

Monica Oancă*

MYSTICAL REVERBERATIONS IN THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL

Keywords: *mysticism; medieval theology; mystical visions; Arthurian literature*

Abstract: *The importance of the mystical aspect in the Quest of the Holy Grail (of The Lancelot-Grail Cycle) has not been sufficiently analysed and I want to draw the attention on several elements which show clearly the way mysticism influenced this romance. Firstly I have presented the world which the Knights of the Round Table populate, insisting on the fact that the supernatural and ordinary events blend in the fabric of this story. The world around the travelling participants is blessed by God, and it is open to God's will. Moreover it is studded with various monasteries as well as hermitages, and religious men have the duty to interpret the mystical visions received by the young knights and to advise them during their spiritual progress.*

Secondly, I want to describe a few mystical characteristics, which are mentioned by Evelyn Underhill, in her work on Mysticism. I will also give some examples from the text in order to point out that the characters' reactions are often determined by mystical reasons. The signs of mystical encounters with God, like excessive crying and falling in a death-like trance, are often mentioned by various knights, so their significance in the inner structure of the text is analysed.

Thirdly, I have insisted on the ultimate mystical experience, which occurs at the ending of this romance namely the fact that Galahad, Perceval and Bors live enjoying daily the presence of the Holy Grail for a year, while Galahad even looks inside the chalice before he dies. The mystical overtones of the work are in keeping with the Church teachings and the diverse evolution of each of the protagonists, advocates a different way of approaching God.

The *Queste del Saint Graal*, a romance written in French, in the 13th century, has been often interpreted as acknowledging the importance of the Holy Eucharist, and thus whenever it is analysed, the stress is placed on its liturgical connotations. The spiritual purity of the participants in the Quest is another aspect which is usually emphasised, and it follows that confessing their sins is a prerequisite for succeeding or at least progressing in their venture. Besides these obvious religious dimensions, there is also a powerful, but veiled, aspect, namely the mystical encounter with the divine.

Since the *Queste* is unique in giving an eminently sacred aim to chivalrous peregrinations, it is also one of the romances in which the religious elements abound and overlap, creating the image of an ideal, Christian world. Prophetic dreams and mystical

* University of Bucharest, Romania.

visions are meant to prepare the protagonists for the final revelation of the Holy Grail and it is the prerogative (as well as the duty) of religious people to interpret them for those who seek knowledge and salvation.

Religious Elements that Define the World of the *Queste*

The world as it is presented in this *romanz* is charmed, as it is predisposed to uncanny occurrences, which are not perceived by onlookers as supernatural (i.e. different from the ordinary human daily reality). On the contrary, extraordinary happenings are expected by the protagonists and they are an integral and innermost part of this land; in other words they are the norm and not the exception. The appearance of Galahad, the young, yet responsible knight, as well as the miraculous way in which he acquires all the paraphernalia necessary for a knight¹ are instances when the divine interferes almost directly. Furthermore, all these objects waiting to be claimed by Galahad seem to be part of an ancient prearranged setting, especially designed for this predestined saintly (or angelic) hero.

Such a world was described by Charles Taylor as an “enchanted world”, which is permeable to the spiritual (divine) influence, and the people that populate it can be influenced by these powers, which are not separated from, but rather participate in the shaping of, the human self. Humans are open to spiritual powers, because the boundary between the spiritual and the earthly world is not impervious, but “porous”. Therefore the human self is “healable”, which is the positive synonym for “vulnerable” (Taylor 34-7), in other words they can be changed and transfigured (as well as guided) by events or visions, which are never random or meaningless, but, quite the opposite, they are directly sent by God and can and should be interpreted by a holy person.²

The temporal starting point of the romance is Pentecost, which is the feast that celebrates the Descent of the Holy Spirit, infusing the whole creation and the twelve disciples with profound understanding and knowledge. It is on this occasion that the Holy Grail remarkably emerges in front of the knights, who are wondrously fed from it. This appearance is a heavenly sign that King Arthur’s Kingdom has divine sanction. According to Barber: “Arthur’s creation of an almost ideal earthly kingdom is recognised by heaven when the Grail appears in his court, but the intrusion of the spiritual world destroys earthly harmony instead of coexisting with it” (Barber, *Holy Grail* 110). Fatefully, it is this particular divine interference that shatters the inner coherence of the

¹ The sword is taken from a stone and the shield is taken by Galahad from a monastery, where it had been kept especially for a pure and “supreme” knight.

² The priests (and other ecclesiastics) are aware of the importance and responsibility they have, namely if the advice is not salvific, the spiritual advisers will be held accountable before God at the last judgement. “Vous me requires grant chose, et se iou de che vous failloie, et puis morissier en pechie mortel y en erreur, vous m’en porries apieler al grant iour de iuse (147). “It is no small thing what you request, and if I fail you and you die in mortal sin or error, you could summon me at the great Judgement Day”. The catechetical role of these clerics is in accordance with the doctrine of the Church, and it is also found in the writings of the mystics, which have, some of them, a didactic tone.

life at court, as it prompts the knights to vow to go in search of the Holy Grail. Moreover, since the Holy Grail does not remain at King Arthur's court, the lack of appropriate holiness of this place is hinted at, and consequently the need for spiritual reformation.

Marvellous adventures occur often in the presence of the knights of the Round Table, but not all of them can benefit from them. When the knights have tried and failed to take the sword from the stone floating on the river, Galahad, who takes it, explains that: "che n'est pas merueille. Car laventure nest pas lor, ains est moie" (10) (That is not to be wondered at, for the adventure [of the sword in the floating stone] was mine, not theirs). This situation is expanded during the Quest, as knights who are not virtuous or spiritual enough do not encounter any adventures, but travel aimlessly and become bored.³ The gift of adventures is only awarded to those who are worthy of them.

More importantly, those deserving enough can accomplish extraordinary exploits and may witness the power of God, as well as the devious temptations of the Devil. Perceval, who is always kind-hearted and devout, has some unusual adventures on the island where he is tempted by a beautiful young lady, and only escapes her lure, when, noticing his sword, he instinctively makes the sign of the cross. The island is only apparently isolated, as a wise man comes several times and converses with him. He encourages him and supports him, but rightfully reprimands him "tous iours seras tu niches" (98, you will ever be simple). The inferred idea is that knights (people) also need to be clever in order to escape the Devil's temptations, and apparently, Perceval is often fooled. However, at the very last moment, his innate devotion to God saves him.

The way people look at the Holy Grail (and at the Host), as well as the fact that they honour it when they see it in this romance, may be associated with the practice in the Catholic Church of elevating the Host high above the priest's head (after the transubstantiation), so that the congregation can see and worship it, a practice observed after 12th-century. Thus "seeing the Host became the high point of lay experience of the Mass" (Duffy 96) and sometimes people went to different churches (or to different altars in the same church), in order to see the (Elevation of the) Host more than once a day (98). The Host was not only an object to be consumed, but also an object to be seen and worshipped.

The importance given to the Host in this romance is consolidated by the role of liturgy in the organisation of the romance, for instance the fact that there are many instances when attendance at Mass is mentioned, and this is true of all the Grail romances (Barber, *The Holy Grail* 138). However this influence is not only superficial, but rather "a liturgical pattern, together with the pattern of the Holy Scripture, was employed for the structure of the *Queste*" (Locke 56). The composition of the romance (in which several significant events are described, stressing their spiritual significance, which is clearly stated) follows the pattern of the liturgy, which emphasises key moments in Jesus' life, whose spiritual and redemptive meanings are highlighted. The symbolical connection

³ "Ien ai troue puis XV iors plus de XX chacun par soi mais il ne not onques j qui ne se plainsist a moi de ce quil ne pot trouver aventure" 105 – (In 15 days I have found more than 20 knights, each of them alone, but did not meet even one who did not complain of the fact that he could not find an adventure.)

with the liturgy is even stronger, due partly to the fact that the Holy Grail is perceived as a symbol of the chalice, used to celebrate the liturgy, and secondly to the fact that in the *Queste* the ultimate goal is receiving the Holy Communion, just like in the Mass. Moreover, the presence of Christ within the fabric of the *Queste* world is very poignant and His name is constantly called out loud by all participants, and the same is true for the Mass, which abounds of prayers to and invocations of Jesus Christ.

The Bible (the New Testament as well as the Old) has a crucial influence on the structure of the story, especially when one considers the succession of visions and explanations, which is follow the pattern of the biblical parables. In addition there are many narratives rooted in the Bible, like the image of the ship, built by Solomon (which is also a remainder of the Fall), Perceval's ordeal on the island (inspired by Christ's Temptation), or the recurrent analogy of Galahad to Christ,⁴ which provides a new interpretation for his actions. His prescience of the sword and shield and also the fact that he can sit unharmed in the Perilous Seat (which is renamed with his name) are signs of his divine foreordination.

Therefore, the world in the *Queste del Saint Graal* is defined through awe-inspiring situations, which are at the same time miraculous and commonplace. Most of the knights, though, are not righteous or chaste enough to encounter any adventures and they return disappointed after having wandered pointlessly. The heroes are faced at the same time with devilish temptations, and tests, in order to prove both their prowess and their faith, and those who are worthy are rewarded with divine blessings and mystical experiences.

Mystical Landmarks and Expectations

In this chapter I will analyse to what extent the characteristics of mystical pursuit identified by Evelyn Underhill can be found in this romance. The core of mystical experience is contemplation, which takes the believer so close to God that he can feel His infinite knowledge, benevolence, and love. Evelyn Underhill described mystical union with God using Walter Hilton's and Ruysbroeck's works:

"The fully developed and completely conscious human soul can open as an anemone does, and know the ocean in which she is bathed.⁵ This act, this condition of consciousness, in which barriers are obliterated, the Absolute flows in on us, and we, rushing out to its embrace, find and feel the Infinite above all reason and above all knowledge, is the true mystical state" (*Mysticism* 40).

This state (or condition) of mystical bliss, in which the protagonists experience an intense union with God, is accompanied by several signs, like hearing heavenly melodies,

⁴ When Perceval is told the history of the Holy Grail and Round Table by his aunt Galahad is compared to Jesus Christ: Car tot aussi comme notre sires [ihesu crist] vint en samblan fu, aussi vint li cheualiers en armes vermeilles qui furent samblans a la color de fu (57) (For just as Our Lord [Jesus Christ] came in the likeness of fire, so came the knight in red clothes, which resembled the colour of fire).

⁵ The soul is often referred to by using a female pronoun, an association made by Richard Rolle in several instances, too.

feeling a warming of the heart (i.e. the area around the heart), or tears, etc. In order to analyse the mystical dimension of the Quest one could attempt to evaluate to what extent such emotions are described or mentioned in the text.

One of the protagonists who feels deeply moved and craves a profound change in order to better himself, as his present state prohibits him from going near the Grail, is Lancelot, who confesses his sins and begins his slow ascent. Finally at Corbenic he is granted the reward of seeing the Grail, which is used to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Although told not to enter the room, prompted by his desire to help the priest to hold the young man he is elevating in his hands at the particular time when he is supposed to elevate the host, Lancelot steps in and he falls in a death-like trance for several days.

The ability to witness this vision, which is a visual representation of the spiritual truth of the Eucharist, is a gift granted by God and when he finally wakes up, he exclaims:

Ha, diex, pour quoi máues uous si tost esuelliet, car iou estoie ore plus aise que iou ne deusse ester, ne ne doie ester huimais . . . iou ai veu si grant meruille et si grant boineurete que mes cuers meismes n'el porroit penser, car che ná mie este chose terriene, mais esperitueus. (228)

Ah! God, why didst Thou waken me so soon? I was far happier now than I shall ever be again! . . . I have seen such great glories and felicity that my heart cannot even conceive it, because this was no earthly, but spiritual vision. (*The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trad. 264)

This vision is certainly a mystical revelation, but unfortunately for Lancelot it comes as an ending, the culmination of his peregrinations, and nothing further is granted to him.

Equally, Bors experiences such strong feelings of reverence for the Host, that, after confessing the Catholic doctrine concerning the reality of Christ's body in the Eucharist, he "commencha a plourer trop durement" (150) (started to weep very hard / he was overmastered by weeping).

Later on, the three knights "pleurent de pitie et de la joi" (208) (weep of joy and compassion) when they witness together a vision of Christ as a hart accompanied (or guarded) by four (shape-shifting) lions, a symbol of Christ and the four evangelists. Therefore crying tears of awe, a reaction familiar to many mystics when they have a vision of God,⁶ is also the knights' response when they have similar revelations.

Trying to categorise mysticism, Evelyn Underhill identifies four important features (Underhill 55-7), and the first one is the fact that mysticism is practical, not theoretical, although it is an entirely spiritual activity. The mystics are not interested in

⁶ Another mystical experience is the lack of need to eat, either because the mystic is close to God or because he/she is completely dedicated to the salvation of his/her soul. Such instances in which the Christian survives for a long period having the daily Holy Communion as the only sustenance, can be found several times in the history of saints. Perceval also feels this satiation on the island, when he does not feel the need to eat or drink . . . ne li prins cele nuit talent de mangier ne de boire, car asses a penser a autre cose" (69).

academic pursuit or in writing treatises on theology, but rather in sharing their experiences and giving concrete advice on how one should progress in piety.

The method used by mystics is love, namely exercising their love for God, which becomes the driving force in their lives. In the *Queste* one can see that those knights who are destined to see the Grail and to experience the joy that comes from its presence find ways to show their devotion to God. Calling the name of God with every opportunity, crossing themselves instinctively (as Percival does several times and it proves salvific), confessing their sins as well as trying to make amends for their mistakes, are different means of declaring their love for God, which guides them on their way.

Furthermore the purpose of the mystic's life is to be united with God, namely to attain a state of unification, which is thus the third feature of the mystical way. This aspect is constantly present in the protagonists' lives, because they always ask to receive Holy Communion, and Galahad's greatest desire, which is fulfilled in the end, is to see God.

Lastly, the fourth is the fact that the mystic is focused entirely on his/her spiritual intent. Although he/she acknowledges his/her duty towards his/her neighbours, his/her purpose is not to better or rearrange this material world, but to change himself/herself inwardly. It is perhaps this last attribute which is not respected by the protagonists, who try to help the people they encounter and participate in tournaments, to exercise their prowess.

If one considers the way in which teachings and adventures are mixed in the *Queste*, it can be said that mystical practices and expectations are found quite often in the texture of the story, and many characteristics of the mystic way can be used to describe the *Queste*, as well.

Finding God: The Final Step of a Perilous Journey

What I want to emphasise is the fact that not only the progress of the knights in their Quest follows a mystical pattern, but especially the achievement and the finality of the Quest is of mystical nature. The *Queste* advocates a search (and finding) of God according to the chivalrous code, trying to apply the general precepts concerning religious practices to male aristocrats, who were always active and dynamic, and who preferred fighting for a clear objective or cause (namely finding the Holy Grail) to contemplating the mysteries of the soul. Nevertheless the final purpose, as one can see towards the ending of the *Queste*, is a state, rather than a status.

Rejoicing daily in the presence of the Holy Grail is the harmonious state which completely satisfies their need for God and for spiritual progress, as shown by the joy the three protagonists experience in prison, when they see the Holy Grail daily:

... les fist prendre a ses gens, & metre en prison, . . . mais de tant lor auint bien, que si tost quil furent emprisonne, notre sires . . . lors enuoia deuant le saint graal, por els faire compaignie (196) (His men got them and put them in prison, . . . but this was a source of good, because as soon as they were imprisoned, Our Lord . . . sent in front of them the Holy Grail, to keep them company).

Galahad, Perceval and Bors are detained in a dungeon for a year, while the Holy Grail comes from Heaven and abides with them daily, filling them with grace for the

whole period of their confinement. Furthermore, Galahad's ardent desire is to look inside the Holy Grail, in order to see the "spiritual mysteries": in other words he wants to see God physically. While trembling violently because of the greatness he witnesses, he declares, "car or voi iou tout apertement, ce que langue ne poroit dire ne cuers penser" (197, now I see revealed what tongue could not relate nor heart conceive), which is the usual way in which the ineffability of God is presented. Mystically, God is in a "cloud of unknowing", and the mystical way towards Him is apophatic.

In order to bring about the culmination of aristocratic expectations, simultaneously fulfilling the religious aspirations, the author gives Galahad royal dignity, as he is made king (apparently against his wishes), for a year before leaving this Earth for Heaven in the company of Josephus, son of Joseph of Arimathea. Galahad's soul is borne to heaven by angels, who "fisent moult grant ioie" (198, make very great joy), and immediately afterwards a hand comes down from heaven carrying upwards the Holy Grail and the lance.

The fates of Galahad, who is often treated as a saint, Perceval, who dies after having taken the religious habit, and Bors, who returns to Arthur's court at Camelot, in order to tell first-hand the adventures they have had and to have them recorded, are dissimilar, yet they all portray knights whose lives are exemplary and whose souls are saved. Therefore, it may be argued that the three protagonists should be regarded as representing different typologies of knighthood, each of them advocating a different way towards God.

The strong connection between the visions and the events occurring in nature, can point to the fact that the world itself is not only transparent to God's will, and therefore revealing God's constant love and care for His creation, but it is presented in the mystical tradition, which envisages "the visible universe as a means to reach its invisible creator" or "a ladder that leads humans back to God" (Cook 163). Thus the second important point is that the world around them, as can be witnessed in the *Queste*, is used by knights in order to help them reach their saintly destination. None of them chooses to avoid the world or to isolate himself from it. The creatures around them (both people and animals) are helpers, showing them what way to follow. The temptations come from those who are closely related to them (Bors' brother, or the lady who wants to seduce Perceval), while the world at large, the elements of nature (rivers, sea, mountains or islands) as well as most of the people they meet, are friendly and supportive.

Such a perspective of the world as an instrument of God, Who can be understood through and revealed by His creation, is again biblically rooted, as according to Saint Paul: "Ever since the creation of the world His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20). This quotation is actually used by mystics when they describe their perception of the world (Cook 163).

The third point that I would like to make is that I believe that the story is not merely religious, but it is also deeply rooted in the teachings of the Church, and I will partly contradict Richard Barber, who said that the *Queste* "has little basis in the received history and teachings of the Church" (Dover, *A Companion to Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, 3), because I have identified many instances when the protagonists receive Communion, and confess before priests, according to the precepts of the Catholic Church. Furthermore the

prayer *Confiteor* (which is said at the beginning of the Catholic Mass) is mentioned as being said by Josephus, when he comes to take Galahad to Heaven. In other words, the Holy Mysteries of Eucharist and Confession are devotedly celebrated within the pages of the *Queste*. Moreover the progress of the protagonists, chaotic as it might seem at first glance, takes place within the confines of a world blessed by the Church, as there are numerous hermitages, monasteries and nunneries, where they are accommodated, taught and reprimanded. The fact which shows the indisputable authority of the Church is the knights' attitude towards hermits, nuns, monks and priests, namely they never revolt or rebel against any of their decisions or advice and neither do they deride or despise any religious ecclesiastical precept.

Conclusions

La Queste del Saint Graal is a work of fiction with a deep mystical substrate, as the final enjoyment of (i.e. feeding from) the Holy Grail is a manifestation of the fulfilled desire of being mystically united with God. Although not the strongest influence, the mystical tradition contributed to the structure of the story, and the actions and reactions of the protagonists should be viewed in this tradition.

Having some didactic features, the text is not openly so, as the teachings are presented in an appealing and entertaining way, which is appropriate for a lay, exuberant aristocratic audience. However it follows rigorously the teachings of the Church regarding abstinence, fasting and chastity, the Holy Sacraments and the reverence due to religious people. The characters progress in a world which is physically studded with monasteries (both large and small) and their horizon of expectations is securely embedded in spiritual activities and mystical encounters with God.

The world as it is inferred from the *Queste* is deeply 'enchanted' by the will of God and it constantly helps those in search of God. Not only the visions they receive, but also the events that occur in the knights' presence carry a spiritual significance and have the role to awaken or strengthen their aspirations towards God. Moreover there is a strong feeling of foreordination, and everything occurs according to God's will, which is foretold by different signs. Such a perception is common to the mystics' vision of the world as an 'instrument' and a channel for reaching its Creator.

Works Cited

- La Queste del Saint Graal*. J.B. Nichols and Sons, London, 1864 (in the French prose of (as is supposed) Maistres Gautiers Map, or Walter Map. Ed. from manuscripts (Royal ms. XIV. E iii) in the British Library by Frederick James Furnivall). Print.
- The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Penguin Classics, 1969. Print.
- Barber, Richard W. *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*. Penguin Books, 2004. Print.
- Cook William R., and Ronald B. Herzman. *The Medieval World View*. Oxford University Press, 1983. Print.
- Dover Carol, ed. *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 2003. Print.

- Duffy Eamon. *The Stripping of Altars: Traditional Religion in England*. New Haven and London: Yale University, 1992. Print.
- Fanous, Samuel, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Field, Rosalind, ed. *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010. Print.
- Locke, Frederick W. *The Quest for the Holy Grail: A Literary Study of a Thirteenth-century French Romance*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1960. Print.
- Price, Betsey B. *Medieval Thought: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.
- Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. Lexington: Renaissance Classics, 2012. Print.