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Zink, Michel. trans. Jeff Rider. *Medieval French Literature: An Introduction*. Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (cloth) \ Pegasus Paperbooks (paper), 1995. Pp. xii, 171. $. ISBN: ISBN 0-86698-163-2 (cloth) \ 0-86698-161-6 (paper).

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This explicitly introductory book on medieval French literature is written by France's most decorated medievalist: College de France, the Sorbonne, the whole chestful of medals in a culture where such things are taken so seriously that even graduating kindergarteners receive academic honors (at something called the "distribution solennelle des prix" no less.)

This review, on the other hand, is written by someone who, by French standards, is singularly underdecorated (scarcely seen the battlefield, in fact) and, for that matter, by current American academic standards of specialization, has no particular claims to expertise in the field. From these circumstances arise, from the outset, crucial oddities, foremost among them perhaps the fact that within French academic culture, writing for hoi polloi, even writing a book we might call a textbook, has quite obviously not ceased to be, as it has within our own domain, one of the valued activities of the scholarly elite. That distinction we have elevated to a measure of class (and thus tenurability) -- whether the books we write constitute the "creation" of knowledge (the activity that the elite is supposed to engage in) versus whether it is "merely" the "dissemination" of knowledge (a far more middlebrow activity, at least a notch or two down the academic class scale) -- is clearly not operative in the same ways in this other universe, one which, in its own different ways, is scarcely egalitarian.

The oddity of my own reading of this book is, furthermore, implicit: I approach it as someone actually resembling the intended reader, or at least one such possible reader -- rather than, as is almost always

the case in our journals, as someone whose expertise is implicitly measured by whether he might have written the book in question. And just so you know up front, before I do my solemn duty and outline some of the reasons why it is the case: the book is a delicious read, and no doubt one that, for the very diversely specialized population that is the readership of this journal, will prove useful in all sorts of ways. It is an extraordinary example of how to accomplish that most difficult of pedagogic missions: it does not speak in exclusive whispers to those in the know and yet it never condescends to the unwashed. Indeed, if those of us who are not specialists in Old French literature are the helots, then Michel Zink is a most civilized Athenian: he is able to simultaneously begin from the beginning and at the same time embrace subtleties, contradictions and ambiguities. Even all the unanswered questions the author himself has, the areas where he is openly puzzled and mystified, are unembarrassedly laid out. Indeed, this is a book in which most chapters, and sections of chapters, not only begin with questions explicitly posed, but **end** with questions.

This book is, of course, about Beginnings, those perpetual beginnings, and it is where Zink begins. The first part of the book is entitled "The Conditions of a Genesis," a title that slyly reflects, from his own beginning, Zink's ability to be both truly introductory and yet never betray the epistemological complexities that are both the delight and the bane of work in the "Middle Ages." Even in his opening sentences on what the "Middle Ages" might be, we get a distinct sense of how the distinguished professor will tell us both what we can (and should) know -- and also what we are bound to see as the "knowledge" that shifts along with our starting points and how we have asked the questions: "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.... A beginning: this is the source of the fascination medieval literature exercises on the mind.... A beginning that is not really a beginning: this is the source of the complexity and the originality of medieval literature.... According to which of these truths one privileges [the imitation and continuation of the Latin tradition(s) versus the formation of the new Romance languages] 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...." (1-2)

The book is structured so that it recapitulates, at each turn in the road, with the introduction of each new genre and historical "stage", the paradoxes of beginnings, as well as distinct historical "periods," that are both illusory and yet, in the way in which we have absorbed and understood European literary history, quite real and influential. Thus, the three principal sections that follow on "The Conditions of a Genesis" are "The Blossoming," "The Establishment of a Literature," and "The End of the Middle Ages," and within any one of these the subsections offer few surprises or radical innovations (thus, for example, in Part II, the major chapters are: The Chansons de Geste; Troubadours and Trouveres; and Romance.) Zink scrupulously, and with elegant economy, respects the "beginningness" of the intended reader in key ways. First, the adherence to standard periodization turns out to be only deceptively (one is tempted to say subversively) traditional, since its principal function is to provide a transparent basis on which the beginner -- be he the scholar in a different corner of medieval literature or the graduate student in French, who may or may not end up being a specialist in medieval literature -- can quickly see the ways in which this history has been perceived and absorbed, without, however, failing to also see its various complications and deficiencies. Secondly, he manages to tell his beginner all the basics he needs about both the "primary" history and texts and the "secondary" history and texts (scholarship) without obscuring the ways in which the latter strongly condition the ways in which one understands the former.

Thus, to take one representative example, the chapter on the chansons de geste begins by defining what such a text is, in a sequence of cumulative simple definitions: epic poems; sung narrative poems; composed of assonant laisses; decasyllabic...and so forth, each definition building toward complexity and a vision that leaves one with a sense of the regnant aesthetics ("the chanson delights in repetitions and echoes and appears to be caught in a perpetual undertow...."(19) This seemingly matter-of-fact definitional section, nevertheless, and quite characteristically, ends with a series of questions, the series of questions, that are what make the texts in

question in the end not so simple at all, for example: "Why should these poems have systematically described events that had occurred -- or were supposed to have occurred--three centuries earlier?"

Zink then proceeds to deal specifically with the historical and textual "case" of the Song of Roland, a text which not only is the single text an outsider needs to know about, but which serves as the best possible prop for the outline of more general critical/scholarly thought that will follow. Somehow, in a very limited space, Zink manages to lay out all the material to educate but also intrigue and even (in the positive sense) puzzle the reader. He begins with the known, the questioned, and the openly mythological pre-history of the Roland story, including (strikingly) the details of the historical events as they are recuperable from the Arab historians and chroniclers. From there he moves, in two sections on the controversial scholarly postures that follow ("The Question of Origins" and "From Oral Performance to Its Written Texts"), to an exquisitely balanced resume: He easily guides us from the 19th century romantic postures (Herder, Grimm) that approached the epic as a reflection of the "collective soul and the national genius of a people," through the paradigmatic and conflicting approaches of Gaston Paris, Bedier and then Menendez Pidal; and finally to the theoretical revisions and refinements that have flowed from the Lord-Parry theories about formulaic performance.

The cliche that comes to mind here is he makes it all seem so easy -- that we might forget, any one of us, how immensely difficult it is to produce fifteen small pages, with only ten citations of the most crucial scholarly works, on a subject such as this. And fifteen pages, it must be reiterated, that fulfill both the obligation to be a true beginning (the reader may not have any idea of what an epic poem is or how it worked) and not be complacent or reductive (now we have years of digesting Lord and Parry and how does that intellectual framework productively complicate our understanding of a genre we no longer really have in our own literature?) This deft balance and the intellectual integrity that it reflects -- that urge to educate without condescending -- does, indeed, make this a book with many audiences, one that I reacted to (among other things) as making me wish it had been around when I was preparing my doctoral exams in this field, which was required although not my principal specialty. It is certainly a book that all of us who are not teaching specialized

courses in medieval French at the graduate level should have recourse to, both for ourselves and for our students, to provide the framework for whatever we are teaching (or writing about) that is tied to this, and the possibilities are numerous: the epic in other languages, the lyric in other languages, the development of the novel, Renaissance and post-Renaissance reconfigurations of medieval forms and themes, just to name a few of the most self-evident.

A final word, and this a propos of the ways this book is attractive in an unusual way for the "foreigners" among us, as well as those who will read it as undergraduates or graduate students and are (or become) French specialists: it is a book far less xenophobic in both its understanding of medieval French literature as an only-incipiently "national" culture and in its knowledge and evaluation of scholars and scholarship that is not French -- or that may propose historical-literary models that are inimical to a vision of French literature as an essentially insular organism. Thus, as I noted, in the discussion of the epic, Zink (correctly, in my opinion) understands the theories of Menendez Pidal as forcefully clarifying many of the obvious problems when one considers only Paris and Bedier and their disciples -- the latter by far and away the customary practice among French medievalists. In a similar vein, Zink's discussion of the theory of what is reductively called the "Arabic origins" of the Provencal lyric is almost exhilaratingly refreshing: first, he actually discusses it, and at greater length, in fact, than the other visions of that thorny origins question (most comparable histories coming from within the French universe either ignore it or dismiss it); secondly, his discussion is lucid and remarkably knowledgeable, clearly based on more than cursory tertiary readings (again, at best this is usually the case among Zink's "peers"); and, finally, again characteristically, he points at the end to the delightful complexities and paradoxes that can be mined here: "the play of influences" is complicated, never mutually exclusive, subject to other socio-historical conditions, only some of which can be known, and so forth.

Come to think of it, perhaps even the specialists in this field would thus benefit from a quick read of this deceptively "slim" volume -- and all of those who are specialists in any field can certainly consider what we have lost, inside our academic universe, by having largely abandoned the practice of writing such truly introductory books.