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THE BEST THING FOR BEING SAD: EDUCATION AND EDUCATORS IN

T. H. WHITE'S *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING*

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C. M. ADDERLEY



One of the major themes which can be detected throughout the body of T. H. White's fiction, from his early mimetic novels *They Winter Abroad* and *First Lesson* to the posthumously-published diaries in *America At Last*, is that of education; specifically, what constitutes a good education. The list of teachers who appear in White's work is quite bewildering: the Professor, an intellectual bore in *They Winter Abroad*, the aging Cambridge don Mr. Belfry in *First Lesson*, the sinister Professor Mauleverer in *Darkness At Pemberley*, and the doddering Professor in *Mistress Masham's Repose* are just a few, and a case could be made for many other characters being educators in a less strict sense. This would seem, then, to be something of an obsession for White. Every writer of conscience feels him or herself to be an educator of some description, but White's search for the perfect educational system contains an element of despair which goes beyond the degree of interest natural to an intellectually-inclined mind. An examination of his background reveals circumstances which one would not immediately suppose to be conducive to a love of learning; happily, he managed to react strongly against this background, and instead of merely complaining, he made suggestions on how to improve the system.

Of White's experience at prep school, little can be learned; but it is certain that his first contact with education after prep school was neither pleasant nor particularly educational. In September 1920, he was sent to Cheltenham College, into an environment of fear and violence, with its strict discipline and frequent beatings presided over by the housemaster, a "sadistic, homosexual, middle-aged bachelor with a gloomy, suffused face." This housemaster, it seemed to White, operated through his equally sadistic prefects. Although homosexuality and sadism were, of course, officially frowned upon, they seem to have been tacitly condoned as a means of enforcing discipline. It was the commonplace normality of the violence and sexual outrage which impressed itself so vividly on the mind of the young T. H. White. He became, in his own estimation, a sadist and flagellant. At Cheltenham the philosophy was that learning was something one did to avoid

punishment, and punishment was something to be borne with patience or else to be meted out with enthusiasm.

White's thoughts on Cheltenham were later written down in verse. A letter to L. J. Potts, his tutor at Cambridge, contains the manuscript of a poem entitled "Dr. Prisonface." The poem describes the titular character with bitter irony as the master of a public school in Surrey. The aim of Dr. Prisonface's education is to teach the pupil how to play cricket well, "or taste the fires of hell," to believe that work is "really not important / But must be done," and that, above all, "Bodies are beastly, love a sneaking vision, / Beauty forbidden, foul, and fancy low." The effect of this dictatorship on the pupil is that he will be taught, and come to believe, that natural sexual tendencies are to be avoided, and to approach them, if he ever does, with shame and self-loathing:

He'll fall at intervals and take a whore,
Shamefully take her in the night time and
 afterwards hate himself
All the more, and do it more.

White wrote this poem whilst teaching at a prep school, which he had to leave because of "the lack of people to teach the boys cricket" (*Letters to a Friend* 28). It seems incredible, given this background, that White should spend two years as an English teacher at the highly respectable public school at Stowe, and still more incredible that he should not react against education bitterly; but he did not. White was a thinker, and set about trying to think of a way education could be accomplished painlessly.

It was precisely this store of unpleasant experiences which made White feel more than adequately qualified to discuss alternative forms of education and the teacher-pupil relationship. The ideal relationship takes the form of a very old man teaching a very young boy. This theme reaches its climax in *The Once and Future King*, where the teachers are Merlyn the enchanter, Toirdealbhach the Irish priest, and Uncle Dap, the swordsman who teaches Lancelot his craft. In the final volume of the work, "The Candle in the Wind," this relationship is extended, so that in the last chapter Arthur himself becomes the teacher, Tom of Newbold Revell, the pupil. Kurth Sprague has pointed out that White's disapproval of Mordred and Galahad finds expression in the fact that they are excluded from this particular type of relationship (pt. 2 ch. 3).

The most notable feature of the first of these teachers, Merlyn, is his backwards life: "I unfortunately was born at the wrong end of time, and I have to live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people

living forwards from behind" (White, *The Once* 29). This has the obvious benefit of accounting for Merlyn's second sight, but it also raises a problem spotted by John K. Crane, who notes that "in training Arthur, he is actually trying to reverse fate but, since he lives backwards in time, knows what will of necessity happen because it has already happened for him" (191n1). This is true: Merlyn knows that Arthur will fail; but his second sight also tells him that Tom of Newbold Revell will carry the idea on to a new generation. Merlyn's education has been designed to make Arthur think for himself, and this is what Arthur enables the rest of mankind to do in the last chapter. By keeping Arthur's story alive, Tom (Thomas Malory) is keeping alive the dream of civilization Arthur had. Merlyn knew what would happen, but his efforts were not supposed to reverse fate: that the dream is to be kept alive is the fate.

Besides this, Merlyn's backwards life has a more important, and more subtle bearing on his role as a teacher. White attributes the ultimate downfall of Arthur, in part at least, to the ancestral wrongs suffered by the Cornwall/Orkney faction: Arthur's attempt on Mordred's life, the rape of Igraine by Uther Pendragon, the conquest of the Gaels in remote history. It is, White argues, a sense of the past which causes war: "It was as if everything would lead to sorrow, so long as man refused to forget the past" (666). Merlyn, whose past lies in the future, is able to be an idealist, to leave this sense of ancestral wrong behind. He teaches the Wart "to believe that man was perfectible: that he was on the whole more decent than beastly: that good was worth trying: that there was no such thing as original sin" (666). This faculty enables him to concentrate less on the causes of strife than on the consequences. This unique perspective on cause and effect makes him the only person able to teach the Wart, who must grow up to become the idealist-king.

The Orkney boys, on the other hand, are largely ignored by the adults in their life, especially their mother. Their education is left to the drunken Irish "saint," Toirdealbhach:

He was a source of mental nourishment to them—a sort of guru, as Merlyn had been to Arthur, who gave them what little culture they were ever to get. They resorted to him like hungry puppies anxious for any kind of eatable, when their mother had cast them out. He had taught them to read and write. (258)

Like Merlyn, Toirdealbhach is to some extent White's self-portrait, evident from such facts as the heavy drinking, of the priest's being the

source of innumerable anecdotes (as any reader of *The Age of Scandal* can readily attest), and of actually signing himself "poor TORDEALBAC Ó ZEALAZAIN."

Toirdealbhach is normally fairly brusque with the boys, often because of his lecherous "heresies" concerning Mother Morlan. In *The Witch in the Wood*, White's earlier version of "The Queen of Air and Darkness," the affection of Torealvac (the earlier spelling of that name) for the boys is more evident. When they come to him for lime, to make bullets which he described to them in connection with Connar MacNessa, he digresses into a long story about how he killed a supernatural eel, and White records: "You see, he had told the boys the story to get out of providing the lime, for people really did make bullets in the way he mentioned" (82). This kind of affection is largely omitted from "The Queen of Air and Darkness," giving the impression that the saint cares little about the boys' education. As Sprague notes:

St. Toirdealbhach with his poteen and stories of old wrongs and ancient bloodshed is ineffectual in weaning the Orkney boys from their mother's wickedness, and is successful only in promulgating a superstitious and bloody-minded attitude toward life. (215)

Uncle Dap, Lancelot's tutor, is "a genuine maestro" whose "branch of learning was chivalry" (White, *The Once* 336). This somewhat narrow field of study makes him rather pedantic, so that apparently insignificant breaches of the rules of heraldry make him frantic. But apart from being an expert on chivalry's theoretical side, he is also "one of the finest swordsmen in France" (337) whose pride in Lancelot is tremendous. When Lancelot falls in love with the Queen, Dap is annoyed at what he regards as the squandering of great talent: "Is the finest knight in Europe to throw away everything I have taught him for the sake of a lady's beautiful eyes?" (349) he demands. The implication is that Dap regards Lancelot very much as his own creation, and his pride stems more from this than from a genuine affection for his pupil's character. This seems to be common with all the teachers. They are not allowed any emotional proximity to their students—perhaps White, remembering the clandestine homosexuality of Cheltenham, recognized the danger of this only too well. Even Merlyn's affection for the Wart is prompted more by the sense of achievement. His moment of crowning glory comes when Arthur expounds the theory—which he has deduced for himself—of

might for right. "The magician stood up as straight as a pillar, stretched out his arms in both directions, looked at the ceiling, and said the first few words of the Nunc Dimittis" (255). In her edition of *The Book of Merlyn*, Sylvia Townsend Warner cites Luke 2.29 as the source of the Nunc Dimittis reference, adding that "This has come to be used in a general sense, signifying 'I've seen it all now; I can die happy'" (White, *The Book* 29). However, the religious implication of the words give them a far deeper meaning. They are uttered by Simeon when Christ is first presented at the temple. Simeon has been told by God that he will not die until he has seen the Messiah, the Savior of the Jewish people. In the same way, Merlyn has been awaiting the blooming of the savior of Gramarye, and his unusual utterance marks the arrival of the King bearing Merlyn's own great idea. Like Christ, Arthur will attempt to propagate the idea of humane decency; like Christ, he will be sacrificed by his people, for his people, because of his adherence to this idea; like Christ, he will live on afterwards—not physically, or even spiritually, like Christ, but as a pure idea, contained in the words set on paper by Sir Thomas Malory and eventually in typeface by William Caxton. This idea comes across even more strongly in the long-suppressed conclusion, *The Book of Merlyn*, where the enchanter lists all those who have written about King Arthur and where, in the last chapter, Arthur does not die, but goes to live in the badger's sett with all his animal friends.

Of course, being the perfect teacher means next to nothing without fairly good pupils. In her biography of White, Warner points out how *The Sword in the Stone* afforded White the opportunity to explore the relationship in its most ideal form on both sides:

In fact, *The Sword in the Stone* had allowed him two wish-fulfillments. He gave himself a dauntless, motherless boyhood; he also gave himself an ideal old age, free from care and contradiction of circumstance, practising an enlightened system of education on a chosen pupil, embellished with an enchanter's hat, omniscient, unconstrainable and with a sink where the crockery washed itself up. (99)

The ideal teacher is a very old man; the ideal pupil is a very young boy. As Sprague observes, "White found the extremes [of age] easier for him [to write about] than the middle years. With few exceptions, his most memorable characters are likely to be those who are either elderly, or children" (326). At Stowe, he had advocated emotional sincerity, the philosophy that the most important thing was "what you felt and

whether your feelings were genuine, personal and sincere," and he clearly felt that this virtue was most likely to be present at the extremes of age. The very young were open to new ways of thinking, and the very old carried the authority of experience. In between were the cynics, competitive and self-seeking. It is these cynics who are most easily affected by the wicked Seventh Sense he describes in *The Ill-Made Knight* (394-96). In the last months of his life, White kept a detailed diary of his American lecture tour, published as *America At Last*, in which he records:

What place does Merlin have talking to grown-ups? They are past listening. All my life I have got on better with children and adolescents, found them more receptive, affectionate and grateful for truth. They ask better questions, consider your answers more seriously, and are at closer, vivid, more intimate grips with life. (233)

The innocence connected with the helplessness of these extremes was evidently most attractive to White.

The Wart fits the bill admirably. He is willing to learn, idealistic, and receptive to the truth, though he does not accept every word from Merlyn unquestioningly. Instead, he carefully considers everything and weighs its value. For example, in the original version of *The Sword in the Stone*, published twenty years before the final version appeared as the first part of *The Once and Future King*, the Wart and Merlyn discover that King Pellinore has been imprisoned by the giant Galapas. Merlyn advises caution, on the grounds that "A chap who doesn't know enough to keep himself out of the clutches of one of these giants isn't worth troubling about" (White, *The Sword* London 283, New York 262); but the more idealistic Wart maintains that rescuing him would be the right thing to do. It is true that this chapter has a deeper, allegorical meaning—it is a satire on fascists, and on the policy of appeasement pursued by the British government in the decade preceding World War II—but it is also meant to throw some light on the Wart's heroism and idealism.

Innocence is a trait which remains with the Wart all his life, even when as a king, he is subjected to others' cynicism and violence. It is this quality, inherent in his youth, which enables him to rescue the prisoners from Morgan le Fay: "Nobody can get into the Castle Chariot, except a boy or girl. . . . Fairies are magic too, and only innocent people can enter their castle" (White, *The Once* 101). The suggestion is that this very lack of experience—the lack of the seventh sense—enables children to

accomplish seemingly impossible feats of idealism. The Wart is an optimist. As a young man, White describes him as "a simple fellow, who took people at their own valuation easily" (322). He has a simple faith that things are exactly as they appear. Since there is no deceit in him, he cannot conceive of any in the world. When Merlyn transforms him into a fish, he accepts it simply as the way of things, expressing no surprise at all. He simply "knew that he was turning into a fish" and "found it difficult to be a new kind of creature" (41), but there is no mention of any degree of astonishment at this magical metamorphosis. Magic, White is saying, can happen in a world to which one reacts honestly and directly: it is, in fact, natural. Later, when the Wart has become King Arthur, the magic has disappeared with his childhood:

"Do you remember anything about the magic you had when you were small?"

"No. Did I have some magic? I can remember that I was interested in birds and beasts. Indeed, that is why I still keep my menagerie at the Tower. But I don't remember about magic."

"People don't remember," said Merlyn. (294)

Toirdealbhach's education is something which the Orkney boys run to when neglected by their mother—which is to say, fairly often. Like the Wart, they are apt to be open to new modes of thought, but the lack of discipline and consistency in their lives perverts their way of thinking. The function of Toirdealbhach's limited education towards the aims of *The Once and Future King* is not so much to create their personalities as to throw them into sharp relief. When the saint talks, each of the boys' reactions are significant and typical. A conversation about warfare concludes:

"I incline my agreement with Toirdealbhach," said Gareth. "After all, what is the good of killing poor kerns who do not know anything? It would be much better for the people who are angry to fight each other themselves, knight against knight."

"But you could not have any wars at all, like that," exclaimed Gaheris.

"It would be absurd," said Gawaine. "You must have people, galore of people, in a war."

"Otherwise you could not kill them," explained Agravaire. (246)

These comments say more about the individuals making them than about warfare as a subject for discussion: Gareth's kindly and sensible regard for those who have no immediate stake in the conflict is touching and sympathetic; Gaheris has never troubled to think what a world would be like without warfare, and simply reacts with surprise; Gawaine ridicules this interruption of what he considers a glorious part of the noble life; and Agravaire, the sadist, can think only of killing. The roles played by each of these characters later in the novel have their beginning in this conversation.

Like the Wart, Lancelot is a perfect pupil, but for a completely different reason—out of a sense of badness, rather than goodness. His physical ugliness, constantly and consistently insisted upon by White, has provided a fertile source of controversy for commentators. Sprague maintains that it is designed to show that Guenever "is a woman who is not attracted by mere surface beauty" (239). Crane sees something of more universal significance in this odd portrait of the courtly lover: Lancelot "realizes all too clearly the presence within himself of this powerful negative force" and "seems in the long run a man who, despite his tremendously sincere effort to be pure, is either haunted or, at times, overwhelmed by man's incapacity to be so" (100-01). Herschell Woodley Lott takes this a stage further:

White ponders the question, if Lancelot is Arthur's best, what can be expected of the average man? Interestingly, White very skillfully portrays Lancelot's face as misshapen "as ugly as an African Ape" in order to suggest the moral ugliness of the best of men. (25)

There may be something in all of these opinions, but the true solution is more complex. In the first place, Lancelot's ugliness is an exterior symbol of his interior cruelty. White was careful to portray Lancelot, like Agravaire, as a sadist. The difference is that Lancelot is a sadist with a conscience. When he is cruel, as he is to Guenever during their hawking expedition (see *The Once* 348), he instantly feels guilty about it. It gives him something he needs to compensate for, both physically and psychologically, and is the source of his otherwise inexplicable inferiority complex, his belief that he is evil: "I am a bad man, I know," he tells Arthur, "but I was always good with arms. It was a consolation to me in my badness, sometimes, to think—to know that I was the best knight in the world" (487). It is this which makes Lancelot such a good pupil.

Sensing himself to be evil, he is constantly striving to be good. Arthur and the Round Table enable him to forget, temporarily, his own baseness, which is why he loves them so much; Elaine and Guenever, between them, bring this baseness painfully home to him. Yet his love for Guenever, transcending baseness, is "the profound feeling of his life" (405) and cannot be bad in itself. Elaine, on the other hand, reminds him exclusively of the chasm in his soul. It is significant that, when he discovers he has slept with Elaine instead of Guenever, his ugliness becomes even more evident: "When he began to cry, the gross lines of his face screwed themselves up fantastically" (392). This is more than just the feeling of betrayal at losing his virginity, which he would have lost if he had in fact slept with Guenever, as he thought he was doing. Before Lancelot discovers that it is a trick, White observes that "He was miserable" (391), but his horror on finding that it is Elaine, instead of Guenever, is far deeper, since it reflects his perceived baseness without the compensation of a transcendental love.

The ideal system of education combines the best of these pupil-teacher relationships with an enlightened approach to education. From White's point of view, only people with considerable practical experience had any right to be teachers. Throughout his life, he collected techniques, learning such diverse skills as translating medieval Latin and flying aeroplanes. Often, these projects were undertaken in self-defense. In one of his American lectures, "The Pleasures of Learning," he said:

Everything collapsed at a critical time in my life and ever since I have been arming myself against disaster. In case, in the next disaster that jumps on me, to be ready with defense. That is why I learn. . . . It is this sense of danger that makes me do the fantastic things that I have always done all my life. (quoted in *America* 6-7)

The purpose of education, for White himself, was to learn to be self-sufficient. Having received no security from his family, he had to learn to depend on himself, and the motivating force behind this self-education had to come from within himself. Being a hard-earned lesson, he naturally believed it to be one of supreme importance. The skills he acquired were designed to protect him from the world, the hostile world which was always subtly attempting to sabotage his individuality. This is the feeling behind the famous passage from *The Sword in the Stone*:

"The best thing for being sad," said Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you. (*The Once* 185-86)

The importance of experience in education—stressed by the list of things to learn, following immediately upon the above-quoted speech—cannot be overstated. "Education is experience," Merlyn remarks, "and the essence of experience is self-reliance" (41). The Wart's education is based exclusively on this principle, that to learn about people, their virtues and vices, it is necessary to view them from a new perspective, without the natural bias towards one's own species. Consequently, Merlyn's scheme is to transform the Wart into a series of different animals, each of which has a different comment on the human condition. From this patchwork of experience, the Wart gains the various skills and perceptions which will make him an exceptional king.

Since White, when writing, considered himself also a teacher, it would have been unethical for him to describe something of which he did not have practical knowledge. His experience as a fisherman, for example, lends the chapter in which the Wart is turned into a fish a certain credibility, in spite of the fantastic nature of the events narrated. Similarly, his familiarity with the sport of falconry allowed him an interpretation of the hawks—rather convincing, in a strange way—as being like a military élite, with a rough form of military discipline and justice. Reading *The Goshawk* makes one aware that even the mad Colonel Cully is a perceptive characterization, for Gos, White's hawk in that book, is equally dangerous, unpredictable and bad-tempered. For a while, White kept an owl, which he called Archimedes, who turns up as Merlyn's familiar (see Warner 97). Like Merlyn, White had an interest in snakes, but unlike the wizard, was unable to transform his pupils into one of them, and had to be content with the next best thing: "I remember the snake craze well," one of the boys from Stowe recalls, "as we used to wander around the neighbouring countryside looking for

them" (quoted in Warner 67). His knowledge of ants came from the experiments he conducted on them in Ireland, to see whether or not they waged war on each other (see Warner 194-95). His appreciation of geese stems from the amount of time he spent hunting them although, as he relates in the short story "Giving Up Shooting" in *The Godstone and the Blackymor*, his love for them eventually persuaded him to stop killing them.

The Wart's visits to the animals, generally speaking, are concerned with the central theme of might and right. The other episodes are usually straightforward adventures designed to test and reinforce such royal virtues as courage and humility. For example, when deciding what message the goat should bear when escaping from Madame Mim, the Wart shows his selflessness by choosing the single word, Kay, and remaining behind himself. "He did not use his own name because he thought Kay more important, and that they would come quicker for him" (*The Sword* London 87; New York 75). Next comes the Wart's lesson in practical chivalry. He has always wanted to be a knight, partly because of his heroic spirit, and partly because knighthood is the highest ideal to which his society aspires. Merlyn shows him the actual way in which the knights, the "brainless unicorns" (*The Once* 55) fight, without revealing the savagery of actual battle, to which the Wart will later be subjected of necessity. The light tone of the book requires a combat in which no one will really get hurt, and the affectionate, child-like knights, Grummore and Pellinore, are the perfect choices. The ferocity of the combat awakens the Wart's sensitivity, though Merlyn knows perfectly well that they will feel nothing through all the armor they are wearing. The comedy of this scene arises mainly from this discrepancy. On the one hand, both knights are equipped to receive and deal out terrible wounds, but their natures are such that they do not want to do it. "Oh, come on, Grummore," protests Pellinore. "I do think you are a cad not to yield. You know very well I can't cut your head off" (66). The satire is evident, but very gentle; the bitterness is not present here, though Crane argues that "When Pellinore and Grummore fight, the situation is hilarious; but the fact that, at the very sight of each other, they *must* fight is horrifying" (83). There are no grounds for this argument—White was having fun in *The Sword in the Stone*, and such bitterness is reserved for later books in the series.

The ordeal with Colonel Cully is a straightforward test of courage, though the Wart also shows his resourcefulness by distracting the goshawk with a ruse just when he is getting dangerous. The same can be said of the raid on Morgan le Fay's castle (or the Anthropophagi in the

British edition) and on the giant Galapas. The Wart absorbs all his lessons, remaining kindly and willing to learn all his life, and they "strengthen his arm at a crucial moment. For White departs from Malory in one important respect: the sword does not come out of the stone at Arthur's first pull. At that moment his friends come to his aid" (Starr 123). With all the animals giving him advice on how to draw the sword, White is suggesting that the very education Merlyn gave him has enabled the Wart not just to be a good king, but to become king in the first place. This is followed by a chapter in which, according to Crane, "England heaps hoards of useless gifts upon Arthur at his coronation, [and] White is definitely peeping around the corner at the hungry faces which have foregone their food so that the heaping and hoarding tradition might be continued" (Crane 83). This is surely to mistake White's tone grievously. For one thing, the animals' love for Arthur is evident from the fact that they helped him draw the sword from the stone: this is a show of that love. No mention has been made in the entire novel of "the hungry faces"; in fact, when in chapters one and fourteen White describes the villeins, he says that "Everybody was happy . . . neither the villein nor the farm labourer starved" (*The Sword* 130). The animals who give the Wart these gifts do so out of sincere affection for one who has been their friend and listened to their problems, and each is a reflection of the giver's individuality. It is hard to see how "four or five dirty leaves with fleas on them" donated by "An anonymous hedgehog" (211) forces anyone to forego his or her food, nor how the menagerie to which "the Wart's friends resorted in their old age, on wing and foot and fin, for the sunset of their happy lives" (212) can be considered, in the context of the novel, as one of a collection of "useless gifts."

Education is the theme which most clearly gives *The Once and Future King* its structure. *The Sword in the Stone* describes the education which makes the idealistic pursuit of Utopia possible. Merlyn educates the Wart in such a way that he can see the faults inherent in society. When he is king, Arthur tries very hard to rectify these faults, by channeling might for right. "The Queen of Air and Darkness" describes how a neglected education can destroy the potential of that Utopia, for later in the novel Mordred, himself a product of Morgause's neglect, is able to use the unique personalities reinforced by this absence of definite education to his own ends. *The Ill-Made Knight* describes not merely the best example of the Utopian ideal, but also, paradoxically, the means by which it will be destroyed, for it is Lancelot's illicit love which gives Mordred the tool he needs. This destruction is narrated in the final

volume, "The Candle in the Wind." From a chaotic and much-neglected childhood education, White has constructed *The Once and Future King* to illustrate the importance of education for good— or for evil.

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STEINBECK'S ADAPTATION OF MALORY'S LAUNCELOT: A TRIUMPH OF REALISM OVER SUPERNATURALISM

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Part translation, part amplification, and part original invention,¹ John Steinbeck's attempt to translate Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* shares these important characteristics with many of its medieval predecessors in the Arthurian cycle. In addition, like so many genuine medieval works, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* was unfinished at Steinbeck's death, a work-in-progress published posthumously, a work that, while he lived, had disappointed his publishers and agent when it departed from the planned translation of Malory and included twentieth-century themes and characterizations, while retaining its medieval subject matter. As a consequence of his editors' expressed disappointment, Steinbeck abandoned this project.²

Such editorial concern, while regrettable, is understandable, for Steinbeck's *Acts* differs widely from Malory's work, and most especially in the characterization of Lancelot. In this unfinished work Steinbeck retained but redirected Malorian themes—themes which vitally affect his portrayal of Lancelot. These redirected themes are interwoven throughout *Acts*, as they are in Malory; however, in *Acts* the implications are vastly different. Malory portrays Lancelot as a knight who fails to maintain knightly perfection because he keeps faith as a lover, a faithfulness which negates the faithfulness he owes to his vows of knighthood, and to his king. Steinbeck, however, characterizes Lancelot as a mature man who has achieved and is isolated by greatness, a characterization analyzed in detail in other essays.³ This Lancelot is a valiant, but fallible and lonely man. His acceptance of his own humanity represents a triumph of psychological realism, a realism revealed through an analysis of Steinbeck's redirected Malorian themes of magic and power, wisdom and love, and prophecy and Fate.

An understanding of Steinbeck's method of adapting and redirecting Malorian characters and themes sheds considerable light on his characterization of Lancelot. Steinbeck was concerned with making the matter of Britain both clear and contemporary; he determined that he could achieve this goal through the personae of *Acts*.⁴ As Steinbeck