"An Inert and Neutral State of Form": Zero-degree Writing, Photography, and Early Prose Narrative in French

Jane Gilbert

Published online: 16 Dec 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"An Inert and Neutral State of Form": Zero-degree Writing, Photography, and Early Prose Narrative in French

Jane Gilbert

University College London, UK

ABSTRACT

Part of my project on literary form in translation, this article stages a dialogue between, on the one hand, the formal and stylistic qualities of medieval literary French prose in the first half-century of its practice, and, on the other, Roland Barthes's essays on zero-degree writing and on photography. French literary prose, which came to the fore suddenly around 1200 CE, presents itself as an impoverished form of writing lacking the vividness and drama of the well-established verse narration. Why, then, did it enjoy international success? The same question may be asked of early photography, self-evidently so much poorer than painting. Barthes helps us to see how a deliberate "loss of color" helps to generate a new vision of the world — which, for early French prose, was linked to the idealism and violence of crusading. Conversely, reading the utopian *Le Degré zero de l'écriture* and, especially, the melancholic *La Chambre claire* alongside medieval Grail romances helps us to see how the quest for an (envisaged or lost) ideal inspires both, and to understand the role of form and the impetus for renewal in Barthes's final published essay.

Modern readers may not be surprised to learn of "the phenomenon of a sudden and voluminous narrative prose literature in French" (Mortensen 2017, 24): from "near absence" before 1200 to "abundance in the following decades" (25). The appeal of narrative literature in French prose perhaps seems self-explanatory in the light of its eventual achievements, as if a direct line ran to the glories of Balzac, Flaubert, Michelet, Proust, Camus, and so on from the earliest experiments: bible translations, sermons, (legendary) histories, and romances.[1] So powerfully does the "prose turn" (25) strike even medievalists that we sometimes forget that serious writing in French verse continued throughout the later Middle Ages. As Armstrong and Kay put it:

> In much the same way that the establishment of color photography did not eliminate black and white but instead defined it as a category and endowed it with a whole new meaning, the widespread use of prose redefined the status of verse ... Despite the "rise" of color, photographs and even cinema films have continued to be produced in the medium of black and white, which connotes its own authenticity, albeit one that differs representationally from color. Similarly with verse. (2011, 2–3)

I find this analogy thought-provoking but slightly odd, for it is commonplace for readers to note how "colorless" early French narrative prose is relative to the narrative verse that precedes and exists alongside it.[2] Unless we believe that medieval audiences saw the matter very differently from us, this observation suggests a revision of Armstrong and Kay's analogy that makes the prose turn counter-intuitive: why would writers choose to neglect verse's chromatics for prose's grayscale?

In this article, I explore the appeal of early French literary prose as a self-declaredly impoverished and neutral literary form by comparing it to early photography. Although the nineteenth-century photographic turn was much slower than the early-thirteenth-century prose turn, photography's gradual conquest of popularity and authority despite painting's being much richer in information — most obviously, the resource of color — can be fruitfully read alongside the rise of prose in the face of narrative verse. In this attempt at comparative historical understanding, I call to my aid two works by Roland Barthes. After outlining some characteristics of early narrative in French prose, I shall develop my understanding of these writings in the light of Barthes's first book, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* ([1953] 1972); then I shall develop the analogy between prose and photography in relation to his last, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (1980). Although Barthes's later writings about photography reject his earlier work's explicit interest in form, both share an interest in "zero-degree" aesthetics and in "reality effects" as tools with which to reform meaning and to build new worlds, to the ends of ethical and spiritual renewal.[3] I aim to show how dialogue between Barthes's works and early French literary prose allows us to appreciate differently certain features of each.

"Romanz sanz rime": early French narrative prose

The oldest extant discussions in French of verse and prose as competing forms occur in translations of what is now called the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, which relates Charlemagne's expedition into Spain as purportedly recorded by his constant companion, the very holy archbishop Turpin. In paratextual prologues or colophons, these translations assert their historical authority in part through their rejection of *rime*, a term used by twelfth-century French verse writers to describe their own productions.[4] Details vary, but certain themes emerge: the prose writers accuse verse of prioritizing form over content, indeed, of necessarily deforming content and deviating from the sources for ornament's sake: "rime se velt afeitier de moz conqueilliz hors de l'estoire" (*rime* wants to adorn itself with words amassed outside the source [i.e., with a mass of words extraneous to the source]; quoted in Hanning 1985, 352; translation mine), therefore "Nus contes rimés n'est verais" (no account in *rime* is true; Woledge and Clive 1964, 27).[5] *Rime* is, moreover, difficult and time-consuming to write, read, translate, understand, and remember:

> La bona contessa . . . me proie que je le [the Latin book containing Turpin's account] meta de latin en romanz sanz rime, por ço que teus set de letra qui de latin ne seüst eslire, e por romanz sera il mielz gardez.

> The good countess requested that I translate it from Latin into French without *rime*, so that people who cannot decipher Latin may know the learning, because some people can read who cannot read Latin, and through French it will be better preserved. (Woledge and Clive 1964, 28)

These explicit denunciations of verse claim, by implication, that a form *sanz rime* is more adequate to the sources. The reasons for this greater adequacy are to be found in such a form's reductive neutrality, which is said to permit ease and speed in production, consumption, and transmission; accessibility to a different and wider public than either French verse or any Latin; and greater durability. The multiple re-transmissions, remediations, travels, and labors by which Turpin's eye-witness account reaches its early-thirteenth-century audiences are (sometimes painstakingly) detailed, and the record is consigned now to French prose in order to conserve as well as further disseminate it. Vernacular prose represents a swifter, surer, and more robust communicative technology than verse, so it was a wise patron who "la [the history] fit metra de latin en romanz senz rima por mieuz entendra, quar eço puet maint sen apendra" (had it translated from Latin into French without *rime* to understand it better, for by this means s/he may learn much wisdom [much wisdom may be learned]; Woledge and Clive 1964, 28).

There is much more to say about such paratextual statements, their relation to Latin and to book history, and about what is meant by *rime*, and by *prose* when the latter term eventually comes into use;[6] neither term means exactly what they do nowadays.[7] Here I highlight only that in the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, which has a claim to be paradigmatic both of the histories and the romances that dominate the prose turn, French prose is presented as rejecting extraneous stylistic and formal elements like so much rubble. This process supposedly makes narrative content easier to process because transmissible across languages, media, technologies, social and geo-political distinctions, individuals, and even such metaphysical divides as that which separates God from man. Texts in French prose are somehow closer to "reality": to past historical events, present and future consumers, and spiritual truths.[8]

Assuming that we do not simply accept the prologues' attempts to make French verse the "marked" and prose the "unmarked" form (so neutral as to remain nameless for three generations), we must ask what the appeal of early literary prose was. Evidently it did appeal; the new prose romances and histories met with great success internationally, even though they never completely displaced verse narrative, either in French or in other languages. Many critics have shown the skill with which early prose composers and *dérimeurs* (or prosifiers: much early prose "translates" pre-existing verse narratives) manipulate their narratives, have analyzed their aesthetic procedures, and contextualized those historically.[9] Here I choose instead, somewhat perversely, to pick at the moments in which they acknowledge the inadequacies of prose style.[10] Anecdotal evidence suggests that non-experts freely admit to finding the style of these early, experimental works inaccessible. Among my students, those whose first language is French often find Old French prose more difficult to read than verse (though those whose first language is English find the reverse). Moreover, students acclimatized to Old French verse narrative generally consider the style of prose romances and histories to be comically drab. I have often used in graduate student classes the excellent Old

French language course at the University of Leeds (http://medfrench.leeds.ac.uk/). Only the seventh, final unit addresses prose, with a passage from the prose *Queste del Saint Graal*, of which this is a representative sample:

> Quant Perceval a grant piece dormi, si s'esveille et demande a mengier; et ele [the demoiselle in whose castle the scene takes place] comande que la table soit mise, et len la met. Et il resgarde que len la cuevre de tele plenté de mes que ce n'est se merveilles non. Et il menjut entre lui et la damoisele. Et quant il demande a boivre len li done; et il troeve que ce est vins, li plus bons et li plus forz dont il onques beust: si se merveille trop dont il puet estre venuz. Car a celui tens n'avoit en la Grant Bretaigne point de vin se ce n'ert en mout riche leu, ainz bevoient comunalment cervoise et autres bevrages que il fesoient. Si en but tant qu'il en eschaufa outre ce qu'il ne deust. (*Queste*, 1923, 109)

> When Perceval has slept for a long while then he wakes up and asks for something to eat and she commands that the table be set and someone sets it. And he sees that they cover it with such a plenty of dishes that it is nothing if not wondrous. And he eats, he and the young lady together. And when he asks for drink they give it him, and he finds that it is wine, the best and the strongest he ever drank, and he wonders very much where it can have come from. For at that time there was in Great Britain no wine unless it was in a very rich place, rather they generally drank beer and other drinks that they made. And he drank so much that he got hotter than he ought to have. (my translation)[11]

My students complain and laugh at what they perceive as a lack of prioritization of information here: for instance, the unexceptional process of setting the table is emphasized by repetition, whereas the expected enjoyment of a rich description of the extraordinary dishes is withheld.[12] Relative to the habits of French narrative verse, the prose presents us with at once too much information and too little. Moreover, as one student put it, the *Queste* passage's style "sucks all the color out." Its syntax unspools wordily, as if to highlight the absence of Latin's lapidary quality, to a degree of which *rime* can aspire. The colorlessness, ordinariness, and slow pace of the *Queste*'s phrases seem to be presented as deliberate features, not hidden but exaggerated. If early French prose strikes us as "prosaic," it is perhaps that its intrinsic features have become so normalized and naturalized that it is uncomfortable to encounter them in their original, undigested, intentionally conspicuous form; what we register as a clumsy attempt at mainstream discourse is, in fact, jarringly experimental and new.

Why would writers and audiences choose prose over verse, when the latter is so evidently richer in sensory input and aesthetic information? Of the many advantages that prose can afford (Goldhill 2002), greater textual length is the most obvious one of which early French prose romances take advantage. "Thirteenth-century French prose writing remained … predominantly narrative and paratactic and 'unlearned' in its style" (Mortensen 2017, 26); perhaps we should say that it "became" those things, since prose writing neglects the stylistic, rhetorical, and conceptual complexities of the twelfth-century French verse narrative tradition onto whose plotlines early prose romances graft themselves, thus inviting the comparison. The contrast with verse is not only felt by those listening to prose read aloud (the most common form of consumption); it is immediately perceptible in an opening in a fourteenth-century manuscript from England (Figures 1 and 2: London, BL, Royal MS 20 A II, ff. 146v, 147r).[13]

Figure 1 — the page on the left when the book is opened — which contains Pierre de Langtoft's verse British history in alexandrine *laisses* (a kind of stanza), marks formal divisions, line length, and monorhyme clearly and attractively, giving the page a strong visual rhythm. On the right-hand page, an extract from the prose *Lancelot* romance (Figure 2), paragraphs are detectable mainly by spaces where the decorated capitals in alternating colors present in Langtoft's text were never supplied (an omission common in medieval manuscripts), punctuation is largely absent, and columns are uniform. There are, of course, much more beautiful prose manuscripts, but it is generally much harder to orient oneself in a manuscript of a medieval prose narrative than of a verse one.[14] In prose romances, the effect is created not only by the *mise en page* (layout) but also by characteristic narrative devices (such as interlace, repetition, and doubling) and discourse (repeating pronouns and conjunctions), as well as the stylistic features described above.[15] It is as if there were an attempt to create a "flat" surface, resistant to particularity and to drama. The ways in which this is done, and the paratextual accounts, suggest that what we are seeing is presented not as a particular *style*, but as an effort to strip away style in order to clarify a "prosaic" *form* or even a *medium*.

To restate my heuristic analogy: why would you go from a colorful, information-rich presentation to one that is so poor in information and so dull? To help me address the problem of early French narrative prose's appeal, I turn now to Barthes.

Figure 1. London, BL, Royal MS 20 A II, f. 146v. © British Library Board. The British Library Board maintains all rights in this image, which is not to be shared, published elsewhere, or altered in any way without the rightsholder's express permission.
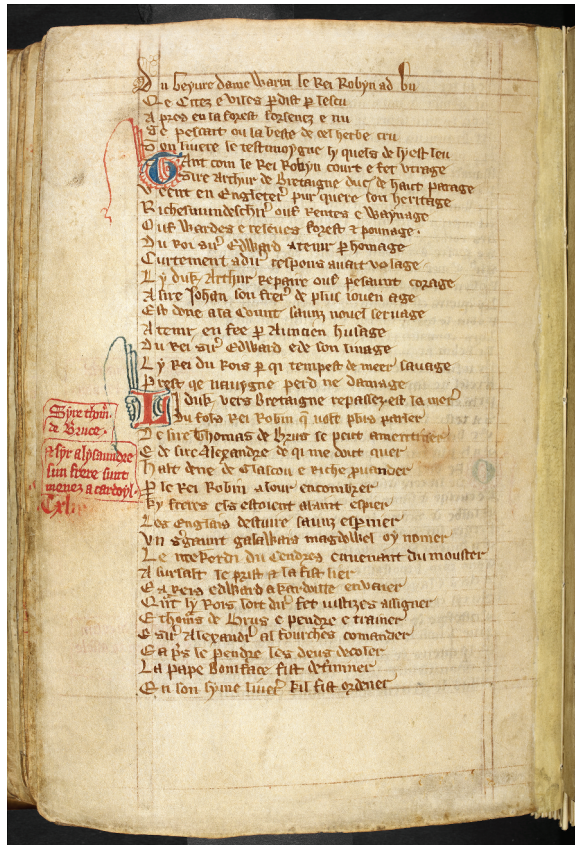
Figure 2. London, BL, Royal MS 20 A II, f. 147r. © British Library Board. The British Library Board maintains all rights in this image, which is not to be shared, published elsewhere, or altered in any way without the rightsholder's express permission.
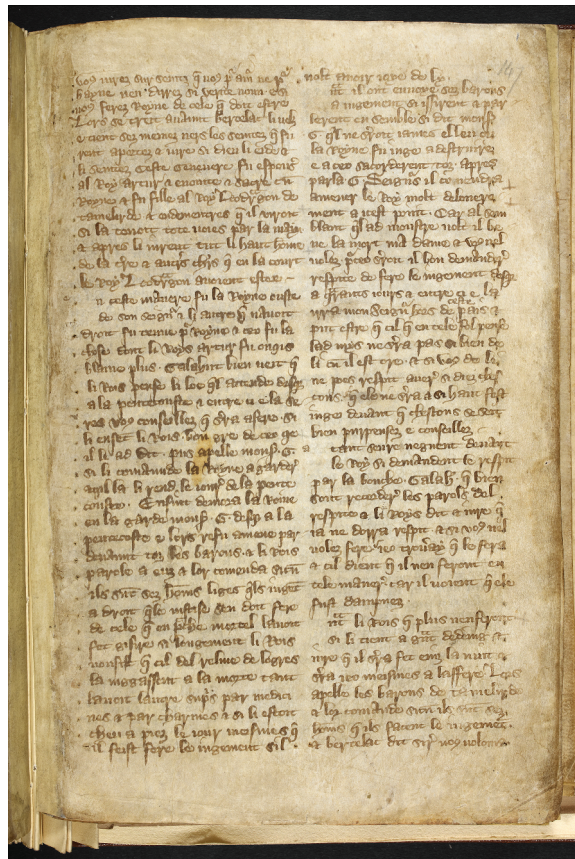
Zero-degree writing: early Barthes

Barthes's early essay hails a non-style, or rather an anti-style, exemplified by Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942): a "nouvelle écriture neurtre," "transparente," "innocente," and "blanche" (new neutral writing, transparent, innocent, colourless; Barthes [1953] 1972, 56–57; 1967, 83–4), this writing intends to liberate itself from the mannerisms of literary tradition. Zero-degree writing aspires to "une absence idéale du style" (an ideal absence of style; [1953] 1972, 56; 1967, 83), to "un état neutre et inerte de la forme" (a neutral and inert state of form; [1953] 1972, 56; 1967, 83), and to "une sorte de langue basique, également éloignée des langages vivants et du langage littéraire proprement dit" (a sort of basic speech, equally far from living languages and from literary language proper; [1953] 1972, 56; 1967, 83). In spite of Barthes's reductivist rhetoric, it is clear that he envisages a set of instruments newly made or remade, purified of the constraining influence of literary and ideological traditions and capable of achieving great new things. The aims are ethical, existentialist, and idealistic. Writing in this way becomes a high discipline, a praxis that frees the writer (and presumably readers) from established social,

cultural, and historical pathways and that creates new futures that are as much political as literary. It renders the writer incapable of lies, hypocrisy, or compromise while endowing him with supreme clarity of insight: "la problématique humaine est découverte et livrée sans couleur, l'écrivain est sans retour un honnête homme" (the problematics of mankind is uncovered and presented without elaboration [literally: without color], the writer becomes irretrievably honest; [1953] 1972, 57; 1967, 84). This new way of registering reality will produce the vision and possibility of a new reality outside the literary domain.

Barthes descends from this heady, political-aesthetic vision, to conclude his essay on an ambivalent note. Because literary convention inevitably reasserts itself, radical novelty is impossible to maintain; nevertheless, it is the impetus and the aspiration of the best modern literary writing:

> imagination avide d'un bonheur des mots, elle se hâte vers un langage rêvé dont la fraîcheur, par une sorte d'anticipation idéale, figurerait la perfection d'un nouveau monde adamique où le langage ne serait plus aliéné. La multiplication des écritures institue une Littérature nouvelle dans la mesure où celle-ci n'invente son langage que pour être un projet: la Littérature devient l'Utopie du langage. ([1953] 1972, 65)

> An imagination eagerly desiring a felicity of words, it hastens towards a dreamed-of language whose freshness, by a kind of ideal anticipation, might portray the perfection of some new Adamic world where language would no longer be alienated. The proliferation of modes of writing brings a new Literature into being in so far as the latter invents its language only in order to be a project: Literature becomes the Utopia of language. (1967, 93–4)

Although the effort to revolutionize form, style, and language is constantly to be reinvented under different cultural and political circumstances, there are notable correspondences between Barthes's account of its mid-twentieth-century French version and the prose fictions and histories written in French in the early thirteenth century. Pursuing these correspondences, we may also suggest similarities of aim.

Barthes's theorization helps us to see how the disconcertingly "prosaic" qualities of early French literary prose are aspirational and inspirational.[16] The insistence on representing and repeating everyday detail envisages not only a new relationship to the world, but actually a new world, one with hierarchies and priorities very different from literature and everyday life as they are normally envisaged. Denunciations of verse, stylistic flattening, "inert and neutral" states of form, and awkward, paratactic, "unlearned" language: all are advance guards of this new world order, expressing an ambition to strip away "convention," "artifice," and "lies" as superfluities diverting from the project which the prosaic texts (thereby) claim as their own. This utopian project is closely linked to crusade. The loss of Jerusalem and of the relic of the Holy Cross in 1187 produced massive cultural shockwaves in Christian Western Europe (Tyerman 2007, chapters 11–14). The resulting historical alienation, and dream of its ending in universal Christian conquest, expressed themselves not only in a flurry of crusading activity but also in cultural productions. A turnaround in critical thinking means that, whereas specialists in medieval French literature once found relatively little writing about the crusades, we now consider their impact to be very widespread, and often registered indirectly (the *Pseudo-Turpin* is an obvious example, translating Christian–Islamic warfare between ninth-century Spain and early-thirteenth-century northern French and imperial territories). Prose romances and histories are far from alone in responding to the call for spiritually

led political and cultural reform, but Barthes's analysis allows us to see how they aim to convey and meet that call through a negative aesthetics (on the analogy of negative theology).

In French prose romance's foundational moments, Merlin and the Grail intertwine, and they or their avatars remain omnipresent in the tradition. The *Joseph d'Arimathie* and *Merlin* commonly attributed to Robert de Boron trace the Grail's trajectory from Christ's Passion to Britain and then entangle it in the prehistory of Arthur's reign;[17] their narrator presents his practice as a kind of para-gospel writing, at once invented and encapsulating some of the truths held by canonical Christian texts (the paradox itself evokes Christian thinking).[18] Symbol of profound ethical and spiritual renewal, the Grail dominates prose romance during the first half of the thirteenth century. It is the central theme of the vast *Lancelot-Grail* cycle, but inserts itself also into the prose *Tristan* and into *Guiron le Courtois*, narratives which at first blush seem unconnected. In another mode, most early prose historiographical works graft the Crusader States into salvation history (William of Tyre, Henri de Valenciennes, the *Histoire ancienne*) or relate crusaders' eyewitness accounts of campaigns (Geoffroi de Villehardouin and Robert de Clari).[19] Patrons and writers of early French prose are linked to dynasties, circles, or areas that identified, or aspired to identify, as crusaders.[20] As in Barthes's early discussion so in early French prose narratives, the practice of zero-degree writing adumbrates a new mode of registering reality that aims to assert and enact a discontinuity with earlier cultural norms, to convey a present historical moment felt to be radically unfamiliar — a crisis — and to respond with a new alignment of truth and reality capable of bringing into (at least ideal) being a perfect world where neither aesthetics, textuality, nor politics are alienated from the spiritual and moral verities of Christianity.

Registering loss: late Barthes

La Chambre claire, the "note on photography" published not long before Barthes's death, maintains his early interest in a new "realism." Now, however, he presents the key element not as stylistic or formal but as technological: photography's realism is a matter of the chemical reaction that occurs when light hits photographic film. Like zero-degree writing, this process does not so much *represent* external reality as *register* it, and concerns reference rather than signification (Barthes 1980, 16–18). It is vital for Barthes's view of photography that, alone among art forms, it records the actual presence of its subject at a specific time and place: its *effet de réel* is in fact an *effet du réel* (Regalado 1986), taking zero-degree aesthetics a stage further. This coincidence between photography's "neutral and inert state" and historical fact deepens enormously the medium's spiritual and philosophical significance.[21]

Much of what Barthes writes here about photography recalls what he had written thirty years earlier about prose. Like zero-degree writing, "La Photographie est *plate*, dans tous les sens du mot" (The Photograph is *flat*, platitudinous; 1980, 164; 1981, 106), and this contributes crucially to its "force d'évidence" (evidential power; 1980, 165; 1981, 106): cultivating an absence of "style" again works to align historical reality with truth. However, the values have changed. Non-style no longer opens onto a glorious future immanent in a — finally! — accurately recorded present, but oppressively forecloses such aspirations and such optimism: from the instrument of the revolutionary, it has become

that of the police. The photographic "arrêt de l'interprétation" makes no comment beyond the stupid, brute "évidence" that constitutes its "loi" (*arrest* of interpretation, evidence, law; 1980, 165; 1981, 107, emphasis in original). The links between early photography and police work are recalled throughout (notably, 1980, 24–33; 1981, 10–15). Zero-degree aesthetics now present us — even beat us around the head with — incontrovertible proof of the Real of human finitude: the banal and utterly astounding facts of mortality, the passage of time, and the singularity of every event and being

> Ce que la Photographie reproduit à l'infini n'a eu lieu qu'une fois: elle répète mécaniquement ce qui ne pourra jamais plus se répéter existentiellement. En elle, l'événement ne se dépasse jamais vers autre chose: elle ramène toujours le corpus dont j'ai besoin au corps que je vois; elle est le Particulier absolu, la Contingence souveraine, mate et comme bête, le *Tel* (telle photo, et non la Photo), bref, la *Tuché*, l'Occasion, la Rencontre, le Réel, dans son expression infatigable. (1980, 15)

> What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression. (1981, 4)

In writing *La Chambre claire*, Barthes tries to elaborate a mode of expression adequate to register the grief caused by his mother's death, which he presents as a hole punched in his life. This death produces in him the same *punctum* or wound that only photography can capture, because the essence of photography is to show us that the pictured subject was once *really there*, and is therefore now truly not. It resists the mourning process by providing us with irrefutable proof of the "*Ça-a-été*" (*That-has-been*; 1980, 120; 1981, 77) which *is* no more. The *passé composé* (present perfect) tense, a salient feature of Camus's style in *L'Étranger* and one that we might therefore have understood, in the context of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, to characterize the brave new language there envisaged for a brave new world, now confronts us with the visceral connection between every present moment and its passing, thus wielding the dagger with which photography punctures our illusions, sucking the color out of life:[22]

> Ce *punctum*, plus ou moins gommé sous l'abondance et la disparité des photos d'actualité, se lit à vif dans la photographie historique: il y a toujours en elle un écrasement du Temps: cela est mort et cela va mourir. Ces deux petites filles qui regardent un aéroplane primitif au-dessus de leur village (elles sont habillées comme ma mère enfant, elles jouent au cerceau), comme elles sont vivantes! Elles ont toute la vie devant elles; mais aussi elles sont mortes (aujourd'hui), elles sont donc *déjà* mortes (hier). (1980, 150–1)

> This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die. These two little girls looking at a primitive airplane above their village (they are dressed like my mother as a child, they are playing with hoops) — how alive they are! They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday). (1981, 96)

By virtue of its nearness to the present tense, the *passé composé* crushes living experience under the weight of its instantaneous and inevitable "disparition," its passing away. There is no time in which to be alive.[23]

If, then, we restate the question with which I began — why go from painting to photography? — then an important answer emerging from *La Chambre claire* is, because only photography makes truly palpable what Barthes calls the "Intraitable" (Intractable; 1980, 120; 1981, 77): loss's essential nature as irrevocable, non-negotiable, irreconcilable, unacceptable, irrefutable, irrecuperable. Thematic and verbal similarities link photography's moribund Realism to the Adamic, utopian, ideal qualities of modern prose fiction envisaged in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, but with an opposite intention and dissimilar temporality: flatness, predictability, and referentiality are associated now not with the creation of life and world but with their utter loss, and with the continuation of that loss in a way that inhibits our ability to engage with life, and consequently with any idea of renewal.

The way in which Barthes writes in *La Chambre claire*, however, suggests that he is here not so much correcting his earlier view as acknowledging an ambiguity: creation and loss, revolution and repression are not mutually exclusive, though our understanding of them may depend on the particular perspective and experience from which we view them. The foundational status of his last essay, both for writing about photography and for a particular mode of critical discourse, testifies to its generative potential. I conclude this article by adding, to the large body of work analyzing or stimulated by the innovations of *La Chambre claire,* a medievalist's observations: the resemblances of Barthes's essay to the Grail romances so common in early French prose writing, and how those resemblances may inflect our reading of both.

Some similarities are thematic, narrative, and biographical: Perceval, the principal Grail knight in the early romances, is a man brought up by his mother and haunted by her death; mothers and reminders of them are inescapable, but also unlocatable (McCracken 1998). The Grail with which men seek to commune is itself a powerfully maternal symbol, promising an experience so totally satisfying that it releases men from the alienations and frustrations of the symbolic order (Rossignol 1995). *Fils sans père* proliferate, echoing the notable absence of a father in *La Chambre claire*: Perceval, Lancelot, Galahad, Merlin, and Arthur are all fatherless sons. Sterility and childlessness are endemic, in impotent kings and their wastelands and in heroes who cannot or will not reproduce. Narrative, cyclical, and chronological timelines ebb and flow. When Barthes discusses how his mother is recreated in old age as his own young daughter, the only "child" he will ever have (1980, 111–13; 1981, 71–2), he embraces a queer temporality that entangles generations in Grail narratives also. Grail texts work to connect interiority and eschatology, urging us to examine our private selves and to reflect on our own and others' deaths — the same directives that Barthes finds in photography. For both early prose Grail narratives and Barthes, such practices point beyond presentist preoccupations to a greater Truth, which is incarnate also in the unadorned everyday world to which early prose style points, and that photography records, so repetitiously and redundantly. Finally, there is in the early French prose works a preoccupation with history, its recording and reception, and especially with the tension between how it is lived by particular humans and how it is experienced by those looking backwards melancholically or forwards prophetically, out of time with their times.

Reading *La Chambre claire* as if it were a work of early French prose, specifically a Grail romance, encourages us to see how its melancholy opens onto a new world (without ceasing to be melancholy). By its uncompromising alignment of reality and truth, the photograph makes mimesis obsolete, rising instead to combine the visible and the visionary in a spiritual-material epiphany. When Barthes, searching for his dead mother in old photographs, finally finds her in the print of a child in a Winter Garden, he emphasizes that this image does not physically resemble the woman he knew, but instead makes her "âme" (soul) immediately present to him: "*C'est ça!*" (There she is!; 1980, 167; 1981, 109, though this translation does not grasp how the original refutes the "*Ça-a-été*"). The intimately personal experience of this picture cannot be conveyed to us who did not know her (the experience of the Grail is incommunicable), therefore the many illustrations in *La Chambre claire* do not include the photograph that the questing text places at its heart. Something about photography as a medium, something about its banal referentiality, permits us to go beyond convention and familiarity direct to truth; the same something prevents the communication of that passage except indirectly, as Barthes writes around the Winter Garden photograph, describing it to us in words and withholding it from us.

The lens of Grail discourse foregrounds how Barthes's analysis of photography's realism and its consequences develops his account of zero-degree writing. To hone in on a detail: the omnipresence of mothers in Grail texts pushes at Barthes's interpretation of the mortiferous *passé composé* (quoted above). In the context of his mother's death, this extract cannot but recall the famous opening of *L'Étranger*, paradigm of zero-degree writing: "Aujourd'hui, Maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas" (Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I don't know; Camus 1942, 1; 1982, 9). The looping Grail temporality embraced in *La Chambre claire* prevents us from separating the despairing judgement of 1980 from the hopeful presentiment of new worlds in 1953, instead connecting them in intimate, non-dialectical ways. This registration of his mother's death delivers the puncture-wound that both destroys and constitutes the viewing subject, and that founds the untenable position of critic. The Winter Garden, as indescribable and as multiply desired as the Grail, embodies a truth beyond language and spawns an experimental discourse that may be called "la façon d'exister d'un silence" (the way a certain silence has of existing; [1953] 1972, 56; 1967, 84), no longer cut to the bone but richly burgeoning. Whatever its stylistic differences from zero-degree writing, the new discourse of its earlier avatar, the new discourse of *La Chambre claire* takes up the latter's vocation of infusing into the world a new spirituality and a new way of living.

Although Barthes's early essay looks forward optimistically to a new world to come and his late one reflects sadly on a world that is no more, both aspire to be sign-posts to another world, whether that is a utopian future or a spiritual other-where. The textual fabric of *La Chambre claire* builds upon and develops out of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, thus producing a model much more complex and ambiguous than the binary opposition or rejection that the later essay's content alone might imply. The way this last text is written tells us that we should not consider one vision as superseding or negating the other. The echoes of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* remind us that the sheen of the Real, evoked by the silvery charisma of early photographic prints (and by the silver cover of my copy of *La Chambre claire*), is the ultimate lure. The Real is not the same as the true. We should not allow it, or the longing for transcendence that it may induce, to blank out the everyday and the present time; the active political impetus of Barthes's early work is also real, true, and necessary. This reflection in turn reminds us that the idealistic reforms and spiritual renewal promoted by early literature in

French prose were restrictively conceived and violently enforced on non-Christian and on Christian bodies, minds, and souls, whether in the crusading territories or domestically. (For many medieval, as many modern commentators, violence in the source of idealism is hardly shocking: the end may justify the means. Politics in the earthly sphere is not left behind by the turn to transcendence — far from it. Nor is it in the discourse founded in *La Chambre claire*.) Zero-degree writing and early photography, as described and analyzed by Barthes, gesture towards a new kind of relation to or realization of form, that both exceeds and undercuts signification and representation to become instead a matter of reference, hence of immediate spiritual and historical truth and reality, with a consequent call to ethical and political action. A very similar impetus and effect, I propose, are connected to the banal, under-written surface of early French prose narratives.

Conclusion

Reading *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* and *La Chambre claire* alongside early prose narratives in French suggests that the latters' dullness may be read as an attempt to fit or reduce *style* to the prose *form*, and thereby to access the world-forming potential of an art-form that would be only referential.[24] The same exercise shows how these medieval texts' obsession with strange temporalities, cross-generational looping, and (re)productivity, with History and renewal, especially as articulated in the quest for the Grail, throw light on Barthes's project of non-fictional, creative critical writing, and on how that project aims not only at registering the true and the real, but also at producing them in the reading subject and thereby in earthly politics and cultures. Whether we consider the early thirteenth-century experiments with French narrative prose, *L'Étranger*, early photography, or the discourse of *La Chambre claire*, Barthes's argument would be that the loss of information that was furnished by preceding forms, media, or technologies *in itself*, and not only via the new technologies, practices, and forms for which it makes space, bathes in the light of History: past, present, and future, finitude, particularity, and eternity, politics and transcendence. Losing information that we are accustomed to receive — literal or metaphorical "color" — is a crucial part of re-orienting our sensibility towards a world of differences.

Notes

1. Many overviews are available. Mortensen's 2017 study of early prose in four traditions is especially insightful due to its comparative nature and focus on book history and librarization; on French, see especially 22–31, including a timeline (25). On earlier, mainly non-literary prose (charters, letters, etc.), see Beer (1992; although Beer rejects the distinction between "literary" and "non-literary").
2. From the scholarly apology that "la prose du *Tristan* frappe par son manque de couleur" (the *Tristan*'s prose is strikingly lacking in color; Milland-Bove [1998, para. 1]) to a graduate student's comment that a passage of a prose romance "sucks all the color out" relative to verse.
3. Many critics have observed the points of contact between zero-degree writing and photography in Barthes's writings; Batchen 2009 centers on this contact, and has been for me particularly stimulating.
4. Godefroy (1881–1902), s.v. *rime, rimer, rimeur* (vol. 10: *Complément*, 1902), http://micmap.org/dicfro/search/complement-godefroy/rime.

5. I combine here extracts from various versions of the French *Pseudo-Turpin*, whether different translations or different manuscripts of the same translation. Ailes gives an excellent introduction to the text, its reception, and scholarship on it. Seven independent translations into French had been produced by 1230 (Ailes 2017, 3). English translations are my own.

6. Texts in French were widely written and read outside the French kingdom and by non-native speakers. An example is Brunetto Latini, credited with introducing the word *prose* into medieval French in his *Tresor* (early 1260s). Brunetto contrasts prose and verse thus: "'la voie de prose est large et pleniere, si comme est ore la commune parleure des gens [the passageway of prose is wide and vast, just as is nowadays people's common speech]' while 'li sentiers de risme est plus estrois et plus fors, si comme celui ki est clos et fermés de murs et de palis [the path of rhyme is more narrow and more arduous, as one that is enclosed and fortified by walls and palisades]'" (quoted and translated by Hult 2008, 31–2). Hult has a sophisticated discussion of a variety of prologues (including some in verse) that make claims similar to that of the *Pseudo-Turpin* (26–32).

7. On the close links of both rhyme and prose to rhythm, see Schmitt (2016, 67–107). Rhyme became a feature of Latin poetics during the medieval period (Brittain 1951, 1–61). Latin prose used a variety of devices that we would now associate with verse, including rhyme:

> The leading authors of [the eleventh and twelfth centuries], many of whom were monks, such as Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), emphasized symmetry and parallelism in the structure of their ample sentences through the use of such devices as isocolon (clauses of equal length), anaphora (repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses), and end rhyme. In many cases, especially by the mid-twelfth century, the harmony of formal prose is enhanced by the practice of ending sentences and clause with accentual rhythms, or *cursus* . . . [N]one of these devices was new. (Tunberg 1996, 112)

> Woledge and Clive (1964) highlight the role of monastic circles in producing French prose in the twelfth century, especially of the Benedictines in England and of the Cistercians, Beghards, and Vaudois on the continent (13–23). They print a short extract from an early sermon to show how it contains "passages d'un lyrisme qui est presque inconnu dans la prose française de l'époque et qui rappelle le style de saint Bernard" (passages of a lyricism virtually unknown in the French prose of the period, and which recalls the style of St Bernard; 23).

8. It is difficult to know how to interpret these claims. Some prose works seem to aim at what we would now consider historical veracity, others at communicating moral truths or even divine truth. Many are also obviously, even blatantly fictional; Emmanuèle Baumgartner calls the *Pseudo-Turpin* "l'un des textes les plus fictionnels qu'ait produits le XIIIe siècle" (one of the most fictional texts that the thirteenth century produced; 1998, para. 4), and the (pseudo-) Robert de Boron *Joseph d'Arimathie* and *Merlin* present themselves as quasi-scriptural. Baumgartner (1998), Hanning (1985), Hult (2008), and Combes (1998) are among the excellent discussions that compare early prose's truth-claims with the very similar assertions made by earlier or contemporary verse texts, equally eager to proclaim their authenticity.

9. The fullest discussion of early French "prosaics" remains Godzich and Kittay's essential monograph (1987).

10. A representative example is this: "The soberness of the prose style, which in some contexts may seem flat by comparison with Chrétien's dazzling command of poetry, turns out paradoxically to be the perfect instrument for expressing the sweet, unswerving loyalty of Lancelot's devotion" (Bruckner 2003, 99).

11. The punctuation of the Old French text is Pauphilet's; there is very little punctuation in manuscripts, so I have minimized it when translating. W. W. Comfort's 1926 translation prunes the original's superfluities while leaving some of its weight, and favors a dated vocabulary and phrasing that endow the passage with the dignity of ceremony:

    When he had slept a long time, he awoke and asked for food. At her command the table was spread, and he saw that it was covered with such a plenty of viands that it was marvellous to behold. When he asked for drink, it was furnished him, and he found it to be the best and strongest wine, so he wondered whence it could have come. For in those days there was no wine in Great Britain except in the houses of the rich, but they commonly drank beer and other beverages which they made. He drank so much of this wine that he became heated to excess. (2000, 100)

    Comfort's translation is old-fashioned now, but many translators still tidy up the text, altering the impact of its style. Lack of space prevents me from giving more examples of early prose style here.

12. Baumgartner comments on the absence in early prose romance (though not so much in historiography) of long descriptions and portraits (1998, para. 14; see also para. 9). Catherine Croizy-Naquet comments that early prose works usually confine themselves to "la description photographique" (photographic description; 2000, 81), only occasionally enriching themselves with "un protocole descriptif chargé de restituer les couleurs du passé" (a descriptive protocol whose job is to restore the colors of the past; 2000, 84).

13. The manuscript is digitized at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal_MS_20_A_II. The visual contrast in this opening arises from a material lacuna: a quire containing the ending of the Langtoft and the beginning of the *Lancelot*, with some intervening texts, was removed in the early modern period and inserted into another Langtoft manuscript, London, BL, Cotton MS Julius A V.

14. Anecdotal evidence from researchers working on the MFLCOF project, www.medievalfrancophone.ac.uk.

15. Baumgartner summarizes the features that Old French prose narrative developed in order to present itself as "la forme neutre d'un récit objectif" (the neutral form of an objective account; 1998, paras 12–15; para. 16).

16. Critics agree on the will to novelty of early prose, but do not generally link it to artistic impoverishment.

17. Closely related verse and prose versions of the *Joseph* survive, while the *Merlin* survives in full in prose and as a 500-line fragment in verse. Richard O'Gorman has written extensively on these texts; see his edition of the *Joseph* (Robert de Boron 1995) for bibliography. There is debate over whether Robert composed the verse or the prose versions, or both (or neither; prose romances tend to co-opt named, historical or fictional authors to lend them weight). Although most scholars maintain that the verse versions precede the prose, Linda Gowans leads those who argue that the prose came first (2004). Corinne Füg-Pierreville, in her recent edition of the prose *Merlin* (2014), agrees with Gowans' view on the priority of the prose, considering it to be the very first French prose romance; she also reviews the arguments for and against Robert de Boron's authorship, and argues that prose's transparency and neutrality allow authorship to be ascribed directly to Merlin (32–46).

18. See especially Hanning (1985), Combes (1998), Trachsler (2000).

19. Many of the relevant prose works are discussed in Morreale and Paul (2018). On the *Histoire ancienne*, see especially MFLCOF and TVOF.

20. See especially the classic discussion in Spiegel (1993). It is interesting that although early French prose is associated above all with the overlapping cultures of northern France, the southern Low Countries, and Lotharingia/Burgundy, these areas, along with Germany and England, are those that seem to have translated the French prose works into verse in their local vernaculars. All also continued to sponsor vernacular verse narrative productions throughout the Middle Ages.

21. Digital photography poses an obvious challenge to this way of thinking, but is beyond the scope of this article; it is noteworthy that Barthes dismisses trick along with other surprise photographs as failing to realize the coincidence of style and medium (1980, 57–60; 1981, 32–34).

22. Daniel Just (2007) explains the importance of Camus to *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* and situates Barthes's (minimal) account relative to contemporary polemics, in particular, Sartre's criticism of Camus (for the *passé composé*, see especially 395). Just's essay includes an insightful discussion of Barthes's long-term interest in "impoverished art" and in its politics (397–402).

23. See the discussion of modern and early modern tense use for the dead in Kenny (2015, 13–26).

24. Or even to particular technologies of literacy, including books and libraries, see Mortensen (2017).

Notes on contributor

Jane Gilbert is Professor of Medieval Literature and Critical Theory at University College London and publishes on medieval French and English literature in dialogue with modern critical theory. A list of publications is available here:
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/european-languages-culture/people/jane-gilbert. This article belongs in her current research project on literary form in translation: an exploration of what happens to literary forms in the translational and contact-zone contexts of medieval literacy, looking especially at French, English, and Latin, and particularly with modern posthuman and intermedial approaches.

References

Ailes, Marianne. 2017. "*Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* Tradition." In *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain*, edited by Robert Rouse, Siân Echard, Helen Fulton, Geoff Rector, and Jacqueline A. Fay. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118396957.wbemlb437 .

Armstrong, Adrian, and Sarah Kay. 2011. *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval France from the "Rose" to the "Rhétoriqueurs."* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1967. *Writing Degree Zero*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. London: Cape.

Barthes, Roland. [1953] 1972. *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture, suivi de Nouveaux essais critiques*. Paris: Seuil.

Barthes, Roland. 1980. *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie*. Paris: Seuil.

Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.

Batchen, Geoffrey, ed. 2009. *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's "Camera lucida."* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Baumgartner, Emmanuèle. 1998. "Le choix de la prose." *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes* 5: 7–13. https://doi.org/10.4000/crm.1322 .

Beer, Jeanette M. A. 1992. *Early Prose in France: Contexts of Bilingualism and Authority* Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute.

Brittain, F. 1951. *The Medieval Latin and Romance Lyric to A.D. 1300*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bruckner, Matilda Tomaryn. 2003. "Redefining the Center: Verse and Prose *Charrette*." In *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, edited by Carol Dover, 95–105. Cambridge: Brewer.

Camus, Albert. 1942. *L'Étranger*. Paris: Gallimard.

Camus, Albert. 1982. *The Outsider*. Translated by Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin.

Combes, Annie. 1998. "Du *Brut* au *Merlin*: le fils du diable et les incertitudes génériques." *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes* 5: 15–32. https://doi.org/10.4000/crm.1332 .

Comfort, W. W., trans. [1926] 2000. *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications. https://www.yorku.ca/inpar/quest_comfort.pdf .

Croizy-Naquet, Catherine. 2000. "Écrire l'histoire: le choix du vers ou de la prose aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles." *Médiévales* 38: 71–85. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43027740 .

Füg-Pierreville, Corinne, ed. 2014. *Le Roman de Merlin en prose*. Paris: Champion.

Godefroi, Frédéric. 1881–1902. *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectres du IXe au XVe siècle.* 10 vols. Paris: Bouillon. Searchable online version: https://www.lexilogos.com/francais_ancien.htm .

Godzich, Wlad, and Jeffrey Kittay. 1987. *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Goldhill, Simon. 2002. *The Invention of Prose*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gowans, Linda. 2004. "What Did Robert de Boron Really Write?" In *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P. J. C. Field*, edited by Bonnie Wheeler, 15–28. Cambridge: Brewer.

Hanning, Robert W. 1985. "Arthurian Evangelists: The Language of Truth in Thirteenth-Century French Prose Romances." *Philological Quarterly* 64 (3): 347–365.

Hult, David F. 2008. "Poetry and the Translation of Knowledge in Jean de Meun." In *Poetry, Knowledge and Community in Late Medieval France*, edited by Rebecca Dixon and Finn E. Sinclair, 19–41. Cambridge: Brewer.

Just, Daniel. 2007. "Against the Novel — Meaning and History in Roland Barthes's *Le degré zero de l'écriture*." *New Literary History* 38 (2): 389–403. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2007.0031 .

Kenny, Neil. 2015. *Death and Tenses: Posthumous Presence in Early Modern France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198754039.003.0002 .

La Queste del Saint Graal, edited by Albert Pauphilet. 1923. Paris: Champion.

McCracken, Peggy. 1998. "Mothers in the Grail Quest: Desire, Pleasure, and Conception." *Arthuriana* 8 (1): 35–48. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27869312 .

Medfrench. 2007. Edited by Katherine Fenton, Alan Hindley, and Brian J. Levy. http://medfrench.leeds.ac.uk/ .

MFLCOF: Medieval Francophone Literary Culture Outside France. 2014. www.medievalfrancophone.ac.uk .

Milland-Bove, Bénédicte. 1998. "'Nous chantons chansons diverses et si tirom diverses cordes': l'esthétique de la dissonance dans le *Tristan en prose*." *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 5: 69–86. https://doi.org/10.4000/crm.1402 .

Morreale, Laura K., and Nicholas L. Paul, eds. 2018. *The French of Outremer: Communities and Communications in the Crusading Mediterranean*. New York: Fordham University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt201mpfg .

Mortensen, Lars Boje. 2017. "The Sudden Success of Prose—A Comparative View of Greek, Latin, Old French and Old Norse." *Medieval Worlds* 5: 3–45. https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no5_2017s3 .

Regalado, Nancy Freeman. 1986. "*Effet de réel, Effet du réel*: Representation and Reference in Villon's *Testament*." *Yale French Studies* 70: 63–77. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2929849 .

Robert de Boron. 1995. *Joseph d'Arimathie: A Critical Edition of the Verse and Prose versions*, edited by Richard O'Gorman. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.

Rossignol, Rosalyn. 1995. "The Holiest Vessel: Maternal Aspects of the Grail." *Arthuriana* 5 (1): 52–61. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27869094 .

Schmitt, Jean-Claude, 2016. *Les rythmes au Moyen Âge*. Paris: Gallimard.

Spiegel, Gabrielle M. 1993. *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Trachsler, Richard. 2000. *Merlin l'enchanteur: Étude sur le « Merlin » de Robert de Boron*. Paris: Sedes.

Tunberg, Terence O. 1996. "Prose Styles and *Cursus*." In *Medieval Latin: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide*, edited by F. A. C. Mantello and A. G. Rigg, 111–21. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

TVOF: The Values of French. https://tvof.ac.uk/ .

Tyerman, Christopher. 2007. *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Kindle.

Woledge, Brian, and H. P. Clive. 1964. *Répertoire des plus anciens textes en prose française: depuis 842 jusqu'aux premières années du XIIIe siècle*. Geneva: Droz.