Commemorative Formulae
in the Geste des Loherens

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Throughout history, there have been those who decried contemporaneous narrative cycles as crudely executed profiteering ventures at best and as a nefarious influence on the minds and morals of the susceptible at worst. But the arguments that may rage, even between scholars, on the relative aesthetic, intellectual and moral merits of these texts tend to obscure a very important consideration: why does a given text-group come to have such extraordinary mass appeal as did the Amadis de Gaula series in the sixteenth century, or Star Trek in our own? What fuels the veritable “critical mass” of text that it embodies such auto-generative power? It is easy—too easy—to dismiss narrative cycles by using the handy “escapist” label. The question begs an answer: escape from what? to what?

As we are all aware, narrative can be a way for the collective to come to terms with itself; a way to work through, recast and demystify the world. Successful narratives, in this context, will be those narratives which are structured, consciously or, more probably, unconsciously, to effectively respond to collective needs. Logically then, we could attempt to define various facets of those needs through the study of narrative structures observed in the texts. In the following pages, I will explore one of the structural hallmarks and narrative cycles—the commemorative formulae that refer to persons or events from other narratives in the cycle—in light of a hypothesis regarding the underlying collective need. While this question is of interest with respect to any number of narrative cycles, modern as well as medieval, I will confine my remarks in the brief study to the Old French geste des Lorrains.

There is no question but that the Lorrain cycle was widely appreciated during the Middle Ages. Scholars have counted some sixty complete or fragmentary manuscripts of the Lorrain narratives—a truly stupendous number. To review the cycle briefly, let me note that it features four generations of the family: Hervis, Garin, Gerbert and Anseïs; and that the branches were most probably composed in the
twelfth and thirteenth centuries, beginning with the narrative of Garin.

From the very first, the Lorrains were conceived genealogically. Garin le Lorrain already included references to other generations; references that would in time be expanded and developed into distinct, separate narratives. Certainly, an audience hearing Garin in later years, after the composition and circulation of other narratives in the cycle, would have been sensitive to the intertextual clues. However, the references are so structured as to give even the initial audience a sense of ongoing, multi-generational story line. Similarly, all of the other narratives in the series include intertextual references, again regardless of the chronological order of composition.

Now it has long been clear to scholars that genealogy is a priority, not only for the Lorrain cycle, but for the chanson de geste in general. However, recent studies have reemphasized the relationship between genealogy and linear time; while on the other hand, the link between genealogy and cyclicity, especially with respect to resulting concepts of the self in time, has received less attention. But to consider genealogy uniquely form the vantage point of linearity is to ignore the plurality of temporal discourses implicit in narrative structures—a plurality which may well represent the beginnings of an answer to the initial question regarding the source of the auto-generative power of narrative cycles.

I would like to advance the theory that the pertinent issue is that of the conceptualization of the self in time, in a society with a variety of temporal frameworks in which to operate. The historical or theological conceptualizations of the self in time certainly have their advantages: the self in history is an individual, a unique being, distinct from all others. The price, of course, is the fragility of that relentlessly finite individuality. The Christian self is both individual, in that salvation conserves the specific parameters of the self even while serving God’s purpose, and immortal—but notably, this form of immortality is conceived of as unearthly, divine, essentially “other” because conceptually impossible in conjunction with the perceived physical world. If a historical immortality is impossible, and a Christian immortality all but unfathomable, then perhaps an antidote may be found in nature, and in narratives which reflect a definition of self based on the natural recurrences of the cycle. Thus, we may hypothesize that the cyclical structures of the geste des Lorrains can
serve to redefine the self in reassuring ways: through narrative, the self, recast as a manifestation of the collective rather than the individual, can be re-realized through a cyclical pattern of death and rebirth in subsequent generations, and is therefore effectively eternal.\textsuperscript{9}

If certain structures inherent to narrative cycles reflect the cyclical concept of time as embodied in the natural world, then the individual self, consistent with the reality of that world, is not immortal. Each act, each “self” is recognized as finite, but also, and most importantly, as repeatable. Repetition, then, is the essence of the existential reassurance inherent to this conceptualization of time. Repetition is, of course, a function of perception; it implies a complex interaction between the observer and the object, which is seen not in isolation but as part of a pattern, through a process of comparison with objects preceding it in the sequence of presentation. This retroactive synthesis engenders anticipation or expectation, as the structure is projected forwards as well as backwards. The recognition of a repeated pattern serves not only to unite but also to separate each reiteration of the pattern. This very recognition of both sameness and difference—the self conceptualized cyclically, cumulatively—is the source of the reassuring power of the cycle. In short, the perception of repeated phenomena in the narratives serves to alleviate anxiety by creating a temporal space in which the finite self can become infinite, through ongoing, dynamic reactualization.\textsuperscript{10}

As I will demonstrate through the examples in the following pages, in the Lorrain cycle, this reactualization of a collective self is made explicit through the commemorative formulae I have evoked above. Because a part of network of repetitive structures, each narrative in the cycle—indeed each episode within a narrative—constitutes a microcosm of the whole. Each act reflects a myriad of other, similar acts. For this repetitive network to have meaning, however, the audience must be aware of it. As I have already noted, the repetition is predicated on the spectator’s literary and cultural competence, to decipher the codes and formulae indicative of the multiplicity behind the single act. Commemorative formulae facilitate this process of decoding and enhance the cyclic aspect of the narratives. These commemorative formulae, not surprisingly, take the form of references to characters, both major and minor, in other narratives in the series. These references are crucial to the text in which they are mentioned because such references serve as a structural touchstone, since the personality, actions and social position of the characters in any given
text are predicated on those of other generations. It is in this way that each character thus referenced becomes a microcosm of the whole, and a repetition of the others.

The epithet is the most common form of commemorative referencing. In Gerbert de Metz, the protagonist Gerbert is known as “Gerbert, li fiz al duc Garin.” In Anseis de Metz, Anseis is “li filz Gerbert.” Garin is the “son of Hervis;” Hervis is the “father of Garin and Bégon.” The epithet—a common formulaic feature of the chanson de geste marking an essential trait or attribute—here serves to underline the basic repetition informing the cycle. The epithet documents continuity, of course, through the evocation of a genealogical relationship; but equally importantly, it documents discontinuity as well, in that the epithet mentions two distinct individuals. This perception of discontinuity or separateness is essential to the concept of repetition, since repetition is necessarily grounded in the perception of the cessation or termination of other, similar occurrences. In simplest terms, for something to happen “again,” it must have happened already. The occurrence with no perceived closure is not a repetition; rather, it is happening “still.” The genealogical epithet in particular, and the commemorative formula in general, then, create a collective self continuous through time, not by positing a static permanence, but by delineating individual occurrences which are then demonstrated to be identical or parallel to each other.

In Garin le Lorrain, for example, the opening verses reference the preceding generation, that of Hervis de Metz, here a mature, powerful lord and the right hand of Charles Martel. The brief evocation of his exploits serves to ground the story of Garin and his brother Bégon in the repetitive cycle: like their father, who is already functioning as one of the king’s most valued men, they will be great and powerful knights, as is explained at their birth:

Grant joie fu du Loheren Hervil,
Je que diroie ne conteroie ci,
Que d’Aeliz la cortoise ot .ii. fiz:
L’ainnez ot non li Loherenz Garins
Qui puis fu dus et ot asez amis;
L’autre ot non Bégon, sire fu de Belin,
Qui molt fu preuz et chevaliers gentis,
De haut para[ra]ge et de molt riche pris. (Garin, 790-97)
The young Garin and Bégon are often compared to their father, as they are expected to be like Hervis, and to emulate his exploits, especially in battle. For example, one of Bégon's uncles urges him to show the same valor as his father: "'Biaux niers,' fait il, 'soiez p[re]us et hardiz! / Hui vos ramenbre de vo pere Hervil, / Du millor home qui sor cheval seïst" (6351-53). And indeed, Bégon is up to the challenge: "Qui dont veïst Begon, le fil Herviz, / Al brant d'acier le chaple maintenir, / De jentil home li peüst sovenir" (6924-26). Garin too is identified as his father's son: "le Loheren Garin, / Le duc de Mez, le fil au duc Hervil" (7081-82). Thus, for Garin and Bégon, the parameters of the self are determined as a function of genealogical repetition. They are expected to be like their father; the audience is clearly guided to this interpretation of the text through the references to Hervis. However, the reference to Hervis also serves to distinguish Garin and Bégon; to set them apart from their father. The duality of cyclical time is thus made manifest for the audience of the text: Garin and Bégon represent one genealogical link in this system which derives its validity from the repetition. That which can be redone, relived, reborn is essentially indestructible.

In Garin (doubtless the earliest composed chanson in the cycle), Garin and Bégon are presented as reiterations of a pattern of knightly valor and achievement, but this reiteration goes both ways. In Hervis, the already-known (because outlined in the earlier chanson) valor of Garin and his brother reinforces the dubious half-bourgeois ancestry of Hervis:

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Bone chanson plast vos a escouter?
Des Loharans, vos voromes chanter:
[Com]e Hervis, li gentis et li bers,
[Cil] qui fut pères Garin le redotei
[Et au] cuen Bégue qui tant ot de bontei,
[To]ute la tresse vos en vorai conter. (Hervis, 2-7)
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In this way, Hervis becomes a repetition of Garin and Bégon, just as they are a repetition of him. The cyclical structure is non-directional. Thus, the order of composition of the narratives in the cycle is less germane to the understanding of its underlying meanings than might be supposed, especially since the Lorrain cycle moves both “backwards” and “forwards” from the central nucleus of the earlier Garin / Gerbert narratives. Indeed, the non-directional, multigenerational parameters of the collective self are demonstrated within a single chanson: in
Garin le Lorrain, not only Garin and Bégon’s father is evoked, but also their children, whose story is the subject of Gerbert de Metz:

Gamins enmainne la bien faite Aeliz:
Deci a Mez ne priset onques fin;
Et fist ses noces de la bele Aeliz.
Premiere nuit qu’ensamble o li dormi,
L’ore fu bone, si engenra i. fil;
Gerbers ot non, si con l’estoire dist,
Al noble cors et au cuer enterin,
Qui tantes guerres fist envers Fromondin
Et vers son pere tant que il le vainqui
Et qu’il l’en fist aler as Sarrasins
Dieu renoier et sa mere autresi,
Et si ocist Guillaume de Monclin
Et dans Bernart, le seignor de Naisil,
Et le lingae torna tot a declin.
Bégon li dus si fu o Biautris;
De cele issi et Hernaus et Gerins
As cuers verais et as talanz hardis
Qui tant amerent Gerbert, le lor cousin;
Ainc ne le vorrent ne laissier ne guerpir. (Garin, 7178-96)

The collective self is defined as a series of expectations predicated on a genealogically enduring model. Each character embodying that model is held to certain parameters of behavior. But if the self is bound by these parameters, so is the other; the loyalties, obligations and antagonisms of the other are also read as a function of the repetitive cyclic structure. This the legacy of Hervis is political as well as genetic: Garin and Bégon can claim the city of Metz, even though it is held by Anseïs of Cologne, because of their father’s ownership of it—an ownership which would be explored and expanded later, in the chanson of Hervis:

“Franc chevalier entendez envers mi:
Vos fustes home al Loheren Hervil;
Vos ne devez mi foi mentir
Al conte Begue ne au conte Garin.
Rendez la terre et trestot le paisl” (Garin, 1213-17)

A similar claim, justifying current ownership as a reiteration of a preexisting state of affairs, is put forth for the town of Soissons:
“Droiz emperere,” ce dist li duz garins,  
“Prenez Soisons, la fort cîte gentil.  
Elle siet bien et ja la voz aqüit.  
Moi doit estre, mes a[n]cestres la tint.” (Garin, 2543-46)

Even the disposition of territory and the favoritism of kings cannot fail to take into account that which is due by dint of genealogical imperative, as the queen reminds the king of services done for him by generations of Lorrains:

Dist la roïne: “Cousins, bien avez dit!  
Recevez les, enperere Pepins,  
Et faites ce que je voz lo et pri,  
Et lor donez et le pain et le vin.  
Je lor donrai et le vair et le gris,  
Les belles armes et les chevax de pris.  
Car vox ramembre du Loheren Garin  
Et de Begen, qui si bien voz servi.  
Se il ne fussent, par le cors saint Martin,  
Li quenz Fromons et la geste Alori,  
Il voz eüssent de France fors flati.  
Karles Martiax, qui soé voz norri,  
Cant il fu mors et e la terre mis,  
Vos remasistes, riches rois, molt petiz.  
Li plais en fu en Frances a Saint Denis,  
Qu’il voz voloient la corone tolir.  
En fin l’eüssent, ne fust le dus Herviz.  
Corona voz, malgré vos anemis.  
Et cil fu peres al Loheren Garin.  
Mal guerredon en rendistes le fil.  
Aautretel faites Gerbert, le duc gentil.” (Gerbert, 315-35)

The generative renewal inherent to a cyclic conceptualization of time is evident in the ebb and flow of the Lorrain family fortunes. Repeated instances of the loss of family lands or honor—a figurative form of death—or the actual death of one of the characters, engender attempts to reiterate or reestablish the collective, familial self. This quest to keep that self current in terms of its definition in a feudal context, informs and structures the narratives in the cycle. That this cycle of death (figurative or actual) and rebirth is ongoing, eternalized, is noted in Garin, Gerbert, and Anseïs. In Gerbert, for instance, the
jongleur remarks on the eternal nature of the war between the Bordelais and the Lorrains:

Granz fu la guerre qui ja ne prendra fin.
Aprés les mors la reprennent li vif;
Aprés les peres la racuellent li fil.
Aprés la mort al Loheren Garin,
La recommence li dus Gerbers, ses fiz. (Gerbert, 2471-75)

It is naturally difficult for the modern reader and critic of the Lorrain cycle to see this cycle of endless warfare as anything but negative. But we must, as always with medieval texts, beware imposing contemporary cultural values; we must beware the assumption that the ongoing war necessarily represents a pessimistic world view. In the Lorrain cycle, while the jongleur regrets the loss of life, and while in Anseïs, it is noted that God himself is against the war, there is another consideration, articulated by Gérin, Garin’s nephew and a major character in the cycle: that of the feudal self, an identity predicated on the concept of the warrior knight, whose role it is to fight courageously and to defend his honor, which is the honor of the collective, familial self as well. In this context, the loss of life through treachery (as is the case with Gerbert) rather than in honest battle, represents, beyond the loss of an individual, a threat to the existence of the collective self within acceptable parameters, and as such, must be answered with action that reestablishes that self in the world. Hence Gérin’s call to arms:

“Signor,” dist il [Gérin], “por coi le lerion?
Hui est li jors del grant estor felon,
Hui vos sovaigne du lignage Fromont
Qui no lignange nos a ocis trestot.
Mias se Dieus plet hui venjance en aron.
Chevalerie soit hui misse en saison.
Bien ait de Dieu qui en ara le don.
Qui ci mora, Dieus li face pardon.
Et une chose sachiés sanz mesprison
Que chevaliers qui muert en sa meson
Desor son lit ne desor son leson,
Chevaliers est, si n’en n’est pas franz hon,
Sa mort ne vaut neant plus d’un boton.
Mais por ce a de chevalier le non,
Se vient a cointe ferir de l’esperon.
Ferir i doit de si tres grant randon
Que il ocie errant son compaignon.
De reposes ne doit querrer ocoison
Mais d’estre en guerre toz jors jusqu’au menton.
Chevalier querrer par contençon,
Servir bataille estors et chaplisson,
Et s’il i muerent, Dieus lor face pardon.
Vivre ne doit chevaliers, par reson,
Lonc tans apres que adoubé l’a on
S’il ne l’enporte par force d’esperon.
C’il a conquis de chevalier le non
A toz jors mais parler en devroit on,
Et de plus jones chevaliers refet on.
Si rapenront d’estor et de faucon,
Si ont tuit fet cil de la norisson.
Fromons ocist le mien pere Begon,
Garin mon oncle, Aubri le Borguignon,
Richier, Gerbert et Berni et Huon
Et tant des autres dont je ne sai le non.
Et nos avons ocis des lor foiison.
Ancor ancuil nos entreverra on
Car nos avons ou nos tant compaignon
Que ja n’avront envers nos garisson.
Alons aus armes, signor, gentil baron!”

In cyclical terms, logically, the negation of the (collective) self—this figurative death—becomes an absolute prerequisite to the reactualization of that self, since the separation of one occurrence from the next is inherent to any perceived repetitive pattern. As I have already noted, the cycle is not a static time frame, but rather a dynamic one, as it passes, and must necessarily continue to pass, through all phases. As Gilles Deleuze put it, “L’instinct de la mort vaut comme principe positif originaire pour la répétition, c’est là son domaine et son sens.”12 It is death, real or figurative, the negation of self, that serves to underline the separation, the difference between elements in the series, and this engenders the perception of repetition essential to the cyclical eternalization of the collective. The Lorrain cycle is eternal precisely because of the ongoing warfare, the ongoing negation and reestablishment of the collective self. In Anseïs, often cited for its dark, tragic portrayal of the feudal world, this eternalizing repetition nevertheless serves as the closure for the narrative:
In conclusion, a reliance on historicity and linear chronology, while serving to individualize the self by specifying its performance with respect to other, numberless repetitions, also serves to underline the irreversibility of events, thus engendering an ongoing need for the reassurance inherent to the cycle. If the chanson de geste gives voice, as Howard Bloch has noted, to “the fear that haunted France’s feudal aristocracy—that is to say, the prospect of interruption,” then it also provides the antidote. Far from being a genre that is blind to “any possibility of the future,” the future, in the Lorrain cycle, is the repetition of the past. A cyclical concept of time, whether expressed in literary terms or lived out as a socio-cultural reality, manages change by encasing it in a framework of repetition, a repetition made explicit by the commemorative formulae inscribed in the texts which permit the informed, competent spectator to conceptualize the intertextual dimension of the narratives, thus creating an illusion of permanence. These reiterative structures and patterns in genealogical cycles, such as that of the Lorrain, represent one of the more effective, if not in all cases one of the most aesthetically or intellectually sophisticated, ways for the collective at large to cope with the definition of the self in time.

Notes

1. The definition of the word “cycle” is, of course, problematic. It is most often used to refer to a group of texts defined and linked by a functionally related cast of characters: usually a family for medieval texts, but often a team or crew for contemporary texts. The terms “cyclic” and “cyclicity,” on the other hand, are most often used to refer to that which is cycle-like; in other words, a structure made up of recurring patterns. I have adopted these definitions for this study.
2. David Schenck, in a particularly apt formulation, which we might borrow here, defines the function of what he calls the “myth” of Guillaume d’Orange: “to offer man a process by which he can integrate himself into his world, to solve problems of contradiction, to express his position in the world in terms acceptable to himself, and to satisfy his dreams and desires in some meaningful way.” The Myth of Guillaume: Poetic Consciousness in the Guillaume d’Orange Cycle (Birmingham, Alabama: Summa, 1988), 7.


5. Furthermore, the cycle is open-ended: references are made to Hervis’s ancestors and to Anseïs’s descendants, although in the case of the latter, those descendants will be in an indirect line, as Anseïs’s own son dies in Anseïs de Metz. The open-ended, cyclical nature of the Lorrains is evident in their composition as well, which, like many Old French epic cycles, moves easily to preceding as well as subsequent generations.

6. In this regard, see Howard Bloch, Etymologies and Genealogies (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983): “And if the linearity of its own poetic process rests on a chronological connection of supposedly factual events that remains inseparable from the sequential linking of ancestors, it is because the epic stands both as the poetic transposition of a straight line and the literary equivalent of lineage.” (98)


8. As Schenck, among others, has pointed out: “We know that medieval man was much closer to nature than we are today, and that consequently he tended to be in touch with the rhythm of the seasons and days.” (63)

9. We can agree with Mircea Eliade, who notes that “we also discover the cyclical structure of time, which is regenerated at each new ‘birth’ on whatever plane. This eternal return reveals and ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming. . . . The past is but a prefiguration of the future. No event is irreversible and no transformation is final.” The Myth of the Eternal Return, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1954), 89-90.


11. And in Garin le Loheren, “S’en mut la guerre qui ainc puis ne prist fin. Aprés les peres la reprisent li fil” (11831-35).

12. Gilles Deleuze, Différence et Répétition , 5th ed. (Paris: PUF, 1985), 27. See also Joseph Campbell, “Renewal Myths and Rites of the Primitive Hunters and Planters,” Eranos Conference (Ascona, Switzerland, 1959; published Dallas, 1969). He makes the same observation with respect to the myths of primitive hunters and planters: “They place death in the middle of the scene and not death alone, but killing—as the precondition of life.” This principle is not dissimilar for more “literate” cultures, as Mircea Eliade notes. Those he calls the “historical” peoples—groups who record their history in linear or chronological fashion—feel “a deeper need to regenerate themselves periodically by abolishing past time.”
(74) Although none of these studies refers specifically to the Old French chanson de geste, it is certainly reasonable to consider the cyclical structures observable in that genre in light of studies exploring similar cyclical structures. As Victor Turner has remarked in The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969), “It is not a matter of different cognitive structures, but of an identical cognitive structure articulating wide diversities of cultural experience.” (3)

15. Schenck notes: “the notion of circularity, of ‘eternal return,’ and thus, again, the notion of an ever-present. Such a concept of time binds tightly our notion of the past to the present, but it also tightly links the future to the present.” (64)
16. Paul Zumthor, in his Essai de poétique médiévale (Paris: Seuil, 1972), remarks that “[a]u sein de la grande dualité épique, les séquences du discours apparaissent ainsi déterminées, moins par leur projection sur l’axe d’une durée, que par la perpétuelle ré-affirmation d’une identité dans la ressemblance: de sorte que les transformations narratives ne font que révéler, à la surface, des équivalences profondes.” (332)