ANGLO-NORMAN LITERATURE

The language. The Norman invasion caused a split in the linguistic unity of the country: French was the language of the ruling class, jointly with Latin, the language of the Church and scholars; AngloSaxon remained confined to the mass of the people.

The two languages underwent a slow but constant change. AngloSaxon, spoken by illiterate people, lost its inflectional endings and many words were modified in form and pronunciation or replaced by equivalent French terms. The language of the Normans lost its purity and, in its turn, was influenced by Anglo-Saxon. The process was accelerated by the loss of Normandy in 1204. The Normans, cut from the continent, became more interested in the language of the conquering people. The result was that, about two centuries from the Conquest, a new language emerged, commonly known as Middle English. It retained its German characteristics, though enriched by French vocabulary. But the process of fusion was not completed until the 16th century.

POETRY

The first examples of poetry had a religious and didactic character, and as it aimed at instructing people, the suitable medium was Middle English. The most representative works are: The Poema Morale (c. 1170), or Moral Ode, a poem of 400 lines containing a solemn exhortation to repent of sin and lead a Christian life (the argument employed is that of terror in the description of the punishments to come; it reveals a break with the Anglo-Saxon tradition, and the old phraseology is replaced by a concise style); the Ormulum (or Orrmulum, late 12th century), a long poem of 20.000 lines in early Middle English, named after the Augustinian monkOrm, who composed it to explain the Gospel to people; The Prick of Conscience, written partly in Latin and partly in Middle English by Richard Rolle (c. 1300-1349), that consists in a series of meditations on life and death.

Secular poetry, though showing its indebtedness to French models, is much more original and expresses a genuine poetic inspiration. A famous poem is The Owl and the Nightingale (c. 1200) of 1794 lines in short rhyming couplets, about the debate between two birds asserting the respective merits of their singing. Different allegorical meanings can be drawn by this poem: the owl and the nightingale symbolize, respectively, asceticism and pleasure, old age and youth, gaiety and gravity, philosophy and art.

An important achievement is represented by the lyrics, short compositions expressing popular feelings such as the joy for the return of summer in The Cuckoo Song (c. 1250), and the pains of love in Western Wind and Alison.

Other works of the period are proverbs, riddles, fables and fabliaux.

The poem Brut, composed by Layamon, introduced the Arthurian myth in English literature. The Celtic legend, well known in Europe beginning from 1137 thanks to Historia Regum Britanniae by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100-1154), was translated into French by Wace (c. 1115-c. 1183), a Norman poet. The work, entitled Roman de Brut (1155), enriched with new episodes and material from other sources, about 1200, inspired Layamon. The poem, in alliterative lines, was called Brut after «Brutus», grandson of Aeneas, considered as the ancestor of a race of heroes.

For a long time English poetry had no distinctive metre. Some English poets continued to use the old Anglo-Saxon alliterative lines and others tried to imitate the variety of the French lines. A gradual change took place in the techniques of versification, and as French models captivated English poets, the rhythm obtained through the alliteration tended to be replaced by the rhyme.

PROSE

Middle English prose of the 13th century continued in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon prose, homiletic, didactic and directed toward ordinary people rather than polite society. The «Katherine Group» (c. 1200), comprising the lives of three saints, is typical.

The most important work in religious prose is considered the Ancrere Riwe (c. 1230), also known as Ancrene Wisse, or Rule for Anchoresses, a treatise written by a chaplain to instruct three women who had devoted themselves to a solitary and ascetic life. This sophisticated manual, of great charm and accomplished style, explains the different aspects of religious rule and devotional conduct. The book was very popular and it greatly influenced the prose of the 13th and 14th century.

The fact that there was no French prose tradition was very important to the preservation of the English prose tradition.