STYLE, THE MUSCLE OF THE SOUL. THEORIES ON READING AND WRITING IN PETRARCH'S TEXTS

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Summary: With his deep passion for the Roman poets and historians and with his effort to transform the cultural agenda through a revival of Antiquity, Petrarch inaugurated new reading and writing practices that would influence and dominate future generations for centuries. Celebrated as the “father of humanism,” he articulated a modern conception of authorship and a new understanding of self. However, a close reading of Petrarch’s writings reveals from time to time a radical scepticism towards the assumptions underlying the hermeneutics of the humanists. The experience of historicity and of the radical instability of the world challenged the notion of a centred and coherent self. In other words: at the same time that he maintained the connection between authorship and identity Petrarch seemed to formulate as well a deep distrust of the concept of author itself.

Petrarch is usually presented as the “father of humanism” or as the “l’initiateur de la Renaissance” as Pierre de Nolhac described him in 1892.¹ At least two reasons have given him this status: on the one hand, in his poems and letters he dramatized the collapse of the medieval way of experiencing and interpreting the world. On the other hand, he formulated a new way of understanding the self, or the human subject, that was intimately connected with the desire to imitate and emulate classical culture. Much attention has been paid to Petrarch’s effort to transform the cultural agenda through a revival of Antiquity, to his practical and philological work as a humanist, as well as to the new conception of the self articulated in his texts. Recently, however, there has been some awareness of Petrarch’s *critique* of certain assumptions underlying the hermeneutics of the humanists: at the same time as he inaugurated new reading and writing practices, he also questioned the fundamental premises of these practices. I will maintain that the discussions by Petrarch are of certain relevance today

¹Nolhac, *Petrarque et l’humanisme*, I, 1.

when essential values in the humanist legacy, as the notion of a centred and coherent self, have for a long period been severely criticized by scholars within humanities as well as social sciences. A close reading of Petrarch's writings, however, reveals a clear consciousness of the rhetorical status of the self: rather than being an object, the self is constituted by our self-interpretations, by our articulations and questions within a framework of qualitative distinctions, to borrow a conception from Charles Taylor. What Petrarch's complex arguments on the issue demonstrate is that the seemingly modern doubts and reservations towards the idea of an objectified self are part of the humanist tradition itself from its very beginning.

Already Jacob Burckhardt described the Renaissance as the close connection created by certain ideas of the human subject and the attempt to emulate cultural standards exemplified in classical Greek and Latin texts. Historical and philological scholars within the Petrarchan reception have to a great extent portrayed Petrarch as a precursor to the European humanism. Although many scholars, as Natalino Sapegno and recently Ronald Witt, have rightly emphasized the importance of the so-called prehumanism of the thirteenth century in Bologna and Padua, of figures such as Lovato dei Lovati, Giovanni del Virgilio and Albertino Mussato, it is Petrarch, with his voluminous and varied production, who dominates the picture of early Italian and European humanism.² The picture is certainly correct in the way that Petrarch was among the first who expressed a deep passion for Antiquity which distinguished humanism as well as the entire Renaissance culture. Travelling all over Europe he bought and copied manuscripts of the classical authors with the result that his private library grew into the largest we know of from the fourteenth century. He acted as a bibliographer and editor, initiating huge reconstruction works of the old, fragmented texts, and he stressed the importance of contextual reading during the process of interpretation. Most importantly, however, Petrarch simply read and studied, with a profound love, the old Roman poets and historians. He imitated them and, on the basis of imitation, he sought to develop his own personal voice, his individual style, which would make his texts immortal just like the texts of the classical authors.

The rediscovering of the authorial voice of the classical texts as well as the development of the own individual style as an author was obviously a main concern to Petrarch and to the early Italian humanists. We might even say that with this new emphasis on the individual style or personal voice in the imitating process, the Renaissance humanists created an author

²Sapegno, *Il Trecento*; Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*.

conception that was going to dominate in the Western world. No one in early Italian humanism expressed this new view of the self more enthusiastically than Petrarch. He was obsessed by the self, by the personal voice or the individual style. Everything he wrote was in one way or another autobiographical. In his letters and poems he explored every movement of his inner as well as his outer experiences. Thus he seems to have created a detailed portrait of himself. In addition to this emphasis on personal experiences, Petrarch also resumed and developed existing literary genres in which a textual self played an important role, as for instance the personal epistle, the classical dialogue, and love poetry in the tradition of the medieval troubadours. In this way he made his personal experiences, his own life, exemplary to future imitations, as he himself imitated and emulated the classical authors in order to define his own individuality and create standards to the contemporary society. The educational objective for the revival of the Antiquity was, in other words, a transformation of the existent culture as well as an articulation and ennoblement of the self. This double aim of the imitation process is profoundly discussed in Petrarch's imitation theories, which were in fact the first theories of imitation clearly formulated in the Renaissance, and to which I soon will return.

Because of the apparently autobiographical aspects of the works by Petrarch, scholars have in generations been tempted to write his biography. I believe that no figure from Early Modern Europe has had his life portrayed in different kinds of *Vita* more than Petrarch, and the biographical production seems not to diminish. A problem for the biographers is, however, that there are a lot of disagreements in his texts. Petrarch's neat and thorough elaborations and corrections of his letters and poems, his modifications of dates, the many intertextual elements and so on, obviously crack the authenticity of the texts. They are fictions as much as testimonies of an author's life. For that reason historians and philologists have studied Petrarch's ample marginal notes and interlinear glosses of his manuscripts in order to get a better picture of his reading and writing practices, of Petrarch as a humanist. In an important article on the Mont Ventoux letter by Petrarch (*Fam.* IV.1), Giuseppe Billanovich writes that through an investigation of other sources, as the marginalia and the glosses rather than the letter itself, which in Billanovich' eyes obviously is fictional, he attempts to "compose another, more truthful and profound" portrait of Petrarch.³ Historians, philologists and classicists, such as Vittorio Rossi, Francisco Rico, Ernest Hatch Wilkins and Hans Baron, have followed the

³Billanovich, "Petrarca e il Ventoso," 390.

same direction using the established methods of textual scholarship to incorporate Petrarch's work into a coherent picture of his life. As a result, these scholars do not differ much from the traditional biographers with their underlying notion of a consistent, objectified self.

Modern literary critics have turned away from the questions about truthfulness of the texts and their correct dates of composition, and rather focused on the poetics of Petrarch, and not at least on the textual self articulated through literary imitations in his writings. In an article from 1975 John Freccero started a debate which was going to be, and still is, of great importance for contemporary readings of Petrarch. His claim was that Petrarch, through imitation strategies of the *Confessions* by Saint Augustine, created in his *Canzoniere* a completely autonomous, idolatrous portrait of himself as author. The moral struggle and the spiritual torment described in the songbook are, according to Freccero, only part of a poetic strategy: "When the spiritual struggle is demystified, its poetic mechanism is revealed: the petrified idolatrous lover is an immutable monument to Petrarch, his creator and namesake."⁴ Freccero's theory of the idolatrous self in Petrarch's poetic universe has been challenged by scholars such as Thomas M. Greene and Giuseppe Mazzotta, but in opposite ways. The main objection against Freccero's hypothesis for both of them is that the textual self in *Canzoniere* as well as Laura, the beloved woman, never appear as immutable. The inconstancy of the signifier, the elusive and ever changing Laura, reflects the uncertain status of the self. But while Greene claims that "the constricting subjectivity" of Petrarch is caused by his failed imitation strategies, Mazzotta points at the fundamental and radical critique itself of the notion of a stable and consistent subject elaborated in the works by Petrarch. Let me briefly try to explain the different points of departure of these arguments before I return to the imitation theories of Petrarch.

According to Thomas Greene the humanistic hermeneutics and the imitation theories of the Renaissance were the result of a new understanding of time and history. It was the experience of time that separated the medieval Christian allegoresis and the humanistic interpretation model. The Christian allegoresis, he explains, assumed that the author and the reader belonged to the same universe of discourse. God was the subject of the words and signs, and in this way a *guarantee* of the referentiality of signs. To read a text was to reveal the spiritual truth behind the verbal surface, a truth which joined the reader to the author. The humanists, how-

⁴Freccero, "The Fig Tree and the Laurel," 34.

ever, having discovered that languages and styles altered with time, partly accepted that the old texts did not belong to their own discourses. To understand the past and to grasp the intentions of the classical authors required a careful archaeological reading of the text, a *subreading*, which involved “a dynamic and continuous interplay between the reader and the distant voice whose very accent and idiom he sought to catch.”⁵

What Greene describes here, is the establishment of the philology as a scholarly discipline, created by the humanists, as well as the new way of composing poetry through imitation. The classical texts required subreading to grasp their otherness, the distant voice of the authors. At the same time the humanist, and first of all Petrarch, sought to write poetry that ought to be subread containing other texts within the compositions. According to Greene, however, Petrarch should have failed in his imitation strategies, in his attempt to construct itineraries or etiological versions of historical passages between his own texts and the classical subtexts. The imitations are failed because the outcome is never an articulation of a clear and stable self, but rather a fall into constricting subjectivity and blurred verbal reference. The elusive presence of Laura represents the plenitude or the “externality which the speaker of *Canzoniere* desires but fails to possess, that fluid and intangible entity which would bring relief by responding to a stable, knowable, recognizable self.”⁶ These falls, he explains, correspond to Petrarch’s explicit feeling of cultural inferiority in the encounters with the classical models. The failed imitations, Petrarch’s unsuccessful incorporations of the experience of time to articulate his authorial voice in his art, were caused by his feelings of weakness and fear of time, something that Greene judges as “a true sickness of his soul.”⁷

One might object in several ways to a reading that concludes with statements about the actual psyche or the self of the author, such as the one Greene has proposed. The mental disturbance or spiritual sickness of the author is a hypothesis that can never be philologically verified, and such theories only tend to draw the literature as a scholarly discipline into the domain of medicine and psychiatry. What I also find difficult to accept is Greene’s assertion containing several ideologically and historically conditioned notions about what a soul or a self is, and what the possibly differences between a sick and healthy soul ought to be. However, the most serious objection against Greene’s explanation in my opinion is that he com-

⁵ Greene, *The Light in Troy*, 93.

⁶ Greene, *The Light in Troy*, 114.

⁷ Greene, *The Light in Troy*, 125.

pletely ignores how Petrarch from time to time examines the complex relationship between writing and self, with the experience of time as the complicating element. Greene overlooks the subtle critique of the imitation theories we meet in Petrarch's works, and consequently his doubts on the archaeological hermeneutics' assumptions of the mystical relationship between writing and self, which should make it possible to conclude from the text to the author. As Carol Everhart Quillen has pointed out, the problem with the "objective" philological practice of the humanists was that it took for granted a certain view of the self which involved a connection between authorship and identity: The humanists regarded the author as a unified, coherent self who informed and explained his work.⁸ The possibility of building bridges to the past, to reconstruct the fragments of the classical period, rested on an understanding of the self which implied that we can deduce from the writings to the intentions of the author, and that the original intentions are attainable across time and space. In this way a new kind of metaphysic, a metaphysic of the self, seemed to replace the medieval metaphysic of the allegoresis. In my opinion, Petrarch challenged this metaphysic of the self at the same time as he stressed that our personal experiences and biographical individuality represent the concrete realm and the only point of departure of true knowledge. Thus he connected knowledge to ethic and rhetoric.

Giuseppe Mazzotta has a quite different approach to Petrarch than Freccero and Greene. According to Mazzotta, Petrarch knows very well that any idea of unity and substantiality of self is doomed to be partial because of the distance between language and desire: while the illusion of desire always is an elusive and unattainable totality, language "betrays desire, both in the sense that it reveals desire, is its spy, and because language bears an essential otherness to desire that generates it."⁹ The shiftiness of Laura, he explains, the many variants of her name, such as "l'aura", "auro", "lauro", and "laurea", shows that desire is always covered under false names of which each is a mask for the restless instability of desire. The elusive character of the beloved woman is in other words a consequence of the poet's awareness of the inadequacy of language and his sense of the impossibility to give a stable figuration of the self.

This awareness of the distance between desire and language is connected to the experience of time, but it is not a result of unconscious "fear of time" as Greene proposed. Mazzotta suggests instead that in his Latin as

⁸Quillen, *Rereading the Renaissance*, 212-213.

⁹Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, 78.

well as in his Italian works Petrarch confronts the notion of a coherent, centred self incorporating time and history *within* the self: "In Petrarch's poetry, time's ruptured dimensions (past, fleeting present, and expectation of the future) are internalized within the self, and they are even identified as the constitutive, broken pieces of oneself."¹⁰ The self, then, is subjected to constraints of time and place, and is thus divided and fragmented. However, as Mazzotta strongly emphasizes, this idea also has a counterpart: despite the fragmentary status of the self, Petrarch presents the self as "the absolutely responsible subject of his own existential choices and as the source from which flows all objectivity."¹¹ The self has no security and permanence, but is subjected to the same fugacity and capricious vicissitudes of life as the body, a notion that is continually reflected upon in the text by Petrarch. However, his obsession with the self, his continuous self-explorations, reveals a conviction of that knowledge of one's own biographical individuality, hidden in the classical maxim *nosce te ipsum*, is the only true and concrete realm of all genuine knowledge.

In his three letters on imitation (*Fam.* I, 8; XXII, 2 and XXIII, 19) Petrarch elaborates intricate thoughts on reading and writing which seem to serve as a theoretical framework for his own, as well as for later humanists' practices. The central ideas in these letters are that through an extensive reading of classical literature, the author will make himself familiar with this heroic past and through an imitation process of the classical ideals he will be able to emulate the classical standards and articulate his own style or individuality. The most striking aspect of Petrarch's imitation theories—and something which is more clearly stressed by him than by his classical sources, Cicero, Quintilian and Seneca — is the emphasis on the *individual* in the imitation process.¹² The individual and the singular have to be protected in both the imitator and the model, and to articulate a personal voice is the main objective of a true poet.

To repeat, let us write neither in the style of one or another writer, but in a style uniquely ours although gathered from a variety of sources. That writer is happier who does not, like the bees, collect a number of scattered things, but instead after the example of certain not much larger

¹⁰Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, 49.

¹¹Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, 83.

¹²This is also emphasized by Martin L. McLaughlin, who has made the most thorough and systematic reading of Petrarch's letters on imitation in his study *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance*.

worms from whose bodies silk is produced, prefers to produce his own thought and speech—provided that the sense is serious and true and his style is ornate. But in truth, this talent is given to no one or to very few.¹³

A sign of the greatest elegance and skill would, in other words, be to create one's *own* thought and speech; but this is nearly impossible, Petrarch argues, for many reasons. Seneca's advice, therefore, seems more useful to him. Referring to his counsel in *Epistulae* 84 on imitating the bees which produce wax and honey through an astonishing process of transformation, Petrarch recommends that authors repeat and vary gathered scraps of the past and put them together in new combinations, transforming them through one's own style. As Mazzotta writes about the style of Petrarch, "the mechanism of imitation comes forth as a unique transmutation of what is radically second hand."¹⁴ What is very interesting, and which I have not seen commented upon before, is that in a strange way Petrarch seems to regard reading and writing as nearly inverted activities. To read is on the one hand an uncovering process and on the other hand a process of appropriation and internalization. Similarly, to write is on the one hand described as a process of externalization and alienation while on the other hand it is a covering process.

A slow reading of the classics involves an uncovering of their literary sources. Petrarch proclaims that he has discovered a lot of such scraps borrowed from others among the classical authors, as for instance Vergil, who not only translated innumerable verses from Greek into Latin, but transferred them from foreign works into his own. This kind of uncovering process, or *subreading*, is, however, difficult and requires a deep familiarity with the texts. In any case, the texts in which Petrarch has discovered literary borrowings in are works by authors who he deeply admires and who he has read over and over again from his earliest childhood. Petrarch has studied the classics so profoundly, he explains, that they are not only familiar to him, they have become part of his body and mind:

I ate in the morning what I would digest in the evening, I swallowed as

¹³*Fam.* I, 8, 5: "Rursus nec huius stilum aut illius, sed unum nostrum conflatum ex pluribus habeamus; felicius quidem non apium more passim sparsa colligere, sed quorundam haud multo maiorum vernium exemplo, quorum ex visceribus sericum prodit, ex se ipso sapere potius et loqui, dummodo et sensus gravi ac verus et sermo esset ornatus. Verum, quia hoc aut nulli prorsus aut paucissimis datum est." Here and hereafter, the English quotations from the letters of Petrarch are taken from the translation by Aldo Bernardo.

¹⁴Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, 94.

a boy what I would ruminate upon as an older man. I have thoroughly absorbed these writings, implanting them not only in my memory but in my marrow, and they have so become one with my mind that were I never to read them for the remainder of my life, they would cling to me, having taken root in the innermost recesses of my mind.¹⁵

A slow and hesitant reading of the classics involves, on the one hand, an uncovering of the literary models of the texts, but on the other hand such reading leads to an internalization, resulting in the fact that these writings grow together with the thoughts of the reader and become a part of his universe of experiences.

When it comes to writing, however, it is of extreme importance to discern between what is coming from others and what belongs to one self. Only through a neat sorting process, where things that have become familiar are separated as something alien, as something that are not ours, are we able to create or articulate our own style. We have to *assimilate* history to learn from it, and *dissimilate* it to create our own individuality. To know history is to know one self. An author needs to know the words that have wandered through history, the relative meaning of the words as well as the different sources of the sentences and expressions in order to discern what belongs to him, and hence producing his own style. Without this historical consciousness, without this careful sorting work, the author risks repeating what has already been written by others. Unconscious reuse can only result in literary and linguistic clichés and to a blurring of the distinctiveness of the author, of his personal style.

The author, however, does not need only to distinguish his own voice from others'. The good author manages to articulate his own style on basis of imitation of many sources, in order to cover his borrowings. In an imitative process an author either has to make his sources stand out—*alienis dictis*—or to transform them in such a way that they become something quite different. As Petrarch explains to Boccaccio: "I grant that I like to embellish my life with sayings and admonitions of others, but not my writing unless I acknowledge the author or make some significant change."¹⁶

¹⁵*Fam.* XXII, 2 12–13: "[...] mane comedi quod sero digerem, hausi puer quod senior ruminarem. Hec se michi tam familiariter ingessere et non modo memorie sed medullis affixa sunt unumque cum ingenio facta sunt meo, ut etsi per omnem vitam amplius non legantur, ipsa quidem hereant, actis in intima animi parte radicibus."

¹⁶*Fam.* XXII, 2, 16: "Vitam michi alienis dictis ac monitus ornare, fateor, est animus, non stilum; nisi vel prolato auctore vel mutatione insigni."

The style has to be developed by many sources, at the same time as the imitation should be covered. To create a style involves to make different what is similar, or to learn from our models, but also to differ from them in order to articulate our own individuality, to follow well-trodden paths, but simultaneously cover our tracks, so they can be sensed only in silent meditation by the readers—in “*tacita mentis indagine*”:

An imitator must take care to write something similar yet not identical to the original, and that similarity must not be like the image to its original in painting where the greater the similarity the greater the praise of the artist, but rather like that of a son to his father. While often very different in their individual features, they have a certain something our painters call an ‘air’, especially noticeable about the face and eyes, that produces a resemblance; seeing the son’s face, we are reminded of the father’s, although if it came to measurement, the features would all be different, but there is something subtle that creates this effect. We must thus see to it that if there is something similar, there is also a great deal that is dissimilar, and that the similar be elusive and unable to be extricated except in silent meditation, for the resemblance is to be felt rather than expressed.¹⁷

The style of an author is connected to his self, to his individuality, but at the same time it is a result of an assimilation and transformation of the styles of others. The style is presented, then, as the mystical principle in Petrarch’s imitation theories: it is the secret that cannot be expressed in words, but which uncover the individuality as well as its relationship to the author. The style is the access to the mind of the author, across the gap of time, all together as it covers or contains his historical roots.

As a curiosity, *stile* in Italian or *stylus* in Latin both signify literary style as well as the writing tool, the pen—an ambiguity that Petrarch often plays

¹⁷ *Fam.* XXIII, 19, 11–13: “[...] curandum imitatori ut quod scribit simile non idem sit, eamque similitudinem talem esse oportere, non qualis est imaginis ad eum cuius imago est, que quo similior eo maior laus artificis, sed qualis filii ad patrem In quibus cum magna sepe diversitas sit membrorum, umbra quedam et quem pictores nostri aerem vocant, qui in vultu inque oculis maxime cernitur, similitudinem illam facit, que statim vis filio, patris in memoriam nos reducat, cum tamen si res ad mensuram redeat, omnia sint diversa; sed est ibi nescio quid occultum quod hanc habeat vim. Sic et nobis providendum ut cum simile aliquid sit, multa sint dissimilia, et id ipsum simile lateat ne deprehendi possit nisi *tacita mentis indagine*, ut intelligi simile queat potiusquam dici. Utendum igitur ingenio alieno utendumque coloribus, abstinendum verbis; illa enim similitudo latet, hec eminet; illa poetas facit, hec simias.”

upon, especially in his poetry. The style appears as something enigmatic then. It is something outward, a tool, and at the same time a veil covering the inner, the soul or the self, of the author. The style is articulated in words, but is also something that cannot be expressed; it is both the concrete characters and the emptiness between them. The style is mobile, it can be developed, but it is also an expression for something constant, something individual and personal in our voice and speech. The style is something that both creates and is created. It is referential, as an imprint of our inward self, and something that is produced in contact with others. In this way, we might say the style contains both *res* and *verba*, form and content, sign and reference.

Through his imitation theories, Petrarch suggests, as we have seen, an approach to other human beings or to other cultures, to discourses of meaning that are not our own. It is *style* we have to search for in the fragments of the past, in the actual ruins as well as in the writings. At the same time style is the tool we have in order to express our own individuality. The process of imitation appears to be a conversation with the past, which teaches the author both to listen and to learn from others—and to articulate his own experiences. The poet's voice is an echo of many voices, the poet's words and thoughts resound with the words and thoughts of others. A purely individual language would be an incomprehensible and meaningless babbling, and a complete repetition of other's speeches would transform the poet to nothing more than an ape. Style, however, guarantees the individual expression in a universal form. It shows how the poet takes part in history and how he puts his mark on it. Style, we might say, is the fingerprint of the poet, which reveals his ancestors, which creates his individuality—and which later generations can sense and imitate through silent meditation or *subreading*.

As I have tried to demonstrate, these imitation letters establish a close connection between writing or style and the self. Style is the prolongation of the self and therefore also provides access to the author's inner life, to his intentions and to the true meaning of the text. It is this secret link between the writing and the self which can be defined as the metaphysical principle of humanistic hermeneutics. But although Petrarch is an initiator of the reading and writing practices of the humanists, he also makes inquiries from time to time about their metaphysical premises. He expresses doubt concerning the possibility of finding the correct meaning or interpretation of the old texts or to being able to grasp the intentions of the ancient authors. Moreover, he constantly discusses the gap or the distance between himself and his own writings.

The distance in time seems to be the crucial point which separates him from the classical authors. As he writes to a friend of his older days: "Who would dare proclaim amidst so much obscurity what the truth is in something deliberately hidden? Who would affirm unhesitatingly that those authors, thousands of years ago, meant this, not something else?"¹⁸ In other words, the thousand of years makes it impossible to grasp what the classical authors once had in their mind. The distance in time rather permits the reader to interpret them in his own way, after what seems right, true or useful to him.

The gap between now and then not only separates the poet as a reader from the intentions of the classical authors, it also separates his contemporary readers from his own intentions. Petrarch's constant revisions of his own writings, recalls of letters for further corrections and so on, are certainly a way of defining the right meaning or interpretation of his texts. But he also admits the impossibility of such a definition. Resigned and dejected he complains in a letter to Boccaccio that also his own writings will be read and interpreted by the crowd independent of his own intentions, as he himself reads and interprets the texts of the ancient authors as he prefers.¹⁹

The strange thing is, however, that the distance in time not only detaches him as a reader from the ancient authors and as a writer from his public; the distance also separates him from himself and his own writings. In a letter to Federigo Aretino, for instance (*Sen.* IV, 5), he proclaims that he does not recognize his own poems from his younger days. They are hardly his ("iam vix meum"). Because of the distance in time he is not familiar with them anymore.

The relationship between style and self, writing and living, are nowhere reflected upon in a more subtle and intimate way than in the opening letter of his huge collection *Letters on Familiar Matters* (*Rerum familiarum libri*). The letter is written to Socrates, which was Petrarch's fictitious name for one of his best friends, Ludwig van Kempen. Already in the opening of the letter, considerations upon time became apparent, the time which "has slipped through our fingers,"²⁰ and upon the year 1348,

¹⁸*Sen.* IV, 5: "Nam quis inter tot ambages rerum, quid in re qualibet studiosè abdita veri insit, sic vaticinari audeat, ut indubitanter affirmat, hoc illos, ante annorum millia sensisse non aliud [...]?"

¹⁹*Sen.* V, 2: "[...] intellexi tandem [...] meque et laborem meum inter vulgi manus laceratum iri."

²⁰*Fam.* I, 1, 1: "Tempora [...] inter digitos effluxerunt."

the year of the Black Death, which had caused the two friends irreparable losses and left them alone. The comfort is that time also will devour the survivors: "There is only one consolation in all this: we too shall follow those who preceded us."²¹ As a preparation for the last journey, Petrarch now wants to give an account of his life and clear up in his possessions: "For me, I am arranging my belongings in little bundles, as wanderers are wont to do" he explains.²² He does not have much. His belongings are mostly his great number of writings of different kinds that lie scattered and neglected throughout his house.

An uncanny and dark atmosphere dominates the description of how he collects his writings, the fragmented testimonies of his life, only to be thrown into the fire. He searches in squalid containers lying in hidden places and pulls out dusty writings half destroyed by decay. He is attacked by mice, worms and spiders that scramble over the old manuscripts. Freud could not have described the many mazes of the mind, the secret closet of the psyche, in a more dramatic way. That the author is wandering through his mental rooms as well as the remote corners of his house, is soon clear enough. When he is on his way to throw everything into the fire, he is tempted to turn over the leaves, and asks himself: "What stops you from looking behind like a tired traveller from a vantage point after a long journey and slowly recalling the memories and cares of your youth?"²³ The first thing he realizes while he reads is how much he himself has changed:

[...] when I began turning over the papers piled at random in no particular order, I was astonished to notice how varied and how disordered their general aspects appeared. I could hardly recognize certain ones, not so much because of their form but because of the changed nature of my own understanding.²⁴

The relationship between the inner and the outer, the writings and the self, is obvious. The meeting with the fragments of the past uncovers his

²¹ *Fam.* I, 1, 2: "Unum est solamen: sequemur et ipsi quos premisimus."

²² *Fam.* I, 1, 3: "[...] ego iam sarcinulas compono, et quod migraturi solent, quid mecum deferam."

²³ *Fam.* I, 1, 4: "Et quid' inquam, 'prohibet, velut e specula fessum longo itinere viatorem, in terga respicere et gradatim adolescentie tue curas metientem recognoscere?'"

²⁴ *Fam.* I, 1, 5: "Sed temere congesta nullo ordine versanti, mirum dictu quam discolor et quam turbida rerum facies occurreret; ut quedam, non tam specie illorum quam intellectus mei acie mutata, vix ipse cognoscerem."

changeable nature as well as the fugacity of the physical world. The dusty, worm-eaten manuscripts lie in front of him as witnesses of his own fragmented, disordered and unstable self—yes, they seem so strange to him that he is hardly able to recognize these earlier versions of himself. The claim is that the self is subjected to changes just like the physical reality, something that disturbs the idea of a unified, coherent self, which was the underlying principle for the reading and writing practices of the humanists. The presupposed eternal or perpetual essence of our nature, which guarantees our personality throughout the vicissitudes of life, is in other words as variable as time itself.

After having decided to dedicate a small pile of the letters, hidden in a corner, and still not burned, to Socrates, Petrarch apologizes for the uneven style of the letters. The style seems to be unequal and full of contradictions because of the variety of subject matters, the shifting intentions, and the different moods of the author. To reconstruct an unambiguous, unique intention of the author on the basis of the letters is therefore impossible.

To be accustomed to the personality of only one person, to know what he likes to hear, and what you should say, is a good quality in a writer, Petrarch explains. According to him Epicurus and Cicero therefore wrote letters to only three people and Seneca just to one. My fate, he complains, has unfortunately been completely different: "I have spent all my life, to this moment, in almost constant travel. Compare my wanderings to those of Ulysses."²⁵ Petrarch then makes a draft of his life and concludes by declaring that he has made lots of acquaintances during these storms of his life. Inevitably, he had to correspond with so many and so different people, that when he rereads his letters, he seems to be constantly contradicting himself.

The lack of a uniform style in the letters, according to Petrarch, has obviously been caused by many reasons: the different people to whom the letters are addressed, the different subject matter, his ever changing experiences, his shifting intentions and his varieties of mood have all created a great variety of style as far as his letters are concerned. Still, he has always spoken about his state of mind, he assures—"animi mei status." The collection of letters might in this way be considered a portrait of himself, but a portrait which he is rather ashamed of because it is so unpolished, so variable and contradictory. I am ashamed of a life fallen into excessive softness,

²⁵ *Fam.* 1, 1, 21: "Michi autem sors longe alia; nempe cui usque ad hoc tempus vita pene omni in peregrinatione transacta est. Ulixeos errores erroribus meis confer."

he confesses: "My style was strong and sober in the early years, an indicator of a truly strong mind [...]. With the passage of time it became weaker and more humble and seemed to lack strength of character."²⁶ Especially the many bitter experiences with the pestilence have infected his style. The deaths of his friends and of an entire world have had consequences regarding his way of writing. The thought of his own death, however, has made himself bolder:

After all, what can frighten someone who has struggled with death so many times? [...]. You will see my actions daily become more fearless and my words more bold. And should any worthy cause require a stronger style you will see style itself become more vigorous.²⁷

The pen, in this quotation, behaves like a muscle ("stilus ipse nervosior"), a muscle that is strengthened and weakened in step with the changes of time. The style or the pen is running parallel to time as an indicator or the hand of a clock. To live and to write, then, seems identical to Petrarch. "Without question, a great number of subjects will present themselves, but I welcome this because for me writing and living are the same thing and I hope will be so to the very end."²⁸

In the opening letter of *Familiars*, Petrarch articulates complex theories on the relationship between writing and life, style and self. He maintains that there is a close connection between authorship and identity, and that the style can be considered a prolongation of the author's self, as the muscle of his soul. But he also explains that it is impossible for the reader to construct a complete picture of the author on the basis of the writings. Every letter mirrors only a moment, a particular experience or a single mood of the perpetual wanderer portrayed in the text. The time interferes and creates a divergence between writing and living. The reader may perhaps try to gather the fragments into a coherent whole, as Petrarch invites the reader to do with the collection of his poems, *Rerum vulgarium frag-*

²⁶*Fam.* I, 1, 21: "Michi autem sors longe alia; nempe cui usque ad hoc tempus vita pene omni in peregrinatione transacta est. Ulixeos errores erroribus meis confer."

²⁷*Fam.* I, 1, 44: "Talis ille vir tantus in doloribus suis fuit; talis ego in meis fueram [...] Animosius in dies agere videbis, animosius loqui; et siquid forte stilo dignum se obtulerit, erit stilus ipse nervosior."

²⁸*Fam.* I, 1, 44: "Multa sane se offerent: scribendi enim michi vivendique unus, ut auguror, finis erit."

menta. But the narrative is not yet over, he explains, as the life itself has not ended. As long as he has friends, he will write, and as long as he writes, he is alive. Only death will finish the work: "Only then will I no longer feel this obligation and will have to consider this work ended when you hear that I am dead and that I am freed from all labours of life. In the meantime I shall continue along the path I have been following [...]"²⁹ Although living and writing, the pen and the self, run parallel, they will never merge. The entire life cannot be caught by the pen, and the pen will never be one with life. A merging is only possible when the time of the poet is ended and the sound of his pen is heard no more.

Petrarch's critique of humanist hermeneutics may seem rather modern discussing problems which we are familiar with in contemporary methodological and scholarly debates. I would suggest, however, that this modernity is due to the fact that Humanism and the humanist tradition is much more ambiguous than we often are willing to acknowledge. Petrarch's Italian poems and his extensive work in Latin reveal an experience of historicity, of the radical instability of the world and the temporal fluidity of one's own existence, which is far more fundamental, complex and conscious than a naive "fear of time." As Petrarch defends the study of the classical *auctores* and tries to elaborate a correct, contextual reading of them, he also questions the possibility to reconstruct the right intentions of the ancient authors at all. At the same time as he emphasizes the necessity of the transformative and individual in the imitation process in order to be an author, he formulates a deep distrust to the *auctor* conception itself. The time interferes and makes it impossible to connect the text to a stable self and to a fixed meaning. As the style or the self is mobile and developed by many sources, the meaning is created in a web of interlocation between the reader and the author, present and past. The meaning is in other words partly dependant upon the reader or the interpreter himself. This is how Petrarch connects knowledge to ethic and rhetoric: Knowledge is a result of our existential choices and of our dialogue with other human beings.

I would also suggest that the seemingly modern aspects of Petrarch's reading and writing practices are the result of a phenomenon that I would like to call the "necessity of anachronism." In accordance with Petrarch it is not only impossible to break through our own individual horizons. The values and ethical frameworks hidden in the historical folds of the lan-

²⁹*Fam.* I, 1, 45: "Tum demum et michi immunitatem huius muneris quesitam et huic operi positum finem scito, cum me defunctum et cunctis vite laboribus absolutum noveris. Interea iter inceptum sequor [...]."

guage, which constitutes us and at the same time goes beyond us, are in fact the only way through which we can listen to distant voices and discover new aspects in the remnants of the past. However, Petrarch never seems to maintain one thing without pointing to the opposite. As his style is ever changing, his subjects varied and his self-portrait always shifting, his thoughts are contradictory and constantly in movement as well. This is what makes him a poet. His writings, the sound of his pen, tease our desire to interpret and force us to know ourselves, our history and our culture always in new terms.

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