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Extension

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5. Extension

Reaching the Beloved in Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch

As in [Chapter 4](#), we read here three poems by Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch that have to do with the encounter with the beloved and its effects on the lover: the *ballata* ‘Perch’i’ no spero di tornar giammai’ and the sonnets ‘Oltra la spera che più larga gira’ and ‘Levòmmi il mio penser in parte ov’era’ (*Rvf*302). In these poems, the modality of the encounter is not so much epiphany and the lady’s manifestation to the poet-lover, as much as the poet-lover moving towards her and thereby bridging an initial separation or filling an absence. Notably, Cavalcanti’s ‘Perch’i’ no spero’ belongs to the traditional genre of the *ballata* of separation, common in the Romance tradition, and the distance that separates the poet-lover from the beloved is geographical. In contrast, the distance in Dante’s ‘Oltra la spera’ and Petrarch’s ‘Levòmmi il mio penser’ is metaphysical insofar as the beloved has died, and the poet continues to love her on earth. Nevertheless, in all three cases there is a strong sense of movement towards the beloved, of bridging the

gap and reaching her in a post-mortem encounter modelled upon the beatific vision. In different ways, all three cases also endow poetry with a particular role in extending desire into pleasure.¹

POSTHUMOUS ENCOUNTER

Our starting point is the ‘ballata di lontananza’ ‘Perch’i’ no spero di tornar giammai’, one of Cavalcanti’s most celebrated poems, in which the poet-lover laments being kept apart from Tuscany, where his lady resides. As Michelangelo Picone has shown, the motif of the separation from the beloved has its origin in Ovid’s lament of the abandoned heroine in the *Heroides*. It enters Troubadour verse through a reversal involving both gender (since it is now the male poet that suffers) and the very value of separation (which now becomes a means for affirming fidelity to the beloved and a desire to return to her). The motif then became quite common in Duecento Italian lyric poetry, where it often blended historical and political themes, such as the poet’s exile from his own city.² What is distinctively Cavalcantian about our poem is the very tragic tone established from the opening line through a double negation (‘no [...] giammai’), which states the impossibility of the poet returning to Tuscany ever again:

Perch’i’ no spero di tornar giammai,
ballatetta, in Toscana,
va’ tu, leggera e piana,

1 On this form of extension, see Elena Lombardi, ‘Desire’, in *The Wings of the Doves*, pp. 86–131 (esp. pp. 113–31).

2 Michelangelo Picone, ‘Addii e assenza amorosa’, in his *Percorsi della lirica duecentesca. Dai Siciliani alla ‘Vita Nova’* (Florence: Cadmo, 2003), pp. 125–43; Raffaella Zanni, ‘Dalla lontananza all’esilio nella lirica italiana del XIII secolo’, *Arzana*, 16–17 (2013), pp. 325–63.

dritt' a la donna mia,
 che per sua cortesia
 ti farà molto onore.

Because I do not ever hope to return, | little ballata,
 to Tuscany, | go forth, light and nimble, | straight
 to my lady, | who, courteous as she is, | will do
 you much honour. ('Perch'i' no spero di tornar
 giammai', 1–6)

The hopelessness of the poet's condition affects the form of the poem, which is given the task of carrying his parting words to the lady and, as critics have acknowledged, is conceived of as an extended *envoi*.³ As Marco Berisso has noticed, already the refrain contains many characteristics that are typical of the *congedo* that usually concludes the text — directly addressing the poem, sending it to the lady, and the expectation that she will receive it.⁴ If the desperate nature of the situation is established from the beginning and distinguishes the poem as Cavalcantian, equally Cavalcantian is that this desperation is conveyed through a limpid and elegant style that contributes to creating a composed tone of resignation: the *ballata* is indeed 'leggera e piana' and, not surprisingly, has often been considered as a fine example of that exquisite 'leggerezza' indicated by Italo Calvino as one of the ciphers of Cavalcanti's poetry.⁵

The first stanza continues the mode of *congedo* by delineating its audience — in this case, as is typical for

3 See for instance De Robertis and Rea in their editions of Cavalcanti's *Rime*, respectively p. 135 and p. 194.

4 *Poesie dello Stilnovo*, ed. by Marco Berisso (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), p. 183.

5 See Italo Calvino, *Lezioni Americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Mondadori, 1993), pp. 7–35. On the 'rassegnata disperazione' of the poem, see Rea's commentary, p. 194, and on the expression of motif of 'sweetness' of language and style through the gendering of the text in the poetry contemporary with Cavalcanti, see Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 132–35.

Cavalcanti, a selective one composed only of those people 'di gentil natura' — and explains that all hope is gone because the poet's death is imminent. Death is then lingered on in the following stanzas:

Tu porterai novelle di sospiri
 piene di dogli' e di molta paura;
 ma guarda che persona non ti miri
 che sia nemica di gentil natura:
 chè certo per la mia disaventura
 tu saresti contesa,
 tanto da lei ripresa
 che mi sarebbe angoscia,
 dopo la morte, poscia
 pianto e novel dolore.

Tu senti, ballatetta, che la morte
 mi stringe, sì che vita m'abbandona;
 e senti come 'l cor si sbatte forte
 per quel che ciascun spirito ragiona.
 Tanto è distrutta già la mia persona,
 ch' io non posso soffrire:
 se tu mi voi servire
 mena l' anima teco,
 (molto di ciò ti preco)
 quando uscirà del core.

(You will bring news of sighs | full of pain and fear;
 | but be sure that nobody looks upon you | who
 appreciates not a noble nature: | for surely, learning
 of my ill fortune | they would stop you in your tracks
 | and rebuke you, so much | that, in the end, death
 | would give me anguish, | after tears and after new
 pain. || Little ballata, you perceive that death's | grip
 is so tight that life forsakes me; | and you know how
 hard my heart beats | at what my vital spirits are
 saying. | My entire person is already so destroyed
 | that I cannot bear it: | if you want to serve me, |
 lead my soul away with you | when it takes leave of
 my heart, | this I beg of you.) ('Perch'i' no spero di
 tornar giammai', 7-26)

Love is not mentioned explicitly, but the poet's unbearable suffering is here described in terms familiar to readers of Cavalcanti's poems and along all the lines of what Tonelli has termed the 'physiology of passion': an experience of love connected to the senses that debilitates the body, impairs its functioning, and impedes the rational capacity of the lover, even leading him to death. Indeed, whether understood epistemologically as the interruption of reasoning or physically as the cessation of the vital faculties, death is the veritable cipher of Cavalcanti's poetry.⁶

The tragic spectacle presented in the *ballata* is strikingly similar to that staged in the sonnet 'L'anima mia vilment' è sbigotita', where the destruction and fragmentation of the self is explicitly induced by Love:

L'anima mia vilment' è sbigotita
de la battaglia ch'è[1]l'ave dal core:
che s'ella sente pur un poco Amore
più presso a lui che non sole, ella more.

Sta come quella che non ha valore,
ch'è per temenza da lo cor partita;
e chi vedesse com' ell'è fuggita
diria per certo: 'Questi non ha vita'.

Per li occhi venne la battaglia in pria,
Che ruppe ogni valore immantente,
si che del colpo fu strutta la mente.

(My soul is wretchedly bewildered | by the battle
fought with my heart: | so much so that, when the
soul feels Love advance, | even just a little closer to
it, it perishes. || It's like one that's lost all power,
| and has left the heart for fear; | anyone seeing
how it fled | would surely say: 'This man is lifeless'.
|| The assault came first through the eyes | and
shattered all my strength at once, | so that my mind
was fractured by the blow.) (1-11)

6 See [Chapter 4](#), n. 16.

In 'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai', one finds all the usual elements of Cavalcanti's dysphoric concept of love, but the combination of the motif of impending death with that of the definitive separation from the lady has resulted in the *ballata* being considered Cavalcanti's last poem, apparently written in exile in Sarzana, where, fallen sick with malaria, he would give 'a last farewell to his beloved'.⁷ This late date of composition is supposedly confirmed by its position in Guido Favati's edition, based on an ideal chronology, but it is now discredited by contemporary editors, who deny its autobiographical character.

Recently Claudio Giunta, while reminding us of the highest degree of formalization of medieval lyric, which follows strict rhetorical conventions and does not necessarily imply any real or biographical reference, has maintained that Cavalcanti's poem is unusual for the detailed precision with which it indicates that the distant beloved is not generically absent but specifically in Tuscany. Giunta has also maintained that the *ballatetta* is unique within the Cavalcantian *corpus* for not presenting the poet's impending death as a consequence of love but as death *tout court*. He has thereby concluded that 'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai' is not a love poem but a 'ballata-testamento', a testament-poem originating from a specific, 'real' situation of Cavalcanti's life, which for Giunta is not to be identified with the exile in Sarzana but most likely with Cavalcanti's journey to Santiago de Compostela.⁸ As Giunta has convincingly shown, and as was already men-

7 Natalino Sapegno speaks of 'ultimo saluto alla donna amata dall'esilio', echoing similar judgments by Ugo Foscolo and Francesco De Sanctis, *Disegno storico della letteratura italiana*, 2nd edn (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1973), p. 24. See Giunta, 'Guido Cavalcanti', pp. 47–48.

8 Rea, in his note to 'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai', has commented that in this poem 'la distanza dalla donna da psicologica si fa geografica', in Cavalcanti, *Rime*, p. 194.

tioned in [Chapter 2](#), the poem deploys some significant features of contemporary testaments, especially the motifs of the *commendatio anime*, the testator's recommendation of his soul to Christ, and of the wish to enjoy the eternal contemplation of God that usually follows on from that recommendation.⁹

In our view it does not seem necessary to deny, as Giunta has, that the poet's death is caused by love, given that, as was mentioned above, for Cavalcanti, passion can lead even to physical death. Moreover, as has been widely observed, the term 'disaventura' (11) connects 'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai' with 'Io temo che la mia disaventura' and 'La forte e nova mia disaventura', two poems that open by stressing the condition of 'disgrazia amorosa' (ill fortune in love),¹⁰ and that in Favati's ordering are placed just before our *ballatetta*. Nonetheless Giunta's point is well taken: the poem's testamentary character is of prime importance. If, as we have seen, the whole poem is conceived of and constructed as an adieu to the beloved, the final two stanzas offer an equally original combination of courtly and eschatological motifs.

Whereas traditionally it is the poet's heart that is sent to the lady as a means of spiritual union between them while separated from one another,¹¹ in Cavalcanti's *ballata* the poet commends his 'anima', i.e., the sensitive soul and site of sensations that normally resides in the heart, to her, allowing for communion with her after *he* will have died, since there is no hope of them being reunited in this life. Of particular significance to our argument is that while in the traditional envoy of the heart the hope remains alive

9 Giunta, 'Guido Cavalcanti', pp. 45–61.

10 See the note by Rea in the commentary to 'Io temo della mia disaventura' in Cavalcanti, *Rime*, p. 186.

11 Zanni, 'Dalla lontananza all'esilio'.

of return and physical reunion with the beloved, in Cavalcanti's text, as we have seen, the initial 'giammai' negates that possibility from the outset. And yet it is precisely and paradoxically the testamentary, posthumous mode of the poem that allows it to open a space for an encounter. The end of the second stanza implies this possibility by suggesting that the *ballatetta*, which we know from the refrain is meant to travel to the lady, take the 'anima' with it when it leaves the heart (24–26). It is in the third stanza that, within the usual Cavalcantian arena of physiological components and affects, this recommendation is first picked up ('menala teco' in line 29 recalls 'mena l'anima teco' in line 24) and then developed in all its potential and force:

Deh, ballatetta mia, a la tu' amistate
 quest'anima che trema raccomando:
 menala teco, nella sua pietate,
 a quella bella donna a cu' ti mando.
 Deh, ballatetta, dille sospirando,
 quando le sè presente:
 'Questa vostra servente
 vien pe-ristar con voi,
 partita da colui
 che fu servo d'Amore.'

(Ah, little ballata, to your friendship | I commend
 this trembling soul: | take it with you, in its suffer-
 ing, | to the beautiful lady to whom I send you. |
 Ah, little ballata, when you are in her presence, | say
 to her, sighing: | 'This servant of yours | comes to
 reside with you; | she leaves behind a man | who
 was once a servant of Love'.) ('Perch'i' no spero di
 tornar giammai', 27–36)

A veritable turn is staged here, and it becomes evident that as also happens in other poems by Cavalcanti,¹² the

12 See Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader*, pp. 95–96.

departing 'anima' is not lost or left alone; in being carried by the *ballata* towards the lady, it is enabled to reach her and to continue the service of love when the poet will have died ('colui | che fu servo d'Amore').

There is no cessation of desire but rather an intensification of it, which culminates in the final stanza. The *fronte* extends the physiology of passion that has been present since the beginning of the poem and also introduces the voice as a third *dramatis persona*, which emerges weeping from the poet's grieving heart ('ch'esci piangendo de lo cor dolente').¹³ The voice is not lost either and is invited to join the 'anima' and the poem in conversing with the lady about the lover's complete collapse, in particular the disintegration of his 'mente', the faculty predisposed to understanding:

Tu, voce sbigottita e deboletta
 ch'esci piangendo de lo cor dolente,
 coll'anima e con questa ballatetta
 va' ragionando della strutta mente.

(Bewildered and frail voice, | you who weeping
 leave my grieving heart, | with my soul and this little
 ballata | tell her of my fractured mind.) ('Perch'i' no
 spero di tornar giammai', 38–40)

13 On the relationship of the heart to poetic voice in the Duecento poets and Cavalcanti specifically, see Agamben, *Stanzas*, pp. 124–31; and Federica Anichini, *Voices of the Body: Liminal Grammar in Guido Cavalcanti's Rime / Voci del corpo: grammatica liminale nelle Rime di Guido Cavalcanti* (Munich: Meidenbauer, 2009). The voice that remains of the poet, and which combines with the 'anima' and the 'ballata', is similar to the one that is presented in 'Voi che per li occhi passaste 'l core' as the only element to survive Love's decimation of the poet and the emptying of his spirits to become 'figura sol en signoria [d'Amore]' (7) and 'voce alquanta, che parla in dolore' (8). On the relationship of this posthumous 'voce' to Echo, see Francesco Giusti's reading of the motif in Cavalcanti in his *Il desiderio della lirica. Poesia, creazione, conoscenza* (Rome: Carocci, 2017), pp. 146–48.

In the *volta* the motif of reaching the lady culminates with the wish for eternal happiness, offering quite an unexpected outcome in relation to the initial separation from the beloved. The poem concludes by boldly imagining a form of beatific vision in which eternal contemplation of God is replaced by that of the lady:

Voi troverete una donna piacente,
 di sì dolce intelletto
 che vi sarà diletto
 starle davanti ognora.
 Anim', e tu l'adora
 sempre, nel su' valore.

(You will find a dazzling lady, | with such sweet
 intellection | that it will delight you | to remain
 eternally in her presence. | Then, my soul, adore
 her | always, in all her valour.) ('Perch'i' no spero
 di tornar giammai', 41–46)

Line 41, 'Voi troverete una donna piacente', reaffirms the encounter with the beloved in her desirability and opens the way to a form of knowledge and subsequent pleasure, to which poetry — through the triad of 'voce'-'anima'-'ballata' — opens up. While line 42 'di sì dolce intelletto' is often read as referring to the lady, in her ability 'to listen and understand lovingly', we find suggestive Marti's interpretation of that line as meaning 'così dolce a chi ne intenda appieno il valore' (so sweet for the one who fully grasps her worth), where 'intelletto' would refer not to rational understanding (which is indeed denied by the phrase 'struttamente' in the previous line) but rather to an experiential form of knowledge that brings sweetness.¹⁴ This experience of sweetness has mystical overtones along the lines

14 On the first interpretation see Rea's note in Cavalcanti, *Rime*, p. 138; and the recent discussion in Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader*,

of ‘che fier per gli occhi una dolcezza al cuore | che ’intender no-lla può chi no-lla prova’ in Dante’s ‘Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare’, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#). In Cavalcanti’s poem, we find particularly significant that this form of ‘intelletto’ rhymes with ‘diletto’, tying it to pleasure and introducing a different modality, one less tragic yet also different from that of the ‘positive’ poems envisioning the possibility of intellecting the lady (as for instance ‘Posso degli occhi miei novella dire’ or ‘Veggio negli occhi della donna mia’).¹⁵ In ‘Perch’i no spero’ the ‘diletto’ is a form of ecstatic surrender and dispossession that turns the promised vision of God into an adoration of the beloved.

As suggested by the adverbs ‘ognora’ and ‘sempre’, which emphatically contrast the initial ‘giammai’, this experience of pleasure also coincides with abandoning temporality and entering a form of eternity. We find here a quite peculiar, courtly version of ‘earthly eschatology’, maybe the only one conceivable for a poet who focused on immanence and did not seem to conceive of life after death. In ‘Perch’i no spero’ we are indeed in a posthumous dimension where survival can only be poetic and moves on a horizontal plane, but it is no less powerful for all that: the departed ‘anima’ is carried by the *ballata* and, through the exhortatory mode that defines the poem’s rhetoric, is given the task, and the pleasure, of perpetual adoration as a promise of prospective fulfilment.¹⁶

pp. 89–100. On the second, see Mario Marti, *Storia del Dolce Stilnovo* (Lecce: Milella, 1973), cited in De Robertis’s note to the line in Cavalcanti, *Rime*, p. 138.

15 We would like to thank Franco Costantini for pointing out the rhyme between ‘intelletto’ and ‘diletto’.

16 See Raffaella Zanni, ‘Prendre congé de sa propre poésie: *Perch’i’ no spero di tornar giammai* de Guido Cavalcanti’, in *Les Deux Guidi: Guinizzelli et Cavalcanti. Mourir d’aimer et autres ruptures*, ed. by Mar-

LUMINOUS PRESENCE

If Cavalcanti's 'Perch'i' no spero' culminates with a fantasy of posthumous contemplation, Dante's 'Oltra la spera che più larga gira' is eschatological and is set after the beloved's death. In this sonnet, the poet imagines that a sigh which emanates from his 'grieving heart' journeys to the other world and gets to the Empyrean (the furthest heaven where God and the blessed reside). There it contemplates the lady, before returning to earth and relating the vision. 'Oltra la spera' famously concludes the *Vita Nova* but was written before and, according to the 'libello' (VN XLI/30), was composed as a 'cosa nova' (new, or wondrous, thing) to accompany the gift of some other poems to two noble ladies. We quote the sonnet in its pre-*Vita Nova* version:¹⁷

Oltra la spera che più larga gira
 passa il sospiro ch'esce del mio core;
 intelligenza nova che l'Amore
 piangendo mette in lui poi sù lo tira.

E quando è giunto là dove disira,
 vede una donna che riceve onore
 e luce sì che per lo suo splendore
 lo pellegrino spirito la mira.

Vedela tal, che quando il mi ridice
 io no-llo 'ntendo, sì parla sottile
 al cor dolente che lo fa parlare.

So io che parla di quella gentile,
 perché sovente ricorda Beatrice,
 sì che lo 'ntendo ben, donne mie care.

(The sigh that leaves my heart | passes beyond the
 outermost heaven; | Love, weeping, instils it with

ina Gagliano, Philippe Guérin, and Raffaella Zanni (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016), pp. 141–56.

17 The text is quoted from Dante, *Rime giovanili e della 'Vita Nuova'*.

a new intelligence | that draws it ever upwards. ||
 And having reached the source of its desire, | it sees
 a woman who receives such honour | and shines
 so luminously, that, for her splendour, | the pilgrim
 spirit gazes in wonder. || It sees her such, that, when
 it tells me, | my comprehension fails, so subtly does
 it address | the grieving heart which makes it speak.
 || But one thing I know: it speaks of that graceful
 woman, | for it often mentions the name of Beatrice,
 | and this much, dear ladies, I understand.)

The beloved's absence is caused by her death, and as such, the sonnet might have suggested an even more insurmountable separation than the geographical distance of Cavalcanti's *ballata*. The motif of weeping, whether it refers to Love or the sigh, indicates the sorrow of that separation, yet the real cipher of the poem is not a sense of loss but one of reaching, vertiginously instilled from the very beginning of the text by the combination of the opening adverb, 'Oltra', the reference to the *Primum mobile* (the most distant physical heaven from earth, beyond which lies the Empyrean), and the enjambement between lines 1 and 2. The verb 'passa', which is to be united with 'Oltra' to form a single word, conveys the sigh's extraordinary ability to reach and a sense of ease and flow. The adverb 'su' in line 4 highlights the verticality of the sigh's journey towards a transcendental dimension and contrasts quite dramatically with the horizontal movement of Cavalcanti's poem, which remains firmly on earth. In 'Oltra la spera', something exceptional is taking place when the sigh is empowered by Love with a new, wondrous faculty ('intelligenza nova') that pulls it upwards to the Empyrean. This infusion seems to appropriate, in a courtly context, the theological concept of *lumen gloriae*, the 'light of glory' given to the separated soul in heaven, which enables it to overcome a rational form

of understanding and enjoy instead an intuitive vision of God.¹⁸

The effects of that extraordinary infusion are presented in the second quatrain, which follows closely from the first (also causally). Line 5, 'E quando è giunto là dove disira', is striking in its emphasis on the attainment and fulfillment of desire. The same fullness imbues the following three lines, which open and close by describing the vision of the lady ('Vede una donna') and the contemplation of her in glory ('la mira') by the sigh, now become a 'spirit' (8). The exceptional character of the journey, which was anticipated by the adjective 'nova', is reinforced by the adjective 'pellegrino' (8), which as Picone has explained, signifies at once that the spirit has left earth behind and reached heaven, and that in heaven it is a 'foreigner' insofar as it is there only temporarily.¹⁹ While it is there, time is suspended, and eternity is accessed. The dazzling nature of its experience is indicated by the intensity with which the lady shines ('luce sì') and by the radiating light in which the spirit contemplates her ('per lo suo splendore [...] la mira').

As seen in [Chapter 4](#), the phrase 'la mira' is the same one that Dante used in the sonnet 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare' to express the miracle of gazing on Beatrice on earth. In the *Paradiso*, 'mirare' refers to the contempla-

18 On the concept of *lumen gloriae*, see Simon Gilson, *Medieval Optics and Theories of Light in the Works of Dante* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp. 252–56.

19 Michelangelo Picone, 'Esilio e peregrinatio: Dalla Vita Nova alla "Canzone montanina"', *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 36.3 (Sept–Dec 2007), pp. 1–14 (p. 15 n. 3). Note that the 'sospiro' of line 2 has become a 'spirito' and that this is slippage is corrected by the prose of the VN, which first explains that 'sospiro' is to be understood as 'pensero', thereby dematerializing it, and then that that 'pensero' is called 'spirito' because it goes to heaven 'spiritualmente' (xLI, 5/30.5).

tion of God, and one only need think of *Paradiso* XXXIII, 97–99 ('Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa, | mirava fissa, immobile e attenta, | e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa') or 109–11 ('Non perché più ch'un' semplice semblante | fosse nel vivo lume ch'io mirava, | che tal è sempre qual s'era davante') to appreciate its ecstatic character. In 'Oltra la spera', the phrase 'la mira' conveys an almost mystical sense of perfection and fullness that nonetheless remains courtly, and the sonnet can be considered as transposing into the other world the epiphany that 'Tanto gentile' stages on earth. However, in 'Oltra la spera' there is a strong emphasis on the individual experience of love in contrast to the collective, participatory mode of 'Tanto gentile', in which Beatrice affects all onlookers equally ('Mostrasi si piacente a chi la mira | che fier per gli occhi una dolcezza al core | che 'ntender no·lla può chi no·lla prova', 9–11).²⁰ Notwithstanding the shift in emphasis from the lady as a miracle descended to earth to the beloved as a beatified soul joined in heaven, the verb 'mira' conveys in both instances a sense of ecstatic bedazzlement and encapsulates a unique balance between the erotic and the divine. In this respect, the two sonnets perfectly represent that exclusively Dantean matrix that Teodolinda Barolini has called a 'theologized courtly love'.²¹

The contemplative experience flows into the sestet and is even intensified by the opening phrase 'Vedela tal' in line 9. It recalls both 'vede' of line 6 and 'la mira' of line 8, creating a sort of 'conceptual' *cobla capfinida* — a rhetorical feature also present, in the same place, in 'Tanto gentile'.²²

20 On the latter, see Giusti, 'Rispondere solo a Beatrice', p. 98.

21 Barolini, 'Dante and the Lyric Past', p. 30.

22 In 'Tanto gentile', the structure of *coblas capfinidas* is created through the words 'mostrare', which concludes line 8, and 'Mostrasi', which opens line 9.

In its indefiniteness, the capacious qualifier ‘tal’ represents the zenith of the poem and the maximum vision that is intuitively attained through the ‘intelligenza nova’ and ecstatically enjoyed beyond all earthly possibility. A caesura follows ‘tal’, and the return of the temporal conjunction ‘quando’ (9 and 5) marks a transition out of timelessness as the temporally suspended experience of vision cedes to the time of retelling (‘quand il mi *ridice*’) that is already a looking back. This temporal shift also coincides with a movement downward: the spirit returns to earth and tries to relate the essence of its vision, but the ‘I’ cannot grasp it: ‘io no·llo ’ntendo sì parla sottile | al cor dolente che lo fa parlare’ (10–11). These lines seem to imply that a gap has opened up, which could hinder the sense of perfection staged so far: the heart is still grieving — where the phrase ‘cor dolente’ is typically Cavalcantian and, as we have seen, also present in line 38 of ‘Perch’i’ no spero’ — and the spirit’s words are too hermetic to understand insofar as the vision was attained beyond earthly means and, like all ecstatic experiences, cannot be fully retained or expressed. ‘[I]o no·llo ’ntendo’ could even be a ‘translation’ of the Pauline ‘nescio’ following his *raptus* to heaven (‘Et scio huiusmodi hominem (sive in corpore sive extra corpus nescio, Deus scit) quoniam raptus est in paradisum, et audivit arcana verba quae non licet homini loqui’; *Corinthians* II xii 2–4). As has been noticed, the motif of ineffability will return in the *Paradiso* and there refer to the impossibility of relating in full the heavenly experience.²³ However, it is important to note that whether the sonnet is read independently from the *Vita Nova* or as its final text, in ‘Oltra la spera’ no vision of God is contemplated or expressly

23 See Barolini’s commentary in *Rime giovanili*, p. 515.

desired, and the vision of Beatrice is described with a comparable intensity and remains the ultimate goal.

‘Oltra la spera’ does not finish with this declaration of ineffability. Once we move into the final tercet, we appreciate that the mention of the ‘I’'s epistemological lack (‘no·llo ’ntendo’) is in fact a strategy designed to reaffirm certainty. Line 12 opens with the affirmative ‘So io’, which, like the ‘So’ found in line 3 of ‘Io sono stato con Amore insieme’ and discussed in [Chapter 4](#), points back to a degree of knowledge that despite the excess of the vision just experienced, the ‘I’ nonetheless continues to possess. As Barolini has indicated, the mention of Beatrice’s name in the following line as that which is remembered functions as a mark of epistemological and intellectual possession that culminates with the phrase ‘lo ’ntendo ben’ in the final line of the sonnet.²⁴ While the *giocosso* poet Cecco Angiolieri famously detected an incongruence between ‘lo ’ntendo ben’ and ‘io no·llo ’ntendo’ of line 11, several critics have shown that there is no contradiction, and in fact, the play between the two phrases has the effect of emphasizing that some understanding persists even after the journey to the Emyrean is concluded.²⁵ Moreover, a trace of the ecstatic excess is seemingly not only preserved but also conveyed. If one remembers that in the *Vita Nova* (which must be almost contemporary with the composition of our sonnet) ‘nomina sunt consequentia rerum’ (names are a consequence of things; XIII, 4/6.4), one can

24 Ibid., p. 519.

25 Cecco Angiolieri accused Dante of this incongruence in the sonnet, ‘Dante Alleghier, Cecco tu’ servo amico’, whose sestet is dedicated to the contradiction he perceived in Dante’s: ‘Ch’al mio parer, ne l’una muta dice | che non intendi su’ sottill parlare, | a que’ che vide la tua Beatrice; || e poi hai detto a le tue donne care | che ben lo intendi; e dunque contradice | a se medesimo questo tu’ trovare’ (9–14). Cited *ibid.*

also see that, as Suzanne Akbari has pointed out, by registering Beatrice's name, 'the poet comes as close as he can to conveying her essence.'²⁶ By inscribing in its textuality the beloved's name, which signifies 'the one who beatifies', the sonnet has her continue to be present and also suggests that from the Empyrean she continues to bestow bliss and pleasure. It is as though the 'diletto' of contemplation that at the end of Cavalcanti's 'Perch'i' no spero' was deferred to a posthumous situation, is realized in 'Oltra la spera' and even extended indefinitely in the sonnet itself.

DUBIOUS FANTASY

Like Dante's and Cavalcanti's poems, Petrarch's 'Levòmmi il mio penser in parte ov'era' (*Rvf* 302) is also a poem of separation that through a post-mortem encounter with the beloved overcomes lack and allows for the articulation of a particular kind of pleasure. As in Dante, the separation comes in the wake of the beloved's death, and the poem describes a journey to reach her in the other world. But the poem does not realize the fullness of Dante's sonnet, and as in Cavalcanti's *ballata*, the eschatology is earthly and the encounter more tenuous.

As Rosanna Bettarini has noted in her commentary of the text, together with *Rvf* 297, 298, 300, and 301, Petrarch's sonnet forms part of a sub-sequence of poems within the *rime in morte* that is especially concerned with the absence of Laura's body and stages a tension between

26 Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), p. 125. On the significance of names with the *Vita Nova's* linguistic theory, see Elena Lombardi, 'Il pensiero linguistico nella *Vita nova*', in *Vita nova, Fiore, Epistola XIII*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and others (Tavarnuzze [Florence]: SISMEL · Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2018), pp. 115–34.

heaven and earth.²⁷ What is particular about *Rvf* 302 (and a feature it shares only with *Rvf* 362) is that, in this sonnet, rather than imagining Laura descending from heaven to comfort him (as in *Rvf* 359), or reappearing in the *locus amoenus* of Vacluse (as in, for instance, *Rvf* 281), the poet moves towards her:

Levòmmi il mio penser in parte ov'era
 quella ch'io cerco, et non ritrovo, in terra:
 ivi, fra lor che 'l terzo cerchio serra,
 la rividi piú bella et meno altera.

Per man mi prese, et disse: — In questa spera
 sarai anchor meco, se 'l desir non erra:
 i' so' colei che ti die' tanta guerra,
 et compie' mia giornata inanzi sera.

Mio ben non cape in intelletto humano:
 te solo aspetto, et quel che tanto amasti
 e là giuso è rimaso, il mio bel velo. —

Deh perché tacque et allargò la mano?
 Ch'al suon de' detti sí pietosi et casti
 poco mancò ch'io non rimasi in cielo.

(My thought lifted me to the place where she dwelt,
 | the one I search for on earth but do not find: |
 there, among the souls of the third heaven, | I be-
 held her once more, lovelier and less proud. || She
 took me by the hand and said: 'in this sphere | you
 will join me again, if desire doesn't err: | I am she
 who caused you such strife, | and I ended my day be-
 fore dusk. || Human intellect cannot comprehend
 my goodness: | I wait only for you, and for that
 which you so loved, | which remains down below,
 my lovely veil. || Ah, why did she fall silent and

27 See Bettarini's note in Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, p. 1329: she writes that Petrarch copies this sonnet as the last of a series on page 3r of his notebook together with 297, 298 and 301, to which on 3v we find also 300, which shares with 302 the same rhymes in 'terra', 'serra', and 'guerra'.

release my hand? | For at the sound of such merciful
 and chaste words | I almost remained in heaven.)
 (*Rvf* 302)

Several critics have set the sonnet in dialogue with ‘*Oltra la spera*’, and it is in particular the first quatrain that invites a parallel between the two sonnets.²⁸ The initial verb, ‘*Levòmmi*’, immediately recreates the vertical movement of ‘*Oltra la spera*’, and the verbs ‘*cerco*’ and ‘*non ritrovo*’ in line 2 indicate the lack and desire that have also initiated this movement. The ‘I’ reaches heaven and, as in the Dantean antecedent, has a vision of the beloved.

Yet as Paul Olson has suggested, if the surface of the sonnet appears very Dantesque, maybe more so than in any other poem by Petrarch, the differences are equally significant.²⁹ The ‘thought’ in line 1 points back to Dante’s sonnet insofar as the prose of the *Vita Nova* had glossed the more physiological ‘*sospiro*’/ ‘*spirito*’ of ‘*Oltra la spera*’ as ‘*pensero*’ (XLI, 3/30.3), but there is no extraordinary faculty (‘*intelligenza nova*’) allowing for an ecstatic encounter beyond human limits. Instead it is the ‘I’ that is elevated, and this happens merely by the power of its ‘*pensero*’, which ‘everything indicates [...] is almost pure memory — mixed, of course, with constantly renewed desire.’³⁰ Petrarch’s vision has a ‘retrospective character’, and while Dante’s spirit sees (‘*vede*’) and contemplates the beloved in a transfigured state (‘*per lo suo splendore [...] la mira*’), the Petrarchan ‘I’ sees her again (‘*la rividi*’), and her transformation appears a more perfect version of her earthly self

28 See in particular, Paul Olson, ‘Two Sonnets of Heavenly Vision’, *Italica*, 35 (1958), pp. 156–61; Bettarini’s note to ‘*Levòmmi*’ in Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, II, pp. 1329–30; and Lombardi, “‘I Desire Therefore I Am’”, pp. 2–30.

29 See Olson, p. 156.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

(‘più bella e meno altera’). The extension of the two journeys is significantly different too: whereas Dante’s ‘sospiro’ journeys through the nine physical heavens and reaches the Emyrean, Petrarch’s journey stops in the third heaven. As Bettarini has noticed, Petrarch’s ‘terzo cerchio’ combines Dante’s *Paradiso*, where the third heaven is that of Venus, with Paul’s *raptus* in II *Corinthians* xii 2 (‘Scio hominem in Christo... raptum huiusmodi usque *ad tertium caelum*’), which is also recalled in Dante’s sonnet in terms of ineffability. However, in the rest of Petrarch’s poem the Pauline reference fades away, and the sense remains that the third heaven is merely that of Venus as the abode of the amatory spirits and love poets (also mentioned in *Rvf* 287).³¹

Ineffability is not what is at stake in Petrarch’s poem, which apparently succeeds in relating what the poet experienced in paradise. It presents heaven not as a space for excess but primarily as a fantasy that displaces into the afterlife an improved version of earthly desire. In ‘Levòmmi il mio penser’ there is not the abandon to the adoration of the beloved that follows Cavalcanti’s posthumous encounter, nor is there an equivalent experience to Dante’s dazzling vision of Beatrice in glory. The phrase ‘la rividi’ does not carry any sense of ecstatic contemplation and is not the endpoint of the encounter. Instead, it opens a space for interaction in a heaven where everything points back to earth but just seems to work better (for the poet). The beloved is more amenable and even becomes approachable and active. She takes the poet by the hand, and the phrase ‘Per man mi prese’ is striking for recalling the reciprocation of desire expressed in Cavalcanti’s *ballata* ‘In un boschetto trova’ pastorella’, his most sensual text, that

31 ‘Ma ben ti prego che ’n la terza spera | Guitton saluti, et messer Cino, et Dante, | Franceschin nostro, et tutta quella schiere’ (9–11).

even culminates with erotic consummation: 'Per man mi prese, d'amorosa voglia, | e disse che donato m'avea 'l core' (She took me by the hand, with amorous intent, | and said that she had given me her heart; 21–22). The reference to Laura's hand also recalls the *Triumphus Mortis* II, in which the beloved appears in a dream the morning after her death and offers the poet her hand before fulfilling his fantasy of ultimate reciprocation: 'e quella man, già tanto desiata, | a me, parlando e sospirando *porse*, | onde eterna dolcezza al cor m'è nata' (and, speaking and sighing, | *she stretched out* to me *that hand* already so long desired, | whence eternal sweetness is born in my heart; 10–12).

In sonnet 302, Laura also speaks, and her speech runs through lines 5–11. Oscillating between past and present, she fulfils all of Petrarch's wishes, compensating for the sufferings that she caused him while alive and for her untimely death, both recalled in lines 7–8 ('i' so' colei che ti die' tanta guerra, | et compie' mia giornata inanzi sera'). Yet this fantasy does not reach the intensity of 'Oltra la spera', and although in the second quatrain Laura states emphatically that Petrarch *will* be with her in the third heaven ('In questa spera | *sarai* anchor meco'), the hypothetical — and ambivalent — clause 'se 'l desir non erra' (6) makes that promise unstable.³² As Peter Hainsworth has underscored, Laura's words add a 'disturbing qualifier that both stresses the strength of her feelings and leaves some room for uncertainty'.³³

32 The most common reading given to the clause 'se 'l desir non erra' refers to Laura's desire, but the text also allows a reading that would refer to the poet's desire, or even to both his and Laura's. In any case, the coupling of desire and errancy is a recurrent feature of Petrarch's lyric sequence.

33 Hainsworth, *Petrarch the Poet*, p. 167.

A similar dynamic is also visible in the first tercet. It opens with Laura's assertion that heavenly bliss is incommensurable for the human intellect: 'Mio ben non cape in intelletto umano' (9), a statement that is theologically accurate and not only recalls lines 9–11 of 'Oltra la spera' but also would not be out of place in Dante's *Paradiso*. Also theologically correct is the desire that Laura, as a separated soul, expresses for her resurrection body. However, the remainder of lines 10–11 convey an earthly fantasy so outrageous that they undermine that correctness and lead us back into the poet's wishful thinking: Laura refers to her body as the 'bel velo' which the poet loved so much ('quel che tanto amasti'),³⁴ and she even states that the only other thing she lacks is the poet himself ('te solo aspetto').

The instability that has by now entered the poem feeds into the question that opens the final tercet. It is introduced by the interjection, 'Deh', which is another mark of that uncertainty recalled by Hainsworth: 'Deh perché tacque et allargò la mano?'. Laura's silence and holding back of her hand have an almost Orphic character,³⁵ causing the vision to dissipate and the beloved to be lost again. Whereas Cavalcanti's *ballatetta* ends by imagining a form

34 The term 'velo' is used to refer to Laura's body on several occasions in the *Rerum vulgariarum fragmenta*. The adjective 'bel' reminds us of the way in which Beatrice refers to her beautiful limbs now scattered in earth in earthly paradise ('le belle membra in ch'io | rinchiusa fui, e che so' 'n terra sparte', *Purg.* xxxi, 50–51). Nancy Vickers has given an intertextual reading of these associations in her 'Re-membering Dante: Petrarch's "Chiare, fresche et dolci acque"', *MLN*, 96.1, Italian Issue (January 1981), pp. 1–11.

35 Cf. Virgil, *Georgics* IV. 499–502: 'dixit et ex oculis subito, ceu fumus in auras | commixtus tenuis, fugit diversa, neque illum | prensantem nequiquam umbras et multa volentem | dicere praeterea vidit', cited from Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid Books 1–6*, trans. by H. R. Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916).

of posthumous union that is set to continue eternally, and Dante's 'Oltra la spera' concludes with the presenting power of Beatrice's name that from heaven continues on earth, 'Levòmmi il mio penser' ends abruptly without answering the question in line 12 and by collapsing downwards and away from the beloved. 'Non rimasi in cielo' emphatically contrasts with the initial '[l]evòmmi', and reading back to the beginning of the sonnet one sees that the present tenses 'cerco, et non ritrovo' already indicate that the journey of the poet towards his lady in heaven has not lasted. Nonetheless, not everything is lost in Petrarch's sonnet either. Bettarini may be going too far when she proposes that at the end of the poem the 'I's 'ecstatic' ascent to heaven is not suspended but reaffirmed ('è rilanciata in chiusura'); but the last two lines are indeed delightfully Petrarchan in the ambivalent way they suggest some presence or at least a trace of it. In an 'almost' fashion beautifully conveyed by the confusing construction 'poco mancò [...] non', the fantasy of fullness is gone, and yet it lingers on poetically and in memory (which, as we have seen in [Chapter 4](#) and will also consider in [Chapter 6](#), are often hard to extricate in Petrarch). We agree with Hainsworth when he writes that 'It may or may not be that heaven will provide such an impossible reconciliation of opposites: all that is certain is that it can be imagined in a poem, that there the pleasure and power of the imagined or imaginary world in all their uncertainties can be represented'.³⁶

What is striking is that pleasure comes not *despite* the ambivalence and instability that are the hallmark of Petrarchan desire but *because* of them. In 'Levòmmi il mio penser', we find neither the lightness of Cavalcanti's 'Perch'i' no spero' nor the epistemological robustness of

36 Hainsworth, *Petrarch the Poet*, p. 167.

'Oltra la spera'. Neither do we find the mystical excess that, in different ways, both of these poems imagine as the ultimate mode of encounter and subsequent bliss. Instead, as we have seen, for Petrarch the journey to heaven is mainly a pretext for imagining a version of earth 'in cielo', where his fantasies can be realized. Whether it is neurotic fixation or heroic fidelity, earthly desires are carried across to the heavenly sphere. In Petrarch's fantasy of heaven, the 'I' is very much present and, with it, all its uncertainties, instabilities, and disorientation. Roland Barthes can be of help in understanding this condition when, in a 'Supplément' to *Le plaisir du texte*, he discussed the concept of drift ('dérive') as a practice of in-consistency ('une pratique d'in-consistance') that resists the strictures of cohesion and solidity, as the active search for a dissociation ('la recherche active d'une dissociation') that challenges the oppression of wholeness.³⁷ As in the other Petrarchan poems we have analysed, this 'pratique d'in-consistance' also seems to be the mode of 'Levòmmi il mio penser': not only of the equivocal encounter it stages and the pleasure it induces in the poetic subject, but also of the experience of reading the poem. If we want to let ourselves be inspired by the conclusive line of the sonnet itself — 'poco mancò ch'io non rimasi in cielo' — we could call this mode — of pleasure and of poetry — an 'almost-mode', one that suggests wholeness and perfection but not quite, one that is even ready to accept failure in order not to yield to the constrictions of totality and closure.³⁸ It is a mode that

37 Roland Barthes, 'Texte supplément to *Le plaisir du texte*', *Art Press*, 4 (1973).

38 For a positive understanding of failing to conform to the heteronormative model of subjectivity not as a limit but as a space for new possibilities, see Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). On the issues of totality and closure,

embraces errancy and drift and invites the reader to get lost in the bewildering labyrinth of the lines that express them.

see *De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Christoph F. E. Holzhey (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017).

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