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1. The Shape of Desire
Metamorphosis and Hybridity in *Rvf* 23 and *Rvf* 70

This chapter, like the ones that follow, explores lyric textuality as a privileged space for articulating a particular form of desire and subjectivity. It focuses on two *canzoni* from Petrarch’s lyric sequence, ‘Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade’ (*Rvf* 23) and ‘Lasso me, ch’io non so in qual parte pieghi’ (*Rvf* 70). By reading them together, we investigate how they blur the distinction between transformation and return and between beginnings and ends, and how, defying conclusion, they give shape to a paradoxical form of pleasure.

*Rvf* 70, the so-called ‘canzone of citations’, opens by staging a state of impasse where the ‘I’ is overwhelmed by

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1 We refer to Petrarch’s lyric sequence using the authorial Latin title. All quotations are taken from Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata, rev. ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 2010). Unless otherwise stated, English translations of lyric poems by Dante, Petrarch, and Cavalcanti are by Caroline Dormor and Lachlan Hughes. All emphasis is ours.
sensual desire, and contemplates correcting it. It is an inter-
textual poem (and part-cento) that culminates in an expli-
tic textual return of the poet’s own poem 23, the so-called ‘canzone of metamorphoses’, in which the poetic subject
undergoes a series of transformations explicitly modelled
on Ovid. The incipit of canzone 23 forms the final line of
canzone 70 and is the last in a series of quotations of the
incipits of earlier poems, each of which closes one of the
stanzas of Petrarch’s canzone and reconstructs what Franco
Suitner has termed ‘il retroterra della lirica romanza’ (the
hinterland of romance lyric).2

All the incipits closing the five stanzas relate to a
concept of love as essentially tyrannical, obsessive, and
compulsive. The first stanza ends with the incipit of the
Occitan poem now thought to be by Guillem de Saint
Gregori, ‘Drez et rayson es qu’ieu ciant e· m demori’, which
Petrarch attributed to Arnaut Daniel and which depicts
the state of subjecting oneself to love even to the point
of death, and finding pleasure in it.3 The other incipits
belong to the Italian lyric tradition. The second stanza ends
with Guido Cavalcanti’s ‘Donna me prega, per ch’io voglio
dire’, the doctrinal canzone that explains the nature and
effects of love as a sensual passion that infects the body
and annihilates reason and the faculty of judgment.4 The
third stanza incorporates the incipit of Dante’s ‘Così nel

2 Franco Suitner, Petrarca e la tradizione stilnovistica (Florence: Olschki,

3 On this misattribution see Sarah Kay, Parrots and Nightingales:
Troubadour Quotations and the Development of European Poetry (Phil-
adelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 189–95 (espe-
sially pp. 189–92); and Petrarca, Canzoniere, ed. by Santagata, p. 352,
which both provide a survey of literature on the subject.

4 On Cavalcanti’s concept of love as lethal in a moral and physical sense,
respectively, see Giorgio Inglese, L’intelletto e l’amore: Studi sulla let-
teratura italiana del Due e Trecento (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2000),
pp. 3–55, and Natascia Tonelli, Fisiologia della passione: Poesia d’amore
mio parlar voglio esser aspro’, one of four rime petrose, or ‘stony rhymes’, which also express the lethal and paralyzing effects of sensual love and in which the harshness of the content is matched by the harshness of the style. The fourth stanza ends by citing the incipit of Cino da Pistoia’s canzone ‘La dolce vista e ’l bel guardo soave’, an exile poem that laments the anguish and torment of being separated from the lady but in a sweeter style, one of dolcezza. Finally, the last stanza ends by returning to Petrarch’s own canzone 23, whose incipit closes the poem.

The trend has been to read Rvf 70 teleologically and as a narrative of conversion, where conversion is not about turning to another faith or confession but rather about moving towards a better moral position and a greater coherence of the self, to which would also correspond a better poetics. In this way the poet is said to renounce the errant desire of his youth, represented by all these incipits, achieving a new mode of loving and speaking. As each voice of the earlier romance tradition is reiterated and surpassed, so the ‘I’ apparently learns how to control his desire and

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7 In this sense, Petrarch’s project dovetails with Dante’s in the Vita Nova, in which the meditation on desire is also a discourse on poetry.
sets out to relinquish the sensually-directed eros that is the hallmark of the courtly lyric, including his own poetry up to this point in the collection, thereby transforming the poet he is — or can be.

Petrarch’s decision to end *Rvf* 70 by referring to the beginning of his earlier poem thus inserts his poetry within a specific lyric and romance genealogy that culminates with him.\(^8\) That point of culmination has been read by Marco Santagata and others as conveying a linear and vertical temporality that leads to conversion.\(^9\) The poem is thereby interpreted as a palinodic gesture through which the poet is at once evoking and recanting his poetic past, specifically its bonds with purely sensual desire, which *Rvf* 23 is taken to represent. Sarah Kay, too, has argued that in *Rvf* 70, through the technique of quotation, Petrarch creates a genealogy of texts that are surpassed one by the other. In the new context of 70, the Petrarchan ‘I’ would ‘disengage’ from the earlier subject position implied in the romance lyrics he quotes in order to occupy a different place and thereby ‘desire differently’.\(^10\) Kay has also supported her forward reading through analysis of another rhetorical feature of the *canzone*, namely the *coblas capfinidas* structure, which consists of connecting the end of one stanza to the beginning of the next through the repetition of the same word. She argues that ‘the resulting interplay of quotation and reaction impels the song forward via a process of self-reappraisal, in which the impulse to break with past guilt and progress toward a new future has to

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\(^9\) See the works cited in n. 6.

content with wistfulness, reluctance and inertia’ (193) but ultimately prevails over them.

Kay sees *canzone* 70 as a new beginning, and her reading is thereby in line with those critics who consider the *canzone* as a prelude to the following three poems, the so-called ‘canzoni degli occhi’, which would express a new lyric mode and, in the vein of the most positive poems of the *dolce stil novo*, celebrate the spiritual improvement brought about by the encounter with the beloved, as though Laura had morphed into Dante’s Beatrice.11 The fact that the poem lacks a *congedo* (the leave-taking that usually concludes a *canzone*) — a feature which is unusual within the *Rvf* and occurs in only one other poem (105) — can also be read formally as a sign of this apparent opening up to what follows and as a projection forwards.12

Therefore, for Kay and Santagata (but also for many others), the fact that *canzone* 70 ends with a quotation from *Rvf* 23 is the sign of a ‘subjective transformation’ and a move beyond the domain of the earlier lyric.13 Instead, our interpretation is in tune with the more ambivalent reading that Rosanna Bettarini and Marco Praloran have given of *Rvf* 70, and proposes that the quotations from the previous poems do not mark a complete departure but function as traces of desire that are reactivated in and by the text.14

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12 On the *canzone*’s lack of *congedo*, see for example, Barolini, ‘The Making of a Lyric Sequence’, p. 23.


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

TRANSFORMATION

In order to answer these questions, it is important to consider *canzone* 23, ‘Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade’, which relates how the lyric ‘I’ was first struck by love. The *canzone* can be interpreted as a manifesto or blueprint

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(Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 1, pp. 343–50; and Marco Praloran, *La canzone di Petrarca: Orchestrazione formale e percorsi argomentativi*, ed. by Arnaldo Soldani (Rome-Padua: Antenore, 2013), pp. 52–65. Unlike Santagata and the other scholars mentioned above, and closer to our reading, in her commentary on *Rvf* 70 Bettarini is not interested in the idea that the *canzone* expresses a conversion and a new departure relative to the poetry of the past, but instead proposes that the citation of *Rvf* 23 with which *Rvf* 70 concludes establishes a line of continuity between the two texts and makes the youthful *canzone* appear ‘come testo lontano dove il poeta si riconosce e da dove comincia a fluire la memoria poetica di se stesso’ (p. 344). Praloran has identified another kind of tension in the Petrarchan *canzone*: on the one hand, he persists with the idea of a new interpretation of desire, according to which through a superior form of sublimation the beloved would no longer be the cause of alienation and anguish, but the means of spiritual elevation. Praloran has also maintained that the different interpretation of amorous desire would result in a new model of the *canzone*-form in which the lyric element perfectly blends with the rational intent (pp. 61–62); on the other hand, Praloran has argued that in spite of the different role of the lady in the process of falling in love, the poet does not manage to diminish the destructive force of desire; on the contrary, he amplifies it because the distance between Laura’s ‘innocence’ and ‘the subject’s infirmity’ is unbridgeable (p. 63).
of Petrarch’s early poetry, one centred on the unrequited love of the troubadour and the Ovidian traditions. As mentioned above, it is constructed around the Ovidian paradigm of metamorphosis and entirely focused on the ‘I’ transformations through the effects of love — first into a laurel, then into a swan, stone, fountain, flint, voice, and stag, evoking respectively the Ovidian myths of Daphne, Cygnus, Battus, Byblis, Echo, and Actaeon. All these are done to a completely passive and powerless subject who cannot but submit to the power of sensual desire. More significantly, they are all forms of punishment, both for a

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15 For a detailed reading of _Rvf_ 23, see Robert M. Durling, ‘Metamorphosis’, in his introduction to _Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics_, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 26–33; Petrarca, _Canzoniere_, ed. by Santagata, 101–02; John Brenkman, ‘Writing, Desire, Dialectic in Petrarch’s _Rime_ 23’, _Pacific Coast Philology_, 9 (1974), pp. 12–19; Annalisa Cipollone, “Né per nova figura il primo alloro...”: La chiusa di _Rvf_ xxiii, il _Canzoniere_ e Dante’, _Rassegna europea di letteratura italiana_, 11 (1998), pp. 29–46; Giovanna Rabitti, “Nel dolce tempo”: sintesi o nuovo cominciamento?’, in _Petrarca volgare e la sua fortuna sino al Cinquecento_, ed. by Bruno Porcelli (= _Italianistica_, 33.2 (May–August 2004)), pp. 95–108; and Gur Zak, _Petrarch’s Humanism and the Care of the Self_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 121–57, in which the author traces an Ovidian style in the poet’s corpus that is linked to the inability or unwillingness to renounce sensual desire, which is in tension both with the Virgilian and Stoic styles, aimed at cultivating virtue and resisting passion, respectively; and with the Augustinian style that necessitates a renunciation of both desire for Laura and for poetic glory.


17 See Zak, _Petrarch’s Humanism_, p. 148, in which he argues that ‘the language of Ovid, of metamorphosis, stands [...] for the loss of reason, of self-control, the succumbing to the grip of the passions’. 
desire represented as transgressive and for the urge to voice it in spite of the prohibition to do so.

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

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

([he] took into his service a powerful lady, | against whom neither cunning, nor force, | nor begging for mercy ever was (or is) much use; | and these two transformed me into what I am, | making of me, a living man, a laurel tree, | which, though winter come, never sheds a leaf.) (Rvf 23, 35–40)

Thus, the first transformation into the laurel is a punishment for not yet bending to love. As we shall see in more depth in the following chapter, this transformation is astonishing for anyone familiar with Petrarch’s poetry for the reversal of roles it implies — usually it is Laura who is turned into a laurel (lauro) with reference to the Ovidian myth of Apollo and Daphne.\(^\text{18}\) In other words,

the way in which Laura rejects the poet’s love is usually presented as analogous to Daphne’s refusal to succumb to Apollo’s advances and subsequent transformation into a laurel tree. In this case, however, it is the poet who is turned into the laurel. As Santagata and others have explained, this metamorphosis is to be understood in terms of the lover’s complete identification with the desired object, the concept that, as Petrarch will later convey in his *Triumphus Cupidinis*, ‘the lover turns into the beloved’ (l’amante ne l’amato si transforme; iii, 162). This transformation of the poetic subject into the laurel confirms the extent to which the poem is about his transformation into a poet dominated by desire: the encounter with Laura is the encounter with poetry. It is also an experience of dispossessing of identity and loss of self, and, as the Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi first suggested, this experience is forever: the image of the evergreen laurel ‘signifies the intensity and constancy of the poet’s love: first, by saying that he has been turned into the very form of his lady; and second by stating that he, like the laurel, never loses his leaves’.


21 See Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Ugo Dotti, with notes by Giacomo Leopardi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), p. 68; our translation. For a related observation on these lines of Petrarch’s poem, see Leonard
If poem 23 is a manifesto of a certain kind of poetics, as it has so often been read, then the image of the poet it reveals is twofold. It communicates not only that poetry feeds off a painful form of desire-as-loss but also that the poet is controlled by his senses and completely at the mercy of the beloved: he even loses his shape and takes on hers. This concept is already made evident at the end of the first stanza, which identifies:

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

(a single thought which causes only anguish, | and makes me deaf to all other thoughts, | and forces me to forget myself entirely: | for it governs all that is in me, and I only the shell.) (RvF 23, 17–20)

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

The first metamorphosis into the laurel is followed by all the others in the subsequent stanzas, but we discover in the congedo that all the other metamorphoses have taken

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place within the laurel and that the ‘I’ has actually remained fixed in the outcome of the first metamorphosis.

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

(Canzone, I never was that cloud of gold | that rained in precious drops | to douse Jove’s fire, at least in part; | but, yes, I was a flame lit by a lovely gaze, | and was the bird that soars highest in the sky, | elevating her whom I honour in my verse: | nor could I ever leave the first laurel behind | for a new form, for its sweet shade | expels all lesser pleasure from my heart.) (Rvf 23, 161–69)

Canzone 23 is thus framed around a series of metamorphoses, but it is a strangely circular kind of process that goes back to the first metamorphosis without perhaps ever having left it. Only the first transformation into the laurel can be considered a proper metamorphosis, while all the subsequent ones ultimately seem to be reiterations of the first experience of desire as punishment and self-loss. Thus, the congedo clarifies what we have already seen announced at the end of the second stanza, where — by saying that ‘i duo mi trasformaro in quel ch’io sono’, that is, that Love and Laura turned him into what he is — the poet already indicates that, having been turned into a laurel, he continues to be one at the time of writing. It is as definitive a type of transformation as the laurel is evergreen: it is
irreversible. In this sense, Rvf 23 is a very Ovidian text. However, what appears as very Petrarchan (and will be explored further in the following chapter) is the particular kind of pleasure with which the poem ends and which seems to turn it around. The laurel, which the poet cannot bring himself to relinquish and which represents the painful experience of self-loss provoked by love, is also a site of pleasure, albeit a paradoxical one. Significantly, the adjective dolce (168), which is present in the incipit and refers to the time before desire, returns here unexpectedly bound to desire, with which it seemed incompatible.

NON-RESOLUTION

At this point, we can consider canzone 70. This poem opens with a sense of frustration and reprises the motif of being forbidden to give voice to desire, which Rvf 23 articulates through an Ovidian paradigm emphasizing its transgressive aspect (in the sense that the metamorphoses are punishments not only for desire but also for the urge to voice it). In Rvf 70, the problem of adequately voicing desire is articulated by tracing the genealogy of courtly poetry. As noted earlier, the final stanza incorporates a quotation from a poem that Petrarch thought was by Arnaut Daniel, a twelfth-century singer of sensual, uncontrollable love. The

24 On the Ovidian dimension of Petrarch’s poem, particularly the interrelationship between transformation, poetry, and passion, see Barkan, The Gods Made Flesh, pp. 206–14.
stanza also reprises the Ovidian motif and locates the intensity of desire in the failure to possess the beloved and the violent, anguished struggle to write about it. The ultimate fantasy here seems to be that of speaking freely, which would reverse the prohibition that was the mark of Rvf 23.26

Non gravi al mio signor perch’io il ripreghi
di dir libero un di tra l’erba e i fiori:
Drez et rayson es qu’ieu ciant e·m demori.

(let it not displease my Lord if I ask again | to
give me leave to say, one day, among the grass and
flowers: | Drez et rayson es qu’ieu ciant e·m demori.
[It is right and just that I should sing and be happy])
(Rvf 70, 8–10)

The following two stanzas — which quote two poems by Cavalcanti and Dante embodying irrational and painful desire — emphasize and reiterate the trap of sensual attraction, centred on the subject’s obsession with the ‘phantasm’ of the lady and his enslavement to it, so powerfully expressed in Cavalcanti’s and Dante’s poems.27 In particular, stanzas 1 and 2 play with the fantasy not only that it might be possible to ‘dir libero’ — make an open avowal of one’s love and receive satisfaction from the beloved — but even, in the Cavalcantian stanza, that she might call on the lover to speak, which reverses Laura’s command in canzone

26 On the frustrated desire for speech in Rvf 23, see especially Brenkman, ‘Writing, Desire, Dialectic’, pp. 15–18.

27 Cf. Dante’s rime petrose and the so-called ‘canzone montanina’, ‘Amor, da che convien ch’io mi doglia’, his last canzone of exile which is also ‘a testament to deadly, Cavalcantian eros’ (Barolini, ‘Dante and the Lyric Past’, p. 41). On the phantasm in medieval lyric poetry, see Giorgio Agamben, Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
‘di ciò non far parola’ (make no word of this; 100). In Ruf 70, the movement is that of a katabasis into the pain of love, and the nadir is reached at the end of the third stanza, where the *aspro* — harsh — language is meant to match the harshness of suffering:

She does not deign to look down so low | as to take note of our words, against the will of heaven, | so that I’m already weary from the struggle: | and so, as my heart grows hard and harsh, | so in my words I want to be harsh]

(Ruf 70, 25–30)

Having reached this ‘hell-like stasis’ of being trapped in sensual love, there is a turning point at the start of stanza 4.28 Here the poet acknowledges the excessive desire expressed in the poem and in the lyric sequence itself up to this point — what the poem calls ‘disiar soverchio’ (excessive desire) — just as he begins to reflect on his actual responsibility in letting himself be taken by this excess. If up to this point the poem stresses the ineluctable force of love, which does not leave any room for the will to resist it, here the fault is acknowledged as belonging to the poetic subject alone:

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

(What am I saying? Or where am I? And who is
deceiving me, | other than me and my excessive de-
sire? | If I search the heavens from sphere to sphere,
| no planet condemns me to tears. | If a mortal veil
dims my sight, | what fault is it of the stars, | or of all
that is lovely? | Tormenting me night and day, she
has dwelt in my heart | since the day I was burdened
with pleasure by | la dolce vista e ’l bel guardo soave.
[the sweet countenance and the lovely, soft gaze])
(Rvf 70, 31–40)

Critics have stressed the change happening in this stanza.
Santagata, for instance, has argued that with these ques-
tions ‘the overturning of the discourse so far put forward
begins: both the desire for reciprocation expressed in the
first two stanzas and the impossibility of realizing that de-
sire, because of the lady’s fault and an adverse destiny, now
appear as a delirium and as guilty self-delusion.’29 How-
ever, we argue that the poet’s recognition of the possibility
to control desire (and therefore of his own responsibility in
yielding to it) coexists with the reiteration of his passivity
and the pleasure of meditating obsessively on the lady’s
image and ceding all control of himself to it. This parado-
xical sweetness was already a feature of Cino’s exile canzone,
where the absence from the lady was lamented in a dolce

29 Petrarca, Canzoniere, ed. by Santagata, p. 354; our translation.
Therefore, rather than seeing the fourth stanza as a pivotal conversion point, we propose reading it in dialogue with Caroline Walker Bynum’s distinction between metamorphosis and hybridity.

For Bynum, metamorphosis is a kind of change that relates to a ‘labile world of flux and transformation’. Metamorphosis is a ‘process’, ‘encountered through story’. It ‘goes from an entity that is one thing to an entity that is another, and the relative weight or presence of the two entities suggests where we are in the story’. Thus, it seems to us that metamorphosis corresponds to an Ovidian paradigm of change or, in a Christian context, to that of conversion as the abrupt and definitive break with the past that is articulated through a linear temporality and that implies, in Foucauldian terms, ‘renunciation’ or ‘dying to oneself’, the idea of ‘being reborn in a different self’.

Hybridity, by contrast, ‘expresses a world of natures or substances’ (often diverse or contradictory to each other) and is ‘encountered through paradox’ — ‘in the instant’. So we understand the hybrid as more static, and Bynum

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30 On Cino’s exile poems and his use of the motif of lontananza to articulate his obsession with the phantasm of the lady, see Catherine Keen, ‘Images of Exile: Distance and Memory in the Poetry of Cino Da Pistoia’, Italian Studies, 55.1 (2000), pp. 21–36. She notes the Cavalcantian dimension to many of Cino’s exile poems, in which the fragmentation of the lady’s image corresponds to the lyric subject’s own fragmentation. On Petrarch’s relationship to Cino more broadly, see Edward L. Boggs III, ‘Cino and Petrarch’, MLN, 94.1, Italian issue (Jan. 1979), pp. 146–52; and Suitner, Petrarch e la tradizione stilnovistica, pp. 99–156.


32 Ibid., p. 30.

33 Michel Foucault, The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–82, ed. by Frédéric Gros, trans. by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), p. 211. As our analysis goes on to show, the primary exemplum of this form of conversion is Augustine’s Confessions.
underscores that the hybrid is ‘not just a frozen metamorphosis’ and is ‘certainly not the end point or interruption of metamorphosis’. It is rather ‘a double being, an entity of two parts — or more’. It makes ‘twoness and the simultaneity of twoness visible’. As such, it can be a figure of contradiction rather than change.\(^{34}\)

On the basis of Bynum’s distinction, our reading is that in stanza 4 of canzone 70, there is no conversion, and if anything changes, it is only Laura: she is no longer the ‘possente donna’, the powerful lady of Rvf 23, who was blamed for the poet’s demise. Instead, in Rvf 70 she is exonerated from any fault:

Se mortal velo il mio veder appanna,  
che colpa è de le stelle,  
o de le cose belle?

(If a mortal veil dims my sight, | what fault is it of  
the stars, | or of all that is lovely?) (Rvf 70, 35–37)

However, although the poet recognizes Laura as the supreme of the ‘cose belle’ and turns the ‘guilt’ (colpa) towards himself, this acknowledgment does not liberate him from desire. In this sense, rather than progressive movement or metamorphosis, we see hybridity here as the paradoxical coexistence of recognizing the possibility of resisting desire and yet compulsively surrendering to it.

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

Tutte le cose, di che ’l mondo è adorno  
uscir buone de man del mastro eterno;  
ma me, che così adentro non discerno,

In this last stanza, though there may be Biblical and even Augustinian elements, the latter of which stand in Petrarch for the necessity to turn towards God, the poem reaches an impasse or a suspension, not a point of conversion or change. Therefore it seems that Rvf 70 ends in a similar vein to Petrarch’s Secretum and the supposed ‘conversion’ canzone Rvf 264. In all these texts, when compared to the Augustinian paradigm that comes to the fore in book 8 of the Confessions as the fervour to convert that accompanies the recognition of the split will, there is no sense in which Petrarch urgently desires God, nor that he is desperately trying to throw off the chains binding the self. There is just a
slightly greater self-awareness, without the impulse to then push it a step further. As Christian Moevs has insightfully put it, in Petrarch one can only join with God through a superhuman effort, through a ‘macho act of the will’, a kind of superego trip that wants to impose a change and never manages it.36 In this sense, the conclusion of Rvf 70 is a non-conclusion similar to that of the Secretum and Rvf 264, in which, with Michelangelo Picone, we can say that ‘the truth that the Petrarchan “I” manages to achieve is related not to his eternal fate but to his earthly destiny; it is not a transcendental revelation but the recognition, rooted in immanence, of his being a sinner and of his living “a brief dream”’.37

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This is how we read Petrarch’s decision to conclude *Rvf* 70 by returning to the beginning of *Rvf* 23. With Bynum, we could say that *Rvf* 70 exhibits the movement of metamorphosis and the fixity of hybridity together. The subject feels the onus to shake the trap of sensual desire in which he is fixed, but there is no change. He is a hybrid: the ‘I’ neither dismisses self-control nor exercises it, acknowledging the weakness in itself without correcting or renouncing it. What interests us here is that by turning incipits into explicits and, in particular, by concluding *canzone* 70 with a return to the beginning of *canzone* 23, Petrarch interrupts forwardness and embraces backwardness. In this sense, the same formal features of *Rvf* 70 (the use of *coblás capfinidas* and the poem’s lack of *congedo*) that, as we indicated earlier, seem to imply progression and an overcoming of past desire simultaneously embody a contrapuntal state of immobility and unwillingness to take leave of the past. Thus, rather than take the quotation with which the poem ends as a sign of surpassing the previous tradition and Petrarch’s own earlier poetics, we see it as a literal return to them. As *Rvf* 23 makes clear, the advent of love is the only and definitive transformation:

e i duo mi trasformaro in quel ch’i’ sono,  
facendomi d’uom vivo un lauro verde,  
che per fredda stagion foglia non perde.

(and these two transformed me into what I am,  
making of me, a living man, a laurel tree,  
which, though winter come, never sheds a leaf.) (*Rvf* 23, 38–40)

In other words, a joint reading of *Rvf* 70 and 23 confirms that the only event in Petrarch’s collection is the encounter

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38 On this point see ibid., p. 110.
with Laura, which is also the making of the poet as a poet of love — the only ‘conversion’ that takes place in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. As we shall see in Chapter 2, his state (of being a laurel) will not change; if anything, it will only intensify. Rather than move towards an end point, the poetic subject remains where it is, and the corresponding non-linear and non-teleological temporality operates at both a subjective and a textual level. Textually, ‘firstness and lastness collapse into the same point’ in *canzone* 70, in the same way that, as Teodolinda Barolini has argued, *Rvf* 23 problematizes the ‘nature of all beginnings and endings’ within the collection’s first poetic micro-sequence (1–23) and in the *Rvf* as a whole.\(^{39}\) Ultimately, the effect is to dissolve the boundaries between the two poems and to create a kind of hybridity in movement insofar as the poems are distinct within the sequence’s macro-structure and yet merge so that the end of one is the beginning of the other, and vice-versa, endlessly.\(^{40}\)

SHAPE IN MOTION

In order to understand what kind of subjectivity corresponds to this non-linear temporality, we propose engaging with Leo Bersani’s concept of aesthetics in his reading of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Three Essays on Sexuality*. Bersani has argued that sexuality is fundament-

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40 On the openness of the form of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, see Picone, ‘Petrarca e il libro non finito’, pp. 91–93, in which he proposes the concept of ‘in-finite’ work. On the ‘canzoni degli occhi’ (*Rvf*71–73) as a particular embodiment of this dynamic, see Barolini, ‘The Making of a Lyric Sequence’, pp. 21–23.
ally paradoxical insofar as it retains the masochistic character of its infantile stage, notwithstanding later attempts to domesticate it according to the normative, teleological model of sexual reproduction. For Bersani, sexuality is characterized by a simultaneous production of ‘a pleasurable unpleasure’, which is not about final satisfaction or release of sexual tension but rather its increase through repetition and replication. This masochistic repetition produces an ‘insistent stasis’ and inverts the idea of a movement towards completion: ‘the end of the story is already in the beginning of the story; the teleological movement goes into reverse at the very moment when it reaches its goal; and the narrative line of sexuality completes itself as a circle’.41

Bersani has also reformulated Freud’s concept of sublimation, seeing ‘artistic sublimation’ as the possibility for textuality not to purify or transcend sexual pleasure but, on the contrary, to extend it to the movement of the text, replicating its paradoxical character and making the reader experience it. More specifically, he has argued that the fundamentally masochistic character of sexuality cannot be articulated through scientific discourse, which inevitably tends to resolve paradox into a linear logic or narrative development, but it is conveyed through the aesthetics of Freudian texts, which engage in self-sabotage and have the proposed arguments continuously fail instead of progressing linearly and reaching a logical conclusion. In this way, Bersani considers aesthetics as ‘a perpetuation and replicative elaboration of masochistic sexual tensions’, which do not aim for resolution, but rather prolongation and intensification.42

41 Bersani, The Freudian Body, p. 35.
42 Ibid., p. 43. See also Leo Bersani, Homos (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and the volume of collected essays by the same
Bersani’s concept of aesthetics can help us better understand the tensions deployed in Petrarch’s textuality and link it to an inherently masochistic form of pleasure: by concluding with the return to Rvf 23, Rvf 70 not only signals the tenacity with which the subject clings to sensual desire and his identity as a love poet, but also embraces the non-linear temporality of non-conversion as continual deferral and intensification of pleasure. In this sense, rather than working as paradigms of desire to be overcome, the lyric citations that Petrarch includes in Rvf 70 reactivate the sensuality of desire, which keeps pleasure in the picture and resists the transformation of the poetic subject.

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

As is by now evident, our interpretation differs from the more common reading of Rvf 70 as the end of one phase of desire and poetry and the start of a new one. Instead,
it seems to us that Ruf 70’s return to Ruf 23 signals a non-conversion that keeps the first phase of desire going and even revendicates it, particularly since, in the end, Ruf 70 defers to 23.

This conjunction of hybridity and metamorphosis, of movement and return, can be aptly represented as a Möbius strip. Discovered in 1857 independently by the
German mathematicians August Möbius and Johann Listing, the Möbius strip is formed by taking a strip of paper and giving a half twist and joining the ends of the strip to form a loop. The Möbius strip is a surface with only one side and only one boundary, and its most significant mathematical property is that ‘it is a non-orientable surface’. As a result of the twist in the strip, ‘the inside surface of the strip becomes the outside surface, and vice versa, endlessly’. There is a beautiful illustration of the strip by M. C. Escher (Fig. 1), and what we find interesting is that ‘if an ant were to crawl along the length of the strip, it would return to its starting point having traversed the entire length of the strip (on both sides of the original paper) without ever crossing an edge’. The Möbius strip can therefore be thought of as conjuring hybridity, movement, and return and offers a suggestive parallel with Petrarch’s poetry: it looks like it has two sides but actually has only one, and what looks like difference is ultimately about identity. In its combination of oneness and twoness, the strip corresponds to the hybrid Petrarchan subject of *canzone* 70, which appears on the verge of change but does not ultimately change, instead remaining double in its combination of incompatible parts. Moreover, much like the movement of the Möbius strip, which seemingly exits one

plane for another only to return, Petrarch's poem 70 in its relation to 23 does not lead outside of the loop but always reinserts itself within the same arc and literally returns to the beginning. In this way, the return gives form to a desire that holds together contradictory impulses without resolving them in a linear process but instead inserting them into an infinite process of retroaction, as in a Möbius strip.

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As a final coda, we could add that this process of retroaction is not limited to the relationship between Rvf 70 and Rvf 23 but could be considered as the form of movement that shapes the whole Rerum vulgarium fragmenta. First, if the poetic subject of the Rvf never moves beyond the position it assumes in canzone 23, then the paradoxical nature of Petrarch’s ‘lyric sequence’, which Barolini has argued combines fragmentation and sequentiality, is given another dimension and made more ambivalent still. Second, the paradigm of deferral and non-conversion that we have identified in canzone 70 can illuminate other moments in the collection that stage an impulse for change and conversion. Remaining in the vicinity of our canzone 70, we could consider the three poems that follow, the ‘canzoni degli occhi’ mentioned above. These poems are meant to prove the change that canzone 70 effects in the poetic subject and indeed do express a new lyric mode, one that appears more ‘positive’. However, this mode exhausts itself, and the following poems regain the usual Petrarchan tone of the ineluctable submission to Laura and to the forces of eros. Moreover, the old, more ‘negative’ mode

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47 Cf. Praloran, La canzone di Petrarca, pp. 66–109, who underscores how this series of poems highlights the impasse of Petrarchan desire
SHAPE OF DESIRE

remains and takes over in the last poem of the sequence, *Rvf* 73 (‘Poi che per mio destino’), where reason is ‘killed’ (la ragione è morta) and abandons itself to sensuality, to the extent that ‘dolcezza’ (sweetness) becomes ‘soverchia’ (excessive), the way in which we have seen that ‘desir’ (desire) was ‘soverchio’ in *canzone* 70. In this way, even when Petrarch’s poetry seems to be on the point of breaking the circle of its own paradoxical desire, it never actually does, like in a Möbius strip.48 That is even true for *Rvf* 264, which Petrarch placed in the pivotal position between the first and second parts of his collection, or for the final penitential sequence of poems that concludes with the *canzone* ‘Vergine bella’ (*Rvf* 366).49 Numerologically speaking, and within the calendrical and cyclical structure of the *Rvf*, which seems to contain one poem for every day of the year, this final poem leads back to *Rvf* 1 and to its paradoxical status as a proemial poem that is meant to abjure everything that follows and so already hints at the inverted and non-linear temporality that is the hallmark of lyric desire in Petrarch.50 In this way, rather than seeing *Rvf* 366

resulting from continual distraction of the subject under the influence of desire and the impossibility of finding a foothold in the circulation of transcendence that passes from Laura to himself (p. 107).


as a final and successful conversion, which completes or enacts a linear progression from Laura to God, one could argue that it replicates the feeding of *canzone* 70 into 23, in an endless feedback loop.\(^\text{51}\)

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