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Medieval French Literature
An Introduction

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later centuries in literary as well as other areas. The Middle Ages are indeed a beginning, an opening which denies an insistence on closure.

Zink arrives at a final caution: "Medieval literature cannot be approached through the conventional distinctions of other periods, including our own." But such a caution is no excuse for intellectual inertia. Zink rightly reminds us of the reason for his *and our* journey:

It is not futile to attempt to understand and appreciate this literature. First and foremost, because it is pleasurable, but also because the discovery of a world which was simultaneously so near and so far from our own invites us to take a new look at ourselves.

Medieval French Literature leads to just such a discovery, and through Jeff Rider's careful and caring translation, many more readers can embark on Michel Zink's instructive voyage of discovery, for this book widens considerably the readership that can enjoy the literary riches of the French Middle Ages.

Introduction

French literature first appeared in the Middle Ages. The ages in between, the intermediate ages, the "Middle Ages"—defined thus negatively as the period separating the classical world from the modern world, without a character of their own—were in fact an age of beginnings. Error and truth mingle in the tension between a name that would be offensive were it not so shopworn, and the reality it hides. For it is indeed true that a continuity existed between classical culture and medieval culture, but it is also true that they were separated by a profound rupture. Medieval culture was in many ways, if only by virtue of the appearance of new languages, a true beginning.

A beginning: this is the source of the fascination medieval literature exercises on the mind—a fascination founded on the impression, or the illusion, that the past explains the present, that the truth of what we are is to be found further back in time, deeper in the roots. A beginning that is not really a beginning: this is the source of the complexity and the originality of medieval literature. The Middle Ages are the moment in which we can seize French civilization and literature in their primitive state, and yet medieval French civilization was in no way primitive, even though certain anthropological approaches sometimes permit one to understand it better.

Such is the first ambiguity of this literature. One may see in it a deliberate effort to imitate, develop, and adapt classical models after the ruptures caused by the collapse of the Roman world, the formation of the young romance languages, and the emergence of a feudal society. One may also see it, on the other hand, as essentially a reflection of a new world, of new sensibilities and new forms of expression. Both the one and the other are true, and it is difficult to harmonize these two truths. According to which of these truths one privileges, moreover, the relations between Latin and the vernacular language, between

the written and the spoken, between the modern notion of literature and the practices of the time take on different aspects.

All the same—and this is the second difficulty encountered by an introductory study—this literature evolved profoundly over time. How could it have been otherwise? It is not a matter of cutting out and studying a single century in the history of French literature. The Middle Ages stretched out over a thousand years. According to historians, they began with the fall of the western Roman empire in 476 and ended in the second half of the fifteenth century. It may be true that the first monuments of French literature did not appear until the end of the ninth century and that this literature was not really established until the end of the eleventh century, but this still leaves four or five centuries of literary production grouped together under the common name of medieval literature.

The approach that will be followed in this book is based on the large chronological divisions of this long period. It is intended to show that these divisions are not arbitrary and can be made to coincide, without artifice, with the stages of a reasonable and coherent account of the development of this literature. I will first consider, in Part One, the conditions of its genesis in relation to the genesis of the language that was its vehicle, and the first manifestations of this language in the oldest extant texts. Part Two will describe the blossoming of an abundant and original French literature through an investigation of its oldest and most important forms—*chanson de geste* (epic song), lyric poetry, and romances—in the twelfth century. The third part will show how the very success of this literature entailed its mutation and its renewal in certain domains, its sclerosis in others; how this success modified the conditions of intellectual and literary life and the diffusion of the writings; how, more generally, it provoked a profound change in literary consciousness. This evolution occurred more or less during the thirteenth century. The fourth part, finally, will consider the last two centuries of medieval French literature, a period which, without calling into question the literary system established in the second half of the thirteenth century, nonetheless formed in many ways a universe of its own and thus requires separate treatment.

PART ONE THE CONDITIONS OF A GENESIS

1

Birth of a Language, Genesis of a Literature

Latin and the Vernacular

A single institution survived the Germanic invasions and the collapse of the Roman Empire and assured the survival of Latin culture: the Church. At the same time, spoken Latin, introduced into Gaul five centuries earlier as a result of the Roman conquest, and already having undergone significant changes, began to change more quickly and more drastically. Several centuries later, French literature was born of the coming together—sometimes in an alliance, sometimes in a confrontation—of the young language born from the ruins of Latin and the already ancient Church, curator of Latin letters.

In “going over to the barbarians,” converting the Germanic conquerors, the Church saved itself and saved Latin culture. Its schools were the only schools. It supplied the courts of the Gothic sovereigns, fascinated by the Roman chancellory, with literate officials. Its bishops, like Sidonius Apollinaris in the fifth century and Venantius Fortunatus in the sixth, still cultivated the art of poetry, exchanged stiffly elegant letters, and composed panegyrics and epithalamia in nearly correct hexameters for princes who barely understood them. Without the manuscripts copied and preserved in its monasteries, Latin literature would be almost entirely lost to us. Under the influence of monasticism in the sixth and seventh centuries, it is true, the Church tended to turn in upon itself, to think of itself as an ideal and autonomous society, to view the lay world as a sort of necessary evil, and to manifest an ever greater severity towards worldly literature. Saint Augustine did permit the study of the liberal arts and pagan authors as preparation for the reading of sacred texts, but this concession was granted less and less often as time went on, and it was denied entirely, for example, by the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon monk the Venerable Bede. Had it

not met with strong resistance, such severity might well have threatened the survival of the classical heritage, preserved until that time alongside of the scriptural and patristic heritage. However, this severity might also be credited with encouraging the extraordinary blossoming of Gregorian chant, a liturgical poetry altogether novel in its form, its expression, and its melodies. As we will see, its poetry and melodies preceded and announced a secular lyricism in the vernacular language. In the second half of the eighth century, the Carolingian renaissance restored classical authors to a place of honor in its efforts to give a better education to the clergy and, therefore, to imperial officials.

But a phenomenon of capital importance occurred at about the same time, one that would slowly but irrevocably define the limits and modify the range of every effort, however fertile, to preserve, restore, and prolong Latinate culture. The spoken language had evolved to the point where the *illiterati*, those who had not been to school, no longer understood Latin. There were no longer two different Latins, literary and spoken, but two different languages. It is hard to know exactly when textual expressions like *lingua rustica* (the rustic language), and so on started to refer to this new language rather than to spoken Latin, but it was certainly the case already in 813, when a canon of the Council of Tours encouraged priests to preach "in linguam rusticam gallicam aut theotiscam" ("in the common 'Gallic' or the common 'Teutonic' language"), or, in other words, in French or in German. At Strasbourg thirty years later, in 842, two of the sons of Louis the Pious, Charles the Bald and Louis the German, and their partisans swore oaths in the Germanic and the Romance languages on the occasion of one of their inconsequential reconciliations, and these oaths were recorded by the historian Nithard in his *Historiarum libri IV* (*Histories*) or *De dissensionibus filiorum Ludovici pii* (*History of the Conflicts of the Sons of Louis the Pious*). Thus was preserved for us the first text in a language that was no longer Latin and would become French.

This evolution was accompanied by fragmentation. Learned from the mouths of legionaries who certainly did not speak like Cicero and who came from every corner of the empire, deformed by native throats, and enriched by Germanic contribu-

tions and indigenous residues, spoken Latin did not undergo a uniform transformation. The diversity of phonetic habits, the proportion of the Germanic element of the population, the level to which Latin culture had penetrated and the length of time it had been in place, the relative importance of these different factors, all these varied from region to region. This is why in Romania, in the lands where Roman colonization had been so strong that the new languages were direct descendants of Latin, these languages—the Romance languages—were different from one another. In the territory that is now France, two languages appeared, which since the time of Dante have been referred to by the way to say "yes" in each: the language of *oil* in the north and the language of *oc* in the south. But these languages themselves were so divided into numerous dialects that contemporaries seem for a long time to have had the impression that there was only one French language and that all the variations were dialectal. A unifying force, literature opposed this centrifugal motion by giving one dialect ascendancy—sometimes only momentary—over the others or, more often, by making a deliberate effort to efface or combine dialectal traces in an attempt to be understood by everyone.

But let us return to the moment when the French language emerged face to face with Latin. It did not become a language of culture simply because it existed; nothing at that time guaranteed that it would ever become one. Or, more precisely, nothing guaranteed that it would become a written language. The Church had a monopoly on intellectual tools and learning. The clerks were all busy copying, commenting on, and imitating the texts of classical authors, adding to the body of scriptural exegesis, composing liturgical poems, and, eventually, reopening the study of philosophy. Why should they seek to forge a new culture in a language that barely existed? Why should they take the trouble to copy down the rude and immoral songs of bumpkins? We know such songs existed because they were condemned as early as the sixth century in sermons and in the ordinances of ecclesiastical councils. And in the tenth century Bernard d'Angers heard them reverberating in the church of Sainte Foy in Conques and was astonished to learn that they pleased the little saint, as she had made known in a vision to an abbot who had wished to silence them. Why should clerks note

down legends in which pagan beliefs still flowered? And if they didn't do it, who would? Only in the bosom of the Church could one learn to read and write. And learning to read and write meant learning to read and write Latin. Even at the very end of the thirteenth century, after two centuries of a flourishing literature in French and at a time when many lay people in fact knew how to read vernacular languages without knowing any, or hardly any, Latin, the Catalan Ramon Lull, in his educational treatise entitled *Doctrina pueril* (*On the Education of Children*), considers it a daring innovation to suggest that children be taught to read and write in their first language. When the French language first emerged, therefore, nothing guaranteed that it would become an independent language of culture, and, in particular, of written culture. After all, it might well have remained indefinitely in a situation similar to that in which dialectal Arabic finds itself vis-à-vis literary Arabic. But things turned out otherwise, and this is why the appearance of the first French texts merits the attention I will devote to it in the next chapter.

Writing and Speaking

The somewhat tortuous phrase I have just used—"an independent language of culture, and, in particular, of written culture"—betrays a hesitation and a difficulty. In what sense was writing a criterion of culture in medieval civilization? Did the two oppositions "Latin vs. French" and "writing vs. speaking" correspond exactly? It is clear that Latin had a monopoly on writing when the Romance languages appeared, but throughout the Middle Ages the relation between writing and speaking was generally very different than it is today, even though the practice of writing spread continuously during this period. Oral performance played the essential role more often than not, and writing seemed to exist only to compensate for lapses of memory. This was true even in the legal domain: some original charters do no more than testify to the existence of a legal action that was performed orally; others merely allude to an orally performed action without bothering to transcribe the details of the agreement. The predominance of oral performance is even clearer in the case of literary works. The medieval literary work, whatever it was, was always intended for oral

transmission and existed only in performance. Song was the essence of poetry, in both Latin and French. Indeed, until romances appeared, all French literature, without exception, was composed to be sung. Poetry, like prose, was read aloud and, undoubtedly, was often recited in a sort of musical monotone. In all this literature there was a theatrical dimension whose importance we will consider later on. Seen from this point of view, the text is just a part of a work that writing transmits only in a mutilated form. One should think here of musical notation, of the neumatic notation of the high Middle Ages which had neither staff nor indication of key. It did not help to decipher the melody, but it did help people who already knew the melody to remember it accurately, and in fact gave them indications that were sometimes astonishingly precise. It would be rather artificial to push this comparison between musical notation and the text too far, but it is nonetheless true that the medieval text was first and foremost a set of essential notes intended to help a performer remember a work.

Most medieval culture, therefore, was not written; and this was almost as true for Latin culture as it was for French. It is generally true that there were far more copies of the most widely disseminated Latin works than there were of those in French, but even Latin books were rare. Books were expensive, and their circulation was limited. A library with fifty volumes was a rich one. When universities were founded in the thirteenth century, their methods testified to the continuing primacy of the spoken word and the continuing transmission of the written word through the medium of the voice even in the highest intellectual circles: a course consisted of the reading aloud of a text that the students did not have before them, accompanied by a commentary. And universities so loathed writing that examinations remained exclusively oral until the end of the nineteenth century. Therefore, all that can be said is that Latin was, for good reason, written before French—both historically and in the life of the educated individual—and that writers and scribes were also professional Latinists. But whether it was a matter of transmitting knowledge or enhancing esthetic effects, speaking held the predominant place in all medieval culture, Latin as well as vernacular culture, and not just in the latter.

Does this mean that we are really dealing with an oral culture where writing was secondary? Nothing could be less true. Admission to the world of writing was cloaked in considerable social and religious status. Written documents were cited as sources and authorities: as we will see, the authors of romances and *chansons de geste* (epic songs) systematically claim, truly or falsely, to have a written source, and preferably a Latin one. The authority par excellence was the Bible, the Book, the Scripture. On Judgement Day, sings the *Dies irae* (*Day of Wrath*), salvation or damnation will depend on the written trace of each person's life: "Liber scriptus referetur / In quo totum continetur" ("the written book will be brought in which everything is contained"). And, according to numerous *exempla*, or edifying anecdotes, penitence so thoroughly erased sins from this great holy book that the devil himself forgot them. In the domain of literature proper, the attention paid to the correct transmission of texts belies any indifference, even relative indifference, to writing. Certain texts do preserve traces of orality, but they are ambiguous and difficult to interpret once they have been fossilized in writing. Speaking was essential, but it was also secondary. Performance was a practical necessity in the actualization of a work—in the realization of its potential effects and, in some cases perhaps, but only in an obscure way, in its composition—and in the immediate transmission of knowledge. But writing preserved words, and this made it authoritative. Again, this was as true in the domain of Latin as it was in the domain of French, once the latter began to be written.

Like the opposition between writing and speaking, the opposition between learned culture and popular culture does not altogether correspond to that between Latin and the vernacular. It is true that some popular beliefs and customs entered the world of writing only when clerks mentioned them with distrust or disgust, or at best without understanding them, or when a manual for confessors instructed priests to ask about them in order to condemn them. But this was because the clerks themselves wished to emphasize the differences between their world and that of the *rustici*. In reality, the two types of sensibilities, beliefs, and ways of thinking differed little. The line dividing the two worlds or, more generally, the line dividing cultivated people from uncultivated ones, did not necessarily correspond

to the line dividing those who could read and write from those who could not, or even to the line dividing those who knew Latin from those who did not. The traces of a popular culture are more numerous and more precise in Latin texts than in French ones. Lay princes—who could not themselves read and write, who knew Latin barely or not at all, but who had *chansons de geste*, saints' lives, historical or biblical compilations, and romances sung or read to them—were more "cultivated" than the clerical jobber who copied the texts out for them, the merchant who was able to keep his account books and knew his letters and numbers but nothing more, or even the obscure monk, despite his veneer of Latin, who remained locked away in his monastery. These princes were also probably further removed from "popular culture." They were "men of letters" who knew neither how to write nor how to read or who, if they were literate, did not often use their abilities, while many of those who did frequently read and write were actually strangers to the world of letters. Both the former and the latter were, but inversely, both literate and illiterate, depending on whether these terms are understood literally or metaphorically.

There are thus no simple answers to the two questions I asked at the beginning of this section. Was writing a criterion of culture? Yes, undoubtedly, but not rigidly or exclusively, because in the Middle Ages it did not have the autonomy it does today. Its use presumed, rather, a passage through orality. Was writing associated with Latin, speaking with French? No, for the same reason: the medieval world was not a world of pure orality, and writing was never totally self-sufficient there. Yes, however, in one sense, since one could not master Latin without mastering writing, and for a long time it was almost impossible to master writing without mastering Latin. For French, the attainment of written representation was an innovation and a conquest marking, necessarily, the moment French literature first appears to us, although it may of course have had a previous, purely oral, existence.

Clerk and Jongleur

To the two oppositions mentioned above—"Latin vs. French" and "writing vs. speaking"—we need to add a third concerning the authors and the actors of literature: the opposition "clerk vs.

jongleur." A clerk was simultaneously a churchman and someone who could read, someone who could understand texts. The two ideas were indissolubly united in the name. The opposite of the clerk, therefore, was the illiterate lay person. Intellectual activity and spiritual effort were united in the clerk. To him were attached both the authority of the Scripture and the authority emanating from all books. His language was Latin, the language of the Church. He was the instrument of the ecclesiastical preservation of Latin literature mentioned earlier. Because he held a monopoly on writing, the fate of the young French language was in his hands. He would decide whether it became a language of written culture or not. In the ninth and tenth centuries, nothing had been decided. As we will see, however, the clerks "went over" to French just as the Church had "gone over" to the barbarians. Most medieval French authors and scribes were clerks. And many of them, a great many of them, made no effort to draw French literature in the direction of their professional preoccupations, religious subjects or the world of the schools.

Beside the clerk stood writing and the Church. Across from him stood the jongleur, condemned by the Church, the man—or the woman—of orality and performance. The word *joculator* is attested from the sixth century on, and its etymological link with the modern French *jeu* (play, game, sport) is clear evidence that the jongleur was an itinerant entertainer, undoubtedly the heir of the ambulant actors of late antiquity, but perhaps also of the Celtic bards and the Germanic singers of epic poems. The jongleur's activities were highly diverse: he or she might be an acrobat, animal trainer, mime, musician, dancer, or singer. Not all jongleurs dedicated themselves to the recitation or singing of poems, but those who did played an important role in the diffusion, and perhaps in the elaboration, of certain poetic forms, like lyric poetry and especially the *chanson de geste*. Thomas Cabham's thirteenth-century manual for confessors divided jongleurs into three categories, one of which—the singers of *chansons de geste* and saints' lives—escaped the condemnation he heaped on the other two. Performers, but sometimes also creators—the line between the two was not as well defined as has sometimes been suggested—perpetually in search of a generous patron, the jongleurs provided the necessary oral and vocal real-

ization of the medieval work. This is why their role diminished as written civilization expanded. From the thirteenth century on, they sought full-time employment with a great lord and held in his court the position of a *ministerialis*, or minstrel. But the true court poets were the *grands rhétoriqueurs*, or great rhetoricians, of the fifteenth century, who were scholars—and clerks.

The clerk and the jongleur were thus the two promoters of French literature in its infancy, and their changing relation to this literature throughout the Middle Ages reflects its evolution.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us return, rather, to the moment when the French language emerged, when it was still up to the clerks to decide whether or not this new language would produce texts.

The First Texts

The Church had no particular reason for devoting the competence of its clerks to the service of the young French language in and of itself. But it had to do so. The sons of Louis the Pious had been obliged to resort to the common Germanic and Romance languages in 842 for political reasons, in order that each one might understand the terms of the oath sworn by the other. The Church was forced to resort to the vernacular language for pastoral reasons. The canon of the Council of Tours held in 813, cited above, and similar canons from throughout the ninth century set forth these reasons in their utter simplicity: if it had not been willing to preach to the people in their own language, the Church would have had to renounce its pursuit of their often still incomplete conversion. This desire to preach in a simple language accessible to everyone, and the consequent need to renounce the oratorical elegance so important to Latin literature, had been manifested often even before the separation of Latin and French, as for example, in the sermons of Saint Caesarius of Arles at the very beginning of the sixth century.

A single written witness of this effort to preach in French survives from the period before the true flowering of French literature. It is a fragmentary draft, half in ordinary letters, half in Tironian notation, of a sermon on the conversion of the Ninevites by Jonah preached at Saint-Amand-les-Eaux (near Lille) around 950 on the occasion of a three-day fast undertaken in the hope that the town might thus be delivered from the Normans. The text is nothing more than a paraphrase of Saint Jerome's commentary on the *Book of Jonah*, written partly in Latin, partly in French. The author was evidently more familiar with French than with Latin, for the only sentence entirely of his own making (on the ultimate conversion of the Jews, a subject dear to his heart) is also the only sentence entirely in French. He was so dependent on his Latin model, however,

that, when he followed it, he could not keep himself from ending in Latin sentences he had begun in French. The text thus shows that habits and cultural models were stronger than simple linguistic competence.

Of course, the humble homilies composed for the people in their own language were not intended to be written down. The sermon on Jonah has come down to us only in the form of a rough copy. In general, sermons in French were not written down and no attention was paid to the esthetic resources or literary potential of these entirely utilitarian efforts. The written preservation of early French poems, primitive as they may be, was the result of an altogether different sensibility. The choice and the arrangement of the words and the attention paid to the meter and the assonance show that their authors wished to produce esthetic effects through specifically linguistic means. And the result seemed worthy of being written down. Nevertheless, these poems reflect the pastoral concerns of the Church almost as much as the sermons do, and this is why they were preserved. They are, moreover, no freer from the influence of Latin models than they are from the influence of the Church. They are not transcriptions of the popular songs whose lewd contents and provocative renderings, usually by women, had long been stigmatized by ecclesiastical councils and sermons. Nor are they reproductions of the pious, albeit barbarian, songs with which the *rustici* honored Saint Foy at Conques. They are transpositions of Latin religious poems into French.

This is the case for the oldest of them, the *Séquence de sainte Eulalie* (*Sequence of Saint Eulalie*, c. 881–882). In the Valenciennes manuscript preserving this short piece of twenty-nine lines, it follows another poem, in Latin, in honor of the same saint. Its role was to introduce to the faithful the saint whose feast was celebrated in the day's liturgy. This pedagogical role is evident in the differences distinguishing it from the Latin poem. The latter is a sort of rhetorical commendation of the saint which assumes that her life is already familiar to the listener, whereas the *Séquence* recounts briefly the story of her martyrdom. But both pieces were intended for insertion in the day's liturgy. Both are sequences, poems destined to be sung between, and to the same melody as, an *Alleluia* and its repetition. The rhymes on -ia at the beginning and end of the French

poem, as well as its place in the manuscript, confirm that it was composed for this purpose. The oldest monument of French literature is thus not simply a religious poem, but a liturgical poem, inserted in the poetic development of the service; a sort of vernacular variant of a Latin poem.

These traits are to be found in all the French poems preserved from the end of the ninth century to the end of the eleventh. However, their liturgical role diminished somewhat during this period. The poems grew longer and were divided into stanzas, and thus escaped from the confines of the sequence; but they were still closely linked to ecclesiastical celebrations. This is true of the tenth-century *Vie de saint Léger* (*Life of Saint Léger*) and the *Passion du Christ* or *Passion du Clermont* (*Passion of Christ* or *Passion of Clermont*) from the end of the same century, which are both contained in a single manuscript at Clermont-Ferrand where the melody is also transcribed. Both poems could easily have been integrated into the liturgy, the *Vie* on the day of the saint's feast, the *Passion* on Palm Sunday or during Holy Week, but both could also have been sung on the same occasions by jongleurs—those singers of saints' lives who escaped Thomas Cabham's condemnation—performing on their own account. This possibility is suggested by the *Chanson de sainte Foy d'Agen* (*Song of Saint Foy of Agen*)—again this little saint of Conques!—an admirable Provençal poem of the second third of the eleventh century. The song, one reads in line 14, is “*bella 'n tresca*” (“good for a *tresque*”). Ordinarily the word *tresque* meant a sort of farandole, a circle dance of Provençal origin; here, however, it undoubtedly meant that the song was intended to accompany a procession in honor of the saint and could therefore have a para-liturgical function. In the manuscript, moreover, it is placed next to a service for Saint Foy. It is in no way a liturgical poem, however. It is too long (593 lines) and the poem itself mentions that it was sung by a jongleur. This jongleur marked the distance separating him from the Latin, clerical world, moreover, by claiming that that world was the source of his poem: he had heard a Latin book read (lines 1–2); he had heard the song sung by *gramadis*—clerks and men of letters (lines 27–28). He sought to earn the good will of his public and seems to have expected some remuneration.

One observes the same development, the same growing

outwards from the liturgy, in the domain of religious theater. Liturgical dramas were dramatic and musical paraphrases of the lives of saints and of episodes from the Bible, composed and performed in monasteries and their schools to enhance the solemnity of the day. They were composed initially in Latin, of course, but the vernacular language eventually made its appearance in the four French stanzas and the French refrain of the *Sponsus* (*Bridegroom*), an eleventh-century portrayal of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

Although a secular Latin literature existed at this time, there is no trace of a secular vernacular literature during this entire period, with one tiny and bizarre exception: the tenth-century poem known as the *Aube bilingue de Fleury* (*Bilingual Dawn Song of Fleury*). The monastery of Fleury, today Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, was a very important intellectual center at this time and a focal point of liturgical drama. An *aube*, as we will see later, is a poem evoking the painful separation of lovers in the morning. This one is in Latin, but each stanza is followed by a two-line refrain in the vernacular language. But which vernacular language? This has never been established with any certainty, nor have these two lines ever been truly understood, although dozens of translations have been proposed, some having no points in common. The reason for this, Paul Zumthor has recently suggested, is that these lines really have no meaning.¹ A few of the key words common to all *aubes*—the cry of the watchman, the tears—stand out in isolation, easily recognizable, from a pidgin that sounds like the vernacular language but doesn't mean anything. The hypothesis is daring and seductive. In any event (and paradoxically, if Zumthor's hypothesis is correct) the *aube* of Fleury is the only evidence that at so early a date clerks could be inspired by, and take an interest in, a vernacular poetry that was more than a simple transposition of their own poetry and not subject to their control. It is possible that the refrain is nothing more than a phonetic imitation of a language the poet had not yet assimilated and mastered, or pretended not yet to have assimilated or mastered in order to

¹ P. Zumthor, “Un trompe-l’oeil linguistique? Le Refrain de *L'aube bilingue de Fleury*,” *Romania* 105 (1984): 171–92.

preserve intact its powerful strangeness. Even if it is no more than this, however, the introduction of the vernacular language into the refrain, like a citation, still manifests an interest in vernacular poetry, perhaps even a fascination with it.

This important poem may preserve the written echo of an autonomous poetry in the vernacular language, but it remains an exception. Up until the end of the eleventh century, the general evolution of our first literary texts corresponds to the development outlined above, distancing them slowly, little by little, from the Latin liturgical models from which they derived. This development culminated in the second half of the eleventh century in the Provençal *Boeci* (*Boethius*) and the French *Vie de saint Alexis* (*Life of Saint Alexis*). The *Boeci* is a fragment of a paraphrase of the *De consolatione philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy*), which was written at the end of the fifth century by Boethius while he was in the prison of his master, King Theodoric; it exercised considerable influence in the realms of both literature and philosophy throughout the Middle Ages. The 278 lines of the *Boeci* correspond to fifty lines of its model; if the paraphrase were complete, it would run to almost 30,000 lines. Although Boethius was sometimes considered a saint and a martyr, some of his medieval readers were troubled by the fact that he was so much more a Neo-Platonist than a true Christian. It is thus not surprising that the *Boeci* has no link to liturgy. It does not represent much of a break, however, either with Latinity, insofar as it is a translation, or with the clerical universe, insofar as its model is a philosophical text that played a major role in the intellectual life of the time.

The *Vie de saint Alexis* is perhaps slightly earlier and is much more significant. Of the surviving French poems, it was the longest (625 lines), the most poetically elaborate, and the most technically masterful up to that time. The tone and the style of the soon-to-emerge *chansons de geste* (epic songs) are already apparent in it at certain points, and its stanzas of five decasyllabic, assonant lines anticipate the epic stanza, or *laisse*. The work enjoyed a durable success that was not entirely eclipsed by the subsequent development of French literature. It is found in five manuscripts copied between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. It was after hearing a jongleur recite the *Vie* in 1174 that Pierre Waldes, a rich citizen of Lyon, distributed his goods

to the poor and began to preach evangelical poverty. He was a precursor of Saint Francis of Assisi, albeit an unfortunate one since he was rejected by the Church and became, in spite of himself, the eponymous founder of the Waldensian sect.

The *Vie de saint Alexis* testifies to the elaborateness and literary qualities French religious literature could henceforth attain. The rest of this book will be devoted principally to secular literature; but it is important to remember that this religious literature remained extremely abundant throughout the Middle Ages in the form of saints' lives, miracle stories, prayers in verse, edifying treatises, and so on. But it remained fundamentally a transposition of a Latin literature into French, as is exemplified by the *Vie de saint Alexis*, an adaptation of a Latin life of this saint, itself translated from a Greek life that was inspired, in turn, by a Syriac text. The first French literary texts are the fruit of an apologetic, pastoral, missionary movement that could not by itself give birth to a truly original literature. If French literature had known only this first birth, it would have vegetated in the shadow of Latin letters. But in the last years of the eleventh century a second birth took place, more sudden than the first, more surprising, and more promising.

3 *The Chansons de Geste*

Two very different literary forms appeared more or less simultaneously in the last years of the eleventh century. Both broke neatly with the models offered by Latin literature, and for a time they constituted the essential manifestations of French literature: the *chanson de geste* (epic song) in the language of *oil* and the lyric poetry of the troubadours in the language of *oc*. The oldest known *chanson de geste*, the version of the *Chanson de Roland* (*Song of Roland*) preserved in the Oxford manuscript, undoubtedly dates from around 1098; and the first troubadour, William IX, count of Poitiers and duke of Aquitaine, lived from 1071 to 1127.

Definition and Nature of the Genre

Chansons de geste are epic poems. They would thus seem to confirm the rule that the epic poem is always one of the first manifestations of a literary tradition—if the uniquely medieval dialectic of innovation and continuity did not once again complicate matters. They are sung narrative poems, as their name suggests (*chanson* = song), and treat of past high deeds, as their name also indicates. The word *geste* corresponds in effect to a nominative feminine singular *gesta*, substituted for the neuter plural *gesta* (things done, high deeds, exploits), from the past participle of *gero*.

These poems are defined by a particular form and content. First, the form: they are composed of homophonic, assonant, *laissez*s (stanzas of irregular length). The meter is decasyllabic with an *a minori*, or minor, caesura (a caesura after the fourth syllable) or, less often, an *a maiori*, or major, caesura (after the sixth syllable). Towards the end of the twelfth century, the decasyllable found a rival in the then fashionable alexandrine (a twelve-syllable line, usually with a caesura after the sixth syllable), but the decasyllable was still felt to be the epic meter par-

excellence even in the sixteenth century when Ronsard, for example, chose to write his *Franciade* in decasyllables. As was noted above, the *Vie de Saint Alexis* (*Life of Saint Alexis*) was written in homophonic, assonant decasyllables, but its five-line stanzas are short and regular; the *Chanson de sainte Foy d'Agen* (*Song of Saint Foy of Agen*) was composed in homophonic, assonant *laissez*s, but the meter is octosyllabic, the common meter of medieval Latin poetry that became the meter of the romance.

The word *laisse* is itself sufficient to provide us with a preliminary idea of the esthetic system of the *chansons de geste*. Derived from the verb *laissier*, which in turn comes from the vulgar Latin *laxare*, it meant essentially “what one leaves behind” and developed a variety of other meanings based on this essential one, from “bequest” or “donation” to “excrement.” In the domain of literature, it generally designated a passage, a paragraph, or a tirade from a text or poem that formed a satisfactory whole, dealt with a single proposition, and could be recited or sung in a single, uninterrupted poetic “flight.” The composition of epics in *laissez*s thus implies a series of such flights, more separate than connected. One launches oneself in a flight of poetic proliferation, so to speak, then, a moment later, lands, pauses, catches one’s breath, and then takes off on a new flight in another assonance, which emphasizes the rupture, as does the ultimate melodic cadence of the *laisse* and the shorter line that sometimes ends it. This is the source of the particular poetic effects that the *chanson de geste* produces and on which it plays. There is no straight, pure narrative line here, as if the desire to know what is going to happen next is not of primary concern. On the contrary, the *chanson* delights in repetitions and echoes and appears to be caught in a perpetual undertow: a succession of repetitive *laissez*s differing only in their assonance and the infinitesimal variations in point of view or content produced by the technique of creating “parallel *laissez*s”; an incessant taking up of formulas that are half a line, or sometimes a whole line, long; the effect of refrains like the famous “Halt sunt li pui . . .” (“High are the mountains . . .”) of the *Chanson de Roland*; the effect of symmetry like that (also in the *Chanson de Roland*) created by the designation of Ganelon as ambassador, then of Roland as leader of the rear guard, or that

born of Charlemagne's successive and opposing rejections of those who volunteer to serve as ambassador.

The *chanson de geste* thus makes use of what one might term the physical effects of language—the almost hypnotic fascination exerted by repetition; the dizziness produced by the same assonance resonating line after line throughout the entire *laisse*, and that produced by a very simple melody, a repeated chant, always the same line after line. These melodies have not in fact come down to us, but our very ignorance confirms their simplicity and stereotypic character: it was pointless to write them down. And we can form some idea of them through indirect testimonies like a line from a parodic *chanson de geste* preserved in the *Jeu de Robin et de Marion* (*Play of Robin and Marion*) and the melodies of certain *chansons de toile* (sewing songs), about which I will say more later. These quasi-physical effects are enhanced by the unique style of the *chansons de geste*: short, sharp sentences, often limited to a single line, joined to the simultaneously regular and unequal hammering of the decasyllable and its asymmetric half-lines; a taste for parataxis and a horror of subordination. Indeed, it seems that the medieval public enjoyed the *chansons de geste* not only for the stories they told, but also for the affective impression they produced since, according to the testimony offered by two romances of the beginning of the thirteenth century, people enjoyed hearing brief fragments of them sung, a single *laisse*, for example, taken out of its context.

The other characteristic trait of the *chansons de geste* is their content. It is the most visible trait and the one that was initially the most striking to modern readers. They are mainly about warfare, and the events they relate have the peculiarity of always taking place during the Carolingian period, usually during the reign of Charlemagne or his son Louis the Pious. The poems' characters are Charlemagne's barons, who fight the Saracens or defend their rights against the emperor or his weak son. They are grouped into three principal cycles, each organized around a character or a lineage: the *geste* of the king, whose kernel is the *Chanson de Roland*; the *geste* of the rebellious barons, with Doon of Mayence and Ogier the Dane; and the *geste* of Garin of Monglane, whose main hero is William of Orange. Spinning off from a first epic poem containing a striking episode or a crucial

theme, like the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Chanson de Guillaume* (*Song of William*), subsequent poems either went further back in time and recounted the youth and first exploits of the hero, the history of his father, then that of his grandfather, and so on, or continued on from the first poem and described the hero's old age, like the *Moniage Guillaume* (*William's Monkhood*), or the lives of his descendants.

While the *chansons de geste* all situate the actions they describe during the Carolingian period, the oldest to come down to us dates, in the state in which we have it, to the very end of the eleventh century. Why should these poems have systematically described events that had occurred—or were supposed to have occurred—three centuries earlier? Or were the *chansons de geste* composed during the Carolingian period, at roughly the same time as the events they relate, even though we can first grasp them only at that moment when they were finally written down, after being transmitted orally for centuries? For more than a century, these questions have been answered in contradictory ways and have provoked an often heated debate. Before summarizing this debate and pointing out its implications and consequences (beyond the traditional and insoluble question of the origin of the genre), I will try to approach it through a concrete case that is also the oldest, the most illustrious, and the most interesting of them all, that of the *Chanson de Roland*.

The Example of the *Chanson de Roland*

The *Chanson de Roland* tells the story of how, on the way back to France from a victorious seven-year expedition in Spain, the rear guard of Charlemagne's army, commanded by his nephew Roland who is accompanied by the twelve peers, is attacked by Saracens at Roncesvalles as a result of the treason of Ganelon, Roland's stepfather. The hero and all his companions are killed in the battle, but their deaths are avenged by the emperor.

The poem, whose renown makes this brief résumé superfluous, has been preserved in six manuscripts, not counting those containing only short fragments of it. The same poem is contained in all the manuscripts, and yet there are no two lines that are truly identical from one version to the others. In some, the poem is written in decasyllables, in others, alexandrines—in yet other cases it changes from one to the other in the course of the

poem, just as some versions change from assonance to rhyme. Even the length of the texts varies from 4,000 lines in the oldest manuscript to almost 9,000 lines in one of the more recent ones (from the end of the thirteenth century). These variations provide interesting hints concerning the transmission and evolution of *chansons de geste*, but they also argue in favor of studying the oldest version—the so-called “O” version contained in manuscript Digby 23 of the Bodleian Library at Oxford—separately from the others. This has been done often, and the Oxford version also seems to me to be the most gripping. It is this one that is meant, therefore, when the *Chanson de Roland* is referred to in the following paragraphs.

The O version was probably composed around 1100. Numerous indications converge on this date and prove that it cannot have been composed much earlier: the language of the poem, for example, certain details that seem to echo the First Crusade, or the mention of drums and camels, whose use had frightened the Christians at the battle of Zalaca in 1086. Nor can it have been composed much after 1100 because it was extremely popular during the first years of the twelfth century (but perhaps an earlier version existed). It was composed around 1100, then, but the event providing its subject, the battle of Roncesvalles, had taken place on 15 August 778. These are the terms in which the enigma of the *chansons de geste* is couched in the case of the *Chanson de Roland*.

What do we know about this event? The *Royal Frankish Annals* mention a victorious expedition into Spain by Charlemagne in the year 778, but they say nothing of any defeat. However, another version of the annals written about twenty years later adds that during the trip back from Spain many Frankish leaders were killed in an ambush by Basques, who pillaged the army's baggage before fleeing. None of the victims is named. Written around 830, Einhard's *Vita Caroli magni (Life of Charlemagne)* reports that in crossing the Pyrenees the emperor experienced “something of the Basques' perfidy” and adds that “in this battle were killed the Seneschal Egihard, Anselm, count of the palace, and Roland, prefect of the Breton March, among many others.” Egihard's epitaph, preserved elsewhere, specifies that he died 15 August, thus indicating the exact day of the battle. Ten years later, finally, the author of the *Vita*

Hludovici imperatoris (Life of Louis the Emperor), who is known as the Limousine Astronomer, recorded frustratingly that “those who were marching in the rear guard of the army were massacred in the mountains; since their names are well known, I will not repeat them here.”

These accounts lead to three conclusions. First, far from being forgotten little by little, the event was mentioned more and more insistently as time went by, until it had become so well known that such insistence was no longer necessary. Second, Einhard indeed names Roland, but last, and his name is not in all the manuscripts of the *Vita*. Roland was, in his eyes, the least important of the three illustrious men who had died in the battle. We also know nothing about Roland, whereas both the Seneschal Egihard and the Palatine Count Anselm are known to us from other sources. Third, all the texts agree that the ambush was the work of Basques. Although it confirms the growing, and surprising, celebrity of the battle of Roncesvalles, then, the *Chanson de Roland* also appears to have modified history in two fundamental ways, giving Roland an importance he never had—supposing that he ever existed—and substituting Saracens for the Basques.

Arab historians give a somewhat different version of the facts, however. According to Ibn Al-Athir (thirteenth century), Charlemagne entered Spain at the invitation of the governor of Saragossa, Sulayman Ben Al-Arabi, who was in revolt against the Umayyad caliph of Cordoba. But when he came to Saragossa, he found the doors of the city closed to him as a result of a change of heart on the part of Ben Al-Arabi. Having succeeded in capturing the governor, the emperor left for France, taking Ben Al-Arabi with him as a prisoner. While he was traveling through the pass of Ibañeta (Roncesvalles), the sons of Ben Al-Arabi, supported undoubtedly by Basques, attacked the Franks and freed their father. According to Ibn Al-Athir, then, the battle of Roncesvalles was not a simple run-in between the French and some mountain men who wanted to loot the baggage, but a fight between French and Saracens. It was also a rather serious loss for Charlemagne.

This version of the events is corroborated and made plausible in various ways. It agrees in certain details with the Latin *Annals*, which mention, for example, the capture of Ben Al-Ara-

bi, but say nothing at all about him subsequently, and this in circumstances in which such a hostage would have been most useful to Charlemagne. If Ibn Al-Athir's version is right, or close to right, it gives a new meaning to the writings of the Latin historiographers and explains perfectly the growing attention given to the defeat. Written soon after the defeat, the official *Annals* would thus seem to have tried to pass over it in silence. But it was so widely known, and had made such an impression that in future years it became impossible not to mention it at least in passing, minimizing its importance at the price of a certain incoherence in the details that permits one to guess at the truth. A looter's raid on the baggage? Really? So what were people like the seneschal—a sort of commander of the general staff—and the count of the palace—a sort of commander of Charlemagne's personal guard—doing in the middle of the baggage train?

All this remains hypothetical. If it were true, however, the long memory that, three centuries later, surfaced in the French poem would be right and the official history would be wrong—at least insofar as the nature of the battle is concerned, for all the rest is clearly pure fiction. The historical existence of Roland remains an enigma, and other characters are surely legendary.

But doesn't this long memory provide some insight into the past? Can one make the "silence of the centuries" speak, as Bédier put it? Can one discover the trace of a legend of Roland that existed before the *Chanson de Roland*, or even a *Chanson de Roland* that existed before the O version? Scholars have long observed that certain traits of the existing *Chanson* are too archaic for the end of the eleventh century: for instance, the bow Charlemagne solemnly gives to Roland before the battle as a sign of the delegation of command; or the borders of France in the *Chanson*, which are those of the Carolingian France of Charles the Simple, not those of the France of the first Capetians. At the beginning of the twelfth century (thus after the Oxford *Roland*, a fact that impugns somewhat his testimony) the historian William of Malmesbury affirmed that at the battle of Hastings in 1066, a jongleur intoned the *cantilena Rolandi* (*Song of Roland*) to encourage the Normans. Other indirect testimony likewise suggests the existence of epic poetry in

French at an early date: at the end of the ninth century, the Monk of Saint Gall alluded to the stories of old soldiers, and the Poeta Saxo mentioned panegyrics of great men in the vernacular language; Latin texts like the "Hague fragment" (between 980 and 1030) and the *Waltharius* (ninth or tenth century) seem to fore-echo the *chansons de geste*. Above all, the *Nota Emilianense*, copied around 1065–1070 in a Spanish manuscript—thirty or forty years before the Oxford poem—summarizes the story of the *Chanson de Roland* and mentions—side by side with Roland, Oliver, Bishop Turpin, and Ogier—William *alcorbitunas*, "William with the Curved (*courbe*) Nose," before he became "William with the Short (*court*) Nose," the William of Orange of the later *chansons de geste*. Finally, in charters from throughout the eleventh century, from Anjou to Béarn, from Auvergne to Provence, one finds brothers named Oliver and Roland; and, enigmatically, Oliver is always the elder brother, Roland the younger.

Evidence thus exists for a *Roland* composed between the battle of Roncesvalles and the Oxford poem, a *Roland* earlier than the *Chanson de Roland*. But how should this evidence be interpreted? This question is at the center of the debate on the origins of the *chanson de geste*.

The Question of Origins

This is the first question medievalists asked in the nineteenth century because they were influenced by the ideas of romanticism, and in particular by those of Herder and the brothers Grimm, concerning the collective soul and the national genius of a people, which manifested themselves, supposedly, at the beginning of its history and its culture by means of spontaneous, anonymous artistic productions. By bringing the origins of the *chansons de geste* to light, it seemed, one would also illuminate the French national identity. This is the spirit in which Gaston Paris first elaborated, in 1865, the theory of the *cantilènes*. After the great invasions, according to Paris, a new national consciousness emerged little by little by means of a poetic activity that reflected the sentiments of the new nation. This poetry, lyric in form, epic in content, took the form of *cantilènes*, short

narrative songs, on historical events.¹ At this time in the nineteenth century, the Homeric poems were thought to be a collection of short, popular pieces that had been brought together long after their composition to create an apparently coherent, long epic poem. In the same way, Gaston Paris imagined that short *cantilènes* had been sewn together to create the *chansons de geste*. In 1884, however, the Italian Pio Rajna observed, first, that there is nothing popular about the *chansons de geste*, that, on the contrary, they exalt the warrior aristocracy; and, second, that no *cantilène* is known to have existed, and very probably none ever did.² Germanic epics, on the other hand, did indeed exist during the Carolingian period. To Rajna, the supposed existence of Romance *cantilènes* served only to mask what the French *chansons de geste* owed to the Germanic epics. In 1888, Gaston Paris was won over by Rajna's views,³ but for a long time thereafter, during this period of Franco-German rivalry and conflict, the debate was influenced by political considerations: if one dated the composition of the *chansons de geste* to the Carolingian period, they were of Germanic origin; if one considered them to be a creation of the eleventh century, they formed a purely French genre.

This second attitude is associated above all with Joseph Bédier, who published his four-volume *Légendes épiques* between 1908 and 1913.⁴ For him, the *chansons de geste* were based on poetic themes rather than on historical memories. Far from being the product of a slow process of creation and the fruit of a tradition, they were created all at once by poets who were perfectly conscious of their art. The most original aspect of his theory, however, is evident in the first words of his work: "In the beginning was the road, marked out by sanctuaries. Before the *chanson de geste*, the legend: a local legend, a church legend." Along the pilgrimage routes, sanctuaries and monasteries displayed the relics of heroes and martyrs who were liable to

¹ G. Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* (Paris: Franck, 1865).

² P. Rajna, *Le origini dell'epopea francese* (Florence: Sansoni, 1884).

³ G. Paris, *La Littérature française au moyen âge: XI^e–IV^e siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1888).

⁴ J. Bédier, *Les Légendes épiques*, 4 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1908–13).

attract pilgrims. The *Chanson de Roland* itself attests (*laisse* 267) that one could see the horn of Roland at Saint-Seurin in Bordeaux, his tomb at Blaye. An inspired poet was all that was needed to collect and give life to these stories dispersed along the roads leading to Santiago de Compostela or, in the case of other *chansons de geste*, to Rome. Philipp-August Becker had already proposed this idea twice, in 1896 and in 1907. In developing it and demonstrating it more fully, Bédier added that these stories were the products of a deliberate propaganda effort on the part of the clerks to enhance the reputation of their sanctuaries. The clerks, at Bordeaux and Blaye, for example, had read the story of Roland's death in Einhard's *Vita Caroli magni* (*Life of Charlemagne*). They then invented the history of the Rolandian relics in order to show them to pilgrims and thus publicize their churches. They slipped this story to some poet and gave him the documents he needed to make good use of it. On the basis of what they had told him, he wrote the entire *Chanson de Roland*. In the same way, as a result of their rivalry with the monks of Aniane, the monks of Gellone—today Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert—exploited the legend of their bellicose founder, bringing William of Orange to the attention of poets. The clerks of Vézelay and of Pothières did the same with Girart of Roussillon, and so on. According to Bédier, there were no *chansons de geste* before the end of the eleventh century. If a *Chanson de Roland* existed before the one we know, it was only a rough draft. The Oxford *Roland*, for Bédier, was the creation of one person. It was written from one end to the other by Turold, its enigmatic signatory, three centuries after the fight at Roncesvalles, without any poetic intermediary between the fight and the composition of the *Chanson*. All the other *chansons de geste* were, in the same way, born of "church legends." And Bédier concluded:

One should speak no longer of epic songs from the time of Charlemagne or of Clovis, nor of a popular, spontaneous, anonymous poetry born of events, gushing from the soul of a whole people; it is time to replace the mystic

heritage of the Grimms with other, more concrete, notions, with other, more explicit, explanations.¹

Supported by the uncommon talents of its author, Bédier's theory was widely accepted for many decades. But it was elaborated at a time when the "silence of the centuries" had not yet spoken and no one knew, for example, of all the pairs of brothers named Oliver and Roland or of the *Nota Emilianense*. And it bordered on the paradoxical by its extreme downplaying of the existence of an oral poetry prior to the earliest known texts, while inviting less skillful zealots to deny the existence of such a poetry altogether. In the 1920s, Ferdinand Lot responded to Bédier's so-called "individualism" by defending the "traditionalist" position and maintaining that the *chansons de geste* preceded and created the cult of epic heroes linked to sanctuaries on the pilgrimage routes rather than succeeding, and being produced by, it:

I accept that all the *chansons* of the William cycle may be explained by the Regordanian Way, by Gellone, etc.—except for one, the oldest, the ancestor, the *Chanson de Guillaume*.

I accept that all the *chansons* whose action is set in Spain know—and admirably well—the road leading to Compostela, except one, the oldest, the *Chanson de Roland*, which knows nothing about the way to Santiago.²

If church legends are not the origin of the *chansons de geste*, "there is no option but to return to the old theory of the transmission from century to century." Thus *Gormont et Isembart* (*Gormont and Isembart*), going back to Louis III's victory over the Normans in 881, was not developed from monastic annals, but was, rather, an adaptation of a Norman version of the poem that made its way to the continent in the ninth or the tenth century. *Girart de Vienne* (*Girart of Vienne*) was based on the *chanson* of a jongleur contemporary with the events at Vienne in

¹ J. Bédier, *Les Légendes épiques*.

² F. Lot, "Etudes sur les légendes épiques françaises IV: Le Cycle de Guillaume d'Orange," *Romania* 53 (1927): 449–73.

870–871. *Raoul de Cambrai* (*Raoul of Cambrai*) actually derived, as the text itself maintains, from the poem of a certain Bertolai who fought at the battle of Origny in 943.

The traditionalist thesis was maintained above all, and with unflagging vigor, by Ramón Menéndez Pidál.¹ Reacting to Bédier and his disciples, who argued that the "supreme excellence" of the O version of the *Chanson de Roland* was a reason to believe that it was the original creation of a single, inspired poet, Pidál felt obliged, wrongly, to denigrate the admirable Oxford version in favor of other versions, especially the V4 version (the first Venice version). But over and above this polemical detail and his somewhat fussy efforts to establish the historical value of the *chansons de geste*, Pidál's thinking was based entirely on one essential idea whose fertility will soon become clear. This was the idea that the medieval text was not born from the imagination or the pen of its author in a definitive, perfect, and unchangeable state; the text lived, rather, through its variants, and thanks to them, it transformed itself and constantly brought itself up to date, generation after generation. There was no authentic and correct text that has been corrupted by the mistakes of successive copies; each version of a text corresponds to a moment of its life and thus enjoys a dignity and an interest equal to those of every other version—even if they are not all equal in esthetic value and the felicities of inspiration. In the case of the *chansons de geste*, every version reflects a performance. Although it grew out of the somewhat old-fashioned discussion about origins—but Pidál was over ninety when he wrote the book mentioned above!—this approach places the complex relation between speaking and writing discussed in Chapter One at the center of the debate.

From the Oral Performance to Its Written Trace

As we have seen, the *chansons de geste* themselves imply that they were diffused orally by jongleurs. The prologues and certain comments made by the narrators in the course of the

¹ R. Menéndez Pidál, *La Chanson de Roland y el neotradicionalismo (origenes de la épica románica)* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1959). French trans., I.-M. Cluzel, *La Chanson de Roland et la tradition épique des Francs* (Paris: Picard, 1960).

texts make this very clear. The importance of variant readings, brought to light by Pidál, likewise suggests this type of diffusion. The combination of these two observations permits us to explain simultaneously the evolution of the texts, their points of disagreement, their fundamental stability and perpetual renewal, their profound permanence over the centuries despite their superficial variations, and their endurance. All the same, by affirming that the *chanson de geste* "lives through its variants," Pidál meant only that the slight changes made by each performer kept the *chanson* in a state of continuous re-elaboration. Others, like the Swiss Jean Rychner¹ and, above all, the American Joseph Duggan,² who applies to the *chanson de geste* the theories of his countrymen Milman Parry and Albert Lord,³ go further. They consider each performance to be a new creation of a poem that does not truly exist in and of itself, independent of its performance. For them, in effect, the performance is not based ultimately on a memorization of the poem—a memorization whose imperfection is reflected in the variants. Using the example of the modern Yugoslavian singers of epics, Lord showed that the singer, by means of formulaic phrases containing the typical actions of the epic plot, learns to re-create the long verse narratives of the oral tradition extemporaneously each time he performs the poem. According to Duggan, the formulaic style characteristic of the *chansons de geste* reveals their oral character. He even refuses to attribute the Oxford *Roland* to a talented writer who revised a pre-existing oral tradition because, he observes, the crucial episodes often taken to be evidence of the poem's composition by a single, gifted author—the episode of the embassy, that of the horn—conform more closely to the formulaic style than do the others. In his opinion, if two distinct narrative genres, the *chanson de geste* and the romance, existed in twelfth-century France, it was simply because the one was oral and the other written. And in order to

¹ J. Rychner, *La Chanson de geste: Essai sur l'art épique des jongleurs* (Geneva: Droz, 1955).

² J. Duggan, *The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic Craft* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973).

³ M. Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970); A. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960).

demonstrate that written *chansons de geste* tended to become like romances, he points out that the formulaic style is less pronounced in *Beuves de Commarchis* (*Beuves of Commarchis*), a late *chanson de geste* from around 1270 by Adenet le Roi, than it is in the *Siege de Barbastre* (*Siege of Barbastre*), which is a century older than Adenet's poem and served as its model.

In reality, however, the formulaic style is found everywhere and is in no way unique to oral literature. It does not in itself constitute proof of orality, and both Lord's theory and Duggan's application of it seem too rigid. As we saw in the first chapter, the opposition between the oral and the written, rarely absolute anywhere or at any time, is never absolute in the Middle Ages. Poets, too, were conscious of this opposition and ceased to evolve in a world of absolute orality from the moment they had access to the two modes of expression. The style they adopted, the effects they produced, and the techniques they used were all "artificial." They were the products of deliberate, at least partially conscious decisions, and cannot be interpreted unequivocally. After all, the *chansons de geste* are known to us only in written form even though they were diffused and circulated orally. The elements that theoretically belong to oral creation, like the formulaic style, are preserved in a written text. The indications of oral enunciation—an appeal to the audience, a request for silence, an announcement that the performer is going to break off in order to pass the hat, to rest, or to get a drink—were carefully recopied in the silence of the *scriptorium*. The artifice is patent.

Of course this artifice may be nothing more than a simple historical discrepancy due to fixed habits and the fundamental conservatism of human behavior. Even if the form and the stylistic characteristics of the poem were conceived for oral performance, they could have survived for a long time without any function in the written poem. Moreover, as Duggan remarks, they grew less pronounced over time. But one may also suppose that a sense of historical discrepancy was, from a very early date, a part of the esthetic system of the *chansons de geste*. From the moment they were written down, they were pleasing because they were stiff and familiarly "archaic," because the stylistic and formal effects linked to their orality made them distant, even when this orality became fictitious. Seen in this

light, the strongly formulaic style of certain bravura passages is an indication less of orality than of a deliberate recourse, at important moments, to the characteristic stylistic effect of the genre. A similar impulse may be seen rather clearly in certain *chansons de geste* that resisted the temptation of rhyme, obstinately and with obvious effort, long after assonance had ceased to be anything more than a curiosity. The *chansons de toile* (sewing songs), which will be discussed later, cultivated the stiff archaism of the epic form in a similar way.

The Evolution of the *Chansons de Geste*

The interest that the appearance and the prehistory of the *chansons de geste* legitimately provoke should not obscure the fact that the genre remained alive throughout the Middle Ages and that all in all it evolved little during this time. The poems did become longer, however, the plots more complex, and, above all, they gave an ever greater role to love and the marvelous. The thirteenth-century *Huon de Bordeaux* (*Huon of Bordeaux*) is a good example of this evolution. The *chansons de geste* thus grew to be more like romances. At the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century, a number of hybrid works appeared that poured themselves into the epic mold of the homophonic *laisse*—in alexandrines more often than in decasyllables—but whose content was drawn from both genres, and sometimes predominantly from romance (*Berthe au grand pied* [*Big-Foot Berthe*] by Adenet le Roi, *Florence de Rome* [*Florence of Rome*], *La Belle Hélène de Constantinople* [*Beautiful Helen of Constantinople*], *Brun de la Montagne* [*Brun of the Mountain*]). As we will see later, the rise of prose at the end of the Middle Ages completed the fusion of the two genres.

But before that, during the heyday of the *chanson de geste* at the end of the twelfth century, the crusades provided the genre with a new, contemporary subject. Modeled on traditional *chansons de geste* on Carolingian topics, a new crusade cycle appeared (*La chanson d'Antioche* [*The Song of Antioch*], *Les captifs* [*The Captives*], *La prise de Jérusalem* [*The Capture of Jerusalem*]) and was kept alive to the very end of the Middle Ages by means of continuations, the joining together of existing poems, and numerous reworkings of the legend of the *Chevalier du Cygne* (Knight of the Swan) and of Godefroy de Bouillon.

The *chanson de geste* is thus more than just one of the oldest forms of French literature. It remained the privileged mode of expression for military exploits and Christian warfare throughout the Middle Ages.