Book Reviews

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This book challenges some of our most cherished notions concerning the genesis and evolution of medieval literature and may well mark a turning point in the study of medieval narrative structure. The method which the author brings to the formidable task of studying "in a general way" (Preface, p. 5) so vast a subject, is indicated by his well-ordered Table of Contents: Preface and Introduction, followed by the categories of his argumentation: (I) The Question of Beginning, Middle, and End; (II) The Question of Length; (III) The Question of Unity; Conclusion, Bibliography, Index.

Gustave Cohen saw the middle ages as a resplendent grande clarté, yet much of contemporary criticism seems to have obfuscated more than illuminated our understanding of the interplay between creative imagination and compositional technique in medieval literature. In contrast with this degeneration into "Games Professors Play," Ryding modestly informs us that: "because of the unusual length and complexity of its narrative productions, I have declined to attempt anything like an exhaustive treatment of the material. Even to have tried to do so would, I believe, have unnecessarily complicated and obscured a tradition that emerges with some clarity when we stand back and view in a simple and unprejudiced way the central narrative tradition extending from the *Vie de Saint Alexis* through the early chansons de geste and the courtly romances of Chrétien de Troyes to the complex and voluminous Arthurian Vulgate" (p. 6; my italics).

"Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it" (Samuel Johnson). The most elegant solution to a complex problem is often the most simple. Ahat Ryding has attempted to do, then, is to apply to the study of medieval literature a fundamental principle of general system theory: that in dealing with patterned relationships of complex components (in this case, narrative structures) it is ideally possible to determine parameters within which fall a broad spectrum of
theories, archetypes and subgroups, and which allow for both description and
analysis. 1

The main thrust of Ryding's argument is that during a period of some
four hundred years "there is a more or less consistent development of
narrative forms, quite independent of and unrelated to Aristotelian notions,
which extends from the beginnings of the vernacular tradition—as early, it
would appear, as Beowulf—to well into the sixteenth century when, in Italy, it
becomes the object of critical attacks from the Aristotelian quarter and
culminates in Tasso's Discorsi del poema eroico" (p.5). That the Poetics, the
writings of the rhetoricians, and those of the neo-Aristotelians furnished a
theory and framework for the "well-made narrative," can hardly be denied.
Ryding puts forth the thesis that their real importance, however, lies in their
having so conditioned modern man's view of all narrative during the past four
centuries that he has been compelled also to measure medieval narrative
against Aristotelian norms. Ryding would have us reject such a tyranny of
concept which leads us to believe that all medieval narrative necessarily has a
beginning, middle, and end, in which events succeed one another logically and
the totality of which comprises a unity. He endeavors to show that many
medieval narratives do not at all conform to these criteria; that in terms of
external structure, they constitute what might be called "open" systems; that
for the most part, their "beginning" is more exactly a prologue involving recall
or promising a new version, and their ending, an epilogue announcing a sequel.
This view is intriguing but not altogether compelling; after all, no story ever
really "ends," it continues to linger on in the auditor's mind where, the
psychologists tell us, it is mediated by a process of conceptualization
dependent on knowns. Why, then, deny this same reality to the poet?
Prologues and epilogues are then more exactly the conventional means of
delimiting beginning and end. If it is true that the genre called saints' lives
characteristically concludes with an exhortation to pray for and emulate the
saint's example, the last word is a resounding: Amen! And what can be more
final than the closing verse of Aucassin et Nicolette—no canteable prent fin,
n'en sai plus dire—while almost without number are the narratives whose
ending is marked by the word: Explicit.

If Aristotelian poetic theory does not explain the structure of medieval
narrative, then what does? Ryding (Conclusion, p. 162) distinguishes three
major phases in its development: 1) the simple story (part one of Erec and of the Roland) which becomes compound: 2) the compound becomes the complex (late romances of Chrétien; thirteenth century prose Lancelot): 3) the complex moves back to simplicity (Boccaccio's Filostrato; Malory's Arthurian tales). To these three phases, correspond three (major) techniques which determine the narrative structure: 1) bipartition: 2) narrative interlace: 3) analysis: unraveling the narrative skein and choosing one coherent unit of narrative. The solution proposed is tempting, but some of the reasoning seems tendentious. While the means used by the "more gifted writers" were obviously different from those used by the "minor writers," Ryding's central argument appears dependent on critical judgments concerning only the "gifted writers." If that is Ryding's intention, his thesis cannot be considered a general theory. Concerning the Lancelot, he says that "for all its length, [it] is yet an intricately constructed work, one less characterized by disunity than by a controlled multiplicity" (p. 162): either this statement contains a subtlety which escapes me, or it is a tautology.

Any theory must be validated not only in those same terms in which it articulates itself, but in its internal coherency and its external consistency. For the greater part, Ryding eschews questions of language, folklore, myth, civilization, and concentrates on showing how, in the fairly representative sampling of the examples studied (German narrative receives little attention), there is in the Western Middles Ages, irrespective of nationality, an adherence to certain principles of poetics, which accounts for the compositional cohesiveness of much of medieval narrative. For E. R. Curtius, the key to our understanding the genesis of European literature was Romance Philology: for Ryding, the key is the genesis, analysis, and filiation of structural forms and patterns which evolve independently of Aristotelian theory but which nonetheless evince logic and order. Each stance attempts to provide a comprehensive view and each—in a Utopian belief that this is possible—says that we can somehow dispense with the autochthonous, religious, social, and ideological differences which in the long run may inform us more cogently and economically than do likenesses. However, one must agree with Ryding's apparent position that linguistic barriers need not obscure the international dimensions and implications of compositional questions such as those which are the focus of his study. One wishes he had furnished us with a working
definition of the two terms which are the very cornerstone of his work: structure and narrative; the closest one comes to this is in a brief opening statement on the inside flap of the jacket: "A study of the evolution of the form of medieval fiction from Beowulf to Orlando furioso." My own understanding of the term structure, as used by the author, would be: "a combination and relation of formal elements which reveal their logical coherence within given objects of analysis."^3

A serious drawback to his study is its sparse and poorly organized Index which does scant justice to the rich contents of the book and which diminishes its effectiveness as a reference manual. Numerous terms, including some most essential to his arguments, are omitted altogether: alternation (thematic: ABAB), 46; bipartition (function), 30; continuity/discontinuity, 40-3; event-clusters, 33, 44; extensions (lateral narrative), 55-6; gradation (episodic), 88-9, 91; rhyme-schemes (episodic repetition as), 90-91; s.v. structural: forms, 30, units, 55, elasticity, 56, evolution, 56, weaknesses, 40; symmetrical effects, 33; Zentralkomposition, 36; to name but a few. The commonly used terms of rhetoric should have been regularized or systematized, consistent with his having translated most of the Latin quotations in his text.

Cultural traits do not a culture make, and not all numbers "count." Still, many scholars would take exception to the summary treatment given to number symbolism and numerical composition. Moreover, the author does not take into account the structural characteristics of vernacular chronicle, so often coated not only with the sugar of romance but with the gore of epic. Such a genre obviously yields to some of the constraints of an historical determinism that challenges the conventional Aristotelian organization of "beginning, middle, end." It is likewise regrettable that, save in his very persuasive commentary on the formation of macroepic (pp. 54-61), the author does not have a detailed examination of time as an integrative and agglutinative factor which shapes spatial relationships and variously compresses or dilates the structural entity. And although he brings into sharp focus the various patterning processes, he does not consider whether a given structural system may be explained by factors beyond our grasp, such as those implied in random combination, or by something more conventional, such as a Darwinian kind of natural selection.
Ryding adds little to our appreciation of the Olifant episode (Roland, vv. 1049-92), when he explains that the narrative function of the three laisses similaires is dramatic "repetition" (pp. 72-4). We might here wish to take into account the function of the codes sociaux, particularly as they concern kinésique (Roland and Olivier are on the battlefield and are obviously reinforcing their words with gestures) and particularly proxémique: the three laisses of 10, 11, and 12 vv. of dialogue give respectively 4-3-3 lines to Olivier (he is exhorting at a distance), but 6-8-9 lines to Roland who, as he gets closer, can say more.

Literary criticism presently constitutes something approaching an industry within the world of the intellectual, and the specialist naturally brings to each new book his own prejudices and expectations. Inevitably, some things will be "missing" and, in the case of Ryding's book, some readers will be disappointed by the lack of informing judgment on the relationship of semiology to the question of narrative structure. Others will find, as has this reviewer, that Ryding's study is a most cogent analysis, rich in penetrating insight. He has put at our disposal a solid theory to formulate new and proper perspectives on the infinite complexities of medieval narrative. Despite the modest length (177 pp.) and unpretentious claims of this book, the audience that will most profit from this book will be that of the specialist.

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1 The most readable source on this subject remains Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Perspectives on General System Theory, Scientific-Philosophical Studies, ed. Edgar Taschdjian, with forewords by Maria von Bertalanffy and Ervin Laszlo (New York: George Braziller, 1975).

2 See Peter Brooks, "Romania and the Widening Gyre," PMLA, 87 (1972) 1, 7-11.


"Resumed in Paul Zumthor's famous postulate: "... la fonction poétique étant relative, dans l'acte de communication, au message comme tel et faisant prédominer les valeurs propres de ce message sur toutes les autres (référentielles, affectives, etc.) impliquées dans l'acte, elle est, par là même, totalement conditionnée, dans son exercice, par les structures de la langue où est formulée la communication (v. études citées, note 3, p. 8)" (Langue et techniques poétiques à l'époque romane (XIe-XIIIe siècles), [Paris: Klincksieck, 1963], p. 47, n. 6).