

*'Favola fui':
Petrarch Writes his Readers¹*



Though you would hardly know from my title, this talk is concerned with the relationship between Dante and Petrarch around the question of reading, or rather, the question of the interplay between reading and writing in the works of both of authors. What I will not do, though I recently have done this elsewhere, in a lovely volume edited by Ted Cachey and Zyg Barański, is to address the *vexata quaestio* of how to interpret Petrarch's reading or readings of Dante (Ascoli 2009). I will say, nonetheless, that I am honored to deliver this talk in the presence, and the name, of Aldo Bernardo, who, among his many important contributions, was to my knowledge the first critic to seriously define and address the problem of Petrarch's curious attitude toward his towering precursor (Bernardo 1955).²

What I am interested in here, however, is rather different—namely what I would call, echoing Foucault and his followers, a “genealogical” relationship, that is a historically intriguing succession which cannot, for the most part, be reduced to a direct intertextual engagement and/or overtly polemical response.³ In the most general terms, what I will be talking about is the way in which both authors present themselves as readers turned writers, and, at the same time, not coincidentally, show a great deal of concern with defining their authorial relationship to their own readers.⁴

On the one hand, it is a banality to say that authors are also readers: of course they are, always and everywhere. Just as it is no earth-shaking matter to revive the Jakobsonian diagram in order to examine, once more, the literary act as the cooperative production of significance by a sender (the author) and a recipient (the reader) mediated by a text (and a set of contextual circumstances surrounding the communicative act).⁵ On the other hand, it strikes me that in discussing the “construction” of authorial personae and the “discourse of authorship” we often

bracket consideration of readership (how often do writings about these questions simply posit “the reader” in general, without specifying, for example, whether we are talking about the original readers of the text or ourselves, whether we are referring to men or to women, whether we are talking about a mass audience, or a coterie, or perhaps even a sole addressee, or whether the author—as in some sense is always the case—is just talking to himself).

Much more specifically, we often talk about the emergence of a “modern” author—who has not infrequently been identified with Petrarch⁶—without a correlative discussion of what kind of changes in the nature of reading might have contributed to the redefinition of the “author function” and, conversely, what consequences a dramatic change in the typical mode of authorial subjectivity might have for who that author’s readers might be and how they go about interacting with “his” texts.⁷

In my recent book on Dante and modern authorship (Ascoli 2008), I set out to historicize the issue of Dante’s relationship to medieval ideas of authorship, which, it seemed to me, has generally been treated in relatively ahistorical fashion, assuming an effort on the Florentine poet’s part to appropriate to himself, *tale quale*, an impersonal authority equivalent to that accorded a classical *auctor*, like Virgil, or even, in some accounts, to that of the human authors of the Bible.⁸ My point, instead, was that Dante was keenly aware of his “modernity”—not “modernity” in the epochal sense we usually bandy the term about—but rather, simply, the fact that he was a living author while the great *auctores*, Christian or classical, poets or philosophers, as might be, were all long-dead. That “modernity,” I argue, placed Dante constitutively in the position of a “lector” or “commentator” on the writing of others. And it was in the attempt to negotiate the temporal and/or ontological abyss between readership and authorship, that Dante, in the end, at once appropriated authority, and turned it into something different than it had been: different in the sense that it became possible to conceive of authors as readers and vice-versa; different in the sense that a living writer, fallible in his moral and epistemological being, caught up in the movement of historical and psychological time, is necessarily quite a different creature from what the Middle Ages called an “auctor.”

This negotiation takes a variety of forms. Perhaps most obviously, it can be seen in Dante’s recurrent assumption of the dual roles of *lector* and *auctor* in what became for him the signature mode of

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“self-commentary”⁹ (in *Vita Nuova*, in *Convivio*, and in the *Epistle to Cangrande* [which is most likely by Dante but, if not, is imitating his virtually unique adoption of this structure]¹⁰). We can also see it, however, in the extraordinary device of having the greatest of the classical Latin *auctores* serve as his guide through three-fifths of the *Commedia*; the personal encounter between *auctor* and *lector* bridges the temporal abyss between them, and from the beginning we are told that Dante’s readings of Virgil—“maestro e autore”—are what have made him into the honored writer in a “bello stilo.”¹¹

In short order we will come to some other ways in which Dante foregrounds this double identity, which also entails a particular attention to his relationship, as author, with future readers. Now, however, I would like to turn our attention to a writer whose style has often seemed to be precisely antithetical to Dante’s,¹² and to bear a far closer relationship to the figure of the “modern author” in the larger sense, than his generational precursor, and fellow Florentine exile. A writer, it would seem, who felt no special need to justify his identity *qua* author,¹³ but whose relationship to reading as an activity and to his own readers in particular is at once crucial and complex. And I would like to begin, as it were, at the beginning, with the first quatrain of the first poem of the *Canzoniere* (with the hope that it will eventually become clear what all this has to do with the preamble I have just delivered):

Voi ch’ascoltate in rime sparse il suono
di quei sospiri ond’io nudriva ‘l core
in sul mio primo giovenile errore
quand’era in parte altr’uom da quel ch’i’sono:¹⁴
(1.1–4)

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

Glosses of these lines, understandably, concentrate on its presentation of the lyric “io,” the poet-lover whose youthful sighs became verses, and whose psychic and/or literary errancy has now, perhaps, in part, undergone correction.¹⁵ In relation to this unstable self whose vicissitudes will subsequently be rehearsed over the course of 365 poems, the “Voi ch’ascoltate,” those who listen, or read, seem fixed, unproblematic.

Yet there *is* a big problem here, though one which Contini in his classic edition of the poem leaves not only unanalyzed but entirely unremarked. Santagata, in his extraordinarily detailed edition and commentary, developed out of Contini's, does indicate it, though laconically, and without special explanation. After noting that "l'apostrofe ai lettori, con l'invito a leggere o ad ascoltare, è topica, sia in ambito lirico, sia in ambito narrativo" (the apostrophe to the readers is commonplace, both in lyric poetry and in narrative; Santagata 2004: 6), and giving numerous parallel examples from Dante and other Due-Trecento writers, then observes—quoting Noferi—who follows the sixteenth century critic Ludovico Castelvetro—that Petrarca, "si discosta dai precedenti facendo del 'voi' un 'vocativo assoluto che simula una costruzione nominale'" (departs from his precedents, making of the 'voi' an 'absolute vocative that imitates a noun phrase').¹⁶ What Noferi means by this last is that, as a careful review of the poem's syntax confirms, the first quatrain of the poem is an incomplete grammatical construction, one which apparently establishes a subject, "voi," qualifies it virtually out of existence with the subordinate clause that introduces the lyric "I," and then clamorously fails to provide a verb and an object to go with the original subject. The quatrain, as either Strunk or White (1959) would cheerfully have noted, is a sentence fragment, and the expedient explanation that it is really a 'vocative' hardly consoles a reader who has wandered around for four lines only to find that he has been hailed and then left hanging.

What to make of this? We could, sticking to the quatrain itself, borrow an aging yet still useful term from Stanley Fish, and assume that this construction is a "self-consuming artifact" (Fish 1972), that the evocation and then the disappearance of the reader stages precisely the famous Petrarchan solipsism and/or narcissism, and thus that the "voi" are nothing more than the passive pretext for the "first modern author" to deploy what Giuseppe Mazzotta has called "the language of the self" (1978).¹⁷ An extreme version of this interpretation might attempt to reinterpret the word "v-o-i" as an elided form of "voglio" (I want); a syneresis attested frequently in the poetry of the *Vita Nuova*, for example).¹⁸ In which case, we recover syntactical wholeness, and give Petrarch's infamous will absolute dominance over the hapless collectivity of readers.¹⁹

This will probably not do, however; most notably because the balance of the poem returns obsessively to the question of readership,

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imagined in a variety of forms.²⁰ In the second quatrain, the “I,” following a typical *stil nuovo* motif, an ungendered variant of Dante’s “donne che avete intelletto d’amore” (ladies who have knowledge of love) imagines “chi per prova intenda amore” (whoever understand love through experience),²¹ not only as the adequate interpreter of his verses, but, indeed, as capable of offering “pietà, nonché perdono” (pity, not to mention pardon) to the errant self. The first tercet, however, offers the image of a larger, even more activist, readership, one far less sympathetic to the poet-lover’s plight:

Ma ben veggio or sì come al popol tutto
favola fui gran tempo, onde sovente,
di me medesimo meco mi vergogno
(1.9–11)

(But now I see well how for a long time I was the talk of the crowd, for which often I am ashamed of myself within [myself])

From an elite cadre of “fedeli d’amore” (again to use Dante’s term [*Vita Nuova*, ch. 3]), Petrarch finds himself in the ears, and then in the mouths, of an undifferentiated mass of listeners/readers—potentially even more vast than the traditional “vulgar herd” of the unlettered, now offering not comforting “pietà” but shaming scorn—that sends the poet into what is surely the most concentrated self-referential frenzy in Western literature (“di me medesimo meco mi vergogno”).

Far from a passive readership attending meekly to the poet’s stray words or the friendly doubles (“amicus alter idem” [a friend is another self]; Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 21:80 [Cicero 1923])²² who merely mirror themselves in his verse, these readers are capable of ridicule, indeed, they offer an activist re-writing of the writer par excellence: they collectively appropriate the role of author and re-present Petrarch to the world, and to himself, turned reader, as a risible “favola.” The power of this latter word lies first in its function of collapsing the distinction between the writing “io” and a possible reading “voi” (now alienated into a third-person collectivity), but also in the ambivalence it expresses about the situation in which the “io” finds himself. “Favola” as one of the lower forms of “fictio,”²³ implies precisely *fama* in its most negative and distorting sense, the one that, for example, Petrarch himself uses in *Familiars* 21.15 (esp. par. 1, 3, 5, 6, 19, 24) when he disdainfully

implies that Dante has wasted his talents writing for a vernacular public incapable of understanding the words and ideas with which he presents them.²⁴ At the same time, clearly, “favola” here means something more like “exemplary fable,”²⁵ and the lines that follow suggest that the shame generated in the reading of himself reinscribed as “favola” of the “popol tutto” has taught him a lesson that has made him, at least in part, “altr’uom.”²⁶ Indeed, so efficacious has this reading of himself being read been that his existence as *favola* is relegated to a remote and absolute past, “fui.”²⁷ I will not dwell on the fact that this interaction has, in the briefest of compasses, thoroughly destabilized the “ethical poetics” through which authoritative texts offer their readers fruitful moral examples to imitate and to avoid.²⁸

Returning then to our pending “voi,” we might say that the lack of a subsequent predicate is semantically if not syntactically replaced by an exercise in hypothetical definition of readership which operates within traditional categories of late medieval lyric and at the same time effects a chiasmatic reversal: on the one hand, an opposition between the elite readership capable of identification and understanding and a mass readership given to undifferentiated mockery, on the other hand, a clear sense that the “understanding” readers have only encouraged him in the vagaries of sensual love and that the ridicule of “il popol tutto” has, in fact, revealed to him the error of his erotic and poetic ways.²⁹

At this point, I am not quite done with my exploration of the problem of reading and writing in the first sonnet of the *Canzoniere*, but I now find it necessary, or at least desirable, to suspend interpretive operations, and return to the question of how Dante’s stagings of the writer/reader dialectic might help us in understanding what is going on here and, indeed, through much of the Petrarchan *oeuvre*. What I will first suggest is that the intrication between authorship and readership that we have just seen emerging in *Canzoniere* 1 may be seen in genealogical, historical relationship with the Dantean work most frequently and easily assimilated to the *Canzoniere*, *Vita Nuova*.³⁰

In a fine essay from 1992, John Ahern offered a strongly suggestive interpretation of the “implied reader” or rather readers of *Vita Nuova* (Ahern 1992; see also Ahern 1990).³¹ Ahern suggests three primary categories—the gendered-female audience of “donne che avete intelletto d’amore”; the primarily male-gendered group of philosophically sophisticated male poets (the *fedeli d’Amore*) in his immediate circle;

and a truly new group of “peregrini,” foreign pilgrims from outside the cultural ambience in which the poems of *Vita Nuova* had been written and to which most of them are apparently directed (cf. *Vita Nuova*, ch. 41). Ahern concludes by affirming that “Dante’s experimental text constructs a new character, the aggressively critical reader, female or male, who exists in some temporal or spatial dimension other than that of the author” (1992: 13).

With this last point, at least with the first part of it, I agree whole-heartedly. And yet I believe it is noteworthy that Ahern bases his analysis almost exclusively on the readership overtly posited for the poems rather than for the composite of prose and poetry that is the *Vita Nuova*, and in the process all but overlooks the two principal reader figures who haunt the pages of the *libello*, namely, Dante’s “primo amico,” privileged interpreter, and in some very limited sense co-author Guido Cavalcanti, to whom the work is explicitly dedicated and who has helped define its linguistic parameters,³² and, far more importantly, for my purposes, Dante himself.

I have already begun to suggest the importance of Dante as reader of Dante, but I can now be much more specific. *Vita Nuova* adds spectacularly to the emergent genre of the lyric collection (notably as propagated by Guittone d’Arezzo and near to Petrarch’s own day, Niccolò dei Rossi), a genre whose importance for the emergence of a biographically specific author-figure has been brilliantly studied by Olivia Holmes (2000). Specifically, in its prose “ragioni” Dante’s *libello* expands and makes explicit a narrative dimension that might be inferred from the lyrics by themselves,³³ both in terms of the erotic experience of the protagonist and in that of the formation of the book itself (we learn, for example, that there are strong principles of selection and exclusion that involve both the subject matter of the poems and the language in which they and the *libello* as a whole are written—*vulgare*, not Latin [ch. 30]). Although this narrative itself has the properties of a literary text—a story is told, a life is shown to change and develop in essential ways—it also, clearly, constitutes a reading, or rather, a palinodic exegesis and reinterpretation of poems composed earlier in terms of their psychological, intersubjective, and social contexts, and their readerly destinations, proposed and empirical.³⁴ It is, of course, the so-called *divisioni* where the “I” of the *libello* appears most directly in his role as reader of his own writing,³⁵ explicitly facilitating, guiding, indeed, controlling the ways in which the

various readers discussed by Ahern, and others unimagined by Dante, will experience them.³⁶

To my knowledge, it was Domenico De Robertis who first suggested that at one point, at least, in *Vita Nuova*, Dante offers a clear rationale for the radically innovative gesture by which a writer sets out to become the privileged interpreter, reader, of his own poetic works.³⁷ In the chapter traditionally numbered 25, Dante pauses to justify his use of the trope of personification in the representation of Amore throughout the libello. His argument is that since classical *poete* (Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Lucan) use figurative language, it is equally permissible for modern “dicatori in rima,” the Occitan and Italian poets who have been writing for the last hundred and fifty years, to do so.

One evident goal of the chapter, remarked Teodolinda Barolini, and many others, is to place Dante in a position comparable to the ancient *auctores*, previewing his entrance into the exclusive “poets’ club” of *Inferno* 4.³⁸ Dante does, however, posit certain differences between the ancients and the moderns, including the restriction of the latter to amorous matters (ch. 25, par. 6). Nonetheless, as I suggested at the outset of this talk, and as I have argued elsewhere (Ascoli 2008), the chapter entails elevating “moderns,” whose culturally normative role is that of subservient commentators and readers, to a kind of parity with the ancients, who have a normative claim on the prestigious role of “*auctor*”—in other words, a hierarchically ordered relationship between past and present, author and reader, is potentially being effaced in chapter 25.

Even more crucially in light of issues that concern me here, the prosaic “I” makes the following specification:

E per questo puote essere manifesto a chi dubita in alcuna parte di questo mio libello. E acciò che non ne pigli alcuna baldanza persona grossa, dico che né li poete parlavano così senza ragione, né quelli che rimano dèono parlare così, non avendo alcuno ragionamento in loro di quello che dicono; però che grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto vesta di figura o di colore rettorico, e poscia, domandato, non sapesse denudare le sue parole da cotale vesta, in guisa che avessero verace intendimento. E questo mio primo amico e io ne sapemo bene di quelli che così rimano stoltamente. (25.9–10)

(And so that no crude person may become overbold because of this, I say that the classical poets did not speak in this

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way without reason, and that the vernacular rhymers should not speak thus if they cannot give a rational account of what they say. For it would be a great shame to one who, rhyming of matters under the cloak of figurative language or rhetorical colors, did not when asked know how to strip his words of said cloak so that they could be truly understood.)

This apparently straightforward injunction has momentous implications, constituting a justification of the hybrid form of *Vita Nuova* as auto-commentary: Dante’s prose *ragioni* and *divisioni* furnish the “reasons” that uncloak the meaning of the poetic texts. What is proposed is something like the structure of authorial intention in a modern sense—the (modern) author must prove himself to be in control of the meaning of his texts and he (Dante) does so by playing the role of the elucidating reader of those texts.

Another way of getting at the same problem is to focus on a verbal complex whose crucial importance in this work has been identified by Durling and Martinez (1990: 64–65; also Ascoli 2008: 190 and n37), namely the word-concept cluster expressed as “intendere,” “intenzione,” “intendimento,” and so on. Though I will not prove the case in detail here, throughout *Vita Nuova* the writing “I” articulates the writer-reader relationship through this linguistic complex, in which the same word “intendimento” signifies *both* the meaning the writer aims to express through his text *and* the understanding of that text by the reader. It can further be shown, in *Vita Nuova* and perhaps even more starkly in *Convivio*, that the Dantean “I” worries incessantly about the possibility that writerly “intenzione” will not be reflected in readerly “intendimento,” and that, in addition to the desire to achieve an authorial prestige like that of the classics, it is also the fear of radical misunderstanding—of misinterpretation—that justifies Dante’s penchant for auto-exegesis and for self-allegorization.³⁹

Two contrary impulses are thus at work. On the one hand, as Ahern rightly claims, Dante imagines an “aggressively critical” reader quite different than the obsequious commentator on authoritative texts that typifies (at least rhetorically) the stance of much late medieval written culture. Indeed, he imagines himself as that reader and clearly links his new claims to prestigious authorship with his ability to elucidate his own intentions, to produce the completed hermeneutic circle that leads from “intenzione” to “intendimento.” On the other hand, the existence

of such an “active, mobile, and hostile,” at least potentially hostile, reader—when that reader is someone other than the poet himself—represents an extreme threat to Dante’s express desire to designate, and to control, the meaning of his own texts.

What then does this have to do with Petrarch and the *Canzoniere*? At first glance, it would appear that Petrarch has studiously eschewed imitating the author-as-reader, reader-as-author of *Vita Nuova*, precisely by removing the prose apparatus *tout court*.⁴⁰ And yet, as I have already begun to indicate in analyzing sonnet 1, far from reversing the innovative direction of Dante’s author/reader dialectic, Petrarch has in fact extended and radicalized it. I will go so far as to argue that because Dante’s reconfiguration of the author/reader complex takes place through forms (especially the mode of text and commentary) and in technical language that outwardly respect medieval concepts and vocabularies of reading and writing, and it has thus been correspondingly difficult to discern fully the incipient modernity of his practice. The same is by no means true of Petrarch. Indeed, I would suggest that the familiar epithets of “first modern man” and “first modern author,” as well as the canny formulation that links these two in “the language of the self” may be recast in light of the author-as-reader, reader-as-author cycle defined in *Vita Nuova* and confirmed throughout the Dantean *oeuvre*. Similarly, this perspective can be used to elaborate one of Giuseppe Mazzotta’s lapidary insights into the wordy “worlds of Petrarch,” namely that this writer’s “dialogues are metaphorical displacements of monologues, just as monologues are always dialogical” (Mazzotta 1993: 9).⁴¹ In other words, I suggest, despite a drastic, widely described, shift in style, there is an evident genealogical continuity by which the concerns similar to those of *Vita Nuova* just discussed are may be discerned in the *Canzoniere* and in Petrarch’s *oeuvre* more generally.

Petrarch, then, completes the bridging of the gap, temporal and hierarchical, separating reader from writer, earlier traversed by Dante. Petrarch imagines the reader-author relationship in at least two ways that Dante’s work makes possible but which Dante himself does not seriously attempt. First, and most evidently, in a number of Latin works, notably the *Secretum*, *Rerum Familiarum Libri*, book 24, and the so-called “Letter to Posterity” (*Seniles* 18.1), he stages extensive, and apparently non-hierarchical, dialogues with other authors and other readers: the great classical and Christian *auctores*, in the first two cases, and his

own present and future readers in the third. In the second place there is the unmediated and simultaneous conflation, most easily detected in the *Canzoniere*, of his own “reading” and “writing” selves.

Let me begin with Petrarch’s transformations of an even better known Dantean device for simultaneously staging and collapsing the distinction between author and reader, namely the introduction of *Virgilio* as character in the *Commedia*. As suggested earlier, while Dante-personaggio overtly defines Virgilio as “autore” and posits the deferentially hierarchical relationship suitable to ancient and modern, *auctor* and *lector*, nonetheless, he is equally and paradoxically presenting that relationship as a way of collapsing the temporal distance between the figures occupying the two roles and of elevating himself to the status of *auctor*. The Franciscus-Augustinus pairing of the *Secretum* apparently works in a way very similar to that of the Dante-Virgil duo in the *Commedia*. The resuscitated “Augustinus” retains some of the immense authority of the patristic *auctor* whose name he bears,⁴² but here again the very textual fact of a conversation between *auctor* and *lector* tends to collapse any sharp distinction between them.⁴³ Moreover, and here Petrarch goes well beyond Dante, while he acknowledges the justice of the moral-spiritual critique that “Augustinus” offers him, “Franciscus” finally refuses to act upon it. In fact, he ends by deferring all advice in the name of fulfilling his own destiny as “*auctor*” in fieri of the epic *Africa* and of love poetry dedicated to Laura. Moreover, just as with Dante’s “Virgilio,” Petrarch is evidently the author of the character “Augustinus,” who is also a product of Petrarch’s assiduous activity as a reader, in this case of the *Confessions*, but also of the Stoic philosophers,⁴⁴ rather than of the *Aeneid*. In short, the author and reader opposition is “deconstructed” into a sort of Moebius strip of simultaneity and continuity, in which the only certainty is that Petrarch himself ultimately plays all of the seemingly distinct parts in the game.

Just how far Petrarch extends Dante’s implicit leveling of the distance between ancient *auctores* and modern *lectores* becomes clearest in the series of letters to these same *auctores* in the twenty-fourth and final book of the *Familiars*. Here, as is very well known, Petrarch writes a series of letters to Cicero, Seneca, Virgil, et al., as if they were living persons with whom he could enter into a conversational dialogue. In this way, Petrarch obviously reverses the medieval order of things: he is now the writer, the *auctores* positioned as his readers. Even more strikingly,

the first letter to Cicero (24.3) openly criticizes the gap between the great orator's stated moral intentions and his historical actions. Again, Petrarch brings into the open an implicit feature of Dante's insistence on the reader's role in analyzing and expounding the author's intentions: he positions himself as the critical reader not only of his own intentions, but of those of the *auctores* as well. It is precisely in this role as critical reader, paradoxically, that he can assume his rightful place as a modern author who is the peer of the ancient *auctores*.⁴⁵

The flip-side of Petrarch's elevation of himself as author with respect to the ancients is the relationship of contingency and interchange he apparently posits with his own readers, present and future. This, of course, is a natural effect of his affinity for the epistolary genre,⁴⁶ which, as he defines it, and as its structure indicates, implies an open-ended exchange and de facto dialogue between two parties, as well as the alternation of roles of writer and reader among them.⁴⁷ These texts, like Dante's self-commentaries, posit two voices, but the separation of voices is to very different effect, creating, at least superficially, an equality and interchangeability between "reader" and "writer," as against the distinct hierarchy and temporal separation that reigns in Dantean "self-exegesis."

One might look, for example, at the unfinished "Letter to Posterity," in which Petrarch clearly expresses his need to find completion as an author through continued readings, and in which he both anticipates and attempts to defuse the kind of sharply critical interpretation of his own life which he gave to Cicero's. Even more strikingly, in the *Familiars*, Petrarch claims to have entered into an open dialogue with any and all of his readers. Crucial in this respect is his remarkable assertion in the very first letter of the collection that each letter he writes depicts a different "self" than all others because each is shaped to conform to the specific circumstances of writing and, especially, to the needs and temperament of the intended reader:⁴⁸

Multis itaque multumque animo et conditione distantibus scribere contigit; tam varie ut ea nunc relegens, interdum pugnancia locus ipse michi videar. . . . Prima quidem scribentis cura est, cui scribat attendere; una enim et quid et qualiter ceterasque circumstantias intelliget. Aliter virum fortem, aliter ignavum decet alloqui; aliter iuvenem inexpertum, aliter vite muneribus functum senem. . . . Infinite sunt varietates hominum, nec

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maior mentium similitudo quam frontium. . . . [U]t geminus sit labor: cogitare quisnam ille sit cui scribere propositum est, qualiter ve tunc affectus, cum ea que scribere instituis lecturus est. Quibus ego difficultatibus multum a me ipso differre compulsus sum. (1.1.27–30)

([In my letters], I . . . had to correspond with many [friends and acquaintances] who differed considerably in character and station. As a result, the letters were so different that in rereading them I seemed to be in constant contradiction. . . . Indeed, the primary concern of a writer is to consider the identity of the person to whom he is writing. Only in this way can he know what and how to write, as well as other pertinent circumstances. The strong man must be addressed in one way, the spiritless one in another, the young and inexperienced in still another. . . . Infinite are the differences among men nor are their minds any more alike than the shapes of their foreheads. . . . Thus writing entails a double labor: first to consider to whom you write, and then what his state of mind will be at the time he undertakes to read what you propose to write. These difficulties compelled me to be very inconsistent. . . .)

Thus, where in the letters to the ancients the modern “reader” dramatizes himself as the equal of authors, in this passage, Petrarch suggests the “decorous” disappearance of the authorial self into its readers.

Nonetheless, and at the very same time that Petrarch imagines a utopia of reversible author-reader dialogue, he also enacts, and in fact exacerbates, the agon of the modern author with his reader that we saw emerging in Dante. If, on the one hand, he posits the reader as his peer and critical interlocutor (as he, in reading the *auctores*, claims to be their peer and critical interlocutor), on the other, he goes on attempting by complex and indirect means to control the meanings of his texts, and to dominate and determine the readings given them.

This phenomenon is quite obvious in the *Secretum* and the letters to the ancients, where the presumed “interlocutors” have been dead and, a fortiori, unable to respond for a millennium and more. It is, furthermore, implicit in the thematics of a gloriously reified poetic identity that govern the “Letter to Posterity,” *Secretum*, and much of the *Canzoniere*—in other words, the problematics of idolatry so elegantly

developed by Durling and Freccero.⁴⁹ Even in the just-cited passage from the first letter of the *Familiars*, it seems obvious that even as Petrarch claims to surrender his unique authorial personality to the individual characters and circumstances of his readers, he is demonstrating the powerful intentional control which he exercises in crafting each letter to its moment and recipient, with the rhetorical aim of eliciting a precise response. In other words, in this case too, Petrarch is ventriloquizing his interlocutor's reactions—he is staging them—thus implicitly bringing the reader into his world and under his control. The supposedly distinct and autonomous reader is revealed as no more than a projection, an emanation of the author. This reading is then confirmed, as Petrarch goes on to tell the recipient of this, first, letter, that he has further controlled the process by destroying letters which did not please him and revising others to suit the new audience of the collected *Familiars*.

This, then, is what I take the underlying logic of the situation to be. When the author understands himself as reader in this way, he opens himself up to an empathetic relationship with his external readership, actual and/or imagined: he recognizes in them the power to extract and even to determine significance that he, as critical reader, also possesses. But for that very reason, he is driven in an opposite direction, that of fearing his own loss of textual control because of their evident powers, and therefore of attempting to affirm his reading as against theirs. And a primary strategy for accomplishing this is by defining and including the relationship of reader and author within the poetic text: of carrying out a preemptive and apotropaic appropriation of the reader which leaves the author, at least in his own imaginary construction, in full control of the situation.

Let us now turn back to the *Canzoniere*. In general terms, which I believe are largely in consonance with a typical, even dominant, understanding of Petrarch's lyric language, we can see this collection not as a step away from the staging of an authorial self-reading, but rather as a genealogical elaboration of the possibilities implicit in Dante's dramatic experiments. In Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, the formal opposition and separation between writing and reading selves tends to disappear. Rather, in his poetry (as so often in his prose) Petrarch reflects on and interprets himself and his work directly, without an "objectifying" structural intermediary.⁵⁰ And in these reflections he mirrors the unstable, temporalized state of the self he is interpreting, making clear the iden-

tity between the two, specular aspects of his textual existence. That is, where Dante-reader comes after and explains Dante-writer, in Petrarch the “reader” is constantly present analyzing and criticizing the intentions of the “writer”—to the point where the self-reading in fact becomes the writing (and this is my take on the question of Petrarch’s “language of the self”). In terms borrowed from Paul De Man, one might say that the relationship of reader to writer is at once de-historicized and radically temporalized (De Man 1969).⁵¹

What, finally, of the first sonnet? We have seen that Petrarch introduces a generalized reader (“Voi”), which at least heuristically can be re-read as the will to write and be read (“Voglio”), and which the writing “I” then projects into a range of ventriloquized readerly voices (“chi per prova intenda”; “I popol tutto”), to which that “I” claims to have listened, thereby, paradoxically, becoming someone who is no longer understandable or interpretable by them (he is no longer the elite “subject of love”; he is no longer the risible “favola” of once upon a time).

The ultimate appearance of a figurative reader in the poem comes, symmetrically, in the very last line, and I have so far avoided touching upon it. In addition to the knowledge of his own shame and vanity, the Petrarchan writer-reader says, he has also learned that “quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno” (whatever is pleasing to the world is a brief dream). This verse is most often understood to express, for example by Santagata, the voice of the neo-Stoic sage who has left his “giovenil errore” of dispersive passion behind him.⁵² But in light of the dynamics we have been considering, I think there is something to add. This “mondo” is, in the logic of the text, a close relative of, if not indeed an alternative name for, the “popol tutto,” but also akin to that subset of more understanding readers, which in the very first line is interpellated, evoked, as “Voi ch’ascoltate” (cf. Noferi 1974a: 35–36; Cherchi 2008: 19–22). “Quanto . . . piace,” then, includes, if it does not specifically designate, “rime sparse” written in the vulgar tongue on the subject of love—a position which, in fact, Petrarch clearly takes in his letter to Boccaccio about Dante as vernacular poet and which he also has others take for him, such as Augustinus in the *Secretum* (especially book 3). The “sogno” of line 14 thus deliberately reprises and mirrors the “suono” of line 1.⁵³

Petrarch, we now find, escapes the various, scattered interpretations of his writings, only at the cost of implicitly dismissing the

Canzoniere itself as “breve sogno,” if not as “favola.” Having so carefully placed himself and his text in his readers’ “hands,” he turns the tables on them—dismissing their pleasures, which are also the pleasures of his text—as insignificant—but only after he has made it perfectly clear that “they” are “he,” “voi,” “io,” and, as we who read and listen almost seven centuries latter might add, “noi.”

Notes

1. An early version of this essay was delivered at the Yale University conference entitled “Petrarch: The Power of the Word” in September 2004. Elements of the reading of the first poem of the *Canzoniere* (*Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*) may be found in Ascoli 2007. The interpretation of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* offered here is related to that offered in Ascoli 2008, esp. ch. 4, which may be consulted for additional discussion and bibliography.
2. A partial list of subsequent explorations of the Dante-Petrarch relationship includes Calcaterra 1942; Billanovich 1961 and 1994; Santagata 1969; Feo 1973; Freccero 1975; Mazzotta 1978; Trovato 1979; Paparelli 1979; Vickers 1981; Martinelli 1981; Velli 1985; Tanturli 1985; Sturm-Maddux 1985: chs. 2–3; Lerner 1986; Ferroni 1998; Martinez 2003; Fenzi 2003; Cachey 2009. See also the extensive bibliography in Cachey and Barański, eds. 2009: 374–402. Recent work, picking up from the seminal study of Billanovich 1949, has begun to emphasize the role of Boccaccio in mediating this relationship (cf. Ascoli 2009: 149n11 et passim).
3. For this use of “genealogy,” see Foucault 1970. Foucault’s concept is directed against a traditional history of causality in the service of unmasking the temporal unfolding of what has come to be called “bio-power.” While it is undoubtedly the case that Petrarch’s treatment of the author-reader dialectic can be seen as entangled in the discursive web of bio-power (for an obvious instance in its contrast between a sympathetic readerly elite and an undifferentiated “popolo,” and, somewhat less obviously, in the lyric “I”’s simultaneous occupation of the roles of morally weak subject to be judged and morally superior judge of that subject), I adopt it in the first instance to distinguish my presentation of the Dante-Petrarch sequence here from the many, many efforts, including my own elsewhere, to create a direct link between the two, whether this is characterized

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as straightforward literary influence or as Bloomian agon. Such efforts inevitably reinforce a canonical, author-centered, model of literary history which belies the symptomatic value of texts such as those examined here for exploring the larger cultural entanglements of reading and writing.

4. A particularly inspiring recent precedent for these reflections is Brian Stock’s magisterial *Ethics through Literature* (Stock 2007). For the history of medieval writers and readers see, first of all, the classic work of Armando Petrucci (1979; 1995). For practices of reading in the late medieval period, see Allen 1982; Copeland 1991; Lerer 1993; Dagenais 1994; Amtower 2000. For Dante and reading, in addition to the classic studies of Auerbach 1954 and Spitzer 1955, see Noakes 1988: esp. 38–80 and Ascoli 2008, esp. ch. 4. For Petrarch and reading, see Kahn 1985; Robbins 1985; Struever 1992; Caratuzzolo and Güntert 2000; Stock 2001, 2003, 2007; Stierle 2003. For an overview of my understanding of the author-reader dialectic in the late middle ages and early modern eras, see Ascoli 2007. Although I would not claim a direct theoretical filiation, my approach certainly has affinities for and debts to what used to be called “reader response” criticism (see, e.g., Suleiman and Crossman eds. 1980; Jauss 1982).
5. Jakobson 1960. See also Abrams 1953 and my comments on the comparability of the two communicative schemes in Ascoli 1987: 29–30n54.
6. Given the pervasiveness of the motif of Petrarch’s modernity, I will only cite a few symptomatic critics: Blumenberg 1966; Tripet 1967; Freccero 1975; Dotti 1978 and 2001; Greene 1982a and b; Stock 2001: esp. 85; Stierle 2003. Cf. Mazzotta 1993; Ascoli 1991.
7. On the transformation of medieval authorship in the 13th and 14th centuries, see first of all Minnis 1984.
8. Among the most notable advocates of Dante as “scriba Dei” are Nardi 1942; Singleton 1954 and 1958; Sarolli 1963; Hollander 1976; Battaglia-Ricci 1983 and 1988; Barolini 1992; Hawkins 1999. See also my discussion of these issues in Ascoli 2008, esp. ch. 7.
9. For extensive discussion of Dante and self-commentary with bibliography, see Ascoli 2008, chapter 4.

10. For discussion of the authenticity debate with bibliography, see Ascoli 1997, 2000, and 2003, as well as Barański 1994, 2005a, 2005b. The findings of Azzetta 2003 seem to some to have settled the question in favor of authenticity, but see the provocative return to the inauthenticity thesis by Ginzburg 2008 and Casadei 2009.
11. On this topic see the discussions with extensive bibliography in Ascoli 2008, ch. 1, sec. 2 and ch. 7, sec. 2.
12. The *locus classicus* for this idea, of course, is Contini 1964.
13. At least not in the same programmatically definitional way as Dante. No doubt, however, that his laureation, the prophecy of himself as poet he puts in the mouth of Ennius in the *Africa*, his frequent recourse to Cicero's *Pro Archia* in affirming the special mission of the poet (e.g. *Familiares* 13.6), his defense of poetry in *Contra Medicum*, and so on should be seen in this light.
14. Though it is properly titled *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, I will nonetheless, exercising readerly prerogative, refer to Petrarch's text hereafter as the *Canzoniere*. Citations are to Petrarch 2004. Translations are by Robert Durling (Petrarch 1976) with one emendation in brackets.
15. Symptomatic is the recent special issue of *Critica del Testo* entitled "L'io lirico: Francesco Petrarca" (Desideri et aliae 2003). Notable discussions of the Petrarchan vernacular "io" include Noferi 1974b and 2001; Freccero 1975; Mazzotta 1978; Santagata 1979: esp. 151–53.
16. Noferi 1974a: 25 quoted by Santagata 2004: 7. Noferi (24–25) for her part attributes the idea to Castelvetro. Efforts like Santagata's or Rico's (1988) or Hainsworth's (1988: 107), or Martinez's (2003: esp. 1–2) to make the invocation of "Voi ch'ascoltate" the extension of proemial commonplaces traceable to the Bible, to the classics, and/or to such "moderns" as Dante and Cavalcanti are edifying, but do not account for the wholesale transformation of the motif, whose originality, and perversity, is clearly marked by the fact that the first non-subordinate verb in the poem appears only in line 8, and has as its subject not "voi" but "io" (see also note 17). Güntert's attempt to explain the oddity of the first eight verses as "un'interruzione *logica* compensata dalla continuità *emotiva*" is still less convincing (2000: 12).

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17. Noferi is thus by no means mistaken when she claims that “[il] Voi . . . si rivela infine come enfitizzazione del vero soggetto: Io” (the ‘voi,’ at last reveals itself as emphasizing the *true* subject: ‘I’; 1974a: 26).
18. See “Morte villana” (ch. 8, lines 9 and 17), “Ballata, i’ voi” (ch. 12, line 1), “Donne che avete” (ch. 19, line 30), and “Li occhi dolenti” (ch. 30, line 10). I cite from Alighieri 1984; translations are my own. Although I accept the critique by Gorni (1995 and 1996) and by Cervigni and Vasta (1995) of Barbi’s widely adopted division of the text into 42 chapters, I use the earlier scheme for ease of reference.
19. On the problematic of the will in Petrarch, see Trinkaus 1970, vol. 1: 3–50 passim and 1979; Ascoli 1991; Wojciehowski 1995: ch. 2.
20. Hainsworth 1988 is the only critic I have found who notes the full extent to which readerly roles proliferate in the poem: “the reader is placed in four positions in succession—as one of the listeners, as one of the special group who have experience of love, as one of the generality who have no time for the speaker, and as someone who cannot fail to agree with the final statement” (107).
21. As will become evident, while I agree with Santagata that this “voi” is distinct from the “specialized audiences” (“fedeli d’amore”; “donne che avete intelletto d’amore” [the faithful of Love; ladies who have knowledge of Love]) variously invoked by Dante, I disagree strongly that the poem addresses a single audience “tendenzialmente universale” (tending to universality; Santagata 1979: 150–51, and 1992: 109–11; but cf. 1979: 153). Martinez 2003: 35 astutely notes that the “voi,” normative and neutral, hence male, of 1.1 is carefully juxtaposed with the first use of “voi” to designate Laura as reader in 5.1. On the plural female addressee in Duecento and Trecento lyric poetry, see Cornish 2000; Sapegno 2003. Compare Cavalcanti’s “Donna me prega.”
22. On Petrarch and friendship more generally, see Lafleur 2001; Wojciehowski 2005.
23. On the medieval usage of “fabula,” especially in opposition to “historia,” see Demats 1973; Hollander 1976: 40n3; Minnis et al. 1988; Mazzotta 1993: 217n18; Kirkham 2001: esp. 1–13; Minnis and Johnson eds. 2005.