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978-0-521-11467-7 - Petrarch's Humanism and the Care of the Self

Gur Zak

Excerpt

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Introduction

In a letter written to a friend, Giovanni Colonna of the Order of Preachers, Petrarch describes a tour the two had taken through the ruins of the ancient city of Rome.¹ Fascinated by the surroundings of his beloved city, Petrarch nevertheless refrains from portraying the actual sites present to his eyes but rather flies on the wings of his imagination to the absent events and people to which the ruins allude²: “here was the palace of Evander, there the shrine of Carmentis, here the cave of Cacus, there the nursing she-wolf and the fig tree of Rumina with the more apt surname of

¹ *Rerum familiarium libri* (*Fam.*) 6.2. Most scholars date the final revision of the letter to 1341. See Ernest H. Wilkins, *Petrarch's Correspondence* (Padua: Antenore, 1960), 59. The Latin edition of the letters is from Petrarca, *Le familiari*, 4 vols., eds. Vittorio Rossi (vols. 1–3) and Umberto Bosco (vol. 4) (Florence: Sansoni, 1942). The translations are from Bernardo's translation in Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium libri* (*Letters on Familiar Matters*), 3 vols., trans. Aldo S. Bernardo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975–85), unless otherwise indicated.

² This technique of connecting descriptions of memory and place, time and space, is borrowed from Virgil, for example, in *Aeneid* 2.29–30. See Jennifer Petrie, *Petrarch: The Augustan Poets, the Italian Tradition and the Canzoniere* (Dublin: Published for the Foundation for Italian Studies, University College, Dublin, 1983), 45. See also the discussion in Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 88, who emphasizes the way that Petrarch's readings allow him to impose order on the landscape of ruins. Kenneth Gouwens, in response to Greene, stresses the equally affective impact that the landscape had on Petrarch. See Gouwens, “Perceiving the Past: Renaissance Humanism after the ‘Cognitive Turn’,” *AHR* 103 (1998): 55–82, at 68. In his classic study, “Petrarch's Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” Theodor Mommsen uses Petrarch's division of the description of his tour into two distinct periods – pagan and Christian Rome – as an example of Petrarch's formation of a new “concept of history” – “drawing a sharp boundary-line between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ history.” See Theodor M. Mommsen, “Petrarch's Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” in Mommsen, *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Eugene F. Rice, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 117.

Romulus.”³ Starting thus with the description of the mythical origins of the city, Petrarch then continues his journey in space and time, advancing mostly linearly through the ages of Roman history, from these mythical origins through the glory of the Empire and early Christianity to the time of Constantine. He then concludes this short chronicle, lamenting not only that what is left from the glory of Rome is mere ruins but also that the significance of the ruins is mostly forgotten: “For today who are more ignorant about Roman affairs than the Roman citizens?”⁴ Ignorance, he adds, that is in turn complemented by the “flight and exile” (*fugam exiliumque*) of the many virtues that flourished in bygone times.

Promising to return to this complaint at another time, Petrarch then brings the discussion back to himself and invites Giovanni to recall how they used to stop at the baths of Diocletian, weary of the long excursion, and to enjoy there the “healthy air, the unimpeded view, silence and desired solitude.”⁵ Alone at the baths, the noises of the outside world ceased to bother them – “we did not discuss business at all, nor household problems nor public affairs”⁶ – and with the “fragments of the ruins” (*ruinarum fragmenta*) still in front of their eyes they turned their gaze to higher matters, discussing history and moral philosophy, the arts and their authors and principles. At a certain point, Petrarch recalls, Colonna asked him to explain the origins of the liberal and mechanical arts, and the poet, taking advantage of “the hour of day, the absence of trivial cares, the place itself,”⁷ and not least “the attentiveness” of his hearer, responded with ease – *haud duriter*. Now, Petrarch tells us, Colonna asked him to go back to that discussion and commit to writing what he had earlier spoken in his ears. His response is striking:

I confess that I did say many things which I can only repeat with different words. Give me back that place, that idle mood, that day, that attention of yours, that particular vein of my talent and I could do what I did then. But all things are changed: the place is not present, the day has passed, the idle mood is gone, and instead of your face I look upon silent words, my spirit

³ “Hic Evandri regia, hic Carmentis edes, hic Caci spelunca, hic lupa nutrix et ruminalis ficus, veriori cognomine romularis” (*Fam.6.2.5; Familiar Letters*, 1:291 [translation slightly modified]).

⁴ “Qui enim hodie magis ignari rerum romanarum sunt, quam romani cives?” (*Fam.6.2.14; Familiar Letters*, 1:293).

⁵ “Aer salutaris et prospectus liber et silentium ac votiva solitudo” (*Fam.6.2.15; Familiar Letters*, 1:294).

⁶ “Ibi de negotiis nichil omnino, nichil de re familiari nichilque de publica” (*Fam.6.2.15; Familiar Letters*, 1:294 [translation slightly modified]).

⁷ “Hora diei et vacuitas inutilium curarum et ipse locus” (*Fam.6.2.17; Familiar Letters*, 1:294 [translation slightly modified]).

is impeded by the din of the business matters I have left behind, matters which until recently roared in my ears, although I fled as soon as I could in order to answer you more freely.⁸

Mutata sunt omnia – everything is changed – Petrarch declares, including his own talent, experience, and mood. The words he spoke at that perfect moment of solitude are therefore forever lost: time passed, leading him away from the moment of presence he enjoyed at the baths, and has taken with it also the words he used at that time. The description of the ruins of Rome thus becomes a metaphor of Petrarch's own self: like the glorious city, he himself is subjected to the ravages of time, constantly changing, leaving behind only fragments – scattered memories and words retained in the minds of the two interlocutors that cannot, as he insists, invoke the past in full. The subjection to the passage of time, Petrarch therefore implies, is a subjection to a constant sense of absence and loss.

But time is not the only cause of the poet's sense of fragmentation and loss. Society has a part in this experience as well: it was the perfect solitude of the baths, detached from the cares of the world, that allowed him to step, as it were, out of time, and freely reflect on higher matters, and it is the “din of business matters” (*rerum fragor*) that is now impeding his spirit from retrieving the state of mind he then enjoyed. The diachronic fragmentation is thus accompanied in the letter by the synchronic dismemberment imposed by society. As Petrarch declares near the end of the letter, it is only in solitude that he “belongs to himself” (*Ibi enim, non alibi, meus sum*).

The reference to solitude as the one state in which Petrarch can feel that he fully belongs to himself suggests that the sense of fragmentation and flux in the letter is accompanied by a feeling of exile. Just as Rome is exiled from her own golden age – the time to which the ruins allude – and to which she might return if she would only begin to “know herself,” so Petrarch is exiled from the state of wholeness that he might regain by returning to solitude. The experiences of exile and fragmentation, as this letter exhibits, are intrinsically intertwined in Petrarch's mind: it is

⁸ “Multa, fateor, dixi, que si non mutatis verbis dicere cupiam, non possim. Redde michi illum locum, illud otium, illum diem, illam attentionem tuam, illum ingenii mei venam: potero quod unquam potui. Sed mutata sunt omnia; locus abest, dies abiit, otium perii, pro facie tua mutas literas aspicio, ingenio meo relictarum a tergo rerum fragor officit, qui adhuc in auribus meis tonat, quamvis ob hoc ipsum in primis inde diffugerim, ut tibi liberius responderem” (*Fam.6.2.18; Familiar Letters, 1:294*).

the loss of a mythical state of presence and bliss, according to him, that is responsible for his current sense of disintegration and flux.⁹

Significantly, for Petrarch the return to the safe haven of solitude, to himself, is characterized above all by writing – his ability to write what he truly wishes: “only there and not elsewhere I belong to myself. There lies my pen which at present rebels everywhere I go and refuses my orders, because I am preoccupied with burdensome matters. Thus, while it is constantly busy when I have plenty of leisure, it prefers to have leisure when I have much to do, and almost like a wicked and insolent servant, it seems to convert the fervor of the master into its own desire for rest.”¹⁰ His return from exile to himself, Petrarch therefore implies here, is above all a return to his vocation as a writer. However, given that in returning to solitude he would be able to compose the book on the liberal arts he promised Colonna, his personal return from exile is also a significant step toward curing the malaise of his society – bringing Rome back to herself.

Petrarch's preoccupation in *Fam.6.2* with the passage of time and the scattering impact of society reflects two of the major developments taking place in the society of the later Middle Ages. From the eleventh

⁹The use of the metaphor of exile to describe his spiritual and existential condition, as we shall see throughout this book, is central to Petrarch's works. A. Bartlett Giamatti describes exile as the defining feature of Petrarch's sense of self: “Petrarch's whole existence, his sense of himself, would be determined by his obsession with origin and exile; by his conviction that he was displaced and marginal.” Giamatti, *Exile and Change in Renaissance Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 13. Nonetheless, whereas Giamatti focuses mainly on Petrarch's sense of exile from the ancient world, the following chapters attempt to show that the “port,” the homeland, from which Petrarch feels himself exiled and that he attempts to regain, constantly shifts – the golden age of his youth, the ancient world, the state of virtue – a fact that contributes to the overall sense of fragmentation and flux dominating his writings. On the theme of exile in Petrarch, see also Thomas M. Greene, “Petrarch's *Viator*: The Displacements of Heroism,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 12 (1982): 25–57, and, from a different perspective, Theodore J. Cachey, Jr., “Introduction,” in *Petrarch's Guide to the Holy Land*, ed. and trans. Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 1–51. W. Scott Blanchard argues that the condition of exile also has positive aspects for Petrarch, because it allows him to practice dissent and commit himself to “world emancipation.” See Blanchard, “Petrarch and the Genealogy of Asceticism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2001): 401–23. For a general study of the theme of exile in medieval and Renaissance Italy, see Randolph Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

¹⁰“Ibi enim, non alibi, meus sum; ibi meus est calamus, qui nunc passim rebellat et recusat imperium, molestissimis occupationibus meis fretus. Ita ille, qui ex otio meo iuge negotium habet, ex negotio sibi otium querit, et quasi impius servus ac contumax, domini laborem in requiem suam trahit” (*Fam.6.2.21*; *Familiar Letters*, 1:295 [translation slightly modified]).

century onward, medieval society experienced a rapid process of urbanization, accompanied and facilitated by the emergence of money economy and mercantile culture.¹¹ These new urban centers, particularly in northern Italy, became centers of innovation and change in all walks of life – the economy, politics, education, and so on – introducing a plethora of new professions and avenues for advancement.¹² At the same time, the emergence of urban life transformed the way people of the period experienced time. As Jacques Le Goff has argued, changes in working patterns in the cities led to the replacement of the old circular and agricultural conceptions of time, alongside the traditional clerical hours of the Church, with a new perception of time as a linear continuum, a development enshrined by the placement of clocks in the city centers.¹³

The growth of urban life and the emergence of the linear conception of time in the period have traditionally been considered by historians as the motivating forces behind the rise of the “modern” individual and autonomous self in the period – a development for which Petrarch himself was often regarded as the ultimate embodiment.¹⁴ The new prospects

¹¹ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 99–121.

¹² Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 23–4.

¹³ Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 48. See also Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 3–27, Gianfranco Folena, “L’orologio del Petrarca,” *Libri e documenti* 5.3 (1979): 1–12, and Alfred von Martin, *Sociology of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

¹⁴ Jacob Burckhardt was of course the first to popularize the notion of the discovery of the individual in the Renaissance in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) (originally published in 1860). On Petrarch as the “first modern man,” see Hans Baron, “Petrarch: His Inner Struggles and the Humanistic Discovery of Man’s Nature,” in *Florilegium historicale; Essays Presented to Wallace K. Ferguson*, eds. J. G. Rowe and W. H. Stockdale (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with the University of Western Ontario, 1971), 18–51; Pierre de Nolhac, *Petrarch and the Ancient World* (Norwood: Norwood Editions, 1976), 3–40 (originally published in 1907); Ugo Dotti, *Petrarca e la scoperta della coscienza moderna* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 15–26; Arnaud Tripet, *Pétrarque, ou la connaissance de soi* (Geneva: Droz, 1967); and Charles Trinkaus, *The Poet as Philosopher: Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). The modernity of Petrarch was emphasized from a very different perspective by John Freccero, “The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch’s Poetics,” *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 34–40, and Robert Durling, “The Ascent of Mount Ventoux and the Crisis of Allegory,” *Italian Quarterly* 18 (1974): 7–28. Freccero argues that Petrarch rejects in his poetry the Augustinian “Logos” and creates his own self-contained poetic universe to affirm his own subjectivity and individuality. For Durling, it is Petrarch’s historical awareness, preventing the possibility of allegory, that separates him from the Middle Ages.

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of advancement available in the city created, at least in theory, an “equality of opportunities” and a much greater emphasis on individual merit than in the preceding feudal order. Furthermore, the new awareness of the linearity of time made it possible for early humanists such as Mussato and Petrarch to assert that any individual achievement – including that of the great men of the past such as Cicero or Aristotle – is bound by a specific time and place and thus to validate the importance of their own first-person perspective and subjective experience. A new sense of individuality and human agency, accompanied by an intensified form of self-consciousness, thus emerged, according to these views, in the period.¹⁵

Yet at the same time, as Petrarch's letter attests, these developments also proved to be a double-edged sword. Faced with the transformation of the traditional ways of life – and the inability of the established Church to address these changes – people of the period experienced an acute spiritual and existential crisis.¹⁶ The pressures of urbanization and the growing materialism of society are often cited as the causes of the spiritual reform movements of the period, from the Waldensians to the Franciscans to the *Devotio Moderna*.¹⁷ The growing awareness of the passing of time, in turn, also emerges in itself as a source of anxiety and concern. Le Goff portrays the new preoccupation in the

¹⁵ Historians of humanism have often attributed the emergence of the new awareness of the passage of time, and with it of the new conception of subjectivity, to the humanists' “discovery” of classical antiquity as a distinct historical period. In the famous words of Eugenio Garin, “For this reason one should never seek to distinguish between the humanistic discovery of antiquity and the humanistic discovery of man – for they amount to exactly the same thing. For the discovery of antiquity implied that one had learnt to make a comparison between antiquity and oneself, to take a detached view of antiquity and to determine one's relation to it. And all this implied, further, the concept of time and memory and a sense of human creation, of human work in this world and of human responsibility.” Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, trans. Peter Munz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 15. For the Italian, see Garin, *L'umanesimo italiano: Filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1994), 22 (first Italian edition was published in 1952; the original edition appeared in German in 1947). Thomas M. Greene argues that Petrarch's “intensified historical consciousness” is responsible for his “exacerbated self-consciousness.” See Greene, *The Light in Troy*, 101. See also the discussion in Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17–21.

¹⁶ See Little, *Religious Poverty*, 1–59.

¹⁷ Little, *Religious Poverty*, 97–218. See also Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 94–5, 98–9; Richard W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1970), 273–7; and Daniel R. Lesnick, *Preaching in Medieval Florence: The Social World of Franciscan and Dominican Spirituality* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 35–45.

period – particularly among Italian humanists born into merchant circles – with “wasting time,” the fear of not using it properly.¹⁸ The fourteenth-century Dominican preacher Domenico Cavalca of Pisa, as Le Goff shows, developed a whole spirituality based on the sinfulness inherent in wasting time.¹⁹ Timothy Kircher has also shown the preoccupation of Dominican preachers of the period, such as Jacopo Passavanti, with the flux of time, emphasizing the need to choose between the “sinful transience of the *saeculum* and the eternal permanence found in the Church.”²⁰

Petrarch's writings and personal history can thus be regarded also as a manifestation of this other, less bright, side of the developments taking place in the later Middle Ages. Growing up in the vibrant city of Avignon as the son of an exiled Florentine notary, Petrarch used well the opportunities the city had to offer to advance his ambitions – establishing connections from an early age with powerful people such as the members of the Colonna family – but these commitments, as he declares, came at the price of endless obligations and anxiety.²¹ In the introductory letter to his *Familiares*, Petrarch dramatizes the fragmentation imposed on him by the intricate web of connections in which he is engaged by describing the contradictions inherent in his letters: “Therefore in these

¹⁸ In a letter Petrarch wrote to his brother, the Carthusian monk Gherardo, in which he describes the composition of his *Bucolicum Carmen*, Petrarch provides a revealing statement on the ways these new norms affected his upbringing: “Thus I found myself there in this state of mind: while not daring to undertake anything major because of my countless pressing matters, I nevertheless was incapable of doing absolutely nothing, since from childhood I was constantly taught to do something, if not always something good. Thus I chose a middle course; though delaying greater projects, I got involved in something to while away the time” (“Illic ergo tunc eram eo animo qui, sicut sub tanta rerum mole magnum aliquid aggredi non auderet, sic omnino nichil agere nesciret, ab infantia mea bono utinam, sed certe in actu perpetuo enutritus. Media via igitur electa est, ut maioribus dilatis, aliquid pro solatio illius temporis meditarer” [*Fam.* 10.4.10–11; *Familiar Letters*, 2:71]).

¹⁹ Le Goff, *Time*, 50–1.

²⁰ Timothy Kircher, *The Poet's Wisdom: The Humanists, the Church, and the Formation of Philosophy in the Early Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 194. In a striking passage from his *Sermones de tempore*, quoted by Kircher, Passavanti declares, “The world is in motion and also its desire. For you will either love temporal things and move in a temporal fashion. Or love Christ and we shall live in eternity. But it is better to choose that we live with the Lord in eternity and let go of this temporal world” (“Mundus transit et concupiscentia eius. Quod vis utrum amare temporalia et transire cum tempore. Aut christum amare et in eternum vivemus. Sed melius est eligere ut cum domino in eternum vivemus et transeuntem mundum relinquemus”). Quotation and translation are from Kircher, *The Poet's Wisdom*, 194.

²¹ For Petrarch's biography, see Ugo Dotti, *Vita di Petrarca* (Rome: Laterza, 1987), and Ernest H. Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

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storms of life, to return to the point, not throwing my anchor for any length of time in any port, and making a number of ordinary friends but unsure of how many true ones (being uncertain of their status and not really having very many), I struck an acquaintance with countless famous ones. I thus had to correspond a great deal with many of them who differed considerably in character and station. As a result, the letters were so different that in rereading them I seemed to be in constant contradiction.”²² Moreover, his acute awareness of the passage of time and historical context – unparalleled by any of his predecessors – also led to his sense of fragmentation and loss. In yet another of his many letters on the theme of *fuga temporis* – his introduction to the book of letters to ancient authors – Petrarch discusses his sense of the threat this constant passage poses to the very “ontology” of the self²³:

I too shall be dying while you read this, you are dying while I write this, we both are dying, we all are dying, we are always dying; we never live here except when doing something virtuous to pave our path to the true life, where in contrast no one dies . . . where there are no change and no reason to fear its ending.²⁴

This Heraclitian assertion, based in a large part on Letter 58 of Seneca’s *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, thus suggests that in Petrarch’s view, one truly exists, truly has being, only when committed to virtue.²⁵ When diverting our attention from virtue, he implies, we become part of the great stream of nonbeing, swept away into the exile and oblivion of history and change.

²² “In his ergo vite tempestatibus, ut ad rem redeam, nullo portu anchoram longum in tempus iaciens, quot veros amicos nescio, quorum et iudicium anceps et penuria ingens est, notos autem innumerabiles quesivi. Multis itaque multumque animo et conditione distantibus scribere contigit; tam varie ut ea nunc relegens, interdum pugnantia locutus ipse michi videar” (*Fam.* 1.1.27; *Familiar Letters*, 1:9).

²³ Wilkins dates the letter to 1360–1. See *Petrarch's Correspondence*, 88. The term “ontology of the self” is taken from Greene, *The Light in Troy*, chap. 6.

²⁴ “Ego quoque dum hec leges moriar, tu moreris dum hec scribo, ambo morimur, omnes morimur, semper morimur, nunquam vivimus dum hic sumus, nisi quandiu virtuosum aliquod agentes sternimus iter nobis ad veram vitam, ubi contra nemo moritur . . . nec mutatio sentitur, nec timetur finis” (*Fam.* 24.1.27; *Familiar Letters*, 3:312).

²⁵ Petrarch quoted Seneca’s Letter 58 earlier on in this letter: “Every visible object accompanies time in its flight; of the things which we see, nothing is fixed. Even I myself, as I comment on this change, am changed myself” (“Quicquid vides, currit cum tempore. Nihil ex iis, quae videmus, manet. Ego ipse, dum loquor mutari ista, mutatus sum” [*Ad Lucilium* 58.22]). The text and translation are from Seneca, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, 3 vols., trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934). Petrarch’s quotation is at *Fam.* 24.1.8 (*Familiar Letters*, 3:309).

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This focus on fragmentation and exile in Petrarch's representation of the self in his writings has led historians and literary critics in recent years to replace the previous notion that Petrarch was "the first modern man" with the new assertion that he is in fact the embodiment of the postmodern self – "fragmented, divided, even fictitious."²⁶ As one literary historian remarked recently, the Renaissance in general is no longer considered as "the bright moment when . . . individualism found widespread nascent expression but as the far darker moment when the modern fragmented self . . . [was] painstakingly born."²⁷ This notion was discussed in relation to Petrarch particularly by Giuseppe Mazzotta in his influential *The Worlds of Petrarch*, arguing that Petrarch's works call into question "precisely the myth of the center and of the centrality of the self"²⁸: "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."²⁹

²⁶ See John Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

²⁷ Douglas Biow, *Doctors, Ambassadors, Secretaries: Humanism and Professions in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), x. Quoted by Martin, *Myths*, 5. The most influential critique of the Burckhardtian thesis of the discovery of the individual is that of Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, claiming that the Renaissance self is not a unique and authoritative individual that can freely fashion itself as Burckhardt envisioned but rather "the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society." See Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 256–7. Another influential critique of Burckhardt's notion of Renaissance individualism is provided by Peter Burke, who demonstrates that Renaissance selves were strongly dependent on social ties. See Burke, "Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes," in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), 17–28, and Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). See also William J. Connell, "Introduction," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Burckhardt's thesis was also attacked by medievalists such as Colin Morris, arguing that most of the traits he found in the Renaissance could already be detected in the twelfth century. See Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1987) (originally published in 1972). Morris's own thesis was evaluated and delineated by Caroline Walker Bynum, who argued that what was new in the twelfth century was not so much the focus on the individual as "a quite self-conscious interest in the process of belonging to groups and filling roles." Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 85.

²⁸ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 59–60.

²⁹ Mazzotta, *Worlds of Petrarch*, 4. For other recent works that focus on the fragmentary nature of Petrarch's representation of the self see, Paul Colilli, *Petrarch's Allegories of Writing*

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The present study, although granting that the notion of fragmentation dominated Petrarch's representation and experience of self, will nevertheless strive to show that Petrarch's writings – both in Latin and the vernacular – represent an ongoing attempt to overcome his sense of diachronic and synchronic dismemberment, to find – just like members of the reform movements of the later Middle Ages – a solution to his “modern” experience of self-in-time. In Petrarch's attempt to cope with his experience of fragmentation, this book argues, he developed a new ethical program, a new philosophy of self – based primarily on a return to the ancient spiritual tradition – at the center of which is the assertion that “self” is not a given presence but a state of mind from which we are exiled, or absent, and which we need to attain through constant cultivation and care, and particularly through the use of writing as a spiritual technique (which for him is always intertwined with that of reading).³⁰

Petrarch's awareness of the flux of time had a crucial impact on his conception of philosophy. Emphasizing that all things – including his own self – are subject to change, Petrarch rejects the possibility of acquiring certain knowledge: for him, the fact that both the perceiving subject and the perceived object are changing renders any such attempt both

(Naples: De Dominicis, 1988); Adelia Noferi, *Frammenti per i fragmenta di Petrarca* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2001); Nancy J. Vickers, “Diana Described: Scattered Women and Scattered Rhymes,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 265–79; Marguerite Waller, *Petrarch's Poetics and Literary History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). Albert R. Ascoli, in turn, has criticized the general historiographical tendency to represent Petrarch as the first modern man, arguing that Petrarch's *Ascent of Mount Ventoux* in itself demonstrates the illusion behind any attempt to organize history according to distinct periods. See Ascoli, “Petrarch's Middle Age: Memory, Imagination, History, and the ‘Ascent of Mount Ventoux,’” *Stanford Italian Review* 10 (1991): 5–43. For another recent critique of the notion of Petrarch as “the first modern man,” see Timothy J. Reiss, *Mirages of the Self: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 303–30.

³⁰ Petrarch refers most explicitly to his sense of exile from his own self (*se ipso*) and the need to overcome it in Book 3 of the *Secretum*, when the figure of Augustinus tells Franciscus: “For far too long, you have been in exile, both from your country and from yourself. It's time to go back” (“Nimis diu iam et a patria et a te ipso exulasti. Tempus est revertendi” [*Secretum* 3.51; *The Secret*, 125]; Latin edition: Francesco Petrarca, *Il mio segreto*, ed. Ugo Dotti [Milan: Rizzoli, 2000]). The English translation is from Petrarch, *The Secret*, ed. with an introduction by Carol E. Quillen [Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003]. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Michel Foucault argues that the notion of self as “the objective to be attained” was especially dominant in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods. See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frederic Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 257.