



## On Functional Multiplicity of Tense-Aspect Forms in Old French Narrative

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Among recent models of linguistically based analysis of literature, Harald Weinrich's *Tempus: besprochene und erzählte Welt* has received much attention from narratologists, including medievalists specializing in French language and literature. Notably Karl Uitti (1979) and Rupert Pickens (1979) have each applied to Old French texts Weinrich's categories of narrative analysis ("narrative" vs. "commentative" text), for different purposes and with varying degrees of success. Uitti uses them to update the argument of an earlier study (Uitti 1969), in which he contrasted an older "Alexis-Roland" narrative tradition (one with no hint of authorial presence) with the playfully "devious" practice of Chrétien in *Yvain*, where pseudo-objective transmission of traditional courtly views is invalidated by "reported FACT," as "narrative is systematically utilized to undercut commentary" (165). Using the same categories, Pickens posits a correlation between "historical consciousness in the narrator" and the distribution of certain verb tenses in the narrative proper. These tenses fall into two categories, which he calls "'present' tenses" (present and present perfect) and "historical tenses" (preterite, imperfect, pluperfect). Neither Pickens nor Uitti gives definitions or Old French examples of these tense types. Nor could they very well have done so. The reason they could not, as this study will show, is that the functions of so-called "present" and "historical" tenses (or tenses of "narrative" and "commentary" [Uitti], corresponding in both cases to "erzählte" and "besprochene" realms [Weinrich]) vary too extensively in medieval texts from one discourse situation to another to allow them to be matched consistently with the standard grammatical designations "present," "perfect," and "preterite." On the positive

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side, however, much useful information about the functional multiplicity of tense-aspect forms in Old French narrative emerges from an understanding of why narrative analysis based on Weinrich's categories is not applicable to Old French.

What Pickens calls "historical consciousness" in medieval vernacular literature raises, or should raise, a very basic question: how does one deduce from the texts the evidence of a particular conception of historical process in the mind of an author (as distinct from a narrator)? This question has been the subject of much speculation,<sup>1</sup> but it has never been satisfactorily elucidated by way of grammatical or linguistic analysis of narrative TENSE USAGE.<sup>2</sup> P.'s attempt to do so with respect to Old French highlights some important methodological assumptions and fallacies. My concern here will be to examine the validity of his quantitative approach to selected categories of the verb in Old French narrative. We should note from the outset, however, that in regard to "historical consciousness," P. does not use this term in the same way as do historians or theoreticians of the philosophy of history. Rather, for P., the term refers to the logic of, and verbal techniques for, the representation of past experience—i.e., devices of narrative:

The relative frequencies of verbs in the two major temporal categories, the "present" tenses and the historical tenses, are relevant to the historical character of a narrative and are essential in the creation of historical consciousness in the narrator. Historical consciousness is suggested by the degree to which a narrator does or does not establish and sustain distance between himself and the events being recounted, on the one hand, and, on the other, between his audience and events (169). Thus, historical consciousness is virtually absent in the Oxford *Roland*, where diegesis contains many verbs in the "present" tenses (about 80%, in fact) and few in the historical tenses (about 20%), but it is pervasive in *La Mort le roi Artu*, where the proportions are reversed . . . (169)

Thus, when he speaks of "historical consciousness" (here and elsewhere, as again below) P. is not concerned with anyone's implicit or explicit theory of long-term temporal process; he is concerned with the formal (grammatical) representation of temporal relations in storytelling. (I use the term "story" here in the wide sense—story/history—with no connotations regarding degree of factuality.) Among these relations, the ones most pertinent to what P. calls "historical consciousness" were formalized more succinctly by Reichenbach (1947) in his now widely used tripartition of verb tense as a deictic category whose primary function is to relate the time of an event (E) or situation

1. Among recent studies one might cite the work of H.-R. Jauss, Hayden White, Lionel Gossman, Paul Zumthor, William Brandt, Jeanette Beer, H. E. Barnes, Stephen Nichols, W. B. Gallie. For a critical overview of the various approaches to the problem, see Fleischman 1983.
2. Michel Blanc at times links tense usage with historical consciousness. See, e.g., his speculations regarding the use of Old French imperfective *passé simple* to describe character traits: "Vairs *out* les oilz et mult fier lu visage./Gent *out* li cors e les costes *out* larges" says the *Roland* poet of Ganelon. The villain's features are for him and the Old French language acquired characteristics, devoid of becoming. They are static" (1964: 107; also 1965: 575).

predicated in an utterance or discourse to some other time: either to the moment of the speech event (S) in absolute tense relationships, or, in relative tense relationships, to a reference point (R), which is in turn situated in relation to S. One could, then, argue that even if the results of P.'s analyses are correct, they will tell us nothing about "historical consciousness," but only about discourse strategies in a certain style of narrative. But even this prospect dims when one realizes that P. does not limit his postulates to "a certain style of narrative" (a style which I will define below), but would have them apply to Old French narrative in general.

It will be useful to recapitulate briefly the way P. conceives and formulates the problem. "For years," he writes, "scholars have attempted to make sense of the apparently erratic tense sequences that are characteristic of the genre [Old French narrative] as a whole"—notably, the alternation between past and present. This alternation does not occur in direct discourse; "only in diegesis, the 'purely' narrative portions of a text, do verb tenses seem to function erratically, in apparently irrational sequences" (168, following Sandmann 1957, 1960). Though this "apparent irrationality" was subjected to detailed scrutiny by Michel Blanc in his London dissertation (1961) and in subsequent articles (1964, 1965) focusing on the "epic present" (alias, elsewhere, "historical present"), P. finds Blanc's explanations deficient: "For example, *La Vie de St. Léger* (mid-10th century) has many fewer presents and perfects and many more preterites, imperfects, pluperfects, and other historical tenses than any prose work analyzed by Blanc" (169). He therefore proposes "a closer, more broadly conceived, and more extensive examination of texts from the mid-tenth through the twelfth centuries" based on categories for the analysis of narrative tense usage developed in turn by Gérard Genette and Harald Weinrich. P. thus states at the outset (183 n. 4) that

the terminology [as regards categories of the verb] used in this study to describe the Old French verb system parallels that of Harald Weinrich in *Tempus: besprochene und erzählte Welt* . . . (1971). I call the 'present' tenses those described by Weinrich as used in commentary only (present, future, perfect, future perfect); my term *historical tenses* corresponds to his concept of narrated time (preterite, imperfect, pluperfect, and conditionals used in indirect discourse).<sup>3</sup>

3. P. correlates these two tense-types (present and historical, abbreviated below as PR and H) with the three modes of discourse he finds operative in narrative (abbreviated below M, D, C): (1) Mimesis ("the stuff of drama"—i.e., direct speech); (2) Diegesis ("the stuff of history": events, actions, reported and imagined speech); (3) Commentary (author's [or narrator's] 1st person intervention in the narrative). The table below shows P.'s correlation of tense-type with discourse mode along 2 axes: proportion of [M] to [D + C], correlated with proportion of [PR] to [H] within [D]. The results of these correlations suggest 3 "models" of Old French narrative ranked according to the degree of a narrator's "historical consciousness":

"model"	proportion of [M] to [D+C]	density of tense forms in D
1. AHISTORICAL	high [M] (low [D+C])	high PR
2. HISTORICAL	high [D+C] (low M)	high H
3. MIXED	high [D+C] (low M)	high PR

P. seems unperturbed by the fact that the categories he borrows from Weinrich were developed for analysis of (1) WRITTEN narrative, which was (2) written in MODERN FRENCH, where not only the system of oppositions of tense and aspect is far more fixed and stable than in Old French, but also the form-function correlations are different. In so doing, P. ignores the fundamentally important observation stressed by Blanc (1964) and Hatcher (1942), both of whom he cites, that in, for example, the Old French epic

the variation in time, stage and aspect of the verb can be attributed to the method of *oral composition and recitation* peculiar to the *chanson de geste* . . . We must never lose sight of the fundamental fact that, whether we believe the Old French epics to have been the fruit of oral improvisation or of written composition, they were intended primarily for oral recitation, that is to say for a *direct communication with an audience* (Blanc 1964: 109, 110; emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

“Direct” communication with an audience—vocal, visual, in-person contact—applies not just to the epic; in the Middle Ages it is the normal way of life for literature in general. To disregard these distinctions—oral vs. written, Old French vs. Modern French—will drastically distort the results obtained by P. in his frequency counts of verb forms in the Old French texts he examines. Further disruptive of these form counts is the fact that in narrative, and particularly in oral narrative, tense-aspect forms often go beyond the basal functions of tense and aspect described above, by taking on expressive functions and by functioning pragmatically in the organization of the discourse (see Fleischman 1986).

At all events, P.’s frequency counts provide the data from which he draws a variety of conflicting conclusions. Some may be seen as harmlessly tautological, e.g., direct discourse, or “narrative mimesis,” co-occurs with other foregrounding devices, notably the historical present, and vice versa: diegesis favors preterite and other “historical” tenses (174–75). But others are more alarming. His major findings may be rapidly summarized as follows:

—“Historical consciousness is virtually absent in the Oxford *Roland*, where diegesis contains many verbs in the ‘present’ tenses (about 80%, in fact) and few in the historical tenses (about 20%), but it is pervasive in *La Mort le roi Artu*, where the proportions are reversed” (169). Hence in the *Roland*, “because temporal and esthetic distance is lacking, there is little room for mature evaluation or for reflection. By contrast, the kind of verbal composition typical of romances in the *Lancelot-Graal* cycle creates a temporal distance that allows for objective observation and judgment, for irony, and for the deployment of other complex historical/narrative techniques such as the assessment and comparison of simultaneous actions” (169).

—Tense usage in Chrétien de Troyes reveals a “trend toward anti-historicization in the composition of his narratives . . . After *Cligés*, Chrétien’s poems become ever more ‘dramatic’ as the quantity of mimetic content increases; but, as if in compensation, verbs in the historical tenses occur more frequently in diege-

4. Hatcher goes even further, seeing “the narrative of the *Roland* [as] an almost completely unbroken flow of activity—that is, of drama” (1942: 612 n. 16).

sis. . . . In [*Lancelot* and *Cligés*] the overall tension created by opposed historicizing and anti-historicizing forces neutralizes them as history. In this, they conform with the small group of 'mixed' compositions . . ." (172). Indeed, concludes P., "often Chrétien's narrator is as insignificant a presence as the *Roland* narrator" (182) (a finding which may come as a surprise to those who do not consider the *Roland* narrator an "insignificant presence"; compare Uitti 1979).

—Finally, as regards the twelve *lais* of Marie de France, P. determines that six of them "conform perfectly with [his] historical model," one (*Equitan*) is "problematic" as regards the proportion of mimesis to diegesis and commentary, and the five others are "historical" as regards the proportion of mimesis to diegesis and commentary, but NOT historical as regards the distribution of tenses ("present" vs. "historical" tenses) in diegesis. In other words, the results here, as in Chrétien, as also in the epic, are problematic and "mixed."

Small wonder. P.'s data on tense usage are from the outset vitiated by a basic failure to distinguish between the FORM of a verb and its multiple FUNCTIONS in narrative (though basic, this failure is not uncommon; cf. Ollier 1978). Table 1 below schematizes P.'s adaptation of Weinrich's categories (as used also by Uitti 1979), contrasting the tenses of "commentary" (present and perfect) with the tenses of "narrated time" (preterite, imperfect, pluperfect), which P. renames "present" tenses and "historical" tenses respectively.

Table 1

"PRESENT" tenses (commentary)	"HISTORICAL" tenses (narrated time)
present	preterite
perfect	imperfect
	pluperfect

For such a schema to be valid, one must suppose consistent functional contrasts among the tense-aspect forms *present*, *perfect*, and *preterite*—i.e., (1) that a present is always either "ahistorical" (or "anti-historicizing") or "commentative" and not at times "historical"; or, in other words, that narrative presents (historical presents or "epic presents"), although temporally and aspectually equivalent in narrative to preterites (and replaceable thereby, with no change in semantic interpretation of what, it is supposed, actually occurred in the narrative sequence of events) are still, nonetheless, always "ahistorical" or commentative in nature; (2) that what P. calls "perfects" (the Old French *passé composé*) are likewise always "commentative" or "ahistorical" in the same ways that presents are here assumed to be so; (3) that the "preterite" (= *passé simple*) never functions as a perfect; (4) that, conversely, the perfect (*passé composé*) never functions as a preterite; (5) that the preterite, imperfect, and pluperfect are always "historical" and never "commentative" or "ahistorical" as these terms are used here. But the fact is that ALL FIVE OF THESE ASSUMPTIONS ARE FALSE. Moreover, while sufficient counterevidence in any of these five instances would disqualify P.'s frequency counts, the accumulation of such evidence in ALL FIVE renders the data wholly unusable.

Table 2 shows a revision of Table 1 in line with the functional multiplicity of tense-aspect forms (not equatable with what P. labels "verb tenses") in Old French narrative. (I am aware that the Table 2 "revisions" bring to light a number of contradictions; this is exactly the point I wish to make.)

Table 2

<i>Functions of Table 1</i> "PRESENT" tense-aspect forms	<i>Functions of Table 1</i> "HISTORICAL" tense-aspect forms
I. "present" (OFr. <i>il parle</i> )	III. passé simple ( <i>il parla</i> ) including passé antérieur ( <i>il ot parlé</i> )
1) S-Pr, Speech-event present, "commentative"	9) E-preterite
2) E-Pr, Narrative present, perfective, = preterite	10) passé simple-perfect
3) E-Pr, Narrative present, imperfective, = imperf.	11) imperfective passé simple
4) G-Pr I, General present, gnomic	12) pluperfect passé simple
5) G-Pr II, General present, local	IV. imparfait ( <i>il parloit</i> )
II. passé composé ( <i>il a parlé</i> )	13) E-imperf.
6) E-Pres. perf., present relevance <i>re</i> E	14) S-imperf.
7) S-pres. perf., present relevance <i>re</i> S	V. pluperfects ( <i>il avoit parlé</i> )
8) passé composé-preterite, no present relevance or resultative aspect	15) E-pluperfect
	16) E-passé antérieur

S refers to speech-event time (*temps de l'énonciation*), E to the time of the narrated events (*temps de l'énoncé*). S-presents are always "commentative," (providing what William Labov calls "external evaluation" of the narrative<sup>5</sup>), whereas E-presents belong to the time of the events narrated while ALSO serv-

5. Anyone telling a story presumably has something interesting to say. What Labov calls "evaluation" in narrative refers to the means by which a narrator constantly assures his listener(s), explicitly and implicitly, that the story is worth telling—or rather worth *hearing*. Evaluation of this type, *external* to the story itself (statements made in speech-event time *about* the events in the story), is contrasted with *internal* evaluation, which is built into the ways the nature, structure, and sequence of events are presented. Thus in the terms of our discussion, in external evaluation the narrator steps out of E-time and addresses the listener directly (this is *one* aspect of what P. calls "commentative" discourse), in utterances whose semantic core is reducible to "it was (+adj.);" (it was really strange, amusing, unusual, etc.—i.e., worth my telling, and worthy of your interest).

*Internal* evaluation makes the same claims implicitly, through a variety of devices: embedded quotations (allowing someone *in* the story to make clear how eminently "reportable"—worth hearing—its events are); evaluative *action* (allowing the events to "speak for themselves"—or rather to give the illusion of doing so, and this is one of the most important factors of the effective narrator's art, since events of course do not speak, *narrators* speak); evaluation by *suspension* of action (stopping or delaying the action underlines the importance of an event); and, finally, what Labov calls "departures from basic narrative syntax" (and in this category he catalogues a large array of syntactic, lexical, phonological, pragmatic, and even paralinguistic prosodic phenomena that enliven a narration). See Labov 1972 and Labov & Waletzky 1967, and, with respect to Old French, Fleischman 1986.

ing the “commentative” function of providing “*internal evaluation*” of the narrative.

Table 2 is replete with FUNCTIONAL OVERLAPS. Note that the crossovers occur in all directions, from so-called commentative to so-called historical (or narrative-event) time, and vice versa, as well as across aspectual lines: *passé composé*-PRETERITES, *passé simple*-PERFECTS and imperfects, presents functioning as preterites and imperfects, pluperfective *passé simple* and *passé antérieur* . . . These overlaps are so pervasive in Old French narrative as to render meaningless the contrasts sketched in Table 1.

A few examples may now be cited from which it will be clear that simply to count and tabulate *forms* is misleading, since the five tense-aspect forms in Table 1 encode, in reality, functions totalling more than three times that number.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the 16 items in Table 2 may be found without difficulty in any reasonably sized sample of Old French narrative. For convenience and brevity, the following examples are taken from C. W. Aspland’s 1979 anthology of representative selections, reliably edited, of standard Old- and Middle-French texts. Most of my examples are from texts also included in P.’s sample.

The famous “horn scene” from the Oxford *Roland* affords convenient examples of, among others, the multiple functions of the present. Numbers in parentheses refer to tense-aspect functions in Table 2:

- Roland *ad mis* (6) l’olifan a sa buche,  
 1754 *Empeint* (2) le ben, par grant vertut le *sunet* (2).  
 Halt *sunt* (3) li pui e la voiz *est* (3) mult lunge,  
 Granz .xxx. liwes l’oïrent (9) il respundre.  
 Karles l’oït (9) e ses cumpaignes tutes.  
 . . . . .  
 1806 De ço qui *calt?* (1) Car *demuret i unt* (6/7) trop.  
 . . . . .  
 N’i *ad* (3) icel ne *demeint* (3) irance  
 Que il ne *sunt* (3) a Rollant le cataigne,  
 Ki se *cumbat* (3) as Sarrazins d’Espaigne;  
 1848 Si *est* blecet (3), ne *quit* (1) qu’anme i *remaigne* (3).  
 Deus! quels seisante humes *ad* (1/3) en sa cumpaigne!  
 Unches meillurs n’en *out* (10) reis ne cataignes.

6. The list is not exhaustive. If one wished to add, e.g., futures and futures in the past (“conditionals”) to the primary and secondary tenses of tables 1 and 2, it would be a simple matter to contrast E-futures (17) with S-futures (18), and E-futures in past (19) with S-conditionals (20) (the abbreviation A refers to the page number in Aspland 1979):

Quant or voit li quens Garins	De Nicolete au cler vis . . .
De son enfant Aucassin	A dementir si se prist
Qu’il ne <i>pora</i> partir (17)	Si con vos <i>porrés</i> oïr (18)
	(A 148)

Or vous *lairons* de cels, si *parlerons* (18) de cels qui sunt devant Costantinoble remés (Villehardouin, A 241)

Quant li quens Garins de Biaucaire vit qu’il ne *poroit* (19) Aucassin son fil retraire des amors Nicolete . . . (A 140)

François s’en rient; que *feroient* il el? (20) (*Charroi de Nîmes*, A 67)

1874 Si cum li cerfs s'en *vait* (4) devant les chiens,  
Devant Rollant si s'en *fuient* (2/3) paiens.

Plus qu'arcbaleste ne *poet* (4) traire un quarrel,  
2266 Devers Espagne en *vait* (2) en un guaret.

**Narrative Presents (NPr's), perfective (2), and imperfective (3).** The NPr's *empeint* and *sunet* (1754), perfective (and in Modern French replaceable by preterites with no change of semantic interpretation), contrast with the NPr's *sunt* and *est* (1755), imperfective (and not replaceable in Modern French by preterites). The order of perfective NPr's corresponds to the sequence of events as they occurred (*sunet* and *empeint* cannot be reversed), whereas imperfective NPr's can be displaced over a certain range with no disruption of narrative sequence (i.e., the phrase "Halt sunt li pui" [1755] not only can be displaced but is indeed found elsewhere in the passage).

**General Presents (GPr's 4 and 5).** *Vait* (1874) and *poet* (2265) are "general presents," unmarked for time. They do not refer to actions or events either in E or in S. If, then, they are not "historical," are they "commentative?" Not in the sense P. uses the term. They are however "evaluative" in the sense defined by Labov.

Since the GPr normally occurs in the enunciation of general, universal truths, it is alternatively referred to as the "gnomic present" (< γνομικός 'pertaining to aphormisms'). This I have designated in Table 2 as the GPr I (4). An arresting variant—GPr II (5)—occurs throughout the *Quinze joyes de mariage* (late 14th or early 15th c.):

La premiere joye de mariage si *est* quant le jeune homme *est* en sa belle jeunesse, qu'il *est* frois, net et plaisant et ne *s'esmoye* fors de tirer esgulletes, faire ballades et icelles chanter, regarder les plus belles, et aviser ou il pourra trouver maniere d'avoir ses plaisirs . . . Si *tournoye* et *serche* le jeunes homs environ la nasse et *fait* tant qu'il *entre* dedens et *se marie*. Et pour la haste qu'il *a* de taster du past *avient* souvent qu'il *enquiert* petivement des besoignes et s'i *boute* tel feur telle vente.

Here the GPr II indicates the way things generally happen, in *this* society, in *these* times, *chez nous aujourd'hui*—i.e., it is not totally unmarked for time; what is suggested is the encompassing time frame for which the activities and events are generalized. Thus in the *Quinze joyes* the GPr tends to merge with the NPr, as the audience/reader imagines a SPECIFIC young man to whom all these specific things happen. But since the text is totally in the present, the events and actions cannot be thought of as regular NPr's, since the latter function only as narrative substitutes for past forms, and GPr's cannot be replaced by pasts.<sup>7</sup>

7. For an account of the preteritive and imperfective functions of the Old French narrative present (*présent vicaire*) from a different perspective (Kiparskian transformationalist in an Indo-European context)—a perspective different from though concordant with the one

**S-Present (1) and S-Present perfect (7).** In the above passage from *Roland*, Charles and his men hear (= heard) the horn, arm themselves, jump on their horses, and hasten toward the battlefield; but to what avail? they have waited too long: “De ço qui calt? Car demuret i unt trop” (1806). Here the narrator steps back, as he does frequently, out of the narrated-event time to sum up and comment in S-time (7) on the action. But note the blurring of deictic coordinates; impersonal *calt* has no grammatical subject, while the subject of *unt demuret* (Charles and his army) is back “there” (*i*) in E-time (6). But a few lines down the narrator’s commentative present *is* marked for the here and now of S: “ne quit (1 sg., JÈ, here) qu’anme i (= there) remaigne” (1848–50). It is precisely in *overlap* such as this of S-time and E-time that the skilled narrator achieves the “dramatic” effect (noted by so many commentators on the *Roland*) by which the audience (in S-time) enjoys the illusion of “actually being there” (in E-time); and in fact, looking at the analysis of the example just quoted, we see that in a momentary spasm of contrary grammatical reflexes, the audience *is*, indeed, simultaneously in both.

A familiar S-pres. perf. (7) that recurs throughout *Aucassin et Nicolette* is the formula “si com avés oï et entendu.”

**Tokens of the passé composé (6, 8).** P. follows Blanc (1964:106, 1965:571) and others in treating the Old French *passé composé* as a present perfect tense and clearly in the *Roland* it so functions predominantly. Most conspicuous in this regard are the “resumptive” present perfects with which the poet frequently begins a new *laisse*: “Roland ad mis l’olifan a sa buche” (1753), “Li quens Rollant el champ est repairet” (1869), “Ço sent Rollant la veüe ad perdue” (2297), and so on: Roland has placed the olifant to his mouth (here you see Roland with his horn at his mouth), Roland has gone back to the field (here you have Roland back at the field), etc. What P. calls the “presentness” of *passé composés* such as these is quite clear. By “presentness” he is referring to what various investigators call “present relevance,” a category often associated, though not obligatorily, with that of resultative aspect. But the *passé composé* does not always function as a perfect—for example, in speech-act verbs:

2284 Ço sent Rollant que s’espee li tolt.  
Uvrit les oilz, si li AD DIT un mot:  
‘Men escientre, tu n’ ies mie des noz.’

Elsewhere the *passé composé*, while still resultative, has no present relevance, and seems to be in transition from perfect to preterite:

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offered here—see Paden 1977. Paden is not convinced, however, that the *présent vicair* in early and pre-Romance texts is a device for highlighting the most important events in a narrative, and argues against equating it with the “historical present”—a valid objection in the case of texts (e.g., certain Latin inscriptions on the one hand, narratives marked by resolutely LITERARY artifice on the other) which manifestly do not belong to the category of oral performance.

- 1889 As vus Marsilie en guise de barunt. . . .  
 L'escut li freint [à Bevon] e Posberc li derumpt,  
 Que mort l'abat seinz altre descunfisun.  
 Puis AD OCIS Yvoeries e Ivon  
 1896 Ensembl'od els Gerard de Russillun.

In the following example, the *passé composé* has shed both current relevance and resultative aspect; it retains only the feature [+ anteriority], and is equivalent to a preterite, as shown strikingly in these lines:

- Li quens Rollant est muntet (6) el destrer.  
 Cuntre lui vient (2) sis cumpainz Oliver.  
 794 *Vint* (9) i Gerins e li proz quens Gerers,  
 E *vint* (9) i Otes, si i *vint* (9) Berengers  
 E *vint* (9) i Astors e Anseis li veillz,  
*Vint* (9) i Gerart de Rossillon li fiers;  
 798 VENUZ I EST (8) li riches dux Gaifiers.  
 Dist l'arcevsque: "Jo irai, par mun chef" . . .

In Marie de France, the *passé composé* has advanced further into the orbit of the preterite, and already functions, in the *lais* (as in Modern French), either as a perfect or as a preterite. The following lines are from *Lanval*:

- 92 Quant il l'oï (9), mut en fu liez (11);  
 Il la baisa (9), puis s'EST DRESCIEZ (6/8: resultative [physical change of  
 state], but no clear current relevance [=CR])  
 Celes que al tref l'amenerent (12)  
 De riches dras le cunreerent (9).  
 Quant il fu vestu de nuvel (12)  
 Suz ciel nen ot (11) plus bel dancel.  
 . . . . .  
 Quant del manger furent levé (16)  
 Sun cheval li UNT AMENÉ (8: [-CR, -RA (=resultative aspect)])  
 112 Bien li ourent la scle mise (16);  
 Mut AD TROUVÉ (8) riche servise.  
 Il prent cungé (2), si EST MUNTEZ (6/8: as above, v. 93).  
 Vers la cité s'en EST ALEZ. (8)

Note the aspectual ambiguity in v. 114: When they had gotten up from the table, they brought him his horse . . . *He says goodbye and has mounted up* (foregrounded NPr's; = *he said goodbye and mounted his horse*). He rode away toward the city. It would seem that the gradual incursion of the present perfect *passé composé* into the preterite territory of the *passé simple* had to hinge on the variable degree of present relevance and resultative aspect available to a particular verb in a given discourse environment, subject to a variable combination of the interrelated constraints of discourse pragmatics, syntax (in verse narrative), and, above all, the lexical semantics of *Aktionsart*.<sup>8</sup> Whence two tendencies clearly observable in Old French narrative:

8. Here is an example from Marie de France (Aspland 93):

326 Lanval l'oï, sun chief dresca. De parler fu aukes hastifs.  
 Bien la *conut*, si *suspira*; "Par fei," fet il, "ceo est m'amie!"  
 Li sanc li EST MUNTÉ al vis.

1. The *passé composé* only gradually ceases to co-occur, in written narrative, in the presence of NPR's—i.e., to unhinge or untie itself from present relevance. Given the widespread use of simple present for preterite in narrative, Foulet theorizes that it was the PRESENT morphological component of the *passé composé* (as well as the original semantic force of *estre* and *avoir* before they become completely bleached into tense-aspect morphemes called “auxiliaries”) that helped drag the *passé composé* little by little into its preterite discourse function. That is, given, e.g., *Roland monte* equivalent in a narrative to *Roland monta*, it was easy to get from *passé composé*-PERFECT *Roland est monté* (Roland has mounted, is mounted) to *passé composé*-PRETERITE—i.e., *Roland est monté* as equivalent to ‘Roland mounted’ (Foulet 1919: 229–230).<sup>9</sup>

To account for the presence of a single *passé composé* form in this passage surrounded by five simplex forms, the various explanations possible (present relevance, meter, foregrounding) are less compelling than *Aktionsart*. In *le sang lui monta au visage* ‘he blushed,’ we would have seen a more extensive, widely bounded action (as Lanval’s face goes from normal to red) than in *le sang lui est monté au visage* ‘he blushed, went red,’ where all we see is the resultant physical state, or end-bounded feature of the action: his face ‘has gone red’. Note that in this example present relevance is of no use in determining our reading of the form as a perfect and not a preterite (though in the same passage the *passé composé*-preterite occurs repeatedly, at vv. 1, 30, 56, 93, 111, 113, 114–15, 236, 247, 336, 338, 341). Thus, irrespective of the absence or presence of current relevance in such cases, it is the resultative aspectual feature that elicits the compound form if the action or state encoded by a particular verb DIRECTS ATTENTION TO ITS RESULTS AT THE EVENT-TIME E. Further discussion of the reasons resultative and present relevance are not necessarily linked in Old French narrative *passé composés* is found in note 10 below.

9. Foulet, who had an accurate grasp of the special foregrounding functions that the present and *passé composé* could assume in making a story more vivid, was unable to conceive of this device as being other than a manifestation of a “familiar,” even “vulgar” idiosyncrasy originating in the lowest register of popular speech. Hence his explanation of the *passé composé*-preterite, and the substitution of the simple present for the preterite and imperfect in written narrative, as “poetic imitations” of what were originally “vulgarisms” (1920: 271–82). Though quite incomplete on this point (the ontogenetic component of his analysis), Foulet’s richly documented 1920 study is a valuable analysis of the gradual extension, from the 12th century to the present, of the *passé composé*-preterite into the domain of the *passé simple*, and the gradual disappearance of the latter. Worthington (1966) argues that in early Old French, *passé composés* read as preterites by Foulet (1919, 1920), Schoch (1912), Sneyders de Vogel (1927), and others, can be interpreted as present perfects because of the dramatic “presentness” imparted by oral delivery (410). While this point is well taken and can be convincingly illustrated with selected examples, it does not justify the sweeping generalization with which she concludes her critique of Foulet: “It is not mandatory then to postulate preteritive function in the Old French compound past, either in the narrative poems or in colloquial use. The poetic tense usage can be explained adequately, and in accord with observable facts, if the compound past is regarded as being syntactically a present perfect *wherever it occurs*” (412, emphasis added). But if medieval drama provides the best available window on colloquial usage, as is often claimed (and Worthington admits this claim), then tense usage in *Pathelin* annihilates her conclusions while buttressing those of Foulet. For judging by tense usage in that play, one would have to conclude that in the 15th century the *passé simple* continues to alternate in spoken French with the *passé composé* for expressing past punctuals in a proportion of roughly one to three: out of 155 such actions/events in the text, 97 are in the *passé composé* (62.5%) and 58 in the *passé simple* (37.5%). (Durative, habitual, and repetitive actions are handled by the *imparfait*, change-of-state predicates continuing in the present always by the *passé composé*.) Especially worthy of note in this regard is the fact that the shepherd Thibaut l’Agnelet uses ONLY the *passé composé* (16 occurrences), while the conversational *passé simple* is frequent in the more self-conscious usage of Pathelin (18 occurrences, 33%), the Draper (23 occurrences, 45%), and

2. Martin Harris (1982: 47–48) suggests that the change from perfect to preterite in Old French proceeded from verbs expressing physical end states (*fini*, *aveuglé*) to verbs of cognitive activity and speech acts, and eventually to intransitive verbs.<sup>10</sup> The transitional state (perfect → preterite) is plain enough in the following lines from *Renart*:

Endui s'en *torment* (2) une sente;  
 4898 N'i a (3) celui qui son cuer *sante* (3),  
 Que fain *avoient* (13) fort et dure;  
 Mais par mervoilleuse avanture  
 Une grant andoille ONT TROVEE (8/6 [+RA])  
 Lez le chemin en une arec.  
 Renart l'A premerains SAISIE (8/6 [+RA])  
 Et Tibert A DIT, "Diex aie!" (8)

Here the *passé composé* is quite far from the present perfect of the *Roland*, and quite close to its preterite value in Modern French. At all events, forms such as the ones we have seen here CANNOT be thought of as "ahistorical" with respect to narrated-event time.<sup>11</sup>

**Passé simple-perfect (10).** Perhaps the most disruptive of the standard view of perfect/preterite contrast in Old French is the fact that the *passé simple*, usually considered the least problematic category in the verb system, is itself not aspectually stable, and can occasionally be found functioning in dialogue as a *perfect*, both in Middle French ("Or sire, la bonne Laurence, / Vostre belle ante, morut elle?" (*Pathelin* 158–59) and in Old French, notably

Guillemette (17 times, 54%)—a pattern consistent (and further supported by details in tense distribution in the play) with Foulet's hypothesis on the origin and spread of the preteritive *passé composé* in popular conversational usage.

10. In the cases examined here where the function of the *passé composé* is ambiguous, it is necessary to separate current relevance (CR) from a resultative aspectual feature (RA). Often in such forms the latter is present without the former, i.e., the function of the *passé composé* form, if not perfective, is still perfect-like, but not yet aspectually bleached to simple preterite. It is worth noting that such examples corroborate (and are corroborated by) evidence from two more remote but related fields, psycholinguistics and comparative Romance historical linguistics. Thus Slobin (1985: 2) notes that evidence from child language suggests that "early uses of past-tense forms are perfect-like, in that they refer to immediately present resultant states (Antinucci & Miller 1976) or 'non-durative, momentary events [tending to be] completive, with a relatively clear result' (Bloom et al. 1980)." This parallels the evolutive stages described by Harris (1982: 49–50) in the development of "present perfect" to "past simple" in Romance.
11. A clinching example of the *passé composé*-preterite occurs in Joinville reporting the following mini-narrative by Louis IX, about the excommunication of the Duke of Brittany by the local bishops. The king begins by stating why he is careful not to compel excommunicated persons to recant: "Car se je le fesoie, je feroie contre Dieu et contre droit. Et si vous en mousterrai un exemple qui est teix, que li évesque de Bretaigne ONT TENU le conte de Bretaigne bien sept ans en escommenement, et puis A EU absolucion par la court de Rome; et se je l'eusse contreint des la premiere annee, je l'eusse contreint a tort." Foulet comments: "Sans doute l'effet de l'absolucion dure encore, et de ce point de vue 'A EU' est très justifié; mais la période d'excommunication du comte de Bretagne est dès longtemps close et on attendrait plutôt 'tindrent' que 'ONT TENU'" (1920: 283).

with *venir*: “Sachiez nos ne venimes mie por vos mal faire, ainz venimes por vos garder” (they are still there) (Villehardouin, *Conquête* §146, quoted by Nyrop 1930, 6: 292). Similarly in *Roland*: “Set anz (ad) qu'en Espagne venimes” (197), and, of course, they too are still there. Indeed, notes Brunot, “les deux temps [*passé composé* and *passé simple*] se mélangent constamment,” as shown strikingly in these two verses from the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*: “Vinc en Jerusalem pour l'amistet de Deu, La croiz et le sepulcre sui venuz aorer” (1906: 240–41).

The *Chronicles* of Froissart present the historical narratives of an historian (of sorts), hence an ideal place to test, extending them to Middle French, P.'s indexes of “historical consciousness.” Again, we will use for convenience the passage from Froissart found in Aspland's anthology (1979).

Li Escot *sont* (5) dur et hardit et fort travaillant en armes et en guerres. Et pour le temps d'adont il *amiroient* (13) et *prisoient* (13) moult petit les Englois et encores *font* (1/5) il au temps present [!]. Et qant il voellent (5) guerrier et entrer ou roiaulme d'Engleterre, il *mainment* (5) bien lor hoost .xx. ou .xxiiiij. lieues lonch, que de jour que de nuit, comment moult de gens se poroient esmervillier de ce, qui ne savoient lor coustume. Certain *est* (1) que, qant il voellent (5) entrer en Engleterre, il *sont* (5) tous a chevaus li uns et li aultres, fors que la ribaudaille qui les *sievent* (5) a piét. . . . Et je Froissars, acteres de ces croniques, *fui* (9) en Escoce en l'an de grasce .M.ccc.lxv., car la bonne roine, madame Phelippe de Hainnau, roine d'Engleterre, m'*escripsi* (9) deviers le roi David d'Escoce, liquels *fu* (11) fils au roi Robert de Brus, et au conte de Douglas qui pour le temps *resnoit* (13). . . . Et *fui* (9) en la compagnie dou roi un quartier d'un an et *cuch* (9) celle aventure que, ce que je *fui* (9) en Escoce, il *viseta* (9) tout son país, par laquelle visitation je *apris* (9) et *considerai* (9) moult de la matere et ordenance des Escocois; et *sont* (5/1) de toute tele condition que chi desus vous *est* (1) devisé. Pour le temps que chil Escocois *estoient entré* (15) ens ou país de Northombrelande . . . (252–53)

“Je Froissars, acteres de ces croniques, fui en Escoce en l'an de grasce 1365 . . .” Author and actor, narrator and part of the narrated events, Froissart here provides what, in P.'s definition, would pass for “commentative” text—not only in the (“ahistorical”) present, but in the “historical” tenses (preterite and imperfect here). This sort of overlap, of course, defies the schema in Table 1.

**Conclusions.** We have now seen that the five tense slots in Table 1 harbor, in reality, at least 16 tense-aspect functions in Old French narrative. Tokens of the present, notably, function historically AND ahistorically; can refer to past AND to (the speaker's) present; can function commentatively but need not do so. The Old French *passé simple* can function as a preterite and as an imperfect; exceptionally, it may even function as a PERFECT. Similarly, the Old French *passé composé* can belong to E OR to S, and while it functions primarily as a perfect, it can also function as a preterite, as it begins already in Old French to move into the territory it will occupy in Modern French. The *plus-que-passé* function can be fulfilled by a pluperfect, a *passé simple*, or by a *passé antérieur*.

From the foregoing it is clear that neither the schema shown in Table 1 nor the expanded version of it in Table 2 (formulated only for the convenience of the discussion here) does justice to the complexity and versatility of the verbal system of Old French narrative. But what should now, above all, be clear from the foregoing discussion, is that if the problem of so-called "irregular" tense usage in Old French narrative has for so long eluded satisfactory elucidation, it is, to a large extent, because scholars have tended to equate tense forms with a far too limited range of functions. The best hope for future research in this area will lie in an integrated approach drawing on a number of fields of contemporary linguistics (discourse analysis, the pragmatics and sociolinguistics of performed texts), narrative theory, and philosophy of language as well as traditional literary history and philology. And since Old French narrative is strongly rooted in the discursive practices of oral performance, we must constantly bear in mind that tense switching of the type described as "irregular" or "dramatic" correlates closely and consistently with the verbal representational system ("oral poetics" if one prefers) of what has come to be called oral-performed story,<sup>12</sup> whereas there is no evidence that either tense switching or oral performance correlates with the degree or type of historical awareness attributable to the narrator.

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12. The correlation of tense switching with oral performance, far from being restricted to primary-oral cultures, is beginning to be studied in a wide variety of languages, periods, and narrative genres. From this perspective, and for Old French narrative in particular, see Fleischman 1986. Along similar lines, but from the perspective of more recent literary usage, Saunders (1969) analyzes tense usage in the *nouveau roman* and finds that in the novel from Proust onward the expanded use of the imperfect, along with a newly defocused "imperfective narrative present" (144–45), represents a partial, and artificial, return to the techniques of oral-performed narrative. The emergence of this "new oral" style is explained as the transcription of what is in essence a performed story ("stories [formalized in this style] are more often spoken, enacted, re-presented" [144]); the tense-aspect system of these stories belongs, therefore, of necessity to spoken usage (145).

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