

Modern Critical Views

PETRARCH

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



Modern Critical Views

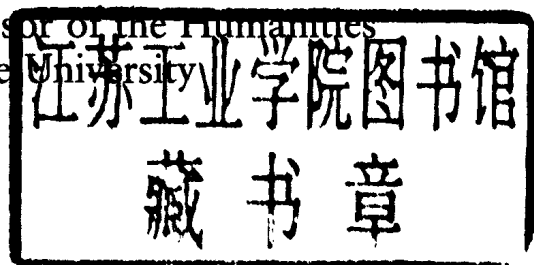
PETRARCH

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

Yale University



CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS

New York ♦ Philadelphia

© 1989 by Chelsea House Publishers, a division
of Main Line Book Co.

Introduction © 1988 by Harold Bloom

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means
without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Petrarch / edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom.

p. cm.—(Modern critical views)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Contents: Scipio vs. Laura / Aldo S. Bernardo—The ascent of
Mt. Ventoux and the crisis of allegory / Robert M. Durling—
The fig tree and the laurel / John Freccero—The Canzoniere and
the language of the self / Giuseppe Mazzotta—Negative stylistics
/ Marguerite Waller—Petrarch and the humanist hermeneutic /
Thomas M. Greene—Classical heritage and the Petrarchan self-
consciousness in the literary emergence of the interior "I" / Aldo
Scaglione—The figure of the reader in Petrarch's *Secretum* /
Victoria Kahn.

ISBN 1-55546-308-8

1. Petrarca, Francesco, 1304-1374—Criticism and
interpretation. [1. Petrarch, 1304-1374—Criticism and
interpretation. 2. Italian literature—History and criticism.]

I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PQ4505.P4 1988

851'.1-dc19

87-17826

CIP

AC

Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best modern criticism available in English on the writings of Petrarch. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Patricia A. Phillippy for her assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction compares Dante's great "stony" sestina to the sestina by Petrarch it most strongly influenced, in order to suggest that Petrarch's deliberate idolatries are his crucial swerve away from Dante. Aldo S. Bernardo begins the chronological sequence of criticism with another contrast, this one between Scipio Africanus as Petrarch's epic subject and Laura as his more authentic, lyric subject.

The superb translator of Petrarch's lyric achievement, Robert M. Durling, ascends Mt. Ventoux with his poet in order to expound Petrarch's resolution of "the crisis of allegory." John Freccero, our foremost contemporary critic of Dante, reads Petrarch's modernist poetics in the context of the poetics of Dante and of St. Augustine's vision of the self.

Petrarch's revolution in the language of the self is expounded by Giuseppe Mazzotta, while Marguerite Waller reads the *Trionfi* as a grand instance of Petrarch's "negative stylistics" in his agon with literary history.

The Humanist mode of arriving at meaning, in an idealistic interweaving of the self's text and tradition, is argued by Thomas M. Greene as Petrarch's major way of interpretation. Another view of the emergence of Petrarch's authorial self out of the relation to the classical heritage is set forth by Aldo Scaglione. Our current concern with the problematics of "reading" is manifested in our final essay, Victoria Kahn's tracing of Petrarch's metaphor of "the reader" in his *Secretum*.

Contents

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
Scipio vs. Laura: "From Young Leaves to Garlands"	9
<i>Aldo S. Bernardo</i>	
The Ascent of Mt. Ventoux and the Crisis of Allegory	29
<i>Robert M. Durling</i>	
The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics	43
<i>John Freccero</i>	
The <i>Canzoniere</i> and the Language of the Self	57
<i>Giuseppe Mazzotta</i>	
Negative Stylistics: A Reading of the <i>Trionfi</i>	79
<i>Marguerite Waller</i>	
Petrarch and the Humanist Hermeneutic	103
<i>Thomas M. Greene</i>	
Classical Heritage and Petrarchan Self-Consciousness in the Literary Emergence of the Interior "I"	125
<i>Aldo Scaglione</i>	

The Figure of the Reader in Petrarch's <i>Secretum</i>	139
<i>Victoria Kahn</i>	
Chronology	159
Contributors	161
Bibliography	163
Acknowledgments	167
Index	169

Introduction

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.

—JOHN FRECCERO

The anguish of contamination (or anxiety of influence) no longer seems to me a particularly modern (or Romantic) malady. Jeremiah the prophet shadows the poet of the Book of Job, Jesus Ben Sirach in his Ecclesiasticus is haunted by Ecclesiastes (Koheleth), and Aristophanes savagely mauls Euripides for his misprisions of Aeschylus. If we add Plato's agon with Homer, and the Gnostics' sense of belatedness in regard both to Plato and the Hebrew Bible, then we have a considerable catalog of ancient literary sorrows.

Petrarch's relation to Dante is enormously complex and difficult to judge, partly because Petrarch's own influence upon poetry after him was so great that it veils everything that is problematical in Petrarch's overwhelming originality. Each strong poet strives to make himself seem more different from his central precursor than he actually is, and Petrarch's strong misreading of Dante, implicit in Petrarch's own poetry, has affected us more than we can know, particularly in helping to present some among us with a Dante wholly given over to the allegory of the theologians, and so apparently altogether free of idolatrous or Petrarchan passion, at least in the *Commedia*. Here Robert M. Durling returns us to the deep affinities between Dante's *rime petrose* and Petrarch's *rime sparse*:

To see one's experience in terms of myth is to see in the myth the possibility of the kind of allegorical meaning that was called

tropological. Petrarch knew and used freely the traditional allegorical interpretations of the Ovidian myths. But he dissociated them from clear-cut moral judgments, and in this he was closer to the Dante of the *petrose* than of the *Commedia*. To say that falling in love and becoming a love poet is a transformation into a laurel tree involves the sense that the channeling of the vital energy of frustrated love into the sublimated, eternizing mode of poetry has consequences not fully subject to conscious choice or to moral judgment. For Petrarch the perfection of literary form, which exists polished and unchanging on the page in a kind of eternity, is achieved only at the cost of the poet's natural life. His vitality must be metamorphosed into words, and this process is profoundly ambiguous. If on the one hand Petrarch subscribes to—even in a sense almost single-handedly founds—the humanistic cult of literary immortality and glory, on the other hand he has an acute awareness that writing poetry involves a kind of death. This recognition has something very modern about it; it gives a measure of the distance that separates Petrarch from Dante, who gambled recklessly on the authority his poem would have as a total integration. Petrarch is always calling attention to the psychologically relative, even suspect, origin of individual poems and thus of writing itself. His hope is that ultimately the great theme of praise will redeem even the egotism of the celebrant.

It is fascinating to me that one could substitute Rilke's name for Petrarch's here, and still retain coherence, particularly if one also substituted Goethe for Dante. What Freccero calls an idolatrous passion (for Laura, for poetry, for literary immortality and glory), Durling calls a kind of death. Both critics are true to Petrarch, and to Rilke, or Yeats, or Wallace Stevens, all of them in a profound sense still Petrarchans. Or perhaps we could say that all of them, like Petrarch himself, come out of the strongest of Dante's stony lyrics, the great sestina "To the Dim Light and the Large Circle of Shade." I give it here in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's piercing version, the best poem that Rossetti ever wrote:

To the dim light and the large circle of shade
 I have clomb, and to the whitening of the hills,
 There where we see no colour in the grass.
 Natheless my longing loses not its green;

It has so taken root in the hard stone
Which talks and hears as though it were a lady.

Utterly frozen is this youthful lady,
Even as the snow that lies within the shade;
For she is no more moved than is the stone
By the sweet season which makes warm the hills
And alters them afresh from white to green,
Covering their sides again with flowers and grass.

When on her hair she sets a crown of grass
The thought has no more room for other lady,
Because she weaves the yellow with the green
So well that Love sits down there in the shade,—
Love who has shut me in among low hills
Faster than between walls of granite-stone.

She is more bright than is a precious stone;
The wound she gives may not be healed with grass:
I therefore have fled far o'er plains and hills
For refuge from so dangerous a lady;
But from her sunshine nothing can give shade,—
Not any hill, nor wall, nor summer-green.

A while ago, I saw her dressed in green,—
So fair, she might have wakened in a stone
This love which I do feel even for her shade;
And therefore, as one woos a graceful lady,
I wooed her in a field that was all grass
Girdled about with very lofty hills.

Yet shall the streams turn back and climb the hills
Before Love's flame in this damp wood and green
Burn, as it burns within a youthful lady,
For my sake, who would sleep away in stone
My life, or feed like beasts upon the grass,
Only to see her garments cast a shade.

How dark soe'er the hills throw out their shade,
Under her summer-green the beautiful lady
Covers it, like a stone covered in grass.

The Lady Pietra degli Scrovigni, sublimely hard-hearted, takes her place with Shakespeare's Dark Lady of the Sonnets as a muse stimulating

one of the two greatest Western poets since Homer and the Bible to unprecedented depths of imaginative degradation. Dante, already quester if not yet pilgrim, climbs the high hills, presumably at twilight, or on a winter day, in search of fulfillment, only to find that he is in love with a Medusa. Petrarch's Laura, in one of her aspects, is also a Medusa who transforms her poet into a stone man. Freccero and Durling agree that Petrarch is properly ambivalent about being the object of such a transformation. The ironies of Dante doubtless transcend those of his son Petrarch, but all the ironies of Dante's sestina seem directed against the poet himself, and not against the superbly cruel Pietra, who reduces her lover to the condition of Nebuchadnezzar, feeding like beasts upon the grass. Troubadour love, culminating in the poetry of Arnaut Daniel, emphasized the oxymoronic destructiveness of the obsessive image of the beloved that the poet carried in his head. This is the disaster of a particular moment, the precise time when the poet falls in love, akin to falling in battle. A purely secularized moment so intense is bound to become a confrontation with the Medusa. Here is Poem 30 of the *rime sparse*, a sestina in which Petrarch has the courage to confront Dante's stony sestina:

A youthful lady under a green laurel
I saw, whiter and colder than snow
not touched by the sun many and many years,
and her speech and her lovely face and her locks
pleased me so that I have her before my eyes
and shall always have wherever I am, on slope or shore.

Then my thoughts will have come to shore
when green leaves are not to be found on a laurel;
when I have a quiet heart and dry eyes
we shall see the fire freeze, and burning snow;
I have not so many hairs in these locks
as I would be willing, in order to see that day, to wait years.

But because time flies and the years flee
and one arrives quickly at death
either with dark or with white locks,
I shall follow the shadow of that sweet laurel
in the most ardent sun or through the snow,
until the last day closes these eyes.

There never have been seen such lovely eyes,
either in our age or in the first years;

they melt me as the sun does the snow:
whence there comes forth a river of tears
that Love leads to the foot of the harsh laurel
that has branches of diamond and golden locks.

I fear I shall change my face and my locks
before she with true pity will show me her eyes,
my idol carved in living laurel;
for, if I do not err, today it is seven years
that I go sighing from shore to shore
night and day, in heat and in snow.

Inwardly fire, though outwardly white snow,
alone with these thoughts, with changed locks,
always weeping I shall go along every shore,
to make pity perhaps come into the eyes
of someone who will be born a thousand years from now—
if a well-tended laurel can live so long.

Gold and topaz in the sun above the snow
are vanquished by the golden locks next to those eyes
that lead my years so quickly to shore.

Durling's translation is prose, and attempts to be literal; Rossetti breaks through his own rhetorical sublimations and repressions in the impassioned verse of his Dante translations. Yet, without prejudice to Petrarch (or to Durling), a contrast of Dante's and Petrarch's Italian texts seems to me productive of results remarkably similar to a juxtaposition of Rossetti and Durling. I cannot conceive of a lyric poet more gifted at what I call "poetic misprision" than Petrarch; his sestina is a beautiful evasion of Dante's, yet an evasion whose gestures depend upon the stony sestina of the great precursor. The unifying element in those gestures is their striking and indeed audaciously deliberate idolatry, cunningly analyzed both by Durling and by Freccero. I wish to add to Durling and Freccero only the speculation that Petrarch's idolatrous gestures, here and elsewhere, are revisionary tropes, figures or ratios intended to widen the distance between Dante and Petrarch. In order to clear a space for his own art, Petrarch overtly takes the spiritual (and aesthetic) risk of substituting idolatry for typology, Laura for Beatrice.

Dante's sestina, if judged by the moral code of the *Commedia*, would condemn its poet to the Inferno, but then that is an overt power of the poem: this is the deep degradation of Dante before his conversion, before

his turn (or return) to Beatrice. Still, poetically his degradation is Sublime, and can be said to mark a limit for the erotic Sublime. The obsessive force of his sestina is unmatched and is still productive in our century in poems like the sleepwalker's ballad of Lorca and the laments for barren passion of Yeats. Dante's sestina spares neither the Lady Pietra nor himself. She is stone, not flesh, and utterly frozen, as much a victim of the Medusa as the Medusa herself. You cannot flee from Pietra; her icy sunshine penetrates every covert place, and so allows no shade. She will not take fire for Dante as other ladies do, despite his hyperbolic devotion (or because of it?) and her lovely green is profoundly sinister, because it is the color of Dante's desire, and not nature's green at all. In some dark sense the Lady Pietra is antithetical to Beatrice, so that Dante's passion for her is decidedly idolatrous, anti-Augustinian, and a triumph for the allegory of the poets over the allegory of the theologians.

Petrarch memorializes the seventh anniversary of his falling in love with Laura, which he celebrates as a falling into idolatry, since it is also a falling into poetic strength. Fire indeed will freeze snow, snow burn, before Petrarch gives up poetry, since poetry alone allows him "to make pity perhaps come into the eyes / of someone who will be born a thousand years from now," a prophecy now two-thirds accomplished in time. All that is idolatrous enough, but Petrarch superbly culminates his sestina by giving scandal, by subverting Psalm 119, which in the Vulgate reads, "I have loved Your commandments above gold and topaz," to which Petrarch replies:

Gold and topaz in the sun above the snow
are vanquished by the golden locks next to those eyes
that lead my years so quickly to shore.

The golden locks of Laura have replaced God's commandments, in a remarkable turn upon Dante's Pietra, whose "curling yellow mingles with the green / so beautifully that Love comes to stay in the shade there." Petrarch has won a victory over Dante's trope, but at the high cost of an idolatry beyond nearly all measure. Dante's response to Petrarch's sestina can be heard proleptically throughout the *Commedia*, which teaches us that what we behold must be the truth, since great or small we gaze into that mirror in which, before we think, we behold our thought. What Petrarch beholds is at once poetry, fame, and death; he does not behold a transcendental truth, or for that matter a demonic one. He asserts a limited authority, because after Dante's extraordinary authority no other sort could be persuasive or authentic. Dante, like Milton, casts a shadow

of belatedness over those who come after. Petrarch, whose genius had to flourish just one generation later and whose own father had been a friend of Dante's, exiled from Florence with Dante, chose a gorgeous solipsism as his poetic stance. Call that solipsism idolatry or what you will; Petrarch urges you to do so. As a wager with mortality, such a stance invented lyric poetry as we continue to know it today.

ALDO S. BERNARDO

*Scipio vs. Laura:
"From Young Leaves to Garlands"*

Notwithstanding the fact that the last book of the *Africa* might give to the casual reader the impression of confusion and of considerable lack of cohesion, it contains much that serves to round out Petrarch's conception of Scipio. When the great Scipio says about himself, "Beauty moves my soul, and my heart, agitated by constant warfare, finds utmost solace in the sweet pleasures of soothing words" (ll. 74-77), we have the portrayal of the humanistic ideal of the supreme man of action acknowledging beauty, art and refinement. This moment precedes Ennius's exposition of the nature and purpose of poetry in which . . . Petrarch is conjured up as a reincarnation of the loftiest poetic tradition. As such, he will sing so worthily of Scipio that, like Scipio, he will merit the laurel crown. If we consider how Ennius's dream of Homer in the last book parallels Scipio's dream in book 1, and how in each case the central point seems to be the revelation of Petrarch's future role in the rightful celebration of Scipio's exploits, we detect not only a unifying device within the poem but a thematic strand of meaning which, in keeping with Ennius's definition of poetry, it is our responsibility to unravel.

In that first dream Scipio's father prophesies that only with the birth of Petrarch will Scipio find a worthy singer. In the last dream, the great Homer utters a similar prophecy to Scipio's favorite poet, adding that the as yet unborn Petrarch will be rewarded by a coronation on the Capitoline. This is followed by the double crowning of Scipio and Ennius.

At this point the reader senses a curious anomaly. While Scipio's

coronation, within the context of the *Africa*, is certainly warranted, the crowning of Ennius appears strange. He seems, indeed, to be rewarded for something he is yet to do, namely, a poem honoring Scipio. The reader cannot avoid recalling Petrarch's own anomalous coronation in 1341. As Wilkins has shown, Petrarch's poetic productivity was so slight prior to his coronation, that the basis for the unusual ceremony remains vague. However, there is little question that among the chief sources of Petrarch's desire for coronation was his love of Laura, whose very name was for Petrarch a reflection of the solemn implications of receiving a laurel crown on the Capitoline.

The final moments of the *Africa*, therefore, invite us not only to look back to the opening dream in which the focus is essentially on Scipio's unparalleled deeds but forward to Petrarch's own coronation with all its biographical echoes. This being the case, it would appear appropriate to examine briefly the manner in which Petrarch's other basic source of inspiration, Laura, seems to be related to Scipio as a poetic image.

When, in this same last book of the *Africa*, Homer, appearing in Ennius's dream, refers to Petrarch's overwhelming love of glory and of the laurel (ll. 229-41), the reader senses a strange fusing in Petrarch's mind of the images of Laura and Scipio as definitions of the loftiest human goals that man can attain. "Though late, he too will ascend your Capitoline in triumph . . . he will restore ancient times with the eternal laurel as he descends attended by the Senate. Of all plants, the Delphic one alone will be dearest to him and he will learn to weave the young leaves into garlands" (ll. 237-45).

At this point, the reader also senses that this fusion, encompassing, as it does, not only the triumph of Scipio and Ennius on the Capitoline but also the reflections on poetry that echo all that is finest in the classical tradition, truly summarizes the total drama of Petrarch and his views as a man of letters—his lifelong dream of achieving in a literary work a fusion of the truths of philosophy, history, and poetry. This is perhaps best reflected in the very last verses of the *Africa* proper (preceding the interpolation concerning King Robert's death) where, as Scipio and Ennius descend the Capitoline following their triumph, Petrarch alludes to the many centuries that have elapsed and to his own daring attempt to scale the same heights in order not to render void the predictions of the "Greek bard" (ll. 390-409). What is most interesting here is the obvious similarity of the episode to the close of Petrarch's third eclogue where we see Laura herself allegorically crowning Petrarch atop the Capitoline!

It is not too difficult to find in Petrarch's writings other moments

when the images of Scipio and Laura seem to fuse. In the middle of Petrarch's announcement of Laura's death as it appears in the well known notation in the Ambrosian Virgil, we find the following: "I have no doubt that her soul, as Seneca says of Scipio Africanus, has returned to heaven whence it came." But even more striking is the moment in the very early, perhaps pre-*Africa*, Sonnet 186 of the *Canzoniere* when Laura's literary apotheosis takes place in the same breath with Scipio's. In the sextet of the Sonnet, Scipio and Laura are chosen as subjects who, though more worthy of Homer and Virgil than Aeneas, Achilles, Ulysses, Augustus, and Agamemnon, had had to settle for singers of lesser note: Scipio for Ennius, and Laura for Petrarch.

Quel fiore antico di vertuti e d'arme
 come sembiante stella ebbe con questo
 novo fior d'onestate e di bellezze!
 Ennio di quel cantò ruvido carme,
 di quest'altro io, ed o pur non molesto
 gli sia il mio ingegno e'l mio lodar non sprezzè!

[That ancient flower of virtue and arms, what a similar star he had with this new flower of chastity and beauty! Ennius sang of him an inelegant song, I of her; and ah! may my wit not displease her, may she not despise my praises!]

(ll. 9-14, trans. by R. Durling, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*)

Both Scipio and Laura are here depicted as "flowers." Scipio was the "ancient flower of virtues and arms"; Laura "the new flower of beauty and goodness." But in the word, *novo*, as well as in the common destinies of the two figures, one senses a strong fusion of the two.

The image of Scipio receives further definition in three other significant moments in Petrarch's works, all three indicating some connection with or reminiscence of Laura. The first, already briefly alluded to, is to be found at the end of the third eclogue which once again discusses a subject very dear to Petrarch: the qualities needed to be worthy of the laurel. The interlocutors in the eclogue are Stupeus and Daphne, the budding poet and the demanding laurel. Early commentators agree that the eclogue is but another *mise en scène* between Petrarch and his image of Laura (as Daphne). After having convinced Daphne that he had truly been initiated into the sacred mysteries of the Muses, the poet is led up the Capitoline by Daphne who embarks upon a long panegyric on its majesty. Following a panoramic view of the glory dispensed atop the hill, Daphne's account