The Oliphant and Roland’s Sacrificial Death

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To wage war does not necessarily include the willingness to be martyred. Yet strong devotion to a cause may result in resigned submission to death. Desire for victory may incline warriors in the first Crusades toward sacrifice. The *chansons de geste* explore such feelings. The poems are set in the early IXth century, but they were written in their present form in the XIIth century. Between these centuries the transition from the Carolingian to the Capetian kings marks a historical shift in France from monarchy to vassalage. The king retained the throne, but lost control of the land.(1) Perhaps for this reason the epics show a longing for a bygone era.

At times heroes encounter deceit and pursue a course of action in a role marginal to the acceptable cultural setting, such as William’s betrayal by monks in the *Moniage Guillaume*.(2) A missed reward in the *Charroi de Nîmes* leads the hero to accept disguise as a battle tactic; and he even accepts the geographic move to another area of the kingdom in *La Prise d’Orange*.(3) In the *Guillaume* cycle William repeatedly experiences a measure of dishonor and misery. But the sacrifice of William in the *Couronnement de Louis*, serving a backward king, son of Charlemagne, seems slight compared to the sacrifice of Roland in the *Song* that bears his name.(4)

The *Song of Roland* has a greater tone of seriousness in contrast to other *chansons de geste*. The *Chanson* shares the rather naïve view of the struggle between Christians and pagans common to the genre. Saracens are portrayed as morally deficient. To battle Charlemagne, the emir relies on treachery; and the pagans’ chief counsel, Blancandrin, even advises sending their sons as guarantors of a false oath to Charles, knowing full well that they may lose their lives.(5) The Christian life is generally confined to belief in angels, use of relics, and spirited fulfillment of vows that often culminate in boastful oaths. However, there are long prayers before military encounters in *Aliscans* and the *Couronnement* which are not present in the *Roland* epic.(6) William flees when odds are stacked against him in battle and lives to fight another day.(7) Such behavior would be unheard of in our *Roland*. The ambush at Roncevaux makes *The Song of Roland* more tragic than any of the other *chansons*.

The higher level of suspense and intrigue is seen most notably in the rapport between characters. There is charm in the fantastic Rainoart's relation to William as comrade.(8) We experience sorrow in *Aliscans*, and in the *Chanson de Guillaume,* when we grieve over William's encounter with his dying nephew, Vivien;(9) but the melodrama of the hero who pulls through every tight spot throughout the remaining of the plot, together with the feasting ludicrously integrated into battle scenes, lacks the tragic intensity we witness in Oliver and Roland's remarkable personality conflict.(10) The characters' goal in the epic genre remains to defeat the enemy. But we sense that the *jongleur* of *The Song of Roland* has a more complex agenda than the oral poets in other *chansons de geste*. Roland's sacrifice becomes more important than the attainment of victory as the crucial factor in setting a primordial example for the best military leader. The uniqueness of *The Song of Roland* accounts for its endurance as the most popular *chanson de geste* of the Middle Ages.

In his *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (1993), Eric Gans develops the concept of a "neo-classical esthetic," where the protagonist is aware of his separation from the scene of representation on which he must find significance.(11) Roland's basic instinct is to pursue glory; this desire drives him irremissibly toward Roncevaux, a scene of *ostensive*, self-confirming sacrifice. In contrast, Oliver grasps only the worldly *imperative* need to kill the enemy and win the war. Hence as one character's behavior points out the central significance of Roncevaux, the other wishes to disengage himself from absorbed entanglement in a hopeless predicament. The measure of Roland's valor is his pursuit of glory; and essential to this quest is his delay in sounding the Oliphant. The hero's sacrifice in turn imparts courage to others.

This deferral of action delays resolution and increases violence in *The Song of Roland*. The battle at Roncevaux delays the eventual downfall of the Saracen army. Ambush through Ganelon's treason provides the necessary motivation for plot development. But it is within the battle itself that we witness the key source for the final tragedy of the French rearguard: Roland's refusal to sound the Oliphant in time. Roland's delay provides the necessary deferral, after the rearguard's separation from the Frankish host, to turn the Oliphant's sound into an ostensive call that broadcasts awareness of events without requesting action, so that only later will Charlemagne and his army avenge the hero's sacrificial death. Since Roland's heroism subsequently inspires warriors in Charlemagne's army, the hero's sacrifice provides a crucial role model for future warfare. By losing a battle, the claim to glory becomes mounted on sacrifice. In *The Song of Roland* the main character's martyrdom provides dramatic content and significant justification for prolonging the war. Deferral of victory is vital for development of the epic narrative.

In terms of military strategy, Oliver's plea to sound the Oliphant is based on the obvious superiority in numbers of the Saracen host. By contrast, the French are few: "It seems to me, our Franks are very few!" [1050](12) Roland transposes the issue to an idealistic plane; the reason the hero gives for not sounding the Oliphant, when Oliver first asks, is fear of suffering from lack of *glory*, Medieval French *los*, in the future:

> "Roland, my friend, it's time to sound your horn,
> King Charles will hear, and bring his army back."
> Roland replies, "You must think I've gone mad!
> In all sweet France I'd forfeit my good name."
> .....
> *"Cumpaign Rollant, kar sunez vostre corn,*
> *Si l'orrat Carles, si returnerat l'ost."*
> *Respunt Rollant: "Jo fereie que fols!*
> *En dulce France en perdreie mun los."* [1051-1054]

"Good name" is here the equivalent of *los*. As we shall see, the glorious name, or *los*, Roland is keen to protect will depend on his readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice, and on the delayed *ostensive* use of the horn in order to call attention to his stance in the sacrificial scene. This absolute need requires that he not use the Oliphant primarily as an *imperative* signal first; such obstinacy makes it impossible for other agents, Charles and his army, to prevent him from assuming his heroic role. No one can devalue the sacrificial scene of Roncevaux. The decision not to sound the horn at the instant in the plot when timely arrival of reinforcements seems possible distinguishes the two heroes.

A second time, Oliver reiterates his plea [1059-1060], only to get another justification for delay from the valiant chevalier:

> Roland replies, "Almighty God forbid
> That I bring shame upon my family,
> And cause sweet France to fall into disgrace!
> I'll strike that horde with my good Durendal."
> .....
> *Respont Rollant: "Ne placet Damnedeu*
> *Que mi parent pur mei seient blasmet*
> *Ne France dulce ja cheet en viltet!*
> *Einz i ferrai de Durendal asez."* [1062-1065]

Roland abhors the thought that his lineage be tarnished by lack of courage. The hero intends to use his sword, Durendal, not the Oliphant.(13) Brandishing his sword is preferable to blowing the horn. Roland is not one to let a call for help take precedence over the warrior spirit:

> "No man on earth shall have the right to say
> That I for pagans sounded the Oliphant!"
> .....
> *"Que ço seit dit de nul hume vivant,*
> *Ne pur paien, que ja seie cornant!"* [1074-1075]

No warrior on either side could blame Roland for seeking aid by sounding the horn too early. His intention is to achieve eternal glory, not safeguard mortal life. Salvation is in Heaven. In the context of the *Chanson*, the hero's example of faith will give transcendental significance to his martyrdom within the epic world. In this sense, Roland turns his death into a scene of sacred representation.

As Oliver enters his third and final plea, trying in vain to get Roland to sound the horn, the same reason of uneven sides is brought forth: "Our company numbers but very few" [1087].(14) Roland at this point makes no reference to fear of losing glorious honor, *los*, but rather crowns his refusal by posing a direct comparative to the superiority in numbers of the Saracen army. He insists that vis à vis the huge host, his arduous courage is a superior force: "The better then we'll fight!" [1088](15) This could make Roland seem guilty of *hybris* for refusing to sound the Oliphant in time. In his rebuttal, however, the brave hero insists that France should not lose worth:

> "If it please God and His angelic host,
> I won't betray the glory of sweet France!
> Better to die than learn to live with shame-
> Charles loves us more as our keen swords win fame."
> .....
> *"Ne place Damnedeu ne ses angles*
> *Que ja pur mei perdet sa valur France!*
> *Melz voeill murir que huntage me venget.*
> *Pur ben ferir l'emperere plus nos aimet."* [1089-1092]

We should pose, in counterpoint to excessive courage, a concern for displaying, through self-sacrifice, strict adherence to raw duty: the warrior must remain at his

assigned post. When Oliver seems resigned to accept Roland's refusal to sound the horn, after his third plea goes unanswered, his tone becomes mournful. He remarks that the rearguard is worthy of pity, "who would not pity them!" [1104](16) Roland answers this observation, declaring his sworn duty to remain in his post as leader of the troops guarding Charles' return to France: "We'll hold our ground; if they will meet us here" [1108].(17) A vassal must safeguard his lord at all costs in the spirit of sacrifice [1009].(18) To hold the rearguard in place becomes a strong mandate, as Oliver himself declares, even after perceiving the vast superiority in numbers:

> "Frenchmen, my lords, now God give you the strength
> To stand your ground, and keep us from defeat."
> .....
> *"Seignurs Franceis, de Deu aiez vertut!*
> *El camp estez, que ne seium vencuz!"* [1045-1046]

By remaining firm in its post, the rearguard exemplifies absolute loyalty to the King with blind patriotic zeal. Both peers' loyalty to Charlemagne also brings out Ganelon's opposite role as traitor and instigator of the tragic events in the plot. Ganelon's later trial and execution broadcasts Roland's death beyond Roncevaux and into epic myth by juxtaposing extreme loyalty to absolute treason, negating the supremacy of selfish gain over patriotic zeal.

> Roland's sacrificial stance is expressed by the hero twice:
> "This is the service a vassal owes his Lord:
> To suffer hardships, endure great heat and cold,
> And in battle to lose both hair and hide."
> ——————————————————-
> "In his Lord's service a man must suffer pain,
> Bitterest cold and burning heat endure;
> He must be willing to lose his flesh and blood."
> .....
> *"Pur sun seignor deit hom susfrir destreiz*
> *E endurer e granz chalz e granz freiz,*
> *Sin deit hom perdre e del quir e del peil."* [1010-1012]
> ——————————————————–
> *"Pur sun seignur deit hum susfrir granz mals*
> *E endurer e forz freiz e granz chalz,*
> *Sin deit hom perdre del sanc e de la char."* [1117-1119]

A warrior must endure suffering for his King. The only condition that might prevent total sacrifice becomes the arrival of reinforcements. We should recall how, once the circumstances made aid futile, Oliver himself had accepted the consequences for failing to sound the Oliphant in time. Practical necessity required a readiness to fight, as the enemy closed in from all sides:

> "They are very close, the king too far away.
> You were too proud to sound the Oliphant:
> If Charles were with us we would not come to grief.
> Look up above us, close to the Gate of Spain."
> .....
> *"Cist nus sunt prés, mais trop nus est loinz Carles.*
> *Vostre olifan, suner vos nel deignastes;*
> *Fust i li reis, n'i oüssum damage.*
> *Guardez amunt devers les porz d'Espaigne."* [1100-1103]

Oliver's loyalty to King and Country is not affected by his regret over the King's absence. Oliver and Roland both agree that they must stand their ground. The warrior-bishop Turpin joins the quest for glory through sacrificial martyrdom:

> "My noble lords, Charlemagne left us here,
> And may our deaths do honor to the king.
> Now you must help defend our holy Faith!" [1127-1129]
> ————————————————————
> "Confess your sins, ask God to pardon you;
> I'll grant you absolution to save your souls.
> Your deaths would be a holy martyrdom." [1132-1134]
> .....
> *"Seignurs baruns, Carles nus laissat ci;*
> *Pur nostre rei devum nus ben murir.*
> *Chrestïentet aidez a sustenir!"* [1127-1129]
> ————————————————————
> *"Clamez vos culpes, si preiez Deu mercit;*
> *Asoldrai vos pur voz anmes guarir.*
> *Se vos murez, esterez seinz martirs*." [1132-1134]

Joseph Bédier quotes line 1134 in his *Commentaires* to assert that the *jongleurs*, singers of tales, plied their trade on the byways along medieval pilgrimage routes.(19) We concur that propagation of the Faith is meaningful enough, so that

such a contention holds sway at the most tragic moment of the *Chanson*, during the destruction of the rearguard; for the theme of warfare for Christ must exist within a specific socio-cultural milieu.(20) The present belongs to King and Country; the future belongs to God.

The hero's obstinate insistence not to sound the Oliphant at the time reinforcements could save the rearguard turns him and his men into sacrificial victims, patriots willing to die for King and Country. It is only later on in the narrative, when approaching his end at the fierce battle in Roncevaux, that Roland finally acquiesces, "I'll blow my horn, and Charlemagne will hear."[1714](21) Charlemagne hears, but he cannot arrive in time. Instead of calling the army back, the Oliphant announces the rearguard's martyrdom. The issue of avoiding danger is no longer in question. Surrounded, the heroes are close to death. Oliver reverses his plea to blow the Oliphant because the instrumental cause for the call is gone:

> Oliver says, "Then you'll disgrace your name.
> Each time I asked you, companion, you refused.
> If Charles were with us, we would not come to grief."
> .....
> *Dist Oliver: "Ne sereit vasselage!*
> *Quant jel vos dis, cumpainz, vos ne deignastes.*
> *S'il fust li reis, n'i oüsum damage."* [1715-1717]

Were Charles and his royal army present, there would be no defeat. The hour is late. The futility of the effort in effect invalidates the companion's reason in the original plea, repeated thrice [1051, 1059, 1071]. Regardless of vast superiority in numbers, a resistant stance is the only choice.

After the battle rages on fiercely for hundreds of lines, Turpin finally intervenes. The warrior-bishop brings to a conclusion the Roland-Oliver conflict about failing to sound the Oliphant with a realistic view of the situation:

> "End your dispute, I pray you, in God's name.
> It's too late now to blow the horn for help,
> But just the same, that's what you'd better do.
> If the king comes, at least we'll be avenged."
> .....
> *"Pur Deu vos pri, ne vos cuntralïez!*
> *Ja li corners ne nos avreit mester,*
> *Mais nepurquant si est il asez melz:*

Venget li reis, si nus purrat venger.” [1741-1744]

Turpin’s argument pairs the uselessness of the act, as death approaches, to the impossibility of Charlemagne’s timely presence. Yet Charles’ army must arrive, however late, at the Oliphant’s call, so that the corpses will be respectfully buried [1749-1751]. Their martyrdom, with Roland at the center, has to be recognized. This ostension, distant in time and space, broadcasts a vital revelation to the community at large in establishing the significance of the original sacrificial scene.(22)

When at long last Roland blows the Oliphant for the first time, the horn’s sound is loud and clear:

Count Roland presses the horn against his mouth;
He grasps it hard, and sounds a mighty blast.
High are the hills, that great voice reaches far-
They hear it echo full thirty leagues around.
.....
Rollant ad mis l’olifan a sa buche,
Empeint le ben, par grant vertut le sunet.
Halt sunt li pui e la voiz est mult lunge,
Granz .XXX. liwes l’oïrent il respundre. [1753-1756]

The acute, terrifying report is heard echoing loudly through a long expanse of land, a strong metaphor for the cultural power of the ostensive. This great distance encompasses dramatically the large measure of terrain the departing Franks must cover in doubling back to Roncevaux. The need for an attempt to arrive on time is not an issue to be debated. Yet actual deployment of the army in answer to the call is questioned by Ganelon [1770-1784]. The first and third Oliphant calls enclose the insolent speech in which Ganelon impudently attempts to turn the blowing of the horn into a frivolous gesture, “Just for a rabbit he’ll blow his horn all day!” [1780](23) Ganelon intends to invert Roland’s sacralizing act, turning it into sacrilege. The audience senses that retribution hangs in the balance. The quintessential patriot stands as sharp contrast to the obdurate traitor. Before Ganelon’s guilt engages the reader’s attention at length, however, again we hear the horn blown a second time by Roland.

And now Count Roland, in anguish and in pain,
With all his strength sounds the great horn again.
Bright drops of blood are springing from his mouth,

Veins in his forehead are cracking with the strain.
……
Li quens Rollant, par peine e par ahans,
Par grant dulor sunet sun olifan.
Par mi la buche en salt fors li cler sancs.
De sun cervel le temple en est rumpant. [1761-1764]

The sound of the Oliphant, whose reach is vast, requires a painful, even fatal, effort by the dying warrior. Ganelon's assertion that Roland's lavish frivolity, "great pride" [1773],(24) is manifested in the Oliphant's call is clear indication of his guilt in the treacherous ambush. He urges the army on back to France, questioning the need to stop for a boastful braggart, "Now he is playing some game to please his peers" [1781].(25) But the call does not project a light tone. The response must be a direct consequence of its urgency. The *jongleur* explains the fatal consequence, as for a third time the Oliphant is blown from Roland's bleeding mouth:

Count Roland's mouth is crimson with his blood,
His temples broken by the tremendous strain.
He sounds the horn in anguish and in pain.
……
Li quens Rollant ad la buche sanglente.
De sun cervel rumput en est li temples.
L'olifan sunet a dulor e a peine. [1785-1787]

Oliver's original plea equates the Oliphant's call to the urgent need for timely help. Near death, Oliver's potential imperative plea to Charlemagne's army, "Come and save us," cannot be answered in fact, so the value of the Oliphant's call as an instrumental act has waned. We even witness how the Oliphant eventually becomes a mere war mace used by Roland to bash in the skull of a treacherous Saracen [2288-2291]. Roland's use of the instrument is not a true distress call, but an ostensive sign informing that he is dying and must soon be buried [1750-1752]. That is, the Oliphant's function regresses from the worldly useful *imperative*, "Come back," to the *ostensive* proclamation, "Here we are, martyrs!" This contrast adheres to the theme of heroism central to the overall epic narrative of the *Chanson*. The main thrust of Roland's being is to attain immortal glory, *los*, through a heroic death. He does not wish to put down his sword and sound the call for aid.

To announce Roland's extreme bravery in battle is the Oliphant call's true ostensive value. In this manner, by pointing to a sacred scene of sacrifice, the call becomes a sign of perennial patriotism. Such is the actual sense of the famous line that

distinguishes between the two peers: *Rollant est proz e Oliver est sage* /"Roland's a hero, and Oliver is wise" [1093]. Untrue to the Oliphant's principal, practical use, Roland dies. But, while the Oliphant's value as an instrument to produce a useful signal diminishes, epic tragedy increases. This transition within a "neoclassical esthetic," while problematizing the scene of representation as a locus within the work, encloses a self-contained diachronic analysis of the emergence of the elementary speech forms. The *ostensive* sign must first establish significant meaning before an *imperative* sign can perform its useful semantic function, even if in the worldly context reaffirming this priority spells doom.

Through meticulous analysis of the heroic motivation for deferring to sound the Oliphant, we may probe into what the sound means for plot development within the narrative. An emergency call from a great, courageous warrior could only mean that death approaches, hence his allies must exercise revenge against his foes. At Roncevaux the tragic hero reveals his true nature as model warrior in quest of glory. Gans explains: "The premature return of Charlemagne's army would have saved him at the price of abandoning the closure of the scenic locus to which his election had led him and on which he finds martyrdom, the source of ultimate significance."(26)

Enhanced by sheer distance from the listener, the call of the Oliphant sounds brutally clear and acquires instant discursive status. As a nonverbal sign the Oliphant's sound has multiple plausible meanings in the poem: "Enemies," and, consequently, the unavoidable cause for their presence must be "Treason," and, hence, the conclusion becomes "Death."(27) This triple ostensive strikes an intensely tragic chord in the listener's mind. In the encompassing and climactic Oliphant's call we sense the condensed narrative of *The Song of Roland*, as the story of the rearguard's ambush, together with its cause and aftermath. Perceiving the striking sound of the horn, even in a silent reading of the poem, we sense the need to immediately grant the sacrificial victim sacred status as martyred hero.

Since the Oliphant is a musical instrument, our view of the central climax of the *Chanson* could in principle be reconstructed strictly from the acute psychological impact caused by its sound. The Oliphant's call is never described in the text; however, overwhelming sound is implied. In his *La Chanson de Geste*, *essai sur l'art epique des jongleurs* (1955), Jean Rychner explains the dramatic virtue of similar strophes by suggesting that repetition stops the action's narrative flow in order to create a lyrical, even *musical*, effect on the audience. The three instances when Oliver asks Roland to sound the Oliphant are matched by the latter's obstinate refusal.

1051 1059 1070

1052 1060 1071

1053 1062 1074

The same lyrical effect resounds with tragic clarity during actual sounding of the horn.

1753 1761 1785

1754 1762 1787

After line 1762 the two following verses describe the previously mentioned fatal consequence: blood gushes forth from the mouth of our hero with nearly bursting temples [1763-1764]. The third blowing of the Oliphant is performed by a dying warrior, bleeding from the mouth, who uses his last breath to proclaim his death before his temples burst from the effort [1786]; Roland thereby invests his last bit of energy into the production of a sign proclaiming permanent sacrificial significance.

The rising climax occasioned by the triple Oliphant's call is represented by Charlemagne's reactions as listener. First he recognizes the sign of a raging battle, "Our Franks are in a fight" [1758].(28)Followed by: "That is Count Roland's horn!" [1768](29) Awareness is crowned by final recognition of the tragic effort: "How long that horn resounds!" [1789](30) All three perceptive responses are introduced by the *jongleur* with the phrase, "then says the king" [1758,1768,1789]. Rychner remarks that the French army's response to the crisis at Roncevaux is acute, immediate, and also arranged by the singer of tales in triple series:

Each to the other pronounces the same vow.
There is not one who can hold back his tears.
Not one but grieves and bitterly laments.(31)
.....
N'i ad celoi a l'altre ne parolt. [1803]
N'i ad celoi ki durement ne plurt. [1814]
N'i ad celoi n'i plurt e se dement. [1836]

These lines epitomize loyalty to the King. Once each warrior becomes a lethal

“Roland,” access to the privilege for attaining a glorious death in battle is lowered from the nobility on down to the common foot soldier in order to allow every warrior communal participation in the heroic code. The demand for *pathos* provides motivation that propels the dramatic action. Roland is no longer an elite warrior lord, nephew to the King, but an *exemplum* for all to follow. Consequently, the heroic sentiments of our multifaceted central character become emotionally accessible. We assume that, once a speaker extends his role and significance beyond speech and into action, Roland’s desire for glory, if not glory itself, is more easily experienced by the audience.

The final feeble blowing of the horn by the moribund hero is intimately tied to the coming of Charlemagne and his forces:

> His temples broken from sounding his great horn,
> Longing to know if Charles is on his way,
> Weakly, once more, he blows the Oliphant.
> .....
> *Rumput est li temples, por ço que il cornat.*
> *Mais saveir volt se Charles i vendrat:*
> *Trait l’olifan, fieblement le sunat.* [2102-2105]

This fourth and last blowing of the horn is pathetic and tragic. The dramatic impact cannot be overestimated. The next mention of the Oliphant in the text is as an object which Roland places under his body, together with *Durendal*, while he collapses, bowing to his promise to die a conqueror, facing the enemy [2359-2360,2363]. Rychner ends his structural analysis by indicating that the effect on the audience of syntactic repetition is strongly musical, paralleling perhaps a nostalgic rhapsody.(32) Viewing the hero’s death as a sacrifice, we may consider the musical accompaniment of Gregorian chant, integral component for the medieval ritual of the Catholic Mass, as similar in effect to the lyrical tone Rychner suggests as backdrop for the Roland epic.(33)

We may add to Rychner’s explanation the insight that line 1755, “High are the hills, that great voice reaches far,” starts the mentioned sequence in *laisse* CXXXIII;(34) a parallel line, “High are the hills, and shadowy and vast,” [1830] ends the same sequence of six *laisses* [CXXXIII-CXXXVIII].(35) These two lines are reminiscent of the line, earlier in the poem, outlining the separation of the rearguard, “High are the hills, deep valleys shun the light” [814].(36) The rearguard is left forlorn in a plain shadowed by high cliffs. We remark how the same phrase appears, as variation on a theme, in the*laisse* where Roland exercises his last living prowess as he smashes the Oliphant on the head of the Saracen who had feigned death to surreptitiously

capture Durendal after the rest of Marsile's forces had already fled the field of battle: "High are the hills and very high the trees" [2271].(37) The resounding line cements his tragic stance; from first to last the hero perishes as martyred warrior with his rearguard at Roncevaux, the sacrificial scene.

The Oliphant's call impacts the present and future of the epic plot, creating verisimilitude. Without the scene of betrayal at the enemy camp, the ambush at Roncevaux would not take place. As previously mentioned, the Oliphant's call, a triple ostensive, links the Saracen *Enemies* to Ganelon's prior *Treason* and Roland's subsequent *Death*. We sense the surging importance of the Oliphant's sound throughout the narrative. Time and again the characters are roused into action by the memory of the horn's sound. We recall how the trauma itself was succinctly summarized and tied to the narrative context of the *Chanson* by the noble old counselor Naimon at the time the horn is blown. Upon hearing the sound, the King's peer offers his interpretation, and draws a vital meaning for the Oliphant's progressively debilitating call:

> Duke Naimon answers, "Great valor swells the sound!
> Roland is fighting: he must have been betrayed –
> And by that man who tells you to hang back."
> .....
> *Respont dux Neimes: "Baron i fait la peine!*
> *Bataille i ad, par le men escïentre.*
> *Cil l'at traït ki vos en roevet feindre."* [1790-1792]

The call proclaimed the surging Saracen attack that annihilates the rearguard. No longer a vague possibility, the result of the unmistakable threat rings clear: "We die." Henceforth Charlemagne knows how to view Ganelon:

> "Here is a felon I'm leaving in your charge-
> He has betrayed the vassals of my house."
> .....
> *"Ben le me guarde, si cume tel felon!*
> *De ma maisnee ad faite traïsun."* [1819-1820]

Roland's courage looms large over Ganelon's treason.(38) Thus, the ostensive use of the Oliphant affects character motivation and overall plot development, by showing Charles that Ganelon's description of the scene is false. The delay in blowing the horn, a heroic act of great magnitude, makes it clear that Roland

cannot be seeking help. Ganelon reads this as mere frivolity, whereas Charles understands the ostensive use of the horn as a sign of martyrdom.

After apprehension of Ganelon and pursuit of Marsile's fleeing forces, Charles and his men double back to Roncevaux. While the French tread among the corpses left at Roncevaux, the King tears his hair and the Army weeps [2412-2415]. As twenty thousand men faint, absorbing vicariously the death of Roland's men, Naimon exhorts the King's forces to avenge the loss and relieve the sorrow: "Let us avenge our grief!" [2428](39) A clear danger is that grief may impair the deployed army's ability to fight effectively.

In the *Chanson* the hero's sacrifice is an asymmetric gesture since no act by the avenging army is enough to bring back Roland, nor can Charlemagne's prowess match the uncompromising courage of his dead nephew. Due to Roland's ostensive gesture, the epic poem cannot become the "Song of Charlemagne," regardless of the hero's absence in the last third of the narrative.(40) Roland feeds the plot as sacrificial victim, and therefore determines and dominates the scenic focus of the poem. The glory Roland reaches in death becomes an object sought by the army of Charlemagne through progressive reiteration of such warring spirit as is kindled by remembrance of the Oliphant's call. After Roncevaux, there follows directly in the text the chase and demise by drowning of Marsile's fleeing forces. The King prays that the sun should not set before revenge is carried out [2450-2451].(41) The consequence is a *deus ex machina*: an angel comes and God performs a miracle [2454-2459]. The sun finally sets after all pagans drown [2474]. Roland reaches Eternal Glory through a warrior's death while a guardian angel facilitates victory for the French army.

We see the Oliphant's sound as intensely climactic due to precise developments in the plot. The unfulfilled desire to help, no longer possible in response to the Oliphant's sound, is redoubled and infuses new strength into the French forces. The French host cannot save the rearguard, but every soldier in the army can run to battle willing to die valiantly on the rearguard's example and attain Eternal Glory. The protracted Oliphant's call spreads the deep significance of the quest for glory throughout the Frankish host. Every soldier is desperate to participate in the violence of war.

The unraveling sacrificial crisis defers the expectation for a victorious end to war and the narrative closure the reader may long for. This is war, not just a single battle. In terms of motivation, we sense that to die while fighting brings immortal glory through noble death. As Turpin explained during the thick of the fray at Roncevaux: "Better to die with honor on this field!" [1518](42) Heaven waits: "For you stand open the gates of Paradise" [1522].(43) The reader senses in the

Chanson a quest to transcend military and political renown in order to attain a self-justified system of sacred values. At Roncevaux Turpin repeatedly blesses warriors [1034,1515]. He draws his sword, *Almace*, and causes havoc [2089].(44) Throughout, the bishop fights valiantly, and he eventually dies with arms outstretched, emulating crucifixion [2241].

Before concluding our argument, we should consider briefly the sacrificial nature of Carolingian conquest. Just as Roland wishes to keep Durendal from enemy hands, Roland's body is protected by Charles' avenging forces [2434-2439]. The French war-cry *Montjoie*, transformed on Roland's example into an ostensive sign, is intimately tied to the concept of deriving victory from suffering, as seen in the etymological reference to Charles' sword, *Joyeuse*. The mount, or hill, of joy recalls the place where the martyrdom of Saint Denis took place. Historically, the battle-cry *Montjoie* itself evolved from reference to "Mount Joy of St. Denis."(45) Both swords, Joyeuse and Durendal, bear relics in the pommel establishing the representational value of sacrificial martyrdom.(46) Both swords now have a new sacrificial narrative to carry them beyond their physical status as weapons. A fearless desire to undergo sacrifice takes central stage. To keep faith, the French army had to protect Roland's corpse from violation by Saracen forces upon arrival at Roncevaux. As the body of a saint, Roland's corpse became the object of a communal interdiction. Ancestral custom and natural law demand Christian burial. Roland deserves public reverence, for he endured martyrdom. Burial rites must be performed to answer the societal need for propriety [2962-2973]. The individual's dependence on the community for proper signification is absolute. Glory is realized through martyrdom, evidenced by a relic left to posterity.

At five instances during the course of the narrative the battle cry "Montjoie," *Munjoie*, is voiced by a character in direct discourse. The *jongleur* quotes Turpin directly as the bishop-warrior urges on the troops at Roncevaux [1350]; soon thereafter in the text the army shouts their war-cry during the furious infighting [1525]; finally, Oliver shouts out one last time as he dies [1974]. The increasing sense of doom strikes a tragic note as the *ostensive* Montjoie becomes a harbinger of death. The other two instances in the *Chanson* for the protracted battle-cry to appear in direct discourse occur as Charlemagne's army approaches Roncevaux [2510]. And we again hear "Montjoie" voiced while the host witnesses the need to confront the forces of Baligant, the powerful emir from abroad who comes to avenge the dead Marsile [3092].

> The deep significance of the Oliphant again surfaces as the French contemplate Charles' encounter with Baligant:

The clear-voiced trumpets ring out from every side-
Above the others resounds Count Roland's horn;
Then all the Frenchmen remember him and mourn.
……
Sunent cil greisle e derere e devant;
Sur tuz les altres bundist li olifant.
Plurent Franceis pur pitet de Rollant. [3118-3120]

Roland had died on line 2397. But, after the battle at Roncevaux, Roland's memory has become significant enough to maintain continual warlike action. His Oliphant is a pervasive, phantasmagorical presence. Every trumpet sound harkens back to Roland's awe-inspiring horn. The Oliphant's call must retain its nature as supplemental war-cry despite the intense sorrow. The practical consequence of lamentation over Roland's death must include an expansion of violent warfare. The King battles Baligant at the call of his own Oliphant, as Baligant himself tells his son Malpramis:

"A valiant lord now sounds the Oliphant,
From his companion a trumpet call comes back."
……
Cil est mult proz ki sunet l'olifant:
D'un graisle cler racatet ses cumpaignz." [3193-3194]

A trumpet answers in support of the Oliphant's call, enhancing the exchange. Throughout the *Chanson*, cause for sounding an Oliphant must be the need to kill. The Oliphant no longer needs to signal a new martyrdom; that meaning is already infused within its call as a rally to the army. The post-Roncevaux Oliphant call, intensified through Roland's death, has become more threatening. The enemy is aware of such intensity, as well. Henceforth in the text, and through the ages, the French army becomes ferociously courageous in their charge against the enemy.

In fact, the phrase "high they are," *haltes sunt*, mentioned during discussion of the high pass leading to the Roncevaux valley, occurs again in the final mention of the King's Oliphant, when last blown in the *Chanson*:

The trumpets sound, their voices clear and high;
The Oliphant rings out above them all.
…… ……
Sunent cez greisles, les voiz en sunt mult cleres;

De l'olifan haltes sunt les menees. [3309-3310]

By breaking through the tone of trumpets, an Oliphant's call combines sound and scene through dramatic remembrance of Roland's heroic death, coalescing military prowess into legend. The sound of an Oliphant encourages the forces of Charlemagne, as he prepares to encounter his nemesis, Baligant. In context, the phrase, "high they are," *haltes sunt*, referring to an Oliphant's sound, recalls the rearguard's fate at the sacrificial scene, since previously in the poem "high they are," *halt sunt*, had referred to the high cliffs at Roncevaux. The ambush site not only inspires awe, the locale also provides a setting for carrying the realistic echo of an Oliphant's sound, and maintains our attention on the call's climactic significance in overall plot development.

At the end of the Chanson, after Ganelon's trial and execution, the Angel Gabriel comes to Charles to signal new troubles ahead [3994-3998]. As the Wheel of Fortune spins on, the King confesses his sorrow: "'God!' says the king, 'how weary is my life'" [4000].(47) Since Charles takes on a more active role after Roland's death, we must refer the Carolingian offensive to the Christian doctrine of redemption through sacrifice. Reward is otherworldly and in human life joy is temporary. In the context of Christian piety victory is delayed until the afterlife. The glory Roland attains is fame in this world, salvation in Heaven.

We recall that in his final moments at Roncevaux, Roland uses the Oliphant as a physical object to smash the head of a Saracen [2295]. We assume the horn as instrument survives the impact, since the object resurfaces twice in the later narrative [3119, 3310]. But possibly the King may have his own Oliphant, separate from Roland's horn. The text is not specific in this regard. What is certain is that the effect of the Oliphant's call endures beyond the instrument's use. Its influence cannot be destroyed. We know the hero's sword is indestructible; *Durendal* survives as emblem of destruction [2342]. As Roland dies heroically, his soul is carried to Paradise by a Cherubim, and by both Saint Michael, and Saint Gabriel [2393-2396]. He will not wield Durendal again, and the Oliphant will be blown by him no more. But his glory and heroism survive his demise. Since through self-sacrifice a Christian may strive toward Eternal Glory, we sense a movement from Christ to Christianity, or from Roland to the Crusades of ensuing centuries. At Roncevaux a center with an absent central figure opens up a potentially plural signification.

Careful reading of *The Song of Roland* discloses a sacrificial crisis caused by rivalry, and persistent, unmitigated violence, intensified by the Oliphant beyond literary language. The dramatic impact of the hero's sacrificial death acquires greater symbolism through the delayed Oliphant's call. Roland's delay in blowing the horn,

converting an *imperative* signal to an *ostensive* sign through sanctifying heroism, expands epic drama and suspense while conveying the real spirit behind a genuine call to arms from the distant past.

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Notes

1. Ferrante 23. (back)

2. Ferrante 21, 288. In the context of this epic, *William in the Monastery*, the hero retires to a monastery, where he experiences the monks' hypocrisy in flagrant breaches of their own rules of silence and attendance at services. In turn, William's uncouth habits and large size appall the monks, who set him up to be robbed and killed by thieves; but the hero wins the fight. Eventually learning of the ruse, the disappointed hero leaves the monastery and becomes a hermit. (back)

3. Gégou 14-15. Ferrante 16, 18. The epics of the *Guillaume* cycle are interconnected. In *The Crowning of Louis* William travels back and forth from Paris to Rome, constantly saving King Louis and the Pope from enemies. Since the King forgets William when he distributes gifts at the beginning of the *Charroi*, in the *Couronnement* Louis offers lands to the hero outright; but the offered lands have heirs already. Incensed, William refuses to take them and decides instead to conquer lands held by the Saracens, first Nîmes, and then Orange. To enter Nîmes, William disguises himself. His skill in speaking Arabic comes in handy. Although he eventually is successful, he and his relatives become restless and leave for Orange. In *The Conquest of Orange* William feels especially enticed by possession of the magnificent palace and the beautiful queen Orable. Again disguised, William, with his brother Gilbert, and his nephew Guielin, enter the Gloriette castle, but they are eventually discovered. William sends Gilbert to bring Bertrand, his other brother, with help. After a stint in towers and subterranean passages, William is successful. Aided by Bertrand, he wins the city and marries Orable, who is baptized and takes the name Guiborc. (back)

4. Ferrante 33-35, 66. (back)

5. Terry 4-5. (back)

6. Ferrante 26, 32, 83-85, 91-92. (back)

7. Ferrante 40. Bennett 93, 97. *La Chanson de Guillaume* presents a series of battles.Vivien, William's nephew, is mortally wounded defending a hopeless position in the first battle. William hears about the battle at Archamp and leaves home with his own nephew Girard and his wife's nephew Guishard. Both youngsters die in the second battle, and William leaves the battlefield to return Guishard's body to

Guiborc, his wife. At home he is treated to a hearty meal and goes back to battle with reinforcements. Back at the third battle, William is victorious against the Saracen Derame, whom he slays with help from his nephew Gui, renowned for his small stature. William then finds the dying Vivien and gives him communion before he dies. William returns home and is not recognized by his wife until he shows her the famous wound to his nose. She urges him to seek aid from the King. He then leaves for court. There is intrigue at Louis's court. William's father, Nemeri of Nerbune, smoothes things down. After a huge feast, the army marches south joined by the powerful Rainoart, former kitchen helper. In the fourth battle the pagans are caught picnicking, so victory is swift. After further intrigue at court, Rainoart's identity as Guiborc's brother is revealed. The poem ends on this note. (back)

8. Ferrante 36. *Aliscans*, another name for Archamp, tells basically the same story as *La Chanson de Guillaume*, except that the death of Vivien opens the poem; instead of extended battles, these come later; in addition, Rainoart's deeds are recounted in more detail. (back)

9. Ferrante 19, 204. Bennett 128-131. (back)

10. Ferrante 193. Bennett 85, 102. (back)

11. Gans 151. (back)

12. Line references and quotes in English are from the Patricia Terry translation, unless otherwise specified. In general, Terry's translation seems to follow the Gérard Moignet edition. Terry 43. *"De nos Franceis m'i semblet aveir mult poi!"* [1050] Moignet 94. (back)

13. *Durendal* was given to Roland directly by Charlemagne, perhaps in the knighthood ceremony. …*Durendal,/ Ma bonne espee, que li reis me dunat* [1120-1121]. Farnsworth 48, 54. (back)

14. *"Nus i avum mult petite cumpaigne"* [1087]. (back)

15. The actual Medieval French reads: "*Mis talenz en est graigne*," literally, "My ardor is superior to that" (trans. mine). In his edition, Moignet notes: "*Graigne*, comparative form of *granz*; the usual form for the nominative case is, in Medieval French, *graindre<grandior*; the form *graigne* is reconstructed analogically from the oblique case *graignur<grandiorem*." (trans. mine) Moignet 96. (back)

16. *"Veeir poez, dolente est la rereguarde"* [1104]. (back)

17. "*Nus remeindrum en estal en la place"* [1108]. (back)

18. The text reads: *“Ben devuns ci estre pur nostre rei”* [1009], literally: “We must hold ground here for our king.” (trans. mine) Moignet 92. (back)

19. Bédier 17. (back)

20. The route to *Santiago de Compostela*, a popular medieval pilgrimage site, passed by Roncevaux to continue on through to Northern Spain. Jotischky & Hull 61. (back)

21. *“Jo cornerai, si l’orrat li reis Karles”* [1714]. (back)

22. Such scenic source may be contrasted with a warning cry of “Fire!” which points to a communal danger and the decision to flee immediately, or fight the fire subsequently. In our *Roland* what is overtly designated is a sacred *locus*, Roncevaux. The esthetic effect is pronounced, as the close-up in a modern day cinematographic *zoom-in* secures enthralled participation by the audience. (back)

23. *“Pur un sul levre vait tute jur cornant.”* [1780]. (back)

24. *“Asez savez le grant orgoill Rollant”* [1773]. (back)

25. *“Devant ses pers vait it ore gabant”* [1781]. (back)

26. Gans 152. (back)

27. Ganelon’s betrayal during his Embassy at the enemy camp leads to the rearguard’s separation from the Frankish host and makes possible ambush at Roncevaux by the emir’s forces. (back)

28. *Ço dist li reis: “Bataille funt nostre hume!”* [1758]. (back)

29. *Ce dist li reis: “Jo oi le corn Rollant!”* [1768]. (back)

30. *Ço dist li reis: “Cel corn ad lunge aleine!”* [1789]. (back)

31. Syntactic repetition is seen more obviously in the original text, since identical understatement heads all three lines. The phrase in question is, “*N’i ad celoi*,” literally, “There is not one.” Terry 70.(back)

32. Rychner 93-99. (back)

33. Forney and Machlis 82. (back)

34. *Halt sunt li pui e la voiz est mult lunge* [1755]. (back)

35. *Halt sunt li pui e tenebrus e grant* [1830]. (back)

36. *Halt sunt li pui e li val tenebrous* [814]. (back)

37. *Halt sunt li pui e mult halt les arbres* [2271]. (back)

38. The resentful relationship between Roland and Ganelon has a tradition extrinsic to the text of the *Chanson*. A Latin text from the 1100's, "Song of Ganelon's Betrayal," *Carmen de prodicione Guenonis*, narrates how Charlemagne, tired of fighting, wished to return to France; but Roland insists on sending an Embassy to Marsile in Saragoce demanding surrender before returning to France. Roland suggests that Ganelon should take the King's message to the Saracen emir. There follows a confrontation between Roland and Ganelon, where Charles intervenes. Ganelon goes to Marsile, who becomes enraged at the demand for surrender. Marsile's wife, Bramimonde, calms down the emir. At this point Marsile insinuates the ambush plot to which the frightened Ganelon agrees, later bringing back the lying promise of Saracen surrender to Charles. The King departs, leaving the rearguard behind, a decision which makes the ambush at Roncevaux possible. In the Latin poem, delaying warfare through Ganelon's resentment interrupts the train of narrative, as in *The Song of Roland*. The scene of betrayal at the enemy camp provides a backdrop to events leading up to tragedy at Roncevaux. Menéndez Pidal 129-130. (back)

39. "*Car chevalchez! Vengez ceste dulor!"* [2428]. (back)

40. Moignet quotes P. le Gentil: "Charlemagne avenges Roland. Therefore, the latter remains the character around whom the work holds together; yet, pursuing vengeance, the former remains at the height of his holy mission. Thus, the homage Charlemagne grants Roland ennobles the one, without diminishing the other. There is no *Song of Charlemagne* grafted on a *Song of Roland*; there is a*Song of Roland*, of powerful import, which surpasses the trauma to attain the level of myth." (translation mine). Moignet 249. (back)

41. This scene is reminiscent of Joshua 10:12-14. The Lord delivers up the Amorites before the children of Israel by delaying sundown for a whole day. The delay of nightfall allows the chosen of God to have revenge over their enemies. Scofield 279. (back)

42. *"Asez est mielz que moerium combatant"* [1518]. (back)

43. *"Seint pareïs vos est abandunant"* [1522]. (back)

44. Bédier considers "Almace" an unexplained name, *nom inexpliqué*, for Turpin's

sword. Bédier 506. The etymology of the name is uncertain; but it may be derived from the Germanic, *all macht*, meaning Almighty. *The Free Encyclopedia*. en.wikipedia.org (back)

45. From the *Annuaire des dictionnaires* website we read: “The Mount Saint Denis Joy, or simply Joy Mount, used to be the name for the hill close to Paris where Saint Denis endured martyrdom; so named because the place of martyrdom was a site of joy for the saint who received his reward. The Mount Saint Denis Joy, *la Mont-joie Saint Denis*, means the Mount Joy of Saint Denis, *le Mont-joie de Saint Denis*, according to the old rule which rendered the Latin genitive by the ablative case. The name Joy Mount extended to all mounds and was used even figuratively. On the other hand, the French seized as war cry Mount Joy of Saint Denis, or, simply, Mount Joy (Montjoie); eventually this war cry became the name for the King’s coat of arms in France.” (trans. mine) *Dictionnaire de L’academie Française*. Mediadico.com (back)

46. *Durendal* has St. Peter’s tooth, part of a garment from the Virgin Mary, drops of St Basil’s blood, St. Denis’ hair [2344-2348]. *Joyeuse* has in the pommel part of the spear that wounded Christ; a direct reference to death and resurrection; it can conquer any foe [2503-2505, 2510]. Geoffrey of Anjou carries the oriflamme, which belonged to St. Peter, also called *Montjoie* [3092]. (back)

47. *“Deus, dist li reis, si penuse est ma vie!”* [4000]. (back)