Performing Old French Poetry
November 16, 2015

Last Saturday, I thought that I would not present what I had prepared for this “collation.” I had planned to continue the series of presentations I started last June in Rennes at the colloquium Pouvoir, Puissance, Force de la Littérature with a paper titled “Le courage dans deux poèmes médiévaux: Les vers de la mort d’Hélinand de Froidmont et Les Congés de Jean Bodel.” In October, I continued on the same texts and themes at the Medieval English Colloquium at Harvard with a paper titled “doing nothing with words or the power of medieval poetry” in which I developed the reflection on Austin and the performative that I had introduced in June. I wanted this third presentation to be less theoretical and more pragmatic, following the spirit of these collations, in which we present our work in progress in an informal fashion. So I prepared a performance of the first three stanzas of Les Vers de la Mort (a performance different from the one I had done in the first two presentations) and I wanted to invite all of you to talk about the role of performance in your research, teaching, studies, or simply apprehension of poetry, medieval or not.

But Friday happened, and death, destruction, and fear were all over the media. I am French and cannot help being more affected by violence falling on places I know, close to home, than by violence falling elsewhere. This does not mean that I consider French lives or French places more important or more sacred than any other lives or any other places on earth. The lives lost in Beirut a day before Paris were as important and as precious, but I cannot mourn or grieve for them in the same way that I mourn and grieve for the lives lost in Paris. I believe this is human, not political. Grief goes in circles. Intense grief is triggered only by death and destruction that affect us directly. With all the sympathy I can have for my fellow human beings, I am not going to grieve in the same fashion for the death of someone else’s mother as I have grieved for the death of my mother. Less intense grief but still grief can be felt when places you know or feel related to become theaters of destruction, whether natural or human made. Beyond these two circles, what we can feel is not grief, but compassion for the grief of others. No more than that (but no less) should be expected when events affect people and places that are outside the two inner circles of our lives. I am not talking here about media coverage and political decisions, which should not be dictated by grief, although both cannot avoid being influenced by grief.

These are the type of things I was ruminating about these past two days, far from the middle ages, far from poetry. But not far from death. I thought about the strange paradox of people dying because they were enjoying life, in a rather banal fashion: having a beer at a bar or dinner in a restaurant, going to a rock concert, going to a soccer game. A year ago, I heard arguments about the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists and writers: they were going too far and provoked Muslims and the Muslim world; even if indeed this was all very sad and tragic, they had in some measure called for it. I heard someone in a pannel at Harvard saying the Charlie Hebdo guys were bullies.
All right: this is arguable. But we can see, now, that the argument is difficult to stretch further, unless we argue that our whole way of life is bullying Muslims and the Muslim world. I thought that a new paradoxical kind of heroism was emerging in the declarations of people saying: I will continue to go to concerts, and to cafés, or even to Paris. Which is like saying “I am willing to put my life at risk because I love life more than death” or “I am willing (although I would prefer not to) to die as a martyr for a decadent way of life that does not care for martyrs.” I thought about all these things to avoid thinking about my own obsessions and fears. But even after I had firmly decided not to perform Héliand’s poem, I could not help hearing the words in my mind: “Mort qui m’a mis muer en mue...”

Héliand de Froidmont was a monk living near Beauvais, North of Paris, in the late 12th century, early 13th century. He came from a noble family, was well educated, and seemed to have had a talent for poetry appreciated in courtly circles. But in his twenties he decided to leave the world and its pleasures for the monastery of Froidmont, a Cistercian house, that is a community practicing a particularly ascetic way of life. A few years after his conversion, around 1195, he wrote a long poem in Old French, addressed to his friends and relatives still living in the “world,” that is living in a secular fashion. I’ll give you the text of the first three stanzas, in Old French with an English translation. Please have a quick look so you can have a sense of what it says.

[performance]