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PETRARCH'S *RERUM VULGARIVM FRAGMENTA*:
MOURNING LAURA

Petrarch is now chiefly celebrated as the author of Italian poetry, of the *Rerum vulgariū fragmenta*. While he was still living, however, he wrote most copiously in Latin as a way of safeguarding his name with posterity. With his unfinished epic poem in Latin, *Africa*, on the theme of the second Punic war, he earned the crown of poet laureate in a solemn ceremony held in Rome in 1341. Time's inexorable ticking and its power to obliterate horrified Petrarch, both personally and professionally. At a difficult juncture in the history of the Italian vernacular, while Italy was not politically or linguistically unified, the poet was troubled by the susceptibility of his Italian poems to being distorted by common readers. He repeatedly swore indifference toward the vernacular compositions.¹ In private, however, the poems secretly received Petrarch's continuing attention until his last days; in fact, he was still in the process of renumbering the last thirty poems of the collection when he died.

Significantly, there is very little mention of Laura in Petrarch's extensive Latin writings and no mention of her in the oration delivered by the poet on the occasion of his highest professional achievement, his coronation as poet laureate in Rome, where he alluded, instead, to the mythological story of Apollo's consecration of the laurels as a result of his pursuit of a nymph who assumes arboreal form in a metamorphosis effected to escape his possession, as the paradigm of the poet's pursuit of his laurels. His *Fragmenta*, seemingly composed out of compulsion to redress his most immediate longings for Laura, tell a multi-faceted story rather than focusing exclusively on an elusive woman. With them Petrarch exposes the most intimate nuances of his illegitimate passion for her (and of his moral crisis), insisting on the uniqueness of his predicament, yet he was prudent to include in the collection multiple poems on entirely different subjects (politics and friendships, for instance), poems which would illustrate how the vernacular functions in the real world and not just in matters of the heart.

In sonnet 90 Petrarch describes his beloved in flight: her blond hair is scattered and knotted by the wind: "Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi / che

'n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea." ("Her golden hair was loosed to the breeze, which turned it in a / thousand sweet knots."[(90. 1-2)])² Fleeting, words attain the unimaginable: they make time stand still and arrest Laura's escape.³ This vision, more than any other, crystallizes the poet's immoderate love and the ephemeral woman who inspires it. This image, furthermore, suggests the paradox of Petrarch's lyrical project in its entirety. Laura's hair, at times flowing in the wind, at times knotted by it, provides the link between the defining themes of the text and its formal logic. Petrarch's *Fragmenta*, to some extent, seem to be the spontaneous expression of an unbridled passion, yet they are meticulously collected and ordered. As soon as the *Fragmenta* allow Petrarch to enjoy momentary release from his relentless obsession, they also renew the emotions that they should redress.

Laura's image throughout the *Fragmenta* is that of a different order of being, a flickering apparition with attributes rather than features. Her shimmering figure comes in and out of focus and her full description, the poet would have us believe, transcends his rhetorical competence ("manca l'ardir, l'ingegno et l'arte"—"there fails my daring, my wit, and my art" [309. 14]). Thus Petrarch relies on the enumeration of a limited number of formalized discrete physical attributes that he reiterates hypnotically, attributes which never come together into a portrait.⁴ Petrarch sprinkles the fragments of Laura's body throughout his scattered rhymes as radiant focal points: her "bella ignuda mano" ("beautiful naked hand" [200.1]), "bel giovenil petto" ("lovely youthful breast" [37.102]), "begli occhi" and "bel guardo sereno" ("beautiful eyes" and "lovely clear gaze" [37. 74 & 83]), "piedi" ("feet" [292. 2]) and, of course, "chiome d'or" ("locks of fine gold" [159. 6]).⁵ Her ephemeral presence can be surmised, obliquely, through faint traces like the imprint of her foot ("et del bel piede alcun vestigio serbe"—"and keep some print of her lovely foot," [162. 4]) or an abandoned glove ("candido leggiadretto et caro guanto,"—"White, light, and dear glove" [199. 9]).⁶ It is equally impossible to pin down Laura's personality given the narrow range of expression granted her by the poet. She laughs ("dolce ride"—"sweetly laughs" [159. 14]), sometimes she sings like a siren ("quel celeste cantare che mi disface"—"that heavenly singing which so melts me"[220. 10]).⁷ Petrarch tells us that she speaks (her "dolce parlare"—"sweet speech," [205. 3] and "l'accorte parole"—"skilful words," [37. 86]), that her words command reverence and were instrumental in his *innamoramento* ("fanno altrui tremar di meraviglia"—"make one tremble with wonder" [200. 12]), but we have negligible access to the content of her utterances. It is the poet who recollects her words ("voi diceste allora"-

“you said then” [87. 9]), or imagines what she meant to say when he encountered her (“parea dir”—“she seemed to say” [33. 13]; “ne la fronte a Madonna avrei ben letto”—“on my lady’s brow I might have read” [331. 52]). Paradoxically, Laura grows increasingly available after she dies, when she appears in the poet’s dreams (“in sonno” [250. 1]).⁸ Laura taunts Petrarch with the frustration of empty embraces (“Beato in sogno, e di languir contento,/ d’abbracciar l’ombra e seguir l’aura estiva,”—“blessed in sleep and satisfied to languish, to embrace shadows,/ and to pursue the summer breeze,” [212, 1-2]);⁹ her physical unavailability drives Petrarch into a state of emotional paralysis, and yet she is the indispensable motivation of a poetic corpus which will earn him the laurel and circulation among generations of readers.

The key question to address is not what the *Rime sparse* are about, but rather what position they individually adopt on the fluidity of perception that they depict with so much virtuosity. At the outset of the *Fragmenta* the reader is faced with the identity of a poetic compilation that announces itself as split: the collection bears a Latin title (*Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*) and a vernacular body (presumably the contrast between a classical and unchanging language and a new and impermanent one would underscore the fragmentation of the following poems).¹⁰ The opening sonnet confirms the complicated nature of Petrarch’s project. In spite of its introductory capacity, it does not firmly situate the poet:

Voi ch’ascoltate in rime sparse il suono
di quei sospiri ond’io nudriva il core
in sul mio primo giovanile errore,
quand’era in parte altr’uom da quel ch’i’ sono: (1. 1-4)

You who hear in scattered rhymes the sound of those sighs
with which I nourished my heart during my first youthful error,
when I was in part another man from what I am now.

Sonnet 1 introduces a subject whose attitude of repentance is incomplete, an incoherent self, besieged by an inner conflict who swings between lucidity and emotion, encapsulated in the utterances “piango” and “ragiono.” These are emotions at odds with one another that require the poet to admit to his psychic disintegration and rhetorical meltdown (“di me medesimo meco mi vergogno”—“I am ashamed of myself within”). And yet, seemingly, Petrarch inaugurated his lyrical sequence with this sonnet in order to suggest that identity should be undivided, static and finished. Petrarch teases the reader with the phantom of a conversion which would give a strong sense of direction to his text and structure its content in a

manner comparable to the use of a vanishing point for organizing spatial perspective. By postponing his conversion, the signifying horizon of his lyrical collection vanishes giving way to its multiplicity and points of dispersal.

In an unpersuasive palinodic move the poet, like Guido da Montefeltro in Dante's *Inferno*,¹¹ entertains the fallacious position of recanting a crime (yet undisclosed) and looking for absolution before sinning. It is, in fact, only in sonnet 2 that Petrarch confesses his offense, his "errore," and then proceeds to reiterate it throughout the scattered rhymes. The recantatory mood of sonnet 1 (*recantare* indeed comprises etymologically both the element of renunciation and repetition), is literalized by the reiteration of the "giovenile errore." Petrarch presents a curious double version of his *innamoramento* in sonnets 2 and 3:

Per fare una leggiadra sua vendetta
e punire un dì ben mille offese,
celatamente Amor l'arco riprese,
come uom ch'a nocer luogo e tempo aspetta.

Era la mia vertute al cor ristretta
per far ivi e ne gli occhi sue difese,
quando 'l colpo mortal là giù discese,
ove solea spuntarsi ogni saetta; (2. 1-8)

To take a graceful revenge and to punish in one day a thousand offenses, Love took up his bow again secretly, like a man who waits for the time and place to hurt.

My vital power was concentrated in my heart, to make there and in my eyes his defense, when the fatal blow fell where every previous arrow had been blunted;

Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro
per la pietà del suo fattore i rai
quando i' fui preso, et non me ne guardai,
che i be' vostr' occhi, Donna, mi legaro.

Tempo non mi pareo da far riparo
contr'a' colpi d'Amor; però m'andai
secur, senza sospetto; onde i miei guai
nel commune dolor s'incominciaro. (3. 1-8)

It was the day when the sun's rays turned pale with grief for his Maker when I was taken, and I did not defend myself against it, for your lovely eyes, Lady, bound me.

It did not seem to me a time for being on guard against Love's blows; therefore I went confident and without fear, so my misfortunes began in the midst of the universal woe.

Literal and syntactical echoes ("Era [...]quando") call attention to the fact that one poem reproduces (though reflected by a distorting mirror) the other. The presentation of the initial Ovidian scene of wounding in sonnet 2 is accommodated to a Christian setting when sonnet 3 uncovers the liturgical occasion (Good Friday) that rendered the poet unarmed and thereby brings the drama of the Fall to bear on his amorous experience.¹² In this way Petrarch brings forth to bear two major, though eclectic, intertexts: profane and sacred, Ovid and the Bible; he sacrilegiously intersects incompatible versions of the same events.¹³ By evoking the figure of the Passion and examining his private suffering against the redemptive suffering of Christ, he implicitly compares his wounds as an unrequited lover to the wounds of Christ on the cross. Suffering is advanced as the condition for writing and his poetry, pouring out of a torn subject, seems almost to hemorrhage from his wounds.¹⁴

As the sequence unfolds, the poet's world, dimmed by the eclipse brought about by Christ's passion in sonnet 3, is illuminated and enlivened by the woman who is born in sonnet 4, who becomes his new, personal sun, yet one connected to Christ by the irreverent comparison of human birth to the mystery of the incarnation (4. 9-14).¹⁵ This initial sequence hardly equips the reader with enough elements to construct a romantic plot. With its allusions to physical death (in sonnets 2 and 3), however, Petrarch reminds his readers that beginnings and epilogues tend to be one and the same in habitual narratives of conversion. In poem 5 the sequence culminates with the simultaneous naming and scattering of the woman (who has thus remained unidentified): "LAUdando" (5. 3); "Real" (5. 5); "Taci" (5. 7); "LAUdare et Reverire" (5. 9); "morTAl" (5. 14). "Laureta" is clearly not vulnerable to the arrows of love (she is not wounded by them), she invades every facet of the poet's universe but in the form of graphic signs, a pure signifier composed and decomposed at the poet's will. The final syllable of her name, in the poem's final line, coincides with the poet's last breath and her death ("il fin"). The poet, who now chooses to identify with Apollo (the Sun), secularizes the spectacle of Christ's crucifixion (when the sun was reverently concealed) and displaces it with the audacity of his professional endeavour. It is Laura, not the mystery of the incarnation, who exceeds his grasp and requires stronger shoulders (the "omeri," which reverently allude to Petrarch's ideal mentor, Homer).

The poet's mental image of Laura is the sensual basis of a love that Petrarch is unable to sublimate into a symbolic occasion for elevation. Intermittently penitent, Petrarch recognizes the danger of a desire that has caused his own spiritual degeneration into a fragmented being. In his most directly personal work, the scathingly introspective *De secretu conflictu*

curarum mearum,¹⁶ Petrarch undertakes a prolonged attempt at spiritual healing. During a three-day dialogue between himself and his spiritual mentor, St. Augustine, he searches his soul and portrays his secular and spiritual aspirations competing in a struggle that endures into a lingering conflict rather than ending in conversion. In the *Fragmenta*, analogously, he correlates his long and painful pursuit of Laura to a continuous struggle which fails to produce a definitive religious epiphany. Against the lofty background of Augustinian orthodoxy it is Laura who merits the applause of the Saint, while Petrarch can bring himself only to confess his failure in relation to his simultaneous commitments to a view of agency (and authorship) as resolved, coherent and self continuous. Laura's unwavering virtue ("Contra autem illa propositi tenax et semper una permansit"—"She always held firm and true to herself" [p. 222]),¹⁷ draws attention to the spiritual fragmentation of the poet and reminds us of his shortcomings.

The implacably personal tale of Petrarch's amorous afflictions (suggestively designated by Augustinus in the *Secretum* as a plague, "tuam pestis" [p. 224]), unfolds against the background of a real epidemic breakout, the Black Death, which swept through Europe twice during Petrarch's life (in 1348 and again in 1361) with devastating consequences and was for all survivors an overwhelming reminder of the uncertainty of life.¹⁸ Petrarch's *Familiars*,¹⁹ an immense epistolary corpus addressed to real and imagined recipients that Petrarch organized and revised with zeal equal to that which went into his vernacular poems, is replete with instances where he confesses his vulnerability to the emotional horrors of the catastrophic event and admits his despair. The dedicatory letter brings his response to the tragedies of epidemic loss to the forefront and thus locates his introspective writing within a large, historical perspective:

Ecce, iam fere omnia tentavimus, at nusquam requies...Tempora, ut aiunt, inter digitos effluerunt; spes nostre veteres cum amicis sepulte sunt. Millesimus trecentessimus quadragesimus octavus annus est, qui nos solos atque inopes fecit. (*Familiars*, 1. 1)

I have attempted almost everything and I have found peace nowhere...Time, it is said, slipped through my fingers; my old hopes are buried with my friends. The year 1348 has left me alone and in despair.

In Petrarch's *Rime* the death of Laura occurs during an outbreak of the great epidemic of 1348.²⁰ The death of Laura and Petrarch's *innamora-mento*, in fact, are the two single events of the *Fragmenta* presented with chronological certainty. This is a striking deviation from the habitual ambiguity of the temporal framework of the *Fragmenta*:

Mille trecento ventisette, a punto
 su l'ora prima, il dì sesto d'aprile,
 nel laberinto intraì, né veggio ond'esca. (211. 12-14)

One thousand three hundred twenty-seven, exactly at the first
 hour of the sixth day of April, I entered the labyrinth, nor do I
 see where I may get out of it.

"Sai che 'n mille trecento quarantotto,
 il dì sesto d'aprile, in l'ora prima
 del corpo uscìo quell'anima beata." (336. 12-14)

"You know that in 1348,, on the sixth day of April, at the first hour,
 that blessed soul left the body."

Petrarch's love blossoms at a specific point in his life and is suddenly (and prematurely) affected by the woman's death, which strikes at another unique moment. Petrarch's lyrical collection is condemned to exist in time, haunted by this stunning, almost insolent coincidence: Laura's death occurs on an anniversary of the day in which the poet first saw her, a symmetry blatantly advertised by Petrarch's identical presentation of the two dates in the final *terzine* of sonnets 211 and 336. It is no accident that the date of the poet's entry into the labyrinth of love (his spiritual death) and Laura's physical death are coordinated. What is more, the poet has fallen in love on Good Friday (the *feria sexta aprilis*), thus his personal tribulations shape up against the larger framework of Christ's crucifixion.²¹ Petrarch relies on the loaded symbolic potential implicit in the *feria sexta aprilis* to construct the moral fabric that underlies the whole collection of the *Fragmenta*. Since the collection is punctuated with fifteen poems commemorating his first encounter with Laura (which later converges with her death, 30, 50, 62, 79, 101, 107, 118, 122, 145, 212, 221, 266, 271, 278, 364, ranging from 1334 to 1358), each anniversary is a reminder of Laura's enduring hold over Petrarch's life. Whether Laura is dead or alive, the poet's perception of time is dangerously scanned in relation to her.

Even when she is alive, however, Laura seems dead, and mourning the essential ingredient to formulate a poetics which identifies in human frailty the stimulus behind human endeavours. When Petrarch depicts Laura at her most glorious, as in the frozen erotic tableaux presented in sonnet 90, he has to concede to the unyielding beat of time, aptly rendered by the reiteration of the word "or" ("ch'or ne son sì scarsi"— "which are now so stingy of it" [90. 4]; "et se non fosse or tale"— "and if she were not such now" [90. 13]). Laura's shimmering golden hair, scattered and knotted by the wind, her luminous eyes, her bearing, her voice, belong to a previous

time and state of being in the same way Petrarch's fragmented self is always linked to its past and imagined through metaphors of loss and desire.

In a letter addressed to Phillip, Bishop of Cavaillon (*Familiars* 24.1) Petrarch expressly equates writing (and reading) with death:

Continue morimur, ego dum hec scribo, tu dum leges, alii dum audient dumque non audient; ego quoque dum hec leges morirar, tu moreris dum hec scribo, ambo morimur, omnes morimur, semper morimur, numquam vivimus dum his sumus... (p. 1245)

We die continuously: myself while I am writing, you, while you are reading, others while they are listening (or not listening) to me. As you will be reading this letter, I will be dying, you are dying while I am writing to you, the two of us are dying, we are all dying, we are always dying, we are never living while we are here...

In the *Fragmenta* Petrarch uses metaphors reminiscent of Laura every time he describes the inescapable ticking of time, since his days move swifter than a deer ("I dì miei più leggier che nessuno cervo/fuggir come ombra"—"My days swifter than any deer, have fled like a shadow" [319.1]), time flies and beguiles him ("O tempo, O ciel volubil che fuggendo/inganni i ciechi et miseri mortali"—"O time, O revolving heavens that fleeing deceive us blind/ and wretched mortals." [355.1-2]), death is around the corner ("et sì come la vita/fugge et la Morte n'è sovra le spalle."—"see how time flies and life flees, and how Death /is at our backs." [128.98-99]). The transitory nature of time is punctuated by the dizzying rate of metamorphoses in canzone 23. This composition is reassessed by its companion poem, 323, as the end of the collection approaches, which depicts the demise of things known to be immortal and erects a poignantly enduring monument to impermanence. Death looms large over the *Fragmenta*, casting a huge shadow which introduces and propels the narrative forward towards its fulfillment, marking the relentless passage from frailty to silence, eternity, and disintegration in poem 366.

In a desperate attempt to relieve the anxiety provoked by the inexorable and unrepeatable events with which life is saturated—it has already brought Laura and will invariably usher the poet (and his work) to a state of oblivion—Petrarch looks for solutions to contain his dispersion and steady his course. Augustinus admonishes him, in the *Secretum*, that he renounce earthly (thus impermanent) pursuits. The Saint, thus, discredits the secular, courtly rationalizations adopted by Franciscus to justify himself, when he maintains that his love for Laura should become a path to salvation. Augustinus clearly spells out the incompatibility of the poet's infat-

uation for Laura (the creature) and his claims of devotion towards the Creator: “Ab amore celestium elongavit animum et a Creatore ad creaturam desiderium inclinavit” — “[She] strayed your soul from heavenly love and substituted your love for a creature for your love for the Creator.” (p. 216). The poet, at times, is painfully conscious of the action he must take in order to correct his mistakes. In the envoy of a powerfully penitential *sestina* “A la dolce ombra de le belle frondi” (142), echoing the idolatrous “Giovane donna sotto un verde lauro” (30) with palinodic intentions, he explicitly lays out his path to redemption from the idolatrous desires explored in the former poem:

Altr'amor, altre frondi, et altro lume,
 altro salir al ciel per altri poggi
 cerco (ché n'è ben tempo) et altri rami. (142. 37-39)

Another love, other leaves, and another light,
 another climbing to Heaven by other hills
 I seek (for it is indeed time), and other branches.

The insistence on the word “altro” reminds us of Augustine’s words in the *Secretum*, where the saint describes his conversion: “transformatus sum in alterum Augustinum,” — “I became transformed in another Augustine,” (p. 114). Petrarch is aware of his moral obligation to replace his double object of desire Laura/lauro with the “altri rami” of the tree/cross of Christ. The intermittently penitential moments in the *Rime* reiterate this view: “cosa bella e mortal passa e non dura” — “this beautiful mortal thing passes and does not endure” (248.8); “Ché mortal cosa amar con tanta fede/ quanta a Dio sol per debito convensi,/più si disdice a chi più pregio brama.” — “For the more one desires honor, the more one is forbidden to/love a mortal thing with the faith that belongs to God alone.” (264.99-101).²² Throughout the *Fragmenta*, in fact, Petrarch displays a keen awareness of his moral situation. This knowledge, however, does not inspire a radical and permanent change. Petrarch candidly confesses his weakness in the concluding line of a poem that echoes the *Secretum* and, just like the prose dialogue, closes with a failed conversion: “et veggio 'l meglio, et al peggior m'appiglio.” — “and I see the better but I lay hold on the worse.” (264.136). Petrarch’s lack of resolution is underscored by the strategy displayed in the organization of his lyrical sequence. In fact, merely three poems after invoking the “altri rami,” he places a sinful poem that concludes with the statement: “sarò qual fui, vivrò com'io son visso” — “still I shall be what I/have been, shall live as I have lived” (145.13).

Petrarch thus remains transfixed by Laura's beauty and attempts to steady his course by disguising his transformation into a stone (and a questionable fulfillment of his family name) as a type of conversion. Under Laura's Medusa-like ability he turns into stone ("l volto di Medusa,/che facea marmo diventar la gente."—"the face of Medusa, which made people become marble." [179.10-11]; "et que belli occhi che i cor fanno smalti,"—"and those lovely eyes that turn hearts into stone" [213.9]).²³ He otherwise attempts to secure the evanescent goal of his desires by solidifying Laura into an object of religious worship. In either case, unwilling, or unable, to give up his investment in a mortal object, he accommodates his sinful predicament to a monumentalization of his passion. His sin, primarily, is not that of having strayed from religion for a worldly passion, but that of having made his love into a religion.²⁴

The poet openly admits to his propensity to commit the sin of idolatry by comparing his adoration of Laura to an old pilgrim's veneration of the *Veronica* in St. Peter's—the cloth carrying the imprint of Christ's image at the time when he was walking on Golgotha to be crucified. (16.9-14)²⁵ Petrarch's presentation of the *Veronica* raises crucial questions on Petrarch's spiritual claims and opens his poetry, which conveys them, to charges of moral perversion. The significance of the cloth is predicated upon the simultaneous belief in the truth of an incarnate God and in the belief that His visage is reproduced, perfectly, upon the cloth. Petrarch daringly employs the reliquary for poetic effect by inverting its legitimate claims: Christ figures as mere metaphor or image ("sembianza") while Laura has become a type of Christ ("forma vera").²⁶ Petrarch's desire to experience and enjoy the visible (Laura), furthermore, supersedes his duty to extrapolate the narrative of the crucifixion from the *Veronica*, in a fashion that is reminiscent of the *Rime*'s gathering of scattered fragments, on the requisite of organizing scattered stains into a plot that bespeaks a dramatic event.

Laura, momentarily collected into visions of static monumentality and transcendental perfection, often becomes an ornate reliquary: "vedi quant'arte dora e mperla e mostra/ l'abito eletto e mai non visto altrove," ("see how much skill has gilded and imperaled and incarnadined/ that noble body never seen elsewhere," [192.5-7]), "Muri eran d'alabastro e 'l tetto d'oro,/ d'avorio uscio, et fenestre di zaffiro" ("The walls were of alabaster and the roof of gold, the entrance/ of ivory and the windows of sapphire," [325.16-17]). She is also transformed into a jewelled cross: "duro lauro/ ch'a i rami di diamante et d'or le chiome." ("harsh laurel/ that has branches of diamond and golden locks." [30.23-24]), decorated with "topacii" ("topaz" [30. 37]),²⁷ revered by the poet as a shrine "l'adoro e 'nchino come cosa santa" ("I adore it and bow to it as to a/ holy thing," [228.14]).

This language is powerfully reminiscent of an astonishing letter to Giovanni Colonna (*Familiars* [1.4]) where Petrarch relates an anecdote implicating the emperor Charlemagne in a case of necrophilia. Charlemagne is hopelessly infatuated with a woman. He shamelessly overlooks both his imperial and his private duties, so much so that his public image is ruined and his own spiritual salvation jeopardized. When the woman suddenly dies everybody celebrates the emperor's deliverance from disgrace. The emperor, however, secretly refuses to accept the inevitable and embalms the woman. He then carries on ghastly trysts with her dead body which is described with a language that is openly reminiscent of Laura's idolatrous metamorphoses. Charlemagne clads his defunct lover with purple cloths and covers her with jewels:

cuius nec morte lenitus furor, sed ipsum obscenum cadaver et
exangue translatus est, quod balsamo et aromatibus conditum,
honustum gemmis et velatum purpura diebus ac noctibus tam miserabili
quam cupido fovebat amplexu. (p. 261)

whose obsession did not diminish with her death, it intensified over the dirty and bloodless corpse; after having had it embalmed and covered in gems and dressed in purple, he would embrace it night and day in abject and passionate fits of passion.

Petrarch extrapolates from this episode a general illustration about the enslaving power of love (certainly one suitable to his enamored condition). In the *Rime*, though, he acknowledges his inability to disassociate himself from the mundane force of love and concedes that his devotion is enduring, constant, and all consuming even after Laura's death. While he remains silent about his own longings to possess a dead female body, absolutely passive, fixed and available, he openly identifies with Orpheus, the poet/musician, on a loving quest for his dead wife Eurydice:

Or avess'io un sì pietoso stile
che Laura mia potesse torre a Morte
come Euridice Orpheo sua senza rime,
ch'i' vivrei anchor più che mai lieto!²⁸ (332.49-52)

Would I had so sorrowful a style
that I could win my Laura back from Death
as Orpheus won his Eurydice without rhymes,
for then I would live more glad than ever!

This unusual tribute to the power of poetry is understandable, since Petrarch is engaged in a prolonged (and unsuccessful) campaign to sway an

unresponsive woman. Furthermore, his readers are invited into his lyrical sequence as a sympathetic audience (the term “pietà” reverberates throughout the collection). Most urgently, Petrarch is invested in gaining mastery over the disordering force of death. The representation of death and containment of its devastating effects is central to the *Fragmenta*, to Petrarch’s poetic project, and is no less challenging than Orpheus’s undertaking. Death, like Laura, is a signifier of absence that incessantly recedes towards an unreachable signified.

In the last poem, 366, while professing to close wounds and tantalizing the reader with completion (the last word of the collection is “pace”), Petrarch recasts old themes: Christ’s flesh dripping innocent blood for the atonement of the guilty becomes the product of the old poetic oxymoron (“virginità feconda” - “fruitful virginity” [366. 58]). The poet, who has blasphemously displaced the wounds of Christ on the cross with his own gaping body and transformed Christ into a figure for his erotic torment,²⁹ is forever subjected to the woman who has crucified him (“con saldi chiodi fisso” ‘nailed there firmly’ [45. 9]) on the mirror where her narcissistic desires begin and end (“veggendo in voi finir vostro desio;” - “seeing your desire ended in yourself.” [46.11]). Her lethal arms (“belle e crude braccia/ che m’ancidono a torto,” - “lovely, cruel arms that/ unjustly kill me,” [171.1-3]) have replaced the outstretched arms of Christ, sacrificed on the cross to save humanity (“Quelle pietose braccia/in ch’io mi fido veggio aperte ancora;” - “Those/ merciful arms in which I trust I see still open;” [264. 14-15]).³⁰

The wounded human body with its exposed orifices remains incomplete, impure, open to view and becomes the model for the organization of the text, with its dual beginnings, partial recantations, inconsistencies, a text, furthermore, that is traversed by seven puzzling blank pages, left by Petrarch (like an open sore) between poem 263 and 264. The text, seemingly unfinished, arrives to its readers in its pure materiality as a dismembered corpus, entrusted with a story which can fall apart as soon as it is assembled.

Staking his claim to life eternal, Petrarch evades the narrative replication of his earlier, spiritual death through sin, the effects of eros on his identity, and, at the same time, he eludes his secular undoing by the literal binding and unbinding of a disseminated manuscript. In order to fulfill an aberrant fantasy and transcend his post lapsarian sexual and mortal body (the sight of putrefaction, decay and corporeal incompleteness) Petrarch tenders his limbs to public viewing, turning himself into a poetic spectacle (like Christ and Laura), and makes a reliquary of the woman who has caused his agony. In the way in which the saintly bodies (or fragments

thereof) revered in shrines will be restored to eternal wholeness and harmony in Paradise, the idol of Laura is the vehicle whereby the poet's own dismembered body and the extension of his self into a fragmented extra-corporeal existence (the *Fragmenta*) will be collected in the "real" world beyond, as a vehicle of his future worldly *fama* and his secular salvation.³¹

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NOTES

¹An eloquent example of Petrarch's denunciations of his vernacular poetry (designated as *nugae* or *nugellae*) is in a letter addressed to Boccaccio (*Seniles* XVII, 3), where he declares that his vernacular texts do not merit serious attention.

²All references to Petrarch's poetry are from Giovanni Ponte, ed. *Francesco Petrarca. Rime sparse*. (Milano: Mursia, 1978); the source of all translations is Robert M. Durling ed. and transl., *Petrarch's Lyric Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976). I will refer to the lyrical collection as *Fragmenta* (from the Latin title given by Petrarch, *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*) or as *Rime sparse* (from the first verse of sonnet 1). All further references to the *Rime sparse* will be included in the text with poem and line number.

³This image is endlessly rehearsed in the *Fragmenta* as the source the poet's passionate condition. See, for instance 127, 83-85; 143, 9-1; 159, 5-6.

⁴For discussions of Laura's description in the *Rime* in terms of Petrarch's poetics of fragmentation and idolatry/fetishism see Nancy Vickers "Remembering Dante: Petrarch's 'Chiare fresche et dolci acque'." *MLN* 96 (1981): 1-11; Robert Durling "Petrarch's 'Giovane donna sotto un verde Lauro.'" *MLN* 86 (1971): 1-20; John Freccero "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics," *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 34-40; Giuseppe Mazzotta, "The *Canzoniere* and the Language of the Self," *Studies in Philology* 75 (1978): 271-296. On the monumental influence of *Petrarchismo* in defining the standard of female beauty in the visual arts, see Elizabeth Cropper "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo* and the Vernacular Style." *Art Bulletin* 18:3 (1976): 374-394.

⁵For the most developed example of Laura's description, see *canzone* 127 (especially ll. 49; 57-65; 77-78); for good examples of Laura's features, see 291; 49; 348. Sara Sturm-Maddox reviews the distinguishing elements of the physical description of Laura as well as her confined repertoire of actions. "Petrarch's Siren: 'Dolce Parlar' and 'dolce canto' in the *Rime sparse*." *Italian Quarterly* 103 (1986): 5-19.

⁶For a reading of Laura's absence, see Robert Pogue Harrison, "The Death of Beatrice and the Petrarchan alternative," in *The Body of Beatrice*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988): 93-109. John Freccero "The Fig Tree" 39 postulates that in the void created by the lady's absence he elevates the verse to the level of love surrogate when the laurel crown replaces Laura's favors as the motive for poetic cre-

ation. The Petrarchan lyric, according to Mazzotta, suffers a loss of referential function and becomes and exercise in poetic self-objectification, "The Canzoniere and the Language of the self". 285-291.

⁷Sturm-Maddox, "Petrarch's Siren," 5. ⁸For instances of her post mortem utterances, see poems 279, 302, 341, 342, 226, 359. In 359 and 362, she offers the poet assurance that she is waiting for him in Paradise.

⁹This is a recurrent image in Virgil's *Aeneid*, where Aeneas fruitlessly attempts to embrace his mother (Book I) and the ghosts of his wife (Book 2) and his father (Books 5, 6). See Elizabeth Belfiore, "'Tar frustra comptensa' Embraces in the *Aeneid*." *Phoenix* 38:1 (March 1984): 19-30.

¹⁰Modern editors still shy away from the original title and adopt, instead, *Canzoniere* (which is in Italian and endows the collection with a stronger sense of wholeness). Gianfranco Contini's edition uses *Canzoniere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1964); Piero Cudini's edition (Milano: Garzanti, 1976) follows the example of Contini; Guido Bezzola titles the collection *Rime* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1976), Giovanni Ponte (Milano: Mursia, 1979), Robert Durling use *Rime sparse*, a title more suggestive of the scattered nature of the poems.

¹¹Guido da Montefeltro's episode appears in Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno*. See T. Barolini, "The Making of a Lyric Sequence: Time and Narrative in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*." *MLN* 104 (1989): 30.

¹²For the parallels between 2 and 3 see Marco Santagata "Connessioni intertestuali nel *Canzoniere* del Petrarca," *Strumenti critici* 9 (1975): 89. For 3 and 62 see Dennis Dutschke "The Anniversary Poems in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*," *Italica* 58 (1981): 88. Sara Sturm-Maddox discusses the "cosmic disturbances associated with the death of Christ" presented in 3. *Petrarch's Metamorphoses: Text and Subtext in the "Rime sparse"* (Columbia: U. of Missouri Press, 1985) 111.

¹³Throughout the *Fragmenta*, in fact, Petrarch cultivates the unpredictable association of dissimilar literary fragments. He borrows, for instance, from the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* in his portrait of Laura: her flowing hair and elusive demeanor strikingly evoke Virgil's Venus (when she materializes, disguised as a huntress, to assist her son Aeneas and departs, hastily, as he is about to recognize her) and Ovid's Daphne (narrowly escaping Apollo's rapacious attentions as she becomes transformed into a laurel). On the Ovidian subtext see Peter Hainsworth. *Petrarch the Poet* (London, 1988) and his "The Myth of Daphne in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*" *Italian Studies* 34 (1979): 36; Sara Sturm Maddox. *Petrarch's Metamorphoses: Text and Subtext in the 'Rime sparse.'* (Columbia: U of Missouri, 1985) esp. ch 2.; Thomas M. Greene *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982) 111. The *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses* rehearse the myth of the origin of Rome but support diametrically antithetical attitudes towards it.. On Ovid's revision of Virgil, see Daniel Javitch: "The *Orlando Furioso* and Ovid's Revision of the *Aeneid*." *MLN* 5 (1984): 1023-1035.

¹⁴The Greek term *pathos*, rendered by Cicero as *perturbatio animi* and by

Seneca with *affectus* begins, at least with Ambrose to be designated as *passio* and merges with the meaning of *passio* as condition of subjugation to an external power (for instance, in Augustine's *Confession* IX, 4 and VIII, 5 & 10, where it is viewed as degeneration and perversion. See: Remo Bodei, *Ordo amoris* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991) 76-77.

¹⁵Poem 4 is discussed by Thomas P. Roche *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequence* (NY: AMS Press, 1989), 22-25; for a discussion of the role of the sun see Peter Hainsworth, *The Languages of Literature in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford and NY: Clarendon Press, 1988), 6.

¹⁶All quotations are from Francesco Petrarca *Secretum* ed. Enrico Fenzi (Milano: Mursia, 1992). I will include all page numbers in the main text. All translations are my own. Petrarch's assiduous frequentation of biblical texts and of the works of Augustine is well documented. Carlo Calcaterra *Nella selva del Petrarca* (Bologna: Editore Licinio Cappella, 1942) presents a useful discussion of Augustine's influence on Petrarch ("Sant'Agostino nelle opere di Dante e Petrarca") and argues that the influence of the saint went beyond the *Secretum*; Adelia Noferi *L'esperienza poetica del Petrarca* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1962), 55-66; 253-284 offers a suggestive correlation of the lyrical poetry and *Secretum*; N. Iliescu *Il Canzoniere petrarchesco e Sant'Agostino* (Roma, 1962) and M. Santagata *I frammenti dell'anima. Storia e racconto nel "Canzoniere" del Petrarca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992) place the *Rime* at the center of the literary project that inspires dialogue.

¹⁷For examples in the *Fragmenta* of Laura's sternness, see poems 260 where her excellence is deemed to surpass that of all the heroines of antiquity, 261, where she is the example of "senno, valor, cortesia," and 263 an apotheosis of her honor.

¹⁸For a general depiction of the obsession of all medieval people with the brevity of life and omnipresence of death, see Philippe Aries, *Storia della morte in Occidente dal Medioevo ai giorni nostri* tr. Simona Vigezzi (Milano: Rizzoli, 1978): esp. 44, 92, 94. See also Umberto Bosco, *Francesco Petrarca*. (Bari: Laterza, 1968), 23-63.

¹⁹Quotations from the *Familiares* are in Francesco Petrarca *Opere* (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1975). All translations are mine.

²⁰Giovanni Boccaccio's descriptions of the effects of the plague on Florentine society in his *Decameron* are illuminating. For the gloom and pessimism, as well as obsession with death, which followed the outbreak of this catastrophe epidemic, see Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951).

²¹Sara Sturm-Maddox discusses the "cosmic disturbances associated with the death of Christ" presented in 3, *Petrarch's Metamorphoses: Text and Subtext in the "Rime sparse"* (Columbia: U. of Missouri Press, 1985), 111. For a discussion of the symbolic meaning of the *Feria sexta aprilis* in terms of Petrarch's personal mythology see B. Martinelli, "*Feria sexta aprilis*: la data sacra nel *Canzoniere* del Petrarca." *Petrarca e il Ventoso* (Bergamo: Minerva Italica, 1977), 103-148 and Carlo Calcaterra, *Nella selva del Petrarca* (Bologna: Cappella, 1942), 225-228.

²²On the opposition of cupidity and charity, see D.W. Robertson, Jr. "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory." *Speculum* 26.1 (1951): 24-49.

²³See K. Foster "Beatrice or Medusa," *Italian Studies Presented to E. R. Vincent* ed. C.P. Brand, K. Foster U. Limentani. 48

²⁴For a comprehensive recapitulation of the anniversary poems see Thomas Roche, "The Calendrical Structure of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*." *Studies in Philology* 71 (1974): 152-172. See Robert M. Durling's seminal discussion of *sestina* 30 in "Petrarch's 'Giovane donna sotto un verde lauro.'" *MLN* 86 (1971): 1-20. Teodolinda Barolini discusses this anniversary poems in "The Making of the Lyric Sequence: Time and Narrative in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*." *MLN* 104 (1989): 20.

²⁵Courtly love, according to D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 99 is essentially idolatrous in nature.

²⁶For a discussion of the real and the figural and the rhetoric of the body exemplified by the Veronica, see Louis Marin "The Figurability of the Visual: The Veronica or the Question of the Portrait at Port-Royal." *New Literary History* (1991), 22: 281-296 and Georges Didi-Huberman "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain) *October* 29 (1984): 63-81.

²⁷For a discussion of this image see John Freccero, "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics." *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 5. The jewelled cross has also eschatological significance. In his article on poem 30, Durling points out that the New Jerusalem is described in Apocalypse 21 as being "decorated with 12 kinds of precious stones, including topaz." See "Petrarch's 'Giovane donna'" 13. Also, see Robert M. Durling *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1965) 247 for a discussion of the rhetorical figure of the *adunaton*, so often employed by Petrarch in his poetry, in terms of its apocalyptic implications.

²⁸For an exploration of the theme of necrophilia through various literary figures, see E. Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992). On Ovid and Virgil's treatment of Orpheus see Charles Segal, *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet*. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1989): esp 1-94.

²⁹Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) offers a brilliant and provocative reading of Renaissance representations of Christ, the centrality of the mystery of the Incarnation and cultural repression of Christ's sexuality. For Christ to redeem humanity by his death he had to be thoroughly man in every aspect, thus the insistence with which artists represented his genitalia (which he connects to the debates about his circumcision).

³⁰In the Incarnation God takes on a body to save humanity he thus institutes the sacrality of the ordinary human body in its fragile physiology. The night before the violent destruction of his flesh Christ designates the ontological presence of his body in its manifestation as the Eucharist. The Eucharistic body and the resur-

rected body, each of them incorruptible, underwrite the ontological alliance of body and soul and the exclusion of the flesh, which is understood to fill out the body imprecisely. Petrarch, unable to disengage from his earthly love and appropriates the terminology of Christianity for his own cult of Laura and for his audience's reverence of the *Fragmenta*.

³¹For a complete study of the theological debates in Petrarch's age about reliquaries, see: Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*. (NY: Columbia UP, 1995). On the sociopolitical significance of the body and on the centrality of the body in the Middle Ages, seen as a period in which incarnational aesthetics governed (thus not a purely metaphysical period) see Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988): 83-106, Peter Brown *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. (NY: Columbia UP, 1988).

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