

## INEXTRICABLE

Cary Howie

### 1. RAZO

Sordello is concerned to tell us that we need to be careful with praise. In a short poem, he addresses first Peire Guillem (with whom he engages in a *tenso* elsewhere) and then Milady—his lady—of Foix to warn against too much praise, immoderate praise, praise of what is fundamentally unpraiseworthy. James J. Wilhelm translates the poem like this:

Lai a.n Peire Guillem man ses bistenza,  
q.ancar non a de lauzar pro apres;  
q'anc mais non vim lauzor qe pro tengues  
si.l laus passet del lauzat sa valenza;  
qe trop lauzar destriga la lauzor  
del trop lauzat e blasma.l lauzador  
lai on vertatz repren sa conoissenza.

A madompna de Fois man per sa honor  
qe no.l plassa desmesur'en lauzor,  
qe trop lauzar es blasmes e faillenza.

[Over to Peire Guillem I'm hastily sending word  
Because he hasn't learned enough about praising;  
For never have we seen a praise that you can call good  
If the words surpass the value of the praised one;  
For excessive praising vitiates the praise  
Of the overpraised one and lays blame upon the praiser  
In places where truth reproves its awareness.

To Milady of Foix I suggest for her honor  
That she shouldn't welcome excess in any praise,

Because excessive praise makes blame and error.]<sup>1</sup>

The poem begins with a direction, a trajectory: “over to Peire Guillem,” the poem is thrown, sent, launched, invoking delay or hesitation—“bistenza”—only to say it away. No delay: Sordello sends his song to Guillem, and he sends it for a reason. Notice the explanatory “qe,” repeated at the beginning of five of the poem’s ten lines. Then notice something else: Guillem has, Sordello says, “not yet [ancar] learned enough [pro] about praising,” but no sooner have those two qualifiers appeared—yet, enough—than they echo, distorted, in the subsequent line: “ancar” truncated as “anc,” “pro” redoubled this time in a more explicitly affirmative vein, which Wilhelm—who, come to think of it, sounds a lot like Guillem—renders as “good.” Good, enough. But enough praise, good praise, or enough knowledge of good praise requires a kind of equivalence of praise to its object: the “valenza” of the former must not exceed, must not pass or trespass, the latter. For too much praise impedes, precisely, praise: Wilhelm says vitiates, but Antonio Petrossi translates the verb as “ritardare, impedire,” to delay or impede, and characterizes it as a “typical verb of the troubadours’ love language that subtends in its semantic structure . . . a continual state of tension and restlessness and a sorrow incapable of attaining its own manifestation” [tipico verbo del linguaggio amoroso dei trovatori che sottende nella sua struttura semantica . . . uno stato continuo di tensione e di inquietudine e un dolore incapace di raggiungere una sua manifestazione].<sup>2</sup> Too much praise, in other words, would seem to create a phenomenological impasse: if praise is in excess to its object—but how would this excess be measured, and by whose criteria?—then this interferes with the very manifestation of praise. Praise becomes no longer recognizable as such. Not only does praise stop looking like itself—how do we know what it looked like in the first place?—but the agent of praise becomes the patient of blame. The work of *destrigar*, the unworking of excessive praise, praise-lag, in effect makes the erstwhile praiser inextricable from his (or, we’ll see shortly, her) object. Where there is too much praise, there is

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<sup>1</sup> James J. Wilhelm, ed. and trans., *The Poetry of Sordello* (New York: Garland, 1987), pp. 138-9.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Petrossi, *Le coblas esparsas occitane anonime*. Doctoral thesis presented to the University of Naples Federico II, 2009, p. 236.

enough blame to go around, at least “there”—a “lai” that repeats the initial word of the poem—where “truth reproves its awareness” or, I’d prefer, truth literally regains consciousness. As if truth had been knocked out by praise’s surplus, knocked flat, knocked cold, and only now, hesitantly, groggily, were reemerging to reestablish some much-needed distinctions: between praise and blame; between too much and enough; between subjects and objects, agents and patients.

Moreover, at the heart of this first stanza, there is something like an anagram, a rearrangement of sounds and senses that once again 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: “lauzor qe pro tengues,” the praise that I—Sordello, Cary, I—hold to be enough, or good enough, enfolds itself into the declaration, the less positional, less perspectival assertion in line five “qe trop lauzar destriga,” that too much praise impedes, implicates. Swap a couple of consonants, scramble the letters, think of how “pro”—enough—might write itself into “trop”—too much—and try to find your way out of the fold between what I hold to be the case and what “praise,” or really “to praise,” holds up. 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.

Or sending it again: the second stanza—is it even really a stanza?—sends for, and to, someone else, Madompna de Foix, Milady of Foix, substituting a lady for a priest, a woman for a man, or adding each to the other, but this time honor is at stake, a reputation more than, say, a given content of knowledge, and the subjunctive in the second line suggests the shift in tone: may immoderation in praise not please her. It is not, in other words, that “desmesur” (the ecstatic opposite of courtly moderation) emphatically and objectively does not please; it is that it ought not—please may it not—please. Where “trop lauzar” introduced, in the first stanza, an inextricable phenomenal impediment, a phenomenological trick, and made praise into something else, or at least made it—and, with it, the speaker or subject or agent of praise—appear to be something else, here, instead or in addition, there is no “destrigar” but, rather, an apparently plain statement of being: too much praise does not “make” anything, despite Wilhelm’s translation, but—to my attentive but untrained eye—is, “es,” blame and failure, fault, default, lack. Too much praise is two

things. What is more—what is too much—one of those two things, blame, is what praise has become already, in its excessive failure to appear as praise, and the other of those two things is an almost impossible word: it is the word for failure but also—this is still, for one more word, a poem about words—the failure of a word, the failure of one word too many.

“Faillenza” defaults, fails to mean much of anything. Is this failure—I cannot ask this enough, no matter what Sordello might say—the feminine mode of the phenomenal inextrication of praise and blame in the first stanza? Where Guillem needs to learn that too much praise, in his hands or out of his mouth, will keep praise from appearing as such—will, in other words, amount to a crisis in the disclosure of truth, in the truth-value of speaking as a form of appearing, of becoming-recognizable—Milady of Foix faces a different problem, a problem of failure and pleasure, of the possible pleasures of immoderate praise and the kinds of shortcomings, the kinds of falling-short, that they might lead to or, in fact, ultimately, be. (My faux-philosophical shorthand for this: what Heidegger is to Guillem, Foucault is to Milady.) What could be pleasurable about immoderate praise, praise beyond measure that would nonetheless literally be immeasure, unmeasure, *within* praise? “Desmesur’en lauzor” presents this embeddedness acoustically, in its sibilance—des / mes / lauz—and its purring—sur / zor—as almost an invitation to hear something wild lurking within the very cadences of praise, the very phonic tissue of the word itself (although, after the first stanza, it is not easy to say what that word “itself” would be, how praise, conceptually or lexically, could ever cohere “enough”). There is something shockingly pleasurable about rolling this word and its variants—the poem also says “lauzar,” “lauzat,” “lauzador”—around in your mouth, or in mine. There’s a trick to it: even as it intensifies the sensory content—the sound, the buzz, the taste—of these variations on praise, repeating them also empties them of something, of something like meaning (although nothing like sense), speaks a kind of gorgeous failure at their heart and in their liquid, hissing cores.

## 2. SIRVENTES

Gorgeous is a praise word. It is evaluative (like *beautiful*) but it is also emphatic (like *gross*). It is, additionally, the object of a

terrifying pun in the city where I live. It plays tricks on you, tricks that Sordello would recognize: when I say, “That’s gorgeous,” I unfocus something in my powers of observation and expression; I don’t say, for example, that gorgeousness is the effect of a particular quantity of a particular color, weight, and texture of fabric draped at a particular angle from a particular part of your body—*gorge* or not—but I say, instead, that in place of this minute catalog I am substituting a more general affirmation. This kind of affirmation—call it praise—does something less and more and other than what mere, or meticulous, description would do. It becomes easy, in the universe of the gorgeous, in the universe of praise, to unhook this insistence—I affirm you—from what, or who, it insists upon. There is a distinct—or, better, a difficult to distinguish—pleasure to this unhooking. You go all gauzy in your gorgeousness. Suddenly my best academic diction fades into the crumbly, crooning consonants of Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall, late in the show. Do it again, praise says. But praise doesn’t stop there. This is part of its problem: praise doesn’t stop at all, particularly inasmuch as it is not, for Milday of Foix, “praise” so much as “praising,” “lauzar” rather than “lauzor.” (But who, really, can successfully keep those vowels straight?) There is an infinity to praise: the possibility, however distant, that it will just keep on, that the thing or person praised (the poem, the body, you) will disappear behind that screen of sibilance; that it will start to seem as though praise and blame are equivalent—tricked out in one another—because it will no longer be clear what they are about. Their object will have become unrecognizable, in the terms of the first stanza: truth will have failed to come to consciousness; manifestation—the becoming-apparent of this praiseworthy body (again, why not, you)—will have tripped over itself, failed to happen, broken its own knees.

This is why it is important to think and speak about praise: we need knees; we also need practices of affirmation. We need “desmesur”—we need it now more than ever—but we need to know its cost, the risks we take with truth, with truthful appearing, when praise is the language we choose to speak. It is not that praise and truth are opposed to one another; in fact, where truth could easily be misunderstood as an uncomplicated appearing—think of the juridical invocation of the whole truth and nothing but—so too could praise summon the fantasy of a desirable lack of complexity. *You’re gorgeous* would be a nice way *not* to say better, more particular, more adequate and attentive and, even, affirming things

about you. We've already seen that part of the problem with praise, for Sordello, is its flirtation with—its enactment of—*destrigar*, the trick of it, the enfoldedness or, let me come out and say it, the *complication* of praise with blame when value—and with it truth—leaves the building. What we need (and I insist on this rhetoric of need because of the poem's closing "faillenza") is an account of how the complications of praise may be thought, said, and sung together with the complications of truth and, yes, pleasure.

Such complications would, first of all, appear to implicate Peire Guillem: the place where truth takes back or reprises its awareness, the place where truth comes or comes to, is structurally and lexically analogous to the place where Guillem is, where the poem is initially sent: "lai on," "lai a.n." Truth's place—the place of its becoming-manifest—is, I would wager, a singular place, and a personal one: it is shot through with particular lives, with particular forms of being and speaking, with particular destinations and destinies (insofar as these latter are understood, anagrammatically and metonymically, as densities, too). To complicate means to fold something *with* something else: in this poem's account of complication, not only is the object of praise folded—wrapped up, quilted, woven—with its (or his or her) subject; not only is the practice of praise folded together with that of blame; but, interleaved with these, the place of courtly or philosophical abstraction—the place of truth—is folded together with the place of a proper name. For Catherine Keller, complication is a way of expressing, after Nicholas of Cusa (writing two hundred or so years after Sordello), the "folding together of all bodies in the infinite," which is "explicated in the finite bodies of the world."<sup>3</sup> Within the universe of this small poem, complication would seem to name the gathering up of praise and blame, subject and object, agent and patient, commonplaces and proper places, the personal and the impersonal, ladies and priests, in an economy whose principle would seem to be that nothing is absolutely distinct; indeed, that this lack of absolute distinction could itself be cause for pleasure. In contrast to (or, better, alongside and within) this practice of complication, explication would insist that everything is only *absolutely* (rather than relatively) distinct, only distinct insofar as the

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Keller, "The Cloud of the Impossible: Embodiment and Apophasis," in Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, eds., *Apophasis Bodies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 35.

horizon of this distinction is nothing less than infinite, nothing less than absolute. Explication—even the ordinary work of explication we call reading a poem—opens the complicated truth of our lives and our speech, that receding horizon, that fainting spell, out into the world. Explication calls a spade a spade (and not, for example, a priest), even as it does not entirely forget the ground from which this call issues.

Karmen MacKendrick puts it this way:

Open again, we are pulled back to the before of memory, to the fire of joyful desiring—not in finding a missing piece of ourselves, but in losing the tidiness of individuation. And returned to ourselves from and even alongside our own absence, we are complicated, enfolding within our selves perpetual reminders of forgetfulness . . . <sup>4</sup>

Praise’s potential for “desmesur” lies in the threat it poses to “the tidiness of individuation,” even as it insists on naming its individual destination or *destinatario*. Enough praise can easily become too much because the very criteria for distinguishing enough from too much fade, or fold, or flame, into the porous ground of a truth whose becoming-disclosed does not obey the demand for haste or clarity or convention. Praise is forgetful—it forgets, momentarily at least, the context that would make an affirmation into something quantifiable, something relative to other affirmations—and, thereby, remembers the absence, the “faillenza,” that propels it forward, that launches it over to Guillem or Milady or wherever it’s going, that makes it possible to speak at all. Other kinds of speaking don’t necessarily remember their absences quite so effectively: the sophistication of a different kind of idiom—call it a critical idiom—might miss the fact that it’s missing something. Praise, like love, never forgets that it’s missing something, never forgets that it is by definition forgetful. *You’re gorgeous*: when did I last say that? When did I last see you? I can’t remember. But you’re here, and so am I, and it feels good to say so, and for this last little sentence please let me forget that we won’t be here much longer.

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<sup>4</sup> Karmen MacKendrick, *Fragmentation and Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 54.

## 3. TENSO

Before I forget, let me acknowledge (let me allow to become recognizable) something else: that there's a difference, a specifically political difference, between praising something generally acknowledged as praiseworthy and praising something generally taken to be unworthy of praise. (Like Sordello's poem, most of our more modern practices of praise proceed from the conviction that the "lauzat" has a certain "valenza.") If part of the social work of praise is its construction of something like a momentary community of affirmation, then part of its social work, a less pleasant part of its social work, is the shorthand that praise becomes for reinforcing canons—of beauty, taste, style—that are also ways not just of testifying to the power of things in the world but of using that power on or against others. If my reputation will only be enhanced by praising you, that is one thing; if, by praising you, I put my reputation—or my job, or my life—on the line, then praise is not necessarily a different thing but a more complicated thing. Similarly, if someone blames what I praise—if what I praise is taken or mistaken as blameworthy—then some kind of crisis occurs not just socially—we find we can't agree—but phenomenally: the very body I want to bring to light, the very truth I want to allow to become visible, becomes blocked not, this time, by the compromised, complicated structure of praise itself but by your—or someone else's—unwillingness to participate in, to consent to, its disclosure. (When this blockage occurs in relation to bodies that have been historically and systematically all too blocked, all too invisible, it is impossible to ignore the political implications, and complications, of praise.) Part of the "faillenza" of praise, part of its failure and, I'd add, its fallenness, is that these kinds of fall-outs happen: I refuse to recognize the praiseworthiness of an object you've chosen—often I might do this in absent, forgetful ways rather than dramatically intentional ones—or you refuse, or just plain fail, to recognize the "valenza" of what I've praised. The stakes will be higher, or lower, depending on whether you are more or less powerful than I am, but, whatever the stakes, the politics of praise will be complicated: shot through—bang—with our blindness to one another, with our forgetfulness of the world and of ourselves, even as we reach back out to that world, even as we continue—how could we not?—to affirm.

In the conclusion to *Seducing Augustine*, MacKendrick raises the question of praise in the following terms:

Praise is not informational; indeed, its content may even in a way be tautological, as when Augustine in those opening lines praises God as being worthy of praise. Praise is language in excess of meaning, or at any rate of denotation, and yet, for Augustine, it is the very deepest, and most important, meaning of language as well.<sup>5</sup>

Sordello refines, or rewrites, the Augustinian tautology—he would, I imagine, be surprised to hear this—by affirming not the praiseworthy ground of praise but, rather, mutual enfoldedness of praiser and praised, too much and enough.<sup>6</sup> If praise, in the Augustinian tradition, is “not informational,” in the Sordellian tradition it is not individual: it is difficult to imagine a praise without interpenetration, without it becoming quite impossible to tell where you leave off, where I begin, and what the hell Milady of Foix is doing in the room. Between “pro” and “trop,” we trip over each other: what’s more, we call it good; we take this jumble and honor it (for our own honor or, as in line eight of Sordello’s poem, someone else’s). MacKendrick will go on to define praise as “the joy of speaking, and of writing; it is the joyful call in response to the call of joy.”<sup>7</sup> And this call, this response, is transforming; more precisely, it transfigures: for Augustine, in MacKendrick’s words, “the transfiguration of the humble is not an obliteration of it; weakness does not become power, nor humility pride, and the eternal divine in the passing flesh does not arrest its transience. Rather we are pulled toward oppositions we must both resist and embrace . . .”<sup>8</sup> What would it mean to think transfiguration rhetorically—that is, to think the figures we cross, in the speech of others and in our own speech, our speech which is never, at least

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<sup>5</sup> Karmen MacKendrick, “Seductive Praises,” in Virginia Burrus, Mark Jordan, and Karmen MacKendrick, *Seducing Augustine* (NY: Fordham UP, 2010), p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> This may be the place to acknowledge that Sarah Kay pointed out, in the questions following a panel at the 2009 meeting of the Modern Language Association, that enough and too much are effectively the same—or at least semantically contiguous—in most romance medieval vernaculars.

<sup>7</sup> MacKendrick, “Praises,” p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> MacKendrick, “Praises,” p. 118.

never properly, ours to own? What would it mean to praise these figures, to speak them in and as praise? And can we elude the coercion—the threat of the imperative—that praise so often, implicitly or explicitly, brings with it? Can we praise things in the world (or their ineffable horizon) without arresting their transience, their ability—perhaps even their tendency—to become other than what they are? And can we praise in such a way that praise itself would not be immune to transformation—into, among other things, blame, love-language, academic discourse, song—while nonetheless remaining praise, resisting and embracing its constitutive work (or unworking) of affirmation?

My instinct is that this would amount to recalibrating—or, again, *complicating*—a practice of affirmation as, instead or in addition, a practice of negation; that praise must unsay something, if it is to keep from smuggling all of the worst kinds of gods (crucially, not transcendent ones) through the back or even the front door. Praise, in this way, would need to be thought (and performed) apophatically in order to be praise at all. Luckily, Sordello has begun to gesture in this direction, perhaps in spite of himself, by enfolding praise and blame within one another, and his contemporary, Francis of Assisi, elsewhere says, and unsays, even more. Too much, even, or just enough: if a poetics of praise would be a poetics of the transfiguring (and transfigured) figure, the kinds of speech that give themselves over to something else, wrenched loose from themselves, unsaid and undone by their not-quite-object while nonetheless remaining inviolate (in MacKendrick’s words: not obliterated), then here is how that fundamentally apophatic practice looks in the Franciscan canticle of the creatures: “Altissimu, omnipotente, bonignore, / tue sono le laude” [Most high, all-powerful, good Lord / praise is yours].<sup>9</sup> The first lines of the canticle are a declaration of expropriation, of the extent to which poetry—since “laude” are praises but also, in fact, the lyric genre in which Francis is writing—does not belong to itself but is, instead, aboriginally “yours.” This “you,” ordinary, informal, is also—paradoxically and paradigmatically—the least ordinary, literally the most high of all possible objects and owners of praise. And there’s no point in glossing over the ownership: this is a lord, if a good one; this is a noble defined in relation to hierarchical position and power (if not, as with the lady of Foix, pleasure). But

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<sup>9</sup> This text of the canticle comes from some dimly lit corner of the internet.

slowly—or not even slowly—the hierarchy (God’s literal highness) becomes frayed, as it repeats itself in the first line of the second stanza: “ad te solo, Altissimo, se konfano / et nullu homo enne dignu / te mentovare” [to you alone, Most High, do they conform / and no man is worthy / to mention you]. At first glance, it’s more of the same. The “you” this poem addresses is absolute, alone in some all-surpassing altitude; higher than any kite. Yet, alongside this assertion of God’s singular relationship to (and grounding of) praise, something else is happening. No one, Francis’s speaker affirms, is worthy to mention you. The question of praiseworthiness takes the unexpected form of asking not whether the object praised is worthy *of* praise but, instead, whether the subject of praise is worthy *to* praise. And Francis answers: no. There is no possible equivalence of praise to its object, *pace* Sordello, because there is no subject of praise—strictly speaking—capable of evaluation, no subject of praise whose own “valenza” has not somehow been called radically into question, set against—alone—a transcendent ground. When we praise, it is not that we are worthless; it is that our worth—our “valenza”—is not our own. When we praise—as when we love—we affirm the radical contingency of our selves, a contingency that somehow manages to speak itself most forcefully, most beautifully, in the practice of affirming someone or something else. Somehow we continue to mention you; somehow we continue to speak and sing and, even, praise; but not for a second are we entitled to this; not for a second does this speech—does anything—belong to us. Our expropriation is such that we are nothing when we praise.

#### 4. CANSO

What would happen if we were to keep this emphasis on the unquestionable praiseworthiness of the object while, at the same time, extending its reach beyond superlatives, beyond the highest and the all-powerful? If my words do not belong to me, must they necessarily belong, instead, to you? Must their ground—and their object—be feudal, on the one hand, or parochial, on the other? Can we think a praise—a praise that would continue to call us radically into question—directed no longer necessarily toward a lord but toward something or someone with which or whom these words are made, “con-fatti,” complicated, mixed up? What would it mean

to think the conformity, the togetherness and the co-shaping, of the voice that praises and the object, the horizon, of that praise?

The most famous line of the canticle, the first line of the third stanza, proclaims, “Laudato sie, mi signore, cum tucte le tue creature” [Praised be you, my lord, with all your creatures]. “Laudato sie,” the poem’s signature move, relinquishes its hold on the praise it offers: “may you be praised” is, after all, as different from “I will praise you” or “Praise him” as it is from “may it not please her” (à la Sordello): from the former because there is no guarantee that the praise will happen, much less that it will reach its destination; from the latter because what is wished for, suspended, left hanging is not an interdiction but a recognition, not a no but a yes. Furthermore, this gamble in your direction—the thrown subjunctive, the wish and the exhortation—is also, strangely, beautifully, bound up with the ties that bind creatures to one another and to you, even as the poem’s initial expropriation—these praises are not my own—gives way to a paradoxical assertion that the lord is nonetheless (and *pace* Brandy and Monica this time) mine. If we hear that “mine” in the most radical sense—as necessarily co-implicated with the “you” who structures and enables the very language of the poem—something explodes inside ownership. You are mine. You are a minefield. And that small explosion—I can’t help wondering—must have something to do with how I am bound up not just with you, whoever you are, but also with these bodies, human and inhuman, animate and otherwise, that are both near and distant from me. We are inextricable. I can’t praise you enough.<sup>10</sup>

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