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Paul Aebischer. *Préhistoire et Protohistoire du Roland d'Oxford*. Berne: Editions Francke, 1972. Pp. 292.

After many years of publishing fine analyses of the manuscript tradition and historical background of the *Song of Roland*, Professor Aebischer reveals here new refinements on these complex problems. He has rethought the studies that were collected in his *Rolandiana et Oliveriana*¹ and has also rescued some others from possible obscurity in various *Melanges*.² Aebischer's interest is not the review of past *Roland* scholarship but the demonstration of his own ideas, with reference to the work of his fellows only where it directly touches his, or when the temptation to scold them for their inadequacies is too great.

The strength and weakness of this book lies in the author's insistence on the rigorous application of logic to apparently unsolvable problems. Combined with the depth and breadth of his learning, the author's logic greatly clarifies such murky areas as the historical matrix of the Rencesvals battle, the passage of this encounter from reality to myth, and the crystallization of its multiform expressions into the Oxford masterpiece. He uses previously untapped Arab records in his expositions, but he nonetheless finally reaches a point where he joins his much criticized predecessors and flings himself into the vast spaces of unsupported theory. There, scholars must leave him furiously tying up loose ends in order to present the reader with a neatly wrapped account.

Learned colleagues as diverse as Claude Lévi-Strauss,³ Joseph Duggan,⁴ and Eugène Vinaver⁵ have recently counseled the acceptance of the illogical in myth and literature. This is especially good advice for medievalists, since there are many areas where we have no information or insufficient, contradictory evidence. Libraries are nonetheless well supplied with the work of scholars beckoning others to succumb to the tempta-

¹(Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967).

²"qui de plus constituent et des boulets pour les collaborateurs à ces travaux forcés, et des cimetières pour les publications qui s'y trouvent enterrés" (p. 6).

³Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et Le Cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964), pp. 60, 64.

⁴Joseph Duggan, "The Generation of the Episode of Baligant: Charlemagne's Dream and the Normans at Manzikert," *Romance Philology*, 30 (Aug., 1976) 1, 59-82, esp. pp. 60-64.

⁵Eugène Vinaver, *A La Recherche d'une poésie médiévale* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1970), Chap. III: "La Mort de Roland," p. 56.

tions of intellectual elegance rather than accept the frustrations of reality. While there is a logical aspect to literature and history, their total meaning is not expressed in these logical relationships, as Aebischer would have us believe. His presentation of the historical environment of both the Christian and Arab worlds around 778 is splendidly clear, but it is a disturbing clarity, one which makes the reader fear an artificial erasure of the vagueness in eighth-century historical sources.

Aebischer's careful presentation of all the factual and documentary evidence arms the reader against the force of his logic. When he emphasizes that the Arabs had every reason to seek Charles's aid and that the emperor had no reason to help them (pp. 33-4), one cannot help thinking back a few pages; there, Charlemagne's vassals were portrayed as having fought for him every summer but without much booty for several years (p. 21). Since the acquisition of loot was not against their chivalric code, Charles might have looked on a Spanish expedition as a golden opportunity for his knights. Not that I wish to join in the theorizing, but the author's rejection of the complex modulations of reality invites the reader to this kind of argumentative dialogue. In that sense, he has achieved a very interesting and stimulating book.

Aebischer's preference for his own logic in the face of fact is demonstrated in his discussion of the cities represented in the Arab delegation to Charlemagne in the summer of 777 (the diplomatic source of Rencsesvals). He rejects an argument of Menéndez-Pidal which is soundly based on textual testimony for the importance of Barcelona. The author minimizes Barcelona in favor of Saragossa, which is not mentioned in the manuscripts. "Mais ce témoignage me semble douteux, et ces noms m'ont tout l'air d'avoir été introduits dans le texte primitif à une époque relativement récente" (p. 38). He gives no further explanation for the textual absence of Saragossa nor does he analyze the manuscript relationships as he does to prove similar points elsewhere. Aebischer rejects Barcelona "parce que c'était un port de mer, et que les Arabes ont toujours préféré les vaisseaux du désert, donc la terre ferme, pour effectuer leurs voyages et leurs expéditions" (p. 38). Since he has just described the Arabs invading Spain by sea (pp. 22-5), it seems strange that the author rules out a seaport with such confidence. His other reasons, which emphasize the geographical and strategic difficulties that Barcelona presents for him, again elevate his logic above the unity of the manuscripts and the caution of Menéndez-Pidal.

There is a tinge of unexplained pro-Arabism in this same logic. For example, Aebischer refers to Sulaiman of Saragossa-Barcelona, the chief Arab envoy, both as *un ami*. (p. 92) mistreated by the rude emperor and as *ce parfait gentilhomme* (p. 90) with no apparent evidence. This is suggested also in an otherwise excellent analysis of Christian and Arab sources intended to determine the circumstances of the Arab-Christian cooperation. The author describes the manipulation of a proud but dull Charlemagne by clever Arab ambassadors, but this interpretation of the laconic texts is not *inéluçtable* -- as he likes to say. If Charlemagne was as greedy for glory as he is pictured, that does not prevent him from having mental reserves about what he would do in Spain, yet the author emphasizes only those of the Arabs. Aebischer's insistence on Charles's gullibility vis-à-vis the Arabs (p. 42) changes when he considers the emperor's letter to the

Pope concerning his expedition. In that letter Charlemagne states that he is going to Spain in response to the danger of an Arab attack. Here Professor Aebischer finds Charles a clever fellow, *de parfaite mauvaise foi* (p. 44). Maybe the Arabs told simple Charles that and he believed them; maybe both sides were tricky. The documents compel us to leave the case open.

Although I find a similar weakness in an otherwise fine analysis of the rescue of Sulaiman from his angry Christian captors, the discussion of the "locus of the Rencesvals battle is on the other hand very satisfying, Aebischer's textual examinations are rigorous, and the attention he gives previously obscure sources is an important contribution to *Roland* scholarship. Even if his extrapolations are occasionally unacceptable, the author has carefully documented most of his statements in this first third of the book, which focuses on historical problems.

When Aebischer approaches the domain of myth⁶ in the second third of his work, "De L'Histoire au Mythe et à la poésie," he closes his eyes to most of the scholarship on mythic form and thought done in the past thirty years. The author abandons his intellectual rigor for fantasy: "Pour chanter la naissance et le développement du mythe, il faudrait non point la voix plus ou moins prosaïque de l'érudit, mais tout l'art, toute la finesse, toute la subtilité d'un Rossini" (p. 93). The author and Claude Lévi-Strauss⁷ share a tendency to talk about myth by drawing musical analogies, but Aebischer's accent is on its relative formlessness whereas Lévi-Strauss uses musical comparisons to express the particular intensity of mythic form. Given this view, it is not surprising that for Aebischer, "Le mensonge, bref, crée le mythe et l'entretient" (p. 94). For him, myth is mystery, and that is why he cannot analyze it with the intellectual precision that he applies to historical problems. "Où naît le mythe? On n'en sait rien: partout et nulle part Qu'est-ce que le mythe? Plus qu'une création, c'est une mutation: c'est l'histoire devenue fiction; c'est un fait, ou un ensemble de faits, transmuté en légende, en poésie" (p. 93). In this sense then, the literary work is also a lie for Aebischer, and that is why he tries to banish all non-logical elements from the Oxford *Roland* (p. 269). Only if the poem is revealed as strictly logical can it redeem itself from its mendacious origins.

From the establishment of myth as fantasy,⁸ Aebischer turns to the destruction of the hero Roland's historicity, an aspect more amenable to his deductive approach. His evaluation of the Fulrad witness lists and the Roland *denarii* is satisfying and thorough. Finally, one scrap of supporting evidence is left: Roland's name as a witness on a twelfth century

⁶Aebischer's work on myth and the *Roland* apparently dates from his article, "Roland: mythe ou personnage historique?", *Revue belge de phil. et d'hist.*, 33 (1965), 849-901.

⁷Lévi-Strauss, *CC*: Introduction; see also his discussion of the chromatic structure of music and myth, p. 287.

⁸Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

copy of a judgment in favor of the Abbey of Lorsch, made in 772. "Une planche de salut si vermoulue et si frêle que, pour mon compte, je préfère ne pas m'en servir et couler à fond tout de suite" (pp. 144-5). I question the author's knowledge of the Lorsch document's imperfection since we do not have the original and the copy *might* be a faithful rendering. In working with medieval history, scholars learn to be content with scraps and respect the integrity of even the smallest of them.

Just as he has ignored the vast output of scholarship on myth in the past generation, the author turns his back on the work of Albert Lord and many others in the field of oral literature. This seriously weakens his discussion of the origin and development of traditional material into literature. Using the fourteenth century battle of Sempach (pp. 146-7), Aebischer constructs a model for the gradual incrustation of the historic event with mythic events and figures. He gives no consideration to the possibility that both Rencesvals and Sempach may have been absorbed into already existing forms and relationship models, the constants of mythic thought⁹ and the formulaic tradition.¹⁰ This view would clash with Aebischer's later insistence on the long periods of time necessary for mythic development (p. 148). Little time is needed if the templates are already present; this is demonstrated in the production of new Yugoslavian epics as described by Lord.¹¹ In this case, I find an example taken from a culture in which epics are still sung more convincing than one which uses only literate evidence from a culture in which epics are apparently not sung.

When he discusses the difference between the Oxford *Roland* and the *Chronique du Pseudo-Turpin*, Aebischer's ideas happen to coincide with an aspect of the Lévi-Strauss interpretation of myth: "un auteur racontant les faits mythiques de Roucevaux ne se considèrait nullement forcé de s'y conformer, qu'il pouvait continuer à s'en tenir à un schéma plus ancien, ou bien-peu importe-qu'il se sentait en droit de modifier, de réduire ou d'allonger le thème base [sic] que lui offrait le *Roland* d'Oxford" (p. 173). Aebischer speaks about the written text where Lévi-Strauss would

⁹Ibid., pp. 9, 18, 20.

¹⁰See his book, *The Singer of Tales* (New York: Atheneum, 1960; Rpt., 1974), and also that of Joseph J. Duggan, *The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic Craft* (Berkeley: U. of Calif. Press, 1973). This position is accepted by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1966), p. 40. For another point of view, that of scholars who believe the *Roland* is the written work of an author who used a formulaic language, see Jean Dufournet, *Cours sur la Chanson de Roland* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1972); Rudy S. Spraycar, "La Chanson de Roland: An oral poem?", *Olifant*, 4 (Oct., 1, 63-74; the unpublished dissertation of Edward A. Heinemann, *The Roman de Roncevaux: Prolegomena to a study of the Manuscript tradition of the Chanson de Roland*, *Dissertation Abstracts*, 31 (Dec., 1970) 2878-A (Princeton).

¹¹Lord, pp. 43-4.

emphasize thought processes and a limited range of variation, but they both stress fluidity. Because we are dealing with literary texts and not raw myth, I would prefer to differentiate the Oxford *Roland*, the *Carmen de pro-dicione Guenonis*, and the *Chronique du Pseudo-Turpin* primarily on generic grounds: the former belongs to the epic and the latter pair to the homiletic tradition.

The author's analysis of the short and long versions of the *Roland*, the classic problems of the original title, author, and final words are well argued and convincing. His ideas on the last line are the least appealing because, once again, they are too much the product of pure logic. For Aebischer, Turolodus is only a copyist who notes that the text he is transcribing ends at the beginning of another episode. Charlemagne, the great warrior, cannot be left as the whining old man he apparently is in Oxford's final *laisse*. However, a careful examination of Charlemagne's role and the language applied to him in the various stages of the epic shows that he is not as consistently active as Aebischer would have it.¹² The emperor's behavior in the final verses of the Oxford text is typical of his functional identity while his r le in the Baligant section is atypical. Aebischer's discussion of the incompleteness of the text also depends on the distinction of *declinet* from the authorial *escrire*; yet all of the other occurrences of *declinet* are connected with an author, so *declinet* seems to be the equivalent of *escrire* and not the scribal sign of a faulty text (pp. 225-7). Furthermore, he relies on a strange interpretation of the Trial section which states that the level of the poem is abased there and so must be raised in a *Guerre de Libye* section (p. 221). Aebischer's mastery of manuscript relationships is impressive and important, but his aesthetic evaluations are rather simplistic.

On the same grounds, I object to his reduction of the highly complex Oxford *Roland* to a demonstration of feudal laws and relationships¹³ (p. 260 ff.). His analysis is not satisfying even in those limited terms. It is not really true, for example, that Ganelon "n'a jamais dit un mot contre Charlemagne, son seigneur" (p. 267). In his confrontation with Marsile and Blancandrin, he gets them to move against Roland thanks to his insistence that it is the best way to strike an incapacitating blow against Charlemagne.¹⁴ Ganelon, then, is lying in the Trial section when he tries to make his actions appear in an acceptable feudal context. Feudalism is not the Golden Key to the meaning of the Oxford *Roland* if it cannot even account for the actions of a pivotal figure like Ganelon.

After having insisted on the importance of the other manuscript

¹²See my "The Structure of the Hero in the *Chanson de Roland*: Heroic Being and Becoming," article, forthcoming.

¹³See Alberto V rvaro's eloquent discussion of the problems of a strictly feudal interpretation of B roul's *Tristan* in his book, *Il "Roman de Tristan" di B roul* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1963), pp. 133-181.

¹⁴Joseph B dier,  d., *La Chanson de Roland* (Paris: L'Edition d'Art H. Piazza, 1966), *laisse* XLI-XLV, note esp. lines 596-7.

versions for so many points in connection with the Bodleian text, Aebischer rejects the testimony of the other manuscripts completely when it does not agree with his acceptance of the Baligant episode on logical grounds (pp. 268-271).¹⁵ He can dismiss these manuscripts and the absence of other information by declaring that the author of the Oxford *Roland* is the author of the Baligant episode. He justifies all this by identifying the author with himself: "l'auteur du *Roland* d'Oxford se présente à nous comme un logicien" (p. 269). Aebischer has a good point in arguing that the lack of manuscript tradition and the presence of non-continuing characters in the betrayal and Aude sections indicate later interpolation (pp. 273-9), but beyond that, there is no certainty, at least as far as the author's arguments are concerned.

Despite my dissatisfaction with Aebischer's insistence on certainty or clarity where I see none, I think the book is nevertheless a fine historical summary and a fascinating examination of many problems that traditionally occupy *Roland* critics. Paul Aebischer has achieved another monument for himself : his *Préhistoire et Protohistoire du Roland d'Oxford* is essential reading for both the graduate student and the seasoned scholar.

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¹⁵Cf. Duggan's careful consideration of the problem in his book cited above, pp. 63-104, and in his previously cited article.