THE POETRY OF THE MEDIEVAL TROUBADOUR, WILLIAM IX OF AQUITAINE

THE SONGS THAT BUILT EUROPE

FIDEL FAJARDO-ACOSTA

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To Deb, Emily, and Sophie

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Preface

"Babariol, babarial, babarian" (William IX, Song 5: 29–30)

The book you are about to read could be upsetting. It might even seem obscene, offensive, perhaps outrageous. It is definitely not suitable for prudish or easily triggered temperaments, guardians of sacred cows, or anyone looking for something to admire or revere in the Middle Ages or in our own postmodern or any other times. The book is highly critical, even cynical, as some reviewers have correctly pointed out. It is not meant to make us feel good about ourselves or to reaffirm us in our values or identities, but to point out very grave problems in those identities, in our character as subjects of western cultures—both European and American. This author does not doubt that eastern cultures, or cultures of any other geographical, chronological, ideological, or other character, suffer from the same problems. The issues tackled in this study are quite universal, if such a dirty word can even be used at all, and pertain to the lives of the language-enabled animals we call humans, creatures that use language to build mental and symbolic structures, whole cultures and realities, within which we exist and through which we represent and understand ourselves.

Ideally, the communicative, information-sharing, and culture-building aspects of language allow humans to think together, cooperate, and organize themselves into orderly structures that enhance their prospects of survival and well-being, as well as the continuity of those structures over a number of generations into the future. Language, on the other hand, also has disturbing potentials that can lead to the building of irrational, unstable structures, faulty realities that negate the benefits of language use. Humans in effect often misuse language as a weapon against other humans, a disguise that allows those who wear it to misrepresent themselves and to deceive and take advantage of others. Such practices can grant short-lived advantages to the individuals and groups that engage in them but also imply the instability

and impermanence of their culture, as they undermine the cooperative and organizational powers on which the building of stable structures depends. The concerns here then are of a linguistic and culture-engineering nature. How was the towering structure of European culture built? What are its foundations? What role did specific language practices, such as the composition of songs in the Middle Ages, play in such endeavors? Will the structure stand the test of time? Or will it go the way of the Tower of Babel, dragged down by the failure of language to perform its basic functions of honest, rational communication?

Though other cultures are no less problematic, this study focuses on western rather than eastern cultures primarily because that is what the author knows best and also due to the world dominance exerted by western nations. In our own postmodern times, the West, particularly America, explains much of the rest, because it has relentlessly exploited it since the days of colonialism and has imposed its culture and its values. No one can escape it, anywhere at all. Though multiculturalists would like to think that we live in a world of profound differences, the llama- or yak-shepherd packing a cell phone and the Coca-Cola sign in the remotest and most inhospitable regions of the planet suggest otherwise. We taught the world our ways. We forced others to speak our language. We have all become Americans, perfected westerners, of one sort or another, straight clones, reverse-engineered, in denial or in shadow form; even the most fiercely anti-American plays by our book. But now we have to live with the consequences of who we are and the world we have created, which apparently we do not like: a planet overpopulated with eight billion versions of ourselves; a wasteful and unsustainable global economy; catastrophic environmental degradation and resource exhaustion; a pandemic of narcissism and other illnesses, not only mental; wholesale abandonment of ethical and moral values; widespread hate of others, our mirror images, and the corresponding social disintegration and self-destruction. The list could go on, but, in essence, the present is problematic, and the future does not look terribly promising, either.

Doomsday pessimism aside, however, this book is actually optimistic and hopeful, even faithful to the idea of higher purposes, especially because the author believes that humans are not incapable of reason or of honest communication. The cultures that we currently belong to are faulty and most certainly irrational and crumbling to pieces. But they can be rebuilt, buttressed, and reengineered in much more stable and sustainable ways, specifically by learning more about, and facing, who we really are and where we came from. This critical investigation of the medieval past, this author suggests, is the key to knowing ourselves and, realizing our faults, being able to change and head in better directions. This applies to all of us, Europeans, Americans, Russians, Chinese, Africans, and everyone else, from the street thug to the king on his golden throne. Though this may seem hard to accept, the days of nationalism are over and so are those of capitalism, racism, sexism, tribalism, identity-ism, and the myriad other absurdities that characterize our way of life. It's time to change and get over ourselves. We are not unique. We are not different. We are just human: dirty, selfish, and nasty animals that can talk, hence with good potential to become

something better. Our interests are the same, no matter how stridently we deny it. The common ground is there. The needed change is common sense, another dirty expression. Such change, on the other hand, cannot proceed by demolition, because that is what we have been doing all along, falsely thinking we have built solid structures, by blowing it all up. Change has to proceed by self-critical, constructive, reconstructive, and rational thought, true and open communication, not revolutionary or language hysterias. Where emotions and passions get involved, we become blind. But taking responsibility, yet another dirty phrase in our world of the aggrieved, is no longer optional. A parent owes their child the basic necessities, just as humanity owes every human being a dignified life in which those basic necessities are also met. There is such a thing as too many people, too much consumption, too much production, and way too much violence. There is also such a thing as self-restraint and laws all must obey. The freedom to pursue our dreams and desires is our greatest enemy, as it will be argued throughout the book. However much that may gratify our fantasies, chest-thumping apes definitely should not be allowed to own guns or amass fortunes. And we have to stop loving others. Our churches already do too much of that. Instead of love and charity, we could make sure everyone can partake of whatever modest banquet can be afforded and shared by everyone in sustainable ways. But all that said, there is also free will and the consequences of choices. The only fate is the one we speak. We can certainly go on ignoring the warnings, just being who we are, vicious hypocrites—obscene, offensive, and outrageous—babbling nonsense to fool others, ultimately fooling only ourselves. So, read, or do not read, all at your own risk.

Introduction

William IX of Aquitaine, the Premodern and Postmodern Conditions

This book offers a close look at the poetry of the medieval troubadour, William IX (1071–1126, r. 1086–1126), duke of Aquitaine and VII count of Poitiers, in an effort to shed light on the continuity and connections between modern/postmodern western culture and the subjectivities of courtly medieval Europeans who lived during the so-called High Middle Ages (c. 1050–1250). The study is grounded on, and constitutes an application of, the theory that the motivational forces at the heart of modern western cultures, the individual pursuit of love and happiness, are both causes and manifestations of larger forces of political, economic, and both bodily and spiritual subjection and domination.[1] Though seemingly very personal and specific to unique individualities, modern/postmodern desires, ambitions, dreams, and aspirations are not independent of larger systems of civic control, economic management, and psychic, emotional and libidinal regulation that have evolved in complexity and magnitude over the course of the last one thousand years, since the era that we, incorrectly, call premodern.

Active in the early twelfth century, William IX was a nobleman with authority over the county of Poitou (centered at the city of Poitiers) and the duchy of Aquitaine, in what is now France. He owed allegiance to the kings of France, was a peer of the counts of Anjou, and exerted dominance over his neighbors, primarily to the south, especially in the region of the Limousin. His power was lesser, relative to his neighbors in the north. Although he may appear to be a rather obscure poet and a seemingly minor figure in European history, his life and works are very useful in understanding consequential phenomena such as the early processes of the formation of national states like France and England, the development of their

national literatures, and the skilled use of the language of love and loving subjection by Renaissance powerhouses such as Queen Elizabeth I of England.

In terms of literature, William IX is the first of the known troubadours, singers of love at the courts of south-central France, and also the first of the named authors of a modern European literature, growing out, but also breaking free, of the Latin literary tradition. A speaker of a Poitevin dialect mixing southern and northern French forms of speech (*langue d'oc* and *langue d'oïl*), his compositions shared elements of the cultures of the north and south of France but decidedly gravitated toward the south, the land of the *langue d'oc*, or Occitania (*oc* is the Old Occitan word for "yes," as opposed to the *oïl* of the northern Old French dialects).[2] His works are therefore classified as Old Occitan literature (formerly known as "Provençal") and part of the corpus of songs of the Occitan troubadours. Due to the subsequent spread and enormous popularity throughout Europe of the romantic and chivalric subject matter first handled by William and other troubadours, he can be considered the "grandfather" of all of the major national literatures of modern Europe, including those of France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and England.

William had particularly close contacts with the nobility that ruled the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain, supporting their struggles against the Muslim powers to the south, Al-Andalus, as part of the long process of the so-called *Reconquista* (c. 720–c. 1492; Re-Conquest) of the Iberian peninsula. William directly participated in the Battle of Cutanda (1120), supporting Alfonso I, *el Batallador* (r. 1104–1134; the Fighter), against the Almoravids. Thus, it is not surprising that Occitan literature and the culture of courtly love and chivalry informed the earliest forms of Spanish literature, from love lyrics like the *cantigas de amigo* (friend songs), Galician-Portuguese *trobadorismo*, including the secular and sacred love poetry of Alfonso X *el Sabio* (r. 1252–1284; the Wise), mixed-genre poetic romances like the Arcipreste de Hita's *Libro de Buen Amor* (1330–1343; Book of Good Love) and chivalric epics like the *Cantar de Mio Cid* (c. 1140–1207; Song of My Cid/Lord, Song of El Cid, based on the historical Spanish Reconquista champion, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, *el Campeador* [the Campaigner], c. 1043–1099).

Under the guidance and patronage of William's granddaughter, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Eleanor's daughter with Louis VII of France, Marie de Champagne, Occitan literary culture spread to northern France, giving rise to the poetry of the *trouvères* (northern French poets following in the steps of the southern troubadours), including love lyrics, the chivalric romances of Chrétien de Troyes (fl. c. 1160–1190), and the whole genre of Arthurian literature. In Germany, the earliest known of the German singers of love, the *Minnesänger*, figures like Der von Kürenberger (fl. c. 1150) and Dietmar von Aist (fl. c. 1140–1170), appeared around the same time as their *trouvère* counterparts in France. In the aftermath of the Albigensian Crusade that devastated southern France, Occitan culture migrated to Italy and influenced the development of Sicilian poetry, the Italian sonnet and other genres, the poetry of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and Petrarch (1304–1374), and the stories of Boccaccio (1313–1375).

As Eleanor of Aquitaine was also the wife of Henry II of England and mother of Richard I, the Lionheart, her court, held at Poitiers for several years, was the center of patronage of literature in the French language of the Norman conquerors of England. The English language in effect evolved from the French of the Normans and the languages of the Anglo-Saxons defeated by William the Conqueror (Duke of Normandy and King William I of England, r. 1066–1087) in 1066. William IX of Aquitaine was a close friend and ally of the Conqueror's son, William Rufus (the Red), King William II of England (r. 1087–1100). English literature itself evolved out of the French Norman literature fostered at Eleanor's court, first as Anglo-Norman literature and then coming into its own, as England gradually assumed an independent national identity in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Neither Chaucer nor Shakespeare, or the English Romantic poets or anything else that happened in English literature since the High and Late Middle Ages would be imaginable at all without the Occitan troubadours, William IX and his family in particular, and everything that followed in the wake of their remarkable cultural accomplishments.

While these facts of literary history are not unknown, they are of little to no interest to postmodern intellectuals, who pride ourselves in the questioning of history and periodization, preferring our "presentism" and cultural populism, the flattening of time into space, and the cranking out of as many *petits récits* (little narratives) as there are individuals with an opinion, informed or not. In such circumstances, truth does not exist. Transnational and transhistorical literary influences, particularly originating in aristocratic circles, such as those represented by William, are deemed incompatible with the local autonomies and regional differences into which postmodernism (dis)solves the monoliths of nationalism and their corresponding national literatures. While earlier scholars, particularly in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, could not see past their own national culture, postmoderns cannot see past their preferred local contingency. In the supposedly progressive passage from modernism to postmodernism, we managed to become even more myopic than we were before. We also tossed out the window thousands of years' worth of insights that seemed too burdensome to sort out, irrelevant to the concerns of present folks who figure they know better and who can always craft a clever meme, put it on a t-shirt, or NFT a colorful collage out of whatever may be trendy, mixed in with bits and pieces of what used to be the past. Postmodernism thus permits us to take pride in ignoring anything that could seem laborious to learn, like history or grammar, and focus instead on our own creative writing, our made-up nonfictions, and our alt-realities, always certain to be more rewarding than inconvenient or upsetting truths.

This book intends to address some of those deficiencies by articulating a meta-narrative that sheds light on the participation of literature in the unfolding of the political, economic, social, and affective forces that shaped modern western ways of life. This *grand récit* (large-scale narrative) will stress the artificiality of the supposedly separate histories of the European national literatures and also question the notion itself of a national literature as a product of a local soil, or of a present independent

of the past. Under this approach, postmodernism itself—the ideology of local truths, regionalisms, and assorted other balkanizations, particularisms, and claims of difference for difference's sake—will be understood as the ideology and the logic of late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson correctly characterized it. Postmodernism, in other words, is an aspect of capitalism's attempt to undermine intellectual activity by denying any connection or thread linking anything to anything else; and also by deriding logic, reason, and thinking altogether, which are deemed feeble and unnecessary in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI). If capital is to grow, everything must be reduced to the isolated and non-interacting individuality of minds drifting away in the contemplation of shreds of garbage bags floating in the wind, a significant image in Sam Mendes's aptly named film, *American Beauty* (1999). As part of the degradation of reality into microplastics, the individual too is a target of division and has to be further individuated by splitting it into a multiplicity of others, defined by divergent desires, the "they" who get to carry out the disintegration of an irremediably decentered psyche.

Objecting then to both modernism and postmodernism, to nationalisms, populisms and particularisms, to the psychopathologies of isolated cultures, languages, minds, and split minds, this study asserts the urgency and vital importance of the return to reason, the bringing together of minds, cultures, languages, literatures, religions, and other human products and endeavors under the umbrella of the common sense and the common truths that we are, falsely, told do not exist. Of course the voice that claims there is no truth and that encourages unreason and ever greater division is that of global capital, which is fiercely unified and systematic, brutally logical, a giant that knows large and disciplined teams thrive and isolated individuals perish, and also knows that its own interest is in splitting its victims against one another and against themselves, accomplished all by their own desiring. Capital then objects to reason, union, and solidarity, not because they are impossible but because they are the secret of its own power. Capital is not about to let its prey become unified and rational, as that would arrest its own growth. In order to protect itself, Capital creates AI, relieving us of the burden of thought and ensuring our reasoning and decisions never deviate from those implicit in its algorithms. In antiquity that role was played by God, who would not let Adam and Eve taste of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, as that would empower them with the same knowledge that God has and could result in their becoming gods and living forever. By sticking to their prescribed diet of harmless greens in peaceful pastures, Adam and Eve can continue to be God's slaves, working his garden, reproducing themselves, and patiently carrying on, like the beasts of burden they are but blissfully unaware of it. As God himself confirms, the serpent was not lying (Genesis 3:4, 22).

But Capital, like the God of Moses, is a liar. All modern humans are liars, of course, as well as our gods and prophets. Moses was just one of us. Neither ancient nor contemporary modernity are our strong points, but this author still believes all humans, even modern and postmodern ones, have positive and promising sides that make it worth the while to write this book in the first place. Reason- and truth-empowered

humanity has the potential to be able to rise out of its corrupt condition and liberate itself from its slavery to inhuman and unholy purposes, to break free from the false paradise of God's Edenic plantation—*hacienda*, *encomienda*, *latifundium,* or Disneyland. To do so, humans must taste of the fruit of the knowledge by which evil and good can be strictly defined and told apart. Violence is evil, lies are evil, cheating merchants are evil, capitalism is evil, the gods we worship are evil. There should be plenty of fodder here for the *lauzengiers,* the Occitan term for scandalmongers. For contemporary humans, in any case, the challenge is to grow up and out of modernism and postmodernism, however cool or entertaining or lucrative they might seem, and follow instead the light to a *Neue Aufklärung*, a New Enlightenment that can bring all people together as one, under the reality of our humanity and common interests, which are not those of the ever-greater concentration of power and capital in the hands of a few who, in any case, are none the better for it, as they too are tools of a power that is entirely indifferent to human needs or potentials.

William IX, One of the Moderns

The modernity of William himself was recognized not only, most famously, by Ezra Pound (1885–1972), who called him "the most 'modern' of the troubadours,"[3] but already by some of the earliest modern scholars of troubadour literature, such as Claude-François-Xavier Millot (L'Abbé Millot; 1726–1785):

> Guillaume IX, comte de Poitou, . . . se rendit célèbre parmi ses contemporains. Aux avantages de la naissance et de la fortune, il réunissoit ceux de la figure, du courage et des talens. On lui reproche une licence de moeurs, qui paroît supposer les rafinemens du luxe moderne; qui cependant n'étoit point rare en ces tems même ...[4]

> [William IX, count of Poitou, was celebrated among his contemporaries. In addition to the advantages of his birth and fortune, he had a handsome figure, courage, and talents. One faults him for behavior deemed licentious, but which is rather similar to the refinements of modern luxury, and not uncommon even in those times][5]

What exactly is meant by "modern" is a key question. As Stephen Greenblatt noted in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), the subjectivities that he studied in the early modern period (c. 1450–1650) were marked by a flexibility of understanding of one's own identity and the portrayal of that identity to others, over which the subject felt s/he had some, if not full, control. Those subjectivities however have existed at various points in history, going back to antiquity and also the medieval period, and are connected to contexts of affluence and commercial activity.[6] Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition* (2005), characterized the artificers of poststructuralist critical theory—figures like Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille, and Roland Barthes—as an "avant-garde premodern" inspired by an "amalgamation of medievalisms" of the essence of postmodernism:

> The diachronic imagination of the *nouvelle critique* reaches across a millennium to embrace a distant epoch as a foundation for its own intellectual work while elaborating a diverse and often perplexingly self-contradictory vision of the Middle Ages and their legacy to modern theoretical reflection. In this sense, the archaeology of medievalism uncovered here has important bearing on the stories that modernity's own critical tradition continues to tell and to leave untold about its past.
>
> One of these stories, of course, is that narrated in Jean François Lyotard's widely influential 1979 treatise on what he termed the "postmodern condition" . . . Lyotard captures the historical sensibility that, with some exceptions, also defined the diverse practices of medievalism among the avant-garde, . . . this coterie's recurrent fascination, even obsession with the historical period that modernity most consistently abjected as its temporal other.[7]

Indeed, conceptually transforming oneself into an "other," the *ostranenie* or "defamiliarization" of the formalists, allows us to see ourselves more clearly, or at least differently, which is the reason intellectual movements usually reject the immediate past and look to a prior era in search of justification of change, or stasis, in the present. In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), Bruno Latour notices the essential duplicity of the modern project, or "constitution," as he calls it, which he tries to rescue by doubling it into a set of "guarantees" that we can have our cake and eat it too, as long as we maintain a respectful set of separations—between nature, individual freedom, society, and God—that can sustain our cohesion as a group and ensure the ability to deal with the challenges of changing circumstances. Thus, Holsinger values the premodernity of the postmoderns as an instrument of change, while Latour resists postmodernity by asserting that modernity can be fixed, with a few adjustments to its systems of representation, confident in its ability to bring about change when change is needed.

Saying we have never been modern, however, only confirms us as profoundly modern, and also medieval, as it tries to make us long for a backward modern past by imagining it as an unrealized progressive future, taking three steps back and one forward. Postmodernity also confirms its backwardness, and modernity, by arming its avant-garde with medieval methods of reasoning, thus making the avant-garde into the extreme rearguard, where the only possible future is to go back, again, to the modern moment. Both moderns and postmoderns are in fact terrified of the future, and for good reason. Those who wanted to move forward as fast as possible now want for time to stop. There are no solutions in either the irrationality and obscurantism of poststructuralist and postmodern theory or the false confidence of the moderns in the stability of their symmetrical structures of contradictions. Neither the suppression nor the endless proliferation of identities—which are only symbolic representations—is going to make any significant difference in preventing the unfolding of the consequences of how we have lived and continue to live in the present, devouring everything, arguing over words and other false identifiers, and entirely failing to address the real issues.

Nietzsche understood better than we do that the problem is the human, and the language that it uses, which enables its duplicity. What Nietzsche discovered is that

we have always been modern, for as long as we've had language, which is for as long as we have been human. Ideally, language enables reason and allows humans to communicate and cooperate, thus to live better. Language is a tool that, like money, can facilitate cooperative division of labor and mutually advantageous exchange, thus creating the conditions for material affluence. An ape that speaks can indeed become rational, civilized, and more prosperous, but it is also a very dangerous animal, to itself and others, because it misuses reason and language to scheme, deceive, and lie to others so as to advance its own gain. It is also dangerous because it thinks it is not an animal, and that it is better than others, human and nonhuman, entitled to larger shares than are its due in any exchange. Language allows this animal to invent identities, differences, and hierarchies where it places itself higher than those it despises and beneath the ones it fears.

All-too-eager to take pride in our identities—mere names, face paint, war masks, signs of superiority and submission—we conveniently skip the reasons we should be deeply embarrassed of who we really are and what we are doing to each other and to the world around us. Underneath the masks and the names, whatever those might be, the same savage leers and vociferates, plots and schemes, dissembles, boasts, flatters, cajoles, and intimidates. Comfortable occupying contradictory positions, as inferior and superior, standing here and there and wherever and everywhere, such a slippery subject is a great negotiator but is also perpetually "conflicted," as we say these days. Deep down, it knows itself to be a living falsehood, ontologically empty, divided against itself and against others, willing and ready to shift places and wear different masks as opportunity dictates, but never able to stand for long anywhere in particular. The self-interest such a subject serves, interestingly, can never be its own, as it is always that of an other, with which it provisionally identifies, but whose identity shifts just as quickly, a tantalizing shadow of a self that forever eludes its grasp. Inhabiting the gap between many different lies, we cannot communicate honestly with others or be objective, cooperate, or become better people. In other words, we are hopeless hypocrites—premoderns, moderns, and postmoderns—dissemblers lost in the dark forests of our own mendacities.[8] Lying to others and to ourselves, we turn the gifts of mind and language into the tools of our own undoing, negating the possibility of transcending our divisions, the duplicity that is modernity.

Regardless of the time period it inhabits, its eternal present, the modern is a trickster, a businessperson, a busybody, a scammer, a practical type, a gossip, a seducer, an adaptable and flexible fellow, a *bricoleur*, a *pícaro*, a con(hu)man. Its defining characteristic is the willingness to act, pretend, deceive, and trick others by claiming one thing or another according to the prospect of a profit. It is the mentality of the market and the merchant, which is the reason modernity is particularly visible wherever trade, commerce, and markets are vigorous. The dishonesty then is what we moderns share, across times and cultures, particularly when we are prosperous and the stakes are high, when a little lie can bring in a big payoff. As a consequence, we continue living in the most abject of ways—in some ways worse than at any point

in antiquity or the medieval period—if only because there are so many of us and our weapons to fight each other have grown so powerful, especially our economic system.

Capitalism is a product of the duplicity of commerce. It thrives on cheating and dividing humans against one another and also against themselves. Capitalism, in effect, is not the design or embodiment of anyone's particular self-interest. It is instead a structure that develops and evolves out of the interactions of countless liars, cheaters, and scammers, operating over thousands of years, always seeking their own gain and accumulating the results of unequal exchanges. The accumulations thus formed are capital proper, embodying the values added from the losses of others in commercial exchanges. Capital then achieves what humans cannot, the coming together of the collective efforts of countless individuals, ironically realized by the divisions of those individuals, as they struggle to get ahead of one another.

As it is constituted by the value of what human beings produce, capital acquires, along with those values, a human identity. Capital is, like a living human, productive and also capable of reproduction but much more powerful than any individual. Like a giant armed with a club, it is endowed with the ability to force individuals into ever more unequal exchanges, by which capital continues to grow. All humans living under capitalism are equally affected. As Aristotle suggested, in Book I of the *Politics*, the individual who engages in commercial exchange or in money lending, for the sake of increasing given amounts of capital, is enslaved to unnatural activities that are contrary to that person's own interests as a rational human being. The capitalist may believe he is gaining by the growth of the capital assets but fails to understand how that growth derives from the losses of those cheated and also from the sacrifice of the capitalist's own time and efforts in the pursuit of such endeavors. The growth of capital has an opportunity cost, as economists call it, which is the life of its owners/managers and also the life of the human society that serves it. It is in this sense that capital owns human beings and grows at their expense.

Modern humans—who take pride in their individual names, believe in themselves, affirm their individuality, and look out after their self-interest—are the creators of the living, breathing, and breeding giant that is capitalism and that grows and flourishes by consuming people's lives. Postmodernism, libertarian anarcho-capitalism, and the globalization of the neoliberal free market are only the most recent manifestations of the condition that, under guise of harmonious and entirely free and voluntary exchanges in pursuit of one's own happiness, gain and self-interest, is in reality a *bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of all against all) in which everyone loses. In *De Cive*, also the *Leviathan*, Hobbes used the idea of such all-out warfare to refer to the state of nature, life in the absence of government or civilization, guided only by the law of the jungle. It is however also the reality of the lives of supposedly civilized modern people, who, while rigging up governments and churches and writing up whole libraries of law books and sacred scriptures, also pretending to be pious and to care about the common good and the wellbeing of others, secretly believe in nothing and obey no law or rule other than their own desires. The law of the market then turns out to be identical to the law of the jungle, which is the law of our desires, what we call our passion and our love.

The irony of the state of seeming harmony and equilibrium of market interactions, where individual selfishness is magically transmuted into the commonwealth, was already understood in antiquity and is dramatically illustrated in the biblical story of the golden calf. The story's economic significance is indicated by the making of an idol out of gold and cattle, the two most notable measures of value in the economies of ancient shepherds and traders such as the biblical Israelites. Capital in itself is a word derived from Latin *caput* (head; plural, *capita*) and refers to aggregate wealth in cattle-based economies where the head of livestock is the unit of value. The merging of the gold and the livestock into a single image suggests an advancing process of mental abstraction of value, central to commerce, that allows for given quantities of one commodity to be equated with given quantities of another commodity, the gold that goes into the crafting of the calf in this case. In that sense, the golden calf is a symbolic representation of the emergence of a market economy and the idea of a common object that can embody, in itself, the values of different commodities, i.e., money. The golden calf also represents the way in which individuals create capital, and capitalism, by contributing their personal wealth, jewelry in this situation, as the raw material for crafting the figure (Exodus 32:2–4). The celebratory mood of the Israelites, singing and dancing around the idol, shows their enjoyment of the benefits of such an economy. Intriguingly, however, it is portrayed as indistinguishable from a state of war and conflict (Exodus 32:17–18). In its opposition to the moral commandments that Moses is bringing to his people, the golden calf represents an economy unhampered by any laws or regulations, a free market, a state of *laissez faire,* resulting in material abundance and great joy to those who participate in it. The joy, however, is not lasting because it is derived from a state of selfish conflict among individuals, each seeking their own gain, a situation that results in tragedy and the breakdown of the social group. As Moses's men go around the camp slaughtering their own people—three thousand of them (Exodus 32: 27–28)—we observe the reality and the consequences of a free-market economy that operates in the absence of moral values or other normative considerations. The Israelites that decided to worship the golden calf were moving in the direction of modernity but cannot be said to have become truly modern till they accepted the commandments of God, while continuing to live according to the values of the market. Modernity comes about only when we can subscribe to multiple and contradictory systems of values, that is, to duplicity itself.

Was William IX then the first of the moderns? Definitely not. But he can be said to be the first of the moderns to become a known author of songs in the modern European vernacular languages. He is also, not unique or unprecedented, but at least refreshingly original for someone living in the Middle Ages, as he seems to want to boast of and expose his own modernity. His shameless bragging of duplicity manages then to both modernize and demodernize him, as he casts off at least some of his disguises, just as he puts them on. Duplicitous even in his admission of duplicity, a liar who at times tells the truth, William was as medieval, or as early modern, even as Romantic, as Mephistopheles himself, just as we are, too.

The Dialectic of Unreason: Romans, Christians, and Germanic Barbarians

Ancient modernity and its corresponding economic and political forms reached their most advanced manifestations in the ways of life and structures of the Roman Empire. Selfish and materialistic, also brutal and singularly systematic and well-organized exploiters, the Romans were true capitalists, colonialists, and imperialists who set the models that future powers would continue to admire and attempt to emulate. The cruelty and inhumanity of Roman oppression were bound to generate hostile reactions and to result in the eventual collapse of the empire itself, brought down by a wasteful and bloated economy exhausting its own resources, by the rivalries among and the self-indulgence of the Romans themselves, and the envy and resentment of their many victims. One of the most notable critiques of Roman culture and its ways of life was Christianity, a clear denunciation of Roman violence, greed, materialism, and injustice. An attack on the ethos of conquest and militarism, of merchants and slave drivers, as well as the hypocrisy of veritable wolves priding themselves in their supposed piety, virtue, and civilization, Christianity denounced the reign of the Antichrist, i.e., the Roman emperors, as a monstrosity with no future and certain to result in eternal damnation. By contrast, Jesus, the true Christ and Messiah, opposed Roman emperors and governors, their false gods, their Jewish puppet kinglets, and the corrupt priests of Jehovah as well. Instead, Jesus preached a religion of love and of peace, of tolerance and forgiveness. He advocated for communal life without private property, sharing the necessaries among all members of the community; caring for the poor, embracing the marginalized, feeding the hungry, and healing of the sick. He overthrew the tables of the merchants, clearly branding them as thieves, and unequivocally predicted the rich would not enter heaven. Profoundly rational in its demand for truth but fiercely persecuted by the Romans and the Jewish upper classes, such a religion could not survive for long. It ended as soon as the followers of Jesus found it inconvenient to live in poverty and fear for their lives and decided instead to join the oppressors and become their best and staunchest allies. Thus the Roman Christian came into being, with the Roman Catholic Church as its institutional embodiment.

An interestingly self-contradictory identity that could simultaneously call itself Christian and live in the most unchristian way possible, that of the Romans, the Roman Christian or Roman Catholic, was the last of the ancient and first of the medieval moderns. Emperor Constantine (r. 306–337) and his mother Helena, Emperor Theodosius (r. 379–395), and their Christian protégés and followers were exemplary manifestations of the new subjectivity and catalysts of the assimilation of Christianity to the Roman way of life and culture. It would be up to figures like Saint Augustine (354–430) and Saint Jerome (c. 345–420) to systematize the theology corresponding to the profound modernity, and hypocrisy, of the Roman Christian subjectivity. The power of the psychic and libidinal investments of Roman Christianity, heavily sexualized around ideas and images like virginity, human

sacrifice, and cannibalism, proved to be a winning combination destined for durability and endurance, even across the rise and fall of multiple empires.

Thus, even after the fall, or waning, of Rome, Roman Christianity survived and was reproduced in the form of Germanic Christians, such as King Clovis of the Franks (r. 481–511) and later Charlemagne, also a king of the Franks (r. 768–814), who, on Christmas Day of the Year of Our Lord 800, was crowned, by Pope Leo III, *Imperator Romanorum* (Emperor of the Romans). The observable constant in these ancient and medieval subjects, and those of later periods, is the distinctly modern instrumentalization of moral and religious ideas in the pursuit of personal gain and self-empowerment, the very reasons Constantine and Clovis adopted Christianity, believing it to be a powerful magic allowing victory in battle against rivals. The specific ways in which Christianity came together with the ambitions of Roman emperors and Germanic kings, also with the interests of merchants and the development of free-market capitalism in the European West, are of the essence in understanding the subject of this study, the troubadour, William IX of Aquitaine, who, still living in the Middle Ages, sang modern Europe into existence.

The New Subjects of Love

William's life and works constitute a paradigmatic illustration of what and who western Europeans were in the twelfth century, and who they were destined to become in the millennium of modernity (1050–2050) to which we belong.[9] Most notable in this new European subject is the continued invocation of Roman Christianity, but within a much more individualistic, self-seeking, competitive, and contentious way of life in which commerce and social stratification by wealth, ranks of nobility, and professional occupation, as well as the consumption and display of luxury commodities, played central roles in the fashioning of identities. The multiplicity of factors determining identity points to a similar complexity of desires and assessments of self-worth. In such a situation, the subject is defined by what it has, i.e., its objective properties, the things it owns and that give it a position within a given hierarchy. But it is also defined by what it desires. Identity in that sense is a gap, a state of inferiority and insufficiency which cannot be remedied except by someone with no desires and who is the object of the desires of others. The subject in effect can never find satisfaction except in ceasing to be a subject altogether and becoming a pure object, an inanimate thing with no feelings whatsoever of its own, but that everyone else intensely desires, like gold or money, a golden idol standing for the values of all desirable things. King Midas attempted to transform everything into gold. Our billionaires do that too. But that is not sufficient, as it is not identical with the transmutation of the self into gold. Love is that alchemy.

Love is the pretense of an affection intended to attract, toward the self, the affections that the self claims to feel for others. Love in that sense is both devious and empty-hearted. The skills required to be an effective lover are also complex. As

William describes it in his songs, the self behind the lover is a protean entity subject to constant recrafting and improvisation. It also looks at others—including humans, animals, and natural resources—as objects with similarly fluid identities, depending on the desires of the self. Affectivity, in that situation, acts as a subjecting force allowing the "lover" to exploit an object of desire, the "beloved." The idealized courtly lady adored by a singing troubadour, the *domna*/*domina* (lady-lord), is one of the most central but not the only example of such objects, a veritable idol that comes to represent what the self wants to become. It is perhaps evident why love finds no satisfaction except in the state of death and why the modern economy is a "death economy," as aptly labeled by John Perkins.[10]

In the context of an individual's efforts at domination/possession of others, love is a highly suspect mode of feeling and self-representation, ultimately a profoundly self-serving profession of service to others. That sort of competitive and power-seeking affection is expressed, in troubadour lyrics, in the paradigmatic situation of a lover expressing complete surrender to the idealized lady, an object of desire already possessed by someone else, generally the wife of another lord. While seemingly an expression of submission to the greater power represented by the *domna*, the lover's goal is to earn her love, i.e., to reverse the flow of desire, turning it around by means of seductive maneuvers so as to cause the beloved to love the lover, effectively inverting the initial power relationship. Love, seen from that perspective, is a form of participation in the dynamics of a power hierarchy where desires flow upward along a chain of actual and imaginary vassal-lord allegiances and libidinal attachments.

So long as the lover loves, he (the gendered pronoun is not tied to biological but cultural realities and is critically important in the given system of desires) is in thrall to, and ensures the solidity of, an existing hierarchy of power that subjects the lover, even as he tries to subject others (women also occupied and occupy the position of lover and singer of love, as in the works of women troubadours or *trobairitz* like the Comtessa de Dia).[11] As a quest for power, love defines the affections of ambitious agents who, however, are subordinated by their own desires and doomed to pine their lives away wishing for impossibilities whose ultimate referents are always deferred upward in the hierarchies of such powers. Thus enslaved by their affections, courtly lovers, the prototypes of modern/postmodern subjects, pursued their own happiness and fulfillment along channels capturing and directing their libidinal energies and putting them in the service of ends beyond their own (as part of cultural and political mechanisms, the phenomenon of love is homologous with the ways in which nature conscripts human bodies for the purposes of biological reproduction). A courtly culture where love and corresponding cultural products play such a role, is not unknown in other times and places, including ancient Rome, Egypt, and India, as well as medieval Japan, and it seems to surface under circumstances of significant accumulations of wealth and political power that make possible the leisure necessary for such passions and activities to flourish.

Along those lines, this book proposes that, acting as autonomous agents believing they could, by clever manipulation of self-representations and appearances, achieve

their goals of self-empowerment, courtly subjects made themselves into tools of larger powers and disempowered themselves in pursuit of the pleasures of the courtly life and its many and very refined forms of entertainment. In that way, the seemingly charming lifestyle of the nobility—including the courting of beautiful women; the composition and singing of songs and performance of music; the ostentatious display of wealth in clothing, food, and jewelry; the partaking in, and hosting of, magnificent feasts with peers and overlords; the playing of board games; and other pleasurable activities—became a golden cage prefiguring the prison houses of modern/postmodern socioeconomic and political structures.

Ironically, a position of mastery and superiority in such contexts can be attained only by agents who feel no love at all, i.e., who actually do not care about others; those who do not waste their time in popular pastimes and who, instead, manage to instrumentalize the affections, desires, and aspiration of others in the service of their own ends. Interestingly, for students of power and wealth disparities, these are some of the mechanisms by which power and wealth are concentrated, gradually leading to the formations of large fortunes, sizable estates and domains, eventually kingdoms, nation-states, and even empires. Significant accumulations of money and power can be read, in a way, as indicators of the directions of the flow of affections and desires, and the transfer of value, from the loving to the unloving, from the players of the game to those astute and unfeeling enough to turn others into their game pieces.

As later explained by Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513), particularly mischievous and ceaselessly machinating individuals stand at the top of the hierarchies of western societies, which in turn are the societies that rule the world. It is incorrect however to think that eastern cultures could have produced different results. Eastern tyrants are no different from western ones. Orientalism and Westernism might just share some degree of truth in that they define human beings pretty well. It is equally incorrect to think that the monsters at the top of our hierarchies are themselves the pinnacle of power, as they too, no less than the opportunistic upstarts that surround them, are subjects of desire.[12] The loving affects of the ruling classes are of course radically self-directed, marked by an intense narcissism that entirely and relentlessly objectifies others, a perfected and the most efficient form of love, so to speak. In its most extreme forms, such love of self can appear manifested as a hubristic psychopathology, thinking of oneself as the supreme and self-created deity, or it can be directed to deified surrogates of the self, the gods that the self directly communicates with and that instruct and guide him in his actions. Whether in the form of self-deification or of self-serving religious beliefs (or both), the desire of the self for the self is also, as represented in the myth of Narcissus, a form of entrapment, a captivity to the abyss of desire, the gallery of opposing mirrors where there is no object and the subject is splintered into the myriad bits and pieces of its own nothingness. Love and self-love, however, both succeed in rendering the subject into the desired object, the unfeeling and dead thing that is the telos of desire.