BRITAIN'S TIME: SIR THOMAS MALORY'S
MORTE D'ARTHUR, BOOK VII

In this paper we aim at analyzing the category "time" in one of the books included in Sir Thomas Malory's version of the story of King Arthur and his court of knights. In particular, we will study book VII -"Sir Garethis tale of Orkeney that was callyd Bewmaynes by sir Kay"- from the above mentioned novel, *Morte D'Arthur* (15th. century), one of the most outstanding examples of the "matter of Britain" in the Isles. We have divided our paper into two parts, the first one being a theoretical revision of the concept of time, focusing our attention on four basic types and their relationship with the medieval consideration of "reality". At last, the second section will contain an exploration of the way time was represented in the tale and of the narrative structures present in it.

To start with, we have assumed the statement by Jacques Le Goff (1965: 223) which claims the existence of more than one representation of time inside the medieval conscience. That's why it is convenient to establish a typology of the notion of time in the Middle Ages, taking into account that it has to be very closely related to two factors which dominated the historical conscience of the medieval man: the real and the "marvellous". By that time, two kinds of reality co-existed; one of them physical and apprehensible, the life people lived day by day, a life to work, love, meet other people, learn, and a threatening or hostile life, in fact, because of the frequency of wars or illnesses which caused a great harm to the whole population.

Side by side with it and perfectly embedded in the very heart of the medieval universe, there was another reality, equally threatening but much more attractive, inherited from ancient pre-christian times, fully accepted as part of the social daily order. We are talking about "the marvellous", a world where it is easy to discover all kinds of supernatural elements, magic, prodigies, every mystery surrounding man in his life journey. And this

medieval man finds the mixture of both worlds absolutely natural. There seems to be no problem to accept them, without even the slightest doubt towards that remnant of the imagination composed by fairies, witches, eschatological phenomena and extra-ordinary adventures.

Since we have stated that time is one of the constitutive parameters of the notion of reality, it has to subsequently be structured paying close attention to the kind of reality it is related to. This way, we will have two great time blocks, each one of them linked to the worlds already described: the time we will call real and the marvellous. At the same time, these could be divided into more specific units, i.e. real time into chrono-historical and liturgical-christian and marvellous time into mythological and epic. We shall study these in detail:

A) REAL TIME (CHRONO-HISTORICAL + LITURGICAL-CHRISTIAN)

Medieval men, with their daily lives fully controlled by the Christian church, did not perceive the chrono-historical time (that is, the normal series of events happening in the years or days of their lives) as the only one possible since they were taught from the very beginning to rule their existence according to the standards suggested by priests and the Sacred Scriptures. Thus, every christened individual was made familiar with the concept of "eternity", which meant an immeasurable portion of time, God's personal attribute and the highest human aspiration. That is, we are dealing with an infinite time which was superimposed and ruled over earthly or historical time. Also, people's activities were organized according to the religious calendar, which imposed on them some free days related to important dates in Christ's life. Medieval men felt that the only authentic, valid time was the Christian one, because it not only arranged their lives, but also brought along a projection for the future. A future which, even if unknown, gave their existence a new meaning.

This way, the medieval man was guided by a religious calendar which had previously included Nature's rhythms (a fact that indicates the pre-eminence of agricultural economy in the Middle Ages) and adapted them to the necessities of the Church. Indeed, the timing of the events was submitted to the sequence of the seasons, hidden under the names of the liturgical periods (Advent, Easter, Whitsuntide…). Despite the repetition, year by year, the

same periods could have been understood as a constant cycle in time which started, ended and re-started again, the individual perceived time as "linear and irreversible" (Guriévich, 1990: 133) because he considered chronological time in relation to that future temporal situation of "eternity" and directed his efforts to achieve that goal.

B) MARVELLOUS TIME (MYTHOLOGICAL + EPIC)

The so-called mythological time comes from the mythical past that we may find in the conscience, in the imaginary of each individual. This mythical past was the time in which the key historical events had taken place and the great heroes performed their praiseworthy deeds. The individual started living a mythological time the very moment that an archetypal figure -let's name it myth- was recalled and revived in the present as if it were a tangible reality. Such a representation of the myth "froze" the real time and imposed an extra-temporal time, out of any logical parameter, where the past became the content of the present and there were no clear limits between both temporal subcategories.

Medieval men judged possible a supernatural marvellous life co-existing with their natural real life. So, they also accepted as logical the reversal of the usual and linear course of time, since they believed it was a product of the other side of reality. The epic heroes and other inhabitants of the marvellous life usually go along a time which does not affect them physically, in which coincidence rules over them and forces them to move in an abstract and parallel world to prevent any limitation from regulations or dispositions belonging to real life. Time seems to be "haunted", "bewitched", a dimension in which simultaneity dominates and is not aware of present, past and future, melting them in a great "continuum" deprived of any logical rule.

Time gets fractured into adventures where such a category becomes condensed, consecrating the instant, the moment as its central element. An instant which ceaselessly lasts in time in a cyclical way, when it gets renewed in every adventure happening by chance inside this marvellous reality. This is the point that shows the major difference between real and marvellous time, the preference of the last one for the moment which comes into existence right now, to the detriment of a promise which may occur in an uncertain future. To sum up, we can recognize in the dialectic opposition real time / mar-

vellous time the essence of a society which manifests a subjacent conflict: the confrontation between a Christian ideology that tries to control every part of life, making everything uniform according to its rules and, on the other hand, the social imaginary of the Middle Ages, from a pagan tradition, which refuses to be tyrannized by the Church and emerges as an alternative, a compensation to an extremely brief, insignificant and regularized life.

The temporal context given by certain religious days (Whitsuntide or the Assumption of the Virgin) as final deadline to get objectives, to culminate or start new adventures is a repetitive landmark which sustains the temporal processes in the Arthurian adventure, with some characteristics diverging from the common liturgical order.

Sir Gareth's fable in book VII is a very good example to enter the temporal scope in which Arthurian heroes use to act. His adventure seems to be defined by a proverbial game of ambiguity and concealment as regards the identity of the knight called "Bewmaynes". The character's strange resolution of not revealing his origin to King Arthur and his knightly court situates us in front of a long way in which two parallel processes take place: first, the achievement of the general consideration of the court and the designation of Bewmaynes/Gareth as heroic knight of the Round Table; second, Bewmaynes/Gareth's own quest for an identity in the marvellous setting of the court.

The means to obtain those objectives is none but the uncertain itinerance in the search for adventures ruled by the courteous conventions belonging to the chivalric game. "Each game creates a world" (Núñez Ramos, 1992: 40) and the one in the Arthurian cycle uses the marvellous world as its paradise. Of course, the concept of time is not free from that idea[1]. There's no spatial or temporal restriction constraining the knightly journey. The logic directing the series of events depends only on an angular factor: chance, coincidence.

The final motivations to solve conflicts, the meeting of the beloved lady or the participation in jousts and battles are nothing more but the framework to arrange the precise elements for the journey and its inevitable unforeseen consequences. A series of coincidences renders possible the innumerable

---

[1] Aparece la hiperbolización fantástica del tiempo, se alargan las horas, los días se reducen a instantes y el tiempo mismo puede ser hechizado. […] Lo eternamente inesperado deja de serlo. Lo inesperado es esperado y sólo esperan lo inesperado. (Bakhtin, 1986: 349 & 346)

encounters of Gareth and other knights and, with it, the subsequent jousts. In prototypical locations with a nearly abstract value, such as forest/open country, darkness/brightness, close/open, castle/valley, inside/outside-, the temporal sequence becomes the consecutive meeting of the wandering character and the other competitors in irrelevant "topoi".

As in Lancelot's, Tristram's or Gawain's journeys, Gareth lives in a "dynamic time" which governs his progress when going through frontiers and crossroads. The pattern of construction of scenes is repeated with significant insistence: a challenge responding to an outrage or insult, formulated as a condition for the passage or simply evidenced in the very act of beginning the attack, means the starting point for the reiterative fight, with the opponent's final death or pardon. The circumstances or motivations for the encounter have no real importance; the joust possesses value in itself. Established as a ludicrous and sacred ritual, the adversaries play in search for their heroic identity. The consecration of that instant freezes both opponents' time in a crisis with only one meaning, the one given by the chivalric game. In that "static time" of the dual confrontation, winning only grants the continuity of the winner in the circular eternity of adventure. In Guriévich's opinion (1990: 163), "deed time breaks the course of the current time in the novel: the instant of the adventure is unique, it is the time when the hero has got his chance of being distinguished".

With a rhythm that increases all along the journey, the repetition of violent meetings is suspiciously emphasized. The figure of the hero is no doubt joined to a paradox: the one contrasting his obsessive auto-affirmation with the frailty of his entity as a character. In the ecstasy of the fight, the Arthurian knight reaches the ephemeral glory of his deeds, a glory always in question, waiting for a new encounter, a new crisis where he may defend his place in the Round Table. Once and again, the Arthurian world constitutes a game of hierarchies where Gareth aims at being equal to Tristram, Wade or Lancelot. The hero's identity comes from his noble birth, but it is in the static time of the joust or tournament when he confirms or loses his feeble condition of archetype.

> And therefore y pray you, rebuke me no more, and when ye se me betyn or yoldyn as recreaunte, than may you bydde me go from you shamfully, but erste, I let you wete, I woll nat departe from

you; for than I were worse than a foole and I wolde departe from you all the whyle that I wynne worshyp. […]

A! Fy for shame, fayre damesell! Sey ye nevir so more to me, for and he were as good a knyght as ever was ony I shall never fayle hym in his moste myght, for other I woll wynne worshyp worshypfully othir dye knyghtly in the felde. (Vinaver, 1991: 189 & 197)

After the extraordinary frequency of the fightings, the identity of the forms or the recurrent setting clichés (forest, black lands, big river with only one possibility of crossing, white tower, dangerous castle, etc.), Malory's tale reveals so great a disdain for temporal specification that this turns into atemporal the events he is narrating.

The itinerance of the hero happens in an indefinite place and time, since in this game, rules pay only attention to the conflict between knights or between these and their ladies. The rest of the circumstances and the scene surrounding the schematic narrative nucleus tends mainly to simplification.

In favour of Gareth's great care for acquiring a status of chivalric hero, the inventory of his deeds, the comments of other characters about him, the way he is usually introduced to strangers, the narration of the knights he has defeated seem to appear everywhere. All of them are excuses to summarize his deeds, in an effort to stop the "tempo" of the narration to recall whatever happened before. This is the moment when Gareth accumulates the features of his worthy identity, which starts with his royal origin:

'He is a noble knyght, truly, madam,' seyde the dwarff, 'and but a yonge man, but he is as lykly a man as ever ye saw ony.'

'What is he, and of what kynne,' seyde the lady, 'is he com, and of whom was he made knyght?'

'Madam,' seyde the dwarff, 'he was kynges son of Orkeney, but his name I woll nat tell you as at this tyme; but wete you well, of sir Launcelot was he made knyght, for of none other wolde he be made knyght, and sir Kay named hym Bewmaynes.'

'How ascaped he,' seyde the lady, 'frome the brethyrn of sir Persaunte?'

'Madam,' he seyde,'as a noble knyght sholde. First he slew two bretherne at a passage of a watir.'

'A!' seyde she, 'they were two good knyghtes, but they were murtherers. That one hyght sir Gararde le Breuse and that other hyght sir Arnolde le Bruse.'

'Than, madam, he recountird at the Blak Knyght and slew hym in playne batayle, and so he toke his hors and his armoure and fought with the Grene Knyght and wanne hym in playne batayle. And in lyke wyse he served the Rede Knyght, and aftir in the same wyse he served the Blew Knyght and wanne hym in playne batayle.'

'Than,' sayde the lady, 'he hath overcom sir Persaunte of Inde that is one of the noblest knyghtes of the worlde?'

'Trewly, madam,' seyde the dwarff, 'he hath wonne all the four bretherne and slayne the Blak Knyght, and yet he dud more tofore: he overthrew sir Kay and leffte hym nye dede uppon the grounde. Also he dud a grete batayle wyth sir Launcelot, and there they departed on evyn hondis. And than sir Launcelot made hym knyght.' (Vinaver, 1991: 194)

Finally recognized by his lady, King Arthur and the knights of the court, and by his own brother, Gawain, Gareth flees one more time, among the general surprise, unable to recognize himself, compelled by the certainty that he is lacking something which prevents his total commitment.

Maybe the character thinks that the tale of the excesses of his behaviour accelerates his inclusion in the chivalric legend. Shown as an example in the oral stories told to the court every Whitsuntide, remembered as part of the list of the most distinguished heroes, Gareth, in his effort to stop his ephemeral pilgrimage through history and make it everlasting, looks for the protection offered by the collective memory. The knight is not ignorant of the value of such mechanisms as the constant repetition and increasing of his deeds. The ones around him are mere spectators of those marvellous fights and conquests and they participate in the game in such a condition. Gareth reaffirms himself in each joust, moved by his internal wish to crystallize as a legendary character in front of every possible witness.

> Than the heroude cryed as he were woode, and many herowdys
> with hym: 'This is sir Gareth of Orkenay in the yealow armys!'
>
> Thereby all the kynges and knyghtes of kynge Arthurs party
> behelde and awayted; and than they presed all knyghtes to
> beholde hym, and ever the herrowdys cryed and seyde: 'This is sir
> Gareth, kynge Lottys son of Orkeney!' (Vinaver, 1991: 217-218)

If pervivence in time due to legend constitutes the ultimate priority of each
Arthurian hero, we can also be certain that their presence in Malory's
narration has been very intimately linked to itinerance. Without this casual
movement, their identity is condemned to death and oblivion. Sir Gareth of
Orkney exists as long as he plays the game of adventure [1].

The hero's wedding and, with it, Dame Lyonesse's subsequent request to
King Arthur so as to keep her husband Gareth out of the tournament which
completes the nuptial celebrations mean the end of every possibility of
Gareth's permanence in the narration. Out of the game and the journey, he
disappears from the tale. Then, other knights will have their own
opportunities to show us their abilities.

> But when this justis was done, sir Lameroke and sir Trystrams
> departed suddeynly and wolde nat be knowyn; for the whych
> kyng Arthure and all the courte was sore dysplesid.
>
> And so they helde the courte fourty dayes with grete solempnyté.
> And thus sir Gareth of Orkeney was a noble knyght, that wedded
> dame Lyonesse of the Castell Parelus. (Vinaver, 1991: 226)

---

[1] El juego aparece entonces como el automovimiento que no tiende a un final o una
meta, sino al movimiento en cuanto movimiento, que indica, por así decirlo, un fenó-
meno de exceso, de la autorrepresentación del ser viviente. (Gadamer, 1991: 67). El
juego produce la satisfacción del encuentro con uno mismo y con el mundo, frente a
la sensación de sometimiento, control exterior, dependencia y escisión que va unida
a las conductas utilitarias y al uso de las proyecciones recibidas y nunca del todo
asumidas. (Núñez Ramos, 1992: 36)

This way, the Arthurian world renews its hero-characters. After Sir Lamerok's and Sir Tristram's leaving, they will be the agents who are going to guarantee the preservation through some more books of King Arthur's court.

Alfonso Fernández García (University of Oviedo)

Gabriela García Teruel (University of Vigo-Ourense)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakhtin, M. 1986: *Problemas literarios y estéticos*. Ciudad de La Habana, Editorial Arte y Literatura.

Bal, M. 1985: Teoría de la narrativa. Una introducción a la narratología. Madrid, Cátedra.

Belevan, H. 1976: *Teoría de lo fantástico*. Barcelona, Anagrama.

Gadamer, H. G. 1991[1977]: *La actualidad de lo bello*. Barcelona, Paidós-ICE/UAB.

Guriévich, A. 1990[1984]: *Las categorías de la cultura medieval*. Madrid, Taurus.

Huizinga, J. 1972[1954]: *Homo ludens*. Madrid, Alianza-Emecé.

Le Goff, J. 1965: *La Civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*. Paris.

Le Goff, J. 1985: *Lo maravilloso y lo cotidiano en el occidente medieval*. Barcelona, Gedisa.

Núñez Ramos, R. 1992: *La poesía*. Madrid, Síntesis.

Rubio Tovar, J. 1994: Lo imaginario y lo maravilloso en la literatura medieval. *Anthropos,* 154-155: 121-124.

Ruiz-Doménec, J. E. 1993: *La novela y el espíritu de la caballería*. Barcelona, Mondadori.

Todorov, T. 1970: *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*. Buenos Aires, Tiempo Contemporáneo.

Vinaver, E. ed. 1991[1971]: *Malory: Works*. Oxford, OUP.

* † *