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### *Huon de Bordeaux:* An Examination of Generative
### Forces in Late Epic Diction

In the following pages *I* shall sketch out what *I* perceive as an important relationship between what Edward Sapir called "linguistic drift"[1] and certain patterns of change in the narrative of Huon de Bordeaux. While I shall speak of only part of this one text, hopefully these remarks will indicate a perspective from which other texts might be examined in future attempts to understand the problematic domain of medieval French literary development. In the possibly extravagant hope that this brief study can make clear such a perspective, which derives largely from Sapir's work, I should like to cite a passage from his chapter on drift:

> Language exists only in so far as it is actually used—spoken and heard, written and read. What significant changes take place in it must exist, to begin with, as individual variations. This is perfectly true, and yet it by no means follows that the general drift of language can be understood from an exhaustive descriptive study of these variations alone. They themselves are random phenomena, like the waves of the sea, moving backward and forward in purposeless flux. The linguistic drift has direction. In other words, only those individual variations embody it or carry it which move in a certain direction, just as only certain wave movements in the bay outline the tide. The drift of a language is constituted by the unconscious selection on the part of its speakers of those individual variations that are cumulative in some special direction (Sapir, pp. 154-5).

It is obvious that literature, too, changes across time and space. Precisely how or why it does so may be an insoluble problem. Yet it seems clear that while Huon de Bordeaux is superficially very different from the Chanson de Roland, for example, the Huon text develops or in some way exploits possibilities already inherent in the structure of the Roland. On the one hand the Huon poet (or poets) would seem to have perceived the broad scope of narrative possibilities within the Charlemagne stories in ways which those stories themselves suggest. On the other, the Huon poet exhibits a certain awareness of his own text as an artifact designed to entertain an audience. The intentional system points systematically towards entertainment as such, a kind of entertainment based, we shall see, on purely literary constructs. In the text may be seen evidence of a tension between two poles we might call "conscious

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[1]Edward Sapir, Language (New York: Harcourt, 1921).

perception" and "unconscious perception." What I have called "uncon-
scious" may perhaps best be considered as those literary elements which
constitute a kind of bedrock upon which the conscious entertainment, in
ways I shall describe, rests and is developed.

Let us now consider the text itself to see how the preceding
observations may be useful in coming to grips with it.  I intend my
approach to be properly philological, yet I shall not attempt to set
forward "an exhaustive descriptive study" of patterns of change in the
text.  Rather I shall try to present a broad view of them which hopefully
will enable us to perceive their general movement.  The passage I have
chosen stands at the midpoint of the chanson; much has happened to put
Huon in his predicament.  En route to the Saracen Gaudisse's court in
Babylon to do Charlemagne's bidding, Huon has accepted Auberon's pro-
tection and promised the fairy king never to lie. When, at the outer
walls of Babylon, he tells a guard he is Saracen, not French, Huon gives
Auberon cause to renounce their pact. Huon finds himself in an orchard,
alone:

> Des ore a Hues les quatre pons pasés.
> Quant il fu outre et il fu aroutés,
> Dont pert le voie du grant palais listé.
> Ens ou vregiet l'amiral est entré;
> Dix ne fist arbre qui peüst fruit porter
> Que il n'eüst ens el vregiet planté.
> Une fontaine i cort par son canel,
> De paradis vient li ruis, sans fauser.
> Il n'est nus hom qui de mere soit nés,
> Qui tant soit vieus ne quenus ne mellés,
> Que, se il puet el ruis ses mains laver,
> Que lués ne soit meschine et bacelers.
> Hues i vint, d'encoste est arestés;
> Ses mains lava et but de l'aige asés.[2]

At this point Huon is cut off from authority; while he has come to
Babylon to fulfill Charlemagne's demands, he now has no power but his own
with which to act.  His own power, on the other hand, will become consid-
erable; Huon drinks from and washes his hands in the fountain which
restores youth and strength.  The juxtaposition of such a fountain with
an epic hero seems to me to have far-reaching implications for the
development of narrative, since it provides or at least contributes to
a foundation for "hero-ness" which is not based on the interweaving of
king, traitor, and community so typical of epic texts.  The poet seems
to expand this idea in the following laisse:

[2]Huon de Bordeaux, ed. Pierre Ruelle (Bruxelles & Paris, 1960),
vv. 5568-81.

> S'est la fontaine a l'amiral Gaudis:
>  Li ruisiaus vient del flun de paradis;
> Dix ne fist feme, tant ait fait ses delis,
> Que, s'ele boit de l'aige un seul petit,
>  Ne soit pucele comme au jour ke nasqui.
> Hues i fu, li damoisiaus de pris;
> Ses mains lava, deseure s'est asis (vv. 5582-88).

The fountain theme enlarges significantly, following a path of its own making. The narrational pattern is identical; in each laisse the poet mentions an individual who through contact with the water will be restored to some former and presumably better state, and then presents an image of Huon in contact with the water. Huon has disobeyed Auberon's express command not to lie and is thus a "sinner," we suspect, in the eyes of the fairy king. But the fountain tends to counteract the concept of the hero's sin altogether; if Huon was not still young and strong and pure, the fountain has made him so. His goodness is already being focused, it would seem, in opposition to Auberon's authority.

The laisse immediately following takes another step in the same direction:

>  Sele fontaine, uns serpens le gardoit;
> Ja nus mauvais n'i metera le doit,
>  Qui soit traïtres ne qui fause sa loit,
> Et s'il i vient, il est mors or endroit.
> Hues i vint, li serpens l'enclinoit
>  Par le vertu del haubert qu'il portoit.
> De l'aige but, ses blances mains lavoit;
> Ore oublia chou que faire devoit (vv. 5589-96).

Serpent, fountain, orchard are, obviously, an ancient literary combination, though this poet differs widely from, say, Genesis in his usage of that combination. This serpent drives evil-doers away from the fountain, specifically traitors and anyone "qui fause sa loit" (v. 5591). Huon's position with regard to this last qualification is slightly ambiguous, but the poet puts him on firmer ground by using the hauberk, an object which in this text can only be worn by those who are free from sin. Through its use, it is suggested to the audience that Huon is good, no matter what Auberon thinks. Yet it is precisely the magic already associated in this text with Auberon that allows the poet to move his hero in the direction of goodness. Auberon's magic is thus being exploited and undercut at the same time; both processes serve to entertain and to build up a certain power in the hero. I do not mean to suggest that this "power" is being consciously projected into the hero; but internal devices such as the hauberk, which seem primarily to advance the narrative, and, by their spectacular nature, to provide entertainment, also

tend to grant the hero a considerable degree of independence within the text. The poet seems intent on establishing Huon's goodness (cf., "ses blances mains lavoit," v. 5595) as if to generate sympathy for a hero who does not deserve his fate.  Latent in this insistence on Huon's goodness lies a force which sets him apart both from the audience and from heroes like Roland.  For whatever else Huon may be, it is inconceivable that he be considered a focus for any celebration of service either to king or to community. His rôle has no broad ideological base of interwoven relationships with anything external to the text.  True, he is in the orchard because Charlemagne has ordered him to perform certain feats at Gaudisse's court, and the notion of service to king, insofar as it is a traditional epic idea, could be considered here a kind of external influence. However, there is no mention whatever of Charlemagne in the <u>laisses</u> under consideration (LIV-LVIII); in fact, the poet remarks that Huon has forgotten what he was supposed to do (v. 5596).  In forgetting what he came to do, Huon cuts himself off from the tradition which dictates that heroes <u>serve</u>, whether it be kings, communities, religions, or ladies. Our hero, at the end of laisse LVI, is <u>mostly just good</u>; there is nothing in the text to which he is now attached, save of course the words themselves which immediately begin to make explicit the breaking-down of the Huon-Auberon alliance:

> Huelins fu ens el vregié entrés ;
> A le fontaine Gaudise l'amiré,
> Li bers i fu asis por reposer.
> La se demente, tenrement a ploré:
>  "He! Dix, dist Hues, et car me secourés!
> He! Auberon, comment esploiterés?
> Faurés me vous u vous me secorrés?
> Jou le sarai, par sainte carité!"
>  Il prist son cor, s'a tenti et sonné
> Tant hautement et par si grant fierté
>  Li sans en saut et par bouce et par nés.
> Auberons l'ot dedens le gaut ramé:
>  "Ha! Dix, dist il, j'oi un larron corner
> Qui a menti au premier pont passer;
> Mais, par Chelui ki en crois fu pené,
>  Il puet ases et tentir et sonner,
>  Ja n'ert par moi secourus ne tensés."
> Et l'enfes Hues ne cessa de corner.
> Li amiraus ert asis au disner;
> Chil ki servoient du vin et du claré,
> Au son del cor commencent a canter,
> Et l'amiraus commença a baler.
> Ses hommes a erroment apielés:

> "Baron, dist il, a moi en entendés.
> Cil qui la corne en cel vregier ramé,
> Il est venus por nous tous encanter.
> Je vous commant sor les membres coper,
> Tantost que chil a laissié le corner,
> Que vous ailliés fervestir et armer;
> S'il vous escape, tot sommes engané."
> Quant or voit Hues nus nel vient viseter,
> Le cor mist jus, se laissa le corner;
> De ses biaus iex commença a plorer.
>                                    (vv. 5595-629)

Thus totally isolated, Huon provides a focus for the audience's sympathy
as he sits weeping "de ses biaus iex" (v. 5629). Like Roland, Huon
bleeds when he blows the horn so forcefully; we suspect, however, that
unlike Roland, Huon will not die of this wound. The scene shifts
abruptly to Auberon's forest, then back to Huon still blowing his horn.
Just as the audience knew in advance that the hauberk could be worn
only by those without sin, so it knows here that the sound of the horn
makes all who hear it dance and sing (see vv. 3847-50). It is there-
fore understood why, in spite of Auberon's failure to appear, those
serving wine to the pagan king begin to sing and he begins to dance.
On the other hand, the event is not exactly "expected" any more than
one expects the poet to produce the hauberk in the preceding laisse
(LVI) both to protect Huon and attest to his innocence. These narrative
devices are thus internally authorized in much the same way as Auberon's
earlier insistence on Huon's never lying (vv. 3723-5) authorizes Au-
beron's refusal to help. Thus in spite of the fact that the audience
may not have known this story the way it probably did know the story
of Roland, for example, these internal authorizations create a certain
illusion of familiarity with what is taking place. Yet the explanation
of Huon's predicament lies wholly within the text; it has nothing to
do with the traditional epic relationships between the concepts of king,
hero, and community. For that reason the text must always be explaining
its own workings and opening in advance possibilities for its own
development. Precisely because it must always explain itself by means
of interlocking internal authorizations, virtually all of which center on
the hero, this text weaves around Huon a complicated literary fabric
whose breadth can afford him an indefinitely large number of possible
actions. In other words, the narrative energy expended in working out
the plot's complications devolves upon Huon, and in so doing tends to
build that character into a figure free of traditional restraints imposed
from outside the text

Let us consider the final laisse in the sequence, where Huon is
moving toward independence even from forces which surround him in the
text itself:

> Quant or voit Hues c'Auberons ne verra,
> Saciés de voir moult grant duel demena:
> "He! las, dist Hues, cis caitis que fera?
> Ma douce mere ja mais ne me verra!
> Cis las dolans, vrais Dix, que devenra?
> Ahi! rois Karles, cil Dix qui tot forma,
> Il te pardoinst les maus que tu fais m'a!
> He! Auberons, tes gens cors que fera?
> Moult ies malvais se de moi pité n'as,
> Car, par Celui qui tout fist et forma,
> Quant je menti a ce pont par dela,
> Ne me souvint de çou que me carcas;
> Se t'ies preudom, tout le me pardonras."
> Puis dist aprés: "Dehait plus plouera!
> Se il me faut, la Dame m'aidera
> Qui le cors Diu en ses dous flans porta;
> Q'ens li se fie desconfis ne sera;
> Et, par Chelui qui le mont estora,
> G'irai la sus, ne sais q'en avenra,
> Et se dirai chou qe on me carca."
> Dont s'aparelle, qe plus n'i aresta,
> L'espee ot çainte, son elme relaça;
> Vers le palais, l'enfes Hues s'en va.
> (vv. 5630-52)

The earlier laisses (LIV-LVII) had insisted upon two aspects of Huon's
situation. The audience was made to understand that he was fundamentally
good and that he was completely isolated from any possible source of
aid. In the laisse quoted here Huon's goodness and isolation now appear
to join forces in order to project him into the emir's palace. This
observation requires some explanation. Throughout the poem Charlemagne
has been unjust to Huon, though Huon never articulates any enmity toward
his king. Such behavior on the hero's part tends implicitly to reinforce
the idea that he is good. Huon's goodness has previously been concretely
perceived; it is precisely from this point in the text that he must move
on to do what is expected of him in spite of the fact that he *is*
isolated and defenseless. The laisses we have considered have so firmly
established Huon's goodness that by vv. 5635-6 he can pray that God for-
give Charlemagne's injustice and in the next two, declare that Auberon
is "malvais" if he continues to be intransigent concerning Huon's lie
at the bridge. Thus the hero now stands in opposition to both
Charlemagne and Auberon; the character's "hero-ness" is broadened and

strengthened by virtue of his separation from the two kings.  Huon is
far more than a central character in Huon de Bordeaux; his adventures,
in and of themselves, are the very stuff of the text.  They lie at the
heart of this poem as commentary upon the chanson de geste genre.  I
do not mean to suggest that the author of Huon "intended" to create
such specific individuality in his hero.  I do mean, however, that by
effectively doing so, he revitalized the genre, moving it in new
directions.

      Thus in this "orchard sequence" we are presented with a hero
figure who does nothing while the narrative itself works to estab-
lish—for its own purposes—first his goodness and his isolation,
and then through them, his power or authority to act alone against the
enemy.  There is no comparable scene in the Roland, that is, one in
which Roland's character and plight are contemplated while the hero
merely occupies the center stage. The components of Roland's "hero-
ness" can not be contemplated per se. The audience perceives those
components or qualities concretely through Roland's acts.  In the
orchard sequence, as Huon himself passively wonders what will happen
to him next, the narrative focuses on the abstract quality of goodness
or purity of soul.  This double separation of hero from his qualities
and hero from the action is, to be sure, foreign to the Roland, yet
at the same time can be understood as deriving from possibilities at
least latent in the Roland's narration.  Roland does contemplate
himself and his deeds as he dies, but that "contemplation" always
falls within a concept of Roland as part of a broader structure which
includes Charles, France, and Christendom.

      Many heroes and many feats of prowess, combined differently
in different texts, separate the Chanson de Roland from Huon de
Bordeaux.  By the time of the Huon, "hero-ness" seems to have become
a concept to be filled out by a character, whereas in the Roland
what the hero is and what his "hero-ness" consists in are perceived
as identical.  As we have seen, Huon de Bordeaux so abstracts the
hero from his qualities or his "hero-ness" that the hero himself is
free to lie with no reduction of his goodness.  There is an interesting
corollary to this process of abstraction: with "hero-ness" taken for
granted, the narrative is free to expand elsewhere, and this process
of creative expansion or broadening could, in increasing the distance
between poet and subject, eventually give rise to a totally ironic
contemplation of the hero.

      In the passage we have been discussing, it is clear that many
of the narrational devices used are drawn from a stockpile of narrative
possibilities which accumulated through the great multiplicity of both
epic and romance texts during the years preceding the composition of
Huon de Bordeaux.  Devices such as the orchard, the fountain-stream,

the snake, are actually topoi which the author has doubtless borrowed
from previous texts and rearranged in possibly new and entertaining
patterns. As we have seen, these devices are all used to render explicit
the hero's goodness; it seems to me useful to consider that goodness
indicative of a deeper force at work within texts up to and including
Huon de Bordeaux.  In all those texts there are heroes who both perform
many feats and are presented as exceptional.  Each heroic feat in each
text could easily give rise to others by a simple process of logical
expansion; the extraordinary or exceptional quality of past heroic feats
would tend to be equalled or surpassed by successive poets who wished
to present a new hero or a new story about a familiar one.  Roland is an
exceptional knight; the character is largely perceived in terms of ser-
vice rendered to king and community.  It is not difficult to imagine
how a desire to create new characters on models like Roland could have
given rise to characters whose extraordinary feats are perceived by the
audience as more important in themselves than in terms of service to
either other characters or to ideals external to the text.

      There thus appear to be forces at work within the text which
push heroic feats towards excellence even beyond human capacity.  Roland
proves himself to be extraordinary in all his undertakings, to the point
even of causing his friend to turn momentarily against him.  His extra-
ordinariness is communicated to the listening community, as previously
said, in concrete ways, that is, through binarily constructed laisses
projecting from Roland outward to specific points within the clusters
of concepts or ideas about Roland's duty to God, France, and king.  Not
only are the themes binarily treated, one aspect at a time, but the
relatively rigid parataxis of the text tends to face off each hemistich
to the next, each verse to the following.  There is no point from which
to doubt the truth of what Roland is; what is ordinary/extraordinary
about him, or simply what he is, is presented in such a way that the
listening community cannot separate itself from its "French-ness" and
"Christian-ness." It therefore is not entertained by the text so much
as it participates therein.  It would seem that the ordinary/extraordin-
ary tension, fundamental to both the Roland and the Huon, drifts to a
point where in Huon what is ordinary about the hero is not merely his
human weakness generally but rather many small weaknesses out of which
the narrative is generated; what is extraordinary about him derives in
very large measure from Auberon and his supernatural powers.  In both
cases, the poet must be quite explicit; all the minute details of Huon's
various disobediences must be explained, as must all the workings of the
supernatural objects which protect him.  In my view, this ample narrative
fabric, constantly woven around the central character, creates a concep-
tual space around him from which he can be perceived as a fictional
character designed principally to entertain an audience whose "French-

ness" and "Christian-ness" are clearly secondary to their status as a community enjoying a public performance for which they are expected to pay. And, as entertainment, Huon de Bordeaux participates in the poetic modes of ca. 1200; one thinks of Floire et Blanchefleur as well as of Aucassin et Nicolette, with their reversals of narrative values.

The audience is thus incorporated into both texts in similar or parallel ways, yet to completely different effect. The Roland poet presents a model of cosmic proportions founded on the French-Christian reality of his community; his text, in moving back and forth over the elements of that reality, builds a literary structure which celebrates both the realities and ideals of its community. The community is thus not separate either from the poet or his text, and the poet makes explicit the notion that understanding his poem requires an understanding of the transcendental truth from which it springs and which it celebrates:

> Co dit la Geste e cil ki el camp fut:
> Le ber Gilie, por qui Deus fait vertuz,
> E fist la chartre el muster de Loüm.
> Ki tant ne set ne l'ad prod entendut.[3]

In Huon de Bordeaux the community is called upon to enjoy a "boine canchon" based not on any tradition of transcendental "truth" but rather on a tradition of literary "truth," from which both poet and audience may stand back in contemplation. The text itself borrows the bones of a work like the Roland and fleshes them out with bits and pieces of many other texts and stories; the central figures of hero, king, traitor still frame the Huon, but the substance of the text relies on itself for structural support. Events are prefigured. and patterns are thus established, such as Huon's regular disobedience to Auberon which eventually leads to his lying whenever he finds it useful. This complex internal structure could not, it seems to me, be rendered in formulaic diction of the kind which dominates the Roland. On the contrary, in order to keep in motion all of the internal complexity which is so obvious throughout Huon de Bordeaux, the poet must have recourse to a flowing hypotaxis which retains the assonance and caesura of the Roland's decasyllabic lines, but little else. The syntax spills over from verse to verse as the poet moves to cover his bases. Consider these lines, which immediately precede the orchard sequence we have been discussing:

[3]La Chanson de Roland, ed. Joseph Bédier (Paris: Piazza, 1927), vv. 2095-8.

> A lui meïsmes l'enfes se dementa;
> Après a dit:  "Damediex m'aidera.
> Bien sai de voir diables m'encanta
> Quant je menti a ce pont par dela."
> (vv. 5564-67)

The situation is very complicated indeed.  Huon's lie first not only
undercuts the profound separation between what is Saracen and what is
French in epic poetry, but also seems to undercut the old epic formula
referring to God or Christ, e.g., "Veire Patene, ki unkes ne mentis"
(Roland, v. 2384), which Huon de Bordeaux itself uses:  "Segnor Baron,
por Diu qui ne menti" (v. 2198).  But despite that lie, the poem
supports Huon at this juncture by invoking God's help; we feel that the
text will no more turn against Huon for his sin than the Roland turns
against its hero for his desmesure.  On the contrary both desmesure
and lying are celebrated in certain ways; both mark their perpetrators
off as different, extraordinary.  But Huon's lying is a kind of literary
game in this text; he suggests here that he was bedeviled and the
following verses, here referred to as the "orchard sequence," contemplate
and celebrate his goodness and solitude.  Thus the lie itself may be
seen as a source of literary generation.  First lying is established
through a kind of accident on the part of a hero who forgot he could
cross the bridge only by showing the giant's ring.  After the orchard
sequence renders explicit Huon's goodness, lying actually seems to
have been incorporated into that goodness:  "Dist li jougleres:
'Comment as tu a non?'/ 'Sire, dist Hues, Garinet m'apele on'" (vv.
7271-2).

In both of the preceding passages, the hero is, in effect,
making a statement about himself and his participation in the story.
In lying, he has both disobeyed Auberon within the text and disobeyed
a precept of Christian doctrine which rests outside it.  He blames the
devil and then proceeds to put lying to good use.  This hero appears
to be outgrowing his epic frame; the narrative space around him is
broad indeed, if in it we can perceive the narrator's distance from his
hero as well as the listening community's.  If the epic frame already
seems, at least in retrospect, to be of secondary importance to the
extraordinary thickening of the narrative, so must the decasyllable
itself, unable to cope with the burgeoning complexities inherent in
this narrative, soon give way to the less structured yet more highly
wrought medium we call prose.

It seems to me that there is a profound movement on all fronts
from the relatively rigid, formalized structure of the Roland, to the
outwardly freer yet inwardly more complex Huon.  Increased awareness of
text as text as opposed in some way to "historical truth," awareness of

the audience as people to be entertained, awareness of characters as
fictional, viewed by both poet and audience from ironic perspectives,
all point to important and only partially conscious pressures, which
must push our literatures along paths we do not clearly perceive, just
as similar pressures must push our languages.  Further study along such
lines might show a great deal about the mechanisms which make abstrac-
tions arise out of concretely narrated events, satire and irony out of
historical fact, prose out of poetry.  I am suggesting that Huon de
Bordeaux, as a case in point, contains within itself latent forces which
will become our contemporary works and heroes, and that those forces
drift across time in a continuous becoming, a dynamic process of
literary development which evolves in response to possibly analyzable
tensions between what appears to be consciously and unconsciously
perceived in the text of each poet at work within his literary tradition
and his language.  It is obvious how much this concept derives from
Edward Sapir; in conclusion I suggest that the implications of the
following statement could lead us to a new approach to the development
of narrative:

> It is strange how long it has taken the European literature to
> learn that style is not an absolute, a something that is to be
> imposed on the language from Greek or Latin models, but merely
> the language itself, running in its natural grooves, and with
> enough of an individual accent to allow the artist's personality
> to be felt as a presence, not as an acrobat (Sapir, p. 227).

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