Conclusion

If we were to recast Beckett’s statement that all of Proust’s world comes out of a teacup, we might say that all of Arthur’s world comes out of the Holy Grail. This multipurpose vessel is both a cup that gives sustenance and a book that gives life, for the Holy Grail is equated, within these texts, with the Grail story. But the nature of this book is clearly two-fold. On one occasion the *livret* of the *Estoire*, the text that Christ instructs the *copiste* to transcribe and which is, ostensibly, the text we are reading, is shown specifically to revive an entranced man from a speechless death-like stupor (2:33). This kind of rebirth is of course the effect that is typically attributed to the power of Scripture. But when Joseph of Arimathea departs to preach the word of God he does not take with him this Book of the Holy Grail that holds within it the miraculous deeds of Christ and shares the rejuvenative powers of Scripture (3:56). The tool that Joseph carries with him in order to preach the gospel is another kind of text, the Grail vessel. Much like the book that is capable of healing entranced and comatose persons, the Grail is described elsewhere in the narrative as liberating individuals suffering from physical wounds and those possessed by madness. A clear affinity is thus posited between the Holy Story and this venerated...
object whose functions intertwine. Just as the Grail story can serve as a liberating agent, the Grail vessel can be used to preach the gospel, each playing thereby a role normally assigned to Scripture.

But the Grail is not itself represented in biblical texts and the Livres du Graal depicted in the Estoire and the Merlin is firmly tied to the fictional mode of Arthurian romance. A vernacular tale of adventure, the Grail story recounted by Merlin to Blaise blends Christian miracles with the marvels of Arthur's realm into a single, chivalric fiction. Although the livret of the Estoire may be accorded the miraculous power of healing, the Arthurian text that recounts this episode diverges from the Sacred Word in almost every respect. Through a plurality of narrative voices alluding to multiple fictional sources, the Grail story actively undermines the univocity and authority of the Scriptural Verbum it is supposed to represent.

This elaborate conflation of Grail and text provides an apt paradigm for the ambivalent project behind the Vulgate Cycle as a whole: the attempt to advance notions of theological significance—authority, interpretation, representation, and closure—and replace them with vernacularized imitations in the realm of romance. We have seen how the subversive enterprise of the Estoire is echoed more subtly in the patterned motifs of the Lancelot where configurations of Incarceration and Liberation, Perception and Deception, and physical Immobility appear at first to be wholly chivalric concerns. In a particularly striking passage of the Estoire, however, these very phenomena are described as being the powers of the Godhead: he liberates prisoners, restores sight to the blind, and heals wounded victims, "Nostres sires desloie les prisounes; nostres sires rent la vêu del cuer as avulés par les tierriennes fragilités, nostres sires garist les blecies et les maumis (redrece)" (2:371). By displacing God's powers onto the pages of the fictional tale, the stock motifs of the Vulgate Cycle demonstrate indirectly how the secular Grail text strives in yet another way to play a role normally reserved for divine authority. Conversely, the ostensibly religious interpretations of chivalric events that are
offered by the resident hermits in the *Queste* do not provide the abstract *senefiance* that they promise. As fictional analogues cast in different historical registers, these "interpretations" narrate more than explain. Through a curious double reversal, the Vulgate's secular tale of combat and adultery is patterned on actions of religious significance although the referent for the avowed "religious" portions of the cycle is mainly literary.

We have seen in chapter 4 how the cycle's narrative patterns textualize the arguments against literature devised by the church fathers, diffusing thereby criticisms of the literary text as a seductive trap and an unnatural divergence from Truth. The frequency of images of deception, entrapment, and physical impairment in these tales reflects, moreover, the double mouvement embodied in the Grail vessel itself. Although claiming on the one hand that the romance narrative issues from the "bouche de la véritet," that it descends from a Latin *auctoritas*, that it can perform the therapeutic miracles reserved for Scripture alone, the Vulgate tales proclaim simultaneously their own textual idolatry, underscoring at every turn the repetition that links them firmly to the mode of the *verbum*. This precarious balance is maintained through elaborate mechanisms of literary rewriting in which plural authorial voices undercut the absolute authority of a unique creator, polysemous interpretations take the place of claims to definitive meaning, and repeated patterned motifs obviate the possibility of accurate representation. Alluding repeatedly to the secular orality and literary provenance of the Arthurian tale, the Vulgate texts claim in so doing to convey the Truth of religious texts. Rather than respecting the theological concept of literature as an expression of the helplessness of the human condition, the lengthy prose tales present themselves as the ultimate and audacious usurper of religious authority.

The Grail is even more instrumental in this enterprise than one may suspect. An obvious parallel to the Christian chalice that contains the body of Christ—the Word of God capable of bringing forth life from death—the Grail vessel contains the words of the Grail story, words capable of bringing to life
Arthur and his chivalric entourage. Whereas the force of the Christian tradition rests on the miracle of the Resurrection that attests God's power as the ultimate creator—as he who can produce life from death—the success of the Arthurian tradition relies on a similar phenomenon of rebirth. Here, however, the resurrection of the long-dead King Arthur is accomplished by a fictional voice that effects a wholly literary rebirth. Rather than invoking the afterlife of its central figure as does the Bible, the Vulgate corpus details the former life (or pre-thirteenth-century existence) of the legendary King Arthur. The past life of this pseudohistorical figure is, in the end, as unverifiable as the second coming of Christ.

One goal of these tales is to erase time so that the past can be made present, so that King Arthur can live on, not just in the oral accounts of a memorial culture, or in the fixed documents of chronicle, but in an open-ended and constantly changing romance text. To this end the Vulgate Cycle makes use of a traditional view of time based largely on repetition, as opposed to a more historical view of time bound by linear sequence and the concept of progress. By harking back to former textual moments, these tales derive their authority and validity from the recurrence and repetition that is peculiar to the fictional mode. The truth that they advance is neither theological nor historical but wholly literary.

We are told throughout the Vulgate narratives that when the Grail adventures finally come to an end, prisoners will be liberated, wounded victims will be cured, the blind will regain their sight. More important, the Grail will reveal a transparent meaning that will make sense of the garbled and often illogical Arthurian world. But this resolution is never achieved in the Vulgate texts. The Grail, which is viewed only by Galahad, remains a curious mystery, and the intriguing prophecies surrounding it are never fully explained.

This is romance in its traditional sense as a delight in the unsolved, as a genre held in the tension of ambiguity and uncertainty. The revelation of precise meaning, whatever its message, can only destroy the delicate balance that typically
melds the sacred and the secular, combining truth and falsehood as literary complements. What these romance texts reveal instead is that the very concept of absolute meaning along with the related notions of definitive authority and accurate representation are mere fictions; but fictions possessing extraordinary force. Not unlike the enigmatic Grail vessel that compels us to seek a meaning that remains unverifiable, Arthurian romance is itself both spellbinding and illusive. In a curious way, then, the Vulgate romances make good on their claim to being as powerful as Scripture. They create a world *ex nihilo* in which readers believe, a world born from a paradoxical chalice-cup whose truth resides in the repetiton of Arthurian fictions.