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Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio on Religious Conversion

The investigation into the cultural transition between the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance from a literary perspective, or more broadly from that pertaining to the history of ideas, has generally moved back in time. Once focused on Petrarch, often considered to be the father of Italian Renaissance Humanism, more recently it has shifted, thanks to the work of Ronald Witt, onto the earlier generations of Lovato dei Lovati and Albertino Mussato, contemporaries respectively of Dante's father and Dante himself.¹ Whatever our understanding of what Italian humanism was, and when and how it began, it would probably be very difficult, if not impossible, to establish a concrete, universally acknowledged canon of fourteenth-century authors and texts that foreshadow or in some way already belong to the new intellectual milieu of the fifteenth century. This is why I will focus my attention only on Petrarch and Boccaccio and their contrastive readings of Dante's *Comedy*. In my paper I will explore a consistent set of theological and aesthetic concepts, foremost among them the medieval (and especially Dante's) idea and representation of Christian conversion in Augustinian terms. The two main poles around which my investigation revolves are the conclusions respectively of Petrarch's *Secretum* and Boccaccio's tale of Ser Ciappelletto (*Dec.* I, 1), two texts that bear witness to the radical intellectual turn towards the new era of Italian Renaissance humanism. With the lone exception of Francesco De Sanctis, critics have surprisingly devoted scant attention to the revolutionary meaning these two texts have as signposts – signposts which lead the way to an insightful understanding of the historical transition between the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance.

In Petrarch's *Secretum* the arguments used by Augustinus, the Christian figure of the father-confessor, are aimed at convincing Franciscus that he must radically change his life. This means in particular that he must rethink the complex of ethical values with which he has so far identified himself, as well as the cultural values by which his literature is oriented. The very conclusion of the dialogue, however, implies that Franciscus is unwilling to curb his desire and undergo the final *mutatio animi*, or in other words that he will undergo no lasting religious conversion after the preliminary steps of *confessio* and

¹ See in particular Ronald Witt: *"In the Footsteps of the Ancients": The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni*. Leiden: Brill 2000 (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, 74).

contritio. What is more, Augustinus himself reaches a surprising conclusion, sanctioning the impossibility of Franciscus's religious conversion: "We are," Petrarch has him concede, "back where we started our argument: you describe your will as weakness. But so be it, since it cannot be otherwise. I pray to God and beg Him to accompany you on your way, and to grant that your errant footsteps will nonetheless lead you to a place of safety."² In fact, as Marco Santagata has convincingly argued, the *Secretum*, set in 1343 but most likely begun in 1347, is meant only to foreshadow the final *mutatio animi* that will take place some years later in Petrarch's life.³ It is interesting to note that in 1347 Petrarch began writing the *De otio religioso*, whose second book contains a passage that sets the parallel between the uncertain condition of Augustine before his conversion and that of Petrarch, a passage which the dialogue *de secreto conflictu* turns into narrative fiction.⁴ Thus, the characters of Augustinus and Franciscus, who together form another split alter ego of Petrarch,⁵ do not hesitate to recognize within the existential parable of Franciscus signs of the one recounted in the *Confessions*. From this point of view, then, Franciscus's reluctance closely reflects Augustine's own lingering unwillingness to surrender himself to God in the *Confessions*.

F. How often have I told you that I could do no more? A. And how often have I replied that in truth you didn't want to? But I am not surprised to see you entangled in the very same complications that once tormented me when I was contemplating setting off on the path of a new life. [...] From that moment onward, since I wanted it, I could do it instantly, and so was transformed happily, and remarkably quickly, into another Augustine, whose unfold-

² Francesco Petrarca: *My Secret Book*. Edited and translated by Nicholas Mann. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2016 (The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 72), p. 257. Latin text in: Francesco Petrarca: *Opere latine*. Edited by Antonietta Bufano. 2 vols. Torino: UTET 1975, I, p. 258: "In antiquam litem relabimur, voluntatem impotentiam vocas. Sed sic eat, quando aliter esse non potest, supplexque Deum oro ut euntem comitetur, gressusque licet vagos, in tutum iubeat pervenire."

³ See Marco Santagata: *I frammenti dell'anima: Storia e racconto nel "Canzoniere" di Petrarca*. Bologna: Il Mulino 1992, p. 56–75. On the *Secretum*'s dates of composition, see Francisco Rico: *Vida u obra de Petrarca. I. Lectura del "Secretum"*. Padova: Antenore 1974; Id.: "Sospir trillustre". *Le date dell'amore e il primo "Canzoniere"*. In: *Critica del testo* 6 (2003), p. 31–48.

⁴ "Inter fluctuationes meas, quas si percurrere cepero et michi confessionum liber ingens ordendus erit, Augustini Confessionum liber obvius fuit." (Petrarca: *Opere latine*, I, p. 802). Francisco Rico explained how the inspiration of both the *Secretum* and *De otio* refers to the same period of interest in Augustine and his *De vera religione*, to be placed around 1347. See Rico: *Vida u obra de Petrarca*, p. 113–117.

⁵ See also David Marsh: *The Burning Question: Crisis and Cosmology in the "Secret"*. In: *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*. Edited by Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2009, p. 211–218 (p. 212).

ing story you know, unless I'm mistaken, from my *Confessions*. [...] F. [...] I do recognize some trace of your unrest amid my own troubles. The result is that every time that I read your *Confessions*, torn as I am between two conflicting emotions of hope and fear, I weep with joy at the impression that what I am reading is not the story of someone else's wanderings, but of my own.⁶

This process of self-identification with Augustine's religious experience in Books I and II of the *Secretum* is another clear sign that the dialogue is ultimately supposed to lead to a conversion. Furthermore, Petrarch parallels Dante's referring to Augustine's experience in the *Convivio*, which Dante does to legitimate speaking about himself in that context,⁷ and thus we can infer that Franciscus's moral and religious experience too is indeed representative – and it certainly is, but in a very different way from Dante's. This is perhaps another reason why this extraordinarily modern dramatization of a moral conflict lies at the center of a work which only pretends to remain secret, or in other words is not aimed at contemporary readers but rather at posterity.

If we now consider *Secretum's* Book III, which was probably completed around 1353, we will immediately perceive Franciscus's change of attitude and behaviour towards his ideal father-confessor and mentor. The interlocutors now take two very different positions which at the very end, as we already know, will remain irreconcilable. The two chains, love and glory (*amor et gloria*), that according to Augustinus are hindering Franciscus's soul are interpreted by Franciscus himself not as chains but – far from it – as wonderful object of his love, *speciosissimae curae*. The metaphor of the two chains obviously refers to Petrarch's tight bonds with Laura and literature, the latter to be identified with both amorous lyric poetry and the two *opera magna* to which Petrarch had entrusted his future

⁶ Petrarca: *My Secret Book*, p. 27. Latin text in: Petrarca: *Opere latine*, I, p. 66–69: “F. Quotiens dixi me ulterius nequivisse? A. Quotiensque respondi, imo verius noluisse? Nec tamen admiror te in his nunc ambagibus obvolutum in quibus olim ego ipse iactatus, dum novam vite viam carpere meditarer. [...] Itaque postquam plene volui, ilicet et potui, miraue et felicissima celeritate transformatus sum in alterum Augustinum, cuius historie seriem, ni fallor, ex Confessionibus meis nosti. [...] F. [...] inter procillas meas fluctuationis tue vestigium recognosco. Ex quo fit ut, quotiens Confessionum tuarum libros lego, inter duos contrarios affectus, spem videlicet et metum, letis non sine lacrimis interdum legere me arbitrer non alienam sed propriam mee peregrinationis historiam.”

⁷ See Dante Alighieri: *Convivio*. Edited by Franca Brambilla Ageno. 2 vols. Firenze: Le Lettere 1995 (Edizione nazionale delle opere di Dante Alighieri, 3), II, to. 2, p. 11: “L'altra [scil. necessaria cagione] è quando, per ragionare di sé, grandissima utilidade ne segue altrui per via di dottrina; e questa ragione mosse Agustino nelle sue Confessioni a parlare di sé, ché per lo processo della sua vita, lo quale fu di meno buono in buono, e di buono in migliore, e di migliore in ottimo, ne diede esemplo e dottrina, la quale per altro sì vero testimonio ricevere non si potea.”

fame, the *De viris illustribus* and the *Africa*. But it is Laura, in the end, who is the unintentional prime mover of all of Franciscus's passions. And whatever the nature of his attachment and how sublime his relationship with her really was, Augustinus points out, she has turned him away from divine love as he has worshipped the creature rather than the Creator, the shortest path to sin. And, he concludes, if all the things created have to be loved for the love for the Creator, Franciscus, on the contrary, loved God not for Himself, but for being the creator of a human being, Laura.

This is a key passage for the interpretation of Book III and of the *Secretum* as a whole. As far as I know, the best scholarly contribution for understanding the meaning of this passage, and then, *e contrario*, for discovering the modernity of the entire dialogue, is to be found, surprisingly enough, not in an essay on Petrarch's *Secretum*, but in Charles Singleton's reading of the Casella episode in the *Purgatory*. In Canto 2, Dante and Virgil have just reached the shore of the mountain-island of Purgatory when they hear a group of souls singing a Psalm of the Exodus, *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*. This is a first sign declaring they are pilgrims, as are Virgil and Dante, who have just arrived in the new, otherworldly realm. As Singleton notes, this detail is essential for understanding the meaning of the episode that now develops. Suddenly, out of the group of souls comes one who makes as to embrace Dante: he is Casella, an old friend of his and a Florentine musician, and Dante asks his friend to console him with a song of love as he used to in the past.

“Amor che nella mente mi ragiona”
 cominciò elli allor sì dolcemente,
 che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona.
 Lo mio maestro e io e quella gente
 ch'eran con lui parevan sì contenti,
 come a nessun toccasse altro la mente.
 Noi eravam tutti fissi e attenti
 a le sue note; ed ecco il veglio onesto
 gridando: “Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?
 qual negligenza, qual stare è questo?
 Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
 ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto.”
 Come quando, cogliendo biado o loglio,
 li colombi adunati a la pastura,
 queti, senza mostrar l'usato orgoglio,
 se cosa appare ond'elli abbian paura,
 subitamente lasciano star l'esca,
 perch'assaliti son da maggior cura;
 così vid'io quella masnada fresca
 lasciar lo canto, e fuggir ver' la costa,

com'om che va, né sa dove rïesca;
 né la nostra partita fu men tosta. (*Purg.* II, 112–133)

["Love that converses with me in my mind,"
 he then began, so sweetly
 that the sweetness sounds within me still.

My master and I and all those standing
 near Casella seemed untroubled,
 as if we had no other care.

We were spellbound, listening to his notes,
 when that venerable old man appeared and cried:
 "What is this, laggard spirits?

What carelessness, what delay is this?
 Hurry to the mountain and there shed the slough
 that lets not God be known to you."

As when doves, gathered at their feeding,
 pecking here and there at wheat or tares,
 without their usual display of pride –
 should something suddenly make them afraid –
 will all at once forget their food
 because they are assailed by greater care,
 thus I saw these new arrivals, their song cut short,
 flee toward the mountain's slope
 like those who take an unfamiliar road.
 And we, with no less haste, departed.]

It is now worth quoting Singleton's commentary at length:

Taken literally, as simply an incident in Purgatory, there is nothing especially surprising in Cato's coming to scatter these 'tardy' souls and send them on their proper way. They are here of course to purge themselves, to become ready to rise to the final beatitude [...]. But if what happens there is seen to reflect what might happen in our life's journey, then evidently a new aspect of meaning enters in. [...] By what right then does old Cato come up (in this life) with his cry that this is wrong? And how is it that the conscience of all will thereupon acknowledge that Cato is right? The answer is readily at hand, of course, when we have remembered (and Cato's cry reminds us) that in this life it is our proper condition as Christians to be as pilgrims. And our thought turns to that distinction which Augustine had made between using and enjoying things.

And then follows a quotation from Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*:

For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires, if it is a proper object of desire; for an unlawful use ought rather to be called an abuse. Suppose, then, we were wanderers in a strange country, and could not live happily away from our fatherland, and that we felt wretched in our wanderings, and wishing to put an end to our misery, determined to return home. [...] But the beauty of the country through which we

pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey, and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy. Such is a picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, so that the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made (Romans I, 20) – that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal. (I, 4)⁸

If Petrarch's ultimate source is indeed Augustine (see also *Doctr.* I, 12),⁹ the episode of Casella singing to quiet the soul's desires could offer him an insightful explanation of the tight bond of love and literature in the *Secretum* and, more importantly, could trigger his reaction against Dante's choice to assign aesthetic pleasure a subordinate role with respect to doctrine. Seen in this light, the interpretation of the episode can also account for why and how some of Petrarch's works, considered through the contrastive views of medieval doctrine and pre-modern aesthetics, are an intended deviation from the path to conversion.

David Marsh has recently drawn attention to the presence of the *Comedy's* three canticles within the three books of the *Secretum*, respectively. Particularly insightful is the idea that “in book 2, when Augustinus examines Franciscus's conscience, we retrace the steps of Dante's gradual ascent-through-confession in the *Purgatorio*.”¹⁰ The structure of *Purg.* XXXI alone is revealing of the three-fold path of confession (ll. 1–42), contrition (ll. 43–90), and conversion (ll. 91–105)

8 See Charles S. Singleton: *Dante Studies 1: Elements of Structures*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1958, p. 23–25. Latin text in: Sant'Agostino: *L'Istruzione cristiana*. Edited by Manlio Simonetti. Milano: Mondadori 2006³, p. 22: “Frui est enim amore inhaerere alicui rei propter seipsam. Uti autem, quod in usum venerit ad id quod amas obtinendum referre, si tamen amandum est. Nam usus illicitus abusus potius vel abusus nominanda est. Quomodo ergo, si essemus peregrini, qui beate vivere nisi in patria non possemus, eaque peregrinatione utique miseri et miseriam finire cupientes, in patriam redire vellemus, opus esset vel terrestribus vel marinis vehiculis, quibus utendum esset ut ad patriam, qua fruendum erat, pervenire valeremus; quod si amoenitates itineris et ipsa gestatio vehiculorum nos delectaret, conversi ad fruendum his quibus uti debuimus, nollemus cito viam finire et perversa suavitate implicati alienaremur a patria, cuius suavitas faceret beatos: sic in huius mortalitatis vita peregrinantes a Domino, si redire in patriam volumus, ubi beati esse possumus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum, ut invisibilia Dei, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciantur (Rom 1, 20), hoc est, ut de corporalibus temporalibusque rebus aeterna et spiritalia capiamus.” (I, 4).

9 “Sed quoniam cupiditate fruendi pro ipso creatore creatura homines configurati huic mundo et mundi nomine congruentissime vocati, non eam [sapientiam] cognoverunt [...]” (I, 12; see *ibid.*, p. 32).

10 Marsh: *The Burning Question*, p. 216.

which the Christian (Dante as a figure of everyman) must take.¹¹ Petrarch must have paid close attention to this canto, as we can see that it focuses on some of the key concepts later deployed in the *Secretum*.

“O tu che se’ di là dal fiume sacro,”
 volgendo suo parlare a me per punta,
 che pur per taglio m’era paruto acro,
 ricominciò , seguendo senza cunta,
 “di, di se questo è vero: a tanta accusa
 tua confession convien esser congiunta”. (*Purg.* XXXI, 1–6)

[“O you on the far side of the sacred stream,”
 turning the point of her words on me
 that had seemed sharp enough when I felt their edge,
 she then went on without a pause: “Say it,
 say if this is true. To such an accusation
 your confession must be joined.”]¹²

Purg. XXXI does not only exemplify a doctrinal tenet that lies at the center of the poem, but also confirms an important aspect of Dante’s poetics, which Guglielmo Gorni explains quite beautifully: Dante tends toward a dialectic dramatization of his own and everyman’s process of redemption and spiritual emancipation; not only in purgatorial examples but in all of his poetry, the state of grace is measured as the distance from the negative point of departure.¹³ In a similar vein, if remorse is one of the most certain sources of the sacred poem’s inspiration, Étienne Gilson points out that, as a poem and as an act, the *Comedy* is a work of penitence. “Like every true act of penitence, Dante’s was also the remedy which saved him; not only his expiation, but his redemption. To make expiation, he had to awaken in the fallen man the poet whom his friend Cavalcanti strove to recall to life, but in vain, for only Beatrice could do so.”¹⁴ But even if she could do so, it was not an easy task. “Beatrice has had to insist in order to make herself understood and, what is more, the only decisive argument capable of breaking

11 See the canto outline in Dante Alighieri: *Purgatorio*. Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. New York: Doubleday 2004, p. 689–691. Hollander, surprisingly enough, does not mention the final moment of Dante’s baptism which allegorizes the final moment of the Christian conversion.

12 For the text of the *Comedy*, see Dante Alighieri: *La “Commedia” secondo l’antica vulgata*. Edited by Giorgio Petrocchi. 2nd rev. edn. 4 vols. Firenze: Le Lettere 1994 (Edizione Nazionale delle opere di Dante, 7). English translation in: Dante Alighieri: *Purgatorio*, p. 693. All translations are drawn from this edition, which also includes *Inferno* (2002) and *Paradiso* (2007).

13 See Guglielmo Gorni: *Il nodo della lingua e il verbo d’amore*. Firenze: Olschki 1981, p. 13.

14 Gilson: *Dante and Philosophy*. Translated by David Moore. New York: Harper and Row 1963, p. 66.

down his resistance has been furnished not by the heaven of Beatrice but by the hell of Virgil.”¹⁵

Later in canto XXXI, the very use of “catene” [chains] (l. 25) which, according to Beatrice, impeded Dante from loving the eternal and only Good, is unlikely to be a mere verbal coincidence and calls the interpreter’s attention to the same situation dramatized in the *Secretum*. But if the situation is undoubtedly the same, as the narratological construction aims to explain the same doctrine in both texts, the conclusion of the two debates concerning conversion, respectively between Beatrice and Dante and between Augustinus and Franciscus, is exactly the opposite. To understand it, it is necessary to reread ll. 22–36 which Petrarch will imitate as a way to ground his distanced perspective:

Ond’ella a me: “Per entro i mie’ disiri,
che ti menavano ad amar lo bene
di là dal qual non è a che s’aspiri,
quai fossi attraversati o quai catene
trovasti, per che del passare innanzi
dovessiti così spogliar la spene?”

E quali agevolezze o quali avanzi
ne la fronte de li altri si mostraro,
per che dovessi lor passeggiare anzi?”

Dopo la tratta d’un sospiro amaro,
a pena ebbi la voce che rispuose,
e le labbra a fatica la formarò.

Piangendo dissi: “Le presenti cose
col falso lor piacer volser miei passi
tosto che ’l vostro viso si nascose.” (*Purg.* XXXI, 22–36)

[At that she said to me: “In your desire for me
that guided you to love that good
beyond which there is nothing left to long for,
what ditches or what chains did you encounter
across your path to make you cast aside
all hope of going forward?

And what profit or advantage showed
in the face of other things so that you felt
you must parade yourself before them?”

After heaving a bitter sigh
I hardly had the voice to give the answer
my lips were laboring to shape.

In tears, I said: “Things set in front of me,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68 and *Purg.* XXX, 136–141: “Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti / a la salute sua eran
giù corti, / fuor che mostrarli le perdute genti. / Per questo visitai l’uscio d’i morti / e a colui che
l’ha qua sù condotto, / li preghi miei, piangendo, furon porti.”

with their false delights, turned back my steps
the moment that Your countenance was hidden.”]

The first observation we can make is that Beatrice plays here the twofold role of Dante’s beloved and confessor, and this indeed happens for a reason: from the early *Vita nova* to (almost all of) the *Comedy*, she is for Dante the true mediator between God and man. According to the character of Augustinus, as we have seen, this is no longer the case of Laura who has, on the contrary, kept Franciscus from directing himself and his desires toward God, an argument which probably accounts for Petrarch’s choice of sharing Beatrice’s attributes between the figures of Laura (beloved) and Augustinus (confessor). This argument, nonetheless, does not put an end to the debate on Petrarch’s conversion, nor does the conclusion of the *Canzoniere*, which dramatizes the poet’s inner conflict as not completely solved.¹⁶ For this reason, I see no contrast – as some interpreters believe – between *RVF* CCCLXVI and the lines which seal the *Triumphus Eternitatis* (and the work as a whole) reaffirming Laura’s secular beatific power and the (possible) future beatitude of contemplating her in the afterlife.¹⁷ Petrarch’s aim was different. As Christian Moevs insightfully pointed out, “with the last vernacular lines he wrote, Petrarch has wiped out the entire philosophizing and mysticizing history of the Italian lyric that culminates in Dante, everything between the Sicilians and himself; or at least, he has wiped out the *Commedia*, and brought us back to the last poem of the *Vita nova*, *Oltre la spera che più larga gira*, in which Dante’s sigh ascends to contemplate his lady in heaven.”¹⁸ Or maybe – we can add – he has not wiped out the entire *Comedy*, but only its conclusion which in fact, by switching focus from Beatrice to the Virgin, betrays the original project (if such was really the project) as it is outlined at the end of the *Vita nova*. So Petrarch’s defining the Virgin as “vera beatrice” (*RVF* CCCLXVI, 52) could allude to his choice of distancing himself from Dante’s stilnovistic poetics which entirely revolved around the beatific role of Beatrice. In any case, it is clear at this point that in the *Secretum* Augustinus implicitly recommends that Franciscus imitate Dante’s theological (and literary) example of conversion, which Petrarch only pretends to

¹⁶ But see Paolo Cherchi: *Verso la chiusura. Saggio sul “Canzoniere” di Petrarca*. Bologna: Il Mulino 2008, for a new thought-provoking interpretation which sees Petrarch’s *mutatio vitae* as final attained.

¹⁷ “felice sasso che ’l bel viso serra! / che, poi ch’avrà ripreso il suo bel velo, / se fu beato chi la vide in terra, / or che fia dunque a rivederla in cielo!” (ll. 142–145) See Francesco Petrarca: *Triumphus*. Edited by Marco Ariani. Milano: Mursia 1988, p. 409–450. Santagata (*I frammenti*, p. 341) rightly points out that the end of the *Canzoniere* excludes Laura. It is true nonetheless that she is still present as the stumbling block on the way of conversion.

¹⁸ Christian Moevs: Subjectivity and Conversion in Dante and Petrarch. In: Zygmunt Barański/Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (eds): *Petrarch and Dante. Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press 2009, p. 237–238.

do by addressing the Virgin in CCCLXVI. This is, in fact, nothing more than a dramatization of the last attempt of conversion, which results in a new failure with no other alternative than reverting to Laura in the *Triumphus Eternitatis*.

That Petrarch's prayer to the Virgin is in fact unable to bring about the desired spiritual freedom which prepares the supplicant for conversion is witnessed by the proemial sonnet of the *Canzoniere*, *Voi ch' ascoltate in rime sparse il suono*, a tormented balance of the poet's never-abandoned secular love for Laura. What is indeed interesting – and to my knowledge still unnoticed – is that *Voi c'ascoltate* is most likely an intended answer to Beatrice's lesson on spiritual constancy which follows Dante's confession in *Purg. XXXI*, 34–36:

Ed ella: “Se tacessi o se negassi
ciò che confessi, non fora men nota
la colpa tua: da tal giudice sassi!

Ma quando scoppia de la propria gota
l'accusa del peccato, in nostra corte
rivolge sé contra 'l taglio la rota.

Tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte
del tuo errore, e perché altra volta,
udendo le serene, sie più forte,
pon giù il seme del piangere e ascolta:
sì udirai come in contraria parte
mover dovieti mia carne sepolta.

Mai non t'appresentò natura o arte
piacer, quanto le belle membra in ch'io
rinchiusa fui, e che so' 'n terra sparte;
e se 'l sommo piacer sì ti fallio
per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale
dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio?

Ben ti dovevi, per lo primo strale
de le cose fallaci, levar suso
di retro a me che non era più tale. [...]” (*Purg. XXXI*, 37–57)

[“Had you stayed silent or denied what you confess,” she said, “your fault could not be any less apparent since it is known to such a Judge.

But when a man's own blushing cheek reveals the condemnation of his sin, in our high court the grindstone dulls the sharp edge of the sword.

Nonetheless, so that you now may bear the shame of your shameful straying and the next time that you hear the Sirens' call be stronger, stop sowing tears and listen.

Then you shall hear just how my buried flesh should have directed you to quite a different place.

Never did art or nature set before you beauty
as great as in the lovely members that enclosed me,
now scattered and reduced to dust.

And if the highest beauty failed you
in my death, what mortal thing
should then have drawn you to desire it?

Indeed, at the very first arrow
of deceitful things, you should have risen up
and followed me who was no longer of them. (...)]”

The situation dramatized in the two texts is doctrinally the same – the confession of a penitent soul who in the end is meant to convert himself – but different is the way in which this situation develops in Dante and Petrarch. Beatrice’s warning clarifies that forgiveness requires confession (“Ma quando scoppia de la propria gota / l’accusa del peccato [...]” [But when a man’s own blushing cheek reveals / the condemnation of his sin (...)], ll. 40–42), as well as repentance or shame for one’s mistake (“[...] perché mo vergogna porte / del tuo errore” [...] so that you now may bear / the shame of your straying (...)], ll. 43–44). In a similar way, in the first quartina of *Voi ch’ascoltate* Petrarch addresses the intended readers of the *rime sparse*, those who have experience of love, in order that he may earn their forgiveness for his “giovanil errore” [youthful error]. A closer analysis, however, can reveal Petrarch’s imitative distance from the model.¹⁹ Dante’s mistake was not his love for Beatrice and was not made in his youth, when Beatrice could lead him to moral perfection and put him on the path to divine truth. His spiritual fall occurred later, around the age of thirty-five, which instead, according to the Bible (e. g.: Is. 38, 10), was the proper time for conversion. The spiritual reading of Dante’s life is clear: after his fall, through Beatrice divine grace grants him the privilege to see the “state of the souls after death” (*Ep.* XIII), the knowledge of which is the only means to redeem his soul. Quite differently, *Voi ch’ascoltate* bears witness to the *impasse* of a man who, while writing, is still only “in parte altr’uom” [in part another man] (l. 4). In the *Secretum*, likewise, Franciscus feels shame, pain, and repentance for his condition, but cannot do anything else, so that Augustinus can rebuke him for being unable to change.²⁰

¹⁹ ‘Imitative distance’ is Robert Hollander’s apt definition of Boccaccio’s relationship with Dante, which can be extended to Petrarch’s as well. See Robert Hollander: *Boccaccio’s Dante: Imitative Distance (Decameron I, 1 and VI, 10)*. In: *Studi sul Boccaccio* 13 (1981–1982), p. 169–198.

²⁰ “Fr. Pudet, piget et penitet, sed ultra non valeo. [...] Aug. Pudeat ergo, pudeat animum nunquam mutari, cum corpus mutetur assidue.” (Petarca: *Opere latine*, I, p. 226–227). Cf. also Petrarch’s *De ignorantia*: “Sed propter infirmitates ac sarcinas vite mortalitatis, quas nedum ferre, sed enumerare difficile est, non possum, fateor, ut vellem, sic inferiores partes anime, in quibus est irascibilis et concupiscibilis appetitus, attollere, quin adhuc terris inhereant.” (Petarca: *Opere latine*, II, p. 1120).

Later in *Purg.* XXXI, Beatrice asks Dante to stop weeping and listen (“pon giù il seme del piangere e ascolta,” l. 46) to her moral teaching so that he will never happen to fall again. This image as well is overturned in Petrarch. Since the first encounter with Laura, the poet’s life has experienced falls and resurrections, and his confession has indulged so much in weeping that it has become the metaphor of the *Canzoniere*’s tormented lyric poetry.²¹ Interestingly enough, the hendiadys of the “[...] vario stile in ch’io piango e ragiono” [the varied style in which I weep and speak] (l. 5) reflects the condition of Dante’s infernal sinners such as Francesca (“dirò come colui che piange e dice.” [I shall tell as one who weeps in telling], *Inf.* V, 126) or Ugolino (“parlare e lagrimar vedrai insieme.” [then you will see me speak and weep together], *Inf.* XXXIII, 9),²² which is ultimately Petrarch’s own sinful condition. The reuse of another stileme of *Purg.* XXXI, “le belle membra [...] / [...] ’n terra sparte.” (ll. 50–51), echoed respectively in *RVF* CXXVI, 2; CCC, 7 (“le belle membra”) and CXXXVII, 9 (“in terra sparsi”), helps clarify how Petrarch also aimed to contrast the theology of Beatrice’s dead body. The *imago mortis* of “le belle membra in ch’io / rinchiusa fui, e che so’ ’n terra sparte,” in its Christian Platonic fashion, does not need any explanation as a medieval reflection on the deceptive attraction of physical beauty. As we know from the *Secretum*, Franciscus has loved the creature, Laura, more than her Creator “as the most beautiful thing that He had ever created,” ignoring that “physical beauty is the lowest form of beauty.”²³ But it is again the *Triumpus Eternitatis*, the “ultimus cantus” in any possible sense,²⁴ which marks a different vision of Laura among the blessed. Marco Ariani has called attention to Lodovico Castelvetro’s interpretation of the text as a definitive response to

²¹ See also Augustinus in the *Secretum*: “Forma [di Laura] quidem tibi visa est tam blanda, tam dulcis, ut in te omnem ex nativis virtutum seminibus proventuram segetem ardentissimi desiderii estibus et assiduo lacrimarum imbre vastaverit.”; “Quid autem insanium quam, non contentum presenti illius vultus effigie, unde hec tanta tibi provenerant, aliam fictam illustris artificis ingenio quesivisse, quam tecum ubique circumferens haberes materiam semper immortalium lacrimarum? Veritus ne fortassis arescerent, irritamenta earum omnia vigilantissime cogitasti, negligenter incuriosus in reliquis.” (ibid., I, p. 184 and 198).

²² See Francesco Petrarca: *Canzoniere*. Edited by Marco Santagata. Milano: Mondadori 1997², comm. *ad loc.*, p. 9.

²³ Petrarca: *My Secret Book*, p. 169. Latin text in Petrarca: *Opere latine*, I, p. 186: “[...] Creatorem non qua decuit amasti, sed miratus artificem fuisti quasi nichil ex omnibus formosius creasset, cum tamen ultima pulcritudinum sit forma corporea.”

²⁴ See Petrarch’s gloss in the Vat. Lat. 3196: “1374, dominico ante cenam. 15 Januarii, ultimus cantus.” In: Angelo Romanò: *Il codice degli abbozzi (Vat. Lat. 3196) di Francesco Petrarca*. Roma: G. Bardi 1955, p. 282 and 284. See also Francesco Petrarca: *Il codice degli abbozzi: Edizione e storia del manoscritto Vaticano latino 3196*. Edited by Laura Paolino. Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi 2000, p. 136–137.

Augustinus's accusations in *Secretum* III (Franciscus's desire for Laura's body and eternal glory) and implicitly, as we already noted, to Dante.²⁵ By relying on the Pauline tenet of the resurrection of the body, Petrarch could finally focus his vision on the unity of Laura's body and soul as well as on the permanence of glory beyond time.²⁶

The comparison with Dante's purgatorial cantos (II and XXXI) helps us discern and understand Petrarch's contrastive reading of the poem as well as, ultimately, his astounding modernity.²⁷ It is, therefore, not surprising that the same inner conflict dramatized in the "secret" dialogue surfaces in other texts which are milestones of Petrarch's ideal autobiographical construction, such as the *Fam.* IV, 1 to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro (1351–1353), *RVF* CCCLX, which mirrors the *Secretum* and may be contemporary to it, and the prayer to the Virgin which seals the *Canzoniere* (*RVF* CCCLXVI).²⁸ Written "not yet being in port," the former bears witness to an Augustinian "very insistent and uncertain battle for control of my [Petrarch's] two selves."²⁹ The latter two once again dramatize the poet's inner conflict between the spiritual and the temporal as still unresolved or in fact, no matter the endless attempts, unresolvable. They outline the narrative boundaries of a last attempt of conversion, *in extremis*, to be told

25 "Vuole adunque il Petrarca per lo triomfo dell'eternità significare l'appagamento dell'uno e dell'altro suo desiderio, che tanto lo molestavano, ciò è dell'amore di Laura e della vaghezza di fama, perciò che per l'eternità cessano le principali cagioni nocive alle cose desiderate, cioè il guastamento delle bellezze di Laura che fu per morte, e il guastamento della fama, che viene per tempo, li quali per l'eternità mancano." See Petrarca: *Triumphs*, p. 382.

26 See *ibid.*

27 On Petrarch's modernity in explicit contrast to Dante's world vision, see also Karlheinz Stierle: *La vita e i tempi di Petrarca: alle origini della moderna coscienza europea*. Translated by Gabriella Pelloni. Venezia: Marsilio 2007, p. 39.

28 See also Ugo Dotti's remarks in: Francesco Petrarca: *Epistole*. Edited by Ugo Dotti. Torino: UTET 1978, p. 15–16. On Petrarch's very productive 1350s and contemporary (re)reading of Dante's *Comedy*, see Enrico Santangelo: Petrarch Reading Dante: The Ascent of Mont Ventoux (*Familiars* 4. 1). In: Martin L. McLaughlin/ Letizia Panizza/ Peter Hainsworth (eds): *Petrarch in Britain: Interpreters, Imitators, and Translators over 700 Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007 (Proceedings of the British Academy, 146), p. 95–111 (p. 98). As to *RVF* CCCLX and the *Secretum*, see Moevs: Subjectivity, p. 226–259. On the dates of *RVF* CCCLX and CCCLXVI, see Petrarca: *Canzoniere*. Ed. Santagata, p. 1366–1367 and 1401.

29 Latin text in: Francesco Petrarca: *Le familiari*. Edited by Vittorio Rossi (vols 1–3) and by Vittorio Rossi and Umberto Bosco (vol. 4). Firenze: Sansoni 1933–1942 (Edizione nazionale delle opere di Petrarca, 10–13), I, p. 157–158: "nondum enim in portu [...] inter quas [voluntates] iandudum in campis cogitationum mearum de utriusque hominis imperio laboriosissima et anceps etiam nunc pugna." (§§ 19–22) Translation in: Francesco Petrarca: *Letters on Familiar Matters: Rerum familiarium libri*. Translated by Aldo S. Bernardo. 3 vols. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1975–1985, I, p. 176–177.

in the last six poems.³⁰ In particular, the final canzone fails to meet the expectations which the previous sonnet of repentance has raised by invoking divine help (*RVF CCCLXV*, 5–11).³¹ If the metaphor of the ship going through the stormy sea of passions recalls the memory of Augustine's pre-conversion past, here as well throughout Petrarch's *oeuvre*,³² the spiritual condition of man afraid of his near death, who finally invokes the Virgin's help, is only that of a "cor contrito humile" [a contrite and humble heart] (*RVF CCCLXVI*, 120), whereas he shows no clear sign of an imminent conversion. In this way, as Joachim Küpper pointed out, the formal ascensional movement from sonnet to canzone contrasts with the ontological descent from God to Mary: that is, from the actual source of grace to the creature as its mediator. This corresponds to a palinody of the previous cycle of sonnets wherein the genuine remorse for one's past life is the necessary (Dantean) condition of reconciliation with God (*RVF CCCLXIII–CCCLXV*).³³ Petrarch's focusing on the Virgin as creature and mediator – it must be added – foreshadows his final return to Laura in the *Triumph*, so that she remains the actual stumbling block on the way to conversion.

The theological distance from Dante could not be greater. In *Par. XXXIII*, rightly considered the palimpsest of *RVF CCCLXVI*, Beatrice the theologian has finally yielded her role as guide and mediator to Saint Bernard the mystic, who acts as mediator to a second mediator, the Virgin, who in turn leads the pilgrim to the true and only Mediator between man and God; that is, Christ.³⁴ At the end of the sacred poem it is the mystical *via brevis*, and not the theological *via longa*,

30 For the notion of an *in extremis* conversion, see Santagata: *I frammenti*, p. 335–340.

31 "Tu che vedi i miei mali indegni et empi, / Re del cielo invisibile immortale, / soccorri a l'alma disviata e frale, / e 'l suo defecto di Tua gratia adempi: / sí che, s'io vissi in guerra et in tempesta, / mora in pace et in porto; et se la stanza / fu vana, almen sia la partita honesta." Francesco Petrarca: *Canzoniere*. Edited by Gianfranco Contini. Torino: Einaudi 1975⁶, p. 454. All quotations from the *Canzoniere* are drawn from this edition; all translations from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems. The "Rime sparse" and Other Lyrics*. Translated and Edited by Robert Durling. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1976.

32 Here: "Vergine chiara et stabile in eterno, / di questo tempestoso mare stella, / d'ogni fedel nocchier fidata guida, / pon' mente in che terribile procella / i' mi ritrovo sol, senza governo, / et ò già vicin l'ultime strida." (ll. 66–71).

33 See Joachim Küpper: *Palinodia e polisemia nella Canzone alla Vergine (con alcune brevi considerazioni sulle condizioni della differenza tra arte classica ed arte moderna)*. In: *Quaderni petrarcheschi* 14 (2004), p. 147–190 (p. 149–150).

34 "Opus est enim mediatore ad Mediatorem istum, nec alter nobis utilior quam Maria." See *Dominica infra octavam Assumptionis B. V. Mariae sermo*. In: *Sancti Bernardi Opera omnia. Sermones II*. Romae: Editiones cistercienses 1968, p. 263. See also Vincenzo Pernicone: *Il canto 32 del "Paradiso"*. Torino: Società Editrice internazionale 1965 (*Lectura Dantis Romana*, n.s.), p. 6–7. For the notion of Christ as unique mediator, see August. *De civ. D.* IX, 15.

that allows Dante to have the supreme vision of God, a doctrinal construction which is allegorized in Beatrice's disappearance.³⁵ More importantly, Bernard's association with the Virgin makes his spiritual condition become such that no other creature could ever reach it, not even Beatrice. This is why the doctrinal trajectory of the *Comedy* as a whole coincides with Dante's poetic journey to Beatrice (his original project?) only to a certain well established point. Beatrice's final absence must not have escaped Petrarch, whose character of Laura, on the contrary, in both the *Canzoniere* and the *Triumphs*, as well as explicitly in the *Secretum*, rightly belongs to modernity in that she can hold sway over the poet's mind until the very end.³⁶ In order to do so, Laura must yield her role of divine mediator and in the *Secretum*, in fact, Petrarch concludes the discussion on the role of Laura as mediator with Franciscus's admission that she did what she could before abandoning him.³⁷ Transformed into allegory, Beatrice can disappear once she has led Dante to his final vision; Laura, having in fact no doctrinal function in Petrarch's fiction, remains at the center of the poet's thoughts until the end. Petrarch, as poet and intellectual, lays no claim to an exemplary (Augustinian / Dantean) conversion allowed to him alone through an angelic lady and by divine grace: the exemplarity of his experience lies instead in the choice of providing the first subjective account of a secular life that is common and unique at the same time.

In an essay entitled *The Vistas in Retrospect* Singleton has epitomized the intellectual trajectory spanning from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance in the key opposition, again drawn from Augustine's *Confessions*, between Dante's unquiet and Boccaccio's quiet hearts. Boccaccio's quiet heart, the critic explains, is a possible translation of the French *nonchalance du salut*, a label Blaise Pascal had used to characterize the spirit of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*.³⁸ Before Singleton, Francesco De Sanctis had divided up the Middle Ages into two long time periods, the centuries of Dante, the Duecento and Trecento on the one hand, and those spanning from Boccaccio to the Cinquecento on the other, in which scheme Petrarch was considered the transition between Dante and Boccaccio (*Storia*

35 That theology must finally yield way to mysticism is the interpretation of the end of the poem provided by Étienne Gilson and is still today one of the most fascinating. See Étienne Gilson: *Dante and Philosophy*, p. 48.

36 See also Ficara and Regn in this volume.

37 "F. Fecit hoc illa quantum potuit. [...] postremo, cum lorifragum ac precipitem videret desere-re maluit quam sequi." (Petrarca: *Opere latine*, I, p. 192–194).

38 See Charles S. Singleton: *The Vitas in Retrospect*. In: *Modern Language Notes* 81, 1 (1966), p. 55–80.

della lett. it. XI, 17).³⁹ In principle, I think that De Sanctis and Singleton were right in tracing a sharp dividing line between Dante's and Boccaccio's worlds, inasmuch as the metaphor of the pilgrim's unquiet heart is, in Augustinian terms, the base of the entire symbolic structure of medieval thought. But this metaphor cannot of course account for all the differences. Boccaccio was in fact far from being uninterested in religious questions, as the first three tales of the *Decameron* clearly demonstrate.⁴⁰ As we shall see by examining the tale of Ser Ciappelletto (*Dec.* I,1), Boccaccio conceived of the worldly perspective as the only one open to human investigation, and thus that is the one he chose for his work.⁴¹ I propose therefore to replace Pascal's concept of *nonchalance du salut* with that of *epoché* (suspension of assent), a product of ancient Stoicism. In this vein, a study of the term *epoché* from the standpoint of historical semantics, spanning from antiquity to Descartes and then up to Husserl,⁴² would prove to be helpful to conceptualize the religious distance between Dante and Boccaccio.

The tale of ser Cepparello holds the first place in the *Decameron*, and in many respects it plays a programmatic role in the work's general framework. As the tale's rubric reads, "Ser Ciappelletto cheats a holy friar by a false confession, and dies; and, having lived as a very bad man, is, on his death, reputed a saint, and called San Ciappelletto." Boccaccio's entire narrative is a parody of the rite of confession and carefully prepares Panfilo's final meditation on the otherworldly destiny of Ser Ciappelletto and its doctrinal consequences.⁴³

Così adunque visse e morì ser Cepparello da Prato e santo divenne come avete udito. Il quale negar non voglio esser possibile lui esser beato nella presenza di Dio, per ciò che, come che la sua vita fosse scellerata e malvagia, egli poté in su lo stremo aver sì fatta contrizione, che per avventura Idio ebbe misericordia di lui e nel suo regno il ricevette: ma per ciò che questo n'è occulto, secondo quello che ne può apparire ragione, e dico costui più tosto

39 See Francesco De Sanctis: *Storia della letteratura italiana*. Edited by Niccolò Gallo. With an Introduction by Giorgio Ficara. Torino: Einaudi-Gallimard 1996, p. 377. See also my *Il "cor inquietum" di Dante e il "cor quietum" di Boccaccio nella "Storia" di Francesco de Sanctis*. In: *Lettere italiane* 67, 2 (2015), p. 225–249.

40 See Carlo Ossola: Boccaccio riprodotto al millimetro. In: *Il Sole 24 ore* (17 March 2013), p. 40; Ilaria Tufano: Boccaccio e la letteratura religiosa: la Prima e la Seconda Giornata del "Decameron". In: *Critica del Testo* 16, 3 (2013), p. 185–207.

41 See also Francesco Bruni: *Boccaccio. L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana*. Bologna: Il Mulino 1990, p. 260.

42 See Giovanni Fornero: Epoché. In: Nicola Abbagnano: *Dizionario di Filosofia*. Edited by Giovanni Fornero. Torino: UTET 1998³, p. 378–379.

43 See Carlo Delcorno: *Exemplum e letteratura. Tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*. Bologna: Il Mulino 1989, p. 269–276; Id.: Ironia/parodia. In: Renzo Bragantini /Pier Massimo Forni (eds): *Lessico critico decameroniano*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri 1995, p. 162–191 (p. 179–180).

dovere essere nelle mani del diavolo in perdizione che in Paradiso. E se così è, grandissima si può la benignità di Dio cognoscere verso noi, la quale non al nostro errore ma alla purità della fé riguardando, così facendo noi nostro mezzano un suo nemico, amico credendolo, ci essaudisce, come se a uno veramente santo per mezzano della sua grazia ricorressimo. E per ciò, acciò che noi per la sua grazia nelle presenti avversità e in questa compagnia così lieta siamo sani e salvi servati, lodando il suo nome nel quale cominciata l'abbiamo, Lui in reverenza avendo, ne' nostri bisogni gli ci raccomandremo sicurissimi d'essere uditi. – E qui si tacque. (I, 1, §§ 89–92)

[So lived, so died Ser Cepperello da Prato, and came to be reputed a saint, as you have heard. Nor would I deny that it is possible that he is of the number of the blessed in the presence of God, seeing that, though his life was evil and depraved, yet he might in his last moments have made so complete an act of contrition that perchance God had mercy on him and received him into His kingdom. But, as this is hidden from us, I speak according to that which appears, and I say that he ought rather to be in the hands of the devil in hell than in Paradise. Which, if so it be, is a manifest token of the superabundance of the goodness of God to usward, inasmuch as He regards not our error but the sincerity of our faith, and hearkens unto us when, mistaking one who is at enmity with Him for a friend, we have recourse to him, as to one holy indeed, as our intercessor for His grace. Wherefore, that we of this gay company may by His grace be preserved safe and sound throughout this time of adversity, commend we ourselves in our need to Him, whose name we began by invoking, with lauds and reverent devotion and good confidence that we shall be heard. And so he was silent.]⁴⁴

After the rubric has determined the narrative core of the confession (certainly a false confession, but nonetheless a confession), Panfilo's conclusion introduces – in the same ironic spirit – the term 'contrition,' the second step on the path to conversion. This is done, I believe, according to a conscious rhetorical strategy whose aim is to flesh out the possibility of Ser Ciappelletto's salvation in the reader's mind. To the Christian faithful, this possibility is in fact open to the very end, even for "il piggior uomo forse che mai nascesse" [the worst man that ever was born] (§ 15), ser Ciappelletto himself, as Panfilo notes at the beginning of his speech: "Nor would I deny that it is possible that he is of the number of the blessed in the presence of God, seeing that, though his life was evil and depraved, yet he might in his last moments have made so complete an act of contrition that perchance God had mercy on him and received him into His kingdom." Panfilo's following parenthetical clause, "ma per ciò che questo n'è occulto" [as this is hidden from us], echoing what he says at the beginning about God, "al quale niuna cosa è occulta" [to whom nothing is hidden], is revealing: the truth is that we are unable to know anything about Ser Ciappelletto's destiny, about anyone's destiny after death. That is to say, in the terms of Dante's Letter to Cangrande

⁴⁴ For text and translation, see respectively: Giovanni Boccaccio: *Decameron*. Edited by Vittore Branca. Torino: Einaudi 1980; *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio Faithfully Translated by James M. Rigg*. 2 vols. London: The Navarre Society 1932 (quotation: vol. I, p. 32–33).

della Scala, that the condition of souls after death, the “status animarum post mortem,” is totally concealed from human minds. The parallel with the Letter to Cangrande is indeed striking and it calls into question the doctrinal foundations of Dante’s vision itself.⁴⁵ This is confirmed by a close reading of Panfilo’s conclusion in the light of the cantos devoted to Guido and Buonconte da Montefeltro (respectively *Inf.* XXVII and *Purg.* V), as well as that featuring King Manfredi (*Purg.* III).

“Francesco venne poi, com’ io fu’ morto,
per me; ma un d’i neri cherubini
li disse: ‘Non portar; non mi far torto.

Venir se ne dee giù tra’ miei meschini
perché diede’l consiglio frodolente,
dal quale in qua stato li sono a’ crini;
ch’assolver non si può chi non si pente,
né pentere e volere insieme puossi
per la contradizion che nol consente.’

Oh me dolente! come mi riscossi
quando mi prese dicendomi: ‘Forse
tu non pensavi ch’io löico fossi!’

A Minòs mi portò; e quelli attorse
otto volte la coda al dosso duro;
e poi che per gran rabbia la si morse,
disse: ‘Questi è d’i rei del foco furo’;
per ch’io là dove vedi son perduto,
e sì vestito, andando, mi rancuro.”

Quand’ elli ebbe ’l suo dir così compiuto,
la fiamma dolorando si partio,
torcendo e dibattendo ’l corno aguto. (*Inf.* XXVII, 112–132)

[“The moment I was dead, Francis came for me.
But one of the dark Cherubim cried out:
‘No, wrong me not by bearing that one off.

He must come down to serve among my minions
because he gave that fraudulent advice.
From then till now I’ve dogged his footsteps.

One may not be absolved without repentance,
nor repent and wish to sin concurrently –
a simple contradiction not allowed.’

Oh, wretch that I am, how I shuddered
when he seized me and said: ‘Perhaps
you didn’t reckon I’d be versed in logic.’

⁴⁵ See also Kurt Flasch: *Poesia dopo la peste. Saggio sul “Decameron”*. Bari: Laterza 1995 (Quadrante, 77), p. 6.

He carried me to Minos, who coiled his tail
 eight times around his scaly back
 and, having gnawed it in his awful rage,
 said: 'Here comes a sinner for the thieving fire.'
 And so, just as you see me, I am damned,
 cloaked as I am. And as I go, I grieve."

Once he had brought his words to this conclusion,
 the weeping flame departed,
 twisting and tossing its pointed horn.]

In his commentary on the tale of Ser Ciappelletto, Vittore Branca has rightly pointed out the intertextual references to the abovementioned cantos of the *Comedy*. But if the assimilation of Ser Ciappelletto and Guido da Montefeltro to a similar damnation (since one may not be absolved without repentance) is implicitly suggested by Panfilo's words, as the most likely outcome according to human understanding, it is not confirmed by Boccaccio, as we have seen. The author instead asks the reader to suspend judgment, as it is impossible for humans ever to penetrate God's mind.⁴⁶ Moreover, the possibility that Ser Ciappelletto "might in his last moments have made so complete an act of contrition that perchance God had mercy on him" must be applied not only to the destiny of Manfredi, as Branca does, but in the first instance to that of Buonconte da Montefeltro. Buonconte also turned to God in the last moments of his life ("nel nome di Maria fini", e quivi / caddi, e rimase la mia carne sola" [I ended on the name of Mary and there I fell/and only my flesh remained], *Purg.* V, 101–102) and his example proves to be more consistent than that of Manfredi, as he is the son of Guido da Montefeltro, who suffered Buonconte's opposite fate. In fact, as Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi notes, Dante has designed *Inf.* XXVII and *Purg.* V as a pair of mirrored cantos dramatizing the opposite judgments that result from different individual choices, that is from contrasting exercises of free will, in a given situation.⁴⁷

On a closer analysis, we can see that the Manfredi episode plays another role in Boccaccio's tale, helping the author dive more deeply into the question at stake. First of all, we should note that, in the words of one of his Florentine hosts, Ser Ciappelletto's crimes "son tanti e sí orribili" [such and so horrible have

⁴⁶ On Boccaccio's suspension of assent in opposition to Dante, see also Mario Baratto: *Realtà e stile nel "Decameron"*. Roma: Editori Riuniti 1984, p. 52–54; Bruni: *Boccaccio*, p. 270; Lucia Battaglia Ricci: *Boccaccio*. Roma: Salerno 2000, p. 173; Ead: *Scrivere un libro di novelle. Giovanni Boccaccio autore, lettore, editore*. Ravenna: Longo 2013 (Memoria del Tempo, 39), p. 140. See also Attilio Bettinzoli: Recensione a Francesco Bruni: *Boccaccio. L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana*. In: *Studi sul Boccaccio* 19 (1990), p. 278.

⁴⁷ See Dante Alighieri: *La Divina Commedia. Inferno*. Edited by Anna M. Chiavacci Leonardi. Milano: Mondadori 2005, p. 800; *Purgatorio*. Ibid., V, 85 and comm. *ad loc.*

been], which echoes Manfredi's confession, "orribil furon li peccati miei" [horrible were my sins], he says. Like Manfredi, Branca rightly notes, ser Cepparello will have no Christian funeral nor burial, but the import is probably greater than that. Manfredi is expressing here the canto's key concept, namely the infinite mercy of God. Let us read the tercets in their entirety: "Orribili furon li peccati miei; / ma la bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia, / che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei." [Horrible were my sins, / but Infinite Goodness with wide-open arms / receives whoever turns to it] (*Purg.* III, 121–123). It is not a coincidence, then, that earlier in the same canto Virgil condemns the pride of human intellect and in this context, incidentally, we should also consider *Par.* XIII, 139–142.⁴⁸ This probably means that Boccaccio uses Manfredi's words to allude once again to the fact that we can have no knowledge of Ser Ciappelletto's condition after death. In this way, the reader is finally led back to what Panfilo had said in his introduction to the tale, that what the story will serve to make apparent is the judgment of man, not the judgment of God.

If we fail to notice all this, we will not be able to understand Boccaccio's suspension of assent in Panfilo's speech, which amounts to a rejection of Dante's claim to an unerring vision of divine justice in action, or, in other words, of the possibility that such justice can be represented in a work of art.⁴⁹ Boccaccio's standpoint here aims to call into question Dante's religious and cultural right to construct his poem, to use Singleton's famous sentence, as a fiction "that (it) is not a fiction."⁵⁰ That Boccaccio's perspective is far from being – we could say – metaphysical emerges once and for all in the preface of the sixth book of the *Decasibus*, where we read he will devote his writing to *res humanae*, human things, since his natural limitations do not permit him other topics like the works and the glory of God, the secrets of nature, and the right of fortune.⁵¹ Furthermore, in his intellectual dialogue with Dante, Boccaccio aims to suggest a philosophical (namely ethical) alternative to the theological vision and judgment dramatized in the *Comedy*, and this very use of Dante against Dante's own position reflects the very original nature of Boccaccio's modern art. By tracing a clear dividing line between Dante's religiously-oriented cultural world and his own, he was the first able to stand outside the textual mirror game, as Teodolinda Barolini aptly called

48 "Matto è chi spera che nostra ragione / possa trascorrer la infinita via / che tiene una sustanza in tre persone. / State contenti, umana gente, al *quia*; / ché, se potuto aveste veder tutto, / mestier non era parturir Maria." (*Purg.* III, 34–39) "Non creda Monna Berta e Ser Martino/ per vedere un furare, altro offerere/ vederli dentro al consiglio divino." (*Par.* XIII, 139–142).

49 See also Flasch: *Poesia dopo la peste*, p. 6.

50 Singleton: *Dante Studies* 1, p. 62.

51 On this see also Carlo Ossola: Boccaccio anima laica. In: *Il Sole* 24 ore (29 Jan. 2012), p. 33.

it, which Dante had skilfully built around his readers with the simplest rhetorical construction of a fiction which never declares itself to be a fiction.⁵²

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⁵² For Barolini's definition, see her: *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press 1992, p. 16, 35 and 94.

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