CHAPTER 2

Eros, Event, and Non-Faciality in Malory’s “The Tale of Balyn and Balan”

EILEEN A. JOY

To lose our fascinating and crippling expressiveness might be the precondition for our moving within nature, moving as appearances registering, and responding to the call of, other appearances.

—Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, and Subjectivity*

ACCORDING TO ANTHONY GIDDENS, “One of the most obvious characteristics separating the modern era from any other period preceding it is modernism’s extreme dynamism. The modern world is a ‘runaway world’: not only is the pace of social change much faster than in any prior system, so also is its scope, and the profoundness with which it affects pre-existing social practices and modes of behavior.” For Giddens, modernity is essentially a “post-traditional” order, and the resulting “integral relation between modernity and radical doubt is . . . existentially troubling for ordinary individuals.”

is exacerbated further, in Giddens’s view, by the fact that, whereas “in premodern settings . . . time and space were connected through the situatedness of place,” in modernity, time and place have become estranged from each other, leading to a general “disembedding” of social institutions whereby social relations are “lifted out” of local contexts and rearticulated “across indefinite tracts of time-space.”

According to Zygmunt Bauman, the fixed and normative “social standing” that supposedly defines the premodern era is replaced in modernity with “compulsive and obligatory self-determination.” And the end result is “a combined experience of insecurity (of position, entitlements and livelihood), of uncertainty (as to their continuation and future stability), and of unsafety (of one’s body, one’s self and their extensions: possessions, neighborhood, community).” In Bauman’s scheme, late modernity literally “liquefies” the supposed solidity of the premodern past, defined primarily by “traditional loyalties,” estates and classes, communal dependency, and “customary rights and obligations.” As a result, the late modern individual is “reshaped after the pattern of the electronic mole . . . a plug on castors, scuffling around in a desperate search for electrical sockets to plug into.”

For Scott Lash, another contemporary social theorist, the modern individual is a nonlinear “combinard” who “puts together networks, constructs alliances, makes deals. He must live, is forced to live in an atmosphere of risk in which self-knowledge and life-chances are precarious.” Further, he is a nomad who lives in “regularizable chaos” at the “interface of the social and the technical,” a place (or “place-polygamy”) where the self is always fundamentally

---

5. Ibid., 23. Bauman distinguishes between an earlier, more “solid” or “heavy” modernity, in which power required “territory” in which to exercise itself (with “empire,” Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, and the Fordist-Taylorist factory standing in as arch-metaphors), and our more current “light” and “liquid” modernity, in which “power has become truly extraterritorial, no longer bound, not even slowed down, by the resistance of space” (11). Reversing the state of the affairs in an earlier modernity, in which settled majorities ruled over nomadic minorities, in the “fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and extraterritorial elite,” and it is now “the smaller, the lighter, the more portable that signifies improvement and progress. Traveling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their resistance—is now the asset of power” (13).
6. Ibid., 14.
incomplete. Lash is careful to distinguish between what he sees as the individual of the “first” Enlightenment (or, industrial) modernity and the individual of the “second” informational modernity—the first was “institutionalized” through “property, contract, the bourgeois family and civil society” while the second is destabilized through the “retreat of the classic institutions: state, class, nuclear family, ethnic group,” as well as through the general indeterminacy of knowledge, and as a result, he begins to spin in perpetual, self-reflexive motion. This individual of the later, “second” modernity, in Lash’s view, never has time to reflect, only to quickly and reflexively make decisions and choices—decisions and choices, moreover, that must be continuously rethought and rechosen because knowledge is now always uncertain, “probabilistic, at best; more likely ‘possibilistic.’”

In Ulrich Beck’s well-known “risk argument,” a totalizing, globalizing economy—in conjunction with new, accelerated technologies, demystified norms of knowledge, perpetual self-reflexivity, and nontraditional social configurations—has brought about unprecedented social hazards and threats to the planet. In this scenario, individualization is to be understood as a change of biographical patterns in which private existence “becomes more and more obviously and emphatically dependent on situations and conditions that completely escape its reach.” To be a human individual today is to live in “a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment,” but Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim argue that this state of affairs also potentializes the release of individual creativity that, in turn, creates a “space for the renewal of society under the condition of radical change.” Whether or not individual creativity really has any space left for itself in an overcrowded and overdetermined (and increasingly, post/human) modernity remains an open question.

8. Ibid., vii, ix–x.
9. Ibid., x.
12. In relation to this open question, it is interesting to note the current preoccupation, in certain philosophical and other intellectual circles, with “Accelerationism,” a movement that insists “the only radical response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, nor to await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating,
In some of the more influential discourses of contemporary sociology (cited above), the Middle Ages offers a mainly static tableau of supposedly solid traditional loyalties, communal dependencies, highly localized social systems, and settled territorial sovereignties out of which, after various processes of the “liquefaction” of traditional social forms, commitments, and support networks alongside the general “acceleration” of everything else, emerges the posttraditional, late modern individual who is socially disembedded, fundamentally incomplete, perpetually self-reflexive, always at risk, and full of radical doubt. We have had much work in medieval and other studies that offers different and valuably complex accounts of and temporal schemata for the development of modern individuality, not to mention Bruno Latour’s argument that there has never really been a radical break or split with the past. We have also Michel de Certeau’s reminder that Western historiography has worked, perhaps too mightily, on a “labor of separation” between the past and the present, tracing “the decision to become different or no longer to be such as one had been up to that time.” Which is not to say that the modern individual is not much different than the medieval one—this would be a gross simplification (not to mention that “which modern individual, situated where?” and “which medieval individual, situated where?” are questions that already complicate the matter of comparison). As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has written, the choice should not necessarily be between “continuist” and decoding, abstractive tendencies” (Mackay and Avanessian, “Introduction,” in #Accelerate, 4). See also Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, “#ACCELERATE: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,” May 2013: http://accelerationism.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/williams-and-srnicek.pdf.


14. See Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). This is also the argument being advanced, collectively, by the authors and editors of postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies.

“alterist” approaches to the past “when both these metanarratives contain truths about the relation of the medieval to the modern and postmodern.”

I would take this one step further and say that almost all of our notions of time and temporality are insufficient to their weirdness and ungraspability, and therefore most of our attempts to map and trace particular causal-linear histories fail at some level to get at the truth, or essence, of what might be called time’s continual and dissonant “forking.” I borrow the idea of forking time from the political theorist William Connolly, who writes:

In every moment, the pressures of the past enter into a dissonant conjunction with uncertain possibilities of the future. The fugitive present is both constituted by this dissonant conjunction between past and present and rendered uncertain in its direction by it. Often enough that uncertainty is resolved through continuity; but below the threshold of human attention indiscernible shifts and changes have accumulated, sometimes finding expression in small mutations and sometimes in large events. So occasionally time forks in new and surprising directions... A rift through which at any moment a surprising fork may emerge, ushering microscopic, small, large, or world historical shifts into an open future unsusceptible to full coverage by a smooth narrative, sufficient set of rules, or tight causal explanation.

Literary narratives, I would argue, can serve as ideal sites through which to explore the emergence of time’s dissonant conjunctions and surprising forks, arising as they do from minds that are both tranhistorical and rooted in particular times and places, and because literary texts are also objects that, as Jonathan Gil Harris has argued, are inherently polychronic and untimely, looking forward and backward and sideward simultaneously and always “out of joint” with their own “times”—more pleated accordion, or palimpsest, than smooth singularity.


17. Bruce Holsinger’s book The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) is worth noting here for the ways in which it critiques and disrupts the widely held idea of postwar French theory as a type of nouvelle critique that arises out of the historical conditions of the 1960s, when in fact the medieval archive played a huge role in the most important theoretical projects of what we now refer to as postmodern theory. See also Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith, eds., The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

18. Connolly, Neuropolitics, 145.

Malory’s *Morte Darthur* wrote in the fifteenth century and arriving as it did on the heels of so many long-established Arthurian narrative traditions—traditions it labored to absorb, recompile, and also refashion—provides for us, I believe, an exemplary site for excavating the traces of a nascently (or protol) modern human individual who is certainly bound and contained within local and national networks of chivalric tradition and centralized, sovereign authority, but who is also thrust, through aventures, into the “compulsive and obligatory self-determination” of a certain alienating pastmodernity. In this sense, the medieval knight of Malory’s Arthurian “discography” is untimely in just the way Harris describes the handkerchief in Shakespeare’s *Othello*: heterodox time is all “crumpled up” in him. I am inventing here the term “pastmodernity” to evoke a special temporal zone in the so-called “medieval” past in which modernity arrives, as it were, in fits and starts ahead of itself, just as “postmodernity” names a variety of temporalities and world “conditions,” whereby modernity is seen as a becoming-something-else while still remaining in “undead” traction with older social, cultural, political, psychic, and like formations. The present moment, in any time, is therefore partly the sum of certain movements of what Cary Howe calls “traherence,” in which nothing really “gets free of what it ostensibly emerges from” and every Now is simultaneously a “not yet” and a “then.” Indeed, in one of the tales that occurs early on in the *Morte,* “The Tale of Balyn and Balan,” we can detect a certain traction between a sedimentation of traditional systems for both hailing and fantasizing the medieval sovereign subject and the arrival of what Scott Lash has called the nonlinear nomad of late modernity who lives in “regularizable chaos” at the “interface of the social and the technical,” a place (or “place-polygamy”) where the self is always fundamentally incomplete.


22. “Traherence” is a neologism coined by Howe. In this same vein, see also Linda Charnes, “Reading for the Wormholes: Micro-periods from the Future,” where she asks us to “imagine a textual circumstance or event that we’ll call a ‘wormhole,’ in which we can detect an idea whose time arrives in advance of its historical ‘context.’ . . . Future ideas must in some way be ‘embedded’ in the texts of the past in order for us to discern their emergence from the position of hindsight. Such ideas might appear inexplicably as odd blips on the textual radar only to recede without further ado. Or they might crash onto a textual scene, sending up clouds of smoke that demand that attention be paid. The way to read for them is by looking for what seem to be mysterious crash sites: anachronistic ideas and depictions the causality of which remain indeterminate” (*Early Modern Culture: An Electronic Seminar,* Issue 6: Timely Meditations, 2007; http://enmc.eserver.org/1-6/charnes.html).

Balyn is often described as one of Malory’s “lesser” or “minor” knights and even as a kind of “anti-knight,” and he certainly operates within his tale—comic or tragically, depending on your viewpoint—as a kind of free radical from whose hands every imaginable disaster is produced. He is often praised for the “prowess” of his hands, and he certainly is a killing machine, and a reckless one at that; everywhere he goes, heads fall off and bodies are split asunder, either by him, or by others while he is simply watching, perhaps in a state of bewilderment at the mayhem he has unwittingly caused. Indeed, Balyn pretty much never gets anything right, and no matter how many times Arthur and Merlin intervene to try and stop him and give him counsel, he simply and willfully ignores it, and therefore, he cannot be contained—in the ways knights such as Lancelot, Gareth, Galahad, and Gawain are—by what might be called the system or assemblage of Camelot, a system which nevertheless establishes the fairy world through which Balyn moves and acts and for which he claims his every bumbling action and will is directed. He springs, quite literally, from Arthur’s prison, where he first distinguishes himself by being able to pull a sword out of a damsel’s scabbard that no one, not even Arthur, is able to remove, and when he is cautioned not to keep the sword or else it will spell his total ruin, he cheerfully and belligerently submits to the “aventure” of not returning it, at which point he becomes “the knight with two swords,” and then all hell breaks loose. A short summary of the tale, which has a complicated plot line, may be helpful here:

Consider the chain of doleful events: first, he shames Arthur by decapitating the Lady of the Lake in court, in Arthur’s presence; next, he slays an Irish knight, Launcer, in a joust, and allows Launcer’s “damesel” to commit suicide in his presence; he assures safe conduct to Harleus de Berbeus, whom the invisible knight Garlon promptly slays in Balin’s presence; another knight, Peryne de Mounte Belyarde, joins Balin’s company, only to be slain in turn by Garlon; Balin finally meets Garlon visible and quickly slays him, which leads to Balin’s crippling King Pellam by striking him with a “Dolorous Stroke” which not only wounds Pellam but prompts a Godly death-blow which leaves “the peple dede slayne on every side” for miles around; he next comes to the aid of the lovelorn Gareynysh of the Mownte, causing Garnsh not only to slay the woman he loves, but to also commit suicide; and to cap all this Balin slays his own brother Balan.23

What is not included in that summary is that, in killing his brother, Balyn himself is also slain. Despite this seemingly self-destructive trajectory, and because this is an enchanted world—by which I mean, a literary-fabulist one—we can also glimpse in Malory’s text, especially in all of the accidents that punctuate Balyn’s quest, a certain future-oriented “eventual hermeneutics”—the phrase coined by the philosopher Claude Romano to describe the human being as an “Advenant” who is “constitutively open to events, insofar as humanity is the capacity to be oneself in the face of what happens to us.” For Romano, there is no originary “Being” (or being-there) for the human, who instead “happens to his possibilities only from an even greater passability with respect to the events that punctuate his adventure and thus give him a history.”

For Romano, passibility arises from the origin of our self-projecting adventure lying outside ourselves (in birth), and therefore coming before any activity or passivity. It is a “being exposed beyond measure to events, in a way that cannot be expressed in terms of passivity, but precedes the distinction between active and passive.” As such, it is a sort of “pre-subjective opening,” because “a passivity that would be mine . . . is given only in the after-shock and counterblow of the event.”

And this definition of what I would call the contingent human also accords exceedingly well with what Allan Mitchell has written about Balyn in his book Ethics and Eventfulness in Medieval English Literature—that Balyn is “an emphatic example of . . . one who is touched by events. . . . More than most knights-errant, Balin finds himself to be particularly gifted and given over to temporality and exteriority.”

This being “given over” to temporality and exteriority can be seen, especially, in the fact that, although Balyn sets out for his adventures from Camelot,
as most knights do, unlike most of the rest of them, he never returns, and while, at times, he seems completely unconscious of the possible consequences of his often furious and seemingly blind actions, at other times, he appears all too aware that he is giving himself over, almost passively, to the wild contingency of the Outside. Just before passing on to the castle where he will meet his death at his twin brother’s hands, and which castle is fronted by a sign that says, “IT IS NOT FOR NO KNYGHT ALONE TO RYDE TOWARD THIS CASTEL,” Balyon hears a horn blow “as it had ben the dethe of a best,” and he says to himself, “That blast . . . is blowen for me, for I am the pryse—and yet I am not dede.” And then, as is typical for Balyon, he goes right on in. Although he soon “repenteth” that he ever did go in, at the same time, he claims that, regardless of life or death, he “wille take the adventure that shalle come to me” (58, 59).27

In Romano’s “eventual” hermeneutics, which is an elaboration and up-ending of Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics (where Being precedes events and is then projected into them), we can see a beautiful conjuncture with the important trope of “adventure” in Malory’s Morte, which literally founds the knightly individual. Although it is always in Arthur’s court—wherever it is being held—that everyone gathers as a community, self-identity, however tied to that court, can never really be discovered (or uncovered) there. It is always on the Outside—the zone of *aventure* (what Jane Bennett has called a “heteroverse,” as opposed to a “universe”)28—where the social relations of the Arthurian world are “lifted out” of the superstructure of Camelot and rearticulated across indefinite tracts of space-time, represented by chains of endlessly deep and winding forests, hallucinatory tableaux, and the nonlinear “traveling life” of the knight himself. And in Balyon’s story, in particular, Balyon’s claim early on, that “manhode and worship [ys hyd] within a mannes person” (42)—an important claim for the medieval chivalric ideal in general, indicating that honor resides not necessarily in clothing and gear and titles, but within some sort of interior space of personhood—this claim is completely up-ended by the details of Balyon’s own narrative, which seems to argue instead

---


28. “Heteroverse” is a term coined by Jane Bennett to describe how Thoreau conceives of an outside “Wildness”/world that is nonhierarchized. “Heteroverse,” as opposed to “universe” (which implies a world with “rounded” wholeness), suggests “both how heterogeneous elements intersect or influence one another and how this ensemble of intersections does not form a unified or self-sufficient whole. It may also, through the idea of verse, convey the sublime character of this dissonant combination” (*Thoreau’s Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild*, rev. ed. [Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2002], 53).
for the idea, elaborated in Romano's philosophy of the event, that Balyn comes into existence as a person only through that which happens to him, and there is, technically speaking, no “inside” or interior personhood that could precede the events of his own story.

Despite Balyn's own intentions (such as they are minimally articulated throughout his “Tale,” primarily as the somewhat self-destructive desire for, as Balyn himself puts it, the regaining of Arthur's love, regardless of the risks), Balyn’s story highlights the idea that “as one to whom events happen, we are neither simply active nor passive, but live out of a passibility that puts our very selves into play and is a capacity to appropriate our possibilities and thereby advance to ourselves.” Another way of putting this would be to consider that the world is not the place where we take place, but rather, the impersonal events of the world, arriving to us, open us up as encounterable, and thereby also open up the world itself. World and subject open together in events, the chief example of which is our very own births. In the magical zone of adventure in medieval romance, the fictional conceit is that the knight comes into chivalric being as he passes from one site to another, encountering events that supposedly reveal the worthiness he always possessed as he, again, passes through them and supposedly comes more fully into his own being, which is like a thing finally revealed in the world (and which also assumes an Outside, a Nature, that has no distinction until we arrive and take place in it). But I would ask instead, following Romano, that we reverse this ontology and say that it is the world that arrives upon the knight, who can only really advance to himself in the events that can never be predicted in advance. It will have to be admitted that Balyn himself is often wholly impervious and impassable with regard to the possibility of advancing to himself through the events that literally, and without predetermined meaning, happen to him, at which times Balyn is a kind of pure negation who cancels in advance, through his often unwitting violence or inattention, the very possibility of passibility, but he is also a sort of beautiful movement, a sensation that Deleuze might say acts as “a break within the flow of absolute consciousness,” with the absolute consciousness in this case being the assemblage of Camelot.

29. After Balyn has killed the knight Launcelor who pursues Balyn in order to avenge Balyn's decapitation of the Lady of the Lake and his resulting affront to Arthur's honor, and has also watched helplessly while Launcelor's lover Colombe kills herself on Launcelor's sword. Balyn tells his brother Balan, “I am right hevy that my lorde Arthure ys displeased with me, for he ys the mosst worshipfull kynge that regnith now in erthe; and lys love I woll gete—other ellis I woll putte my lyff in adventure” (46).


And Camelot is an assemblage, I would argue, in the way that Manuel DeLanda describes Deleuze’s thinking on such systems: it is characterized by “relations of exteriority,” which imply that “the properties of the component parts [a knight’s “doughty hondes,” for example, or the “fayre foreste,” or the call of a distressed damsel] can never explain [on their own] the relations which constitute the whole [Camelot, or, the “machine” of Arthurian romance], that is, ‘relations do not have as their causes the properties of the [component parts] between which they are established,’ although they may be caused by the exercise of a component’s capacities.”32 A knight or lady, as a singular component, may be plugged into any number of different literary assemblages (other than Malory’s Camelot). Their interactions with other components cannot be predicted in advance, but place these things in relation to each other within the spatial boundaries of a medieval romance (e.g., a knight seeking “aventure” riding through the “fayre foreste” with a lady running toward him and crying out that her lover has been wrongfully killed) and we know what happens next—or rather, that one of just a few outcomes, or further “relations,” can be predicted in advance. There is a good reason, when we teach Arthurian romance, that our students struggle to keep characters, locations, and separate “adventures” straight: they are all, more or less, exactly the same, and only the names seem to change.

There is a high degree of internal homogeneity and territorialization in the world of Arthurian romance, which contains certain well-defined spatial boundaries (there is always a forest, always a castle, always a perilous bridge, always a set of tents in which Arthur can be found holding court, etc.) as well as nonspatial “sorting processes” whereby certain characters are allowed in this world, others are kept out, and face-to-face relations are predetermined to a certain extent by generic scripts that constrain possibilities, but this is not to say, of course, that each medieval romance is not utterly different from every single other medieval romance, which is why it also has to be argued that Malory’s Arthurian world is an assemblage, not only because of its internal homogeneity and symbiosis (which, left to itself, would make that world more of a stratum, or a stone-world), but because it is a system of bodies, actions, passions, statements, expressions, and enunciations that, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “swing between a stratum state and a movement of destratification . . . between a territorial closure that tends to restratify them and a deterritorializing movement that connects them to the Cosmos.”33

It may be that the generic yet highly idiosyncratic Balyn is an agent, or cutting edge, of deterritorialization, a kind of contagion who seeks to carry the whole assemblage away with him by, in a sense, taking the rules of this world to their too-literal extreme and hurrying headlong thereby into the void of his own death—an end predicted to him with dire seriousness several times throughout his tale. During the twin brothers’ penultimate battle on a little island in one of the many no-places of the Arthurian Outside, both Balyn and Balan are wearing borrowed armor and therefore do not recognize each other. And being equally matched, they are wounded and die simultaneously, possibly demonstrating—in a kind of beautiful miniature of the entire genre—that there can finally be no individual lives. There can only be expressions or enunciations of the system, which requires not just death but even the undoing of one’s birth (or of the possibility of being reborn both to and in the world). Indeed, after Balyn realizes he has mortally wounded his brother Balan and falls backward from grief, Balan removes Balyn’s helmet and does not “know him by the visage, it was so full hewn and bledde” (60): for the most part, this is a truly faceless world—Balyn never possessed a face even before his nonface was shredded by his brother, and therefore, the absence of Balyn’s face in this scene figures a sort of sublimely terrifying slippage of faciality that reveals the black box of Arthurian nonsubjectivity (everyone is a “subject” of Camelot, and yet everyone is also no one in particular because everyone is fully exchangeable and expendable). The brothers’ final request, made in one joined voice, is to be buried in one pit together, just as they came into the world, “bothe oute of one wombe, that is to say one moders bely” (60)—which is to say, as if they had never entered the world to begin with, or ever been encountered by the world.

But for me, there is also one moment in Balyn’s story that signifies the spot of a kind of crash landing from the future of the richer possibilities of Romano’s “eventual hermeneutics”—this is the moment when, after Balyn kills the Irish knight Launceor, Launceor’s lover Colombe arrives to announce to Balyn, “Two bodyes thou hast slayne in one herte, and two hertes in one body, and two soules thou has lost,” and immediately after saying this and making “grete dole oute of mesure,” she takes her lover’s sword and after struggling for a bit with Balyn, who is trying to wrest that sword from her, she sets “the pommel to the grounde, and rove hirselff thorowwoute the body” (46). This scene is not, in and of itself, extraordinary within Malory or even the larger corpus of medieval romance. Knights are often accidentally killing someone’s lover—male and female—and you can almost always count on the injured party to show up, give vent to sorrow “oute of all mesure,” and then throw themselves on their lover’s sword, and if enough people are there to witness it, they will
also throw themselves on the ground and shed a reservoir of tears. But what is unique in this scene is that, immediately after Colombe’s suicide, Belyn is so struck with wonder at her will to self-destruction over her love for the dead Launcelot, and so ashamed of himself for causing that self-destruction, that, as Malory writes, “For sorrow he myght no lenger beholde them, but turned bys horse and loked toward a Fayre foreste” (46).

It is only for a moment that Belyn turns away, and the sight of his brother suddenly riding out of the forest toward him quickly breaks the scene, but in that singular instance of both being struck with amazement at the power of eros—of a fierce attachment to the world, and more pointedly, to one particular body in that world, without whom this world has been drained of reason and possibility—and also in turning away from the sight of two particular loving-destroying bodies, Belyn reveals his capacity for what remains unthinkable for him in almost every other moment of his story: the ability to stop, to pause in astonishment at the sight of an event that reveals the wonder of the sudden presence of a body, a being, who is so saturated with herself and her lover’s sword (which is also to say, his body and his things) that she is opting out of the system in order to go on as a lover, even without her body. Further, this scene of erotic, bodily grief and astonishment—as event, even as a cutting through of Belyn himself as an event—determines the strata of Belyn’s world and threatens to literally carry him away. But Belyn’s astonishment, which causes him to turn away from the sight of the very world that we might say he cannot bear, which threatens to carry him away from and back to himself in a new way, is almost immediately broken by the sight of his brother Balan riding toward him out of the “fayre forest,” which, in Malory’s world at least, is the classic route of escape. It is also the image of an incorruptible

34. It is significant, further, that this momentary act of turning away, because Belyn could “no lenger beholde them,” is unique to Malory’s version of the story. In the French prose Suite de Merlin, considered to be Malory’s primary source for this narrative, Belyn does not turn away in his astonishment and the author also qualifies Belyn’s astonishment as being related to Belyn’s surprise that a woman could love so intensely (whereas in Malory, it is the sight of the two dead bodies together that affects Belyn so profoundly, in addition to his shame at having caused the damsel’s grief): “Quand il voit ceste aventure, il ne set que dire: car il est si durement esbassis quil ne set s’il dort eu s’il veille. Car il ne vit onques ou siecle chos n’ont il sesmervillast autant comme il fait de ceste. Si dist que loiaumont amoit la damoisele et qu’il ne cuidoit pas que en cueur de feme peust eneter amour si vraie” [“When he saw this event, he did not know what to say; for he was so astonished that he didn’t know if he were asleep or awake. He had never seen in this world a thing that amazed him as much as this one did. He said to himself that the damsel loved loyally and that he hadn’t thought such true love could enter into the heart of a woman”]: cited from Le Roman de Balain: A Prose Romance of the Thirteenth Century, ed. M. Dominica Legge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), 20; the translation is mine.
beauty, because it is not really a beautiful forest, but an idea of one, seen at a
distance: the very frame of the aesthetic (and inhuman, faceless) narrative to
which Balyn must return.

And the two dead lovers, left behind, shimmer in their eventfulness, which
the narrative hurries to cover over and look away from. The only way for-
ward, then, is to Balyn's own catastrophic death—to be slain himself by his
own brother whom he himself will slay, bringing him back, perhaps ironically,
to this earlier scene in which two hearts in one body and two souls have been
irrevocably lost together (and always will be)—this is the foregone conclusion
of a life devoted to the idea of knighthood, to its aesthetic beauty and chaos
of mistaken identities, and ultimately, its supposedly “higher” impersonality,
which requires death . . .

. . . And yet, because Malory's world re-unfolds each time we return to it
as readers, its events—Balyn's momentary astonishment, which is a sort of sus-
pension of himself (as well as his and his brother's uncannily doubled death,
which is also a return to their mother's womb as if they had never been born
at all)—remain always in the future. The characters are, as it were, shut up
in a narrative in which the same things happen to them over and over again
with no possibility of a different ending—just as every time we read Anna
Karenina, Anna will always jump between the cars of the oncoming train. Yet
there is an apophatic element inscribed in the body of the language of Malo-
ry's (or any literary) text, which we might say is also an important function
of the “event” of Colombes’s suicide and Balyn's astonishment at it—an event,
moreover, that, in John Caputo’s words, is “inexhaustible” and “possessed of
unplumbable depths, an inner restlessness and dynamic by virtue of which
the event is never given a final expression in words and never reaches a final
realization in things.”35 This might also be a new credo for the human individ-
ual as an advenant who desires, not to master the world, nor merely (or overly
aggressively) to project herself into that world (as becoming-human), but
rather, seeks opportunities to well up in the “diachrony of the radically burst
open and non-synchronisable times”36 of events, to take place in the taking-
place of the world. This would be to live both within, and against the grain,
of the genre itself—which is to say, the “romance,” but also history.

83 [73–86].
36. Romano, L’événement et le monde, 65; quoted in Mackinlay, “Event, World, and Place,” 9-