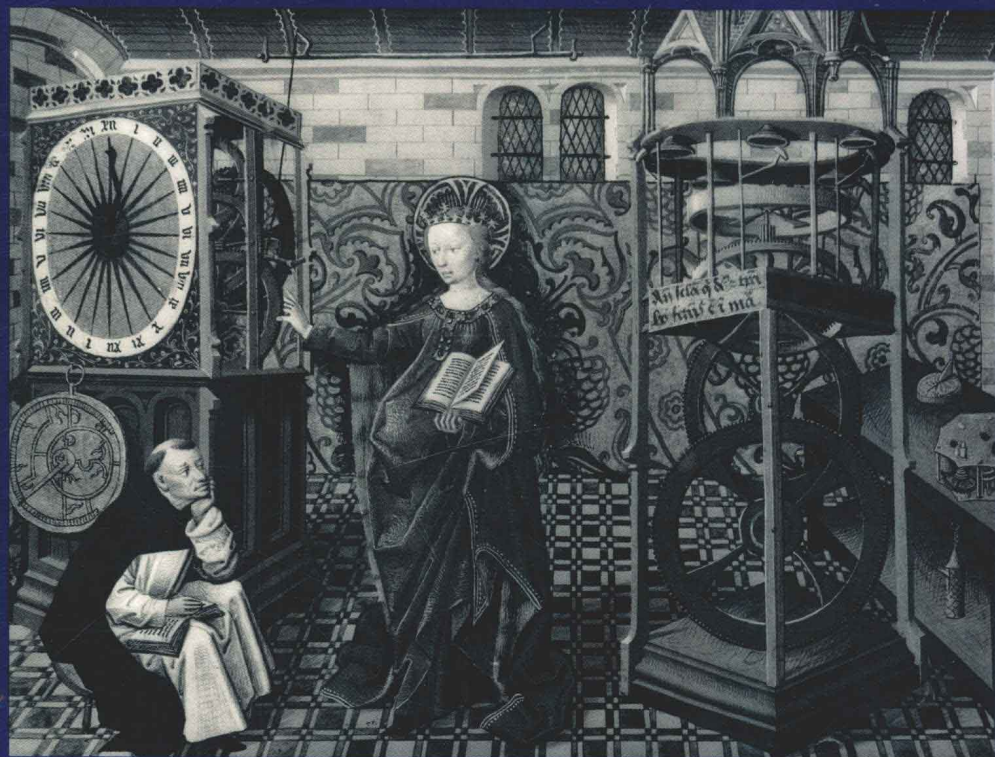


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Rereading Allegory:
Essays in Memory
of Daniel Poirion



Yale French Studies

Rereading Allegory: Essays in Memory of Daniel Poirion

SAHAR AMER
and NOAH D. GUYNN

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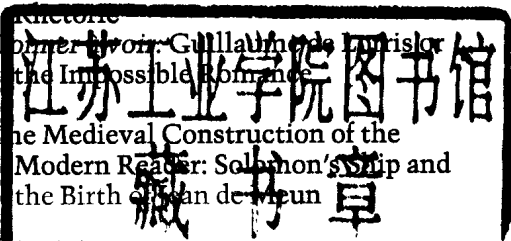
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Yale French Studies

Sahar Amer and Noah D. Guynn,

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IN MEMORIAM

Daniel Poirion

1927–1996

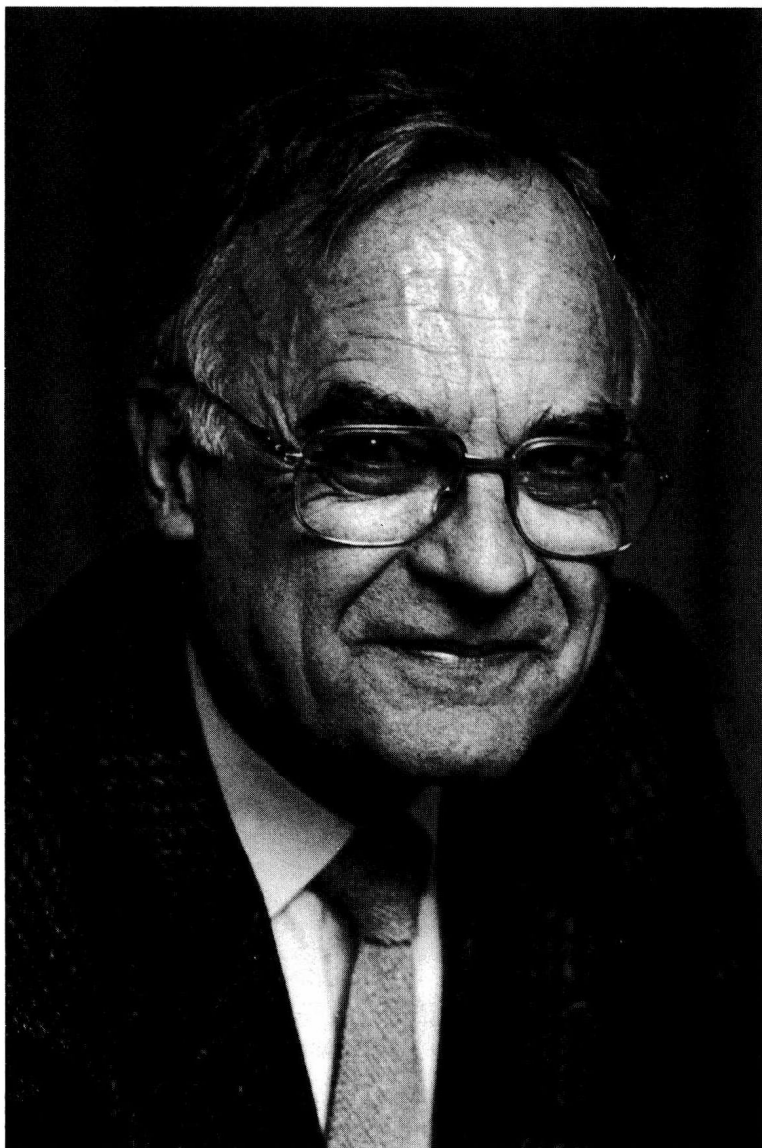


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Daniel Poirion

Editors' Preface

The transcendental ambitions of medieval allegory have given rise to a critical tradition in which literature is understood to produce a totalized, perfected meaning after the fact of the text. The tendency of the allegorist to announce an imminent unveiling of his poem's immanent truth has led medievalists to construe allegory as a highly structured, and therefore ultimately decipherable, system of rhetorical imagery. Its function would be to conceal, but only temporarily, universal essences beneath a veil of metaphor. According to such a view, timeless truths about the human condition, the cosmos, and the supernal beyond, or alternatively, textual truths about authorship, cultural context, and thematic content, could eventually be disclosed through the exegetical unfolding of allegory's encoded rhetoric.

This myth of the truthfulness and ultimate perfectibility of poetry derives, however, less from medievalists than from the allegorical poets themselves. In his *De planctu Naturae*, Alan of Lille asserts that, while

in superficiali littere cortice falsum resonat lira poetica, interius uero auditoribus secretum intelligentie altioris eloquitur, ut exteriori falsitatis abiecto putamine dulciorem nucleum ueritatis secrete intus lector inueniat.

the poetic lyre gives a false note on the outer *bark* of the composition, within it tells the listeners a secret of deeper significance, so that when the outer shell of falsehood has been discarded the reader finds the sweeter kernel of truth hidden within.¹

1. Alan of Lille, *De planctu Naturae*, 8.133–36, ed. Nikolaus Häring, in *Studii mediaevali*, terza serie, 19/2 (1978): 797–879; *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 140, slightly modified. Emphasis ours.

Similar textual metaphors abound in classical and medieval writings, whether it is the *cortex* (bark or shell), *integumentum* (outer covering), or *involucrum* (enveloping sheath). Much taken with the simple elegance of this exegetical model with its reassuring vision of the utilitarian value and ultimate redemption of poetry, medievalists have repeated the wisdom that allegory, as a "purely" substitutive, vertical mode of representation, can indeed overcome the deceptiveness of mimetic representation in order to disclose, at some anticipated point in the future, an absolute signified—a timeless truth or essence temporarily concealed by, but unquestionably contained within, the allegorical figure. The truth is *there*, we are told by allegorists and medievalists alike, somewhere beneath the hard, resistant surface of metaphorical signs. And if we will only dig deeper, we will find that, in spite of an initial betrayal by the seductive strains of the "poetic lyre," the "outer bark of the composition" conceals an epiphany: a manifestation of transcendent purity that far exceeds the temporality of forms and the insufficiency of rhetoric and signs.

And yet perhaps there are alternative ways of interpreting the *cortex*, *integumentum*, and *involucrum*—tautological figures of figuration and, as we shall see, paradoxical figures of an unfigurable truth. No doubt Alan himself would agree (though with the trepidation of an intractable moralist) that the *cortex* of poetry resounds, not with the false note of a temporary obfuscation, but with multiple, alternative truths about the production of meaning through reading and rereading. Etymologically at least, allegory is itself a discourse of alteration and alienation, a "speaking otherwise" (*allo agoria*) that signifies both the translucency of the Logos to materiality and sublimity as well as the rifts, deficiencies, and differences intrinsic to signs. We find a profound statement on the complexities of speaking otherwise in Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, a text that is in large part inspired by Alan's *De planctu*. Here Lady Reason, playing the role of Scholastic exegete, comments on Ovid's myth of the Golden Age and proclaims to the lover:

La verité dedenz reposte
seroit clere, s'el iert esposte;
bien l'entendras, se bien repetes
les integumanz aus poetes. [ll. 7135–38]

The truth hidden within would be clear if it were explained; you will understand it well if you repeat the integuments of/on the poets well.²

2. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy (Paris: Champion, 1973–75), 3 vols. Translations and emphasis ours.

Strikingly, there are two ways to read the phrase "integumanz aus poetes," and consequently two quite different ways of understanding the operations of allegorical poetry. Either Reason is referring to "integuments on the poets," meaning authoritative glosses on great works of poetry (John of Garland's *Integumenta Ovidii*, for instance), or to "integuments of the poets," meaning, simply, poetry itself. Either we are meant to adhere to the wisdom of commentators who have uncovered the singular, decidable truth that lies within poetic texts, or we are meant to repeat or reread the texts themselves, searching for alternative modes of access to the truth and for alternative truths that may not yet have been revealed. Actually, though the former reading is preferred by some scholars, the latter reading would seem a more obvious one, since the preposition *aus* does not commonly signify superimposition in Old French but rather possession. (Indeed, the genitive *Ovidii* in John of Garland's title indicates that the *integumenta* in question belong to Ovid rather than to John.) Regardless, if, as Lady Reason suggests, we must repeat the "integumanz aus poetes," it is because the truth hidden within is iterative in nature and therefore temporal, ongoing, and ultimately evasive. Reason suggests that the integuments do *not* mark an immanent, timeless truth or even a deferred revelation, but rather an impossible, asymptotic conjunction between signifier and signified, texts and truths, forms and ideas. Reading may draw us closer to the "sweeter kernel of truth"; or alternatively, it may offer the renewal of the illusion that texts contain the truth, whereas the truth itself remains unrepresentable and forever beyond our reach. Lady Reason does not—or perhaps cannot—reveal this recalcitrant mystery to us. For Reason here not only evokes the iterative function of metaphor, but her own failure, as a metaphor, to *be* Reason or even a reasonable facsimile. She is *not* the truth or idea of Reason, but a figurative stand-in suggesting that truths, essences, and ideas exist always elsewhere and cannot be uncovered or grasped through careful repetition of the poetic word. This truth of the evasiveness of the truth is itself far more than a simple paradox; it is rather a tautology, perhaps even a cliché. It recalls an antinomy central to Western poetics at least since Plato: that poetry inevitably enacts the deficiency of mimesis as a mere approximation of the real and the inadequacy of signs to totalize or stabilize the relationship between form and meaning. Poetry performs its temporal predicament even as it aspires to a potential ideality and the revelation of a truth hidden within.

Over the past twenty years or so, medievalists have begun to ac-

knowledge the dissonances and conflictual investments of allegorical truth-telling, and to recognize that the otherness of multiple meanings and the absence or alienation of the truth are intrinsic to "speaking otherwise." While not abandoning the contributions and insights of traditional literary history and philology, many scholars have asserted that allegory constructs a far more complex interplay of mimetic deceptions than was previously thought. They have noted, moreover, that medieval authors were sensitive to the paradoxical contingency, perhaps even undecidability, of allegory, that most essentializing and apparently decidable of representational modes. In the field of Old French, scholars have been guided in particular by the groundbreaking work of Daniel Poirion, who, in an essay entitled "Mask and Allegorical Personification," advances the notion that allegory constitutes a highly ambiguous—albeit highly structured—metaphorical system that does not contain its truth, but instead produces a play of superficial illusions and an inexhaustible regression of deceptive masks and signifiers. Poirion calls this effect a "process of accession," by which he means that allegorical figures refer not to stable categories or universal ideas, but to a proliferation of multiple alternate meanings. He maintains that the allegorical mode does not, and indeed cannot, reveal an essential, unchanging thematic content, nor any kind of originary or eventual moment of textual truth or plenitude. Rather, it plays on the multiple possibilities of its own interpretability and on the irreducible plurality of deceptive forms, rendered plural through the repetition of texts, through reading and rereading over time. In this sense, Poirion argues, allegory rejects the claims of theology, philosophy, and science to obtain or to derive the "whole truth" through categorical, essentializing representations. Instead, it embraces the "pleasure of forms," which is not the discovery of essence or being through the similitudes of art, but the proliferation of yet further illusions and deceptive signs by dint of the absence of an identifiable source of determinate meaning and the impossibility of a sufficient, totalized gloss. Lady Reason herself refers to allegorical poems as "*geus*" (games) and "*fables*" (from the Latin *fabula*, a lying or untrue narrative), thereby suggesting that metaphor—a category in which she herself must be included—plays on its own falsity, in spite of its aspiration to transcendent truth, in order to "deliter" (delight) the reader (ll. 7144–45). The reading and rereading of allegory does not, therefore, produce a categorical, universal, or reasonable truth after the fact of the text, but instead exposes the unstable, pleasurable, perhaps even titillating fluctuations of the metaphorical signifier.

Poirion's rethinking of medieval allegory has had a tremendous impact on the study not just of individual allegorical texts like the *Roman de la Rose*, but of medieval textuality and culture generally. Poirion, like Northrop Frye before him, conceives of allegory as a mode rather than a genre—a pervasive representational strategy in which medieval authors ponder and enact the disjunction, fragmentation, and consequent multiplicity of poetic language. Indeed, Poirion, along with scholars such as Paul Zumthor and Roger Dragonetti, was a pioneer in the movement to reevaluate the dialogical complexity of Old French literary culture—a tradition that simultaneously values an intractable, immutable structurality and the unstructuring effects of contingency and historicity. "It is *semblance* that signifies," Poirion writes, "since every *senefiance* is given in *apparence*." If the overarching truth of the literary text (its *senefiance*) is always only an *apparence*, an illusion or metaphor to be interpreted anew, if every signified in turn becomes a signifier of its own incompleteness, then it is appropriate to understand medieval reading as a form of supplementary writing, an endless and ever unfulfilled attempt to grasp the truth through the word. Medieval reading is, in other words, always *rereading*, since no single gloss can be sufficient or self-contained, but necessarily proposes its own readability and revisability. The textual metaphors of *cortex*, *integumentum*, and *involucrum* therefore suggest a literary tradition in which meaning is conceived, not simply as synchronic simultaneity and plenitude, but as a diachronic unfolding and deferred eventuality, as a ceaseless reinvention, rediscovery, and multiplication of an apparently innate truth. Or as Poirion was fond of repeating, the superficial, geometrical rigidity and structural fortifications of the allegorical *paysage* belie the utter complexity of medieval literary culture, which offers a fluid conception of spaces and boundaries of all kinds.

This is not to say that Poirion advocates a move away from the rigorous study of literary forms. He insists, in "Mask and Allegorical Personification," that a "history of literary art" must take into consideration an "order of texts" or a "logic of appearances, a phenomenology, whose processes lead, of course, to modern theories, but whose principle goes back to the very origins of art." Poirion acknowledges, however, that an "order of texts" may not correspond in any transparent way to historical "truth" or a "physical, economic, social, or political reality." The literary scholar, unlike the historian, should valorize "the ephemeral and the apparent," even when literature vociferously proclaims its own absolute truth and structural order. Poirion resists the

notion that literary forms contain the “whole truth” of author, text, or cultural context; that medieval writers necessarily understood poetry to govern an ineffable presence; or that the self-conscious “truth-telling” of medieval texts obliges the medievalist to adhere to rigidly positivistic critical practices. Far from construing allegory as a limiting term referring exclusively to formal constraints, Poirion recognizes it instead as being “surtout une invitation à la relecture” (above all an invitation to rereading).³ At first blush, the phrase may appear banal or obvious, but its effects on the field of medieval studies have been far-reaching. This invitation to reread and to consider anew both literary texts and intellectual traditions has allowed for an extraordinary resurgence of intellectual dialogue and a vital new beginning for medieval studies.

Thus, the present issue of *Yale French Studies* rereads medieval allegory and takes as a point of departure the essay “Mask and Allegorical Personification,” translated here for the first time, as well as another pivotal work, “Literature as Memory: ‘Wo die Zeit wird Raum,’” in which Poirion elaborates a notion of an intertextual network linking writing and rewriting in the Middle Ages through rhetorical, allegorical, and mnemonic strategies. The essays in the body of the volume all in some way respond to the notion that medieval allegorical poetry was produced within—and itself produces—an economy of disjunction and iterability, an economy in which the signifier is alienated from its signified, or more precisely, in which the signified is a signifier of its own alienation. The disjunctive and iterative nature of allegorical tropes suggests the inexhaustible productivity of the polysemous text as it evolves historically through interpretation, reception, and learned repetition. The first section of essays includes work by Jody Enders, Eric Hicks, and Nancy Freeman Regalado, and addresses questions of history and memory, in particular the notion that the motility of time invades, transforms, and degrades the structurality of allegory. These authors examine the ways in which medieval allegorical texts seek to overcome the ungrounding effects of diachronic movement through synchronic structures and strategies of analepsis and prolepsis, historiography and prophecy. The second section examines the spatial, geographical, and political dimensions of the allegorical mode, allegory being etymologically already a political discourse and a delimitation of

3. Unpublished notes from Daniel Poirion’s seminar “Rose et Graal” at Yale University, 14 January 1992.

the space of reception: speech in the *agora*, or public forum. Essays by Stephen G. Nichols, Brigitte Cazelles, and Peggy McCracken focus on the metaphorization and politicization of space in the Middle Ages, whether the radically Other space of the Holy Land, the proximate space of Breton culture, or the territorialization of women's bodies in rituals of sacrifice. A third section, including essays by Grace M. Armstrong, Kevin Brownlee, and David F. Hult, examines notions of legacy and closure: the transformation of narratives over time through rewriting and continuation, the status of the "open text," and representations of narrative completion in the Middle Ages. A final section is comprised of an essay by R. Howard Bloch on the Old French word *deviser*, which he examines in the specificity of its individual uses and then interprets, more generally, as an allegory for the production of meaning *in verbis*, rather than *in re*. Old French literature, Bloch argues, points to the ways in which words form knowledge and existence rather than merely uncovering truth.

Even more than a rereading of medieval allegory, however, this volume serves as a tribute to the memory of Daniel Poirion, who passed away on 15 March 1996 after a painful battle with pancreatic cancer. Like any memorial, this collection of essays not only reminds us of our grief and loss, but also of the importance of repetition—without which the memorial would fail to perpetuate memory or to signify at all—and the unavoidable transformation of meaning, including that of the memorial itself, through rereading. For there are important connections between the fluctuation of textual meaning and the fleetingness of time, between the polysemy of the allegorical text, which is richly meaningful because it transforms itself through history, and the stifling of the individual voice in death. Augustine maintains in Book 11 of his *Confessions* that words, like time, "*fugiant et praetereunt*," *flee and pass away, or are fleeing and are passing away*, even as we perceive and say that they are.⁴ The passing away of words implies, figuratively, the perishing of the speaker, whose own temporal predicament is inscribed in the fact that he has taken time to grapple with the question of time. Indeed the effort to define or totalize the essence of time is, in one sense, wasting time, since it produces not intellectual mastery, but irresolution and frustration: "*Et confiteor tibi, domine, ignorare me adhuc quid sit tempus*" (And I confess to you, Lord, that I

4. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. James J. O'Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 11.6. Translations ours.

still do not know what time is) (11.25). Nearly a millennium later, Guillaume de Lorris finds, like Augustine, that even the learned clerk must fail in his attempts to account for the flight of words in time, that time thwarts, and therefore renders suspect, the notion of an adequate response to the question of temporal flux:

Li tens, qui s'en vet nuit et jor
 sanz repox prendre et sanz sejour,
 et qui de nos se part et emble
 si celeement qu'il nos semble
 qu'il s'aresté adés en un point,
 et il ne s'i aresté point,
 ainz ne fine de trespasser,
 que l'en ne puet neïs penser
 quel tens ce est qui est presenz,
 sel demandez a clers lisanz,
 qu'ençois que l'en l'eüst pensé
 seroient ja .iii. tens passé. [361–70b]

Time, who goes away night and day without taking rest and without pause, and who leaves us and steals away so covertly that it appears to us that he is always stopped at one point, but he never stops there. Rather, he never ceases passing away, such that one can in no way think what time it is that is present—even if you ask learned clerks—for as soon as one would have thought it, three moments would already have passed.

In "Literature as Memory," Poirion echoes the question posed by his illustrious predecessors, suggesting that there is indeed a mystery intrinsic to—and resounding within—language, texts, and forms, one that even *clers lisanz* can never answer for, that is, the mystery of diachronic loss. Time is an unanswerable question, and yet one that is posed anew as texts are read and reread. Or better, time is a question that poses itself, whether implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously, with every instance of speaking, reading, or writing, reminding us of the ephemerality of texts, interpretations, and—most poignantly—of life itself. Literature, Poirion writes, is "the struggle against forgetfulness, against the disappearance or evaporation of words through time"; and writing necessarily anticipates or inscribes the death of the writer, even as he leaves, in writing, a trace of his fleeting, momentary consciousness.

The poignancy of Poirion's argument is, of course, all the more affecting in hindsight, since it can now be understood to refer not just to

the ephemerality of time and words, but to the perishability of life and memory. It is both a theoretical abstraction on the diachronic, iterative nature of the literary text, and a biographical reality of passing away. Borrowing a medieval textual metaphor, the thread and cloth, Poirion suggests, in "Literature as Memory," that one cannot anticipate one's end nor the ends to which one's words will be used or the truths that will be found within them. One can only stop speaking, or rather, at a certain point one's voice is lost, consumed by time—words can no more be preserved in their originary truth or momentary consciousness than a weaver can hold a fistful of burning straw. Poirion reminds us of the fleetingness of time, truth, and consciousness by citing Rutebeuf, closing the article with the phrase "Par temps mi est faillie traime" (With the passage of time, I have run out of thread). Momentarily, Rutebeuf's phrase becomes Poirion's own and is transformed into a haunting, elegiacal aphorism, announcing, through the words of the long-dead poet, the eventual death of the *clers lisanz* who dedicated himself to the word. Poirion's own silence here, his refusal to comment on the aphorism, painfully anticipates the silencing of his voice, and stands, in retrospect, as a memorial in which we can easily discern a self-fulfilling prophecy. Obviously, this particular borrowing suggests not a lack of original thinking, but on the contrary an awareness of the impossibility of true possession or even self-possession through language or figuration. "Literature as Memory," though written some ten years before Poirion's death, prophesies—as perhaps all writing does—the passing of its author, his inevitable flight into the past. And the metaphor of the thread and cloth suggests that time necessarily invades and unsettles the timeless, death-defying order of "speaking otherwise," signifying the relentlessness of our temporal predicament and the irretrievable losses intrinsic to representation, knowledge, and life itself.

Poirion would be quick to remind us, however, of the richness produced both in spite and by dint of loss. The essays in this volume take heed of Poirion's invitation to reread by reflecting on the diversity of the cultural legacy bequeathed to us by the writers of the Middle Ages. At the same time, they reconsider the legacy of wisdom that Poirion himself left behind in the form of an unusually rich body of critical writings. It is indeed a legacy that will not soon be forgotten, for it presupposes that texts are made up of an "infinite combination of threads," producing an inexhaustible meaningfulness and a ceaseless renewability of interpretation. Poirion does not seek to exclude others

from the recondite domain of medieval studies through his own authoritative writings. Instead, he encourages us to find our own truths as they are echoed within the texts we read and reread. Our sadness at the passing of a mentor, colleague, and friend is thus tempered by the knowledge that the thread itself has not been broken. Rather, it continues to offer us, in the form of an invitation to rereading, the ever revived possibility of newness—new readings, new interpretations, new texts. In the generosity and expansiveness of his critical vision, Poirion sought to validate parallaxic difference: a change in position that offers the possibility for reconsideration, reexamination, and revaluation. We understand this, above all else, to be Poirion's legacy to future generations and hope to preserve and build on that legacy through this commemorative volume of essays.

We would like to thank all those who have contributed to the volume or who have helped us in conceiving and executing the project. In particular, we extend our deepest appreciation to Jacqueline Poirion for her assistance in a time of nearly unbearable grief; to the Yale French Department and the board of *Yale French Studies* for sponsoring and overseeing the project; to David F. Hult for his guidance on the preface; to the translators, Deborah S. Reisinger, Christine Reno, and Brett Wells, and particularly Gretchen V. Angelo and Caroline Weber for tackling Poirion's dense, intricate prose; and to Alyson Waters, Managing Editor of *Yale French Studies*, for her tremendous energy and unfailing wisdom. It goes without saying that the Poirion family has our most heartfelt sympathy for their tragic loss. We hope this memorial will provide some measure of comfort.

*I. “An Invitation to
Rereading”*

