

Violence, Perspective, and Postmodern Historiography in *Raoul de Cambrai*

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I. Violence

“Violence” is notoriously difficult to define. It is in itself a phenomenological term, inscribing reference not only to the concept of an event but also the event’s effect on its victim and a judgment of the event itself. To recognize that complexity is not to undervalue or displace the problem of violence, but to recognize that violence has repercussions, in individual psyches and in the social body, which metamorphose the initial shock into more subtle forms, not necessarily less damaging.

The word’s primary meaning is physical and carnal. A first heuristic definition can be that it pierces skin, and as more than a pinprick. It pierces skin and inflicts serious damage. It may involve more than broken skin: broken bones, including those of the head, may be involved. It implies at least the danger of death, hence the *Song of Roland*’s descriptions of lances through the chest, sword point in the side, sword edge on the head, sword point in the small of the back, and sword whirled about with both hands—instances that allow a historian to list the heroes’ murderous exploits as an anthology of mortal blows (Fossier, *Enfance de l’Europe*, vol. 1, p.124).

This is a masculinist heuristics, specific to the male activity of mounted combat with metal weapons. Physical violence causes other damages that can be called “violations.” Breaking the skin is an attack on the integrity of the body and hence an attack on the person’s identity. After the fact, one is no longer what one was. Neither the body nor the psyche remains self-identical through and beyond violence. Psychic violence is oxymoronic. Intangible, the psyche is not directly harmed by sword, fist, or bullet, and yet it suffers at physical wounding, a psychic supplement of violence. The juxtaposition of “violence” and “violation”

recalls their common etymon, the French *viol* ‘rape.’ That is one physical event all would agree on calling violent that does *not* require the breaking of skin except with very young victims. Skin is in fact a metaphor. It is heuristic for a category whose deconstruction goes back to the phenomenological reduction of the inner and the outer—Jacques Derrida cited Husserl to this effect in the *Grammatologie* (p. 94). Derrida’s unlimited series of metaphors (from “trace” through “invagination” to “spectrality”) that mark the presence of alterity in identity make identifying rape as violence difficult. It also renders difficult consideration of the subject, a topic Derrida generally avoids.

A topos of contemporary theory is the rejection of the distinction between physical, material violence and the symbolic violences of language in particular. One of the rare moments when Derrida disassociates himself from the thought of Emmanuel Levinas is on this point precisely. In the historic 1964 essay on Levinas, “Violence et métaphysique,” Derrida rejects the distinction between discourse and violence. Discourse itself, the discourse of the proper, is ontological, hence in itself and per se violent. Derrida asks if discourse is not violent *originellement*, if it is not the case that war inhabits the philosophical logos itself, even though it is only in that logos that peace can be declared, a problematic that goes back to Heraclitus.¹ The distinction between discourse and violence looks doomed to remain an inaccessible horizon. Nonviolence, rather than the essence of discourse, would be its *telos* at most. Language can only reach towards justice indefinitely, while engaging in violence in itself. “Violence contre violence. *Economie de violence*” (Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” pp. 171 f.).

A textual economy of violence is exactly what we will examine in a bit. Let me cite Derrida’s language epigraphically as marking the topic of my discourse, which retains a certain polemical angle (polemical, rather than *polemos*: observing a certain limit, a verbal limit).

¹ “War is father of all and the king of all; and some he has made gods and some men, some bond and some free” (qtd. in Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 136).

In the *Grammatologie*, Derrida radicalizes the theme and asserts “the unity of violence and writing” as originary (p. 156²). This is not writing in its narrow sense, linear, graphic, and phonetic. It is identified with the social. Any society that simultaneously produces and obliterates its proper nouns and plays with classificatory difference practices “l’écriture en général” (p. 162). Any organized society whatever, then, is violent by definition. “Writing,” in this larger sense, is the originary violence itself. Calling things by their names invokes a system of differences which classifies linguistic and social belonging. In doing so—and this is crucial—it deploys and perpetuates the impossibility of “the vocative point,” of addressing an Other directly without recourse to a social symbolic: talking to them “really,” in themselves, not via the displacement of a social code. Is an ethics of the visage still possible?

Derrida’s assertion of universal violence is based on a binary opposition between the individual and the social. The “vocative point” is an impossible purity (because the individual is posited as an asocial singularity) prior to contact with the social and its grid pattern of identificatory writing. The individual exists prior to the social: that is why “naming” is the originary violence of language, which negates the individual by inscribing him or her as (mere) difference, thereby classifying and suspending the absolute vocative. But is this not an ontologizing of the individual, the postulation of a presocial essence which one would want to address? Who, today, believes in such an essence? Derrida here leaps back behind Lacan and Althusser to a far earlier view of the subject—a view he cites repeatedly—to explain the maneuver of avoiding the topic. The argument needs an essentialist human nature to make possible the criticism that thinking the unique singularity within a system means jettisoning a presystemic proper (Derrida, *Grammatologie*, p. 162).

If writing itself is the first violence, a second violence is the effort to hide it. A third violence is evil, war, indiscretion, rape. It is at this “tertiary level, that of the empirical consciousness, that the common concept

² Editor’s note: all translations from Derrida’s *De la grammatologie* are the author’s. Page numbers refer to the 1967 French edition listed under *Works Cited*.

of violence [. . .] should no doubt be situated” (Derrida, *Grammatologie*, p. 165). Originary violence resides in language; its appearance in the flash of the dagger, in the devastations of war, in the rape of girl or grandmother, in material violences, is merely “tertiary.” A question of identity arises: who speaks here? Lévi-Strauss? Derrida paraphrasing or extending Lévi-Strauss? Derrida writing in his own name? Haidu impersonating one of the two or both?

These initial remarks on the problematics of language and violence in Derrida mark the fusion of social violence and the letter of writing in his thought. It inspires the continuous attack on identity, up to and including *Spectres de Marx* and beyond. This book adds to the sequence of terms whose self-multiplication insistently avoids the ontological “naming” named above, starting with “trace” and going through “invagination,” by adding and now “covering” them (as a pop singer “covers” another singer’s song) with “specter.” Note Derrida’s consistency: if proper naming is violence, he avoids that violence by continually shifting his key term. Of course, the semiosis of the key term relies on the signifying power of all the signs in its cotext. Writing still makes sense, even when the central term’s “propriety” is avoided: the cotext bears the burden of meaning. Derrida, who has specifically argued for an equivalence of philosophy and poetry, is nothing if not a poet in his philosophical practice.

As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, however, in *Spectres de Marx* the figure of the specter is generated by occultation of the very core of Marx’s thought, materialism as a constitutive problem: this the “proper” of Marx (Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” p. 36).³ Derrida claims his occultation performs a “‘radicalization’ of Marx.” As Slavoj Žižek notes in *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?*, it has the practical effect of imposing the “renunciation of any actual radical political measures” (p. 154). Its occlusion renounces the exchange of violence and violation by restricting the field of exchange to the verbal: responses to the material violences of established power are verbal only, confirming the reduction of “revolution” to its metaphoric usage.

³ See also Montag’s discussion in “Spirits Armed and Unarmed: Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*.”

Derrida's deconstruction proceeds by dismantling the ideas that compose Marxism: the opposition of the dominant and the dominated; the concept of social class and the class struggle; and the materialist determination of the superstructure (*Spectres*, pp. 95-97). The "ultimate support" of this ideological system is the notion of identity, the self-identity of a social class.⁴ Derrida himself reduces *Spectres de Marx* to this attack on identity: "[. . .] does everything in my book not come down to problematizing, precisely, every process of identification, or, even, of determination in general [. . .]?" ("Marx and Sons," p. 226). The "guiding thread, the red thread" that runs all the way through the book is the idea of a messianic justice whose value depends on its eluding the sway of "that logic of identity and self-identity" ("Marx and Sons," p. 227).⁵ What is at stake in the serialism of that entire series of metaphors—trace, invagination, spectrality, etc.—is that of discrete identity: naming a singularity.

Violence is defined by the transgression of identity. Identity is necessary for the conceptualization of violence. Identity is not chosen: it indexes one, entering the field of vision from screen left, towards a double phallus of towering power that names us all. Identity is itself a constitutive violence. Violence and identity dance an identitarian *carole*. Deconstruction is another partner, dancing the violence of its dismemberment of another's conjunctions.

It was not Derrida who first tied the knot between language and violence. I want to go back to Charles Sanders Peirce and his familiar trichotomy of icon, index, and symbol ("Logic as Semiotic"). The symbol is roughly the equivalent of Saussure's arbitrary sign: its signification depends on the shared codes of interpreters to vanquish the violence of arbitrariness. The icon's visual resemblance is also subject to interpretation: that grounds the contemporary problematics of representation. The

⁴ "[. . .] ce support ultime que serait l'identité et l'identité à soi d'une classe sociale [. . .]" (*Spectres*, p. 97).

⁵ There are passages in *Spectres de Marx* which raise uncomfortable questions about what Levinas called "*le prophétisme messianique du bourgeois installé*" (which he termed "*hypocrite*").

meaningfulness of the entire system, however, depends on the index. The index—or better, the indexical function—anchors the entire system of signification to referential reality. Pointing anchors language in concrete reality.

The index points the entire system of language to that ultimate reference, “external reality,” not only physically but violently. Let me cite two examples from Peirce. The first is that of the weathervane. As the wind blows on its surface, the index turns to indicate the direction of the wind. The weathervane is a sign of the wind’s force and direction. The second example is aggressive, piercing, and shattering. Take a piece of mould.⁶ Shoot a bullet through it. The bullet hole is a sign of the shot that went through it, an index. Without the shot, no hole. But the hole is there “whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not” (qtd. in Hoopes, *Peirce on Signs*, p. 240). The index is a sign in which physical violence replaces interpretive codes. We can dispense with the interpreter: the hole “means” a bullet went through the material, interpretant or no (Hoopes, *Peirce on Signs*, p. 239 f.).

Violence, aggressiveness, and brutality, terms associated with materiality in Peirce, are also associated with the realism of Duns Scotus and, specifically, with the doctrine of *haecceitas*, “the hereness and nowness” of things as ultimate qualities (*Essential Peirce*, ed. Houser and Kloesel, vol. 1, p. 275). For Peirce, a fact “in its isolated aggressive stubbornness and individual reality” is possessed of unquestionable brutality (*Essential Peirce*, 1:274-75). It is that which is, its “haecceity is the *ultima ratio*, the brutal fact that will not be questioned” (*Essential Peirce*, 1:275 f.).

What occurs between pairs, between two subjects, is “dynamical action, or action of brute force” (Peirce, “Pragmatism in Retrospect,” p. 282). “Every physical force reacts between a pair of particles, either of which serves as index (a sign) of the other” (Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic,” p. 114). Index, violence, conflict, and signification are related. “As experienced, haecceity is known as shock or brute resistance [. . .] [the] nonconceptual experience of dyadic opposition or ‘upagainstness’ [. . .]” (Murphey, “Peirce, Charles Sanders,” p. 74B). For both Peirce and Sco-

⁶ A hollow form for production of shaped objects, e.g., a bullet mold?

tus, haecceity is the principle of individuation: “only individual things have haecceity” (Murphey, “Peirce, Charles Sanders, p. 74B). “Singularity” is a rough equivalent of “the concrete individual,” minus its ideological associations. The singular admits of groupings of multiple singulars.⁷

Dyadism is the structure of narrativity, as in Greimas’s initial narrative semiotics, whose constitutive function is conflict. Peirce contrasts the brutal, aggressive violence of dyadism to the life of the mind. “[E]very intellectual operation involves a triad of symbols” (“Logic as Semiotic,” p. 114). What Peirce calls “semiosis” is “an action [. . .] which [. . .] involves [. . .] coöperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs” (“Pragmatism in Retrospect,” p. 282). Triadism structures “semiosis,” which for Peirce means the fusion of thought and expression, of signification and logic—a kind of “writing,” perhaps. Triadism is also the locus of law, knowledge, and community.

The dyadic, conflictual structure of narrative, as textualized, ordinarily morphs into a more complex, reflective triadicity. The model of the monosemantic exemplum, so important to medievalism, is hard to find: even exempla are polysemantic (Bremond et al., *L’Exemplum*). The agnostic basis of narrative implies the representation of the antagonist’s value scheme. If this representation is inadequate—frequently the case, perhaps the norm—it incites questioning at the least. To some degree, the text’s representation of anti-axiological values make of hybridity a norm of textuality. One might hazard the hypothesis that this incitement offers the essential rationale for narrative.

Neither Derrida’s flattening of violence to a monoplanar phenomenology nor the sharp opposition of physical violence to psychic or symbolic violence can work adequately. Violence as the fatal blow; violence as various degrees of physical struggle; violence as deprivation; violence as enforced labor; violence as ideological assault; violence as the neces-

⁷ “The being of a singular may consist in the being of other singulars which are its parts” (*Essential Peirce*, 2:208).

sary destructiveness of avant-gardism; violence as the multiple breaks and fissures of conventional textuality; violence as repression into which the victim is corraled and coopted; and violence—in some ways the worst, as Derrida sees—as utter silence: all are stations of suffering on a continuum not necessarily linear, archipelagoes among whose islands transfers and exchanges occur all the time. Think of a universal translating machine. The greater the distance the exchange travels, the more monstrous the event appears. But that distance is cognitive and aesthetic: it is not an objective, measurable fact; it depends on the understanding and expectations of parties. The entire process, however, requires recognition of the particular islands involved: both identity and exchange, both identity and spectrality.

Let me return momentarily to Derrida's great teacher, Levinas. In "Esprit et violence" (a text to which Derrida refers), Levinas opposes spiritual life to violence. He cites Eric Weil with respect and admiration for the opposition of violence and discourse (Levinas, "Esprit et violence," p. 18). Violence is not only in the shock of billiard balls, in the storm that ravages a harvest, in a totalitarian state that degrades its citizens, and in wars of conquest that enslave people. "All action is violent," says Levinas, "where one acts as if one were alone in acting: as if the rest of the universe were there only to receive the action; any action is violent which we undergo without being entirely its collaborators" ("Esprit et violence," p. 18).

However profound the differences between Peirce and Levinas, they share a similarity here. Peirce reduces dyadism to two trajectories of conflict—just like Greimas's narrativity. It is when the interpretive function kicks in that things change. Though Peirce alternates between a disincarnated "interpretant" and one who, as flesh and blood, is an individual interpreter, it is when the act of interpretation occurs that discourse appears as the exchanges among sign, object, and the active mind. That is the cognitive axis of community that overcomes the initial brutal, aggressive "upagainstness." That is the step, incremental but real, which allows Levinas to say: "The banal fact of conversation leaves, in one way, the order of violence. This banal fact is the marvel of marvels (*la merveille des merveilles*)" ("Esprit et violence," p. 19). Conversation, Peirce's

regulative community, requires an inclusive recognition of differences; of presences with specific historicities; of interlocutors with the *haecceitas* of specific identities; of shared codes; and of what is most difficult of all today, an acknowledgment of commonality: “conversation” occurs under the implicit sign of universalism. Only then can the other’s visage—Levinas’s key term—be apprehended.

Peirce connects index, singularity, identity, and spectrality, negating the last. An index, he says, “always denotes a reacting singular.” He identifies singular, named identity, citing “such names as Theodore Roosevelt and Rudyard Kipling as singulars. They denote persons who we may roughly say are equally known to you and to me” (*Essential Peirce*, 2:221). Peirce has been led “to suppose that one person preserving an identity through the continuity of space, time, character, memory, etc., has been one singular connected with all these phenomena [. . .] all these phenomena unite to support the hypothesis that there is one singular Theodore Roosevelt quite unmistakable for a phantom or for any other man than himself” (*Essential Peirce*, 2:222).⁸

For me, the denial of spectrality in the assertion of identity has to include identity’s deconstruction, which does not mean its destruction. Identity is not a rock-solid, exclusive, and unified haecceity. No identity today is unitary. The claim of such unitary identity is, precisely, a terrorist claim. “Identity” = the “address” for a “subject”: an internally divided field of forces occasionally forced into decisionary acts by ideological contradictions. Nevertheless, “identity” exists. It comes to us from the “outside,” from the social symbolic, and typically disguises itself as given by “nature.” Insofar as “identity” legitimates itself by “nature,” we can be sure it is ideological.

Using the term loosely, the singularity called “writing” is an institutionalization of violence which transcends violence in the very violence of yoking disparatenesses of meaning. In that act of yoking, of structura-

⁸ When Badiou wants to conclude a book on Gilles Deleuze with a discussion of his subject in the context of the history of philosophy, he titles that chapter, “Une singularité” (Badiou, *Deleuze: «La clameur de l’Être»*, pp. 139-50).

tion, writing yokes itself to constitutive alterities: the others of other texts, the others of history (both plural). While the specificity of writing in general is its dispersal into relations with alterities and is thus perhaps undefinable (see the scribbles of the painter Cy Twombly), the specificity of the singular text lies in the particular configuration it entertains among its constitutive alterities.

If violence is difficult to define, it is that it is not a singularity but a multiplicity, at least dichotomous. It is both logical and coherent according to recognizable relations of cause and effect; it is also radically irrational, unmeasurable, and unforeseeable. It is both logical and monstrous.⁹ Violence comports an interplay of logic and irrationality, the copresence or comingling of narrative logic and its monstrous effects. To what extent does this discrepancy, this violence on our epistemic categories, itself define violence?

Finally, I can do no more than mention a direction which would take us far and be untimely. That is the current in modern thought that insists on the positive necessity of violence. Among the thinkers to be cited would be Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, Franz Fanon, Melanie Klein, and Jacques Lacan, as well as Louis Althusser and the post-Althusserian theorists working on the problem of the subject. One would need to cite those events foundational for political modernity, the revolutions of 1775, 1789, and 1917. Each of these comported indubitable monstrosity to some contemporaries. The question all these events raise, in their very monstrosity, is the logic—the human and political logic—that led to their undertaking.

⁹ A culture of “honor” has a substantive encoding in which attack calls for revenge: $a > [b = a^1]$. Irrationality comes in two ways: a quantitative disproportion of “b” in relation to “a,” of the “revenge” as against the “attack”; or the displacement of targets. Raoul de Cambrai is justified in feeling aggrieved by King Louis, but “taking it out” on Marsent is irrational. But the categories of “rationality” and “irrationality,” of propriety and disproportion, are largely aesthetic and hence cultural variables.

II. *Raoul de Cambrai*¹⁰

In spite of my investment in the *Roland*, few medieval texts incite recognition of “the subject of violence” as does *Raoul de Cambrai*. Recent years have seen renewed interest in this puzzling, monstrous text, thanks above all to the new edition prepared by Sarah Kay and to her exploratory studies from the mid-eighties which define the problematics of the text for our time.¹¹

The connection of *Raoul* with the *Roland* is ambiguous.¹² Their manuscripts are roughly contemporary, but their moments of composition, in their present forms, may be a century apart. If, as I have argued, the *Roland* is “one of the very first annunciatory signs” of the coming of the state to France (Haidu, *Subject of Violence*, p. 209), why is it that there is no trace of a stable, ordering power in *Raoul* as one of the late epic poems from the turn of the thirteenth century? Is it the fact, as Sarah Kay has suggested with some irony, that these later texts “de-invented” the state (*Chansons de Geste*, p. 14)?

An initial step in dealing with *Raoul de Cambrai* is to recognize its multiple violences and violations. The text’s physical fragmentation can stand as a sign for its structural and aesthetic fragmentations. What we identify as the more archaic epic narrative material occurs in the first part, the “Raoul” section of the poem. The manuscript presents this material in rhymed verse. What is likely to be more recent material, reminiscent of “romance”—a love interest, a pilgrimage adventure—occurs in a second part. The manuscript presents this material in assonanced verse.

¹⁰ The following pages are a somewhat different version of a section in my forthcoming *The Subject: Medieval/Modern. Text and Governance in the Middle Ages*.

¹¹ See *Works Cited* for Kay’s articles and her OUP edition and translation, reissued by Livre de Poche with a new introduction and translation by William Kibler. Kay’s work has recently been joined by the important, if somewhat compressed, book by Baumgartner and Harf-Lancner.

¹² See Bezzola’s “De Roland à Raoul de Cambrai” for a discussion of this ambiguity.

Thus, the older material is in the newer verse form while the newer material is in an older verse form. The whole thus takes the shape of a chiasmus between form and content, a doubled crossing-over.

The content itself is fragmented, heterogeneous. Its heterogeneity devolves from the conjunction of two different kinds of narrative material: monstrous violence associated with epic and elements associated with “romance,” namely, women and love (though it has to be added immediately that *Raoul*’s women and love are of a new kind *not* found in romance). In spite of the text’s heterogeneities, it has proved possible to speak of its “unity” in conjunction with its adherence to a specified “genre”—the different kinds of narrative material being considered merely as “motifs” belonging to the category of material (*Stoff*). A full consideration of this view would require passage through at least the Aristotelian notion of unity and its appropriation by French neoclassicism in the seventeenth century as it continues to inform romantic and postromantic aesthetics—an exercise to be bypassed, somewhat regretfully.

Raoul’s textual fragmentation tends to be discussed either in terms of authorial/scribal multiplicity or in terms of genre theory. Neither accounts for what I seek, less a matter of traditional “unity”—difficult to sustain with medieval texts in general—than some sense of a historic coherence: the text’s coherence with itself and the text’s coherence with its own historicity. Perhaps this is identical with what Sarah Kay has in mind in subtitling her book on the late *chansons de geste* “political fictions.” As a political fiction, *Raoul de Cambrai*’s reaction to efforts to civilize medieval society is largely negative and profoundly pessimistic. It produces this critique through its very heterogeneities. Coherence is grounded both in contradiction and self-*différance*. Like the *Roland* before it, I take *Raoul* to be a serious, multifaceted text oriented towards an examination of the problem of violence. Recognizing the conditions of production of orality, the *Roland* constructs itself as a rigorous, sequential logic. *Raoul* grounds itself in the very heterogeneities that shake the notion of coherence.

A historical reading of political fictions depends on two dialectical insertions: in the intertextualities of literary history and in political evolution. Both aim at textual Others out of which the text constructs its co-

herence. As against my much admired friend Alexandre Leupin, I do not believe that *Raoul's* "knighthood and its private wars" are mere figures of the text's own writing process (Leupin, "*Raoul de Cambrai: The Illegitimacy of Writing*," p. 131): they are necessary interlocutors, Others who must be addressed. *Raoul* represents not simply a linear continuation of the earlier *chansons de geste* but a further stage in a general intertextual dialectic which embraces other types of texts.¹³ The initial "Raoul" section constitutes a radical denial of the idealizations of romance. Women, insistently represented, consistently lose out against the homosocial bond and its codes. Male warrior violence does not submit to the female instance: Raoul refuses to heed Alice and incinerates Marsent. The force of *compagnonnage*—whether straight up, as at the beginning, or inverted, as when Bernier revolts against Raoul—dominates male/female relations. Its violent dynamic, even in the second part, overcomes even the most earnest seeker after peaceful settlements of disputes. Bernier, who repeatedly seeks peace by humbling himself before other alpha males, himself becomes a pale reproduction of Raoul, impelled to violence before losing himself in the pilgrimage adventure of romance.

An essential (re)transformation occurs at the level of the Destinator. For strategic and structural reasons, Chrétien's romance operated a displacement that falsified the equation of power. In a major shift from the *romans antiques*, Chrétien's texts displaced the refulgent figure of Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Arthur and reduced him to a secondary function as a king who, in Chrétien's last works, is repeatedly ridiculed: Chrétien focalizes on the vassalic protagonist. *Contra*, *Raoul* insists on the king's role and its effects in the sociopolitical diegesis. It is not a nice picture, not a flattering picture. Some of the late *chansons de geste* do show the effects of the increasingly "unified order," announced by the *Roland*, that Philip II was laying: kingship is increasingly institutionalized; centralization in Paris has begun; and the king's power vis-à-vis the

¹³ On the distinction of textual "types" and "genres," see Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*.

feudal princes has increased (Gosman, *Rex Franciae*¹⁴), but overall, its representation of the king is not a nice picture nor a flattering one. Sarah Kay is entirely right to point out that *Raoul* “holds no prospect of a unified order” (*Chansons de Geste*, p. 14). More specifically, there is little trace in the “Raoul” section composed at the *beginning* of Philip’s reign of the achievement of the *end* of his reign a generation later (he reigned for over 40 years). Nevertheless, the king’s role is essential to the poem.

Depending on one’s theoretical orientation towards violence as a social and philosophical problem, either the king’s malfeasance in granting fiefs *causes* the disasters of the narrative, or his manipulations of fief attribution work as the *narrative precondition* for the surfacing of Raoul’s savagery. The king first grants the Cambrésis, Raoul’s hereditary fief, to Gibouin le Manceau with the assurance that it will return to the boy Raoul when he is able to bear arms. When Raoul comes of age, however, King Louis refuses to restore the Cambrésis to him. Instead, the king promises Raoul the first fief that becomes available in its place. That compensatory fief turns out to be the Vermandois when Herbert of Vermandois dies leaving four sons and the grandson who is Raoul’s vassal and *compagnon*, Bernier. Pressed by Raoul, the king grants him the Vermandois, though without a royal warrant.

At the source of the major conflicts are the ill-judgments and injustices of King Louis: first an injustice to Raoul, then another injustice to the sons and grandson of Herbert of Vermandois. The effects of these grants are to set the two clans, the populations of Cambrai and the Vermandois, against each other. Raoul’s campaign to conquer the Vermandois as his fief leads to the scene which sticks most deeply in the memory, the conflagration of Origny at Raoul’s order in which the abbess of the local convent burns in flames along with another hundred nuns.

¹⁴ Gosman’s work is based on seven texts from the early thirteenth century: *Ami et Amile*, *Aymeri de Narbonne*, *Galien le restoré*, *La destruction de Rome*, *Simon de Pouille*, *Gui de Nanteuil*, and *La chanson des Saisnes*.

III. A feminist *Raoul de Cambrai*?

Scenes of the devastation of war are not infrequent in epic. Indeed, they are a frequent narrative convention. What is unusual about this particular occurrence is its closeup of one victim of the violence: the narrator zooms in on Marsent and her anguished death. The later narrative exploits and reinforces our memory of the scene: it is repeatedly referred to (eight times by my count) in the later action by Bernier and others.¹⁵ Think of a still frame of Marsent burning in the abbey founded in her honor occasionally interspersed throughout later episodes to punctuate various scenes and conversations. The singularity of the event becomes a leit motif resounding through the narrative. Its repetition constitutes a trace working in the text, a trace which defines and affirms Bernier's identity and leads to his murderous revenge.

That the featured victim is a woman is not accidental. The presence of women in this narrative has been amply noted, as has the fact that, although their presences remind one of romance, they are not simply migrants from romance. Their number, their importance, and the crucial role their love plays in the "Bernier" section may reveal the influence of romance, but the women's character and the character of the love that is narrated are something else again. The text excels in representations of women who are shrewd, savvy, and carnal, and who nonetheless do not succeed in imposing their intelligence, understanding, and desire for peace on a social segment still patriarchal, still violent, and dedicated to war.

Raoul de Cambrai reacts dialectically to its complex, constitutive tradition by denying earlier assumptions: the notion of a good or well-meaning king; the king's evacuation from the narrative scene; the willing subordination of Thanatos to Eros; the courtly idealization of woman; and the central narrative focus on a positively marked male hero.¹⁶ In-

¹⁵ In lines 1468, 1518, 1560, 1569, 1677 ff., 1708 ff., 1721, and 1839-44.

¹⁶ I disagree with the identification of the narrator's voice with that of the son as hero, which in turn falsifies the representations of the text's women. See Fenster, "The Son's Mother."

stead, the text shows the harsh effects of royal power; the reinstated opposition of Eros and Thanatos; images of women focused on this world, who, though admirable, do not succeed in imposing their intelligence, understanding, and desire for peace on a male class segment still dedicated to war; and finally—*Raoul* goes beyond the *Roland* in this—the representation of male characters who, awesome in certain respects, are so flawed as to make the very notion of the “hero” ideologically absurd. Awe at the courage, the prepossession, and the total commitment to self-assertion does not smother the critique of violence.

Bonds among male actors are economic and political as well as affective. They are mediated by the fief (a source of power), wealth, and status. A historian finds half a dozen technical meanings to the “fief” in this text (White, “Discourse of Inheritance”), but Leupin has grasped its essential narrative ambiguity. The fief’s instability—and hence the narrative’s—results from the fact that it is governed by two contradictory laws: inheritance by primogeniture and the sovereign’s right to invest whom he pleases with a fief upon its reversion (Leupin, “*Raoul de Cambrai*: The Illegitimacy of Writing,” p. 135). What this binarism bypasses, however, is the expectation of justice, that the king’s award of fiefs will recognize vassal claims in discharging his right and responsibilities. The text leaves no room for doubt: royal malfeasance in granting fiefs initiates the disasters of the narrative. The king’s manipulations of fief attribution are the narrative precondition for the surfacing of Raoul’s savagery and Bernier’s revenge. In spite of his clear injustices to Raoul and to the descendants of Herbert of Vermandois, Louis is not demonized. Each error, each injustice, is given a context of political imperatives which make it comprehensible. However horrendous its effects, the initiating choice is rationally comprehensible. The king makes human mistakes, he is not a figure of evil incarnate.

All these injustices, however, haunt their victims as iterated spectres demanding the satisfaction of revenge. They set the two clans—the men of Cambrai with Raoul at their head and those of the Vermandois including Bernier—endlessly against each other. Spectrality haunts its hosts to the moment of death. Does it lift them from the horns of their dilemmas as subjects of contradiction? Does it relieve their vengeance of its ethical

and political weight? I think not. Spectrality does not relieve any actor of the burden imposed by identity or the past acts identity bears. On the contrary, spectrality haunts individuals unrelentingly precisely because of their identity, because of their genealogy and their earlier acts. The logic of violence is not humane, but it is human and subject to both ethical and political judgment.

The devastation of war is a narrative convention in epic, whose constitutive problematic is male warrior violence. That is the “genre”’s conventional norm. It is a mistake, however, to see this particular text as exclusively concerned with the central relation of the *chansons de geste*, that between lords and vassals.¹⁷ Excessive focus on genre obscures what defines a text, the dimensions of meaning produced by narrative and verbal structures.¹⁸

Raoul de Cambrai introduces a radically countervailing element into this conventional masculinity. The first major scene of devastation is part of Raoul’s campaign to conquer the Vermandois as his newly awarded fief, which leads to the conflagration of Origny at his order. Bernier’s mother Marsent is abbess of a convent founded there in her honor by the sons of Herbert of Vermandois. She burns up in the furnace of flames along with another hundred nuns. Flames pour out the doors: no one can get as close to the flames as a javelin’s cast. Alongside a great marble altar, Marsent is stretched out flat on the ground, her sweet face consumed by fire, on her breast the psalter burning (ll. 1300 ff.).

The violence of the event is concentrated by the zoom in of the narration on the victim, Marsent, and her anguished death. Repeated back reference later in the narrative exploits and reinforces our memory of the

¹⁷ Gaunt focuses exclusively on the *compagnonnage* of Raoul and Bernier and sees the text exhibiting “a nostalgia for a formerly heroic world [. . .] a yearning for a lost perfect world is manifest in virtually all *chansons de geste*” (*Gender and Genre*, p. 62).

¹⁸ On the issue of genre, compare Kay (*Age of Romance*) and Gaunt (*Gender and Genre*) with my “Romance: Idealistic Genre or Historical Text?”.

scene.¹⁹ Those spectral recurrences turn the singular event into a leit motif resounding throughout the narrative. The effect is semantic as well as musical. Its repetitions define and affirm Bernier's identity and lead to his murderous revenge: spectrality produces the narrative act.

The importance of women in this narrative has been amply noted. Their presence reminds one of romance, but they are not migrants from romance. Their number, their importance, and the role they play reveal an *influence* of romance, but their character and the character of their love are something else again. Béatrice, Guerri le Sor's daughter, is a narrative world away from courtly ladies: no false timidity, no hesitation in self-analysis, no problematization of dominance, none of the complexities and subtleties of *fin'amors* or courtly love. On the contrary, she assumes desire and sexuality unhesitatingly and with anticipation (Baumgartner and Harf-Lancner, Raoul de Cambrai: *L'impossible révolte*, p. 88). Meeting Bernier at her father's castle, she directly asks his name.²⁰ Falling in love with the man in silks, she immediately calculates how to get him, whispering to herself:

“Lie la dame qe isil aroit prise,
 car molt a los de grant chevalerie;
 qi le tenroit tot nu soz sa cortine,
 miex li valroit qe nule rien qi vive.”
 [.]
 “Q[u]i le loroit acoler et baisier,
 miex li v[a]lroit qe boivre ne mengier.”
 Puis dist en bas, c'ele puet exploitier,
 qe le tenra encor ains l'anuitier. (5409-12; 5423-26)

“Lucky the lady whom this man were to choose, for he has a tremendous reputation for knighthood; anyone who could hold him naked in her sheets would find him worth more

¹⁹ Lines 1468, 1518, 1560, 1569, 1677 ff., 1708 ff., 1721, 1839-44, and more.

²⁰ Compare Soredamor's hesitation in *Cligès*.

than any living thing. [. . .] Anyone who was allowed to kiss and embrace him would find it better for her than meat and drink.” Then she added in an undertone that if she can manage it, she’ll have her arms around him by nightfall.²¹

A bit later, in line 5607, she tells her father she wants a husband for her body’s pleasure: “ ‘Mari vos qier por mon cors deporter’ ” “ ‘I want a husband who will make me really happy.’ ” Béatrice rejoins the narrative functions separated in the *Yvain*: Laudine as the site of desire and power and Lunete as the instrumental manipulator. She does so as a new feminine type, neither epic nor courtly. On the contrary, Béatrice is a dialectical rejoinder to their opposition (an *Aufhebung* perhaps?).

Béatrice is a narrative world away from the ladies of romance. Like the historical women of the time, she is the object of political manipulations. The king’s efforts in the “Bernier” section are oriented to marrying off Béatrice, who has become Guerri’s sole heir, to one of his feudal dependents, Herchambault de Ponthieu. His efforts include kidnapping her to try to force that second marriage on her, even while her husband, whom she has just married, is alive. While Béatrice is not one of the female combatants whose textual figure is formed during the twelfth century—perhaps as a result of the Second Crusade (Ciggaar, “La dame combattante”)—she does successfully oppose the king’s manipulations.

The king’s authority—arbitrary, ineffective, and divisive to the body of feudalism—is faced with a new force: Béatrice’s love for Bernier. Her passion is carnal, her sexuality driving and unhesitatingly assumed. Both passion and sexuality are directly and frequently expressed in complete disregard of the refinements, complexities, and subtleties of courtly love (we will return to this point later). A new kind of woman strides onto the scene of French textuality in *Raoul de Cambrai*. Though not successful in achieving permanent social harmony, Béatrice’s love for Bernier knits the two warring clans of the Cambrésis and the Vermandois through the marriage bond that then needs to be defended against the king, at least for a while. Only Béatrice succeeds in leaving her fief to the inheritor she

²¹ The translation is Kay’s, somewhat modified.

designates, in imposing her choice on the world, and in reconciling the sons of Herbert with Raoul's uncle. Far from occasioning guilt or embarrassment, the carnal sexuality of her love is the basis for the closest the text comes to harmony and peace (Baumgartner and Harf-Lancner, *Raoul de Cambrai: L'impossible révolte*, p. 140). A woman's self-assertion against even royal power succeeds.

Béatrice appears in the second major part of the text, however, which may be a late continuation dating from the later part of Philip Augustus' reign. The first section, the "Raoul" section, contains no love interest comparable to Béatrice and Bernier, but it does field two female figures that are imposing in their own terms. Both stage a particular relationship, that of mothers and sons, which is crucial and redoubled in the "Raoul" section. They also perform a particular structural role.

The presence of woman is established as early as the second *laisse*, which announces four major characters: Guerri le Sor; Raoul de Cambrai; Herbert de Vermandois; and Lady Alice, described in line 38 as *la gentil dame au gent cor avenant*. Her presence recurs in *laises* 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, etc. Nor is her presence merely a matter of linear frequency. She performs a narrative role, a cognitive role, that of political sagacity, when she recognizes, as her son Raoul does not, that Louis's grant of the Vermandois is a dangerous trap. She understands and announces, prophetically, that the grant will result in Raoul's own death. It is not that she had read the poem she occurs in ahead of time (as a poststructuralist turn might have had it) but that she grasped the king's political strategy of divide and conquer. When she warns Raoul of the danger of the Vermandois, she adds rules of behavior: that he not destroy chapel or church, kill the poor, nor take booty or pillage (ll. 855-99). These reminders of the Peace of God legislation enrage Raoul. Alice curses him: "[...] let God who judges everything not bring you back safe and sound and in one piece!" (ll. 956-57). She regrets it immediately, but the malediction is pronounced and hangs in the air. It correctly predicts Raoul's death at Bernier's hands. Is it causal as well? Alice's malediction also demonstrates her susceptibility to the same rage that inhabits her son. Mothers and sons, in this text, have complicated relationships.

The first female figure of the poem textualizes a more profound understanding of the king's political stratagem than that of her son the hero: her understanding is at the level of the king's strategizing. Similarly, Marsent, the abbess of a convent founded in her honor by the sons of Herbert of Vermandois, shows courage and skill in negotiating a truce with Raoul without recourse to any but moral force as well as religious devotion in choosing not to escape from the town in flames (ll. 1300 ff.). Both mothers are women of strength, courage, shrewdness, independence, political savvy and sagacity, and have the capacity to negotiate even from positions of weakness.

Alice and Marsent's structural role is not dissimilar from that of another mother being written at about the same time: the mother figure in Chrétien's *Perceval*. *Perceval*'s mother appears at the inception of the text, in its first episode, voicing a harsh critique of the very knighthood that will be the object of her son's quest. She too issues rules of behavior disregarded by her son. *Perceval*'s mother dies of grief at his departure; Bernier's mother dies in grief at the hands of her son's lord. Her condemnation of knighthood shadows the entire narrative text.²² While we cannot assume any direct influence between the *Perceval* and *Raoul*, it is not impossible in either direction. After all, Chrétien's text is dedicated to Philip, the count of Flanders. It may have been written at his court. The similarities of roughly contemporary texts composed in the same place are perhaps not accidental.

The figure of woman constructed in *Raoul de Cambrai* is not only unanticipated by the courtly tradition, it is constructed in direct opposition to that tradition as a dialectical response to the romance image of the courtly lady. Secondly, like the mother figure in the *Perceval*, the presence of these mother figures which relay each other in the "Raoul" section has a specific structural function: they are more than a "motif," more

²² Something I did not appreciate when I wrote *Aesthetic Distance*: "If the mother's presence in the narrative is short, her absence remains present throughout *Perceval*'s adventures (Deist) and casts its spell on Gauvain's as well" (Bruckner, "Rewriting Chrétien's *Conte du graal*," p. 225).

than an accident, more than a passing moment in a narrative conceived of as pure linearity. As previously stated, both of *Raoul de Cambrai*'s mother figures are women of strength, courage, independence, political sagacity, and the ability and readiness to negotiate even from positions of weakness. Join their representation to that of Béatrice: a new female *representamen* is being constructed.²³ All three mothers are presented in binary opposition to knighthood, although in different ways.

My account of the horrific scene of Marsent burning to death as the victim of Raoul's cruelty at Origny omitted one element. The text does not proceed only by "objective" narration of the event, although this would be normal narrative technique in both epic and romance. Instead, it brings an observer on the scene, Marsent's own son, Bernier, vassal and boon companion of the feudal lord who orders the attack on the town. Bernier rushes up, sword in hand, only to be forced by the intense heat to watch his mother burn and die in the flames. A dual narrative object is textualized: the mother as the victim of raging feudal violence and the son who watches her die helplessly, her killer's feudal vassal. The sadistic violence is observed and by one implicated in it.

Implication is not limited to Bernier: implication is recursive. As Bernier observes his mother, we observe both the mother burning and Bernier observing her. In staging so memorably the son's gaze on the dying mother, a shameful fact,²⁴ the text also inscribes our own voyeuristic, scopophilic gaze. The audience is implicated in his shame: the original medieval audience and we ourselves. The function of the perspectival observer is recursively re-enacted by various narrative actors. The poem stages scopophilic desire repeatedly. Scopophilia and its aural/oral equivalent are inevitable not only in cinema but in literary communication, which trades on "epistemophilia" (Melanie Klein's term). What is striking here is its recursive staging in the text itself. The text leaves

²³ My discussion stresses commonalities whereas Fenster argues for the characters' differences and, specifically, an opposition between the "good mother" (Marsent) and the "bad" (Aalais) as projection of a guilty son's matricidal fantasy (ll. 91 f.).

²⁴ Bernier would want to deny it but cannot (l. 1679).

open, however, the question whether this recursivity turns our own gaze upon the structure of recursivity itself: that is the audience's call.

Alice and Marsent are more than narrative "material," "motif," or "thematics." They perform a particular structural role, that of observer, of witness. They establish a "point of view," a "perspective" from which to view the narrative. Bernier observes as well. Since he is implicated and culpabilized by what he observes, he fuses gaze and the gazed-at, but de-idealized woman becomes the narrative observer par excellence and the judge of male violence. Her gaze is turned on the men whose violence kills and sometimes kills the women themselves.

Marsent's spectral trace works through to Raoul's and Bernier's ends. The final haunted reference to her death occurs towards the end of the text in a passage which fuses the work of memory, guilt, and moral indeterminacy. Bernier, beset in battle, prays: "'Lord God, Father,' said noble Bernier, 'never was I so fiercely attacked by any man. Some sin has caught up with me here [. . .]'" (ll. 6817-19). First he regrets having taken revenge on his lord: "'I was mad in killing Raoul—he reared me and made me a knight'" (ll. 6820-21). Then he reverses field to discard guilt: "'Holy Mary, what have I said? He burned my mother in Origny church, he wanted to rob my uncles of their vast lands, he wanted to exile and shame my father—how could I not kill Raoul? God judge me if I acted in wrong'" (ll. 6822-27).²⁵ The indeterminacy of perspectivalism and the moral ambiguity of life under a hidden God have rarely been presented so hauntingly. Bernier's identity is precisely to be the subject haunted by the moral indeterminacy.

IV. For a perspectival postmodern historiography

Perspectivalism itself needs to be placed in perspective. "Perspective" and "point of view"—I disregard a possible distinction—share two distinguished histories: Anglo-Saxon modernism and medieval French. As is often the case, modernism precedes medievalism. "Point of view"

²⁵ Again, the base translation is Kay's throughout, although I have taken the liberty of several modifications.

was constituted as a recognizable narrative technique in Henry James's novels and identified and discussed in the prefaces collected and published as *The Art of the Novel*. James's experimentation was summarized by Percy Lubbock (*Craft of Fiction*), recodified by the academic Norman Friedman ("Point of View"), and reviewed by (post)structuralist theoreticians like A.J. Greimas, Gérard Genette, and Gerald Prince.²⁶

In medieval studies, the issue of voice is integral to readings of Jean de Meun and Chaucer: the devices of wide-ranging discussions or the travelers' individual tales set alternative subjectivities, in the guise of character(s) and author(s), at the undecidable heart of the text (Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self*; Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*). The essential moments of its history in French medievalism would include early studies in verbal and narrative style masquerading under the signature of "irony." More recently, Bernard Cerquiglini, Michèle Perret, and the late and regretted Suzanne Fleishmann represent essential moments. The matter has recently been reviewed and synthesized by Sophie Marnette's linguistics of medieval *narrat-or-ology* (*Narrateur et points de vue*).

Obviously, major differences must be noted. James's internal narrators (as well as Peircian semiotic pragmaticism) marks a phenomenological influence associated with the relativization at the heart of the late capitalist ideology of individualism and its alienation.²⁷ Individuation is key here. Medieval textuality is not bound by the same ideological context or technological discipline, although it is not absolutely foreign either. The same form or structure acquires different significations in different cultural contexts. Form and structure themselves become signs of their culture in the arbitrary bond of signs generally.

One of the medieval perspectival techniques, seen in both *Perceval* and *Raoul de Cambrai*, consists of simply implanting a character who fuses the roles of participant, observer, and commentator, representing not only a personal 'take' on the action but a perspective from which a

²⁶ Most recently, see Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology*.

²⁷ Charles Sanders Peirce: 1838-1914; William James: 1842-1910; Henry James: 1843-1916.

narratee can *view* the unfolding action. The arrival of Blancandrin in Charlemagne's camp in *laisse 8* of the *Roland* leads the text to pass in review the Frankish warriors according to recognizable class distinctions from the foreigner's perspective. In the *Perceval*, the hero's mother's denunciation of knighthood suggests an interpretive *point* from which the narrative may be *viewed* as bearing far more complex meanings than the narrative subject himself can grasp. A similar perspective is constructed in *Raoul de Cambrai*, although in a different manner.

Novelistic perspective itself is polyvalent. It may have some utility for a postmodern historiography. In fact, the process of adaptation has already begun. Jacques le Goff's *St. Louis* limns a different image of the king according to each category of documents inscribing the king's figure. It presents a fragmented and (although Le Goff does not say so) postmodern example of historiography. Another example is Gabrielle Spiegel's *Romancing the Past*, directly pertinent to our text, which I follow here. Spiegel recounts Philip II's relentless manipulations of his relations to successive counts of Flanders as part of a general strategy of expanding the king's territory by weakening his vassals' hold on their own lands and annexing what he could, by hook or by crook, through peaceable means or warfare. His technique was time-honored: destabilize the environment, undermine the nobility's autonomy, divide and conquer, and sow conflict among opponents so as to weaken them. His main antagonist was Philip of Alsace (1157/63-1191). Between the two Philips, the "Vermandois Succession" was a central stake, as in our poem, affecting marital strategies and financial resources (Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, pp. 31-44; Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus*, pp. 99 f.). Open hostilities broke out, leading to the humiliation of Philip of Alsace and the loss of all practical authority over most of his county. By 1192, his lands were split five ways. In 1196 the king's shenanigans led the Flemish aristocracy to take up arms against him. According to a contemporary chronicler, "There was scarcely any baron in this march of Flanders [. . .] who was not against him" (qtd. in Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 39). The violations of a trust which might have reigned between king and subjects led to the violences of "open rebellion."

The intensity of the conflict was proportionate to the stakes. Flanders was one of the most successful of the twelfth-century ministates called “principalities” (Dunbabin, *France in the Making*), with a solid economic basis in the transformation of raw materials from England into finished textiles for resale throughout Europe. Its economy benefited from a highly centralized node of state formation. Its submission was a major triumph for the king. The acquisition of the Artois and the Vermandois financed Philip II’s successful campaigns against his Angevin and Flemish rivals in 1204 and 1214. They were key to his ultimate triumph, which led to the moniker “Philip Augustus.”

I hope to have perpetrated as little injustice as possible in summarizing Gabrielle Spiegel’s detailed account. However, anyone who knows the poem will stop me and say: But look here, Peter, none of this is to be found in *Raoul de Cambrai*. This is entirely true. The institutionalization of the French monarchy as the initiation of the French state, Philip II’s achievement, is *not* given in *Raoul de Cambrai*. What is found instead is the figure of a king who misuses his role of redistributing fiefs to vassals, who exercises that right in ways that sow discord and dissension among those vassals, and who profits from the conflicts that ensue, conflicts which deploy the characteristics of the aristocracy. What *Raoul de Cambrai* shows is a royal strategy analogous to that of Philip Augustus but seen from the opposite side: the reverse of the king’s point of view, its negative side. *Raoul de Cambrai* is not narrated from the perspective of a wily, cunning, and centralizing king or his idealization but from the perspective of vassals who are its victims. The dreadful narrative of Raoul, Bernier, Guerri le Sor, etc., is not the constructive side of state formation. On the contrary, the story represents the deleterious effects of state formation on those who would have hoped to stand in its way so as to retain their independence precisely *from* that state. It is a counternarrative to the creation of statehood in France, the *feudal narrative* of a feudal class losing ground before the advances of the *monarchical state*. It is a counternarrative to the creation of France.

Raoul de Cambrai is the exploration of Philip Augustus’s politics *from the other side*, the side of its opponents, the Flemish nobles. These are the patrons who commissioned different versions of the *Pseudo-*

Turpin as part of a body of vernacular literature by and for the Flemish aristocracy to valorize its own ideological premises in opposition to the hegemonic aspirations of a Frankish monarchy. The *Pseudo-Turpin* appropriated the monarchical-leaning *Song of Roland* for the ideological purposes of the Flemish nobles. *Raoul de Cambrai* is a far more ambitious dialectical response to the sequence of vernacular textualities of the twelfth century, revised and rebutted from the perspective of a complex but distinctly feudal subject position. The poem refracts the disintegrative effects of Philip II's divisive strategies on the late twelfth-century Flemish nobility, as in the conflicts over the Vermandois succession, through the prism of historical memories of ancient wars between the clans of the Vermandois and the Cambrésis going back to the ninth and tenth centuries.²⁸ The link between past and present is specified by the contemporary *Chronique de Waulsort*: "Sed virus praeteritae commotionis in Viromannorum et Cameracensium serpit visceribus usque in praesens tempus" 'The virus of these past passions creeps still today in the men's viscera of the Vermandois and the Cambrésis' (qtd. in Baumgartner and Harf-Lancner, *Raoul de Cambrai: L'impossible révolte*, p. 159).

The Flemish nobility, however, is only a local metonym for a larger class throughout a "France" that does not yet exist, a class weakened and fundamentally threatened by an expansionist monarchy. The poem inscribes "the ideological aspirations of a declining social class" (Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 97), the subject position of a dominant historical class seeing its position of dominance undermined and fractured by the fulfillment of what had only been a promise in the *Song of Roland*, the institutionalization of the state by the stratagems of Philip Augustus, stratagems whose basic effects are the same as those of Louis in *Raoul de Cambrai*. That was the feudal class compounded of the barons and the knights who held a major slice of power—social, economic, and political—and saw it threatened. That was the class, previously dominant, whose sensed marginalization the poem dramatizes. That is the problematic which gives not Aristotelian unity but semiotic coherence to the

²⁸ See Kibler's summary in the Introduction to the *Livre de Poche* edition (pp. 11-22).

poem's heterogeneities. Linearities exist, but neither this textual narrative nor the narrative of history constructs a simple, linear, teleological unity. Both are internally complex: they integrate heterogeneous instances. They are "hybrid."

My reading of *Raoul de Cambrai* is perspectival. So is my reading of medieval history. While modern historians quibble, there is little question but that medievals conceived of society as constituted by major social classes, if not exactly in a Marxist sense of "class." Comparison of those medieval classes with modern conceptualizations of classes is necessary, keeping in mind that Marx was concerned to analyze the class structure of industrial capitalism. That said, any useful definition of class will include elements of economic interest as well as the exercise of political power and violence as constitutive elements, amply recognized by medievals themselves, observing society in terms of their own systems of logic. When the dust settles on contemporary historiographical discussions, medieval history is impelled largely by the frictions and conflicts of social classes and class segments.

The literary scholar does not legislate for his colleagues in history; s/he may express needs or *desiderata*. Different kinds of historiographical praxis are needed. One is a perspectival history in which specific groups constituted by perceptions, ideologies, and actions and operating within the horizon of a social totality are seen as differentiated, relatively autonomous agents or subjects. The recent argument over whether the medieval period was or was not violent is not a tempest in a teacup. The overall structure of medieval society and the shape of medieval history are in question,²⁹ but the resolution to the question will come, it seems to me, not as a choice between the two terms of the binary "violent vs. non-violent" nor as a delicate verbal adjustment between the two terms. It

²⁹ Major elements in this debate are Poly and Bournazel, *La mutation féodale*; Head and Landes, *The Peace of God*; Barthélémy (*Société dans le comté, L'an mil*, and "The Feudal Revolution"); Haidu (*Subject of Violence* and "Violence and the Peace Movement"); Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution"; and White ("Debate: the 'Feudal Revolution'").

will come by a recognition that activities which seemed a profoundly objectionable violence to some segments of society—clerics, women, peasants—were a perfectly ordinary and appropriate performance of noble entitlements to others. Violence, aggressiveness, and brutality, terms associated with materiality in Peirce, are also associated with the realism of Duns Scotus and, specifically, with the doctrine of *haecceitas*, “the hereness and nowness” of things as ultimate qualities. For Peirce, a fact “in its isolated aggressive stubbornness and individual reality” is possessed of insistent brutality. It is that which is, its “haecceity is the *ultima ratio* [. . .] the brutal fact that will not be questioned” (*Essential Peirce* 1:274 f.) One meaning of that “brutality” is its obdurate refusal of subsumption by our constructs of the Real. That insistence on a preverbal, preconceptual brutality of fact which refuses totalizing integration into our Reals and violates all epistemological framings, combined with precisely those shaken frames in textual perspectivalism, incorporates an understanding of the class structure—however problematic—of medieval society, its violence, and its connection to the material bases of existence and reproduction.

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