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Making Flowers Speak: Petrarch and Idiorrhythm

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ABSTRACT

This article brings Petrarch's (1304–74) lyric poetry into dialogue with Barthes's notion of "idiorrhythmie" (idiorrhythm) as outlined in his lecture course *Comment vivre ensemble* (*How to Live Together*). It explores both the idiorrhythmic aspects of Petrarchan desire and the traits of lyric utterance through which they are expressed, with a focus on *canzone* 126 of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Fragments of Vernacular Things*). The article begins with a study of Barthes's exposition of idiorrhythm: its medieval origins in the monastic communities of Mount Athos and the productively unstable and improvised character of the "living together," and apart, that it implies. Most significant for the analysis that follows is idiorrhythm's relationship to eros, Barthes's idea that idiorrhythm preserves a space for the body's desires in opening to interruptions, deviations, and digressions. The remainder of the article offers a close reading of Petrarch's *Rvf* 126, focusing on one image in the poem that, like Barthes's idiorrhythm, is rooted in fantasy and embraces errancy: the image of a flower that turning and falling around the poet's beloved seems to speak of love.

KEYWORDS

Petrarch; idiorrhythm; desire; lyric; fantasy; errancy

What do Francesco Petrarca (1304–74, known in the English-speaking world as Petrarch) and Roland Barthes have in common? More particularly, what does Barthes's fantasy of living together in *Comment vivre ensemble* (*How to Live Together*) have to do with Petrarch's lyric poetry in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Fragments of Vernacular Things*, henceforth *Rvf*)? I propose exploring these questions through a study of "idiorrhythmie" (idiorrhythm), first outlining this concept as we encounter it in Barthes's thought and, after, analyzing the traits of Petrarch's poetics that can be broadly considered as "idiorrhythmic." Desire is a connecting thread between the two and, more specifically, the movement of eros that idiorrhythm expresses. As I detail below, idiorrhythm can be thought of as an oscillating kind of rhythm that corresponds to a flexible and quite fluid interaction between one subject and the rest, as idiorrhythm incorporates moments of both proximity and distance in the relation between subjects. It is the latter that emerges as particularly important for understanding the dynamics of Petrarchan erotics, and I take Barthes's gesture of making fantasy a vital component of thinking and understanding as an invitation to open up his discourse of idiorrhythm to *canzone* 126 of Petrarch's *Rvf*, *Chiare, fresche et dolci acque* (*Clear, fresh and sweet waters*).

Barthes and “idiorrhthy”

Barthes’s notion of “idiorrhthy” is intimately connected with the idea of living together (“vivre ensemble”) that he articulates in the series of lectures he gave at the Collège de France between 1976–77, published posthumously as *Comment vivre ensemble*. More particularly, idiorrhthy is bound up with the question of how each member of a community may live amongst others while nevertheless preserving their own subjective rhythm and movement. In the lecture of January 12, 1977, Barthes acknowledges that the word “idiorrhthy” held a special power over him, giving shape and substance to the “fantasme” (fantasy) he had been imagining of a form of living together that could provide a sense of belonging while not negating the individuality of the subject or the need for being alone (2002a, 36–40; 2012, 6–9). Barthes reveals that “idiorrhthy” is in fact a borrowed word, one that derives from his propitious, if casual, reading (“lecture gratuite”) of Jacques Lacarrière’s *L’Été grec* (*The Greek Summer*) (1975, cited in Barthes 2002a, 37; 2012, 6) whose opening chapters consider the history of the monastic communities on Mount Athos in northeastern Greece.¹ The origins of idiorrhthy are medieval and its setting this “Montaigne Sainte” (Holy Mountain; Lacarrière 1975, 19) where, since the fourth century, monks are said to have lived “à la fois isolés et reliés” (both isolated from and in contact with one another; Barthes 2002a, 37; 2012, 6), embodying *rhuthmos*: a form of relation between subjects that is improvised, changeable, and thus non-definitive (2002a, 38; 2012, 7).² Barthes describes idiorrhthy as a utopian mid-point, or happy medium, between two extremes: on the one hand, extreme solitude (i.e. eremitism) and, on the other, coenobitism or complete integration in the community (2002a, 40; 2012, 9). The fantasy to which idiorrhthy gives substance is that of a “collectivity without *telos*,” which can preserve the subject’s freedom and idiosyncrasies without isolating it (O’Meara 2012, 110). The monks whom Lacarrière describes as idiorrhthmic live both inside and outside the rule and their way of life is “très excentrique” (very eccentric) since “[elle] n’a jamais bien pris dans l’Église” (it never really caught on in the Church; Barthes 2002a, 40; 2012, 9). On Mount Athos, the monks preserve their own goods and daily rituals in their cells and come together only occasionally — for example, on annual feast days. With the exception of Compline, these monks’ days are not measured by liturgical time, according to the canonical hours and their corresponding rites and offices, but rather follow a rhythm all of the monks’ own (Lacarrière 1975, 49, cited in Barthes 2002a, 37; 2012, 6).

For Barthes, idiorrhthy is to be associated with mutable and (productively) unpredictable patterns of behavior, which refuse to conform to repressive ideologies or structures of power. Idiorrhthy is “le contraire même d’une cadence cassante, implacable de régularité” (the exact opposite of an inflexible, implacably regular cadence; Barthes 2002a, 39; 2012, 8). It can be thought of as a “discreet, personal deviation from the metronomical” or as a “swing” about a line that allows each subject to keep its own distinctive rhythm, which is supple and mobile (Lübecker 2009, 133; see also Barthes 2002a, 69; 2012, 35). This kind of rhythmic movement is neither stable nor systematic but it can still be discerned in what Barthes calls a “forme passagère” (a transitory, fleeting form; 2002a, 69; 2012, 35). In idiorrhthy one passes from one malleable form to another and encounters *rhuthmos*, a particularly supple and varying kind of rhythm:

le rythme admettant un plus ou un moins, une imperfection, un supplément, un manque, un *idios*: ce qui n’entre pas dans la structure, ou y entrerait de force. (2002a, 69)

a rhythm that allows for approximation, for imperfection, a supplement, a lack, an *idios*: what doesn't fit the structure or would have to be made to fit. (2012, 35)

Elsewhere Barthes states that *rhuthmos* is a sort of “fluent” (flowing), specifically connecting it to the flow of atoms and differentiation of nature and things conceived of by the Ionian philosophers known as “atomists” (Barthes 2002a, 38; 2012, 7). Here he draws on Émile Benveniste's discussion of rhythm (Greek ῥυθμός) in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Problems in General Linguistics), where Benveniste argues that the roots of the word are not to be found in the Greek verb “to flow” but in the noun denoting the form, arrangement, or disposition “of that which does not have organic consistency” and is consequently subject to change (1966, 332–33; 1971, 285–86). Barthes explains that while originally the word “rhythm” alone carried the meaning that *rhuthmos* has, the prefix “idio-” (proper, particular) is a necessary component of idiorrhythm because rhythm has become reified by restrictive forms of power that connote repression and not freedom, homogeneity rather than difference (See also Hillen and Walker 2008, 64).

Idiorrhythm's preservation of what is supplemental and shifting (cf. Baldwin 2020, 57) makes it a vital component of eros for Barthes. In creating a flexible *trait d'union* between individual and community, idiorrhythm keeps the body “distant pour sauvegarder le prix du corps: son désir” (at a distance in order to safeguard its value: its desire; 2002a, 72; 2012, 38). As Barthes shows in his example of a “Banc” (School of fish), whenever idiorrhythm is “forclose” (foreclosed), eros itself is “chassé” (excluded; 2002a, 72; 2012, 38). Since each fish in a school moves entirely in synchrony with all the others, with no fish out of line, there is no differentiation between them. Instead, we find a “vision . . . terrible” (terrifying image) of fish that reproduce without sexual contact — an “espèce pure, sans sujet” (pure species with no subjects; 2002a, 72; 2012, 37–38). According to Barthes, idiorrhythm is fundamental to eros, which thrives on imperfections and interruptions as well as deviations and digressions.

When Barthes lectures to his students, this sort of openness to errancy becomes part of his pedagogical practice. He follows what he describes as a “non-méthode” (non-method), which resists the fetishization of “le but” (the end goal; 2002a, 180; 2012, 133) and opens up to a rhetoric of infinite digression (2002a, 182; 2012, 135).³ In his lecture of January 12, 1977 (in the oral version rather than the written notes), Barthes explains that his own “fantasme de vie libre” (fantasy of living freely), like all fantasies, did not develop linearly but through a series of “torsions imprévisibles” (unpredictable twists and turns), engendering his work on idiorrhythm and from there his analysis of religious life on Mount Athos (Barthes 2020).⁴ Barthes explains that he then proceeded to think about contemporary communities, himself, and his group of friends. For him, the library plays the role of “synaxe” (synaxis), where the monks would gather for prayer, and the “fantasme” (fantasy; 2002a, 38; 2012, 7) that motivates his thinking leads him to analysing a specific set of spaces, located in literary works: for example, the sanatorium (in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*); the island (in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*); and the room of solitary confinement (in André Gide's *La séquestrée de Poitiers* [*The Confined Woman of Poitiers*]).⁵

In outlining his intellectual and literary venture, Barthes makes very clear that what does not interest him is the “Vivre-à-deux” (Two-People-Living-Together; 2002a, 37; 2012, 6) imagined as the ultimate fantasy of his *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*) in which the lover dreams of creating “un petit cosmos . . . habité seulement par ‘nous deux’” (a little cosmos . . . inhabited only by “the two of us”; 2002b, 178; 2002c, 139). At first, this might seem like an obstacle to reading *Comment vivre ensemble* in dialogue with Petrarch, given that his own dream of creating a poetic space in which he and his beloved, Laura, could co-exist seems founded on just such a dyad. Nevertheless, even in the most solitary of situations, the Petrarchan lover finds that he is rarely alone in thinking about, and desiring, Laura. His most common companion is Amor, a personified Love, who in *Rvf* 35 emblematically accompanies the poet everywhere even as he flees other people. Amor is characteristically the poet's interlocutor in this sonnet, but some poems open to a wider circle of addressees: friends, the *Rvf*'s (imagined) readers, God and, finally, Mary.⁶ Within single texts, the poet's solitude may also be framed or interrupted by other signs or forms of community, particularly the presence of animals and plants (see e.g. *Rvf* 22, 162, and 310) that intensify or contrast his own state.

In what follows, I want to argue that Petrarch's poetry can be illuminated through reference to both of Barthes's texts (*Comment vivre ensemble* and *Fragments*) and that an attention to the idiorrhhythmic component of Petrarch's lyrics complicates and enriches our understanding of what desire is for the medieval poet. In particular, reading Barthes together with Petrarch encourages us to look beyond — or further into — the poet's apparent “rêve d'union totale avec l'être aimé” (dream of total union with the loved being) and to consider what offsets or decenters that amorous relation and simultaneously intensifies eros. The relationship between the Petrarchan self and its surroundings is of particular significance here and I have chosen to focus on a text (*Rvf* 126) that reveals the strange way in which solitude and collectivity coexist in a *locus amoenus* made ideal in its connection with the beloved and providing the writer with the “scène (scénario)” (scene [scenario]; Barthes 2002a, 37; 2012, 7) necessary for his particular fantasy of idiorrhymy to take shape.

Petrarch and idiorrhymy

Rvf 126, *Chiare, fresche et dolci acque* (*Clear, fresh and sweet waters*), is one of the best known and most quoted of Petrarch's lyric poems. A *canzone* composed of five stanzas and a *congedo*, poem 126 is included in the first part of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, also known as the *Canzoniere* (*Songbook*) or *Rime sparse* (*Scattered Rhymes*).⁷ This work is an authorial sequence of 366 lyric poems that Petrarch ordered and revised over many years, but which resist narrativity as much as they invite it. The multiple titles by which we refer to Petrarch's collection underscore the tension between fragmentation and unity that underlies his “lyric sequence,” a form that is both “programmatically open” and tenuously ordered given that poems are glossed only by each other without any additional commentary (Barolini 1989, 5). Petrarch's practice is one that, like Barthes's “non-method,” absorbs what the French theorist terms the “tracé excentrique de possibilités” (eccentric path of possibilities; 2002a, 180; 2012, 133), which favors incomplete propositions and leaves meaning open. In the *Rvf*, Petrarch's desire seems to evolve but without

necessarily moving forward, meaning that repetition and variation play one against the other. More accurately, the poet's desire *revolves* in keeping with his penchant for digression and recursion, a state the poet brilliantly expresses in *Rvf* 118.13–14, “io son pur quel ch’i’ mi soglio, / né per mille rivolte anchor son mosso” (I am still what I have always been nor for a thousand turnings have I yet moved).⁸

Principally, the *Rvf* focus on the poet's love for a woman he calls Laura, whose death (registered in *Rvf* 267) divides the collection asymmetrically and brings into focus the lover's central dilemma: how he may reconcile, if it is reconcilable, the desire he has for Laura with his love for God, the beautiful yet mortal creature with the eternal Creator.⁹ Part of the pleasure of *Rvf* 126 — and pleasure is so often the goal of Petrarch's lyrics — comes from the poet's transposition of immortality to the vision he has of Laura, which does not resolve this dilemma but does bracket it for a while. The poem is rightly considered to be one of Petrarch's most felicitous texts, in several senses of the word. Not only does it stand out within his lyric sequence for the “sweetness” of its style (see in particular Bettarini's note in Petrarca 2005, I, 588–89), but it also functions as a sort of apex within a sub-sequence of *canzoni* that runs from *Rvf* 125–29. This sub-sequence is mainly driven by the poet's search for the beloved in a landscape identified with Petrarch's beloved Vaucluse, in Southern France, where he often locates his primordial vision of Laura or his memory of it.¹⁰ Vaucluse is presented primarily as a scene of encounter, mixing memory and desire, and one way to think of *Rvf* 125–29 is as a variation on a theme, the theme being the hoped-for reunion with the beloved in the *locus amoenus* notwithstanding the vicissitudes that intervene to frustrate and thereby intensify eros: time, separation, the distant or cold nature of the beloved, and the poet's own incapacity to adequately remember or verbalize his experience (on time specifically, see Barolini 1989, 25–27). It would be feasible to consider how idiorrhythmy plays out across the sub-sequence of *canzoni* as a whole but I shall limit myself to 126, taking it as a sort of microcosm of internal variation within the sub-sequence and across Petrarch's lyric sequence more broadly.

While *Rvf* 125, 127, and 129 all, in different ways, emphasize absence and distance, *Rvf* 126 uniquely stages a breakthrough and, in Teodolinda Barolini's words, recounts an “actual ecstasis” that corresponds to a miraculous vision of Laura in a *locus amoenus* (1989, 25). As for Barthes in *Comment vivre ensemble*, setting is very important and this poem contains one of the most detailed of Petrarch's descriptions of the landscape of Vaucluse. Characteristically Petrarch follows a wandering and circuitous path to fulfilment and his poem approaches the cherished vision of Laura obliquely rather than head on. Jonathan Culler has written that a defining feature of lyric poetry is its mode of indirection (2015, 34) and Petrarch's *Rvf* 126 is a quintessential lyric in this sense. It is, for this reason, also an “erotic” text in Barthes's meaning of the word, which is to say a realm of variation, instability, and *mouvance* revealing that kinship between “des rythmes particuliers, l'aération, les distances, les différences du Vivre-Ensemble et la plénitude, la richesse de l'Éros” (the particular rhythms, the aerations, the distances, the differences of Living-Together and the plenitude, the richness of Eros) that he posits in *Comment vivre ensemble* (2002a, 72; 2012, 38).¹¹ Despite what we might expect, Petrarch's poem does not simply imagine an ideal co-existence of lover and beloved but rather represents a proliferating desire within a landscape that is alive precisely in its sense of community and multiplicity.

This is so because, from the outset of the *canzone*, the poet is not in dialogue with Laura but instead addresses his poem to the personified elements of the natural world that retain some trace of her body: the branches, trees, flowers and clear waters that she touched or came into

contact with, however fleetingly, when she dwelled among them. The opening stanza establishes the trope of prosopopoeia that dominates the poem also later on, and to which I return below, as the poet calls on nature to listen to his “parole extreme” (dying words, line 13). In the second stanza, the lyric “I” even expresses a desire to “live together” with these natural elements in a posthumous moment as the poet ardently imagines his body finding space and rest among them upon his death: “qualche grazia il meschino / corpo *fra voi* ricopra” (may some grace bury my meagre body *among you* [plural]; lines 17–18, emphasis added).

The poet’s premature consignment of himself to the grave, so that he might be absorbed into the landscape, reveals the way in which desire unfolds in the poem: non-linearly and from a post-mortem perspective. From the poet’s nostalgia for the absent body of the beloved, which shapes the opening stanza, we move first to this personal death-wish conceived as a peaceful and inevitable end to Love’s torments (stanza 2), and then to the fantasy that Laura might one day return to the lovers’ “usato soggiorno” (customary place) to look for the poet and, finding him already “terra in fra le pietre” (earth amid the stones), weep over his grave and sigh so sweetly that she could gain mercy for him in heaven (stanza 3).¹²

This transition from the poet’s wistful longing to see his beloved again to his imagining *her* returning to look for *him* after he is dead, introduces into the poem that “supplement,” “lack,” and “idios” that characterize idiorrhymy for Barthes. What the poet imagines is both too much and not enough: the poem stages the fantasy that reciprocal desire is possible but only in the absence of one party and too late. This asymmetry unbalances the lyric “I” and reveals the convoluted space of its desire, which is characteristically animated by that which is imperfect, not fully consistent. It is in the fourth stanza that these idiorrhhythmic aspects of Petrarch’s desire are most visible. There is a sudden temporal swerve in the poem as the poet moves from imagining Laura in the future to re-imagining her through the filter of memory (cued with the imperfect tense), which produces an ecstatic vision of the lady seated in glory among the trees and flowers:

Da’ be’ rami scendea
 (dolce ne la memoria)
 una pioggia di fior’ sovra ’l suo grembo;
 et ella si sedea
 humile in tanta gloria,
 coverta già de l’amoroso nembo.
 Qual fior cadea sul lembo,
 qual su le trecce bionde,
 ch’oro forbito et perle
 eran quel dí, averderle;
 qual si posava in terra, et qual su l’onde;
 qual con un vago errore
 girando pareva dir: Qui regna Amore. (40–52)

From the beautiful boughs (sweet in memory) a rain of flowers was falling into her lap; and she was sitting humble in so much glory, already covered with the loving cloud; this flower was falling on her hem, this one on her blond braids, which were polished gold and pearls to see that day; this one was coming to rest on the ground, this one on the surface of the water, this one, with a graceful wandering, turning about seemed to say: “Here reigns Love.”

Idiorrhymy is present both at a formal level in this stanza and in the scene being described. If we map the stanza's shape, we find that there is no real progress or development, although there is an intensification and crescendo that culminate in the present tense affirmation, "Here reigns Love."¹³ The movement otherwise is downwards: the flowers fall first into Laura's lap and then onto the ground, coming to rest there or on the surface of the water. Like water, the flowers drift and together form a "rain" ("pioggia") which, combined with the reference to the Lady's being seated "humble in so much glory," present a composite and paradoxical figure that is part-Danaë, part-Beatrice, and part-Mary (see Vickers 1981 and Fenzi 2003). One flower in this miscellany is described as specifically errant, wandering and turning about as it seems to speak (lines 51–52), the verb "parea" indicating both the reach of the fantasy and the poet's awareness that what he sees is an illusion (Mazzotta 1993, 179). Petrarch locates the beauty of his vision with this flower as much as with the beloved herself — its movement is described as a "*vago errore*," "vago" being an almost untranslatable word that incorporated senses from "uncertain" and "wandering" to "desirous" or "desirable" (Imus 2016, 213). This adjective imbues the motion, and imagined discourse, of the flower with qualities common to the depiction of lover and beloved (his uncertainty and longing, her elusive grace and beauty).

Another marked feature of the stanza is the poet's use of deictics, especially the repeated "qual" (each one), and the "qui" (here). In relation to these deictics, Ullrich Langer has written of a "spatialization of affect," a concept that has a strong idiorrhymic character in Petrarch's poetry since desire is often mapped spatially (Langer 2015, 69).¹⁴ Both Langer and Rosanna Bettarini comment, in turn, on how the Petrarchan "qui" counterbalances the repeated "ove" (there or where) of the first stanza of the poem, which punctuates the lover's initial search for traces of his beloved in the landscape and emphasizes distance over proximity. The "qui" in stanza 4 seems intended to collapse the interval dividing "then" and "now," the time of the originary vision and the time of writing and remembering it. The gap between them is never completely closed, however, and the preservation of distance is a vital component of the erotic. Even in the moment Laura appears to the poet she is "coverta" (veiled) by a loving cloud. This adjective returns us to the image of the poet's withered body tenderly covered by nature's blanket ("qualche grazia il meschino / corpo fra voi ricopra") and thereby raises again a specter of mortality. It confirms that for Petrarch, as for Barthes, "c'est l'intermittence . . . qui est érotique" (it is intermittence . . . that is erotic) with the desire captivated by "la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition" (the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance; Barthes 2002d, 223; 1975, 10) given that, in the following stanza, a temporal and spatial gap are again established from the object, which has already disappeared.

In elucidating further the idiorrhymic dimension of Petrarch's poem and its relationship to eros, I propose taking the phrase "*vago errore*" (line 51), which expresses the wandering pattern the flower makes as it falls, as a "form of desire" in the sense in which Manuele Gragnolati, drawing on the work of Leo Bersani, has spoken of the relationship between desire, textuality, and aesthetics (Gragnolati 2013; Bersani 1986). I am interested in thinking about the relationship between the form of *Rvf* 126 and the desire it articulates, and specifically in what happens when idiorrhymy — the distinctive movement of the subject in space (a space that is inherently relational and shaped by desire) — is extended to the text and replicated by it.

This attention to form returns us to Petrarch's deliberate differentiation of one flower from the other as they fall, touching first one part of Laura's body and then another, as well as to the notion of "flument" (flowing) that Barthes, via Benveniste, connects to configurations and arrangements that are variable and ever-moving (see also Macé 2015, 12–13). Langer is surely right when he comments in relation to *Rvf* 126 that "The process of singling out each individual in a 'rain' of flowers could be endless, a drawing-out of the instant of pleasure, into a duration without end" (2015, 71). The enjambement between lines 51 and 52 intensifies this effect insofar as it extends and expands the orbit of the last flower's wandering movement as much as possible. If there is a shape to this flower's falling it is a spiral, turning or spinning as it cascades around Laura (see Mazzotta 1993, 179). This is a "shape of return," to quote the title of a conference that was held at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Enquiry in 2017.¹⁵ It brings us to another of Barthes's essays, "Réquichot et son corps" (Réquichot and his body), in which he analyzes the figure of the spiral in this artist's work:

la spirale, comme cercle déporté à l'infini, est dialectique: sur la spirale, les choses reviennent, *mais à un autre niveau*: il y a retour dans la différence, non ressassement dans l'identité. (2002e, 386)

the spiral, a kind of circle distended to infinity, is dialectical: on the spiral, things recur, *but at another level*: there is a return in difference, not repetition in identity. (1986, 218–19)

This last statement could apply equally well to the movement of Petrarch's lyric sequence as to *Rvf* 126. The rhythm and meter of Petrarch's poem recreate this feeling of wandering, moving, and turning around, since we find a constant variation between hendecasyllables and *settenari* (eleven and seven syllable lines), the latter present in an unusually high number in this *canzone* (only *Rvf* 125 contains more). The effect is that of metrical variation and even anomaly — especially in the closing distich of each stanza which is composed of a *settenario* followed by a hendecasyllable (ff) — and the poetic meter embodies an idiorrhymy that is akin to musical *rubato*. *Rubato* signifies "the expressive alteration of rhythm or tempo" (Hudson 2001) that can take a variety of forms, including acceleration and retardation, with the effect of the final hendecasyllable in Petrarch's stanzas being that of a slowing.¹⁶

The parenthetical statement in line 41 of Petrarch's poem, rendered in modern editions in brackets, is another formal cipher of this oscillation.¹⁷ It serves to interrupt the main clause, drawing out only further the cascading movement of the flowers while simultaneously drawing our attention to memory, a memory that is hard to locate temporally and may even precede the "rimembrar" (remembering) of stanza 1. Its primary effect/affect is sweetness but what is it that is sweet? Grammatically, the adjective "dolce" cannot qualify any word in the previous line and likely relates to the rain of flowers falling in Laura's lap, however its lack of a definite object is surely significant. Its effect is one of making us pause: we arrive at the vision of Laura gradually, not immediately, and the perspective suddenly shifts from her to Love ("Qui regna Amore"; line 52), the third person in this desiring scenario.

This statement, too, with which the stanza ends, has an idiorrhymic feel about it, reiterating the trope of indirection and obliqueness. As Langer argues, "'Qui regna Amore' is also not 'I love you'" (2015, 72), an utterance that in his *Fragments* Barthes

terms a “holophrase” (holophrase), since “je t’aime” (I love you) “ne transmet pas un sens, mais s’accroche à une situation limite: ‘celle où le sujet est suspendu dans un rapport spéculaire à l’autre’” (does not transmit a meaning but fastens onto a limit situation: “the one where the subject is suspended in a specular relation to the other”; 2002b, 188; 2002c, 148). Petrarch’s “Qui regna Amore” seems more open and less fixed than a declaration of love: mediated through the prosopopoeia that gives the flower (itself mediated through memory) a seeming-voice, the vision implies a doubleness that attests to the duplicity of the poem itself. At one moment capable of making even flowers speak, at another the text deprives the poet of his own voice. It is here that we may detect where Petrarch’s idiorrhymy, in safeguarding the body’s desire, as Barthes would put it, simultaneously opens a space for the subject’s passivity and for the pleasure it finds in getting carried away:

Così carco d’oblio
il divin portamento
e ’l volto e le parole e ’l dolce riso
m’aveano, et sì diviso
da l’image vera,
ch’i’ dicea sospirando:
Qui come venn’io, o quando? (56–62)

Her divine mien, and face and words and sweet smile had made me so laden with forgetfulness and had so divided me from the true image that I said sighing “How did I get here and when?”

This loss of self-control, which happens through a disorienting non-perception of reality (or perception of un-reality), is a pleasurable state for Petrarch and is marked by a sweetness that makes the empty grass on which he rests indefinitely seem like heaven to him (“Da indi in qua mi piace / questa herba sì, ch’altrove non ho pace,” lines 63–65).

Reading back from these lines to stanza 4 we see that the space that idiorrhymy creates for safeguarding the poet’s desire cannot emerge without simultaneously dispossessing him of some aspect of self. Finding pleasure in the flower’s “vago errore,” Petrarch suggests a way of being in desire that is non-linear, non-teleological, oblique and perhaps infinite — or at least indefinite.¹⁸ Outside of the subjective *origo* (source) implied by the deictics there is no first-person subject in the fourth stanza of the poem and Petrarch employs predominantly impersonal constructions to imply that he is more of an onlooker than a participant in the scene.¹⁹ His gesture confirms, once again, that the erotic thrill for Petrarch resides in what Barthes in his final lecture in *Comment vivre ensemble* calls a “pathos of distances” (“pathos des distances”), borrowing a term this time from Nietzsche:

ce qui est désiré, c’est une distance qui ne casse pas l’affect . . . une distance pénétrée, irriguée de tendresse. (2002a, 179)

what is desired is a distance that won’t destroy affect . . . a distance permeated, irrigated by tender feeling (2012, 132)

This “érotique de la distance” (erotics of distance; 2002a, 72; 2012, 38) is emblematic of the way in which Petrarchan desire emerges as “productively masochistic” in Bersani’s phrase (1986, 63). It is characterized not by the pursuit of end-pleasure or the

consummation of desire, but by a deferral and intensification of desire that produces pleasure in anticipation of ultimate fulfilment (Bersani 1986, 33–34). As such, Barthes's notion of idiorrhymy allows us to grasp something fundamental about Petrarch's lyric textuality in this passage, namely the way in which his poetry creates and maintains an erotics of distance that is predicated on a desire intensified through non-possession. This concept is Barthesian, although it could equally describe the courtly poetry of the troubadours, and not just in terms of *amor de lonh* or love from afar. In Petrarch's poem, it is connected with the distance that endures between the lover and his beloved, even at the height of the vision, and leads to the figure of Love (Amor) displacing both lover and beloved in a final discursive twist that subsumes everything to Love's dominion while preserving the tenuousness of the utterance that may (or may not have been) spoken by the flower.

In Petrarch's poem this erotics of distance is primarily spatial, as the deictics I have analysed indicate. Yet there is also a strange temporality in line 27 of Petrarch's *canzone*, "Tempo verrà ancora forse" (The time will come again perhaps) in which idiorrhymy emerges through the "ancora" meaning "still" or "again" and the qualifying "forse." On the temporal dimension of idiorrhymy see Tygstrup (2018, 224). Laura "will *perhaps* come" (my emphasis) to their accustomed place, shared surely only in the imagination, and look for him — so that *he* will become the object of *her* desire. If we go back to the spiral, and think of the flower falling in terms of time as well as space then, as Barthes says of it, "rien n'est premier et cependant tout est nouveau" (nothing is first yet everything is new, 2002e, 386; 1986, 219). "En ce répétant, elle engendre un déplacement" (By repeating itself, it engenders a displacement): another sign of idiorrhymy, which in his essay on Réquichot's spiral, Barthes effectively connects to "la phrase poétique," i.e. to poetic language itself (2002e, 386; 1986, 219).

Thus if there is a pleasure of the text for Petrarch, and *Rvf* 126 strongly supports that view, idiorrhymy would be on the side of the radical and unstable border of the text: "mobile, vide (apte à prendre n'importe quels contours)" (mobile, blank [ready to assume any contours]; 2002d, 221; 1975, 6), i.e. the one that is excessive, untamable, and disturbing. It is a dimension of Petrarch's poetry that we can see connected to the author's style and specifically to what he describes as the "vario stile" (varying style) in which he composes his lyric verse (*Rvf* 1.5). Variation and idiorrhymy result as the hallmarks of the poet's particular experience of creativity and pleasure, as unsettling as they may be for the "I." In this reading, the *rhuthmos* of Petrarch's desire that we can identify in the flower of *Rvf* 126 is suggestive of what poetry can do for him "that other discourses do not" (Mazzotta 1993, 168), namely preserve a space for that supplementary element which destabilizes the whole and makes for "a practice of in-consistency" ("une pratique d'in-consistance") that resists closure and embraces "drift" ("dérive," Barthes 1973; see also Gagnolati and Southerden 2020, 135).

Coda

It is possible to extend this analysis of idiorrhymy in *Rvf* 126 to one last observation about Petrarch's lyric textuality. The almost-speaking flower of this *canzone* allows us to perceive something that is not always apparent in the *Rvf*, namely the flexible quality of the poet's textuality even where the desire for the beloved seems fixed and unbending in

its search for her. There is a fluid element in *Rvf* 126, which interacts with, and also unsettles, the traditional view of a poet intent on creating an autonomous poetic universe that would find its ultimate point of signification in the beloved rather than God (cf. Durling 1971; Freccero 1975).²⁰ While it is true that in many poems the desire for Laura appears to be reified in a series of self-referential poetic symbols, which function as idols by setting the beloved in the place of God as source of all meaning, this does not exhaust the possibilities of the poet's language, which preserves a protean and productively unstable quality.

Emilio Pasquini has referred to the “intoxicating abandon” and “flow” of involuntary memory in *Rvf* 126 (2011, 177), which are expressed in the idiorrhhythmic movements I have traced in the text. They point to the malleability of Petrarch's lyric verse and remind us that for this poet, however balanced certain poems may appear there is nonetheless “a disturbance of regularity which seems to be part of the questionable pleasure of poetry itself” (Hainsworth 1998, 207). We could recall how the *settenari* offset the flow of the hendecasyllables, or note the effect of the many caesurae that punctuate the lines, enumerating each flower in turn such that the vision of the whole is at once enriched and fragmented (lines 46–52). We remember that, for Barthes, the *rhuthmos* that idiorrhthy preserves is a form captured “dans l'instant de l'état assumé de quelque chose de mouvant, de mobile, de fluide” (in the moment of the taking shape of something unstable, mobile, fluid; Barthes 2020, my translation), in other words a form that is prone to shift and to change without dissolving completely. If anything is “modifiable” (changeable; Barthes 2002a, 38; 2012, 154) in Petrarch's poetry then this is thanks to the shifting surface of his poetic language. From this perspective, the phrase “vago errore” to which I have repeatedly returned in this article's “spiral” is what gives substance and meaning to Petrarch's fantasy, as the word “idiorrhthy” did for Barthes. It suggests that there is beauty in error and pleasure in indefiniteness. “Love reigns here,” Petrarch's flower seems to be saying as it turns forever about the line.

Notes

1. Lacarrière (1975) introduces the term “idiorythmie” on p. 40, where he begins discussing the monks' peculiar way of life on Mount Athos.
2. Barthes gives an overview of the development of monastic communities, from the first examples of eremitism through to the foundation of monasteries on Mount Athos in the tenth century, in the entry on “Monachisme” (Monachism; 2002a, 41–42; 2012, 9–11).
3. Barthes links this “non-method” to the Greek *Paideia* (2002a, 180; 2012, 133). On the links between this concept and idiorrhthy, see De Pourcq (2008).
4. The recordings of Barthes's lecture series are available on in the “Archives” section of the website dedicated to Roland Barthes (roland-barthes.org). Citations come from the lecture of January 12, 1977.
5. For a full list of the literary works Barthes treats in his lectures, see 2002a, 44–49 and 2012, 12–17.
6. See for example, the poems addressed to Sennuccio del Bene (*Rvf* 108; 112–13) and to members of the Colonna family, his patrons (*Rvf* 266; 322); *Rvf* 1 addressed to the poet's audience; *Rvf* 61, 80, and 364, directed to God; and *Rvf* 366 to Mary.

7. The Latin title is the author's own while *Rime sparse* — a phrase taken from the first line of the opening poem of the collection — offers a correlative of *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* in the Italian. *Canzoniere* is a much later designation, dating to the early sixteenth century, and is perhaps the work's best-known title.
8. Quotations from the *Rvf* come from Petrarca (2004). Translations are mine.
9. Petrarch's *Rvf* is divided into two parts, a division that falls between poems 263 and 264. On the structure of the *Rvf*, see Hainsworth (1998, 49–77), and Santagata (2004, lxiv–cii).
10. On the sequence *Rvf* 125–29 see Stierle 2004; on Vacluse see Petrarca (1958). *Rvf* 128 (the *canzone Italia mia*) is the only poem in the sub-sequence to take a different theme.
11. On *mouvance* see Rushworth, “Barthes and *Mouvance*” in this Special Issue.
12. This is a motif that reverse the more traditional love dynamics of the bereft lover vainly pursuing the phantasm of his beloved.
13. Bettarini comments in Petrarca (2005, vol. 1, 595), that this “regna” also has the sense of “abides,” indicating the duration of Love's reign.
14. See also Southerden (2012, 128–84); and for a prime example see the opening stanza of *Rvf* 127, “In quella parte *dove* Amor mi sprona” (In that place *where* Love spurs me; my emphasis).
15. ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Enquiry. “The Shape of Return: Progress, Process, and Repetition in Medieval Culture.” <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/the-shape-of-return/>.
16. *Rubato* is a musical form that Barthes references indirectly when he cites Casals on rhythm as “retard” (delay; 2002a, 69; 2012, 35), as he had done in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (2002f, 730).
17. Although brackets are a modern addition, the syntax of the interpolated phrase confirms its parenthetical nature. On parenthesis in Petrarch see Musumeci (1976).
18. In this respect, the “vago errore” has a different tenor from the “primo giovanile errore” (first youthful error) of *Rvf* 1, counterbalancing with beauty and lightness the proem's moralistic focus on shame and repentance.
19. On the deictic *origo* see Green (1992).
20. See also Rushworth (2017).

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