2. THE FIG TREE AND THE LAUREL: PETRARCH'S POETICS

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AFTER six centuries Petrarch's reputation as the first humanist remains unshaken. Cultural historians have generally accepted his own estimate of himself as the man who inaugurated a new era, leaving behind him what he called "the dark ages." His reputation as a poet is equally secure, at least in the literary histories; he is in many respects the most influential poet in the history of Western literature. Critics have failed, however, to define adequately the ways in which his poetry was as revolutionary as his humanistic writings. The poetics of the *Canzoniere* remain as elusive as the persona that emerges from its lyrics. The purpose of this essay is to offer a tentative definition and to suggest the ways in which Petrarch's greatest work deserves its reputation as the precursor of modern poetry.

Petrarch's poetic achievement, for all its grandeur, would appear to be decidedly conservative with respect to the Middle Ages. Far from repudiating the verse forms of his predecessors, he brought them to technical perfection and established them as models for future generations of poets. The poems of the *Canzoniere* seem to be crystallizations of previously invented verse forms: the sonnet, the sestina, the Dantesque canzone. In content, they are equally familiar, not to say banal, for they elaborate with spectacular variations a tired theme of courtly love: the idolatrous and unrequited passion for a beautiful and sometimes cruel lady. Apart from the extensive use of classical myth, there is little that is radically new in the thematics of the *Canzoniere*.

The extraordinary innovation in the *Canzoniere* is rather to be found in what the verses leave unsaid, in the blank spaces separating these lyric "fragments," as they were called, from each other. The persona created by the serial juxtaposition of dimensionless

lyric moments is as illusory as the animation of a film strip, the product of the reader's imagination as much as of the poet's craft; yet, the resultant portrait of an eternally weeping lover remains Petrarch's most distinctive poetic achievement. Because it is a composite of lyric instants, the portrait has no temporality; only the most naive reader would take it for authentic autobiography. For the same reason, it is immune from the ravages of time, a mood given a fictive *durée* by the temporality of the reader, or a score to be performed by generations of readers from the Renaissance to the Romantics. It remained for centuries the model of poetic self-creation even for poets who, in matters of form, thought of themselves as anti-Petrarchan.

Literary self-creation in the Middle Ages could not fail to evoke the name of Saint Augustine, the founder of the genre. The *Confessions*, Petrarch's favorite book, is at the same time the model for much of Petrarch's description of the lover as sinner. Both stories are ostensibly attempts to recapture a former self in a retrospective literary structure, a narrative of conversion (*Canz.* 1.4: "quand' era in parte altr'uom da quel ch'i'sono"), but Petrarch makes no claim to reality or to moral witness. Instead, he uses Augustinian principles in order to create a totally autonomous portrait of the artist, devoid of any ontological claim. The moral struggle and the spiritual torment described in the *Canzoniere* are, as we shall see, part of a poetic strategy. When the spiritual struggle is demystified, its poetic mechanism is revealed: the petrified idolatrous lover is an immutable monument to Petrarch, his creator and namesake. In this sense, the laurel, the emblem both of the lover's enthrallment and of the poet's triumph, is the antitype of Augustine's fig tree, under which the saint's conversion took place. The fig tree was already a scriptural emblem of conversion before Augustine used the image in his *Confessions* to represent the manifestation of the pattern of universal history in his own life. Petrarch's laurel, on the other hand, has no such moral dimension of meaning. It stands for a poetry whose real subject matter is its own act and whose creation is its own author.

The two emblems, the fig tree and the laurel, may be said to stand respectively, as we shall see, for different modes of signification: the allegorical and the autoreflexive. The first is the mode characteristic of Christian typology, while the second, extended over the course of the entire narrative, is Petrarch's own. The fig tree and the laurel stand for the two poles of a verbal universe whose principles were shared by Augustine and the poet. Before defining the differences between them more precisely, we must turn to review some of those principles.

For Augustine, consciousness begins in desire. To discover the self is to discover it as in some sense lacking, absent to itself, and desire is the soul's reaching out to fill the void. This reaching out toward an as-yet-unspecified object is at the same time the birth of language, or at least of the paralanguage of gesticulation, literally a reaching out toward signification. The first chapters of the *Confessions* represent language and desire as indistinguishable, perhaps even coextensive. The child learns to speak in order to express its desire; at the same time, however, it learns what to desire from a world of objects that adults have named. Language is not only the vehicle of desire, it is also in some sense its creator, first through the agency of others, the mother and the nurse, and ultimately, sometimes insidiously, through the power of literary suggestion. From the first words of the child to the final utterance, the process remains essentially the same: far from being the sole interpreters of the words we use, we are at the same time interpreted by them. For Augustine, then, as for contemporary semiologists, man *is* his own language, for his desires and his words are inseparable.

If this is so, it follows that the end terms of both language and desire are one and the same. So it is, inevitably, in a theology of the Word. The ultimate end of desire is God, in whom the soul finds its satisfaction. The ultimate end of signification is a principle of intelligibility in terms of which all things may be understood. God the Word is at once the end of all desire and the ultimate meaning of all discourse. In the ninth book of the *Confessions*, just before the death of Monica, Augustine speaks of language in terms of desire and of desire in terms of language:

> If, for any man, the tumult of the flesh were silent: if the images of the earth, the waters and the air were silent: if the poles were silent; if the soul itself were silent and transcended itself by not thinking about itself . . . if they were silent and He spoke . . . by Himself, Whom we love in these things; were we to hear Him without them and if it continued like this, would it not be entering into the joy of the Lord? (9.10)

All creation is a discourse leading to Love, just as all desire is ultimately a desire for the Word. The theology of the Word binds together language and desire by ordering both to God, in whom they are grounded. From a naturalistic standpoint, it is impossible to say whether human discourse is a reflection of the word or whether the idea of God is simply a metaphoric application of linguistic theory. Whether we accept Augustine's theology in some form or translate it into what might be called a semiology of desire, we remain within a verbal universe, reaching out for a silent terminal point that lies outside the system.

The Word, the silence that subtends the system, grounds both desire and language. In its absence, however, both threaten to become an infinite regression, approaching ultimate satisfaction and ultimate significance as an unreachable limit. This is probably most clear in terms of Augustinian desire, which is insatiable in human terms. Each of the successive desires of life are in fact desires for selfhood, expressed metonymically in an ascending hierarchy of abstraction: nourishment for the child, sex for the adolescent, fame for the adult. In an Augustinian world, there is no escape from desire short of God: "Our heart [he says] is unquiet until it rest in Thee" (*Confessions*, 1.1).

As all desire is ultimately a desire for God, so all signs point ultimately to the Word. In a world without ultimate significance, there is no escape from the infinite referentiality of signs. Signs, like desire, continually point beyond themselves. In the *De Magistro*, for example, Augustine says that signs cannot convince an unbeliever, but can only point in the direction of reality. For the unbeliever to perceive the Truth, Christ must teach him from within. Short of the Word made flesh, there can be no bridge between words and things: "All other things may be expressed in some way; He alone is ineffable, Who spoke and all things were made. He spoke and we were made; but we are unable to speak of Him. His Word, by Whom we were spoken, is His Son. He was made weak, so that He might be spoken by us, despite our weakness" (10.33ff. See also M. Colish, *The Mirror of Language* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968], 57).

In our own day, we have learned about the infinite referentiality of signs, "unlimited semiosis," from Saussure and from Peirce, among others. Anterior to the written text is the spoken text, anterior to that is the acoustic image, in turn dependent upon a concept that is itself linguistically structured. Our attempt to make the leap from words to things seems doomed to a continual feedback that looks like infinite regression. C.S. Peirce speaks of the phenomenon in terms that are reminiscent of the *De Magistro:*

> The object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant. But an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object at its limit. . . . Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation *to which the torch of truth is handed along* and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.[1]

For Augustine, the central metaphor of Christianity provided the grounding for this infinite regression. Reality itself is linguistically structured. It is God's book, having him for both its author and its subject matter. Words point to things, but those things are themselves signs pointing to God, the ultimately signified. The metaphor of God's book halts the infinite series by ordering all signs to itself. In germ, this is the foundation of Christian allegory and of salvation history.

The fig tree, in Augustine's narrative, is a sign, just as it is in the gospels when Christ says to his disciples that they must look to the fig tree if they would read the signs of the apocalyptic time. The fig tree in the garden of Milan, in the eighth book of the *Confessions*, for all its historicity, is at the same time meant to represent the broader pattern of salvation history for all Christians. The moment represents the revelation of God's Word at a particular time and place, recapitulating the Christ event in an individual soul. Behind that fig tree stands a whole series of anterior images pointing backward to Genesis; Augustine's reader is meant to prolong the trajectory by applying it to his own life and extending it proleptically toward the ending of time.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Micah looks forward to the day when the promise will be fulfilled: "He shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree" (4.4). The hope of the Jews, their nationhood, is represented by the same tree that in Genesis suggested their estrangement from God. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, the words of the prophet are perhaps recalled when Nathanael is called out from under the fig tree by the Messiah: "Before Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee" (1.48). So in the *Confessions*, Augustine's calling, in the voices of children who sing "tolle, lege," takes place under the tree of Micah and Nathanael, whatever its botanical species. The paradigm of salvation history is made manifest at the end of an historical evolution and provides another "testament" to the interpretation of a man by God's Word.

Because Augustine's narrative is patterned after the same model that he took to be the principle of intelligibility in all human reality, the question of its historicity is meaningless. It might be said that the redemption itself depends upon a literary understanding of God's relationship to the world: the manifestation, at the end of a syntagmatic chain, of a significance present from the beginning. Like the intentionality of a sentence that preexists in its utterance and emerges concretely, in retrospect, from that utterance, the uncreated Word produces its signifier and is in turn made manifest by it.

Like language, the Redemption is tautology, ending where it began. Exactly the same relationship exists between Augustine's narrative and the reality it presumably represents. Is the story that we read a faithful portrayal of a life interpreted by God, or is that conversion experience the illusory feedback of plot structure in a narrative of the self? Conversion demands that there be both a continuity and a discontinuity between the self that *is* and the self that *was*. Similarly, a narrative of the self demands that author and persona be distinguished until they are fused at the narrative's culminating moment. Just as it is impossible to say whether God's presence is the reality of the Bible or the illusory projection of it, so it is impossible to say whether the conversion experience is the cause or the creature of the narrative that we read. When language in some form, however metaphorical, is the ultimate reality, we must be content with words upon words.

It must not be imagined that this is a modern distortion of Augustine's conception of his enterprise. In the text of the *Confessions*, conversion is always a literary event, a gloss on an anterior text. He correctly interprets the voices of the children to be a command to pick up the Bible and read a passage at random because he remembered Ponticianus's story of the two men who read the life of Antony and were thereupon converted. Antony himself, he remembered, "happened to go into a church while the gospel was being read and had taken it as a counsel addressed to himself when he heard the words, 'Go home and sell all that belongs to you . . . and follow me.' By this divine pronouncement he had at once been converted to You" (8.12). So Augustine picks up the Bible and reads the passage that interprets him and is thereby converted. The following moment points to his newly acquired vocation, for he then passes the Bible to his friend Alypius, thereby suggesting that his own text is to be applied proleptically to the reader himself as a part of the continual unfolding of God's Word in time. Consequently, the "truth-value" of Augustine's narrative depends, not upon its hypothetical conformity to brute "fact," supposing such a thing to exist, nor upon the illusory projection of human representation, but upon the arbitrary privilege granted to God's Word as the ultimate significance of all discourse. The fig tree, under the shade of which all this takes place, stands for a tradition of textual anteriority that extends backward in time to the Logos and forward to the same Logos at time's ending, when both desire and words are finally fulfilled: "Justi et sancti fruuntur Verbo Dei sine lectione, sine litteris."[2]

We must turn now, for contrast, to a passage in the first book of Petrarch's *Secretum*, in which Francesco is scolded by his fictive in-

terlocutor, Augustine, for a moral weakness with which they were both familiar: a certain paralysis of the will. Augustine reassures Francesco by describing his own conversion.

> Yet, for all that, I remained the man I had been before, when finally a profound meditation brought before my eyes all of my unhappiness. Thus, from the moment that I willed it fully and completely, I found the power to do it, and with a marvelous and joyful rapidity, I was transformed into another Augustine, whose story I believe you know from my *Confessions*.
>
> Francesco: I know it, of course: nor can I ever forget that life-giving fig tree, under whose shadow this miracle happened to you.
>
> Augustine: I should hope not, for neither myrtle nor ivy, nor even that laurel dear (so they say) to Phoebus, should be so welcome to you. Even if the entire chorus of poets should yearn for that laurel and you above all, who alone among all of your contemporaries were worthy to have its sought-after leaves as your crown, yet the remembrance of that fig tree should be dearer, if, after many tempests, you one day arrive in port, for it portends a sure hope of correction and pardon.[3]

The note of preciosity, here as elsewhere in the *Secretum*, derives from the fact that since both voices are Petrarch's the inconclusive conversation about moral paralysis constitutes an elegant dramatization of its own subject matter. Like the historical Augustine whom he so much admired, Petrarch was expert at drawing real literary strength from fictionalized moral flaws. Of much more interest, however, is the very un-Augustinian homage that Augustine pays to the poet laureate, thereby betraying the real point of the exchange. Francesco compliments Augustine for the *Confessions* and acknowledges the fig tree as an example for all men. The laurel, however, the symbol of poetic supremacy, is his alone. We must turn now to the implications of Petrarch's claim.

We have seen that the fig tree is an allegorical sign. It stands for a referential series of anterior texts grounded in the Logos. It is at once unique, as the letter must be, and yet referential, pointing to a truth beyond itself, a spiritual sense. While it is true that the being of the letter cannot be doubted, its meaning transcends it in importance. As all signs point ultimately to God, so it may be said that all books, for the Augustinian, are in some sense copies of God's Book. When Dante affirms that he is simply a scribe, copying down the words that love dictates to him, he is echoing this theory. On the other hand, for the laurel to be truly unique, it cannot *mean* anything: its referentiality must be neutralized if it is to remain the property of its creator. Petrarch makes of it the emblem of the mirror relationship

Laura-Lauro, which is to say, the poetic lady created by the poet, who in turn creates him as poet laureate. This circularity forecloses all referentiality and in its self-contained dynamism resembles the inner life of the Trinity as the Church fathers imagined it. One could scarcely suppose a greater autonomy. This poetic strategy corresponds, in the theological order, to the sin of idolatry.

In his *Religion of Israel* (trans. M. Greenberg [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960]), Yehezkel Kaufmann has shown that the Jews' conception of idolatry was a kind of fetishism, the worship of reified signs devoid of significance. The gods of the gentiles were coextensive with their representations, as though they dwelt not on Olympus or in the skies, but within a golden calf, a stone, or a piece of wood. Signs point to an absence or a significance yet to come; they are in this sense allegorical. Idols, as the Jews understood them, like fetishes, were a desperate attempt to render *presence*, a reified sign, one might almost say a metaphor.[4] It is almost as if the gentiles, in the Jews' reading, sought to evade the temporality inherent in the human condition by reifying their signs and thereby eternalizing significance in the here and now. Stones are mute, but as a compensation they last forever.

This theological problematic has its exact counterpart in the linguistic realm, except that its terms are reversed: in order to create an autonomous universe of autoreflexive signs without reference to an anterior logos—the dream of almost every poet since Petrarch—it is necessary that the thematic of such poetry be equally autoreflexive and self-contained, which is to say, that it be idolatrous in the Augustinian sense. The idolatrous love for Laura, however self-abasing it may seem, has the effect of creating a thoroughly autonomous portrait of the poet who creates it; its circular referentiality, like that of the Trinity (Father, Son, and the Love that binds them), cannot be transcended at a higher order. The laurel lives forever, no matter what happened to Francesco. This is the human strategy, the demystification of Petrarch's deliberately idolatrous pose. If the gentiles, in the Jews' interpretation of them, sought to make their gods present by reifying their signs, then we might say that Petrarch sought to reify his signs, objectify his poetic work, by making his "god," the lady Laura, the object of his worship. Critics given to psychologizing have repeatedly tried to reconstruct Petrarch's spiritual torment from his verses; where language is the only reality, however, it would be more prudent to see the spiritual torment as the reflection, the thematic translation, of his autoreflexive poetics.

We may observe in passing that the semiological meaning of idolatry, that is, the reification of the sign in an attempt to create poetic

presence, is consonant with Augustine's sign theory. In the first chapter of the *De Doctrina Christiana*, in the middle of a discussion of the referentiality of signs, he introduces his famous distinction concerning human desire (1.2): God alone is to be enjoyed [*frui*], all other things are to be used [*uti*]. Sin consists in enjoying that which should be used. The distinction seems somewhat out of place until we recall that all things are signs and that God is the terminal point on a referential chain. Once language is equated with desire, then it is clear that to deprive signs of their referentiality and to treat a poetic statement as autonomous, an end in itself, is the definition of idolatry.

Perhaps the most obvious example of Petrarch's attempt to short-circuit the referentiality of his signs is to be found in the sestina numbered 30 in the *Canzoniere:* "Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro." Augustine's conversion took place in a single moment, the *kairos*, in the shadow of the fig tree. Petrarch transforms the moment into a cyclical lifetime in the shadow of the laurel:

> seguiró l'ombra di quel dolce lauro
> per lo più ardente sole e per la neve,
> fin che l'ultimo dí chiuda quest'occhi.

The *lauro* here represents the lady, whose shadow the lover will follow all the days of his life, just as the lover in Dante's sestina, from which Petrarch's is derived, spends all of his time searching "dove suoi panni fanno ombra."[5] Because Petrarch's *lauro* is literally a tree, however, that symbolic search is a turning around in a circle, following the shadow cast by the tree through the hours of the day and the seasons of the year. The exterior quest has become an internal obsession; the image of the beloved (*idolo*) is quite literally an idol: "l'idolo mio scolpito in vivo lauro."

In his brilliant article on this sestina, Robert Durling has produced further evidence of the idolatrous quality of its content.[6] It is, he reminds us, an anniversary poem celebrating the poet's meeting with Laura. Since this occurred on Good Friday, a private liturgy of love is here substituted for the liturgy of the cross. Moreover, the laurel, with its branches of diamond, has become an idolatrous cross of glory. In other words, the most significant of Christianity's *signs* has become virtually a proper name. The pun, underscoring the opacity of the sign (*Laura/lauro*), makes any mediation impossible.

There is a further point to be made about this sestina, concerning its last lines:

> L'auro e i topacii al sol sopra la neve
> vincon le bionde chiome presso agli occhi
> che menan gli anni miei sì tosto a riva.

The comparison of Laura's face to gold and topaz on the snow, sparkling in the sun, is not only reified and coldly beautiful, it is radically fragmentary in a way that scarcely seems accidental. One of the consequences of treating a signifier as an absolute is that its integrity cannot be maintained. Without a principle of intelligibility, a collection of signs threatens to break down into its component parts. To put the matter in medieval terms, we may say that the Spirit is the "form" of the letter in the same way that the soul is the form of the body. In the absence of such a principle of anteriority, signs lose their connection to each other. So it is with Laura. Her virtues and her beauties are scattered like the objects of fetish worship: her eyes and hair are like gold and topaz on the snow, while the outline of her face is lost; her fingers are like ivory and roses or oriental pearls, her eyes are the pole stars, her arms are branches of diamond. Like the poetry that celebrates her, she gains immortality at the price of vitality and historicity. Each part of her has the significance of her entire person; it remains the task of the reader to string together her gemlike qualities into an idealized unity.

The same may be said of the unity of the *Canzoniere*. In order to remove from the poems all traces of temporality and contingency, poetic instants are strung together like pearls on an invisible strand. The lyrics themselves counterfeit a *durée* by their physical proximity and so create a symbolic time, free of the threat of closure. The arrangement of these *rime sparse*, whatever its rationale, may be thought of as an attempt to spatialize time and so to introduce a narrative element in a way that does not threaten to exceed the carefully delimited confines of the text. It is reminiscent to us of cinematographic art, a counterfeit of time wherein a series of images are spatially juxtaposed, awaiting a temporality that will give them life from the outside. Since Petrarch's day, the strategy has been used by innumerable authors of sonnet-sequences, so that it remains one of the most familiar devices of literary self-portraiture.

I have spoken repeatedly of Petrarch's *attempt* to exclude referentiality from his text. His success, of course, was only relative. Not only is referentiality intrinsic to all language, but also there towered behind him the figure of Dante, to whom all love poetry, especially in Italian, would forever after be referred, if only by contrast. Beatrice is in many senses the opposite of Laura. She was a mediatrix, continually pointing beyond herself to God. Throughout most of the *Paradiso*, for example, the pilgrim looks to her eyes only obliquely so that he sees what lies beyond her. Laura's eyes, by contrast, are "homicidal mirrors" in which her narcissistic lover finds spiritual death. When we translate that theme into poetic

terms, we conclude that the lady celebrated by Petrarch is a brilliant surface, a pure signifier whose momentary exteriority to the poet serves as an Archimedean point from which he can create himself.

One of the Dantesque themes that most clearly suggests Beatrice's epistemological function as a sign is the theme of her veil, used extensively in the last cantos of the *Purgatorio*. Her unveiling of her face is peculiarly apt to illustrate the parallelism of language and desire in the Augustinian tradition, for the motif is at once erotic and semiotic: her feminine beauty *revealed* within the context of an intellectual and doctrinal *re-velation*. In the canto of the Medusa (*Inf*. 9.63: "Sotto il velame de li versi strani"), Dante had already referred to the significance of his poem with the same figure: his verses were a *veil* to his meaning. It seems likely that in analogous passages, most notably that of the Siren (*Purg*. 19.63), we are meant to perceive this metalinguistic dimension of meaning. Even in our own day the figure is still used to describe the process of representation. C. S. Peirce, in the passage cited above, makes suggestive use of it: "The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing can never be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here" (*CP*, 1.117). the Freudian (or neo-Freudian) implications do not concern us here; the point is that from St. Paul to Dante the veil covering a radiant face was used as a figure for the relationship of the sign to its referent.[7] In the light of this tradition, it can hardly be fortuitous that Laura's veil, though also a covering, was at times her only reality.

This is the significance, I believe, of what seems otherwise to be simply a charming madrigal (*Rime* 52):

> Non al suo amante piú Dïana piacque
> quando per tal ventura tutta ignuda
> la vide in mezzo de le gelide acque,
>
> ch'a me la pastorella alpestra et cruda
> posta a bagnar un leggiadretto velo
> ch'a l'aura il vago et biondo capel chiuda;
>
> tal che mi fece, or quand' egli arde 'l cielo,
> tutto tremar d'un amoroso gielo.

[Diana did not so please her lover when, by a similar stroke of fortune, he beheld her completely naked amid the icy waters, as did the cruel alpine shepherdess please me, seated to wash a pretty little veil that protects her [Laura's] lovely blonde hair from the breeze: she made me, now when the summer sky is burning, tremble all over with an amorous chill.]

Laura's name, hidden in the pun of the sixth line, is her only presence in these verses, just as her veil is her only presence in the charming anecdote. Her veil, bathed in the water like the naked goddess seen by Acteon, functions as a fetish, an erotic signifier of a referent whose absence the lover refuses to acknowledge. So poetically, the reified verbal sign, wrenched free of its semantic context (*l'aura*/*Laura*), must be read as an affirmation of poetic presence, the *word* (and by extension the poem) as its own sole and sufficient meaning. For all of its lightheartedness, the poem illustrates the fundamental strategy of the *Canzoniere:* the *thematics* of idolatry transformed into the *poetics* of presence.

I do not mean to imply that the sin of idolatry exhausts the thematics of the *Canzoniere*. Many of the later poems suggest that the love for Laura was ennobling, at least in a literary or humanistic sense. My point is simply that idolatry, however repugnant to an Augustinian moralist, is at the linguistic level the essence of poetic autonomy. Because language and desire are indistinguishable in a literary text, we may say that by accusing his persona of an idolatrous passion Petrarch was affirming his own autonomy as a poetic creator. To psychologize about "spiritual torment" in the *Canzoniere* is to live the illusion that Petrarch was perhaps the first to create.

Many more studies of this length would be required to illustrate the full implications of this affirmation for the history of love poetry. In germ, it suggests that all the fictions of courtly love have their semiotic justifications: the love must be idolatrous for its poetic expression to be autonomous; the idolatry cannot be unconflicted, any more than a sign can be completely nonreferential if it is to communicate anything at all. Spiritual struggle stands for the dialectic of literary creation, somewhere between opaque carnality and transparent transcendency. Finally, it might be suggested that the illicit or even adulterous nature of the passion has its counterpart in the "anxiety of influence": communication demands that our signs be appropriated; poetic creation often requires that they be stolen. Petrarch's prodigious originality is that he was entirely self-conscious about the principles of which his predecessors were only dimly aware. By transforming the Augustinian analysis of sin into a new aesthetic, he made self-alienation in life the mark of self-creation in literature and so established a literary tradition that has yet to be exhausted.

The *Canzoniere* ends with a prayer to the Virgin for forgiveness.

Laura, he says, was a Medusa who turned him into a man of stone. Nevertheless, I have shown that the deadend nature of that passion is a sign of the poetry's monumentality. In the same poem, he addresses the Virgin as the antitype of his beloved, affirming that the Queen of Heaven is the only true mediatrix: *vera beatrice*. At one level, of course, his refusal to capitalize that familiar word suggests that Dante too had his problems with idolatry and reification. At another level, however, it identifies his own beloved with that of his literary ancestor. On that ambiguous note, both the passion and the poem are concluded and Petrarchism is born.

Notes

1. *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 1:117.
2. *In Psalmos* 119, 6, quoted by M. Pontet, *L'Exégèse de S. Augustin prédicateur* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), 117.
3. *Secretum I*. I have translated from E. Carrara's edition of *Prose*, ed. G. Martellotti et al. (Milan: Ricciardi, 1955), 41 ff.
4. For a different, although analogous, interpretation of "idolatry" which omits the erotic dimension of meaning, see Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957). I am grateful to my friend Giuseppe Mazzotta for bringing this book to my attention.
5. Dante, *Rime*, ed. G. Contini (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), 159.
6. "Petrarch's 'Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro,'" *MLN* 86 (1971): 1–20.
7. Second Corinthians, 3, where the veil hides the face of Moses, that is, where the "letter" covers the "spirit." For the veil, see also D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), *sub voce*.

3. "PER SELVE E BOSCHERECCI LABIRINTI": DESIRE AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN ARIOSTO'S *ORLANDO FURIOSO*

EUGENIO DONATO

> Artes è quel che vo' vu' dite
> maquillage o trucco.
> —C.E. Gadda

> Les Dieux sont morts:
> mais ils sont morts de rire.
> —G. Deleuze

Ariosto at the beginning of the *Orlando Furioso* stages Angelica's escape from Paris. Angelica is the object of both Orlando's and Rinaldo's desire: they both pursue her, but since she does not reciprocate their feelings, at the first opportunity she gets on the back of a horse and heads straight for the woods. This first incident is quite characteristic of both a predominant leitmotif that will run throughout the development of the narrative and the privileged topography within which the latter will deploy itself. Practically every incident in the vast construct of the *Orlando Furioso* consists of a tale of characters pursuing, with more or less success, the usually elusive object of their desire. The nature of the object matters little; it can be a woman, a helmet, a sword, a horse, or simply glory and renown.

The privileged locus of this quest is a space most often represented by woods through which knights and ladies roam freely but which has its own topology, which determines encounters between them and also governs the devious paths they follow in their movements. This particular space is not simply to be confused with any

Literary Theory/ Renaissance Texts

EDITED BY

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DAVID QUINT

The Johns Hopkins University Press

BALTIMORE AND LONDON (1986)