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The Medieval and the Modern in Baudelaire's "À une passante"¹

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<ABSTRACT>

This article highlights a medieval dimension to Charles Baudelaire's "À une passante," a poem that has been considered emblematic of poetic modernity. A comparative reading with two medieval Italian sonnets, Dante's "Tanto gentile e onesta pare" and Guido Cavalcanti's "Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira," brings to light Baudelaire's continuity with, and divergence from, the medieval lyric. "À une passante" ultimately emerges as traditional in its subject matter and form, and modern in its portrayal of a highly individualized self and this self's relationship to the other. This double dimension, encompassing both an immutable poetic form and the fleeting present of nineteenth-century Paris, is finally linked to Baudelaire's account of the composite nature of art in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne."

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The sonnet "À une passante" is frequently cited as evidence of the modernity of Baudelaire's lyric poetry, though definitions of this modernity have varied. For Timothy Raser (93–95) and Jérôme Thélot (485–88), the modernity of the poem lies in the fact that the female figure at its centre is a real, flesh-and-blood woman rather than an idealized abstraction. In his 1985 reading, Ross Chambers (246) describes the poem's modernity in terms of the chance nature of the encounter it describes. He links this to the poem's urban setting, which has also contributed to Walter Benjamin's appreciation of the poem's modernity (46), as well as that of Jonathan Culler (27). Finally, for Fabio Camilletti, Chambers in his 2015 reading (104–15), and Sima Godfrey, it is the speaker's realization of the impossibility of ever knowing the female figure—that is, the problem of persistent anonymity—that makes the sonnet modern.

In parallel to this widespread emphasis on the modernity of “À une passante,” some critics have acknowledged its continuity with a lyric tradition dating back to Dante. Culler argues that “though this is certainly an urban poem [...], the poem also takes up a lyric tradition of the *innamoramento*, the transfiguring initial sight of the beloved, as in Dante or Petrarch” (27). Camilletti and Francis Heck (18) have described the poem as a nineteenth-century rewriting of Dante’s Florentine encounters with Beatrice as narrated in his early work the *Vita nuova*. Finally, Camilletti and Ethan Knapp have brought to light the Dantesque intertexts that are present in Benjamin’s readings of Baudelaire.

It is the poem’s interlacing of medieval and modern elements that will be the concern of this article. Through a comparative reading of Baudelaire’s sonnet with two medieval Italian sonnets, I shall, on the one hand, demonstrate the poem’s debt to a tradition dating back to the thirteenth century, and, on the other hand, offer a new account of the poem’s modernity. I will follow Ethan Knapp’s suggestion that “the most effective way to understand a relationship between modernity and the Middle Ages is not by beginning our thoughts with a conception of the modern as a temporal span,” but rather “as a philosophical constellation” (526). Knapp’s constellation is formed by the issues of allegory and urban community; mine, by temporality and subjectivity, in particular in terms of their relationship to the Other. For the purposes of this analysis I have chosen Dante’s “Tanto gentile e onesta pare” and Guido Cavalcanti’s “Chi è questa che vèn, ch’ogn’om la mira” because of their thematic similarity to “À une passante”: both are sonnets in which a lyric subject gazes at the miraculous apparition of a woman against the implicit backdrop of an urban setting.

A little background may prove useful for readers unfamiliar with the medieval tradition. The sonnet is generally considered to have been invented in Sicily in the first part of the thirteenth century by Giacomo Da Lentini, but it was in the big cities of the Italian plains that this poetic form gained real popularity under the pens of a working urban middle-class (Spiller, 11–44). The *poets of the origins*, as they are known in Italy, worked as accountants and paralegals, and they often composed, copied, and shared poems in the margins of financial and legal documents, as has been

studied in particular by Justin Steinberg. In other words, to be a poet in thirteenth-century Italy did not mean sitting alone in the contemplation nature; it implied involvement with one's city and its inhabitants. Poets formed communities, sending poems to each other in exchanges called *tenzoni*.² Florence in the late thirteenth century thus provided burgeoning poets and aspiring politicians (such as the young Dante) with a stimulating setting of bustling financial and political activity, as well as artistic and literary production. Dante and Cavalcanti's paths crossed not only through poetic dialogue, but also in the streets of Florence and in their political careers. The city of Florence often serves as an implicit or explicit backdrop in their writings.³

The sonnets "Tanto gentile" and "Chi è questa che vèn" were written in this lively urban setting and are fruitfully read together for the way they exemplify positive and negative treatments of the topos of the *donna angelo* (woman-angel).⁴ Dante's "Tanto gentile" appears in his *Vita nuova*, a book which intersperses lyric poems with his own exegeses of these works, along with accounts of his love for Beatrice in an unnamed city—presumably Florence:⁵

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.

Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.

Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira,
che dà per li occhi una dolcezza al core,
che 'ntender no la può chi no la prova:

e par che de la sua labbia si mova
un spirito soave pien d'amore,
che va dicendo a l'anima: Sospira.

[So noble and so honourable
does my lady look when she greets others,
that every trembling tongue turns silent,
and eyes dare not look upon her.

She goes forth, hearing herself praised,
benignly clothed in humility;
and she seems a thing descended
from heaven to earth to show miracles.

She looks so pleasing to those who gaze at her,
that she gives through the eyes a sweetness to the heart,
that is understood only by those who experience it:

And it seems that from her lips there moves
a gentle spirit full of love,
which comes forth, telling the soul: 'Sigh.']⁶

The sonnet's temporality plays a crucial role in making it an "ideal lyric," as it has been called by Robert Pogue Harrison.⁷ While narrative requires a before and an after, one of the defining aspects of the lyric is its ability to remove an event from the flow of time. As has been argued by Culler in

Theory of the Lyric, a lyric poem seeks to become an event in itself, an event that is iterated in every experience of reading.⁸ What Culler calls “the lyric present” or “the vivid yet indeterminate *now* of articulation” (294) is implicit in all poetry, but some poems make the lyric present explicit, by using the present tense or relying on verbal markers (such as “now” or “at this moment”) that tie the text to the moment of reading. Dante’s sonnet is a prime example of this explicit lyric present: it is entirely in the present tense and has the deictic temporal marker “quando” (*when*) in its second line. This “quando” could have two meanings: we can take it to refer to a single event that is only recreated or repeated in the act of reading, or we could read it as referring to a routine event (also translatable as “whenever”). In this second sense, the poem describes how this woman looks *every* time she walks in the street and greets men; in other words, it tells about a series of encounters and a habit of looking—which tells a very different story from the singular and unrepeatable encounter dramatized in Baudelaire’s “À une passante.”

Whether we interpret the “quando” of Dante’s sonnet as a unique or as a repeated occurrence, it is clear that the main difference between Baudelaire and Dante’s poems is the segment of time that they focus on. In “À une passante” we have a sequence: a narrative in which the woman is absent, present, and then absent again. The “before” and “after” are not included in Dante’s poem, and the view of the beloved is not subject to the flow of time. This is best encapsulated by the three verbs in verse 5 “Ella si va, sentendosi laudare” (*She goes forth, hearing herself praised*), where we have the present tense “va,” exemplifying the lyric present as described by Culler, followed by the gerund “sentendosi,” which stretches this present, followed by the verb “laudare” in the atemporal infinitive. Dante has thus removed time as a consideration.⁹

The narrative passages of the *Vita nuova* inform us that the poem is about Beatrice. Within the sonnet itself, the main clue as to the woman’s identity is the possessive article used in the second line, “la donna mia” (“my lady”). The word “mia” should not be taken as an expression of amorous possession; it points here to the lyric subject’s unrequited feelings. The poem thus presents a unilateral understanding of desire, in which the “donna” does not even acknowledge the lyric

subject's existence: the very same verse referring to her as "la donna mia" describes her interactions with other people: "my lady when she greets others." In one of the *Vita nuova*'s prose sections, Dante in fact suggests that resigning himself to unrequited love is a key aspect of his poetics.¹⁰

The subsequent verses further weaken any possibility of love between the poet and the woman. Other people on the street are just as struck by the woman's presence as the poet; everyone grows silent, no one daring to look at her. The fact that she is continuously hearing praise (verse 5), as suggested by the gerund, implies that a many people comment on her as she walks by. In the first tercet, we learn that all those who gaze upon her experience a sweetness in their heart, a sweetness that cannot be put into words. In the final tercet, the imperative "Sospira" ("Sigh") is addressed not to the lyric subject individually, but to all the lady's beholders. In other words, this woman is perceived as miraculous by all who see her: the repeated use of the verb "parere" ("to seem") suggests the poet relates only what is plain to everyone.

This collective quality (or "chorality"¹¹) of "Tanto gentile" is perhaps the most notable aspect of this lyric poem, along with its evasion of time. The sonnet actively works against constructing an individualized lyric subject. Grammatically speaking, it is practically devoid of a poetic subject insofar as we have no pronoun or verb in the first person singular.¹² The poetic subject is only made present by the single instance of the possessive "mia," which, as demonstrated above, is immediately undermined by the focus on the lady's interactions with others.

The shared nature of the experience of the beatific lady is a key point of continuity between Dante's sonnet and Cavalcanti's sonnet:

Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira,
che fa tremar di chiaritate l'âre
e mena seco Amor, sì che parlare
null'omo pote, ma ciascun sospira?

O Deo, che sembra quando li occhi gira,

dical' Amor, ch'i' nol savria contare:
cotanto d'umiltà donna mi pare,
ch'ogn'altra ver' di lei i' la chiam'ira.

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

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

[Who is she, who comes and all men gaze upon?
She makes the air tremble with light
and brings forth Love, so that no man
can speak, but every one sighs.

Oh God, how she looks when she turns her eyes,
let Love declare, for I could not.
She seems to me so full of humility,
that I'd call any other woman a fury.

One could not describe her charm,
For every noble virtue bows before her,
And beauty itself holds her as its goddess.

Our mind was never elevated enough
Nor were we sufficiently blessed
To ever have true knowledge of her.]¹³

In this sonnet too, the lyric present suspends us in the moment in which the female figure approaches. Here too, the woman in question is admired by all those present, who in this case are explicitly gendered as male. In stating that she makes the air around her shimmer, Cavalcanti's sonnet goes further than Dante, making the woman's miraculous nature an external phenomenon, as opposed to merely a shared impression. Cavalcanti's sonnet however also diverges from Dante's in important ways. First, the lyric subject is explicit, appearing in the second quatrain when the poetic voice protests its inability to speak. This gives Cavalcanti's sonnet a metapoetic dimension that was absent from Dante's: while the entirety of "Tanto gentile" was concerned with the lady, "Chi è questa che vèn" includes the plight of the poet who struggles for words. In this respect, Cavalcanti's poem is closer to Baudelaire's "À une passante," in which we also go from a description of the woman to a focus on the speaker's distress. But unlike "À une passante," the lyric subject's plight in "Chi è questa che vèn" is interwoven with that of other men. In the opening quatrain it is "ogn'om" ("all men") and "ciascun" ("every one") who react to the woman's appearance. While the second quatrain focuses on the lyric subject's inability to speak of her, this is followed in the first tercet by the impersonal form ("One could not describe her charms") and then by a first-person plural in the final tercet ("Our mind was never elevated enough / Nor were we sufficiently blessed"). In other words, the failure of language is not only the lyric subject's; it is shared by all. The experience of the encounter with this female figure is thus collective.

"Chi è questa che vèn" is often read alongside Dante's "Tanto gentile," and critics often comment on Cavalcanti's negativity, especially in the anaphoric repetition of "non" in the tercets. In contrast with the sense of beatitude that Dante's female figure produces, the supernatural character of Cavalcanti's woman leads to despair, since she ultimately highlights the lyric subject and the rest

of the male spectators' inadequacy: they will never be able to speak of her worthily, nor will they ever know or understand her. The opening question "Who is this woman?" is thus answered in the tercets, which give the simple request for identification a new ontological dimension: "We shall never know."

As a sonnet about a beautiful woman walking by in an urban setting, "À une passante" shows important elements of continuity with the medieval Italian lyric tradition. However, in contrast to these earlier models, its treatment of temporality and of the lyric subject's individuality mark an important point of departure from the medieval tradition.

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit ! —Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! *jamais* peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais! (*Œuvres complètes* I: 92–93)

First of all, the contrast between the beatific effect of the woman in Dante and the intellectual despair resulting from the woman in Cavalcanti allows us to highlight the ambivalence of Baudelaire's female figure. Whereas in the second quatrain the sweetness and pleasure found in her eyes can kill, in the first tercet her gaze gives the lyric subject new life ("renaître"). The sonnet thus contains both the Cavalcantian linking of love to death and despair,¹⁴ and the Dantean casting of the female figure as a salvific source of second chances and spiritual rebirth. (In Baudelaire's case the rebirth does not evoke religious connotations.) In this respect, the comparison with Cavalcanti allows us to avoid Benjamin's negative reading, according to which the vicissitudes of modern life have ruined the blissful courtly desire of the Middle-Ages (46). In fact, the loss experienced by Cavalcanti's lyric subject is far more radical than that experienced by Baudelaire's: while the "passante" is unreachable primarily for practical reasons (she has disappeared from view), Cavalcanti's female figure is ontologically unknowable to the lyric subject, and thus a constant reminder of his inadequacy. This shows that an awareness of the unknowable in the love lyric—what Chambers calls "disalienation" (*Atmospherics* 54–5, 114–15)—is not inherently modern. What does disappear when we move from the medieval sonnets to Baudelaire is the sense that the female figure is a miraculous creature who impresses all those who see her. While the woman in Dante and Cavalcanti's poems affects everyone around her (positively or negatively), Baudelaire's woman affects the lyric subject alone, and this holds important implications for the individualization of the poetic subject.

As seen above, Dante's sonnet is practically devoid of a lyric subject and focuses on describing the woman and her interactions with "altrui" ("others"). Moreover, these others are susceptible to the same reaction as the lyric subject, which is suggested by the closing imperative "Sospira." In Cavalcanti's sonnet, although the lyric subject is grammatically present, it is interwoven with expressions that group that subject with other men. Baudelaire's lyric subject, in contrast, makes its first appearance in opposition to the surrounding crowd, referred to through the

synecdoche “La rue” and described as aggressively loud: “La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.”¹⁵ The next first-person pronoun appears in verse 6, after the female figure has been introduced: “Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant.” A strong emphasis on individuality is achieved both through the combination of personal pronouns (“Moi, je”) and through the description of the lyric subject’s attitude as something quite out of the ordinary (“un extravagant”). perhaps even seen as superior to the other passersby (Lapaire 286). As with the sonnet’s opening verse, what is being suggested here is that the lyric subject is alone in a crowd, separated from others by his reaction to the female figure. In this respect we can also contrast Baudelaire’s metaphor “ciel livide où germe l’ouragan” with Cavalcanti’s reference to the air shimmering around the female figure: in Baudelaire’s sonnet the changing weather is not an external phenomenon perceived by everyone, but something entirely contained in the exchange of looks shared between the subject and the woman.

The most notable difference between “À une passante” and the medieval sonnets is its temporality. Baudelaire’s sonnet dramatizes a before, a during, and an after: initially there is only the crowd; then the woman emerges, briefly; finally she disappears. This sequence has led Chambers to describe the sonnet as an allegory for the passage of time (*Atmospherics*, 106–15),¹⁶ which is emphasized by the variety of tenses used in the poem. As Françoise Meltzer’s says, “Present, past, and future are all here” (88), —and certain hemistichs act as summaries of action: “Une femme passa” and “Un éclair... puis la nuit!” Any similar summary of Dante or Cavalcanti’s sonnets would occur in the present tense, with no sequence of events or change in circumstance: “Une femme passe” one might say. The verses in Baudelaire that describe the woman (“d’une main fastueuse / Soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet; / Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue”) are those temporally close to Dante and Cavalcanti’s sonnets, the present participle creating a sense of continuousness as the lyric subject takes in the woman’s details, emphasizing her presence—although, as the title indicates, this presence will be fleeting.

Baudelaire's use of tenses works hand in hand with his emphasis on the individuality of the lyric subject's reaction to the female figure. The present is a porous tense which remains endlessly open to appropriation by the reader: when we read a deictic temporal marker such as the word "now" in Dante and Cavalcanti's sonnets, it implies our own "now" at the same time. The sonnets' present is thus open to others in the same way the miraculous nature of the woman becomes available and manifest to all. In contrast, the modes and tenses used by Baudelaire, conspire with the first person to relate a singular, personal experience: against the backdrop of an impersonal street described in the imperfect ("hurlait"), a singular event occurs in the simple past ("Une femme passa"), which leads to the lyric subject's consideration of a possible future relationship that has already receded into the past of lost opportunities, expressed by the plus-perfect subjunctive ("Ô toi que j'eusse aimée"). Of course, this is a lyric poem and there will always be a degree of implicit "presentness," of possible identification by the reader. But Baudelaire's lyric present is restrained compared to that of Dante and Cavalcanti, which erase the lyric subject in their chorality and are made open and pliable by their expression in the present tense.

In a sense, if we attribute a modern quality to "À une passante," it is less because of the story it tells than in the type of relationship it creates between the lyric subject and the other people, including the reader.

Just what is the relationship between the lyric subject and the woman? This, too, sets Baudelaire's sonnet apart from the medieval love lyric. While the woman's description has elements of continuity with the tradition (she stands out from the crowd; she is "majestueuse" and "noble"; her eyes can bring either a sweet pain or a new life), the introduction of the female figure's perspective at the end of the poem (even if speculative on the part of the poet) presents a major break with tradition.¹⁷ Baudelaire's use of the second person in the tercets allows him to transform the female figure from object into subject, thereby suggesting intersubjectivity and creating a less dominant lyric subject. The poet finds himself the object of another person's attention—in other words: the other's other.

The question of whether one should interpret the female perspective as the lyric subject's narcissistic self-projection or as genuinely other has been a divisive one. Culler is decisively of the former opinion, describing the final verse as "extraordinarily self-indulgent" (28). Thélot (490) and Humphries (236) read the "poet" as denying the woman's autonomy by identifying with her, though Thélot does nonetheless describe her as "*une femme incarnée avec une mémoire et une liberté*" (485–86). Elissa Marder takes the detail that the woman is in mourning as evidence that she is wearing a veil over her face; therefore the lyric subject must be fantasizing about a gaze that he cannot see (84). On the other side of the debate, Kristiaan Versluys reads the storm in the woman's eyes as the lyric subject's fantasy, but the exchange of glances as truly taking place, arguing that we find a "reciprocal relation between [Baudelaire's] subject and object" (297, 300). Chambers has described the event in the poem as an "unspoken exchange between her and 'I,'" since there is not only something readable in the woman's eye, but also something readable in the lyric subject's eye—which is presumably why she *knows* that he would have loved her ("Storm," 158, 161). Thompson also argues that the poem suggests a "mutual bond" between the two, rather than a unilateral "fantasy" (157–58). More indirectly, Lapaire's interpretation of "*comme un extravagant*" as the perspective of the other passersby also suggests that the poem remains open to more than a single perspective (286).¹⁸

So which is it? Is intersubjectivity in "*À une passante*" real or imagined? On the one hand, the subject knows nothing about the woman apart from how she looks: the cause of her "grand deuil" remains a mystery and she, a complete stranger. On the other hand, as noted by Chambers, Thompson, and Versluys, she does look back at the subject—thus refusing to remain in the passive role of unaware object of observation.¹⁹

The case made by Culler, Thélot, Humphries, and Marder for the female perspective as a narcissistic self-projection is built on a premise that confuses art with life: it may be that in real life men cannot read women's eyes, or that in nineteenth-century Paris women in mourning wore veils; however, if we are willing to suspend our disbelief for omniscient narrators in realist novels, can we

not do the same for the lyric subject of “À une passante”? Considering that it is this tragedy of a missed connection that has made the poem’s ending so enduring, it’s clear that many readers of “À une passante” do suspend their disbelief, feeling keenly that the lyric subject’s regret is based on more than fantasy. In Thompson’s words: “in this case the poet would prefer reality [...] to imagination” (157).

Moreover, because the “passante” is portrayed as the lyric subject’s other, the poem enacts her transformation from object into subject. The transformation begins with Baudelaire’s use of the second person in the tercets, which creates an effect of escalation. When the second person first appears it is as direct object to the lyric subject: “Ne te verrai-je.” The second person then becomes a grammatical subject in “j’ignore où tu fuis,” eventually becoming an individual endowed with thoughts and perspectives, in the second hemistich of the same verse: “tu ne sais où je vais.” The male lyric subject and the “passante” in this verse are in perfect equilibrium, alternating in the role of subject from hemistich to hemistich (Thompson, 158). The most dramatic moment, however, comes in the sonnet’s final hemistich (“ô toi qui le savais”), which rewrites all that has come before. Indeed, in “À une passante” the true *volta* occurs not between the quatrains and the tercets, but between the first and the second hemistich of the sonnet’s final verse, when we learn that the anonymous object of desire was aware all along of her status as object of desire: “Ô toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!” The poetic subject’s desire is a shared experience; as Thompson has suggested, it hints at a mutual attraction (157).

At this point we have come very far from a lyric tradition in which the female figure is spoken of in the third person, with no perspective of her own and no ability to respond to the male poet’s desire.²⁰

Including the female figure’s perspective in the sonnet also has the effect of making her more human and consequently more knowable, in contrast to Cavalcanti’s woman who remains ontologically unknowable, or to Dante’s “donna,” whose presence can be experienced, but not explained or understood. Camilletti has argued that what makes Baudelaire’s “passante” a Beatrice

(in the sense of an unattainable idealized female) is the fact that she disappears into the crowd before the lyric subject has the opportunity to know her, in contrast to Dante's Beatrice, who would remain divine and unknowable however much time the lyric subject spent in her company ("Falling of Beatrice" 130). This leads Camilletti to conclude, in line with Benjamin, that in Baudelaire's poem we find a damaged version of the love of medieval lyric, which is now only dreamed of with a degree of "nostalgia" ("On pleure" 90; "Falling of Beatrice" 126)²¹ But there is little trace of this alleged nostalgia for divine women in "À une passante." On the contrary, the "passante" is made most desirable by the fact that she is a real human subject, who in other circumstances could have reciprocated the male subject's desire. And it is in this possibility of reciprocation that lies Baudelaire's greatest break from tradition.

Although Baudelaire's sonnet breaks from the medieval love lyric by having a less than ideal temporality, an emphasis on individuality, and an object of desire who reciprocates the subject's attention, these elements nonetheless work together with the poem's more traditional aspects, that is: its theme and its form, the brevity of the sonnet perfectly mirroring the brevity of the encounter.²² In doing so, "À une passante" acts as an illustration of the theories put forward in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne." It is worth reminding ourselves that Baudelaire's famous account of the double temporality of art follows directly from a critique of nineteenth-century artists' over-use of medieval settings:

Si nous jetons un coup d'œil sur nos expositions de tableaux modernes, nous sommes frappés de la tendance générale des artistes à habiller tous les sujets de costumes anciens. [...] [L]es peintres actuels, choisissant des sujets d'une nature généralement applicable à toutes les époques, s'obstinent à les affubler des costumes du Moyen Âge, de la Renaissance ou de l'Orient. C'est évidemment le signe d'une grande paresse; car il est beaucoup plus commode de déclarer que tout est absolument laid dans l'habit d'une époque, que de s'appliquer à en extraire la beauté mystérieuse qui y est contenue, si

minime ou si légère qu'elle soit. La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable.²³

With "À une passante" Baudelaire offers us the opposite of medievalism: the elements of tradition are not highlighted as other, but incorporated into the sonnet's modern setting.²⁴ Or to use the culinary metaphors that Baudelaire draws on in "Le peintre de la vie moderne," contemporary details, such as the noisiness of the street and the passerby's nineteenth-century dress, add the flavour that disguises the poem's traditional elements.²⁵ Baudelaire in "À une passante" is so successful at intermingling the old and the new that they have become hard to disentangle, and a poem in a form dating back to the thirteenth century, telling the story of a male lyric subject's desire for a woman, has paradoxically become emblematic of modernity.

Baudelaire's account of art as necessarily being made of both the eternal and the transitory is also illustrated by the persistent success of the sonnet as a poetic form. Every sonnet draws on the elements highlighted in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne", combining a fixed and unchanging structure ("l'éternel et l'immuable") with the unique stamp brought to it by different poets ("le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent"), including "la portion de beauté [...] en même temps voilée et exprimée sinon par la mode, au moins par le tempérament particulier de l'auteur" (685). The double temporality of the sonnet is crystallized by the figure of the "passante" herself, a nineteenth-century Parisienne with features of the medieval beloved. Indeed, as has been noted by Marguerite Murphy (182) and Ross Chambers ("Street Poetry," 248), her very description combines the eternal and the transitory, insofar as she is part sculpture ("sa jambe de statue") and part contemporary fashion ("le feston et l'ourlet").²⁶ Chambers has argued that she "figures a work of art and hence refers back to the poem itself" ("Street Poetry," 257). One could also say that she is, more generally, a figure for the sonnet.

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² On the dialogic nature of medieval Italian lyric poetry see Giunta.

³ On Florence in Dante's early poetry see Tanturli. On Dante's friendship and poetic rivalry with Guido Cavalcanti see, among others, Barolini, 70–101; Harrison ("Approaching the *Vita nuova*"); Gragnolati, 17–34.

⁴ For a series of brief examples of the "donna angelo" topos in Dante's literary context, see Santagata, 16–19. Joan Ferrante has argued that in courtly literature woman symbolized either a positive value, when love for her awakens man to a new sense of himself and higher aspirations, or a negative value, when desire for her is carnal and distracts man from higher aspirations. Dante and Cavalcanti's sonnets fall within the former category.

⁵ An earlier draft of the poem circulated before the *Vita nuova* was written. On the differences between the two versions see Barolini's commentary in Dante, *Rime giovanili*, 392–402.

⁶ Dante, *Vita nuova*, 51–52. My translation.

⁷ Harrison (31–46) argues that this sonnet embodies the emotion of poetic inspiration. See Harrison.

⁸ "A fundamental characteristic of lyric, I am arguing, is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special 'now' of lyric articulation. The bold wager of poetic apostrophe is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the 'now' in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur" (Culler, 226).

⁹ My interpretation in this respect aligns itself with that of Gragnolati and Southerden, who argue that Dante's sonnet makes entropy unimaginable.

¹⁰ "Love, through his grace, has placed all my bliss in something that cannot fail me [:] those words that praise my lady." Dante, *Vita nuova*, chapter XVIII. Translation from Musa, *Dante's Vita nuova: A Translation and an Essay*, 31.

¹¹ I take the term “choral” from Picone, who describes Cavalcanti’s “Chi è questa che vèn” as a “trionfo della corallità sull’individualità” (“triumph of chorality over individuality”) (197).

¹² We can surmise that this was a conscious decision from the fact that an earlier version of the poem read “credo che” (“I think that”) instead of “e par che” (“and it seems”) in verse 7. See Barolini (Dante, *Rime*, 392–402).

¹³ Cavalcanti, 75–76. My translation.

¹⁴ Cavalcanti’s negativity in matters of love, conveyed in “Chi è questa che vèn” in terms of an intellectual and poetic ineptitude, runs throughout his poetic oeuvre and is condensed in his programmatic poem “Donna me prega” (116–22) which includes the verse “Di sua potenza segue spesso morte” (“its [Love’s] power frequently leads to death”).

¹⁵ Thompson has observed that the word “moi” in the line is trapped between “rue assourdissante” and “hurlait,” thereby dramatizing his being surrounded by tormenting chaos (146–47). Godfrey also argues that the poem’s opening dramatizes the lyric I’s dissociation and isolation from others (35).

¹⁶ In this respect I disagree with Blood’s account of Baudelaire’s sonnet as a “snapshot” capturing the “here and now,” a description which better fits Dante and Cavalcanti’s sonnets. Blood’s analysis is at its most perceptive when she compares Baudelaire’s sonnet not to photography, but to film and chronophotography (Blood, 255–56 and 265–66).

¹⁷ The opposition between the woman and the crowd has been noted by Aynsworth (329) and Le Boulay (26) in terms of her “out of place” beauty and nobility, and by Thompson in terms of her order in contrast with the crowd’s disorder (150). Meltzer notes all of these aspects (86).

¹⁸ Leo Bersani incorporates both sides of this argument, identifying in Baudelaire’s writings, on the one hand, a false openness, which is in reality a form of narcissistic appropriation whereby “[t]he self is lost only to be relocated everywhere”; on the other hand, excitement and pleasure are derived from “being shattered by otherness” (11). Though he does not offer a reading of “À une passante” itself, Bersani argues that the *Tableaux parisiens* poems as a whole fall into the former tendency, in

which the other is appropriated. Bersani's key example is "Les Petites Vieilles," in which the lyric subject follows old women, imagining and describing what their lives might have been (106–25).

¹⁹ Versluys also draws a distinction between "À une passante," in which the "bandying of looks" indicates her awareness and the possibility of a mutual love, and the other *Tableaux parisiens* in which Baudelaire's lyric subject narcissistically sees in marginalized figures "an emblem of himself" (295–97).

²⁰ A similar break from tradition will be made by Dante himself in the *Divine Comedy*, in which Beatrice returns with her own perspective on her treatment in his early works.

²¹ Benjamin famously writes that the love of medieval lyric in this poem is "stigmatized by the big city" (46). Godfrey similarly reads "À une passante" as a reworking of the "Renaissance love lyric" in terms of absence and thus ultimately a "poème sur rien" (40–41).

²² I here disagree with Culler's suggestion that "modern urban experience does not fit itself to the traditional lyric structure of the sonnet" (28).

²³ Baudelaire, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," *Œuvres complètes* II: 683–724 (694–95).

²⁴ I am indebted to Camilletti's comparison of "À une passante" with Holiday's medievalist painting "Dante and Beatrice" (1883), which emphasizes the otherness of the setting of Dante's encounter ("On pleure," 86).

²⁵ In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* Baudelaire describes modernity as "l'enveloppe amusante, tintillante, apéritive" without which art is "indigestible" (685).

²⁶ Karlheinz Stierle hints at the same in his article on the "Tableaux parisiens," in which he summarizes her as "the essence of modern beauty, antique beauty, and caricature" (359).