

THE VOWEL MOSAIC IN THE CANSOS OF BERNART DE VENTADORN

Patrick Michael Thomas

A true poet, Bernart de Ventadorn claims to derive inspiration from the Muse of Love in order to explain the excellence of his verse:

Non es meravelha s'eu chan
melhs de nul autre chantador,
que plus me tra'l cors vas amor
e melhs sui faihz a so coman. (I.1-4)¹

A true πολυτέλης, this Fra Angelico of medieval lyricism (Billet 173) shows himself to be a superlative craftsman of verse. If, for example, we study the vowels in "Non es meravelha s'eu chan", certain definite patterns emerge, patterns that strongly suggest the hand of a self-conscious, albeit inspired, artist. Insofar as our study of the intraversicular stressed vowels has shown that the vowels naturally fall into groups of 2,² we have utilized the same division here and found that such a grouping turns out to be equally revelatory.

Strophe I:

Non es meravelha s'eu ³ chan	oe / ea / ea / ea
melhs de nul autre chantador,	ee / ya / ea / ao
que plus me tra'l cors vas amor	ey / ea / oa / ao
e melhs sui faihz a so coman.	ee / ya / ao / oa
Cor e cors e saber e sen	oe / oe / ae / ee
e fors' e poder i ai mes.	eo / eo / ei / ae
Si•m tira vas amor lo fres	ii / aa / ao / oe
que vas outra part no•m aten.	ea / aa / ao / ae

(I.1-8)

In addition to the end rhymes, there appear to be interior "rimes plates": *aa* - vv. 7-8; *ee* - vv. 2,4,5; *ii* - v. 7. Perhaps even more interesting is the repetition of

1 All citations are from the critical edition of Moshé Lazar.

2 This study will soon appear in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* under the title "La Voyelle en miroir: La Tapisserie Vocalique de 'Can vei la lauzeta mover.'" One recalls the "principe binaire" Imre Szabics refers to in his study on Bernart's "Can l'erba fresch' e-lh folha par" (p. 247).

3 When it comes to diphthongs, we have used the stressed element to illustrate more clearly our point. Thus, in the case of "eu," "e" has been retained and "u" has been ignored.

certain vowel configurations which become reversed as in a mirror.⁴ For example, *ao* is found in vv. 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 and its mirror image, *oa*, shows up in v. 34. In like manner, we see *ea* in vv. 1, 2, 3, 8 and its mirror image, *ae*, in vv. 5, 6, 8; *oe* in vv. 1, 5, 7 and its mirror image, *eo*, in v. 6; the triple repetition of *ea* in v. 1 and its mirror image, *ae*, as the 4th vowel group⁵ in vv. 6 and 8. Sometimes we find a recurring vocalic pattern without a mirror image, i.e., *ya* - vv. 2, 4. As to *ei* in v. 6 and *ey* in v. 3, one may wonder if this does not border on a recurring vocalic pattern. Although /i/ and /y/ are different vowels, nonetheless it is true that /y/ is a doubly articulated vowel which includes the fronted tongue position for /i/. Nor is this an isolated case where vowel pairs are tantalizingly close. These "imperfect twins" occur in other *versos*⁶ as will be pointed out later on in this study. Other observations may be made concerning the recurring vocalic patterns in this strophe: *ao* as the 4th VG in vv. 2-3; *oe/oe* in v. 5 immediately followed in v. 6 by its mirror image *eo:eo*; *aa/ao* in vv. 7-8.

Similar patterns of sound can be found in the second strophe.

Ben es mortz qui d'amor no sen	ee / oi / ao / oe
al cor cal que dousa sabor;	ao / ae / oa / ao
e que val viure ses amor	ee / ai / ee / ao
mas per enoi far a la gen?	ae / eo / aa / ae
Ja Domnedeus no'm azir tan	ao / ee / oa / ia
qu'eu ja pois viva jorn ni mes.	ea / oi / ao / ie
pois que d'anoi serai mepres	oe / eo / ea / ee
ni d'amor non aurai talan.	ia / oo / aa / aa

(II.9-16)

Interior "rimes plates": *aa* - vv. 12, 16; *ee* - vv. 9, 11, 13, 15; *oo* - v. 16.

Mirror Images:

1. a. *ao* - vv. 9, 10, 11, 13, 14
b. *oa* - vv. 10, 13
2. a. *oe* - vv. 9, 15
b. *eo* - vv. 12, 15
3. a. *ae* - vv. 10, 12
b. *ea* - vv. 14, 15
4. a. *ai* - v. 11
b. *ia* - vv. 13, 16

There is also a phenomenon that may be summarized by the formula $x + H/L$, where H is a high vowel /i, e, y/, and L is a low vowel /a, o, u/. Not infrequently, the

4 In her provocative study, Sarah Kay shows how in "Can vei la lauzeta mover" the repetition of verbs in various forms demonstrates verbal reflection (pp. 277-278). Matthew C. Steel devotes an entire article to show how this *trobar* gives evidence of musical mirroring: "A Case for the Predominance of Melody over Text in Troubadour Lyric: Bernart de Ventadorn's 'Can vei la lauzeta mover.'" Along more linguistic lines, one might refer to Erich Köhler's study: "Can vei la lauzeta mover: Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von phonischer Struktur und semantischer Struktur."

5 Henceforth "vowel group" will be abbreviated as VG.

6 It would seem that prior to the thirteenth century the terms *canso* and *verso* are used interchangeably. During the first decades of the thirteenth century a generic distinction begins to emerge (Bossy 280).

study of vowel groups seems to indicate an alternation of high and low vowels. In this strophe the phenomenon is complicated by the reversal of a mirror image. In vv. 9 and 14, we find *oi*, in v. 14 *ie*. What these vowel groups have in common, represented by x, is *i*. Rewritten according to formula, *oi* > L + x, *ie* > x + H with mirror image.

Other recurring patterns: the 3rd VG of vv. 9-10, i.e., *ao ... oa*, are repeated in the same position in vv. 13-14 in mirror reversal, *oa ... ao*; as in I.2-3, the 4th VG of II.10-11, *ao* being in the second and third verse of each strophe.

Strophe III:

Per bona fe e ses enjan	eo / ae / ee / ea
am la plus bel' e la melhor.	aa / ye / ea / eo
Del cor sospir e dels olhs plor,	eo / oi / ee / oo
car tan l'am eu, per que i ai dan	aa / ae / ee / aa
Eu que'n posc mais, s'Amors me pren,	ee / oa / ao / ee
e las charcers en que m'a mes,	ea / ae / ee / ae
no pot claus obrir mas merces,	oo / ao / ia / ee
e de merce no·i trop nien?	ee / ee / oo / ie

(III.17-24)

Interior "rimes plates": *aa* - vv. 18, 20; *ee* - vv. 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24; *oo* - vv. 19, 23, 24.

Mirror images:

1. a. ae - vv. 17, 20, 22
b. ea - vv. 17, 18, 22
2. a. oa - v. 21
b. ao - vv. 21, 23

Imperfect twins: ye (v. 18) and ie (v. 24)

Other recurring patterns: *eo* - vv. 17, 18, 19; the first vowel group of vv. 17-20: *eo ... aa ... eo ... aa*.

Strophe IV:

Aquest' amors me fer tan gen	ae / ao / ee / ae
al cor d'una dousa sabor:	ao / ya / oa / ao
cen vetz mor lo jorn de dolor	ee / oo / oe / oo
e reuiu de joi autras cen.	ee / ie / oa / ae
Ben es mos mals de bel semblan,	ee / oa / ee / ea
que mais val mos mals qu'autre bes;	ea / ao / aa / ee
e pois mos mals aitan bos m'es,	eo / oa / aa / oe
bos er lo bes apres l'afan.	oe / oe / ae / aa

(IV. 25-32)

Interior "rimes plates": *aa* - vv. 30, 31, 32; *ee* - vv. 25, 27, 28, 29, 30; *oo* - v. 27.

Mirror images:

1. a. ae - vv. 25, 28, 32
b. ea - vv. 29, 30
2. a. ao - vv. 25, 26, 30
b. oa - vv. 26, 28, 29, 31
3. a. oe - vv. 27, 31, 32
b. eo - v. 31

Other recurring patterns: the third VG in vv. 25-26, i.e., *ee ... oa*, is repeated in the same position in vv. 28-29 with mirror reversal: *aa ... ee*; the first VG of vv. 27-29 is identical: *ee*; the *oe/oe* repetition in v. 32.

Strophe V;

Ai Deus! car se fosson trian	ae / ae / oo / ia
d'entrels faus li fin amador,	ee / ai / ia / ao
e•lh lauzenger e•lh trichador	ea / ee / ei / ao
portesson corns el fron denan!	oe / oo / eo / ea
Tot l'aur del mon e tot l'argen	oa / eo / eo / ae
i volgr'aver dat, s'eu l'agues,	io / ae / ae / ae
sol que ma domna conogues	oe / ao / ao / oe
aissi com eu l'am finamen.	ai / oe / ai / ae

(V.33-40)

Interior "rimes plates": *ee* - vv. 34, 35; *oo* - vv. 33, 36.

Mirror images:

1. a. ae - vv. 33, 37, 38, 40
b. ea - vv. 35, 36
2. a. ai - vv. 34, 40
b. ia - vv. 33, 34
3. a. ao - vv. 34, 35, 39
b. oa - v. 37
4. a. oe - vv. 36, 39, 40
b. eo - vv. 36, 37

H/L + x: a. ei - v. 35 (H + x)
b. io - v. 38 (x + L with mirror image)

Other recurring patterns: *eo/eo* (v. 37), *ae/ae* (v. 38), *ao/ao* (v. 39); the *ae* ending in vv. 37-38 and 40; as in the first 2 strophes, the second and third verses of this stanza end in *ao*.

Strophe VI:

Cant eu la vei, be m'es parven	ae / ae / ee / ae
als olhs, al vis, a la color,	ao / ai / aa / oo
car aissi tremble de paor	aa / ie / ee / ao
com fa la folha contra•l ven.	oa / ao / ao / ae
Non ai de sen per un efan,	oa / ee / ey / ea
aissi sui d'amor entepres;	ai / ya / oe / ee
e d'ome qu'es aissi conques	eo / ee / ai / oe

pot domn' aver almorna gran.

oo / ae / ao / aa

(VI. 41-48)

Interior "rimes plates": *ee* - vv. 41, 43, 45, 46, 47; *aa* - vv. 42, 43, 48; *oo* - vv. 42, 48.

Mirror images:

1. a. *ae* - vv. 41, 44, 48
b. *ea* - v. 45
2. a. *oa* - vv. 44, 45
b. *ao* - vv. 42, 43, 44, 48
3. a. *oe* - vv. 46, 47
b. *eo* - v. 47

H/L + x: a. *ey* - v. 45 (H + x)

b. *ya* - v. 46 (x + L with mirror image)

Other recurring patterns: *ai* - vv. 42, 46, 47; *ae/ea* - v. 41; *ao/oa* - v. 44; the first VG of vv. 44-45: *oa*.

Strophe VII:

Bona domna, re no•us deman	oa / oa / eo / ea
mas que•m prendatz per servidor,	ae / ea / ee / io
qu'e•us servirai com bo senhor,	ee / ia / oo / eo
cossi que del gazardo m'an.	oi / ee / aa / oa
Ve•us m'al vostre comandamen,	ea / oe / oa / ae
francs cors umils, gais e cortes!	ao / yi / ae / oe
Ors ni leos non etz vos ges,	oi / eo / oe / oe
que•m auciatz, s'a vos me ren.	ea / ia / ao / ee

(VII. 49-56)

Interior "rimes plates": *aa* - v. 52; *ee* - vv. 50, 51, 52, 56; *oo* - v. 51.

Mirror images:

1. a. *oa* - vv. 49, 52, 53
b. *ao* - vv. 54, 56
2. a. *eo* - vv. 49, 51, 55
b. *oe* - vv. 53, 54, 55
3. a. *io* - v. 50
b. *oi* - vv. 52, 55
4. a. *ea* - vv. 49, 50, 53, 56
b. *ae* - vv. 50, 53, 54

x + H/L: a. *ia* - vv. 51, 56 (x + L)

b. *yi* - v. 54 (H + x with mirror image)

Other recurring patterns: *oa/oa* in v. 49; *oe* in the 4th VG of vv. 54-55; *oe/oe* in v. 55; the first VG of vv. 52-53, i.e., *oi ... ea*, repeated in vv. 55-56.

Strophe VIII⁷:

A Mo Cortes, lai on ilh es,
tramet lo vers, e ja no•lh pes
car n'ai estat tan lonjamen.

ao / oe / ao / ie
ae / oe / ea / oe
aa / ea / ao / ae

(VIII. 57-59)

Interior "rimes plates": aa - v. 59.

Mirror images:

1. a. ae - vv. 58, 59
b. ea - vv. 58, 59

Other recurring patterns: ao - vv. 57, 59; oe - vv. 57, 58.

With Bernart de Ventadorn, poem is incantation,⁸ the repetition of certain sound patterns lulling and entrancing the hearer. As with Marie de France, the poet's power is his seductive charm (Guidot 433). Beneath the poetic enchantment lies the subtle craft of the troubadour *fabricator*. In the *canso* analyzed, we investigated beneath the poetry's polished surface to discover: interior "rimes plates", several cases of mirror images, as well as recurring VG without a mirror image, the H/L + x pattern, and possibly a case of "imperfect twins". It should be noted that quite a large number of VG fall into the mirror image category. In "Non es meravelha...", out of a total of 236 VG, 108 are mirror image (MI). It is also perhaps not irrelevant that in this poem the *ea/ae* MI predominate, although the *eo/oe* and *ao/oa* MI are also numerically significant: "Non es meravelha..." *ea/ae* - 43, *ao/oa* - 39, *eo/oe* - 26. Reminding us somewhat of the H/L + x pattern, most of the 3 major MI, i.e., *ea/ae* and *eo/oe*, follow a H/L // L/H pattern. The wonderful thing about a poet like Bernart de Ventadorn is that his work has so much depth that, despite the surface simplicity,⁹ there is always something more to discover.

Works Cited

- Billet, Léon. *Bernard de Ventadorn, Troubadour du XII^e siècle*. Orfeuil: Tulle, 1974.
Bossy, Michel-André "Cyclical Composition in Giraut Riquier's Book of Poems." *Speculum* 66, ii (April 1991), 277-293.
Guidot, Bernard. "Pouvoirs et Séductions, Pouvoir de Séduction dans les *Lais* de Marie de France." *Romanische Forschungen* 102, iv (1990), 425-433.
Hitti, Philip K. *History of the Arabs*. New York: Macmillan, 1951.
Kay, Sarah. "Love In a Mirror: An Aspect of the Imagery of Bernart de Ventadorn." *Medium Aevum* L11 (1983), 272-285.

7 Of course, in the *tornada* there is nothing essentially new. As the name itself indicates it is a "return" as to structure of the rhymes, probably of melody, a recall of the poet and the Lady, more rarely a repetition of the poem's themes (Phan 57).

8 There are various etymologies given to the word *troubadour*, one tracing its origin to the Arabic root *TRB* (= music, song) (Hitti 562), another more recently going back to the Latin *tropator* or composer of tropes, optional accretions to the liturgy (Robertson 250). Whatever its source, music seems to be intimately associated with these poets of *fin' amors*.

9 The recent study by Roy Rosenstein, "Latent Dialogue and Manifest Role-Playing in Bernart de Ventadorn", only enhances our contention that this poet's *cansos* are less than simple.

Köhler, Eric. "Can vei la lauzeta mover: Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von phonischer Struktur und semantischer Struktur." Ed. Peter V. Zima. *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Eastern Europe*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1981. 445-468.

Lazar, Moshé, ed. *Bernard de Ventadour, Troubadour du XII^e siècle*, Chansons d'amour. Paris: Klincksieck, 1966.

Phan, Chantal. "La tornada et l'envoi: fonctions structurelles et poétiques." *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* XXXIV, 1 (janvier-mars 1991), 57-61.

Robertson, Alec and Denis Stevens, eds. *The Pelican History of Music*. I: Ancient Forms to Polyphony. Baltimore: Penguin, 1960.

Rosenstein, Roy. "Latent Dialogue and Manifest Role-Playing in Bernart de Ventadorn." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* XCI, 3 (1990), 357-368.

Steel, Matthew C. "A Case for the Predominance of Melody over Text in Troubadour Lyric: Bernart de Ventadorn's 'Can vei la lauzeta mover.'" *Michigan Academician* XIV (Winter 1982), 259-271.

Szabics, Imre. "Structure et sens poétique dans les anciennes chansons d'amour occitanes." *Acta litteraria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 25 (1983), 237-247.