SAMPLING AS REPAIR:

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The title alludes to the first tercet of Dante's *Commedia*, on which the poem is based:

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

Bergvall sets herself a simple yet daunting task: transcribe all of the English translations of this stanza that are archived at the British Museum before the turn of the millennium. Discounting latecomers and manuscripts under restoration, she collects forty-seven versions in all. She then alphabetizes and numbers them, removing 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." 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. Here are the first five tercets:

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)

The procedure determines the minutest details of the poem in advance. Bergvall formulates her method as an axiom or algorithm so exact that a computer, given access to the metadata of the British Library's holdings, could have generated a nearly identical text.

++Dworkin uses the word *proleptic* to describe the way in which such programmatic texts – although written by hand – "anticipate the computerized new media that would seem to be their ideal vehicle." But it is not simply a matter of anticipation: as we have already seen with Bök (and to some extent with Perec as well), the act of … ++

%% They don't do this *because* they don't have computers (although that's what Bök claims); there's a certain *pathos* to humans carrying out tasks better fitted to machines … a sort of proletarianization of labor; Stiegler – discretizing of gesture in the industrial revolution; … routinization, deskilling … Warhol: I want to be a machine.

; indeed, it is formulated so exactly that a computer, given access to the metadata of the British

Library's holdings, could have written it for her.

In this way, the poem 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) is supplanted, for conceptual writers, by Kenneth Goldsmith's metaphor of the poet as a "word processor" or "medieval scribe," aspiring 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 sample the words of others precisely in an effort to dissolve the authority of the lyric voice. Like other works of conceptual poetry written at the turn of the millennium, "Via"

Deskilling poetic labor and

Dismantling the Poundian vision of the poet as singular craftsman by deskilling *poesis* into transcription,

Even as the poem works to deskill poetic labor and dismantle the Poundian vision of the poet as singular craftsman, it also engages with an emergent poetics of the database, enumerating and alphabetizing the translations into an index that permits random access. But as with many of the other examples in this study, the poem sabotages this indexical structure by making its interface strategically unusable. Disregarding more conventional indices such as the author's surname or the date of publication (both of which are given in the text), 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 serves no practical end. 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. Just as *Eunoia* provides an interface to the dictionary that delights readers precisely to the degree that it could never help them locate actual words (since the only words contained there are monovocalic and because their sequence is narrative rather than alphabetical), "Via" turns the list into a literary and aesthetic form by divesting it of any instrumental value. …

Dworkin argues that such works mimic the database logic of new media in ways that expose its inner contradictions, revealing errors and glitches that undermine the digital fantasy of seamlessly integrated data. "Via" participates in this critical practice: enumerating translations that often differ only by a ++handful++ of words ++reveals++ a subtle pattern of variation and self-difference beneath the smooth surface of the list. 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. Indeed, the poem's subtitle ("48 Dante Variations," although there are only forty-seven) suggests that the original tercet, cited as an epigram, might itself be a variation, an origin without originality. In this way, "Via" stages a tension between the exactitude promised by enumeration and the multiplicity inherent in translation. It is because each stanza is exactly copied and indexed that the limits of this exactitude emerge with such urgency.

Dworkin goes on to argue that conceptualism's engagement with new media also works to expose forms of information management that subtend more sinister projects – such as drone warfare or mass surveillance. 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 comes dangerously close to reinscribing the very phenomenon it sets out to critique. This is what Eve Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading": the ways in which literary criticism has become pervasively (if not ubiquitously) obsessed with exposing 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, say – 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."

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 (Caroline Dinshaw, for example): 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. 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.

"Via," I want to argue, enacts a mode of queer time not only by engaging a medieval text and its modern afterlives, but by doing so within a poetic form that is decisively nonlinear and asynchronous. By alphabetizing the text, Bergvall disrupts the historical chronology of the translations, charging the gap between each tercet with a small 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 Poundian 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, is nevertheless highly legible, and paratext such as names and dates, unlike the notoriously obfuscating footnotes to the *Wasteland*, form a contiguous (if 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 unified 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." Appropriation, as Bergvall practices it, has less in common with Pound's ideogrammic method than with that curious gesture that Sedgwick calls the *beside*: an affinity between things, as if between two bodies, or two hands touching each other, that permits "a spacious agnosticism about the … linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking."

Part of what is at stake in such figures, figures for how we might combine heterogeneous texts without desiring to shock, is a bid for the unheroic, an unwillingness to make poetry's capacity for asynchrony and discontinuity into 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, stubborn disinclination to move forward. Bergvall does again and again what she has already done, copying the same words in minimally different combinations or even returning to the Library "to double-check and amend an entry, a publication date, a spelling. Checking each line, each variation once, twice." 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 is slow, belated, lagging 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 already said, to the heroic rivalry of poets vying for the right to succession, but Beckett's 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 such a radically 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 difference between such a figure of 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 its structure in advance, but it is also a logic that comes undone through its own figures of asynchrony, stoppage, and impasse. Here, these forms of temporal lapse appear more reparative than paranoid, more ambient than paratactic, without giving up their potential to unsettle our normative sense of historical time. It is worth distinguishing between the rigor of the constraint and our affective response to the text that it generates: perhaps a little bored or dazed, etherized by the poem's calculated tedium, and yet not irremediably frozen into inaction. We are not forced to choose, as some readers of

conceptualism would suggest, 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. Conceptualism, read more subtly, asks what kinds of agency might still be possible under such improbable constraints. The answer Bergvall proposes here (as tentative as any inventory drafted by Perec) is a stubborn yet unprepossessing refusal to let time progress.