

Barbara N. Sargent-Baur

Forum

On first looking into a new book on a classic text, one does not always feel like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken. The new work may turn out to be largely a representation of long-held views; or it may stray from the text it purports to elucidate; it may simply not be worthy of its subject. Still, if one is to read the thing at all, a rule of thumb in such matters is to give it an open-minded perusal and a thoughtful evaluation, even if the views expressed in it differ from the canon—or from one's own. In particular a study by a scholar of established reputation, while it may not compel our agreement, deserves at least to be taken seriously. *A fortiori*, this applies to an assessment intended for publication.

I raise these generalities with reference to a recent book and to its review in *Olifant* 14 (1989): 227-300. The book is Robert Francis Cook's *The Sense of the Song of Roland* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1987); the review is by Eugene Vance.

It is standard practice, in preparing a review for a scholarly journal, to do two things, at least: give a factual summary of a book's contents, for the information of readers wishing to know quickly whether the work in question is potentially useful to them; and then offer a judgment on the quality of the work according to the lights of the reviewer. It would perhaps oversimplify the process to call these elements objective and subjective, or informational and discriminatory, or (to borrow Northrop Frye's terms for the process as applied to literary texts) journalistic and academic, since inevitably they reinforce each other to some degree. Yet in one way or another both ought to be present in a discussion of a new critical study. Leaving aside for the moment the evaluative side of the Vance review, it ought to be pointed out that the descriptive job has not been done at all; one is left with the impression that the Cook study is comprised of a Preface and some three dozen pages of commentary. This is a false impression, which I should like to correct as well as I can.

Fully one-half of this study (pages 3-124) is given over to a detailed "Commentary on the Narrative." This proceeds sequentially, taking account now of individual *laissez*, now of pairs or triads of *laissez* or of complete scenes. In one way or another, each *laisse* is accounted for, both as a narrative unit and as a component in a narrative sequence. As we follow the order of presentation, we are increasingly put in mind of symmetries in structure, of anticipations of future events, of echoes of events and statements already related, and of significant discrepancies between passages (e.g. that between the written message that Ganelon is charged to deliver to Marsile and the oral statement that Ganelon in fact makes, and that Marsile believes). By this effect of accumulation, the commentary grows ever more substantial as it proceeds. I think it safe to say that nothing of importance in speech or action or authorial comment is omitted, that a conscientious effort has been made to take note of all the major details, and particularly those that have given rise to critical comment and discussion over the last century and more. This is in itself no mean achievement.

After this retrospective, Professor Cook proceeds to the second and more theoretical half of the book. It is entitled "The Sense of the Song of Roland," and takes us back to some of the issues raised in a preliminary way in the Preface. The long preceding Commentary has laid the ground-work for what is now a lengthy and searching discussion of some fundamental questions. One could scarcely present them all here; but they primarily involve the sort of society for which this epic was composed and sung, and the degree to which the *Roland* mirrors that society with regard to conditions of life, common assumptions, and shared values. This in turn leads to an exploration of the sort of work the *Roland* is, and the kinds of characters who inhabit it. Professor Cook proposes that a work of literature—a *fortiori* a traditional one, and known to have been famous in its time—must be read in the context of the culture in which it was born. *Roland* is a product of the early feudal age and expresses its moral priorities: fidelity and courage of course, but also duty, discipline, and (if necessary) self-sacrifice of the individual for the common weal. In this context, reckless and disastrous pride is not a heroic trait. Furthermore (bearing in mind that the *Roland* is not just an epic but a Christian poem), it is not a trait that Christians then or now are called upon to admire; and yet the poem attests to the entry of Roland, and only Roland, into

Paradise. It is on these and similar grounds that Professor Cook firmly rejects the by-now conventional view that Roland is guilty of *desmesure* and that the massacre at Roncevaux is an inexcusable military disaster brought on by one man's folly. "What sort of response is the self-centered heedlessness we find in Roland supposed to have awakened in the hearers for whom he was created? He is said to look upon man's deadliest occupation as a sport or game. What does this have to do with the ethos of the elite around the year 1100?" (128). A good deal of the ensuing attempt to answer this question grows out of the observation "much of what happens in the *Song of Roland* seems to have little relevance to the theme of everbearing pride and its consequences, or no congruity with it at all." (129).

The development of these ideas from a variety of perspectives occupies the latter half of the study. The chapters are "Rereading the *Song of Roland*" "Démésure and Choice," "The Characters: Words and Deeds," "Coherence and Ideology," "The Feudal-Christian Setting," "The Feudal-Christian Ethos," "The Aesthetics of Heroism," and "Roland's Simple Heroism." One cannot briefly do justice to a long, subtle, and detailed exposition. The argument, though, is consistent. It might be summarized as follows:

The *Roland*, though complex, is not obscure, nor is it ambiguous;

it is a unity, and is unified through reference to contemporary experience and common belief;

it must be read as a whole, not as isolated scenes and bits of dialogue or authorial commentary;

so read, it is a reaffirmation of the values of the society in and for which it was composed in the form we now possess.

Professor Cook insists (rightly, in my view) that what we make of the *Chanson de Roland* is largely a function of what we make of Roland himself. This study makes a strong case for the hero as being exactly that, at least in terms of the poet and his audience (if not of modern academic critics): the context is feudal and Christian, the situation within the narrative is one not just of war

but of a *just* war, and the Christian Franks (except for Ganelon) are presented as embodying the values of early-feudal society. Ganelon fails in his duty, and is condemned in the poem by Charlemagne, the other Franks, and the judgment of God. His antithesis is Roland, who "both knows and does his duty. His sacrifice is immediately understandable in the context of the poem's action. His responsibility to the emperor Charlemagne, to his comrades, and to his society precludes his sounding his horn at Roncevaux, for in effect he has given his sworn word to fight to the last when the expected attack comes, and the importance of that promise transcends the circumstances" (xii). And further, on the matter of Roland's responsibility and the conception of duty that the poet attributes to him, "The nature of his job is clear on its face, and he sums it up for himself. If an attack comes, when it comes, he must stand his ground between the attackers, with their advantage of surprise, and his comrades, and in the crudest of terms buy time for the army to cross the passes safely (as it does) even at the cost of his life" (168).

Such observations add up to a reading that is highly consistent, and to my mind persuasive. At the same time it presents an argument in favor of a sound historicism as the indispensable point of departure for the interpretation of an old text. The argument has been made before, but seldom more vigorously or tellingly than here. "Duty, trust, lies and truth, sacrifice, fear, fatigue, frustration, and the courage that serves as touchstone and makes all these things clear: of such is the *Song* made. They yield to no other theme in universality simply because their expression is specifically early feudal. *Homines mulieresque sumus*; there is no surprise that the past can speak to us, once we have stopped talking to ourselves" (243).

I hope that these quotations and observations will go some way to filling the gaps left by the review. That I disagree with the general assessment given therein will be sufficiently obvious. Furthermore, a review of this degree of severity positively invites a hard scrutiny in its turn. One might point out that the attack (Vance 228) on the reference to the "impressive permanence of epic character" (Cook 243) takes no account of the nuances with which this *aperçu* is surrounded and the salutary insistence on relating this to individual texts; nor does it mention the (fairly innocuous) proposition that what Roland has in common with other heroes of

Western tradition are "steadfastness and personal courage"—qualities that do mark Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Æneas, and Beowulf, although Professor Vance seems not to think so. Passing from heroism to historicism, the reviewer manages to tar Professor Cook and Joan Evans with the same brush, for the former bases some of his argument on a "ludicrously naïve quotation" from the latter. In point of fact, the Evans quotation has been misunderstood by the reviewer; her statement that somewhere about 1100 the stability necessary for the development of medieval civilization, including scholastic philosophy, had been achieved, is interpreted as a statement that scholastic philosophy itself was flowering ca. 1100. Naïveté is not a stick with which to beat Joan Evans. Nor is "pretending" to be *au courant* with the secondary literature (a charge made on p. 229) one with which to beat R. F. Cook.

There is a troubling proportion of truncated quotations, and some inaccurate ones (even of Alice Colby-Hall's one-sentence jacket comment). If the scholar under scrutiny is "eminently quotable" (Vance 230), he deserves at least to be quoted correctly.

I shall conclude with a word on *bienséance*: it is one thing to have intellectual differences with someone, another thing altogether to resort in print to *ad hominem* attacks. This is not a plea for kinder, gentler criticism, but for a reasonable level of civility and decorum in scholarly discourse.

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Personalia

George D. Greenia (Professor, Department of Modern Languages, College of William & Mary) lists the following recent publications: "The Court of Alfonso X in Words and Pictures: Las Cantigas," to appear in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context. Acts of the Fifth Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society. Dalfsen, The Netherlands, 9-16, 1986.* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990); ; "A New Manuscript Illuminated in the Alphonsine Scriptorium," *Bulletin of the Cantigueiros de Santa María* 2 (1989): 31-42; "The *Libro de Alexandre* and the Computerized Editing of Texts" (Review Article of *Libro de Alexandre*, Estudio y edición de Francisco Marcos Marin [Madrid, 1987]), *La Corónica* 17 (1988): 55-67. He is currently working on an edition and study of B. N. MS. 10011, *Libro de moralidades* (Guillaume de Conques's *Liber moralium philosophorum* with interpolations from works by the Arabic philosopher Algazeli); with Thomas L. Amos, "Resources on Medieval Iberia at the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library," *La Corónica* 18 (1989): 129-37; and with Catherine Cantleberry, *A Tentative Bibliography of Sources for Iberian Manuscript Studies* (Collegeville, MN: Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, 1989).

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Daniel Métraux is currently preparing an edition of Girart d'Amiens's *Charlemagne* as a doctoral thesis. He is working under the direction of Eric Hicks (University of Lausanne).

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Gerald A. Bertin has recently published *Le Moniage Rainouart II et III*, tome I, Paris, 1988, SATF, pp. CXVII + 339. At the present time he is preparing tome II.

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