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From Paradox to Exclusivity: Dante and Petrarch’s Lyrical Eschatologies

This essay brings Petrarch and Dante’s poetry into dialogue in order to highlight some crucial tensions that have to do with the continuing presence of a fundamentally lyric component within the framework of Christian paradise. ‘Lyric’, in our analysis, stands for an aspect of identity bound up with the relation to the beloved and to a desire contained in the body and expressed in the longing for it. Our focus is on the different modes of textuality at play in Dante’s Paradiso and Petrarch’s Triumphus Eternitatis and the ways they express the “form of desire” informing each poet’s work and especially his eschatological imagination. Our approach draws on Manuele Gragnolati’s reading of Dante’s Paradiso in Amor che move: linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante (2013) and extends some of the questions raised there to Petrarch’s Triumphus Eternitatis. In particular, we aim to examine the relationship between language and corporeality as explored in the concept of the resurrection of the body, which carries a relational sense of identity bound up with the individual’s memory, desires, and history and both complicates and opens up an understanding of poetry and eschatology.

Our point of departure are the shores of Dante’s Purgatory, where the pilgrim encounters a shade who has also just arrived at the realm of purgation: the shade of Casella, an old friend from the times of youth when Dante had not yet been exiled from Florence. This episode re-writes the Virgilian motif of the failed embrace between a living and a dead person: the pilgrim and the shade of the old friend try to embrace each other but they cannot because – as the poet laments – shades in the otherworld are “vane”, empty (Purg. II, 79). Indeed, as the figure of Statius explains in Purgatorio XXV, shades in Dante’s afterlife have an aerial body that gives them an appearance – “aspetto” – but no substantiality: “Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l’aspetto! / tre volte dietro a lei le mani avvinsi, / e tante mi tornai con esse al petto” [Oh empty shades, except in seeming! / Three times I clasped my hands behind him / only to find them clasped to my own chest]

1 On the notion of the “form of desire”, see Manuele Gragnolati’s recent study: Amor che move: Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante. Milan: Il Saggiatore 2013.
(Purg., II, 79–81). What is important to note is that both friends, who have just arrived in Purgatory, are still entrapped by their earthly desires. Casella tells Dante that although he is now a soul deprived of his mortal body, he continues to love his friend in the same way that he did on earth: “Così com’io t’amai / nel mortal corpo, così t’amo sciolta” [“Even as I loved you in my mortal flesh,” he said, / “so do I love you freed from it”] (Purg. II, 89–90). And Dante also shows nostalgia for the past and asks his friend to sing in the same way he used to sing in their youth. Casella performs Dante’s canzone Amor che nella mente mi ragiona in such a way that everybody remains enchanted by its sweetness, “‘Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona’ / cominciò elli allor si dolcemente, / che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona” [“Love that converses with me in my mind,” / he then began, so sweetly / that the sweetness sounds within me still] (Purg. II, 112–14).

As is well known, the rest of the episode shows that the mutual affection which the two friends still feel for each other is wrong and that attachment to the mortal body, affection for friends and beloved, and nostalgia for the past must change in Purgatory. Indeed, the moral structure of Dante’s Purgatory prescribes that the souls learn to detach themselves from anything transient and re-direct all their desires towards God. According to what Teodolinda Barolini calls Dante’s Augustinian paradigm of desire, attachments to one’s earthly body and nostalgia for the earthly affections symbolized by it are considered as distractions that the purging soul must abandon if it wants to attain the complete love for God that is necessary to reach Heaven.


4 Amor che nella mente mi ragiona is one of Dante’s Rime, included in Book III of Convivio, where it heralds the transfer of Dante’s affection from Beatrice to Lady Philosophy. On the importance of this auto-citation in the Commedia, see Teodolinda Barolini: Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the ‘Comedy’. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984, p. 31–40.


A similar point is also made by Beatrice in her scolding of the pilgrim in the garden of Eden, when, pointing to her beautiful limbs now scattered on earth and reduced to ashes – her “belle membra [...] / che so’ ’n terra sparte” (Purg. XXXI, 50–51) –, she explains that it is precisely when her body died that the pilgrim should have loved her most because this would have meant loving her soul, the immortal part of her that will never fail him. Actually, he should love her more now that she is a shade than when she was in her fleshly body on earth: albeit beautiful, the earthly body is mortal, and one should neither love it as though it were not doomed to die nor, as the pilgrim did after Beatrice’s death, replace it with some other mortal good that distracts from fully directing one’s love to God:

Mai non t’appresentò natura o arte
piacere, quanto le bella membra in ch’io
rinchiusa fui, e che so’ ’n terra sparte,
e se ’l sommo piacer si ti fallìo
per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale
dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio?
   Ben ti dovevi, per lo primo strale
de le cose fallaci, levar suso
di retro a me che non era più tale. (Purg. XXXI, 49–57)

[Never did art or nature set before you beauty
as great as in the lovely members that enclosed me,
now scattered and reduced to dust.
And if the highest beauty failed you
in my death, what mortal thing
should then have drawn you to desire it?
Indeed, at the very first arrow
of deceitful things, you should have risen up
and followed me who was no longer of them.]

Beatrice’s words not only confirm that one should not love earthly goods too much, but also that there is something problematic in the mortal, fleshly body that is related to an intimate desire for others that must be overcome. Flesh would not seem to be required in the eschatological panorama of the Commedia, where by releasing a body of air, the souls are able to acquire the corporeality that is necessary for the full experience of the afterlife and the full expression of the self. As the Inferno and Purgatorio place emphasis on the intensity of the souls’ pain, so the Paradiso is full of passages indicating that in Heaven the fleshless souls have access to the beatific vision, which satisfies all their desires and grants them perfect bliss:
Lume è là sù che visibile face
lo creatore a quella creatura
che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace. (Par. XXX, 100–02)

[There is a light above that makes the Creator
visible to every creature
that finds its only peace in seeing Him.]

Purgatory can therefore be considered as the experience, at once painful and productive, that allows the soul to transform personal and individual love into *caritas*, that is, the absolute and unconditional love for God which is also gratuitous love for one’s neighbour and implies the possibility to open oneself to others and free oneself from sin’s monomania and self-obsession.8

Several interesting studies have shown that this condition achieved and manifested by the souls in heaven corresponds to a state of merging with God that opens up the self and radically changes it. Thus, for instance, Lino Pertile and Steven Botterill have indicated that Beatrice must also eventually leave and be replaced by St Bernard before the pilgrim can reach the ultimate union with God and the Universe;9 and Robin Kirkpatrick has spoken of a “spirit of dispossession” that characterizes the condition of being in Heaven, while Christian Moevs indicates that the redirection of desire from mortal to immortal goods can be understood as a “spontaneous crucifixion of the self” and that “love is selflessness, and self is lovelessness.”10

There is something fascinating about the loss of self that uniting with God implies in Dante’s concept of heaven and in the kind of subjectivity that this loss entails. But if an important component of the heavenly state imagined by Dante is

7 On the fullness of the separated souls’ experience in Hell and Heaven, see Gragnolati: *Experiencing the Afterlife*, p. 77–87, and his: *Amor che move*, p. 69–90.
constituted by this transformation and shattering of the self, nonetheless it is also necessary to complicate this idea by acknowledging that there is actually something about their past that the souls in heaven continue to be attached to and that cannot be tamed, disciplined, or fully abandoned – an identity, that is, that goes in the opposite direction of transformation. Central to this dimension is the celebration of the resurrection of the flesh that takes place in Paradiso XIV, a moment in the Commedia in which Dante conveys with sublime intensity the nostalgia for one’s own mortal body and the intimate affections that it represents. The first passage that contributes to an appreciation of what is at stake for Dante is Solomon’s celebration of the resurrection of the flesh:

“Come la carne gloriosa e santa
fia rivestita, la nostra persona
più grata fia per esser tutta quanta:
per che s’accrescerà ciò che ne dona
di gratiitùto lume il sommo bene
lume ch’a lui veder ne condiziona;
onde la visïon crescer convene,
crescer l’ardor che di quella s’accende,
crescer lo raggio che da esso vene”. (Par. XIV, 43–51).

[When we put on again our flesh,
glorified and holy, then our persons
will be more pleasing for being all complete,
so that the light, granted to us freely
by the Highest Good, shall increase,
the light that makes us fit to see Him.
From that light, vision must increase
and love increase what vision kindles,
and radiance increase, which comes from love.]

The second passage in the same canto expresses the souls’ joyful reaction at Solomon’s celebration of the resurrection of the flesh:

“Tanto mi parver sùbiti e accorti
e l’uno e l’altro coro a dicer “Amme!”,
che ben mostrar disio d’i corpi morti:
forse non pur per lor, ma per le mamme,
per li padri e per li altri che fuor cari
anzi che fosser sempiterne fiamme” (Par. XIV, 61–66).

[So quick and eager seemed to me both choirs
to say their Amen that they clearly showed]
their desire for their dead bodies,
not perhaps for themselves alone, but for their mothers,
for their fathers, and for others whom they loved
before they all became eternal flames.]

The joy with which the souls react at the prospect of reuniting with their fleshly body – that mortal body which has remained on earth and is now a corpse –, reveals the intensity of their nostalgia for it (“disio d’i corpi morti”).11 Unlike many other passages of the Paradiso that stress the souls’ current happiness, here Dante’s poem emphasizes the intensity with which they long for reuniting with their bodies, when they will be happier. In particular, the rhyme words “amme” / “mamme” / “fiamme” express that after the recovery of what are now dead bodies, the separated souls – which in heaven have become splendid lights, enflamed by their beatitude and love for God – will become again veritable individuals with their own singularity, made of relations and memory.

What is important to note is that the souls’ desire for their dead body is connected not only with the increase of their vision of God, but also with their personal attachments and is the passionate “expression of their desire to love fully in heaven what they loved on earth”12 – that is, the souls’ “disio d’i corpi morti” seems to contradict the Augustinian paradigm of detachment which, as we have seen, characterizes the process of Purgatory as selflessness and dispossession. Moreover it appears that the relational sense expressed by the souls’ desire for their resurrected body is somewhat of a novelty with respect to contemporary theologians, who focused mainly on the exclusive relation of the individual to God and were less interested in the idea that personal and individual attachments continue in heaven among the blessed.13 The connection Dante makes in Paradiso XIV


between the body’s materiality and fleshliness, memory and individuality, is striking and these features emerge as fundamental parts of the experience of heaven in his conception, and consequently of his anthropology. As such, there arises a tension in the *Commedia* between the state of heaven as a dissolution of the self and the blessed souls’ “disio d’i corpi morti”, which arguably includes not only the desire to embrace Casella at the end of time but also to recuperate Beatrice.14

Such a tension culminates in the last cantos of the *Paradiso* (XXX–XXXIII) with Dante’s staging of a highly original eschatological situation. Here, in the Empyrean, Dante-pilgrim’s desire to see the blessed with their resurrected bodies as they will be at the Last Judgment is fully realized as the poet subverts traditional eschatological temporalities and anticipates the scene of resurrection before the end of time.15 As such Dante unites the two eschatological emphases structuring his “sacra poema” [sacred poem] (*Par. XXIII*, 62) – that is to say the immediacy and intensity of the soul’s experience straight after it has separated from the earthly body and the fully material, relational and corporeal sense of identity that will only come back with the resurrection of the body.16 Most importantly, this integration happens not only at a thematic and eschatological level but also poetically. In a very complex way, the final cantos of the poem harness a “jumping” textuality (one that, as Barolini states, is “non-discursive, non-linear, de-chronologized and affective”) and a form of poetic language that both embrace the vernacular in all its fluidity and range of expression and replicate the resurrection of the body textually, within language.17

14 On this point, see Gragnolati: *Amor che move*, especially Chapter 5: “Forse non pur per loro, ma per le mamme”: La nostalgia del *Paradiso* e gli abbracci della *Commedia*, p. 91–110, and Chapter 7: Forme del desiderio, p. 139–161.

15 Dante makes this claim explicit in *Paradiso* XXX, 43–45, when he writes: “Qui vederai l’una e l’altra milizia / di paradiso, e l’una in quelli aspetti / che tu vedrai a l’ultima giustizia” [Here you shall see both soldieries of Paradise, / one of them in just such form / as you shall see it at the final judgment].

16 See Chapter 4 of Gragnolati: *Experiencing the Afterlife* for a detailed discussion, p. 139–178.

17 See Barolini: *The Undivine ‘Comedy’*, Chapter 10: The Sacred Poem is Forced to Jump: Closure and the Poetics of Enjambment, p. 218–256: p. 221. Her notion of a “jumping” textuality as fundamentally lyric rather than narrative in nature derives from her analysis of the terzina from *Paradiso* XXIII, 61–63, in which Dante acknowledges that he must leap over the moment of ecstatic, lyrical, mystical vision he cannot describe and rejoin his path further up: “e così, figurando il paradiso, / convien saltar lo sacrato poema / come chi trova suo cammin reciso” [And so, in representing Paradise, / the sacred poem must make its leap across, / as does a man who finds his path cut off]. On the poetic language of the high *Paradiso* as incorporating a Kristevan dimension of semiotic affect which recuperates the fluid and maternal component of the vernacular, see Gary P. Cestaro: *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2003, especially p. 135–166; and Gragnolati, *Amor che move*, p. 149–161.
If therefore, as indicated above, the heavenly state can be interpreted as the dissolution of one’s identity into the movement of God’s cosmic order and his love (“l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle” [The Love that moves the sun and all the other stars], Par. XXXIII, 145), paradoxically it also continues to express an individuality accepted in its relational singularity that persists in the body and the desire for it. Perhaps most importantly, we can say that Dante’s collapse of eschatology in the final cantos of the Paradiso actually replicates the pleasure of losing oneself, of merging with God, and finding oneself again through the memory of the body, associated at once with Beatrice, the vernacular, and the lyric. It constitutes a paradoxical fullness of textuality, which replicates in turn the paradoxical fullness of a desire experienced as glory, a state of eschatological plenitude in which, to quote Caroline Walker Bynum, “Desire is now.” As such, the textuality of the high Paradiso also succeeds in recuperating the corporeal dimension that the poem associates with memory, desire and relationality, none of which is wholly subsumable into the God pole yet remain a fundamental component of identity in beatitude.

Bearing in mind Dante’s performance and embrace of paradox as the very essence of desire in the Paradiso, it is appropriate now to turn to Petrarch’s Triumphi and to a consideration of the kind of eschatology and textuality they embody, especially when read relationally with Dante’s Commedia and Petrarch’s own Rerum vulgarium fragmenta. The Triumphi, likely composed between 1352–1374, are written in the form of a vision and in terza rima – the meter Dante invented for his Commedia – and as such explicitly invite a comparison with Dante’s magnum opus. They narrate a triumphal procession of six allegorical figures, each of which is defeated in turn by a greater victor – Love, Chastity (represented by Laura, Petrarch’s beloved), Death, Fame, and Time – until Eternity triumphs over them all. As in the Commedia with respect to the Vita nova, in the Triumphi the love poetry of the Rerum vulgarium fragmenta opens up to a moral and eschatological dimension that culminates with paradise. In turn, the epic

18 For example, these elements come together in Paradiso XXX, 70–75, in the affective and eroticized language Beatrice employs to describe the transformation of the pilgrim’s desire in the moment he drinks from the river of light: “L’alto disio che mo t’infiamma e urge, / d’aver notizia di ciò che tu vei, / tanto mi piace più quanto più turge; / ma di quest’ acqua convien che tu bei / prima che tanta sete in te si sazi’: / così mi disse il sol de li occhi miei” [“The deep desire that now inflames and prods you / to understand at last all that you see / pleases me the more the more it surges / But you must drink first of these waters / before your great thirst may be satisfied.” / Thus the sun of my eyes spoke to me]. They are, however, a notably constant feature of the last cantos of the poem describing the beatific vision.

framework of the *Triumphi* (modelled on the classical epic as much as Dante’s vernacular one), and the movement generated by the *terza rima* itself, instigate a “vertical” drive largely absent from the *rime sparse* of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*.20

In particular, it is important to explore the notion of desire conveyed by the *Triumphi*’s finale, which offers a depiction of heaven that goes against the development of some key theological assumptions about the afterlife in the late Middle Ages, specifically regarding the beatific vision and Dante’s own eschatology in the *Commedia*. As earlier discussed, the eschatological focus had shifted during this period from a concern with the event of the Last Judgment, and the resurrection of the body at the end of time, towards the experience of the separated soul in the time between death and the resurrection. This development concluded with the 1336 promulgation of the papal bull *Benedictus Deus*, which officially declared that in heaven a separated soul enjoys ultimate beatitude and does not need its body in order to have access to full vision of God. This edict was passed in Avignon, the place where Petrarch lived and worked in and around the papal curia, and it is not surprising that, as Maria Cecilia Bertolani has shown, he knew well contemporary theological debates on the beatific vision.21 In c.1336, Petrarch even wrote a letter to Benedict XII in which he acknowledged the Pontiff’s view that the resurrection of the body is not necessary for the blessed souls’ glory and that they are granted the beatific vision straight after physical death.22 Yet the *Triumphi* imagine quite a different eschatology, not only focused on the resurrection of the body, but also conveying the rather profane potential of resurrection as a recovery of the beloved’s body. Instead of redirecting desire from a mortal lady to an immortal God, the *Triumphi* seem to justify the poet-lover’s


21 For example those put forward by Robert of Anjou, Benedict XII, and Durand of St Pourçain. See the first two chapters of Maria Cecilia Bertolani’s: *Petrarca e la visione dell’eterno*. Bologna: Il Mulino 2005, p. 1–126; and Bynum’s discussion of “the controversy over the beatific vision” in: *The Resurrection of the Body*, p. 283–91.

22 The letter in question is *Epistola I*, 5, analysed by Bertolani in: *Petrarca e la visione dell’eterno*, p. 99–126.
desire for his lady by imagining that the resurrection of her body will cure it of the imperfections that had made it problematic on earth. They almost entirely ignore Dante’s focus on the separated soul’s experience after physical death and exclude almost all mention of the *visio Dei*, suggesting instead that ultimate happiness lies neither in the beatific vision nor in the recovery of one’s own body, but in the contemplation of Laura’s resurrected body, made impassable (to time) and incorruptible (to death).

As earlier discussed, Dante went to great lengths to enable his souls to have full experience of either bliss or pain immediately after death, inventing the theory of the *ombra*, whereby a soul unfolds a body of air in the afterlife, which allows it to have shape and to express all sensitive faculties. At the same time, as we have seen in *Paradiso* XIV, Dante’s accordance with the recent eschatological interest for the experience of the separated soul does not prevent him from also stressing the increase in beatitude that will coincide with the return of the resurrection body at the end of time. Yet, with the “disio d’i’ corpi morti”, Dante makes this eschatological emphasis entirely his own in emphasizing the kind of relationality it embodies. It is a relationality expressed not only in the joyous intensification of the *visio Dei* that ensues from the soul’s becoming even more open and pleasing to God, as He gives even more of Himself (“per che s’accrescerà ciò che ne dona / di gratüito lume il sommo bene”, [*Par.* XIV, 46–47]), but also in the desire to embrace one’s loved ones and reactivate the memory and affective identity carried by the body as a locus of desire in all its specificity and relationality, and for Dante bound up both with the resurgence of a lyric form of textuality and with the vernacular. In the *Triumphi*, by contrast, Petrarch’s relationality is made more exclusive in narrowing to focus on Petrarch and Laura alone in their poetic (and eschatological) singularity. As such, the beatific experience of the *Triumphi* is not located in the gratuitous giving of the self to God or even to others (or Him to you), but in a carefully choreographed vision of the triumph of the beloved, which actually puts that vision outside of any known eschatological parameters in the strictest sense.

As in Petrarch’s *Secretum*, turning to God is a moral issue (the desire to seek refuge from sin, to find a way out of the *cor inquietum*), and what seems to be lacking is the most profound and intense desire of the soul, from the moment it exists, to reunite with its Maker that was for instance expressed by Dante in *Convivio* IV and beautifully reiterated by Beatrice in *Par.* VII, 142–44: “Ma vostra vita sanza mezzo spira / la somma beninanza, e la innamora / di sé si che poi sempre la disira” [But supreme goodness breathes life in you, / unmediated, and *He* so enamors your soul / of Himself that it desires *Him*]
forever after]. While Dante’s concept of the love uniting creature and Creator culminates in the Paradiso with the soul’s desire to merge with the divinity up to and including the dissolution of the ego, Petrarch cannot really contemplate such a surrender and establishes instead a different eschatology, a lyric fantasy whereby all of heaven is subsumed to Laura’s restoration in her corporeal wholeness, as eros triumphs over caritas and the blessed, and even God Himself, make way for her final apotheosis.

As though to underscore the radical departure Petrarch will ultimately make, both from the dominant eschatological position of his time and Dante’s, the Triumphus Eternitatis begins by implying that Petrarch’s poetic subject, still shaken and dispersed by the vicissitudes of desire, time, and history staged in the earlier Triumphs, is on the point of conversion and preparing to move into God:

Da poi che sotto ‘l ciel cosa non vidi stabile e ferma, tutto sbigottito
mi volsi a me, e dissi: “In che ti fidi?”
Risposi: “Nel Signor, che mai fallito non à promessa a chi si fida in lui.
[...] Tarde non fur mai gratie divine;
in quelle spero che ’n me anchor faranno alte operationi e pellegrine”.
Cosi detto e risposto. Or, se non stanno queste cose che ’l ciel volge e governa, dopo molto voltar, che fine avranno?
Questo pensava; e mentre più s’interna la mente mia, veder mi parve un mondo novo, in etate immobile ed eterna,
e ’l sole e tutto ’l ciel disfar a tondo con le sue stelle, anchor la terra e ’l mare, e rifarne un più bello e più giocondo.
Qual meraviglia ebb’io, quando ristare vidi in un punto quel che mai non stette, ma discorrendo suol tutto cangiare!
E le tre partì sue vidi ristrecte

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23 See Convivio IV.12 and, as counterpoint, Petrarch’s Secretum I, 15, 1 in which Augustinus, as he laments Franciscus’s blindness in matters of desire and especially his entrapment in the blind prison of the body, accuses him of having forgotten his divine origins and neglected his Creator, allowing his soul to be alienated by the cupiditas resulting from the unchecked indulgence of the passions, “Audi ergo. Animam quidem tuam, sicut celitus bene institutam esse non negaverim, sic ex contagio corporis huius, ubi circumsepta est, multum a primeva nobilitate sua degenerasse ne dubites; nec degenerasse duntaxat, sed longo iam tractu temporis obtorpuisse, facta velut proprie originis ac superni Conditoris immemorem”. In Francesco Petrarca: Secretum. Edited by Ugo Dotti. Rome: Archivio Guido Izzi 1993.
ad una sola, e quella una esser ferma
si che, come solea, più non s'affrette;
e quasi in terra d'erbe ignuda ed herma,
ch’umana vita fanno varia e ‘nferma!
Passa il penser si come sole in vetro,
anzi più assai, però che nulla il tene.
O, qual gratia mi fia, se mai l’impetro,
ch’i’vegglia ivi presente il sommo bene,
non alcun mal, che solo il tempo mesce
e con lui si diparte e con lui vène. (TE, 1–5; 13–39)

[When I had seen that nothing under heaven
Is firm and stable, in dismay I turned
To my heart, and asked: “Wherein has thou thy trust?”
“In the Lord”, the answer came, “Who keepeth ever
His covenant with one who trusts in Him.
[...] Divine mercies never come too late:
In them I hope, that they may work in me
A transformation deep and excellent.”
’Twas thus my heart made answer. If all things
That are beneath the heavens are to fail,
How, after many circlings, will they end?
So ran my thought; and as I pondered it
More and more deeply, I at last beheld
A world made new and changeless and eternal.
I saw the sun, the heavens, and the stars
And land and sea unmade, and made again
More beauteous and more joyous than before.
Greatly I marveled, seeing time itself
Come to an end, that ne’er before had ceased,
But had been wont its course to change all things.
Past, present, future: these I saw combined
In a single term, and that unchangeable:
No swiftness now, as there had been before.
As on an empty plan, I now could see

No “shall be” or “has been,” “ne’er” or “before”  
Or “after,” filling life with doubtfulness.  
Thought passes as a ray of the sun through glass –  
More swiftly still, for there is nought to impede.  
What grace, if I am worthy, shall be mine,  
If I may there behold the Highest Good,  
And none of the harm that is poured out by Time,  
And comes with Time, and disappears with Time!]

This passage includes many references to Dante’s Paradiso and a few of its features are especially significant for understanding Petrarch’s eschatological and apocalyptic imagination, the initial suggestion of orthodoxy, and the hints at the deviation to come. Firstly, and most importantly, while the Triumphus Eternitatis begins where the Triumphus Temporis had ended, with the ‘I’ caught in the onslaught of time, it quickly moves towards the point of stability and fixity that Petrarch claims to find in God as the absolutely non-contingent presence at the centre of the universe (vv. 4–6), but ultimately aligns with the Apocalyptic perspective of the ‘new heaven and new earth’ (Apoc. 21) that emerge only at the end of time, at the Last Judgment. The question posed in lines 16–18, “Or, se non stanno / queste cose che ‘l ciel volge e governa, dopo molto voltar, che fine avranno” marks the transition to considering ‘last things’, and is the moment when Petrarch’s emphasis on resurrection surfaces, here already played almost exclusively in terms of vision and the visionary (“vidi”; “veggio”; “veggio”; “veder mi parve”; “vidi”; “vidi”; “veggia”), carried through the length of the Triumphus Eternitatis in the recurring (Dantean) phrase “vedrassi” (TE, 93; 106; 115) – referred to the revelation of God’s providential plan for humankind at the end of time, including the final Judgment of the righteous and the wicked.26 Yet Petrarch’s reading and appropriation of Apocalypse is partial and restrictive: while he emphasizes the importance of revelation and the unprecedented power of the vision of the ‘new world’ to subsume the old, he underplays the theocentric, sustaining and titanic presence of God as “Alpha and Omega” (Apoc. 1), as Source and destination of all created being, as well as the final

25 See Triumphus Temporis, 142–45, “Tutto vince e ritoglie il Tempo avaro; / chiamasi Fama, ed è morir secondo, / né più che contra’l primo è alcun riparo. / Così il Tempo triunfa i nomi e’l mondo” [Time in his avarice steals so much away: / Men call it Fame;’tis but a second death, / And both alike are strong beyond defense. / Thus doth Time triumph over the world and Fame].

26 The crucial intertext from Dante’s Paradiso is Par. XIX, 115–141, where, in the Heaven of Justice, the Eagle utters forth the names of the corrupt Christian rulers as they shall be written in the Book of Judgment. The nine terzine, three of which begin “Li si vedrà” [There they shall see], and three “Vedrassi” [The text will show] form, with the last three beginning “E” [And], the acrostic “LVE” [plague].
victory of the Lamb (since Christ’s glorious Triumph will be replaced by Laura’s lyric apotheosis).

Petrarch’s rewriting of Dante is arguably even more radical, and according to Christian Moevs, can be taken as evidence not only of Petrarch’s resistance to metaphysics, but also a doubt about the very ontological foundations of the soul and its relationship to its Maker. Able to join with God only through a superhuman effort of the will (a “macho” act, in the Secretum) that would quell all other desires, the Petrarchan subject does not possess that innate desire propelling it to reunite with its Source and the ground of all being (as articulated in Par. VII, and indeed through the length of the Commedia) but rather has to strive even just to seek God among the things of the world.27 As a result, in the Triumphus Eternitatis, Petrarch’s eternity results as:

a strange affair: it is not a transcendence of time and flux, but rather it is time and flux frozen, fixed, stopped. It is not a beatific vision of the divine light, of pure being or consciousness as the ontological foundation of the world; it is rather a dream that the fleeting world itself could be made a “cosa [...] stabile e fera” [...] in short, a spatiotemporal world that is non-contingent, stable, unchanging, permanently new, whole, dependable and gathered together.28

Petrarch’s eternity is consequently without end and, insofar as time is suspended, timeless too. But it is definitively not the totum simul of Dante’s Paradiso, where, as Barolini has shown, the poet actually aims to recreate textually the experience of “ontological simultaneity”: eternity not as mere duration, but God’s “plenitude of presence in a never-fading instant”.29

Petrarch’s recasting of the Dantean “punto”, the verb “s’interna” and the phrase “sommo bene”, are all revealing of this eschatological scarto. All drawn from Paradiso XXXIII, where they have a deeply metaphysical and mystical valence, they turn on the identity of the human soul with God and, in the case of the “punto”, on the divine mind (the Empyrean, “[che] non è in loco e non s’impola” [is not in space and does not turn on poles], Par. XXII, 67) in which all creation finds its place and where Dante, having penetrated into the very mystery of the Incarnation, will ultimately gaze upon an image of “la nostra effige” [our likeness] painted in the second Person of the Trinity (Par. XXXIII, 130–32). To this we might also add the “gratia” of line 36 of Petrarch’s Triumphus Eternitatis, which

28 Moevs: Subjectivity and Conversion, p. 234.
29 Barolini: The Undivine ‘Comedy’, p. 168.
is likely not the ecstatic flowing of love and grace from God to the blessed soul, but rather the dispensation that would allow for Petrarch’s vision of eternity to take place, and for the ‘I’ to transcend time and death and be reunited with Laura.

Moreover, unlike the progression that defines all of the Commedia, in these opening lines of the Triumphus Eternitatis, we find at most a pseudo-progression: a simulated movement toward what we think might be the visio Dei but which will end not with God but with Laura (as though He might be an intermediary to reach her). All in all, Petrarch radically alters Dante’s mystical terminology since his self-absorption will ultimately be lyric and not mystical, not an opening up or turning oneself inside out to merge with the other but a closing in or down to focus exclusively on one individual in all her (lyric) specificity. The “sommo bene” (TE, 37), which recalls the passage of Paradiso XIV quoted above, as well as Beatrice’s “sommo piacer” (Purg. XXXI, 52), referred to her earthly body now scattered in earth, consequently results as retroactively ambiguous. It could be God, but given how the Triumphus Eternitatis evolves it is more likely to be a no longer synecdochic symbol of Laura in her fully embodied glory and perfection at the resurrection.30

The thing that seems to hold Petrarch’s vision of eternity together is not divine love, then, but rather the indissolubility of the ego, which resists surrendering itself into God because, as Moevs indicates, it has become detached from the principle that would make that an attractive or certain possibility.31 While he argues that, as such, the ego, “cannot come to know the world as itself, and cannot give up itself without ceasing to exist entirely”, our interpretation considers that ego also as a fundamentally lyric entity in Petrarch, and opens up to a more positive way of viewing that “locus of thought and desire”. The latter may be, in Moevs’s words, “evanescent” but it still carries an impassable affective and erotic drive bound to the corporeal dimension of an individual made unique by its personal affective history.32

To speak of ‘lyric’ in relation to our two authors is precisely to emphasize the corporeal, intersubjective, and relational aspect of their poetic eschatologies. In Dante’s case, we call ‘lyric’ that undisciplinable, affective component bound up with the body as a locus of desire, memory and relationality; with the past; and

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31 Moevs: Subjectivity and Conversion, p. 245.

ultimately with Beatrice. In Dante, this lyric dimension, not entirely subsumable into the more mystical, self-dissolutory merging with God, is precisely what the text of the *Commedia* shows there is a resistance to relinquishing, and therefore keeps in paradoxical tension right to the end of the poem. In Petrarch’s *Triumphus Eternitatis*, by contrast, the lyric pole is that which takes over, becomes the only thing that matters, to the exclusion of everything else (especially: the experience of *caritas* and the radical openness of the self to the Other through ecstatic union and the *visio Dei*, as well as a more broadly inter-subjective dimension beyond Laura and Petrarch themselves). In other words, ‘lyric’ implies a specific relationality but the way Dante and Petrarch treat and integrate that relationality into their vision of heaven is very different.

Unsurprisingly, Petrarch’s lyric eschatology fully unfolds itself in the moment when Laura herself appears in the text of the *Triumphus Eternitatis*, where there is also a resurgence of the lyric mode in all its specificity and – in Petrarch’s case – exclusivity:

O felici quelle anime che ’n via
sono o seranno di venire al fine
di ch’io ragiono, *quandunque e’ si sia*.
E tra l’altre leggiadre e pellegrine
beatissima lei, che morte occise
assai di qua dal natural confine!

*Parranno allor* l’angeliche divise
e l’oneste parole e i penser casti
che nel cor giovenil natura mise.

Tanti volti, che Morte e ’l Tempo à guasti,
torneranno al suo più fiorito stato;
e vedrassi ove, Amor, tu mi legasti,
ond’io a dito ne sarò mostrato:
“Ecco chi pianse sempre, e nel suo pianto
sovra ’l riso d’ogni altro fu beato!”

E quella di ch’anchor piangendo canto
avrà gran meraviglia di se stessa,
vedendosi fra tutte dar il vanto.

[…]

E ’l Tempo, a disfar tutto così presto,
e Morte, in sua ragion cotanto avara,
morti insieme seranno a quella e questo.

E quei che Fama meritaron chiara,
che ’l Tempo spense, e i be’ visi leggiadri
che ’mpallidir fe’ ’l Tempo e Morte amara,
l’oblivïon, *gli aspetti oscuri e adri,*
*più che mai bei tornando*, lasceranno
a Morte impetüosa, a’ giorni ladri.
Ne l’età più fiorita e verde avranno
con immortal bellezza eterna fama.
Ma innanzi a tutte ch’a rifarsi vanno
è quella che piangendo il mondo chiama
con la mia lingua e con la stancha penna:
ma ’l ciel pur di vederla intera brama.
A riva un fiume che nasce in Gebenna,
Amor mi die’ per lei sì lunga guerra,
che la memoria ancora il cor accenna.
Felice sasso che ’l bel viso serra!
Che, poi che avrà preso il suo bel velo,
se fu beato chi la vide in terra,
or che fia dunque a rivederla in cielo? (TE, 82–99; 125–145)

[Blessèd those souls that now are on the way,
Or will be soon, to reach the final goal,
Whereof I speak, whenever it may be;
And among all the rare and beauteous ones,
Most blessèd she, who long before she came
To the bound that nature sets was slain by death.
Then will be manifest the angelic modes,
The honorable words, and the chaste thoughts
That nature set within her youthful heart.
The countenances hurt by death and time
Will now appear in perfect flowering,
The bond wherewith Love bound me will be seen.
And pointing toward me will be some who say:
“He ever wept, and yet amid his tears
Was bliest above the joys of other men.”
And she of whom, still weeping, I sing,
Will find it very wonderful that she
Should have the highest praise among them all.
(...)
Time, ever ready to destroy all things,
And Death, so greedy in her evil power,
One and the other, shall together die.
And those who merited illustrious fame
That Time had quenched, and countenances fair
Made pale and wan by Time and bitter Death,
Becoming still more beauteous than before
Will leave to raging Death and thieving Time
Oblivion, and aspects dark and sad.
In the full flower of youth they shall possess
Immortal beauty and eternal fame.
Before them all, who go to be made anew,
Is she for whom the world is weeping still,
Calling her with my tongue and weary pen,
But heaven too desires her, body and soul.
Beside a stream that rises in the Alps
Love gave to me for her a war so long
My heart still bears the memory thereof.
Happy the stone that covers her fair face!
And now that she her beauty hath resumed,
If he was blest who saw her here on earth,
What then will it be to see her again in heaven!

Again, Petrarch’s text makes clear that we are in an apocalyptic perspective,
emphatically looking forward to the end of time, when the resurrection of the
body will take place: “sono o seranno”, “paranno allor”, “torneranno”, “vedrassi
[...]”. Yet, as he interpolates the god of Love (Amor is a lyric figure representing
eros and not the Christian God here) and even himself into that vision as a kind of
celebrity (vv. 93–96), Petrarch’s eschatological vision takes a decisive turn toward
the phantasmatic. There is absolutely no reference to the increase in beatific
vision, to Dante’s “ardore” or his “gratüito lume”, but only to the hypostatized
“immortal bellezza e eterna fama” which in turn conflate three poles together:
the lyric (“bellezza”), Christian (“immortal”, “eternal”, again “bellezza”), and
classical (“fama”). Petrarch’s emphasis is not on selfless giving (Dante’s “dona”),
or receiving (in the return of love from creature to Creator) but rather on the self-
centred and self-centring forces of beauty and fame redeemed from Time’s grasp.

Thus while we do remain within a Christian framework, and in the shadow
of the Apocalypse, there is no reference to Christ, the Trinity, or to God, but the
staging of an eschatological fantasy, which culminates with the vision of Laura
alone. The final question mark of the poem suspends, as much as it extends, the
text into the fourth dimension. As a result, notwithstanding its vertical drive and
final burst of lyric energy, the Triumphus Eternitatis ends on a kind of stasis, just
as the projected vision of Laura in her corporeal wholeness retains a sense of
distance and detachment consonant with the still unrealized status of the ques-
tion or wish formulated in the closing lines. With the mention of her “bel velo”,
Petrarch stresses Laura’s resurrected beauty as well as the material continuity
connecting her resurrected flesh to the “mortal veil” whose loss and decay was so
lamented in the second part of the Rerum vulgarium fragmenta. Yet she remains
an object of beauty to be contemplated, rather than the subject of an embrace
that (in Dante’s case) truly allowed for the inter-subjective experience of affective
union through the medium of the body in all its specific, relational extensions.

33 See, for example, RVF 268, “Che debb’io far?” and RVF 302, “Levòmmi il mio pensier”, which
has interesting parallels with the last sonnet of Dante’s Vita Nuova, “Oltre la spera che più larga
girá” (XLI).
Laura's body is perhaps, as is so frequently the case in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, fetishized by poetry more than it is embodied into it, though this is the closest Petrarch gets – and it is further than ever before – to making it (textually) present. Nonetheless, in emphatically delaying the experience of fullness until the body will return at the end of time, Petrarch endows his language with a kind of spectrality that is actually in tension with the eschatological emphasis on resurrection on which he bases the entire *Triumphus Eternitatis*.

We remember that in the final cantos of Dante’s *Paradiso*, with the collapse of eschatology into poetry there is a resurrection of a lyric textuality, whereby the pilgrim actually experiences the resurrection and the poem replicates it in the text. Everything is simultaneously present in a form of relationality which also preserves and extends desire and memory into the eschatological present of the resurrection itself. In the *Triumphus Eternitatis*, by contrast, Petrarch does not experience (eschatological) fullness because it is projected into a still undetermined future (cf. “quandunque sia”), and what may be missing is precisely the felt affect so materially present in the *Paradiso*’s lyric textuality. For Petrarch, the moment can be imagined, and the subject can gain a kind of satisfaction from the fantasy, but it cannot be experienced or expressed except between the lines, and at the very margins of the text.

Petrarch, in the end, does away completely with the collective, non-subjective, ‘universal’ part of the heavenly experience, which Dante posits in the *visio Dei* and the experience of selfless love and loving selflessness. As a result, Petrarch’s “disio d’i’corpi morti” is something else as well: focused on the single body of the beloved, and not even on the lover’s body, it is still paradigmatic of Petrarch’s eschatology but paradigmatic of an obsessive, almost tyrannical ‘monomania bi-soggettiva’ (the term is ours) focused on Petrarch and Laura alone. Making eternity itself a mere extension and deification of a quintessentially lyric fantasy, the poet can state without irony that all of heaven desires, with almost cupidinous force (the word Petrarch uses is “brama”), to look upon Laura’s body in its restored corporeal wholeness and to celebrate her immortal beauty and eternal fame (“dar il vanto”).

The collective experience of heaven consequently has no place except to validate the supremacy of Laura’s image in relation to Petrarch’s gaze and to the resurrected landscape of his heart, whose affective current is carried by memory into the furthest reaches of Petrarch’s eschatological imagination (“A riva [...] rivederla in cielo?”), where as noted earlier it remains only describable in part, and certainly intensified more than actually transformed.34

34 And note the strong echo of the sweetness of Casella’s *amoroso canto*, “che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona” (*Purg*. II, 114), cited earlier, as well as Petrarch’s potential rewriting
As the memory of the lyric past floods back, the prospect of entering a celestial Jerusalem (if it ever existed) is completely supplanted by the vision of a new and timeless Vaucluse transposed into this paradise at the end of time. It leads us back all the way to the “chiuso loco” with which the Triumphus Cupidinis opened, as the scene of both the writing subject’s dream and his subjection to love, here both redeemed and valorized in light of the final vision of Laura’s resurrected body.\(^\text{35}\) In this vision of eternity, God cannot but be absent: within the confines of Petrarch’s redeemed lyric universe of the Triumphi, where Laura is restored – however conditionally – to presence, if she has taken God’s place, He is relegated to hers in a stunning reversal of the substitution of Laura by the Virgin Mary in RVF 366.

At the same time, the experience of desire and language also changes. Whereas with the textual ‘fireworks’ Dante stages at the end of the Paradiso, the pilgrim’s own desire and will ("disio" and "velle") are brought into a perfect cosmological circulation with “l’amor che move il sole e l’altr’ stelle” (Par. XXXIII, 142–45), at the end of the Triumphus Eternitatis it feels paradoxically like the movement of desire is absent or at least held in a kind of suspended animation. Perhaps this is because Petrarch, in doing away with the paradox that had sustained his earlier lyric production, also removes some of the tension as well, making his language less dazzling or bright and more subdued, to create a different kind of textuality, both with respect to Dante’s Commedia and Petrarch’s own Rerum vulgarium fragmenta.

Dante’s Paradiso is sustained by presence, to the extent that even where, as in Paradiso XIV, the body is felt as absent, the lack of it can still be celebrated as joyous. In Petrarch, by contrast, what is absent really isn’t there: in the Rerum vulgarium fragmenta, Laura dissolves even when she comes back and the lack of her mortal corpo remains irreducible even in the face of its promised return at the

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\(^{35}\) Cf. Triumphus Cupidinis I, 8, and Marco Ariani’s intertextual reading of the two moments of the work in Francesco Petrarca: Triumphi. Edited by Marco Ariani. Milan: Mursia 1988, p. 384: “è dunque il corpo glorioso di Madonna che fa ri Fiorire la landa desolata del tempo annientato: il topos del plazer primaverile, corroso all’inizio del poema, ritorna, alla fine, in un cerchio perfettamente concluso, radicalmente riavvalorato.” [thus it is the glorified body of the Lady that causes the desolate moor of annihilated time to reflower: the topos of the springtime plazer, corroded at the start of the poem, returns, at the end, in a perfectly completed circle, radically reaffirmed]. Translation is ours.
end of time.\textsuperscript{36} In the \textit{Triumphi}, Petrarch's wish – mediated through Laura's body – is realized (and consolidated by the repetition of the “bel velo” in \textit{TE}, 143) but realized precisely still as a wish projected forward to an indeterminate future. Everything is put off until the resurrection, because it cannot stand before, to the point at which we may even end up further from God than we were in the \textit{Rerum vulgarium fragmenta}. Nonetheless we might yet suggest that the delay or deferral in desire’s ultimate fulfilment, and the quite radical gesture of supplanting God with Laura while still contemplating her from a distance, is still a form of pleasure for Petrarch, if a masochistic one. In this form of desire, fore-pleasure counts as much as end-pleasure and the subject seeks to remain in that state as long as possible since it too can be – paradoxically – satisfying.\textsuperscript{37}

Yet it is not only Petrarch's concept of love and desire that so radically alters his eschatological anthropology with respect to Dante’s, but also Petrarch’s relationship to language. The ending of the \textit{Triumphus Eternitatis}, which constitutes in effect Petrarch's last word on his vernacular production, raises the questions of what the vernacular itself might be for Petrarch, in distinction to Dante. Certainly, it does not appear to be the affective, maternal, even abject, “wild corporeality of natural language” that we find in the \textit{Commedia} (as Elena Lombardi has recently defined it); but something more constructed or codified.\textsuperscript{38} Petrarch’s \textit{volgare} is

\begin{footnotes}
\item[36] See e. g. \textit{RVF} 302, “Levòmmi il mio pensier”, especially lines 10–11: “te solo aspetto et quel che tanto amasti / e là giuso è rimaso, il mio bel velo” [I only wait for you and for that which you loved so much and which remained down there, my lovely veil]; and \textit{RVF} 362, 3–4, “esser mi par ch’àn ivi il suo tesoro / lasciando in terra lo squarciato velo” [it seems to me I am almost one of those who there possess their treasure, leaving on earth their rent veils]. On the notion of absence in the \textit{Triumphi} as connected to Laura, see Santagata’s comment in his Introduzione that: “Il finale [del \textit{Triumphus Eternitatis}], diviso tra rievocazione storica e speranza ultraterrena, è in una certa misura inattesa. In fondo, il lettore aveva dimenticato Laura e l’amore per lei. E proprio questo è il punto dolente del suo personaggio. Non la saltuaria presenza, ma il fatto che quando esso è assente lo è per vero. […] Ripeto, Laura non è Beatrice.” [The ending [of \textit{Triumphus Eternitatis}], suspended between the re-evocation of history and otherworldly hope, is to some extent unexpected. Deep down, the reader had forgotten about Laura and the poet’s love for her. Indeed this is the sore spot of her character. Not her only occasional presence, but the fact that when she is absent, she is absent for real. [...] I repeat, Laura is not Beatrice]. In: Petrarca, \textit{Trionfi}, p. XIII–LII (p. XLVIII–XLIX). Translation is ours.


\end{footnotes}
assimilated less through the inter-subjective relationality that Dante ultimately posits in the image of the infant suckling at the mother’s breast, so prominent in the high Paradiso, than from a return to the preceding lyric tradition that celebrated the very absence Petrarch internalizes, and that one still feels in the Triumphi’s uniquely erotic and lyric vision of eternity.39

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39 On Petrarch’s conception of the volgare, especially as rooted in his reading of the Occitan and early Italian lyric traditions, see Marco Santagata, Introduzione. In Petrarca, Canzoniere, p. XIX–CII; and Marco Ariani: La lingua poetica del Petrarcha volgare. In his: Petrarca, p. 311–335. Moews similarly acknowledges Petrarch’s return to a prior (lyric) position when he notes that, “With the last vernacular lines he wrote, Petrarch [...] wiped out the entire philosophizing and mysticizing history of the Italian lyric that culminates with Dante, everything between the Sicilians and himself; or at least he has wiped out the Commedia, and brought us back to the last poem of Vita Nova, ‘Oltre la spera che più larga gira’”. In: Subjectivity and Conversion, p. 237–238.


**Articles and Papers**


