Robert F. Cook

Unity and Esthetics of the Late Chansons de geste

It is becoming increasingly obvious that we cannot create a full literary history of the Old French verse epic until we have understood the two or three dozen texts the genre produced over the last five or ten decades of its existence. That, at least, is the lesson I have drawn from the not-so-recent work of Robert Bossuat, and from the more recent studies and editions by Keith Sinclair; William Kibler, Jean-Louis Picherit, and Thelma Fenster; François Suard; Nico van den Boogaard, and others. And it seems even more clear that we will not understand the very late chansons de geste until we have identified and accounted for our own critical reactions to them. In other words, here as elsewhere, reception history must precede and condition the esthetics of reception. Whence an initial question: why did our ancestors persist in doing something we do not

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1 This article is revised from a paper read in the Fourth Symposium on the Romance Epic, sponsored by the Société Renecvals, American-Canadian Branch, at the annual meeting of the Medieval Institute at Kalamazoo, in May of 1984.

especially like, on the evidence of most criticism? Why did redactors and audiences in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries create, copy and presumably circulate these huge episodic verse narratives in their distinctive form? It is far from a foregone conclusion that our late medieval ancestors would have agreed with Léon Gautier's assessment of these works as "fausses épopées," and as insults to the golden ideals of both French chivalry and epic poetics.3

I need not rehearse the late epic's reputation for this journal's readers. Still, it is worth noting that the very alien esthetic of the poems in question has received strikingly little sympathy even among those of us who have published about them. To use Hayden White's handy term broadly, we condescend to our subject, presumably in order to keep our colleagues from condescending to us. Bossuat, who knew the late poems as well as anyone since Gautier, spoke disdainfully of them: "Le style en est pauvre, et ... les jongleurs anonymes s'entendent surtout à démarquer l'œuvre d'autrui"; he adds: "[ils] n'avaient d'autre ambition que de plaire [à la foule] en gagnant leur pitance."4 Françoise Meunier declared the *Chanson de Godin* to be "un énorme faras ... une compilation d'éléments hétéroclites mal assemblés, ... un monstre de lenteur, de prolixité et de monotonie."5 Cutting a bit closer to home, I find that the best argument I could myself once muster for the late epic goes like this: "Leurs défaillances esthétiques ont vite éclipsé, aux yeux de la critique, leur réel intérêt historique. Il faut pourtant dire, à leur

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3 *Les épopées françaises*, 2nd ed., II (1892), 526. Gautier sums up his long study on the late texts in this fashion: "Il n'ont, ces pauvres poèmes, ni la profonde beauté, ni la rudesse et le naturel de nos plus anciennes chansons. Pour tout dire en un mot qui dit tout, ils ne sont plus épiques..." (5-43).

4 "Réflexions sur le deuxième cycle de la Croisade," *Le Moyen Age*, 64 (1958), 147.

5 Cited in Suard, "Epopée française tardive," 450.
décharge, que les dernières chansons de geste ne sont pas toujours et partout insupportables à lire."\(^6\)

François Suard's recent article in the Horrent Mélanges, "L'Épopée française tardive, XIVe-XVe siècles," is inevitably brief, given the ramifications of the subject; but it goes a long way toward setting the study of these works on a sounder footing through inductive analyses of their themes, content, and construction. Nevertheless, there remains at least one problem — that of unity or its absence in works of such astounding length — for which Suard's solution seems to me not quite complete and perhaps overly prescriptive.

Suard begins with a natural reaction — one that I am inclined to share as I face the daunting task of producing the obligatory plot summary for the new edition of Baudouin de Sébourc: "L’étendue des poèmes tardifs n’est que l’expression massive d’un type de composition nouveau qui déconcerte le lecteur."\(^7\) The next step, then, is to ask whether this esthetic discomfiture — Suard's readerly reaction and mine (and presumably Gautier's) to the poems' massiveness as we perceive it — can be generalized to all periods of the text's reception. I would like to suggest that fourteenth-century audiences did not share our malaise.

Suard is surely right to consider that the impression of confusion in these texts is not an accident but the side-effect of a deliberate application of structural principles.

La chanson de geste tardive se propose en effet de présenter l'histoire complète de nombreux personnages, alors que les textes antérieurs limitent leur projet narratif à une action

\(^6\) *Le Bâtard de Bouillon* (Geneva; Droz, 1972), vii. Cf. the remarks cited in Kibler, "Relectures." Gautier spoke of "l’affection que nous leur [=the late texts] portons presque malgré nous."

\(^7\) "Épopée française tardive," 450, my emphasis. Cf. Gautier on unity, II, 486.
déterminée centrée sur quelques protagonistes. Au lieu d'une
bataille avec ses préparatifs et ses conséquences, on nous
présente la révélation d'un héros jusque-là occulté, l'histoire de
ses amours et de ses exploits et parfois le récit des aventures de
ses enfants et de leurs descendants (450).

Nevertheless, one may ask whether this is really all that new
or unusual a procedure, from a hypothetical fourteenth-century point
of view. On reading Suard's formulation, I was struck immediately
by how closely his structural description of the late epic corresponds
to the principle of unification that seems to be what brought the epic
cycles together. The cycles, of course, do not attempt to tell a single
story; they place under one roof a series of textual mansiones
independent in origin but linked by some extra-narrative framework
that covers all their inhabitants — family relationships in the typical
case of the William Cycle, though simple nominal identity of
William and Rainouart with themselves serves to hold the core
together. Nevertheless, the elements of revelation, love-interest, and
descendancy evoked by Suard are at least all present in such texts as
Aliscans and the Prise d'Orange.

There are degrees in this, obviously — the Crusade Cycle
does tell a single story and in that sense is the most unified of cycles;
the Geste du Roi is not really a cycle and was never copied in its
totality as we conceive it. But in no case does it occur to us, today at
least, to condemn cyclical manuscripts of several tens of thousands
of lines for internal inconsistencies from one branch to another or
for clean breaks in the narrative line; we do not expect a cycle to
have a narrative line. Gautier's remark that "Dans Charles le Chauve
il y a dix chansons qui se suivent et sont à peine reliées l'une à
l'autre" is a reproach only when applied to a literary work that raises
expectations of unity in something like the Aristotelian sense. And
whatever expectations we derive from a redactor's statement that
"My song begins here," it is not sure that late medieval hearers or
even readers expected Aristotelian epics with "plots ... dramatically
constructed, like those of tragedies; they should center [adds
Aristotle] upon a single action, whole and complete, and have a
beginning, a middle and an end ... like a single complete organism...”

In this regard, we may say that there were three major types of very long epic texts in circulation during, say, the middle of the fourteenth century. The first is represented by the William Cycle, which seems to have stopped proliferating fairly early. There is no late total reworking of it that competes with the twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts. The outward extension of the cycle from its core follows fairly strict lines of kinship. The entire cycle is converted into prose without simultaneously engendering sequels or parallel texts of immense length (though one should not forget the existence of Galien).

The second type is represented by the Crusade Cycle. It is a living paradigm in the fourteenth century and is completely rewritten in a new version around the middle of the century. The Chevalier au Cygne et Godefroid de Bouillon thus attains the size of a cycle all by itself. It does not, however, innovate radically with respect to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century narrative material it inherits from the later states of the First Crusade Cycle. On the other hand, the Crusade Cycle also generates a parallel text, the Baudouin de Sebourc, which does not recount any events of the Cycle itself, either early or late, First or Second. With Suard, I have attached the latter poem to a special class, included within our third type.

For present purposes, we may say that this third type has two subtypes. One is represented by Tristan de Nanteuil, which foreshadows and explains some of the events of the Nanteuil Cycle, creating the necessary conditions for those events without actually


9 Suard counts four types (“Tradition épique,” 97; ”Epopée française tardive,” 449-50), but he has in mind poems composed during the period in question, not all the possible types in circulation. Compare Gautier's distinctions, II, 411-31.
including them. The other is represented by Baudouin de Sebourc, which (despite its various allusions to the Crusades and the Holy Land) is an entirely independent story which neither recounts, nor continues, nor sets the stage for any episodes that are already present elsewhere in its cycle. 10

It is the motivation of the redactors in this third mode — the makers of Lion de Bourges, Hugues Capet, and Dieudonné de Hongrie, among others — that is of greatest interest. They are not simply updating material already in circulation, but composing mostly self-contained poems with new protagonists and new settings. The result, as Suard says, is strikingly episodic in character. The heroes and heroines are multiple and their adventures are interlaced.11

Suard gives the example of Tristan de Nanteuil, in which Gui de Nanteuil and his pregnant wife Aiglentine, on their way to rescue the long-suffering Aye d’Avignon, are separated. Their son Tristan, once born, is stolen by robbers, which means there are three lost protagonists to be reunited and reestablished. Each has his or her own story line, and they hold the center stage alternatively. Gui takes a mistress and has another son; Aiglentine is borne off into captivity; Tristan grows up incognito, takes up with Blanchandine, has his own son, and so on and on. Kibler, Picherit and Fenster point out that Lion de Bourges proceeds in much the same way. Alis, wife of the exiled Herpin de Bourges, is kidnapped in the forest and their son is abandoned, to be raised by a lioness. Alis, disguised as a man, becomes seneschal of Toledo; Herpin (among many other things) saves Rome from the pagans, but winds

10 This despite some ingenious arguments of Suzanne Duparc-Quioz’s, most recently in “Les poèmes du deuxième cycle de la Croisade: problèmes de composition et de chronologie,” Revue d’histoire des textes, 9 (1979), 141-81. The Baudouin is in no logical sense a “suite”; it does have protagonists in common with the rest of the Crusade Cycle.

11 The Bâtard de Bouillon may have been conceived in the same way; see my edition, p. xxxi.
up in Toledo himself, as a prisoner. Lion falls in love with Florantine and has twin sons. This is only the first third of the poem. By the time Lion has found his parents, he has lost his sons, and even at the end of the fourteenth-century text, one traitor remains unpunished.

Finally one might add the example of Baudouin de Sebourc, which exhibits a double generational diversification. Baudouin's mother Rose, queen of Nijmegen, loses her husband Ernoul to the treachery of Gaufroi early on (he is not one of the Chétifs as in the First Cycle), and she moves in and out of prison and from Occident to Orient as a result Baudouin is raised in anonymity and has thirty sons of his own, all illegitimate. The final episode brings him and his eldest son together on the battlefield. But his brother Esmeré and the enamoured Saracen princess Eliénor have their own subplot; and the irrepressible villain Gaufroi is encountered at every turn.

Allowing for various embroideries, these summaries sound finally a bit like what we would get if we tried to summarize a manuscript of the greater William Cycle in a few lines. Only the interlacing is significantly different. It should in principle be easy to accept it in epics as we do in romances, where the technique is fairly well assimilated into the scholarly literature. But the late chanson de geste has the misfortune of coming at the end of a long generic history. Baudouin de Sebourc, Tristan de Nanteuil, Hugues Capet, Anseïs de Carthage, et al., are inevitably compared with earlier epics that can be conceived as units in something like an Aristotelian or organic sense. I scarcely need add that older texts have been so conceived both as a function of the literary historians' search for origins, and as part of the esthetic defense of the genre as a whole against criticisms such as Brunetière's. "Plus un poème est ancien, plus il est un," proclaimed Gautier (I, 530).

12 Maria Luisa Donaire Fernández describes in detail a form of the entrelacement technique already to be found in the thirteenth-century Enfances Renier, in Essor et fortune: Actes du IXe congrès, 498-508. Other early examples may well remain to be found.
The late texts of the third type, on the other hand, appear nearly seamless to us at first glance. There is no reason to consider that they were made up by juxtaposition of older, smaller works. Their episodic boundaries are in fact often marked by traditional signs of division — summaries, announcements, appeals to the audience, and so on — but their literary history militates against our considering the late poems as anything but monads.

Despite the analytical advantage our knowledge gives us, I think the distinction between cycles and independent unitary poems may have been blurred for contemporaries starting from the time the chansons de geste became available in compiled cyclical form. What the late redactors have in mind to imitate is not what we think of as the epic unit — a 1900-line Prise or a 1500-line Charroi or even a 9000-line Roman de Roncevaux. They are, instead, composing epics as they knew them — long, episodic sequences whose parts may have a recognizable beginning, middle, and end, but which are themselves characterized by the sort of tumbling movement that we think of as cyclical and that we dissociate from the act of epic composition itself. Add in a dash of interlace, and the result, if taken as a whole, will naturally seem confusing.

On the other hand, the late medieval audience may never have had to take these poems as wholes. We are constrained to do that by our classification system, which puts the Charroi de Nîmes and Lion de Bourges on the same footing, as titulary circumscribed units. Nonetheless, I think there is an important condition in the reception history of epic cycles that makes it possible to reduce the impression of confusion and enchevêtrement that the late epics give. Most of the late poems are, again, immense. Suard mentions the Chevalier au Cygne et Godefroid de Bouillon [cf. p. 7] (35,180 lines), Tristan de Nanteuil (incompletely preserved; about 23,000) and so on; he might have added Baudouin de Sebourc, which now has 25,774 lines and should not vary from that figure in the final edition, or Lion de Bourges, with 34,298 lines in the Alexandrine version. It is conceivable for one or two scribes to copy such a text whole. The resulting manuscript is obviously several hundred leaves long (184 for Lion, but 384 for the Baudouin B manuscript, in
single columns). But it is hard to imagine anyone except a reader in
the novelistic or critical modes trying to swallow one of these copies
in relatively uninterrupted fashion, or hold all its parts in mind
constantly.

Novelistic reading has often been assumed for the late texts
(and often tacitly), but it is not the only possibility. If we do assume
an end-to-end, private reading, we may still consider that an
alternation of principal characters, and a sequence of episodes not
related by cause and effect, may have brought some esthetic
pleasure, some joy of deferral and suspension, to late-medieval
readers as to their counterparts in the succeeding centuries. But
before we assume an esthetic motivation, based in an experience
analogous to our experience as readers, we should attempt to verify
the conditions under which the late epics actually existed as
literature.

Studies on the transmission of the late epics actually offer
three possibilities. The expected mode of presentation of late
chansons de geste may have been individual reading in private, or
reading aloud to small or large groups, or else traditional
declamatory recitation or even singing. After all, the texts are in
verse, and not in just any verse, but in chanson de geste meter with
an easily recognizable formulaic component and other characteristics
taken as self-evident proof of oral transmission in other works.¹³

Though the suggestions made by Madeleine Tyssens have
not, I gather, compelled general assent, she may be right to say
someone (not necessarily a jongleur) read these and other epic texts

¹³ Van den Boogaard set forth a number of reasons for believing that
Tristan de Nanteuil was performed and even composed orally: "Le caractère oral
de la chanson de geste tardive," Langue et littérature françaises du Moyen Age:
arguments for late oral transmission or composition are similar (esp. 394-95); I
made tentative suggestions in the same vein for the Bâtard (xlii-xliii, and note
25).
aloud from books at some point in their history. The references Tyssens has listed to the act of reading, like the many late allusions to the singing of tales, are often dismissed as mere conventions. Nevertheless, given the long survival of oral epic outside France, I know of no reason why allusions of either type should not be taken seriously, in conjunction with the poems’ own direct addresses to their inscribed audiences. After all, Jean Corbechon could define the cymphonia as an "instrument dont les aveugles jouent en chantant les chansons de geste," as late as 1372. Martín de Riquer’s influential article “Épopée jongleresque à écouter, épopée romanesque à lire” established a codicological dichotomy that the manuscripts of the very late chansons de geste do not entirely bear out. They are often not expensive decorated library manuscripts but very simple and even hasty copies, probably utilitarian in nature.

If we espouse one of the two oral hypotheses — either public singing or group reading — then we are free to imagine the audiences for which the late chansons de geste were intended as hearing them in segments analogous in their effect to the shorter, earlier chansons de geste. It is these segments of several hundred or a few thousand lines at most — battles, kidnappings, voyages,


16 “Épopée jongleresque à écouter, épopée romanesque à lire,” La technique littéraire des chansons de geste (Colloque de Liège) (Paris: Les Belles-Lettres, 1959), 75-84, conclusions repeated in Les chansons de geste françaises, 2nd ed. (Paris: Nizet, 1957), 307-10. Examples of manuscripts of poor quality (rapidly written, with little or no decoration, on paper, or on ill-prepared and damaged parchment) include that of Tristan de Nanteuil (B.N. fr. 1478); those of Baudouin and the Bâtard (B.N. fr. 12552, dated fourteenth-century, and 12553); and Ms. A of Lion (B.N. fr. 22555).
trials, tourneys — that have individual protagonists and relative unity of action.

I am, of course, recalling Rychner's estimate of one to two thousand lines for a jongleur's séance, and it may be worth recalling, as well, that for Rychner the episodic character of certain early poems — the Couronnement de Louis for example — is an indication of oral performance. However the late poems may have been composed (I intend to skirt that question here), their audiences may well have enjoyed them segment by segment, within the time of actual reception. Each segment is a more or less self-contained story — but one comfortably set in a plenary whole in which known characters move toward a long-term resolution. The author's job, then, is to imagine péripéties and changes of setting which defer the resolution but never block it. Baudouin de Sébou, for example, ranges from the Picard countryside to the Holy Land with, among other things, an excursion to Hell and back. The eponymous hero is imprisoned, disarmed, tossed by Mediterranean storms, and distracted by the charms of Ivorine, daughter of the Old Man of the Mountain. But neither he, nor his arch-enemy Gaufroi, nor indeed his mother, brothers, cousins, sons, or assorted paramours are killed or otherwise disposed of until the redactor pleases.

None of this makes Ciperis de Vignevaux or Florence de Rome anything like Proust or even Jules Romains (though it may recall certain aspects of the Comédie humaine). But the French Middle Ages never did produce anything like Proust, which observation brings me back to my starting point. We will not be able to give an adequate account of the literature the period did produce — and even cherished, to the point of lavishing scribal time and support materials on it — until we have looked beyond first appearances, ceased to presume inadequacies in makers and audiences a priori, and tried instead to discover in what ways literary productions like the late epics are something besides accidents. The hypothesis of the cycle as the perceived epic unit, the analogy of early "songs" with later "episodes," and the idea of oral diffusion

17 La chanson de geste (Geneva: Droz, 1957), 48-54.
can help answer the question asked in the first paragraph of this essay. They explain certain aspects of composition as deriving from understandable audience expectations, and thus deserve to be kept in mind as we continue to explore the last flowering of verse epic production in the distinctive medieval French mode.

Robert Francis Cook
University of Virginia

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Colloquium on the Romance Epic

CALL FOR PAPERS

The seventh colloquium on the Romance epic, sponsored by the American-Canadian Branch of the Société Internationale Rencesvals, will be held May 15-16, 1987, in the framework of the XXII Congress on Medieval Studies hosted by Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo.

The titles of papers for this colloquium must be received by its organizer, Professor Hans-Erich Keller, no later than 15 October 1986. Abstracts are strongly recommended. Contact:

Professor Hans-Erich Keller
The Ohio State University
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
1841 Millikin Road
Columbus, Ohio 43210-1229