

ITALIAN LECTURE

From Laurel to Fig: Petrarch and the Structures of the Self

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You may perhaps have heard something about me, although it is not very likely that my obscure little name will have been able to travel far in time and space. And perhaps you would like to know what kind of a man I was, and what became of my writings, especially those whose reputation may have reached you, or whose name you may have heard mentioned . . .¹

THE VOICE, reaching successfully across space and time, is that of Francesco Petrarca, to whom I shall henceforth refer as Petrarch, planning for posterity in an autobiographical letter specifically addressed to future generations and, like so much else that he wrote, unfinished. The project was an unusual one for the fourteenth century, and indeed for the Middle Ages as a whole: autobiography was not a common genre in an age less insistent on the value of the individual, however insignificant, than our own; the few examples that we have, if they are other than merely formulaic in content, reveal the overarching influence of the *Confessions* of St Augustine. Abelard for example seems more mindful of his post-traumatic discovery of the moral life, his conversion, than of any damage done to Heloise.

Even in those opening words, Petrarch reveals some of his characteristic traits: a modesty almost unbecoming in one sufficiently convinced of his own reputation to address future readers; an awareness of the

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¹ *Posteritati*, in Francesco Petrarca, *Prose*, ed. G. Martellotti, P. G. Ricci, E. Carrara, E. Bianchi (Milan-Naples, 1955), p. 2.

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importance of his works as the vehicles for that reputation; an implicit faith in the power of the text—the letter—to reach those to whom it was addressed. The picture that he proceeds to sketch of himself is marked as much by its self-indulgence as by its lucidity, but it is far from complete, for the story that it tells peters out in about 1351, almost a quarter of a century before his death. It would seem that he started to write it in the 1360s, and that he continued to work at it until at least 1371.² Yet the narrative, which naturally shows all the benefits of hindsight, does not live up to its own promises: for a fuller picture we must look elsewhere. The fact that we can, and that Petrarch has left us so much material for the documentation of his own life, is probably more significant than his failure to complete his one exclusively and overtly autobiographical text. It turns out that in the last seven years of his life (1367–74) he frequently chose to look back, in letters and in polemical texts, at the events of earlier years, but it also becomes apparent that this retrospection is coloured by the desire to make of the recollection of things past an artful and coherent narrative, what he several times called a *'fabula'*. Into that narrative he wove his various works, and as we unpick its threads with the benefit of our hindsight, we become aware of underlying structures which hold it all together, interlacing events, real or imagined, with all manner of texts which both evoke and on occasions actually constitute those events.

The reason for starting at the end of this story is that it is only then that Petrarch enables us to see what he thought its fundamental structure should be. My intention in the pages that follow is not, however, to go back to the beginning to 'tell it as it was', but rather to pick out some of the main narrative strands of the composite autobiography that he bequeathed to posterity, and to examine the extraordinarily rich and imaginative textures that he created with and around them.

Undoubtedly the one single element that has attracted more attention than any other is the subject of the 366 poems that make up his *Canzoniere*, or *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, 'fragments in the vernacular' as he called them: I mean of course his poetic love, or rather his poetic persona's love, for a lady not by chance named Laura, whose role as Muse rivals that of Dante's Beatrice, and whose name is scarcely less evocative than hers. Yet it is interesting to note that, in the economy of Petrarch's own retrospective narrative in the *Letter to Posterity*, the

² For this chronology, cf. Ricci in *Posteritati*, pp. 1161–2.

stress falls on the laurel crown rather than on the eponymous beloved as the central motif of his *fabula*. Of the lady he tells us (and this is *all* he tells us, even if it conflicts with much of the poetic evidence), ‘I laboured under a single intense but honourable love in adolescence, and would have laboured longer, had not an expedient death extinguished a flame that was already beginning to dim’.³ So much for Laura, and the poems that he elsewhere dismisses as ‘*nugelle*’—trifles. So much, indeed, for several centuries of ingenious efforts by critics of all persuasions, from the tomb-hunting Maurice Scève in the sixteenth century⁴ to the catastrophe-theory reconstructions of Frederick Jones in the present one,⁵ to graft flesh and blood onto a lyric fantasy. I do not seek to deny, any more than Petrarch himself does, that he suffered from the pangs of the flesh, but in the *Letter to Posterity* he assures us that by his fortieth year they, and even their memory, were behind him, and that thereafter he scarcely ever even looked at a woman; indeed he gives thanks to God for what he counts a great blessing: to be still vigorous and yet free of a servitude that he declares was always hateful to him.⁶

These remarks are not inspired by some prurient interest in the particularities of a long-buried love-affair, but rather by the wish to indicate that at this relatively late stage in his life Petrarch himself makes little of his love, and incidentally that what he does make of it, he locates firmly in his adolescence, which, in the terms that he inherited from Isidore of Seville, means from the age of fourteen to twenty-eight;⁷ further he assures us that any other untoward desires had extinguished themselves, in his account, by the time that he was forty. He puts it in a nutshell: ‘*Adolescentia me fefellit . . .*: adolescence led me astray, youth swept me off my feet, but old age set me straight again.’⁸ Youth, in the Isidorian scheme

³ *Prose*, p. 4.

⁴ For Scève’s discovery, see the account in J. F. P. A. de Sade, *Mémoires pour la vie de François Pétrarque*, I (Amsterdam, 1764), ‘Notes pour éclaircir quelques endroits . . .’, pp. 13–26. Sade had a strong family interest in the identification of Laura as Laure de Noves, wife of Hugues de Sade (see *ibid.*, pp. 9–13).

⁵ F. J. Jones, *The Structure of Petrarch’s ‘Canzoniere’* (Woodbridge, 1995). Jones is also a protagonist of historicity: cf. ‘Further evidence of the identity of Petrarch’s Laura’, *Italian Studies*, 39 (1984), 27–46.

⁶ *Prose*, p. 4.

⁷ On Isidore’s six ages of man, see *Etymologiae*, XI. 2. 1–7; for Petrarch’s varying use of this and other traditional divisions of the human life-span, cf. F. Rico, *Vida u obra de Petrarca*, I (Padua, 1974), pp. 160 and 361, n. 380; C. Calcaterra, *Nella selva del Petrarca* (Bologna, 1942), pp. 84–6.

⁸ *Prose*, p. 2.

of things, ran to the age of forty; old age began at sixty, or sometimes at seventy. Petrarch is here safely ensconced in his sixties, looking back at the follies of the first four decades of his life.

And at the triumphs, which appear to have interested him a great deal more. A significant section of the *Letter to Posterity* is devoted to his coronation with laurels: an extended account, referring to the evidence of a number of letters which he had written and to which I shall return since they are in fact practically the only evidence available, an account which bears in particular on the role of his sponsor King Robert of Sicily. But with hindsight the older man expresses his surprise at the king's high opinion of him, declaring that 'his judgement was in perfect accord with that of many people, and in particular with my own; yet today I believe that he was more influenced by friendship and the desire to encourage a young man than by any quest for truth'.⁹

It would appear that, from the vantage point of old age, Petrarch's concern was with some deeper form of truth distinct from the poetic fictions with which he had embellished his youth. We should not from this, however, conclude that there is a radical disparity between the two: in a letter of 1370 Petrarch picks up a theme from his youth and explains that the poet's task is *ingere*: to invent or fashion not so as to lie but to compose and ornament, to suggest the truth skilfully by means of a literary or stylistic device while at the same time concealing it behind an agreeable veil of fiction.¹⁰ The fictions that he has chosen to leave us are thus in a real sense his truth.

But they are not consistent: as we survey the other writings of the last ten years of his life which display an overtly autobiographical purpose, we become more and more aware of the conundrums and the contradictions. There are for instance no further mentions of his love, and only passing references to his coronation, which is conspicuous by its absence from a letter of 1367 in which Petrarch mentions both King Robert and his visits to Rome and Naples,¹¹ and in another of the very last year of his life where he speaks of the *post mortem* laureation of his old tutor, Convevole da Prato.¹² Instead, there appears to be an increasing concern with his writing, which was both the most characteristic of his actions

⁹ *Prose*, pp. 14–16 (at 16).

¹⁰ *Seniles*, XII. 2 to Boccaccio, 17 November 1370, in F. Petrarca, *Opera*, ed. Basle 1554, II, pp. 999–1011 (at 1001).

¹¹ *Seniles*, X. 2 to Guido Sette, 1367 (ed. Martellotti in *Prose*, pp. 1090–1124).

¹² *Seniles*, XVI. 1 to Luca da Penna, 27 April 1374 (ed. Basle 1554, II, pp. 1046–50).

and the strongest of his passions, and with his reading, as if between them they—rather than love or fame—defined his existence.

In 1353, for instance, in his *Invectiva contra medicum* he had declared that he had abandoned the study of the classical poets more than seven years earlier, though they had fixed themselves in his memory because he had read them so assiduously at an earlier age; instead he says that he had turned to Holy Scripture.¹³ The same point is made more generally in the *Letter to Posterity* and in a number of other letters, yet we have incontrovertible, autograph evidence that this is not the case, and that he continued to read classical literature to his dying day. Similarly, the statement in the same *Invective* that instead of reading the poets he writes poetry for others born after him to read,¹⁴ is apparently undermined by his assertion in the *Letter to Posterity* that seeking fame from fine writings is an empty pursuit: what matters is not to write well, but to live well.¹⁵

Yet it is plain that the two—writing well and living well—are in his case inseparable, and linked by a single fundamental method, which is that of imitation. By this I do not mean what we might call plagiarism, but *imitatio* in the creative sense in which we constantly encounter it in Petrarch's writings.¹⁶ He was deeply aware of the traditions on which he depended: thus we find him looking to the authors of antiquity not only for literary genres (from epic to eclogue) or structures (from epistle to dialogue) but also, more narrowly, for thoughts and words, while at the same time he may imitate them in the reported actions of his life. It is rare to find a moment of biographical significance which does not have a classical or other illustrious example behind it. To quote but one example (to which I shall return), Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux is explicitly linked to the climbing of Mount Hemo in Thrace by Philip V of Macedon as related by Livy, and is thus firmly located in an historical and classical context, while its unusual nature is deliberately emphasised by the royal example that he is following.¹⁷

But in a letter to Boccaccio of 1359 that is an extended theoretical

¹³ *Invective contra medicum*, III, ed. P. G. Ricci (Rome, 1950), p. 74, ll. 534–58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5, ll. 563–5.

¹⁵ *Prose*, p. 6.

¹⁶ For a wide-ranging recent discussion of this topic, see M. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford, 1995).

¹⁷ Cf. *Familiars*, IV. 1. 1–3 (all references are to F. Petrarca, *Le familiari*, ed. V. Rossi, 4 vols. (Florence, 1933–42)).

discussion of the topic of imitation, and a dissection of his own practice of it, where Petrarch speaks of ornamenting both his life and his writing with the examples of others, he also states quite clearly that just as each one of us has a unique personal quality to his face and gestures, so also to his voice and style.¹⁸ It is certainly axiomatic in Petrarch's life, as in his works, that imitation is rarely, if ever, unaccompanied by an awareness and assertion of that individuality: as a consequence it is perhaps less his models that should concern us than what he made of them.

In a letter of 1360, he had told Francesco Nelli that he loved Cicero and Virgil above all other writers, 'so much so that the one [Cicero] was as a father to me, the other [Virgil] as a brother';¹⁹ fourteen years later, a few months before his death, in what was probably his final act of epistolary retrospection, he recorded for Luca da Penna his early passion for the same two writers, and a curious incident in which his father saved one manuscript by each of them from the fire for him, urging Cicero as an aid with his legal studies (never, incidentally to be pursued beyond his student days at Bologna), and Virgil as offering occasional freedom of the spirit.²⁰

To Virgil's *Aeneid* and Eclogues, which he studied and annotated assiduously in a manuscript (the so-called Ambrosian Virgil) he had prepared for his father, and for which he commissioned a frontispiece by Simone Martini,²¹ he owed in particular the inspiration for his own epic *Africa* and his *Bucolicum carmen*, not to mention much of the fabric of his own Latin verse. To Cicero, several of whose works he was responsible for recovering for posterity, he owed not only many of his ideas in defence of poetry (derived from his first significant discovery, the *Pro Archia* found at Liège in 1333), and the framework for the dialogue of his great moral encyclopaedia, the *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, borrowed from the *Tusculan Disputations*, but also notions of style, and above all perhaps the idea of the letter collection. Petrarch's rediscovery of Cicero's letters to Atticus in the Capitular library at Verona in 1345 was profoundly to influence not only his own writing and self-presentation, but also the

¹⁸ *Familiars*, XXII. 2; on the individual voice, see sections 16–17.

¹⁹ *Familiars*, XXII. 10. 5.

²⁰ *Seniles*, XVI. 1 (ed. Basle 1554, II, p. 1047).

²¹ Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS SP 10 27 (formerly A. 49); facsimile: *Francisci Petrarcae Vergilianus codex* (Milan, 1930). Cf. M. Feo, 'Petrarca, Francesco' in *Enciclopedia Virgiliana*, IV (Rome, 1988), pp. 53–78, and in particular on the MS, pp. 53–60.

development of one of the major genres of humanist discourse, the *epistolario*.²²

Of the 650 or so Latin letters that Petrarch has left us, he gathered the majority into two collections, the *Familiars*²³ and the *Seniles*.²⁴ The first of these offers a particularly striking illustration of the way in which Petrarch's writings evolved over time, and of the consequential difficulties for the historian who wants to establish a clear chronological framework within which to describe the events of the author's life, let alone his intellectual or spiritual development. Petrarch must have started to keep copies of the letters that he wrote from about 1320 onwards, but it was not until he made his Ciceronian discovery in 1345 that he had the idea of editing and shaping his correspondence into a coherent collection. His first thought seems to have been to organise it in twelve books, in imitation of the structure of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Later, in 1350 or shortly after, he decided in favour of a twenty-book structure following the model of Seneca's letters to Lucilius; finally, however, in 1360 he decided to adopt the Homeric pattern of twenty-four books.²⁵

Meanwhile he had been assiduously collecting the correspondence of nearly forty years, and adding new letters to it. The 350 that he finally chose to stand in the *Familiars*, the definitive text of which he completed in 1366, had been carefully chosen, arranged, and rewritten. Some of them were unashamed exercises in style and rhetoric, and had been written specially for the collection; others had undergone major revision, sometimes more than once; yet others had acquired fictitious dates, or were placed in a chronological position which reflected artistic purpose

²² On Petrarch and Cicero, see P. de Nolhac, *Pétrarque et l'humanisme* (Paris, 1907²), I, pp. 34–47, 211–68; G. Billanovich, 'Petraeca e Cicerone', in *Miscellanea G. Mercati* (Vatican City, 1946), pp. 88–106; *Texts and Transmission: a Survey of the Latin Classics*, ed. L. D. Reynolds (Oxford, 1983), in the sections devoted to Cicero, pp. 54–142; on the *Tusculans* and the *De remediis*: S. Rizzo, 'Un nuovo codice delle *Tuscolane* dalla biblioteca del Petrarca', in *Ciceroniana. Atti del IX Colloquium Tullianum. Courmayeur, 29 aprile–1 maggio 1995* (Rome, 1996), pp. 75–104.

²³ *Rerum familiarium libri*: ed. Rossi (see n. 17 above); English translation, *Letters on Familiar Matters*, by A. S. Bernardo, 3 vols. (Albany, NY, 1975 and Baltimore/London, 1982–5).

²⁴ *Epistole rerum senilium*, ed. Basle 1554, (see n. 10 above); Italian translation by G. Fracassetti, *Lettere senili di Francesco Petrarca*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1869–70); English translation by A. S. Bernardo *et al.*, *Letters of Old Age*, 3 vols. (Baltimore, 1992).

²⁵ On the construction of the *Familiars*, cf. G. Billanovich, *Petrarca letterato. I. Lo scrittoio del Petrarca* (Rome, 1947), pp. 1–55; V. Rossi, *Scritti di critica letteraria*, II, *Studi sul Petrarca e sul Rinascimento* (Florence, 1930), pp. 3–227; 'Sulla formazione delle raccolte epistolari petrarchesche', *Annali della Cattedra petrarchesca*, 3 (1932), 55–73.

rather than historical accuracy. Many letters which were clearly originally written in the 1330s and 1340s draw generously for quotations and references on classical texts which Petrarch only came to know at least a decade later; certain feelings and attitudes which he connects with a particular period in his life are undoubtedly the fruit of reflection by the maturer man who is recasting and editing the corpus of his letters so as to embellish and make sense of his past. One might indeed say that as Petrarch spends much of his life writing letters, so he spends much of his letters writing his life. For the *Familiaries* not only illustrate the creative urge to make a major work and a coherent statement about himself out of scattered elements which would otherwise have remained minor fragments, but also exemplify Petrarch's absolutely characteristic creative dissatisfaction.

In the making of the *Familiaries*, a certain tension between his attempt to tell his own story well and his desire to make his texts exemplary for posterity, as Cicero's had been for him, led Petrarch constantly to revise details which might be too personal or too limited in time. We know this from the numerous instances in which we have not only the final edited version of a letter as it appeared in the definitive collection, but also the earliest redaction: the so-called γ or missive form in which the letter was actually sent, and on occasions even an intermediary version as he began to work towards his critical edition of his texts.²⁶ Comparison between these various levels of composition reveals stylistic improvements, the addition or removal of quotations from classical authors, and the removal of details which might limit the application of the text to a particular moment in time: proper names being replaced by neutral terms—'a man', 'a place', or, in an evocation of the death of the laurel, the substitution of a more general 'storm' for the specific 'plague'.²⁷

One extraordinary instance of this process which has recently come to light in the Florentine archives, and which shows the intensity with which Petrarch played his own game, is the missive form of his letter to Homer, which in its final form stands in the series of overtly rhetorical epistles to the great men of antiquity in the final book of the *Familiaries*.²⁸ The defin-

²⁶ For the different redactions of the letters, cf. Rossi, in *Le famigliari*, I, pp. xi–xvii.

²⁷ *Familiaries*, VIII. 3. 16; for the γ redaction, cf. ed. Rossi, II, p. 199.

²⁸ *Familiaries*, XXIV. 12. I am most grateful to that consummate master of the Florentine archives, Nicolai Rubinstein, for calling my attention to Archivio di Stato, MS Acquisti e doni 304, a description of which I have prepared for the forthcoming revised edition of *Codici latini del Petrarca nelle biblioteche fiorentine*, ed. M. Feo (Florence, 1991). It contains copies of eleven Petrarchan letters, five of them in the γ redaction.

itive version has the following rubric: ‘To an unknown correspondent: reply to a long letter full of information addressed to himself [that is to say Petrarch] in Homer’s name and sent from the kingdom of the dead.’²⁹ Now the Florentine manuscript does not contain the definitive text of the letter in question, but rather a copy of the missive version. It does not have any rubric, but does explicitly name Leonzio Pilato, who had translated Homer for Petrarch, in a passage where by contrast the definitive version only mentions ‘unus vir’—an unspecified man who had brought the great poet back to the Latin-speaking world.

So far so good, but my mention of a missive version, implying that it was actually sent, may appear a shade presumptuous, since we are dealing with a letter that was clearly a literary fiction, addressed to a Greek poet who was himself, after all, something of a literary fiction. Yet the testimony of the manuscript is clear: on the back of this letter, which had been folded in three as if to be sent, is written the address: ‘Homero Meonio poete inaccessiblei’: to the poet Homer in deepest Lydia. The folding, the layout and even the script of the address follow closely those of Petrarch’s authentic letters,³⁰ and I have no doubt that this is a faithful copy of a Petrarchan autograph, which may serve to show once again the extent to which Petrarch was capable of mixing fiction and reality, and how intimate was his symbiosis with his literary forebears.

Of these I have already mentioned Cicero and Virgil, but must now turn to three other figures to whom Petrarch’s debt, as writer and as creator of his personal myth, was considerable. These are the poets Ovid and Propertius, and St Augustine. They are deeply bound up in what emerge as the major themes—loosely, love, coronation, and crisis—which, refracted solely through the medium of writing (and often of letter-writing), come to dominate the image of himself that Petrarch bequeathed to us, where this mixture of fiction and reality is particularly apparent. In the pages that follow I shall explore the role of these three figures, and focus in particular upon a certain creative tension between Ovidian and Augustinian elements which tends to generate crisis, and above all text.

First, according to the chronology of Petrarch’s *fabula*, the love for Laura. There is nothing better to begin with than a date, especially one

²⁹ Ed. Rossi, IV, p. 253; Rossi was not aware of the existence of the γ redaction of this letter.

³⁰ See F. Petrarca, *Epistole autografe*, ed. A. Petrucci (Padua, 1968), and in particular pl. XVI (Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS 53. 35, f. 18^v).

written by the author himself on the flyleaf of one of his most precious manuscripts, the Ambrosian Virgil codex to which I referred earlier.

Laura, famous for her own virtues, and long celebrated in my poems, first appeared to my eyes in the early years of my adolescence, in the year 1327 on the sixth day of April in the church of St Claire at Avignon in the early morning; and in the same city in the same month of April on the same sixth day at the same early hour, but in the year 1348, her light was taken from that of the world . . .³¹

This succinct evocation of what has proved to be one of the most enduring passions in European literature underpins the whole imaginative structure of the *Canzoniere*, and it is wonderfully precise: twenty-one years to the very hour had elapsed, Petrarch tells us, between his first sight of Laura and her death (in the plague, as we learn elsewhere). We may take this text as a clear statement of Petrarch's poetic love-life as he wished it to be preserved for posterity. But it is less simple than it appears. There is for instance an underlying numerological structure (others can be found in the *Canzoniere*):³² three times seven, in which, most significantly, the coronation with laurels falls exactly two thirds of the way through. Indeed Petrarch alleges elsewhere that the day of his falling in love was, like the day of his entry into Rome and that of Laura's death, Good Friday. He is fabricating: it was not.³³ But the fiction here advanced is far more important than such minor departures from historical fact.

Furthermore this apparently intimate text, dating from no earlier than 1351, three years after the death it evokes, is far from spontaneous.³⁴ In its opening formula it clearly echoes a passage from Propertius's opening Elegy celebrating his Cynthia, and another in the fourth book.³⁵ Besides

³¹ Published by Nolhac, *Pétrarque*, II, p. 286, from Petrarch's Virgil (see n. 21 above).

³² See for example T. P. Roche, 'The calendrical structure of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*', *Studies in Philology*, 71 (1974), 152–71; F. J. Jones, 'Arguments in favour of a calendrical structure for Petrarch's *Canzoniere*', *Modern Language Review*, 79 (1984), 579–88; or, for the religious significance of the number six, B. Martinelli, "'Feria sexta aprilis". La data sacra nel *Canzoniere* del Petrarca', in his *Petrarca e il Ventoso* (Bergamo, 1977), pp. 103–48; K. Foster, *Petrarch: Poet and Humanist* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 53–6.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁴ Cf. M. Feo, 'Inquietudini filologiche del Petrarca: il luogo della discesa agli inferni', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 17 (1974), 121, n. 3.

³⁵ See Propertius, *Elegiae*, I. 1. 1–2 and IV. 7. 50. I owe this insight, and much of what follows, to discussions with Natascia Tonelli and to a paper that she gave at the Warburg Institute; see now her important article 'Petrarca, Properzio e la struttura del *Canzoniere*', *Rinascimento*, 2nd ser., 38 (1998), 249–315, esp. 255–6. More general considerations on Petrarch and Propertius are to be found in J. Petrie, *Petrarch: the Augustan Poets, the Italian Tradition and the 'Canzoniere'* (Dublin, 1983).

which, the opening sonnet of the *Canzoniere*, as well as many of its major themes, and its depiction of the poet's passion, progressing through the life of his lady to her death, and to dream visions of her beyond death—and indeed the very notion and structure of a single poetic love-story forming a single book—all these owe something of their origins to Propertius, whose *Elegies* Petrarch may well have encountered as early as the 1330s. This fact alone will serve to remind us that the *Canzoniere* is far from being the autobiographical narrative that some would wish it; indeed it is now abundantly clear that in form and content, and even in its apparently historical grounding, it is of a distinctly Propertian mould.³⁶

The underlying theme of the *Canzoniere* is however transformation, based on Ovid's account in book I of the *Metamorphoses* of the nymph Daphne, who fled the attentions of the sun-god Phoebus (Apollo) and was changed into a laurel tree, thereby perpetually eluding her suitor; there is a further twist to the theme: Ovid declared that triumphant generals would henceforth wreath their heads with laurel leaves, and that these would remain perpetually green.³⁷

It is likely that Petrarch encountered this passage in adolescence: his own copy of the *Metamorphoses* has fairly recently come to light, and bears proof of his reading in the form of annotations apparently made at a relatively early stage in his career.³⁸ He would also very probably have been familiar with the kind of allegorical interpretations (most of them relating to the fruitless pursuit of vainglory) that were put upon the story, a bewildering variety of which were offered in the 1340s by his friend Pierre Bersuire in his *Ovidius moralizatus*.³⁹ But far from adopting any of these slavishly, Petrarch worked to evolve his own version of the myth.⁴⁰ The first unmistakable signs of this occur in the earliest group of Italian lyrics that he composed for what was to become, over the following forty years, his *Canzoniere*. Of the fourteen poems more or less securely

³⁶ See Tonelli, 'Petarca, Properzio', *passim*.

³⁷ *Metamorphoses*, I. 452–567.

³⁸ London, British Library, Harley MS 3754, identified by A. C. de la Mare, who was kind enough to call it to my attention. See 'A Palaeographer's Odyssey', in *Sight & Insight. Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85*, ed. J. Onians (1994), pp. 99, 107, n. 20.

³⁹ Cf. M. S. Van der Bijl, 'Petrus Berchorius, *Reductorium morale, liber XV: Ovidius moralizatus, cap. ii*', *Vivarium*, 9 (1971), 27–33.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed treatment of the present argument, cf. Mann, 'Pétrarque et les métamorphoses de Daphné', *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé*, 53 (1994), 382–403; bibliographical note, pp. 402–3.

identified as having been composed between 1326 and 1341, eight make reference to the myth which concerns us.

What is most probably the very earliest of these, dating perhaps from 1330, the *canzone* ‘Nel dolce tempo della prima etade’, shows a first attempt to grapple with the poetic possibilities of metamorphosis.⁴¹ The love-struck poet himself goes through a series of transformations: into a laurel, then a swan, a stone, a fountain, a flint and a stag. The homage to Ovid is clear, but what is notable is that in this first elaboration of his relationship with the laurel, Petrarch does not identify with Apollo, but with his victim Daphne. We further find references to the evergreen nature of the laurel, and an explicit acknowledgement of Petrarch’s aspiration to be crowned with laurels, a desire for fame at this early stage ironically thwarted, but which was to become a major feature of his intellectual and creative life.

It is worth noting Petrarch’s poetic reticence regarding the naming of the beloved, or indeed of Daphne, in these early poems, which doubtless reveal, in this respect if not in others, the influence of the Provençal tradition. Only twice does he go so far, in those composed before 1341, as to identify as a laurel the tree that he celebrates.⁴² He cannot of course be counting on effective concealment, for any educated reader would no doubt immediately have recognised the oblique references to the Ovidian story. But given the extreme fondness which Petrarch develops in later parts of the *Canzoniere* for wordplay based upon the name of Laura and its homophony with the laurel tree (*lauro*) and the wind (*l’aura*) and golden (*l’aureo*), it is striking that he originally had recourse only to such periphrases as ‘l’arbor ch’amò già Febo in corpo umano’.⁴³ Daphne is never named, and yet is clearly an essential model for the fictitious figure of Laura. Apollo on the other hand makes frequent appearances as a role-model for, and rival to, Petrarch’s persona as glorious but thwarted pursuer of the ever-elusive lady. Furthermore, as leader of the Muses, Apollo is also the god of poetry and thus constantly present as a figure of inspiration. Indeed, the focus of Petrarch’s attention initially appears to

⁴¹ *Canzoniere* (henceforth *RVF*), 23; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 385–6; D. Dutschke, *Francesco Petrarca, Canzone XXIII: from First to Final Version* (Ravenna, 1977); B. Martinelli, ‘La canzone delle metamorfosi e la formazione del *Canzoniere*’, in his *Petrarca e il Ventoso* (n. 32 above), pp. 1–102.

⁴² See *RVF* 6 and 64.

⁴³ *RVF* 41, 2; in Latin we find ‘amata Phebo virgo’ (*Familiares*, XI. 6. 1) or ‘virgo Hemonie’ (*Ep. Metr.*, III. 3. 72; *Africa*, V. 479).

fall firmly on Apollo: the emphasis is more therefore on himself as lover than on any particular beloved.⁴⁴

The other theme which emerges distinctly from the earliest group of poems is that of the laurel as the crown of poets, evoked as ‘quella fronde | di che sperato avea già lor corona’ in what is known as the *Canzone delle metamorfosi*, and explicitly spelled out again in the sonnet that was to follow it in the definitive ordering of the lyric sequence.⁴⁵ In both cases, the laurel crown is desired but has not yet been achieved. This desire is not simply a poetic device, but was to be a major element in Petrarch’s literary career, and one that he accordingly documented for posterity with great care.

We do not know to what machinations he may have resorted to set the process of his coronation in motion, but they were almost too successful: he announces in a letter to his friend Giovanni Colonna in 1340 that he received on the very same day two independent invitations to be crowned with laurels: one from the Roman Senate, the other from the University of Paris.⁴⁶ In a subsequent letter to his patron Giacomo Colonna, he describes his hesitations, then his decision to accept the invitation to Rome, ‘driven’ as he says ‘by the desire for the Delphic laurel, which was once the unique and special object of the aspirations of great rulers and sacred poets, but is now either scorned or forgotten’. His choice of Rome was doubtless inspired by his wish to receive the crown ‘on the ashes of the ancient poets, and in their abode’; he also notes that the ceremony is to take place on Easter Sunday, on the Capitoline.⁴⁷

In due course, after an extended *viva voce* examination conducted by King Robert of Sicily in Naples, Petrarch entered Rome on 6 April 1341, and was crowned with laurels on the Capitoline by a Roman senator two days later. His speech for the occasion took as its text Virgil’s lines ‘Sed me Parnasi deserta per ardua dulcis | raptat amor’⁴⁸—a sweet longing urges me upwards over the lonely slopes of Parnassus—and dwelt upon the art of poetry and fame, mediated by the properties of the laurel, the ‘due reward of emperors and poets’, which is fragrant, gives shade, is

⁴⁴ See in particular *RVF* 34, ‘Apollo, s’ancor vive il bel desio’, which Petrarch probably chose to open the *Canzoniere* in its earliest form.

⁴⁵ *RVF* 23, 43–4; cf. 24, 3–4: ‘la corona | che suole ornar chi poetando scrive’.

⁴⁶ *Familiares*, IV. 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, IV. 6. 5–7.

⁴⁸ *Georg.*, III. 291–2.

incorruptible and preserves books and, being sacred to Apollo, makes dreams come true, reveals the future, and is immune to lightning.⁴⁹

There can be no doubt that this really was a capital event in the life of this ambitious thirty-six-year-old poet who had not yet published anything that might qualify him for such an accolade: an unprecedented reconstruction of classical ceremonial, and an incomparable act of self-aggrandisement by which he made public his strategic adoption of the laurel as a personal emblem. What is however remarkable is the almost total absence of any independent evidence, to corroborate that of Petrarch's own letters, that this historic event ever took place. The only potentially independent account that we have is that of Boccaccio, but we have to remember that he was himself a skilled myth-maker and later to become Petrarch's foremost disciple. Indeed his account is all the more suspect because he wrote it in semi-uncial capitals rather like an ancient inscription:⁵⁰ for Boccaccio, the coronation had become part of history, but I would suggest that this is a case of the history of mentalities rather than of events: the idea of the celebration of poetry by the man who saw himself as the last and greatest of the poets was more important than the strict historicity of the events. We shall probably never know what happened in Rome on 8 April 1341, but what really matters in Petrarch's *oeuvre* is the symbolic significance of this grand gesture, which was ten years later to take its symbolic place, two-thirds of the way through, in his love-life, or in the account of it that he had by that stage carefully composed.

First however we must consider the place of the coronation in Petrarch's writings in the more immediate aftermath of 1341. The third eclogue of his *Bucolicum carmen*, probably composed in 1346,⁵¹ provides an account of it which, while it is set in the pastoral mode and is thus deliberately fictitious, nonetheless enables us to understand better how much Petrarch had invested in his coronation. The action of the eclogue, entitled *Amor pastorius*, is located in 1341, just before the crucial event; it

⁴⁹ Cf. C. Godi, 'La "collatio laureationis" del Petrarca', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 13 (1970), 1–27 (text of the speech: pp. 13–27).

⁵⁰ In his so-called 'Zibaldone laurenziano': Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS Pl. 29. 8, f. 73; reproduced in *Mostra di codici petrarcheschi laurenziani. Firenze, maggio-ottobre 1974* (Florence, 1974), pl. III; cf. G. Biagi [E. Rostagno], *Lo zibaldone boccaccesco mediceo-laurenziano riprodotto in fac-simile* (Florence, 1915).

⁵¹ Cf. Mann, 'The Making of Petrarch's *Bucolicum carmen*: a Contribution to the History of the Text', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 20 (1977), 127–82 (at 131–2).

relates, as usual in dialogue form, an encounter between two shepherds, Stupeus and Dane. Dane stands for Daphne (the variant spelling is common in medieval texts), and from her very first words describes herself as scorned by Phoebus. Stupeus, whose name has associations of burning (from *stoppa*, tow) and admiration (*stupens*), clearly represents the poet himself.⁵² He declares his love for Dane, whose physical beauty is briefly evoked in terms strongly reminiscent of the *Metamorphoses*, and describes his pain at her rejection of him, thus casting himself firmly in the mould of Apollo. Dane replies by recalling that she has also rejected the sun-god. Stupeus again states his love, this time recalling the Virgilian theme of his coronation speech, and the pursuit of poetic immortality.

He had, he says, for fifteen years suffered patiently all the torments of passion, unable to give voice to them until finally Argus (whom we recognise from the preceding eclogue as representing King Robert of Sicily) had approved his songs: a reference no doubt to the oral examination which had preceded the coronation. Complaisantly, Dane agrees that Argus alone was qualified to make such a judgement, and urges Stupeus to sing, which he does, in terms again recalling the Ovidian myth, but also the polyvalency of the laurel. Encouraged by Dane, he then tells how he first beheld a laurel-tree beneath which the Muses were dancing. One of them, Calliope, came forward to give him a branch plucked from the laurel-tree, urging him to go with it to Dane and to beg her, on behalf of the Muses, not to flee any longer. At this, Dane is duly touched, and leads Stupeus to a hill where, she tells him, in a passage based on the description of antique triumphs in *Metamorphoses*, I. 557–61, shepherds used in past times to celebrate their victories, their brows wreathed in laurel leaves. She reveals how Scipio, Virgil, and Ennius had come there to be crowned, and takes the laurel branch from him, returning it in the form of a wreath.⁵³

Here for the first time we see three key elements of Petrarch's programme artfully interwoven: love, poetry, and the desire for fame. It is his love for Daphne that brings him into contact with the Muses and enables him to sing; it is his song which earns him the attention of the nymph, who no longer flees but crowns him with laurels. As another of Petrarch's

⁵² For the names of the protagonists, cf. M. Feo, 'Per l'esegesi della III egloga del Petrarca', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 10 (1967), 385–401.

⁵³ *Bucolicum carmen*, III; see the bilingual edition by T. G. Bergin (*Petrarch's Bucolicum carmen*, Newhaven/London, 1974), pp. 30–47, 222–3, and for further details, Mann, *Pétrarque* (n. 40 above), 389–91.

personae, Silvius, later declares in the tenth eclogue, the poet owes everything to the laurel.⁵⁴

The allegorical significance of the *Bucolicum carmen* did not escape its early commentators, quite possibly because they had some guidance from Petrarch himself as to how to interpret his poems, but it is striking that there is nowhere in the fourteenth-century commentaries to the third eclogue any mention of any beloved lady other than Daphne who, as we have seen, unequivocally represents poetry. The implications of the Ovidian myth were as yet limited to Petrarch's poetic career and public reputation as poet laureate. Only in one commentary (that of Francesco Piendibeni da Montepulciano) to the tenth and eleventh eclogues, finished later, do we begin to find mentions of love for an earthly lady, named curiously as Lauretta.⁵⁵

The point that I wish to emphasise here is that Petrarch appears not to have realised, in 1346 when writing his third eclogue, what was subsequently to become abundantly obvious: the potential value of a lady called Laura to enhance his personal version of the Daphne myth. In particular, no Laura is associated at this early stage with the coronation. Both the tenth and eleventh eclogues must have been written after the Black Death of 1348, since they both refer to the effects of the plague; but by then Petrarch's programme had entered a new phase, even if the name that the commentator advances is not as yet the vital one.

Yet as against the silence of one text, there is the eloquent evidence of another to consider: a letter to Petrarch's friend and patron Giacomo Colonna, written from Avignon on a 21 December which is datable, at least in the fictitious structure of things, to 1336, the year of the climbing of Mont Ventoux, to which I shall shortly be returning. Here, Petrarch replies in a light-hearted way to the accusation that Colonna had apparently levelled at him, that he had invented the name of Laura to have something to write about, and to draw attention to himself. He implies that Colonna has said that the only Laura in his life was the poetic laurel, and that the woman, like the love-poems and the poet's sighs, were all the purest fiction. 'Oh, if only you were joking,' Petrarch responds, 'and if

⁵⁴ 'Laurea cognomen tribuit michi, laurea famam | laurea divitias . . .': *Bucolicum carmen*, X, 376–7.

⁵⁵ Francesco Piendibeni was a pupil of Petrarch's close friend Pietro da Moglio; his autograph commentary on the *Bucolicum carmen*, dated 1394 (of which I have an edition in preparation), is in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Pal. lat. 1729; for the mentions of Lauretta see ff. 19^v–20^r, 23^v, 25^r–27^r.

only she really were an invention and not a mad passion,' and teasingly he calls upon St Augustine, whom he describes as his other invention, to help heal him of his wounds.⁵⁶

Here, it seems, is irrefutable proof, in Petrarch's *ipsissima verba*, that five years before the coronation he had already long been concerned with the lady Laura. But we are here dealing with a highly elaborated literary artefact, not a notarial record. We have no way of knowing when Petrarch actually wrote this letter, but the strategic association with an invented Augustine suggests the *Secretum* of the 1340s or 1350s, and we have plenty of evidence to demonstrate that he was capable, at the stage at which he was assembling the *Familiars* as a collection in the 1350s and 1360s, of composing and adding much later letters to give coherence and substance to his overall fictitious design. What this letter reveals is in fact the self-awareness that we come to expect of the mature Petrarch; what it does not in my view do is to prove that that self-awareness was in 1336 already being brought to bear on a point which was not yet at issue.

For as we have seen, none of the poems certainly written before 1341 makes any mention of Laura. The only possible exception is the sonnet 'Quando io movo i sospiri a chiamar voi', which cannot however be shown with certainty to antedate 1356. Besides, although it does make elaborate rhetorical play upon the lady's name in the context of an explicit reference to Apollo, it in fact exploits not the name of Laura, but the three syllables of Lau-Re-Ta, the name found in Piendibeni's commentary on the tenth and eleventh eclogues.⁵⁷ It is only in the poems composed later that the fugitive lady of the myth acquires her full name and role, and indeed a further dimension not entirely present in Ovid, and marked in the *Canzoniere* for the first time in *canzone* 119, that of refusing love but bestowing the laurel crown.⁵⁸ The love that remains unrequited yet gives poetic fame is confirmed in the final poem of the first part of the *Canzoniere*, in which Laura is reintegrated into the triumphal laurel which Petrarch had so ardently desired, and her chastity becomes her highest virtue, inspiring the poet to better things.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Familiars*, II, 9, esp. sections 18–20 ('simulatus ille . . . Augustinus' at 20).

⁵⁷ Now *RVF* 5; cf. l. 3–8: 'LAUdando s'incomincia udir di fore | il suon de' primi dolci accenti suoi. | Vostre stato REal, che 'ncontro poi, | raddoppia a l'alta impresa il mio valore; | ma: TAcì, grida il fin, ché farle honore | è d'altri homeri soma che da' tuoi'.

⁵⁸ See ll. 102–5: 'dicendo: "non temer ch'i'mi allontanati", | di verde lauro una ghirlanda colse | laqual co le sue mani | intorno intorno a le mie tempie avolse'.

⁵⁹ *RVF* 263.

No informed reading of the *Canzoniere* as we now have it can ignore its moral dimension. Yet what emerges from an investigation into the development of Petrarch's ideas mirrored in his reworking and reordering of the lyrics is a sense that the moral imperative plays no part in the initial story, which is that of an ambitious young poet aspiring to achieve fame through his art; only later, perhaps after a series of crises, does he discover that the creation of a lady with a suitable name could enhance his fame, and by adding a dimension hitherto lacking, enhance his art.

At this stage it is therefore essential to consider Petrarch's crises through such evidence as we possess. The first of them, conveniently blamed by certain scholars upon Another Woman who bore Petrarch a child in 1336,⁶⁰ is explored in the memorable letter (*Familiare*, IV. 1) in which he describes the climbing of Mont Ventoux, a letter which is dated, fictitiously as I shall show, to the same year.

It tells how on 26 April 1336 Petrarch and his brother Gherardo came to climb Mont Ventoux. We have already noted the elements of imitation—of Philip of Macedon and Livy—that appear to have inspired the exploit. But the starting point in the text is *cupiditas videndi*,⁶¹ a desire to see from the top of the mountain that St Bernard would have called *curiositas*, and a state of sin. Petrarch's account appears highly circumstantial, and I shall not linger over the details of the climb, except to say that he and his brother set off before dawn from a little inn at Malaucène, each with a servant. Gherardo went shinning up the mountainside by the steepest but shortest routes, while Petrarch kept looking for easier paths on the lower slopes, being ready to climb for longer if the incline was less steep. So that by the time Gherardo reached the upper ranges, Petrarch was still struggling some way below. Finally, though, he caught up with his brother, but almost immediately started his search for easier paths and found himself going down into the valleys again. 'Thus, as before,' he ruefully exclaims, 'I encountered serious trouble: I had tried to put off the effort of having to climb, but the nature of things does not depend upon human desires, and it is impossible for a body to arrive at a summit by descending . . .'.⁶²

One may pause at this stage on the slopes and ask what is going on.

⁶⁰ Cf. A. Foresti, 'Studi sul Petrarca. Dalle prime alle 'secondo lagrime'. Un capitolo della storia dell'amore di Francesco Petrarca', *Convivium*, 14 (1942), 97–100; Martinelli, 'Petrarca e il Ventoso', in his *Petrarca e il Ventoso*, pp. 184–5.

⁶¹ *Familiare*, IV. 1. 1: 'sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate ductus'.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 6–11.

Scarcely, I think, a feat of mountaineering. We should first note the stamp of Lactantius upon the narrative: in an extended passage of the *Divine Institutes*, he deals with the image of the Pythagorean Y, which Petrarch elsewhere associates with the crucial crossroads that arise at crisis points in a man's existence.⁶³ Lactantius writes to the Emperor Constantine that there are two paths along which all life must proceed: one which leads to virtue and to heaven, which is steep and rugged from the start; the other which sinks to vice and to hell, and which at its beginning appears to be pleasant and well-trodden, but later becomes steep, rough with stones, overgrown with thorns, and interrupted by deep waters or violent torrents.⁶⁴

Finally, after repeatedly falling back in the Lactantian manner, and after explicitly comparing his rather unsuccessful method of climbing with his equally indirect approach to the blessed life, Petrarch reaches the summit. There, he falls into a meditation, inspired by the impossible panorama that opens out before him: he sees (partly, as he admits, with the eyes of the spirit) the Alps and Italy on one side, Marseille and Aigues Mortes on the other.⁶⁵ And he recalls his departure from Bologna and his beloved homeland ten years earlier. He looks back over his 'perduti giorni': a decade of sins, ambition, and desires, and gives his retrospection an explicitly Augustinian tone by quoting the beginning of the second book of the *Confessions*: 'I want to remember the abominable deeds that I perpetrated in those days, and the carnal corruption of my spirit. I do this, my God, not because I love those sins, but so that I may love you . . .'.⁶⁶

But the role of St Augustine does not end there. For it turns out that Petrarch had carried up with him (surely not by chance) his copy of the *Confessions*, which incidentally had been given to him by the very Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro to whom this letter is addressed. He lets the book fall open and reads the first passage that comes to his eyes: 'men go to admire the heights of the mountains and the great flood of the seas, and rolling rivers and the ring of ocean, and the wheeling of the stars, yet to themselves they pay no heed'.⁶⁷ This text, urging not *cupiditas videndi* and awe at nature but *contemptus mundi* and introspection, for which he

⁶³ Cf. for instance *Familiars*, VII. 17. 1–4; XII. 3. 6–7.

⁶⁴ Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, VI. 3. 6–18.

⁶⁵ *Familiars*, IV. 1. 18 and 25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19–21; Augustine, *Confessions*, II. 1. 1.

⁶⁷ *Confessions*, X. 8. 15.

immediately (but implicitly) quotes Senecan approval,⁶⁸ is furthermore taken from that part of the tenth book where Augustine considers the role of memory and the function of the images of the past that we store inside ourselves. If the opening words of book II of the *Confessions* seemed programmatic enough as an introduction to the summit of Mont Ventoux, then surely what Petrarch finds when he gets there is even more emphatic. For he proceeds explicitly to relate his experience on the mountain top at the age of thirty-two to the dramatic conversion of Augustine under the fig tree at the same age: he compares his happening upon the passage in the *Confessions* with what had befallen his illustrious predecessor, who had heard an inner voice commanding him to read the first passage in the scriptures that his eyes should fall upon as he opened the book, and who had thus lighted upon St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* where he read 'not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envy. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.'⁶⁹

Thus Petrarch establishes a clear parallel of considerable spiritual significance. And if we should be in any doubt as to the credentials of his act of imitation, he immediately dispels them by reminding us that Augustine was himself imitating—or claiming to imitate—St Anthony, who had come by chance across a passage in the Gospels which had commanded him to 'go home and sell all that belongs to you'.⁷⁰ The implications of this chain of *imitatio* are that Petrarch's version of the ancient divinatory practice of the random consultation of books, the *sortes Virgilianae*, has led him to a fundamental turning-point on his journey: from the sinful desire to see to the healing need to know himself.

It seems clear that the spiritual conversion that Petrarch here evokes is not a record of what happened in 1336, but a retrospective response to a crisis of that period, possibly inflamed by a second crisis triggered by Gherardo's entry into the Charterhouse at Montrieux in 1343. The date that Petrarch assigns to the letter is significant: 26 April was a Friday, and he was much given to penitential experiences, or exercises, on Fridays; as we have seen, moreover, the year 1336 is not only a poignant anniversary, but is also the thirty-second year of his life, precisely the age at which Augustine underwent his dramatic conversion under a fig-tree. When one

⁶⁸ *Familiares*, IV. 1. 28: 'nichil preter animum esse mirabile, cui magno nichil est magnum' (Seneca, *Ep. ad Lucilium*, 8. 5); cf. Martinelli, 'Petarca e il Ventoso', p. 198.

⁶⁹ *Rom.*, XIII. 13–14; *Familiares*, IV. 1. 30.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 31–2; *Matt.* XIX. 21.

further considers the explicit references to the beatific life as being located on high, and recalls how he describes his brother Gherardo's climbing method—straight up the steepest paths to the top—we may be fairly sure that Petrarch is referring to the fact that Gherardo had taken the more difficult, but more direct, route to spiritual heights. At the very least, then, it seems likely that even if some such expedition really did take place in 1336, it was not until at least seven years later that it could have assumed its full allegorical significance and have been written up in such elaborate form. Indeed, Billanovich has shown on impeccable philological grounds that Petrarch must have reworked the final version of the letter as we now have it in 1352 or 1353, some ten years after Gherardo became a Carthusian, and eleven years after the death of Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, to whom the letter purports to be addressed.⁷¹

There is thus little doubt that the letter cannot be what Petrarch claims it is: a spontaneous and immediate account of a real event. What he tells us is that he wrote it immediately on returning to the little inn from which he and his brother had departed before dawn that day.⁷² It is however intrinsically unlikely that a man who had got up before dawn to accomplish a trek of some 40 kilometres, including a climb to 1,300 metres, would, on returning in the depths of night, and on an empty stomach, proceed to write such a long and carefully articulated letter. It is the more unlikely since it contains no fewer than twenty direct or indirect quotations from classical, scriptural, and patristic sources, some of them only known to him years later. But then we have seen how carefully Petrarch edited everything that he wrote, often long after the event. In short, the journey to the summit of Mont Ventoux was carefully created to narrate the drama which Petrarch had by the early 1350s identified as being at the centre of his inner conflict: the need to seek solitude and to escape from the pulls of earthly desires.

But one cannot fully understand the account of it, entitled in the definitive version of the letter *de curis propriis*, without reference to the *Secretum*, the final redaction of which appears to date from precisely the same period as that letter,⁷³ and whose full title, *De secreto conflictu*

⁷¹ G. Billanovich, 'Petrarca e il Ventoso', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 9 (1966), 389–401; cf. Martinelli, 'Petrarca e il Ventoso', p. 150 and *passim*.

⁷² *Familiars*, IV. 1. 35.

⁷³ The dating of the *Secretum* (ed. E. Carrara, in *Prose*, pp. 22–215) has been the subject of much dispute, but the two most recent major protagonists—F. Rico (*Vida u obra*: see n. 7 above) and H. Baron (*Petrarch's 'Secretum': its Making and its Meaning*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985)—at least agree that it was drafted in 1347 and revised in 1349 and 1353.

curarum mearum, inevitably recalls that given to the letter. It is a three-day dialogue, located in 1342–3 (portrayed as another moment of crisis), and conducted in the presence of Truth, between Franciscus, who stands for the young, ambitious and love-sick poet, and Augustinus, his *alter ego*: not just his favourite saint acting as a confessor, but also Petrarch the older and wiser man reflecting critically upon the follies of his youth. Their debate is the first truly searching essay in self-analysis of the modern world; the introspection which makes that self-analysis possible is clearly the outcome of the injunction delivered on the mountain-top by St Augustine's text: know yourself.

Petrarch's long meditations upon St Augustine's crisis in books 8–10 of the *Confessions* take shape in what becomes his own confession facing his own crisis, consciously written down to give permanence and reality to the flux and fictions which it represents. It certainly faithfully records aspects of its author's disingenuousness and self-indulgence, for from the very start, Truth praises Franciscus for his poetry,⁷⁴ and it is not long before Augustinus comments favourably on his self-awareness.⁷⁵ And when Franciscus recalls the fig-tree under which St Augustine saw the light, Augustinus congratulates him on his parallel experience with the laurel tree.⁷⁶ Elsewhere in the third book, Franciscus is surprised and flattered when Augustinus praises the *dulcedo* of one of his poems on solitude, and we are surprised to hear the saint-figure even finding some justification for Franciscus's pursuit of fame.⁷⁷

Interestingly, much of Augustinus's attack in the second day is directed at Franciscus's intellectual habits: at reading, which engenders arrogance, and at writing, which, apart from being a vehicle for mad ambitions, a part of his quest for fame, is also by its very nature inadequate, since words cannot fully express the realities that they are called upon to portray. Nor is this analysis of Petrarch's creative dilemma a superficial one, for Augustinus deliberately uses the evidence of Petrarch's own writings to prove to Franciscus how arrogant he is; he even chides

⁷⁴ In the *prohemium*: ed. *Prose*, p. 22.

⁷⁵ *Secretum*, I: 'Nec tam tenuis tue indolis spes est michi quin, si animum acriter intenderis, per te ipsum videas . . .'; ed. *Prose*, p. 36.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–2.

⁷⁷ *Secretum*, III: *ibid.*, p. 174 (Aug.: 'quod cum multis in locis, tum in eo presertim poemate, quod de statu tuo loculentissime cecinisti; cuius ego dulcedine, interim dum caneres, delectabar . . .'); p. 273 (Aug.: 'ut inglorius degas nunquam consulam . . . Nosti enim gloria, velut umbram quandam esse virtutis . . .'), following Cicero, *Tusc.*, I. 45. 109.

him for one of his most persistent literary devices, the use of examples borrowed from antiquity.⁷⁸

But if ambition is, as Augustinus says, an adamantine chain that holds Franciscus captive in his state of sin, the real focus of the father confessor's critique (and it should be said that it is a critique resting as much on the writings of St Bernard as of St Augustine) is the wayward son's love, which he sees as the other, and more dangerous, chain. The greater part of the third day of the debate is focused upon that love of Laura that Franciscus at first refuses to see as anything but a chaste and virtuous predilection, but which Augustinus condemns as the fiercest of passions: a misplaced desire for an earthly creature, and an obstacle to the love of the Creator. He even points to the literary conceit which is, as we have seen, such a central part of Petrarch's personal myth, accusing Franciscus of being so obsessed by the name of the beloved that he worships and celebrates in poetry everything that sounds the same, and most especially the laurels of fame, which he desired as ardently as the woman named after them.⁷⁹

In this way, Augustinus seems to confirm Petrarch's official and definitive chronology for his life: first the love of Laura, then poems, then the coronation—a sequence of events corroborating, or corroborated by, the note on Laura in the Ambrosian Virgil, written at very much the same time. But I have tried to show that there are reasons for thinking otherwise: there are no poems mentioning Laura before the coronation, and no excitement in the manuscript in which Petrarch read the *Metamorphoses*, very probably before 1340. When he comes to the passage which concerns us, he simply notes 'Fabula Daphnes' and 'mutatio Daphnes in laurum arborem'.⁸⁰ These are of course arguments *ex silentio*, and I eagerly await their refutation by the discovery of hitherto unknown facts. But as I read Petrarch, everything suggests that his use of the Daphne myth does not reach its fulfilment in the adoption of the name of Laura until *after* the coronation. Petrarch's first love was fame; women there may have been, but the quintessential lady only came later, once he had realized the full poetic potential of the name he had given her.

Augustinus puts his finger on the dangers of Franciscus's attachment to his love, and to his fame, in the *Secretum*. In the final year of his life

⁷⁸ *Secretum*, II: ed. *Prose*, pp. 72–6, 120–8.

⁷⁹ *Secretum*, III: *ibid.*, pp. 134–46, 158.

⁸⁰ Harley MS 3754, ff. 162^{r-v}.

Petrarch wrote a long letter to Boccaccio, a kind of spiritual testament in which he seems to have absorbed the Augustinian lesson. He complains about his own story: ‘as for the laurels, I was immature when I obtained them, and the leaves were bitter; if I had been more mature at the time, I would not have desired them’. As at the beginning of his career, he makes no mention of Laura, but tells how the laurel crown had left him nothing but ‘the bitterest fruit of infinite envy, which destroyed my peace of mind and made me pay the penalty for my vainglory and the rashness of my youth’.⁸¹

I have several times suggested that in his writings Petrarch shaped the events of his life to mould the *fabula* (as he himself calls it) that he was composing, a story in which his love of laurels, and his use of the Daphne myth, played an essential structuring role. There is a final chapter to this story, almost an epilogue, which I cannot resist mentioning briefly since it demonstrates how complete was the circularity of life and literature in his case—and that is the remarkable account of Petrarch’s attempts to plant laurel trees in his garden.

The account is remarkable for several reasons. First, it is not a literary one, but consists of a series of private notes in the margin of one of Petrarch’s manuscripts, recording in his own hand his horticultural experiments between 1349 and 1369.⁸² Such notes are exceedingly rare for the fourteenth century, if not actually unique. Second, they are remarkable in that they demonstrate a dogged determination on Petrarch’s part to grow laurel trees, despite the renewed failure of his attempts: six planted in Milan in April 1357 all withered in due course; five others planted in March 1359 also perished; ten years later he tried again at Arquà, but two laurel trees transplanted in the spring of 1369 both died, and we do not know the fate of a further attempt on 7th December of the same year, though it seems likely that it too failed, since in a later description of his garden there, Petrarch refers only to olive trees and some vines.

But the final remarkable feature of these notes, to which such a rapid summary does no justice, is the way in which they reflect, even in the prac-

⁸¹ *Seniles*, XVII. 2 (ed. *Prose*, pp. 1134–58, at p. 1152).

⁸² Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 2193, ff. 156^{r-v}. The MS is described in M. Vattasso, *I codici petrarcheschi della Biblioteca Vaticana* (Rome, 1908), pp. 161–2; the text of the notes is transcribed (more correctly than in Nohac, *Pétrarque*, II, pp. 259–68) in *ibid.*, pp. 230–4; cf. pl. I. See on this topic Mann, ‘Il Petrarca giardiniere (a proposito del sonetto CCXXVIII)’, *Atti e memorie dell’Accademia Patavina di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, 104 (1991–2), Parte III, pp. 235–56 (at 239–42).

ticalities of gardening, Petrarch's concern with the literary significance of his laurels. In an entry dated Saturday 16 March 1359, he records his latest attempt to plant five laurels. 'Among the other factors that should greatly assist the growth of these sacred trees [he says] was that Giovanni Boccaccio of Certaldo, a dear friend of theirs and of mine, who had arrived by chance that very afternoon, was present at the planting. We will see how it turns out.'⁸³ The reference to his friend's devotion to the laurel immediately recalls us to the literary sphere, for we know that among his many other activities, Boccaccio spent that month in Milan with Petrarch, revising the text of the *Bucolicum carmen*.⁸⁴ In that respect, his visit bore poetic fruit (and also had a radical effect on the composition of Boccaccio's own eclogues), even if it seems not to have been especially beneficial to the laurels, which withered and died.

Perhaps the earliest metamorphosis worked upon Petrarch by the Ovidian myth was, as we have seen, his poetic transformation into a laurel tree; here however we witness his final, real transformation into a gardener. But between these two extremes we can detect the full potency of the Daphne story as a classical model to be imitated and surpassed, and the rich variety of the metamorphoses that Petrarch worked upon it. The initial attraction of the leaves of Apollo's favourite tree had nothing to do with love, but was the fame that they brought to those who were rewarded with them: hence Petrarch's first great ambition, realised as it seems in Rome in 1341, to be crowned with laurels. His celebration of the event in the third eclogue speaks only of his love for poetry, yet as he explored the rich implications of Ovid's story, the association of the laurel and love began to emerge; he came to see the value of the name of Laura as an object of desire and as an emblem of poetry. And thus he constructed a fictitious identity for her, and a symbolic chronology for his passion for her, both moulded by his reading of Propertius. By adopting and adapting the Ovidian myth, Petrarch transmutes his own imaginative experience into a new personal myth in which the object of desire can be seen to fuse all his ambitions.

But against this potent laurel we must set the fig-tree under which Augustine underwent his conversion crisis. An Augustinian paradigm, explored on the slopes of Mont Ventoux and enacted in the dialogue of

⁸³ MS Vat. lat. 2193, f. 156; Vattasso, *Codici*, p. 233.

⁸⁴ *Familiars*, XXII. 2. 1; cf. Billanovich, *Petrarca letterato*, pp. 213–14; E. H. Wilkins, *Petrarch's Eight Years in Milan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 183; Mann, "'O Deus, qualis epistola!'" A New Petrarch Letter', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 17 (1974), 209; 'The Making', 133–4.

the *Secretum*, sets up a deliberate and crucial tension with the Ovidian model. Whether this corresponds to a genuine crisis in Petrarch's moral life, in which case it must be located in the early 1350s when both these texts were completed, or whether it merely reflects Petrarch's need for critical reflection upon his own achievements, it certainly constitutes an integral part of the image of himself that he chose to bequeath to us. As we saw at the beginning, he may not have completed his self-defining *Letter to Posterity*, but the whole of his existence is in one sense literary, that is to say mediated and powerfully modelled by the reflexes and the reflections of the writer. So that the whole body of texts that Petrarch has left behind, whether in Latin or in Italian, together constitutes a unique and fascinating autobiographical project, which we can still continue to interrogate in search of the image of him that we want to construct.