

THE WEIGHT OF GRAVITY

THE BODIES AND THE GESTURES IN GALICIAN-PORTUGUESE MEDIEVAL POETRY

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From all voices arriving to us from the Iberian Middle Age, those of the Galician-Portuguese troubadours and minstrels are probably the most direct. I use the word “voices” obviously as a metaphor, since what we really have, apart a few melodies, are not exactly the voices but only the words that such voices have once sung. One should outline however that those words are words for singing. And also that, in this case, the word “singing” should be understood not in a metaphorical sense (as later happens in the work of Camões “*Eu canto o peito ilustre lusitano...*” “I sing the honorable Lusitanian heart...”) but as clearly referential: the texts, the words that have survived from medieval poetry were actually sang, and, as far as we can presume, they were sang by their authors, at least in an initial moment. And this is the first fact which directly leads us to the medieval body, even if, in this case, this body is impossible to remake: the fact that these words were publically sang by voices and bodies which come into play and which should also obey to an oral and theatral art whose rules we ignore, but of which we find dispersed fragments in satirical songs, such as this advise that Gil Peres Conde gives to a minstrel (B 1515): “*Jogar, três cousas havedes mester/ pera cantar, de que se paguem en:/ é doair’ e voz e aprenderdes bem...*” (Minstrel, you need three things/ in order to sing, if you want to please your audience:/ grace and voice and to learn well...) ¹. Grace (may be a good translation for *doaire*), voice and technique, basically. Song’s authors, the medieval poets were also performers, actors, which means that, regardless of the meaning of the words that remain, these are texts which in their own time were inseparable from a body art, from the direct and physical

¹ All troubadour’s compositions are quoted in my own edition, regarding the project named “*Littera, edição, actualização e preservação do património literário medieval português*” (Littera, edition, update and preservation of the Portuguese literary Medieval patrimony), by a team of researchers from the FCSH/UNL University, with support from the *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* (Foundation for the Science and Technology), under my coordination. This project, shortly will be make available, online, all Galician-Portuguese songs.

contact of the voice with the listener, as it is characteristic of all cultures where oral tradition prevails.

Having said that, which is no more than an implicit invitation to the reader's imagination to add a singing body to all following quotes, I hereby intend to re-read the surviving texts, in order to determine, specifically, the way or ways by which the medieval body and gestures are integrated within those texts.

In this view, it is important to remember, once more, that the Galician - Portuguese troubadours and minstrels built their songs following three different models, i.e., following one of the three canonic genres of the troubadour's art: *cantigas de amor*, *cantigas de amigo* e *cantigas de escárnio ou maldizer* (Love songs, Amiga songs, and satirical songs). If the type of enunciation was different in these three genres, as it is well known – the male lyric voice in the *cantigas de amor*, the female lyric voice in the *cantigas de amigo* and the satirical voice (also male, in most cases) in the *cantigas de escárnio e maldizer* – this is not the only distinctive aspect between these three genres. In fact, the choice for one of the voices immediately implies a very different universe, a difference which is based, mostly, in the way the body is (or is not) referred in each one of them. Let us focus, then, in each one of these universes, which can appear to us as apparently and oddly parallel, even contradictory, to approach what distinguishes or unite them, their differences showing what I believe it is the specific and ambiguous way the Middle Age relates to the body.

Thus, the male lyric voice of the *cantiga de amor* is essentially a sentimental voice and therefore, the body (his own or that of his beloved) is practically absent. If the *Senhor* (lady) is, as the rules dictate (and as paradigmatically described by D. Dinis), “*a melhor das melhores*” (the best of the best), the most “*fremosa*” (beautiful), if she “*fala bem e ri melhor*” (speaks well and laughs the better), and if she is the most “*mesurada*” (has the most poise), we shall note that nothing of her and of her body reveals. More than a specific human character, the *senhor* in the *cantiga de amor* appears as a place, or a function, if one will: that of the lover to whom the song is addressed. In the same way, the male voice who sings does not reveal, in general, any visible and individualized exterior, he is also not a body, but instead a function, that of the *servidor* (servant). Any referential register, including the gesture, is therefore excluded (the secrecy regarding the beloved's identity is, as known, the generic justification of this sentimental singing; and I don't speak of motivations here, but of the final result). It is certain, of course, that this masculine lyric voice does desire and repeatedly asks for *the good from his senhor* (the satisfaction of his desires), and in this aspect, the *cantiga de amor* is not declaredly platonic or purely spiritual – it is a profane song. Furthermore, the euphemism *Bem* (*the good*), for being often repeated, is transformed essentially into the code for the *coita*, the *suffering* from the unrequited or unconsumed love. And this is the motif, *par excellence*, of the *fin'amor* in its Galician-

Portuguese version. The song of consumed love, of the Provençal *joi* (joy) – *as mans sotz son mantel* (the hands under her cloak) as the first troubadour, Guilhem de Poitiers, sings – does not form a part of the universe of the Galician-Portuguese *cantiga de amor*, save for very rare exceptions (which follows, as it has been mentioned in others studies, the late *Provençal* models, later to the Albigensian Crusades).

In fact, this is such an abstract and ether universe that we can almost consider an authentic revolution (or provocation) the praise that João Garcia de Guilhade makes, in one of his *cantigas de amor* (A 229, B 419, V 30) to the green eyes of his *senhor*: *os olhos verdes que eu vi/ me fazem ora andar assi* (the green eyes which I have seen/ have made me now be like this). It should be noted that, from the little we know about João Garcia de Guilhade, perhaps it was precisely the surprise effect from the deliberate breach of the rule what he aimed for. Also in some hybrid compositions, half way between the lyric tone and the laughter, the universe of the terrestrial bodies can be seen from time to time, like in this picture which Rui Queimado makes of Guiomar Afonso Gata (it should be noted that the direct reference to her name is itself a sign of being in the exterior of the lyrical model) : “*Pois que eu ora morto for/ sei bem ca dirá mia senhor:/ - Eu sô Guiomar Afonso (...)* *Pois que eu morrer filhará/ entom o seu queix’e dirá: - Eu sô Guiomar Afonso*” (A 143, B 264) (As soon as I will die/ I know my lady will say/ - I am Guiomar Afonso (...) When I will be death she will put/her hand under her chin and she will say/- I am Guiomar Afonso). A small miniature of a “self-righteous” Guiomar Afonso, with the drawing of a gesture (hand resting on her chin) which immediately places us in the location and time of the singing (which is also, obviously, a kind of smiling harassment), the small poem of Rui Queimado is, just like the abovementioned *cantiga* of João Garcia de Guilharde, one of the few exceptions in almost 700 *cantigas* of this genre that have survived time, mostly perfectly normative, and whose universe is exclusively sentimental and therefore abstract.

Quite different is the universe of the *cantigas de amigo*, as we know. But before mentioning its characteristics we should outline that, if these voices follow different models, the authors of such voices are exactly the same. It is the same D. Dinis, for instance, who, on another register, allows us to follow, in a well-known *alba* (B 569, V 172), the morning course of the *velida* (the beautiful one), from her bed until the *hill* where she goes to wash shirts, which allows us to see the morning becoming cloudy, the wind raising and the irritation of the young girl trying to get hold of the shirts which now flutter in the wind. It is the body in its morning elevation, trough where the game of love silently (and very wisely) passes by, in a discrete, but very specific sexual way. Indeed, the lyrical feminine voice which the troubadours and minstrels make sing in the *cantigas de amigo* points to a radically different universe, an universe which is almost always defined by the woman’s eroticized body (a feminin body which symptomatically goes from the designation of *senhor* (beloved lady) to *amiga* (girlfriend) or even *corpo velido* (beautiful body)), in an open and natural space which

is usually a rural space, and where feelings (which also exist) are updated in bodies and gestures, sang, almost exclusively in the moment of the erotic initiation to love. In this way, the *velida* (beautiful one), the *bem-talhada* (well-shaped body) dances, washes her hair in the fountain, bathes in the sea, lies down under several types of trees (some of these, like the hazelnut, are symbolically nuptial), brings to the gatherings candles (which the mother must light), sings while she needles, goes in search of water, or offers several objects to her friend (belts, mainly). This means that she exteriorizes and materializes in various forms (forms which are enclosed in a quotidian and popular life) the emotions she sings – better to say, the emotions which the troubadour or minstrel make her sing.

In fact, as the Portuguese critic António José Saraiva points out in one of his last two texts², there is obviously a theatrical side to these *cantigas*, in which the feminine voice which is heard is not completely hidden within the mark of the masculine voice that constructed it: who else says “*eu, a velida*” (I, the beautiful) but that who sees her – the author of the song? The feminine lyric “I” in the *cantigas de amigo* can be understood, thus, as a “you” that troubadours and minstrels play and give voice to. This proto-heteronomy, as we may call it, allows frequent self-referrals, as for example, the *cantiga* where Paio Gomes Charinho refers, through his friend’s voice his admiral’s ensigns (which historically he was): “*As froles do meu amigo/ briosas vam no navio*” (the flowers of my friend / proudly go in the vessel) (B 817, V 401, reference made to the Fleur De Lis of his blazon). It also allows, in a subtle game, that the same *olhos verdes* (green eyes) sang in the male voice of João Garcia de Guilhade reappaer in the voice of his *amiga* (*siquer meus olhos verdes som* – my eyes are even green), says the girlfriend in B 742, V 344).

Opening up to the space of medieval quotidian life (mostly popular and not courtly), these *cantigas de amigo* thus reveal a coloured and active feminine universe in the staging of the lyric voice of a young woman. We must add however that this voice, although not coming from an abstract sentimental place, like in the *cantiga de amor*, but beeing the voice of a *corpo velido* (beautiful body), it is generally also not a voice of an individual body, in an individualized register. Even a clear (auto-)referral, like the green eyes referral, is the exception, and not the rule. And even if such exceptions, which send us to historical circumstances and bodies, appear in the *cantigas the amigo* more often than in the *cantigas de amor*, regarding the female image we are far from any art of portrait which could allow us to visualize historical and individualized people and bodies.

² “Poetry in *Cancioneiros* (Songbooks) is not lyric, but dramatic”, *Poesia e Drama*, (Poetry and Drama) Gradiva, Lisbon 1990.

Thus, the *fremosinha* (literally “the little beauty”) is also a type, paradigmatically and summarily defined in this well known dialogued *cantiga* by Bernardo de Bonaval (B 1137, V 728): “Oh, my beauty, by God, far from the village, who do you await? I came to wait for my friend.” All the *fremosinhas* are this voice: the voice of a young woman’s body, singing in open and rural space (*far from the village*), and charged with eroticism by the wait (or by the presence) of the *amigo* (whose gestures, mainly of hunting or war – be noted that, in this masculine case, gestures are never rural – also appear in filigree).

In fact, the universe of the realistic picture is mainly the universe of the *cantigas de escárnio e maldizer*. I should outline that I don’t use here the word “realistic” in any value connotation (neither does it relegate the *cantigas de amor* or de *cantigas de amigo* to any “unrealistic” register - one can say that their real is different). In this context, realistic has rather a technical sense: the *cantigas de escárnio e maldizer* have the critique to the immediate social reality surrounding troubadours and minstrels as its starting point and therefore the bodies which they present are the historical bodies, personal and non transmissible, with a name, a place and a time. Fulfilling their mission of “speaking ill of someone” regarding what they believe it is censurable, troubadours and minstrels use their observation sense – of the facts but also of the people, in their individual materiality. And so, the ethereal or perfect bodies of the other genres materialize and land on the surface of the imperfect things, which is also the world of laughter and carnival. These are not contradictory worlds, but complementary – and we stress the fact that they are sung by the same voices. Here, what is sang (what is satirized, what is laughable) is essentially the *mal-talhado* bodies (ugly bodies), whether they are of the married or single women (often the ugly or less “*mesurada*” – less beautiful, like the one who “passes wind” in front of the door of Afonso X: *Nom quer’eu donzela fea/ que ant’a minha porta pea*, B476 – I do not want an ugly girl, who passes wind in front of my door”), or the male “badly-shaped” bodies, even of the troubadours and minstrels themselves (as it is sang by Afonso Eanes do Cotom, B 1616, V 1149: *A mim dam preç’, e nom é desguisado/ dos maltalhados, e nom erram i;/ Joam Fernandes, o mour’, outrossi/ nos maltalhados o vejo contado./ E pero maltalhados semos nós,/ s’homem visse Pero da Ponte em cós,/ semelhar-lh-ia moi peor talhado* (They say about me and it’s fair enough/that I have an ugly body, and they say true/They say the same about Joam Fernandes, the moor/ But beeing true that both of us are like that/ if one sees Pero a Ponte without his coat/ everybody will see he is much worst)). We should note that this self-irony and this self-inclusion in the world of the imperfect things is indeed one of the appealing characteristics of the Galician-Portuguese satirical songs.

In terms of feminine pictures, and even if the satire is frequently addressed to both married and single women, this is also the universe *par excellence* of the courtesans, i.e., of the feminine body which does not fit within any sentimental dimension, and

sometimes described in detail (we even have a full body picture, in the song whereby the minstrel João Baveca describes the bath of two courtesans, who mutually compare their physical features – or the damages provoked on their bodies by age and bad habits, B 1458, V 1068³). In this case, more than obscene (classification which I believe is anachronistic, as it only relates to a contemporary reading effect), the linguistic register of the satirical songs may be classified as non-euphemistic. Thus, in such direct songs (another register often used by the troubadours and minstrels is that of mistake or double meaning), the language nominates things, namely the body, by its common and vulgar name – etymologically, the name used by the common people (vulgo). In another words, we can speak of the use of a popular register, on which troubadours and minstrels appear to be perfectly comfortable in. It should be also noted that the different social status of these authors are of no relevance in this matter: the direct and non-euphemistic vocabulary is common to all, from the author of *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, Afonso X, to the most obscure minstrel (with clear advantage to Afonso X who was a master in this domain of satirical songs). In any event, and either being direct or equivocal, the *cantigas de escárnio e maldizer* do not obey any kind of censure regarding the body and its functions.

If sex occupies a big part of these songs (organs, members and its performance, several intimacies, such as hair, marks and even cultural marks, like circumcision), these pictures are also supported by all genres of distinctive physical characteristics, from hair style (a minstrel with his hair parted down the middle or with hair bedridden with water, a clergyman with his hair cut short to the ears), to the clothing (the large waistbands hiding the stomach of some rural nobles, the golden brass necklace of a long-bearded *coteife* (a vilan soldier). Also, troubadours and minstrels do not hesitate to openly inserting, along with characteristics which are part of the usual repertoire of satire (the bold, the old man with dyed hair or the purple noses from the wine) another physical features which may shock our contemporary vision of public and private spheres, such as the references to diseases or deformities (in the first case, we can find several sexual diseases, with at least a case of an almost clinical description of the symptoms of a “penis cancer”; but D. Dinis also has a song on which he remarkably diagnoses a person suffering from cataracts; regarding deformities, this includes the limpers, the blind or even the leprous, for example). Also the eschatological references belong to this universe, with several “bad smells”, among which we could outline

³ *Estavam hoje duas soldadeiras/ dizendo bem, a gram peça, de si;/ e viu ãa delas as olheiras/ de sa companha, e diss’assi:/ - Que enrugadas olheiras teedes! E diss’a outra: - Vós com’as veedes/ desses cabelos sobr’essas trincheiras (...).* (There were two courtesans/, praising themselves/and one of them sees the blab bags/ under the other’s eyes and says:/Such wrinkled eyes you have! And the other says: - How can you see them/ having that hair over your eyes). The description of this picture continues and ends with the reference to the *mole ventre* (flaccid stomach) of one and to the breasts, looking like *cevadeiras* (bags) of the other.

those felt in the wake of a dead man (a bad man, according to the troubadour). This refers to two odd songs with the same theme, one by Pero Garcia Buralês (B 1372, V 980) and other by Pero Garcia d'Ambroa (B 1575), who refer to the sudden death of a certain Pero Bom, motivated, apparently, by the expel of gases (if we can say so – but the vernacular word used is still the current), and which probably mention the belief that, to all sinners (and villains), their soul did not leave their bodies through the mouth, as to all fair man, but instead through their lower end.

If the description of the body, in its immediate physical materiality appears in the *cantigas de escárnio e maldizer*, these are also almost never static pictures: all characters perform several gestures, of all kinds. I pick two examples who seem to show us a very characteristic medieval experience of the body: one of them, from a short song of João Airas de Santiago (B 1465, V 1075), is the gesture of some old women spitting to the floor in the moment of an engagement as a symbolic reference to bad augury, which lead us to a sign language, codified and magical, as an essential complement of the word (*Talhou D. Beeito/ aqui o feito*, dizem as velhas e cospem no chão), (D. Beeito has set his destiny/ having it done here, say the old women and spit to the floor), a language which was certainly very active in the medieval society, even if the exclusively written sources that have survived only allow us to know some echos; other, the odd gesture of “pointing the finger” which is mentioned in a song by Estêvão da Guarda (B 1312, V 917) and which, in my opinion, does not only refer, as it has been understood, to the current meaning of “it is rude to point the finger at someone” (even if we may need to ask ourselves about the motives of the continuance of such conviction). In fact, it seems to have existed a whole codified sign language, in this case not just of the universe of the magic symbol, but instead of the sign, of the group code (such as the current gesture of the fingers placed in V, or even the example of shutting the hand and keeping the middle finger up): in the case of the gesture referred to by Estêvão da Guarda in a song that, in an equivocal register, mentions homosexual behaviors, it is not impossible that it could be an allusion to a language of such type, here exposed (in fact, some medieval documents acknowledge the gesture of shutting the hand and keeping the middle finger up as a way of recognition between homosexuals⁴). These two examples, although brief, illustrate well how the body was certainly an essential component of the medieval communication, with a much more importance than nowadays, which means that the Middle Ages could have been closer to the body than our mediated, deferred and even virtual culture could conceive.

We now return, as way of conclusion, to the three registers of speech of the troubadour's art of song, whose diversity seems to have not obeyed any hierarchy (in

⁴ George Ifrah, *História universal dos algarismos*, (universal History of the Algarisms) Editora Nova Fronteira, Rio de Janeiro, 2nd edition, 1977, vol.1, pages 114-117.

the *Cancioneiros* – Songbooks – songs of all three genres have the same treatment and in two of them (songbooks of Vaticana and of Portugal National Library) – as a result of successive amendments, these different songs appear, instead, profusely mixed). In fact, I believe that the main question concerning this simultaneity of registers is a question of aesthetical codes, which are inseparable from the medieval way of seeing the body. I quote Michael Camille in an interesting study on the profusion of erotic or obscene images which appear on the margin of the medieval manuscripts, even the religious⁵: “In fact, what is of importance today on contradictory cultural codes did not seem so opposite in the Middle Ages (...) The mixture of registers and genres seems to have been a literary and artistic trend valued and enjoyed by an elite”. And the author adds, establishing a contrast with the further art: “The rules which are imposed by the academic art, the self-censure and the taste from the public will restrain, in the after-medieval images, this shock of the refined and instinctive, of the spirit and of the body”. In addition, a hierarchy of genres shall come to join the different styles. Until the appearance of the postmodernism, the barriers between superior and inferior culture will exclude the abrupt counterbalance of diverse images”. The three genres in which the Galician-Portuguese troubadours and minstrels compose reveal to us exactly how this mixture, in its complementarity, is the genuine mark of the medieval civilization. Though, more than contradictory, the different registers of the troubadours’ art of singing are complementary: and in its whole, they provide us with an image which is not just a unique and plain image of the body but instead a true tridimensional image. In this respect, we can say that the Middle Ages is in fact a civilization of ambivalence - or of the polyphony, we may also say.

⁵ *Images dans les marges – Aux limites de l’art médiéval*, Ed. Gallimard, Paris 1997 (for the French translation), page 21.