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The Perfect Woman in Boccaccio and Petrarch

Every form, every poem falls apart when separated from its ideas and, conversely, 'idea,' in one of its primitive acceptations, means precisely form and poem. Let us now read the youthful verses of a writer who, with his conception of humanity and nature, would change the very institutions of writing:

Intorn' ad una fonte, in un pratello
di verdi erbette pieno e di bei fiori,
sedean tre angiolette, i loro amori
forse narrando, ed a ciascuna il bello
 viso adombrava un verde ramicello
ch'i capei d'or cingea, al qual di fuori
e dentro insieme i dua vaghi colori
avvolgea un suave venticello.

E dopo alquanto l'una alle due disse
(com'io udi'): "Deh, se per avventura
di ciascuna l'amante or qui venisse,
 fuggiremo noi quinci per paura?".
A cui le due risposer: "Chi fuggisse,
poco savia saria, con tal ventura!".

[Beside a fountain in a little grove
That fresh green fronds and pretty flowers did grace,
Three maidens sat and talked methinks of love.
Mid golden locks, o'ershadowing each sweet face,
For coolness was entwined a leaf-green spray,
And all the while a gentle zephyr played
Through green and golden in a tender way,
Weaving a web of sunshine and of shade.
After a while, unto the other two
One spoke, and I could hear her words: "Think you
That if our lovers were to happen by
We would all run away for very fright?"
The others answered her: "From such delight
She were a little fool who'd wish to fly!"¹

¹ Giovanni Boccaccio: *Rime*. Edited by Vittore Branca. In: *Tutte le opere di G. Boccaccio*. Edited by Vittore Branca. 10 vols. Milan: Mondadori 1992, vol. V, 1, p. 33; trans. in: *An Anthology of Italian Poems. 13th–19th Century*. Selected and Translated by Lorna de' Lucchi. New York: Biblio and Tannen 1967, p. 93.

It is impossible to approach these immature but charming verses of Boccaccio, this umpteenth *pastourelle*, without discovering within them not only his wit, but also the unripe and encouraging novelty of his thought: the ‘angioletta’ who, in interrupting her love list with that final exclamation, savors the immediate, voluptuous, desirous fulfillment of so many acute fantasies, and already accomplishes – tiny thing that she is – a small revolution. In speaking out, she leaves her lover speechless (we can imagine him nearby, hidden behind a shrub). Her legendary shyness is contradicted by a new impulse to speak and to live and to descend from that celestial throne which the Provençal poet constructed for her; her silence is shattered, and that silence is followed by a frenetic circulation of amorous words and actions, of snares set to capture lovers, of meticulous plans to cheat on husbands and wives, of profuse pleasures, dreamt of from one end of the world to the other. Abstraction crumbles majestically in the face of natural reality, as foreseen by William of Occam, whom Boccaccio glossed in two letters from his youth:² the universal understood as a ‘natural sign’ for things thus takes the place of the conventional universal; space and time do not exist in and of themselves, but only in relation to size and motion; the ‘rational sciences’ refute useless or complex entities outside of experience and logic. Thus the maiden who calls an embrace with her lover ‘ventura’ (fortune), rebellious heir of the sweetness and frigidity of the Dolce Stilnovo, is a sign not of corruption, but of a profound transformation of the concept of nature; she is also the prime mover of a universe in which men are meant to act amorously – poetically – together with women. If the “dama dei pensieri” [lady of thoughts] was poetically untouchable, here on the contrary poetry exists in the contact of woman and man, in the return to earth of that which has always been earthly, in the conflagration of bodies within the new flame of carnal love.

An “altro foco” [different fire] from that of the chaste, divine huntress ignites the women in the *Caccia di Diana*; that is, the fire of Venus, who, appearing in the form of an “ignuda giovinetta” [nude girl], grants handsome men to her faithful followers. The “venereo fuoco” [Venereal fire] suddenly ignites Florio and Biancifiore in the *Filocolo*, in such a way that “tardi la freddezza di Diana li avrebbe potuti rattiepidare” [it would have been too late for the coldness of Diana to be able to moderate them]: “Veramente,” says Florio, “[...] tu sola sopra tutte le cose del mondo mi piaci.” [“Indeed,” said Florio, “(...) you alone please me above all the things of this world.”] “Certo tu non piaci meno a me, che io a te” [“Certainly you please me no less than I do you”], Biancifiore responds

² See Cesare Vasoli: *La dialettica e la retorica dell’Umanesimo*. Milan: Feltrinelli 1968, p. 12; Kurt Flasch: *Poesia dopo la peste. Saggio su Boccaccio*. Bari: Laterza 1995, p. 7 ff.

(II, 4, 3–8).³ We should note that this reciprocal declaration overturns the rites of courtly love, and its simplicity, from the point of view of poetic invention, is quite novel with respect to the lover's traditional fear and trembling in the presence of the beloved. Here anything can be said as anything is possible, or better it is inherently and essentially disposed to amorous action. The beloved is transformed into lover, and her desire is equal to his; each one's desire is consecrated in a heretofore unthinkable reciprocity. Where is the troubadour's desire offered in sacrifice, his mad solitude, his sharp and obscure words? Here Florio, separated from Biancifiore, turns his eyes "tra'l bianco vestimento e le colorite carni" [between the white garment and the colored flesh] of two other maidens; "con atto festevole" [reaching playfully] he tries out each part of their bodies, and Boccaccio observes objectively that "niuna gliene è negate" [none of them were denied him] (III, 11, 12–13). Standing before the Admiral's Tower, where Biancifiore, betrothed to the Sultan of Babylon, is locked away, Florio entertains a very realistic doubt: will Biancifiore still love him? "Tu t'inganni," he says to himself, "se tu pensi che colei ora di te si ricordi, essendo senza vederti tanto tempo dimorata. Nulla femina è che si lungamente in amare perseveri, se l'occhio o il tatto spesso in lei non raccende amore." ["You deceive yourself, if you think that she remembers you now, after having been without you for so long. There is no woman who perseveres so long in loving, if her love is not frequently rekindled by sight or touch."] (IV, 89, 7–8). (In this monologue we find hints of Nino's strident voice in *Purg.* VIII, 76–78: "Per lei assai di lieve si comprende / quanto in femmina foco d'amor dura, / se l'occhio o il tatto spesso non l'accende." [There is an easy lesson in her conduct: / how short a time the fire of love endures in woman / if frequent sight and touch do not rekindle it.]⁴ A certain Ulysean desire to prevail, a certain "essercizio" [experience] of the world, removes some of the heroic or spiritual or theoretical components from Florio's constancy, and from his thoughts about the beloved some of the contemplative and unbearable parts that were found in the Provençal poets; here instead it is preferable 'to look upon' rather than 'to think about,' and the sentimental pleasures of the *reverie* are shunned in favor of the innumerable, passionate, actual pleasures of "continuato vedere" [constant viewing]:

3 Giovanni Boccaccio: *Filocolo*. Edited by Antonio Enzo Quaglio. In: *Tutte le opere di G. Boccaccio*. Edited by Vittore Branca. 10 vols. Milan: Mondadori 1967, I, p. 127–128. Translation in: Giovanni Boccaccio: *Il Filocolo*. Translated by Donald Cheney with the Collaboration of Thomas G. Bergin. New York and London: Garland 1985 (Garland Library of Medieval Literature, 43B), p. 49–50. All quotations and translations from the *Filocolo* are drawn from these editions, respectively.

4 Translation in: Dante Alighieri: *Purgatorio*. A Verse Translation by Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander. Introduction and Notes by Robert Hollander. New York: Anchor Books 2003, p. 169.

Quella cosa ch'è amata [...] quanto più si vede più diletta; e però io credo che molto maggior diletto porga il riguardare che non fa il pensare, però che ogni bellezza prima per lo vederla piace, poi per lo continuato vedere nell'animo tale piacere si conferma, e generasene amore e quelli disii che da lui nascono. E niuna bellezza è tanto amata per alcuna altra cagione, quanto per piacere agli occhi, e contentare quelli; dunque vedendola si contentano, pensandone, loro di vederla s'accresce disio: e più diletto sente chi si contenta che chi di contentarsi desidera. (IV, 61, 1-2)

[The thing that is loved (...) delights more the more it is seen; and so I think that seeing brings much more delight than thinking does, since every beauty pleases first through being seen; and then through continuing to be seen, this pleasure is strengthened in one's spirit, and out of it love is generated, and those desires which are born from it. And no beauty is so much loved for any other reason than to please and satisfy the eyes; therefore, in seeing it they are satisfied, but in thinking of it the desire to see it is increased; and more delight is felt by the one who is satisfied than by the one who desires to be satisfied.]

With this astute reasoning, the *Filocolo* puts an end to the abstract and ritual *gentilezza* of the troubadours, and invents a *gentilezza* that is the producer of earthly grace, of pleasures offered like fruit from a basket. Boccaccio is quite clear on this point: the fervent sighs, the weeping, the flaming desires will never die, but will always be the just price and the sentimental frame for love; however, these aspects by themselves will no longer have a primary dignity, nor will they hold the unwavering attention of the lover, who instead will be eager to forget them or even to delight in them, like an aphrodisiac, in the arms of the beloved. So, just like the lover's "alto appetito" (large appetite), the woman's desire also acquires legitimacy: "Perfetta donna" – we read in the *Filostrato* – "ha più fermo disire / d'essere amata, e d'amar si diletta" [The perfect lady hath a stronger desire to be loved and taketh delight in loving] (VIII, 32, 1-2);⁵ and it matters little if Boccaccio was thinking of some historical siren, such as Mariella Caracciola, Caterina Caradente, Lucrezia Barrile, or of some imaginary creature, or of women in general: she on par with man in her desire ("Certo tu non piaci meno a me, che io a te"), and this electrical shock, this electrifying naturality is transmitted in every one of Boccaccio's amorous pages, even in the most formalistic and most heavily imbued with Alexandrian elegance. Even the *Ameto*, being, in Contini's terms, an example of "mannerism to the point of teratology,"⁶ with its "gracious choir" of nymphs – Mopsa, Emilia, Adiona, Acrimonia, Agapes, Fiammetta – sings of

5 Giovanni Boccaccio: *Filostrato*. Edited by Vittore Branca. In: *Tutte le opere di G. Boccaccio*. Edited by Vittore Branca. 10 vols. Milan: Mondadori 1964, II, p. 225. Trans. in: *The Filostrato of Giovanni Boccaccio*. A Translation with Parallel Text by Nathaniel E. Griffin and Arthur B. Myrick. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1929, p. 499.

6 Gianfranco Contini: *Letteratura italiana delle origini*. Florence: Sansoni 1970, p. 716.

unanimous desire (the Virgilian “trahit sua quemque voluptas,” *Ecl.* II, 65), of the happy and infinite embrace between women and men on this world’s stage; and with the invocation to the “graziosa stella” [gracious star] Citerea projects on high (a height of tone and diction, obviously) the ‘honest’ ardor of men and women, so that it will be remembered and imitated in the future. Woman and man find themselves on the same plane. The principle of feminine spirituality, like that of fidelity – legislated by men – is absent from the discussion: Alatiel (*Decameron* II, 7), over the course of four years and in various locations, falls into the hands of gentle but greedy men, and her kissed mouth “non perde ventura, anzi rinnuova come fa la luna” (§ 122) [was never the worse: like as the moon reneweth her course]; in this new and exemplary character “desire is preserved and repentance eliminated,” as Aleksander Veselovskij observed.⁷ In even more obvious terms, Madonna Filippa (*Decameron* VI, 7), guilty of adultery, gives a speech against the very laws of man, which no woman was ever called upon to approve. In Boccaccio’s world, love is first and foremost the expression of guiltless pleasure and of a constant search for pleasure without end: just as in the Golden Age, here women and men do not suffer mortal weariness of the flesh – a Christian benefit for generations of anxious folk – instead, they contrive to multiply their enjoyments and infinite surprises. However, in contrast to the Golden Age, these couples augment mere sensuality with art – that is, a type of bourgeois consecration of the primitive – while rejecting the invasiveness of the spirit itself as an extraneous and disruptive element. The “cura de’ mortali” [cares of mortals] is not “insensata” [foolish], as Dante would want it, but is blessed by God as a principle of action; and man is not meant (only in his own nightmares) to exhaust himself “nel diletto della carne involto” [in the toils of flesh] (*Par.* XI, 8).⁸ This ‘exhaustion’ is an invention of the mind: “e quel ben,” we read in the *Ameto*, “che io prima avea gustato / puro, da quinci innanzi con disiri / di nuovo accesi venne mescolato [...]” [And that delight, that my heart had first tasted pure, from then on became mixed with newly lit desires] (XLIX, 28–30)⁹ Culture and art (which allow for the mixing of that initial good [“quel bene”]) defeat the inventions of the spirit, sublime but useless in Boccaccio’s bourgeois world. The inimitable grace of a gesture, a tone of voice, the silent appeal of a glance – along with a book standing open in the background – give concupiscence a sense of *honesty*, or as

7 Quotation in: Viktor Sklovskij: *L'energia dell'errore*. Rome: Editori Riuniti 1984, p. 76.

8 Translation in: Dante Alighieri: *Paradiso*. Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. Introduction and Notes by Robert Hollander. New York: Anchor Books 2008, p. 255.

9 Giovanni Boccaccio: *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*. Edited by Antonio Enzo Quaglio. In: *ibid.*, p. 832. Translation in: Giovanni Boccaccio: *L'Ameto*. Translated by Judith Serafini-Sauli. New York and London: Garland 1985 (The Garland Library of Medieval Literature, 33B), p. 143.

we would now say, the *form* it needs in order to be memorable. And there is memorable concupiscence in every page of Boccaccio. In the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* ('elegy' meaning *stilus miserorum*, according to the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* II, 4, 5) the gestures, the voice, the glances all belong to Panfilo, and the open book in the background is Ovid's *Heroides*. Fiammetta, the first 'narrator' of Italian literature, "minutely analyzes her own state of mind" (Contini)¹⁰ when confronted with her love for a man; and she describes this man, "negli atti piacevolissimo e onestissimo nell'abito suo" [he was handsome and very pleasing in his gestures and he was dressed most nobly] (I, 6, 3),¹¹ in the same way that a man typically describes a woman: with an intoxicated attention for physical details, with the misery and infinite melancholy that men often demonstrate at the sight of female beauty. Unlike her seventeenth-century descendent the Princess of Clèves – the very image of reticence – Fiammetta speaks for herself right from the first:

Mentre che io in cotal guisa, poco altrui rimirando, e molto da molti rimirata, dimoro, credendo che la mia bellezza altrui pigliasse, avvenne che l'altrui me miseramente prese. E già essendo vicina al doloroso punto, il quale o di certissima morte o di vita più che altra angosciosa dovea essere cagione, non so da che spirito mossa, gli occhi con debita gravità elevati, intra la moltitudine d'i circostanti giovini con aguto riguardamento distesi. E oltre a tutti, solo e appoggiato ad una colonna marmorea, a me dirittissimamente un giovine opposto vidi; e, quello che ancora fatto non avea d'alcuno altro, da incessabile fato mossa, meco lui e li suoi modi cominciai ad estimare. (I, 6, 1)

[While I went on in this way, seldom looking at others but much admired by many and believing that my beauty captivated other people, it happened that someone else's beauty unfortunately captured me. And as I was already close to that fateful moment which was to be the cause of certain death or of a life more wretched than any other, I was moved by an unknown spirit, and with my eyes raised in due solemnity, I gazed piercingly through the crowd of surrounding youths, and apart from everyone else, alone and learning against a marble column, exactly opposite me, I saw a young man; moved by an inevitable fate, I did something I had never done before with anyone else: I began to take mental stock of him and his manner.]

A sequence of jealousy, fury, doubts, hopes, and desperations follows the initial flame, as is well known, but in the end nothing escapes from the spell of that "ricchissimo letto" [richest bed] – a sort of totem – in which Venus is "molto faticata"

¹⁰ Contini: *Letteratura*, p. 722.

¹¹ Giovanni Boccaccio: *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. Edited by Carlo Delcorno. In: *Tutte le opere di G. Boccaccio*. Vittore Branca. 10 vols. Milan: Mondadori 1994, V, 2, p. 30. Translation in: Giovanni Boccaccio: *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*. Edited and Translated by Mariangela Causa-Steindler and Thomas Mauch. Chicago: Chicago University Press 1990, p. 7. See these two editions for text and translation of the other passages.

[completely worn out] by the two lovers. Even their separation (Panfilo to Florence, Fiammetta to Naples) and the subsequent rumors seem lusty; even distance becomes sensual:

Egli mi pareva alcuna volta con lui tornato vagare in giardini bellissimi, di frondi, di fiori e di frutti varii adorni, con lui insieme quasi d'ogni temenza rimoti, come già facemmo; e quivi lui per la mano tenendo, e esso me, farmi ogni suo accidente contare. E molte volte, avanti che il suo dire avesse fornito, mi pareva baciandolo romperli le parole, e quasi appena vero parendomi ciò ch'io vedea, dicea: "Deh, è egli vero che tu sii tornato? Certo sì è, io ti pur tengo!" E quindi di capo il baciava. (III, 12, 6-7)

[Sometimes I had the impression that he had returned and that I was with him wandering about together, as we had done before, in magnificent gardens adorned with all sorts of trees, fruits, and flowers, and there, walking hand in hand, I made him tell me everything that had happened to him, and frequently I seemed to interrupt what he was saying with a kiss, but because what I was seeing seemed hardly true to me, I said: "Pray, is it true that you are back? Indeed it is, since I am holding you!" And then I kissed him again.]

Gentilezza is sensuality, and elegy is the mourning of sensuality. It is no coincidence that Boccaccio's models are the Oïlitan *Eneas*, or Chrétien de Troies's *Cligés*, or *Floire* (for the *Filocolo*), or Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (for the *Filostrato*): all essentially narrative models dominated by a taste for adventure and plot twists, along with an Ovidian-like attention for the psychology of love. In this way Fiammetta (the lovestruck Boccaccio's Maria d'Aquino) becomes the heroine of a new mythology with respect to the Dolce Stilnovo, and of a tried and tested mythology with respect to the classical texts: She is Sappho who loves Phaon, Hypermnestra who loves Lynceus, Phyllis who loves Demophon, Dido who loves Aeneas. In her gestures are both grace and the nostalgia for carnal love; and in her thoughts the exalting image of The Embrace, the fidelity to this one and only symbol of happiness in life.

We must not underestimate Fiammetta; we must not believe that she is anything less, anything less splendid, than the abstract Occitan *dame*, nor that aloofness is any more seductive than passion. Indeed, for Boccaccio, passion itself emanates a new aura of *gentilezza*, in which the person in love acknowledges his or her own destiny. Florio's destiny, for example, is determined by his passion for Biancifiore, and his opposition to his father, in the name of passion, is full of pride:

Se egli per forza la mi vorrà torre, e io con forza la difenderò. Io non sarò meno debole d'amici e di potenza di lui: e quando egli pur fosse più forte di me, puommi egli più che cacciar del suo regno? Se egli me ne caccia, io starò in un altro. Il mondo è grande assai: l'andare pellegrinando mi fia cagione d'essercizio. (III, 7, 10-12)

[If he wants to take her from me by force, I shall defend her by force. I shall be no less weak in friends and power than he; but even if he is the stronger, what can he do beyond exiling me from his realm? If he exiles me, I shall go to another. The world is very large, and wandering will give me the opportunity for experience.]

The destiny of Cimone (*Decameron* V, 1) – an illiterate man lacking “costume alcuno” (any manners), a man without a destiny – is born the moment he catches sight of Efigenia, on a day in May, in “un pratello d’altissimi alberi circuito” [a grove circled by tall trees]. Cimone is handsome and strong, but “quasi matto” [almost mad] and “di perduta speranza” [without hope]; he is the son of a Cypriot nobleman, but his ways are “più convenienti a bestia che ad uomo” [more similar to an animal than a man]; he is very wealthy, but lives a humble life in the country, among his father’s farmers. In other words, he lacks one of the two conditions of Boccaccio’s ideal man: a purpose in the world, and nobility and goodness of the soul. When Efigenia appears to be asleep “con un vestimento indosso tanto sottile, che quasi niente delle candide carni nascondeva” [with garment worn so lightly that almost none of her fair flesh was hidden], Cimone is transfixed by her, enrapt in ecstasy at the sight of her mouth, her throat, her arms and her breast, “poco ancora rilevato” [as yet but in bud], Efigenia has her eyes closed and lies motionless:

La quale come Cimone vide, non altramenti che se mai più forma di femina veduta non avesse, fermatosi sopra il suo bastone, senza dire alcuna cosa, con ammirazione grandissima la incominciò intentissimo a riguardare; e nel rozzo petto, nel quale per mille ammaestramenti non era alcuna impressione di cittadinesco piacere potuta entrare, sentì destrarsi un pensiero, il quale nella materiale grossa mente gli ragionava, costei essere la più bella cosa che giammai per alcuno vivente veduta fosse. (V, 1, 8)

[No sooner did Cimone catch sight of her, than, as if he had never before seen form of woman, he stopped short, and leaning on his cudgel, regarded her intently, saying never a word, and lost in admiration. And in his rude soul, which, despite a thousand lessons, had hitherto remained impervious to every delight that belongs to urbane life, he felt the awakening of an idea, that bade his gross and coarse mind acknowledge, that this girl was the fairest creature that had ever been seen by mortal eye.]¹²

In the case of Cimone the flesh redeems the spirit, the honest nudity of beauty restores an uncivilized man to civility, to the city, considered the opposite of the country throughout the Middle Ages. Cimone in fact learns “i modi, quali a’ gentili

¹² Giovanni Boccaccio: *Decameron*. Edited by Vittore Branca. 2 vols. Turin: Einaudi 1992, p. 596. English translation in: *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio Faithfully Translated by James M. Rigg*. 2 vols. London: The Navarre Society 1932, II, p. 3. All quotations and translations from the *Decameron* are drawn from these two editions, respectively.

uomini si convenieno e massimamente agl' innamorati" [the manners proper to gentlemen, and especially to lovers], he studies song and music, becomes "valorosissimo tra' filosofanti" [most eminent among the philosophic wits], and after four years is "il più leggiadro e meglio costumato e con più particolari virtù che altro giovane alcuno che nell'isola fosse di Cipri" [the most elegant and well-mannered of young men, of the young cavaliers that were in the island of Cyprus.] (§§ 18–20). His solitude – that is, his savageness – is overcome by desire, which creates destiny even in the deserts and on the mountaintops, and raises cities and traditions and languages even within the unimaginable void; this coarse and brutish man overcomes solitude by falling in love.

As to Boccaccio? How does this happy and sentimental man view solitude? Who, for him, is the lone artist standing before the world? Why would solitude, the enemy of plots, be represented as a sister and a lawgiver in the life of this writer? The apologue of Cimone reveals the divergence in views that Boccaccio eventually adopted in his fifties. Perhaps based on the exhortations of Petrarch, *gloriosus praeceptor* [the glorious teacher] who "amores meos [...] vertit in melius" [changed my loves for the better],¹³ or perhaps from sacred scripture, or from the effects of melancholy, he drew the impression that women are not in fact the honest civilizing force he had once imagined. Indeed, in the *Corbaccio* – a brilliant little misogynistic book from 1365 – he applied himself to revealing their every baseness, stolidity and cupidity. And the intrusion of this quintessentially medieval antifeminist sentiment, amid so many pages in praise of feminine sweetness, is quite shocking. If the stupid, violent and vulgar women of the *Corbaccio* are perhaps the realistic extreme or the inevitable deformation of a pre-established harmony, they are most certainly the symptom of a spiritual crisis. Looking back on his world, on Gostanza who loves Martuccio, on Pietro Boccamazza who flees with Agnoella, on the Priest of Varlungo who lies with monna Belcolore, Boccaccio seeks distance and views all of it with a cold regard: the acts and loves of men, the beauty of women, all seem obstructed and faded as if on an old tapestry, or corruptible, or vain; pleasure itself seems worthy of his reproach, with all its intrigues and daring feats. Why should he go back down into the vast world? To visit castles, infamous alleys, ship dens? Why continue to love women, when instead he can choose the Muses?

A te s'appartiene, e so che tu'l conosci, più d'usare i solitari luoghi che le moltitudini ne' templi e negli altri pubblici luoghi raccolte, visitare, e quivi stando, operando, versificando, essercitare lo 'ngegno e sforzarti di divenir migliore e d'ampliare a tuo potere, più con cose

¹³ Giovanni Boccaccio: *Epistole e lettere*. Edited by Ginetta Auzzas. In: *Tutte le opere di G. Boccaccio*. Edited by Vittore Branca. 10 vols. Milan: Mondadori 1994, V, 1, p. 720.

fatte che con parole, la fama tua; che, appresso quella salute ed eterno riposo, il qual ciascuno che drittamente desidera dee volere, è il fine della tua lunga sollecitudine. Mentre tu sarai ne' boschi e ne' rimoti luoghi, le Ninfe Castalide, alle quali queste malvage femmine si vogliono assomigliare, non t'abbandoneranno già mai; la bellezza delle quali, sì come io ho inteso è celestiale. (§§ 196–197)

[Rather than visiting the multitudes gathered in churches and other public places, it is fitting for you, and I know you are aware of it, to frequent solitary places, and there, by studying, working, and versifying, to exercise your intellect and to make an effort to better yourself, and, as best you can, to increase your fame more with deeds than words; for after that, salvation and eternal repose, which everyone who desires aright must want, are the goal of your long diligence.

While you are in the woods and remote places, the Castalian nymphs, with whom these wicked women would compare themselves, will never abandon you. Their beauty, as I have heard, is celestial.]¹⁴

This classical, Heliconian solitude, suffused with Christian austerity, is the myth of the late Boccaccio; a great man who, at a certain point, comes to despise life's turmoil; a curious and happy man who, at a certain point, becomes melancholic: we can imagine him in the cold Certaldese nights, bundled up in the miniver cloak given to him by Petrarch, writing without pause, studying, researching, alone, tenaciously alone, he who invented Buffalmacco and the exhilarating celebration of life.

Petrarch, the master of solitude, continually describes this human state of excellence, and bequeaths it to his contemporaries as well as to posterity. Solitude is a treasure, a limitless hoard of which he studies and catalogues every gem: from Vaucluse, where he lives with two servants and a dog “blacker than pitch and faster than breeze” (*Fam.* XIII, 11, 1),¹⁵ to his house among the fields of Sant'Ambrogio in Padua, where in one of his little gardens, “ornamented with fronds and flowers,” he receives Boccaccio (*Ep.* X, 5),¹⁶ to Arquà, in the Euganean hills, where he dies, all of his life is a succession of solitudes. “Wherever he went;”

¹⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio: *Corbaccio*. Edited by Giorgio Padoan. In: *Tutte le opere di G. Boccaccio*. Edited by Vittore Branca. 10 vols. Milan: Mondadori 1994, V, 2, p. 476. Trans. in: Giovanni Boccaccio: *The Corbaccio*. Translated and edited by Anthony K. Cassell. Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1975, p. 36.

¹⁵ “Canis tuus pice nigrior vento levrior [...]” See Francesco Petrarca: *Le familiari*. Ed. by Vittorio Rossi (vols 1–3) and by Vittorio Rossi and Umberto Bosco (vol. 4). Firenze: Sansoni 1933–1942 (Edizione nazionale delle opere di Petrarca, 10–13), III, p. 91. English translation in: Francesco Petrarca: *Letters on Familiar Matters: Rerum familiarium libri*. Translated by Aldo S. Bernardo. 3 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1975–1985, II, p. 212.

¹⁶ “[...] et in ortulum ibamus tuum iam ob novum ver frondibus atque floribus ornatum.” See Boccaccio's letter to Petrarch (1353). In: Boccaccio: *Epistole e lettere*, p. 574.

writes Ugo Foscolo, “he took up his abode in a sort of hermitage, and continued to compose whole volumes [...].”¹⁷ Along with Augustine (the *Confessions*, the *Soliloquies*, *De vera religione*), his companions in solitude are the Roman writers (Virgil and his “dulcedo quedam et sonoritas” [sweetness and tunefulness of the words], Cicero and his *concinnitas*; *Sen. XVI, 1*),¹⁸ and then the Davidian Psalms and Boethius and the Provençal poets; secret bosom friends, discrete and agreeable, who can join him from any part of the world and from any period of time; friends who settle themselves into a corner of the house and assist him attentively, who take leave at his merest signal, “redeantque vocati” (returning when called; *Epyst. XVI, 187*).¹⁹ Petrarch does not squander a minute of his time; rather, he lives “today in the present day, content to live tomorrow if a morrow shall be granted.” (*De vita sol. I, 8*)²⁰ (lives today for today, and will live tomorrow, if it is given, when tomorrow comes). His day is industrious and the hours follow one after another, each bringing new riches. Anxiety, which stalks the city dweller, is unknown to him, and among the books he has to read and those to write he knows nothing but happiness:

Solitario, cui quid agere velit iam provisum est, cui non modo de partibus sed de tota etate semesl est constitutum, non dies aut nox longior, sepe vero brevior est quam vellet, dum honestis in rebus occupatum deserit et ante suscepti finem operis lux finitur.

[But for the solitary man, who has regulated the entire course of his life and not merely some portions of it, there is no day or night that is too long, though it is often shorter than he would like when he is engaged in his innocent tasks and the light of day is gone before his labor is accomplished.] (*ibid.*).²¹

A collector of solitudes and occupant of hermit retreats, Petrarch is also, and exemplarily so, *homme accompli*: one cannot imagine a more perfect elegance

¹⁷ Ugo Foscolo: *An Essay on the Character of Petrarch* 16. In his: *Saggi e discorsi critici*. Edited by Cesare Foligno. Florence: Le Monnier 1953 (Edizione nazionale delle opere di U.F., 10), p. 104.

¹⁸ *Franciscus Petrarcae Opera omnia*. Basle: Sebastianus Henricpetri 1581, p. 946. English translation in: 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, II, p. 600.

¹⁹ Francesco Petrarca: *Epistole metriche*. In his: *Rime, Trionfi e poesie latine*. Edited by Ferdinando Neri/ Guido Martellotti et al. Milan and Naples: Ricciardi 1951 (Letteratura italiana. Storia e testi, 6), p. 736.

²⁰ “[...] hodiernum diem hodie vivit, crastinum, si dabitur, cras victurus.” See Francesco Petrarca: *Prose*. Edited by Guido Martellotti / Pier Giorgio Ricci et al. Milan and Naples: Ricciardi 1955, p. 398. English translation in: *The Life of Solitude by Francis Petrarch*. Ed. and trans. by J. Zeitlin. Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1924, p. 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 396–398. English trans., p. 180.

and cordiality than his, a more tempered eloquence, a gentler smile. Whether addressing himself to Robert of Anjou or to the sharecropper of Vaucluse, he expresses himself with the same measure and attention, with the same spirit he reserves for the great men of the past: “elegant, [...] inclined to melancholy, of a delicate and impressionable nature,”²² as Francesco De Sanctis would say of him, with a hint of impatience. But in his self portrait within the *Posteritati* we find truth and modesty, intensity and charm, brilliance and temperance united so harmoniously as to repel even this impatience. To discover the true Petrarch, behind the veil of syntax, beyond the masterful and niggling unilingualism of his verses, was, to a certain extent, every scholar’s dream, beginning in particular with De Sanctis (“Mai non puoi coglierlo in veste da camera; mai non ti viene innanzi che in guanti gialli e in cravatta bianca” [You can never surprise him in his nightrobes; he only ever comes to meet you in yellow gloves and a white tie]):²³ but the irreality with which the poet surrounds himself is not the enemy of truth; rather, it is his truth expressed freely in his works and in his own life. Solitude and irreality are the walls of the house in which Petrarch dwelled. All that is physical – material objects, his own body – was a great bore to him: “what do you find troublesome about it?” Augustine asks him in the *Secretum*. “Nothing other than the usual complaints: that it’s mortal, that it involves me in its pains, that it weighs me down with its weight, that when my spirit wants to wake, it induces it to sleep [...].”²⁴ Everything that is present and historical alarms him: “I always disliked our own age,” he confides in the *Posteritati*, “- so much so, that had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I would have preferred to have been born in any other time than our own.”²⁵ Everything that is not of the spirit and that falls into the obtuseness of the senses terrifies him, and to Boccaccio, who urges him to rest, he responds almost sternly: “[...] so great is my hatred for sleep and lazy repose. [...] whatever I may appear to you

²² “elegante [...] inchinevole alla malinconia, natura impressionabile e delicata.” See Francesco De Sanctis: *Saggio critico sul Petrarca*. Edited by Niccolò Gallo. Turin: Einaudi 1964, p. 39.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁴ “Aug. [...] Quid in eo molestum experiris? Fr. Nichil equidem, nisi comunia quedam: quod mortale est, quod suis me doloribus implicat, mole pregravat, somnum suadet spiritu vigilante [...]” See Petrarch: *Prose*, p. 118. Trans. in: Francesco Petrarch: *My Secret Book*. Edited and Translated by Nicholas Mann. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016 (The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 72), p. 131.

²⁵ “[...] michi semper etas ista displicuit; ut, nisi me amor carorum in diversum traheret, qualibet etate natus esse semper optaverim [...]” See Petrarch: *Prose*, p. 1–19, at p. 6. Trans. in: Petrarch: *Letter to Posterity*. In his: *Selections from the “Canzoniere” and Other Works*. Translated and Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Mark Musa. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985, p. 1–10, at p. 3.

or to others, this is my view of myself.” (*Senilis* XVII, 2, 9).²⁶ Reality is brutal and dull; human society – in every epoch – is *impious* (Avignon: “*empia Babilonia*,” *RVF* CXIV, 1); life itself, among men, becomes incomprehensible, and so nature, which we never tire of admiring and praising, is transformed into a scene of frigid beauty (“Then indeed having seen enough of the mountain I turned my inner eyes within [...],” we read in the famous epistle to Dionigi di San Sepolcro).²⁷ But what do we find in solitude? Above all the sentiment of the vanity of the world and of time:

[...] Sine tempore vivite; nam vos
 et magno partum debent tempora nomen,
 transibuntque cito que vos mansura putatis.
 Una manere potest occasus nescia virtus.
 Illa viam facit ad superos. Hac pergite fortes,
 nec defessa gravi succumbant terga labori.
 Quod si falsa vagam delectat gloria mentem,
 aspice quid cupias: transibunt tempora, corpus
 hoc cadet et cedent indigno membra sepulcro;
 mox ruet et bustum, titulusque in marmore sectus
 occidet: hinc mortem patieris, nate, secundam.
 Clara quidem libris felicibus insita vivet
 Fama diu, tamen ipsa suas passura tenebras. (*Africa* II, 423–435)

[...] Live beyond time,
 for Time devours both you and your renown,
 fruit of such arduous toil. For true it is:
 what seems most lasting does most swiftly fade.
 Virtue alone, that heeds not death, endures.
 Virtue alone prepares the way to Heaven.
 So hither, heroes, come! Let this last burden
 Be not too great for the weary backs to bear.
 But if your wayward heart still would find joy
 in empty glory, know what prize you seek:
 the years will pass, your mortal form decay;
 your limbs will lie in an unworthy tomb
 which in its turn will crumble, while your name
 fades from the sculptured marble. Thus you'll know
 a second death. Though honors registered
 on worthy scrolls have long and lustrous life,

²⁶ “[...] tantum somni et languide odium est quietis. [...] quicquid tibi, quicquid aliis videar, hoc de me iudicium meum est.” See Petrarca: *Prose*, p. 1156. Trans., II, p. 654.

²⁷ “Tunc vero montem satis vidisse contentus, in me ipsum interiores oculos reflexi [...]” See Petrarca: *Le familiari*, I, p. 159. English translation in: Petrarca: *Letters on Familiar Matters*, I, p. 178.

yet they too in the end are likewise doomed
to fade away. (...)]²⁸

This biblical headlong rush of time and civilization toward ruin, this immense dust cloud to which the history of mankind is reduced, is a fixed point – the only fixed point – of the Petrarchan ‘system.’ If everything in his soul is uncertain and changeable (“*Voluntates mee fluctuant, et desideria discordant et discordando me lacerant.*” [My wishes fluctuate and my desires are discordant and, being so, they tear me to pieces.], *Fam.* II, 9, 17),²⁹ if nearly every thought has its opposite and every passion has its own share of blame, Petrarch has not the least doubt about *vanitas*; indeed, this vanity, time’s inability to endure, is the primary driving force of his poetry. In the verses of the *Africa*, Scipio weeps for history and for his times, which will leave no traces (not even ruins can be considered a trace, because even they become dust and nothing), and for fame, which is limited in time, and which stands in opposition to *virtus*. God, the immutable, is, for Christian Petrarch who, as E. H. Wilkins observed, “never questioned any article of the creed; he never explored the field of theology;”³⁰ the polar opposite of ruin, the ahistorical principle of every certainty, the heavenly *Festboden*. Just as the ruin of human actions is certain (and even, we should note, of poetry: “*ipsa suas passura tenebras,*” *Afr.* II, 435), equally certain is God’s perpetual splendor.

Between the two poles of human lability and divine consistency, time and eternity, Petrarch constructs his most perfect song: “Padre del ciel, dopo i perduti giorni, / dopo le notti vaneggiando spese [...]” [Father of Heaven, after the lost days, after the nights spent] (*RVF* LXII, 1–2).³¹ This vertical rapture, this dream of absolute redemption (“*reduci i pensier’ vaghi a miglior luogo,*” *ibid.*, 13) is, in an inchoative sense, the religious consecration of solitude. In solitude, which will never result in absolute happiness, the word is above all a form of prayer, a question addressed to his “great friend” which would free the poet from the “binding” of his sins. Nevertheless, the poet knows himself to be weak and cannot find the spiritual energy to regain his health; he has grace in his sights, but something

28 Pétrarque: *LAfrique*. Préface de Henri Lamarque. Introduction, traduction et notes de Rebecca Lenoir. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon 2002, p. 102. Trans. in: *Petrarch's Africa*. Translated and Annotated by Thomas G. Bergin and Alice S. Wilson. New Haven: Yale University Press 1977, p. 37.

29 Francesco Petrarca: *Le familiari*, I, p. 94. Trans., I, p. 101.

30 Ernst Hatch Wilkins: *Life of Petrarch*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1961, p. 254.

31 All quotes from the *RVF* are taken from Francesco Petrarca: *Canzoniere*. Edited by Gianfranco Contini. Turin: Einaudi 1964; translations from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems. The "Rime sparse" and Other Lyrics*. Translated and Edited by Robert Durling. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1976.

within his own being impedes him from obtaining it. This friend of the Augustinians, Benedictines, Camaldolese, Celestines, Cistercians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Vallumbrosans, this devotee of religious leisure, this ardent admirer of his own brother, a monk at Montrieux, this fanciful man so in love with decisive action remains beyond action himself: “all change occurs in his mind, while externally everything remains exactly the same” (De Sanctis).³² In the Kierkegaardian stages of existence, Petrarch would be the “false aesthete,” he who, having seen the ethical world, instead chooses the aesthetic world but does not live aesthetically because he sins and succumbs to ethical determinations; this weak man (*spiritus lenis*) is lacking the “baptism of the will,” which gives an ethical character to reflection. Tormented by *aegritudo* and by sloth, “funesta quedam pestis animi” [dreadful sickness of the spirit],³³ Petrarch is like a warrior surrounded by cruel enemies and weapons of war, ladders and vines; alone and without a means of escape, he is left with nothing but the infinite pain of defeat, even if perhaps, in some part of heaven, victorious chariots do shine: “Who would not take fright and grieve at the sight of swords flashing everywhere and the threatening faces of the enemy, and at the thought of the approaching destruction, especially since, even in the absence of such threats the loss of freedom is itself unbearable for courageous men?” (*Secretum* II).³⁴ Compared with Augustine, who effected his own conversion, Petrarch is the man who does not know what he wants and whose life remains essentially static and filled with anguish. How many tears and how much anxiety in his solitude! True religious tears turn “Augustine into a different Augustine;” those of Petrarch, who sees the better and chooses the worse, take pathos and tenderness to the point of irremediable unhappiness.

As a guest of the poet’s solitude, Laura is also its worst enemy. An immaterial creature like her ancestors in the Sicilian and Dolce Stilnovo traditions, with her mere appearance she creates a disturbance and an immediate ecstasy in the contemplator, whose solitude shifts from ascetic to amorous, from happy to unhappy. Laura, like glory, like the odious sexual act, like sloth, is a spiritual ‘ball and chain’; her very appearance is an act of domination, and the enchained will never again break free from her grasp. Laura is evanescent: her golden tresses, her dark eyes, perfect hands, her veil, her glove, her (green) gown, her signal of greeting, whether denied or conceded, are nothing more than emblems; cruel or sweet, aloof or smiling, she herself is no more real than the abstract Provençal

³² De Sanctis: *Saggio critico*, p. 119.

³³ Petrarca: *Prose*, p. 106. Trans. p. 113.

³⁴ “Undique fulgentes gladios, minantesque vultus hostium cernens vicinumque cogitans excidium, quidni paveat et lugeat, quando, his licet cessantibus, ipsa libertatis amissio viris fortibus mestissima est?” See Petrarca: *Prose*, p. 108. Trans., p. 117.

dames. But something escapes from the rule of evanescence: new elements, new ambiguities are found in that visage. Cesare De Lollis wrote that Laura is the type “of lady who has nothing to do with that angelic maiden, an artificial creation of the circle of Florentine youths, and little to do with that *châtelaine* of Provence, reigning from a distance.”³⁵ Laura’s secret is in her sweet and arcane proximity to Francesco, in her being a living presence – immaterial creature that she is – in his life. Despite its various attempts at allegorization – the encounter on the anniversary of the Passion of Christ (“Mille trecento ventisette, a punto / su l’ora prima, il dí sesto d’aprile” [One thousand three hundred twenty-seven, exactly at the first / hour of the sixth day of April], *RVF* CCXI, 12–13), the death of the lady on the twenty-first anniversary of their first meeting, 6 April 1348 – despite its general conception “as a counterpoint to the liturgical breviary” (Contini),³⁶ despite its ingeniousness, the *Canzoniere* is the story, or the daily journal, of a passion. Precisely because of its oscillation between salvation and perdition, occurrence and repetition, spiritual ascent and worldliness, Laura’s appearance evokes surprise and creates quite an original psychological storyline. We can imagine Francesco who, one particular day, recognizes here on earth that which “era più degna d’immortale stato” [was more worthy of immortal state]: he sees “begli occhi lucenti” [beautiful shining eyes], he receives from her a “dolce saluto” [sweet greeting] (*RVF* CX, 8, 13, 14), and his reaction is similar to ecstasy: “I’ mi riscossi; ed ella oltra, parlando, / passò, che la parola i’ non sofferisi, / né’l dolce sfavillar degli occhi suoi” [I trembled, and she, conversing, passed onward, for I could not / endure her speech or the sweet sparkling of her eyes] (*RVF* CXI, 9–11). His mind is entranced and taken prisoner by the image (Cassirer would speak of “mythical thought”) and cannot distinguish or discern: “[...] avvezza / la mente a contemplar sola costei / ch’altro non vede [...]” [accustomed / my mind to contemplate her alone that it sees nothing else] (*RVF* CXVI, 5–7); solitude is seemingly defeated by “tanta maiestade,” and every goal of individual askesis is forever forgotten. Wouldn’t a reciprocated love, an ecstatic love, a love between two souls, be happier than the solitary path of the Christian ascetic?

Quel vago impallidir che’l dolce riso
d’un amorosa nebbia ricoperse,
con tanta maiestade al cor s’offerse
che li si fece incontr’a mezzo ‘l viso
Conobbi allor sì come in paradiso
vede l’un l’altro, in tal guisa s’aperse

³⁵ Cesare De Lollis: *Recensione al florilegio petrarchesco di N. Zingarelli*. In: *La Cultura* 6 (1927), p. 464–466.

³⁶ Contini: *Letteratura*, p. 580.

quel pietoso penser, ch'altri non scerse;
ma vidil io, ch'altrove non m'affiso.

Ogni angelica vista, ogni atto umile
che già mai in donna ov'amor fosse apparve,
fora uno sdegno a lato a quel che dico.

Chinava a terra il bel guardo gentile
e tacendo dicea come a me parve:
"Chi m'allontana il mio fedele amico?" (RVF CXXIII)

[The lovely pallor, which covered her sweet smile with a cloud
Of love, with so much majesty presented itself to my heart that
He went to meet it in the midst of my face.
I learned then how they see each other in Paradise; so clearly did
That merciful thought open itself, which no one else perceived,
But I saw it, for I fixed myself nowhere else.
Every angelic expression, every humble gesture that ever ap-
peared in a lady who harbored love, would be scorn beside what
I speak of.
She bent to earth her lovely noble glance and in her silence said,
as it seemed to me: "Who sends away from me my faithful
friend?"]

Come in paradiso vede l'un l'altro: one can reach this state of exceptional communion only in a dream or, more precisely, in ecstasy; and Francesco completely abandons himself to his "pietoso penser," the private celebration of Love Absolute, which defies explanation and contracts, equivocations and words ("tacendo dicea"), and which annuls the fiction of time. But a similar love, so vertiginous and perfectly happy, cannot have a narration nor *fragmenta*. Laura's beauty is such that every other earthly beauty, in comparison, seems negligible; indeed, when Laura laughs or weeps or speaks, everything is *intent* and immobile, and the world itself is enchanted and suspended. But precisely this excellence, this being 'alone' at the summit of beauty itself, causes the lover – who, in the ecstasy of the meeting, loved Laura *sine tempore* – to fall headlong into time and into a solitude from which he once thought himself to be forever free. Laura is *ideal* ("In qual parte del Ciel, in quale Idea" [In what part of Heaven, in what Idea], RVF CLIX, 1), but also mysteriously alive and rich with earthly seductions: "non sa come Amor sana e come ancide, / chi non sa come dolce ella sospira / e come dolce parla e dolce ride" [he does not know how Love heals and how he kills, who does / not know how sweetly she sighs and how sweetly she speaks and / sweetly laughs] (ibid., 12–14). Francesco, enrapt by Laura's seductive ideality, is simultaneously repelled by it – Laura's greatness is not his greatness – and remains alone, still in love, a desperate celebrant of the rites of his little sacred story.

From this moment, in the fragmentary pages of the *Canzoniere*, Laura's portrait cedes a bit to Francesco's authority. Like Guidoriccio da Fogliano in Simone Martini's famous Sienese fresco, who rides through a lunar desert under the face of the sky, carrying with him his victories and his solitude, so Francesco, the solitary figure anointed by Love, the nobleman, wanders through the world, waving his exalted melancholy like a banner. He flees from Laura while carrying her in his own heart, flees "ma non s'è ratto che'l desio / meco non venga [...]" [but not so quickly that my desire / does not come with me] (*RVF XVIII*, 10–11), like a blind man, "che non sa ove si vada e pur si parte" [who does not / know where to go and still departs] (*ibid.*, 4); his solitude is troubled because the 'ministers' – thoughts of love – visit it assiduously. His own ability to reason is disturbed: on the one hand he concludes that the amorous yoke and shackles are sweeter than "l'andare sciolto" [going free] (*RVF LXXXIX*, 11), and that he regrets this "nova libertà" [new liberty] (*ibid.*, 4); on the other hand he sees his initial error quite clearly, when "[...] l'antica strada / di libertà mi fu precisa [...]" (*RVF XCVI*, 9–10). Francesco knows well that he cannot make head or tail of this contradiction:

Pien d'un vago penser che me desvia
da tutti gli altri e fammi al mondo ir solo,
ad or ad ora a me stesso m'involo,
pur lei cercando che fuggir devria [...] (*RVF CLXIX*, 1–4)

[Full of a yearning thought that makes me stray away from all
others and go alone in the world, from time to time I steal myself
away from myself, still seeking only her whom I should flee]

Only Christ or death could free him, but Christ – whose cross broke apart the Stoic circle – can do nothing for a man entwined in an earthly love, and death seems a distant promise. Thus Francesco's love can neither be eliminated nor brought to fulfillment; love that renders the lover "tremante" [trembling] and "fioco" [feeble] seems to be a state of inexpressibility, a condition of obstruction which prevents one's words from being heard and understood by any other, and above all by the beloved:

Più volte già dal bel sembiante umano
ò preso ardir co' le mie fide scorte
d'assalir con parole oneste accorte
la mia nemica in atto umile e piano.
Fanno poi gli occhi suoi mio penser vano,
per ch'ogni mia fortuna, ogni mia sorte,
mio ben, mio male, e mia vita e mia morte,
quei che solo il pò far, l'ha posto in mano.
Ond'io non pote' mai formar parola

ch'altro che da me stesso fosse intesa;
 così m'è fatto Amor tremante e fioco!
 E veggi' or ben che caritate accesa
 lega la lingua altrui, gli spirti invola:
 chi pò dir com'egli arde, è 'n picciol foco (RVF CLXX)

[Many times from her kind expression I have learned boldness,
 with my faithful guides, to assail with virtuous skillful words my
 enemy so humble and mild of bearing.
 But her eyes then make my thought vain, for Love, who alone
 can do so, has placed in her hands all my fortune, all my
 destiny, my good, my ill, my life, and my death.
 Wherefore I have never been able to form a word that was
 understood by any but myself, Love has made me so trembling
 and weak!
 And I see well how burning Love binds one's tongue, steals away
 one's breath: he who can say how he burns is in but a little fire.]

True love, like true desperation, has no words: “desperation that writes well is not really definitive,” as Paul Valéry would say;³⁷ and Francesco, who fails to “formar” words that can be understood by anyone other than himself, now finds himself at the point of amorous aphasia. But, against all expectations, he continues to speak and write, demonstrating that the amorous word is a great deal stronger and larger than love itself. Thus, for once at least, we learn the truth from this fascinating liar.

Now let us proceed with our investigation. On his mythical boat, “sì lieve di saver, d'error sì carica” [so light of wisdom, so laden with error] (RVF CXXXII, 12), Francesco finds himself in a stormy sea, sailing against the wind; at times he feels that he no longer understands anything and he succumbs to anguish; perhaps Laura herself never existed at all, or is hiding in the fog (“Celansi i duo mei dolci usati segni” [My two usual sweet stars are hidden], RVF CLXXXIX, 12). Even God is absent, or has withdrawn or vanished among the enormous waves: “nuoto per mar che non à fondo o riva,” Francesco says, “solco onde, e'n rena fondo, e scrivo in vento” [I swim through a sea that has / no floor or shore, I plow the waves and found my house on sand / and write on wind] (RVF CCXII, 3–4). In this condition, Laura's presence, albeit ghostly and ambiguous, becomes necessary; if Laura were not there, “tanto et più fien le cose oscure e sole” [so dark and darker will / things be and deserted] (RVF CCXVIII, 13), as if the sun and moon were missing from the sky, the wind from the air, the plants and woods from the earth, and intellect and language from humankind. Thus she realizes and dramatizes

37 Paul Valéry: *Variation sur une “Pensée” annotée par l'auteur*. Liège: Balancier 1930, p. 22.

Francesco's solitude, which is otherwise anguished, eternally mute and uninhabited: her absence is perhaps more inconceivable than the absence of God, at least on the level of fable, which in Petrarch becomes the pure transcription and repetition of the initial occurrence. God can conceal himself from the lover, reason can abandon him, 'art' can be forgotten, but Laura cannot die (her death, in the *Canzoniere*, is a mere formality). Indeed, her eternity, her eternal presence, competes with that of God: "Tal la mi trovo al petto ove ch'i' sia, / felice incarco; e con preghiere oneste / l'adoro e'inchino come cosa santa." [Such do I find it in my breast, wherever I may be, a happy / burden, and with chaste prayers I adore it and bow to it as to a / holy thing.] (*RVF* CCXXVIII, 12–14). Already having moved beyond Guinizelli and Dante, here the woman is not the mediator of divine grace, nor the contemplator of God; rather, she herself is the eternally reborn, the timeless phoenix, with her adorers, her churches and her heaven, just like God. Leopardi, in his masterful and laconic commentary on the *Canzoniere*, would ironize this phoenix ("Rumor has it that the Phoenix lives hidden in the mountains of Arabia, when in fact she lives in our own parts, and flies majestically through our skies. This means that Laura is the true phoenix, and the other is a fable!"),³⁸ but somewhat wrongfully, if we consider that Francesco, in his oscillation between Laura and God, is forced to accentuate Laura's majesty by any means possible. In the *canzone* CXXXV, for example, Laura is seen not as a phoenix but as a mythical African animal, the catoblepas, whose eyes destroy anyone coming under its gaze, and even as the Fountain of Epirus, icy cold, but which can ignite fires within itself. With these exaggerations Francesco portrays himself as prisoner of a curse, fatally deceived by love: "L'anima mia, ch'offesa / ancor non era d'amoroso foco, / appressandosi un poco / a quella fredda, ch'io sempre sospiro, / arse tutta [...]" [My soul, not yet harmed by any fire of love, approaching but a little that cold one for whom I ever sigh, / caught fire entirely] (*ibid.*, 65–69) This indeed is the curse. But, "poi che 'nfiammata l'ebbe, / rispensela virtù gelata e bella": this is the deception, namely the discovery of the fallacy of amorous ecstasy and irreparable solitude of both lover and beloved (Lucretius in fact noted that lovers are denied fusion into a single being: "[...] nihil inde abraderere possunt / nec penetrare et abire in corpus corpore toto." [they cannot rub nothing off, nor can they penetrate and be absorbed body in body], *De rer. nat.* IV, 1110–1111).³⁹ Therefore, Laura

38 "La fama porta che la Fenice viva nascosta nelle montagne d'Arabia, quando ella in verità vive nelle nostre parti, e vola maestosamente per l'aria. Vuol dire che Laura è la vera fenice, e l'altra è una favola!" See Francesco Petrarca: *Canzoniere*. Introduction by Ugo Foscolo. Notes by Giacomo Leopardi. Edited by U. Dotti. Milan: Feltrinelli 2003⁶, p. 200.

39 Lucretius: *De rerum natura*. With and English Translation by W. H. D. Rouse. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1992, p. 362–363.

is the deception in which Francesco blindly persists, year after year; even when he runs “ver la stagion contraria” [nearing the season that is contrary] (RVF CLXVIII, 10), he feels his strength leave him, his words escape him, his life slip away little by little. To immortalize this deception for posterity, to render splendid, in his verses, the solitude of the lover and the “infinita bellezza” [infinite beauty] (CCIII, 5) of the beloved is, on the other hand, is the thorn in Francesco’s side:

Quest’arder mio, di che vi cal sì poco,
 e i vostri onori in mie rime diffusi,
 ne porian infiammar fors’ancor mille;
 ch’i’ veggio nel penser, dolce mio foco,
 fredda una lingua e duo belli occhi chiusi
 rimaner, dopo noi, pien’ di faville. (RVF CCIII, 9–14)

[This ardor of mine, which matters so little to you, and your praises in my well-known rhymes, could perhaps yet inflame thousands;
 for in my thought I see, O my sweet fire, a tongue cold in death and two lovely eyes closed, which after us will remain full of embers.]

Francesco’s love is handed down to posterity without ornament, nor pretense of beatitude, but rather in its naked and unhappy beauty; and the countless future readers of the *Canzoniere* will be gifted this absolute figure (“Tu sola mi piaci”), this monotonous succession of radiant instants and moments of solitude.

In one of the *Penitential Psalms*, Petrarch would say that love is the effect of a diversion and a desperation: “Non respexi ad orientem, nec unde debueram auxilium expectavi; nec sicut dignum fuerat, speravi.” [Nor look I yet, Lord, to the east, / Nor hope for help, where I am will’d] (*Ps.* VI, 4);⁴⁰ and so I fell in love. Love, which in the poems is presented as the pivotal experience of human life, would be nothing more than a distraction, a force that draws the soul away from its purpose; and beauty is the supreme source of feeling (corruption) and lamenting elegy. After all, in one of the *Metrice* the poet regards his own love for Laura with severity, and in the *Posteritati* he dedicates only two lines to that *amor acerrimus sed unicus et honestus* [an overwhelming but pure love-affair].⁴¹ But within these examples we find reticence and silence. Is not the invocation of the eastern horizon, by this

⁴⁰ Francesco Petrarca: *Salmi penitenziali*. In his: *Rime, Trionfi e poesie latine*. Edited by F. Neri, G. Martellotti, E. Bianchi, N. Sapegno. Milan: Ricciardi 1951 (Letteratura italiana. Storia e testi, 6), p. 842. Trans. in: *Petrarch's Penitential Psalms*. In: *The Works of George Chapman. Poems and Minor Translations*. With and Introduction by Algernon C. Swinburne. London: Chatto and Windus 1975, p. 133–142, at p. 140.

⁴¹ Petrarca: *Prose*, p. 4. Trans. p. 2.

brilliant inventor of sunsets, spiritually unrealistic? And doesn't the human blaze of Laura's eyes have the quality of an eternal dawn? The late Jungian psychologist James Hillman, in his now classic work *Re-Visioning Psychology*, confirms that the Augustinian statement on interiority ("Noli foras ire, in the ipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas [...]." [Do not go abroad. Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth.], *De vera relig.* XXXIX, 72)⁴² acts 'poetically' on Petrararch's soul: if the external world – the mountains, the ocean waves, the flow of rivers, the stars – is refuted because of its vain beauty, then neither is interiority, to which Petrararch consecrates himself ("[...] in me ipsum interiores oculos reflexi" [I turned my inner eyes within], *Fam.* IV, 1),⁴³ lacking in beauty or form; just like the world outside, interiority has its own landscape, with trees, ocean waves, rivers and stars. In spite of what Augustine might teach, interiority is not pure spiritual intimacy or silent abyss or expectation, but the opening scene of a play, the locus of poetic action *par excellence*. It is in these scenographic terms that Francesco, solitary man and capable of marvelous feats, tells the story of his soul:

Anzi tre dì creata era alma in parte
da por sua cura in cose altere et nove,
e dispregiar di quel ch'a molti è'n pregio,
quest'ancor dubbia del fatal suo corso,
sola, pensando, pargoletta et sciolta,
intrò di primavera in un bel bosco.

Era un tenero fior nato in quel bosco
il giorno avanti; et la radice in parte
ch'apressar nol potea anima sciolta;
ché v'eran di lacciuo' forme sí nove,
e tal piacer precipitava al corso
che perder libertate ivi era in pregio.

Caro, dolce, alto, et faticoso pregio
che ratto mi volgesti al verde bosco
usato di sviarne a mezzo'l corso!

Et ò cerco poi'l mondo a parte a parte
se versi o petre o suco d'erbe nove
mi rendesser un dí la mente sciolta.

Ma, lasso, or veggio che la carne sciolta
fia di quel nodo ond'è'l suo maggior pregio
prima che medicine antiche o nove
saldin le piaghe ch'i' presi in quel bosco
folto di spine: ond'i' ò ben tal parte,

⁴² Translation in: Augustine: *Early Writings*. Selected and Translated with Introductions by John H. S. Burleigh. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1953, p. 262.

⁴³ Petrarca: *Le familiari*, I, p. 159. Trans. in: Petrarca: *Letters on Familiar Matters*, I, p. 178.

che zoppo n'esco, e'ntra'vi a sí gran corso.

Pien di lacci et di stecchi un duro corso
 aggio a fornire, ove leggera et sciolta
 pianta avrebbe uopo e sana d'ogni parte.
 Ma tu, Signor, ch'ài di pietate il pregio
 porgimi la man destra in questo bosco;
 vinca'l tuo sol le mie tenebre nove.

Guarda'l mio stato, a le vaghezze nove
 che'nnterrompendo di mia vita il corso
 m'àn fatto habitador d'ombroso bosco;
 rendimi, s'esser pò, libera, et sciolta
 l'errante mia consorte, e fia Tuo'l pregio
 s'anchor teco la trovo in miglior parte.

Or ecco in parte le question' mie nove:
 s'alcun pregio in me vive, o'n tutto è corso,
 o l'alma sciolta, o ritenuta al bosco. (*RVF C CXIV*)

[Three days before, a soul had been created in a place
 where it might put its care in things high and new
 and despise what the many prize.
 She, still uncertain of her fated course,
 alone, thoughtful, young, and free,
 in springtime entered a lovely wood.

A tender flower had been born in that wood
 the day before, with its root in a place
 that could not be approached by a soul still free;
 for there were snares there of form so new
 and such pleasure hastened one's course
 that to lose liberty was there a prize.

Dear, sweet, high, laborious prize,
 which quickly turned me to the green wood,
 accustomed to making us stray in the midst of our course!
 And I have later sought through the world from place to place
 if verses or precious stones or juice of strange herbs
 could one day make my mind free.

But now, alas, I see that my flesh shall be free
 From that knot for which it is most greatly prized,
 before medicines old or new
 can heal the wounds I received in that wood
 thick with thorns; on account of them it is my lot
 to come out lame, and I entered with so swift a course!

Full of snares and thorns is the course
 that I must complete, where a light, free
 foot would be in need, one whole in every place.
 But you, Lord, who have all pity's praise,
 reach me your right hand in this wood:
 let your sun vanquish this my strange shadow.

Guard my state from those new beauties
 which, breaking off my life's course,
 have made me a dweller in the shady wood:
 Make again, if it can be, unbound and free
 my wandering consort; and let yours be the praise
 if I find her again with You in a better place.

Now behold in part my strange doubts:
 if any worth is alive in me or all run out,
 if my soul is free or captive in the wood.]

This story of the soul, narrated in the six strophes and *commiato* of sestina CCXIV, is of an almost transparent, almost evanescent allegorism: there is a wood, a tender flower, thorns; nothing more. What a difference from Dante's *selva*! There the 'soul' was above all *forma corporis*, the primary creator of "natura riottosa" (unruly nature, according to Ungaretti), free to choose and pursue its aim among forms both real and spectral – the allegories, the three beasts – free to ascend "dall'imo del baratro all'empireo" (from the depths of the abyss up to the Empyrean). Here instead the soul, removed from conflict with the material world and placed in sweet captivity, completes imaginary voyages, raises muffled supplications and invocations to heaven, lives weakly, sings with a whisper of a voice. Having reached the third stage of life – adolescence – the soul hesitates in uncertainty; faced with a thousand possible directions, it still doesn't recognize its own destiny and has no idea which way to go; but it is young, and we catch a glimpse of the joy, the simple passion of *going*. The entrance to that shadowy wood is in fact enmeshed by a web of marvels, enticements and pleasures, whose point of diffusion is Laura – the tender flower – and whose primary seduction is the threshold, the choice, the distinction with respect to the rest of the world: the soul the soul would like to enter into this sort of place for all eternity, it must hand itself over as prisoner, it must exile itself in perpetuity. But this segregation in the delightful excellence of the wood coincides, in a certain sense, with oblivion and the abandoning of truth and the absence of means. The wood itself is an eminently ambiguous place which, on the one hand, reveals to the soul the "fatal suo corso" – that is, its perpetual captivity – and on the other *diverts* (distracts from) its ascetic intension as well as its disposition to "cose altere et nove": "perder libertate ivi era in pregio", says Francesco; and then: "Caro, dolce, alto et faticoso pregio / che ratto mi volgesti al verde bosco [...]." The wood therefore creates a form – a challenge, an acute vital principle, an agony – in his soul (*agony*, Rosenzweig reminds us, is the apex of solitude);⁴⁴ and the paradox of

44 See Franz Rosenzweig: *The Star of Redemption*. Translated by Barbara E. Galli. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 2005, p. 80.

this solitude is that, in this very place where it finally recognizes itself, the soul is dying, wounded by eternal thorns, mutilated, circumfused by stubborn shadows. Is it possible to escape from this paradoxical solitude? To look for the eastern horizon, from a place so sweetly cruel? “Ma tu, Signor, ch’ài di pietate il pregio, / porgimi la man destra in questo bosco; / vinca ‘l tuo sol le mie tenebre nove.” Like every Petrarchan invocation, this seems both ‘absolute’ and indefinitely replicable: extreme defender of his privilege of being in love, Francesco looks with glowing eyes toward eternity and hopes to find a new design for himself, an epilogue or a miraculous dissolution of love itself. But eternity is still far off, and his prayer becomes the elegy and grief of a lonely soul “ritenuta al bosco.”

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