Introduction: Desire

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Within its reach, though yet ungrasped
Desire’s perfect Goal —
No nearer — lest the Actual —
Should disentrall thy soul —

— Emily Dickinson

Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

— John Donne

Listening back to the echoes that can be found in volume 15 of MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities, the volume ended on a note of yearning. The introduction to Echo discussed how readers turn to literature to seek a completeness lacking in our own lives, due to the inability to see our own stories from start to finish. This yearning for an irretrievable, complete past is inextricably bound up with the concept of the echo. Such longing has similar potency for this special issue on desire. Much in the same way that the echo is always an imperfect mimic of the original, desire functions in a similar mode: the fulfilment of desire often falls short of the overwhelming impulses that underlie the urge. This could, however, shed light on the ineffability of desire; our inability to effectively communicate in words or images how desire completely enthrals us. Could, then, the anti-climactic fulfilment in literature or cultural production more broadly echo an inability to describe desire, its ineffability and how it naturally evades language?

The human drive of desire, whether for sex, food, knowledge, power, material assets or for the continuation of narrative, is a topic that fascinates novelists, poets, cinematographers, and other artists. When musing over desire though, artists rarely describe it in the same way. Desire resists a simple, uniform definition and consequently there is a wealth of literature and cinema that addresses the human drive of desire in various ways. Reflecting on narrative pleasure and its friable nature, Roland Barthes states: ‘[e]veryone can testify that the pleasure of the text is not certain: nothing says that this same text will please us a second time; it is a friable pleasure, split by mood, habit, circumstance, a precarious pleasure’. Here, Barthes suggests that we cannot rely on pleasure, it has a certain friability. The pleasure gained from the text cannot be predicted in any sense, and such an interpretation lends itself to other forms of desire. Desire cannot be determined by ‘mood, habit [nor] circumstance’; rather it evades rules, habits and patterns. The nature of desire intrigued contemporary Spanish cinematographer, Pedro Almodóvar, so much so that he named his production company in its honour, El Deseo S.A [Desire]. The Cartesian formulation ‘I desire, therefore I am’ can be applied to many of his most compelling characters.

His films are notable for how they deal with the pervasiveness of lust and desire, and how these infuse human relationships. Desire is so abundant in Almodóvar’s cinematography that Paul Julian Smith’s monograph on his cinema is quite fittingly entitled, Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar. The language that scholars and artists decide to use when referring to desire is worth analysing. Here, for example, Smith defines desire in terms of excess, of desire overflowing or being abundant, by using the adjective ‘unlimited’. By framing desire as ‘unlimited’, Smith highlights the idea that desire is boundless, it has infinite possibilities and those that experience desire have a certain lack of control over their drives. Such language ties into the friability that Barthes attributed to the pleasure of the text. Lacking control over our desires is a theme that is addressed at length in Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita. Humbert Humbert’s transgressive obsession with twelve-year-old Dolores Haze, or Lolita as he calls her, enthrals his body and torments his mind: ‘[w]hile my body knew what it craved for, my mind rejected my body’s every plea. [...] Taboos strangulated me.’ Humbert’s desire for a young, pre-pubescent girl — a ‘nymphet’ as he calls her — is certainly an illicit desire forbidden in society, and as such, he metaphorically describes such taboos and bodily impulses strangling him. In the aftermath of his illicit, perverse relation with Lolita, he describes himself teetering over the edge of temptation, tentative that he may

8 Nabokov, p. 18.
fall prey to his desires once again: ‘two years of monstrous indulgence had left me with certain habits of lust: I feared lest the void I lived in might drive me to plunge into the freedom of sudden insanity when confronted with a chance temptation in some lane between school and supper.’ The language Nabokov uses here in Humbert’s narrative is interesting. Nabokov describes the act of Humbert giving into his desires as a plunge into pleasure. Namely, if he gives into ‘monstrous indulgence’ again, he will struggle to limit his desire and he might potentially become overwhelmed and in a state of ‘sudden insanity’. His desire is also described as being monstrous — namely it’s unnatural, potentially hideous or frightening in nature. Such language shows the unpredictability of desire, and how it can deviate from what is considered safe and natural.

Monstrous and sadistic forms of desire and violence can be found in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*. In Carter’s short story, the heroine is due to marry a Marquis and she reflects on the unpredictability of his desire, directly connecting desire and violence: ‘[a]nd it was as though the imponderable weight of his desire was a force I might not withstand, not by virtue of its violence but because of its very gravity.’ That the heroine senses a gravity and violence associated with the Marquis’s desire is a notable foreshadowing of her discovery that he has killed his three former wives and enjoys sadistic pornography. *The Bloody Chamber* deals with the dangers of sadomasochistic and violent forms of desire that exceed consensual limits and end in bloodshed. Desire, then, is not always contained within safe and consensual boundaries. For the purposes of this volume, it is worth reflecting on the shapeshifting nature of desire: for some, it is ineffable; for others, excessive; or even imponderably violent. The metamorphic quality of desire imbues this volume of *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities* and the papers that comprise it.

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Constructed from a kaleidoscope of cultural impulses ranging from classical mythology to doctrinal discussion, the presence of an affective lexicon in the discourse of desire in Dante’s *Paradiso* is reflected and validated in Botticelli’s choice of infant figures in his illustrations to cantos 21 and 30. — Rebecca Bowen

The volume begins firmly on Italian soil with Dr Rebecca Bowen (University of Oxford) who writes on the languages of desire in Botticelli and Dante (‘Languages of Desire in Botticelli and Dante: *Paradiso* 21’). In her essay, she explores the interpretative possibilities of Sandro Botticelli’s illustrations of the blessed souls in *Paradiso* 21 as a flock of winged infants. Used as the basis for the engravings included in the 1481 Florentine edition of the text, Botticelli’s illustrations validate certain lexical strands in Dante’s poem, particularly

9 Nabokov, pp. 257–58.
10 Nabokov, pp. 257–58.
the strands that carry an affective, eroticized charge. Bowen uses Botticelli’s winged infants as a lens to break down the hermeneutical puzzle that is Dante’s complex and ambiguous engagement with desire. Notably, she explores Botticelli’s image and Dante’s text from the perspective of the ‘potentially secularizing, albeit classicizing, connotations of winged infants in fifteenth-century visual culture’. Analysing the kinetic exuberance of the winged infants, Bowen’s essay demonstrates how Botticelli’s illustration responds to multiple aspects of the complex poetic fabric of Dante’s poem. Ultimately, she posits that Botticelli took advantage of the cultural ambiguity of the winged infants in the late fifteenth century to reflect and respond to the lexical range of Dante’s Paradiso and its kaleidoscopic presentation of desire.

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Both women, inspired by Rousseau, write on the precipice between the expression of female desire and the sensibility and opinion of the eventual readership. — Katherine Moore

In her contribution to this volume, Katherine Moore (Florida State University) explores the representation of female desire in Madame Roland’s Mémoires and Sophie Cottin’s Claire d’Albe. Roland and Cottin wrote in the milieu of eighteenth-century France where the rules of bienséance largely forbade the discussion of sexuality in literature, with female sexuality being particularly taboo. In her essay entitled ‘Reading Between the Lines: Female Sexual Desire in the Late Eighteenth Century’, Moore analyses the intricacies of expression and euphemism which imbue Roland and Cottin’s texts. Through euphemistic language in her Mémoires, Madame Roland distances herself from the sexual sensations of her body, placing herself on a chaste pedestal. As such, Moore argues that Roland’s posthumous writings may have been performative in that they cemented a chaste image of Madame Roland, an image that jarred with the extramarital affair she had in the months leading up to her arrest and execution. Cottin’s epistolary novel, Claire d’Albe, is infused with passion, desire and transgression, told through a loose retelling of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse. The eponymous protagonist of Cottin’s novel, Claire, is largely concerned with keeping her desire to commit adultery under control. Claire, though, is unable to resist the sensorial pleasure of Frédéric, the object of her sexual desire. Through Cottin’s sophisticated use of euphemistic language, she presents Claire as ecstatic and overwhelmed with the violence of her desire. The inclusion of such female desire was unheard of in eighteenth-century France, and indeed, morally outrageous. Publishing her novel anonymously, Cottin was able to write sexually scandalous prose that placed the sexuality of her female protagonist at the centre of her text, which became the best-selling novel in France between 1816–20.
Women living within patriarchal systems, such as Gabriela, wear symbolic masks to tackle the anxiety produced by a key feature of their femininities: the wish to overtly follow their sex drive without any guilt. — Karol Valderrama-Burgos

In ‘“Life is Real”: Sexual Freedom and Sex for Pleasure in La vida “era” en serio (Mónica Borda, 2011), Dr Karol Valderrama-Burgos (Queens University Belfast) brings us to the world of cinema, here exploring the depiction of desire in one of the first Colombian films to be directed by a woman. The protagonist of Borda’s film, Gabriela, lives in constant denial of her desires, as these appear to clash with her dual role as a mother and wife. A world of fantasy and of masks — perhaps suggested by the title, which echoes, albeit in inverted form, Calderón’s Life is a Dream — thus becomes the playground in which Gabriela can break free from these shackles. Initially presented as docile and submissive, Gabriela’s worldview is shaken following an encounter with her polar-opposite, Luisa: a femme fatale who will go on to awaken Gabriela’s repressed sexual desires. Exploring the women’s subsequent encounters in detail, Valderrama-Burgos posits that Joan Rivière’s work on womanliness as masquerade provides the clue to unlocking Gabriela’s increasing erratic behaviour, which at times borders on the criminal. It is argued that masks — physical and imagined — are constantly at play when desire is in question. It is only through adopting the mask of another that Gabriela may voice desires that are initially foreign even to herself.

Jaime Gil de Biedma’s diaries present a chameleonic, multifaceted approach to the tension ridden performance of masculine gender and queer desire in the Spanish intellectual bourgeoisie of the late 1950s. — Álvaro González Montero

Of all genres, it is perhaps the diary form that provides the most natural home for desire to be explored. The personal diary is by its nature confessional: at least in genesis, it is the opposite of the bestseller — its intended readership remaining stubbornly at one. It should come as no surprise, then, that these texts are so often published posthumously. Such is the case in ‘The Camp and the Dandy: Class, Sexuality, and Desire in Gil de Biedma’s Diaries’ by contributor Álvaro González Montero (University of Leeds). Focusing on the diaries of Gil de Biedma — acclaimed twentieth-century Catalan poet, member of the Generación de 50 and perpetual provocateur — González Montero explores distinct epochs of Gil de Biedma’s sexual experimentation. Mapping through the diaries across decades, Montero identifies distinct stages in the poet’s evolution in sexual expressivity, ranging from a keen interest in the marginal (exemplified by a maldista attitude) to an altogether more detached, Wildean campism in his later years.
In Ewald’s tragedy, set in the Garden of Eden, Ewa is the first human being to appear, and her very first words reveal that she suddenly feels a still-undefined desire: ‘Mig længes inderlig — men veed jeg selv hvorefter? — / Gud! — ’ [I long fervently — but do I know for what? — / God!]. — Sarah Fengler

The implications of acting upon (forbidden) desire form the basis of Genesis 1–3 and Christian doctrine thereafter. Taking the origins of man’s fall as a starting point, the final essay of this volume explores what is perhaps the most archetypal story of the dangers of desire, that of Adam and Eve. In ‘Longing for Life and Death: Eve’s Desires in Klopstock’s Der Tod Adams and Ewald’s Adam og Ewa’, Sarah Fengler (University of Oxford) explores how Eve is reimagined in two eighteenth-century tragedies. Through close textual analysis, Fengler posits that the German Der Tod Adams (1757) and Danish Adam og Ewa (1769) present radically different interpretations of Eve’s desires, despite both drawing from the Old Testament. In Klopstock’s text, ‘Eva’ longs for death not only because it presents the possibility of salvation, but also because she feels she belongs to Adam, and thus must follow his actions. Ewald’s ‘Ewa’, by contrast, seeks meaning beyond Adam, and her desires — and actions — reflect an emancipatory potential. She, too, desires salvation, but this is expressed independently of Adam’s wishes. Ultimately, it is suggested that both texts shed light on eighteenth-century interpretations of religious scripture — and the yearnings that underpin it.

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Agony is ecstasy, death is life: the Spanish mystics were well-aware of the ineffability of spiritual desire, attempting to capture this quality through the use of paradox. Like Donne, quoted in the opening pages of this volume, San Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591) and Santa Teresa de Ávila (1515–1582) portrayed the yearning for a union with God in highly eroticized terms, shocking contemporary readers and provoking theological debate to this day. The century following their deaths, Gian Lorenzo Bernini would go on to immortalize Teresa in marble form. The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa (1652) depicts the Saint in the throes of longing as an angel approaches, a scene evocative of her own infamous fits of rapture. Reclined, eyes closed, mouth ajar: the visual implies both the height of salvation and perhaps another sort of death, the petite mort.

This link between the divine and the erotic is explored by Rebecca Bowen in

the first essay of this volume. Reading Dante’s *Commedia* in light of Botticelli’s accompanying illustrations, completed almost two centuries following the text’s genesis, Bowen observes potentially secularizing tendencies on the part of the illustrator, which themselves echo the evolving role of the winged infant in the late fifteenth century. At the time of Botticelli’s creation, angels were ordinarily depicted as adults — as opposed to the cherubic *putti* that arrived only later, in the sixteenth century — thereby complicating a reading of the souls. Furthermore, Botticelli’s images serve to reinforce the inherently ambiguous relationship with desire already present in the text: ‘[t]he hairsbreadth of distance between Dante’s raised right hand and the foot of the infant above him, for example, presents a tantalizing proximity that increases the suggestive symbolism of the winged figures’. Bowen’s analysis thus takes on a dialogic approach: Botticelli’s unusual decision to depict the blessed souls as infants — the first such example in the *Paradiso* — may reveal not only the cultural attitudes and circumstances surrounding his illustrations, but also previously obscured aspects of Dante’s text, most notably in relation to its representation of spiritual desire as erotically charged.

Dante’s Beatrice can be viewed as the logical inverse of the Biblical Eve; the former leads the poet to salvation while the latter provokes man’s downfall, thereby establishing a world of sin. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that desire takes a dark turn in Sarah Fengler’s comparative analysis of two eighteenth-century renderings of Eve. The German *Éva* and Danish *Ewa* both testify to longing for death, here read as an all-consuming desire, but Eva does so out of sense of belonging to Adam, rather than for her own spiritual emancipation. The forbidden fruit itself takes on multiple meanings: ‘it entails not only the risk of death, but also the possibility of happiness, which is decisive for Ewa’. Despite these theological overtones, Fengler’s essay thus shares elements with Katherine Moore’s secularly orientated (if contemporaneous) texts. In both essays, one can discern a decidedly gendered attitude in the manner in which female desire is expressed. Notably, Moore’s exploration of Sophie Cottin’s *Claire d’Albe* (1799) exposes how unbridled female desire reverberates with the taboos associated with that first, legendary bite. The married eponymous character both desires another man and wishes to be faithful; this dual longing culminates in a torturous sexual experience that has violently religious undertones: ‘the mélange of the sexual and religious delight calls into question Claire’s understanding that this love and desire is against God and therefore forbidden’. The forbidden aspect of desire is similarly portrayed, albeit in more muted tones, in Madame Roland’s *Mémoires*, Moore’s textual counterpart to *Claire d’Albe*.

The *Mémoires* bring us to the realm of confessional writing, here also explored by Álvaro González Montero in relation to Gil de Biedma’s diaries. Both the *Mémoires* and the *Diarios* were published posthumously. Crucially, however, Roland wrote while imprisoned, with the explicit intention of the
text finding an eventual readership. Allowing for this, Moore proposes that Roland’s continual references to the virtues of chastity — alongside an apparent revulsion towards the sexual — can be read as a sort of literary performance. By contrast, one would be hard-pressed to discern any self-censorship in Gil de Biedma’s diaries, despite the fact that this collection, too, was intended for publication. González Montero maintains that these diaries reveal the extent to which social class could permit (or inhibit) sexually ‘deviant’ expression. In the case of Gil de Biedma, the author’s social status allowed him to move through both homosexual and heterosexual spaces with relative ease, adopting different masks for each. Rather unlike any of the other authors approached in this volume, Gil de Biedma describes his desires as though they exist beyond the boundaries of the moral and immoral — this binary is eschewed for a more nuanced take on what is portrayed as desire’s inherently kinetic nature: overwhelming in one moment, forgotten the next.

Masks also form the basis of the remaining essay in this volume, though approached from a markedly different angle. Here, one observes the consequences of involuntary masks: those that are superimposed by society to hide or stifle desire, as opposed to those deliberately adopted by the subject in question. Returning to the representation of female sexuality, Karol Valderrama-Burgos explores the 2011 Colombian film, *La vida ‘era’ en serio* through the lens of Joan Rivière’s notion of womanliness as masquerade. Through a focus on the protagonist’s overwhelming envy of a sexually liberated co-worker, Valderrama-Burgos reveals the extent to which repressed desire can have dire consequences. Complicating the reading, however — and here we see echoes of Moore’s thesis on *Claire d’Albe* — is the fact that while Gabriela yearns for sexual liberation, she does not wish to entirely disavow her established role as a wife and mother. Her fantasies, thus, appear to remain just that. Still, Valderrama-Burgos posits that Gabriela’s comments at the film’s close suggest an internal transformation: ‘[a]lthough Pablo asserts that life was real before her crisis, Gabriela contributes to the film’s decisive ending by affirming that life has only just started for her.’ If Gabriela may appear superficially the same, it is left up to the viewer to interpret how she might go on to express — or indeed act upon — her desires moving forward.

Despite covering a range of almost 700 years, the texts in this volume all grapple with what appears to be an inherent duality of amorous pursuit, whether in the realm of the theological or secular. Desire, despite orientating towards the object of longing, inevitably also represents the possibility of pain. Perhaps it had to be so: Cupid (Eros) was traditionally depicted with a double arrow — one of gold to inspire love, the other lead or steel to create aversion. Millenia later, the mystics self-flagellated, a form of repent that could lead one closer to God: the ultimate desire. This sadomasochistic quality is explored in Miss Havisham’s explosive monologue in *Great Expectations*, as narrated by Pip:
“I’ll tell you,” said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, “what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter — as I did.”

While Miss Havisham’s definition of love is perhaps questionable, this same description, if applied to desire, appears apt. Messy, unbridled, self-contradictory: desire underpins human relations, acting as a consistently destabilizing force. It has been the cause of the worst of human atrocities (one might wish to begin with Troy), and also the greatest of unions — spiritual or otherwise. As the contributors to this volume have consistently suggested, it resists strict definition. If at its height desire evades the limits of language, the intention to provide a (written) volume on the subject thus seems a fraught exercise, doomed from outset. But while desire itself may be ineffable, a study of its manifestations across artistic genres need not conform to this rule. In the act of analysis, the role of the critic is not to reproduce desire, but to chart its transformations. The volatility, then, of desire is both the hermeneutic puzzle and its own solution. Or, to return to Barthes, with whom we opened this volume: ‘It is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool.’
