



## REVISITING THE *SECRETUM*: LINEARITY AND CIRCULARITY IN PETRARCH'S DIALOGUE

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*Nam in omni sermone, gravi presertim et ambiguo, non tam quid dicatur, quam quid non dicatur attendendum est.*

Francesco Petrarca: *Secretum*, III. 188.

### Introduction

The *Secretum* is one of the most researched Latin works of Francesco Petrarca. At the same time it has incited the most contradictory interpretations. One group of scholars has applied the “biographical approach,” trying to use the *Secretum* to gain information from Petrarca’s text concerning his life, or, vice versa, trying to understand his work on the basis of what they supposed they knew about his life. They did not take into consideration the fictional character of the text. The other way to approach Petrarca’s work has been to treat it as literature, that is, to analyze it by finding the literary context and embedding it into different literary traditions.

One aspect of the work has been neglected by the latter studies: They have not questioned the purpose of the text. Whenever the question of this purpose has been asked and analyzed, it has been by scholars practicing the “biographical approach,” that is, by those who identified the narrator’s avowed purpose with Petrarca’s original aim with no reservations.

Both the “biographical” and the “literary” approaches have their shortcomings concerning the question of the *Secretum*’s aim. The “literary approach” does not consider it at all and the “biographical approach” has tried to answer it based on a credulous reading of the text.

In the present analysis I want to offer a new and different approach to the *Secretum*, claiming that the question about its purpose has to be seen as fundamental.<sup>1</sup> “There can be no motiveless creation....There can be no expression without an origin and an object, a from and a for.”<sup>2</sup> My analysis aims

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<sup>1</sup> This article is extracted from my MA thesis, “Revisiting the *Secretum*: Linearity and Circularity in Petrarca’s Dialogue,” (Central European University, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations, The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 12.



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at finding the “from and the for” of the *Secretum*: its purpose and possible audience, which was evidently closely related to the question of the purpose.

In my examination, two approaches are applied to the text: Firstly, I close-read the dialogue on the basis of a distinction between its author and the narrator. Here, I will analyze the narrative strategies of the *Secretum* and its possible readings suggested by these strategies. Secondly, I place my analysis into the context of the contemporary reception of the work. By analyzing examples of the contemporary reading of the text, I provide evidence for the tenability of my reading.

### **Linear and Circular Reading/Re-reading of the *Secretum* as a Description of *Franciscus*' Dream**

#### *1. The linear and the circular readings on the level of the narrative strategies*

When examining narrative strategies, one has to pose the following questions: How does the text present itself? How do these strategies reveal the author to his readers? What makes these strategies special and what do they say about the author's position in the text? What can be understood from them about the author's intention?

In my interpretation, the text suggests two parallel readings that contradict each other. One, which I will hereafter call the linear reading of the dialogue, is the reading suggested by *Franciscus*,<sup>3</sup> the narrator of the text. Based on this reading, the *Secretum* is the written form of the essence of a conversation between *Franciscus* and *Augustinus* in the silent presence of *Veritas*, who appeared in order to help him, seeing that he is ill with *acedia*. According to *Franciscus*' description in the *Probemium*, *Veritas* appeared to the narrator while he was awake, not in his dream:

*...contigit nuper ut non, sicut egros animos solet, somnus opprimeret, sed anxium atque pervigilem mulier quedam inenarrabilis etatis et luminis, formaque non satis ab hominibus intellecta, incertum quibus viis adiisse videretur.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In order to make a distinction between the fictitious characters of the dialogue and the “real” persons I will use italics for the former ones.

<sup>4</sup> In my work I have used the bilingual (Latin and Italian) edition of Fenzi, provided with an abundant commentary and an informative introduction: Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum*, ed. Enrico Fenzi, (Milan: Mursia, 1992) (hereafter: *Secr.*). When quoting Latin texts, I will use spelling according to the editions used. Since, for quoting the text, the secondary literature on the *Secretum* generally follows the page numbers of the edition by Carrara, given also in the edition of Fenzi, I will use both of them for quoting the text,



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He puts the essence of the conversation in writing in order to have the possibility of re-reading it when he needs the advice given by *Augustinus*. I call the interpretation suggested by *Franciscus* "linear," because if one accepts his description of the genesis of the dialogue, one reads the *Secretum* as an apparition seen awake, which can be seen as something that might help *Franciscus*' healing. In this case one treats the plot of the work as linear. Despite the ambiguity of the end of the dialogue, by accepting *Franciscus*' interpretation one accepts the possibility of being healed of *acedia*. Consequently, the linear reading is at the same time optimistic. The secondary literature and the commentary on the text trust this statement of *Franciscus*, concluding from it that Petrarch, by emphasizing that *Franciscus* was awake, wanted to break with the tradition of the *visio* literature. Rico<sup>5</sup> states that Petrarch's distancing himself from the vision literature serves to render the description of the meeting with *Augustinus* and *Veritas* more vivid. Mercuri argues for connections between the *Secretum* and *Divina Commedia*. In his opinion, the aim of the allusions in the *Secretum* to *Divina Commedia* is on the one hand Petrarch connecting himself to that literary tradition. On the other hand, the emphasis on *Franciscus* being awake when *Veritas* and *Augustinus* appeared, as opposed to Dante's vision setting, is part of Petrarch distancing himself from Dante.

Both studies, by attributing different functions to the emphasis on *Franciscus* being awake, accept *Franciscus* as a reliable narrator of the text. This implies that Petrarch's intention is for his readers to read the *Secretum* as a description of something that happened to *Franciscus* while he was awake. In contrast to this opinion, I would like to propose another possible reading of the text that I call the circular reading.

Besides the reading suggested by *Franciscus*, the narrator of the text, another reading is suggested by Petrarch, the author of the text.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion,

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first the page numbers of the Fenzi edition and then those of the Carrara edition. For the English translation I will use the translation by Davy A. Carozza and H. James Shey, *Petrarch's Secretum with Introduction, Notes and Critical Anthology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) (hereafter: *Transl.*). *Secr.* 94, 22, "Recently... I did not give way to sleep as depressed people tend to do, but rather found myself tense and wide awake. To my astonishment, a woman seemed to stand before me. I do not know how she came to be there, and I cannot describe her youthful radiance nor her beauty, which corresponds only imperfectly to anything in human experience." *Transl.* 37.

<sup>5</sup> Francisco Rico, *Vida u obra de Petrarca. I. Lectura del Secretum* (Padua: Antenore, 1974), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Since the *Secretum* is clearly not a factual narration, but fiction (an "autofiction"), one has to distinguish between the author and the narrator, even if the text itself induces the reader to do the opposite.



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at some points in the dialogue he uses a narrative strategy that creates an ironical distance between himself and *Franciscus*, who turns out to be an unreliable narrator. Below, I will analyze the parts of the text that make the reader mistrustful of the narrator's veracity, in other words, the elements of the text which can be seen as a tool that creates an ironical distance between himself and *Franciscus*.

a. *Franciscus*' egritudo

The first element is *Franciscus*' illness. The narrator appears in the dialogue as a sick person who is to be cured. That is the reason why he needs help and why the other two characters in the dialogue visit him: *...nec te latet quam periculosa et longa egritudine tentus sit,*<sup>7</sup> *Veritas* says to *Augustinus* about *Franciscus*. This illness is called *acedia* later in the text: *Habet te funesta quedam pestis animi, quam acediam moderni, veteres egritudinem dixerunt.*<sup>8</sup> The symptoms of this illness are the same as those of the sick person in Boethius' *De consolatione Philosophiae*.<sup>9</sup> The senses of the patient become dull; his eyes cannot tolerate light, thus, one of the signs of his recovery is that his eyesight becomes clear again. Another important symptom of *acedia* is the memory becoming dull; this symptom is emphasized the most in the dialogue. *Franciscus* forgets everything, including his readings and even the fact that he is a mortal: *An non te mortalem esse meministi?*<sup>10</sup> *Augustinus* asks him. The process of curing basically consists of making *Franciscus* remember what he already knew but forgot because of his illness. Two other symptoms of *acedia* are the most relevant for the question examined here. One is that the patient always falls asleep. The connection between *Franciscus*' egritudo and this lethargy is also made clear by the passage of the *Prohemium* quoted above (*non, sicut egros animos solet, somnus opprimeret.*) *Augustinus* also makes an allusion to this symptom in the very beginning of the first book, by accosting *Franciscus* with these words: *quid somnias?*<sup>11</sup> The other effect accompanying *acedia*, the most

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<sup>7</sup> *Secr.* 96, 24, "...you are aware that he is the victim of a long and serious illness." *Transl.* 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Secr.* 176, 106, "You are plagued by a disease of the mind, which we moderns call melancholy and the ancients called egritudo." *Transl.* 84.

<sup>9</sup> For Boethius' description of the symptoms of this illness see the study of Wolfgang Schmid, "Philosophisches und Medizinisches in der *Consolatio* des Boethius," in *Festschrift Bruno Snell. Zum 60. Geburtstag am 18. Juni 1956 von Freunden und Schülern überreicht* (München: Beck, 1956), 113–144.

<sup>10</sup> *Secr.* 100, 28, "Or have you forgotten that you will die?" *Transl.* 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Secr.* 100, 28, (the translation in this case has to be corrected) "What are you daydreaming about?"



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dangerous of all the symptoms, is that the patient believes himself to be healthy. *Veritas*, says to *Augustinus* about *Franciscus*' illness: ...*que eo propinquior morti est quo eger ipse a proprii morbi cognitione remotior*,<sup>12</sup> and later: ...*te ipse decipias*.<sup>13</sup>

The narrator, who states that he was awake during the visit of *Veritas* and *Augustinus*, has an illness of which the two most important symptoms are lethargy and the fact that the patient does not have any consciousness of being ill. This aspect could make the reader hesitate whether to trust *Franciscus* or not.

### *b. The Secretum as visum, oraculum or insomnium*

That interpreting the *Secretum* as a dream description is a valid reading of the text is supported by an analysis of the connections between the terminology used by Petrarch and the terminology of Classical dream literature. The most relevant text in this regard is Macrobius' presentation of the various kinds of dreams in the first book of his commentaries on *Somnium Scipionis*. Here he creates five groups of dreams; one of the five categories is the group called *visum*. These dreams appear in a state between sleep and waking, showing figures of unusual size and shape. One of the characteristics of this kind of dream is that the dreaming person thinks he is awake: ...*in quadam, ut aiunt, prima somni nebula adhuc se vigilare aestimans, qui dormire vix coepit aspicere videtur irruentes in se vel passim vagantes formas*.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, a state does exist in the Classical tradition—known by Petrarch—in which the dreamer thinks he is awake. This seems to be the state in which *Franciscus*' was found.

In Macrobius' typology an *oraculum* is another kind of dream which can be taken into consideration in interpreting the dialogue. It is not a strange idea in the Macrobian system to connect a dream to more than one type, because the Classical author also, writing about the dream of Scipio, connects it to several kinds of dreams, that is, to *oraculum*, *visio*, and *somnium*. The *oraculum* is a dream in which a parent or another respectable figure, such as a god or a priest, gives advice with regard to what the dreamer should or should not do in the future. *Franciscus*' dream—with the divine figure of *Veritas* and with *Augustinus*, who comes to *Franciscus* in order to help him come out of his crisis, also corresponds to this condition. The third type that can be applied to *Secretum* is the *insomnium*, in which the dreamer sees things that attracted his attention when he was awake. This can also be true for *Franciscus*, who, before the visit of *Veritas* and *Augus-*

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<sup>12</sup> *Secr.* 96, 26, "Ironically, the nearer he draws to death, the less aware he is of his own disease." *Transl.* 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Secr.* 100, 28, "You ... are deceiving yourself." *Transl.* 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius. *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*. Ed. Jakob Willis (Leipzig: Bibliotheca Teubneriana, 1970), I. 3, 7.



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*tinus*, was thinking about the questions treated later in the conversation. It says in the sentence describing the setting of the dialogue: ...*et sepissime cogitanti qualiter in hanc vitam intrassem, qualiterve forem egressurus...*<sup>15</sup>

Reviewing the Macrobian types of dreams applicable to the setting of *Secretum*, one can conclude that the dialogue can be read as a dream in three ways: two of these types are deceptive dreams (*insomnium* and *visum*), which according to Macrobius are not worth interpreting, and one appertains to true dreams, the *oraculum*. The fact that there are two false dreams among these types should not make readers hesitate regarding the possibility of interpretation because in the parallel case of the interpretation of Scipio's dream the possibility that it could be seen as a false dream did not constitute an impediment to the interpretability of the dream. Unraveling the intertextual web of the dialogue, I will examine some other elements of the text which make this reading even more convincing.

c. "O quam te memorem virgo?" Veritas-Venus: Franciscus' love

*Franciscus*, upon seeing *Veritas*, does not recognize her at first sight and asks who she is. He accosts her saying: *o quam te memorem virgo? Namque haud tibi vultus/mortalis, nec vox hominem sonat.*<sup>16</sup> *Franciscus* quotes here Virgil's *Aeneid*, the most frequently quoted text in the dialogue. According to Mercuri,<sup>17</sup> this quoting of Virgil in describing the visit of *Veritas* and *Augustinus* alludes to the way Dante uses Virgil as a guide in his *Divina Commedia*, and thus *Franciscus*' meeting with *Veritas* and *Augustinus* can be seen as the counterpart of Dante's journey in the hereafter. In my opinion, one should not settle for stating the fact that the quotation is from Virgil. By examining the original context of these verses one can enrich the interpretation of this scene with a new element, which may have implications that are relevant for my reading of the *Secretum*.

The original context of Virgil's verses is the first book of the *Aeneid* (327–328) is in the scene when *Aeneas* meets *Venus* in Carthage. *Venus* appears to her son as a Spartan virgin, telling him the history of Carthage and foretelling the return of his fellows. *Aeneas* notices only at the last minute that it was his mother who spoke to him. He lashes out at her with bitter words (*falsis ludis*

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<sup>15</sup> *Secr.* 94, 22, (I had to change the translation slightly) "While absorbed in thoughts about how I came into existence and how I shall pass out of it..."

<sup>16</sup> *Secr.* 94, 22, "Tell me, maiden, what name to call you by./Your appearance and speech are not those of a human." *Transl.* 37.

<sup>17</sup> Roberto Mercuri, "Genesi della tradizione letteraria italiana in Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio," in *Letteratura Italiana, Storia e Geografia. I. L'eta medievale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1987), 229–455, 335.



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*imaginibus*, I. 407–408) because of her always appearing to him in disguise. In the original context, the verses were used for accosting a deceptive apparition, that is, an apparition that seems to be something other than what it really is. The ideal erudite reader of Petrarch's text was likely to think of this original context of the cited verses; consequently, this connotation of deceptiveness had to infiltrate into his reading. The parallelism between the two contexts, the original and the new context in the *Secretum*, is the other fact supporting the assumption that the reader when reading this citation has to draw the original context into his reading as well. The two contexts seem to be similar: in both an authoritative female figure gives advice to the protagonist.

Another detail of the original scene that has to be emphasized is that the goddess accosted by *Aeneas* is *Venus*. The third book of the *Secretum* deals with human weakness, the two bonds hindering *Franciscus* in recovery: *amor* and *gloria*. *Fr. Quenam sunt quas memoras catbene? A: Amor et gloria.*<sup>18</sup> These are the two chains binding *Franciscus* to earth, impeding him in taking care of the things concerning his soul and leading to salvation. The conversation with *Augustinus* in the presence of *Veritas* essentially serves to help *Franciscus* rid himself of these chains. Keeping this in mind, it seems confusing that *Franciscus* accosts *Veritas*, whose aim is to help him to get out of the snare of *Venus*, with the very words used in the *Aeneid* for accosting the same *Venus*.

Furthermore, the *Probemium* is not the only passage in the *Secretum* where this scene from the *Aeneid* appears in the text. In the part of the third book mentioned above, *Augustinus* is trying to convince *Franciscus* that he should get rid of the chains binding him to the love of earthly things, arguing that *Franciscus* should also forget his love for a mortal woman. When *Franciscus* justifies his love by pleading her virtues, *Augustinus* answers that the fact that the subject of his love is virtuous does not make any difference to the vanity of his feelings. In his answer he uses irony: *nihil enim adversabor: sit regina, sit sancta, dea certe an Phoebi soror, an nympharum sanguinis una.*<sup>19</sup> The second part of *Augustinus*' answer (*dea certe...*) is a continuation of the passage cited in the *Probemium*.<sup>20</sup> This strict fitting of the two quotations to each other cannot be accidental; it has to have a

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<sup>18</sup> *Secr.* 202, 132, "Fr: What are the chains you are talking about? A: Love and glory." *Transl.* 102.

<sup>19</sup> *Secr.* 210, 142, "I have no objections. Let her be a queen, a saint, a goddess, or a sister of Apollo, or one of the nymphs." *Transl.* 107.

<sup>20</sup> The whole passage of the *Aeneid* is: "o quam te memorem, virgo? Namque haud tibi vultus/ mortalis, nec vox hominem sonat, o, dea certe/ an Phoebi soror? An Nympharum sanguinis una?" It means that *Augustinus* continues the quotation exactly where *Franciscus* ended it, omitting only the "o".



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function in the text. Petrarch's using the same passage of the *Aeneid* for both accosting *Veritas* and speaking about his love is another phenomenon making the reader hesitate over the identity of the woman who appeared to *Franciscus* in the beginning of the work and aroused some doubts already at her entry. The reader no longer knows who she is. Is she really *Veritas*, as suggested by *Franciscus*, or *Venus*, or even *Franciscus*' love?

## 2. *The linear and circular readings on the level of the content*

Accepting the statement of Victoria Kahn,<sup>21</sup> who argues that the main topic of the dialogue is the question of reading, one has to analyze in what exactly the teaching about reading, advanced in the *Secretum*, consists. The possibility of a double reading of the dialogue, besides on the level of the narrative strategies, also appears on the level of the content of the text, meaning that the representation of reading can also be interpreted in both the linear and the circular ways. The two parallel and at the same time clashing representations of reading appear on two different levels of the text. The linear interpretation is presented in the text *expressis verbis*, in the statements of the characters, that is, on the level of what the text says, while the circular interpretation is present on the level of what the text is, how it functions, how it presents itself as text.

### a. *The linear interpretation of reading*

According to *Augustinus*, one of *Franciscus*' main problems is that he does not remember well the things he has already read. Consequently, the moral problem turns out to be a problem concerning the right way of reading, or the other way round, the question of reading turns out to be a moral question. The reminders by *Augustinus* of the things *Franciscus* has already read serve as the organizing principle of the dialogue. Let me quote some examples to illustrate the pervasiveness of this strategy: *Legis semper ista sed negligis*,<sup>22</sup> says *Augustinus* to *Franciscus*, speaking about a quotation from Horace. Another typical example for the Augustinian reproach about *Franciscus*' forgetfulness of his reading: *Lectio autem ista quid profuit? Ex multis enim, que legisti, quantum est quod inbeserit animo...*?<sup>23</sup>

But the detailed discussions concerning the topic of reading are even more telling than these seemingly only accidentally dropped remarks. Discussing the

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<sup>21</sup> Victoria Kahn, "The Figure of the Reader in Petrarch's *Secretum*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 100 (1985): 154–166.

<sup>22</sup> *Secr.* 156, 82, "You read such things often enough, but ignore them." *Transl.* 72.

<sup>23</sup> *Secr.* 144, 72, "As for reading, what is the use of that? Out of all that you have read, how much has really stayed in your mind?" *Transl.* 66.



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act of reading, *Augustinus* warns his disciple that what he reads should become real knowledge and not be forgotten.

*Quotiens legenti salutare se se offerunt sententiae, quibus vel excitari sentis animum vel frenari, noli viribus ingenii fidere, sed illas in memoriae penetralibus absconde multoque studio tibi familiares effice ut, quod experti solent medici, quocumque loco vel tempore dilationis impatiens morbus invaserit, velut in animo conscripta remedia.*<sup>24</sup>

According to *Augustinus*' teaching in the *Secretum*, reading can help one become what one has to become; it can serve as a remedy against *acedia*. This optimistic notion of reading can be seen as a linear view, since in this interpretation it leads the reader toward a goal. It is possible to recover, and it is possible through reading itself.

### *b. The Circular Interpretation of Reading*

The significance of the passage quoted above is underscored by the *Prohemium*, where the text provides a description of the fictional situation which eventually gave rise to the writing of the book one is about to read. Here the goal of writing this dialogue is identified as remembering the essence of the conversation that took place between *Franciscus* and *Augustinus*.

*Ubi multa licet adversus seculi nostri mores, deque communibus mortalium piaculis dicta sint, ea tamen quibus ipse notatus sum, memoriae altius impressi.*<sup>25</sup>

And further:

*Tuque ideo libelle, conventus hominum fugiens mecum mansisse contentus eris, nominis proprii non immemor. Secretum enim meum es et diceris, michique in*

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<sup>24</sup> *Secr.* 192, 122, "As often as you come across any beneficial ideas in your reading, by which your spirit is roused and enthralled, do not merely trust to the power of your intelligence, but commit them carefully to memory and make them familiar to you by intensive study. In that way of an experienced doctor who has ready remedies whenever a disease strikes which needs immediate attention, you too would have the remedy written in your mind." *Transl.* 93.

<sup>25</sup> *Secr.* 98, 26, "Much criticism was spoken against the behavior of our age and against the common failings of men in general. It seemed that the whole human race was being reproached, rather than me alone. I well remember, however, the charges lodged against me in particular. I decided to set down in writing this intimate conversation so as not to forget its details, and the result is this little book." *Transl.* 39.



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*altioribus occupato, ut unumquodque in abdito dictum meministi, in abdito memorabis.*<sup>26</sup>

If one compares this passage to *Augustinus'* teaching on reading in the dialogue, that *Franciscus* should learn how to relate what he reads to himself, that he should remember the most important messages with the aid of some signs, one can see that the *Secretum* is not merely the transcription of the conversation, it is itself the application of *Augustinus'* teaching. Consequently, the writing of the *Secretum* can be interpreted as rereading from *Franciscus'* readings, as a selection with commentaries on his most important readings. Writing as rereading: this is the circular interpretation of the function of reading, suggested not by what the text *says* (as in the case of the linear interpretation), but by what the text *is*: the scheme of the dialogue consists of quotations from *Franciscus'* former readings. In the circular interpretation, the writing of the *Secretum* turns out to be reading, the rereading of texts of from the past. One reads in order to write, and writing becomes reading. Reading and writing do not have any moral function; they cannot help anyone to recover; they are to be seen as an autotelic process. This despair is reflected at the end of the dialogue by *Augustinus'* remark on *Franciscus'* attitude, when *Augustinus* says that they arrived at the same point where they started their conversation:<sup>27</sup> *In antiquam litem relabimur, voluntatem impotentiam vocas.*<sup>28</sup>

### Reading the *Secretum* and its Purpose in the Context of its Contemporary Reception

In this part of my analysis I attempt to reveal Petrarch's possible purpose in the *Secretum* by contextualizing the double reading that I offer. The context I will examine is the contemporary reception of the *Secretum*. I attempt to find answers to the following questions: What might the meaning be of the paradox of the

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<sup>26</sup> *Secr.* 98, 26. This little volume, therefore, is not intended for wide circulation, but will remain among my private papers, in keeping this title. For it is a private conversation, and so shall be called. When I find myself preoccupied with the more profound problems of human existence, I shall have a faithful record to recall to my mind what was said in that conversation. *Transl.* 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Augustinus* started his teaching with the anti-augustinian, or Pelagian, doctrine about the human will. According to this anti-augustinian teaching of the fictitious *Augustinus*, *Franciscus'* problem is that he does not really want to change, because if he wanted to he could.

<sup>28</sup> *Secr.* 282, 214, "We are slipping back into an old argument." *Transl.* 144.



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two clashing readings? What could the rational basis be for an author to write a text having two interpretations that undermine each other's validity?

Having argued for a double reading of the *Secretum*, one has to face the question of its validity. How can the reader be certain that his or her reading is not an overinterpretation of the text?

An analysis of the contemporary reception of the dialogue is a useful aid that may help to justify the reading proposed by the present analysis. One can never be sure about being right in a reading; the maximum to be sought is a possible reading. In my work, I try to combine both sides of the interpretation, first focusing on what the text says, that is, what can be seen as the intention of the text, and second, what can one learn about the dialogue by examining its contemporary reception. The contemporary reception has a special significance in the history of the reception of a work because it can help to reconstruct the ideal reader of the work, that is, a reader with the same *Erwartungshorizont* as the author had, whom the author might have had in mind while writing. Could the text be understood when it was written as one tries to interpret it now?

Examining the contemporary and almost contemporary receptions of the *Secretum*,<sup>29</sup> one can find examples of both interpretations. Billanovich cites evidence for the fact that the *Secretum* was read in the monastic ambience. It was used, together with *De Otio religioso*, *Sine nomine*, and *Salmi penitentiali* as a text for pious meditations.<sup>30</sup> Billanovich summarizes the popularity of Petrarch's works as texts stimulating meditation by stating that their author had a similar role in the spiritual development of his readers as *Augustinus* had.<sup>31</sup> He also quotes a brief summary of the *Secretum* by Vespasiano Bisticci, who writes about the dialogue when discussing about the conversion of Francesco da Legname:

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<sup>29</sup> As the present work's aim was not to analyze the reception of the dialogue, my source for this part of my analysis is the secondary literature on the question. Since there is no detailed overview on the question (works about Petrarch's reception concentrate almost exclusively on the reception of *Canzoniere*) I have to rely on the sparsely dropped remarks in the literature on the question. The most informative book in this respect is Giuseppe Billanovich, *Petrarca letterato*, I. *Lo scrittoio del Petrarca*. (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1947), (hereafter: *Petr. Lett.*) and especially the chapter *Da Padova all'Europa*, 297–419. In general, questions on the dialogue's reception can be summarized as: it has been a question for a long time whether it was known in the life of Petrarch. As a consequence, most of the studies do not pay attention to the contemporary reception of the dialogue.

<sup>30</sup> Billanovich, *Petr. Lett.* 372–379.

<sup>31</sup> "...il maestro Petrarca estende per decenni dopo la morte la sua opera di direttore di coscienza, o addirittura, come egli si era proposto, di minore sant'Agostino," Billanovich, *Petr. Lett.* 377–378.



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[Messer Francesco da Legname] nel principio della sua conversion mandò a Firenze per uno libretto composto da messer Francesco Petrarca, intitolato *De conflictu curarum suarum*, dove in forma di dialogo egli si confessa de' peccati sua all'onnipotente Iddio, e Santo Agostino, così è opinione, risponde al Petrarca dolendosi de' sua errori, e così con infinite lacrime il Petrarca si confessa de' sua peccati all'onnipotente Iddio, e ne domanda perdonanza. Messer Francesco col mezzo di questo libro si convertì al suo Iddio, e mutossi della vita e de' costumi, in modo ch' era ignuno che non si maravigliasse di tanta mutazione in ogni cosa, quanta fece in brevissimo tempo.<sup>32</sup>

In the light of this passage, the *Secretum* seems to have been read as a true description of a conversion, similar to that of Augustine, used because of its exemplariness in order to further the readers' personal moral development. This reading is identical with what I call linear reading.

This interpretation, however, despite being more successful in the reception of the work, was not the only way the dialogue was read. Boccaccio, another contemporary reader of the text, constructed an opposite meaning of the text. The evidence for this reading is indirect and can be reconstructed on the basis of a paraphrase of the *Secretum*.<sup>33</sup> Boccaccio, in the beginning of the eighth book of his *De casibus virorum illustrium*, dated to 1359, relates his dream in which Petrarch appeared to him. According to his report, while working on *De casibus virorum illustrium*, a sense of laziness stole over him and he fell asleep. In his dream, Petrarch appeared to him and urged him to continue his work, pleading the *fama* that Boccaccio could obtain by his writing. Föcking calls

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<sup>32</sup> Vespasiano Bisticci, *Vite di uomini illustri*, quoted in Billanovich, *Petr. Lett.*, 378. In my translation: "Messer Francesco da Legname, at the beginning of his conversion, sent someone to Florence for a booklet composed by the master Francesco Petrarca, with the title 'De conflictu curarum suarum' (that is, for the *Secretum*). In this book, in the form of a dialogue, Petrarca confesses his sins to the almighty God, and, it is said that Augustine answers Petrarca feeling pity for his sins. Petrarca, with neverending crying, confesses his sins to the almighty God, and craves his pardon. Master Petrarca, with this booklet, converted to God and he changed his life and his customs, so that there was no one who would not have been surprised by such a change in everything that had happened in such a short time."

<sup>33</sup> Marc Föcking mentions this paraphrase of the *Prohemium* of the *Secretum* in a footnote of his study. He uses it as evidence of the fact that the *Secretum* was known by some of Petrarch's friends already in his lifetime. Marc Föcking, "Dyalogum quendam Petrarca's *Secretum* und die Arbeit am Dialog im Trecento," in *Möglichkeiten des Dialogs, Struktur und Funktion einer Literarischen Gattung zwischen Mittelalter und Renaissance in Italien*. Text und Kontext, Romanische Literaturen und allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft 15, ed. Klaus W. Hempfer, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002) 76–114.



## Revisiting the *Secretum*: Linearity and Circularity in Petrarch's Dialogue

attention, first, to the fact that the passage describing Petrarch's appearance paraphrases Petrarch's description of *Veritas'* visit. Second, he also states that in Boccaccio's text Petrarch is arguing in order to convince Boccaccio of the opposite of what *Augustinus* argued for in the *Secretum*, namely, seeking glory. These two facts alone would be sufficient for coming to the conclusion that Boccaccio saw the possibility of reading the *Secretum* in a different way compared to those who applied the linear reading to it. Accordingly, Boccaccio's reading might be an example of the interpretation of the text that I call here a circular reading. Boccaccio turns the argumentation of the *Secretum* upside down: in his work it is the lazy writer, Boccaccio, who uses Augustine's argumentation against *fama* in order to convince himself that he should not continue working:

*O insana cupido! Adveniet hora, et iam est que te a rebus mortalibus eximat, que corpusculum conterat tuum, que te convertat in fabulam. Quid, oro, cum nil ex momentaneis rebus amplius senties, etiam si orbis totus ore pleno nil aliud preter nomen tuum cum laude cantet, absens, honoris aut voluptatis assummes?*<sup>34</sup>

While laziness is using arguments that in the *Secretum* have been used for pious reasons, when the master, Petrarch, appears he uses arguments that are the opposite of those used by his master, *Augustinus*, in the *Secretum*. In Boccaccio's text, he argues for the beauty of *fama*, calling it *desiderabile bonum*.<sup>35</sup>

In my opinion, in addition to the facts that Föcking mentions, there are some other elements in Boccaccio's text that support the conclusion I draw from Boccaccio's paraphrase. In the beginning of the eighth book, the narrator sleeps, which is not only mentioned, but an almost exaggerated emphasis is put on this circumstance. He writes: *...in tantum tanque profundum demersus soporem sum ut, nedum alteri, verum michi ipsi immobilis factus mortuus fere viderer*.<sup>36</sup> When he almost obeyed the advice received in his dream, Boccaccio was about to wake up: *Talibus ergo plurimisque similibus suadente desidia semivictus imo victus in totum, caput,*

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<sup>34</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *De casibus virorum illustrium*, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, 9, ed. Vittore Branca, (Milan: Mondadori, 1983) (hereafter Bocc.). In my translation: "Oh, foolish desire! The hour will come, or rather it has already arrived, that will drag you away from all the mortal things, that will destroy your miserable body, and that will turn you into a tale. Tell me, what honour or pleasure will you take, even if the whole world would in full mouth sing only the praises of your name, when you will not feel anything from the transitory things, when you will not be here any more."

<sup>35</sup> Bocc. 658.

<sup>36</sup> Bocc. 650, in my translation: "I delved into such a deep and heavy sleep that it almost seemed not only to others but even to myself that I was dead because I became so immobile."



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*quod in cubitum surrecturus erexeram, in pulvinar iterum reclinavi.*<sup>37</sup> He wanted to wake up, but in the end he could not. It was in this state that the figure of Petrarch appeared to him: *Sed ecce visum est michi, nescio quibus missum ab oris, hominem astitisse...*<sup>38</sup> The fact that the narrator in Boccaccio's case was sleeping when Petrarch appeared to him also supports the inference about Boccaccio's circular reading of the *Secretum*.

Another detail supporting the idea that Boccaccio's paraphrase testifies to Boccaccio's circular reading of the *Secretum* is the good reputation it assigns to poetry. According to the Petrarch of Boccaccio's text:

*Sic nos inter multipllices Scipiones Affricano primo, inter Catones Censorio, inter Quintios Cincinnato, inter Stoicos Platoni, inter Peripateticos Aristoteli, inter poetas Homero aut Maroni, si note aliud dignum non sit, fingendo dignitatis superaddimus aliquid phantasia.*<sup>39</sup>

Fantasy and invention are seen as tools by which great personalities' fame is created, and consequently, as good tools, because fame in the whole argument has been shown as something desirable.

On the basis of the analysis of texts that provide the context for the *Secretum* one can conclude that its contemporary reception supports the possibility of a double reading of the dialogue. The oscillation between the two positions with regard to the role of reading, literary activity, and poetry can be exemplified in Petrarch's œuvre as in the *Erwartungshorizont* of the contemporary readers, which can be reconstructed on the basis of their understanding of the *Secretum*.

Accepting the interpretation of the *Secretum* according to which it is a justification of poetry, it is not difficult to answer the question about its purpose. It can be seen as a self-justification of Petrarch, being a poet himself. The question about the audience can also be solved, by combining what Petrarch writes about the function of *integumentum* and what he is doing in the text of the *Secretum*. In the dialogue he uses the same technique of hiding the

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<sup>37</sup> Bocc. 652, in my translation: "While I was quasi, or rather totally, won over by these and similar things by which idleness tried to convince me, once again I reclined my head that I was already raising, wanting to stand up in my dream, on to the cushion."

<sup>38</sup> Bocc. 652, in my translation: "But behold, somebody appeared to me, I do not know from where he was sent..."

<sup>39</sup> Bocc. 658. In my translation: "Thus, we assign to Africanus among the many Scipiones, to Censorius among the Catones, to Cincinnatus among the Quintii, to Plato among the Stoics, to Aristotle among the Peripatetics, to Homer or to Virgil among the poets some dignity by means of invention, with fantasy, if there is nothing else worth mentioning."



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message from those who in his opinion are not worthy of understanding it. His ideal audience is not the ignorant physician to whom *Contra medicum* was addressed. It can be assumed that the ideal audience of the *Secretum* is formed by readers who have exactly the same culture as Petrarch, meaning that Petrarch's most perfect ideal reader is himself. Consequently, *Franciscus'* statement in the *Prohemium* about the purpose of the dialogue can also be understood in this way: the *Secretum* is not addressed to the opposition camp, but to those who have the same cultural equipment and the same interests as Petrarch.

The question about the ideal audience (which is related to the question of the implied reader of the text) can be answered on the basis of the analysis of the text itself, because the implied reader and the ideal audience are readers constructed by the text itself. The analysis of a possible audience that met the expectations of the text, i. e. that had the same cultural background as the author, has not been the purpose of this study. It might, however, be the subject of further analyses in the framework of studies on Petrarch's reception.

### Conclusion

By analyzing the narrative strategies and the narrator's position in the text, I argue that Petrarch's position as author can be understood as an oscillation between two positions: sometimes hiding himself and merging his figure into the figure of the narrator, that is, *Franciscus*; sometimes creating an ironic distance between himself and *Franciscus*. In the latter case, the narrator turns out to be unreliable. Since former analyses of the *Secretum* have always accepted *Franciscus* as a trustworthy narrator, I have tried emphasize those elements of the text that seem to undermine the narrator's reliability, that is, those parts of the text that show the distance created by Petrarch between himself and *Franciscus*.

According to the two positions of the author in the text (hiding and distancing himself), two parallel readings of the *Secretum* can be established:

- a. The traditional way of interpreting the text accepts *Franciscus* as a reliable narrator, according to which his healing of *acedia* is possible, which might be called the "linear reading."
- b. The parallel reading to the "linear" interpretation is the "circular reading" of the text, according to which it is impossible to be cured of *acedia*. What the linear interpretation claims to be a tool for healing (a vision seen awake), in the circular reading turns out to be a symptom of the illness (a dream of a person laboring under lethargy).

Consequently, the question of reading, which is also the central topic of the dialogue, should generally be interpreted in both the linear and the circular



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way. In the linear interpretation it has a moral function by which it can be justified, while according to the circular interpretation it is an autotelic process that is useful in itself. The clash of these two contradictory interpretations in the text has the function of providing a paradoxical justification of the unjustifiable, that is poetry. It creates the tension of the *Secretum*.

Generally, the “paradox” purpose of the *Secretum* was the justification of poetry, a heroic and ironic proposition of the author, who was aware of its impossibility: an act trying to resolve the irresolvable question that poetry always has to face. From the author’s side, the motivation is clear: it is the poet’s self-justification. As for the audience, one has to suppose a group of intellectuals of the same cultural level as Petrarch, who were able to decipher the message under the *integumentum* that hid it from those who did not have the same cultural equipment and background. Petrarch’s ideal audience was formed by people who had the same culture, the same viewpoints, and asked the same questions.

Readers select their texts; texts select their readers, they filter out those who are not prepared to battle their way through the obstacles they present. This is the reason why Petrarch could afford a contradiction as a justification of poetry.