LYRIC PALIMPSESTS:

CAROLINE BERGVALL AND JEN BERVIN

Although Caroline Bergvall is frequently described as a fellow traveller of the conceptual poetry movement (or even as one of its most exemplary practitioners), her writing itself is much more difficult to classify. A native speaker of French and Norwegian, Bergvall lives in London and writes primarily in English, frequently crossing linguistic borders through the use of translation, heteroglossia, and paronomasia – among other literary tactics that seek to infringe upon the insularity and self-identity assumed by national languages. Her work moves fluidly among media from printed chapbooks to video, installation, and performance art, approaching the written word not as an end in itself but as one node in a multi-stage process of scoring and transcription. (One poem in *Goan Atom*, for example, transcribes a recording of herself reading the same poem while suffering from a toothache, preserving her myriad stutters and disfluencies.) At the same time, she draws upon a rich tradition of interlingual play in early avant-garde poetry (including work by Gertrude Stein, Raymond Rousell, and Unica Zürn) as well as, unsurprisingly, the legacy of the Oulipo, prompting Marjorie Perloff's reading of her work, alongside Bök's *Eunoia*, as an example of that group's enduring afterlife among contemporary poets.[1]

Unlike Bök, however, who displays its debt to Perec with a candor that is at once reverent and competitive (a form of *agon* that doubles the poet's struggle to overcome his self-imposed constraint), Bergvall is more reticent about her relation to the Oulipo. *The* n*oulipoean Analects*, an anthology of feminist essays on potential literature, includes three brief texts in which she explores Perec's late writings on the infra-ordinary (including the *tentatifs* I read in my first

chapter). If Bök champions the determinacy of the lipogram and its affinity with algorithmic logic, Bergvall instead focuses on the contingency inherent in Perec's attempt to inventory the minutiae of everyday life:

> A *tentative* is as tentative as an attempt. Open to the fallibility of an experiment that ties writing to a contingent, unpredictable investment in social space and time. How does one invest oneself in all the comings and goings-on at street-level of various Parisian quarters? (44)

This tension between the relentless momentum of the constraint and the tentative (and ultimately unfulfilled) promise of its execution also animates Bergvall's most explicitly constraint-based poem. Over a period of two years, Bergvall transcribed and collated translations of the first tercet of Dante's *Inferno*, using only editions that were accessible in the British Library until May 2000 – exactly seven centuries after Dante is said to begin his journey. Discounting latecomers and manuscripts under restoration, she alphabetized and numbered the stanzas (forty-seven in all) and removed all paratextual details except the author's surname and the date of publication. What emerges, in her own words, is a "musicalised sense of panic … a perfect plot in the massing of time."[2] The haunting refrain of the same words repeated again and again with subtle yet telling variations gives readers the sense that we too, like Dante, are lost in a dark wood. The poem is entitled "Via: 48 Dante Variations." Here is the original Italian, followed by the first five tercets:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
> che la diritta via era smarrita.

1. Along the journey of our life half way
   I found myself again in a dark wood
   wherein the straight road no longer lay.
   (Dale, 1996)

2. At the midpoint in the journey of our life
   I found myself astray in a dark wood
   For the straight path had vanished.
   (Creagh and Hollander, 1989)

3. HALF over the wayfaring of our life,
   Since missed the right way, through a night-dark wood
   Struggling, I found myself.
   (Musgrave, 1893)

4. Half way along the road we have to go,
   I found myself obscured in a great forest,
   Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way.
   (Sisson, 1980)

5. Halfway along the journey of our life
   I woke in wonder in a sunless wood
   For I had wandered from the narrow way
   (Zappulla, 1998)

Composed at the turn of the millennium – first as a score for digitally-processed voice (in collaboration with the Irish composer Ciíaran Maher) and later published in *Chain* magazine alongside other seminal works of conceptual poetry – "Via" exemplifies an emergent poetics of the database despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that it was written entirely by hand. Generated by a constraint that determines every dimension of its form in advance, the poem demonstrates what Craig Dworkin calls the "proleptic" character of texts by human authors that nevertheless "anticipate the computerized new media that would seem to be their ideal vehicle" ("Imaginary" 30). In this sense, "Via" deviates from a high modernist poetics that often invokes Dante (and medieval poetry in general) as a metonym for craftsmanship and innovation. Eliot's famous epigram to the *Wasteland* ("For Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*": the better craftsman, Dante's praise for the troubadour Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio* XXVI) gives way to the figure of the scribe or the scrivener who aspires merely to copy rather than to create. If Eliot's epigram registers

a sense of *agon* or competition among friendly or not-so-friendly rivals (implying that Pound is *il miglior fabbro*, but Eliot the better poet), Bergvall's poem works to systematically dissolve any hierarchy or logic of succession among the authors it compiles: poet translators (Pinsky, Longfellow, even Rosetti, whose version Pound praises in *The Spirit of Romance*) are lost amid the rabble of so many anonymous others, reduced to a string of surnames that echo and chatter like the personae trapped in the *Inferno* itself. This tension between singular innovation and divergent translation plays off an infamous crux in the original tercet: as Leo Spitzer observes, Dante finds *himself* ("mi retrovai") precisely in the middle of *our* life ("nostra vita"), a doubling effect that encompasses the poem as a whole and gives the texture of singular experience to an allegorical journey that is shared by all. "Via" extends this analogy between the singular *mi* and the plural *nostra* to a contemporary milieu where poets freely sample the words of others in an effort to dissolve the authority of the lyric voice – or rather to register the way in which new media at the turn of the millennium (and the remix culture that accompanies their emergence) render an enduring belief in lyric ontology both impossible and obsolete.

Even as the poem works to deskill poetic labor, then, dismantling the Poundian vision of the poet as singular craftsman, it also engages with an emergent poetics of the database. Bergvall enumerates and alphabetizes the translations into an index that permits random access, inviting readers to skim and skip among the various stanzas without privileging the original tercet as the only viable point of departure. And while this indexical structure promises a semblance of order, a way of disambiguating an otherwise vertiginous array of copies, Bergvall ultimately sabotages her index by making its interface unusable. Disregarding more conventional indices such as the author's surname or the date of publication (both of which are given in the text, if only as a

reminder of their irrelevance), the poem instead alphabetizes each translation by its first letter, transforming the left margin into an array of slant rhymes (*along*, *at*, *half*, *halfway*) whose indexical principle forecloses at the outset any imaginable use. Like the giant *S* on first page of *Ulysses* (severed from the word *stately* on the next verso), the first letter of each stanza bears a merely contingent relation to the text that follows, calling attention to its own graphic and phonetic texture (with a nod to the drop capitals and rubricated initials of illuminated manuscripts) while, at the same time, thwarting the accessibility of the very system it instantiates. Just as *Eunoia* provides an interface to the dictionary that delights readers precisely to the degree that it could never help them locate specific words (since its lexicon is entirely monovocalic and its sequence is narrative rather than alphabetical), "Via" turns the list into a literary and aesthetic form by divesting it of any instrumental value. As Perec does with enumeration, she unravels a highly technical form – the alphabetical index – by extending its principle to an absurd extreme.

If "Via" can be classified as an example of conceptual poetry (although Bergvall remains deeply ambivalent about her association with the movement), it is partly because it shares with more overtly conceptual poems such as *Eunoia* a desire not only to borrow formal structures from new media, but also to disrupt their systematizing logic. Dworkin argues that conceptual poetry (as well as its precursors among the Oulipo and the Collège de 'Pataphysique) reveals errors and glitches within the edifice of the database that undermine its fantasy of seamlessly integrated data:

> [The absurdity generated by constraints] points to the inevitable discontinuity between all generalized systems and the incongruous individuals those systems are meant to account for; to the alienation of each concrete experience from the narratives of normalcy meant to absorb it; to the proscriptive inadequacy of descriptive schemes. In literary terms, these works contrast a formal rigidity, guaranteed by their preestablished rules, with the fluid interchangeability of the content structured by that form. ("Imaginary" 38)

The preceding chapters have all furnished examples of this mode of critique: Perec's attempt to inventory his diet, which runs aground on the etcetera of appetite (a theme that returns in Bergvall's "Fried Tale," a list of every mention of food and drink in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*); Calvino's dialectic between the algorithmic logic of chess and the suspended time of ekphrasis in *Invisible Cities*; and, perhaps most relevant here, Bök's distillation of the dictionary into a poetic reverie that renounces its own desire for disaffected mastery through the nimble play of the vowels. More minimalist and understated than any of these projects, *Via* is no less relentless in its deconstruction of the database genre, tugging at the seams not only of Dante's epic (whose authority unravels in the face of its endless variations) but also of the list that gives these variations their form. A handful of recurring elements (*journey*, *road*, *myself*, *life*) serve as a leitmotif that throws each deviation into greater relief: the wood is by turns *obscure*, *sunless*, *gloomy*, *darksome*, *dusky*, or *shadowed*; the road is either *lost* or *misplaced*. Like Gertrude Stein's injunction to begin again, Dante's epiphany ("I found myself again") echoes throughout these translations as a reminder that no two are alike, that there is no such thing as repetition. Recalling Perec's definition of enumeration as a perennial tension between perfection and incompletion, Bergvall describes the way that error threatens to corrupt her seemingly irrefragable procedure:

> Surprisingly, more than once, I had to go back to the books to double-check and amend an entry, a publication date, a spelling. Checking each line, each variation, twice. Increasingly, the project was about keeping count, making sure. That what I was copying was what was there. Not to inadvertently change what had been printed. To reproduce each translative gesture. (*Fig* 65)

Each variation is itself threatened by variation, differing not only from the original Italian but also from itself, twice transcribed and so exposed, even if exactly copied, to the difference inherent in repetition. The poem's subtitle ("48 Dante Variations," although there are only forty-seven) implies that even the original tercet, cited as an epigram at the top of the text, constitutes a variation, an origin devoid of originality, no more and no less authoritative than the multitude of translations it inspires. In this flat network of stanzas, ordered only by the arbitrary sequence of the alphabet and linked by the irregular echo of a refrain, no voice, no version, has priority over any other. The order promised by the list (and the encyclopedic ambitions of the medieval epic it distills) converges with a dispersion of registers and dialects. Not even alphabetization – our most ubiquitous and indomitable method of organizing text – can reabsorb the centrifugal force of a poem that seems determined (no less than Perec's tentative inventories) to dismantle the very principle on which its form depends.

Dworkin goes on to argue that conceptualism's *detournement* of new media also works to expose forms of information management that subtend more sinister projects such as mass surveillance, drone warfare, and (more recently, after the rise of Web 2.0) the commodification of the affective labor performed by online communities. In this way, he offers a riposte to the widespread objection that conceptual writing is politically disengaged and naïvely optimistic about the emancipatory potential of digital technologies. Yet there is a danger here: if the political stakes of conceptualism are tied to its ability to expose the structural artifice of systems larger than itself, that is, to function as a *symptom* of new media, this desire for exposure also threatens to re-inscribe the very phenomenon it sets out to critique. This is what Eve Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading": the ways in which literary and cultural critics feel pervasively (if not

ubiquitously) compelled to expose the complicity of literature with historically-conditioned structures of power. Paranoia in this sense is highly contagious: the impulse to expose an object that is itself concerned with exposure – digital surveillance, for example – partakes of that object's own desire to withdraw to a vantage that affords unchecked mastery. If the critical work of conceptualism is to register a widespread paranoia about the politics of digitization, it risks adopting those politics as its own.

For Sedgwick, the real danger of paranoid reading is not that it misses its target, that our suspicion will turn out to be unjust or misplaced. The danger is that paranoia leaves no room for other modes of reading (including "the weaving of intertextual discourse") that serve to sustain precarious selves and communities in a world that appears indifferent to their nurture. Sedgwick describes an alternative practice of "reparative reading" that might offset our discipline's obsession with critique: to suspend judgement, to read with the grain, in ways that "assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self" (149). This reparative impulse also has a temporal dimension, assembling fragments of the past into eclectic heaps that are "*not necessarily like any preexisting whole*." Such assemblages cannot be totalized or normalized precisely because they are belated and asynchronous – which is to say, as Elizabeth Freeman adds in a gloss on this passage, "we can't know in advance, but only retrospectively if even then, what is queer and what is not" (xiii).

Repair has been a key concept for queer theorists who seek to oppose normative regimes of time that are constitutive of modernity (the linear time of reproductive genealogy, the cyclical time of domestic labor). If, as Freeman argues, modernity compels us to move in lockstep with historical time (or what she calls "chrononormativity"), yolking lived experience to temporal

regimes that are irreversible, teleological, and homogenous, we can also break out of this regimen by engaging in reparative practices that cut across time and imagine temporal modes that are wayward and nonlinear. This is partly why queer temporality has enjoyed such a rich following among medievalists: the medieval (or the premodern more generally) often appears as the term that modernity must exclude in order to delimit itself as adequately secularized and disenchanted.[3] The endurance of the medieval within the modern or the contemporary, then, registers a profound dissatisfaction with concepts of modernity that are defined by historical progress and enlightened critique.

In this light, "Via" performs a mode of queer time not only by rewriting a medieval text and its modern afterlives, but by doing so within a poetic form that is integrally asynchronous. By alphabetizing the text, Bergvall disrupts the historical chronology of the translations, charging the gap between each tercet with a leap backwards or forwards in time. Such leaps are formally marked both by rapid variations in style (by turns archaic, minimalist, or colloquial) and by the fluctuating dates, positioned emphatically at the end of each stanza, punctuating our time travel even as their rhyming digits form a sort of unifying refrain (1989, 1893, 1998, 1993). On the one hand, these points of temporal rupture look back to the paratactic, collage-based techniques of the modernist epic: Pound's *Cantos*, for example, partly modeled on Dante's *Commedia*, assembles fragments of text from disparate moments of history, where the gap or cut between each pair of fragments, as with cinematic montage, radically disrupts our sense of linear time. But Bergvall's poem, by contrast, works to dull the disruptive force of parataxis, its potential to shock, demystify, or estrange. Absent here are the aggressive shifts in dialect, register, voice, or syntax that poets of the Pound era use to roughen the texture of language in an effort to emancipate readers from

automatized habits of perception. Bergvall alters her sources as little as possible: the diction and syntax of the poem, while sometimes archaic or obscure, always remains legible, and paratext such as names or dates, unlike the notoriously obfuscating footnotes to the *Wasteland*, form a complete (if radically disordered) system of reference. Her original performance of the poem, dirge-like and mellifluent, accompanied by a subharmonic drone synthesized from her own voice, sutures the otherwise hetereoglossic stanzas into a continuous stream of vocables. Hers is what Tan Lin calls an "ambient poetics," a mode of appropriation that foregoes "radical disjuncture" and the "shock effect of montage" for an aesthetic or even anesthetic experience that is "relaxing, boring, absorptive, sampled freely and without effort." The ambient texture of "Via" emerges partly through the miscellany of affects invoked by the translations: for Musgrave, Dante is *struggling*; for Sisson, *bewildered*; for Zappulla, he *wakes in wonder*. None of these words appears in the Italian (which says nothing about how Dante *feels*, only that he is lost) and yet as a group they index the very feelings of struggle, bewilderment, and wonder that readers are apt to experience as they wend their way among the maze of variations. The cumulative force of these affects properly belongs neither to the medieval poet nor to any of his translators: unmoored from any one persona, bewilderment and wonder circulate freely among the stanzas and across the many centuries they encompass. Like the denizens of the Inferno, who each suffer alone and yet form a chorus by virtue of their inclusion in the poem, the network of impersonal affects at play in "Via" give rise to a community of asynchronous voices that forestall the normative momentum of historical time.

Bergvall's method of assembling divergent texts without provoking shock or estrangement also recalls theories of the lyric as an unheroic or inconsequential genre, suspending narrative

time without making this suspension a model for redemptive action. Read this way, the queer time of "Via" resides less in specific moments of temporal rupture than in a pervasive disinclination to move forward. Bergvall does again and again what she has already done, copying the same words in minimally different combinations, often returning to the Library to double-check her work. This gesture of doubling back, of retracing one's steps, mirrors the suspended temporality of the poem: like Dante lost in the dark wood, the time of transcription lags behind not only the text being copied, but also the copy itself, which is never self-identical or wholly at rest. We encounter here, in Bergvall's words, less the "causal horror of linear travel" than "a narrative of structure, stop-start, each voice trying itself out, nothing looped, yet nothing moving beyond the first line, never beyond the first song, never beyond the first day." The poem enacts the *retrouvai* of Dante's original tercet, as the conflicted *I* finds himself again and again amid a catalogue of texts that have themselves been refound.

Comparing her work to the practice of digital sampling ("stop-start … nothing looped"), Bergvall imagines a very different form of temporality than the procedural logic of the algorithm that conceptual writing strives to mimic: an unheroic withdrawal, as Anne-Lise François might describe it, from the demand for redemptive action or narrative progression. "Via" suspends epic momentum for lyric inconsequence, although it is a lyric whose scene of solitary repose – a poet alone in the woods – is routinely thwarted by the proximity of other voices that resemble, without ever being equivalent to, his own. "Via," we might say, is a poem that makes nothing happen. If there is a modernist Dante at play here, it is not Eliot's *miglior fabbro*, tied, as I have argued, to the heroic rivalry of poets vying for the right to succession, but Belacqua, the indolent persona of *Purgatorio* IV, who neglects to ascend the steps to the gates of Purgatory because, as he says,

"Frate, l'andare in su che porta?" ("Brother, what is the use of going up?"). "Via" assumes a similarly inoperative pose, Belaqua's indolence – not, as for Dante, a vindication of his sin, but a disarmingly equivocal refusal to undertake decisive action or perform meaningful work – in short, a refusal to make time count.

There is a minimal yet crucial difference between such withdrawn or unheroic agency and conceptualism's desire to supplant the lyric voice with the impersonality of a literate machine. "Via," to be sure, follows a programmatic logic that determines much of its structure in advance, but that logic also comes undone through its own figures of asynchrony, stoppage, and impasse. Readers are not forced to choose (as conceptualism often implies) between unexamined complicity with the inhuman abstraction of digital systems, on the one hand, and, on the other, an avant-garde tactics that seeks to expose the contradictions of new media through radical forms of mimesis. Bergvall instead shows how the forms of temporal rupture that emerge from her alphabetical list thwart the sequential time both of the epic it rewrites and of enumeration itself, refusing subtly yet stubbornly to let time progress.

NOTES

1. In "The Oulipo Factor," Perloff invokes these two poets not just as neo-Oulipians but as inheritors of a more capacious poetic formalism with roots in the historic avant-gardes. Departing from the rhetoric of conceptualism (which holds that a poem is reducible to the articulation of its generative constraint), Perloff aligns the Oulipo and its successors with the modernist (and Russian formalist) argument that moments of heightened artifice serve to estrange and thereby renew our atrophied attentiveness to form. Bök and Bergvall, in this reading, serve as antidotes to a contemporary scene awash with naïvely confessional lyrics that Perloff disparages (with a nod to Ezra Pound's *A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste*) as little more than lineated prose. Although Perloff has been instrumental in forging transatlantic and transhistorical connections between modernism, the Oulipo, and contemporary anglophone poetry, the division she makes here between lyric expression and avant-garde formalism is one that the new lyric studies has thoroughly sought to dispel. For a judicious critique of this divide (and a careful reading of Perloff's formative dissertation on Yeats), see Izenberg, *Being Numerous*.

2. The phrase is from an unpublished draft of the poem (ctd. in Perloff 38). In *Fig*, Bergvall describes the original Italian in similar terms:

> I had started this piece by accident. Stumbling upon Dante's shadeless souls on my way to other books. Perhaps following a lead, in the dark of dark, in the woods of woods, in the sense of panic of the opening canto: 1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2-3 lines, and the three menace him. (64)

3. For an especially felicitous example of such scholarship, see Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now*, which traces the afterlives of medieval literature and philosophy (especially in the work of amateur philologists) in order to uncover "forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinary linear measurements of everyday life" (5). Also see Cole and Vance Smith, *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages,* a sustained critique of Reinhart Koselleck's theory of modernity as a self-legitimating break with the premodern.