THE SONG OF ROLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Then Taillefer, most skilled in song,
Spurring his dashing steed along,
Before the Duke began to sing
Of Roland, of great Charles the king,
Oliver, and those lords beside
Who came to Roncevaux, and died.
(Wace, Roman de Rou, ll. 8013 - 18)

It was a hundred years or so after the Battle of Hastings that the Jersey poet Wace told of the preparations for the conflict and how a certain minstrel, Taillefer, sang a song of Roland before Duke William and the advancing Norman knights. His claim does not stand up to close scrutiny, as we shall see; but at first sight it is not unreasonable, bearing witness as it does to what his contemporaries recognised as the inspirational qualities of the Song of Roland. Wace saw it working on the emotions as both a palliative for battle nerves and a stimulant for those about to be hurled into the melee. What better way indeed to concentrate the knight’s mind on his martial duties? He hears the sounds of combat before the real blows are struck; he participates through the minstrel’s mediation in acts of firm, even jaunty courage in the face of heavy odds; he is reminded of the obligations of commander to men, men to commander, comrade to comrade; he is fired with a pride in lineage and nationhood, and feels the spiritual elation of total commitment to a just cause. Otherwise, in the words of Archbishop Turpin,

... four penny pieces are worth more,
And he should be a cloistered monk instead
And ever after pray for all our sins.

(ll. 1880 - 82)
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Such was the power, as Wace was fully aware, with which this earliest and finest chanson de geste was charged.

Chansons de geste

None of the eighty or more surviving Old French epics encapsulate better than the Song of Roland the crusading warrior spirit of the feudal nobility. That nobility was of mainly Frankish stock; for when in the fifth century the tide of Germanic invaders swept over the old Roman province of Gaul, it was the Franks who colonised much of the land that perpetuates their memory in its very name: France. But although they prevailed over the native population, their language yielded in time to the form of Latin imported by the Roman settlers and which had itself ousted the Celtic speech of the Gauls. Not that Germanic died without resistance: it was still the mother-tongue of Charlemagne and also, no doubt, of the historical Roland. And it bequeathed to French many words that speak of the particular character of the Franks: the terms for ‘arrogance’, ‘boldness’, ‘hate’ and ‘shame’, for ‘war’ and things associated with it – ‘helmet’, ‘broadsword’, ‘wound’, ‘guard’ and many more.

We know the Franks had their own heroic songs, for which Charlemagne himself had some affection; but by about 1100 when, it is generally supposed, our Song of Roland was given its present form, the ancestral legends were being handed down in the French tongue and given the characteristic form of chansons de geste. Of these the Roland is not only the earliest to have come down and, remarkably, the most highly crafted: it is also one of the shortest, only half the length of many, whilst some marched on for up to 20,000 lines.

These epic poems were truly ‘chansons’, since at least in part they were sung, or chanted, by the jongleurs, itinerant minstrels who accompanied themselves on the vielle, an early form of fiddle. Their performances, whether in castle hall or public place, would often have extended over several sessions. We know sadly little of the music: a single line from one poem has been preserved, embedded in a thirteenth-century play.

But we assume it to have been simple and repetitive, designed to excite the emotions by reinforcing the already strong pulse of the epic line. Perhaps the mysterious letters AOI copied at frequent intervals at the end of lines in our unique Roland manuscript are in some way related to the musical presentation, but we cannot be sure.

‘Chansons’, then, because the poems were sung. But why ‘de geste’? The Latin gesta means ‘deeds’: so these were songs of deeds or, in this context, notable deeds, deeds of valour. The French derivative geste acquired further, more particular, senses: the deeds of a group or family, even the family itself. ‘God curse me,’ cries Roland, ‘if I fail my geste!’ (I. 788). Traditionally, too, the whole corpus of these epics was divided into gestes according to their subjects. The Roland belongs to the Geste du Roi, the king in question being, of course, Charlemagne, whose presence as divinely appointed ruler of the Franks is felt throughout the constituent texts, whether he appears in an active or a passive role.

The poets present their matter as firm fact; but however ready their public may have been to believe in those brave heroic figures and their often superhuman deeds, the chansons de geste were historical in only the loosest sense. Nevertheless, most of them do carry at least a grain or two of fact, in the shape either of historical characters or of actual events that can be verified from the chronicles or charters relating to the period in question. Surprisingly, in view of the relatively late dating ascribed to the existing poems, that period is most often the remote Carolingian era of the eighth and ninth centuries. However, it is by no means certain, despite Wace’s testimony, that the clash of the armies at Hastings in 1066 could have been preluded by the singing of anything we would recognise as a chanson de geste. We are in fact confronted by a gap of roughly three hundred years between many of the events and their celebration in the epics we know. These are the so-called ‘silent centuries’ which generations of scholars have been interrogating for evidence of some bridging tradition: they have heard only confused whispers in reply.

No one now takes seriously the belief of some of the Romantics that epics sprang from the soul of the people and composed themselves, rather than being composed. More
rationally, one school of critics supposed that memorable events prompted an immediate response in short songs which, by a process of accretion and elaboration over many years in the course of oral, and therefore unrecorded, transmission, grew into the full-blown epics that were finally written down on parchment. This 'traditionalist' line of criticism has found its opponents in the 'individualists', whose greatest champion was Joseph Bédier. He believed the chansons were created all of a piece by individual poets from the late eleventh century onwards. Typically, they were the fruit of cooperation between minstrels who plied their trade up and down the great pilgrim routes and the clerics of the religious houses along their way, who supplied them with local legends and scraps of information from their archives. For the creation of the Roland the routes leading to Saint James’s shrine at Santiago de Compostela were especially significant. Other solutions to the puzzle have been proposed: the Latin epics both Classical and medieval have been advanced as holding the key, chronicles have been scoured for evidence. But it is surely vain to seek too neat a theory to explain the origin of the genre as a whole. We shall return to the case of the Roland.

History and Legend

In the year 778 Charles, King of the Franks, suffered a military reverse in the Pyrenean pass of Roncevaux. Some modern historians believe it was a far more serious affair than appears in the 'official' chronicles of his reign. Be that as it may, had it not occurred there would have been no Song of Roland, and world literature would have been the poorer.

When his father died in 768, Charles, then about twenty-six years old, inherited half of his kingdom, to which the other half was added three years later on the death of his brother. As king of the Franks he pursued an expansionist policy until they held territories stretching from the Channel in the north to Calabria in the south and from northern Spain to Hungary and the Elbe in the east. Then, on Christmas Day in the year 800, he was crowned in Rome by Pope Leo as the first Holy Roman Emperor. He died in 814.
lacked the resolve to overcome this opposition. Perhaps, as some have suggested, he received disturbing news from his Saxon front. At all events, he turned his back on Saragossa and began his withdrawal to France, according to some accounts taking Ibn Al-Arabí with him. Returning to Pamplona, he razed its walls to the ground, then headed once more for the passes of the Pyrenees. Of the subsequent disastrous events we have no record from Charles’s own day; but Einhard, writing it seems in about 830, amplified a somewhat earlier account in the Royal Annals. Having spoken of such successes as the Franks had enjoyed in Spain, he tells how they were given in the Pyrenees a taste of Basque treachery:

For, as the army proceeded, drawn out in a long file as dictated by the lie of the land and the narrow pass, the Basques had laid on the crest of a mountain an ambush, to which the place lent itself because of the denseness of the woods, which are there at their thickest. They dashed down on the last section of the baggage-train and the troops of the rearguard, who were shielding the main force that went ahead. These they forced down into the valley below, engaged them in battle, and slew them all to a man. Then, having plundered the baggage, under cover of the falling darkness they scattered with utmost speed in all directions. In this action the Basques were helped by the lightness of their arms and the nature of the terrain where the engagement was fought: by contrast, the weight of their own arms and their disadvantageous position made the Franks no match for the Basques. In that battle were slain Eggihard the royal seneschal, Anselm count of the palace, and Roland commander of the Breton Marches, along with many another. And that action could not be avenged there and then since the enemy having performed it, dispersed without leaving any trace whatsoever of where they might be sought.

This was the event known since the time of our Song as the Battle of Roncevaux; and from a surviving epitaph of the seneschal Eggihard we know that it was fought on August 15th 778. One has the impression that Einhard and the other early chroniclers tactfully excused the defeat and played down its gravity: the Song may be nearer the mark in presenting it as Charles’s greatest military setback. Certainly it cost him some of his leading nobles, as is confirmed by the Royal Annals, which add that the king took it much to heart. Moreover its impact on the public imagination may be gauged by the fact that over sixty years later a writer was able to say that he would refrain from mentioning the names of those massacred with the rearguard as they were widely known. So it is on Einhard that we have to rely for those we have, apart from the independent testimony on Eggihard mentioned above. Of Anselm there is no other record. And Roland himself? It is by no means sure that his name figured in Einhard’s original account, for some manuscripts omit it. On the other hand, a Roland does appear prominently in a charter of about 772 among the nobles of the royal palace, whilst a silver denier in circulation before 790 carries on one face the name of the king, ‘Carlus’, and on the reverse the abbreviated form ‘Rodlan’.

We can assume, then, that one of Charles’s leading nobles by the name of Roland did fight and die in the Pyrenean pass on that August day in 778. More doubtful is whether, as Arabic sources claim, there was Saracen participation in the battle or what truth there is in the allegation that Ibn Al-Arabí was rescued by his sons from Charles’s clutches. The borderline between true history, speculation and wishful thinking is already impossible to distinguish, even before the legendary process has gathered momentum. Three hundred years later and fact had been almost submerged by fiction.

Of the figures associated by Einhard with the drama of Roncevaux, Charles retains his authority in the epic and indeed is raised prematurely to the rank of emperor. Roland, on whom the spotlight now turns, acquires added dignity by becoming the king’s beloved nephew and chief of the twelve Peers, his favoured paladins. But of Eggihard and the shadowy Anselm we hear nothing, nor of the particular Moorish leaders reputed to have been involved in the whole Spanish episode. Instead, of the full supporting cast of Christians and Saracens who people the Song, none is known to have played any part in the affair. Most, in fact, are either untraceable in history or have been identified with figures of later periods. The nominally Christian Basques reported to have engineered the massacre have also quit the scene: the enemy is now the Spanish King Marsile with his Saracen hordes and, later, the mighty Emir
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Baligant, summoned from Cairo to Marsile’s aid. Even more significantly, the disaster is no longer wrought by a band of opportunist plunderers, but is the outcome of the treacherous connivance with the infidels of one of the chief Christian lords, Count Ganelon, brother-in-law of Charles himself.

Despite the uniqueness of the Roland in many respects, it has long been used as a test case in the debate over epic origins and how history came in this way to be transformed into legend. A particularly intriguing piece of evidence has come to light in the form of a note in Latin copied into a Spanish manuscript some time before 1070. This is the so-called Nota Emilianense:

In the year 778 King Charles came to Saragossa. At that time he had twelve nephews, each having three thousand knights in armour, and among whom can be named Roland, Bertrand, Ogier Shortsword, William the Hooknosed, Oliver and Bishop Turpin. And each of these, along with his followers, served the king for one month a year. It happened that the king stopped with his army in Saragossa. After a while, he was advised by his men to accept many gifts in order that the army should not die of hunger but return to their own land. This was done. Then it pleased the king that, for the safety of the men of his army, Roland the brave warrior should form the rearguard with his own men. But when the army crossed through the pass of Cize, Roland was slain in Roncevaux by the Saracens.

So here, before our Song of Roland, we find its hero in the company of his probably fictitious companion Oliver as well as of Turpin and characters familiar from other epics. To our surprise, they are all described as nephews of Charles. The attackers are Saracens, and the place of the disaster is Roncevaux. The natural conclusion that legend has already been to work is strengthened by the association in various documents from quite early in the eleventh century of the names Roland and Oliver. Plainly the traditionalist case is not without foundation.

One finds in Latin texts occasional references to popular songs celebrating great men and events. Small wonder that in the course of such oral transmission historical truth becomes distorted and elaborated. Conscious of the exemplary function of their tales, those who shaped and purveyed them would naturally relate their contents to the political and social conditions and ideals of their own day; and round about 1100 these were very different from those prevailing in the age of Charlemagne.

Within thirty years of the great monarch’s death in 814 his empire became fragmented under his successors, and the Franks’ external enemies found new heart. The Vikings struck in the north, pillaging, settling and eventually being granted as a fief the province to be known after them as Normandy. The eastern borders were harried by Hungarian war-bands; and once again the Moslem threat was felt in the south. Along the Mediterranean coast Saracen raiders were active for over a century, plundering towns like Arles, taking captives, exacting ransoms. The Carolingian dynasty found its authority progressively eroded until, in 987, the Capetian line was inaugurated by the crowning of Hugh Capet as king of the West Franks. Although one may think of this as heralding the emergence of France as a nation, any true sense of nationhood was slow to develop in the face of the regional interests and loyalties fostered by the feudal structure of the kingdom. Despite the appearance in the Roland of a sentiment akin to patriotism, this is the reflection more of a poetic ideal than of contemporary reality.

The origins of the feudal system go far back into history, but its character and ethos as portrayed in the Roland are very much those of the poet’s own times. In an age when the law was that of the strong, strength was sought by individuals in collective defence and mutual aid. Characteristic of feudalism were the vertical bonds between individuals in the hierarchical medieval society. The humble freeman looked upwards for protection from a more powerful neighbour who looked in turn to a social superior to guarantee his security. Equally, those at the top of the ladder needed support from those below, and for that service they were prepared to pay in land. Thus the feudal pyramid was established, with the king bestowing fiefs on his chief vassals, they on lesser nobles and so on down to tenant farmers, for whom the serfs laboured.

Both the advantages and the obligations were shared under this system. Fulbert, Bishop of Chartres, wrote as much in 1020: the vassal must do no damage to his lord’s person or to
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his security, honour or property, moreover he must always be ready to aid him with counsel or with physical assistance when required. The lord was morally bound to reciprocate, for mutual loyalty was the cement holding together the whole feudal structure, a fact emphasised and dramatised in the swearing of homage and the investiture ceremony performed with solemn Christian ritual. For God was the supreme overlord, whose authority was transmitted through the king, His regent on earth, down to every member of the feudal group. Society as a whole was also divinely ordered, with its three basic classes: the knights devoted first and foremost to fighting, the clerics to prayer, and the common folk to toil. Exceptionally one might find individuals playing a dual role, like the battling Archbishop Turpin of the Song (he was strictly infringing his Church's rules by preferring the blood-drawing sword to the permitted mace).

In a system relying so heavily on the honouring of formal pacts and contracts and the spirit behind them, the administration of justice assumed a vital role; and the ultimate dispenser of justice, as supreme overlord, was God Himself. He was the final arbiter when human judgment failed; and that was the principle underlying the judicial combat, the *judicium Dei*, from which the victor would emerge with divine approval as having right on his side. We already find a description of such a practice in a poem celebrating Charlemagne's son Louis and composed in about 827 by a certain Ermoldus Nigellus or Ermold the Black, of whom we shall hear more. The procedure is described:

> There was, and still is, an ancient custom of the Franks which, so long as it lasts, will be the honour and glory of that people: when any man fails to keep faith with the king, for reward or by deceit, or when the wretch seeks to perform against the king, his family or his authority an act in contravention of his pledged faith, and if then a fellow subject presents himself declaring that he too is concerned with this matter, it is right that they should both fight it out in a fierce duel in the presence of the Frankish kings and all the court; for France abhors this crime.

Then a particular instance is cited:

> The emperor declares: 'The Franks may settle this affair: it is right and fitting and is also our command.' And when the Franks' judgment has been passed according to the ancient custom, they [the contestants] prepare their arms and quiver with impatience to get to grips.

The similarity with the circumstances of Ganelon's trial in our epic is striking – suspiciously so in view of the gap of almost three centuries between the texts.

The feudal nobleman, then, is bound by a strict set of obligations and loyalties. His own honour is closely tied to that of his family, which must never be besmirched. To his overlord, the king himself in the case of the great barons, he owed counsel when called upon to give it and military assistance in times of need. Towards those beneath him, whether the troops in his service or the peasants on his lands, he must act justly and with generosity to secure their own loyalty. He should avoid immoderate acts of a kind that might introduce tensions within the social group; but the most heinous of feudal crimes was that of treason.

There was another bond too, which is nowhere better illustrated than in the *Roland*, namely that relationship between fellow-knights that is known as *compagnonnage*. Two young men, not related by birth but who may have received their chivalric training in the same household, might freely pledge to each other loyal comradeship and brotherhood in arms. Their pact was not necessarily formal; but its effect was to link the knights' destinies as firmly as any feudal tie or even blood connection. Their relationship was henceforth fully recognised and respected by their fellows, for better or worse. In our poem there are several couplings of names that imply such an association, but neither history nor legend offers any more illustrious pair of companions than Roland and Oliver.

By the beginning of the twelfth century France was finding its identity as a feudal monarchy, although much of the power in the land was still exercised by the king's turbulent vassals. However, these nobles now found a new outlet for their aggressive energies when in 1095, Pope Urban II called for an expedition to free Jerusalem and the Holy Places from the control of infidels. In his summons he invoked the name and
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example of Charlemagne; and it was established as an article of faith that those dying in this cause would be absolved of their sins and received straight into Paradise. The following year the First Crusade was launched in a spirit with which the Roland is permeated.

Meanwhile, in Spain the Moorish hegemony was as yet far from broken, although by now the Christian states in the north of the country were growing in strength and confidence. Not that the divisions in the Peninsula had always been along strictly religious lines. The Moslems showed a good deal of tolerance towards both Christians and Jews living in their own lands; and their northern neighbours derived much benefit from a culture which was in many spheres, such as music, lyric poetry, mathematics, textiles, metalwork, ceramics and agriculture, far superior to their own. From time to time even military alliances cut across racial boundaries as the needs of local rulers, Christian or Moslem, dictated. By the beginning of the eleventh century the Moorish power had reached its zenith under the rule of the Ommayad caliphs based in Cordoba. Then, however, the central authority crumbled, whilst the Christian states grew more united and, with the encouragement of the Church and especially the militant monks of Cluny, drove south against the infidels. In 1085 Toledo fell; but that was the signal for a Berber invasion from Africa, which halted the Christian advance. The Reconquest had begun, but many years would pass before it was complete.

The Frankish kingdom gathering its strength as a unified feudal state and sensing already its destiny as a great nation, its fighting aristocracy incited by popes and prelates to expel the Saracens from Spain and wrest the Holy Land from their grasp: that was the historical moment when a brilliant epic poet chose to turn haunting memories of events long past into an inspiring song full of meaning for the men of his day.

Legend into Literature

Whatever the form in which the Roland legend reached this poet, the credit must surely be his for transforming it into a masterpiece of literature that stands triumphantly the test of time. And from his poem has stemmed the entire literary tradition of Roncevaux, which has extended down through the Middle Ages and on into modern days. Yet we are extremely fortunate to have it at all: it could so easily have been for us one of those phantom texts or hopeful reconstructions that literary historians would have referred to as 'the lost archetype'. In fact for centuries it really was lost, since the single manuscript which contains it came to public notice only in the 1830s. Prompted by a passing mention in an edition of Chaucer, a young French scholar ran to earth in Oxford's Bodleian Library this unprepossessing but priceless manuscript. That was in 1835; and two years later he published its contents as La Chanson de Roland (other versions had previously gone under the name of La Chanson de Roncevaux). The poem is nowadays often spoken of as the 'Oxford Roland', to distinguish it from the other treatments of the legend.

The manuscript appears to have been copied in England, and the language of the epic has Anglo-Norman characteristics. That is not to say that the poet himself necessarily lived north of the Channel; for between the composition and the recording at least a quarter of a century seems to have passed, time enough to see changes in the linguistic complexion of the text, which in any case shows some scribal corruption. Who, then, was the poet?

In the final enigmatic line there is a name which is often taken to be his: 'Ci falt la geste que Turoldus declinet' (I. 4002). Turold, here given a Latin ending, is a good Norman name; and various candidates for the authorship of the Roland have been proposed: a nephew of William the Conqueror, for instance, who followed him to England in 1066 and was subsequently abbot of Malmesbury and of Peterborough, where he died in 1098; or the Turold who was Bishop of Bayeux from 1097 to 1107 and was still alive in 1127. There is even a Norman messenger in the Bayeux tapestry (unless it is the dwarfish figure behind him) who is so named.

Is Turoldus the poet, then? There is no easy answer. The innocent-looking line is fraught with difficulty. Depending on the meaning of geste (it could be the work or its source) and declinet ('copies', 'amplifies', 'completes' and 'relates' are some possible senses), Turoldus could be the author of the poem or
of its source, the final redactor, or even the scribe or jongleur. My own rendering 'Here ends the story Turoldus completes' is therefore only one possibility among several.

Despite the fact that our Roland has only chanced to survive in a single manuscript, it must have been widely disseminated from the early years of the twelfth century, no doubt carried more often in the jongleurs' heads than as a prompt copy in their packs. The poet's name did not live on, whatever it was; and it is never mentioned by any of the epic's medieval admirers, adaptors or imitators. There is, though, no disguising the fact that it is his work which lies directly behind, if at some remove from, all the later versions we know, versions of wide provenance and showing an interesting range of responses to its promptings.

The Oxford Roland, like many of the earlier chansons de geste, used assonance rather than rhyme as end-decoration for its lines. This feature it shares with one re-handling in Italianised French, which matches its account fairly closely at first, but then strains the economy of the narrative by elaborating the original episodes and adding new ones. The other half-dozen or so French versions that have come down, some in very fragmentary form, are all rhymed. They diverge further from our text, lingering sentimentally over some scenes such as Charlemagne's grief for Roland, or Aude's heartbreak or adding incidents like Ganelon's escape from custody and recapture, thus losing in intensity what they gain in length.

The manuscripts in which these works are found were copied in all corners of France and, in at least one case, in Italy, a testimony to the wide appeal of the legend that is further confirmed by the various translations that were made in the course of the Middle Ages. While passing as history, it catered for a spread of tastes and interests. For the fighting man there was the example of loyal heroism in the field, and for the politically minded the nostalgic evocation of imperial glories; the religious might find inspiration in the exaltation of the true faith; and there was for the moralist the exploration of human folly, for the tender-hearted the anguish of its tragic outcome.

By 1170 the Roland was translated into German verse by Conrad, a Bavarian priest who accentuated its religious, crusading spirit; and in the next century his version was renovated by a Rhenish poet, Der Stricker. Also in the thirteenth century a rendering was made in Old Norse prose for the Norwegian King Haakon V, a great lover of the French chivalric legends. One of the earliest texts in medieval Dutch treats the subject; but, like a Castilian version, it is corrupt and mutilated. There are re-handlings in Provencal and even in Welsh. A Middle English fragment breaks off in mid-battle with Roland contemplating sending for help from Charles. This may surprise us; but it is a tribute to the legend's tenacity that a fourteenth-century English poet turned to it at all at a time when a British Charlemagne was firmly enthroned in insular legend in the person of King Arthur. It is, indeed, very likely that the tradition of Charles and his paladins played a significant part in shaping that of Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, just as the Spanish national epic of the Cid (a historical figure of the late eleventh century) appears to owe some debt to the Roland.

The surviving texts give but the merest hint of the popularity enjoyed by the story throughout the Middle Ages. They could be backed by countless references in vernacular verse and prose where mention is made as a matter of common knowledge to the exemplary heroism of Roland or the archetypal treachery of Ganelon. By poet and performer alike the legend was exploited as a 'besi-seller'; and this posed something of a challenge to the men of the Church, who were inclined to disparage the vernacular heroic songs unless they could put them to their personal profit. In this case they saw an opportunity to use the story of Roncevaux and its preliminaries, if rather deviously, to further their pious ends. So by about 1140 a Latin prose account was fabricated, the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle, thus called because it purported to be a true account of the Spanish campaign as given by the warrior archbishop himself (he had, it seems, survived Roncevaux, though his wounds still gave him some discomfort). The work bears small resemblance to the Oxford Roland, being full of miracles and devout precepts, lacking the apocalyptic battle against Baligant (though the latter does appear alongside his brother Marsile as King of Saragossa) and, less surprisingly, banishing fair Aude from the story. It does, on the other hand, tell at some length of Roland's combat and theological debate
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with a pagan giant Ferracutus (Fernagut) and other of his doings in Spain. It thus helped to fill out his fictional biography, which was further extended, following common medieval practice, in a later generation of chansons de geste. A Latin verse text by contrast, which deals with Ganelon's treachery and its consequences, makes little extra contribution to the legend, being essentially a heavily edited version of the events recounted in the Oxford poem.

The Italians had a particular affection for the Roland story, which their scribes and artists helped to hand down and generations of their story-tellers to embellish. On the eve of the Renaissance, Luigi Pulci introduced a note of buffoonery into certain episodes of our hero's career, whilst Boiardo, in his imaginative though unfinished Orlando innamorato, made love the mainspring of his chivalry. Ariosto, a fellow-poet from Ferrara, undertook to complete the work by making the love-sick Orlando (Roland) lose his wits to become the Orlando furioso, infatuated by the alluring Angelica. He is led through a maze of bizarre adventures more characteristic of romance than epic (his wits, for instance, are recovered by a friend from the moon) until by the end he has won a great battle but lost his Angelica. The Roland-poet would doubtless have turned in his grave to find his single-minded hero dodging in and out of such preposterous fictions. But there was no real cause for concern at such a loss of dignity: the figure he bequeathed was too stalwart to be tossed for long by the winds of literary fashion, and Roland still holds an honoured place among the great epic figures. Had not Dante, after all, given him special mention among the 'blessed company' lost at Roncevaux and even afforded a glimpse of him, still with Charlemagne, in Paradise?

The Master-Poet

The Song of Roland has been ranked with the first Gothic arch, the first stained-glass window and the first troubadour poem as one of those unexplained miracles of the Middle Ages. Literary miracles, though, do not happen, except in the sense that every now and then there occurs the conjunction of the matter, the moment and the man to profit from them. The matter in this case was the fact of Roncevaux already become legend; the moment was a time when feudal Christian hearts were being stirred by calls to crusade against the infidel; and the man was an individual gifted with poetic vision and the skill to clothe it in memorable verse, a person of wide interests and deep humanity. Is there anything more we can say, or deduce, about him?

There can be no question of his having invented, though he may well have refined, a technique so evidently evolved to accommodate the jongleur's art of dramatic recital. He must certainly have been closely familiar with a now untraceable but already developed tradition of epic composition designed for oral delivery, and not only familiar with it but perfectly attuned to its emotive range and engrossed by its subject-matter. A gifted jongleur himself, perhaps? The possibility is almost excluded by the presence in his poem of features, too often neglected or played down in the past, which strongly suggest for him a background of clerical learning. He could conceivably have been a forerunner of those wandering scholars who were to peddle their profane verses about Europe, composing in his case not in Latin but for an unlettered public in the common tongue. Whatever his status, he does appear to have been conversant with certain Latin texts, notably the biography of Charlemagne by Einhard and the poem of Ermold the Black as well as the Scriptures; and it is possible to detect elements from all these deftly woven into the narrative. For example, his portrait of Charlemagne as well as the elemental portents presaging Roland's death seem partly inspired by Einhard; we have already suspected borrowing from Ermoldus in the account of Ganelon's trial; and God's staying of the sun has an obvious biblical model in the story of Joshua. Here, then, was a remarkable man with experience of both the secular and the clerical worlds and having the imagination to fuse together the widely differing traditions of popular oral epic and learned written literature.

For such a man the Latinised name of Turoldus might seem entirely appropriate. However, it is not merely the poem's far from transparent last line that puts us in some doubt. There is also the equally controversial question of the authenticity of
about a quarter of the Roland, the so-called Baligant episode. A strong case exists for seeing this section as the work of a talented redactor wishing to extend a more compact original; and if this is so, the same man may have added the two final sections (laissses) and sealed his contribution with his own name. The problem of authorship is further clouded.

As the Baligant question has crucial implications for a full appreciation of the poem, the main arguments in the debate may be briefly summarised. Those who welcome the Emir's presence point out that he either figures in or has left his influence on the later versions of the story and so would have had a role to play at an early stage of its poetic development; they make much of the supposed need for the final showdown between the Christian emperor and the ruler of all pagandom; and they admire the symmetry which they feel its inclusion achieves. The style of this section is, they claim, much the same as that in the rest of the poem. Opponents of the Emir maintain that once all the pagans of whom we had been aware have been cut to pieces or drowned in the waters of the Ebro, it is gratuitous to conjure up another host, of which we had been given no inkling; they feel that the introduction of Baligant actually destroys the symmetry of the dual conflict, king against king, vassal against vassal; they hold that the new episode drags its feet, lacks originality in its details, and seriously changes the tone of the work and the role and character of Charlemagne. Against the argument drawn from later texts the anti-Baligant forces would insist that this cannot disprove the existence of an earlier, pristine, version, which dropped out of circulation once the expanded one found favour. As for the style, any interpolator worth his salt would do his utmost to blend in his additional material. It can be seen that a good deal of the debate consists of the airing of impressions and the passing of subjective judgments that can neither be substantiated nor completely dismissed.

At this point it is proper for me to declare my allegiance to the anti-Baligant party. One argument I would advance, and which the reader may care to test, is that Charles was initially afforded three premonitory dreams; but the redactor moved the third from its original position after l. 736 to follow a laisse of his own (ll. 2525 - 54) and serve as introduction to the new matter (which occupies approximately ll. 2525 - 2844, 2974 - 3681, and perhaps 3975 - 4001). But why weary the reader with such cavilling? Is not the Oxford text a totally authentic version, if not the only one, which must have captivated medieval audiences as it stands and is in any case the earliest form we have? All this is true. However, as I wish in the following pages to pay my tribute to the master-poet in whose debt we stand, I would not lay at his door these long passages which, however technically competent, lack for me the inspired touch of the rest of the Song. Others may prefer the wider perspectives introduced, as I believe, by the redactor. They may welcome the impression he gives of all Christendom on the march fired by the militant crusading ardour of his day. Does it matter that he has made it harder to say who is now the hero of the Song - Roland or Charlemagne? Personal taste nudges critical judgment. But in the end, unlike a medieval jongleur's captive audience, we are free to make our own choice and assess accordingly the art of the poem and the vision behind it.

The Poet's Vision

We imagine, then, a craftsman-poet steeped in his book-learning yet thrilling to the stirring chords struck by popular minstrelsy in its evocation of bygone deeds of valour serving the warrior ideal. He too was eager to capture, magnify and reflect back the lurid spectacle of the battlefield, the selfless courage of those legendary heroes. But, and here lies much of the greatness and fascination of his Song, behind the epic grandeur of the verse we glimpse a man who knows reality for what it is and is inclined to question what he most exalts.

His religious convictions are, of course, never put in doubt. Those who died in Charlemagne's holy cause have the gates of Paradise opened to them, as promised by the battling Archbishop Turpin; for 'Pagans are wrong and Christians in the right' (l. 1015). The Franks are the elect of God, their opponents doomed to death and hellfire unless they submit to forcible conversion. Divine justice is paramount and terrible in its retribution on those who break its spiritual and temporal
precepts. Angels are its messengers, dreams and miracles its manifestations. All the Christian rites and practices are duly observed by Emperor and subjects alike: even Ganelon carried holy relics in his sword-hilt. Whether Roland himself is a saint and martyr in the poet's eyes has long been a matter for dispute. If so, the religious theme must be seen as dominant throughout the Song. Against this view, however, I would argue that the emphasis shifts from the more worldly topics of betrayal, heroism and feudal justice to that of the triumph of Christianity only with the unheralded arrival of Baligant. This question too must be left to the reader's judgment.

Whilst in his heart the poet knows the Christians to be in the right and their actions governed by a sense of honour foreign to the Saracens, his reason tells him that the Franks and even the mighty Charlemagne were subject to the faults and foibles of ordinary mortals; and to this his telling of the legend bears witness. From the very beginning it is plain that this will be a story as much of human weakness and error as of unwavering virtue.

For seven years Charles has waged his inconclusive campaign throughout the Spanish kingdom. Final victory may be in sight, but it still has to be won, even with Roland in the field. So when there seems to be an opportunity for an honourable peace, it is only the headstrong Roland who stands out against negotiations, despite the others' misgivings in the light of previous Saracen treachery. The offer then, as now, is that King Marsile will submit to Charles and the true faith, and the battle-worn Christians will again see their homes and families. But one of the French barons must be sent to Saragossa at his peril to treat with the perfidious enemy. Who? Not Naimes, or Archbishop Turpin, or any of the twelve peers: they are too precious to Charles. 'Said Roland: 'Send my stepsire Ganelon' (I. 277). We can well sympathise with Ganelon, especially as Roland's suggestion seems to have been made in the context of some earlier quarrel, hinted at in the subsequent trial proceedings; and Roland's sneer and laughter are not calculated to lessen his stepfather's rage.

We are disposed to believe Ganelon's account to Blancandrin of Roland's obsessive vanity. Do we not see it continually borne out by his words and actions, not least during the battle, when the treachery is paying its deadly dividends? Oliver would claim that the very destruction of the rearguard was the direct result of Roland's reckless folly in refusing to summon help. So the sad train of events goes on: error of judgment leading to act of spite, perhaps, and thus to revenge, fatal foolhardiness and a grim blow to the Christian cause. The heroism is a sweet topping on a very bitter mixture and is itself not unalloyed virtue in the poet's eyes.

Are we, though, justified in associating the less glamorous side of the story with his own personal vision? The legend may, after all, have been established in its main lines before he took it over. I think we are. His viewpoint, however, is revealed less obviously in the leading events than in the small touches, and not least in certain snatches of dialogue to which the action gives rise. The cool-headed Oliver's sardonic exchanges with Roland seem particularly instructive in this respect, as we shall see. The presentation of Charlemagne, too, appears to have about it something more individual than traditional. Rash though it may be to try to read the mind of a poet vanished for nine hundred years, the risk is worth running, so strong is one's impression of a total, yet strangely divided, personality. His double view of things I have already equated with an opposition between the grand poetic concept and a true experience of life. It is expressed constantly in the interplay of antithetical elements: the communal cause contrasting with personal ambition, glorious valour with the working out of petty, grievances, firm resolve with doubts and hesitation, Roland the exemplary hero with Roland the bewildered companion, Ganelon the betrayer with Ganelon the brave and outspoken supporter of the king, the Holy Emperor Charlemagne with Charles the muddle-headed old man. There is the whole-hearted idealism of the poet on the one hand, and his implicit criticism, even protest, on the other.

### The Characters

The figures of Roland and Oliver have been modelled, some would say, on the old rhetorical opposition of fortitudo and sapientia: 'Roland is valiant, Oliver is wise' (I. 1093). This may