

# COMPARATIVE LITERATURE NEWSLETTER

## Welcome New Graduate Students and Faculty

**Kristen Bergman** grew up in Redlands (Southern California) and got her B.A. from Westmont College in Santa Barbara. Her research interests include British, French and Italian nineteenth century literature and postcolonial literature/studies. She enjoys hiking, volleyball and cooking—when she has the time.

**Jessie Christensen** received a Bachelor of Arts degrees in Spanish Translation and English and a Master of Arts degree in Spanish from Brigham Young University. Her research interests include twentieth-century Spanish literature, adaptation theory, translation theory, and issues related to history, fiction, and collective memory in film and literature.

**Ted Geier** grew up in the San Francisco Bay area and did his undergraduate work in Humanities and Philosophy at the University of Oregon. He did his Master's degree in Humanities and Literary Theory at San Francisco State University. His MA thesis is entitled "Used Language: Difference/ Discourse/ Critters." He plans to study critical and political theory at UC Davis and hopes to do work in American cultural and agricultural studies, as well. Interests include ecology, geography, environmental thought and literature, sentience/ cognition, anything dirty.

**D Dayton** came to UC Davis this fall after working for the Long Island University China Center for several years. He holds a Master of Arts in Chinese Studies from the University of Sydney and currently researches modern Chinese literature with a specific focus on Chinese ethnic minority literature. His interests also include Native American and Russian literature.

**Prof. Archana Venkatesan** received her M.A. in 2000 and her PhD in 2004 from University of California Berkeley. Her interests include Tamil poetry and religious studies, and she is currently writing a book titled *Antal and Her Magic Mirror*.

## Thanks, Merci, Danke

Comp Lit PhD students Natalie Strobach and Michael Graziano hosted the second annual potluck "Orphan Thanksgiving" celebration for friends and colleagues who couldn't mark the holiday with their families. Over 20 people attended, representing many different floors of Sproul and cultural backgrounds, as demonstrated by D. Dayton's "Asian-style deviled eggs" and Laurence Lemaire's "authentic French quiche."



## In memory of a dedicated teacher Winning Essay

The program is pleased to announce the winner of the first annual Amy Lee Prize, Kevin Peterson. Kevin is an undergraduate English major who wrote his prizewinning essay, "Picking the Flower of France: Natural Imagery and Divine Providence in *The Song of Roland*," for Teaching Assistant Christina Schiesari's Comparative Literature 2 class.

Teachers of the Comparative Literature 1-4 series submitted their best student papers to a specially chosen committee of graduate students and professors, who finally chose Kevin Peterson's paper as the best of the best. The essay is

Even members of the program who had other plans were with us in spirit - and in the multitude of chairs borrowed from our offices in Sproul in order to fill up the makeshift thirty-foot dinner table.

The evening wore on until only a bare handful was left to engage in an epic eight-person game of Monopoly, left unresolved somewhere in the wee hours of the morning. (Mike was winning, and Chris Tong had just bought his first property: the Waterworks.)



reprinted on the following pages.

This annual contest is held in memory of Amy Lee, a graduate student of Comparative Literature who died of cancer in September 2007 following a brief illness. Amy was a passionate teacher and a dedicated scholar, and this prize is intended to reward the type of superlative students she loved to teach.

### Picking the Flower of France: Natural Imagery and Divine Providence in *The Song of Roland*

France's national epic poem, *The Song of Roland*, aside from being a masterpiece of Middle Age epic poetry and Christian propaganda, represents an early example of the pairing between the natural world and the will of divine power, or God. The natural world has from the outset, harkening back to the Old Testament itself, always been closely allied with vivid descriptions of divine power, be they the devilish incarnation of Satan as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, or Joshua's plea that the sun stand still, a naturalistic biblical parallel that finds renewed expression in *The Song of Roland*. This pairing of the natural world, which God undoubtedly created in Christian philosophy and is indeed his truly great mystery to humankind, with the will of God is particularly indicative of a close connection with God, and in the case of *The Song of Roland*, seems to suggest a continuation of the feudal hierarchy that permeates the human ranks of the poem itself. The hierarchy created by this pairing ultimately seems to affirm the righteousness of the Franks' cause and makes certain the divine Providence of those who follow the law of the natural world, which is indeed ultimately the law of God himself.

The first major pairing of naturalistic language and divine will occurs as Roland and the Twelve Peers face the treacherous Saracen army after being abandoned by the rest of the Frankish forces. Roland surveys the dead, "and weeps for them, as a great warrior weeps," and prays that "God... [will] grant Paradise to all [their] souls, / make them lie down among the holy flowers" (140.1853-56). This image of Paradise as being an ethereal field of "holy flowers" is blatantly indicative of natural imagery attributed to divine grace, as Roland hopes that God will grant them this naturalistic solace because of their sacrifice for his divine cause against the pagan Saracens. This image of the "holy flower" is later attributed to Roland himself after he dies, as King Charles pleads "Lord, let me have my right, let me have honor, / they tore me from the flower of sweet France" (178.2430-31). Here Roland is a flower, an object that is both associated with the natural world and the heavens, and indeed Roland seems to be the ideal convergence of these concepts as he is a martyr for Charles' (and by extension, God's) cause. The righteousness of Charles' cause and Roland's martyrdom become apparent as Charles pursues the pagan armies and "sees the twilight faltering," as he "gets down in a meadow on the green grass, / lies down on the ground, prays to the Lord his God / to make the sun stand still for him in heaven, / hold back the night, let the day linger on" (179.2447-51). This image of the King showing reverence to God is closely connected to a vivid, natural world around him, as he is "in a meadow on the green grass," and he asks for God to manipulate the natural world that God himself created and "make the sun stand still." God complies, a sure sign that Charles' cause is righteous, and the angel that arrives reaffirms this divine Providence telling Charles to "ride: God knows. The light will not fail you. / God knows that you have lost the flower of France" (179.2454-55).

The positive association of Charles and France's cause with divine righteousness and the natural world reaches its climax as the Christian forces prevail over the pagans, and as "the day wears on" and "night has gathered... / The moon shines brights, the stars are all ablaze, / The Emperor has taken Saragossa" (266.3658-60). Thus the natural world (and indeed the aspects of the natural world that seem at once natural and divine, i.e. the stars and moon) seems to reflect the victory of the moral Christians over the deceptive and godless pagans. This seamless fusion of the divine and natural thus both poetically and literally resolves the conflict between the Christian forces of Charles and the pagans led by Baligant, though King Charles is left to preside over the treachery and immorality of his own comrade, the traitorous Ganelon.

Negative natural imagery, on the other hand, is repeatedly associated with the forces against Charles, be they Baligant and the pagan forces or even his own countryman Ganelon. This negative imagery begins with the initial deception of Charles by Ganelon, continues through the Saracens' battle against Roland and Charles, and culminates in the trial of Ganelon. One of the first negative associations comes as the pagans devise their plot to get Charles to leave Spain, as King Marsilion tells his men "to go to Charlemagne, / he's at the siege of Cordres, the citadel. / Olive branches are to be in your hands- / that signifies peace and humility" (5.70-73). Here Marsilion seems to invoke the symbol of "peace and humility" (presumably to God) in a deceitful manner, as he ultimately intends to go back on his promise to ensure that Charles and the Franks leave Spain. The olive branch, an undoubtedly natural symbol, is subsequently a point of focus for Roland, who believes the Saracens to be false, saying that "this kind, Marsilion, played the traitor: / he sent you men, fifteen of his pagans- / and sure enough, each held an olive branch, / and the recited just these same words to you... / they counseled you to a bit of madness" (14.201-06). Thus Roland seems to acknowledge the false use of the not only natural but also religious symbol of peace, as the olive branch was a symbol of peace and humility to Noah after the great flood in the Old Testament. However, the angry and vindictive Ganelon interferes, and even employs biblical imagery to describe his contempt of Roland, telling the emissary of Marsilion how "one day the Emperor was sitting in the shade: / his nephew came, still wearing his hauberk... / and in his hand he held a bright red apple: 'Dear Lord, here, take,' said Roland to his uncle: / 'I offer you the crowns of all the earth's kings'" (29.383-88). The apple, aside from its obvious natural significance, also carries biblical significance, as it was indeed an apple that Eve took from the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil which led to the fall from grace and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Here Ganelon equates Roland's brandishing of the apple as arrogance, though it would seem to indicate a particular righteousness to Charlemagne's crusade as Roland displays a degree of humility in his offering of the "crowns of the earth's kings," demarcating a separation between the rulers of the earth and the divine ruler, God himself. This pairing of both natural and overtly religious imagery in the descriptions of those who in opposition

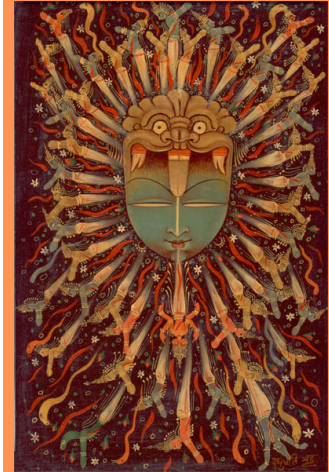
to Charlemagne's cause continues, both in the vividly prophetic dreams of Charlemagne and in the descriptions of the pagans themselves.

Charlemagne's connection with God is further reinforced through his dreams, which both prophesize the oncoming challenges to the Christian forces as well as represent the pagans as evil and allied with hell. As Charles prepares for his final conflict with the pagan forces, he receives a dream from Saint Gabriel in which he:

sees the thunder, the winds, the blasts of ice,/ the hurricanes, the dreadful tempests,  
the fires and flames made ready in the sky./ And suddenly all things fall on his men./  
Their lances burn.../ serpents, vipers, dragons, demons of hell.../ And the French cry:  
'Charlemagne, come help us!'/... out of a wood a great lion [comes] at him,/ It is tremendous, wild, great with pride;/... [and] attacks the King! (185.2532-51)

This vivid prophecy is rife with natural as well as biblical imagery, as natural manifestations of the power of the natural world (and by extension, God) are represented in the "hurricanes," "tempests," "thunder," "wind," and "blasts of ice," as well as clearly biblical manifestations of evil such as "serpents, vipers, dragons, [and] demons of hell" are set in opposition to Charles. Charlemagne is also attacked by a "lion.. great with pride," which seems in direct contrast to both the earlier image of the olive branch as a symbol of "peace and humility" towards God, as well as a general notion of humility and obedience to God's will, as pride is viewed as a sin against God. Thus this dream serves to highlight the connection of Charlemagne to God (as it is sent directly to him from an angel), as well as reinforce the virtuousness of his reverence for God, as he understands his true position as subservient to God despite his role as Emperor of many men. The negative descriptions of Charlemagne's enemies in his dreams are made manifest as the pagans are introduced, the first of whom is "Chernubles of Muniegre," who comes from a land where "no sun shines... and the grain cannot grow,/ rain does not fall, and the dew does not gather,/ there is no rock that is not black, all black;/ and many say, devils live in that land" (78.979-83). Thus not only is a sense of barrenness and sterility established, but also negative religious imagery is employed to describe the "devils" that live in that land. Similarly, both negative naturalistic as well as religious imagery is used to describe the pagan armies, whose "hauberks" are "all blazing, helmets like flames!" (80.1022). This destructive natural imagery (fire) is also employed in the trial of Ganelon, which can be viewed as the final conflict between immorality, through Ganelon's deception, and divine righteousness in the character of Tierri. Pinabel, while fighting Tierri to prove Ganelon's innocence, "strikes Tierri now on that helmet of Provence:/ the fire shoots out and sets the grass aflame;/ and shows Tierri the point of that steel sword.../ God protects him, he is not struck down dead" (285.3916-23). This culminating image finds Pinabel setting the grass (an aspect of the natural world already associated with the righteous French) ablaze, with fire associated with the destructive malice of the pagans. God divinely intervenes and saves Tierri, thus definitively emphasizing the moral superiority and righteousness of the French, who indeed know their place as subservient to God as well as very much immersed in the rich natural world that he has provided for their benefit.

The clear connection between natural harmony and divine righteousness, as outlined in *The Song of Roland*, is inherently profound as it strikes at the core of human experience, which in many ways is defined by the way we interact with the world around us. This connection clearly defines a way to both live a fulfilling life immersed in the natural world, as well as serve God and be morally fulfilled. However, the balance between living harmoniously with the natural world and serving God (by interpreting holy texts) at times seems to come into conflict, as is seen in contemporary examples such as stem-cell research and genetic modification. However, *The Song of Roland* would certainly seem to suggest that an understanding of our role in the natural world, and ultimately as subservient to God, is all that is needed in order to live a physically and morally fulfilling life.



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