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Boccaccio’s Critique of Petrarch

Boccaccio’s career as a writer began in the shadow of Dante and Petrarch, but Petrarch was Boccaccio’s privileged interlocutor till the end of their lives. The two of them freely exchanged flatteries (Seniles XVII, 2): Petrarch would call Boccaccio the “Lactantius and Plautus of our time,” and Boccaccio would reciprocate calling Petrarch the equal of Virgil and Cicero.

Their intellectual friendship was officially inaugurated with Boccaccio’s gift of St. Augustine’s Commentary on the Psalms (1353) and did not seem to falter when, a short time later, Petrarch disappointed his friend’s desire to see him reconciled to the city and turbulent history of Florence. From the Life of Petrarch we get a sense of what Boccaccio deeply admired in Petrarch and what made him simultaneously somewhat uneasy: he admired the Florentine compatriot-writer who, even while living abroad, won international acclaim. But he was puzzled by Petrarch’s political ties to despots and princes.

This paper will ponder their relation. I will make the case that deep intellectual differences between them emerged in time. They revolved mainly around issues that characterize their respective ideas about the modern age and are crystallized by Petrarch’s powerful project of a renewed Western culture. That the two of them steadily engaged in this shared concern is evident from a number of views they held over, say, the “place” of Dante in literary history.

Boccaccio hardly spared reprimanding Petrarch for not acknowledging the role Dante played in that history. Boccaccio was right. Petrarch refused to take part in Boccaccio’s “cult of Dante” that led him to write the Life of Dante and, eventually, to end his career lecturing on Dante’s Inferno. Both the reproach and the defense, if taken seriously, and not as questionable psychological symptoms of poetic rivalry toward Dante, highlight Petrarch’s conviction that modernity needed a new esthetics, a new way of thinking, and a new style that would look beyond an older view of the sacredness of politics and would be capable of expressing the demands of the times.

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The signal was clear: Petrarch thought of himself as the major actor in the drama of modern history, which was marked by momentous historical events such as the crisis of the Avignonese Church, the failure of the sciences – such as medicine – during the Black Plague that had altered his society, the hundred years war between France and England, and the collapse of Cola’s effort to establish the Roman Republic. In the middle of this topsy-turvy world, so he felt, it was impossible to formulate a general truth that would encompass the whole world. For the broken, divided reality of history (which Petrarch experienced within his own self) he would provide a new esthetics that was centered on the freedom of the self and would be open to the irreducibly contradictory facets of his experiences.

His project meant bidding farewell to Dante’s political fantasies of reviving the Roman Empire or similar universalizing schemes. It entailed the retrieval of a form of religious interiority, such as St. Augustine’s, and, along with it, the focus on individualities and cultural elites. Such a project posited the establishment of an autonomous culture, free from ecclesiastical and political institutions, and such that it would safeguard the full weight of Latin classical culture against the encroachments of peddlers of philosophical abstractions by scholastic and neo-Aristotelian philosophers. To realize this grandiose plan, Petrarch sought to co-opt, among others, Boccaccio, as the Seniles (V, 2) makes painfully clear to Boccaccio himself.²

Did Boccaccio, in turn, ever tear himself out of the tight intimacy and collaboration with Petrarch, out of the sort of alliance both of them were interested in forging? The question admits of no simple answer. Their relation, strained by occasional peeves, became at times problematic and was colored by ambivalences on both sides and by differences that could not but be brought to a head. And yet their polemics were always tinged with genuine affection.

One show of affection is typified by Petrarch’s decision to translate into Latin the last novella of the Decameron, the story of Gualtieri and Griselda. By translating it, Petrarch wanted the vernacular text by his “dear brother” Boccaccio to reach a larger European audience. There is a flip side to this generous gesture:

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² Francesco Petrarca: Res seniles: Libri V–VIII. Edited by Silvia Rizzo. Firenze: Le lettere 2009, p. 36–38, § 30: “Quod autem secundum tertium ve pati nequis, vide ne superbie vere sit. Ut ego etenim te antistem – cui utinam par esset!, ut te precedat ille nostri eloquii dux vulgaris, id ne adeo moleste fers, ab uno vel altero, concive presertim tuo, seu omnino a paucissimis te prieri?” [“Take care lest it really be pride that you cannot endure second or third place, or that I should surpass you when I wish to be your equal, or that the master of our vernacular literature should be preferred to you. Do you bear it so ill to be thus outdone by one or two men, especially fellow citizens, or at most very few?”] Here and elsewhere I quote from F. Petrarca: Letters of Old Age. Edited and translated by Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin & Reta A. Bernardo. 2 vols. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1992, I, p. 160.
something is lost in Petrarch’s translation, and what is lost is Boccaccio’s literal-
ness, the sense of political arbitrariness in his narrative of the private and public
despotism of the Prince. With an arbitrariness equal to the despot’s, Petrarch
de-historicizes and de-politicizes the novella: the vernacular turns into Latin, and
the narrative becomes a metaphysical allegory of the soul’s surrender to God.
Personal affections aside, Boccaccio does finally come to grips with Petrarch’s
perspective on the shape and direction he wanted to impart to modernity. He goes
his way and knows that the road he will take could mean disrupting the prin-
ciples undergirding his master’s intellectual edifice.

The text where Boccaccio presents his own comprehensive grasp and couples
together questions about the self, freedom, history, nature, and modernity (which
is to be understood as the time of coming to consciousness of and of linking up
these four points) is the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods.* He had started in 1360 and
finished in 1374, at a time when he was also giving public lectures on Dante in Flo-
rence. In its most general outline, the *Genealogy* arrays the world-history of myth
from its dark beginnings in Demogorgon, which literally means the “demon of the
earth.” Each myth gives the imaginative representation of the quandaries and vio-
lence undergirding the human condition. The key to the dark depths of mythology
and human existence, Demogorgon turns into the figuration of primal productive,
fecund Chaos. The other end of the *Genealogy* features books XIV and XV, which
are devoted to a discussion of modern poetry and poets, as well as, to the rational,
rhetorical apparatus of literature, namely, the question of allegory in literary nar-
ratives. Clearly, a genetic relation is posited between the myth of origins and the
event of modernity. In locating classical pagan myths as the vital source of moder-
nity, Boccaccio assigns priority to Chaos and casts it as the matrix and shadow of
modern self-conscious rational order. Consistently, he produces a unified narra-
tive, the formal totality of which is made of heterogeneous and dismembered parts.

The central purpose of the *Genealogy* – to see myths as a whole made of
parts – is achieved through the account of Boccaccio’s own diligent quest into
the extant archives of tradition and antiquarian sources, and the quest is figured
as a journey across time and space that results in a universal history of myth
or mythography. He calls it a “*Genealogy,*” a term that revises and adapts the
earlier medieval sense of “history.” But there is a difference between the two.

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3 Giovanni Boccaccio: *Genealogia doerum gentilium.* Edited by Vittorio Zaccaria. In: *Tutte le
been recently studied in Italy in a volume of essays in *Intersezioni* 2 (2011), *Il mito al tempo dei
Mercanti: una proposta* edited by Francesco Citti and Sebastiana Nobili (p. 175–178). See also
David Lummus: Boccaccio’s Poetic Anthropology: Allegories of History in the *Genealogie deorum
The semantic field of the word “history”, to be sure, is broad and it encompasses autobiographies, representations of events, encyclopedic writings etc.

Whether one reads Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum*, Vincent of Beauvais’s encyclopedic *Speculum historiale* (a history of the world up to 1240), Peter Comestor’s *Historia scholastica*, Bede’s *Historia anglorum*, or Dante’s sense of istoria (*Purgatorio* X, 70–73), the semantic arc of this historiographic genre implies a chronology and an inquiry into the documented facts of ancient epochs, that are both believed to be true and organized by a teleology.

Boccaccio goes out of the way to cite Vincent of Beauvais’s encyclopedic work. Like Beauvais’ deliberate mixture of the encyclopedic and the historical genres in his *Speculum Historiale*, the *Genealogy* features some of its traits and asks to be viewed as a mythic deepening of historia: it lacks a precise chronological order, but it comes forth as an imaginative, conjectural rediscovery of oblique byways and crossing paths of cultural traditions distant from one another in the geography of the classical imagination. To this end Boccaccio roams from the authority of Dictys in Crete about the Trojan dynastic lines (*Genealogy* II, xxvi) to Egypt and Greece, all the way to the legendary genealogy of historical figures of Greek and Roman history, such as Alexander and Scipio Africanus. All the myths are linked together in a persistent system of kinship or, to say it in the language of emblems introducing every book of the *Genealogy*, as an organic family tree and a tree of poetic knowledge engendered by the insights of the exegete, Boccaccio himself.

From this standpoint, the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* presupposes and belongs to the hybrid genre of medieval encyclopedism. The forerunner was Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, a seventh century alphabet of knowledge in which etymology provides access to the world of concepts and things. In the thirteenth century Vincent of Beauvais forcefully rejected Isidore’s model for the unity of knowledge in favor of a historical and chronological narrative order. In between, however, European letters witnessed the production of the likes of Rabanus Maurus, Honorius of Autun, Alexander Neckham, and Bartholomew Anglicus, down to Brunetto Latini. Boccaccio, who had practiced the encyclopedic mode in literary works, such as *De casibus*, *De claris mulieribus*, and *De montibus*, reaches in the *Genealogy* for the ultimate foundation of knowledge in mythical consciousness so that he can arrive at his own re-organization of knowledge for modern times.

At roughly the same time, Boccaccio was engaged in his encyclopedic *Genealogy*, a significant event happened. Although Petrarch had compiled earlier in his career an encyclopedic-historical text, *Rerum memorandarum libri*, he wrote a text, *On His Own Ignorance*, that unleashed a searing attack against the phenomenon of encyclopedias. He dismissed the genre as a mindless classification of fossils and arbitrary ordering of knowledge.
In this tract, signed off in Padua on January 13, 1368, he relates a strange encounter with four young neo-Aristotelians (or Averroists) who had made the fateful error of accusing Petrarch – who thought of himself as a classic – of being out of fashion and of lacking a rigorous knowledge of modern philosophy or scholasticism. Petrarch’s defense branches out in different directions. He rebuffs his visitors with the Socratic argument that true knowledge coincides with ignorance – mindful of the ethical edge of the claim. He turns his attention to the Socratic conception of the examined life, the self as the only object worthy of examination, in the persuasion that the self can reveal and shape the world. Finally, he dismisses out of hand precisely Vincent of Beauvais’s encyclopedia, which is based on the premise that in a rigorous empirical study of nature and the new knowledge made available by Arab science (medicine, above all), lay the foundation of a valid knowledge.

To Petrarch, scientific knowledge and naturalism amount to a trivial, empty description of natural reality and of the external architectonics of knowledge. With ruthless sarcasm, he caricatures Vincent of Beauvais’s own brand of naturalism. Vincent, he says, “[...] knows how many hairs a lion has in its mane, [...] that elephants mate from behind, and are pregnant for two years; [...] that a hunter can trick a tiger with a mirror [...], that moles are blind, tat bees are deaf.”

The overt satire encompasses the chaotic, undisciplined catalogue of mere legends, fanciful fossils of lore, commonplace observations of natural phenomena and, above all, the principle of a possible objective order subtending the tabulations of knowledge. To this abstract structure Petrarch juxtaposes a different model of education: the autobiographical account of his own apprenticeship from the liberal arts to ethics and theology. The process of education is represented through the classical *topos* of a journey through stages leading to the citadel of the philosophical life. He identifies these intellectual stages as the real geographical places of his early youth: Montpellier, Avignon, Bologna etc. on the basis of the belief that genuine knowledge is rooted in the depth of living and is woven in the texture of one’s own experience.

On *His Own Ignorance*, in reality, draws and recapitulates the main lines of Petrarch’s cultural project. This project is centered on his own individual self. Thus, he writes an *apologia* for his own intellectual and moral claims. His personal superiority – so he overtly states – rests on the foundations of the Latin tradition, on the masters of introspective self-analysis such as Augustine, Boethius, Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux, the Victorines (Hugh and Richard),

etc. Petrarch identifies true wisdom with the interiority of religious faith over and against Aristotle’s rationalism. As a consequence of his belief in the centrality of rhetoric, poetry, and theology in the scheme of knowledge, he posits the equation between poetry and theology. The point is really driven home in the letter he sent to Boccaccio’s disciple, Benvenuto da Imola (Seniles XV, 2) in 1373. In an open polemic with Augustine (who had dismissed as a pagan confusion the purported similarity between poetry and theology), Petrarch insists on the valorization of the Roman rhetorical tradition (Cicero, Quintilian).

At first glance, Petrarch’s project of a humanistic culture, with its allegiance to the theology of Augustine’s “way of the heart,” has its point of departure in the now of everyday life, in the daily exploration of one’s moods to be conducted through the lenses of the ethical, historical, and rhetorical funds of classical and patristic wisdom – Cicero, Seneca, Boethius, Ambrose, Augustine, etc.

Plainly enough, Boccaccio agrees with much of Petrarch’s vision. The Decameron, for instance, manifestly takes as its point of departure the now of the political, historical catastrophe of 1348. Yet he reconceives the configuration of Petrarch’s project and subjects it to a sharp critique. What exactly separates their parallel lines of inquiry and where do they lead?

I have claimed that Petrarch is both the interlocutor and the polemical target of Boccaccio’s own understanding of his work. The Genealogy of the Gentile Gods is framed by two explicit references to Petrarch. The first occurs in the Proem to book I. In point of fact, these introductory pages are addressed to Hugh, king of Jerusalem and Cyprus, and the address makes visible the political overtone of the Genealogy. We can extrapolate the king’s intent in commissioning this huge bibliographical undertaking: he expected nothing less than the proof of kings’ descent from gods – as Aeneas and Augustus do from Venus. This belief survived, so Boccaccio relates, till the time the Greek state came into being.

It is within this context that Boccaccio mentions for the first time Petrarch by name. He simply tells the king that the work he expects of him could best be done by “the famous Francesco Petrarch.” The detail cannot make us infer even the hint of a difference in moral-political orientation between the two of them. To the contrary, Boccaccio goes on acknowledging his discipleship to Petrarch by listing a number of qualities edging toward the hyperbolic: he is gifted with a celesti ingenio (a divine intelligence), a strong memory, admirable eloquence, and an intimate familiarity with history and philosophy. (Proem I, 21)

Donnino da Parma, the king’s emissary and secretary, responds that he has not been fortunate to meet this extraordinary man, whose fame has reached the sky. What may be a simple touch of elegant diplomatic rhetoric to praise a great man who did not get the job, brings to the surface an issue central to the Genealogy and to Petrarch: fame, which crystallizes the will of the self to transcend time and its ruptures.

The other explicit reference to Petrarch comes off like an intellectual portrait of the man, whose love of freedom goes hand in hand with his being enamored with political power. Just as Dante was bound by great friendship to Frederick of Sicily and to Cangrande della Scala, so did Petrarch – Boccaccio writes – cultivate close ties with kings and popes alike, from John king of France to Popes Clement VI and Innocent VI. Above all, Petrarch is praised for his ability in teaching a king (XIV, xxii, 5) and for reversing the hierarchy of power between king and poet. He is specifically credited with brilliant insights into the “arcane meanings” of Virgil’s poetry which he unveiled to the king of Naples (a confidence made to Boccaccio by Petrarch). Nor was his knowledge valuable only to ingratiate that powerful king. Boccaccio praises Petrarch for treating sacred theology in a poem such as Bucolicum Carmen, much as Dante himself had done (XIV, xxii, 8). In short, he enshrines Petrarch as a classic worthy of standing shoulder to shoulder with Dante. The last time Petrarch’s name appears (XV, vi, 11) Boccaccio circles back to the beginning and expresses the hope his “teacher” will read the Genealogy and correct its likely errors.

We are watching through these gracious acknowledgements the staging of a dialogue manqué between a self-styled modest Boccaccio and Petrarch as the absent protagonist. The theatrical sketch lets us glimpse what Boccaccio does not actually say but he is steadily implying: the problematic question of Petrarch’s own standpoint on the world and its history. He casts Petrarch as one who occupies a higher point of view than Boccaccio does, and from that high standpoint he can embrace with seeming ease, thanks to his formidable memory, all epochs of history and all perspectives.

In De remediis utriusque fortune Petrarch memorably writes “we are never whole, never just one, but at odds with ourselves, self-destructing. [...] torn between wholly unstable states of mind, wavering without any let up, from the beginning to its very end, the life of man.”6 But he steps back from this sort of

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self-consciousness that shapes his lyrical self-representation through the myths of Echo and Narcissus in the Canzoniere. In On His Own Ignorance he looks from a high and solitary altitude at his own time and at the young people who, in telling him of his untimeliness, embody the images of modern life and its likely future values. Confronted with them, the figure Petrarch cuts is that of a classic, as Boccaccio hints, perched above the flow of time-bound events and retiring into himself to a life of cloistered and yet free self-reflection.

In reality, Petrarch is never simply the detached spectator of life’s drama. He is its protagonist who affirms the values of the universe his work has called into existence. On His Own Ignorance comes through exactly as the breviary of a man who fights, who engages in invectives, refuses the fashion of the day and asserts the perennial significance of the intellectual / moral tradition he has forged.

Petrarch’s mythology of the self that Boccaccio deftly brings out is based on a number of attributes that need recapitulation. Boccaccio places him on a pedestal of authority, for his fame allows him to hold the world as if it lay at his feet. He teaches kings and would counsel popes. By linking Petrarch with Dante (for whom theology was the real homeland), Boccaccio may well believe that Petrarch sees theology as the horizon of history and of all knowledge. In fact, both Boccaccio and Petrarch subscribe to the identification of poetry with theology and both agree that theology is the “poetry of God” (cf. XIV, xviii).

This portrait of Petrarch goes beyond the rhetoric of innocent praise. Through it Boccaccio reaches down to the cause of their rift and brings the very origin of the crisis of contemporary thought back to the heart of Petrarch’s project: the question of subjectivity. What Petrarch saw as a remedy – the self, and more precisely the standpoint of the self in history – Boccaccio considers a flawed perspective. A thematic double focus – the self and history, the self in history – sustains the narrative movement of the Genealogy of the Gentile Gods, and I turn to it.

Boccaccio dramatizes the sense of his own self in strikingly non-Petrarchan terms. In the Proem to book I, which gets going by highlighting the origin of Boccaccio’s own text, he describes the difficult circumstances of his undertaking. He stages his own self from two distinct angles. The first is political, and it concerns the relation between knowledge and power, between himself as the author of the text and King Hugh, who pays for the job and whose authority he acknowledges. Boccaccio’s initial exchange with the king’s courtier, Donnino da Parma, as well as a series of addresses to the king punctuating the Genealogy, cast an ambiguous light on the hierarchical relation between them. Boccaccio is no Lactantius (an intellectual who became the advisor of Constantine), as Petrarch with some malice had called him. The king’s sovereignty is countered by Boccaccio’s doubts as the teacher of the king. Unlike Petrarch with King Robert, Boccaccio does not teach his king the arcane secrets of power. Aware of the underlying,
possible manipulation of the evidence dug up by the research, Boccaccio engages in a display of skepticism (in the form of authorial modesty) about the scientific validity of his work-in-progress. The modesty carefully and yet flatly denies the possibility of establishing, out of ancient forgeries and documentary gaps, the legitimacy of the king’s royal/divine origin. The disavowal is an exercise in freedom.

The second angle on the representation of the self confirms and yet it is ostensibly kept separate from the first. Boccaccio, as the author who is researching his topic, stages himself as a sailor navigating uncharted seas in rough weather. He cannot master the world of myth, and his journey of discovery of treasures troves in unknown lands may end in shipwreck as he goes from one harbor to another. One example out of many will suffice: “the sky darkened with clouds, the splendor of the sunlight disappeared, the air trembling in the wind [...] I began to fear that everything had turned to primal chaos [...] thus, not without horror, do I leave behind the shores of the Ocean to direct the prow of my little boat [...]” (VIII, Proem 1–5).

The point of his navigational rhetoric for the act of writing—a literary topos that prominently figures in literary history (Homer, Virgil, Dante etc.) for the philosophical quest—is that Boccaccio is literally at sea, that is, he understands the specifically political danger inherent in his literary adventure. That book VIII describes Saturn and his fall from Heaven by an act of usurpation unveils the nature of the fear he feels at the gathering of a storm. The metaphor of his sailing over stormy waters, moreover, conveys his awareness that he cannot turn the sea’s shapelessness into a scientific chart of a universal, true historiography. He can only concoct a genealogy of the imagination. The dubious availability of empirical evidence makes him re-enact the work of the old physician Aesculapius: like Aesculapius, he has to dig into graves and bring the ghosts of the past back to life, that is, arrange the ancient myths into a system of relations conveying an intelligible moral sense. At the same time, the figure of Theodontius, who may never have existed, is ironically treated as Boccaccio’s main privileged source of the history of myths.

At stake in this representation of self is Boccaccio’s willed limitation of the authority of his own voice: it lacks any solid ground of certainty and admits to his fear of never reaching the firm land of knowledge. Thus, the text he has produced amounts to the sum total of ancient and recent hypotheses about the dark

7 “Offuscari nebulis celum, et solis preclarum deficere iubar, turbari ventis aera [...] ceptum est. Ego autem [...] timere cepi, ne in antiquum chaos omnia verterentur [...]. [...] Non ergo absque horrore quodam Oceani litora prolemque relinquo [...] directurus fragilis navigii proram [...].” My translation.
and lost origins of cosmos and of their mythical imagination (Ovid, Varro, Augustine, Hyginus, Chalcydius, Barlaam, Leontius etc.). This rhetorical procedure highlights Boccaccio's sense of his place in the story he tells. His divergence from Petrarch's sense of an omniscient, sovereign voice that transcends and controls the universe of discourse in *On His Own Ignorance* is plain. Unlike Petrarch, Boccaccio adopts a strategy that demands that he move beyond the partition of self and others; he can, thus, try to reach for a place from which a different, alternative model of culture can be envisioned.

The many textual echoes, citations, and authors’ names interlocking throughout the *Genealogy* can remind the reader of the multiple narrators and shifting perspectives deployed in the *Decameron*. They chiefly reflect Boccaccio’s sense of both what it takes to reach a panoramic vision and of the stumbling block in his way toward untangling the weave of contradictory, fragmentary evidence and shifting identities. From this standpoint, the strategy recalls the productivity and the shadow of Chaos, Demogorgon, from whom all myths stem and who hovers over the confusing, frequent re-appearance in time of the same mythical names, such as Jupiter.

We are approaching the leading thought of the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*. Demogorgon, the first pagan god, is a shapeless chthonic entity that lives hidden in the womb of the earth accompanied by Chaos and Eternity. This mythical, poetic trinity reflects and paradoxically epitomizes the enigma of origins: the reality of contradictory hypotheses about the beginning of the cosmos put forth by the early philosophers / theologians of Greece (Thales, Anaximander etc.). The founding role assigned to Demogorgon points to a second critical difference between Boccaccio and Petrarch: their respective visions of history, within which they ponder the question of subject.

The ultimate foundation of Petrarch’s imaginative world lies, as stated earlier, in his subjectivity and in the rational will of the self. So does Boccaccio assess his thinking: he stresses that Petrarch, agreeing with Leontius, believed that poetry originated with the Greeks (XIV, viii). Poetry began, that is, not in the shadowy depths of the pre-rational mythical age of Demogorgon, but in the philosophical, enlightened time of Greek rationality. Barlaam’s teaching of Greek, I suspect, had its own unacknowledged impact on Petrarch, and this suspicion flows from Boccaccio’s suggestion that his friend’s cultural paradigm is modeled on and is narrowly circumscribed within the orbit of the Greek tradition.8 To be sure, classical

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8 Lummus has argued about Boccaccio’s openness to the Greeks. His point is well taken, but it has to be seen in the light of the charge that Petrarch misunderstands the Greek model. See David Lummus: Boccaccio’s Hellenism and the Foundations of Modernity. In: *Mediaevalia* 33 (2012), p. 101-167.
myths – Narcissus, Echo, Apollo, Diana, Venus etc. – span Petrarch’s poetry, but
the hallmark of his poetic imagination lies in the lucid, self-conscious analysis of
the contingency of daily moods. In this sense, Petrarch shuns the profundity and
passion of the mythological age and drives a wedge between it and the rationality
of allegory. Boccaccio, on the contrary, erases the drastic juxtaposition between
antiquity and modernity, myth and poetry, and theology and poetry. He retrieves
the untamed, primordial Chaos, such as the tragic history of Thebes, Troy, the
Plague etc. – and views them as recurrent phenomena of the Chaos steadily
threatening all fictions of order. The fictions aim at relieving suffering, but they
also remind us of the inevitability of coming face to face with the Chaos lurking
behind appearances.

Most of Boccaccio’s works begin with the evocation of the shadows Chaos
casts on historical experiences, and then he proceeds to weigh the possible
virtues – rationality, prudence, moderation, chastity, eutrapelia – capable of neu-
tralizing the hold Chaos has on the world. To give a few random examples, let me
mention the Black Plague in the Decameron – when nature seemed to go mad –
behind the decision of the young women and men to escape the city and reach
a pastoral landscape on the hills of Fiesole. The Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta
internalizes the images of Chaos as it portrays the tortured, delirious psyche of
Fiammetta under the impact of her love disappointment. In the Filostrato, as the
city of Troy edges near destruction, Troilo’s love for Criseida has Boccaccio reach
into the darkest corners of his mind (as he had done with the labyrinthine puzzle
of Fiammetta’s). For both characters Boccaccio adopts a Petrarchan language.
Troilo – like Chaucer’s Troilus – gives vent to his grief by quoting one of Petrarch’s
sonnets (S’amor non è, che dunque è quel ch’io sento? RVF 132). Fiammetta’s mel-
ancholy over the absence of her lover resembles the solipsism of the Petrarchists
avant-la-lettre.

Boccaccio’s notion of the persistent recurrence of Chaos in history and in
the individual mind, that which pushes human beings into the obsessiveness
of destructive passions, is rooted in a definable ideology of nature, of the links
between nature and history. It is a vision at odds with a rational view of history
as a plot one can control and shape. The question he obliquely raises and must
be answered is whether or not he thinks culture must be explained in terms of
nature, though not in a regressive-positivistic manner. Boccaccio’s figuration of
Demogorgon, I would suggest, derives from the tradition of Naturalism that was
developed in the twelfth century at the school of Chartres and found its imagi-
native extension into texts such as Brunetto Latini’s Tesoretto, the Roman de la
Rose’s ideas of nature, and into debates about nature and law.

Brilliant figures such as Chalcidius, Guillaume de Conches, Bernard Silves-
ter, Alain de Lille and Thierry of Chartres were engaged in the difficult project
of harmonizing the Platonic cosmology of the *Timaeus* with the account of Creation in Genesis. Boccaccio, I would further suggest, patterned his *Genealogy* on one text that he knew well and encapsulates this tradition: the *Cosmographia* of Bernard Silvester.

The poem is extant thanks to Boccaccio who copied it down and preserved it. At any rate, the poem is divided into two components, the *Megacosm* and the *Microcosm*. In its cosmological and man-centered components, the *Cosmographia* features the Christian moral tradition on the role of Nature as the protagonist of Creation. In other texts, beginning with Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Nature is variously identified with the law of Nature and with Reason; she is called the procreative *Mater generationis* or *Vicaria-Dei* (the agent of God). Bernard defines it as the “womb of life,” as a cosmic power that begs Divine Providence to shape Silva according to esthetic principles of beauty and order. The prayer amounts to a radical shift in the understanding of Plato’s *hyle*: *Silva* is “[…]

Boccaccio registers the divergences between Petrarch’s and his own idea of nature. For instance, in *Genealogy XIV, x*, which argues that poets spin out hidden truths under the veil of their fables, Boccaccio discusses some pastoral poetry of Nature. He singles out Petrarch’s *Bucolicum Carmen*, Virgil’s *Bucolics*, and his own *Buccolicum Carmen*, as he calls it to distinguish it from Petrarch’s poem. Petrarch’s eclogues have little or no representation of nature, and in this sense they offer a mutilated version of Vergil’s *Bucolics*, and, above all, a flight from ethical naturalism (4–6). The twelve poems comprising Petrarch’s pastoral make up an autobiographical narrative of how the self achieves its liberty and they end in eclogue XII with the poet plunged into the world of history exemplified by the mighty war between France and England. To it, Boccaccio juxtaposes his own poem of nature as well as Virgil’s *Georgics* and *The Aeneid*. For him, as for Vergil, nature is fashioned into history. But Boccaccio’s complex figuration of Nature goes beyond the polemics with Petrarch and it involves the theories debated at the School of Chartres.

For the physicists at Chartres, for Bernard as well as his disciples Alain de Lille’s *De planctu naturae* and for their epigone Brunetto Latini’s *Tesoretto*, Nature

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provides the moral standards for reforming man and for re-founding a livable political society. The optimistic view predominant at Chartres, the belief in the goodness of Nature’s laws and of sex in repairing death’s devastation are certainly attenuated by Jean de Meun’s ironic view of the distance separating Nature from the pleasures of Venus. Furthermore, the anthropomorphism of Nature’s allegorical personification presupposes the principle of the intelligibility and rationality of Nature and affirms the continuity between Nature and the human world.

Thanks to Brunetto Latini, these debates filter into the Italian literary landscape. At the beginning of the *Inferno* Dante adopts the Platonic “hyle” (Bernard’s *Silva*) and calls it “Selva” (I, 2) to lay the basis for the pilgrim’s spiritual disorder he will eventually transcend. In the *Decameron* to the chaos of the Plague Boccaccio contrasts the play of utopia ruled by laws of reason in an artifice of nature, known as the *locus amoenus*, while in the novella of Tancredi and Ghismunda (*Decameron* IV, I) the relation between nature and law – the very principle of natural law – is drawn in a tragic light.

The *Genealogy*, on the other hand, focuses on something prior to the fragile fabric of Nature: the ambivalence of Chaos disguises its formless excess under a variety of masks and proliferates into myriad myths scattered all over the face of the earth. By showing how from Chaos, as from a matrix, derives a no less chaotic view of history, politics, society, and laws, Boccaccio rejects as too simple the Chartrians’ benevolent view of Nature.

The point is made in the Proem to book I. It evokes Eternity, Demogorgon’s companion, unknowable and inaccessible to the human mind. Everything that reaches its gate – so Boccaccio writes – does so by re-joining the kingdom of Nature, to whom he refers in the lexicon of *natura naturans* (creating Nature) and *natura naturata* (created Nature), which derives from John Scotus Erigena (*De divisione naturae* II, 2). But this theological language for Nature as a creative force and the sum of created things is quickly bracketed. By the scholastic rhetoric (which Petrarch claimed he abhorred) it is as if Boccaccio wants to dispel the suspicion that he posits the idea of the eternity of Nature and that he reduces it to the condition of an eternal immanence. At the same time, by the scholastic lexicon he does not impose – as the Neo-Platonists do – the myth of harmony reconciling the representation of Chaos and the biblical story of Creation. Myth and theology, in short, stand as two parallel representations running independently of each other, but joining together at the end of time. They are

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linked by a relation – a word implying differences and convergences – such as one finds in poetry and theology.

After evoking Eternity and Nature, Boccaccio turns to the phantasmagoria of the natural sequence of created beings. From the Earth – the eighth of the nine daughters of Demogorgon – are born five children, among whom is Fama, love, death (Erebus), and time. It is difficult to resist recalling the ordered, progressive, hierarchical ascent of Petrarch’s Trionfi (love, time, fame, death, and Eternity), which Boccaccio dismantles. The neat rank ordering is displaced, and with it, Petrarch’s luminous self-consciousness plunges into the opacity of the mythology of Demogorgon who transcends all order and all individualities.

Fama, moreover, is the other name of Clio, the muse of history. In the wake of the Aeneid (IV, 17 ff.) and the Metamorphoses (XII, 39 ff.), we gather that Fama, from fari, to speak, is bound to malicious rumor, slander, reputation and opinion and she stands for the ever ambiguous, shifty and contradictory language of history.

Against the background of Fama, the history of the self that longs to attain a stable, posthumous existence is seen more skeptically than in any of Boccaccio’s representations. Discussing Narcissus and Echo (Genealogy VII, lviii–lix) – two crucial figures of Petrarch’s self in the Canzoniere – Narcissus is identified as the son of a river: like water, he flows inexorably away. Echo, who only fragments and repeats words she has heard, fades like her own sounds in the wind. Of her Boccaccio writes, “Famam ego intelligo,” (VII, lix, 3) and he adds that she describes those who die as if they never lived. As pure sound, Echo, thus, joins the noises of history, and neither she nor Narcissus will ever triumph over it.

So this final chapter ends on two figures of self and history who are indistinguishable from each other. They are the figures that turned Boccaccio in search of a way, his way beyond Petrarch’s theories. Petrarch, no doubt, appears to Boccaccio as the one great thinker of his time who has taken seriously the question of agency in history and who has affirmed the will of the self as the power of the individual consciousness to confront and shape the world in which he is situated.

But Boccaccio also reminds Petrarch, whom he imagines as his reader, of the two critical issues of his own project. One is that history, as Petrarch saw it, must be construed as the sum total of perspectival experiences held together by one’s subjective consciousness. The other concerns the limitations of the self in time: the representation of a faltering author undercuts the noblest dreams of re-inventing history. Boccaccio reminds us of the need to envision the future from the standpoint of the memory of the foggy, shaky origins of human culture.
especially when he seeks to open up a new, unexplored way into the knowledge of myth.

In response to Petrarch’s contention that Fortune and the mutability of time must be confronted by the virtues harbored within oneself (the ethical virtues, the intellectual virtues, and God’s gifts), Boccaccio etches a theory that surpasses Petrarch’s. He had turned to prose, the prose of the Decameron, based on an idea of alterity and had introduced the model of a style capable of representing the complicity between seemingly unrelated themes, such as, for instance, sexuality and theology (see on this the previous chapter). Above all, the recurring, impending reality of Chaos leads him to produce an art which is both inscribed within and capable of provisionally holding at bay the sovereignty of Chaos. The work of art, its virtues of prudence and rigor, coincides with and makes available the power of language to open up the ambiguities of history and the self.

Language was the remedy Madonna Fiammetta found to get her out of her madness. It was the brigata’s logotherapy (la curación de la palabra as Lain Entralgo called it) that sheltered them from the plague, and it is language that annuls Echo’s very existence. The virtues of poetic language hidden at the heart of every myth lie in their meaning, which both contains and exceeds their literal sense.

The excess precedes the economy of the literal determination of every statement, the way Chaos precedes order, and it coincides with the very idea of “Genealogy,” which both posits the uncontainable energy of Demogorgon and entails the generosity of myths, their multiplicity and their process of steady regeneration. In grasping the priority of Chaos or excess, forever transgressive and forever going beyond the boundaries of the literal, Boccaccio uncovered a new perspective on poetic language as a relation of bodies and passions that are grounded in myths.

One last question is in order: which one of the two ways, Petrarch’s and Boccaccio’s, is preferable to the other? The answer can only be genealogical: each depends on and presupposes the other, and both together draw the double face of Humanism, that is to say either face reflected in a mirror. Petrarch, who founds a “world of words” not without a political scheme underlying it, leads to Machiavelli. Boccaccio’s Genealogy of the Gentile Gods reads like the preamble to Vico’s New Science.

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