

Introduction

Voy ce papier de tous costez noircy
Du mortel dueil de mes iustes querelles
(*Délie*, 188)

IN A LIFE singularly devoid of recorded biographical incident – even his dates of birth and death remain in doubt – a single story about Maurice Scève stands out. It is recounted by the Lyonese publisher Jean de Tournes in the preface to his handsome 1545 Italian-language edition of *Il Petrarca*, dedicated to his esteemed friend “M. Mauritio Scæva.”¹ Scève’s masterpiece, the *Délie*, had just come out the previous year – it was the first full-fledged Petrarchan *canzoniere* ever to appear in French – so the (apocryphal?) tale de Tournes tells in this preface was no doubt motivated on the one hand by his desire to confirm Scève as France’s true inheritor of the laurels of Petrarch and, on the other, by his patriotic zeal to establish the Provençal origins of the Italian poet’s legendary muse.

According to de Tournes, who claimed to have had this story “narrated at length” from Scève himself, it was in 1533, during the course of his studies at Avignon, that the latter was contacted by two Italian notables to aid in the discovery of the tomb of Laura – who, by Petrarch’s own account, had died there on April 6, 1348, twenty-one years to the day after he had first met her

on the banks of the Rhône. Local tradition maintained that she was none other than Laure de Nove, wife of Hughes de Sade, and Scève accordingly led his Italian cohorts to a Franciscan chapel originally founded by the House of Sade – the very same family whose name would later be illustrated by the Divine Marquis. There an unmarked tomb was discovered by the amateur archaeologists and duly opened. De Tournes describes what followed:

Initially nothing was found except earth and tiny bones, but near an intact jaw lay an iron box bound shut by a copper wire, which you [Scève] immediately opened, discovering within it a sheet that was folded and sealed with green wax and a bronze medal with a miniature figure of a lady on one side and nothing on the other; which lady seemed to be spreading her dress open over her breasts with her two hands, and surrounding her there were four letters only: M.L.M.I., which everyone tried his best to explain, and it so happened that Your Lordship approached more closely and, without guaranteeing that this was indeed so, proposed the following interpretation: *Madonna Laura Morta Jace*.

That is, “Here Lies Dead Madonna Laura.”²

This scene reads like an allegory of the triumphs of humanist philology – Lorenzo da Valla unmasking the Donation of Constantine as a forgery, Horopollo deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs, or Petrarch himself uncovering ancient manuscripts that brought new life to the past.³ It is a scene, moreover, that uncannily prefigures the poetics of Scève’s own *Délie*, in which each 10 x 10 dizain presents itself as a hermetically sealed box or tomb which must be opened in order to reveal its hidden contents

– more often than not involving (as here) the enigmatic presence of an eroticized icon of the Lady and her attendant (funerary) inscription. By penetrating into Laura’s crypt and conquering its hermeneutic mysteries, Scève thus Orphically repossesses Petrarch’s lost object as his own.

Like Mallarmé, Scève is a poet of meanings and morphemes endlessly pleated and unpleated. So it is only appropriate that the folded sheet (“membrana piegata”) buried in Laura’s reliquary be now unsealed:

Once the piece of paper was opened, inside there was discovered a sonnet that was difficult to read because the letters written along the crease were effaced by time. The paper then being handed to you to see whether you might be able to decipher it, Your Lordship read it completely, holding it up against the light of the sun, and made a copy of it which . . . I have reproduced below.

Difficult though it is to envisage how in the obscurity of a chapel a sheet of paper might be held up against the light of the sun, the same metaphor will be applied to Scève’s own muse Délie, for she is the source of illumination, be it lunar or solar, that allows him to decipher the text of his own darkness, that enables him to read, as it were, across his own crease. The Italian poem of which Scève here transcribes a copy – medieval scribal culture modulating into Renaissance intertextuality – and which de Tournes subsequently reproduces at the end of his preface as a sonnet by Petrarch, is attributed by at least one modern editor to Scève himself.⁴

Attracted by the news of the discovery of Laura’s tomb (so the narrative continues), King François I, en route to Marseilles to

confer with Pope Clement about the upcoming marriage of his son Henri to Catherine de' Medeci, stopped off at the chapel in Avignon, "had the slab of stone lifted, took the box, and read the sonnet." In honor of Petrarch's muse, the monarch then dashed off an epitaph which de Tournes also quotes at the end of his preface:

O gentille Ame estant tant estimée
Qui te pourra louer qu'en se taisant?
Car la parolle est tousjours réprimée
Quand le subject surmonte le disant.

O gentle Soul, being so esteemed,
Who could praise you save in silence?
For speech is always restrained
When the subject surpasses the speaker.

Generally thought to be a composition of François I himself (in a chapter of his *Memoirs* recounting his visit to Laura's tomb in 1802, Chateaubriand quotes these lines as illustrative of the French poet-king's patronage of Italian artists), these decasyllables may in fact have been ghostwritten by Scève himself, as scholars such as Saulnier have instead suggested.⁵ If this is indeed the case, then Stendhal, who was inordinately fond of the phrase "le sujet surpasse le disant" and who cited it in his autobiography whenever too overcome with emotion or memory to continue writing,⁶ was unwittingly (mis)quoting the single line of Scève's to have survived in literary posterity until his work was finally exhumed from oblivion in the early twentieth century. *Quand le subject surmonte le disant* – an apt motto for the poetics of the

Délie, whose 450 poems obsessively attempt to seize that “Object of Highest Virtue” which forever lies just beyond the ambit of articulate speech.

When Scève published his *Délie* in 1544, he was already a figure of considerable note in his native Lyons. By birthright he descended from one of the city’s most prosperous and illustrious families: his father, a prominent municipal magistrate, was named ambassador to the court upon the accession of François I to the throne in 1515; his sisters, well-married into the *noblesse de robe*, entertained local literati in their salons and wrote verse for their amusement; his cousins, Guillaume and Jean, were also minor published poets and benefactors of the arts. As for Scève himself, the record is far more scanty. He may have taken minor orders in his youth (which might explain why he never chose to marry) and he may have pursued advanced studies in Italy (he is referred to as a “doctor” – of law? – in a 1540 document), but he never seems to have pursued any profession, preferring instead the vocation of a man of letters whose independent wealth allowed him to pursue his humanist learning while protecting him from the political vagaries of court patronage (experienced only all too cruelly by his poetic mentor, Clément Marot or, for that matter, his English contemporary Sir Thomas Wyatt).

Scève’s first published work, characteristically unsigned,⁷ was a translation of a Spanish novel by Juan de Flores, *Grimalte y Gradissa*, a continuation of Boccaccio’s popular romance *Fiammetta* (1481). Published as a commercial venture in 1535 by François Juste (who had brought out Rabelais’s *Gargantua* the previous year), *La déplorable fin de Flamete* is above all notable for its translator’s confession in the preface that, like the characters

in this tragic tale, he too had known the “torment of love” and had spent “the best years of [his] life” attempting to traverse its “perilous ford” – an allusion, Scève’s biographers infer, to some ill-starred romance of his youth, also hinted at in various poems of the *Délie*. During this same year of 1535, Clément Marot, in exile at the court of Ferrara, composed his “Blason du Beau Tétin,” inviting his fellow French poets to emulate his example with further celebrations of portions of the female anatomy. Scève’s contribution to this poetic joust, a delicate encomium of The Eyebrow – most of the other contestants had aimed somewhat lower – was adjudged the winner by Renée, duchess of Ferrara, thus gaining him his first measure of courtly fame.

In 1536, while the court of François I was summering in Lyons in preparation for the Italian campaign against Charles V, the young Dauphin unexpectedly died under mysterious circumstances (poisoning by agents of the Austrian Emperor was suspected). Under the leadership of Lyons’ most prominent humanist, Etienne Dolet, the city’s poets immediately marshaled their collective talents to issue a volume of memorial tributes, *Recueil de vers latins et vulgaires, de plusieurs Poètes françoys, composés sur le trespas de feu Monsieur le Dauphin*. Scève’s contributions to this *tombeau* accounted for nearly one third of the volume: five Latin epigrams, two French huitains, and a lengthy eclogue, *Arion*, in which the late Dauphin was allegorically metamorphosed into a dolphin. Scève’s prominence in this bilingual collection is indicative of his rising reputation among the poets of Lyons and, in particular, among the group known as the Sodalitium Lugdunense, a coterie of intellectuals who, under the guidance of Dolet, were committed to making neo-Latin the official language of French verse, the better to rival and

surpass their erudite humanist contemporaries abroad. The French monarchy, however, was moving in the opposite direction, issuing the edict of Villers-Cotterets in 1539 which decreed that all legal documents be henceforth recorded in French. Dolet's sodality (Bourbon, Ducher, Visagier, etc.), inspired in part by the example of Petrarch's move from Latin into the vulgar tongue, similarly began placing more emphasis on literary production in the vernacular. Scève's *Délie* is in a sense the culmination of this Lyonesse evolution toward a more local, more native literary language – as much a *Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoise* as Du Bellay's more celebrated manifesto, published five years in its wake.

Around 1536, in his mid-thirties, *nel mezzo del cammin*, Scève fell violently in love.⁸ This mind- and heart-shattering moment of Petrarchan *innamoramento*, which he describes in the very first dizain of the *Délie* as a catastrophic deathblow to the very integrity of his own identity, will be returned to again and again over the course of its 449 poems – an originary trauma that is endlessly revisited and from which he can never fully recover. Although opinions differ, it is more or less generally agreed that Scève's obscure object of desire was Pernette du Guillet, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed budding young poet of Lyons some twenty years his junior and whose marriage in 1538 effectively guaranteed that his passion would thereafter remain unrequited.⁹ In dizain (henceforth “D”) 161, he vents his jealousy in a rage as chiseled as the lyrics of Catullus, Tibullus, or Propertius:

Alone with myself, she with her husband:
I in my anguish, she in her soft sheets.
Wrapped in grief, I wallow in Nettles,

And she lies there naked in his arms.

Ha! (unworthy him), he holds, he fondles her:
And she suffers him: &, frailer of the two,
Violates love by this unjust bond,
Sealed by human, not divine, decree.

O holy law, just to all, except to me,
For I am punished for her misdeeds.

But Pernette, to judge from the collection of her *Rymes* that was published posthumously in 1545 (and for which Scève provided three epitaphs), was not content merely to act the passive partner in this neo-Platonizing agon of love. As feminist readings have argued, her poems addressed to Scève are less echoes of her mentor's dizains than coolly ironic undercuttings of the metaphorical ground of their intellectual and erotic exchange. Rather than agreeing to play the reflected light of the Moon to his masculine Sun, for example, she prefers instead to picture herself as the *ournée* (daytime) accompanying his *jour* (daylight), the emphasis falling less on gendered antithesis than on elusive complementarity.¹⁰

To restrict the figure of Scève's *Délie* to the biographical instance of Pernette du Guillet, however, is to considerably limit the resonance of this "Object of Highest Virtue" – a composite divinity inspired by any number of loves and, perhaps even more important, culled from the vast mnemonic storehouse of his reading, which included the Greek Anthology, the Latin lyric, the medieval poets of courtly love, Dante, Petrarch, and more contemporary French and Italian versifiers such as the *Rhétoriqueurs* Marot and Lemaire de Belges and the neo-Petrarchans Cariteo, Serafino, and Bembo. As Jacqueline Risset observes,

the *Délie* conflates the act of literary citation with the fantasy of erotic fusion, in the process generating a text that is continually open to available tradition, continually in colloquy with what lies beyond its borders. When Scève's canzoniere began circulating in manuscript in the mid-1530s, the work thus became the maieutic center of all the concentric circles of literary Lyons, not only exerting its gravitational pull on the poetry of Pernette du Guillet, Louise Labé, and Pontus de Tyard, but also gathering the promotional talents of Dolet and Marot into its orbit. Little wonder, then, that Jean de Tournes trumpeted the 1544 appearance of the *Délie*, interspersed with fifty allegorical woodcuts – it was the first book of the Renaissance fully to integrate poems and emblems – as the crowning achievement of the city's cosmopolitan humanist culture.

After the publication of the *Délie*, the ever shadowy Scève seems to go into retreat, given over to protracted mourning: Marot expires in exile in Turin in 1544; Pernette dies of the plague in 1545; Scève's cousin Guillaume passes away in 1546, the same year that his close friend Dolet is burned at the stake in Paris for heresy; in 1547, the poet-king François I dies, followed two years later by his sister, Marguerite de Navarre, Scève's sometime protector and patron, for whose two collections of poetry, the *Marguerites* and the *Suyte des Marguerites* (published by de Tournes in 1547), he provided liminary sonnets. The fruit of his rural retreat, *Saulsaye* (*Willow Grove*), was brought out in 1547, with the melancholy subtitle "Eclogue of the Solitary Life," and in 1549, in a similarly meditative mood, he published translations of Psalms 26 and 83. In 1548, he returned briefly to public life, organizing the ceremonial Entry of the new king Henri II and his wife Catherine de' Medici into Lyons, a

spectacular municipal festival for which Scève designed and directed the elaborate allegorical pageantry, just as he had earlier superintended the 1540 Entry of Hippolyte d'Este as archbishop of Lyons in collaboration with the Florentine painter Benedetto dal Bene.

In 1555 Scève emerges again in typically oblique fashion, this time as one of the prime movers behind the publication of the *Euvres* (i.e. *Works*) of Louise Labé, brought out by the house of his close friend Jean de Tournes. Scève figures prominently (although anonymously) among the authors of the twenty-four poems in praise of “Louïze Labé Lionnoïze” that make up one third of the volume – the other poets and scholars from his circle participating in the project included Pontus de Tyard, Guillaume de la Taysonnière, Claude de Taillemont, Philibert Bugnyon, Jean-Antoine de Baïf, Antoine du Moulin, Jacques Pelletier, Guillaume des Autels, and Olivier de Magny (long believed to be Labé’s lover). In a 2006 book that fell like a bombshell on the French literary scene (especially given that the revered Labé was featured on the Agrégation exam that year), Sorbonne professor Mireille Huchon argued that Labé was in fact “une créature de papier” or “paper doll,” that is, the product of a collaborative scheme by Scève and friends to invent a modern French “Sappho” who could vie with the ancient one – an encouragement, however paternalistic, to French poetesses to come. If Petrarch had been engaged in “laudare Laura” (praising Laura), why not – as Marot had suggested back 1542 – similarly establish a more native Lyonese poetic cult devoted to “louer Louise” (praising Louise)? Although an historical Louise Labé did in fact exist (records attest, for example, to such details as her marriage to a local ropemaker, hence her sobriquet “La Belle Cordière”),

Huchon argues that her *Euvres* were essentially a playful hoax (or *supercherie*) concocted by the literati of Lyons (like Scève's earlier "discovery" of Laura's tomb) – and she goes so far as to attribute much of Labé's celebrated and proto-feminist prose piece, "Débat de Folie et d'Amour" (heavily influenced by Leone Ebreo), to Scève himself. As to the three elegies and twenty-four sonnets that constitute the core of Labé's dense and passionate poetic oeuvre, Huchon is somewhat less forthcoming about their precise authorship. Indeed, given the intricate intertextual networks that connect the Latin and Italian poets to Marot, Dolet, Scève, and Pernette within the vortex of printing and translation that was sixteenth-century Lyons, perhaps the very notion of "original" authorship needs to be considerably qualified. Whether ghost-written in drag by Scève & Co. or composed by "La Belle Cordière" herself, the erotic intensities of such Labé sonnets as "Baise m'encor, rebaise moy, & baise" are sure to survive scholarly debates about their attribution.¹¹

The remainder of Scève's life is given over to the composition of the *Microcosme*, a biblical epic exactly 3003 verses in length, composed of three books of one thousand alexandrines each, followed by a three-line conclusion that celebrates the poem's completion in 1559, the year of the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis, which established peace between France and Spain. A visionary narrative whose blend of encyclopedic learning and Old Testament prophecy looks forward to the baroque epics of Du Bartas (*La Sepmaine*, 1578), d'Aubigné (*Les Tragiques*, 1616), and Milton, Scève's account of the Creation up through the murder of Abel by Cain (Book I) and of the dream in which Adam is vouchsafed a panoramic vision of the future of humanity (Book

II), followed by Adam and Eve's first postlapsarian enjoyments of the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge (Book III), remains optimistically humanistic in its heroic emphasis on mankind's general progress toward tolerance and enlightenment under the tutelage of a benevolent, if distant, Lucretian God. The book is signed only by the motto "Non si non la" – which punningly captures man's ever restless Faustian drive to be "not here not there," but rather always on the move, always elsewhere, "not [here] unless there." Finally published by de Tournes in 1562, Scève's epic fell on deaf ears: Lyons, riven by riots enflamed by the Wars of Religion, was soon to be decimated by a devastating plague.¹² As darkness settled over the city, the death of Scève, one of its great luminaries, went unobserved and unrecorded.

Although Du Bellay generously extolled his "divine mind" in several early poems (Ronsard proved somewhat less kind), Scève's work was totally eclipsed by that of Labé and the Pléiade until the early twentieth century. A mere generation after Scève's death, the critic Pasquier was already observing that the poet's "senseless obscurity" was the reason why "his book died with him," while in the nineteenth century Sainte-Beuve pronounced him "well-nigh unreadable" and Brunetière scoffingly compared the impenetrability of his verse to that of Mallarmé. A critical edition of the *Délie* was finally published by Parturier in 1916, but it was not until the 1920s that Scève's poetry emerged from more than three centuries of oblivion, thanks to the singlehanded efforts of poet and critic (and Joyce translator) Valéry Larbaud, who recovered Scève by that same modernist revision of the relation of tradition to the individual talent which had marked Eliot's turn to the Metaphysicals or Pound's

translations of Cavalcanti and the troubadours. In Larbaud's case, ardent Hispanophile that he was, his rediscovery of Scève was primarily sparked by the reading of Quevedo and Góngora, in whose broader baroque circuit he subsequently located Marino, Théophile de Viau, and Saint-Amant – and, on the English side, Wyatt and Herrick, translations of whom (by Auguste Morel, his collaborator on the French version of *Ulysses*) he published in the cosmopolitan literary journal *Commerce*, which he co-edited with Paul Valéry and Léon-Paul Fargue. Larbaud's incisive "Notes sur Maurice Scève" appeared in the magazine in 1925: juxtaposed in the pages of *Commerce* with the late hymns and fragments of Hölderlin and the poems of Ungaretti, Hofmannsthal, Pasternak, Mandelstam, and Ponge, Scève emerged as a startlingly modern voice.¹³

"Dichten=condensare" runs the Poundian dictum – and the primary quality of Scève's poetry that Larbaud singles out for praise is its radical compaction. To read the dizains of the *Délie* against Ronsard's sonnets, he observes, is to realize that the latter usually contain four lines too many ("on dirait du Scève délayé, soufflé, dont on a allegé la sauce"). One of the advantages of Scève's choice of the ten-line form of the dizain over the sonnet, he continues, is that it is just the right length to be sung; in addition, its various paragraph-like subdivisions (whose indentations typically cut the poem up into blocks of 4 + 6, 6 + 4, 4 + 4 + 2, or 8 + 2 lines, though other permutations are also explored) allow for a more flexible pattern of musical pauses than the scheme of octave and sestet.¹⁴ Seven of the poems of the *Délie* are known to have been set to music during Scève's lifetime, and his canzoniere often borrows its metaphors of harmony (or, more crucially, discordance) from the art of song.¹⁵