

## Between Tradition and Transgression: Amelia Rosselli's Petrarch

EMMANUELA TANDELLO

PETRARCH'S PRESENCE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALIAN POETRY has been seen to progress from an initial position of relatively undisputed centrality, to being the object of a paradoxically secret, difficult legacy. Jointly with Dante—though both opposed to, and in dialogue with the poet of the *Commedia*—and almost invariably mediated through Leopardi, Petrarch figures at the very heart of the critical debate that informs and shapes the poetry of the first half of the *Novecento*.<sup>1</sup> All major poets, from Ungaretti to the third generation *Hermetics* (Luzi, Bigongiari, Gatto), to Montale, and Saba, find Petrarch, in the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, an indispensable interlocutor. Ungaretti's 'essential', absolute poetic language, and the 'Ptolemaic' centrality granted to the poetic subject, are firmly rooted in his rereading of Petrarch. Montale's own poetry, generally acknowledged as leaning more towards the Dantean model, is known to undergo a crucial Petrarchan phase with *Gli orecchini* (1940); and Saba's own Petrarchism, half-hearted when not altogether dismissed by the poet himself, is flagrantly allowed to linger through the most compromising title of his *opus*, even when his *Canzoniere's* lifelong project moves further and further away from its original, disputed model.

As we progress through the century, the dialogue with Petrarch becomes increasingly beset with difficulty and unease. Even Sereni and Zanzotto, in whose poetry Petrarch is most visibly present and recognisable, exhibit, on closer acquaintance, a severe case of anxiety of influence. In both cases, the poetic legacy of the *RVF* is hailed as a 'via negativa' crucially mediated by Leopardi. Sereni—troubled by the narcissism of

<sup>1</sup> See A. Noferi, 'Le poetiche critiche novecentesche "sub specie petrarchae"', in *Le poetiche critiche novecentesche* (Florence, 1970), pp. 225–81.

the Petrarchan Subject, perceived as veritable original sin of lyric discourse—only faintheartedly recognises the centrality of the original emotion obsessively revisited and recast, the passion endlessly metamorphosed into phantasm as the necessary, indeed indispensable nucleus of poetry.<sup>2</sup> For Zanzotto, the intellectual, ethical essence of the Petrarchan legacy lies paradoxically in what modern mass culture would recognise as *irrelevance*, in its exemplary ‘going beyond’ (*oltranzismo*, a word that is significantly resonant of his own poetry), its power of resistance, its refusal to succumb to each failed attempt at dialogue, its determination to reaffirm the inevitable non-answer (*‘un’unica non-risposta’*) that the poetic voice, forced into monologue, unavoidably has to confront today, as it did then. But this is nevertheless also a *‘via negativa’*, leading rather to the contemplation of a most/post-Leopardian *‘nulla’*, which Zanzotto’s own poetry programmatically embraces.<sup>3</sup>

Far more difficult and contradictory still is the relationship with the author of the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* for poets as diverse as Bertolucci, Sanguineti, and the great *dantesco* par excellence, Giorgio Caproni: paradoxical, and even transgressive, it would appear to be experienced as innermost secrecy and difficulty.<sup>4</sup> Of this complex reality of difficult and often unacknowledged debt, the poetry of Amelia Rosselli has been said to represent one of the most extreme, even unlikely, examples. The choice of her work, as a way of approaching the subject of Petrarch’s legacy in contemporary Italian poetry, might thus appear a peculiar, even contentious choice. Not unjustly described as radical, unique, if not positively anomalous within the panorama of the poetry of the second half of the century, she is generally understood to pledge her literary allegiance to a wide, post-romantic modernist tradition that polemically brings together the Leopardi–Montale line (but also D’Annunzio and Campana) with an equally wide European, and North American latitude (with Rimbaud, Lautréamont, but also Hopkins, Cummings, and Rilke as her acknowledged sources). Indeed, it is with poets lying outside the Italian tradition (authors as different as Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath,

<sup>2</sup> V. Sereni, ‘Petrarca, nella sua finzione la sua verità: testo di una conversazione tenuta alla biblioteca cantonale di Lugano la sera del 7 maggio 1974’, in *Sentieri di Gloria: note e ragionamenti sulla letteratura* (Milan, 1996), pp. 127–46.

<sup>3</sup> A. Zanzotto, ‘Petrarca tra il palazzo e la cameretta’, in *Fantasie di avvicinamento* (Milan, 1991), now in *Scritti sulla letteratura* (Milan, 2001), pp. 261–71 (p. 262).

<sup>4</sup> Thus Andrea Cortellessa in his introduction to *Un’altra storia: Petrarca nel Novecento italiano*, ed. A. Cortellessa (Rome, 2004), p. xii.

Paul Celan) that she is generally—and perhaps too hastily—more comfortably associated. Such poetic topographies would appear to place her very far from what is known as the ‘Petrarchan’ line of the *Novecento*. Rather, her radical, sustained linguistic experimentation would appear to place her, jointly with a poet like Sanguineti, closer to Dante; and her avowed opposition to a solipsistically central poetic self can sound positively anti-Petrarchan. In reality, as this chapter aims to show, there is much in Rosselli that chimes both with the unease expressed by Sereni, and at the same time with Zanzotto’s belief in poetry’s ethical radicalism. The essence of her poetry remains, notwithstanding her ‘intentions’, essentially lyrical. It revolves, in other words, around the mythic construction of a universal subjectivity caught at the moment of loss, mourning for an absence, and in that absence seeking—and failing to find—meaning and self-definition. It is in this ultimate allegiance to the lyric, I argue, that Rosselli’s poetry can be seen to reaffirm the enduring value of the Petrarchan legacy at the close of the second millennium. I endeavour to show here how Petrarchan discourse operates within her poetry as a veritable ghost in the machine, and how—albeit ‘dissonant’, elusive to the point of being almost invisible, and transgressed to the point of being almost unrecognisable<sup>5</sup>—it constitutes the ‘degree zero’ from which the transgression—and reaffirmation—of lyric discourse perpetrated by her own poetry can be seen to depart.

Of her three major books, *Serie ospedaliera* (1969) appears to me to be the one in which the dialogue with Petrarch is more explicitly and ‘productively’ engaged. My analysis thus concentrates on *Serie*, and focuses on three major aspects of Petrarchan presence, arguing first of all that the sparse, but unmistakable verbal echoes always aim at deliberately and explicitly challenging lyric discourse; that the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*’s lyric degree zero is evoked, resummoned, by being exposed and allowed to dialogue *a posteriori* with some of its later poetic paradigms (through a rare ‘modern nostalgia’ that is shared with Leopardi and Montale). Lastly, perhaps more importantly, I argue how Rosselli’s use of archaic mythologemes in constructing a personal poetic myth finds in the *RVF* an ‘inevitable’ interlocutor.

*Serie ospedaliera* marks a significant departure from the modernist/avant-garde-inspired experimentation of Rosselli’s first book, *Variazioni*

<sup>5</sup> A. Baldacci, ‘Il Petrarca di Amelia Rosselli: da Mallarmé verso Celan’, in Cortellessa, *Un'altra storia*, pp. 271–7.

*belliche* (1964).<sup>6</sup> The adjective ‘ospedaliera’ is meant to carry, according to the poet’s own explanation, a metapoetic meaning of linguistic and stylistic ‘cure’ and ‘recovery’ from the corrosive and bellicose plurilingual experimentation that characterised the earlier poetry. The modernist legacy, with its masters Rimbaud, Campana, Montale (i.e. the poets whose presence is macroscopically visible, in the poetry of *Variazioni belliche*, and of the experimental *poemetto* ‘La libellula’) is replaced by other influences, defined by the poet as ‘minor’ or ‘out-dated’, such as Saba, Hermetic poets, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rilke. Rosselli is notoriously idiosyncratic in her mapping of literary history, and often unreliable in owning up to her extraordinarily wide poetic culture. Petrarch is never mentioned here—nor, incidentally, is Leopardi, of whom Rosselli is perhaps, with Sereni, the most original contemporary heir. Given that even Rosselli’s idiosyncrasy would not extend as far as to class these poets as ‘minori’, we are left with their declared outdatedness. In other words, her lack of acknowledgement might betray an embarrassment, something similar to Sereni’s reluctance to even mention lyric poetry, let alone admit to its practice. And yet *Serie* is essentially that: a revisitation of the lyric model in all its major defining features. Written between 1962 and 1966, during one of Rosselli’s worse, and longer, spells of illness, its eighty-eight poems draw on what the poet herself calls her intimate, private experience of depression and melancholy, and are haunted by obsessive, darkly threatening intimations of death. The adjective ‘ospedaliera’ is also meant to carry a crucial narrowing of focus, and an essentially passive, ‘supine’, crippled outlook (but we shall later on venture to call it ‘posthumous’) on external reality, experienced as distant and utterly unreal. The theme of desire, which galvanised and empowered the bold, ‘bellicose’ diction of the previous book, is here daringly, if misleadingly, announced as utterly spent. A void, deserted space is contemplated instead, populated by shadows of a previous life; one of these shadows is love itself, now reduced to a pointlessly wandering, intermittent, neglectful presence/absence; the other one, all-powerful, is death. The rediscovery of the iconic and emotional spatiality of the landscape, the infinitely more restrained tone and contained register, the greater adherence to a less foreign, deviant language (‘un rigore linguistico maggiore’),<sup>7</sup> in the pursuit of a new (renewed, rediscovered)

<sup>6</sup> A. Rosselli, *Serie ospedaliera* (Milan, 1969); now in A. Rosselli, *Le poesie*, ed. E. Tandello (Milan, 1997). All quotations are taken from this edition, abbreviated as *ARP*. All English translations are mine.

<sup>7</sup> G. Spagnoletti, ‘Intervista ad Amelia Rosselli’, in A. Rosselli, *Una scrittura plurale*, ed. F. Caputo (Novara, 2004), p. 299.

classicism ('una nuova classicità')<sup>8</sup>—all unmistakably spell a lyric inspiration, and a lyric intent, for which the dialogue with Petrarch is not just implied but unavoidable.

Beginning with the landscape. *Serie*, as already suggested, is dominated by a distinct pathos of place. A 'real' landscape, the 'boschi e rocce dell'alto Abruzzo', where the poet spent her convalescence, and her emotional response to it (a most Leopardian yearning for a benign, protective Nature is underscored by the anguished vision of its illusory and treacherous reality) is staged as theatre of mourning, where a crippling loss is experienced again and again. There are players in this drama of loss, which, as we shall see, come to occupy/to haunt this stage: 'someone' has died/has left; someone else is distressed by this loss/departure; the third player is Death. As the following 'twin' poems eloquently demonstrate, Rosselli engages with two immediately recognisable models: the Petrarchan *locus amoenus*, and the Leopardian idyll, allowing them to interact, and to 'correct' each other:

C'è vento ancora e tutti gli sforzi  
non servono a tenere la radura  
ferma nel suo proposito.

Sento tintinnire l'erba, essa non  
può, amarsi. Salvo che immettendo  
nell'aria fragranze, disobbediando  
alla natura.

Rocce covano serpi che correggono  
quest'idillio nascente.<sup>9</sup>

Faccia nell'erba odori quel poco  
che c'è da odorare. Sei stanco  
vuoi dormire, ma non puoi. Le  
rocce frastagliate prendono pose  
sardoniche.

La morte è nell'aria, ti sfugge  
solo per un poco. Quando torni  
in pensione ti metti in ginocchio.

O vorresti. Ma non puoi.<sup>10</sup>

These 'twin' poems are quintessential of the book as a whole: a restrained, remote voice records minimal happenings within a landscape that has been stripped of everything, except its essentials: a windswept ('vento') clearing ('la radura') of grass ('l'erba') and rocks ('rocce'). The human presence is hardly noticeable, the verb 'sento' the only give-away of a passive observer and listener. The wind, whistling through the blades of grass, makes a

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> 'C'è vento ancora', *ARP*, p. 420: 'It is windy still and no efforts/ will hold the clearing/ to its purpose.// I hear the grass jingle, it/ cannot, love itself. Save by issuing/ fragrances into the air, disobeying/ nature.// Rocks hide snakes,/ this budding idyll stands corrected.'

<sup>10</sup> 'Faccia nell'erba', *ARP*, p. 421: 'Your face in the grass you smell what little/ there is to be smelled. You are tired/ wish to sleep, but cannot. The/ jagged rocks strike/ sardonic attitudes.// Death is in the air, it barely escapes/ you. Once back/ in your hotel room you kneel down.// Or would like to. But cannot.'

sweet sound and sweet scents are released into the air. Yet this is no restful picture. It is ‘still’ windy (‘ancora’), and the restlessness, the movement caused by the insistent wind on the clearing, defeats ‘tutti gli sforzi’: to put it simply, this landscape—which would appear to have not only a purpose (‘proposito’), but indeed a determination (‘ferma nel suo proposito’)—is in motion, it won’t keep still. The negative ‘non servono’ is reinforced in the second stanza, through what would appear to be a paradox: the grass ‘cannot love itself’ (but see the comma that separates the modal from the infinitive—‘it cannot, love [. . .]’) except by ‘inserting’ sweet scents into the air, thus ‘disobeying’ nature. This is no spring landscape, if this act of love—sweet scents announcing the coming of spring, the time for conception and birth—is defined as defiant of the laws of nature. The rescue and ‘fixing’ of the landscape—see the active function of the gerunds (‘immettendo’, ‘disobbediando’), and their assonance with ‘sento’—pursued in the first two stanzas would appear to achieve their aim in the final one, but chillingly so. The life being ‘hatched’ here, in what now has become the most barren of landscapes (intensified by the absence of definite articles: ‘rocce’, ‘serpi’) is chthonic, and utterly evil.

Both poems carry, in language and iconography, the powerful, unmistakable memory of the *locus amoenus* both as place of (far from comforting) evocation of the absent Laura, and space where the poet’s vision of her death is witnessed, and where the *contra natura* behaviour of the landscape projects the poetic subject’s sense of desperation (his weariness) at her loss. The synecdoches, ‘erba’ and ‘rocce’, evoke widely used Petrarchan tropes, but so does ‘stanco’. A few examples will suffice: ‘Ed io non ritrovando intorno intorno/ ombra di lei, né pur de’ suoi piedi orma/ come uom che tra via dorma/ gittai mi stancho sovra l’erba un giorno’ (*Canzoniere* 23. 108–11); ‘Da indi in qua mi piace/ questa herba sì, ch’altrove non ò pace’ (126. 64–5); and ‘L’aura mia sacra al mio stancho riposo/ spira sì spesso’ (356. 1–2); perhaps more relevantly still, *canzone* 129, where the refuge offered by the landscape—‘Per alti monti et per selve aspre trovo/ qualche riposo’ (129. 14–15), and again ‘Ove porge ombra un pino alto od un colle/ talor m’arresto, et pur nel primo sasso/ disegno co la mente il suo bel viso’ (129. 27–9)—and the ensuing vision (‘quel dolce error’) are chased off by ‘il vero’. Last but not least, death’s threat in the first poem is conveyed through a strikingly similar image in *canzone* 323, where Laura–Eurydice dies ‘punta poi nel tallon d’un picciol angue’ (323. 69).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *RVF* 23: ‘And I, not finding—How I looked around!—/ her shadow or her footprint anywhere, like a tired traveller/ just threw myself one day upon the grass’; *RVF* 126: ‘And now I know I love/

The Rossellian version of the devastated *locus amoenus* as sterile desert is object of sustained repetition and variation (thus, incidentally, echoing the *Canzoniere's* very own iterative nature). The closing poem of *Serie*, for example, restages the same scene: among 'grass intermingled with tenderness' death's threat, its cruelty, is met, and the *fantasma* is sought in the illusory comfort of sleep: 'Ritrovare tra le erbe frammiste di tenerezza/ un'obbligatoria crudeltà'; 'Cercare nel sonno che concede qualche mal posto ristoro un'ombra gracile'.<sup>12</sup>

Both poems also carry a powerful memory of the Leopardian idyll—to which they are also formally closer—with its characteristic dramatisation of the contemplative stance, its visual and auditory prompt, and its staging of a comforting yielding to the vision, as in the lines from 'L'infinito', 'come il vento/ *odo* stormir fra queste piante', and the phrase 'dolce naufragare'. Indeed, the Leopardian idyll *is* the modern translation of the Petrarchan 'sweet error': 'e naufragar m'è *dolce* in questo mare'. That Rosselli is well aware of the discourse she is engaging with is perhaps given away by that verb 'correggono': the 'serpi'—symbol of evil and sin, as well as death—lurking under the rocks are another incarnation of the corrective powers of 'il vero'. Indeed, this 'correction' is witnessed in *Serie* again and again, where the vision is both celebrated for its sweetness ('apre nuovi orizzonti alla mia gioia'), and unmasked as lie ('menzogna'): '*Dolcezza dello sguardo* e una eventuale/ menzogna da proliferare con le mani/ aperte a tutte le visioni [. . .]'; 'un *verissimol* dirsi che è finita la strada che rimane/ chiusa a ogni scuotere di portone [. . .]'.<sup>13</sup>

Like the vision/idyll, the landscape itself is exposed as conceit. 'Giardino', 'piccolo parco', 'deserto', 'campo', and even 'campo di morte' (death camp, but also cemetery), it is openly acknowledged in its purpose as a framing, imaginative device: 'questo tuo quadro giardino', 'giardino della mia figurata mente' ('your square garden', 'garden of my imagined/imagining mind', or indeed 'figurate mind'). Once more, death's bold, and

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this grass so much I find peace nowhere else'; *RVF* 129: 'Still by some stream on a deserted slope,/ or in the mountains' dark declivities,/ my soul finds comfort in its dire distress'; 'Where a tall pine or small hill casts a shade/ I stop, in the first stone I come across/ imagining I see her lovely face'; *RVF* 323: 'bitten by a serpent in the heel'. All quotations from Petrarch are taken from the Santagata edition of the *Canzoniere* (Milan, 1996). All English translations are taken from Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. J. G. Nichols (Manchester, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> *ARP*, p. 431: 'To find again, in the grass mingled with tenderness,/ an obligatory cruelty'; 'To seek in sleep that hardly grants repose a fragile shadow'.

<sup>13</sup> *ARP*, p. 372: 'Sweet pleasant gaze and a possible lie/ to be extended profusely to all visions'; 'a most true/ saying to oneself that the road has reached its end and remains/ closed to any shaking of the gate' (my italics).

bitterly ironic, proclamation of its own reality and importance, turns it into ‘angolo morto’ (a dead corner), thus disabusing us, and the poetic subject with us, of its deceptive peacefulness. And as in the *RVF*, the vision of a devastated landscape is witness to an event that binds together the poet’s emotional and poetic fate.

The topos of vanity and futility invests poetry itself, in a way that is again strongly reminiscent of the *RVF*. As Enrico Testa has recently observed, this second book is crossed by a strong undercurrent of ironic metapoetic reflections, uttered by a bitter and disappointed subject on the verge of withdrawing from the lifelong engagement with the ‘cult’ of poetry now declared futile and obsolete.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the poem ‘Dialogo con i poeti’ stages a bitter and ironic invective in which a modern *perte d’auréole*<sup>15</sup> is pitted against the very essence of the lyric stance :

Da poeta a poeta: in linguaggio sterile, che  
s’appropria della benedizione e ne fa un piccolo  
gioco o gesto, *rallentando il passo* sul fiume  
per lasciar dire ogni onestà. Da poeta in poeta:  
simili ad uccellacci, che rapiscono il vento  
che li porta e contribuiscono a migliorare  
la fame. *Di passo in passo un futile motivo che  
li rallegra*, vedendosi crescere in *stima*, i letterati  
con le camicie aperte che s’abbronzano al sole  
di tutte le tranquillità: *un piccolo gesto sfortunato  
li riconduce all’aldilà con la morte che sembra  
scendere e stringerli*. [. . .]<sup>16</sup>

The syntactic prolepsis ‘da poeta a poeta’, ‘da poeta in poeta’ (from poet to poet), and above all ‘di passo in passo’ (step after step), is an unmistakable echo of *Canzoniere* 129, ‘Di pensier in pensier, di monte in monte’, whose very setting is also, significantly, evoked in Rosselli’s poem by the image of the poet walking along the river: ‘Se ’n solitaria spiaggia, rivo o fonte [. . .]’ and again in the *congedo* ‘mi rivedrai sovr’un ruscel

<sup>14</sup> E. Testa, *Dopo la lirica: antologia della poesia italiana 1960–2000* (Turin, 2005), p. 198.

<sup>15</sup> We find this suggestion in Daniela La Penna’s own reading of this poem in her article ‘La metafora ventosa nella poesia di Amelia Rosselli’, in *Trasparenze*, XVII–XIX, special issue dedicated to Amelia Rosselli, ed. E. Tandello and G. Devoto (Genoa, 2003), 309–32 (325).

<sup>16</sup> *ARP*, p. 393: ‘From poet to poet: in sterile words, that/ make blessing their own and turn it into a little/ game or gesture, slowing down as they walk along the river/ to allow every truthfulness to speak. From poet to poet:/ like scavenging birds, kidnapping the wind/ that carries them and helping to improve/ hunger. Step after step a futile reason/ makes them rejoice, as they see their fame increase, the literati/ with their open shirts basking in the sun/ of all tranquillity: a small unlucky gesture/ leads them to the afterlife and death seems to/ descend upon them and seize them’ (my italics).

corrente'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, 'rallentando il passo' unmistakably alludes to the 'passi tardi e lenti' of the famous sonnet 35 (and the same allusion is found again in Rosselli in *ARP* 373, 'Dolce caos [. . .]': 'in questo pacifico piccolo parco vedo te partire, *al passi ancora lenti*').<sup>18</sup> Tradition (that which is handed down 'from poet to poet'), and poetry's prime source of inspiration—Petrarch's phantasm, through its airy synecdoche—are thus the underlying themes of Rosselli's poem, and the very targets of her critique. Elsewhere in her poetry Rosselli launches derisive invectives against the 'holy fathers' of tradition, the sustained practice of (mis-)quotation and allusion constituting as much a searing critique of tradition as a strategy to find one's own place within it.<sup>19</sup> 'Dialogo con i poeti' has all the pathos of an indictment precisely because it allows Petrarch's language to leave its ghostly trail across it. Poetry itself is dismissed as sterile language, insignificant play ('piccolo gioco'), inspired by 'futile' motives. Its practitioners—the poets-literati—are like scavenging birds ('uccellacci'), who in abducting the *aura* that inspires them, hijack its role as emotional core of the lyric act, and drive it instead of being driven by it. The pursuit of poetry as futile narcissistic play (think of the closing line of 129, 'In guisa d'uom che pensi e pianga e scriva') is reiterated elsewhere, too:

Pensi pensi pensi e è la fine. Di tutti i tuoi incartamenti  
incantamenti. Mentre menti io me la filo sulla linea del  
sonetto montagnaro.<sup>20</sup>

'Pensi' inevitably echoes the many uses of 'pensare' and 'pensieri' in the *Canzoniere*, its pointed repetition suggesting again an empty exercise (and that applies even if we interpret the interlocutor to be the poet *herself*). The paronomastic pair 'incartamenti (papers)–incantamenti (spells)' unlocks its own ghost, the lie ('menti') that informs it, whilst the poetic subject ironically 'scarpers' poetically in a different direction.

The setting of *Canzoniere* 129 informs 'Dialogo con i poeti' in another important respect. In Petrarch's poem, the wandering subject is reunited with his heart, there where the object of his quest dwells: 'mi rivedrai

<sup>17</sup> 'still by some stream on a deserted slope'; 'you will see me again,/ beside a running stream'.

<sup>18</sup> 'in this peaceful small park I see you leave with slow and measured steps'.

<sup>19</sup> This is particularly visible in the long poem 'La libellula' (*ARP*, pp. 141–58), where the poet engages with, and deconstructs, texts by Rimbaud, Campana, Montale, as well as several other poets, including Dante.

<sup>20</sup> *ARP*, p. 366: 'You think think think and there you have it. The end of all your spells/ of all your papers. While you lie, I scarp along the line of the/ mountain sonnet.'

sovr'un ruscel corrente,/ ove l'aura si sente/ d'un fresco et odorifero laureto./ Ivi è 'l mio cor, et quella che 'l m'invola' (129. 68–71). His *promenade*, if we may be allowed a modern allusion here, shapes the space of the text, and seals it as the only legitimate space where the poet should dwell: there where inspiration holds him. The promenade in Rosselli's poem, however, ends in a far more ominous place:

un piccolo gesto sfortunato  
li riconduce all'aldilà con la morte che sembra  
scendere e stringerli. [. . .]

The poets' descent into the underworld, surrounded by death/the dead harks back to the *nekylia* of Homeric, Ovidian, Dantean memory, instigated either by their desire to speak with the dead (and that is indeed the purpose fulfilled by *nekylia* in epic poetry), or by the desire to bring One back to life, as in the Orphic myth. The strongly parodic, abrasive apostrophe of 'Dialogo con i poeti' suffers a sudden lyric surge (or is it a plunge?) and leads us back not only to where poetry is sorely tested (and shown wanting), but perhaps where Rosselli believes it should be: in close proximity to transience and tremendousness (as Emily Dickinson would have put it), acknowledging itself defeated, and silenced. If this is what poetry should do—meet and dialogue with death, with the dead—then where does this leave lyric poetry, and that 'other' dialogue it stages? Rosselli's reply lies in an unescapable identification of the two dialogues—made possible by the form they share, the dialogue 'io–tu'.<sup>21</sup> If the unlucky gesture belongs to the poet, the realm of the dead belongs to the figure he evokes (and irretrievably loses) through his gaze. This is observed in those poems where the theatre of mourning, as I have called the Rossellian *locus amoenus*, becomes witness to a dramatised, dialogic relationship of love, loss, and mourning between two separate, alienated *personae*.

This dramatisation effectively displaces the centrality of the lyric self (which is morphologically marked as feminine), weakening its control over the textual space by making it dependent on *another* (morphologically marked in the masculine). This other, addressed as 'tu', is speechless—sometimes 'sordo', certainly neglectful—but endowed with vision. Indeed, he is in actual fact *auctor* of the space of the garden, which is presented as existing through *his* gaze. The poetic subject is established as

<sup>21</sup> On this subject, see T. Bisanti, 'Il dialogo negato: tentazione mistica e ricerca del "tu" nella poesia di Amelia Rosselli', *Nuova Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, VII (2004), 411–50.

hostage to this *auctoritas*, and confined to the void, empty dispossessed space of the garden, condemned to a futureless fate as object of *his* vision:

E non posso lamentarmi d'altro, che *vedendo*  
*la tua visione*, tu non chiami o fiorisci  
 allegramente attorno al mio corpo profumato  
 di innocente pigrizia.<sup>22</sup>

It is his vision that conjures her, and leads her to the garden—‘un addolcimento visionario/ mi porta stanca nel tuo quadro giardino’ (a visionary softening/ leads me tired to your square garden)—and keeps her there to witness his departure, and his return—which is however never complete, as he appears to hover at the threshold, apparently branded by some kind of curse, or punishment:

Tutt'intorno il vuoto gentile sembra  
 pensare ad altra cosa che il tuo  
 ritorno—sembra scacciandoti, infestarti  
 d'una punizione [. . .]

But someone/something else claims her utterly:

La morte forte del suo avere fa cenno  
 sì, vieni—ed io rompendo ogni indugio  
 fastosamente la saluto.<sup>23</sup>

Death—which, as we have seen in ‘Faccia nell'erba [. . .]’ is in the air itself (‘La morte è nell'aria’)—hovers ominously in the garden, turning it into ‘un angolo morto’ by asserting its claim, and drawing her deep into its domain. Indeed, death replaces the other as the subject's truest companion: ‘Povera creatura/ è la morte se nell'inferno delle piccole/ ore sonnecchia anche fra le mie braccia’ (Death is indeed a wretched creature if in the early hours' hell/ it naps in my arms).

Controlled by the other, the poetic subject is merely the product of writing, ‘un refrattario separarsi dell'inchiostro/ dalle tue ambigue mani’ (a reluctant severing of ink/ from your ambiguous hands). ‘Mitragliata da un fiume/ di parole’—*his* words—she is defined through a clearly recognisable Petrarchan attribute, ‘*chioma* trapassata dalle *passioni*’,

<sup>22</sup> *APR*, p. 379: ‘And I cannot complain about anything else, but that in seeing/ your vision, you do not call or blossom/ happily around my body/ smelling sweetly of innocent laziness’ (my italics).

<sup>23</sup> *APR*, p. 372: ‘All around the gentle emptiness seems/ to think of something other than your/ return—seems in chasing you to riddle/ you with a punishment [. . .]; death, strong in her possessions gestures towards me/—yes, come—and I hasten to greet her, ostentatiously.’

surrounded by shadows, protagonist of a mystery that is disclosed only to his narcissistic gaze:

Vi è solo ombra intorno alla capanna, solo  
 monti morti e vuoti attorno al mio segreto  
 che solo tu con il tuo sguardo puoi prevedere  
 questa solitudine che si quesita per ritornare  
 ancora, morta sulla preda.<sup>24</sup>

Still bound by desire, she compliantly relinquishes her freedom: 'Ed ora ti mostro, fra le *selve* secche, anche/ un sorriso compartecipe'.<sup>25</sup>

In challenging the *auctoritas* of the gaze, by having the subject occupy the position normally held by the (silent, dead) object of desire, casting it as hostage, captive, of an immutable destiny, Rosselli thus radically perverts the lyric model. Indeed, it is in her adoption of the constitutive form of lyric discourse, the dialogue *in absentia*, that we can locate the most complex aspect of Rosselli's relationship with Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. As with the vision/idyll poems discussed earlier, that relationship reveals itself to be far from exclusive, as it strays and betrays, collides and colludes with other discourses—some elective, like Leopardi's, some more distant and openly anti-Petrarchan, like Montale's. They all emerge in the Rossellian text tainted by association, to the point of no return, as indeed the following poem amply demonstrates:

*Tu non ricordi le mie dorate spiagge, se come penso  
 infesto ti sporgi dalla balconata, senza vedere  
 alcunché fuori della tua mente, che scrive difficilmente  
 cose belle [ . . ]*

*E poi vedi il cielo blu, colorandosi a tuo dispetto  
 che sporge anch'esso, assistendoti, attendendoti  
 mentre con la musa fai ricamo, altre piccole astuzie  
 o il naufragare. Ed è dolce il naufragare in questo sonno  
 così spiritato [ . . ]*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *ARP*, p. 400: 'Only shade around the hut, only/ hills dead and empty around my secret/ that only you through your gaze can foresee/ this loneliness addressing itself only to return/ again, dead on its prey.'

<sup>25</sup> *ARP*, p. 404: 'And now I show you, amid dry woods/ a sympathetic smile'. Compare the intimation of mortality in *RVF* 22. 37: 'Ma io sarò sotterra in secca selva' (I shall be under earth and dry wood).

<sup>26</sup> *ARP*, p. 406: 'You do not remember my golden shores, if as I suspect/ you lean hostile from the balcony, failing/ to see anything at all outside your own mind,/ which hardly ever writes/ beautiful things [ . . ]; And then you see the blue sky, colour spreading across it despite you/ it also leans, assisting you, attending you/ while with the muse you embroider, other small tricks/ or your drowning. And drowning is sweet in this sleep/ so possessed [ . . ]' (my italics).

Three opening lines—‘Tu non ricordi la casa dei doganieri’, from Montale’s ‘Casa dei doganieri’, ‘Silvia rimembri ancor’, from Leopardi’s ‘A Silvia’, and ‘Standomi un giorno solo a la fenestra’, from Petrarch’s own *Canzone delle visioni* (323)—are forced here to acknowledge a shared conceit. First established in the *RVF* as a framing device for the essentially scopophilic position of the subject (embodied in its verb par excellence, ‘mirar’) lying outside the vision, but responsible for it (we watch him watching another/something else), the image/conceit of the window returns in ‘A Silvia’—Leopardi’s ‘d’in sul verone del paterno ostello’ (from the balcony of my paternal dwelling)—and, with a reversal of roles, in Montale’s ‘Il balcone’ (it is Arletta who leans out/appears at the window, not the poet): ‘ti sporgi da questa/ finestra che non s’illumina’ (you lean towards it/ from this unlighted window). Another is gazed at, waited for, evoked through memory, or through memory lost forever, forgotten. The critique is still there: ‘con la musa fai ricamo’, ‘[fuori del]la tua mente, che scrive difficilmente/ cose belle’; the sky is unmasked once more as conceit as it ‘assists’ the other-as-poet as well as hosting his vision/his ‘waiting’ (compare ‘Il balcone’ again: ‘sull’arduo nulla si spunta/ l’ansia di attenderti vivo’). The *poetica della rimembranza* which informs ‘A Silvia’ and ‘Casa dei doganieri’ is turned on its head, as the incipit of the Rosselli poem takes on an embattled, resentful tone. Her ‘tu non ricordi’ is an accusation of neglect, not the living’s meditation over the dead’s loss of being. And it is spoken from a perfectly recognisable position, as Silvia, Arletta (and inevitably Laura) converge into one major figure, that of the ‘dead girl’, which in turn is the modern paradigm of the Eurydice–Persephone archetype. And it is here, in the use of archaic and literary myth with the aim of constructing a powerful personal myth, that the poet of *Serie ospedaliera*, and the poet of the *RVF* would appear to find an unexpected alliance.

The figure that comes to dominate—through her liminality, her passivity, her very posthumousness (it is Arletta who leans out/appears at the window, not the poet)—the poetry of *Serie* is thus the product of a ‘mythical’ operation. Arletta/Annetta, Montale’s negative, ‘infernal’ muse, until recently much neglected by critics, has now been recognised as a Eurydice figure; Silvia, of whom Arletta is said to be a much younger, feral ‘sister’,<sup>27</sup> is Leopardi’s own modern Kore, a Persephone

<sup>27</sup> G. Lonardi, ‘Mito e “melos” per Arletta: “Punta del Mesco”’, in *Il fiore dell’addio: Leonora, Manrico e altri fantasmi del melodramma nella poesia di Montale* (Bologna, 2003), pp. 139–59 (p. 139).

figure custodian of the dead. They are both ‘povere fanciulle che perdero il fior degli anni’ (Leopardi), both transformed into powerful, meaningful absences–presences which become bound up with the poet’s own personal story, his relationship with death, with being, with poetry itself. But another poet cast his lady into a bride of Hades, many centuries before. The first revisitation of the Eurydice–Persephone myth, is, of course, Petrarch’s own rewriting of the Orphic myth as told by Virgil in the fourth book of the *Georgics*.

As is well known, this is confined to three texts: it is first developed in *canzone* 270 (‘Ritogli a Morte quella che m’ha tolto,/ E ripon le tue insegne nel bel volto’), it culminates in *canzone* 323, in the so-called ‘Eurydice stanza’, and reappears briefly in *sestina* 332: ‘Or avess’io un sì pietoso stile/ che Laura mia potesse torre a Morte/ come Euridice Orpheo sua senza rime,/ ch’i’ viverei anchor più che mai lieto!’ (332. 49–52).<sup>28</sup> The decision to cast Laura as ‘moritura puella’ who shares Eurydice’s fate, enables him to cast himself as the orphaned Orpheus figure. As Virgil’s Eurydice dies whilst she tries to flee from Aristaeus, she is thus distantly related to Daphne, who flees from Apollo, as Santagata observes. The choice of myth, as Fredi Chiappelli points out, is thus an amplification of the canonical pairing Laura–Francesco=Daphne–Apollo. Michele Feo’s study of Petrarch’s tenth Eclogue and Claudianus’ *De raptu Proserpina* suggests further—albeit arguably—that the myth of Ceres and Proserpine is also implied in Petrarch’s complex operation, establishing a powerful triangulation: Laura–Francesco=Daphne–Apollo=Eurydice–Orpheus=Proserpine–Ceres, where the poet identifies with Ceres’ grief, thus setting ‘personal grief [. . .] against a larger pattern of loss and renewal’.<sup>29</sup> As a result, Laura also acquires the features of a chthonian maiden, as she departs, enveloped by a ‘nebbia oscura’, a bride of Hades who nevertheless does not return, making the poet’s mourning permanent, and final.

<sup>28</sup> Petrarch’s use of the Orphic myth in the *Canzone delle visioni* has been explored at length. See F. Chiappelli, *Studi sul linguaggio del Petrarca: la canzone delle visioni* (Florence, 1971); N. Gardini, ‘Un esempio di imitazione virgiliana nel *Canzoniere* petrarchesco: il mito di Orfeo’, in *Modern Language Notes*, CX (1995), 132–44; F. Brunori, ‘Il mito ovidiano di Orfeo e Euridice nel *Canzoniere* di Petrarca’, *Romance Quarterly*, XLIV (1997), 233–44; M. Santagata, ‘Il lutto dell’umanista’, in *Amate e amanti: figure della lirica amorosa fra Dante e Petrarca* (Bologna, 1999), pp. 195–221; M. Feo, ‘Il sogno di Cerere e la morte del lauro petrarchesco’, in *Il Petrarca ad Arquà: atti del convegno di studi nel VI centenario (1370–1374)*, ed. G. Billanovich and G. Frasso (Padova, 1975), pp. 117–48, esp. pp. 128–9.

<sup>29</sup> C. Segal, *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* (Baltimore, MD, 1989), p. 138.

Eurydice, Laura, Persephone, Arletta (and Silvia) converge into a synchronic mythologeme that haunts one of *Serie*'s central elegies:

Tu non vivi fra *queste piante* che s'attorcigliano  
attorno a questo mio piede senza vasi,  
e non hai nella tua linea alcuna *canzone* per  
questi miei versi sterili ora che tu non  
avvicini le tue labbra strette a *questo mio*  
corpo *ombrato*.

Tu non appari a chiarire il *mistero* della  
tua non-presenza, tu non stimoli i fiori  
in corona attorno al mio polso, rotto perché  
non posso tenerti vicino. [. . .]

[. . .] Tu non agganci  
stretti fili alla mia mano che tanto lontana  
non può sollevare i pesi dalla tua testa  
rotta dai singulti.

Temo di fare con la mia presenza scempio  
delle occasioni, ora che tu non *rinverdisci*  
l'orizzonte. Temo di apparire strana, confusa  
a belare quest'incomprensione [. . .] Non ho  
altro sorso dalle tue arse labbra che  
questo mio empio *mistero*, noia del giorno  
spaccato in mille schegge.<sup>30</sup>

The immediate referent of this poem is, unquestionably, Montale's Arletta, who is the object herself of a mythical operation in 'Incontro', where she displays recognisable Daphnean qualities: 'Una misera fronda che in un *vaso*/ s'alleva s'una porta di osteria [. . .] A lei tendo la mano, e farsi mia un'altra vita sento [. . .] quasi anelli/ alle dita non foglie mi si attorciano ma capelli' (a sad bough craning from a jar/ by a tavern door. I reach for it and feel/ another life becoming mine [. . .] and it's hair, not leaves, that winds/ around my fingers like rings). It is again Arletta, who in 'Casa dei doganieri' is turned into a Eurydice figure, lonely, enveloped

<sup>30</sup> *ARP*, p. 427: 'You do not live among these potless plants twisting and winding/ around my feet/ and you do not have a song lined up for/ these sterile lines of mine now that you/ won't bring your tight lips to this/ shaded body./ You won't appear to clear the mystery of/ your non-presence, won't stir the garland/ of flowers around my wrist, which was broken because/ I cannot keep you close [. . .]/ [. . .] You won't tie/ tight strings to my hand now so distant/ it cannot relieve the burden off your head/ shattered by sobs./ I fear my presence will tear the occasions/ to pieces, now that you won't renew/ the horizon with green tendrils. I fear I'll seem strange, confused/ bleating uncomprehendingly [. . .] I drink no draught from your lips/ other than this wanton mystery, boredom of a day/ shattered into a thousand shards' (my italics).

by darkness, indeed absent/dead, to whom the poet still tries to cling though the thread of memory: ‘un filo s’addipana.// Ne tengo un capo, ma tu resti sola/ né qui respiri nell’oscurità’ (a thread gets wound.// I hold one end still [. . .] but you’re alone, not here, not breathing in the dark).

Rosselli’s poem, however, cannot be read as merely a response, or a rewriting, of the Montalean source—rather, as we have witnessed in the ‘twin’ poem ‘Tu non ricordi le mie dorate spiagge’, the poet is happy to allow tradition to confront its own very making, its own very history. The distressed, speechless Other, and his visible, excessive distress (his sobbing literally tearing his head apart) are strongly reminiscent both of Orpheus’ fate, and of his *furor* in the *Georgics* (‘Orpheu,/ quis tantus furor?’),<sup>31</sup> which in Petrarch had become restrained ‘sgomento’ and ‘pianto’: ‘Ahi, nulla, altro che pianto [. . .]’. He is thus an Orpheus figure, whose restorative powers (those of poetry) fail to restore the landscape to life again: ‘tu non stimoli i fiori’, ‘tu non rinverdisci/ l’orizzonte’. His poetry will not rescue her, he is struck dumb (‘le tue labbra strette’). Just as Petrarch in *Canzoniere* 332 affirms the impossibility of life without Orpheus’ power to rescue Laura—‘Or avess’io un sì pietoso stile/ che Laura mia potesse torre a Morte,/ come Euridice Orpheo sua senza rime,/ ch’i *vivere*i anchor più che mai lieto’<sup>32</sup>—similarly the Rossellian Other cannot and does not live: ‘tu non vivi’. Up to this point, the poem would appear to articulate the Laura–Eurydice perspective, and not that of the poet/Other, who becomes, paradoxically, the absent, lost one. But the image of sterile verse, which reinforces the failure of poetry to restore life, is characteristically ambiguous—the possessive ‘questi miei [versi]’ may suggest that they belong to her (i.e. traditionally, as they are *about* her), but also that she has authored them, and that *he* is their object. As a consequence, the *topos* of the laurel’s departure and absence is not merely turned on its head: *he*, the *Other*, has departed, has abandoned her (‘tu non appari’, ‘la tua non-presenza’). And this is the more grievous, as he would also appear to possess the powers of spring/Persephone/Laura in the *RVF*, as can be seen in numberless occasions, for example in 194: ‘L’aura gentil, che rasserena i poggi,/ destando i fior’ (L’aura, the gentle breeze that clears the hills,/ rousing flowers). But it is he who fails to hold on to her hand: we have stressed the Montalean source of ‘fili’, but the image of the hand

<sup>31</sup> ‘What madness, Orpheus’, Virgil, *Georgics* 4. 494, in *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid*, with an English translation by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA, 1986).

<sup>32</sup> ‘I wish I had such a sorrowful style/ that it could take my Laura from Death,/ as Orpheus rescued his Eurydice without poetry,/ for I would then live even happier than ever.’

that Orpheus stretches out to Eurydice is already in the *Georgics*: 'invalidasque tibi tendens, heu! Non tua, palmas' (stretching out to thee strengthless hands, thine, alas! no more). And indeed, as in the *Georgics*, and in the *Canzone delle visioni*, the Rossellian subject is confined to disappearing into shadow: 'ex oculis subito, ceu fumus in auras [. . .] fugit diversa [. . .]' (from his sight, like smoke mingling with thin air, she vanished afar). Compare *RVF* 323: 'ma le parti supreme/ eran avolte d'una nebbia oscura' (but all that lady's head/ was hidden by surrounding mist and cloud) (323. 67–8). She is condemned to her life as symbol of poetry (her Daphnean nature) and of shadow: 'il mio corpo *ombrato*', protagonist of an Orphic mystery that is wanton, evil—whilst his mystery remains utterly uncomprehended by her.

Something very complex is going on here. We seem to be missing a passage, or a position in the equation. If we go back to the Petrarchan mythologisation of Laura, we had Orpheus–Francesco, and Eurydice/Proserpine–Laura. But in Rosselli we seem to have Orpheus–Francesco–Amelia and Eurydice/Proserpine–Laura–Amelia. This creates a powerful destabilising effect on the subject of this poetry, which becomes thus exposed to the posthumous position traditionally reserved for the feminine 'tu'.

To conclude. By casting itself as 'hostage' to another's *auctoritas* (emotional and poetic) the Rossellian subject renounces centrality, allowing itself to move between the traditional positions of lyric discourse, and establishing itself as necessary Otherness, thus guaranteeing the dialogue with death that for the poet is the true purpose of poetry. In order to do so, the poet has only one option: to engage with lyric discourse at its source, and to create her own powerful personal myth. Petrarch proves then to be the not-so-secret ghost in her machine, truly inevitable—if irretrievably remote.

