

## Book Review

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Vladimir R. Rossman. *Perspectives of Irony in Medieval French Literature*. De proprietatibus litterarum: Series major, 35. The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1975. Pp. 198.

This study is the author's 1972 Columbia dissertation. In it, he proposes "to point to the extraordinary scope of irony" (p. 9) in medieval French literature, in many genres and in varying complexity and scope. To this end, he first sets out a definition of irony and then, in subsequent chapters, moves from limited application of the concept (ch. II, "Irony of Words"; ch. III, "Episodic Irony") to a very wide application (ch. IV, "Works Wholly Ironical by One Author" [*Aucassin et Nicolette*, *Yvain*]; ch. V, "The *Romance of the Rose*"); in the last chapter, on the *Rose*, we arrive at a sort of "modern" use of irony, or at "modern irony" already. It is the middle chapter, III, that interests the student of epic in particular, since two of the chapter's five parts deal with chansons de geste: pt. 3, the *Voyage de Charlemagne*; pt. 4, Ganelon's rôle in the *Chanson de Roland*.

In concentrating on these fifteen pages (71-85), I realize that I am being somewhat unjust to the author's thesis, which consists in showing how irony is prevalent in medieval French literature. I must thus state right here that the case is proven; not that many were not already at least tacitly in agreement with the assertion.

Rossman's operative definition is that "irony . . . consists of a context of at least two opposed terms (ironic context) characterizing the same object (ironic reality) in relation to which they are logically incompatible" (p. 32). As it stands, this definition of irony is rather a static one. Much more helpful would be a concept which regards irony as an effect produced in the reader (or hearer). The major problem in the present study comes, in a sense, from its being written too soon, for the year before its publication (and the second year after its successful presentation as a dissertation), Wayne C. Booth came out with his extremely rich contribution to the discussion of the question, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974). Booth's examination of irony is based principally on analysis of reading, of the effect which the consumption of the literary product produces in the consumer/reader (or hearer). Irony, says Booth, is present in a literary work when, we have the process:

a *required rejection* of the surface meaning;  
a consideration of *alternatives*;  
a *decision* about the author's position;  
and a *reconstruction* in harmony with what we infer about that position  
(p. 147; cf. pp. 10-12; I have rearranged the form of the phrasing).

To use a different, more abstract vocabulary, irony is a secondary meaning effect (meta-effect) produced by the incompatibility of two primary meaning

effects. It is thus based on a contrast of meanings, the first being the work's "surface meaning," the second being a "new"—or deeper—meaning provided by the reader, but based on his/her understanding of the author's—to use a nasty word—intent.

On the face of things, Booth would seem to deal with lectorial competence, in which isotopic discrepancies between work (author) and reader are primary, while Rossman would seem to take his point of departure in a bit more "philological" one, that of logically exclusive isotopies in the work itself. I bring Booth into my discussion simply to help explain the disappointed feeling I had after reading Rossman. The former's is a more extensive treatment, both in length of pages and in scope of works treated. It leads to more intelligence of these works. Rossman—in part because his work is rather short—does not really come to grips with the mechanisms of irony, with the effects made on the reader, with the processes the reader must go through in order to reconstruct a text "acceptable" to him/her. This is perhaps why, although one (I) finds oneself in agreement often with Rossman's observations, one remains *sur sa faim*; one would have liked to see him analyze thoroughly what a given text "does" in producing irony. And this despite the logical arrangement of his study and the limited number of texts taken up. But since the proof of the pudding . . . , so the proof of the theory is in its application, and we must see if Rossman's study can help us better to appreciate at least the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* and the *Roland*.

In the *Voyage/Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, it is the mock vows, the *gabs* of Charlemagne and his men uttered among themselves whilst in their cups, that are ironic, says Rossman (p. 72). Thus Charles and his men take them precisely as *gabs*, jokingly, whereas the spy, and Emperor Hugh after him, take them seriously, literally.

But, secondly, the beginning of the *Pèlerinage* shows Charles considering Hugh as a rival (due to his wife's statement that Hugh might just wear his crown "plus belement" (v. 16) than Charlemagne his). Thus, in this light, Charles's vow—and those of his knights—implying that he/they can do better than Hugh and his men, are serious. Rossman states:

Irony originating in the juxtaposition of the beginning of the *Voyage* and the *gab* scene makes the playful nature of the boasts seem false. Irony produced by the hosts' reaction to the boasts suggests that levity is true, and suspicion unjustified. Paradoxically, in the *Voyage*, the playfulness of vows seems both true and false. Its attributes, incompatible and opposite, are ironic. The ironic patterns strengthen irony in the work, yet reality in one context annihilates irony in the other: what seemed true before is now false (p. 77).

This passage is followed by a citation from R. C. Bates on the "baroque" nature of the *Pèlerinage*, and by a concluding two lines on the "negation of irony" in the work.

It is remarkable that Rossman does not spend more than two lines on the fulfillment of the vows. Surely there is great irony here, in the fact that, through prayer before the relics acquired in Jerusalem, the Franks are granted power to fulfil their vows. Now this includes Olivier, the

first to be challenged by Hugh; God's granting Olivier the fulfillment of his vow (which repeats a wish made earlier, at table) is a bit ironic. Yet Olivier does not really "fulfil" the vow. He declares to the girl, in bed, that he does not seek to carry out his will (v. 719). She replies, asking him to have mercy on her. He will do so, provided she acquit him of his promise before the king (vv. 723-24 = tell the king he has carried out his vow); and he will make her his "drue." One must note that there is absolutely no mention of sexual accomplishment on their part. To her father's question, the following morning, whether Olivier "did it to her a hundred times" (v. 728), she answers "Yes." Thus Hugh is convinced, through a lie, that Olivier did carry out his vow. A strange, if not ironic, way for God to help Olivier carry out his *gab*. Moreover, Hugh is angry at his daughter's answer; however, the immediately following lines would show this anger to be caused, not by his daughter being deflowered (*et comment!*), but rather that Olivier is "gariz" (v. 723), out of danger because he "did" what he vowed to do.

The whole discussion of the question of irony in the *Pèlerinage*—surely a valid question—is exceedingly thin, because Rossman seems to be satisfied with bringing forth but a rapid example of irony in the work rather than examining the question in depth, and even without following through on the work's development of the irony he shows.

In examining the *Roland*, Rossman speaks of the "irony of treason" (p. 79). In short, Ganelon's claim to innocence and Charlemagne's (and Thierry's) contrary charge of treason, demanding "opposite verdicts for the same deeds . . . create an ironic context," to which, I presume, Ganelon's action—what *historialiter* he did—stands related as the ironic reality.

Furthermore, in laisses 40 and 41, Ganelon praises Charles (while denigrating Roland); yet by setting up the attack on the rearguard, he diminishes Charles's power. His behavior here is thus ironic (p. 85), is the ironic reality: "Ganelon's behavior becomes ironic when set against the reader's expectations in law and in the morality of the poem" (p. 85). This comment on the reader's participation is a rare one, but one on which the author does not follow through.

Certainly, one can say that—in the common (loose) usage of the term—it is "ironic" that Ganelon, while praising Charles, sets out "objectively" to harm him. But to note this is not to advance or enrich very much our understanding of the poem beyond what we already "knew."

One can make a case for saying that practically every piece of literature is ironic or at least contains ironic elements. This would be to say that the ironic effect is an essential element of "literature." But this is to go far beyond Rossman's purview.

More to the point, at least so far as the middle ages go, is the "fact" that the ironic way of considering phenomena is very much at home in our period. St. Augustine's "etiam peccata" and the Exultet's "felix culpa" are indicators of this attitude. That which estranges humans from God can, at the same time, serve to bring them closer to Him (etiam peccata) and Him closer to them (felix culpa). Thus what, from one point of view, is disastrous, is from another ("higher") one, beneficial in the long run. At least this analysis corresponds to Rossman's definition. But it

does not concord easily with Booth's, the latter's being much more satisfying to the critic of literature.

I will go outside of the epic for one more remark. Rossman's concentration on small contexts causes him to overlook some major ones: in discussing "irony of words" in the "Mariage Rutebeuf," he notes that Rutebeuf "married"

Uit jors après [*sic* for Faral and Bastin's après] la nascion  
Jhesu qui souffri passion . . . (vv. 3-4)

and goes on to discuss Rutebeuf's literal statements of misfortune. But the octave of Christmas is the feast of the Circumcision, surely an "ironic" day on which to choose to be wed. If circumcision for newly-borns is painless, for older males it is less so (see Gen 35:24-25); at the risk of belaboring in quasi-fabliau style a point, I would point out that 1) one's wedding day implies utilization of a certain portion of the male anatomy; 2) circumcision implies non-utilization of that portion for at least a while; it also implies pain . . . I need not go on, but must only insist *contra illos qui littera sequuntur*, that I by no means intend to imply that Rutebeuf was ever circumcised, much less on a given 1 January.

Although Rossman's study is not of much help to students of the epic, this is due to the author's (self-imposed?) exceedingly limited treatment. The discussions in the following chapters are worth perusal—although that of Yvain is far from the richness of Rossman's fellow Columbian, P. Haidu, on *Cligés* and *Perceval*. Rossman has extended to other texts, the work done by Haidu and has noted the prevalence of the ironic mode, in at least minimal form (irony of words) in much of medieval French literature. I remain convinced, nonetheless, that the works treated are done so too rapidly, with consequent loss of depth. It now remains for someone to take up the question, say of irony in the chansons de geste, using a more dynamic form of analysis, and to apply it extensively and intensively.

More important is the problem of the detection of irony. To use a Boothian example: my friend has just stomped in, dripping water from every part, whilst peals of thunder roll through the open door. I turn to him and ask: "How's the weather?" If I am not being ironic, I am being singularly stupid. Only those who either know me or see how I look when I ask my question can know.

To say that the ballad "Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine" of Charles d'Orléans is ironic (pp. 36-39) (or that of François Villon, even) is to belabor the obvious. Most of Rossman's examples deal with intratextual ironic effects. But, as my example simple-mindedly shows, irony is often determined by extratextual signs, as in the example from Rutebeuf above. One has to know what "eight days after Christmas" signifies—or one has to read the explanation in a note—to detect the irony. Théophile Gautier read Villon quite differently from us. Villon's bequest to three "pauvres petits orphelins" moved our Jeune France. But we have the note and are moved differently now that we know that the three were notable (not to say notorious) usurers. Surely our reading is the richer for this added information. But at what point does a given irony become non-recuperable

by the "common reader," or even invisible for the scholar? At what point do the notes outweigh the text?

We thus arrive at the dilemma posed by Paul Zumthor in the first part of his *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), that it is extremely difficult to read medieval literary works as they were originally read; thus the necessity for a more immanent reading (generally along structuralist lines). The success of some of those efforts is undeniable and such work must be pursued.

But the difficulty of recuperating the "original experience" renders it all the more necessary that such "philological" efforts, of whatever obedience, be pursued and deepened.

Unfortunately, Rossman's work, while bringing forward the awareness of the all-pervasiveness of irony in literature, specifically in medieval French, does not even note these problems, which still need to be set out clearly and attacked systematically.

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### Medieval Stylistics Meeting

A Conference on Modern Approaches to Medieval Stylistics will take place on Saturday, April 16, at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and will include papers by: Peter Dembowski (University of Chicago), "The Vocabulary of Courtly Old French Lyrics-Stylistic Implications"; Eugene Vance (Université de Montréal), "St. Augustine and the Poetics of Dialogue"; James J. Wilhelm (Rutgers University), "The Ovidian Style of Bernart de Ventadorn"; Walter Scheps (SUNY at Stonybrook), "Semantic Universals and Some Aspects of Medieval Narrative"; Evelyn Birge Vitz (New York University), "Marie de France: A Style of Her Own"; Peter Haidu (University of Illinois), "Medieval Stylistics: Independent Stratum or Low Man on the Semiotic Totem Pole"; Rupert T. Pickens (University of Kentucky), "Temporal Style in Chrétien's *Conte del Graal*"; Richard A. Lanham (U.C.L.A.), "The Motives of Eloquence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance"; Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (Dartmouth College), "Brightest and Best of the Signs of Mourning: The Poetics of Death and Resurrection."