

Excerpts from this section were read on the air February 22nd, 2008.

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1/8/01 Monday's Rock, Sandro Lingam

Closing time: 11:10 p.m., C.S.T.

Ever since Dante singled out the troubadours for their 'vernacular eloquence' the rhetorical artistry of these poets has been, on and off, in the spotlight. It has, in fact, become such a commonplace to speak of the rhetoric of troubadour poetry that a more compelling question is often overlooked, namely, why did the troubadours make their rhetoric evident at all? Why do so many of the poets draw attention to the fact that they are making poetry; why do so many of them refer in explicitly technical ways to their *razos* or the '*art d'escrire*'? These poetic works are not, or at least not primarily, didactic tracts where one might expect to find overt mention or explicit use of rhetorical techniques and strategies. Rather, the poems of the troubadours contain some of the most beautiful lyric verse of all time. Why, then, 'spoil it' with the metalanguage of rhetoric?

Sarah Spence

"Rhetoric and Hermeneutics"

The Troubadours: An Introduction,

Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, editors

In which the "I" of the love lyric experiences subjugation as an historical debasement

It was understood by the Council that Professor Lovernius Razos indulged in abstraction as a defense against the daily encroachments of disturbing particulars: the fungus that thickened and yellowed the nails of his wife's great toes, the angry mole crimsoning under his left armpit, the tube of adipose tissue slung beneath his atrophied *rectus abdominus* muscles, which he now imagined was somehow impinging on his prostate gland and belittling him with impotence. The world was getting louder and fuzzier, the students younger, ruder and dumber, and he heard whisperings in the corridors (or he imagined that he heard whisperings) that his theories were outdated and absurd, that he was coasting on his reputation, that the *emeritus* leeches on to the end of his name was the administration's not-so-subtle hint prodding him to retire, a hint that he was either too arrogant or too dotty to accept. But lately, these erosions were accompanied by more cataclysmic dislocations — hallucinations, visitations, prolepses of the organs of sense — which caused him to lose his mental footing in the present, and slip down into the past, and not just his own past, no, but the past of the land of Oc, the past of the makers of *trobar*. Dr. Razos feared that his long devotion to medieval scholarship and the world of the troubadours was leading him, by excruciating degrees, into the maelstrom of *l'amor fou* — the madness of love. But love for whom or for what? At the center of his consciousness there whirled a large, toxic planet, the encroachment or the memory of a terrifying event whose orbit dare not be entered without the heatshield of some abstract inquiry. These questions were some of the professor's typical idealizations that he hoped

— with academic fervor — would somehow make noble the deterioration of his physical condition through the cruel process of aging. And yet . . . and yet, he also hoped — with a real lover’s fervor — that they would somehow restore the shambles of his personal life from its current declining state of necrosis to once again incarnate as living flesh. His lectures were more and more being held accountable to an uncontrollable slosh of brain chemicals. Where Lucidity and all her regal entourage of Intelligence and Zeal once held illustrious court, the galloping specters, Atrophy and Death, now wrecked havoc in the ruined halls. His career, the very twistings of his tongue in vain speech, had succumbed to the dusty boredom of dissected synapses.

Student voice: Professor, your formulation of sublimation is confusing me. You say sublimation generates an energy that illuminates a sense object and infuses it with reality. But then you say that the object does not exist until the metaphor, the word, gives it life. How can the word bring us something which is not real and make it real?

Professor Razos: You have correctly perceived the paradox of the word. Sublimation is the psyche’s defense against a cruel reality, a reality created by metaphors, words, if you will, that have become objectified. The desire which is thwarted for the lover’s touch — either unfulfilled, which is tragic, or fulfilled, which is fatally tragic — retreats as sublimation advances its projections. Both the retreat and advance are like the back and forth sweep of conflicting armies, which struggle to claim the No-Man’s land of truth. This is the essence of the battle of the psyche, the battle of the senses and of the sexes, and this is why we study the troubadours, because they were and are, the noble veterans of this conflict. Through *trobar*, their glorious linguistic findings, they transform the violence and the ennui of mundane reality into elegance and glory. They learned, as we also must learn, to fight under Ovid’s banner: “*Militae species amor est,*” love is a kind of military discipline. True love, *fin’amor*, is hell.

He thought he heard sniggering from the back of the room, centered, he suspected, from the big red-jersied blob of an ex-football player, and his gorge rose with hatred. Then he felt a moment of suspension, a moment in which the patterns of chalk motes floating down a corridor of diffused sunlight, the counterchange of creases in the palms of his hands, the sticky sensation of old man’s spittle in his mouth amassed an onslaught of absurd and debilitating detail against his tottering reason. He felt a resurgence of the collywobbles as his intestines cramped with the threat of diarrhea: *Merde!*

The Compte was witty, generous, socially gracious, all-powerful within his domains, ruthless, cunning and cruel. He stood under a portrait of his deceased wife, which was placed deliberately, but oddly, above the lintel of the door to his banquet hall. He asked his young quest, the outspoken foundling ward of the Lord of a sometimes allied, sometimes rival fiefdom, his opinion of the work. The young man tried to cloak his nervousness beneath an artifice of flowery words.

“I see the clear weather darken, and the young birds huddle in confusion — her glory out-springs the Spring, and makes the Sun ashamed to stand beside her.”

Student's voice: But Professor, what does it mean, *fin' amor*?

Professor Razos: The architecture of a peasant's hut or of a great Cathedral is the same, its center is built around emptiness. *Fin' amor* is a vacuole, the empty center, or, as the chaos theorists now call it "the strange attractor," the void into which one projects one's fondest desires and out of which spin one's deepest disappointments — the sun and the sunburn.

Now laughter, though furtive, definitely resounded.

"She was too loose with her favors, as was her fin' amor, and is it not boorish, for men of refinement such as ourselves, to have to endure the villainy of the unmannerly? But come, I did not ask you your opinion of the Lady, who in any case is no longer with us, but what do you think of the painting?" The Compte fingered the jewel inlay in the hilt of his dagger, his touch accustomed to weapons and finery. The young man, feeling incensed but shamed, and wondering about the words "she is no longer with us," thought of the Compte's young daughter, of her skin, and of the mole on the inner side of her left thigh.

"Sir, my Liege, it is a mirror of verisimilitude, as true to nature as Nature is true to herself." His tongue felt a little swollen and thick, and his elocution seemed a bit cloddish. His hope was that the Compte, absorbed in his own amusement, had not noticed.

Student's voice: But Sir, did the troubadours actually do it, or did they just talk about doing it?

Professor Razos: They both did it, and did not do it, as you so colloquially put it. But that is not the point. *Fin' amor*, or rather the words surrounding *fin' amor* — *joi, joven, cortesia, largueza, valor* and the rest, were only the joy, youth, courtesy, generosity and honor that made the mirror bright. The brightness was what mattered.

Student's voice: But Professor, what about the smut? Some poems are just plain lewd and crude.

The Compte flashed a grin, his amber incisors gleaming malevolently from the pepper-grayblack thicket of his close-cropped beard. What did he know? "But my young friend, explain what you mean by 'mirror?' For a mirror is glass and fragile, and this painting is as vital as the blood."

Professor Razos: Do you know Ashley Montague's book, *Touching*? In it, he prints two interesting diagrams to demonstrate the brain's relationship to sensory and motor functioning. Along side his schematic of the brain's hemispheres, he has placed two curious homunculi, humans distorted in their body proportions to represent the brain's perception. In the diagram signifying the sensory function, the lips of the homunculus,

and particularly the lower lip, is vastly more expanded than the genitalia. And so it follows with the pharynx, too. Thus, in the diagram signifying motor function, the organs of vocalization are distortedly enlarged. The troubadours knew that the brain is the chief erotic organ, and that the brain makes love with the lips and throat — with speech. Therefore, they sublimated *fin' amor* with *vers*. The body of the he or she was a secondary consideration, the emptiness at the center. In their work, the body had already been subsumed in poetry. It ascends to the angelic domain where all touching assumes a symbolic function, even while it descends into sweat, cum and tears. Janus-faced, each work lives simultaneously in the *Corpus Dioboli* and in the *Corpus Christi*. And that is why the same person can be spoken of in the most exalted and in the most debased of terms.

Were they listening, or were they mocking? His face seemed hot, and he was suddenly seized by a fit of micromania, the delusion that his body was suddenly shrinking down to the size of his book, his penis leading the way. He had a sudden urge to grab himself, as if he could, with his quickly withering hand, prevent the absolute disappearance of his male member.

“Come, Sir, the meaning of the mirror.”

As they were speaking, the Compte had subtly, but deliberately taken a few steps forward, and the young jongleur had unconsciously followed. Now when the younger man looked at the painting, the figure of the woman was distorted, her sweet bridal visage elongated past any human semblance. Her lips were grotesquely huge and her eyes and forehead were distant and contracted. But a cloudy shape at the base of the painting, which he had first perceived as mere folds of drapery, began a frightening transfiguration.

“The mirror, My Liege, is a barrier to loving. The glass is what we touch, never the skin. This is mezura, measure, self-control. All we may touch, may love with fin' amor is the measured eloquence of pleasing words.”

From the back of the room arose a series of kecks, the dry heaves of that blob working to retch without success. Professor Razos thought he heard the whispered mock: “*Lover, Lover,*” the sophomoric gibe the students made of his unusual given name, bequeathed to him from a dead distaff, Irish uncle, a long-lamented hero of the First World War, long-damned by the Professor for his odd bequest.

Student's voice: But Sir, how can the same words mean opposite things?

Professor Razos: The same words often mean opposite things. For meaning is not a one to one signifier of thing to meme, but a tension between opposite poles of desire. The mirror of the troubadour's *cansons* is only the last, glass barrier separating physical from metaphysical brightness. Before reaching that brightness, there must be what Freud called *vorlust*, foreplay, the detour that builds tension and throws off the sparks which illuminate the image, making it luminous, that is to say, lovable, in the mind. The

troubadours called these detours, these obstacles *gilos* — jealousy, *lauzengiers* — spies, *gardardor* — guards, *amor de lonh* — distance in space or time, *celar* — the need for secrecy and *senhals* — recourse to pseudonyms.

And now he saw it. The drapery, from this humiliating angle, looming above him over the heavy portal, was a death's head, a grim and grinning skull. At that moment he understood — The Compte knew all! Marcebru realized that he was a marked man.

Suddenly Professor Razos went weak in the loins, and in this elumbrated condition he imagined what remained of his wizened body to be grotesque beyond the endurance of any but the most piteous onlooker. His skin seemed suddenly foveated with pustules, his paunch swelled to form an immense, gelatinous draffsack, his red eyes, grown suddenly exothalamic, protruded unnaturally from his scabrous skull and his jaw was festooned with a pendulous choller of fat. He was sure he had become a thoroughly fecaloid blob, as far in appearance from a handsome *jongleur* as vomit in a goblet is from nectar. His only way out of this hideous phallorhiknosis now was to speak and to thereby create, if he could, a golem of words that he could slip into like a suit of new skin, and thus hide his misshapen body.

Professor Razos: For the whole tradition of courtly love in the middle ages and romantic love in our own times is nothing more than a vast example of anamorphosis, an object that appears to be one thing, but upon close examination, read: “critical dissection,” becomes another. Ovid said *Arte regendus Amor*, “love must be ruled by art,” and the whole art of the troubadours and of the psyche’s response to desire is nothing less than our inexorable approach towards the mirror’s barrier. For it is the desire to acquire eloquence that makes us jealous, the desire to discover eloquence that makes us spy, the desire to protect our eloquence that makes us guard, the desire to idolize eloquence that makes us abscond to faraway places and times, the desire to cloak the beloved in eloquence that makes us secretive, and the desire to hide our eloquence from vulgar minds that makes us resort to pseudonyms. This tension between conflicting desires, between having and not having, between loving and hating, between praising and damning, oscillates like the current of an electric circuit. It magnetizes meaning. It creates energy. All of poetry, all of life, all of love, is by definition an anamorphosis. For as we examine anything minutely, all objects — women, men, poetry, paintings, trees, animals, skies, rivers, seas, stones — become revelation, that is to say, they reveal themselves as words.

The Compte could do as he would, but the young man, terrified as he was of the Compte’s duplicity and ruthlessness, yet possessed more than all his nemesis’s wealth and power: for he knew what the Compte could never know — the pleasures of her charms.

A daughter is not a wife, even in the Compte’s depraved mind. Still, Marcebru felt a flurry of darkness bleeding across his vision, as if a whole flock of starlings had startled at his feet, and blotted out the sun.

Ring Toss

Dear One,
 Through all the nights,
 Through all the days,
 I flay my flesh
To clothe
 Your blinding brightness.
Recompense me.

Dear One,
 Though you have suffered
 Through the nights and days,
 I am the light I am.

Dear One,
 This blaze can never
Recompense thee.

Dear One,
 This circling maze —
 The flesh, the word,
 The dream, flay me
 As they revolve,
How can
 I dare to leave? Please
Recompense me.

This ring
 Is the enchantment
 Of our love. You are
 Pain's livid wound, I am
Its flame.
 This maze can never
Recompense thee.