A/ESPIRAR: THE LOST SIGH OF THE TROUBADOUR TRADITION

Valerie M. Wilhite

The contributions in this special volume of *Glossator* inspire new understandings of the passages they gloss, but they also offer clues as to why so many who encounter troubadour lyric end up producing new material in any number of media. Participating with Anna Kłosowska in the compilation of this volume has changed my understanding of the troubadour song as well as troubadour lyrical production and reception. The image of one verb, though a verb in movement, symbolizes this change in perception. When studying language as taught in French schools, the student learns through translation: *thème* is the process of translation into the language to be learned, *version* into one's native language. In the courses of *thème et version* it was common practice to write out a text adding a vertical line before any word that might have possible variants and then adding these other alternatives above the word originally chosen. The image of a verb with just such a single letter as variant placed above the vowel that begins the word stands as an emblem of this change: what troubadour lyrical production was to me and what I now think it to be. The verb or verbs in question are the Occitan *aspirar* and *espirar.*[1] Raynouard lists both under the noun *esperit* and the truncated entries for each verb begin as follows:

[1] François Raynouard, *Lexique roman ou dictionnaire de la langue des troubadours.* 6 vols (Paris: Silvestre, 1836-1845), vol. 2.

ESPERIT, SPERIT, *s. m.*, lat. SPIRITUS, esprit, âme.

9. ESPIRAR, ESPEIRAR, *v.*, lat. EXSPIRARE, inspirer, souffler, animer.

L' ESPEIRET d' arma viven.

Brev. d'amor, fol. 56.

13. ASPIRAR, *v.*, lat. ASPIRARE, souffler, soupirer.

Apres que fo formatz, nostre Senher lh' ASPIRET, per sa grassia, en la cara, esperit de vida.

Liv. de Sydrac, fol. 15.

Après qu'il fut formé, notre Seigneur lui *souffla*, par sa grâce, sur la face, l'esprit de vie.

What I had once considered to be the last sigh of the troubadour tradition or the lyrical production *of fin' amors* in Occitan is not at all a final breath, the last exhalation of a dying art. Those hiccups and coughs of Raimon Vidal's *Razos de trobar* and *novas*; Guiraut Riquier's arguments and *apologias*; the *Consistoris'* regulations and rewards; and even Matfre's religious refiguring were not signs of expiration. They were not sighs; they were the result of those who had inhaled the songs of the troubadours and could not but create new works by exhaling. These parties were the participants in an unending succession of traditions of troubadour reception. What had seemed a last sigh is in fact only the breathing of a living tradition.

Naturally, the sigh, or *sospir* is ubiquitous in the love songs of the troubadours. *Sospir* and its verb *sospirar* are listed under *esperit* (mind, soul, spirit). And it is in reflection on the various semantic strands of *esperit* that the sigh becomes the spirit or breath of life. To find the sigh, *sospir*, one must begin by going to Raynouard's main entry, *ESPERIT*, the mind, the soul, the spirit/*esperit*, and then

pass through the *espirital*/spiritual or immaterial, followed by an *espertar*/awakening, and an *espiracio*/expiration but also the act of breathing or respiration. Indeed, after expiring, the reader finds the entry for *espiramen*, breath and inspiration, so seemingly distant from the *sospir*. This is followed by the *espiratiu*, the expiratory, or exhalatory, the act of exhaling heavily. It is at this point that the verb *espirar,* alternatively spelled *espeirar*, is situated, a verb that means to breathe onto, to bring to life, and to inspire. Raynouard's lexicon indicates it is the Occitan verb chosen by Matfre Ermengaud to render the scene from Genesis when God breathes life into man:

> Quar Dieus quant hac creat lo mon
> E las creaturas que·i son,
> Ell pueis formet tot en derrier
> De la terra l'ome premier,
> E l'espiret d'arma viven . . . [2]

It is not, however, the verb chosen by the author of the *Livre de Sydrac* cited by Raynouard. After a number of other entries under *esperit, aspirar* comes in at number thirteen. This is the verb chosen by the author of the same scene in Genesis in the *Livre de Sydrac*. *Aspirar* is translated by Raynouard as both *souffler*, to breathe onto something, and *soupirer*, to sigh. Here, the convergence of breath of life and sigh is made clear. The word that means to sigh is the word chosen to depict God infusing man with the spirit or soul of life: "Apres que fo formatz, nostre Senher lh'aspiret, per sa grassia, en la cara, esperit de vida."[3] Seeking the *sospir* I'd thought characterized the Occitan literary scene after the twelfth century, I find the breath that awakens and inspires the spirit. Each inhalation of the *art de trobar* invites exhalation–new cultural products. This volume is a compilation of just that.

The rhythmic cycle of reading as inhaling and exhaling language is placed on display in the piece by Simone Marchesi in

[2] For God, when he had created the world and the creatures that are in it, as the very last he formed the first man from earth and into him breathed a living soul. ll. 7955-7959. Ed. Peter T. Ricketts. *Le Breviari d'Amor de Matfre Ermengaud.* Vol II. AEIO 4. (London: Westfield College, 1989).

[3] After he was formed, our lord blew, by his grace, on his face, the spirit of life. Ctd. Raynouard 176.

this volume. Marchesi demonstrates how to read a Dantean passage by allowing us to follow him as he traces the reading and rewriting of the troubadours Arnaut Daniel and Folquet de Marseille. What Dante has done–writing as a reader–his modern readers do; they produce readings in which Dante is seen as "recuperating Arnaut's keywords and prominent stylistic features and importing them into his own text or in a corrective light, with Dante deliberately undoing Arnaut's original diction and style to present a morally 'better' version of his predecessor's poetics." As they blow the obfuscating dust off one line of Dante's *Comedy* they stir dust and words, creating new and intriguing readings, texts that renew the reader's desire to read well. Marchesi shows Dante as the quintessential writer-*cum*-reader by explicating nine lines from *Purgatorio* in which Arnaut Daniel is made to speak. It becomes clear, with Marchesi's guidance, that Arnaut's keywords, conceits, formulae, syntax, were understood by a reader who could incorporate their significance into a new semantic framework, a theological one. Arnaut's dependence upon the troubadour conceit of oxymoronic dichotomies is recast by Dante. He does this by situating it in a context where such a dichotomy is to be expected. It befits with the sinner struggling through the process of reckoning with his sinful self.

The choice to include as last line of his commented passage the first line of a new tercet allows Marchesi to highlight how seamless can be reading and rewriting troubadours within a new genre and for a new audience. Luke Sunderland's study lists some of the ways the troubadour poem can be renewed in the *espiratiu* by readers who want to rewrite them for a particular public. His analysis of "Dir vos vuoill" by Marcabru lists various adaptive techniques. Sunderland points out that manuscript C uses those strategies to make the poem fit the persona of Marcabru more than does the version in manuscript A. In fact, he claims the version produces a piece that is "more Marcabru than Marcabru." In so doing the party (or parties) responsible for version C betray a fascination with the personal life and experience of the poet-lover that engrosses many who discover troubadour *fin' amors*. Indeed, the exploration of the poet-lover leads to new texts like the *vidas* and *razos*, studied extensively by both Isabel de Riquer and William Burgwinkle. Riquer and Burgwinkle join the tradition they study: they are incorporated into the lineage of those who produce texts based on the legendary lives of the troubadours. The life of

the troubadour, their work shows us, is a literary construction. The literary construction, whether discovered in the troubadour's song, the fiction, or elsewhere, attracts attention. The life of the troubadour, the poet-lover, is somehow greater, larger, than the life of the poet. Manuscript C renders Marcabru's poem "more Marcabru than Marcabru," and the medieval accounts and the modern novel by Bolaño cited by Burgwinkle make Sordello greater than Sordello.

However, even if Sunderland proposes that a first objective in ms C is in some ways to stress the character of Marcabru, the second goal "also shifts the focus away from the poet's own life and attempts to deliver a series of truths about love that are wide-ranging in their scope and import." The possibility of bifurcated or even opposed meanings, interpretations, or objectives of the troubadour song is mentioned by the troubadours themselves. Their constant play with duality puzzles the troubadour audience. The rewriters of the troubadours often suggest that what intrigues the listener or reader is first understood as an intensely personal account. However, as the listener is drawn into an intimate love relationship, they discover truths of love applicable beyond the reality of the song. For many followers of *fin' amors* the corpus of the troubadours is an encyclopedia of love. The love *canso* and its poet-lover hold *auctoritas.* This is the case in the passage from the *Breviari d'amor* Sunderland examines. Matfre regularly cites troubadour lyrics to demonstrate the way their wisdom can assist the reader in navigating through the good and evil in the world. Yet Sunderland points out Matfre's unwillingness to accept Marcabru as one who knows. "Dir vos vuoill" as cited by Matfre highlights a discrepancy between Marcabru's biography and his *saber.* Sunderland's "Marcabru in Motion" explores a reader's understanding of the relationship between the individual, love, and knowledge within troubadour lyric. The art of composing troubadour lyric is mirrored by the act of reading: the *canso* moves from love to epistemology.

The two interdependent planes-- one representing love's intimate subjectivity and the other the wisdom or truth of love– come together to endow the troubadour love song with their power. Personal experience leads the troubadour to a reflection on the universals. When these two areas of exploration touch, the composer cannot help but reflect on the way in which singing, speaking, writing, communicating is really nothing but a dance

within the labyrinth of glossed experience. Language is nothing more than the commentary to human experience. Troubadour lyric extends an invitation to participate in the commentary. When the troubadour exhales, *esperit*, he *esperit*, inspires, animates, and breathes life into the listener or reader.

In his commentary on Bernart de Ventadorn's "Quan vei la laudeta mover," Huw Grange evokes the image of the woven tapestry. He suggests that for "Quan vei" the oral and the written are not two separate traditions so much as an "intricate web of oral and written dissemination that must have preceded the song's capture on the folios of songbook G [that] continues to be woven" so that it is "often impossible to unravel these disparate voices." Grange's own voice as he performs and the voices of other performers represent a continuity of breath. The motivation and the mechanisms for inspiring love of the song or giving breath and voice, *espirar*, *espiracio*, *espiramen*, to the troubadour song are not the work of later audiences wishing to resuscitate the dying tradition of *fin' amors* but a feature of the troubadour art itself. Grange notes that both motives and means inform the composition practice of Bernart de Ventadorn, the classic troubadour working in the period considered the golden age of troubadour lyrical production.

The structural features of chant, a musical language common to *joglars*, troubadours, scribes, and aficionados of the love *canso*, and employed in the melody of PC 70, 43, ensured its audience would be receptive because they would "know" the song before hearing or reading it. It is a musical trick that has a linguistic counterpart in Marcabru's "Dire vos vuoill ses duptanssa" that, as Sunderland claims, "is a poem that lent itself readily to adaptation, addition, re-ordering and reworking." Grange and Sunderland, along with the other contributors, make concrete the relationship between the enchanting and haunting nature of the troubadour love song and its permanence. This volume clarifies the fact that very specific characteristics in the thematic, linguistic, and musical shape of the troubadour song were employed by the troubadours to promote a song's survival. Grange builds on William D. Paden's comment that song is "naturally memorable" and Patrick Michael Thomas' notion that the manipulation of phonemes in "Qan vei" renders the listener "spellbound." Grange's commentary shows these features were enlisted to ensure that the troubadour's song stirs and lingers in the *esperit*, in the mind and soul of the listener and in *l'air du temps*, what Grange calls the "memorial context,"

until such a time as it landed upon the folios that preserved it in yet another way.

The migrations of any given song result in variants that are, in essence, commentary but also new songs with different lovers– perhaps narcissistic in some manuscripts and some modern readings, while selfless in others, a fool in one reading and he who scoffs at fools in another. One of these many Bernarts, this time the misogynist of PC 70, 43, is taken as the point of departure in Marion Coderch's exploration of Bernart's "Lo rossinhols s'esbaudeya," read and rewritten in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Catalonia.The movement from the individual to the universal that played a part in the transmission and readings of "Dire vos vuoill" are highlighted by Coderch. While the poet-lover was framed as *auctoritas* in the adoption of Marcabru's lines, courtly love virtues are framed for the fifteenth-century reader of Pere Torroella. Coderch proposes that poets in the eastern Iberian peninsula take the concept of love from the troubadour *canso* in order to create a new personified love, a figure named Love. This suggests that the troubadour art of composing makes use of discrete units capable of resonating separately to different degrees for various audiences. The troubadour *canso* would seem to be constructed with minute units–phonetic, semantic, syntactic, imagistic, melodic, and more–that can each be moved to accommodate a different organizing principle suited to the reader, the adapter, the audience.

Cerverí de Girona and Sordello create their works by beginning with building blocks they know can be rearranged. The troubadour or *joglar*, editor, biographer or teacher can reconfigure a work by moving the parts even adding new pieces and taking away others. The emphasis and even significance of a poem changes as these rewriters discern how best to hit their mark. Riquer and Comas point out that Cerverí "renewed Occitan poetry by using genres and compositional styles that his predecessors rejected as excessively common." Cabré begins her piece on Cerverí by saying that medieval reception would have naturally carried in it the gloss that she will provide for the modern reader. The gloss is the signifying framework into which the pieces of the poem are fit. This act of reception where the gloss somehow exists before the hearing or reading, much as the melodic structure exists prior to singing, according to Grange, collapses the points of reception. Grange points out that performance allows for a

conflation of the "I" in the head of the reader with the "I" that was once in the hand of the scribe, then the editor, and other performers, and once upon a time, the heart or head of the poet-lover. Grange says, "the voice of the troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn, however faint, sounds with mine." Howie finds himself caught in the web or labyrinth with Sordello, a web made sticky and inescapable, made memorable by "a rearrangement of sounds and senses" in the matrix of troubadour composition. A song "calls into question or puts on display what it would mean to extricate, once and for all something like a message from this poem; or something like oneself." Not only has the "I" become, "I–Sordello, Cary, I–" but the message and the reader have been conflated. The troubadour song captivates its reader so that escape is the object of a dare but not a possibility: "Find your way out of that fold – find your way, perhaps, all the way to Guillem, wherever he is–and you might find yourself taking something back." Which is to say, you are carried within the lines, the riddle, the message and even were you not to be, you would carry it in you–the needling questions of epistemology or love, or the haunting tune that you whistle without realizing it. The troubadour song pulls the reader or listener into the song itself.

The *art de trobar* is predicated on the production of poems that can be easily remembered and readily adopted for new social systems and aesthetic cultures. Though the troubadours might *sospir or aspirar*, the lyrical tradition of is one of *espiramen* or *espirar*. The *canso* of *fin' amors* breathes as much as the lover sighs.

Valerie M. Wilhite currently is Visiting Assistant Professor of Spanish at Miami University. Her main research interests pertain to medieval poets' theories of language and literature and the turns in the troubadour tradition after 1200. These interests were inspired by the oeuvre of Raimon Vidal de Besalù, the subject of her current book project.