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Performative desires: Sereni's re-staging of Dante and Petrarch*

This essay seeks to interpret a specific moment in the history of Italian poetry in the context of linguistic notions of performance and the performative. Focusing on language as a medium for the constitution of selfhood, it looks at the intertextual dialogue that Vittorio Sereni stages with Dante and Petrarch in his 1975–76 poem ‘La malattia dell’olmo’ (‘The Disease of the Elm’),¹ which looks back to the Earthly Paradise cantos of *Purgatorio* (especially 30–31) and *canzone* 126 of *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, ‘Chiare, fresche et dolci acque’ (‘Clear, fresh, sweet waters’).² Looking at how Sereni revisits and reworks the performative strategies at play in these earlier texts sheds light upon his poetic project and that of his predecessors, and demonstrates how what begins in Dante and Petrarch as a project of restoration (of self and Other, respectively) becomes, in Sereni’s poem, a measure of his subject’s undoing.

It may appear at first paradoxical to make a modern Italian poet the subject of a paper on performance in the Middle Ages, especially one whose work seems, on the surface at least, to move against tradition, establishing an alternative model of subjectivity that goes against the dominant, Petrarchan mode that had characterized Italian lyric poetry for several centuries when he began writing. Yet if the ‘I’ that Sereni’s poetry stages in his later two collections—*Gli strumenti umani* (*The Human*

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1 In Vittorio Sereni, *Stella variabile* [*Variable Star*], Milan 1981, now in Vittorio Sereni, *Poesie*, 4th edn, ed. by Dante Isella, Milan 2000 (Meridiani), pp. 254–255. A selection of Sereni’s poems is available in English translation, in *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Vittorio Sereni: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. by Peter Robinson, Marcus Perryman, Chicago, London 2006, including ‘The Disease of the Elm’, pp. 261–263.

2 The dual-language edition of Dante’s *Purgatorio* to which I refer is *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 2 Purgatorio*, ed. by Robert M. Durling, New York 2003; References to Petrarch’s *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* are to *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The ‘Rime sparse’ and Other Lyrics*, ed. and trans. by Robert M. Durling, Cambridge, Mass., London 1976. Where I wish to draw emphasis to individual words or lines of poems, this will be rendered in italics in all cases.

Implements), 1965 and *Stella variabile* (*Variable Star*), 1981—seems at some remove from the traditionally static, monologic ‘I’ normally understood to inhabit the lyric universe, his choice to write a narrative, dialogic form of poetry that relocates his subject to a space outside of the securer domain of centralized lyric verse, does not occur in a vacuum. His textual innovations are in fact all the more radical for their taking place in active discourse with tradition and with a set of ideals that, whilst no longer tenable in the modern context, are nonetheless present as residues or fragments of a more complete poetic world he would seek to recreate. As Sereni explains in an interview on poetry he gave to secondary school students in Parma in 1979:

Oggi, leggendo Dante, possiamo essere culturalmente interessati dal fatto che la sua posizione politica era quel che era in quel determinato momento, però non c’è dubbio che di fronte alla costruzione terrena e metafisica della *Divina Commedia* noi ci fermiamo su determinati punti, dove sentiamo che è la poesia che trionfa su tutto il resto. Ora dire che differenza c’è tra noi e Dante è un discorso inutile, perché noi facciamo una lettura particolare di Dante, di Petrarca, che li rende attuali; per cui sentiamo che certi aspetti della nostra sensibilità ed esperienza si rispecchiano perfettamente in loro. Quindi non c’è una poesia del passato e una poesia del presente, c’è una evoluzione. Di diverso tra noi e i poeti del passato c’è il nostro lavoro in formazione, che noi compiamo in quanto siamo soggetti diversi da quelli che c’erano prima.

(Today, reading Dante, we can be interested culturally in the fact that his political position was what it was in that particular moment, but there is no doubt that when faced with the earthly and metaphysical structure of the *Divina Commedia* we focus our attention on specific points, in which we feel that it is the poetry that triumphs over everything else. Today, to say what difference there is between us and Dante is a senseless discourse since we undertake a particular reading of Dante and Petrarch which makes them contemporary, to the extent that we feel that certain aspects of our sensibility and experience are perfectly reflected in theirs. Consequently, there is not a poetry of the past and a poetry of the present but an evolution. What differs between us and the poets of the past is our project in the making, which we undertake inasmuch as we are different subjects from those who existed before.)³

3 ‘Vittorio Sereni’, in *Sulla poesia: conversazione nelle scuole*, ed. by Giuliana Massani, Bruno Rivalta, Parma 1999, pp. 41–62 (pp. 43–44) – English translation is my own. The passage comes from a transcript of two interviews Sereni gave to students at the *Scuola media inferiore ‘G. Pascoli’* and *Istituto tecnico industriale statale* in Parma on 12 December 1979, published together with contributions by other Italian poets including Bertolucci, Zanzotto, Porta, Conte and Cucchi. Sereni also wrote two important critical essays on Dante and Petrarch, in which he discusses the ‘poetic’ value of their work in further detail: ‘Si può leggere Dante come un poeta puro?’ (‘Can Dante be Read as a Pure Poet?’), first publ. in *Milano Sera*, 23–24 October 1950, p. 3, now in Vittorio Sereni, *Sentieri di gloria: note e ragionamenti sulla letteratura*, ed. by Giuseppe Strazzeri, Milan 1996 (Piccola biblioteca Oscar 96), pp. 28–33; ‘Petrarca, nella sua finzione la sua verità’ (‘Petrarch, in his Fiction his Truth’), first publ.

Intertextuality becomes, in this way, a key agent of revision of Sereni's poetic 'I', a means of constituting selfhood that puts the emphasis upon language and on a textual performance that is inevitably measured against what has come before. It also engenders a version of linguistic performativity that goes beyond the question of mere self-expression to encompass what, following Giuseppe Mazzotta's re-evaluation of Petrarch's poetic subject, we can term 'self-making', with all that this implies of an active, constantly renewed search for poetic identity, rooted in discourse.⁴ Mazzotta argues that even when reading a text like Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* [henceforth *RVF*], which is undeniably constructed on the model of a dominant subjectivity (that of its author), we should not expect to find a unified or consistent self who pre-exists or somehow transcends the poems, but rather a subject understood as divided and fragmented, only graspable in and through the poems themselves. It is this more 'modern' explanation of how textuality functions to stage an 'I' in a not at all pre-determined fashion that I will draw upon in my own analysis of Sereni's 'La malattia dell'olmo' and its likely intertextual sources, Dante's *Purgatorio* 30–31 and Petrarch's *RVF* 126.

'La malattia dell'olmo'

Se ti importa che ancora sia estate
eccoti in riva al fiume l'albero squamarsi
delle foglie più deboli: roseogialli
petali di fiori sconosciuti
– e a futura memoria i sempreverdi
immobili.

Ma più importa che la gente cammini in allegria
che corra al fiume la città e un gabbiano
avventuratosi sin qua si sfogli
in un lampo di candore.

Guidami tu, stella variabile, fin che puoi...

– e il giorno fonde le rive in miele e oro
le rifonde in un buio oleoso
fino al pullulare delle luci.

Scocca

da quel formicolio

(in abridged form, with the title 'Sì dolce è del mio amaro la radice' ('So Sweet is the Root of my Bitterness') in *Corriere del Ticino*, 22 June 1974, now in *Sentieri di gloria*, pp. 127–146.

4 'Memory, imagination, and desire, the terms within which the poet's act of self-making is carried out, appear to be ambiguous instruments of the poetic project', Giuseppe Mazzotta, 'The *Canzoniere* and the Language of the Self', in *The Worlds of Petrarch*, Durham, London 1993 (Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies 14), pp. 58–79 (p. 60).

un atomo ronzante, a colpo
 sicuro mi centra
 dove più punge e brucia.
 Vienmi vicino, parlami, tenerezza,
 – dico voltandomi a una
 vita fino a ieri a me prossima
 oggi così lontana – scaccia
 da me questo spino molesto,
 la memoria:
 non si sfama mai.
 È fatto – mormora in risposta
 nell'ultimo chiaro
 quell'ombra – adesso dormi, riposa.

Mi hai

tolto l'aculeo, non
 il suo fuoco – sospiro abbandonandomi a lei
 in sogno con lei precipitando giù.

'The Disease of the Elm' // If it matters to you it's still summer / look here how
 on the river bank the tree / flakes its more tenuous leaves: / rosy-yellow petals of
 unknown flowers / – and to future memory the evergreens / motionless. // But
 it matters more the people step gaily, / the city rush to the river and a seagull, /
 ventured as far as here, be unleafed / in a flare of brilliant white. // Lead me,
 variable star, as long as you're able... // – and the day casts the banks in honey
 and gold / and recasts them in an oily dark / until the teeming of lights. // It
 darts / out from that swarm, / the humming atom, hits me / with unswerving
 aim / where it most stings and burns. // Come near to me, speak to me,
 tenderness, / – I say, turning back towards / a life until yesterday close to me /
 today so remote – drive out / from me the insistent thorn, / the memory: / it is
 never satisfied. // It's finished – that shadow / murmurs a reply / in the last light
 – sleep now, rest. // You've / removed the thorn, but not / its burning – I sigh
 as I give myself up to her / in dreams with her already falling.

'La malattia dell'olmo', like the earlier texts with which it is in dialogue, stages an Edenic moment that situates the quest for identity in the context of the poet's relationship to time and memory. The central themes are, as we might expect given the purgatorial context the poem evokes, the journey back through time, the recuperation of loss, and the desire to redeem the self, but they are embodied in such a way as to suggest that Sereni is both establishing the purgatorial journey as paradigm and reworking its final destination.⁵ Sereni's moment of failed expiation,

5 As Teodolinda Barolini points out, "The very idea of a return to the beginning ('lo ritornare a lo principio'), of a progression forward to the past, finds its precise counterpart [...] in purgatory, where forward motion is a way of recuperating and redeeming the past, of returning to lost innocence and our collective point of origin, the garden of Eden'. As she clarifies, this also involves an 'unmaking of memory' through memory, so that like the other souls of Purgatory, Dante-pilgrim is simultaneously called upon to remember and to

modelled negatively on Dante's much more successful scene of redemption in the Earthly Paradise, leads to what is effectively a linguistic or poetic version of a Fall. Where language in both Dante and Petrarch's texts is credited, in different ways, with the role of countering absence and loss, Sereni seems destined only to lose again what he is unsure of having possessed in the first place.

Discontinuity shapes the topography of Sereni's poem too and his Eden, coming as it does within a predominantly secular universe, is immediately set apart from Dante's by its solely terrestrial origins and its almost complete extraneousness from any sense of a higher reality. Moreover, like Petrarch in *RVF* 126, Sereni never properly seems to inhabit the locus amoenus before he is cast out again and his landscape seems corrupt from the start, with the decaying elm tree also an image of a self in disarray, with the two joined in the intermediary realm of the speaking voice that laments their common demise.

Memory in all three texts, as the medium through which the process of 'self-making' is attempted, establishes an ambivalent textual space in which the past fuses with the present, dividing the subject between two or more temporal domains and forcing him to choose between them. In the context of progressive purgation that each text evokes—in Sereni and Petrarch's case if only by association with Dante—the dangers of memory threaten to disrupt the evolutionary agenda, causing the subject to lose direction, leading him backwards more than forwards, away from what, following Petrarch, we can term the 'true image' ('*imagine vera*', *RVF* 126.60) towards its dangerous simulacrum.

Dante's '*memorie triste*' ('memories of sin', or 'sad memories', *Purgatorio* 31.11), which the pilgrim is called upon to purge in the Earthly Paradise, are themselves an embodiment of this tension at the textual level. Bound up with the rebirth and re-evocation of Dante's desire for Beatrice, they are the central motif for understanding the way in which Eros is performed as memory or phantasm, and the potential dangers that ensue. Like other instances of a backwards looking desire that emerge through *Purgatorio*, they imply a momentary suspension of the journey, a temporary lapse or regression in desire, with (the poet's) discourse

forget (*The Undivine 'Comedy': Detheologizing Dante*, Princeton 1992, p. 101). 'La malattia dell'olmo', like several poems in *Stella variabile*, evokes a purgatorial setting precisely in this context, but it soon cedes to a more limbic atmosphere as soon as the poet proves unable to purge himself of the dangers of memory, causing him to become trapped in the circle of a purely backwards-looking desire, which ends progression altogether.

responsible for correcting the moment of indirection, reinstating forward motion and ultimately the journey itself.⁶

As Sereni's comments on Dante's *Commedia*, cited earlier, make clear, it is indeed a question of the power of poetry—in this case, to counter an original loss—that is at stake in the poetic quest. In *Purgatorio* 30–31, language not only has the power to 'return' the past to the subject but also to 're-turn' it, rewriting and redeeming previously transgressive discourse (in the more negative sense of what led astray) as a necessary but false path on the journey to salvation.⁷ Petrarch's poem, on the other hand, with its repeated motifs of textual indirection, gives errant desire free rein. Emphasis is less on the penitential force of words than on their imagistic value—their power to evoke and to sustain a vision (of Laura).

The world that Petrarch constructs to recuperate his beloved merely 'turns about' the same point so that his textual performance, whilst undoubtedly modelled on Dante's, also constantly departs from it, foreshadowing Sereni's reworking of the same scene. The familiar elements are present: the wood of memory, the beloved who emerges shrouded in a veil of flowers ambiguously re-clothed by the poet's memory before his sight is able, the feeling or knowledge that she is descended from Heaven, a place from which the poet has been exiled and to which he hopes now to return. But they circulate endlessly, without progression, in the same way that Petrarch's discourse, though all directed towards a single goal (the restoration of Laura's image, as she was on the first day he saw her), can be integrating of the Other but problematically dispersive of the self.⁸

6 The meeting with Casella on the shores of Purgatory in *Purgatorio* 2 is another key example of this, where nostalgic desire (embodied in Casella's song), which causes the souls to delay their ascent up the Mountain, is corrected by Cato's rebuke. This episode is discussed in detail by Teodolinda Barolini in *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Comedy'*, Princeton 1984, pp. 31–40.

7 My analysis here borrows from Barolini's excellent discussion of the essential difference between Petrarch and Dante's relationship to time, where Petrarch's 'capacity for turning without ever converting' dramatically underscores the differences in the role of memory as a vehicle of restoration of the 'I' or its object. See Teodolinda Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence: Time and Narrative in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*', in *MLN* 104/1, Italian Issue (January 1989), pp. 1–38 (pp. 11–12).

8 As is well known, there is a scarcity of biographical detail in the *RVF* that makes it difficult to determine where, if at all, Petrarch first saw the woman he calls 'Laura'. In a letter (*Familiars* 2. 9) to his friend Giacomo Colonna, defending Laura as a real woman against doubts that she was merely an allegory of the poetic laurel, Petrarch places the first sighting of his beloved in the church of St Clare in Avignon but within the poetic universe of the *RVF*, Petrarch often transposes the vision to Vaucluse, which is privileged as the locus of the original encounter with the beloved, as in 'Chiare, fresche et dolci acque' analysed here. For further discussion of the elusive quality of the 'history' of Petrarch's love for Laura see

Sereni's female figure too (in his case, definitively a phantasm), though initially sought out for her redemptive potential, soon slides towards her reality as a 'shade', infernal perhaps more than purgatorial, less a true Other than a fractured self-image restored ambiguously to the present, to which the poet finally 'abandons himself' when his hoped for purgation does not occur. In the context of the quintessentially transitional agenda that characterizes Dante's Eden, Sereni's inability to progress is indeed damning, with the culminating, downward trajectory of his poem consolidating his distance also from Petrarch who, in refusing to move anywhere at all, preserves something of his experience intact in the intermediate realm of the poem, however dubious its effects.

The difference in outcome in the three poems is however, I believe, linguistic more than topographic, less a result of whether the subject can 'move' himself from place to place in physical terms, than a question of what language can achieve on a similar plane. Already this suggests that the 'success' of each performance depends fundamentally upon the poet's ability to make language do as he desires or, better, upon the extent to which desire (errant or otherwise) can be brought under control through the medium of speech. Beginning with Dante, and with a notion of discourse that can be 'transformative' as much as 'performative' of the 'I' and the world on which it depends, capable of restoring presence from absence and even of resurrecting the dead, we can trace the 'fortunes of the performative' through Petrarch to Sereni, mapping the evolution taking place at the level of language that sees a progressive attenuation in its presencing force.⁹ The speech act, as the moment in which identity is affirmed or denied and desire fulfilled or frustrated, proves central to each poem's dynamic, and implies that something more than mere speaking is going on.

Any discussion of performance in these terms inevitably leads us into dialogue with theories of the philosophy of language and, in particular, John Austin's work on 'the performative utterance'. In his essay, 'Preliminary Isolation of the Performative', Austin explains that performatives are those in which a subject 'does' more than 'says', where 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action', and unlike the constative statement, are prescriptive more than descriptive.¹⁰ Whilst he

Peter Hainsworth, *Petrarch the Poet: An Introduction to the 'Rerum vulgarium fragmenta'*, London 1988, pp. 108–118, and Durling's introduction to *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 4–7.

9 I borrow the phrase 'fortunes of the performative' from Jonathan Culler's very useful article, 'Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative', in *Poetics Today* 21/3 (Fall 2000), pp. 503–519.

10 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford 1962 (William James Lectures 1955), pp. 6–7.

limits his investigation to ‘the product of ordinary circumstances’, and specifically precludes literary discourse from his analysis saying that ‘a performative utterance will be in a *peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on a stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy’, he does recognize the ambiguities to which linguistic performance is open, something which is merely heightened when we are dealing with a textual performance and a speaking voice that may or may not coincide with a real figure, in a concrete situation.¹¹ As Émile Benveniste clarifies:

Le performatif n’a pas de valeur de description ni de prescription, mais, encore une fois, d’accomplissement. [...] Bref, il est événement parce qu’il crée l’événement. [...] Cela conduit à reconnaître au performatif une propriété singulière, celle d’être *sui-référentiel*, de se référer à une réalité qu’il constitue lui-même, du fait qu’il est effectivement énoncé dans des conditions qui le font acte.

(It [the performative utterance] does not have the value of description or prescription but, once again, of performance. [...] In short, it is an event because it creates the event. [...] This leads us to recognize in the performative a peculiar quality, that of being *self-referential*, of referring to a reality that it itself constitutes by the fact that it is actually uttered in conditions that make it an act.)¹²

If performatives set out to ‘accomplish the act that they designate’ then the implication is that they can do so more or less successfully depending on how effectively the performative utterance is articulated and received.¹³ Austin’s ‘doctrine of the *infelicities*’ which deals with performatives that mis-fire or go astray seems to acknowledge this aspect of performance, especially when he talks of a ‘mis-invocation of procedure’ that leads to a particular speech act becoming null and void.¹⁴ The question of the ‘illocutionary’ force of the utterance—the ability of the speaker to transform the locutionary act (mere speaking) into an act of ‘illocution’ (that which is accomplished or performed by speaking) —will be of particular importance when analysing Sereni’s use of the performative.¹⁵

11 *ibid.*, p. 22. Italics in the original.

12 Émile Benveniste, ‘La philosophie analytique et le langage’ (‘Analytical Philosophy and Language’), in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 2 vols, Paris 1966–1974, I (1966), pp. 267–276 (pp. 273–274). English translation taken from Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek, Coral Gables, Fla 1971 (Miami Linguistics Series 8), p. 236. Italics in the original.

13 ‘The notion of the performative—an utterance that accomplishes the act that it designates—was proposed by the philosopher J.L. Austin to describe a type of utterance neglected by philosophers’, Culler, ‘Fortunes of the Performative’, p. 503.

14 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, pp. 16–17. Italics in the original.

15 For a very clear account of the distinction between the three dimensions of the performative utterance—locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary, see Culler, ‘Fortunes of the Performative’, p. 506: ‘He [Austin] distinguishes the locutionary act, which is the act of speaking a sentence, from the illocutionary act, which is the act we perform by

By reducing the illocutionary force of language as a vehicle of construction of the 'I', Sereni turns an utterance designed to create a new state of affairs or to bring about change in the subject entirely on its head by the altered circumstances of its use.

As soon as the performative function is asserted, the notion of the static author dissipates, to be replaced by a much more dynamic conception of the relationship between the writer and his written self. Petrarch's *RVF* is a prime example of this kind of performativity, with each 'fragmenta' staging a new subject, the same and yet different from what has come before. Taken to its logical conclusion, all identity becomes textual, able to be read as well as articulated at the level of discourse, 'identité est un *fait* immédiatement saisi—accepté ou refusé, au niveau de l'énonciation' ('identity is a *fact* immediately grasped—accepted or refused, at the level of enunciation').¹⁶ Or to put it another way, 'the basic problem of the performative is the question, yet to be resolved, of whether there can be a harmonious fusion of doing and saying or whether there is an ineluctable tension [...] that governs and undermines all textual activity'.¹⁷

The performative utterance thus has a profound influence also on the question of autobiography and its relationship to the individual who appears to be speaking through the medium of the speech act, but whose identity may in fact be a product of what he says. As Paul de Man argues in his essay, 'Autobiography as De-facement':

Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name [...]. But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model? We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?¹⁸

speaking this sentence, and from the perlocutionary act, which is an act accomplished (effects secured) by performing the illocutionary act'.

16 Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris 1975 (Poétique), p. 35. English translation taken from Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary, Minneapolis 1989 (Theory and History of Literature 52), p. 21. Italics in the original.

17 Culler, 'Fortunes of the Performative', p. 518.

18 De Man, Paul, 'Autobiography as De-facement', in *MLN* 94/5, Comparative Literature (December 1979), 919–930 (p. 920). Italics in the original.

When De Man also raises, with regard to Wordsworth, the ‘question of autobiographical discourse as a discourse of self-restoration’ (p. 925), he further highlights the problematic relationship between language and identity, reaffirming the text’s value to confer a face on what is merely a voice (in the example he gives of *prosopopoeia*—that which makes the dead or absent ‘speak’) but also the ‘latent threat’ (p. 928) of language that also carries something of the face away with it, ‘Language, as trope, is always privative’ (p. 930). ‘Trope’, it should be noted, derives etymologically from the Greek ‘to turn’ and the language of literature (including that of poetry and autobiography) is thus figurative in a double sense: it ‘figures’, i.e. ‘brings into shape’ an ‘I’ but also ‘disfigures’ it, turning that ‘I’ towards and away from itself in a complex dialectic that all the texts I am looking at—Sereni’s in particular—evoke at the level of the performative.

This dialectic is apparent above all in the interplay of voice and image, with Dante’s text providing the performative or, if we like, ‘figurative’ ideal that enables him to construct and to restore, through a language of tropes, not only the past but also Beatrice herself. The motif of the ‘revestita voce’ (‘re-clothing of the voice’), introduced in *Purgatorio* 30.15, in the context of the procession that marks the advent of Beatrice, functions I believe as a mise-en-abyme of the linguistic or textual operation that is in play in both this canto and the next. It is what Martinez and Durling term a ‘daring trope’ with ‘a rich ambiguity of meaning’; literally meaning ‘to be clothed again’, or ‘to be clothed over’, it appears to be a metonymy for the resurrected body that will be restored to all souls at the Last Judgement.¹⁹ However it also takes on a unique value when applied to Beatrice, who is herself a form of ‘revestita voce’, brought back to life in these cantos even more forcefully by what she says than by the traits of her physical appearance:

così, dentro una nuvola di fiori
che da le mani angeliche saliva
e ricadeva in giù dentro e di fòri,
sovra candido vel cinta d’uliva
donna m’apparve, sotto verde manto
vestita di color di *fiamma viva*.

E lo spirito mio, che *già cotanto*
tempo era stato ch’a la sua presenza
non era di stupor tremando affranto,
sanza de li occhi aver più conoscenza,
per occulta virtù che da lei mosse
d’antico amor sentì la gran potenza.

Tosto che ne la vista mi percosse
l’alta virtù che *già* m’avea trafitto

19 Durling, Martinez, Notes to *Purgatorio* 30, pp. 519–520

prima ch'io fuor di puerizia fosse,
volsimi a sinistra col respitto
 col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma
 quando ha paura o quando elli è afflitto,
per dicere a Virgilio: 'Men che dramma
 di sangue m'è rimaso che non tremi:
 conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma!'

Ma *Virgilio* n'avea lasciati scerni
 di sé – *Virgilio*, dolcissimo padre,
Virgilio, a cui per mia salute die'mi –,
 né quantunque perdeo l'antica matre
 valse a le guance nette di rugiada
 che, lagrimando, non tornasser atre.

'*Dante*, perché *Virgilio* se ne vada,
non pianger anco, non piangere ancora,
 ché *pianger* ti conven per altra spada'.

Quasi ammiraglio che in poppa e in prora
 viene a veder la gente che ministra
 per li altri legni, e a ben far l'incora:
 in su la sponda del carro sinistro,
quando mi volsi al suon del nome mio,
 che di necessità qui si registra,
 vidi la donna che pria m'appario
 velata sotto l'angelica festa
 drizzar li occhi ver' me di qua dal rio,
 tutto che 'l vel che le scendea di testa,
 cerchiato de le fronde di Minerva,
 non la lasciasse parer manifesta. (*Purgatorio* 30.28-69)

So, within a cloud of flowers that from the hands of the angels was rising and falling back within and without, / her white veil girt with olive, a lady appeared to me, *clothed*, beneath a green mantle, in the colour of *living flame*. / And my spirit, which *already for so long a time* had not known in her presence the awe that overcame it with trembling, / without having more knowledge through the eyes, because of hidden power that moved from her, *felt the great force of ancient love*. / *As soon as* my sight was struck by that high power that had transfixed me before I was out of boyhood, / *I turned to the left* with the appeal with which a little boy runs to his mama when he is afraid or when he is hurt, / *to say* to Virgil: 'Less than a dram of blood is left me that is not trembling: I know the signs of the ancient flame!' / But *Virgil* had left us deprived of himself – *Virgil*, most sweet father, *Virgil*, to whom I gave myself for my salvation –, / nor did everything our ancient mother lost suffice to prevent my check, though cleansed with dew, from turning dark again with tears. / 'Dante, though Virgil depart, *do not weep yet, do not weep yet*, for you must *weep* to another sword'. / Like an admiral who comes to stern and prow to see the people who serve on the other ships, and heartens them to do well: / on the left side of the chariot, *when I turned at the sound of my name*, which of necessity is here set down, / I saw the lady who had just appeared to me veiled beneath the angelic welcome, directing her eyes towards me across

the stream, / although the veil that came down from her head, circled with Minerva's foliage, did not permit her to appear openly.

The first image of Beatrice that is restored to Dante is thus a visual one, in which her clothing is emphasized, but also the fact that, at this point, she is still 'veiled' to him. This 'veiling' is important since with the pilgrim still unready and unable to gaze upon Beatrice in the full glory of her 'seconda etade' ('second age', *Purgatorio* 30.125), the emphasis quickly shifts from her clothing to her voice which, in the absence of a clear and perfect vision of her, mediates between them, becoming the instrument of communication and ultimately of confession and absolution. When, in *Purgatorio* 30.73, Beatrice declares 'Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice' ('Look at us well! Truly I am, truly I am Beatrice'), it is the uttering of her name that allows the pilgrim to perceive her true identity long before she is physically 'unveiled' to him, and language in these cantos is performative not only of the 'I' but also of his object, dramatically restored to him from the past but also endowed with a newness that derives from the full force of her direct speech.

Ultimately then it is the voice (both her own, and the poet's) that re-clothes Beatrice, just as it is language that 'rewrites' or 'writes over' the memory of the body (evoked, in 30.28–48, through a nostalgic register of Dante's 'ancient love' that leads the poet and the reader back to the earliest pages of Dante's 'book of memory', the *Vita nova*, and the image of Beatrice as he first saw her), re-directing the pilgrim's gaze across the water, to the opposite bank where the 'new' Beatrice resides in all her [veiled] glory, ready to be [re]discovered by him beyond Lethe and beyond death.²⁰ By textually privileging the present vision of the 'fiamma viva' ('living flame', l. 33), by having it appear first, Dante alerts us to the fact that it will be—indeed must be—the dominant force in this encounter, yet he also delays full recognition until the 'antica fiamma' ('ancient flame') too has made itself felt, so that an uneasy tension persists. As Piero Botani puts it:

To the unforgettable experience of his adolescence Dante now leads us back, as he will again at the end of the canto (115–45) and in the following one, where his 'vita nuova' will be revisited with a new consciousness. The 'theophany' with

20 Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, ed. by Domenico De Robertis, Milan, Naples 1980. Available in English translation as Dante Alighieri, *The New Life*, ed. by E.V. Rieu, trans. by William Anderson, Harmondsworth, Eng, Baltimore 1964 (Penguin Classics). In *Purgatorio* 30.28–48, nostalgic desire for Beatrice is everywhere written into Dante's discourse and especially into the repetition of key words and phrases that replay in particularly intense fashion the first encounter with Beatrice when Dante was just nine years old (recounted in *Vita nova*, II, 1–10), redefining it, certainly, but also revisiting it almost frame by frame.

which the scene opened becomes 'recherche du temps perdu' and at the same time anagnorisis.²¹

In reanimating the past whilst at the same time articulating it as something different, with a new body and soul, Dante's own discourse becomes just another version of a 'revestita voce' ('re-clothed voice'). Having restored Beatrice from the dead, language takes on an even more profound role in a process of textual redirectioning that allows Dante to recuperate his 'temps perdu' ('lost time'), redeeming a poetic past as much as a real one. The rift in time (as well as space), represented by Lethe, will only be properly healed when the pilgrim crosses it. There is however a progressive movement in time, evident in the temporal markers that punctuate the text at this point, that prefigures and prepares for the definitive transition that will occur later on.

As Teodolinda Barolini explains, 'Only purgatory is the place where "tempo per tempo si ristora" (*Purg.* 23.84), where time is restored to us so that we can undo in time what we did in time', and this is a process that Dante's text recreates or performs through its own manipulation of time and memory.²² The passage just quoted from *Purgatorio* 30 could not demonstrate this point any more clearly. Past time, restaged through memory, competes for space with present time, made evident in Dante's use of the adverbs 'già' ('already') (repeated twice), 'tosto che' ('as soon as'), 'ancora' ('yet'), and 'quando' ('when'), which all have a role in making or performing time anew. The dangers of regression are clearly present but, by progressively reaffirming the present frame of the encounter (which is also the more immediate frame of direct speech), language redeems itself, literally turning time around, so that from facing his past, the pilgrim turns around to face his future.

Let us consider further how Dante achieves this. Both clauses dependent on 'già' ('already') designate an earlier period in Dante's desire for Beatrice that the text evokes as it rewrites it: the first, ll. 34–36, 'E lo spirito mio, che *già cotanto / tempo* era stato ch'a la sua presenza / non era di stupor tremando affranto' ('And my spirit, which *already for so long a time* had not known in her presence the awe that overcame it with trembling'), indicates the negative period of time when Dante 'turned away' from Beatrice after her death, a time spent in her literal and metaphorical absence from the world, from Dante's thoughts, and from his writing. The second, ll. 40–42, '*Tosto che* ne la vista mi percosse / l'alta virtù che *già* m'avea trafitto / prima ch'io fuor di puerizia fosse' ('*As soon as* my sight was struck by that high power that had transfixed me before I was out of

21 Piero Boitani, 'I know the signs of the ancient flame: Dante's recognitions', in *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 142–176 (p. 164).

22 Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, p. 101.

boyhood'), goes even further back in time to the moment that his 'ancient love' was born, indicating the endurance of a desire that has been present from Dante's earliest encounter with Beatrice and that makes itself felt again now, even more powerfully than before.

In both cases, the force of this 'ancient love' is potentially overwhelming and the pilgrim risks getting lost in it, evident in his turning back to the left, to what is familiar, and to Virgil. But Virgil is not there and the utterance that the pilgrim addresses to him (ll. 46–48) hovers in an uncertain textual space between speech and silence, desire and its vocalization: since his addressee is missing, the comfort or support the pilgrim seeks is not to be found in that direction. Loss is quite literally written into language, a loss for which only Beatrice can compensate, and only once the process of mourning (for Virgil, and everything he represents) has been carried out. The thrice repeated name of Virgil (ll. 49–51), which echoes the loss of Eurydice in the Orphic myth, and leads to the pilgrim's face 'turning dark' with tears is the first step in this process that Beatrice will complete, countering the three 'Virgils' with the three verbs meaning 'to weep' whose purpose is in fact to stop his crying—to delay it for the proper time (the confession)—when what he will be called upon to mourn is yet more important still. As John Freccero argues:

The calling out to Eurydice is the culmination of Virgilian pathos, lamenting death that is stronger than poetry, as it is stronger than love and even than Rome. Dante's adversative *ma* records the loss, yet transcends it with an affirmation.²³

The redirectioning of desire at this point therefore functions precisely through language—the language that Beatrice speaks but also the language of the text. Hearing Beatrice speak his name (l. 55), Dante 'turns away' from the hole left by an absent Virgil towards Beatrice, who he perceives as looking at him for the first time, beginning in earnest the dialogue that will direct the rest of their encounter. The 'quando' or 'when' of line 62, '*quando mi volsi al suon del nome mio*' ('*when I turned at the sound of my name*'), is indeed the pivotal moment or 'turning point' in determining the transition since, in 'turning back' to Beatrice, the pilgrim is also facing forward once more, and it also corrects the period of momentary regression that Virgil's disappearance had threatened, similarly countered in the turning away from absence to presence, from past to future, and from left to right.

The dynamic of speech and reply, so crucial in determining the performative and transformative qualities of Dante's text at this point, is thus also staged textually as a dialogue between the author and himself.

²³ John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, Cambridge, Mass., London 1986, p. 208.

The processes of '*figure*, figuration and disfiguration' that De Man posits at the heart of autobiography are also those we find in *Purgatorio* 30–31 in the different subject positions that Dante occupies as both author and character, particularly in the linguistic exchange with Beatrice at the moment of the confession.²⁴ In fact, as I now wish to demonstrate, the way in which Dante choreographs the scene at this point suggests that the confession and absolution that the text stages are for the benefit of the poet as much as for his character. What Dante's language 'performs' at this point is nothing less than the triple salvation of his character, that of his 'sacrato poema' ('sacred poem', *Paradiso* 23.62), and himself as its author.

Beatrice's discourse once again provides the key, absorbing as it does the power of the sacraments as well as an intensely personal register that relates to the very private and poetic nature of Dante's sin, and its redemption. Her embittered accusations, as well as her 'lesson', though undoubtedly designed to 're-turn' the pilgrim towards her as I have already shown, also redirect the poet and his desire towards God. When Dante is named by Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30.55—the only occurrence of this in the whole poem—author and character momentarily coincide, as they do again when Beatrice addresses Dante through allusions to his youth and his earlier text, the *Vita nova*, when the single pronoun 'he' testifies to the power of Beatrice's discourse to reach and to affect both penitent subjects in turn (Dante poet, and Dante pilgrim):

questi fu tal ne la sua vita nova
virtüalmente, ch'ogne abito destro
fatto avrebbe in lui mirabil prova. (*Purgatorio* 30.115–117)

he was such in his new life, potentially, that every good habit would have produced a marvellous result in him.

Sì tosto come in su la soglia fui
di mia seconda etade e mutai vita,
questi si tolse a me e diessi altrui: (*Purgatorio* 30.124–126)

When I was on the threshold of my second age and changed lives, *he* took himself from me and gave himself to another.

The author is clearly implicated as well as his character at this point, not least because the subject designated by the '*questi*' ('he') belongs to a temporal sphere that precedes the events narrated at the start of the poem. This multi-levelled discourse, in which the text once again exploits its status as a 're-clothed' version of a voice, also extends to canto 31 in which Dante's confession proper is voiced more emphatically by the text than by the pilgrim himself:

24 De Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', p. 926.

‘O tu che se’ di là dal fiume sacro,’
volgendo suo parlare a me per punta,
 che pur per taglio m’era paruto acro,
 ricominciò, seguendo senza cunta:
 ‘Dì, di se questo è vero: a tanta accusa
 tua confession conviene esser congiunta’.

Era la mia virtù tanto confusa
 che *la voce si mosse e pria si spense*
 che da li organi suoi fosse dischiusa.

Poco sofferse poi disse: ‘Che pense?
 Rispondi a me, ché le memorie triste
 in te non sono ancor da l’acqua offense’.

Confusione e paura insieme miste
mi pinsero un tal ‘sì’ fuor de la bocca
al quale intender fuor mestier le viste.
 [...]

Dopo la tratta d’un sospiro amaro,
 a pena ebbi la voce che rispuose,
 e le labbra a fatica la formaro:

piangendo dissi: ‘Le presenti cose
 col falso lor piacer volser miei passi
 tosto che ’l vostro viso si nascose’.

Ed ella: ‘Se tacessi o se negassi
 ciò che confessi, non fora men nota
 la colpa tua: da tal giudice sassi! (*Purgatorio* 31.1-39)

‘O you who are beyond the sacred river’, *turning toward me* the point of her speech, whose mere edge had seemed sharp to me, / she began again, continuing without delay: ‘say, say if this is true: to so great an accusation your confession must now be joined.’ / My strength was so confounded that *my voice began but gave out before it was released from its organs*. / She endured this briefly, then she said: ‘What are you pondering? Answer me, for your memories of evil have not yet been erased by the waters’. / *Confusion and fear mixed together drove such a ‘Yes’ out of my mouth that to hear it one needed eyes*. [...] / After heaving a bitter sigh, I hardly had the voice to reply, and my lips formed it with difficulty; / weeping I said, ‘Present things with their false pleasure turned my steps as soon as your face was hidden’. / And she: ‘If you were silent or denied what you confess, your guilt would be no less remarked: by such a judge is it known! (*Purgatorio* 31.1-39)

We remember that the pilgrim has already been declared by Virgil to be ‘free and upright’ of will at the end of *Purgatorio* 27 when the last *P* of sin has been erased from his forehead.²⁵ The relapse into a state of darkness and confusion is thus all the more startling for taking place at this point

25 ‘Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno: / libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio, / e fallo fora non fare a suo senno. / Per ch’io te sovra te corono e mitrio’ (‘No longer await any word or any sign from me: free, upright and whole is your will, and it would be a fault not to act according to its intent. Therefore you over yourself I crown and mitre’), *Purgatorio* 27.139-42.

and yet I believe also entirely logical if we accept that the backwards looking, melancholy desire that must be purged is ultimately the author's own and that this is *his* response, to Beatrice, through the medium of the text. Borges, when recounting the details of what he terms this 'aching scene', concludes (quoting Theophil Spoerri) that 'undoubtedly Dante himself had envisioned this meeting differently. Nothing in the preceding pages indicates that the greatest humiliation of his life awaits him there', as though the text somehow 'performs' the shaming and redemption of its author in a way that exceeds his own intentions on the matter.²⁶ Bernard Stambler too, when he discusses the dialectic of author and text, is drawn to the specifically textual properties of the confessional event:

[...] While remaining within the framework of his poem in these six cantos, Dante is so to speak relaxing his narrative exposition of the afterworld and bringing in a new mode of discourse—one which mixes direct expression (in which something close to the purely literal is the only sense) and symbolic expression (in which the thing-said exists for the thing-meant, as in the figures of the pageants). The Pilgrim's journey, and the allegory depending on it, are partly suspended while certain things are said (by Dante of course) to Dante the Poet, rather than, as regularly elsewhere, to Dante the Pilgrim.²⁷

The reticence of the pilgrim at this point can thus be interpreted as a textual strategy or poetic device that leaves room for the poet to speak (to himself and Beatrice), whilst the difficulties of articulation at the level of the narrative contaminate the author's discourse too so that the painfulness of the process that has brought Dante to self-knowledge and to the conviction of his own sin is mirrored linguistically in the figuring and disfiguring of the voice. In turn the text, endowed with a new body and soul, corrects the sin that poetry itself, as a unique version of a voice, represents. When Dante's text intercedes to utter the reply to Beatrice that the pilgrim's voice articulates only fragmentarily or incompletely, the author's words are not mere glosses to the action but actually perform the exorcism of the poet's own 'memorie triste' or 'memories of sin' which, since Beatrice made her reappearance, have been the most dangerous threat to the process of salvation:

Sotto 'l suo velo e oltre la riviera
vincer pariemmi più sé stessa antica,
vincer che l'altre qui, quand'ella c'era.
Di penter sì mi punse ivi l'ortica

26 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Nine Dantesque Essays: 1945-1951', in *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger, trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, Eliot Weinberger, London 2001 (Penguin Classics), pp. 265-305 (p. 299). The quotation from Theophil Spoerri comes from *Einführung in die Göttliche Komödie*, Zurich 1946.

27 Bernard Stambler, 'The Confrontation of Beatrice and Dante: *Purgatorio* XXX', in *Italiana* 42/1 (March 1965), pp. 61-97 (p. 63-64).

che *di tutte altre cose* qual mi torse
più nel suo amor, *più mi si fé nemica*.

Tanta riconoscenza il cor mi morse
ch'io caddi vinto; e quale allora femmi
salsi colei che la cagion mi porse.

Poi, quando il cor virtù di fuor rendemmi,
la donna ch' io avea trovata sola
sopra me vidi, e dicea: 'Tiemmi, tiemmi!'

Tratto m'avea nel fiume infin la gola,
e tirandosi me dietro sen giva
sovresso l'acqua, lieve come scola.

Quando fui presso alla beata riva,
'*Asperges me*' sì dolcemente udissi
che nol so rimembrar, non ch' io lo scriva.

La bella donna ne le braccia aprissi;
abbracciommi la testa e mi sommerse
ove convenne ch' io l'acqua inghiottissi.

Indi mi tolse e bagnato m'offerse
dentro a la danza de le quattro belle,
e ciascuna del braccio mi coperse. (*Purgatorio* 31.82-105)

Under her veil and beyond the river she seemed to me to surpass her former self more than she surpassed other women here, when she was here. / The nettle of repentance so pricked me then, that whatever other thing had most turned me toward its love, now became most hateful to me. / So much recognition bit my heart that I fell overcome, and what I then became, she knows who was its cause. / Then, when my heart gave me back my external powers, the lady whom I had found alone I saw above me and she was saying: 'Hold me, hold me!' / She had drawn me into the river up to my throat, and, pulling me after her, she was walking on the water as light as a boat. / When I drew near the blessed shore, 'Asperges me' was heard so sweetly that I cannot remember, let alone write it. / The beautiful lady opened her arms, embraced my head, and submerged me, so that I had to swallow some of the water. / Then she took me and, drenched as I was, inserted me into the dance of the four beauties, and each of them covered me with her arm.

Thus, as the 'ancient' ('antica') register of desire resurfaces in these cantos, Dante must once again mourn the loss of his earthly passion, gaining in its place a language of plenitude (or more-than-plenitude), embodied in the poetics of fullness and heightened sensory perception we find in lines 82–90, which in turn highlights the insufficiencies of the earlier syntax of desire that has been definitively superseded. Like the Casella episode in *Purgatorio* 2, which as Barolini tells us 'functions as a lapse, a backward glance', this episode's 'redemption is implicit in its occurrence' and there is no doubt from this perspective that the pilgrim will emerge as a newly born soul on the other side.²⁸ With this dramatic moment Dante succeeds

²⁸ Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, p. 40.

in uniting in a unique dimension all the paths that have been trodden to bring the pilgrim and the poet to this point, redeeming them all (even the wrong turns, 'the sum total of personal falls, little deaths, other paths')—rewriting every journey, and every transgression with this one.²⁹

In 'Chiare, fresche et dolci acque' ('Clear, fresh, sweet waters'), Petrarch, on the other hand, uses his return journey to rewrite transgression only in a more negative sense, seeking to live it again (as it happened before) rather than to change or alter its course. The locus of his original vision of Laura—Vaucluse, conjured up as a kind of *bortus conclusus*, as Mazzotta notes—is at once the origin and destination of desire, a space for the cultivation of the poet's love, where the primordial image of the beloved might be reproduced and preserved exactly as it was at their first encounter.³⁰ Like the *bortus conclusus* so often associated with the Virgin in medieval iconography, the vision of Laura is destined to remain untouched, but, in Petrarch's poem, also unchanged and untranscended.

Thus, where Dante's performative strategies are used linguistically to stage a new version of the self and to redefine the boundaries of poetic discourse, giving the language of the *Commedia* the redemptive power of the sacraments, Petrarch's language is used instead to cultivate his pleasure in the sin of recollection, which the poem 'performs' without ever 'transforming' the 'I'. As Durling suggests, canzone 126 does indeed exhibit a 'memory [...] transfigured by desire',³¹ but more importantly it establishes Petrarch's desire as inherently mnemonic, and problematically so, directed almost entirely toward the past, which is both too fixed and yet not substantial enough to be a truly satisfactory compensation for the empty present. The power of poetry is thus asserted, but so are its dangers—everything for which Petrarch will ultimately feel the need to repent but here rejoices in, for there may be nothing else, or nothing beyond words:

S' egli è pur mio destino
e' l cielo in ciò s'adopra,
ch'Amor quest'occhi lagrimando chiuda,
qualche grazia il meschino
corpo fra voi ricopra,
et torni l'alma al proprio albergo ignuda;
la morte fia men cruda
se questa spene porto
a quel dubbioso passo:

29 *ibid.*, p. 56.

30 Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, p. 172.

31 Durling, 'Introduction' to *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, p. 24.

ché lo spirito lasso
 non poria mai in più riposato porto
 né in più tranquilla fossa
 fuggir la carne travagliata et l'ossa. (ll. 14-26)

If it is indeed my destiny and Heaven exerts itself that Love close those eyes while they are still weeping, / let some grace bury my poor body among you and let my soul return naked to this its own dwelling; / death will be less harsh if I bear this hope to the fearful pass, for my weary spirit could never in a more restful port or a more tranquil grave flee my labouring flesh and my bones.

Where Dante presents his dream as 'true', Petrarch prizes his own dream for what it is—an act of wilful self-delusion or 'vago errore' ('lovely wandering' / 'beautiful error', l. 51), a site of absence more than presence, and the outlet for a death-oriented desire which transforms that absence into a chamber for Laura and the self but only through a process of self-alienation that is ultimately as unsettling and divisive an experience as Dante's is edifying. As Peter Hainsworth writes of sonnet 157, though his comments could apply equally well to *canzone* 126:

Ontologically there is a question surrounding the very nature of the thing that is read. Nor can it be otherwise: Petrarch has accepted fully the consequences of his rejection of any system of thought that pretends to objectivity, to designate what is real. The subjectivity of the experience alluded to and the subjectivity of the poem go hand in hand, the reader being put into a position of having to decide whether anything worthy of the name has happened at all. The senses are not excluded, but we are inside a special area that can only be thought of as poetic, though Petrarch can never designate it as such.³²

Typically, in *RVF* 126, Laura begins as an absent universe that the poet is trying to reconstruct, and the poem as a whole sees Petrarch trying to mimic the miracle of Dante's language in *Purgatorio* 30–31 in order to restore her to presence, as she was on the very first day he saw her. However, in order to figure his ideal version of the afterlife, in which he would be free to roam imaginatively in the Earthly Paradise, Petrarch is forced to prematurely consign himself to the grave, imagining that only once he is dead and buried could Laura conceivably return to look for him. Not only does this reverse the central dynamic established between the (living) pilgrim and (the resurrected) Beatrice, but also suggests that Petrarch's poem is to be an encounter *manqué* since he must absent himself from the scene in order for Laura to come back in. As Nancy Vickers suggests, 'Dante's text, like Petrarch's, imposes the association eros-mortality, and at least momentarily, presents us with a lover trapped in a middle space, neither Hell nor Heaven, by his ambivalent perception of a beloved', but as forcefully as Dante commits to transcending that

³² Hainsworth, *Petrarch the Poet*, p. 124.

state, Petrarch embraces it.³³ Purgatory is for Petrarch a condition of writing; it is synonymous with poetry. He can no more escape it than he can the self.

Thus although Petrarch undoubtedly models his 'vision' of Laura on the beatific vision of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30–31, he also continually departs from that model, rewriting Dante's progressive discourse of desire as one of suspension or regression, privileging a backwards look that will become the dominant index of desire also in Sereni's poem, which follows a similar melancholy trajectory, in which desire becomes blocked. Whereas Dante overwrites the memory of Beatrice's 'belle membra' ('lovely members', *Purgatorio* 31.50) with her voice, alerting us to the changed nature of his desire and the reconciliation and exaltation of the human within the divine, Petrarch is fixated solely with Laura's body and the hole left by her physical absence from the place—Vaucluse—whose landscape his poem recreates:

Chiare fresche et dolci acque
 ove *le belle membra*
 pose colei che sola a me par donna,
 gentil ramo ove piacque
 (con sospir mi rimbomba)
 a lei di fare al bel fianco colonna
 erba et fior' che la gonna
 leggiadra ricoverse
 co l'angelico seno;
 aere sacro, sereno,
 ove Amor co' begli occhi il cor m'aperse:
 date udiencia insieme
 a le dolenti mie parole estreme. (ll. 1–13)

Clear, fresh, sweet waters where she who alone seems lady to me rested her *lovely body*, / gentle branch where it pleased her (with sighing I remember) to make a column for her lovely side / grass and flowers that her rich garment covered along with her angelic breast, sacred bright air; / where Love opened my heart with her lovely eyes: listen all together to my sorrowful dying words.

Laura never speaks and this renders the image of her, when she does reappear, in one sense more malleable, in another less certain or substantial than that of Beatrice. Though clearly 're-clothed' from memory as Beatrice is, Laura is not so much 'clothed anew' as merely 'clothed (over) again' and she is definitively not a 'revestita voce' ('re-clothed voice'), leaving Petrarch's performance problematically one-sided, centred on the self more than the Other, and unable to recuperate Laura except fragmentarily or incompletely. More problematically, since Laura is still

33 Nancy Vickers, 'Re-membling Dante: Petrarch's "Chiare, fresche et dolci acque"', in *MLN* 96/1, Italian Issue (January 1981), pp. 1–11 (p. 9).

alive at this point, the association of her with a dead Beatrice betrays Petrarch's funeral strategy for her repossession, as well as foreshadowing his realization that 'only when reclassified as dead, i.e. immortal, will she cease to impede his voyage toward certainty, stability, and peace, and instead promote it'.³⁴

Petrarch's subject and his memory are not in process as they are when Dante writes his text, but establish themselves rather as reified, static objects that are designed to freeze time, and thus counter temporality. But the confusion of eternity with a suspended, frozen moment that is in fact a heightened moment caught *in time* (the contingent, historical instant when he first saw Laura), as opposed to a timeless one, indicates how Petrarch's own version of an absolute can only come through a temporal distortion.

This process of distortion is rendered most clearly in the central performative phrase of the fourth strophe, 'qual con un vago errore / girando pareva dir: "Qui regna amore"' ('this one [flower], with a lovely wandering, turning about seemed to say: "Here reigns Love"'), which momentarily conflates the poet's voice with that of the vision, yielding a remarkably substantial image of his beloved, albeit one shrouded in a 'loving cloud' that conceals as much as reveals who lies beneath:

Da' be' rami scendea
(dolce ne la memoria)
una pioggia di fior sovra 'l suo grembo,
et ella si sedea
umile in tanta gloria,
coverta già de l'amoroso nembo;
qual fior cadea sul lembo,
qual su le trecce bionde
ch' oro forbito et perle
eran quel dì a vederle,
qual si posava in terra et qual su l'onde
qual con un vago errore
girando pareva dir: 'Qui regna Amore'. (ll. 40-52)

From the lovely branches was descending (sweet in memory) a rain of flowers over her bosom, / and she was sitting humble in such glory, already covered with the loving cloud; / this flower was falling on her skirt, this one on her blond braids, which were burnished gold and pearls to see that day; / this one was coming to rest on the ground, this one on the water, this one, with a lovely wandering, turning about seemed to say: 'Here reigns Love'.

As an instance of direct speech in the present tense, the quintessentially performative phrase 'Here reigns Love' certainly appears to establish Love's kingdom more than describe it, creating a seat for Laura within the

34 Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence', p. 36.

poem, which is also a space in which to seat her phantasm. However, there is a tension or ambiguity with regard to tense and to person that suggests things may not be so straightforward, casting doubt on the unity of the vision and the poet's status within it.

The 'Here' in particular, as the culmination of a textual strategy that Petrarch has used since the beginning of the poem in order to locate Laura despite her absence, rooting the phantasms of memory in the landscape, carries an implicit doubleness, appearing as it does at the heart of that same performative phrase. If it is meant to stand for the miraculous assimilation of past and present in a single location, through the medium of the poem, it could also imply their disjunction. Depending on whether or not we believe that Petrarch has managed to establish a harmonious relationship between the landscape of memory (evoked through the imperfect tense, aligned with the flower) and the landscape of dream (evoked through the present tense, aligned with Love and the kingdom), this is either the moment that Petrarch gets closest to Laura or the moment at which he is furthest from her.

We should also remember that it is the flower, and not the 'I', that is credited with uttering the words that constitute the creative force of the vision. Already, this implies a dissociation of the poet from his own voice and a loss of ownership of the dream as well as the memory in which it originates. The speech act is also tempered further by the verb of doubt which suggests that the flower only '*seemed* to say' those words, or perhaps only seemed to be speaking at all. Since, in performative terms, the existence of the world and of Laura depends upon the success of the utterance, whether or not it actually took place is of prime importance. Mediated as it is through the *prosopopoeia* that gives the flower (itself mediated through memory) a voice, the vision implies a doubleness that attests to the duplicity of the poem itself—at one moment capable of making even flowers 'speak', at another it deprives the poet of his own voice in order that the image of Laura, somewhat suspect in its own right, can come to the fore.

On the one hand, the flower 'turning about itself', perpetuates and commemorates the memory and image of Laura cyclically, in a pose of circularity which resembles that of liturgy. Petrarch wants to transform the single historical moment at which he first saw Laura into an eternally repeatable event. However, if the liturgical framework is present it is undeniably distorted with regard to the subject since the filter of memory always remains in place and there is no suggestion that Petrarch entirely succeeds in making Laura truly present in the way that medieval concepts of 'memoria' as anamnesis could, through the performance of a rite,

restore a moment from the past and allow it to be experienced properly anew, as though for the first time:

Clearly, the passage [The Institution Narrative of the Eucharist] chronicles an event that took place only once. Yet when the celebrant touches the bread and wine as he repeats the words 'he...took the bread', and 'he...took the cup', these actions become inexplicably contemporary, without being exactly mimetic. [...] Each celebration is distant in history from the inaugural event, but at the same time, the induced proximity of the performance grants it a special kind of immediacy, as though it were happening for the first time.³⁵

Petrarch tries to grant his vision of Laura this kind of immediacy but the parentheses that enclose his statements on memory in the first and the fourth strophes—'con sospir mi rimembra' ('(with sighing I remember)'), l. 5; 'dolce ne la memoria' ('(sweet in memory)'), l. 41—show that he cannot entirely discount his perception of the fragmentation of time. Already at the start of the vision, there is an indication of errancy in the random pattern that Petrarch's flowers make as they fall which, if they spell the integration of Laura's image on the one hand (since they trace out her form), spell disintegration on the other (since that form is always partially hidden, only glimpsed between the flowers themselves). Moreover, whilst these flowers undoubtedly look back to the 'rain of flowers' that mark the advent of Beatrice's return in *Purgatorio* 30, they are less a sign of eternity or of the angelic nature of the beloved than of the synecdochic representation of Laura's body that looks back most strongly to the more negative image of Beatrice's 'lovely members [...] scattered in earth' [*Purgatorio* 31.49–51].³⁶ As Mazzotta notes, 'in a poem such as this, in which there is an extraordinary awareness of her physicality—her body is cherished as 'le belle membra' (l. 2) —as well as a concern with the destiny of the poet's own body, the loss of Laura as a concrete image is not altogether a positive value'.³⁷

Measured against the Dantean model of the speech act that Petrarch's poem reappropriates, the loss that the poet experiences with regard to his own poetic voice is possibly even more damning than the dissipation of Laura's image per se, though of course the two function interdependently to fracture the momentary harmony that seems to have been achieved at the end of strophe four, where the vision had earlier reached its height, 'Qui regna Amore' ('Here reigns Love'). The profound feeling of

35 Bridget Nichols, *Liturgical Hermeneutics: Interpreting Liturgical Rites in Performance*, Frankfurt a. M. 1996, p. 110.

36 'Mai non t'appresentò natura o arte / piacer quanto le belle membra in ch'io / rinchiusa fui, e sono in terra sparte' ('Never did nature or art present to you such beauty as did the lovely members in which I was enclosed, and now they are scattered in earth').

37 Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, p. 178.

disorientation that he communicates suggests that by the end of the poem Petrarch occupies what is only a limbic space and not a properly purgatorial one (since he will never leave it, and it will have no ending), and he is exiled to an uncertain time and place that are no longer the space (or time) of the vision but are also not the space (or time) of reality:

Quante volte diss'io
 allor, pien di spavento:
 'Costei per fermo nacque in paradiso!'
 Così carico d'oblio
 il divin portamento
 e 'l volto e le parole e 'l dolce riso
 m'aveano, et sì diviso
 da l'immagine vera,
 ch' i' dicea sospirando:
 'Qui come venn'io o quando?'
 credendo esser in ciel, non là dov'era.
 Da indi in qua mi piace
 Quest'erba sì ch' altrove non ò pace.
 Se tu avessi ornamenti quant' ài voglia
 poresti arditamente
 uscir del bosco et gir infra la gente. (ll. 53-68)

How many times did I say to myself then, full of awe: 'She was surely born in Paradise!' / Her divine bearing and her face and her words and her sweet smile had so laden me with forgetfulness / and so divided me from the true image, that I was sighing: / 'How did I come here and when?' thinking I was in Heaven, not there where I was. From then on this grass has pleased me so that elsewhere I have no peace. // If you had as many beauties as you have desire, you could boldly leave the wood and go among people.

When Laura fails to speak or return the reciprocal gaze the poet sought in strophe three when he imagined her returning to look for him ('cercandomi', 'seeking me', l. 33), his discourse rebounds on itself so that all that is replayed back to him is the sound of his own voice. Whilst lines 53–55 rework something of the cyclicity of the flower's discourse in the preceding lines, the poet's words are but a paler reflection of what has come before and the performative phrase in line 55, distorted by the past historic that introduces it, does not have the same presencing force as its predecessor. The fact that the utterance must be repeated in order to have a chance of creating the required effect, and only indirectly instates Laura as present (through 'costei' / 'she'), focusing on an earlier period in her history and dispersing time more than unifying it, leaves us with the feeling that the lessening power of speech mirrors the waning force of the vision or, better, the 'I's impending dissociation from it.

As line 61 makes clear, speaking for Petrarch coincides with 'sighing'. Whereas the 'sighs' that the pilgrim uttered at the moment of the

confession communicated his release from sin and the ‘unblocking’ of the soul from memory, Petrarch’s sigh represents only the irreconcilability of desire and its object, and the eternalization of a process that takes the poet back full circle to the beginning of the poem—to dwell amongst the trees and the grass where Laura has been before and could be again. The tenacity of the poet at this point, and his continuing attachment to what can only be an incomplete and flawed experience but is regarded as absolute (since, as he tells us, he finds peace nowhere else) definitively mark Petrarch’s distance from Dante. Unable to relinquish Laura and move into God, Petrarch cannot be like the pilgrim because he fails to adequately mourn the past, getting caught up instead in a spiral of desire whose ending is just the same as its beginning.

The traits of melancholia that Petrarch’s text betrays—the impossibility of leaving the past behind, the preservation in fantasy of what has long since been lost in reality—are in turn carried through to Sereni’s poem.³⁸ ‘La malattia dell’olmo’ and the diseased tree at its heart embody a kind of malady of the soul that cannot easily be rectified because it is felt by the poet to be innate, inevitable, and ultimately beyond his control. Sereni’s subject is closest to Petrarch’s morbid articulation of the self as dead or dying, and there is a similar emphasis on posthumous existence, which colours negatively the entire scene and puts the Other firmly in shadow (we remember that she is herself a shade), so that she barely materializes before dissolving again. The poet appears to desire restitution for some past transgression (associated, Dantesquely, with memory), and the focus is similarly on countering loss, but that loss is more intangible than either Dante’s or Petrarch’s (whose texts ultimately interrogate the loss of a named beloved), and thus more difficult to go about reversing or replacing.

Hence, where Petrarch was able to transform his hollow space (the landscape, his soul) into an enchanted wood of memory (the poem), both celebrating and denying absence through the medium of the poetic word, Sereni seems reconciled to loss. Any fantasy of plenitude has fallen away and Sereni’s performance is neither as self-sufficient as Petrarch’s nor as edifying as Dante’s. Where the pilgrim’s memories are remade, Sereni’s subject is ‘undone’ by memory, and his speech act is even more profoundly alienating than Petrarch’s insofar as the subject is split from the start and unable to make the two parts of himself join up.

Sereni’s elm, like the one that marks the entrance to Hades in *Aeneid* VI, is ‘shadowy and vast’, from which ‘false Dreams hold in throngs,

38 My definition of melancholia here borrows from Esther Sánchez-Pardo’s account in *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia*, Durham, London 2003 (Post-contemporary Interventions), p. 53.

clinging under every leaf.³⁹ False dreams are those without meaning, that lead nowhere, or like Petrarch's 'vago errore' consciously misdirect the subject, leading him astray. Sereni's dream is also 'false'—entering into dialogue with the shade of his past life, he hopes he might be able to purge himself of the dangers of memory but instead they are intensified. Without the privilege of the Dantean perspective, he cannot distinguish between the true and the false path, or between the greater and the lesser good, and is literally plagued by indecision. Looking in too many directions at once he cannot decide which way to go, a disorientation compounded by linguistic indirection and the uncertainty of the outcome.

Already at the end of strophe two, any possibility of a spectacular denouement appears to be discounted with the wished for 'unleafing' or 'unfeathering' of the gull in a flare of brilliant white only hypothetical at best, destined like Sereni's 'variable star'—that gives the name to the collection from which this poem is from—to burn itself out before it has properly had a chance to exist. His textual performance is all in the gap or the shortfall performatively speaking, in what he cannot articulate, or what language fails to achieve or recuperate of a world that has been lost or damaged. His speech act is marked most of all by its inability to effect change or bring about a better future and returning to Austin's 'doctrine of the *infelicities*', we can say that Sereni's performance in a sense 'misfires', is staged incompletely or erroneously in respect to the model it appropriates, or to borrow a phrase from Benveniste, is 'frappé de nullité' ('rendered null and void'), struck or bordered on all sides by nothingness into which the subject and his poem fall at the end.⁴⁰

He retains elements of the 'vision' (of Beatrice and of Laura) but does so whilst preventing any 'visionary' dimension in the strictest sense of the word making itself felt, recasting the 'rain of flowers' as the disintegrating process of the elm shedding its leaves, a sign of decay rather than as in Dante the advent of an eternal, angelic presence, or in Petrarch that which endures of the image of Laura on the first day he saw her. The lights ('La

39 'In medio ramos annosaque brachia pandit / ulmus opaca, ingens, quam sedem Somnia volgo / vana tenere ferunt, foliisque sub omnibus haerent', *Aeneid* VI. 282–284, in Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*, ed. and trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge, Mass. 1974, pp. 526–527.

40 'Tout l'essentiel de cet article porte sur les "malheurs" de l'énoncé performatif, sur les circonstances qui peuvent le frapper de nullité [...] ('The most important part of this article deals with the "unhappinesses" of the performative utterance, with the circumstances which can render it null and void [...]), Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, p. 270 (*Problems in General Linguistics*, p. 233).

malattia', l. 14), also potentially of Dantean derivation [*Purgatorio* 29.62],⁴¹ similarly do not herald the advent of a saviour figure; they are not the bright lights of the procession but only stars twinkling intermittently against the impending blackness of the sky.

Sereni's experience of desire, like Petrarch's, borders on self-annihilation but he enjoys few of the compensatory pleasures that Petrarch still finds in the material of poetry as a space for the celebration of desire and the beloved, however transitory or flawed the experience may be. Sereni's performance is also founded on absence but it is not the imaginatively favourable or creative absence of Petrarch, but more of a metaphysical absence, based on the feeling that there may be nothing more, or nothing beyond the self, and he stands at the extreme end of a line of poets for whom desire is the foundation of poetry, and its fulfilment the increasingly elusive goal:

Over the course of a poetic process whose emblematic temporal extremes are Petrarch and Mallarmé, this essential textual tension of Romance poetry will displace its center from desire to mourning: Eros will yield to Thanatos its impossible love object so as to recover it, through a subtle and funereal strategy, as lost object, and the poem will become the site of an absence yet nonetheless draws from this absence its specific authority.⁴²

Any possibility of transcendence (either of himself, or of his situation) seems to be closed off to Sereni from the start and a bathetic mode dominates that detracts from the horizon of expectation established by Dante and Petrarch's texts that the performative will be used to transform the subject or his situation, however successful or unsuccessful the attempt. Instead, Sereni writes into his performatives a concept of limit so that they constantly near a boundary (which he hopes to cross), but ultimately force him to recoil when things do not turn out as he had hoped, as though he is looking back retrospectively with the foreknowledge of what is to be (or has already been) lost.

This is reinforced through the poem as a whole in a series of adverbial phrases that cut short the poetic path before it has properly opened up, precipitating its demise as well as the impossibility of exceeding the framework of its more limited reality: 'ancora' ('still'—but not for long, l. 1), 'sin qua' ('as far as here', l. 9), 'fin che' ('as long as', l. 11), 'fino a... fino a' ('until...until', l. 14; l. 21). A sense of constriction is also apparent in the restricted space given to the 'I' to speak directly, which limits his potential

41 'La donna mi sgridò: 'Perché pur ardi / sì ne l'affetto de le vive luci, / e ciò che vien di retro a lor non guardi' ('The lady scolded me: 'Why do you burn so with feeling for the living lights, and do not look at what comes after them?'), *Purgatorio* 28.61–63.

42 Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez, Minneapolis, London 1993 (*Theory and History of Literature* 69), p. 129.

to exist as a subject, and confines him for much of the poem to the status of a passive object. His appearances are charted through the series of events that befall him, over which he has little or no control or from which he has abdicated all responsibility, more than through a conscious project of 'self-making', (i) '*Guidami tu, stella variabile...*' ('Guide *me*, variable star...'); (ii) '*mi centra / dove più punge e brucia*' ('hits me [...] where it most stings and burns'); (iii) '*scaccia / da me questo spino molesto*' ('drive out *from me* the insistent thorn'); (iv) '*mi hai tolto l'aculeo non il suo fuoco*' ('you've removed [*from me*] the thorn but not its burning'). The speaker is very much on the outside, looking in, and his stock seems deficient at the linguistic level: he cannot sustain momentum. Like Petrarch he has no real audience except himself and yet his own version of the phantasm—the shade or 'ombra'—is too closely bound up with his interior life and with the memory he seeks to purge, to offer any hope of change or release.

Even when the 'I' does speak directly, as is the case in several of the examples cited above, the actions he tries to perform by speaking tend to become undone or unravel themselves before really taking effect. When the imperative form is used, as in example (i) and example (iii), the wish expressed remains unfulfilled or unverifiable, and when it is rendered in the past tense, as in example (iv), the 'I' loses all agency in the process and cannot properly insert himself into the performative realm (confined, strictly speaking, to the present tense indicative mood).⁴³ In turn, the fact that the main performative act poetic language is called upon to perform—the purging of memory—happens at the point of ellipsis between lines 25 and 26 and is identifiable only in the past tense '*È fatto*' ('It's done'), l. 26, which eventually turns out not even to be true, reveals the full extent of the ineffectual nature of speech. Through its flawed articulation of a desire for redemption, language 'murmurs' ('mormora') its response as a sign of its incompleteness. Unable to redeem the subject or to assuage his memory, only the more negative traits of his desire persist.

More revealing still, to this extent, is Sereni's choice of compound verbs to designate the act of speaking as it relates to the 'I': '*dico voltandomi*' ('I say, turning back') and '*sospiro abbandonandomi*' ('I sigh, abandoning myself') which confirm that speaking carries for him an explicit danger, the same danger in fact that will culminate with the fall. Both verbs are combined with a gerundive phrase that indicates what happens to the subject while or as he is speaking; both highlight a disjunction between the subject's aims and his achievement that undoes

43 Lecture V of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* deals with the grammatical determinants of performative language, including, most importantly, the present tense indicative mood, pp. 53–66.

the force of his utterance or stops it in its tracks, so that it merely hangs there, once again merely the expression of a wish or desire that cannot be fulfilled.

In the first example (ll. 19–25), the poet, using the imperative form, requests that life come near to him, speak to him, and in speaking, purge him of the ‘insistent thorn’ of memory that harms him, undoubtedly a reworking of ‘la puntura della rimembranza’ (‘the pricking of memory’, *Purgatorio* 12.20) which, however is not countered, unlike for Dante the pilgrim, by any ‘sting of the nettle of repentance’ [*Purgatorio* 31.85–87] and so never succeeds in becoming productive. Speech is aligned with turning and more specifically with turning back. This is particularly ironic in the given context since the backwards look would appear to reinforce rather than to dispel the overwhelming force of memory, just as the ‘shade’ herself is problematically part of that memory, or only reachable through it.

This same backwards look, encoded in language, also inevitably carries something of Orpheus’ banishing gaze on Eurydice that returns her to the underworld but, in Sereni’s case, also carries the poet off too as the light fades and he too literally ‘falls into shadow’. As the angel warns Dante-pilgrim in *Purgatorio* 9.132, ‘[...] di fuor torna chi ’n dietro si guata’ ([...] whoever looks back must return outside’): the backwards look precipitates the fall; Sereni is not yet strong enough to resist it. He has not advanced enough on his journey of self-knowledge to be able to look behind himself and carry on moving. Thus he ‘abandons himself’, the journey, and the poem all in one go. The ‘sigh’ that replaces or absorbs speech in line 30 looks back to the pilgrim’s ‘sighs’ only negatively; as was the case in Petrarch’s poem, sighing is not synonymous with the liberation from sin or memory, but with the realization that both will be perpetuated eternally in desire. Speaking and falling, in the last two lines of Sereni’s poem, entirely coincide. The sigh neither loosens nor dissolves the knot, only strengthening the bond that ties the poet to the darkest part of himself, ‘Mi hai / tolto l’aculeo, non / il suo fuoco – *sospiro* abbandonandomi a lei / in sogno con lei *precipitando già*’ (‘You’ve / removed the thorn, but not / its burning – *I sigh* as I give myself up to her / in dreams with her *already falling*’).

Sereni’s poem thus ends with the evocation of something like the linguistic equivalent of suspended animation, which slows life down without allowing it to stop completely. Death is already with the subject but there is no hope of termination. In a poem that like Petrarch’s *canzone* already knows how it will end when it starts out, and could not have turned out differently, the final pernicious reference to a time that has already passed, but can also never move on— ‘precipitando già’ (‘*already*

falling') —is the most damning indication of all that language itself may come too late to stop it. Where both Dante and Petrarch, in their different ways, seek a language that can counter death (be it the death of the Other —Dante, or the death of memory—Petrarch), Sereni seems to yield to it. In revisiting the performative strategies of the two medieval authors and making them entirely his own, he performs the most original of elegies, staging a memorial for a still living thing that is perpetually brought back to death as opposed to life.

As Judith Butler states, 'where melancholy is the refusal of grief, it is also always the incorporation of loss, the miming of the death it cannot mourn'—Sereni's performance incorporates loss, both the loss of the object and more fundamentally perhaps a loss of faith in the power of poetry to compensate for an original lack.⁴⁴ This marks dramatically Sereni's departure from Dante and dissociates him even from Petrarch who, despite his desire being similarly misplaced, still entrusts language with a project of restoration (of the self and his beloved).

For Dante, whose 'self-making' is staged through the triple collaboration of author, poem, and character, poetic performance is an edifying and redemptive experience that marks the birth of a new Christian subject on the summit of Mount Purgatory, and the coming together of desire and language in a way that was not possible before that moment. Dante's poem represents what, following Agamben's analysis, we can term a '*joî d'amour*', furnishing a '*stantia*' or chamber in which the beatitude of love is celebrated and in which:

[...] desire, supported by a conception that constitutes the sole coherent attempt in Western thought to overcome the metaphysical fracture of presence, celebrates, for perhaps the last time in the history of Western poetry, its joyful and inexhaustible 'spiritual union' with its own object of love, with that 'joy that never ends'.⁴⁵

As we have seen, what is restored to Dante in Eden is also the possibility of a pre-lapsarian language—the return to a primordial state of unity and wholeness—which paves the way for the supra-linguistic realm of *Paradiso* in which language will be pushed to its furthest limits, and ultimately become redundant in light of the heavenly state of continuous understanding. Petrarch and Sereni, on the other hand, are stopped short of entering a truly paradisiacal dimension linguistically speaking, failing—through an excess of self-concern (Petrarch) or an absence of self-belief (Sereni)—to move beyond the language of the past, which can only partially compensate for the deficiencies of the present.

44 Judith Butler, 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification', in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, Calif. 1997, pp. 132–150 (p. 142).

45 Agamben, *Stanzas*, pp. 129–130.

In both Petrarch and Sereni's texts, faith in the Logos itself seems to have fallen away, and in entrusting the 'dreams' of their poems to figures of 'error', or chance, or potentially aimless 'wandering' ('errore'), they testify also to their deviation from a medieval symbolic order that Dante's more ordered universe creates and upholds at the level of discourse. Petrarch's poem may retain some shadow of fullness but it is only the ghost of memory or the beguiling force of the imagination, which veil more than compensate for the underlying absence at their heart. In Sereni's poem, performative language intensifies this absence yet further and he moulds his poetic landscape to a remarkably original articulation of a poetic 'I', which draws its material from the past as much as the present in order to measure the full scope of its decline.

If performance in literature resides above all in the power of the word to bring something into being or, in Heideggerian fashion, marks the moment at which something 'begins its presencing',⁴⁶ Petrarch and Sereni's modernity would seem to exist mainly in the 'absenting' power of their speech, which prefigures the deconstructionist view that:

[...] There is not a fall *from* full presence but, as it were, a fall *within* presence, an inability of 'presence' to fulfil its promise of being able to form a ground. Full presence [...] is not a prelapsarian ideal or an eschatological hope, but an illusory goal—the illusion being that there is in fact something outside the sign system which can escape its determinations.⁴⁷

Perhaps, in the end, what all these texts perform is the dialogue that language stages with itself.

46 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter, New York 2001, p. 152.

47 Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge 1989, p. 14, cited in Nichols, *Liturgical Hermeneutics*, p. 39. Italics in the original. Hart is here summarizing Derrida's position on language, and his theory of deconstruction.

III. Embodied voice: Reading and re-reading