Order from Accident: Cyclic Consciousness at the End of the Middle Ages

The later Middle Ages, codicologically speaking, is surely the “Age of the Narrative Cycle”. The briefest overview will show how far this is the case. Of the nine cyclic manuscripts of the prose Lancelot listed by Micha, only three seem to predate 1300, and of those, two date from the end of the thirteenth century. For the forty-nine manuscripts of the second, cyclic, version of the prose Tristan, the figures are even more striking: thirty-seven date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, only twelve from the thirteenth. One can continue: of the three manuscripts which contain the so-called “Grand Cycle” of the Garin de Monglane or William cycle, two date from the fourteenth century; of the five manuscripts which give the “cycle des Loherains” in more or less detail, Green


4 Herman Joseph Green, Ansei s de Mes, according to Ms N (Bibl. Ars. 3143) (Paris: Les Presses Modernes, 1939).
and in more detail Bonnardot⁵ — would find only one from the thirteenth century, as against four from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Very similar figures obtain for the cyclical manuscripts of the so-called Second Crusade Cycle,⁶ and indeed, Duggan⁷ would see the most intense copying of cyclical compilations as centring precisely on the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. We must of course take account of the random preservation of manuscripts — and of the perhaps relatively greater number of manuscripts actually copied after 1300. But the figures nevertheless strikingly demonstrate — and particularly given the number of these manuscripts which are meticulously copied and sumptuously illustrated — the literary prestige attached to the codicological cycle: the late-medieval patron, it seems, was something of a thésauriseur...

But patrons were clearly not content with commissioning ever more complete anthologies of already-existing cycles. There exists what one might call a continuing cyclical impulse: cyclical contributions to the already existing cycles, and even the constitution of new cycles to join the prose-romance cycles and the well-established Garin de Monglane, Renaut de Montauban and Crusade cycles. Few of the latter, it is true, ever achieved a great deal of currency, and they may well reflect family pride or individual enterprise, but to take some typical examples: two fifteenth century manuscripts complete what is often known as the “petit cycle de Blaye”⁸ by rounding out the life-stories of Ami and his grandson Jourdain de Blaye in the epics devoted to them and then filling in the time-span that separates them. Similarly in the case of the cycle of Huon de Bordeaux: the sole manuscript to centre around the nucleus of Huon himself both the prehistory of Auberon and the post-history of Esclarmonde is dated June 1311,⁹ the most

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⁸ The “petit cycle de Blaye” has been analysed in a series of theses from Greifswald: K. Unger, Mitteilungen aus der Alexandrinerversion der Chanson von Jourdain de Blavies (1913); A. Neufang, Mitteilungen aus der Alexandrinerversion der Chanson d'Ami et Aimé (1914); H. Funk, Weitere Text-Mitteilungen aus der Alexandrinerversion des Jourdain de Blavies (1915). Cf. on the same subject Peter M. Dembowski, ‘La prétendue geste de Blaye’, in Actas del xI Congreso Internacional de Linguística y Filología Romanicas (Madrid: Gráficas Oviedo, 1968), pp. 841-51, and a few remarks in his edition of the text: Jourdain de Blaye (Jordains de Blaives) (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 1-5.

⁹ See François Suard, ‘Le Cycle en vers de Huon de Bordeaux: étude des relations entre les trois témoins français’, in La Chanson de geste et le mythe carolingien: Mélanges René Louis (Saint-Pére-sous-Vézelay: Musée archéologique régional, 1982), ii, pp. 1035-50. Full references to the editions of the different branches to the cycle (Auberon, Huon de Bordeaux, Esclarmonde etc.) will be found conveniently in Jean Subrenat, ed., Le Roman d’Auberon: Prologue de Huon de Bordeaux, Textes littéraires français (Genève: Droz, 1973), p. xii. The sole manuscript containing all the branches of the cycle is Turin ms. L π 14; Suard and Subrenat both offer descriptions and bibliographies.

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⁹ See François Suard, ‘Le Cycle en vers de Huon de Bordeaux: étude des relations entre les trois témoins français’, in La Chanson de geste et le mythe carolingien: Mélanges René Louis (Saint-Pére-sous-Vézelay: Musée archéologique régional, 1982), ii, pp. 1035-50. Full references to the editions of the different branches to the cycle (Auberon, Huon de Bordeaux, Esclarmonde etc.) will be found conveniently in Jean Subrenat, ed., Le Roman d’Auberon: Prologue de Huon de Bordeaux, Textes littéraires français (Genève: Droz, 1973), p. xii. The sole manuscript containing all the branches of the cycle is Turin ms. L π 14; Suard and Subrenat both offer descriptions and bibliographies.
complete stage in “un travail d’élaboration progressive qui s’est effectué entre la fin du xiiième et le xvème s.”. Similarly, too, and finally — because one could continue such listings indefinitely — the completion of the legend of Charlemagne operated by Girard d’Amiens in his interminable (23,000 alexandrines...) Charlemagne composed, it seems, shortly before 1308 and which in the oldest manuscript preserved rounds out the legend of Charlemagne by providing an Enfances.11

But I am of course begging a question. Conventional as it is for modern critics to talk of “cycles” and “cyclic manuscripts”, we must remember, as Staines reminds us,12 that the coinage is a recent one, and more particularly that what medievalists understand by “cyclicity” as it relates to narrative cycles has an uncomfortable duality. On the one hand stands the sort of cyclicity efficiently summed up by Niedzelski in a volume of essays in honour of Jean Misrahi:

Il s’agit d’une série d’œuvres en prose ou en vers qui semblent se prolonger les unes les autres soit parce qu’elles présentent des personnages communs ou apparentés, soit parce qu’elles reprennent la même idée générale, le même thème ou qu’elles exposent le même fait historique ou légendaire.13

This we might call sequential cyclicity: an authorial tendency to capitalise by accretion on the popularity of a particular hero or lineage, or a scribal process of agglomeration which may at its simplest do no more than juxtapose a series of individual texts linked only by the presence, say, of some particular hero.14 To generalise perhaps prematurely, we may say that the sequential cyclification of romance or epic supposes a purely linear conception of time. If romance is defined (as it is by, say, Northrop Frye or Patricia Parker15) as a form in which reader-gratification is produced by first deferral and then completion of a project (such as a quest), if the included ending too supposes the attainment of an end delineated in the narrative project as a whole (the hero’s victory, the defeat of the perceived enemy), then it is in a way characteristic of sequential cyclicity that it should lose this satisfying circularity in a sequence of projects and com-

10 Suard, ‘Le Cycle en vers de Huon de Bordeaux’, p. 1046.
12 Both in his discussion paper (see pp. 108-110), and in a paper given at a colloquium on Transtextualités médiévales (Amherst, Massachusetts, November 1991), to be published in S. Sturm-Maddox and D. Maddox, eds., Transtextualities: Of Cycles and Cyclicity in Medieval French Literature (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, forthcoming).
pletions to which there may well be no overriding overall structure, no necessary end.\footnote{16}

But this brings us to the second sort of cyclicity which I propose to call organic cyclicity — to define which I shall borrow from Larry Crist in the same collection:

The second sense of “cycle” denotes a complete story or history, a rise and fall. (…) Cycle in this sense is a complete turn, through a number of separate but connected works, of the Wheel of Fortune.\footnote{17}

This second type of cyclicity models fictional structure on a conception of time itself as a cycle, a circular process or movement carrying a history back to beginnings, from, as it were, an identifiable beginning to a final stasis. These two definitions may be fundamental — may indeed bedevil much discussion of what is meant by cyclicity — but they will fortunately serve to encapsulate the argument of this paper. What I propose to suggest is that they are not contradictory, but rather occupy convergent ends of a developmental spectrum: sequential cyclicity, which agglomerates and articulates series of texts, whose goal is comprehensiveness but whose compilatory strategies reflect a conception of time which remains linear, moves in some texts at least, and sufficiently widely for us to speak of a trend, to that more sophisticated, organic cyclicity which demands what I have elsewhere called plenitude: a sense of narrative completeness which is predicated on a conception of time as circular and which attempts to integrate any particular fictional construct into a larger universal history conceived against the same overarching temporal scheme.\footnote{18} My contention — and I shall in this paper risk a certain number of perhaps rash generalisations — is that by the fourteenth century conscious, organic cyclicity has become a model widely enough disseminated that, increasingly, existing cycles are modified in ways which accentuate and contribute to it. And perhaps the most telling example of what I have called “cyclic consciousness” is the astonishingly ambitious narrative scheme of the Roman de Perceforest, a calque invented from scratch, and exploiting and integrated into a variety of existing cycles.\footnote{19} After all, just as it has become conventional to read continuations and interpolations as evidence of the reception of certain works, because the simple process of extending or interpolation must isolate and systematise the characteristics which contemporaries found


\footnote{18} In a paper read at the colloquium on Transtextualités médiévales (see above, note 12).

fundamental to the "parent" text, so a work conceived as a cyclical whole and thus reworking pre-existing cycles must betray much of what fourteenth-century readers and writers considered strategically indispensible to the elaboration of a new and complex fictional/historical architecture.

But let me first revert a little, to the thirteenth century, to a manuscript which interestingly seems to herald the shift from sequential to organic cyclicity, from accident to order: B.N. fonds français 1450. As I imagine everyone must know, this manuscript, dating from 1225-1250, is a compilation of material drawn from the romans d'antiquité and from Arthurian romance.20 It contains, in order, a series of romances: the Roman de Troie, the Roman d'Eneas, Wace's Roman de Brut into which have been interpolated Chrétien's five romances, Erec, Perceval (with the First Continuation), Cligès, Yvain and the Charrette, and finally the Roman de Dolopathos (a derivative of the Sept Sages de Rome). Such compendia are not in the least unusual, of course — indeed, a manuscript such as this can be read as a model of sequential cyclicity. But this is not a mere compilation, nor is the scribe simply copying here a sequence of texts: he is an editor who has made minor modifications to his texts in order to integrate them into a narratively consistent whole in which text can mesh with text in the production of an elaborate and self-consistent architectonic.21 Huot and Walters both explain the process: a system of coded ornamental initials, a minor manipulation of narrative voice at the end of the Charrette leading effortlessly back into the Roman de Dolopathos, the prologue to the Roman de Troie detached from its specific text and serving thereby as prologue to the collection as a whole. But what is above all interesting for our present purposes is that the collection articulates a particular chronology. Chrétien's romances, notoriously, are a-temporal; they partake of neither variety of cyclicity, and indeed offer reader-gratification only by successful completion of individual projects. Thus each operates within a self-consistent world which has as présupposé a kingdom with recognisable dramatis personae and established customs, but with no connection to other temporal realities outside its own bounds, and while each of the five romances is of course susceptible of cyclical development (viz. the multiple continuations of the Conte del Graal, of which Keith Busby reminds us), Chrétien himself appears not to have exploited them even to the extent of relating one to the other. But in terms of historical overview, there is of course one notable exception — Cligès — and whereas in the process of anthologisation the scribe has suppressed all Chrétien's other prologues, the prologue to Cligès, with its classic statement of the doctrine of translatio studii et imperii, has survived,


"extend[ing] its significance throughout the collection, providing an important key to the logic and unity of compilation." Its presence, as by an interesting effect of **mise en abyme**, draws our attention to the chronological conspectus contained in the compilation: that cultural and political migration from Troy to Rome to Britain which is the essence of **translatio**, and which is, of course, predicated precisely on a cyclical series of destructions and rebirths, turns of Fortune's Wheel. In other words, this compiler is recasting his material in ways which, however tacit, subscribe to an ordered, cyclical model of world history, and thus to my second category: organic cyclicity.

What then in this manuscript characterises such cyclicity? In the first place, I consider, it is a metatextual consciousness that the individual a-temporal Arthurian narrative has its designated place beyond its own textual and fictional ground in an existing textual corpus: there operates therefore what one might in French call "une esthétique de la totalisation" which privileges the most encyclopedic time-span. The corollary, of course, is that the cycle cannot be devoted simply to an individual: essentially, it is the history of a collectivity, here the people of Britain whose history is traced from Troy to Britain in ms. 1450 and which links the histories of any particular hero to the destiny of a kingdom. Secondly, it is a sense that this corpus of texts represents the historical continuum, the extra-textual chronological frame of reference which will provide a coherent etiology for the corpus of romances: the contingencies or accidents of Arthur's kingdom are rendered inevitable either directly by genealogy or indirectly by the essentially repetitious patterns of human history, and thus integrated, however implicitly, into an ordered vision of world history, an ideological continuity. Thirdly, and necessarily, this etiological process can be bounded: there exists some person, some event — here the fall of Troy — conventionally read as constituting "the beginning" beyond which retrogression is not demanded, and we shall see that in later romance and epic cycles a similar untransgressible bounding event may also be sought for the closure of the narrative, and thus ensure that the dominant analogies and images associated with cyclicity — the life-cycle, the seasonal and liturgical cycles, the eschatological cycle, all perhaps visualised via the persistent metaphor of Fortune's Wheel — are actualised in terms of fictional history. These several elements — integration into a textual corpus, a time-span bounded within identifiable **événements limitrophes** but within those limits encyclopedic, analogies with the eschatological cycle, the shift from individual to collectivity, a concern for etiology — are what I would see as the determinants of organic cyclicity in the fourteenth century: the characteristics which writers, interestingly, attach to new

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22 Huot, *From Song to Book*, p. 28.

23 One should probably compare the so-called Guiot manuscript of Chrétien de Troyes' romances; cf. Mario Roques, 'Le manuscrit francois 794 de la Bibliotheque Nationale et le scribe Guiot', in *Romantia* 73 (1952), pp. 177-99; for a similar "cyclic urge" in the so-called universal histories, see G. Raynaud de Lage, 'Les "Romans antiques" dans l"Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César"', in his *Les Romans français et autres etudes litteraires et linguistique*, Publications romanes et françaises 138 (Genève: Droz, 1976), pp. 55-86, and cf. also Lori Walters' contribution to the present volume, pp. 135-39.
cyclical texts attached to existing cycles, or, increasingly, to cyclical collections established for patrons, as well in the most elaborate form to a new cyclical construct like the *Roman de Perceforest.*

Let me start — appropriately enough — with geneses. The cycle, I have suggested, is acutely aware of origins and etiologies. Virtually all commentators on cyclical development point out that it works as it were to a reverse chronology: thus those parts of the cycle which deal with beginnings in narrative chronology tend in fact to be composed last in literary-historical chronology — a family tree in reverse in which characteristically the writer looks for congruous ancestors, and more particularly, for ancestors who are the *fons et origo* of a later dynasty and a later hero. Examples proliferate: Kibler's invaluable bibliography of the late epic is a litany of fourteenth-century originary epics. On the one hand, I would see this as a manifestation of that "esthétique de la totalisation" typical of the fourteenth century of which I spoke earlier — the simple wish to agglomerate the greatest possible time-span, the most encyclopedic history, which constitutes sequential cyclicity — but on the other, I suggest, this originary strategy has the effect of imposing on the cycle a sense of integrity or coherence or design. In a seminal article on the late epic, for instance, Suard defines the narrative projects of the late-medieval epic with a particularly telling expression:

La chanson de geste tardive se propose en effet de présenter l'histoire complète de nombreux personnages, alors que les textes antérieurs limitent leur projet narratif à une action déterminée centrée sur quelques protagonistes. Au lieu d'une bataille avec ses préparatifs et ses conséquences, on nous présente la révélation d'un héros jusque là occulté...

The phrase "révélation d'un héros" draws attention to an aspect of organic cyclicity which I consider fundamental: that the focus of the completed cycle must be centripetal, not centrifugal. By this I mean that its narrative strategies must be designed in effect to prevent the reader's curiosity from turning to further preludes: the nuclear hero must be satisfactorily explained both genealogically and etiologically by the data provided within the cycle. The Arthurian cycles, of course, operate precisely this centripetal focus: Chrétien's mysterious *graal* reverts to the dish used by Christ at the Last Supper, and it thence becomes absurd to wonder where it came from. Perceval, then Galaad, then, bizarrely, Tristan, trace their ancestries back to Joseph of Arimathea, and in the context of New Testament chronology, no further enquiry is needed.
In the fourteenth century, this conjunction of etiology and chronology becomes fundamental to the conception of cycle-creation. A bibliography of late medieval epics will contain a quite astonishing number of cyclical contributions whose role is to close off the genealogical antecedents of any particular geste. The *Roman d’Auberon* (of uncertain date, but most probably composed not long before the date of the surviving manuscripts) is paradigmatic.\(^{28}\) As I suggested above, this work is designed to clarify the genealogy of Auberon, already, of course, outlined at the end of the kernel text, *Huon de Bordeaux*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Chil Auberons que tant ot segnoraige}, & \\
\text{Sachiés k’il fu fieus Julien Cesare} & \\
\text{Qui tint Hungrie, une tere sauvage,} & \\
\text{Et Osteriche et trestout l’iretaige. (…)} & \\
\text{Jules ot feme, une dame moult sage;} & \\
\text{Morgue ot a non, mout ot cler le visage:} & \\
\text{Cele fu mere Auberon le sauvage,} & \\
\text{Si n’ot plus d’oirs en trestot son eaige.} &
\end{align*}
\]

On these minor *données* the later poet embroiders lavishly, providing Auberon with a family tree of all-embracing complexity which contrives to incorporate *matière de France, matière de Bretagne, matière de Rome* and Old and New Testaments:\(^{30}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Judas Maccabeus} & = \text{daughter of Bendifort} \\
\text{Bruneâut} & = \text{Césaire} \\
\text{Brunehaut} & = \text{Césaire} \quad [\text{Uter}] \\
\text{Jules Cesar} & = \text{Morgain} \\
\text{Jules Cesar} & = \text{Morgain} \quad \text{Arthur} \\
\text{Auberon} & \quad \text{Georges [later emperor of Rome]}
\end{align*}
\]

What is created is, as it were, a totality in which Auberon operates on the fringes of universal history, incorporated into an extremely complex textual universe: his great-grandfather is the *preux* Judas Maccabeus, representative of Jewish history and imposed on the late-medieval imagination not only by Petrus Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*, but also by two thirteenth-century vernacular poems;\(^{31}\) by juxtaposition, therefore, Auberon subsumes the authority of the Old Testament into the epic fictions of France. His father is Julius Caesar, his mother Morgue la Fée, and although each plays a genealogical rather than an active or political role, nevertheless this little poem, barely 2500 lines long, thus proposes a positively encyclopedic interweaving of fantasy, history and pseudo-history. And Auberon’s brother Georges — later Saint Georges — incorporates

\(^{28}\) See above, note 9.


\(^{30}\) See Subrenat’s remarks in his edition of *Le Roman d’Auberon* (see note 9), pp. xxvi-lxv.

\(^{31}\) For details, see Subrenat, *Le Roman d’Auberon*.  

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by implication the New Testament too: the Virgin Mary assists Georges' *amie* in childbirth, and Georges’ own wounds are healed when he is washed in the water in which the Virgin is bathing the infant Christ. Subrenat in his edition of the text convincingly argues that this farrago of pseudo-history should be treated on its own terms, as a clever amplification of scattered hints in the “kernel” or “parent” text, *Huon de Bordeaux*. But I suggest that we should rather see it as evidence for what I earlier called “centripetal focus”: the process whereby the kernel text is set at the historical and genealogical centre — and therefore at the predictive and inevitable centre — of universal history. Of course, all the more intriguing of Auberon’s attributes, somewhat mechanically, find a satisfactory raison d’être: magic horn, magic hauberk, magic hanap... But more important is the predictive function of the *Roman d’Auberon*. It is the poet’s particular concern, it seems, to close off all avenues of enquiry into prior circumstance: ancillary characters are given their efficient genealogical place, attitudes are explained, even Auberon’s magical powers are given their own, safely Christian, pedigree. What we see, in other words, is a concern for defined and untransgressible commencement, as urgent, it seems, as is the concern for untransgressible closure that we noted earlier.

I linger on this not particularly distinguished late-medieval epic because it seems to me to epitomise the narrative strategies of cycle-creation in the later Middle Ages, already of course adumbrated in earlier romance and epic developments, but by the fourteenth century tending to be systematised in ways which foreground their overriding importance. *Ciperis de Vignevaux*, for instance, proposes a most complex origin for the dynasty of Charlemagne: 32

```
   Dagobert    Philippe
     /      \
    Louis    Orable = Ciperis
            /     \
           1 son Clovis 15 other sons
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What is interesting about this ingenious family tree is that, as the attentive reader will notice and as the latest commentator on this epic, Heintze, suggests, the founding couple of the Carolingian dynasty is here presented (unapologetically) as incestuous 33 — and this, I agree with Heintze, can only be justified if it is supposed that the unmixed purity of the bloodline, the genealogical architecture, is paramount. Orable and Ciperis [Chilperic] are the *fons et origo* of their race — and because of this incest perhaps also, as Heintze would con-

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33 Michael Heintze, *'Ciperis de Vignevaux: l'origine de la famille royale dans l'épopée française*', in *Au Carrefour des routes de l'Europe*, n, pp. 659-73.
tend, at the origin of that particular inability to produce sons and heirs that seems to dog the dynasty throughout the "cycle du roi".

Dieudonné de Hongrie, otherwise known as Charles le Chauve, which like Ciperis survives in a single manuscript, proposes a genealogy just as extraordinary for the same dynasty:  

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Melisant de Hongrie [pagan] = Marguerite de Berri [baptised as Charles le Chauve]
Philippe de Hongrie = Doraine Charlot
Dieudonné de Hongrie [later known as St Honoré] = Supplante [later known as Ste Foy]
Dagobert Corsabrin
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Here, the author’s main focus seems to be to provide first a genealogical founding myth — incorporating pagan and Christian worlds — and a European sphere of influence: Dieudonné operates not merely in France and Hungary, but also, profitably, in Constantinople and ... Lausanne ...

These late-medieval epics — generally surviving in single manuscripts — are useful because they epitomise the narrative strategies of cycle-creation in the late Middle Ages, already of course adumbrated in earlier romance and epic developments, but by the fourteenth century tending to be systematised.  It is symptomatic, for instance, that etiologies form the conceptual matrices of the Roman de Perceforest, based on what seems to be precisely the same overriding concern for an intertextual historical construct, the same concern for origins, the same system of centripetal narrative reference, the same symmetries of prophecy fulfilled, genealogy vindicated.  Like that of the Roman d'Auberon, the chronology of the Roman de Perceforest is uneasy. Its author too attempts — in the end somewhat unsuccessfully — to synthesise matière antique and matière de...

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34 There is no edition of this text, which survives only in MS. Bibliothèque Nationale fonds fr. 24372. For details, see for instance L.-F. Flûtre, 'Dieudonné de Hongrie, chanson de geste du xive siècle (alias Roman de Charles le Chauve)', in Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie 68 (1952), pp. 321-400.

35 After a long period of neglect, the aesthetics and narrative structures of these late epics are now receiving more sympathetic attention; see William Kibler, 'La chanson d'aventures', in Essor et fortune de la chanson de geste (...) : Actes du ixéme congrès de la Société Rencseval (Modena: Mucchi, 1984), pp. 509-15; Robert F. Cook, 'Méchants romans et épopee française', in L'Esprit Créateur 23 (1983), pp. 64-74; id., 'Unity and Esthetics of the Late Chansons de geste', in Olifant 11 (1986), pp. 103-14.

36 Philippe Vereist proposes that late medieval cycles are organised around the notion of heros redivivus — that is, that the kernel hero is a reincarnation of an earlier, major figure (see his edition of Renaut de Montauban from manuscript Bibliothèque Nationale fonds français 764; Rijksuniversiteit te Gent, Werken uitgegeven door de Faculteit van de Letteren en Wijsbegeerte 175 (Gent, 1988), p. 35).
Bretagne: a genealogy ultimately for Arthur which incorporates Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and all the Trojan heroes who are the stuff of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The centrality of this genealogical and etiological project— and the essentially centripetal direction of this pseudo-historical *thésaurisation*— is conveyed by a dream-vision vouchsafed to Arthur’s ancestor Gallafur in Book v of the romance; I quote it in full because of the extraordinary density of the metaphor. Gallafur has a vision of the future in which he foresees the destiny of Britain and within it his own seminal role:

Si me fut advis que tout mon corps estoit aussi cler comme cristal. Car je voioie par dedens moy toutes les officines ainsi que nature les avoir ordonnees et de quoi chascune servoit. Entre les quelles choses je prins moult a regarder mon coer que je voioie tout a plain et me perchuz que toutes les vaines qui par mon corps s’espardeoit avoient commencement a lui et y prendoient sang et doulceur pour tout le corps arouser. Entre les quelles choses je vei qu’i se departoit du coeur une vainette estraire trop plus clere et plus vermei lies [sic] que toutes les autres. Je regardai celle a merveilles et en le regardant je vey que le coer y envoioit sang trop plus pur et plus net qu’en toutes les autres vaines. Et bien me fut advis que c’estoit la fleur et la substance de tout le sang qui du coer descendoit. Ce sang dont je vous touche ala tant courre que vint au coeur. Et m’estoit advis que je y voioie une goutte pendant ou fons plus vermeil et plus clere que un rubis. Tant la regardai que la viz transmuer en blancheur. Et lors fus desirant que aucune personne la venist recepvoir por la doubte que j’avoie qu’elle ne cheist a terre. Ainsi que j’estoit en ce point atant me fus advis que par devers moi venoit la plus noble demoiselle que oncques euve se veue tenant une coulpe doree en sa main. Si tost que la vei moult me pleut, si lui priai qu’elle vousist recepvoir celle goutte dedens sa coulpe.38

Gallafur’s vision in effect provides a microcosm of the narrative project of the cycle as a whole, by concretising and centralising the notion of the blood-line. It is a permanent characteristic of the later part of the romance, as I have argued elsewhere, that it should pursue a deliberate strategy of making the event necessary: everything is pre-ordained. Compelling genealogies are established not only for the royal house, but also for ancillary characters, following the principles of congruity established in the pre-existing cycles: thus Merlin descends from the ambiguous, sometimes rather comic figure of Passelion, Guinevere from the Chevalier au Dauphin, recognised as the most refined and accomplished lover of the epoch of Perceforest.39 Castles and towns prominent in fictionally later Arthurian romances find their origins in the building programme of Perceforest’s kingdom, and all the more notable events of Arthur’s kingdom are duplicated in a process of foreshadowing characteristic of the symmetrical conception of the cycle not only here but in earlier cycles: the Franc Palais and the Table Ronde as marks of ultimate chivalric success and fellowship, the maimed king Gadifer echoing the Roi Pecheur of the canonical Arthurian cycles.

But of course to mention symmetry brings me back to my initial postulate: that the centripetal focus of late medieval cycles supposes a completed whole in

37 Book i, pp. 64-119.
38 Book v, fE 280v-281r.
in which the reader’s attention is deflected from further curiosity by a genesis and also — and this is my next topic — by a closure: what I earlier called an événement limitrophe.\(^{40}\) After all, to privilege inevitability and necessity does imply some finite fictional history. Cook has pointed to this mechanism at work in the later medieval reworking of the Crusade cycles which inscribes in the behaviour of the triumphant Christians of the First Crusade in the Holy Land — their internecine quarrels, the treacherous murders of Godefroy de Bouillon by Eralc the arch-traitor, the gradual weakening of the crusading barons’ sense of purpose and idealism — the seeds of their ultimate downfall, the apocalyptic moment when Jerusalem falls once more, the wheel having come full circle, to the forces of Saladin.\(^{41}\) As Crist says of the Saladin (which he edits):

[A la mort de Saladin] s’achève le cycle de la croisade: prise de Jérusalem par les chrétiens; reprise de la ville à cause des péchés et dissensions des chrétiens, par les Sarrasins commandés par Saladin; celui-ci meurt lui-même, tué par un chrétien.\(^{42}\)

In this way, in what I defined as organic cyclicity, the closure of a cycle provides a point of disjunction at which the reader, without residual expectations, can experience the structure of the work or series of works as both dynamic and whole — can look back over the events chronicled and see the destinies which were earlier foreshadowed and accomplished, those inconclusive events which were left unexplained or curtailed now brought to fruition. An organic cycle cannot, by its very nature, leave events in suspension. We saw earlier how in the shift from sequential to organic cyclicity, manuscript 1450 for instance had recourse to the eminently cyclical model of \textit{translatio imperii}: that doctrine which sees universal history as represented by imperial cycle after imperial cycle of foundation, triumph and destruction.\(^{43}\) In medieval terms, of course, there are obvious models. It would be legitimate, after all, to see William’s death allied to his sanctity <i>providing by his apotheosis just such a sense of stasis, of completion. But more compelling, perhaps, is the closure proposed for the Vulgate cycle of Arthurian romances: that apocalypse where all participants find their ending, and where only Arthur himself, symptomatically, is taken off to a mysterious fate.

Late medieval modifications to the end of certain manuscripts of the prose


Tristan suggest that this model was gaining currency.\(^{44}\) As everyone knows, the prose Tristan goes far to complete that integration of the Arthurian and Tristanian worlds already adumbrated in the different poetic versions of the legend. Tristan dies in the course of a Quest of the Grail conceived as a political and chivalric catastrophe.\(^{45}\) The majority of surviving manuscripts draw the Tristan story determinedly to a close at this point — epitomised by the comment in one manuscript:

\[\text{Si se taist ore le conte atant des aventures du saint graal que plus n'en parole, pour ce que bien les avons menees affin. Ne il n'est nulz qui après cest conte empeust autre chose dire s'il ne vouloit mentir.}\]

But the reader remains aware of loose threads, and his slight unease is apparently shared by the writer, who also betrays an uncomfortable sense of incompleteness. He promises his patron a sequel:

\[\text{[li rois] a trouvé que assés choses faillent en cestui livre qui bien i seroient convenables a metre, ne metre ne s'i porroient mie desormais, que je autre fois me travaillasse de faire un autre livre ou toute la mottie fut contenue qui en cestui livre faut. (...) Me retornrai adont sor le grant livre dou latin et selom les autres qui estrait sont an la gentil langue française, et de ce que je verrai que il faudra, si lou voudrai amender.}\]

Notably, he will “acomplir” everything written by Luces de Gant, and “touchier sor les livres que maistres Gautier Maup fist” and incorporate the “flor de la matiere” produced by Robert de Boron,

\[\text{en tel maniere que li livres de monsoingnour Luces de Gant et de maistre Gautier Maup et de mon soingnour Robert de Berron (...) s'accourderont au mien livre et li miens s'acorderont en meints choses as lour.}\]

He will, in other words, produce a compendium whose conception at least seems to displace Tristan from the centre of the romance dedicated to him, by shifting narrative emphasis to the collective political history of Arthur’s Britain. That this may indeed have been the intention of the writer, and not merely a pious platitude, is suggested by both Löseth and Van Coolput,\(^{47}\) given that the text of the romance promises on several occasions just such a sequel. But as the romance stands, only two eccentric manuscripts do in fact tie up the loose threads by appending either all of \textit{La Mort le roi Artus} (ms. B.N. fonds fr. 758), or a summary of it (ms. B.N. fonds fr. 24400). Significantly, both these manuscripts seem to be late: Baumgartner would date the former to the four-


\(^{45}\) See the judicious \textit{mise au point} in Colette-Anne van Coolput, \textit{Aventures quérant et le sens du monde. Aspects de la réception productive des premiers romans du Graal cycliques dans le Tristan en prose} (Louvain: Presses Universitaires, 1986), pp. 116 ff.

\(^{46}\) These and the following two quotations from Löseth, \textit{Le Roman de Tristan}, pp. 402-03.

\(^{47}\) Van Coolput, \textit{Aventures quérant}, pp. 77 ff.
teenth century, and the latter even later, to the fifteenth at the earliest. But the *modus operandi* of ms. 24400 is revelatory: the account is compressed in the extreme, difficult to follow, indeed somewhat garbled, but it is designed to leave no thread untied, in concentrating virtually exclusively on deaths expeditiously described: in two folios, Mordred is dead, the king also, Lucant is stifled, Girflé and Lancelot have become hermits... The ineptitude of the summary should not blind us to the summariser’s tidy-minded and methodical attempt to provide what amounts to a narrative apocalypse. And the scribe of ms. 758 articulates precisely this aim in an *explicit* even more emphatic than that quoted by Löseth above:

Chi fenist la destructions des chevaliers de la Table ronde le boin roi Artus de la grand bri­taigne. Si fine ichi son livre si vraiment que apres che nen porroit nuls contes qui ne mentist de toutes choses. 49

Once again, however, the *Roman de Perceforest* provides the most striking evidence of the apocalyptic ending. The last “pre-Arthurian” king of Britain, Arthur’s distant ancestor, is sent by a mysterious voice to the Ile de Vie, an island reminiscent of course of Arthur’s Avalon which preserves life indefinitely. On it, in a life of endless prayer awaiting the coming of Christ, are the heroes of the romance as a whole:

Celle compaignie estoit de grant reverence, car ja fussent vestus de peaulx de mouton, toutesfois estoien ilz tous couvers de leurs cheveulx plus bels que nesge qui leur descendoient tout en bas pres du talon, et par devant eulx gesoient les barbes blanches et esparses qui leur acouvoit les poictrines et tout aval jusques aux genoulx. Et des hommes de tel habit en y avoit jusques a quatre (...). L’aisné estoit nommé Dardanon, qui vint au pays un pou apres ce que Brutus eut poeuplé la terre de Bretegaigne; le second estoit Gadiffer; le tiers estoit le roy Perceforest son frere, et le quart estoit le roy Gallafur duquel le roy Gadiffer estoit grant sire. Et la cinquiesme personne estoit la sage roine femme du roy Gadiffer. 50

These metonymic figures personify the different cycles that go to make up the realm — the hermit Dardanon a survivor of the Fall of Troy, Perceforest and Gadiffer appointed by Alexander the Great, the “sage roine” prophet of the coming of Christ; once given the news that Christ is born, they accept their deaths and are buried together in a kingdom devastated by Danish invasions and awaiting the coming this time of Arthur in a new *translatio imperii*. We are witnesses here, as it were, to two distinct apocalypses. The Britain of the *Roman de Perceforest* has already experienced a destruction of appalling ferocity, where the Romans destroy the country in an attempt at conquest orchestrated by treachery within the royal family (echoes, of course, of Mordred), and which leads to a Britain reduced to primitive savagery. 51 As Gallafur arrives on the Ile de Vie, a second is in progress: the Saxons have invaded, and will

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49 ff. 354v.
50 vi, ff. 373 r-v.
lay waste the kingdom to such effect that all “historical” memory of Perceforest and Gadifer will vanish, and only a bloodline will survive. Thus the five relics of the Ile de Vie stand, in some degree, for the vanished civilisation of the world of Alexander the Great and the kings he appointed as rulers for England and Scotland. Their deaths and their consecrations — because they will be buried, with all due solemnity, back on the mainland — provide a fitting and necessary end for the romance, necessary because it is a precondition of the renaissance of Britain, this time under Arthur. But it is, of course, also an apocalypse; after some two hundred years, all memory of Alexander is effaced, and his influence in pre-Arthurian Britain can be assessed in its entirety: the birth of true chivalry under Alexander, nurtured by Perceforest’s Franc Palais; the growing understanding of the promise of Christ’s coming, with Dardanon and the Reine Fée; the political civilising of the country under Gallafur I. But in particular, of course, it is because the text has returned to a point of stasis that patterns can at last be discerned — those patterns which are, as Kelly reminds us, fundamental to our reading of a text or series of texts as cyclical, and which are perceivable only at that point when one can envisage the projection of an achieved equilibrium into an indefinite future.  

And I am sure that one pattern at least — typological — has clearly presented itself. Surely we cannot read these late-medieval cycles without being reminded of the great eschatological patterns of Biblical history: indeed, I have deliberately used expressions such as genesis and apocalypse which will foreground these echoes. Are we perhaps in the presence of that universal story schema which Frye proposes, where the book serves as a fictive model of the temporal world? It is my proposition that the attention of cycle-writers and compilers turns increasingly, as the Middle Ages progresses, towards a model of this sort: an eschatological and strictly cyclical model where what is looked for is completion, predictability, necessity, genealogical inevitability, and where coherence is read as provided not only for humans, but also for societies, as comprised and patterned between life and death.

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52 Necessary also because already predicted consistently throughout the romance; see for example v. 286r.
53 See pp. 97-98 of the present volume.