



Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 151–61

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CITE AS:

Francesco Giusti, 'Reversion: Lyric Time(s) II', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 151–61 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-15_19>

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ABSTRACT: Is a *history* of the lyric even conceivable? What would a *lyric* temporality look like? With a focus on Rainer Maria Rilke's decision not to translate, but rather to rewrite Dante's *Vita nova* (1293–1295) in the first of his *Duineser Elegien* (1912), the essay deploys *reversion* (as turning back, return, coming around again), alongside *re-citation*, as a keyword that can unlock the transhistorical operations of the lyric as the re-enactment of selected gestures under different circumstances.

Reversion

Lyric Time(s) II

FRANCESCO GIUSTI

In the first of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*, *recitation* occurs both as a poetic principle and as a performed action. What Rilke covertly re-cites is Dante's *Vita nova* (1293–1295). Where can Dante be found in this poem? Some contextual information is needed to become aware of his undisclosed presence. From 22 October 1911 to 9 May 1912, Rilke was a guest of Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis in the castle of Duino. There Rilke devoted himself to reading the *Vita nova*. The Princess asked the poet to translate Dante's work and he pondered the idea for a while. Eventually, he abandoned the endeavour and, in 1912, started writing the *Duino Elegies* instead. In her memories of Rilke from 1932, the Princess recalls a peculiar episode that occurred while the poet was walking along the cliffs near the castle: 'in the midst of his pondering, he suddenly stopped, for it seemed to him as if a voice had called to him in the roar of the storm.'¹ The voice ap-

1 Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, *Erinnerungen an Rainer Maria Rilke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1994), pp. 48–49. Translations are mine.

parently uttered the following words: 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the hierarchies / of angels?' ('Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel / Ordnungen?').² Rilke quickly wrote down the sentence in his notebook, and that same evening he drafted the first elegy. The outburst of creativity continued through the following days, when he drafted the second elegy and fragments of later ones. The question heard in the storm came to constitute the opening lines of the poem.

These dynamics of negotiation of poetic agency closely resemble those recounted by Dante in the tenth paragraph (XVIII–XIX) of the *Vita nova*.³ While walking along a river, Dante the character is suddenly seized by a pressing desire to speak and starts pondering the modality and the potential audience of the speech. At that point,

[...] my tongue, as if moved of its own accord, spoke and said: *Ladies who have intelligence of love*. With great delight I decided to keep these words in mind and to use them as the beginning of my poem. Later, after returning to the aforementioned city and reflecting for several days, I began writing a canzone, using this beginning, and I constructed it in a way that will appear below in its divisions. The canzone begins: *Ladies who have*.⁴

2 All quotations are from Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke*, ed. by Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Horst Nalewski, and August Stahl, 4 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1996), II: *Gedichte 1910 bis 1926*, ed. by Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn, pp. 201–204 (p. 201). Translations are mine.

3 I follow the text and the subdivision of the text into 31 paragraphs provided in Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, ed. by Guglielmo Gorni (Turin: Einaudi, 1996). The numbering of the corresponding section in Michele Barbi's edition is provided in Roman numerals in parenthesis.

4 All translations of the *Vita nova* are from Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Vita Nuova. New Edition: A Translation and an Essay*, ed. and trans. by Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973). '[...] la mia lingua parlò quasi come per sé stessa mosca e disse: "Donne

The 'origin' of the gesture performed in the opening lines is concealed in Rilke's elegy. Writing literary history, one can retrace it only from contextual information.⁵ Why? I would suggest that Rilke knows that this lyric gesture has no proper origin. Receiving verses from external forces is one of the motifs by which the basic gesture of negotiating one's own subjective voice has been traditionally carried out. There is no attempt in the elegy to go back to the 'first' time that gesture was performed in order to repeat it. Even for the presumed first occurrence in the *Vita nova*, one can find a constellation of references spanning from Greek and Latin poetry to numberless recurrences at least up to Valéry's *vers donné*.⁶ Rilke's poet-speaker prefers to trace a series of re-enacted gestures with no supersession.

Twenty lines later (26–53), the elegy addresses a 'traditional' condition: the poet is never ready to contain the approaching beloved, the moment of inspiration in its fullness. The movements of thought and expectation seem to divert the poet's attention and make the fullness of experience impossible (whose vocalization is interrupted by the sigh in Dante's 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare'). What, then, could poets do? They should 'sing the lovers' ('singe die Liebenden', l. 36) in order to make their emotions immortal. What kind of song should it be? It should be a song

ch'avete intellecto d'amore". Queste parole io ripuosi nella mente con grande letitia, pensando di prenderle per mio cominciamento. Onde poi, ritornato alla sopradecta cittade, pensando alquanti die cominciai una canzone con questo cominciamento, ordinata nel modo che si vedrà di sotto nella sua divisione. La canzone comincia *Donne ch'avete*', in Dante, *Vita nova*, pp. 92–93.

- 5 For reflections on a possible 'lyric history', see Susan Stewart, 'Preface to a Lyric History', in *The Uses of Literary History*, ed. by Marshall Brown (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 199–218.
- 6 Michel Jarrety, 'The Poetics of Practice and Theory', in *Reading Paul Valéry: Universe in Mind*, ed. by Paul Gifford and Brian Stimpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 105–20.

of praise. This praise (*Preisung*) must be constantly started anew, because it is fated never to be fully achieved. Old examples of unfulfilled love should teach 'us' that it is time for 'us' to love without a beloved⁷ — one could think of Dante's renunciation of reciprocity in the economy of love, but Beatrice always affects Dante even after her untimely (or too timely) death. This is formulated as an exhortation, or an expectation, addressed to a *you* that might well be the speaker or a future poet. There is no explicit *you* in 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare', but I tried to show in my first contribution ('Recitation') how Dante constructs a text to be shared with potential readers: each monodic vocalization of the poem joins a choral reiteration, somehow de-crystallizing or, in Augustinian terms, distending the distilled 'now' by vocalizing it anew in the present of reading.⁸

Perhaps, this is why Rilke decided not to translate the *Vita nova*, but rather to re-enact it, to take over its way of loving, to inhabit the position of its speaker. In other words, to listen to the 'uninterrupted message' ('die ununterbrochene Nachricht') he mentions in line 60. 'We' should endure, trembling, as 'the arrow endures the bow' ('wie der Pfeil die Sehne besteht', l. 52). It is a matter of recitation more than mere repetition. Re-citation inscribes the renewed gesture and the new self in a long unbroken

7 The plural first person pronoun is used in the poem itself, where the 'I' and the 'you' are included in a 'we' that could be defined by the collective gesture of praise. It seems that different individuals can share this gesture in a form of chorality. Therefore, what can be shared — both synchronically and diachronically — is not a particular object of love, but a certain modality of loving.

8 I am disconnecting here the notions of monodic and choral poetry from their musical accompaniment to engage with their modalities of enunciation. Chorality is crucial to the definition of lyric in W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

series whereas repetition instantiates again the old words by appropriating them. In its flight, the arrow is more than itself because of the power the bowstring has given to it, not so much for the target it is directed towards.

So, the trembling song ought to be sung for the power that love exerts, not for an object (the beloved) to be eventually obtained. The relation with objects should not be one of interpretation or attribution of meaning; as Rilke writes at lines 12–13: ‘we are not so securely at home / in the interpreted world’ (‘wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind / in der gedeuteten Welt’).⁹ At the same time, ‘we’ as humans cannot withstand the angel, and even less embrace a divine being: in fact, if an Angel ‘were to suddenly / take me to its heart, I would vanish into its / stronger presence’ (‘und gesetzt selbst, es nähme / einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem / stärkeren Dasein’, ll. 2–4). A different ontological status makes any unmediated contact between human beings and the divine impossible. In a Cavalcantian morbid attitude, this is the effect that the bodily presence of Beatrice has on Dante in the first paragraphs of the *Vita nova*. The vision of her annihilates the last remainders of his vital power: ‘not only did the sight of her not defend me: it ultimately annihilated the little life I had left’ (‘cotal veduta non solamente non mi difendea, ma finalmente disconfiggea la mia poca vita’ (9, XVI). However, the angel, as the young dead in the final section of the elegy, can exert some pressure on human beings, can push ‘us’ toward it. The speaker of the elegies realizes, as much as Dante’s speaker, that one cannot fully experience nor

9 See Raoul Walsch, ‘daß wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind in der gedeuteten Welt’: *Untersuchung zur Thematik der gedeuteten Welt in Rilkes ‘Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge’, ‘Duineser Elegien’ und spätester Lyrik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012), pp. 226–64.

understand the divine entity; thus a different *relationship*, a new way to *speak* about it, needs to be established.

In rhetoric, reversion — from the Latin *reversio* — denotes all those figures of speech that involve a *turning back*, a *return*, a *coming around again*: anastrophe, chiasmus, epiphora, anaphora. This backward movement, which establishes a present and announces a future, could be transferred from the verbal design of a single poem, through the *œuvre* of an author, to the inner workings of the literary genre.¹⁰ This is another feature that Rilke could find in the *Vita nova*, where Dante attempts to re-cite himself, that is, to assemble old and scattered lyrics turning them into a linear progression towards Christian love and a unitary story of his love for Beatrice. Yet the story ends up being less linear than expected and the linear process of *conversion* to Beatrice is interrupted by *reversions*.¹¹ An evidence of this problematic is the fact that, as the supposedly teleological narrative proceeds, the new poetic modality — the *stilo della loda* (style of praise) — is not consistently deployed. If the canzone in paragraph 10 (XIX), ‘Ladies

10 Riffaterre hints at a similar mechanism: ‘It is only in isolation that the poem is difficult and, when made easy, trite. It makes sense only when read as a metonym of the whole genre — like the antique tessera that was just a shard by itself, but a message when fitted to its matching piece. And its significance lies not in hidden depths, but in the fact of its being a variation on a motif’, Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 163. I argue that the ‘variation’ does not operate primarily on motifs but rather on gestures. Gestures give form to the speech more than address a thematic content, as *topoi*, motifs, and themes seem to do at different levels. Lyric gestures concern the linguistic practice and show a certain degree of awareness of its limits.

11 According to Harrison, while mourning the death of Beatrice in the sequence of poems composed for the ‘*donna pietosa*’, Dante both reverts to previous poetics and explores a different poetic possibility, the ‘*Petrarchan alternative*’. See Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 93–109.

who have intelligence of love' ('Donne ch'avete intellecto d'amore'), is ascribed to the new poetics of praise, then the reader has to wait until paragraph 12 (XXI) and then paragraph 17 (XXVI) to have other poems composed in such manner.¹² The poems in-between dangerously revert to previous modalities of loving and poetry writing. Even the poetic supersession that Dante traces in a sort of progressive figural fulfillment is more problematic than sometimes admitted.¹³

Proper praise or *celebration*, in Dante's project, had to be directed toward a specific subject named Beatrice;¹⁴ Rilke retains the *towardness* of the speech but empties the destination. In a certain sense, he prefers the Dante before his definitive conversion (or final reversion) to Beatrice, which is again the outcome first of Beatrice's apparition in

12 The protagonist of the *Vita nova*, Barolini writes, 'does not so much proceed in a consistently forward direction [...] as return again and again to his previous condition, from which he must once more start forth: textual indices of this condition are the *ri* prefix in "ripigliare lo stilo de la sua loda" (XXVI, 4), and the unusual recording of two initial quatrains [...] for the sonnet of chapter XXXIV,' Teodolinda Barolini, "'Cominciandomi dal principio infino a la fine" (V.N., XXIII, 15): Forging Anti-Narrative in the "Vita Nuova", in *La gloriosa donna de la mente: A Commentary on the Vita Nuova*, ed. by Vincent Moleta (Florence: Olschki, 1994), pp. 119–40 (p. 124).

13 In the *Vita nova*, Dante traces the story of his own poetic development while at the same time outlining a history of recent poetics: from Guittone d'Arezzo and Bonagiunta da Lucca, through Cavalcanti and then Guinizelli, up to himself. See Zygmunt G. Barański, 'Dante Alighieri: Experimentation and (Self-)Exegesis', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. by H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989–), II: *The Middle Ages*, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (2005), pp. 561–82 (p. 567).

14 Indeed, Dante sees Beatrice 'among the hierarchies of angels', to use Rilke's formulation, first in the vision (*immaginazione*) recounted in 'Donna pietosa e di novella etate' ('A lady of tender years', 14, XXIII) and lastly in the ascension of his spirit to Heaven in 'Oltre la sfera che più larga gira' ('Beyond the sphere', 30, XLI). In the final lines of the former, after the vision, he raises his eyes to Heaven and addresses Beatrice directly (ll. 83–84).

a vision and then of Dante's wishful intention. Of course, there is a historical reason for this. In Dante, divine love is granted to the human being: God calls the individual to respond to his love. In Rilke and in modernist negative theology,¹⁵ the angel is utterly removed from all human affairs. In the *Duineser Elegien*, therefore, Rilke problematizes Dante's idea of being called by the other as the driving force of a continuous poetic performance: the response to the request of *conversion* towards the other. He seems rather to propose the intrinsic value of the practice of a perpetual calling upon the silent other: a return to a human position. In the seventh elegy, it is the flow of the summoning voice to keep the angel at a distance: 'Since my call / is always full of effusion, against such a powerful / stream you cannot proceed' ('Denn mein / Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg; wider so starke / Strömung kannst du nicht schreiten', ll. 87–89).¹⁶ This way Rilke seems to revert to a poetics of calling that values the practice of voicing itself — the same poetics on which, according to the first elegy, secular Petrarchism relies in its poetic practice. By mentioning the Italian Renaissance poet Gaspara Stampa, the poem traces its own tradition of lyric subjectivities. They seem to share a long-lasting form of love and a modality of lyric speech that do not expect reciprocation, but are performed by the

15 For a discussion of the role of negative theology in modern and post-modern poetics, see William Franke, *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) and *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014). See also *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

16 Rilke, *Werke*, II: pp. 220–23 (p. 223).

poetic effort to appeal to the unattainable entity.¹⁷ The divine is not represented in lyric poetry, it cannot be; rather, poetry embodies the human effort to keep calling.

The lyric poem finds its own place in different temporalities that meet in every act of reading it. The historical form of subjectivity inscribed in a poem can vary according to cultural and historical circumstances, but the discursive mode seems to retain certain gestures that allow for the inscription of subjectivity. Rilke is not *saying* the same words or conveying the same meaning as Dante, he is rather *making* the same gesture under different circumstances and in a different historical context. The lyric as a discursive mode seems to work in a non-linear and non-unidirectional temporality, which is not that of nineteenth-century literary history.

Re-citation is neither intertextuality¹⁸ nor Harold Bloom's agonistic supersession (the 'anxiety of influence'),¹⁹ but rather the effort to reinhabit the position of previous speakers. The lyric poem as a 'script', to use Jonathan Culler's term,²⁰ could be reconsidered,

17 Francesco Giusti, *Il desiderio della lirica. Poesia, creazione, conoscenza* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2016), pp. 107–09.

18 The phenomenon I am sketching here does not coincide with *intertextuality* as it has been variously defined after Julia Kristeva's use of the term in her 1966 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 64–91. It neither dissolves the text into a net of other texts nor implies that it is only the reader who gives meaning to the text. *Re-citation*, in the sense I give to the term, involves the negotiation of individual presence within a transhistorical recurrence of lyric gestures, which are not necessarily translated into a stable phrasing to be found in a specific text and then reused.

19 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

20 Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 187. Tied to actual subjects, the idea can already be

in its transhistorical dimension, as a less rigid form. It is not a text to be simply repeated, but rather a repertoire of gestures and rhetorical structures that, depending on the historical context of performance, may or may not come already arranged in verbal fragments. Different historical subjectivities can re-enact those gestures either in writing or in reading.²¹ The verbal gesture performed in the poem is thus recognized as still viable. Indeed, lyric speech asks to be validated by its reader. For this reason, the lyric is not the expression of an individual's uniqueness, but rather the partial renunciation of enclosed particularity

found in Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997): '[A] lyric is meant to be spoken by its reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words. A lyric poem is a script for performance by its reader. It is, then, the most intimate of genres, constructing a twinship between writer and reader. And it is the most universal of genres, because it presumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer's shoes and speak the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader's own' (pp. xl–xli). More than as an identification of two entities in accordance to a precise script, here the relationship is conceived as a more flexible performance of two processes following shared gestures that different subjectivities can perform without fully individuating themselves, therefore with no requirement of a complete assimilation. See Daniel Morris, *Lyric Encounters: Essays on American Poetry from Lazarus and Frost to Ortiz Cofer and Alexie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 1–2.

- 21 Paul Allen Miller, *Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness: The Birth of a Genre from Archaic Greece to Augustan Rome* (London: Routledge, 1994) locates the birth of the modern lyric subject — 'an individual and highly self-reflexive subjective consciousness' (p. 1) — in the writing culture developed in Augustan Rome and in the context of the production of authorial books of poetry. I would distinguish, as Dante implicitly does in the *Vita nova*, between the potential openness of the single poem, which offers a shareable subjective position of enunciation, and the projection of a subject or individual identity brought forth especially by the organized macrotext, which allows 'recursive modes of reading' (p. 2). The friction between the iterable single poem and the projection of an author, made possible by retrospective and multitemporal (self)-reading, is what Dante explores in the *Vita nova*.

in favour of an open mutuality.²² In the act of *re-citing* a poem, the reader realizes a similarity of particularity (the situational experience) and generality (the shareable conditions). Although the act of speaking individuates the lyric subjectivity by marking its dissimilarity, it also places it within a potential transhistorical community. Instead of isolating a subject in an auto-referential self-sufficiency, the subjective position of lyric speaking may open to an acknowledgement of proximity through time.

22 See Jay M. Bernstein, 'Confession and Forgiveness: Hegel's Poetics of Action', in *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and Poetic Imagination*, ed. by Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 34–65 (p. 48).

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