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H-France Review Vol. 18 (May 2018), No. 108

Christophe Imperiali, *Perceval en question: Éloge de la curiosité*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 279 pp. Bibliography and index. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3577-5.

Review by Matthieu Boyd, Fairleigh Dickinson University.

*Perceval en question* is a study of the Perceval story and its modern reception. The book derives from a distinguished 2008 dissertation, *En quête de Perceval: étude sur un mythe littéraire*, that is available for free online.[1] The material has been pruned and repackaged, and uses some publications, including primary texts, that have come out in the interim, notably in the case of Yves Bonnefoy.[2] A companion book with the same title as the dissertation, which traces the development of the Perceval story in a more linear and systematic way, is said to be forthcoming from publisher Champion.

*Perceval en question* is in the series “Études de littérature des XX<sup>e</sup> et XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles,” and thus is not presented as a book for medievalists. However, it engages seriously with medieval content. Perceval’s story overlaps with the story of the Grail, but Imperiali keeps the focus tight on Perceval, his quest, and his relations.

This study seems to be unprecedented in its scope. The topic of “Perceval in Modern French Literature” is treated only briefly *Perceval: A Casebook*, edited by Arthur Groos and Norris J. Lacy,[3] and though the point that Perceval’s modern reception was “inspired more often by Wagnerian opera than by medieval literary sources” [4] is somewhat borne out by Imperiali, the nuanced and thematically well-ordered presentation of *Perceval en question* is hard to summarize so simply.

The first part of the book (“Perceval face à l’autre: structures relationnelles”) addresses Perceval as myth and highlights his interactions with family. It starts with versions of the story that provided modern authors with their source material: Chrétien de Troyes’s *Conte du graal* (with a glance at the Welsh *Peredur*), the medieval French continuations to Chrétien, and Wagner’s *Parsifal*.

Imperiali uses Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Guy Gouttebroze, and others to examine the Perceval of these texts in relation to Oedipus (and also, in passing, Orestes). Lévi-Strauss considered Perceval an inversion of Oedipus, noting various parallels (p. 15). For example, the Sphinx confronts Oedipus with a question that lacks an answer (which Oedipus gives); the Grail procession confronts Perceval with an answer that lacks a question (which Perceval fails to ask). The consequence of Oedipus’s answer is the summer-like corruption of a teeming plague;

the consequence of Perceval's silence is the wintry purity of a blighted land. In marrying answer to question, Oedipus achieves an unlikely rapprochement that is mirrored by his own incestuous marriage; Perceval, by keeping silent, arguably transcends his undue attachment to his mother (and so, Gouttebroze would argue, the whole Oedipal framework). Imperiali investigates Perceval's family relationships according to the medieval texts: his culpability in his mother's death; his relationship to the lineage of the Fisher King; his meeting with his female cousin. He concludes that the importance of family relationships is integral to the Perceval story from the beginning, especially because it involves a quest for self-definition that takes place in opposition to parental figures. Just as Oedipus unknowingly kills his father in returning home to Thebes, Perceval unknowingly causes his mother to die of grief when he leaves their secluded life together, and this lapse comes back to haunt him (when he discovers his identity as *Perceval li Gallois*, it converts almost instantly into *Perceval li cheitif*, "Perceval the wretched"). It seems that while Oedipus's sense of himself is at first insufficiently particular (he doesn't know the details of who he is or what distinguishes him from other men), Perceval's is too dependent: he lets the characters he meets define his role.

Imperiali takes Gerhart Hauptmann's *Parsifal* and several works by Julien Gracq as examples of how Perceval's family relationships are explored through retelling. The idea of the "incurable wound," no longer confined to the Fisher King, arises repeatedly. In Hauptmann, there seems to be a more pronounced Oedipal aspect that Imperiali also sees from time to time in Gracq. Gracq, in *Au Château d'Argol, Un beau ténébreux, Le Roi Pêcheur*, and *Le Rivage des Syrtes*, engages again and again with the Perceval story, which he explicitly says he is getting from Wagner. This makes him conceive the essence of the story as a relationship triangle where the young and inexperienced Perceval character interacts with equivalents of Wagner's Grail King Amfortas (a wounded older man) and the composite female character Kundry (Loathly Lady, seductress, Wandering Jew, and Sleeping Beauty, who is first repulsed and then redeemed by Perceval). Imperiali describes these three roles in Gracq's recurring triangle as "jeune homme aspirant à la transgression / vieil homme y ayant aspiré, mais incarnant à présent le renoncement / femme séductrice favorisant les énergies transgressives" (p. 98), and notes that when the older man and the woman take on a parental role, there is overlap with the Oedipal triangle of "'fils' accomplissant la transgression / 'père' éliminé comme obstacle / 'mère-épouse' qui est à la fois l'objet du désir transgressif et le moyen d'un avènement, d'une naissance" (p. 98). Imperiali uses the two works that are the most obviously retellings—*Argol* and *Le Roi Pêcheur*—to draw out parallels with the other two. The result is an illuminating study of Gracq's sustained involvement with the "Percevalian triangle" and with themes of wounding, outrage, and redemption. How much the rest of Gracq's oeuvre addresses similar themes without Perceval is rightly set aside—this book is about Perceval, not Gracq—but scholars of Gracq will surely find that Imperiali has helped them.

As an aside: Imperiali notes Michel Murat's suggestion that "ARGoL" is a subversive rewriting of "GRAaL" (p. 57, note 1). He does not mention the folk etymology of *Argol* as meaning "loss" or "perdition" in Breton, and the legend linking the actual village of Argol to the drowned city of Ys (Argol was supposedly where the water stopped rising). (The actual etymology involves *koll* "hazel" as opposed to *koll* "loss, destruction.") Since *Au Château d'Argol* was completed in 1937, when Gracq began teaching in Quimper, near the real Argol, he could have known about the folk etymology; if he did, it would be entirely complementary to the character Albert's reflections on the Fall and the *felix culpa*, the fault that necessarily precedes redemption (pp. 57, 62-64).

The second part of the book (“Perceval face au texte: lecture/écriture”) discusses Perceval in terms of literary theory. It returns at first to Chrétien and other medieval authors. When Perceval tries to reattach the pieces of the broken sword—as though reconstituting a narrative—he is like a writer; when he confronts the “radical alterity” of the Grail and tries to interpret it, he is like a reader (p. 124). Imperiali discusses how the manifestation of the Grail in words was a challenge to medieval readers. The sense of the Grail as cup is “lost in translation” in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (where it is understood as a stone) and the Icelandic *Parzivals saga* (where it is mysteriously described as a *textus*; a *braull*, presumably from *graull*; and a *gangandi greiði*, the latter term rendered by Imperiali as “service ambulant” without reference to the many publications addressing this difficult term, which propose translations from “*Wegzehrnug*, nourishment or food while walking along a path” to “walking purveyor of hospitality” to “une puissance en marche”). Imperiali runs with the *textus*, a term meaning gospelbook or gradual (i.e., a hymnbook), and proceeds to Paulin Paris’s fanciful nineteenth-century theory that the Grail was in origin a Latin book of the liturgy used by Joseph of Arimathea. Authors and theorists since Paris, though largely ignorant of him, have found it compelling to represent the Grail as book or sign necessitating interpretation. This returns us to the idea of Perceval as writer/reader (the two combine like someone trying to interpret his own dream) (p. 141), and specifically as one who must construct his own identity from the linked signs with which the tale confronts him, including the iconic image of blood on the snow. Imperiali shows that actual reading by Perceval is particularly central to the *Fourth Continuation* by Gerbert de Montreuil, and he returns to Gracq to show how this element is present in his works as well.

Ultimately, the myth of Perceval is said to have two distinguishing features (pp. 195–197): it is about a search for meaning, and it is inherently unfinished. The story—unlike the tragedy of Oedipus (or Arthur, I suppose, although Arthur, as “once and future king,” is still alive or at least revivable)—does not include Perceval’s death. Chrétien’s medieval successors, except in *Perlesvaus* and the *Didot Perceval*, declined to bring his quest to a pat conclusion. Therefore, the Perceval dossier does not need to be “reopened” for authors to work with it; as source material, it is always and forever open. Any attempt to seal it with a definitive ending in no way commits other writers to follow suit. It therefore offers a broad and versatile “Percevalian poetics,” which Imperiali explores in Wagner, Proust, Bonnefoy, Handke, and Perec.

In Wagner—about whom Imperiali has published a separate book, *Wagner: l’Opéra hors de soi*[5]—Imperiali sees *Parsifal* as a “mise en abyme de la quête artistique aboutie” (p. 202) within Wagner’s framework of *Kunstreligion*, the redemption and elevation of the human spirit through artistic creation. Wagner’s *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* is discussed as being especially relevant to *Parsifal* in this respect.

Developing the insights of Pierre-Louis Rey and Brian Rogers and picking up on references to Parsifal in Proust’s correspondence as well as key episodes in the text, Imperiali shows that *À la recherche du temps perdu* can be considered a masked but deliberate rewriting of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, in which the lost time is recovered through sense-memory in what Proust himself called an “illumination à la Parsifal.”

Distinguished poet Yves Bonnefoy has not retold the Perceval story, but discussed it in theoretical terms in essays from 1959 and 2013. Having once called T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste*

*Land* “le vrai mythe de la culture moderne,” Bonnefoy now aspires to “le Graal sans sa légende,” seeking transcendence through immanence, that is, through the presence of the everyday, and sees Perceval himself in the situation of a poet challenged to make sense of the world. This is like Proust, but distinct in that Proust’s protagonist is in search of lost time and Bonnefoy is trying to seize the here and now.

In Peter Handke’s 1990 play, *Das Spiel vom Fragen oder die Reise zum sonoren Land* (translated as *Voyage au pays sonore ou l’art de la question* by Bruno Bayen and as *Voyage to the Sonorous Land or the Art of Asking* by Gita Honegger)[6], the capacity to confront questions and ultimately to ask them is therapeutic for the character Parzifal, who at first becomes enraged by questions and is prone to silence and then to floods of disjointed verbiage before calibrating to the norms of adult conversation. Imperiali sees this process as similar to working with an autistic child.

The discussion of Georges Perec focuses on the character of Percival Bartlebooth in *La Vie mode d’emploi* (translated as *Life: A User’s Manual* by David Bellos)[7] and links him to an enigmatic X marking “the death of the father” and to a concept of “the quest for its own sake” that unfolds across Perec’s entire oeuvre. The case is somewhat subtle and complex, but Imperiali seems to develop it convincingly from the existing scholarship on Perec.

Imperiali is an engaging guide. He handles medieval and modern texts and scholarship with confidence and interweaves his coverage so that thematic points emerge through and beyond the discussions of particular authors. His style is elegant and lucid. He is generous with plot summary and close reading throughout the book, and in four appendices he helpfully summarizes Chrétien’s *Conte du graal*; the medieval continuations of it; and Wagner’s *Parsifal*. (Appendix four is a chronological chart of medieval texts involving Perceval.) Where non-French readers may struggle is that Imperiali provides detailed orientations to texts, but not to authors. Anyone needing general background on Hauptmann or Gracq or even Bonnefoy will have to look elsewhere. In the age of Google, this is not a major problem.

With nothing to be said yet about the promised volume from Champion, *Perceval en question* would be a valuable book for medievalists. Paying significant attention to the medieval texts, it invites reflection on the ultimate sense and interpretive possibilities of Perceval in a way that would be especially useful for comparative study or for teaching, where one is encouraged not to miss the forest for the trees. Meanwhile, tying together so many major authors who engage productively with the Perceval story would seem to be a significant contribution to modern French and European literary studies. This book is impressive and deserves wide reading.

## NOTES

[1] Christophe Imperiali, *En quête de Perceval: étude sur un mythe littéraire*. [www.theses.fr/2008PA040248.pdf](http://www.theses.fr/2008PA040248.pdf); [www.theses.paris-sorbonne.fr/these.imperiali.pdf](http://www.theses.paris-sorbonne.fr/these/imperiali.pdf).

[2] Yves Bonnefoy, *Le Graal sans la légende* (Paris: Galilée, 2013). Bonnefoy is discussed in Imperiali on pp. 216-24.

[3] Arthur Groos and Norris J. Lacy, eds., *Perceval: A Casebook* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 27-28.

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[4] Groos and Lacy, *Perceval*, p. 27.

[5] Christophe Imperiali, *Wagner: l'Opéra hors de soi* (Geneva/Gand: Fondation Bodmer/MER Paper Kunsthalle, 2013).

[6] Peter Handke, *Voyage au pays sonore ou l'Art de la question*, trans. Bruno Bayen (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). Peter Handke, *Voyage to the Sonorous Land, Or, The Art of Asking; and, The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*, trans. Gita Honegger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[7] Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Paris: Hachette, 1978). Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, trans. David Bellos (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, 1987).

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ISSN 1553-9172