

Récit et Temporalité : Histoire et Historicité in the Oxford Manuscript of La Chanson de Roland

WHEN WE REFER to a particular piece of writing as literature, rather than, say, as history, that suggests several judgments; that the discourse in question bears an oblique and problematical relationship to what one might call "historical truth"; that various rhetorical strategies are brought into play, be they figures of speech or appeals to emotion; and, finally, that it is a problematical form of discourse which does not allow itself to be pinned down, an undecidable combination of the referential and the non-referential. This article examines certain problems of historicity as exemplified by the Oxford manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland* (problems which are often heightened when this manuscript is considered in its relationship to other manuscripts) and their interconnection with questions of narrative standpoint and tense-structure.

Understanding of these questions has thus far developed along two separate lines. On the one hand, concerning tense usage, one has such scholars as von Wartburg, who saw a relative indifference to distinctions of tense: "Ce qui frappe avant tout, c'est la grande liberté dont jouit l'ancien français, c'est sa forme très relâchée."¹ On the other hand, the problem of historical perspective has been treated by Zumthor, who advances the following proposition: "A l'égard des facteurs historiques et idéologiques qui lui restent externes, le texte fonctionne comme un filtre." For Zumthor, the medieval text is that which "s'interpose entre [la com-

¹Walther von Wartburg, *Évolution et structure de la langue française*, dixième édition (Berne: Éditions A. Francke, 1971), p. 93.

munauté qui l'a produit.] et nous."²

Where these two issues merge is in consideration of the narrative event, the nature of an orally-transmitted text, and the temporal difference between the story and the audience (in which the relationship narrator-audience is concerned with a present situation and the relationship narrator-story with a past situation). Rather than imply, as did von Wartburg, that the narrator of the *Roland* is responsible for a jumble of tenses, Hatcher assigned specific functions to various tenses and combinations of tenses within the narrative.³ Although Hatcher's distinctions are often quite useful, one can nevertheless go one step further, as Weinrich does, by grouping tenses into two categories which characterize locutionary attitudes.⁴ Into Weinrich's first category, that of tenses evoking *le monde commenté*, fall the present, the *passé composé* and the future, each of which involves a situation where the relationship of the narrator to his audience becomes heightened, where both narrator and audience are concerned and are forced to act and react. For Weinrich, commentary is a fragment of action, engaging both partners in discourse and continually modifying the relationship between the two. On the other hand, Weinrich's *monde raconté* comprises other locutionary situations, such as those commonly involved in an historical account, a novel, or a piece of journalism. That category uses discourse in the *passé simple*, imperfect, *plus-que-parfait*, and conditional. What distinguishes between the two *mondes* is neither the nature of the material presented nor the literary genre in which it is presented, but rather the manner of presentation in terms of provoking immediate reaction on the part of the listener or reader. Thus the extra-linguistic situation comes into consideration only with the *monde commenté*. And it is precisely the extra-linguistic situation which is of primary importance in the *Chanson de Roland*, given that, as a *chanson de geste*, it was presented orally to an audience and, moreover, to an audience that was already familiar with the events of the story.

²Paul Zumthor, "Le texte médiéval et l'histoire: propositions méthodologiques," *Romanic Review*, 64 (1973).

³Anna Granville Hatcher, "Tense Usage in the *Roland*," *Studies in Philology*, 39 (October 1942), pp. 597-624.

⁴Harald Weinrich, *Le Temps: le récit et le commentaire*, trans. Michèle Lacoste, Collection poétique (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

The oral nature of the text then might lead one to stress the importance of commented tenses, or even to make the generalization that the *Chanson de Roland* occurs in the present, a commented tense. To substantiate this claim, one need only quote the second-last line, which states firmly in the present tense that Charles "Pluret des oilz, sa barbe blanche tirt."⁵ Thus, when the performance or reading is finished, the audience or reader is left only with a present situation analogous to that created by the last line of *Madame Bovary*: "Il vient de recevoir la croix d'honneur" — both result in a certain timelessness or eternal presence being given to the work as a whole. This technique can be seen as partially motivated by the fact that the *Roland* was one of a cycle of *chansons de geste* concerning Charlemagne, and ending in the present tense is one way of opening the text to the possibility of continuation. Of course, one need not read as far as the final line in order to grasp the present-ness of the narrative fully, for this is apparent from the first line: "Carles li reis, nostre emperere magnes," where the "nostre" here can be seen both as uniting the narrator with the material of his story and with his audience, so that in fact the "nous" becomes all three: the characters, the narrator, and the audience. (It is perhaps equally possible to see the "nous" of the first line of *Madame Bovary* — "Nous étions à l'étude" — as fulfilling the same unifying function.) Thus the narrator immediately becomes a mediator whose function is to create a representation of the past.

The full ambiguity of the situation is brought out in the realization that the *Chanson de Roland* is really one civilization speaking to itself. The audience is already familiar with the events of the story and, through what might otherwise seem a strange combination of retrospection, foreshadowing, and paratactic phrase structure, the audience is itself involved in creating the logic of the story. The Oxford manuscript exhibits only a very tangential relationship to what one might call "historical truth," for, while historically based, its historicity is of little importance to the story or to the way in which it is related. Nowhere in the text is historical fact referred to as such, and such pieces of information as chronological dates are completely absent.

The question of historical perspective might be conveniently consid-

⁵Quotations from the *Roland* are from the Bédier edition (Paris: Édition d'Art H. Piazza, 1921; édition définitive, 1937).

ered by examining the external referentiality of the text, i.e., those points where the text refers outside itself. There are but three:

Deus me cunfunde, se la geste en desment! (v. 788)
 Il est escrit en la geste Francor. . . (v. 1443)
 Il est escrit en l'anciene geste ... (v. 3742)

As is apparent, those references are not to historical events but to a prior, written text. Further, they in no way serve to strengthen the historicity of the text, for in the first case (v. 788), the actual veracity of the prior *geste* is put into question, and in the other two references, the previous *geste* is cited to substantiate the truthfulness of relatively minor events, without making any claims about the status of the current narration as a whole. So that what is in other contexts a legitimate historical device (citing one's sources to establish credibility) is here used in such a way that referentially in fact subverts historicity.

The contingent nature of the Oxford manuscript with respect to both historical and narrative perspective becomes manifest with examination of other manuscripts of the *Chanson*. The Venice manuscript (V₄) affords a very rich field for attempts to verify any connection of tense usage and narrative perspective with the historicity of the text. The opening lines of V₄ differ radically from those of the Oxford manuscript and consequently offer a radically different point from which to view the narration as a whole:

Chi voil oïr vere significance?
 A San Donis ert une geste, in France;⁶

Firstly the V₄ manuscript is conscious of, and explicit about, both the locutionary situation ("Chi voil oïr") and the historical veracity of the text ("vere significance"). The reference to the *geste* occurs at a much more critical moment than do any of the three references in the Oxford manuscript, the V₄ text thus pointing immediately outside of itself. While the Oxford manuscript contains the unifying *nostre*, an implied present tense, the V₄ in fact attenuates the importance of the locutionary situation, not only by direct mention of it through *oïr*, through which a separation of audience and narrator is created, but also by the extra-textual reference and the use

⁶References to the Venice IV manuscript are from the Mortier edition (Paris: Éditions de la Geste Francor, 1942).

of a verb tense of the *monde raconté*, the imperfect *ert*.

Both the Oxford and V₄ manuscripts (as well as Châteauroux and others) contain the reference to the *geste Francor* (V₄: 1380 "El est scritto en la geste Francor"). What is brought out by this linking feature is the nature of the individual manuscripts as descendants of a (missing) paradigm, reference to which is used in various ways and to varying degrees to establish the historicity of the individual manuscripts. Nevertheless, the historical perspective of these two manuscripts is not established primarily by extra-textual referentiality but rather through the use of verb tenses.

If one is to view the V₄ manuscript, as the manuscript seems to view itself by virtue of its opening line, as emphasizing historical perspective (or the relationship narrator-story) over the locutionary situation (the relationship narrator-audience), then one would expect this to be borne out in tense usage. Since the present tense is the primary tense of the narrative of the Oxford manuscript, appearing, according to Hatcher, almost 1600 times (followed by the *passé composé* with about 375 instances), it is interesting to note what sorts of changes take place in the third person singular present tense of *estre* (*est* — the most common single verb form of the Oxford manuscript) between the two manuscripts. According to Duggan,⁷ the *est* form appears in the Oxford manuscript 441 times. *Est* can represent either a present tense or be used in forming a *passé composé* (both tenses are, however, of Weinrich's *monde commenté*) and in fact is used in roughly the same proportion of present tenses to *passé composé* as in the text as a whole (1600/375). Of these 441 instances of *est* in the Oxford manuscript, only 349 of the corresponding lines actually appear in the V₄, and of these 349 pairs 33 represent discrepancies in verb tense between the two manuscripts. Each one of these 33 discrepancies is an instance of a commented tense in the Oxford manuscript being changed to a narrated tense in the V₄. In other words, each time a tense has been changed, the narrative perspective has also been changed, and in no case is there a change of tense *within* Weinrich's *monde commenté* (e.g., from present to *passé composé* or vice-versa). Representative examples of these modifica-

⁷Joseph J. Duggan, *A Concordance of the Chanson de Roland* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1969).

tions follow:

Ço dist Rollant : "Cist colp est de produme! "

(O, v. 1288)

Ço dist Rollant : "Cil fo colp de produme!"

(V₄, v. 1207)

Oliver est desur un pui haut muntez

(O, v. 1017)

Oliver monta desor o pei altor

(V₄, v. 952)

sa hanste est frait . . . (O, v. 1352)

Ses asta fraita. . . (V₄, v. 1269)

Li angles est tute noit a sun chef (O, v. 2528)

Li angel estoit tote noit a son chef (V₄, v. 2719)

Tant chevalchat qu'il est premers devant

(O, v. 2842)

Tant çivalçeit qu'il fu primer avant (V₄, v. 3025)

What is of further interest with regard to these alterations is the fact that of the 33, only 4 occur within dialogue, which perhaps indicates that the narrator has in some sense inherited set blocks of narration and has been left to create his own perspective on them. Thus, what Zumthor refers to as the text functioning as filter, may in fact be properly the work not of the text but of the narrator.

While the Oxford manuscript contains three references to the prior *geste*, V₄, contains only one beyond the initial one (v. 1380), so that again there is no strong connection between referentiality and historicity, for the first extra-textual reference in V₄ establishes the veracity of the text as a whole, and the historical perspective is carried on in what follows through the use of narrated tenses. In both manuscripts, what we have is historical perspective (referentiality) accomplished through, or even supplanted by, narrative perspective, with very limited recourse to the citation of actual events in history as such. The reliance of each text on history is reflected primarily implicitly in its use of narrated tenses.

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