

The Triumph of Poetry



Figure 1: (P_Po_1) Santa Chiara and St Martin

The faces you are looking at are details from the frescos that Simone Martini painted in the Lower Church at Assisi around 1220, and they represent St Clare and St Martin. However, I am showing them here as a kind of *virtual* reality.

Simone later painted a miniature of Laura at some time in the 1340s, and although the portrait has not survived, I think we can be pretty certain that it looked something like the image above—if only because all of Simone’s women are remarkably similar, and all have more or less exactly the same mouth, no wider than the base of the nose. Similarly, if St Clare can ‘stand for’ Laura, the detail of St Martin can do duty for Petrarch as a young man. In fact, the image is particularly relevant because Petrarch tells us that he was inordinately proud of his flowing locks as a young man, and was intensely self-conscious about his premature baldness, of which we see signs in the receding temples.

Simone also painted a miniature, just under twelve inches high, as the frontispiece for Petrarch’s own copy of the commentary by Servius to the works of Virgil, which *has* survived. Reproduced below on the left, it too is an example of ‘virtual reality’: the shepherd with his sheep, the peasant farmer with his pruning knife and the knight with his lance ‘stand for’ the three works of Virgil, *Eclogues*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid*.

[FIXME: both left and right slide missing from carousel with paper placeholder in each case; find scan and insert both]

The figure on the right is Virgil himself, ‘reclining under the panoply of a broad-leaved beech’ (*patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi*), in an allusion to the opening of the *Eclogues*. But as I have already hinted, there are grounds for thinking that it may be intended as an idealised portrait of Petrarch, or at least to ‘stand for’ him.

In the context of this lecture, however, the most important figure in the picture may be that of Servius. He is the author of the commentary, but in ‘*virtual* reality’ he could stand for a portrait of *me*. His attitude captures how I see my own role: I am going to ‘draw back the veil’, show you the meaning of some of Petrarch’s poems, reveal their significance, and present to you Petrarch in his ‘true colours’, by making the case for his being the greatest lyric poet in Europe between Horace and Shakespeare.

I am not going to explore the ‘affinities’ between painting and poetry any further, however, in the ways I have been doing in related lectures; and while I shall go on using visual aids, this lecture will focus overwhelmingly on texts, not images. The main reason for this act of renunciation is that I think the art of painting took about one hundred years to ‘catch up’ with what Petrarch was doing in his portrait of Laura (as you will later see in some paintings by Pisanello and Botticelli), and about *three hundred* years before it could do anything remotely resembling Petrarch’s *self*-portrait. And so we must pass to *him*.

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

*Thirteen hundred and twenty seven, precisely
at the first hour, on the sixth day of April,*

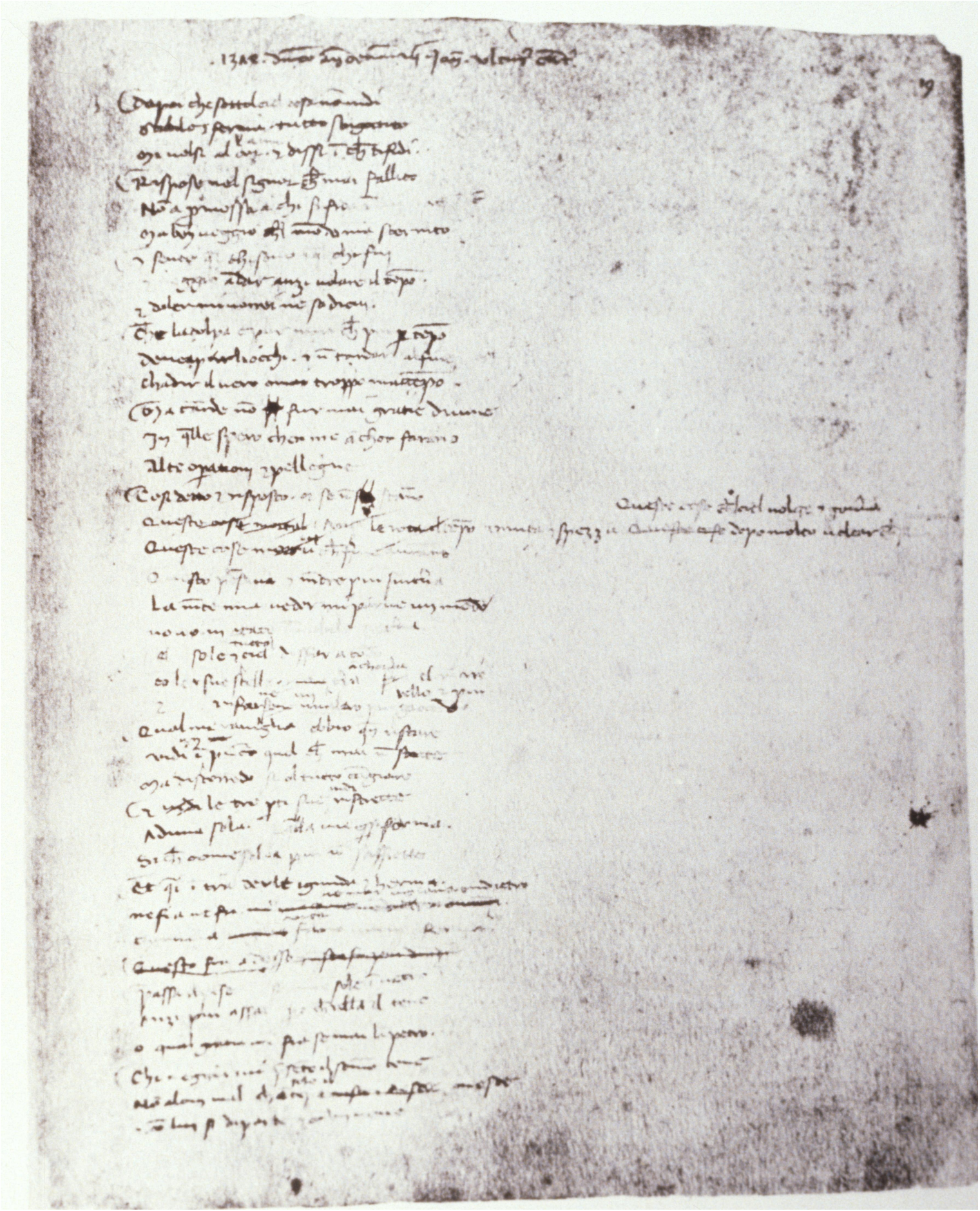


Figure 2: (P_Po_3) Petrarch’s copy of Virgil. [FIXME: or is this the holograph of the Triumph of Eternity intended for Fig 4? The hand is obviously hard at this size, but I can make out ‘Qual’ at the start of a line in the main body, suggesting it’s Italian...]

Laura’s death occurred in 1348, which Petrarch recorded at the time in this note in his copy of Virgil. In a very late sonnet, quoted above, we are told that it fell on ‘the sixth of April at the first hour’, exactly 21 years after he had first set eyes on her—to the day and the hour, ‘the time and the hour’ he had always ‘praised’.

[FIXME: The slides with the ‘date passages’ appear to have also gone awol, and the relevant excerpts definitely need inserting here]

I pass now to another very important aspect of Petrarch’s awareness of time. Both his poems and his Latin works reveal an extraordinarily acute, even morbid, sense of the *speed* of time, the rush of time towards death:

Eraclitus ait: ‘in idem flumen bis descendimus et non descendimus’...Hominis autem etsi parumper occultior, nihil tamen mod-
eratioꝝ fuga est. Fugit enim non fluminis tantum more, sed fulminis.
Limus et umbra tenuis et fumus Euro volvente rarissimus; nullum tam
breve momentum est quod non aliquid vitae detrahat...praecipites
agimur, nec sentimus...

(*Rerum memorandarum*, III)

*Heracleitus says: “We can and yet we cannot go down twice into the
same river”. Man’s flight is less perceptible but no more restrained.
It flies not like a river (flumen) but like lightning (fulmen). We
are earth, a tenuous shadow, the finest dust in the swirling wind;
there is no moment so brief that it does not subtract something from
life; we are driven on headlong and yet unaware.*

In his Italian poetry the theme finds expression in passages like the opening of this sonnet, written when he was in his fifties:

I dì miei più leggier che nesun cervo
fuggir come ombra, e non vider più bene
ch’un batter d’occhio e poche ore serene
ch’amare e dolci ne la mente servo.
Misero mondo. Instabile e protervo!
(319, 1–5)

*My days, swifter than any deer,
fled like a shadow; and saw happiness no longer
than the twinkling of an eye, and but few calm hours,
which I store in the mind, at once bitter and sweet.
Wretched world, unstable and wanton!*

However, it had already found dramatic expression in poems written before he was thirty-five:

Quanto più m’avvicino al giorno estremo
che l’umana miseria suol far breve,
più veggio il tempo andar veloce e leve
e ’l mio di lui sperar fallace e scemo.[^12]
(32, 1–4)

*The nearer I draw to that final day
which makes human wretchedness of brief duration*

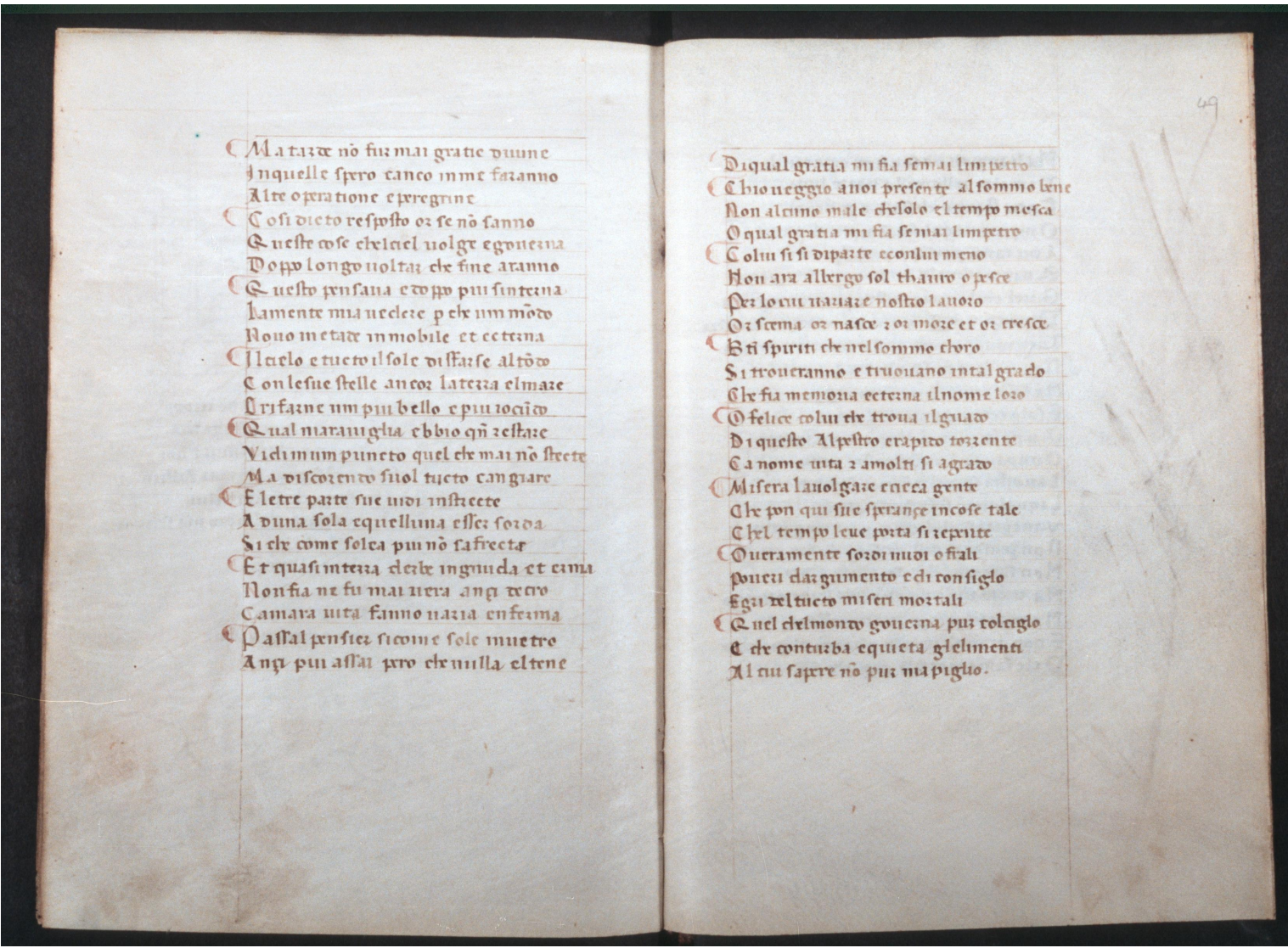


Figure 3: (P_Po_4) Fifteenth-century manuscript and holograph [FIXME: uncertain about slide, insert image later after discussion] of the* Triumph of Eternity

In the poem he insists that Eternity means a perpetual present, of ‘today’, ‘now’, and ‘is’, to the exclusion of ‘has been’ and ‘will be’, ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’. The hills of worldly preoccupations that prevent us from seeing the truth will be flattened in front and behind—there will be nothing to remember, and nothing to hope for.

Quel che l’anima nostra preme e ’ngombra:
«dianzi», «adesso», «ier», «diman», «mattino» e «sera»
tutti in un punto passeran com’ ombra;
non avrà loco «fu» «sarà» né «era»,
ma «è» solo in presente, ed «ora» ed «oggi»
e sola eternità raccolta e ’ntera;
quasi spianati dietro e ’nnanzi i poggi
ch’ occupavan la vista, non fia in cui
vostro sperare e rimembrar s’ appoggi;
la qual varietà fa spesso altrui
vaneggiar sì che ’l viver pare un gioco,
pensando pur: «che sarò io? che fui?»
(*Trionfo dell’Eternità*, 64–75)

*That which crushes and encumbers our soul,
“before”, “now”, “yesterday”, “tomorrow”, “morning” and “even-
ing”
will all pass away at once like a shadow;
there will be no ‘has been’, ‘will be’ or ‘was’,
but ‘is’ in the present only, and ‘now’ and ‘today’,
and eternity alone, undivided and entire.
In front and behind, the hills will be levelled
that possessed your sight, and there will be nothing
on which your hoping and remembering may rest;
this variety it is that makes men so often
disquiet themselves in vain, so that life seems a game,
thinking always: “what will become of me? what was I?”*

But what Petrarch feels and expresses in so many poems are the vain questions of the last line in this passage: ‘What will become of me? What was I?’ His own vivid experience of the present was simply that of a dividing line between past and future, between remorse for sins of commission and omission, and hope of salvation or fear of damnation; a dividing line that was never still, but always rushing towards the moment of his own personal extinction.

All these themes find their simplest and most beautiful expression in the opening of the sonnet, *La vita fugge*:

La vita fugge e non s’arresta un’ora,
e la morte vien dietro a gran giornate,
e le cose presenti e le passate
mi danno guerra, e le future ancora...
(272, 1–4)

*Life flies, and never halts for a single hour,
and death comes behind with forced marches,*

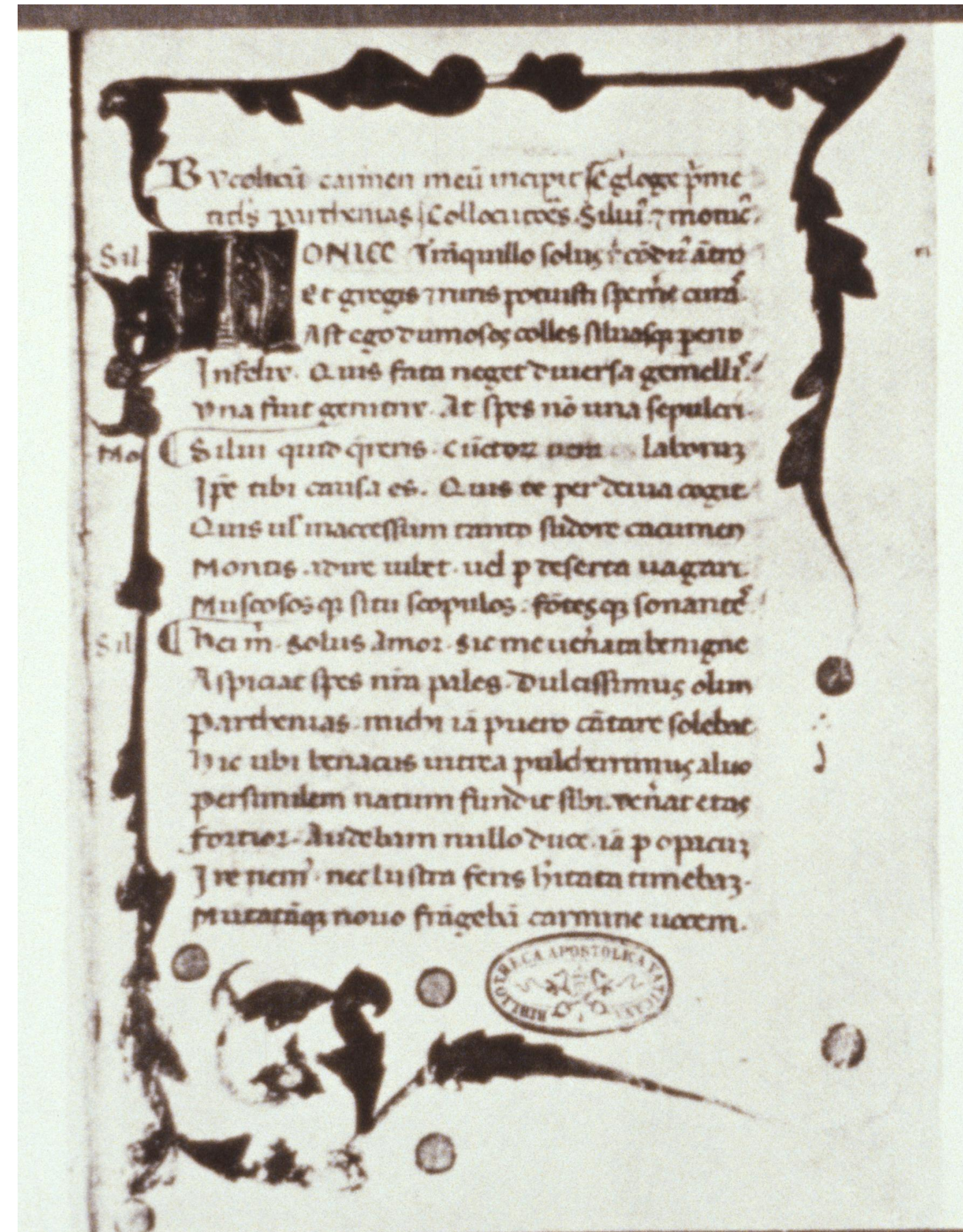


Figure 4: (P_Po_6) Petrarch’s Eclogue, and an autograph Latin letter

He wrote many Latin poems, including the Virgilian Eclogue pictured above, and an unfinished Virgilian epic, *Africa*, telling the story of Hannibal and Scipio. In Latin prose, he wrote biographies of famous men, a treatise in praise of the solitary life, a blistering invective against the universities of his day, and hundreds and hundreds of letters, to friends and eminent people, including epistles to great men of the past like Cicero and Virgil, and one addressed to *us*, ‘posterity’.

It was these Latin writings that brought him fame in his own time; and for which—so he tells us, although there is no independent record—he was crowned in 1341 as Poet laureate by the King of Naples, Robert. In the judgement of ‘posterity’, however, the chief reason for honouring his name remains his lyrics in Italian—366 in all, one for every day of a leap year—which he wrote and rewrote, and ordered and reordered, leaving a perfect fair copy of the final redaction of which almost a third is in his own hand. These are his *Fragments of Vernacular Things*, or *Scattered Rhymes* (as he called them), which make up the *Book of Songs*, or *Canzoniere*, as the collection came to be called.

I must also mention one other group of ‘short long poems’—written in Italian, in terza rima, like *The Divine Comedy*—which were composed at intervals from 1338 until his death, since it was these that suggested the title of my lecture. They are the ‘triumphs’. First, the *Triumph of Love*, describing the victories of Cupid over many famous men and women. Then the *Triumph of Chastity* (of Laura and others, over Love); and in this wooden panel in the National Gallery you will see that Cupid’s arrows are aimed at her in vain:



Figure 5: (P_Po_7) FIXME: ?artist and title

Then came the *Triumph of Death* (over Laura); then the *Triumph of Fame* (conquering Death); then the *Triumph of Time* (which obliterates all records, all ‘fame’); and, last, the *Triumph of Eternity* over Time—as it were, the Redemption of Time. You will see, though, that my title—the ‘Triumph of Poetry’—is my own invention; and I shall not talk about the real Triumphs any more, even though they were much admired in the Renaissance.

Instead, let us return to the *Canzoniere*, and begin to ask ourselves what his poetry means to us, and what it meant to *him*. We can give one important part of that answer immediately: poetry gives pleasure, instinctive pleasure, pleasure in sounds and intricate formal patterns enjoyed almost for their own sake. Petrarch tells us:

Siquidem, ab ipsa pueritia...ego libris Ciceronis incubui...Et in illa quidem aetate, nihil intelligere poteram, sola me verborum dulcedo quaedam et sonoritas detinebat.

(*Sen.* XV, 1)

*From my boyhood I poured over Cicero’s writings. At that age I could understand nothing but was held by a certain sweetness of the words alone, and by their sonority.

This is no bad way for us to come to his verse the first instance. More evidence of this instinctive pleasure comes from the drafts which have survived for some of the poems. Petrarch makes little jottings in the margins, short phrases in Latin such as: ‘Wait; put this another way; I don’t like this’. And then, when he hits upon the phrase he wants, he uses the formula that we still use in Cambridge to despatch University business: *Hoc placet*. Or once—and it is very revealing—‘I like this because it’s fuller in sound, *hoc placet quia sonantior*’.

I shall go on to make more serious claims for Petrarch’s poetry, but I hope you will not forget Petrarch’s simple and intuitive satisfaction with the rhythm and sound that are right. It is abundantly clear, from these same ‘working’ manuscripts, that for Petrarch poetry was a craft, and that he deliberately drew, in a creative way, on his intimate knowledge of the classical Roman poets and of the more recent love poetry in Provençal and Italian. His drafts also show that almost all his most characteristic effects were ‘worked for’. His methods were in fact very close to those of a Renaissance artist. One can find analogies to a painter’s rapid preliminary sketches (involving borrowings or ‘imitations’ from earlier masters), a careful drawing, showing the fall of light and the modelling, long and patient brushwork on the canvas, layer by layer, glaze by glaze, to produce a superbly finished and durable product—including quite a number of *pentimenti* at the last moment.

One concrete example is the sestet of the sonnet *Aspro core e selvaggio*. A note on the first manuscript tells us that he wrote it at three o’clock on September 21, 1350:

1350, septembris 21, martis hora 3...propter unum quod legi Paduae in cantilena Arnaldi Danielis: «Aman, preian, s’afranca cors ufecs».

21 September 1350, Tuesday, 3 am...inspired by a line in a canzone by Arnaut Daniel that I read in Padua: ‘By loving and entreating a proud heart is tamed’.



Figure 6: (P_Po_8) Two women by Pisanello

I move on now to another important aspect, to the figure of Laura. In the absence of that portrait by Simone, I show you here two heads by Pisanello, a portrait from the life, and an imaginary blonde Isotta in a badly damaged fresco, which were painted in the first half of the next century, but in a style that I myself find very close to the spirit of Petrarch's poetry.

Petrarch certainly accepted what rhetoricians had laid down for centuries, that poetry is concerned with either praise or blame. In the *Canzoniere*, there is relatively little 'blame' or 'vituperation', and what there is, is mostly of a political kind, attacking either the corruption of the Papal Court at Avignon, or the degeneracy of the rulers of Italy. But, of course, there are a great many poems of praise: praise for the beloved, praise of Laura. As you read these poems, you will be struck by the fact that her virtues and attributes are very *generic*. Nevertheless, you will find that her personality is remarkably consistent; and Petrarch is *particular* in that, at least, for all her qualities are 'anchored' or 'rooted' in her name, which is the badge of her individuality and at the same time the clue to her nature, on the principle that *nomina sunt consequentia rerum*.

Among the many reasons why Petrarch's imitators necessarily fell short of their master and model, was that their ladies inevitably had different names, that were less suggestive. For example, Boiardo, author of the best *canzoniere* in the fifteenth century, had to make do with Antonia Caprara, whose name he spelled out in this acrostic sonnet:

Angelica vagheza in cui natura
Ne mostra ciò che bel puote operare,
Tal che a sì chiara luce acomperare
Ogni stella del ciel parebe oscura,
Non si può aconciamente anima dura
In graziosa vista colorare;
A voi una umiltà ne li occhi appare,
Che di pietade ogn'alma rassicura.
A che mostrare adunqua che le pene
Per voi portate sian portate in vano,
Ridendo el foco ch'el mio cor disface?
Alma ligiadra, tropo disconvene
Risposta dura a un visto tanto umano:
Aiuto adunque, o morte, qual vi piace.
[FIXME: reference needed to which work of Boiardo]*

A Laura by any other name, however, does not smell as sweet; and Petrarch will spin endless variations around that magic name. Laura is 'l'aura', the breeze, emblem of the spirit, of breath, of speech, of life itself; or she is 'l'aurora', the dawn, symbol of new life, renewal, new hope; or she is the 'golden one', 'l'aurea'. Switching genders, she is gold, 'l'auro', emblem of all that is noble and precious; or else she is 'il lauro', the bay tree or laurel, evergreen, immortal, whose leaves were used to crown both conquerors and poets.

This last meaning recalls the myth of Daphne, the chaste nymph, loved and literally pursued by Apollo, and transformed into the laurel to save her from his lust. If Laura becomes Daphne, then Petrarch becomes a new Apollo, or else a rival to Apollo in his love. He praises and celebrates her too by drawing on other classical



Figure 7: (P_Po_9) Rembrandt, self-portraits as a young and old man

This is a grand comparison to make, and there are some obvious objections to consider, which would require me to make to some very necessary qualifications, and in their fullest form, would take a great deal of time and space to set forth. Instead, I offer the images above as hidden persuaders, while I make five simple points.

First, it is undoubtedly true that Petrarch's portrait is largely that of a lover, *any* lover or any *unrequited* lover, with all his absurdities, his mood swings, contradictions, and his almost masochistic delight in the torments of love; and the proof of this lies in the fact that all the main features of the portrait, together with the paradoxical images and the antithetical constructions that he used in modelling the image, were imitated by his followers all over Europe for the next three centuries. Yet—and this is my second point—unlike his imitators, and unlike most of the Petrarchists, Petrarch endured the death of his beloved; and his self-portrait includes the experience of bereavement and mourning.

Third, as we saw at the very beginning, even when Laura was alive, Petrarch had seen her as in some sense a rival to Christ. He had recognised that his cult of her, virtuous as she was, was in some sense idolatrous, leading him to eternal damnation. In other words, unlike his imitators, his self portrait is a highly critical one, full of self-reproach and self accusation, very close in tone to St Augustine's *Confessions*, which was among the books he carried around with him and read most. This is made clear from the very first sonnet of the collection, in which he speaks of his 'shame' and 'remorse', and concedes that all earthly pleasures are no more than a 'brief dream':

Ma ben veggio or sì come al popol tutto
favola fui gran tempo, onde sovente
di me medesmo meco mi vergogno;
e del mio vaneggiar vergogna è 'l frutto
e 'l pentersi, e 'l conoscer chiaramente
che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno.
(1, 9–14)

*But now I see clearly that I have long been
the butt of common talk, and so I often
feel shame for myself within me;
and shame is the fruit of my empty words,
and repentance, and the clear knowledge
that whatever this world loves is a brief dream.*

Fourth, the portrait Petrarch paints is not just of a man torn between divided loyalties, but of a man as explorer of his own nature, as an honest and unsparing critic of himself:

Quel ch'ì' fo veggio, e non m'inganna il vero
mal conosciuto...
(264, 91–2)

*I see what I am doing, and I am not deceived
by an imperfect grasp of the truth...*

ch'ì' conosco il mio fallo e non lo scuso



Figure 8: (P_Po_10) Petrarch's FIXME: autograph

Perhaps the best way to reassert the uniqueness and individuality of the portrait, will be to consider his sense of *place*, and its relation to that dominant sense of *time*. If you think back to that sonnet in praise of Laura, you will remember that the countryside, the background, was no more than a hint of an idealised landscape. Yet the fact remains that for Petrarch it was a *specific* landscape, and there are quite a number of poems where he introduces proper names, and describes particular features, to indicate that he is writing about Avignon and the countryside of Provence—especially the ‘closed valley’, Valle Chiusa, or Vacluse, through which runs the river Sorga, or Sorgue. Below we have his own sketch of his country retreat at the foot of a page in his copy of Pliny; as well as a contemporary photograph of his house, which you can visit in Vacluse as a Petrarch museum.



Figure 9: (P_Po_11) A sketch by Petrarch of his country home, and a picture-postcard of it today

However, my point is not to demonstrate that Petrarch’s poetry has a sense of place. What I want to get at is that, for Petrarch, space or place exists in what I have called ‘*cyclical* time’: the countryside changes from week to week, and season to season, but not from year to year. When he returns, alone, to the changeless landscape—which is so closely associated with the figure of Laura in his mind that the figure and the background merge and become one, and Laura is the landscape, and the landscape is Laura—then the familiar scene can summon up the image of her, although she is absent, and renew the feelings of love and longing.

That is, at least, the simplest situation. But if the return is a real return, that is, if sufficient time has elapsed for him to think of it as a ‘return’, then the sameness of the landscape, existing in cyclical time, will summon up memories rather than associations, and these memories will sharpen his awareness of the changes that have come about in him, and in Laura, both of whom exist in *linear* time.

Petrarch’s experience is, if you like, the opposite of the paradox propounded by Heraclitus, which we touched on earlier: ‘you cannot cross the same river twice’. The usual reason given is, of course, that the water is never the same water; but Petrarch cannot cross the river twice because he is no longer the same person. Thus when he returned to Vaucluse in the 1340s after a prolonged absence, or, far more poignantly, when he returned in the 1350s after Laura’s death, and when he chose to make these returns not just the occasion of poetry, but the actual substance of his poems, he created a new kind of poetry—a new kind of meditation, which we can perhaps call ‘On revisiting scenes of childhood or of love’:

Valle, che de’ lamenti miei se’ piena,
fiume, che spesso del mio pianger cresci,
...
dolce sentier, che sì amaro riesci,
colle che mi piacesti, or mi rincresci,
ov’ancor per usanza Amor mi mena;
ben riconosco in voi l’usate forme,
non, lasso, in me, che da sì lieta vita
son fatto albergo d’infinita doglia.
Quinci vedea ’l mio bene, e per queste orme
torno a vedere ond’al ciel nuda è gita
lasciando in terra la sua bella spoglia.
(301, 1–2, 6–14)

*Valley, full of my laments,
river, often swelling with my tears, /.../ sweet path, with so bitter
an end,
hill, that I loved and now find hateful,
where love still leads me as he was wont to do:
In you I recognise your accustomed forms,
but not, alas, in me, who from so joyful a life
have become the dwelling of infinite grief.
Here I would see my love, and along these traces
I return to see whence she ascended into heaven,
leaving her beautiful vesture on earth.*

In this sonnet, he apostrophises the constituent parts of the landscape, the valley