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Author(s): Suzanne Fleischman

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'Overlay Structures' in the Song of Roland:
A Discourse-Pragmatic Strategy of Oral Narrative
Suzanne Fleischman
University of California, Berkeley

1. Introduction.

1.1 Recent work on the organization of narrative discourse has shown that 'grounding' in a text (the foreground-background contrast) is accomplished across languages via similar grammatical oppositions, involving e.g., transitivity, case marking, tense-aspect, and clause type. In particular, it has been observed that foregrounded material tends to be encoded in main clauses, backgrounded material in various types of subordinate clauses. However, the parataxis of many varieties of ORAL narrative, in which stories are played out largely through a syntax of juxtaposed or co-ordinated main clauses, tends to favor grounding devices other than subordination. In this paper I analyze the operation in the Old French Song of Roland of an alternative grounding device, more suited to parataxis, which has been identified in the 'natural' narrative styles of several unrelated languages and which Grimes (1972, 1975) has labelled 'overlay'.

1.2 Roland is a narrative artifact of a feudal warrior culture. As part of the Christian campaign against the infidel, Charlemagne has been battling the Saracens in Spain. Their king Marsilion falsely promises that if Charles will go back to France, he will follow him there and become a Christian. Count Roland nominates his stepfather Ganelon for the dangerous mission of negotiating this arrangement with the Saracens. Ganelon convinces the pagans that the only way to achieve peace is to put an end to the Frankish war-party -- Roland, his companion Oliver, and the 12 Peers. Ganelon has them assigned to the rear guard for the retreat into France, then conspires with Marsilion to have the pagans attack them once Charles and his forces have gone on. As the pagan hordes approach at Roncevaux pass, Oliver entreats Roland to sound his horn to call Charles and the army back for help. Roland refuses, opting to fight on alone. Only when the battle is clearly lost does Roland sound his horn, and in so doing bursts his temples and dies. Hearing the distress signal, Charles returns to Roncevaux, only to find the remains of a massacre. He avenges Roland by annihilating Marsilion's army, then goes on to secure victory for Christianity by defeating the army of the Emir Baligant, Emperor of all Islam. The text closes with Ganelon's trial and execution for treason.

1.3 Among the salient features of the compositional technique of Roland are the 'similar laisses,'¹ in which the movement of narrative time is arrested at strategic points by sequences of 2-3 laisses that repeat the same basic information with variations of detail. Most often emphasized in Roland criticism is the lyric dimension of these moments of narrative stasis and their role in the elaboration of a poetic technique that has elevated the Oxford

text (early 12th c.) to a position of pre-eminence within the epic genre. With no intent to minimize this artistic achievement, I propose in this paper to show:

(a) that the 'overlay' structure (defined in 2.2 below) of Roland's similar laissez serves two important discourse functions: MONITORING INFORMATION FLOW (controlling the pace of the discourse and the rate at which 'new' information is introduced) and FOREGROUNDING;² and

(b) that certain devices viewed by literary analysts as hallmarks of poetic craftsmanship can and often do occur in non-literary discourse and in widely diverse linguistic traditions. My intent is not to undercut the poetic effect of such devices, but simply to elucidate their linguistic underpinning.

2. Repetition and Narrative Temporality

2.1 Among the components of narrative structure that bear on temporality, Genette (1980) introduced the parameter of FREQUENCY to refer to the number of times an event occurs in the story-world (histoire) relative to the number of times it is narrated in the text (récit). Of the three frequency relations discussed by Genette, the similar-laisse phenomenon of Roland corresponds to his 'repetitive' formula, i.e. telling n times what happened only once.³ Admittedly, Genette says, a statement such as Yesterday I went to bed early, yesterday I went to bed early, yesterday I went to bed early might seem purely hypothetical and irrelevant to literature -- "an illformed offspring of the combinative mind" (115). Yet many modern artistic narratives turn precisely on narrative's capacity for repetition: the film of Rashomon comes to mind; or Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!, in which the main event is narrated 39 times (cited in Rimmon-Kenan 1983:57f.).

2.2 Genette's discussion of repetition focuses on highly literate narrative forms. Yet structures of repetition are even more common in oral poetic traditions, and likewise have their place in the non-poetic, 'natural' narrative styles of certain oral cultures. Relevant to Roland is a particular narrative protocol documented in unrelated languages of Brazil (Borôro) and New Guinea (Chuave, Pidgin, Angaataha), for which Grimes (1972, 1975) has coined the term 'overlay':

The overlay technique involves putting together two or more PLANES, each of which constitutes a narration of the same sequence of events. The first plane consists largely of new information. The second plane, and the others that follow it, begin the sequence over again.... They consist partly of new information that is being given for the first time in that plane, partly of given information such as that which is referred to anaphorically, and partly of information that is repeated piecemeal from an earlier plane. This repeated information has a special status: it is the highlighted information that ties the whole overlay together. Informationally it is the backbone of the whole structure. (Grimes 1975:293)

2.3 The claim we are advancing here is that the similar-laisse phenomenon of Old French chansons de geste, which literary critics find most artfully realized in the Oxford Roland, bears striking resemblance to the tightly structured rhetorical pattern of overlay found in non-literate --and non-Western--natural narrative traditions. But before proceeding with an analysis of overlay and its functions in Roland, a few observations are in order concerning the nature and structure of Old French epic discourse.

3. The Structure of Epic Narrative

3.1 The fabric of Old French epic narrative is woven with periodic 'backstitching' between the laisses. Typically one or more verses of an earlier laisse are picked up anaphorically in a new laisse. Often the linkage occurs at the beginning of the new laisse, where it functions as the starting point or theme, though it may occur elsewhere in the laisse as well. The conspicuous linkages and repetitions of the chansons de geste have generally been related to the fact that, according to one widely held theory, this song-poetry was composed and re-composed in performance before a listening audience.⁴ For those of us whose 'narrative competence' has developed in a culture of literacy --where chronology is crucial and the building blocks of narratives are sequentially ordered eventlike units--the minimal narrativity of epic discourse, with its frequent violations of chronology, unsignalled repetitions of the same events, and high density of non-eventive material, may prove disconcerting. How does one "follow the plot"? But for the public of the chansons de geste the plots of these tales were generally well known. Epic performance offered its listeners not a new adventure in narrative but the pleasure of the familiar in a participatory ritual of communal solidarity. Through each re-citation of this "secular scripture of the community" (Goldin 1978:42), a largely non-literate society engaged itself in the historiographic process.

3.2 The familiarity of the epic material and the requirements imposed by oral-aural transmission were no doubt contributing factors to the low-level narrativity of epic discourse, whose structure has been described as "independent pictures strung together like beads" (Auerbach 1953:114f.). There is little concern for what we consider to be the defining primes of narrative textuality: chronology and causality. As Goldin (1978:42) observes, "each laisse contains not so much a linear narration of a certain act as a meditation upon it.... This can be seen most readily in the laisses parallèles and laisses similaires... but it is the controlling principle nearly everywhere." Another critic goes further: "there is no background, no foreground, no ascending or descending order between scenes. Important moments are stressed quantitatively by repetition in parallel [and similar] laisses, not by climactic sequential development" (Grunmann 1976:56). While acknowledging the centrality of repetition to the epic poetic technique, Grunmann

apparently fails to perceive the pragmatic role of repetition structures in delineating the narrative foreground.

3.3 This difference between a textuality (usually written) in which grounding is accomplished through subordination and one (typically oral) in which it is accomplished quantitatively through accumulation, is captured in Grimes's contrastive metaphor of 'outlines' vs. 'overlays':

An outline structure puts semantic information into a perspective in two dimensions: coördinating parallel elements and subordinating other things to them, whereas overlay structure adds a third dimension to the other two.... Outline structures communicate relationships by dependency: overlay structures use accretion as well. (Grimes 1972:513)

4. The Similar Laisses

At various points in Roland, the content of an entire laisse will be reiterated with variations, according to a pattern which fits strikingly with the description of overlays given in 2.2. The Oxford text contains 5 sets of similar laisses: 2 sets of 3 laisses each:

40-42: Marsilion and Ganelon discuss the war

83-85: Oliver implores Roland to sound his horn

and three double sets of 3 + 3:

133-135: Roland finally sounds his horn

136-138: Charles returns in vain to aid Roland and the rearward

171-173: Roland's dying address to his sword Durandal

174-176: Roland's death

205-207: Charles finds Roland's body

208-210: Charles' lament over Roland

Space limitations preclude examination of more than 2 of these passages, nor is it possible to reproduce here, for comparison, the natural narrative texts whose structure the overlay pattern was formulated to capture. The interested reader is referred to Grimes 1972:516-521.

4.1 Marsilion and Ganelon.

4.1.1 The 'narrative' content of laisses 40-42 may be summed up as follows: Ganelon, sent by Charles to negotiate with the Saracens, is interrogated by their king Marsilion as to Charles's inclination to continue the war. This is clearly a moment of narrative stasis: there are no 'events', only speech-events. As presented in (1), the exchange has been broken down into its constituent information blocks, with a letter assigned to each:

- a. Said Marsilion: "I tell you, Ganelon
I have a great desire to love you dearly.
b. I want to hear you speak of Charlemagne.
He is so old, he's used up all his time--
c. from what I hear, he is past two hundred!
d. He has pushed his old body through so many lands,
e. taken so many blows on his buckled shield,
f. made beggars of so many mighty kings:
g. when will he lose the heart for making war?"
h. Ganelon answers: "Charles is not one to lose heart.
i. No man sees him, no man learns to know him
who does not say: the Emperor is great.
I do not know how to praise him so highly
that his great merit would not surpass my praise.
Who could recount his glory and his valor?"
n. God put the light in him of such lordness,
he would choose death before he failed
his barons."
- Ço dist Marsilies: "Guenes, par veir sacez,
En talent ai que mult vos voeill amer.
De Carlemagne vos voeill oir 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 co 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
Mielz voelt murir que guerpir
sun barnet."

41.

- b. Said the pagan: "I have reason to marvel
at Charlemagne, a man so old and grey--
c. he's two hundred years old, I hear, and more;
d. he has tortured his body through so many lands,
e. and borne so many blows from lance and spear
f. made beggars of so many mighty kings:
g. when will he lose the heart for making war?"
j. "Never," said Ganelon, "while his nephew lives,
k. he's a fighter, there's no vassal like him under
the vault of heaven. And he has friends.
l. There's Oliver, a good man, his companion.
m. And the 12 Peers, whom Charles holds very dear,
form the vanguard, with 20,000 knights.
h. Charles is secure, he fears no man on earth."
- Dist li paiens: "Mult me puis merveiller
De Carlemagne, ki est canuz e vielz
Men escientre, dous cenz ans ad e mielz.
Par tantes teres ad sun cors travaillet,
Tanz colps ad pris de lances e d'espiet,
Tanz riches reis cunduit a mendistiet!
Quant ert il mais recreanz d'osteier?"
--Ço n'iert, dist Guenes, tant cum vivet
sis nies:
N'ad tel vassal suz le cape del ciel.
Mult par est proz sis cumpainz, Oliver;
Li .xii. pers, que Carles ad tant chers,
Funt les enguardes a .xx. milie chevalers.
Sours est Carles, que nuis home ne crent."

42.

- b. Said the pagan: "Truly, how I must marvel
at Charlemagne, who is so grey and white--
c. over two hundred years, from what I hear;
d. gone through so many lands a conqueror,
e. and borne so many blows from strong,
sharp spears,
f. killed and conquered so many mighty kings:
g. when will he lose the heart for making war?"
j. "Never," said Ganelon, "while one man lives:
Roland!
k. no man like him from here to the Orient!
l. There's his companion, Oliver, a brave man.
m. And the 12 Peers, whom Charles holds very dear,
form the vanguard, with 20,000 Franks.
n. Charles is secure, he fears no man alive."
- 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 conquerant,
Tanz colps ad pris de bons espiez
trenchanz,
Tanz riches reis morz e vencuz en champ!
Quant ier il mais d'osteier recreant?
--Ço n'ier, 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.
Sours est Carles, ne crent hume vivant."

4.1.2. In languages that make important use of overlays, Grimes notes (1972:520), the temporal sequence of elements within each plane is unilinear, i.e., a composite projection of all the planes onto a time-line would yield a single sequence of events (but see n.6) as given in (2) for the similar laisses in (1) above:

- (2)
- a. Marsilion: offer of friendship to Ganelon
 - b. Charlemagne is so old and grey
 - c. He is over 200 years old, they say⁵
 - d. His old body has struggled to conquer many lands
 - e. He has taken so many blows
 - f. He has reduced so many kings
 - g. When will he tire of making war?
 - h. Ganelon: Never. Charles is secure, he fears no one
 - i. He is so noble; his valor and glory surpass description
 - j. Never, so long as Roland lives⁶
 - k. Roland has no equal
 - l. There is also valiant Oliver, his companion
 - m. The 12 peers, with 20,000 Frankish knights, form the vanguard
 - n. Charles is so noble, he would choose death before abandoning his men

4.2. The "First Horn Scene".

4.2.1. At the crucial moment in the battle of Roncevaux narrated in laisses 83-85, the rearguard of Charlemagne's army, commanded by Roland, is faced with certain defeat at the hands of the pagans. Roland's trusted friend Oliver entreats him to sound his horn so that Charlemagne will hear it and, recognizing it as a sign of distress, come to their assistance with the remainder of the Frankish troops. Once again, the similar laisses occur at a dialogue, whose overall contribution to the plot may be summed up in two 'narrative events': Oliver entreats Roland to sound his horn; Roland refuses:

(3) 83.

- a. Said Oliver: "The pagan force is great
from what I see, our French here are too few.
b. Roland, my companion, sound your horn then,
c. Charles will hear it, the army will come back."
d. Roland replies: "I'd be a fool to do it.
f. I would lose my good name all through sweet France.
i. I will strike now, I'll strike with Durendal,
k. the blade will be bloody to the gold from striking!
m. These pagan traitors came to these passes doomed!
I promise you, they are marked men, they'll die."
- Dist Oliver: "Païen unt grant esforz;
De noz Franceis m'i semblet avoir molt poi!
Cumpaign Rollant, kar sunez vostre corn,
Si l'orrat Charles, si retournerat l'ost."
Respunt Rollant: "Jo fereie que fols!
En dulce France en perdreie mun los.
Sempres ferrai de Durendal granz colps;
Sanglant en ert li branz entresqu'a l'or.
Felun païen mar i vindrent as porz:
Jo vos plevis, tuz sunt jugez a mort."

84.

- b. "Roland, Companion, now sound the olifant,
c. Charles will hear it, he will bring the army back,
the King will come with all his barons to help us."
g. Roland replies: "May it never please God
that my kin should be shamed because of me,
h. or that sweet France should fall into disgrace.
i. Never! Never! I'll strike with Durendal,
I'll strike with this good sword strapped to my side.
k. You'll see this blade running its whole length
with blood.
m. These pagan traitors have gathered here to die.
I promise you, they are all bound for death."
- "Cumpainz Rollant, l'olifant car sunez,
Si l'orrat Charles, ferat l'ost retourner,
Succurrat nos li reis od sun barnet."
Respont Rollant: "Ne placet Dammedeu
Que mi parent pur mei seient blasmet
Ne France dulce ja cheet en viltet!
Einz i ferrai de Durendal asez,
Tut en verrez le brant ensanglentet.
Felun païen mar i sunt assemblez:
Jo vos plevis, tut sunt a mort livrez."

85.

- b. "Roland, Companion, sound your olifant now,
c. Charles will hear it, marching through
those passes.
I promise you, the Franks will come at once."
e. Roland replies: "May it never please God
that any man alive should come to say
that pagans—pagans!—once made me
sound this horn:
g. no kin of mine will ever bear that shame.
i. Once I enter this great battle coming
j. and strike my thousand seven hundred blows,
k. you'll see the bloody steel of Durendal.
l. These French are good—they will strike
like brave men.
m. Nothing can save the men of Spain from death."
- "Cumpainz Rollant, sunez vostre olifant,
Si l'orrat Charles, ki est as
porz passant.
Je vos plevis, ja retournerunt Franc.
—Ne placet Deu, ço li respunt Rollant,
Que co seit dit de nul hume vivant,
Ne pur païen, que ja seie cornant!
Ja n'en avrunt reproce mi parent.
Quant jo serai en la bataille grant
E jo ferrai e mil colps e .vii. cenz
De Durendal verrez l'acer sanglent.
Franceis sunt bon, si ferrunt
vassalment;
Ja cil d'Espagne n'avrunt de mort guarant."

4.2.2. The information blocks of this scene, in logical order, are given in (4):

- (4) a. Oliver: we are badly outnumbered
 b. Roland, sound your horn!
 c. Charles will hear it and return with the army
 to help us
 d. Roland: I'd be a fool to do so
 e. Never let it never be said that pagans made me
 sound my horn
 f. My reputation would be tarnished
 g. My family would be humiliated
 h. France would be dishonored
 i. No, I'll do battle with Durendal my sword
 j. I will strike 1700 blows
 k. The blade [of my sword] will be bathed in blood
 l. The French are valiant warriors
 m. The pagans are doomed

4.3. The distribution and arrangement of information blocks according to *laisses* is given in Table 1 below; the discourse status of the information contained in each of these blocks ('given', 'new', or 'highlighted') is given in Table 2:

Table 1. Distribution of content units across similar *laisses*

40:	a b c d e f g h i	83:	a b c d f i k m
41:	b c d e f g j k l m h	84:	b c g h i k m
42:	b c d e f g j k l m h	85:	b c e g i j k l m

Table 2. Discourse status of information in overlay sequences

Is.	Given	New	Highlighted ₂ *	Highlighted ₃ *	G/N/H
40	a	b c d e f g h i n	--	--	1/9/0
41	--	j k l m	b c d e f g h	--	0/4/7
42	--	--	j k l m	b c d e f g h	0/0/11
83	a	b c d f i k m	--	--	1/7/0
84	--	g h	b c i k m	--	0/2/5
85	--	e j l	g	b c i k m	0/3/6

5. The Pragmatics of Overlay

5.1 With reference to the definition of overlays given in 2.2, we observe, first, that the texts in (1) and (3) consist of three *laisses* (= planes) apiece, each of which narrates the same basic sequence of events. Second, as can be seen from Table 2, the first

* Elements highlighted in 2 *laisses* are separated here from those highlighted in all 3. Triple highlighting is indicated only for the last *laisse* of each sequence.

laisse of each set consists largely of new information. The second and third laisses begin the sequences over again, in each case omitting a, which was already given information. The second and third laisses contain a mixture of new information and information repeated from the previous laisse(s) in quasi identical formulation. We will examine these two types of information in turn, beginning with new information.

5.2 New Information. As Grimes notes (1972:520f.), another effect of overlay, besides the three-dimensional shaping it gives, is the control it provides over the rate of information introduction. A speaker has control not only over the content and organization of his discourse but also over the rate at which he chooses to introduce new information. The first plane of an overlay "sets the field" and almost all is new information. As shown in Table 2, the ratio of given to new information blocks in laisses 40 and 83 is 1/9 and 1/7 respectively. Once the field has been established and the listener recognizes that he is in an overlay structure, the narrator can use the control provided by the overlay for stylistic or dramatic effect:

5.2.1 In the exchange between Ganelon and Marsilion, the latter's questions are identical in each laisse. Only in Ganelon's replies is there 'movement' (new information), but it is movement that is psychological and dramatic rather than narrative, gradually revealing Ganelon's thoughts and hinting at the eventual betrayal. Thus in laisse 40 he speaks in broad terms of Charlemagne's nobles; in 41 he specifies: Charles will not abandon the war effort as long as his nephew lives; only in 42 does he utter the name of Roland.

5.2.2. An analogous progression occurs in the exchange between Roland and Oliver. In each of the laisses 83-85, Oliver reiterates his request for Roland to sound his horn for help. Each response adds to our understanding of his celebrated pride (over which vials of scholarly ink have been spilled!) by revealing a different dimension of feudal man's identity: in 83 Roland sees the act in terms of the personal shame that would result; in 84 the contagion spreads to the larger body politic-- dulce France; in 84 and 85 it touches the kin-group.

The psychological tension and poetic poignance of the similar laisses, the profound lyricism of these moments of narrative stasis, are realized by means of the overlay, a structure in which new information can be dispensed in carefully measured doses, its meaning and effect building up cumulatively through parallelistic repetition.

5.3. Highlighted information. The repeated elements that carry through from plane to plane enjoy a privileged status: they are "made to stand out by being placed in slightly different environments, just as a stereoscopic visual image makes the foreground objects stand out by relating them to slightly different backgrounds" (Grimes 1975:293). Around this highlighted information the other elements constitute "an embroidery of detail". In the texts examined by Grimes, foregrounding seems to be accomplished through subordination as well as through overlay, hence he refers

to overlay as "a third dimension"; accretion operates on top of dependency. But as noted above (1.1), the paratactic metered verse of the chansons de geste does not lend itself well to grounding through subordination. Alternative foregrounding strategies are called for -- contrastive, e.g. through tense-aspect oppositions (see Fleischman 1985) and/or quantitative, through overlay.

In Roland foregrounding via overlay operates on two levels: In the narrative 'macrostructure', as we shall see below (§6), it is the laissez similaires that profile the crucial moments of this drama of feudal conflict. On the level of 'microstructure', within the planes of the overlay, it is through highlighted information that the value structure of the poem is most clearly articulated. But note that what is highlighted in this text through overlay is not at all the sequential event-like structures that investigators typically point to in discussions of foregrounding (cf. Hopper 1979a,b, Wallace 1982), but rather, rhetorically spare lines of dialogue. Individually they function as shorthand surface formulas for complex underlying structures of belief and behavior; collectively they express in nuce the essence of the poem.

5.3.1. This is illustrated clearly in the exchange between Roland and Oliver; the highlighted information is repeated here as (5):

- (5) b. Roland, sound your horn!
- c. Charles will hear it and return with the army to help
- i. No, I'll do battle with Durendal my sword
- k. The blade will be bathed in blood
- m. The pagans are doomed

These statements, intoned in three successive laissez, sum up the persona of Roland as exemplar of the feudal warrior class, living in a world governed by conditional necessity and conflicting demands. Each highlighted block encloses layers of meaning: b and c together evoke the hierarchy of vassalage relationships and the obligations they entail: Roland is at once Charles's vassal and lord over his own subordinates; just as Charles is responsible for Roland's well-being (c), Roland is in turn responsible for safeguarding those under him. As a lord his duty is to summon help and prevent the sacrifice of his men (b). But as the proud warrior vassal, Roland believes it his duty to carry on the fight alone. It would be a humiliation to call for help when he is sure he and his men can defeat the Saracens (i, k). As noted above (5.2.2), the new information introduced progressively in d-h reveals three levels on which the act of calling for help would cast a shadow: ego, family, and country. The ultimate level--God and all of Christianity--comes into play in the last element highlighted in this sequence. The Christian triumph over the pagans is for Roland a matter of providential necessity (m). What he does not know is that the miles Christi destined to carry out God's will not be Roland.

5.3.2. The highlighted information in Ganelon's exchange with Marsilion is given in (6). Blocks repeated in all 3 laissez are

marked with an asterisk; the remaining blocks appear only in laisses 41 and 42.

- (6) *b. Charlemagne is so old and grey
*c. He is over 200 years old, they say
*d. His old body has struggled to conquer many lands
*e. He has taken so many blows
*f. He has laid low so many kings
*g. When will he tire of making war?
*h. Ganelon: Never. Charles is secure, he fears no one.
j. Never, so long as Roland lives
k. Roland has no equal;
l. There is also valiant Oliver, his companion;
m. The 12 peers, with 20,000 Frankish knights, form
the vanguard

5.3.2.1. Laisses 40-42 are part of the larger episode of "Ganelon's treason", in which the baron conspires with the pagans to wipe out the rearguard of the army, which, through his own maneuvering, will be commanded by his stepson Roland. As can be seen from Table 2. above, most elements in this overlay constitute high- lighted, i.e. foregrounded information. Yet no action takes place. What we are given is a description, focalized through Ganelon, of Charlemagne and his relationship to his vassals, in particular to Roland. Once we understand the conditions of this relationship, and once the treason has been set in motion, the ensuing events are, as in tragedy, ineluctably determined. It is the centrality to the poem of Charles's relationship to Roland that is underscored by its presentation in overlay.⁷

5.3.2.2. The microstructure of these laisses is further revealing of the subtle shades of foregrounding available through overlay. Comparing the relative frequency of highlighted elements in these laisses, we observe first that units repeated 3 times all refer to Charlemagne, while those repeated only twice refer to Roland and his companions. Is this perhaps a subtle validation, on the level of form, of various critics' view that this poem is primarily a story about Charlemagne and only secondarily about Roland? Second, it was noted above that foregrounding in Roland does not correlate with narrative causality, i.e., the foregrounded elements are not necessarily those that advance the plot. The single plot-advancing element in this sequence is j; through his assertion that Charles will continue to make war as long as Roland lives, Ganelon sows the seed of the betrayal. Yet this material so crucial to narrative development is repeated only twice. It thus appears to be of lesser significance than Ganelon's parallel assertion of Charles's fearless determination (h), if frequency is a valid indicator of degree of foregrounding. For it is ultimately Charles who realizes the victory of Christianity over the infidel. But at what price? As the poem closes, Charles is once again called off to war; he "weeps from his eyes, pulls his white beard" (v. 4001). It cannot be gratuitous that the paratactic juxtaposition of these two symbolic gestures is reiterated 5 times

(vv. 772, 2414, 2943, 3712, 4001).

6. Similar Laisses and Narrative 'Profile'

6.1 Most discourse, narrative or other, is not spoken or written on a uniform level of excitation or intensity. There is mounting and declining tension, generally within a global cumulative development. As Longacre (1981:347ff.) has observed, it is the 'peaks' of discourse intensity that serve to give a 'profile' to a whole text which includes one or more such units. Peaks are frequently marked in the surface syntax of a language by rhetorical underlining -- various devices designed to "slow down the camera" by packing or extending the event line so that the peak does not go by too fast. These devices include repetition and paraphrase, or introduction of a mass of detail that would not be appropriate to routine narration (349).

6.2 Longacre distinguishes further between 'narrative' or 'action' peaks and 'thematic' or 'didactic' peaks. Action peaks relate directly to the event structure of the text: they correlate with points of maximum tension (climaxes) or crucial events (dénouements) that make resolutions possible. At thematic peaks "chronological movement ceases and someone talks" (349). This distinction, first suggested in Woods 1980 to describe the narrative structure of Halbi (an IE language of India), is realized in a text in a number of ways, outlined in Table 3:

Table 3. Thematic and Action Peaks (from Woods(1980:281))

<u>Thematic Peaks</u>	<u>Action Peaks</u>
No chronological progression	Marked chronological progression
Cyclic structure	Forward movement
2 participants only, little description	Crowded with participants, much description
Crowded with props and extensive descriptions	Limited props and limited description
Dialogue	Events

The above description of thematic peaks is strikingly appropriate to Roland's similar laisses: Narrative time stops; a 2-party dialogue occurs, with no description of participants; and a cyclic structure is realized through the overlay. Though props and description are not abundant, such is not the case for all similar laisses. The double overlay at Roland's death is filled with props described in detail (a dark rock, a pine tree, the olifant, Roland's glove, his sword Durendal with its vividly described relics encased in the bridge).

6.3. The concept of a discourse profile, delineated by peaks, provides a useful analytic framework in which to pose the question of why Roland's similar laisses occur where they do. As in the natural narrative traditions for which this framework was conceived, structures of repetition in Roland are inserted to mark thematic peaks. Longacre suggests that if a text has both action

and thematic peaks, the latter will usually occur after the former (348). But in a minimally linear narrative like Roland, in which the event-line is tenuous and often fragmented, one could argue that there are no action peaks; or, better, that action and thematic peaks coincide. That is to say, pivotal narrative junctures (action peaks) --the plotting of the treason, the two horn scenes, Roland's death, Charlemagne's discovery of Roland's body-- are formally marked by the occurrence of similar laisses (thematic peaks). Like a kaleidoscope they "pack" the peaks of narrative tension by multiplying the images in repetitive patterns.7.

Conclusions.

7.1 The similar laisses of Old French epic narrative have been the subject of extensive --and at times very perceptive-- literary commentary,⁸ the thrust of which has been to demonstrate the consummate poetic effect of these lyric interludes in an overall narrative design. This paper has taken a rather different approach to the similar laisses.

Intrigued by their surface resemblance to the overlay patterns found in certain non-literate natural narrative traditions, I sought to determine whether the discourse pragmatic functions of repetitive narration might not be analogous in the two text types. What I discovered is that the quantitative foregrounding made possible through overlays is ideally suited to paratactic discourse --like medieval epic-- in which grounding cannot be carried out easily through a main clause-subordinate clause contrast.⁹ In Roland's overlays functional repetition operates on two levels-- that of the laisse as a whole and that of individual information blocks. Through repetition of entire laisses a series of peaks is marked out which collectively define the profile of the discourse. By means of these peaks --zones of "turbulence" on the event-line-- the high points of narrative development are foregrounded. Within the laisse unit, overlay operates at once as a device to foreground specific information blocks --a skillful composer can manipulate frequency of repetition to produce a nuanced grounding spectrum -- and as a mechanism to control the flow of new information for dramatic and poetic effect. It is at this micro-level that formal structures of repetition are seen to correlate with the most important structures of meaning in the poem.

7.2 It seems clear that the sharp separation many investigators make between literary and conversational, or poetic and non-poetic, texts is not always a useful one. The strategies used in 'natural' and 'artificial' narratives to accomplish certain basic discourse tasks are often the same. I support Polanyi's view (1981:36) that oral storytelling in conversational contexts is the primary site for understanding narrative structure. The foregoing analysis has, I hope, demonstrated the relevance of natural language data, and of certain analytical frameworks linguists use to describe them, to the study of poetic texts.

1. The term 'laisse' refers to the stropic unit of chansons de geste. The number of verses could vary (the average in Roland is 14); what ties the laisse together is a single assonance. A flexible poetic form with only two constraints: meter and assonance, the laisse is well adapted to the conditions of oral performance. On its function in the structure and performance of epic songs, see Rychner 1955: 71-74.

2. As used here, 'foreground' refers to those elements of a narrative text which are marked somehow as salient or central to the meaning of that text. Foreground need not be synonymous with the sequential event-line, as understood by some investigators, nor is it necessarily in binary opposition to 'background'. I have argued elsewhere (Fleischman 1985) against a dichotomous view of grounding in favor of a continuum or spectrum approach (cf. Longacre 1981) involving levels of information relevance.

3. In 'singulative' narration what happens once is told only once; 'iterative' narration involves telling only once what "happened" n times (see Genette 1980: Chap.3).

4. According to "oralists", the chansons de geste are products of formulaic composition-in-performance --a poetic analog of rule-governed creativity; the singer-composer draws on a repertoire of recombinant building blocks (formulas) to put together each performance of a text.

5. This hyperbolic calculation presumably refers to the 200 years of Carolingian rule.

6. The ordering of h-i, n vis-à-vis j-m is unclear. The two sequences represent different components of Ganelon's response. As noted above, strict chronology is not an overriding concern of this poetry. The order given in (2) evidently represents a decision on my part to impose linearity on a temporally "turbulent" point in the text.

7. In the fictional world Charles's relationship to Roland goes beyond that of lord to vassal. A 10th-c. Latin saint's life alludes to an unspecified sin committed by Charles and forgiven by St. Giles. The Old Norse Karlamagnús saga and other vernacular versions of the legend reveal the nature of this sin: Charles had incestuous relations with his sister, whence Roland was born (see Aebischer 1972). Though this is not made explicit in the Oxford text, we can consider it to have been presupposed information in light of an allusion by the poet to a document which St. Giles presumably received from an angel, containing the details of Charlemagne's conduct. Apropos of this document, the poet comments: "He who does not know this, knows nothing" (v. 2098).

8. Cf. Pope 1913-1915, Faral 1934, Rychner 1955, Vinaver 1964a, 1964b, 1971, Paquette 1980, among others.

9. Grimes notes in passing (1972:516) that in the overlays he examined parataxis tends to predominate over hypotaxis.

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