

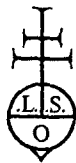
ITALIAN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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*LA GLORIOSA DONNA
DE LA MENTE*

A commentary on the *Vita Nuova*

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PERTH

1994

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“COMINCIANDOMI DAL PRINCIPIO INFINO
A LA FINE” (V.N., XXIII, 15):
FORGING ANTI-NARRATIVE IN THE “VITA NUOVA”

Dante’s view of the human experience as a linear path affording encounters with the new, a line of becoming intercepted by newness, may be extrapolated from a passage in the *Paradiso* that denies the faculty of memory to angels. Because angels never turn their faces from the face of God and see all things in his eternal present, their sight is uninterrupted by new things, and they have no need of memory (which we use to store the new things once they are no longer new):¹

Queste sustanze, poi che fur gioconde
de la faccia di Dio, non volser viso
da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde:
però non hanno vedere interciso
da novo obietto, e però non bisogna
rememorar per concetto diviso.

(*Par.*, XXIX, 76-81)

This passage is of particular relevance to the *Vita Nuova*, a text whose proemial invocation of the “libro de la mia memoria” constitutes an acknowledgment of the narrativity inherent in remembering. More generally, one could say that both the passage in *Paradiso* XXIX and the first chapter of the *Vita Nuova* are symptomatic of an author profoundly conscious of the narrativity of the human condition. The condition of an-

¹ Augustine described memory as a great storehouse in *Confessions*, X, 8, noting in X, 11 that memories that have been stored too long have to be thought out again as though they were new, “nova”.

gels, “[che] non hanno vedere interciso / da novo obietto”, is precisely not the human condition; our condition, the *cammin di nostra vita*, imitated by the narrative *cammino* of the text, is precisely *vedere interciso da novo obietto*. The *novo obietto*, moreover, requires a mental structure that can accommodate it, and so “conchetto diviso” is born; since we do not see everything all at once, but must see and remember many new things sequentially, *ad una ad una* (as in “le vite spiritali” of *Par.*, XXXIII, 24, which the pilgrim is said to have experienced “ad una ad una”), human beings think differentiatedly, by way of divided thoughts, “per conchetto diviso”.

Conchetto diviso, in other words, is the result of our existence in time. Time, according to the Aristotelian definition that Dante offers in the *Convivio*, is “numero di movimento, secondo prima e poi” (IV, II, 6): “numerus motus secundum prius et posterius” (*Physics*, IV, 11, 219b). Time, therefore, comports otherness, difference, non-identity, non-simultaneity. As a result of our existence in time, we do not think as angels do, by intuiting first principles, but by “distinguishing and combining concepts” “componendo et dividendo” in Aquinas’s Latin.² Aquinas’s “dividendo”, used as a talisman for human thought processes that are necessarily subject to time, sequence, number, and difference, is echoed not only by *Paradiso* XXIX’s “conchetto diviso”: Vergil punctuates one of his discourses in the *Commedia* with “se dividendo bene stimo” (*Purg.*, XVII, 112); the pilgrim’s “mente unita” must naturally revert to being “in più cose divisa” (*Par.*, X, 63); and in the *Convivio* Dante characterizes the writer’s task as a “mestiere di procedere dividendo” (II, XII, 10). In this way Dante enlists himself as a follower of Augustine, who had meditated on the temporality of human language and narrative in Book XI of the *Confessions*, while noting that angels read God’s will *sine syllabis temporum* (XIII, 15), and shows that he is fully capable of articulating for himself Paul Ricoeur’s maxim that “the world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world”.³ The writer is one who harnesses human *conchetto diviso* in the creation of a linguistic system of dif-

² See *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 58, 4: “Utrum angeli intelligant componendo et dividendo”. Also of interest is Augustine’s reference in *De doctrina christiana* to the “scientia definiendi, dividendi, atque partiendi” (II, xxxv, 53).

³ *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1984, vol. 1, p. 3. This paper represents an attempt on my part to extend to the *Vita Nuova* considerations regarding time and narrative that I have previously applied to the *Commedia* and to the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*; see T. BAROLINI, *Dante’s Heaven of the Sun as a Meditation on Narrative*, «Lettere Italiane», XL, 1988, pp. 3-36, and *The*

ferences, which is to say, that the writer employs the *divisioni* of the mind to create the *divisioni* of the text.

All products of the human epistemological condition – of *conchetto diviso* – are themselves divisible, marked by their existence in time. No verbal artifact is immune from division/*distinctio*/difference⁴ – from time, sequence, number. At the same time, much of the lyrical enterprise could be viewed as a search for indemnity from time; we could say, generalizing and simplifying, that the lyric is a verbal artifact wherein meter, rhyme, and metaphoric density work to simulate the illusion of a protected and extratemporal dimension. When Dante decides, in the third chapter of the *Vita Nuova*, to subject a sonnet to division, he is deciding on a convention – which he later calls *divisione* – whose avowed purpose is to lay bare the poem's significance and whose more salient purpose is to divest the poem of any residual temporal immunity. Everything about the little paragraph that follows the *Vita Nuova*'s first sonnet spells time: the verb *dividere*, the ordinal numeral “due”, the cardinal numerals “prima” and “seconda”, and the verb “cominciare”.

Questo sonetto si *divide* in *due* parti; che ne la *prima* parte saluto e domando risponzione, ne la *seconda* significo a che si dee rispondere. La *seconda* parte *comincia* quivi: *Già eran* (III, 13).

The *divisioni* point to our epistemological condition; they tell us that *conchetto diviso* subtends all human creation by imposing linearity and narrativity upon the poem's lyrical unity. They narrativize – or delyricize – the lyric. Lexically, this process is reflected in the presence of words like *narrare* and *narrazione*, concentrated in the *divisioni* (“ne la *seconda* [parte] narro” [VII, 7]; “E anche si divide questa *seconda* parte in cinque, secondo cinque diverse *narrazioni*” [XV, 8]). We remember, too,

Making of a Lyric Sequence: Time and Narrative in Petrarch's 'Rerum vulgarium fragmenta', «Modern Language Notes», CIV, 1989, pp. 1-38.

⁴ It should be clear that I use ‘difference’ as Dante himself uses it, much as Aquinas uses *distinctio*: “any type of non-identity between objects and things. Often called diversity or difference” (T. Gilby, ed., *Summa Theologiae*, Cambridge, Blackfriars, 1967, vol. III, p. 164). On *distinctio* as an essential component of the scholastic *forma mentis*, see E. PANOFSKY, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, New York, Meridian, 1957, who comments: “In the *Vita Nuova* the poet himself goes out of his way to analyze the tenor of each sonnet and *canzone* by ‘parts’ and ‘parts of parts’ in perfectly Scholastic fashion, whereas Petrarch, half a century later, was to conceive of the structure of his songs in terms of euphony rather than logic” (pp. 36-37). While there is little doubt that Petrarch would find a scholastic apparatus distasteful, there is just as little doubt that the structure of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* is based not on euphony but on logic.

the striking label *narratore* used for the three sonnets that “fuoro narratori di tutto quasi lo mio stato” (XVII, 1), as well as the author’s later decision to turn to the *canzone* form, “non credendo potere ciò narrare in brevitade di sonetto” (XXVII, 2).⁵

It may seem, then, that I fully endorse the recent proposal that “the *Vita Nuova* tells the story of Dante’s discovery of narrative time, over against lyric time”.⁶ Rather, I believe that in the *Vita Nuova* Dante learns to play narrative time and lyric time against each other, as he had perhaps already begun to do in the *Fiore* (a point to which we shall return), and as he would certainly later do in the *Commedia*, notably in the *Paradiso*. In an essay on the narrative principles of the *Paradiso*’s heaven of the sun, I sketched Dante’s shifts from ‘narrative’ to ‘anti-narrative’: “from a discursive logical mode based on embracing *distinzione*, that is, a mode that accepts the fundamental subjection of narrative to linear time, to a lyrical or ‘anti-narrative’ mode that rebels against the dominion of time”.⁷ I have since elaborated these principles into a reading of the third canticle that focuses on Dante’s willful alternation between the two modes: the one, ‘narrative’, is discursive, logical, linear, intellectual; the other, ‘lyrical’, may be defined as the opposite of the former, i.e. non-discursive, non-linear or circular, and affective.⁸ Of course, the term ‘lyrical’ with respect to the *Paradiso* is used loosely, in an attempt to define a discrete narrative mode that is peculiarly resistant to subdivision—resistant to time. In the *Vita Nuova*, on the other hand, ‘lyrical’ need not be used loosely; the *libello*’s alternating prose and verse offers us a literalization of the *Paradiso*’s alternation between ‘narrative’, based on an Aristotelian sense of time as duration and continuum, and ‘lyric’, based on an Augustinian sense of time as an indivisible instant: “In fact the only time that can be called present is an instant, if we can conceive of such, that

⁵ This passage offers a contemporary endorsement for my suggestion that “the canzone is the closest approximation to narrative in a lyric universe” (*The Making of a Lyric Sequence*, p. 25).

⁶ R. P. HARRISON, *The Body of Beatrice*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. 152. On questions of narrative versus lyric in the *Vita Nuova*, see also M. PICONE, *Strutture poetiche e strutture prosastiche nella Vita Nuova*, «Modern Language Notes», XCII, 1977, pp. 117-129. Both authors treat the two categories more as discrete dichotomies than as sources of mutual and dialectical *contaminatio*.

⁷ *Dante’s Heaven of the Sun as a Meditation on Narrative*, p. 23.

⁸ See the chapters on the *Paradiso* in my book, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992. The anti-narrative mode of the *Paradiso* is characterized rhetorically by apostrophes, exclamations, heavily metaphoric language, and intensely affective similes.

cannot be divided even into the most minute fractions, and a point of time as small as this passes so rapidly from the future to the past that its duration is without length".⁹

The *Vita Nuova*'s literal alternations between prose narrative and verse lyrics may thus be seen as an antecedent for the *Paradiso*'s more figurative alternations between a narrative and a lyrical mode. In both cases, what is at stake is time: the *Paradiso*'s lyrical or anti-narrative mode surfaces most dramatically in those cantos – such as XXIII, XXX, and XXXIII – in which the poet most heroically strives to deny the time and difference inherent in his medium in order to simulate the *totum simul* of paradise. The lyrical mode of the third canticle could be called, in Ricoeur's terminology, a form of "dechronologized narrative";¹⁰ by the same token, it could be called lyricized narrative. We have already taken note of the *Vita Nuova*'s attempt to narrativize the lyric through the deployment of *divisioni*. What I would like to show in this essay is the presence of a double contamination, whereby the *libello* is the locus not only of a narrativized – chronologized – lyric, but also of a lyricized – dechronologized – narrative. The circular time-resistant anti-narrative of the *Paradiso* is forged in that crucible of juvenile invention, the *Vita Nuova*.

The *Vita Nuova* both gives the impression of telling a linear story, and at the same time continually subverts this impression through its actual story-telling techniques. This is the reason that its simple plot and story-line defy detailed retention, that the ordered sequence of events fails to stand out in high-focus relief (except at the most macroscopic level), but tends to revert very quickly, even after many readings, to an unfocused, hazy blur. Among the factors that contribute to this experience are several features of the text that have been studied in other contexts. We think, for instance, of the carefully undefined setting of the *Vita Nuova*, in which urban, architectural, and geographical particulars are winnowed out, so that the reader is insulated from spatial and historical specificity and is left to flounder about in an atmosphere of murky

⁹ *Confessions*, XI, 15, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, London, Penguin, 1961.

¹⁰ In fact, if, in Ricoeur's formulation, "the major tendency of modern theory of narrative ... is to 'dechronologize' narrative" (P. RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative*, trans. K. MacLaughlin and D. Pellauer, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1984, I, p. 30), then Dante's *Paradiso* is very modern.

abstraction.¹¹ We think also of the undulating psychological state of the protagonist, who does not so much proceed in a consistently forward direction – along a narrative *cammino* furnished with a clearly marked beginning, middle, and end – as return again and again to his previous condition, from which he must once more start forth: textual indices of this condition are the *ri* prefix in “ripigliare lo stilo de la sua loda” (XXVI, 4),¹² and the unusual recording of two initial quatrains – a “primo cominciamento” and a “secondo cominciamento” – for the sonnet of chapter XXXIV. Even the *libello*'s ending is presented not as an ending but as an ultimate beginning, a final new point of departure, the relapse vis-à-vis the *donna gentile* having mandated a post-textual ‘ri-ripigliare’ of the praise-style for Beatrice at some unspecified future time.¹³

It is worth considering from this perspective the text's heavy but ambivalent use of *cominciare* (the verbal analogue for the *ri* prefix). On the one hand, this verb is the icon of Aristotelian time, of relentless forward motion, of narrative progression, of commitment to what lies ahead. It appears in Latin at the text's beginning, as the rubric under which the author is to transcribe the memories that furnish his book: “*Incipit vita nova*”.¹⁴ The word “*incipit*” is echoed in translation in each of the *divisioni*, whenever Dante indicates the *incipit*, or first verse, of a poem or section of a poem by using the phrase “lo quale comincia”: “E allora dissi questo sonetto, lo quale comincia: *Con l'altre donne*” (XIV, 10). The text's ‘action sequences’, too, make frequent use of *cominciare*. Let us look at a passage that is notorious as a ‘new beginning’ within the *Vita Nuova*, the passage in which the mocking ladies force Dante into the

¹¹ On the lack of descriptive detail, see M. MUSA, *Dante's "Vita Nuova": A Translation and an Essay*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1973, pp. 100-106.

¹² The original use of *ripigliare* in XVII, 1 (“ripigliare matra nuova e più nobile che la passata”) means only ‘prendere’ rather than ‘riprendere’; see the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, Rome, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970-1978, and De Robertis's comments, *Vita Nuova*, ed. D. De Robertis, Milan-Naples, Ricciardi, 1980, p. 108. It is nonetheless tempting to think in terms of a state of mind which is always already repetitive.

¹³ MUSA, *Dante's "Vita Nuova"*, notes that the *Vita Nuova* ends “in failure and in the recognition of failure” (p. 168), while for HARRISON, *The Body of Beatrice*, “[a] dramatic failure, an avowed authorial inadequacy, haunt the end of this work” (p. 11), so that “by the end of the work both narrator and protagonist are looking forward, not backward, in time, to an event that they hope will bring closure to the new life” (p. 12).

¹⁴ For an interesting meditation on beginnings in Dante's works, which takes into consideration the new beginning of *Vita Nuova*, XVIII-XIX discussed below, see G. GORNI, *La teoria del "cominciamento", «Il nodo della lingua e il verbo d'amore: Studi su Dante e altri duecentisti»*, Florence, Olschki, 1981, pp. 143-186.

realization that his happiness lies not outside him, but within him, in “quelle parole che lodano la mia donna” (XVIII, 8).

E poi che m'ebbe dette queste parole, non solamente ella, ma tutte l'altre *cominciario* ad attendere in vista la mia risponsione ... Allora queste donne *cominciario* a parlare tra loro ... E però propuosi di prendere per materia de lo mio parlare sempre mai quello che fosse loda di questa gentilissima; e pensando molto a ciò, pareami avere impresa troppo alta materia quanto a me, sì che non ardia di *cominciare*; e così dimorai alquanti dì con disiderio di dire e con paura di *cominciare* (XVIII, 3-9).

In this case, as is indicated by the double appearance of the infinitive on its own, *cominciare* is itself thematized: this passage, like *Inferno* II with which it has much in common, is actually *about* beginning – wanting to begin, fearing to begin.¹⁵ As a result, we find *cominciare* accorded a greater dignity than it usually possesses, serving as the conclusion to chapter XVIII (“e con paura di cominciare”) and as prelude to chapter XIX’s presentation of the *libello*’s first *canzone* (“io cominciai a pensare ... Queste parole io ripuosi ne la mente con grande letizia, pensando di prenderle per mio *cominciamento* ... cominciai una canzone con questo *cominciamento*” [XIX, 1-3]).

In this case, given that “le nove rime, *cominciando* / ‘Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore’” (*Purg.*, XXIV, 50-51) are again proclaimed a *cominciamento* in the *Commedia*, the new beginning is authentic – the real thing.¹⁶ Nevertheless, within the *Vita Nuova*, the protagonist will need to “ripigliare lo stilo de la sua loda” – the style of *Donne ch’avete* – later on. So, what is the real new beginning? What is the beginning from which there is no backsliding, the beginning to which there is no need ever to return, *ripigliandolo*? The *Vita Nuova* reminds us that over-using *cominciare* is a double-edged sword: one could say that the entire text is com-

¹⁵ *Cominciare* appears in *Inferno* II six times: in no other canto do combined uses of *cominciare* and *incominciare* exceed four appearances. A discussion of canto II as a meditation on beginning may be found in my recent book; for the moment, let me note only that there too the protagonist is on a treadmill, consigned by his “novi pensier” (38) to endless stops and starts, which keep him from truly beginning: “sì che dal cominciar tutto si tolle” (39). Like *Inferno* II, *Vita Nuova* XVIII is highly verbal, marked by repeated uses of *dire*, *parlare*, *parola*. Moreover, the use of “impresa” at chapter’s end (“pareami avere impresa troppo alta materia quanto a me”), although a past participle, anticipates the nouns of *Inferno*, II: the “impresa / che fu nel cominciar cotanto tosta” of lines 41-42 and the “onrata impresa” of line 47.

¹⁶ For the significance of *Donne ch’avete* as an *incipit* within the *Commedia*, see T. BAROLINI, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy*, Princeton, Princeton, University Press, 1984, pp. 40-57.

mitted to incipience, to beginning the new life, but one could also say that so much beginning undercuts incipience, making the text almost pre-Petrarchan. If every point is a new beginning, which are the real new beginnings? Or, if each new beginning is real, why doesn't it lead to more than another new beginning? Here are some examples of action sequences (taken from the beginning, middle, and end of the *Vita Nuova*) that are littered with the construction *cominciare* in the *passato remoto* followed by an infinitive (also, less frequently, by other forms of the verb and by the noun).

In quello punto dico veracemente che lo spirito de la vita ... *cominciò* a tremare ... In quello punto lo spirito animale ... si *cominciò* a maravigliare molto ... In quello punto lo spirito naturale ... *cominciò* a piangere ... D'allora innanzi dico che Amore signoreggiò la mia anima ... e *cominciò* a prendere ... (II, 4-7).

E quando ei pensato alquanto di lei ... si *cominciai* a piangere ... E però mi giunse uno sì forte smarrimento, che chiusi li occhi e *cominciai* a travagliare ... ne lo *incominciamento* de lo errare che fece la mia fantasia ... Così *cominciando* ad errare la mia fantasia ... Allora *cominciai* a piangere ... E quando io avea veduto compiere tutti li dolorosi mestieri ... *incominciai* a dire ... E dicendo io queste parole ... una donna giovane e gentile ... con grande paura *cominciò* a piangere ... E quando mi videro, *cominciaro* a dire ... (XXIII, 3-14).

Allora *cominciai* a pensare di lei ... lo mio cuore *cominciò* dolorosamente a pentere ... E dico che d'allora innanzi *cominciai* a pensare di lei ... (XXXIX, 2-3).

Like the narrative itself, of which it could be taken as an emblem, *cominciare* seems to function both according to expectation and counter to expectation. According to expectation, it serves to buttress narrativity: one should note, in the passages cited above, the frequent linking of the verb to adverbs of time like "allora" and "d'allora innanzi". Even more striking is the way these sequences seem to push the author into compliance with narrativity; thus, the sequence of chapter XXIII leads to Dante's decision to narrate his vision to the ladies at his bedside, omitting only Beatrice's name: "Allora, *cominciandomi dal principio infino a la fine*, dissi loro quello che veduto avea, tacendo lo nome di questa gentilissima" (XXIII, 15). Likewise, in chapter XXXIX, his renewal of fealty to Beatrice's memory takes the form of a narrativizing of his memories of her: "Allora *cominciai* a pensare di lei; e *ricordandomi di lei secondo l'ordine del tempo passato*, lo mio cuore *cominciò* dolorosamente a pentere" (XXXIX, 2). However, it is also true that the relentless presence of *com-*

inciare, if viewed from the perspective of the overall pattern and not of the isolated instance, yields the impression of the protagonist being on a treadmill, of his beginning over and over and thus in truth never beginning at all. The *Vita Nuova*'s deployment of *cominciare* reflects the text's programmatic contaminations: between lyric and narrative, stasis and conversion. Typical of the *Vita Nuova* is the fact that the narrative breakthrough of chapter XVIII leads to the lyrical pinnacle of chapter XIX: the temporal urgency of conversion issues into the (relatively) atemporal form of a lyric, which is immediately retemporalized through the agency of the *libello*'s longest and most formidable *divisioni*.¹⁷

In retrospect *Donne ch'avete* is labelled "cotale trattato" (XX, 2) as though the minuteness of the divisions had rendered it prose; the divisions serve to make it better understood ("Questa canzone, acciò che sia meglio intesa, la dividerò più artificiosamente che l'altre cose di sopra" [XIX, 15]), to tame it, to bring it within the scope of the *volgo* ("Appresso che questa canzone fue alquanto divulgata tra le genti" [XX, 1]). But – to insist on the dialectical *contaminatio* to which I referred earlier – if in the *Vita Nuova* verse is corralled and domesticated, prose on the other hand is given remarkably free license (despite chapter XXV's intimation that vernacular prose cannot be granted the same "licenza di parlare" [7] claimed for the vernacular lyric).¹⁸ Not even its syntax seems to be held accountable; consider, for instance, the anomaly of a *passato remoto* that, in phrases like "Apparve vestita" (II, 3), effects not temporal progression but rather atemporality, abstraction from the conditions of time: "Non si istituisce qui, con questi passati remoti, una sequenza nar-

¹⁷ I have qualified my assertion of *Donne ch'avete*'s atemporality in recognition of the fact that it is a *canzone*, the least atemporal of the lyric forms (see note 5 above). Although Dante makes it clear that *Donne ch'avete* in his 'ideal lyric', the poem most frequently analyzed as the embodiment of the praise-style is the sonnet *Tanto gentile*. See HARRISON, *The Body of Beatrice*, who justifies his concentration on the sonnet by noting that "[t]he sign that forms its lyric circle of incorporation and that comes from Beatrice's proximity is fundamentally different from the reflective and solitary 'inspiration' of the rationalistic canzone" (p. 46). Is the *canzone* rationalistic, or has it been apparently rationalized by the *divisioni*?

¹⁸ Prose is introduced as a premise in a syllogism arguing that vernacular poets should be granted the same license as Latin poets: since "maggiore licenza di parlare" is granted to poets than to "prosaici dittatori", and since the vernacular "dicitori per rima" are in fact vernacular poets, it follows that they should be granted greater license than that granted to other vernacular writers, the same amount, in fact, granted to the Latin poets (XXV, 7). Given that the "licenza" under discussion is the prosopopoeia that has presented Love as a speaking person, it is worth noting that Dante's theoretical remarks do not square with his practice: in practice his prose has taken quite as many liberties with regard to the personification of *Amor* as has his verse.

rativa, che implichi una progressione temporale della vicenda; viene in mente, invece, l'aoristo greco, con l'aspetto verbale dell'azione in sé e per sé, astratta da ogni rapporto col tempo. Non progressivo, dunque, ma atemporale, rappresentativo, questo passato remoto".¹⁹ Enlarging our purview from the syntactic to the narratological, we will now examine some of the *Vita Nuova's* most egregious narrative behavior, its shocking inclusions and its even more shocking omissions.

When, at the end of chapter II, Dante indicates that he will pass over – *trapassare* – some of the events of his life in order to transcribe only those he considers sufficiently significant, he indicates both his sense of the linearity and temporality of narrative and his willingness to subvert and reorder that linearity to his own purposes. The chapter's conclusion – “e *trapassando* molte cose le quali si potrebbero trarre de l'esempio onde nascono queste, *verrò* a quelle parole le quali sono scritte ne la mia memoria sotto maggiori paragrafi” (II, 10) – emphasizes (with the verbs “*trapassando*” and “*verrò*”) the narrative journey as a correlative to the journey of our life, but at the same time it unsettles the analogy by emancipating the author from a linear recounting and freeing him from the narrative *cammino*. If there is to be a *trapassare* of narrative sequence, then we are constrained to ask: what of the events *not* to be transcribed? And what of the order in which the events occurred? The suggestion that our author is unwilling to be bound to a temporal sequence is immediately confirmed at the outset of chapter III, where Dante interrupts a past-tense account of Beatrice's greeting to interpolate her present-tense death and glory:

e passando per una via, volse li occhi verso quella parte ov'io era molto pauroso, e per la sua ineffabile cortesia, *la quale è oggi meritata nel grande secolo*, mi salutò molto virtuosamente (III, 1).

Beatrice is thus dead before she has even begun to live. In narrative terms, one could say that the book has ended before it has ever begun; and, indeed, a similar interpolated present tense is found at the book's end (in the third chapter from the end, as compared to the third chapter from the beginning). Chapter XL's “bellissima figura, la quale vede la mia donna gloriosamente” (XL, 1), although no longer shocking in the

¹⁹ B. GARAVELLI, *Presenze di sintassi poetica nella prosa della “Vita Nuova”*, «Strumenti critici», XLIX, 1982, pp. 312-348; quotation p. 329.

aftermath of her death, echoes the earlier “la quale è oggi meritata nel grande secolo” and underscores our sense of having encountered the text’s ending at its beginning.

Dante inscribes circularity into the narrative time-line by using techniques which seem to foreshorten the text: in this case the intrusive present tense whereby he anticipates an event to which, as the circle completes itself, he will later return. Prolepsis – literally a taking beforehand, an anticipation of what is to come – is one of the building blocks of the *Vita Nuova*. The following instances are culled from chapters I-XIV: 1) the decision in chapter V to omit the poems written for the first screen-lady unless they praise Beatrice, constituting “loda di lei” (4), anticipates the discovery of the “parole che lodano la mia donna” in chapter XVIII, 8 and the “stilo de la sua loda” in chapter XXVI, 4; 2) the decision in chapter VI to mention the *serventese* containing the names of sixty ladies because Beatrice’s name miraculously took the ninth position anticipates the discussion of Beatrice and the number nine in chapter XXIX; 3) the reference to “Geremia profeta” in VII, 7, immediately preceding the *Vita Nuova*’s first death in chapter VIII, anticipates the prophet’s recurrence on the occasion of Beatrice’s death, in chapter XXVIII, and the reference to “Geremia profeta” in XXX, 1; 4) the description in chapter XI of the effects of Beatrice’s greeting on the author anticipates her effects on the populace in chapter XXVI; 5) the discussion in chapter XII of the legitimacy of addressing and thus personifying a *ballata* terminates by inviting the reader to a later discussion of the same “dubbio” in an even more difficult context (“e però dico che questo dubbio io lo intendo solvere e dichiarare in questo libello ancora in parte più dubbiosa” [XII, 17]), thus explicitly anticipating chapter XXV; 6) the “battaglia de li diversi pensieri” to which the poet refers in XIV, 1 anticipates the “battaglia” between his eyes and his heart in chapter XXXVII, called “la battaglia de’ pensieri” in XXXVIII, 4. In the *Vita Nuova* events are coordinated to former events, to which they accrue in a widening gyre: the second screen-lady follows the first, as the first death (that of the lady of chapter VIII) is followed by the second (that of Beatrice’s father in chapter XXII) and ultimately by the third: the death of Beatrice herself.

Rendered conspicuous by the preceding examples of prolepsis is the issue of narrative prerogative: the narrator may choose to omit (in the case of the poems to the screen-lady), exercising his right to *trapassare*, or may choose to include (in the case of the reference to the *ser-*

ventese).²⁰ Of all such exercizings of narratological fiat the most remarkable is without doubt the decision to omit from the narrative the account of Beatrice's death. Returning to our two axes, if the prose axis is intended as the repository of the historical, then once again we find Dante confecting a prose that hardly respects its own *raison d'être*: for Beatrice's death is certainly central to the history that the author has undertaken to record. By choosing to omit the narrative of Beatrice's death, Dante dramatically defies history, time, sequence – all the values apparently exemplified within the *libello* by the prose narrative. By choosing to invest a prose narrative with such values, but then further choosing to divest it of its single most crucial potential undertaking, Dante creates a kind of black hole in the *Vita Nuova*: time goes in, but does not come out.

How is Beatrice's death conveyed? First, by prolepsis. In other words, it is narrated before it occurs, by way of the vision visited on the protagonist in chapter XXIII, the “erronea fantasia” (8) that – like the “non falsi errori” of the *Commedia* (*Purg.*, XV, 117) – tells the truth.²¹ The recounting of the vision, notable for its unrestrained use of the visionary marker *parere*, used for Dante's ecstatic visions and prophetic dreams in the *Commedia* as well, becomes the recounting of her death: he sees premonitions of her death (dishevelled weeping ladies, a darkened sun and discolored stars, birds falling dead to earth, earthquakes); he sees angels taking her soul to heaven; he sees her dead body, and, before the ladies cover her head with a white veil, the very expression of her face. All this he sees; this is the death of Beatrice, narrated through the veil of *parere*, through the screen of his “fallace imaginare” (XXIII, 15). Dante tells us all this now, in a defiance of narrative sequence that is all the more intriguing if we consider that he takes this same chapter as an opportunity to represent himself as an exemplary narrator, one who is committed to telling the ladies at his bedside everything he saw in his vision, *in the proper order*, proceeding from the beginning and arriving at the end: “cominciandomi dal principio infino a la fine, dissi loro quello che veduto avea, tacendo lo nome di questa gentilissima” (XXIII, 15).

²⁰ See PICONE, *Strutture poetiche*, on the “Eliminazione dei dati”, and the “Trascrizione e analisi dei dati rilevanti”, p. 125.

²¹ The paradigm of the “non-false error” is already present in *Vita Nuova*, XXIII. With respect to the dreams of the *libello* and their significance for the *Commedia*, see I. BALDELLI, *Visione, immaginazione e fantasia nella “Vita Nuova”*, in *I sogni nel Medioevo*, ed. T. Gregory, Rome, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985, pp. 1-10.

However, if this passage seems, on the one hand, *not* to reflect the author's behavior, which manifests no such concern for the proprieties of orderly sequence, on the other it does speak to a governing principle of the *libello's* narrative construction. The *reticentia* whereby the protagonist deletes Beatrice's name from his account to the ladies – as though her name were not the very essence and substance of her historical incarnate meaning, as though she were not “chiamata da molti Beatrice li quali non sapeano che si chiamare” (II, 1), as though he should still be governed by a courtly ethos of secrecy rather than by a Christian ethos of revelation – this *reticentia* parallels the principle of omission whereby the unscreened and unveiled account of her death and resurrection is deleted from a narrative that can in fact be grounded in nothing else.

That is one way to look at it. Another way would be to conclude that the omission is salutary and necessary precisely *because* so much more is at stake than the death of a courtly beloved, that the secrecy in this case safeguards the special nature of Beatrice, and protects her departure (“la sua partita” [XXVIII, 2]) from being sentimentalized, vulgarized, cheapened – from being rendered one more pathetic event in the long record of human pathos. Could he have done her dying justice, given the significance he intended it to have? Could he have made it so different from any other death? We all feel that the deaths we personally experience are more significant than other deaths, but Dante wants to make us acknowledge that in his case the feeling is objectively true. Looking at the question from the perspective of the problems Dante faced, rather than from the perspective of the solutions he offers, we can entertain the possibility that, as he confronted the problem of narrating Beatrice's death, Dante decided that it was not something he could tackle head-on. Maybe he means what he says when he declares, as the second of his three reasons for silence, that “ancora non sarebbe sufficiente la mia lingua a trattare come si converrebbe di ciò” (XXVIII, 2). Maybe, therefore, he decided that the most effective way to handle Beatrice's death would be through a combination of prolepsis and *praeteritio*. At any rate, chapter XXVIII, in which Beatrice's death is formally announced, is chiefly devoted to telling us why he cannot tell us about it.²²

²² For a different perspective on this issue, see J. KLEINER, who argues that “[t]he contrast between Dante's revelatory and reticent accounts of Beatrice's death betrays a contradiction fundamental to Dante's entire project” (p. 91); see *Finding the Center: Revelation and Reticence in the "Vita nuova"*, «Texas Studies in Literature and Language», XXXII, 1990, pp. 83-100.

At the same time, it is important to note, with regard to the forging of a narrative that is in some ways antithetical to itself, that Dante registers his awareness of going against the grain. He knows that he is going against the expectations – indeed the pleasure – of his audience: “E avvegna che forse *piacerebbe* a presente trattare alquanto de la sua partita da noi, non è lo mio intendimento di trattarne qui per tre ragioni” (XXVIII, 2). Needless to say, his readers have never been satisfied with the three proffered reasons, and the bereftness of the widowed city, so ostentatiously proclaimed in chapter XXVIII’s opening salvo from Jeremiah’s *Lamentations*, is replicated and internalized in the bereftness of the reader, who is left even more frustrated by the “tre ragioni” than by the simple absence of narration. But Dante is deliberately asserting a new kind of narrative logic, one which demands an absence where the reader desires a presence, and he goes on to institutionalize this absence by “widowing” the remaining poems, a procedure that he initiates with respect to the *canzone* of chapter XXXI and to which he holds from then on: “E acciò che questa canzone paia rimanere più vedova dopo lo suo fine, la dividerò prima che io la scriva; e cotale modo terrò da qui innanzi” (XXXI, 2). Certainly on first encountering the *divisioni* one does not experience them as comforting – rather as dry, tedious, and inimical to the lyrics they allegedly serve. If one had never been acclimated to their presence one would probably not miss them. But, given the carefully cultivated process of acclimation, the removal of the *divisioni* from the space following the poems to the space preceding them does in fact result in a sense of emptiness: gone are the cushions of time and history that protect a lyric’s conclusion, “lo suo fine”, from the *fine* of the chapter’s end. By contrast to the previous poems, cosily sandwiched in between their prose guardians, the poems deprived of their concluding *divisioni* are left to face the void alone – are indeed bereft.

The first lyric whose widowhood is procured as a result of the plan cited above is the *canzone* *Li occhi dolenti*, which is the first poem encountered after the formal announcement of Beatrice’s death. However, the first lyric to be in fact deprived of the cushioning provided by terminal prose is the *canzone* of chapter XXVII, which is subsequently presented as literally interrupted by the occurrence of Beatrice’s death: “Io era nel proponimento ancora di questa canzone, e compiuta n’avea questa soprascritta stanza, quando lo signore de la giustizia chiamoe questa gentilissima” (XXVII, 1). Again, we have an instance of prolepsis: the soon-to-be programmatic widowing of lyrics as a sign of Beat-

rice's absence has been anticipated by the empty space following the *canzone* of chapter XXVII. In a move that we have seen to be typical of the *Vita Nuova's* idiosyncratically circular narrativity, the thing is done *before* we have been given the framework within which to understand it, in the same way that Beatrice's present-tense glory is inserted into the narrative *before* she has had a chance to die. Likewise the verse from Jeremiah's *Lamentations* at the outset of chapter XXVIII is cited *before* we know of her death, and is separated from its gloss both by the omissions of chapter XXVIII and by the inclusions of chapter XXIX, the so-called digression on the significance of the number nine. On the one hand, Dante seems preoccupied with *incipits* and narrative order; he uses Jeremiah's *incipit* (which he notes as such) as his own *incipit*, thus indicating a new beginning of particular thematic weight: "E questo dico, acciò che altri non si maravigli perché io l'abbia allegato di sopra, quasi come entrata de la nuova materia che appresso vene" (XXX, 1). But, on the other hand, in no other section of the *Vita Nuova* is expected narrative behavior so thoroughly flouted, as is indicated by the fact that the above explanation belongs to chapter XXX, rather than to chapter XXVIII. Dante need not have concerned himself with his reader's *maraviglia* if his narrative had only followed sequential order – like, for example, the order of the syntax of the opening sentence of chapter XXX, which proceeds "dal principio infino a la fine": from the reason for the city's widowhood ("Poi che fue partita da questo seculo, rimase tutta la sopradetta cittade quasi vedova dispogliata da ogni dignitade"), to the poet's adoption of the prophet's desolate words ("pigliando quello cominciamento di Geremia profeta che dice: *Quomodo sedet sola civitas*").

By disrupting his narrative time-line with the interpolated discussion of the number nine, as by omitting any account of Beatrice's death, Dante is countering our inherent narratological expectations and creating a circular anti-narrative, contaminated by the lyric. Beatrice dies not *in medias res* but *in mediis verbis*, when "compiuta n'avea questa soprascritta stanza". In this way historical time is absorbed by lyric time; even in a text where the conflation of lived experience and written word is programmatic from the beginning to the end (from the *proemio's* "libro de la mia memoria" to the discovery that happiness lies in a certain kind of poetic language, "quelle parole che lodano la donna mia", to the concluding vision that appears "Appresso questo sonetto"), the fact that Beatrice's death is recorded in the interstices of a *canzone* is noteworthy. The *Vita Nuova's* ongoing dialectic of temporal *contaminatio* mandates

not only that diachrony be imposed upon synchrony, the prose controlling and determining the interpretative reach of the poems, but also that synchrony make inroads upon diachrony, in the form of a narrative whose temporal coordinates are occasionally skewed. One important index of this *contaminatio* is Dante's handling of the chapter *incipits*. As the following list indicates, most of the *Vita Nuova's* chapter openings are situated along an ongoing narrative time-line; of these, many begin with temporal conjunctions such as "Appresso che" and "Poi che", coordinated with the *passato remoto*.

- II. Nove fiata già appresso ... apparve
- III. Poi che fuoro passati tanti die
- IV. Da questa visione innanzi cominciò
- V. Uno giorno avvenne che
- VI. Dico che in questo tempo ... mi venne una volontade di volere ricordare
- VII. La donna co la quale io avea tanto tempo ... convenne che si partisse
- VIII. Appresso lo partire di questa gentile donna fue piacere
- IX. Appresso la morte di questa donna alquanti die avvenne cosa
- X. Appresso la mia ritornata mi misi a cercare
- XII. Ora, tornando al proposito, dico che poi che la mia beatitudine mi fue negata
- XIII. Appresso di questa soprascritta visione mi cominciaro
- XIV. Appresso la battaglia de li diversi pensieri avvenne che
- XV. Appresso la nuova trasfigurazione mi giunse
- XVI. Appresso ciò che io dissi questo sonetto
- XVII. Poi che dissi questi tre sonetti
- XVIII. Con ciò sia cosa che per la vista mia ... fui chiamato da una di queste gentili donne
- XIX. Avvenne poi che ... a me giunse tanta volontade di dire
- XX. Appresso che questa canzone fue alquanto divulgata
- XXI. Poscia che trattai d'Amore ne la soprascritta rima
- XXII. Appresso ciò non molti di passati, sì come piacque
- XXIII. Appresso ciò per pochi di avvenne che
- XXIV. Appresso questa vana imaginazione, avvenne uno die
- XXXVII. Appresso ciò, cominciai a pensare uno giorno sopra quello che detto avea de la mia donna
- XXX. Poi che fue partita da questo secolo
- XXXI. Poi che li miei occhi ebbero per alquanto tempo lagrimato
- XXXII. Poi che detta fue questa canzone
- XXXIII. Poi che detto ei questo sonetto
- XXXIV. In quello giorno nel quale si compiea l'anno ... volsi li occhi

- XXXV. Poi per alquanto tempo ... molto stava pensoso ... levai li occhi per vedere se altri mi vedesse
 XXXVI. Avvenne poi che
 XXXVII. Io venni a tanto per la vista di questa donna
 XXXVIII. Ricovrai la vista di quella donna
 XXXIX. Contra questo avversario de la ragione si levoe un die
 XL. Dopo questa tribulazione avvenne
 XLI. Poi mandaro due donne gentili
 XLII. Appresso questo sonetto apparve a me una mirabile visione

Despite appearances, the insistent narrativity of the above *incipits* is far from consistently maintained. First of all, it is undercut by the conflation of poetic time with historical time, which progresses from such instances as chapter XVI's "Appresso ciò che io dissi questo sonetto" to the total conflation of the last chapter's "Appresso questo sonetto apparve", where the action of speaking is suppressed altogether, as though the sonnet were an action in itself. By having the protagonist mark historical progression in his own life with *verba* rather than with *gesta*, by placing physical motion and interpersonal action of the sort usually associated with plot development on the same plane as the 'action' of a poem (e.g. VI, XVI, XVII, XIX, XXI, XXVII, XXXII, XXXIII, XLII), Dante undermines the narrativity conveyed by "Appresso che" and "Poi che".²³ Moreover, there are six *incipits* omitted from the above list. These *incipits* are not situated in narrative time, are not anchored in the narrative by the type of *passato remoto* cited above, but instead use the present and imperfect tenses to give the impression of 'floating' in time.

- I. "In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria ... si trova una rubrica".
 Being not narrative but meta-narrative, the *proemio* adopts the present tense.
- XI. "Dico che quando ella apparia da parte alcuna ... mi giugnea una fiamma di caritate".
 An uninterrupted and uninteruptable imperfect tense is used to make manifest the sacrament – the visible sign of invisible grace – named Beatrice.

²³ Regarding the opening of chapter XVI, DE ROBERTIS, *Vita Nuova*, comments that "il rapporto di successione indicato da *Appresso ciò che...* non è tanto storico, quanto d'integrazione e di conoscenza" (p. 102). KLEINER, *Finding the Center*, charts a shift from *appresso* to *poi* and attempts to distinguish between them: "*Appresso* ceases to be the proper conjunction between different chapters as soon as Beatrice's death occurs" (p. 89). GORNI, *Il nodo della lingua*, discusses the *incipits* of the *Commedia*, noting the "attacchi narrativi *Da poi che* and *Po scia che*" (p. 174).

- XXV. "Potrebbe qui dubitare persona degna ... che io dico d'Amore come se fosse una cosa per sé".
The 'digression' on prosopopoeia belongs to the present tense, except for references to historical figures.
- XXVI. "Questa gentilissima donna, di cui ragionato è ne le precedenti parole, venne in tanta grazia de le genti, che quando passava per via, le persone correano per vedere lei; onde mirabile letizia me ne giungea".
The *passato remoto* in "venne in tanta grazia" is akin to the atemporal aorist discussed earlier; the persistent use of the imperfect tense recalls chapter XI, of which chapter XXVI is the programmatic echo (it dissociates itself from its precursor only later, with the definitive action of "propuosi di dicere parole" [4]).
- XXVIII. "*Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo! facta est quasi vidua domina gentium*".
Although the subsequent sentence introduces plot and the narrative *passato remoto* ("lo signore de la giustizia chiamoe questa gentilissima"), the *incipit's* present tense disengages the chapter from the narrative sequence.
- XXIX. "Io dico che, secondo l'usanza d'Arabia, l'anima sua nobilissima si partio ne la prima ora del nono giorno del mese; e secondo l'usanza di Siria, ella si partio nel nono mese de l'anno, però che lo primo mese è ivi Tisirin primo, lo quale a noi è Ottobre".
Although the *passato remoto* "si partio" refers to a specific temporal occurrence, it is blunted by being enfolded within the present-tense discussion of the number nine, and eventually yields to the atemporal *passato remoto* in "questo numero fue ella medesima" (3).

It is worth noting that four of the six 'floating' chapters (XXV, XXVI, XXVIII and XXIX) are located in the vicinity of the anti-narration of Beatrice's death, as though to highlight the dechronologized nature of that event. Beyond this fact, one could further claim a special role for each of the chapters that follows the vision of her death in XXIII, from XXIV through XXIX: chapter XXIV's analogy between Giovanna and John the Baptist is essentially an introduction to figural allegory; chapter XXV's consideration of personification and of crossing the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate lays the poetic groundwork for the *Commedia*; chapter XXVI reprises the incantatory atmosphere of chapter XI and the "stilo de la sua loda"; chapter XXVII's *canzone* is interrupted *in mediis verbis* by the death of Beatrice; chapter XXVIII begins with the citation of a biblical prophet; chapter XXIX tells

us that she was the number nine. Two of these chapters, XXV and XXIX, constitute famous ‘digressions’ within the *Vita Nuova*, and are perhaps better known as such than the one chapter that is clearly marked as a digression, namely chapter XI. Dante goes out of his way to invoke the root meaning of *digressione* in order to indicate the digressive nature of chapter XI, warning us at the end of chapter X that he intends to leave the narrative path (“E *uscendo* alquanto del proposito presente”) and signalling his return to it at the beginning of chapter XII (“Ora, *tornando* al proposito”). In this way, he offers us an index by which to gauge what occurs later on: chapter XXIX, although echoing chapter XI in its opening “Io dico che”, should *not*, according to the author’s implied directions, be labelled a digression. Dante’s point is not that he has digressed, but that he has not digressed – for if he had he would have done nothing new. His purpose, in situating chapter XXIX where he does within the narrative sequence, is to create not a digressive narrativity but a new kind of narrativity, an anti-narrativity, whereby narrative time – whether it be linear or swerving, *progressio* or *digressio* – is replaced by the dechronologized identification of Beatrice with the number nine.

No one would deny the *Vita Nuova*’s role as an extended prolepsis vis-à-vis the *Commedia*. Dante wrote the *Vita Nuova*, Dante later wrote the *Commedia*, and Dante certainly intended – at least retrospectively, but proleptically according to the *libello*’s final chapter – that the former should herald the latter, both as testament to the historicity of the noumenal and as testament to the power of narrative. I have suggested that the *Vita Nuova*’s prose anticipates not only the narrative future of Dantesque *terza rima*, but also the undercuttings to which Dante subjects his narrative in the *Paradiso*; the last canticle’s techniques for dechronologizing narrative may have their distant precursor in the means used to destabilize the narrativity of the *Vita Nuova*’s narrative. An important distinction needs to be made at this point, however, for while the *Paradiso*’s lyricized narrativity is intended to subvert the linearity of time, it in no way participates in a drama of protracted conversion (although it does participate in a drama of protracted gratification, and in narrative terms, from the point of view of the representational issues involved, the two are not so different). The notion of a drama of protracted conversion brings us back to my earlier suggestion regarding the *Vita Nuova*’s many *ricominciamenti* and the pre-Petrarchan qualities of this text; it is with the *libello*’s status as double forerunner, of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* as well as of the *Commedia*, that I would like to conclude.

I have attempted elsewhere to define the paradoxes of the lyric sequence as a genre, noting that it insists simultaneously on fragmentation – each lyric is an individual entity endowed with a beginning and ending – and on fragmentation’s opposite, namely a sequentiality, a linearity brought about by the existence of the larger unit that subsumes the individual parts into a common structure, with a common beginning and end.²⁴ In other words, the lyric sequence is a hybrid form: it is a blend of lyric and narrative drives, a programmatic *contaminatio* that is neither purely lyric nor purely narrative. Petrarch, I have previously shown, deliberately plays the two drives against each other, exploiting narrativity to the extent of undermining the fragmentariness of his *fragmenta*, while at the same time keeping excessive narrativity at bay. Excessive narrativity, from the Petrarchan standpoint, will be the future of the genre; later lyric sequences throughout Europe become ever more overtly biographical, ever more incapable or unwilling to resist the blandishments of story-telling. Petrarch is never seduced by narrativity, at least in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*; the *Trionfi*, by contrast, can be read precisely as the measure of the failures that beset him when he tries to be Dante, when he attempts the narrativity of the *Commedia*, and fails.

The lyric sequence, in Petrarch’s hands, has both narrativized one part of its past and shed the narrativity of another, and has not yet reverted to the encroaching narrativity of its future. Looking to the past, to the “preistoria” of the Petrarchan lyric sequence, as Marco Santagata calls it, we find that Dante is present on at least three counts.²⁵

1) Dante wrote lyrics that he never collected, as Arnaut Daniel and Guido Cavalcanti and all the lyric poets had done before him; i.e. he defines the absolutely not narrative tradition that Petrarch, by inventing the lyric sequence, narrativizes and changes.

2) If Dante wrote the *Fiore*, he wrote an extended version of the kind of *corona* of sonnets in which Folgòre da San Gimignano and Guittone d’Arezzo had dabbled;²⁶ this operation does not entail collecting previously written lyrics and transcribing them in a newly significant order, but composing sonnets with the express purpose of telling a story. The story in question is that of the *Roman de la Rose*, which the *Fiore*’s

²⁴ See BAROLINI, *The Making of a Lyric Sequence*, especially pp. 1-7.

²⁵ M. SANTAGATA, *Dal sonetto al Canzoniere: ricerche sulla preistoria e la costituzione di un genere*, Padua, Liviana, 1979.

²⁶ See SANTAGATA, *Dal sonetto al Canzoniere*, chapter III.

sequence of 232 sonnets condenses and retells in a mode that is less philosophically digressive and hence, if anything, more dedicated to narrative thrust than the octosyllabic original. In fact, if we consider the *Fiore* a pre-*Vita Nuova* example of Dante's experimentation with lyric/narrative *contaminatio*, then the point we have to bear in mind is that this sequence of sonnets in no way eschews narrativity. It is best compared not to the lyric sequence of the future, in which the *contaminatio* is so delicately balanced, but to a work like the *Filostrato*;²⁷ the sonnets take the place that later will be taken by octaves. In other words, although made of lyrics, the work is a narrative. Of course, that fact in itself cannot but be suggestive of *contaminatio*, and therefore, despite all my caveats, of the lyric sequence. By the same token, it is equally suggestive with regard to the *Commedia* – itself a narrative in verse.

3) In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante takes the step that is fundamental for the conception of the lyric sequence, namely that of collecting previously written lyrics and transcribing them in a new and significant order (“*transcripsi in ordine*” is the refrain that runs through Petrarch's copy books). C. S. Lewis commented that “[t]he difference between the *Vita Nuova* and Petrarch's *Rime* is that Petrarch abandoned the prose links; and it was they that carried the narrative”.²⁸ In fact, it is important to remember that the *Vita Nuova*'s narrative is not carried solely by the prose; Dante preempted the idea of arranging previously unarranged lyrics to make them signify something they had not previously signified. At the same time, it is also important that, of Dante's two means for generating narrativity, Petrarch discards the more heavy-handed, namely prose, and retains the more supple, namely order.

The *Vita Nuova* occupies a special position in this genealogy because of the clarity of its double allegiance, the straightforwardness of its duplicity: it is, without a doubt, both prose and verse, both narrative and lyric.²⁹ The fact that the *libello*'s duplicity turns out to be even more du-

²⁷ See T. C. STILLINGER, *The Form of “Filostrato”*, «Stanford Italian Review», IX, 1990, pp. 191-200, who argues that both the *Filostrato* and the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* derive “a powerful new mode of writing from the divided form of the *Vita Nuova*” (p. 208).

²⁸ C. S. LEWIS, *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954, p. 327.

²⁹ Noting that the *Vita Nuova* is “un testo eccentrico rispetto al genere [canzoniere]” (pp. 127-128), SANTAGATA, *Dal sonetto al Canzoniere*, writes further: “È comunque un libro subdolo, che non si lascia afferrare per intero: in esso infatti confluisce una raggera di tradizioni e di influenze che rende quasi impossibile la sua ascrizione ad un genere individuato da

plicitous, because of a programmatic *contaminatio* that results in a narrativized lyric and a lyricized narrative, makes it an even more prophetic text, both with respect to the *Paradiso* (lyricized narrative) and with respect to the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (narrativized lyric). The obsession with the new that issues on the one hand into the relentless narrativity of the *Commedia* issues on the other into the ever-new beginnings – and ultimate stasis – of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. It is thus not surprising to find that supremely Petrarchan way of marking time, the anniversary poem, anticipated by the *Vita Nuova*, whose protagonist conceives of the idea in chapter XXXIV, not coincidentally the chapter of the sonnet with the two *cominciamenti*: “mi venne un pensiero di dire parole, quasi per annovale” (3). The invention of the anniversary poem is a perfect emblem for the nature of Dante’s prolepses vis-à-vis history, which have an uncanny way of forecasting even the future they do not choose. Dante intends to use time, not to mark it, and therefore the *Vita Nuova* contains only one anniversary poem; it serves its memorial purpose, with the result that the protagonist moves forward (albeit with the stuttering of the two *cominciamenti*). Nothing could be less Petrarchan. And yet the utterly Petrarchan convention of the anniversary poem originates here, in the *Vita Nuova*, which thus – despite its profound eccentricity – provides yet another point of departure. Combining alterity and identity, difference with genesis – nothing could be more Dantesque.

criteri più interni rispetto alla esteriore nozione di *prosimum*. Romanzo, trattato, autobiografia letteraria e spirituale, allegoresi e, perché no, canzoniere; sono tutti aspetti presenti, ma nessuno di essi è egemonico” (p. 136).