

Teresa Caligiure

In antiquam litem relabimur.

Sceptical Hints in Petrarch's *Secretum**

Cum enim neque melius quaeri veritas possit,
quam interrogando et respondendo.
(Augustine, *Soliloquium*, II:7,14)

Introduction

Francesco Petrarch's *Secretum*¹ is a Latin dialogue in three books composed between 1347 and 1353.² The aim of this paper is to investigate certain sceptical hints emerging

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1 The Latin text is as established by Enrico Carrara in Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum*, in idem, *Prose*, eds. Guido Martellotti, Pier Giorgio Ricci, Enrico Carrara, and Enrico Bianchi (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1955): 22–215, amended with corrections from Bufano's edition in Francesco Petrarca, *Opere latine*, vol. 1, ed. Antonietta Bufano (Turin: UTET, 1975): 44–258. The English text follows Mann's excellent translation in Petrarch, *My Secret Book*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Mann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016). Paragraph numbers refer to Fenzi's outstanding annotated edition, Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum. Il mio segreto*, ed. Enrico Fenzi (Milan: Mursia, 1992), which gives the pages from Carrara's edition.

2 On the dating of the composition, cf. Francisco Rico, *Vita u obra de Petrarca. I: Lectura del 'Secretum'* (Padua: Antenore, 1974). In his impressive analysis, Rico demonstrated that the action of the dialogue takes place between 1342 and 1343. According to him, the first redaction dates from 1347 and was followed by a second in 1349 and a final edition, thoroughly re-elaborated, completed in 1353. In 1358, Petrarch is supposed to have merely re-read the text, adding some marginal notes that confirm the proposed chronology of the three editions. We can read those marginal notes in the copy of the *Secretum* made by Tebaldo della Casa, reproduced in the current Codice Laurenziano XXVI sin. 9 of the Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana in Florence, cc. 208–243. Hans Baron, *Petrarch's 'Secretum.' Its Making and its Meaning*, Medieval Academy of America (Cambridge: Mass., 1985) proposes a different reconstruction of the *Secretum*: his important analysis roots the interpretation and the proposed dates more solidly in the biographical data. Bortolo Martinelli, *Il Secretum conteso* (Naples: Loffredo, 1982) and Giovanni Ponte, "Nella selva del Petrarca: la discussa data del Secretum," *Giornale storico della Letteratura italiana* 167 (1990): 1–63, also discussed—with different hypotheses—the complex question of establishing the chronology of the *Secretum*'s composition. For a careful reconstruction of the many hypotheses concerning the editing and dating of the *Secretum*, see Fenzi, *Secretum*, 5–77 (introduction).

from the dialogue which underpinned the conception of Francesco's character and his relationship with the quest for Christian truth.

It would be proper to begin with the *Proem*, as it anticipates the ideological cores of the *Secretum* by delineating Francesco's moral character, that of a man prone to anxious brooding about the human condition: 'Not long ago, while I was yet again meditating with astonishment on how I had come into this life and how I would depart from it.'³ Next, Truth⁴ appears in the shape of a woman whose presence plays a specific role, as she herself explains:

Taking pity on your errors I have come down from afar to help you in your hour of need. Until now you have often all too often gazed upon the earth with clouded eyes; if so far you have found mortal things delightful, how much more can you not hope for if you look up to things eternal? [...] So I gazed, eager to look at her, but my mortal eyes could not bear the celestial light, and I lowered them again. Seeing this, she was silent for a moment, and then, repeatedly breaking into speech, she forced me with brief and almost insignificant questions to respond and to discuss a multitude of things. I recognised that this was doubly to my advantage: I became a little wiser, and at the same time, feeling more confident as a result of our discussion, I began to be able to look more openly at the face.⁵

Francesco dwells in error because his interests aim solely at mundane goods. Truth, whom he described in his Latin poem *Africa*⁶ and with whom he is therefore well acquainted, comes to his rescue. After a brief silent pause,⁷ during which Francesco shivers in awe, unable to bear the gaze of such celestial splendour, Truth, through

³ 'Attonito michi quidem et sepiissime cogitanti qualiter in hanc vitam intrassem, qualiter ve forem egressurus.' Cf. Seneca, *Ad Lucil.*, XXII:14 ss; Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, I:1, Augustine, *Sol.*, I:1.1. On the semantic richness of the *incipit* and the intricate web of classical and medieval references, see Rico, *Secretum*, 16–20.

⁴ On the character of Truth in the *Proem*, see the *ad locum* comments of Rico and Fenzi.

⁵ *Proem*, 22–24: 'Errores tuos miserata, de longinquo tempestivum tibi auxilium latura descendi. Satis superque satis hactenus terram caligantibus oculis aspexisti; quos si usqueadeo mortalia ista permulcent, quid futurum speras si eos ad eterna sustuleris? [...]. Rursus igitur in terram oculos decicio; quod illa cognoscens, brevis spatii interveniente silentio, iterumque et iterum in verba prorumpens, minutis interrogatiunculis me quoque ut secum multa colloquerer coegit. 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.'

⁶ In fact, the received text of the poem *Africa* contains no description of Truth or of her palace, contrarily to what Francesco writes in the *Proem*. The same question concerns Book III of the dialogue, in which Augustine repeatedly refers to the poem. On this issue, also connected to chronological aspects of the work, see Enrico Fenzi, "Dall'*Africa* al *Secretum*. Il sogno di Scipione e la composizione del poema," in idem, *Saggi petrarcheschi* (Florence: Cadmo, 2003): 305–365; idem, *Secretum*, 23–39 (introduction); 399–400, n. 327; 407, n. 376; 411–412, n. 402 (commentary).

⁷ On the topic of silence in Petrarch, understood as inner recollection, far from the distractions of the city, and for its different meanings relating to *otium* see, including the references to previous studies, Arnaud Tripet, "Pétrarque, la parole silencieuse," *Italique* 8 (2005): 9–25 and Ilaria Tufano, "I silenzi di Petrarca," in *Silenzio*. Atti del terzo colloquio internazionale di letteratura italiana, Napoli, 2–4 ottobre 2008, ed. Silvia Zoppi Garampi (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2011): 105–120.

minutae interrogatiunculae,⁸ initiates a conversation intended to bring about the moral elevation of her interlocutor. Nonetheless, the task of reaching deep into the depths of Francesco's soul and diverting his desires from earthly vanities is entrusted to Augustine, because 'it is the human voice that penetrates the ear of mortal man.'⁹ Francesco recognises the saint at once because of his posture, his African outfit and Roman eloquence, and his eagerness to question him;¹⁰ however, Truth addresses Augustine first. Truth asks Augustine to come out of his silent brooding ('taciturna meditatio'), since Francesco is moribund because of his own sin and, furthermore, is dangerously far from understanding the nature of his own sickness: that is why he needs a physician who is an expert in mundane passions.¹¹ Augustine,¹² to whom Francesco is devoted as he views him as the intellectual closest to his own sensitivity, is an example to follow, since he also wandered in error before reaching a path of truth-seeking.¹³ In fact, Petrarch considered Augustine his own master. The saint accepts the task, initiating a three-day exchange with the disciple in the silent presence of Truth.¹⁴

'Sola virtus animum felicitat'

The structure of the work, as the *auctor* highlights, draws from the model of Platonic and Ciceronian dialogues.¹⁵ Its constant and crucial references are Boethius' *Conso-*

8 This is a Ciceronian syntagm opening the proem of the *Paradoxa stoicorum ad Marcum Brutum* I:2.

9 *Proem*, 24: 'Aurem mortalis hominis humana vox feriat.'

10 *Ibidem*: 'iam interrogationis verba dictaveram' ('I was already preparing to frame my question').

11 *Ibidem*: 'quod cum ita sit, passionum expertarum curator optime' ('For this reason you are the best healer of passions that you yourself have experienced').

12 Among the important studies on the relationship between Augustine and Petrarch, see at least Pietro Paolo Gerosa, *Umanesimo cristiano del Petrarca. Influenza agostiniana, attinenze medievali* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1966); Elena Giannarelli, "Petrarca e i Padri della Chiesa," in *Quaderni Petrarqueschi* 9–10 (1992–3): 393–412; Giuseppe Billanovich, "Petrarca, Boccaccio e le 'Enarrationes in Psalmos' di sant'Agostino," in idem, *Petrarca e il primo Umanesimo* (Padua: Antenore, 1996): 68–96; Enrico Fenzi, "Platone, Petrarca, Agostino," in idem, *Saggi petrarcheschi*, 519–552; Roberto Cardini and Paolo Viti, eds., *Petrarca e i Padri della Chiesa: Petrarca e Arezzo* (Pagliai: Polistampa, 2004): 29–100 and 209–305; Roberto Cardini and Donatella Coppini, eds., *Petrarca e Agostino* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004); and Alexander Lee, *Petrarch and St. Augustine: Classical Scholarship, Christian Theology and the Origins of the Renaissance in Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

13 Cf. *Secretum*, I:42 where Petrarch states that, when he read the *Confessions*, he would find that it mirrored his own situation. Cf. also *Fam.*, X:3, 56, where, among the Augustinian readings recommended to Monica, the *Confessions* are paired with the *Soliloquium* and *Fam.*, IV:1 about the similarity that Petrarch stated between his existential path and Augustine's.

14 *Proem*, 26: 'illa de singulis in silentio iudicante' ('Truth, who passed silent judgment on every word').

15 *Proem*, 26: 'hunc nempe scribendi morem a Cicerone meo didici; at ipse prius a Platone didicerat' ('I learned this technique from Cicero who in turn had learned it from Plato'). In the *Tusculan Dispu-*

lation of *Philosophy* and Augustine's *Confessions*, together with the moral writings of Seneca.¹⁶ From the prologue on, Petrarch refers to Augustine's *Soliloquium*¹⁷ as well. As has already been pointed out,¹⁸ the Cassiciaco dialogues were, among Augustine's works, one of the major influences on the character of Francesco in the *Secretum*.¹⁹ Without forgetting the substantial differences between them, these similarities show the importance of assent in the quest for truth and also how, in the *Secretum*, Francesco lacks the final assent that would allow him to take on a new moral path. Further evidence of the influence of the *Soliloquium* on the *Secretum* are the facts that the inner dialogue between Augustine and Ratio also lasts for three days and that Ratio advises Augustine to ask for God's help against the infirmities of sin ('ora salutem et auxilium'). In the *Soliloquium*, the author 'undertakes, and in turn discusses, the difficult path of philosophical reflection, which is aimed at investigating, through reason and evidence, those truths that matter to man and to which he refers to live.'²⁰ Nevertheless, Augustine, unlike Francesco, recites a long prayer before the actual opening of the dialogue. In the prayer, he turns desire and *voluntas*²¹ towards God and begs to be able to reach God's knowledge and that of the soul.²² Furthermore, he demonstrates his gradual moral elevation, showing his progress²³ and his willing spiritual growth.

tations, I:4,8 Cicero acknowledged in turn having drawn inspiration from the Socratic maieutic model, consecrated by Plato.

16 For the classical and medieval models of the *Proem*, see the *ad locum* comments of Rico and Fenzi.

17 *Sol.*, I:1,1: 'Volventi mihi multa ac varia mecum diu ac per multos dies sedulo quaerenti memetipsum ac bonum meum, quidve mali evitandum esset, ait mihi subito sive ego ipse sive alius quis, extrinsecus sive intrinsecus, nescio; nam hoc ipsum est quod magnopere scire molior, ait ergo mihi.'

18 Nicolae Iliescu wrote about the connections between the *Secretum* and the *Soliloquium*, *Il Canzoniere Petrarcesco e Sant'Agostino* (Rome: Società Accademica Romana, 1962): 43: 'His direct model [for the *Secretum*] is the *Soliloquium*, rather than the *Confessions*: because of the same dialogical form, the debate on the many forms of vanity, the character of intimacy (*Soliloquia-Secretum*) and because of the presence of Truth.' See also Francesco Tateo's interesting observations, *Dialogo interiore e polemica ideologica nel 'Secretum' del Petrarca* (Florence, Le Monnier, 1965) now revised in idem, *L'ozio segreto di Petrarca* (Bari: Palomar, 2005): 21–95, esp. 36–38. As for the *Proem*, cf. especially Rico, *Secretum*, 21–41; *ibidem*, 37, n.112 and 38, where the scholar stresses the topic of the *Secretum* as an imitation of the *Soliloquium*.

19 See Rico, *Secretum*, 384; 415–416.

20 Unless otherwise stated, English translations are the author's. Cf. Onorato Grassi in Augustine, *Soliloquia*, ed. Onorato Grassi (Milan: Bompiani, 2002): 7 (introduction): '[L'autore] percorre, e a sua volta ripropone, la difficile strada della riflessione filosofica, volta a indagare, mediante la ragione e secondo il criterio dell'evidenza, le verità che interessano l'uomo e alle quali egli si riferisce per vivere.'

21 On the relationship between *amor* and *voluntas* in Augustine's works, cf. Donatella Pagliacci, *Volere e amare. Agostino e la conversione del desiderio* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2003). For the *Soliloquium* in particular, see the second chapter, *ibidem*, 47–100.

22 *Sol.*, I:1–6.

23 Cf., e.g., *ibidem*, I:10,17.

In the *Proem*, Francesco lies in a situation of error and inner closure; however, at the end of the dialogue, after a long analysis of his conscience, he still wishes—as at the beginning—to take care of his mundane commitments ('mortalia negotia' III:214). Indeed, he does not display a thoroughly manifest will towards the virtuous life, and his master Augustine rebukes him accordingly. In the *Secretum*, Petrarch, through an introspective analysis in the presence of Truth, delineates the project of a virtuous life to be put into practice in Augustine's replies; still, the disciple defers his master's proposals. Francesco's moral progress and the awareness he acquires of his own sin should allow him to shed the *phantasmata* ('imagines rerum visibilium'; 'pestis illa fantasmatum')²⁴ that make one's spirit numb and paralyses one's actions. Nevertheless, he does not reach an immediate practical goal, but rather a deferred action. This is testified by the master's closing line, where he resignedly joins in with a prayer: 'But so be it, since it cannot be otherwise. I pray to God and beg Him to accompany you on your way, and to grant that your errant footsteps will nonetheless lead you to a place of safety.'²⁵ Besides, while in the *Soliloquium* Augustine's deferral of an answer opens up the possibility of a broader argumentation, meant to show the moral progress he has achieved,²⁶ in the *Secretum* Francesco's stalling in heeding his master's call, and so Truth's own call, is due to sloth and to his unwillingness to face the matter and admit his error, or to his persistent dwelling in error itself.

In the first book of the *Secretum*, Augustine bestows upon his disciple the duty of acknowledging his own negligent *voluntas* towards good, impaired by his mundane passions. The saint at once introduces the matters he cherishes the most: the redis-

24 Cf. *Secretum*, I:64–66. To explain the meaning of this word, Augustine refers to a passage mistakenly attributed to St. Paul (in truth an excerpt from *Sap.*, IX:15), and Francesco mentions Augustine's *De vera religione* and the influence it had on him; the master then specifies that *De vera religione* was inspired by his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, and generally by Plato, Socrates, and Cicero, and quotes with this respect a passage from the *Tusculan Disputations*. On this passage, see Rico, *Secretum*, 11–121; Fenzi, *Secretum*, 314–315, n. 141 and 142 and introduction. For the relationship between *De vera religione* and Petrarch's works, see Rico, "Petrarca y el 'De vera religione'," *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 17 (1974): 313–364. On this theme, see Rino Caputo, *Cogitans fingit. Petrarca tra 'Secretum' e 'Canzoniere'* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1987). Massimo Ciavolella, "La stanza della memoria: amore e malattia nel 'Secretum' e nei 'Rerum vulgarium fragmenta'", *Quaderns d'Italia* 11 (2006): 55–63, examines the *phantasmata* and the role of the faculty of the imagination in the *Secretum* and in sonnets LXXXIII, CVII, CXVI, CXXX of the *RVF*, with respect to the theories of the philosophers and doctors of Scholastic and Arabic traditions tracing back to Aristotle and Galen. Concerning Petrarch's *RVF* and closely relating to Dante's *Vita Nuova*, the topics, vocabulary, and physiological processes determined by the imaginative faculty with respect to the *amor hereos*, with ample reference to philosophical and scientific treatises, were discussed by Nataschia Tonelli, *Fisiologia della passione. Poesia d'amore e medicina da Cavalcanti a Boccaccio* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo per la Fondazione Ezio Franceschini, 2015): 125–151.

25 *Proem*, III:214: 'Sed sic eat, quando aliter esse non potest, supplexque Deum oro ut euntem committitur, gressusque licet vagos, in tutum iubeat pervenire.'

26 E.g. *Sol.*, I:10,17; e.g. Augustine stopped desiring honours: 'Fateor, eos modo ac paene his diebus cupere destiti.'

covery of one's self (*nosce te ipsum*), the awareness of error, the *meditatio mortis*,²⁷ and the search for happiness through virtue; he then moves on to analysing Francesco's past experiences and his state of spiritual misery. Firstly—in the second book—the saint pressingly questions Francesco about the seven deadly sins, greatly elaborating on sloth, the sin by which Francesco is most tormented. Then, in the third book, Augustine probes the two passions that, for his disciple, are the hardest to get rid of: his love for Laura and his longing for glory.

Augustine's words in Book I echo the strict principles of Stoic morality,²⁸ which binds together notions of virtue and truth, preaching abstention from passions—thus from richness, earthly love, and the desire for glory—and the primacy of will.

A: For if virtue alone makes the mind happy, as has been frequently proved with the most convincing arguments by Cicero and many others, then it follows absolutely that nothing removes the mind from happiness unless it is the opposite of virtue [...].

F: Of course I remember: you are directing me back to the teaching of the Stoics, which are contrary to popular opinion and closer to the truth than to general practice. [...] I [...] don't doubt that the maxims of the Stoics are preferable to the errors of the common people [...]. For that reason, even allowing for the Stoic maxim, one can accept that many are unhappy against their will, while grieving and wishing that the contrary were true. [...]

A: I had set about showing you that in order to escape the confines of our mortal condition and to lift ourselves to higher things, the first step, so to speak, consists of meditation on death and human misery; the second is the ardent desire and determination to rise above them.

F: I wouldn't dare to admit that I had set my mind against it. For my esteem for you has so grown since my youth that if my opinion were in any way different from yours, I'd recognize that I was mistaken.²⁹

27 On the *meditatio mortis* in the *Secretum*, besides the comments of Rico and Fenzi on the many passages of the dialogue where the topic is present, see Sabrina Stroppa, *Petrarca e la morte. Tra 'Familiari' e Canzoniere* (Rome: Aracne, 2014): 59–76.

28 The Stoic morality, as highlighted by Rico, *Secretum*, 53ff. and Baron, *Petrarch's 'Secretum'*, 34–46, acquires a growing importance for Petrarch right in the 1350s, hence at the same time of the composition of the *Secretum*, and, according to Baron, it determines following additions to the first writing that can be witnessed in several parts of the *Secretum*. On the Stoicism of the *Secretum*, besides the ad locum comments of Rico and Fenzi, see Ugo Dotti, *Secretum*, (introduction): 7–47, idem, *Vita di Petrarca* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1987): 154–175.

29 *Secretum*, I:34: 'A: Nam si sola virtus animum felicitat, quod et a Marco Tullio et a multis sepe validissimis rationibus demonstratum est, consequentissimum est ut nichil quoque nisi virtutis oppositum a felicitate dimoveat [...].

F: Recordor equidem; ad stoicorum precepta me revocas, populorum opinionibus aversa et veritati propinquiora quam usui. [...] Quam ob rem, stante licet stoicorum sententia, tolerari potest multos invitos ac dolentes optantesque contrarium esse miserrimos. [...].

A: Id agere tecum institueram, ut ostenderem, ad evadendum huius nostre mortalitatis angustias ad tollendumque se se altius, primum veluti gradum obtinere meditationem mortis humaneque miserie; secundum vero desiderium vehemens studiumque surgendi; quibus exactis ad id, quo vestra suspirat intentio, ascensum facilem pollicebar; nisi tibi forte nunc etiam contrarium videatur.

F: Contrarium michi quidem videri dicere non ausim; ea namque de te ab adolescentia mea mecum crevit opinio ut, siquid aliter michi visum fuerit quam tibi, aberrasse me noverim.'

Francesco complains about the impracticability of the Stoic tenets and confirms the sternness of his will: indeed, despite wanting to, he has not managed to detach himself from human passions. The harsh and abstract dimension of Stoic morality is then mitigated in the second book by the master and disciple's shared proposals, favouring a 'peripatetic moderation'³⁰ that considers material necessities and the control of passions less severely. Augustine's recommendations and rebukes rest on the fundamental topics of the book: a lack of virtue is the cause of man's unhappiness, and the sole remedy is a sincere and thorough meditation on death. Such a meditation is not merely contemplative, but should be able to drag the mind towards certain spirit-changing thoughts, so that, assisted by the action of a powerful will, they can elevate man from his state of misery and moral anguish. A stern will can hold passions in check and manage the *fluctuationes* and moral inadequacies that cause the breaks, toils, and contradictions that drive man away from happiness and truth. The issue of the *opinionum perversitas*—that is, self-deception as the root of all evil, a Stoic topic tracing back to Seneca and Cicero—is also crucial, and is acknowledged from the beginning of the saint's discourse.³¹

From this first part of the dialogue, one can already grasp how the whole discourse will unravel and how the inner dialectic is driven by the two characters.³² Francesco is the kind of disciple who objects and answers back to his master, but who is also able to admit his own error, albeit standing by his own beliefs. Augustine is the *pater optime*, redeemed sinner and doctor of the soul, who guides spiritual reflection, examines the disciple, grasps argumentative inspirations from his replies, and points out his inconsistencies and contradictions, compelling him to better define his concepts, words, and possible justifications. The discourse about *voluntas* is a fitting example:

A: We agreed to set aside the snares of deceit and to devote ourselves with absolute candor to the search for truth. [...].

F: There'll be no end to this, for I will never say that. For I know, and you are my witness, how often I wanted to, but couldn't, and how many tears I shed to no avail.

A: I can bear witness to your many tears, but by no means to your will.³³

³⁰ Cf. *Secretum*, II. For this notion, refer to the precise explanation in Fenzi, *Secretum*, 55–77 (introduction); 295, n. 18; 327, n. 68; 331–332, n. 94; 332–332, n. 99; 338, n. 142; n. 348, n. 207 (commentary).

³¹ Cfr. *Secretum*, I, 36; II, 68 II, 108.

³² These aspects were discussed in Tateo, *Dialogo interiore e polemica ideologica nel 'Secretum' del Petrarca*, passim, and Oscar Giuliani, *Allegoria retorica e poetica nel 'Secretum' del Petrarca* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1977), passim.

³³ *Secretum*, I:40: 'A: Conventa sunt, ut fallaciarum laqueis reiectis circa veritatis stadium pura cum simplicitate versemur. [...]

F: Nunquam erit finis; nunquam enim hoc fatebor. Scio quidem, et tu testis es michi, quotiens volui nec potui; quot lacrimas fudi, nec profuerint.

A: Lacrimarum tibi testis sum multarum, voluntatis vero minime.'

Truth is sought by digging deep into the soul, thus laying bare Francesco's miseries, faults, and desires. He tries, sometimes, to escape his own responsibilities through answers meant to defend his literary activity and the two chains that bind him to sin: his love for Laura and his desire for poetic glory. The whole dialogue appears as a critical debate about human behaviour, or more specifically about the vices of Francesco as a man,³⁴ in a crescendo full of harsh accusations. According to Augustine, *voluntas* manages the very possibility of choice at the Pythagorean cross-roads between good and evil. Therefore, he distinguishes between 'one wanting to...' and 'one being able to...' based on a resolve that, for Francesco, is not a longing but a feeble wish (*Secretum*, I:44). This awareness helps to clear the mind from the danger of self-deception and the justification of vice (*Secretum*, I:28). The whole work, indeed, is based on the Augustinian topic of finding oneself,³⁵ of dedicating oneself to *otium*,³⁶ understood as an inner quest aimed at perfecting one's morality in a Christian dimension.

A Failing Adhesion

From the first, the dialogue is rich in argumentations pertaining to the foundational question³⁷ of all the discourse that Francesco addresses to the master: 'What holds me back?'³⁸ The question is repeated in order to complain that the *meditatio mortis* has not achieved the desired effect (*Secretum*, I:62). There is a further reference to Augustine's *Soliloquium*: 'Why then did I still stay in suspense and will I defer with an astonishing sorrow?'³⁹ Still, in the Augustinian passage, the author exhibits the longing for knowledge that determines the very meaning of life.⁴⁰ This expectation cannot be found in the words of Francesco, for whom vain mortal cares overwhelm the quest for truth and the possibility of living a virtuous life.⁴¹

Augustine's continuous pleas for the *meditatio mortis*—a pivotal matter for the whole dialogue—which allows us to grasp the value of eternity and to tell what is ephemeral and useless from what is worthy of being pursued, arouse in Francesco,

³⁴ E.g. *Secretum*, I:26.

³⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione*, 39:72: 'Noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas.'

³⁶ Cf. Teresa Caligiure, "Otium," in *Lessico petrarchesco*, eds. Romana Brovia and Luca Marcozzi (Rome: Carocci, 2016): 220–230.

³⁷ Fenzi, *Secretum*, 309, n. 110. Cf. also the letter to the Ventoso (*Fam.*, IV:I,14).

³⁸ *Secretum*, I:58: 'Quid ergo me retinet?'

³⁹ *Sol.*, I:13, 22: 'Quid ergo adhuc suspensor infelix, et cruciatu miserabili differor?'

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibidem*: 'Ego autem solam propter se amo sapientiam, caetera vero vel adesse mihi volo, vel deesse timeo propter ipsam; vitam, quietem, amicos.' Cf. also *Acad.*, III:2,4: 'Etenim quia vivo, propterea volo sapientiam, non quod sapientiam desidero, volo vitam.'

⁴¹ Cf. Fenzi, *Secretum*, 309.

even on the third day of the dialogue, fears pertaining to the time⁴² he ought to dedicate to his activities as a poet and historian. First of all, the impossibility of completing the epic poem *Africa*, aimed at praising Scipio Africanus' heroic deeds and therefore the great history of Rome, a work fiercely reproved by Augustine as a waste of time for the sole scope of mundane glory:

A: Thus you have dedicated the whole of your life to these two projects (not to mention the many others with which they have been interspersed) wasting your most precious and irreplaceable gift, for as you write about others, you forget yourself. [...] Oh unhappy man, if what you say is true.⁴³

Francesco wasted the best years of his life as a historian and poet in dedicating himself to works—*Africa* and *De viris*—which please his friends and will win him immortal glory among the living and in posterity.⁴⁴ Human ambition is not worthy of being called 'glory,' and so Augustine warns his disciple that he should rather cultivate virtue: 'virtutem cole, gloriam neglige' (*Secretum*, III:206). For happiness to be long-lasting, it must relate to something permanent and not to something transient and changing, and therefore, real happiness can only be found in God, who is eternal: in fact, the sole hope of permanence is 'in Him who never moves and whose sun never sets.'⁴⁵ Happy, hence, is he who finds God. Conversely, Francesco addresses his happiness and his main interests towards what is uncertain: to poetry and the poetic glory he will be granted by the *Africa* that he repeatedly mentions in the third book. When the disciple expresses his worry that he might not be able to complete it and argues that he could hardly forsake a work that has cost him so much labour halfway through, Augustine retorts: 'I know which way you are stumbling. You'd rather abandon yourself than your little books.'⁴⁶

The moral bind between will and time, on which is measured the wisdom of men, resonates in Augustine's accusing appeals to eternal goods, to which Francesco responds, foreshadowing the end of the dialogue: 'I am not abandoning them, but it may be that I'm putting them off.'⁴⁷ The consequences of such a statement are dire, inasmuch as it means that he has placed his trust in the *incertum*⁴⁸ with the final

⁴² On the topic of time, crucial in Petrarch's works, and for previous references, see Luca Marcozzi, *Petrarca platonico. Studi sull'immaginario filosofico del canzoniere* (Rome: Aracne, 2011): 73–95 and idem, "Tempo" in *Lessico Petrarcesco*, eds. Romana Brovia and Luca Marcozzi (Rome: Carocci, 2016): 325–332.

⁴³ *Secretum*, III:192 and 196: 'A: Ita totam vitam his duabus curis ['Africa,' 'De viris'], ut intercurrentes alias innumeras sileam, prodigus preciosissime irreparabilesque rei, tribuis deque aliis scribens, tui ipsius oblivisceris. [...] O te si vera memoras, infelicem!'

⁴⁴ Cf. also *Secretum*, I:32.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, III:208: 'In Eo qui non movetur quique occasum nescit.'

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, III:206: 'Quo pede claudices agnosco. Te ipsum derelinquere mavis, quam libellos tuos.'

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, III:196: 'haud equidem destituo; sed fortassis differo.' Cf. Fenzi, *Secretum*, 402, n. 345.

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibidem*: 'Quia rerum certarum avarissimi estis, incertarum prodigi.'

result of forsaking himself.⁴⁹ To the master's stern and well-constructed criticism, the disciple responds with an attempt to invert the order of things, as he states his preference to commit first to mortal things and then to the eternal ones, because the former will naturally be followed by the latter, and, when the latter occur, they will definitively oust the former. His effort to justify his passions concerning writing and his love for Laura, yet still within a journey between *mortalia* and *eterna*, is clear.⁵⁰ By aiming his interest towards what he knows to be transient, Francesco postpones and suspends his acceptance of undertaking a path towards the virtuous life. Indeed, there are several passages of the dialogue in which Augustine rebukes Francesco because of how he continually defers, and rather pursues what is uncertain.⁵¹

As for the passages of the *Secretum* where Augustine reprimands Francesco for the time committed to poetry, the quest for glory, and his literary *curiositas*, suggesting to him a philosophical journey of *meditatio mortis*, soul searching, and contemplation of the divine things, Francisco Rico suggested as a source of inspiration—together with other references that he fittingly signals in his commentary—a few Augustinian passages from *De ordine*⁵² and from *Contra Academicos*,⁵³ the first dialogue that Augustine wrote after he converted. Rico highlights how the Cassiciaco dialogues influenced the composition of the *Secretum*:

Pero tengo por evidente que la figura de Licencio contribuyó aun más a modelar la situación en que ahora se halla Francesco. Descubrir el paralelismo con el caso de Licencio, así, desvanece cualquier duda que aún pudiera albergar el lector sobre el sentido de la contestación del Santo.⁵⁴

Licentius burns with love for his own poetry and for that of Virgil, and Augustine attempts to draw him closer to the study of wisdom by suggesting that he reads Cicero's *Hortensius*.⁵⁵ If the character of Licentius has somehow helped to mould the figure of Francesco and the situation that the *Secretum* describes, it may be useful to point out

49 Cf. *ibidem*, III:206: 'te ipsum derelinquere mavis.' As Augustine retorts with a *reductio ad absurdum*, asking Francesco what would he do if he had an infinite amount of time before him, Francesco answers, with swift certainty, by mentioning the *Africa*, saying that he would then be able to compose a famous, rare, and excellent work ('preclarum nempe rarumque opus et egregium').

50 Cf. *Secretum*, III:198. See Rico, *Secretum*, 397–398; Fenzi, *Secretum*, 403, n. 361.

51 Cf., e.g., *Secretum*, III:186: 'Cogita in hoc uno falli in homines, quod differendum putant quod differi non potest.'

52 *De ordine*, I:III, 6, 8; I:V, 12.

53 Cf. Rico, *Secretum*, 384; 415–416.

54 Rico, *Secretum*, 416: 'But it is evident to me that the figure of Licentius further contributed to shaping the situation in which Francesco now finds himself. The discovery of the parallelism with the case of Licentius, thus, dispels any doubts that the reader might still harbour about the meaning of the saint's answer.'

55 It was the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* that caused Augustine to become involved in philosophy, cf. *Conf.*, III:4, 7–8.

the passages which, in the *Contra Academicos*,⁵⁶ pertain to the diatribe against the Academics and the sceptics. Augustine first scolds Licentius, who favours the Academics, because of the latter's excessive interest in writing poetry and reading the *Aeneid*—the same *Aeneid* that Francesco has been mentioning at crucial points in the *Secretum* from the *Proem* (I:22) onwards—and then resumes the discourse on Academics and the value of philosophy (*Acad.*, II:IV,10). Immediately afterwards, the discussion moves on to the notion of philosophy upheld by both the ancient and the new Academics beginning from Carneades' definitions, through an argument connecting the search for truth, assent, and what is likely to be (*Acad.*, II:IV,11 ff.). Yet again, in the third book, Augustine, after pointing out that Licentius has composed some verses and is consumed by the love of poetry ('quorum amore ita percussus est'), returns to the existential importance of philosophy as a necessary and most noble occupation for searching for the truth, compared to poetry and all other activities: 'Negotium nostrum non leve aut superfluum, sed necessarium ac summum esse arbitror: magnopere quaerere veritatem' (*Acad.*, III:1,1). In the last passage individuated by Rico, Augustine finds Licentius toiling to compose his verses and so, to address him a more effective rebuke, he says:

I hope that someday you will gain mastery of poetics as you desire. Not that this accomplishment pleases me very much! I see that you are so infatuated that you can't escape this love except through tiring of it, however, and it's customary for this to happen readily after one becomes accomplished.⁵⁷

He then calls him back to fruitful philosophy.

In the Augustinian works, the discourse about scepticism begins with Cicero as the unique Latin source, through whom Augustine becomes acquainted with the scepticism born into the Platonic Academy with Arcesilaus and developed by Carneades and Philo. Augustine's polemic against the Academics concerns philosophical research and includes its relationship with Christian religion.⁵⁸ Through a critical

⁵⁶ For a synthesis of the different interpretations of the work with respect to the objective of the Augustinian polemic and the meaning of scepticism in Augustine, see Augustine, *Contro gli accademici*, ed. Giovanni Catapano (Milan: Bompiani, 2005); Giovanni Catapano, "Quale scetticismo viene criticato da Agostino nel 'Contra Academicos'?", *Quaestio* 6 (2006): 1–5.

⁵⁷ *Acad.*, III:IV,7: 'Opto quidem, inquam, tibi ut istam poeticam quam concupisti, complectaris aliquando: non quod me nimis delectet ista perfectio; sed quod video te tantum exarsisse, ut nisi fastidio evadere ab hoc amore non possis; quod evenire post perfectionem facile solet.' English translation from Augustine, *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995): 58.

⁵⁸ On the relationship between Christianity and scepticism in the *Contra Academicos*, see Anne-Isabelle Bouton-Touboul, "Scepticisme et religion dans le 'Contra Academicos' d'Augustin," in *Scepticisme et religion. Constantes et évolutions, de la philosophie hellénistique à la philosophie médiévale*, eds. Anne-Isabelle Bouton-Touboul and Carlos Lévy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016): 171–192. For the differences between Academic scepticism and Christianity in the *Enchiridion*, see Giovanni Catapano, "Errore, assenso e fede. La critica dello scetticismo accademico nell'Enchiridion di Agostino," in

examination of several sceptical theses, Augustine defends *scepsis*,⁵⁹ exhorting Licentius and his disciples to dedicate themselves to philosophy, enriching the plea with autobiographical elements about his former acquaintance with the Academics' arguments.⁶⁰ It is those arguments that had distracted him from seeking the truth in the past, and that is why he now defends the usefulness of philosophising (*Acad.*, III:20,43).⁶¹ The strictly interwoven Cassiciaco dialogues, including the *Soliloquium*, were written by Augustine right after his conversion in order to confront the problem of certainty in the possibility of knowing the truth following his adhesion to the Manichean doctrines and his proximity to the scepticism of the New Academy. Sceptical doubt was an intellectual obstacle to be tackled, and Augustine felt that he had to justify the value of knowledge and to show it to his disciples. Here, the issue of the certainty of truth is bound to that of happiness:⁶² if we want to be happy, we have to search for truth.

In the final passage of *Contra Academicos*, Augustine shares his last appeal about the positions of the Academics in an attempt to persuade Licentius and the other bystanders and declares that, while accepting that he is not yet wise and rather thinking of himself as a fool,⁶³ he is confident about his possibility of reaching the truth;⁶⁴ however, in order to do this, which is what the Academics would prevent him from doing, he has to detach himself from those things that mortals deem to be good and rely on the authority of the Christ:

I've renounced all the other things that mortal men think to be good and proposed to devote myself to searching for wisdom. The arguments of the Academicians seriously deterred me from this undertaking. Now, however, I am sufficiently protected against them by this discussion of ours. Furthermore, no one doubts that we're prompted to learn by the twin forces of authority and reason. Therefore, I'm resolved not to depart from the authority of Christ on any score whatsoever.⁶⁵

Scepticisme et religion. Constantes et évolutions, de la philosophie hellénistique à la philosophie médiévale, 219–233.

⁵⁹ As for this thesis, I follow Catapano, "Quale scetticismo viene criticato da Agostino nel 'Contra Academicos'?", 12–13.

⁶⁰ In the period preceding his conversion to Christianity, after having experienced error and having adhered to Manichean doctrines, Augustine had been tempted by scepticism and became close to the New Academy.

⁶¹ Catapano, "Quale scetticismo viene criticato da Agostino nel 'Contra Academicos'?", 8–9.

⁶² *Acad.*, I:II,3.

⁶³ *Acad.*, III:V,12; VIII:17; IX:21; XII:27; XIII:29. I refer to the passages highlighted by Catapano, "Quale scetticismo viene criticato da Agostino nel 'Contra Academicos'?", 12.

⁶⁴ This proposal includes the idea of a Platonism akin to the Christian sphere and Christ's safe *auctoritas*.

⁶⁵ *Acad.*, III:20,43: 'Contemptis tamen caeteris omnibus, quae bona mortales putant, huic investigandae inservire proposui. A quo me negotio quoniam rationes Academicorum non leviter deterrebant, satis, ut arbitror, contra eas ista disputatione munitus sum. Nulli autem dubium est gemino pondere nos impelli ad discendum, auctoritatis atque rationis. Mihi ergo certum est nusquam prorsus a Christi auctoritate discedere: non enim reperio valentiorum.'

It is a goal to be achieved in due time,⁶⁶ and one that Augustine connects with the figure of Christ, proclaiming the urgency of forsaking mortal things. His final message is radical, inasmuch as he expresses his confidence in the search for truth based on Christian *auctoritas*, and stresses the need to turn away from mortal things. Francesco, instead, when Augustine calls on him to answer for himself, declares his commitment to the *res humanae*. Augustine has just begged him not to make his words vain:

'The whole life of a philosopher is nothing more than a preparation for death.'⁶⁷ It is indeed this thought that will teach to scorn mortal deeds [...]. I'll reply that you do not need lengthy instructions [...]. There's no need to think about it at length. [...] You must not hesitate a moment longer. [...] For the rest, since our discussion has ranged so widely, if you liked anything I said, I'd ask you not to let it whiter away through idleness and neglect; if there was anything you found harder to swallow, then do not take it amiss.⁶⁸

Francesco replies as follows:

I shall attend to myself as best I can and will gather together the scattered fragments of my soul and will dwell diligently upon myself. But as we speak there are definitely many important matters awaiting my attention, even if they are still mortal ones.⁶⁹

After the master's broad argumentations—accusing the disciple of loving mundane things for their own sake and not as works of God, and of sinning out of weakness of will—Francesco, even while accepting the truth of Christian principles, avoids a completely moral resolve. He suspends his moral choice and does not give that assent which, in Augustinian terms, would allow him to set off on a completely Christian path, notwithstanding the fact that he has conceived of and somehow made this assent his own. The argumentations present in the works dating back to the Cassiciaco period, still considering the complexity of the Augustinian works and the substantial differences between them, seem to have left a mark on Petrarch's dialogue and also in the debated ending. The time and zeal that Licentius devotes to poetry in Au-

66 Indeed, he contends he is just 33 and must not lose hope of achieving it (*Acad.*, III:20,43). On the topic of time in Augustine, see Pasquale Porro, "Agostino e il 'privilegio dell'adesso'," in *Interiorità e intenzionalità in S. Agostino*. Atti del I e del II Seminario Internazionale del Centro di Studi Agostiniani di Perugia, ed. Luigi Alici (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum," 1990): 177–204.

67 Quoting Cicero from the *Tusculan Disputations*, I:30,74.

68 *Secretum*, III:210–212: 'Tota philosophorum vita commentatio mortis est. Ista, inquam, cogitation docebit te mortalia facta contemnere [...]. Respondebo tibi longis te monitionibus non egere [...]. Non longis deliberationibus opus est. [...] Non est ulterius hesitandum. [...] Ceterum, quia satis multa contulimus, queso, siquid ex me gratum accepisti, ne patiaris situ desidiaque marcescere; siquid autem asperius, ne moleste feras.'

69 *Secretum*, III:214: 'Adero michi ipse quantum potero, et sparsa anime fragmenta recolligam, moraborque mecum sedulo. Sane nunc, dum loquimur, multa me magnae, quamvis adhuc mortalia, negotia expectant.'

gustine's *Contra Academicos* closely resonate with the character of Francesco; some of the arguments in favour of philosophy from the Cassiciaco dialogues are the same ones that Augustine employs to persuade Francesco to abandon poetical and historical works and the pursuit of that *inanis gloria* that sways him from what is true and eternal; thus Francesco's final answer emerges in stern opposition to Augustine's conclusive message in *Contra Academicos*. Many of Augustine's arguments in the *Secretum* attempt to dissuade Francesco from his desire to dedicate the precious span of his life to poetry and the quest for poetic glory, connecting to the main topics of the work, such as the *ruit hora*, the meaning of life, and the *meditatio mortis*, the ultimate goal of philosophy.

In the *Secretum*, the 'sceptical' aspect (if it can be called this) consists in not choosing correctly and in not adhering to moral pagan teachings and to the Christian truth proposed by Augustine in the present time. Francesco's attitude is therefore sceptical, given his suspension and the deferral of a choice after the many convincing and heartfelt pleas coming from Augustine that should seem to elicit a clear answer. Instead, even if the success of the dialogue lies in the future promise that can be assumed from the words 'Adero michi [...] sedulo,' at the practical level, the answer is a different one.⁷⁰

Francesco does not consider the master's teachings as urgent as Augustine suggests several times that they are, and he accepts them only to delay them; in other words, he does not 'accept' them in the totality of the meaning that also includes the category of time: the teachings are true, but to be applied in the future, after attending to what he actually cherishes more. What is still lacking is a strong motivation, an aware resolve to put the precepts into action.

The indecisions and the ambiguities of this failure to make a practical choice clearly show through at the end of the dialogue, which it is important to quote:

I'm really very grateful to you for this threeday conversation as well as for many other things, for you have wiped the mist from my eyes and have dispelled the thick surrounding cloud of error. But how I can thank the lady who as sat through our long discussion to the end without becoming bored by them? If she had turned her face away from us we would have been wrapped in darkness, wandering down sidetracks, and you would have had nothing concrete to say, nor I anything concrete to learn. But now, since your home is in heaven and my stay on earth is not yet at an end I don't know how long it will last (indeed as you can see I am in a state of suspended anxiety about this), I beg you both not to abandon me, even if I am far distant from you. Without you, dear Father, my life would be unpleasant, but without her it would be nothing.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Cf. Fenzi, *Secretum*, 417 n. 442; 418, n. 445.

⁷¹ *Secretum*, III:212: 'Ego vero tibi, tum pro aliis multis, tum pro hoc triduo colloquio magnas gratias ago, quoniam et caligantia lumina deteristi et densam circumfusi erroris nebulam discussisti. Huic autem quas referam grates, que, multiloquio non gravata, usque nos ad exitum expectavit? Que si usquam faciem avertisset, operi tenebris per devia vagaremur, solidumque nichil vel tua contineret oratio, vel intellectus meus exciperet. Nunc vero, quoniam sedes vestra celum est, michi autem terrena nondum finitur habitatio, que quorsum duratura sit nescio et in hoc pendeo anxius, ut vides,

Francesco's final praise of Truth and of the saint whose advice he has declined to follow seem to belittle the long arguments for the necessity of a strong will which had extended over the three-day dialogue. For Augustine, the seat of Truth is unintelligible, to be found in God and the eternal; the *res humanae* are transient, and therefore the time of man becomes meaningful only if it becomes the time of God. Still, in order to do this, one has to avoid the wastage caused by human miseries, and must neither love the creatures more than their Creator nor prefer the quest for glory to the quest for virtue.

Notwithstanding the master's timely and persuasive argumentations, and even after Francesco has admitted his limits and his sin, if there is a final prayer, it is not by Francesco, as one could expect, but by Augustine himself, who prays to God that He may save his disciple during his journey.

Francesco never questions the truthfulness of Christian principles, nor the teaching of Augustine, in which he firmly believes. He often repeats how fundamental the master's works were for him. Moreover, Francesco often calls on Truth as a witness to his moral commitment⁷² and to his wish to transcend his spiritual misery. He is eager to talk to his master and to listen to his arguments, thanks to which he becomes aware of the temptation of self-deception, the moral value of time, the necessity of a complete *voluntas*, and the potential rewards of an 'acerrima meditatio mortis'.⁷³ Francesco seems quite often to shake out of his numbness,⁷⁴ and acknowledges the benefits he received from his encounter with Truth, who, since the beginning, has already made him a little wiser ('doctior factus sum,' *Proem*, 24) and without whose help both he and Augustine would have wandered aimlessly in the dark (III:212). Nonetheless, the conversion does not take place.⁷⁵

Rather, a subtle strategy emerges from Francesco's words, delineating the wish to postpone the moral project and the attempt to justify the possibility of combining his actual *negotia* with the concern for eternity. In this case, the function of doubt, understood within the Augustinian heritage as the origin of the dialogue between man and truth, despite leading Francesco to some self-awareness, does not trigger the clear acceptance of taking on a journey to rediscover his interiority and the presence of Christ in his soul.

Francesco, despite acknowledging the truthfulness of the Scriptural message and his own human weaknesses, escapes a full moral decision, still bound—even as he dialogues with the master—to his moral and literal cares. This aspect widens

obsecro ne me, licet magnis tractibus distantem, deseratis. Sine te enim, pater optime, vita mea in-
amena, sine hac autem nulla foret.'

⁷² Cf. *Secretum*, I:36; I:142–144.

⁷³ *Secretum*, I:54.

⁷⁴ Cf., e.g., *Secretum*, I:68. Right after the digression about the soul-corrupting *phantasmata*, at the end of the first day, Augustine exclaims: 'Bene habet! Torpor adcessit,' so Francesco admits and acknowledges the numbness of his soul.

⁷⁵ See Fenzi, *Secretum*, 60 (introduction).

the gap between contingency and immanence, increasing the inner turmoil, existential doubt, and unease of the ego.⁷⁶ But what are thoughts and good intentions good for, if they are not put in action? This passage is crucial to understand the movements of one who adheres, but defers. After all, Augustine had already pointed this out about the literary *curiositas*: ‘What use was all that reading? How much of the many things that you have read has remained implanted in your mind, has taken root, has borne timely fruits?’⁷⁷

‘In antiquam litem relabimur’

In the end, after his pressing exhortations (III:212), the saint abstains from adding further theoretical elements to his discourse (‘respondebo tibi longis monitionibus non egere’), expecting a practical answer from his disciple. Francesco’s final response recalls his initial situation, when he still dwelled in error and Truth urged him to open his soul and lift his gaze from mortal things to follow the eternal ones. The following lines mirror the alternating voices of conscience, the impulses of the soul (‘impetum animi’), which can be either contemptible or beautiful and which, in the latter case, lead to the good (‘ad honesta pulcerrimus est’):

I agree. And the only reason why I’m now so eager to hurry up and attend to the others is so that I can have done with them and come back to these, even if aware that—as you said a short while ago—it would be much safer for me to concentrate on this single line of study and, without deviating, to set off on the road that leads straight to salvation. But I haven’t got the strength to curb my desire.⁷⁸

And the master’s answer highlights this return⁷⁹ to the initial situation—‘We are back where we started our argument’⁸⁰—calling out the main ‘default’ of the disciple: ‘You describe your will as weakness.’⁸¹ Francesco, as we have seen, does not follow the Augustinian principle of divine time, but rather a mundane one that favours his mortal occupations. The dialectical match reaches an apparently unexpected conclusion, but, as Enrico Fenzi⁸² explained, it is the only one which fits the discourse of the

⁷⁶ Francesco Petrarca, *Mi secreto. Epístolas (selección)*, ed. Rossend Arqués Corominas, transl. Rossend Arqués Corominas and Anna Saurí (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011): 22–27.

⁷⁷ *Secretum*, II:72: ‘Lectio autem ista quid profuit? Ex multis enim, que legisti, quantum est quod inheserit animo, quod radices egerit, quod fructum proferat tempestivum?’

⁷⁸ *Secretum*, III:214: ‘F: Fateor; neque aliam ob causam propero nunc tam studiosus ad reliqua, nisi ut, illis explicitis, ad hec redeam: non ignarus, ut paulo ante dicebas, multo michi futurum esse securius studium hoc unum sectari et, deviis pretermissis, rectum callem salutis apprehendere. Sed desiderium frenare non valeo.’

⁷⁹ As correctly defined by Fenzi, *Secretum*, 5–77 (introduction).

⁸⁰ ‘In antiquam litem relabimur.’

⁸¹ ‘Voluntatem impotentiam vocas.’

⁸² Fenzi, *Secretum*, 418, n. 448.

whole book. This conclusion, which Bortolo Martinelli deemed as insignificant,⁸³ has provoked different interpretations. Nicolae Iliescu⁸⁴ comments on it by referring to a passage of the *Confessions* (III:2,21) where Monica, to avert her son from the Manichean doctrines, addresses a bishop who, knowing Augustine's stubbornness and his intelligence, tells her to pray, because Augustine will discover his error on his own precisely by reading those Manichean books ('Tantum roga pro eo Dominum; ipse legendo reperiet, quis ille sit error et quanta impietas'). According to Iliescu, the *Secretum* repeats the same message of trust displayed by the prayer through which Francesco is entrusted into God's care. But Fenzi rightly objects that 'the suggestion is attractive, and certainly enriches our reading of this conclusion. But it is not conclusive, if only because the bishop's words are not found at the end of the *Confessions*, but at the beginning.'⁸⁵ In the view of Francesco Tateo, 'the return to history and literature is not a relapse, if it is indeed conceived as a transition. [...] Perhaps we should not seek any coherence in the character, or give too much weight to his incoherence. He does not represent the actual Petrarch.'⁸⁶ Rico stresses the previous passage and Francesco's adhering answer ('adereo michi...sedulo'), which represent the acceptance of the saint's invitation to 'live for one's own sake' as is proper for a philosopher ('ut philosophum decet').⁸⁷ He comments that Francesco is hence eager to realise the programme of the *Soliloquium* and of *De vera religione*, namely to seek for the truth inside of himself, and that he has learned the correct order of the hierarchy of values and a clear awareness of the 'inanis gloria': this is—he argues—the last and perhaps the greatest of Augustine's triumphs.⁸⁸ According to Ugo Dotti: 'Such self-analysis does not lead to any concrete resolution and this is, in the end, the most important result, the one that does not reveal so much the writer's incapacity to choose between two equally true paths, but rather his resolve in escaping the choice itself.'⁸⁹ According to Oscar Giuliani, Francesco refuses to adhere to the saint's invitation, but accepts the essential guidelines in his proposals to delay them as far as his writings are concerned.⁹⁰

Before ending our discourse, it should be remembered that the ending of the *Secretum* is somewhat anticipated in *Parthenias*,⁹¹ in the first eclogue of the *Bucolicum carmen* composed in 1347 after Petrarch had visited his brother Gherardo, who was a monk at the Chartreuse de Montrieux. In this composition, Silvio (that is, Petrarch),

⁸³ Martinelli, *Il Secretum conteso*, passim.

⁸⁴ Iliescu, *Il Canzoniere Petrarcesco e Sant'Agostino*, 65.

⁸⁵ Fenzi, *Secretum*, 419, n. 448.

⁸⁶ Tateo, *Dialogo interiore e polemica ideologica nel 'Secretum' del Petrarca*, 92–94.

⁸⁷ Rico, *Secretum*, 444–446.

⁸⁸ Rico, *Secretum*, 449.

⁸⁹ Dotti, *Vita di Petrarca*, 158.

⁹⁰ Giuliani, *Allegoria retorica e poetica nel 'Secretum' del Petrarca*, 189–201.

⁹¹ On the relationship between *Parthenias* and *Secretum* see Martinelli, "Il finale del 'Secretum'," *Revue de études italiennes* 29 (1983): 70–71, and recently the comprehensive essay by Enrico Fenzi, "Verso il 'Secretum': 'Bucolicum Carmen' I, 'Parthenias'," *Petrarchesca* 1 (2013): 13–54.

and Monico (his brother Gherardo) represent the contrast between the classical and profane poetry of Homer and Virgil, revered by Silvio, and sacred poetry, the Psalms of David, praised by Gherardo. The eclogue, too, begins with the matter of unhappiness caused by one's own will. When Silvio describes himself as unhappy and wandering among thorny hills and woods, Monico answers him that there is no one forcing him, but that Silvio himself is the cause of his own ill ('cunctorum vera laborum / ipse tibi causa es. Quis te per devia cogit?' 6–7). Monico proposes the possibility of a monastic life to his brother and a poetical ideal inspired by David's psalms. Silvio's answer is elusive, as he is now busy with things he cannot defer: 'Experiar, si fata volent; nunc ire necesse est' (110). And, as Monico questions him as to what hurries him so much and where ('Quo precor? Aut quis te stimulus, que cura perurget?' 111), Silvio answers that what urges him is the love of poetry ('urget amor muse,' 112) and the wish to sing the great story of Rome and of humanity; that is, to dedicate himself to the *Africa*. In the *Secretum*, unlike in the eclogue, the contrast between pagan and classical culture is absent. Francesco, indeed, does not contrast his cultivated literary activity with the possibility of writing holy texts: as claimed by Umberto Bosco, 'his intimate estrangement is conceived within Christianity.'⁹²

Hence, the reason for the return to the initial situation, stressed in the words of the saint, and the coherence of the conclusion with the rest of the dialogue, are to be sought, following Fenzi's reading—highlighting the strict bond between the dialogue and Petrarch's other works—in the literary and practical necessities Petrarch was experiencing at that time. According to Fenzi, in the *Secretum* Petrarch exhibits the idea of stopping work on the *Africa*, which was taking too much time away at a historical moment when many things had changed for him.⁹³

A series of radical changes had altered his vision of history, personal and universal, and affected the conception, evolution, and drafting of his later works: the death of Laura and many friends from the plague of 1348, his decision to distance himself from Cola di Rienzo's endeavour, his final break-up with the Colonna family, and the ever-shrinking possibility of remaining in Avignon. As Fenzi explains, these are vital needs transposed into the literary dimension, but they manifest a crisis and a need for change. In the *Secretum*, the author, approaching old age, sheds light on the moral inadequacy of old poetical and cultural commitments and the want of a 'change of life and values' mirroring the need to save himself, to 'go back to himself.'⁹⁴ In this sense, the adhesion to the words of the saint is present, but it will take place in the future, while for the moment Francesco will provisionally return to the old commitments that will not last for long. This interpretation partially follows Baron's interpretation of the *Secretum*, as he reads it as an autobiographical tes-

⁹² Umberto Bosco, *Francesco Petrarca* (Bari: Laterza, 1961): 90–91.

⁹³ Fenzi, *Secretum*, 5–77 (introduction).

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

timony referring to the problems and the dynamics that authors were really experiencing in those years.

The figure of Francesco, therefore, fits a precise literary design, modelled on the Augustinian example of the truth-seeking sinner, which will appear in the later works in which Petrarch portrays himself as finally free from the adamant chains described in the *Secretum*, committed to the writing of new works. Therefore, the conclusion and the entire book should be read as the expression of a crisis and of an 'intimate evolution of the author,'⁹⁵ who transforms facts into an idealised biography⁹⁶ to be handed down to posterity.

The deferral of the master's project will in fact find a later development in the 'sparse rhymes' of the *RVF* and in other great moral works, until the more mature *De suis ipsius et multorum ignorantia*,⁹⁷ in which Petrarch, in a later period of his life, presents himself as a moral philosopher, considering his previous words, and hence his previous works, as outdated: 'recedant vetera de ore meo' (II:35–36).

Therefore, the *Secretum* hands us the moral and intellectual portrait of a man experiencing a growing conflict, a phase he eventually transcended in later works. So, in 1360 Petrarch writes to Francesco Nelli:

I have loved Cicero, I admit, and I have loved Virgil; I was taken by their style and genius more than by anything else [...]. Nor am I just beginning, and from my graying hair I can see that I began none too soon. Now my orators shall be Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory, my philosopher shall be Paul and my poet David, whom, as you know, many years ago in the first eclogue of my *Bucolicum carmen* I compared to Homer and Virgil so as to leave the victory undecided. Until the present the old power of deeply rooted habit has stood in the way, yet personal experience and the glowing revelation of truth allow no room for doubt.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ivi: 55 ff.

⁹⁶ On this theme, see Marco Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima. Storia e racconto nel Canzoniere di Petrarca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992).

⁹⁷ On this work see Fenzi's introduction to and impressive commentary on the text in Francesco Petrarca, *De Ignorantia. Della mia ignoranza e di quella di molti altri*, ed. Enrico Fenzi (Milan: Mursia, 1999).

⁹⁸ *Fam.*, XXII:10,5–8: 'Amavi ego Ciceronem, fateor, et Virgilium amavi, usqueadeo quidem stilo delectatus et ingenio ut nichil supra [...]. Sed iam michi maius agitur negotium, maiorque salutis quam eloquentie cura est; legi que delectabant, lego que prosint; is michi nunc animus est, imo vero iam pridem fuit, neque enim nunc incipio, neque vero me id ante tempus agere coma probat albescens. Iamque oratores mei fuerint Ambrosius Augustinus Ieronimus Gregorius, philosophus meus Paulus, meus poeta David, quem ut nosti multos ante annos prima egloga Bucolici carminis ita cum Homero Virgilioque composui, ut ibi quidem victoria anceps sit; hic vero, etsi adhuc obstat radicate consuetudinis vis antiqua, dubium tamen in re esse non sinit victrix experientia atque oculis se se infundens fulgida veritas.' I quote from Francesco Petrarca, *Letters on Familiar Matters. Rerum Familiarum Libri*, XVII–XXIV, vol. 3, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

Conclusion

Petrarch has indeed presented a phase of his life in the *Secretum*, examining some of his literary and moral projects through the dialogue. The dialogic *factio* sets out the different positions of Augustine and Francesco and offers a piece of the idealised autobiography that Petrarch builds across his writings. The references to the Cassiciaco dialogues and to the character of Licentius allow us to understand how Augustine's early Christian writings influenced some aspects of the development of the figure of Francesco, his final deferral, and his failure to assent to the dedication of his life to *otium*. Petrarch will further develop the topic of inner recollection, delineated in the *Secretum* and modelled in the tradition of Plato, Seneca, Cicero, and Augustine, in later works, always in relation to the issue of the quest for happiness through the practice of virtue, in a line of thought which, beginning with the *Secretum* and unravelling through other works, arrives at *De ignorantia*, the most comprehensive manifesto of his understanding of philosophy, written between 1367 and 1371, almost a decade after the 1358 final rereading of the *Secretum*.⁹⁹ In *De ignorantia*, Petrarch challenges the authority principle, against scholastic Aristotelianism that tends to reduce human culture to the limits of physical and logical problems.¹⁰⁰ The quarrel is indeed recalled in the *Secretum* (I:42; I:52), where it concerns the garrulity of the dialectics ('*dyalecticorum garrulitas*'), that is of the terminist logicians of the Ockhamian tradition whose ideas, rooted in Oxford and Paris, would reach Italy in the middle of the fourteenth century.¹⁰¹ Rather than being against Averroism, Petrarch's blows are aimed at Aristotelism,¹⁰² at the dogmatism of the *ipse dixit* stalwarts¹⁰³ and of those who reject the multiplicity of perspectives and doctrines with respect to the method of attaining the truth.¹⁰⁴ As Eugenio Garin explains, 'here, the attitude is radical, and it displays, in the clear critical orientation, the teaching of the *Cicero scepticus*, that is, the questioning not only of an encyclopaedia, but of an epistemology.'¹⁰⁵ Petrarch, who owned Cicero's *Academica*,¹⁰⁶ would rely on several sceptical

⁹⁹ Cf. note 3.

¹⁰⁰ Eugenio Garin, *Il ritorno dei filosofi antichi. Ristampa accresciuta del saggio 'Gli umanisti e la scienza'* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1994): 23.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Rico, *Secretum*, 86, n. 112; see also: 138–139; 233, 239–240; Fenzi, *Secretum*, 297, n. 32; 300–301, n. 53; 304–305, n. 78.

¹⁰² Cf. Paul O. Kristeller, "Petrarch's 'Averroists.' A note on the History of Aristotelianism in Venice, Padua and Bologna," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* XIV (1952): 59–65.

¹⁰³ On this issue, see Luca Bianchi, "'Aristotele fu un uomo e poté errare': sulle origini medievali della critica al 'principio di autorità,'" in idem, *Filosofia e teologia nel Trecento. Studi in ricordo di Eugenio Randi* (Louvain: Institut d'Études médiévales, 1994): 509–533.

¹⁰⁴ Garin, *Il ritorno dei filosofi antichi. Ristampa accresciuta del saggio 'Gli umanisti e la scienza'*, 24–25.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, 25: 'Qui veramente l'atteggiamento è radicale, e svela nel chiaro orientamento critico il magistero del *Cicero scepticus*, ossia di quella messa in discussione non solo di una enciclopedia, ma di una epistemologia.'

strategies as he argued against Scholasticism, especially in *De Ignorantia*.¹⁰⁷ He urges paying more attention to the principle of *ratio* than to that of *auctoritas*: 'I believe that Aristotle was a great man and a polymath. But he was still human and could therefore have been ignorant of some things, or even of many things.'¹⁰⁸ In many passages of the treatise, Petrarch openly states that Aristotle, an unquestioned authority for many 'stultos aristotelicos' and for an 'insanum et clamoroso scolasticarum vulgus',¹⁰⁹ did not grasp the principles on which knowledge should be based.

Petrarch argues in a polemic against four Venetian Aristotelians who accuse him of being a good man, but an ignorant one.¹¹⁰ His discourse attacks the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which completely fails in its claim of teaching how to reach happiness; in fact, after having read it, we understand what happiness is, but not how to reach it. The Aristotelian treatise, therefore, lacks a practical goal inasmuch as, after having read Aristotle, we may know something more about virtue, but we will not have improved ourselves. This polemical work, linked to a complex series of matters relating both to the historical and cultural context of the time and to the author's biographical issues,¹¹¹ represents—together with other works—a closing of the circle. In *De ignorantia*, Petrarch, relying on the richness of a soul inclined towards *otium*, proposes himself as a master and a *philosophus* who, investigating his own self, has the duty of

106 Petrarch inserts Cicero's *Academica* into the list of 'libri mei peculiare,' but he initially thought it to be Cicero's *Hortensius*. In fact, it was *Academica Priora*, book 2 (*Lucullus*). He realised this later, in 1343 (*Seniles*, 16:1). Cf. Martin McLaughlin, *Petrarch and Cicero: Adulation and Critical Distance*, in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Cicero*, ed. William H. F. Altman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015): 19–20. Petrarch refers to Cicero's sceptical attitude in *Secretum*, III:156.

107 Cf. Charles B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the 'Academica' in the Renaissance* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972): 45–46. For Cicero's influence in Petrarch, see McLaughlin, *Petrarch and Cicero: Adulation and Critical Distance*, 19–38. Cf. also Diego Pirillo, "Philosophy", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Michael Wyatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 260–275, particularly the entry "Ancient Skepticism and Renaissance Doubt," 273–275.

108 *Ign.* IV:63: 'Ego uero magnum quendam uirum ac multiscium Aristotelem, sed fuisse hominem, et idcirco aliqua, imo et multa nescire potuisse arbitror.' I quote from Marsh's excellent translation in Francesco Petrarca, *De suis ipsius et multorum ignorantia/On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*, in idem, *Invectives*, ed. and trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003): 222–363.

109 *Ign.*, IV:152; 155.

110 *Ign.*, II:17.

111 On these matters, see Andreas Kamp, *Petrarcas philosophisches Programm. Über Prämissen, Antiaristotelismus und 'Neues Wissen' von 'De sui ipsius et multorum aliorum ignorantia'* (Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York, and Paris: Lang, 1989) and idem, "Petrarch," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*, vol. 2, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011): 968–973; see especially Fenzi's introduction in Francesco Petrarca, *De Ignorantia. Della mia ignoranza e di quella di molti altri*, ed. Enrico Fenzi: 5–104. The issue is also carefully discussed by Ruedi Imbach, "Virtus illitterata. Il significato filosofico della critica della Scolastica nel 'De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia' di Petrarca," in *La sfida laica, per una nuova storia della filosofia medievale*, eds. Ruedi Imbach and Catherine König-Pralong (Rome: Carocci, 2016): 115–128.

teaching the love of truth rather than its knowledge: a thoroughly Augustinian lesson. Opposing a cold and list-like science and openly arguing against Aristotle's supporters, Petrarch presents himself not as a cultivated man, but rather as a good man who teaches us how to be virtuous.¹¹²

Such a perspective shows a different portrait of the author to that depicted in the *Secretum*, characterised by an ethical scepticism that would prevent Francesco from practising virtue. After a few pages dedicated to Petrarch's scepticism¹¹³ and prudent interest in the Academics,¹¹⁴ with respect to *De ignorantia* and the Petrarchan conception of philosophy, Pietro Paolo Gerosa writes: 'the profession of true philosophy cannot therefore be divided from the Christian practice, because it is such only when to the knowledge of God, one also adds his worship. [...] Did [Petrarch] always do this? Alas no; and he is forced to confess this in the conclusion of the *Secretum*.'¹¹⁵

Therefore, in the treatise, philosophy becomes for Petrarch a positive and practical lifestyle, and the search for truth finds its foundation in an intimate reconnection with Christ (Ign. IV:147). The tenets of Christian morality, which in the Latin dialogue were defended and proposed by Augustine, are now the reasons that Petrarch defends¹¹⁶ in order to rediscover himself and to be an example for others.

112 Ign., IV:148. Cf. also the invitation addressed to Antonio Albanzani in *Sen.*, XI:7.

113 Gerosa, *Umanesimo cristiano del Petrarca. Influenza agostiniana, attinenze medievali*, 270–275.

114 *Ibidem*, 270. Gerosa quotes with this respect a passage from *Rer. mem.*, IV:31, 1–3: 'Nobis autem eatenus modestus Achademie mos placeat: verisimilia sequi ubi ultra non attingimus, nichil temere dampnare, nichil impudenter asserere. Veritas ergo suis locis maneat; nos ad exempla pergamus.'

115 Gerosa, *Umanesimo cristiano del Petrarca. Influenza agostiniana, attinenze medievali*, 233–234: 'La professione della vera filosofia non è perciò separabile dalla pratica cristiana poiché è tale solo quando alla conoscenza di Dio ne unisca anche il culto [...] L'applicò egli [Petrarca] sempre? Purtroppo no; ed è costretto a confessarlo nella conclusione del *Secretum*.'

116 Ign., IV:64.