although he embraced Petrarch's historical perspective – the exaltation of classical antiquity coupled with the condemnation of the centuries that followed – Boccaccio did not subscribe to his friend's pessimistic view of the present and, in particular, did not share his reservations concerning Dante and literature in the vernacular. He strongly believed that a revival was already under way, but not restricted to the field of literature and not necessarily dependent on the use of Latin. In the figurative arts, he says, Giotto 'brought back to light an art which had been buried for centuries beneath the blunders of those who, in their paintings, aimed to bring visual delight to the ignorant rather than intellectual satisfaction to the wise' (*Decameron* IV, 5, 6). As for literature, in a letter written in 1371 to his friend Iacopo Pizzinga, Boccaccio assigns a distinct place to each of the two great men of his time who had revived 'the lost Italian glory': Dante, taking a new route, 'dared to make the Muses sing in his mother tongue, neither vulgar, nor rustic, as some would have it', while Petrarch followed 'the route of the Ancients'. To these two, posterity has added the 'humble psalmist', Giovanni Boccaccio: reformer and innovator of the European literary tradition, classical and modern scholar of encyclopaedic erudition, poet and prose writer always ready to attempt new subjects and new forms, and above all great narrator and author of one of the most enduring masterpieces of world literature.

Week 3 (19 Oct)

6
Petrarch

John Took

Petrarch, the most committed of the great *trecentisti* to the revitalisation of a Latin literary culture in Italy, was at the same time the most decisive of them for the development of the vernacular tradition. Dante, it is true, had his followers – not least among them Boccaccio in the *Amorosa visione* and Petrarch himself in the *Trionfi* – in respect of a certain kind of visionary literature in the vernacular, and Boccaccio was to remain for generations a point of reference in respect of the *novella* tradition in Italian. But neither was as decisive for the development of literary good taste in Europe, in and beyond the Renaissance period, as the Petrarch of the *Rime*. And here there is an irony, for of all the great *trecentisti*, Petrarch, a poet of well-nigh unerring tact in the management of form, is psychologically the least settled of them, the least at one with himself in respect of the conflicting forces of personality and of moral sensibility. At every point in the *Canzoniere* (the traditional title of his collected *Rime*), the technical assurance flowing from his extraordinarily developed sense of formal propriety contrasts with – even as it gives expression to – a sustained sense of spiritual uncertainty, a state of mind characterised at every turn by a sense of restlessness and irresolution.

Life

The formal circumstances of Petrarch's life, with its endless oscillation between the courtly patronage of popes, priests and princes and the stillness of his country retreats, are themselves a metaphor of his spiritual existence. Born in Arezzo in 1304 of a Florentine lawyer exiled (like Dante) from his native city as a White Guelf, his early years were spent in Pisa, in Avignon (where his father came to work in 1312) and at Carpentras in Provence, where he was schooled in grammar and rhetoric by another exiled spirit, Convenevole da Prato. In 1316, in Montpellier, he began his legal studies, which for a time, though with less than complete commitment, he continued in Bologna. With the death of his father in 1326, Petrarch abandoned law and returned to Avignon, where in 1330, thanks to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, he enjoyed his first ecclesiastical appointment as household chaplain. It was here, on 6 April 1327, in the church of St Clare, that he first caught sight of Laura, a figure who thereafter stood both materially and symbolically at the centre of his complex

spirituality. It was during this period too that, in the course of his travels to northern Europe (1333), he discovered at Liège the lost *Pro Archia* oration of Cicero, important for his own conception of the public responsibilities of the literary man, and that he was appointed, on the recommendation of Giovanni Colonna, to a canonry (the first of several he was to receive) in Lombez cathedral. In 1337 he returned to Avignon, where he acquired a house at Vaucluse on the banks of the Sorgue.

These, for Petrarch, were years of intense humanist ambition, and the late 1330s saw the start of his Latin epic, the *Africa*, conceived along the lines of the *Aeneid* as a celebration of Scipio Africanus, and of the *De viris illustribus* ('On Famous Men'), a celebration of great men in the manner of the Roman historian Livy. They were years which culminated in his examination for, and coronation as, poet laureate (Rome, 1341), an occasion largely engineered by Petrarch himself, which confirmed him in his vocation as the prototypical representative of a new order of humanist scholarship and literary enterprise. But the doubts always present in Petrarch's mind as to the moral legitimacy of his humanist aspirations began at once to surface. Though the following years (spent between the peace of Vaucluse and the diplomatic busyness of Naples, Rome and various cities in the north of Italy) saw the continuation of the *Rerum memorandarum libri* ('Books of Things to be Remembered') and the inception of the *Bucolicum Carmen* or *Eclogues* (1346), they saw too the more meditative undertaking represented by the *De vita solitaria* ('On the Solitary Life') and the *De otio religioso* ('On Religious Ease') (Lent, 1346 and 1347 respectively). The same period (1342–53), which witnessed the catastrophic plague of 1348 responsible for the deaths of some of Petrarch's closest friends and, above all, of Laura, saw also the drafting and finalisation (possibly as late as 1352 or 1353) of the *Secretum* ('My Secret'), a sustained act of self-interrogation on the part of one repeatedly inclined to call into question the principles of his moral and intellectual existence. The year 1350 saw, too, Petrarch's first initiative – probably in response to the example of Cicero (in 1345 he had discovered Cicero's letters to Atticus, Quintus and Brutus in the cathedral library at Verona) – in the collecting and ordering of his now ample private and public correspondence, and of his *Rime* or *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, or fragments in the vernacular as he came to call them, a process which continued to the end of his life.

Following his final departure from Vaucluse in 1353, Petrarch established himself at the court of Archbishop Giovanni Visconti in Milan, whence, often on diplomatic business, he visited, among other places, Venice, Mantua, Prague and Paris. This period saw the conception of his other main vernacular work, the *Trionfi* ('Triumphs'), which occupied him until the final year of his life. From 1362 to 1367, he lived principally in Venice, where in 1363 he entertained Boccaccio as his guest. This is the period of the *Familiares* ('Familial') and *Seniles* ('Of Advanced Years') collections of letters (begun before 1353), of the morally encyclopaedic *De remediis utriusque fortune* ('Remedies for Fortune both Good and Ill', 1354–65), and of the *De sui ipsius et aliorum multorum ignorantia* ('On his Own Ignorance and That of Many Besides', 1367), a work especially important for Petrarch's self-affirmation as a poet-philosopher in the classical and humanist tradition over and against the scholastic, and particularly the Averroist, tradition of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. In 1370, he settled definitively at Arquà near Padua (he had a house built there on land given to him by Francesco da Carrara), where he continued working on his edition of the *Rime* and where he composed his autobiographical and confessional 'Letter to Posterity' ('Posteritati', *Seniles* XVIII, 1). He died on the night of 18 July 1374, and was buried at Arquà.

Cultural and moral context

Petrarch is the most monothematic of the great *trecentisti* in that, notwithstanding the varied occasion and inspiration of his successive works, each of them, from the discrete letters and poems which flow into the *Familiares*, *Seniles* and *Canzoniere* to the more extensive meditations on the moral and religious life, bears on the nucleus of concerns which dominated his existence as a whole. Petrarch himself was inclined to define and analyse these concerns in terms of the legitimacy or otherwise of his ambitions as a poet and lover – as a poet in the tradition of the great Latin *auctores* of antiquity, and as a lover of Laura inasmuch as she came to symbolise for him every kind of worldly desire and happiness, poetic and philological as well as erotic. More precisely he was inclined to define and analyse them in terms of the kind of psychological conflict engendered by a Neoplatonising metaphysic apt to cast doubt on the nobility of the flesh, by a Stoicising Christianity apt to question the worthiness of irrational passion and impetuosity and by a Pauline and Augustinian sense of the soul as divided against itself. Conscious of the call to be in God as the final cause of its activity as a creature of understanding and love, the wayward spirit nonetheless settles for a merely proximate end, for an idolatrous delight in the possibilities of the moment. Called, as Dante had put it in the *Paradiso* (I, 70), to a species of transhumanisation or spiritual self-surpassing, the recalcitrant soul settles instead for a tragic dissipation of spiritual energy. Thus, for example, the *Secretum*, having diagnosed the author's basic problem as a failure of the will, goes on to explore in terms of the seven deadly sins plus, in the third book, his inordinate love for Laura and his extravagant thirst for glory, each alike a trap for the indisciplined spirit – so too in the moral treatises, any number of his letters, and, in a melancholy vein at times shading off into the contrite, many of his *Rime*.

But the moral situation in Petrarch is more complicated than his own

account of it suggests; for Petrarch, endowed certainly with a remarkable volatility and restlessness of character, witnessed, and indeed acted out at first hand, a cultural transition apt inevitably to bring him into conflict with himself. Quite apart from the data of personality, his circumstances were in themselves sufficient to ensure a crisis of self-interpretation. On the one hand, then, there is the Pauline and Augustinian part of his culture and formation which at every point calls into question the integrity of the will, which encourages a sense of the impossibility of justification short of a movement of grace, and which summons the soul to a systematic relegation of every mortal concern to the soul's eternal well-being. This aspect of Petrarch's temperament, greatly stimulated by his brother's enrolment as a Carthusian monk in 1343 and by the solitude of Vaucluse, emerges even in moments of the greatest humanist enthusiasm to challenge the legitimacy of his scholarly, poetic and amorous initiatives and, in doing so, to precipitate a mood of spiritual concern. On the other hand, there is the summons and the companionship of the classical poets and moralists (especially, among the latter, of Cicero and Seneca) calling the uncertain spirit to an act of self-affirmation – intellectual, moral and affective – here and now, this side of death. And the result of this counter-summons from antiquity to an act of self-affirmation here and now – of this impossible juxtaposition, within one and the same consciousness, of conflicting and ultimately irreducible world views – is a crisis of being everywhere discernible in Petrarch, a state of spiritual affliction apparent even in the most apparently assured of his literary formulas.

The *Canzoniere*

Petrarch's originality

Petrarch's poetry – and for the moment we are thinking primarily of the *Canzoniere* – is the poetry of ceaseless self-qualification. It is poetry marked at every point, both formally and substantially, by the subtlest – as well as, at times, by the most violent – forms of conceptual and expressive gradation and opposition. Thus the rising intensity and linear progression of the *stilnovo* sonnet give way in Petrarch to a species of reflexivity whereby the leading emphases of the poem are at once – in the very moment of their formulation – subject to interrogation and revision. The sustained momentum and insistent resolution of thought frequently characteristic of the Cavalcantian and Dantean *stilnovo* give way to a kind of critical self-reprise which vastly complicates the psychological texture of the poem and introduces into it a new rhythm and periodicity. Take, for example, the following poem from the mature phase of Dante's activity as a *stilnovista* (*Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare* from Chapter XXVI of the *Vita Nuova*) and compare it with Petrarch's *In qual parte del ciel, in quale ydea* (*Canz.* CLIX):

Dante

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.

Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.

Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira,
che dà per li occhi una dolcezza al core,
che 'ntender no la può chi no la prova:

e par che de la sua labbia si mova
un spirito soave pien d'amore,
che va dicendo a l'anima: Sospira.

(So noble and full of dignity my lady appears when she greets anyone that all tongues tremble and fall silent and eyes dare not look at her. She goes on her way, hearing herself praised, graciously clothed with humility; and seems a creature come down from heaven to earth to make the miraculous known.

She appears so beautiful to those who gaze at her that through the eyes she sends a sweetness into the heart such as none can understand but he who experiences it; and from her lips seems to come a spirit, gentle and full of love, that says to the soul: 'Sigh.')

Petr.

In qual parte del ciel, in quale ydea
era l'exempio, onde Natura tolse
quel bel viso leggiadro, in ch'ella volse
mostrar qua giù quanto lassù potea?

Qual nimpha in fonti, in selve mai qual dea,
chiome d'oro sì fino a l'aura sciolse?
quando un cor tante in sé vertuti accolse?
benché la somma è di mia morte rea.

Per divina bellezza indarno mira
chi gli occhi de costei già mai non vide
come soavemente ella gli gira;

non sa come Amor sana, et come ancide,
chi non sa come dolce ella sospira,
et come dolce parla, et dolce ride.

(In what part of heaven, in what Idea was the pattern from which Nature copied that lovely face, in which she has shown down here all that she is capable of doing up there? What nymph in a fountain, in the woods what goddess ever loosed to the breeze locks of such fine gold? Whenever did a heart contain so many virtues? Though the sum of them is guilty of my death.

He looks in vain for divine beauty who never saw her eyes, how sweetly she turns them; he does not know how Love heals and how he kills, who does not know how sweetly she sighs and how sweetly she speaks and sweetly laughs.)

Thematically, technically, but above all in terms of psychological structure, the transition is absolute. On the one hand, there is the rapturous transcendentalism of the Dantean *stilnovo*, where the object of the poet's celebration is a *new* (in the sense of a miraculous, even messianic) presence in the historical order. On the other hand, there is the fraught psychologism of the Petrarchan sonnet, where the intuition of an ideal precipitates in one and the same moment a state of spiritual confusion and a sense of imminent demise. The uninterrupted progression of the Dantean sonnet from appearance ('tanto onesta pare') to the unspeakable bliss of disinterested celebration ('che va dicendo a l'anima: Sospira'), a progression which subsumes each successive emphasis in the rhythm and continuity of the whole, gives way in Petrarch to a sharp and even brutal reversal of thought and sensation as the poet registers the spiritual consequences of his own, no less rapturous intuition ('benché la somma è di mia morte rea'). And what follows, far from being an ecstatic resolution of the 'ideal' motif with which the poem begins (Laura as the perfect manifestation of an original Idea), takes the form of a circular meditation ('dolce ... dolce ... dolce') on the irony of love as a principle both of affirmation and of destruction, of being and of non-being ('come Amor sana, et come ancide'). Assurance, as the mood of the poet's utterance, gives way to uncertainty, and progression gives way to a more or less desperate sense of repetition, of unending sameness.

Composition and structure

Petrarch worked on the ordering of his poems in the *Canzoniere* right up until his death in July 1374, and there is no reason to suppose that the shape of the collection as contained in the Vatican Library manuscript V.L. 3195 (which witnesses to the state of the *Canzoniere* as Petrarch left it at his death and of which about a third is autograph) would have been definitive. Certain structural principles are evident in its composition – the poems divide into those composed before and after Laura's death, there are several anniversary poems pointing to a chronological interest in the overall arrangement, and there is a beginning and an end to the collection suggesting a process of moral evolution – but it is probable that Petrarch inserted and arranged poems according to his ever-changing perception of checks and balances in the work, of its thematic clusters and contrasts. The American scholar E. H. Wilkins has provided a painstaking, but even so still largely conjectural, account of the development of the collection based on manuscript evidence. An early grouping of the poems, contained in another Vatican Library manuscript (Chigi L.V. 176, which dates from 1359–62 and which has 215 of the final 366 poems making up the *Canzoniere* in its final form), suggests a process of organisation originating in the 1340s and based on chronological, thematic and metrical considerations. But, for all the available evidence (and a third

manuscript, V.L. 3196, consists of fair copies and annotations in Petrarch's own hand dating from the mid-1330s), the earliest phases in the creation of the collection remain obscure. The later phases are more certain. In 1366 Petrarch engaged a copyist, Giovanni Malpaghini, to begin transcribing his poems into what is now Vatican Library V.L. 3195, and by April 1367, when Malpaghini resigned this task, he (Malpaghini) had copied out 244 poems, whereupon Petrarch himself continued the work right up until the last months of his life. By this time, indeed by the time of Malpaghini's departure, Petrarch had settled on the title *Francisci Petrarche laureati poete Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* for his collection ('Occasional Pieces in the Vernacular by Francis Petrarch Poet Laureate'), and here again indications in the manuscripts confirm details of chronology and intended organisation. Even so, several issues – such as the date of the prologue poem *Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono* ('You who hear in scattered rhymes the sound') or when exactly Petrarch settled on the primary twofold division of the poems before and after the death of Laura – remain a matter for conjecture, a situation only complicated, in the absence of firm manuscript evidence, by recourse (useful as it sometimes is) to parallel texts outside the *Canzoniere*.

The *Canzoniere* consists of 366 poems made up of sonnets (317), *canzoni* (29), *sestine* (9), ballads (7) and madrigals (4). The vast majority of these poems concern Laura and the vicissitudes of Petrarch's love for her. Prominent among the poems of other than amorous inspiration is the political *canzone Italia mia* ('My Italy', CXXVIII), an indictment of Bavarian (i.e. mercenary) treachery ('bavarico inganno', line 66) in respect of Italy's 'fair land' (line 18). With this may be grouped the *canzone* addressed to Giacomo Colonna on the occasion of the 1333 crusade against Islam (XXVIII) and Petrarch's hymn to Rome as the city most favoured by Fortune but, alas, the most destitute now of modern champions (LIII), which probably belongs to the occasion of his first visit there in 1337. Another group of poems, including most conspicuously *Una donna più bella assai che 'l sole* ('A lady more beautiful by far than the sun', CXIX), conceived in the wake of Petrarch's crowning as poet laureate in April 1341), concerns poets and poetry. Notable here is the sonnet *S'i' fussi stato fermo a la spelunca* ('If I had stayed in the cave', CLXVI), with its expression of the aridity of Petrarch's inspiration in the vernacular, together with XCII (on the death of Cino da Pistoia in 1336) and CCLXXXVII (on the death of Sennuccio del Bene, another poet friend of Petrarch's, in 1349), each an act of literary acknowledgement. Other poems in the non-amorous sector of the *Canzoniere* include the moral meditation of VII on the exile of philosophy in Petrarch's generation, and a number of correspondence poems, including a sonnet addressed (probably) to the Carthusians of Montrieux in the wake of a visit there (CXXXIX).

But by far the majority of the poems in the *Canzoniere* are erotic in inspiration. They set out to explore the patterns of thought and emotion

generated by Petrarch's love for Laura, the subjective or psychological aspect of this love figuring, within the economy of the whole, altogether more prominently than its objective or descriptive aspect, than the figure of Laura herself. This main body of amorous poems both does and does not have a formal structure and development. It *does* have a formal structure in the sense, first, that the collection as a whole is prefaced by an introductory sonnet which, in the manner of an epilogue rather than of a proemium proper, sets the experience of the whole within the perspective of age and of maturity; and secondly, it has a conclusion which appears to mark the resolution of its accumulated uncertainty and anguish. Straightaway, then, in the opening poem, the reader is called into an attitude of understanding and compassion in respect of an order of experience now superseded in its vanity and plaintiveness by wisdom, repentance, and a sense of the illusive character of mortal joy:

Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono
di quei sospiri ond'io nudriva 'l core
in sul mio primo giovenile errore
quand'era in parte altr'uom da quel ch'i' sono,

del vario stile in ch'io piango et ragiono
fra le vane speranze e 'l van dolore,
ove sia chi per prova intenda amore,
spero trovar pietà, non che perdono.

Ma ben veggio or sì come al popol tutto
favola fui gran tempo, onde sovente
di me medesmo meco mi vergogno;

et del mio vaneggiar vergogna è 'l frutto,
e 'l pentersi, e 'l conoscer chiaramente
che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno.

(I)

(You who hear in scattered rhymes the sound of those sighs with which I nourished my heart during my first youthful error, when I was in part another man from what I am now; for the varied style in which I weep and speak between vain hopes and vain sorrow, where there is anyone who understands love through experience, I hope to find, not only pardon, but pity.

But now I see well how for a long time I was the talk of the crowd, for which I am often ashamed of myself within; and of my raving shame is the fruit, and repentance, and the clear knowledge that whatever pleases in the world is a brief dream.)

And these – vanity, repentance and the sense of an obsession lived out over the years in an attitude of perverse wilfulness – are the leading emphases of the concluding plea to the Virgin, now at last established at the centre of the soul's desire:

Vergine, in cui ò tutta mia speranza
che possi et vogli al gran bisogno aitarme,
non mi lasciare in su l'extremo passo.

Non guardar me, ma Chi degnò crearme;
no 'l mio valor, ma l'altra Sua sembianza,
ch'è in me, ti mova a curar d'uom sì basso.
Medusa et l'error mio m'àn fatto un sasso
d'umor vano stillante:
Vergine, tu di sante
lagrime et pie adempi 'l meo cor lasso,
ch'almen l'ultimo pianto sia devoto,
senza terrestro limo,
come fu 'l primo non d'insania voto.

(CCCLXVI, 105–17)

(Virgin in whom I have put all my hopes that you will be able, and will wish to help me in my great need; do not leave me at the last pass; do not consider me, but Him who deigned to create me; let not my worth but His high likeness that is in me move you to help one so low. Medusa and my error have made me a stone dripping vain moisture. Virgin, fill my weary heart with holy, repentant tears; let at least my last weeping be devout and without earthly mud, as was my first vow, before my insanity.)

First part

Thus the whole experience of the *Canzoniere* is circumscribed, in Petrarch's presentation of it, by his first infatuation with Laura on Good Friday, 1327 (III) – its *terminus a quo* – and by the redirection of spiritual energy represented by his turning to the Virgin in the twilight of his years, its *terminus ad quem*. Between these two points, and constituting the next most important principle as far as the structure of the *Canzoniere* is concerned, comes the division of the collection into before and after her death, with its implications for the substance and psychology of the love song. Of the poems in the first part of the *Canzoniere*, the first six are in the nature of an exposition. Petrarch establishes the time, the place and the mood of his first encounter with Laura. In what follows, each aspect of this experience – its joy, pain, hope and disappointment – is developed in terms of a dialectical relationship with its opposite, pleasure shading off into pain, anticipation into remorse, hope into disillusionment and exultation into guilt. Among the many recurrent themes and psychological motifs to emerge more or less insistently in this part of the collection are those of Petrarch's sense of captivity and yearning for deliverance, his deepening sense of isolation and wretchedness, and an increasingly desperate sense of the passage of time and of his own ebbing, but unfulfilled, mortality, all qualified (at times simultaneously) by intuitions of bliss, by the fluctuations of sensuousness and even, occasionally, by a kind of humorous self-mockery. This, above all, is the poetry of restlessness, of a progressively urgent search for the kind of peace contingent on the freeing of the soul from its obsessive concern with Laura. Exemplary in this respect is the opening stanza from the exquisite

canzone *Di pensier in pensier, di monte in monte* ('From thought to thought, from mountain to mountain', CXXIX), where a sense of the soul's victimisation by love – in truth, of its amorous *self*-victimisation – issues in an unclouded expression of existential confusion ('this man is burning and of his state is uncertain'):

Di pensier in pensier, di monte in monte
mi guida Amor, ch'ogni segnato calle
provo contrario a la tranquilla vita.
Se 'n solitaria piaggia, rivo o fonte,
se 'nfra duo poggi siede ombrosa valle,
ivi s'acqueta l'alma sbigottita;
et come Amor l'envita,
or ride, or piange, or teme, or s'assecura;
e 'l volto che lei segue ov'ella il mena
si turba et rasserena,
et in un esser picciol tempo dura;
onde a la vista huom di tal vita experto
diria: Questo arde, et di suo stato è incerto.

(CXXIX, 1–13)

(From thought to thought, from mountain to mountain, Love guides me; for I find every trodden path to be contrary to a tranquil life. If there is on some solitary slope a river or spring, or between two peaks a shady valley, there my frightened soul is quieted; and, as Love leads it on, now it laughs, now weeps, now fears, now is confident; and my face, which follows wherever my soul leads, is clouded and made clear again, and remains but a short time in any one state; and at the sight anyone who had experienced such a life would say: 'This man is burning [with love] and of his state is uncertain.')

By this time, the penitential element lurking beneath the surface of Petrarch's discourse, and emerging explicitly in poems such as the sonnet *Padre del ciel* ('Father in heaven', LXII), has itself become a dominant theme of the collection, and confirms in its prominence the parallel meditation of the famous Mont Ventoux letter (self-dated April 1336 but finalised possibly as late as 1352), with its sense of misdirected spiritual energy. Even so, from this point on in Petrarch's celebration of Laura as the historical manifestation of the prototypical Idea (see again CLIX, quoted above), there is a growing sense of the spirit as suffering and as standing in need of redemption. And with this, the psychological analysis becomes ever more searching and acute. Torn as he is between loving and non-loving, between existing for Laura and struggling to be free from her, Petrarch stands somehow over and against himself, in a state of self-estrangement characterised alternately by rebellion and by resignation. Some poems, it is true, maintain the celebratory mood, but the general drift of Petrarch's argument, or rather its deep but progressively explicit state of mind, is that of conflict and self-interrogation.

Second part

Conflict and self-interrogation are again leading features of the second part of the *Canzoniere*, inaugurated by the sustained confessionalism – of recognisably Pauline and Augustinian provenance – of the *canzone I' vo pensando* ('I go thinking', CCLXIV). This is a study in the divided self, in the predicament of the one who both wills and does not will his own well-being. The final line of the poem, which neatly fuses classical and Christian motifs – the Ovidian 'I see and approve the better but follow the worse' (*Metam.* VII, 20–1) and the Pauline 'for what I would do, that I do not, but what I hate, that I do' (Romans 7:15) – expresses precisely the situation of the soul lost to itself and powerless to embrace its own highest good: 'et veggio 'l meglio, et al peggior m'appiglio' ('I see the better and embrace the worse'). But Laura's death, though by no means resolving the existential conflict at the root of his being, at least engenders a new possibility, that of seeing her henceforth as a principle of salvation, as a means of lifting the soul from its carnality. Bit by bit, then – though the process is by no means linear or uninterrupted – Laura is perceived by Petrarch as being at work redemptively in his experience. Miraculously present to him (and there are several visitation or apparition poems in this second part of the *Canzoniere*), she is at work as one who admonishes and guides, as one who identifies with the suffering spirit in its struggle for liberation and decisiveness. An example is CCLXXXV, where Laura's companionship as a lover is at the same time that of a mother and a wife:

Né mai pietosa madre al caro figlio
né donna accesa al suo sposo dilecto
die' con tanti sospir, con tal sospetto
in dubbio stato sì fedel consiglio,

come a me quella che 'l mio grave exiglio
mirando dal suo eterno alto ricetto,
spesso a me torna co l'usato affecto,
et di doppia pietate ornata il ciglio:

or di madre, or d'amante; or teme, or arde
d'onesto foco; et nel parlar mi mostra
quel che 'n questo viaggio fugga o segua,

contando i casi de la vita nostra,
pregando ch'a levar l'alma non tarde:
et sol quant'ella parla, ò pace e tregua.

(Never did a pitying mother to her dear son or a loving wife to her beloved husband give with so many sighs, with such anxiety, such faithful counsel in a perilous time, as she gives to me, who, seeing from her eternal home my heavy exile, often returns to me with her usual affection and with her brow adorned with double pity, now that of a mother, now that of a lover. Now she fears, now she burns with virtuous fire; and in her speech she shows me what in this journey I must avoid or pursue, telling over the

events of our life, begging me not to delay in lifting up my soul. And only while she speaks do I have peace, or at least a truce.)

Other poems too (CCCLIX, for example, or CCCLXII) confirm the notion of Laura, in death, as a guide and intercessor for the lost and perplexed spirit, but the problem of Petrarch's love for her – to be interpreted, as we have said, in terms not simply of a conflict between the rational and the sensitive soul, but of a clash of two world views, of the Stoic sense of affirmation in and through self and the Christian sense of affirmation in and through God – is not itself open to solution in terms simply of a redefinition of Laura and of her function in the experience of Petrarch as her lover. The situation is too complex for this, and the ambiguities of the Laura theme too stubborn and deeply rooted. The final phase of the *Canzoniere*, therefore, offers an altogether more drastic solution as Petrarch confesses the guilt of his obsession with Laura and turns repentantly, in a mood of specifically Christian piety, to the Virgin. The final poem of the collection, *Vergine bella* ('Beautiful Virgin'), is a plea for compassion on the part of a spirit hopelessly lost in the twisted byways ('torta via') of its sorrowful existence. Liturgical in its repetitive, almost formulaic structure and at times psalmic in imagery, the *canzone* is as fiercely self-critical as anything Petrarch ever wrote. From the beginning, he says, he has been waylaid by his own folly, and has brought upon himself his own wretchedness. Laura, recast now as Medusa (line 111), has been a principle, not of renewal and elevation, but of spiritual paralysis. His mood is contrite, and in the face of a mortal span now quickly nearing its end, Petrarch bids the Virgin intercede in favour of a peaceful homecoming:

> Il dì s'appressa, et non pote esser lunge,
> sì corre il tempo et vola,
> Vergine unica et sola,
> e 'l cor or conscientia or morte punge.
> Raccomandami al tuo figliuol, verace
> homo et verace Dio,
> ch'accolga 'l mio spirito ultimo in pace.
>
> (CCCLXVI, 131–7)

(The day draws near and cannot be far, time so runs and flies, single, sole Virgin; and now conscience, now death pierces my heart; commend me to your Son, true man and true God, that He may receive my last breath in peace.)

But if the *Canzoniere* does in this sense have a 'story' – a more or less discernible spiritual progression culminating in an act of Christian confession – it is a story all but subsumed in the circularity of its leading emphases. The 'twisted byways' and 'prayer to the Virgin' motifs of the final *canzone* recall clearly enough the infernal–paradisal progression of the *Commedia*; but where the 'story' of the *Commedia* is one of progressive self-transcendence through a simultaneous presence in the pilgrim spirit of human and divine willing, the *Canzoniere*, for all its final turning of the soul to Mary, is a study in the psychology of obsession, a psychology not so much resolved as confirmed by its closing formula. In both parts of the collection, both before and after the death of Laura, each successive proposition is qualified by its opposite, and each successive emphasis shades off into, or else is starkly countered by, its antithesis.

Technical virtuosity

It is here, in relation to the endless process of spiritual self-qualification in Petrarch, that we discern most clearly the leading features of his craftsmanship as a poet, for Petrarch's is the art, precisely, of technical graduation and contrast, of spiritual articulation in and through the reflexiveness of form. Metrically, he exploits the essentially binary structure of the *canzone* stanza and of the sonnet for the purposes of a more or less drastic, and frequently ironic, inflection of the argument. The principal division generated by the *canzone*-stanza and sonnet form occurs between the *frons* (in the sonnet, the quatrains) and the *sirima* (in the sonnet, the tercets), and it is at this point that, in keeping with the reader's expectation, Petrarch will frequently introduce his leading discursive inflection; so, for example, the first sonnet (*Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono*, quoted above), with its adversative 'Ma' ('But') at line 9. Quite as often, however, he will counter expectation, and thus reinforce the change of direction, by advancing or retarding the antithetical moment of his argument, as, for example, in the sonnet *In qual parte del ciel*, also quoted above, where the about-turn of line 8 ('benché la somma è di mia morte rea', 'though the sum of them is guilty of my death') unexpectedly disrupts the more normal discursive pattern of the sonnet. Elsewhere, as, for example, in XXXV (*Solo et pensoso i più deserti campi*, 'Alone and filled with care the most deserted fields'), the antithetical inflection is delayed until the last tercet. In each case, form, far from constraining thought or imposing upon it aesthetically, confirms it in its basic angularity, its tendency to proceed in terms of thematic shifts and polarities.

The same responsiveness of form to the endlessly shifting patterns of thought and emotion is evident at the metrical level of the poem, where the hendecasyllable (*endecasillabo*) in particular – the *superbissimum carmen*, as Dante had called it (*DVE* II, v, 8), of Italian vernacular verse – is subject to constant rhythmic variation. The main stresses in the hendecasyllable fall on the sixth and the tenth (or penultimate) syllable of the line. A caesura after the fourth syllable produces a hendecasyllable *a minore* (the first block is smaller than the second), while a caesura after the sixth syllable gives a hendecasyllable *a maiore* (the first block is larger than the second). Thus the first line of the sonnet *Voi ch'ascoltate*, quoted above, is a regular hendecasyllable *a minore* ('Voi ch'ascoltate / in ríme sparse il suóno'), while the last line is a regular hendecasyllable *a maiore* ('che quanto piace al móndo / è breve sógno'). Also, an additional stress falls on one or other of the even syllables in the line (in *Voi*

ch'ascoltate on the eighth syllable of line 1 – 'spárse' – and on the fourth syllable of line 14 – 'piáce'), or else on the seventh syllable of an *a minore* line ('del vario stile / in ch'io piángo et ragiono') or the third syllable of an *a maiore* line ('fra le vâne speranze / e 'l van dolore'). But these basic provisions are subject in Petrarch to infinite experimentation in pursuit of rhythmic variety, a variety achieved sometimes by simply multiplying the number of words in the line (a practice which militates against the notion of three canonical stresses), sometimes through synaeresis (the metrical elision of contiguous vowels within a word) and sometimes through synaloephe (the metrical elision of vowels between words) – a feature which, as in the case of the opening line of *Voi ch'ascoltate*, can diminish the force of the caesura ('Voi ch'ascoltáte^in ríme spárse il suóno'). Indeed, a truer metrical representation of this line, taking into account the secondary stress on syllable 1, the synaloepha which interrupts the primary caesura at syllable 5 and the secondary caesura which interrupts the synaloepha at syllable 9, would be as follows: 'Vói ch'ascoltáte / ^in ríme spárse / ^il suóno' – something which, on the very threshold of the *Canzoniere*, points up the freedom and accomplishment with which Petrarch handles rhythm within the established patterns of the hendecasyllable.

Lexically and acoustically, Petrarch develops the selective vocabulary of the *stilnovo* in keeping both with his more ample appeal to the lexicon of the Provençal poets (and, as far as Dante is concerned, the *rime petrose*, for which see above, p. 46), and also with his heightened sense of contrastive sound texture. For example, in *Voi ch'ascoltate* we have '*V*oi', 'ascoltate', 'core', 'errore', 'dolore', 'vergogno', 'sogno' and '*v*ane', '*v*an', 'o*v*e', 'pro*v*a', '*v*eggio', '*v*aneggiar'). Near-synonyms or semantic clusters designed to give expression to the endless inflection of his leading emphases abound: 'affanni' (distress), 'doglia' and 'dolore' (pain), 'fatiche' (labours), 'stanchezza' (tiredness); and alliteration at every point reinforces the semantic substance and the mutual invocation of terms (in *Voi ch'ascoltate* at line 12: 'et del mio *v*aneggiar *v*ergogna è 'l frutto'). At the same time, a certain exclusiveness and tendency towards the generic in respect of vocabulary confirms the fundamental atemporality and abstraction of Petrarch's meditation in the *Canzoniere*, preserving it – except on rare and calculated occasions – from the merely anecdotal.

Syntactically, Petrarch pursues the thought and mood of the poem as a whole by means of a (for the most part) gentle linguistic 'consequentialism' – the kind of consequentialism secured by such connectives as 'onde' ('whence'), 'quando' ('when'), 'ove', ('where'), 'come' ('as'), 'overo' ('or else'), 'ché' ('because'), 'però' (in the sense of 'therefore') and 'se non che' ('except that') as well as by the frequently concatenated 'e' ('and'). True, dramatic reversals are not lacking, both within poems and between them. But especially persuasive in Petrarch is the kind of technical and expressive chromaticism in which one emphasis shades off well-nigh imperceptibly into another, modifying it as much tonally as substantially; so, for example, in *Voi ch'ascoltate*, the movement from apostrophe (line 1) to apothegm (line 14) by way of a discreet linking of clauses designed to elucidate the complexities of Petrarch's situation in a manner entirely unfussed by syntactical difficulty. Syntactical difficulty, as cultivated at key points in his tradition by Arnaut Daniel, Guittone and Dante in the *petrose* is, again with the occasional calculated exception, resolved in a gracious flow of delicately subversive periods.

Rhetorically, Petrarch deploys, with the greatest finesse and sense of responsibility, the figures of speech and thought most apt to guarantee the subtleties of his discourse. Of these, particularly prominent are the contrastive devices of oxymoron and antithesis, and the repetitive devices of synonym and polysyndeton. Each in its way serves to differentiate and to intensify the leading propositions of Petrarch's argument; so, for example, the oxymoron of CCV, the exasperated 'dolci ire', 'dolci sdegni', 'dolce mal', 'dolce affanno' and 'dolce amaro' ('sweet angers', 'sweet disdains', 'sweet evil', 'sweet grief' and 'sweet bitterness'), and the antithesis of the first quatrain of CCXV with its play on the polarities of nobility and humility, sophistication and purity, age and youth, and gravity and joy ('nobil sangue ... vita humile', 'alto intellecto ... puro core', 'frutto senile ... giovenil fiore', 'aspetto pensoso ... anima lieta'). Notable too is the polysyndeton of LXI with its feverish 'and ... and ... and': 'Benedetto sia 'l giorno, e 'l mese, et l'anno, / et la stagione, e 'l tempo, et l'ora, e 'l punto ...' ('Blessed be the day, and the month, and the year, / and the season, and the time, and the hour, and the moment ...'), as well as the synecdoche, the metonymy and (especially) the metaphor which throughout confirm and maintain the complexity of Petrarch's moral and emotional sensibility, the firmness, and yet at the same time the elusiveness, of the meanings he seeks to establish.

Characteristic too of Petrarch's style in the *Canzoniere* is its ample recourse to the texts central to his humanistic and vernacular-literary culture. Throughout the collection, motifs derived from the classical sector of his learning – from (among others) Virgil's *Eclogues*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Ars amatoria*, Horace's *Odes*, and Statius' *Thebaid* and *Achilleid* – are interwoven, often with the subtlest kind of allusion and rhythmic dexterity, with scriptural motifs and reminiscences of Petrarch's Provençal, Siculo-Tuscan and *stilnovo* tradition. His poetry testifies in this sense not only to a secure possession both of the classical and of the vernacular literary traditions in which he stands, but also, as far as the classical tradition in particular is concerned, to a characteristically humanist, and theologically unprejudiced, delight in the encounter in and for itself. But – and this is where the formalities of the *Canzoniere* refer back, as they always do in Petrarch, to its thematic concerns – the humanist encounter with antiquity is for him a matter not primarily of aesthetic concern (though it is that too), but of existential concern. It is in and through the text, as subject to a kind of re-enactment in conscience, that he seeks to define the shape and substance of his own problematic being. This process of self-definition in and through the text

is everywhere discernible in his work. At every stage of his experience as a poet and moralist, the authors and texts he takes most to heart are there as companions in the search for a properly structured and intelligible humanity: Cicero's letters, orations and *De officiis* and Seneca's *Epistolae* as models of public self-affirmation; the *Aeneid* as a model of Roman epic grandeur and magnanimity; the *Metamorphoses* as an exploration (especially in the myth of Daphne and Apollo) of changeability and elusiveness; Augustine's *Confessions* as a model of anxious spiritual pilgrimage. These especially are ever present to him as an invitation and guide to self-elucidation, all of which lends to the drama of the *Canzoniere* an exquisitely literary patina, an unmistakable (but not on this account disingenuous) *letterarietà*.

The *Trionfi*

The *Trionfi*, Petrarch's other main work in the vernacular, is problematic in a different sense, for here it is a question not merely of the basic, and basically unresolved, existential crisis at the root of Petrarch's experience as a lover and poet, but of the adequacy of his text, in its precise imaginative and technical conception, significantly to meet this crisis. This, certainly, was Petrarch's aim in the work: to resolve the recurrent questions of his troubled conscience (questions of time and eternity, mortality and immortality, and human glory) in a fresh form, by means of an alternative poetic structure. Like the *Rime*, but more systematically, the *Trionfi* (which Petrarch began probably in the early 1350s and with which he was still occupied as late as January 1374) was to be an exercise in moral elucidation, an attempt to integrate one with another the various, and for the most part conflicting, forces at work within him. But implicit in the project from the outset were the seeds of its non-viability, of its insufficiency to solve the kinds of problem it was called upon to solve; for Petrarch's genius lay not so much in systematic resolution as in the projection of discrete states of mind and dispositions, a state of affairs to which the *Canzoniere* answered with perfect precision, but to which the *Trionfi*, with its eminently Dantean structure (but lack of Dantean economy), remains indifferent. The result is an order of poetry which, while bearing about it a characteristically Petrarchan sense of moral commitment, betrays in its formal conception the most authentic features of the poet's analytical and expressive temperament.

The structure and narrative line of the poem are straightforward enough. Caught up in a vision in which he enjoys the services of an unidentified guide, Petrarch witnesses a series of triumphs or victorious pageants. The first is that of Love, in the course of which he sees and speaks with the endless victims of amorous obsession, including at one point (I, iv, 31ff.) Dante, Cino, Guittone and other representatives of the Sicilian, Tuscan and *stilnovo* schools of lyric poetry. Then, in more or less quick succession, come the triumphs of Chastity,

Death, Fame, Time and Eternity, where again the Petrarch character at the centre of the *Trionfi*, like the Dante character at the centre of the *Commedia*, hears and interrogates those he meets along the way. Throughout Laura is celebrated as a model of purity in love, as one transfigured by death and as a principle of the poet's salvation. Some of the *Trionfi* are divided, like the *Commedia*, into cantos (the 'Triumph of Love' is in four parts, the 'Triumph of Death' in two, and the 'Triumph of Fame' in three); and, like the *Canzoniere*, the work as a whole reflects Petrarch's humanist learning as well as his responsiveness to a number of vernacular sources (possibly including, in addition to Dante's *Commedia*, the *Amorosa visione* of Boccaccio and the *Roman de la rose* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung). Only a small part of the work (passages from the Triumphs of Love and Eternity) has come down in autograph manuscript (V.L. 3196 in the Vatican Library).

The characteristic strategies and sonorities of the Petrarchan line are everywhere in evidence in the *Trionfi*, and the metrical form of the poem (Dantean *terza rima*), however much of a constraint in other respects, encourages in its cyclic structure the use of anaphora and other kinds of repetitive device. The lexis and tonality of the poem is frequently, and at times exquisitely, Petrarchan; so, for example, this tercet from the Triumph of Love:

le chiome accolte in oro e sparse al vento,
gli occhi, ch'accesi d'un celeste lume
m'infiamman sì ch' i' son d'arder contento!

(I, iii, 136–8)

(her tresses gathered in gold and loosed to the wind, and her eyes which, lit up with a heavenly light, enflame me such that I am content to burn!)

Or this from the 'Triumph of Death':

che' vostri dolci sdegni e le dolci ire,
le dolci paci ne' belli occhi scritte,
tenner molti anni in dubbio il mio desire.

(III, ii, 82–4)

(for the sweet disdain, the sweet reproaches and the sweet peace written in your beautiful eyes held my desire for many years in uncertainty.)

But the need to maintain a narrative line and to sustain the forward momentum of the *terza rima* in which it is developed, not to mention the poem's self-consciously Dantean sense of eschatological drama, impinge throughout the *Trionfi* to disturb, and in the end to destroy, the non-progressive form of the properly Petrarchan meditation. The reiterative pattern of thought and expression discernible in the more reflective moments of the work is by and large taken up in a kind of argumentative relentlessness apt to drown the meditative in the moral; so, for example, these lines from the 'Triumph of Death':

O ciechi, e 'l tanto affaticar che giova?
Tutti tornate a la gran madre antica,
e 'l vostro nome a pena si ritrova.
Pur de le mill'è un'utile fatica,
che non sian tutte vanità palesi?
Chi intende a' vostri studii sì mel dica.

(III, i, 88–93)

(O blind souls, what is the point of all this labouring? You all return to the great mother of old and your names are hardly remembered. Is there one profitable labour among your thousand such that all are not overt vanity? Let the one all-intent on your business thus confess himself to me.)

This does not mean that the moralism of the *Trionfi* is not itself authentically Petrarchan. On the contrary, arising as it does from the perpetual crisis at the centre of Petrarch's existence, it represents yet a further, heroic attempt to assuage that crisis and to enable the poet to discover an inner peace. Rather, it fatally upsets the meditative stillness, the constant recapitulation and the delicate inflection of mood and emphasis, which mark the most characteristic and the most compelling of Petrarch's utterances. The 'horizontal' movement of thought and argumentation which in Dante complements the 'verticality' or depth of his intuition is, in Petrarch, achieved at the expense of this verticality – for which reason the *Trionfi*, for all the grandeur of its general conception, remains marginal to his poetic production in the vernacular.

Latin works

Petrarch's Latin works (see also below pp. 132–5) enter into the history of Italian literature in two ways. First, they help to develop and sustain the kind of classicism (verifiable especially on the imaginative and lexical plane) which renders the poetic language of the *stilnovisti* subject, in the *Canzoniere*, to renewal; and secondly, they elaborate, in a kind of parallel meditation, the central concerns of the *Rime*, exploring and unfolding them sometimes in the quietist manner of the Christian recluse and sometimes in the domestic-epistolary (but always self-consciously literary) manner of the Stoic moralist and confidant. Especially important, for the first of these, are the incomplete *Africa*, begun probably in 1338 and published posthumously in nine books (but with a number of lacunae) in 1396 by Pier Paulo Vergerio; the *Epistolae metricae*, a collection of sixty-six letters in hexameters dating from 1331 onwards and dedicated to Petrarch's friend Marco Barbato di Sulmona; and the *Bucolicum carmen*, a collection of twelve Latin eclogues conceived in 1346. Each of these works testifies to the strength of Petrarch's ambition as a humanist scholar and poet in the years up until 1350 or thereabouts, and each witnesses to the extraordinary depth and tenacity of his apprenticeship as a literary technician in the manner of (especially) Virgil. But it is their confessional aspect which links them with the other main group of texts most obviously representative of Petrarch as a Latinist: the *Secretum*, the *De vita solitaria* and the *De otio religioso*, and with the various collections of Petrarch's letters. Each of these constitutes in its way an interpretative key to the *Canzoniere*, for each explores, more or less systematically, one or other of Petrarch's concerns in the vernacular poems: the idea of an existence uncluttered by ambition and by irrational passion, a life of spiritual calm dedicated to the pursuit of classical and Christian wisdom; and an ideal unity of understanding and willing in respect of the diverse possibilities for human beings in time and eternity. This, at any rate, is the ideal proposed by the *De vita solitaria* and by the *De otio religioso*, while the *Secretum* and the letters explore the same kind of themes in the more dramatic context of moral self-confrontation and – as far as many of the *Familiares* are concerned – in the more domestic context of Petrarch's minutely documented day-to-day existence.

Other works of importance in this sector include two historical compilations (the *De viris illustribus*, begun in the late 1330s, and the *Rerum memorandarum libri* of the mid 1340s); a vast moral compendium, conceived in the form of a series of dialogues, on prosperity and adversity (*De remediis utriusque fortune*, dating from the mid 1350s); a series of invectives and polemical pieces, including especially the *De sui ipsius et aliorum multorum ignorantia* (1367), an act of self-vindication in respect of the – as far as Petrarch was concerned – alien and hostile spirituality of late medieval radical Aristotelianism; and the *Posteritati* or *Letter to Posterity* (c. 1370), grouped by Petrarch with the *Seniles* collection of letters (XVIII, 1) but constituting in an altogether unique fashion, and in a manner designed to engage the sympathy of generations to come, a final *apologia pro vita sua*.