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Evelyn Birge Vitz. *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology: Subjects and Objects of Desire*. New York: NYU Press, 1989.

In this collection of seven essays, recently issued in paperback, Vitz employs central principles of modern narratology, principally from Greimas and Todorov, to examine the structure of the subject, objects of desire, transformations, and causation in medieval texts. Unlike many studies which embrace structuralist/semiotic issues and terminology uncritically or dismiss them out-of-hand, this one balances a serious critique of their limitations in accounting for narratives formed by pre-romantic views of self and motivation with her own fresh insights which are partially motivated by structuralism's questions.

She tells us, for example, that in the *Historia Calamitatum* Abelard measures his superiority "vertically," through an intensity of both good and bad qualities, rather than "horizontally," by differentiating himself from his peers. He thus places himself in the medieval tradition of "praise and blame" literature which is particular to medieval autobiography. Abelard's story may also not be "narratively" successful because he does not integrate the two periods of his life—the lustful sinner and the castrated monk—into a "homogenized" life story of a unique individual. He makes of his life an exemplum, oriented toward the *destinataire*, not a revelation of the *destinateur* which also confounds modern expectations.

The first of two essays on *Le Roman de la rose* discusses the fragmentation of the "I" into four distinct identities which are partially revealed through verb tenses. The distancing of the preterit, the emotional involvement of the *passé composé*, and the dramatic, oral qualities of the present mark the progressive emotional involvement of the narrator. Even if it is a courtly commonplace, the story is so effective emotionally as to suggest autobiography, not irony. The other essay focuses on the language of space—inside/outside and inclusion/exclusion of the hero who desires to move "in." He is not the typical subject described in narratological theory because he is not an

"interior" acting upon an "exterior" through heroic acts. Vitz reads the *Rose* as profoundly religious, as the very structure of desire. Contrary to a Robertsonian reading, the poem is not a Christian critique of courtliness, but a depiction of love as a state of infinite yearning which requires the surrender of the self. The medieval protagonist is therefore not an adequate Subject because the hero must always submit to something greater.

In the essay on *La Fille du comte de Pontieu*, the text seems a pretext for comparing modern and medieval concepts of récit, story, chronicle, and history. Vitz finds Greimas's actantial schema inadequate for a narrative where numerous subjects pursue their own objects and the real Subject is an abstraction, the perpetuation and glory of *la famille Pontieu*. The text, like many medieval ones, is discontinuous and unclear at points, which makes it closer to chronicle than to story with its emphasis on causality and transformation. Although subjects lose sight of their objects and the events are loosely connected episodes, the causality rests in God's grander plan for the family and its heirs. Like the historian who may not understand the raw material of experience, the narrator only hints at connections and meaning. The unity of this narrative is not of process, as in modern ones, but of fixed patterns humans may only partially understand.

In the essay of *La vie de St. Alexis*, Vitz argues that modern theories of the subject's desire and ultimate possession of an object would be a negative model of *cupiditas* to the Christian. Desire in medieval narrative would be better understood as St. Bernard defines *caritas*, the paradoxical desire for an absent and yet present God whom it never possesses but may know better and who motivates man to transcendence, not transformation. In the saint's life, another problem with the Greimacian model is clear. The subject is God and the protagonist is both his *adjuvant* and another subject because he must do God's will. Subjects abound—we, the audience, must pray to Alexis for our own salvation and the family offers its moving lament. Although the presence of so many subjects (and the absence of any recognition of the transcendent subject) shows the limits of theory to account for the structure of this narrative, Vitz thinks it supplies a way of looking at *desire* and suggests a map for defining medieval genres through their configuration of subjects. For hagiography this would include the presence of the "we" who desire salvation through the saint; otherwise, the text would be mere biography.

In her most thorough rejection of narratology, Vitz explains why the Todorovian syntactic analysis cannot account for our confusion on reading Marie's *Lais* for the first time. She points to multiple agents without verbs; the still fluid use of verb tenses in Old French which confound our ability to distinguish event from description, figure from ground; events that have unclear or inconsistent consequences; and outcomes that are not resolutions of major conflicts. All of these problems suggest that the *Lais* are not intelligible syntactically in Todorov's sense, especially on a first reading. They can be understood retroactively through stylistic features such as aesthetically pleasing endings.

The final essay offers a broad critique of modern approaches to desire and causality by focusing on *La Chanson de Roland*, Thomas's *Tristan*, and a fabliau, *Du Segretain moine*. Vitz asks whether the characters get what they want, what model of causality operates in the narrative, and what the relationship is between satisfaction of the characters' desires and closure of the narrative. She demonstrates that St. Augustine's views on causality offer better insights into these texts than do Todorov's, because in religious narratives human agency is not sufficient. In ways unlike classical mythology, the Christian view accepts that humans are responsible for their actions, but their actions are not necessarily responsible for the outcome of the action. Analyzing causes in *Tristan*, for example, is problematic because it is difficult to know what the characters desire; they are made incompetent by love. The characters are incapable of transforming themselves because love is not a dynamic motivator of events but an excuse for the moralist/narrator's analysis. Desire in the three quite different texts initiates events, but characters are not adequate by themselves' they do not so much get what they want as what they deserve. Also, closure is more rhetorical flourish than a satisfaction of the desire which initiated the sequence of events.

In her conclusion, Vitz admits (apologetically?) that she is "struck by the Christianity of the texts examined" (213), but her readings are not in the Robertsonian vein. The *Rose*, for example, is a religious work because it celebrates an "infinite yearning for the inaccessible" (214). She suggests that desire is so fundamental in medieval narrative that one could classify genres according to what the protagonist desires, and since God is often a narrative subject, the mysteriousness of his ways accounts for the lack of intelligibility of certain narrative sequences.

Her fine insights into how desire and the limits of human agency are narrativized are a useful corrective to the refusal to speak of religious belief in the name of modernism and the pieties of anagogic interpretation. Yet her off-hand allusion to Ong, the oral tradition, I and a very dated idea about right brain/left brain processing detract. The level of generality overall will be a problem for those looking for extensive textual analysis, because Vitz devotes as much space to showing the limits of structuralist theory as she does to analyzing the texts. This is, moreover, the great weakness of the collection; these theories have been thoroughly challenged by post-structuralism and new historicism for many years now.

Vitz herself mixes a phenomenological and cultural approach in her critique without suggesting there is any incompatibility with structuralism. Her interest in the reception of the text on first reading, the impact of hagiography on the audience, medieval theories of causation, and traces of orality are all extremely interesting questions to ask, but are not those of narratology. She belabors the point that medieval narrative is not always "intelligible" because we cannot know why something happens. Structuralists do not ask why, but rather how sequences function.

Her book is, nonetheless, a collection of very good essays that could profitably be read as a whole or independently of each other. The language is admirable unpretentious for a book on critical theory (love is an "itch" in Tristan) and her sources—from Augustine to "The Little Gingerbread Man"—show her understanding of reading as the textual expression of desire.