

Charlemagne and the Love of Learning

During the forty-six years that he ruled the destinies of Europe, Charlemagne was engaged in incessant wars, which seemed to leave little time for literary pursuits, and was organizing a vast political system which, even in peaceable times, would have demanded the undivided attention of any ordinary sovereign. But if there ever was a man who by his mere natural endowments soared above other men, it was Charlemagne. His life, like his stature, was colossal. Time never seemed wanting to him for anything that he willed to accomplish, and during his ten years' campaign against the Saxons and Lombards, he contrived to get leisure enough to study grammar and render himself tolerably proficient as a Latin writer in prose and verse. He found his tutors in the cities that he conquered. But none of these learned personages were destined to take so large a part in that revival of learning which made the glory of Charlemagne's reign, as the English monk Alcuin.

Alcuin came to France in 782, bringing with him several of the best scholars of York. Charlemagne presented himself as his first pupil, together with the three princes, Pepin, Charles and Louis, his sister Gisla and his daughter Richtrude, his councilors and his secretary. Such illustrious scholars soon found plenty to imitate their example, and Alcuin saw himself called on to lecture daily to a goodly crowd of bishops, nobles and courtiers. The king wished to transform his court into a new Athens, preferable to that of ancient Greece, in so far as the doctrine of Christ is to be preferred to that of Plato. All the liberal arts were taught there, but in such a way that each bore reference to religion, for this was regarded as the final end of all learning.

Augusta Theodosia Drane, *Christian Schools and Scholars*

Guided Commentary

- ▶ What term does the author use to describe Charlemagne's life? Why?
- ▶ Why did "time never seem to be wanting" to Charlemagne?
- ▶ What was important to him? Why might this have been so?
- ▶ Why might the author say that the "revival of learning.... made the glory of Charlemagne's reign"?
- ▶ What does the last paragraph tell us about other qualities in Charlemagne?

Composition Topics

His life, like his stature, was colossal. Time never seemed wanting to him for anything that he willed to accomplish. And yet the glory of his reign was...

A. Drane

Who is this colossal giant? With broad strokes and vivid colors paint his portrait.

[N. B. The first composition topic from "The War for Civilization" page is also about Charlemagne, suitable after reading *The Song of Roland*.]

The Beginning of Guenes' Treachery

XX

"Franks, chevaliers," says the Emperour then, Charles,
 "Choose ye me out a baron from my marches,
 To Marsilie shall carry back my answer."
 Then says Rollanz: "There's Guenes, my goodfather."
 Answer the Franks: "For he can wisely manage;
 So let him go, there's none you should send rather."
 And that count Guenes is very full of anguish;
 Off from his neck he flings the pelts of marten,
 And on his feet stands clear in silken garment.
 Proud face he had, his eyes with colour, sparkled;
 Fine limbs he had, his ribs were broadly arched
 So fair he seemed that all the court regarded.
 Says to Rollant: "Fool, wherefore art so wrathful?
 All men know well that I am thy goodfather;
 Thou hast decreed, to Marsiliun I travel.
 Then if God grant that I return hereafter,
 I'll follow thee with such a force of passion
 That will endure so long as life may last thee."
 Answers Rollanz: "Thou'rt full of pride and madness.
 All men know well, I take no thought for slander;
 But some wise man, surely, should bear the answer;
 If the King will, I'm ready to go rather."

XXI

Answers him Guene: "Thou shalt not go for me.
 Thou'rt not my man, nor am I lord of thee.
 Charles commands that I do his decree,
 To Sarraguce going to Marsilie;
 There I will work a little trickery,
 This mighty wrath of mine I'll thus let free."
 When Rollanz heard, began to laugh for glee.

XXII

When Guenes sees that Rollant laughs at it,
 Such grief he has, for rage he's like to split,
 A little more, and he has lost his wit:
 Says to that count: "I love you not a bit;
 A false judgement you bore me when you chid.
 Right Emperour, you see me where you sit,
 I will your word accomplish, as you bid.

XXIII

"To Sarraguce I must repair, 'tis plain;
 Whence who goes there returns no more again.
 Your sister's hand in marriage have I ta'en;
 And I've a son, there is no prettier swain:
 Baldwin, men say he shews the knightly strain.
 To him I leave my honours and domain.
 Care well for him; he'll look for me in vain."
 Answers him Charles: "Your heart is too humane.
 When I command, time is to start amain."

Guided Commentary

- Give the context of laisses XX-XXIII. What mission is being discussed?
- What vivid words has the author used to show Guenes' reaction to Roland's suggesting him for the mission? What does this reaction reveal about Guenes?
- What lines give us insight into Roland's character? Explain.
- Explain Charlemagne's response, "Your heart is too humane. When I command, time is to start amain."

Oliver and Roland Dispute over Sounding the Olifant

LXXXIII

Says Oliver: "Pagans in force abound,
While of us Franks but very few I count;
Comrade Rollanz, your horn I pray you sound!
If Charles hear, he'll turn his armies round."
Answers Rollanz: "A fool I should be found;
In France the Douce would perish my renown.
With Durendal I'll lay on thick and stout,
In blood the blade, to its golden hilt, I'll drown.
Felon pagans to th' pass shall not come down;
I pledge you now, to death they all are bound.

LXXXIV

"Comrade Rollanz, sound the olifant, I pray;
If Charles hear, the host he'll turn again;
Will succour us our King and baronage."
Answers Rollanz: "Never, by God, I say,
For my misdeed shall kinsmen hear the blame,
Nor France the Douce fall into evil fame!
Rather stout blows with Durendal I'll lay,
With my good sword that by my side doth sway;
Till bloodied o'er you shall behold the blade.
Felon pagans are gathered to their shame;
I pledge you now, to death they're doomed to-day."

LXXXV

"Comrade Rollanz, once sound your olifant!
If Charles hear, where in the pass he stands,
I pledge you now, they'll turn again, the Franks."
"Never, by God," then answers him Rollanz,
"Shall it be said by any living man,
That for pagans I took my horn in hand!
Never by me shall men reproach my clan.
When I am come into the battle grand,
And blows lay on, by hundred, by thousand,
Of Durendal bloodied you'll see the brand.
Franks are good men; like vassals brave they'll stand;
Nay, Spanish men from death have no warrant."

LXXXVI

Says Oliver: "In this I see no blame;
I have beheld the Sarrazins of Spain;
Covered with them, the mountains and the vales,
The wastes I saw, and all the farthest plains.
A muster great they've made, this people strange;
We have of men a very little tale."
Answers Rollanz: "My anger is inflamed.
Never, please God His Angels and His Saints,
Never by me shall Frankish valour fail!
Rather I'll die than shame shall me attain.
Therefore strike on, the Emperour's love to gain."

LXXXVII

Pride hath Rollanz, wisdom Olivier hath;
 And both of them shew marvellous courage;
 Once they are horsed, once they have donned their arms,
 Rather they'd die than from the battle pass.
 Good are the counts, and lofty their language.
 Felon pagans come cantering in their wrath.
 Says Oliver: "Behold and see, Rollanz,
 These are right near, but Charles is very far.
 On the olifant deign now to sound a blast;
 Were the King here, we should not fear damage.
 Only look up towards the Pass of Aspre,
 In sorrow there you'll see the whole rereward.
 Who does this deed, does no more afterward."
 Answers Rollanz: "Utter not such outrage!
 Evil his heart that is in thought coward!
 We shall remain firm in our place installed;
 From us the blows shall come, from us the assault."

Guided Commentary

- ▶ What reasons does Oliver give for wanting to sound the horn? Are they valid reasons?
- ▶ Why does Roland refuse? What does this tell us about his character?
- ▶ In laisse 87, which line shows that Oliver has a foreboding of what will soon come to pass?
- ▶ In your opinion, which of the two friends judges rightly? Support your answer.

Composition Topics

*When the Franks were come, and Terra Major knew,
 Saw Gascony their land and their seigneur's,
 Remembering their fiefs and their honours,
 Their little maids, their gentle wives and true;
 There was not one that shed not tears for rue.*

Laisse LXVI

After a long absence, imagine the homecoming of the Franks, or of another soldier, or...

or:

What is it that makes these brave warriors suddenly so tender? How can you explain their seven-year absence from home?

"What seems to dominate in the Middle Ages is an immense ideal, which puts on a pedestal heroes not free from immoderate pride, like Roland, or not without fault, like Oliver..."

Gustave Cohen

Continue this reflection.

The Death of Oliver

CXLV

Franks are but few; which, when the pagans know,
 Among themselves comfort and pride they shew;
 Says each to each: "Wrong was that Emperor."
 Their alcaliph upon a sorrel rode,
 And pricked it well with both his spurs of gold;
 Struck Oliver, behind, on the back-bone,
 His hauberk white into his body broke,
 Clean through his breast the thrusting spear he drove;
 After he said: "You've borne a mighty blow.
 Charles the great should not have left you so;
 He's done us wrong, small thanks to him we owe;
 I've well avenged all ours on you alone."

CXLVI

Oliver feels that he to die is bound,
 Holds Halteclere, whose steel is rough and brown,
 Strikes the alcaliph on his helm's golden mount;
 Flowers and stones fall clattering to the ground,
 Slices his head, to th'small teeth in his mouth;
 So brandishes his blade and flings him down;
 After he says: "Pagan, accurst be thou!
 Thou'lt never say that Charles forsakes me now;
 Nor to thy wife, nor any dame thou'lt found,
 Thou'lt never boast, in lands where thou wast crowned,
 One pennyworth from me thou'lt taken out,
 Nor damage wrought on me nor any around."
 After, for aid, "Rollant!" he cries aloud.

CXLVII

Oliver feels that death is drawing nigh;
 To avenge himself he hath no longer time;
 Through the great press most gallantly he strikes,
 He breaks their spears, their buckled shields doth slice,
 Their feet, their fists, their shoulders and their sides,
 Dismembers them: whoso had seen that sigh,
 Dead in the field one on another piled,
 Remember well a vassal brave he might.
 Charles ensign he'll not forget it quite;
 Aloud and clear "Monjoie" again he cries.
 To call Rollanz, his friend and peer, he tries:
 "My companion, come hither to my side.
 With bitter grief we must us now divide."

CXLVIII

Then Rollant looked upon Olivier's face;
 Which was all wan and colourless and pale,
 While the clear blood, out of his body sprayed,
 Upon the ground gushed forth and ran away.
 "God!" said that count, "What shall I do or say?
 My companion, gallant for such ill fate!
 Neer shall man be, against thee could prevail.
 Ah! France the Douce, henceforth art thou made waste
 Of vassals brave, confounded and disgraced!
 Our Emperour shall suffer damage great."
 And with these words upon his horse he faints.

CXLIX

You'd seen Rollant aswoon there in his seat,
 And Oliver, who unto death doth bleed,
 So much he's bled, his eyes are dim and weak;
 Nor clear enough his vision, far or near,
 To recognise whatever man he sees;
 His companion, when each the other meets,
 Above the helm jewelled with gold he beats,
 Slicing it down from there to the nose-piece,
 But not his head; he's touched not brow nor cheek.
 At such a blow Rollant regards him keen,
 And asks of him, in gentle tones and sweet:
 "To do this thing, my comrade, did you mean?
 This is Rollanz, who ever held you dear;
 And no mistrust was ever us between."
 Says Oliver: "Now can I hear you speak;
 I see you not: may the Lord God you keep!
 I struck you now: and for your pardon plead."
 Answers Rollanz: "I am not hurt, indeed;
 I pardon you, before God's Throne and here."
 Upon these words, each to the other leans;
 And in such love you had their parting seen.

CL

Oliver feels death's anguish on him now;
 And in his head his two eyes swimming round;
 Nothing he sees; he hears not any sound;
 Dismounting then, he kneels upon the ground,
 Proclaims his sins both firmly and aloud,
 Clasps his two hands, heavenwards holds them out,
 Prays God himself in Paradise to allow;
 Blessings on Charles, and on Douce France he vows,
 And his comrade, Rollanz, to whom he's bound.
 Then his heart fails; his helmet nods and bows;
 Upon the earth he lays his whole length out:
 And he is dead, may stay no more, that count.
 Rollanz the brave mourns him with grief profound;
 Nowhere on earth so sad a man you'd found.

CLI

So Rollant's friend is dead whom when he sees
 Face to the ground, and biting it with's teeth,
 Begins to mourn in language very sweet:
 "Unlucky, friend, your courage was indeed!
 Together we have spent such days and years;
 No harmful thing twixt thee and me has been.
 Now thou art dead, and all my life a grief."
 And with these words again he swoons, that chief,
 Upon his horse, which he calls Veillantif;
 Stirrups of gold support him underneath;
 He cannot fall, whichever way he lean.

Guided Commentary

- In what circumstances is Oliver struck? Why does the author give such precise details?
- What is Oliver's first reaction when he feels that "he is bound to die"? What does this reaction reveal about his character?
- Why do you suppose the author makes Oliver strike his companion by mistake?
- In this whole passage, how is the friendship between Roland and Oliver thrown into relief?

The Death of Aude [or Alde]

CCLXVIII

That Emperour, returning out of Spain,
 Arrived in France, in his chief seat, at Aix,
 Clomb to th' Palace, into the hall he came.
 Was come to him there Alde, that fair dame;
 Said to the King: "Where's Rollanz the Captain,
 Who sware to me, he'd have me for his mate?"
 Then upon Charles a heavy sorrow weighed,
 And his eyes wept, he tore his beard again:
 "Sister, dear friend, of a dead man you spake.
 I'll give you one far better in exchange,
 That is Loewis, what further can I say;
 He is my son, and shall my marches take."
 Alde answered him: "That word to me is strange.
 Never, please God, His Angels and His Saints,
 When Rollant's dead shall I alive remain!"
 Her colour fails, at th' feet of Charlemain,
 She falls; she's dead. Her soul God's Mercy awaits!
 Barons of France weep therefore and complain.

CCLXIX

Alde the fair is gone now to her rest.
 Yet the King thought she was but swooning then,
 Pity he had, our Emperour, and wept,
 Took her in's hands, raised her from th'earth again;
 On her shoulders her head still drooped and leant.
 When Charles saw that she was truly dead
 Four countesses at once he summoned;
 To a monast'ry of nuns they bare her thence,
 All night their watch until the dawn they held;
 Before the altar her tomb was fashioned well;
 Her memory the King with honour kept.

Composition Topics

Reread laisses CCLXVIII and CCLXIX. Is Alde's death beautiful? Why?

Faithful to her womanly fidelity as Roland had been faithful to his vassal fidelity, the beautiful Aude died, beautiful and simple in her profound love as he had been beautiful in his bravery. E. Faral

Imagine the character of the beautiful Aude, whose personality is barely sketched in *The Song of Roland*.

Honor to this mysterious Tuold who is revealed in the last stanza of The Song of Roland:

*So Ends the Tale
 Which Tuold Hath Conceived.*

Continue this panegyric of Tuold.

We are not, in using legend, affirming a belief in a particular occurrence, but listening with profit to a story; and if the moral of the story is sound – if its effect is toward truth, goodness, beauty – that is all we ask. H. Belloc

Does *The Song of Roland* have this effect?

Roncesvalles: The Noblest of Our Christian Songs

Before the next day dawned — Saturday the 15th of August, the Assumption — the vanguard was marshalled, and filed away upon the long straight Roman road that goes still upward and northward into the summits, and when the sun rose it took full the limestone cliffs of Albiscar, which are marvellous under the morning.

It was not till all those thousands upon thousands had gone their way, a cloud of dust behind them and the debris of their bivouacs, that a smaller body of the train, the rearguard, was marshalled to follow on. It had for captain and leader Roland, the Count of the Marches of Brittany, and with him were others of the Court.

There is a place in Roncesvalles where the gorge singularly narrows and the steep sides become precipitous cliffs approaching one towards the other. As the head of the column reached this place the sound of the water was much louder in their ears. Roland and his peers, remembering Spain, were refreshed, for now at last they were in the gateway of the Larger Land — the Terra Major, Gaul, their home.

It was in this place, in the Pass of Roncesvalles, in the mid-afternoon I think (seeing how their march was planned), that the disaster broke.

They say that not one man escaped from the slaughter of Roncesvalles to the main army, and to Charlemagne and to the Larger Land. But this cannot be so, for from that dreadful place there went forth at least such men as could tell the story and make it greater, until there rose from it, like incense from a little pot, an immortal legend which is the noblest of our Christian songs. Therein you may read the golden story of Roland — how he blew the horn that was heard from Saragossa to Toulouse, and how he challenged God, holding up his glove when he died, and how the angel took him to the hill of God and the city of Paradise, dead. And as the angel so bore him Roland's head lay back upon the angel's arm, like the head of a man in sleep.

Hilaire Belloc, *Miniatures of French History*

Guided Commentary

- ▶ What is the setting of this text? What natural beauty does the author evoke to make it so real?
- ▶ What effect does the author create, by the short fourth paragraph?
- ▶ What image of Roland does the author leave in our mind?
- ▶ To what does the author compare the tale of the “disaster”? Why?

Composition Topic

Before the next day dawned, the vanguard was marshalled, and filed away upon the long straight Roman road that goes still upward and northward into the summits, and when the sun rose it took full the limestone cliffs of Albiscar, which are marvellous under the morning.

H. Belloc

Take us with the vanguard on their march.

There is a place in Roncesvalles where the gorge singularly narrows and the steep sides become precipitous cliffs approaching one towards the other.

H. Belloc

One of your friends has just visited Roncesvalles and writes to tell you about it...

From that dreadful place there went forth such men as could tell the story and make it greater, until there rose from it, like incense from a little pot, an immortal legend which is the noblest of our Christian songs.

H. Belloc

Imagine one of these men telling the tale of *The Song of Roland*. Why is such a legend "like incense from a little pot"?

Song of Roland: The War for Civilization

Most of us remember reading, in the school histories of our childhood, that at the Battle of Hastings, Taillefer the Jongleur went in front of the Norman Army throwing his sword in the air and singing the Song of Roland.

It testifies to a truth in the very heart of Christendom, that even the court poet of William the Conqueror was celebrating Roland the conquered. That high note of the forlorn hope, of a host at bay and a battle against odds without end, is the note on which the great French epic ends. I know nothing more moving in poetry than that strange and unexpected ending; that splendidly inconclusive conclusion. Charlemagne the Christian emperor has at last established his empire in quiet; has done justice almost in the manner of a day of judgment, and sleeps as it were upon his throne with a peace almost like that of Paradise. And there appears to him the angel of God crying aloud that his arms are needed in a new and distant land, and that he must take up again the endless march of his days. And the great king tears his long white beard and cries out against his restless life. The poem ends, as it were with a vision and vista of wars against the barbarians; and the vision is true. For that war is never ended, which defends the sanity of the world against all the stark anarchies and rending negations which rage against it for ever. That war is never finished in this world; and the grass has hardly grown on the graves of our own friends who fell in it.

G.K. Chesterton, Introduction to *The Song of Roland*

Guided Commentary

- ▶ What irony does Chesterton point out about the scene in the first paragraph?
- ▶ What two scenes from Song of Roland does Chesterton present? How has he made them so moving? Why can they be said to express the same "high note of the forlorn hope"?
- ▶ With what "vision" does Chesterton leave us?
- ▶ To whom does Chesterton pay tribute in the last lines (written in 1919)? Why perhaps?

Composition Topics

*That Emperour inclined his head full low;
Hasty in speech he never was, but slow.*

Laisse X

Using everything you have learned from reading *The Song of Roland*, present the personality of the Emperor Charlemagne.

That high note of the forlorn hope, of a host at bay and a battle against odds without end, is the note on which the great French epic ends. I know nothing more moving in poetry than that strange and unexpected ending; that splendidly inconclusive conclusion.

G.K. Chesterton

After rereading the final laisse of *The Song of Roland*, continue these reflections.

In these epic heroes, Charlemagne, Roland, Oliver, all of the sentiments of a knightly age and of a heroic humanity are brought back to life, exalted and carried to the peak of their power.

J. Calvet

What secrets of another age and another civilization lie hidden in *The Song of Roland*?

Poems

Passages from *The Song of Roland* may make up most of the poetry for this segment, but you may want to supplement with poems about the themes of the work: war, honor, patriotism, loyalty, friendship... The following provide a few suggestions.

Epitaph for One Dead at Ronscevalles

(Quoted by Helen Waddell, in a lecture entitled "Poetry in the Dark Ages")

Buried in this low grave his pale limbs lie
Whose spirit climbs the starry steep of heaven.
Born of a famous stock, of the blood of France,
All gifts of gentleness and noble living
Were his but yesterday.

The down of manhood on his rosy cheek
Scarce fledged; alas, so youth and beauty died...
The day King Charlemagne spurned under foot
The soil of Spain, that day he died to the world,
And now, where'er he be, he lives to God...

Go with him now, O Vincent, mighty martyr,
Plead for him, blessed one, with the Most High.
Here in his grave-mound though his body lie,
He climbs the shining road, stands in God's house.

And all ye Christian folk that cross the threshold
Of this holy place, plead for him with the Son
Begotten of the Father's heart, and say
"God in Thy mercy" – say ye all together –
"Redeem Thy servant Eghard from his sins."

To Lucasta, Going to the Wars, by Richard Lovelace (1618–1658)

Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind,
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind
To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
As thou too shalt adore;
I could not love thee, Dear, so much,
Loved I not Honour more.

Everyone Sang, by Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967)

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on—on—and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

An interesting contrast to *The Song of Roland* could come from studying
The Charge of the Light Brigade, by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892).

Blessed Are Those Who Died for Carnal Earth, by Charles Péguy (translated from his poem *Eve*)

Blessed are those who died for carnal earth.
Provided it was in a just war.
Blessed are those who died for a plot of ground.
Blessed are those who died a solemn death.

Blessed are those who died in great battles.
Stretched out on the ground in the face of God.
Blessed are those who died on a final high place,
Amid all the pomp of grandiose funerals.

Blessed are those who died for their carnal cities.
For they are the body of the City of God.
Blessed are those who died for their hearth and their fire,
And the lowly honors of their father's house.

For such is the image and such the beginning
The body and the shadow of the house of God.
Blessed are those who died in that embrace,
In honor's clasp and earth's avowal.

For honor's clasp is the beginning
And the first draught of eternal avowal.
Blessed are those who died in this crushing down,
In the accomplishment of this earthly vow.

For earth's vow is the beginning
And the first draught of faithfulness.
Blessed are those who died in that coronation
In that obedience and that humility.

Blessed are those who died, for they have returned
Into primeval clay and primeval earth.
Blessed are those who died in a just war.
Blessed is the wheat that is ripe and the wheat that is gathered in sheaves.

Dedicatory Ode, by Hilaire Belloc
(On friendship, though the emphasis is not the same as in *The Song of Roland*.)

The wealth of youth, we spent it well
And decently, as very few can.
And is it lost? I cannot tell:
And what is more, I doubt if you can.

The question's very much too wide,
And much too deep, and much too hollow,
And learned men on either side
Use arguments I cannot follow.

They say that in the unchanging place,
Where all we loved is always dear,
We meet our morning face to face
And find at last our twentieth year...

They say (and I am glad they say)
It is so; and it may be so:
It may be just the other way,
I cannot tell. But this I know:

From quiet homes and first beginning,
Out to the undiscovered ends,
There's nothing worth the wear of winning,
But laughter and the love of friends.