

# **Text, Artefact and the Creative Process: ‘The Sad, Bewildered Quills’ of Guido Cavalcanti**

DAVID BOWE, BALLIOL COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

## **Abstract:**

This article will engage with issues of material culture and medieval technologies of writing in conversation with representations of the creative process and poetic subjectivity through a close reading of the sonnet ‘Noi siàn le triste penne isbigottite’ [*We are the sad, bewildered quills*] by the Florentine poet (and friend of Dante) Guido Cavalcanti (c.1255-1300), in light of common representations of scribes at work in visual culture. By reading Cavalcanti’s representation of the art of writing and the artefact of the text this article will explore the ‘written-ness’ of the Italian tradition, in contrast with the oral performance culture of troubadour lyric, and the implications of this material, textual tradition for the representation of a fragmented self. I will posit that Cavalcanti’s poetic praxis depends on the legible, material object of the text. Across Cavalcanti’s lyric output we witness a disassembling of the self into myriad, often physiological, parts, which are given individual voices through sustained prosopopoeia, generating a model of subjectivity located in physiology and textuality. In this sonnet, this practice is extended even to the implements of textual production. I will highlight the manner in which the multiple voices of Cavalcanti’s texts engage in an internalised dialogue, and their fundamental role in the representation of his poetic self. My reading will investigate this sonnet’s representation of tools of writing as lyric voices in themselves, contextualising this imagery within Cavalcanti’s poetics of self-fragmentation and placing it in conversation with the material culture of the circulation of poetry in late-medieval Italy. This article will act as a meeting place for issues of visual and material culture, textuality, and poetics in so far as they all contribute to the foregrounding of creative processes — the creation of poetic texts, content and selves — in this Cavalcantian text.

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A manuscript presupposes a scribe. In fact, it quite literally presupposes a hand (*manus*) that writes (*scribere*), and this is precisely what Guido Cavalcanti (c. 1255-1300) offers us in his tragic yet playful depiction of the act of writing in the sonnet ‘Noi siàn le triste penne

isbigottite' [*We are the sad, bewildered quills*]. This poem, written in the last third of the thirteenth century, offers us a locus for the simultaneous discussion of poetics, the materiality and circulation of texts and the representation (both literary and visual) of the creative process, whether specifically poetic, or broadly artistic. I will now expand on each of these in reverse order. As regards the creative process, Cavalcanti taps into a vein of imagery that was present in contemporary manuscript illuminations and in depictions of writers elsewhere (most diffusely in representations of the evangelists armed with quills and knives copying down their gospels). This is not to suggest that Cavalcanti's text is precisely ekphrastic, but rather that it can fruitfully be read in light of such imagery. In other words, his literary representation of the tools of writing may be inspired as much by the items in front of him on his writing table — a sort of written still life — as the visual culture in which he is writing, but the illustrative tradition provides an important context for the production of Cavalcanti's text.

These visual and textual depictions of the process of creation, of the making of the written artefact, also provide a useful spur to us as readers to refocus on the materiality of texts. In contrast to the emphasis on oral performance in the Provençal tradition that had gone before, the Italian poetic tradition was 'born [...] under the signs of Latinity and of writing', and this written-ness has implications for the contemporary circulation of early Italian texts and also for the ways in which we receive them today.<sup>1</sup> Cavalcanti vibrantly depicts these implications and he engages with them on multiple occasions in his oeuvre, though I will be restricting my focus primarily to the most emphatic example here. It is in this light that the issue of poetics is raised. Cavalcanti employs the medium of text, the fact of its materiality, and the means of its production to express a model of lyric poetry that relies on a destructive experience of love, a manuscript circulation of poetry, and a fragmented, polyphonic subjectivity. Indeed, we shall see that Cavalcanti's text exists in an imagistic dialogue with illuminations, carvings and other visual depictions of the act of writing.

Visual representations of scribes, Church Fathers and Evangelists, laying down their texts with knife and quill in hand, can be found in numerous illuminations, engravings and frescos throughout Europe and within Italy. We find a plethora of instances of the iconography of the scribe scattered through medieval Europe. One beautiful example of this iconography appears in the late thirteenth/early fourteenth-century manuscript Plutei

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<sup>1</sup> Olivia Holmes, *Assembling the lyric self: Authorship from Troubadour song to Italian poetry book* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 47. For a reconstruction of circulation and compilation culture in late medieval Italy, see Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: urban readers and writers in late medieval Italy (The William and Katherine Devers series in Dante studies)* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

42.19 in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, containing Brunetto Latini's *Tesoro* and, on fol. 72, an image of Brunetto (a famous denizen of the fifteenth circle of the *Inferno* penned by Cavalcanti's one-time friend Dante Alighieri) writing with pen and knife.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in Europe we find an English-made Bible of 1270-80 (Princeton, University Library, MS Garrett 28) with images of Jerome (fol. 1<sup>r</sup>), the evangelist Luke (fol. 400<sup>v</sup>) and the Apostle Paul (fol. 434<sup>v</sup>), all writing with pen and knife in hand.<sup>3</sup> This list does not intend to be exhaustive, but merely to demonstrate the commonplace nature of visual representations of the scribe sitting at his manuscript clutching his writing tools.

With this widespread image in mind, let us turn to Cavalcanti's sonnet:<sup>4</sup>

Noi sìan le triste penne isbigotite,  
le cesoiuzze e 'l coltellin dolente,  
ch'avemo scritte dolorosamente  
quelle parole che vo' avete udite.

Or vi diciàn perché noi sìan partite  
e sìan venute a voi qui di presente:  
la man che ci movea dice che sente  
cose dubbiose nel core apparite;

le quali hanno destrutto sì costui  
ed hannol posto sì presso a la morte,  
ch'altro non n'è rimasto che sospiri.

Or vi preghiàn quanto possiàn più forte  
che non sdegniate di tenerci noi,  
tanto ch'un poco di pietà vi miri.

*We are the sad, bewildered quills,  
the little clippers and the suffering knife,  
who have written with such sadness  
all those words that you have heard.*

*Now we tell you why we've left,  
and come to you, here present:  
the hand that moved us says it feels  
worrying things that have appeared in the heart;  
and these have so destroyed him  
and pushed him so close to death,  
that he has nothing left but sighs.*

*Now we beg you, as strongly as we can,  
not to disdain to keep us  
as long as a little pity may become you.*

The insistence on the textuality of this sonnet borders on the tautological, coming as it does from a circulation culture rooted in manuscript copying as well as composition. The survival of copied poetry (both fragments and whole texts) in the ledgers of Bolognese notaries (the *Memoriali Bolognesi*) and the three great C13th lyric anthologies — Laurenziano-Rediano 9, Banco Rari 217 (the Palatine Codex), and Vaticano Latino 3973 (with its notable collection of sonnet exchanges, or *tenzoni*) — is indicative of a lively scribal culture and the diffusion of written verse.<sup>5</sup> Indeed many poems from this period of

<sup>2</sup> Image available at <<http://www.florin.ms/tesorettintro.html>> [accessed 26 September 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Images available on the *Index of Christian Art* (Princeton University) <<http://ica.princeton.edu>> [accessed 26 September 2014].

<sup>4</sup> For the texts of Cavalcanti's poems I follow the editorial suggestions made in Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. by Roberto Rea and Giorgio Inglese (Rome: Carocci, 2012). The translations are my own., though alternatives are available in Guido Cavalcanti, *The Complete Poems*, Marc A. Cirigliano trans. (New York: Italica Press, 1992 and *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti: A Critical English Edition*, Simon West trans. (Leicester: Troubador, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For extensive discussion of this culture see Steinberg, pp. 17-144.

Italian production make explicit reference to writing and reading practices alongside more generic, figurative uses of the terminology of singing, saying and hearing. What is more striking in Cavalcanti's poem is the lack of any 'I'.<sup>6</sup> That is not to say there are no speakers in this text: in fact there are many, a veritable chorus of non-'I' voices. The quills, clippers, and knife — the very tools of writing — deliver a message from the hand that moved them regarding the state of the lover. Indeed, in Calvino's assessment, Cavalcanti is 'the first to consider the instruments and gestures of his own activity [of writing] as the true subject of the work'.<sup>7</sup> The ambiguity of Calvino's 'soggetto', which I have here translated with the equally polysemous 'subject', accurately suggests the nature of these non-'I' speakers as offering an alternative subjectivity, one not restricted to the straightforward speaking 'I'.

The textual representation of speech, even in the context of a decidedly written Italian tradition, remains an emphatic presence in our sonnet, and Maria Corti has highlighted the adoption of spoken forms in the language of the quills, knife, and clippers: 'sian' [*we are*], 'diciàn' [*we say/tell*], 'preghiàn' [*we beg*], 'possian' [*we can*] are spoken Florentine variants of *siamo*, *diciamo*, *preghiamo*, *possiamo*.<sup>8</sup> The presence of alternative voices is, in fact, characteristic of Cavalcanti's representation of the experience of love and indeed of the self. Such a ruptured persona owes its development to the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia, the personifying figure that grants voices to non-human speakers and which characterises Cavalcanti's oeuvre as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Through this insistent prosopopoeia the various fragments of the self take on individuated speaking identities that are arrayed alongside the 'I' in a 'dramatised representation' of the experience of the passion of love.<sup>10</sup> Cavalcanti's personification, then, is not exclusively (or even predominantly) of the sort that gives substance to abstract nouns, though Amore (Love as deity) of course features heavily in his poetry.<sup>11</sup> Rather, Cavalcantian prosopopoeia consists in the creation of

<sup>6</sup> The absence of the 'mediation of the I-speaker' [*Senza più alcuna mediazione dell'io-personaggio*] is emphasised by Alfredo Troiano, 'Per un'interpretazione del sonetto XVIII di Guido Cavalcanti', *Testo: Studi di teoria e storia della letteratura e della critica*, 46 (2003), pp. 7-22 (14).

<sup>7</sup> 'Il primo a considerare gli strumenti e i gesti della propria attività come il vero soggetto dell'opera', Italo Calvino, 'La penna in prima persona (Per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)', in *Una pietra sopra: Discorsi di letteratura e società* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), pp. 294-300 (294), originally published in a French translation as 'La plume à la première personne', Jean Thibaudeau trans., in *Derrière le miroir*, 224, (May, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Maria Corti, 'La penna alla prima persona', in *Guido Cavalcanti laico e le origini della poesia europea nel VII centenario della morte: Atti del convegno internazionale (Barcellona, 16-20 ottobre 2001)*, ed. by Rossend Arqués (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2003), pp. 217-23, and reprinted in *Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante: La felicità mentale, Percorsi dell'invenzione e altri saggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), pp. 42-49 (46).

<sup>9</sup> *Poeti del Dolce stil novo*, ed. by Mario Marti (Florence: Le Monnier, 1969), p. 157; Robert Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 69-70 & 74-81, and 'The Ghost of Guido Cavalcanti, Revisited', in *Guido Cavalcanti tra i suoi lettori (Guido Cavalcanti: Proceedings of the International Symposium for the Seventh Centennial of his Death)*, ed. by Maria Luisa Ardizzone (Fiesole, FI: Cadmo, 2003), pp. 119-30 (122-23); also Corti 'Introduzione', in *Guido Cavalcanti, Rime*, ed. by Marcello Ciccuto, 5th edn (Milano: Rizzoli, 1998), pp. 5-27, the section on the personification of spirits (pp. 10-22) is excerpted and reprinted as 'Gli spiritelli, *dramatis personae*', in *Scritti*, pp. 50-58.

<sup>10</sup> '[U]na rappresentazione [...] drammatizzata', Corrado Calenda, *Per altezza d'ingegno: Saggio su Guido Cavalcanti* (Naples: Liguori, 1976), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, pp. 79-80.

separate, individuated actors and speakers from the body's constituent processes, parts and faculties. For example, in the following lines from one of Cavalcanti's *ballate*:

Davanti agli occhi miei vegg'io lo core  
e l'anima dolente che s'ancide,  
che mor d'un colpo che li diede Amore  
ed in quel punto che madonna vide.  
(‘I’ prego voi che di dolor parlate’, 4-7)

*Before my eyes I see the heart  
and the suffering soul which are slain,  
which die of a blow struck by Love  
in that moment when my lady was seen.*

Several of the key terms and images in Cavalcanti's lexicon are evident here: the recurrent sensation of ‘suffering’ [*dolore*]; the violent act of the ‘blow’ [*colpo*] which provokes the love experience; the physiological elements of the ‘eyes’ [*occhi*], ‘heart’ [*core*], and ‘soul’ [*anima*]. In Cavalcanti's poetry these physiological terms, along with the concept of ‘spritis’ [*spiriti*] (‘hybrid entities that bridge the gap between the corporeal and incorporeal’),<sup>12</sup> belong to a technical, scientific lexicon, which will be discussed further below.<sup>13</sup> The parts they play in the experience of love-as-passion are rigorously established in Cavalcanti's doctrinal *canzone*, ‘Donna me prega’. The technical language of that poem is dependent on an Aristotelian natural philosophy, whose importance for Cavalcanti's poetic ‘phenomenology of love’ has been carefully explored by a number of scholars.<sup>14</sup> The presence and role of these physiological components (eyes, soul, spirits, et al) in his texts, however, also go beyond the limits of their functions in natural philosophy. The carefully enumerated physiology allows for Cavalcanti's representation of a particular brand of subjectivity insofar as the prosopopoeia of these physiological attributes renders the ‘I’ as but a single player on a populous interior stage. In the example above, the soul and heart have lives (and deaths) and struggles of their own. While other poets, including Cavalcanti's erstwhile ‘friend’ Dante, draw on the same physiology of love, their prosopopoeia does not persist in the same way and nor does it affect the ‘I’ in the same destructive and thoroughgoing manner.<sup>15</sup> Cavalcanti's multi-voiced interior life results in a

<sup>12</sup> Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 13. For the spirits in Cavalcanti see Federica Anichini, *Voices of the Body: Liminal Grammar in Guido Cavalcanti's 'Rime' (Voci del corpo: Grammatica liminale nelle 'Rime' di Guido Cavalcanti)*, (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2009), pp. 87-114, and Dana E. Stewart, *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender and Subjectivity Medieval Love Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), pp. 89-92.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Luisa Ardiszone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 16-29. Also Anichini, pp. 39-47 on ‘the alliance between natural philosophy and medicine’ which characterised and informed Cavalcanti's intellectual and physiological model.

<sup>14</sup> Ardiszone, *The Other Middle Ages*, pp. 16-40; Inglese, *L'intelletto e l'amore: studi sulla letteratura italiana del Due e Trecento* (La nuova Italia: Florence, 2000), pp. 13-47; Sonia Gentili, *L'uomo aristotelico: alle origini della letteratura italiana* (Carocci: Rome, 2005), pp. 187-91.

<sup>15</sup> Webb, pp. 74-81. There is not space in this article to make fuller comparisons of Cavalcanti's uses of physiology with those of his contemporaries. Elsewhere I have discussed points of contact and contrast between some of Dante's uses of physiology and personification and Cavalcanti's. David Bowe, “E io a lui”: Dialogic models of conversion and self-

particular and irreducible polyphonic subjectivity, which goes beyond, and sometimes even displaces the 'I'. Elsewhere, we find a prime example of this new Cavalcantian mode of personification in the sonnet 'Deh, spiriti miei, quando mi vedete' [*Oh, my spirits, when you see me*], in which the 'I' remonstrates with the circulatory spirits for failing to 'send forth|from the mind words adorned with weeping' [*come non mandate|fuor della mente parole adornate|di pianto?*] (2-3).

This fracturing of the self into a multitude of autonomous fragments is the starting point from which the bewilderment, which characterises Cavalcanti's poetry, unfolds.<sup>16</sup> It is also the point from which the polyphony of Cavalcanti's self emerges. The 'I's address to the 'spirits', 'heart', etc., and their replies, feature frequently throughout Cavalcanti's texts, creating internalised dialogues evident in his corpus as a whole. The proliferation of participants in this sonnet represents both a staged dialogue and a polyphony, which I find it helpful to describe in terms developed by Bakhtin in his discussions of novelistic discourse. Such a model of the polyphonic text (and thus, in Cavalcanti's case, subjectivity) is one in which each voice 'sound[s], as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines with it'.<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin is referring to Dostoevsky's authorial voice and its relationship with other characters within his novels, but I quote him here because the essence of his observation — that an apparently authorial speaker may co-exist in interdependence and tension with other speakers within a text — strikes me as pertinent and offers a useful vocabulary for describing the kind of relationship found between Cavalcanti's 'I' (analogous to the author's word) and his many speaking personifications (the other, co-sounding voices). The resolute co-sounding of these voices and the resistance to any overriding unity in these texts are the aspects that mark Cavalcanti's poetry and representations of both self and love so intriguing and innovative. While an engagement with Bakhtin in the context of medieval lyric may still surprise, given his explicit interest in the novel and dismissal of poetry as essentially monologic, recent work has acknowledged the usefulness of Bakhtin's thought in reading lyric texts, and I have elsewhere proposed and pursued an extended engagement with the polyphonic and

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representation in medieval Italian poetry' (doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2014), pp. 103-20. Dante famously refers to Cavalcanti with the formula 'the first of my friends' [*primo de li miei amici*] in the *Vita Nuova* (III, 14) and the two exchanged a number of sonnets. Later, the relationship seems to have soured and Dante was among the priors of Florence who decreed Cavalcanti's exile from the city in 1300, and later added insult to injury by implying that Guido would find himself in hell among the heretical souls of the sixth circle (*Inferno* X).

<sup>16</sup> Calenda, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 7. As will become increasingly evident, the many voices in Cavalcanti's texts are the many voices of his corporeally defined subjectivity, as in Corti's analysis of the 'prime actors of the dramatic action' [*attori primi dell'azione drammatica*], which she identifies as 'three subjects, only very typical and distinct in Guido, [...] the mind, the soul, the heart' [*tre soggetti, soltanto in Guido be tipici e distinti, [...] la mente, l'anima, il cuore*], Corti, 'Introduzione', pp. 8-9), a list which will be expanded in the present article.

dialogic Bakhtin as part of a broader set of ‘dialogic processes’ at play in medieval Italian poetry.<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this article I will limit myself to the language and implications of polyphony as useful for shedding light on Cavalcanti’s text.

Thus far I have emphasised the interior realm of the poet’s body, but in Cavalcanti’s texts the boundary between external and internal is always a blurred one. In the sonnet ‘Tu m’hai sì piena di dolor la mente’ [*You have so filled my mind with pain*] the poet describes his condition in sculptural terms, which give way to an opening out of the interior space. The poet describes himself as a dead man walking (‘he who is out of life’ [*colui ch’è fuor di vita*], 9), appearing to be made of ‘copper or wood or stone’ [*di rame o di pietra o di legno*] (11) and moved only by artificial means (‘only by mastery’ [*sol per maestria*], 12) — an automaton, a moving statue. The interiority which has characterised my discussion thus far is exploded outward as the ‘I’ reveals the nature of the wound [*ferita*], inflicted by love, which is carried ‘in the heart’ [*ne lo core*] (13), but remains an ‘open sign’ [*aperto segno*] (14), evident to ‘those who gaze on him’ [*chi lo sguarda*] (10).<sup>19</sup> Cavalcanti’s interiority, then, is opened out to an audience in a manner which is represented through the sculptural simile of the automaton, and which results in the communicative implications of the sign. The openness of the sign carried in Cavalcanti’s heart may be radical, but it owes something to a traditional understanding of the ‘intercorporeal circulation’ of spirits in medieval physiology.<sup>20</sup> These spirits are ‘non-material impulses’; they exist between the physical and metaphysical realms, acting as circulatory go-betweens for body and the soul.<sup>21</sup> Spirits are also connected to and transmitted through the operation of the gaze in a physiological model of amorous interaction which depends on the porousness of the heart and a resultant, quasi-osmotic passage of circulatory spirits between individuals, in our case a beloved and a lover.<sup>22</sup> We need merely recall another of Cavalcanti’s sonnets, ‘Pegli occhi fere un spirito sottile’ [*Through my eyes a deft spirit passes*], which, while often read as self-parody, still precisely maps the processes of the experience of passion as understood in natural philosophy onto these circulatory spirits over the course of its 14 lines (and 14 repetitions of ‘spirito’ or its diminutive ‘spiritello’).<sup>23</sup> The opening of Cavalcanti’s heart and the associated loss of corporeal control, however, retain their

<sup>18</sup> See *Dialogism and Lyric Self-fashioning: Bakhtin and the Voices of a Genre*, ed. by Jacob Blevins, (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2008) and the introduction to Bowe, “E io a lui”, pp. 1-11, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> On the blurring of the internal/external boundaries in this sonnet, see Anichini, pp. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> Webb, p. 63, in the context of her discussion of the ‘Porous Heart’ and the circulatory, as opposed to impression, model of sensory perception.

<sup>21</sup> Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 12. For ease of reference, I quote directly from Creagh’s translation, sanctioned by Esther Calvino. Calvino’s Italian is found in *Lezioni americane: sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milano: Mondadori, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Webb, pp. 62-63.

<sup>23</sup> Rea and Inglese, p. 162. For readings of the poem as self-parodic, see Calvino, *Six Memos*, p. 13; Gianfranco Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, II (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), p. 530.

peculiarity in that they allows the spirits far freer movement than the traditional bounds of this circulatory model.<sup>24</sup> This freedom has a knock-on effect both for Cavalcanti's subjectivity and for his account of the material text.

Cavalcanti's spirits number among his myriad personifications, and these personifications are all speakers. Their voices sound alongside the 'authorial', poetic 'I', necessitating a consideration of them as part of a subjectivity that exceeds the bounds of the 'I'-speaker. This is generated precisely through the multiplicity of speaking subjects, which are contained in the poet's body and in the bounds of the text, a dual corpus, in which subjectivity plays out. The *canzone* 'Io non pensava che lo cor giammai' [*I did not think that the heart ever*] gives further weight to this model of subjectivity as the 'I' makes an appeal not, on this occasion, directly to the spirits, but to the *canzone* itself, as is conventional in an *envoi*. This being a Cavalcantian *envoi*, however, it is perhaps unsurprising that the nature of the appeal concerns the mission not just of the text, but also of the spirits:

e prego umilmente a lei tu guidi  
li spiriti fuggiti del mio core,  
che per soverchio de lo su' valore  
eran distrutti, se non fosser vòlti  
(*'Io non pensava'*, 47-50)

and I humbly beg, please guide to her  
the spirits that have fled my heart,  
which, thanks to the overcoming of its power,  
would have been destroyed, had they not flown

Cavalcanti appeals to the poem to assist the spirits in escaping the internal circulation of the body and to enter properly into the circulatory relationship with the beloved, into the circulation of the material text, by means of the textual corpus. By pleading with the text to carry his spirits, Cavalcanti is inserting the text into the circulation of spirits between individuals discussed above, mediating the mechanism of the gaze with the artefact of the text. This imbuing of the text with physiological functions is a striking example of the spirit as 'vector of information', a 'messenger-cum-message [which] is the poetic text itself'.<sup>25</sup> It also illustrates the aforementioned double body, both poetic and physical, across which Cavalcantian subjectivity plays out and in both aspects of which the personified physiological elements form part of a polyphonic subjectivity, expressed and expressing through poetry. The message with which Cavalcanti ultimately entrusts the *canzone* — "These are in the figure|of one who dies in bewilderment" [*'Questi sono in figura|d'un che si more sbigottitamente'*] — acts as a knowing nod to the rhetorical *figura* of prosopopoeia

<sup>24</sup> On this loss of control, see Webb, p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Calvino, *Six Memos*.

through which Cavalcanti is expressing his subjectivity and as a potent statement of the roles of the spirits within that polyphonic model of self. The spirits must thus be classified (in Cavalcanti's account) as textual actors as well as physiological ones.

This binding together of personifications with textuality reaches its apex in the principal sonnet under consideration in this article, 'Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite', to which we will now return. As we have seen, the 'I' gives way entirely to non-'I' speakers — the voices of writing implements — which in turn report the faltering voices of other, physiological personifications: 'We are the sad, bewildered quills, the little clippers and the suffering knife' [*Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite, le cesoiuzze e 'l coltellin dolente*] ('Noi siàn le triste penne', 1-2). These tools are reporting the speech of yet another non-'I' speaker:

Or vi diciàn perché noi siàn partite  
e siàn venute a voi qui di presente:  
la man che ci movea dice che sente  
cose dubbiose nel core apparite;  
(*'Noi siàn le triste penne'*, 5-8)

*Now we tell you why we've left,  
and come to you, here present:  
the hand that moved us says it feels  
worrying things that have appeared in the heart;*

The body of the poet is represented through the mediation of 'la man', the hand personified as speaker and perceiver. It is this hand that 'speaks' [*dice*] and feels [*sente*] and also moves the tools which address us. The poet himself is present, if at all, only in the pronoun 'him' [*costui*] (9) which may indicate his mute presence as the one who is destroyed [*destrutto*] (9), on the brink of death [*sì presso a la morte*] (10), and 'left with nothing but sighs' [*altro non n'è rimasto che sospiri*] (11). All verbal communication is entrusted to the peripheries of the body and the tools of text-making. Thinking again of the illuminations and other images of scribes and writers circulating in Cavalcanti's milieu, this poem would not be an ekphrasis of such a scene, as much as an excision of the figure of the scribe from the image. By removing the scribe from the picture, this sonnet offers an example of 'exacerbated prosopopoeia', which renders Cavalcanti's subjectivity polyphonic, and precludes all attempts to reduce it to any kind of straightforward unity.<sup>26</sup> Such polyphony relies on the doubled body mentioned above (and those polyphonic speakers which it contains), representing the opening up of the poet's interior space, a space which plays host to the physiological and psychological personifications which define Cavalcanti's

<sup>26</sup> Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 81. Harrison reads this process as entirely destructive, while I view it as part of the construction of Cavalcanti's polyphonic subjectivity.

narration of love.<sup>27</sup> This space and its visitors also form part of the circulatory system in which that body participates.

The inherence of these voices in the processes of Cavalcanti's physico-poetic body should inform our understanding of his polyphonic subjectivity and thus his poetics. What the sonnet fundamentally does, as is confirmed in its final tercet, is to illustrate the possibility, in Cavalcanti's poetics, for a model of subjectivity to be expressed in a text without the necessity of the 'I' as voice:

Or vi preghiàn quanto possiàn più forte  
che non sdegniate di tenerci noi,  
tanto ch'un poco di pietà vi miri.  
(*'Noi siàn le triste penne'*, 12-14)

*Now we beg you, as strongly as we can,  
not to disdain to keep us  
as long as a little pity may become you.*

The materials of writing take up the challenge of voicing the destructive experience of love even as the poet-as-speaker dwindles into aphasic silence.<sup>28</sup> These final three lines explicitly confer on the tools of writing — the pens, clippers and knife which have been relating the sorry state of the poet — a speaking role, encompassed in the verb *pregare* [*to plead*] (present in its first person plural form 'preghiàn' in line 12), which is typical of the 'I' (as we saw in the *ballata* quoted above). There is, then, no privileged speaker; even the inanimate objects of the writing process become entangled in the physico-poetic body through Cavalcanti's persistent prosopopoeia and thus take on the role of speaking subjects, undertaking the same actions as the soul, the heart and the spirits.<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that this sonnet simply effaces the self, or that the writing implements take the place of the poet. Rather than an either/or dichotomy, we are presented with a polyphony, an encompassment of multiple co-sounding voices. In fact, we can readily consider these apparently external aspects — the pen, knife and clippers — within the physiological chain of events we witness throughout Cavalcanti's poetic process.

Other texts attest to a circulatory amorous experience: the influx of the experience of the lady (by way of the 'gaze' [*sguardo*] and the entry of a 'lofty, noble spirit' [*spirito* [...] *alto e gentile*] in 'Deh spiriti miei' [*Oh my spirits*], 6; 9-10) through the eyes, via the brain to the heart, stimulating the poet's own spirits and soul; and the subsequent outward movement of the spirits, the sighs and the text, a text that is imbued with the power to transfer spirits. Thus if the text can carry the substance of spirit, surely the tools with

<sup>27</sup> Anichini, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> See Elena Lombardi, 'The Grammar of Vision in Guido Cavalcanti', in *Guido Cavalcanti tra i suoi lettori*, ed. by Ardizzone, pp. 83-92 (89-90).

<sup>29</sup> Corti, 'La penna', p. 44-45.

which the text are created also carry that substance; they become literally incorporated in the poet's twofold corpus and so enjoy an equal role in the polyphonic subjectivity expressed in Cavalcanti's poems. The intricacy and encompassing nature of this body-poetic is an extreme example of the sort of porousness of the heart and body, which has been elucidated above and provides the defining topography in which Cavalcantian subjectivity plays out. 'Guido is the poet of the membrane', yes, but this membrane extends to the very textuality of which carries his self-representation.<sup>30</sup> It is this radical internalism that characterises Cavalcanti's representation of 'a corporeal subjectivity'.<sup>31</sup> In turn, this subjectivity allows the personification of physiological and psychological entities and the extension of the internal realm into the textual one. Cavalcanti's model even incorporates the tools of writing and the text itself into the ranks of personified entities and, indeed, the circulatory relationship with the lady. This cleaving of the corporeal to the written, of subjectivity to the material creative process, confirms the aforementioned distance of the Italian tradition from the oral performance culture of the troubadours, even appropriating the language of such performance for the tools of writing. In Cavalcanti's sonnet, as is commonly the case in late medieval Italian lyric, even speaking is a visual act. Just as Cavalcanti's subjectivity is corporeal, his 'voice' is textual, material and legible.

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In Cavalcanti's poetry, then, we witness an insistently polyphonic subjectivity in which multiple speaking personifications generate a poetic identity. This process is played out within the enclosed, material space of the poet's double corpus, the physical body and the body of the text. The interactions between the 'I'-voice and the voices of the multiple physiological personifications co-sound to offer an irreducibly polyphonic account of poetic subjectivity. In turn, the status of 'I' as a speaker is neither privileged nor unique, but it is still validated through interactions with the other personified speakers. These personifications, whether strictly internal (heart or soul, for example), transitional (the communicative spirits and sighs), or apparently external elements incorporated in the body-poetic (namely the tools of writing and the text itself), bear an equal speaking weight to the 'I' and, as we have seen, can even be entirely substituted for it in a text. Prosopopoeia fulfils the communicative function of subjectivity and performs identities to the reader, while asserting the identity of the body for which they speak (as in the tool of

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<sup>30</sup> Harrison, 'The Ghost of Guido', p. 124.

<sup>31</sup> '[U]na soggettività corporea'; Gentili, p. 17, in relation to the Cavalcantian model of the sensitive soul.

writing reporting the speech of ‘the hand that moves [them]’). The actions of material textual creation, then, become embroiled to the point of inseparability in the representation of subjectivity, which takes place through the speech acts of these multiple voices as transmitted by the material text. In Cavalcanti’s model of subjectivity – and with it, poetic creation – the lover’s physiology and the materiality of the manuscript text are foregrounded as joint loci of the love experience and source of subjectivity and in turn a poetics which represents that subjectivity in a strikingly novel manner. The voices of the ‘I’ and the voices of personified heart, mind, eyes, soul, spirits, hand, clippers, knife and quills interact within a single physical and poetic space to generate a circulatory and dialogic subjectivity. In Cavalcanti’s verse the physiological processes of love become continuous with the physical processes of artistic creation; his poetics are embedded in both body and text, poet and poetry.