

Times, they are a-switchin’ (*and spaces, too*)

The most famous French epic, the *Song of Roland*, was composed almost one thousand years ago. It was then certainly told, played, sung, for decades in a form very close to the famous Oxford manuscript of the Bodleian Library; but it slowly vanished from French ears and mouths for centuries, until the manuscript was rediscovered at the end of the 19th century. It is now considered as a major work of French literature and is widely read and studied. However, it is very scarcely performed today as a living epic, so studies tend to deal with a fossilized text.

I therefore, along with Philippe Brunet, who is reviving Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with his ancient theater company, have begun to give lectures and recitals of the *Song of the Roland*, renewed by my own translation, which tries to reproduce its original rhythm: 10-syllable verses, composed of a first 4-syllable hemistich and a second 6-syllable hemistich; a single *assonance* through each single stanza, which is a vowel repeated along the stanza, on every sixth syllable of the second hemistich, which is always stressed. These principles of translation are almost the same as those of the beautiful translation into English which C. K. Scott Moncrieff, the famous translator of Proust, published in 1919; my translation into modern French is a little more ambitious, because I regularly try to test the possibility of telling it aloud to a real audience.

Moreover, with Philippe Brunet, for a few months now, we have thus been trying to renew, to renew the Homeric epics, not only by reading them aloud, but also by declaiming and playing whole books from memory. I have also begun to memorize and declaim the *Song of Roland*, expecting to be able to declaim a few hundred of verses at the World Epic Festival, telling the episode of Oliver’s death: trying to transform myself into something approaching the medieval French bard – who is properly called a *jongleur* – I pretend to have a new understanding of what could happen between the *jongleur* and his audience, even though I feel like a childish beginner compared to the Kyrgyz manaschis. Even though this renewal and reconstruction is also, by its very nature, somehow impossible, this could be a reason to try to make artificially coincide a bard of the 11th century, and a would-be bard of the 21st century: epics, by their very nature, are willing to be at the crossroads of times that don’t cross in the real world, just as the *Song of Roland* sings, at the end of the 11th century, a battle which had taken place at the end of the 8th century, and invokes, in its first verse,

the emperor Charlemagne, as “*nostre emperere*”, (“Our emperor”), as if he was still the emperor of France in 1100.

This switching of times and spaces is in fact constant in the *Chanson de Roland*. It appears within each single stanza; we will get a glimpse of it with the 128th, with which I could begin my declamation of “Oliver’s death”. Roland commands Charlemagne’s rearguard across the Pyrenees mountains, but because of Ganelon’s treachery, they are trapped by far numerous enemies. Despite his friend Oliver’s prayers, Roland won’t blow to wind the *Olifant*, his horn made from an elephant’s tusk, to call back Charlemagne’s army, Now with only sixty Frenchmen still alive, against tens of thousands of enemies, he changes his mind.



Ancient French	Modern French	Modern English
Li quens Rollant des soens i veit grant perte.	Roland le comte des siens voit grande perte.	The count Rollant great loss of his men sees,
Cum cumpaignun Oliver en apelet :	À son ami Olivier il s’adresse :	His companion Oliver calls, and speaks:
« Bel sire, cumpainz, pur Deu, que vos en haitet ?	« Seigneur ami, de la joie, rien ne reste...	“Sir and comrade, in God’s Name, That you keeps,
Tanz bons vassals veez gesir par tere !	Regardez donc tous ces vaillants par terre !	Such good vassals you see lie here in heaps;
Pleindre poüms France dulce, la bele.	Nous pouvons plaindre douce France la belle :	For France the Douce, fair country, may we weep,
De tels barons cum or remeint deserte !	Sans ces barons, elle est plus que déserte !	Of such barons long desolate she’ll be.
E ! reis, amis, que vos ici nen estes ?	Roi, mon ami ! Pourquoi n’ai-je votre aide ?	Ah! King and friend, wherefore are you not here?
Oliver, frere, cum le purrum nus faire ?	Cher Olivier, comment pourrons-nous faire ?	How, Oliver, brother, can we achieve?
Cum faitement li manderum nuvels ? »	Par quel moyen faut-il que je l’appelle ? »	And by what means our news to him repeat?”
Dist Oliver : « Jo nel sai cument quere.	Olivier dit : « Votre question est vaine.	Says Oliver: “I know not how to seek;
Mielz voeill murir que hunte nus seit retraite. »	Mieux vaut mourir, qu’une honteuse Geste ! »	Rather I’d die than shame come of this feat. »
.AOI.	.AOI.	.AOI.

The first hemistich of the 128th stanza (v. 1691, “*Li quens Rollant*”, “The count Rollant”, “*Roland le comte*”), by which I would begin to declaim the « Oliver’s death » episode, is a well-known formulaic first hemistich, and it cannot be fully understood without feeling bodies’ presence.

It is indeed a necessity to make appear somewhere between the *jongleur* and his audience a kind of virtual body of Roland. When the *jongleur* says “*Li quens Rollant*”, he is not only saying “I am going to tell of Roland”; he is saying “Look, Roland is here” – and, certainly, “will soon be speaking”. His name fills a single hemistich, because this very hemistich has to evoke, to draw in the air the presence of Roland, so that he will be able to act under the audience’s eyes.

And this presence is not only present somewhere in the air, in the area delimited by the *jongleur* and the audience’s body; it should be present in a specific location,

so that it will be easily distinguished from the second hero's place of the stanza: Olivier, who will appear and speak in line 1700.

But the second much important thing appearing here is the heroes' duality : in a single stanza, they tend to be almost always two, as here are Roland and Oliver. Everything occurs as if there were only two available places for heroes between the *jongleur* and the audience: on the left hand and on the right hand.

Those are the most natural places occupied by the two heroes speaking: they are in fact dependent upon this body fact: a *jongleur* has two hands, and those two hands are able to point at two different heroes. If the performance setting allows the *jongleur* to somehow walk in front of the audience, there are also two places that his feet can reach, on his left, and on his right, which make possible to address speeches from one hero to the other.

Moreover, if those two positions do exist for the *jongleur*, it allows him to get a third addressing direction: in front of him, towards the audience. This is all the more useful that the *jongleur* needs another area to point at: the area where the Frenchmen's bodies lie, at which both of the heroes have to look: (v. 1691, "The count Rollant great loss of his men sees") for Roland, and "*Tanz bons vassals veez gesir par tere*", (v. 1694 "Such good vassals you see lie here in heaps") as Oliver is told to do by Roland. This area has to be at the crossing of four gazes: those of Roland and Olivier, those of the *jongleur* as the narrator, and of the audience: it forms the central area of what I call the circle of the myth: the disk bounded by this circle along which can glide, actually or virtually, the *jongleur*.

We have thus bounded four places, four locations existing somewhere between the *jongleur* and the audience's bodies: two for the heroes, on the left and on the right, one for the narrator at the center back, one for the dead: the soil on which fall the dead ("*par tere*", "on the ground", v. 1694). Those four locations are all natural emanations of the *jongleur's* body: left hand; seat; right hand; chest and downwards gaze.

But the 128th stanza gives a glimpse of a fifth place available for the *jongleur's deixis* : in front of him, where the audience is, or somewhere behind the audience : in fact, *ahead* of the *jongleur*. It is the place for "*France dulce la bele*" ("France the sweet, fair country"), that France of which the first verse of the song says the ruler is "*nostre*

emperere” (“our emperor”): Roland’s France and the audience’s France, that is the eternal France.

Finally, there’s a sixth place, a sixth direction of *deixis* available for a human body: upwards, which he can point at raising his arms. I think that this other location is available to be used in that very stanza in order to address Charlemagne, when he’s supposed to be elsewhere: “*E reis amis, que vos ici non estes !*” (v. 1697, “Ah! King and friend! Wherefore are you not here?”).

We could thus add those stage directions to the text:

[LEFT] Roland le comte [CENTERWARDS] voit des siens grande perte.
 [RIGHTWARDS] À son ami Olivier il s’adresse :
 « Seigneur ami, de la joie rien ne reste !
 1696 [CENTERWARDS] Regardez donc tous ces vaillants par terre !
 Nous pouvons plaindre [AHEAD] douce France la belle :
 [CENTERWARDS] Sans ces barons, [AHEAD] elle est plus que déserte !
 [UPWARDS] Roi, mon ami ! Pourquoi n’ai-je votre aide ?
 1700 Cher Olivier, comment pourrons-nous faire ?
 Par quel moyen [UPWARDS] faut-il que je l’appelle ? »
 [RIGHT] *Olivier dit* : « Votre question est vaine.
 Mieux vaut mourir, qu’une honteuse Geste ! » .**AOI.**
 1704 [CENTER BACK]

What do they mean ? Those stage directions are not really stage directions in as much as they should be directly applied « on stage », or in the performance, but are rather, as we say in French, *didascalies*. The word is borrowed from the greek language, and it is related to *didaskô*, which is a verb meaning « to teach ». Those *didascalies* are in fact a way of teaching how to say the text, of working the way of declaiming the text, of working the harmony between the text and the *jongleur’s* body.

In the reality of performance, it can become many different things. It depends on the *jongleur’s* mobility : does he move on his legs ? Can he move both hands ? Is he playing a musical instrument ? Does he choose to keep some dignity, reducing, as much as possible, all gestures ? Everything is possible, but those movements, those directions should be felt inside the *jongleur* himself, so that it becomes something the audience can feel somewhere between him and them. And this will arise in performance by some way of the body, may it be large or small gestures, may it be something transposed in voice and melody.

Moreover, if, while learning the text and its declamation, you make large and exaggerated gestures and movements, those can become, through work, more discreet, subtle and elegant, because the audience wants to hear the text first. This balance between text and gesture, between variegation and sobriety is certainly one of the most difficult tasks of a *jongleur*, as well as of an actor.

Anyhow, I should explain two more things in my stage direction propositions : first of all, the end : the last hemistich, « *que hunte nus seit retraite* », (v. 1701) “that shame come of this feat”) refers in fact to the song itself: “*retraire*” indeed means in ancient French, literally “pull again”, but also “narrate again”; that’s why I have used the French word “*geste*” (“epic”) in my modern French translation. On those very words, Oliver in fact points to the original *jongleur*’s place, where he seats, if he’s a seated *jongleur*, where he can make a pause, at the end of the stanza.

But I have to move backwards one hemistich more, to the first hemistich of the last verse of this stanza: “*Mielz voeill murir*” (“Rather I’d die”) which is a remake of what Roland said when he refused to wind the olifant (v. 1091): “*Melz voeill murir qu’a huntage remaigne*”, “Rather I’ll die than shame shall me attain”). Oliver quotes Roland, and mocks him, thus making himself a *jongleur*, who is, etymologically, a player of words, a mocker. This very hemistich is, in itself, switching times, for the *jongleur*’s voice here actually carries fact three voices: Oliver’s mocking voice, Roland’s voice, mocked, through the *jongleur*’s own voice, which reappears dimly, for he’s actually talking of himself. As a result, three times are present at the same time: the time when Oliver is supposed to speak, the time when Roland spoke, and the time when the *jongleur* is actually addressing the audience.

This allows me to dwell on an important phenomenon that I studied in my *La danse des temps dans l’épopée, d’Homère au Roland*: tense-switching, especially in verbs that introduce reported speech. I would like to point out just one element: the formulaic hemistich “*Dist Oliver*” (“Said Oliver”, “*Olivier dit*”), generally written and spoken in the *simple past*, sounds here, in the stanzas 128-130, very different from the rest of the text, just like a stage direction told from outside: it is so different from the rest that it cannot be integrated into the declamation flow in a gentle and mild way.

If the *jongleur* is singing, he may then have to stop to sing; if he’s closing his eyes, maybe then he has to gaze at the audience, thus meaning: “I am here with you, now in the present, looking with you at those distant feats, that are present in the cir-

cle of the myth.” As long as this hemistich is both inside and outside the verse, it must be felt as a special attitude of the *jongleur*, gliding on the boundaries between myth and reality.



Through this single stanza we have glimpsed how epic performance allows to switch times, to virtually exchange bodies, roles and places, so that the bard and the audience could touch something beyond, in a kind of mystical motion.

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Pour citer cet article

Lakshmanan-Minet N. (2023), “Times, they are a-switchin’ (and spaces, too)”, 7th World Epics Festival, Osh, *Time and Space in the Narrator’s Text*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8032573> ; <https://www.lettresclassiques.fr/2023/06/13/times-they-are-a-switchin/> ;

