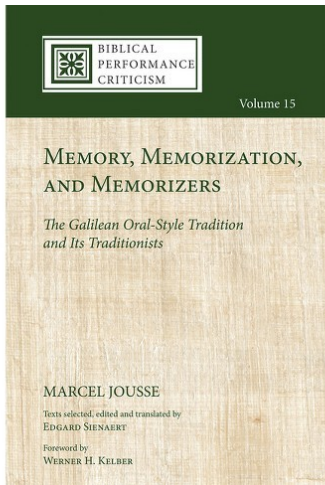


Edgard Sienaert (1940-2024)

A Remembrance by Werner Kelber

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Edgard Sienaert, the distinguished translator of the works of Marcel Jousse, passed away on January 2 of this year. With Edgar's death humanistic scholarship has lost one of its greatest experts in oral tradition, and I have lost a close friend.

Our collegial relationship dates back many years, and it further deepened into friendship on my visit to the University of the Free State in September 2018.

For Edgard and me this was an occasion for intense face-to-face conversations, and for discussions with both undergraduate students and faculty. It was also an occasion for Edgard's wife Moliehi to get to know my adopted daughter Eva. The African and the African-American lady

immediately bonded and became good friends as well. As the four of us were having a wonderful time together, I came to experience Edgard's exquisite sense of humor.

In November 2019 I invited Edgard and Moliehi to the United States to attend the Society of Biblical Literature Meeting in San Diego, CA. A session of « Bible in Ancient and Modern Media » devoted to the legacy of Jousse afforded an opportunity for Edgard to present his own reading of the French anthropologist to an American audience.

Edgar was an exceptionally selfless academic who devoted four decades (!) of his career to the translation of another colleague's work.

Born in West Flanders, his mother tongue was Flemish, a version of Dutch spoken in western Belgium. He received his French academic education in Belgium, obtaining degrees in medieval Romance languages and literature.

After he accepted an appointment at the University of Natal (now Kwa-Zulu-Natal), he became acquainted with living oral traditions in the surrounding Zulu area, and he recognized that many of the linguistic idiosyncrasies he had encountered in medieval French literature found an explanation in oral epistemology.

Researching all resources on oral tradition accessible to him, he came across the work of Marcel Jousse. Til the end of his life, Edgard insisted that Jousse was one of very few western academics who genuinely understood what oral style tradition and oral culture was about. More than once he expressed regrets to me that Jousse was not only neglected by humanists and social scientists, but was never included alongside established luminaries such as Milman Parry, Albert Lord, Walter Ong, and others.

In 1985 Edgard organized the first conference on oral tradition at the University of Natal, and to the best of his recollection Albert Lord was the invited keynote speaker.

Beginning in 1988 he was running full time the Center for Oral Studies at his University, supervising an orality-literacy program. "In twelve years, there were some fifty-odd master students

and four or five PhD's. Seminars were conducted on Saturdays as all these students were working during the week.”

In the same year he commenced his work as translator when, as he wrote, "I realized that Jousse's book on the oral style has not been translated into English." Edgar was referring to Jousse's magnum opus: *Le Style oral rythmique et mnémotechnique chez les verbo-moteurs* (1925). The English translation, accomplished together with Richard Whitaker, appeared in 1990 under the title *The Oral Style*. The book is for the most part made up of citations of approximately 176 authors. They testify to the existence of widespread knowledge of and profound sensibilities to oral tradition among individual scholars in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. Upon its translation into English, John Miles Foley described *The Oral Style* as "a cornerstone of modern studies of oral tradition," and Sienaert himself introduced the translation by calling it "a work of fundamental importance in the field of orality-literacy studies."

About the culture of oral style Jousse put it in a 1956 lecture at the Sorbonne that way: "Cela demande toute une vie de travail et de recherche." Edgar himself wrote about the work of Jousse: "Jousse is an elephant and can only be eaten bit by bit." All this is a way of saying that Edgar recognized that Jousse, far from projecting western literary values, had accomplished what few in modernity had ever achieved: the recovery of the authentic phonology, morphology, and psycholinguistics of oral culture. One should add that Jousse's book represents a highly distinctive exposé of oral style and diction which in all likelihood was difficult to translate and is certainly difficult to read. Edgar accomplished what appeared beyond the reach of most: to render into English Jousse's very special nomenclature, mode of thinking, and linguistic style.

Following the translation of *Le Style oral* Edgar embarked upon a full-fledged career of translating and editing Jousse's lectures, essays, and stenographic materials, and writing extensively about Jousse's work and thought.

Edgard showed high interest in the 2022 volume *The Forgotten Compass: Marcel Jousse and the Exploration of the Oral World*, coedited by Bruce Chilton and myself. For this volume he not only edited two lectures by Jousse, but he also contributed his own essay on Jousse's concept of mimism. Apart from Edgar's own writings, the book is the only major introduction and application in English of the work of Jousse.

I want to take this opportunity and express my deep-felt gratitude to K.C. Hanson, Editor-in-Chief of Wipf and Stock Publishers, for facilitating a publication forum for Edgar's translations of Jousse's works. In addition to *The Forgotten*

Compass I am thinking of the publication of Jousse's monumental work, edited and translated by Edgar, *Memory, Memorization, and Memorizer: The Galilean Oral-Style Tradition and Its Traditionists* (2018). This is also the place to thank David Rhoads and Kelly Iverson for accepting both volumes in the Biblical Performance Criticism series. Last not least, I am deeply grateful for the publication of his *In Search of Coherence: Introducing Marcel Jousse's Anthropology of Mimism* (Pickwick Publications, 2016).

