Patrice Uhl, *Anti-doxa, paradoxes et contre-textes. Études occitanes*

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Patrick Uhl introduces his book, somewhat self-effacingly, as a collection of essays, all previously published and all linked by a notion of the écart – a disjunction, whether political, sexual, poetical or moral. The examples he gives are instructive: breaks between one way of conceiving doxa (religious or societal) and another, between one ideological and poetic reading of fin’amor and another, or between two different means of conceiving language and rhetoric, with poetry standing as both its defender and challenger. His method makes a certain sense: these are indeed individual études that do not necessarily add up to a fully coherent monograph; but I cannot help but conclude that Uhl is selling himself just a little bit short. The eleven studies I read can actually be grouped rather conveniently into three distinct areas, each of which betrays Uhl’s interests in literary relations between the North and South: i.e., between the Occitan courts and Arabic poetic tradition, on the one hand, and northern France poetry on the other. Though his point is, in one sense at least, to argue for the almost uninterrupted dialogue between the poetic cultures ofoil and oc, al’Andalus and the land beyond the Pyrenees, he also makes the claim that troubadour poetic culture remained somehow almost entirely within the domain of an educated elite (‘entre amics fins’), never really engaging with the ‘bourgeois’ public of the Puys of the North (p. 186). Given how debatable that last statement is, and its placement at the conclusion of this volume, it is amazing just how little controversy the rest of the book provokes, at least for this reader. The fine argumentation, philological grounding, and clear-headed reasoning that prevail
in all of these essays serve as a rapier to clear away the brush left by earlier critics and their sometimes tragic, sometimes comical, inability to see beyond the mores and doxa of their own day.

2 The first of the tripartite grouping of essays I alluded to above begins with an essay on Arabic poetry composed in al-Andalus and focuses largely on the poetry of Wallada, an eleventh-century poet (c. 1010-1077) whose ten extant compositions, sexually frank and brimming with invective against her former lover, allow Uhl to show his colours. This essay, which serves as an edifying introduction, also establishes the author’s parti pris: the undeniable links that exist between Arabic and Occitan poetry, the reliance of Guilhem IX’s poetry on a mass of topoi and poetic forms already present in the Christian Aquitaine of the late eleventh century, the celebration of women poets, the championing of poetic mobility and openness to other traditions, the liberty of sexual expression in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While crediting his predecessors with their scholarly accomplishments, he is also quite capable of pointing out their limitations and of revitalising a field that has seen too few takers in recent decades (the Arabic hypothesis, in particular, which has seen little progress since the flawed argumentation of the mid-20th century).

3 This first discussion of the earliest years of the Hispano-Arabic and Occitan tradition and the powerful counter-example that Wallada provides leads to a section consisting of three studies, all pertaining in one way or another to the work of Guilhem IX. The first of these establishes convincingly Guilhem’s reliance on the songs and Arabic poetic forms that he would have heard as a young man in the Aquitaine, many of which would have moved across the Pyrenees in the previous century. The second of these études reinforces this point by examining Guilhem’s use of a pseudo-Arabic expression in his song, ‘Farai un vers, pos mi sonelh’ (PC 183, 12). Uhl makes several interesting points here: firstly, that Guilhem may knowingly have composed himself two versions of his song for two different audiences; secondly, that his use of this Arabic-sounding language in the ms C version of the song adds a surplus sense to the text that is not necessarily found in other versions (mss VNN²); and thirdly, that Guilhem might have been including in the songs remembered fragments of Arabic refrains from songs that he knew by memory, without ever having fully understood them. The third étude of this series involves the famous ‘red cat’ image that appears in this same song by Guilhem. Starting from an examination of what is known of Guilhem’s life and reiterating the fact that there was a break in troubadour tradition in the mid-12th century, Uhl returns to the roots of the Occitan tradition to link the cat with one of the stock characters of early Arabic poetry, the gardador, or watchman. There follows an ingenious reading of the enois/enujos that pits the psychoanalytic readings of Huchet and Rey-Flaud against the traditional Arabic structure of the song such that it is not so much the red-cat-as-female-sex that the pilgrim fears but rather the parodied figure who has been charged with protecting the honour of the ravenous N’Agnes and M’Ermessen.

4 The next two chapters sit more or less by themselves, though the second of them, the étude on Flamenca, makes important points that arise again in the last, rhetorical grouping of three. The Sordello étude, while interesting, has less to add to the argument of the book as a whole. Flamenca, on the other hand, links rather unexpectedly the 13th-century romance with the Roman de Renart by illustrating how the Flamenca author uses the Hersant rape episode from Branche 2 (v. 1261-1280 in Dufournet, 1985) of the Renart as a structuring model and then speculating on why this sparkling romance failed to reach a
larger audience in its time. The underground tunnel (the pertuis) in Flamenca might evoke for Uhl un temps révolu, a nostalgic return to an age of troubadour ‘classicisme’ and a moral code free from the restraints of the Toulousain orthodoxy and the Inquisition, but it also challenges for him the Lacanian reading of courtly love as one inevitably linked to neurosis rather than freedom.

The final section of the book, if we consider études 7-11 a block united by a common interest in the conception and celebration of the nonsensical and contradictory, is built on a close and extremely detailed examination of the supposed genres, and/or rhetorical figures, of the reversari and devinalh. Contrasting the later Leys d’Amors’ definition of the reversari with actual poetic practice of the earlier poets, Uhl arrives at the not exactly surprising conclusion that the 12th and 13th-century practitioners had a much less rigid conception of generic restrictions and observed little adherence to what the later theoreticians decreed. What is interesting about all of this is how Uhl highlights this same formalising tendency in 20th-century critics and the limitations of the categories that they constructed. Citing Appel’s grouping of four songs in the genre of the devinalh, Uhl shows how the reversari and devinalh often merge in readers’ eyes, even when the poets themselves have never used this terminology or made such claims for their works. The cobla reversa and vers revers were, as he demonstrates, rhetorical constructions linked to the theme of paradox to which poets had frequent recourse, even if they did so as often for comic relief as for philosophical speculation. The devinalh, in particular, as Uhl shows in his eighth étude, solidified into a genre following Appel’s reading, though there is little evidence that that category is justified. The intricate unravelling that follows show Uhl off at his philological best and leads him to conclude that in this world of post-practice theorisations, ‘c’est bien de métatradition médiéviste, et non de subtradition médiévale, qu’il conviendrait de parler’ (p. 132).

Étude 9 moves this discussion into the arena of ‘de oppositis’ compositions in both the areas of Oc and Oïl, and allows Uhl to comment again on the continuity of the tradition between North to South and one language to another. Including Anglo-Norman as well as Northern French texts, he affirms the meshing of the different traditions as essential in the creation of a wider poetic ethics. Citing the 1254 Modena troubadour manuscript D, which includes within it (fol. 229-230) a collection of 63 songs in French, makes this point particularly well. The French poets composing fatrasies which parody Occitan poetry also learned how to perform that parody from the very songs they turned their guns on, according to Uhl, and the same could be said for the Fatrasies d’Arras. The 10th and 11th études displace this argument from Northern France to Northern Italy: first through a study of Aiméric de Peguilhan and Albertet de Sisteron’s tenso de non-re and then through a reading of Arnaut Daniel’s contribution to the tenso surrounding the ‘affaire Cornilh’. The former brings out the philosophical paradoxes implicit in the invitation to write a song about a non-thing, thus making it a thing of another sort; and the latter insists on the centrality of the supposed ‘obscene’ song of Arnaut to his work (‘Pois Ramone.N Trucs Malecs’ [PC 29, 15]) and the tradition as a whole. Setting this tenso in the larger arena of obscene language within the corpus (and the Arabic tradition that preceded it), Uhl returns to the concerns of his first étude, those of the woman poet, the woman as sexual presence, the woman as capable of questioning the norms of her cultural milieu.

There are so many other brilliant suggestions that Uhl makes and with such clarity and force that I can only list a few of them: a) songs are generally retained in memory through their ‘matérialité sonore (rythmique, rimique, mélodique)’, not their words or
message (p. 32); b) entrebescamen is more than a poetic technique, it is also an apt cultural descriptor that informs poetic practice in the 12th and 13th centuries; c) the tenso that is said to be the most objectionable in all the Occitan tradition, that of Montan and La Dame (PC 306, 2) is at the same time a rhetorically sophisticated sampling of troubadour classicism at its purest.

Only on occasion, would I would have liked more repetition of one of his points or a stronger assertion of their importance. One example is the point he makes about the connections between the North and the South of France throughout the period of the 12th and 13th centuries and his use of the reversari, or the taste for confounding paradox, to confirm it. One cannot help but agree that this is a striking feature of the early and classic periods of troubadour composition and that it cannot have failed to impress those using these earlier works as their models; but surely there is a philosophical importance to this point that does not quite get the hearing here that it deserves. The poets were not just playing with models, after all; they were also questioning modes of thought. Uhl does makes this point elsewhere, however, in arguing that Occitan poetry always carries within it rhetorical models of contestation – political, religious, and sexual. It is this contestatory feature of the poetry that should be more emphasised when we are discussing the differences between what were soon to become the national and linguistic traditions of France and Italy. What changes were made to Occitan texts in translation and why? Were Arabic traces excised deliberately or through gradual change? How were Occitan topoi adapted differently in different locales for local use? How and why did troubadour manuscripts come to be written and why and where did they travel? If it is true, as Uhl asserts in the conclusion to his final étude, that the Occitan tradition always remained the phenomenon of in-crowd, an insular poetic phenomenon that lacked the socio-political breadth and audience of the Northern French fatras, then why the fuss about them or the mania to trade, perform, and adapt them? I have my doubts on that point, even as I credit Uhl’s work with more credibility than almost any other writing on the topic today. His work, more than most, makes it clear just what it is that is so special about the troubadours and it is certainly not just their adoration of the Lady! It is their construction of a rock-solid rhetorical and tropological system which could encompass both praise and disdain, power and its counter-discourse, doxa and its deconstruction. The emphasis that Uhl places on the play and wit of these poets and their destabilising classicism is as welcome as his revisiting of the Arab origins, and will only encourage, I hope, more work of this calibre.