

The Possibility of Opera

In the performances of the Prologue of *Orfeo*, as staged by Luca Ronconi (see chapter 3), and of *Combattimento*, as staged by Pierre Audi (chapter 6), a character at first represents the narrator—La Musica in the former case, Testo in the latter one. Both characters assert their presences through musical, verbal, and scenic effects. At a later phase—respectively, in the third and seventh strophes of their settings—La Musica and Testo also emerge as focalizing agents, their function as narrators gradually receding into the background in order to “give life” to focalized characters—respectively, Orpheus and Tancredi/Clorinda. Clorinda becomes so autonomous a character as to herself become a focalizer at the end. Under this perspective, both performances can be said to stage the birth of musical theater, and in the second case, we might add, out of the spirit of the madrigal.

The madrigal is traditionally dominated by the narrator’s voice, diffused into the polyphonic concentus. But in the hands of Monteverdi, particularly in his Books V to VIII, the madrigal becomes the privileged site for the performance of a plurality of points of view. Characters come to life intermittently even despite their absence from the verbal text as such, thanks, for example, to the focalizing role played by instruments in *concertato* madrigals. Still, the narrator remains the ever-present voice (in narrative terms) that is audible and visible mostly in the continuo line, but also intermittently in individual voices (in physical terms) such as the bass—this was a traditional conduit of the “speaker” since Arcadelt. The implicit power of the composer as narrator remained a staple of operatic performances into the seventeenth century (and beyond), as attested by Charles de Saint-Évremond’s claim that “the composer comes to mind before the operatic hero does; it is Rossi, Cavalli, Cesti, whom we imagine . . . and one cannot deny

that in the performances at the Palais Royal everyone is thinking a hundred times more of Lully than of Thésée or Cadmus.”¹

In the following pages I discuss a political and cultural context relevant to the above developments and characterizing the Venice of the first half of the seventeenth century, in which Monteverdi operated. In 1637, the Serenissima, as known, saw the beginning of public opera, followed six years later by the masterwork in the genre, *The Coronation of Poppea*. I focus on the politics and culture of the elites, in particular the academy known as the Incogniti (the Unknowns). It is within this Venetian intellectual circle that human voice was accorded a unique epistemological value in the making of subjectivity—an indispensable condition for the creation of operatic characters defined primarily by their voices. This view of voice depended on a larger, skeptical worldview, typical of some late Renaissance intellectual circles (in this respect proto-Enlightenment-like), which mistrusted commonly accepted dogmas about the value of reason.²

The role played by Giovan Battista Marino in this context was prominent, his aesthetics widely shared also by the librettist of *Poppea*, Giovan Francesco Busenello, a member of the Incogniti. As seen in chapter 6, Monteverdi’s settings of Marino’s poems in his Books VI and VII allowed the composer to develop a proto-operatic fictional world in which characters emerge within a “theatre of the ear” that is all the musician’s autonomous invention as narrator. Marinist aesthetics enabled the multiplicity of points of view characterizing the fictional world of Monteverdi not only in his madrigals but also, as I claim, in his last operatic masterwork. In the final part of the chapter I explore the issue of multiple perspectives in relationship to *Poppea*.

THE AESTHETICS OF NOTHING: MONTEVERDI, MARINO, AND THE INCOGNITI

The Accademia degli Incogniti was one of the largest and most prestigious academies in seventeenth-century Europe. Active in Venice between ca. 1623 and 1661, the academy counted among its three hundred members librettists such as the author of *Poppea* Giovan Francesco Busenello, Giacomo Badoaro (the librettist of Monteverdi’s *Ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*), Maiolino Bisaccioni, Giacomo Dall’Angelo, Giovan Battista Fusconi, Scipione Errico, Nicolò Beregan, and Giulio Strozzi. In addition to librettos and cantata texts, Incogniti members wrote poetic praises of the divas singing on the stages of Venice, such as the Roman Anna Renzi (the first Octavia in *Poppea*). They also might have played a role in the activities of the Teatro Novissimo, the theater which, in 1641, saw the premiere of Giulio Strozzi and Francesco Saccati’s opera *La finta pazza*—the best-traveled opera at the time, touring much of Italy, to finally be brought to Paris in 1645 (it too featured Renzi in the original cast).³ A subgroup of the Incogniti

during the late 1630s, known as the Accademia degli Unisoni, was, as its name suggests, especially interested in music, holding its meetings in the house of singer and composer Barbara Strozzi, the stepdaughter of the Incognito Giulio.

The Incogniti's reputation spread all over Europe via an effective self-promoting propaganda machine, in part thanks to their contacts with several Venetian publishers (notably Sarzina, Baba, and Valvasense), which, despite the threat of censorship, continued to print the Incogniti's licentious works.⁴ Many of the academicians were in fact libertines, their religious views bordering on blasphemy and Protestantism. In the first twenty years of its existence (1637–57) Venetian opera could fully develop thanks in part to a favorable political and religious environment that, in modern terms, can be roughly defined as “progressive” and “liberal.” A libertine academy such as the Incogniti could prosper only in a period in which the city enjoyed a freedom that modern historians deem as unprecedented in European history.

Giovan Francesco Loredano, the founder of the Incogniti and the prime engine of their activities, published several narrative works ranging from lascivious amorous novels to austere religious meditations. The academicians met in his palace near S. Maria Formosa, in the *sestiere* of Castello. An echo of these gatherings is preserved in a collection of discourses published in 1635 dealing with the most varied subjects, from the trivial (such as cheese-tasting) to the serious (politics, history, and aesthetics).⁵

The last discourse of the nineteen in the collection is entitled *Le Glorie del Niente* (The Glories of Nothing) and was written by Marin Dall'Angelo.⁶ Like Busenello (the author of *Poppea*) and other librettists, Dall'Angelo was a prominent Venetian lawyer. He was also the leader of another academy, the Accademia degli Imperfetti, to which Busenello and Bisaccioni belonged, and the father of librettist Giacomo, both an Incognito and an Imperfetto. *Le Glorie del Niente* had been published separately a year earlier as part of a polemical exchange of views between the Incogniti and certain French intellectuals.⁷ In this Franco-Italian polemic the issue at stake was the concept of Nothing, advocated by the Italians but opposed by the French.

The exchange started with a *discorso* by the Incognito Luigi Manzini, entitled *Il Niente* (Nothing), published in May 1634.⁸ Dall'Angelo's *Glorie del Niente* must have appeared shortly after it, since a harsh reply to both essays was published in July, written by the Frenchman Raimondo Vidal and entitled *Il Niente annientato* (Nothing annihilated), with a dedication to Gasparo Coignet, the French ambassador in Venice. In the following month, Jacques Gaffarel, an emissary of Richelieu, attempted a compromise, but in 1635 a certain “Villa, Accademico Disarmato” concluded the diatribe with a detailed critique of Manzini's *discorso*.

This debate echoed many earlier discussions on the same subject dating from as far back as ancient philosophy, and continued the tradition of “paradoxes on

Nothing” that flourished during the Renaissance.⁹ Expanding on this tradition, the academicians extended the philosophical compass of Nothingness so broadly that it illuminates other aspects of their ideology, including the aesthetics implied in their support of the genre of opera.

The main thesis of Manzini’s *Il Niente*—one that was certainly inflammatory, to judge from the subsequent reactions—is “that no thing, outside of God, is more noble and perfect than Nothing.”¹⁰ The author begins his essay by praising novelty over authority, and the “new” over the “old,” claiming for himself a new freedom (*nuova libertà*) of judgment. He rejects all philosophical and theological assertions about the inadmissibility of Nothing as well as scientific claims about Nature’s avoidance of a vacuum (*horror vacui*)—impressively so, as this is a full decade before Torricelli’s discovery of the actual physical vacuum. Nothing, Manzini says, “includes in itself all that is possible and all that is impossible.”¹¹ In a display of virtuoso rhetoric, he initiates a long and elaborate list of attributes of Nothing by affirming that Man himself is Nothing—a statement that he curiously supports by claiming that the Latin word *Homo* contains two Os to represent two zeros that, in turn, represent Nothing (!). Indeed, all human disciplines and liberal arts, according to Manzini, evolve from Nothing. He discusses in turn: perspective, painting, sculpture, military arts, architecture, philosophy, politics, theology, arithmetic (here again the zero is his evidence), dialectic, rhetoric—and finally grammar, of which Manzini says: “It is an unhappy discipline that only tries to shape boys’ rough voices; the same voices which, as soon as they are exposed to air, are dispersed by strong winds, and which, if pious minds did not collect their fantastic relics, would—all of them, at the point of their birth—vanish into the wide sepulcher of Nothing and evaporate.”¹² In this passage voice and nothing are directly associated.

To the list of what we may henceforth call “figures of Nothing”—including voice—the author adds sleep, darkness, silence, time, and death. In his treatment of the last two figures Manzini touches not only on the semantic area of the *vanitates vanitatum* portrayed in contemporary painted “still lives” (one thinks of Evaristo Baschenis), but also on ideological assumptions common to much early seventeenth-century Italian literature: in particular, the poems dealing with the time preceding God’s Creation, when there was no time. For the Incogniti, this *nihil*, contrary to Doctrine, is not dispelled by the act of Creation, but is still within and around us, constantly reminding men of the blurred boundaries between Life and Death. Only at the point of death will we completely “open our eyes” to the “wonders of Nothing” (*le meraviglie del Niente*)—until that moment, we can only be alerted to the signs of what is indeed denoted by absence.¹³

Manzini’s essay was soon echoed by Dall’Angelo’s *discorso* on the same subject, *Le Glorie del Niente*, which reinforced its main points. Dedicating his essay to the founder of the Incogniti, Loredano, Dall’Angelo presents a list of figures of

Nothing similar to Manzini's. For example, under the rubric "Life" Dall'Angelo claims that men are nothing but "dust, shadows, and dreams, which in the end only aim to teach us that our life is an animated trumpet that keeps playing, in the triumph of death, the admirable Glories of Nothing."¹⁴ Other concepts explored by Dall'Angelo indicate the aspiration on the part of the Incogniti toward a unifying, even encyclopedic philosophy of Nothing. These include "poetics," described as "a very formal idea of all Nothing" ("can it," the author wonders, "be itself without inventions, like fables without phantasms, which are nothing else than nothing?");¹⁵ "histories," which are "none other than many glorious annals of the wonders of Nothing";¹⁶ and finally, "politics," a subject relevant to theater (musical and nonmusical):

And if we turn to politics, you see that its aim is nothing else than increasing or augmenting the magnitude of the wonders of Nothing. If politics teaches how to add to the greatness of one Prince, you'll see in it a great master in annihilating the greatness of another one. If politics has already added to the greatness of somebody in the past, what else has it done through this help other than having caused the opening of many Royal Theaters, in which the Nothing represents, in the outcome of the plots, the wonders of its own Glories? In them you can see how from the fall of the first queen of the world, the Babylonian monarchy, arises the great throne of the Persian; from the ruins of the Persian are built the foundations of the Greek; and from the ashes of the Greek is ignited the flame of the greatness of the Roman one.¹⁷

Dall'Angelo affirms that the soul of man is also Nothing, reinforcing Manzini's similar claim (but quoting from Skeptic philosophers), and so are his virtue, history, health, and study. In contrast to the humanistic ideology predominant in the Renaissance, the author claims that the disciplines of the Trivium (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric), far from empowering man in his search for knowledge, teach him nothing else than to embellish "those voices that serve only as midwives to the vain products of our imagination, delivering them perfect into the air only in order to vanish into Nothing."¹⁸ Dall'Angelo also lists all four elements (earth, water, air, and fire) as deriving from Nothing.

Dall'Angelo's belief that the disciplines of language cannot be used to gain knowledge of the world has far-reaching implications. Since the world to which language should refer is indeed Nothing, words become useless. A comprehensive conception of an all-involving Nothing—a true *Weltanschauung*—can certainly not spare human language. Compared to previous, late-Renaissance assumptions, Dall'Angelo's claims reflect a "paradigm shift," a shift that, by extending the concept of Nothing to language, both he and his fellow academician Manzini were no doubt conscious of accomplishing (Manzini, we remember, opens his essay by praising novelty over authority). Their views of the relative value of reality and language bear four significant consequences for music and opera.

First, the Incogniti aesthetics reveals a profound distrust of verbal language—words, in their view, are as unsubstantial as the outside world that they mirror and to which they refer. The Incogniti skepticism affects *in primis* the status of written texts. This is evident in other works of theirs, for example, in the novels of Loredano, in which characters often show a remarkable inability to speak normally, as if they were affected by logorrhea or aphasia. Such symptoms of a crisis of language, however, are not only a peculiar characteristic of Incogniti works but, as modern literary critics observe, they can also be considered one of the main stylistic features of Italian literature during the period in which the academy flourished. In that period, which critics generally consider the beginning of the Baroque, many literary genres lost their internal balance, their classic decorum and equilibrium. Prose texts, for example, either stretched themselves into multi-volume works of gigantic proportions or shrank into the tiny dimensions of the aphorism, in both cases disrupting the reader's temporal expectations. The Incogniti philosophy of nothing, with its distrust of the power of verbal language, may well be considered the philosophical premise of these stylistic extremes. These features also characterize contemporaneous texts written for music, i.e., *poesie per musica* and librettos, texts of special interest to the academicians. In such texts, programmatically, the semantic "weight" of words tends to evaporate, while their sonorous aspect prevails. On the page, for example, arias appear as short aphoristic poems. But in the life of performance the music stretches the text's temporal dimension, conveying the feeling and the dramatic situation. Distrust of the meaning of language is compensated by trust in the power of voice. The Incogniti distrust of written texts opens the door to performance—and Venetian opera will immediately capitalize on this new opportunity.

A second consequence of the Incogniti claims (one not unrelated to the first) affects the fabric of language itself, that is, the dependence of sound on sense.¹⁹ If words (as the Incogniti claim) lose their power to reflect reality—i.e., if they are disentangled from their meanings—then the relationship of meaning to sound and voice is disrupted, entering a situation of crisis and instability. To borrow from the terminology used by Michel Foucault in describing the linguistic situation of a wide variety of discourses produced in seventeenth-century Europe: If words are no longer the "marks of things," a void opens up in language between signifiers and signifieds; the former, emancipated from the latter, become free to "wander off on their own" and to play with themselves as pure sonorous entities.²⁰ This dissociation of sound and meaning enables a positive evaluation, indeed a legitimization, of sound in itself, affecting not only its linguistic but also its musical aspect. Two autonomous sounding structures enter in fact into a relationship when text and music are joined together. Being equal in status, music does not need to claim its dependence on texts. The Incogniti's distrust of verbal meaning legitimizes new music-stylistic choices. For example, the use of sound-miming

melismas to illustrate textual meaning (madrigalisms) can coexist with passages that efface meaning, such as overvocalizations resulting from asynchronicities between text and music.²¹ These phenomena become justified from the aesthetic point of view. After all, why bother to reflect the meaning of words musically if they signify nothing?

A third consequence of the detachment of *res* and *verba* accomplished by the Incogniti philosophy is the dismantling of a traditional notion that had dominated the aesthetics of opera since late sixteenth-century discussions on the legitimacy of the genre, centering on Aristotelian precepts of imitation in drama: the adherence to the principle of verisimilitude.²² If (as the Incogniti claim) the world has no meaning and signs are divorced from the things they should signify, then no reality can be persuasively staged, either verbally or visually. The Renaissance ideal of art imitating nature loses its *raison d'être*, and verisimilitude becomes dispensable. Indeed, the Incogniti's innovative views represent the counterpart—better, the epistemological condition—of two principles at the root of seventeenth-century aesthetics in Italy: novelty (*novità*) and the “marvelous” (*meraviglia*). These two principles, positively emphasizing imagination and experimentation, are diametrically opposed to that of verisimilitude, with its implications of realism and adherence to received notions. It is revealing in this respect that Marino—the champion and main practitioner of the aesthetics of “novelty” and of the “marvelous”—was also a member of the Accademia degli Incogniti. He was the author of the prototypical Baroque *dictum* “il fin del poeta è la meraviglia” (the aim of the poet is to marvel), a sentence that might have been extended de facto to the aims of opera producers.

Finally, breaking with the principle of verisimilitude also allowed the Incogniti—and opera—to set aside another tenet ruling Renaissance drama, one endlessly discussed by literary theorists, the so-called Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action.²³ The three unities were discussed by Incogniti librettists in the prefaces to their works, often, however, simply to dismiss them, claiming that modern taste and the need to satisfy the audience were enough to breach them. Busenello, the librettist of *Poppea*, argued against the unity of time in the preface to *Didone* (1641), against those of time and place in that of *Giulio Cesare* (1646), and against unity of action in *Gli amori di Apollo e Dafne* (1640). He justifies this last breach by invoking the example of Guarini's tragicomedy *Il Pastor fido*, with its two-tiered plot involving two couples of lovers—Mirtillo and Amarilli, and Silvio and Dorinda—which provided librettist Giovanni Faustini (not an Incognito, however) with the model for the plots of his operas of the 1640s and 1650s. As Andrea Battistini has observed in relationship to the plot of *Poppea*, “while the literati suffered for a long time the vetoes of the pseudo-Aristotelian unities, the librettists and the musicians, much more unscrupulous than the literati, allowed themselves to weave within the same opera multiple and varied actions, such as,

in *Poppea*, the tragic act of Seneca's suicide, the moving event of Octavia's exile, and the erotic scenes tied to the appearance on stage of Poppaea.²⁴

As a consequence of this disregard of dramatic unities, operatic plots could now fully resemble those of novels (*romanzi*), a genre in which the Incogniti were indeed masters.²⁵ In the words of one of the Incogniti novelists, Giambattista Manzini, the genre of the novel was "the most stupendous and glorious machine devised by the mind," one that could freely blend history, poetry, and epics, and compete with more established literary genres. The same could be said for the new Venetian operas of the 1640s and 1650s, which, precisely like contemporary Venetian novels, had clear commercial goals and aimed to cultivate a wide and diversified public, from the nobleman to the prostitute. The libertine academy even made a collective effort to publish a multi-authored collection of novels written by forty-five of its members and entitled *Cento novelle dei signori Incogniti*, which came out in 1651 but was published in a first installment of thirty items in 1641.²⁶ Incogniti libertine writers such as Ferrante Pallavicino, Francesco Pona, and Antonio Rocco (but also Loredano) all wrote several successful novels, often censored by the Church. The Incogniti activity in this literary field is to be seen in a European context in which this popular genre was starting to become what it still is today, and to which the Venetian authors made a significant contribution, their works being translated into French, German, English, and Spanish.²⁷

The novel is the genre characterized by that relationship between narrator and characters, and by that multiplicity of points of views, from which modern narratology first developed its main conceptual tools, such as focalization. In a chapter of his essay "Dramaturgy of Italian Opera" entitled, significantly, "The Opera as Novel," Carl Dahlhaus discusses the plot of Francesco Cavalli's *Erismena* (1655) as a manifestation of the poetics of "beautiful confusion" or *beau irrégulier* (Boileau). Dahlhaus traces its roots to the Baroque novel of Hellenistic derivation: "as 'ideal types', both the musical and the spoken forms of baroque drama"—he claims, although unaware of the Incogniti novels—"are derivatives of the novel, for it was only in that genre's almost unlimited space that the interplay of deceptions, calumnies, misunderstandings, and mistaken identities could achieve the essential degree of complication."²⁸

If opera, as Dahlhaus claims, does resemble a novel—and this, as we have seen, is particularly true in the Venice of the late Monteverdi (Francesco Cavalli's teacher)—then the issue arises as to the identity of the narrator and its relationship to the characters—an issue with which the madrigal had long dealt with before the Incogniti laid the ground for a new operatic aesthetics.

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In the final pages of his *Glorie del Niente*, Dall'Angelo proceeds to dismantle (one would say, annihilate) another relevant notion that lies at the core of Renaissance

aesthetics: Petrarch's concept of female Beauty. That the academician was aware of disrupting traditional notions is shown by the elaborate rhetorical maneuver to which he resorts in his essay to introduce the issue as part of his "catalogue" of attributes of Nothing. Deceptively, he first lists all the reasons why we should indeed believe in Beauty as the manifestation in the universe of the One, thus following the Neoplatonic tradition embodied, for example, in much sixteenth-century love poetry influenced by Petrarch or by the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino.²⁹ But then the Incognito's prose takes a brusque turn: "Yet this is not so, listeners. On the contrary: there is nobody else that can more certainly explain to us the glories of Nothing than Beauty: she, the glorious hand that in the great painting of the universe, brushes for us the wonders of Nothing; she herself is the vague and most gracious Nothing . . . , the first mother of the glories of Nothing."³⁰

In support of his controversial claim that Beauty is Nothing, Dall'Angelo quotes the following lines:

O diletto mortal, gioia terrena,
 come pullula tosto e tosto cade!
 Vano piacer che gli animi trastulla,
 nato di Vanità, *svanisce in nulla*. (emphasis added)³¹

Dall'Angelo draws the four lines from the seventh canto of *L'Adone*, Marino's masterwork of 1623, today considered the quintessential Baroque poem.³² The lines conclude the episode featuring a beautiful singer named Allurement. In *Adone* VII music and voice are so central that the canto can be considered a manifesto of the musical aesthetics of the period. In this respect it provides a background for understanding the Incogniti's views on voice and, indirectly, on opera—as well as Monteverdi's own aesthetics.

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L'Adone is a poem of immense ambition and proportions, indeed the longest one in Italian literature (about forty thousand lines divided into twenty cantos). Its refined style has been aptly characterized by a modern scholar as "grandly musical."³³ Marino often uses language not so much for its content, or for advancing the narrative, but for its purely sonorous qualities, almost as if he were toying with language's signifiers. In effect the poem is poor as far as narrative elements are concerned, the plot consisting basically of a gigantic reelaboration (the longest in world literature) of the myth of Venus and Adonis as recounted by Ovid, filled with lengthy digressions.

One of Marino's most extensive additions to the myth consists of the visit of Venus and Adonis to the Palace of the Senses. There the young boy is "educated" by the goddess in the pleasures of the senses by walking through five Gardens,

those of Sight, Smell (canto VI), Hearing and Music, Taste (canto VII), and finally Touch (canto VIII).

In canto VII, entitled “Le delizie” (The delightful things), Adonis and Venus enter the Garden of Hearing after a guardian playing the lyre welcomes them.³⁴ The famous lines “Music and Poetry are two sisters/who alleviate the afflicted” (1, 1–2) announce the topic that repeatedly surfaces in the canto, the relationships between voice and words.³⁵ Through a detailed anatomic description of the ear and of its functioning, the guardian of the garden explains to the visitors the value of hearing (11–17). Then he brings them to a large birdcage in which several species of birds, all described in great detail, sing their “symphony” (18–31). One bird stands out in the group: the nightingale, the “musical monster” (*musico mostro*), “the sounding atom” (*atomo sonante*), whose performance is described as if it were that of a virtuoso singer (*ottava* 33):

To hear a musical monster: oh what a wonder,
 one that is heard, yes, but only a little bit,
 how it now breaks its voice, and now recovers,
 now stops it, now twists it, now soft, now loud,
 now it murmurs lowly, now thins it,
 now makes of sweet *groppi* a long chain,
 which always, whether it scatters it or gathers it,
 with the same melody it ties and loosens.³⁶

The nightingale first sings a “lament” and then a “canzonetta,” while Adonis listens with “attentive ears” (*orecchie fisse*). Mercury arrives and tells the lovers a story that reminds them of the price once paid by the nightingale for such gorgeous singing (38–62): One night an abandoned lover took refuge in a forest and started singing his lament accompanied by his lute. A nightingale heard him, stopped singing his plea for the coming day, and started, little by little, to imitate the lover’s lament. The man took pleasure in hearing the imitation of his singing, so, initially with the intention of mocking the bird, he started playing some really virtuoso passages on the lyre to see if the bird was able to follow him. To the lover’s dismay, the nightingale actually managed to replicate everything that he played, so that a heated contest arose, which, in canto VII, lasts for nine *ottave* (44–53). The contest ends with the brutal death of the nightingale, literally exploding because of excessive singing (54). Mercury concludes the story as follows: the poet, after having buried the bird within his lute, kept one of its feathers with which he wrote his lament on the death of the nightingale (55–62).

Through the episode of the contest between poet and nightingale Marino creates a powerful narrative symbolizing the birth of written poetry out of the death of singing: it is necessary for the nightingale to die in order for the poet to start writing (earlier he only improvised). That is: if music and poetry are indeed

sisters (as Marino claims at the beginning of the canto), the latter can exist only insofar as the former sacrifices her very essence, although music does survive within poetry as a memory, an absence (i.e., a nothing).

The episode of the contest also shares important characteristics with other literary narratives concerning the bird's singing and, by association, the voice's relationship with death; for example, with the story of the Lacaedemonian and the nightingale narrated by Plutarch, which was adopted in the Renaissance by Erasmus and then repeated as a topos by many other writers, a story that culminates (as Marino's contest does) with the death of the bird and the suggestion that it was always just a nothing. Death is also the outcome in the Greek myth of Procne and Philomela, at the root of many references to voice in European literature.³⁷ In this instance, as in Marino's contest, death is followed by lament: Procne is transformed into a nightingale perpetually lamenting her child Itys, whom she has killed to avenge her husband's rape of her sister, Philomela.³⁸ As the nightingale's lament represents Procne's memory of the death of her son, so too the poet's lament in Marino's episode of the contest in *Adone* VII represents the memory of the nightingale's death.

Marino also follows this death-lament pattern in his *Rime boscherecce* (part of *La Lira*), a collection of short poems discussed in the previous chapter in connection with Monteverdi's settings in Books VI and VII.³⁹ The eighty-eight poems of the *Boscherecce* are divided into two sections, 1–64 and 65–88, the second section being merely a monothematic appendix entirely devoted to Polyphemus. In the first section—the body of the work—the Procne myth informs poems 2 to 5, which praise the singing of the nightingale, similarly to *ottava* 33 of *Adone* VII, quoted above. The last poem, no. 64, is instead a lament on the bird's death. The narrative implicit in Marino's arrangement of these poems thus again follows the myth's path from singing to death and lament. Consequently, the subtext of the central poems, from 6 to 63, is death. These poems include the sonnets set by Monteverdi in his Books VI and VII—nos. 41, 42, 43, 47, and 50—poems that, as we have seen, are characterized by the topic of detachment (flight, departure, separation). In light of Marino's narrative in the *Boscherecce*, Monteverdi's settings of seemingly innocent pastoral poems take on an additional tragic subtext, because detachment becomes a signifier for death through singing. The topic of death, we remember, also informs the other settings included in Book VI: the two grandiose lament cycles, by Arianna (*Lasciatemi morire*) and by Glauco (*Incenerite spoglie*), and the two Petrarch settings derived from the *in morte* part of the *Canzoniere*, *Zefiro torna* and *Ohimé il bel viso*.

Monteverdi's poetic choices in Book VI are thus characterized by an overall tragic *tinta*, as it emerges from considering the poetic source for four out of the ten settings therein included, those on texts drawn from Marino's *Boscherecce* (poems no. 41, 42, 43, and 50 in Marino, corresponding to madrigals nos. 9, 8,

4, and 7 in Monteverdi). If, then, the topic of Monteverdi's Book VI was indeed death, what was its purpose and destination? Book VI is the only madrigal book by Monteverdi that, mysteriously, contains no dedicatee. It was published in Venice in 1614 soon after the composer had moved from Mantua to Venice after having served the Gonzagas since about 1592, the year of the dedication of Book III to Duke Vincenzo. The poetic content of Book VI has a clear retrospective character. The *Lamento d'Arianna* was of course originally composed, in the monodic version, for the opera *Arianna* performed in Mantua in 1608 for the wedding of Vincenzo's son, Francesco, to Margherita, who came from the court of Savoy in Turin. Marino was employed at that court by Margherita's father, Carlo Emanuele I, from 1608 to 1615. Hidden under the name "Glaucó" in *Incenerite spoglie* is none other than Duke Vincenzo, mourning the death of the singer Caterina Martinelli, who had been scheduled to sing *Arianna* but had died prematurely. On February 9, 1612, just two years before the publication of Book VI, Duke Vincenzo passed away, leaving the dukedom to Francesco, the dedicatee of the score of *Orfeo*. This score was published in Venice in 1609 and then reissued in 1615, the year after Book VI came out. Francesco died prematurely the same year as his father, on December 22, 1612. We know that the relationships between Monteverdi and Francesco's successor, his brother Ferdinando, were not ideal—the musician having left for Venice just two years after the new duke came to power.

It is likely, then, that the retrospective Book VI was put together to commemorate the death of the two Gonzaga dukes—father and son—who had indeed protected Monteverdi (and his brother Giulio Cesare) for about twenty years and had both passed away just before its publication. In early modern Italy, patronage links, as Claudio Annibaldi reminds us by singling out Monteverdi's career as an example, did not simply and abruptly break once an artist switched patrons.⁴⁰ This is shown, for example, by Monteverdi's autobiographical dedication of his *Selva morale* to Vincenzo's daughter, Eleonora Gonzaga, written in 1641 from Venice, almost three decades after he had left Mantua (see chapter 4). As discussed in chapter 6, by choosing to set Marino's narrative-oriented poems in Book VI, Monteverdi undoubtedly signaled a shift in his musical poetics. It is possible that his poetic choice also helped him to link the work to his personal and professional past.

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In Marino's *Adone* VII the narrative pattern "singing–death–lament" is so pervasive that it can be said not only to affect the episode of the deadly contest between poet and nightingale (*ottave* 38–62) but to also extend backward to the one preceding it (32–37), which includes *ottava* 33 (discussed above), describing the bird's joyful and solitary performance as a virtuoso singer. In light of this pattern, the second episode is indeed the natural outcome of the first. The assumption

that death is constantly implied in the nightingale's singing is reinforced by an examination of the oldest literary source for *ottava* 33, a passage from the *Natural History* of the Latin encyclopedist Pliny the Elder. Pliny describes nightingales as singing "harmoniously for fifteen days and fifteen nights consecutively, without interruption," then he adds:

In the first place there is so loud a voice and so persistent a supply of breath in such a tiny little body; then there is the consummate knowledge of music in a single bird: the sound is given out with modulations, and now is drawn out into a long note with one continuous breath, now varied by managing the breath, now made staccato by checking it, linked together by prolonging it, or carried on by holding it back; or it is suddenly lowered, and at times sinks into a mere murmur, loud, low, bass, treble, with trills, with long notes, modulated when this seems good—high, middle, low register.⁴¹

But what is most relevant to our point is that in Pliny this passage is followed by a description of the heated contests occurring between nightingales. The contests, he says, often finish tragically with the death of one of the contenders, who would rather stop breathing than singing. Other nightingales instead (Pliny continues) prefer to listen first to the best singers and then to start imitating them; then teacher and pupil exchange parts and we can perceive that often the teacher reproaches the pupil for his mistakes.

The idea of "contest" is a crucial aspect of nightingales' singing according to Pliny, whose text has been immensely influential in European literature. Among the many literary works influenced by this description of the nightingale—specifically, the bird's joyful singing—is Guarini's *Mentre vaga angioletta*. Monteverdi sets this poem in his Book VIII of madrigals (publ. 1638; see chapter 6). The setting features two tenors competing with each other in highly virtuoso passages, in an exaltation of pure voice. Monteverdi's doubling, however, is not strictly required by Guarini's poem, which describes the experience of listening to one singer only. The doubling thus represents a reference, through music, to Pliny's description of the emulation between the birds—a text only implied by the poet but openly suggested by the composer, who evidently takes over as the narrator.⁴²

As seen, the two episodes of *Adone* VII described above (*ottave* 33 and 38–62) are related through their common Plinian source: the joyful nightingale singing in *ottava* 33 is only a prelude to the bird's tragic death in *ottava* 56. Marino absorbs and reelaborates the archetypal narrative pattern concerning nightingales present not only in Pliny's description but also in Plutarch's tale and in the myth of Procne. In effect, in canto VII, singing appears to be a "veil" that disguises what the Incogniti consider, as we have seen, the most inevitable among the manifestations of Nothingness, death. Since the bird is obviously a trope for the singer—through the performance Adonis learns about the sense of

hearing—Marino, then, in these two episodes, is advancing a discourse on the power (and dangers) of the human voice. This is further confirmed by a third episode, covering *ottave* 81–95 and following those involving the nightingales: the manifestation and disappearance of Allurement, a monstrous but charming character, half-woman and half-bird (but with fish scales, and so a Siren). This episode unfolds a narrative whose outcome reinforces Marino’s main point, i.e., that human voice simply disguises death.

After having heard the sad story of the musical contest, Venus and Adonis enter the Garden of Music and meet the living allegories of Poetry and Music, two women, one appealing to the intellect, the other to the senses. If Poetry learns from music both rhythm and meter, Music learns from Poetry how to enrich sounds with concepts.⁴³ Marino himself provides the clue for the reader to associate the mythological world he describes in *Adone* with the contemporary musical world of opera and singers. In a clear reference to the Florentine *camerata* and to the emergence of monody (69–70), the poet claims that only Italy was able to inherit the ancient Greek art of balancing music and poetry. This perfect equilibrium of the two sisters, however, is lost soon afterwards (81), when, all of a sudden, a female figure—Allurement—emerges from inside a flower and starts singing with an enchanting and magical voice.⁴⁴

Both a moral condemnation of and a fascination with the character of Allurement coexist in Marino’s description of her physical attributes and of her singing.⁴⁵ Before reporting her words, Marino defines them as “alluring and clear voices, in which *death* was welcomed into the *air*” (89, 7–8; italics mine).⁴⁶ The poet is fully aware of the ambiguities involved in dealing with the power of voice. On the one hand, he upholds the thesis that song is deceiving and lascivious, that it appeals to our irrational side and thus is morally condemnable. On the other hand, Marino describes sound and hearing as an indispensable source of pleasure and delight. In the end, he does not solve this apparent contradiction, but simply juxtaposes the two sides of the issue, leaving the dialectic, so to speak, in place. The danger of voice, for example, is a theme that indeed emerges at the beginning of the canto (1–7), before Venus and Adonis reach the Garden of Hearing. There, echoing the century-long condemnation of female voice within Christian doctrine, Marino speculates on whether female voice can be morally acceptable when it is completely freed from words. This time the poet gives a negative answer: voice is indeed conducive to lasciviousness. Yet, during the rest of the canto, as we have seen, the poet transparently betrays (and conveys) his undeniable fascination with pure voice, by highlighting its most sensual and physical characteristics through the evocation of both the nightingale’s and Allurement’s singing.

The final part of the episode of Allurement shows the dangerous side of singing, but, again, in an ambiguous way. The singer herself warns Adonis about

the transitory nature of Beauty: “Beauty,” she says, “is a flash of lightening, age a shadow, / which cannot stop the inevitable flight [of time]” (91, 1–2).⁴⁷ At this point Allurement disappears, almost dematerializing under the effect of a ray of sun. Her dissolving into air is followed by Marino’s final reflection on the whole episode (95): “O deadly delight, earthly joy, / how it swarms at once, and at once falls! / Vain pleasure that amuses souls, / born of vanity, vanishes into nothing.”⁴⁸

These, we remember, are the lines that the Incognito Dall’Angelo quotes in the section of his *Glories of Nothing* dealing with Beauty as “the first mother of Nothing.” By considering the context of canto VII of Marino’s *Adone* (that is, by reading the lines quoted by Dall’Angelo as the Incogniti themselves would have read them) it emerges that Beauty (in Dall’Angelo) coincides with Allurement (in Marino): both are indeed singers. For Marino, Beauty and Voice converge in the character of the vanishing Allurement. But Dall’Angelo, as we have seen, takes a further step. For him, Beauty and Voice fall under an identical semantic umbrella: they are both *vanitates*, tropes for death, “figures of Nothing.”

The ramifications of the equation made by the Incogniti among Nothing, Beauty, and Voice are consequential for the genre of opera ever since its origins on the public stage in Venice. In operas, female characters—none perhaps more so than Monteverdi’s Poppaea—were represented on stage as alluring not only for their physical beauty but also for their enchanting voices. By enabling the concept of Nothing to be woven into a rich semantic web with Voice, Beauty, and Death, the Incogniti were in effect paving the way to that particular diva, the *femme fatale*, who was to dominate the operatic stage for centuries.

FOCALIZATION IN *POPPEA*

Around the concept of Nothing, as we have seen, the Incogniti built a constellation of related tropes. These included Voice, Death, and Beauty, but also Time, Dust, Darkness, Dreams, Silence, Sleep, etc. In literary works, these figures formed a “repertoire” upon which writers drew whenever the subject fell into the semantic area of Nothing.⁴⁹ Busenello, the author of *Poppea*, adopted these tropes frequently in his poetic works, including in his libretto for Monteverdi. For example, in the Prologue, Fortune says in addressing Virtue (here and below, figures of Nothing are in italics):

Ogni tuo professore
 se da me sta diviso
 rimane un *vacuo nulla*
 destituito da numeri, che mai
 non rileva alcun conto;
 sembra un *foco* dipinto
 che né scalda, né splende.⁵⁰