Verse, Prose, and Authorial Subjectivity in the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*

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The relatively sudden expansion of the use of Old French prose in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries has become a subject of recent scholarly inquiry. Throughout the twelfth century, French verse was the dominant vernacular form. But at the beginning of the thirteenth century, verse began to lose its hegemony in favor of prose. Early vernacular prose works such as Nicolas de Senlis' *Pseudo-Turpin* and the prose version of Robert de Boron's verse *Roman du Graal* as well as Geoffroy de Villehardouin's and Robert de Clari's respective *Conquestes de Constantinople* were all written between 1200 and 1220. During the second decade of the thirteenth century, the long history of the Romans entitled *Li Fet des Romains* was created, it also in vernacular prose, and the monumental *Prose Lancelot* soon followed. It is noteworthy that the texts mentioned above all lay a claim to some sort of historical validity, although today we may consider them as more fictional than factual.

The reasons for this changing aesthetic are not entirely known. Luckily, some of the writers of the late twelfth-early thirteenth centuries did make their opinions known on the subject. In the prose preface to the *Pseudo-Turpin*, Nicolas de Senlis states that he has recast his version of this tale into the vernacular so that it would be "mieus gardés"—better kept (qtd. in Godzich and Kittay xiii-xiv). He affirms that there are those who do not read Latin and offers this as further justification for his use of French. Referring in the same passage to jongleurs, he also makes the remark that "Nus contes rimés n'est verais; tot est mençongie ço qu'il en dient; car il n'en sievent riens for quant pour oïr dire,"[1] thus denigrating verse texts, their performers, and their oral sources.

Another writer of the same period echoes similar anti-verse sentiments in the verse introduction to *La Mort Aymeri de Narbonne* (1180-1220), by stating: "Nus hom ne puet chançon de jeste dire / que il ne mente la ou li verse define, / as mos drecier et a tailler la rime"[2] (qtd. in Godzich and Kittay 145, lines 3055-57). Taken together, these remarks constitute an explicit condemnation of the tradition of performing a verse text for which the performer is the sole guarantor of authenticity: such compositions are

seen as mendacious because of their oral (as opposed to written) sources and because of the manipulation they undergo in the versification process.

Unfortunately, no explicit reasoning has yet been found in texts of the period to justify the use of prose for its own sake; therefore we must deduce the motivations from anti-verse comments such as those just mentioned. Logically, one would say that since verse is seen (at least by some writers of the period) as untruthful, prose must then be the language of truth, and this explains its use in works intended to be received as historically genuine. This view has been generally accepted by scholars in the field. Another perspective has focused on the issue of verse's supposed orality, rather than that of its supposed untruthfulness, in contrast to which prose is seen as a silent, written form (Godzich and Kittay 37).

In both of the above perspectives, verse and prose are presented as binary opposites. In spite of the fact that medieval writers were openly critical of verse, it is quite possible that the forms are not always as different as they may seem. Simply put, and to risk stating the obvious, I would like to suggest that it is inaccurate to see verse and prose as opposites. First of all, although verse is considered to be an oral form and prose written, the prose text cannot be said to be completely out of the oral domain, since all reading was voiced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Stock 408-9; Saenger 379-80). The text discussed below, in particular, offers proof of this oral dimension in its numerous apostrophes to the listening public as "Segnors e dames:" it was composed for performance before an audience. The oral aspect of any text, however, is difficult at best for us to fully grasp at a distance of some eight hundred years. Therefore, leaving aside the issue of performance per se, in the following pages I will examine textual features relating to authorial subjectivity and truth that are similar in both verse and prose in the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*.[3]

The text in question is a prosimetrum work, containing both verse and prose. It is the oldest extant universal history written in Old French, created under the auspices of Rogier IV, Castellan of Lille, probably between 1208 and 1213 (Meyer 1; Raynaud de Lage 15). The anonymous author of this text intended to tell the entire human story, starting with Genesis and going all the way up to contemporary Flanders. Unfortunately, the work was left unfinished, and the history stops abruptly in the middle of the story of Caesar's campaign in Gaul in 57 BC. In 1885, Paul Meyer brought this compilation to the attention of the scholarly community, and identified seven distinct sections that make up what he called the "première rédaction:"

1. The biblical story of creation and the fall;
2. the histories of Assyria and Greece;

3. a prose version of the *Roman de Thèbes*;
4. tales of the Amazons, the Minotaur, and Hercules;
5. a prose version of the *Roman de Troie*;
6. a prose version of the *Roman d'Enéas*;
7. a lengthy history of Rome, into which is incorporated a prose version of the *Roman d'Alexandre* (Meyer 36-49).[4]

In spite of its incomplete nature, this history was extremely popular in the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, a fact attested to by the large number of extant manuscripts. The so-called "première rédaction" can be found in over 50 manuscript copies (Woledge, *Bibliographie* 56-57, *Supp.* 42). All of the manuscripts in this group follow the same general format. However, there is one copy that is particularly interesting. That is Bibliothèque Nationale 20125, a thirteenth-century manuscript believed to have been created at the Acre scriptorium and known to art scholars as the *Histoire universelle* (Joslin iii, ix-xi). This text of 375 folios, in addition to containing many illuminations, also has an introduction and nineteen other passages written in Old French octosyllabic rhymed couplets. While one can find occasional verses in the other copies, this is the only manuscript that offers so many (Spiegel 110-11). It should be noted that manuscript 2576 of Vienna, previously thought to have contained these same verse passages, does not.

The verse passages vary in length from six to 146 lines; most are relatively short. In these poems that are interspersed throughout the compilation, the redactor speaks directly to his public. Notably, in his first poem in Genesis, he states at the beginning: "Ci parole cil qui le livre fait e doctrine laisser mal a faire"[5] (qtd. in Joslin 35).

For the most part, the topics have to do with Christian comportment. This writer seems to have been very concerned that his public understand not only the events he related as history but also their lessons. In his compilation, which one can compare in type to Orosius' *Historiarum adversum paganos libri septem*, his purpose was to show that God's plan is at work and that our role as humans is to follow his teachings. As an introduction to the first verse passage, he states:

> Segnors e dames, por Deu entendés e retenés. Si ferés que sage. Adans par son peché perdi paradis qu'il tous jours eüst eü en heritage. E sa generations fu perie tote par lor vils pechés e par lor outrages, e Noés toz sous entre tant de gent salvés par ses bones ovres. Certes encor est e iert parmenablement cil sires qui a ces que je vos ai dit si droiturerement lor dessertes rendi, c'onques encor n'i out faillance. Encor rent il les merites. De ce ne soit nus en doutance (qtd. in Joslin 35-37).[6]

Although he is also quite entertaining, the redactor's apologetic and didactic purpose is clear. Many of the passages, which one can aptly call verse moralizations because their function does seem overwhelmingly that of presenting the moral to the listeners, deal with the topics of death and the final judgment. An example of this is found in the following poem:

> Segnors, por Deus que peut ce estre?
> Que nus hom ne change son estre
> Por la paör qu'il ait de mort,
> Qui tant aigrement pince e mort
> Qu'ele nos fait laissier richece,
> Honor, beauté, force e pröece!
> . . .
> E quant les chars soef nories
> Seront avec les vers porries,
> La seront rendu li meffait
> Qu'en cest siecle ont esté fait. (B.N. f. fr. ms. 20125, folio 212 b-c, lines 1-6 and 35-38. All subsequent quotations from this manuscript will be referenced by folio number.)[7]

Other subjects include pride, envy, greed, the loyal servant, God as guardian, God's love for the worthy man, God's mercy, and the sins of the sodomites. And then there are also a few that do not quite fit the category of moralization: six lines on the fleeting nature of human sympathy, and a passage on cowardly knights who would rather look at themselves in mirrors than fight as they should. The author also seems preoccupied with the notion of the just reward in a few places. One wonders if he had his own payment in mind when he wrote the following lines:

> Quar on dist piessa, tot par voir,
> "Qui fait promesse e ne la faut
> Le cuer a son ami se caut."
> E par prometre sans doner
> Puet on le fou reconforter,
> Mais ce ne fait ou le sage home.
> Ja Romulus qui funda Rome
> N'eüst vencus ses anemis
> Si sans doner eüst promis.
> E ce avient assés encore
> Qu'il sunt maint haut home ou tans d'ore,
> Qui tant prometent sans doner.

> Ja Deus ne lor puist parduner,
> Qu'il n'en pergent lor segnories
> E lor honors e lor baillies,
> E les cuers ansi de lor homes! (f. 180c-d)[8]

But it is fair to say that the author is most concerned with death and the thereafter, and with his public's lack of concern for what may befall them after their eventual and certain demise.

The verses in the *Histoire ancienne* at first appear to express the type of subjectivity associated with oral performance and the performer's personal guarantee of his text's authenticity. As previously mentioned, the author identifies himself as such in the first moralization and hence deliberately calls attention to himself as an individual rather than remaining in neutral discourse. In all of the verse passages, the redactor expresses what is clearly his own point of view—whether it be on the subject of salvation or on that of the proper rewards for loyal servants.

At the same time, as historian and teacher, the writer's voice also blends with that of the lesson itself. Where does the writer as a person speak as opposed to the writer as a historian telling God's truth? A close examination of the verse moralizations reveals that the compiler speaks as a preacher in these poems—he is getting the message out on behalf of God, not telling his own personal story. Although it is true that he may have an overriding interest and may personally benefit from correcting some of the behavior patterns he criticizes, his message is still hammered home with the authority of divine judgment standing behind him. This power behind the text provides the poet with the backing he needs to put forth his entire text—and the verse passages especially—as truthful. And if he would like for us to believe what he relates about the events to be truthful in a temporal setting, then what he tells in the verse passages is intended to be received as truthful in a spiritual and moral setting. One could say that in the verse sections he connects earthly history and the events of the past with the spiritual destiny of each individual. They form a bridge uniting the past with the future, and prevent the compilation from being seen as a collection of stories having no moral significance for contemporary times.

These nineteen poems are ultimately more important in terms of the text's message than the prose text surrounding them: they tell the truth about God, humanity, the relationship between the two, and the duties of being a good Christian. In this sense, the idea that the verse passages represent a subjectivity is not accurate. This medieval historian inscribes himself in the tradition of Orosius: it is not his personal situation that is under discussion, but rather the fate of all humankind. This verity is larger than any other one could possibly be. Truth here is not neutral, but directly expressed in personal terms; the compiler presents the abstract quality of that divine truth, as he sees it, in a human shape.

This narrative voice which is personal yet somehow carries a universal resonance can also be heard in certain prose passages of the *Histoire ancienne*, as illustrated by the *Roman de Thèbes* section: the redactor's interpretation of and commentary on the events he recounts are inserted into the body of the text in prose (Interestingly enough, this 28-folio segment does not contain any verse moralizations.). I have discussed elsewhere how the author, through these prose interventions, attempts to instill confidence in his version of this Oedipus story and its aftermath by pointedly commenting on "wrong" versions of the story as it had been previously told and by explicitly referring to his knowledge of the true story.[9] For example, he makes the following comment:

> Ci dient li pluisor que Pollinices e Tideus e Parthonopeus vindrent en Thebes avec la reïne por conduire e au palais descendirent, e qu'au repairier les firent contreguaitier cil de la vile por ocire. Mes je ne truis mie si bien en la veraie estorie que je vos veull afermer e dire (f. 113b).[10]

The interventions serve to create a new *auctoritas* for his new version of the text, for in spite of his assertions, he does not follow Statius' *Thebaid*, nor any known verse version of the *Roman de Thèbes* (there were three in the second half of the twelfth century), and his text is sorely in need of an authoritative source.

Given this narrative slant, it is not surprising that the redactor also hastens to tell his public about the spiritual errors of those whose misfortunes he relates, such as when he describes the folly of the pagans:

> Or esguardés com les gens estoient fol e non sachant adonques, que creoient e cuidoient que li solaus fust deus e la luna deuesse: si laissoient aourer le creator de tote choze, si aoroient le creature qu'il avoit creé e faite (f. 90c).[11]

But just as the so-called personal voice is used in the service of eternal truth in the verse passages, so it is also in the prose. These moments in which the writer speaks to the public as an individual do not detract from the truthfulness of the history; rather, they support it by offering concrete, flesh and blood affirmation of the text's value and its message. This editorializing is an important part of the work, in that it tells the public that

the redactor's judgment is keen and that he is aware of his responsibility to personally justify his narration in order to make it valid.

This personal commentary and affirmation of the truthfulness and the validity of the work, here without a reference to a written source but within the framework of a written text, appears to combine elements of both writing and speaking cultures. It is well-known that the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw an increase in lay literacy and in the uses of written texts in many different areas of medieval life. One of the resulting changes brought by this increase was a heightened status accorded to the written text. This does help to explain, in part, the new emphasis on written sources. However, centuries of tradition of a culture whose most important acts were affirmed and maintained in oral, rather than written contexts do not simply disappear. As late as the first third of the twelfth century, the monk Orderic Vitalis included in his history of Normandy such things as William the Conqueror's deathbed speech and the description of the wreck of the White Ship, which cost the lives of some three hundred people, including those of the two sons of Henry I. He did so on the firm affirmation that these things were true; however, they were also undocumented. This shows that merely a generation or two before the period under discussion, the oral tradition was alive and well and personal declarations were considered trustworthy. The personal voice of the *Histoire ancienne*'s prose narrator may well be an echo of this tradition.

Two conclusions may be drawn from the preceding discussion. First, both the prose and the verse express the author's subjectivity—a subjectivity associated with the oral tradition but here used as authenticating support in the new use of French prose. Second, the personal interventions and poems inserted in the prose text may serve to heighten the text's value as truthful and authentic, rather than diminish it. What we see at play here is a completely different notion of truth, not only from the point of view of the events that are considered to be historical, but also in terms of the meta-historical: that is, the spiritual plane. The Christian historian's task was to set out examples of good and bad behavior and to demonstrate their results. As Walter Map wrote in *De nugis curialium*,

> For history, which is based on truth, and fable, which weaveth a tissue of fancy, both bless the good with a happy end so that virtue may be loved, and damn the bad with a foul ending, wishing to render wickedness hateful (qtd. in Allen 68).

In such a context, it is essential that the text be perceived as true and based on an authoritative model. That authority may come from an esteemed Latin text such as Statius' *Thebaid*, the prose form itself, perhaps imitated from the Bible, or from the personal testimony of the work's creator. In the *Histoire ancienne*, both the newer emphasis on the written word and the traditional value of the spoken word are employed in order to create a text whose truthfulness cannot be doubted, and both prose and verse function to assert and support that verity. The contrasting presence of these elements in the text endows it with a complexity worthy of further study.

• NOTES

[1] "No rhymed tale is true; everything that they say is a lie, because they know nothing except from by hearsay." This and all subsequent translations are my own.

[2] "No man can tell a chanson de geste without lying at the end of the line, in ordering the words and shaping the rhyme."

[3] With the exception of the Genesis section (edited by Mary Coker Joslin), the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* remains unpublished. This study is based on Bibliothèque Nationale f. fr. ms. 20125.

[4] Meyer's "première rédaction" contains the sections outlined above; his "seconde rédaction" contains neither Genesis nor the prose *Roman d'Alexandre* and substitutes a long prose version of the *Roman de Troie* based on the verse *roman* by Benoit de Sainte More for the shorter prose *Troie* based on Dares' text. Woledge's "troisième rédaction" contains both Genesis and Sainte More's *Troie* as well as sections taken from the *Trésor de Sapience* (Meyer 64; Woledge, *Bibliographie* 56-58).

[5] "Now he who makes this book speaks, and teaches to leave off of doing evil."

[6] "Lords and ladies, for God's sake listen and retain this, and you will be wise. By his sin, Adam lost heaven which would have been eternally his. And his descendents were lost on account of their vile sins and their offenses, and Noah alone among so many people was saved by his good deeds. Assuredly, it is and will always be our Lord who gave their just reward to these people that I have so straightforwardly told you about, who has never yet failed [to do so]. He still gives the just reward. About this, let no one be in doubt."

[7] "Lords, for god's sake what can this be? That no man changes his way of life on account of the fear of death, who pinches and bites so violently that she makes us leave behind wealth, honor, beauty, strength and valor! . . . And when the soft, well-fed flesh is rotting with worms, then the misdeeds that have been committed on earth will be recompensed."

[8] "It has been said for a long time, truly, that 'he who makes a promise and doesn't fail it warms his friend's heart.' By promising without giving one can as-

suage the foolish man. But this is not done with the wise man. Never would Romulus, who founded Rome, have conquered his enemies if he had promised without giving. And this still happens often because there are many powerful men today who promise much without giving. May God not forgive them any longer, so that they lose their power, honors and domains, and thus the loyalty of their men!"

[9] In a paper entitled "Narrative Strategy as *Auctoritas* in the Thirteenth-Century Prose Version of the *Roman de Thèbes*," given at the 29th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, MI, May 7, 1994.

[10] "Some say that Pollicines and Tydeus and Parthenopeus came into Thebes to accompany the queen and stopped at the palace, and that upon their return the people of the city attacked them in order to kill them. But I don't find this in the true story that I want to tell you."

[11] "Look how the people were foolish and ignorant then, because they believed that the sun was a god and the moon a goddess. Thus they did not worship the creator of all things, but the things that he had created."

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Albert Camus' Don Juan: Class and Sexuality

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"Tout vient," Camus wrote, looking back on his life, "de mon impossibilité congénitale à être un bourgeois et un bourgeois content. La moindre apparence de stabilité dans ma vie me terrifie" (*Carnets*, III, 150).[1] The inclusive "tout" in this passage offers readers the opportunity to extend Camus' confession to include his portrait of Don Juan in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and to examine how this important figure casts light on the questions of class and sexuality in Camus' early works. Hardly has the word "bourgeois" appeared in his notebook when Camus writes, almost automatically, "stabilité." Stability acquires a negative connotation when it signifies intellectual conformism or, in more personal, intimate terms, emotional atrophy. Love and marriage, as social imperatives and as concepts of stability preempted by the middle class, might also be factors in the mind or heart's demise. Camus' first two novels, *La Mort heureuse* and *L'Etranger*, as well as his essays *Noces* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* specifically examine these factors.

There is a brief but significant passage in *L'Etranger* that illustrates the relationship between a man's sexuality and his reaction to certain social assumptions about love and to codes of behavior regarding fidelity. Meursault is walking through the streets of Algiers with Marie whom he has just agreed to marry:

> Nous avons marché et traversé la ville par ses grandes rues. Les femmes étaient belles et j'ai demandé à Marie si elle le remarquait. Elle m'a dit que oui et qu'elle me comprenait. Pendant un moment, nous n'avons plus parlé. (*Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles*, 1156-57)[2]

The silence following this brief exchange amplifies and prolongs what both characters have said and gives the reader time to reflect upon its importance. Its importance becomes even more apparent when we realize that this walk is a reprise of a similar walk that Patrice Mersault takes with Marthe in *La Mort heureuse*, a novel written prior to *L'Etranger* but never published in Camus' lifetime: