Chapter Two
Fictions of Authorship and Authority

We have seen in chapter 1 how authorship in the Vulgate romances is characterized in two ways: as a tradition of writing associated with named (if bogus) authors such as Walter Map, Arthur’s scribes, and the scriptor Blaise, and as a tradition of oral delivery exemplified by the tales of King Arthur’s knights and Merlin’s dictation, stories that ostensibly provide source material for written accounts.¹ And yet it is impossible to chart a textual genealogy that could feasibly include all of the dictatores and scriptores who are named as “authors” of the Vulgate narratives. The elaborate textual genealogies advanced in these tales actually constitute fictions of authority that are used to assert the validity of the Vulgate romances as accurate and truthful documents despite their literary provenance. Curiously, however, this fiction of textuality, developed through reference to the cycle’s many competing subtexts, is accompanied in every instance by a fiction of orality advanced in terms of the voice. We have seen previously how the Queste and the Mort Artu posit the existence of a written record used by Walter Map to “fere son livre.” But these records are said to result in turn from the oral deposition of King Arthur’s knights returned from battle. The Merlin offers a similar scenario of textual transmission
stating in the closing lines that the tale recounted by Robert de Boron is based on that of another book, the Livre dou Graal: “Et je Rebert de Borron qui cest livre retrais par l'enseignement dou Livre dou Graal et einsis com li Livres le reconte me covient a parler et retraire.

Yet this book, too, has an oral source, for it is, ostensibly, the product of Merlin's dictation to Blaise as we have seen (p. 101). In the Estoire the joint emphasis on written and oral transmission is maintained in a slightly different way. The text is described as issuing directly from a personified voice, but in this case the oral source is the divine voice of God. A sacred text authored by Christ after the Resurrection, this romance was delivered to us, we are told, “par la bouce de la véritet.”

It was given written form only subsequently when an anonymous scribe reverently copied Christ's words.

We are confronted here with several interesting linguistic anomalies. Because the récit of the Estoire is in Old French, the divine author whose voice we hear in this text appears to speak in the vernacular idiom. Even though we are told that this tale has been translated from Latin into French (3:194), the words issuing from “la bouce de la véritet” in our version of the Estoire have been thoroughly assimilated by a vernacular literary tradition. Merlin's tale, similarly, even though it claims to have the authority of Scripture (pp. 73–75), descends apparently from a tale recorded in French—as the Livre dou Graal—not from an authoritative Latin antecedent. What is more curious, however, is that Bors and Arthur's other knights who tell their tales aloud at court are said to form part of a written tradition in Latin since the record of their verbal account had to be translated subsequently into French (Queste, pp. 279–80). There is, thus, a dual tendency within the Vulgate's narrative genealogies to emphasize both the vernacular identity of these tales and their grounding in Latin antecedents. The strange twists of linguistic attribution that result from this two-pronged effort attest to a complex double play for textual authentication in the Vulgate Cycle and alert us to a whole set of hierarchical reversals which
characterize the narrative strategy subtly deployed in these texts.

The concerted melange of oral and written "sources" attributed to the Vulgate tales is significant because it mirrors, to a large degree, the two principal means used to authenticate theological texts in the Middle Ages. While de-emphasizing the role of individual authorship, the Vulgate romances attempt instead to situate themselves within a well-established medieval tradition of textual authority known as auctoritas, a process used to validate medieval Latin texts by quoting from Scriptural and patristic writings. In addition to borrowing and reformulating the system of auctoritas, however, the Vulgate romances also parrot the ultimate source for these documents: the sacred Word or divine voice of God. As literary accounts that embody "truth," the Vulgate texts advance both the authority of previous "Latin" texts and the sacred authority of God's voice as guarantors of their veracity.

But the role of these authenticators is subverted within the framework of literary narrative, as the linguistic anomalies cited above might suggest. For in point of fact, the "Latin" texts to which the Vulgate corpus refers are simply other romance narratives, or other segments of the Vulgate's own fictional tale. And the authoritative voice of God is similarly displaced by the wholly fictive voice of the vernacular tale cast as li contes. In the following pages we will examine how, in the Merlin and the Estoire in particular, the medieval traditions of Scriptural authority and the sacred voice are subtly usurped and deftly recast into a literary mold, how reference to the Divine Book is transformed into the evocation of many secular books as the Word cedes its authoritative place to words.

The kind of rewriting to be examined in this chapter involves the process that leads us from one of those secular subtexts to the next, and the allied shift that takes us from one authorial voice to another. For when we listen to the conjoined tales of Map, Merlin, and Robert De Boron, our gaze is shifted repeatedly between different segments of the Vulgate narratives, from
tales of the current chivalric exploits to prophecies of future deeds, to documentation of past feats. And the recurrent descriptions of *li contes* as turning away from the exploits of one knight to recount those of another performs a similar function. Directing our attention from Gauvain to Bohort to Lancelot, the voice of *li contes* constantly orients our reading toward new segments of narrative. Although claiming to derive authenticity from their association with specific individual authors, whether speakers or writers, the Vulgate tales actually base their authority on repeated reference to their own fictive narration.

THE BOOK

If we return for a moment to the textual genealogy advanced in the *Merlin*, it is clear that even though this tale claims to be the product of a single author, Robert de Boron, who derives his narrative from a single ancestor text, the *Livre du Graal*, Boron’s text mentions many contributors whose individual narratives conjoin to form the tale that we read. Here, as in the other Vulgate tales, a fiction of textual ancestry supersedes the emphasis on single authorship. According to the narrative genealogy that is outlined in the *Merlin*, the *Livre du Graal* is actually a combination of the Book of Joseph (the Grail story) and Blaise’s book: a three-tiered story that Merlin dictated to his scribe, Blaise. This tale is said to include an account of Merlin’s current deeds and exploits, a description of past events (the reign of Uther and Pendragon, Merlin’s past feats, and the origins of the Holy Grail), and a record of Merlin’s prophecies for the future.4

If Robert de Boron’s *Merlin* were merely a copy of a single Grail Book, of Joseph’s book alone, it would not contain the deeds of Merlin and Arthur’s knights, which it does in fact record. Yet we are given no clear indication of the exact filiation between these written accounts which, in many cases, are shown to overlap. Rather, the emphasis is placed on a relatively ambiguous but definitely plural writing subject fed by many books. Indeed, we learn not only that the Grail material is
preserved in both Blaise's and Joseph's books, but also that Merlin's prophecies are similarly contained in yet another work: an account of his predictions that was specifically commissioned by Pendragon. This text also contains, we are told, the adventures of Arthur's knights, transcribed into written form based on the oral deposition of men returned from battle and tournament. Again, writing and the voice coalesce to create a text derived from multiple "authors."

The same is true in the *Estoire*, where we are told twice that this work is preserved for us because Robert De Boron translated it from an original Latin text into French, "et mesire Robers de Borom, qui ceste estoire translata de latin en francois" (3:194,269). It seems at first that the role of the *estoire* is to furnish the subject matter or source material for Boron's French text, which is then retold by other narrative voices in the tale as we have it. The contents of *l'estoire* are said to be recounted by *li contes* on several occasions, *li contes* "retorne a l'estore que il avoit coumencie" (3:271), and "recoumence l'estoire et son conte ensement" (3:271). The original *estoire* is thus given a new narrative form within the French *contes* that now contains it.

However, the term *estoire* is also used to refer to the current narration, Robert's French translation. The following passage designates both antecedent text (*vielle Estoire*) and the tale we are reading (*ceste Estoire*) by the same word, "et mesire Robiers de Borron que ceste estoire translata dou latin en francois, si acorde bien, et la vielle estoire s'acorde et tiesmongne que issi fu-il" (3:269). Thus, in addition to functioning as a source, the *estoire* is presented at times as a credible narrative voice in its own right. And this voice "recounts" and tells its tale much in the manner that *li contes* does elsewhere in the text, "l'estoire de cest livre le dira chà avant" (2:185). In fact, Robert's text is called alternately "l'estoire dou Saint Graal" (3:269) and "li contes dou Saint Graal" (3:194), thus eliminating any distinction one might have hoped to establish between the Latin source and the subsequent French "translation." Furthermore, it is unclear whether Robert de Boron, the purported translator of this text, is to be identified with the author-narrator who
appears in the tale. Is the jou who addresses us merely the narrator of the original text whose voice has been translated into French, or has this jou been appropriated by the new author? The trio formed by Robert, jou, and l’estoire is grounded in the same authorial ambiguity that characterizes the group of voices that recount the other Vulgate narratives: Map, je, and li contes. Throughout this corpus of tales, then, the romance text is characterized as an ambiguous amalgam of many interrelated texts. Reference to a single master creator, be he secular or divine, is eclipsed by emphasis on a more amorphous textual process grounded in multiple texts and plural voices.

AUCTORITAS

This literary system recalls, in many ways, the medieval tradition of auctoritas in which authentication of a work derives from the citation of previous texts, and the validity of an author’s literary contribution lies less in his ingenious rendition of the subject matter than in the ability to align his text with those of previous authors. The word auctor was most commonly used in the Middle Ages as a juridical term meaning he who bears witness and thereby serves as guarantor. Auctoritas, then, was literally the quality possessed by a magistrate, writer, priest, or any credible witness. By metonymy, auctoritas came to designate as well the person possessing this quality. And through a final metonymic transformation, it was used to refer to the written document containing the words of the guarantor. Thus the text itself came to be known as an auctoritas in its own right. When the medieval writer invokes the “auctoritas Gregorii, Augustini,” for example, this designation has no bearing on the personal merit of Gregory or Augustine. Reference is here made less to the individual author than to the long-standing textual tradition of which his works form a part.

It is, in fact, during the medieval period that a clear distinction begins to develop between the Latin terms actor, meaning author or composer, and auctor, meaning authority or authentic
source. This differentiation is found in French vernacular texts as early as the thirteenth century, although its origin can be located in earlier Latin works. Many Latin writers seek to authenticate their statements by referring simply to the auctores without specifying their names. Latin sermons state regularly that “the authorities say” or “Scripture says.” In many instances the specific content of the work cited appears to have been of little importance; certain authors go so far as to cite auctores that do not in fact exist. Here the choice of an appropriate literary source to bolster one's argument is outweighed by the simple desire to validate one's work by placing it within a textual tradition. Spitzer gave precise formulation to this curious phenomenon in his statement that the existence of a source was more important for the medieval author than citing a particular source. In this view the listener need only be told of the book's existence, he need only be assured of its status as an objectively existing entity. Thus, the repeated claim to authority that characterizes so many medieval Latin texts is itself actually grounded in an elaborate narrative fiction, a myth of literary power used to augment the status of non-sacred writing.

What we find in the Vulgate romances is a vernacular version of the system of auctoritas, a fiction of authority that is both cultivated and actively undermined. Yet the Vulgate texts incorporate a slight variation on the process of authentication; instead of citing other independent narratives to guarantee their authenticity, these romances simply refer to other portions of a single, lengthy corpus of tales. The texts derived from oral depositions of Arthur's knights, from Merlin's dictations or Blaise's book, all are said to form part of the very narrative we are reading. Auctoritas has here become a kind of secular inter-textuality.

This is particularly evident in the Estoire, which offers an interesting twist on the process of literary authentication by constantly citing portions of the tale that are not recorded in our text. We are instructed repeatedly that li contes will not now speak of this subject or that:
ne parole mie li contes ici endroit (2:321)
Ne parole (ore) plus li contes (2:331)
à tant se taist ore li contes (2:337–38)
à tant laist ore li contes à parler d'iaus une pièce (3:29).

Although some of the segments in question have been recounted earlier in the text, and others will be included later on, still others never appear in the narrative as we have it. The implication is that this narrative omits certain passages that have been included in previous versions of it, or that could be related on subsequent occasions. Nascien is described, at one point, as having told about the giant that he encountered. We do not hear the actual tale of adventure because “aillours en parlera bien li contes” (3:112). And yet, twelve pages later we read that the conte did in fact recount the incident chà arrière (3:124).¹⁵ In this case the tale has been displaced entirely by the comments regarding its proper location. Here, as in the traditional system of auctoritas, reference to another tale is more important than whether that tale really exists or what it might actually say. What the foregoing statements suggest, in fact, is that the story embodied in the Vulgate romances both precedes and extends beyond this written version of it. Authentication is here not established by defining a specific, verifiable line of textual descent; authentication in the Estoire results simply from the insistence that the tale has been told before and that it will be told again.

This vernacular auctoritas serves, then, to orient our reading of the text by guiding our attention back to an earlier portion of the tale, or by pointing ahead to a future narrative segment. In place of the linear succession from divine author to lowly copiste, the Estoire is shown tangibly to rest on a more circular process of self-reference. Constant mention of what the text has recounted chà arrière or to what it will relate ça avant encourage us at every turn to re-read this text. Phrases like “issi comme li estoire le tesmongne ça avant” (2:49) and “Issi com li livres a conté chà arrière”(2:216) consistently interrupt the development storyline, turning our gaze away from the tale at hand to one of many intertexts.¹⁶ And this effect is reinforced further by
the familiar refrain “comme vous avés oït,” which performs essentially the same function as “chà arrière.” We even find at times a future counterpart for the backward-looking “comme vous avés oït” in the form of “désoremais orrés” (2:237), or “vous orrés deviser chà avant” (2:439). All of these phrases work in concert to undermine the headlong progression of narrative time in the Estoire, supplementing the strictly sequential development of events with an ambiguous chronology. The entwined narratives of jou, li contes, li livre, and l’estoire serve a similar purpose. When we read, for example, that the tale “retourne sour les messages dont jou vous avoie commenchiet a con­ter et ne pourquant ançois que il die des messages, con­tera-il coument Nasciens vint” (2:427), we confront the image of a text that weaves in and out of time, alluding simultaneously to present, past, and future narrative moments. Sometimes the past is even deferred or transferred to the future, as in the case where we are told that the tale will recount later when the king was crowned previously, “l’estoire de cest livre le dira chà avant tout esclariement por quoi il fu ainsi apielés, et coument ichele onctions fu pardue quant il dut estre premièrement coronés” (2:185).

ATEMPORALITY AND GENEALOGY

As a result of this kind of rewriting, the Vulgate text is able to push subtly against the traditional timebound framework of secular discourse. The notion of the earthly text as a faithful copy of the revealed Word of God is here replaced by its converse: a secular text that slyly appropriates for itself the timeless quality generally attributed in the Middle Ages to Scripture. When Josephe foretells Evalach’s defeat in battle, he is said to understand the “force des escriptures” (2:203), and when he predicts the future on another occasion, he is described as bringing forth “les fors mos des escriptures” (2:292). Scripture is here associated not only with future events, but events that can be known in the same way that one knows historical details that have been committed to writing. This understanding of Scripture as portraying the future as if it were past, as being both
predictive and historical, is articulated most clearly in the medieval exegetical tradition of figuralism where the Old and New Testaments are read as narrative complements. Neither text can be seen clearly to precede or follow the other. Though the figural elements of the Old Testament embody the Truth of the New Testament, this Truth in turn clarifies the hidden essence of the figura. In this manner chronological sequence is thoroughly undermined since the Old Testament constitutes both a record of the church’s past and the documentation of its future.¹⁷

To achieve a similar kind of atemporality, the Vulgate romances use ordinary temporal indicators to foster narrative discontinuity. “Or laisserons a parler de lui” (2:49), “Mais à tant se taist ore li contes sour le roi Mordrain (2:337–38), and “Or lairons à tant ester del roy” (2:162) are types of phrases that recur at regular intervals, but their function is not to link successive portions of the narrative into a smooth and even chronology. These expressions serve rather to delineate moments of rupture in the narrative line and in the genealogical succession of its characters. When we read, for example, that the conte stops speaking of the lignié of Mordrain and Nascien and Celidoine in order to return to that of Joseph and Josephé: “mais a tant laisse onc li contes chi endroit parler de Chélydoine et d’icel lignée et retourne à Joseph et à Josephe, quar, grant pièce s’en est téus” (3:125), or that the conte stops speaking of the branch of Alain and returns to Celidoine and his lineage: “Si se traist [sic] ore li contes à parler de la brance Alain car bien a ore deviset çou que il en devoit dire, et etoigne à parler de Céli­doine et d’icelui autre lignage” (3:296), it is clear that the lines of this discontinuous narrative are linked overtly to a fragmented view of genealogical heritage. The point is made especially clear when the tale is said to truncate its description of all the lines that issued from Celidoine to return to another branch that is called the story of Merlin, “Si se taist or à tant li contes de toutes les ligniés ki de Céleidoine issirent, et retourne à une autre brance qu’on apele l’estore Mellin” (3:306–7). Ancestral
branches of the family tree are thus presented as synonymous with the episodic branches of the romance text, and both are systematically recast into a form that approximates the timeless mode of Scripture.

In the *Estoire* we are confronted with a wealth of genealogical documentation regarding the descendants of Eve and of Solomon, and concerning the ancestors of Gauvain and Lancelot (2:469 ff., 3:153–54, 269–71, 302–3). The genealogies of Galahad and Joseph are among the most important in the tale because Joseph and his son Josephé become keepers of the Holy Grail, and Galahad gives rise to a long lineage of venerable religious men (2:168). Yet the strictly chronological dimension of their heritage is accompanied by another, nonlinear sort of genealogy.

Christ explains to Joseph that there are two types of *semente*: that represented by the relation between Joseph and his son Josephé, and that which results from preaching, from sowing a seed with words. Joseph is assured by Christ that if he preaches in His name, "ançois sera ta semente espandue" (2:119–20). The *semente* of the Word that is evoked here is precisely the opposite of the chronological lineage that aligns generations of fathers and sons in predictable succession. This second type of filiation defies temporal constraints since it is based not on human proportions but on the Word, which is said to be the Alpha and Omega just as God is described as "li coumenchemens" and "li fins" of all things (2:288).

The role of Galahad is, in large part, to enable a similarly circular reading of Arthurian history. When he is referred to as a new kind of *semente*, a *noviau fruit* whose heirs will constitute a *sainte lignié*, we can understand this lineage as possessing the timelessness of sacred texts. Galahad is described, on the one hand, as the last in the genealogical line of Nascien, and yet this line of descent is also presented as a process of cyclical return. Just as Nascien was the first to see the marvels of the Grail in the past, Galahad will be the last to view them in the future: “Et chil qui ces merveilles verra, si sera li daarrains hom dou lignage
Nascien et tout autressi comme Nasciens a estet li premiers hom qui les mierveilles dou Graal ait véues, autressi sera chil daarrains hom qui les verra” (2:312-13).

The relation between these two men is not simply that of ancestor and descendant; the genealogical link between them is given a distinctly analogical cast, reminiscent of the Vulgate’s definition of the atemporal Godhead. Standing at the nexus of past and future moments, Galahad will succeed in putting an end to the Grail adventures in Arthur’s realm precisely because of his special ties to Solomon and the past: “Lanselos Galaad, ichelui buen chevalier qui mist a fin les aventures de la Grant-Bretagne et pour çou se chil fu concéus em péchiet, ne resgarda pas nostres sires a çou, ains regorda à la haute brance des pseudommes et à la buenne vie et au buen pourposement que il avoit” (3:296). As the quintessential Arthurian hero, Galahad is expected to surpass in his task all those who came before him and all those who will come afterwards, “si passera de son mestier tous chiaus qui devant lui auront estet et qui après lui venront” (2:448; 3:117). He is hailed as one who will not only put an end to the adventures that precede his arrival, but also to those that occur subsequently: “chil metra a fin les aventures qui avenront en la terre u aventure et sa voluntes li conduira” (3:117). Galahad’s identity rests, in a sense, on his ability to span past and future historical moments, much in the manner that the text of the Estoire is characterized by its persistent reference to past and future narrative incidents.

In fact the plurality of temporal modes that is ascribed to Galahad is characteristic of the whole notion of textuality as it is advanced in the Merlin and the Estoire. The composite text formed from the contributions of Merlin, Blaise, Arthur’s knights, and various scribes encompasses three historical periods in a systematic destructuring of chronological sequence. The text prepared by Arthur’s scribes is a chronicle of the present exploits of the knights of the realm. Yet it is destined for “our heirs” (nostre hoir) and becomes, as such, a documentation of current events that is designed to serve eventually as a record of the Arthurian past. Pendragon’s collection of Merlin’s proph-
ecies, on the other hand, is an account of the future made in the present, a record placed at the disposal of current readers concerning events that will take place later. Blaise's book contains both types of narrative mentioned above, both chronicle and prophecy, and combines them with history. Although Merlin dictates present events to Blaise, and includes predictions for the future, he also recounts incidents from the pre-Arthurian past: the origins of the Grail and of Merlin, and the reign of Uther and Pendragon.

The function of these plural narrative voices is to downplay individual authority by transcending the chronological constraints that might otherwise delimit the text—either by associating it with a specific historical author or by classifying it as a particular link in the genealogical succession of texts concerning the Holy Grail. One might wonder, for example, why the anonymous romances of the Vulgate corpus mention only the names of bogus authors while thoroughly effacing the real historical writers who produced the tales. Or, why these narratives insist on positing fictional ancestor texts such as the *estoire* in King Henry's archive, or the sacred *livre* copied by the "author" of the *Estoire* while obscuring their literary debt to Chrétien's *Lancelot* and *Perceval*.\(^{19}\) But if these romance texts are in fact vying for the authority of Scripture, they cannot be restricted by the limitations that typify the *verbum*, by single authorship or historical time. Instead, the plural authorial voice in the *Estoire* and the *Merlin* enables the Vulgate narratives to break away from the bonds of the historicized "work" in the Barthesian sense of the term.\(^{20}\) They allow the vernacular tale to record both past events and future occurrences in their mutual complementarity, much as Scripture foretells events in the New Testament which in turn elucidate Old Testament parallels. Rather than establish their worth by citing biblical auctoritas, these romance texts try to become an auctoritas in their own right.

Yet the notion of textuality that is advanced in the *Estoire* and the *Merlin* borrows only selectively from the biblical tradition. Whereas it aspires to the ambiguous chronology ascribed to the
reading and interpretation of Scripture, this vernacular textual-
ity eschews at the same time the deference to genealogical
hierarchy that accompanies the writing and copying of a sacred
text. That is to say that the text which is presented in the
Vulgate romances rejects those qualities of Scripture that were
used traditionally to denounce literary expression as inferior
to the creative work of divine authority. It sidesteps the textual
hierarchy that ranks the Truth of the revealed Word of God far
above the deceitful posturing of man’s fictive creation.

LITERARY TRUTH

What we find instead is a fiction that proclaims itself as True,
competing for the distinction of vérité that is traditionally re-
served for the truly authoritative text. Although the Estoire
asserts at times that what it recounts is accurate because it
duplicates a Scriptural tale, “car çou dist la vérites de li’escrip-
ture” (2:388), this romance contains other “truths” that are
established on the authority of the conte alone. The fact that
Nascien was imprisoned on an island that could spin around
magically is presented here as an indisputable truth whose
validity parallels that of biblical accounts, “car il est verités que
ele tournoie, mais pour çou que la manière de son tournoie-
ment ne est pas couneue de tous chiaus ne de toutes celes qui
parlé en ont oî, et pour çou est-il raisons que cis contes en
démonstre la véritet” (2:428). In this manner, the Estoire, charac-
terized overtly as a sacred text that issued from “la bouce de la
véritet” (2:439), is accorded clearly superior status to the un-
trustworthy “enlacemens de paroles’ of tales that have simply
been heard from others (oî as autres, 2:428). This is indeed a
curious claim for a text which itself puts such strong emphasis
on the spoken word, a text composed of numerous authorial
voices each of which does nothing other than conte, raconte,
parole, and dist. And yet we are told repeatedly that the “truth-
ful” words of this narrative somehow carry more weight than
the idle paroles of other tales.
THE VOICE

This brings us to the fiction of orality that is employed throughout the Vulgate Cycle and made especially manifest in the Estoire. We have seen, in chapter 1, how the voice of li contes is said both to record and recount the events that we are reading, thereby effectively displacing the roles generally played by a text’s author and narrator. Yet, if the author of this cycle of tales is Christ, as one of the Vulgate’s fictive genealogies contends (2:439), it is his power as the ultimate writer-creator that is challenged directly by these tales of mock truth. When we are reminded at regular intervals in the Vulgate corpus that the tale is telling itself, that li contes dist, se taist, raconte, laist a parler de, it is not the divine voice of Scriptural Truth that is presented to us, but the rival voice of fiction.

If the textual genealogies that are propounded in the Vulgate Cycle can be seen as mimicking, to a degree, the written documentation of medieval auctoritas, the insistence throughout these romance narratives on the voice that produces them affects a parallel hierarchical reversal of the plenary Word. Whereas the medieval monastic tradition posits writing as an act of copying the voice of God,21 the romance tradition of the Vulgate texts obscures this sacred voice replacing it with a wholly literary process of telling a story. And this is nowhere more evident than in the recasting of the typical refrain “Scripture says” or “the authorities say” into the more vernacular formulation of “li contes dist.” In line with our previous assertion that the “author” of the Vulgate romances exists “in the text,” we could thus state further that the voice which speaks to us from the manuscript pages is, quite literally, the voice of the text.

In fact the conte is not the only narrative voice that is described as telling the tale of the Vulgate romances. The estoire is also said to conte and raconte the narrative we read, and li livre is presented in equally animated terms: “li livre a conte” (2:216).22 The relatively static text encoded on the written page of the
Vulgate documents is thus given voice, or presented as if it were in the process of being told to an audience. This characterization of textuality reflects the process of oral delivery employed typically in the reading of literary texts in the Middle Ages. It is even evoked at times in relation to Latin texts upon which vernacular narratives are based. In the *Espurgatoire de Saint Patrice*, for example, Marie de France describes the Latin *tractatus* that she is ostensibly translating into French as an articulate narrative voice that speaks and tells much in the manner that *li contes* is said to recount the tales of the *Estoire* and the *Queste*:  

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{si cum li livre le nus dit} & \quad \text{line 4} \\
\text{Si cum [li] livre le nus dit} & \quad \text{line 806} \\
\text{Dunt li livre nus cunte ci} & \quad \text{line 1403}
\end{align*}
\]

Here the written predecessor of Marie’s narrative—a book alluded to elsewhere as *li escriz* (line 421) and *nostre escrit* (line 141)—is accorded the role of a speaking voice.

In the *Estoire* the fiction of orality is developed more elaborately through extensive use of the first-person plural: *nous*. With the same verbal formulations attributed elsewhere in the text to *li contes* and *jou*, the voice of *nous* is said to speak, tell, recount, and leave off speaking about the characters and events in the narrative. In some instances this *nous* refers to a collectivity of author and audience resembling the *nous* used in Chrétien’s *Yvain*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Artus, li boens rois de Bretaingne} & \\
\text{la cui proesco nos enseigne} & \\
\text{que nos soiens preu et cortois,} & \\
\text{tint cort si riche come rois} & \quad \text{(vv. 1–4)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mes or parlons de cez qui furent,} & \\
\text{si leissons cez qui ancor durent.} & \quad \text{(vv. 29–30)}
\end{align*}
\]

In the *Estoire* statements such as “laisserons à parler de lui ichi endroit .I. poi, et *diront* [sic] coument *nostres* sires fu traities à mort” (2:50), or “Or lairons à tant ester del roy, si *dirons* de
Joseph qui se gist en son lit” (2:162) offer a similar portrait of speaker and listener as collective “readers” who follow the lines of the story together, leaving one character for a moment in order to learn about the exploits of another.26

Yet, at times the *Estoire* carries this process even further by displacing the voice of the text’s putative author onto a series of textualized narrators. Of the fifteen occasions where *nous* is invoked, four of them distinguish clearly between the listening public (*vous*) and an authorial voice that remains plural (*nous*). When we read, for example, “Si vous dirons du roy Evalach” (2:155), or “Or vous lairons de Tholomer et si vous conteron del roy Evalach” (2:222), it is clear that a collective audience (*vous*) is here interacting with a collective speaker.27 In these cases *nous* does not derive its plurality from the association of a single reciter with his group of listeners. This second kind of *nous* is composed instead of the plurality forged from *je*, *li contes*, and other textualized voices working together as companion storytellers. In the latter two-thirds of the *Estoire* in fact, *nous* disappears entirely as an authorial voice and is replaced by an alteration between *je* and *li contes*. We have seen previously the extent to which these two voices perform parallel functions in recounting the tale of this romance. In this case they also combine forces with *li livre* and *l’estoire* to create a plural author addressing a distinctly separate public.28

Whether the voice of *nous* incorporates the members of a listening audience or allies itself with other speaking voices, the significance of this literary construct lies in the illusion of orality that it creates. It serves, in this sense, the same function as the repeated evocation of *li livre*, *li contes*, and *l’estoire* as “texts” devoid of specific titles or authors. Both of these narrative strategies emphasize the voice of the text rather than any written source,29 and they suggest, thereby, the more fluid process of oral presentation apart from strict authorial control. When *li livre* is said to tell the tale or *nous* is described as recounting events, we are given a picture of the act of reading, of the creation or more accurately the re-creation of a text through speech.
ORAL PERFORMANCE

From what little we know of textual delivery in the Middle Ages, it appears that the recitation of a written text could, in fact, have been accomplished by any number of persons; the performance of a single manuscript was, we assume, undertaken by a series of individual reciters over time. The success of each performance did not depend ultimately on the name or character of the original writer, nor on the authority of the material recounted. Successful delivery depended, rather, on the appropriate conjunction between reciter and listener.

In fact the medieval reader who presents the text to his audience enjoys a more concrete and immediate presence with that audience than does the author of the tale. Although the reader may "play" the author's part when reciting a prologue or epilogue that makes reference to this tale's superiority over other versions by less well-qualified writers, it is only through this pseudoauthor, this acting voice or dramatic filter, that the text makes contact with its public. It was, of course, possible for a medieval author to read his own works, in which case the distance between author and audience would be greatly reduced. And yet, we can safely assume that even the author would give different color to the voices of individual characters on different occasions, creating thereby a series of interpretations that diverge somewhat from the fixity of the words written on the manuscript page. In this case the form of the original tale is subtly recast in each successive performance of it. Radically different from the fixed words of Scripture, the orally-delivered text is grounded, to a large degree, in changeability. It is this very changeability that the continual shift between textualized voices of nous, je, li livre, li contes, and l'estoire evokes, emphasizing the role of literary fabrication as crucially distinct from unitary theological Truth.

Indeed, when authorial insignia are obscured in the Vulgate corpus behind a textualized collective "speaker" whose voice brings the written tale to life, reading in these romances is characterized primarily as an interaction between teller and
listener. Such a formulation is current in many vernacular texts of the High Middle Ages where an emphasis on the verbs dire, conté, paroler, and raconter transforms the written work into a speaker,\textsuperscript{32} and the complementary use of oir, escouter, and entendre casts the reader as a listener.\textsuperscript{33} In this case the "text," whether Latin source, vernacular translation, or fictive elaboration is seen less as a fixed document than as a process of verbal exchange.\textsuperscript{34}

In the \textit{Estoire}, however, the characterization of textuality in oral terms is complicated by the contrary insistence that the words recounted here issue directly from the mouth of God. Repeated reference to the plural voices of je, li contés, and li livre serves both to imitate the authoritative Word of God and to devalue theological Truth by advancing in its stead the plural and wholly fictive voice of the vernacular tale.

To say that the author of the Vulgate romances is in the text is thus not equivalent to asserting that his identity is locked into the words on the manuscript page. This is, on the contrary, the condition ascribed to the other author, Christ, whose authority and existence are validated by their inclusion within Scripture.\textsuperscript{35} For our "author," to be in the text is to have a voice in telling it. And it is in the oral pronouncement of the tale that the text's authority resides. While reproducing in vernacular form the medieval systems of authority grounded in biblical Truth and the divine voice of God, the Vulgate romances actually call into question these very processes of authentication. Through the use of temporal markers that announce what is to come and rephrase what has already been said, through reference to the overlapping subtexts of Merlin, Blaise, Robert de Boron, and Walter Map, and through the evocation of \textit{li livre}, \textit{li contés}, \textit{l'estoire}, and \textit{nous} as textualized authors, the Vulgate Cycle replaces traditional forms of authentication with the wholly literary authority of intertextual reference. In clear opposition to the fixed \textit{vérité} of Scripture, these tales offer a kind of truth that is more ambiguous and changeable, a fictive truth anchored in the plural and secular \textit{verbum}.\textsuperscript{36}

Although it might appear that the authorial voice of the
Vulgate texts is diluted and weakened by its plurality, this voice remains extremely powerful. For in its dissolution it has appropriated the force of the Godhead, he who created the world with the Word, and first established truth and authority by dictating the law to Moses. Whereas the individual voices of Bors, Lancelot, or Merlin cannot reconstruct the whole of the Grail adventures—there are demonstrable lapses in their accounts—this task is successfully performed by *li contes*. And although all of Arthur's world might be preserved in the archive at Salisbury, it does not come alive until it is recreated by the voice of the tale. As scriptural Truth gives way to fictive truth, it is ultimately the voice of *li contes* that serves as author and authenticator of these romance texts. As readers of a voiced tale, we witness the transformation of the theological model of writing into a literary process of rewriting. The closed theological system based on the revealed word that must be transcribed precisely is replaced here by an infinitely open-ended system: that of the vernacular text that refers constantly and in many different ways to itself.