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Charlemagne's Second Dream*

The object of this communication is to discuss the interpretation of lines 725-36 of the Song of Roland (Charlemagne's second dream on the eve of the battle of Roncevaux) in the light of a recent article by M. Herman Braet.¹

Charlemagne has two successive dreams on the eve of the battle of Roncevaux, and these are related in two consecutive *laissez*. In the first *laisse* (lines 717-724) Charles dreams that he is at the "greignurs porz de Cizer": Ganelon appears, seizes the lance of ashwood that Charles is holding in his hands, and shakes and breaks it so that the fragments fly heavenwards. The symbolism of the dream is transparent: Ganelon, by his treason with the Saracens, has ensured that the mainstay of Charles's strength (the rearguard commanded by Roland) shall be broken and destroyed by the Saracens.

It is the second dream (lines 725-36) that is the enigmatic one, and here scholars have taken one of two conflicting views: either that the dream refers to Ganelon's treason and its subsequent punishment when Pinabel appears as his champion at the trial (lines 3742-3933) or that it is a foreshadowing of the attack on Roland and the rearguard at Roncevaux, with Marsile appearing in the dream under the semblance of a boar, and the "algalife," his uncle, in the likeness of a leopard. The majority opinion favors the first interpretation, but K.-J. Steinmeyer² has recently put forward arguments attempting to show that the second interpretation (which I shall call the "Roncevaux interpretation") is the correct one. Braet's article is mainly devoted to attacking Steinmeyer's interpretation on methodological grounds.

Braet's main point³ is that we have no right to change the terms of

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¹"Le Second Rêve de Charlemagne dans la Chanson de Roland," Romanica Gandensia, 12 (1969), tirage à part, pp. 5-19.

²In his Untersuchungen zur allegorischen Bedeutung der Träume im altfranzösischen Rolandslied (München, 1963).

³Art. cit., pp. 7-9.

the problem that the Oxford text poses for us. Above all, we must not use the readings of the collateral versions, or rather those of the alpha redaction whose representatives they are, in order to elucidate the Oxford text and thereby favor either of the conflicting interpretations of the dream. Thus, where the Oxford MS. has "Devers Ardene" in line 728, the other versions have readings going back to an original alpha reading "Devers Espagne." This merely shows that the alpha version connected the boar and the leopard with Spain and thus presumably with the battle of Roncevaux. But it does not prove that the original Roland poet did likewise. Nor have we the right to explain away such an awkward phrase in the text as "a sa capele a Ais." It will not do, says Braet, to regard these words as an epic formula without any precise meaning, or as a mere way of indicating that when the events of the second dream take place Charles has crossed over to the French side of the Pyrenees. We must respect the fact that in the Oxford Roland Charles dreams that he is at his chapel at Aix (i.e., at Aix-la-Chapelle) and that the animals in the dream come from the direction of the Ardennes. On these matters I am thoroughly in agreement with M. Braet.

On a further matter, I am not altogether of M. Braet's opinion. It does not seem helpful to take the dream animals out of their context and seek a meaning for them in medieval animal symbolism, hoping thereby to obtain some clue to the meaning of the *laisse* as a whole.⁴ One difficulty, of course, is that very often animals have a number of symbolic interpretations, depending on the particular Biblical passages in which they occur. Thus, while the lion of the tribe of Judah is a Christological symbol, the leo vorans who goes about seeking his prey is a symbol of the devil. And Baligant, who in Charles's third dream after the battle of Roncevaux appears (line 2551) as a lion hidden in a wood, is probably so represented, not because he is "of the devil's party," but because he is a worthy antagonist of Charlemagne. Let us not forget that, apart from their religious function, symbolic animals frequently appear in the epics simply to typify various qualities that aggressive warriors share with aggressive animals: physical strength, alertness, courage, tenacity, ferocity. Thus, we have in lines 1110-1111 of the Roland:

Quant Rollant veit que la bataille serat
Plus se fait fiers que leon ne leupart.

⁴Art. cit., pp. 9-15, where the symbolic meaning of the animals is discussed at length, with the intention of refuting Steinmeyer's interpretations, but in Steinmeyer's terms: that is to say, with the animals discussed out of context. It should, however, be noted that while there are no grounds for saying that the leopard in an epic dream always represents a Saracen (see Braet's demonstration, art. cit., pp. 11-12) it is found with this acceptance.

I am thus prepared to take the symbolic animals in the Roland in a very general sense, simply as symbolizing courageous and implacable enemies of Charlemagne.

The following are the elements of the second dream, in chronological order:

1. Charles dreams that he is at his chapel at Aix.
2. A "vers" (i.e., a verrat or boar) bites his right arm.
3. A leopard comes towards him from the direction of the Ardenne.
4. It attacks the king's own person ("sun cors demenie").
5. A hunting-dog (a "veltre") comes out of the palace and runs towards Charles.
6. He tears off ("trenchet") the ear of "the first boar."
7. He then attacks the leopard.
8. The French say that there is a great battle, but they do not know who will be victorious.

Whatever interpretation we adopt, the symbolism of the dream will remain confused, irrational, and enigmatic, perhaps designedly so.

For those who see here a prefiguration of the closing episode of the story—the trial of Ganelon for treason and the judicial battle between his champion Pinabel and Tierri d'Anjou, representing the king's interest—there is an obvious chronological difficulty. Ganelon's treason is symbolized by the action of the boar who bites the king's right arm. But the plotting of the treason, and its consummation at Roncevaux, is not synchronous with Pinabel's defense of Ganelon at his trial. Nor is the treason plotted at Aix-la-Chapelle, although it may have been conceived there. Hence M. Braet is obliged to suppose (art. cit., p. 14) that the "morsure devient une retrospection future: elle fait allusion au forfait de Ganelon tel qu'il sera rappelé le jour du procès." But if these were the poet's intentions, then the best that can be said about them is that they are very misleading, because the affabulation of the dream suggests that Charles will shortly be attacked by two opponents in swift succession, the second coming up to support the first on one and the same battlefield and Charles's champion (the "veltre") assailing and gravely wounding the first, the dream closing while he is engaged with the second.

There are further difficulties involved in this interpretation. The wounding of the boar by tearing off his ear corresponds to no physical mutilation inflicted on Ganelon by Tierri, who in any case never fights directly with the traitor. Braet therefore has to treat the mutilation as symbolic: as a "flétrissure morale"⁵ which Tierri inflicts on Ganelon by furnishing the judicial proof against him.

⁵Art. cit., p. 15, note 2. Braet also suggests that there may be

If neither Ganelon nor Pinabel directly assail Charles, the latter can be said to attack the king's body metaphorically since in overawing the court and supporting his relation he is in effect opposing the king and upholding his enemies. Nevertheless, there is the fourth dream of Charles (lines 2555-2568) to be considered. This is the second of the two dreams that Charles dreams before the battle with Baligant, and it relates quite clearly to the trial of Ganelon. The dreamer is at Aix-la-Chapelle: he is holding a young bear in chains. Thirty bears come out of the forest and ask Charles to give the young bear back to them, "because it is right that we should succour our kinsman" (line 2562). A "veltre" comes from Charles's palace and attacks the greatest of the bears, but Charles does not see the issue of the combat. The symbolism of the dream is quite transparent: the young bear is Ganelon, whom Charles has in fact given into the charge of the cooks of his household, "chained as one would a bear" (line 1827). The thirty bears are his relations, headed by Pinabel, who go pledge for him: the "veltre" is Thierry d'Anjou, and the struggle with the chief bear prefigures the judicial battle with Pinabel.

Scholars have noted the similarities between the second and fourth dreams and have sometimes let their knowledge of the fourth dream influence their interpretation of the second.⁶ The fact that the king dreams that he is at Aix-la-Chapelle and is defended by a "veltre" in both dreams exerts a subtle suggestion and persuades the critic that the content of both is the same. Yet one must emphasize, not the similarities, but the difference between the treatment in the two dreams. What is being contested in the fourth dream is Charles's right to hold Ganelon a prisoner and to have him brought before a court. The relations are suppliants, their motives are family loyalty, and their object is not to destroy Charles but to save Ganelon from death and shame. Having identified themselves with Ganelon, poetic justice demands that they should share the same punishment. But there is no suggestion, as there is in the second dream, of overt aggression against Charles. In this respect, it reflects the outlook of the trial episode far more faithfully than the second dream does. Charles's person, or his authority, are in fact no longer in danger once Ganelon has been made a prisoner and the Saracens defeated. What is in balance is his vengeance on Ganelon; and the proof of Ganelon's guilt is left to the judgement of God.

a connection with the account of the seizure of Christ in the garden in the four Gospels and the incident of the cutting off of the ear of the High Priest's servant. But the fact that Christ reproves the action and heals the victim makes the parallel somewhat inopportune.

Thus Bédier, in his commentary on line 727, suggested that uers may be an Anglo-Norman spelling for urs and that the two attacking animals are therefore a bear and a leopard.

Of all four dreams, the only one whose symbolism is not patently clear is the second: Braet admits that if we are to associate it with Ganelon's trail and Pinabel's intervention on his behalf, we shall have to attribute to it a "sens moins directement accessible ... et [qui] sollicite davantage ... le pouvoir symbolique . . . des images."⁷ We shall also have to suppose that it duplicates the content of the fourth dream. What then is the objection to interpreting it as a foreshadowing of the battle of Roncevaux, with the boar representing Marsile and the leopard the "algalife," his uncle?

The symbolism will remain cloudy and confused, but no more so than if the other interpretation is accepted. These are the major difficulties in the way of the Roncevaux interpretation:

1. The dreamer dreams that he is at Aix-la-Chapelle and that it is there that the events of the dream unfold.

2. If the "veltres" signifies Roland, then the latter appears in the dream in a doubly symbolic fashion: first, as the "right arm of Charles" and "Charles's own body" and secondly as the "veltres" who assails the attacking animals.

3. Whereas Roland cuts off the hand of Marsile (line 1903), just as the "veltres" tears off the ear of the boar, it is Oliver who is attacked and mortally wounded by the "algalife" (Morganics) and then kills his adversary.⁸

If we regard the two *laissez* that recount the first two dreams as in some respects *laissez similaires*, then the second can be treated as an expansion, elaboration, and "repetition with variation" of the first. It is difficult to suppose, having regard to the general stylistic principles of the Oxford *Roland*, that the king can dream two successive dreams without the *décor* being varied. The procedure here can be assimilated to that of the opening of the two *laissez* (lines 2909-15 and lines 2916-32), in which Charles laments over Roland's death. There we have:

2909 Ami Rollant, jo m'en irai en France:
Cum jo serai a Loün en ma chambre
De plusurs regnes vendrunt li hume estrange.

followed by :

2916 Ami Rollant, proezdoem, juvente bele,
Cum jo serai a Eis, em ma chapele
Vendrunt li hume, demanderont nuveles.

⁷Art. cit., p. 15.

⁸Lines 1943-1957: but it is of course Roland and Turpin (lines 2134-45) who put the last remnants of the "algalife's" army to flight and Roland who remains (line 2163) in final possession of the field.

We should not consider the expression "a sa capele ad Ais" a meaningless epic formula: nevertheless, there is no reason why, because the symbolic events of the second dream are located at Aix, the real events to which the dream refers should take place there also. This is not the case, as we have seen, even if the second dream is connected with the trial of Ganelon: while Pinabel's intervention takes place at Aix, Ganelon's treason is consummated at Saragossa and at Roncevaux.

The "double symbolism" of Charles's body and the "veltres" can be explained if we regard the second dream as an amplification of the first. In the first dream, we have Roland and the rearguard represented as an "ashen lance" held in Charles's hands. The metaphor is developed in the second, where the "right arm" of Charles, a metaphor used elsewhere for Roland (line 597), is bitten by the boar while the leopard attacks the king's "very body": there is an obvious gradatio here (ashen lance; right arm; very body) which may well symbolize the three stages of the working out of the treason (Ganelon's compact with the Saracens; Marsile's attack; its climax, after Marsile has fled wounded from the battle, in the onslaught of the "algalife"). There is, of course, a remarkable coincidence between the cutting off of Marsile's hand by Roland (line 1903) and the tearing off the boar's ear. This coincidence is so striking that, for me (as no doubt for the generality of medieval readers), it determines the interpretation of the dream. Against it must be set the discrepancy that it is not Roland but Oliver who fights with and kills the "algalife." But in a dream there has to be a drastic simplification of the events foreshadowed: the resistance of the rearguard has to be typified by the single figure of its leader, the double rôle of Roland and his followers—that of victim and assailant—by Charles's body and by the animal that comes to the defense of the monarch.

Braet regards the change of "Devers Ardene" to "Devers Espagne" in the alpha as a proof that the alpha redactor misunderstood the symbolism of the original and reinterpreted the dream as an allusion to the battle of Roncevaux. But why should we conclude that he misunderstood the original poet's intentions? He may have thought the symbolism needlessly obscure and introduced "Devers Espagne" as a lectio faciliior. It is in any case a dangerous thing to assume that the symbolism of the original was so obscure that contemporaries were likely to misunderstand it and that the poet's intentions were understood only by himself and modern scholars.

What was probably of decisive importance for the alpha redactor, his contemporaries, and the poet himself, was the context in which the dream is set. The section of the poem that begins at line 703 and ends at 840 is dominated by the thought of the coming battle. What we have in these lines is the preparation, on the emotional plane as well as the material, of the disaster to come. The two dreams of Charles are preceded by the passage (lines 710-16) in which the Saracen army advances stealth-

ily through the hills and takes up its position in readiness to attack the rearguard. So that when Charles dreams of what is to happen on the morrow, the audience have already had their minds directed toward these events. Then follows the nomination of Roland to the rearguard; Roland's refusal to accept reinforcements, which seals the fate of his army; Roland's confidence as he makes his dispositions. The crossing of the Pyrenees by the main army and the *laisse* beginning "Halt sunt li pui" (line 814) is an occasion for the heightening of the emotional situation and for underlining the contrast between the joy of the main army when they look down on Gascony lying below them and the anguish awaiting the rearguard, an anguish which Charles, full of the deepest foreboding, already feels.

The single-minded concentration on the coming battle, the atmosphere of menace in which the narrative is bathed, the uncertainty as to how the battle will end, the consciousness that a great tragedy is imminent and a feeling that the tragedy may be unrelieved: all these factors have to be taken into account in assessing the audience's reaction to the first two dreams. However confusing the symbolism, there is a sense of direction in this part of the story which makes it inevitable that the hearer shall see in the dreams a prediction of the coming battle. We are on the eve of Roncevaux, and both author and listeners know it.

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