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Declensions of 'Now'
Lyric Epiphanies in Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch

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This chapter continues to explore the risks and pleasures of passivity by reading together three sonnets by Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch: 'Chi è questa che vèn ch'ogn'om la mira'; 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare', and 'Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi' (*Rvf* 90). All three sonnets engage with the notion of epiphany, understood as an event in time that is focused on an experience of instantaneity and implies a showing forth.[1] In this sense, epiphany (etymologically derived from the Greek, ἐπιφάνεια, meaning 'manifestation')

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1   On the notion of epiphany, see Paul Friedrich, 'Lyric Epiphany', *Language in Society*, 30 (2001), pp. 217–47; and Rainer Warning, 'Seeing and Hearing in Ancient and Medieval Epiphany', in *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames*, ed. by Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, and Alison Calho (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 102–16, which includes a comparative reading of poems by Dante and Petrarch. He argues that relative to Dante, Petrarch's epiphanies are more 'subjective' and 'psychologizing'; in a poem like *Rvf* 111 (and arguably in *Rvf* 90 too), Petrarch 'allows a specific temporal moment to break into the language with the fugacity

is a kind of presencing: a way both to make presence visible and to experience it in the 'now'.

In all three sonnets, the manifestation is that of the beloved, and they all register the effects that her appearing has on the poetic subject. Yet they are far from homogenous in their attempts to capture the particular temporality of the lady's epiphany and of its effects in the present. Our analysis of these temporal differences in the lyrics has led us to consider them in relationship to non-linear temporality, especially queer temporality. For the last few decades, queer theory has been interested in exploring how in its entanglement with desire and embodiment, temporality can take many different forms that challenge the normativity of progression, linearity, and teleology.[2] For instance, both Lee Edelman and Jack/Judith Halberstam have criticized, in very different ways, the heteronormative structure of progressivist visions of futurity, and Heather Love has shown the significance of looking backwards.[3] Scholars like Carolyn Dinshaw and Carla Freccero have also destabilized linear ways of understanding the past and

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of an appearance' (p. 112). See also Warning, 'Imitatio und Intertextualität. Zur Geschichte lyrischer Dekonstruktion der Amortheologie: Dante, Petrarca, Baudelaire', in *Lektüren romanischer Lyrik. Von den Trobadors zum Surrealismus* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1997), pp. 104–41. For a discussion of epiphany's sacramental charge, and an argument for its cautious use in relation to broader notions of lyricism, see Robin Kirkpatrick, 'Polemics of Praise: Theology as Text, Narrative, and Rhetoric in Dante's *Commedia*', in *Dante's 'Commedia': Theology as Poetry*, ed. by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 14–35 (pp. 17–21).

2   See for instance, *Queer Temporalities*, ed. by Elizabeth Freeman (=*GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13.2–3 (2007)).

3   Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

relating to it.[4] In this chapter, we dialogue in particular with Carolyn Dinshaw's interest in the different possibilities of the present and the 'now'. Dinshaw has shown that '[t]he present moment is more heterogeneous and asynchronous than the everyday image of *now* […] would allow'.[5] Through her analysis of mainly middle English narrative texts, Dinshaw has shown that 'desire can reveal a temporally multiple world in the *now* (a queer world, that is)'.[6] In looking at our three Italian lyric epiphanies, we are also interested in the relationship between temporality and desire, in particular how 'now' is declined differently and thereby articulates diverse subjectivities.

QUESTIONING

The first sonnet of our trilogy, 'Chi è questa che vèn', is by the Florentine poet Guido Cavalcanti:

> Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira,
> che fa tremar di chiaritate l'âre
> e mena seco Amor, sì che parlare
> null'omo pote, ma ciascun sospira?
>
> O Deo, che sembra quando li occhi gira!
> dical' Amor, ch'i' nol savria contare:
> cotanto d'umiltà donna mi pare,
> ch'ogn'altra ver' di lei i' la chiam' ira.

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4   Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Post-modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

5   Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 7 (italics in the original).

6   Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now*, p. 5 (italics in the original).

Non si poria contar la sua piagenza,
ch'a le' s'inchin' ogni gentil vertute,
e la Beltate per sua dea la mostra.

Non fu sì alta già la mente nostra
e non si pose 'n noi tanta salute,
che propiamente n'aviàn canoscenza.

(Who is she who approaches, on whom everyone
gazes, | who makes the air tremble with clarity | and
brings Love in her wake, so that | no one can speak
but each one sighs? || Oh God, what she seems
when she looks my way! | Let Love himself speak
of it, for I would not know how: | she appears to me
a lady of such humility | that next to her all other
women seem proud. || No one could describe her
fairness, | for every gracious virtue bows to her, |
and Beauty worships her as its goddess. || No mind
has reached such heights, | none of us has ever had
such perfection | to know her properly.)

As noticed by several commentators, this sonnet is already
in a dialogue with what comes before, specifically with
Guido Guinizzelli's sonnet 'Io vo'[gliọ] del ver mia donna
laudare', which engages with the motif of the *laus mulieris*
from the troubadour and early Sicilian tradition but pushes
it to a new intensity.[7] Indeed, its main characteristic is the
theologization of the lady to the extent that the event of her
appearing elevates her to quasi-divine status. 'Io vo'[gliọ]

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7   See Guido Guinizzelli, *Rime*, ed. by Luciano Rossi (Turin: Einaudi,
2002), p. 50. The poem, which we quote from *Poeti del Dolce stil novo*,
ed. by Donato Pirovano (Rome: Salerno, 2012), pp. 43–45, reads as
follows: 'Io vo'[gliọ] del ver la mia donna laudare | ed asembrarli la rosa
e lo giglio: | piú che stella dïana splende e pare, | e ciò ch'è lassú bello
a lei somiglio. || Verde river' a lei rasembro e l'âre, | tutti color di fior', |
giano e vermiglio, | oro ed azzurro e ricche gioi per dare: | medesmo
Amor per lei rafina meglio. || Passa per via adorna, e sí gentile | ch'abassa
orgoglio a cui dona salute, | e fa 'l de nostra fé se non la crede; | e non·le
pò apressare om che sia vile; | ancor ve dirò c'ha maggior vertute: | null'
om pò mal pensar fin che la vede.'

del ver' is one of the poems with which Guinizzelli tried to revitalize the courtly tradition after it had been violently denounced by Guittone d'Arezzo in his *canzone* 'Ora parrà s'eo saverò contare' and in his 'conversion' into Frate Guittone. In particular, Guittone had fiercely criticized the immorality of the courtly discourse and its incompatibility with God and the use of reason. The 'solution' that Guinizzelli proposed consists in contaminating the courtly register with modes from sacred poetry and in turning the praise of the lady into the description of an epiphany of a truly miraculous being, one capable of improving the lover and making him virtuous.[8]

Cavalcanti's 'Chi è questa che vèn' both alludes to this contamination and recasts it. The allusion is made explicit through the use of two rhymes (one in each stanza) and four rhyme words, *âre*, *pare*, *virtute*, *salute*, that also appear in 'Io vo'[glio] del ver'. Cavalcanti's poem opens with the same airy radiance and lightness of Guinizzelli's antecedent and also repeats the strategy of contaminating the erotic and the theological, rewriting as its incipit a verse from the Song of Songs, 'Quae est ista quae progeditur' (Who is she that cometh forth; 6.9).[9] The poem opens by celebrating the splendour of the lady's epiphany and by conveying the extraordinary effects of her power and radi-

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8   On the polemical relationship between Guinizzelli and Guittone, whose sonnet 'S'eo tale fosse ch'io potesse stare' accuses a fellow poet, most likely Guinizzelli, of the 'foul mistake' (laido errore) of replacing the technique of 'sopravanzamento' with that of 'equiparazione' and thereby introducing modes of sacred poetry into his courtly verses, see Paolo Borsa, *La nuova poesia di Guido Guinizzelli* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2007), pp. 61–102.

9   As Paola Nasti has noted, there is an additional 'riscrittura' in Cavalcanti's poem of another verse from the Song of Songs, 'averte oculos tuos a me quia ipsi me avolare fecerunt' (6.4). See Nasti, 'Nozze e vedovanza', p. 74. Latin text and translation of the Song of Songs come from <http://www.latinvulgate.com/> [accessed 18 July 2020].

ance, which even make the air tremble, thereby transposing into the environment the reaction usually characterizing the Cavalcantian lover.[10] Her appearing is a manifestation of Love itself, and the only possible response to that encounter is a silent, powerless sigh. The first quatrain conveys a sense of fullness in the present, and following Jonathan Culler's theorization of lyric as an 'event', one could say that the use of just present tenses up to line 5 makes the immediateness of epiphany and its fulguration reiterable each time the poem is read.[11] However, a gap is opened in that fullness by the rhetoric of the poem, which articulates the description of the epiphany as a question about the lady that turns out to be unanswerable. In this way, from the awesome shock of her presence, the lover passes to a state of consternation and, after, into an awareness of the impossibility of ever truly knowing her for what she is.

The nature of temporality in the poem registers the decline from presence to absence. At first we might see the 'now' of epiphany compressed in its fullness between the 'vèn' of line 1 — the coming (to be) and coming to pass of the lady — and the 'quando' (when) of line 5, when, according to the typical phenomenology of love in Duecento lyric poetry, the lover's eyes are hit by the lady's gaze.[12] It is

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10   It is the optical phenomenon of 'scintillation' — see the note to line 2 of the poem in Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime. Con le rime di Iacopo Cavalcanti*, ed. by Domenico De Robertis (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p. 17.

11   Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 125–31, especially p. 131.

12   See Bruno Nardi, 'Filosofia dell'amore nei rimatori italiani del Duecento e in Dante', in *Dante e la cultura medievale. Nuovi saggi di filosofia dantesca*, ed. by Paolo Mazzantini, new edn (Bari: Laterza, 1985), pp. 9–79, Dana Stewart, *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender, and Subjectivity in Medieval Love Poetry* (London: Bucknell University Press, 2003), and Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 61–82.

as though an entire phenomenology of love is condensed in that instant. The exclamation mark added by editors at the end of line 5 registers the shock of the visual encounter as well as the precipitation that follows, which is at once an erotic fall and a sign that the intensity of the epiphany fades.[13] Line 6, 'dical' Amor, ch'i' nol savria contare', begins to suggest that the subject cannot answer the question he has asked. The overwhelming nature of the lady induces his aphasia and the repeated negation of his ability to speak of her. In this way, the physical and physiological phenomena that register the epiphany, as awe-inspiring and dazzling as they are, give way to an only more ambivalent paralysis that is cognitive and registered by a series of negations: '*Non si poria* contar […] *Non fu* sì alta già la mente nostra | e *non si pose* 'n noi tanta salute' (9–13).

Some critics have spoken of apophatic theology in relation to Cavalcanti's insistent negation and have seen it as another way of stressing the miraculous nature of the lady and her ineffability, while others have focused instead on the pessimism conveyed by the sonnet. Paola Nasti has even argued that Cavalcanti's translation of the Song of Songs is potentially parodic and serves to turn a text of positive theology into the basis for a negative metaphysics, 'almost to refute the idea that through the mediation of spiritual love […] man can get closer to God, and vice versa'.[14] Along these lines, Cavalcanti's appropri-

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13   Cf. Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 72.

14   '[Q]uasi a rifiutare l'idea che attraverso la mediazione dell'amore spirituale […] l'uomo possa avvicinarsi a Dio e viceversa' (Nasti, 'Nozze e vedovanza', p. 82). On the negative theology of Cavalcanti, see for instance De Robertis: 'si giunge qui alla proclamazione d'inconoscibilità e ineffabilità in termini senz'altro di teologia negativa', in his edition of Cavalcanti's *Rime*, p. 17. By contrast, Nasti's argument proceeds along a dual track to emphasize just how 'disconcerting' (sconcertante) Caval-

ation of the Song of Songs negates, in turn, Guinizzelli's theologizing of courtly poetry and recasts his divinization of the *donna* from a much more pessimistic perspective. Moreover, Cavalcanti's use of the word 'propiamente', which Guinizzelli had employed in his *canzone*, 'Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore', to communicate the complete identity of love and the noble soul like heat from a burning flame, is revealing.[15] The adverb is resignified to imply a kind of improper knowledge, an imbalance in nature, in the sense that for Cavalcanti there can be no equivalence between the lady's power and the inability of the lover's mind to comprehend it.

There is no doubt about the lady's splendour, which as we have seen, is beautifully if ambivalently conveyed in the opening of the poem, but it seems to us that another modality begins to emerge and to align 'Chi è questa che vèn' with other poems by Cavalcanti that stress the impossibility of knowledge caused by the power of love. Within the general framework of Cavalcanti's Aristotelian philosophy of passion, this failure of intellection results from an inability to move beyond the particularity of the sensory image that is internalized as a phantasm and meditated upon obsessively

canti's allusion to the Song of Songs could have been for his medieval audience. Firstly, she suggests that he engages with the gnoseological dimension of the Song of Songs that, in allegorical interpretations, was centred on the intellectual and moral perfection the soul (Bride) could achieve through divine grace and spiritual union (Bridegroom), moving it in an 'agnostic' direction. Secondly, she considers how Cavalcanti potentially engages with the liturgical context as well. Since the verse he cites was particularly present in forms of Marian devotion and the celebration of the Annunciation, his use of it potentially reverses the positive 'comic' associations it had in Marian liturgy (where it emphasized love as the way to reach God). See Nasti, 'Nozze e vedovanza', pp. 81–87.

15   See lines 8–10 of Guinizzelli's *canzone*, 'e prende amore in gentilezza loco | così propïamente | come calore in clarità di foco'.

without the possibility of further abstraction.[16] However, what seems particular in 'Chi è questa che vèn' is the suggestion that the lover, having been struck by the lady's gaze, does not even begin the process of intellecting her image, and the phenomenon of the creation of the phantasm, usually very present in Cavalcanti's poetry, is not mentioned at all.[17] As Robert Harrison has written with reference to the impaired temporality of the process, 'Guido's [sonnet] begins with an explosive eruption of perfect verse, which the rest of the poem cannot sustain. The sigh comes too quickly, the lady vanishes too suddenly, and the poem features an extended anticlimax from the second stanza on.'[18] This may explain why, rather than an obsessive fixation upon the phantasm, we find instead a quite impersonal, distanced, and somewhat external representation of the lady

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16 See Rea's commentary in his edition of Cavalcanti's *Rime*, p. 59. For an explanation of the cognitive modality expressed by Cavalcanti's poems (especially in his doctrinal *canzone* 'Donna me prega'), see Giorgio Inglese, *L'intelletto e l'amore: Studi sulla letteratura italiana del Due e Trecento* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2000), pp. 23–26. Both Rea and Inglese follow the 'Averroistic' interpretation of Cavalcanti's poetry, which sees his anthropology as influenced by the way in which in the late thirteenth-century Aristotle's treatises on the soul were interpreted through Averroes' commentaries. For a recent interpretation of Cavalcanti's poetry that is more interested in its connections with contemporary medicine, see Tonelli, *Fisiologia della passione*, pp. 3–70. Either way, the consequence of love is death, to be understood as an epistemological failure in the former case and as the physical cessation of life in the latter. On the cognitive paralysis of 'Chi è questa che vèn', see also Maria Luisa Ardizzone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 17–18, and Paolo Borsa, 'L'immagine nel cuore e l'immagine nella mente: dal Notaro alla *Vita nuova* attraverso i due Guidi', in *Les Deux Guidi: Guinizzelli et Cavalcanti. Mourir d'aimer et autres ruptures*, ed. by Marina Gagliano, Philippe Guérin, and Raffaella Zanni (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016), pp. 75–92 (esp. pp. 83–85).

17 On the significance of the phantasm in Cavalcanti's poetry, see Agamben, *Stanzas*.

18 Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 72.

in relation to the hypostatized terms, 'umiltà' (humility), 'piagenza' (fairness), and 'Beltate' (Beauty).

The conditional tense in line 9, 'Non si poria…', together with the emphatic negative, makes a decisive move in the tercets towards the space (and time) of impossibility — the one that is excluded from the lover's experience and ultimately traps him in the fixed condition of *not knowing* ('Non *fu* […] non si *pose*') while still desiring to know the lady and yet recognizing the futility of that desire. Thus the lady remains out of reach, and by the last tercet, she is completely inaccessible to consciousness and practically absent. We now understand that the choice of articulating the lady's epiphany as a question that cannot (and never will) be answered has introduced a disturbance that reduces the fullness of presence and shifts the focus towards lack and absence. In particular, the end of the poem indicates that, although something could have started, not only is the process of 'canoscenza' negated, it is specifically aborted.

The story the poem tells is ultimately this one of an anticipated and inevitable loss, and there is something quite fatalistic in this perspective, which seems in line with the ineluctability that represents the general mood of Cavalcanti's insistence on physiology governing the subject.[19] Thinking about how Cavalcanti's articulation of temporality creates a space for negativity, we might say that what is at first presented as the 'now' of epiphanic encounter turns out to be an epistemological 'not yet' that corresponds to a 'never there'. This becomes the dominant temporal mode of Cavalcanti's sonnet and qualifies the 'now' of its epi-

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19   On anticipated loss and the work of mourning, see Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) and Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning*.

phany. As a mode, it correlates to what in desiring terms is a moment of 'pre-loss' that emphatically forecloses the possibility of the experience begun at the moment of epiphany ('*quando* li occhi gira') coming to completion insofar as its beginning is also its end.

LIVING

If we can think of the 'now' in Cavalcanti's poem as never getting beyond a state of pre-loss, the 'now' in Dante's 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare', by contrast, coincides with a moment of losslessness. Like Cavalcanti's 'Chi è questa che vèn', Dante's sonnet also refers to Guinizzelli's 'Io vo'[glio] del ver' and restages the lady's epiphany; but whereas Cavalcanti stresses the lover's insufficiency and the lady's unattainability, Dante develops even further Guinizzelli's poetics of praise and theologization of eros and does so in a fully positive way. In the *Vita Nova* the sonnet will exemplify the newly found praise style ('stilo de la loda'), which is staged as a way to break with Cavalcanti's negativity and to embrace instead a self-sufficient form of love that finds perfect happiness in the praise of the lady herself:

> Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
> la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
> ch'ogne lingua divien tremando muta,
> e gli occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.
>
> Ella se ·n va, sentendosi laudare,
> benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
> credo che sia una cosa venuta
> di cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.
>
> Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira,
> che fier per gli occhi una dolcezza al core,
> che 'ntender no·lla può chi no·lla prova:

e par che della suo labbia si mova
un spirito soave pien d'amore,
che va dicendo a l'anima: 'Sospira!'[20]

(My lady appears so graceful and dignified | when she greets those around her, | that every tongue turns trembling mute | and eyes dare not look upon her. || She walks by, hearing herself praised, | clothed in kind humility. | I believe that she has come from heaven | to earth to show forth a miracle. || She shows herself so lovely to those who look upon her | that, through the eyes, the heart is pierced by a sweetness | known only to those who have felt it. || And from her lips seems to move | a gentle spirit, full of love, | that says to the soul: 'sigh!'.)

We can think of Dante's sonnet as an epiphany that begins from the first word of the opening line, with the appearance of the lady (Beatrice) in all of her plenitude and grace. It extends through the remainder of the poem in a perfect lyric circulation that captures not only some essential quality of the *donna* but also and especially the perfection of desire that she effects as she passes.[21] In fact, the poem stages a double epiphany: the encounter with the miracle that is Beatrice as she is made manifest, as well as the interiorization of the experience, which changes the beholder. His heart ('cor'), like the heart of anyone who looks at her, is pervaded by sweetness ('dolcezza'), and his soul assents to the 'spirito soave pien d'amore' that, emanating from her lips, tells it to sigh.

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20   The text of Dante's sonnet comes from Dante Alighieri, *Rime giovanili e della 'Vita Nuova'*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini, with notes by Manuele Gragnolati (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009).

21   Cf. Harrison, 'Dante's ideal lyric crystallizes, encapsulates, or maximizes the plenitude of Beatrice's presence, forming […] a lyric circle of incorporation', *The Body of Beatrice*, pp. 94–95.

Most strikingly of all, 'Tanto gentile' conveys an experience of the 'now' in which pleasure and desire coincide and create a sense of fullness that is sustained throughout the poem. Neither is there entropy, nor is the possibility of its production envisioned.[22] Dante's poem of epiphany is properly an experience of ec-stasis and that ec-stasis correlates to an erasure of subjectivity or — better — a movement beyond or outside of it. The effect is expansive and indicates a positive experience of dispossession that contrasts with the more negative passivity of Cavalcanti's poem, in which the capitulation to love is unwilled and produces lack. We can map this difference between the two poets in their use of the verb *sospirare* (to sigh). In Cavalcanti, the subject's passivity refers to the impossibility of controlling the experience of love, and in this sense, the 'sospira' of 'Chi è questa che vèn' can be considered a sign of consternation, foreshadowing the insufficiency of the human mind. Dante's 'sospira', given in the imperative, also indicates a form of passivity, but is a clear invitation to pleasure, and the surrender is positive.[23] It brings about

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22   The term entropy originates from the field of thermodynamics and is the measure of a system's disorder. The second law of thermodynamics, according to which the entropy of a closed system increases irreversibly, is the basis for the so-called thermodynamic arrow of time. On entropy in relation to language, see Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 71 and p. 182.

23   NB: As a free-standing rima, 'Tanto gentile' includes the variant in line 7, 'Credo che sia una cosa venuta…'. Dante's replacement of 'credo che' with 'par che' in the *Vita Nova* iteration of the sonnet pushes further the movement towards dispossession that is characteristic of the 'stilo de la loda' or praise style, which is not about the subject but about the object of desire. Indeed, in the *Vita Nova*, Dante's praise style is explicitly presented as a way to overcome Cavalcanti's narcissism and insistence on the 'I'. See Manuele Gragnolati, 'Trasformazioni e assenze: la *performance* della *Vita nova* e le figure di Dante e Cavalcanti', *L'Alighieri*, 35 (2010), pp. 5–23.

the ecstatic sweetness that is the poem's purpose and that lies at the heart of the 'stilo de la loda'.[24]

The difference between Dante and Cavalcanti's use of the verb 'mostrare' also consolidates the gap dividing their epiphanic experiences. In Dante's poem it is Beatrice herself who does the 'showing' forth — who participates in the miracle that she brings with her — and who gives herself (*'Mostrasi* sì piacente a chi la mira') to others. She thereby imparts to them directly the experience of sweetness that is the very nature of the epiphany for Dante. In Cavalcanti's sonnet, by contrast, the lady can be seen for what she is but cannot be experienced as such, and certainly not known in her *oltranza* (beyondness).[25] In 'Chi è questa che vèn', her 'excess' ('*che* sembra!'; '*cotanto...*'; '*non si poria contar...*') is an obstacle and does not allow the lover to participate in her reality. The fulguration of her presence at the beginning of the poem is spectacular, but it is also exclusory and so contrasts quite dramatically with Dante's experience, which centres on the infusion of grace that Beatrice's presence effects and particularly pervades the tercets. The 'spirito soave pien d'amore' that emanates from Beatrice's lips and speaks to the soul reverses the negative stasis in

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24   In Harrison's words: 'The entire lyric project of the *Vita nuova* lies in the sigh that ends the poem and brings its subject to rest in aesthetic stasis. Here Beatrice no longer incites desire but placates it. This final sigh seems like a resignation to her intangible otherness but also figures as the inspiration that she dispenses through her proximity. [...] While the poem consummates itself in the sigh, the final expiration also marks the beginning of a lyric retrieval of the plenitude of presence'. Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 44. As he later clarifies, this aesthetic stasis is 'not an absence of motion' but a rhythm of giving and holding back to create a paradoxical 'placation' of desire.

25   The notion of *oltranza* or *oltraggio*, and especially of the lady as 'oltra natura', which is a recurrent theme in Cavalcanti's poetry (as, for example, in the ballate, 'Fresca rosa novella', lines 31 and 40; and 'Veggio negli occhi de la donna mia'), also seems implied in 'Chi è questa che vèn'.

which the mind is left in Cavalcanti's poem. It emphasizes instead the receptivity of the soul and Dante's growing awareness of 'how the outside world, other people (particularly Beatrice), and the divine impact his individual corporeality' in a transformative sense.[26]

These intertextual analyses bring us to a more fundamental perception of the disparity between Dante and Cavalcanti's poems. While Cavalcanti's sonnet aims at 'canoscenza' (knowledge), a state of 'felicità mentale' (the joy of intellection, knowledge, abstraction), but never arrives there — indeed can barely start to access to it — Dante's poem aims at '*provare* dolcezza' (*experiencing* sweetness), which carries a distinctly mystical charge and indicates a move away from intellection and towards experience. [27] The latter is something that the temporality of Dante's sonnet enacts by making the space and time of the epiphany the space and time of the 'prova' — the experience itself, which does not require anything further to come after it. In a way, it is an equivalent state to the mystical experience of Paradise that Caroline Walker Bynum refers to as 'desire is *now*'.[28] In this sense, the double negation that appears in line 11, 'che 'ntender *no*·lla può chi *no*·lla prova' stresses a possibility of knowledge. However, that ''ntender', insofar as it designates the receipt of sweetness and the experience of it in the heart, is something that can only be perceived or felt, not theorized. In other words, the understanding of sweetness is not rational, but if you experience it you

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26   Webb, *The Medieval Heart*, p. 79.

27   See Maria Corti, *Felicità mentale: nuove prospettive per Cavalcanti e Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), pp. 3–71.

28   See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 339 (italics in the original).

know what it is. Unlike the 'canoscenza' of Cavalcanti's poem, Dante's poetics of *provare* is not about trying to transport the mind somewhere else but about receiving and experiencing the thing that is offered as a loving gift. It is a (temporary) leap into the instantaneity of glory, which the poem does not so much describe as actively perform each time that it is read.[29]

Consequently, even as Dante reprises some very Cavalcantian terms — 'tremando', 'sospira' — for describing the physiology of love and the phenomenal effects of the lady's passing, his sonnet resignifies them. The 'tremando', for example, like the other verbs of movement — especially the 'si mova' (a privileged Dantean cipher for desire) — indicate not the presence of disturbance, affective variation, or flux, but the fact that desire itself is happening and that the experience is one of pleasure.[30] Moreover, through the insistent use of the present tense and the gerund (including the *presente progressivo* (present progressive) construction, 'va dicendo'), the poem extends the pleasure of the 'now' indefinitely.

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29 In so many lyric poems, 'the sense of *now* is palpable', Jonathan Culler has argued; we might even call it a '"floating now" that is repeated each time the poem is read'. See his *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 293–94 and also Francesco Giusti's reading of Dante's 'Tanto gentile' in dialogue with Culler's book, 'Rispondere solo a Beatrice. "Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare" e il rischio della ripetizione lirica', *Revue des études dantesques*, 2 (2018), pp. 87–109 (esp. pp. 97–102).

30 In *Purgatorio* xviii, 32, Dante defines desire as 'moto spiritale'. On desire as motion in Dante see, for example, Elena Lombardi's reading in *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), esp. pp. 81–84.

PERSEVERING

While Cavalcanti's poem stages a failure and Dante's incarnates an achieved experience, Petrarch's depicts a memory (or fantasy in the guise of remembrance) that destabilizes the epiphany from the outset:[31]

> Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi
> che 'n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea,
> e 'l vago lume oltra misura ardea
> di quei begli occhi, ch'or ne son sì scarsi;
>
> e 'l viso di pietosi color' farsi,
> non so se vero o falso, mi parea:
> i' che l'ésca amorosa al petto avea,
> qual meraviglia se di súbito arsi?
>
> Non era l'andar suo cosa mortale,
> ma d'angelica forma; et le parole
> sonavan altro che pur voce humana:
>
> uno spirito celeste, un vivo sole
> fu quel ch'i' vidi: et se non fosse or tale,
> piagha per allentar d'arco non sana.
>
> (Her golden hair fluttered in the breeze, | twisting into a thousand sweet knots, | and those beautiful eyes which once shone beyond measure | are now deprived of their enchanting light. || Her face seemed to colour with compassion | (whether real or imagined I do not know): | and should I, Love's captive, | wonder if I suddenly caught fire? || She walked not like a mortal woman, | but like an angelic creature, and when she spoke, | the loveliness of her words did not resemble any human voice. || A celestial spirit, a living sun, | this is what I saw; and even if she were no longer so, | the wound doesn't heal, though the bow be slack.) (*Rvf* 90)

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31   On the crucial role of remembrance in Petrarch's epiphanies, through which Petrarch undertakes a 'deconstruction of Dante', see Warning, 'Seeing and Hearing', p. 113.

Whereas Cavalcanti's poem hints at something that doesn't properly begin, and the poetic subject is excluded from participation in the miracle of the epiphany, Petrarch's poem begins from a post-eventual perspective, already after the fact. His epiphany is in the past: in the sonnet the lyric 'I' remembers Laura's previous beauty and how, upon seeing her, he immediately fell in love. The passing of time may have made her less beautiful, and he may even have been mistaken in his original perception of her ('non so se vero o falso mi parea'), but he loves her still.

At the start of the poem, the epiphany is drastically qualified and that qualification is temporal — the imperfect tenses of the first quatrain leave no doubt as to the lady's distancing in the present and her subjection to time and decay.[32] Even the 'gold' (oro) of her hair, loosed to the breeze (a play on Laura's name), hints at the insidious presence of time ('or' (now); 'ora' (hour)).[33] According to Adelia Noferi, the effect of this first line is vertiginous, as it catapults the reader back in time.[34] Petrarch's paradoxical epiphany comes as part of a recollection, and its instantaneity ('subito') is mediated through memory, 'qual meraviglia se di sùbito arsi?'. In that moment, there was no time for thinking; thinking came afterwards, as did the awareness of time, although both are ultimately sub-

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32   Santagata has noted in his commentary to Petrarch's poem that the dimmed light of Laura's eyes could be an 'allusione "realistica" a una malattia', in Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, p. 445. Georges Güntert has underscored, in turn, how 'Erano i capei d'oro' is followed by two sonnets that have funerary themes (*Rvf* 91 on the death of a friend's lady and *Rvf* 92, composed in honour of Cino da Pistoia), 'Sonetti occasionali e capolavori (*RVF* 90–99)', in *Il Canzoniere: Lettura micro e macrotestuale*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 2007), pp. 243–60.

33   This is a point Güntert has made in 'Sonetti occasionali', p. 251.

34   Adelia Noferi, *L'esperienza poetica del Petrarca* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1962), p. 9.

sumed to the uninterrupted and all-encompassing time of desire and its power.[35] Indeed the poem begins with something like pure entropy but makes of that entropy its means of going somewhere else — taking the lover-poet, and his reader, into a different time and space. This is a time for capturing something that perhaps cannot exist outside of poetry — the 'or' of Petrarch's poem, which both measures and collapses the distance between that 'now' and what came before. The poet's careful configuration of the temporal frame means that the lyric 'I' 'captures and caresses the past as he conjures it and holds it in memory'.[36] As such, Petrarch's poem begins 'post-loss' but it also manages to move beyond loss by the end, subsuming all of time to the continuous present of the aphoristic last line, 'piagha per allentar d'arco *non sana*'.

In other words, in his sonnet as a whole, Petrarch gives us a kind of 'history', which is also a history of temporal loss, in order at once to retrieve the prior event of presence *and* reconfigure it in the 'now' of the poem. As a result, 'Erano i capei d'oro' incorporates an even more complex kind of temporality than either Dante's or Cavalcanti's poems since it encompasses priority (in Petrarch's use of the imperfect tense and *passato remoto*), presentness (in his use of the present tense), and a third time — the time of poetry — which through the vehicle of memory and/or fantasy succeeds in absorbing all these other times within it. Through accepting, manipulating, and even own-

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35   On the poem's transfiguration of Laura's past beauty into its own particular temporal and spatial mode, see Noferi, *L'esperienza poetica del Petrarca*, pp. 9–10 where she speaks of 'una mitica, delirante memoria che restituisce le cose in una sostanza incorrutibile ed assoluta'; and Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 60–61.

36   See Barolini, 'Petrarch as the Metaphysical Poet', p. 206.

ing time, Petrarch manages to reformulate it to a degree through poetry. He is able to intervene in his experience in a way that Cavalcanti cannot do, stuck as Cavalcanti's subject is in the inexorable frame of his natural philosophy from which there is no exit or consolation, not even in the beauty of poetry.

Thus, while Petrarch poses a question at line 4, as Cavalcanti does, it is purely rhetorical and not the inter-rogative of Cavalcanti's poem, which really seeks an answer and finds it tragically lacking. In fact, for Petrarch there is *no* question, or the question is unimportant. Although the 'I' declares that he does not know ('non so') if the vision of Laura was 'real or imagined' (vero o falso), there is no anxiety in that doubt, and knowledge is not at issue. If, with Cavalcanti, we are at the level of pre-cognition and in Dante, with the time of experience, with Petrarch we are within the paradoxically pleasurable effects of memory in the 'now'. As Barolini has argued, 'Erano i capei d'oro' is the 'paradigmatic sonnet' for exploring the 'temporality of eros' in Petrarch; moreover, for this poet, 'desire is more important as a modality through which to experience the passing of time than it is as an experience in itself'.[37]

Within the context of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* as a whole, which explores a constant tension between the poet's love for Laura and his desire for God, given that Laura has aged and become less beautiful, the dissipation of the beloved object in time could finally allow Petrarch to relinquish his desire, but he holds onto it.[38] As Rainer

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37   See Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence', p. 15 n. 30; and her, 'Petrarch Who is the Metaphysical Poet', p. 206.

38   The question of Laura's beauty and her status as a 'mortal thing', the desire for which prevents the Petrarchan 'I' from reaching heaven, is a core topic of Book III of Petrarch's *Secretum*. On these tensions in Petrarch, see Marco Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima: Storia e rac-*

Warning has argued, memory for Petrarch is an agent of *voluptas*, which 'coincides in part with sensual desire, nostalgia for the beloved in her worldly corporeality […] which the poetic imagination cannot forego'.[39] This tenacity explains the irreducibility of Petrarchan desire and, in 'Erano i capei d'oro', gives us the image of a rather 'heroic' if masochistic Petrarch who refuses to give up on love and instead embraces desire, for all its contradictions, as an experience of intensity.[40] His poem stages a spectral kind of presence — he no longer possesses everything that initiated the desire in the first place (and that too might have been a mirage — *parere* suggests mere 'seeming' as opposed to the mystical, even visionary, sense it carried in Dante or its phenomenal valence in Cavalcanti), but desire is not diminished for all that. If anything, desire is energized by its refusal to give in to time. In fact, the poet turns the inexorability of time and ageing into an opportunity to state the fidelity and enduring quality of his desire for Laura despite everything. In other terms, in Petrarch's poem there is a kind of suspension — a lingering in pleasure — that allows the initial moment of desire to continue indefinitely.

It is revealing in this respect that the recollection of the epiphany in lines 12–13 ('uno spirito celeste, un vivo sole | fu quel ch'i' vidi') syntactically mirrors the first two lines of Dante's sonnet insofar as, like Dante, Petrarch also de-

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conto nel 'Canzoniere' di Petrarca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), especially 'Dall'amore-passione alla *caritas*', pp. 209–42; Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence'; Moevs, 'Subjectivity and Conversion'; and Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, pp. 33–79.

39 See Warning, 'Seeing and Hearing', p. 113.

40 On Petrarch and masochism see Chapters 1 and 2 of this book; and Georges Barthouil, 'Toujours aimer, toujours souffrir, toujours mourir ou fatalité et volontarisme chez Pétrarque', in *Francesco Petrarca: Père des renaissances, Serviteur de l'amour et de la paix* (Avignon: Aubanel, 1974), pp. 183–208.

ploys a strong enjambement to create a feeling of presence. Yet by putting the verb ('fu') in *rejet* in the enjambement, Petrarch underscores both the absolute fracture between past and present *and* the (poetic) collapse of the past into the present and the elision of the distance between them. The poet *saw* 'a celestial spirit, a living sun', but in line 12 these entities are, for a moment, purely nominal and thus timeless. As qualified as Petrarch's epiphany seems at the outset, what keeps it going is not the experience of beauty per se but the unyielding quality of desire and the perseverance that poetry allows. The result is a paradoxical epiphany that draws its energy from the past — the epiphany took place *in the* past — but by the end of the poem the past is also in the present, since the temporal line that runs from the 'sùbito' to the present has not been broken and in fact has been forged by the poem. To this extent, the 'now' of poetry contrasts entropy and even overcomes it.

<div align="center">***</div>

Our concluding observations address how temporality relates, on the one hand, to desire and subjectivity and, on the other, to pleasure.

Cavalcanti inserts knowledge into the discourse of desire, and we can regard desire in his poetry as an extension towards knowledge. Yet in 'Chi è questa che vèn', the subject of the poem falls short from even beginning the process of cognition and never reaches pleasure. The phrase in line 12 of the poem, 'Non *fu* sì alta *già* la mente nostra', with its striking use of the negative 'non', past historic 'fu' and temporal marker, 'già', indicates that the time of desire is that of a preemptive negation, in the past, of a possibility that consequently will never come: the mind never was powerful enough to grasp the nature of the lady and

never will be. Cavalcanti's closing statement comes as one of fact and opens up a space of resignation in the present that acknowledges an impossibility and blocks desire. The final tercet of the poem consequently marks the moment when the 'not yet' truly becomes a 'never there' and not only negates the possibility of knowledge but even makes the desire for it pointless.

By contrast, desire in Dante's sonnet is a fully positive experience of pleasure and hence programmatically different from Cavalcanti's.[41] What sets Dante's experience apart in 'Tanto gentile' is the mystical moment of 'now': felicity and pleasure lie in ecstatic dispossession and an expansion of the 'I' beyond itself. That expansion happens through the dilation of the final sigh, which is itself a confirmation of the experience of presence. In Dante's case, poetry activates this presence, and while the reader of Cavalcanti's 'Chi è questa che vèn' is, by the end of the poem, faced with the bleakness of an inevitable lack, the reader of 'Tanto gentile' experiences a perfect and unassailable sweetness.

With Petrarch, too, things change. His poem begins emphatically in the past, which conveys the epiphany's imperfection and would theoretically impair the presence of its effects. In practice, though, the potential to experience sweetness endures, albeit with a paradoxical slant. Like Cavalcanti, the subject knows that the object of desire (knowledge for Cavalcanti, Laura for Petrarch) is flawed and that desire is doomed; and yet, as in Dante's 'Tanto gentile', 'Erano i capei d'oro' is about creating an enduring pleasure. What is striking in Petrarch's poem is that the awareness of loss does not preclude presence and indeed

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41   While the failure of 'canoscenza' is the general mode, there are some poems by Cavalcanti where 'canoscenza' does take place. See especially Cavalcanti, *Rime*, XXIII–XXVI.

makes poetry's capacity to recuperate its trace ever more vital. Ultimately, in *Rvf* 90, poetry becomes the space where memory has the power to suspend time and allows desire to persist while recognizing the defectiveness of the object but embracing it still in a fascinating gesture of masochistic perseverance.

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