

Book Review

Oral Traditions

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The Parallel Rhythmic Recitatives of the Rabbis of Israel:

Genre of the Maxim

by Marcel Jousse

Prefaced and translated by Edgard Sienaert and Joan Conolly

Cape Town and Durban: Mantis Publishing

ISBN: 0-620-28290-8, 258 pages

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The Parallel Rhythmic Recitatives of the Rabbis of Israel: Genre of the Maxim by Marcel Jousse, prefaced and translated by Edgard Sienaert and Joan Conolly, is an exceptionally important book, translated from the original French text which is very rare, and consequently little known.

Jousse's work has been brought back into the forefront of studies of oral traditions by Sienaert and Conolly with their earlier translation of *The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm* (2000); and this new volume both complements that landmark publication and moves us into a new appreciation of the significance of Jousse's radically simply and remarkably sophisticated theory of Oral Style. It was based on the physical realities of voice and movement rather than the abstract dynamics of culture and cognition; and countering the widely accepted claim that writing and printing provided human beings with a way of recording and studying texts, it demonstrated the origins of these practices in the ancient—and as Jousse constantly emphasized, the modern—rhythmic and gestural technologies of memorization.

Early in the twentieth century, when much that is now taken for granted in studies of language and discourse was being formulated, Jousse was a major presence; and his work—coinciding as it did with that of Rudolph Steiner, with which it was in sympathy—provoked lively controversy. But then, in the way of the world, Jousse slipped out of hearing, and out of print. This book, which complements *The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm* and takes us onto new territory, remedies that.

The Parallel Rhythmic Recitatives of the Rabbis of Israel: Genre of the Maxim is a collection of fifty Aramaic proverbs which Jousse translated into French. Jousse explains the mnemonic effect of rhythm and balance in their structure, and outlines a theory of oral expression that combines (as few others do) the physical and the psychological, as well as the secular and the sacred dynamics of recitation.

It will be of interest to a wide range of readers, across religious and cultural and linguistic traditions; and it is a welcome reminder of what important work there is to be done by staying close to the actual conditions of textual production and reproduction.

Edgard Sienaert and Joan Conolly have added a valuable preface which locates Jousse in the context of a number of current issues in the study of oral and written traditions. I regularly use *The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm* in the courses I teach in oral and written traditions at the University of Toronto and the University of Michigan; and I look forward to adding this new study. Response to Jousse by the graduate students I teach, typically from around the world and representing a wide array of cultural and religious heritages, is invariably enthusiastic; and recently several Ph.D. students have taken up his work in their dissertations.

This is very significant scholarship that Edgard Sienaert and Joan Conolly are engaged in, and I both applaud and encourage it.

