

Part I

The Poetry of Lament

Chapter 1

The Poetry of Mourning in the *Vita nova*: An Agambenian Reading

Catherine Keen

In a brief comment on Dante Alighieri's *Vita nova* (c. 1293/95), the philosopher and critic Giorgio Agamben notes how 'the rubric *Vita nova* delimits an undecideability between what is lived and what is poeticized'. He comments that:

Dante consciously plays with the title of the work, so that it is impossible to decide once and for all if in the title one is to find a reference to what is lived or to what is poeticized, to the 'book' (*libro*) of memory (in which one finds the title *Incipit vita nova*) or to the 'booklet' (*libello*) in which the poet transcribes what the reader will read.¹

In the large body of critical writings on Dante's first substantial authored work, there is abundant discussion of its chosen title and of the metaphors of book and booklet introduced in its opening words.² Agamben's readings of Dante, and of medieval theories and practice of poetry form part, rather, of his exploration of how creative and literary language divides between poetry and prose and of how language confronts the limitations and finitude of

¹ Giorgio Agamben, 'The Dictation of Poetry', in *The End of the Poem*, pp. 76–86 (p. 84).

² The *Vita nova* is henceforth in this chapter referenced as *VN*. For recent bibliography on the book/booklet image, see at least Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 175–201; Michelangelo Picone, 'La teoria dell'*auctoritas* nella *Vita Nova*', *Tenzzone*, 6 (2005), 173–91; H. Wayne Storey, 'Following Instructions: Remaking Dante's *Vita Nova* in the Fourteenth Century', in *Medieval Constructions in Gender and Identity: Essays in Honor of Joan M. Ferrante*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), pp. 117–32; Jelena Todorović, *Dante and the Dynamics of Textual Exchange* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). Fundamental for some of the mourning themes discussed here is the connection with elegy traced in Stefano Carrai, *Dante elegiaco: una chiave di lettura per la 'Vita nova'* (Florence: Olschki, 2006). In this essay I adopt the Latin title *Vita nova* based on Dante's inscribed incipit, *VN* I. 1; all references to the *Vita nova* follow Donato Pirovano's edition in Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova; Rime*, ed. by Donato Pirovano and Marco Grimaldi (Rome: Salerno, 2015), pp. 77–289.

human experience.³ The *Vita nova*, which presents Dante's own authorially selected series of lyric poems framed by expository prose and extended between multiple imagined time-frames of experience and composition, lends itself well to such enquiry. In Dante, Agamben suggests, the commitment to following 'use' rather than 'art' by writing in vernacular rather than formalized, grammatically regulated Latin (*gramatica*), is to embrace the instability but also the affective primordially of lived experience; whilst the tension that surrounds the openings and still more the closures of lyric utterance underscore the vernacular's transience via form as well as medium.⁴ 'To speak in the vernacular is to precisely experience this incessant death and rebirth of words, which no grammar [*gramatica*] can fully treat', Agamben argues.⁵

In this essay I explore how, in both its formal and linguistic structures, Dante's *Vita nova* exploits the tension between 'what is lived and what is poeticized' in relation to the theme of mourning. Especially, I examine how the work leaves space to the eloquence of hesitations, fragmentations, and silences that inhere in the literary choices to use vernacular and to alternate between prose and lyric contents, both for Dante and for the book's inscribed poetic communities, including Beatrice, the central female protagonist whom the narrator loves, and whose death marks a pivotal moment within the text. The discussion begins with reflections on the *Vita nova*'s prose elements, reviewing how Dante positions them in relation to the 'widow' metaphor used to describe the disruption of the textual succession of prose and poetry units following his account of Beatrice's death. Next, focusing primarily on lyric contents, I consider the introduction of mourners and mourning into the text, as both Dante and Beatrice participate in rituals of funeral, lament, and commemoration, finally leaving Dante as survivor mourning Beatrice herself. I review the text's strategies of inclusion and omission with regard to public and social versus private and interior expressions of grief via Agamben's 'phantasms', the imagined beings of lyric discourse. Finally, in a review of the

³ This essay draws especially on two of Agamben's collections. First, *Categorie italiane: studi di poetica* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), whose title underlines how engagement with Italian literature in particular informs its reflections, a prominence lost in the English translation's title (n. 1 above), though this rightly avoids confining the essays to a 'national literature' focus (see Anthony Adler, 'Deconfabulation: Agamben's Italian Categories and the Impossibility of Experience', *Diacritics*, 43.3 (2015), 68–94 (pp. 82–89). Secondly, *Stanze*; in English, *Stanzas*. On Agamben's literary thought, as distinct from the *Homo Sacer* series, I found especially helpful Adler, 'Deconfabulation'; Paolo Bartoloni, 'Dante Alighieri', in *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage*, ed. by Adam Kotsko and Carlo Salzani (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 125–30; William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis* (London: Continuum, 2010).

⁴ Agamben explores Dante's vernacular/*gramatica* distinction in 'The Dream of Language', in *The End of the Poem*, pp. 43–61; the titular essay 'The End of the Poem' focuses on problems of ending, in *The End of the Poem*, pp. 109–15.

⁵ Agamben, 'The Dream of Language', p. 54; and on vernacular and *gramatica* more widely in Dante's thought, pp. 53–61. See also Gary P. Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

motif of selection and copying, I reflect on the alternative afterlives that Dante obliquely imagines for his poetry, especially in the increasingly uneven copying situations ascribed to the post-mortem, ‘widowed’ lyrics.

A Book of Memory and of Mourning: Prose

The theme of loss and mourning is present within the *Vita nova* from its opening phrases. The presentation of the entire text as a selection drawn from the narrator’s book of memory confronts the reader immediately with the idea of retrospection across what is distant, disrupted, or absent:

In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la qual dice: *Incipit vita nova*. Sotto la qual rubrica io trovo scritte le parole le quali è mio intendimento d’assemprare in questo libello; e se non tutte, almeno la loro sentenza. (VN I. 1)

In my Book of Memory, in the early part where there is little to be read, there comes a chapter with the rubric: *Incipit vita nova*. It is my intention to copy into this little book the words I find written under that heading — if not all of them, at least the essence of their meaning.⁶

These opening lines prompted Agamben’s declaration on the ‘undecideability between what is lived and what is poeticized’. As readers, they tell us that the physical pages that we follow in the *libello*’s interpretive transcription will always be incomplete and fall into a silence that remains provisional, since the living writer’s memory-book is *in fieri*, forever moving ahead of the poetic or scribal record. The book’s ending anticipates this, too. Not only does it offer a tantalizing promise of more to come, from an author in continually evolving literary apprenticeship, but it anticipates a permanent falling into silence at the moment of his own death and transition into paradise, beyond the limits of earthly discourse:⁷

Appresso questo sonetto apparve a me una mirabile visione, ne la quale io vidi cose che mi fecero proporre di non dire più di questa benedetta, infino a tanto che io potessi

⁶ Prose translations throughout are from *Dante’s ‘Vita Nuova’*, ed. and trans. by Mark L. Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973); lyrics from *Dante’s Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).

⁷ On the open ending’s promise of future writing, see Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 119–20, 135, 139–41.

piú degnamente trattare di lei. [...] Sí che, se [...] la mia vita duri per alquanti anni, io spero di dire di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna; e poi piaccia a colui che è Sire de la cortesia, che la mia anima sen possa gire a vedere la gloria de la sua donna, cioè di quella benedetta Beatrice, la quale gloriosamente mira ne la faccia di colui *qui est per omnia secula benedictus*. (VN XLII. 1–3)

After I wrote this sonnet there came to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blessèd one until I would be capable of writing about her in a nobler way. [...] Accordingly, if [...] my life continue for a few more years, I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman. And then may it please the One who is the Lord of graciousness that my soul ascend to behold the glory of its lady, that is, of that blessèd Beatrice, who in glory contemplates the countenance of the One *qui est per omnia secula benedictus* [who is forever blessèd].

Structural incompletions, omissions, and alternatives are crafted into the *Vita nova* from beginning to end and, besides being declared overtly in these opening and closing prose statements, achieve prominence at different internal moments.⁸

Memory and mourning are intrinsic to the work from the start. The phraseology first introducing Beatrice as ‘la gloriosa donna de la mia mente’ (VN II. 1) would immediately tell medieval audiences that her enjoyment of paradisaal glory means she is already dead, as Mark Musa’s translation stresses, calling her ‘the *now* glorious lady of my mind’ (my emphasis).⁹ Structurally, the ordering of the prose strongly marks the disruptive consequences of Beatrice’s death for protagonist, book, and writer. Its earlier sections frame almost every lyric between two prose presentations of its thematic and rhetorical content: first, an account of the supposed biographical circumstances of its composition (the *ragione*); at the end, an analytical ‘division’ (*divisione*) of its formal structure follows the poem.¹⁰ From the moment

⁸ Agamben’s ‘End of the Poem’ highlights the ‘crisis’ associated with poetic closure (pp. 112–13, and see below): in Dante’s experimental book form, his opening and closure chiastically articulate a similar ‘crisis of identity’ for the booklet recounting a poeticized life-experience.

⁹ See Charles Singleton, ‘The Death of Beatrice’, in *An Essay on the ‘Vita nuova’* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 6–24 (p. 7). Teodolinda Barolini stresses Dante’s insistent narratological prolepsis from incipit onwards, in ‘Cominciando dal principio infino alla fine: Forging Anti-narrative in the *Vita nuova*’, in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 175–92 (esp. pp. 183–90).

¹⁰ The apparently biographical material uses verbs such as *narrare*, *trattare*, *ragionare* [narrate, treat, tell], or the noun *ragione*, a partial calque of the Occitan *razo* which Agamben also discusses in *The End of the Poem*: see Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, pp. 35–38. On *Vita nova*’s *ragioni* and *divisioni*, see Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, pp. 179–181; Todorović, *Dante and the Dynamics of Textual Exchange*, pp. 115–21 (esp. p. 119); Federica Pich, ‘On the Threshold of Poems: A Paratextual Approach to the Narrative/Lyric

of Beatrice's death announcement, the *divisione* is moved to join the *ragione* ahead of the poem, leaving it 'widowed': 'E acciò che questa canzone paia rimanere piú vedova dopo lo suo fine, la dividerò prima che io la scriva; e cotale modo terrò da qui innanzi' [And in order that this *canzone* may seem to remain all the more widowed after it has come to an end, I shall divide it before I copy it. And from now on I shall follow this method] (VN XXXI. 2). The phrasing emphatically echoes the biblical quotation from Lamentations that precedes the announcement of Beatrice's death: '*Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo! facta est quasi vidua domina gentium*' [How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! how is the mistress of the Gentiles become as a widow] (VN XXVIII. 1, Lam. 1. 1).¹¹ Thus the shock of Beatrice's death is matched by a deep re-structuring of the book's narrative pattern, rooted in biblical paradigms of grief. The change means there is no longer any in-page textual separation between the emotional biography of Dante-the-lover and the controlled rhetorical commentary of Dante-the-poet, which become a single textual unit.

After Beatrice's death, the lyric thus always stands as the end-stop — or at least, the point of falling into silence — to a unit of thought. To extend one of Agamben's notes on 'The End of the Poem', this restructuring exposes the 'decisive crisis' that accumulates at a poem's ending, where metrical and semantic structures seek to be reconciled. Previously, the closing *divisione* analysing each lyric's rhetorical components has contained the poem's energies and bridged lyric and narrative realities. Agamben posits that a lyric *tornada* or *envoi* marks a kind of 'institutional necessity', 'as if for poetry the end implied a catastrophe and loss of identity so irreparable as to demand the deployment of very special metrical and semantic means'. In the *Vita nova*, the prose *divisione* has performed a function of retrospection across the completed lyric similar to a metrical *tornada*, and its changed position after Beatrice's death is presented as marking crisis and deprivation: structural widowhood. Now, more intensely than before, 'the poem [will] leave behind it only an empty space in which [...] truly *rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu*'.¹²

The Mourner's Lament: Phantasm and Poeticization

Opposition in Italian Renaissance Poetry', in *Self-Commentary in Early Modern European Literature, 1400–1700*, ed. by Francesco Venturi (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 99–134 (pp. 101–05).

¹¹ See Ronald Martinez, 'Mourning Beatrice: The Rhetoric of Threnody in the *Vita nuova*', *MLN*, 113.1 (1998), 1–29 (esp. pp. 17, 20); repr. in *Dante: The Critical Complex*, ed. by Richard Lansing, 8 vols (New York: Routledge, 2003), I, 127–55. See also Carrai, *Dante elegiaco*, pp. 86–89.

¹² All from Agamben, 'The End of the Poem', pp. 112–14. The French quotation is from Stéphane Mallarmé: 'nothing will have taken place but the place'.

We can thus extend Agamben's explorations of how the organized discourse of poetry confronts the problems of ending and of empty space, in the case of the *Vita nova*, to include the discursive units of *ragione-lyric-divisione* and, even more, the 'widowed' units of *ragione-divisione-lyric*. Looking elsewhere in Agamben's work, his discussions of melancholia, loss, and memory in relation to medieval love poetry also cast light on mourning rituals within the *Vita nova*, as another element that 'delimits an undecideability between what is lived and what is poeticized'.¹³ For Agamben, the love discourse of the *Vita nova* and its commitment to the vernacular's transience coalesce in Beatrice, 'the name of the amorous experience of the event of language at play in the poetic text itself'.¹⁴ This 'event of language' expresses the 'threshold' aesthetic Agamben sees in thirteenth-century love literature, where lyrics are dominated by images of the beloved generated from sense observation, but interiorized as 'phantasms' within the discursive subject, such that possession and desire can be subjugated via a kind of mediated co-presence satisfied by the act of poetic articulation itself.¹⁵ 'Medieval psychology [...] conceived of love as an essentially phantasmatic process involving both imagination and memory, in an assiduous tormented circling around an image painted or reflected in the deepest self,' he notes.¹⁶

A trajectory of this dispossessed, phantasmic love discourse within the *Vita nova* can, I suggest, be traced over the arc of its four funerals (and a wedding — though one that takes on dangerously funereal traits). Beyond my pun on the film title *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Agamben's emphasis on the priority of poeticization over (auto)biography makes Beatrice's imagined death and funeral, in the lyric 'Donna pietosa e di novella etate' [A lady, tender in heart and young] (VN XXIII. 17), just as 'real' as the three deaths claimed as external events.¹⁷ In the latter, the protagonist and/or his beloved Beatrice participate in social observances that mark, externally, real-world deaths and losses but also provoke the articulation of mournful poetry directed inwards towards and between the image-persons populating the spaces of lyric rather than external cityscapes.¹⁸ Proleptic and imagined as

¹³ Agamben, 'The Dictation of Poetry', p. 84.

¹⁴ Agamben, 'Dream of Language', p. 58.

¹⁵ Bartoloni, 'Dante Alighieri', pp. 125–27. For the VN in Agamben, *Stanzas*, see esp. 'Spiritus phantasticus', pp. 90–101; 'Spirits of Love', pp. 102–110.

¹⁶ Agamben, 'Eros at the Mirror', in *Stanzas*, pp. 73–89 (p. 81); see also *Stanzas*, Part I, 'The Phantasms of Eros'.

¹⁷ *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, dir. by Mike Newell (Rank, 1994). I classify the *Vita nova*'s four funerals as those of Beatrice's friend (VN VIII) and father (XXII), and the imagined (XXIII) then genuine death of Beatrice (XXVIII); each is however dramatized multiple times in the text, in both prose and lyric iterations.

¹⁸ On the *Vita nova*'s lyric phantasms and the influence of Guido Cavalcanti (another of Agamben's key medieval poets), see Gianfranco Contini, 'Cavalcanti in Dante', in *Un'idea di Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), pp.

well as real deaths, and losses of both a distant and an intimate nature increasingly saturate the narrative, as Dante's book works towards, around, and beyond the central death of Beatrice, and reconfigures its conceptualization of loss and mourning.¹⁹

The *Vita nova*'s prose conveys from the outset that Beatrice is already dead and in glory, and more specific encounters with death and mourning are introduced from early on. Even the first two poems intertwine images of love with those of deathly loss. In the first sonnet, presenting in double phantasm the imagined beings of its lyric subject's dream-vision, the beloved is wrapped in a shroud-like sheet. Its troubadoric image of eating the lover's burning heart recalls love's traditional fatality;²⁰ while the prose shows the authenticity of its deathly premonition by citing the response sonnet embracing this interpretation, Guido Cavalcanti's 'Vedesti, al mio parere, onne valore' [I think that you beheld all worth] (VN III. 14).²¹ The second poem provides the *Vita nova*'s first quotation from the Book of Lamentations that is later directly linked to Beatrice's death. A vernacular translation calls to 'O voi che per la via d'Amor passate' [O you who pass by on Love's way] (VN VII. 3, l. 1), making the *via d'Amor* a locale for Jerusalemic mourning; the *divisione* directly quotes the Latin source text, 'O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus' [O all ye that pass by the way, attend, and see if there be any sorrow like to my sorrow] (VN VII. 7, Lam. 1. 12).²² Yet the melancholy is directed again into a domain of lyric phantasms: according to the prose, 'O voi che per la via' appropriated Jeremiah's mourning discourse for an indirect and metaphorical loss, lamenting the departure on a voyage (not the death) of a woman (not Beatrice) who has 'screened' Dante's true love (though love for Beatrice is itself a source of suffering and sorrow).

143–58. See also Giuseppe Mazzotta, 'The Language of Poetry in the *Vita nuova*', *Rivista di studi italiani*, 1.1 (1983), 3–14.

¹⁹ Martinez reads 'the unfolding of the plot of the *Vita nuova* as a series of separations and losses', 'Mourning Beatrice', pp. 15–16; while Fabio Camilletti reads the book as 'a progressive refinement of love and poetry through loss': *The Portrait of Beatrice: Dante, D. G. Rossetti, and the Imaginary Lady* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), p. 17. See also Jeremy Tambling, 'Thinking Melancholy: Allegory and the *Vita nuova*', *Romanic Review*, 96.1 (2005), 85–105 (p. 99), on the link between death and memory. Singleton's 'Death of Beatrice' argues for the reality of the *libello*'s visions, especially the imagined death in 'Donna pietosa'.

²⁰ On the eaten heart, see Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 77–81 (drawing extensively on Agamben's *Homo Sacer* studies); Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 156–63.

²¹ See Carrai, *Dante elegiaco*, pp. 23–24; Manuele Gragnolati, '(In-)Corporeality, Language, Performance in Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*', in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 213–22 (p. 217); Michelangelo Picone, 'Dante e Cino: una lunga amicizia. Prima parte: i tempi della *Vita nova*', *Dante*, 1 (2004), 39–53 (pp. 42–46).

²² See Tambling, 'Thinking Melancholy', pp. 89–90.

The sonnet's lament matches what Agamben identifies as a Freudian sense of melancholia, 'the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object'.²³ The early preoccupation with absence expands thanks to overtly indirect social and poetic projections of loss onto and into simulacra of the beloved and of the poetry that utters her into being, whilst also managing to speak truthfully about Beatrice (and about the melancholy surrounding her approaching loss). Thus, the third and fourth poems swiftly move us from citational to historical mourning, at the first funeral: the lament of 'O voi che per la via' did indeed, it proves, anticipate a death.²⁴ For the only time in the *Vita nova*, Dante-narrator claims to have witnessed the real-world mourning rituals in person. The victim is a young woman companion of Beatrice, 'lo cui corpo io vidi giacere senza l'anima in mezzo di molte donne, le quali piangeano assai pietosamente' [I saw her body without the soul, lying in the midst of many ladies who were weeping most pitifully] (*VN VIII*. 1). Like the preceding lyric's anticipatory quotation from Lamentations, this funeral stands in proleptically for those following, and it produces the first experiments in explicitly funereal poetry. The resulting two sonnets both publicize painful confrontation with bodily death, yet internalize mourning, like love, into the space of lyric with its projected image-persons, as the allegorical phantasms of Love and Death mingle with the equally projected lyric figures of the poet and the mourning women.

The intertextual inferences of the eaten heart sonnet come close to realization at a wedding banquet, where the lover undergoes a near-death experience when overwhelmed by his beloved's proximity. In the related two sonnets, fictive personae dramatize the fatality of intense desire. The first portrays the lover's transformation into a ghostly 'figura nova' [strange figure] or 'figura d'altrui' [figure of another] (*VN XIV*. 11–12, ll. 3, 12), empty of any personal substance. In the second, death warnings are shouted not only by Love but by the inanimate fabric of the wedding-hall, as the phantasms of lyric space become themselves spatial beings. If the first sonnet's human form is transformed into an empty shell, here stones acquire voice. Their menacing "'Moia, moia'" ['Die, Die'] (*VN XV*. 4, l. 8) anticipates the "'morra'ti, morra'ti'" ['You will die, you will die'] (*VN XXIII*. 22, l. 42) called by lamenting women in the *canzone* 'Donna pietosa', a little later in the narrative, where Dante

²³ Agamben, 'The Lost Object', in *Stanzas*, pp. 19–21 (p. 20). On the Freudian melancholia of the episode's 'screen memories', see Tambling, 'Thinking Melancholy', pp. 102–03.

²⁴ Nancy Vickers terms this 'proleptic citation': 'Widowed Words: Dante, Petrarch, and the Metaphors of Mourning', in *Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. by Kevin Brownlee and Walter Stephens (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), pp. 97–108 (p. 100).

hallucinates his own and Beatrice's inevitable deaths.²⁵ Even in the laudatory *canzone*, 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore' [Ladies who have understanding of love] (VN XIX. 5), praise of Beatrice involves recognition that 'Madonna è disiata in sommo cielo' [My lady is desired in highest heaven] (VN XIX. 9, l. 29), anticipating a heavenwards journey that inevitably implies bodily death.²⁶

The remaining three funerals are not witnessed materially by the protagonist. On the death of Beatrice's father, the lover is screened from direct knowledge of Beatrice's grief, and even from talking to her female companions, by gender-segregated mourning conventions (VN XXII. 3). Replaying some of the dynamics of the opening lines of 'O voi che per la via', the weeping lover becomes a spectacle for women leaving the house of mourning and passing him by; Beatrice remains enclosed within. Poet and women maintain decorous silence in the prose; but by eavesdropping on their conversations the poet imagines lyric dialogues where he and they attempt to represent the absent Beatrice's grief. The dialogue thus projected out of the streetscape and into the confines of two sonnets permits an Agambenian prioritization of poeticized over lived experience, as words never spoken even within the prose fiction are uttered by the lyric's image-persons of lover and women.

After her father's funeral come death and mourning rituals for Beatrice herself, along with further layerings of ineffability, interiority, and distance between poet and beloved. In 'Donna pietosa', the sick protagonist realizes his own and his beloved's mortality, and imagines in detail both the ascent of Beatrice's soul to heaven, and funeral rites performed for her on earth. The *canzone* borrows from the scenarios of the previous two deaths (of the young woman, and Beatrice's father), which adds contextually to its ambiguity as a 'vano imaginar' [delusive vision] or 'imaginar fallace' [false vision] (VN XXIII. 23, 26, ll. 44, 65), a product of melancholic substitutions and anticipations of loss.²⁷ As well as creating echoes from elsewhere in the narrative, the mourning scenes of 'Donna pietosa' are enriched by borrowings from the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion, with eclipse and earthquake marking Beatrice's death as a Christological event.²⁸ These biblical allusions both underline the mediated nature of the poem's mourning imagery, but also stress that it offers a fundamentally truthful way of thinking about Beatrice, literally central to the *libello*: not only to its exploration of her salvific role in the narrator's life experience, but also numerically

²⁵ Martinez, 'Mourning Beatrice', pp. 21–22; Mazzotta, 'The Language of Poetry in the *Vita nuova*', pp. 7–8.

²⁶ Martinez links the image to *planctus* traditions ('Mourning Beatrice', p. 14).

²⁷ Agamben, 'Introduction', in *Stanzas*, pp. xv–xix (pp. xvii–xviii).

²⁸ Singleton, *An Essay on the 'Vita nuova'*, pp. 18–20; Tambling, 'Thinking Melancholy', pp. 21–25. On the *Vita nova*'s elision of corporeal death and salvific emphasis on the glory of changed, celestial life, see Camilletti, *The Portrait of Beatrice*, pp. 15–17.

central to the prosimetrum's formal construction, being the sixteenth of its thirty-one collected poems.²⁹

Fragments of Mourning Discourse: Falling into Silence

The announcement of Beatrice's historical death that 'Donna pietosa' anticipates is accompanied by escalating statements about the impossibility of authentically capturing the poet's mourning in verse. The *libello*'s third *canzone* is, or should have been, the lyric 'Sì lungiamente m'ha tenuto Amore' [Love has possessed me so long] (VN XXVII. 3). But the poem is left hanging as a single stanza, and, uniquely in the *Vita nova*, the narrator presents a poem claimed to be incomplete.³⁰ Returning to Agamben's commentary on the perils of poetic endings, we truly take the measure of the impending crisis when, for the only time in the narrative, 'the poem leaves behind it only an empty space', not only lacking analytical *divisione* but interrupted in a way that marks the 'catastrophe' of ending that here implies a sense of the radical loss of poetic subjecthood as well as of textual sound and sense.

The inclusion of the unfinished lyric precedes a new structural and conceptual confrontation with the crisis of absolute loss; and the struggle to convey absence and incompleteness is hereafter actualized in increasing fragmentation of the narrative record.³¹ Transcription of the uncompleted lyric is disrupted by the return of the opening words of Lamentations: '*Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo! facta est quasi vidua domina gentium*'. The narrative stutters across the sudden incursion of this Latin phrase: only after copying Jeremiah's text does the narrator mark his *canzone*'s disruption: 'Io era nel proponimento ancora di questa canzone, e compiuta n'avea questa soprascritta stanza, quando lo Signore de la giustizia chiamò questa gentilissima a gloriare' [I was still engaged in composing this *canzone*, in fact I had completed only the stanza written above, when the God of Justice called this most gracious one to glory] (VN XXVIII. 1). Temporality and articulation are thus both fragmented, already 'widowed', although the extent of the loss and

²⁹ Singleton, *An Essay on the 'Vita nuova'*, pp. 6–7, 18; Barolini explores how the abundant detail in the poem and its frame, contrasting with the 'black hole' surrounding the death event itself, interact to support or to undermine Dante's self-projection as an 'exemplary narrator' (*Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, pp. 185–87).

³⁰ Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, pp. 188–89; David Bowe, 'Rubrics and Red Dresses: Ordering the *Vita nova*', *La Rivista*, 8.1 (2020), 5–29 (p. 19); Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, pp. 117–19; Tambling, 'Thinking Melancholy', pp. 91–92. Monostrophic *canzoni* were produced by contemporary lyricists, so the poem is potentially complete; the prose commentary claims otherwise.

³¹ See Francesca Southerden, 'Lost for Words: Recuperating Melancholy Subjectivity in Dante's Eden', in *Dante's Plurilingualism*, ed. by Fortuna, Gagnolati, and Trabandt, pp. 193–210 (pp. 193–95).

its structural implications are not yet evident.³² Famously, no direct account of Beatrice's death appears: it is literally unspeakable.

Only after a long passage on the event's numerological significance is the biblical citation picked up and glossed as expressing the condition of the poet and his whole community after Beatrice's death. When we finally reach the third complete *canzone*, 'Li occhi dolenti per pietà del core' [My eyes that grieve because of my heart's anguish] (VN XXXI. 8), with the fourth of the book's phantasmically-staged lyric mourning scenes, the lover confronts its unspeakability — the woman's name is linked to definitive loss ('Ita n'è Beatrice in l'alto cielo' [Beatrice has departed to heaven on high], VN XXXI. 10, l. 15), while the speaker's voice dwindles and is displaced into his own lyric projections. His role as mourner is embodied finally within the personified poem itself, which melds into the imagined crowd of mourning women as a 'figliuola di trestizia' [daughter of sorrow] (VN XXXI. 17, l. 75) whose genealogy derives from the primacy of the poetic over the biographical order of existence.³³

As for '*Quomodo sedet sola civitas*', the code-switching between the discursive Latin *grammatica* of power and institutions, into the vernacular of poetry, love, and loss, is a vital element in the *libello*'s mourning poetics. Dante reshapes the Jerusalemic lament to fit the unnamed city where the love-fiction is located, describing it as 'la sopradetta cittade quasi vedova' [the aforementioned city [...] left as if a widow] (VN XXX. 1), shifting into the vernacular that, for Agamben, intrinsically articulates the transience of the human condition.³⁴ The scriptural Latin provides a half-opening for social and civic modes of discourse: 'onde io, ancora lagrimando in questa desolata cittade, scrissi a li principi de la terra alquanto de la sua condizione, pigliando quello cominciamento di Geremia profeta: *Quomodo sedet sola civitas*' [and I, still weeping in this barren city, wrote to the princes of the land describing its condition, taking my opening words from the prophet Jeremiah [...]: *Quomodo sedet sola civitas*] (VN XXX. 1). Latin epistolography, however, is declaredly out of place for the interiorized poetic environment of the *libello*, and unlike the *canzone* 'Sì lungiamente', transcribed in its unfinished entirety, the finished Latin epistle is absent from the narrative. The allusion to it stands in tension with the suppression of detail concerning the crisis-moment of Beatrice's death and omission of any funeral visualization. If Beatrice, as Agamben suggests, 'is the name of the amorous experience of the event of language at play

³² Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, pp. 187–89.

³³ Martinez, 'Mourning Beatrice', pp. 16–18; Southerden, 'Lost for Words', p. 201; Vickers, 'Widowed Words', pp. 105–08; see Agamben, 'The Dictation of Poetry', p. 84.

³⁴ Agamben, 'Dream of Language'; Bartoloni, 'Dante Alighieri', p. 126.

in the poetic text itself, Dante's refusal to narrate her death and burial locates the book's new life (*vita nova*) in poetry, with its vivifying phantasms, rather than in biography, history, and Latin's institutional power.³⁵ The event is thus appropriately accompanied within the narrative by linguistic and formal hesitations: by oscillation between Latin and vernacular, complete and incomplete texts, transcription and omission; and by increasing recourse, in the remaining narration, to a poetics of fragment, fantasy, and unrealized or not-yet-realized alternative utterance.

From here onwards, Dante's statements about his chosen audiences and about his *libello*'s selection and transcription of materials become ever more susceptible to fragmentation or silencing. The major signal of disruption is the prose *divisioni*'s repositioning to their 'widowed' place before the lyrics, noted above. This draws attention to Dante's authority as the shaping author and editor of a work drawn from his own intriguingly absent-yet-present book of memory; but also renounces some of that control, by stressing the 'collapse into silence' that Agamben finds in the crisis of poetic endings.³⁶ The book marks this crisis clearly, hinting at the multiple, fragmented afterlives of the *Vita nova*'s component poems via allusions to elements that are not present in the *libello*, to poems whose meanings elude contemporary audiences, or to rewritings and exchanges glimpsed only in part.

After the unfinished 'Sì lungiamente' and the missing *Quomodo sedet* epistle, the formal *planctus* of 'Li occhi dolenti' is followed by two more funeral lyrics, 'Venite a 'ntender li sospiri miei' [Come and hear my sighs] (*VN* XXXII. 5) and 'Quantunque volte, lasso!, mi rimembra' [Alas, whenever I remember] (*VN* XXXIII. 5). The poems' laments are elaborately ventriloquized performances. They are commissioned by a friend of the narrator, Beatrice's brother, who conceals his objective ('simulava sue parole', *VN* XXXII. 2) by claiming he wants to commemorate a different woman's death, inviting his accomplished friend to voice words on his behalf. To complicate this already elaborate screening, the first-person voice in 'Venite a 'ntender' incorporates and conceals the lover's own mourning for Beatrice beneath the voice of its commissioning patron. Similarly, the prose unfolds a hidden distinction between the patron's and poet's subject-positions in the two grieving stanzas of 'Quantunque volte'. We may return to Agamben's 'threshold' or 'labyrinth' arguments about how medieval poetry employs phantasm and simulacra to interiorize the tension between desire and its inevitable absence and loss. To let the poet go 'into the heart of what [is kept]

³⁵ Agamben, 'Dream of Language', p. 58.

³⁶ Agamben, 'End of the Poem', p. 115.

at a distance', the identities of the dead woman, of the voices saying 'I', and of the poet producing them all become increasingly elusive and indirect.³⁷

Like the moment of Beatrice's actual death, its anniversary is recorded in another disrupted poem, 'Era venuta ne la mente mia' [There had come into my heart] (VN XXXIV. 7).³⁸ Contrary to the incomplete 'Sì lungiamente', disruption here produces poetic excess. Two alternative opening quatrains to the sonnet record two perspectives on the speaker's acts of grieving, with his mournful introspection represented either as a solitary tableau, in the first incipit, or as a moment witnessed by others, in the second. In this episode, we glimpse Dante as visual artist as well as poet, sketching angels on his writing-tablet, although of course his drawings are absent from our reading experience.³⁹ The second incipit, addressing the bystanders who watch him sketching, makes this a historical moment that pins the poem to social spaces inhabited by the author and his audience; yet the external encounter is subordinated, in both prose and lyric, to the interior realm where the persons of poetry or painting constitute the speaker's central experiential focus.⁴⁰ As readers, we have the choice to begin with either or both of the quatrains as the poem's stuttering starting point, offering us at least three alternative versions of the poem; but always depriving us of its author's angelic decorations. We can never recuperate the writing-tablets where the *Vita nova's* mournfully yearning protagonist sketched words and/or images, and neither we nor he can fix the sonnet into regular, unified diction contained within a stable frame. It is 'widowed' both of prose *divisione* (that is, the *divisione* stands in the post-mortem widowed position, ahead of the poem) and of accompanying 'figure d'angeli' (figures of angels: VN XXXIV. 3), as it falls precariously into silence.

The struggles and screenings incorporated into the first year's poetry of mourning anticipate more serious complications that arise when the demonstrative empathy of a 'donna gentile' [gracious lady] with the lover's sorrow nearly leads to recovery from grieving and a new love story with a woman who closely replicates Beatrice's external traits. But with another phantasmic moment that doubles back to the dalliances with 'screen women' near the start of the book, a dream vision of Beatrice re-immerses the lover in his devotion to her, and

³⁷ Agamben, 'Introduction', in *Stanzas*, p. xviii.

³⁸ Southerden, 'Lost for Words', p. 197.

³⁹ See Federica Pich, 'L'immagine "donna de la mente" dalle *Rime* alla *Vita Nova*', in *Le Rime di Dante*, ed. by Claudia Berra and Paolo Borsa (Milan: Cisalpino, 2010), pp. 345–76. Gorni speculates on the possible Y-shaped or 'winged' transcription of the dual incipits as a *carmen figuratum*: 'Nota al testo', in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, ed. by Gorni, pp. 338–40; Camilletti provides a rewarding, extended discussion of the episode's word-image relationships (*The Portrait of Beatrice*, pp. 19–34).

⁴⁰ See Agamben on the 'image in the heart' motif: 'Eros at the Mirror', p. 81.

to the problem of articulating her love and loss effectively in mourning verse.⁴¹ The timing of the ‘*donna gentile*’ interlude falls significantly after the end of a year’s mourning, during which the lover has been immersed in recalling the past (‘*ne la quale mi ricordava del passato tempo*’: VN XXXV. 1). Its distractions are punctured only by a deeper memorial retrospection that follows the dream of Beatrice: a recursion that perpetuates mourning but also promises to impose order on it (as expressed also by the *libello*’s open ending): ‘*ricordandomi di lei secondo l’ordine del tempo passato*’ [remembering her in the sequence of past times] (VN XXXIX. 2). As Donato Pirovano notes, the *libello* achieves its open-ended resolution by embracing the melancholy of perpetual absence, turning to poetry to create a verbal ‘reliquary’ in and through which the lover’s devotion can be maintained.⁴²

The last two lyrics, with their prose frames, constitute phantasmic reliquaries in recalling how medieval pilgrimage engaged with the liminality of relics as material emblems of the transcendent realm. In the penultimate sonnet, the poet imagines telling a group of pilgrims passing through his city how this apparent waystop is a Jerusalemic ‘*città dolente*’ [sorrowing city] (VN XL. 9, l. 6). In the final poem, in turn, the poet’s own ‘*peregrino spirito*’ [pilgrim spirit] (VN XLI. 10, l. 8), in the form of a wordless sigh, travels to behold Beatrice in paradise, a vision too ineffable for coherent speech. The book’s closing words, as we saw above, end the book without definitively resolving its narrative and instead anticipate speech-acts and silences yet to come, to fill still-unwritten pages in the book of the poet’s future memory.⁴³

The final poem’s phantasmic pilgrimage crystallizes the preoccupation with absence and displacement running through the *libello*’s closing sections. It is introduced however with an explicitly social and patronal opening scenario that envisages a possible re-ordering or alternative genesis of the *Vita nova*, which is often overlooked. Another kind of silence or absence arises in the prose notes explaining its genesis as prompted by a request from ‘*due donne gentili [...] pregando che io mandassi loro di queste mie parole rimate*’ [two gentlewomen [...] requesting that I send them some of my poetry] (VN XLI. 1). The request looks back over the narrator’s lyric past, since the women’s invitation shows knowledge of

⁴¹ Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, pp. 127–32, with a Freudian reading that chimes with Agamben’s ‘Lost Object’ discussion; Bowe, ‘Rubrics and Red Dresses’, pp. 21–22.

⁴² Donato Pirovano, ‘Nota introduttiva’, in *Vita nuova; Rime*, ed. by Pirovano and Grimaldi, pp. 3–36 (p. 24). See Seeta Chaganti’s studies of the ‘poetics of enshrinement’ that creates textual and performative reliquaries in verse: *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴³ See Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, pp. 135–41; Camilletti, *The Portrait of Beatrice*, pp. 32–33.

existing poetic production; but it looks forward too, since it prompts him to write ‘una cosa nuova’ [something new] (VN XLI. 1). This new poem, ‘Oltre la sfera che piú larga gira’ [Beyond the sphere that circles widest] (VN XLI. 10), becomes the last lyric transcribed within the pages of the *Vita nova*. Yet Dante also notes that the poem was one of three sent to the women, in a micro-series of mourning poems drawn from the post-mortem lyrics for Beatrice.⁴⁴ The resulting sequence is one that readers can put together from within the text, but which we must manufacture for ourselves: Dante does not transcribe it. We cannot be sure about its precise shape, either. Its constituent poems are listed in reverse chronological sequence: so would the putative page sent to the women begin with the brand-new ‘Oltre la sfera’ (VN XLI), followed by ‘Deh peregrini’ (VN XL), and finally ‘Venite a ’ntender’ (VN XXXII), the funeral poem commissioned by Beatrice’s kinsman, in the order listed in the prose *ragione* (VN XLI. 1)? Or would the poet have sent his lyrics in what the *Vita nova* suggests is the correct narrative order, with ‘Venite a ’ntender’ first, then ‘Deh peregrini’, and finally ‘Oltre la sfera’? Each choice would significantly affect the emotive charge of a sequence in which the balance between mourning and consolation varies depending on whether it begins or ends with ‘Oltre la sfera’.

Compressing, disrupting, and fragmenting the *Vita Nova*’s lyric sequence, the authorized but absent micro-collection sent to the women remains focused on mourning. Its new poem, ‘Oltre la sfera’, introduces the consolatory note that continues into the final prose ending of Dante’s prosimetrum. Yet famously, even those final sentences dissolve into narrative absence and ineffability. They project the *Vita nova*’s opening premise of incomplete transcription away from the past and into the future, from the book of memory to the book of the not-yet-known, contingent and unpredictable. Agamben comments on ‘the undecideability between what is lived and what is poeticized’ in Dante’s *libello*.⁴⁵ Up to its closing pages, new starting points and uncompleted utterances proliferate around the words we read, taking us from the newness of the incipit through to the closing poetic ‘cosa nuova’. As readers, we continually confront the gap between what is said and unsaid, what is biography and what is literature. At the end of the *Vita nova*, we are assured there is more of both to come. For the moment, both the final poem and the final prose have to fall into a silence that accepts its own incompleteness, and acknowledges the loss of Beatrice as something for which the mourning, earth-bound writer cannot find words.

⁴⁴ Martinez calls it a ‘germinal mini-anthology of the *libello* itself [...] that emphasizes the domination of mourning’ (‘Mourning Beatrice’, p. 13).

⁴⁵ Agamben, ‘The Dictation of Poetry’, p. 84.

