

I. RECENZJE

Eugene Vance, *FROM TOPIC TO TALE: LOGIC AND NARRATIVITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES*. Foreword by Vlad Godzich. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1987, pp., XXXIII, 131.

Eugene Vance's book should be welcomed by both medievalists and those interested in the history of literary ideas as one of the still rather few studies of medieval vernacular poetics in the context of contemporary linguistic science. Medievalists will profit from it on the conceptual apparatus which enabled medieval poets to compose their works as they did. Historians of literary thought, on the other hand, may be led into some hitherto unacknowledged intellectual foundations of poetics — now a separate discipline of study, which began only to emerge as such in the remote Middle Ages.

Innovatively enough, out of the three arts of the *trivium* it is not rhetoric which is seen by Vance as particularly influential on poetics, but logic operating through the channels of *grammatica*.

Vance's discussion of the notions of fiction and fictive truth as developing under the impact of dialectics is especially illuminating. Following the general critical consensus as to the cultural shift from orality to literacy during the twelfth-century Renaissance and assuming the related influence of *grammatica* upon literature, he suggests that that influence began to carry logical concepts into the art of poetic discourse after the massive infiltration of dialectics into grammar in the first half of the twelfth century. Thus, the grammar

which Chrétien de Troyes was most directly familiar with was logical grammar, and Vance argues that, as a result, the rules governing the production of both grammatical as well as of logical discourse began to operate also in the sphere of narrative composition.

He draws a number of suggestive analogies. He compares a logical argument, defined as "a sequence of propositions", to a "kernel story" understood as a "discrete discursive unit made up of a sequence of narrative statements or events" (p. 20). Like the truth of an argument, "[...] the truth of a series of consignant, fictive events is inherent to narrative discourse itself, and not to reality." (p. 20) Furthermore, "both a proposition and a narrative statement reflect 'happenings' which are above all mental phenomena, (...) in that they express 'phantasies' or presentations of reality to the mind." (p. 20).

The new notion of fictive truth proposed by Vance for medieval poetics seems to liberate poetry, he claims, from the constraints of referentiality. Yet in my opinion this is only partly true. For though such constraints are removed as far as material reality is concerned, they still persist in relation to the realm of ideas. The concept of reflection present in the last of the formulations quoted above entails separation of the processes of thinking and writing: the writer conveys the thoughts already formed in his mind into discourse. The source of creativity, and of meaning, is seen, implicitly, not in the literary text but in the writer's mind. This not only weakens Vance's point about the essential textuality of Chrétien's poetics, but also calls for an

appropriate theory of imagination which would account for the birth of new ideas in the poet's intellect.

Moreover, in linking poetics with dialectics so radically there is a potential danger of reducing the former to the status of a branch of logic. Vance solves this problem by proposing a dynamic view of that relationship. He emphasizes time and again that Chrétien's narratives should be regarded as a conscious transgression of dialectical principles and that "Chrétien seems concerned to assign epistemological limits to the claims of logical truth in his fiction, that is, to show us that fiction can perfectly well *include* logical necessities without being *constrained* by them" (p. 21). This emphasis on the spirit of autonomy in Chrétien's relationship to logic endows his poetics with a dynamism which is further illuminated by Vance's recognition of multiple influences on his art. It is especially manifest in the presentation of logic and rhetoric as opposite forces differently shaping Chrétien's poetics (cf. p. 23). The dynamic view of the interaction between poetic discourse and other types of discourse provides an excellent theoretical framework for the analysis of specific romances.

The very nature of romance and of courtly ethics is convincingly discussed by Vance in relation to logic. He shows change to be an essential element of romance on various levels of its structure, a feature which distinguishes romance from the earlier heroic epic. He argues that the new possibility of drawing characters as dynamic, changeable beings, as well as the possibility of perceiving signs as equivocal and even as containing contrary meanings was due to the logical distinction between the unchangeable substance and varying accidents. Thus, romance can be defined as "an art of the accident—*aventure*—which 'happens' to or *in* a noble primary substance, for instance, a knight who *now* fights and *now* loves" (p. 30). A new concept of heroic honour is also

possible, one that is not exclusively based on the hero's constancy and prowess on the battlefield but which encompasses also his activities as a true servant of love. The very vocabulary of courtly erotic poetry is characterized by a number of oxymorons of which the opposition between *joie* and *dolor* may be considered representative. Such a coexistence of contraries in one human being and within the scope of one psychological state may again be attributed, Vance argues, to the subtleties of the dialectical reasoning of the day. Lastly, he views Chrétien's creation of the *merveilleux* as his conscious exploitation and contestation of the logical criteria of necessity and probability. In sum, logic is regarded here as a powerful formative factor of romance narrative form and of courtly ethics.

Furthermore, Vance reflects upon the role of medieval logic on a more abstract level of general and theoretical poetics. Namely, he suggests that dialectical topics provided medieval writers with a set of general rules of narrative construction and that it therefore constituted a kind of metarhetoric or metafiction. He points to the difference between the notion of topics as introduced by Curtius and the medieval meaning of topics as a branch of logic. He claims, moreover, that Chrétien was influenced not so much by rhetorical topics, which taught how to find arguments concerning circumstances and facts, as by the more theoretical dialectical topics which defined universal and abstract laws of reasoning. Vance describes this discipline as "*those latent [sic] rules of composition which guarantee the possibility of fiction as being formally and logically true. Without making claims for its being ontologically true in the same way as topics allow logicians to construct purely hypothetical syllogisms such as 'if all human beings are wood and all wood is stone, all human beings are stone'*" (pp. 47—48). At this point Vance once again emphasizes that Chrétien, far

from being constrained by dialectical laws, is interested rather in "constructing scenes where norms of belief are *belied* by the circumstances of the exceptional and the marvelous" (p. 52).

Theoretical considerations of the book are supported by illustrative analyses of *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain*. Vance regards the area of perception by both the poet and his characters of the equivocal world of romance as the main sphere of dialectical influence on poetics. A protagonist's ontological and social status, his or her actions and moral character, as well as emblems and symbols surrounding them are all subject to interpretation and engage the faculty of rational judgement on the part of other characters and of the reader. In *Erec et Enide*, Vance argues, Chrétien makes his characters and the audience explore the subtleties of the logical distinction between substance and accidents, and the ensuing possibility of the existence of contraries within one substance. Accidental change is presented by Chrétien first in the sphere of social roles and then on a deeper, psychological level in the heroes' lives. In his analysis of *Yvain* Vance demonstrates how the various episodes of *Yvain ou le chevalier au lion*, differing in content, are all related to the single abstract topic "from species", and especially to the classical example of its maximal proposition: "if it is a human, it is an animal". He shows how in the course of the story human basic animality is first established step by step, up to the point of the degradation of Yvain to a forest beast, and how it is next perfected into the final image of the hero as an ideal social animal.

Vance's investigation of the dialectical determinants of Chrétien's poetics leads him to an interesting redefinition of the much debated terms "*sens*" and "*conjointure*". First of all, he is able to divorce them from any notion of ontological referentiality and to treat them as the functions of the internal, syntagmatic organization of the text. Although

his distinction between *sens* and *conjointure* is not quite clear, it may be gathered that the latter term refers to the network of internal textual relationships, while the former to the meaning which the related parts of the text signify (cf. p. 22). The analysis of *Yvain* in the light of dialectical topics leads Vance to a further abstraction of the meaning of *conjointure* which now comes to be understood as a pattern of purely abstract narrative relationships which are "places" that are 'empty' because they can subsist in the intellect independently of the specific content that can 'fill' them" (p. 80).

Vance treats the problem of referentiality historically, implying that while it was overcome by Chrétien's dialectical poetics, it was nevertheless a determining factor in traditional epic. Yet does the fact that epic discourse served also as a discourse of history entail referentiality? It may equally well suggest that in the earlier period historical events were not presented as faithful to the objective truth but were shaped in accordance with the epic vision of the world. The same holds true for the later period as well, as witnessed, for example, by Froissart's chronicles. The question of referentiality seems to be central to the very concept of a literary work as such, irrespective of the epoch in which it is produced. There is a paradox in the fact that while Vance argues for the absence of the demand for referentiality in Chrétien's poetics, he himself understands literature as a reflection of its cultural context (cf. e.g. p. XXI). Unfortunately, he does not specify what precisely he means by words such as "reality" and "referentiality". As it is, his main argument seems to contain a contradiction. On the one hand, fictive discourse is presented in terms of hypothetical narrative statements, supposedly devoid of any external references, and on the other hand, romance is understood as a model "for understanding and expressing reality" (p. XXIII).

Such a contradiction results, I think, from the lack of a definite methodological standpoint on the author's part. He implicitly assumes the position of the historical-theoretical study of medieval poetics, which is based solely on medieval cultural and intellectual categories. Such an approach in its pure form is, however, utopian since no one is able to shun altogether the categories of one's own culture. Besides, the medieval categories themselves cannot be accepted unreservedly as the best possible key to medieval literature. As a result, Vance's study is based, not always coherently, both on medieval assumptions as well as on those of the general-theoretical approach. The influence of the latter is manifest in his preoccupation with signs in the last chapter where he gradually departs from the main concerns of the book, engaging himself in strictly semiotic considerations. The impact of semiotics and structuralism is also evident in his treatment of romance as a system determined by other external systems such as those derived from grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics.

Nevertheless, the most manifest modern theoretical influence can be observed in Vance's discussion of the textuality of medieval poetics. He considers that textuality to have been a product of the power of *grammatica* which for him seems to be synonymous not only with literacy and writing, but also with literature. He presents *grammatica* as a literary universe within which medieval romances could come into being, and even more than that, as a shaping force of social and political organization. Thus, both the cultural reality and the poem which reflects it are viewed as products of the pervasive influence of *grammatica* in the medieval world. Although Vance claims that there exists a difference between medieval textuality and modern theories of writing, this difference is not manifest in his book.

Moreover, the thesis about the cen-

tral role of *grammatica* in the emergence of medieval vernacular poetics is not illustrated convincingly enough. In Chapter One, "From Grammatica to a Poetics of the Text", where he discusses the meaning and characteristics of medieval grammar, he fails to show precisely the significance of those features for poetics. Only one aspect of grammar, the fact that it involved an active reading and interpretation of inherited texts, is related here to the poetics of romance. He suggests that the hermeneutical attitudes of Biblical exegetes as well as interpreters of pagan *auctores* were now transferred by Chrétien to his own vernacular and secular writing, and that they contributed to the development of such literary phenomena characteristic of romance poetry as the distinction between the past tense of the inherited story and the present tense of the interpreting narrator, and the corresponding distinction between history and story. The proposal of linking Latin exegesis of authorized Biblical as well as pagan writers with the formation of vernacular poetics is very interesting, though not entirely new. Similar influences have already been suggested for English vernacular poetics of the second half of the fourteenth century (cf. J. B. Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages*. University of Toronto Press, 1982; A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, London 1984). While Vance's suggestions find firm support in those two studies, he also implies that the processes of transference of exegetical attitudes to vernacular secular writing, observable in English Literature in the second half of the fourteenth century, may have already started to take place in French literature two centuries earlier.

It is to be regretted that Vance does not pursue in greater detail the transition from *grammatica* to a poetics of the text. Despite his theoretical assumptions, in his presentation of Chrétien's poetics he tends to depart further and further away from medieval gram-

mar and to rely more and more on his own general convictions of a modern critic. His statement on page 6 is indicative of this: "Like the literature of most periods in our culture, medieval vernacular poetry tends both to fictionalize the process of its own begetting and to celebrate in its heroes cognitive processes that reflect the author's own". This opinion may be quite correct, and yet one wonders to what extent its author may see medieval literature as a replica of his own critical tools and convictions. This is of course a perennial problem of literary study, but Vance's book, in its levelling of modern and medieval categories, does not help to solve it.

In sum, the book seems to me strongest on logic and narrativity, and it succeeds in illuminating their mutual interaction. Its all too general discussion of the textual dimension of medieval culture, however, despite the many fascinating ideas which it contains, does not contribute to the clarity of the main issue and might perhaps be put aside as material for another study. Finally, the methodological eclecticism of the book prevents its author from giving us more fully persuasive insights into the status of medieval fiction.

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¹ Nie dysponując innymi numerami „Roman” trudno ocenić, czy recenzowany zeszyt i w jakiej mierze jest reprezentatywny dla tego pisma. Chyba, że to powieść?...