

Petrarch's "Conversion"
on Mont Ventoux
and the Patterns
of Religious Experience

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Pétrarque était passionné par le récit que fait saint Augustin de sa conversion. Il a donc cherché tout au long de sa vie à réaliser cette expérience pour lui-même tout en la rendant significative dans le contexte humaniste chrétien. Sa lettre concernant son expérience spirituelle lors de son ascension au sommet du Mont Ventoux en est le témoin. Il s'agit d'une transformation de soi dans un contexte d'émotion soigneusement étudié par les philosophes de la religion au siècle dernier. Leurs études tracent un profil générique de ce changement profond, non seulement de la transformation que Pétrarque n'arrive pas à effectuer après des années de recherches, mais aussi d'un désir d'expérience transcendante qui faisait implicitement partie de la pensée philosophique des humanistes en général.

One of the best known of Petrarch's *Familiar Letters* is the first of the Fourth Book recounting his ascent of the highest mountain in Provence, Mont Ventoux.¹ Petrarch carried out this fresh air outing in the company of his brother and a couple of servants, quite precisely on April 26, 1336—or so the letter would have it. According to the account, Gherardo made his way directly to the top while Francesco wandered about looking for the easiest routes or stopped to meditate on the state of his soul. This literal and allegorical excursion culminated in a splendid view of the surrounding country as far as Italy, Aigues-Mortes, and the Rhone River; and, towards sundown, in a bit of bibliomancy using a copy of Augustine's *Confessions*.² It was a pivotal moment: the text from the tenth book upon which Petrarch's eyes first fell echoed in such an uncanny way the activities in which he had just engaged, that he took it for an omen and fell into silent reflection all the way down the mountain. Petrarch's letter, with its moments of meditation, its allegorical exploitation of the features in the physical ascent, and its program of classical allusions informing even the geographical descriptions, is much more than a travel narrative. Its studied appearance, quite justifiably, has led

several twentieth-century readers to the conclusion that an actual ascent may never have been made, and that the entire letter was the literary creation of a man nearing 50 rather than a same-day report of a man of 32.³ Plausibly, at a time almost 20 years later, when Petrarch began to gather and edit his letters, he either composed or significantly edited this piece. That Gherardo had taken up the contemplative life as a Carthusian monk years after the alleged climb would alone account for his direct ascent to the top in the letter, while Petrarch's own errancy would represent his lack of spiritual progress even a decade after expressing his anxieties in the *Secretum*. But whether early or late in its composition, the emblematic narrative structure embodies the paradigmatic order of spiritual conversion. That is the topic of the present study: arguably, a desire for the decisive transformation of mind states that constitutes conversion is one of the leading motifs in Petrarch's thought, and an ever-present factor in his examination of the self; the paradoxical significances of conversion extend well beyond this moment in his life. That the options proffered by conversion become a lifelong dilemma for him makes the Ventoux letter the perfect context for an extended look into the psychology of conversion—the dynamics of a particular religious experience—leading to summary reflections on the relationship of conversion to humanist thought in general as a modus for the management of consciousness.

The letter has by no means escaped critical attention. To the contrary, no allusion or literary device has gone unnoticed. At the beginning of a sixty-seven-page article entitled "Petrarca e il Ventoso" published in 1977, Bortolo Martinelli reminds his readers that there already exists "una copiosa bibliografia specifica"⁴ on the work, including early articles by Pierre Courcelle, the archival work of Giuseppe Billanovich, and Arnaud Tripet's *Pétrarque ou la connaissance de soi*.⁵ Moreover, Evelyne Luciani has brought to culmination the many preliminary enquiries into the influence of Saint Augustine upon the letters and treatises of Petrarch, while Robert Durling has examined the Mont Ventoux letter episode by episode for its allegorical strategies. Others have dealt with the paradoxical life of the humanist who dwells upon his moral shortcomings with full Christian intensity, yet who seeks the blessed life through the reading of Seneca, Virgil, and Cicero, and who pines after salvation with minimal reference to fellowship with God. The research of Giles Constable points out the many references to monasticism in Petrarch's writings and the admiration he held for those devoted to the contemplative life, including the occasions on which Petrarch revealed his own attraction to the monastic vocation. By contrast, Francesco Tateo's study of the *Secretum* is concerned with maintaining a clean separation between the author and Francesco the persona of the dialogue who is hard beset by a spiritual guide

to bring his fallen will to the sticking point of spiritual decision-making. For him, the *Secretum* is in no literal sense about spiritual conversion beyond the search for beatitude in the world of humanist endeavours.⁶ Giuseppe Mazzotta considers the letter as one among the many surrounding letters, each to a different recipient. In each, Petrarch is seen to deal with different ideas partitioned and segmented from each other. These are the “worlds” of Petrarch which together form a non-integrated record of his preoccupations, easily misunderstood as successive biographical moments.⁷ Among these scholars there is little consensus concerning the significance of Petrarch’s impassioned exercises in the reorientation of the will toward spiritual self-improvement, although the voices on all sides of the matter need to be heard.

The letter itself recounts a spiritual drama that ends in the long innuendo of silence. On the way up, the author meditates on his own moral shortcomings. Then, at the top, he turns geographical space into a stretch of moral time relating to his own progress of the soul. Already evident is the turning, or conversion, of his attention from things deemed outward to the inner life. When the chance passage from the *Confessions* reinforces the urgency of this interiorizing direction, he ceases to read, speaks briefly of the conversions of Saint Augustine and Saint Anthony, and leaves the reader to speculate upon the progress he then made toward the blessed life—that for which he professed to yearn. In this he creates a kind of hermeneutic loop, for without the structuring of Christian conversion, the episode has no spiritualizing direction, yet the uncertain nature of the “*beata vita*” gives no assurance that the perfect mastery of the will preached to Francesco in the *Secretum* pertains specifically to Christian goals. Nevertheless, the conversion structure, itself, remains embedded in the sequence of the letter. It is about mind states and their emotional counterparts, about an epiphanic moment that offers to separate the anxieties of time past from the beatified mind of time future through cognitive revelation. In Petrarch’s case, given his passionate commitment to human love, to travel, to the recovery of ancient writings, to the political life, and to a legitimate quest for earthly renown, there is a reticence to assign precise values to this transaction, or to frame it in soteriological terms, the allusions to the conversions of Augustine and Anthony notwithstanding. Yet “a spiritual conversion under the influence of Augustine”⁸ remains not only the nucleus of this letter, but the *idée-force* behind others of his meditational and confessional treatises.

This fact, too, has not escaped prior notice, although inevitably investigators turn back to its autobiographical significance. Evelyne Luciani suggests that in his eagerness to imitate the Bishop of Hippo, Petrarch created an episode resembling “le récit de la conversion intérieure,”⁹ but that his

examination of conscience did not propel him toward a higher spiritual level, a reading in keeping with Pierre Courcelle's evaluation of the *Secretum*.¹⁰ Giles Constable agrees that Petrarch was attracted to the *Confessions* of Augustine because they offered a paradigm for escape from his more habitual frames of mind, but only toward momentary flights as he profiled them in *De otio religioso*. Even his mountain-top epiphany did not amount to "a sudden change or conversion in 1336."¹¹ Carlo Segré goes further in urging that Petrarch's purpose in these creations was never Christian, but rather a quest for the rational life that would bring him peace of mind both morally and vocationally; Enrico Carrara concludes that he never "underwent one of those resolving crises that renew[s] the hope in a human soul and inspire[s] the solid certainty of a new faith."¹² In this he joins the many exegetes who seek to distance the humanist from his own vehicles based on Christian thought.¹³ Francesco Tateo would allow that the *Secretum* is a philosophical treatise over "material and spiritual exigencies, nature and religion, science and faith," and that one option among others for the integrated self was the entry into a spiritual life characterized by "will, freedom and unconditional adherence to God," but he would not allow that Petrarch's writings reflect a "turbulent psychological drama."¹⁴ Such a work, for him, could only be a reasoned endorsement of the life of humanist study, with a mild Augustinian caveat that such studies alone will not lead to the happy and blessed life, which is a work of the soul in conjunction with faith and the will.¹⁵ Yet just such words point to the other side of the hermeneutic loop—that of the Christian paradigm. Petrarch professed that he had "learned from Augustine that no one can become what he wishes to be unless he hates himself as he is." In the Mont Ventoux letter he employed such terms as "surging emotions," attachment to "the filth of earth," and the "labour and sweat to raise our bodies a little closer to Heaven."¹⁶ Metaphors all, perhaps, yet they are attached to a profile of intended action beginning in low self-esteem across liminal spaces and time, at an ambiguous pace, toward a more spiritualized state of consciousness. The trajectory conveys its own power as a dynamic idea.

Petrarch presents the component parts of the sequence as transparent Christian allegory: shedding excess baggage; the negative counsel of an old shepherd; the ascent itself as spiritual labour; the miscalculated detours along easier paths; the triple meditations on inner states loosely co-ordinated to the external sights; the conversion of moralized space into moralized time; and the quest for inner peace calibrated against the distracting perspectives of the world. Each of these features is a position along the hike toward conversion, beginning in guilt and insufficiency intensified by strenuous physical effort, and ending in a moment of heightened self-perception in relation to stated

spiritual goals.¹⁷ Spiritualized minds who scale mountains can barely resist the mental collaboration required to solicit the revelation that comes only at the summit, nor can they resist the inward plunge toward intimations of beatitude. The question comes down to the permanence of the altered state. Yet the shape of the events alone is sufficient to warrant analysis as a generic religious experience.

It is the insistent presence of the spiritual experience of conversion that asks for clarification as the quintessential rite of passage separating initiates from non-initiates, the blessed from the unredeemed. The crux in the methodology of the following excursus into conversion psychology is whether the examination should look backward, only, to Saint Paul, the Church fathers, and medieval theologians for the nature of that experience, or forward to nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars who, for the first time, sought to examine conversion phenomenologically in emotional and cognitive terms. No special case need be made for the retro-reading of past generic cultural practice provided the universalized analysis is not, in fact, polluted by modern biases and ideologies. That is an eternal problem. But the premise assumed here is that modern investigations of the psyche can shed light on traditions of experience, culturally and historically constructed as they are, because they play out in minds “universalized” by dint of their common genetic profiling and mental architecture. The argument follows that Petrarch’s conversion trajectory is circumscribed by the nature of mind, so that inversely, an understanding of the nature of mind in the conversion process may speak to the nature of Petrarch’s idea of conversion, not only for himself, but for the humanist age. That such an enquiry should be carried out is a question that stands in apposition to whether it can be carried out.

Scholars in the early twentieth century, beginning with William James and Edwin Starbuck, began the investigation into conversion by collecting anecdotal accounts not unlike that provided by Petrarch, each one, needless to say, accompanied by its own configuration of circumstances and preliminary states of mind. Among those witnesses were Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, together with the many histories arising in the evangelical *milieux* of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. The common denominators became increasingly clear as the methods of inquiry became more objective. Thouless profiled in detail the dynamic state of pre-understanding regarding the redeemed state, an understanding that coexisted with an adherence to old values during the preparation stage, followed by the shock techniques required for collapsing the old self.¹⁸ William James described the process as a “subconscious incubation” of the new order projecting itself in imagined forms as the precondition to choice. On the mountain, these moments are

encased in narrative allegory. In the *Secretum*, that same dichotomy of mind is presented in dialogic fashion by assigning to the interlocutors the roles of advocate for the projected reorientation of consciousness, with a reticent candidate still overly committed to the values of the active life. Such a debate could have no meaning at all without the prospect of change—a transformation of a kind that could be named and shaped, however vaguely, in the imagination. For Petrarch, conversion entered a circle of reasoning that defined beatitude only as the absence of desire for the things of the world that aroused in him sensations of guilt and torment, and as a joy that is solicited as its own essence without specifically theistic associations.¹⁹ These are important perimeters, for there are many other potential objectives, both cognitive and emotional, that have been associated with the conversion experience.

Fortunately, Petrarch did not have to say what part of the mind was spiritually redeemed, in modern cognitive terms, for so many of the mental operations we invest with purpose, essence, and identity simply carry out their functions on a blind competitive basis producing configurations of thought we are pleased to imagine as properties of the self and its soul. Nevertheless, it was not without significance that he chose consciousness as the target of these redemption-driven exercises, leading us to speculate on Petrarch's own philosophy of mind. Tellingly, the very words concerning the inward turning that appear to him with such oracular power on Mont Ventoux derive from the heart of one of Augustine's most challenging inquiries, namely his examination of the nature of memory as the theatre of all spiritual experience. Memory alone can supply the cognitive resources for discovering inward mental events; hence in memory alone resides the knowledge of God. The study of mind therefore turns around the understanding of spiritual things that are generated without empirical origins. How can we know that which has not been learned? How can the mind itself be regenerated by that which it is able, through self-discipline, to call up from memory? Augustine's examination of the components of consciousness in relation to the directives of the will, in pre-Cartesian fashion, brought him eventually to a state of wonder at the magnitude of the mind in all its diversity and power, and ultimately to a necessary act of faith. By dint of its architectural design, the mind, for Augustine, was an instrument to be shaped in accordance with its spiritual potential, and Petrarch was clearly influenced by that imperative.²⁰

The discussion served to centre both the act of conversion and its long-term benefits in the conscious mind and its capacities to enjoy its own operations. For how else may the *beata vita* be defined but as an inner state of selective recall of all things conducive to the most agreeable emotions? Thus, for Petrarch, conversion may be defined as the potential for minds to reorient

their moral and deliberative states in the interests of limiting the contents of consciousness to approved considerations and memories through the power of the will alone, abetted by the emotions deemed beatific. In these terms, he points to one of the master discourses of his career, and to one that is, at the same time, apt for investigation in relation to the phylogenetic capabilities of the mind based on the human capacity for computational analysis of belief structures in relation to idealized modes of consciousness. These two discourses, the ancient and the modern, can be brought into alignment.

To be sure, the neuro-cognitive systems involved in religious conversion can only be inferred from the accounts given of the experience itself.²¹ Clearly, decisive things happen in the brain at the time of conversion, although we need not return here to the level of neuron clusters and the altered firing impedances involved in learning, or to altered modular functions responsible for prioritizing information patterns in their struggle for a brief moment in consciousness. Yet the beatified mind must begin with the neurobiological competence of the brain to produce it. Conversion has already been labelled an *idée-force*, one which has the power to alter the conditions of individuals or of epochs. In the context of cognition, it is the process of displacing one major “propositional network” with another. Such a network is the brain’s tendency to develop habituated syntax around idea clusters, causing the mind to replay them to consciousness in iterative ways that reconfirm the analysis of the self in the environment. These clusters contribute to the predilections of personality, and to a sense of the constancy of the self. They are also responsible for association thinking by which an entry idea produces secondary and tertiary ideas in closely associated patterns—thus the challenge in dislodging them.

Stated otherwise, the mind, grounded in the socialized values attendant upon inclusive fitness in a survivalist world of instincts and struggle, is not easily convinced to modify these values in sacrificial terms without a significant affective pay-off. It would be supererogation to reassess the whole of the Ventoux letter as a meta-conscious propositional network through which “ascent” inaugurates the associations that complete the spiritual exercise in its classic psychological sequence from guilt to transcendence deemed the necessary precondition to conversion. But we are decidedly working in that territory. The component still unaccounted for is volition, the agent of mind that Petrarch insists upon repeatedly as alone responsible for refashioning the self through the installation of alternate belief structures and their attendant emotions. This network analysis has been invoked here to explain the conversion scenarios in Petrarch’s thought in relation to the default syntax of the mind built up through habituation that must be radically or methodically displaced in any conversion experience.

Some theorists of conversion resort to schemata to explain the phenomenon, a schema being a “template-like representation of a highly complex system of knowledge.”²² These differ in function from association networks in their capacity to organize and interpret incoming information. The schema is first a categorizing feature by which diverse manifestations within a group are reduced to prototypes. But the concept has been widely extended to account for social behaviour in the form of scripts that calibrate actions to situations. In this sense, schemata function in more proactive ways, evaluating, censoring, suppressing in accordance with their own habituated configurations. They are subject to adaptation through the processes of learning, but they are conservative in nature, as part of the survival strategy of the organism. A conversion experience in spiritual terms entails the systemic displacement of entire belief and value schemata in favour of new patterns calculated to reweight the organism’s response to mental activity. Such wording may sound like the jargonizing of the self-evident. Yet these are the current terms of choice in the literature of religious psychology, borrowed from the cognitive sciences, to account for the phenomenology of spiritually motivated alterations to consciousness.

William James was well on the way a century ago to a cognitive analysis through reverse engineering. For him, conversion was an exchange of belief structures through an intensely emotional process of subtraction and addition, culminating in a “dark night” collapse of the personality that allowed for the mystical sensation of feeling a new person emerge from the old like a second birth. Such emotional turmoil was essential, for it served to denigrate previous values, thereby forcing the convert to rely on the new religious schemata to interpret all subsequent experience.²³ This “emotional occasion,” could be generated through the words of an advocate for change, such as Saint Augustine’s in the *Secretum*, or through the convert’s own meditations on sin and guilt, as in the Ventoux letter. These templates are easily retrofitted upon Petrarch’s conversion narratives and require no special exegesis. The only phase not brought under examination is the last in which a new baseline for judging experience becomes the norm gained from the period of emotional crisis.²⁴

This is an explanatory beginning, but the vocabulary of schemata and scripts will fall short of a full phenomenological explanation of the Pauline divide between the old and new selves unless it can be mapped upon a complete anatomy of human consciousness. This is more than can be done currently, but there are some suppositions to make. Conversion experiences occur as identifiable phenomena within the phylogenetic human brain. They may be described generically as paradigm shifts in both ideological and emotional terms. The

theatre of action is consciousness itself, which is an unfathomably complex adaptive capacity to reason, to be aware, to remember, to imagine, to experience sensory *qualia*, to register belonging, and to identify limbic sensations. Conversion transpires as a unique sequence within this faculty, programming many of its capacities in the interest of permanently altering all subsequent events of the stream in relation to an adopted religious belief system. This is impossible, however, without some manner of meta-conscious reflection, that is, an ability to think about a future self in contrast to a present condition of the self.²⁵ Conversion is a matter of identity as well as a mind state of selected thoughts and emotions. But if consciousness is difficult to define, the self is even more so. Seemingly, consciousness is equipped with a capacity to be aware of its own operations and their significance—in short, a reflexive or meta-conscious capacity.²⁶ This feature, too, must have been confirmed by adaptive measures enhancing survival strategies. Or is it merely the accidental by-product of an ability to strategize in time, and hence to be aware of mind operations in time past and time future? The result is a sense of self, beginning in the alterities between body and not body, self-interest and other-interest, present existence and future extinction. These awarenesses can be converted into strategic schemata whereby the many categories of self-interest can be distinguished in relation to the welter of sensations passing through an otherwise relatively promiscuous and passive stream of thought. The self, despite all that we have granted to it by way of subjectivity and identity, may be nothing more than goal driven attribution clusters that invigilate the flow of consciously registered information to the advantage of the organism. Of course, when those advantages extend to spiritual, moral, affective, and group goals, not to mention the desire for life after death, the self and its attribution schemata become infinitely complex. Hence the interest in conversion, because it represents a major overhaul of the schemata of the self functions of the mind.²⁷

The mind so described provides hints concerning the ways in which the meta-conscious dimensions of the self may be segmented off through projective play and reconstituted around new watch hierarchies that will henceforth regulate the stream of consciousness according to their own pleasure principles. Some such set of operations must be involved in any transactional conversion process, whether it is motivated by Christian principles, or whether it is an idealized mind state projected in neoplatonic or related philosophical terms.²⁸ Conversion may be nothing more than a learning process by which the priorities of consciousness are redetermined by altered subconscious habits.

The account of conversion provided here has concentrated upon the noetic elements of a cognitive paradigm shift, one that is arrived at by reason

and volition, given their prominence in the Ventoux account. But there are few conversion narratives that do not involve the emotions either as part of the preparatory turmoil, as part of the transition process itself, or as part of the new state of mind, often associated with the joy of deliverance or surrender. For as Pruyser stated, “the deity claims not only intellectual recognition, but heartfelt and feelingful transactions and loyalty. Piety cannot exist without emotion.”²⁹ Just how the limbic system is enjoined in the process is a subject that, like the cognitive elements, must begin with fundamental definitions concerning the interface between thought and emotions. Recent thinking is nearly unanimous in abandoning the notion of the cerebral cortex as a governor of the passions embedded in a more primitive part of the brain. The evolutionary sequence still pertains, but there is a remarkable integration between the two systems, so that efficient thought is inconceivable without limbic coaching with regard to priorities, as demonstrated in the work of Antonio Damasio.³⁰ Steven Pinker provides an accessible account of the liquidity with which thought, at times, initiates emotions through networks passing through the amygdala to the hypothalamus, as well as of the reverse process by which the sensations in the body present themselves to consciousness for interpretation according to the leading attributions in place.³¹ Conversion processes involve both forms of emotional “language,” whether as feelings resulting from notions of inadequacy and guilt, or as limbic sensations which the mind can interpret as spiritual experience. The second effect is the result of the persistent autonomy of the limbic system and its access to data not always available to consciousness, as described by Paul Griffiths.³² Recent scholars interested in the conversion process as a religious experience have sought to identify the leading emotions—fear, disgust, sorrow, longing (as in forlorn or nostalgic desire), surprise, elation, relief, or merely a humming sense of well-being—and to decipher how these play out in the narrative of conversion as the attribution systems are altered.³³ Petrarch, during the Ventoux expedition, recorded the sequence of his emotional states: “I was abashed,” I was “angry with myself that I should still be admiring earthly things,” “I turned my eye upon myself, and from that time not a syllable fell from my lips until we reached the bottom again,” “I wondered at the natural nobility of our soul . . .”³⁴ Religious exercises may, in the first instance, be directed at orders of thought, but rarely without some “cathartic” intent built in. Conversion, particularly of the sudden variety, follows an excitatory course in order to provoke both change and the permanence of the new state, including both self-loathing and rapture.³⁵ Petrarch’s writings are characterized by his own very particular reading of these antinomies, allowing to himself feelings of anger and despondency at the outset, and perhaps something close to true joy

through intimations of the blessed life—a state of approved thoughts experienced as pure emotion—at the close.³⁶

The most eloquent philosopher to report on this dimension of the religious mind was Friedrich Schleiermacher who, in his *On Religion*, published in 1799, stated that “religion is not knowledge and science, either of the world or of God. Without being knowledge, it recognizes knowledge and science. In itself it is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God.”³⁷ He went on to provide his own list of the leading affections of the religious mind: longing, piety, humility, compassion, contrition, and desire for progress in the sacred life. These are properly termed “affections,” within the control of thought, as opposed to the passions which rise up from the animal appetites. Petrarch was clearly no enthusiast, no mystic, no subject for revivalist melodrama, but he was intensely concerned with the devotional management of his affections and passions. In his letter to Gasparo Squaro dei Broaspini (between 1363 and 1369), he relates how writing itself was a means for intensifying his feelings, allowing him to grieve through copious weeping.³⁸ By so expending his tears, he could then return to the letters for consolation—a lesson perhaps in the creation and use of the *Secretum*. There will, in fact, be no agreement concerning the intensity and scope, much less the autobiographical reliability of the emotions he does express. Yet the *Secretum* is formally and by design a struggle with existential anxieties everywhere suffused with the emotions belonging to the phases of conversion, or the lack of progress along that experiential path.

If the beatified mind, for Petrarch, is characterized by the repose that comes after long and arduous endeavour, the fallen mind is that which finds no energy even to begin that pursuit. Just as his goal stops short of *enthusiasmos* or rapture through an identity association with a god, exaltation, mystical visions, or divine frenzy, so failure does not descend into abject despair, but into a state of torpor or acedia, epitomized by the absence of all desire to ascend.³⁹ What Petrarch ultimately intended by his conversion narratives will continue to stir debate. Whether he wished for himself the solitary life in order to flee the world and all its vanities, or merely to flee the world that distracted him from his humanist pursuits, remains open to debate. But the mind theatre as a place of turmoil is a Petrarchan leitmotif, as profiled in the ninth letter of Book II, wherein the “outer man wars with the inner man” leaving him no rest,⁴⁰ and the will of the would-be convert fails to escape its own lassitude. Not even Laura’s death could pass without creating in Petrarch’s mind an admonition to change. On the first guard leaf of his copy of Virgil he wrote that in having the “most serious” of his temptations removed, he was reminded again of his “vanishing years,” and of his desire to “flee from

Babylon,” which he hoped to do with God’s grace.⁴¹ Hegel, somewhere, described this fixation as the resources of the finite mind seeking to know its own nature as absolute mind.

To know the reason why humankind in intellectual and religious communities throughout the world has been drawn to ideas of consciousness-engineering according to discipline-related, guilt-driven, or shock-activated means is not to be asked here, except to say that: with the idea of volition comes the prospect of turning it upon the operations of mind; with the notion of paradise comes the idea of making thought its own golden age; and with the notion of subjective plasticity comes the moralized motives for self-improvement. Petrarch dropped himself into this vortex of western thought—unwillingly perhaps, for clearly large segments of his being resisted it. But once in, he nevertheless made the Augustinian malaise the crisis and crux of his philosophical thinking, leaving in the Ventoux letter what may be an ambiguous testimonial to personal fact, but no less a compelling representation of the experiential structure that haunted his imagination seemingly for a lifetime.

What may be said, then, about the Petrarchan conversion crisis as a crux of the humanist experience in general? Paul Oscar Kristeller states without qualification that “Petrarch’s personal form of religion had no direct influence upon his followers among the humanists, and [that] his emphasis on man, although accepted and developed by many of them, did not retain its original connection with Augustine.”⁴² Such an assurance could be taken as a challenge to prove otherwise, insofar as Petrarch’s letters and Latin treatises circulated widely. But the matter of linear influences is too confining where the conversion paradigm is concerned, simply because the idea is so integral to western thought.⁴³ Petrarch’s adaptation of the narrative is more accurately viewed as the manifestation of an archetype along a great continuum that originates on the road to Damascus, if not in Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium on Love*, and that continues to the present time as a religious commission or nostalgic need to organize the life of the mind around invigilating values pre-approved as conducive to the highest forms of the spiritual-intellectual life. The Christian and platonist *loci* were conflated in the writings of the neoplatonists, culminating in the writings of Ficino. Arguably, no thinker of the Italian Renaissance was more preoccupied with the psychology of the interiorized mind, to be achieved by methodical adjustments to the watch hierarchies that pilot the soul. Ficino, in that regard, was the most eloquent *porte-parole* for the *vita contemplativa* of his age, an age that, according to Hannah Arendt, did not come to an end before the very pragmatic *vita activa* of the seventeenth century.⁴⁴ Modern scholars continue to celebrate

the *Secretum* for its breezes of modernity perceived in its statements of resistance to a spiritual call, forgetting that it is a work of consolation for a man caught in the throes of mental torpor who could imagine escape only as a work of mind. The historical turning point for Arendt was not a denial of truth and knowledge, but the realization that “they could be won only by ‘action’ and not by contemplation.”⁴⁵ In this regard, all that pertained to Platonic paradigms pertained to conversion, for the imperfect vision within the famous cave signified mere human doing, while the abandonment of the cave was tantamount to the contemplation of the eternal truths of the heavens. This redemption through altered optics, achieved through right contemplation, “determined to a large extent the thought patterns into which Western philosophy almost automatically fell whenever it was not animated by a great and original philosophical impetus.”⁴⁶

The far-off beacon was the life of pure intellect suffused with religious feeling, for through the *contaminatio* of the Christian model, that quest was invariably invested with qualities of religious experience. Ficino’s inclusive system vacillates between pure forms, ideal beauty, beatific mentation, and the knowledge of God—all were as one. Common to all such philosophies is the preparation of the “way,” the profiling of operations by which the mind is transported from level to level of contemplation. The result is a system of hierarchies linked by correspondences serving as mind echelons in relation to aesthetic pleasures; the modelled mind becomes its own artefact for enjoyment. Through method, the mind overcomes its own lassitude, and through redefinition, that which constitutes the beatified state also brings to actualization all of the cosmological ideas of the humanist syncretists. The product is a regimen for the soul, a program for self-actualization that progresses from a life among the lower senses to a contemplation of divine things. “Ficino ... wrote in his *Argumentum de summo bono* that the supreme good consisted in the contemplation not of any created good but of the highest good, that is, God.”⁴⁷ The *Theologia platonica* is, needless to say, thoroughly imbued with notions of conversion through ascent, joining metaphor to volition and contemplation in order to spiritualize the operations of consciousness. The platonic template for such movement is found in Plato’s *Symposium on Love* (210e–212a) concerning the rungs of the ladder by which the mind advances from the contemplation of particular and transitory beauty to glimpses of true beauty.

That a line of influence between Petrarch and Ficino may be doubted does not diminish the structural affinities that join their thought. Both were philosophers of the sanctified mind to be enjoyed as a form of the *beata vita*. Each writer created narratives concerning the progress of the soul, with

its positive and negative emotions. The neoplatonists went on to discuss at length whether God was to be known principally through contemplation or enjoyment, through intellectual understanding or through emotion. That debate reappears in the writing of Rudolf Otto, in the early twentieth century, in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), no less than in the writings of the earliest Christians who spoke both of the knowledge of God and the joy of His presence. Paradoxically, the neoplatonists were inclined to make the will itself the receptor of spiritual joy.⁴⁸

Lorenzo Valla, before Ficino, in *De voluptate* (which he later preferred to call *De vero bono*, 1432–32) made an inquiry into the nature of the highest good, beginning with the moral virtue of the Stoics and passing through the pleasure of the Epicureans, including their theories on the tranquil mind. But he too makes his way toward a Christian apologetic in following virtue for the sake of future happiness, intimations of which could be had on earth through the ordering of the mind (chapter 9). Kristeller profiles this state as the spiritualized contemplation of the visible world through a combination of faith and imagination.⁴⁹ In this treatise, the virtuous life rises to the blessed life incorporated into the Christian frame of time and salvation. Conversion here is a methodical process in which classical and Christian attribution networks are superimposed to the common end of initiating the mind into a state of beatitude on earth as it will be in heaven.

Girolamo Benivieni completes the classical-Christian dyad in a pair of poems, the first his “Amor dalle cui,” made famous by a lengthy commentary by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola based upon Ficino’s *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium*. In later years Benivieni provided his own Christian corrective in “Amor sotto cui” which exchanges the conversion arrived at by climbing the ladder of beauty for the conversion prescribed by Saint Augustine in his *De doctrina* (II.7). Yet each course was eudemonic in nature, tending toward the beatified mind revelling in the perfect harmony of its own transactions. Ficino confessed that perfection would be a rare and fleeting achievement for a select group of seekers—those willing to labour ceaselessly for the joys they would obtain. His affinities would have been with the enlightened one of II Corinthians 12:2 who was “caught up to the third heaven” where he saw visions and revelations, rather than with the Saint Paul of Acts 9:3–22 whose eyes were opened on the road to Damascus, who saw light out of heaven and was struck blind until he was initiated into the company of Christians under Ananias through the laying on of hands. But in this order of contemplation, Ficino joins cause with Petrarch as a man who sought to define his own life course as one of ascent in relation to a contemplative ideal.

Petrarch drew upon several, but not all of the varieties of conversion experience. The emotion that is sometimes ratcheted up to catapult the mind into crisis in order to elicit the transformed state is, for him, systemically or by default, modulated by reason, apathy, alternative commitments, or even multiple versions of the beatific state. But the cognitive-emotional procedures associated with that shift reveal the transactional nature of the challenge, as well as the attendant conditions of the emotions. Petrarch avoids the Faustian dilemma by incorporating the schema of conversion into the momentary fluxions of life whereby the best of both worlds might form a kind of dyad between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. That was his working solution.

As a prelude to future centuries, it is revealing that Petrarch was deeply attached to this religious-oriented duty to spiritualize the mind in keeping with Christian tradition in apposition to his deeply-held commitment to the worlds of erotic desire, statesmanship, and fame. There had been a break with the age of faith, but not without a lingering nostalgic—if not an altogether stronger—disposition for the pleasures and agonies of spiritualized mind control. How to incorporate that experience into the new humanist philosophy was to become a major preoccupation among later thinkers. There was the perceived need to redefine and reconstitute an equivalent-to-conversion engagement with the world through a version of existence in time and space viewed as a progress of the soul toward timelessness, unity, and harmony. As for Petrarch, the record is clear that he never relinquished the attraction which the monastic life held for him. It is equally true that he confronted the world of contemplation as a place “which the self longs for and from which the self is also excluded,”⁵⁰ much as he looked upon solitude as both beatific and a temptation to sink into the sorrows of love and self-pity.⁵¹ But Petrarch’s reticence has meaning only in relation to an intuitive understanding of the elective engineering of cognitive and emotional mind states according to a defined system of the good. That transactional definition is an elucidation of modern times, but was implicit in all that pertained to “conversion philosophy” throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, concerning which the Ventoux letter serves as a cameo and a pivotal witness.

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Notes

1. The English translations from the letters are by Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). For the original texts, one should turn to *Petrarca: Le Familiari*, ed. Vittorio Rossi and Umberto Bosco (Florence: Sansoni, 1933–42). See also François Pétrarque, *L’ascension du Mont Ventoux*, trans. Paul Bachmann, préface, Eve Duperray (Fontaine-de-Vaucluse: Musée Pétrarque, 1996).

2. It is significant that Petrarch adopted this form of *sortes* for generating the impression that he had received a form of communication from the spirit world. It would have a future as late as the seventeenth century as the means of choice for demonstrating a state of election, particularly for those Protestants whose assurance had been cast into doubt by the logistics of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. See Dayton Haskin, *Milton's Burden of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), pp. 13–24. The practice of locating texts by chance, and by that means attributing oracular authority to them, or the force of truth in relation to questions posed, goes back to Antiquity. Clearly it remained a popular form of truth-seeking in the early Christian period because it was condemned by several Church councils in the fourth century (Haskin, p. 21). Augustine, himself, had been attracted to astrology in his earlier years, and also practised bibliomancy; he spoke of it in his *Confessions* as a mere deception, something that appeared true only out of chance. “It was not surprising, then, that for the mind of man, quite unconsciously, through some instinct not within its own control, should hit upon some thing that answered to the circumstances and the facts of a particular question” (IV.3, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin [London: Penguin, 1961], p. 74). Augustine had to explain how the mysterious and chance appearance of a compelling biblical text leading to his conversion was not an act of divination. In Petrarch’s case, the lines do not indicate deliverance, but only show the way. They nevertheless, through the “truth” element invested in coincidence, figure in the conversion narrative as a spirit voice confirming the moment. It was, after all, in form and substance, a game of divination.
3. Giuseppe Billanovich may have been the first to argue for the later date, and to accept as a consequence that the actual excursion was never made, in *Petrarca letterato*, I. *Lo scrittoio del Petrarca* (Rome: Edizioni di ‘Storia e letteratura’, 1947), p.193–98. He reiterates and expands his arguments in his “Petrarca e il Ventoso,” *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 9 (1966), pp. 389–401, concluding that the piece could not have been written before Gherardo had entered the monastery in Montrieux (397), not to mention the literary allusions employed that had not come to Petrarch’s attention by 1336 (Petrarch discovered Cicero’s letters only in 1345 in Verona, for example). These arguments are accepted by many later writers, including Davy Carozza and H. James Shey in their introduction to Petrarch’s *Secretum* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 19. Hans Baron, speaking for others, accepts the reasoning, but does not concur that the original ascent was never made, allowing that the final version was modified to fit his concerns of the 1350s; see *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni: Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 18. For a summary of the dating issue, see Giles Constable, “Petrarch and Monasticism,” *Francesco Petrarca: Citizen of the World*, ed. Aldo Bernardo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), p. 96, n. 199.
4. Bortolo Martinelli, *Petrarca e il Ventoso*, intro. Enzo Noè Girardi (Bergamo: Minerva Italica, 1977), p. 149.
5. Arnaud Tripet, *Pétrarque ou la connaissance de soi* (Genève: Droz, 1967). For Courcelle, see note 10, and Billanovich, the end of note 13. See also Ernest Hatch Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
6. Several of these positions will be described in subsequent paragraphs and endnotes. For Evelyne Luciani, see note 9; for Robert Durling, note 13; for Giles Constable, note 11; for Francesco Tateo, note 14.

7. Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 84–85.
8. Baron, p. 20.
9. Evelyne Luciani, *Les "Confessions" de Saint Augustin dans les lettres de Pétrarque* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1982), p. 66.
10. Pierre Courcelle, "Pétrarque entre Saint Augustin et les Augustins du XIV^e siècle," *Studi Petrarqueschi* (1961), pp. 58–71.
11. Giles Constable, "Petrarch and Monasticism," *Francesco Petrarca, Citizen of the World*, ed. Aldo Bernardo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), p. 98.
12. Carlo Segrè, "Il *Secretum* del Petrarca e le *Confessioni* di Sant' Agostino," *Studi Petrarqueschi* (1911), pp. 1–127; Enrico Carrara, "Francesco Petrarca, *My Secrets*" (from *Francesco Petrarca, Il mio segreto*, Florence: Sansoni, 1943), in *Petrarch's Secretum*, ed. Davy Carozza and H. James Shey (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 248.
13. Carolyn Chiapelli suggests that Petrarch signals real progress, for what he confesses in the letter "is that although he may wander in uncertain ways, he knows that there is One Way to eternal peace"; see Chiapelli, "The Motif of Confession in Petrarch's *Mont Ventoux*," *Modern Language Notes* 16 (1978), p. 136. Robert Durling is resoundingly sceptical in stating that the allegorical parts were self cancelling (11) thereby "disarming (...) the existential urgency" of the letter (13) leading to a breakdown in the symmetry between the Augustinian scene in the garden, and Petrarch's "charade" on the mountain top, "undermining the very struggle for authenticity" on Petrarch's part, in turn making irony tantamount to the negative side of allegory (22–23); see Durling, "The Ascent of Mt. Ventoux and the Crisis of Allegory," *Italian Quarterly* 69 (1974), pp. 7–28. By contrast, again, the silence of the descent is a spiritual crescendo according to Jerrold Seigel's analysis of rhetoric and silence as a *topos* in the works of Augustine and Petrarch; the letter may be an illustration of the fact that "for Augustine, spiritual progress could be represented by a movement from speech to silence, from outer appearance to inner truth," a principle based on Augustine's "rhetoric of silence"; see Seigel, "Ideas of Eloquence and Silence in Petrarch," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26 (1965), p. 157. Those most opposed to the idea of conversion include Billanovich in *Petrarca letterato* (vol. 1, p. 195) and G. Voight in *Pétrarque, Boccace et les débuts de l'humanisme en Italie* (Paris, Le Monnier, 1894), p. 128; their arguments originating in the desire to make Petrarch the first modern man and complete humanist to the exclusion of the Christian elements at the heart of humanism. See also Dieter Kramers, "L'ascension du Mont Ventoux," *Actes du Congrès International Francesco Petrarca, Père des Renaissances, Serviteur de l'Amour et de la Paix* (Avignon : Aubanel, 1974), pp. 122–31.
14. Francesco Tateo, "Interior Dialogue and Ideological Polemic in Petrarch's *Secretum*," (*Dialogo interiore e polemica ideologica nel "Secretum" del Petrarca* [Florence: Le Monnier, 1965]), in *Petrarch's Secretum*, trans. Davy Carozza and H. James Shey (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 270. See also Charles Dejob, "Le *Secretum* de Pétrarque," *Bulletin Italien* 3 (1903), pp. 261–80.
15. Tateo, p. 271.
16. Fam. Let. XXIV.1, in *Petrarch and His World*, p. 202.
17. The ascent motif is archetypal in nature, yet may have its specific origins in Saint Augustine's symbolism of the mountain in the spiritual life as an object of conquest through

- labour in *De beata vita* I.3. There is a noteworthy analogue in Hugh of St. Victor's twelfth sermon, "De spiritualibus montibus et arboribus Israel," in the *Patrologia latina* 177, pp. 924–29.
18. R.H. Thouless, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion*, 3rd ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 105.
 19. Petrarch's *De vita solitario* (1346) is another of his characteristically dual-purpose statements, for not only does it speak of his predilection for personal solitude as a place away from the business of cities where he could wander, study, or pass his time with a few select friends; solitude was also part of a religious ideal, a spiritual frame of mind, because it allowed him to direct his attention toward heaven. It is the silence in which the blessed life might be created, and a clue to the silence he imposed upon himself on the return down the mountain, for in this work he speaks of the solitude that brings "a presentiment of future bliss" (Constable, p. 64).
 20. Augustine, pp. 214–24.
 21. W.S. Brown and C. Caetano, "Conversion, Cognition, and Neuropsychology," *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H.N. Malony and S. Southard (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1992), p. 147.
 22. W.S. Brown and C. Caetano, p. 155.
 23. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor [1902], 1964), p. 335.
 24. B.J. McCallister, "Cognitive Theory and Religious Experience," *Handbook of Religious Experience*, ed. R.W. Hood Jr. (Birmingham Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1995), pp. 312–52, p. 338.
 25. Theories of the self are only one component of the most recent cognitive studies on the nature of consciousness. Daniel Dennett deals with the question *en passant* throughout his justly celebrated *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), as does Bernard Baars, *In the Theater of Consciousness: The Workspace of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Baars discusses the "director" feature of mind and the tendency to anthropomorphize this organizational capacity. It is a way of expressing the self as a complex configuration of potential information that is ready, upon prompting, to audit, phase, and modify, in conjunction with the emotions, the parallel modular preoccupations of consciousness. Dennett makes light of the idea that the brain must be a theatre to which it plays itself back as though in a performance, but the analogy persists as a way of understanding that consciousness plays itself for "someone," which may be another way of constructing the self.
 26. Saint Augustine approaches the notion in his observation in Book X.16 of the *Confessions* that the mind can be present to itself by its own power (p. 222).
 27. This definition is shaped to accommodate the profile of Petrarchan conversion, to be sure, for a more plastic definition must include the mind's capacity to conduct operations it can attribute only to outside forces, or to imagine its completion in out-of-body experiences, states of rapture with or without the presence of a god, states of infinite socializing with a personal God, or the willed cessation of all conscious activity as the marker of nirvana. In these terms, conversion must take place in relation to the modular networks forming what Paul Churchland terms the "watch" hierarchies by which the brain is able to prioritize its own activities in relation to environmental stressors. By the logic of reverse engineering

from effect to cause, one assumes that the brain has built-in mechanisms for selecting out of the maze of potential thoughts and sensations, during moments of alert, those most beneficial to the organism; see Churchland, *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). Moreover, in keeping with the work of Popper and Eccles in (Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and its Brain* [New York: Springer Verlag, 1977]) there are mechanisms whereby consciousness is able to project multiple drafts of the future in relation to present circumstances that allow the mind to choose among options. One may then speculate that the efficiency of consciousness as an adaptive operation is dependent upon the ego or self function that invigilates all that passes through consciousness. These neuron modules interact with the “contents” of awareness to establish attention priorities (Churchland, p. 8). This same set of cognitively oriented operations also encompasses systems of morality conflated with self-worth, and the emotions attached to shame, well-being, and a cluster of related affections. See also R. Sperry, *Science and Moral Priority: Merging Mind, Brain, and Human Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

28. No specific mention has been made of the role of language in shaping the conversion experience because rhetoric prepared by an advocate is not a part of the Ventoux letter as it is in the *Secretum*. Nevertheless, self-talking and abundant use of metaphor are parts of the experience, and there have been certain leading images that have proven their effectiveness in preparing the mind for religious change. These have been studied by many recent scholars, including Ralph Metzner in “Ten Classical Metaphors of Self-Transformation,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 12 (1980), pp. 47–62. Petrarch used emotional language as a way of exciting his own emotions as he wrote in order to bring himself to a full cathartic experience, as he explained in his letter to Gasparo Squaro dei Broaspiini. Raymond Paloutzian provides a résumé of the importance attached to language in the conversion processes (*Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, 2nd ed. [Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996], p. 188), particularly in relation to the work of W. Proudfoot in *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
29. Paul Pruyser, *A Dynamic Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), p. 146.
30. Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994).
31. Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 370. Paloutzian studies the “Schachter” factor, which is the relativity of the interpretation of emotional sensations in accordance with the current preoccupations of the mind. Through “religious” suggestivity, all manner of feeling will be assigned religious meaning, and the more easily so the more the states of consciousness are “unusual” (p. 187).
32. Paul Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 97.
33. The literature on this subject has expanded exponentially in recent years. An anthology much to be recommended is the *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1992) containing 17 articles on every aspect of the phenomenon. Excellent analyses of the affections and emotions experienced in the conversion process are to be found in the work of Raymond Paloutzian (see note 28), Paul Pruyser (see note 29), and particularly in L.R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

- 1993)—a study in which the many components of the experience are grouped under seven headings corresponding to the generic phases of the overall narrative. See also Bernard Spilka, Ralph W. Hood Jr. and Richard L. Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1985), Bruce T. Riley, *The Psychology of Religious Experience in its Personal and Institutional Dimensions* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), C.D. Batson, P. Schoenrade and W.L. Ventis, *Religion and the Individual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and G.E.W. Scobie, "Types of Christian Conversion," *Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 1 (1973), pp. 265–71.
34. Fam. Let. IV.1, *Petrarch and his World*, pp. 100–112.
 35. Paloutzian describes the role of the emotions, in conjunction with the drive toward self-consistency, in preventing cognitive recidivism following the conversion experience. The emotions are first programmed to catapult the convert into a changed state, and then to hold the individual in that new state (p. 187).
 36. Petrarch's *beata vita* can perhaps be no further defined than it is in the writings of Saint Augustine from which it is derived. Debate arose in following centuries among the neo-platonists concerning the relation between knowledge and feeling in the beatified states they envisioned for themselves. Even this debate can be subjected to forms of modern analysis, as in Pruyser's distinction between "activity affect" and what he calls "embeddedness affect" (p. 166). Joy in the former mode sustains and mobilizes the energies necessary to accomplish tasks in the world; it is the limbic colouring of the mind that leads out of acedia. In the latter mode, joy is a latent state waiting for activation through divine dispensation, prayer, rites, or spiritual exercises. The argument under examination is circular insofar as anticipated joy may be the active drive to prayer and rites. One sees this loop in the poetry of George Herbert, whose preoccupation with spiritual joy becomes the substance of his tortured muse. Clearly, for Petrarch, beatitude has emotional overtones if only as the absence of the unwanted passions of the pre-converted state, but the degree to which it assumed numinous properties is by no means certain.
 37. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 36.
 38. *Petrarch and His World*, p. 220.
 39. William James invented his own term for this dimension of acedia, "anhedonia," or a state of passive joylessness, a "lack of taste and zest and spring" (*On the Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 125). He associated it with the "misery-threshold" (117) that precedes conversion.
 40. *Petrarch and His World*, p. 31.
 41. *Petrarch, A Humanist among Princes* (An Anthology of Petrarch's Letters), ed. David Thompson (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 87.
 42. Paul O. Kristeller, "Augustine and the Early Renaissance," *Review of Religion* 8 (1944), p. 347.
 43. To this point, one might invoke the conversion of Saint Thomas Aquinas, about which we would know more, for in 1273, at the age of 48, after his work on the *Summa theologiae* was complete, he fell under the blighting conviction that all his writing had been vanity, a thing of mere straw, compared to his recent vision, and that henceforth he would never write another word. It was a marked change, accompanied by spiritual phenomena of an unspecified kind, together with guilt concerning his great work in words, rhetoric, and

logic, followed by a devotionally induced silence. The experience of conversion belongs to the Christian world order, of which Saint Augustine's account is but one eloquent version, and Petrarch's another. The importance is that they are all manifestations of a "well-defined course" in keeping with the "idea" of conversion (Thouless, p. 113).

44. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 262ff.
45. Arendt, p. 263.
46. Arendt, p. 266.
47. *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 345.
48. *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 352.
49. Paul O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 30–31.
50. Mazotta, p. 5.
51. Fam. Let. VIII.7. *Petrarch and His World*, pp. 269–75