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A 'Miscellaneous Enterprise'

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A 'Miscellaneous Enterprise'

From cocoon forth a butterfly
As lady from her door
Emerged — a summer afternoon —
Repairing everywhere,
Without design, that I could trace,
Except to stray abroad
On miscellaneous enterprise
The clovers understood.

Emily Dickinson,
'The Butterfly's Day'

TEXTUAL ENCOUNTERS

Opening to passion as an unsettling, transformative force; extending desire to the text, expanding the self, and dissolving its boundaries; imagining pleasures outside the norm and intensifying them; overcoming loss and reaching beyond death; being loyal to oneself and defying productivity, resolution, and cohesion while embracing paradox,

non-linearity, incompleteness. These are some of the possibilities of lyric that this book explores by reading poems in dialogue with one another.

Most of the poems belong to Italian authors from the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who have contributed to shaping the Western lyric tradition: Guido Cavalcanti (c. 1255–1300), Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), and Francesco Petrarca (1304–74). They stem from 'courtly' poetry of *fin'amors*, which originated in Provence in the late eleventh century and which in Italy developed beginning from the early thirteenth century, first in Sicily and then in the central and northern parts of the peninsula.¹ These poets were in dialogue with one another, both directly through poetic exchanges and debates and less explicitly through various forms of intertextuality. For instance, the relationship between Guido Cavalcanti and Dante has been one of the most fascinating and explored parts of Dante Studies, alongside the equally discussed issue of Petrarch's position with respect to Dante. Our analysis sometimes begins with the dialogue that these poets' texts explicitly establish among themselves, but the form of comparison that we employ also opens up other less apparent dialogues. These are all forms of 'textual encounter', and by proposing this term we aim to convey the dynamics that a dialogue between texts produces beyond a linear sense of influence, source, or genealogy.

In this endeavour, we have been inspired by Donna Haraway's and Anne Carson's ways of reading texts with

1 For an overview of the relationship between early Italian lyric and courtly poetry, see the chapter 'Dante and the Lyric Past' in Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press), pp. 23–46. On the development of medieval love lyric, see also Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), pp. 109–66.

one another. With the notion of 'diffraction', Haraway has proposed a shift of optical metaphors for a new critical mode of thought and practice. Taking as its point of reference the optical phenomenon of diffraction, according to which lightwaves striking an object do not reproduce its exact form but give way to interference patterns that depend equally on the object and the lightwaves themselves, Haraway argues that diffraction produces a different critical consciousness. Unlike reflection, a diffractive reading has texts interact beyond the hierarchy of original and copy and studies them one through the other, with the aim of offering a different perspective and producing something new.²

Carson's scholarship provides a beautiful example of creating conversations between authors and texts that are not based on pre-existing connections between them but nonetheless use one to better understand the other. As she has written about her reading of Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan in *Economy of the Unlost*, 'With and against, aligned and adverse, each is placed like a surface on which the other may come into focus.'³ This rich and creative mode of comparison also informs her reading of Sappho,

2 Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouseTM: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 273. See also Donna J. Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York, Routledge, 1992), pp. 295–337; and Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele, 'Diffraction: Onto-Epistemology, Quantum Physics and the Critical Humanities', *Parallax*, 20.3 (2014), pp. 165–67. On the difference between reflection and diffraction, see Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, 'Diffraction statt Reflexion. Zu Donna Haraways Konzept des situierten Wissens', *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, 1 (2011), pp. 83–92.

3 Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. viii.

Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil in *Decreation*. Taking her cue from a lyric by Sappho that implicitly poses the question: 'What is it that love dares the self to do?', Carson has explored striking affinities in the three writers' experience and expression of ecstasis, of 'standing outside oneself'. Not only love, but also writing, emerges as a state of 'absolute daring' that involves having the self 'disappear' from its own narrative in a paradoxical endeavour of 'telling'. Carson has replicated the mysterious non-consequentiality of this undertaking in a three-part essay that has four parts rather than three.⁴

The textual encounters that we propose in this book do not erase the differences or specificity of the individual poems, nor do they overlook their histories or context, but they always try to open new avenues of interpretation. When poems are part of a larger collection, we consider their position within it, but our approach has been to read them one through the other. Often this approach allows for fresh insight on the poems, even when they are some of the most famous or explored of the Italian tradition, and what drives our endeavour is a conceptual interest in understanding how these poems articulate a particular dimension of lyric textuality. Thus the first two chapters may focus on Petrarch, and he may be the author most frequently mentioned throughout, but he is always read as part of a larger interest in the lyric that doesn't necessarily begin or end with him. In [Chapter 3](#), for example, a sonnet by Shakespeare is read together with sonnets by Dante and Petrarch, not on the basis of a possible poetic genealogy (in this case mediated by Petrarch) but as a means

4 Anne Carson, 'Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God', in her *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005), pp. 155–83.

to understand different ways in which lyric textuality can convey the irresistible force of passion and how different degrees of control and abandon articulate different pleasures. Furthermore, in the [final chapter](#) we propose a textual encounter that shows such a force reappearing in two later works by Dante and Petrarch that have supposedly left the lyric behind.

Careful close reading has been our main tool for investigating lyric textuality. This includes in-depth consideration of rhetorical, linguistic, and syntactic features, as well as analysis of conceptual and philosophical complexity in relation to cultural context. At the same time, an important interlocutor has been some late twentieth-century theory that has shown how textuality is imbued with desire and gives shape to subjectivity. In particular, we engage with Leo Bersani's theory of 'aesthetics', according to which textuality does not transcend desire but enacts its movement.⁵ This engagement with theory — which also includes a more recent interest in affect, queer temporality, and the post-human — offers some concepts and perspectives for looking at medieval and early modern poems and developing from them new readings. It is a creative operation that, in turn, enables us to produce some new concepts that both illuminate the poems analysed and offer possibilities for thinking further about poetry and its possibilities for the present.

This book affirms the transformative potential of passion by focusing on lyric as a space for affect, wherein a receptive subject is unsettled, moved, and shaped by desire. While in the wake of Augustine, many medieval authors,

5 Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). See in particular [Chapter 1](#) of the present study.

including Dante and Petrarch, reflected at length on the risks of letting reason and will be overcome by desire, in the texts we read, the 'I's susceptibility to love coincides with a heightened capacity for feeling, expansion, and abandon. Passion breaks the hardness and strictures of control, allowing the lyric subject to imagine new possibilities and stray into the pleasures of paradox, instability, and non-linearity.

In his interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Gilles Deleuze famously highlighted that 'we do not even know of what a body is capable' and that 'we do not even know of what affections we are capable, nor the extent of our power'.⁶ Deleuze insisted that such knowledge can be attained, not through reasoning, but only if we 'concretely try to become active' through a series of trials leading to the full experience of our bodies' potential. In this book we suggest that, likewise, we don't know what lyric can do until we experience it, and that lyric is a privileged realm to explore our power of being affected.

While maintaining a profound respect for the texts, we have given ourselves the freedom to roam with and among them, finding pleasure in a 'miscellaneous enterprise' that tries to capture and convey not a theory or

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 226. On passion see in particular, Erich Auerbach, 'Passio as Passion', in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. by James I. Porter, trans. by Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 165–87. On affect see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), Simo Knuutila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For a comparative study of affect in Petrarch and Dante, see Francesca Southerden, 'The Intensity of Affect', in *Dante and Petrarch in the Garden of Language* (in progress), with additional bibliography on these authors.

comprehensive definition of lyric as a genre but some moments of 'lyric in action.'⁷ Each chapter is dedicated to one of these moments, and if in gathering and arranging them we have suggested some possible connections, each chapter also interacts with all the others in a transversal way through recurring concepts and resonances. It is a movement that hopefully retains some trace of the lyric potential for non-linearity and resistance to closure, which many of these poems powerfully convey. We also like to think that Dickinson's butterfly that moves freely and 'repair[s] everywhere' is a suggestive image for a less systematic and more open, 'lyric' way of reading and thinking, which we have tried to follow and which we hope the reader may also find inspiring — and even take pleasure in.

LYRIC IN ACTION

The book opens with a diptych that explores different articulations of desire in the lyric Petrarch. **Chapter 1** reads together two *canzoni* belonging to Petrarch's lyric sequence, the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Fragments in the Vernacular*). This first textual encounter was suggested by Petrarch himself and inscribed in the textuality of the so-called 'canzone of citations' (*Rvf* 70, 'Lasso me, ch'io non so in qual parte pieghi'). This *canzone* cites texts by earlier poets at the end of the first four stanzas (the pseudo-Arnaut Daniel, Cavalcanti, Dante, and Cino da Pistoia) and concludes the

7 For a recent theorization of lyric, see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). See also *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), and Virginia Jackson, 'Lyric', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene and others, 4th edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 826–34.

fifth and final stanza by citing Petrarch's own 'canzone of metamorphoses' (*Rvf* 23, 'Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade'). In the past, the *canzone* of citations has often been read as a palinode through which the poet renounces the erroneous desire of the past and formulates a new, correct way of loving and writing. By reading the two *canzoni* together, we question this teleological narrative of conversion and show that the only significant change takes place in the earlier *canzone* and is the metamorphosis into a love poet. In our reading, rather than a recantation, the later *canzone* indicates a return to the previous one, and the impulse towards 'conversion' and change coexists with an irresistible attachment to the past and to passion's torments. We also develop the idea that Petrarch's paradoxical form of pleasure is replicated by textuality and can be visualized in terms of a Möbius strip, in which forward movement is in reality a movement backwards that returns to the beginning endlessly, with no way out of the loop. This same shape, we suggest, can be found in other crucial moments of Petrarch's lyric sequence.

In [Chapter 2](#), it is our own analysis that returns to *canzone* 23 and engages it in a different textual encounter, this time with the sonnet 'Amor co la man dextra il lato manco' (*Rvf* 228). This encounter has been suggested to us by an unusual reversal in these texts. Usually the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* stage the transformation of the beloved Laura into a laurel tree, and in analogy with the Ovidian myth of Apollo and Daphne, this motif emphasizes desire for possession and ensuing frustration. Instead, in the poems we are putting in dialogue, it is the poetic subject who is transformed into, or implanted with, the laurel. By engaging these poems with recent philosophical works that consider the nature of plant existence as a

form of interconnectedness and porosity to the outside, our analysis explores the possibilities for subjectivity and desire that are imagined in the relationship to the laurel. Most importantly, we show that rather than emphasizing the traditional dynamics of desire in Petrarch's lyric, these poems bring into play a radical passivity that opens up the subject and expresses a sense of desire not as lack but as intensity.

Passivity is also at the core of [Chapter 3](#), which proposes more surprising textual encounters between sonnets by Dante, Petrarch, and Shakespeare that all explore the relationship between will, reason, and passion: Dante's 'Io sono stato con Amore insieme'; Petrarch's *Rvf* 132, 'S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento?' and Shakespeare's sonnet 129, 'Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame'. This chapter shows that while these sonnets share a concern with desire as compulsion, an irresistible and ineluctable force which paralyzes reason and makes the will impotent to act, they also articulate it with differing degrees of abandon, which are visible in their different lyric textualities. While Dante maintains a certain scientific lucidity that holds together the subject and the poem, and Shakespeare embraces a devastatingly masochistic impulse that annihilates the subject and radically unbalances the poem beyond any sense of measure or control, Petrarch cultivates an 'art of imbalance' that finds pleasure in a state of contrariness and conveys a radical instability without dissolving the subject into the Shakespearian abject.

While retaining an interest for passivity, [Chapters 4 and 5](#) form another diptych that focuses on the intersubjective and relational dimensions of lyric. [Chapter 4](#) opens a new perspective on three of the most famous sonnets of the Italian lyric tradition: Cavalcanti's 'Chi è questa che vèn

ch'ogn'om la mira', Dante's 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare', and Petrarch's 'Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi' (*Rvf* 90). They are all praise poems and all engage with the notion of epiphany, understood as an experience of instantaneity and a manifestation of presence, associated in each case with the appearance of the beloved and its effects on the poetic 'I'. In dialogue with recent interest in queer forms of temporality and its relationship with desire and embodiment, our analysis focuses on the different declensions of the 'now' in the three poems and shows that they articulate three different forms of subjectivity and pleasure. Cavalcanti's poem stages a fulguration that cannot be sustained, and the subject finds himself in a space of negativity where the 'now' both initiates desire and precludes fulfilment. By contrast, Dante's sonnet is characterized by pure positivity, and the 'now' of the beloved's epiphany, which the poem enacts and the reader also experiences in all its affective intensity, consists in an ecstatic excess of sweetness that is impervious to time. Petrarch's sonnet begins negatively by displacing the 'now' of epiphany into the past and so qualifies it from the outset as imperfect. And yet with a paradoxical twist that is typical of Petrarch, memory and poetry remake a 'now' in which desire perseveres and pleasure thrives notwithstanding the violence of time.

An encounter with the beloved is also at the centre of [Chapter 5](#), which similarly reads three poems by Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch: the *ballata* 'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai' and the sonnets 'Oltra la spera che più larga gira' and 'Levòmmi il mio pensier in parte ov'era' (*Rvf* 302). This textual grouping is perhaps more unexpected than the previous one insofar as Petrarch's sonnet is a clear rewriting of Dante's (both staging the possibility of reaching the beloved after death), but Cavalcanti's

ballata is usually read independently. What interests us is that Cavalcanti's poem also conceives of the lyric space as a means of extending desire and imagining a post-mortem possibility to bridge the gap with the beloved. Our analysis explores the different modalities of this encounter and its outcome: a posthumous pleasure that is more imagined than experienced and remains on an horizontal axis; a vertiginous journey through the universe that reaches heaven and realizes desire beyond all limits; and an earthly fantasy of the afterlife that manages to give pleasure in its tenuousness and instability.

The last chapter offers a comparative reading of the significance of the body and the enduring presence of lyric in two later texts by Dante and Petrarch that do not strictly belong to the lyric genre and are meant to depart from eros insofar as it is incompatible with God: Dante's *Paradiso* and Petrarch's *Triumphus Eternitatis*, which is his most 'Dantean' text. By studying the representations of heaven and eternity in both works, we explore how they relate to and differ from the eschatological tenets of the time. In particular, we focus on the doctrine of the resurrection of the body and show the different ways in which, for both poets, a theological concept becomes an opportunity to reaffirm the affective component of lyric. Dante's text reveals a profound anchorage in God and a drive towards fusing with Him in the beatific vision yet also maintains an erotic attachment with the beloved that is contained in the body and the desire for it. It is a paradoxical sense of fullness that culminates with the anticipation of the Resurrection that the final cantos of *Paradiso* not only stage but enact through a powerful, pyrotechnic textuality. Petrarch, instead, reveals a less strong drive towards the Divine and turns the doctrine of bodily return into the possibility for

curing Laura's body of its earthly imperfections. Significantly, in the *Triumphus Eternitatis*, the ultimate pleasure consists not in the vision of God but in the eternal contemplation of Laura's perfected beauty. However, even when turning the traditional understanding of heaven upside down, Petrarch's poetry leaves space for desire not to be satiated but to keep its affective power and to be experienced as a paradoxical pleasure. For Petrarch (as also for Dante), once a love poet, always a love poet.

The book concludes with an **epilogue** by the contemporary poet Antonella Anedda Angioy, who traces other lyric possibilities and extends them into the present. She explores the encounter between Petrarch, Paul Celan, and Osip Mandelstam, in particular Celan's sense that 'Petrarch's | in sight | again' and Mandelstam's translation of four sonnets by Petrarch into Russian. She thereby identifies the creative power that poetry has 'to reread the texts, to bring them closer by further questioning, to annul time so as to make it live again in the space of language.' By offering her own variation on one of Mandelstam's renditions of Petrarch, she beautifully enacts that power. Anedda Angioy's epilogue is presented in the original Italian and is followed by a translation into English by another contemporary poet, Jamie McKendrick, who expands the dialogue between poets even further.

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The multifarious encounters and conversations that have contributed to the miscellaneous character of this enterprise are also evident in the rich textual lives of its parts. Other versions of most chapters have been published or are about to be published elsewhere, often in other languages. They have been rewritten for this book, but it is a pleasure to acknowledge the other venues in which they appear, the occasions for which they were originally thought, and the others in which they were discussed. The first version of Chapter 6 was presented at the conference 'The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-modern World: Petrarch

and Boccaccio between the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance' (Freie Universität Berlin, June 2014), organized by Igor Candido and Bernard Huss. It was published as 'From Paradox to Exclusivity: Dante's and Petrarch's Lyrical Eschatologies', in *The Unity of Knowledge in Pre-modern World*, ed. by Igor Candido (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 129–52. Chapter 4 began its life as part of a collaborative Oxford project on Medieval Temporalities by the Somerville Medievalist Research Group (SMRG), and the version written for that project, 'From Loss to Capture: Temporality in Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch's Lyrical Epiphanies', is forthcoming in *Medieval Temporalities: The Experience of Time in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Almut Suerbaum and Annie Sutherland (D. S. Brewer). Another version was presented in Italian at the workshop 'Les deux Guidi (Guinizzelli et Cavalcanti): quelques prolongements' (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, February 2017), organized by Marina Gagliano, Philippe Guérin, and Raffaella Zanni, and was published as 'Dalla perdita al possesso. Forme di temporalità nelle epifanie liriche di Cavalcanti, Dante e Petrarca', *Chroniques italiennes web*, 32 (2017), pp. 137–54. Chapter 1 was originally presented at the conference 'The Shape of Return: Progress, Process, and Repetition in Medieval Culture', organized by Francesco Giusti and Daniel Reeve (ICI Berlin, September 2017). Two versions have appeared as 'Poetry Without End: Reiterating Desire in Petrarch's *Rvf* 70 and 23', in *Ends of Poetry*, ed. by Gian Maria Annovi and Thomas Harrison (= *California Italian Studies*, 8.1 (2018)), pp. 1–13 and 'Petrarca e la forma del desiderio: tra metamorfosi e soggettività ibrida in *Rvf* 70 e 23', *Per Leggere*, 18.35 (2018), pp. 27–41. We began thinking of Chapter 3 for the conference 'Dante et Shakespeare: cosmologie, politique,

poétique' (Université de Poitiers, April 2019), organized by Isabelle Battesti and Pascale Drouet, and an early version of it was also presented in Paris at the newly created 'DanteLab@Sorbonne Université' in October 2018. It has appeared in French as 'Compulsion, plaisir, regret: volonté et passivité dans trois sonnets de Dante, Pétrarque et Shakespeare', in *Dante et Shakespeare: cosmologie, politique, poétique*, ed. by Isabelle Battesti and Pascale Drouet (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020), pp. 105–23. Like Chapter 4, Chapter 2 took shape as part of a SMRG project, this time on the subject of Openness in Medieval Culture. It was presented at the Symposium, 'Openness in Medieval Culture' (ICI Berlin, June 2019), organized by Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum, and a version is forthcoming in *Openness in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum (ICI Berlin Press).

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