

A
History

OF

WESTERN

LITERATURE

J.M.COHEN THE STORY OF CONTINENTAL WRITING FROM
THE MEDIEVAL EPICS TO THE LITERATURE OF THE 1960'S

A HISTORY OF
WESTERN LITERATURE

J. M. COHEN



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TO AUDREY

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every receipt and invoice should be properly filed and indexed for easy retrieval. This is particularly crucial for businesses that deal with a large volume of transactions, as it helps in identifying discrepancies and ensuring compliance with tax regulations.

In addition, the document highlights the need for regular audits. By conducting periodic reviews of financial records, businesses can detect errors or fraud early on, preventing potential losses. It also suggests implementing internal controls to minimize the risk of mismanagement and ensure the integrity of the accounting system.

Furthermore, the document provides guidance on how to handle complex transactions, such as those involving multiple parties or jurisdictions. It stresses the importance of clear communication and documentation to avoid misunderstandings and legal complications.

Finally, the document concludes by encouraging businesses to stay up-to-date with the latest accounting practices and regulations. Continuous learning and adaptation are key to maintaining a robust and efficient financial system.

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The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every receipt and invoice should be properly filed and indexed for easy retrieval. This is particularly crucial for businesses that deal with a large volume of transactions or those in highly regulated industries.

Next, the document addresses the issue of data security. In an era where digital records are the norm, it is essential to implement robust security measures to protect sensitive information from unauthorized access, theft, or loss. This includes using strong passwords, encryption, and regular security audits.

The document also covers the topic of data backup and recovery. It stresses the need for a consistent backup schedule and a clear recovery plan in case of a disaster. This ensures that critical data is preserved and can be restored quickly, minimizing downtime and potential financial loss.

Furthermore, the document discusses the importance of staying up-to-date with the latest software and hardware. Regular updates and maintenance are necessary to ensure that the system is running smoothly and securely. It also highlights the value of investing in reliable hardware that can handle the demands of the business.

Finally, the document concludes by emphasizing the overall importance of a well-maintained and secure record-keeping system. It is a key component of any successful business operation, providing the foundation for accurate financial reporting, compliance, and strategic decision-making.

FOREWORD

WESTERN Literature, from the birth of vernacular poetry in France to the present age in which similar fashions prevail over an area extending from Buenos Aires to Moscow, from Athens to San Francisco, can be thought of as a single expanding tradition. It is the history of this tradition that I have set out to write, excluding, however, all direct reference to English writers, since my viewpoint is that of one who looks across the Channel for similarities and contrasts, but is nevertheless conscious of the—admittedly subjective—differences separating his own literature from that written in other languages.

English literature—and consequently American also—is excluded from this survey, as is all writing in Latin which, although closely related to medieval writing in the vernacular, has an academic flavour that prevents its being read today.

For my especial purpose is to act as a guide to what is living and readable, either in the original or in translation. I have avoided all reference to dead works, important only for historical reasons, and have deliberately refrained from providing a bibliography of books on literary history and criticism. It is the poetry, the plays, the novels and the works of speculation, of the great authors of the past that I would urge my readers to turn to, and in respect of these anyone can extract his own reading-list from my text.

There are, however, a few books which have strongly influenced my way of looking at literature, and the chief of these are Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (translation, Routledge), C. S. Lewis's *Allegory of Love* (Oxford Univ. Press), and various works by Ramón Menéndez Pidal. The translation of Curtius's book originated as Bollinger series XXVI published in 1953 by Pantheon Books Inc. for the Bollinger Foundation.

FOREWORD

I have had much help, and from many people, in the writing of this book; and I am particularly grateful to Miss G. R. Levy for her careful reading of my typescript, for her many suggestions, and for the initial inspiration which I drew from her study of the epic, *The Sword from the Rock* (Faber 1953); also to Mr Colin Hardie for the loan of two scripts on Dante, entitled *A Spiritual Autobiography*, read by him in the Third Programme in October, 1954, and so far, I believe, unprinted; to Mrs H. A. Frankfort for reading some Dutch poetry with me; to Professor L. W. Forster for information concerning Dutch and Flemish authors; to my son Mark for criticism, interest, and the drawing of the Time Chart, and finally to my wife, with whom so much that I have read during nearly thirty years has been fruitfully discussed.

Quotations are given in English where a satisfactory translation exists: otherwise in the original, followed by a plain prose rendering.

For the present edition I have made a few necessary corrections and expanded or otherwise altered several paragraphs towards the end of the book, to account for a few important works published in the last few years.

J.M.C.

Chapter One

EPIC TALES AND ROMANCES OF ADVENTURE

EUROPEAN Literature was born fully mature towards the beginning of the twelfth century. It was contemporary with the Crusades, and it was the product of the same conflict of forces. It arose, that is to say, from the impact of the non-Christian upon the Christian world. On the one side the Romance languages had developed so far as to be virtually independent of the debased Latin from which they had evolved; on the other hand the Dark Ages had not themselves produced from the relics of classical culture any fresh myths which could be the subject of poetry in the vernacular. Priests and monks continued to compose epics and treatises, chronicles and hymns, in Medieval Latin, but their inspiration had run dry. What is more, a new public had appeared, that had little or no Latin. The feudal princes who were leading the great counter-offensive against the infidels had leisure. They had furthermore contact in many places with these same infidels, whose level of civilization was higher than theirs. Their courts – perhaps in imitation of the more cultured Moslem – were becoming more luxurious, and they demanded entertainment. Some of their ladies, indeed, quickly set themselves up as patronesses of the almost non-existent literary arts. The lords of the Frankish world wanted to hear their own praises sung; not by way of personal adulation, however, for this was not an age of personality worship. What they asked of their *jongleurs* or minstrels was an idealized picture of the Christian mission which they had assumed. They demanded a presentation of the Christian way of life that they were defending, and their own age offered them no compelling idea. So from outside the narrow Latin world were called in the heroic sagas of the Teutons, the romantic legends of the Celts, and that spiritualized cult of courtship, which was probably taught them by the infidels themselves, but which came to its second and

European birth in the courts of Central and Southern France.

Now the *jongleur* could sing of knightly virtues, of beauty in women, of constancy in love, and of adventure in strange lands to grasping feudal chieftains, who saw themselves, as they listened, making a last stand with Roland in the pass of Roncesvalles, or – more realistically – reconquering the Spanish peninsula piecemeal with the Cid, and loading an ungrateful king with the spoils – of which however, sufficient remained in the conqueror's hands to make him a rich man. Alternatively, at one degree farther from reality, some young knight in the draughty hall of a Norman castle might set out, in his imagination, with Lancelot or Percival in search of that mysterious Graal, the bringing of which to King Arthur's court would usher in a new age; or, in a more private dream, he might see himself glorified in the shape of Tristan, mad for the love of Queen Iseult, or as Lancelot martyred by the triumph and shame of his passion for Guenevere. The new literature supplied living myths for the emergent knightly caste. The *chansons de geste* (Songs of the great Deeds of old) presented the pettiest baron to himself as a Christian hero; the poems that told of the 'Matter of Britain', the central theme of which was the history of King Arthur and his knights, transformed him into a romantic adventurer; and the lyrical poetry, which arose contemporaneously with the epic, showed him to himself in the light of a lover, approaching his mistress with mingled awe and desire. Here, for the first time in Western poetry, sexual feeling was raised to the level of a transcendent emotion, and the theme of ideal love, unknown to the poets of Greece and Rome, was added to those of great poetry. The poetry of the twelfth century, indeed, contained from the outset four of the five principal ingredients of the European poetic tradition. Heroism, love, the worship of God and the search for the unknown, were all treated by the epic and lyric poets of France and Spain, while the fifth ingredient, the analysis of the poet's own feelings and motives, and the dramatization of his own personality, though on the whole missing until the Renaissance began to stress the importance of the individual and his private vision, appeared sporadically

even at that time among the lyricists of the West, and most recognizably in the Danube valley, among the *Minnesänger*, the German poets of courtly love.

Twelfth-century poetry, nevertheless, is on the whole virtually anonymous. Just as we hardly know the names of the architects who, in the same age, were building the great Cathedrals, so we know very little about the *troubadours* or *trouvères* – as they were called in Provence and Northern France respectively – who made the songs which the *joglars* or *jongleurs* sang. Even the name which they assumed suggests that the composers of the *chansons de geste* thought of themselves as nameless craftsmen rather than as poets to compare with the almost legendary ancients, Homer, Virgil, and their favourite Statius. For the word *trouvère* means no more than finder, or at best inventor. The *troubadour* of the South, on the other hand, though the name makes no greater claim to poetic individuality, leaves on his songs the imprint of a personal mannerism, if not of a fully independent style; and we have at least some anecdotes, if no very full biographical information, about the chief poets of Provence. But most often such stories as can be extracted from his work have little reference to the composer's own life.

The vernacular literature of the twelfth century was not designed for reading. The epic poems were composed for recitation to the simple music of a primitive fiddle, and the lyrics for singing to more complicated tunes, sometimes with refrains, or as a voice and fiddle accompaniment to a dance. There was, consequently, a very close relationship between the metres used and the traditional dance steps; and since most of the dances were popular in origin it was at this point that the cultivated lyric touched the folk-song, with the result that in some districts, in Northern France and Spain in particular, poems began to be devised on less sophisticated subjects by the *jongleurs* themselves, independently of the *trouvères*, to be sung at the festivities of the common people. It was the dance that bridged the gap between the art-forms proper to each caste.

The *jongleur*, who recited the *trouvère's* poetry at the feudal courts, or at stages on the much frequented pilgrimage roads

to Jerusalem, to St James of Compostela, and to the shrines of the many lesser saints, was probably a cleric. For, in this age, only a cleric was able to read and write; and his poem was almost certainly not recited out of his head, but learnt from a parchment copy. In the earliest days he may well have been a decent monk, entrusted with the job of entertaining passing pilgrims for the benefit of his monastery funds. But by the twelfth century his activities were by no means confined within institutional walls, or to the mere recitation of poetry. He was by then a general wandering entertainer, a singer, a conjuror, an acrobat, and even an actor in crude knock-about farces, for the amusement either of gentlemen and their ladies in their castles or of the crowd in the market place. Originally, the chief items in his repertory had been poems on the lives of saints and miracle stories, of which some fragments have survived which predate the *chansons de geste*. These were the only form of religious literature then circulating, for the Church discouraged its priests from giving readings from the Bible, and such partial translations into the vernacular as existed were rare. Among these miracle stories one of the favourites in all countries was the story of St Alexis, a verse rendering of which, attributed to a canon of Rouen Cathedral, is one of the oldest monuments of Northern French literature; it dates from the eleventh century, but begins with a characteristically backward glance to a golden age, long years before that:

The world was good in the times of old,
For then there was faith and justice and love.

Those were the days in which wealthy Christians like Alexis would abandon the secular life and wander the pagan world, begging crusts from the tables of the great and taking beatings from their servants, amidst an efflorescence of miracles. Legends of the Saints, Bible stories, and apocryphal tales about the Virgin Mary, whose cult was then rapidly spreading, made up the *jongleur's* early repertory, and these continued to be written until well on into the thirteenth century. But, as has been suggested, to the extent that the *jongleur's* repertory extended his reputation declined: and soon ecclesiastical dignitaries began to protest against the disgrace which he brought

on the clergy; soon his ranks came to be recruited only from among unfrocked or disreputable priests, or from laymen who had somehow managed to pick up a clerk's education.

The *jongleur*, however, was not – as has been noted – usually the composer of the poems or stories that he recited. The composer, the *troubadour* or *trouvère*, was either a respectable cleric or a landed nobleman or, at worst, the rackets younger son of some aristocratic house. It is true that, especially in Southern France, the *troubadour* might sink so far as to recite his compositions himself, which would bring his status down to that of a mere baron's retainer. But he was divided by the widest of social cleavages from the disreputable *jongleur*, who wandered like St Alexis, sometimes as far abroad as Hungary or Cyprus, though for less laudable reasons than that blessed saint and martyr.

The first *trouvère* whose name we find attached to an important work signs with the Latinized form of his name, Tuoldus: 'Here ends the *geste*, for Tuoldus grows weak'. The obvious interpretation of this last line of the *Chanson de Roland* is that one Théroulde, to give his Norman name its French form, claims to be its author. Scholarship, however, is by no means unanimous in accepting this reading: nor can any of the Thérouldes living in England or Normandy in the first half of the twelfth century be associated with any certainty with this first great work of Romance literature. The general assumption is that he was a cleric of some eminence and of wide reading, and some have gone so far as to see in the *Chanson* parallels to various passages in the *Aeneid*. The poem indubitably bears evidence of at least some acquaintance with Virgil, an author very little read at that time and known chiefly for his reputation, mysteriously acquired in the Dark Ages, as a practitioner in magic.

The version that we have is certainly not the first treatment of the story. We learn, indeed, from a verse chronicle that a *jongleur* named Taillefer recited a song of Roland and Oliver before William the Conqueror on the field of Hastings. But this is not our poem, which we know from a copy made in England about the middle of the twelfth century from an original probably quite recent. For though the *jongleur's*

practice was, no doubt, to graft new material on old, and himself to alter the poem in the course of memorizing it, or even to adapt it to the particular local interests of his hearers, this poem bears every sign of being a completely new version retelling the old story, but supplemented by new material drawn from a history of the Franks (*Gesta Francorum*) which is several times mentioned in the text. It is of these *gesta* that some scholars believe Théroulde to have been the author; the meaning of the line quoted would then be, Here ends the *geste* for Théroulde (my authority) gives out.

The basis of the *Chanson* is unhistorical. Charlemagne made only a very perfunctory show of fighting the Saracens; he did not succeed in taking Saragossa, a Moslem town, but did sack Pamplona, a Christian one; and the rearguard action in the pass of Roncesvalles, in which a certain knight Hruoland – Count of the Breton marches – fell, was in fact fought against the local Basques, not against the infidel at all. However, the legend of Charlemagne's Saracenic wars was by the eleventh century firmly established, and the Roland poem had a great topical appeal. For now once more all the knights of Christendom were gathering to fight the infidel, this time in defence of the newly reconquered Holy Places. There is even a theory that Théroulde's *Chanson* was composed as recruiting propaganda at a moment when the nobles of France and England were losing interest in the Eastern war.

The tale tells of the heroic defence of Roncesvalles by Charlemagne's headstrong nephew Roland and his more sober comrade Oliver, of their death after the slaughter of countless foes, of Charlemagne's tardy arrival on the battlefield and of his revenge upon the enemy. It is a story of battle and treachery, of honour, loyalty, and superhuman endurance; and its passages of deepest feeling are those which record the friendship of Roland and Oliver, and lament their successive deaths. Apart from the mutual loyalty of these two knights, the theme of love occurs only once, at the end, when the fair Alde falls dead on learning that Roland will never return to marry her; and there are few supernatural incidents except for Charlemagne's prophetic dreams, for Gabriel's appearance at the moment of Roland's death, and for the moment when