Perceval, the errant knight: romancing the rhizome
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Recently, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s figure of the rhizome has been applied to narrative structures. Janet H. Murray suggests that rhizome narratives consist of many stories, thus undermining the sense of a dominant structure or closure.1 Similarly, Wolfgang Kraus remarks that rhizome stories “can be easily changed, retold, de- and reconstructed and are thus open to the future.”2 According to Kraus, rhizome stories “show a narrator erring around in his story, “failing” on the coherent organisation of the telling and never succeeding in getting hold of a coherent agent in this multithreaded story-web.”3 In this paper, which is part of a longer study on grail narratives, I will focus on two of the “roots” of the Perceval story, Chretien de Troyes’ incomplete Le Conte du Graal (Perceval) and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzifal, demonstrating how each functions as a rhizome story as well as part of a dispersed rhizomatic network of grail narratives. The role of erring, as the act of wandering and making a mistake, will be examined in the context of the errant-knight, the errant-narrator and the errant narrative.

In my comparative analysis of these texts, I will focus on the following aspects of the romance as a rhizome story:

1. Quite literally, Perceval is the exemplar of the errant knight, a figure whose wandering quests are driven by the errors he commits, and whose errors drive him to err further. As his quest for the grail demonstrates, error leads to delay, even deferring the possibility of ever completing the quest. Error, in turn, also produces further erring as a proliferate number of participants are called upon to fulfill the quest for the grail, thus renewing and further dispersing the quest. Perceval, the errant knight, produces an errant quest, open to all.

2. The metanarrative is figured as a rhizome. The characteristics of Perceval’s errant course, delay, deferral, proliferation and renewal, are also those of the rhizome as defined by Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze. The rhizome, a plant capable of multiplying itself from multiple sources, suggests a non-hierarchical network: “In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system with a General and without an organizing memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states”.4 Although their strategies differ, I will explore how voices of the narrator in Chretien and Eschenbach prompt the reader to imagine the text as an errant structure, a narrative that has “gone off course” (i.e. reference to sources, references to other narratives, introduction of multiple characters who acenter the narrative, fragmentation, multiple frames of interpretation, multiple concepts of power, mirrored figures, etc).

3. What is the role of errancy? In what ways do Eschenbach and Chretien both create narratives that fail to cohere or lend themselves to closure? In what way is the errant-narrator a double for the errant-knight?

4. In the romance, the Grail functions as a rhizome. It is an object of shifting significance and form, thus indeterminate, open to subsequent interpretation: the product and source of

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3 Ibid.
multiple histories and genealogies. In the two romances to be discussed, it is placed in a variety of contexts, situated among Celtic, Christian and Muslim interpretations of its meaning. Thus, it too can be interpreted as a rhizome. As such, it is both a benign and a potentially lethal force, at the root of a number of subversive effects in various kingdoms, most notably that of Arthur.

5. In the canon, the Grail functions as a rhizome story. The Grail is open to ongoing retellings, deconstructions and reconstructions, all of which have continued for well over eight centuries. Within the canon, the quest for the grail is open, ongoing and subject to reinterpretation, a possibility enabled by its mysterious, open signification. How does such interpretation change our reading of the canon?

6. Finally, it is perhaps the very possibility of the grail as a rhizome/rhizome story that challenges the Arthurian tendency to rootedness, to the notion of a central kingdom and king. The figure of Arthur is dispersed by the grail quest, subject to affiliation with Christ, the Fisher King and hope of a ruler to come. The “once and future king” is acentered and transformed into the one and the many: a figure whose identity is subject to ongoing exploration, thus enabling writers and readers to err in searching for the grail quest and to err as well through the field of the Arthurian genre. To what extent do the “errancy” of the grail legend and the tale of Perceval subvert or transform the Arthurian genre?