

The Grail Utopia in Southern Germany*

SIMON WILSON

However one defines it—as the search for self-knowledge, for unity with the divine, for inner certainty regarding the mysteries at the centre of Christianity; as the search for wholeness, harmony, for transformation—however one defines the Grail quest, I think it is fair to say that few if any of us have succeeded on it.

Even those who take a purely materialist approach and believe in an object which encompasses all the meanings of the Grail and that this object can be held in one's hands, placed in a box, or locked in a safe, even they have not yet offered us a Grail which convinces.

As for myself, I cannot claim to have reached the goal of my spiritual quest (or indeed to have uncovered a vessel which can only be the Holy Grail).

It has been said however that he who seeks has already found: 'No one searches for nothing. All who search, search for what they secretly already know, search for what they have secretly already found.'¹ The point is to listen very carefully. On the Grail quest this means to listen very carefully to what one's heart already knows, to discern its true voice, and also to learn to recognize illusions and delusions for what they are. By patiently and meticulously attending to the true promptings of the heart, one may become conscious of what is in any case always already there: the centre of one's true self.

My talk is part of the quest. That is, I have, in preparing it and preparing for it, tried to follow the still small voice of the heart, to open myself to it and not to be led astray by other competing voices, such as those of fear, sentimental wish fulfilment, or pride.

But the Grail quest is not today's subject. My talk may be inseparable from the quest, but I intend to speak about another aspect of the Grail: the Grail as centre of a terrestrial order, the *perfect* terrestrial

* This essay is based on a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy, 5 August 2010.

1. Jean Gebser, 'Auf der Suche nach dem neuen Bewusstsein', *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5:2 (Schaffhausen: Novalis Verlag, 1977), p. 55. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.)

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order, a paradise on earth. The proper, natural symbol of this order is not the quest. It is probably more likely to be a structure of some sort housing the Grail at its heart. My subject, then, is the Grail Temple, and specifically the role played by the Grail Temple in Germany.

My focus will be on the idea that the Holy Roman Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian was directly inspired by the Grail Temple of German literature when he founded, in 1330, a monastery church at Ettal, in the very south of Germany. I will attempt to draw out some of the implications of this idea, and then touch upon the ways in which two subsequent Bavarian rulers tried to realize the ideal Grail order in their lands.

The Grail Temple, German writers tell us, stands on the mountain of Munt Salvasch. Around the foot of Munt Salvasch is a defensive wall. Surrounding all this is a wild impenetrable forest. The forest, the wall, the mountain: a series of concentric circles through which only those who have a special spiritual destiny can pass.

This is the land of Salvaterre; and it lies, according to at least one account, in Galicia in Spain, about as far west as you can go on the mainland of Europe. The Grail Temple constitutes the centre of Salvaterre. And at the very centre of the Temple hovers the Grail.

The Grail is served by an elect community of men and women, and especially by the dynasty of Grail Kings, who have been chosen by God and are predestined to enjoy eternal blessings in heaven.

In this temenos—this sacred precinct protected from the vagaries and uncertainties of profane life—the Grail community enjoys heaven right here and now on earth: ‘Earthly paradise had they in the presence of the Grail’, one poet tells us.²

The Grail is the very presence of God on our level of being, and it establishes a seamless connection between earth and the transcendent spiritual realm. So close are the human and the divine in Salvaterre that it must seem to those who dwell there that they already know in their hearts, with complete certainty, what life is like in the celestial paradise.

In my account of the ideal kingdom of Salvaterre I have been exclusively following the German Grail tradition. One of the chief

2. ‘Irdisch paradise heten si bi dem grale . . .’ Quoted in Klaus Zatloukal, *Salvaterre: Studien zu Sinn und Funktion des Gralsbereiches im Jüngerer Tituel* (Vienna: Verlag Karl M. Halosar, 1978), p. 137.

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features which consistently distinguishes German Grail literature from its English—and perhaps also French—equivalents is its focus on this Grail-centred realm at the expense of the court of King Arthur. Arthur and his knights of course appear in medieval and early modern German Grail romances, but they are largely marginalized.³ The Round Table, in the German tradition, constitutes the centre of chivalry, of courtly love, of adventure, and as such is fascinating. It is the epitome of courtly civilization—but, in the end, its values are essentially worldly. They are fragile, transitory, unstable, not centred directly on God like those of Salvaterre. In the literature of medieval and early modern Germany it is Salvaterre, with the Grail Temple at its heart, which is the supreme model of an ideal society suffused from top to bottom with the presence of God.⁴

The Grail-centred community living on Munt Salvasch in the middle of Salvaterre first appears in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, which was probably written in the first decade of the thirteenth century.

But the detailed account of the Temple which so fascinated later commentators, and which continues to enchant—and with which we are concerned today—appears in a work written some 60 years later, between around 1260 and 1275. It is generally called *Jüngerer Titurel* (that is, *The Later Titurel*), and was composed by a man called Albrecht. Apart from this one name, we know next to nothing about him.

In contrast to the ambiguous, quicksilver quality of Wolfram's *Parzival*, Albrecht's poem has a monumental, somewhat static air to it, in keeping with the colossal Grail Temple which is so central to the work.

The Temple, in Albrecht's description, is an impossibly complex structure, given unity by the Grail at its centre.⁵ It was built by Titurel, the first of the Grail Kings, to instructions provided by the Grail itself.

3. See Walter Blank, 'Die positive Utopie des Grals: Zu Wolframs Graldarstellung und ihrer Nachwirkung im Mittelalter,' in *Sprache–Literatur–Kultur: Studien zu ihrer Geschichte im deutschen Süden und Westen; Wolfgang Kleiber zu seinem 60. Geburtstag gewidmet*, ed. Albrecht Greule and Uwe Ruberg (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989), pp. 337–53 (at p. 345).

4. German poets are reluctant to connect King Arthur in any way with the dynasty of Grail Kings: see Zatloukal, *Salvaterre*, pp. 64–5.

5. For Albrecht's description of the Grail Temple see Albrecht von Scharfenberg, *Jüngerer Titurel*, vol. 1, ed. Werner Wolf (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1955), pp. 78–110. A translation into modern German can be found in Steffen Brokmann, *Die Beschreibung des Graltempels in Albrechts 'Jüngerem Titurel': Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung*

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Albrecht relates how, in preparation for the Temple, the top of Munt Salvasch is levelled and polished, revealing that, beneath the rubble accumulated on its surface, it is in fact of pure onyx. On the smooth top of this onyx mountain, Titurel has the Grail Temple constructed. It is a tremendous circular structure, and is built almost entirely of gold and precious stones: sapphires, emeralds, amethysts, rubies, and gems unknown to us. The windows are of beryl inlaid with other precious stones. The jewels and crystals have been chosen, Albrecht tells us, for their specific effects on the souls and senses of those in the Temple: sapphire, for example, enables a man truly to regret his sins and so to overcome his sinful nature.

Around the Temple are placed seventy-two choirs (or individual chapels), the largest one, twice the size of the others, being in the East. It is thus an immense, seventy-two-sided, shining and sparkling polygon.

Sculpted on the interior walls of the Temple we find trees, thick foliage, vines, angels in flight, which resonantly ring out when they are caught by a breeze. The vaulting of the roof is made of blue sapphires inlaid with gems that sparkle like the stars. A golden sun and a silver moon move through these heavens with the aid of a complicated clockwork mechanism. Below the Temple, visible through its crystal flooring, is an artificial sea in which fish and other marine animals—also man-made—appear to swim.

At the very centre of the building hovers the Grail, residing in a miniature version of the Temple.

Albrecht's description is so rich—and I have omitted many of its elements—that an interpretation would take a whole lecture series. But essentially the effect is one of transcendent enchantment in which all the disparate elements—even the aquatic automata—are reconciled into a unified harmonious whole by the central presence of the Grail. In the words of the great Traditionalist René Guénon, the Grail is the 'Heart of the World'.⁶ It radiates pure divine presence, pure being, into the circle of the Temple around it. Under the sway of the Grail, enchanted by the Temple, one is no longer conditioned by material,

des Grads eines Doktors der Philologie in der Abteilung für Philologie der Ruhr Universität Bochum (1999), pp. 53–90. I know of no complete translation into English but a partial translation can be found in Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: The History of a Legend* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 194.

6. René Guénon, *Symbols of Sacred Science*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 14.

merely human existence: the separation and fragmentation symbolized by the Fall and by Babel are overcome. Even death is conquered: the Grail, Albrecht tells us, preserves those who gaze upon it from the depredations of mortality.

Although largely forgotten today, *The Later Titurel* was, in the centuries after its composition, immensely popular and held in great esteem.⁷ By the nineteenth century, however, the work's popularity was waning. In 1829, for instance, Karl Lachmann, a leading medievalist, called the poem 'a tedious, dead and pretentious work'.⁸

But then something interesting happened. As critics were turning against Albrecht's poem, antiquarians and art historians were beginning to be fascinated by its description of the Grail Temple. Despite the fact that it is clearly only possible to realize the Temple if one is directly inspired by the Grail, as Titurel was, some even tried to reconstruct it, on paper at least. Drawings of the Grail Temple were, for instance, published by Sulpiz Boisserée in 1835.⁹ Boisserée was a friend of Goethe's, an art collector, antiquarian, and Gothic revivalist. His was one of the most influential voices calling for the completion of Cologne Cathedral. He imagined the Grail Temple as a huge and ornate Gothic church, a conception clearly influenced by the filigree architecture of Cologne Cathedral (Plate 1).

7. We can see this for example in the number of complete extant manuscripts—eleven, together with 45 fragments. At least one of the manuscripts, from the first half of the fifteenth century, is lavishly illustrated with 85 colour miniatures, of a luxury usually associated with religious works or texts regarded as historical: see James Rushing, 'The Medieval German Pictorial Evidence', in *The Arthur of the Germans: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval German and Dutch Literature*, ed. W. H. Jackson and S. A. Ranawake (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 257–79 (at p. 272). It was also printed in 1477 in Strasbourg, making it an early printed work. In 1462 the nobleman and bibliophile Jakob Püterich von Reichertshausen hailed the poem as 'the crown of German books' ('das haubt ob deutschen püechen'): see Marion Gibbs, 'Fragment and Expansion: Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Titurel* and Albrecht, *Jüngerer Titurel*', *ibid.*, pp. 69–80 (at p. 74). A little later, in 1491, Count Gerhard von Sayn, in his testament, wrote that *The Later Titurel* contained 'the godliest teachings' ('die gotlichste Lere') of all German books, and called on his sons to follow those teachings: see W. H. Jackson, 'The Arthurian Material and German Society in the Middle Ages', *ibid.* pp. 280–93 (at p. 287).

8. 'Ein langweiliges, todtes und geziertes Werk'; cited in Gibbs, pp. 74–5.

9. Sulpiz Boisserée, 'Ueber die Beschreibung des Tempels des heiligen Grales in dem Heldengedicht Titurel Kap. III', *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu München*, Philos.-philol. Classe, 1 (1835).

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Boisserée's drawings, I think, bring out the idea of diversity in unity. The ground plan, with its quartering, captures the ordering presence of the Grail—the Heart of the World—at the building's centre. The circumference is the world of phenomena, divided into four, as was traditional: the four seasons, the four corners of the earth, the four cardinal points, the four elements, etc. It is the centre, radiating out to the wheel of existence, which suffuses all these with significance.

But the antiquarians did not stop with here, with drawings. They began to claim that, some sixty or so years after the poem had been written, the Temple was, at least partially, realized in stone.

In the course of the nineteenth century there emerged, in fact, a consensus among German antiquarians and art historians that the monastery church at Ettal (Plate 2), in the very south of the country, was inspired by Albrecht's Grail Temple. Founded in 1330 as part of a monastery, the church was originally Gothic; after a fire in 1744 it was renovated in the Baroque style, hence its appearance today. It stands in a narrow valley of the Bavarian Alps, some forty-five miles southwest of Munich.

The church at Ettal is a twelve-sided rotunda. The side to the east consists of a choir or chapel. In its original state it probably had a central pillar, and would have resembled the chapter houses of British cathedrals, such as those of Lincoln, York or Wells.¹⁰ Now, although buildings constructed on this plan are not uncommon in Britain, they are extremely rare in Germany: not unheard of, but very unusual.

Ettal, then, would have resembled a reduced and much less ornate version of the Grail Temple.

There is also the nature of the Ettal community to be taken into consideration. It was this which attracted the attention of Sulpiz Boisserée, who was in fact the first to mention Ettal in connection with the Grail Temple. In his study of the Grail Temple in *The Later Tituel*, Boisserée was struck by the similarity of the structure of Albrecht's Grail community to that of Ettal.¹¹ In the poem we find a married Grail King, together with knights and female Grail attendants. This reminded Boisserée of the extremely unusual combination of the chivalric, the worldly and the spiritual, of men and women in the Rule

10. See Father Pius Fischer, 'Die Gründungsidee', *Ettaler Mandl* 49:22 (1970) 27; and Wolfgang Götz, *Zentralbau und Zentralbautendenz in der gotischen Architektur* (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 1968), p. 281.

11. Boisserée, 'Ueber die Beschreibung', pp. 327–8.

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of Ettal, which calls not only for twenty Benedictine monks but also for twelve knights with their wives, and six widows, plus a married master to rule over the knights and a married mistress to rule over their wives.

It is also more than conceivable that Albrecht's Grail Temple would have been in the mind of the man who founded Ettal. Albrecht dedicated *The Later Titurel* to Ludwig II of Bavaria, probably hoping to gain his patronage after difficulties with his initial patrons.¹² Ludwig II was the father of the founder of Ettal, Ludwig IV (generally known as Ludwig the Bavarian). The Grail Temple was in the family, so to speak. Moreover, Arthurian and Grail romances were extremely popular at the court of Ludwig the Bavarian,¹³ and there can be no doubt that Albrecht's poem was read there.

It can certainly be said that there are grounds for believing that Ettal was inspired in some way by *The Later Titurel*. But, to be fair, the grounds as I have so far described them seem a somewhat insubstantial foundation for a structure like the Grail Temple.

But there is the heart yet to be talked about: the centre of the world where heaven and earth are reconciled and eternal, divine order resides, which so speaks to the individual. And of course there is Ludwig's own heart to be spoken of.

Sulpiz Boisserée had discussed a possible connection between Ettal and Albrecht's Grail Temple in 1835. But it was to be the German antiquarian and historian Hyacinth Holland who really established the identity of the two in the minds and hearts of his countrymen. In 1860 Holland published a pamphlet entitled *Kaiser Ludwig der Bayer und sein Stift zu Ettal* ('Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian and the Monastery he Founded at Ettal').

Holland began with the Rule of Ettal, which, like Boisserée, he found astonishingly reminiscent of the community of knights and female Grail servants under a married Grail King, as described by Albrecht.¹⁴

12. Gibbs, 'Fragment and Expansion', p. 76.

13. Heinz Thomas, *Ludwig der Bayer (1282–1347): Kaiser und Ketzer* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1993), pp. 240–43.

14. 'The Rule of this monastery, with its sacred and secular knighthood, is of such a strange nature, and so incomparable with any previous monastic institutions, that one could perhaps suspect that the Emperor had in mind to realise an ideal Munsulvasch [sic] with its temple knights and servants of the Grail' (Hyacinth Holland, *Kaiser Ludwig der Bayer und sein Stift zu Ettal* [München: August Rohsold, 1860], p. 17).

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'This apparently unjustifiable suspicion', he added, 'grows in confidence when one examines more closely the monastic church at Ettal.'¹⁵

Holland provided a reconstruction of the church in its original Gothic appearance in which we can, I think, detect a certain scaled-down similarity to the Grail Temple in Boisserée's drawings—especially, perhaps, in the ground plan, with its east-facing choir (Plates 3 and 4).

After analysing the general form of Ettal, and particular details of the building that need not detain us here, Holland came to the conclusion that the church was inspired by the Grail Temple. That this inspiration did not result in an exact copy need not, I think, concern us: quite apart from the fact that Albrecht's Temple cannot be realized outside the imagination of readers, we have to bear in mind that even the coffers of a king and emperor are not bottomless.¹⁶

Holland did, however, address the heart, the heart as the centre of divine order, radiating out into the precincts surrounding it—and the human heart, the centre of the true self. In particular, of course, he addressed Ludwig's heart.

He did this by raising the logical question: if Ettal was inspired by the Grail Temple, then where do we find the Grail? In other words: where is Ettal's true centre? The answer he proposed was that the church was centred on a statuette of the Madonna and Child,¹⁷ which thereby takes the part of the Grail at Ettal.

The statuette was donated to Ettal by Ludwig himself, and was always intended to be the hub of the community. A legend which goes back at least to the middle of the fourteenth century has it that Ludwig was given the carving by a mysterious monk, who instructed him to build Ettal to hold it. It seemed to Ludwig that the monk was an angel sent by God. After giving him the statue, indeed, the monk vanished before his very eyes.

Holland showed that the miraculous Madonna originally stood on the main altar of the church, and that the altar itself was placed

15. *Ibid.*

16. Holland's trump card is, however, unfortunately erroneous. He believed that Ludwig IV and the poet Albrecht were contemporaries, and that the King (and not his father) was the dedicatee of *The Later Titirel*. This led him to the mistaken conclusion that Ludwig and Albrecht knew each other, and that Albrecht had witnessed the construction of Ettal. See Holland, *Kaiser Ludwig*, pp. 24–6.

17. This is the statuette depicted in Plate 4.

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against the central pillar. Thus, like the Grail in Albrecht's Temple, it was at the very centre point of the church.¹⁸

Holland went on to report certain stories about the statue which were current in the nineteenth century. It was apparently made of a kind of stone which was unknown on earth, having fallen from heaven; it was so beautiful that it could not have been made by human hand; it could only be touched—or indeed seen—by those who are pure of heart. All these, of course, were attributes of the Grail.¹⁹

This divine statue, then, stood at the centre of Ettal, linking heaven and earth and healing, as Holland tells, the bodies and souls of all who came under its enchantment.²⁰ And among those who fell under its spell one finds, of course Ludwig the Bavarian. 'If one wanted to go further,' Holland writes,

one would have, in the Emperor [i.e. Ludwig], burdened by the grave infirmity of his excommunication, also the sick king, the roi pecheur [sic], gaining new strength by looking at the Ettal Grail and . . . forgetting all his political pains.²¹

Although Holland does not commit himself to this idea, he nevertheless offers us a revelation of Ettal as a place which could heal, or at least ease, Ludwig's sufferings. These sufferings were in part occasioned by the constant squabbling and infighting among rival kings which was endemic in the Germany of the time. But, as Holland says, they were largely a direct result of one of the defining facts of Ludwig's life: that he had been excommunicated by the Pope. Ettal, in Holland's view, served to help Ludwig overcome the divisions that he and his land were subject to; it was a place beyond all internecine rivalry, and untouched by tension between the secular and the sacred.

After Hyacinth Holland's little book it became a generally accepted fact, for German contemporaries at least, that Ettal was the Grail Temple. In 1862, for instance, Joachim Sighart, in his monumental history of the fine arts in Bavaria, wrote:

If all the signs are to be believed, the poetical Emperor wanted to found here a worthy building and a group of knights praying for

18. Holland, *Kaiser Ludwig*, pp. 22–3. 19. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 30. 21. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

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and protecting . . . the miraculous statue of the Mother of God, which he had brought with him in emulation of the Holy Grail and the Grail Temple as described in *The Later Titurel*.²²

And in 1865, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, builder of architectural fantasies such as Neuschwanstein, wrote to his friend Richard Wagner describing a walking tour of the mountains:

In the distance, at the end of the valley, towers the church at Ettal from out of the dark verdancy of the pines. Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian is said to have built this church after the plan of the Grail Temple at Mont Salvat;—and there the figure of Lohengrin comes to life anew before my eyes, and Parcival, the hero of the future, I see before my mind's eye, searching for salvation, for the one Truth.²³

We may justifiably enquire whether we can entirely trust the insights of Boisserée, Holland, King Ludwig II *et al.* After all, in their company we find ourselves in some of the deepest thickets of nineteenth-century German Romanticism. Like many others, they lionized the Middle Ages as a kind of Golden Age of the German nation, and saw Gothic art and architecture as embodying this ideal past. They may have been projecting their dreams and desires onto Ettal, just as had happened in the case of Cologne Cathedral: seeing in it a mystical national centre.

I do think there is a certain amount of nineteenth-century wishful thinking here. But I also think the ideas regarding Ettal which I have outlined are essentially accurate. To justify this view I intend to look more closely at Hyacinth Holland's insight: that a Grail-centre offered a kind of solution to the political and spiritual ills of the Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian. The Grail, indeed, was almost the only logical solution.

As you may recall, it is generally believed that Albrecht wrote *The Later Titurel* between around 1260 and 1275. He was thus writing against the backdrop of what is known as the Great Interregnum, an

22. Joachim Sighart, *Geschichte der bildenden Künste im Königreich Bayern von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (München: J. G. Cotta, 1863), p. 357.

23. *König Ludwig II. und Richard Wagner: Briefwechsel*, ed. Otto Strobel, 5 vols (Karlsruhe: G. Braun Verlag, 1936–1939), 1.108.

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unsettled period in which the Holy Roman Empire was for all intents and purposes without leadership, and Germany threatened to fragment completely into a patchwork of petty duchies constantly at loggerheads with each other.

The start of the Great Interregnum is usually dated to either 1245, when the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, was deposed by Pope Innocent IV, or to 1250, the year of Frederick's death. The relationship between the Emperor and the papacy had been uncomfortable for many years. The main bone of contention was the question of who should be regarded as the head of Christendom, its secular, royal representative or its ecclesiastical representative. Under Frederick the conflict had worsened, and, in 1239, in an effort to undermine the Emperor, the then Pope, Gregory IX, had excommunicated him.

For twenty-three years after Frederick's death, until 1273, no generally acknowledged Holy Roman Emperor emerged. The leading dynasties were unable to put forward convincing candidates, and when emperors were elected they were simply not acknowledged by the other families and kingdoms. Meanwhile, the rule of law broke down completely. Princes and bishops vied with each other to see who could raise the most punitive taxes and seize the most territory; robber barons roamed the countryside, ransacking villages; impoverished knights went on kidnapping sprees, living off the ransoms.

Society splintered and plunged into anarchy. Understandably, many German commentators of the time believed that the world was coming to an end and that the Antichrist would appear at any moment. Many blamed the Pope and priests as much as, if not more than, the nobility, which was indeed a fair assessment.²⁴

Even the election of Rudolph IV as Emperor in 1273 could not restore Germany to the relative stability of the pre-Interregnum period. The country's extreme fragmentation, which was to last until well into the nineteenth century, was a direct result of the Great Interregnum.

It is easy to understand Albrecht's poem as an intervention in this chaos. His Grail Temple with its Grail-centred community is the expression of a deep longing for order. But Albrecht does not advocate a return to the older, pre-Interregnum religious and political order. Instead, as we have seen, he describes something quite different: a community which embodies divine order, amounting to heaven on

24. See Zatloukal, *Salwaterre*, pp. 246–50.

earth. On Munt Salvasch 'there is no divergence between the world and God'.²⁵ Instead, there is a seamless continuum emanating from God, through the Grail, to the kings appointed by God Himself to be the keepers of the Grail, and through them to the men and women serving the Grail.²⁶

All of this means, of course, that Salvaterre is not only an exemplary kingdom, a model court, in a way that King Arthur's court is not. It is also independent of the Church. It does not rely on the Church for its legitimation, but directly on God Himself.

This is not to say that Salvaterre represents a centre of opposition to the Church. That is not the case, at least initially. The Temple is built, and its community founded, Albrecht tells us, in the early years of Christianity. The Grail, we are told, is a bowl which was used by Christ at the Last Supper, fashioned out of a mysterious stone brought to earth in ancient times.²⁷ After the death of Jesus it had been in the possession of Joseph of Arimathea, until it was passed on by an angel to Titurel. At this time, Albrecht tells us, the Christian Church was not as widespread as it became later. Of those who were Christians, however, 'all were joined with God'.²⁸

The special status enjoyed by the Grail community consisted in the nature and quality of its relationship with God. The being of every member is transformed by God's presence in their heart. Those living outside Salvaterre know God as natural men can know Him, while the Grail community has been spiritualized, as it were, by His proximity, so that they are no longer subject to the facts of human life, such as mortality. They are celestial beings, but here on earth. The Grail-centred community lives a kind of esoteric, inner Christianity, existing parallel to Church-based religion but in no way in competition with it.

As the centuries passed, the Church disseminated Christianity throughout Europe. But the paradoxical result was a drifting away

25. Joachim Bumke, 'Die Utopie des Grals. Eine Gesellschaft ohne Liebe?', in *Literarische Utopie-Entwürfe*, ed. Hiltrud Gnüg (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), pp. 70–79 (at p. 73).

26. See Blank, *op. cit.*

27. Albrecht's Grail thus reconciles Robert de Boron's conception of the Grail as the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper with Wolfram's description of it as a stone brought from heaven: see Barber, *The Holy Grail*, p. 195. Perhaps we can say that Albrecht conceives of a Grail which belongs to an esoteric tradition which is older than Christianity but which also reaches its highest expression in that religion.

28. 'All . . . mit gote warn vereinet': quoted in Zatloukal, *Salvaterre*, p. 110.

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from the godliness of the early years of Christianity. The West fell further and further into sin, further and further away from God and into chaos, until, Albrecht tells us, in around the year 500 the general sinfulness of the western world forced the Grail, and with it the Temple and its whole community, to abandon Europe for the East, for India.

Albrecht's poem is, then, a specific comment on his age. Its solution to the chaos and sinfulness is divinely ordained kingship and a society drenched in the spirit. He also makes it clear that this kind of realm, namely the Grail-centred community, has no place in Europe, divided as it is between secular rulers like Arthur and an exoteric Church.

But Albrecht does offer an alternative location for the Grail, the Grail Temple and the community: the India of the legendary ruler Prester John. India is the only place on earth which is still open to the Divine Principle, a place where the Grail's voice can still be heard over the clamour of an exoteric Church on the one hand and the noisy demands of secular kings on the other. The India described by Albrecht is Christian, but it is not subject to the debilitating division between the sacred and the secular which has so bedevilled the West. Its ruler is Prester John, and, as his title suggests, he is a priest: in fact, he is priest and king in one.

The figure of Prester John, the ruler of a fabulous Asian realm, appeared in the European consciousness roughly when the Grail did, that is, in the twelfth century.²⁹ It was a response to the same tensions between ecclesiastical and imperial powers as the Grail, and attempted to solve the same problems. In Prester John, as in the Grail, people saw a guarantor of ideal order on earth, and it is no coincidence that the two appeared at around the same time and in the same place.

There are indeed deep parallels between Albrecht's account of the Grail-centred community and his description of Prester John's India. Prester John is essentially an instrument of God's will, as are the Grail Kings. Under Prester John, India is a perfectly functioning, strictly

29. 'Prester John first came to the attention of western Europeans in the work of Otto, bishop of Freising, who wrote that he had been told about him by Bishop Hugh of Jabala, in the crusader states, in 1145. Prester John was believed to be the priest-ruler of a rich kingdom in Asia. In about 1165 a letter began to circulate in western Europe which purported to be from Prester John to Manuel Comnenus, the Byzantine emperor, and to have been forwarded by Manuel to the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. "Prester John" depicted his kingdom as an earthly paradise . . . and explained that he, a priest, controlled both Church and State, including the Church leaders' (Helen Nicholson, *Love, War and the Grail* [Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2001], p. 123).

hierarchical feudal state, which, despite attacks from pagan foreigners, is stable, peaceful and inconceivably rich. It is kept so by enchantment: Prester John's kingdom is filled with magical objects—such as herbs and precious stones—which, like the Grail Temple, have the power to open the individual to the presence of the divine.³⁰

Prester John's kingdom is in essence one great Grail Temple, and its population one great community of the Grail.

Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian, the founder of Ettal, faced the same problems which had beset the Germany of the Great Interregnum, and which had been addressed by Albrecht: rival rulers and antagonistic Popes. His first reaction, as I see it, was to endeavour to defend the status quo, i.e. the institutions of the Holy Roman Empire, and above all, of course, his own position as emperor. Then, symbolically at least, he tried to re-found the Holy Roman Empire, to establish a superior version. When that failed, he turned to the Grail and the ideal kingdom of Prester John.

Ludwig was elected King of Germany in 1314, some 41 years after the end of the Great Interregnum. With that he also became King of the Romans, a title customarily adopted by the Holy Roman Emperor prior to his imperial coronation. His early years as king were marked by attempts to entrench his position as the leader of the German states, and by a series of debilitating and at times humiliating battles against his main rival, Frederick of Austria. Only in 1322 was he finally able to assert himself against Frederick, at which point Pope John XXII, seizing his moment to extend the papacy's power against that of the future Emperor, openly turned on him. In 1323 he called on Ludwig to resign all his titles. When the king refused, the Pope excommunicated him.

Over the next few years Ludwig responded to this devastating event by stressing to the Pope the danger his move posed to the stability of the empire and hence to Christendom.³¹ His attempts to defend the divine nature of the institutions of the Holy Roman Empire having fallen on deaf ears, he next tried to re-establish order by, symbolically at least, re-founding the Holy Roman Empire. He had himself crowned Emperor in Rome in 1328 (it will be remembered that the Pope was languishing in his Babylonian captivity in Avignon at the time). Having done that, he declared that he had been divinely appointed,

30. See Zatloukal, *Salwaterre*, pp. 267ff.

31. See Thomas, *Ludwig der Bayer*, pp. 160, 164.

and thus did not need the Pope to crown him. He declared himself, that is, to be in the same category as Titurel, the Grail King, or Prester John. He went so far as to appoint an anti-pope, Nicholas V.

Ludwig may have placed himself in a position similar to that of a divinely appointed Grail King, but his new Holy Roman Empire was dependent on support from below, from the Roman crowd. Inevitably it turned against him, and he was forced out of the city. He began to run out of money. His men mutinied. He faced hostile armies yet again. And Nicholas, his anti-pope, was captured and taken to Avignon, where he lived out the rest of his days as an ordinary monk.

Humiliated, Ludwig was obliged to flee Italy, his alternative Empire in ruins. He was now surely King and Emperor in name only, and even those hollow titles were not recognized by the Pope.³² He was an absence at the heart of the empire.

His attempts to defend the empire had failed. His founding of a new empire had likewise failed. He turned then to a third, a more mystical alternative. Having fled Italy, and arriving back in Bavaria, he founded the monastery at Ettal.

In founding Ettal, Ludwig established a centre for divine order on earth which was independent of the Church. As you will recall, the legend, almost as old as Ettal itself—or perhaps even contemporaneous—has it that a literally angelic monk presented to Ludwig the statuette of the Virgin and Child, to form the centre of a new foundation. The statuette was—or was regarded as being—heaven-sent, a manifestation of divine will on earth, linking the spiritual and the material.

Ludwig personally laid the foundation stone for Ettal on 28 April 1330. He also seems to have chosen the name for the monastery, 'unser Frawen etal'. The word Ettal consists of two elements—'E' and 'Tal.' The second means 'valley' while the first, in the German of the day, meant 'vow,' 'promise,' 'law' or 'marriage.'³³ The word Ettal, then, contains a complex nexus of ideas: 'unser Frawen etal' means 'The Valley Pledged to Our Lady', 'Promised to Our Lady', 'Sworn to Our

32. Indeed, from 1327 onwards the only title the Pope would allow him was that of 'Ludwig the Bavarian', the title by which he is best known today. This was meant to advertise the fact that Ludwig had been stripped of all royal and aristocratic titles: he was in the eyes of the Pope just a commoner, plain Ludwig who lived in provincial Bavaria.

33. See Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 236–7.

Lady,' 'The Valley Wed to Our Lady,' 'The Valley Under the Law of Our Lady.' The implication is that the monastery and valley thus designated enjoy a special—a new—connection to the transcendent sphere. A new marriage of heaven and earth, a new vow. A new law.

One is reminded of the etymological meaning of the word 'religion'—a tying back, a renewed link with the ground of all reality, with God. But the objective of Ettal was not to be the centre of a new religion. It was rather a centre of a new quality of connection to the realities of Christianity. It did not aim to challenge the Church, it existed parallel to it.

Ettal, then, does indeed have the characteristics of a Grail centre, as portrayed by Albrecht in *The Later Titurel*, establishing a seamless connection between heaven and earth. As in Albrecht's poem, it was built according to divine instructions, by a king who had been, in his own eyes at least, directly appointed by God.

I think we can, then, credit the insights of writers like Sulpiz Boisserée and Hyacinth Holland who held, for example, that the church at Ettal and the Rule of the monastery were inspired by the Grail Temple and the community around it. Nothing could be more natural at a national centre of heavenly order, founded by a man who knew Albrecht's poem, and who was indeed the son of its dedicatee.

And perhaps we now know why Ludwig did it. It was a symbolic act, intended to establish a new kind of order in Germany in the face of a Holy Roman Empire which was imploding and had been doing so for some time. It was an order—a Grail order—which was independent of existing power structures, independent of the Pope and of the kings and princes all vying for wealth and influence.

By building a Grail Temple, Ludwig implies that the Grail can return from India. Ettal can then re-enchant Bavaria and Germany, like one of the jewels in Prester John's kingdom or in the Grail Temple itself, purifying the hearts of the people around it. Germany, then, becomes Prester John's India, and Ludwig is both Titurel, builder of the Grail Temple, and Prester John himself, ruling over a perfectly ordered realm.

Of course Ludwig's actions were symbolic, but that does not mean that they were in vain. On the contrary: while the Holy Roman Empire is long gone, Ettal the symbol continues to hold sway over the imagination, reconciling, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, heaven and earth.

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Ludwig's story of course did not end there. He could not simply ignore the fallen world of constant squabbling beyond Ettal: power-hungry Popes and kings went on eating away at his authority. He continued to assert the divine nature of his position.³⁴ He died in 1347, and if we can credit a contemporaneous German mystic, he would have known that he was passing straight into paradise. Ludwig played a special role in the visions of Margarete Ebner, a Dominican nun in a southern German convent, both before and after his death. Margarete was informed by Jesus himself that he had assured the Emperor of eternal life because of Ludwig's love for him.³⁵ On another occasion the Christ Child told her, 'I will never more leave him, nor here nor there, for he loves me . . .'.³⁶ After Ludwig's death, Jesus informed her: 'He bore me in his heart and so I have surrounded him with my mercy, from which I will never expel him until I have prepared him for eternal life.'³⁷ Jesus tells Margarete Ebner that Ludwig enjoyed his special protection, and that this protection assured him of, and prepared him for paradise. Jesus is saying to the mystic that King Ludwig the Bavarian was a Grail King.

Whatever we choose to make of Margarete Ebner's visions, Ludwig was by no means the last Bavarian monarch to be identified as a Grail King, by others and by himself. Perhaps the Grail continued to work its enchantment on the souls of these later rulers. Periodically, at any rate, they would turn to it as the centre of ideal order—and, naturally, to the vision of themselves as its King. Despite Ludwig's best efforts, however, the Grail seems to have abandoned Ettal. The later pretenders to the throne of Grail King were each faced with the task of re-establishing the order that had, once more, been lost.

Some 160 years after the founding of Ettal, for example, Ludwig's descendent, Duke Albrecht IV of Upper Bavaria, presided over a court which clearly lived in an atmosphere created by courtly poetry. At least one major work seems to have been written for the exclusive use

34. In a declaration of 1338, for example, he asserted that he had no superior on earth: Thomas, *Ludwig der Bayer*, p. 314. In documents he referred to himself as the 'Stellvertreter' of God on earth, a phrase usually reserved for the Pope; 'der Stellvertreter Christi', for example, is German for 'The Vicar of Christ' (Fischer, 'Die Gründungsidee', p. 58).

35. Gertrud Benker, *Ludwig der Bayer: Ein Wittelsbacher auf dem Kaiserthron. 1282–1347* (München: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1997), p. 263.

36. *Ibid.* 37. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

of Albrecht's court to help forge its self-identity.³⁸ Composed between 1481 and the 1490s, Ulrich Fuetrer's *Buch der Abenteuer* (*Book of Adventures*) is a grand synthesis of the stories of the Grail, the Grail dynasty and of Arthur, and is partly based on *The Later Titirel*. It is dedicated to Duke Albrecht and makes repeated and conspicuous references to him and his Munich court. Fuetrer likens his patron not to Arthur but to the Grail King, and his court not to Arthur's court but to that of the Grail community. If the Grail were still on earth, he writes, Albrecht would have to be appointed Grail King: 'Were the noble Grail still on earth, he [i.e. Albrecht] would have to bear its sceptre and crown.'³⁹

There is of course a sadness to these words. At the same time as flattering Duke Albrecht, they show an awareness that the enchantment worked by Fuetrer is a fiction, and not enough to entice the Grail back to Germany. As far as we know, the Duke did not attempt to realize the poetry as his ancestor had, by constructing his equivalent of Ettal, for example. It was enough for him to use the Grail vision to establish the pre-eminence of his Munich court within the existing political framework, and within the world of his own imagination.

Another descendent of the Emperor, however, turned both to art and to ambitious building programmes to try to tempt the Grail back. This Grail King was of course Ludwig II of Bavaria. He, however, had the misfortune to live in the nineteenth century, when the gap between political realities and the romantic Grail utopia was unbridgeable, in the imagination just as much as in the outside world.

As we know, Ludwig II was inspired by the idea prevalent in his time, that his ancestor the Emperor had built Ettal as a Grail Temple. In 1865, aged nineteen, he wrote to his idol Richard Wagner describing a walking-tour in the Bavarian Alps. We have already heard the passage:

In the distance, at the end of the valley, towers the church at Ettal from out of the dark verdancy of the pines. Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian is said to have built this church after the plan of the Grail

38. See Christelrose Rischer, *Literarische Rezeption und kulturelles Selbstverständnis in der deutschen Literatur der 'Ritterrenaissance' des 15. Jahrhunderts: Untersuchungen zu Ulrich Füetriers 'Buch der Abenteuer' und dem 'Ehrenbrief' des Jakob Püterich von Reichertshausen* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1973), pp. 22–3.

39. 'Wär noch zer welt der edel gral, er müest der tragen zepter unde krone'; quoted *ibid.*, p. 22.

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Temple at Mont Salvat;—and there the figure of Lohengrin comes to life before my eyes, and Parcival, the hero of the future, I see before my mind's eye, searching for salvation, for the one Truth.

And he added: 'How my soul longs and thirsts for such works as can re-create those spirits for us . . .'⁴⁰

Ettal creates a longing in the dreamy young King for the return of the Grail dynasty. But it is a longing the monastic church cannot still: clearly the edifice can still enchant, but it is empty. The Grail has gone.

Ludwig, in fact, looked to the mystic power of Wagner's music to bring back the Grail and with it the Grail Kings. Above all, of course, he looked to his friend to revive the Grail King in him, that he might be a re-incarnation of Parcival and fulfil his destiny as a divinely ordained King with Bavaria as his Grail Kingdom. Wagner, indeed, took to calling Ludwig Parcival:⁴¹ Ludwig gladly accepted the name and used it himself.

Ludwig, however, longed for more than private gratification and hoped that Wagner's operas would draw Munich and the whole of Bavaria into this vision.

Ludwig had first attended a performance of Wagnerian opera aged only fifteen, in 1861, when he saw *Lohengrin*. In the third act the title character reveals that he is the son of a Grail King, and sings of Mont Salvat and the Grail Temple. The young Crown Prince was moved to tears.⁴²

In 1864 Ludwig finally met the great man, who took no great persuading that his music had the power to transform the people of Munich. To symbolize this, the city was to be remodelled around his art. A new opera-house was to be built which could cope with the demands of his works, on high ground overlooking Ludwig's capital, which would thus lie at the feet of the harbinger of the Grail. Wagner's music would bring the Grail back; and an opera-house, not a church, would be the new Grail Temple, the new Ettal.⁴³

Ludwig certainly had the money, but in the Central Europe of the nineteenth century a king no longer had the power. Politicians, the press, courtiers and the general public were appalled by the financial

40. *König Ludwig II. und Richard Wagner, loc. cit.*

41. Christopher McIntosh, *The Swan King: Ludwig II of Bavaria* (London: Robin Clark Ltd, 1986), p. 55.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5. 43. *Ibid.*, pp. 48–9.

burden and the influence Wagner had over Ludwig. At the end of 1865 the hostility had reached such a height that the composer was obliged to leave Munich, and would never live there again.

Ludwig's immense castle-building programme was a direct result of these events. If his capital refused to be transformed into the centre of a Grail Kingdom, Ludwig could at least refashion his immediate environment so that he could personally live in an atmosphere of Grail enchantment. As Joscelyn Godwin has written, Ludwig's palaces were in effect 'place[s] of retreat from the public world into a private universe', where the King could 'kindle his imagination'.⁴⁴ Better to be a Grail King in private, after all, than no Grail King at all.

The Disneyesque confection now known as Neuschwanstein was the first palace, a great stage set where he could act his part. Hyacinth Holland, author of the influential book on Ettal as the Grail Temple, was brought in to design the interior decorations. For the so-called Singers' Hall he developed pictures illustrating episodes from the Grail story, turning it, in the words of Christopher McIntosh, into 'a place for the contemplation of the Grail mysteries in a spirit of awe'.⁴⁵ The Throne Room, meanwhile, was a celebration of divine kingship.

The Grail, however, inhabits a temple, not a castle. By building castles Ludwig was tacitly admitting that he was a Grail King without the Grail. When Wagner left Munich, he took with him the power to entice the Grail into returning. Ludwig's castles are overwhelming, but in the end all they mark is an absence, that of Wagner and of the Grail.

Ludwig's visionary life had, as a backdrop, the continuing division of Germany into a series of petty states. There was also a ruthless military force in the background, forging its own solution to the situation, namely the powerful north German state of Prussia under the unstoppable figure of Bismarck. After Prussia had defeated France in the war of 1870/71, the other German states saw no alternative to unification under the leadership of Prussia. Bavaria's days as a truly independent kingdom were over.

By 1873 Ludwig could not even see a future for himself in his private Grail Castles, and initiated enquiries into the possibility of finding some sort of foreign territory to which he could relocate and establish

44. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (Grand Rapids MI: Phanes Press, 2002), pp. 85, 246.

45. McIntosh, *The Swan King*, p. 131.

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a new kingdom. Like the Grail, he would be forced out of his lands by the sinfulness of the Europeans, to find a new home. One could also say that if he could not bring the Grail back to Bavaria, he would have to travel to seek it. Having found the Grail's Kingdom he would then be Prester John, ruling over an enchanted country.

Nothing of course came of the plans, and with his Grail Kingdom—however modest, however private—now untenable, he descended into insanity, leading to what was in effect a palace coup and his mysterious death by drowning in 1886.

I am sure I am not alone in finding Ludwig II's Grail vision a much more attractive solution to Germany and Europe's problems than Bismarck's murderous intervention. But it was the Godless military solution which won out, and would continue to win out for the next seventy years or so, before it was superseded by the Common Market, with its different brand of *Realpolitik*. It does seem that the Grail has been driven from Europe for good.

Perhaps that accounts for the fact that modern man finds it easier to think of the Grail in terms of a personal quest rather than as the centre of a perfect terrestrial order, here and now. Even at the time of Ludwig's ancestor and namesake, Ludwig the Bavarian, the Grail order was essentially nostalgic, a longing for a condition which, as related in *The Later Titurel*, had been lost in the early years of Christianity. The foundation of Ettal, however, was testimony to the confidence that the Grail order could be re-established. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, there was no place for such confidence. The Grail could now only be sought. It was elsewhere, always beyond the conventional framework of life in modern society.

One day the Grail Temple may be built again, initiating a new marriage of heaven and earth. Until then we are left with our personal quests.