

# The Oxford *Roland* as an Ahistorical Document: A Tale of Ghosts or a Ghost of a Tale?

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The 'Oxford *Roland*' is the name given to Digby MS 23 in the Bodleian Library.<sup>1</sup> It is an Anglo-Norman text, in 298 assonanced *laissez* or stanzas of irregular length. Each verse comprises a pair of hemistiches or rhythmic *cursus*, the first two-stressed, the second three-stressed, the syllable count of which is again irregular. Other later redactions of the *Roland* tradition have survived, in Anglo-Norman, Old French, and various other languages. We shall return to these later, but for the moment we shall concentrate on the earliest extant version.

## Perspective

In an article published in 1990, Gabrielle M. Spiegel states that it is now almost a commonplace for historians to recognise the impossibility of retrieving historical 'facts' from Mediaeval literary texts.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis for the historian as for the literary specialist, she argues, needs to shift towards a more anthropological position, whereby an evaluation may be made of the role of textual objects within a broader socio-cultural framework.<sup>3</sup> The present paper responds to this perceived need.

The particular perspective in which we shall approach the period is that of a literary analyst investigating the creative imagination as it operates in manuscript texts. This paper is therefore situated within the tradition of literary studies devoted to investigating the anatomy of the imaginative processes at work in

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1 For a description of the manuscript, see Charles Samaran and Alexandre de Laborde, *'La Chanson de Roland': reproduction phototypique du manuscrit Digby 23 de la Bodleian Library d'Oxford* (Paris, 1933), pp. 7-18.

2 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', in *Speculum*, 65, *The New Philology* (1990), pp. 59-86: p. 59.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

moulding these texts individually and collectively, such analyses relying on a constant back and forth reading of their literal, narrative, and symbolic material. Furthermore, since all work on the Middle Ages is an essentially anthropological exercise, involving as it does an attempt to reach an understanding of a culture different from our own, it will be suggested that such a goal can only be attained by examining as wide a range of contemporary aesthetic phenomena as possible. The arena of investigation will therefore not be restricted to epic texts, nor even to narrative ones: rather it will include within its ambit manuscript literature in general (including biblical commentaries and scientific works on contemporary philosophy, arts, and sciences), as well as extant manifestations of the visual, architectural, and liturgical arts of the period.

In what follows, I shall attempt to anchor such a study in an appreciation of the literal and narrative structure of the Oxford *Roland*: that is, in terms of contemporary literary theory as revealed through the tenets of scriptural exegesis (including but not restricted to biblical commentaries), of the *sensus literalis* and the *sensus historialis* of the text.<sup>4</sup> The preeminence of the 'literal' meaning in expounding upon Mediaeval texts is demonstrated in the following passage, which comes from the first book of the *Exegetica* (attributed to the authority and authorship of Hugh of St Victor).<sup>5</sup> In this passage, it is stated that an understanding of the historical-narrative, the allegorical, and the mystical-symbolic levels of meaning in any given text depends entirely on an accurate appraisal of the literal construction of the text (the *littera*) itself:

Cum igitur mystica intelligentia non nisi ex iis quae primo loco littera proponit colligatur, miror qua fronte quidam allegoriarum se doctores jactitant, qui ipsam adhuc primam litterae significationem ignorant. Nos, inquirunt, scripturam legimus, sed non legimus litteram. Non curamus de littera; sed allegoriam docemus. Quomodo ergo scripturam legitis, et litteram non legitis? Si enim littera tollitur,

4 See the *Didascalicon*, a pedagogic text tracing the student's path to a knowledge of philosophy and theology through the arts and sciences, attributed to Hugh of St Victor, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (hereafter *PL*) CLXXVI, VI, iii, p. 801A:

Si tamen hujus vocabuli significatione largius utimur, nullum est inconveniens, ut scilicet 'historiam' esse dicamus, non tantum rerum gestarum narrationem; sed illam primam significationem cujuslibet narrationis, quae secundum proprietatem verborum exprimitur.

In his *Didascalicon* of Hugh of St Victor: *A Medieval Guide to the Arts* (New York & London, 1961, p. 37), Jerome Taylor translates this passage as follows:

But if we take the meaning of the word more broadly, it is not unfitting that we call by the name 'history' not only the recounting of actual deeds but also the first meaning of any narrative which uses words according to their proper nature.

Cf. the following passage, included in the *Exegetica in scripturam sanctam*, again attributed to Hugh (in *PL* CLXXV, I, iii, pp. 11D-12A):

Prima expositio est historica, in qua consideratur prima verborum significatio ad res ipsas de quibus agitur.

5 *Exegetica* I, *PL* CLXXV, v, p. 13B and D: 'Quod sit necessaria interpretatio litteralis et historica', in *PL* CLXXV, p. 13B and D (emphases added). In my translation I have treated the term *scriptura* as a common noun on its three occurrences in the passage, since the context indicates that the reflections are not restricted to biblical texts, but apply to reading and writing in general.

scriptura quid est? Nos, inquiunt, litteram legimus, sed non secundum litteram. Allegoriam enim legimus, et exponimus litteram non secundum litteram, sed secundum allegoriam. Quid ergo est litteram exponere, nisi id quod significat littera demonstrare? Sed littera, inquiunt, aliud significat secundum historiam, aliud secundum allegoriam ..... Noli itaque de intelligentia scripturarum gloriari, quandiu litteram ignoras. Litteram autem ignorare est ignorare quid littera significet, et quid significetur a littera.

[Since therefore the mystical meaning of a text cannot be determined except by examining what the letter of the text in the first instance puts forward, I am astonished at the cheek with which some people boast that they teach allegorical interpretation, although they are not aware of the first meaning of the letter itself. 'We teach literature (*scripturam*),' they say, 'but without reading the letter. The letter does not interest us; but we teach allegorical interpretation.' 'How then,' [I ask], 'can you read literature if you don't read it according to its literal meaning? For if the letter is taken away, what is the written word?' 'We teach letters,' they say, 'and we expose the letter, not according to its literal interpretation but according to allegory.' 'What then does exposing the letter mean, unless it means demonstrating what the letter signifies?' 'But,' they say, 'the letter means one thing according to an historical interpretation, and another thing according to allegory ....' So, don't boast about understanding the written word as long as you don't know what the *letter* means. For being ignorant of the letter means being ignorant both of what the letter signifies, and of what is signified by the letter.]

This passage arms the reader with methodological hints relating to the primary importance of the letter in analysing any contemporary text. A further methodological pointer appropriate to our purpose is provided by the strangely reprehensible 'characters' we meet here: although we are perfectly used to encountering false lovers, false poets, false story-tellers, false soldiers, false Christians and so on in narrative texts, acting as foils offsetting the more excellent representatives of the arts in question, we would perhaps be less prepared for their counterparts in 'serious' texts on literary and scriptural interpretation to be presented in exactly the same terms. However, recognising in this description of 'false exegetes' the use of a rhetorical device common to all varieties of mediaeval texts<sup>6</sup> leads us to identify these nebulous characters, first and foremost, as narrative *types*: their presence in the text, far from being due to biographical accident, depends entirely on the dictates of established literary convention.

In line then with the advice given by the exegetical tradition in the above passage, it is proposed in this paper to build towards an anthropological interpretation of manuscripted texts through an examination of the literal construction of the *Roland* of Digby 23, and to maintain a certain degree of circumspection with respect to the apparent verisimilitude of both the characters we encounter and the narrative events set forth in the text.

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<sup>6</sup> *Contrarii per privantiam*: see the Commentary on Psalm I, attributed to Cassiodorus, in *PL* LXX, p. 27A.



## Laisse 40

Co dist Marsilies: 'Guenes, par ueir sacez,  
 En talant ai que mult uos uoell amter.  
 De Carlemagne uos uoell oir parler.  
 Il est mult uielz si ad sun tens uset,  
 Men escient, dous cezanz anz ad passet.  
 Par tantes teres ad sun cors demend,  
 Tanz ad pris sur sun escut bueler,  
 Tanz riches reis cundit a mendistied,  
 Quant ert il mais recreanz dosteier?  
 Guenes respunt: 'Carles nest mie tels,  
 Nest hom kil ueit e comistre le set  
 [Que co] ne diet que lempereze est ber.  
 Tant nel uos sai ne preiser ne loer  
 Que plus ni ad donur e de bontet.  
 Sa grant valor kil purreit acunter?  
 De tel barnage lad *Deus* enlumnet,  
 Meilz uoelt murir que guerpir sun barnet.'

## Laisse 83

Dist Oliuer: 'Paien unt grant esforz,  
 De noz Francs ni semblet auer mult poi.  
*Cumpaign Rollant*, kar semez uostre com.  
 Sili orrat Carles si retournera lost.'  
 Respunt Rollant: 'To ferete que fols.  
 En dulce France en perdrete mun los.  
 Sempres ferrai de Durendal grant colps,  
 Sanglant en ert li branx entres qual or.  
 Felun paien mar iundrent as porz.  
 Io uos pleuis tuz sunt ingez amort.' AOI

## Laisse 41

Dist li paiens: 'Mult me puis menuellier  
 De Carlemagne, ki est canuz e uielz,  
 Men esciente dous ceanz anz ad e mieilz.  
 Par tantes teres ad sun cors traucillet,  
 Tanz colps ad pris de lances e despiet,  
 Tanz riches reis cundit amendistiet,  
 Quant ert il mais recreanz dosteier?  
 'Co niert,' dist Guenes, 'tant cum uinet sis  
 nes,  
 Nad tel uassal surz la cappe del ciel.  
 Mult par est proz sis *cumpainz* Oliuer.  
 Les .xii. pers que Carles ad tant chers  
 Funt les enguardes a .xx. mille cheualers.  
 Sours est Carles, que nuls home ne creat.'

AOI

## Laisse 84

'*Cumpainz Rollant*, lolifan car semez.  
 Sili orrat Carles ferat lost retourner.  
 Succurra nos il reis od *tut* sun barnet.'  
 Respunt Rollant: 'Ne placet Damedeu  
 Que mi parent pur mei seient blasmet  
 Ne France dulce ia cheet en uiliet.  
 Einz i ferrai de Durendal asez.  
 Ma bone espree que ai ceint al costet  
 Tut en uerrez le brant en sanglaent.  
 Felun paien mar isant assemblez.  
 Io uos pleuis tuz sunt amort luerez.' AOI

## Laisse 42

Dist li sarrazins: 'Meneille en ai grant  
 De Carlemagne ki est canuz e blancs.  
 Mien esciente plus ad de .ii. anz.  
 Par tantes teres est alet cunquertant,  
 Tanz colps ad pris de bons espiez trenchanz,  
 Tanz riches reis morz e uencuz en champ,  
 Quant ier il mais dosteier recreant?  
 'Co niert,' dist Guenes, 'tant cum uinet  
 Rollant,

Nad tel uassal dici quen orient.

Mult par est proz Oliuer sis *cumpainz*.

Li .xii. per que Carles aimet tant

Funt les enguardes a .xx. mille de Francs.

Sours est Carles, ne cre creat hume uiuant.'

AOI

## Laisse 85

'*Cumpainz Rollant*, semez uostre ollfan.  
 Sili orrat Carles ki est as porz passant  
 Le uos pleuis ia retournerunt Franc.'  
 'Ne placet Dieu,' co li respunt Rollant,  
 'Que co seit dit de nul hume uiuant  
 Ne pur paien que ia sete comant.  
 La nen aurunt reproce ni parent.  
 Quant io serai en la bataille grant  
 E io ferrai e mil colps e .vii. ceuz.  
 De Durendal uerrez lacer sanglent.  
 Francs sunt bon si ferrunt uassalment.  
 La cil deSPAigne nauerunt de mort guarant.'

### Iconographic Construction A: *Littera*

Since Albert B. Lord's recognition, in his landmark work, *The Singer of Tales*,<sup>7</sup> of the formulaic character of the *Roland* tradition, the letter of the texts constituting the tradition has in a sense been privileged over other intratextual concerns. At the same time, however, attention has been largely deflected from the materiality of the manuscript tradition and more firmly concentrated on the oral environment upon which, according to Lord, the manuscript tradition was to some extent contingent.<sup>8</sup> I would suggest, however, that interpreting the formulaic mode of construction as an irrefutable sign pointing to the primarily oral character of that tradition is based on faulty reasoning, and amounts in fact to a syllogism: for if on the one hand formulaic construction is a *sine qua non* of traditional oral poetry, and if, on the other, formulae can be identified in a particular text, it does not in any sense follow that formulaic manuscript texts must be oral.<sup>9</sup> We shall therefore limit ourselves for the moment to examining the formulaic character of the Oxford *Roland*, and defer until later further discussion of the 'orality' question.

The formulaic character of the Oxford *Roland* is perhaps most easily perceived in the 'similar' or 'parallel' *laissez* such as *laissez* 40-41-42 (ff. 10<sup>r</sup>-10<sup>v</sup>) and 83-84-85 (ff. 19<sup>v</sup>-20<sup>r</sup>), set out opposite.<sup>10</sup>

In each of these two sequences, the literal material presented in the first *laisse* has been reformulated, reorganised, and amplified in the second and third. A comparison of *laisse* (hereafter l.) 41 with l. 42 reveals certain of the techniques employed not only in *laissez similaires* but also elsewhere in the text: after the initial substitution of *sarrazins* for *paiens* in the first verse of l. 42, the first half-line of each subsequent verse is retained with very few changes, while the end-line assonance is assured, usually by substitution of a synonymic or analogical word or expression, or, as occurs in the following verses, by lifting the second and third lexical units in the verse, and modifying them in a way which allows for their transposition:

ll. 41 and 42, v. 1—substitution for the adverb *mult* of the

7 *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 202ff.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 202-7.

9 Lord's statement (*ibid.*, p. 289, n. 9) that oral and written techniques of verse composition are 'contradictory and mutually exclusive' has however been accepted by many subsequent scholars.

10 The text of the *Roland* passages quoted hereafter is based directly on the phototype reproduction published by Laborde, to which reference has already been made. F. Whitehead's edition (Blackwell's French Texts, 1968) was consulted. Where it was not possible to decipher the text from the photographic reproduction of the manuscript, elements from this edition have been included within square brackets. However, as we are principally concerned with the literal content of the manuscript, Whitehead's occasional emendations have not been retained. Elements printed in italics represent suggested developments of scribal *sigla*. Where these and other elements appear to have been added by 'the reviser', they are included as superscripts.

equivalent adjective *grant*

v. 3—substitution of the formula *plus ... de* for *e miez* (reinforced by the graphical reformulation of *dous cenz anz* as *ii-c anz*)

v. 7—inversion of *recreanz dosteier* to produce *dosteier recreanz*

v. 10—inversion of the formula *sis cumpainz Oliver* to produce *Oliver sis cumpainz*.

The same techniques are exploited in ll. 83-84-85, although here elaboration is more apparent through lexical substitution (e.g. expansion through the incorporation of developmental material) and transposition between verses.

These passages clearly draw attention away from the 'story-line' (the *lectio secundum historiam*) and focus it on their own literal construction (the *lectio secundum litteram*). The techniques identified here are however used throughout the text, with every word, every rhythmic unit, every sense unit echoing material found elsewhere in the same work. This principle of universal reformulation may best be illustrated by referring to an extended set of *laissez* (ll. 93-106, ff. 22r-25v) in which techniques used in *laissez similaires* attain virtuosic dimensions. These *laissez* are set out below:<sup>11</sup>

Laisse 93

Li nies Marsilie, il ad a num AELROTH,  
Tut premereins cheualchet deuant lost.

.....

Quant lot ROLLANT, Deus! si grant doel en  
out,  
Sun cheual brochet, laiset curre a esforz,  
Vait le ferir li quens quanque il pout.  
Lescut li freint e losberc li desclot,  
Trenchet le piz, si li briset les os,  
Tute leschine li deseueret del dos,  
Od sun espiet lanme li getet fors;  
Enpeint le ben, fait li brandir le cors,  
Pleine sa hanste del cheual labat mort,  
En dous meitez li ad briset le col;  
Ne leserat, co dit, que ni parolt:

Laisse 94

Vn duc i est, si ad num FALSARON.  
Icil er frere al rei Marsiliun.

.....

Ot le OLIUER, si n ad mult grant irur,  
Le cheual brochet des oriez esperuns,  
Vait le ferir enguise de baron,  
Lescut li freint e losberc li derumpt,  
El cors li met les pans del gunfanun,  
Pleine sa hanste labat mort des arcuns.  
Guardet a tere, ueit gesir le glutun,  
Si li ad dit par mult fiere raison:

.....

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11 In order to facilitate discussion of the characters in the next section, the names of the principal antagonists in each *laisse*, their swords, and mounts have been emphasised in the following.

Laisse 95

Vns reis i *est* si ad num CORSABLIX.  
 Barbarins *est* dun estrage pais.  
 .....  
 Ben lentendit li arcvesques TURPIN.  
 [Suz ciel] nat hume que voeillet hair.  
 Sun cheual brochet des *esperuns* dor fin,  
 Par grant uertut sil *est* alet ferir.  
 [Lescut] li freinst, losberc li descumfist,  
 [Sun] grant espriet par mi le cors li mist;  
 Empeint le ben, que mort le fait brandir,  
 Pleine sa hanste labat mort el chemin;  
 Guardet arere, ueit le glutun gesir,  
 Ne laisserat que ni parolt, co dit:

Laisse 96

ENGELERS<sup>12</sup> fiert MALPR/MIS DE BRIGAL.  
 Sis bons escuz un dener ne li ualt.  
 Tute li freint la bucle de cristal,  
 Lune meitiet li turnet cuntreual,  
 Losberc li *rump*t entresque a la charn,  
 Sun bon espriet enz el cors li enbat.  
 Li paiens chet cuntreual a un quat,  
 Lanme de lui en portet Sathanas. AOI.

Laisse 97

E sis *cumpainz* GERERS fiert IAMURAFLE,  
 Lescut li freint e losberc li desmailet,  
 Sun bon espriet li ment en la curaille,  
 Empeint le bien, *parmi* le cors li passet,  
 Que mort labat el camp pleine sa hanste.  
 Dist Oliuer: 'Gente *est* nostre bataille.'

Laisse 98

SANSUN li dux, il uait ferir IALMACUR,  
 Lescut li freinst ki *est* a flurs e ad or,  
 Li bons osbercs ne li *est* guarant prod,  
 Trenchet li le coer, le frie e le pulmun,  
 Que labat, *qui* quen peist u qui nun.  
 Dist larceuesque: 'Cist colp *est* de baron.'

Laisse 99

E ANSEIS laiset le cheual curre,  
 Si uait ferir TURGIS DE TURTELEUSE,  
 Lescut li freint desuz loree bucle,  
 De sun osberc li *derumpit* les dubles,  
 Del bon espriet el cors li met la mure,  
 Empeinst le ben, tut le fer li mist ultre,  
 Pleine sa hanste el camp mort le tresturnet.  
 Co dist Rollant: 'Cist colp *est* de produme.'

Laisse 100

Et ENGELERS li guascuinz DE BURDELE  
 Sun cheual *brochet*, si li laschet la resne,  
 Si uait ferir ESCREMIZ DE UALTERNE,  
 Lescut del col li freint e escantelet,  
 De sun osberc li *rumpit* lauentaile,  
 Sil fiert el piz entre les dous furceles.  
 Pleine sa hanste labat mort de la sele.  
 Apres li dist: 'Turnet estes a *perdre*.' AOI.

Laisse 101

E GUALTER fiet un paien ESTORGANS  
 Sur sun escut en la pene deuant,  
 Que tut li trenchet le uermeil e le blanc;  
 De sun osberc li ad *rumpit* les pans,  
 El cors li met sun bon espriet trechant,  
 Que mort labat de sun cheual curant;  
 Apres li dist: 'Ia ni auez guarant.'

Laisse 102

E BERENGER, il fiert ASTRAMARIZ,  
 Lescut li freinst, losberc li descumfist,  
 Sun fort escut parmi le cors li mist,  
 Que mort labat entre mil Sarrazins.  
 Des ·xii· pers li ·x· en sunt ocis,  
 Ne mes que dous nen i ad remes uifs,  
 Co *est* CHERNUBLES e li quens MARGARIZ.

12 The reading *Engelers* in the manuscript has been changed in Whitehead's edition to *Gerins*.



Laisse 104

La bataille *est* merueilleuse *e* cum[une];  
 Li quens ROLLANT mie ne sasour[et],  
 Fiert del espiet, tant cume hanste [li duret],  
 A ·xv· cols lad fraite *e* perdue,  
 Trait DURENDAL, sa bone espee [nue],  
 Sun cheual brochet si uait ferir  
 [CHERNUBLE],  
 Lelme li freint u li [carbuncle luisent],  
 Trenchet le cors *e* la [cheueleure],  
 Si li [trenchat] les oilz *e* la faiture,  
 Le blanc osberc dunt la maile *est* [menue],  
 E tut le cors tres quen la [furcheuure].  
 [E]nz en la sele ki *est* a or batue,  
 [E]l cheual *est* lespee aresteue;  
 Trenchet leschine hunc ni out [quis iointure],  
 Tut abat mort el pred sur lerbe drue;  
 Apres li dist: 'Culuert, mar i moustes  
 ....'

Laisse 103

MARGARIZ *est* mult uailant cheualers  
 E bels *e* forz *e* isnels *e* legers;  
 Le cheual brochet, uait ferir OLIUER,  
 Lescut li freint suz la bucle dor mer,  
 [Lez] le costet li conduist sun espiet.  
 Deus le guarit quell cors nel ad tuchet.  
 La hanste fruisset, mie nen abatiet,  
 .....

Laisse 105

Li quens ROLLANT parmi le *champ*  
 cheualchet,  
 [Tient] DURENDAL ki ben trenchet *e* taillet,  
 Des SARRAZINS lur fait mult grant [damage].  
 Ki lui ueist [lun] geter mort sul altre,  
 Li sanc tuz clers gesir par cele [place].  
 Sanglant en ad *e* losberc *e* brace,  
 [Sun bon] cheual le col *e* lespalles.  
 E OLIUER de ferir ne se targ[et];  
 Li ·XII· PER nen deiuent auer blasme.  
 E LI FRANCEIS i fierent *e* si caplent,<sup>13</sup>  
 Moerent PAIEN *e* alquanz en [i pasment].  
 Dist larcuesque: 'Ben ait nostre barnage.'  
 'Munioie' escriet, co *est* lenseigne Carle. AOI.

Laisse 106

E OLIUER cheualchet par lestor,  
 Sa hanste *est* fait, nen ad *que* un truncun,  
 E uait ferrir un paien MALUN,  
 Lescut li freint ki *est* ad or *e* a flur,  
 Fors de la teste li met les oilz [ansdous];  
 [E la] ceruele li chet as piez [desuz].  
 Mort le tresturnet od tut ·vii·c· des lur,  
 Pois ad ocis TURGIS *e* ESTURGUZ;  
 [La] hanste briset *e* esclictet iosquas poinz.  
 Co dist Rollant: 'Cumpainz, *que* faites uos?'  
 .....

Laisse 107

Danz OLIUER trait ad sa bone espee,  
 ....  
 Fiert un paien IUSTIN DE UALFERREE,  
 Tute la teste li ad par mi seuree,  
 Trenchet le cors *e* bronie safree,  
 [La] bone sele ki a or *est* gemmee,  
 E al ceual *e* leschine trenchee;  
 Tut abat mort deuant loi en la pree.  
 Co dist Rollant: 'Uos receifio, frere.  
 Por itels colps nos eimet li emperere.'  
 De tutes parz *est* 'Munioe' escriee. AOI.

Laisse 108

Li quis GERINS set el ceual SOREL  
 E sis cumpainz GERERS en PASSE CERF;  
 Laschent lor reisnes, brochent amdui a ait  
 E uunt ferir un paien TIMOZEL,  
 Lun en lescut *e* li altre en losberc;  
 Lur dous espiez enz el cors li unt fait,  
 Mort le tresturnet tres enmi un guaret.  
 Nel oi dire ne io mie nel sai  
 Liquels dels dous en fut li plus isnels.  
 ESPUERES (icil fut FILZ BURDEL),  
 .....<sup>14</sup>  
 E LARCEUESQUE lor ocist SIGLOREL,  
 Lencateur ki ia fut en enfer  
 Par artimal li cundoist Iupiter.  
 Co dist Turpin: 'Icist uos<sup>15</sup> ert forsfait.'  
 Respunt Rollant: 'Uencut *est* le culuert.  
 Oliuer frere, itels colps me sunt bel.'

13 The conj. *e* is written in superscript in the manuscript.

14 Whitehead and others consider that two verses have been telescoped into one and suggest the following emendation: Esperveres, icil fu filz Burel, / Celui ocist Engelpers de Burdel.

15 Whitehead reads *nos*. However, comparison with other laisses in the set indicates that Turpin, like his

In order to stress that an understanding of the *literal* construction of these *laissez* is an essentially pre-narrative exercise, no translation has been supplied. Once the reader has identified the *way* in which the iconographic technique has been employed, there is no need to rely on a translation to follow the rhythm of the narrative at this point.

On the other hand, a reader who fails to examine this section of the *Roland secundum litteram* and who passes directly to a *lectio historica* will probably find the episode rather blood-thirsty, and condemn the literal and narrative material as repetitive, ultimately boring,<sup>16</sup> to be read through in a hurry. Such a reading equates with listening to early polyphonic music, or the compositions of Buxtehude or Bach, without any understanding of counterpoint. The musical analogy is accurate as in both instances, composition and reception rely on identifying an elastic set of constitutive textual elements, which are developed through repetition, imitation, transposition, elaboration, reduction, substitution, inversion and so on. In both contexts, our understanding and our pleasure are enhanced, firstly by familiarity with the elaborative techniques being employed, and secondly, by recognition of the complementary functions played by the repetition of formulaic material and by the ongoing revitalisation of the constituent material. An understanding based on these principles is probably indispensable if one wishes to make reasoned value judgments of particular works, compare different works with each other, and arrive at an appropriate evaluation of the art—musical or literary—to which such works belong.

Once the analogy of manuscript literature with contrapuntal music is accepted, it becomes apparent that the excitement, the suspense, and ultimately the pleasure afforded by the *Roland* are no longer focussed in narrative elements such as plot and characterisation, but reside primarily in an appreciation of the architectural techniques themselves. Anticipation attaches to the way in which the 'notes' will be combined afresh in each new *laisse*, given the underlying constraints of rhythm and assonance: how often, one asks, can this material be remoulded to create each time a small cameo, distinctive, unique, yet iconographically related to all the rest? The brilliance is not then in the *historia* but in the *littera*, the manipulation of the *prima materia* itself.

Suspense at the strictly narrative level is reduced to a minimum in other ways as well. In l. 12, for instance, we meet the twelve French peers, of whom the twelfth named is Ganelon (variously written *Guenes*, *Guenelon*, *Guenelun* in the text). If we did not already suspect by his place in the order of those named that this character is to play Judas Iscariot to Charlemagne's Christ, the explicit forecast of his treason would provide the clue.

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counterparts, is addressing these words to the dead.

<sup>16</sup> Such a subjective response to the formulaic mode of construction seems to motivate Lord's statement (*op. cit.*, pp. 20-21) that 'No literary composer would tolerate the repeated use of the same passages even if there were some slight verbal changes in it'.

In fact, by the end of the very first *laisse*, we know the story's outline and conclusion: that Charlemagne's troops will vanquish the opposing forces represented at the first by Marsile (*Marsille, Marsilies, Marsiliun, Marsiliuns*), king of Sarragossa, and replace Islam with Christianity.

Such knowledge of the end depends however both on familiarity with the narrative structure of works other than the *Roland*, and on an acceptance of the need to base one's reading of each text on intertextual principles. In any number of saints' lives, we read in the first few lines that the Christian and Saracen worlds are in conflict, whatever the names of the opposing rulers, and immediately we know that a hero-saint, male or female, is to undergo intense suffering and death in order to bring about the desired unification under the Christian banner. Again, in the romances and *contes*, the same narrative structure is fore-shadowed in the *incipit* material and the same expectations ultimately fulfilled, although here the opposition between light and shadow is expressed less often in terms of the Christian-Moslem dichotomy, and the Christian king (represented by the Charlemagne figure in the *Roland*) will be replaced, as likely as not, by Arthur.

Given the minimisation of the element of suspense at the level of narrative and the concomitant displacement of emphasis from the narrative to the area of literal construction, how are we to interpret the apparent blood-thirstiness of the battle episode set out in ll. 93-108 above? The element of violence is not lost, far from it, but the insistence itself ultimately blunts its impact. It becomes ritualised through formalised reiteration, worked through in its archetypal form to the point where it is transcended, the concentration of interest on the literal level abstracting the narrative to a plane beyond that of everyday experience and expectations. In other words, in this material, violence is highlighted and directly confronted, and the insistent re-elaboration effecting its transformation allows it to be reintegrated, in a refined form, into the psyche from which it springs. Through such a process, events which might take place in the mundane world are transposed to the level of incantation, of myth, that is, to that level of experience, akin to the dream world yet accessible during modified wakefulness, where distinctions are blurred and the receptor's imagination, at once directed along familiar paths and liberated from precise constraints, is allowed to exercise to the full its refreshing and healing capacities.<sup>17</sup>

It seems from what precedes that nothing within the *Roland* story is either stable or distinctive, except perhaps the Digby text itself. However, even at this level, stability is illusory. To the instances already given, the following comments may be added.

Firstly, leaving aside the normal difficulties of deciphering a text written on

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17 It is in such terms that the function of narrative texts (*fabulae*) is presented in the *Didascalicon*, v, vii, entitled 'Quomodo legenda sit Scriptura divina ad correctionem morum' (in *PL* CLXXVI, p. 795B-D).

ill-cured parchment and exposed for part of its life to excessive light,<sup>18</sup> the *Roland* of Digby 23 is far from being a unified textual object in itself. Throughout the 72 folii, lexical units have been expurgated, sometimes replaced by overwriting apparently in a different hand (known as that of the reviser); and alterations through interlinear and marginal additions have been introduced, sometimes in one hand, sometimes in another. In fact, the published results of investigations using an ultra-violet lamp<sup>19</sup> are an almost indispensable tool in reading what we call the Oxford *Roland*. It must be noted, however, that the more material we have at our disposal, the less stable and unified the 'text' becomes.

Secondly, unlike the bulk of manuscript narrative texts which have passed into printed editions, the Oxford *Roland* has for all intents and purposes enjoyed the status of a *unicum*. Several other versions, dating from a good century or more later than this one, have been preserved, but so marked are the dissimilarities between the early text and the later ones taken as a group that it is considered perfectly respectable in this instance to regard the two as representing two virtually different manuscript traditions altogether.

In all, six Old French and Anglo-Norman versions of the *Roland* have survived besides the Oxford text.<sup>20</sup> There are also three fragments in French, and twelve versions in other languages: Old Norse, Swedish and Danish, Middle High German, Middle Welsh, Middle Dutch, Occitan, Old Spanish, Middle English, and Latin.<sup>21</sup>

Of the French versions, only one (Venice IV) is assonanced like the *Roland*, the rest being rhymed. The rhyming texts roughly follow Oxford to the Roncesvaux episode, then radical changes are introduced.<sup>22</sup> There are two notable changes, according to Duggan:

1° The episode involving Aude, which occupies only 29 verses in Oxford, extends to seven or eight hundred verses in Venice IV and the rhyming versions. The additional material includes a series of dreams telling Aude of Roland's death, and dwells at length on Aude's anguish and eventual demise. In the words of Duggan, 'Aude's suffering and death places her on a par with Charlemagne and Roland [as one] of the three main characters in the poem'.<sup>23</sup>

18 In the introduction to the photographic reproduction of the Digby MS referred to above, Laborde and Samaran draw attention to the damage then being caused the manuscript by its being displayed in a glass case in the Bodleian Library (p. 6).

19 Charles Samaran, 'Lectures sous les rayons ultra-violet: *Chanson de Roland* (manuscrit d'Oxford)', in *Romania*, 55 (1929), pp. 401-10.

20 J. J. Duggan's article, "Oral Performance, Writing and the Textual Tradition of the Medieval Epic in the Romance Languages: The Example of the *Song of Roland*", in *Parergon*, n.s. 2 (1984), pp. 74-95, is rich in information about the manuscript tradition of the *Roland*. Edited versions or photographic reproductions of the seven major francophone versions of this tale have been published by Raoul Mortier: *Les textes de la 'Chanson de Roland'*, 10 vols (Paris, 1940-1944).

21 Duggan, *ibid.*, p. 81.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 82 and ff.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

2° Guenelon's trial, which takes place in these versions at Laon rather than at Aix, is at least twice as long as in the Oxford text. In these versions, Guenelon escapes and is recaptured, whereupon a sequence of seven *laissez* is devoted to setting forth various proposals for executing him, each, in Duggan's view, more cruel than the last.

The overall pattern of variation from version to version conforms then to the process of internal imitation and destabilisation as we have seen it operating within the particularised context of the Digby version. In other words, the techniques employed within the *laissez similaires* are exploited just as rigorously in formulating new and ever unique manuscript interpretations of the *estoire*.<sup>24</sup>

OXFORD: Laisse 105, vv. 1338-50

Li quens Rollant par mi le champ chevalchet,  
Tient Durendal, ki ben trenchet e taillet,  
Des Sarrazins lur fait mult grant damage.  
Ki lui veïst l'un geter mort su l'autre,  
Li sanc tuz clers gesir par cele place!  
Sanglant en ad e l'osberc e la brace,  
Sun bon cheval le col e les espalles.  
E Oliver de ferir ne se target,  
Li .XII. per n'en deivent avoir blasme,  
E li Franceis i fierent e si caplent.  
Moerent paien e alquanz en i pasment.  
Dist l'arcevesque: 'Ben ait nostre barnage!'  
'Munjoie!' escriet, ço est l'enseigne Carle.

VENICE IV: Laisse 101, vv. 1256-67

Li cont Rollant parmé la camp çivalçe,  
Tent Durindarda, che ben trença et ben taile,  
De qui de Spagna el fa si gran dalmaçe.  
Chi l'un veest çeter mort sor l'autre,  
Lo sang tut cler en saie for et desglace!  
Sanglent n'est son uberg et son elme,  
Son bon cival el col et l'espalle.  
E Oliver del ferir no se tarde,  
Li doç ber no de ma aver blasme.  
Morunt pain alquant si s'en spasme.  
Dist l'arcevesque: 'Nostre çent se salve!  
Or plaxesse a Deo, de tel n'aves asa Carle!'

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24 The following *laissez* will be transcribed exactly as they appear in Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, pp. 204-5.

CHÂTEAURoux: Laisse 144, vv. 2277-92  
 Rollanz fu proz et de mult fier coraje;  
 Tint Durendart par mot ruste bataille;  
 De Saraçins a fait mot grant doumage;  
 Cel jor mostra si ben son vasalage.  
 Qi l'atendit ne fist mie qe saje:  
 La teste i pert, ne demande autre gaje;  
 Sanc et cervelle fait voler en l'erbaje,  
 Tot a son cors sanglant et son visage.  
 Et Oliver de ferir ne se targe;  
 Li .XII. per, qi sunt de haut parage,  
 Ferent et caplent desor la gent sauvage:  
 Murent paien a duel et a hontage.  
 Dist l'arcevesque: 'Nostre gent est mot sage!  
 Bien se defendent a cest estrot pasage.  
 Car pleüst Deu, qi fist oisel volage,  
 Chi fust li rois cui avons fait domage!'

CAMBRIDGE: Laisse 39, vv. 577-92  
 Roullant fut preux et de fier courage,  
 Tint Durandal par son riche barnage,  
 De Sarrasins y fait moult grant damage,  
 Le jour y monstre si bien son vasselage,  
 Cil qui l'atent y fait moult grant folage,  
 La teste prent, il ne quiert aultre gage,  
 Sang et cervele fait voler par l'erbage,  
 Et Oliver de ferir ne targe;  
 Li .XII. pairs qui sont de haut parage,  
 Ne ly Franceys ja n'y aront hontage!  
 Dist l'arcevesque: 'Nostre gent est mult  
 sage!  
 Fierent et chaplent sur celle gent sauvage:  
 Meurent paiens a deul et a hontage.  
 Bien se desfendent a ceul estroit passage;  
 Car pleüst Dieu, qui fist oysel sauvage,  
 Que fust cy ly rois a qui avon fait homage!'

Whatever the scale of the imitation—whether the unit under consideration is a particular graphy, verse, rhythmic measure, lexical pattern or other sense unit, a laisse, an episode, or an entire text—the iconographic process equating with the ongoing revitalisation of existing material is always respected.

What is more, the formulaic or iconographic process is not restricted, any more than the narrative patterns are, to any one generically related set of texts. The process is carried on, through the reutilisation of rhythmic, lexical, and narrative formulae, across boundaries apparently separating the so-called *chansons de geste* from saints' lives, romances, short versified tales, and so on. Distinctiveness attaches only to the specific way in which the common bank of constitutive material is utilised in any given material context.<sup>25</sup>

### Iconographic Construction B: *Dramatis Personae*

As we have seen, the world of the *Roland* is a bipartite one in which the struggle for unity is played out between two opposing yet identical realms: on the one hand, Christian Europe is striving to extend its influence to include the

<sup>25</sup> It is a common misconception that the romances are more stable in their manuscript transmission than the *chansons de geste*, and that they are not formulaic in the same degree. They therefore tend to remain exempt from analyses dealing with manuscript texts as manifestations of the oral poet's art. For instance, in an article published in the volume of *Parergon* mentioned earlier ('The Interaction of Oral and Written Traditions in Twelfth-Century Old French Verse Romances', in *Parergon*, n.s. 2, 1984, pp. 97-109, esp. p. 97), Ann Trindade quotes a passage from an article written by Michael Curschmann ('The Concept of the Oral Formula as an Impediment to our Understanding of Medieval Poetry', in *Medievalia et Humanistica*, VII, 1977, pp. 63-76), in which the abyss seen to lie between epic and romance traditions is precisely delineated:

In subject matter [the courtly romance] looks towards the aristocratic illiterate lay culture, but it has no oral past and depends on literacy for its existence.

Moslem countries; on the other, the Moslem world is striving to include Christian Europe under its banner.

The Christian world centred on Aix in France is presented as unified: one God, one religion, one king, one purpose. Conversion to the faith is the only alternative to death offered to the vanquished people. The Moslem world, on the other hand, is fragmented: it is centred on Sarragossa under the leadership, first of Marsilie, then—by a belated extension of perspective reflecting the segmentation of the enemy world and foreshadowing the inevitable collapse of the pagan system—to the lord of all Islam, Baligant. In opposition to the Christian God, Apollo stands alongside Mahomet and Tervagant/Termagant to form the triple focus of spirituality, this being expressed in terms of enchantment and sorcery. Again, the emphasis is shifted away from the spiritual realm to the political, as the Southern forces strive to establish control over Sarragossa and all Spain, and ultimately over France. There is never any suggestion that conversion to the Moslem system of belief, fragmented as the latter is seen to be, is offered as an alternative to death and destruction: the ultimate aim is to extend the shadow of lifelessness beyond its present boundaries, to annihilate France by making her into a desert<sup>26</sup> and by transforming her leader, Charlemagne, into an impotent old man, no longer willing or able to engage in war.

As the desert world of Islam represents the shadow counterpoised to the urge for self-definition motivating the Christian world, it is natural that the characters surrounding Charlemagne, acting as his proxies and splitting off his organic personality into its various complementary components, should find themselves reflected by counterparts or twins in the enemy camp. The most notable examples of this are provided by the balancing of individuals within the following sets:

1° Charlemagne himself vs the Marsilie/Baligant pair;

2° the companions, Roland and Oliver, vs Marsilie's proxies, his nephew, Aelroth, and his brother, Falsaron;

3° the twelve French peers vs the twelve Spanish peers assembled to fight at Roncesvaux;

4° the Roland-Oliver partnership vs the companions Basilie and Basant, earlier sent into enemy territory and summarily executed by the Spaniards; on

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26 Like Chernuble's kingdom, described in l. 78:  
Del altre part est Chernubles de Munigre,  
Josqua la tere si cheuelli balient,  
Greignor fais portet par giu quant il seneuisset  
Que 'iiii' mulez ne funt quant il sumeient.  
Icele tere, co dit, d'uz il esteit,  
Soleill ni luist ne blet ni poet pas creistre,  
Pluie ni chet, rusee ni adeiset,  
Piere ni ad que tute ne seit neire.  
Dient alquanz que diables i meignent.  
Ce dist Chernubles: '...  
Franceis murrunt e France en ert deserte.'

another level, the very names Basilie and Basant reflect those of Marsilie and Baligant;

5° the messenger, Guenelon, the traitor of the cunning tongue, vs his eloquent counterpart, the ambassador Blancandrins, on the one hand, and on the other, the traitor Valdabrun;

6° Aude, Roland's fiancée and Oliver's sister, who dies at the news of Roland's death, vs Bramimunde, Marsilie's wife, who 'dies' to her old identity (Bramimunde's 'death' is defined in terms of her political and religious affiliations and even her name: on her arrival at Aix, her political and religious acquiescence is expressed in her acceptance of baptism and of the Christian name, Juliane, which has been chosen for her);

7° the Archbishop, Turpin, who offers heaven as a reward to those who are about to die in the battle, vs the enchantor, Siglorel, who is said to have used the arts of black magic to induce Jupiter to lead him to hell.

Distinctiveness is also reduced in the matching of similar names, such as Gerers and Gerin; Ive/Ivon and Ivoire/Yvoerie (note the suggested additional associations with the *olifant* as Roland's horn and as the material from which Marsilie's footstool is made); Marsilie's wife, Bramimunde, and Gramimunde, the horse ridden by the Sarracen traitor, Valdabrun.

Earlier we looked briefly at the lexical material presented and persistently reworked in ll. 93-108. As we were concentrating at the time on the principle of lexical reformulation, little attention was paid to the characters around whom this lexico-narrative material was constellated. It is clear that little significance attaches, in the first instance, to the distribution of specific names within this episode, as long as the iconographic mode of reorganising given material is seen to have been respected. Let us now consider the characters named in this section, beginning in fact at l. 91. This segment of the text begins with Roland's readiness to fly into battle, and culminates in the certainty that the French troops will not survive in spite of their mighty victory. As we examine the players named in these laisses, it will once again be apparent that distinctiveness is constantly being balanced against similarity.

CHARACTERS IN LAISSES 91-109

- |    |   |       |   |
|----|---|-------|---|
| 91 | Concerns ROLAND, Charlemagne's nephew       |       |   |
| 92 | Concerns OLIVER, Roland's <i>cumpaignun</i> |       |   |
| 93 | ROLAND, Charles' nephew                     | kills | AELROTH, Marsilie's nephew and co-proxy with Falsaron   |
| 94 | OLIVER                                      | kills | FALSARON, Duke of Dathan and Abirun, <sup>27</sup> brother of Marsilie, uncle and co-proxy with Aelroth |

27 As Whitehead points out in his edition, these names are biblical: they refer, in both *Numbers* 16: 1 and 26: 9 and in *Deut.* 11: 6, to two of the sons of Eliab.



*The Epic in History*

- 95 Archbishop TURPIN kills CORSABLIX
- 96 ENGELERS<sup>28</sup> kills MALPRIMIS de Brigal
- 97 GERERS, *sis cumpainz* kills L'AMURAFLE (Clarín de Balaguez, named in ll. 5 and 72?)
- 98 SANSUN kills L'ALMAÇUR (the one from Moriane, mentioned, again after reference to *l'amurafle*, in l. 73?)
- 99 ANSEIS (named in association with Sansun, ll. 8, 162, 177) kills TURGIS de Turteluse
- 100 ENGELERS, *li guascuinz de Burdele* kills ESCREMIZ de Ualterne
- 101 GUALTER kills ESTORGANS
- 102 BERENGER kills ASTRAMARIZ
- CHERNUBLES and MARGARIZ alone of the 12 pagan peers remain alive
- 103 MARGARIZ attacks OLIVER (his arms and armour are damaged, but he is not wounded)
- 104 ROLAND (with DURENDAL) kills CHERNUBLE
- 105 ROLAND and OLIVER heaping dead on dead
- 106 OLIVER (with sword stump) kills 1<sup>o</sup> MALUN (=MALPRIMIS, already killed by Engeler, l. 96?)
- kills 2<sup>o</sup> TURGIS (= TURGIS, already killed by Anseis, l. 99?)
- kills 3<sup>o</sup> ESTURGUZ (= ESTORGANS, already killed by Gualter, l. 101?)
- 107 OLIVER (with HALTECLERE) kills JUSTIN de Ualferree
- ROLAND welcomes OLIVER, his 'brother':  
Co dist Rollant: 'Uos receis io, frere.  
Pour itels colps nos eimet li emperere.'
- 108 GERINS (on SOREL) with GERERS, *sis cumpainz* (on PASSE CERF) kill TIMOZEL
- Ambiguous reference to ESPUERES, *filz Burdel*
- Archbishop (TURPIN) kills SIGLOREL, *l'encanteur*
- All characters subsumed in ROLAND/EVIL ONE dichotomy, and ultimately in the unity of the first person singular:
- Nel oi dire ne io mie nel sai ....  
Respunt Rollant: 'Vencut est le culvert.  
Oliver frere, itels colps me sunt bel.'
- 109 I-NARRATOR's summation:
- La bataille est aduree endementres,  
Franc e paien merueilus colps i rendent,  
Fierent li un, li altre se defendent.  
Tant hanste i ad e fraite e sanglente,  
Tant gunfanun rumpu e tant enseigne,  
Tant *bon* Franceis i perdent lor iuente  
Nie reuerrunt lor meres ne lor *femmes*  
Ne cels de France ki as porz les atendent.

28 As we have already seen, Whitehead changes *Engelers* to *Gerins* here.

The first few *laissez* of the battle scene schematised above give a reassuring sense of stability as Roland, Charlemagne's nephew, and his companion, Oliver, kill their opposite numbers in Aelroth and Falsaron, Marsilie's nephew and brother. Turpin's killing of Corsablix seems equally apt, provided the latter can be identified with the Corsalis named earlier (l. 71) as a master of black magic. Sansun and Anseis have already been named as companions (l. 8), as have Gerin and Gerer (ll. 8 and 64), so it would seem natural that they should take the stage now in successive *laissez*. However, in the present list, Gerin is replaced by Engeliers (an 'error' which Whitehead rectifies in the time-honoured manner); what is more, in the *laisse* naming the twelve peers who are to protect the French rear-guard (l. 64), Anseis' companion is called Astor, not Sansun; and Engeliers, who next appears for the second time in the present line-up of peers, was not included in the earlier list at all, whereas several of the original twelve have disappeared from sight for the moment: Otes, Gerart de Rossillon, and Gaifiers.

In fact, only ten peers are named in the battle scene, and, leaving aside the ambiguous reference to Espueres, only eight members of the original list (l. 64) appear here at all (these are marked by an \* in the following): Roland\*, Oliver\*, Turpin\*, Engeliers, Gerers\*, Sansun, Anseis\*, Gualter\*, Berenger\*, and Gerins\*. What is more, when Charlemagne later arrives and bemoans the loss of his stalwarts (l. 177), he provides a new inventory, now including the names of twelve peers in addition to his nephew, Roland (*Li xii per que io aueie laiset*, v. 2410): the archbishop, Oliver, Gerins, Gerers, Otes, Berengers, Ive, Ivoire, Engeler, Sansun, Anseis, Gerard de Russillon. The new list, in which Ive and Ivoire are now included, coincides only imperfectly with the two preceding ones.

The discrepancies between these lists are elusive but far from insignificant. Unless one is prepared to recognise the principle of iconographic reconstruction in this instability, one is obliged to have recourse to such concepts as imperfect memory and error in transmission and transcription in order to explain them.

When we turn to the enemy camp, similar patterns emerge. The matching of the *amurafle* and the *almacur* in ll. 97-98 lends some confusion, as their correspondence with the *amurafle*, Clarin de Balaguez, and the *almacur* from Moriane in ll. 72-73 is not certain. The phonic similarity linking the names Escremez, Estorgans, and Astramariz (who appears elsewhere as Estramariz)<sup>29</sup> seems designed, precisely, to minimise distinctiveness.

Attention is drawn in l. 102 to the presence of twelve peers on the pagan side of whom only two remain alive. The claim as to the numbers killed can be 'verified' by reference to the previous 10 *laissez*, and the concordance of the two tallies lulls us into a false sense of security. For once Margariz has attacked Oliver and Chernuble has been killed by Roland, Margariz disappears from view

29 What is more, Estorgans and Estramariz appear as companions in l. 76, the confusion being further enhanced by the mention of an Estamarin and *sun per*, Eudropin, in l. 5.

permanently (unless he is to be seen as 'resurrected' later, in l. 143, as Marsilie's uncle, Marganices), and his place among the 'twelve' peers is taken by an astonishing array of new candidates for death: not only are these new characters surprising in their number, but their relationship with those already killed leaves one wondering once again about distinctiveness as to personages, as we shall see.

Let us first return, however, to the French side. Once Oliver has been attacked by Margariz, there is an interesting shift in the narrative as swords and mounts take on both names and a talismanic value. However, armed with the stump of his broken sword (it is only later that he takes up his sword, Halteclere), Oliver manages to kill three of the 'new' peers: Malun, Turgis, and Esturguz. As a Turgis has already been killed (l. 99) and an Estorgans despatched (l. 101), we might wonder whether Oliver is not in fact dreaming at this stage, killing anew those already dead, or whether, as suggested in the grammatical inversion present in the names Estorgans (pres. part. form, active) and Esturguz (past part. form, passive), he is 'killing' the twins or shadows of those gone before. If this is an accurate interpretation, then Malun can be presumed to be the twin of another dead peer, perhaps Malprimis or Estorgan's companion, Astramariz.

This interpretation is borne out in the remaining *laissez* of the set. In l. 107, Roland seems to be welcoming Oliver as his brother and other self to some sort of shadow world in which neither can ultimately be distinguished from the other, this lack of distinctiveness being conveyed through the notion of Charlemagne's equal love for them both. We are led to examine the action which precedes Roland's statements: Oliver, armed now with Halteclere, has just killed Justin de Ualferree, presumably in direct imitation of Roland who, three *laissez* earlier, had killed Chernuble with his sword, Durendal. This is the first time we have met Justin in this scene where, ostensibly, the only one of the pagan peers to remain alive is Margariz. Are we then to understand that Justin is in fact the double of this peer, who has recently disappeared from the scene (Justin might then be seen as a type of Bartholomew, Judas' replacement), or perhaps the shadow of Escremiz de Ualterne, killed at l. 100, to whom he is related through the similarity in their 'patronyms'? In either case, the effect is to confuse identities and dissolve distinctiveness.

In the following *laisse* too, yet another peer, Timozel, is killed by the companions Gerin and Gerer, further doubled, in the fashion of talismans or familiars, by their newly named horses. The imprecise reference to Espueres, perhaps a form of *espervier*, 'sparrow-hawk', suggests the possibility of a further coupling with Malprimis de Brigal, who, as we are told at l. 71, could run faster than any horse. Then in l. 108, Turpin, the archbishop, is finally matched with Siglorel, the enchantor who, as we learn in this *laisse*, had once used sorcery to convince Jupiter to take him to hell (whether on a visit or permanently is not altogether clear from the text). Again, Siglorel can be further twinned with the third of the pagan peers, Corsablix, the master of the evil arts whom Turpin

himself has already killed in l. 95.

The confusion of 'characters' participating in the action of these *laissez* is completed in Roland's summation at the end of l. 108: *Vencut est le culvert. / Oliver frere, itels colps me sunt bel*. Here multiplicity in the enemy camp is reduced to singularity through the use of the singular term, *le culvert*, and is immediately balanced against the unity on the French side evoked first in the final 'twinning' of Roland and Oliver (*Oliver frere*), then in the first person singular of *me sunt bel*, which in turn seems to identify the united pair with Charlemagne as an incarnation of the Christian world in microcosm.

At the level of the actors as at that of the literal construction of the text, reiterations, inversions, and reformulations of existing—i.e. known and familiar—narrative material are constantly being emphasised, the various 'characters' being continuously twinned and overlapped. In such conditions, there can be no singularity of personality, no distinguishing of persons. As the layers of familiarity and recognition are multiplied, so the various players are stylised and their roles formalised.

What is the point then of reducing distinctiveness at the level of the players? We have seen that at the level of story, attention is drawn away from verisimilitude through the displacement of suspense or anticipation to the level of *littera*. In exactly the same way, confusion of individualities concentrates attention away from the workaday world of actual or potential events which we in our own distinctive literary climate are used to seeing counterfeited in fiction. The process is directly akin to the *sublimatio* of alchemy: distinctiveness belongs to the material plane alone; in the world of dreams, the emotions, psychic activity, on the other hand, boundaries are blurred and entities are constantly forming new combinations, like the molecules of water or, even more pronouncedly, of steam.

Through the deliberate imitation and reformulation of given lexico-narrative material, the Mediaeval scribe-author ensures that the characters are ever familiar yet ever sliding just out of range of individualised acquaintance. Such is the extent of this sort of manipulation of the story-teller's *prima materia* that not even the most logically-minded, earth-bound receptor can resist the hypnotic effects of the narrator's craft. At a certain point, earlier or later, the receptor is released from the urge to draw lines of demarcation around the individual characters, and is caught up in the ebb and flow of the language itself. The characters deployed and interchanged throughout the text, like the narrative events they serve to bring about, are simply pretexts: their function is to lead the narrative forward through its highly formalised, thus familiar, meanders, without shock or divagation, to the inevitable end announced, through intertextual associations, in the very first *laisse*.

## The Aesthetic Context

Our analysis of the *Roland* has already brought us a long way from the interpretation placed on epic texts as recordings of historical 'facts'. The incantatory, even hallucinatory, quality of the lexical and narrative constructs leaves us in no doubt as to the emphatically mendacious nature of the material being communicated, at least from an 'historical' viewpoint as our century has been used to defining this term. However, the use of the iconographic mode of construction linking verses, laisses, and episodes, the incantatory quality of the language, and the persistence with which the techniques employed dissolve associations with the more linear universe of sense-based perceptions, all serve to confer on the *Roland* the status of myth or of ritual.

The validity of this statement can be further demonstrated by comparison with the Latin Mass, undoubtedly the form of ritual above all others with which exponents of the literary art in the Middle Ages can be assumed to have been familiar. Like the *Roland*, the Mass depends for its incantatory effect on an iconographic intertwining of the formulaic elements of which it is constituted, some of which remain constant from one manifestation to the next, while others are as consistently variable.<sup>30</sup>

We have seen that the *Roland* confronts and amplifies human experience, especially in the terrifying realm of violence and death, and that the model of formulaic reiteration, or iconographic reformulation, to which it adheres, guarantees the safe integration of attendant emotions through a process of *sublimatio*. Similarly, the Mass holds within itself the ability to 'catch up' into itself everyday events and emotions, and to transform them through the use of highly ritualised linguistic formulae: the Mass bends its form to give controlled expression to the joys and sorrows of everyday life, while at the same time lending dignity and public recognition to important stages in the evolving lives of individuals and the communities they constitute.

Several other features of the *Roland* relate the text directly to liturgical 'performances'. In examining the battle scene, we have already seen how the multiplicity of characters and actions, on the one hand, and the individuality of each as expressed through the use of the first person pronoun 'I', on the other, are ultimately absorbed back into a singular entity: in this case Charlemagne himself through the twinning and ultimate identification of Roland and Oliver. One of the distinctive features of the Mass is that the 'I' is used in the same way: i.e. as a function in which multiplicity is condensed through similarity to unity, thus permitting no distinction as to 'personages'. No matter whether the Mass is being said (in isolation or not) by a single priest, concelebrated by several priests,

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30 That the Mass is an iconographic form of expression, such that each manifestation of the form is essentially different from all others in spite of certain marked consistencies, is demonstrated in my *Esthétique et Manuscriture: Le 'moulin à paroles' au moyen âge* (Heidelberg, 1992), esp. chap. 4.

with the support of deacons and acolytes, in the presence of a choir, of a congregation which participates or not in the verbal exchanges, the singular pronoun 'I' remains intact, and retains its archetypal force centring the entire phenomenon on an indivisible microcosm.

Liturgical practices such as the Mass are again brought to mind by what might be called the rhythmic play of reported speech in the text of the *Roland*. This is evident

1° in the insistent use of verbal exchange on the responsorial pattern, a statement introduced by the verb *dire* being followed, within the same *laisse*, by a response introduced by *respundre* (see ll. 83-84-85 above, for instance);

2° in the use of the chorus or choir, again introduced, often after such a responsory, to repeat, endorse, summarise, or reflect upon the thoughts, emotions, and actions already expressed by the protagonists—or 'soloists'. The choir thus tends on the whole to swing back and forth in time and attitude with the flow of a discussion, although it can occasionally fulfil a more active function, as for instance when its members say: 'Let us break up the squabble' (*Desfaimes la meslee*, l. 34).

On the whole, it seems that the choir is divided into two sections reflected in the introductory formulae *dient franceis* and *dient paien*, the latter being subject to variation as *dient sarrazin* (see ll. 42 and 43 above). Very occasionally, this generic distinction is lacking, as the formula *tuit dient* (l. 27) suggests a *tutti* passage; and on at least one occasion, the 'voices' are scattered across the choir: *dient plusur* (l. 111).

A caveat is necessary here. It is in no way being suggested that the pattern of voices identified reflects an actual *viva voce* performance of the *Chanson de Roland*: rather, that manuscript texts such as the *Roland* counterfeit, through the conventional incorporation of appropriate terminology, the formal delineations of the oral situation, whereby the written—i.e. manuscripted—text obeys *literally* the exigencies of *Eloquentia*.

The 'choir' can also engage in the action of the tale, in unspoken ways. An example of this is provided very early in the *Chanson* when Charlemagne tells Roland and Oliver to be quiet and refuses to consider their offer to be sent as envoys to Marsilie. The silence imposed on the companions is as it were amplified by a sympathetic choir: *Franceis se taisent, as les uus aquisez* ('The Frenchmen fall silent: see how quiet they have become', l. 18). In ll. 206-210, the choir serves to reflect and underline the gradual dispersion of Charlemagne's grief at Roland's death from the level of private and personal emotion to the universal plane:

—l. 206: Private grief, hence a solo performance, as Charlemagne finds Roland's body and FAINTS upon it with the excess of his grief.

—l. 207: Official royal grief, hence still a solo performance, as Charlemagne recovers his senses, expresses his grief at the loss of his own honour (implying an

altered relationship between self and others), and FAINTS again.

—l. 208: Generalised grief, as Charlemagne regains consciousness, prays for Roland's soul, and states that no other of his friends or relations will ever match him. Here, sorrow extends across the entire community surrounding him (represented now by the 'choir'): 100,000 Frenchmen cannot but WEEP.

—l. 110: Universalised grief, as Charlemagne foresees an eternity of grief ahead. All nations, his allies at present, will turn against him, thus ensuring the disintegration of the Christian alliance. He sets about tearing out his beard and the hair on his head, whereupon the 'choir' of 100,000 Frenchmen falls to the ground in a DEAD FAINT.

As the analysis of this passage suggests, the choir's role is not limited to verbal expression: through the actions it performs, which include fighting, dying, and being buried, the activities specific to the named characters acquire extension, and assume the status of universalised forces.

There is as well a 'solo part' performed by an unnamed personage who in turn engages in reflection and assessment, and predicts momentous events and changes in fortune to come. This solo 'voice' enters without the benefit of being announced through the verbal conventions of reported speech: it is the voice which we are used to calling the narrator or the 'intervening Author' (see the *planh*, at l. 109, transcribed above), but to which it might be more apt to refer, in the light of this interpretation of the role of the 'choir', as the solo cantor.

As we have seen, given the ambient society's familiarity, above all other theatrical forms, with the oft-repeated and ever-varied form of the Mass, repetitions, both direct and iconographically modified, of formulae and entire laisses in the *Roland* lend a quasi-liturgical quality to the text as a whole. The incantatory effects of the technique might best be appreciated by comparison with the following formulae from the Mass:

*Kyrie eleison (ter), Christe eleison (ter), Kyrie eleison (ter)*

*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*

*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.*

The following exchanges, which occur several times in the Mass, have a similar effect:

*D. Per omnia saecula saeculorum.—R. Amen.*

*D. Dominus vobiscum.—R. Et cum spiritu tuo.*

Similarly, the Mass serves as an *exemplum* justifying the practice of

reworking material, occurring near the end of one *laisse*, at the beginning of the next. The practice can be identified in the exchange (marked by the formulae *dist* and *respunt* in the *Roland*) leading into the Preface, and from there into the Canon of the Mass:

*D. Dominus vobiscum.—R. Et cum spiritu tuo.*

*D. Sursum corda.—R. Habemus ad Dominum.*

*D. Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro.—R. Dignum et justum est.*

*Vere dignum et justum est, aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere, Domine sancte, Pater omnipotens, aeternae Deus ...*

Considered in isolation from their formalised context, ritualistic function, and incantatory effect, such reiterations and reformulations in both the liturgy and its offspring, manuscript literature, have no meaning; and receptors are necessarily reduced to employing such value-laden terms as ‘monotonous’, ‘unsophisticated’, ‘rustic’, and ‘crude’ (*fruste*) to define the various phenomena in question. (The orality hypothesis falls unconsciously into this trap.) On the other hand, recognition of the formularised qualities of the text, at the levels of both language and narrative structure, serves to dignify the tale, raising it above the common-place and conferring on it an archetypal or mythical status.

Whereas the orality hypothesis admits ‘mixed’ traditions as a possible variant, and thereby allows for speculation about the relative density of formulae in different texts (usually expressed as a percentage of the whole), the iconographic model allows us to view manuscript texts, like visual icons and Masses and Romanesque churches, as 100% ‘formulaic’ in every case. The invariable presence of certain fixed materials—for instance, a fixed agenda for the positioning of lexico-narrative, pictorial, or architectural elements within a whole—is as essential to the preservation of the tradition as the necessarily variable components. The end result, the completed, unified textual icon, represents a reelaboration, 100% unique, of an existing ‘idea’.

In the case of the Mass, unity is ensured through the highly stylised interweaving of the Proper (that is, material specifically selected as appropriate to a particular time, place, and set of circumstances in the life of a localised community) at preestablished points in the invariable textual and gestural thread (called the ‘Ordinary’ of the Mass). In architecture, controlled variation depends on an acceptance of certain fundamental constraints relating to ground-plans, orientation, elevation, ornamentation, and so on.

The introduction of the orality model into the field of Mediaeval studies has had an important revitalising effect. Quantities of enthusiastic work have been carried out in the area. Now that the initial enthusiasm has reached a peak, it is surely timely to stand back and evaluate its premises—not everyone took the



time to do so earlier on in the phase of its introduction and development.<sup>31</sup> Noting the syllogism on which the application of the orality model to manuscript literature is based is in no sense a denigration of what has been learnt in the intervening years about the *process* of formulaic construction evident in the texts. On the contrary, the painstaking studies already undertaken in this field of research will surely be of great use in analysing Mediaeval textuality in the double perspective proposed in this paper: that is, in evaluating afresh the formulaic techniques employed in both manuscript and oral traditions, in the light of the iconographic procedures characterising contemporary art-forms including the Mass.

The existence of a dynamic tradition of oral composition parallel to that of the production of manuscripts is not to be denied. It must however be emphasised that, if the same formulaic *mode* of construction is visible in manuscript texts, it does not necessarily follow that the latter derive from, or are subordinate to, an oral tradition. Two phenomena in particular illustrate the need to recognise this distinction:

1° the broad range of fields of aesthetic expression mentioned above, of which we have such masses of evidence from the Romanesque period, show the formulaic or iconographic mode of construction to be operating on the same scale as in manuscript narrative texts;

2° the iconographic mode of constant re-elaboration of existing elements of construction and of existing unitary 'ideas' is typical of all writing of the period and the preceding millenium—including transmission of the biblical Canon—right up to the time when the printing press offered the possibility of replacing the open quality of the manuscript medium with the author-centred closure which currently characterises our aesthetic environment.

Adherents of the oralist position, on the other hand, necessarily privilege figures of speculation to the detriment of extant evidence of the phenomenon being examined. Emphasis is constantly displaced away from texts as they stand to possible antecedents. Evaluations are based on what might have been, not on what is still in existence. Authorship and authenticity are shifted away from the scribes and their texts to possible predecessors, in both the manuscript and oral media, who are by definition no less insubstantial than any other sort of ghosts. Ultimately, manuscript texts themselves are ignored, except insofar as they are seen to allow speculation about 'historical events' which might just possibly have occurred at earlier periods of history, and about the 'real-life' people who are

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31 Nonetheless, early caveats against assuming the oral antecedents of manuscript texts were given by Larry D. Benson ('The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry', in *PMLA of America*, 81, 1966, pp. 334-41), R. F. Lawrence ('The Formulaic Theory and its Application to English Alliterative Poetry', in Alistair Fowler, *Essays on Style and Language*, New York, 1966, pp. 166-83), A. E. Watts (*The Lyre and the Harp*, New Haven & London, 1969), and Donald K. Fry ('Caedmon as a Formulaic Poet', in J. J. Duggan, *Oral Literature: Seven Essays*, Edinburgh and London, 1975).

supposed, on the 'evidence' of these texts, to have participated in these events. In our scramble to establish 'historical facts', it is only too easy to disregard the urge for fictional distance to which such literary documents as the *Roland* testify through their emphatic suppression of mundane verisimilitude.

Restoring Mediaeval literary objects like the *Roland* to their cultural context alongside other ritualised aesthetic forms such as the Mass and contemporary art and architecture, each of which is characterised by adherence to the principle of iconographic reformulation, allows us to minimise the perennial danger inherent in anthropological investigations of a culture different from our own: namely, that of projecting and superimposing our own localised cultural values and expectations on an essentially foreign phenomenon. In our own aesthetic and philosophic environment, individuality at the level of text, genre, authorship, and reception is the perceived norm. This means that interference between the different arts, as between philosophy and aesthetic expression as a whole, is due to accident and individual taste rather than to collectively approved convention. Permitting early European vernacular artefacts to communicate their distinctive quality to us in terms grounded in their own cultural environment, on the other hand, allows us to reintegrate the mythological bases of our cultural heritage: in other words, to come to terms with the Western European 'Dreaming'. Given the strong similarities linking together phenomena which we prefer to keep distinct, there would be no point in 'censoring out' selected aspects of the Mediaeval philosophical, intellectual, and aesthetic environment on the grounds of its perceived irrelevance. Such an *a priori* appraisal, equating with an essentially twentieth-century point of view, would automatically invalidate its own claims.

It is ultimately an exercise in futility to attempt to recuperate 'historical' facts—as we now define the notion—from a text such as the *Roland*. Not only does the Digby text consistently draw attention to its own fictional quality, but it goes even further: for if its point of departure is a mere shadow of what could possibly take place or have taken place in the material world of real-life exploits, its literal and narrative structure quickly establishes a pattern of constant diffusion of particles and dissolution of boundaries whereby the alchemical process of *sublimatio* is achieved. The transformed *prima materia*, the unified *logos* into which the text inexorably develops, eludes, subtly but emphatically, such misappropriation of its constituent parts.