

WHEN DEATH BECAME A CREATURE: SAINT  
FRANCIS & SISTER DEATH

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1.

Saint Francis—dressed in his rough and grizzled robes—reaches his hands into the air. He is destabilized, as though the ecstatic fervor coursing through his veins (pulsing just under the surface of his translucent skin) might set his lumbering and bony body to flight. He looks to the birds. He is fixated on the way their wings cut, knife-like, through the thick air. Creatures, each one of them, who do not seem to recall their point of departure. He is watching their small and tenacious eyes that glint like polished onyx. He is a madman in the marketplace: he has something to tell them. *I know*, he wants to say, *where this liberty to fly comes from*.

2.

Saint Francis—dressed in his rough and grizzled robes—reclines. His eyes are closed. His hood is carefully tucked around his head and covers his ears. There is the suggestion of a smile on his lips. Friars, on their knees, kiss at the soles of his dead feet. The *transitus* must have, already, begun. Or does the soup of his soul still keep him warm? A nobleman, in folds of silk, kneels by his side. The four fingers of his left hand are sunk into the sacred wound between Francis's ribs. Doubting, we are meant to think. But there is no blood. Into what other world does this gash lead? We cannot see the expression on the nobleman's face. But his fingers, frozen into this fresco by Giotto, have been there for hundreds of years—transfixed.

SAINT FRANCIS was a friend to all creatures. Or so the legend goes. He is now—by the writ of Pope John Paul II—patron saint of ecology. The historian Lynn White Jr., in his mythical condemnation of Christianity as a force of ecological destruction, made a hero of Francis. He was, White argued, a “left-wing” heretic—one who sought to “set up a democracy of all God’s creatures.”<sup>1</sup> Other Christian saints, says White, wanted “dominance over creatures.”<sup>2</sup> But Francis, White felt, was something different.<sup>3</sup> Francis, instead, beckons us down the path to a harmonious sense of cosmic connection. Or so this particular story goes.

This is, when we skim over the surface, what we might immediately see in the *Laudes Creaturarum*—commonly translated as the “Praise of Creatures” or “Canticle of Brother Sun.”<sup>4</sup> It is one of the few written texts properly attributed to Francis himself, a text that tantalizes with a glimpse into the sanctified mind. Francis addresses each of the elements (earth, wind, water, fire) as his brothers and sisters, evoking a sense of ancestral familiarity with the world itself. Francis even—through a turn of phrase—renders *death* a fellow creature. Death becomes a creature he can live in fellowship with, rather than fear. Is this Francis, the eco-warrior, who *liberates* death from a horrific state of abjection? Or is this Francis, the terrified human being, who seeks to *subject* death to a creaturely, mortal, condition?

Françoise Dastur argues that Christianity maintains a paradoxical relation to death: one that is simultaneously a recognition and a denial. The figure of a dying, wounded Christ on the cross places death at the heart of this faith. “The spectacle of the Passion of the Christ, which Christians constantly have before their eyes, endlessly enjoins them to remember that death is what

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, New Series, 155 (1967): 1203-1207, 1206.

<sup>2</sup> White Jr., “The Historical Roots,” 1207.

<sup>3</sup> I will not, here, entertain the copious critiques of White’s rather simplistic characterization of both Francis and Christianity. They are many. Suffice it to say that I use White’s analysis here because I do find it—in spite of the polemics—indicative of a reading of Francis that pardons him from sins that even fellow saints have been accused of.

<sup>4</sup> All English translations of this poem are borrowed from: Alessandro Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love: Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

constitutes the very essence of their being. To live as a Christian is to live in the imminence of death.”<sup>5</sup> And yet, central as death might be, it is only a passage. In the hierarchy of creation, death itself becomes more fleeting than God’s eternity. Christianity, Dastur argues, relates to death in “the dialectical form of a recognition that is at the same time a denial.”<sup>6</sup> Francis embraces Sister Death as a fellow creature, in recognition of some mutual mortality. But, in doing this, he rejects the power that death might otherwise have over him. Does he fall, neatly, into this pattern of paradoxical rejection and recognition that Dastur illuminates?

In this dynamic, Dastur argues, this Christian paradox of death continues to re-create death as the ultimate scandal. It continues to abject death. But is this, truly, the case with Francis’s *lauda*? Does Francis’s paradoxical relation to death ultimately resolve into a kind of violent synthesis, where death’s ecological import is denied and rejected? Is Francis’s kinship with death ultimately without camaraderie? Or does this patron saint of the ecological open a real space for death—as a creature—to live, move, and have a being?

*Altissimu omnipotente, bon  
signore,  
tue so le laude, la gloria e  
l'onore et benedictione:  
ad te solu, altissimo, se  
confanno,  
et nullu homo ene dignu te  
mentovare.*

*Most high, omnipotent, and  
kindly Lord,  
yours are the praise, the glory,  
all blessings and all fame.  
To you alone, most High, do  
they belong  
as there is here no man worthy  
to speak your name.*

The text opens with an invocation to the Most High. This song of praise is directed: its movement is ever upward, ever inward, ever intoxicated, ever disturbed by the elusive work of a Most High. The trajectory of this praise is not into the radical diversity of creaturely bodies. This song of praise is not meant to celebrate creatures *for the sake of* creatures. The bodies of creatures will light up in the following stanzas. But they are not illuminated

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<sup>5</sup> Francoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Robert Vallier (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Dastur, *How Are We*, 35.

for their own sake. They are illuminated for what they might otherwise obscure. They are praised for their roots, their origins, their beginnings, their ground, their superstructure. They are praised *not* because they are strange or particular. Rather, these strange and particular creatures are praised because they are shards of, instantiations of, a particularity that resounds in and around all creatures: the Most High. “Our age tends to regard Saint Francis romantically as a person who was kind to animals and friendly toward birds,” Edward Armstrong wrote in the early 1970s. “But when emphasis on this aspect of his character involves failure to stress his complete devotion to his Lord and Master, the outcome is a very distorted picture of the man and his message.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, he is friend to all creatures—not only animals, but the force of the wind, the earth’s elements. Their friendship, their kinship, is mediated by the Most High.

It is precisely this Most High that gives structure and shape to the complex world of creatures. The Most High brings unity to creaturely difference. Phillip Sheldrake argues that Duns Scotus’s concept of the perfection of “the particular” was influenced, above all, by the tenor of Francis’s canticle. “Francis experienced each particular element of creation,” Sheldrake explains, “not merely Creation as an abstract whole.”<sup>8</sup> It is precisely this dignity Francis grants to each particular creature that leads to Scotus’s *haecceitas*—“thisness”—says Sheldrake. Thisness, Sheldrake intimates, obliges God to find a place “among the rejected garbage of this world.”<sup>9</sup> Every particular thing *matters*. All matter, no matter how filthy, how useless, has a place. Not even in the furthest recesses of the landfill of creation is anything lost. And yet, this garbage is *perfect garbage*. It betrays a particular glow of the light. Because the Most High itself collapses into, decays into, the garbage of this world, we celebrate its thisness. The lights that flicker in the garbage piles of this world obey their hushed and almost incomprehensible command to glow.

There is, perhaps, a kind of immanent and topographical quality to this Most High. The structure that is imposed upon the

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<sup>7</sup> Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1973), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Sheldrake, “Human Identity and the Particularity of Place,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1 (2001): 43-64.

<sup>9</sup> Sheldrake, “Human Identity,” 60.

set of all creatures is that of a thisness that is seen less as *imposed from above* and more as a kind of installation of *aboveness* into each thing. As Giorgio Agamben describes Almaric of Bena's interpretation of the phrase "God is in all things", God does not so much "take place" or have a place. Rather, God becomes the "taking place of the entities." God becomes, "the being-worm of the worm, the being-stone of the stone."<sup>10</sup> So it is, perhaps, with the thisness of creatures in the wake of Francis's Most High.

It is the glow of this Most High, argues D.H.S. Nicholson, that makes Francis a mystic. Mysticism, as Nicholson describes it, carries as its sole end and aim "the necessity for the annihilation of self as precedent to that knowledge of God."<sup>11</sup> What happens after this annihilation, argues Nicholson, is not a dissolution but, instead, the discovery of a new thread that weaves the fabric of creation all over again. "There is thus a unity running through the mystic's life . . . a thread upon which his actions are strung which leads finally to Deity." It is upon the discovery of this thread, says Nicholson, that a mystic like Francis discovers he is, "supremely free, inasmuch as he can be confronted with no circumstances where God cannot be found."<sup>12</sup> It is this thin and elusive thread of the Most High that Francis invites us to take up (or to see as *already* woven into the fabric of our being) as we embark on this song of praise.

*Laudato sie, mi Signore, cun  
tutte le tue creature,  
spezialmente messer lo frate  
Sole,  
lo quale è iorno, e allumini noi  
per lui.  
Ed ello è bello e radiante cun  
grande splendore:  
de te, Altissimo, porta  
significazione.*

*Praised, O my Lord, with all  
your creatures be,  
most especially master brother  
sun,  
who dawns for us, and You  
through him give light:  
and fair he is and shining with  
mighty luminescence,  
And carries, O most High, a  
glimpse of what You are.*

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<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 14.5.

<sup>11</sup> D.H.S. Nicholson, *The Mysticism of Saint Francis of Assisi* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1923), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholson, *Mysticism of Saint Francis*, 315.

Praise is built, formally, into the body of the text itself. The *Laudes Creaturarum* is a formal echo of the Latin *lauda*, a liturgical prayer used at the morning mass. But this *lauda* was of the vernacular Italian variety—meant to be performed as minstrelsy, among the people, in the streets. The vernacular *lauda*, says Alessandro Vettori, had an “inelegant, rough quality” that made it appealing as a form of popular piety. This facilitated the transfer of high-church morality into new pockets in the social fabric. “What the mendicant movements did on a sociological level, the *lauda* did on a catechetical level.”<sup>13</sup> There is, of course, a paucity of reliable information about this particular *lauda*. A number of hagiographers have testified to what Vettori calls the “melic nature” of the text—that its form indicates an intent to be sung. But particular details (the melody itself, for example) have been lost.<sup>14</sup> The sole element that, now, seems to give this *lauda* a rhythm of its own is the litanic structure carried through the repetition of the “Praised be” (*Laudato si*). The repetition of praise shapes the text through the “sweet tyranny” of its litany.<sup>15</sup>

There has been controversy, among commentators, as to the correct translation of the Italian *per*. Should Francis be understood, here, to be praising God “for” creatures?<sup>16</sup> Or “through” creatures? To praise the divine *for* the creatures would be to take each creature as evidence of its creator’s greatness. This is what Roger Sorrell describes as the “causal interpretation.”<sup>17</sup> Each creature is a sign that points to its initial cause. Sorrell argues that the Italian *per* should function, here, more like the French *par*: to be read as “by” or “through.” God, in other words, would be praised *through* creatures, *via* creatures. The creature becomes more than a sign or a signal but, itself, a medium of transfer with agency. This, Sorrell

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<sup>13</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, xv.

<sup>14</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 65.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase “sweet tyranny” is pulled from Leo Spitzer’s commentary on the text: Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 74.

<sup>16</sup> It should be mentioned, perhaps, that the “per” we find in the Catholic Credo (when it reads, “per quem omnia facta sunt”) typically translates as, “by whom all things were made.” This places the agency on the side of the creator figure. Following this logic, perhaps, the *per* that we read here would also carry the association of reading as such a “by” or “through.”

<sup>17</sup> Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 115.

argues, is more indicative of Francis’s stance that reverence and praise for creatures also revealed “creation’s autonomous beauty and worth.”<sup>18</sup> I submit, however, that whatever autonomy creatures have in this schema, it is fragile. Creatures may be autonomous in relation to one another, for instance. The human creature might have few justifiable reasons to serve as tyrant of the created world. But this creaturely autonomy is always capped by the mutual subjection of creatures to the power of their god. To keep open the tension in this potentially ambiguous preposition is to keep that autonomy teetering on the high wire.

The stakes, here in the opening stanzas of the *lauda*, are indeed high. Which is to say that Francis welcomes us into the world of the text at the pinnacle of creation. We open with a reference to the Most High, and we descend into an invocation of the sun. We begin a tour of the hierarchy of creation. The sun earns the title of “master”—a figure of power and authority. The sun stands as, quite literally, a sign of the divine. To begin with a figure of light is to echo the creation story in the Genesis narrative: *let there be light*, God commands, and the sun snaps to attention. The sun was there at the beginning of the creation. The sun is quite nearly coeval with God himself. The sun might be the *logos*—the principle of life that twists and winds its way through the rest of the creation. The sun might be the Son—Christ, that Sun of God.

*Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora  
Luna a le Stelle:  
in cielo l’hai formate clarite e  
preziose e belle.*

*Praised be, my Lord, for sister  
moon and every star:  
in heaven You made them  
precious and clear and fair.*

The sun is, moreover, a man. The sun—in this familial cosmos—is the brotherly element. Now we meet the woman who lives in the shadows of the sun: the moon, sister moon. In the *lauda*, says Edward Armstrong, “sun, fire, and weather are masculine because the qualities associated with them are power and robustness; the moon, water, and earth are praised for their gentleness and generosity, the moon for her charity, water for her cleanliness.”<sup>19</sup> It is sex, gender—the old union of opposites—that makes this an active cosmos. The oscillation back and forth between the masculine and

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<sup>18</sup> Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic*, 231.

the feminine elements will now give the *lauda* an additional rhythm, below that “sweet tyranny” of the litanical beat of praise. We alternate back and forth between power and virtue, they temper one another. And yet, however much they may harmonize, this pairing of sexual opposites also casts the text’s subjections into sharper relief.

Vettori argues that this pairing of sexual opposites makes this a mystical text of sexual union. The binomial work of the male-female gendered pair is reminiscent, he says, of the Garden of Eden. We begin to sense, in the text, the aromas of this prelapsarian paradise. This is the almost saccharine perfume of melancholy. “The interactive structure of the two genders mirrors the love uniting mankind to divinity,” argues Vettori.<sup>20</sup> There is the suggestion of a near completeness in this tension between gendered opposites. “The matrimonial union of two genders coincides with the inextricable bond of fraternity and sorority uniting all creation.”<sup>21</sup> Francis seeks “the recovery of the harmony governing the universe at creation.”<sup>22</sup> It is the bifurcation of the earth into gendered pairs that will, in part, help him to accomplish this.

His craving for a paradisiacal state may, in fact, *also* be apparent in Francis’s deep kinship with animals (an element of the cosmos that is, in fact, conspicuously absent from this *lauda*.) Mircea Eliade argues that kinship with animals reveals an ecstatic desire to return to a prelapsarian state. This becomes, Eliade argues, especially apparent when we look at the example of Francis.<sup>23</sup> Eliade compares Francis to the shaman who, in trance, uses a secret language (sometimes referred to as the “language of the animals”<sup>24</sup>). In being *like* animals, in being uniquely capable of speaking their language the mystic (as shaman), is pulled “out of the general condition of ‘fallen’ humanity” and is somehow permitted “to re-enter the *illud tempus* described to us by the paradise myths.” The ability to communicate with animals, in other

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<sup>20</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1960).

<sup>24</sup> Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, 61.

words, is meant to be interpreted as a sign that the mystic has, “a spiritual life much richer than the merely human life of ordinary mortals.”<sup>25</sup> Francis’s sense of creaturely life, his understanding of the deep ancestral kinship at work in creaturely life (across the elemental spectrum), and its harmonies, might be read as a sign of his ecstasies, or his mystical aims.

But it is important—especially when we are, after all, talking about the animal bodies of creatures—not to let the sexual tones in this harmony be deafened, either. The sexual tensions of the poem become more apparent, perhaps, when we think of Francis as something like a courtly love poet. Francis steps into the role of Troubadour for God. The glorification of the female was a conceptual innovation of courtly love poetry that Francis mimicked in other contexts. This was, says Vettori, the nature of Francis’s reverence for Lady Poverty. “Although earlier orders had viewed celibacy as a spiritual marriage to the Church, or to Christ, Franciscanism revises the concept by introducing the intermediary value of poverty and allegorizing her as a lady, a woman who preserves features and characteristics of distant and aloof courtly love ladies.”<sup>26</sup> The Franciscan friars were offered the image of a woman who is dingy, without jewels, grown gaunt from a lack of food. But yet, their devotion “resembles the relation of male lover to female beloved in courtly love, in which subordination and service were absolute prerequisites for participating in the new way of loving.”<sup>27</sup> In courtly love, in the reverence for Lady Poverty, the faint promise of sexual union (of an end to desire) is enough to justify the subordination of the male (the lover, the friar) to the female (holy poverty, or the feminine symbolic figurehead of feudal authority.) This is a rhetoric that drives sexual submission.

Here in the *lauda*, however, the female is passive. She is the moon: patient, quiet, hiding herself in cycles. Here, it is the female element who becomes submissive.

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<sup>25</sup> Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 47.

<p><i>Laudato si, mi Signore, per frate Vento, a per Aere e Nubilo e Sereno e onne tempo, per lo quale a le tue creature dai sustentamento.</i></p>	<p><i>Praised be, my Lord, for brother wind, for the air and clouds and every kind of weather by which You give your creatures nourishment.</i></p>
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In spite of the fact that the masculine elements here are indeed those of power (wind, weather), submission is not to the male elements of the cosmos, either. The function of the turbulence of wind, air, or clouds, is not to demand obedience but rather to serve: to nourish. The harmony of the binomial pair (the male/female, the brother/sister, the sun/moon) is, together, subordinate to the power they should praise. In their union, in the pairing of sexual opposites, they are in the sway of a holy kind of back-and-forth. This is the paradisiacal pairing of the Garden. Together, the pair of opposites is to submit to a state of initial condition—in their mutuality, they both maintain an awareness of the condition of possibility for this mutuality (their creation). There is something, perhaps, more Trinitarian about this dynamic. The pair of opposites is not complete without the third—their condition of possibility, the unifying or synthesizing dynamic that continues to draw out and sustain the tensions between them.

<p><i>Laudato si, mi Signore, per sor Aqua, la quale è molto utile e umile a preziosa e casta.</i></p>	<p><i>Praised be, my Lord, for our sister water, which is so useful, humble, and precious and pure.</i></p>
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The role, however, of the female elements is distinct. The metaphysical characteristics of these gendered elements are loaded with function and responsibility. The female elements of creation bear the weight of the virtues. While it is the responsibility of brother sun to fuel the elements of the universe, and the responsibility of brother wind to mix them up and nourish them into action, it is the responsibility of sister water to purify, to make virtuous. It is through sister water that humility and purity work their way into the cosmos.

The female factors in the cosmos appear to be responsible for actually living out (or embodying) the virtues themselves. What

Mary Daly called “phallic morality” was a celebration, or glorification, of the virtuous behaviors expected from the subordinate (such as, quintessentially, women): a sacrificial kind of love, deep and reverential humility.<sup>28</sup> Although the ideology of this “phallic morality” was to demand such virtuous behavior across the gender divide, this ethic came to be seen as quintessentially feminine, passive. To be virtuous was to be subordinate, passive, feminine. Here in the *lauda*, the female flow of water carries the silt of this virtue as she rushes on toward purification. But the glorification of passivity need not be aqueous. For Catherine of Genoa—a female mystic who found herself made pure only by the power of divine love—it was fire that purified. The “fire of God’s love” that tears through the soul was designed, she suggested, to strip it of “imperfections” like “a dross.”<sup>29</sup> As fire purifies metal by molting it, casting off the scum, God purifies the soul, she suggests.

*Laudato si, mi Signore, per  
frate Foco,  
per lo quale enn’allumini la  
nocte:  
ed ello è bello e iocondo e  
robusto e forte.*

*Praised be, my Lord, for brother  
fire  
through which you lend us luster  
through the night,  
and he is fair and merry, and  
vigorous and strong.*

In brother fire, however, we encounter strength and vigor. But the brotherhood that Francis invokes—this cosmic friendship between men—should not be likened to that of fraternal societies. Francis’s obsession with brotherhood, argues G.K. Chesterton, “will be entirely misunderstood if it is understood in the sense of what is often called camaraderie; the back-slapping sort of brotherhood.” What we see, here, is not power back-slapping with power—the kinship of fraternal order. The kind of brotherhood that we see in Francis is a folkloric variety that builds and develops in “that [same] fairy borderland” where he dreamt about flowers and animals. It was a brotherhood of pious politeness, argues

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<sup>28</sup> See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

<sup>29</sup> Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory: The Spiritual Dialogue* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979), 80.

Chesterton, which would have driven Francis to apologize to a cat for stepping on its tail.<sup>30</sup>

The tale of Francis's troubled encounter with brother fire, toward the end of his short life, reveals that Francis did not hope the fraternity to be unidirectional. It was not, merely, a courtesy that *he* extended to the other creatures of the world. As Chesterton describes it, Francis's diseased eyes were on the verge of blindness—to which the only remedy at the time seemed to have been to cauterize his eyes, without anesthetic. "In other words it was to burn his living eyeballs with a red-hot iron." When the iron was brought close to his face, threatening with its hot, hot heat, Francis reportedly "rose as with an urbane gesture and spoke as to an invisible presence: 'Brother Fire, God made you beautiful and strong and useful; I pray you to be courteous with me.'" It is a soft command—one that recognizes the superior power of the opponent, but attempts a domestication of that power nonetheless. Francis demands politeness from brother fire, much as he is willing to treat this brother with courtesy and respect. Chesterton charges that this moment was one of the "masterpieces" in the "art of life."<sup>31</sup> It is artful in its mythic, meticulous politeness. But I think it also reveals the extent to which Francis saw himself as something like God's circus trainer in the wilderness of the creaturely world. Francis was not a man at the mercy of the ravenous beauty of the creaturely world—he used tools that would allow him to discipline and punish, to control, to bring about the cold and fierce beauty of cosmic order.

His friendship with nonhuman creatures was often animated by forms of domestication. In the legend of the wolf of Gubbio, Francis was rumored to have traveled to the city of Gubbio, where a wolf was haunting the outskirts of the city. Citizens reportedly left their houses only when armed. Yet no one was able to chase the wolf away. Francis trekked out into the woods alone, making a sign of the cross at the wolf as it lunged for him. This drove the animal to fall at Francis's feet. Francis began to address him as "Brother Wolf" and proceeded to scold him for the crimes he'd perpetuated in the region. The two of them returned to the city, together, giving Francis cause to preach a sermon.

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<sup>30</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1924), 139.

<sup>31</sup> Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 137.

What this story would seem to indicate, argues David Salter, is that Francis “would appear to have recognized that the creature was an autonomous being in his own right, who was entitled to be treated by humans with respect and understanding, and not simply as an inanimate object with no independent claim to life.”<sup>32</sup> The wolf was not to be chased after with knives or arrows, in other words, but was to be reasoned with and treated courteously. Salter suggests, however, that this story does not present us with an example of Francis’s democratic and egalitarian relationship with nonhuman creatures. Francis was condemning the wolf’s “bestial” behavior and was civilizing him, humanizing him, domesticating him. This was a form of “moral censure” that insisted the wolf “curb his wolfish instincts” and seek to recover the prelapsarian state of innocence that Francis and his fellow Christians sought. What this looks like, argues Salter, is something more like the re-establishment of human dominion, rather than an egalitarian democracy of all creatures.<sup>33</sup> It looks, perhaps, like a demand that nonhuman creatures become subject to a world crafted by the humans. There is something of this, too, in the story of Francis’s sermon to the birds. Commanding that the birds give praise to the creator who gave them such beauty in flight, Francis takes on the glimmer of a missionary evangelist to another continent. He speaks another language, he brings them—with a strangely intense delight—an alien god. It rings with the tone of a colonial enterprise.

Roger Sorrell has suggested that the Franciscan view of creation has much in common with the Cistercian view: both orders sought to celebrate the harmonic patterns woven into the creation. But Sorrell finds the sharpest point of distinction in the fact that the Cistercians were driven to “reconcile a deep reverence for creation with a need for technical domination of the environment for protection, security, and support.” Sorrell’s theory is that this is because the Cistercians were a settled, monastic community. The Franciscan approach, Sorrell argues, “arose from a more primitively organized social grouping very much attached to a life of wandering and individual meditative retreat.”<sup>34</sup> Sorrell

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<sup>32</sup> David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters With Animals in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, U.K. ; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Sorrell, *Saint Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 37.

believes that this drove a more “humble intimacy with the natural environment.”<sup>35</sup> Yet doesn’t this make something of a noble savage of Francis himself? Nomadic life is not without its own forms of technical, environmental, domination. Certainly, Francis’s techniques of control are subtle and abstract. But this does not mean they are nonexistent.

Francis’s relationship with Brother Ass (his scornfully affectionate nickname for his own animal body) is both similar to, and different from, his treatment of nonhuman creatures. That is to say, Francis demands of his animal body the same sort of strict discipline and control that he expected of nonhuman animals. His animal body was, in a sense, another creature to control and civilize. But that he exercises this control on what is most intimate to him complicates the narrative that Francis was merely seeking a form of dominion and control that would serve to *please* the purely human.

Francis was an ascetic whose spirituality was dependent upon various forms of bodily subjection. The name “Brother Ass,” of course, makes reference to a domesticated creature who was long notorious for its ability to patiently bear the weight of a load, and the crack of a whip.<sup>36</sup> It was also, however, an animal that was seen—in medieval culture—as able to bear its load with a certain amount of bliss. Control of the impulse of his own animal body was a necessity, for Francis. He was known for his resistance to satiate his body’s needs—with either food or water. He resisted sufficiency. As a mendicant, he would force himself to eat the piles of domestic refuse that were made available to him. On the rare occasion that he was brought a delicious treat, he was rumored to mix the food with ashes.<sup>37</sup> To cultivate a love of poverty meant that his body would never experience the sensual pleasures of food. He was training himself, domesticating himself, into a life without

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<sup>35</sup> Sorrell, *Saint Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Francis’s reference to the ass carries something of the jest in it, as well. The humor, certainly, was not lost on him. Medieval culture celebrated the ass as a symbol of folly. The medieval *asinaria festa* (the “feast of the ass”) was accompanied by the “*Orientis Partibus*” (the “song of the ass”) and congregants were invited to, “banish ill will and gloom”. See Max Harris, *Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 101.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholson, *Mysticism of Saint Francis*, 204.

gratifications. Yet, like an ass, he bore the burden of this discipline with a certain kind of joy.

The aim of Francis's bodily discipline, however, extended beyond the realm of gustatory delights. He was not merely training his animal body to grow wholly unaccustomed to the riches, the delight, of food. He was civilizing his own body, disciplining his own body, to be close to, respectful of, intimate with, bodies that were excluded from civilization proper. I am thinking, especially, of the story of Francis and the leper. In the European Middle Ages, of course, those inflicted with leprosy were quarantined—kept at a distance from the social order. Lepers were, in some locations, adorned with a bell that warned of their approach. In some local mythologies they were understood to hover indiscriminately between life and death—they were understood to be something like ghosts. This fear—of a body affected by leprosy—was shared by a younger Francis. His decision to embrace a leper is often pointed to as a crucial foothold in his spiritual path: a road to Damascus moment.<sup>38</sup> Nicholson argues that this was, “his first act of violent self-control”—an act that would shape his bodily practices for the rest of his life.<sup>39</sup> This was a form of corporeal domination that did not protect him but, instead, made him more vulnerable. It was a civilizing act that was set in contradistinction to the dominant societal injunctions: to keep the fabric of the social order clean, safe, free of disease.<sup>40</sup>

There are strange tensions at play in Francis's text. Creaturely bodies—the flesh of actually existing, real things—are important for what they reveal about Francis's mystical vision. Indeed, they are beautiful for the harmonious threads that weave them together—that reveal their interdependence. It is an interdependence that connects creaturely bodies to a strange ancestral web. And yet what is also revealed, upon closer examination, are the marks left

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example (where this exact vocabulary is used) Paul M. Allen and Joan deRis Allen, *Francis of Assisi's Canticle of the Creatures: A Modern Spiritual Path* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 43.

<sup>39</sup> Nicholson, *Mysticism of Saint Francis*, 203.

<sup>40</sup> This can be complicated, somewhat, when we observe the fact that according to legend, the body of the actual leper disappears after Francis's embrace. That the leper was merely a miraculous instantiation, rather than an actual creaturely body, would suggest that Francis was never truly at risk anyhow. This makes the aim and effect of the narrative somewhat more ambiguous.

behind when this fine and fragile web pulls them together. When we look at what *happens* to creaturely bodies, in this mystical vision, we do not miss the subtle pain it inflicts upon them. We cannot quite cast a blind eye to the price they pay for harmony.

The body itself, argues Arnold Davidson, was important in the case of Francis for the way that it was able to “physicalize” his mysticism. In the event of miracles or mystical states, “it was all too easy to reinterpret psychologically these mystical states and to consider them as nothing more than excesses of the imagination.”<sup>41</sup> Davidson sees this happening, especially, with Francis’s stigmata. The stigmata, “marked, one could say, a new stage in the history of the miraculous.”<sup>42</sup> It was able, Davidson suggests, to impart something more concrete about Francis’s mysticism into the iconography of the saint. “The iconography of the stigmatization much more directly depicts the vision as a corporeal one. An imaginative vision, being produced in the beholder’s imagination, could not be seen by other people. If more than one person sees the vision, then it must be a corporeal vision, whereby the object exists outside the people beholding it.”<sup>43</sup> The creaturely body, in Francis’s mysticism, was a stage that was being set—one that revealed evidence of the divine that any of us could reach out and touch. Does Francis’s marshalling of the elements in this *lauda* not perform a similar function? *Revelation is everywhere, to be seen, everything we can touch*, it suggests. The divine is, everywhere, physicalized. The thread of the Most High is even woven into that which terrifies: the burn of the fire, the ravages of disease, a gaping wound. If we are unafraid to pull close, we begin to see how it ties us together. And how it pinches, when it does so.

*Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora  
nostra matre Terra,  
la quale ne sustenta e governa,  
  
e prouce diversi fructi con  
coloriti fiore ed erba.*

*Praised be, my Lord, for our  
sister, mother earth,  
which does sustain and govern  
us,  
and brings forth diverse fruits  
with colored buds and grass.*

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<sup>41</sup> Arnold I. Davidson, “Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 451-480, 477.

<sup>42</sup> Davidson, “Miracles of Bodily Transformation,” 456.

<sup>43</sup> Davidson, “Miracles of Bodily Transformation,” 475.

It may, as I have been suggesting, be unwise to pastoralize Francis. But as this stanza of his *lauda* makes clear—the language he uses makes it easy to do so. The Francis of legend was gaping with the sacred wounds of stigmata, revels in his own self-starvation, was driven to kiss lepers. But the tone of this comforting *lauda* is clean and bright. The “sweet tyranny” of the repetitive, liturgical scheme, gives the song its own sense of comfort. Beyond that, the imagery itself is pretty and perfumed—enough to pacify. The unsettling power, the potential terror of all that is fecund, is not articulated. It is not given imagery. But Francis’s own linguistic pastoralization of the great big mother seems to be a form of sanitization.

Francis praises, here, the feminine “sister mother” he calls earth. Not only does she nurture and sustain, but he grants her a marginal degree of authority in his claim that she “governs” us. Yet this authority is also undermined by her very title. She is not *simply* a mother—she is not *enough* to be a mother. Instead, she is a “sister mother”—a title that undermines her motherliness by softening it with the fresh, young face of sisterliness. This is a sharp contrast with brother sun, who receives the title of “messer”—a title that is placed *before* the appellation “brother.”

The abject, as I have suggested, plays a role in Francis’s mystical vision—his encounter with the leper, the legend of his stigmata. These signs of abjection are celebrated as icons of self-dissolution. But it is notably absent from this *lauda*. The abject, as Julia Kristeva describes it, plays a crucial role in the annihilation of self that is so often used to describe the mystic. The writer of abjection, she claims, exists in a condition of “waste” or rejection. The writer of abjection *becomes* waste.<sup>44</sup> The abject takes us to the very border of our condition as living creatures—to the point where we might come into our closest encounters with death. “Mystical Christendom turned this abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God,” she writes.<sup>45</sup> Certainly the life of Francis—as it takes its shape from other texts—would give evidence of this sort of abjection. But this *lauda*, in its clean brightness, seems to give none.

The dampening of this sister mother’s power, however, might give some indication of how Francis—with intent—seems to be

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<sup>44</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 13.

<sup>45</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

cleaning this mystical text of signs of abjection. If it was a song to be sung on the street, it was meant to pacify and give comfort. And the images of fecundity with the power to comfort are saccharine and tame: the sweet taste of fruit, the innocent promise of a bud, the tickle of new grass. They are the images of a birth that might, still, be permanently severed from death. The placenta, as Simone de Beauvoir points out, is not such an image. Instead, “That membranous mass by which the fetus grows is the sign of its dependency.”<sup>46</sup> The fetus as icon of fertility, of fecundity, reveals not only the power of birth, but the fragility of dependence. “To have been conceived and born an infant is the curse that hangs over [man’s] destiny, the impurity that contaminates his being.”<sup>47</sup> The mother, argues Beauvoir, “dooms him to death. The quivering jelly which is elaborated in the womb (the womb, secret and sealed like the tomb) evokes too clearly the soft viscosity of carrion for him not to turn shuddering away.”<sup>48</sup> Francis tempers the mother’s power. She is not *truly* a mother. She is merely a “sister mother”—an incomprehensible hybrid of female biological functions. She is not given power because, perhaps, she would then be able to govern us enough to inflict us with *both* birth and death. Here, Francis seems only to give her the authority to nourish. The earth, too, is a creature to domesticate and civilize.

*Laudato si, mi Signore, per  
quelli che perdonano per lo  
tuo amore  
a sostengo infirmitate e  
tribolazione.  
Beati quelli che 'l sosterrano in  
pace,  
ca da te, Altissimo, sirano  
incoronati.*

*Praised be, my Lord, for those  
who for your love forgive,  
and every trouble, every illness  
bear.  
Blessed are those who meekly  
endure,  
for You, most High, will crown  
them finally.*

Commentators report that this was the original ending to the *lauda*, when it was first scribed in 1225. Francis again stresses the contingency and dependence of all creatures. But they are not

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<sup>46</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 146.

<sup>47</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 148.

contingent as an infant is contingent—so fragile that even the skull is soft. Rather, they are subject to, obedient to this Most High that works in and through them. They may be fragile, but not like the rotting fruits of that wild and abundant earth. His alien glory is a shield around them. For the sake of this Most High they are willing to forgive when it is most unappealing, to bear every possible illness, to suffer every possible form of trouble. The reward, for this obedience, is that they will wear—at the end of time—the crown. The meek will be the ones to inherit the earth. Francis holds out the carrot of justice. The great mother of this mortal earth is only a sister. She is not the one who made us, but is only a fellow mortal—suffering the fate of all contingent things. The stage that she has set, for us to live on, does not give evidence of the justice he needs to see. Her justice, like everything else, rots.

But Francis will not want a justice that rots, nor will he suffer his creatures to wait for a justice that will only arrive at the end of time. We wait to *to be crowned*, but Francis makes the promise of this glory immanent, at hand. He wants to bring us justice—in some form—*now*. This also means we suffer its price. But this would not be the end. Francis would still make a late addition to the *lauda*, extending the scope of his concern.

*Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora  
nostra Morte corporale,  
da la quale nullo omo viventi  
po' scampare.*

*Guai a quelli che morrano ne le  
peccata mortali!*

*Beati quelli che troverà ne le tue  
sanctissime voluntati,*

*Beati quelli che troverà ne le tue  
sanctissime voluntati,*

*ca la morte seconda no li farrà  
male.*

*Laudate e benedicite mi Signore,  
e reingraziate e serviteli cub  
grande umilitate.*

*Praised be, my Lord, for our  
sister our bodily death,  
from which no living man can  
ever flee.*

*Woe to all those who die in  
mortal sin,*

*and blessed they who in your  
holy will are found,*

*for in no way will they by their  
second death be wronged.*

*So praise and bless and thank  
my Lord, and be*

*subject to him with great  
humility.*

Commentators report that this final stanza of the poem was added, by Francis, only days before his own death (what followers were to call his *transitus*) in 1226. Francis does not end the song, then, with

the promise of justice but with the promise of immortality. Those who follow the rules, who are obedient, who subject themselves to the “sweet tyranny” of the demand to praise, will be rewarded. They will be offered the view from on top: they will be shown that death is an illusion. The harmony that is promised—to live with the most blessed souls, in the eternal spheres—is also accompanied by what is, perhaps, the most intense subjection. Francis (on his own deathbed) finds death, herself, subject to mortality. He subjects her to the creaturely condition.

Death, like the sister mother earth, is a woman. Death will not be a *power* with which Francis must contend. She will be the submissive sex. Death is not the figure of fearsome intelligence and cunning who must be challenged to a chess match. Death is a woman. Feminist thinkers, like Beauvoir, have made much of the connection between woman and death. Death as a woman, says Beauvoir, becomes “a false infinite, an ideal without Truth, she stands exposed as finiteness and mediocrity and, on the same ground, as falsehood.”<sup>49</sup> Rather than read death as an end, then, she becomes a means through which man can comprehend the immortality promised to him by the father. Woman, as the condition of possibility of birth, threatens always to remind him of this contingency. And yet, “she also enables him to exceed his own limits.”<sup>50</sup> It is by passing through the false infinite that is death that the infinite becomes effective, real.

As Francis copes with the end of the body, the contingency of the body, it would appear that he seeks also to pass through this mortality—into the real infinite. No man can ever flee sister death. But to be given up to her, he suggests, is not the end. Francis, instead, mortalizes death. Does this characterization—the creation of death as a sister creature—typify what Dastur argues is the Christian pattern of negotiating with death? Does Francis simply turn her into a bad infinite, a false infinite, and subject her (like everything that is not divine) to the creature condition? Does he recognize her, only to reject her? Can it be said that he is, really, a friend to this creature? Does his mystical vision hinge on a gesture of coldness and cruelty towards death? Do the final lines of this *lauda* indicate that he has found a way to trump this female creature’s power?

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<sup>49</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 187.

<sup>50</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 148.

Dastur argues that our relation to death can be more than a simplistic anxiety that leads us to fear death as the enemy, that leads us to reject or deny it. She argues that anxiety (a Heideggerian sense of anxiety, properly understood), when embraced, can give rise to a kind of transfiguration. We can, “let ourselves be born by it in order thus to achieve that moment when it changes into joy.”<sup>51</sup> She suggests that this sort of shift can change our very understanding of what death is. When we are able to see both joy and death resonate together at the same moment, she argues, we begin to see that death is not an enemy but, “the very condition of our being born.” It is, “no longer an obstacle, but rather a springboard.” Death is not the end of the human, but that which gives us the opportunity to be human in the first place. Death is not a “scandal” but, instead, the “very foundation of our existence.”<sup>52</sup> It is death upon which we are ultimately dependent. Death makes creatures of us all.

It is true that Francis dissociates death and fecundity, in his *lauda*. He does not suggest that death is ripe, productive. It is true that his gendering of death, to some degree, renders her less powerful, less potent. He names death a “sister” and not a “mother.” We are not *ultimately* dependent upon death. Rather, we and death are co-dependents. It is fair to say that Francis—who was not above utilizing the techniques of discipline and punishment at his disposal—maintains some illusory degree of control over death, by naming her a fellow creature.

Yet there is some gesture of camaraderie in this rhetorical device, as well. By making death a creature—one of the many creatures that he *praises*—Francis also seems to recognize a fellowship, a kinship, that would otherwise be incomprehensible. In this, he seems to pass beyond a “rejection” of death and into something else. It may not be death who stands as the condition of our existence. But Francis does seem to suggest that we (death, and the rest of us) are in this together. For this—for our entanglement, for our mutual dependence, for the attempts we each make to navigate the terrain of this earthly existence—he seems to think that death, as one of the creatures, is worthy of a kind of praise. Death, like the other creatures, has her “thisness,” she too is illuminated with a particular kind of light.

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<sup>51</sup> Dastur, *How Are We*, 42.

<sup>52</sup> Dastur, *How Are We*, 44.

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