

The Technique of Laisses similaires  
in the  
Ganelon-Marsile Exchange  
of the Chanson de Roland

The usage of laisses similaires occurs in more than one medieval epic, but most critics would probably agree with Jean Rychner that "c'est incontestablement l'auteur du Roland qui a tiré le meilleur parti de la vertu lyrique des ensembles de laisses similaires . . ." <sup>1</sup> He is, of course, referring to the Oxford manuscript of the Roland, which includes in its total of 291 laisses at least five generally recognized sets of laisses similaires. <sup>2</sup> As many critics have pointed out, it is no accident that these occur at some of the most strategic junctures, or the moments "les plus dramatiques, les plus décisifs" (Rychner, 93) of the story: in the Ganelon-Marsile exchange, the first Roland-Olivier confrontation, the sounding of the olifant, Roland's farewell to his sword followed immediately by his death, and finally, Charlemagne's five-laisse lament of the dead hero. <sup>3</sup> In effect, the laisses similaires on all these occasions serve to slow down narrative time, or even halt it entirely, in order to develop more fully the significance of these vital moments.

Yet how, precisely, are these moments developed? Laisses similaires have, after all, a dual nature: they are at the same time alike and different. Repetition of certain elements constitutes their similarity, and seems to be the manner in which the poet initially draws the listener-reader's attention to these events. But similarities in these laisses also position the reader in regard to the text; from the constant elements in the text, a viewpoint is developed on its unstable elements. The second aspect, that of difference, is not only thus highlighted, but also placed

within a frame which in some respect gives it meaning. This can perhaps be better understood upon examination of a set of laisses similaires in the Roland text.

However, before embarking upon such an analysis, a rather interesting aspect of the particular laisses similaires of the Roland must be discussed. In all five groups named above, the poet has chosen to develop these moments as dialogues. The first three rather obviously adhere to this design: Ganelon and Marsile negotiate treason, Olivier and Roland dispute the proper course of action to take, and Ganelon, Charles and Naines all verbally react to Roland's sounding of the horn. Yet the remaining two groups of laisses similaires also fulfill this apparent criterion, albeit more indirectly: Roland, in a certain sense, enters into a dialogue first with Durendal, whose resistance to Roland's intent is in some sort a reply, and then with God, who responds to his prayers by sending his angels to carry the count's soul to paradise. In the last ensemble of laisses similaires, Charles calls on an absent Roland in a dialogue made impossible by the count's demise, then creates his own dialogue with "li hume estrange" (l. 2911) in laisses CCVIII and CCIX, and finally, still within the framework of his unfulfillable dialogue with Roland, wishes his own death so he may rejoin his lost maisnee (laisse CCX).

As some scholars have remarked, it is often very difficult to determine the narrative role of the laisses similaires: whether they are describing and then redescribing one moment in time (Roland's death, one assumes, can only happen once, yet recurs in three laisses), or are portraying several individual occurrences of like actions (does Roland sound the horn three times?). This ambi-

guity seems intensified by the dialogical quality of the laisses similaires: by one modern definition at least, in dialogical narrative, the "temps du récit" equals the "temps de l'histoire."<sup>4</sup> If one accepts the "redescriptive" nature of these laisses, the Roland text then seems to belie this modern concept of narrative time, and indeed the whole modern notion of verisimilitude. Dialogue is not only repeated and expanded beyond the confines of the "temps de l'histoire," but its very "objective" nature is cast into doubt by the variability of its transcriptions (what are Roland's actual last words to Durendal?). Yet the alternative narrative possibility, that is, that these laisses similaires describe a progressive dialogue whose segments are meant to be regarded as temporally distinct but similar in content, is still greatly at odds with our modern notions of verisimilitude. The notion of dialogue as a concatenated set of responses would place this narrative style of repetition and non-linear progression in a very uncertain light.

The resolution of this dichotomy of narrative technique and verisimilitude must then inevitably lie outside the realm of modern qualifications of both these terms. In fact, as ever, the best method for arriving at a greater understanding of the narrative technique of laisses similaires commences with a close examination of the text itself. Since the first three sets of laisses similaires more clearly demonstrate the presentation of dialogues through this narrative structure, this analysis will be focussed upon one of these: the first one, namely the Ganelon-Marsile dialogue.

In laisses XL-XLII, in which Ganelon and Marsile take the first firm step towards their treacherous alliance, the dual nature of these laisses simili-



three laissez is the "end" line of the preceding series, the key line of Marsile's speech, and perhaps of this entire passage: "Quant ert il mais recreanz d'osteier?" This question is taken up in exactly the same form in laisse XLI (l. 543), and varied only slightly in laisse XLII, line 556: "Quant ier il mais d'osteir recreant?"

Interestingly, it is after this most invariable line of the three laissez that laissez XLI and XLII diverge the most sharply from their predecessor, though all the while maintaining a strict parallelism between themselves. Ganelon's reply in XL is concerned entirely with praise of Charlemagne, while in XLI and XLII, attention shifts away from Charles' prowess to Roland, Olivier and the twelve peers.

Some few elements, however, are threaded throughout the three laissez: for example, in all three, Ganelon emphasizes that Charles will not stop fighting (although an important "tant cum" qualifies this assertion in XLI and XLII). Likewise, it is made evident in all three that Charles cares deeply for his barons ("Meilz voelt murir que guerpis sun barnet," l. 536 of the first laisse, is echoed in the lines "Les .XII. pers, que Carles ad tant chers" and "Li .XII. per, que Carles aimet tant"--ll. 547 and 560--of the second and third laissez). Finally, there is a similarity of style in the three Ganelon replies: in all three, whether they describe Charles (XL) or Roland and Olivier (XLI and XLII), superlative structures of a curious nature seem to be a dominant feature. These superlatives, although ultimately positive in meaning, are nevertheless syntactically based upon a negation. In laisse XL, lines 531-4, for example, Ganelon asserts (negatively):

". . .Carles n'est mie tels.  
 N'est hom kil veit e conuistre le set  
 Que ço ne diet que l'emperere est ber.  
 Tant nel vos sai ne preiser ne loer  
 Que plus n'i ad d'onur e de bontet. . ."  
 (my emphasis)

This same negative-to-positive superlative structure is also present in XLI:

--Ço n'iert," dist Guenes, "tant cum vivet  
 sis niés:  
 N'at tel vassal suz la cape del ciel.  
 . . .  
 Solrs est Carles, que nuls home ne crent."  
 AOI

and in XLII:

--Ço n'iert," dist Guenes, "tant cum vivet  
 Rollant:  
 N'ad tel vassal d'ici qu'en Orient.  
 . . .  
 Solrs est Carles, ne crent hume vivant."  
 AOI

However, these similarities are much less evident than those of Ganelon's replies in laissez XLI and XLII; these last develop quite differently from XL, while at the same time developing parallel in relation to each other. Indeed, in the last four lines of these laissez, the only differences apparent would seem to be the result of the change in assonance from /e/ (XLI) to /â/ (XLII) (although this would be greatly minimizing the fineness of the Roland's art).

XLI:

"Mult par est proz sis cumpainz, Oliver;

Les .XII. pers, que Carles ad tant chers,  
Funt les enguardes a .XX. milie chevalers.  
Sours est Carles, que nuls home ne crent."  
AOI

XLII:

"Mult par est proz Oliver, sis cumpainz;  
Li .XII. per, que Carles aimet tant,  
Funt les enguardes a .XX. milie de  
Francs.  
Sours est Carles, ne crent hume vivant."  
AOI

Yet although these similarities are indeed strong, together these last two replies diverge considerably from the initial response of Ganelon in laisse XL, where Charlemagne is the object of extended praise, and Roland is not at all mentioned. As demonstrated above, there are some thematic and specific stylistic links between all three Ganelon replies, but the obvious structures indicate a movement, or a progression, from the first laisse to the second two. Before examining the function of similarity in this movement, however, one more structural observation should be made, namely, that upon close examination of this particular ensemble of laissez similaires, a certain pattern of similarity emerges.

As has already been demonstrated, the first part of each of the three laissez, the Marsile speech, begins in much the same way ("Ço dist Marsilies," etc.). Indeed, it has also been observed that similarity seems to be the rule for all parts of Marsile's discourse before the caesura dividing the fourth and fifth syllables. Differences in this section of the laisse, then, occur in the second part of each individual line. Although some of these variations could arguably be attri-

buted merely to the distinctive assonance of each laisse, there are other more evident additions and alterations, especially in the third laisse, which have by design a significance beyond the dictates of laisse form (i.e. its basis of assonance). These will be discussed later in detail, but for the moment this disposition of similarity and difference claims attention in its own right, since it seems to be echoed in the greater structure of the ensemble.

For, it can be said, the pattern "similarity to difference," found in each line of the Marsile discourse, is also evident in the general structure of each laisse. The change in Ganelon's reply from XL to XLI clearly follows this pattern, as Ganelon's speech switches its focus from Charles to Roland. The sole verbatim repetition throughout all three laisses occurs in the first half of the lines in the first half of each laisse.

This disposition is supremely logical when the effect on the listener-reader is taken into account, for exact repetition at the beginning of each line necessarily draws attention to the similar nature of these laisses. And, by isolating the constant elements in this manner, the differences of each line, and of each Ganelon reply, are brought ever more sharply into focus. A cue to the listener-reader is thus given: the movement or progress in each of these laisses will originate from the differences at the end of each line, and at the end of each laisse (that is, in the Ganelon replies). Once we are attuned to the effects of this procedure in the first two laisses, the purpose of the parallelism of the last two laisses becomes apparent. Once again, the third laisse repeats verbatim the first half of each line of the Marsile speech, and varies



considerably in the second half; yet this verbatim repetition of first words goes on to encompass the Ganelon reply as well.

The effect on the listener-reader of this extension of repetition before the caesura into the Ganelon discourse is subtle, yet potent: as has been previously remarked, the Ganelon reply of the third laisse could seem to differentiate itself from that of the second only superficially, through its change in assonance. This evaluation, however, does not do justice to the intricacy of the poet's art. In fact, through this pattern of verbatim repetition as it is carried on into the third laisse, the listener-reader is led to narrow his perception of the locus of relevant difference down to the last syllables of each line, and to focus his attention on the subtle yet vital progressions in this part of the text. In fact, the assonantal difference, far from arising out of a mere formal necessity, becomes another important device exploited successfully by the poet to produce the global effect of these laissez.

Similarity in these laissez, then, functions in at least two ways to draw the listener-reader's attention to these passages. The pattern or form it takes in these laissez alerts the listener-reader from the first that though the basic narrative situation is constant, there are important differences which need to be perceived and evaluated. In fact, this pattern informs the reader as to the location of these differences within the text (at the end of each line, and in the Ganelon reply). The second function of similarity is implied by the first: namely that it must frame or even contain these differences, so that progress in the plot of the narrative is halted, or at most confined to within the bounds of certain constants. These constants then have their own

power over the way in which the listener-reader will grasp the content of these laissez.

The constants in these laissez, we have already seen, exist at several levels: word, phrase, sentence, etc. The basic dialogical structure, Marsile's question and Ganelon's answer, is the most general constant of this series, and is nicely reinforced by the most faithfully rendered line of the whole series, "Quant ert il mais recreanz d'osteier?" (l. 528). In effect, the intersection of similarities here of structure (dialogue) and specific line (the crucial question) and even word (repetitious use of tant) gives considerable insight into the significance of what is happening in the story. First, the very fact that a pagan and a French baron are entering into a dialogue must be underscored, for in itself this constitutes a highly problematic situation. The basic stance of Marsile is made clear as well: the repeated usage of tant implies a certain awe, fear or even despair before Charlemagne's strength. The last question of his speech, the true constant of Marsile's lines, seems to sum up this feeling and emphasize the pagan king's urgent desire for relief from the threat of Charlemagne, a veritable need on his part that in some sense places him at the mercy of Ganelon's guile.

Ganelon's reply varies considerably from the first to the second laisse, yet a few common traits have been found to exist in all three. These, in fact, will serve as an interpretive framework for reading Ganelon's replies as they progress from one laisse to the next. In reply to Marsile's plea, Ganelon replies all three times in the negative: this, of course, heightens the tension for Marsile, since Charles would seem to be invincible. Ganelon, in effect, exploits the fears of Marsile, and, with the later qualifica-

tions of tant cum added to XLI and XLII, redirects them for his own purposes. Charles' attachment to his barons is another theme appearing in all three laissez. Here, Ganelon, with treacherous finesse, seeks to associate defeat of Charles' barons with a victory over the emperor himself, once again attempting to manipulate Marsile into serving his personal ends. Lastly, Ganelon's style in all three laissez, specifically his use of the negative-to-positive superlative indicated above, also gives a frame of reference from which the alert listener may view Ganelon's speech. This propensity for saying positive things through use of negations subtly raises the question of sincerity. Use of this procedure implies a certain syntagmatic ambiguity in the speech of this character, an ambiguity, one can say, which symptomizes treasonous discourse. Outwardly maintaining the appearance of loyalty, the traitor secretly commits evil; just as Judas kisses Christ to betray him, Ganelon first praises Charles, then even Roland, only to betray them both. The negations in the traitor's words of praise, however, may serve as subtle signals as to the true nature of his intent.

This global atmosphere of urgent need (on the part of the pagan king) and clever manipulation (by Ganelon) already established by the similarities in these discourses, is also supported by the differences woven into the text over the course of this passage. As has already been observed, the similarities in these laissez attract attention to their locus of variance, that is, primarily to the second half of each Marsile line, and to the Ganelon reply. There are two notable exceptions to this rule, but they have their own logical purpose. The first of these is found in the very first line of each laisse, where similarity and difference meaningfully coincide in the formula

"Ço dist Marsilies" and its variations "Dist li paiens" and "Dist li Sarrazins." Marsile is, of course, one and the same with the pagan and the Saracen, and the verb remains constant (without doubt drawing attention to the ultimate similarity of the laisses), but there is difference, and significance in this difference, of appellation. Marsile is a man; to term him "li paiens" is accurate, but shifts the focus from his individuality to his religious role: he is the enemy of Christianity. The further shift to "li Sarrazins" finalizes the movement: not only does he have a religious identity, but a political one as well, and both are implicitly opposed to Charlemagne's corresponding double identification as Holy Roman Emperor and King of the Franks. Thus, Marsile becomes for the listener-reader more and more of an enemy; a signal on the part of the narrator that his words must therefore be subject to at least increasing skepticism, if not utter disbelief.

This narrative manipulation comes very opportunely, since Marsile's words actually become ever more flattering of Charles as the laisses progress. As Roger Pensom points out,<sup>5</sup> in the first laisse of the series, Marsile speaks rather denigratingly of Charles, saying he is "mult vielz, si ad sun tens uset . . ." This line, in fact, is the second violation to the locus of difference pattern, taking up an entire line, instead of the usual half. Its purpose must be to draw attention to its initial nature and thence to its subsequent forms. In fact, Marsile reformulates his discourse in a more "polite" manner each time; he adds the elements of admiration, "Mult me puis merveiller" and "Merveille en ai grant," and slowly transforms his description of Charles to first "canuz e vielz" (canuz for Pensom is honorable; vielz, bordering on the pejorative), and then

finally to "canuz e blancs," both of these terms possessing only positive connotations.

The same general movement towards flattery is furthered in the expected locus of difference, in developments of lines such as "Par tantes teres ad sun cors demened," where demened is replaced in the second *laisse* with the stronger verb tra-veillet; in the third, the verbs chosen are even more powerfully endowed: "Par tantes teres est alet cunquerant" (my emphasis). This tendency towards a more active and forceful description of Charles is continued in the following two lines, where the

Tanz cols ad pris de lances e d'espiez  
Tanz riches reis cunduiz a mendistiet

of XLI becomes the more extreme

Tanz colps ad pris de bons espiez  
trenchanz,  
Tanz riches reis morz e vencuz en champ

of XLII. Yet the frame provided by the introductory formulae and by the closing constant of Marsile's speech ("Quant ert il mais recreanz d'osteier?") recalls the true purpose of this enunciation: although praise is profuse, the pagan's real interest in Charles is that of a desperate man seeking relief from his political and religious enemy. Marsile attempts his own brand of guile in progressively flattering Charles; by putting himself in a weaker, conciliating position before Ganelon, the pagan king is hoping to manipulate the dialogue to promote the latter's good will and allay his fears, facilitating a possible eventual collusion in betrayal.

The differences in Ganelon's replies indicates

an acknowledgment of the pagan king's efforts, although Ganelon is careful initially to negate Marsile's hopes in each of the three responses. In the first laisse, Marsile's denigration of Charles has sought to implicate Ganelon in this disrespect of the emperor; this is going too far, too fast for the Frankish baron, so his initial negation holds throughout the remainder of the first laisse. As Pierre LeGentil has pointed out,<sup>6</sup> Ganelon is very careful to establish a distinction between his loyalty to Charles and his willingness to betray Roland. This explains his reactions to Marsile's more flattering portrayals of the Christian emperor in the successive laisses. In XLI, Marsile has adroitly neutralized the pejorative nuance of his words concerning Charles; Ganelon, in return, qualifies his initial denial, "Ço n'iert," with a highly significant "tant cum vivet sis niés" that allows a single opening for the frustrated and despairing Saracen to attack Charles. This is the first real step towards treason for Ganelon; he is quick, however, to attempt to cover his now obvious intent with a ritual eulogy of Roland and the twelve peers.

Ganelon's second reply is taken up almost word for word in the third laisse, yet by narrowing the locus of relevant difference to the last part of each line, and by emphasizing this essential difference through a change in assonance (to /<sup>u</sup>a/), the reader's attention is firmly fixed. Roland is finally named; indeed the assonance of all the preceding lines leads up to this moment. The denial is still initially there, but it is dwarfed by the power of the evocation of Roland's name, as is the formal eulogy which is once again offered. The initial step is firm and irrevocable; the narrator has left no doubt that Ganelon has thus committed himself to treason.

The progress of these discourses serves thus to further the effects already in part produced by their similarities. The development of a treasonous discourse reveals itself thus progressively to the listener-reader as the distance is increased between Marsile's growing identification as enemy and his ironically conciliating words. At the same time, Ganelon is seen to narrow in on the naming of his victim, the act which realises his treasonous intent, while still seeking to cover the nefarious nature of his action through the manipulation of speech. Dialogue here, in fact, is manipulated by both its participants, yet more importantly over the whole, it is the hand of the narrator that manipulates the listener-reader's perception and interpretation of this scene. Ganelon and Marsile, in the true fashion of the worst of evil-doers, speak with forked tongues: on one level their words may seem innocuous enough--Ganelon praises Charles and Roland, Marsile paints a flattering portrait of Charles--but succeeding layers reveal the true nature of their discourse and its murderous intent. And in this dialogue, while its participants are perceived to be moving closer and closer to collusion, an opposite effect is taking place within the reader: he is being led by the narrator to a position of condemning distance, over and above these scheming traitors.

Laisses similaires as a narrative technique thus not only call attention to this episode by dwelling upon it for the space of three laisses, but more importantly, they convey to the listener-reader a vital perception of the nature of this treasonous discourse. This effort to predispose the listener-reader's attitude toward Ganelon, for instance, will give much of Roland's fate its pathos; it will also serve an important purpose later, when Ganelon must be publicly judged.

Returning to the notion of verisimilitude, however, one is still forced to acknowledge the temporal ambiguity of these actions (it remains unclear whether these laisses are redescriptive or consecutive in nature). Yet the Marsile-Ganelon dialogue can still be considered as faithfully rendered. "Realism" in the Roland does not seem to be based upon historical accuracy so much as upon historical significance. The modern notion of dialogue and verisimilitude cannot be meaningfully applied to this case; instead, based on the manner of presentation of the text, especially in these laisses similaires, it is evident that the transmission of truth for this poet does not depend on strict adherence to the exact reproduction of reality. Instead, what the the poet's art does effectively provide is the key to a greater global understanding of historical events. After all, what does it matter what Ganelon's actual words were and how often he said them? What is important is the nature of his discourse: the fact that under the words of praise a movement is beginning, a movement that has its beginning in a dozen treasonous lines of dialogue, but that will end in the death of thousands.

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Complete text of laisses XL-XLII (Bédier edition):

XL:

Ço dist Marsilies: "Guenes, par veir  
sacez,  
En talant ai que mult vos voeill amer.  
De Carlemagne vos voeill oïr parler.  
Il est mult vielz, si ad sun tens uset;  
Men escient dous cenz anz ad passet.  
Par tantes teres ad sun cors demened,  
Tanz colps ad pris sur sun escut bucler,  
Tanz riches reis cunduit a mendisted:  
Quant ert il mais recreanz d'osteier?"  
Guenes respunt: "Carles n'est mie tels.  
N'est hom kil veit e conuistre le set  
Que ço ne diet que l'emperere est ber.  
Tant nel vos sai ne preiser ne loer  
Que plus n'i ad d'onur e de bontet.  
Sa grant valor, kil purreit acunter?  
De tel barnage l'ad Deus enluminet  
Meilz voelt murir que guerpir sun barnet."

XLI:

Dist li paiens: "Mult me puis merveiller  
De Carlemagne, ki est canuz e vielz!  
Men escientre dous cenz anz ad e mielz.  
Par tantes teres ad sun cors travailleit,  
Tanz cols ad pris de lances e d'espiez,  
Tanz riches reis cunduis a mendistiet:  
Quant ert il mais recreanz d'osteier?  
--Ço n'iert," dist Guenes, "tant cum vivet  
sis niés:  
N'at tel vassal suz la cape del ciel.  
Mult par est proz sis cumpainz, Oliver;  
Les .XII. pers, que Carles ad tant chers,  
Funt les enguardes a .XX. milie chevalers.  
Sours est Carles, que nuls home ne crent."  
AOI.

Dist li Sarrazins: "Merveille en ai grant  
De Carlemagne, ki est canuz e blancs!  
Mien escientre plus ad de .II.C. anz.  
Par tantes teres est alet cunquerant,  
Tanz colps ad pris de bons espiez  
    trenchanz,  
Tanz riches reis morz e vencuz en champ:  
Quant ier il mais d'osteir recreant?  
--Ço n'iert," dist Guenes, "tant cum vivet  
    Rollant:  
N'ad tel vassal d'ici qu'en Orient.  
Mult par est proz Oliver, sis cumpainz;  
Li .XII. per, que Carles aimet tant,  
Funt les enguardes a .XX. milie de Francs.  
Soûrs est Carles, ne crent hume vivant."  
    AOI.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jean Rychner, La Chanson de Geste: Essai sur l'art épique des jongleurs (Genève: Droz, 1955), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Actually, the total number of laissez similaires has yet to be defined. Various critics have suggested that there are more laissez similaires than those included in these five groups, and Rychner himself suggests a sixth (however, this set is not generally recognized); yet despite differences, virtually all critics do agree upon these five ensembles, which I mention below.

<sup>3</sup> These passages are designated as follows in the Joseph Bédier edition of La Chanson de Roland (Oxford ms.) (Paris: L'Édition d'art H. Piazza, 1944): Laissez XL-XLII; Laissez LXXXIII-LXXXV; Laissez CXXXIII-CXXXV; Laissez CLXXI-CLXXIII and CLXXIV-CLXXVI; Laissez CCVI-CCVII and CCVIII-CCX.

(Henceforth, all citations from the Roland will be drawn from the Bédier edition.)

<sup>4</sup> G. Genette, Figures III (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), pp. 129-30.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Pensom, Literary Technique in the Chanson de Roland (Genève: Droz S.A., 1982) (Histoire des idées et critique littéraire, vol. 203), 102-3.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre LeGentil, The Chanson de Roland, trans. Frances F. Beer (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969), 83-84.

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