

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LAW OF VERISIMILITUDE

ANSELM OF LAON ON VERISIMILITUDE

In the apodictic tone appropriate to the statement of a universally valid law, Anselm of Laon pronounces in his Lucan commentary that 'omnis scriptor verisimiliter debet scribere', 'omnis, qui narrat, verisimiliter saltim debet narrare'.¹ If verisimilitude is a requirement binding on every writer, regardless of genre, then it follows that for Anselm the difference between history and poetry, to which the commentators of Lucan devote considerable attention, is subordinated to the overriding obligation to narrate in a plausible fashion.²

Anselm's position, which would set verisimilitude higher than factual truth, is derived from rhetorical doctrine. In the system of classical eloquence *verisimilitudo* is one of the three *virtutes narrationis*;³ in the words of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: 'Tres res convenit habere narrationem: ut brevis, ut dilucida, ut verisimilis sit'.⁴ The requirement to narrate plausibly flowed originally from the practical context of forensic or deliberative oratory, where the need to convince judges or other auditors of the rightness of one's cause was paramount; according to Cicero, verisimilitude is a virtue pertaining to that type of *narratio* 'quae causae continet expositionem' (*De inventione*, 1.20.28). The decline in imperial Rome of the institutions where this kind of eloquence was applied, and the concomitant attraction of rhetoric into the ambit of poetry, obscured the original reasons for this connexion between plausibility and persuasion, and made it possible for verisimilitude to be elevated to a law binding on all literature, as it is in Anselm.⁵

The requirement of verisimilitude is satisfied when narrative corresponds to conventional ways of making sense of the world. A narrative is credible, says Cicero, 'si res ad eorum qui agent naturam et ad vulgi morem et ad eorum qui audient opinionem accommodabitur'.⁶ The orator must see to it that the narrated events stand in an adequate causal, temporal and spatial relationship to each other; he must pay due regard to the character, motives and abilities of the persons involved, and must ensure that the representation of time and space is not such as would render the action implausible.⁷ The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* in

particular is adamant that these precepts must be observed even in the narration of true events: 'Si vera res erit, nihilominus haec omnia conservanda sunt, nam saepe veritas, nisi haec servata sint, fidem non potest facere' (1.9.16). If even real facts are not always plausible in themselves, but require rhetorical treatment in order to make them so, it follows that the verisimilar narrative is not a simulacrum of reality, but a representation of the world structured in accordance with prevailing cultural conventions, the 'mos vulgi' and the 'opinio auditorum'. Even the injunction that the orator should respect the 'natura agentium' does not mean that he must necessarily depict people as they are in reality; rather it means that the representation of the characters should be tailored to fit the actions that are to be ascribed to them. Thus, says Quintilian, a person accused of theft must be represented as covetous, an adulterer must appear lecherous, a murderer impetuous, and so on.⁸ Character is perceived through cultural stereotypes.

The real world, which often seems arbitrary, unintelligible and incredible, must therefore be shaped and explained, infused with causality and consistency, if it is to be made decipherable and convincing. This rhetorical position, with its disdain for raw facts, contrasts starkly with the historiographical, which, in spite of its occasional acknowledgment of the rule of verisimilitude, considers the telling of the unadorned factual truth to be the highest obligation.⁹ The *verisimilitudo* aspired to by the rhetoricians is also different from Aristotle's concept of verisimilitude, even though at first glance it may appear to be the same. For Aristotle, poetry is representation, which, following a principle of likelihood (*to eikos*), is able to transcend the particular (*ta kath' ekaston*) and attain universally valid meanings (*ta katholou*). It is this universality that sets poetry apart from and above history (*Poetics*, 1451b). Common to Aristotle and the rhetoricians, then, is the idea that reality requires shaping by the poet or orator, and that this shaping is guided by a principle of verisimilitude. The difference is over the nature of this verisimilitude. Aristotle associates the concept with universality, philosophical truth, and exemplarity; *to eikos* is a category that transcends time and place (1451b, 1461b; see above, pp. 34–35). The rhetoricians, by contrast, are not interested in elucidating absolute and timeless truths, but in persuading an audience of a particular thing (which may in fact not be true) on a particular occasion; as a model of *credibilitas* Quintilian cites Cicero's speech in defence of Milo, noting approvingly that with his eloquence 'iudicem fefellerit'.¹⁰ The *verisimilitudo* cultivated by the rhetoricians is an image of truthfulness that is entirely the product of cultural convention, the orator's discourse, and the effects of his eloquence on the audience. All these variables are bounded by time and place. Precisely because this image of truthfulness is engendered as the listeners measure their experience of the orator's discourse against their experience of the world, we may term it experimental.

The infusion of causality into historical events, so that their narration will have shape and meaning, is the function ascribed by Anselm to the concept of verisimilitude when he introduces it into his Lucan commentary. He notes that once Lucan has concluded his prologue he does not, as he ought, begin the narrative, but first dwells for a while on the origins of the civil war:

Facta propositione et invocatione deberet statim narrare, ut res gesta est; sed prius ostendit quae fuerunt causae huius tanti belli . . . Omnis narratio debet esse vera vel verisimilis. Cum vera esse videtur proponit tales causas, quae possent illos promovere ad bellum et ad discordiam. (Weber, pp. 17–18)

In setting forth the causes of war, Lucan has occasion to describe the characters and motives of Pompey and Caesar, the leaders of the rival factions.¹¹ Since the rhetoricians' precepts for *narratio verisimilis* place great emphasis on the credible portrayal of character and circumstance, it is natural that *figurae sententiae* such as *descriptio personae*, *topographia* and *evidentia* — by which is meant the vivid and detailed depiction of an object, so that the listener feels that he is seeing it with his own eyes (Lausberg, paras 810–19) — should come into their own in the creation of a plausible narrative. Indeed, almost all of the subsequent occasions on which Anselm invokes the law of verisimilitude are concerned with Lucan's use of such rhetorical figures in order to make contentions seem plausible that otherwise would be dismissed as extravagant or improbable. Thus, the character of Curio, his talent and legal knowledge, are described in order to explain why, corrupt though he was, he had so much influence in Rome (*Pharsalia*, iv, 814–15); the vivid depiction of the raging storm — an instance of *evidentia* — explains why Caesar, normally a fearless character, should for once be afraid for his safety (v, 597–677); the portrayal of Erictho as a celebrated witch makes it understandable that even somebody as well versed in magic and divination as Pompeius should want to consult her (vi, 508–68).¹² The same holds for Lucan's descriptions of places: the Rubicon is described by him 'quia omnis scriptor verisimiliter debet scribere' (I, 185, 213–22); the topography of the rivers Genusus and Hapsos in Epirus is said by Anselm to explain why the hostile armies of Caesar and Pompey did not join battle immediately (v, 461–67); the attention paid by Lucan to the vast scale of Caesar's work of circumvallation makes the feat itself seem credible, as well as explaining why the forces of Pompey were able to move camp without even knowing of their confinement (vi, 29–63); the digression into the geography of Thessaly, and how its marshes drained to leave plains, establishes that human habitation is possible even in that mountainous and inhospitable region (vi, 334–80).¹³

From the last chapter it will be recalled that although Anselm considers Lucan to be a historian, for the traditional reasons, he admits that Lucan could nevertheless be called a poet on account of the liberties he takes with geographical description; it was argued further that Anselm's isolation of Lucan's handling of *topographia* was merely symptomatic of an underlying attitude that

identifies all figurative diction with poetic fiction (see above, pp. 64–65, 71–73). We see, then, that in analysing Lucan's employment of rhetorical devices in terms of the contribution they make to the greater intelligibility and credibility of the story, Anselm in effect locates the law of verisimilitude as active at the junction of poetry and history. The process we traced in the *Pharsalia* of exploiting the resources of poetic fiction in order to render intelligible the raw and sometimes random facts of history, a process that certain modern critics wish to connect with Aristotelean notions of *poiēsis* (see above, pp. 80–81), is, in Anselm's understanding of it, dictated and regulated by a rhetorical principle: the requirement, binding on every author, to produce a *narratio verisimilis*.

Gottfried's analogous practice of using poetic devices in order to open up perspectives of meaning on the allegedly historical core of the story of Tristan and Isolde could, it seems to me, equally well be explained as the result of an orientation to this rhetorically inspired law of verisimilitude. A brief examination of Gottfried's use of three figures will give some idea of how, by means of fictional devices, he manages to achieve the consistency in the representation of character and circumstance that we recognize as the hallmark of *narratio verisimilis* or *probabilis*. The three I have chosen for purposes of demonstration are *descriptio personae*, *evidentia* and *digressio*. (The latter, really a *pars orationis* in the classical system of eloquence, appears to have been interpreted as a figure of amplification in the Middle Ages.)¹⁴

In his description of Riwalin, Gottfried lays great emphasis on his *übermuot*, the overweening self-confidence typical of youth, and identifies this dominant personality trait as the cause of his future downfall (262–318). This procedure has been shown by Stanislaw Sawicki to be an example of a specialized technique of *descriptio personae* known by Matthew of Vendôme as *descriptio tempestiva*, which prescribes that a character should be portrayed in such a way as to make credible the subsequent actions in which he or she will be involved; the example given by Matthew is of Callisto, who must be described in all her beauty so that it will appear natural ('ut verisimile sit') that Jupiter should fall in love with her.¹⁵ Indeed, Sawicki considers that in elaborating Riwalin's fatal *übermuot* as the key to an understanding of this character's short and turbulent career Gottfried has gone beyond Thomas significantly.¹⁶ Although it is instructive to have our attention drawn to the link between Matthew's precept and Gottfried's practice, what is missing from Sawicki's account is an awareness that *descriptio tempestiva* is merely a technical device intended to assist the writer in realizing a broader rhetorical principle, namely that a verisimilar narrative is one in which, as Quintilian puts it, 'personas convenientes iis, quae facta credi volumus, constituerimus'.¹⁷

The function of *evidentia* in Gottfried's narrative has been treated by Winfried Christ, who argues that the concrete, extensive detail associated with this figure creates an impression of documentary realism, which in turn heightens the

plausibility of the story. Among the passages of vivid description discussed by Christ are: the narration of Rual's arrival at Tintagel, where the reactions of Mark and his court to the newcomer are progressively described until Rual tells his story and reveals his true identity (3859–4332); the episode of Marjodo's nocturnal discovery of the lovers, in which everything is recounted from his point of view, following the sequence of his thoughts and actions (15511–619); narration from the perspective of the character in the scene of Isolde's gradual realization that the name 'Tantris' is an anagram of 'Tristan' (10088–122); the exhaustive detail in Tristan's demonstration of hunting skills to the Cornishmen (2788–3080, 3169–89). All these passages dwell in the present, allowing the reader to follow the unfolding of events at their pace of occurrence, as though he were experiencing them as an eyewitness, and so contribute to the verisimilitude of the story.¹⁸ To these instances of *evidentia* one might add Gottfried's vivid portrayal of the sea storm that assails the Norwegian merchants: its intensity is reflected in the fear they show and in concrete details such as ships' pitching and tossing and the sailors' inability to walk on deck (2412–39). The emphasis on how the characters are affected by the storm provides adequate motivation for their actions, for the violence of the elements leads the Norsemen to realize that they have sinned by kidnapping Tristan, and they resolve to release him (2440–73).¹⁹

The connexion between amplificatory digression and verisimilitude is well illustrated by Gottfried's finely observed remarks on the corrosive effect on love of doubt and suspicion (13749–852). The excursus is characterized by a movement from the particular to the general and back again. It begins with the depiction of the situation of an individual character: Marke's obsessive doubts and suspicions about his wife and his nephew (13749–76). Then Gottfried interrupts the impersonal narrative to address his audience directly with the question 'waz mag ouch liebe naher gan/dan zwivel unde arcwan?' (13777–78). This gives rise to generalized reflexion on how destructive it is for a lover to fall prey to doubts (13781–90). Such behaviour is 'ein harte unwiser muot . . . ein michel tumphait', maintains Gottfried, but it is also the norm, 'wan daz ez al diu werlt tuot' (13791–93). However, Gottfried continues, even worse than suspicion is certainty, and the lover who sees his worst doubts confirmed would then prefer the state of doubt to the unhappy truth (13797–812). This choice between two evils — it is better to endure uncertainty in love than to know the unpleasant facts (13817–20) — remains purely speculative, though, for nobody could ever make it in reality, according to Gottfried's reasoning. It is, he says, impossible for anyone in love not to be suspicious (13821–24), and it is also love's habitual practice — 'site' (13829) — not to leave go of doubts and suspicions until their truth is confirmed (13829–42). The lover who was not impelled by this destructive will to knowledge would cease to be a lover, and Marke is no exception to the rule:

dem selben sinnelosen site
 dem gieng ouch Marke vaste mite:
 er wante spate unde vruo
 allen sinen sin dar zuo,
 daz er den zwivel unde den wan
 gerne haete hin getan
 und daz er mit der warheit
 uf sin herzecliches leit
 vil gerne komen waere. (13843–51)

With these words, Gottfried returns to the narrative. The difference from the position at the outset is that, in the course of the digression, Marke's individuality and unique circumstances have been reduced to a typical case, with the result that his behaviour gains intelligibility and plausibility because it has been shown to accord with what one would expect everyone else, 'al diu werlt', to do in the same situation.²⁰ The same procedure of abstraction from a particular instance in order to explain it may be observed in other excursuses of Gottfried's into the mentality of lovers, such as the one on *zorn ane haz* as an efficacious means of strengthening the bonds of love (13031–75), or the commentary on how the eyes cannot help but express what the heart feels (16464–98). Here too, human actions as narrated in all their individual variety (Tristan and Isolde's squabbles, their longing glances) become comprehensible as the exemplification of certain fundamental principles that govern behaviour; having set out the rules, all Gottfried has to do is add 'alsus treip Tristan unde Isot', 'als taten die gelieben ie' (13074, 16483), for their conduct to become instantly verisimilar.²¹

Winfried Christ considers that Gottfried's work consists in the rhetorical transformation of the Tristan legend, with the intention of producing a narrative that will be convincing to its public; for him, the truth to which Gottfried lays claim with his romance is the truth of rhetoric, verisimilitude.²² What Christ neglects, however, are specific developments in the vernacular narrative tradition that condition Gottfried's espousal of the oratorical virtue of *verisimilitudo*. Without reference to the literary historical context, Gottfried's poetics of verisimilitude will appear abstract and ahistorical, as though it were nothing more than the automatic consequence of the application of rhetorical art, defined as 'dicere ad persuadendum accommodat'.²³ We have repeatedly emphasized the co-existence in vernacular literature around 1200 of two narrative modes: the archival and the experimental. It is this vernacular context that sets the parameters for Gottfried's poetics, which we have characterized as an experiment with history. In this poetics the law of verisimilitude, before which the difference between history and fiction is unimportant, provided that the narrative is plausible, comes into its own as a means of bringing the two modes together in a regulated fashion. Poetic device expands and explains the material provided by history, making it accessible to experience and thereby plausible.

THE LAW OF VERISIMILITUDE IN THOMAS AND GOTTFRIED

If an orientation to the rhetorical virtue of verisimilitude is implicit in Gottfried's deployment of figurative devices, there is also a passage where he makes his allegiance to this narrative principle explicit. And here he clearly has an antecedent in Thomas, to whom accordingly we turn first.

The passage in question in the French romance is the celebrated one in which Thomas criticizes other narrators of the Tristan story for not following the authoritative version of Breri.²⁴ It is the likely source of the section of Gottfried's prologue that is devoted to 'die von Tristande hant gelesen', given the close verbal correspondences between the French and German:

Nel dient pas sulun Breri
 Ky solt les gestes e les cunttes
 De tuz les reis, de tuz les cunttes
 Ki orent esté en Bretaingne; (Douce, 848–51)
 sin sprachen in der rihte niht
 als Thomas von Britanje giht,
 der aventiure meister was
 und an britunschen buochen las
 aller der lantherren leben. (149–53).²⁵

The two passages also reveal parallels in their manner of argument. Both authors reject existing versions of the Tristan legend in favour of the one given by a named authority. Both connect, but do not completely identify, the reliability of their preferred source with historical scholarship: Breri is described as having knowledge of the history of Brittany, which does not necessarily mean that what he wrote or told was also history, and a similar uncertainty surrounds the way in which Thomas is said by Gottfried to have made use of historical material. Both Gottfried and Thomas avoid making any express statement of dependence on their authority.²⁶

Unlike Gottfried, however, Thomas's essay in source criticism does not form part of a prologue (it is possible that Thomas might have begun his romance with general remarks on the sources he had used; see Bédier, 1, 1), but is occasioned by a difference over a specific narrative detail: the divergence between those who have it that Tristran sent Guvernal to fetch Yseut in order to cure him of his lethal wound, and Thomas, who maintains that the messenger was Kaherdin (Douce, 859–62).²⁷ (Gottfried's *Tristan* breaks off before reaching this point in the story, so that we cannot tell whether he too would have commented on this dispute.) Thomas's resolution of the controversy is prefaced by a general appreciation of the whole tradition, which he professes to know well in all its variety:

Asez sai que chescun en dit
 E ço que il unt mis en escrit,

Mes sulun ço que j'ai oï,
 Nel dient pas sulun Breri . . . (Douce, 845–48)

Then the argument takes a remarkable twist. Thomas does not, as one might expect, declare that he is going to follow Breri; neither here nor anywhere else in the surviving fragments of his Tristan romance does he clarify his relationship to Breri, whom he indeed never mentions again. Instead, he passes straight over to the problem in hand, whether it was Guvernal or Kaherdin who made the urgent voyage to England. The matter is settled not by invoking the authority of Breri, but by appealing to a concept of what is verisimilar and plausible in narrative. Thomas's name for this concept is *raisun*:

Enveiad Tristran Guvernal
 En Engleterre pur Ysolt.
 Thomas iço granter ne volt,
 E si volt par raisun mustrer
 Qu'iço ne put pas esteer. (Douce, 860–64)

The reason why Guvernal cannot have been the messenger is, continues Thomas, that he was so well known in England that he would have been identified immediately, and would therefore be of no use on a mission where secrecy is of the essence (Douce, 865–70). He then formulates his doubts about Guvernal's suitability in the form of a direct question to the audience:

E coment pust il dunc venir
 Sun servise a la curt offrir
 Al rei, as baruns, as serjanz,
 Cum fust estrange marchanz,
 Que hum issi coneüz
 N'i fud mult tost aparceüz?
 Ne sai coment il se gardast,
 Ne coment Ysolt amenast. (Douce, 871–78)

Thomas's question is an invitation to his public to join him in a *Gedanken-experiment*. They are encouraged to picture in their mind's eye a possible world in which Guvernal is the messenger and to imagine how, given the circumstances, he could have carried out his mission successfully. Thomas has tried out this possibility in his head and has come to the conclusion that it cannot be made to work in a way that would not strain all notions of plausibility and credibility in narrative. The inference is that the audience will reach the same conclusions and agree that the author is right to insist that Kaherdin was the messenger. The correct version is arrived at by testing out alternative fictional experiences to see which one appears most plausible in the light of what we know about the characters and their circumstances and how we would expect them to fare in the real world. This experimental and consensual form of truth, which is established by measuring fictional experience against empirical experience, and which Thomas calls *raisun*, is what the rhetoricians call *verisimilitudo*.

Those who disagree with Thomas ‘sunt del cunte forsveié/E de la verur esluingné’ (Douce, 879–80). The argument appears to have changed suddenly, from one in which the variant account is dismissed because it lacks verisimilitude, to one that discounts what others say because it is not true. Thomas oscillates between a rhetorical and — if by *verur* he means factual truth — a historiographical test for which version of the story is to be accepted. Possibly this oscillation between *raisun* and *verur* may be put down to a failure on Thomas’s part to reconcile the two modes of truth, the experimental and the factual. From this passage alone, which is the only evidence we possess, we cannot determine exactly how he viewed the relationship between *raisun* and *verur*, if he ever reflected on it at all. On the other hand, the inconsistency may be only apparent. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1.9.16), it will be recalled (see above, p. 87), states that even with historical facts one must take care to narrate them in a plausible fashion because these facts are often not convincing in themselves (‘nam saepe veritas fidem non potest facere’). The word to note is ‘saepe’: there may be occasions when the unadorned truth *is* convincing. Although rhetorical truth and factual truth are two completely different things, this does not prevent their coinciding from time to time; the point the author of the *Rhetorica* is trying to make is that the orator should never assume that there will always be a coincidence between the two modes of truth, which are fundamentally separate. Perhaps Thomas is seeking to represent his version of events as one of those rare examples of the occasional agreement between verisimilitude and historical truth. If this interpretation is right, Thomas’s argument would be that the version of events proposed by him is preferable in the first place because it is plausible and consistently motivated, and in the second place because it also happens to be factually true in this particular case. This reading, which assumes a hierarchy of instances (verisimilitude is higher than historical truth), is borne out by the rest of the passage, in which Thomas returns to the notion of *raisun* as supreme arbiter in the dispute. If others do not agree with him, he has no desire to quarrel with them: ‘Tengent le lur e jo le men:/La raisun s’i pruvera ben!’ (Douce, 883–84).²⁸

Although it is very likely that this passage from Thomas provided the model for Gottfried’s own critical estimation of the tradition, the prologue to *Tristan* does not contain any term equivalent to Thomas’s *raisun* or Latin *verisimilitudo*. For an explicit statement of the principle, we have to wait until Gottfried reaches a specific point in the story at which he too will diverge from what his predecessors have said: the narration of how the Cornish barons plot to bring about Tristan’s downfall by persuading the king to marry. Gottfried objects to the way others tell the story on two counts: firstly, he does not believe, as these narrators have it, that a swallow flew from Cornwall to Ireland and back again, bringing with it a woman’s hair (8601–15); secondly, he does not agree with the version according to which Tristan and his companions set out in search of the

bride without knowing whom they should be seeking or where (8616–28). Gottfried does not mention any names; those who tell the story in this way are kept anonymous: ‘si lesent an Tristande’, ‘swer saget’ (8601, 8617). Because the version related by Eilhart von Oberge contains the motifs that Gottfried rejects, it has been assumed that Gottfried’s criticism is directed at Eilhart, or at a Tristan romance closely resembling his. Eilhart recounts how the Cornish barons, jealous of the favours shown by Marke to his nephew Tristrant, hope to diminish the latter’s influence at court by persuading the king to marry, even though he has already expressed his wish never to do so and to be succeeded by his nephew. While Marke is pondering how he can best persuade his barons to drop their demand, two swallows chase into the hall, bearing a woman’s hair. Marke sees his opportunity: he announces that he will marry no other woman than the one to whom this hair belongs, thinking that she will never be found. Tristrant and his retinue set out in search of the bride, with no specific destination in view, except that Tristrant gives orders to avoid Ireland, the home of his mortal enemies. After a month at sea, a storm carries their ship close to Ireland, home of Isalde, whose hair it was that the swallows brought to Cornwall (Eilhart, lines 1337–1501).

In Eilhart’s account, the choice of bride and the means of obtaining her are removed from human calculation and control and are decided instead by random forces. But it is not to this causation by aleatory factors that Gottfried objects — his own narrative world is full of sequences set in train by an initial incident that occurs ‘von aventiure’;²⁹ his polemic against the swallow and the voyage with no destination pertains rather to these motifs’ lack of verisimilitude. The denunciation of the first of these is framed as a rhetorical question, which, like the question Thomas had asked about Gubernal’s suitability as a messenger, invites the public to participate in a *Gedankenexperiment*, by which the plausibility of the swallow episode will be tested according to the criterion of Ciceronian *verisimilitudo*:

genistet ie kein swalwe me
mit solhem ungemache,
so vil so si busache
bi ir in dem lande vant,
daz über mer in vremediu lant
nach ir bugeraete streich? (8608–13)

Cicero, it will be remembered, states that a verisimilar narrative is one that fits the nature of the actors in it, the habits of ordinary people, and the beliefs of the audience (see above, p. 86). Nobody believes that it lies within the nature of a swallow to fly such great distances in search of nesting material, and the story therefore falls down: ‘weiz got, hie spellet sich der leich./hie lispet daz maere’ (8614–15). Told in such a way, the narrative would become a *spel*, a fabulous or mendacious tale, and it would lisp, or speak incoherently.³⁰ If it is Eilhart whom

Gottfried is attacking here, he has been misrepresented: the episode as it is told by him involves two swallows, not one, and there is never the merest suggestion that they flew to Ireland to gather nesting material. The motif, which in Eilhart's romance functions as a symbol of the impenetrable force of fate, is subjected by Gottfried to a relentless rationalization, bringing it down to the level of consensual perceptions of everyday reality, and so making it appear ridiculous.³¹ The same assumption of rational motivation underlies Gottfried's polemic against the story that Tristan and his companions set out in search of an unknown bride of unknown whereabouts; he condemns it for being absurd, 'alwaere' (8616). It is not to be expected that people should behave in such a way:

ja waerens alle samet gewesen,
der künic, ders uz sande,
sin rat von dem lande,
die boten gouche unde soten,
waerens also gewesen boten. (8624–28)

Cicero (*De inventione*, 1.21.29) and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1.9.16) teach that a narrative will be plausible if, among other things, the orator pays heed to the 'personarum dignitates', by which they mean that a person's behaviour must be seen to accord with his rank. Gottfried's argument is that if the story is told in the manner criticized by him, then the actions of the king, his advisers and his messengers will be out of keeping with their standing and will become an object of ridicule.

The narrative principle that Thomas calls *raisun* is expressed by Gottfried *e contrario* by the words *spellen*, *lispen*, *alwaere*, which designate a mode of storytelling that infringes the law of verisimilitude. Like Thomas, Gottfried does not invoke the authority of a reliable source in order to dismiss what he sees as errors: it is not the truth of these events that is principally at issue, it is their plausibility. Nevertheless, as with Thomas, there is an indication that, on a subordinate level of the argument, Gottfried considers the version he criticizes to be false as well. A *spel* — Gottfried's derogatory term for the tale of the swallow and the hair — can be an untrue story,³² and of the author who insists on the motif of the voyage with no destination Gottfried says: 'waz rach er an den buochen,/der diz hiez schriben unde lesen?' (8622–23). What kind of books Gottfried has in mind is not clear, but one undertone in this statement might be that whoever tells the story in this way deviates from the authoritative and factual version enshrined in written historical records.³³

Gottfried's own version of how a marriage is arranged for Marke avoids the need to include any implausible episodes by using resources already present in the story to motivate the course of events. Not only do his barons want the king to marry, they want him to marry a specific person. The choice of Isolde is determined, in the first instance, by the barons' hostility to Tristan. They decide on her, as Gottfried puts it, 'niwan durch Tristandes tot' (8453); how this is so

becomes transparent as soon as they propose that Tristan should be the one to arrange the marriage, for this will deliver him into the hands of his mortal enemies in Ireland (8524–44). The barons' proposal is also motivated from Marke's perspective: Isolde's beauty and accomplishments are already known to him from Tristan's eulogy of her, and he is ready to acquiesce to his courtiers because he thinks that the scheme stands no chance of success and that he will be able to remain celibate and be succeeded by his nephew (8506–22). Then there are the political considerations that the barons put to Marke, however hypocritically: the marriage is desirable because it would end the enmity between Cornwall and Ireland and would eventually bring Ireland under Cornish sovereignty (8489–504). The choice of Isolde as a bride for Marke is thus not a bolt from the blue, but the plausible outcome of human aims and calculations. And since the name and whereabouts of the bride are known from the outset, the motif of the voyage with no destination automatically becomes redundant: Tristan and his retinue head straight for Ireland.

The difference between Eilhart and Gottfried turns on the observation of the law of verisimilitude in the motivation of the story of how a bride was found for Marke. Both authors begin this episode with the same constellation of character and motive: on the one hand the king and the affection and favour he shows his nephew, and on the other the courtiers who are jealous of this special relationship (Eilhart, 1337–43; Gottfried, 5152–61, 8358–64). But whereas Eilhart allows the subsequent action to be determined by external and aleatory forces, Gottfried exploits the potential contained within the initial clash of motives and ambitions in order to represent the episode as a court intrigue where every move, even if it is not always predictable, appears plausible in terms of what we already know about the characters involved.³⁴ Thus even Tristan's willingness to go to Ireland, which might seem surprising in the light of the dangers such a voyage holds in store for him, is of a piece with earlier instances of his reckless behaviour in the face of apparently impossible odds, such as his keenness to fight Morold and his decision to try to have his wound cured by the elder Isolde. The attention Gottfried pays to the depiction of character and motive helps bring about the intelligibility and consistency of representation that define the rhetorical virtue of *narratio verisimilis*.³⁵

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. *Marci Annaei Lucani Pharsalia*, edited by Karl Friedrich Weber, III, 39, 323.
2. Berthe M. Marti, 'Literary Criticism in the Mediaeval Commentaries on Lucan', pp. 251–52.
3. See Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik*, paras 294–334.
4. Edited by H. Caplan (London, 1954), I.9.14. The terms *probabilis* and *credibilis* are also used; see Lausberg, para. 322 (p. 180).
5. On the assimilation of rhetoric to poetics, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, p. 75.
6. Cicero, *De inventione*, I.21.29. Compare the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, I.9.16: 'Veri similis narratio erit si ut mos, ut opinio, ut natura postulat dicemus.'

7. *De inventione*, i.21.29; *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, i.9.16; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, iv.2.52.
8. *Institutio oratoria*, iv.2.52: 'Credibilis autem erit narratio . . . si personas convenientes iis, quae facta credi volemus, constituerimus, ut furti reum cupidum, adulterii libidinosum, homicidii temerarium, vel his contraria, si defendemus.'
9. Marie Schulz, *Die Lehre von der historischen Methode bei den Geschichtschreibern des Mittelalters*, pp. 121–24. She considers that historians who do mention the requirement of verisimilitude are mechanically repeating rhetorical precepts which actually had no application in historiography.
10. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, iv.2.59. The reference is to *Pro Milone*, x.28.
11. Lucan, *Belli civilis libri decem*, i, 120–57. Further references will be given in the text.
12. Weber, p. 323: 'Omnis qui narrat, verisimiliter saltem debet narrare. Quia dixit illum solum tantam Romae habuisse potestatem, ostendit esse non mirum, si hoc fecit, cum nullus tantae indolis esset Romae, neque qui tantum de legibus sciret'; p. 403: 'Quia dixerat Caesarem tam strenuum esse et nullo modo timere, non videretur verisimile, ut unquam timeret; et ut hoc verisimile videretur, immoratus est tantum in illa tempestate'; p. 477: 'Ideo hanc digressionem fecit, quia non esset verisimile, ut tantus homo et tam valens in magica arte veniret ad eam quaerere de futuris, nisi praecelleret ceteras in hac arte'. On sea storms and *evidentia*, see Lausberg, para. 810 (p. 401).
13. Weber, p. 39: 'Superius vocavit Rubiconem parvum, et postea tumidum; et quia omnis scriptor verisimiliter debet scribere, ideo describit Rubiconem; et dicit naturaliter eum parvum, ubi dicit eum parvo fonte cadere, et serpere per imas valles'; p. 383: 'Genusus et Apsus sunt fluvii, quos describit ideo, quia non videretur verisimile, ut, cum ita prope essent tam graves inimici, quin statim concurrerent. Et dicit istos esse in medio; et ne circuire possent, dicit quod prope erant montes, unde urgebantur. Et cito intrant mare'; pp. 424–25. 'Et potuit mutare castra, cum tantum spatii esset ibi, quod et nascebantur flumina ibi et fatigabantur. Quod verisimile est; non enim poterat venire Caesar una die, nisi usque ad medietatem . . . Et ut videretur verisimile, dicit quod tot fuerunt, quod possunt iungere Seston Abydo, scilicet Phryxum pontum implere de terra'; p. 450: 'Et quia ex omni parte erant montes ideo agri diu oppressi sunt a paludibus . . . Nisi enim hoc scriberet, non videretur verisimile, ut ibi etiam habitatio esset'.
14. Edmond Faral, *Les Arts poétiques*, pp. 74–175.
15. Stanislaw Sawicki, *Gottfried von Straßburg und die Poetik des Mittelalters*, pp. 75–78. Matthew of Vendôme, *Ars versificatoria*, i.38–40: 'Si agatur de amoris efficacia, quomodo scilicet Jupiter Parasis amore exarsit, praelibanda est puellae descriptio et assignanda puellaris pulchritudinis elegantia, ut, auditio speculo pulchritudinis, verisimile sit et quasi conjecturale auditori Jovis medullas tot et tantis insudasse deliciis'; also i.73 (referring to *Pharsalia*, ii, 388–90): 'Ut vera dicantur vel veri similia . . . Sicut Lucanus qui Curionem talem describit quod voluntatem civilis belli facile possit intimare' (Faral, *Les Arts poétiques*, pp. 118–19, 135).
16. Sawicki, p. 78. His estimation of Thomas's handling of the description is based on the evidence of the Old Norse saga.
17. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, iv.2.52. See above, p. 87.
18. Winfried Christ, *Rhetorik und Roman*, pp. 284–88.
19. Ingrid Hahn, *Raum und Landschaft in Gottfrieds Tristan*, p. 17, remarks that Gottfried's description of the storm contains fewer concrete details than the Old Norse saga, concentrating instead on how the characters react to the tempest.
20. Compare the interpretation of this excursus by Christ, pp. 55–63. He also emphasizes the movement of the argument from the particular to the general, but then stresses what I see as the speculative content of the digression – Gottfried's demonstration of the preferability of doubt to certainty – in order to conclude that Gottfried's disquisition 'entwickelt keine an der Welterfahrung des Publikums oder der Gesamtdarstellung der Figuren verifizierbare Psychologie' (p. 61). Naturally the claim that a lover will find suspicion a lesser evil than certain knowledge can never be verified because, as we saw, Gottfried's reasoning means that no lover will ever find himself in a position to make the choice; on the other hand, by explaining Marke's behaviour with reference to the norms of 'al diu werlt' and the 'site' of love, Gottfried is surely making a strong appeal to collectively held opinions as the basis for understanding and judgment.
21. The monograph of Lore Peiffer, *Zur Funktion der Exkurse im 'Tristan' Gottfrieds von Straßburg*, GAG, 31 (Göppingen, 1971), also investigates Gottfried's excursuses as a technique that allows the narrator to comment on aspects of the plot; but she sees in this practice an opportunity for Gottfried to set out his personal view of love, rather than an attempt to contribute to narrative verisimilitude.
22. See in particular the section entitled 'Die Wahrheit der Rhetorik', Christ, pp. 330–40.
23. Cicero, *De oratore*, edited by E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (London, 1942), i.31.138. See also Lausberg, para. 33.

24. *Les Fragments du Roman de Tristan*, edited by Bartina H. Wind, Douce Fragment, lines 835–84. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.
25. See Joseph Bédier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*, II, 38, and Werner Schröder, 'Die von *Tristande hant gelesen*: Quellenhinweise und Quellenkritik im "Tristan" Gottfrieds von Straßburg', p. 315.
26. On Gottfried's prologue see above, pp. 49–53.
27. Neither of the surviving 'primitive' versions has it that the messenger was Gurnal; Beroul breaks off before reaching this episode, and in Eilhart the mission is undertaken by Tristrant's 'Wirt' (*Tristrant*, lines 9256–72).
28. Jean Frappier regards the terms *raisun* and *verur* as synonymous, tentatively connecting them with Aristotelean verisimilitude ('Sur le mot "raison" dans le *Tristan* de Thomas d'Angleterre', in *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Honor of Helmut A. Hatzfeld*, edited by A. Crisafulli (Washington, 1964), pp. 168–71).
29. See Walter Haug, 'Aventiure in Gottfrieds von Straßburg *Tristan*', in *Festschrift für Hans Eggers zum 65. Geburtstag*, edited by Herbert Backes, *Beiträge*, 94, Sonderheft (Tübingen, 1972), pp. 88–125.
30. The *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch* glosses *sich spellen* as 'zum spel werden', *spel* as 'erzählung, märchen, lügenhafte und unnütze rede' (II, II, 490–92); for *lispēn* see I, 1010.
31. Gerhard Schindele, *Tristan: Metamorphose und Tradition*, pp. 21–26; Christ, p. 297.
32. Compare, for instance, Ulrich von Zatzikhoven, *Lanzelet*, edited by K. A. Hahn (Frankfurt, 1845), line 8521: 'ez ist ein wârheit, niht ein spel', and *Priester Johannes*, in Friedrich Zamcke, 'Der Priester Johannes', *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der königlichen sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, 7 (Leipzig, 1879), p. 958 'habt ez niht für ein spel, /ez ist genomen von der wârheit' (lines 72–73); for further attestations see the *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, II, II, 491.
33. See D. H. Green, 'Oral Poetry and Written Composition. (An Aspect of the Feud between Gottfried and Wolfram)', pp. 170, 220. An alternative interpretation of line 8622, translating *rechen* not as 'sich rächen' but as 'mit den Händen zusammenkratzen', has been proposed by Gottfried Weber, in his edition of *Tristan* (Darmstadt, 1967): 'Was hat der aus den Büchern (Quellen, Vorlagen) zusammengekratzt, der dies aufschreiben und lesen ließ?' (p. 656).
34. See Rainer Gruenter, 'Der Favorit: Das Motiv der höfischen Intrige in Gotfrids *Tristan und Isold*', *Euphorion*, 58 (1964), 113–28.
35. Attention to consistent and rational motivation of each episode in the narrative was identified by Friedrich Ranke as one of the cardinal characteristics of Thomas's courtly adaptation of the *Tristan* legend that Gottfried built on further; see *Tristan und Isold*, *Bücher des Mittelalters*, 3, pp. 130–31, 133–35, 179–87.