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Poetry Without End: Reiterating Desire in Petrarch's *Rvf* 70 and 23

Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden

Our article focuses on two canzoni from Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* or *Canzoniere*, *Rvf* 23, "Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade," and *Rvf* 70, "Lasso me, ch'io non so in qual parte pieghi."¹ By reading them comparatively, we aim to set up a dialogue between the concepts of return and conversion and to explore the relationship between the form of the texts and the subjectivity it shapes. In particular, we are interested in investigating how Petrarch blurs the distinction between beginnings and ends and how, defying conclusion, his lyric poetry gives form to a sort of masochistic pleasure.

Rvf 70 is an intertextual canzone (and part-cento) that culminates in an explicit textual return of the poet's own poem 23, the so-called *canzone delle metamorfosi*, in which the poetic subject undergoes a series of transformations explicitly modelled on Ovid. The incipit of canzone 23, "Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade," forms the final line of canzone 70 and is the last in a series of quotations of the incipits of earlier poems, each of which closes one of the stanzas of Petrarch's poem and reconstructs what Franco Suitner has termed "il retroterra della lirica romanza" ["the hinterland of romance lyric"].²

All the incipits closing the five stanzas relate to a concept of love as essentially tyrannical, obsessive, and compulsive. The first stanza ends with the incipit of the Occitan poem now thought to be by Guillem de Saint Gregori, "Drez et rayson es qu'ieu ciant e· m demori," which Petrarch attributed to Arnaut Daniel and which embodies a paradoxical form of desire that involves subjecting oneself to love even to the point of death, and finding pleasure in it.³ The other incipits belong to the Italian lyric tradition. The second stanza ends with Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna me prega," the doctrinal canzone that explains the nature and effects of love as a sensual passion that infects the body and annihilates reason and the faculty of judgment.⁴ The third stanza incorporates the incipit of Dante's "Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro," one of four *rime petrose*, or "stony rhymes," which also express the lethal and paralyzing effects of sensual love and in which the harshness of the content is matched by the harshness of the style. The fourth stanza ends by citing the incipit of Cino da Pistoia's canzone "La dolce vista e 'l bel guardo soave," an exile poem that laments the anguish and torment of being separated from the lady but in a sweeter style, one of *dolcezza*.⁵ Finally, the last stanza ends by quoting

¹ All quotations from Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* are taken from Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Marco Santagata, rev. ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 2010). English translations come from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). All emphases are ours.

² Franco Suitner, *Petrarca e la tradizione stilnovistica* (Florence: Olschki, 1977), 12.

³ On this misattribution see Sarah Kay, *Parrots and Nightingales: Troubadour Quotations and the Development of European Poetry* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 189–95 (especially 189–92); and Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata, 352, which both provide a survey of literature on the subject.

⁴ On Cavalcanti's concept of love as lethal, in a moral and physical sense, respectively, see Giorgio Inglese, *L'intelletto e l'amore: Studi sulla letteratura italiana del Due e Trecento* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2000), 3–55, and Natascia Tonelli, *Fisiologia della passione: Poesia d'amore e medicina da Cavalcanti a Boccaccio* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2015), 3–70.

⁵ Cf. Teodolinda Barolini, "The Making of a Lyric Sequence: Time and Narrative in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*," in "Italian Issue," special issue, *MLN* 104/1 (Jan. 1989): 23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2904989>, in

Petrarch's own canzone 23, as mentioned above. Thus, the return that we wish to explore pivots on Petrarch's decision to include at the end of the poem the incipit of his own canzone.

The trend has been to read *Rvf* 70 teleologically and as a narrative of conversion,⁶ where conversion is not about turning to another faith but rather about moving towards a better moral position and a greater coherence of the self, to which would also correspond a better poetics.⁷ In this way the poet is said to renounce the errant desire of his youth represented by all these incipits, achieving a new mode of loving and speaking. As each voice of the earlier romance tradition is reiterated and surpassed, so the "I" apparently learns how to control his desire and sets out to relinquish the sensually-directed eros that is the hallmark of the courtly lyric, including his own poetry up to this point in the collection, thereby transforming the kind of poet he is—or can be.

Petrarch's decision to end *Rvf* 70 by referring to the beginning of his earlier poem, 23, thus inserts his poetry within a specific lyric and romance genealogy which culminates with him. That point of culmination is read, by Marco Santagata and others, as conveying a linear and vertical temporality that leads to conversion.⁸ The poem is thereby interpreted as a palinodic gesture through which the poet is at once evoking and recanting his poetic past, specifically its bonds with purely sensual desire, which *Rvf* 23 is taken to represent. Sarah Kay, too, argues that in *Rvf* 70, through the technique of quotation, Petrarch creates a genealogy of texts that are surpassed one by the other and—in their new context of 70—permit the Petrarchan "I" to "disengage" from the earlier subject position implied in the romance lyrics he quotes to occupy a different place and thereby "desire differently."⁹ Kay also supports her forward reading through her analysis of another rhetorical feature of the canzone, namely the *coblas capfinidas* structure, which consists of connecting the end of one stanza to the beginning of the next through the repetition of the same word. She argues that "the resulting interplay of quotation and reaction impels the song forward via a process of self-reappraisal, in which the impulse to break with past guilt and progress toward a new future has to contend with wistfulness, reluctance and inertia" (193), but ultimately prevails over them.

Kay sees canzone 70 as a new beginning and her reading is thereby in line with those critics who consider the canzone as a prelude to the following three poems, the so-called *canzoni degli occhi*, which would express a new lyric mode and, in the vein of the most positive poems of the *dolce stil novo*, celebrate the spiritual improvement brought about by the encounter with the beloved, as though Laura had morphed into Beatrice.¹⁰ The fact that canzone 70 lacks a *congedo*,

which she notes that "Cino's verse [...] is tonally similar to the Petrarchan verse with which the poem ends [...]—the main difference, in fact, is the temporal anxiety that Petrarch fuses into Cino's unalloyed sweetness." On Cino's prolific use of the adjective "dolce," see Maria Corti, "Il linguaggio poetico di Cino da Pistoia," *Cultura mediolatina* 12/3 (1952): 193.

⁶ See in particular Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata, 349; Kay, *Parrots and Nightingales*, 194–95; and Martin Eisner, *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature: Dante, Petrarch, Cavalcanti, and the Authority of the Vernacular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 91–92. On poetic genealogy, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Petrarch's Dialogue with Dante," in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 179–81.

⁷ In this sense, Petrarch's project dovetails with Dante's in the *Vita Nova*, in which the meditation on desire is also a discourse on poetry.

⁸ See the works cited in n. 6.

⁹ Kay, *Parrots and Nightingales*, 194–95.

¹⁰ See Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata, 349–50; and on the *canzoni degli occhi* sequence, see in particular Barolini, "The Making of a Lyric Sequence," 21–24; and Corrado Bologna, "'Occhi solo occhi' (*Rvf* 70–75)," in *Canzoniere: Lettura micro e macrotestuale*, ed. Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 2007), 183–205. For a

a feature which is unusual within the *Rvf* and occurs in only one other poem (105), can also be read formally as a sign of this apparent opening up to what follows and as a projection forwards.¹¹

Therefore, for Kay and Santagata (but also for many others), the fact that canzone 70 ends with a quotation from *Rvf* 23 is the sign of a “subjective transformation” and a move beyond the domain of the earlier lyric.¹² Instead, for us, the presence of the beginning of *Rvf* 23 and of the other lyric texts in canzone 70 signals that their form of desire is still there. In this sense, the quotations from the previous poets function as traces in the text and are actually reactivated as paradigms of desire.

Therefore, the question we are asking differs from the one previously considered by critics: what if we take canzone 70 not as the end of a phase, but as a literal return to 23? How would that change our reading of the texts, and especially the relationship between the two poems, of the supposed palinode that one makes of the other? Can our analysis tell us something about the subjectivity shaped by textual return in these two poems (and perhaps in Petrarch’s collection more broadly)?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to consider canzone 23, “Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade,” which relates how the lyric “I” was first struck by love. The canzone can be interpreted as a manifesto or blueprint of Petrarch’s early poetry, one centered on the unrequited love of the troubadour and the Ovidian traditions.¹³ As mentioned above, it is constructed around the Ovidian paradigm of metamorphosis and is entirely focused on the “I”’s transformations through the effects of love—first into a laurel, then into a swan, stone, fountain, flint, voice, and stag, evoking respectively the Ovidian myths of Daphne, Cygnus, Battus, Byblis, Echo, and Actaeon.¹⁴ All these are done to a completely passive and powerless subject who cannot but submit to the power of sensual desire.¹⁵ More significantly, they are all forms of punishment both for a desire represented as transgressive and for the urge to voice it in spite of the prohibition to do so.

discussion of Petrarch in relation to the poets of the *dolce stil novo*, see Suitner, *Petrarca e la tradizione stilnovistica*.

¹¹ On the canzone’s lack of congedo see for example, Barolini, “The Making of a Lyric Sequence,” 23.

¹² Kay, *Parrots and Nightingales*, 194–95.

¹³ For a detailed reading of *Rvf* 23, see Durling, “Metamorphosis,” in his introduction to *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, 26–33; Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata, 101–02; John Brenkman, “Writing, Desire, Dialectic in Petrarch’s *Rime* 23,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 9 (1974): 12–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1316564>; Annalisa Cipollone, “‘Né per nova figura il primo alloro...’: La chiusa di *Rvf* XXIII, il *Canzoniere* e Dante,” *Rassegna europea di letteratura italiana* 11 (1998): 29–46; Giovanna Rabitti, “‘Nel dolce tempo’: sintesi o nuovo cominciamento?,” in “Petrarca volgare e la sua fortuna sino al Cinquecento,” special issue, *Italianistica* 33/2 (May/August 2004): 95–108; and Gur Zak, *Petrarch’s Humanism and the Care of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 121–57, in which the author traces an Ovidian style in the poet’s corpus that is linked to the inability or unwillingness to renounce sensual desire, which is in tension both with the Virgilian and Stoic styles, aimed at cultivating virtue and resisting passion, respectively; and the Augustinian style that necessitates a renunciation of both desire for Laura and for poetic glory.

¹⁴ On the paradigm of Ovidian metamorphosis as intrinsic to the *Rvf*, see Sara Sturm-Maddox, *Petrarch’s Metamorphoses: Text and Subtext in the Rime Sparse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985); Lynn Enterline, *The Poetics of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 120–45; and Gregory Heyworth, *Desiring Bodies: Ovidian Romance and the Cult of Form* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 179–227.

¹⁵ See Zak, *Petrarch’s Humanism*, 148, in which he argues that “the language of Ovid, of metamorphosis, stands [...] for the loss of reason, of self-control, the succumbing to the grip of the passions.”

After describing how “in the sweet time of his first youth” the subject lived in freedom, “libertade,” that is, immune from the effects and pains of love, the second part of the second stanza ends by describing how Love, with the help of a “powerful woman,” who is clearly the poet’s beloved Laura, transforms him into a laurel:

prese in sua scorta una possente donna,
ver’ cui poco già mai mi valse o vale
ingegno, o forza, o dimandar perdono;
e i duo mi trasformaro in quel ch’i’ sono,
facendomi d’uom vivo un lauro verde,
che per fredda stagion foglia non perde. (35–40)

[[Love] took as his patroness a powerful Lady, against whom wit, or force, or asking pardon has helped or helps me little: *those two transformed me into what I am, making me of a living man, a green laurel* that loses no leaf for all the cold season.]

Thus, the first transformation into the laurel is a punishment for not yet bending to love. It astonishes anyone who is familiar with Petrarch’s *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* for the reversal of roles it implies—usually it is Laura who is turned into a laurel (*lauro*) with reference to the Ovidian myth of Apollo and Daphne.¹⁶ In other words, the way in which Laura rejects the poet’s love is usually presented as analogous to Daphne’s refusal to succumb to Apollo’s advances and subsequent transformation into a laurel tree. In this case, however, it is the poet who is turned into the laurel. As Santagata and others explain, this metamorphosis is to be understood in terms of the lover’s complete identification with the desired object, the concept that, as Petrarch will later convey in his *Triumphs*, “l’amante ne l’amato si trasformo” [the lover turns into the beloved].¹⁷ This transformation of the poet into the laurel confirms the extent to which the poem is about the protagonist’s transformation into a poet dominated by desire: the encounter with Laura is the encounter with poetry.¹⁸ It is also an experience of dispossession of identity and loss of self, and this experience is forever: as the Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi glosses these lines, the image of the evergreen laurel “vuol significare l’intensità e la costanza dell’amor suo: la prima dicendo di essere stato trasformato nella persona stessa della sua donna, l’altra dicendo ch’egli, come fa il lauro, non perde mai foglia” [signifies the intensity and constancy of the

¹⁶ See for example, *Rvf* 22, *Rvf* 34, and *Rvf* 197. On the myth of Apollo and Daphne, see Sturm–Maddox, *Petrarch’s Metamorphoses*, 35–40; and Natascia Tonelli, *Per queste orme: Studi sul Canzoniere di Petrarca* (Pisa: Pacini, 2016), 40–41.

¹⁷ *Triumphus Cupidinis* III, 162, in Francesco Petrarca, *Trionfi, Rime estravaganti, Codice degli abbozzi*, ed. Vinicio Pacca and Laura Paolino (Milan: Mondadori, 1996). For Santagata’s observation, cf. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, 109. The expression in the *Triumphs* appears to be a profane rendering of the Christian idea of compassion, the idea that Mary’s love for Christ during His Passion transformed her into an image of her Son because, as Bonaventura da Bagnoregio writes, “vis amoris amantem in amati similitudinem transformat” (Bonaventura, *De assumptione B. Virginis Mariae*, sermo 2, in *Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, 9 vols. [Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1889–1901], 9:161. See also Otto G. von Simpson, “Compassio and Co-redemptio in Roger Van Der Weyden’s Descent from the Cross,” *The Art Bulletin* 25 (1953): 9–16.

¹⁸ In her reading of *Rvf* 23, Carla Freccero comments on how Petrarch’s poem simultaneously marks the poet’s falling in love and his becoming a poet. See her “Ovidian Subjectivities in Early Modern Lyric: Identification and Desire in Petrarch and Louise Labé,” in *Ovid and the Renaissance Body*, ed. Goran Stanivukovic (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 21–37.

poet's love: first, by saying that he has been turned into the very form of his lady; and second by stating that he, like the laurel, never loses his leaves].¹⁹

If poem 23 is taken as a manifesto of a certain kind of poetics, as it has so often been read, then the image of the poet it reveals is twofold. It communicates not only that poetry feeds off a painful form of desire-as-loss, but also that the poet is controlled by his senses and completely at the mercy of the beloved: he even loses his shape and takes on hers.²⁰ This concept was already made evident at the end of the first stanza, which identifies:

un penser che solo angoscia dàlle,
tal ch' ad ogni altro fa voltar le spalle,
e mi face obliar me stesso a forza:
ché tèn di me quel d'entro, et io la scorza. (17–20)

[one thought which alone gives it such anguish that it makes me turn my back on every other and makes me forget myself beyond resistance, for it holds what is within me, and I only the shell.]

In Robert Durling's words, in the transformation of the lover into the laurel "the idea is that of the movement of love from potency to actuality in the will's taking on the form of the desired object."²¹

The first metamorphosis into the laurel is followed by all the others in the subsequent stanzas, but we discover in the envoy that all the other metamorphoses have taken place within the laurel and that the "I" has actually remained fixed in the outcome of the first metamorphosis.

Canzon, i' non fu' mai quel nuvol d'oro
che poi discese in pretiosa pioggia,
sí che 'l foco di Giove in parte spense;
ma fui ben fiamma ch'un bel guardo accense,
et fui l'uccel che piú per l'aere poggia,
alzando lei che ne' miei detti honoro:
né per nova figura il primo alloro
seppi lassar, ché pur la sua dolce ombra
ogni men bel piacer del cor mi sgombra. (161–69)

[Song, I was never the cloud of gold that once descended in a precious rain so that it partly quenched the fire of Jove, but I have certainly been a flame lit by a lovely glance and I have been the bird that rises highest in the air raising her whom in

¹⁹ See Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Ugo Dotti, with notes by Giacomo Leopardi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013). For a related observation on these lines of Petrarch's poem, see Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 211.

²⁰ On the concept of desire-as-loss, see Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 12–13 and 163–64. See also from the same author, "I desire therefore I am': Petrarch's *Canzoniere* between the Medieval and the Modern Notion of Desire," in *Early Modern Medievalisms: The Interplay between Scholarly Reflection and Artistic Production*, eds. Alicia C. Montoya, Wim van Anrooij, and Sophie van Romburgh (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 19–41.

²¹ Robert M. Durling, "Petrarch's 'Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro,'" *MLN* 86/1 (1971): 11 n. 14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2907460>.

my words I honour; *nor for any new shape could I leave the first laurel, for still its sweet shade turns away from my heart any less beautiful pleasure.*]

Canzone 23 is thus framed around a series of metamorphoses but it is a strangely circular kind of process that goes back to the first metamorphosis without perhaps ever having left it. Only the first transformation into the laurel can be considered a proper metamorphosis, while all the subsequent ones ultimately seem to be reiterations of the first experience of desire as punishment and self-loss. Thus, the envoy clarifies what we have already seen announced at the end of the second stanza, where—by saying that “*i duo mi trasformaro in quel ch’io sono*,” that is, that Love and Laura turned him into what he *is*—the poet already indicates that, having been turned into a laurel, he continues to be one at the time of writing. It is as definitive a type of transformation as the laurel is evergreen: it is irreversible. In this sense, *Rvf* 23 is a very Ovidian text.²² What appears to us as very Petrarchan, though, is the hint of masochism with which the poem ends and which seems to turn it around. The laurel, which the poet cannot bring himself to relinquish and which represents the painful experience of self-loss provoked by love, is a site of pleasure, albeit a paradoxical one:

né per nova figura il primo alloro
seppi lassar, *ché pur la sua dolce ombra*
ogni men bel piacer del cor mi sgombra. (167–69)

[*nor for any new shape could I leave the first laurel, for still its sweet shade turns away from my heart any less beautiful pleasure.*]²³

Significantly, the adjective *dolce*, which is present in the incipit and refers to the time before desire, returns here unexpectedly bound to desire, with which it seemed and indeed is incompatible.

At this point, we can consider canzone 70. This poem opens with a sense of frustration and reprises the motif of being forbidden to give voice to desire, which *Rvf* 23 articulated through an Ovidian paradigm emphasizing its transgressive aspect (in the sense that the metamorphoses are punishments not only for desire but also for the urge to voice it). In *Rvf* 70, the problem of adequately voicing desire is articulated in the context of the genealogy of courtly poetry that it traces.

As noted earlier, the first stanza incorporates a quotation from a poem that Petrarch thought was by Arnaut Daniel, the singer of sensual, uncontrollable love. The stanza also reprises the Ovidian motif and locates the intensity of desire in the failure to possess the beloved and the violent, anguished struggle to write about it. The ultimate fantasy here seems to be that of speaking freely, which would reverse the prohibition on speaking that was the mark of *Rvf* 23:

Non gravi al mio signor perch’io il ripregghi

²² On the Ovidian dimension of Petrarch’s poem, as focused on the interrelationship between transformation, poetry, and passion, see Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh*, 206–14.

²³ On paradoxical pleasure, see Christoph F.E. Holzhey, “The Lover of a Hybrid: Memory and Fantasy in *Aracoeli*,” in *The Power of Disturbance: Elsa Morante’s Aracoeli*, eds. Manuele Gragnolati and Sara Fortuna (Oxford: Legenda, 2009), 42–58. Cf. also Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, “From Paradox to Exclusivity: Dante and Petrarch’s Lyrical Eschatologies,” in *Petrarch and Boccaccio: The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Igor Candido (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 129–52.

di dir libero un dì tra l'erba e i fiori:
Drez et rayson es qu'ieu ciant e m demori. (8–10)

[*let it not displease my lord that I beg him again to let me say freely one day, “It is right and just that I sing and be joyful.”*]²⁴

The following two stanzas—which quote two poems by Cavalcanti and Dante embodying irrational and painful desire—emphasize and reiterate the trap of sensual attraction, centered on the subject’s obsession with the “phantasm” of the lady and his enslavement to it, so powerfully expressed in Cavalcanti’s and Dante’s poems.²⁵ In particular, stanzas 1 and 2 play with the fantasy not only that it might be possible to “dir libero”—make an open avowal of one’s love and receive satisfaction from the beloved—but even, in the Cavalcantian stanza, that she might call on the lover to speak, which reverses Laura’s command in canzone 23, “di ciò non far parola” [make no word of this, 100]. In 70, the movement is that of a katabasis into the pain of love and the nadir is reached at the end of the third stanza, where the *aspro*—harsh—language is meant to match the harshness of suffering and surrenders to it:

Ella non degna di mirar sì basso
che di nostre parole
curi, ché ‘l ciel non vòle
al qual pur contrastando i’ son già lasso:
onde, come nel cor m’induro e ’naspro,
così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro. (25–30)

[She does not deign to look so low as to care about our words; for the heavens do not wish it and resisting them I am already weary; therefore, as in my heart I become hard and bitter: “So in my speech I wish to be harsh.”]

Having reached this “hell-like stasis” of being trapped in sensual love, the turning point comes at the start of stanza 4.²⁶ Here there is an explicit acknowledgment of the excessive desire expressed in the poem and in the lyric sequence itself up to this point—what the poem calls “disiàr soverchio” [“excessive desire”]—just as the poet begins to reflect on his actual responsibility in letting himself be taken by this excess. If up to this point the poem stresses the ineluctable force of love, which does not leave any room for the will to resist it, here the fault is acknowledged as belonging to the poetic subject alone:

²⁴ On the frustrated desire for speech in *Rvf* 23, see especially Brenkman, “Writing, Desire, Dialectic,” 15–18.

²⁵ Cf. Dante’s *rime petrose* and the so-called *canzone montanina*, “Amor, da che convien ch’io mi doglia,” his last canzone of exile which is also “a testament to deadly, Cavalcantian eros” (Teodolinda Barolini, “Dante and the Lyric Past,” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], 41). On the phantasm, see Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze: La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993).

²⁶ See Zygmunt G. Barański, “Petrarch, Dante, Cavalcanti,” in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 85. On petrified immobility as the hallmark of canzone 23, see Barolini, “The Making of a Lyric Sequence,” 30.

Che parlo? o dove sono? e chi m'inganna,
 altri ch'io stesso e 'l desiar soverchio?
 Già s'i'trascorro il ciel di cerchio in cerchio,
 nessun pianeta a pianger mi condanna.
 Se mortal velo il mio veder appanna,
 che colpa è de le stelle,
 o de le cose belle?
 Meco si sta chi dí et notte m'affanna,
 poi che del suo piacer mi fe' gir grave
la dolce vista e 'l bel guardo soave. (31–40)

[What am I saying? or where am I? and who deceives me but myself and my *excessive desire*? Nay, if I run through the sky from sphere to sphere, no planet condemns me to weeping. If a mortal veil dulls my sight, what fault is it of the stars or *of beautiful things*? With me dwells one who day and night troubles me, since she made me go heavy with the pleasure of “The sweet sight of her and her lovely soft glance.”]

Critics stress the change happening in this stanza, arguing that with these questions “inizia il rovesciamento del discorso sin qui svolto: sia il desiderio di corresponsione espresso nelle prime due stanze, sia il riconoscimento dell'impossibilità di realizzarlo per colpa della donna e dell'avverso destino appaiono ora come delirio e colpevole autoinganno” [the overturning of the discourse so far put forward begins: both the desire for reciprocation expressed in the first two stanzas and the impossibility of realizing that desire, because of the lady's fault and an adverse destiny, now appear as a delirium and as guilty self-delusion].²⁷ We see things differently and would rather argue that the poet's recognition of the possibility to control desire (and therefore of his own responsibility in yielding to it) co-exists with the reiteration of his passivity and the pleasure of meditating obsessively on the lady's image and ceding all control of himself to it. This paradoxical sweetness was already a feature of Cino's exile canzone, where the absence from the lady was lamented in a *dolce* style.²⁸ Therefore, unlike other critics who stress that this is a pivotal conversion point, we would propose another interpretation, one based on Caroline Walker Bynum's distinction between metamorphosis and hybridity.²⁹

For Bynum, metamorphosis is a kind of change that relates to a “labile world of flux and transformation.” Metamorphosis is a “process,” “encountered through story.” It “goes from an entity that is one thing to an entity that is another, and the relative weight or presence of the two entities suggests where we are in the story” (*Metamorphosis and Identity*, 30). Thus, in our analysis, metamorphosis corresponds to the Ovidian paradigm of change or, in a Christian model, to that of conversion as the abrupt and definitive break with the past that is articulated

²⁷ Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata, 354.

²⁸ On Cino's exile poems, and his use of the motif of *lontananza* to articulate his obsession with the phantasm of the lady, see Catherine Keen, “Images of Exile: Distance and Memory in the Poetry of Cino Da Pistoia,” *Italian Studies* 55/1 (2000): 21–36, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/its.2000.55.1.21>. She notes the Cavalcantian dimension to many of Cino's exile poems, in which the fragmentation of the lady's image corresponds to the lyric “I”'s own fragmentation. On Petrarch's relationship to Cino more broadly, see Edward L. Boggs III, “Cino and Petrarch,” in “Italian Issue,” special issue, *MLN* 94/1 (Jan. 1979): 146–52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2906335>; and Suitner, *Petrarca e la tradizione stilnovistica*, 99–156.

²⁹ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

through a linear temporality and in Foucauldian terms implies “renunciation” or “dying to oneself,” the idea of “being reborn in a different self.”³⁰

Hybridity, by contrast, “expresses a world of natures or substances” (often diverse or contradictory to each other) and is “encountered through paradox”—“in the instant.” So we understand the hybrid as more static, and Bynum underscores that the hybrid is “not just a frozen metamorphosis” and is “certainly not the end point or interruption of metamorphosis.” It is rather “a double being, an entity of two parts—or more.” It makes “twoness and the simultaneity of twoness visible.” As such, it can be a figure of contradiction rather than change.³¹

On the basis of Bynum’s distinction, our reading is that in stanza 4 of canzone 70, there is no conversion, and if anything changes it is only Laura: she is no longer the “possente donna,” the powerful lady of 23, who was blamed for the poet’s demise (“S’io moro, il danno è vostro” [If I die, yours is the loss]). Instead, in 70 she is exonerated from any fault:

Se mortal velo il mio veder appanna,
che colpa è de le stelle,
o de le cose belle? (35–37)

[If a mortal veil dulls my sight, what fault is it of the stars or *of beautiful things*?]

However, although the poet recognizes Laura as the supreme of the “cose belle” and turns the guilt [“colpa”] towards himself, this acknowledgment does not liberate him from desire. In this sense, rather than progressive movement or metamorphosis, we would see hybridity here as the paradoxical co-existence of recognizing the possibility of resisting desire and compulsively surrendering to it.

In a similar vein, the last stanza points to the goodness of creation but ends up confirming the “I”’s continued errancy and powerlessness:

Tutte le cose, di che ’l mondo è adorno
uscìr buone de man del mastro eterno;
ma me, che cosí adentro non discerno,
abbaglia il bel che mi si mostra intorno;
et s’al vero splendor già mai ritorno,
l’occhio non po’ star fermo,
cosí l’è fatto infermo
pur la sua propria colpa, et non quel giorno
ch’i’ volsi inver’ l’angelica beltade
nel dolce tempo de la prima etade. (41–50)

[All things with which the world is beauteous came forth good from the hand of the eternal Workman: but I, who do not discern so far within, am dazzled by the beauty that I see about me, and if I ever return to the true splendour, my eye

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–82*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), 211. As our analysis goes on to show, the primary exemplum of this form of conversion is Augustine’s *Confessions*.

³¹ Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 30–31.

cannot stay still, it is so weakened by its very own fault, and not by that day when I turned toward her angelic beauty: “In the sweet time of my first age.”]

In this last stanza, if there are Biblical and even Augustinian elements, the latter of which stand in Petrarch for the necessity to turn towards God, the poem reaches an impasse or a suspension, not a point of conversion or change. Therefore it seems to us that *Rvf* 70 ends in a similar vein as Petrarch’s *Secretum* and the supposed “conversion” canzone *Rvf* 264. In all these texts, when compared to the Augustinian paradigm that comes to the fore in book 8 of the *Confessions* as the fervor to convert that accompanies the recognition of the split will, there is no sense in which Petrarch urgently desires God, nor that he is desperately trying to throw off the chains binding the self. There is just a slightly greater self-awareness, without the impulse to then push it a step further. As Christian Moevs insightfully puts it, in Petrarch one can only join with God through a superhuman effort, through a “macho act of the will,” a kind of superego trip that wants to impose a change and never manages it.³² In this sense, the conclusion of *Rvf* 70 is a non-conclusion similar to that of the *Secretum* and *Rvf* 264, in which, with Michelangelo Picone, we can say that “La verità che egli [l’io petrarchesco] riesce a conquistare riguarda non la sua sorte eterna ma il suo destino terreno; non è una rivelazione trascendentale ma la constatazione, radicata nell’immanenza, del suo essere peccatore e del suo vivere ‘un breve sogno’” [“the truth that the Petrarchan ‘I’ manages to achieve is related not to his eternal fate but to his earthly destiny; it is not a transcendental revelation but the recognition, rooted in immanence, of his being a sinner and of his living ‘a brief dream’”].³³

This is how we would like to read Petrarch’s choice of concluding *Rvf* 70 by returning to the beginning of 23. With Bynum, we could say that in *Rvf* 70 we have the movement of metamorphosis and the fixity of hybridity together. The subject feels the onus to shake the trap of sensual desire in which he is fixed, but there is no change.³⁴ He is a hybrid: the “I” neither dismisses self-control nor exercises it, acknowledging the weakness in itself without correcting or renouncing it. What interests us here is that by concluding canzone 70 with a return to the beginning of canzone 23, Petrarch interrupts forwardness and embraces backwardness. In this sense, the same formal features of *Rvf* 70 (the use of *coblas capfinidas* and the poem’s lack of

³² Christian Moevs, “Subjectivity and Conversion in Dante and Petrarch,” in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 246. On this aspect of Petrarch’s poetics, see Francesca Southerden, “The Art of Rambling: Errant Thoughts and Entangled Passions in Petrarch’s ‘Ascent of Mont Ventoux’ (*Fam.* IV, 1) and *Rvf* 129,” in *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry, Hypothesis and Experience in the European Middle Ages*, eds. Philip Knox, Jonathan Morton, and Daniel Reeve (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 197–221. On Augustine in Petrarch, see Carlo Calcaterra, *Sant’Agostino nelle opere di Dante e del Petrarca* (Milan: Società editrice Vita e Pensiero, 1931); Nicolae Iliescu, *Il canzoniere petrarchesco e Sant’Agostino* (Rome: Società accademica romana, 1962); Carol E. Quillen, *Rereading the Renaissance: Petrarch, Augustine, and the Language of Humanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); and Dino Cervigni, “The Petrarchan Lover’s Non-Dialogic and Dialogic Discourse: An Augustinian Semiotic Approach to Petrarch’s *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 22 (2004): 105–34.

³³ Michelangelo Picone, “Petrarca e il libro non finito,” in “Petrarca volgare e la sua fortuna sino al Cinquecento,” special issue, *Italianistica* 33/2 (May/August 2004): 88. For a reading of *Rvf* 264 in relation to the *Secretum*, see Teodolinda Barolini, “The Self in the Labyrinth of Time: *Rerum vulgariū fragmenta*,” in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, eds. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 33–62; and Giuseppina Stella Galbiati, “Sulla canzone ‘I’ vo pensando’ (*Rvf* 264): L’ascendente agostiniano ed altre suggestioni culturali,” in “Petrarca volgare e la sua fortuna sino al Cinquecento,” special issue, *Italianistica* 33/2 (May/August 2004): 109–21.

³⁴ On this point see Galbiati, “Sulla canzone *I’ vo pensando*,” 110.

congedo) that, as we indicated earlier, seem to imply progression and an overcoming of past desire simultaneously embody a contrapuntal state of remaining enchained and unwilling to take leave of the past. Thus, rather than take the quotation with which the poem ends as a sign of surpassing the previous tradition and Petrarch's own earlier poetics, we see it as a literal return to them and precisely to the advent of love as the only and definitive transformation, as 23 already makes clear:

e i duo mi trasformaro in quel ch'i' sono,
facendomi d'uom vivo un lauro verde,
che per fredda stagion foglia non perde. (38–40)

[those two transformed me into what I am, making me of a living man, a green laurel that loses no leaf for all the cold season.]

In other words, a joint reading of *Rvf* 70 and 23 makes explicit that the only event in Petrarch's collection is the encounter with Laura, which is also the making of the poet as a poet of love. His state (of being a laurel) will not change; if anything, it will only intensify. Rather than move towards an end point, the poetic subject remains where it is and the corresponding non-linear and non-teleological temporality operates both at a subjective and a textual level. Textually, "firstness and lastness collapse into the same point" in canzone 70, in the same way that, as Teodolinda Barolini has argued, *Rvf* 23 problematizes the "nature of all beginnings and endings" within the collection's first poetic micro-sequence (1–23) and in the *Rvf* as a whole.³⁵ Ultimately, the effect is to dissolve the boundaries between the two poems and to create a kind of hybridity in movement insofar as the poems are distinct within the sequence's macro-structure and yet merge so that the end of one is the beginning of the other and vice-versa, endlessly.³⁶

In order to understand what kind of subjectivity corresponds to this non-linear temporality, we propose engaging with Leo Bersani's concept of aesthetics in his reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Three Essays on Sexuality*. Bersani argues that sexuality is fundamentally paradoxical insofar as it retains the masochistic character of its infantile stage, notwithstanding the later attempt to domesticate it according to the normative, teleological model of sexual reproduction. For Bersani, sexuality is characterized by a simultaneous production of "a pleasurable unpleasure," which is not about final satisfaction or release of sexual tension but rather its increase through repetition and replication. This masochistic repetition produces an "insistent stasis" and inverts the idea of a movement towards completion: "the end of the story is already in the beginning of the story; the teleological movement goes into reverse at the very moment when it reaches its goal; and the narrative line of sexuality completes itself as a circle."³⁷

³⁵ Teodolinda Barolini, "Petrarch as the Metaphysical Poet Who Is Not Dante: Metaphysical Markers at the Beginning of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Rvf* 1–21)," in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 196–97. See also Rabitti, "*Nel dolce tempo*."

³⁶ For the shape of this movement in terms of a Möbius strip, see Manuele Gagnolati and Francesca Southerden, "Petarcarca e la forma del desiderio: tra metamorfosi e soggettività ibrida in *Rvf* 70 e 23," *Per leggere*, 18/35 (autumn 2018): 27–42. On the openness of the form of the *Rvf*, see Picone, "Petarcarca e il libro non finito," 91–93, in which he proposes the concept of "opera in-finita" [in-finite work]. On the *canzoni degli occhi* (*Rvf* 71–73) as a particular embodiment of this dynamic, see Barolini, "The Making of a Lyric Sequence," 21–23.

³⁷ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 35.

Bersani also reformulates Freud's concept of sublimation, seeing "artistic sublimation" as the possibility for textuality not to purify or transcend sexual pleasure but, on the contrary, to extend it to the movement of the text, replicating its paradoxical character and making the reader experience it. More specifically, he argues that the fundamentally masochistic character of sexuality cannot be articulated through scientific discourse, which inevitably tends to resolve paradox into a linear logic or narrative development, but it is conveyed through the aesthetics of the Freudian texts, which engage in self-sabotage and have the proposed arguments continuously fail instead of progressing linearly and reaching a logical conclusion. In this way, Bersani considers aesthetics as "a perpetuation and replicative elaboration of masochistic sexual tensions" (*The Freudian Body*, 43), which do not aim for resolution, but rather prolongation and intensification.³⁸

Bersani's concept of aesthetics can help us better understand the tensions deployed in Petrarch's textuality and link it to an inherently masochistic form of pleasure: by concluding with the return to 23, *Rvf* 70 not only signals the tenacity with which the subject clings to sensual desire and his identity as a love poet, but also embraces the non-linear temporality of non-conversion as continual deferral and intensification of pleasure.³⁹ In this sense, rather than working as paradigms of desire to be overcome, the lyric citations that Petrarch includes in *Rvf* 70 reactivate the sensuality of desire, which keeps pleasure in the picture and resists the transformation of the poetic subject.

RVF 70's return to 23 can even be seen as the poet's tenacious attempt to recuperate the masochistic impulse that concluded *Rvf* 23, "ché pur la sua dolce ombra | ogni men bel piacer del cor mi sgombra" (168–69), where the "beautiful pleasure" was that of surrendering the self to passion and its torments, represented by remaining in the sweet shade of the laurel. While in *RVF* 23 the paradoxical, masochistic pleasure derives from enjoying the pain of self-loss imposed through punishment, in *Rvf* 70 it consists of lingering in the impasse of assuming responsibility for a transgressive desire without ever relinquishing it.

As is by now evident, our interpretation differs from the more common reading of *Rvf* 70 as the end of one phase of desire and poetry and the start of a new one. Instead, it seems to us that *Rvf* 70's return to 23 signals a non-conversion that keeps the first phase of desire going and even revivifies it, particularly since, in the end, *Rvf* 70 defers to 23. Taking the relationship between the two poems as a starting point, and returning to Bersani's concept of aesthetics, we might even see this form of desire as one that is replicated throughout the remainder of Petrarch's collection. It would be possible to extend the argument in two directions. First, if the poetic subject of the *Rvf* never moves beyond the position it assumes in canzone 23, then the paradoxical nature of Petrarch's "lyric sequence," which Barolini has argued combines

³⁸ See also Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and the volume of collected essays by the same author, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). On Bersani in relation to early modern literature, including Petrarch, see Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). On the Bersanian notion of sublimation in relation to Petrarch, see Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 71.

³⁹ Cf. Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, "Dalla perdita al possesso: Forme di temporalità non lineare nelle epifanie liriche di Cavalcanti, Dante e Petrarca," *Chroniques italiennes* web series 32/1 (2017): 156–74, <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/chroniques-italiennes-recherche-par-numero-441707.kjsp?RH=1488359347838>.

On masochism in Petrarch see also Georges Barhouil, "Toujours aimer, toujours souffrir, toujours mourir, ou Fatalité et volontarisme chez Pétrarque," in *Actes du Congrès International Francesco Petrarca: Père des renaissances, serviteur de l'amour et de la paix (1374–1974)* (Avignon: Aubanel, 1974), 183–208.

fragmentation and sequentiality, is given another dimension and made more ambivalent still.⁴⁰ Second, the paradigm of deferral and non-conversion that we have identified in canzone 70 could illuminate other moments in the collection that stage an impulse for change and conversion, for example, *Rvf* 264, that Petrarch places in the pivotal position between the first and second parts of his collection, or the final penitential sequence of poems that concludes with the *canzone alla Vergine* (*Rvf* 366).⁴¹ Numerologically speaking, and within the calendrical and cyclical structure of the *Rvf*, this final poem leads back to *Rvf* 1 and to its paradoxical status as a proemial poem that is meant to abjure everything that follows and so already hints at the inverted and non-linear temporality that is the hallmark of lyric desire in Petrarch.⁴² In this way, rather than seeing *Rvf* 366 as a final and successful conversion, which completes or enacts a linear progression from Laura to God, one could argue that it replicates the feeding of canzone 70 into 23, in which the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end.⁴³

⁴⁰ See Barolini, "The Making of a Lyric Sequence," especially 6–7.

⁴¹ On the irresolution of the *Rvf*'s ending, cf. Natascia Tonelli, "Vat. Lat. 3195: Un libro concluso? Lettura di *Rvf* 360–366," in her *Per queste orme*, 7–34; and Picone, "Petrarca e il libro non finito." For a reading of *Rvf* 366 in light of the desire for conversion and in relation to Dante, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 163–66; Mario Petrini, "La canzone alla Vergine," *Critica letteraria* 23 (1994): 33–42; Cervigni, "The Petrarchan Lover's Non-Dialogic and Dialogic Discourse"; and Moevs, "Subjectivity and Conversion," 231 and 238–39.

⁴² See especially Moevs, "Subjectivity and Conversion", 231–34. On the relationship between *Rvf* 1 and *Rvf* 23 specifically, both afforded the status of "incipit," see Rabitti, "*Nel dolce tempo*," 102–08.

⁴³ For a recent study of *Rvf* 366 in relation to the "end" of Petrarch's desire, see John Ochoa, "The Poet Becomes the Poem: The Missing Object and Petrarch's Ends in the *Canzoniere*," *Romance Quarterly* 65/1 (2018): 38–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08831157.2018.1396138>.