The strength of this book rests in Colilli’s desire to see Italian humanism, in general, and Petrarch’s Africa, in particular, in a new light. Colilli reviews all the relevant criticism (Festa; Bernardo; Fera; Freccero; Greene; and Mazzotta) and works of Petrarch (Contra medicum, De remedii, De oti religioso, De vita solitaria, Canzoniere, Trionfi, Epistole, but not the De viris) and tries to incorporate Derridean theories of writing and difference into his interpretation (especially in the second chapter). One relevant critic that Colilli misses, though, is Giuseppe Ungaretti who, in his Brazilian lectures and in Il poeta dell’oblio (1943), examines the memorial quality of Petrarch’s poetics much as Colilli does, but without the Heideggerian thrust. In fact, Colilli’s last example on page 40 (the first quatrain of sonnet 18 of the Canzoniere) of the coincidence of the images of covering/darkness with opening/clearness/seeing is one of Ungaretti’s favorites to show the interplay of time, memory, and light imagery in Petrarch’s poetry. Perhaps the poet of La terra promessa could have furnished some of the poetic wisdom required of this post-rational critic.

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Every interpreter of Petrarch encounters a crisis peculiar to interpreters of Petrarch: how to handle the infuriating capacity of this great poet and intellectual to entertain opposition, conflictedness, duality while he at the same time seeks absolute unity of style, sentiment, social experience. It is unnervingly easy to assimilate Petrarch’s willed complexity to the polarities of eternity and history between which he seems to have constantly oscillated — and further to construct those polarities in the interpreter’s own image. Giuseppe Mazzotta’s previous subjects, Dante and Boccaccio, place him in a strong position to attack the “Petrarch problem” from either polarity, and they give him a detachment which is useful equipment for approaching a poet like Petrarch in this “post post-structuralist” moment in which we find ourselves. Like its subject, the resulting book of essays is very conscious of the moment, and it executes some typically Petrarchan manoeuvres in paying tribute to eminent predecessors and contemporaries while at the same time insisting on the necessity of a new agenda. While he evidently wishes to keep at arm’s length the prevailing American critique of Petrarch’s “idolatry,” Mazzotta recognizes the problem posed by the poet’s desire for fixity, and each of the subsequent essays addresses itself to a text which provokes us to consider this central issue.

The Worlds of Petrarch has been assembled from papers Mazzotta has been giving over the past few years; unhappily the publishers seem to have done little, if any editing, and there are problems of coherence which good copy-editing ought to have smoothed out. A central chapter is naturally the influential essay of 1978, “The Canzoniere and the Language of the Self.” The Canzoniere, after all, is where we begin, though increasingly it is not where we end. For her 1991 study Petrarch’s Genius: Pentimento and Prophecy (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P) Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle prepared herself with a complete re-reading of the Opera Omnia, and Mazzotta shows a similar reluctance to confine himself to Petrarch’s lyric poetry. It is the creative mind that made the
amplifications or additions to the poem — his entire problematic would have collapsed. (See Sen. 2.1 to Boccaccio where Petrarch laments the time pressures disallowing needed revisions to the Africa.) Colilli seems to accept illogic as the unavoidable consequence of his stance against logic and rationality. On the contrary, in his Letter on Humanism, Heidegger himself expressly denies that a stance against logic must be either alogical or illogical. In his hurry to reach the post-rational, Colilli literally makes much ado about nothing.

Colilli thinks of the Africa not only as a completed poem, but, in fact, as the first poem of humanism (11) and rejects the common critical opinion that the Africa is an artistic failure (16-17). The author reiterates his thesis that: “È assente, riteniamo, dall’intera gamma degli studi petrarcheschi il tentativo di studiare il poema epico quale una manifestazione del pensiero poetante che medita sulla differenza tra gli esseri e l’Essere” (18). Given that Petrarch wishes to preserve historical difference and flux to liberate “l’Essere fossilizzato della Roma antica” (45), why would Petrarch write this epic for contemporary Italy in Latin instead of in the vernacular (as, for example, the Trionfi were)? Colilli does not address this important consideration. Moreover, Petrarch does not completely despair because of the historical gap between his day and classical Rome (75); rather, I would submit, he employs the unifying powers of poetry to resuscitate antiquity in order to bridge the gap. The poet taps into the heroic reputation of the epic’s protagonist, Scipio the Elder, to individualize, humanize, and exemplify Roman virtue. Although Colilli neither comments on nor pursues this aspect, heroism cannot be absent from Vico’s mind in the passage opening La poetica dell’aletheia.

The Africa certainly sings the glory of Rome, but the poem’s inspiration springs from the historical figure of Scipio, a ‘true,’ historical character who embodied the cardinal virtues which made Rome great. The fact that Rome eventually became a world empire and the seat of the Church only validates the greatness of this hero. Colilli overlooks these positive aspects to emphasize Scipio’s role as witness of the “mortalità dell’abisso” (75), represented, in particular, by books three through eight of the Africa. Scipio comes to represent “l’esperienza del negativo” (81) of a “poetica negativa” (87), while the Africa is termed an “abisso . . . una lettera morta” (83). In the Letter on Humanism, Heidegger denies accusations of nihilism in his thinking, rhetorically citing the opinion of his detractors that: “We pitch everything that does not stay close to the familiar and beloved positive into the previously excavated pit of pure negation which negates everything, ends in nothing, and so consummates nihilism.” Lest I be accused of clinging to the “beloved positive” and so of being unfairly negative toward Colilli’s reading, he himself is quite clear about his negative emphasis of the Africa.

Showing imprecision to detail, Colilli confuses Scipio the Elder, protagonist of the poem, with his father Publius Cornelius. Describing the former’s dream at the beginning of Petrarch’s poem, Colilli repeatedly refers incorrectly to the latter as “Scipione il maggiore” (60, 82). These minor and probably unintentional mistakes might be due to a confusion of Petrarch’s dream scene with Cicero’s Somnium Scipionis where Scipio the Younger dreams of and receives advice from, indeed, Scipio the Elder. More significantly, though, Colilli does not once mention the biography of Scipio in Petrarch’s De viris illustribus. The author therefore misses the opportunity to connect biography and history, a linkage which would illuminate the myth of the historical individual which the Africa dramatizes.
suis et multorum ignorantia) to tell us how he believes thinking is related to the will, and his exploitation of the topos of solitude (for example in song 129) to dramatize the act of choice. Petrarch, Mazzotta seems to be saying, does not think; rather, he discovers the event of thought.

It is this sense of Petrarch’s immersion in the event (indeed, in himself as event) which provides some of the richest results of Mazzotta’s readings. Its exploration dominates subsequent chapters: the 1978 essay on the Canzoniere and the language of the self, a new essay on the ethics of self which examines the phenomenon of contingent personal experience in the context of Petrarch’s will to purification, and a chapter on the world of history which returns to and expands on his preliminary discussion of De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia. Though there are statements I would have to challenge here, I admire Mazzotta’s insistence on Petrarch’s immersion in history and his own historicity. We need to take seriously the evidence that in reading Petrarch, despite our on-going construction of him as a poet of failed transcendent love, we are always forced to the immediate, the tangible, the contingent.

Petrarch’s critics are at their most fruitful when they take this task seriously, and Mazzotta himself is prepared to do so, since his eventual definition of philology presents it as “primarily the discipline that accounts for the elements making up the historical specificity of any text” (167). Yet the chapter “Orpheus: Rhetoric and Music,” which might provide a test case for his method, seems weak and ill-argued, vacillating as it does between Virgil and Lucan in an effort to argue that music is the aesthetic principle governing the Canzoniere, when it could have been following up Petrarch’s intellectual relationship with his friend the musical theorist Philippe de Vitry. And Mazzotta’s reading of “Chiare, fresche e dolci acque,” (Canz. 126), the poem he chooses to demonstrate his definition, has also its problems; rather than the Vergilian vision which Mazzotta proposes, the philological imagination might well suggest a Propertian one, dependent specifically on Prop. 1.17 (19-24) and in a general way on 4.7.

Mazzotta’s project is most fully tested in the chapter “Humanism and Monastic Spirituality” which (except for the two appendixes) closes the book. Here the author is on ground thoroughly worked by Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle; regrettably he has not been able to do more than to take note of her book in an endnote. His own argument traces Petrarch’s many meditations on the nature of the contemplative life, and concludes that De otio religioso “marks Petrarch’s repudiation of his previous efforts to reconcile worldly wisdom and religious transcendence ... faith and culture [‘letters,’ litterae in Mazzotta’s translation] constitute the poles of an insoluble antinomy” (162). Applying this, expectably, to a reading of the Canzoniere’s concluding prayer to the Virgin (Canz. 366) Mazzotta attempts to show that Petrarch, dramatizing his surrender to “the voices and fixed forms of tradition” (165) in a poem which holds an extremely privileged position in the collection, at the same time reveals a heart “ceaselessly displaced and ceaselessly tending to the truth of faith” (165).

“Dramatizes” may be the key word here, for not to give it its full weight (and it seems to be employed quite casually), is to accept Petrarch’s version of himself at face value. If Mazzotta’s treatment of this great hymn succeeds in persuading us of the poet’s passionate involvement with experience, it does not sufficiently remind us of the persistent canniness of that purificatory and exclusionary mind. I don’t think we will be able to unlock the simultaneity of Petrarch’s “thought of history and death” (1) without exploring further the nature of that ruthless artistry. Nevertheless, with much insight, The Worlds
of Petrarch provides a potent instrument for investigating that sense of the power of time and human experience to which Petrarch himself always returns us, and this is a direction which we need to take. As Mazzotta so acutely observes at the conclusion of this stimulating volume, “few poets of antiquity or early modernity belong to the future as much as Petrarch does” (181).

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Questo lavoro di Steven Grossvogel si presenta immediatamente come uno studio organico e rigoroso del Filocolo che, come dichiara il critico americano, ha da sempre presentato delle difficoltà e addirittura un certo imbarazzo per la critica tradizionale.

Nel capitolo introduttivo Grossvogel passa in rassegna la critica che si è già occupata del Filocolo. Questa è una lucida e utilissima revisione tanto della critica europea (specialmente italiana) quanto di quella americana. Grossvogel riscontra soprattutto tra gli italiani una certa tendenza a limitare, se non proprio a sminuire, il valore compositivo del Filocolo riscontrando in esso una frammentarietà episodica, comprensibile solo se si considera il fatto che il Certaldese fosse alle prime armi del mestiere. Leggendo questa rassegna si è portati a concludere che Grossvogel tende, in linea di massima, a favorire la critica americana produttrice, del resto, di ottimi lavori, rigorosi nella loro interpretazione e ad un tempo innovatori. Il critico, infatti, riconosce esplicitamente i suoi addebiti rendendo omaggio a tre grossi nomi: Victoria Kirkham, Giuseppe Mazzotta e Janet Smarr.

Uno degli obiettivi che si propone Grossvogel in questo suo studio è di riscattare proprio quella frammentarietà riscontrando in essa una funzione d'ordine logico-stilistico, perfettamente giustificabile sia in seno a una visione complessiva dell'opera sia singolarmente nell'ambito circoscritto dei vari episodi. Grossvogel, quindi, intraprende una dettagliata rilettura dei principali temi portanti del Filocolo allo scopo di dimostrare come, una volta contestualizzati nel corretto sostrato culturale, essi stessi fungano da connettori tra i vari spezzi compositivi e tra i vari ordini di narrazione.

Seguendo una lunga tradizione critica, anche Grossvogel analizza nel suo I capitolo il I e il V libro del Filocolo. Si tratta di esaminarne le tematiche principali alla luce di quegli scrittori classici e cristiani che le avevano già trattate prima del giovane Boccaccio, sia in opere serie di tipo filosofico che didattico-morale, sia in opere divulgative di tipo letterario. Grossvogel suggerisce una breve lista di autori che, del resto, erano stati in gran parte individuati dalla critica precedente e propone i nomi di Boezio e di San Tommaso d'Aquino come i due pilastri portanti dell'intero complesso narrativo-concettuale del Filocolo. Il rapporto tra Fato, Fortuna e Provvidenza viene studiato in base ai suddetti autori per indagare l'effetto che questi agenti soprannaturali hanno sia sul comportamento dei principali personaggi, sia sullo sviluppo degli eventi narrati. L'influenza di Boezio sul Boccaccio, già riscontrata da vari critici, dal Torracca al Quaglio, viene ora riferita e ampiamente studiata da Grossvogel, che rivisita lo scrittore in modo originale e dimostra come il Filocolo s'inserisca ideologicamente in una visione...