Book Review

William C. Calin

The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition, by Gerard J. Brault. Vol. I, Introduction and Commentary; Vol. II, Oxford Text and English Translation. University Park, Pa. & London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978.

GERARD J. BRAULT BEGAN HIS CAREER as a philologist in the traditional manner, specializing in Girart d'Amiens and Franco-Canadian linguistics. His *Early Blazon: Heraldic Terminology in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* was published by the Oxford University Press in 1972 to general acclaim: it is a unique work in its field. Meanwhile, since the late 1960's, Brault's interests have shifted in the direction of literary criticism. A steady flow of articles on the *Song of Roland*, consistently of the very highest quality, have made him probably the leading Roland-scholar in the western hemisphere. This varied experience, all his background and training, now culminate in *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition*, his MAGNUM OPUS, a massive scholarly monument on which he has been working steadily since at least 1966.

Volume I contains an introduction of some 115 pages divided into twenty-one categories or sub-headings:

1. The Historical Event
2. Legend, Poem, and Text
3. Recent Scholarship on the *Song of Roland*
4. Turoldus and His World
5. The Church and the Arts
6. Popular Tradition
7. Learned Tradition
8. Realism, Idealism, and the Epic Universe
9. Ambiguity and Logic
10. Some Exegetical Guideposts
11. The Meaning of the *Song of Roland*
12. Literature Through Art: Iconographic Formulas and Transpositions
13. Structure
14. Thematic Unity

15. Metaphorical Consistency
16. Landscape
17. Tone
18. Narrative Devices and Techniques
19. Character Portrayal
20. Rhythm
21. Oral Interpretation: The Gestural Script

This is followed by a running Commentary on the *Roland,* divided into forty-nine sections, that covers an additional 201 pages. Volume I closes with footnotes to the Introduction and to the Commentary, a Bibliography of Works Cited, Picture Credits, Index, and Illustrations. Volume II (246 pages) is devoted to an edition of the Oxford manuscript and a line-by-line English translation presented on facing pages, followed by Notes to the manuscript, to the Oxford text, and to the translation.

In the tradition of such distinguished Rolandists as Bédier, Mortier, Whitehead, and Segre, Brault is committed to the PRECELLENCE of the Oxford MS. Indeed, he proves to be more conservative than Segre, author of the most recent major critical edition of the *chanson.*[1] Unlike Segre, Brault introduces the absolute minimum of emendations, even to correct scribal oversight. His facing English translation is meant quite consciously to serve the function of a "trot": that is, it strives for accuracy and has no esthetic prétentions whatsoever. Brault's version is indeed the most correct that I am aware of in a modern vernacular, for he has benefited widely from George Fenwick Jones's research into Rolandian semantics, indeed has incorporated the gist of Jones's findings into his translation.[2] The Pennsylvania State University Press might well consider reissuing Volume II alone as a paperback: it could prove to be of service to comparative literature students and Chaucerians, people whose modern French may be flimsy and who, therefore, cannot benefit from Bédier or Moignet.

Volume I, in terms of literary criticism, is an important statement, which sums up the position of one of the most influential currents in

[1]*La Chanson de Roland,* ed. Cesare Segre (Milan & Naples: Ricciardi, 1971).

[2]George Fenwick Jones, *The Ethos of the Song of Roland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963).

Roland-studies today. Those who have followed his articles and papers over the years are familiar with the editor's critical stance. *Grosso modo* and *simpliciter,* Brault believes in the integrity of the *Roland* as a work of art and as a consciously, willfully composed piece of literature; it is not the *mise à l'écrit* of a haphazard oral performance, even though stylistic aspects of the Oxford text may derive ultimately from oral tradition and Turoldus is, of course, familiar with oral diction. Furthermore, the *chanson* is an epic of the crusades, *gesta Dei per Francos,* which can and should be elucidated by methods of analysis oriented toward uncovering typological aspects of the text, in terms of Christian allegory. In addition to typological, traditionally Christian patterns of imagery, Brault also proclaims that the character Roland is in no way guilty of hubris, that he is the ideal *miles Christi,* not to be condemned at all, and, an inevitable corollary, that Ganelon is uniquely a Satan-figure, a wretch who betrays the sacred host out of avarice—someone for whom the reader can feel no sympathy whatsoever.

So often in our profession, a reviewer will find certain aspects of the reviewee's book are excellent, and others less so, always claiming to be "scientific," when in fact his strictures are based uniquely upon whether or not he happens to share the reviewee's critical bias. In order to avoid such a situation, I prefer to state quite simply my own position vis-à-vis the *Song of Roland.* I agree entirely with Brault's options: the value of the *chanson* as literature, its crusade ideology, its typological structure, its appropriateness as an object for modern critical scrutiny, etc. The unique area where we differ concerns character-interpretation: I adhere to the more traditional view which considers Roland guilty of hubris for declining a stronger rear guard and refusing to sound the horn, consequently that Oliver does embody a certain *sapientia* that surpasses, on one level at least, his *comrade's fortitudo,* and that, while condemning Ganelon's treachery and assimilating him to the Serpent and to Judas, we can also admire some of his human qualities as a great feudal baron. Given that Brault does emphasize what I choose to call his Christological reading of the text throughout the Introduction and Commentary, inevitably there were moments when, perusing his work, I shouted "No!" in addition to the many times when I exclaimed "Yes!" In all cases, however, my reaction was uniquely one of differing interpretation or literary taste. In no way do I question Brault's scholarship or his

command of the material. He knows the Oxford *Roland* much better than I do, and I certainly do not pretend to have unearthed new evidence that can decide such matters one way or the other.

It is difficult to list even an approximation of the many sensitive, perceptive, intelligent insights Brault brings to the text. His method—a running commentary—is especially useful for those interested in establishing minute and precise parallelisms, antitheses, and anticipations, from one passage to another; and for those concerned with *Rezeptionsästhetik* (my term, not Brault's; he avoids jargon), the way the public was carried along by the narrative, responding in a specific way to various increments in the plot. Given Brault's critical orientation, we can expect numerous references to Scripture or the Fathers, cogent analogies in a Christologically-oriented world-view. He also contributes a rich, well-documented knowledge of contemporary iconography in the fine arts, and appropriate evidence from other versions of the Roland legend, including the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* and the *Rolandslied.* Among the more penetrating analyses, I especially appreciated Brault's remarks on the female characters, Aude and Bramimonde; on the Saracens as grotesque, demonic parodies "aping" the Christian Franks; on the Charlemagne-Abraham-Job figure; on spatial patterns (the road, the ascent, the two cities); on vegetative patterns (forests, gardens, trees, flowers, etc); on gesture and oral communications among the characters; on Saracen oaths as ritual; on the Psychomachia effect of early encounters at Roncevaux, etc., etc. There can be no doubt that Brault's analyses, in terms of subtlety *and finesse,* merit our respect and most careful scrutiny.

Given my own critical bias, inevitably I regret that certain aspects of recent scholarship, especially the German socio-Marxist school, are neglected in favor the hubris/ non-hubris question (cf. Brault's subhead 3), also some of his more extreme opinions, for example that Ganelon sold his soul to Satan and is possessed by him (pp. 155-56); that Oliver has at one point gone insane (p. 212); or that Roland is an embodiment of *humilitas.* The editor also claims both that the majority of Old French scholars are concerned only with philology and history and that his own views are those of a small minority. This may have been true fifteen years ago but, I think, is no longer the case. Also, in part due to his own magnificent scholarly articles, now perhaps the greater number of active

medievalists (one thinks offhand of Brault, Cook, Crist, Kibler, Mickel; Payen, Ribard; Rütten, Waltz, Wendt; and there are many others) share the Christological view. Brault is no longer defending a citadel; he and his colleagues are in the process of conquering the *imperium Rolandicum* in its totality.

Writing a scholarly book corresponds in more than one way to the creation of novels, drama, and poetry. Both the scholar and the poet choose a genre and a mode of writing, then exploit it with the appropriate texture, tone, narrative voice, etc. Brault's choice of genre is somewhat daring in these post-structuralist times. And some readers may well question whether we need an additional edition and translation of the *Roland* (when so many have appeared in recent years) and whether a running commentary provides the best possible format for literary criticism. Each reader must decide that question for himself. Given Brault's option, his choice, I am convinced that he has carried out his original intent with brio. The scholarship, the insights, the style, the structure, the pacing—are impeccable. The result is most impressive indeed.

Two final points. (1) It is obvious that the Introduction and Commentary are meant for a wider public than most "medievalist" books. Certain sections of the Introduction (no. 4: "Turoldus and His World," for example) are directed at the general reader or the beginning graduate student, not the scholar. It is perhaps in part for them that Brault chose the scholarly "genre" he did. I think he should be commended for attempting *haute vulgarisation* and for bringing it off so effectively. Never is he condescending, never does the reader notice the jarring of tones, the conflict or juxtaposition of styles endemic to such endeavors.

(2) Volume I contains some 140 pages of footnotes. These are one of Brault's finest accomplishments. When so often in the profession the notes are devoted to citing one's own *opera omnia incognita* or to irrelevant works by one's friends or members of a clique, Brault's achievement stands out in striking, indeed apocalyptic contrast. He has covered *all* the relevant scholarship and places it fairly, honestly, perceptively in focus. (The only exception I picked up is Michael Wendt's

book; Raimund Rütten also could have been cited more often.)[3] His notes and Bibliography of Works Cited (an additional 32 pages), the latest word in Roland and *chanson de geste* scholarship, prove to be perhaps the strongest affirmation of Brault's meticulousness, sensitivity, and hard work as a medieval scholar.

The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition presents in sum the research and meditation the editor has devoted to his text for a period of a good decade; it is also *the* presentation in English of what is becoming the dominant interpretation of the *chanson* for our generation. It contains a mine of information of benefit to all scholars in the field, and will help initiate a whole new generation of students to the eternal problems that baffle and tantalize us all.

William C. Calin
University of Oregon