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ARTICLE

Taming Time: Writing and Motifs of Waiting in Twelfth- through Fourteenth-Century Occitan *Albas**

To the Dawn of my life.

The troubadour repertoire includes a corpus of nineteen songs composed between the end of the twelfth century and the fourteenth century, which are traditionally classified as *albas*. Despite the thematic diversity—be they about separation, erotic or religious in nature—these all celebrate or mourn the arrival of the day. Most of the *albas* have a courtly setting: two lovers – whose secret encounter was favored by (the) night – deplore the unwelcome approach of day, which will force them to separate. The bifurcated motif of waiting and of desire infuses these lyrical pieces: time becomes the main subject of the songs. The singing ‘I’ uses the resources of rhetoric to speed up or slow down time in order to satisfy the needs of desire. The medieval Occitan lyric has a tendency to temporalize desire and to associate it with waiting or with projection. Adulterous love superimposes temporality onto forbidden desire: to the linearity of the contractual alliances of marriage, this love juxtaposes the changing laws of desire waiting to be realized, or at least spoken aloud. In the *canço* the expression *fin’amor* defines the outlines of such adulterous love, whose extratemporality Paul Zumthor has demonstrated,¹ thanks to its ability to project unfulfilled desire in an uncertain future. But while the *canço*’s subject remains unchanged, the *alba*, on the contrary, falls precisely into a regulated temporality: the passage from night to day under the circumstances of consummated adultery. There

1 Zumthor, ‘De la circularité’ 129–40; and *Essai* 187–188, concerning poetic themes and motifs.

is an essential question to be asked about the link between the genres, in which temporality regulates the affective mechanisms of amorous speech, the enunciation of love as the particular expression of desire by the poet, and the activity of courtly pastimes, in which poetry in general and the *alba* in particular was read, discussed and debated. Dominique Billy and Christophe Chaguignan have, both, respectively studied this generic dimension, and provided us with convincing answers.² Is the *alba*, as a performance and reading in the specific context of the southern courts, a means of passing time? Certainly not. Dominique Billy especially focuses on the criteria defining the auto-reference system of the genre, while acknowledging the essential, even fundamental dimension of the parting motif.³ The modulations of waiting and of desire, and the projection of a nocturnal love in a present that keeps retaining it, offer the specular image of medieval listeners trying to occupy their entertain themselves while simultaneously seeking to make this passage of time meaningful. Being aware of time going by is to take possession of it, to draw it out or shorten it by means of emotions that follow, correspond and contradict one another. Only these very emotions make this experience more intense, endowing it with a singular dimension of play.

There is an essential playfulness in the writing of the Occitan *albas* which consists in reproducing the different temporalities of desire. These different temporal modalities are based on a range of emotions: waiting and frustrated desires arouse joy, sadness, anguish, anger, shame and many other emotions at the heart of the poetic and narrative construction. To fully understand this, we must first examine the different forms of time in the genre, and then, examine their effects on the writing process and, in particular, on the importance of emotions in these lyrical poems. This analysis will make it possible to draw some conclusions about the paradoxical status of time in the genre of the *alba*.

As a medium to enunciate the hopes of a relationship that must end at dawn, the *alba* bears witness to the anthropological amplitude of medieval emotions. The *alba*, situated between day and night, while stars remain in the indecision of temporality, promotes the expression of emotions connected to the voicing of desire and of love.

2 Billy, 'Nouvelles perspectives sur l'*alba*' 355-377; and Chaguignan 'Alba et Gayta: deux définitions' 46-68.

3 Billy, 'Le traitement théorique de l'*alba*' 195-214.

Anthropologically, this thesis is valuable because it makes the establishment of a typology possible. This presupposition is all the more true when considered in relation to the *canso*. The *canso* generally takes place around the beginning of a love relationship, and its only stakes essentially consist of one obligation, that is the lovers' anonymity. The *canso* projects desire in the future of an unfulfilled love, a future that is an integral part of the poetic strategies of the genre. Conversely, in the *alba*, the notion of adulterous love is essential to the genre, since it portrays the moment that precedes both the sunrise and the separation of a couple who must flee the daylight. Dawn therefore represents the moment that Gouiran and Bauer have called 'l'interrègne astral' (the astral interregnum):⁴ a space that is temporal, and one in which the stars have already disappeared and the sun's first light has just begun to brighten the horizon. This moment of the day – the indistinct space and moment of the *alba* – is the fundamental element of this poetry, because the moment is an inescapable fact as well as because the word *alba* itself holds a particular status. The term can refer to a one-word refrain concluding the last verse of each stanza or, more rarely, as a word systematically included in a fixed spot in the first verse of a stanza or in another verse. One of the characteristics of the *alba* is undoubtedly the disturbing ambiguity of its status, as Vincer Colomer Dominguez and Trobio Fuente Cornejo have proven it⁵. The absence of the stars makes it a moment of instability, a moment when everything may happen. The *alba* does not ally itself with the promises of the day or with the protective night; it is the climax of the moment *par excellence*: one that cannot decide between a late night or an early day. It may variously portray the relief of those who have managed to escape the temptations of the night (in the religious *alba*) or the despair of those whom it separates (in the amorous *alba*). In either case the *alba* is linked to pain; its unstable equilibrium makes it an emotional no man's land. On an emotional level, it is the uncertain moment that lovers try to connect to their domain of the night, knowing that it possesses no temporal reality, except that which is embodied in the cry of the watchman: a poignant reminder of the dangers of the day.

4 Gouiran and Bauer, 'L'aube et les astres' II, 169.

5 Colomer Dominguez, 'Albas provenzales' 33–45; Fuente Cornejo, *La canción de Alba* 35–36.

This character of fundamental uncertainty needs not be separated from spatial reality. In quite a number of *albas*, the natural setting which varies according to the seasons serves as a backdrop to the lovers' tryst. The first stanza is often characterized by the illustration of a seasonal *topos* closely linked to the image of love, a technique which is also found in the *canso*. However, in the *alba*, this natural setting takes on a spatial reality: it is immediately sensitive to the sight, touch and hearing of the lovers: the shadow's concealment, the foliage's freshness, the bird's song. But it is on the temporal plane that the distinction from the *canso* – the song of unrealized love – is clearer: just as the *canso* shows the world during a precise season but at an abstract hour, the *alba* shows us the world at a precise time, but during an abstract season. Gouiran and Bauer show how much the *canso* differs from the *alba* in the treatment of traditional descriptive elements, flowers and birds. While the *canso* includes them in its discourse, the *alba* limits them to a mere element of the backdrop/concedes to them a staging of the scene:

*Quan lo rossinhols escria
ab sa par la nueg e-l dia,
yeu suy ab ma bel'amia
jos la flor*

“When the nightingale sings
To his mate night and day,
I am with my beautiful friend
Under the flower)”⁶

In contrast to this *alba* of separation by Raimon de Las Salas:

*ay auzitz,
d'auzels petitiz
pels plassaditz.*

“I have heard
From the little birds
In the forests)”⁷

6 Anonymous, ‘Quan lo rossinhols escria’ PC 461.203 [Alfred Pillet et Henry Carstens, *Bibliographie der Troubadours*, ergänzt, weitergeführt und herausgegeben, Halle, Niemeyer, 1933, henceforth referred to as PC.] I, 1–4. Unless indicated otherwise, the citations are from *Les albas occitanes*, ed. Chaguinian.

7 Raimon de las Salas, ‘Dieus, aydatz’ PC 409.2. I, 13–15.

While birds in the *canço* are limited to the role of *topoi* projected into a discourse of possibilities, the birds of the *alba* intervene in the dramatization of the song. The bird, modeled on the image of a watchman, echoes the watchman's warning with its song, announcing the beginning of the new day that presides over the lovers' separation or reminding them of the sweetness of their night of love. The *canço* imagines a 'natural' universe as a simple frame serving as a point of comparison, to supplement or counterbalance the troubadour's song. By contrast, the *alba* places this framework at the heart of the temporal system: it exemplifies the urgency of the moment. Birds are the vanguard of the day within a night that is about to end.

Within this role of 'efficient framework' – to use Gouiran's expression – the stars are also markers of an autonomous time. In the first sense, the imminence of the day is manifested both in the cosmographic plane and on the plane of proximity: in the *alba*, a correspondence is established between the particular situation of the lovers and the great celestial movements that regulate and measure time. To prove that this is a timeless truth, Guiraut de Bornelh's watchman tells the happy lover about the inescapable advance of the day: 'issetz al fenestrel / e esgardatz las ensenhas del sel' (go to the window and look at the signs in the sky),⁸ confirming what the birds have already announced.

Here again, Gouiran and Bauer have studied another formal trait in order to extend their reflection on the temporal plane: the rhyme scheme.⁹ In three *albas* there is a vocalic ending often considered the prosodic signature of the genre: *-ia*. This ambivalent rhyme connects *dia* (day) and *dia* (the first and third persons of the present subjunctive of the verb *dire* [to say]). The three poems in question are 'Us cavaliers' by Bertran d'Alamanon (stanzas II and III); the anonymous 'Ab la gensor' (stanza III); and the religious *alba*, 'Vers Dieus' by Falquet de Romans. Gouiran and Bauer deduce that there is no conflict between the subjective claim of the *alba* and the coming of the day: this overlap in registers is a symptom of the constraints of the stars on matters of love. This convincing hypothesis deserves to be extended into the temporal conception that governs the enunciation of the genre. The *serena alba* – in a way the opposite of Guiraut Riquier – develops the

8 Guiraut de Bornelh, 'Reis glorios' PC 242.64, IV, 1–2.

9 Gouiran and Bauer, 'L'aube et les astres' 171.

hypothesis with the adjective *astratz* (IV, 1), which defines the destiny of the lover-poet in the song:

*Mout es greus turmenz astratz
A selb qu'ab nulh valedor
no-s pot valer [...].*

“Grievous is the astral torment
To him who with no protector
Cannot protect himself [...].”¹⁰

Unlike in the separation *alba*, the lover-poet no longer fears seeing the dawning of the day which will separate him from his lady; instead, he fears that he will not be able to contain himself until their next rendezvous. The two experiences, however, come to the same thing: the pangs of passing time. Time goes by too slowly for those who are eager to meet each other and too quickly for those who fear separation. If the verb *dire*, in the subjunctive – the mood of subjectivity – rhymes with *dia* (day), the singer finds himself confronted with the paradox of having to sing in a moment that must never know an end/ at a time that must never know any ending. We can notice that this vow takes on different forms in diverse *albas*: ‘Plagues a Dieu ja la nueitz non falhis’ (May it please God that the night might never end) confesses the lady in the anonymous *alba* ‘En un vergier’ (In an orchard).¹¹ In Guiraut de Bornelh’s *alba*, ‘Reis glorios’ (Glorious king), the lover cries: ‘[T]an soy en ric sojorn / qu’ieu non volgra mays fos alba ni jorn’ (I am in so rich a dalliance / that I do not want dawn or day to ever come).¹² The sequence is taken up by the lover in the *alba*, ‘Us cavaliers’ (Once a knight) by Bertran d’Alamanon: ‘Doussa res, s’esser podia / que jamais alba ni dia / no fos’ (Sweet creature, if it could be / that it were never dawn nor day).¹³ This necessity of a never-ending night, as the only way to finish the *albas*, constitutes the paradox of the *alba*. It is therefore necessary for the night to be endless: regarding the two lovers, because the night witnesses the birth and fading away of their love; and also concerning the expression of desire, since love at night becomes the poetic object of the *alba*. In this moment of

10 Guiraut Riquier, ‘Ad un fin aman fon datz’ PC 248.4, VI, 28–30.

11 Anonymous, ‘En un vergier’ PC 461.113, II, 5.

12 Guiraut de Bornelh, ‘Reis glorios’ PC 242.64, VII, 1–2.

13 Bertran d’Alamanon, ‘Us cavalier’ PC 76.23, II, 1–3.

transition described by dawn and marking the end of their lovemaking, the *alba* hearkens to daybreak, at least by announcing it. Then arises the recurring motif of the poet invited to retain the night, or the motif of deploring the announcement of the rising sun by the watchman. This paradox triggers emotional frustration, but poetically, it allows for a prolongation of desire or a projection of it into the future. Its song of consummated love is inscribed in a timespan that transcends temporality.

These remarks on the expansion of time also have strong erotic implications in the *albas*, especially with respect to waiting. The motif of erotic waiting in the *alba* is built on opposing principles with respect to the *canso*. The nineteenth-century rediscoverers of medieval literature were largely attracted to stories of amorous – and even adulterous – adventures. The creation of the notion of ‘courtly love’ stemmed from Andreas Capellanus long before Duby’s attempt to write a history of human emotions.¹⁴

This notion of ‘courtly love’, whose substance refers to a rather restrictive amorous apparatus, brings together the *domna* (lady) and her suitor. The *fin’amor* of the troubadours is generally based on the delay and the fantasization of sexual pleasure. Desire is central to the bond of love, but it is a desire that is not necessarily satisfied, due to the unattainability of the lady and the delayed embrace, as illustrated by the famous motif of *amour de lonb* (love from afar), celebrated by Jaufre Rudel, (fl. 1130–70). On such ground, courtly love seems to be clearly incarnated in the *canso*. The *canso* describes an ideal of amorous harmony reached between the *domna* and her lover at the end of a long path of emotional progression, of the suitor (*fenbador*) in supplication (*precador*), beseeching the *domna* to give him hope about a forthcoming embrace. Thus, courtly love seems to be fully embodied in the *canso*. Like *fin’amor*, the *canso* is above all an ‘ *erotique de la maîtrise du désir*’ (erotics of the mastery of desire).¹⁵ Dominique Billy, in his article entitled, ‘Nouvelles perspectives sur l’*alba*’ concluded that the *alba* is a troubadour-related genre whose origins are doubtlessly courtly. Studying this genre provides us with clues as to the means of expressing one’s feeling, according to a new set of criteria, both literary and social.¹⁶ The emotions that constitute the *canso* dramatize the waiting: pain, melancholy, languor or ecstasy, the contentment that expresses joy. The *canso*

14 Duby, *Mâle Moyen Âge*.

15 Régnier-Bohler 32.

16 Nelli, *L’Érotique des troubadours*, 11–12.

– founded on the delay and the anticipation of sexual pleasure – proposes a mixing of contrary emotions (pleasure and pain, hope and anguish, contentment and melancholy, etc.) since ‘morose delight’ is simultaneously pleasure (in anticipation of sexual release) and pain (in the concomitant lack of pleasure). There is even an accomplishment of lyrical play when the poet directly exalts the sweetness of suffering inflicted by this lack of pleasure. We recall in particular stanza IV of the *canço* ‘Quan lo rius de la fontana’ (When the stream of the fountain) by Jaufre Rudel:

*De dezir mos cors no fina
 Vas selba ren qu'ieu pus am;
 E cre que volers m'enguana
 Si cobezeza la-m tol;
 Que pus es ponbens qu'espina
 La dolors que ab joi sana;
 Don ja non vuelh qu'om m'en planba.*

“Of desire my heart has no end
 For her whom I love the most
 And I believe that wanting deceives me
 Since yearning takes her from me;
 For it is more painful than a thorn,
 The pain healed by joy;
 So I do not want anyone to pity me)”¹⁷

On the contrary, the *albas* portray satisfied desire, consummated in the welcoming shadow of night and offer a more complex emotional dramaturgy. This mode of composition reproduces the suffering of lack in the present, whereas the *canço* projects itself towards the future. There is no longer any anticipation of sexual pleasure, only the attempt to retain time by means of rhetorical games of emotion. The *alba* creates a poetic process of dramatization through a real distancing between the enunciative instance and the ‘I’ of the text, which then becomes a narrative that depicts the characters. Bertran of Alamanon literally presents the *alba*: ‘Us cavalier si jazia / ab la re que plus volia / soven baizan li dizia’ (Once a knight was lying / with the person he loved the most / kissing her often he said to her).¹⁸ Similarly, in a magnificent anonymous *alba*, the lady’s song is literally embedded in the the first stanza where the author first glimpses her:

¹⁷ *Les Troubadours*, trans. Nelli and Lavaud, I, 50–1.

¹⁸ Bertran d’Alamanon, ‘Us cavaliers’ PC 76.23, I, 1–3.

*En un vergier sotz fuella d'albespi
tenc la dompna son amic costa si,
tro la gayta crida que l'alba vi.
Oy Dieus, oy Dieus, de l'alba! tan tost ve!*

"In an orchard under the leaves of a hawthorn
The lady held her lover by her side,
Until the watchman cried that he saw the dawn.
Ob God, ob God, the dawn! How soon it comes!"

The poet has invited us to join the intimacy of the cover of hawthorn, veritable topos of the romantic rendez-vous. His description allows us to get closer and closer to the couple. In the last *cobla*, the focus widens: the lady is at the center of the gazes, which gives way to a generalized point of view. In this last context, the refrain takes on an enunciative scope:

*La dompna es agradans e plazen,
per sa beutat la gardon mantas gens,
e a son cor en amar leyalmens.
Oy Dieus, oy Dieus, de l'alba! tan tost ve!*

"The lady is agreeable and pleasant,
Many people look at her for her beauty,
And to her heart for her loyal love.
Ob God, ob God, the dawn! How soon it comes!"¹⁹

The enunciative framework that structures the compositions thus makes it possible to draw up the contours of a complex affective game, indeed, by representing different points of view: those of the lover, the beloved, the watchman, and even a discreet narrator. In doing so, the *alba* allows the emotional relationship to evolve over time. This regulates the relationships between the different speakers and the characters to whom they speak. Time in the *alba* is a modality regulating the emotions expressed in the poems.

Time is primarily characterized by its fleeting nature and thus articulates one of the specific formal characteristics of the Occitan *alba*. This characteristic is the inscription of the enunciation of most secular *albas*, and in particular, of the separation *albas*, in a supposedly temporal present (the moment that precedes the sunrise) and not extra-temporal, as in the *canso*. Such reference to a seemingly extra-textual reality (a

19 Anonymous, 'En un vergier' PC 461.113, I and VI.

reality that due to the fiction of the narrative is not a pure effect of the song) confers transitivity to the overall meaning that contrasts strongly with the intransitivity of the words ascribed to the 'I' of the *cansos*. The temporal time of the *alba* (since it is inscribed in the temporality of the passage of night to day) leads to a form of transitivity: the present of the enunciation returns to the present that is unfolding, the aims of the poetic protagonists (the beauty of the lady, the regret of separating, the exchanged vows, etc.). On the contrary, the *canso* is more intransitive: its aims are general and detached from the contingency of objects. This relationship between transitivity and intransitivity therefore is not connected to waiting. Thus, the fate of the love declaration in the secular *alba* is closely linked to the threat of daybreak. This is evidenced, as we have seen, by the special status of the love declaration in its relation to what one might call the referent.

The verbalization of love is made impossible by the double constraint of waiting for dawn, which urges the lovers to separate, and at the same time subjects the enunciation of the *alba* to the passage of time, so that the articulation of love is made impossible. The two lovers are forced to pass time by commenting on the time that passes. From this point of view, the anonymous *alba Quan lo rossinbols* (When the nightingale) can be understood as the fiction of the impossible relation of the declaration of the dawn to the passage of time:

*Quan lo rossinbols escria
ab sa par la nueg e-l dia,
yeu suy ab ma bell'amia
jos la flor
tro la gaita de la tor
escrida : Drute, al levar !
qu'ieu vey l'alba e-l jorn clar.*

"When the nightingale sings
To his mate night and day,
I am with my beautiful friend
Under the flower
Until from the tower the watchman
Announces: Lovers, get up!
I see the dawn and the clear day.)"²⁰

20 Anonymous, 'Quan lo rossighols escria' PC 461.203.

This *alba* evokes the status of the lover-poet on the one hand, and on the other, that of the nightingale, in order to oppose them (due to an adversarial relationship implicit in the initial *quan*). The bird's love song – as an indissoluble union and reciprocal identification of song and love, in other words a *canso* – ignores the difference between day and night since this bird sings no matter the time. It is precisely to elucidate the temporal difference that the lyrical subject of this *alba* says that he suffers: to be in the situation of a lover who, having known pleasure with his beloved, cannot sing. Paradoxically, the watchman announces (*escrïa*) the end of the night and at the same time, the end of love. The disconnection between making love and singing is precisely what makes the *alba*'s declaration of love impossible. If love in the *canso* is a projected and unrealized desire, that of the *alba* appears as its opposite: an impossible love – at least impossible to sing – different from consummated desire. This disconnection between loving and singing makes the love declaration of the *alba* temporally ambiguous, producing a love song that is a formally negation of the song and therefore a non-love.

The time in the *alba* that is subject to the contrasting and contrarian influence of the stars, is a paradoxical time. By expanding and contracting itself, this paradoxical time submits the love song to the impossibility of its realization while at the same time providing the emotional palette with a wide diversity hitherto unequalled in the poetic repertoire. Emotions permit to make this malleability of the text happen within the poem by playing on its length at leisure.

This in-between, happening at twilight, is characterized by a poetics which fosters the feeling of expectation and maintains desire. That's why, the *alba*, by taming time, resorts to all the resources of emotions, and thus, provides the poetry of the troubadours with a constantly renewed freshness.

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