poetry, but its "sediment" remained on earth in the form of real property (*reale Besitz*). This material "residue," says Wagner, was the actual (*tatsächlichen*) property (13) of a new merchant class. For this class the grail legends had an ideal meaning at once commercial and religious. The free bourgeoisie of northern Italy took up the quest for the Holy Grail through ideal fiduciary forms. With the waning of the Middle Ages the bourgeois became a creditor, and, like Shylock in Venice, he turned from religion to finance and jurisprudence.

Checking Out the Eucharist

> When we really know the history of gold . . . as a medium of exchange . . . during the Middle Ages, a flood of light will be shed upon many hidden trends and connections which at present elude our understanding.
>
> MARC BLOCH[39]

Since the ancients, theorists of money and language have considered money to be a combination of inscription (sign) with inscribed thing, a combination or knot that recalls Wagner's description of the

39. Marc Bloch, "The Problem of Gold in the Middle Ages," *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*, trans. J. E. Anderson (Berkeley, 1967), p. 186.

Nibelung's Hoard as both ideal and real. The time of the grail legends was one of transition from economic realism to economic nominalism, in which the signifying *intellectus* was given greater emphasis than the material *res.*[40] With the nominalist theorists the intellectual idea (money) was separated conceptually from the real thing (ingot), the *intellectus* from the substantial *res.* "It was in the thirteenth century," writes Marc Bloch, "that the intrinsic value of money was separated from money of account."[41] As understood in the new theories, money is, as some modern scholars aver,[42] a kind of "floating signifier," but it is a signifier that does not so much "herald the future widespread development of paper money" as express the hope for a kind of disembodied Word or a blank check.

That the grail should be both symbol and thing, both representation and product, is, in this context, the most disturbing aspect of the grail tales. The quandary seems at first to be a theological one, but it is also ideological. The grail tales seem to inveigh against financial merchantry, but, as we shall see, they are active participants in the popular expression of it.

The problem arises when, following the lead of the tales themselves, we ask whether the grail is a member of the group of all ordinary worldly things (like a horn, or *cors*) or a thing not of this world (perhaps like Christ's body, or *corpus Christi*). If the grail is a member of the group of all worldly things, then it is homogeneous with its products and produces itself. (A horn of plenty may produce a horn.) If, on the other hand, the grail is a thing not of this world, then it is heterogeneous with its products and has the same relation to them as God has to the material wafer and wine into which and from which He is mysteriously metamorphosed during the Eucharist.[43] The grail tales raise

40. On this movement see Marc Bloch, *Esquisse d'une histoire monétaire de l'Europe* (Paris, 1954).

41. Marc Bloch, "Économie nature ou économie argent," *Annales d'histoire sociale* 5 (1933): 7–16. On "money of account" see C. Cipolla, *Money, Prices and Civilization in the Mediterranean World from the Fifth to the Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, 1956).

42. Howard Bloch, "Money, Metaphor, and the Mediation of Social Difference in Old French Romance," manuscript.

43. An influential etymology derives *Holy Grail* (*Saint Graal*) from the "real/royal blood" (*sang real*) of Jesus. On the Eucharist in the grail tales, and on the grail as graceful chalice, see E. Antichkopf, "Le Saint Graal et les rites eucharistiques," *Romania* 55 (1929): 175–94.

this problem of the genus of the grail and then skirt it by rhetorical conflation of the container with the contained, of the *cors* with the *corpus Christi*. (In one grail tale a man says, "For my thoughts are completed since I see the thing [the grail] in which all things are," but he fails to say whether one of the things he sees in the container is the container itself.)[44] The tales present the grail as being a thing both of this world and not of this world, or as being a thing both homogeneous and heterogeneous with all things. The grail, which is the source of all things, is the source of itself; to put it another way, one of the contents of the container that is the grail is the container itself.

But how can anything be both the symbol of all things and the source of them? The etymonic Word in the Gospel of Saint John suggests an answer, for in some Christian theology the problem of symbolization and production is expressed in terms of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, who is sent to earth or made flesh. (Unlike the Jewish son of Abraham, who is saved by the appearance of a horn [*cor*], the Christian son is sacrificed as the redeemer of mankind.)[45] The problem implicit in the relation between *cors* and *corpus Christi* is thus not particular to the Middle Ages. The theological expression of the general quandary about homogeneity and heterogeneity, however, seems to have changed during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. During this period, widespread debates about the Eucharist focused on the doctrine according to which a material thing becomes a source of spiritual as well as (or instead of) corporeal nourishment. (In the Greek hermetic tradition that influenced Wolfram, it is said that "the word is drunk, the food of truth," and that "the knowledge of divine essence is eating and drinking from the Word of God.")[46] The association of food and drink with the Word of God dominated the

44. *Estoire du Saint Graal* (Lancelot Grail Cycle), in *Le Saint Graal, ou Josef d'Arimathie: première branche des romans de la Table Ronde* (Robert de Boron), ed. E. Hucher (Le Mans, 1874–78), 2:306.

45. Thus the Christian horn of salvation (*keras sōtērias*, Luke 1:69) is a version of the horn that sprouts for David (P. 132:17). Compare "On that day I will cause a horn to spring forth to the house of Israel, and I will open your lips among them" (Ezek. 29:21). The horns of a ram caught in a thicket save the Son (Isaac) of the Father (Abraham) (Gen. 22:13).

46. Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens). Cf. Hermes Trismegistus, who concludes his *Asclepius* with "Our souls have had, if I may say so, their full share of food in the course of this discussion of things divine." Quoted by H. and R. Kahane, *Krater*, pp. 19–20.