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I shall love you against my will: The allure of the past and poetic subreading in Petrarch

If we consider the birth of humanism to be connected to the revival of the Latin classics in the late medieval period, there is no better place to start than with the works of Petrarch (1304-74), a singular man of letters who drastically affected the course of Italian and European literature and thought. A common characterization of Petrarch is that it was he who 'rediscovered' the world of classical rhetoric, initiating a new attitude towards education and a changed perspective on human affairs that would lead to the Italian Renaissance. This is not entirely baseless, for he did indeed exert great efforts to revive the Latin style of the late Roman republic, and as for rediscovery, he did locate a collection of Cicero's letters that had gone unnoticed for centuries. However, it is simplistic to imagine that the works of writers like Virgil, Cicero, Juvenal, and Ovid had been little known throughout the Middle Ages, for through the efforts of Augustine, Boethius, and Macrobius, their work was imitated and passed into the thirteenth century by Alcuin, John of Salisbury, Pierre de Blois, and many others.¹ Within this chain of imitation and transmission, Petrarch's place is not so extraordinary that he would stand that strikingly above the late scholastic philosophers who preceded him. The importance in Petrarch's writing does not occur in his passion, as singularly enthusiastic as it was, for the classical period, but rather in that he rethought his position *vis-à-vis* the Roman masters in a completely novel way. Unlike his predecessors, Petrarch did not interact with Cicero and Virgil as relics of the past—his relationship with them was rather one of creative imagination, rehabilitating them into the present as if they were alive today. A careful inquiry into the world-view that allowed Petrarch to write from this perspective can afford us a deeper and more nuanced understanding of his impact upon European thought than the 'rediscovery' concept allows.

The basis for this inquiry comes from a reading of Petrarch presented by Thomas Greene in his book *The Light in Troy*, in which he suggests that Petrarch may have been unique in that he came to see the literary landscape of ancient Rome as a time and a culture that had been fundamentally severed from his own.² Such an idea could very well influence one's rapport with the past, especially in contrast to a holistic view of history in which past, present, and future are all essentially indivisible elements stretched along a single continuum, or yet a third reading of history that simply ignores the past as irrelevant to the problems of present-day existence. The problem of time, then, becomes the

1. Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 81.

2. Greene, 90.

fundamental issue at stake. I would like to add that a similar shift in world view had taken place almost a thousand years prior to Petrarch in the figure of Saint Augustine, whose spirit tangibly lingers over Petrarch's work. To consider Petrarch's understanding of time, then, I shall begin with Augustine's, for it is his world-view that chiefly informs the environment of Petrarch's upbringing. These two scholars, it will be argued, both initiated paradigmatic shifts in the way time and history could be understood. The significance of these changes is readily apprehended, for Augustine and his follower Boethius are widely known as the first of the scholastics, while Petrarch, for his part, is similarly considered the first of the humanists. The ramifications of their respective attitudes towards time should give a good indication of just how important they were in laying the foundation for major intellectual and historical movements to take place.

In a 1996 lecture entitled *Paradoxes of Time in St. Augustine*, Roland Teske contends that much of Augustine's theology was formulated in response to the accusations of critics and skeptics of the Catholic Church of his day, among them the Arians, the Pelagians, and most particularly the Manicheans, whose creed Augustine had once followed. One of the key objections the latter posed against the Christians was the question of creation: if, as the opening lines of Scripture claim, God created the heavens and the earth *in the beginning*, what was he doing before? And why, since timeless pre-existence, did he suddenly decide to create a temporal existence? This question relies on a particular understanding of time to be intelligible. It requires that time be an essential aspect of existence, so that if God truly exists, he must operate within that framework. In other words, there had to have been a *time* that God decided to create the world, a *moment*, or a *beginning*, as it is called in Genesis. If there was a beginning, there surely must have been a moment *before* the creation, a state of pre-beginning. If God can be presumed to have moved from a state of 'rest' to a state of 'creating', this would show that he himself was subject to change, and thus not truly eternal.³ This paradox was indeed a difficult question to answer within this ontology. Origen attempted to solve it, but because he saw time as a contingent aspect of existence, he could only argue that the sheer impiety and absurdity of the idea of an idle God should be enough to prove that he could never have been so; thus, God can be assumed to be eternally in the process of creating. This is not an airtight defense, for if God is eternally-creating, his creation must be similarly eternally-created; the distinction between an eternal God and a temporal world is lost.

Augustine found the solution to this paradox through his encounter with Greek philosophy. Many alternative views of time had been proposed by the ancient philosophers: time as indivisible atoms, time as divisible leaps, time as unreal, time as being in the mind, a kind of time which does not

3. Roland J. Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), 15.

flow, time as presence, and so on.⁴ Aristotle, for example, had argued that the world was eternal and questioned the actual existence of time,⁵ but this was utterly unacceptable for the Christian theologians, who were committed to the createdness of the world. The big break for Augustine, however, came with the writings of the third-century philosopher Plotinus. Up to that point, the idea of *eternity* had been understood as the encompassing of all time, as belonging to past, present, and future; Plotinus instead proposed a conception of eternity as being *outside* time, of being essentially *timeless*.⁶ The existence of this possibility was proved through the acknowledgment of universal truth. A simple example: Two plus two will always equal four, immutably and eternally—there was never a time when two plus two *began* to equal four. This truth exists, and it exists outside time. Thus, existence can effectively reside in two spheres, that of the timeless and that of the temporal, and truth, in fact, is to be found in the latter.

During Augustine's period of searching and inquiry, as described in his *Confessions*, he turned away from the Manicheans and came into the books of the Platonists. Through reading Plotinus, Augustine came to believe that truth does not exist within that which changes, because truth itself cannot change; God, therefore, as the embodiment of Truth, is himself outside time. To conceive of the possibility of true existence as an eternal 'now', devoid of change or succession, affords us a glimpse into understanding God as a timeless, ever-abiding being, rather than as a being that functions within beginnings and endings. Time, instead, only comes into play in the realm of corporeal being, which is the domain of change. It is measured and perceived through what Plotinus describes as the 'distention' of the mind or soul (διάστασις ζωης, or for Augustine, *distentio animi*): through the faculties of memory, attention, and expectation, change and movement of bodies is comprehended as the passage of time.⁸ This theorization sets up a duality of existence between body and idea, similar to the philosophy of Plato. The world of human affairs falls squarely in the realm of time, while God remains entirely confined to another, timeless dimension. In this way Augustine was able to counter the Manicheans in a way Origen could not; through the conception of time as a property outside of God and inherent to temporal being, he rendered the question of the 'pre-beginning' as immaterial to the debate.

A second, equally important aspect of Augustine's work is the Platonic turning-inward to discover truth, particularly in Books VII-X of the *Confessions*. Because Augustine is necessarily committed to an ideal of God as immutable and timeless, he is at first confounded in his efforts to

4. Richard Sorabji, "Time, mysticism, and creation," in *Augustine's Confessions: Critical Essays*, ed. William Mann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 209.

5. Simo Knuuttila, "Time and creation in Augustine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110.

6. Teske, 20.

7. Teske, 32.

8. Sorabji, 213.

conceive of divinity through sensory and rational faculties, because there is not a thing in existence that is not somehow subject to the ravages of time: “With all my heart I believed you to be incorruptible, immune from injury, and unchangeable[,] although I did not know why and how.”⁹ At this critical juncture, it is only through the admonishments of the “Platonic books” that he undertakes the inwards and upwards journey articulated by Plato in the *Symposium* and elaborated upon by Plotinus: “by admiring the beauty of material things, [the journey] goes on through the levels of soul (*anima*) and reason (*ratiocinans potentia*) to that which changelessly is.”¹⁰ What Augustine understands to be the most ontologically sound way to describe God is found within the immutability that is common to all immutable truths, an ever-present Being that resides in the realm of timeless eternity.¹¹ The strong Platonic basis for this conception of God is especially vivid at the moment of Augustine’s visual encounter with the divine, the beatific vision. The imagery of light in this passage is very similar to the language of Neoplatonic, gnostic, and mystical encounters with God:

I entered and with my soul’s eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind—not the light of every day, nor a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude. It was not that light, but a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light.¹²

A critical difference between the two viewpoints, of course, is the role of grace. While Plotinus claims that through discipline and training, the light of truth can be beheld without a guide (*deiknus*),¹³ Augustine repeatedly points to the necessity of God’s intervention in order to receive the beatific vision. Following the passage quoted above, he says, “You raised me up to make me see,” and later writes that within the Scriptures “all the truth I had read in the Platonists was stated here *together with the commendation of your grace*.”¹⁴ The Platonists are essentially correct, he seems to be saying, except for that they are ignorant of the need for grace. These concepts of timelessness, upwards ascent, and salvation through grace are themes that embedded themselves in the Christian world-view of western Europe for the next thousand years, and should provide us with the necessary framework from which we can engage our later medieval authors.

Augustine’s assimilation of Aristotelian logic and Platonist ontology into his theology carried enormous impact in the development of a Christian world-view that would dominate the Middle Ages. Because his argument hinged upon the critical distinction between time/change and timelessness/

9. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (VII. i), translated with an introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), 111.

10. Sorabji, 217.

11. Scott MacDonald, “The divine nature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 78.

12. *Confessions*, VII. x, 123.

13. Sorabji, 223.

14. *Confessions*, VII. xxi, 123, 130-31. Emphasis mine.

immutability, the unchanging nature of God became a cornerstone of Catholic thought. This, of course, led to conclusions about the nature of grace, predestination, and free will that were alienating to some factions within the Church and resulted in the complete excision of any Pelagian tendencies from Catholic doctrine.¹⁵ His willingness to argue from reason alone (*sola ratione*) was very attractive to Boethius, whose own work paved the way for a tradition of education and learning that formed the basis for European scholastic education, first through monasteries and then urban universities.¹⁶ Augustinian concepts thus passed into the works of John Scottus Eriugena, Anselm of Canterbury, and the important *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae* of Peter Lombard, which was a centerpiece of the theological curriculum until 1600s.¹⁷

With the dawn of the thirteenth century, an influx of ‘new’ sciences from Islamic and Greek sources, most notably the translations and commentaries on Aristotle by Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroës), rekindled an interest in certain metaphysical concepts that were seemingly contrary to those held by Augustine, developing into a kind of rift between ‘Augustinian’ and ‘Aristotelian’ scholars (the same rift is observed between the Dominicans and the Franciscans, so it should be noted that this is anything but one-sided). While the debate did turn bitter and came to a boil at the Universities of Paris and Oxford in 1270 and 1277, when certain Aristotelian and Averroist suppositions were condemned for their heretical views, it is important to remember that a great amount of discussion and reformulation was taking place at the same time. Just as Augustine incorporated both Aristotelian and Platonist elements in his thought, so did Saint Thomas Aquinas, the leading ‘Aristotelian’ of the thirteenth century, continue to draw upon Augustine as the foremost *auctoritas* of Christianity.¹⁸

Thomas—undoubtedly one of the single most influential Christian theologians in history—found himself on both sides of the Aristotelian fence. He deplored the ‘excessive Averroism’ of some of his scholastic contemporaries and frequently took up the pen in refuting their arguments (his treatise *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* being the most salient example). At the same time, some of his own Aristotelian ideas were attacked in the aforementioned Condemnation of 1277. It is unnecessary here to explore the nuances of Thomas’ theology, nor to reduce it to the label ‘Aristotelian’ or not; suffice it to say that he approached Aristotle with a “receptive and welcoming attitude” and offered such a thorough and painstaking reading of his works that the philosopher Pico della Mirandola would

15. James Wetzel, “Predestination, Pelagianism, and foreknowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 49.

16. Ralph McInerney, *Boethius and Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 24.

17. M. W. F. Stone, “Augustine and medieval philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 253-55.

18. Stone, 257.

later say, “*Sine Thoma Aristoteles mutus esset.*”¹⁹ Through the rehabilitation of Aristotle into Catholic doctrine, scholastic learning underwent a major internal shift. Theology and ethics were to be treated as natural sciences like any other, with holy scripture as its data; empiricism and reason were valid routes for the discovery of immutable truth. Aristotle’s prestige among the scholastics grew to such an extent that it led Petrarch to exclaim, “In every single sentence, they daily pound us with Aristotle, whose name alone they grasp, until I suspect that both he and their listeners are disgusted.”²⁰

Although Thomas presided over a general shift in attention away from Plato and Platonist ideas and towards an Aristotelian approach to metaphysics, the Augustinian answer to questions around time, grace, and God’s immutability remained unchallenged, both because they had become so central to the Christian doctrine and because they were partially derived from Aristotle anyway. Aristotle’s contention that the world was eternal was an uncomfortable point for Thomas, and he had to redeem it through a careful distinction between necessary and contingent falsehoods;²¹ the immutability of God, on the other hand, remained a firm condition of dogma. In this passage we see the changeless nature of God reaffirmed, although devoid of the Plotinian language of ascent and light that characterizes Augustine’s account:

It was shown above that there is some first being, whom we call God; and that this first being must be pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality, for the reason that, absolutely, potentiality is posterior to act. Now everything which is in any way changed, is in some way in potentiality. Hence it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable. (*Summa Theologica*, I.9.2)²²

The quoted passage is basically a reiteration of the same idea, though in the language of Aristotle and not that of Plotinus. It can thus be comfortably understood as the medieval scholastic attitude towards time, first theorized by Augustine and then confirmed by Thomas, despite the changing intellectual currents of a millennium. Time is not, essentially, real; it is a perception of change formed by the distention of the mind that remembers the past, analyzes the present, and anticipates the future. Such distentions can divide history into intelligible parts—an hour, an age, a season, a lifetime, or even human history itself, from the Fall of Adam to the Day of Judgement. The division of history can be a productive analytical tool, but it is ultimately an exercise in fantasy—*it does not bring one towards the truth*. Truth *only* occurs in the realm of eternal existence, not in corporeal change, and the only being that exists eternally is God. Therefore, any endeavor to mine human history in search of truth is simply misguided. Any Christian who seeks to know the truth need only turn to that which is

19. McNerny, 28.

20. Francesco Petrarca, “On his own ignorance,” in *Invectives*, edited and translated by David Marsh (Cambridge, MA and London: The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2003), 321.

21. McNerny, 29.

22. Peter Kreeft, *A Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 105.

presently manifest: creation itself, *i.e.*, the natural sciences, and divine revelation, *i.e.*, the holy scriptures. The past is certainly not obliterated within this way of thinking; it is rather, and merely, not relevant to the pursuit of philosophy. Historical significance plays no real role in this world-view; the monuments and ruins of the past were simply observed, noted as ‘marvels’ (*mirabilia*) in the travelogues, and the subject was left at that.²³

With this in mind, let us now turn to Petrarch and introduce him in his own words, with a description he made of himself in his *Letter to Posterity*: “I have dwelt single-mindedly on learning about antiquity, among other things because this age has always displeased me . . . I always wished to have been born in any other age whatever, and to forget this one, seeming always to graft myself in my mind onto other ages.”²⁴ This simple, rather poignant phrase is enough to make a significantly different relationship to the past apparent to us. Petrarch is, from the outset, unsatisfied with that which is available to him, and his whole life seems characterized by a search to connect himself with that which is no longer there. Allusions to the past permeate his writing; in one letter he compares his wanderings in exile to those of Ulysses,²⁵ while in another he offers advice through the mouth of Seneca, distancing himself both from credit and blame, depending on how things work out.²⁶ At one time, while reading Cicero, the following remarkable incident takes place:

When I read his letters I feel as offended as I feel enticed. Indeed, beside myself, in a fit of anger I wrote to him *as if he were a friend living in my time* with an intimacy that I consider proper because of my deep and immediate acquaintance with his thought. I thus reminded him of those things he had written that had offended me, *forgetting, as it were, the gap of time*. This idea became the beginning of something that made me do the same thing with Seneca after rereading after many years his tragedy entitled *Ocatvia*. Him I also reproached and thereafter, as occasion arose, I similarly wrote to Varro, Virgil and others.²⁷

This is strange activity indeed from the perspective of Augustine and Aquinas. Not only is Petrarch seemingly obsessed with the works of pagan writers at the expense of his attention to the natural sciences and scripture, he writes *letters* to men who have been dead for a thousand years! Petrarch is acutely aware of this seeming frivolity—he claims that this took place in such a heightened emotional state, he simply forgot the gap of time that separates him from his interlocutors. . . “*as it were*.” The qualifier suggests a second possible reading even as he lures us away from it. He seems, in fact, to have stumbled upon something that works for him, for if he had understood his engagement

23. Greene, 90.

24. Francesco Petrarch, “Sen. XVIII, 1” in *Letters of Old Age (Rerum Senilium Libri)*, translated by Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin and Rita A. Bernardo (New York: Italica Press, 2005), 673-74.

25. Francesco Petrarch, “Fam. I, 1” in *Letters on Familiar Matters (Rerum Familiarium Libri)*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, (New York: Italica Press, 2005), 8.

26. *Fam.* I, 8., 41.

27. *Fam.* I, 1., 12-13. Emphasis mine.

with the past as an ineffective one-sided conversation with non-existence, why, then, does he not stop with Cicero? On the contrary, conversing with the past becomes his habit. It becomes the most meaningful, satisfying way for him to read the Roman masters, a way that is philosophically impossible or absurd within the Augustinian concept of time.

Much of Petrarch's career can be understood in the light of him *conversing* with the past, through letter-writing, through imitation of literary style and form, through his ethics and rhetoric, and even through his personal life. Many of his own works are written in the echo of classical masterpieces: his letters, as he himself writes, are arranged along the model of Cicero,²⁸ his epic poem *Africa* evokes the language of Virgil, his letter on the ascent of Mount Ventoux is a corollary to Augustine's *Confessions*, his meditation *The Secret* mirrors the *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, his *De Viris Illustribus* is a didactic history like that of Livy,²⁹ and his lyric *Canzoniere* dances with Ovidian imagery. He even sought to resurrect a public ceremony that, at least in his view, had not been performed since the time of Domitian.³⁰ The awarding of laurel crowns had begun to creep back into practice before Petrarch, first with Albertino Mussato in Bologna and then the post-humous coronation of Dante in Florence, but for Petrarch it was critical that a poet laureate be crowned in Rome, and that the coronation be conducted by the Emperor, in order to revive the special relationship between power and poetry he envisioned taking place in the realm of Augustus:³¹

There was a time, there was an age, that was happier for poets, an age when they were held in the highest honor, first in Greece and then in Italy, and especially when Caesar Augustus held imperial sway, under whom there flourished excellent poets, Virgil, Varus, Ovid, Horace, and many others.³²

After much effort at making his poetic ambitions known, Petrarch received simultaneous invitations to be crowned poet laureate from the University of Paris and the court of King Robert of Naples. His letters show that this was a decision that he could not take lightly, for Paris was the city of one of Europe's great universities, yet as he tells us in the end, it was his *amor patriae* that brought him to Rome, in the hope that "I may renew in the now aged Republic a beauteous custom of its flourishing youth."³³

The ceremony was performed by King Robert in April of 1341. The oration that Petrarch delivered for the occasion was carefully thought out, drawing from a dozen different classical authors, whose citation makes up between a fifth and a fourth of the whole speech.³⁴ In a dialogic process similar

28. *Fam.* I, 1., 10.

29. Benjamin G. Kohl, "Petrarch's Prefaces to *De Viris Illustribus*," *History and Theory* 13, no. 2 (May 1974): 135.

30. Ernest H. Wilkins, "Appendix: Petrarch's Coronation Oration," in *Studies in the Life and Works of Petrarch* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1955), 304.

31. Ernest H. Wilkins, "The Coronation of Petrarch," *Speculum*, 18, no. 2 (Apr. 1943): 166-67.

32. "Coronation Oration," 303.

33. "Coronation Oration," 304.

34. Wilkins, 174.

to his letter-writing, Petrarch brings his heroes of the past together to offer a view of moral history quite unlike the timeless essentialism of scholastic truth. As we have read, Petrarch did indeed desire to revive the glory of the Roman Republic, but the question remains, why? Rome was not the city it had once been; the Republic had long ago passed into oblivion. The capital of a once mighty Empire now presided over a small piece of territory, dwarfed by the neighboring kingdoms of Naples, France, and the Holy Roman Empire. Paris, as a matter of fact, was the more important center of scholarship and learning, as Petrarch knew.³⁵ Why, then, did he choose to go to the objectively lesser city? A citation from Cicero is Petrarch's reply:

Wherefore even Athens delights us not so much through its magnificent buildings and its exquisite works of ancient art as through the *memory* of its great men: 'twas here they dwelt, 'twas here they sat, 'twas here they engaged in their philosophical discussions. *And with reverence I contemplate their tombs.*³⁶

This is a form of engagement with the past that had not been articulated since the age of antiquity. Like Athens for Cicero, Rome's precedence over cities like Paris does not derive from what it *is*, but rather from what it *was*; the simple fact of its *former* greatness is enough to earn Petrarch's reverence and loyalty. In a series of letters to Giovanni Colonna di San Vito, discussed and analyzed by Greene, Petrarch repeatedly demonstrates his ability to divine value from a site through the gaze of historical imagination. His visit to Cologne is "a very pleasant occupation, not so much because of what I actually saw, as from the *recollection of our ancestors*, who left such illustrious memorials of Roman virtue so far from the fatherland."³⁷ His wanderings through the ruins and wilderness of Rome itself provoke a similar reaction. Despite its apparent emptiness, he sees the ghost of the past in every overgrown trench and ruined edifice: "This is the rock that Manlius defended and then fell from; here Camillus repelled the Gauls as they gaped at the unexpected gold . . . Here Caesar triumphed, here he perished. In this temple Augustus viewed the prostrate kings and the whole world at his feet."³⁸ The fact that the city of Petrarch's description, and the people who live in it, *no longer exist*, is apparently secondary. It is the *imagination* of the past through text, rather than the *examination* of the present through empirical science, that is meaningful. Indeed, he writes that he had long delayed his journey to Rome on the fear that finally seeing it in its humble and reduced reality would destroy the grandeur it held in his mind's eye, but on the contrary, "Rome was greater, and greater are its ruins than I imagined. I no longer wonder that the whole world was conquered by this city but that I was conquered so late."³⁹ In this final passage, we detect both a yearning for a previous age that has faded out of

35. cf. *Fam.* IV, 4.

36. "Coronation Oration," 305. Emphasis mine.

37. Greene, 89. Emphasis mine.

38. *Fam.* VI, 2., 292.

39. *Fam.* II, 14., 113.

existence, which we noted in our introduction of Petrarch, and an ebullient joy upon recovering it for the present. The past has been restored to agency; an ancient city can still conquer men.

Returning to the coronation oration, we will now consider that Petrarch does not only assign value and meaning to the past, but also sees it as a residence of truth. Echoing the language of Augustine and Virgil, Petrarch describes his undertaking as a “toilsome and dangerous path,” which he hopes will act as a guide for those who would follow in his footsteps.⁴⁰ Success in this project is not by any means a guarantee, for “whereas in the other arts one may attain his goal through sheer toil and study, it is far otherwise with the art of poetry, in which nothing can be accomplished unless a certain *inner* and *divinely given* energy is infused in the poet’s spirit.”⁴¹ The emphasized phrases should remind us of Augustine, whose own quest for the beatific vision depended upon both a Plotinian turning-inwards and the Christian concept of divine grace. There is no doubt that both thinkers consider their journey one and the same: the search for truth. They diverge, however, on the location where truth can be found. Quoting from Cicero, who quotes from Ennius, Petrarch names the poets “sacred in their own right”⁴² and reclaims the pursuit of truth, which had been confined through Thomas Aquinas to the realm of dialectic philosophy,⁴³ for the orators, historians, and poets.

I could readily prove to you that poets under the veil of fictions have set forth truths physical, moral, and historical—thus bearing out a statement I often make, that the difference between a poet on the one hand and a historian or a moral or physical philosopher on the other is the same as the difference between a clouded sky and a clear sky, since in each case the same light exists in the object of vision, but is perceived in different degrees according to the capacity of the observers. Poetry, furthermore, is all the sweeter since a truth that must be sought with some care gives all the more delight when it is discovered.⁴⁴

We have now examined two premises of Petrarch’s: first, that the vestiges of the past are inherently valuable, and second, that poetry is a valid way to discovering truth. These two premises are tightly bound up with one another, and the full expression of their relationship may be the key to understanding the core of humanism as an intellectual and moral movement. Let us now consider that the creative revival of the past through text and imagination (or, as we sometimes call it, history) is the very poetic project that Petrarch undertakes in his search for truth. As Greene points out, the plaintive looking back to the past was certainly nothing unusual for the great medieval scholars, citing Pierre de Blois and Chrétien de Troyes as examples; however, whenever poignancy is found it seems to be

40. “Coronation Oration,” 306.

41. “Coronation Oration,” 301. Emphasis mine.

42. *ibid.*

43. Jerrold E. Seigel, “Ideals of Eloquence and Silence in Petrarch,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, no. 2 (Apr. - Jun. 1965): 154.

44. “Coronation Oration,” 307.

directed towards the *artifacts* of antiquity, and not its *ideas*: “If the glory of the ancients is gone, those books of theirs which have survived are there to be copied and rewritten.” Greene goes on to say that the fundamental perception of the past as an extension of the present makes it impossible to measure any difference between the society of ancient Greece and Rome, leading to a *metonymic* incorporation of past learning into present-day science.⁴⁵ The adoption of Theseus as a model of chivalric virtue, or the depiction of Aristotle in Florentine garb, are obvious examples of this temporal monism. There is not a sense that they are different people, of a different age; that which is in the past is effortlessly absorbed into the work of the present in a kind of literary *distentio animi*, bringing all relevant knowledge into the meaningful sphere of present existence and the natural sciences of Thomas Aquinas.

It is only with Petrarch that the past as an *alternative* takes on a life of its own. In his scheme, time is no longer a continuum in the holistic sense that the medieval scholars had proposed; it is rather fractured into individual units with their own boundaries, across which difference and otherness can be located. Rather than a ontological whole, time is rendered into a *thing* that can either be irretrievably lost or saved from oblivion. In describing Petrarch’s wanderings about the ancient city of Rome, Greene argues that he is “discovering” history, much in the same manner he is said to have “discovered” classical style.⁴⁶ This discovery hinged upon the premise that the past was drastically *different* than the present and could only be recovered through the work of reading order into the the fragments and ruins that lay about him. It is an essentially poetic undertaking, for it cannot be fully understood through what is manifestly evident. It is a process of intuition and imagination, reading into what is *not* there, delving between the lines, and scrutinizing the past for “subterranean outlines, emergent presences, ghostly reverberations, and vestigial forms.”⁴⁷

Reaching across and connecting with these distant shadows is not at all the self-same, always-already effortlessness of scholastic holism. Work needs to be done—philology, history, translation, rhetoric, grammar, and all of the humanist sciences that seek to decipher that which is latent and hidden, a process Greene defines as subreading.⁴⁸ This is a process not of reiterating what the previous author said, but of resurrecting the author so as to engage him in a dialogue, exploring avenues and possibilities he himself may never have opened. Thus it was that Petrarch wrote letters with both his own contemporaries and authors who had passed on a thousand years ago. In the literalist sense, there is no utility in opening dialogue with someone long since deceased—obviously, Petrarch was not writing for their benefit but for himself and those who would care to join the conversation. Through recalling, resounding, reanimating, and rereading the authors of antiquity, Petrarch was essentially engaged in

45. Greene, 86.

46. Greene, 90.

47. Greene, 93.

48. *ibid.*

the creation of a public, polyphonous literary space that allowed for the individual assumption and adaptation of the voices of the past—an activity that eschewed a transfer of philosophic and moral wisdom maintained by the Aristotelean scholastics that was holistic, eternal, and knowable. It was indeed the scholastics' reduction of the liberal arts, following the lead of Thomas Aquinas, to the realm of natural sciences that raised Petrarch's ire:

In fact, Rhetoric, whom you wish to make your servant, is your enemy. . . As long as a rational soul has its reason, it commands the body, and the body serves it. Thus all the arts invented for the soul's sake command those invented for the body's sake, and the latter serve the soul. It is clear that the liberal arts were invented for the soul, and the mechanical arts for the body. Draw the conclusion, O dialectician: Therefore, rhetoric is the servant of medicine!⁴⁹

Although Petrarch was awarded the laurel crown for his Latin epic *Africa* (which remained incomplete to the end of his days), and found great renown for his Italian *Canzoniere*, it was in the art of rhetoric where Petrarch seems to have found his voice. He considered rhetoric, like poetry, to be a vehicle for the bearing of truth and wisdom and made its cultivation a cornerstone of his moral philosophy; despite humanism's notorious resistance to comprehensive definition, the importance of rhetoric is a point few scholars would disagree on. In the words of Hanna Gray, "the bond which united humanists, no matter how far separated in outlook or in time, was a conception of eloquence and its uses."⁵⁰ Or Jerrold Seigel: "Fundamental to the program of Renaissance humanism was the desire to combine wisdom with eloquence, to join together philosophy and rhetoric."⁵¹ While philosophy, or truth, was considered knowable, definable, and readily available within the books of Plato, Aristotle, and the Christian scriptures, fine rhetoric was matter of poetics and resistant to any categorical theorization; Victoria Kahn illustrates how poetic concepts such as decorum, *spezzatura*, or prudence cannot be categorically defined, but must be demonstrated in a series of instances by the teacher, and accordingly practiced in instances by the student, until the proper "taste," as Erasmus put it, is established within the practitioner.⁵² Future generations of humanists maintained this attitude: Scott Blanchard describes Lorenzo Valla's philosophical reflection "continuous" and "unsystematic,"⁵³ and in his *I Libri Della Famiglia*, Alberti's father-figure Gianozzo tells his students: "I like a reason which amounts to a clear demonstration rather than an argument which forces me to admit a point."⁵⁴

49. Francesco Petrarca, "Against a physician," in *Invectives*, 133-35.

50. Hanna H. Gray, "Renaissance Humanism: The pursuit of eloquence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24, no. 4 (Oct. - Dec. 1963): 498.

51. Seigel, 147

52. Victoria Kahn, "Humanism and the resistance to theory," ch. 16 in *Literary theory/Renaissance texts*, edited by Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 377-78.

53. W. Scott Blanchard, "The negative dialectic of Lorenzo Valla: a study in the pathology of opposition," *Renaissance Studies* 14 no. 2 (2000): 171.

54. Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence, Book Three*, translation and introduction by Renée Neu Watkins (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1994), 31.

Drawing from Blanchard and Kahn, the poetic movement of Petrarch functions within in a world-view that sees existence as ambivalent, fractured, and incomplete, where truth cannot be fully proven or established, but must be endlessly demonstrated and articulated to other people for them to master if it is to be passed on. As much as Petrarch liked to withdraw from society and as much as he praised the contemplative life, his efforts can only be fully realized if they are received in a public space.

The public nature of the humanist project carries, albeit implicitly, another defiance of scholastic norms that could have been outrageous if it were fully articulated. Restoring honor to the Republic, attaining personal glory, and the stimulation of other men are the three impulses that call Petrarch to action in his oration, all goals that must orient on public reception to be realized.⁵⁵ The central role humanity plays in a such a criteria of merit does not write divine judgement out of the picture, but it certainly carries the suggestion of an alternative source of value. The public presence of rhetoric can only be justified, of course, if it is fortified with wisdom, but this is not problematic for Petrarch, for not only do poets have access to the same truths as the philosophers, but they are better equipped to defend truth from the ravages of time: "There have indeed been many men who in their lifetime were glorious and memorable for what they wrought in writings or in arms, whose names have nevertheless fallen into oblivion for this one reason, that they did not succeed in expressing in the stable and enduring style of a true man of letters what it was that they really had in their minds and spirits."⁵⁶ This is an interesting passage, for it raises the topic of possible immortality, or at least an extension of life, through the work of poetry. I certainly do not doubt that Petrarch would agree with Augustine that nothing is truly eternal except God, but he nevertheless seems receptive to imagining a kind of afterlife that takes place within the human imagination. The implications of such an alternative are indeed weighty, and Petrarch does not find their reconciliation with his religious beliefs an easy one.

The fact that Petrarch is willing to express ambivalence, doubt, and uncertainty over his view of history shows that he did indeed adhere to an underlying Augustinian morality that held no place for the celebration of humankind for its own sake. This sense of self-contradiction is explored by Jerrold Seigel, who points out that while Petrarch is sometimes vehement in his arguments that the eloquence of the poet can be nothing less than the articulation of wisdom, at other times he reprimands himself for devoting himself to the adulation of the public and ignoring the matters of his spiritual well-being.⁵⁷ In his *Invective against a physician* for example, Petrarch claims the great writers of Catholic theology, among them Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Cyprian, Victorinus, and Lactantius, for poetry, for their

55. "Coronation oration," 304.

56. "Coronation oration," 308.

57. Jerrold E. Seigel, "Ideals of Eloquence and Silence in Petrarch," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, no. 2 (Apr. - Jun. 1965), pp. 147-174.

works were built “using mortar furnished by the poets.”⁵⁸ Yet in a letter to Tomamaso da Messina, he exhorts his friend to flee the public arena and devote himself to quiet speculation: “Unless we are determined to appear rather than to be, we will enjoy not the applause of the foolish multitude but rather truth and silence.”⁵⁹ Perhaps Petrarch’s inner disquiet is most strikingly on display in a imagined dialogue between himself and the spirit of Augustine, *The Secret (Secretum)*, which was never published during his lifetime. In it, we see the humanist in Petrarch arguing with his Augustinian conscience, debating between the allure of human immortality and the promise of divine eternity:

Augustinius: . . . Now you concentrate diligently on your poem *Africa*, but without abandoning your history [*De viris illustribus*]. And so you devote yourself to these two tasks . . . Writing about others, you forget yourself.

Franciscus: . . . Sometimes I am afraid of this, I admit.

Augustinius: . . . I don’t want to be too difficult here. Let’s suppose that it [*Africa*] is a great work. But if you recognized what an impediment it is to an even greater work, you would abhor what you now desire. I would even say this: In the first place, this great work distracts your soul from all its better duties. Let me add that this great work is not widely known or long-lived; it is contained within the bounds of time and space.

Franciscus: I know this old and trite fable of the philosophers. . . Human glory is enough for me. This is what I long for.

Augustinius: . . . If this is really what you mean, you are indeed miserable! . . . For the sake of a blast of hot air—as you admit, that is meaningless and transitory—you abandon things that endure forever.

Franciscus: I hardly abandon them. I just put them off for a while.⁶⁰

Petrarch’s dialogue with the Augustinius reflects his complex attitude towards these two world-views. On the one hand, he seems more than willing to agree with his mentor on the fact that he is a mortal human being, that God exists, and that his time would be best spent preparing his soul for salvation. Yet Franciscus remains stubbornly defiant in his pursuit of human glory, even challenging Augustinius to give him a better reason than the “old and trite fables” of the philosophers. While his encounter with Augustine is modeled on that between Boethius and Philosophy, the debate ends on a rather ambivalent note, unlike his counterpart Boethius, whose earthly woes are finally laid to rest through his meditation on God’s plan. Upon Augustinius’s final plea that he abandon his literary ambitions and return to himself, he simply responds, “I cannot restrain my desire for the world,” and the two discussants are left at an impasse.⁶¹

58. “Against a physician,” 83.

59. *Fam.* I, 8., 45

60. Francesco Petrarch, *The Secret*, edited by Carol E. Quillen (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 137-38. I have heavily abridged the dialogue through ellipses, but this is the gist of it.

61. *Secret*, 148.

Carol Quillen notes that Augustine was among Petrarch's favorite authors, not just for his inspiring story of conversion but also the classical erudition he brought to his writing. It is through the virtue of Cicero, the philosophy of Plotinius, and the exhortations of Paul that his redemption is brought about.⁶² The emotional intensity, rhetorical power, and sincere tone of the *Confessions* is so palpable, Franciscus tells Augustinus, "whenever I read your book . . . I think that I am reading the story not of another's wanderings but of my very own."⁶³ The potential for spiritual redemption through text makes him the natural choice for an interlocutor; if anyone can guide him through life, Augustine can. It is significant, then, that even while turning to his master for guidance, Petrarch frames the encounter through his own world-view. Just as he resurrects Cicero and Virgil in his prose and letters, so is Augustine revived in questions of moral philosophy; thus the poetic technique of textual disinterment and subreading is in play, even with the father of a scholasticism whose modern-day proponents irritated Petrarch so. The dialogues and intertextual play between Augustine and Petrarch are the signs of a man caught between different ways of looking at the world, unable to concede one for another and determined to see them all through. The kernels of a major change in thinking are evident, but it would be another hundred years before Pico della Mirandola would have God say to man: "In conformity with thy free judgement, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world."⁶⁴

One of the most powerful intertextual echoes in Petrarch's work is his rereading of Book VIII of the *Confessions*, subtitled "The Birthpangs of Conversion." In this passage, Augustine, like Petrarch, finds himself paralyzed in a battle of wills, caught in the "monstrous situation" in which "the mind commands itself and meets resistance."⁶⁵ Despite wanting to love God, his will is still incomplete; his addiction to earthly success and pleasure has "robbed my soul of all concentration,"⁶⁶ resulting in wretched and ineffectual prayers to God such as "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet."⁶⁷ It is seemingly the condition of being human that Augustine is struggling against, for he seems fundamentally incapable of generating the needed will to surmount this obstacle. The most he can hope for is to desire conversion so fervently that God will complete the journey and offer him the gift of grace. This eventually happens. In the throes of spiritual agony, Augustine hears a voice, chanting, "Pick

62. Carol E. Quillen, "Petrarch's Secret and Renaissance Humanism," introduction to *The Secret*, by Francesco Petrarch (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 33.

63. *Secret*, 57.

64. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, translated by C.G. Wallis, Paul J.W. Miller, and D. Carmichael (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 5.

65. *Confessions*, VIII. ix, 147.

66. *Confessions*, VIII. v, 140.

67. *Confessions*, VIII. vii, 145.

up and read, pick up and read.” He hurries to the Bible, seizes it, and reads the first passage his eye falls upon: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts” (Rom. 13: 13-14). The conversion has taken place:

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.⁶⁸

This moment is resurrected and reworked in Petrarch’s famous letter describing his ascent of Mount Ventoux (*Fam.* IV, 1). The narrative is rich in its intertextual density, with passages alluding to Plato’s allegory of the cave, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Augustine’s *Confessions*, all three stories of journey and struggle. While Plato’s philosopher emerges from the cave and sees the source of the light for what it is, and Augustine comes to knowledge of the divine through the grace of God, Petrarch’s moment of epiphany ends in an odd anti-climax. In the beginning of the journey, Petrarch finds himself in a similar state of paralysis. Seeking the easy way up, he finds himself continuously thwarted and confounded, to the amusement of his brother, but by the end of the day, he has finally reached the summit. Upon beholding all of creation spread clearly out before him, Petrarch is hit by a flash of inspiration and opens the *Confessions*, just as Augustine had opened the scriptures, and reads:

And men go to marvel at the heights of mountains, the mighty waves of the sea, the vast flowing rivers, the immensity of the ocean and the revolutions of the stars, and yet they neglect themselves.⁶⁹

Petrarch is shocked; it is as if Augustine had come out to scold him for taking pleasure in the world, even though the mountain had been conquered. The journey, apparently, is not yet over: “I was angry with myself that I should have been marveling at earthly things at that very point. I should have learnt a long time before, even from non-Christian philosophers, that nothing except the soul is wondrous and that, compared to the soul, nothing is great.”⁷⁰ This epiphany is especially significant when we consider that it was Augustine who said that God’s existence is evidently manifest in the splendor and order of his creation. The simple act of gazing out at the world and allowing oneself to be struck by its harmony, the vestiges of God’s transcendent beauty, is sufficient to move the spirit into a state of worship, if it is outfitted with the appropriate attitude.⁷¹ This understanding of nature was prevalent for hundreds of years, echoed in the writings of Boethius and Pico alike. Petrarch, somehow, has missed the intended outcome; his contemplation of nature has indeed produced an epiphany, but his focus has been re-directed to the human soul, and his journey, to repeat, is not yet over.

68. *Confessions*, VIII. xii, 152-153.

69. *Fam.* IV, 1., 105.

70. *ibid.*

71. R.A. Markus, “Augustine: God and nature,” ch. 26 in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, 1970), 396-97.

After reading the passage, Petrarch responds in the only meaningful way that he knows. Upon his conversion Augustine is bursting to tell his companion of his experience, but Petrarch falls silent before his brother's questions. He returns to the inn where they were staying and sits down to write, turning once again to the familiar ghosts of the past and the promise of an immortalized future in his quest for a life that is both moral and meaningful. He can not quite turn towards himself and abandon the conversation with humanity that he loves so much, nor can he give up his commitment to the Christian promise of salvation. As he is well aware, he has a long, toilsome road ahead.

I certainly still have a lot of tricky and tiresome work to do. What I used to love, I don't love anymore. No, I am lying. I still love it, but more moderately. Here again I have lied. I still love it but more ashamedly, more sadly. At last I have told the truth. There you have it; I love, but I love what I would love not to love and what I would strongly desire to hate. I love nevertheless, but against my will. I am compelled to, though despondent and sorrowful. And I feel within my own miserable self the full meaning of the short line by that most famous poet:

*I shall hate you, if I can. If I can't, I shall love you against my will.*⁷²

72. *Fam.* IV, 1., 103.