

# Cosmopolitan and Vernacular

## Petrarch at Sea

### Abstract

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Casual readers and scholars alike celebrate Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*RVF*) as an early masterpiece of vernacular lyric. Yet Petrarch directed most of his professional energies as writer to Latin composition, in the belief that Latin was the language of his most important literary models and of the literary future. This essay studies Petrarch's life – in particular, episodes revealing his conflicted attitudes toward the sea and especially toward travel by ship – in order to comment on his attitude toward the language of literature: his respect for Latin, his enduring affection for Italian, and his work on the vernacular lyrics at the very end of his life. The essay uses Theodor Adorno's formulation of 'late style' (Adorno used this concept to discuss the late work of composers, in particular Beethoven) to describe Petrarch's late work on the *RVF* in his last years. It argues that Petrarch's turn to the vernacular in his final years should be read as a kind of linguistic experimentalism – fragmentary and catastrophic, as Adorno would describe it, rather than sweet, unified and harmonic – made possible when Petrarch is no longer using Latin to think about literary posterity.\*

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1. See, for instance, the (hilariously titled) *Wall Street Journal* article "Caveat Emptor: Lovers of Latin Try to Sell a Dead Language," by Matthew Dalton (29 Nov. 2013) on the Schola Nova in Belgium, which educates Latin speakers and promotes Latin as pan-European language.

Of all the specters of unity that haunt Europe, the dream of a common language is the most equivocal. Few hanker for a return to Latin – until the topic of English hegemony looms, and Latin seems the lesser of the evils.<sup>1</sup> Latin, after all, was the language that gave Europe coherence (and liturgical unity, though now that ship has sailed) and that linked the present to the ancient past for the centuries predating modernity. With the collapse of Latinity and the rise of that curious beast, the national language system, Europe lost any semblance of linguistic unity. In order to do business together, an Italian and a Dane or a Frenchman and a Ukrainian must learn another's language. Enter English – and the regional particularism which Europe symbolizes and celebrates is weakened.

The national language system is arguably the most distinctive feature of the European nation state. The principle that the mother

tongue should serve as language of culture, that the literary language (like the nation) should have territorial sovereignty, and that contemporary spoken practice should serve as stylistic standard which the written language must emulate seems natural – until one looks away from Europe to virtually any other part of the globe. Much of what medieval literary historians study is the drama that unfolded when European writers undertook to create regional literatures using tongues which, at first, were understood to be distinct both from Latin and from the mother tongue as spoken in the kitchen and in the piazza, and only over time became naturalized as national languages.

This drama unfolded differently in each corner of Europe. In Italy, a number of factors complicated the emergence of a regional literary tradition. In large part because Italians felt Latin to be their own possession, they long resisted the rise of vernacular culture. And perhaps because their activities as merchants put them in regular contact with so many and such diverse populations, they showed little reluctance to import others' linguistic and literary cultures along with their commodities and goods. Thus in northern Italy both French and Occitan were used as literary languages between the late twelfth and late fourteenth century, and in southern Italy and Sicily Arabic survived as literary language into the twelfth century and Greek into the thirteenth. The explosion of vernacular culture during the thirteenth and fourteenth century – in particular the activities of the three authors known as the Tre Corone (or Three Crowns) of Italian letters, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio – augured great things. But during the fifteenth century Italians rewound the tape: they returned to Latinity; they lovingly cultivated the Latin language and allowed the new leaves of vernacular culture to wither on the vine.

No author better symbolizes the contradictions and tensions of late medieval literary culture than Francesco Petrarch (1304–74), and no work better expresses the paradoxical instability and enduring power of emergent vernacular letters than the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (RVF).<sup>2</sup> Petrarch himself weighs the “vernacular fragments” against his Latin compositions in the opening sentences of the volume that served him as fictionalized autobiography, the collection of letters (written in Latin) known as the *Familiare*s. He describes the

great number of writings that lie scattered and neglected throughout my house [...] confused heaps of letters and formless piles of papers

2. I follow current scholarly convention in referring to Petrarch's lyric collection (usually) using the Latin title he himself gave it. The title *Canzoniere* became popular only during the nineteenth century.

(multa michi scriptorum diversi generis supellex domi [...] sparsa quidem et neglecta [...] confusis itaque circumventus literarum cumulis et informi papiro).

And he sorts them into categories that merge linguistic and stylistic distinctions:

Part of the writing was free of literary niceties, part showed the influence of Homeric control since I rarely made use of the rules of Isocrates; but another part intended for charming the ears of the multitude relied on its own particular rules

(Erat pars soluto gressu libera, pars frenis homericis astricta, quoniam ysocraticis habenis raro utimur; pars autem, mulcendis vulgi auribus intenta, suis et ipsa legibus utebatur).<sup>3</sup>

3. *Familiares* 1.1.3–4 and 6: Petrarca, *Letters* 1: 3–4 and *Le Familiari* 1: 3–4.

Petrarch's intention here is to characterize all his efforts as writer and with quick, deft strokes to create distinctions among them, to sort them into categories. One "formless pile of papers" was written in prose (literally, "free and unbound in its ways"); one obeyed the poetic rules that govern epic ("Homeric reins"). In a third pile, Petrarch sets the writings "intended to caress the ears of the crowd" (*mulcendis vulgi auribus intenta*). The fragments of vernacular lyrics used a linguistic medium that had a scant literary record in comparison to the millennial archive of the cosmopolitan tongue, Latin; that did not yet possess a standardized orthography, grammar, or lexicon; that was as fluid and variable and as seductive to the ear as music. While the *grammatica* could be compelled to obey the rules of quantitative meter and the ancient standards of linguistic practice, the nearly lawless vernacular ("obeying only its own rules") flows like the errant melodies drifting in from the street and the tavern.

Viewed in the context of Petrarch's corpus as a whole, the *RVF* poses a peculiar problem. It is one of a very small minority of vernacular works written by the master. In Latin, Petrarch wrote some twenty eight texts and treatises – from the major works, like the abandoned epic *Africa*; the *Secretum*, a private volume of reflections not circulated during his life; and the multiple volumes of letters which the fifteenth century Humanists would use as a stylebook of Latin prose, to the briefer and more occasional texts like the *Penitential Psalms* and the *Prayers*. And in Italian, he wrote two: the *Canzoniere* and the *Trionfi*. The works in Latin, combined, represent (by a very rough count) 720,000 words of prose and poetry; the Italian poetry

adds up to a total of 68,700 words. Petrarch wrote 91.3% of his oeuvre in Latin and 8.7% in Italian.

But scholars have long recognized that Latin mattered most to Petrarch, and it is not just the prominence of Latinity in Petrarch's corpus that poses a problem for literary historians. More difficult to account for is the fact that – despite his palpable love and respect for the Latin language – Petrarch returned to the vernacular at the end of his life. The semi-autograph manuscript of the *RVF* that we know today as Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), Vat. lat. 3195 was Petrarch's own working copy, which he continued to edit until shortly before his death. And his sustained work on the *Trionfi* dates to this same period: late in his life, during his years of residence in Venice and, after that, at his final home at Arquà.<sup>4</sup> The curious position of the *RVF* in Petrarch's corpus, his late work on the *RVF* in particular as a sort of linguistic *pentimento*, has not deterred its ardent fans. Today, it remains the most loved of Petrarch's works. But the imbalance between Latin and Italian makes the writer's linguistic footprint difficult to describe with accuracy and precision. The corpus makes a queasy cocktail of ingredients that mingle uneasily with each other: the large yet inconsequential Latin corpus on the one hand and the sliver of vernacular poetry, which would change the course of European letters, on the other; the works of probity and substance that only scholars read on the one hand, and the *fragmenta* we all love on the other; the measured and balanced periodic sentences of the Latin works on the one hand, and on the other the urgent, musical verses of the vernacular rhymes – scattered like dice, scattered like ships in a storm.

To further complicate matters, this attitude toward Petrarch's corpus – the disproportionate attention given to the relatively small body of vernacular poetry – contradicts the immediate influence that Petrarch's work had on Italian letters. The fifteenth century saw the ascendance of Humanism in Italy. And the Humanists, following Petrarch's authoritative lead (and with a couple of noteworthy exceptions), promoted Latin and had little use for the vernacular.<sup>5</sup> When Italy (like the rest of Europe) finally embraced the vernacular, during the sixteenth century, Italy (like the rest of Europe) would take up Petrarchan poetics – meaning, of course, the vernacular lyrics of the *Canzoniere*, not the pompous and ponderous Latin epic, the *Africa*. But for the first century following his death, Petrarch was known, respected and loved as supreme Latin stylist and as Latin philologist, and his most popular work was a Latin treatise, *De remediis utriusque*

4. I follow Pacca in dating the *Trionfi* to this same period, late in Petrarch's life (250–55), although it's quite possible that he first conceived the work much earlier.

5. The vernacular, of course, had its fifteenth century defenders – most notably Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), who wrote important treatises in Italian and composed his own grammar of the vernacular (preserved in a single, autograph manuscript). In the second half of the Quattrocento vernacular writers would become more numerous and vernacular composition more central to the literary life of the peninsula; see in particular the works of Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441–94) and Angelo Poliziano (1454–94) and the vernacular activism of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92).

6. On the manuscript tradition of *De remediis utriusque fortunae* see Trapp 218. Of course, with the return of vernacular culture in Italy during the sixteenth century, the fortunes of both Petrarch's and Boccaccio's vernacular works would rise.

7. The *RVF* famously both embodies and abjures the passing of time: it builds ineluctably toward death (Laura's death, Petrarch's death) and at the same time paces a repetitive yet unfruitful annual cycle of time, like an ancient, futile fertility ritual; there are 366 poems in the book, usually understood as 365 (one for each day of the year) + 1 (either the introductory sonnet or the concluding canzone addressed to the Virgin can be understood as the supplementary, extra-annual poem). For these reasons, and because the passing of time becomes at moments an obsession for Petrarch as poet, the topic of time in relation to the *RVF* is a vast and intricate one.

8. Images of travel by ship and of shipwreck in particular are abundant in Petrarch's works, in both Latin and the vernacular; I will focus only on a specific set of these. I have chosen to focus on the *RVF* and not the *Trionfi* – the other vernacular work of Petrarch's old age – in part because the *RVF* is the product both of youth and of old age. But it is also true that in the *Trionfi*, Petrarch did not use images of ships at sea and shipwreck in particular in the same way as in the *RVF*. In the *Trionfi* seascapes serve as establishing shots to locate characters of historical or mythological importance. But images of stormy seas or of boats tossed on the waves are not used to represent a state of mind, as they are in the *RVF*. To my knowledge the sole exception to this rule is a fleeting image of a sailor turning his ship away from reefs, used as a simile; see *Triumphus Pudicitie* 50–51 (Petrarca, *Trionfi* 236).

9. Petrarch worked on the vernacular poems throughout his life. Scholars have identified periods of work on the lyric poems that would become the *RVF* in 1336–37, 1342, 1347–50, 1356–58, 1359–62, and finally 1366–74. For an exhaustive discussion of the phases of work on the *RVF* see Wilkins, *The Making*. In this reading, I am interested in his decisive turn at the end of his life not to Latin but to

*fortunae*.<sup>6</sup> In the same way, Boccaccio was known above all for his Latin works, and *De genealogia deorum* was the most read of his treatises. Only Dante, of the great writers of the Trecento, was remembered principally for the vernacular masterpiece; and his star dimmed (temporarily) for that reason.

In this essay, I will tease out one thread from this knot of problems to do with the tangled relation between cosmopolitan language and vernacular in late medieval poetics: I will study Petrarch's turn to the vernacular at the end of his life. And I will use the formulation 'late style' to think about the structural difficulty posed by the *RVF* as a linguistic rear-guard action. The term comes from Adorno, who used it to describe the late works of Beethoven and suggested that a similar dynamic could be found in the late works of other composers. Adorno proposed that in his late work, Beethoven moved beyond the sublime accomplishments of maturity – sweet or solemn, masterful and melodic – into a new kind of emotional abstraction, beyond beauty, even beyond coherent emotional expressionism. Adorno on 'late style' is – like much of Adorno's thought – difficult yet immensely suggestive. And thinking about the passing of time in relation to the *RVF* is notoriously risky business.<sup>7</sup> Yet I believe that Adorno's fragmentary writings on 'late style' can help us to read Petrarch's late work on the lyric poems by illuminating their lasting power, for Petrarch himself as well as for us. In the final section of this essay, I will use Adorno on 'late style' to read two sonnets from the *RVF*, focusing on images of ships in distress as metaphors that align the poetry and the poet's life.<sup>8</sup> My aim is not to contribute to the superb biographical criticism that tracks the composition of the *RVF* in relation to the events of Petrarch's life, but rather to create a portrait of the poet *at sea* – in the English idiom, at once "bewildered" and "meandering" – in the trackless ocean of vernacular poetics at the end of his life. Petrarch began the *RVF* as a young man and continued to work on it periodically throughout his life. But in its final form it is the work of old age.<sup>9</sup> More important to my inquiry in this essay, it is the work to which he chose to devote himself toward the end: not the enduring Latin monuments, but the vernacular fragments. Is it possible to see a stylistic progression in the *RVF* from a mature, harmonious, affectionate and sweet style to a style that is ravaged, emotionally expressionless, and devoid of sweetness? Can we track this development in a narrowly defined set of images in particular: the ship on the troubled sea of life? Adorno proposes that in their late works, great artists have finished with mere beauty. "In the

the humble vernacular, and to the vernacular fragments in particular. In other words, I'm not arguing that the vernacular *didn't* interest him (at least sporadically) earlier in his life, but rather asking *why* the vernacular interested him particularly during this late period: what attractions it held for him at the end of his life.

history of art,” he writes, “late works are the catastrophes” (567). Does Petrarch’s late work on the *RVF*, as Adorno suggests it might, represent *catastrophe*: the catastrophic collapse of the self, of the unified literary work, or of the cosmopolitan language of literature?

## A Cat May Look at a King

In January of 1361, Petrarch – who, at the venerable age of 56, had already been crowned Poet Laureate by the Roman Senate, and had acted as emissary for popes and monarchs – was sent on a diplomatic mission to King Jean II of France to congratulate him on his recent release from captivity under the English. Jean, remembered as Jean le Bon, had been captured following his defeat in battle at Poitiers in 1356 and taken as prisoner of war to London. Released in 1360 after his son, Charles, concluded a treaty that promised a ruinous ransom to buy his freedom, Jean returned to Paris. Petrarch met him there on behalf of his patrons, the Visconti of Milan, to celebrate his safe return to the capital.<sup>10</sup>

The speech that Petrarch made on this occasion, which he himself edited and recorded for posterity, begins with a disclaimer defending his use of Latin rather than French in his audience with the King. And, read against the backdrop of the linguistic policies of the French court and the linguistic adventures of the French king, his oration makes a succinct and forceful statement of both Petrarch’s attachment to the Latin language and the challenges that Latin faced in late medieval Europe. King Jean’s court, it seems, had requested that as a concession to local sensibilities Petrarch address his audience in French. And in his opening comments, he explains his choice not to comply. He concedes that it would be preferable to speak in the language that is more agreeable and more familiar to his audience. And he recalls with approval the rulers of ancient Rome, who would allow no language but their own to be spoken in their presence: they conducted their audiences in Latin and only in Latin. Other monarchs, too, enforced a similar linguistic policy. Thus Athenian Themistocles was obliged to work up some Persian before his negotiations with the King of Persia, rather than

offend the ears of the King with a foreign tongue (*peregrinum ydioma*). And indeed willingly would I myself do the same, if I could. But I am not a man of such wit: I do not know the

10. On Petrarch’s embassy to King Jean see Barbeau du Rocher and Wilkins, *Life* 173–76.

French language, nor am I able to learn it with ease (Petrarch, “Collatio” 1286–89).

Yet – despite his modesty about his own linguistic capacity – Petrarch is emboldened by the knowledge that Jean as a young man was himself devoted to the study of Latin. Petrarch cannot be expected to address so magnificent a personage in a language that no one could expect him to have mastered; and so Petrarch begs the king’s condescension and announces his intention to say his piece in their common tongue, Latin.

As is usual with matters relating to Petrarch’s biography, we have only his own version of this story. Petrarch edited his papers carefully, with an eye to shaping his reputation and managing his fame. Historians commenting on this episode typically assume that Petrarch received a formal request to speak in French and read these sentences as his firm refusal to do so – shocking temerity on his part, if this is the case. Indeed, it’s difficult to imagine the sequence of events leading up to Petrarch’s audience with the king. Did King Jean (or a member of his retinue) attempt to dictate the terms of the ceremony, to be rebuked by Petrarch? Or was there a more spontaneous exchange: did Petrarch begin his comments in his fluent, Italian-accented Latin to be interrupted by the King, and only then continue (perhaps halting and uncertain) his prepared text, aware that the King was not following his periodic sentences and poetic flourishes? Was this exordium part of the speech that the King and the court heard, or was it added later, as self-justification on Petrarch’s part?

Perhaps most provocative, the episode compels us to ask: how well did Petrarch know his audience? King Jean II is remembered today, among other things, as the originator of a French vernacularization movement, a movement that would come to fruition under his son and successor, Charles V – also present at Petrarch’s address. During Jean’s reign the Bible was vulgarized by Jean de Sy. Jean de Vignay created a French version of Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Historiale*. But the first translation made during Jean’s rule and with his patronage was the work of another man, also present when Petrarch addressed the King. Pierre Bersuire (also known as Pierre of Poitiers) vulgarized *Decades* I, III and IV of Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*.<sup>11</sup> Pierre was an old friend of Petrarch’s; they had known each other since Petrarch’s days in Avignon, Petrarch’s home until 1353.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Pierre’s vernacular translation of Livy would not have been possible without Petrarch’s intervention. It was Petrarch’s philological detective work that brought Livy fully into the Middle Ages. Before Pe-

11. On vernacular translation in fourteenth century France, see Monfrin.

12. On Pierre Bersuire, see Pannier and Barbeau du Rocher 197–200.

trarch's diligent search for new manuscript versions of the *Decades*, before his meticulous editorial work on the text, Livy's name was attached to countless vernacular works, some more or less faithfully translated from Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and others spin-offs of derivative compendia or epitomes, circulating as independent (and increasingly variant) texts. Petrarch used his deep knowledge of Latin and his acute sense of Latin style to restore Livy's text – which Pierre in turn reproduced in the French vernacular.

We know that Pierre was there (along with King Jean and the Dauphin) because, once again, we have Petrarch's own account of the event, recorded in a letter written to Pierre. And, thanks to this letter, we know that Jean and his retinue did pay attention to Petrarch's Latin address that day – or at least they took in portions of it. Petrarch reminds Pierre of the events of the day: he noticed, as he spoke, that King Jean and his son Charles both responded eagerly to Petrarch's mention of Fortune. And Petrarch tells Pierre that he had a visit later that night from someone who warned him that he would be summoned to the King's presence to discuss and debate the role that Fortune plays in human affairs.<sup>13</sup> Given Jean's recent adventures – his defeat and capture; the hostage exchange negotiated as part of the terms of his release, which required him to send another son, Louis, along with 39 other French nobles to England to take his place – it seems that the royal family had every reason to be interested in the subtle machinations of Fortune. Yet Jean's interest in Petrarch's thoughts on the twists and turns of fate, it seems, extended only so far. Petrarch reminds Pierre that he dutifully attended the King and the Dauphin, who whiled away the hours in vagaries and self-preening. A cat may look at a king – but he may not, it seems, speak with one. Petrarch left without saying his piece on Fortune.

Perhaps the King simply had little interest in inviting another torrent of voluble Latin from his Italian visitor's mouth. A glance at the text of Petrarch's address to King Jean allows another, admittedly uncharitable interpretation of the day's events. Petrarch addresses the topic of Fortune in the opening lines of his speech, building to a line from Virgil on the subject: *Fortuna omnipotens et ineluctabile fatum* (“All-powerful Fortune and inevitable fate”). One imagines Petrarch intoning the word *Fortuna* sonorously each time it occurs – typically, for emphasis, at the end of a phrase – and giving Virgil's verse the prominence it merits (Petrarca, “Collatio” 1290–91). One also imagines the King's and the Dauphin's ears perking to the sound of a word they recognized. The Latin word *Fortuna* entered French – as it en-

13. *Familiars* 22.13: Petrarca, *Letters* 3: 240–41 and *Le Familiari* 4: 136–38.



tered all the Romance languages – virtually unchanged. The French *fortune* is a cognate of the Latin *fortuna*, and hence immediately familiar even to the ear unaccustomed to following the divagations and peregrinations of Latin syntax. Certainly the dusty and moldering heap of Petrarch's periodic sentences – larded with subordinate clauses, meandering toward the *ineluctabile fatum* of that final Virgilian verse – must not have gone down easily at the French court. The quickening that Petrarch saw in his audience when he discussed Fortune was perhaps a sign of linguistic as well as moral comprehension and recognition – *anagnorisis*, as the Greeks would call it, though King Jean would probably prefer *entendiment* or *savoir*: good Latinate words that had, by one path or another, been naturalized by the fourteenth century as French.

It is difficult for modern readers to understand the depth of Petrarch's feeling for the Latin language. The Italian poetry presents a strong distraction. Who is Petrarch, for us, but the voice of poetic modernity: the poet who taught Europeans to appreciate the poetic immediacy and urgency of the vernacular (and its bosom companion, inconstancy)? But Petrarch himself spurned the vernacular. He placed his trust in Latinity: a language that moved with ease from Rome to Avignon and Avignon to Paris, that allowed the moderns to read and even to address the ancients (as Petrarch himself did in the letters he wrote to his literary models – Cicero, Virgil, Homer). He derided the vernacular poetry which defines his reputation for us as “trifles” – *nugae* – in a note he wrote (in Latin, of course) on the working draft of one of his poems: further evidence, if such were needed, of his disdain for (or at best conflicted feelings toward) vernacular composition.<sup>14</sup>

The episode with King Jean obliged Petrarch to tip his hand, to reveal his attachment to Latin. His waspish rejection of Jean's vernacular was not likely to win him friends at the King's court; but Petrarch himself had no use for the frivolities of court life. He had written elsewhere, long before this journey, that he was scandalized by the French court's ignorance of Latin, and that he could not picture himself as courtier among those who had no feeling for Latin (Petrarca, *Rerum memorandarum libri* 40: 1.37.9). As for King Jean, he would last less than four years in France. By the end of 1363 he had slipped back to England, called back either by a sense of honor (his ransom had not been satisfied) or, according to some, by the gaieties of English court life.<sup>15</sup> What language, one wonders, did the King speak with his captors: Norman French, the French of King Jean's court,

14. The comment can be seen in the modern facsimile reproduction of the “manoscritto degli abbozzi”, the autograph manuscript of working drafts of a small number of poems from the *Canzoniere*; see *Il Codice Vaticano lat.* 3196 11v.

15. There is some speculation about Jean's motives for returning to England. A waggish chronicler, the Continuator of Guillaume de Nangis, accused him of going back to England *causa joci*, “for the sake of sport” (see the *Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis* 2: 333) – there being apparently a lady involved. But there is certainly more to the story. Jean arrived to great festivities and a warm welcome in London in January 1364; sadly, he soon fell sick and would be dead by the end of April.

English, or some combination of these? Perhaps Jean himself had acquired a taste (as those who travel sometimes do) for living in translation: in the *peregrinum ydioma* of the English court, a linguistic register liberated of regionalisms and unburdened by the idiosyncrasies of hearth and home.

## Petrarch Turns His Back on the Sea

Petrarch traveled a great deal – on diplomatic missions, like the journey to Paris to celebrate King Jean’s release from captivity; from one ecclesiastical posting to the next; to call on friends, visit libraries and examine manuscripts. Scrutinizing Ernest Hatch Wilkins’s biography of Petrarch (largely based on close readings of the letters), I count no fewer than 57 distinct displacements, including trips, long or short, and changes of residence from one city to another. Petrarch’s travels took him mostly through the Italian peninsula, from Nice and Milan in the west to Venice in the east and to Naples in the south. He also traveled to Ghent and Liège, to Basel and Prague, and (twice) to Paris. Given the frequency of Petrarch’s travels, it is scarcely surprising that in the letters we find frequent descriptions of the road. He concludes a long letter, written in 1342 to the Friar Giovanni Colonna, with a description of an oneiric itinerary that leads from the River Aniene – outside the walls of Tivoli, Giovanni’s home – from river to river, with a quick dash through the Tyrrhenian Sea, and thence up “the Sorgue, the most peaceful of rivers” to reach “a spring second to none:” the riverbank at Petrarch’s home in Vacluse.<sup>16</sup> Giovanni suffers from gout, and making the journey by ship would be easy on his afflicted feet; the late medieval equivalent of Aladdin’s magic carpet, the ship would bring him painlessly to Petrarch’s side. Petrarch also writes often about the discomforts and indignities of travel, by land and by sea.

Images of the sea, of sailors and of ships at sea are a medieval rhetorical convention, of course, and they would become a quotidian conceit for the Petrarchists. But they are not among the most common in the *RVF*. Petrarch writes more often of his pen and paper as vehicles of thought, or of the laurel tree as a sign of poetic achievement and fame and as Laura’s doppelganger. Yet, although it is an image he uses relatively sparingly, the sea and the ship far from shore serve Petrarch well as a metaphor both for the stormy sea of love and for the turbulent sea of life.<sup>17</sup> The beautiful sonnet *Passa la nave mia*

16. *Familiars* 6.3.68: Petrarca, *Letters* 1: 312 and *Le Familiari* 2: 76.

17. On the image of the ship at sea in the *Canzoniere*, see Cachey, “From Shipwreck” and “Peregrinus.”

18. On the position of this poem in earlier versions of the *Canzoniere* see Wilkins, *The Making* 93 (for the pre-Chigi form) and 160 (for the Chigi form).

19. See Petrarca, *Le Rime* 377–78. Muratori worries particularly over the seaworthiness of Petrarch's vessel, which he reckons is constructed with "strumenti danosissimi" (378).

20. *Familiars* 1.1.21: Petrarca, *Letters* 1: 8 and *Le Familiari* 1: 7.

*colma d'oblio* (RVF 189), which in the earlier arrangements of the *Canzoniere* was the concluding poem of Part I of the collection, is one of his most focused and extended elaborations of the image of the ship at sea.<sup>18</sup> In this sonnet, the ship represents the lover himself. Love personified – Petrarch's 'enemy' – sits at the tiller of the ship. His tormented thoughts man the oars. Storms of sighs fill the sails, a constant rain of tears lashes the deck, and the lights of shore – Laura's eyes – hide themselves from the lover. The commentary tradition admires the elegance of the allegory but criticizes the sonnet on nautical grounds. Alessandro Tassoni points out that "sighs" might plausibly fill a sail, but not "hopes" and "desires," as Petrarch suggests. Muratori makes the eminently reasonable point that the storms of tears would not loosen the ropes, but rather make them tauter.<sup>19</sup> Petrarch uses technical vocabulary to satisfying emotional effect, but – as the commentators point out – his poetic ship might not prove seaworthy.

In his other writings, and in the letters in particular, Petrarch also deploys images of the sea, ships, travel by sea and sailors, to great poetic effect. And in the letters, naturally, these images tend to have an autobiographical dimension. The figure of Ulysses in particular appears a number of times in the letters. At the very beginning of the first collection of letters, the *Rerum familiarum libri*, Petrarch uses Ulysses as autobiographical self-representation:

Compare my wanderings to those of Ulysses. Though the reputation of our name and of our achievements be the same, he indeed traveled neither more nor farther than I.<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the *Familiars* to Petrarch's construction of his public image, and difficult to exaggerate the importance of the letters as stylistic model for the Humanists. The collection was the chief tool that Petrarch used to sculpt his public image, and a key text for the Latin prose of the Quattrocento. Some of the letters do reflect events in Petrarch's life. But scholars agree that all of them have been carefully crafted to reflect the image of himself that Petrarch wanted to leave for posterity. Thus it is fair to assume that Petrarch chose to compare himself to Ulysses at the beginning of the first letter of the collection for a reason.

Ulysses speaks to Petrarch firstly because Ulysses possessed a trans-historical literary glamour that Petrarch particularly admired. In his Greek incarnation – as Odysseus – he was the hero of an ancient epic. This epic was lost to Petrarch's contemporaries, because

Homer's *Odyssey* had not yet been translated into Latin – and he was all the more alluring for that. Later in his life, Petrarch (along with Boccaccio) would midwife Homer's rebirth into Latin by hiring a Calabrian Greek – the ill-fated Leontius Pilatus, to whom I will return later – to translate Homer. Secondly, Petrarch uses Ulysses as a self-representation for the reasons he gives in this passage: like Ulysses, he was a restless traveler. Petrarch was born to exile – his family was exiled from Florence shortly before his birth – and, and as his itinerary suggests, he seemed most comfortable on the road. He established a residence in various places throughout his life, but he had no long-term fixed home. He was a nomad; he was Ulysses.<sup>21</sup>

This being the case, it is all the more surprising to learn that in 1343, at the age of 39 (and just a year after writing the idyllic description of the riverine route from Tivoli to Vaucluse), Petrarch made a vow never again to travel by sea. Sea travel was fraught with dangers and uncertainty during the late Middle Ages. Yet it was the usual and the most convenient way to travel to most of the places Petrarch visited. He records in his letters the reason for his disgust with the sea. In 1343, he traveled from Avignon to Naples, acting as emissary from the Pope to the King of Naples. He and his entourage set sail from Nice and put in at Monaco for the night. Bad weather kept them in port on the next day. On the day after that they sailed, despite continuing unsettled weather. They were obliged to put in at Porto Maurizio, on the Ligurian coast. They reached land too late to enter the city, and had to sleep in a sailors' tavern. At this point, exasperated by the indignities of sea travel, he decided to go it by land, and bought horses. The party got stuck at the southern border of Lombardy; Milan and Pisa were at war, their armies encamped in the area. Once that hurdle was behind them, they took to sea from Lerici, traveling about 70 kilometers south along the coast to Pisa. From there, they rode to Rome and finally reached Naples.<sup>22</sup>

This trip – as grueling as it sounds – was not, however, what inspired Petrarch's vow never again to travel by sea. He makes this pronouncement in a letter he wrote soon after this one, a letter in which he describes a devastating storm that blew in from the sea, while he was in residence at Naples.<sup>23</sup> Petrarch clearly conceived this letter as a set piece; he describes it explicitly as such in the opening phrases, in which he mentions Juvenal and cites Juvenal's phrase, "a poetic tempest arose."<sup>24</sup> In the letter that follows, he gives a vivid and horrified account of the destruction and the human anguish caused by the storm. And he closes by vowing that he will never again travel by

21. On Petrarch's nomadism as moral conviction, see Pacca, *Petrarca* 82–83.

To students of Italian literature, there is much in this biographical profile that mirrors the life and works of Dante Alighieri. Dante was exiled from Florence in 1301, and Petrarch's father in 1302, by the same political faction. Dante traveled throughout northern Italy after his exile and ended his life in Ravenna, not far from Petrarch's last home in Arquà. Perhaps most importantly from the perspective of the literary record, Dante's Ulysses – whose biography differed in important ways from Homer's Odysseus – was the Ulysses that Petrarch knew, until Leontius' translation revealed to him what Homer had written.

22. *Familiars* 5.3: *Petrarca, Letters* 1: 232–37 and *Le Familiari* 2: 5–10.

23. *Familiars* 5.5: *Petrarca, Letters* 1: 243–48 and *Le Familiari* 2: 14–19.

24. Petrarch was fond of this phrase. He had used it already in a letter to Giovanni Colonna; *Familiars* 2.8.3: *Petrarca, Letters* 1: 98 and *Le Familiari* 1: 89. For other citations of this phrase in Petrarch's works, see Berra 658.

25. *Familiars* 5.5.21; Petrarca, *Letters*  
1: 248 and *Le Familiari* 2: 19.

sea: “since I was born on land,” he beseeches his correspondent, “permit me to die on land.”<sup>25</sup>

We know that the storm that Petrarch describes in this letter did occur. We have a corroborating account of it from the contemporary historian Giovanni Villani (3: 367). We also know that Petrarch persevered in his refusal to travel by sea. He refers to the fact in subsequent writings, using this excuse (for instance) fifteen years later (in 1358) to decline a friend’s invitation to accompany him on pilgrimage to the Holy Land (*Petrarch’s Guide* 1v–2r: Pr. 3–5; unnumbered pages). Yet there is a puzzle here, and it is typical of the questions that Petrarch’s biography raises for the historian. The two anecdotes I have just summarized – the journey from Avignon to Naples and the storm in Naples – are taken from Petrarch’s letters, which are, in many cases, the only biographical source we have. But is Petrarch a reliable narrator of his own life? Certainly he experienced discomfort at sea. This trip seems to have been particularly difficult. The image of the great poet, who had been crowned poet laureate by the Roman Senate the previous year, sleeping rough in a sailors’ tavern outside the city gates at Porto Maurizio is not easy to dismiss. Imagine the sailors driven to shore by that same storm with whom he would share this refuge: Frenchmen, Italians and Spaniards, Greeks and Saracens – the motley crew that manned the Mediterranean ships of the age, even (one presumes) the accommodating women there to meet their needs in port. Was it the horrors that he saw from a distance – the storm at sea, at once sublime and terrifying – that made Petrarch vow never to travel by ship again, as the authorized biography tells us? Or was it the indignity of the journey down, which he personally experienced? It is difficult to trust the answer that the letters give us. Certainly, given Petrarch’s long-standing refusal to travel by sea, the move that he made late in his life – one of his last displacements, in 1362 – is startling. For he must travel by ship in order to reach the city that became his home at the age of 58: Venice.

## Petrarch in Venice

Later in his life, Petrarch started to think seriously about the disposition of his library, and this is what brought him to Venice. The collection of books that he had amassed was at the time the largest private library in Europe; it was, in fact, the largest secular library of any kind – public or private – in Europe. The life of restless travel made

caring for a library of this magnitude difficult. When he brought books with him, he worried about their safety on the roads, where they were vulnerable to both bandits and the elements. And if he left them behind he must live without them. So he negotiated a deal with the *Maggior Consiglio* of Venice that granted him a house large enough for himself and his books, if he agreed to leave his books to the city for the creation of a public library – which would have been the first such library in Europe. He moved to Venice in September 1362, a year after his trip to France to celebrate the return of King Jean, and lived there until 1368, when he relocated to the mainland – a move which he first considered temporary. Over time, as his health began to fail, it became clear that he would not return to the city. And in time the books also moved to the mainland to join him. The visionary public library failed to materialize.<sup>26</sup>

26. On Petrarch's library, see Pastore Stocchi. The letter from the *Maggior Consiglio* in Venice accepting the donation of Petrarch's library and giving him in return a house in perpetuity has been published in *Petrarca: mostra di documenti* 20.

When he moved to Venice, Petrarch was not in the first bloom of youth, and the great works were behind him. Treatises like the *Secretum* and *De viris illustribus* had been begun and, in many cases, finished years earlier. He started writing the last of his great books, *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, in 1354, eight years before the move to Venice. During these late years, of course, he remained productive. The last period of sustained work on the *RVF*, the work that produced the *RVF* in the form we know it, began during the years of his residence in Venice. Giovanni Malpaghini, who had been working for Petrarch as copyist – he spent two years writing out the fair copy of the *Familiars* – started work on the final, fair copy of the *RVF* (the manuscript we know as BAV, Vat. Lat. 3195) in 1366. One year later, in 1367, Giovanni had a breakdown and refused to write any more (Wilkins, *Life* 205–06 and 208–11). Petrarch would take over the copying when Giovanni left his employment and would continue to edit and arrange the poems until the end of his life. Also during his Venetian residence, Petrarch received the long-awaited copy of Leontius Pilatus' Latin translation of the Homeric epics. Leontius, whom Boccaccio and Petrarch hired to translate the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, completed this work while living with Boccaccio in Florence, and Petrarch had to wait for Boccaccio to have a copy of Leontius' translations made before he could read the work himself. This reached him, finally, in 1366 (Wilkins, *Life* 207–08).

When he received these translations at the end of the year, they must have seemed to him like a message from beyond a watery grave – because in these Latin verses the long-dead Greek poet lived again and sang again, but also for a more lugubrious reason: because Le-

27. On Leontius Pilatus, in addition to Marilyn Desmond's wonderful essay, see also Pertusi's authoritative *Leontio Pilato fra Petrarca e Boccaccio*.

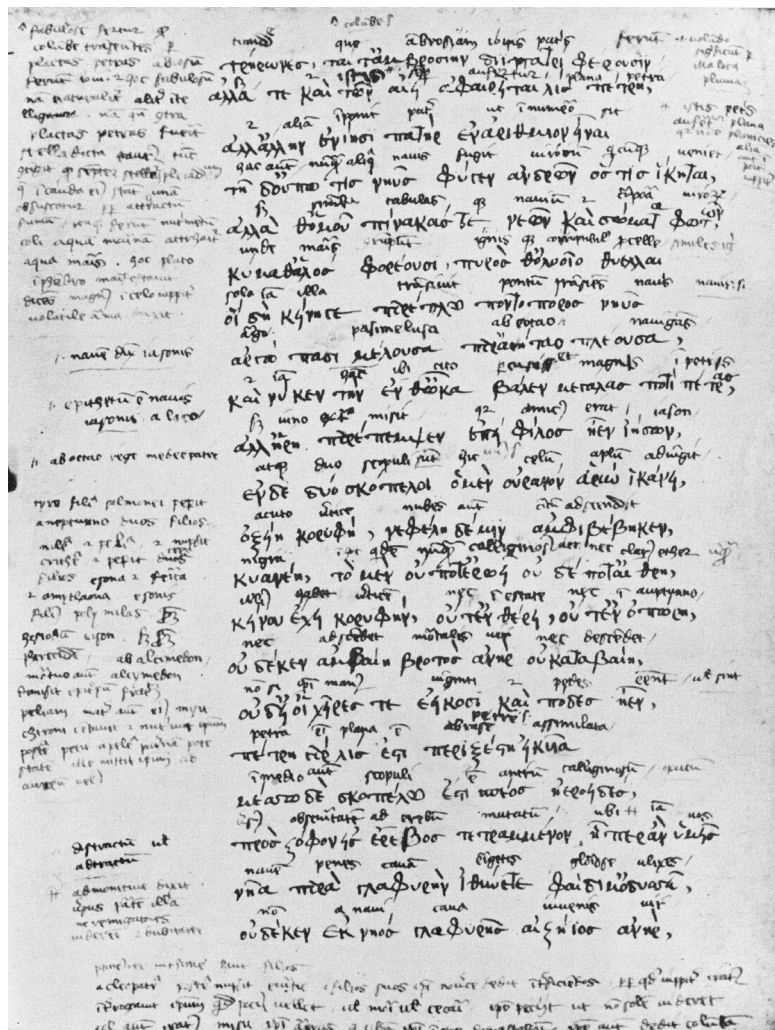
Plate 1: Venezia, BNM, cod. gr. IX 29, 154v, Hom. *Od.* XII, 63–83. Greek and Latin autograph of Leontius Pilatus.

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ontius, the man who brought Homer to life in Latin, had himself died at sea earlier in 1366. We know about Leontius' death because we have the letter that Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio describing his sad fate. Leontius, like Petrarch, was himself a bit of an Odysseus (as Marilyn Desmond describes him in a recent essay): a man who seemed at home nowhere, who traveled restlessly from city to city.<sup>27</sup> After finishing work on the translations of the Homeric epics, he conceived a desire to visit Constantinople. He came to Venice, where he stayed with Petrarch, and from there he set sail in 1363. On the return journey from Constantinople to Venice in 1366, just outside the Venetian harbor, Leontius' ship was caught in a sudden storm. It was struck by lightning, and Leontius – alone among those on the ship – died. Petrarch's letter to Boccaccio describes his death in detail and with the horror of one who himself suffers from fear of the sea. While the sailors ran about the ship attempting to keep it afloat, Leontius clung to the mast in fear, and the mast drew the lightning bolt that

killed him. Petrarch reports that Leontius' books were preserved by the sailors, who delivered them to him. And he hopes that among them might be found the volumes that he asked Leontius to bring back from Constantinople, copies of the works of Euripides and Plato (Petrarca, *Res seniles* 6.1: vol. 2: 112–17). It is not clear whether Leontius acquired the books and whether, if he did, Petrarch located them. Leontius' meager collection, like Petrarch's library, has been scattered or has vanished altogether.

However, several crucial manuscripts documenting Leontius' work for Petrarch and Boccaccio do remain in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana at Venice: the interlinear Greek and Latin texts that were Leontius' working drafts for the translation he made for Boccaccio and Petrarch (See Plate 1),



28. These manuscripts are Gr. IX 2 a (1447) – the Greek *Iliad* with interlinear Latin translation; Gr. IX 29 (1007) – the Greek *Odyssey* with interlinear Latin translation; and Lat. XII 23 (3946) – the Latin *Odyssey*. On this last manuscript, see Franceschini and Pertusi; and Pertusi 531–63. In fact, Petrarch seems to have studied the *Iliad*; he had it nicely bound and illuminated and annotated it himself (Pertusi 147–48). His copy of the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, is annotated only through f. 21 (*Odyssey* 2.242). A note in somebody else's hand explains that Petrarch died while the volume was being illuminated (Pertusi 152–53).

29. In fact, Boccaccio misunderstood Petrarch's request and sent him the description of the journey to the underworld when Petrarch was particularly interested in reading about the terrestrial point of access to the underworld; see *Res seniles* 5.1.33–35; vol. 2: 30–31.

as well as a fair copy of the Latin *Odyssey*.<sup>28</sup> Petrarch's own copies of Homer in Latin have ended up in Paris, and the precise relation of the Latin *Odyssey* now in Venice to Petrarch's is disputed, but it is clear that the Marciana *Odyssey* is an early copy of Leontius' translation. And, like the interlinear translations now in Venice, the Latin *Odyssey* was read, and was studied as a crucial resource by its early readers. There are abundant marginal notes in all the Marciana manuscripts – the interlinear translations and the Latin fair copy of the *Odyssey* – some in Humanist hands. These notes demonstrate that the texts continued to serve as reference works for centuries after they were created.

The interlinear translations in the bilingual Greek-Latin version of Homer's epics are, inevitably, rough – guidelines for a polished copy of the work. Even the handsome fair copy in the Marciana is in spots rocky going. As an example of the quality of these early translations, consider the prophecy about his own fate that Odysseus hears from Tiresias when he meets Tiresias in the underworld. We know that Petrarch had a special interest in this episode from the *Odyssey*. When he wrote to Boccaccio asking for copies of Leontius' translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he requested a quick advance copy of one passage in particular: the description of Odysseus's journey to the underworld.<sup>29</sup> He would find this passage toward the end of that episode. Here, Tiresias tells Odysseus that he will travel far from the sea, to a place where he meets a man who takes his row for a winnowing hoe, because he doesn't know the life of the sea and has never seen a ship. The translator, in this case, has never seen a winnowing hoe – at least not the Homeric Greek word for one – because he transliterates the Greek, rather than translating it (Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana (BNM), Lat. XII 23 [3946], 49r, l. 22 [*Odyssey* 11.128]):

alius palam Athiriligon habeat supra nitidum humerum  
(another man will openly have an Athiriligon upon his  
shining shoulder)

It is hard to imagine what Petrarch, who was himself an astute textual critic, made of this passage. Also baffling is Leontius' rendition of the crucial phrase from Tiresias's prophecy that tells Odysseus how death will finally reach him (BNM, Lat. XII 23 [3946], 49r, ll. 26–27 [*Odyssey* 11.133]):



Mors autem tibi a mare est infirma valde

(Death moreover, much enfeebled, comes to you from the sea)

Here Tiresias reassures Odysseus that his death will occur *far away* from the sea: the ceaseless wanderings that keep him from home will end, and he will die on land, among his people. These are glad tidings. Sailors fear no death more than drowning. Yet in late medieval Latin, the passage is ambiguous. The construction allows two meanings. And certainly a reader who maps Latin syntax and prepositions using an Italianate template – a reader, furthermore, primed by Dante’s Ulysses, who died *far from land* – might take the Latin to mean quite the opposite of what Homer’s Greek actually says. Leontius’ Latin suggests that grim, relentless death will leave its seabed to find Ulysses – no matter how far it must travel from its natural home, no matter how much the journey wears it down. For a late medieval audience to whom Dante’s Ulysses is closer than Homer’s and to whom Dante’s Italian is more proximate than classical Greek, this passage could be construed as a pronouncement of doom.

Leontius’ death touched Petrarch deeply. When Leontius died, Petrarch did not lose a dear friend and patron, as he did when Giacomo Colonna died in 1341. He did not lose the lodestar of his emotional and poetic life, as he did when Laura died in 1348. But he was a young man when Giacomo and Laura died, with a young man’s optimism and resilience. Leontius’ death occurred at the beginning of 1366, when Petrarch was 61 years old. And it obliged him to face the sea. Following Leontius’ death Petrarch must have had contact with the sailors whom he describes in the letter to Boccaccio; he must have sought them out or received them in his house. From them he acquired Leontius’ meager possessions and “squalid little books” (*squalentes libelli*), and from them he heard the story of Leontius’ terrible end (*Res seniles* 6.1.21: vol. 2: 116–17). Indeed, it would have been hard for Petrarch to avoid the sea from his house in Venice – situated in a prime location on the Canale di San Marco, midway between St. Mark’s square and the Arsenale, near the pier that was the port of entry to Venice during Petrarch’s life.<sup>30</sup> Petrarch’s house faced out onto the lagoon that opened into the Adriatic: one of the largest bodies of open water visible from the city of Venice, one of the busiest liquid highways of the Veneto.<sup>31</sup> The life of the sea was inescapable in Petrarch’s Venice; it lay directly outside Petrarch’s house, a visual and sonic constant in his life, woven indissolubly into the fabric of daily life. In Venice, even in church, one can be at sea. The Venetians – who

30. Petrarch lived at the Palazzo Molin, on the Riva degli Schiavoni. See Wilkins, *Petrarch’s Later Years* 42.

31. In one of the finest passages in the *Seniles*, Petrarch suspends a letter to describe the stirring sight of a ship setting sail in the middle of the night, as he witnessed it while composing the letter (to Francesco Bruni; see *Res seniles* 2.3.49–56: vol. 1: 156–57).

32. Two of these churches survive, with roofs framed like the hull of a ship: Santo Stefano and San Giacomo dell'Orto.

do not miss a trick – understood that the vaulted roof of a church could be constructed on the same principle as the hull of a ship.<sup>32</sup> And so, when you walk into a church in Venice, you might see above your head the ribs of a ship, as if you were a sailor on a ship inverted by the terrible winds of a storm like the one Petrarch described in Naples more than 20 years earlier. Venice was a city where – even at home, even at church – you were at sea: no refuge for a man who, fifteen years earlier, turned his back on the sea.

## Petrarch at Sea

Images of ships and of the sea are rare in the early poems of the *RVF*. In the first half of the collection descriptions of shores more typically refer to riverbanks, not the sea, and they are a setting for intimate, pastoral scenes. The quintessential shore in the first half of the *RVF* is the riverbank near Petrarch's house at Vacluse. When Petrarch talks about *journeys* in the early poems, they are typically journeys by land – as in the famous sonnet describing an old man's pilgrimage to Rome, *Movesi il vecchierel canuto et biancho*. Images of ships at sea begin to appear more frequently later in the *RVF*, and they regularly are used to represent Petrarch's journey both as a lover, traveling toward a port that represents union with Laura, and as a Christian, traveling toward a port that represents death and union with God. Sonnet 234, for instance, begins with a compact image in which the poet's bedroom is a *port* rocked by daily storms:<sup>33</sup>

O cameretta che già fosti un porto  
a le gravi tempeste mie diürne,  
fonte se' or di lagrime nocturne,  
che 'l dí celate per vergogna porto.

(O little room that once was a haven in the strong storms I  
suffered daily, now you are a fountain of nightly tears, which I  
carry during the day concealed in shame)

In the opening lines of sonnet 235, Petrarch acknowledges that he has been *importuno* (v. 4) with his haughty monarch (and at this point, we have no difficulty recognizing Laura in that description). The word *importuno* means 'unpleasant' or 'annoying.' In the context, however, it is tempting to see in it a false etymology, to assume that the poet is using the word to measure his distance from the port,

33. See *Canzoniere*, ed. Bettarini 2: 1073; *Canzoniere*, ed. Contini 296; *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata 969. The dominant themes of this sonnet are capably glossed by both Marco Santagata and Rosanna Bettarini: the "little room" is "emblematic of the closed place where the *Canzoniere* was written, its peace and its (poetic) storms" (*Canzoniere*, ed. Bettarini, 2: 1073). Both Bettarini and Santagata note Dante's reference to his room in the *Vita Nova* (*Canzoniere*, ed. Bettarini, 2: 1073 fn. 1; *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata, 969 fn. 1) along with other relevant passages from Petrarch's own works and from Scripture. I do not claim that the image of shipwreck is the most important note Petrarch strikes in this sonnet, nor is my reading intended to be exhaustive. On the contrary, I am pointing out a subtle but forceful theme in this sonnet (and the next).

where he will be reunited with Laura. And in the stanza that follows he compares himself to a sailor at sea, looking at the rocks that stand between him and the port, weighing the danger to himself and to the precious cargo his ship carries – his life, his soul, his love for Laura, her benevolence toward him; all these interpretations are possible. The word *porto* appears in prominent rhyme position in the opening lines of sonnet 234 (quoted above), at the end of verses 1 and 4 – the second time as a homonym, as the rules of prosody require (though spelled the same, it has a different meaning). *Porto* does not appear as a discrete word in sonnet 235, but is present as etymon from which the vocabulary of the poem is derived (*trasporta* [v. 1], *importuno* [v. 4], *porta* [v.13]). And it is central to the meaning of the poem, which represents the lover himself as “debile barcha” (“fragile boat,” v. 7), watchful and anxious as he is driven out to sea. By the end of sonnet 235 Petrarch has become both sea (stirred into horrible waves by sighs) and ship, “disarmata di vele et di governo” (“stripped of sails and rudder,” v. 14).<sup>34</sup>

34. See *Canzoniere*, ed. Bettarini 2: 1076; *Canzoniere*, ed. Contini 297; *Canzoniere*, ed. Santagata 972. Both Bettarini and Santagata connect 235 thematically with the preceding sonnet – Santagata observes that 235 “seems to refer to the same episode [as 234], a transgression with reference to Laura” – and point out that the rhyme schemes are identical in 234 and 235 (ABBA ABBA CDE CDE).

In sonnet 234, Petrarch gives us a tidy image of a ship threatened during a stormy night. In sonnet 235 this image fragments: it is at once intensified and abstracted. Is this phenomenon of fragmentation and intensification an example of ‘late style,’ as described by Adorno? In the essay “Late Style in Beethoven,” Adorno characterized the master’s late works, in contradistinction to the works of youth and maturity, as “ravaged [...] devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny” (564). The late compositions, he wrote, lack the harmony and sublime balance found in the works of youth and middle age. One might speculate that, in works created late in the master’s life, the spirit liberates itself from convention. Not so, Adorno writes: in the late works, “one finds formulas and phrases of convention scattered about” (565), fragments of form that float free of the structures that bind them in more conventional works of art. In early and mature works, we often hear the voice of self-discovery and self-celebration. However, according to Adorno, subjectivity does not strive to express itself in the late work. Rather, the sovereign voice of the subject sunders its relation to the work of art, leaving “only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself” (566). Rather than cohere into a sweet, unified work, these fragments of the sovereign self speak urgently of the dissolution of the self. Rather than depict a sweeping landscape, as the works of youth and maturity do, late works illuminate glimpses of a flinty terrain that are harsh, startling,

at times flaring into beauty, but without the measured harmony and balance of the early and mature works. “In the history of art,” Adorno concludes, “late works are the catastrophes” (567).

We know that sonnets 234 and 235 were incorporated into the *Canzoniere* during the last phases of work on the manuscript, despite the fact that they fall in Part I of the final manuscript. Recall that Giovanni Malpaghini started work on the manuscript we know as BAV, Vat. lat. 3195 in 1366, and he left Petrarch’s household following his breakdown in 1367 or 1368. At that point Petrarch took over the work of copying poems into the manuscript; the final poems in both sections of the *Canzoniere* were copied by Petrarch himself. These two sonnets, 234 and 235, appear in Part I. But because they come toward the end of Part I, they are written in Petrarch’s hand. According to Ernest Hatch Wilkins’s meticulous accounting of the subsequent phases of composition of the *RVF*, these two sonnets were incorporated into the manuscript between 1367 and 1372 (*The Making* 194: Table I). They may have been composed earlier; but even if Petrarch was reworking poems drafted long before, they were edited, perfected, and absorbed into the fair copy of the *RVF* relatively late in the process of composition. If there is a ‘late style’ in the *Canzoniere*, this would be a likely place to find it.

Is there a marked difference between the image of shipwreck in sonnets 234–35 and one that appears in a poem composed by Petrarch in youth or maturity – like, for instance, the shipwreck image discussed earlier in this essay from sonnet 189? In that poem, *Passa la nave mia colma d’oblio*, the self, like a sovereign ship of state, sails serenely toward its appointment with doom; and the metaphor too steers unerringly from the beginning of the poem to its end. The poem depicts catastrophe, but it does so confidently and unhesitatingly. The sonnet sequence 234–35, in contrast, starts with a glancing reference to the ship in peril. The ship sails through sonnet 235, but we catch sight of it only in fragments: a flinty shoreline flaring into beauty as flashes of lightning illuminate it. At times the image is so abstract that it is *ported* into phrases that have nothing to do with ships or with the sea – in the words etymologically related to the *porto* of sonnet 234. Sonnet 189 was present in the early redactions of the *Canzoniere*. In it, we should find the confident and masterful style of the poet in maturity. In the sonnet sequence 234–35, it seems, we have identified something else: the elegant coherence of the image that Petrarch crafted as a young man is exploded into fragments of conventional phrasing that compel, fascinate, even dazzle the read-

er, yet do not fuse into a compact and unified metaphor that illuminates the lover's pain (and, perhaps, reflects our own). Is this an example of what Adorno termed 'late style'?

Before responding to that question, I will add another hermeneutic layer to my interpretation of images of the sea, of sailors, of ships and shipwreck in the *RVF*. Shipwreck is a catastrophe. The *shipwreck metaphor* in a Petrarchan poem, however, is something different: a phenomenon which the twentieth century German philosopher Hans Blumenberg called, in his eponymous book, *Shipwreck with Spectator*. Blumenberg was the innovator of what he termed *metaphorology*: a philosophical approach in which the philosopher, rather than arguing from the philosophical canon to elaborate abstract ideas, studies the literary record of human efforts to make sense of life. More precisely, the philosopher uses one particularly quixotic linguistic behavior – the metaphor – to think about the perils of existence and the human response to them. In this book, Blumenberg works his way through a sequence of metaphorical shipwrecks observed by metaphorical spectators, from Greek antiquity to the twentieth century, and draws a series of conclusions about our ability to make aesthetic hay out of the catastrophe that is life.<sup>35</sup>

Each of the vignettes that I have described in this essay, drawn from Petrarch's life and work, is precisely a shipwreck observed by the same spectator. From the tavern in Porto Maurizio, on Petrarch's voyage from Avignon to Italy, to the storm in Naples to Leontius Pilatus' horrendous end; from the "nave colma d'oblio" of sonnet 189 to the "nave di merci preciose carcha" of sonnet 235 – in each of these episodes and each of these texts, sailors on ships come to ruin, and Petrarch observes and records. According to Blumenberg, the "shipwreck with spectator" metaphor may be used at times as a wedge to separate the observer from a distant, observed catastrophe. Typically, however, the metaphor puts the reader on board the ship, or at least emphasizes our affective connection to the sailor in distress. In most cases, thus, the metaphor allows us to reflect on the ethical problems posed by catastrophe. By the end of the book, though, in the last variation on the metaphor that Blumenberg discusses, the connotation of the metaphor has shifted. The sea remains a metaphor for life – which is standard in pre-modern metaphors involving sailors, ships and the sea, from philosophy to sermon literature to Petrarchan lyric – but the ship, in this case, represents language. We use language to analyze the world. On board the ship, in this life, we use language to build the metaphors that help us to make sense of the

35. Others before me have used Blumenberg to read the shipwrecks in particular and the travels and upheavals in general in Petrarch's life and works; see Cachey, "From Shipwreck" and "Peregrinus;" and Berra.

world, to aestheticize it and understand how to love it. Only when we reach port will we be able to look back at the stormy sea we have traversed and see it without recourse to the estranging hermeneutic filters, the languages and metaphors that buoyed us in life.

Blumenberg's extended discussion of the shipwreck metaphor encourages the reader to focus on the ethical dimension of Petrarch's use of the image of the ship, the affective connection between the observer on the shore and the unhappy sailor. I would like to use the final pages of Blumenberg's book, in which the ship becomes a metaphor for language as the vehicle that ferries us through this exilic life, to push my reading of the *RVF* one step further. Do Adorno's reflections on late work describe the late poems in the *RVF*, those that Petrarch himself copied into the manuscript? Or can we recognize here the *RVF* as a whole? After all, the attributes Adorno describes (fragmentation, stylization, sublime disregard for the sovereign self) seem typical of the *RVF* from beginning to end, to be found as much (for instance) in canzone 23, the first canzone of the collection – *Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade*, the canzone of the metamorphoses – as in the later shipwreck sonnets I have discussed here. Perhaps the *Canzoniere* itself, in its final form – which is, after all, the work of an old man, work that Petrarch undertook after life and Venice had had their way with him – is 'late work' for Petrarch.

I would like to propose that Adorno's formulation on 'late style' describes not only the late poems added to the *RVF*, not only the *RVF* as a whole, but Petrarch's attitude toward the Italian language itself. Three languages have played starring roles in this essay: Italian, Latin, and Greek. In his conflicted way, Petrarch longed to be able to read the Greek language. He studied classical Greek, but to no avail. And he had a life-long commitment to the Latin language, a language that he ardently loved. Leontius' Latin Homer, when it finally reached him, represented a consummation of that love: the language he most adored brought to him the epics he most desired.<sup>36</sup> And yet in his late work, Petrarch turned to a language that seemed to have scant appeal to him as literary instrument: to the meager, stumbling, ephemeral, immature, inexperienced, altogether inchoate Italian vernacular. I believe that we find something like Adorno's 'late style' in Petrarch's response to the antinomy of literary vernacular and Latin – each necessary to the other, yet each inimical to the other. His late work documents the catastrophic collapse of Latinity, its explosion into vernacular shards ("In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes"). In the *RVF*, we see a new and curious affection for this strange

36. In this light, it is interesting to note that Giovanni Malpighini – the copyist who wrote out the first two thirds of the *RVF* – returned to Petrarch's employment after his recovery from his breakdown and copied out the Latin text of the Homeric epics, although he did not again work on the *Canzoniere*; see Pertusi 38–39 and Pacca 241.

animal, the Italian language. The attentiveness to the music of the language, the joy in its lyric potential, the eagerness to watch it perform its arcane exercises without concern to create a coherent, unified monument that might speak to posterity: this is the wonder of the *Canzoniere*. Italian itself, in the *RVF*, is the ‘late style’ of *Latin*: vulgarities illuminated by the occasional flash of light in which we catch glimpses of the grandeur of the cosmopolitan language.

## Conclusion

In the anthropomorphic (or, more accurately, vitalistic) images often used to represent language history and literary history, the emergent vernacular literary histories of the late Middle Ages are typically represented as fledglings: young, vibrant, untried, experimental, curious, and yearning toward their own maturity. Certainly in other regional contexts, this dramatic template better represents what happened when a local vernacular pushed aside Latinity and stepped onto the stage of literary history. In the Italian context, however, the opposition between vernacular and Latin was more fraught – even incestuous (to continue the metaphor of familial descent). Latin was a local language. And Italian was not autonomous of it but was its shadow, its doppelganger, the pillow talk of Latinity. In fact, the Humanists’ first fumbling steps back toward vernacular culture took the form of a long debate over the spoken language of the ancient Romans. One position in this debate argued that Italian was no more than corrupt Latin, a form of the language that had decayed over the centuries. The other held that the vernacular was a sempiternal spoken code, co-extensive with the formal cosmopolitan language; modern linguists call such an opposition between the elite, written language and the popular register *diglossia*. And it was in the context of these debates that the metaphor of the *living language* – and by extension its shadow, the *dead language*: in this case, classical Latin – was first coined.<sup>37</sup> Thus did the homely vernacular turn the tables on Latin: once seen as the rubble of Latinity, in this metaphorical sleight of hand it raised its lovely, willful, youthful head and overthrew the hegemonic language of the literary past – Latin, a language newly discovered to be long dead.

In this essay I have tried to capture another perspective on the relationship between Latin and emergent Italian by viewing it not as an oedipal struggle between hoary ancestor and headstrong youth

37. On the notion of the vernacular as ‘living language,’ see Faithfull. For an overview of the debates regarding Latinity and the status of the vernacular with editions of relevant texts, see Tavoni.

38. I should point out that Edward Said wrote a book on 'late style' – which, sadly, was published only posthumously. If I have relied on Adorno rather than Said in this essay, it is primarily because I find the poetic condensation of Adorno's essay suggestive. In part, too, I turn to Adorno rather than Said because in *On Late Style*, Said seems mainly interested in (literary and musical) mannerism, and because he grounds his discussion explicitly in biographical criticism – relating it first and foremost to the body (3–4) and to his own critical oeuvre, in particular his early career book, *Beginnings* (4–5). Adorno wrote explicitly that his comments on 'late style' were meant to work against "subjectivist methodology" and biographical criticism (565–66). My reading of Petrarch too has used the work to illuminate the biography, and vice versa – but I hope to resist the temptation to see the work as gloss on the life, or vice versa.

but rather as something less agonistic. Was the vernacular noodling at the end of his life a retreat for Petrarch into the spoken murmurings of his youth, or an advance into new, uncharted territory – an attempt (as it is often read) to overtake Dante? Or did Petrarch move toward the vernacular because, at long last, he no longer thought about legacy (as second term American presidents call it) or about literary futurity? The *Trionfi* – the other vernacular work of his maturity – do not invite this reading. In the *RVF* alone, it seems, we catch a glimpse of Petrarch at play in the fields of language. "Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art," Adorno wrote in his essay on 'late style' (566).<sup>38</sup> He uses this distinction to argue against the autobiographical criticism that sees late works as the truest and purest expressions of subjectivity. For Adorno, Beethoven's 'late style' is sublimely uninterested in subjectivity, and instead immerses itself in form: "conventions find expression as the naked representation of themselves" (566). So too, one could argue, in the *Canzoniere* Italian no longer competes with Latin, but performs its poetic maneuvers in the dark – in the shadow of Latinity, if you like, but really only for the pleasure of its maker.

There is sweetness in the *Canzoniere*, of course, as there is sweetness in late Beethoven and in the late work of other masters (I think especially of late Titian): here I disagree with Adorno. But it is a music created by a master in colloquy with his medium, with the mistress of the art to which he has devoted his working life. Laura is long gone; the riverbank at Vacluse is a distant memory; Petrarch sits (like the sailors in Blumenberg's *Shipwreck with Spectator*) in a small, frail bark on the fretful sea of language. In the *RVF*, Petrarch writes *in* Italian and *for* Italian; he treats the medium of the Italian language as the late work of Latin. The *RVF* is not a new departure or a fresh start but rather a long look back at cosmopolitan eloquence: a mis-sive from a boat sailing swiftly for another shore; a long goodbye, as Raymond Chandler called it, in his vernacular masterpiece. Other masters of the new vernacular arts – Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, or Chaucer, for instance – did not use their own vernaculars this way, because of poetic sensibility but also because for them the line between vernacular and cosmopolitan language was not labile and gossamer-thin, as it was in the Italian context. So I suspect, at least. Then again, maybe I am blinded by my own affection for Italian: the poetic language which I love and to which I have devoted my professional life, as if it were a cosmopolitan language rather than



(merely) the territorially and historically bounded tongue of a modern nation-state.

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