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Roland at Roncevaux: A Vote for the Angels

Since 1965, when my translation of *La Chanson de Roland* was first published, there have been two shifts in academic perspective relevant to the writing of the present paper. Translators, who were always considered useful for *others,* are now perceived in the light of Translation Theory, with its recognition of translation as a form of hermeneutics, and this has brought some degree of academic respectability. While translators were becoming more involved with the abstract, medievalists were exhausting their interest in philological and historical aspects of the *Roland* and concerning themselves instead with those aspects which are also the domain of translators, that is, literature *per se.* The works of Gerard J. Brault[1] and Robert Francis Cook[2] offer the most notable recent examples of this preference. Cook places primary emphasis on the perfection of Roland's feudal relationship to Charles, rather than, as Brault would have it, his service to God.

Professor Cook's principal thesis had been previously expressed in an article about translation, in which he complains that a particular passage (laisses 83-85), crucial to his opinion, had been mistreated by various translators, including myself. I plead guilty to the charge of including words not in the text, but whether or not this is legitimately called hypertranslation—in Cook's definition "presenting as part of the text meanings and events that are not there but whose presence we expect"[3]—depends, of course, on whether

1 Gerard J. Brault, *The Song of Roland,* 2 vols. (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978). Quotations from the text will come from this edition.

2 Robert Francis Cook, *The Sense of the Song of Roland* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

3 Robert Francis Cook, "Translators and Traducers: Some English Versions of the *Song of Roland,* stanzas 83-85," *Olifant* 7 (1980): 331.

or not the assumptions expressed by those words are also to be found between, if not in, the words of the original. If indeed they are, I am in complete agreement with the statement made by Frederick Goldin in the introduction to his translation: "[T]o translate strictly according to the letter—to ignore what is there simply because it is not there in black and white—is to be guilty of a crime against the poem not unlike Ganelon's against the state."[4] Professor Goldin's translation of laisse 84 includes, as Cook regretfully notes, the word "here" as the place of the pagans' forthcoming deaths ("These pagan traitors have gathered here to die," v. 1068). While Cook maintains that such intrusions show the influence of preconceived opinion, I would like to argue that his reading, literal as it seems, has been slanted by his own beliefs about the text.

The question is whether or not Roland claimed that the Saracens would die at Roncevaux. In criticizing my own translation of line 1058 of this sequence ("They all are doomed to die at Roncevaux"), Professor Cook states: "Can it be doubted that the fashionable critical notion of *démesure* has led the translator, perhaps unawares . . ." *(Olifant* 338) to express her belief that he did. I suppose in a way I do believe that Roland's attitude constitutes *démesure,* taking that to mean something beyond the scope of the reasonable, only I do not consider it either wrong or sinful. Quite the contrary.

I would like to emphasize that I regard Professor Cook's book as a major contribution to *Roland* scholarship. Those who find Brault's work too "Christological," to use Professor Calin's term,[5] may be persuaded by Cook to stop reading, and, worse, teaching the poem as a misbegotten tragedy in which the angels arrive inexplicably to escort Roland to an eternal reward. Whether or not Turoldus intended it so, that apotheosis functions in the text to exclude certain kinds of interpretation—all, in fact, which see

[4] Frederick Goldin, *The Song of Roland* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978) 47.

[5] William C. Calin, review of Brault's edition, *Olifant* 7 (1980): 361.

Roland as having been wrong. Repentence, however great the sin, would receive, at best, some promise of salvation, certainly not immediate. Even Archbishop Turpin, the only character in the poem to be defined as both *proz* and *sages* (v. 3691), was granted no supernatural distinction, to say nothing of Oliver who, in the view of critics arguing repentence, would have been right when Roland was wrong. Interpretations that regard Roland as *ultrecuidant* without specific repentence are even less able to make sense of the text.

Only absolute fidelity to an ideal can account for Roland's behavior throughout the poem, and especially for the manner of his death. It is a measure of the poem's greatness that it has survived interpretations that leave one wondering why it has been so long admired, so a book which ably relieves it from the burden of misunderstanding is profoundly welcome. Professor Cook's insistence that Roland is not only guiltless but commended by God and angels seems to me much more important than the precise definition of the absolute to which he was committed.

But examination of laisses 83-85 in the light of Cook's criticism may not yield to agreement about the nature of that commitment. While I would now be inclined to translate that passage more conservatively, I do not believe that this would alter the fundamental meaning as I perceive it. Professor Cook is certainly correct in stating that considerations of rhyme will not justify the specific mention of Roncevaux as the place where the Saracens would die. (Lest the reader unfamiliar with my translation be wondering what rhymes are doing there at all, let me mention that having found assonance too restricting and not very effectual in English, I used a rhyme at the end of each laisse to suggest its emphatic conclusion and its way of functioning as an individual unit in the drama. For the marching rhythm of the decasyllables, so different from iambic pentameter, a visible hiatus after the fourth or sixth syllable was introduced. There seems no way, otherwise, to maintain a ten-syllable line without the reader's automatically scanning it as classical English verse. I regret, therefore, that Professor Cook chose to delete the visible caesurae from the passage he quotes [*Olifant* 337].)

Cook, intent on showing an absence of *démesure,* insists on the general nature of Roland's promises: "And where is *démesure*

going to show up, if not in the only sustained statement Roland ever makes about anything?" (338). The idea is that translators, with their built-in expectations of *démesure,* build it into their versions, thus producing "not a rendering of the Oxford text, but a gloss." The poem would then be "about *démesure"* (339). I would point out that even if Roland *does* assume the forthcoming death of all the pagans, the fact is that the multitude Oliver has seen, and many more besides, will indeed be killed by the rear guard. On the other hand, there would seem to be no getting around the extraordinary confidence Roland expresses. This is more comprehensible to me in a religious context than as an expression of loyalty to Charles. Cook argues as follows:

> The structural key to the Roncevaux episode is the relationship, through time, between promises and their accomplishment... Roland's promises are *qualified ones,* and their context is broader than the battle of Roncevaux. These facts, though not always appreciated, are essential. Roland carries out his promises as qualified, while his enemies neither limit theirs nor succeed in fulfilling them. There is little to be gained by contorting these elements of the text, or ignoring them, for the sake of a scholarly doctrine of heroic pride. Personal pride—even if Roland did exhibit such pride—would be irrelevant to the theme of responsibility and sacrifice in a context of promises and ensuing, related acts. *(Sense* 137, italics mine)

Toward the end of his book, Cook does place this secular absolute in the larger context of religious faith, the possibility of sacrifice in affirmation of a cause more compelling than life and more motivating than fear. I think this aspect needs to be assumed in laisses 83-85. If it is, the words themselves will take on a different emphasis from the one Cook gives them.

Our reading of these laisses seems to me prepared in Roland's initial response to Oliver's unemphatic statement that the noise of weapons may mean battle with the Saracens. Neither in his *Olifant* article nor in the Commentary section of his book does Professor Cook mention the line that precedes the "feudal credo" of laisse 79: "E Deus la nus otreit!" These words eloquently summarize Roland's unalterable position. War against a pagan enemy would be a gift from God. The size of the opposing army is not in question here; when it is, Roland's response will be the same.

The spontaneity of the exclamation is an expression of the individual, but he speaks for the group he leads. A second statement refers, not to God, whose will remains to be seen, but to the king for whom they are, in various senses, to stand. The well-known list of feudal obligations that follows includes quite specific statements about suffering, but there is nothing about dying. Returning to the religious context, Roland utters the celebrated line,"Paien unt tort e chrestïens unt dreit" (v. 1015), which resounds like a ground-bass through the entire poem, implied in Roland's first speech about Marsile, reiterated by Roland when he has killed Marsile's nephew. To be right, in a tradition of judicial combat, means to win, with God's help. In this belief, asking Charles to return would indeed be a dishonor, a lack of faith, a refusal of the circumstances God has provided.[6]

Roland, Oliver, and the others of the rear guard are irreproachably courageous. There is no disagreement about what must be done. Oliver alone thinks of summoning help, to which Roland replies, not by an abstract statement, but personally: "Jo fereie que fols!" (v. 1053). *Fols* is unexpected and, taken literally, does not contribute to the notion of *démesure.* However strongly it is intended—madness? foolishness?—it refers to un-reason. Rather than seeing it as a reference to Roland's promise to Charles, *fols* seems more easily explained by the extreme attitude appropriate to a Holy War. To doubt the rear guard's ability to carry out its task would be as mad as to doubt that a weak man can win a judicial combat, as witness Thierry later on. It is Roland who will do, or not do, something *fol,* since the decision is exclusively his. *Jo* accepts the responsibility without comment. But his belief in the power of being right, like his rejoicing in the possibility of battle, is not personal or prideful in any petty sense. If he loses his *los* it will be because he has been a bad chieftain, because he has failed to lead his men in the direction of their own honor and their immortal life, not because his men all die on the field.

Roland then states (vv. 1055-6) that he will drench his sword in blood, indicating, as Cook points out, no particular time, place, or result. There follows what Cook refers to as "one of the

[6]Brault expresses similar views; see especially I: 178-79.

most misunderstood predictions in all literature" *(Sense* 64): "Felun paien mar i vindrent as porz, / Jo vos plevis, tuz sunt jugez a mort" (lines 1057-58). What Cook considers to be misunderstood is that Roland's statement about the death of the pagans—those who, in Brault's translation, will "rue the day" they came to Roncevaux—is given in the most general of terms.

Only under the influence of an improbable, even sinful, despair could Roland have felt it worth stating that the pagans, like the rest of us, would all die some day. That would be to wrest the shadow of a positive feeling from a fact whose accuracy has no immediate relevance. I suppose that the leader of a detachment in a modern army, not equipped with theological armor and about to be overwhelmed, might have such a thought in the guise of optimism. But if he spoke it aloud, he would sound either bitter or ironic; it could hardly be effective as an encouragement to fight regardless of the odds.

Textual meaning has to, be determined, often enough, by assumptions about appropriate modes of speech. Roland, as I perceive him, cannot be devious, cannot speak other than directly. The word *eschec* in his speech to the Franks before the battle begins (v. 1167) offers another example. Cook's view, that it refers to a spiritual triumph, is attractive, since we know that there would be no other booty for the rear guard. But martyrdom is not the purpose of a crusade any more than of a judicial combat. Roland and his Franks expect to destroy the Saracens, whatever the cost to themselves, and at the outset of the battle are not likely to be thinking about other forms of victory. Salvation in another life will be offered by the archbishop when there is no more hope left in this one. That is not the mood in laisses 83-85.

Parataxis leaves much unstated, but I think it would be difficult not to see Roland's promise to wield Durendal mightily, the prediction that the pagans will regret corning to Roncevaux, and the final line, "Jo vos plevis, tuz sunt jugez a mort" (v. 1058) as an ascending series. The pagans *are jugez a mort*—again an expression that surprizes, suggesting the judgement of God on those who are wrong, as well as the immediate judgement of Roland that it is inappropriate to call for help. If Roland is merely reminding Oliver that pagans, however numerous, are mortal, he would scarcely have had to append *Jo vos plevis* to his remark. This oath of assurance is

repeated in line 1069, and this time the pagans are *a mort livrez,* "doomed to die", as Cook and Brault both translate it, but the formulation suggests that they are already handed over to death, essentially dead already. The pagans Oliver has seen are, in fact, as good as dead, along with many not yet in sight.

Similar arguments could be made regarding the parallel statement in laisse 85: "Ja cil d'Espaigne n'avrunt de mort guarant." If Roland believes that the rear guard actually can defeat the pagans, he is not making a rash, prideful, senseless decision. Roland is the one member of the army who is totally clear-headed, the only one who was willing to act on the implications of Marsile's earlier treachery. Charles himself was not so resolute. I believe that it was because the Franks, no matter how weary they were of fighting, would normally have been swayed by Roland's argument, that the poet had him express himself in a manner that, however factual, would have been irritatingly boastful (as it has irritated countless critics). To me this is proof of the poet's genius, not a revelation of Roland's essential character. Roland is not tempted by the impossible peace, because in him the crusading spirit is absolute, and totally internalized. In other words, it is natural.

This is the spirit that moves him at Roncevaux. There is no weighing of alternatives; he does not even consider calling for help. Such singlemindedness might well have been culpable, indeed prideful, if all that had been at stake were Roland's obligation to Charles, his sworn word. Whatever the obligation of the rear guard (Cook reminds us that we really do not know what it was), the situation of being attacked by so enormous an army was surely unusual, and admitting of more than one response. The service of God, however, may demand anything, invoking no reasons, and in that service any victory may be granted. Before they die, the archbishop will say to Roland: "Cist camp est vostre, mercit Deu, vostre e mien" (v. 2183). Their sacrifice, moreover, has no negative consequences; as Cook points out *(Sense* 87), neither Roland nor the peers were indispensable.

Roland acts out of a faith so much a part of himself that he does not even allude to it. When Oliver in his dismay incongruously breaks Roland's engagement to his sister, Roland is startled enough to realize for the first time how the situation looks from a more secular point of view. And Oliver hastens to utter his Polonius-like

morality. The depth of Roland's shock at their difference is shown later when he momentarily believes that Oliver, blinded by his wounds and close to death, might have struck at him intentionally.

The most significant passage in which Roland looks at Roncevaux from a purely human perspective is, of course, laisse 140. It is unfortunate that the crucial line, 1863, includes the ambiguous *pur mei.* Here various translators, praised by Cook for their adherence to the letter of the text in laisses 83-85, select among the possible meanings according to their general interpretation of the poem. For those who believe, with Cook and the present writer, that an accurate reading of *La Chanson de Roland* depends on our seeing that Roland is not guilty of the sin of pride and has nothing to repent, these translations do a great disservice. There is no possibility of a neutral translation of this line, one that would provide the "raw material" for readings that Cook talks about. There can only be "a translation which can be read *in that way and no other" (Olifant* 332), regardless of the translator's intention and skill. Owen's translation, the least damaging, has "on my behalf I see you slain,"[7] Brault, "I see you dying for my sake" (115), Merwin, "I see you dying for my sake."[8] Other versions include Sayers's "For me you go to death,"[9] and Bédier's "pour moi."[10] My own preference for "because of me" can be particularly well supported by line 1090: "Que ja pur mei perdet sa valur France!" Brault translates here "on my account," and certainly the meaning "for my sake" or "for me" would be impossible.

The Franks do indeed become martyrs because of Roland, because of his absolute commitment to Charlemagne's cause, which in its "lightness" requires of them only that they fight those who are

[7] D. D. R. Owen, *The Song of Roland* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1972) 72.

[8] W. S. Merwin, *The Song of Roland* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970) 53.

[9] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Song of Roland* (Penguin Books, 1957) 123.

[10] Joseph Bédier, *La Chanson de Roland* (Paris: L'Edition d'Art H. Piazza, 1960) 157.

"wrong" in whatever circumstances. Their refusal to recognize this wrongness in Marsile is the true cause of their deaths. Roland would have provided them an easier way to continue the war. When he perceives the human consequences of his faith, Roland expresses his sorrow that he could not both lead the Franks and protect them, that evil was ultimately so powerful that only God could be their *guarant,* as the Franks had expected him to be. This is the grief that he feels he would not survive, even if he survived Roncevaux. But unless *pur mei* is mistranslated, he expresses no sense of having acted in error, or unwisely, and certainly not sinfully. If he had it to decide again, who would imagine Roland yielding to Oliver's arguments?

This is also the sense in which he seems to me proud. The certainty of the saints is not necessarily endearing, and Christian humility is incompatible with Holy War. The dazzling figure of Roland exhorting his troops just before the battle, giving them something to look up to, and beyond him the shining tip of his spear against the sky—this charismatic war-leader is anything but self-effacing, however ready he may be for self-sacrifice.

The last gesture of Roland's life—offering his right gauntlet to God (v. 2389)—has a similar quality; it is a gesture which, like the poem itself, magnificently survives beyond the reach of contradictory interpretations. To these I would like to add a few observations, following Brault's suggestion (I: 29) that the symbolic aspects of the poem are best perceived in the context of the whole. One of the most evident is the giving and receiving of a gauntlet. Quite probably the specific meaning in each instance would have been more apparent to contemporary listeners than to us, but most readers become aware of the series stretching from the glove Ganelon dropped, symbol of his authority to speak for Charles to Marsile, to the glove Roland extends toward God, and, beyond Roland's death, to the passage where Marsile has to use his left hand to offer his own gauntlet to Baligant. Baligant's acceptance is somewhat qualified; there is some question as to whether Marsile has failed too utterly even to be granted so much, if I correctly understand the *nepurquant* of line 2838. Finally, there are the gauntlets Pinabel and Thierry leave as their pledges to Charles.

In each case the greater emphasis is on the receiver. That Roland's gesture is not one of homage has been very convincingly

demonstrated by recent scholarship—I would certainly adjust my translation accordingly—and Brault's view that it is "an outward manifestation of his remorse" (I: 259) is impressively argued, taking "remorse" in the general sense. Nevertheless I do not agree with Cook *(Sense* 100, note 125) that humility is the dominant emotion, except perhaps as the mood of any *mea culpa.* The reader may be more likely to perceive in Roland's gesture a triumphant echo of Ganelon's unconscious revelation: the traitor dropped the glove, the exemplar of perfect fidelity extends it toward the ultimate object of his faith.

And it is received. Here, too, the receiver's rôle is the more significant. The difficulty of interpreting Roland's gesture has resulted in a certain lack of attention to its supernatural result. Saint Gabriel takes the glove from Roland's hand while Roland is *still alive.* This direct encounter of the physical and spiritual domains is more vivid than Charles's dreams and visions, more daring than the poet's attributing to the same angelic figure words that Charles and all of us can actually hear. The moment of Roland's death reveals the supreme tact of the poet who, like his hero, succeeds so far beyond all reasonable expectations.

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