EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS among academic disciplines, particularly those between history and the arts, seems inevitably to lead to discussing the relationship between fact and fiction. Do the stories told in literature and art distort historical events, pretty them up and make them more palatable? Or do the arts, when their subject matter is factual, make the past available to us in ways that transcend the records of history?

I want to speak to these questions by considering two great leaders, Charlemagne and William of Normandy; two battles in which they figured, Roncevaux [Roncevalles] and Hastings; and two works of art inspired by those battles, The Song of Roland and the Bayeux Tapestry.

To begin chronologically is to begin with such facts as we seem to have about Charlemagne and the battle of Roncevaux. I say “seem to have” because, as anyone who has ever read several conflicting newspaper reports of a single incident knows, so-called facts are very often open to question, and always open to interpretation.

The most useful source for this information about Charlemagne and Roncevaux is the Vita Karoli [Life of Charlemagne] (ca. 830) by Einhard, or Eginhard, Charlemagne’s chaplain and sometime secretary. Einhard chron-
icles an incident which took place as Charlemagne led his army back toward Germany after a successful expedition against the Moors in Spain.

While his army was marching in a long line . . . the Gascons placed an ambuscade on the top of the mountain . . . and then rushing down into the valley beneath threw into disorder the last part of the baggage train and also the rearguard which acted as a protection to those in advance. In the battle which followed the Gascons slew their opponents to the last man. . . . In this battle Eggihard, the surveyor of the royal table; Anselm, the Count of the Palace, and Roland, Praefect of the Breton frontier, were killed along with very many others. Nor could this assault be punished at once, for when the deed had been done the enemy so completely disappeared that they left behind them not so much as a rumour of their whereabouts. (19-20)

There are a number of other nearly contemporary accounts of this battle which took place in 778 at Roncevaux. One of these, the *Vita Hludovici Imperatoris* (ca. 840), written by an anonymous author sometimes called the Astronome of Limoges, includes the observation that “[T]hose who were marching in the rear guard of the army were massacred in the mountains; as their names are so well known, I won't bother to mention them again.” It does seem clear, as Gentil points out, that “the battle at Roncevaux had so struck men's imaginations that, more than sixty years afterward, the names of the victims were still strong in their memories” (12-13).

During the next centuries the story not only survived, but was elaborated upon, and finally around 1100 someone—more about that someone later—wrote a poem of approximately four thousand lines about the incident. This is the earliest and finest of the *chansons de geste*, the songs of great deeds; it is called *Le Chanson de Roland*, *The Song of Roland*.

When we read this medieval epic we find that the event at Roncevaux has undergone a curious transformation. Charlemagne, who was born in 742 and would be thirty-six years old in 778, is, we discover, believed by his enemies to have “lived more than two hundred years.” The Gascons [Basques] who attacked the rear guard in the mountain pass are now Saracens, infidels. Roland (mentioned only as a casualty by Einhard) becomes, along with his companions, Oliver and Archbishop Turpin (who were not mentioned at all by Einhard), a hero of Achillean proportions who, upon his death, is carried immediately to Paradise. The ambush itself is discovered to have been treacherously arranged by Ganelon, Roland's stepfather and Charlemagne's baron, in order to bring about the death of Roland. And the deed which Einhard tells us could not “be punished at once” is indeed immediately avenged.
What is it that has happened in a little over two centuries to transmute Einhard's simple chronicle into this great epic of the Middle Ages?

First, obviously, the tale was somehow kept alive, and it grew. Facts became, to some degree at least, fictionalized. A chronicle became a story. Prose became poetry.

But why? The bare-boned facts had been recorded. Why elaborate?

I mentioned earlier that facts are always open to interpretation; for interpretation is the method by which we may better understand the meaning behind the facts. Facts themselves often tell us less than we need to know to make use of them—because life, viewed merely as a series of "facts," seems at times, as the poet says, to have "really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" (Arnold 33-34).

We try to make sense of a life that is hard to live—a life into which we are born willy-nilly; through which we rejoice and suffer, randomly it seems; and at the end of which we die, with little choice of when or how. We try to make sense of it; we're too close to it, however, to do so to any great degree, to perceive a pattern. We lack perspective. But a story, a fiction, imposes order upon the apparent chaos. It provides us with a longer view and suggests causes and effects.

For example: why, the ancients might have wondered, did the tragedy of Troy happen? Looking backward, Virgil and, after him, Dante could point out that if Troy had not fallen, Aeneas would not have had to flee; if Aeneas had not had to flee, Rome would not have been founded; if Rome had not been founded, the Roman Empire would not have been established; if the Roman Empire had not been established (this Dante, of course), Christianity would not have found a seat, and the Western World as we know it would not exist.

We can speculate in the same way about the tale of Roland. Why, the people of the Middle Ages might have asked, did those brave men, the best of Charlemagne's knights, die in such a way—not even in battle, but in ambush? And so the story developed to bring honor and glory to them and to impose order upon chaos; to fit the incident in with the divine scheme; to "justify the ways of God to men" (Milton I, 26); and to point out what a glorious but difficult and sad and weary thing it is to fight for good against evil.

Having postulated why the story survived and evolved, we may begin to wonder, how, in an era of minimal literacy, it grew into the epic we know today and how the legend of Charlemagne grew to the immense proportions that it achieved during the late Middle Ages—for the Roland song is only one among many of the tales of Charlemagne which have been embodied in art forms.

We may speculate that the story was first passed along by word of mouth—as news, gossip. Soldiers are notorious for their propensity to
rehash, perhaps even exaggerate, the battles they have witnessed or been involved in. And something about this battle was particularly captivating to the imagination. This, too, was the era when pilgrimages were in fashion; certainly the deeds of Charlemagne and his paladins must often have come into the minds and conversations of those traveling the great pilgrimage route which actually traverses Roncevaux and leads to Santiago de Compostela, a shrine which, as later legends have it, was built by Charlemagne to house the remains of Saint James. Scholars surmise that at the pilgrims' rest-stops along the way—for even in the Middle Ages tourists stopped for food and rest and entertainment—there were jongleurs, singers, story tellers, who entertained and edified the travelers with tales of the great heroes. Doubtless, too, the jongleurs and minstrels, trouveres or troubadours, who journeyed from great house to great house, earning their livings through singing, chanting, story telling, often took Charlemagne as their subject.

Many of the legends which arose are recorded in the Pseudo-Turpin (ca. 1150), properly titled Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi, which purports to have been written not, of course, by the Archbishop Turpin who died at Roncevaux, but by an historical Turpin, Archbishop of Reims, who died peacefully at home around the year 800. Is there a fiction in the making here? What might be the relationship between this historical Turpin and the great warrior priest Turpin of The Song of Roland? Is this merely a coincidence of names? Or did some later story-teller, some admirer of Turpin perhaps, deciding that a battling bishop would add zest and depth to his tale, transform a chronicler into a character?

At any rate, in the Pseudo-Turpin, of whose author we are uncertain, we find recorded many of Charles's legendary exploits. And a number of these, in turn, are represented in an early thirteenth century stained glass window of Chartres cathedral. In one panel of the "Charlemagne window" Roland is depicted defeating a giant (an incident not mentioned in the Chanson); in another panel he is blowing his horn, Oliphant, and fruitlessly trying to break Durandel, his sword, by striking it against a rock; in a third panel Charles is being informed of Roland's death. But the Charlemagne window depicts not only scenes from The Song of Roland, it also incorporates them into two narratives of other, perhaps later, legends connected with the figure of Charlemagne.

The first narrative, echoing the Pseudo-Turpin, begins with Charles receiving messengers from the Emperor Constantine (a fourth century figure and no contemporary of Charlemagne). Charlemagne then appears, fully armed, in a vision to Constantine, who sends him off to deliver the Holy Land from the pagans. This having been accomplished, Charlemagne returns to Constantine and receives from him reliquaries which he takes back with him to his chapel at Aix la Chapelle.
In the second narrative, which also echoes the *Pseudo-Turpin*, Charlemagne is visited by the spirit of Saint James, who "exhort[s] the Frankish emperor to liberate the land where his corporeal remains lie 'unknown and without memorial.'" In the remaining panels we see Charles carrying out the task set him by Saint James. He defeats the pagans in Spain, orders churches built, most importantly Santiago de Campostel for James himself; and he goes back to Aix la Chapelle, losing, as we have seen, Roland and the rest of the rearguard along the way (Nichols 95-100).

The *Chanson*, the *Pseudo-Turpin*, the window at Chartres are only three of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of works of art which take as their matter the legends surrounding Charlemagne. Once again, why? Why all these stories, statues, manuscript illuminations, stained glass windows taking Charlemagne as their subject—as a great leader who receives supernatural portents, who wearies of, but never fails to carry out, the almost superhuman tasks laid upon him?

It is, of course, no new idea to suggest that humans need heroes, people who exemplify the qualities we most cherish, figures who show us what we might be, what a human is capable of. This is true for any era, but perhaps particularly so for the centuries surrounding Charlemagne's reign. It was a time of great expansion for Christianity and, in its expansion, Christianity destroyed much that had been—both physically by throwing down buildings and statues, and in other ways by denying old gods, discouraging old myths, frowning upon tales of older, pagan heroes. So a great Christian hero was perhaps needed—not merely for purposes of propaganda, but because the human heart craves such figures to admire and to revere.

And there was Charlemagne, ready for legend as well as history. Charlemagne, not only a great soldier and king, but one associated (as we have seen in the *Pseudo-Turpin* and the Chartres window) with Constantine, the Roman Emperor who, through the Edict of Milan in 313, had ordered complete freedom of worship throughout his realm; Constantine, who had lent his personal support to the Christians, relieving the considerable persecution they had suffered under Roman rule; Constantine, who had championed the church and used it to help unify his empire which Charlemagne was later to restore and consolidate.

Coronated as Emperor and Augustus of the Holy Roman Empire, a leader whose "authority... derived from his implicational relationship with Constantine... Charlemagne could be seen less as a successor to Constantine than as a *renovatio* of him, a re-presentation of what he was perceived to have stood for" (Nichols 73).

The medieval imagination seems to have perceived Charlemagne, in his mystical association with Constantine and through his own achievements, as the greatest defender of the faith, the epitome of the Christian hero—thus, the very stuff of which legends are made.
Some two hundred years after the time of Charlemagne, about the time that *The Song of Roland*, as we have it, was written down, another Christian leader was setting out to claim his kingdom and, although he was presumably unaware of it at the time, to become something of a legend himself. Early in the year 1066, upon hearing that Edward the Confessor, King of England, had died and that Harold Godwinson had assumed the crown, William Duke of Normandy prepared to invade England. Although adverse weather delayed his fleet's sailing, the invasion was duly carried out. After Harold was killed in a battle every bit as bloody as the one which had taken place at Roncevaux, William claimed the throne of England.

Those are the "facts." But they don't tell us very much. Indeed, they tell us less even than does Einhard's account of the "treason of the Gascons," about the motives of the individuals involved and about the justness of their actions.

But just as *The Song of Roland* elaborates, albeit in a fictionalized form, the actions of Roland and Charlemagne, so a later work of art, or "document" as it is often referred to, the Bayeux Tapestry, elaborates the actions of Edward, Harold, and William.

We know a bit more about the construction of the Tapestry than about that of *The Song of Roland*. It was probably commissioned by William's half-brother, Bishop Odo, shortly after William's accession to the English throne. The Tapestry is embroidered, rather than woven, in woolen thread upon linen cloth, and measures approximately 230 feet in length by about 20 inches in height (Bertrand 6). The Tapestry is distinctive because of its unusual shape, but what is truly extraordinary about it is that, whereas most tapestries depict one scene or at most a series of scenes, the Bayeux Tapestry actually tells a story. Like *The Song of Roland*, it is a narrative, and this is its tale.

Edward the Confessor, childless king of England, sends Harold Godwinson to Duke William of Normandy with a message. The Tapestry itself does not say explicitly what the message is, but it is believed to have been a confirmation from Edward that he had named William his heir and successor to the throne of England. Upon Harold's landing in Normandy, he is taken prisoner by Guy, Count of Ponthieu. When news of this reaches William, he arranges for Harold's release and takes Harold with him to battle against Conan of Brittany. As the troops march toward battle Harold gives proof of his chivalry and courage by rescuing two soldiers from the quicksand surrounding Le Mont Saint Michel. William and Harold are victorious and, after the fighting is over, William gives Harold arms as a reward for his valor. They then return to Bayeux where Harold, his hands resting upon reliquaries, swears an oath, perhaps under duress, before William. Once again, the Tapestry does not make the oath explicit, but
there can be no doubt, in the medieval understanding, that in one form or another Harold is swearing loyalty to William, thus becoming his dependent or vassal and owing him support.

Harold returns to England and, upon the death of Edward, immediately claims the throne. Not long after his coronation a "hairy star," Halley's Comet, appears in the sky, and is taken as a portent of evil. William, upon hearing of what he considers Harold's usurpation of the English throne, prepares a fleet and invades England. The Tapestry, in describing the battle near Hastings in October, 1066, relates all the horrors of medieval war. Bodies are slashed, hacked, mutilated, stripped of arms, and Harold is killed, leaving the way open for William's victory and his assumption of the English crown.

Although The Song of Roland and the Bayeux Tapestry employ different media, the one embroidered with threads and the other with words; although we call one a chanson de geste—a song of great deeds—and the other a tapestry, there are striking similarities between them.

In content both take as their subject matter a battle between two nations, a battle which results from treachery or the breaking of an oath; both employ warrior/bishops (Turpin and Odo) as characters; both emphasize, in epic style, the intervention of supernatural forces and the carrying out of a divine plan; both, too, give the hero a worthy adversary (for whatever else the infidels in Roland may be they are no cowards once battle is joined), and dramatize the bitterness of war—even of a just or holy war; both display the pageantry and color of chivalric feudalism.

In technique, both are told through short scenes, irregularly divided and vividly sketched. In Roland the lines are grouped into laisses, "bundles" of lines, verses of irregular length. In the Tapestry, scenes are "bundles" of pictures enclosed by stylized trees and buildings. Both, also, are open-ended rather than neatly tied up in the manner of, for instance, a Victorian novel, with the future safely accounted for. When we come to the final lines of The Song of Roland we know that Charlemagne must continue fighting for his faith, but we do not see him do so; likewise, when we come to the final remaining stitches of the Bayeux Tapestry we know that William will be crowned King of England and undoubtedly face many new trials; however we, once again, are not to witness them.

But there is another, more important similarity between the two works: both are interested in displaying, through the dramatization of specific events, the character of a leader and a justification for his actions. We may assume, I think, that the audience for The Song of Roland was sympathetic toward Charlemagne and his actions; they were after all a Christian medieval audience and Charlemagne was a great medieval Christian leader who defended his kingdom and faith from the barbarians and infidels. The
Bayeux Tapestry, however, could not be so certain of finding a sympathetic audience, particularly in England, the conquest of which it celebrates. The English, after all, were English—Anglo-Saxon—and William, after all, was Norman. He spoke a different language; he brought with him his own nobles; he arranged for a great and bothersome census to be taken in order to catalogue his new possessions in The Domesday Book. Many of the English, as witnessed by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, felt resentment, if not downright enmity, toward him. And most of all he shed much Christian blood—great quantities of it—both English and Norman. Here was not the Great Charles repelling heretical invaders, but a Christian king himself invading a Christian land and killing others of his faith.

How to justify such an action? Perhaps by explaining through a popular medium one's motives and the events leading up to the action—by creating, as Michael Parisse writes, a "propaganda film" (51)—the Bayeux Tapestry—which, like The Song of Roland, tells the version of the story that one wishes to propagate. For we can see that the narrative of the Tapestry follows closely such facts as we have at our command, but elaborates them, adding details of crucial importance to its primary function of capturing its audience and convincing that audience of the rightness of William's actions.

And in creating this propaganda might it not be worthwhile to suggest that one's motives and actions are based upon those of an established hero? That, like that hero, one was forced to shed blood because of the treachery of one's own vassal? Could it have been in the mind of the designer of the Tapestry to suggest that as Charlemagne was forced to battle because of Ganelon's treachery, so was William forced to battle because of Harold's treachery—that William, like Charles before him, was actually conducting a holy war, a war necessary to fulfill the divine plan?

The idea that I am playing with, of course, is that the Charlemagne legend, as embodied in The Song of Roland, influenced the design of the Bayeux Tapestry; but is there evidence to support such a conjecture?

We have seen that there are similarities of content and structure in the two works, and we know that the Tapestry was created and the Song written down within two decades of each other. We know, too, that the Tapestry was certainly ordered by the Normans and that the Song is transcribed in Norman French.

There are two other clues that might link the two works. The first clue is that in 1125 William of Malmesbury, describing the Battle of Hastings in his Gesta Regum Angelorum [Deeds of the Kings of England], tells us that Taillefer, a jongleur, led William's troops to battle, going before them, tossing a sword into the air and chanting a song of Roland "that men might be encouraged by the martial example of the hero" (Le Gentil 18, Moncrieff vii).
The other clue, as in the Turpin question in *Roland*, lies in what is perhaps merely a coincidence of names. In both the Tapestry and in the *Song* we find a person named Turold or Turoludus. His name appears in the enigmatic final line of the Oxford manuscript of *Roland*. It is "to all outward appearance, a simple, self-explanatory line typical of closing formulae in romances and epics alike" (Hult 892).

The line reads: "*CI FALT LA GESTE QUE TUROLDUS DECLINET.*"

What drives the scholars to distraction about this line is that, despite its outward appearance, it is not a "simple self-explanatory line." Because of changes in the definitions of some words in the French language between the twelfth and twentieth centuries, no one knows exactly how to translate it. Scott Moncrieff, in his *Roland*, translates: "*SO ENDS THE TALE WHICH TUROLD HATH CONCEIVED.*" Dorothy Sayers, on the other hand, translates: "Here ends the geste Turoludus would recite." Patricia Terry tries it this way: "Here ends the poem, for Turoludus declines." Whether this version implies that he refuses to tell any more of it or that he has fallen into ill health remains a moot question.

One determined translator lists every possible permutation:

- Here ends the song
- Here ends the tale
- Here ends the gest
- Here ends the written history
- Here ends the source

that Turold composes, paraphrases, amplifies
that Turold completes, relates, that Turold declaims, recounts, narrates,
that Turold copies, transcribes, for Turold grows weak, grows weary, declines,
that Turold turns into poetry.

(Goldin n.p.)

Perhaps the most graceful, although least scholarly, manner in which to treat the puzzle is to agree with George Saintsbury that the *Roland* is "the great song that Turoludus [whoever he may be] did something absolutely uncertain with" (Moncrieff 139).

So there it is. We have the facts, the words "*CI FALT LA GESTE QUE TUROLDUS DECLINET,*" but they are meaningless to us because we cannot interpret them to find out who Turoludus was or what he did with the Roland song.

Is there some other approach? Is there some way, without distorting such "facts" as we have, to speculate upon the problem? What if we turn to another source of information, bring our background knowledge of the age to bear, and make a leap of imagination? What about going back to the
Bayeux Tapestry to see if there are any clues which might connect the two Turolds?

The Tapestry's Turold seems to be a minor character, and appears only once, in scene ten (Parisse 15) where William's messengers confront Guy de Ponthieu, yet he is one of the few persons in the Tapestry who is given an identifying inscription rather than being merely mentioned in the narrative of the running Latin text. This would seem to suggest that he is a personage, someone of importance, in the court of William of Normandy.

One commentator writes that he is "some kind of bearded dwarf" (Bertrand 13). Another calls him "a bearded character named Turold," and remarks that "the fact that he is so small is in direct relation to the requirements of the drawing and does not signify that the character depicted is a midget" (Parisse 112-113). Parisse also writes that "Turold can probably not be linked in any way to the author of the Song of Roland [sic]" (112). His assertions may well be valid. On the other hand, it comes readily to the memory that it was not uncommon for court entertainers, or fools (who most often were not fools at all) to be midgets or dwarfs. And one may wonder if the Turol of the Bayeux Tapestry might not have been William's fool; if he might not have entertained his duke with some version of the Roland song; if his words mightn't have been transcribed; if Taillefer, being more normally formed and agile, having learned the song from Turold, might not have been inspired, or ordered, to lead William's troops into battle with its chant.

That is a lot of conjecture, and I cannot substantiate it. I have established no "facts" about this matter; indeed, what I have established, or, at least, tried to establish, is the beginning of a fiction. And what that fiction accomplishes for me is not to distort the historical events, but rather to illuminate them; for by thinking about, by "playing with," relationships among these various people, events, and works of art, I have made them come to life for me; they have become part of my own experience, my own memory. And to create vicarious experience is, after all, the point of storytelling.

Although this discussion has not uncovered any new, verifiable information about Charlemagne or William, about the Bayeux Tapestry or The Song of Roland, I hope it has established the worth of conjecture, the worth of searching for relationships. I hope that the discussion will suggest that works of art, that works of history, that works of literature do not exist in disciplinary vacuums, but that they illuminate one another; that they illuminate the minds and imaginations of their own ages; and that they help to form and illuminate the minds and imaginations of future ages.
For if we can recognize the connections between the image of Constantine and the legend of Charlemagne and between the legend of Charlemagne and the story of William, perhaps we will be capable of recognizing that these connections extend to our own age. Perhaps these stories, by educating the heart as well as the mind, by telling of the values cherished by ages past, can help us to recognize the values we cherish.

Most of all, I hope to suggest that the purpose of fiction is not to distort the "facts," or to pretty them up. Rather, its purpose is to go beyond a mere recitation of them, and to order them in a fashion which universalizes their meanings. As Aristotle tells us, "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened but what may happen . . . for poetry tends to express the universal . . . " (*Poetics* 9.1451b.1, 3).

Fiction interprets and synthesizes experience so that we may gain insight into and understanding of the often baffling, seemingly random, workings of the human condition; fiction by engaging our emotions, our imaginations, our intellects creates for us memories of the emotions, the imaginations, the intellects of those who lived before us and makes available to us the experience and wisdom of ages past.
Works Consulted


