

THE POET IN BABYLON:
PETRARCH, DANTE, AND THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPHETIC MODE

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

My research is designed to plumb a question crucial to our understanding of both Dante and Petrarch: do they write for heaven or for earth? Does their poetry operate, as holds the present scholarly consensus, within the confines of Ciceronian rhetorical norms, whether aimed at practical reform within the sphere of politics, or else, failing that, representing a withdrawal into wishful thinking or pessimistic introspection? How does their seeming interest in the renewal of the Roman Empire correlate with the otherworldly commitments of their Christian faith? It is my contention that the two elements are complementary rather than competitive: that both poets are able to maintain a vital interest and engagement with the world while at the same time recognizing the inevitable tragedy of human history; and that they do this by adopting the rhetorical stance of Jeremiah. If the moral suasion of Classical Humanist rhetoric must ultimately fail to save the world from its vices, to avoid despair requires a vision of the world redeemed.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joel Salvatore Pastor was born in Oxford, Ohio, but grew up chiefly in Vermont. He first encountered Dante, quite by accident, whilst wandering the stacks of Bizzell Library at the University of Oklahoma, and soon thereafter found himself immersed in research in the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell University. He lives in Ithaca, New York, with his wife, Jennifer, and their three children: Francesca, Laura, and Elizabeth.

For my parents, who reared me;
for my daughters, who love me;
for my wife, who continues to extend me grace.

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I am deeply obliged to my graduate committee chair at Cornell, Bill Kennedy. His courtesy and kindness have meant the world to me, and the completion of this dissertation, to say nothing of whatever virtues it may possess, I owe in great part to his probing questions, encouraging commentary, and indefatigable solicitude. My other committee members deserve no less thanks: John Najemy, for his splendid lectures on Renaissance Florence that fired the imagination and the intellect, and for the compliment of taking my arguments seriously; equally, for his very careful attention to this manuscript, which has saved me from countless infelicities. Likewise I thank Marilyn Migiel, among many other things, for her tremendous investment in my writing. Even now, nearly every sentence I compose has been read over, and doubtless much improved, by the skeptical voice of Marilyn inside my head. I thank all these for their assistance, to which so much of what is good herein is owed. I cheerfully retain title to the rest.

It would be absurd to close these all-too-brief remarks without making mention of my family. I thank my children: Francesca, Laura, and Elizabeth, for their love

and liveliness, for balancing my academic life with such joyful abandon. More than any other, I return poor thanks here to my lovely bride, Jenny. Thank you for your forbearance, for your generosity with my time, for allowing me to go away and write; most of all, for your affectionate desire that I return.

It is intimidating to touch the like of Dante and Petrarch with the blunt instrument of criticism, to drag to earth a poetry more suited to the stars. Yet in this one respect I fancy I can boast amid *cotanto senno*: they were both of them content to write about their ladies, those luminous beings partaking equally of earth and heaven, and in whose gaze resides an invitation to beatitude. Reader, I married mine.

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INTRODUCTION

That Dante and Petrarch wrote poetry is, I believe, a truth universally acknowledged. We are less sure as to why. The psychological aspect of the question is, of course, necessarily opaque to the methods of modern scholarship: whatever the proportions of self-regard, idealism, rage and hope that underlie the brilliant alloy of their verses, neither man is presently available for an interview. Yet take the question ideologically and we find ourselves before a vast field of critical engagement. Well before Petrarch's death in 1374, the work of both poets was being interrogated with particular concern for its intended impact on the world; an intersection of politics and rhetoric that continues to provoke comment and critical reflection in our day. Yet despite its length and breadth, the field is remarkably monolithic in its output. With few exceptions, the respective authorial engagements of Dante and Petrarch with social and political affairs, together with the relationship between their two approaches, are questions that each admit but one response. The present study aims to cast fresh light upon them.

The first difficulty arises with the framing of the question. To lump Dante and Petrarch together as a collective object of study is to violate a central tenet of the received wisdom of *Trecento* studies. Practically every scholar since Boccaccio has known, or at any rate suspected, that the only proper way to think about the two first Crowns of Florence is antithetically. Dante's Muse is public, prophetic, Medieval, political, encyclopedic; Petrarch's is private, spiritual, modern, introspective, fragmentary. Their very portraits say as much: Dante's aquiline sobriety and piercing

gaze, his beard tinged black, as the elderly Veronese heard tell, with infernal fire, conveys a high severity of purpose. Petrarch, on the other hand, with cherub countenance and laurel crown, conveys little purpose at all. Here we trade in stereotypes; yet such perspectives are instructive. Turn from portraiture to politics, and a similar effect can be observed. With Dante, the relevant question is not whether but which: which political customs and values are meant to be encouraged and facilitated by his verse? Here there are a variety of answers: some call him a partisan of Empire,¹ others a Republican of sorts,² but nearly all agree that the poet of the *Divina Commedia* is first invested in the secular world, writing in Italian for the masses and intent on driving them with the goad of eloquence toward some definite, terrestrial conception of the Good.

As for Petrarch, the opposite consensus holds: his are the poetics of the self. The wars and tumults of his age, it is generally conceded, largely caught his fancy as opportunities to explore his own fragmented subjectivity, or else increase his personal renown; ideally, he would do both at once. But the terms of his engagement were decidedly individualistic: he would labor to compose a fine moral epistle for a friend, but would just as soon prevent the ill-spoken hoi polloi from having anything to do with his poetic compositions.

¹ e.g., Joan Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

² Robert Hollander and Albert L. Rossi, "Dante's Republican Treasury," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 104 (1986), 59-82. Honess, Claire. *From Florence to the Heavenly City: The Poetry of Citizenship in Dante*. Oxford: Legenda, 2006. Neither Hollander and Rossi, nor Honess directly challenges the imperial emphasis found in Ferrante (and others). Both, however, lay additional emphasis on Dante's interest on local civic virtues which assume a measure of republican independence.

In distinguishing between Dante and Petrarch on this basis, it is ironic that we apply a standard of rhetorical teleology which owes much of its popularity to Petrarch. It was he, in his “Coronation Oration” on the occasion of being crowned poet laureate in Rome, who insisted on the public, political function of poetry. The speech drew heavily on Cicero, and sought to establish poetry as not only morally sound (*pace* its Dominican detractors), but essential to the health of the political community, a view of eloquence predicated on moral suasion that took its place among the central dogmas of Renaissance Humanism. In learning to write Latin like Cicero, they began to learn to think like him as well, and their rhetorical ideals persist in a variety of forms today. Notably, they continue to define the way we read Dante and Petrarch.

If the chief end of poetry is political flourishing, then we critics are left with a binary standard to apply. Since Dante in his poetry is clearly invested in political affairs, we make of him a Ciceronian, a propagandist so committed to enacting his vision of the ideal city that he does not scruple to make a means of paradise itself. Petrarch, on the other hand, seems sometimes Ciceronian, other times less so; the general consensus among critics seems to be that he either had some political feelings and abandoned them, or else he was never particularly invested to begin with; within the last few decades the matter of his politics has been felt to be somewhat indecorous. In any event, scholars of Petrarch typically find different questions to occupy their time.

The response of those who try to sort the matter out, at least within the last forty years or so, generally takes one of two forms. The first is that championed by Hans Baron, whose Petrarch, like his Renaissance, is characterized by a radical crisis.

In his concern to establish a radical disjuncture between the Florentine chancery of 1402 and what came before, Baron's argument drove a wedge between Petrarch and Leonardo Bruni, leaving the former to languish in the shadows of the Middle Ages, a Mosaic figure "first to see a new land, but not granted to enter it."³ On this view, young Petrarch was deeply influenced by classical political ideals, and a legitimate precursor to those "civic Humanists" in whose definition Baron played so prominent a role. This early Petrarch advocated liberty and political participation by a virtuous citizenry; he supported Cola di Rienzo and his hero was the Roman Scipio. After the failure of the Roman revolution, however, Petrarch was disillusioned.⁴ He rejected his civic enthusiasm, traded Scipio for Julius Caesar, and returned to the "medieval" ideology of empire and monarchical rule linked to a notionally Augustinian antipathy for practical politics.⁵ Baron thus resolves the tension between contrasting political statements by appeal to chronology: Petrarch simply changed his mind.

Baron's thesis has been challenged in its details, his bright demarcations between historical moments somewhat muddled.⁶ Yet robust alternatives to his broad conception of Petrarch's political views are thin on the ground. One such response is that of Giuseppe Mazzotta, who differs from Baron on methodological grounds,

³ Hans Baron, "Moot Problems of Renaissance Interpretation: An Answer to Wallace K. Ferguson," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19 (1958), p. 28, quoted in Craig Kallendorf, "The Historical Petrarch," *The American Historical Review*, 101, no. 1 (February 1996), p. 130.

⁴ Hans Baron, *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni: Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 35. Echoing this more recently is Fabio Vander, *La modernità italiana* (Lecce: Piero Manni, 1997), 143-4.

⁵ Cf. Hans Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 28. Cf. Giacomo Ferrà, *Petrarca, la politica, la storia* (Messina: Centro interdipartimentale di studi umanistici, 2006), 79, who straddles the line between attributing Petrarch's preference for signorial rule to a personal crisis on the one hand, or on the other to lack of contact with reality induced by his poetic cast of mind.

⁶ Kallendorf, "Virgil, Dante and Empire in Italian Thought, 1300-1500," *Vergilius* no. 34 (1988). 44-70. Kallendorf lays out several useful correctives to Baron's sweeping perspective, but omits to offer an alternative account.

correctly stipulating that not everything the poet wrote can be arranged into an intellectual biography.⁷ Mazzotta also picks up, far more than Baron, on the central importance of Petrarch's poetic identity, which enables the poet throughout his career to transcend the merely political for a realm of culture that finds its end in self-knowledge.⁸ Rather than emphasizing Petrarch's disappointment at the failure of Cola's Roman adventure, as Baron does, Mazzotta instead stresses that their rupture predated Cola's failure, and actually revealed their very different interpretations of Rome itself. For Petrarch, the Roman ruins stood for an intangible history that inspired and was accessible solely by means of poetry; for the visionary Tribune, these dry bones could be made to walk. In Mazzotta's reading, Petrarch understood the political as fundamentally a question of poetics; thus, rather than asserting a binary taxonomy (Medieval versus Renaissance, Republic versus Empire, *vita activa* versus *vita contemplativa*) and defining Petrarch's views in those terms, he is able to pose with greater nuance the question of how Petrarch himself conceived of the relationship between poet and city.

Despite these differences, however, and his corresponding lack of interest in Petrarch's putative dramatic midlife crisis, Mazzotta's interpretation has much in common with Baron's view of the second half of Petrarch's life. To Baron's picture of a return to traditional, passive political values, Mazzotta offers the aggressive

⁷ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁸ Similar to Mazzotta's cultural focus is the more recent monograph of Ugo Dotti, *Petrarca civile: Alle origini dell'intellettuale moderno* (Roma: Laterza, 2001). For Dotti, Petrarch's shifting political ideology reveals that his real agenda had more to do with establishing his own intellectual independence from political figures through cultural renovation than any precise political state of affairs. See pp. 210-214.

builder of an “empire of letters”⁹ whose aesthetic preoccupations nevertheless reduce the sphere of political action to practical irrelevance. Just as Baron argues for a Petrarch who replaces politics with prayer, Mazzotta gives us one whose overpowering inner life excludes the external world to marginal importance. In the final analysis, both concur that Petrarch ultimately had other things than politics on his mind.

This perception of diffidence or instability in Petrarch’s political commitments goes back to the poet’s own lifetime. In 1353, immediately after settling in Milan, he received a stern letter from his friend and disciple Giovanni Boccaccio. Three years previously, Boccaccio had visited him in Padua to copy some manuscripts and to extend an offer from the Florentine government of a chair in their new university. Petrarch had not officially declined the offer, sending Boccaccio back instead with an ambiguous promise to think it over, but his choice of Milan, then under the lordship of the Visconti and mortal enemy to Florence, was answer enough. For Boccaccio, it was a slap in the face, and his surprise and outrage come through clearly in the letter. Boccaccio addresses Petrarch in the guise of pastoral allegory, and drawing attention to the gap between Petrarch’s poet-Humanist *persona* in the *Bucolicum Carmen* and his present unpatriotic course of action. Yet Boccaccio tempers his aggressive tone by framing his attack obliquely: addressing Petrarch as “preceptor inclite” (honored teacher, *Ep.* 10.1),¹⁰ he merely asks him to pass along to Silvius, represented as a mutual friend, the dreadful rumors about himself that have been circulating, and to ask

⁹ Mazzotta (1993), 114.

¹⁰ Text of Boccaccio’s letter cited from *Epistole*, eds. Ginetta Auzzas and Augusto Campana, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, v. 5., t. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1992). Citations by letter number and paragraph; translations mine.

him to put them to rest. The meaning seems clear enough. In Boccaccio's mind, there is no political neutrality: to fail to support one's *patria* is to attack it.¹¹ Particularly for a poet like Petrarch, a "most famous exhorter of virtue,"¹² the Milanese entanglement causes an instant metamorphosis into a "pursuer of vices."¹³ Poetry especially demands civic virtue, defined (at least) as indefatigable loyalty to one's native land, irrespective of its merit.¹⁴ In addition to appealing to Petrarch's patriotism in the abstract, Boccaccio mounts an attack on Petrarch's poetic credibility. The context of his polemic derives primarily from Petrarch's *Bucolicum Carmen*, the ideals of which he accuses Petrarch of undermining. Boccaccio raises as arguments several images from the *Carmen*, each of which, he implies, Petrarch has overturned by his present behavior. So, rather than being raptured by the Muses to the summit of Parnassus to receive the laurel, Petrarch/Silvius leaves behind the Helicon Springs, "imprisoning with himself both Penean Daphne and the Pierian Sisters" in a cave.¹⁵ Whereas he would not surrender his lyre to Gallus, nor cease playing it even for Argus' death, he now casts it down before the notorious Aegon.¹⁶ Unwilling to abandon his pursuit of the Muses for the monastic tranquility of Monicus, he now accepts the tumult of a disordered city, forfeiting poetic vocation and tranquility alike.¹⁷ Boccaccio's attack is not simply an ideological polemic, but an accusation of

¹¹ Ibid., 10.25.

¹² "Virtutum exortator clarissimus," *ibid.*, 25.

¹³ "Vitiatorum sectator," *ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 23-24. It is a view which, interestingly enough, Bruni's generation would crystallize into a dogma around the ideal of Florentine consensus. Cf. his *Vita di Dante e del Petrarca*.

¹⁵ "Secum pariter Danem peneiam et pierias carcerasse sorores," Boccaccio 10.11-12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

hypocrisy: Petrarch's own poetry, or at least Boccaccio's interpretation of it, testifies against him.

Boccaccio's methodology has much to recommend it. However, closer analysis of the poem in question casts considerable doubt on his conclusions. The *Carmen* does indeed make claims, both for Petrarch's political philosophy and his poetics. Boccaccio (together with many modern readers) construed the work as an account of the author's poetic achievements and classical erudition, a celebration of the classical, civic poetics which he was credited for restoring to vitality. Yet on analysis these poems appear under their true colors as masterful rhetorical set-pieces: carefully structured arguments in which the cunning ambiguity of the conclusion does as much work as the words themselves. If we subject the eclogues to the careful reading they deserve, the laurel withers on the vine: the actual subject of the *Carmen* is revealed to be not the triumph of eloquence but its tragedy. Over and over again, the superficial self-congratulations, and the rhetorical skill that won them are revealed as futile bulwarks against the inevitable victory of death. The virtuous life of the fields which Petrarch's shepherds hymn becomes mere portless wandering, endless steps without a dance to lend them meaning. But Petrarch's indictment does not want for subtlety. He presents his pessimism with a foil, as the later eclogues seem to push for a Stoicized philosophical disengagement from the sublunary realm. Yet – as with so many of the endings of the individual entries – the ambiguous conclusion to the *Carmen* as a whole suggests that his adoption of such *contemptus mundi* is only partial at best.

Having at least adumbrated the complexity of Petrarch's poetic deployment of this particular ideology, the second chapter passes on to Dante's *Commedia*. Just as Petrarch is not half so disengaged from political and ideological debates as he might seem, so Dante's adaptation of Ciceronian rhetoric is not nearly so enthusiastic as one might otherwise suppose. Dante's text fills two roles here: it accomplishes (or represents) in a single text the ideological progress that occupied Petrarch from the 1340s to his final years, and in so doing it furnishes a concrete point of reference for the poetic and political engagement which this study finds writ large across Petrarch's life and works. Dante's notional embrace of the civic, terrestrial potential of his verse is first acknowledged and analyzed, chiefly through the pilgrim's staged interaction with early humanist Brunetto Latini. Yet this and related episodes, taken on their own terms, reveal the systematic subversion of this theme, wherein Ciceronian eloquence, and the virtue it produces, are shown to confer not harmony, but faction and violence. It is, in fact, precisely of this kind of poetry that Dante pilgrim must repent to write his *Comedy*. The act of writing it, however, derives from neither vain optimism nor despair: as a network of allusions testify, Dante presents himself as poeticizing in the genre of Old Testament prophecy. Like Jeremiah, he no longer seeks to reform the corrupted world order, but to sweep it clean by ruin and calamity, to bring about the Final Judgment and inaugurate the reign of Christ. Dante's apocalypticism has been analyzed many times,¹⁸ but never with regard to the gigantic purpose it implicitly confers upon his rhetoric. On my reading, Dante's act of speaking forth represents itself as a literal force charged with the prophetic enactment of the purgation of the

¹⁸ See chapter two for more extensive bibliography upon this point.

world: to write “in pro del mondo che mal vive” (on behalf of the world that lives ill, *Purg.* 32.103) thus signifies bringing to pass the final reckoning with evil by which alone tranquility and justice are established forever. Dante’s recognition that the sphere of politics and history to which rhetoric belongs is inevitably circumscribed by tragedy is thus redressed by the audacity of his faith: poetic speech retains its value; equally importantly, so does the world, and Dante its poet, for all his rage, can describe himself sincerely as the Christian who exceeds his fellows in the virtue of hope.

Chapter three takes this model of prophetic, rather than political, engagement, and applies it to a pair of Petrarch’s works from a slightly later period. The dialogue entitled *Secretum* is among his best-known prose works, but rarely is it considered in relation to Petrarch’s other “secret” compositions, the *Bucolicum Carmen* (discussed in chapter one) and the epistolary collection *Liber Sine Nomine*, with which it forms a kind of triptych. The three works are noteworthy, first, for their explicitly anti-rhetorical gestures: the mystifying allegorical veils of the *Carmen*, the absent dates and addressees from the *Liber*, and the *Secretum*’s declaration of its own inviolability. All three works begin with an implicit attack on the terms of civic rhetoric, a withdrawal from public political engagement. Chapter three begins, then, by continuing the argument of chapter one in light of the rhetorical potential suggested by chapter two. The *Carmen*’s end was indecisive, suspended between ascetic withdrawal and a futile, almost involuntary interest in terrestrial affairs. The argumentative poles of the *Secretum*, performed by Augustinus and Franciscus, correspond exactly to these positions: the former exaggerates his critique of

worldliness to a heretical extreme; the latter refuses the supposed “conversion” to which he is enjoined, but in a surprising twist is shown to have the better of the theological argument. But if Petrarch presents himself as unwilling to reject the world, the defense he supplies is tepid at best – he must admit that his pursuit of love and fame, the defining features of his poetic vocation, are not ultimate. The *Liber*, in its rambling indictments of the wickedness of the Avignonese Curia, broadens the problem of the poet’s soul to encompass all the degradation and corruption of a fallen world. Glossing the problem in more explicitly theological terms, the letters point the way, for all their anonymity, to a supernatural solution.

If the foregoing arguments are found credible, Petrarch’s political views are getting very near to Dante’s. Both poets share a vital interest in the world and the awareness of its ills; both lack hope in rhetoric to fix it. The final chapter demonstrates Petrarch’s appropriation of the prophetic mode to his Italian poetry in the *Rime sparse* and *Trionfi*. The lyrics of the former work are in many respects a catalogue of failure: the poet documents at length the impotence of rhetoric, not only on the world at large, but, most egregiously, on his own soul. Unwilling to renounce his love for Laura, Petrarch is left to burn: but burning here suggests the possibility of redemption.

CHAPTER 1
ORPHEUS NODS:
THE FAILURE OF RHETORIC IN THE *BUCOLICUM CARMEN*

The fundamental difficulty in understanding Petrarch's politics is rhetorical. When he writes that "whatever is pleasing to the world is a passing dream" at the outset of the *Rime*,¹⁹ we must first interpret the statement not as a philosophical declaration regarding the value of terrestrial goods, but as a component within a larger rhetorical project. Petrarch's famous oscillation between partisanship and Stoicism, public harangues in support of Milanese imperialism²⁰ and the bucolic pastimes of a recluse: these apparent tensions in his personality are filtered, and to a large extent, created, by the textual project of self-fashioning that occupied so much of Petrarch's poetic activity. Yet to understand him as a poet is simultaneously to pursue his conception of poetry, particularly with regard to the purpose he ascribed to his verse. How do we balance his claims in the *Collatio* that poetry is chiefly civic in character, aimed at reforming the morals of the *polis*, against the relentless introspection of the *Rime*? The tension appears throughout Petrarch's career, but one place it appears with particular urgency is in his *Bucolicum Carmen*.

¹⁹ "Quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno," 1.14. Citations from the *Canzoniere* taken from Marco Santagata's edition (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), and are referenced by poem and line number; all translations mine.

²⁰ See Victoria Kirkham, "Petrarch the Courtier: Five Public Speeches," in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, eds. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 144-146.

The *Bucolicum Carmen* is among those works of Petrarch's which might be nominated "supplemental," the kind that is mentioned, if at all, with an eye to scrupulous completeness (as in the recent critical survey of Petrarch's complete works²¹), or as anecdotal support for conclusions drawn from more popular texts. For this we have the author to thank, at least in part. Introducing the first eclogue to his brother Gherardo, he makes a point of its occasional nature:²²

Illic ergo tunc eram eo animo qui, sicut sub tanta rerum mole magnum aliquid aggredi non auderet, sic omnino nihil agere nesciret, ab infantia mea, bono utinam, sed certe in actu perpetuo enutritus. Media via igitur electa est, ut maioribus dilatis, aliquid pro solatio illius temporis meditarer. ... Ceterum quia nichil prius in animo erat, eclogarum prima de nobis ambobus scripta est.
(*Familiares* 10.4.10-11)

[Thus I found myself [in the Vaucluse] in this frame of mind: while not daring to undertake anything major because of my countless pressing matters I nevertheless was incapable of doing absolutely nothing, since from childhood I was constantly taught to do something, if not always something good. Thus I chose a middle course; though delaying greater projects, I got involved in something to while away the time. ... Since I had nothing else in mind to write about, the first of the eclogues was written about the two of us.]

Petrarch introduces the *Carmen* as a diversion from the noble task of epic, the literary embodiment and product of Petrarch's long perambulations through the forests of Vaucluse by which the restless and unfocused poet passed the time. It seems not unreasonable to conclude that the resultant poem, like a master's sketchpad full of doodles, merits somewhat less of our attention. Particularly in light of the high civic burden with which he had invested poetry in his coronation speech a few years prior, these pastoral colloquies seem trifling indeed. Even the praise of its defenders is half-

²¹ Edited by Kirkham and Maggi – see previous note.

²² Latin text from Vittorio Rossi and Umberto Bosco, *Le Familiari* (Florence: Sansoni, 1933-42), 4 vols, referenced by Book, Letter, and Reference Number. Translations mine, although I did consult that of Aldo Bernardo (*Francesco Petrarca: Letters on Familiar Matters* [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982]) at various points.

hearted. Thomas Bergin, who has rendered great service decking out the *Carmen* in English garb, tells us that we can appreciate its virtues only “if we look beyond the medievalism, not allowing our eye to be distracted by the gargoyles of the allegory.”²³ Its excellence, for the translator, lies chiefly in its ability to furnish Petrarch's readers with “the outlines of a genuine and honest *autoritratto*.”²⁴

Yet Bergin's proposed approach to the *Carmen* is peculiar, given Petrarch's repeated declarations that his eclogues are meant to be obscure. A work deliberately enshrouded in allegorical figures is, on its face, the very last place we should be looking to understand its author's true opinions. Bergin's view depends on a kind of implicit rhetorical flattening that reduces the puzzles of the *Carmen* to mere superficial “mystification” capable of being swept away with the aid of competent glossators. Accordingly, once it has been established that the characters in, say, the

²³ Thomas G. Bergin, *Petrarch's Bucolicum Carmen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), xv. Bergin also points out the relative popularity of the *Carmen* in the Renaissance, when it received the honor of learned commentary. Latin citations from the *Carmen* are taken from Antonio Avena's edition (*Il Bucolicum Carmen: e i suoi commenti inediti* [Padua: Società cooperativa tipografica, 1906]), and referenced by eclogue name and line number (e.g. “Parthenias” 119). References to Bergin's introduction by page number in roman (e.g. Bergin xv), and his endnotes in arabic (e.g. Bergin 228). All translations into English are mine, although I have benefited immensely from Bergin's lively verse rendering, together with the Italian prose translations of Tonino Mattucci, Enrico Bianchi (Eclogues 1, 11), and Guido Martellotti (Eclogue 10). Tonino T. Mattucci, *Il Bucolicum Carmen di Francesco Petrarca: Introdotto, tradotto ed annotato* (Pisa: Giardini, 1971); Enrico Bianchi, *Egloghe*, in *Francesco Petrarca: Rime, Trionfi e Poesie latine* (Milan: R. Ricciardi, 1951); Guido Martellotti, *Laurea Occidens: Bucolicum Carmen X* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1968).

²⁴ Bergin, xvi. Bergin's approach is also followed, albeit tacitly, by those few modern scholars who do discuss the work: Thomas Greene's influential essay *Petrarch Viator* (in *The Vulnerable Text: Essays on Renaissance Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], pp. 18-45) takes the opening eclogue as a point of departure for an argument about Petrarch's modern conception of the secular; Giuseppe Mazzotta mentions it in a thematically similar, if subtler, analysis (*The Worlds of Petrarch* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1993] 147-166), and Albert Ascoli takes it as grounds for a contrast between Petrarch and Dante in the arena of poetics (“Blinding the Cyclops: Petrarch after Dante” in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, eds. Zygmunt Baranski and Theodore Cachey, Jr. [Notre Dame: University of Notre Press, 2009], 114-173). None of these, however, offers a comprehensive analysis even of the individual component, let alone the larger work: as for Bergin, the *Carmen* becomes fodder for our understanding of Petrarch, not a work worthy of consideration in its own right.

first eclogue represent Petrarch and his brother, a straightforward analogy is authorized between Petrarch's feelings and the views expressed by his literary avatar. As we have seen, such a low view of the complexity of Petrarch's rhetoric in this case finds apparent support in the own author's words. But closer analysis reveals the *Carmen* to be a highly sophisticated rhetorical performance, one, in fact, that subjects rhetoric itself, especially that of the *Africa*, to a surprising degree of scrutiny.

To the small extent that the meaning of the *Carmen* is discussed at all, two interpretations predominate. Stefano Carrai, on the one hand, proposes that the collection "recapitulat[es] the great medieval *de contemptu mundi* motif."²⁵ Carrai's argument is briefly stated, making his evidence difficult to assess, but he does note the central position of the "anti-papal" eclogues. In this formulation, Petrarch's goal for the work would be conservative and moralist, rebuking ecclesiastical and political venality in favor of withdrawal from the world. The majority of critics,²⁶ however, following Thomas Greene, take the opposite view, casting the *Carmen* as a humanist polemic against the monastic ideal of the *vita contemplativa*. Central to their argument is the first eclogue, "Parthenias," in which the poet stages an argument between himself and his brother Gherardo on the relative merits of Classical poetry and the Scriptures – and, by implication, the value of the world beyond the cloister. As will be seen, neither interpretation is beyond discussion, but the significance of

²⁵ Stefano Carrai, "Pastoral as Personal Mythology in History (*Bucolicum Carmen*)," in Kirkham and Maggi, 167-69.

²⁶ Within the limited subset of scholars, chiefly North American, who engage with the *Carmen* in any substantive way. Discussed below in detail are the most prominent of these: Greene himself, Giuseppe Mazzotta, and Albert Ascoli.

“Parthenias” is certain. Not only is it essential to our reading of the *Carmen*, but to understanding Petrarch’s general poetics.

The first interpretive difficulty with “Parthenias” is that there should be an argument at all.²⁷ If we start by reading the glossarial epistle that accompanied it to Gherardo’s cell, we might expect poetry and Scripture to get along splendidly. The stated purpose of the letter is to persuade Gherardo to overcome his suspicion of poetry and read the eclogue, for theology, as Petrarch stipulates at the beginning of the letter, is simply poetry about God. What is it but poetry, he inquires, when Christ is called by turns a Worm, a Lion, and a Lamb? Citing the authority of Isidore and Aristotle, among others, he observes that poets were the first theologians, and points out that much of the Bible, particularly the Psalms, is metrical in form. What matters, he concludes, is the content of writing: like food that can be served on either gold or clay, truth may be conveyed in verse or prose with equal profit.²⁸ It is a thoroughly traditional defense of poetry as rhetorical adornment, clearly recalling Augustine’s treatment of eloquence in the *De doctrina*.²⁹ So far, so good: Gherardo need not scruple to drink water from the Jordan and the Helicon alike. But Petrarch has also conflated poetry as style with poetry as content, implicitly refuting his own argument: theology, he admits, treats of God and the things of heaven, whereas the poets wrote “of [pagan] gods and men” (de diis hominibusque tractatur). Poetry is now not simply figures of speech and metrical forms, an ornate vessel suitable for conveying

²⁷ Albert Ascoli remarks on several of these points in his discussion of *Familiare* X.4 (Ascoli, 124-9).

²⁸ *Familiare* X.4.8-9 makes this plain: “focus on the meaning,” Petrarch instructs his brother, “if it is true and healthful, embrace it whatever the style” (sensibus intendere, qui si veri salubresque sunt, quolibet stilo illos amplectere).

²⁹ Aurelius Augustinus, Vincenzo Tarulli (trans.), *La dottrina cristiana: testo latino dell’edizione Maurina confrontato con il corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1992), IV.7.15.

theological truth, but an ideologically charged discourse completely divorced from the concerns of faith. In contrast to the claims of Albertino Mussato, whose defense of poetry as crypto-theology Petrarch seemed a moment before to be invoking, poetry becomes an anti-theology.³⁰ As the exegesis of “Parthenias” below will make increasingly plain, the two discourses are not compatible at all: poetry and theology entail mutually exclusive commitments, and between them lies all the gulf between Earth and Heaven. This rupture between poetry and theology is further emphasized by the allegorical names he gives his shepherds. Gherardo, the contemplative, becomes the Cyclopean “Monicus” (one-eyed, but also, naturally, monk), for his monastic vocation obscures all but the Divine. Petrarch explains his own name, “Silvius,” as owing simply to his preference for woodlands over cities. But he will go on to gloss most of his pastoral images in very public, even civic terms (e.g. the flocks whose care Monicus, and implicitly not Silvius, has abandoned become “the city and mankind”), suggesting active, political engagement in the world. Whatever his protestations to the contrary, the author of “Parthenias” is deeply invested in the social and political effects of poetry. He is also concerned, in an even more ironic twist, to re-establish the gulf between theology and poetry he had pretended to efface.

The eclogue/letter dyad thus erects a rigid distinction between the cloister (theology) on the one hand, and political engagement (poetry) on the other. But having established the two horns of his dilemma, Petrarch appears, characteristically, unable to choose between them. The narrative frame for the debate about writing is Silvius’ profound unhappiness with his ceaseless wandering, alluding, says the gloss,

³⁰ E. W. Curtius, trans. Willard R. Trask, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 216.

both to Petrarch's itinerant lifestyle on earth and his uncertain home in the hereafter. The debate about writing comes embedded within (and, indeed, for Petrarch embodies) this allegory of moral struggle, but the outcome of both remains unclear. Having refused his brother's invitation to seek shelter in his cave, Silvius allows that he may reconsider in future, and strides away to write his *Africa* (i.e., poetry in the most public, political and pagan mode, that of epic); Monicus concludes by admonishing him of the dangers of the road. It would appear that not only are the heavenly and earthly discourses incompatible, but they have very little to say to one another. Petrarch would later say that the conclusion of "Parthenias" was deliberately left ambiguous. For Greene, however, the ambiguity is a merely a polite obfuscation: read correctly, he contends, "Parthenias" reveals the author's covert hostility toward Gherardo and the ascetic, world-denying ideology he represents.

The hinge of Greene's argument is the recurrence of Cyclopean imagery. We have already observed that Monicus means "one-eyed." Towards the end of the eclogue, another Cyclops rears his ugly head: Polyphemus, representing Hannibal, into whose cavern young Scipio Africanus thrusts his way.³¹ Noting the apparent likeness between cave-dwelling Monicus and the one-eyed Carthaginian, Greene concludes that "[i]f the poet's hero storms into one [cavern] by force, it is tempting to suspect an unavowed temptation on the part of Scipio's bard to assault the other 'cavern' at Montrieux."³² The intention of this putative aggression against the monk is to liberate Petrarch from the shadow of "centuries of guilt," a constricting religious boundary which the poet must transgress to become at last "profoundly free, the

³¹ "Parthenias," 115.

³² Greene, 23.

disencumbered traveler of a Renaissance.”³³ It is in this transgressive freedom – temporal, moral, and intellectual – that Greene locates both the genius and the risk of Petrarchan humanism: whatever the outcome of Silvius/Petrarch’s journey, it is in the voyage itself that freedom and significance are found.

Giuseppe Mazzotta, writing ten years later, substantially concurs: “Just as Scipio routes Hannibal, so Silvius’s heroic poem... can overwhelm the heroics of the one-eyed monk.”³⁴ However, in contrast to Greene’s humanist triumphalism, Mazzotta suggests that Silvius’ apparent success represents a more nuanced articulation of the proper spheres of secular poetry and faith: Gherardo remains happy in his cloister contemplating things divine, but it is in Petrarch’s world – the realm of contingency and passion, the *vita activa* of politics and war – that the “contradictory exigencies of history” are realized and confronted. Without entirely denying the value of ascetic contemplation, Petrarch’s dramatized refusal to follow his brother into Orders serves, for Mazzotta, to accuse Gherardo of ignoring the reality of history in favor of an over-realized eschatology. Petrarch may acknowledge in his brother’s choice a superior realm of experience leading more directly to beatitude (*Familiare* IV.1 suggests a similar idea, although not without its own complications), but such single-minded pursuit ultimately relegates religion to the margins of history, as well as “deadening its powers” therein: a faith that is unable to take seriously the challenge of historical mutability is a faith unable to correct it.³⁵ Gherardo is, as it were, so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good; only by figuratively suppressing him can

³³ Ibid., 45.

³⁴ Mazzotta (1993), 155.

³⁵ Ibid., 166.

Petrarch open a space for human agency, the rhetorical and cultural project of humanism. Both Greene and Mazzotta agree, then, that Monicus/Gherardo signifies a religious ideology more concerned with escaping from the world than engaging it, and which Petrarch feels he must overcome in order to validate the ethical aims of his own classicizing poetics. This identification of Petrarch's antagonist with a tradition to be pushed aside is refined still further by Albert Ascoli, who argues that the Cyclopean monk is actually Dante.³⁶

The fraught relationship between Dante and Petrarch is well remarked-upon in the literature, and needs no introduction here. Ascoli's contribution, in his recent essay on "Parthenias," is to bring this tension – typically located in their respective vernacular productions – to bear on Petrarch's Latin poetry.³⁷ For here in the eclogues, rather than simply waving Dante behind him as the master of a stylistic register which he, Petrarch, had abandoned in his youth, Petrarch confronts the challenge of Dante's audacious claims for a theological poetics. Ascoli draws attention to Dante's status as the true reviver of the Virgilian eclogue, citing his epistolary exchange with Giovanni di Vergilio – a verse debate, interestingly enough, over the value of Dante's anti-Classical and (perhaps, to Petrarch's refined ear, just slightly "raucus"³⁸) *poema sacro*. To allude to Dante's *Egloghe* is thus equally to raise the thorny issue of his solution to the problem of poetry – namely, the generic conflation he effects between inspired Scripture and his own writing. Whereas other writers, such as Mussato in his letters or Boccaccio in the *Genealogia*, defend poetry

³⁶ Ascoli, 143.

³⁷ Ibid., 121-2.

³⁸ So Silvius describes the Psalms of David. "Parthenias," 74.

obliquely by alleging moral and theological truths hidden behind the veil of figurative speech – an approach which Petrarch by turns employs and dismantles, as has been seen – Dante’s approach is more straightforward. As the entire construct of the *Commedia* makes plain, his poetry is presented as if authorized by God himself, a divinely commissioned communiqué that puts him on a level with the prophets of old, its un-classical, comedic “mixed style” recalling the cadences of Scripture; “Giovanni,” he says with breezy familiarity, “è meco.”³⁹ The staggering audacity of Dante’s authorial stance could hardly be further removed from Petrarch’s careful distinctions, in style as well as content.

Consequently, when Ascoli ties the “Parthenias” debate to Dante, he naturally associates him with the side of Monicus, Gherardo, and (following Greene) Polyphemus.⁴⁰ According to this reading, Petrarch is less concerned with a defense of poetry against faith as such, and more with distinguishing his own poetics from that of his predecessor and potential rival. Still, as Ascoli admits, by bringing Dante into the context of precisely this debate, Petrarch inevitably casts himself as championing a basically secular humanist ideology: his antagonist may be a Cyclops, but he wears the cassock all the same. In Ascoli’s reading, the “Parthenias” alludes to and attacks Dante on two critical fronts, the better to emasculate him as a rival for Petrarch’s self-authorizing status as the reviver of Poetry. The first of these, and far more obvious, is the pastoral genre itself. It was Dante, not Petrarch, who actually revived the Virgilian

³⁹ “John agrees with me,” *Purgatorio* 29.105, referring to St. John, traditional author of the Gospel of that name, three apostolic letters, and (most relevant for Dante’s purposes) the Apocalypse. Citations of the *Commedia* taken from Giorgio Petrocchi, *La Divina Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994).

⁴⁰ Ascoli, 127.

eclogue, and it was Dante who pioneered the technique of composing them as epistles dramatizing a conversation with the addressee; the utility of thrusting so obvious a threat back into his cavern (Ascoli argues that the Polyphemus imagery in the “Parthenias” is likewise Dantean, lending the apparent assimilation between poet and monster a hint of cruel irony) seems clear.⁴¹ The second, more important front of Petrarch’s attack is that against Dante’s poetic authority: that of “a quasi-biblical prophet.” Ascoli notes a connection between Monicus’ botched description of the Jordan and Dante’s account of the rivers of Eden in *Purgatorio* 33, which scene, “as much as any other passage in the *Commedia*, [...] represents Dante’s claim to the status of *theologus-poeta*, or, perhaps better, *scriba Dei* – the very claim that Petrarch is fiercely rejecting in his one-sided polemic with Gherardo.”⁴² Thus, Ascoli’s conclusion takes that of Mazzotta and Greene a step further: Petrarch places a great abyss between his own classical poetics and any theological contamination, and he takes great care to locate Dante on the other side.

The three readings described above differ in matters of detail, but they are remarkably consistent in evaluating the eclogue’s general thrust: all agree that Petrarch means to show the triumph of his poetics over the religiously-inflected darkness that preceded it. Their position is predicated, in other words, on the idea that Silvius wins the argument. But supposing he doesn’t? Should Silvius lose, the stakes remain unchanged, but the implications differ profoundly. For now “Parthenias” can no longer be the tidy case-study opposing Renaissance humanism to monastic spirituality, nor a subtly deployed polemic to prop up Petrarch’s claims to originality

⁴¹ Ascoli, 141.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 135.

vis-à-vis his Florentine predecessor. Rather it becomes an ideological reversal of dizzying proportions: fresh from his laureation on the Capitol, where Cicero was summoned as witness to the civic utility of poets, a “Parthenias” in which the humanist is vanquished would seem to constitute a flat rejection of what is commonly understood to be Petrarch’s own poetic project of moral and political *renovatio*.⁴³ At the very least, it would force us to reconsider what the parameters and goals of such a project might actually have been.

Silvius, as everyone agrees, is a paradigm for humanist poetic activity: through his philological connection to the classical past, he confronts the world of history and politics and seeks to move it towards virtue.⁴⁴ As a poetics it is Ciceronian, an eloquence which finds its fulfillment in the political realm. Note the exclusively public concerns Silvius attributes to his poetic masters: they sing of Rome, Troy, the wars of kings; love, sorrow and anger, as experienced in their effects – chief among which, at least in Homer and Virgil, are the aforementioned wars; the gods, as seen in their respective realms; “forests and pastures” (*silvas et rura*, recalling his own implied concerns in vv. 2-3 – that is, people and cities), and armed men;⁴⁵ in short, his poets “illumine all the world with high-sounding verses.”⁴⁶ It is, quite literally, the poetry of the world. This relentless secularity is also the model for Silvius’ own verse. He is, in effect, a perfect humanist, engaging with the tumultuous contingency of life and mastering it by eloquence. As such, Silvius defines his verse

⁴³ Despite the not insignificant group of scholars who explain Petrarch’s various political pronouncements as products of the poet’s cynical opportunism, or worse, lack of contact with reality. See Introduction.

⁴⁴ Mazzotta (1993), 155.

⁴⁵ “Parthenias,” 75-89.

⁴⁶ “Totum altisonis illustrant versibus orbem,” *ibid.*, 90.

through constant references to the myth of Orpheus. The tale of the ancient poet whose song could tame wild beasts and even stones was deployed for a great variety of reasons in the Middle Ages, but for Petrarch its primary significance was the indissoluble connection between the poet and the *polis*, an interpretation he derived from Cicero.⁴⁷ In this reading, the power of the Thracian's song becomes a parable about the political utility of rhetoric, making music, and poetry, basic to an orderly human community.⁴⁸ The metaphorical connection established by the gloss between the natural world (the field and forest) and the urban landscape already suggests this Orphean conceit, allegorically enacting a linguistic transformation from wilderness to city. More pointedly, Silvius makes constant reference to nature's domination by eloquence. His love-affair with the Muses enabled him to walk fearlessly in dangerous forests,⁴⁹ he wonders that his teachers' speech does not cause the mountains and the woods to run,⁵⁰ his own singing will likewise (he hopes) someday gratify the mountains and the very air;⁵¹ most explicitly, his single aspiration for his forthcoming monument to Scipio's virtue – the *Africa* – is that it should be Orphean.⁵² The last may strike us as unusual: Orpheus was not known to be an epic poet, so it is strange to see him employed as the standard, particularly in an eclogue about Petrarch's affection for Virgil and Homer. Bringing in Orpheus by name, however, simply underscores Scipio's unique status as a moral and political exemplar: the praise of

⁴⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, H.M. Hubbell (ed. and trans.), *De inventione* (London: William Heinemann, 1949), 1.2.

⁴⁸ Stephen Murphy, *The Gift of Immortality: Myths of Power and Humanist Poetics* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 49; Cf. Mazzotta (1993), 138, 128.

⁴⁹ "Parthenias," 16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 122-23.

virtue is the civic function of poets, and the ultimate example of virtue merits the praise of the original civic poet. The tight connection suggests the humanist assimilation between the princely and poetic functions, folding Petrarch's triumph into Scipio's, and both into the eternal destiny of Rome. This definition of the poet's task echoes Petrarch's Coronation Oration. Three things inspired him, he says, to scale the arduous slopes of Parnassus: the honor of the Republic, the desire for glory, and the chance to stimulate others, particularly those in power, to like virtue.⁵³ This is why the laurel, to which the climax of his speech is devoted, binds alike the poet and the prince. In connecting the two, Petrarch posits poetry as a discourse relentlessly committed to the present world, to reviving, if not Rome in a political sense, at least the virtue which flourished there (as he said elsewhere) "before the celebration and veneration of Christ's name."⁵⁴

It remains to see who wins. If Silvius should triumph, as recent scholarship has tended to suppose, it would seem to function as a validation of Petrarch's humanist poetics as described above; if not, it would seem to throw those same poetics into crisis. The major argument adduced in support of Silvius' victory in the dialogue is the coincidence of the two Cyclopes, Monicus and Polyphemus, discussed above. When combined with the very natural expectation that authors who participate in arguments they stage themselves typically prevail, the evidence appears compelling. But the comparison should give us pause. Polyphemus, the cannibal, is a notorious despiser of god and man, the very image of brute appetite, whereas Monicus, the

⁵³ *Collatio edita per Clarissimum Poetam Franciscum Petrarcam Florentinum Rome, in Capitolio, Tempore Laureationis Sue*, in *Opere Latine di Francesco Petrarca*, ed. Antonietta Bufano (Turin: UTET, 1975), v. 2, par. 5. ref. num. 7; p. 1264.

⁵⁴ *Familiars VI.2.*

ascetic, of his two eyes has retained the one directed heavenward. Is it not more likely that they lack opposite eyes? In other words, not all Cyclopes are created equal: if these two are indeed a pair, their only possible relation – like, indeed, poetry and theology – is that of radical antithesis. Petrarch has already suggested an allegorical template for distinguishing between an earthly and a heavenly gaze – the difference between himself and his brother is expressed precisely by specifying that Gherardo has eyes for heaven alone. Thus, if we are meant to associate Polyphemus with anyone, Silvius seems a better choice. Even though his song evokes the monster’s defeat, the heroism of the deed is limited to the inferior realm of history and politics. Scipio, Silvius, and Polyphemus are all playing in the same league.

That Silvius (and Petrarch) should celebrate his own metaphorical destruction may seem odd, but in fact the irony goes deeper still. Petrarch seems to have used the entire eclogue to critique his own prior conception of the poet’s civic identity, voicing it in the character of Silvius, then deliberately undermining and defeating it. This may be observed from the progression of arguments in the text, where Monicus, contrary to most accounts, actually seems to have the better of it. The deployment of Orphean imagery by Silvius is particularly telling in this regard. What initially appears a successful (because uncontested) appropriation of Orpheus’ political significance actually, on closer examination, becomes a catalogue of failure. Silvius’ youthful boldness, he admits, was occasioned by vanity;⁵⁵ his poetic masters’ ability to charm the natural world is conspicuous precisely by its absence, a failure which Monicus

⁵⁵ “Parthenias,” 19.

underscores by selecting David for his own poetic model.⁵⁶ As for Scipio: had Silvius intended to illustrate the Orphic effects of civic poetry – that conspicuous examples of virtue make other citizens more virtuous – he could have hardly picked a worse example. Scipio’s considerable virtue and ability provoked not virtue but envy in his fellow citizens;⁵⁷ he died a bitter exile from the city he had rescued, and refused his body to the land that had betrayed him. The use of Scipio thus implies a deep-seated pessimism: virtue of the highest sort is insufficient to create political harmony. Indeed, rather than the poet being assimilated to the hero, climbing (as Bernardo put it) the Capitoline steps together for an equal laurel crown,⁵⁸ “Parthenias” portrays the converse. Scipio’s celebration by a homeless wanderer submerges his Orphic taming of the Libyan lions beneath the overwhelming experience of exile.

Further, implicit in the terms of the “Parthenias” debate is the comparison between Scipio (and hence his poet) and David. Let us see how they stack up. The first is a youth “born of the race of gods,” recalling Scipio’s legendary patrilineal relation to Jupiter; the second is not a son but father to the Christ. David casts down a giant and kills lions; his fame, Monicus says, in an ironic allusion to Virgil’s Rome, extends to “whatever shore the ocean washes.”⁵⁹ By contrast, Silvius’ encomium of Scipio seems downright tepid: he may have vanquished Polyphemus and cleared the cats from Libya, but his name is only celebrated only on Italian soil.⁶⁰ Considering his

⁵⁶ Praising God’s power in delivering the Hebrews from Egypt, David records just such a display (Psalm 114).

⁵⁷ Aldo Bernardo, *Petrarch, Scipio, and the Africa: The Birth of Humanism’s Dream* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), 19.

⁵⁸ Bernardo (1962), 198.

⁵⁹ “Parthenias,” 108.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

dismissal of David's "rude panting"⁶¹ some fifty lines previously, Silvius appears quietly to have reconsidered.

Between Silvius' disdain and his tacit surrender stands the speech of Monicus at line 91, the eclogue's narrative hinge. Whereas Monicus' posture up until this point has been bashful and reserved, even stumbling over his words at one point,⁶² here he finds his voice. Holding forth for a full eighteen lines, nearly five times as prolix as his next-longest rejoinder, Monicus attacks his brother's pagan poetics on theological, aesthetic and moral grounds. He begins by responding directly to Silvius' catalogue of gods: "this one," he says, "sings about a God before whom the crowd of defeated gods trembles."⁶³ Jehovah will not suffer himself to be paired with lesser deities. More than that, in line with the difference between Cyclopes posited above, Gherardo insists upon a categorical distinction between their relative spheres of influence. The phrase "defeated gods" at first seems out of place – "Parthenias" records no discussion of any war in heaven. But in fact, the adjective is perfectly appropriate. Gherardo is alluding to Augustine's *City of God*, precisely at the moment when the Bishop of Hippo decides to take on Virgil.

As is well known, Augustine's object in the *De civitate* was twofold: to defend Christians against the charge that their religion had caused the Sack of Rome, and to distinguish between the human political community of the Roman Empire and the divine *polis* of his title. Near the beginning of the work he addresses Virgil's account of Rome's founding, according to which *pious Aeneas* had carried his household gods

⁶¹ "Raucus anelat," *ibid.*, 74.

⁶² "Parthenias," 62-63.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

across the sea to Italy. (We note that Silvius' poets are first identified, in his catalogue of topics, as those "who sing of Rome and Troy."⁶⁴) These Trojan *penates* thenceforth lent his new city their protection, of which, Augustine's pagan contemporaries charged, the imperial change of faith under Constantine had denuded it. The Saint makes what seems in retrospect the obvious retort: the only reason Aeneas left Troy in the first place was that the Greeks had burnt it to the ground – his "protective gods" were evidently no such thing. They were, in fact, *victos deos* – the phrase is Virgilian⁶⁵ – unable either to protect Troy or even save themselves. What protection, he concludes, could such pathetic idols possibly offer? It seems, rather, that Rome protected them, and not vice-versa.⁶⁶ Gherardo's use of Augustine here is entirely on point: in contrast to his brother's civic poetics based on Virgil and the pagan deities, he quotes the Saint by way of turning Virgil's words against himself. This intertextual relationship with Augustine marks an important, and, to the best of my knowledge, overlooked, current in "Parthenias." It serves to re-contextualize the entire conversation, for if we approach Petrarch's putative defense of Virgil with Augustine in mind, can we ignore the moral dimensions of the "error" he employs this eclogue to confess? Augustine's *Confessions*, we recall, single out Virgil as uniquely distracting from spiritual concerns. As he writes in the *Confessions*, his tears for Dido's death, Creusa's loss, and Troy's incineration led him to forget the far more

⁶⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid*, ed. J. W. Mackail (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1930), 2.320.

⁶⁶ Aurelius Augustinus, *La città di Dio*, ed. and trans. Domenico Gentili (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1968), 1.3.

desperate wandering of his own soul (*oblitus errarum mearum*).⁶⁷ And it is precisely errancy that bookends “Parthenias”: Silvius begins by lamenting his vagrant life, and ends (without, we note, a syllable’s response to Monicus’ assault upon his “peerless champions”) by departing for parts unknown. But not in triumph – his is not the *braggadocio* of Greene’s Humanist pioneer. Rather, the Augustinian subtext casts this work as a confession, and the endless, desperate travels of its hero as a tragedy, a mad voyage without hope of reaching port. This meandering tendency on Petrarch’s part is regarded by some critics as a means by which he sought to distinguish between himself and Dante. Yet “Parthenias” seems far less sanguine about this poetics of errancy. Even before reading “Parthenias,” the letter to Gherardo discussed above hints of a crisis in Petrarch’s former rhetorical pretensions. Petrarch took up the project, so he tells Gherardo, because he had temporarily put aside the *Africa* and needed something to do. However much Silvius and his fellows (particularly Stupeus) may refer to the glories of epic, their very existence constitutes a digression from Petrarch’s ostensible political poetics – the bucolic genre is by definition a withdrawal from history and politics. Such digressive, romantic moments are not, of course, completely foreign to Classical epic. Perhaps the most notable instance is book four of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas sidelines the destiny of Troy and Rome for a dalliance in the Carthaginian countryside. Virgil’s moral comes through with the thunder of divine rebuke: Aeneas’ love for Dido menaces the whole destiny of Rome, and hence the world. The hero is obliged to forswear his private world of love and rededicate

⁶⁷ Aurelius Augustinus, *Confessioni*, ed. Manlio Simonetti, trans. Gioachino Chiarini (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 1.3.13.

himself to history and Rome. Consider Silvius' rambling in light of this. Monicus twice asks him for the reason, and twice the answer comes: *Amor*.⁶⁸

We have further evidence of the *Carmen*'s polemical, anti-political significance from the author himself, but this time with a twist. In the introduction to the *Liber sine nomine*, Petrarch describes his eclogues as "an ambiguous kind of poem that few might understand but that many might find pleasing."⁶⁹ The declaration explicitly marks Petrarch's abandonment of a public, politically oriented rhetoric – rather than setting forth heroic *exempla* to stimulate hearers to virtue, the *Carmen* is apparently designed to by-pass the multitudes entirely. As a model, Petrarch appears to have exchanged Cicero for the prophet Isaiah, to whom God says by way of commissioning, "Go, and thou shalt say to this people: Hearing, hear, and understand not: and see the vision, and know it not."⁷⁰ Whereas in the Coronation Oration Petrarch had associated his rhetoric with the dream of political and cultural renewal, here his optimism seems to have withered on the vine. The first eclogue may be named for Virgil, but its relation to his poetics is entirely subversive. And indeed, if we read the remaining eclogues with "Parthenias" as interpretive key, the failure of eloquence begins to seem an omnipresent undercurrent. The second eclogue, "Argus," begins by establishing a classic pastoral *mise-en-scène*: shepherds are resting their flocks in the heat of the afternoon,⁷¹ and some produce "deft pipes for singing."⁷² But

⁶⁸ "Parthenias," 11, 112.

⁶⁹ "Poematis genus ambigui, scriberem, quod paucis intellectum, plures forsitan delectaret," Francesco Petrarca and Laura Casarsa (ed.), *Liber sine nomine* (Turin: Aragno, 2010), Praefatio, para. 2, translation mine.

⁷⁰ Isaiah 6:9. All English biblical citations taken from the Douay-Rheims translation (*The Holy Bible*, ed. Richard Challoner [New York: Douay Bible House, 1941]).

⁷¹ "Argus," 1-5.

⁷² "Canendo/ [] pars agiles calamos," *ibid.*, 6-7.

our expectation that the shepherds will commence their song is immediately thwarted: “then a dark cloud blocked Phoebus’ light, and night suddenly fell headlong before its appointed time.”⁷³ The surprise thunderstorm destroys a great cypress beneath which the shepherds had sought shelter,⁷⁴ so instead of singing they disperse to seek it elsewhere.⁷⁵ The preliminary action leads directly into the main theme of the eclogue, which is the failure of poetry upon the death of Argus (King Robert of Naples). Sharing the protection of a double cavern,⁷⁶ the two main interlocutors, Silvius and Pythias, begin to speak.⁷⁷ The matter of their discussion is the death of their patron, but its rhetorical commitments are pervasive. Pythias opens the lament with a long series of anaphora on “quis” (who),⁷⁸ suggesting the uniqueness of their friend and protector, and the second question that he asks is “Who will move for me with his voice the beasts and oaks and stones?”⁷⁹ The lament of Silvius that follows is structurally similar, recalling the potent tongue that could “move stones and beasts and tear up the fixed ash tree from the earth.”⁸⁰ Yet Argus, despite his Orphic eloquence, is dead. Orpheus in the “Parthenias” was a rhetorical ideal, albeit one activated with polemical intent. The character of Argus seems to have fulfilled this ideal, using his speech to reform the world and establish peace and justice, but this success only comes to us in retrospect, as a chimerical perfection that has passed away. Argus dies

⁷³ “Tum fusca nitentem obduxit Phebum nubes, precepsque repente ante expectatum nox affuit,” *ibid.*, 7-9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20-23.

⁷⁶ “Geminis cavernis,” *ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁷ *Varia* 49 identifies Silvius as the poet; the other characters refer to various of his friends in Naples, to whom he sent the eclogue “as one specimen of the bucolic poem I lately composed.”

⁷⁸ “Argus,” 73-90.

⁷⁹ “Quis michi voce feras quercusque et saxa movebit?” *ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁰ “Rupesque ferasque/ flecteret et fixas terre divelleret ornos,” *ibid.*, 110-111.

and sings no more, the peace he left is shattered, and the world persists in its affliction.⁸¹ If King Robert is compared to Orpheus, the terms are predominantly negative: even the successful fusion of eloquence and power can only be presented in its moment of collapse.

The eclogue reflects ominously on King Robert's inability to make his virtuous rule outlast himself – even before the cypress falls, the elements have descended into open war. But the interpretation of *Silvius* is darker still. “Farewell, *Argus*! We will all follow you with small delay.”⁸² *Silvius*' nod to the inevitable approach of death marks the fulfillment of a second theme that constitutes the true pessimism of the eclogue. Not only has the best of shepherds been struck down, but the proper lesson to derive, *Silvius* argues, is a resignation not far from despair:

Sed ferre necesse est./ Hec est vita hominum, Phitia; sic leta dolendis/ alternat fortuna ferox. Eat ordine mundus/ antiquo; nobis rerum experientia prosit:/ quo grex cumque miser ruerit, consistere pulcrum est. (“Argus,” 53-57)

[“But one must endure, for such is the life of Man, *Pythius*: cruel Fortune brings by turns to grievous ruin. The world goes in its ancient manner; let us benefit from experience: wherever our wretched flocks may fall, it is well for us to linger there.”]

His advice is received enthusiastically;⁸³ at the end of the eclogue, both shepherds take it, wandering off in opposite directions,⁸⁴ and leaving the narrator *Idaeus*, who reports their conversation, alone with his well-befitting grief.⁸⁵ The similarity of “*Argus*” to its predecessor is doubtless clear: they are defined by wandering, the deceitful promises of Orphean rhetoric, and the dread of death.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 92-102.

⁸² “*Arge*, vale! Nos te cuncti, mora parva, sequemur,” *ibid.*, 121.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸⁵ “*Solus ego afflicto merens*,” *ibid.*, 124.

The third eclogue, “Amor pastorius,” may seem to overturn this darksome theme. For whereas the first two entries post their sorrows in the foreground, this one presents itself as the explicit fulfillment of their aspirations. Where “Parthenias” gave us Silvius/Petrarch’s quest to find the Muses and compose the *Africa*,⁸⁶ “Amor pastorius” celebrates these labors as already accomplished.⁸⁷ Where the one proposed Parthenias (Virgil) as a distant model and teacher, the other allows the poet to look down on him from the glorious summit of Latin eloquence.⁸⁸ Likewise, the Argus whose death made poetry impossible in the second eclogue reappears here to legitimize the eloquence of Stupeus. Indeed, despite the existential pessimism of the second eclogue, now Argus commands Stupeus to sing with confidence.⁸⁹ On a still more basic level, this third eclogue celebrates the author’s successful conquest of the laurel, represented in the successful pursuit of Daphne. This conflation of erotic and poetic triumph, what Michele Feo calls Daphne’s “Protean agility” to become by turns the laurel and Madonna Laura,⁹⁰ seems to capture, as in other Petrarchan *loci*,⁹¹ the author’s fondest wishes. The eclogue even ends with a virtual parade, as Stupeus, having won his Lady and his laurel, surveys the history of Rome⁹² and resolves to forsake his other cares:⁹³ not only has his *Africa* garnered fame and love, but its

⁸⁶ “Parthenias,” 40-41, 121-23.

⁸⁷ “Amor pastorius,” 105-17, 152-54, 164.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁰ “Si converte continuamente con proteica agilità nella laurea, ossia nella coronazione poetia, nella gloria che ne discende, e in madonna Laura.” Michele Feo, “Per l’esegesi della III egloga del Petrarca,” *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 10 (1967), 386.

⁹¹ We might think of the similar procedure by Augustine in Book Three of the *Secretum*.

⁹² “Amor,” 129-57.

⁹³ “Linque alias curas,” *ibid.*, 163.

completion enables him to find repose.⁹⁴ Yet the triumph is too perfect. Without cynicism, we can remark first, as noted above, that the entire *Carmen* stands at cross purposes with Petrarch's epic composition in more than one respect. To celebrate the public, political concerns of epic in a genre that self-consciously withdraws from such engagement is at least a muddled message. More directly, the time that Petrarch devoted to composing it, that summer of 1346 upon the Sorgue, was time away from working on the never-finished *Africa*. Petrarch wrote the *Carmen*, at least the first four elements thereof, in order to distract his thoughts from the epic of which he had begun to tire.⁹⁵ That he now rejoices in the completion of a task he had abandoned seems if anything to call into question his commitment to its goals.

The positivity of "Amor pastorius" seems to call into question the deep pessimism with which its predecessors, particularly "Argus," regard oratory. Yet considering the paradoxes noted above, it makes more sense to regard "Argus" as correcting its successor, rather than the other way round. This impression is augmented when we turn to the fourth eclogue, the most explicit yet in its rhetorical engagement. Entitled "Dedalus" for the classical genius who fashioned the wondrous lyre around which the narrative revolves, it purports to demonstrate the superiority of Italian poetry to French. Gallus urges Tyrrhenus to hand over the instrument so that he, too, can learn to sing. Naturally, he is refused. But Tyrrhenus' response is curiously self-defeating. His lyre, he reports, has a social and ethical function.

[F]astidia mulcet,/ Lassatos animos refovet, solatur amicos,/ Gaudia restituit,
pellit de pectore luctum,/ Exiccat lacrimas, compscicit flebile murmur,/ Spes
revehit, frangitque metus, vultumque serenat. ("Dedalus," 45-9)

⁹⁴ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁵ Ernst Hatch Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 57.

[It eases troubles, restores exhausted spirits, solaces friends, returns joy,
banishes grief, dries up tears, quenches the tearful moan, brings back hope; it
rouths our fear and leaves our faces tranquil.]

It is hardly mysterious why Gallus should desire such a splendid artifact. But what is curious is that the bulk of the eclogue is devoted to Tyrrhenus' attempts to dissuade his petitioner, a task at which his failure could not be more complete. As Gallus persists despite these blandishments, the attentive reader might be forgiven for wondering if this magical lyre is really half so effective as advertised. Gallus even says as much:

Posceris auxilium; tu consulis? Incipe rebus/ Mecum; verba alijs, quos
possunt verba muovere. ("Dedalus," 70-1)

[Your help is sought and you give counsel? Rather with me begin to
act; as for your words, give them to those whom words can move.]

Tyrrhenus' appeals are impotent in the face of his interlocutor's cupidity, a desire which Gallus confesses is driven by his envy.⁹⁶ Although Tyrrhenus instructs his friend that such burning desire for the instrument is both unfitting and immoderate,⁹⁷ the Frenchman is utterly unmoved. Whatever his other merits, Tyrrhenus' rhetorical gifts are obviously not up to the task of moral suasion: the eclogue ends, abruptly and inconclusively, with a frustrated apostrophe from Gallus: "O happy Tirrenus, beloved by the gods above!"⁹⁸ If this outcome fairly represents the art of singing to which Stupeus and Silvius lay claim, then its high promise is only outstripped by the disappointment of its issue.

⁹⁶ "Dedalus," 38.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 73-74.

⁹⁸ "O felix, o care deis, Tirrene, supernis," *ibid.*, 75.

The fifth eclogue, “Pietas pastoralis,” takes this strategy of backhanded argumentation, of critiques that masquerade as vaunts, in a different direction. It was composed in 1347 and sent with an accompanying gloss to Cola da Rienzo, of whose attempted reform of the Roman state along republican lines the eclogue treats. But its approach is oblique: it appears to the reader as a kind of prequel, with the Tribune evidently waiting in the wings. The bulk of the poem’s 141 verses are occupied by two brothers, representing the rival Colonna and Orsini factions, disputing how best to serve their aged mother, by which we understand Rome. After a few turns of dialogue the poles of debate seem clearly established: Martius (the Colonna) wishes to restore her former glory, and Apicius (the Orsini) prefers that she be “rent in two”;⁹⁹ each advances various supporting arguments. After a hundred and fifteen lines of this, however, Festinus, a messenger, arrives and upsets the whole discussion: “With what vain words do you consume the fleeting hours?”¹⁰⁰ It seems that neither brother is in earnest in their quarrel, and now their younger brother is approaching, “to whom belongs the forest,”¹⁰¹ a telling detail that associates him with Petrarch’s Silvius character from eclogues 1 and 2. This brother, represented *in absentia* by his herald, seems initially not to be much of a talker: while his older brothers bicker, he has been running, rebuilding, and pacifying Rome.¹⁰² Petrarch, who up until now has been directing the brothers’ argument, now reveals it as a bit of clever misdirection. Festinus’ expository monologue makes clear that the youngest brother does not

⁹⁹ From Petrarch’s gloss, *Epistolae Variæ* 42, cited in Bergin, 226.

¹⁰⁰ “Quid vano sermone leves consumitis horas?” “Pietas,” 115

¹⁰¹ “Silvas frater habet,” *ibid.*, 117.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 117-19.

eschew speech in the slightest. Having rebuilt the walls against external threats,¹⁰³ he turns to quell Rome's endemic civil dissensions with the power of his voice. Festinus catalogues the wild beasts (we recall the "feras" which the songs of Argus and Silvius have been accustomed to tame in the first two eclogues) which he has reduced to a harmonious community: wicked bears, bloody-minded boars; serpents, lions, eagles, all now coexist with gentle lambs.¹⁰⁴ And the means of doing so is entirely rhetorical: "he sits watchful on a lofty summit, singing sweetly, and all the fields are hushed."¹⁰⁵ From Roman unity flows Imperial restoration, first in Italy,¹⁰⁶ and then beyond: "[s]hould he extend his voice, he will uproot the Moors and Indians/ the Northern snows, and the burning deserts of the South."¹⁰⁷ Yet again, political redemption is signified by Orphean rhetoric – the next line begins with "imperat" (he orders), as the youngest sibling commands his brothers to be silent. This would seem a tremendous affirmation, both of Petrarch's specific hopes for Cola's Roman revolution, and of the possibilities of political eloquence in general. And yet, at the moment of greatest optimism, when Petrarch in his letter positively identifies the Orphic third brother with the person of the Tribune, he qualifies his judgment: "You are so far (*hactenus*) the younger brother," which, as Bergin remarks, "seems a significant reservation."¹⁰⁸ Once more, Petrarch evacuates his thesis in what ought to be a moment of triumph. At very least, we can observe that he allows the possibility that his confidence has been misplaced.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 123-24.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 124-27.

¹⁰⁵ "Excelso, predulce canens, sedet aggere custos./ Pascua tuta silent," *ibid.*, 128-29.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 129-30.

¹⁰⁷ "Si vocem extulerit, Mauros turbabit et Indos,/ Arctoasque nives, austrique calentis arenas," *ibid.*, 132-33.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Bergin, 226.

“*Pietas pastoralis*” is a dialogue much interested in dissembling. Martius was to all appearances the patriot whose filial piety the title of the eclogue meant to praise: “let us search out the cause [of this evil done our mother], and having discovered, oppose it: love compels, and piety enjoins it.”¹⁰⁹ Despite their other disagreements, both declare the ailing Rome to be their common mother.¹¹⁰ Yet as Festinus announces, not only is their patriotism “vain words,” but neither one is even actually a native Roman!¹¹¹ Looking back through the eclogue, we can also observe a subtle suggestion on Petrarch’s part that the three brothers are more alike than they may seem. The nameless third brother certainly accomplishes great deeds with his sweet song – so we are told. Yet as Apicius has already remarked, “sweet words cost little.”¹¹² Petrarch does not go far as to accuse Cola of lying, but neither is the framing device of the eclogue designed to inspire maximum confidence. Just as the apparent patriotism of Martius was revealed to be fraudulent only by the subsequent revelations of Festinus, so, Petrarch implies, Cola’s own success may prove similarly evanescent. Thus, the poem that seems to herald Roman restoration at the Tribune’s word actually circles round to make the point Cola may not be the one for whom Rome waits. The self-declared piety of shepherds is not to be relied upon.

Eclogues six and seven are devoted to the moral pollution of the Church: in the former St. Peter appears in the guise of Pamphilus to condemn the current Pope, who despite his blustering response is actually frightened enough that he tries to do something about the state of his “flock.” The latter eclogue contains his remedy,

¹⁰⁹ “*Querere nos causas, fatisque obstare repertis/ suadet amor, pietasque iubet,*” “*Pietas*,” 10-11.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-5.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 115, 134.

¹¹² “*Munus leve dulcia verba,*” *ibid.*, 24.

which, strikingly enough, is to summon his harlot/consort Epy to help him invent a plausible-sounding cover story to enable them to outwit God at the Final Judgment.¹¹³ This is, of course, merely the frame for Epy's extended catalogue of wicked cardinals, to identifying whom Wilkins devoted such attention.¹¹⁴ But what such detailed researches omit is that the eclogue's title, "Gre^x infectus et suffectus," casts this chronicle of deceit as a redemption narrative (the flock is literally "unmade," *in-ficere*, and replaced) effected by Epy's *fictis verbis*. That the conversation in *Gre^x* is a brutal satire goes without saying, but its target, at a basic level, is the transformative power of eloquence as a perversion of the Gospel.

If some of the early eclogues seemed at first to posit an affirmative view of eloquence, the cumulative pessimism of the remaining five seems difficult to dispute. Petrarch separates on less than genial terms from his longtime patron at the Curia, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna (eclogue 8), turning from Southern France to Italy. There is the hint of a new beginning, for in Italy the very grass is sweeter;¹¹⁵ the poet declares that "singing I will sit alone, whether in shady valley or upon the banks of a crystal fountain beneath apollonian leaves."¹¹⁶ Yet the next three eclogues, written after 1348, are devoted to mourning the advancing horror of the Pestilence. Eclogue 9, "Querulus," does so in a general way, depicting the ruin of precisely that Saturnian landscape for which its predecessor had so yearned.¹¹⁷ The next two entries (10-11) focus on the more personal impact of the plague on Petrarch, the death of Laura, and

¹¹³ *Vvera licet fictis pretextere crimina verbis*," "Gre^x infectus and suffectus," 17.

¹¹⁴ Ernest Hatch Wilkins, "Petrarch's seventh eclogue," *Medievalia et humanistica* 8 (1954), pp. 21-31.

¹¹⁵ "Divortium," 60.

¹¹⁶ "Valle vel umbrosa, nitidique in margine fontis/ solus apollinea modulans sub fronde sedebo," *ibid.*, 124-25.

¹¹⁷ "Querulus," 68-74.

here the rhetorical agenda of the *Carmen* reaches its apogee. If the early part of the composition attacked the civic potential of the laurel subversively, by posing a disjuncture between explicit praise in the dialogue and implicit rejection in the narrative, these latter eclogues openly take the failure of the laurel as their theme. Close examination revealed the underlying polemic in even the triumphant celebration of pagan eloquence of “Amor pastorius,” wherein the poet-lover meets the Muses, obtains poetic glory, and gets the girl. How much more so, then, upon the latter’s sudden demise?

Yet these three eclogues of lament, faced with a world from which the animating force of poetry had been stripped, do not lapse into complete despair. All three follow a common narrative path from outpourings of grief to rationalizing resignation. In “Querulus,” Philogeus (meaning “earth-lover”) comes to recognize the plague as an act of righteous judgment from on high, and agrees to follow his friend Theophilus (“God-lover”) to seek celestial tranquility. In “Laurea Occidens” the conversation between Silvanus and Socrates leads to a similar outcome: the sacred laurel is not dead at all, merely “ravished by supernal powers, and planted in the happy plains of God.”¹¹⁸ Hearing this, Silvanus turns from his lament and announces that he will now look to his own soul in hopes of joining her there.¹¹⁹ “Galathea,” the third of the mourning-cycle, briefly complicates the premise by including a third character: between Niobe’s untrammelled dolor and the spiritual reassurance of Fulgida is interposed the character of Fusca (derived from *fusco*, “darken”), who instructs her sister to abstain from weeping (“What nourishment do you seek through your

¹¹⁸ “Superi rapuere sacram, et felicibus arvis/ Inseruere Dei,” “Laurea occidens,” 400-401.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 406-411.

tears?”¹²⁰) on the rather Stoical grounds that tears are worthless. The sorrows of existence, she asserts, can only be relieved by the oblivion of death.¹²¹ Her echo of Silvius’ despairing counsel in “Argus” (eclogue 2) is doubtless intentional, so it is of great interest that here Petrarch provides a contrary response. Like “Pietas pastoralis” (eclogue 5), “Galathea” begins as a dialogue, contrasting Niobe’s grief to Fusca’s diffidence, then abruptly shifts gears with the arrival of a new character. Upon the approach of Fulgida (“the shining one”), Fusca, who has had the better of the argument thus far, assumes the new arrival will support her side. “Fulgida draws near without a word, but from her grave expression she means to rebuke your weeping.”¹²² Yet as in eclogue 5, Fulgida rejects both sides of the debate, insisting in line with eclogues 9 and 10 that the disputants “abandon earth and hope for heaven.”¹²³ This positions her to critique both Niobe’s immoderate grief (“To mourn the favorable outcome of another is but envy”¹²⁴) and her sister’s earthbound cynicism (“Fusca, you live in the depths, but we upon the heights”¹²⁵). The death of Galatea signifies merely release from the prison of her mortal shell,¹²⁶ and so ought rather to be celebrated than bewailed, a conclusion to which Niobe, at least, is happy to accede.¹²⁷ (We hear no reply from Fusca.)

This distinction between the two sisters’ response highlights another remarkable aspect of these three eclogues. Time and again, we have observed that

¹²⁰ “Quid lacrimis alimenta petis?” “Galathea,” 2.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹²² “Fulgida calle/ advenit et tacita castigat fronte querelas,” *ibid.*, 54.

¹²³ “Celum terris optate relictis,” *ibid.*, 68.

¹²⁴ “Alterius sortem lugere secundam/ invidia est,” *ibid.*, 64-65.

¹²⁵ “Fusca, locis imis habitas; nos summa tenemus,” *ibid.*, 72.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

Petrarch's spokesmen for Ciceronian/Orphean rhetoric seem rather incompetent at actually using that rhetoric in conversation. However marvelous Tyrrhenus' lyre, his song makes no progress whatsoever in drawing his Gallic friend to virtue. Yet here we see a thrice-repeated pattern of rhetorical success: the dead are not raised and the rocks and trees retain their stations, but all three of the mourners in these pieces – Philogeus, Silvanus, and Niobe – are persuaded to release their sorrow and to turn to God. The superiority of divine rhetoric to terrestrial is especially apparent in the tenth eclogue. Chiefly famous for its stupefying catalogue of classical erudition, "Laurea occidens" follows Silvanus on a poetic itinerary around the Mediterranean. From his initial encounter with the laurel in Southern France, he wends his way Eastward around the high points of the ancient world, stopping to recall the famous poets in each land he visits. In a long section of over three hundred lines, to which Petrarch was still making periodic additions well into the 1360s,¹²⁸ Silvanus names the ancient authors, ending, naturally, with his own triumph on the Capitoline.¹²⁹ And yet, he says, although invested with the laurel and being named among "cotanto senno" (as Dante put it, *Inf.* 4.102), it availed him naught: the laurel falls, his hope is shattered, and his life becomes a torment.¹³⁰ The pomp of poetry is set at nothing in the face of death. Moreover, Silvanus' lament itself is repeatedly presented as a moral impediment, another theme common to all three eclogues, yet most pronounced here. Eclogue 10 begins with a question from Socrates ("Why are you sad?"¹³¹) to which Silvanus' digression forms part of his response. Yet his complaint is hampered, twice,

¹²⁸ Bergin, 236.

¹²⁹ "Laura occidens," 373.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 394-95.

¹³¹ "Quid, Silvane, doles?" *ibid.*, 1.

by an inability to speak.¹³² The figure is not hard to gloss: classical poetics have no answer to the tragedy of history; as Petrarch acknowledge in another place, “I can offer nothing but my tears.”¹³³ At the end of “Laurea,” Socrates, for all the sympathy he has displayed thus far, rebukes his companion: “Your grieving is too garrulous.”¹³⁴ At the end of their discussion, Silvanus leaves off complaining and turns from poetry to prayer: “behold,” reads the eclogue’s final verse, “I pray in humility, and so I will pray always.”¹³⁵

By this point, it could easily appear that the true narrative of the *Bucolicum Carmen* is one of authorial repentance wherein Petrarch, his aspiration for the Muses and the laurel now revealed for the vain baubles that they were, casts them aside and joins Gherardo in his cell, at least on the allegorical plane. To escape mundane sorrows through a broadly Platonic insistence on the priority of the immaterial is certainly a cogent and plausible reaction, and one which these three eclogues clearly lead us to embrace. But such a theory is complicated by the structure of the *Carmen*, for Petrarch doesn’t end his composition here. The twelfth eclogue, “Conflictatio” seems to unlearn all the lessons of its predecessors. True, there is no intemperate mourning, nor do the characters engage in paradoxical paeans to the Muses. In fact, the final eclogue is much different from its fellows. It is hardly a dialogue – there are two shepherds, Multivolus and Volucer, but out of one hundred and sixty verses, the former speaks but two. Stranger still, Volucer’s hundred and fifty-eight line monologue is itself a report of an argument between two other shepherds, “Arthicus”

¹³² Ibid., 8, 33.

¹³³ *Familiares* VII.5.

¹³⁴ “Est dolor usque loquax,” *ibid.*, 399.

¹³⁵ “Precor ecce humilis, semperque precabor,” *ibid.*, 411.

and “Pan”; according to Bergin’s gloss, these stand for the crowned sovereigns of England and France, respectively, and the matter of their argument is The Hundred Years’ War.¹³⁶ Yet this eclogue-within-an-eclogue, in which the kings are made to argue like brutes and come to blows in the same manner, betrays the same horrified fascination with the civic sphere that we have seen throughout the *Carmen*.

Commentators are divided in interpreting the two shepherds in the prime narrative, Multivolus and Volucer: Francesco Piendibedi da Montepulciano reads them as, respectively, personifications of the common people (“who want much,” *qui multa vult*) and fame (“which moves swiftly,” *fama quia facilliter movetur*), whereas Benvenuto da Imola understands the latter as merely “a swift messenger” (*festinum numptium [sic]*).¹³⁷ Multivolus might also seem to speak for Petrarch himself, owing to his moralizing line that concludes both the eclogue and the *Carmen*: “Go: now rather place firm hope in favorable things.”¹³⁸ This might appear to support a reading of the *Carmen* as conversion-narrative – the anti-political view clearly gets the final word – but from a rhetorical perspective it raises more questions than it answers. Like the three eclogues of lament that came before it, the corruption of this world is answered by an appeal to exchange it for the next. Yet in this case, unlike the preceding cluster, we see no response to the injunction. Volucer is bewildered and afraid at the dreadful spectacle to which he testifies. The answer of Multivolus, with its implied reproach over his lack of critical distance from the things of earth, produces no observable change, no repentance. Given the care Petrarch evinced in eclogues 9-

¹³⁶ Bergin, 250.

¹³⁷ Avena, 286 (also cited in Bergin, 250), 242.

¹³⁸ “I; nunc in rebus spem certam pone secundis,” “Conflictatio,” 160.

11 to underscore the effectiveness of this salutary rhetoric, that he omits to do so here seems rather to return us to the arguments of the early *Carmen*. The throwback status of his final line is reinforced by its echo of the last line of “Parthenias,” where Monicus counsels his brother “Go safely, and beware the varied fortunes of the road.”¹³⁹ That Multivulus’ similar advice comes in response to a complaint about Blind Fortune’s wheel makes the cases match quite well indeed.¹⁴⁰ The circular argumentation of the *Carmen*, bookended by the theme of wandering, deconstructs the anti-materialist pieties of these latter eclogues of lament just as neatly as the Orphic pretension of “Parthenias” – Silvius strides away, but not in victory, despite common opinion: as Dante might put it, he merely “seems like one who wins, not the one who loses.”¹⁴¹ Rather than concluding with another poem of renunciation, evidence of a mind truly freed from mortal cares, Petrarch concludes by documenting in obsessive detail the insoluble political affairs of France. The cluster of laments have proposed a standard of political disengagement which its author shows himself resolutely unwilling to fulfill.

The *Carmen*, then, seems to end approximately where it began: in despair about the world from which, try as he might, he cannot divert his gaze. Another long look, horrifying yet fascinating, as he wanders in a world with no hope of reform. In all this wandering, has Petrarch found a destination, or is this merely the heroic/tragic progress of Greene’s eternal *viator*? Although critique implies an alternative as a basis for judgment, Petrarch’s analysis in the *Carmen* gives us precious little in that

¹³⁹ “I sospes, variosque vie circumspice casus,” “Parthenias,” 124.

¹⁴⁰ “Conflictatio,” 158-59.

¹⁴¹ “E parve di costoro quelli che vince, non colui che perde,” *Inferno* 15.124.

direction. He sets forth the problem at some length, but the solution is far less clear. Is his polemic, then, as some have thought, the eloquence of despair, the rage of a dreamer who cannot accept the world into which he has awakened? Petrarch's politics in the *Carmen* have been glossed, here and elsewhere, in terms of the example of Dante. The parallels are too close to ignore, Petrarch taking on the guise of a "Silvanus" to lament his exile from the virtuous ideal of Rome. If the *Carmen* documents his growing dissatisfaction with the impermanence of that ideal, could it be he longs as well for its antitype, the one "of which Christ is a Roman"? Both poets demonstrate equivalent disgust with political and ecclesiastical corruption; both, indeed, show Peter the Apostle launching diatribes against the evils of the church; both, oddly enough, ascribe their deeply problematic political agenda to an orator, a homeless wanderer in peculiar and uncomfortable proximity to the city of Sodom. For Dante this is Brunetto Latini, who runs forever in the circle sealed with that name. Petrarch draws a similar connection, if less overtly. The Jordan river that Silvius rejects in the "Parthenias" has many features, of which he mentions two: Christ's washing therein by John the Baptist, and the "fields turned to ash" by which it flows,¹⁴² signifying respectively redemption and the dreadful judgment for which Sodom and Gomorrah are proverbial. Then too, if the poetry espoused by Silvius is notable in its failure to overcome the challenge of mortality, Brunetto is ironically depicted by Dante as the man who taught the pilgrim "how man makes himself immortal."¹⁴³ Petrarch and Dante are all too often set at odds, yet here they find a

¹⁴² "Parthenias," 69.

¹⁴³ *Inf.* 15.85.

curiously subtle harmony. To explain the puzzling politics of one, then, is at least to suggest an answer to the puzzle of the other.

Petrarch's monument to political disintegration in the *Carmen*, like Dante's in the *Commedia*, is obsessive – and excessive – as only a lover's rage can be. Lest we make of either one a monk, we must keep this tension in the foreground. The difficulty for both poets is to balance the competing claims of earth and heaven, and neither finds a simple resolution in one direction or the other. To put it another way, whatever their pessimism about the civic possibilities of poetry, both elected to compose polemics instead of prayers. What is the significance of such a paradoxical engagement? The answer, as I hope to suggest in the following chapters, is a kind of *via tertia* between the city and the abbey. It is the mediating function of the prophet.

CHAPTER 2

DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*: FROM CICERONIAN RHETORIC TO JEREMIAD

I. Cicero in Hell

We have approached Petrarch's work from the point of view of the function of poetic eloquence, posing the question whether poetry, conceived of as a discourse geared toward the flourishing of the *polis*, is a legitimate occupation for a Christian writer. Opposite poetry is the mode which Petrarch calls theology, in which eloquence is charged with advancing not human political ends but the kingdom of heaven. Can Petrarch's verse serve the Orphic function of re-edifying the fractured political landscape of *Trecento* Europe, or should he tune his lyre to more celestial strains? In the oft-overlooked *Bucolicum Carmen*, Petrarch stages a conflict between the two poetics, and riding on its outcome is the value of the world itself, for theology's champion is a cyclops blind to every temporal concern. On the other side of the balance the poet stakes his soul, for heaven will brook no competition. Petrarch seems to force himself to choose between Virgil, the prophet of Empire, and David, singer of the Holy Spirit; between Cicero of Rome and Augustine of the City of God. For a Christian writer, it would seem at least formally an easy choice, but Petrarch's intense political feelings do not permit him to abandon the world. In consequence of this dissonance, the *Carmen* becomes a poem self-consciously at war with itself, its polemical (and therefore political) objectives constantly thwarted by an undercurrent of political (and therefore poetic) despair. In order to better grasp the scope of this dilemma, which represents *in nuce* the basic problematic of Petrarch's life and work, the present chapter will examine Petrarch's predecessor Dante, whose *Commedia*

grapples with a similar conundrum. As it happens, the political attitudes of the two Florentines bear striking, if often unremarked, similarities, as do the curiously nuanced representations of those attitudes in their respective compositions. On this front, Petrarch is very far from the obdurate anti-Dantism with which he is so often charged. And if indeed it can be shown that the two poets approached the problem of poet and *polis* along similar lines, it will be useful to take a careful look at how one of them, Dante, attempted to resolve it.

The political tension at the heart of Dante's *Commedia* may be most easily observed in the discrepancy between its author's ideological commitments and the plot of the story he decided to write. The narrative structure of the *Commedia* is simple enough: a man leaves the sin-sodden world for the righteous community of the Blessed, travelling "from Florence to a people just and righteous."¹⁴⁴ One might plausibly conclude on the strength of this summary alone that the *Commedia* is less than sanguine about the course of human history, as the proper response to disagreeable political circumstances would be, apparently, to flee the world entirely. At the same time, even the poem's most casual readers cannot fail to observe its incessant political advocacy—for the restoration of the Empire, the peace of Italy, and the purification—by which is meant sanctifying impoverishment—of the Church. More importantly, the pilgrim does not simply escape the world. He must return, we find, and the substance of his tale—the hundred *canti* recounting his experience in the hereafter—becomes a prophetic message which he is commissioned to deliver "for the

¹⁴⁴ *Paradiso* 31.39. All citations of the *Commedia* from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Florence: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1994). Except where stated otherwise, all translations of non-English works are mine.

benefit of the wicked world.”¹⁴⁵ But what is it that he must communicate? Is the chief burden of the *Commedia* political, making it a rhetorical performance designed to stimulate civic virtue in its audience? Or is it a predominantly religious work, summoning the faithful to fix their eyes on heaven? Can the two ends exist together, or are they mutually exclusive?

Even to pose the question may seem a false step—after all, is not Dante the poet who above all represents the fusion of theological and poetic discourses, the uniquely authoritative “theologus-poeta”?¹⁴⁶ But even if the critical consensus in our day tends to grant Dante’s poem this hybrid status with respect to genre, modern analyses of his politics insist on admitting the two alternatives in a strictly hierarchical arrangement. Erich Auerbach argued in the mid-twentieth century that Dante’s interest in terrestrial affairs ultimately swept away the theological underpinnings of his poem; in his striking turn of phrase, “the image of Man replaces the image of God.”¹⁴⁷ Dante thus comes to be defined as an anti-Augustinian writer, politically engaged precisely to the extent, as Peter Hawkins has suggested, that he subordinates his Augustinian Christian faith to the concerns of this world.¹⁴⁸ Rather than approaching the world of history and politics through a figural lens as a means of apprehending spiritual truths, Dante is understood to instrumentalize heaven itself, the better to make his point about the proper functioning of political communities on earth. As Charles

¹⁴⁵ *Purg.* 32.103.

¹⁴⁶ The phrase is from Robert Hollander, proposing that the poem’s hybrid allegorical mode is designed to fend off the Dominican critique of poetic fiction as a lie (“Dante, *Theologus-Poeta*,” *Dante Studies* 118 [2000], 261-302).

¹⁴⁷ Erich Auerbach, “Farinata and Cavalcante,” trans. W. R. Trask, *The Kenyon Review* 14.2 (1952), 207-42; 242.

¹⁴⁸ Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 212.

Till Davis puts it, “Dante’s other world is a symbol for this one.”¹⁴⁹ Joan Ferrante agrees, carrying the argument so far as to construct a kind of reverse allegorization: hell becomes a vision of corrupt society, purgatory an account of social reformation, and paradise “the model for... political and moral life on earth.”¹⁵⁰ Ugo Dotti deftly draws out the rhetorical implications of so closely aligning the *Commedia* with the *civitas terrena*:¹⁵¹

The reader, listening to [Dante’s] voice, quickly comes to realize that it also speaks of him, and not in connection with the salvation of his soul, but rather with reference to those great cultural and ethico-political themes that are ever relevant, in the search for new bearings in the world of men. (130)

Dotti is perhaps more absolute than most in drawing the dichotomy between the otherworldly discourse of salvation and questions of culture, politics, and ethics that find their fulfillment in the “the world of men” (he will go on to enlist the poem among the great republican treatises of Cicero and Plato),¹⁵² but every proponent of a politicized *Commedia* shares, implicitly or otherwise, the view that Dante’s text owes more to Cicero than to Augustine, that (to put it another way) his poem functions chiefly in the role of civic oratory, exhorting its readers to live well in the *polis*.¹⁵³

Another way to describe this politically inscribed poetics is by recourse to the myth of Orpheus, the first of the Greeks to practice poetry. Like Augustine before

¹⁴⁹ Charles Till Davis, *Dante’s Italy and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 195.

¹⁵⁰ Joan Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 253. See also the more recent work of Claire Honess, who advances the same point from a somewhat broader perspective (*From Florence to the Heavenly City: The Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* [Oxford: Legenda, 2006]).

¹⁵¹ Ugo Dotti, *La Divina Commedia e la città dell’uomo: Introduzione alla lettura di Dante* (Rome: Donzelli, 1996).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁵³ Honess makes the point explicitly, affirming that for Dante “the definition of the ‘good citizen’ may be conflated with that of the ‘good man’ (or ‘good woman’)” (41).

him, Isidore considers the first poets to have been primitive theologians: it was from the elevated discourse deemed appropriate to sacred ritual that the rules of poetry were initially derived.¹⁵⁴ Such a reading of the Orpheus legend would tend to emphasize, naturally enough, his power to charm the gods, particularly Pluto, with his song. There was, however, another tradition which saw expressed in Orpheus the potential of rhetoric in the political sphere. Dante himself lends support to such a reading in his gloss of the myth in *Convivio*:¹⁵⁵

dice Ovidio che Orfeo faceva colla cetera mansuete le fiere, e li arbori e le pietre a sé muovere: che vuol dire che lo savio uomo collo strumento della sua voce faccia mansuescere ed umiliare li crudeli cuori, e faccia muovere alla sua voluntade coloro che [non] hanno vita di scienza e d'arte; e coloro che non hanno vita ragionevole alcuna sono quasi come pietre. (2.1.4)

[Ovid says that Orpheus rendered wild beasts tame, and compelled the trees and stone to come to him; that is to say, that the wise man with the instrument of his voice tames and humbles savage hearts, and moves to his will those who do not live with wisdom or skill; and those who do not live rationally are almost like stones.]

In this reading, the Thracian poet is allegorized into a social and political context, and becomes, in fact, a figure for the capabilities of civic oratory. Possessed of wisdom and eloquence alike (“the wise man with the instrument of his voice”), the orator can both comprehend the good himself, and persuade his fellows to behave accordingly. This good to which he moved men’s hearts was likewise politically contextualized: although Dante’s gloss is not explicit, the “humility” in view here has little to do with Christian meekness. Rather than the self-abnegation of the saint, it is the citizen’s

¹⁵⁴ Aurelius Augustinus, *La città di Dio: Testo latino dell’edizione Maurina confrontato con il corpus Christianorum*, ed. D. Gentili and A. Trapè, trans. Gentili (Turin: Città Nuova Editrice, 1988), 18.14; Isidoro di Siviglia, *Etimologie o origine*, v.1, ed. Angelo Valastro Canale (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 2004), 7.7.9-10.

¹⁵⁵ Citation taken from *Convivio*, eds. Gianfranco Fioravanti and Claudio Giunta in *Dante Alighieri: Opere*, ed. Marco Santagata, v. 2 (Milan: Mondadori Editore, 2014).

submission of his own interest to the common cause. This becomes clearer if we look instead at Dante's probable source for the gloss just cited,¹⁵⁶ the *Tresor* of Brunetto

Latini:¹⁵⁷

Tuilles... ci raconte l'astoire que Arestion [Orpheus], qui fist la cité de Ateines, [que] il fasoit venir le piere & le marien a la douçor de son chant, ce est a dire que por ses bones paroles il retrait les homes de sauvages roches ou il abitoient & les amena a la comune habitasion de celle cite. (292)

[Tully... recounts that Orpheus, who built the city of Athens, compelled stones and water by the sweetness of his song, which is to say that by his good words he recalled men from the rugged rocks where they had lived and accustomed and disposed them to living together in that city.]

For Brunetto, Orpheus' primary function is the foundation of Athens ("qui fist la cité de Ateines")—the legendary poet domesticates wild men in order to make them fit "for living together" (a la comune habitasion).¹⁵⁸ This political reading of the Orpheus myth derived in large part from Brunetto's discovery and rehabilitation of the political Cicero. The Roman orator was never entirely forgotten, of course, but his influence in the Christian Middle Ages, no doubt impeded by Augustine's sharp critique of pagan political systems, had tended to be limited to matters of style. In the writings of Brunetto, however, a new image emerged: Cicero not merely as a philosopher and Latinist, but as an ideal citizen, bravely marshalling his words in defense of the commonwealth.¹⁵⁹ Where Augustine had granted the value of rhetorical training chiefly in service to the preaching of the gospel,¹⁶⁰ Brunetto, relying on Cicero,

¹⁵⁶ Davis, 124.

¹⁵⁷ Cited from Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres dou Tresor*, ed. Spurgeon Baldwin and Paul Barrette (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003).

¹⁵⁸ Probably drawing on the *De Inventione* of Cicero, I.2-3.

¹⁵⁹ Davis, 174-75.

¹⁶⁰ St. Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 4.16.33. See also discussion of this point in Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 11.

insisted on its inextricability from politics: “the science of speaking well and of ruling men is the noblest art in the world” (est la sciense de bien parler & de gouverner gens plus noble de nul autre dou monde, *Tresor* 1.1.4).¹⁶¹ Observe the singular verb: for Latini, eloquence implies political power.¹⁶² To talk about Dante as an orator in that sense is, therefore, equally to make a claim about Dante’s attitude towards Brunetto and, hence, the civic ideology he represents. The converse also holds: to understand the deployment of Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* 15 is to grasp a significant aspect of Dante’s own poetics.¹⁶³

Arriving at that portion of the Seventh Circle where dwell the damned Brunetto and his cohort, the pilgrim and his guide find themselves upon a stony bank, which, as the narrator spends some three tercets explaining, is similar to (if slightly

¹⁶¹ As noted in Jerrold Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism: The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom, Petrarch to Valla* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 211. See also Davis, 170.

¹⁶² The virtual identity of politics and eloquence in Brunetto’s worldview is so well remarked upon that it begins to seem cliché: witness the comment in Giovanni Villani’s *Cronica* that Brunetto “was the one who began to teach the Florentines to be less coarse, and to make them skilled in speaking well, and in knowing how to guide and rule our republic according to the art of politics” (cited in John Najemy, “Brunetto Latini’s *Politica*,” *Dante Studies* 112 [1994], 33-53; 33). In the same article, Najemy observes the close relationship between Villani’s construal of Latini’s influence and the political program of the Florentine *primo popolo*, a movement for which Najemy elsewhere detects strong, though not un-complicated, sympathies in the *Commedia* (“Dante and Florence,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 80-99). This by itself would tend to suggest congruence between Brunetto’s politics and those of his protégé, were it not for the latter’s ultimate disavowal (see below) of that ideology.

¹⁶³ The episode of Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* 15 is, of course, highly controversial. Scholars have differed over the precise nature of Latini’s sin as well as in evaluating Dante’s response to it. On the first question, was it (as the *lectio facilior* would suggest) sexual sodomy, or some metaphorical equivalent? André Pezard suggests a linguistic perversion: writing in French instead of Tuscan (*Sous la pluie de feu [Enfer, chan XV]* [Paris: Vrim, 1950]), Richard Kay worldliness (*Dante’s Swift and Strong* [Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978]), which Hollander’s commentary connects to Latini’s Guelf politics, and Peter Armour, a heretical embrace of Stoic philosophical principles (“Brunetto, the Stoic Pessimist,” *Dante Studies* 112 [1994], 1-18). On the second question, are we meant to echo the pilgrim’s sympathy at the suffering of so noble a soul, as Ugo Dotti suggests (53), or even observe “a transparent distinction between sinner and sin” (Joseph Pequigney, “Sodomy in Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*,” *Representations* 36 [1991], 22-42; 26); or else, per Freccero’s reading (“The Eternal Image of the Father” in *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante’s Commedia*, ed. Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey Schnapp [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991], 62-76), understand the pilgrim’s pity as a moral failing which the poet would have us avoid?

smaller than) the dykes erected by the Flemish and the Paduans to hold back seasonal floods.¹⁶⁴ The opening image, then, presents a stark contrast between nature and corporate human ingenuity: the walls which “defend their towns and castles” (*Inf.* 15.9) are the literal artifact dividing civilization from chaos. The analogy maps easily on to the infernal topography: just as the townsfolk are protected from a dangerous river by *their* bulwark, so the denizens of the inner ring are defended from the boiling blood of Phlegethon by theirs. The implication is obvious: the sodomites are citizens.¹⁶⁵ This is reinforced by their communitarian behavior: the “troop” (*schiera*, 15.16) of souls travels as one, and all peer in silent solidarity at the intruders. When at last Brunetto steps out to address the pilgrim at v. 24, he acts the part of spokesman: all the sodomites who pass the two travelers observe them with interest, but only Brunetto is capable of voicing their feelings. His voice has a remarkable effect on the protagonist: whereas Dante Pilgrim spends the first eight tercets either syntactically passive (“thus being seen... I was recognized” [*così adochiato... fui conosciuto*], 15.21-22) or folded up with Virgil (“we met [*incontrammo*], 15.15),¹⁶⁶ v. 25 commences with: “And I...” Motivated by Brunetto’s appearance, the pilgrim finally regains his active role in the narrative, but how familiar are his actions! He too begins to stare fixedly,¹⁶⁷ he gains “*conoscenza*” (28) of Brunetto’s identity,¹⁶⁸ and, finally, the

¹⁶⁴ *Inf.* 15.4-12.

¹⁶⁵ It is perhaps not coincidental that Honess, making the contrary argument that the inhabitants of Lower Hell are characterized by “anti-citizenship” (56), discusses neither the present *canto* nor the one that follows.

¹⁶⁶ There are two first-person singular active verbs applied to the protagonist at lines 13-14 (“non avrei visto... rivolto mi fossi”), but they constitute the two halves of a counterfactual statement indicating precisely what Dante pilgrim would *not* have seen, had he decided—as in fact he does not—to turn round. If anything, this simply reinforces the character’s passivity.

¹⁶⁷ *Inf.* 15.26.

famous cry of anguished recognition: “Siete voi qui, Ser Brunetto?” (Are *you* here, Ser Brunetto, 30). The pilgrim’s response is entirely an echo of his interlocutor. He stands at the margin of Brunetto’s city with the bloody river at his back, and at the sound of the orator’s voice begins to copy the inhabitants to a dangerous extent. Indeed, the pilgrim’s first thought after greeting Brunetto will be to consider whether or not he dares to step down, or even sit, upon the flaming sands.¹⁶⁹

Brunetto’s initial presentation as a civic orator is further developed by what he says. His interaction with the pilgrim consists in large part of a blistering attack on the mores of contemporary Florence, whose Roman founding he contrasts with the influence of immigrants from the surrounding countryside:

Ma quello ingrato popolo maligno
che discese di Fiesole ab antico,
e tiene ancor del monte e del macigno.
(*Inf.* 15.61-63)

[But that graceless, evil race/ who from Fiesole descended long ago,/ and
retain still something of the mountain and the rock.]

Brunetto casts the Fiesolans’ degenerative influence on Florence precisely in terms of their savagery: they “retain something of the mountain and the rock.” As Cristoforo Landino puts it in his commentary on the passage, the Fiesolans’ very nature is rock-like: “wherefore ...[the Fiesolan race] is hard and bitter like that stone.”¹⁷⁰ Brunetto’s description of these foreign interlopers in *Inferno* coincides nicely with Dante’s gloss of Orpheus in *Convivio*, and hence the historical Brunetto’s Ciceronian view. The

¹⁶⁸ Literally, the pilgrim obtains “la conoscenza sua” (15.28), “knowledge of who he [Brunetto] was,” but also, potentially, “his knowledge,” reinforcing Brunetto’s status as pedagogue.

¹⁶⁹ *Inf.* 15.35-36, 43.

¹⁷⁰ “Adunque ... è duro et aspro chome quella pietra.” All commentaries to the *Commedia* taken from the archives of the *Dartmouth Dante Project* (dante.dartmouth.edu); translations thereof into English mine.

savagery of those without the virtue orators supply is best illustrated by comparing them to trees and stones.

If, as has been suggested, Brunetto's essential function in *Inferno* is to represent a Ciceronian poetics, then Dante's response to him takes on profound ideological significance. John Freccero has pointed out the cruel irony in Dante's choice of sodomy as the definitive vice for his "cara e buona imagine paterna" (15.83; dear and good paternal image), connecting sterile sexuality to Brunetto's rejection of his own mortality, his place in the generational progression of the species.¹⁷¹ But Brunetto's concept of "how man makes himself immortal" (come l'uom s'eterna, 85) is also essentially political. The second book of Brunetto's *Tresor* includes a discussion of "renown" (renomee), which repays great deeds and wisdom with "a second life" (une seconde vie) of glory in the public imagination.¹⁷² The author then introduces a dispute on the value of such glory between Boethius on the one hand, and his classical *auctores* on the other. Boethius is cited arguing that the pursuit of reputation not infrequently makes men wicked—"we prefer to seem good than to be so."¹⁷³ In response, Brunetto produces witnesses, chiefly Juvenal and Cicero, to the effect that Boethius' distinction between reputation and reality is contradictory:

& ce dit Tuilles: qui vet avoir gloire face que il soit tels come il viaut resenbler; car cil qui cuide gaagner gloire par fausse demonstrance ou par faintes paroles ou par semblant de sa chiere est villainement deceus... por ce que nulle chose fainte ne puet durer longuement. (*Tresor* 120.4)

[And thus says Cicero: let whoever desires glory work to become that which he would seem to be, for whoever expects to win glory by false show or

¹⁷¹ Freccero, 66.

¹⁷² *Tresor* 2.120.1.

¹⁷³ "Nos volons miaus sembler bons que estre le," *ibid.*, 2.120.2

fraudulent words or by outer appearance is terribly deceived... for nothing fraudulent can last very long.]

By endorsing a pagan account of glory, Brunetto implicitly subscribes to pagan ethics as well: if reputation among men perfectly corresponds to merit, then the Christian virtues, which confer not earthly but heavenly renown, are excluded.¹⁷⁴ Thus, when in *Inferno* 15 Dante alludes to this doctrine of civic immortality, he positions his interlocutor as the proponent of a secular theory of virtue grounded in political success. One need hardly mention that it is also deeply idolatrous: a Christian was obliged to respect the distinction between Augustine's Two Cities, and to privilege, as Brunetto clearly does not, "quella Roma onde Cristo è romano" (that Rome of which Christ is a Roman, *Purgatorio* 32.102). It is in this idolatrous commitment to a temporal good that the heart of Brunetto's transgression is to be found, for sodomy implies far more than sexual rebellion. This may be seen in the first chapter of St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, where he introduces the vice in the following, rather surprising way:¹⁷⁵

[21] Because that, when they knew God, they have not glorified him as God, or given thanks; but became vain in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened. [22] For professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. [23] And they changed the glory of the incorruptible God [gloriam incorruptibilis Dei] into the likeness of the image of a corruptible man [in similitudinem imaginis corruptibilis hominis], and of birds, and of fourfooted beasts, and of creeping things. [24] Wherefore God gave them up to the desires of their heart [desideria cordis eorum], unto uncleanness [immunditiam], to dishonour their own bodies among themselves [contumeliis adficiant corpora sua]. [25] Who changed the truth of God into a lie; and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. 1 Thess. 2.4 by way of example..

¹⁷⁵ All English biblical citations taken from the Douay-Rheims translation (*The Holy Bible*, ed. Richard Challoner [New York: Douay Bible House, 1941]); Latin from the *Biblia sacra: iuxta Vulgatam versionem* (5th ed.), ed. Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007).

[26] For this cause God delivered them up to shameful affections [passiones ignominiaē]. For their women have changed the natural use into that use which is against nature. [27] And, in like manner, the men also, leaving the natural use of the women [relicta naturali usu feminae], have burned in their lusts one towards another [exarserunt in desideriiis suis], men with men working that which is filthy [turpitudinem operantes], and receiving in themselves the recompense which was due to their error [mercedem quam oportuit erroris sui].

For Paul, somewhat surprisingly, sodomy is not simply a sin but the *penalty* for sin—“the recompense that was due to their error”—and the sin in question is precisely that idolatrous reversal of Creator and creation of which Dante makes Brunetto the proponent: “For this cause [i.e., because of their denial of the divine prerogative of worship] God delivered them up to shameful affections.” Whereas a proper understanding of the created order (of which the human political community is, in Dante’s view, the supreme expression) should lead to knowledge of God, entailing both worship and thanksgiving, Dante’s sodomites, described as would-be intellectuals (we recall of Brunetto & co. that “all were clerics and literary men of great fame,” *Inf.* 15.106-7), consciously reject such revelation. In so doing, they pervert Nature, making an end out of a means; their sexual condition thus functions as a devastatingly ironic *contrappasso*. In parallel with Paul’s account, their excessive love for the world becomes an empty gesture serving merely to deceive themselves, their physical sterility corresponding to their futile materialism. Sodomy is emblematic of an idolatrous politics.

More pointedly, Sodom signifies an idolatrous *polity*. In Genesis, the first we hear of it is when Abraham and his nephew Lot decide to part ways. Chapter 13 records Lot’s decision thus:

[10] And Lot, lifting up his eyes, saw all the country about the Jordan, which was watered throughout, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrha, as the paradise of the Lord [paradisus Domini], and like Egypt as one comes to Segor. ... [12] Abram dwelt in the land of Chanaan; and Lot abode in the towns that were about the Jordan, and dwelt in Sodom. [13] And the men of Sodom were very wicked, and sinners before the face of the Lord, beyond measure [pessimi erant et peccatores coram Domino nimis].

Lot's choice for the better-watered Jordan river valley corresponds to a preference for settled life in prosperous and wicked Sodom—which, significantly, he confuses with “the paradise of the Lord.” Abraham, by contrast, turns the other way, toward the wilderness, reinforcing his holy status as an exile. After the obliteration of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, the two cities are calcified into a kind of parable, trotted out by prophets both to measure the wickedness of a city or a nation, and to warn its people of the terrifying consequences of divine wrath. It is in this spirit that Jesus tells the people of Capernaum, “But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable [remissius erit] for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.”¹⁷⁶ Jesus' admonition is communal, not personal, for rarely if ever in the Bible do we meet an individual of whom “sodomite” is predicated in a purely sexual capacity.¹⁷⁷ The trope of Sodom almost invariably applies to a corrupt political unit, upon which the coming judgment of God may be foretold with the certainty of sight. Moreover, when the trope is deployed in a reproach of Israel, the fundamental infraction is idolatry, as Moses' speech to Israel makes clear.¹⁷⁸ Thus, when we arrive at Dante's “circle [that] stamps Sodom with its seal” (giron suggella/ del segno suo ... Soddoma, *Inf.* 11.49-50), we are encountering a vice that already carries significant political baggage: a

¹⁷⁶ Matt. 11.24.

¹⁷⁷ Kay, 209-290.

¹⁷⁸ Deut. 29.

Sodomitic city is one in which corruption—finally defined as forsaking God—has reached its zenith. How precisely Dante reverses the oratorical philosophy of his mentor! For whereas Ciceronian rhetoric ought to produce a citizenry unified in its orientation towards the good, to make its exponent a Sodomite associates him with a polity from which virtue is altogether absent, where idolatry has had its fullest triumph. And indeed, although Freccero is doubtless correct to emphasize the adjective “paternal” in the pilgrim’s “good and dear paternal image” for its ironic connection to Brunetto’s vice,¹⁷⁹ the true force of the line’s irony rests on Brunetto’s status as *image*.¹⁸⁰ Like Paul’s “images in the form of corruptible man,”¹⁸¹ which represent the idolatrous perversion of Creation, Brunetto’s eminently corruptible corporality is meant for an *imago Dei*, a reflection of the divine nature, chief among the created order of signs which, read correctly, point to God. But he rejects this transfer, with its consequent acceptance of the contingent status of the sublunary sphere. Brunetto’s paternity is *imaginary* precisely because he is a false image: a sign that refuses to signify. And if Brunetto’s crime is thus to confound the image and the artist, God in this case, is it any wonder that his own form is distorted nearly beyond recognition?¹⁸² Having despised his role as image-bearer, he forfeits it.

The cause of Brunetto’s condemnation is thus intimately related to his idolatrous elevation of civic virtue, which, as the end of *Inferno* 15 suggests, becomes a kind of cyclical futility. Brunetto may immortalize himself, may run “like one who

¹⁷⁹ Freccero, 61-64.

¹⁸⁰ One thinks in this connection of the punishment visited upon Lot’s wife in his escape from Sodom (Gen. 19): her backward glance, a gesture of identification with her wicked city, reduced her to an image made of salt.

¹⁸¹ Rom. 1.23.

¹⁸² *Inf.* 15.26-27.

wins,”¹⁸³ but in this endless race without a prize, victory is just as illusory as fatherhood. The close of Brunetto’s main address to Dante, however, will lead us to an even darker possibility:

La tua fortuna tanto onor ti serba
che l’una parte e l’altra avranno fame
di te; ma lungi fia dal becco l’erba.
Faccian le bestie fiesolane strame
di lor medesme, e non tocchin la pianta,
s’alcuna surge ancora in lor letame.
(*Inf.* 15.70-75)

[Your fortune reserves to you such honor/ that one party and the other will hunger/ for you; but far from the mouth will be the grass./ Let the beasts of Fiesole make fodder/ of themselves, and touch not the plant/ if any still springs up amid their dung.]

Dante will escape the clutches of both parties, who in consuming themselves will leave untouched “the holy seed” of Florentine *romanitas*. The recurrent floral imagery (beginning four lines previously at 66, in which Dante is a fig among bitter sorbs) implies that this seed of Roman virtue is actually Dante himself: line 72 describes him as grass (*erba*) which escapes being eaten by a ruminant, referring to the factions’ “hunger” for him, and the next two lines develop the same conceit with additional details: the animal becomes a group of Fiesolan beasts, the reason they do not consume the plant is that they are fighting each other, and the mode shifts from indicative (*fia*) to hortatory subjunctive (*faccian*). Brunetto will go on to associate this plant’s origin with Florence’s original Roman virtue, but its connection to Dante seems clear. Brunetto is anointing his “little boy” representative and propagator of his civic conception of virtue.¹⁸⁴ However, he accomplishes this by subverting his own

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.31.

conception of oratory: Dante, the object of his harangue, is metaphorically transformed into a vegetable. On Brunetto's reading of the Orpheus myth, this is topsy-turvy: rocks and plants are supposed to become citizens, not the other way around; for Dante to put such a reversal into his old teacher's mouth is as decisive a rejection as any he could have devised.

Together with what we have observed about Brunetto's alienated corporality, this reversal leads us to a further referent. For the full weight of Dante's tragic assessment of this Ciceronian poetics, we must return to Pier della Vigna, orator and politician, who anticipates Brunetto's anti-Orphic metaphor in his own body. Even Pier's new form, a briar, seems to be recalled by the accentuated sterility of Brunetto's circle: in Genesis, the emergence of such plants signifies the resistance of the natural world to cultivation.¹⁸⁵ Pier's shape is thus a monument to the Fall of Man, itself an illustration of the danger lurking beneath all rhetorical display. In the Genesis account, God's warning against the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is immediately followed by the Serpent's contravention: he tells Eve, "You surely shall not die!"¹⁸⁶ Eve's beguilement in Paradise reveals paradigmatically the ability of language to confer death instead of life, and Pier's exculpatory speech in *Inferno* 13 suggests a similar conclusion. The suicide's oration has long been noted for its rhetorical craft, as Dante poet recreates the high Chancery style which had so influenced both his own prose and that of Brunetto Latini—indeed, David Higgins has shown its almost perfect adherence to Ciceronian rules of oratory.¹⁸⁷ But Pier's

¹⁸⁵ Gen. 3.18.

¹⁸⁶ "Nequaquam morte moriemini," Gen. 3.4.

¹⁸⁷ David Higgins, "Cicero, Aquinas, and St. Matthew in *Inferno* XIII," *Dante Studies* 93 (1975), 61-94.

Ciceronianism does more than lend structure to his discourse. In Dante's portrayal, the Chancellor's suicide and subsequent damnation is the direct result of his idolatrous Ciceronian ideology. His polished introduction hinges on a telling, and ultimately fatal, metaphor:

io son colui che tenne ambo le chiavi
del cor di Federigo, e che le volsi
serrando e disserrando, sì soavi
che dal segreto suo quasi ogn' uom tolsi
fede portai al glorioso officio
tanto ch'i' ne perde' li sonni e ' polsi.
(*Inf.* 13.58-63)

[I am the one who held both keys/ to Frederick's heart, and who revolved them/ locking and unlocking so deftly/ that from his secret I kept almost every man away;/ so faithfully I held the glorious post/ that I lost both sleep and blood.]

If holding the keys associates Pier with his apostolic namesake in the role of Pope, then his emperor, by good and necessary consequence, is God, a starkly pagan implication which Pier's later reference to Frederick as "Augustus" does nothing to diminish. The final two lines of the section cited above are typically glossed by commentators as a declaration of Pier's innocence; as Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio put it, "faithfulness in his glorious office brought with it the favor of the emperor, jealousy from the courtiers, and consequently his eventual death."¹⁸⁸ But is there not a staggering irony in Pier, who observably refused to put his faith in God, praising himself for fidelity to a secular ruler? Despite his current situation, which suggests in no uncertain terms that he miscalculated his political commitments, Pier goes on to assert his innocence in the following terms:

Per le nove radici d'esto legno

¹⁸⁸ See the commentary of Bosco and Reggio to this passage.

vi giuro che già mai non ruppi fede
al mio signor, che fu d'onor sì degno.
(*Inf.* 13.73-75)

[By the new roots of this tree/ I swear to you that I never broke faith/ with my
so worthy lord.]

The irony is palpable: Pier swears upon the sign of his damnation—the new roots which are the punishment of his apostasy—that he has never “broken faith with his so worthy lord”; he is, in other words, a faithful idolater. The ironic ambivalence of his defense, and the confusion it implies between secular politics and heaven, reveals Brunetto’s ideology taken to its logical extreme: not merely sodomy but suicide. Pier’s description of Frederick is no less rich. If ever there were an inappropriate way of describing an emperor who blinds and imprisons loyal ministers, surely it is “worthy”! The implication could hardly be stronger: in choosing this world over the next, Pier forfeits both. Likewise, by so clearly defining these two sinners with reference to their idolatrous Ciceronianism, Dante rejects both it and them.

I have from time to time referred to this Classical rhetorical ideology which Brunetto exemplifies by the adjective “Orphic,” owing to the centrality of that myth to his conception of oratory. Dante’s response comes even clearer if we move from the instance to the form: for the *Commedia* stages interactions not merely with Orphic rhetoricians like Brunetto and Pier, but with Orpheus himself. The Thracian bard only appears as a character in the poem once, a passing reference in *Inferno* 4, among the sages of Antiquity: “and I saw Orpheus,/ and Tullius [Cicero], and Linus and moral Seneca” (140-41). Orpheus is collocated with Linus, his fellow *poeta-theologus* of Antiquity, and between them, significantly, stands Marcus Tullius Cicero. But there is

a further moment in which the *Commedia* engages Orpheus more or less directly. At the summit of Mount Purgatory, as Virgil vanishes from Dante's side, the pilgrim mourns his passing in words that, as Rachel Jacoff has shown, clearly allude to the version of the Orpheus-legend recounted in the fourth book of Virgil's *Georgics*.¹⁸⁹ But rather than the Ciceronian city-builder whom Dante listed in Limbo and recalled in the person of Brunetto, the Orpheus of Virgil's narrative is the lover who descends to Hades in pursuit of his bride, and then, returning with her, looks back too soon and watches her recede into the abyss. It is this irremediable loss which the pilgrim's tears for Virgil are meant to evoke. But as Jacoff indicates, although this Orpheus-like sorrow takes Virgil's sudden absence as its proximate cause, it also provides a paradigm for the pilgrim's relationship to Beatrice. Dante Pilgrim is self-evidently a bereaved poet who travels to hell and back in pursuit of his lady. But here the analogy seems to falter, for Beatrice is nothing like the passive Eurydice, awaiting her beloved in the world below—if anything, Beatrice behaves rather more like Orpheus than the pilgrim does, descending to “the gates of the dead” (*Purg.* 30.139) in order to arrange for Dante's rescue.¹⁹⁰ Jacoff proposes that the allusion is intentionally polyvalent, the better to transmogrify Virgil's pagan tragedy into a Christian triumph: in her view, Beatrice and Dante Pilgrim are both associated with Orpheus precisely in order to emphasize the distance between Virgil's text and Dante's. The pilgrim may mourn, as Orpheus does, at the sudden finality of his loss. But in the universe of the *Commedia*,

¹⁸⁹ Rachel Jacoff, “Intertextualities in Arcadia,” in Jacoff and Schnapp, 135.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

such morning over Virgil is drawn into the Augustinian paradigm of introspection and repentance: Dante ought instead to cry—as he will subsequently do—over his sins.¹⁹¹

But for all her insight, Jacoff understates the far from casual link between Dante Pilgrim’s Orphic tears and the nature of the confession they anticipate. When at last the pilgrim comes to admit the sin which had led him so far afield of Beatrice and God, he does so thus:

...“Le presenti cose
col falso lor piacer volser miei passi
tosto che ’l vostro viso si nascose.”
(*Purg.* 31.34-36)

[The things of this world/ with their false pleasure turned my steps/ as soon as
your face was concealed.]

By his own admission, Dante’s fundamental sin was that he preferred the false (because impermanent) pleasures of earth over and above their heavenly fulfillment. Beatrice had charged him with chasing “false images of the good” (*imagini di ben... false*, *Purg.* 30.131), which vice she attributes to his despair over her death.¹⁹² But this despair, Beatrice says, came from Dante’s excessive love for “the beautiful limbs in which I was enclosed” (*le belle membra in ch’io/ rinchiusa fui*, *Purg.* 31.50-51). Whereas her death ought to have taught Dante the instability of mortal goods, and hence directed his eyes heavenward, his uncontrolled affection for her beauty turned his steps aside. This is consistent with Virgil’s Orpheus, who forfeits his Eurydice precisely because he cannot forbear to turn around and look at her. The connection becomes still tighter if we refer to the analogous story in Boethius. Book 3 of the *Consolatio* presents the Orpheus narrative as a parable about the disappointment in

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁹² *Purg.* 30.129.

store for those who remain tied to temporal goods, and glosses Orpheus' fatal backward glance as evidence of his terrestrial preoccupations.¹⁹³ "Happy is he," declares Philosophy by way of introduction, "who can cast off the chains of heavy earth" (*felix, qui potuit gravis/ terrae soluere vincula*, 3.12.3-4). Both versions of Orpheus, civic and erotic, are thus linked by excess temporal attachments—indeed, when Virgil's passing is memorialized by comparing him to a Neoplatonic Eurydice, can we ignore the implication that his terrestrial Rome, of which Christ is clearly not a citizen, accompanies him back to hell? Can it be coincidental that the pilgrim begins to repent of idolatrous worldly attachments in the tercet that directly follows his greatest identification with Orpheus?¹⁹⁴ The *Commedia's* Orphic moments are inevitably implicated in a systematic confusion between heaven and earth of which the pilgrim, and implicitly the poet, now repents. We recall that *Purgatorio* 30.55 also contains, through Beatrice's use of Dante's name, the closest identification of poet and pilgrim. In framing Orpheus as the embodiment of an idolatrous tendency and then rejecting him, Dante turns away from the Earthly City as well.

II. Cacciaguida's Florence: Mars on Earth

The foregoing conclusion raises a tension, not merely with common perception, but seemingly with the plot of the *Commedia* itself. For it is no secret that the civic sentiments I have posited that Dante rejects reverberate throughout the poem, not only from the mouths and in the regions of the damned, but from the second and

¹⁹³ Boethius, *Consolatio philosophiae*, ed. James Joseph O'Donnell (Bryn Mawr: Thomas Library, Bryn Mawr College, 1984), 3.12.55-58.

¹⁹⁴ It is worth recalling, incidentally, that upon losing Eurydice, Ovid's Orpheus becomes a sodomite (*Metamorphoses*, ed. R. J. Tarrant [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 11.83-85).

third *cantiche* as well. The most obvious example of this continuity is the episode of Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* 15-17, where Dante's glorified ancestor holds forth about the moral decline of Florence in terms calculated to match Brunetto's diatribe in the parallel canto of *Inferno*. As regards their common city, saint and sodomite appear to be in perfect accord: Florentine expansion into the surrounding countryside, and the subsequent flood of immigrants, have weakened the city's original (Roman) moral fiber and led to its ruin; implicitly, then, what is needed is a kind of eloquence capable of quickening the spent flames of citizenship—civic oratory, of which both Brunetto's diatribe and Cacciaguida's lyrical nostalgia are compelling examples. Likewise, Brunetto makes prophecies;¹⁹⁵ Cacciaguida glosses and confirms them.¹⁹⁶ Most importantly, where Brunetto identifies Dante as the seed of Rome,¹⁹⁷ Cacciaguida ties his fate to the imperial cause by referring him to Cangrande della Scala.¹⁹⁸ The consistency of their respective agendas may seem to trouble the contention advanced here that Dante, who after all crafted both characters and their speeches, despairs of the ideology behind such rhetoric. Davis, who reads the episode as confirming the civic nature of Dante's undertaking, poses a very reasonable question: if the poet wants us to reject Brunetto's civic ideology, why have Cacciaguida endorse his thesis?¹⁹⁹ The episode is widely taken in this spirit,²⁰⁰ and, indeed, Cacciaguida as we meet him in *Paradiso* certainly appears to retain in death the same vital interest in the world he evidenced in life: of the nearly three hundred verses he speaks, over two-

¹⁹⁵ *Inf.* 15.69-72.

¹⁹⁶ *Par.* 17.61-19.

¹⁹⁷ *Inf.* 15.76-77.

¹⁹⁸ *Par.* 17.76-93.

¹⁹⁹ Davis, 195.

²⁰⁰ Ferrante, 281; Honess, 45.

thirds are devoted to Florentine history and mores. But the attention Cacciaguida devotes to their mutual city serves by way of introduction to his real function in the poem, which is chiefly to explain, “by clear words and concrete language,”²⁰¹ the terrible prophecies which the pilgrim has been hearing all throughout his journey, and, consequently, to establish the prophetic autonomy Dante’s state of exile confers on his composition. This is the role for which the poem has been preparing us since at least the end of *Inferno* 10. And because Cacciaguida is endowed by the poet with the standing to authorize Dante’s poetic audacity in the *Commedia*, the elder Florentine assumes special importance in the poem’s ideological economy. The question then arises as to what his extended *excursus* on the history of his city in *Paradiso* 15-16 has to do with his charge to the poet-pilgrim in the following canto.

One reading, which the previous paragraph attributed to Davis, takes Cacciaguida’s nostalgia as basically consistent with Dante’s aspirations—Old Florence as a kind of prelapsarian political ideal toward the attainment of which Dante is understood to devote his poem. Giuseppe Mazzotta makes a similar gesture in his discussion of *communitas*, considering Florence’s representation in the *Commedia* as a *locus amoenus*: “[Cacciaguida’s] elegy is also a hope that the order of Eden is typologically possible here on earth.”²⁰² Although Mazzotta cautions that such a hope

²⁰¹ *Par.* 17.34-35.

²⁰² Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 145. Mazzotta’s careful distinction between earthly and heavenly, historical and eschatological goals, is followed by, among others, Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (“*Paradiso XVII*,” in *Le bianche stole: Saggi sul Paradiso di Dante* [Florence: Sismel, 2010], 143-61; 156). Yet in permitting space for Dante’s rhetoric to be targeted at temporal, political improvements, to be, as it were, both Ciceronian and Augustinian, such critics downplay Dante’s attacks on precisely that kind of rhetoric, as well as his insistence on the mutual exclusivity of the

“cannot be exhausted entirely within the bounds of history,” his words do not foreclose a civic purpose for Dante’s text.²⁰³ At least by implication, the task of political renewal via eloquence remains.

The other interpretive possibility, broadly speaking, is that Cacciaguida’s Florentine pastoral is meant not to evoke longing but to admonish. Focusing on the implications of the episode’s location in the Sphere of Mars, such scholars as Jeffrey Schnapp and Nino Borsellino have argued that Cacciaguida’s portrayal of the city actually serves to remind the pilgrim (and the reader) that existence in the domain of history, of politics and war, is implicated in the hopeless struggle against mutability and death.²⁰⁴ As Schnapp writes, recalling Dante’s astrological speculations in

Convivio:

Mars initiates... the endless “passing away of kings and transmutation of kingdoms” (“morte di regi e transmutamento di regni,” *Convivio* 2.13.22) that make of the human city a place of wandering and exile. (129)

The rule of Mars entails chaos and tragedy on the human plane, and Florence is a case in point. In support we are pointed to Brunetto Latini’s description of early Florence as “The Church of Mars,” “as a result of which,” continues Brunetto, “it is no wonder the Florentines are always in discord and at war, since that planet reigns over them.”²⁰⁵

Mars stands against the Classical ideal of the harmonious body politic: strictly

competing poetic ideologies. See also Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes and Other Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), esp. 245-53.

²⁰³ Mazzotta, 146.

²⁰⁴ Nino Borsellino, “Sotto il segno di Marte: la cronaca del padre antico (*Par. XVI*),” *L’Alighieri: Rassegna bibliografica dantesca* 74 (1995), 37-46; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *The Transfiguration of History at the Center of Dante’s Paradise* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

²⁰⁵ Latini 1.37.2-3 (cited in Schapp, 36).

speaking, a Martial city is a contradiction in terms.²⁰⁶ It may seem surprising, then, that Cacciaguida's supposed encomium to Old Florence is larded with references to Mars and martiality. He gives his own birth year in terms of the red planet's peregrinations (*Par.* 16.37-39); the repose of Florence which he praises, their glory and their justice, is figured by success in battle (149-54). The Florentines are literally defined by war: Cacciaguida estimates the population of his day by the number under arms who dwelt "between Mars and the Baptist" (16.47), referring to the ancient statue of the War God which the ancient city had, upon conversion to Christianity, marginalized without entirely removing. In Villani's account, the persistence of the statue marked the problematic intersection of pagan religiosity and politics:²⁰⁷

i Fiorentini levaro il loro idolo, il quale appellavano lo Idio Marti, e puosollo in su un'alta torre presso al fiume d'Arno, e nol vollono rompere né spezzare, però che per loro antiche memorie trovavano che il detto idolo di Marti era consecrato sotto ascendente di tale pianeta, che come fosse rotto o commosso in vile luogo, la città avrebbe pericolo e danno, e grande mutazione. E con tutto che i Fiorentini di nuovo fossono divenuti Cristiani, ancora teneano molti costumi del paganesimo, e tennero gran tempo, e temeano forte il loro antico idolo di Marti; sì erano ancora poco perfetti nella santa fede. (2.23)

[the Florentines removed their idol, which they called the god Mars, and placed it upon a high tower, by the river Arno, and they did not want to break or destroy it, because in their ancient records they found that the said idol of Mars had been consecrated under the ascendancy of this planet, such that, if it were broken or moved to an unworthy place, the city would suffer peril and injury, and undergo great changes. And although the Florentines had lately become Christians, they still retained many pagan customs, and long continued to observe them, and they still stood in awe of their ancient idol of Mars, *so little were they perfected as yet in the holy faith.*]

Villani foregrounds the difficulty with this syncretist gesture even as he seeks to distance it from his own time: to retain an idol for the sake of political stability stands

²⁰⁶ Mars could also represent a principle of harmony, for which see below (p. 76).

²⁰⁷ Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, v. 1, ed. Giuseppe Porta (Parma: U. Guanda, 1990). Italics added.

in flagrant violation of the principle of Christian monotheism. The Florentine reverence for their idol was, in effect, a political idolatry, yet another illustration of that divided loyalty between heaven and earth to which the *Commedia* continually recurs in explaining their political decay. The anonymous suicide of *Inferno* 13 casts the problem from the other side: in removing the war god from their midst, he charges, Florence has incurred his wrath.²⁰⁸ Curious fidelity! A man in anguish from the torments of the Christian hell decides to communicate a warning about the reverence due a pagan deity!

Dante's choice of the Suicide to underscore Florentine idolatry is of course intentional, for in his view it is ultimately a suicidal arrangement: as happened with Pier della Vigna, the Florentines' divided loyalty between earth and heaven, typified by the distinction between the wilderness of Abram and John the Baptist, and the sodomitic, civic function of the god, will ultimately lead them not merely to destruction, but self-slaughter. Observe the conclusion of Cacciaguیدا's elegy:

Ma conveniesi, a quella pietra scema
che guarda 'l ponte, che Fiorenza fesse
vittima ne la sua pace postrema.

(*Par.* 16.145-147)

But it was fitting at that broken stone/ which guards the bridge that Florence
make/ a sacrificial victim in the final moment of her peace.

"It was fitting," Cacciaguیدا says, that the murder of Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonti, which kindled Florence into civil war, should take the form of an

²⁰⁸ *Inf.* 13.143-45.

occult blood sacrifice before the effigy.²⁰⁹ Fitting, no doubt, because the symbolic resumption of such public, pagan rituals implies the quenching of Florentine Christianity, the triumph of the god of war, and the final paroxysm of violence as the quintessentially divided city returns, as it must, to the chaos whence it sprang. The very symbol of the Heaven of Mars is a great cross, the emblem of the radical discontinuity between pagan and Christian.²¹⁰ The cross of Mars is not entirely the poet's invention—we see report of a similar apparition, a red cross in the skies above Florence at the outbreak of open hostilities between the Black and White factions in the *Cronica* of Dino Compagni, where it signified “that God was powerfully opposed to our anguished [crucciato] city.”²¹¹ So the brightest days of Cacciaguida's Florence, insofar as they are martial, are tarred with the doom and folly—not for nothing does the Crusader describe the world in Boethian terms as “fallacious”²¹²—of the City of Man.

Mars had another face, of course. Not only a principle of violence and destruction, the planet also stood for music, poetry, and civic concord.²¹³ Through its relationship to harmony and the Platonic notion of *paideia*, the planet could also represent the ordered structure of the ideal *polis* as created and maintained by rhetoric. This aspect of Mars is drawn out in *Inferno* 16, where the three Florentine politicians run beneath the burning rain. Hollander has pointed out the uniqueness of their rapport with one another: unlike every other group of sinners we encounter, the three

²⁰⁹ Curiously, Schnapp interprets these words as an echo of the Suicide, as if Cacciaguida would really attribute the overthrow of his city to the anger of a slighted demon (53). We may accept a kind of *de facto* polytheism from the damned, but it seems a stretch coming from a beatified Crusader.

²¹⁰ Schnapp, 71.

²¹¹ Dino Compagni, *Cronica*, ed. Gino Luzzatto (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), 2.19. Translation mine.

²¹² “Fallace,” *Par.* 15.146.

²¹³ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke, 1993), 146.

sodomites actually speak together in chorus,²¹⁴ a display of unity all the more surprising given that they were the leaders of a faction while on earth.²¹⁵ In hell, their rhetorical concord is matched by their physical choreography: in addition to the circuit they are condemned to run, these three add an epicycle so as to match the pilgrim's pace (16.21), a literal pantomime of planetary motion. Despite their involvement in the divided government of Florence, their portrayal here, from a political standpoint, is overwhelmingly positive. Equally surprising, given their damnation, is the emphasis Dante poet lays on their personal virtues. Virgil introduces the episode by warning Dante pilgrim that these three merit courtesy (16.15), a compliment he extends to no one else in the poem. When they begin to question Dante, they evidence only two concerns: fame—both their own, and that to which the pilgrim may aspire (16.35, 85; 66)—and whether or not their city retains any of its virtue (16.67-69). In short, they are a picture of Ciceronian virtue, honorable citizens devoted to their country's welfare, and have received the accustomed recompense in the form of the immortality of fame. The pilgrim is an enthusiastic participant in this transaction: asked to speak with them because of their renown (16.31-33), he avers always having "heard and said [their] honored names with affection" (16.59-60). Their civic virtue has, so to speak, worked, securing them honor even after death. More importantly, they ask the wayfarer, who is of course a poet, to perpetuate their memory when he returns (16.85), a charge he will fulfill by narrating the present episode in his poem. Unlike in the Brunetto episode discussed above, there is no

²¹⁴ *Inf.* 16.79-85.

²¹⁵ Robert Hollander, "Dante's Harmonious Homosexuals (*Inferno* 16.7-90)," *The Electronic Bulletin of the Dante Society of America, Inferno* (1996).

hint—beyond the mere fact of taking place in hell—that *Inferno* 16 is meant to be read ironically, or that the fame of these sodomites is ill-deserved. They are truly noble, in the Ciceronian sense, without the taint of vanity or self-aggrandizement we see in Brunetto; even Rusticucci’s elliptical confession of his vice, entirely concerned with the harm he suffers from his *fiera moglie* (16.45; shrewish wife), has no impact on the pilgrim’s admiration. Indeed, among early commentators it has the general effect of diverting blame on to his better half. Nor, I think, are we meant simply to approach such situations in the *Commedia* as a question of moral arithmetic, subtracting from their virtues (“the political excellence which they displayed in life”²¹⁶) the perceived demerit of sodomy, and judging if the sum be positive or negative. Rather, there is at work a counter-intuitive logic. Like Brunetto and Pier, the sodomites of *Inferno* 16 are not damned in spite of their virtues but *because* of them, for the excessive love they bear towards the City of Man. Their frame of reference exactly parallels Brunetto’s notion of civic immortality as a recompense for civic virtue, but in a Christian cosmos, a virtue which makes politics its end can only end in idolatrous futility.

Inferno 16 also sheds some light on the question of whether the arguments and evidence presented thus far are not perhaps rather too subtle to support the conclusions I have indicated. If Dante means us to share his putative disillusionment with the Earthly City, why not simply say so directly? Why rely on the creativity of future readers to invert the apparent sense of his text? Without directly speaking to the poet’s motives, we can observe that a salient feature in his presentation of political

²¹⁶ “L’eccellenza civile che essi ebbero in vita,” as Chiavacci Leonardi summarized it in her commentary on *Inferno* 16.22.

idolatry is its unparalleled seductiveness. The pilgrim's interaction with the sodomites is suffused with eroticism. First, he describes their appearance:

Qual sogliono i campioni far nudi e unti
avvisando lor presa e lor vantaggio,
prima che sien tra lor battuti e punti.
(*Inf.* 16.22-24)

[As nude and oiled champions are wont to do/looking for their hold and their advantage/ before they come to blows and thrusts.]

Commentators tend to read the image in these lines as martial, not erotic. However, when we juxtapose it with the pilgrim's reaction to their names a few tercets down, the simile assumes a rather different nuance. The narrator describes his feelings thus:

S'i' fossi stato dal foco coperto,
gittato mi sarei tra lor di sotto,
e credo che 'l dottor l'avria sofferto;
ma perch'io mi sarei bruciato e cotto,
vinse paura la mia buona voglia
che di loro abbracciar mi facea ghiotto.
(*Inf.* 16.46-51)

[Had I been protected from the fire,/ I would have thrown myself down among them,/ and I think my teacher would have permitted it;/ but since I would have been burned and cooked,/ fear overcame my good intent/ which made me hunger to embrace them.]

The first two lines (46-47) recall the pilgrim's reaction upon meeting Brunetto: here as then, unbounded admiration for his compatriots makes him want to join them on the flaming sand, a desire restrained only by his fear of being singed. It is worth pausing a moment over the peculiarity of this response. No other torture that the pilgrim sees, whether punishments or purgations, ever elicits in him the desire to endure it himself. Other sinners, even those whose plight most deeply moves him he is content to pity—only among the sodomites does he seriously entertain the notion of sharing in their

torment. He may swoon at Francesca's tale of woe, but at no time does it occur to him to join her in "the infernal tempest."²¹⁷ His reaction to the sodomites is *sui generis*. In Canto 16, his second interaction with that class of sinner, Dante raises the stakes: whereas seeing Brunetto induced the pilgrim to offer to come down and sit with him, here he "hungers to embrace them."²¹⁸ Whatever its political valences, sodomy remains a sexual transgression, which locates the temptation (and how else could we describe the pilgrim's sudden impulse to precipitate himself into the very fires of hell?) firmly within the realm of the erotic. Boccaccio, in his commentary on the canto, even suggests that Dante's unusual regard for these sinners implies that the poet wishes "to confess himself a sinner of this wicked fault." Without going quite so far, we can at least observe that the pilgrim is here made to experience nobility—the defining attribute of all three runners in *Inferno* 16—as a sexual temptation to which he very nearly (and quite literally) falls.

This staging of sodomy as Ciceronian seduction brings us back to a perplexing detail in *Paradiso* 16. Upon learning that the peer of heaven with whom he has been talking is his ancestor, the pilgrim responds by elevating his register to the formal "voi." Critics have almost universally regarded this as a vainglorious gesture, and not unreasonably: the canto begins with an apostrophe to "our insignificant nobility of blood,"²¹⁹ and Beatrice answers with an admonitory smile, so that she seems "like one who coughed at Guinevere's first recorded fault."²²⁰ The terms of the simile put Dante pilgrim in the position of the adulterous queen, seduced, as it were, by the great deeds

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.31.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.51.

²¹⁹ "Poca nostra nobiltà di sangue," *Paradiso* 16.1.

²²⁰ "Parve quella che tossio/ al primo fallo scritto di Ginevra," *ibid.*, 14-15.

and reputation of his blood relation. The difficulty with this reading is that the pilgrim's gesture is not, on the face of it, vainglorious, at least not in the sense of thinking himself more virtuous than he actually is.²²¹ The only questionable action we see is his formal address to Cacciaguida, which if anything expresses humility relative to the superior dignity of the saint. It may be that we are meant to condemn the pilgrim's elation at finding his relative so honored, but then we would have to account for Cacciaguida's equivalent glee at witnessing God's "courtesy" to *his* relative, the pilgrim.²²² What *Paradiso* 16 confronts us with, then, is a subtle remonstrance (from Beatrice, who in her dealings with the pilgrim rarely invites the charge of being a soft touch) without an obvious infraction. And yet the "voi" is surely problematic in some way: after Cacciaguida's disquisition on Florentine history in Canto 16, the pilgrim reverts to the informal "tu."²²³ If, as has been argued, the sum of that discourse was to highlight the tragedy of human politics, it seems reasonable to suppose that the wayfarer's mistake was likewise politically inclined; that is, in saluting his relative the imperial cavalier, he was tempted once again to overvalue precisely those martial, civic virtues which Cacciaguida so clearly exemplifies. The preceding tercet, in fact, defines the honorific in Roman and imperial terms:

Dal "voi" che prima a Roma s'offerie,
in che la sua famiglia men persevera,
ricominciaron le parole mie.

(*Par.* 16.10-12)

²²¹ Cf. Dante's discussion of nobility in the fourth *canzone* of *Convivio*.

²²² *Par.* 15.47-48.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 17.13, e.g.

[With that “You” which was offered first at Rome/ in which her family has least persisted/ My words began again.]

Many commentators read this tercet in line with Dante’s disparagement of the Roman *tristiloquium* (vile tongue) in *De vulgari eloquentia*—as an accusation of surrendering their former elegance of expression even when addressing eminent persons.²²⁴ But such a purely linguistic jab seems out of place amid the tragedy of Florence that occupies the remainder of Canto 16. In that context it is far more plausible to understand it as a statement about politics, not style: “the family of Rome” in verse 11 would thus be the majority of Italians who refuse to honor Caesar, and his heirs in the Western Empire, as did their fathers. Read this way, the pilgrim’s deference to Cacciaguida, like that he showed the runners of *Inferno* 16, is implicitly political, inscribed within the Ciceronian system of fame as the reward for virtue, and in both cases his regard is glossed in terms of a seduction. A striking feature of *Inferno* 16 is the narrator’s assertion that, had he indeed hurled himself into the flames to embrace the damned, his “good intention” would have met with Virgil’s approval,²²⁵ identifying Virgil along with the pilgrim as unusually sympathetic to that class of sinners those whose lives most clearly approximated the classical ideal of nobility, the comportment of the virtuous citizen. But whereas the version of that ideal evident in the first *cantica* is inevitably poisoned with idolatry, Cacciaguida’s elegiac rendering of Old Florence in *Paradiso* 15 leads the pilgrim into a subtler infraction. He does not go so far, perhaps, as to consider Florence as an end in and of itself, unlike the shades

²²⁴ Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. Mirko Tavoni, in *Dante Alighieri: Opere*, v.1, ed. Marco Santagata (Milan: Mondadori Editori, 2011), 1.11.2.

²²⁵ *Inf.* 16.48, 51.

of hell so benighted by their politics that even in eternity they think of nothing else. But he does allow himself to imagine, for an instant, that the political harmony of his forefathers might be re-created and extended; indeed, that “such a lovely civic life” as they had enjoyed was worth contending for.²²⁶ Indeed, as his address to the Crusader remedies the disobedience of Italy, it marks him, like his “father,” as a partisan of earthly empire. It is the questionable nature of earthly achievement and political success that Dante poet calls to our attention with his *poca nostra nobiltà di sangue*—what time will truncate with its shears is life itself,²²⁷ and finally all human efforts. This is why Canto 16 is essentially a chronicle of entropy: the families of the great whizz by, some young and in the flower of their strength, still dominating Florentine affairs in Dante’s day, others senescent, weak, and soon to be obscured by time. Cacciaguida’s answer to the pilgrim’s eager inquiry about the families of Old Florence is a lesson in the futility of relying on the endless fluctuations of history, a meditation on Mars and *mors*.²²⁸

III. Jeremiah and Ulysses

So where does all of this leave Dante? We seem to have come full circle, to arrive at the impasse with which we began. Just where the political structure of the *Commedia* appears most robust, Dante turns it about to show the cracks. Even as he parades exemplars of civic virtue before our eyes, he lets them linger long enough to demonstrate their feebleness, for all the virtue in the world cannot spare the *polis* the endless flux of history that leads to faction, violence and suicide, and the claims of

²²⁶ *Par.* 15.30-31.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.9.

²²⁸ Schnapp, 48-49.

rhetoric to do so are groundless. Charles Till Davis offers one plausible answer to this quandary in his analysis of “Dante’s vision of history.” In Davis’ view, Dante’s political aspirations would be fulfilled when the Roman empire rose again, ruled by “a second Augustus” whose domain would be “the temporal point at which man’s earthly and heavenly beatitudes could intersect.”²²⁹ Davis takes Dante at his word in the *Monarchia*, comparing the Universal Empire advocated in that tract to (Pseudo-) Methodius’ *rex christianorum*, a ruler with both eschatological and temporal responsibilities: ruling the world with justice, converting the Saracens and Jews, and preparing the way for Christ.²³⁰ This interpretation, however, tends to make of Dante’s poem a vague statement of faith that someone, someday, somewhere would fix the world, and ignores the implicit tension between that faith, and the more concrete ethical and civic ends which Davis elsewhere argues that Dante wishes his poem to serve.²³¹ If the world is to be saved from its current decay by God’s inevitable providence, then the urgency of moral suasion by rhetorical exercises like poetry would seem to be considerably diminished.

This, then, is the difficulty with which readers of the *Commedia* are finally presented. It seems that we must either make of Dante a disinterested seer declaring blind faith in the machinations of Providence, or else a Ciceronian who, strangely, targets his own rhetoric for deconstruction.²³² There exists, however, a way by which

²²⁹ Davis, 40-41.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 191, e.g.

²³² Scholarship in this area is too massive to give more than the faintest summary. The field can be very roughly divided, however, into three major strands: historicist, political, and eschatological. The first, represented by Marjorie Reeves (“Dante and the Prophetic View of History,” in *The World of Dante: Essays on Dante and His Times*, ed. Cecil Grayson [New York: Oxford University Press, 1980], 62-84), Rachel Jacoff (“Dante, Geremia e la problematica profetica,” in *Dante e la Bibbia: Atti del*

Dante's poetic investment in the world need not overthrow his faith. If Dante's language were not rhetorical but prophetic, he would be able to stand both outside and within history, to engage with its contingency without losing sight of heaven, and employ a mode of speaking equal not merely to lamenting the evils of his day, but to redressing them.

Giuseppe Mazzotta comes near to allowing this possibility, allowing that Dante seeks "the imposition of redemption upon history" – an eschatological finality that will put an end to the endless cycles of the pagans.²³³ Mazzotta tends to emphasize less the content of Dante's faith than the unstable status of his rhetoric, but he nevertheless alludes to the suggestive possibility that the poem's account of redemption history – its cosmic application of the Exodus narrative – may itself prove capable of effecting that redemption. At the same time, however, based on his reading of *Inferno* 26 (with us we shall turn momentarily), Mazzotta suggests even the prophetic language which Dante hopes will attest to his narrative's veracity has at least potential fraud as its necessary condition, constituting "a *revelatio*, that which

Cognegno Internazionale promosso da "Biblia," Settembre 26-8, 1986, Firenze, ed. Giovanni Barblan [Florence: Olschki, 1988], 113-123), Richard K. Emmerson and Ronald B. Herzman (*The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992]), and Lucia Battaglia Ricci ("Dice Isaia...": Dante e il profetismo biblico," in *La Bibbia di Dante. Esperienza mistica, profezie e teologia biblica in Dante*, ed. Giuseppe Ledda [Ravenna: Centro Dantesco dei Frati minori conventuali, 2011], 49-75) evaluates Dante's prophetic rhetoric in comparison with the Bible and other apocalyptic groups of his day. The second tends to view Dante's prophetic moments as either utopian reveries (Nicolò Mineo, *Dante: un sogno di armonia terrena* [Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 2005], Gian Roberto Sarolli, *Prolegomena alla Divina Commedia* [Florence: Olschki, 1971]) or concrete political proposals presented as prophecy to lend them greater weight (Ferrante, 1984). The final group is comprised of those focus on elucidating the content of Dante's image of the end-times: the final reform of church and society and the return of Christ, whether they lay more stress on theological and Biblical elements (e.g. Robert Kaske, *Dante's 'DXV' and 'Veltro'* [New York: Fordham University Press, 1961]) or political developments (Davis 1984). All of these, however, tend to force Dante into a box that ill accommodates him, either dismissing his repeated claims to sincerity, or else undercutting his passionate political engagement.

²³³ Mazzotta (1979), 64-65.

simultaneously unveils as it inevitably puts the veil on once again.”²³⁴ Mazzotta skirts the edge of a dangerous concession: the idea that Dante actually was, or at any rate wrote like, a prophet on the order of Ezekiel or Isaiah, and that the verbal artifact of his poem directly corresponds to a larger, providential reality, or even might, potentially, create it – that “words may be translated into life.” Mazzotta’s caution is instructive.

Whether this metaphor [the poem’s status as a prophetic text] is taken to be a symbolic transaction endorsed by God, or an illusory, magic act of poetic mythmaking; whether we believe that the poem is a stone that edifies our faith, or is an artifice that barely conceals the grave – is a question Dante poses, but it remains necessarily an open one. (318)

The *Commedia* as a hyperbolic piece of Ciceronian rhetoric is relatively easy to accept; less so the notion that its authority derives from some super-rational experience of the divine. But as Theodolinda Barolini points out, that does appear to be the way the poet represents his authorial stance.²³⁵ What if we were to take this gesture at face value, to allow that Dante’s claim to divine inspiration is not a metaphor at all? This is not to ask whether or not we should believe in Dante’s poem as faithful Christians believe the Gospel of Matthew. Rather, it is to point out that our commonsense assumptions about the *Commedia*’s poetic teleology – that its primary function is rhetorical, in the Ciceronian sense – are addressed by the poem, more than once, and decisively rejected. What is the alternative? If his *Commedia* represents a serious attempt to transcend both the moral capacity of his human audience and the limitations of human language, to enact upon the world that state of eschatological perfection toward which ordinary rhetoric can only seek to blandish and persuade,

²³⁴ Ibid., 106.

²³⁵ Barolini (1992), 11.

then to associate his poetics with the latter entirely mistakes his purpose. Irrespective of whether we are inclined to grant that Dante actually could speak history into existence, we cannot begin to grasp the wild scope of his ambition until we recognize that he presents himself as doing exactly that.

The obvious objection to reading him this way, of course, is that virtually none of the things Dante predicts have taken place. If he asks us to take him seriously as a seer, we might well reply that his vision has failed: there is still no shortage of cupidity in the world, and the Catholic church maintains its temporal possessions to this day. More to the point, Dante seems to have been well aware that his world-historical predictions were unlikely to be fulfilled in history, particular after the death of Henry VII in 1313. It would seem then, per Bruno Nardi's suggestion, that if Dante wanted to appear a prophet, he must appear to be a false one.²³⁶ But this overstates the point: although a true prophet is by definition one whose oracles come to pass, the Christian interpretive tradition affords sufficient space for complex or eschatological fulfillments, as is the case with John's Apocalypse or the later chapters of Daniel. There is no reason to chide Dante for inconsistency or presumption if his apocalyptic "soon" has not yet arrived. The danger attendant upon this interpretation, however, is the same one remarked on above in connection with Davis' explanation, namely, that it seems to reduce Dante's poetic/prophetic activity to a pure statement of individual faith. The way for Dante to escape from this is to appropriate the rhetorical stance of Jeremiah.

²³⁶ Bruno Nardi and Marilyn Myatt (trans.), "Whether Dante Was a True Prophet," in *Critical Essays on Dante*, ed. Giuseppe Mazzotta (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991), 114.

To argue that the *Commedia* derives its approach to history and rhetoric from Jeremiah is in some sense to attempt to square the circle, to bring together the author's undeniable and enduring concern for the degeneracy of his city and the world with the fact that his poem's engagement with that world is wildly pessimistic. In order to incorporate both the Classical and Augustinian aspects of Dante's poetics, to distinguish between Ciceronian rhetoric and a disinterested theologization of history without entirely jettisoning either, let us turn to that supremely rhetorical episode: *Inferno* 26, the canto of Ulysses.

Ulysses' unique importance to the economy of the *Commedia* forces on us a weighty decision. We may either read him *in malo* as a figure of intellectual pride, or *in bono* as a tragic hero; in the balance when we choose is the whole political and religious project of the *Commedia*. For as goes Ulysses, so goes his rhetoric: we are treated to a *virtuoso* Ciceronian performance by the legendary *fandi factor* so that we may observe Dante's response with maximum clarity. Mazzotta has drawn attention to the virtual identity between Ulysses' oration to his men and certain passages of Brunetto Latini's *La rettorica*, particularly those concerned with the Orphic role of rhetoric in founding and sustaining cities.²³⁷ The rhetoric which, for Mazzotta, forms the principal matter of the canto is thus explicitly that which animated Brunetto's shade. Ulysses' rhetoric serves to recapitulate Brunetto's argument in the strongest possible terms, and hence to give Dante a final crack at dismantling it. William Stull and Robert Hollander make a similar point from a different angle, arguing that Dante's depiction of Ulysses derives chiefly from Lucan's Julius Caesar in the *De bello*

²³⁷ Mazzotta (1979), 77.

civili.²³⁸ If the Ulysses of *Inferno* 26 recalls Caesar as a leader whose hypocritical rhetoric caused the devastation of his *patria*, this can only buttress the suspect status of such oratory. Because Stull and Hollander are interacting with the debate over Ulysses' relative culpability, their analysis focuses on defining Dante's view of him through the lens of Caesar. But if, as they contend, canto 26 gives us a Caesarean Ulysses, it also suggests a Ulyssean Caesar, the embodiment of Universal Monarchy exposed, for all his grandeur, as a fraud. Dante's view of Caesar, as Hollander and Stull acknowledge, is characterized by a certain ambivalence, which they attribute to the poet's "strange blend of political allegiances," his divided loyalty between the ideals of the Roman Republic and that of the Roman Empire, of which he considered Julius Caesar the founder.²³⁹ Dante was, of course, a citizen of the Florentine Republic who appeared to embrace the Imperial cause after his exile, and it is quite true that his *Commedia* betrays an admixture of both republican and imperial sentiments. But the question of whether or not Dante believes the sphere of earthly government to be the proper field of operation for his poetry is logically prior to the question of what sort of earthly government he would prefer, and the former question is enough to account for his seemingly contradictory attitude. I propose that, here as elsewhere, Dante intends both to praise Caesar and to bury him: first by putting the ideology he embodies into the eloquent mouths of the champions of hell, then by gradually revealing that ideology as limited by, and ultimately incapable of dealing with, the endless fluctuations of the tragedy of Mars. We see this pattern at work with

²³⁸ Stull, William and Robert Hollander, "The Lucanian Source of Dante's Ulysses," *Studi danteschi* 63 (1991), 6.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

Ulysses. Initially, his *bolgia* proves to be seductive, recalling the trope of the pilgrim's narrowly averted plunge into hellfire from *Inferno* 15 and 16: "had I not seized an outcropping rock," the narrator says, describing his fascinated gaze toward the fraudulent spirits, "I would have fallen in without being pushed."²⁴⁰ In contrast to the earlier episodes, however, the impulse to identify with the damned comes across as less than voluntary, falling as against descending, and it is preceded by a declaration of rhetorical caution from the narrator.²⁴¹ In any case, when he actually comes to describe Ulysses, paired in death with his companion Diomedes, the pilgrim recurs to a deeply unflattering allusion:

chi è 'n quel foco che vien sì diviso
di sopra, che par surger de la pira
dov' Eteòcle col fratel fu miso?
(Inf. 26.52-54)

[who is in that flame so divided/ at the top, that it seems to spring forth from
the pyre/ where Eteocles was laid with his brother?]

Before we or the pilgrim even learn that the shade under discussion is Ulysses, the text has already tainted the civic implications of whatever he will have to say by connecting him to the princes of Thebes, that archetypal City of Man,²⁴² whose rival passions tore their land apart. So intense was their hatred that even the flames upon their communal pyre refused to mingle, whence comes the image for Dante's simile. The significance of drawing a connection between Ulysses and a pair of warmongering fratricides, as with the subtext of the *De bellum civili* or the *folle volo*

²⁴⁰ *Inferno* 26.44-45.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

²⁴² Mazzotta (1979), 98.

toward the Mountain of Grace, seems clear enough: his rhetoric, like Brunetto's, is futile.

Thus far, the canto seems little different than the other infernal episodes we have examined. But what sets *Inferno* 26 apart is that here, rather than simply deconstructing the Ciceronian poetics of his interlocutor, Dante attempts to stake out an alternative mode of discourse. For not only do the flames recall the tragedy of Thebes, but also the ascension of Elijah. Interestingly, the poet compares his own vantage point to that of Elijah's servant and successor Elisha,²⁴³ who is empowered to take up his master's prophetic role precisely on the grounds of having observed his rapture. It is not unrelated that Dante begins this canto with a prophetic diatribe about the destruction of Florence. If the colloquy with Ulysses represents the poet's rejection of Brunetto's charge to take up the cause of Florentine *romanitas*, then it may well also represent his assumption of a different mantle.

In Mazzotta's reading, to approach prophecy and rhetoric as antitheses is overly simplistic. As he puts it, "Dante seems more interested, at this juncture of the journey, to map the threatening contiguity between them, to question precisely the possibility of distinguishing between them,"²⁴⁴ contending that the canto dramatizes not simply the separation between prophecy and rhetoric, Elijah as the anti-Ulysses, but also their uncomfortable proximity, as discourses based in language and hence equally implicated in the devices of fraud.²⁴⁵ Were this the case, Elijah would seem a peculiar illustration: certainly he was a prophet, but he was nothing like a rhetorician.

²⁴³ *Inf.* 26.34-35, 2 Kings 2:9-15.

²⁴⁴ Mazzotta (1979), 92.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

His words are spare, when any are recorded – one thinks of the Apostle Paul who came to Corinth, “not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstrations of the Spirit and of power.”²⁴⁶ In Paul’s usage, the gap between prophecy and rhetoric is not, in the first instance, that all-too-porous border between truth and falsehood, as Mazzotta seems to suggest.²⁴⁷ Rather, it is the difference between *res* and *verbum*, and the singular ability of the prophet to match one to the other. This is what truly distinguishes Elijah from his infernal opposite in the *Commedia* – the ability of prophetic language summed up in the mystical status of the *Logos* not only to represent reality but to create it. As John writes in the famous introduction to his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word (Verbum)... and without him was made nothing that was made.”²⁴⁸ Unlike Ulysses, Elijah is famous not for speeches but for prayers which result in prodigies of judgment upon the apostate Northern Kingdom of Israel: first causing, then ending, a three-year drought,²⁴⁹ resurrecting a widow’s son,²⁵⁰ and twice summoning fire from heaven.²⁵¹ By comparison to Ulysses, whose ethical appeal to his shipmates is revealed as seduction by the failure of their quest,²⁵² the sheer efficacy of Elijah’s prophetic speech stands in stark relief. It is precisely this potency of Elijah’s words to which St. James refers when he writes in his epistle that “the continual prayer (*deprecatio adsidua*) of a just man availeth much.”²⁵³ The apostle’s point is that such power is not inherent, but available to all: Elijah “was a

²⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:4.

²⁴⁷ Mazzotta (1979), 92.

²⁴⁸ John 1:1, 3.

²⁴⁹ 1 Kings 17:1, recapitulated by the witnesses in Apocalypse 11:6.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, vv. 17-24.

²⁵¹ 1 Kings 18, 2 Kings 1; vaguely echoed in Apocalypse 11:5.

²⁵² Mazzotta (1979), 96.

²⁵³ James 5:16.

man passible like unto us (*similis nobis passibilis*),” he writes in the succeeding verse, a similarity, observed the Venerable Bede in his commentary to the passage,²⁵⁴ grounded in the mental and physical hardships Elijah endured – begging for bread,²⁵⁵ and fleeing to the desert.²⁵⁶ In commencing canto 26 with a denunciation of Florence, the exile Dante appears to take James at his word.

To argue that Dante has absorbed prophecy into his poetics and rejected Ulyssean rhetoric might seem to return us to the simple binary that Mazzotta warned against, with divinely efficacious speech as one term and fraudulent rhetoric as the other. But merely to note that Dante was the author of a long poem is to refute any notion that he saw himself as adopting Elijah’s genre, because strictly speaking that would have involved no writing at all. Elijah is useful as an obvious negation of Ulysses’ rhetorical significance: his richly messianic gesture of forcing back the Jordan’s tide and crossing on dry land²⁵⁷ moments before his assumption into Heaven is a successful journey toward eternity which finds in the pilgrim’s quest its recapitulation, in Ulysses’ *folle volo* its ironic double. However, as a model for Dante’s composition he is untenable. What Dante sought was not an ascetic negation of rhetoric and its political implications, a poetry of and for the wilderness, but a hybrid genre capable both of bearing witness to the tragedy of history, and of transcending it. Mention has already been made of the explicit ambivalence of the flames of the eighth *bolgia*: at once the symbol of political conflagration and prophetic inspiration, the two rhetorical polarities of canto 26. Yet the fiery tongues

²⁵⁴ *On the Seven Catholic Epistles*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cisterian Publications, 1985).

²⁵⁵ 1 Kings 17:8.

²⁵⁶ 1 Kings 19:1-4.

²⁵⁷ 2 Kings 2:8-11.

conceal not just sinners but a third potential model, the prophet Jeremiah, to whom God says: “Because you have spoken this word, behold I will make my words in thy mouth as fire, and this people as wood, and it shall devour them,”²⁵⁸ a declaration prompted, as it happens, by Yahweh’s anger against the false counselors and prophets of the Jews!²⁵⁹

Jeremiah’s contribution to Dante’s poetics might be described as the yoking of contrary extremes. None of Jeremiah’s colleagues among the Major Prophets hurled such boiling invective against the holy city of Jerusalem, and none of them were half so devastated by its overthrow. Doubtless much of this intensity derives from the peculiar circumstances of his biography: alone among his fellows, Jeremiah endured both persecution from his countrymen, and the trauma of the great Babylonian siege which he had so often foretold. This is another peculiarity of Jeremiah’s prophetic career, “the intimate connection between the prophet’s life and message” (l’intimo legame tra la vita e il messaggio del profeta), that Rachel Jacoff calls “the central factor of the book of Jeremiah” (il fattore centrale del libro di Geremia).²⁶⁰ It scarcely needs to be observed that this connection is also a (if not the) defining element of the *Commedia*’s composition: Dante’s personal pilgrimage is inseparable from his poetic mission, of which, indeed, it constitutes the major typological device. Like Dante an outcast among his people, Jeremiah displays a partisan’s rage against his city comingled with a theologian’s awareness of the divine purposes in history and the inability of human effort to accomplish them. His speech, as recorded in the book that

²⁵⁸ Jeremiah 5:14.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 11-13.

²⁶⁰ Jacoff (1988), 120.

bears his name, engages not the minds of his listeners – quite the reverse – but instead the very fabric of history itself, bringing about the allegorical drama of judgment and redemption which alone can heal the wounds of time. This is the great distinction between prophetic utterance and mere rhetoric: whereas the latter acts by moral suasion, Jeremiah’s declarations are understood to be endowed with supernatural potency. As the above citation from Jeremiah 5 suggests, his rhetoric was not merely predictive, but a flame of judgment designed to wreak destruction on his wicked nation. The conclusion is necessary, if unsettling: Jeremiah’s constant railing against the wickedness of Judah was not intended to evoke repentance, but only wrath. As Yahweh tells him, “And thou shalt speak to them all these words, but they will not hearken to thee: and thou shalt call them, but they will not answer thee.”²⁶¹ The time for repentance is past, and the apocalyptic depravity of Israel is ripe for vengeance.

Dante’s wrath seems little different: if we look at the great prophetic condemnations which resound throughout the *Commedia*, allowance for human improvement is infinitesimal. The diatribe which begins *Inferno* 26 is a good example:

Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se’ sì grande
 che per mare e per terra batti l’ali,
 e per lo ’nferno tuo nome si spande!
 [...]

Ma se presso al mattin del ver si sogna,
 tu sentirai, di qua da picciol tempo,
 di quel che Prato, non ch’altri, t’agogna.
 E se già fosse, non saria per tempo.
 Così foss’ ei, da che pur esser dee!
 ché più mi graverà, com’ più m’attempo.
 (*Inf.* 26.1-3, 7-12)

²⁶¹ Jeremiah 7:27.

[Rejoice, Florence, at being so great/ that you beat your wings over sea and land,/ and that your name is spread throughout all hell!/ .../ But if near morning one dreams the truth,/ you will feel before too long,/ that which Prato, among others, wishes on you./ And were this to have happened already, it would not be too soon./ Let it be so, since it must be!/ for it weighs heavier on me the more I age.]

Dante's prediction of the coming destruction of Florence mingles anger towards his native land with a curious resignation: "Let it be so, since it must be!" (v. 11) is hardly a slogan calculated to inspire social and religious transformation. Jacoff connects Jeremiah's "visione dell'implacabile ira divina" (vision of God's implacable anger) to the equally insatiable wrath of Dante.²⁶² No better example of the latter can be found than his repeated condemnations of Pope Boniface VIII, most notably as delivered by Peter himself in highest heaven,²⁶³ a discourse, Jacoff argues, which alludes at its climax to Jeremiah's Temple Sermon.²⁶⁴ Dante's hostility towards the Pontiff excludes any possibility of repentance—even in the Emyrean, the poem's attitude is limited to scornful assurances of judgment.²⁶⁵ This, Jacoff argues, presents a problem.

Anche nel Paradiso, invettive quali quelle di Pietro e Beatrice finiscono con la promessa dell'aiuto divino; ma, come in Geremia, i due momenti non sono mai legati da un rapporto di causalità. L'aporia dell'invito al pentimento e la promessa dell'aiuto divino rendono davvero problematica la denuncia del profeta e ci sprofondano nell'incertezza dell'esito. (Jacoff [1988], 120)

[Even in *Paradiso*, invectives like those of Peter and Beatrice finish with the assurance of divine aid; but, as in Jeremiah, the two moments are never joined by a causal relationship. The *aporia* between the invitation to repentance and the promise of divine aid render the prophet's denunciation truly problematic, and throws us into uncertainty concerning its effect.]

²⁶² Jacoff (1988), 120.

²⁶³ *Paradiso* 27.19-66.

²⁶⁴ Jeremiah 7, Jacoff (1988), 114-116.

²⁶⁵ *Paradiso* 30.148, e.g.

The problem Jacoff raises is that of the apparent rhetorical futility which characterizes both The Book of Jeremiah and the *Commedia*: both works indict the people of their age with terrible sins, yet both look forward to an idyllic future, assured by God's good plan in history. If the prophetic word cannot inspire the repentance in its audience necessary to avert catastrophe, what is its purpose? The question is apt indeed, but the answer she supplies (that anger is better than indifference²⁶⁶) is only partial. For Dante is not merely angry about history. Far from it: as Beatrice states before the celestial examiners, the pilgrim and soon-to-be poet outstrips all living Christians in the virtue of hope.²⁶⁷

But if Jeremiah supplies a model for Dante's curious admixture of Boethian contempt and partisan vitriol, he also gives us a way of explaining how this most stern poet could possibly describe himself as optimistic. Paradoxically, it is found in the prophet's book of Lamentations. As Roland Martinez has pointed out, despite the plaintive mode established by the title, Jeremiah's elegies are characterized by "the passage from sorrow to consolation."²⁶⁸ Indeed, in liturgy and the biblical commentary tradition Lamentations was typically read as a precursor to the Song of Songs. Not only does apostasy lead to destruction, and hence mourning, but destruction implies the renewal of God's people and their subsequent songs of rejoicing. As Isaiah put it,

Be comforted [consolamini], be comforted, my people, saith your God. Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, and call to her: for her evil [malitia eius] is come to an end, her iniquity is forgiven: she hath received of the hand of the Lord

²⁶⁶ Jacoff (1988), 121.

²⁶⁷ *Par.* 25.52-53.

²⁶⁸ Roland Martinez, "Lament and Lamentations in 'Purgatorio' and the Case of Dante's Statius," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 115 (1997): 50.

double for all her sins [suscepit de manu Domini duplicita pro omnibus peccatis suis]. (Is. 40:1-2)

The eruption of God's vengeance is thus, paradoxically, a source of comfort and an assurance of his love amounting to a kind of promise, for only when evil has been purged can blessings come. Indeed, Lamentations already contains within itself not merely tears of exile but the promise of return: "Thy iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Sion, he will no more carry thee away into captivity."²⁶⁹ The judgment is terrible indeed, but it is necessary to secure the status of God's people.

The outlines of this hope may be seen more clearly if we return to the final episode in the Cacciaguida triptych.²⁷⁰ *Paradiso* 17, widely recognized as crucial to Dante's strategy of assigning divine legitimacy to his poem, does so through a curious prophecy, the significance of which has been just as widely overlooked. The canto opens with Cacciaguida's prophetic gloss of the personal tragedy his soon-to-be-exiled descendant will endure, then turns to describe the "first refuge" he will encounter, at the court of Cangrande della Scala (*Par.* 17.70-72). Several tercets of the kind of praise one might expect from a grateful wanderer toward his noble patron follow: the Lord of Verona is a military and political leader whose noble deeds bear out his Martial imprint (*Par.* 17.76-78). But Cangrande's chief distinction is not valor or wisdom but magnificence,²⁷¹ an epithet he shares with only Beatrice (*Par.* 31.88) and the Virgin (33.20). In Aristotelian terms, magnificence signals generosity,²⁷² the want of avarice, underscoring the connection between Cangrande and the *veltro* prophecy of

²⁶⁹ Lamentations 4:22.

²⁷⁰ *Il Tritico di Cacciaguida: Lectura Dantis Scaligeri, 2008-2009*, ed. Ennio Sandal (Rome: Editrice Antenore, 2011).

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17.85.

²⁷² On this point, see the commentary of Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi to *Paradiso* 17.

Inferno 1; more importantly, it marks Cangrande as an anti-Orphic ruler who despite his station assigns worldly goods their appropriate value. To highlight this aspect of Cangrande's character both associates him with the poet he was to sponsor (we recall Dante pilgrim's confession of his faults in this regard,²⁷³ and his continued attention to the matter in canto 16 of *Paradiso*), and enables him to fulfill his mission as a just Christian ruler. But what is that mission? Cacciaguida supplies a very obscure gloss:

“per lui fia trasmutata molta gente,
cambiando condizion ricchi e mendici
e portera'ne scritto ne la mente
di lui, e nol dirai”; e disse cose
incredibili a quei che fier presente.

(*Par.* 17.89-93)

[by him many shall be altered/ rich men trading places with the beggars/ and you shall bear this written in your mind/ of him, and not tell of it”; and he related things/ incredible to those who will be present at them.]

The deliberate ambiguity of this prophecy about Cangrande is frequently explained by Dante's not really knowing the future, and hence resorting to a kind of catch-all augury to elevate his patron in generic terms without potentially embarrassing himself. Notwithstanding its *prima facie* plausibility and consequent popularity among commentators,²⁷⁴ this interpretation is less than satisfactory. Dante has not been shy about making fairly specific world-historical predictions throughout the poem, to the point where the most casual of readers can hardly fail to notice that, whether under color of the *veltro*,²⁷⁵ the *DXV*,²⁷⁶ or simply Providence,²⁷⁷ the poet appears quite sure

²⁷³ *Purg.* 31.34-36.

²⁷⁴ To cite three examples of many, see the commentaries of Cristoforo Landino, Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, and Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi on this passage.

²⁷⁵ *Inf.* 1.109-111.

²⁷⁶ *Purg.* 33.40-45.

²⁷⁷ *Par.* 27.61-63.

that the avarice that so upsets the world and corrupts the church will be eliminated in short order. Dante more than once stakes his poem's credibility on an eschatological renovation of human nature and society; it is difficult to conceive what he could possibly have forecast for Cangrande that would seem shocking next to the New Heavens and the New Earth. Nor was Dante under any necessity to use this particular instrument—an inexpressible prophecy of some unspecified future greatness—to praise his friend and patron; there were, after all, other ways. So why go to the trouble? If anything, given the audacity and relative specificity of the other passages, suppressing this particular prophecy rather emphasizes its significance. Far from being a kind of throwaway compliment (or, as Robert Hollander has suggested in his commentary, a rather desperate statement of Dante's irrational yet boundless faith in the defunct imperial cause) Cangrande's destiny seems deeply implicated in the apocalyptic revolutions with which the *Commedia* seems to have so much to do.

I suggest the key lies in the biblical intertext connecting the suppressed Cangrande prophecy of *Paradiso* 17 to the Apocalypse of John, chapter 10. Here the apostle,²⁷⁸ whose ostensible function in his great vision is that of reporter, is explicitly forbidden from relaying the message of the seven thunders. “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and write it not,” the angel orders (Apocalypse 10:4). Invoking the trope of the silenced oracle might conceivably lend a veneer of authenticity to Dante's narrative. Yet there remains, I think, a further possible connection, deriving from the surrounding biblical context. The tenth and eleventh chapters of Apocalypse

²⁷⁸ Whereas mainstream biblical scholarship tends to doubt the attribution of Apocalypse to the author of the Gospel, the traditional view seems more apposite in a discussion of Dante's use of the sacred text.

occupy a curious pause between the first six and the seventh of the angelic trumpeters, heralds, respectively, of devastating calamities on one hand—war, famine, pestilence²⁷⁹—and of the birth of the Christ child on the other.²⁸⁰ In the interstice, John is re-commissioned,²⁸¹ notably, by being made to eat a scroll which tastes bitter but turns sweet upon digestion,²⁸² an image which Cacciaguida will invert in describing the future reception of Dante’s divinely authorized words.²⁸³ The other event, which occupies most of John’s eleventh chapter, is the appearance and activity of the two witnesses, powerful servants of Jehovah who consume their enemies by pouring fire from their mouths.²⁸⁴ The parallel between this apocalyptic display of rhetorical potency and the capacities of both Elijah and Jeremiah underscored above is, I trust, sufficiently plain. John’s two witnesses will speak and work their marvels for a defined span of time until their deaths at the hands of Sodom—a metaphorical designation, John reminds us, for first-century Jerusalem, which he qualifies as the place of Christ’s crucifixion.²⁸⁵ This is a curious moment in John’s narrative: despite tremendous power and divine protection, the very ministers of God are shown to fall; upon their deaths the final trumpet sounds to announce the triumphant return of Christ: “The kingdom of this world [regnum huius mundi] is become our Lord’s and his Christ’s” (11:15). John’s eschaton is obtrusively political in this section, introduced at the end of Apocalypse 10 by the angel’s statement that the apostle “must prophesy

²⁷⁹ Apoc., 8.6-9.20.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 12.1-6.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 10.5-11.

²⁸² Ibid., 10.10.

²⁸³ *Par.* 17.130-32.

²⁸⁴ Apoc. 11.5.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 11.8.

again to many peoples and nations and tongues and kings” (10:11). In taking up his divine office as judge and king, Jesus, and he alone, brings peace.

The significance of this biblical source is to inscribe the apparent imperialist sentiment of the Cangrande prophecy within a narrative of warning and calamity, death and renewal. Hollander wonders, and he is not alone in this, what Dante could possibly have expected Cangrande to have accomplished for the imperial cause: for all his reputed martial prowess, the Imperial Vicar and Lord of Verona was hardly in a position to deprive the Pope of his benefices, to say nothing of chasing cupidity from Europe.²⁸⁶ These are messianic prerogatives, which can only be carried out in full by the risen Christ, but the subtle link between *Paradiso* and Apocalypse suggests instead that we read Cangrande as an instance of theological allegory, a historical ruler who in his freedom from cupidity presents us with a type of Christ, the ultimate example of liberality and kingship. In sum, Cangrande gives us martiality *in bono*, a Davidic warrior-prince who nevertheless does not forget that, as Cacciaguida says explicitly, “le vostre cose tutte hanno lor morte” (all human things are mortal, *Par.* 16.79). The tragedy of Florence, her decline and death, gives us the other side of Mars—the tragic virtue inscribed by mutability. By connecting the perfection of Florentine *romanitas* and virtue with civic dissolution, Cacciaguida’s discourse at once recalls and discredits Brunetto’s conceit about the sustaining capabilities of oratory. Even supreme levels of civic virtue cannot redeem the city, whether Florence, or Rome, from its inevitable fate. The tragedy of Mars forecloses not merely the rhetorical

²⁸⁶ Which is why Bosco and Reggio dismiss the contention that Cangrande is meant to fulfill the *veltro* prophecy of *Inferno* 1.109-111.

redemption of Florence, but of the world at large, and forces Dante poet to locate his hope elsewhere.

What then? If Dante despairs of rhetoric, what remains of his mission to write the *Commedia* “on behalf of the wicked world”? Granting his rejection of Ciceronian poetics, must we league him with the radical asceticism of the Spiritual Franciscans?²⁸⁷ Yet this is incredible: Dante’s passion for justice on the earth is far too palpable to be denied: in his conception, human wickedness makes even the silent Heaven of Contemplation thunder with opprobrium.²⁸⁸ Fortunately, the apocalyptic intertext suggests a means by which the poet can admit the futility of politics without foregoing worldly engagement. The two witnesses in John’s Apocalypse, we note, convince no one: like the “two just men” of *Inferno* 6 (or Jeremiah, or Elijah), their counsel to the nations is not heeded, at least not insofar as we are told. But that seems tangential to their purpose, for instead of moral suasion, the proper business of the Ciceronian orator, they speak prodigies of judgment and consume their enemies, identified as Sodomites and Egyptians, with fire and plague.²⁸⁹ What might appear to be a re-enactment of divine vengeance, however, now encounters an unexpected check. The Beast from the abyss destroys them both, and “their bodies... lie in the streets of the great city, which is called spiritually, Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord also was crucified.”²⁹⁰ The episode neatly recalls, and inverts, the outpourings of divine wrath in both Sodom and Egypt: in both those cases, two witnesses ended

²⁸⁷ A possibility about which Nicolò Mineo offers some useful considerations, although he rejects it on quite other grounds than those proposed here. *Dante: un sogno di armonia terrena* (Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 2005), 220.

²⁸⁸ *Par.* 21.139-42.

²⁸⁹ *Apoc.* 11.5-6.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.7-10.

with power (angels in the former case, Moses and Aaron in the latter) are sent against an evil nation, which rejects their warning and suffers judgment in return.²⁹¹ Here, however, evil is seen to prevail; for all their power, the testimony of the witnesses seems belied in the event.

If Dante's evocation of the text of Apocalypse here in *Paradiso* 17 suggests, as I believe it does, a vital link between the message his pilgrim is commissioned to deliver and the prophetic activity of these two apocalyptic witnesses, we might easily find ourselves interpreting this as the sorrow of an exile who turns from the treachery of history to seek solace in the mysteries of a transcendent plan.²⁹² Certainly his poetic speech in the *Commedia* may be seen as an attempt at "paying out" the wicked for their crimes, a gesture that in its apparent retreat to poetic fiction conspicuously fails. Yet this would be to miss the ending of the story. John's two witnesses, recalled to life, are drawn up into heaven, whence comes the risen Christ in judgment, to wreak what they could merely prophesy, and thereby justify their words. If their apparent failure, the contumacy of wicked nations in the face of truth, is also Dante's, then their eventual success he means to share as well. In writing the *Commedia*, then, Dante hopes not to save the world, nor to flee it, but to bring about its ruin in apocalyptic fire. For only in the crisis of destruction, the summoning of divine judgment, can history, so ill begun, be rectified.

Read in this light, Dante's denunciations become an affirmation of God's faithfulness: if Florence must "receive double for all her sins," it is only that she may be restored and comforted. It is the model of Christ, whose incarnation, suffering and

²⁹¹ The episodes are found in Genesis 20 and Exodus 4-12.

²⁹² Chiavacci Leonardi, 160-61.

death was a necessary step to better things. “Ought not Christ to have suffered these things,” Jesus inquired on the road to Emmaeus, “and so enter into his glory?”²⁹³ Eschatological tranquility requires the eradication of the wicked, and it falls to prophecy to speed things on their way. This is the nature of Dante’s engagement with the world. He helps “il mondo che mal vive” precisely by his call for God to judge it, for only thus can earth be cured of her depravity. It is this approach, the jeremiad, that enables Dante to love the world and yet transcend it, to remain grounded in history without despair. Only by transforming the vices of his time into a *felix culpa* could what he wrote become a Comedy.

²⁹³ Luke 24:26.

CHAPTER 3
THE WORLD IN THE DOCK:
FROM *CONTEMPTUS MUNDI* TO PROPHETIC ENGAGEMENT

We left Petrarch, back at the end of chapter one, in a bit of difficulty regarding his poetics. For despite the formal alignment of the *Bucolicum Carmen* with the expected classical and humanist conceptions of poetic teleology – virtuous political action – the *Carmen*'s underlying narrative deconstructs this claim, and ultimately exposes it as a self-aggrandizing fiction. Eloquence cannot redeem the world, and it is difficult to imagine what, in Petrarch's mind, might take its place. In any event, what is clear is that in the decade or so following the publication of the *Carmen*, Petrarch returned more than once to his anti-rhetorical theme. Among the subversive elements of the *Carmen*, it will be recalled, is the extreme opacity Petrarch credited to its allegories. Rather than illuminating truth, the better to lead their audience to virtue, Petrarch's figures instead are intended to conceal it.²⁹⁴ This ambivalent approach to truth recurs in two other compositions of this period, the dialogue entitled *De secreto conflictu curarum mearum* (popularly and henceforth "the *Secretum*"), and the epistolary collection known as the *Liber Sine Nomine*. Despite their differences in genre and occasion, which typically leads them to be considered in isolation, the three works share a fundamental concern with the failure of eloquence. The *Carmen*, as has

²⁹⁴ Of course, as Petrarch himself had argued in the *Contra Medicum* and elsewhere, poetic figures were traditionally designed to be understood only by those who were worthy, the labor of interpretation augmenting the pleasure of understanding. What distinguishes the *Carmen* is that Petrarch seems to have decided that virtually no one in his day was so deserving, a level of obscurity that seems to undermine any possible salutary effects – no one can be made virtuous by incomprehensible communication.

been seen in the foregoing discussion of the letter to Gherardo (*Fam. X.4*), begins with a defense of classical poetics, but ends by admitting that the tragedy of history is beyond any help that rhetoric can offer. The *Secretum* and the *Liber Sine Nomine* take the opposite approach: both preface their rhetorical performances with the promise that what we are about to read is not, in fact, intended for ordinary public consumption. But as will be seen, despite such ostentatious anti-rhetorical gestures – we are a long way from the self-aggrandizing pretensions of the *Collatio*²⁹⁵ – the two prose works ultimately suggest a way forward for Petrarch’s poetry. For that is finally the question: if Petrarch concedes that poetry, at least in the classical context so dear to humanism, is fraudulent, how can he remain a poet? He must find an alternative to Cicero.

Approaching the *Secretum* with the *Carmen* in mind – Petrarch completed the initial draft of the dialogue in 1347, being more than half-way finished with the other work – we appear to be on familiar terrain. Indeed, far from qualifying the *Carmen*’s anti-Ciceronian polemic, the *Secretum*²⁹⁶ seems to push it even further along, attacking not merely classical poetics, as articulated by Franciscus, but the validity of any affection toward the world whatsoever. This is perhaps most evident in the change of genre. Although bucolic lacks the overt nationalism of epic, its rhetoric remains open to inscription within a Ciceronian framework through allegory, a possibility which, as we have seen, the *Carmen* by turns endorses and, ultimately, resists. The *Secretum*, however, discards the classical tradition wholesale by exchanging Virgil’s genre for

²⁹⁵ Dennis Looney, “The Beginnings of Humanistic Oratory: Petrarch’s *Coronation Oration*,” in *Petrarch: A Guide to the Complete Works*, eds. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 134.

²⁹⁶ Or at least the apparently authoritative voice of Augustinus therein.

that of Augustine, the public for the private, the political for the spiritual. The shift is made explicit in the Preface: practically the first words out of Veritas' mouth are an admonition to turn away from earth and toward eternity. This thematic consistency between the *Carmen* and the dialogue is supplemented by other points of contact. When we encounter Franciscus, he is "considering the way in which [he] entered this life, and the way in which [he] was to leave it."²⁹⁷ Parthenias, his fellow Petrarchan avatar in the first eclogue, opens his complaint in a similar vein: "Unhappy me! Who would deny that Fate has dealt with brothers differently? One womb bore us, but there is no hope of an equal grave!"²⁹⁸ We remarked in chapter one on the Augustinian character of Monicus' contribution to the "Parthenias" debate. As the parallel debate resumes in the *Secretum*, who better to hold up the monastic end than St. Augustine himself? The *Carmen* documents and critiques Silvius' (and Petrarch's) desire to assume the mantle of Orpheus, the poet-*vates* who raised the walls of Athens with his lyre, underscoring the impotence of civic poetry by deconstructing its foundation myth. Not by coincidence do we encounter, in the *Secretum*'s Preface, the like accomplishment of Amphion with Thebes. The allusion comes from the mouth of Veritas herself, who refers to a (now lost) *ekphrasis* in a draft of *Africa* devoted to her legendary mountain habitation:

Illa ego sum – inquit – quam tu in Africa nostra curiosa quadam elegancia
descripsisti; cui, non segnius quam Amphyon ille dirceus, in extremo quidem

²⁹⁷ "Cogitanti qualiter in hanc vitam intrassem, qualiter ve forem egressurus," Preface, 22. References to Enrico Carrara's text of the *Secretum* (in *Francesco Petrarca: Prose*, ed. Guido Martellotti [Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1955]) are by book and page number; translations are mine unless noted otherwise, although I have made use of Carrara's Italian version at certain points.

²⁹⁸ "Infelix! Quis fata neget diversa gemellis?/ Una fuit genitrix; at spes non una sepulcri!" , "Parthenias" 5. References to Petrarch's *Bucolicum Carmen* taken from Antonio Avena (ed.), *Il Bucolicum Carmen: e i suoi commenti inediti* (Padua: Società cooperativa tipografica, 1906). Translations into English mine.

occidentis summoque Atlantis vertice habitationem clarissimam atque
pulcherrimam mirabili artificio ac poeticis, ut proprie dicam, manibus erexisti.
(Preface, 22)

[“I am the one,” she said, “whom you described in our Africa with particular eloquence, and for whom, not unlike Amphion the Dircean, you raised up with wondrous artifice in the far western heights of Atlantis a most beautiful and splendid dwelling by the hands, so to speak, of poetry.]

According to Veritas, Franciscus has fulfilled Silvius’ aspirations: like the Theban king, his song can conjure stones into a palace, an allegorical commonplace for the political power of eloquence. But Franciscus’ poetic skill entails not just authority, but elevated access to truth. Veritas continues:

Age itaque, iam securus ausculta, neve illius presentem faciem perhorrescas,
quam pridem tibi sat familiariter cognitam arguta circumlocutione testatus es.
(ibid.)

[“So then, listen attentively, and do not shudder before the face of her whom your limpid speech attests was once your close familiar.”]

Veritas’ conclusion brings into play the old debate between theology and poetry, wherein the latter discourse was alleged (among other things) to consist primarily of falsehood; following the defense in Petrarch’s letter to Gherardo (*Fam.* 10.4), her answer appears to elide the differences between the two. There, theology was but the poetry of God; here, poetry itself grounds Franciscus’ claim to knowledge of the truth. Yet, as happened in the letter, this accommodation cannot hold; the claim, we see immediately, is false. Immediately after Veritas falls silent, Franciscus will turn toward her and find he cannot bear the sight. “Then, keen on looking at her, I gazed her way, but behold, the ethereal light could not be pierced by human strength.”²⁹⁹

The motivation that led Petrarch to establish a link between Franciscus and the

²⁹⁹ “Itaque videndi avidus respicio, et ecce lumen ethereum acies humana non pertulit,” Preface, 24.

founder of the archetypal City of Man now comes into clearer focus: all the poet's skill cannot prevent his alienation from the Truth. Such a sharp distinction between poetry and truth can only serve to undermine the myth of political stability essential to Ciceronian poetics. True virtue cannot be based on fraud, nor transcendence on what cannot endure. If human life is irrevocably bounded by the grim reality of death, human poetry cannot possibly make good on its promise to grant immortality, whether individually or to a community, and it is only his own blindness that divides Franciscus from the truth. But having shown us the sickness, Veritas supplies its cure, conversing with Franciscus (about what we are not told) in such a way that he reports,

Duplex hinc michi bonum provenisse cognovi: nam, et aliquantulum doctior factus sum, aliquantoque ex ipsa conversatione securior spectare coram posse cepi vultum illum, qui nimio primum me splendore terruerat.

(bk. 1, p. 24)

[I have gained two advantages therefrom: both that I am made a little wiser, and that, somewhat steadied by that conversation, I began to be able to inspect that face which before had terrified me with its splendor.]

Before the dialogue has even properly begun, then, Franciscus' conversion has already taken place – like the beggar in the gospel, he was blind yet now he sees.³⁰⁰

Augustinus' intervention, and all the verbal swordplay of the dialogue's three books

takes place only in the aftermath of this remarkable occurrence. Franciscus'

conversion tends to complicate his relationship with Augustinus: paradoxically, the

presence of Veritas legitimizes not only the ascetic arguments of Augustinus (by

bringing him in expressly to speak on her behalf, 24), but also the contrary position of

Franciscus. It is a curious equivocation on Petrarch's part, and doubtless intentional –

³⁰⁰ John 9:25. English citations of the Bible from the Douay-Rheims version, ed. Richard Challoner (New York: Douay Bible House, 1941); those in Latin from *Biblia Sacra: iuxta Vulgata versionem*, ed. Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 5th edition, ed. Roger Gryson.

as Franciscus mentions upon seeing him, the shade of the Bishop of Hippo needs no introduction (24). Augustine's authority was already a given, as Petrarch was perfectly well aware, so the net effect of Veritas' dual endorsement in the Preface is not, as might appear, to supplement it, but rather to take it down a peg by putting the two on equal footing. For when Franciscus rejects the counsel of his examiner, we recall that he does so *coram veritate*, staring in the face of Truth.

The ambivalence suggested by the epistemological equality of the two disputants is underscored by the dialogue's complex approach to Christian dogma. Most scholarly debate over the *Secretum* has focused on the alleged Stoicism of Augustinus, with some noting his apparent disregard for grace, in comparison with his historical namesake, and others contending that his views simply reflect Petrarch's familiarity with St. Augustine's early treatises, particularly the *De vera religione* and the *Soliloquies*.³⁰¹ But even conceding that Augustinus' ethics are amenable to being harmonized with those of the Bishop of Hippo, there remains a far more basic rift between the two. The fundamental question of the *Secretum*, as expressed by Veritas in the Preface, concerns the value of the material world, and it is precisely on this point that Augustinus reveals himself to be at variance with both his namesake and

³⁰¹ There is great variety on this point. Charles Trinkaus finds Augustinus to be a Stoic-Christian hybrid, but interprets it as reflecting Petrarch's eclecticism (*In Our Image and Likeness* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970], vol. 1, p. 16), whereas Ronald Witt, agreeing on the first point, sees it rather as illustrative of Petrarch's desperate oscillations between Christianity and Classicism (*In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* [Leiden: Brill, 2000], 251). More recently, Gur Zak has suggested that the contamination reflects Petrarch's evolving view of the good life (*Petrarchan Humanism and the Care of the Self* [New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 92). On the other side, readers like Francisco Rico ("Volontà e grazia nel *Secretum*," *Petrarca e Agostino*, eds. Roberto Cardini and Donatella Coppini [Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2004], 39-50) and Alexander Lee (*Petrarch and Augustine: Classical Scholarship, Christian Theology, and the Origins of the Renaissance in Italy* [Boston: Brill, 2012], esp. ch. 2) have argued, persuasively in my view, that the ethical tensions between Augustinus and, say, the Augustine of the *Confessions*, are equally apparent in the Saint's own works. The difficulty in the *Secretum*, as will shortly appear, is rather over anti-materialism.

Christian orthodoxy. He arrives on the scene, it will be remembered, accusing Franciscus of willing his own misery, which counterintuitive proposition his patient is eventually persuaded to grant (1, 38). When Franciscus inquires in return why then he does not appear able to make himself virtuous, and therefore happy, by an effort of his mind and will, Augustinus supplies the following diagnosis:

Animam quidem tuam, sicut celitus bene institutam esse non negaverim, sic ex contagio corporis huius, ubi circumsepta est, multum a primeva nobilitate sua degenerasse ne dubites; nec degenerasse duntaxat, sed longo iam tractu temporis obtorpuisse, factam velut proprie originis ac superni Conditoris immemorem. Nempe passiones ex corporea commistione subortas oblivionemque nature melioris, divinitus videtur attigisse Virgilius, ubi ait:

Igneus est illis vigor et celestis origo
seminibus, quantum non noxia corpora tardant
terrenique hebetant artus, moribundaque membra.
Hinc metuunt cupiuntque dolent gaudentque, neque auras
respiciunt, clause tenebris et carcere ceco. (bk. 1, p. 64)

[Just as your soul was created good in heaven, which I do not deny, so you should not doubt that, from the contagion of this body which clothes it, it has greatly degenerated. And it has not merely degenerated, but for a long time been dull, its true origin and its divine Creator forgotten. It seems that Virgil was touched by divine influence when he said that human passions, and our forgetfulness of our better nature, stem from the soul's connection to a body:

There is fiery power in those celestial/ seeds, inasmuch as they are not impeded by harmful bodies/ and dulled by earthy frames and dying members./ From this they dread and lust and grieve and revel, nor do they regard the heavens,/ shut within the gloom of their dark prison.]

The fundamental trouble with Franciscus, Augustinus assures him, is that primeval nobility of his soul has been tarnished by contact with his body. To propose that an otherwise virtuous soul becomes sinful simply as a result of being placed in a body (*sic ex contagio corporis huius... degenerasse*), as Augustinus does, amounts to an attack on physicality as such, a dualist account of matter and spirit which the scandal

of Christ's incarnation and resurrection renders utterly untenable. To put such an assertion into the mouth of a Doctor of the Church, particularly St. Augustine, suggests either astonishing naïveté on Petrarch's part, or else polemical intent. Leave aside that he has against all odds transformed the Bishop of Hippo into a Manichaean; the irony goes deeper still. As Carol Quillen has noted, Augustinus' appeal to Virgil patently recalls a similar passage in the *De civitate Dei*, in which the same Virgilian citation also features prominently.³⁰² But unlike the endorsement it receives in the *Secretum*, the *De civitate* rejects Virgil's perspective unequivocally. Although St. Augustine accepts the Mantuan as an accurate exponent of Platonic doctrine, he continues "yet our faith holds otherwise... corruptible flesh does not make the soul sinful, but the sinful soul makes the flesh corruptible."³⁰³ It is impossible to imagine a more exact traduction of the Saint's remarks than that of Augustinus: precisely where the historical Augustine was concerned to disassociate himself from Platonic dualism, Petrarch's version embraces it wholeheartedly. Here is a curious thing. We observed in chapter one that Petrarch used arguments from the *De civitate* to enable Monicus to confound the Orphic pretensions of his wandering brother – which is to say, to undermine the pagan myth of the Eternal City. Now, however, he makes Augustinus take the same work one step further, attacking physical reality as such, and in so doing directly contravenes Saint Augustine's point of view. The very question which, as we have seen, has occupied Petrarch since the *Carmen* – the proper

³⁰² Carol Quillen, *Re-reading the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 193-94.

³⁰³ "Tamen aliter se habet fides nostra... nec caro corruptibilis animam peccatricem, sed anima peccatrix fecit esse corruptibilem carnem." Aurelius Augustinus, *La città di Dio: Testo latino dell'edizione Maurina confrontato con il corpus christianorum*, eds. D. Gentili and A. Trapè (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1988), vol. 2, bk. 14, para. 3. Translation mine.

valuation of the material world – also undergirds the whole *Secretum* project, and it is here that Augustinus espouses not Christianity but a kind of Platonism. Saint Augustine’s affinity for Plato is no secret. But neither are his reservations, and Petrarch’s version of the Saint erases all distinction between bishop and philosopher. What is more, the very neatness of the distortion, the ostentatious drawing of the reader’s gaze toward his model at just the moment where he deviates from it, argues that it was a deliberate gesture on Petrarch’s part. His Augustinus can be chalked up neither to carelessness nor to inattention. What remains is caricature – a strawman construct of Augustinianism so radical that the poet can ignore his interlocutor’s counsel with faith intact. There is a certain irony in Petrarch turning the greatest Christian *auctor* of the Middle Ages into a most un-Augustinian heretic. In so doing he radically revises our expectations of what his dialogue is meant to accomplish. For not only is it unclear whether Franciscus will be saved from his misery, but even the soteriological status of Augustinus is in doubt. Never mind now *whether* Franciscus will heed the counsel of his putative rescuer, the typical source of dramatic tension in penitential narratives. The issue now is, *should* he?

The real question, of course, is not so much whether Augustinus is orthodox, but how he is meant to function in the rhetorical economy of the *Secretum*. Most readers concede that the dialogue’s ending is at least somewhat ambiguous, although there is considerably less agreement as to why.³⁰⁴ Franciscus makes certain

³⁰⁴ Witt and Trinkaus take the ambiguity in the text as a consequence of Petrarch’s own ambivalence (see above, n. 4). Victoria Kahn (“The Figure of the Reader in Petrarch’s *Secretum*,” PMLA 100.2 [1985]: 154-166) and Carol Quillen, by contrast, see the tension between poet and saint as a self-authorizing strategy by which Petrarch declares his independence from Augustinian modes of reading. On the other hand, Rico and Lee, together with David Marsh (“The Burning Question: Crisis and

concessions, but refuses others, most notably when he is asked to surrender his pursuit of glory, under which is comprehended chiefly his identity as a poet. The *Secretum* tends to take away with one hand what it has given with the other: if Augustinus calls poets to witness the veracity of his arguments, he does so in order to do away with poetry; if Franciscus' poetic claim to authority is overturned in the Preface, he ends the dialogue without renouncing it. Similarly, if Augustinus labors in book one to convince his patient that his misery persists only because he consents to it, his final words are strangely fatalistic:

Aug: In antiquam litem relabimur, voluntatem impotentiam vocas. Sed sic eat, quando aliter esse non potest, supplexque Deum oro ut euntem comitetur, gressusque licet vagos, in tutum iubeat pervenire. (bk. 3, p. 214)

[Aug: We return to our old dispute: you think your will is impotent. Let it be so, since it cannot be otherwise, and I will pray to God that he will attend your way, and draw your steps, even those that err, to safety.]

Augustinus admits that the opening disagreement, which occupied much of Book One and provided the basis for the remainder of the discussion, remains: Franciscus continues to maintain, against his teacher's counsel, that he is unable simply to will himself virtuous or happy. The conversation has come full circle with negligible effect. Franciscus, for his part, concludes by hoping that Augustinus' prayer will not be countermanded by the contrary operations of *fortuna*, a response that calls into question the efficacy of Providence even as it alludes to the similar demurrals of Silvius toward a similar invitation in the *Carmen*.

Cosmology in the *Secret* [*Secretum*]," in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, eds. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 211-219) tend to see the conflict as being essentially resolved in Augustinus' favor, while Giuseppe Mazzotta ("Petrarch's Dialogue with Dante," in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, eds. Zygmunt Baranski and Theodore Cachey, Jr. [Notre Dame: University of Notre Press, 2009], 77-94) reads it as Petrarch's incomplete rejection of the authority of the past, specifically Dante's.

The parallels between “Parthenias” and the *Secretum* are particularly strong here: Franciscus, like the morbid shepherd in the poem, is a wanderer and poet who responds to invitations toward silence and safety with a present refusal and an appeal to Fate for the future. What differentiates the two is the degree of asceticism to which their Augustinian interlocutor invites them. Monicus, on the one hand, is content to demonstrate the superiority of David over the pagan *auctores*, whereas Augustinus’ radical dualism would seem to exclude even the political laments and imprecations with which the psalmist’s poems are replete. The context of the *Bucolicum carmen* brings the significance of this reversal into clearer focus, for it is but another aspect of the structural similarity between the two works. Where the *Carmen* employed a pagan genre to critique pagan rhetoric and its attendant political claims, the dialogue uses the Christian genre of renunciation and repentance to dramatize the author’s refusal to forsake the world entirely. The end of the *Carmen*, as suggested in chapter one, leaves Petrarch in a kind of suspension: fatally disillusioned with the world, yet outside the refuge of the cloister. In setting the *Secretum* as a counterpoint, Petrarch shifts the ground without resolving the basic conflict: now on the defensive, Franciscus must contend over whether the world retains any value whatsoever. And while Augustinus’ answer is decisively in the negative, his *contemptus mundi* is so extreme as to pass beyond the bounds of orthodoxy and open a space for Franciscus (and Petrarch) to reject it, just as he did the Orphic triumphalism of the *Carmen*. But if Petrarch will have neither flesh nor spirit individually, it remains to see if he will be able to unite the two in a productive fashion. And for this we must turn to the *Liber sine nomine*.

Largely finished by 1359, six years after the completion of the final version of the dialogue, the *Sine nomine* collection seems at first glance a far more political work. That the author of these letters felt strongly about the ruin of Italy or the depravity of the Church can hardly be denied. But even if he admits the legitimacy of emotional engagement, he still gives little quarter to Ciceronian rhetoric: his purpose is not exhortation but lament.³⁰⁵ Indeed, the veils he lays over the composition, his refusal to circulate the letters with any identifying information, plainly convey profound frustration with the oratorical project of *renovatio*. Closer inspection reveals a deeply introspective strand as well that subtends his political and ecclesiastical polemic. The corruption of the world extends to Petrarch too (or at any rate to the speaking subject³⁰⁶), dramatized in his crisis of will over fleeing the wicked Curia, a clear thematic parallel to the *Secretum*.³⁰⁷ As the Apostle James would say, he knoweth the good, yet doth it not; as in the dialogue, Petrarch's will is trapped. Petrarch also emphasizes the ideological kinship between the *Sine Nomine* and the *Carmen*. As noted in chapter one, the Preface to the former work introduces the latter as having been "motivated by the same consideration" (ea... cogitatio induxit, Pref., 2), the same awareness of the evils of the world, the same desire that "lamentation cease not before its cause."³⁰⁸ And if the two works share a common motivation, they also both participate in equal pessimism with regard to the potential of rhetoric to do

³⁰⁵ Preface, 1. References to the Latin text of the *Sine Nomine* will be by Letter number and paragraph in Laura Casarsa's edition (*Francisci Petrarce: Liber Sine Nomine* [Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2010]). Translations are mine unless stated otherwise, although I have benefited greatly from both the English version of Norman Zacour, and the Italian rendering in Laura Casarsa's edition.

³⁰⁶ Gabriele Baldassari, *Unum in locum: Strategie macrotestuali nel Petrarca politico* (Milan: LED, 2006), 67.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

³⁰⁸ "Non ante fletus desinet quam dolor," *SN* Pref. 1.

anything about the sad situation whence they sprang: neither can communicate in open terms, for “truth is now a capital offense” (“nunc capitalis est veritas,” Pref. 1.1). All three works, then, have truth as their inescapable condition, but it is inevitably a truth that cannot speak. The *Sine nomine* thus combines the dual problems of *Carmen* and *Secretum*, the crisis of the poet in a world which he can neither abandon nor repair; its crucial contribution is to gesture toward a possible solution.

As a compilation with the thematic unity that implies, the *Sine nomine* attacks many things, but its ultimate target is the twin failures of rhetoric which Petrarch took such pains to dramatize in the two works which preceded it: political reform in the *Carmen*, moral/philosophical reform in the *Secretum*. In order to overcome both obstacles, Petrarch must eschew his classical and patristic exemplars and pass on to a mode strikingly reminiscent of the *Commedia*. The Dantean element in the *Sine Nomine* is often remarked upon by critics, but rarely is it considered in their construction of the macrotext.³⁰⁹ It is my contention that the collection’s unique density of Dantean themes reflects a uniquely Dantean object. As the previous chapter sought to demonstrate, the rhetorical crux of the *Commedia* is the poet’s rejection of Ciceronian oratory in exchange for the prophetic word. In a similar manner, the *Sine Nomine*, the third element in Petrarch’s anti-rhetorical triptych, hints at a similar conversion in its author’s poetics. To transcend the world without forsaking it, he must recur to the prophetic trope of Babylon.

That Babylon is the chief theme of the *Sine Nomine* even a cursory reading of its nineteen letters will reveal. The letters attacks many evils, but over and above them

³⁰⁹ Cf., e.g., Ronald Martinez, “The Book Without a Name: Petrarch’s Open Secret,” in Kirkham and Maggi, 297-299; Baldassari, 89-115.

all stands the French-led Curia at Avignon, the new Babylon upon the Rhone. The Dantean quality of Petrarch's polemic is undeniable: the sorry state of Rome – which, as in the *Commedia* and *Monarchia*, stands in for the entire world by virtue of being its rightful head (*SN* 4.9) – he blames on ecclesiastical avarice, expressed in pretensions to temporal authority (deriving from the Donation of Constantine, 17.16-17), and causing the attenuation of the Empire and the corruption of the Church. The echoes of *Inferno* 19 are clear enough. The Papal Curia is denounced in a similarly Dantean vein: altogether wicked, a cesspool of all the world's vices, a new monument to human depravity. Designed to be the summit of Christ's kingdom on the earth, it has instead been infected with love for gold, and is now become the embodiment of sin, leading the rest of the world to the very summit of wickedness (*SN* 6.1). But Petrarch's polemic is not mere raillery. He presents his critique as a theological dilemma, essentially an apocalyptic framing of the problem of evil: how can such thoroughgoing immorality possibly be consistent with Christ's rule?

In the seventh epistle Petrarch addresses his concerns to Christ directly:

Dehinc crebro ad eum, quem in delitiis habeo, *crucifixum* versus, mesta voce atque oculis humentibus exclamo "Iesu bone et nimium mansuete, quid hoc est? Exurge! Quare obdormis? Exurge et ne repellas in finem! Quare *faciem tuam avertis*? Oblivisceris inopie nostre et tribulationis nostre? ... Quid agis, in te sperantium Salus? *Quid, Salvator, cogitas?*

(LSN 7.5, 7, emphasis mine)

[Thereupon, repeatedly turned to him, the Crucified One in whom I delight, I cry out with muted voice and dampened eyes: "Jesus, most merciful and good, what is this that has happened? Rise up! Why do you sleep? Rise up at last and do not refuse us! Why do you turn your face aside? Are you ignorant of our helplessness and our tribulations? ... What are you doing, Savior of those who hope in you? On what, O Savior, are you meditating?]

Direct attribution is difficult to prove, but the complaint bears striking similarities to a similar apostrophe in Dante's *Purgatorio*:

E se licito m'è, o sommo Giove
che fosti in terra per noi *crucifisso*,
son li giusti *occhi tuoi rivolti altrove?*

O è preparazion che ne *l'abisso*
del tuo consiglio fai per alcun bene
in tutto de l'accorger nostro scisso?

(*Purg.* 6.118-123, emphasis mine)

[And if I am allowed to ask, O highest Jove/ who was crucified on earth for us/
are your just eyes turned elsewhere?/ Or is this some preparation which in the
abyss/ of your counsel you make for some good/ altogether separate from our
ken?]

Both poets begin by recalling the incontrovertible evidence of Christ's concern for humanity in his incarnation and crucifixion, which is also the grounds on which his claim to universal sovereignty derives.³¹⁰ Recalling Christ's rule underscores his moral and legal responsibility to protect his kingdom. The opening thus neatly recapitulates the problem: it is precisely that world which belongs to Christ, which he died to redeem, that so suffers beneath the weight of sin. Both writers then raise the counterfactual hypothesis that the omniscient Second Person of the Trinity is simply oblivious, before conceding the possibility that the divine plan is simply inscrutable. Unconstrained by poetic concision, Petrarch's prose rendering takes the line of questioning one step further. Granted Christ's omniscience (*SN* 7.8), Petrarch verbalizes the two remaining possibilities: either Christ must now hate his people, or else he must be unable to help them (*SN* 7.9). But of course these two are counterfactuals as well. Petrarch is perfectly cognizant that he can affirm neither and remain a Christian. The sentiment they capture, however, is equivalent to the paradox

³¹⁰ Phil. 2:5-11.

in which the *Carmen* and the *Secretum* have left our poet: the world is both far too precious to scorn, and observably beyond redemption. Petrarch recasts the tension theologically, and in so doing draws it to a point; unlike Juvenal,³¹¹ who can mock the world's foibles without feeling any particular imperative to square their existence with a religious ideology, Petrarch's explicit commitment to Christianity – to a God who is at once engaged, benevolent, and powerful – requires that he find a solution. The price of failure is his faith.

The letter/prayer concludes with what might seem a gesture of despair: “We beg you,” he concludes, “to put an end either to the evils of the world, or to the world itself” (et vel tot mundi mala vel mundum ipsum finias precamur, *SN* 7.13).

Suggesting as a possibility that Christ no longer save the world but destroy it appears to belie Petrarch's affirmation of continuing faith: immediately beforehand, he had addressed God as “our hope” (*spes nostra*). But in fact, as will be seen, it is precisely by drawing on the apocalyptic potential of his language that Petrarch will attempt to redeem his rhetoric against the global degradation of his age. If the world cannot be induced to save itself by human means, then it must be purged clean by the fire of divine judgment. It is precisely because oratory is impotent before the tragedy of history that Petrarch must adopt the rhetoric of prophecy instead.

The two letters at the crux of the *Sine Nomine* dramatize Petrarch's change of rhetorical office. The ninth epistle is devoted to lamenting Italian degradation at the

³¹¹ As Martinez (2009) points out, the *Sine nomine* draws upon the Roman satirical tradition in several respects (292-97). Yet surely here is a major ideological distinction.

hands of the “senseless and savage barbarians” (demens et vesana barbaries, *SN* 9.5), notably the French.³¹² But the woes of Italy are self-inflicted:

persecutionum duo sunt genera: hoc nolentes patimur, hoc volentes. ... Hoc persecutionis fasce serva nostris temporibus suspirat Italia, tum demum finem habitura miserie, cum unum velle ceperit. (*SN* 9.1, 4)

[afflictions are of two kinds: those we suffer unwillingly, and those we accept willingly. ... Servile Italy now sighs beneath the burden of this (latter kind of) trouble: when she has begun to will one thing, only then will she have an end of grief.]

Italy may be oppressed, but the root of the trouble is her own disunity: could the inhabitants of the peninsula but be united, Petrarch implies, then she would win her liberty. Given what has been argued in these pages concerning Petrarch’s rhetorical skepticism, that he should here attribute the peninsula’s distress to what is essentially civic spirit appears strange. Italians, he seems to say, need only avail themselves of that classical *virtus* with which it was the orator’s office to imbue his fellow citizens, and thus united, they cannot fail to win their freedom. If such remedies as oratory can supply are indeed able to restore Italian greatness, and, by extension, reverse the tragic slide of history, then it would seem that the usefulness of oratory continues unimpeded. Thus, whatever he may have implied in the *Carmen*, Petrarch permits his reader to consider the possibilities of rhetoric afresh. But the ending gives it all away: “I write this to you in haste,” he concludes, “as an indignant exile from Jerusalem among the rivers of Babylon.”³¹³ Suddenly, the letter’s rhetorical pretensions are cast in a rather different light. Petrarch quotes the incipit of Psalm 137 (*Vulgate* 136), traditionally attributed to King David as a prophetic response to the great exile of the

³¹² Cf. Casarsa, p. 89 n.2.

³¹³ “Hec tibi raptim Ierosolimitanus exul inter et super flumina Babilonis indignans scripsi,” *SN*. 9.8.

Jews imposed by Nabuchodonosor. In so doing, he elevates Italy's oppression to cosmic significance, transfigured their oppressors into the scourge of divine wrath, against which there can be no resistance. Certainly the analogy brings Petrarch's earlier feint at optimism into serious question, for Israel's exile was remedied not by civic reform (indeed, it was occasioned by precisely the sort of nationalist sentiment which the earlier part of the letter seemed to encourage³¹⁴) but national repentance. The biblical account to which Petrarch explicitly connects the contemporary political landscape simply has no room for Cicero. And lest we think his valediction merely an offhand gesture, he spends the entire tenth epistle (also written to Nelli) explaining just why Avignon deserves to be called – and indeed is – the new Babylon.

The tenth letter takes the form of an appendix to its predecessor in order to defend the conceit that Avignon is Babylon, which, Petrarch explains, may have perplexed his correspondent. Nelli's confusion, which Petrarch now proposes to dissolve, is that the two historical Babylons were in Assyria and Egypt, not southern France, and the commonplace Christian metaphorical usage (deriving originally from the Apocalypse of John, and used to great effect by Augustine) was typically directed at Rome "on account of the size of its empire and its latitude"³¹⁵ – a curious elision for the city on which were based both the Whore of John's Apocalypse, and Augustine's new City of Man! Neither of these would seem to supply a precedent for applying the name to Avignon. Not so, Petrarch counters, for there is a host of allegorical resemblances. Whereas the first Babylon was ruled by Semiramis and the second by

³¹⁴ Cf. the account in Jeremiah 27, where the prophet lays responsibility for the forthcoming sack of Jerusalem squarely at the feet of those who will not submit to foreign domination.

³¹⁵ "Propter proportionem imperiorum et climatum," *ibid.*, 10.1-2.

Cambyses, the new Babylon upon the Rhone plays host to both of these figures. In addition, here at Avignon dwells Nimrod himself, “reaching heavenward with his proud turrets.”³¹⁶ Likewise, if Babylon was first named for the confusion of languages that occurred there, as noted in Genesis, Avignon is the paradigmatic “city of confusion,”³¹⁷ likely referring as much to the variety of language as to the variety of wickedness; at any rate, as Petrarch notes in the previous epistle, it remains firmly under the control of barbarians. Avignon’s depravity is Babylonian in the strictest sense of the word; consequently, reasons the author, its name should match its deeds.

But as if discontented with his reasoning so far, Petrarch proceeds to introduce corroborating witnesses. If you want to know more, he tells Nelli, look to Saint Augustine’s sermon on the psalm in question and “find out what the name Babylon meant to him. After you read it, you will agree that the name fits the Rhone as well as it does the Euphrates or the Nile.”³¹⁸ The pair of sentences receives no further comment in the text, and Petrarch moves on to his next example.³¹⁹ But if we linger long enough to take Petrarch up on his suggestion, and actually consult the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, there appears a curious *lacuna*. For Augustine contends that Babylon is no city at all, but a state of mind.³²⁰

³¹⁶ Ibid., 10.4.

³¹⁷ Cf. Gen. 11:19.

³¹⁸ “Invenies quid sibi ‘Babilonicum’ nomen velit. Quod cum legeris, dices non minus Rodano quam Eurphrati debitum quam Nilo,” *SN* 10.5-6.

³¹⁹ That of Ambrose’s *De obitu Valentiniiani consolatio*, in which the Bishop of Milan draws a rather loose association between Vienne, late Imperial center on the Rhone and site of Emperor Valentinian II’s murder, and Babylon.

³²⁰ *Esposizioni sui Salmi: testo latino dall’edizione Maurina ripresa sostanzialmente dal corpus christianorum*, ed. Vincenzo Tarulli (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1968), vol 4. Translations by Scholastica Hebgin and Felicitas Corrigan (Westminster: Newman Press, 1960). References by chapter and paragraph.

Sed iam diximus Caritati vestrae omnia quae secundum litteram in illa civitate contingebant, figuras nostras fuisse: et facile potest demonstrari captivos nos esse ... Diabolus ergo et angeli eius captivos nos duxerunt; nec ducerent nisi consentientes. (Ps. 136. par. 7)

[We have already told you, Dear Ones, that all which befell that city [Jerusalem] in a literal sense were but figures for us; it is easy to show that we are captives. ... It was the devil and his angels who led us into captivity, but they could not have done so without our consent.]

The typological value of the psalm is thus, for Augustine, neither physical nor political, but spiritual – it refers to the soul’s estrangement from God. Dismissing the historical and political details of the Babylonian Captivity, Augustine’s reading turns the nation of Israel into the Church, their oppressors either spiritual powers or, more generally, the temptations of the world. There is nothing further from Augustine’s mind than identifying “Babylon” with some contemporary political oppressor; his concern, here as elsewhere, is with applying Scripture to the inner life of the believer. To conclude from this as Petrarch seems to do that “the name [of Babylon] fits the Rhone as well as the Euphrates or the Nile” seems curious. If the *Enarrationes* do not entirely exclude Petrarch’s reading, they certainly do little to support it. What Augustine allegorizes as a broad condition of spiritual bondage, Petrarch seeks to locate in the political machinations of a physical city. Moreover, whereas the oratorical posture of letter nine placed him “in the world but not of it,” as it were, able to give a ringing condemnation of the French clergy, the appeal to Augustine’s allegorical reading suggests a far more introspective tack: Babylon as universal human condition from which poet’s soul is not exempt. The contamination of the speaker by the evil he denounces suggests a like contamination of his discourse

between oratory and confession. The task Petrarch has set for his eloquence is now redoubled: not only must he save his fellows, but equally himself.

It is not difficult to see the connection between Augustine's account and Petrarch's complaint about his own spiritual malaise elsewhere in the letters and in the *Secretum* – in both works, he (as represented by his spokesmen) is afflicted by a disposition that he appears powerless to change.³²¹ In both works, its chief effect is to prevent him from abandoning his mundane preoccupations, whether metaphorically or literally. Both works observe, with a kind of flourish, that to be so disposed is actually sinful. But how differently the charge is handled! In the *Secretum*, Augustinus uses it in an attempt to seal his argument that Franciscus' misery is voluntary, suggesting that his patient confronts each miserable moment as a free agent who only persists in his unhappiness by continually refusing to make the virtuous choice to abandon his the worldly desires and ambitions.³²² This is an argument which, as we have seen, ultimately fails both at convincing Franciscus and, more importantly, at reforming his will. In fact, upon hearing it, Franciscus immediately pushes back, and his answer suggests the Augustinian categories of the *Enarrationes*. Granted that the initial transgression is voluntary, Franciscus argues that the sinner's will becomes bound, that sin freely entered into is not so easily left (*Secretum*, bk. 1, p. 38). More Augustinian than Augustinus, he maintains that his will is captive and unable to

³²¹ Baldassari, 67-68.

³²² Lee takes a different view, arguing that Augustinus' emphasis is not on will but on cognition. The distinction is interesting, but problematic as applied to the *Secretum* – surely Augustinus' concluding summary of precisely this argument (cited above) in book 3 suggests that the real point of contention is the will?

escape: he can ask for prayer, but like Bellerophon to whom he is compared,³²³ his ill-fated wandering seems interminable. In the *Sine nomine*, where the author's difficulty is distilled into whether he will finally succeed in leaving Avignon/Babylon behind (marking the analogy between it and Augustine's exposition as intentional), he begins by lamenting it as a kind of inviolable fate,³²⁴ then, three letters on, corrects himself: "in truth not fate but my own sin" (*fato seu verius peccato meo*, *SN* 8.1) explains his continued residence in Babylon. But if remaining at Avignon is a sin, it is simultaneously beyond his control: the letter requests compassion for what he must endure while living in the Papal city,³²⁵ but evinces no intention to reform. Once more, the decision seems out of his hands: as Franciscus contended, to fall does not imply that one can get back up (*Secretum*, bk. 1, p. 38). Thus far, Petrarch's authorial "I" in the *Sine nomine* runs basically in parallel with Franciscus in the *Secretum* – each acknowledges responsibility for his unhappiness while disclaiming all ability to remedy it. But unlike the dialogue, the *Sine nomine* contextualizes this spiritual cul-de-sac by pairing it with the Augustinian account of exile. The eighth letter, which Petrarch sends to the Bishop of Padua as a hybrid confession and lament, is immediately followed by letter nine's analysis of the plight of Italy. Juxtaposed, the respective predicaments of the sinner and his nation fall easily into the now-familiar Augustinian categories: both exiled, at the mercy of barbarians, and both in bondage through their own transgression.

³²³ *Secretum* book 3, page 156.

³²⁴ *SN* 5.7.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.8.

There still remains the discrepancy between Petrarch's political appropriation of the psalm and Augustine's figural reading – it would seem that it cannot at once apply to the political corruption of Europe and the Christian's struggle against sin. The one suggests political and secular fulfillment, the other private and spiritual, a gulf which neatly recapitulates the analogous fissure between the *Secretum* and the *Carmen*. How appropriate that Petrarch should turn to his old poetic foil from "Parthenias," King David, just as he reaches to embrace both the ideological poles he had rejected in the previous works. For indeed, as will be seen, the very psalm that underscores the tension also suggests a means of resolving it; far from negating his concern for Italian sovereignty, Petrarch's reference to Augustine's reading of the psalm actually provides him with a new rhetorical avenue through which both his nation and his soul can be redeemed. For David's famous song of the Captivity is, in fact, a prophecy of Israel's redemption and his own.

The trouble with Classical rhetoric, as Petrarch has repeatedly sought to dramatize, is that it does not work. Whereas his sporadic jibes at Aristotle suggest that he views the Humanist rhetorical tradition as superior to contemporary philosophy at instilling virtue in its hearers, and hence grant social cohesion and political longevity, the works we have looked at thus far – the *Carmen*, the *Secretum* and the *Sine nomine* – take pains to show that rhetorical cannot overcome the tragedy of history. David's psalm takes this sense of tragedy as its departure point. The opening line quoted by Petrarch, "Upon the rivers of Babylon," already tells the alert reader of the biblical text all he needs to know: Jerusalem, whose name invokes the *visio pacis*, has been ravaged by war; the Jews, people of the Land of Promise, have been

wrenched away from it; and the Davidic throne, promised to the psalmist in perpetuity, is broken. At the outset, then, we are told that this will be a psalm that tries to make sense of a political world gone mad.

David's poetic response to such outrages takes the form of a meditation on the function of music in the context of exile. The harmony of music, of course, recalls the perfect arrangement of the cosmos in time and motion, as well as the well-ordered soul with its felicitous balance of virtues and powers, which together suggest the ability of oratory to effect such a balance in its hearers. Thus, to evoke music is to suggest a vision of universal concord, in which the divine proportions are communicated to the *polis* and the self alike.³²⁶ But David has little time for such utopian conceits: he thematizes music as absence, an impossibility given the rupture of history:

in salicibus in medio ejus suspendimus organa nostra
quia illic interrogaverunt nos qui captivos duxerunt nos, verba cantionum
et qui abduxerunt nos hymnum cantate nobis de canticis Sion
Quomodo cantabimus canticum Domini in terra aliena?

(Ps. 136. 2-4)

[On the willows in the midst [of Babylon] we hung up our instruments./ For there they that led us into captivity required of us the words of songs./ And they that carried us away, said: Sing ye to us a hymn of the songs of Sion./ How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?]

Music in such circumstances is not only impossible, but would actually represent complicity with those who carried him into exile, an accommodation David rejects.

From the prophetic perspective of the psalmist, the political dissolution of Israel

³²⁶ There was also, of course, the reversal of the image: music as seduction, as a means of stimulating the passions and igniting civic violence, a possibility not lost on either Dante or Petrarch (cf. Chapter 2 in this regard).

provokes an existential crisis. In the ruin of what he took to be the divine political order of Israel's success, David is not merely a king without a country, but a singer without song. Indeed, the next two verses emphasize this latter element in the form of a curse:

Si oblitus fuero tui Hierusalem oblivioni detur dextera mea
adhaereat lingua mea faucibus meis, si non meminero tui
si non praeposuero Hierusalem in principio laetitiae meae
(Ps. 136.5-6)

[If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten./ Let my tongue cleave to my jaws, if I do not remember thee:/ if I make not Jerusalem the beginning of my joy.]

David's ability to fulfill his role as divine singer is fatally compromised by the fall of his country – he cannot sing about Sion when Sion is lost. Even should he violate his memories of the Promised Land by acceding to his oppressors' demands, no song could result: the curse targets his tongue and hands, essential to musical expression. Amid the dystopian ascendancy of Babylon, the psalmist declares his office vacant. He can offer nothing but his tears.

It requires little sensitivity to note the how well Petrarch's feelings for Italy map on to those of David for Judah: clearly, Petrarch did not choose to describe his exile in such terms by happenstance. And thus far, the character of political engagement they suggest strays little from the mainstream view. We see once more the figure of a vacillating Petrarch, advancing to the edge of a robust nationalist sentiment at one moment, only to retreat into rhetorical despair the next. It might seem from the psalm that, in the void of cosmic justice, there is nothing left to say. But like Petrarch, David is not yet finished: he continues to speak, his voice swelling

to a dreadful curse, this time upon the enemies of Israel. Psalm 136 is not the only song of imprecation in the Psalter, but it is uniquely violent. The fall of Jerusalem is to be repaid with interest:

memor esto Domine filiorum Edom diem Hierusalem
qui dicunt exinanite exinanite usque ad fundamentum in ea
filia Babylonis misera beatus
qui retribuet tibi retributionem tuam quam retribuisti nobis
Beatus qui tenebit et adlidet parvulos tuos ad petram
(Ps. 136.7-9).

[Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem:/ Who say:
Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof./ O daughter of Babylon,
miserable:/ blessed shall he be who shall repay thee thy payment which thou
hast paid us./ Blessed be he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the
rock.]

To contextualize these remaining verses, it will be useful to ponder the following question for a moment: in the face of his obliterated country and the rupture of the covenant, why has David taken the trouble to reaffirm his loyalty, not merely to Jehovah, but to the land itself (vv. 5-6)? The psalm's title is of service here: for it runs "A psalm of David, for Jeremias" in the Douay-Rheims translation (Psalmus David, Jeremiae), and its opening seems precisely calculated to evoke the weeping prophet. But Jeremiah's tears were tears of judgment, his lifetime ministry a malediction on the apostasies of Israel; yet his book reaches its emotional summit with a long indictment of the instrument, Babylon, by which that malediction was effected. The Lamentations over Judah are merely a prelude to God's vengeance on her enemies, itself but a precursor to the return of Israel to favor.

It is in this prophetic key that the bloody closing verses in the psalm present themselves, a crucial step, as chapter one proposed, in the Christian cycle of judgment

and redemption that culminates with the return of Christ, the antitype of the Davidic kingship, to his eternal throne. The destruction of Babylon entails the restoration of Jerusalem and inaugurates, per Jeremiah 31, the New Covenant – which is to say the New Creation.

Thus saith the Lord: A voice was heard on high of lamentation, of mourning, and weeping, of Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted for them, because they are not. Thus saith the Lord: Let thy voice cease from weeping, and thy eyes from tears: for there is a reward for thy work, saith the Lord: and they shall return out of the land of the enemy. (Jer. 31:15-17)

David's act of singing is thus not merely descriptive but performative: the personal and political vindication to which the psalm looks forward will be accomplished by the prophetic curses it both pronounces and enacts. Indeed, in the very act of speaking forth, the psalmist is already free: his curses are themselves a song, a defiant cry of faith that breaks through the shadows of contingency to the just reality beneath.

David's song provides the basis for a new kind of rhetoric capable of organizing both soul and *polis* with respect to God's transcendent order, positing a single, encyclopedic fabric of reality, an apocalyptic fusion between flesh and spirit, faith and sight.

In appropriating David's prophetic response, Petrarch dramatizes a similar rapprochement, moving past the apparent split between himself and Augustine through the mediation of the psalm of exile. Indeed, the escape was physical as well as rhetorical: within a year of writing *Sine nomine* 10, Petrarch had left Avignon and was *en route* to Italy. The problem of Babylon is a cataclysmic rupture at once spiritual, political, and cosmic; and it falls to the poetry of imprecation and renewal to weave them back together. In constructing his polemic this way, Petrarch opens a

space for a new poetics in the prophetic mode. Of course it is not really new: quite apart from Jeremiah and the Psalms, we have already seen that Dante employed this mode to undergird his claims to prophetic authority. What use Petrarch makes of it will be most apparent in his vernacular collections, the *Rime sparse* and *Trionfi*, which form the subject of the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FROM EXILE TO TRIUMPH: PETRARCH, BABYLON, AND LAURA

The first and third chapters of this study endeavored to define Petrarch's poetics in negative terms, defending him fore and aft, so to speak, from both idolatrous Ciceronian political engagement and the *contemptus mundi* of the cloister. As has been shown, however alluring the Classical myth of political and personal immortality through eloquence, Petrarch could not accept it; however desperate the travails of the world, he proved unable to abandon it. What remains, then, is to offer a positive account of Petrarch's poetics that incorporates both ideological poles. Whereas an earlier school of criticism dealt with Petrarch's problematic complexity on this point by calling him (at least) ideologically unstable, and modern critics tend to nullify the tension by regarding his apparent political concerns as insincere or metaphorical, the following pages will argue for Petrarch's commitment to a poetics broad enough to accommodate both tragedy and hope. The Dantean mode of prophecy, whereby it is the privilege of the poet at once to recognize, condemn, and remedy the tragic circle of mortality - this is where the tatters of Petrarch's verse, his politics and soul can be made whole. And for this we must turn to his vernacular compositions, the *Rime sparse* and *Trionfi*.

Aside from an exercise in stating the obvious, to call the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* "fragmentary" is to remark upon the defining structural feature of the text. This is particularly evident if we approach it with the inevitable reference point for fourteenth-century compositions in the Italian *volgare*, Dante's *Commedia*, in mind.

Dante's chief concern in writing, as we have seen, is to redress the seemingly incurable divisions that rent the political and spiritual fabric of *Trecento* Europe. To the shattered remnants of the old Imperial Order, he opposes "quella Roma onde Cristo è romano" (that Rome of which Christ is a Roman, *Purgatorio* 32.102);³²⁷ to Florence, the archetypal divided city, swift and salutary judgment; and to his own divided and imperfect world a pageant of death and resurrection by which is authorized his divine vocation as a prophet, and consequently his ability to write the poem which will accomplish all these things. It is no overstatement to say that Dante's narrative is meant to be the final answer to the fragmentation of history. The coherence and perfection of the story of the world are inscribed upon his title page and reflected in the seamless undulation of his chosen meter: the tragedy of history becomes a *felix culpa* when approached from the perspective of eternity. Petrarch's "scattered rhymes," on the other hand, begin by suggesting a narrative in the confessional mode, then systematically refuse to submit to its demands. Whether in the misleading and obscure chronological relationship of individual poems,³²⁸ the instability of the lyric *io* that prevents him doing anything but wandering in aimless circles, or the mere fact that one must stop reading and begin anew some three hundred and sixty-five times in order to make it through,³²⁹ Petrarch's *Rime* seem to reject the very possibility of organizing his experience, let alone cosmic history, into a cohesive whole.³³⁰

³²⁷ References to the *Commedia* taken from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994). All translations into English are mine.

³²⁸ Teodolinda Barolini, "The Self in the Labyrinth of Time," in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, eds. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 37.

³²⁹ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 78-79.

³³⁰ This point is almost universally accepted in the last few generations of criticism. See, for instance, Giuseppe Mazzotta, *ibid.*, Marco Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima. Storia e racconto nel Canzoniere*

This tendency of Petrarch's toward programmatic incoherence comes into clear focus when we consider the fraught soteriology of his *Rime*. Whereas Dante's composition takes the pilgrim's ultimate salvation as a narrative pre-supposition, Petrarch takes the problem of conversion as his starting point, and it continues to recur, unsolved, throughout his *Rime*. As Christian Moevs has written, "The first poem of the *Canzoniere* epitomizes with pure Petrarchan ambiguity the impasse of a will to convert that is not entire, not single-minded, not one, that contaminates the new present with the past error."³³¹ Moevs continues in the same vein, encompassing both the *Rime* and the *Trionfi*: "We may conclude, then, that the Petrarchan narrator never achieves conversion. He never definitively renounces multiplicity for unity, the world for God."³³² Moevs locates the primary impetus of Petrarchan subjectivity in a rejection of linearity; hence, a rejection of Dante's theology of history wherein Christ punctuates (in the Incarnation) and terminates (in the Final Judgment) the story of the world; equally, of Dante's Augustinian model of conversion whereby the will, conceived of as, if not necessarily monolithic (cf. James 1:5, e.g.), at least admitting the possibility of unity, is radically transformed by God's grace. In its place Moevs finds the modern (or even post-modern) ideal of irreducible multiplicity, which renders salvation in the Dantean/Augustinian sense – whether individual or cosmic – a dead letter. In contrast to the Augustinian tradition represented by Dante's "poetics of

di Petrarca, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), or Thomas Greene's "The Self in Renaissance Literature," in *The Disciplines of Criticism: Essays in Literary Theory, Interpretation, and History*, eds. Peter Demetz, Thomas Greene, and Lowry Nelson, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

³³¹ Christian Moevs, "Subjectivity and Conversion in Dante and Petrarch," in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, eds. Zygmunt Baranski and Theodore Cachey (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 233-34. Moevs' evaluation of Petrarch's lyric selfhood as irreducibly fragmentary reflects a broad consensus. See, for instance, Teodolinda Barolini's contribution to the same volume: "Petrarch as the Metaphysical Poet Who Is Not Dante," 197.

³³² Moevs, 238.

conversion,” where the will can be made one and turned to good, the assumptions underlying Petrarch's lyric persona are understood to foreclose this possibility.³³³ Not only does the narrator not convert, his fragmentary subjectivity makes such a choice impossible. Petrarch cannot become entirely “another Petrarch” as Augustine became “another Augustine” because there was never any original “Petrarch” to begin with. This divergence between Dante and Petrarch over the nature of the self imposes strict limits on what the latter's rhetoric can accomplish. Never mind ecclesiastical corruption or the wounds of Italy: to quote the Pharisee, Petrarch cannot even save himself.

That Petrarch structures his anthology as a drama of incurable fragmentation thus bears profoundly on the ends he wishes it to advance. This is especially apparent in light of the close parallel Dante draws between his own conversion (as represented in the poem) and the cosmic ambitions he proposes for his verse. As discussed in chapter two, the pilgrim's repentance and absolution atop Mount Purgatory are as much a statement of the author's poetics as about his faith. Virgil, symbol of that Classical eloquence directed toward political success, endows the pilgrim with crown and miter in token of the moral progress he has made. Yet Virgil's estimation of the

³³³ The failure of the Petrarchan narrator to convert has been generally accepted since at least John Freccero's “The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics,” *Diacritics* 5, no. 1 (1975): 34-40. For a contrary perspective, see Thomas Roche, *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), esp. the introduction and first chapter. J. Christopher Warner somewhat ingeniously attempts to harmonize the two ideas by arguing that the narrator's non-conversion is a kind of “playful daring” following the Horatian trope of syntactic suspension (“The Frying Pan and the Phoenix: Petrarch's Poetics Revisited,” *Rivista di studi italiani* 14, no. 1, [June 1996]: 21). See also Marjorie Boyle, who contends that doubts regarding Petrarch's piety as represented in the *Rime*, or attention to the ironic, self-reflexive gestures in that work, are nothing more than “the imposition of irony [...] allied with historiographical assumptions about the relation of religion and culture and fabricated from a quasi- or pseudo-scholarship about theology” (*Petrarch's Genius: Pentimento and Prophecy* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], 2-3). Boyle's work is useful for the seriousness with which she engages with Petrarch's theological concerns, but unfortunately fails to take into account the rhetorical complexity with which those concerns are staged. See below, 164n. 355.

pilgrim's virtue is immediately contested by Beatrice, who indicts her charge for setting his hope on earthly goods and ignoring heaven. That this is the very fault for which Virgil himself, Brunetto Latini, Farinata, and all the rest of that parade “who set their minds on doing good” (*Inf.* 6.81) were damned should not escape our notice. Virgil was entrusted with his task by Beatrice for his *ornate parole*, and they have not failed of their purpose: his pupil's will is purified of vice and subordinate to proper rational control. But pagan eloquence is limited by pagan ethics, and the poet-prophet who will save “il mondo che mal vive” (the world that lives ill, *Purg.* 32.103) must offer more than moral suasion. It is only when Dante repents of his newfound virtue that Beatrice can invest him with his role in the eschatological drama. The process of conversion in the *Commedia* thus follows a two-tiered strategy wherein the pilgrim-poet must both rise above his personal sins, and then, in a second moment, radically revise his understanding of the poetic task before him. Having attained to Cicero, he must pass on to Jeremiah. Nor is the achievement of this personal and poetic beatitude quite so sure as Moevs' essay would imply. The conversion-scene in *Purgatorio*, while decisive, is also observably not final: the pilgrim's progress through Paradise is marred by moral detours at least three times;³³⁴ the rebukes he receives are no less real for being gentled with a smile. In the final *canto* of his journey, Bernard's prayer to Mary for the traveler's admission to the Beatific Vision ends with a request that she guard his passions, protect him from “movimenti umani” (the unstable passions of humanity, *Par.* 33.36-7), implying very clearly that even after such a tremendous vision, the pilgrim-poet may yet fall away. If the end of that *canto* is, as Moevs

³³⁴ *Paradiso* 16.10-15, 18.19-21, 25.118-123.

argues,³³⁵ indeed intended to recapitulate the moment of mystical union to the universal One (as opposed to evoking, say, a prophetic vision, which in the Biblical literature is available even to great sinners like King Saul), nevertheless its relation to the experience evoked by Augustine's fig tree falls short of unequivocal. The difficulties attendant on conversion seem more immediate to the poet of the *Rime*, but the difference between the two is ultimately quantitative.

More importantly, rather than contradicting the Dantean model, the apparent failure of conversion in the *Rime* actually reiterates the rhetorical doubling of its predecessor. Just as the *Commedia* grants Dante the benefits of Classical eloquence before revealing its insufficiency, so the basic project of Petrarch's lyric can be expressed as the narrator's effort to reform his own will, to "gather up the scattered fragments of his soul," as Franciscus says in the *Secretum* (*sparsa anime fragmenta recolligam*, bk. 3, p. 214).³³⁶ That the prologue sonnet's "quand' era in parte altr'uom da quel ch'i' sono" (when I was in part another man from what I am, *Rvf* 1.4) suggests this task has been completed,³³⁷ while simultaneously denying the possibility of such closure, clearly recalls the non-conversion of Franciscus in that dialogue. However, as chapter three pointed out, the *Secretum* employs the trope of conversion in a very idiosyncratic way: Augustinus' exhortations to forsake the world owe far more to Platonic asceticism than to Christianity, to the point of outright dualism. Petrarch's subversion of the Augustinian/Boethian genre of dialogical progress toward spiritual

³³⁵ Moevs, 235.

³³⁶ Francis Petrarch, *Secretum*, ed. Enrico Carrara, in *Prose*, ed. Guido Martellotti (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1955).

³³⁷ All references to the text of the *Canzoniere* taken from Marco Santagata's Meridiani edition (3rd printing, 1999). All translations are mine, although I have been helped at various points by Durling's rendering (*Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. Robert M. Durling [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976]).

enlightenment is matched by his programmatic substitution of Classical Platonism for Christian soteriology. This has the effect of transforming the conclusion from a display of *accidia* by the seemingly irresolute author to a stoutly Augustinian defense of the value of creation.³³⁸ The subverted conversion narrative of the *Rime* re-enacts a similar debate. Witness once again its opening sonnet: the fruit of love is said to be “clear knowledge that whatever gratifies the world is a passing dream” (‘l conoscer chiaramente/ che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno, *Rvf* 1.13-14). Likewise, the *canzone* that opens the collection's second part, “Io vo’ pensando,” constructs Petrarch's predicament in dualist terms, as an inability to obtain “those wings with which our intellect is raised to heaven from its mortal prison” (quell’ale/ co le quai del mortal/ carcer nostro intelletto al ciel si leva, 264.6-8). The conversion paradigm toward which the *Rime* are ostensibly directed is not, therefore, particularly Christian; its failure tells us less about Petrarch's theology and psychology than about his poetics. Far from a means of distinguishing his vernacular poetry from that of Dante, the narrator's inability to convert serves rather to indict Ciceronian poetics and its supposed ability to lead the audience, in this case, Petrarch himself, to virtue. By his Dantesque insistence on the futility of such eloquence, Petrarch adumbrates the possibility of a Dantesque solution through the adoption of a prophetic rhetorical

³³⁸ Giuseppe Mazzotta (“Petrarch’s Dialogue with Dante,” in Baranski and Cachey) makes a similar claim about the outcome of the *Secretum*, that Franciscus “asserts the value of this world” (192), without, however, interacting on the question of whether Augustinus' voluntarism (to use Charles Trinkaus' phrase) and frank dualism ought to alter our perception that he speaks from “a medieval eschatological perspective” (189). Trinkaus himself remarks on the complex status of conversion in the dialogue, noting the wide gulf between the miraculous experience recounted in *Confessions* 8.12 and Augustinus' reliance on the “the idea that *rhetoric* can be applied as a *remedy*” (*In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979] 10; italics in original).

mode. Following the threads to the *Triumphus Eternitatis*, we will find that is precisely what he has done.

To affirm the similarities in rhetorical strategy between the *Rime sparse* and the *Commedia* is not to deny their very real differences. Dante's composition seems chiefly focused on world-historical matters, with the pilgrim's interiority, his struggles and reactions, receiving relatively short shrift. For Petrarch, the opposite seems to be true: his "poetics of the self" draw even rather complex political wranglings within the sphere of his own subjectivity.³³⁹ Whereas Dante's personal salvation seems to arise as the inevitable consequence of the doom he must pronounce over his broken city, Petrarch reverses the metaphor: Babylon is merely an external expression of the evil present in his own heart. Nevertheless, both poets take the time to articulate Ciceronian poetics in various expressions (whether at the level of society and politics, or the more private concerns of individual virtue and reward), the better to undermine it and rebuild upon a new and visionary foundation. In analyzing Petrarch's *Rime*, we will proceed as it were from the outside in, with its explicitly political elements.

The politics of Petrarch's *Rime* are largely set forth in three *canzoni* scattered throughout the *prima pars*. As diffuse as their locations are their subjects: "O aspectata in ciel" (28) celebrates of the impending Crusade of Philip IV of France, planned for 1334 but never undertaken; "Spirto gentile" (53) describes a potential savior come to pacify the feuding Roman barons and restore the city to prosperity and power; and "Italia mia" (128) laments the ruinous effects of mercenary warfare between rival Italian city-states. Yet as Gabriele Baldassari has shown, this apparent

³³⁹ Mazzotta (1993), 128.

heterogeneity masks a common theme: the political salvation of Italy.³⁴⁰ The first two poems have different recipients – indeed, most scholarship about them to date has focused on identifying the “Noble Spirit” of the one, and the “Heaven-awaited Soul” of the other. It seems to me, however, that if Petrarch has so successfully obscured the names associated with these poems, it is because he meant for us to focus elsewhere: on the evolving role of the poetic voice to enact the political agenda which all three poems share. Central to all three is this question of *renovatio* by rhetoric, a possibility which Petrarch will by turns elevate, appropriate, and subvert.

The first *canzone* in the cycle is “O aspectata in ciel” (*Rvf* 28), but it is not the first poem in the *Rime* with social and political concerns. That honor goes to the 7th sonnet, “La gola e ’l somno e l’otiose piume” (Gluttony and sleep and plumes of sloth), addressed, per the arguments of Marco Santagata, to the same Fra Giovanni Colonna di Galliciano as *canzone* 53, to which we shall turn presently.³⁴¹ The sonnet has two chief motives, invective and petition, both of which are adumbrated in the second tercet:

Pochi compagni avrai per l’altra via;
 tanto ti prego più, gentile spirito,
 non lassar la magnanima tua impresa
 (*Rvf* 7.12-14).

[You will have few companions on that other road/ so much the more I beg you, noble soul,/ not to abandon your great-spirited enterprise.]

³⁴⁰ Gabriele Baldassari, *Unum in locum. Strategie macrotestuali nel Petrarca politico* (Milano: LED, 2006).

³⁴¹ Marco Santagata, *Petrarca e i Colonna: Sui destinatari di R.V.F. 7,10, 28 e 40* (Lucca: M. Pacini Fazzi, 1988), 35-52. While I find Santagata’s analysis convincing, it need not be dispositive: of greater importance, in my view, is Petrarch’s deliberate association of the two poems by repetition of the phrase “gentile spirito”/“spirito gentile.”

In other words, the friar's "magnanima impresa," the composition of a *De viris illustribus* based on Livy, will win him little popularity, the world being entirely given over, as the incipit suggests, to lust and gluttony and sloth. Nevertheless, Petrarch begs his correspondent to complete the work for its own sake; the central adjective "magnanima" (v. 14) suggests the summit of Aristotelian virtue and a corresponding disregard for common opinion, an entirely appropriate attitude for a man whose study is the illustrious example of the ancient world, ignored and ridiculed by moderns: "Povera e nuda vai philosophia,/ dice la turba al vil guadagno intesa" ('poor and naked goes philosophy'/ says the mob intent on vile gain, 10-11); the octave makes clear that "turba" is to be taken in the broadest possible sense. What defines Giovanni as a "gentile spirito" is precisely the gulf that separates his classically-inflected virtues from the utter decadence of contemporary society, and the function of the sonnet is to emphasize the contrast between the two. The next entry in the *Rime* to depart from Petrarch's stated goal of rationalizing and repenting for his errant love, sonnet 27, presents us with a far rosier picture of the world. "Il successor di Karlo" introduces the crusading theme around which the *canzone* is structured, and seems to promise political redemption: the planned excursion of Philip VI of France, the titular heir of Charles, will not only overthrow the rulers of Babylon (27.3-4), but will also restore the papacy to Rome (v. 6), thereby pacifying the civil turbulence with which that city (and by extension the peninsula at large) seems incurably beset (9-11). It is the latter pair of concerns, the improvements in Italy's political landscape, that occupy most of Petrarch's attention, and he expresses them in observably Dantean terms. Rome is

figured as a bride begging her absent husband to return (v. 13),³⁴² and those who upset her peace – traditionally, rival barons, unable to live in harmony because no higher power intervenes to curb their greed – are savage wolves,³⁴³ further identified as adulterers (chiunque amor legittimo scompagna, v. 11, in contrast to the true *sposo* for whom Rome waits). This last element calls to mind the overall trajectory of the *Rime* up to this point, namely, Petrarch's illicit designs on Laura, and opposes to it the legitimate desire behind the Crusade and its salutary consequences. This presents a clear contrast to the pessimism of “La gola e ’l somno,” for whereas one might suppose that a compendium of virtuous exemplars would inspire others to similar attainments, as in Classical rhetorical theory, the sonnet to Fra Giovanni denies that possibility: “Pochi compagni avrai” (7.12). “Il successor di Karlo,” on the other hand, posits that the degradation of Italy can be remedied, if not by histories of virtues past, then by present actions. The following *canzone*, “O aspectata in ciel” therefore takes place within the ideological polarities established by its two precursors. In the balance is the feasibility of renewing Roman virtue, and by implication the value of the world itself: does nobility walk alone, or can it draw society behind it on the paths of righteousness?

The opening stanza of the *canzone* (reproduced below for ease of reference) appears to favor the *contemptus mundi* of “La gola e ’l somno,” as Petrarch introduces the protagonist by way of praising his lack of worldly attachments.

³⁴² Cf. *Purgatorio* 6.114. It bears mentioning that whereas in Dante's rendering the husband is clearly understood to be the Emperor, Petrarch's version seems to identify it with the Pope.

³⁴³ “Fieri lupi,” *ibid.*, 10. Cf., *inter alia*, *Purgatorio* 14.58-60, *Paradiso* 27.55-57, in which wolves stand for secular and ecclesiastical malefactors. The theory of squabbling lesser magistrates is articulated in Dante's *Monarchia* 1.11-13, and is the basis for his critique of Italian/Roman disunity in *Purgatorio* 6.

O aspectata in ciel beata e bella
 anima che di nostra humanitade
 vestita vai, non come l'altre carca:
 perché ti sian men dure omai le strade,
 a Dio dilecta, obediente ancella,
 onde al suo regno di qua giù si varca,
 ecco novellamente a la tua barca,
 ch'al cieco mondo à già volte le spalle
 per gir al miglior porto,
 d'un vento occidental dolce conforto;
 lo qual per mezzo questa oscura valle,
 ove piangiamo il nostro et l'altrui torto,
 la condurrà de' lacci antichi sciolta,
 per drittissimo calle,
 al verace oriente ov'ella è volta.

(*Rvf* 28.1-15)

[O heaven-awaited good and blessed/ soul that in our human state/ goes dressed, not like others burdened:/ in order now that the the roads should be less hard for you,/ obedient handmaiden, God's delight,/ by which one gets to heaven from here below,/ see now that to your ship,/ which has already turned away from the blind world,/ to travel to the better port,/ comes sweet comfort from a Western wind;/ which through this dark valley,/ where we bewail our own and others' wrongs,/ will bring it, freed from ancient bonds, by straightest path,/ to that true East whereunto she bends.]

He wears his body as a garment, not a burden (suggesting the ease with which it can be removed, vv. 2-3), he has turned aside from the blind world (8), he is free from the shackles of carnal affection (13), and God, in token of favor, has supplied him with a gentle breeze to speed his soul along to the “verace oriente” - clearly indicating heaven (10-15). If we read the first stanza in that vein, however, the second comes as a reversal, or at least a complication. Having valorized his addressee's spiritual itinerary to the “true East” (15), Petrarch now begins to rejoice over the possibility of a military campaign in the other East - the physical region of Palestine, “ove [Cristo] fo posto in croce” (where [Christ] was placed upon the cross, 23); to the sweet wind that bears aloft his protagonist's soul he now adds the heaven-sent “inspiration” (*spira*,

v. 25) to garrison the desert sands. In expressing optimism for the crusading project introduced in “Il successor di Karlo,” the *canzone* seems to endorse its political program as well. The world is apparently worth saving; more than that, Petrarch expresses his belief that its salvation by military means cannot but succeed (16-30). Stanzas three and four follow in the same spirit, providing two additional reasons for confidence: a) the incontestable power of united Europe, particularly the northern races (31-51), and b) the relative feebleness and cowardice of their opponents (52-60). The sixth and seventh stanzas serve a similar function with a view, perhaps, to flattering the classical culture of Petrarch's correspondent, for now he draws his reasons from Antiquity. To take the cross is to reenact the virtuous adventurism of the Romans (79-83), and even to transcend it (84-87). Likewise invoked is the successful Greek resistance against Persian invaders; that such valor may now be equaled or surpassed, Petrarch concludes, ought to inspire his correspondent with gratitude at having lived to see such days (91-105). Petrarch buoys his rather ostentatious confidence by a seemingly unproblematic conflation between the political and the divine: the road to heaven, True East, apparently leads past the Holy Sepulcher, and is paved with the civic virtues of the Classical tradition. In previous chapters we have observed both Petrarch and Dante casting Christian and pagan virtues at odds with each other. Has Petrarch discovered a workable compromise in the Crusade?

The implicit claim of “O aspectata in ciel” is that the call to holy warfare against the heathen will lead to peace in Europe. As stanza three puts it, France and Spain and England and

infin là dove sona

doctrina del sanctissimo Elicona,
varie di lingue et d'arme, et de le gonne,
a l'alta impresa caritate sprona,
(vv. 39-42).

[as far as can be heard/ the teachings of most holy Helicon,/ a multitude of
tongues and arms and dress/ charity spurs toward the lofty enterprise.]

So noble is the call eastward that the member-states of Christendom will replace their mutual antipathy with charity. In connecting the military adventurism of the Crusade to domestic tranquility, Petrarch enters into dialogue with a longstanding literary convention; as Baldassari put it, "[P]er l'uomo medievale la crociata è la vera e unica alternativa alle guerre fratricidi" (for medieval man, crusading is the true and only alternative to fratricidal conflict, 162). It is a tradition that has its roots in the first appeals of Urban II to the rulers of Europe, and that finds its most memorable evocation in the central *canti* of Dante's *Paradiso*, where the poet's ancestor Cacciaguida testifies to the perfection of Old Florence, whence he marched beneath the ensign of the cross. Yet as chapter two sought to demonstrate, for Dante the ideal *polis* for which he makes his ancestor a spokesman contains the seeds of its own overthrow. Florentine virtue was inextricable from its paganism and imperialism, martial qualities which inscribed it in the tragic gyre of historical contingency. Mars occupies a defining role in Cacciaguida's Florence, from the literal position of his effigy (*Par.* 16.47) to the valor of her troops (vv. 151-154), an attribute that brings both glory (152) and wide influence in Tuscany. Yet it is precisely this regional hegemony which leads the idol, unsated with the blood of foreign towns, to turn its appetite within the swollen circuit of the walls: with the sacrifice of Buondelmonte,³⁴⁴

³⁴⁴ Described with the technical term "vittima," *Par.* 16.147.

Mars becomes Molech, devouring the Florentines' children; just as surely, Cacciaguida's elegy is transformed into a warning about the limits of political virtue. Dante may allow that the Crusading mentality coincides with or even nourishes Cacciaguida's "così bello/ viver di cittadini" (so a fine civic life, *Par.* 15.130-31), but his larger point is that it doesn't matter: cities are as mortal as their citizens.³⁴⁵ Thus when Petrarch begins to interact, as he does in this *canzone* and the preceding sonnet, with the political ramifications of the projected Crusade, he does so in the shadow of both the prevailing convention, and Dante's radical subversion thereof. Will the *Rime* accept Dante's stark political theory with its dire implications for rhetoric, or will they suppress it in favor of a hybrid Christian-Ciceronian conception?

Certainly, much of what we have remarked upon so far seems to favor the latter option. If Petrarch indeed means us to understand that the Crusade's benefits to European and Italian co-operation are illusory, neither sonnet nor *canzone* makes that obvious. But if we turn to the fifth stanza of "O aspectata in ciel," where the song reaches its emotional climax and the speaker turns from description to exhortation, we can observe Petrarch establishing distance between the pro-Crusading sentiments of the *canzone* and his own verse. The stanza begins with the conjunctive "Dunque," inviting readers to apply the information of stanzas two through four:

Dunque ora è 'l tempo da ritirar il collo
dal giogo antico, et da squarciare il velo
ch'è stato avvolto intorno agli occhi nostri
(*Rvf* 28.61-63).

[Therefore now is the time to withdraw our necks/ from the ancient yoke, and to remove the veil that has been bound about our eyes.]

³⁴⁵ Cf. *Par.* 16.79-81.

If victory is indeed as certain as the *canzone* makes out, then it may indeed be time to tear encumbrances from eyes and neck. The plural possessive in v. 63 also revises our expectations of Petrarch's audience: suddenly, he seems to be addressing not one man but the whole of Europe, and himself as well, for now it is “we” whom he enjoins to throw off the “ancient yoke” (*giogo antico*) and veil, apparently following the example of the unnamed protagonist, whose soul is “free of ancient bonds” (*de' lacci antichi sciolta*, 13). Once again, Petrarch equivocates between the heavenly object of the protagonist's moral perfection and the terrestrial object of European political unity and freedom. He continues, turning to address the protagonist directly:

et che 'l nobil ingegno che dal cielo
per gratia tien' de l'immortale Apollo,
et l'eloquentia sua vertù qui mostri
or con la lingua, or co' laudati incostri
(vv. 64-67).

[and [both] that noble wit which from heaven/ you possess by grace of
deathless Apollo,/ and the strength of eloquence you here display/ now by
tongue, now by your esteemed pen.]

Only now, some sixty lines in, does Petrarch clarify that the one for whom heaven has been waiting is not a political leader but a rhetorician – even, perhaps, a poet, who has Apollo to thank for his *ingegno* (64-65). In crediting the promised military victory to such a man, Petrarch collapses the distinction between politics and poetry, even as he has already done with that between political and spiritual freedom. What results is a classic statement of Ciceronian rhetoric varnished with Christian teleology: as the sixth stanza makes clear, to take the cross not only repeats the virtuous military adventurism of Rome, but surpasses it by serving ends both earthly and divine,³⁴⁶ and

³⁴⁶ Baldassari, 211.

it falls to poetry to bring these good effects to pass. Indeed, so potent will be his addressee's tongue and pen, Petrarch says, that in comparison the deeds of Orpheus and Amphion will seem commonplace (68-69). We observe further an allusion to the pessimism of “La gola e ’l somno,” now amended. Whereas the sonnet presents “chi vòl far d’Elicon nascer fiume” (the one who wishes to draw a stream from Helicon, 7.8) as “cosa mirabile” (a wondrous thing, v. 7), owing to the extinguishing of “ogni benigno lume/ del ciel” (every favorable light/ from heaven, 5-6), the *canzone* defines the limits of the orator's effectiveness within Europe as corresponding to the extent of the knowledge of most sacred Helicon (28.40). In the sonnet, poetry is unknown owing to a withdrawal of heaven's favor, in the *canzone*, its widespread influence is taken as a given, and why? Possibly because, as stanza two remarks, the ruler of heaven has again turned his eyes upon the place where he was crucified (28.23-24). This trope of the beneficial political effects which accrue as a direct consequence of Christ turning to regard the world is one we have seen before in Petrarch, as discussed in chapter three, and, as noted there, one he shares with Dante. The dramatic lament in *Purgatorio* has already been referenced above in connection with sonnet 27; its concerns over the corruption and division of “serva Italia” climax with a direct address to Christ in his salvific role as “crocifisso,” demanding to know if the divine gaze is indeed directed elsewhere (*Purgatorio* 6.119-120). To Dante's question, and his own from the *Liber Sine Nomine*, Petrarch seems to return an answer: not anymore.

Yet despite his advocacy for a political rhetoric that will be capable of redeeming Italy, Petrarch seems to hesitate. The effect of writing a political poem like “O aspectata in ciel” with the goal of persuading someone else to write political poetry

is, paradoxically, to insulate Petrarch's own verse from the effects he promises. If victory is such a foregone conclusion, and poetry is really so capable, then why should not Petrarch employ his own verse to that effect, rather than abdicating in favor of his unnamed protagonist? If Petrarch's poetry is not capable of moral suasion, then why write hortatory poetry like the *canzone* in the first place? The obvious answer is that Petrarch's lyric self as presented in the *Rime* lacks the moral qualities of his idealized poet-protagonist – unlike the addressee of *Rvf* 7 and 28, he is not free from the ancient bonds. The *congedo* suggests as much:

Tu vedrai Italia et l'onorata riva
 canzon, ch'agli occhi miei cela et contende
 non mar, non poggio o fiume,
 ma solo Amor che del suo altero lume
 più m'invaghisce dove più m'incende:
 né Natura può star contra 'l costume
 (*Rvf* 28.106-111)

[You will see Italy and those honored shores/ song, which from my eyes hides
 and draws away/ not sea, nor hill nor river,/ but only Love who by his lofty
 light/ increases my desire as he burns me more:/ nor can Nature stand against
 the force of habit.]

So whereas his poem will be seeing Italy *en route* to its recipient, Petrarch himself will not, and why? Because Amor prevents him; as chapter one remarked, this is the same excuse Silvius returned to justify refusing his brother's invitation to the cloister.³⁴⁷

The opposition between *Natura* and *costume* in v. 111 is calculated to recall the pessimism of sonnet 7, where it refers to the fallen nature of humanity as “almost lost” and “overcome by habit” (*quasi smarrita/ nostra natura vinta dal costume*, 7.3-4).

Petrarch charges the human race with having been estranged (the very Dantean *smarrita*) from its proper course of virtue, leaving Helicon's spring dry (v. 8) and

³⁴⁷ “Parthenias,” 112.

Giovanni Colonna di Galliciano, his addressee, to walk the “other way” without much company. Now, perhaps writing to the same Giovanni, Petrarch turns the charge upon himself. The cumulative effect of Love's ministrations, we understand, is to overcome the poet's natural affection for his homeland, and consequently to render him, unlike Giovanni who retains his *amor patriae*, unfit for the “alta impresa” of restoring Italy to greatness. The lines seem calculated to praise his correspondent by comparison, but one wonders why Giovanni, whose lack of worldly entanglements Petrarch had been celebrating in the first stanza, should suddenly appear as a model of patriotic zeal. It might appear that the poet distinguishes between erotic and nationalist affections, but the final verses of the poem refuse any such accommodation:

Or movi [canzone], non smarrir l'altre compagne,
che non pur sotto bende
alberga Amor, per cui si ride e piagne
(*Rvf* 28.112-114).

[Now go, song, and do not misplace your companions/ for not only under ladies' veils/ does Love dwell, for whom one laughs and weeps.]

The *canzone* ends on a defensive note, with Petrarch's justification for seeming to contaminate with political concerns the putative erotic theme of his collection. In fact, he tells us, there is no contamination: the *Rime* maintains coherence through the persistent dominion of Love, whether beneath a lady's veil or the helmet of a cavalier. But his defense creates more difficulties than it solves, for love in the *Canzoniere* is not infrequently something requiring repentance. In this *canzone* Petrarch had, till now, seemed to evade such associations by instead opting for the more theologically suggestive “charity” (*caritate*, v. 42). If now the love (*Amor*, v. 114) that motivates the hoped-for Crusade is really the same as that which Petrarch has defined as folly

(*Rvf* 6.1) and a torment (12.1), then the moral status of the venture is brought into considerable doubt. The twenty-seven entries before “O aspectata in ciel” have made no secret of the antagonism between the rule of Amor and Christianity. In the first place, in keeping with trobadoric custom, Petrarch's love for Laura is adulterous, a species of idolatry (e.g. *Rvf* 3, 16). “Il successor di Karlo,” on the other hand, explicitly distinguishes between legitimate, spousal affection,³⁴⁸ and its opposite, placing the Crusading impulse in the former category; similarly, the *canzone* glorifies the unifying spirit of its martial theme by drawing a favorable comparison to love “so worthy or so legitimate” (qual amor sì licito o sì degno, 28.43). Now, however, Petrarch associates both himself and the ideals of his *canzone* with the opposite kind of love, that dangerous affection “for which one laughs and weeps” (28.114). It is a dizzying reversal. To situate the apparent holiness of his political agenda within such a problematic discourse tends to unsettle, if not refute outright, his attempted synthesis between earthly and heavenly goals. The implicit tension between Cicero and Dante remains unresolved.

The next entry in the political cycle, “Spirto gentile, che quelle membra reggi” (Noble soul, who rules those members, *Rvf* 53), takes many of the features of its predecessor and intensifies them. The introductory epithet quotes sonnet 7, where the addressee of “O aspectata in ciel” is called “gentile spirto” (v. 13). Already suggested in the incipit is the distinction between soul and body, and Petrarch's valorization of the former, with which *canzone* 28 began: as in “O aspectata in ciel,” Petrarch lauds his addressee for exercising rational control over his body (53.1-3), a virtue that

³⁴⁸ “Amor legitimo... Roma che del suo sposo lagna,” *Rvf* 27.11,13.

implicitly legitimates his political authority (4-6). Likewise recalling sonnet 7 are the decrepit mores of the world, from which, excepting the titular hero, every ray of light has been extinguished.³⁴⁹ But as was the case in the earlier *canzone*, the pessimism of the sonnet is revised and corrected: the predominance of vice in Italy is not merely a tragedy to be lamented, but an opportunity for the protagonist to remedy the situation. But in spite of such superficial congruities, the real business of “Spirto gentile” is to overthrow the tenuous Ciceronian-Christian compromise proposed by *canzone* 28. For whereas “O aspectata in ciel” at least made a show of weaving together earthly and heavenly objectives, “Spirto gentile” is emphatic in its terrestrial commitments.

The ideological distance between *Spirto gentile* and its predecessor is observable as early as the *sìrìma* of stanza one, where Petrarch states the problem he hopes to address:

Italia, che suoi guai non par che senta:
vecchia, otiosa, et lenta
dormirà sempre, et non fia chi la svegli?
(*Rvf* 28.11-13).

[Italy, who seems not to perceive her troubles:/ old, slothful, and slow/ will she sleep forever, and will there be none to wake her?]

What was implicit in *canzone* 28 – pacification and *renovatio* of Italy as the chief consequence of the Crusade – here takes center stage. No more taking up the lance for Jesus; the hero of *canzone* 53, armed now with a senatorial *verga* (v. 4), will deal with Rome and Italy directly. Petrarch does not altogether dispense with the heavenly perspective of “O aspectata in ciel,” but he does thoroughly redirect it. *Canzone* 28 devotes the first half of stanza two to the prayers which have gone up before the “pietà

³⁴⁹ *Rvf* 53.7-8, cf. 7.2.

superna” (supernal pity), seeking aid in the holy conflict against Babylon. The prayers of “Spirto gentile,” by contrast, flow in the opposite direction, with “l’anime che lassù son cittadine” (the souls who are citizens above) invoking the aid of Petrarch’s human correspondent, and their petition has the far more mundane object of halting civil strife in Rome (43-46). As in the preceding *canzone*, the earthly peace in view has a spiritual justification – Petrarch calls attention to the difficulty of pilgrimage to Rome owing to local conditions – but it seems rather perfunctory by contrast. The matter is raised in stanza four, and practically disappears thereafter; references in stanza five to the petitions of various sympathetic parties, including children and monks (vv. 57-61): “O signor nostro, aita, aita” (O our lord, help, help, 62) leave the identity of the *signor* in question conspicuously vague: do they address themselves to the Almighty, or, as before, is it the aristocratic Roman hero whom they have in view? Petrarch highlights the problematic nature of such prayers by linking them to the wishes of various Roman heroes: Fabricius, Brutus, and both Scipios would happily support the hero’s project “s’egli è anchor venuto/ romor là giù” (if to them also came/ the tale there below, *Rvf* 53.37-42). The expression “damning with faint praise” – or perhaps its converse – seems apt: Christian poets who wish to enlist the pagans as authorities typically do not remind us that their sponsors are phoning in endorsements from the pit of hell. Far more than in the previous *canzone*, Petrarch dilutes and perturbs the Christian element of his conceit. The juxtaposition here of Roman and heavenly citizens also recalls and subverts a key moment in Dante’s *Commedia*, the famous promise of Beatrice atop Mount Purgatory that the author and pilgrim will someday be no more a wanderer (*silvano*) but “cive/ di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano” (a

citizen of that Rome whereof Christ is Roman, *Purg.* 32.100-102). For Dante, as noted in chapter two, this is an emphatic restatement of the gulf between the epitome of human government, Rome, and Christ's kingdom, the proper delineation between which, it has been argued, is a central goal of his poem. But what Dante put asunder, Petrarch merges here: his "citizens above" perform their continued political engagement by endorsing the aspirations of pagan heroes. This constitutes another reversal of "O aspectata in ciel," where it was the modern, Christian impulse to vindicate God's honor in the Holy Land that took pride of place, and the catalogue of Classical examples in stanzas six and seven was relegated to a supporting role. Here, the object – restoration of Roman and Italian virtue – owes far more to Cicero than Paul, and even the Christian window-dressing in stanza four is self-refuting. In fact, to represent the saints of heaven praying to a Roman official recalls precisely the historical conflicts between Christian and Roman conceptions of virtue, the great attacks upon the Church by Domitian and Nero over the Imperial *cultus*, and Petrarch casts his saints, shockingly, on the pagan side. The effect of this is largely to undo the tenuous compromise between earthly and heavenly goals which "O aspectata in ciel" had attempted to construct. The Rome of which Christ is a Roman cannot without profound distortion be reduced a means for improving its earthly counterpart. By foregrounding his putative attempt to deploy heaven in service to an earthly political agenda, Petrarch brings to light its fatal contradiction.

Even more striking than the contrasting ends of the two *canzoni* is the divergence in Petrarch's suggested motivation for their respective heroes. As we have seen, the two protagonists are extremely similar. Yet between the closing exhortations

that mark the final stanza of each poem there is a radical ideological displacement. As Baldassari notes, the good effects of *canzone* 28 are attributed to Providence, hence, the closing verses of the final stanza “do not exalt the addressee, but rather invite him to humility and gratitude before God.”³⁵⁰ Petrarch calls on his interlocutor to reflect on ancient Greek successes against the Persians and take confidence in the coming venture; consequently, he is to return thanks to God “who has preserved you for such good.”³⁵¹ “Spirto gentile” takes the opposite approach, offering the reward of personal glory.

ad huom mortal non fu aperta la via
per farsi, come a te, di fama eterno
(*Rvf* 53.92-93)

[to no other man is the way open/ as to you, to make himself by fame
immortal.]

That fame is the reward for magnificent accomplishments goes without saying, but Petrarch's turn of phrase is striking: this renewal of Rome that the hero has in view will be an opportunity for him to “make himself immortal” (*farsi eterno*, v. 93), a virtual citation of *Inferno* 15.85, where Brunetto Latini is reported to have taught the pilgrim “come l’uom s’eterna” (how man makes himself immortal). It is once again the Ciceronian trope of civic immortality, the virtuous cycle of great deeds and renown that seals the relationship of poets to princes and binds both indissolubly to the flourishing of the body politic, for thus by the bribe of immortality in song were the pagan heroes induced to suffer for the common good, an offer which Petrarch now extends to his protagonist. A more antithetical motive to the humble faith encouraged

³⁵⁰ “Non esaltano l’interlocutore, ma lo invitano all’umiltà e alla gratitudine verso Dio,” Baldassari, 216.

³⁵¹ “Che gli anni tuoi riserva a tanto bene,” *Rvf* 28.105.

in the earlier *canzone* can scarcely be contrived. The allusion to *Inferno* emphasizes the widening ideological gulf between the *Rime* and Dante's conception: where "O aspectata in ciel" recalled Cacciaguida without the qualifying elegiac tone, "Spirto gentile" approves the frank paganism of Brunetto Latini.³⁵² Dante would have certainly rejected the Christian-Ciceronian accommodation of *canzone* 28, on the grounds that it conceded too much importance to the civic sphere. Now Petrarch seems to reject it too, but from the opposite direction: where Dante backed away from Cicero, Petrarch seems to throw out Christ.

Curiously enough, now that he has undermined the hybrid potential of his Ciceronian-Christian rhetoric, Petrarch seems to take aim at its Ciceronian component. "Spirto gentile" is, as noted above, explicitly focused on pacifying Rome (and, by extension, Italy). Yet by the sixth stanza it becomes clear that Petrarch's real interest is not merely peace, but partisan advantage.

Orsi, lupi, leoni, aquile et serpi
 ad una gran marmorëa colomna
 fanno noia sovente, et a sé danno:
 di costor piange quella gentil donna
 che t'`a chiamato a ciò che di lei sterpi
 le male piante che fiorir non sanno
 (Rvf 53.71-76).

[Bears, wolves, lions, eagles and snakes/ to a great marble column/ cause frequent irritations, and to themselves harm:/ on their account that noble lady cries/ who has summoned you to tear out the bad plants who do not know how to flower.]

The Colonna, transparently figured as a "great marble column" (gran marmorëa colomna, v. 72) are beset by the other barons, variously signified by the animals in v.

³⁵² Which consisted, it will be recalled, in his preference for the terrestrial immortality of fame over eternity in heaven.

71, and the dead twigs of v. 76, which last it falls to the unnamed protagonist to prune. It may be perfectly natural for Petrarch to celebrate the accession of one of his patron's allies to senatorial dignity, and to look forward to what mischief the new official will be empowered to wreak upon their rivals, but such an outlook is diametrically opposed to his stated goal of returning Rome to her primitive harmony and virtue. It is as if Dante, after all his complaints about the "città partita," were to announce from the heights of the Empyrean that the way to solve the universal discord of the world was to chase all the Black Guelphs from Florence and raze their palaces and towers. The two impulses are as exclusive as Cicero and Catiline.

Coupled with this redefinition of the object of this rhetoric – advantage in the civil war as opposed to its surcease – is Petrarch's increasing doubt about its efficacy. One of the ways in which "Spirto gentile" raises the stakes on its predecessor is by eliminating the middle man. Rather than addressing another poet who will then, in turn, write the hortatory verses that will save Italy, Petrarch's lyric *io* now takes up the job himself. Yet even as he seems to raise the profile of this kind of rhetoric, he makes evident as early as stanza one that the present undertaking is far less certain than that in 28. The final line expresses his wish that he could take Italy, personified as a lazy old woman, by the hair himself, presumably to wake her and draw her forth from the mud ("Le man' l'avess'io avolto entro' capegli!", *Rvf* 53.14, cf. 21-23). But such seizing and saving are clearly prerogatives of the political figure to whom he writes, and not of the poet himself. As a counterfactual, the apostrophe amounts to a declaration of his own relative impotence. No human voice, he testifies in the next two lines, could rouse her (v. 16-17): the time has come for deeds. Whereas the

subject of “O aspectata in ciel” can speak in such a way as to lead Italy to freedom (28.61-62, 70-72), blurring the line between eloquence and political authority, in “Spirto gentile” Petrarch makes a clear delineation between his own speech and any tangible effects. Just at the moment when he ought to be embracing Ciceronian political ideology, when he has divorced civic rhetoric from its religious trappings and appropriated it to his own lyric voice, Petrarch tells us in so many words that its claims are false. Two poems into the political cycle, the optimistic accommodation of *canzone* 28 seems to have been compromised beyond repair.

It is no surprise, then, that upon arriving at the third installment we are greeted with a declaration of rhetorical despair:

Italia mia, benché 'l parlar sia indarno
 a le piaghe mortali
 che nel bel corpo tuo s'è spesse veggio,
 piacemi almen che' miei sospir' sian quali
 spera 'l Tevere et l'Arno,
 e 'l Po, dove doglioso et grave or seggio.
 (Rvf 128.1-6).

[My Italy, although speech is impotent/ before the mortal wounds/ which in your lovely form I so often see,/ it pleases me at least that my sighs be those/ for which hope Tiber and Arno,/ and the Po, where sorrowing and sad I sit.]

The cause of oratory, then, is dead. Italy's wounds are now too grave for any remedy of speech. Previously Petrarch had implied contradictions and adumbrated doubts; now he puts the matter plainly. But with such a grave admission at the outset – that he offers now not public rhetoric but sighs – the question arises as to what purpose the remainder of the long rhetorical performance called “Italia mia” is meant to serve. Apart from its initial function as a meditation on Petrarch's experience in the siege of Parma, in the *Rime* it plays an important role both in wrapping up the political cycle

and in integrating that cycle with the rest of the collection. We remarked above that the progression from the first *canzone* to the second is marked by increasing specificity and ideological rigor. The third and final installment addresses the agenda which its precursors had so carefully refined, and subjects it to a withering *reductio*. So, for example, both *canzoni* had connected Rome to Mars: first in a reference to its founder's magnificence (28.79), then in calling on Romans as a whole to reclaim their birthright (53.26). Petrarch has no need to invent the link between Mars and the Roman national character, but presenting it in such ideal terms inevitably suggests a contrast with Dante, for whom Mars embodies the principle of Florentine civil strife and dissolution, the idolatrous supplanting with earthly political goals those of the *rex Iudaeorum*. What initially appeared to be a throwaway reference to Romulus becomes, in its second iteration, an overt call to paganism. Mars returns in “Italia mia,” but how different his disguise! Rather than the strength of Rome renewed, he is “Mars proud and savage,” to whom it falls to “close and harden hearts” (e i cor’/ che ’ndura et serra/ Marte superbo et fero, 128.12-13), and only God is able to deliver from his power (vv.14-16). It is as if Petrarch's counsel in “Spirto gentile” had been heeded: the Latin rulers are once again “l popol di Marte,” full of pride (115) and violence, and have in consequence of their “divided wills/ laid waste to the most beautiful part of the world” (vostre voglie divise/ guastan del mondo la più bella parte, 55-56). The War-God has returned, and Italy is ruined; now the poet turns to Christ to remedy his own petition.

Petrarch subjects the political agenda of the two prior *canzoni* to a similar deconstruction. When “O aspectata in ciel” argued (indirectly, through the mediation

of another poet) for attacking Palestine, it did so on the basis of restoring concord between the states of Europe, with Italy, home of Petrarch's Orphic interlocutor, at the head. The acme of Fra' Giovanni's notional achievement (Petrarch devotes an entire stanza to it) is seemingly to render the war-like Germans "più devota che non sòle" (more faithful than their custom, 28.52) – to induce them to travel to the Holy Land and there give battle to the infidel (vv. 46-60). This implicit hierarchy between Latins and Barbarians recurs with greater force in "Spirto gentile," which argues the converse: ameliorating civil strife in Italy and Rome (by suppressing rival barons, 53.74-76) will restore the military strength of Rome "whose ancient walls the world fears and loves/ and at them shudders" (53.29-30). The end in view is now not peace but conquest, the restoration of Italy's imperial prerogatives. "Italia mia" represents a further intensification of Petrarch's nationalistic rhetoric: now he dreams not of the halcyon days when fear of Rome was mixed with love, but apophatically recalls the sanguinary violence of the Caesars:

Cesare taccio che per ogni piaggia
 fece l'erbe sanguine
 di lor vene, ove 'l nostro ferro mise
 (Rvf 128.49-51).

[I say nothing of Caesar who on every field/ bloodied the grass/ from their veins to which he set our steel.]

The relatively understated hierarchies of the previous two *canzoni* now metastasize to open war, as Petrarch fantasizes about massacring Germans in their own country: Caesar's legionnaires were Italians armed with "nostro ferro," occupying Germany as the German mercenary companies now occupy Italy. Italy has but to recall her "ancient valor," her rulers to evidence "segno alcun di pietate" (any sign of piety), and

their oppressors will (fia) be demolished in an instant (92-96) – co-operation has become rule has become slaughter. Yet these brave words are belied by Petrarch's dual admissions in stanza one that a) his rhetoric is impotent (1-3), hence able to rouse the necessary virtue in neither rulers nor their subjects, and b) the problem with Italy, in any case, is precisely the overweening rule of Mars (10-13). His talk of easy victory seems particularly fantastical in light of his impressive portrait of German military prowess in “O aspectata in ciel,” where the invincible “tedesca rabbia” (Germanic rage) was to have been directed at the Turks. Not only is Petrarch’s attempt to mobilize the virtues of his *patria* absurdly self-defeating on its own terms, as greater martiality leads to greater disunity, but it explicitly acknowledges itself to be so. As in the previous case, intensifying his civic rhetoric only renders more pellucid its futility.

“Italia mia” is Petrarch's best known political *canzone*, the exemplar, Figurelli said, of patriotic lyric,³⁵³ yet as we have seen it is easily the most pessimistic of the lot. The discordant countermelody extends beyond the poem's moves to thematize its own failure. Petrarch insists on the disinterested, truthful character of his lament: “Io parlo per ver dire,/ non per odio d'altrui né per disprezzo” (I speak for truth, not from hatred nor contempt, 128.63-64). Drawing our attention to the truth-status of so nakedly paradoxical a poem is a curious maneuver for a punctilious rhetorician like Petrarch, who is not likely to have been unaware of its internal contradictions. The question returns: what is the purpose of this political cycle, which, as we have just seen, makes a point of swallowing its tail? The natural explanation is to connect Petrarch’s

³⁵³ Fernando Figurelli, *Lettura del Canzoniere del Petrarca* (Napoli: R. Pironti, 1954), 264.

deconstruction of political rhetoric to his deconstruction, in the remainder of the *Rime*, of Senecan moral suasion, the putative project of his frame-story. Such slippage between political despair and spiritual anxiety is a constant feature of the compositions discussed in chapters one and three of this study. But rather than arguing that Petrarch is merely using political and social circumstances as a metaphor to analyze his own interiority,³⁵⁴ I propose that he connects the two because in the context of prophecy they are inextricable – political and spiritual exile are alike comprehended in the trope of Babylon. Absent his conversion, Dante cannot become the poet of the *Commedia*, any more than Jeremiah can receive his Messianic oracles before experiencing theophany (Jr. 1:9-10). One cannot see the world renewed except through eyes of faith. In the *Rime*, Petrarch includes both elements, but as a kind of photo negative, embedding the theme of failed political *renovatio* within the story of a failed conversion. The famous apostrophe that ends our *canzone*, “Pace, pace, pace” (v. 122) alludes to both reversals: it is the promised result that all of Petrarch's Ciceronian rhetoric has manifestly failed to deliver. Yet its repetition here, in a poem so heavily invested in its own veracity, adds a dark spiritual substratum. The self-consciously counterfactual and ineffective cry of peace recalls a repeated trope in the prophecy of Jeremiah, where the official seers of Judah dismiss the prophet's visions of calamity.

A minore quippe usque ad majorem, omnes avaritiae student, et a propheta usque ad sacerdotem cuncti faciunt dolum. Et curabunt contritionem filiae populi mei cum ignominia, dicentes: Pax, pax! et non erat pax.

(Jeremiah 6:13-14)

³⁵⁴ As does Mazzotta (1993), 146.

[For from the least of them even to the greatest, all are given to covetousness: and from the prophet even to the priest, all are guilty of deceit. And they healed the breach of the daughter of my people disgracefully, saying: Peace, peace: and there was no peace.]

The biblical context matches that of the *canzone* relatively well: Israel, like Italy, invites invasion from “the land of the north” (Jer. 6:22) – Babylon in the former case, Germany in the latter - owing to their grasping cupidity (*avaritia* in Jeremiah becomes in Petrarch *desir cieco*, v. 36), and the consequence is annihilation. This is also consistent with Petrarch's description in the *Liber Sine Nomine*, as described in chapter three – Italy's problems are self-inflicted, and, so far as human instruments are concerned, irremediable; her present political state is so dire as to merit comparison to that of the Jews in Babylon. But beyond merely underscoring the grim prognosis for Italy, the connection to Jeremiah impeaches the lyric *io* of the *Canzoniere* as a false prophet. Like the soothsayers of the Southern Kingdom, the narrator of the political cycle is a deceiver, and his agenda has its end in Babylon³⁵⁵. In drawing the connection, Petrarch represents his narrator's embrace of Ciceronian rhetoric as a false promise with catastrophic consequences.³⁵⁶

It might seem that such a conclusion requires us to reconsider the tight relationship earlier asserted between Petrarch's political agenda in the *Rime*, and his more explicit project of renouncing his earthly love. But the two narratives are

³⁵⁵ Boyle takes a contrary view, ignoring the political cycle's internal contradictions to lump it in with the “prophetic mission for the poet Petrarch” to restore the Church to Rome and Virgilian virtue to Italians. In this mission she also includes “[t]he epic *Africa*, designed to inspire Italy's repentance through self-knowledge of its past glory” (131). It seems evident that the two goals, Christian and Roman, are at cross purposes. As the foregoing analysis has shown, both Dante and Petrarch agreed that the civic religion of Cicero and Brunetto Latini can only be harmonized with Christianity if the latter is mutilated beyond recognition.

³⁵⁶ The connection between Jeremiah's prophecy, particularly in Lamentations, and the penitential project of the *Canzoniere* has been drawn by Ronald Martinez, “Mourning Laura in the *Canzoniere*: Lessons from Lamentations,” *MLN* 118 no. 1 (January 2003 – Italian Issue), 1-45.

inextricable. Within six poems of admitting, in “Italia mia,” that the peace his rhetoric produces is illusory, we find the corresponding statement: “Pace non trovo” (134.1); as Jeremiah put it, “‘Pax, pax,’ et non erat pax.” The entire *Canzoniere* is a grand excursus detailing Petrarch’s desperate search for peace, political as well as personal; and the twin failures are mutually implicative. It is impossible to decouple Petrarch’s subjectivity from his *patria* – as we saw before in the *Secretum* and the *Sine nomine*, the intractable divisions that plague Italy are exactly reproduced in Petrarch’s soul. Indeed, the explicit connection to Jeremiah merely reinforces the already explicit equivalence between Petrarch’s love for Laura and his investment in the world: as the proemial sonnet declared, to renounce the former is to realize that “whatever gratifies the world is a passing dream” (*Rvf* 1.14). The joint mortality of Laura and the world for which she stands is one term in the dialectical procedure of the *Rime*, for even if his Lady dies, Petrarch’s argument is that pursuing her was worth it just the same. Yet, as the political *canzoni* are at pains to tell us, this pursuit presents its own snare, that of Brunetto and his ilk. Petrarch’s self-defeating rhetoric in these poems implies his critique of their presumptive ideology, which holds politics as an end in itself. To ignore the evanescent nature of the political, Petrarch argues, entraps one in a labyrinth, in the chaos and contingency of Mars. If the poet demonstrates that both alternatives – rhetorical engagement with the world and its opposite – are literary and theological dead ends, perhaps that is because he has some other object in view.

In a similar vein, there is no need to read the failed repentance of the *Rime* as an attack on Augustinian or Dantean soteriology, as if Petrarch thought his own divided will showed true conversion to be impossible. A more likely possibility is that

Petrarch contradicts himself so that we might question the terms of the debate. Just as the political cycle serves to remove Cicero from serious consideration, the erotic narrative of the *Rime* rejects the anti-materialist tendency against which Petrarch has been struggling since he wrote the *Carmen*. He cannot reject Laura, nor the world, nor himself; nor (here is the crucial point) need he do so in the first place. Yet the present state of all these things is intolerable. The remainder of this chapter will present Petrarch's eventual solution to this Babylonian instability.

Up to this point we have been drawing comparisons between the rhetorical posture of the *Rime* and that elucidated by chapters one and three in Petrarch's other works, and thus far the same pattern has emerged: on the one hand, optimism for a secular *renovatio*, subsequently exposed as sterile; on the other, *contemptus mundi*, subsequently rejected as impracticable. As before, the exilic state of Petrarch's country is reflected by the intractable bondage of his soul, and both resist the remedy of moral suasion. But the poet of the *Rime* goes further still, suggesting the potential for a remedy in the very moment of despair.

If Petrarch's dual themes of faith and politics within the *Rime* truly find their intersection on the road to Babylon, then those lyrics that treat of that city explicitly assume greater relative importance in the macrotext. The so-called "Babylonian sonnets" (*Rvf* 136-38), are a remarkable moment in the collection, when Petrarch's general disappointment with contemporary mores comes to a sharp point. No longer content to indict the world at large, he focuses his attention on the manifold corruptions of the Avignonese Papacy. This he identifies with the Whore of John's Apocalypse (e.g., Apocalypse 17:1), a move which recalls a similar equivalence drawn

by the *Sine Nomine* in Letter Nine, where he signs himself “an exile on the rivers of Babylon” (*super flumina Babylonis*), an obvious reference to David's prophetic psalm of exile. That Psalm, in the Vulgate text, comes in at number one hundred thirty-six, suggesting, as we turn to address Petrarch's apocalyptic sonnet of the same number, that he may have had a similar idea. Nevertheless, in the context of the *Rime*, such a polemical deployment of Babylon marks an important alteration in the mode of Petrarch's rhetoric. Whereas his initial, relatively optimistic political *canzone* had raised the specter of Babylon, it was strictly an external enemy off in the desert, trembling at the united force of Christendom (*Rvf* 28.30). But now that the fiction of political reform has been exposed as such, the trope reappears, this time sitting in the throne of the vicar Christ. And Petrarch's response is no longer to lament, but to call down judgment on its head.

There is a complication, however, when we begin to read the sonnet, which opens thus: “Fiamma dal ciel su le tue treccie piova” (let fire from heaven rain upon your tresses, *Rvf* 136.1). In one sense the conceit is fairly straightforward: the evil city, addressed in second person singular, is a wicked woman, “in cui Luxuria fa l'ultima prova” (in whom Lust puts forth its greatest effort, v. 8). Papal wickedness is gendered female and expressed in sexual terms; in consequence of such apostasy, the poet prays for Heaven's fire. Petrarch's prayer is unsurprising – indeed, as a Christian, he can hardly respond otherwise to the ultimate symbol of human rebellion against God. The sexualized degeneration of the Apostolic Church – the Bride of Christ – into Babylonian apostasy is likewise a familiar Biblical trope, derived from the prophecy of Ezekiel (chapters 22-23), among many other places, and well-attested

in moralist Christian literature from the early Roman empire onward. Yet, if we put aside the context supplied by having read the entire sonnet, and instead imagine ourselves approaching the first line in isolation, the picture is somewhat obscured. The identity of the addressee is initially unspecified, although “treccie” suggests a woman; only in line two will we learn that her moral status is “malvagia.” In the meantime, while inferring divine judgment from “fire from Heaven” is not *prima facie* unreasonable, it is hardly the only option permitted us by Petrarch’s text. In fact, whereas there are no similarly imprecatory poems in the preceding hundred and thirty-five compositions, there is at least one in which burning rain features prominently: the *congedo* of canzone twenty-three, “Nel dolce tempo della prima etade.”³⁵⁷

Canzon, i’ non fu’ mai quel nuvol d’oro
 che poi discese in pretiosa pioggia,
 sì che ’l foco di Giove in parte spense;
 (Rvf 23.161-3)

[Song, I was never that golden cloud/ which then dispersed in precious rain/ so
 that Jove’s fire in part went out;]

The lines allude to the miraculous impregnation of Danae, mother of Perseus, by Zeus in one of his more creative guises: a golden cloud. The crucial verb *spegnere*, attached to either “quel nuvol d’oro,” or, in a reflexive sense, “’l foco di Giove,” extends the metaphor of rain (*pretiosa pioggia*, v. 162) by applying its extinguishing effects to the passion of the god. Yet the imagery doubles back on itself, for the very rain tasked with quenching the fire of Jove’s lust (163), is equally the mechanism by which that lust is consummated. The end of the *canzone* thus depicts a rain of divine

³⁵⁷ Marco Santagata devotes significant energy to demonstrating the peculiar significance of “Nel dolce tempo” in the general economy of the *Rime*. *Per moderne carte: La biblioteca volgare di Petrarca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990), particularly 273-327.

fire upon a woman, not in punishment, but for sexual gratification. Recall that *Giove* in Petrarch's lexicon indicates both Jupiter and Jehovah, and that *giova* appears in 136.4 as a rhyme word with *piova*, and it begins to seem that sonnet and *canzone* are speaking in similar terms.³⁵⁸ "Nel dolce tempo" is a crucial element in assessing the rhetorical self-awareness of the *Rime*: the first *canzone* of the book, it contains Petrarch's transformation into the laurel (39-40), the first mention of Laura's Medusa-like qualities (80), and, uniquely in Petrarch's verse, has an entire line recur elsewhere in the collection - the final verse of the "tradition" poem (*Rvf* 70), the poetic genealogy that relates Petrarch to Cavalcanti, Dante, and Cino da Pistoia. If the political cycle, which began by launching a Crusade, concludes by bringing us around to Babylon, the Babylonian sonnets drive us backward to consider the possibilities of Petrarch's poetic vocation.

The most obvious common element between the sonnet and the *canzone* to which it refers is their shared concern with degeneration. "Nel dolce tempo" is famous for its sequence of Ovidian metamorphoses, where the poet-lover's first encounter with the *donna amata* changes him into a laurel (39) and thence to a swan (60); incurring her wrath by incautious speech he becomes by turns a rock, then a fountain (119); then, winning pity by his tears he regains himself (135). Reduced like Echo to an incorporeal voice, he wanders (139-43), and returns to his body only to suffer the worst fate of all: he becomes a stag like Actaeon, and must flee before the baying of his own hounds (158-160). But the most fundamental metamorphosis of the *canzone*, the initial rupture for which the lush parade of Classically-informed

³⁵⁸ Indeed, sonnet 137 will indict Babylon for worshipping *non Giove et Palla, ma Venere et Bacco* (4).

mutations is but a gloss, appears on the spiritual plane. “Lasso, che son! che fui!” (Alas, what I am! What I was!, v. 30), the narrator exclaims, referring to the primal innocence he forfeited by succumbing to the demands of love. The story of the *canzone* is, at bottom, Petrarch’s fall from grace. Likewise, the narrative tension of the sonnet, together with its two companions, might be fairly summarized in two sentences: a) the Curia is wicked; b) it didn’t used to be. The first quatrain charts a journey from Saturnine purity, evoked by the Ovidian trope of river-water and acorns,³⁵⁹ to wealth and status (136.2-3). But it is an evolution that is also a deformation: the third line is a perverse refraction of Christ’s incarnation from II Corinthians 8:9 “that being rich he became poor, for your sakes; that through his poverty you might be rich.” Petrarch indicts the clergy for the obverse procedure – “by impoverishing others you have become rich and great” (*Rvf.* 136.3).

The next 7 lines present a comprehensive picture of corruption: the Church becomes a nest of falsehoods, then a slave to wine and delicacies; lustful old men embrace *fanciulle* (with a distinct tinge of satire regarding Luxuria’s “ultima prova” in line 8), and Beelzebub himself appears with the implements of sin in hand (“co’ mantici et col foco et co li specchi,” 11), which Santagata interprets as being used “per stimolare... la stanca virilità” (in order to stimulate their exhausted virility , 674). The transformation has been completed: the Bride of Christ is now a strumpet, and the stench of her ill-doing reaches God (v. 14). The bottom half of the *sestina* recapitulates the itinerary of the Church: initial poverty and purity (12-13), then such prodigious evil as threatens to pollute the courts of heaven. The sonnet is framed,

³⁵⁹ Cf. *Met.* I.106.

then, by an inverted cycle of celestial communication: as the stink of evil rises upward in the last verse, just so falls the judicial rain of fire in the first. Yet the final verse, taken as a complement to the incipit, recalls not merely the grounds of judgment, but also its aftermath. John's account of Babylon in the Apocalypse ends with the beatified saints rejoicing over its destruction. "And again they said: Alleluia. And her smoke ascendeth for ever and ever" (19:3). In John's vision, the ascension of smoke from the ruined city masks and rectifies the offending scent of wickedness it gave off while intact (18:5); just so Petrarch's outraged invective against Avignon contains the seeds of its own resolution – that is, it is in principle comedic. This trajectory comes clearer still if we read the second sonnet in the Babylonian triptych, "L'avara Babilonia à colmo il sacco" (*Rvf* 137.1). Here Petrarch seems less concerned with the history of the Church, and comparatively more interested in diagnosing its sin, and dilating on what will follow the inevitable judgment. Whereas "Fiamma dal ciel" impeached the obvious symptoms of decadence, its successor takes the manifold evils of the Papal court for granted. As the first quatrain plainly states, Babylon has already attained to vice and, in consequence, God's impending wrath, in sufficient measure. But this sonnet seeks an explanation in pagan theological allegory, wherein the trouble with the high clergy is that they've traded "Giove et Palla" for Venus and Bacchus, an obvious conceit for their debauched behavior. But Petrarch takes his conceit seriously: after positioning himself as waiting impatiently for justice to be accomplished (137.5), he announces that their idols will be cast down while their towers, and the people who dwelt therein, burn inside and out. Her smoke ascendeth

forever. In the second tercet Petrarch opens the question of what will succeed the cataclysm, and his answer is heartening.

Anime belle et di virtute amiche
terranno il mondo; et poi vedrem lui farsi
aurèo tutto, et pien de l'opre antiche.
(*Rvf* 137.12-14)

[Beautiful souls and friends of virtue/ will possess the world; and then we shall see it make itself all of gold, and full of ancient deeds.]

The effect of the devastation for which he prays will be the reappearance of the Golden Age. Lest we be left in doubt at the interpenetration of Classical and Christian themes that defines the purity of the apostolic church in Ovidian terms, the final sonnet of the cycle takes a more explicitly biblical tack, drawing on Ezekiel's prophecy against the Jews, to mock Rome in her Babylonian guise (v. 3) for the folly in relying on her lovers (10-12). Adultery as a *senhal* for spiritual infidelity is a biblical commonplace, further developing the theme of idolatry, which as we saw weighed heavily in the political sequence (and elsewhere in the *Rime*). Here, however, the precise identity of the idols in question seems to shift: the civic idol *par excellence* is Mars, God of war and associated, as Dante noted in *Convivio*, with the power of oratory; whereas the twin temptations for the Church appear to be Mammon and Luxuria, Bacchus and Venus. Petrarch's parting shot, that Emperor Constantine will never return (13), focuses our attention on the precise moment of transmutation, when the Roman church was made a profligate, the moment that Dante dramatized in *Purgatorio* by metamorphosing the Chariot of Christ into a feathered monstrosity. Yet as in Dante's vision, Petrarch balances his vitriol with the assurance, assumed by his predictions of restoration and taunts alike, that the Babylonian wickedness of the

Church is finite, a period of trial with a definite end. Even in his lyric, Petrarch imports the radical historical expectations of Christian theology where the temporary triumph of the Adversary is just another scene in the divine masquerade – which is, of course, a comedy.

But if the Babylonian sonnets communicate Petrarch's aspirations for the Church, is there any reason to suppose he is destined for a similar good end? When we turn our attention back to the manifold deformations of Petrarch's soul and body that punctuate "Nel dolce tempo," the prognosis looks pretty grim. After eight transformations in a hundred and sixty verses, the speaker has been going from bad to worse; his final shape, that of Actaeon's deer, is understood to be a death sentence.

But let us consider the *congedo*.

Canzon, i' non fu' mai quel nuvol d'oro
che poi discese in pretiosa pioggia,
sì che 'l foco di Giove in parte spense;
ma fui ben fiamma ch'un bel guardo accense,
et fui l'uccel che più per l'aere poggia,
alzando lei che ne' miei detti honoro:
né per nova figura il primo alloro
seppi lassar, ché pur la sua dolce ombra
ogni men bel piacer del cor mi sgombra.
(*Rvf* 23.161-9)

[Song, I was never that golden cloud/ which then dispersed in precious rain/
such that the fire of Jove in part was spent,/ but I really was that flame which a
lovely visage set alight/ and I was the bird who mounts up highest through the
air,/ bearing off her who in my words I honor/ nor can I leave my first laurel
for another shape, for even her sweet shadow/ every uncouth pleasure from my
heart removes.]

The first thing to observe is the drastic increase in the rate of change. Having endured approximately one metamorphosis per twenty-line stanza in what came before, Petrarch confronts alterations in the first six verses of the *congedo* at ten times that

rate. From the golden cloud (161-163) he turns to flame (164) and then, at last, an eagle (165-166), all at breakneck pace. Moreover the first of these, which, we recall, was the initial point of contact between “Nel dolce tempo” and “Fiamma dal ciel,” appears under the curious (and capacious) category of transformations that Petrarch’s narrator did not experience. What is the significance of a non-transformation that merits such prominence as the opening line of the *congedo* affords? Most simply, the golden cloud is singled out (both for inclusion, as the only non-metamorphosis in the poem, and for exclusion from the other metaphors of change) in consequence of representing transformation as a successful expedient by the lover. The laurel tree is an indelible reminder of Apollo’s failed pursuit of Daphne, the swan evokes the futile tears of Cygnus over the thunder-stricken body of his nephew Phaeton.³⁶⁰ The next transformation alludes to Medusa, as noted above – surely there can be no more obvious statement that one’s *amour* isn’t going well than to conflate the Lady with a Gorgon – and the next, a fountain, derives from Byblis’ vain tears over her brother (p. 115). Echo is reduced to a mere voice because of Narcissus’ indifference, and Actaeon’s transformation is provoked by his impious violation of the virgin huntress, the briefest glimpse before he is torn to pieces by his hounds. In short, the entire *canzone*, under the guise of a *remedia amoris*, is a catalogue of frustrated sexual desire that finds its climax in disassociation from the single example of amorous success. Yet Petrarch’s pursuit of Laura, which might at first glance seem to be the driving

³⁶⁰ Santagata (1996), 110. These two transformations also bear a curious relationship with the closing allusions to Jupiter: in the first case, “Danaë” is perilously similar to “Dane,” Petrarch’s name for Daphne in the *Bucolicum Carmen*; in the second, is it likely Petrarch could change his lover-poet to a swan without having Leda, another of Jupiter’s successful conquests, in the back of his mind? In any event, the swan in line 60 is clearly unsuccessful, so any resemblance can only be ironic.

tension of the song, is merely the symptom of the initial spiritual deformation wrought by the “*fera voglia*” (v. 2) of Love. In the now-familiar Petrarchan manner, the apparent grounds of conflict – whether Laura will rescue her suitor by yielding to his blandishments – are shown to be a false dichotomy, for catching Laura at Love’s behest will not restore his soul. Counterintuitively, the lack of consummation underscored at the top of the *congedo* actually furthers Petrarch’s ultimate goal in the *canzone*, as he sets it forth in the opening stanza: “perché cantando il duol si disacerba” (v. 4). The objective of the poem is to ameliorate (literally to “unbitter”) his pain, which Santagata interprets along Horatian lines as a kind of Classically-inflected lyric therapy session³⁶¹ – the poet’s ability to voice his discontent as a means of easing his sorrow. I want to suggest, however, that the rhetorical agenda of *canzone* 23 is rather bolder, that the “duol” that Petrarch means his song, and by extension, his songbook, to remedy is similar in kind to that of which he was complaining in the Babylonian sonnets: the descent from wisdom and innocence into the tumult of erotic vice. We know he defines Amor, his new master in the poem, in terms of idolatry (famously, Love “made [Petrarch] love God less,” 360.31), and that this spiritual deformation is meant to be recalled by the Babylonian sequence, where the descent of the Church from *her* primal innocence is marked by breaking faith with God and transferring her loyalty to Venus (137.4). We also know that the desperate political straits of contemporary Europe are represented (in the *Rime* as elsewhere) to be merely another facet of the same Babylonian depravity. Petrarch’s fallen world infects poet, priest, and king alike; it gives the lie to Cicero and renders even apostolic

³⁶¹ Santagata also observes in the same place that Petrarch elsewhere questions the value of such respite, calling it illusory and counterproductive. Santagata (1990), 103.

virtue evanescent. Its face is constantly in flux; metamorphosis – deformation – and entropy are essential to its nature. The central trauma of the *Rime*, as Teodolinda Barolini suggests, is the inescapable fact of its poet's own mortality.³⁶² But rather than using rhetorical mazes to obscure and ignore the ravages of time, as if to turn the Labyrinth against the Minotaur, Petrarch's actual objective is to see the Labyrinth and its monster blasted from the earth. Let us return to the *congedo*.

Petrarch's non-transformation into a golden cloud leads to two further metamorphoses, which Santagata interprets as alluding to Jove's seduction of Aegina in the form of a flame,³⁶³ and, more famously, Ganymede. This reading leaves obscure, however, the salient question of what might distinguish the one Jovian seduction, that of Danaë, from the other two. Petrarch tells us he was *not* the golden cloud, but he did become the flame and bird. Equally problematic is that "Nel dolce tempo" has asserted, from the outset that Petrarch's suit was unsuccessful: the whole thing is a retrospective account of his sufferings. It would be absurd to make the final moment of his lament into an admission that, having won the Lady, he actually has no further complaints. Besides, if there is one constant in the endless fluctuations of the *Rime*, surely it is that Petrarch as lover cannot succeed – he simply cannot carry off and ravish the *donna amata* in the way that Jove, aquilaform, did beautiful Ganymede. Interpretations of the *Rime* that purport to show him doing so, even on the level of a metaphor, ought to be held in suspicion. In any event, the present case offers us a

³⁶² Teodolinda Barolini, "The Making of a Lyric Sequence: Time and Narrative in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*" (MLN vol 104, no. 1, [Jan. 1989 – Italian Issue], 1-38.

³⁶³ Santagata erroneously sources the Aegina story to *Metamorphoses* VII.615-8, rather than VI.113, which runs *Asopida luserit ignis*. Sturm-Maddox agrees with him about the eagle, but prefers Semele for the "bel guardo" (31).

better alternative. What if the *fiamma* (v. 164) is actually a reference to the myth of Semele, “metamorphosed” (per Ovid) into a flame upon beholding Jove's unveiled glory? It would continue the general pattern in the *canzone* of Petrarch's self-representation as the (often-female) victim of metamorphosis, and permits a meaningful delineation between this successful change and the transformation *manqué* that preceded it, justifying the adversative in v. 164. More importantly, as will be seen, it provides a way for Petrarch to make sense of this complicated nexus of political and spiritual exile he so insistently combines together. As he said in response to the plenary wickedness of Avignon, “Aspectando ragion mi struggo et fiacco” (137.5; waiting for justice [ragion] I grow weary and worn) – yet it is also an answer, a rational account he seeks; an alternate perspective that will enable him to peer beyond the tragedy of history. What he is looking for, in short, is the transcendent vision that will enact a transformation *ad bonum*, and change his halting lyric to a comedy.

In this regard, the symbolic potential of Semele is considerable. Burned up because of her bold desire to look on God (Jove) directly, she makes a handy figure for introducing both the dangers and the glories of mystical communion with the divine. Equally, as the mother of Bacchus, Semele is related to poetic furor; Ovid recounts her role in fomenting riotous bacchanalian festivals in the environs of Rome.³⁶⁴ Most significant for our purposes is her appearance in Dante's *Paradiso*, *canto* 21.³⁶⁵ This *canto*, which begins with the pilgrim's and Beatrice's ascent to the Heaven of Saturn, begins on a note of uncertainty and peril.

³⁶⁴ *Fasti* 6.503ff.

³⁶⁵ Kevin Brownlee, “Ovid's Semele and Dante's Metamorphosis: *Paradiso* XXI-XXIII,” in *MLN*, Vol. 101, No. 1, Italian Issue (Jan., 1986): 147-156.

Già eran li occhi miei rifissi al volto
 de la mia donna, e l'animo con essi,
 e da ogne altro intento s'era tolto.
 E quella non ridea; ma "S'io ridessi,"
 mi cominciò, "tu ti faresti quale
 fu Semelè quando di cener fessi:
 ché la bellezza mia, che per le scale
 de l'eterno palazzo più s'accende,
 com' hai veduto, quanto più si sale,
 se non si temperasse, tanto splende,
 che 'l tuo mortal podere, al suo fulgore,
 sarebbe fronda che trono scoscende.

(*Paradiso* 21.1-12).

[Already my eyes were fixed again upon the face/ of my lady, and my soul
 with them/ from every other thought it was removed./ And she refrained from
 smiling but began/ "Were I to smile, you would become what/ Semele was
 when she turned to ash:/ for my beauty, which as I mount the stairs/ of the
 eternal palace burns yet brighter,/ as you have seen, the higher we rise,/ that if
 it were not tempered it would shine so brightly that your mortal power before
 its glory would be like leaves scorched by a thunderbolt.]

The pilgrim gazes fixedly at Beatrice, shocked to discover that here in the noblest of the motile heavens she refrains from smiling (v. 4). The reason she gives Dante is that his vision is as yet too weak to look upon her unveiled countenance, which grows in splendor as she regains her proper place among the blessed. Were she to permit him to do so, her smile, like Jove's thunderbolt in the myth, would incinerate him. As Kevin Brownlee argues, the Semele-myth undergirds the structure of the pilgrim's encounter with the Contemplatives, both here at the outset, explicitly, and throughout the next two *canti*, through (among other things) a pattern of repeated references to thunderbolts.³⁶⁶ It culminates with the brief theophany in *Paradiso* 23, once he has passed the threshold of the Crystalline Sphere (23.19-39): overwhelmed ("ti sobranza," 32) by Christ's appearance, Dante's own mind expands ("la mente mia.../

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 155.

fatta piú grande,” vv. 43-44), a process he compares to the discharge of lightning (40-42); newly transported, he re-opens his eyes and turns them on his Lady, finally able to endure the brilliant sight (55-60); in the process, not coincidentally, he fulfills the aspirations of his *Vita Nuova* to behold his lady in God’s presence. This increased power of vision enables him to see, as well, the celestial rose (73), and directly triggers his famous reflection on the difficulty of his mimetic task – “e cosí, figurando il paradiso,/ convien saltar lo sacro poema” (and thus, in representing Paradise, it is fitting that the sacred poem leap, 61-62). In order to become the poet of the *Commedia*, Dante must transcend Semele’s failed example, and look not just upon his lady, but on the ultimate ground of reality without being consumed. Recall that Dante’s divine mission, as communicated in the pageant atop Mount Purgatory, had as necessary antecedent passage through a wall of flame; only thus, Virgil warned him, could he ever hope to gaze on Beatrice again.³⁶⁷ Yet even having passed the flames, the pilgrim is insufficiently prepared: from the moment she arrives on the scene, Beatrice’s eyes are a constant source of fascination and distress. Dante’s ability to look her in the face tracks the progress of his sanctification; their first meeting in *Purgatorio* is defined by Dante’s problematic gaze. The first thing the pilgrim notices about her is the green cloak that obstructs his sight.³⁶⁸ Then he turns aside to look at Virgil, who, he finds, has suddenly been lost to view. The long impeachment of his yet-remaining vice follows hard on Virgil’s disappearance, culminating in *Purgatorio* 31 with Beatrice commanding him to raise his eyes to her.³⁶⁹ Semele-like, the pilgrim

³⁶⁷ *Purg.* 27.35-36.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.34-37.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.67-75.

finds he cannot bear the longed-for sight and is mysteriously changed: “I fell, defeated, and what I became then/ she knows” (*Pur.*31.89-90). And the error that unfits him for regarding his beloved consisted chiefly in an idolatrous attachment to the Earthly City. The departure of Virgil, as has been observed, bears a tight thematic connection to the sin of which the pilgrim/poet must repent: both are intimately linked with the characteristic transgression of Orpheus, the model for Ciceronian poetics.³⁷⁰ For Dante to succeed where Semele had failed requires thus not only personal but poetic redemption.

In this context, for Petrarch to present himself as failing the test of Semele aptly sums up his experience in this most entropic of *canzoni*, “Nel dolce tempo.” His rhetoric, which he has so thoroughly discredited by repeatedly staging its inability to free his country and reform its character, is likewise shown to be unable to prevent him falling – and remaining – beneath the yoke of love. These parallels between his own fall and that of the errant Christian Church suggests that both suffer from a deformation equally beyond human remedy. His pursuit of Laura in “Nel dolce tempo” becomes metaphorically an attempt to rationalize his intolerable situation: to escape from time and see the end from the beginning, a trespass of divine prerogatives that can only end with Petrarch's own demise. This is the essential narrative of *canzone* 23: the derangement that impels Petrarch's pursuit of Laura renders him equally ill-suited for her gaze. If he cannot, like Jove, take her in the cloud, then he is condemned to burn. Petrarch, the poet of the *Rime*, his great act of self-authorship, indicts himself as a tremendous failure.

³⁷⁰ See Chapter 2, above.

And yet, as in Dante, the flames may yet prove purgative. We have not yet discussed the significance of the final transformation of “Nel dolce tempo.” Having suffered in the flames, Petrarch metamorphoses into a bird of some kind, probably an eagle, as the bird which flies the highest. To transform from ashes to a bird, however, suggests no ordinary avian but the phoenix. Christopher Warner has argued for the unique significance of the phoenix in the narrative arc of the *Canzoniere*, proposing that the apparent failure to repent is actually meant to re-enact the phoenix-myth: if Petrarch represents himself aflame with passion, whether in “Nel dolce tempo” or elsewhere, it is only because that burning, so contextualized, necessarily implies rebirth.³⁷¹ Whether or not Warner’s scheme for the *Canzoniere* holds, certainly the present instance seems a clear example of phoenix-like rebirth. In that sense, like Dante’s experience in Purgatory, Petrarch’s ability to suffer and record the ravages of time permits him to transcend them; purified by fire and recalled to life he is enabled, at least metaphorically, to regain his squandered innocence. This is the answer to the question posed near the beginning of this section: the way that Petrarch’s song “unbitters” (*disacerba*) his pain is by permitting it to kill him – figuratively in the sense of the poem, spiritually and finally if taken in its ultimate theological sense – then crowing with the Apostle “Oh Death, where is thy sting?” (I Corinthians 15:55). Yet if that is the case, if the conclusion of “Nel dolce tempo” represents at least a fractal instance of spiritual conversion, itself a pageant of the resurrection of the body at the end of days, why not proceed, as Dante did, to incorporate this into a universal narrative? If Petrarch has succeeded, in the space of a single *canzone* so early in the

³⁷¹ Warner, 16.

Rime, in obtaining that transcendent perspective that makes sense of all the ruin of the world, why does he still spend the remaining three hundred and forty-three poems wandering the Labyrinth? There are two justifications. First, his conversion in “Nel dolce tempo” is incomplete without the prodigious evidence of failure he heaps up around it. To a far greater degree than Dante, Petrarch perceives the tremendous burden placed by mortality upon his own poetics. Petrarch knows little of Dante’s hair-whitening audacity in claiming the mantle of vatic authority. His severely introspective bent requires a much deeper self-accounting than the poet of the *Commedia* required of himself, a longer (and infinitely subtler) struggle before his poetry could be purged for its new and Providential work. The second, and rather simpler, answer to the question “why did not Petrarch respond to the conversion he depicts by writing something more triumphant?” is that he did. The *Trionfi* are a collection of processional allegories in Dante’s patented *terza rima* which recount a hierarchy of various elements, ordered according to their relative power. And it is precisely here that we see Petrarch express the kind of divine objectivity that we would expect of one reborn – another significance of the eagle into which he is transformed at the end of “Nel dolce tempo” is the gift of unblinking sight, a virtue that associates that bird with John’s apocalyptic prophecy. Amor leads the first of these, drawing Petrarch in his train, but he is followed by Chastity, against whom Love’s tyranny is impotent. Laura features prominently here, only to be swept up by the following *Triumphus Mortis*. After death comes Fame, and so the *Triumphus Famae* leads those heroes whose noble deeds outlived them. Yet Fame too has a *terminus ad quem*, and it finally gives way to Time.

The last of these processions is the *Triumphus Eternitatis*. Arguably the final poem Petrarch ever wrote, it ought to have been – so say the few critics who take an interest in it – a kind of Petrarchan *Paradiso*, the moment when Petrarch matched the strength of his maturity against so towering a rival. With such expectations, it is not hard to understand their disappointment. Pitting the two compositions against each other, Moevs dismisses Petrarch’s “rather off-hand account” as “almost Ariostesque in irony”;³⁷² Santagata calls it a poem of eternal death that stands in “contrast [...] with the author’s most intimate convictions.”³⁷³ But it is the fact of the comparison itself that begs explanation, not Petrarch’s poem. Petrarch’s composition, with its hundred forty-four verses, is approximately one thirty-third the length of Dante’s final *cantica*. More importantly, they have radically different subjects. Dante’s is a travelogue that takes place in historical time, beginning on a Saturday in 1300, and ending at dawn Easter Sunday with the beatific vision. Petrarch’s, rather, is a vision of the cosmos, from the New Earth, the old one having passed away.³⁷⁴ This opens distinctly different narrative possibilities to each. Dante’s poem still contains historical drama – Saint Peter can flush crimson and threaten doomsday on the wicked pontiff. After Armageddon, when Petrarch’s *Triumph* takes place, there’s little point in such theatrics. Similarly, while Dante’s journey to the stars is freighted with the awful burden of his divine commission, Petrarch’s look about the world made new seems a distinctly casual affair by contrast. How could it be otherwise? There is, per John’s

³⁷² Moevs, 236.

³⁷³ *Petrarca: Trionfi, Rime estravaganti, Codice degli abbozzi*, eds. Vinicio Pacca and Laura Paolino; Introduction by Marco Santagata (Milan: Mondadori, 1996). Santagata, p. LI-LII.

³⁷⁴ *Triumphus Eternitatis* 21 (cf. Apocalypse 21.1). References to the Italian text of the *Trionfi* taken from Pacca and Paolino, 1996. Translations mine, although I have also consulted the English version prepared by Earnest Hatch Wilkens (*The Triumphs of Petrarch* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962]).

account, no sorrow now, no conflict. One cannot write adventure-stories in eternity. So Petrarch's narrator spends the first ninety-odd verses reflecting on various aspects of what he finds: time has collapsed into a single point (*TE* 28-9), the planets no longer spin through the heavens but remain fixed (40-42), human vanity and striving are reprehended (49-51). But this is not to say that nothing happens there. Laura finally appears, proclaiming "Ecco chi pianse sempre, e nel suo pianto/ sopra il riso d'ogni altro fu beato!" (See the one who always cried, and in his tears/ is blessed above the smile of every other!, 95-96). Petrarch's sufferings in love, which we saw were really the sufferings of contingency, of time, are now, at long last, afforded the only perspective capable of lending them significance. Eternity, for Petrarch, is finally a property of vision.

Vedrassi quanto in van cura si pone,
 e quanto indarno s'affatica e suda,
 come sono inganate le persone:
 nesun segreto fia che copra o chiuda;
 fia ogni conscienza, o chiara, o fosca,
 dinanzi a tutto 'l mondo aperta e nuda:
 e fia chi ragion giudichi e conosca.
 (*TE* 103-112)

[I will see how much for vain things we are concerned,/ and how much in vain we tire ourselves and toil,/ how people are deceived:/ no secret shall remain closed and concealed;/ let every conscience, whether dark or clear,/ before all the world appear nude and open:/ and there shall be One who knows and judges righteously.]

The image of the Last Judgment is surprisingly serene, as Petrarch's dream expands to embrace the whole of humanity. In eternity, all things are laid bare before God's throne (112); and no longer will dissimulation hold any sway. He proceeds to the conclusion of his *Triumph*, a final rapture at the deathless memory of Laura.

A riva un fiume che nasce in Gebenna
 Amor mi die' per lei sì lunga guerra
 che la memoria anchora il cor accenna.
 Felice sasso che 'l bel viso serra!
 Che, poi che avrà rispreso il suo bel velo,
 se fu beato chi la vide in terra,
 or che fia dunque a rivederla in cielo?
 (TE 139-145)

[On the bank of a river that comes forth from Gebenna/ Love gave me for her so long a war/ that still the memory inflames my heart./ Happy stone that seals her lovely face!/ When she will have taken up again her lovely form, if he was blessed who saw her on the earth, now, how will it be to see her once again in heaven?]

Petrarch rehearses the history of his love – their meeting on the banks of the Rhone, the bitter conflict in his soul, the memory of which still pricks his heart (139-141). Moevs and Santagata have both pointed out the ways in which this *Triumph* undercuts Petrarch's supposed renunciation of his Lady in "Vergine bella" (*Rvf* 366) – in that *canzone*, the final entry in the *Rime*, one of the charges against Laura was that, Medusa-like, she had turned him to a stone.³⁷⁵ Now he praises, of all things, her gravestone, "Felice sasso" (*TE* 142), which is to say himself. The common pun on Petrarch's name makes an easy combination with the monument of words he has erected to her memory. More precisely, he says that he is happy, and the object of his hope lies along the visible spectrum. As he remembers her in death, so he wants to see his Lady in glory, resurrected. This conclusion clearly departs from the final entry of the *Canzoniere*. But it is a spot-on fulfillment of his aspirations from "Nel dolce tempo." Petrarch's metamorphosis through fire to a creature with elevated powers of vision clearly indicates his longed-for ability to contemplate his Lady, and this time not to fail the test. Yet first he must dispense with his idolatry:

³⁷⁵ "M'han fatto un sasso," *Rvf* 366.111.

né per nova figura il primo alloro seppi lassar,
ché pur la sua dolce ombra
ogni men bel piacer del cor mi sgombra.

(*Rvf* 23.167-69)

[nor can I leave my first laurel for another shape, for even her sweet shadow/
removes every uncouth pleasure from my heart.]

In contrast to Dante's scene of post-mortem reconciliation, the *Triumph* depicts Petrarch as having been faithful to his love, even (the double meaning of "ombra" assumes special poignancy in this light) after death. Yet as has been observed elsewhere, the mere fact of making Laura the focal point of Paradise seems problematic. Moevs connects it to the final chapter in the *Vita nuova*, where young Dante expresses a similar aspiration to see his Lady in glory, a desire which, as we saw some pages back, the *Commedia* pays back with interest. Of course, having had his cake, Dante, as he usually does, manages to eat it, too: passing beyond Beatrice and ascending to the beatific vision. In Petrarch's poem of eternity, by contrast, God makes a very brief, desultory appearance; Laura clearly takes pride of place. It is certainly conceivable that Petrarch's elevation of his Lady went beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, yet if the ideological significance of his love for her as argued in these pages is creditable, that is not a necessary conclusion. Petrarch seems to be forever staging arguments about the value of his love, and time and again, as has been demonstrated, the matter at issue seems to be not his affection for a particular woman, however fair and virtuous, but rather the value of materiality itself, the world Christ came to save. Petrarch's steadfast refusal to renounce the world, whatever its disasters and infirmities, is defined by his devotion to Laura, by his conviction that the wounds

of his country and the apostasy of his church, even the flickering powers of his own inconstant soul can be made right. To criticize his vision of eternity for being somewhat dull misunderstands its purpose. For Petrarch the wanderer, Petrarch the contingent, Petrarch, who felt with preternatural acuteness every laceration of the cruel whips of time, the beatific contemplation of Laura was a vindication long in coming. Let us not begrudge his peace.

CONCLUSION

This study began with a simple question: Did Petrarch and Dante intend their poetry to fix the world? The answer to that question puts in play one of the fundamental tenets of Renaissance humanism, the proposition that language, skillfully employed, can salve the wounds of history. It also engages with widespread critical consensus, for even those readers who do not take Petrarch and Dante to be wholeheartedly committed to the ideology here in view tend to indict them for falling short of it, as if its value and practicability were beyond dispute. Yet as has been seen, this kind of binary approach fails to account for the complexity of their poetics. Far from merely accepting political and social activism as the proper standard to which poetry should conform, and by which it may be judged, both Petrarch and Dante expend considerable energy attacking the standard itself, and putting in its place the biblical model of jeremiad. If their poetics are (or attempt to be) biblical and prophetic, rather than modern and secular, this has enormous bearing on our interpretation of their ideological commitments. The foregoing pages have touched on some of these implications: most obviously, their political aspirations can no longer be entirely in harmony with those of their literary heirs in the Italian Renaissance – or, to put it another way, it forces us to seek such heirs elsewhere, if at all. If the rhetorical purposes of Dante and Petrarch only admit an eschatological fulfillment, then the later developments of humanism are based in a rejection of their thought.

Yet whatever its merits as an analysis of their poetics, the foregoing does not pretend to be a global interpretation of either Petrarch or Dante. Even if the central

point that neither means to be a Ciceronian rhetorician should win general acceptance, the alternative suggested here requires further interrogation. We might go to the other extreme and claim that both men saw themselves exclusively as prophets, but this is problematic if we take a broader view of their work. In Dante's case, his composition of the treatise *Monarchia* during the years he wrote the *Comedy* seems to tell against the notion that he really despaired of politics. Likewise, it is hard to square the comments on rhetoric in Petrarch's invectives – to note but one set of contrary examples – with the doubts I have ascribed to him. These tensions are real, and it is no rebuttal to say that their resolution falls outside the scope of the present research. But to remark on these tensions is merely to assert that the complex mosaic of these two poets' thought is larger than the single pigment here supplied. Dante and Petrarch were men of extraordinary genius: it is they who see round us, not the reverse. We are in no danger of exhausting the resources of such fertile minds; consequently, if at times this study has offered a corrective to some critical tendency or other, it intends collaboration, not competition, with the common project of *Trecento* scholarship.

In addition to questions about the integration of these authors' poetics with their respective literary corpora, this study also invites further investigation on several other points. One of these is the evolution of Augustinian thought in the early Middle Ages. Whereas the politics of medieval Augustinianism are often represented in exclusively negative terms, an ideology of disengagement, the fact that Dante and Petrarch both continually draw on Augustine as the basis for their attacks on Cicero suggests a more nuanced reading of both the Doctor of Grace and his medieval reception. It is clear from the foregoing that Dante is no anti-Augustinian; still less

Petrarch. But we need not understand their refusal to divest from worldly affairs as a radical innovation – rather, it likely represents the evolution of a tradition that could stand further exploration.

My work also suggests new possibilities with respect to the development of Italian humanism, which traces its genesis especially to Petrarch. That the notional father of a cultural phenomenon so intimately tied to both rhetorical optimism and a secular political ideology should ultimately reject both elements further complicates an already vexed relationship. Yet what of Machiavelli, sometimes known as the last of the humanists? Everyone is familiar with his popular reputation as a cynic, a caricature inspired by, at least, his willingness to subject the promises of rhetoric to critical analysis. Yet however revolutionary this approach in the context of the early sixteenth century, it might be more accurate to say that he returns humanism to its point of origin in the *Trecento*. It is no coincidence that the author of *The Prince* concludes his treatise with frankly messianic language and a citation from Petrarch's *Rime*.

Finally, and perhaps most salient, this study seeks to repropose the agonistic traditional account of Petrarch's relationship to Dante. Critics since Boccaccio have overwhelmingly focused on the instances wherein the two poets' worldviews seem to collide, with the natural consequence of exaggerating both the prevalence and the centrality of such tensions. This is the source of our modern view of Dante and Petrarch as an Oedipal dyad, the later poet seeking to denigrate and ultimately supplant his predecessor. Petrarch is subjected to a double standard: on the one hand, his apparent dissents from Dante are taken at face value, while on the other, his

deployments of Dantean themes merely reinforce the insidious subtlety of his polemic. Yet as has been shown, the response of both poets to the claims of Ciceronian rhetoric – which is to say, to the political and moral plight of Italy – betrays far more similarities than differences. Their rejection of this rhetoric, coupled with a mutual interest in salvific fire as an alternative poetic teleology, is surely too striking for coincidence. Yet it is also possible to make the opposite mistake, conflating the two beyond what the evidence will bear. There is much yet to do if we wish to put the two founders of Italian literature in proper relation to each other and their many heirs. Yet if these pages have done their work, we can embark upon that project poorer by at least one misconception. Dante and Petrarch both endured the pain of exile on multiple levels: social, political, spiritual, even literary. But in their activity as poets, driven by a fierce commitment to a world beyond the help of human language, they were nothing if not proud compatriots.

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