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Between Petrarch and Boccaccio: Strategies of the End

It is often the case that great literary masterpieces contain within themselves the mark of epochal events. Quite unique, however, is the fact that two works such as the *Canzoniere* and the *Decameron* (created by two authors linked by many personal connections) – works that, even in their diversity, assume a fundamental significance for an entire culture – would give such a decisive significance to a single event and to its date, inscribed in different ways within their own literary fabric, attributing to it the sense of the experience that forms it. The date of 1348, of the terrible plague that devastated Europe, is variously inscribed in the great vernacular works of Petrarch and Boccaccio, which were destined to become major canonical models for the contemporary literature of Italy and all of Europe. Perhaps a parallel could be found in the manner in which three great masterpieces of the early 1900s – *Le temps retrouvé* by Marcel Proust, *La coscienza di Zeno* by Italo Svevo, and *Der Zauberberg* by Thomas Mann (none of which could be said to take on a canonical role comparable to those fourteenth-century works) – describe the event of the first world war. It must be mentioned, however, that the description of the events of 1348 in the *Decameron* and in the *Canzoniere* are often perceived quite differently from one work to the other. As the *Introduction* to the *Decameron* demands, with the explicit affirmation of importance that the author attributes to the ‘horrid beginning,’ universal and insistent is the attention that readers and critics have given to the plague of Florence, to Boccaccio’s narration and description of the event, and to the way in which, from its destructive horizon, arises in the youthful *brigata* the flight toward the Edenic countryside and the decision to narrate the *novelle*. Regarding the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* on the other hand, apart from the attention given to the symbolic significance of the date Petrarch falls in love and the date of Laura’s death, and to the nexus that links them, in general little attention has been given to the specific historical substance of the year 1348 or to the singular implicit parallelism that Francesco, by inserting this date into the *Canzoniere*, manages to establish with the very different work of his friend Giovanni.

Immediately after the *Proem*, having justified with his readers the “grave e noioso principio” [heavy and distressful prelude] from which his work stems, Boccaccio quickly names the “pestifera mortalità trapassata” [late mortal pestilence], which the work itself “porta nella sua fronte” [bears upon its very front]. Likewise,

having amply justified the initial significance of the “orrido cominciamento” [horrid beginning], he begins the narration, establishing in precise terms its time and place:

Dico adunque che già erano gli anni della fruttifera incarnazione del Figliuolo di Dio al numero pervenuti di milletrecentoquarantotto, quando nella egregia città di Fiorenza, oltre a ogn'altra italica bellissima, pervenne la mortifera pestilenza [...].

[I say, then, that the years of the beatific incarnation of the Son of God had reached the tale of one thousand three hundred and forty-eight, when in the illustrious city of Florence, the fairest of all the cities of Italy, there made its appearance that deadly pestilence (...).]¹

By contrast, the date 1348 appears much later in the *Canzoniere*, just at the threshold of its ending, in the last tercet of the sonnet *Tornami a mente (anzi v'è dentro quella)* [She comes to mind (no, she is always there)] (CCCXXXVI), likely composed toward the end of the 1360s:

Sai che 'n mille trecento quarantotto,
il dí sesto d'aprile, in l'ora prima,
del corpo uscío quell'anima beata.

[You do know that in thirteen forty-eight,
At hour one of the sixth day of April
That soul now blest departed from its body.]²

In the codex Vaticano latino 3195 this text is the first of a series in which Petrarch inscribed in Arabic characters the definitive numeration (correcting the order in which the poems had been transcribed previously), as well as the only one of the series, together with the final *canzone* of the Virgin, whose placement was not changed. It remains fixed in position 336, and the number 1 placed above it indicates that we are dealing with the first of that final series, to which the poet felt the need to make those late changes in position, propelled by an anxiety and a dissatisfaction we cannot consider thoroughly resolved by the numeration suggested at the end. It is well known, moreover, that the date appeared explicitly in the famous note of the Ambrosiano Virgil, in correspondence with that attributed

1 I cite the text of the *Decameron* from that given by Vittore Branca in his classic edition: Giovanni Boccaccio: *Decameron*. Edited by Vittore Branca. In: *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Edited by Vittore Branca. Milano: Mondadori 1976, indicating the relevant paragraph (here I, *Introduzione*, 8). English translations are drawn from Giovanni Boccaccio: *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio Faithfully Translated by James M. Rigg*. 2 vols. London: The Navarre Society 1903.

2 For the *Canzoniere* I cite from Francesco Petrarca: *Canzoniere: Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. Edited by Rosanna Bettarini. Torino: Einaudi 2005 (Nuova raccolta di classici italiani annotate, 20). English translations are drawn from Francesco Petrarca: *The Canzoniere or Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. Translated with commentary by Mark Musa. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press 1996.

to Petrarch's falling in love: "et in eadem civitate, eodem mense Aprili, eodem die VI^o, eadem hora prima, anno autem M^o III^c XLVIII^o, ab hac luce lux illa subtracta est."³ Evident is the link between the insertion of the date 1348 into CCCXXXVI and of 1327 into the last tercet of CCXI, previously lacking a specific year, according to the version documented in the 'codice degli abbozzi':

Nel laberinto intrai, né veggio ond'esca,
su l'ora prima, il dí sesto d'aprile,
lasso me, insieme presi l'amo e l'ésca!

[I entered the labyrinth, and I see no way to escape,
at the first hour, the sixth day of April,
alas, I took both bait and hook together!]⁴

As the marginalia of Vaticano latino 3196 indicates, this sonnet *Voglia mi sprona, Amor mi guida e scorge*, [*Desire spurs me, Love sees and guides my way*,] was at first put aside and then later recovered in June of 1369 as part of the final revision, in evident and intentional correspondence with the final tercet of CCCXXXVI:

Mille trecento ventisette, a punto
su l'ora prima, il dí sesto d'aprile,
nel laberinto intrai, né veggio ond'esca.

[In thirteen twenty-seven, and precisely
at the first hour of the sixth of April
I entered the labyrinth, and I see no way out.]

Overlooking the disagreement between the actual and symbolic dates – defined by the identification of April 6 with Good Friday (indicated in III and in LXII) and by the relative incongruence with the actual date of 1327 – and the undulating numerological horizon that, *a posteriori*, as viewed after the fact, imposes itself upon the global structure of the *Canzoniere*,⁵ it remains evident that the insertion of the date 1327 into the sonnet CCXI formed an intentional correspondence

³ See Pierre de Nolhac: *Pétrarque et l'humanisme*. 2 vols. Paris: H. Champion 1907, II, p. 286. The same correspondence between April 6, the date of falling in love, and that of the death of Laura, occurs in *Triumphus Mortis*, I, 133–134: "L'ora prima era, il dì sesto d'aprile,/ che già mi strinse, ed or, lasso, mi sciolse." [April the sixth, it was, and the first hour, / When I was bound-and now, alas, set free!] I cite from the following editions: Francesco Petrarca: *Triumphs*. Edited by Marco Ariani. Milano: Mursia 1988; *The Triumphs of Petrarch*. Trans. by Ernest H. Wilkins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962.

⁴ English translation by Bridget Pupillo.

⁵ Above all see Marco Santagata: *I frammenti dell'anima. Storia e racconto nel Canzoniere di Petrarca*. Bologna: il Mulino 1992, p. 321–330, and the textual notes cited in his edition of the *Canzoniere*: Francesco Petrarca: *Canzoniere*. Edited by Marco Santagata. Milano: Mondadori 2004.

with that of 1348 in CCCXXXVI. This date was imbued with a significance both final and absolute, which entails a radical intrusion of the external reality of that *annus horribilis* (while 1327, the date of Petrarch's falling in love, remains historically neutral, referring instead to a personal experience, set within the *topos* of love in a church, albeit projected into the symbolic nexus of April 6/Good Friday).

The date 1348 is inscribed at the very opening of the great collection of the *Familiares*: the proemial letter *Ad Socratem suum* (*To his Socrates*) starts with the disastrous consequences of that year, with the ruinous flow of a time that saw no peace but rather the collapse of all hopes, with the death of so many friends, the pain of which can be only partially assuaged in knowing that one's own death is nigh:

Quid vero nunc agimus, frater? Ecce, iam fere omnia tentavimus et nusquam requies. Quando illam expectamus? Ubi eam querimus? Tempora, ut aiunt, inter digitos effluxerunt; spes nostre veteres cum amicis sepulte sunt. Mille trecentessimus quadragessimus octavus annus est, qui nos solos atque inopes fecit; neque enim ea nobis abstulit, que Indo aut Caspio Carpathio ve mari restaurari queant: irreparabiles sunt ultime iacture; et quodcumque mors intulit, immedicabile vulnus est. Unum est solamen: sequemur et ipsi quos premisimus. Que quidem expectatio quam brevis futura sit, nescio; hoc scio, quod longa esse non potest. Quantulacunque sane est, non potest esse non molesta. (I, 1, 1–2)

[What are we to do now, dear brother? Alas, we have already tried almost everything and no rest is in sight. When can we expect it? Where shall we seek it? Time, as they say, has slipped through our fingers; our former hopes are buried with our friends. The year 1348 left us alone and helpless; it did not deprive us of things that can be restored by the Indian or Caspian or Carpathian Sea. It subjected us to irreparable losses. Whatever death wrought is now an incurable wound. There is only one consolation in all this: we too shall follow those who preceded us. How long our wait will be I do not know; but this I do know, that it cannot be long. And however short the wait may be, it cannot avoid being burdensome.]⁶

The impossibility of the much desired *requies*, the anxiety of *expectatio*, the inexorable passage of time, the death of hopes and of friends: it is as though from this year springs forth a confirmation in extreme terms of the irreparable loss of existence. And one notes the significance imbued in those negative adjectives that have an essential presence in Petrarch's Latin: *irreparabiles* and *immedicabile*, referring to the effects of temporality and to the actions of time on desire. In this same initial epistle Petrarch turns his gaze toward the hope of his work reaching its conclusion, once again entrusting to his friend this final image of his soul:

⁶ I cite the *Familiares* from the following edition: Francesco Petrarca: *Le Familiari*. Edited and translated by Ugo Dotti and Felicita Audisio. 5 vols. Torino: Nino Aragno 2004–2009. English translations drawn from Francesco Petrarca: *Letters on Familiar Matters: Rerum familiarium libri*. Translated by Aldo S. Bernardo. 3 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1975–1985, I, p. 3.

Illam vero non Phidie Minervam, ut ait Cicero, sed qualemcunque animi mei effigiem atque ingenii simulacrum multo michi studio dedolatum, si unquam supremam illi manum imposuero, cum ad te venerit, secure qualibet in arce constituito. (I, 1, 37)

[The other work I have been polishing with great care, though not a Phidian Minerva, as Cicero asserts, but a true portrait and likeness such as it is of my talent if ever I shall be able to give it the last touches, that work, I say, when it reaches you, you may set up without concern at the summit of whatever stronghold you please.]

Indeed, due to this deep bond Petrarch shares with his friends, the intertwining of the subject matter of the *Familiars* with the life of the author allows him to identify the act of finishing these epistles with the end of his own life (“[...] scribendi enim michi vivendique unus, ut auguror, finis erit.” [(...) for me writing and living are the same and I hope will be so to the very end.] I, 1, 44). The scope of this work is delineated solely by Petrarch’s love for his friends, to whom he bestows the gift of his words; and this love may be dissolved only by death:

Tum demum et michi immunitatem huius muneris quesitam et huic operi positum finem scito, cum me defunctum et cunctis vite laboribus absolutum noveris. Interea iter inceptum sequar, non prius vie quam lucis exitum operiens; et quietis michi loco fuerit dulcis labor. (I, 1, 45)

[Only then will I no longer feel this obligation and will have to consider this work ended when you hear that I am dead and that I am freed from all the labors of life. In the meantime I shall continue along the path I have been following, and shall avoid any exits so long as there is light. And the sweet labor will serve for me almost as a place of rest.]

This equation of the span of life and the span of writing, an idea that governs both the letters already written and those yet to be penned, seems to be submerged within the conclusion of this proemial epistle, which fixes its composition within the time span of the (unspecified) day presently coming to an end. The day ends, the letter ends; just as the letters collected in the book will end with the ending of life:

Dulce michi colloquium tecum fuit, cupideque et quasi de industria protractum; vultum enim tuum retulit per tot terras et maria teque mihi presentem fecit usque ad vesperam, cum matutino calamum cepissem. Diei iam et epystole finis adest. (I, 1, 47)

[This discourse with you has been most pleasant for me and I have drawn it out eagerly and as though by design. It has kept your face constantly before me throughout a great number of lands and seas, as if my presence until dusk, though it was with the early morning light that I had taken up my pen.]

Amidst the various signs of apprehension concerning the passage of time and the confrontation with the end which disturb the fabric of the *Familiars*, the date of 1348 irrupts with more immediate urgency in Book VIII, with the famous Letter

7, also addressed *Ad Socratem suum*, which Petrarch, in the footsteps of Cicero, begins with the desperate triple invocation to his dear friend:

Mi frater, mi frater, mi frater – novum epystole principium, imo antiquum, et ante mille fere quadringentos annos a Marco Tullio usurpatum –; heu michi, frater amantissime, quid dicam? unde ordiar? quonam vertar? undique dolor, terror undique. (VIII, 7, 1)

[Oh brother, brother, brother (a new kind of beginning for a letter, indeed an ancient one used by Marcus Tullius almost fourteen hundred years ago); alas dearest brother, what shall I say? Where shall I begin? Where shall I turn? Everywhere we see sorrow, on all sides we see terror.]

The flood of pain and the sense of death, coupled with the inability to respond to these sensations in a language worthy of the task, have given rise to a desperate outburst; the force of these feelings has pushed the author's soul as well as his literary style outside the control of reason. More than a year passed before the author, struggling against the ravages of fortune, managed to create something of worth; without equal, however, is the exceptionality of that year, which comes to be associated with its numerical figure and with its dangerous extension into the present:

Qua in re benigno sub iudice forsan excuser, si ad examen venerit illud quoque, non leve aliud, sed millesimum trecentimum quadagesimum octavum sexte etatis annum esse quem lugeo, qui non solum nos amicis, sed mundum omnem gentibus spoliavit; cui siquid defuit, sequens ecce annus illius reliquias demetit, et quicquid illi procelle superfuerat, mortifera falce persequitur. (VIII, 7, 11)

[Because of this I may perhaps be excused by a benign judge if he were also to consider that I am bewailing not something inconsequential, but the 1348th year of the sixth age, which not only deprived us of our friends but the entire world of actual nations. If anyone escaped, the coming year is gathering its harvest so that whatever survived that storm is being pursued by death's sickle.]

Indeed, something unprecedented occurred in that year, with a devastation and an emptying of the world the likes of which had never been seen before, and to which later generations cannot truly give credence (after all, the historians are silent, the philosophers shrug their shoulders, wrinkle their brows and with a finger ask for silence):

Credes ista, posteritas, cum ipsi qui vidimus, vix credamus, somnia credituri nisi expectati apertis hec oculis cerneremus, et lustrata urbe funeribus suis plena, domum reversi, exoptatis pignoribus vacuam illam reperientes, sciremus utique vera esse que gemimus? (VIII, 7, 13)

[Will you believe such things, oh posterity, when we ourselves who see them can scarcely believe them and would consider them dreams except that we perceive them awake and with our eyes open and that after viewing a city full of funerals we return to our homes only to find them empty of our loved ones.]

After posing heartfelt questions to God on the incomprehensible reason for all of this, Petrarch introduces once again his grief over the personal emptiness that this year has left in its wake, over the necessity and impossibility of finding new friends, now that the human race is nearly extinct and the end of the world is near:

Stipati eramus, prope iam soli sumus. Nove amicitie contrahende sunt. Unde autem sive ad quid, humano genere pene extincto, et proximo, ut auguror, rerum finem? (VIII, 7, 21)

[We used to be a crowd, now we are almost alone. We must seek new friendships. But where or for what reason when the human species is almost extinct and the end, as I hope, is near?]

The perception of this solitude does not elicit much trust in the stability of the common stage of the world. Rather, it provokes the sensation that each life is disappearing, in this world's shadowy consistency and in the reciprocal anticipation of the news of death:

E tanta sodalium turba ad quem redacti numerum sumus, vides; et ecce, dum loquimur, ipsi etiam fugimus atque umbre in morem evanescimus, momentoque temporis abiisse alter alterum accipiet, et ipse mox previum secuturus. (VIII, 7, 23)⁷

7 It will not be necessary to reference the widespread presence in the *Canzoniere* of metaphors of life and of reality such as “ombra/sogno/sonno” and of various possible references to classical Latin works (in primis Orazio, *Carmina*, IV, 7, 16) as well as to the Psalms. The emblematic final verse of the proemial sonnet (“che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno” [“that worldly joy is just a fleeting dream”]) will certainly take on an archetypal importance for the tradition that proceeds it; other notable examples occur in CLVI, 4 (“ché quant’io miro par sogni, ombre et fumi” [“for all I see seems shadow, smoke, and dreams”]), CCXCIV, 12 (“Veramente siam noi polvere et ombra” [“In truth we are nothing but dust and shadow”]), CCCXXI, 22 (“Nebbia o polvere al vento” [“A mist or dust caught in the wind [...]”]), CCCL, 1–2 (“Questo nostro caduco et fragil bene, / ch’è vento et ombra, et à nome beltate” [“This frail and perishable good of ours / which is a wind and shadow known as beauty”])), beyond other similar occurrences in the Latin works and within the *Familiars* itself (in XI, 3, 10 in concurrence with the formidable image of the *fabula inexplata*: “video eam ipsam que vita dicitur, fugacis umbram nebule vel fenum ventis impulsam denique vel confusum somnium esse vel fabulam inexplatam vel siquid inanius dici potest” [“I see that even what is called life is but a shadow of a fleeting cloud, or smoke wafted by the winds, or finally troubled sleep or an unfinished tale or anything else conceivably more empty.”])). A remark on this theme can be attributed to the ample reflection of the epistle to Boccaccio on the prophetic threats of Pietro Petroni, where one finds among others this sequence: “Profecto fumes, umbra, somnium, prestigium, nichil denique nisi luctus et laboris archa vita est que hic agitur; quod unum bonum habet: ad aliam vitam via est” (“Indeed the life we live here is only smoke, a shadow, a dream, an illusion, in short, nothing but a threshing floor for grief and toil. Its one good is that it leads to another life [...],” *Seniles*, I, 5, 16). On the theme of the plague and its many sorrows, one must remember as well the *Epystule metrice*, I, 14 and *Bucolicum carmen*, IX e X.

[See to what a small number we have been reduced from so large a group of comrades: and note that while we are speaking we ourselves are also fleeing and are vanishing in the fashion of shades, and in the moment of time one of us receives the news of the departure of the other and the survivor will in turn be following upon the footsteps of the other.]

At the end of the following letter to the same Socrates (which reports the death of Paganino of Bizzozzero), the author places the well-known image of life as “sonno/sogno,” from which only death arises:

Somnus est vita quam degimus, et quicquid in ea geritur somnio simillimum. Sola mors somnum et somnia discutit. (VIII, 8, 5)⁸

[The life we live is but a sleep, and in whatever occurs in it is very similar to a dream. Death alone breaks up the sleep and disperses the dreams.]

Approaching the completion of his *Familiars* after many long years, Petrarch places, at the opening of the final book almost entirely addressed to the writers of antiquity, a letter to Philippe de Cabasoles, dedicated to the insistent theme of the passage of time (*Ad Philippum Cavallicensem Episcopum, de inestimabili fuga temporis*). The letter begins with a true and proper measure of the time that has passed from the start of the collection, the thirty years during which he arranged his life into this mise-en-scène: it refers back to I, 3, in which the then youthful author addresses the elderly Raimondo Subirani, discussing *de flore etatis instabili*. With the passage of those years, that which was once a simple moral consideration becomes directly verified through experience: the end connects back to the beginning, with the realization, in old age, of a truth already understood in youth:

[...] familiariter ut solebam scribens, in epystola quadam, que pro ratione temporis in prima acie stans procul hanc preit, ingenue professus sum cepisse me iam tunc orientis vite fugam cursumque cognoscere. Nunc autem miror quisem sed, fateor, verum scripsi. Quodsi illa etate verum fuit, quid nunc putas, quando quod presagiebam accidit? (XXIV, 1, 3)

[I wrote a friendly letter, as was my wont, to this elder who had begun to feel such affection for my extreme youth and my budding mind as to cultivate and favor it with example,

8 In the same Book VIII the letter to Luca Cristiani (Olimpio) concerning the author's intention to leave Vaucluse, in addition to indicating the necessity to look toward the end (“Nobis sane, si sapimus, non in longum modo, sed in finem quoque prospiciendum est” [Without doubt we must look ahead not only at the long run but to the very end] (VIII, 3, 8)), records the recent death of Laura: “quodque sine suspirio dici nequit, virentissima olim laurus mea vi repentine tempestatis exaruit, que una michi non Sorgiam modo sed Ruentiam Ticino fecerat cariorem; velumque, quo oculi mei tegebantur, ablatum est [...]” [Furthermore, I can hardly add this without deep sighs, that laurel of mine which was once so green as been withered by the power of an unexpected storm, that laurel which made not only the Sorgue but the Durance dearer than the rushing Ticino. And the veil which covered my eyes has been lifted (...)] (VIII, 3, 16–17).

counsel, and words. In that letter, which stands because of its date at the beginning of this collection quite a distance from this one, I even then confessed to a dawning recognition about the flight and swiftness of my young life. I now find this astonishing, but what I wrote was true. And if my words were true then, how do you think they now apply when what I had foreseen has come to pass?]

Thereafter follows a veritable catalog of Latin quotes on the *topos* of the transience of youth and the passage of time (for instance with the famous Virgilian formula “fugit irreparabile tempus,” *Georgics*, III, 284, which occurs often in the writings of Petrarch), and again an ample series of considerations, in which this *topos* is married with points of particular intensity, with a fervent insistence, with a dogged syntax, producing a result quite different from the most noted and famous developments of the theme in the *Canzoniere*. Thus Petrarch records his notations on a theme that he continually worked into his books, beginning in his youth:

Notabam certa fide non verborum faleras sed res ipsas, misere scilicet vite huius angustias, brevitatem velocitatem festinationem, lapsum cursum volatum occultasque fallacias, tempus irreparabile, caducum et mutabile vite florem, rosei oris fluxum decus, irredutitatis iuventutis effrenem fugam et tacite obrepentis insidias senectutis; ad extremum rugas et morbos et tristitiam et laborem et indomite mortis inclementiam implacabilemque durtiem. (XXIV, 1, 10)

[Diligently I would note not the verbal facility but the substance of the thought – the distresses and brevity of this life, its haste, tumbling course and hidden deceits, time’s irrecoverability, the perishable and changing flower of life, the fugitive beauty of a rosy face, the frantic flight of unreturning youth, the deceits of a silently stealthy old age, and finally, the wrinkles, illnesses, sadness, toils, and implacable cruelty and harshness of indomitable death.]

Now, however, he feels each of the days, hours, moments “ad ultimam urgere” [propels me toward the end]; every day he is dying and is at the point of seeing his entire life as a thing of the past. In and around him everything has changed. This changing and passage of time weighs upon his perception of the present, on the very act of writing and reading:

Nunc eo, et sicut hic calamus movetur sic ego moveor, sed multo velocius; hic enim pigre dictanti animo obsequitur, ego dum nature legem sequor, propero curro rapio ad extrema iamque oculis metam cerno.

[...]

Ecce ad hunc locum epystole perveneram deliberansque quid dicerem amplius seu quid non dicerem, hec inter, ut assolet, papirum vacuum inverso calamo feriebam. Res ipsa materiam obtulit cogitanti inter dimensionis morulas tempus labi, meque interim collabi abire deficere et, ut proprie dicam, mori. Continue morimur; ego dum hec scribo, tu dum leges, alii dum audient dumque non audient; ego quoque dum hec leges moriar, tu moreris

dum hec scribo, ambo morimur, omnes morimur, semper morimur, nunquam vivimus dum hic sumus [...] (XXIV, 1, 24, 26–27)

[Now I proceed, and just as this pen moves, so do I, but much more rapidly, for my pen obeys the mind's sluggish dictation whereas I follow nature's law, and thus hasten, run, gallop to my end, already beholding my goal.

(...)

Having reached this point in the letter, I was wondering what more to say or not to say, and meanwhile, as is my custom, I was tapping the blank paper with my pen. This action provided me with a subject, for I considered how, during the briefest of intervals, time rushes onward, and I along with it, slipping away, failing, and, to speak honestly, dying. We all are constantly dying, I while writing these words, you while reading them, others while hearing or not hearing them; I too shall be dying while you read this, you are dying while I write this, we both are dying, we all are dying, we are always dying; we never live here (...)]

If, in pointing toward the end, this first letter of Book XXIV measures thus the thirty years passed since that third letter of Book I, in which the young Petrarch displayed to an old sage his awareness of the impermanence of his own youth, the last letter of this final book reconnects more directly to the first of the entire collection, closing the circle with the very same addressee, to whom the *Familiars* is dedicated (*Ad Socratem suum, conclusio huius libri*). This direct reference to the collection's first letter reminds us just how much was said there on the continuity of this familial writing, on its direct correspondence with life, in such a way that, even if it is now at a close, in reality it is not concluding, because the conversation with friends may be ended only by death:

Et hoc quidem opus adestens cepi, senex perago; imo vero ceptum prosequor; unum est enim hoc ex omnibus, cui supremam sola mors imponet manum. Quomodo ego alium amici colloqui quam vite funem sperem? aut quenam dies me spirantem inter eos tacitum efficiet, cum quibus ore gelido sepultusque loqui cogito? (XXIV, 13,3)

[I began this work as a young man; I am completing it in my old age, or rather I am continuing it since it is the only one that death alone can end. What other end can I expect for my conversations with friends but the end of life? Or how could I possibly remain silent with them while still alive if I plan to speak to them with my cold lips from the grave?]

If indeed the *Familiars* are at an end, the *Seniles*, in the proem to Francesco Nelli (*Ad Simonidem suum*) spring forth from the memory of that former work's dedication (*Ad Socratem suum*) and of the death of its own Ludwig van Kempen, in an intertwining of dates and tragic events which connects the two collections quite closely. Immediately within the text appears the 1348 from the incipit of the *Familiars*, tying that date to the present year of 1361, a new pestilential year:

Olim, Socrati meo scribens, questus eram quod etatis huius annus ille, post millesimum trecentesium, quadragessimus octavus, omnibus me prope solatiis vite amicorum mortibus

spoliasset; quo dolore, nam memini, questibus et lacrimis cuncta compleveram. Quid nunc primo et sexagesimo faciam anno qui, cum cetera ornamenta ferme omnia, tum id quod carissimum unicumque habui, ipsum michi Socratem eripuit? (*Seniles*, I, 1,1)

[Writing some time ago to my Socrates (Ludwig van Kempen), I had complained that the year 1348 of our era had deprived me of nearly every consolation in life because of my friends' deaths. For I remember with what grief I gave vent to uncontrollable laments and tears. Now what shall I do in the sixty-first year of this century, which has snatched away, together with nearly every other treasure, even my dearest and most precious one, Socrates himself?]⁹

In referring to the *Familiares*, Petrarch reiterates once again the correspondence between the end of life and the end of the composition:

Est ad Socratem Librum Familiarium Rerum noster, corpore quidem ingens et, si sineretur, ingentior futurus. Proinde quod illic presagiebam video: nullus michi alius epystolaris stili quam vite finis ostenditur. (*Seniles*, I, 1, 4).¹⁰

[My book, *Letters on Familiar Matters*, is dedicated to Socrates; vast in its bulk, it would become still more so if I were to allow it. Now I see just what I then guessed: nothing but the end of my life will bring an end to my letter writing.]

Essential, but certainly very different, is the connection between life and writing in the *Canzoniere*: there we find a growing tension concerning the end which finds order in the final redaction of Vaticano latino 3195, but which also animates the better part of the book and demonstrates itself through diverse strategies that influence both the conclusive tension of the individual components and the systemization of the whole during the process of its formation and organization. This arrangement certainly tends toward a 'closure'; nevertheless, it inevitably remains marked by an irreparable conflict, caused by the furtive persistence of that *inexpletum* which inevitably and continually steers the collection of the *sparsa anime fragmenta* toward correction, toward displacement, toward a definitive

⁹ I cite the *Seniles* from the following edition: Francesco Petrarca: *Le senili*. Edited by Ugo Dotti and Felicita Audisio. 3 vols. Torino: Nino Aragno 2004–2010. English translations are drawn from Francesco Petrarca: *Letters of Old Age: Rerum Senilium Libri I–XVIII*. Translated by Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin et al. 2 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1992.

¹⁰ Petrarch returns to this motif again in the *Seniles*, I, 3, 22 and III, 1, 22: in this last letter, to Boccaccio, dated Venice, September 7 (1363), he justifies the fact that the new collection will be dedicated to Nelli, despite the man's death, and once again he makes reference to the terrible dates of 1348 and 1361, together with the misfortunes of the following year. This letter was not immediately sent: he mailed it together with the next much briefer letter, dated September 20, in which Petrarch displays an anguished apprehension concerning the fate of his friend, about whom he has heard no news. Having expressed his fear that Boccaccio is no longer alive, he concludes with this striking salutation: "Vale si vivis; si defunctus, eternum" ("Farewell, if you live, and if you are no more, farewell forever," *Seniles*, III, 2, 4).

impossibility of systemization, on which only the peace of death can place limits. On the other hand, this continual contradictory movement is balanced by an urge to define every single text as absolute: as if each of the fragments (or at least those with the most intense accents) presents itself as definitive, as a sort of 'last word' ("dolenti mie parole extreme"; [these my mournful, my last words] of CXXVI, 13, for example), which arches toward and eventually congeals within its final pen stroke, within the authoritativeness of its own existence, and within the impression of revelation it lends to its own closure (in the *canzoni* this effect often occurs even at the end of single stanzas).

Apart from the critical work of Santagata, the attention given in recent years to the book-like structure of the *Canzoniere* has given rise to a new perception of broader coherence within the work as a whole, as well as of the complexity and aim of its constructive process. It seems to me, however, that equating the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* with a novel – that is, identifying within the work an actual storyline moving toward the penitential resolution already present in the proemial sonnet – can in fact lead us astray. Among other things, this comparison negates the long historical life of this masterpiece, giving the illusion that our modern – or postmodern – interpretation finally liberates us from age-old misunderstandings and incomprehension. Petrarch's poetry continues to assert its grandness and appeal precisely through its contradictory measure, through the jagged movement that led to its final draft, allowing for various perceptions of the end and for diverse outcomes of that anxiety for the dissolution of life and beauty which, as the above-mentioned reference of *Familiare* XXIV, 1 to *Familiare* I, 3 demonstrates, stirred Petrarch from a young age.

It should be quite evident once again that the date of 1348 is crucial to the very organization of the *Canzoniere* as a book, with all misfortunes culminating in the death of the beloved, and with the renewed and more radical sense of the end that this date implies. Following above all the reconstruction of Santagata, it is the so-called Coreggio edition that traces a path toward disillusion and repentance, found in the proemial sonnet (which appears there for the first time). This path, in which one does not distinguish between a first and second part of the collection (despite the presence of the *canzone* CCLXIV, which would eventually come to introduce the second part), culminates in what would become sonnet CCXCII, *Gli occhi di ch'io parlai sì caldamente* (*Those eyes of which I spoke with such emotion*), based on a neat bipartition of the quatrains, which emphasize Laura's death and her beauty turning 'to dust', and the tercets, which treat the condition of the poet who, without Laura's light, falls prey to an incurable sorrow that annuls any possibility of poetic production. The second tercet marks with its own conclusion the end of all love poetry, which would be replaced instead by tears:

Or sia qui fine al mio amoroso canto:
 secca è la vena de l'usato ingegno,
 et la cetera mia rivolta in pianto. (CCXCII, 12–14)

[Let my love song finish right here and now;
 dry is the vein of my habitual art,
 my lyre now has turned to playing tears.]

Already present in this edition is the group of *canzoni* CXXV–CXXIX, in which we can verify, in a different manner, the anxiety to define the text in absolute terms, to bring the language to a sort of closure of experience, imbuing it with a hint of the definitive, as if to redeem the ephemeral substance of life. It seems that the poetic word wants to impose a definitive persistence on the visible, on beauty, on the amorous tension of the self; it justifies and recognizes the loss of the self within the other; to it is entrusted the revelation of a value that loses itself, and through this word it presents itself as definitive, radical and absolute, truly ‘final’! Absolute and final is the revelation of Laura in the landscape of Vaucluse in CXXV and CXXVI; absolute and final is her appearance and constant presence in the unreachable, intrusive distance as described in CXXVII and CXXIX. In the substance and conclusions of the individual stanzas, as in the *congedi*, each of which is addressed to the same *canzone*, one finds various configurations of this absoluteness, the manifestation of an insurmountable anxiety to give a definitive sense to the word and to reality as it is experienced and remembered, in which one exhausts and exalts the entire space of the experience. Without being able to conduct here an expansive reading of these *canzoni*, I will limit myself to noting how in the first *canzone*, *Se 'l pensier che mi strugge* (*If this thought painning me*), the very terrain of the Vaucluse (even the vegetation that sprouts from it) produces the effect of being watched and lightly touched by Laura, so that the last trace of her is not completely lost:

Ovunque gli occhi volgo
 trovo un dolce sereno
 pensando: Qui percosse il vago lume.
 Qualunque herba o fior colgo
 credo che nel terreno
 aggia radice, ov'ella ebbe in costume
 gir fra le piagge e'l fiume,
 et talor farsi un seggio
 fresco, fiorito et verde.
 Così nulla se'n perde,
 et più certezza averne fôra il peggio. (CXXV, 66–76)

[Wherever my eyes turn
 I find sweet brightness there
 and think: “That lovely light once struck right here.”]

All grass or blooms I pick
 I think have had their roots
 in that same ground where she was wont to walk
 between the banks and river
 and sometimes made a seat,
 fresh, flowering, and green.
 This way no part is lost,
 and knowing more exactly would be worse.]

In *Chiare, fresche e dolci acque* (*Clear, cool, sweet, running waters*), this definitive horizon establishes itself beyond the death of the subject, in the posthumous fantasy of a woman weeping over his bodily remains, interred in that same place and now identified with the earth and rocks, with the specific geological makeup of the Vaucluse:

Tempo verrà anchor forse
 ch'a l'usato soggiorno
 torni la fera bella et mansiüeta,
 et là 'v'ella mi scorse
 nel benedetto giorno,
 volga la vista disiosa et lieta,
 cercandomi; et, o pïeta!,
 già terra in fra le pietre
 vedendo, Amor l'inspiri
 in guisa che sospiri
 sí dolcemente che mercé m'impetre,
 et faccia forza al cielo,
 asciugandosi gli occhi col bel velo. (CXXVI, 27–39)

[And there will come a time, perhaps,
 that to the well-known place
 the lovely animal returns, and tamed,
 and there where she first saw me
 that day which now is blessed,
 she turns her eyes with hope and happiness
 in search of me, and – ah, the pity –
 to see me there as dust
 among the stones, Love will
 inspire her and she will sigh
 so sweetly she will win for me some mercy
 and force open the heavens
 drying her eyes there with her lovely veil.]

While *In quella parte dove Amor mi sprona* ends with a symbolic postponement of death, separated from the persistence – even in its absence – of the thought of love, *Di pensiero in pensier, di monte in monte* (*From thought to thought, mountain to mountain top*) epitomizes within the mountainous landscape the images

of absent Laura and of the poet himself (“me freddo, pietra morta in pietra viva” [down cold as dead stone set on living rock], CXXIX, 51), who in the *congedo* splits his actual bodily substance between Vaucluse and the present location (below is his *cor*, here is merely his *image*):

Canzone, oltra quell'alpe
là dove il ciel è piú sereno et lieto
mi rivedrai sovr'un ruscel corrente,
ove l'aura si sente
d'un fresco et odorifero laureto.
Ivi è'l mio cor, et quella che'l m'invola;
qui veder pòi l'immagine mia sola. (CXXIX, 66 I–72)

[My song, beyond those Alps
where skies are more serene and happier,
you'll see me by a running brook once more
where you can sense the aura
distilling from the fresh and fragrant laurel:
there is my heart and there is one who steals it;
what you see here is but the ghost of me.]

Perhaps the most extreme symbol – one that shapes the very grass on which Laura appears into an ultimate locus of peace, one that excludes from itself every other experience, every other vital element, one that establishes within itself the entire significance of language and of life – occurs at the end of the last stanza of *Chiare, fresche e dolci acque*, just before the very brief *congedo*:

Quante volte diss'io
allor pien di spavento:
Costei per fermo nacque in paradiso.
Cosí carco d'oblio
il divin portamento
e'l volto e le parole e'l dolce riso
m'aveano, et sí diviso
da l'immagine vera,
ch'i' dicea sospirando:
Qui come venn'io, o quando?;
credendo d'esser in ciel, non là dov'era.
Da indi in qua mi piace
questa herba sí, ch'altrove non ò pace. (CXXVI, 53–65)

[How often I would say
at that time, full of awe:
“For certain she was born up there in Heaven!”
And her divine behavior,
her face and words and her sweet smile
so filled me with forgetfulness

and so divided me
 from the true image
 that I would sigh and say:
 “Just how and when did I come here?”
 thinking I was in Heaven, not where I was;
 and since then I have loved
 this bank of grass and find peace nowhere else.]

Within this theme of peace one might also consider the cycle that includes the *canzone* dedicated to Italy: quite different from that ultimate peace of *eros* and its paradisiacal setting, but nevertheless longed for within the concrete political and civil arena, as it is invoked in the heartfelt final clause of the *canzone* (an authoritative ending, much like that of the very famous penultimate stanza, which Machiavelli would employ as the closing words of his *Principe*):

Canzone, io t'ammonisco
 che tua ragion cortesemente dica,
 perché tra gente altera ir ti convene,
 et le voglie son piene
 già de l'usanza pessima et antica,
 del ver sempre nemica.
 Proverai tua ventura
 fra' magnanimi pochi a chi'l ben piace.
 Di' lor: – Chi m'assicura?
 I' vo gridando: Pace, pace, pace. (CXXVIII, 112–122)

[My song, I bid that you
 express your sentiments with courtesy,
 for you must go among a haughty people
 whose wills are still so full
 of that ancient, most vicious of all habits,
 always truth's enemy.
 But you must try your fortune
 among the valiant few who love the good;
 tell them: “Who will protect me?
 I go my way beseeching: Peace, peace, peace.”]

It is evident that ‘peace’ is a word of essential importance in the *Canzoniere*, with thirty-seven occurrences, in which it functions both implicitly and explicitly in an oxymoronic relationship with ‘war,’ as demonstrated symbolically in the famous incipit of CXXXIV, *Pace non trovo, et non ò da far Guerra* (*I find no peace, and I am not at war*).¹¹

¹¹ Similar to the term ‘peace,’ but with less intensity, Petrarch utilizes the adjectives *queto/queta* and the verb *acquetare*, in its various forms.

The thought of Laura functions as a continual disturbance, while simultaneously seeming to offer the only possible peace for the subject's incurable angst. In the second part, and particularly in the final portion of the *Canzoniere*, 'peace' acquires a religious significance; however, the work never resolves itself in the affirmation of a peace definitively attained; rather, 'peace' will be identified above all with a final homecoming, with the tranquility of a death under the aegis of God's grace, in the assured realization of that hope for the afterlife. The word 'peace' returns thus in the last two 'penitential' sonnets, CCLXIV, 11, and CCCLXV, 10, and closes the *canzone* to the Virgin, the last of the entire *Canzoniere*:

Il dí s'appressa, et non pòte esser lunge,
 sí corre il tempo et vola,
 Vergine unica et sola,
 e'l cor or coscìentia or morte punge.
 Raccomandami al tuo figliuol, verace
 homo et verace Dio,
 ch'accolga'l mïo spirto ultimo in pace. (CCCLXVI, 131–137)

[The day draws near, it cannot be far off;
 time runs and flies so fast,
 Virgin, the one and only one,
 and death and conscience now stab at my heart;
 commend me to your Son who is the true
 man and the truth of God,
 that He accept my final breath in peace.]

This final 'peace,' disturbed as it is by the eternal return of the theme of time's passage, certainly cannot hope to resolve within itself the entire significance of the *Canzoniere*, in which the term has assumed diverse meanings, often aiming at an absolute identification of the self and of the revelation of beauty, in a contradictory arrangement of experience, in a lacerating perception of fragility and of the elusiveness of life. This laceration, this contradictory tension, remains at play right up to the conclusion of the *Canzoniere*: it informs the choice of the last texts of the first part, from the Chigi form through to the final version, as well as the arrangement of the key texts of the second part, such as the inaugural CCLXIV, *I' vo pensando, et nel penser m'assale* (*I go on thinking, and I'm seized in thought*), and the two *canzoni* CCCLIX, *Quando il soave mio fido conforto* (*When that kind, faithful comforter of mine*) and CCCLX, *Quel'antiquo mio dolce empio signore* (*That old and sweet yet cruel master of mine*), which simultaneously seem to recapitulate and to project into the otherworldly future – all while continuing to justify – the event of Petrarch's love for Laura.

Onto this ending, with all the additions and rearrangements enacted by the poet in his last days, is imposed the significance of that date of 1348, inserted, as

we have seen, into sonnet CCCXXXVI, that which is likely the first sonnet of the series which Petrarch indicates as final (number one of the new Arabic numeration that gives rise to a reorganization of the book's end). In the very last section, however, the above-mentioned sonnet CCCLXV, *Tennemi Amor anni ventuno ardendo* (*Twenty-one years Love kept me burning gladly*), defines within its first verse the number of years of his love, those twenty-one years that span from 1327 to 1348, to which the fourth verse adds ten years spent successively in sorrow – years and events which the poet now views through the lens of repentance, of a confident trust in God concerning the impending liberation from the prison of life. These symbolic numbers extend likewise into the *canzone* to the Virgin where, within the poet's repentance and anticipation of peace – almost within the name of Mary herself – Laura still remains inscribed (for what other meaning could we ascribe to the fact that 'Virgin' is repeated twenty-one times, just like those burning years recorded by the preceding sonnet? Or to the fact that the stanzas of the *canzone* number ten, the same as those years spent weeping?).¹²

Through a less problematic process occurs a pacifying perception of the death of Laura in the *Triumphus Mortis*, in the famous clause of canto I ("Morte bella pareo nel suo bel viso" [And even death seemed fair in her fair face.]); however, canto II instead concludes with the indication, through Laura's own voice, of a "gran tempo" in which the poet would remain "in terra" without her:

Però saper vorrei, madonna, s'io
 Son per tardi seguirvi, o se per tempo. –
 Ella, già mossa, disse: – al creder mio,

tu starai in terra senza me gran tempo. (*Triumphus Mortis*, II, 188–191)

[Therefore, Madonna, this I fain would know:
 Shall it be soon or late that I follow you?
 And she, departing, said: "'Tis my belief
 Thou wilt be long without me on the earth."]

Direct projection toward an 'after' that does not negate, but rather renews the 'before', determined by a view toward the 'present' (from the "felice sasso" of

¹² It may be significant that the sonnet CCLXV was previously inserted a bit further from the final *canzone*, in position 360, then relocated in that definitive version by the abovementioned Arabic numeration. On the movement that leads the *Canzoniere* toward its final systemization, see Paolo Cherchi: *Verso la chiusura: Saggio sul 'Canzoniere' di Petrarca*. Bologna: Il Mulino 2008 (Saggi, 686). A separate study would lead to the conclusion that Petrarch was preparing for the unfinished *Africa*, a conclusion in which was inscribed the death of Robert of Anjou, to whom the work was dedicated, and which addressed the work, entrusting its own fame to it, bidding it a long life in better times than the present and a new birth in an age more favorable to poets.

Laura's tomb emerges the image of the future "rivederla in cielo" clothed in the "bel velo," the source of an eternal beatitude that will renew and perfect her former appearance "in terra") is the idea that seals the *Triumphus Eternitatis*, 142–145:

felice sasso che'l bel viso serra!
ché, poi ch'avrà ripreso il suo bel velo,
se fu beato chi la vide in terra

or che fia dunque rivederla in cielo?

[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!]

The fact that the *Decameron* carries "nella sua fronte" [upon its very front] the date 1348, with "la dolorosa ricordanza della pestifera mortalità trapassata" [the sorrowful memory of the late mortal pestilence], assumes a significance paradoxically opposed to the ways in which Petrarch evokes that same year. It deals instead with an "orrido cominciamento" [horrid beginning], with a tragic – albeit already overcome – suspension of every civil bond, with an invasion of death which lay the threat of the end over the horizon of society as a whole. Boccaccio's intention provokes a polemical rebirth, the construction of an ideal and entirely literary society, capable of achieving "quella festa, quella allegrezza, quello piacere [...] senza trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione" [(...) all cheer of festal gathering and other delights, so long as in no particular we overstep the bounds of reason, I, *Introduzione*, 65], in a more open and 'honest' practice of existence. At play is the relationship between death and narration, the idea of narration as a banishment of death, as critics and readers have insistently observed, referring repeatedly to the example of Shahrazād, whose own storytelling suspends death. Boccaccio's narrative, however, is not an attempt to impede the homicidal intentions of a king or human authority; it functions instead as a response to the ruinous, destructive force of nature, incomprehensible within human parameters (as Petrarch also noted in his abovementioned letter on the plague, *Familiare*, VIII, 7).

From death and destruction arises a surge of vitality, not casual and disordered, but elegantly constructed and organized, well defined in its order and in the accurate rules governing life in the country villas as well as the narration of the *novelle*. All of this storytelling – the pleasure it elicits – is marked by the close presence of destruction; and after all, these festive settings – this Eden on which the critics insist – are very near to Florence. There is no lack of examples in

which the narrators refer to the “presenti avversità” [time of adversity, I, I, 91], the “pistolenza presente” [present pestilence, VI, 3, 8], the “soprastante pistolenza” [time of pestilence, IX, *Introduzione*, 2]. Asking his readers’ pardon before undertaking the narration of the events of the plague, for the *noia* that they will suffer from this sort of beginning, the author underscores that, without these events, the narration never would have come about:

A questa brieve noia (dico brieve in quanto in poche lettere si contiene) seguita prestamente la dolcezza e il piacere il quale io v’ho davanti promesso e che forse non sarebbe da così fatto inizio, se non si dicesse, aspettato. E nel vero, se io potuto avessi onestamente per altra parte menarvi a quello che io desidero che per così aspro sentiero come fia questo, io l’avrei volentier fatto: ma per ciò che, qual fosse la cagione per che le cose che appresso si leggeranno avvenissero, non si poteva senza questa ramemorazion dimostrare, quasi da necessità costretto a scriverle mi conduco. (I, *Introduzione*, 6–7)

[To this brief exordium of woe – brief, I say, inasmuch as it can be put within the compass of a few letters – succeed forthwith the sweets and delights which I have promised you, and which, perhaps, had I not done so, were not to have been expected from it. In truth, had it been honestly possible to guide you whither I would bring you by a road less rough than this will be, I would gladly have so done. But, because without this review of the past, it would not be in my power to shew how the matters, of which you will hereafter read, came to pass, I am almost bound of necessity to enter upon it, if I would write of them at all.]

Another sign of the end – though certainly less radical and disastrous – was already present before the narrative’s beginning in the *Proemio* to women, where Boccaccio, in accounting for his disposition to console the afflicted, attributes it to his own gratitude toward those from whom he in his own turn received consolation during a period of painful love now ended. Right from its very beginning the book sets forth in the name of an autobiographical experience of the end of love; this emotion’s progressive diminution, to the point of reducing itself to a pleasing echo of memory, is attributed to the divine law that brings all things to an end:

Ma sì come a Colui piacque il quale, essendo Egli infinito, diede per legge incommutabile a tutte le cose mondane aver fine, il mio amore, oltre a ogn’altro fervente e il quale niuna forza di proponimento o di consiglio o di vergogna evidente, o pericolo che seguir ne potesse, aveva potuto né rompere né piegare, per se medesimo in processo di tempo si diminuì in guisa, che sol di sé nella mente m’ha al presente lasciato quel piacere che egli è usato di porgere a chi troppo non si mette ne’ suoi più cupi pelaghi navigando; per che, dove faticoso esser solea, ogni affanno togliendo via, dilettevole il sento esser rimaso. (*Proemio*, 5)

[But, as it pleased Him, who, being infinite, has assigned by immutable law an end to all things mundane, my love, beyond all other fervent, and neither to be broken nor bent by any force of determination, or counsel of prudence, or fear of manifest shame or ensuing danger, did nevertheless in course of time abate of its own accord, in such wise that it has

now left nought of itself in my mind but that pleasure which it is wont to afford to him who does not adventure too far out in navigating its deep seas; so that, whereas it was used to be grievous, now, all discomfort being done away, I find that which remains to be delightful.]

At any rate the narration of the *Decameron* rests upon a suspension and distortion of the view of experience; and one can indeed imagine that the actual experience of 1348, the fact of having survived that terrible year, has produced a sort of knee-jerk reaction in the author, causing him to introduce into the new and unimagined horizon of this book his own passion for 'pleasurable' literature, for the romance tradition, for those same outcomes for Florentine culture and civilization. Apart from the plague functioning to give rise to the fiction of the *brigata* of storytellers, one can assert that, had Boccaccio not suffered through that anguished experience of death and chaos, the *Decameron* would not have come into being; it would not have come to be his life's most formidable creation, his perspective on threatened Florentine civilization as depicted through the model of contemporary European narration. Within this frame he imposes, with even more decisive significance, a critical detachment from the penitential consequences with which the *Decameron* covertly vies;¹³ and the titling of the book as the *cognominato prencipe Galeotto* creates an even more ambiguous and complex density.

Thus in the development of the frame, if the central roles are played on the one hand by Pampinea, creator of the 'buen retiro' and first queen of the *brigata*, and on the other hand by Panfilò, victorious alter ego of the author and inaugural narrator (with the *novella* of ser Ciappelletto), another crucial role is that of Dioneo, whom Giancarlo Mazzacurati accurately defines as "spirito dell'ebbrezza, dell'ilarità terrestre, degli umori improvvisi, [...] lo scarto e l'antidoto che impedisce la morte del testo, il passaggio dalla festa alla noia" [the spirit of euphoria, of earthly mirth, of sudden mood swings, (...) the deviation and the antidote that impedes the death of the text, the passage from celebration to boredom], inviting his reimagining as "archetipo della moderna soggettività romanzesca" [the archetype of modern romance subjectivity], comparing him "ad altri eroi della scrittura fuorilegge, ai *fools*, ai portatori di *tics*, agli sghembi, ai maniacali" [to other heroes of renegade writing, to fools, to persons with a tic, to the physically deformed, to the mentally insane].¹⁴ In his crooked position, Dioneo is the antidote to death, and not only to that of the text, but to the outside threat of death which that

¹³ Essential to this argument, obviously, is the monograph of Lucia Battaglia Ricci: *Ragionare nel giardino: Boccaccio e i cicli pittorici del "Trionfo della morte."* Roma: Salerno editrice 1987 (particularly chapter 2, *La peste e la "cultura della penitenza,"* p. 45–96).

¹⁴ Giancarlo Mazzacurati: *La regina e il buffone: ordo e varietas nella costruzione del Decameron.* In: Matteo Palumbo (ed.): *All'ombra di Dioneo: Tipologie e percorsi della novella da Boccaccio a Bandello.* Scandicci: La Nuova Italia 1996, p. 37–43; p. 42.

‘horrid beginning’ reveals most fully. His role is a necessary one, because from it emerges that surge of life, that dream of a happy society devoted to honest pleasure; it enables the author to express at the highest level the characters of Florentine society and to explore the contradictory plurality of the world, the diverse forms and occurrences of human life in the present and in the past. Panfilo, the first narrator, is charged with ruling the last day, the *novelle* of which express the highest courtly values of liberality and magnificence, and the passage with which he inaugurates that last morning immediately professes a concern for the future:

[...] Panfilo, levatosi, le donne e' suoi compagni fece chiamare. E venuti tutti, con loro insieme diliberato del dove andar potessero al lor diletto, con lento passo si mise innanzi accompagnato da Filomena e da Fiammetta, tutti gli altri appresso seguendogli; e molte cose della loro futura vita insieme parlando e dicendo e rispondendo, per lungo spazio s'andarono diportando [...] (X, *Introduzione*, 2–3)

[...] when uprose Pamfilo, and roused the ladies and his comrades. And all the company being assembled, and choice made of the place whither they should betake them for their diversion, he, accompanied by Filomena and Fiammetta, led the way at a slow pace, followed by all the rest. So fared they no little space, beguiling the time with talk of their future way of life, whereof there was much to tell and much to answer [...]

This concern for the future, appearing just before the work's end, connects back to quips Pampinea made in her first speech:

[...] e tanto dimorare in tal guisa, che noi veggiamo, se prima da morte non siam sopraggiunte, che fine il cielo riserbi a queste cose. (I, *Introduzione*, 71)

[...] and in such way of life continue, until we see – if death should not first overtake us – the end which Heaven reserves for these events.]

The last *novella*, that of Griselda and the marquis of Saluzzo, variously “Petrarchized” and moralized, allows for the famous resolution of the *Decameron* in an upward-moving rhythm, a trajectory that leads from the depraved Ciappelletto to the virtuous Griselda (perhaps seen directly as *figura Mariae*, with an implicit convergence of the finale of the *Decameron* and that of the *Canzoniere*, as well as the Dantean *Commedia*).¹⁵ However, aside from the fact that this *novella* comes from the mouth of the ‘crooked’ Dioneo, one should give more attention to its paradoxical opening: the narrator begins “laughing,” directly evoking the first

¹⁵ Among the well-justified denials of Griselda's final exemplarity, see Francesco Bruni: *Boccaccio: L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana*. Bologna: Il Mulino 1990, p. 271–273, where he rightly insists on the fact that “l'opera rimane esposta alla controversia, alla discussione” (“the work continues to arouse controversy and discussion”) (p. 273).

novella of the seventh day, with the ambiguous metaphor of the “coda ritta della fantasima” [erect tail of the phantasm] (nor should it be overlooked that the *novella* in question ends with the proposal of diverse hypotheses on what actually occurred and on the true name of the protagonist, Gianni Lotteringhi or Gianni di Nello). Dioneo now addresses the female portion of his audience, ironically calling them ‘gentle’ and declaring that he wishes his storytelling to bring him nearer to the world of women, yet presenting a protagonist characterized by a “mad folly”:

[...] e per ciò, acciò che io troppo da voi non mi scosti, vo’ ragionar d’un marchese, non cosa magnifica ma una matta bestialità, come che ben ne gli seguisse alla fine; la quale io non consiglio alcun che segua, per ciò che gran peccato fu che a costui ben n’avenisse. (X, 10, 3)

[...] wherefore, that I stray not too far from you, I am minded to tell you somewhat of a Marquis; certes, nought magnificent, but a piece of mad folly, albeit there came good thereof to him in the end. The which I counsel none to copy, for that great pity’twas that it turned out well with him.]

Before the actual story begins, the happy ending is introduced as an incongruous outcome, a sort of perversion, a true shame. Dioneo affirms and reinforces this idea of reversal within the long *novella* through words with which he concludes it, with the erotic metaphor of ‘dusting the pelisse,’ which mirrors perfectly that initial metaphor of the ‘tail of the phantasm’:

Chi avrebbe, altri che Griselda, potuto col viso non solamente asciutto ma lieto sofferir le rigide e mai più non udite prove da Gualtier fatte? Al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d’essersi abbattuto a una che quando, fuori di casa, l’avesse fuori in camiscia cacciata, s’avesse sì a un altro fatto scuotere il pillicione che riuscito ne fosse una bella roba. (X, 10, 68–69)

[Who but Griselda had been able, with a countenance not only tearless, but cheerful, to endure the hard and unheard-of trials to which Gualtieri subjected her? Who perhaps might have deemed himself to have made no bad investment, had he chanced upon one, who, having been turned out of his house in her shift, had found means so to dust the pelisse of another as to get herself thereby a fine robe.]

Panfilo, however, gives the concluding speech, which, after having vindicated the “continua onestà, continua concordia, continua fraternal dimestichezza” [seemliness and the sweet intimacy of brothers and sisters] of this time spent together, affirms the necessity of departure, to avoid any fastidious or malevolent criticisms against them as well as the risk of being joined by importunate folk. Having given instructions for departure the next morning, they pass their final evening in dining, dance and song: jealous Fiammetta sings the appropriately themed ballad *S’amor venisse senza gelosia* (*So came but Love, and brought no*

jealousy), ending with a warning to every possible rival. Then, after implying that the final celebration lasted nearly to midnight, the text hastily records the morning's departure and return to Florence, with an arrival back at the starting point of Santa Maria Novella, and notes the farewells between the young men who "a' lor altri piaceri attesero" [departed to find other diversions elsewhere], and the young ladies who "quando tempo lor parve, se ne tornarono alle lor case" [in due time repaired to their homes, X, *Conclusione*, 16]. A most rapid closure, if compared with the long course of the *Introduzione* to the first day, and of the plague that is so precisely described there, of which we find no more mention, nor of the situation in which Florence must still find itself, considering only two weeks have since passed. In this very rapid disappearance of the *brigata* we might perhaps catch a trace of that final melancholy that often accompanies great narrations, the events of worlds teeming with life, the characters and the situations lovingly followed by the author who seems able to disconnect himself from them only in this brusque manner, almost with a jerk.

At any rate, Boccaccio, to avoid misunderstandings with the 'most gracious ladies' to whom the work is addressed, seals the work with the *Author's Conclusion*, where he affirms above all his satisfaction with having reached the goal that he had indicated at the beginning:

Nobilissime giovani, a consolazion delle quali io a così lunga fatica messo mi sono, io mi credo, aiutantemi la divina grazia, sì come io avviso, per li vostri pietosi prieghi non già per li miei meriti, quello compiutamente aver fornito che io nel principio della presente opera promisi di dover fare [...] (*Conclusione dell'autore*, 1)

[Most noble damsels, for whose solace I addressed me to this long and toilsome task, meseems that, aided by the Divine grace, the bestowal whereof I impute to the efficacy of your pious prayers, and in no wise to merits of mine, I have now brought this work to the full and perfect consummation which in the outset thereof I promised you.]

In putting forth here the various justifications for the defense of his book with regard to the 'trifling objections' that some female reader "o altri potrebbe dire" [or other might advance], the author continually inserts internal folds, ironic and self-parodic outbursts, which highlight internal contradictions, like digressive reservations toward the persuasive gravity of the assertions on the honesty of the substance and style. Here we move from the list of erotic metaphors (after all, it is not unbecoming for men and women "di dir tutto di 'foro' e 'caviglia' e 'mortaiò' e 'pestello' e 'salsiccia' e 'mortadelle,' e tutto pieni di simiglianti cose," [to make use of such terms as hole, and pin, and mortar, and pestle, and sausage, and polony, and plenty more besides of a like sort, 5] to the characterization of the time of the plague as that in which "andar con le brache in capo per iscampo di sé era alli più onesti non disdicevole" [the most sedate might without disgrace walk abroad

with his breeches for headgear, 7], to the nicknames of Cinciglione and Scolaio (9), to the allusive quips concerning the sanctimonious and the fanatical who, among other things, “dicono e anche fanno delle cosette otta per vicenda,” [there are little matters that even the beguines tell, ay, and do, now and again, 15], to the self-parodying hint at his own ‘weight’ and his own levity (“parlando a quelle che pesato non m’hanno, affermo che io non son grave, anzi son io sì lieve, che io sto a galla nell’acqua” [in answer to the fair that have not weighed me, I affirm that I am not of gravity; on the contrary I am so light that I float on the surface of the water, 23],¹⁶ to an apparent denial of any satire against the friars, which in reality turns out to be an augmented version (“per ciò che i frati son buone persone e fuggono il disagio per l’amor di Dio e macinano a raccolta e nol ridicono; e se non che di tutti un poco vien del caprino, troppo sarebbe più piacevole il piatto loro” [seeing that the friars are good folk, and eschew hardship for the love of God, and grind intermittently, and never blab; and, were they not all a trifle malodorous, intercourse with them would be much more agreeable, 26].

Through this ironic filigree he insists once again on the legitimacy of an unbiased view of reality and of the uncontrollable multiplicity of the world, beyond all false modesty. In the foreground is the responsibility of the reading, the disposition of the book to follow different paths and to allow for a free selection among the *novelle*: the author, wishing to encourage this type of reading, claims to have prepared the rubrics with summaries of the *novelle* in order to support their individual selection (the *novelle* “nella fronte portan segnato quello che esse dentro dal loro seno nascoso tengono,” [each bears on its brow the epitome of that which it hides within its bosom, § 19].

The compactness of the book can be counteracted through the ever-changing variety of the world and of language itself. Into the tableau of this changeability the author inscribes his opinions on his own language, responding to the accusations of those who say he has an “evil tongue and venomous”; to this purpose he adds the statements of a female neighbor of his who, when he had but a few *novelle* left to write in order to complete the book, had noted the sweetness of his language:

Confesso nondimeno le cose di questo mondo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento, e così potrebbe della mia lingua essere intervenuto; la quale, non credendo io al mio giudizio, il quale a mio potere io fuggo nelle mie cose, non ha guari mi disse una mia vicina che io l’aveva la migliore e la più dolce del mondo: e in verità, quando questo fu, egli erano poche a scrivere delle soprascritte novelle. (§ 27)

¹⁶ Following this statement are other ironic outbursts, referring to the banter that friars insert into their sermons and the pious lamentations appropriate to those who fear laughing too much (among these, with comic misrepresentation, “the Complaint of the Magdalen”).

[Nevertheless, I acknowledge that the things of this world have no stability, but are ever undergoing change; and this may have befallen my tongue, albeit, no great while ago, one of my fair neighbours – for in what pertains to myself I trust not my own judgment, but forgo it to the best of my power – told me'twas the goodliest and sweetest tongue in the world; and in sooth, when this occurred, few of the said stories were yet to write (...)]

Beneath this reference to the neighbor's testimony one can perhaps glimpse a veiled erotic allusion (a turn of phrase such as "’twas the goodliest and sweetest tongue in the world" in this context does not seem to limit itself to a literal interpretation; it seems, rather, to convey a possible double meaning). The book closes under the influence of these ironic diversions: it centers the defense of 'honesty' within this game of lighthearted deviations which, just before the conventional thanks to God (who conducted the 'so long travail' to its 'desired goal') and salute to the benevolent memory of its female readers, leaves open – with apparent indifference – the path to an uncontrollable multiplicity of opinions and points of view:

E lasciando omai a ciascheduna e dire e credere come le pare, tempo è da por fine alle parole, Colui umilmente ringraziando che dopo sì lunga fatica col suo aiuto n'ha al disiderato fine condotto. E voi, piacevoli donne, con la sua grazia in pace vi rimanete, di me ricordandovi, se a alcuna forse alcuna cosa giova l'averle lette. (§ 29)

[So, then, be every lady at liberty to say and believe whatever she may think fit: but'tis now time for me to bring these remarks to a close, with humble thanks to Him, by whose help and guidance I, after so long travail, have been brought to the desired goal. And may you, sweet my ladies, rest ever in His grace and peace; and be not unmindful of me, if, peradventure, any of you may, in any measure, have been profited by reading these stories.]

The text seals this notion of the freedom and responsibility of its readership (primarily female) within the rubric that marks its end, with the title of the work and with the return of the 'surname' of 'prince Galeotto,' already displayed in the initial title. This mild evaporation of the work's end seems to wipe away every trace of its 'horrid beginning.'

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