Rhetoric and Inspiration
The Other Petrarchism

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> Poets were the first priests, the first prophets, the first Legislators and politicians in the world.[1]

We are in Florence and Ferrara, between 1300 and 1600 A.D. At the beginning of this period the subjects of petty Italian potentates dream of a universal Empire and Church: a universal confined to the Latin world. Over the next three centuries this dream gradually fades; the idea of a universal Church is largely replaced by a discourse addressed to the individual conscience while in the political world sovereignty becomes synonymous with local power. The universal is progressively dissolved within a multiplicity of separate regimes, each rooted in its own territory; in other words, individual societies achieve spiritual legitimation by a transfer of sovereignty. Thus linked with the absolute, territorial sovereignty, rehabilitating the idea of the local, becomes the foundation of the many-sided flowering of the Renaissance. A reading of the poets is helpful in grasping the full complexity of this historical transformation. How were Dante, Petrarch and those poets who imitated the poets of Antiquity, the so-called Petrarchists, understood? This study will focus on the way in which the texts were created. By comparing them we will try to elucidate what makes for the importance and urgency of these poems.

The term "Petrarchists" covers those French – the so-called Pleiad – and Italian poets of the sixteenth century who took Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304-1364) as their model. In Italy, these poets are recognized by two fundamental traits: the use of Ancient forms imitated by Petrarch, and the utilization of the thirteenth century Tuscan dialect as "noble" language. This characterization conceals two polarized ways of being and thinking, two social projects.

One of the two poles of this contradiction is familiar to all of us; I am speaking of Humanism and Catholicism; the other I will call neo-pagan Platonism. Of course this formulation is somewhat artificial because both the Platonist and Catholic currents are Platonist in nature. However, for the purposes of this comparison I will initially use the first category to identify those poets and settings most favorable to absolutism. In this embodiment of the State, the various social orders disappear, leaving only two positions; those who govern and those who are governed, rulers and subjects. These societies base their discourse on the "transcendentalist" side of Plato's thought and are partial to monody in music.

The other side comprises those poets and environments favorable to an aristocratic State, one in which the function of the aristocracy, as the foundation of the social order, is to harmonize the rulers with their subjects (the people). These societies and poets base their discourse on the "Platonist" dialogue and the idea of a single, unitary universe in which the human mind has access to the divine; they are partisans of polyphonic music. This difference, which was perceived by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, casts a very interesting light on some of the poems written by the young Dante in *Vita Nuova* and in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*.

For us, it is no longer possible to live such a coexistence of contradictory ideas and incompatible values. However, as we shall see, it was possible, during the period in which Dante lived (1264-1321), to think in two contradictory manners, each of which was separately contained within a discrete level of consciousness. This was achieved by establishing a hierarchy, and this study must therefore confront a problem linked to the concept of hierarchy: how can we explain a concept of coherence that allows for contradiction, when we can no longer think of encompassing the coexistence of opposites, a *simultaneous* yes and no?[2]

The First Period: Theology

The first "Petrarchist" period, that of Dante's youth, had a theological context (there was no other for it to have). However, with this context in mind, we can read the work of Dante's youth dif-

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ferently by applying the distinction between divine love and the love of system that Hannah Arendt put forth in her book *Love and St. Augustine*.[3]

The medieval universe is finite, interdependent, and differentiated, its order based on teleological principles. It is comprised of two separate but related aspects: the celestial spheres, which are perfect and incorruptible, and the sublunary world which undergoes a continuous process of decay. Within this system, any phenomenon, action, or discourse contains two levels: empirical reality, which is called appearance, with each appearance reflecting a form which is its foundation in the celestial city, itself located at a higher level than the origins and principles that become causes and form a continuous chain that descends, like a genealogical tree, to the lower world of appearances. Knowledge becomes possible by following the genealogical trail of appearances upward, from cause to cause, until we reach principles, and from principles to the first principle and cause, which is God; or – a more common approach – by delineating, based on a genesis of appearances.

It was to Avveroes (1126-1198) that the theologians attributed the idea – although in fact it was a more ancient one[4] – that human beings, by the power of desire or Love, could know all. This identity of knowing and being was heretical for other reasons: the love to which the Church referred could only be constructed because it was already there; the love to which Avveroes referred was not. Hannah Arendt, in writing of Augustine, describes the alterity and derivation of these two conceptions:

> The transformation of self-love into total self-renunciation in the abiding within God; in other words, the passage of the self into the forgetting of the self can only be understood in the context of love as desire, and of the specific situation of man in the face of his own good which, as a correlate of desire, must on principle be sought outside of human life.[5]

The Christian idea of God's love is a love of the Other (with a capital O), understood as being of a filial nature; on the other hand, Dante's concept of love, based on the model developed by the Ancients, remains within the same generation. Its object is a sexualized other, a man for a woman, a woman for a man: it is love for the other (with a small o) spreading from the object-other to all of Creation.

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Ancient love – or desire – is depicted in terms of an encounter with an other of the opposite sex. This procreative love, which the Ancients applied to the entire system, was replaced by Christianity with love for the first cause, which depicts the establishment of order as an act of patrilinear filiation. Christ, as son and father of man, substituted baptism for birth,[6] with baptism understood as a filiation of man to God. Mankind is a product of a Father-Son relation,[7] and Christian love expresses a filial relation in which the faithful are viewed as children. Thus the object of Christian love is simultaneously, or rather successively, the father and the mother;[8] reproduction here is asexual, or rather it tries to deny a relationship to the sexualized other: it is thus no surprise that humanist individualism was its result. The idea of the bi-sexual nature of Adam and Christ, defended earlier by the Gnostics, was recently taken up by Pope John-Paul I, who scandalized many of the faithful when he asserted that "God is even more our Mother than Father." Thus Catholicism – today's Christian *oikumene* – no longer says only "Our Father" but also "Our Mother."

In Paris, the debate became a dispute. Between 1260 and 1277 the doctrines of Avveroes, which were defended by Siger of Brabant and Boece of Dacia, came under attack from St. Thomas Aquinas and the entire scholastic camp. In the same two-sided universe-*universitas*, the Church adopted a position that, by rarefying the relationship to God, resulted in the unification of the mental field: the Church held that there was but a single and unique agent of, and above all that there was but a single and unique path – going in one direction, from creation to creature – toward knowledge; and that it came from above, from the will of God, *author of essences*. On 18 January 1277 Pope John XXI condemned:

1. The doctrine of the efficacy of the human mind actuated by desire. Faithful to the Aristotelian system, Avveroes had argued that the forms were not directly created by the actions of the divine intellect but that the totality of forms was contained in matter itself. Here Aristotle's philosophy is cross-bred first with Islam, then Christianity; but the key element is that matter is discussed in terms of substance. The Latin commentators of the 13th century who discussed

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the subject in these terms concluded that the human mind could trace the forms contained in matter back to the primordial form, the divine nature.

2. The doctrine of the eternal return: since events in the sublunary world are determined by the rotations of the celestial bodies, and since these rotations pass indefinitely through the same phases, they must produce the same effects here below.

3. The doctrine of the duality of truth: truth according to reason (in the terrestrial city) and truth according to faith (in the celestial city): a single proposition could be true according to one and false according to the other. Which is the way it should be: these oppositions at the level of basic principles constitute the foundation of the system and are what sets it all in motion. This duality produced another: between temporal and eternal life. And Dante, for his part, adds still another: that between final ends, or celestial bliss, under the guidance of the Pope; and happiness – human well-being – in the terrestrial city, under the rule of the Emperor or King.

This dispute thus opposed two systems, one based on cause, creation, and substance, the other on hierarchy, system, and relation. The Pope's condemnations, however, did not give rise to book burnings: contradiction was the very foundation of hierarchy, it was creative. The condemned doctrines were studied by clerics, and the libraries – speaking of hierarchy! – even had a place called hell.

Avveroism came back to life in the following generation, at the schools of Padua.[9] And in the generation after that, the debate was taken up by the poets, which was quite understandable: after its institutional rejection, the doctrine underwent a mutation, passing to those who speak the truth without knowing what they speak: the poets.

The Young Dante and the *Vita Nuova*

This opposition between the two systems permeates the work of Dante's youth. Although it is but an hypothesis, I will try, using

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examples, to demonstrate how it works. Dante is a bridge between Medieval Avveroism and the Platonist Academies of the 16th century. He wrote to his brother Gerard:[10] "Poetry is not in contradiction with theology, I might even dare say that *theology* is a kind of poetry emanating from God." This little phrase cautiously suggests a rather unorthodox equivalence: it implies a form of human access to "divine things" that is as effective as Revelation. In the next generation, Boccaccio restated it, in his *A Brief Treatise in Praise of Dante*, in terms of an absolute equivalence: "Theology is nothing other than a poetry of God. Therefore it would appear that not only is poetry a form of theology, but that theology is a form of poetry."[11]

For Dante, the intellect freed of the body and moved by desire can do anything. He sees eros as the true producer of forms. This inspiring eros develops by "heroic fury" – the kind heroes possess, such as Ariosto's *Roland the Furious*. Although the heroes of Seneca's tragedies were also furious, theirs was projected outside themselves as they were possessed by one of the four heroic furies derived from the Platonic *prisca theologia:* the poetic (the muses), the mysterial (Dionysos), the prophetic (Apollo), and the erotic. However, the Italian aristocrats of the 16th century were commonly accepted as superior by quality or "nature," that is, by seniority of their descendency, defined in terms of seniority: often of Norman or Frankish ancestry, they bore in their veins the blood of Ariosto's heroes. Therefore, like the poets, they were capable and desirous of meeting the challenge. This erotic and poetic fury leads to a kind of divination by poetry – or prophetic fury – that rivals that of theology. This fury, alien to society and antagonistic to its laws, calls into question, like Lancelot's loving desire, the separation of the divine and natural orders that Christian dogma insisted upon.

Written in 1292-93, the *Vita Nuova* is a work of Dante's youth, and was inspired by the death of Beatrice on 8 June 1290. This little book is a spiritual autobiography structured around a group of poems. Each chapter is divided into three sections: the narration of a biographical event that reveals the reasons for the composition of a central poem which is then analyzed. Dante is wonder struck by the power of his poetry to bring back the memory of Beatrice from heaven, her celestial home. In the course of an

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analysis of a love song that he has just written, Dante makes this crucial remark in Chapter 3:[12]

La nostra operazione in alcuno modo è generazione.	Whatever we do, we always act by engendering.

This is an important general proposition. Dante's *generazione* is different from our word "generation," which implies creation. It is an adaptation of the pagan and Avveroean concept of engendering. And in humans all engendering is a consequence of a polarity: the opposition of the sexes. In Chapter 2 of the *Vita Nuova* Dante writes:[13]

D'allora innanzi dico che *Amore segnoreggiò la mia* *anima, la quale fu si tosto* *a lui disponsata.*	From that day forward I say Love became the master Of my Soul to which It was immediately married.

This reminds one of the vows of nuns, declaring themselves wives to Christ. Dante dedicated himself to this sexually polarized desire of creating forms, seen as the act of entering a religious order.

In the introductory section of Chapter 34 of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante describes a kind of inspired intellectual vision. On the anniversary of Beatrice's death, on the day that "this woman became a citizen of eternal life," the poet finds himself drawing an angel on "certain tablets." While he is drawing he notices a group of strangers observing him: "Men whom it is fitting to do honor." These men, whom he has at first not noticed, were watching what he is doing "well before I realized it." Seeing them, the poet rises and greets them with the following words: "'There was someone else with me before, that's why I was dreaming.' Then they left."

These brave spectators are alter egos whose look expresses a shared desire – a desire, not an entreaty. The object of their desire is a woman's face, and they are honored because they are an emanation of the system. But they are only voyeurs: they neither speak nor take up the pen. After they leave, Dante returns to his work: before that he couldn't even begin: he could only dream.

What begins now is poetic act, an engenderment by desire, a copulation. Words come to his lips – he uses the verb "to come" – , "where I will speak to those persons who came earlier." It is a son-

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net, beginning with the words, *Era venuta* ("She had come"). The sonnet "comes" to him with two *beginnings*, and he decides to preserve both of them, writing two sonnets that differ only in their opening four lines:

Primo cominciamento	First Beginning
Era venuta ne la mente mia	Into my mind she came
la gentil donna che per suo valore	the noble woman who by her
fu posta da l'altissimo signore	worth was placed by the almighty
nel ciel de l'umiltate	in the heaven of humility
ov'è Maria	where Mary reigns.
Secondo cominciamento	**Second Beginning**
Era venuta ne la mente mia	Into my mind she came
quella donna gentil cui piange	this noble woman for whom Love
Amore entro'n quel punto che lo	lamented even at the moment
suo valore vi trasse a riguardar	when her worth compelled you
quel ch'eo facia.	to look at what I was doing.

In its published versions the word "almighty" is printed in small letters. Only the word *Love* is written with a capital: love is both the system and its copula, expressed on both the level of principle and realization. The first beginning suggests a filial relation, to a mother and father; the second suggests a relationship between lovers. The songs sung by the madrigalists of the 16th century are similarly permeated by the presence of the *Madonna*, always written with a capital M: depending on the context, it refers either to the beloved or the Madonna herself.

Let us now return to the beginning of the sonnet and try to isolate its visual dimension. Here we can distinguish two levels, which the different beginnings help to clarify. We see the poet drawing at his table; this scene is visible to him and to the "worthy" spectators, the other level being visible only to him; he, Dante, can move between them, the worthy ones cannot. An angel is depicted on the tablets on which he is drawing. The scene takes place in the context of a dual pantheon, both Christian and pagan: on one side there is Mary, wife and mother (a great Other, a hybrid of God the father, the filial love of someone engendered in relation to its engenderer); on the other there is Beatrice in paradise, in a sort of osmosis. For Christianity, the engendering relation is secondary to God the Father and God the Mother. Beatrice is above not because she is mother but because she is dead, and

she is loved as a woman: desire subsumes filial piety. The other side is dominated by Love and its retinue, those men to whom honor is due. In the first system, inspiration is sent from above, by the *almighty*, down below – in other words, by grace. In the second, it responds to a desire that comes from below: it comes simultaneously from above and below, from Love, i.e. from the poet's desire, and from the personal valor of Beatrice; it is an active trinity, one of whose components is feminine. This feature is characteristic of the 16th-century poets of the academies.

The text is written in code. In the 16th century the world of the senses was still identified with appearance and error. To the human mind they offered figures which, for those adept at understanding symbols, signaled a primordial or archetypal form. The locus of the forms was the celestial city. The ascent from cause to cause – and its opposite, the redescent, through genealogy – was the essence of ritual activity, and these figures would have been incomprehensible without assessment and decoding. In order to understand, interpretative and hermeneutic acts were required. Meaning was sought in relation to, not in the experience of, daily life; in order to have truth value, meaning had to be discovered beyond material reality, in a symbol signalling to a person capable of grasping its message.

In order to understand what Dante is talking about, we need to recall that the lower order is a vertical projection of the higher; or more exactly, the result of a system – one to which daily life is subordinate – that is equivalent to the image, to its visible aspect. The angel drawn on the tablet is a figure or symbol of Beatrice. It is the expression of a sublime – because unrealizable – desire, which is addressed to the system as a whole. This reflection from above is intercepted by the mind's eye. It is observed from above, but only indirectly, by the group of men who originate from on high and approach the poet, yet capable of seeing things only from above. Everything that is passes through desire, but this implies a memory, and a harmony that comes not from childhood but the universe.

Visually, the scene comprises a double movement. The first is the perpetual back and forth between Beatrice and her reflection. This takes place on the vertical axis, from the heavens down to its visible projection on earthly tablets. The second, by an angle of

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incidence, is the movement between this terrestrial projection and the worthy, desiring, contemplative but inactive spectators. In Catholicism one does not contemplate, one has faith: Christian love is the desire to be at one with Christ and the Virgin Mary. Here the contemplative society formed by those who desire but do not draw is contrasted with those who draw and desire, the poet-actors. These apparitions "worthy of being honored" could be described as intermediary entities: taking form, these witnesses who belong to the world of forms and principles are capable of "passing" from one city to the other, and especially from the Christian system to the one they represent, thanks to the power of the poet who brings them to life: like the apostles, they are brothers in their desire for divine things, simultaneously prefiguring the shades of *Purgatory* and the aristocrats of the academies. The poet's spirit, transcending not only the system of the two cities but those of Antiquity and Christian dogma, accomplishes something that the vision of his noble and "desiring-contemplating" public could only realize in part (they understood it only imperfectly and could not complete the passage); and he does it in two forms, in the "two beginnings." Death here is associated with the absence of speech and is opposed to Dante's form of poetic engendering.

These two beginnings integrate the traditions revered in *The Divine Comedy*: those of pagan and Christian Antiquity. Which raises a question: did Dante, in contrast to fundamental Christian dogma, acknowledge the existence of more than one path toward divine perfection? In comparing the two beginnings we see that the first does not mention people – the guardians – who observe the poet (who is also himself a guardian). He only indicates where Beatrice is (in heaven), in such a way that the memory arises, as I have just described it, in a simultaneous movement downward from above, and upward from below.

The second beginning is another way of thinking the same thing. It assumes that the ascending/descending motion has already been carried out, which is not contradictory: Beatrice simply "came." It takes place completely within the visible, along the horizontal axis, from the perspective of which the movement of the worthy men who approach the poet is described. The latter occupies the center of the scene, at the point where the two motions intersect.

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From the point of view of *The Divine Comedy* the two beginnings can be seen as representing theology (creation-filiation) and philosophy (the pantheistic system) – the poet's two mistresses. They represent the two opposing origins, the two approaches to the invisible, the one causal, the other desiring-engendering, which gives priority to exceptional men. Although the poet can neither choose among nor synthesize them, they nevertheless exist: desire cannot annul the distance between the upper and lower, it is the copula that sets the entire system in motion. Dante, having separated the terms of the contradiction, can then establish a hierarchy and overcome the opposition. He presents, in the most complete way possible, the two separated sides of a single reality.

Although for Dante both paths are viable, the Church opted for transcendence alone: in the end, it denied to reason access to divine things. All throughout the *Vita Nuova* Dante returns to the theme of the inspiring power of desire. He also insists upon the cryptic nature of the divine and of the necessity of a hermeneutic approach: each poem is preceded by an account of the circumstances that "inspired" it, and it is followed by a decoding. The way in which desire operates is described in the poem belonging to Chapter 41:[14]

Oltre la sphera che più larga gira	Beyond the sphere that makes the widest round,
passa'l sospiro ch'esce del mio core	passes the sigh arisen from my heart;
intelligenza nova, che l'Amore	a new intelligence that Love in tears
piangendo mette in lui, pur su lo tira	endowed it with is urging it on high.
quand'elli è giunto là dove desira	Once having reached the place of its desiring,
vede una donna, che riceve onore	it sees a lady held in reverence,
e luce si, che per lo suo splendore	splendid in light; and through her radiance,
lo peregrino spirito la mira	the pilgrim spirit looks upon her being.
(,,,)	(…)
Vedela tal, che quando'l mi ridice	But when it tries to tell me what it saw,
io non l'intendo, si parla sottile	I cannot understand her subtle words
al cor dolente, che lo fa parlare.	it speaks to the sad heart that makes it speak.

This *mira* implies an act of reverence and calls forth a fantastic vision. The poem is pervaded with a feeling of certainty regarding the efficacy of *desire, Love, mind,* and *heart*. But it also includes a *sigh* and a *sad heart*. Having created a vision in which he cannot partake, Dante introduces a mysterious note of suffering – inexplicable out of context – that we will discuss below, and which is characteristic of the Petrarchan poets of the 16th century: those

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who weave visions to which others are mere spectators. Within the Christian configuration, which is based on the creator's love for his creature, no such suffering is possible: we are therefore dealing with an altogether different conception.

Elsewhere in this "intellectual vision" it is *courtly ladies* who "do honor" to Beatrice, the *noble lady* of earlier in the text: these noble sisters could have been loved similarly to Beatrice being the feminine counterpart to the men who honored Dante. Teresa D'Avila was also visited by such "intellectual speech", accompanied by "intellectual visions" in which, "without seeing anything the soul understands, more clearly than if it could see, who it is and from what side it comes."[15] These mental visions presume a two-sided universe, a fully human subject possessing two interdependent but separate sexes, and a world comprised of two cities founded on contradictory principles. The insistence on the subtlety of the message – intended only for those who can understand it – is not the only allusion that Dante makes to the existence of select coteries where the most noble and talented people of the age met: a precursor to the aristocratic academies of the 16th century. Such spectators, as intermediary entities who belong to both cities or sides of the universe, are a frequent presence in the *Vita Nuova*. As valiant men or courtly ladies, they simultaneously do honor both above, to the *noble lady*, and here below, to the divine poet whose pen they guide in its interpretive work.

Petrarch (and Ronsard)

Here is how the 135th sonnet[16] to Petrarch's *Canzoniere* ends:

Pascomi di dolor, piangendo rido	Feeding on grief, smothered in tears
Egualment mi spiace vita e morte	Death and life are equally distasteful to me
In questo stato son, donna, per voi.	Lady, because of you, I am in this state.

The *I* of this poem is a real person, with direct experience of empirical reality, addressing an individual lady. This intensification of the individual takes on a real body and suffers martyrdom,

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recalling the historical body of Christ. Life and death are no longer part of a cycle that transcends them; rather they both suggest an equal displeasure whose tonality has a Christian ring to it. Any escape from the human condition is impossible. Beatrice's death was a passage; Laura's (or Petrarch's) is an end. Here we participate in irreversible time, not in profane and pagan cyclical time. To make the difference even more stark, let us jump ahead two centuries, to Paris: For Ronsard, Antiquity is but a superficial decor:

> I am a Prometheus in passion:
> I want, I dare, I strive but I can't,
> The Fates weave my life like black thread.

Desire, confined to earth, is clearly "incapable" of changing levels. All it now provides is anticipation and the anguish that accompanies abandonment. The poet, like a forgotten child, wanders from anguish to death, and loses himself: but he does not succeed in escaping himself. The pagan pantheon is now a mere allegory: even in reliving Prometheus's passion, now a symbol of Christ (but not of fury or excess), the poet can do nothing to combat the irreversible. For Petrarch:

La vita fugge, e non s'arresta un'or	Life runs away, and the hours do not last
E la morte vien dietro à gran giornate[17]	Death chases after us at full speed.

Ronsard takes up this same idea:

> I have only my bones, I'm a skeleton
> Without flesh, nerve, muscle, pith
> Nimble death has struck without mercy:
> If I dare look at my arms I begin to tremble,
>   Apollo and his son, two great masters together,
> Would be unable to cure me; tricked by their trade
> I say Farewell, dear sun; My sight is blurry
> My body departing to where everything decays[18]

In this poem paganism is subordinated to Christianity, and the passage to divine things – here, God in the singular – can only occur at God's initiative; it is therefore unattainable. Nature, from this point of view, is little more than entropy, and the quest for salvation becomes central. Petrarch and Ronsard do not seek permanence in the eternal return of harmony; they seek eternity in Literature. By contrast, for Dante death and silence are opposed

to engenderment in cyclical time. In the Christian and Humanist conception, the other side of death – resurrection or return to the point of origin – vanishes: everything occurs within linear time (*la durée*). Ronsard follows Petrarch in saying that only the poet's word is eternal; and through that word so are his love and personal relation to Laura, Helen, or Cassandra, which will accompany his fame. Both the poet and the object of his love age and die, and all is vanity (I have Ronsard in mind here: "When you have grown old …" but also Dante in his old age: *La belleza ch'io vidi si trasmoda*, "the beauty that I saw is now transfigurated.")

The humanists bequeathed to the nineteenth century this dualism between a body of historical flesh and a beyond of the flesh. This intensification of the historical body is one side of the rise of individualism. When the transition from life to death occurs in time, death becomes final. The idea of the vanity of life and the devaluing of pagan Love thus lead to the discourse of the Church and the quest for transcendence. *Noi siamo nati a formar l'angelica farfalla* ("we are born to be metamorphosed into an angelic butterfly"). In contrast to these uncertain lines from Dante – "love here is not in vain" – we have Petrarch's certainty[19]:

I'vo piangendo i miei passati tempi I quai passi in amar cosa mortale. [20]	I go lamenting the past Spent loving a mortal thing.

Ronsard now removes whatever ambiguity remained; and offers a Christian conclusion:[21]

> … Do not forget
> That your soul is not pagan but Christian
> And that our great Master, stretched out
> Dying on the cross, overcame death's sting
> Which now is but a pleasant passage
> For our return to heaven, giving us courage
> To bear our cross, our light and sweet burden,
> And to die for him as he did for us,
> Without fearing, as do children, the infernal gondola.

Antiquity is irrelevant to this discourse. In this orthodox presentation, pagan death – "the infernal gondola," Charon's boat – is an object of fear and irrational terror, while Christian death is an object of desire: Christ has returned to heaven, he has over-

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come death and its sting, but he was resurrected only once, and that is not to be our lot. Petrarch and Ronsard emphasize Christian death and present, in the here and now, a personal experience of terrestrial love that takes place in the course of life, between a before and an after. This temporalization, by excluding the possibility of a movement between the here and the beyond, pushes the moment of death into a near future and reduces the correspondence between the celestial and terrestrial cities to a mere literary figure. The paganism of the Pleiad is clearly subordinate to its Christianity: nature is but a symbol of the divine nature, and the Roman Catholic heaven is not to be found here on earth. Ronsard insists on this point with a troubling redundancy when he speaks, in his *Préface au roi François II*, "of the heavenly harmony of the heavens."[22]

Petrarch and Ronsard operate within the parameters defined by individual consciousness and the rhetorical tradition of northern Europe. Their thought is linear while their logic, inherited exclusively from the Scholastics, is applied to the world of appearances alone, the terrestrial city. Their distanced intellect is no longer "capable and desirous of God" (St. Bernard). Dante and the Academies think in different terms. Their agent intellect, seen as corresponding to divine things, engenders reality.

Boccaccio and Petrarch

During Petrarch's lifetime (1304-1364), the distinction we have just drawn was used to separate Latinists from Hellenists. However, in truth almost none of the "Hellenists" knew Greek. Instead, using translations, these so-called Hellenists relied on the authority of the Greek philosophers – whose categories they imitated – instead of the Latin rhetoricians. Petrarch, a "Latinist," did not know Greek and admired both Augustine – who hated Greek – and Cicero. He yearned for a return to the Antiquity of Roman eloquence, not to the Antiquity of Greek philosophical dialogue. Both points of view are looking back to a point of origin: in that they are both essentially Christian. Petrarch fears what would happen to Christian faith if Platonic dialogue were to replace rhetoric and

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persuasion. In his correspondence (1360) he describes a disagreement between himself and the "Hellenist" Boccaccio (1313-1375), to whom he ascribes the following words: "Your Augustine and Paul were nothing but big mouths. I only wish that you could stand up to a reading of Avveroes; then you would see just how much greater he is than your fools." At that point Petrarch throws him out of his house, lamenting the fact that they allow people who express such views to walk around free. The extent of this disagreement needs some clarification. The friendship between Petrarch and Boccaccio was hierarchical in nature: Boccaccio declared himself to be Petrarch's disciple and usually expressed his differences with his "illustrious model" tactfully. In the *Brief Treatise in Praise of Dante (Trattatello in laude di Dante,1358-1363)* he contrasts "the hidden fruit" of Socratic dialogue with the "specious foliage" of eloquence.[23] Without a doubt, Dante was the bone of contention in their disagreement: soon after the little crisis I have just described, Boccaccio gave a copy of Dante's works to his friend, then maliciously dedicated his *Brief Treatise* to him. In it, Dante's mother has a dream, just before his birth, that her son will be a shepherd; then, spared the normal way of death, he is metamorphosed into a peacock, and

> the peacock has four notable characteristics: angelic plumage, containing a hundred eyes; misshapen feet [Oedipus, in Greek?] and an easy gait; a voice horrifying to hear; and incorruptible and sweet-smelling flesh [because its angelic plumage covers it].[24]

Below, in a discussion of swans, we will return to this theme of metamorphosis. After 1360 Boccaccio's home in Florence became the meeting place for the founders of a movement that historians of literature have perhaps a bit too hastily called "prehumanist" or "Petrarchist." It was here that Salutati and Villani, loyal followers of the Augustinian circle at the Church of Santo Spirito (and to which Marsilio Ficino would later belong), received their education. In 1460, Ficino (1433-1490) founded the first Italian philosophical academy, *Accademia Platonica*. The idea for it was born at Boccaccio's house. In his final work,[25] the author of *The Decameron* defines poetry as "the soul of the world, emanating from the heart of God." Petrarch would have understood this statement differently from Dante. The result of this difference affected the devel-

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opment of the academies. Based on a Platonist model, they were first conceived by Boccaccio's contemporaries and took physical shape in the following generation.

The Academies:
An Activity both Political and Educational

Dante's *La Vita Nuova* prefigures the educational program carried out in the aristocratic academies. Although Marsilio Ficino founded the first such academy in 1460 in Florence, it had in fact been proceeded by several other attempts, such as the school created in 1424 by Vittorino da Feltre for the Gonzagos of Mantua, and the so-called "philosophical academies," based on the Hellenic tradition and imported via Byzantium during the Church "Council of Union" held in Florence and Ferrara (1434-1439). In 1437, L. B. Alberti described both the present state of the academies and their ultimate goal:

> The academies seem to me to resemble the fabulous agate ring that Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, wore; by a prodigious work of art and nature the nine muses and Apollo were engraved on it.[26]

The muses, grand daughters of Uranos, can see the invisible. They are near the origin; their song, which heralds the beginning of all life, "builds a bridge between the here and the beyond" (J.P. Vernant). And it is Apollo – solar deity and sovereign, inspiration to the poets and philosophers, who makes it possible for the intellect, by an act of self-transcendence, to reach the beyond – who presides over their meetings. All of this is visible in a single piece of pure stone, an agate, charged with the totalizing connotations of the Greek *agathos* and embodying the perfection of civilized life: think of the term *kalos k'agathos*, which describes the perfect gentleman, who is handsome, well, and good.

After the 15th century the followers of Dante felt the need to create a setting for dialogue and recollection in which poetry and philosophy, polyphonic chant, dance, and the plastic arts, could all be explored. They also needed to establish sites for the education of noble children. These aristocratic academies sought to break with the Scholastic tradition and its emphasis on rhetorics

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and persuasion. The new academies were in fact little concerned with persuasion: the aim of their educational system was creativity, based not on eloquence but active inner listening and dialogue among equals. Their meetings, consisting in polyphonic discussion of all past and present authorities, were attended by an active audience (the scholastic model of university activity held in comparison a passive audience).

The academicians turned away from those they termed "the vulgar," describing as "noise" the discourse and song discharged by this lesser humanity. They sought neither to convince this "vulgar" mass nor to raise it up to their level through education: on the subject of human nature, they were total pessimists. However, the harmony they sought to create was intended to serve others, those on whom they had not turned their backs. By working as a community the academies sought to produce a form of speech that would allow its members to experience the music of the spheres and to obtain knowledge, by desire or erotic fury, of the mysteries. By making use of polyphony, poly-dialogue, music and poetic inspiration, their members sought to go beyond the world of appearances in order to reach the principles of the celestial city. Thus they opposed both the humanist present and medieval past, turning instead toward a more venerable, and more ancient, past.

Seated in circle, they sang madrigals written for four "equal" voices. The texts, first person singular poems, used expressions such as "I am dying" and "I am suffering" but without explicit reference to a concrete context. In so doing, they were trying to suggest the existence of a community "I" of the nobility which was opposed to the rest of society. This four-voiced individual suffered, died, and was reborn in the course of the poems: death here was depicted not as a final exit but a single step in an vital cycle. The madrigal was associated with a ritualized system of gesture and movement, of mystery and precious objects, such as the first printed musical scores. The circle of heroes was represented in song as a single being that felt and suffered but was without individual consciousness, a multi-voiced being-system which participated both in the lower world and the celestial spheres. As witness for the entire society, it was capable of regenerating social

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harmony and was invested with spiritual authority. The madrigals constitute the memory of this multi-bodied individual.

The aristocratic academies made their own use of the Avveroism that Dante had expressed in his poetry. This thought was then reconstituted on the theoretical plane by – among others – Marsilio Ficino and later by the "Platonist" theoreticians of the academies in the 15th and 16th centuries. In theology it led to Giordano Bruno's "true natural theology of the world" and an exit from the Church. It remains an essential component of Italian thought. The stake on which Bruno was burned in 1601 stands as a monument to the difference between this kind of thinking and the rest of Latin Europe's.

Sixteenth-century Petrarchism had a musical dimension: the polyphonic madrigal or "French song" (*canzone alla francese*).[27] Between 1515 and 1560, at the academies of Florence and Ferrara, Petrarchist poems were transposed into madrigals for several voices. The polarization of the two currents is clearly visible in their different approaches to music. One sort of poem was written to be read and, only secondarily, sometimes sung. On the other hand, the aristocratic academicians of the "Dante party," who sought to express through music the supreme dimension – ethical, educational, and social – of which the Greeks had spoken, met in their salons, seated in circle around a round table, to sing a *musica reservata* for four voices; this music, aimed at those who could understand it, was not intended for listeners. The poems, written to be sung, circulated and were reworked in the academies before their publication: they were printed underneath the music. This practice had neither an ethical nor aesthetic purpose; rather it expressed a perfection of action consisting of mastery and subordination: these people saw themselves as guardians of *homo optimus*.

The texts, written and reworked in the Italian academies, underwent three to five years of performance and perfecting before publication. Over this time the performed piece went through many modifications, even as regards the content of the poem. Its performance was seen as more important than its written trace: the singers were allowed to modify it as they saw fit. This anteriority and primacy accorded to oral performance over invariant written text, and the continual reworking of it through

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discussion, was characteristic of the academies of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Raymond Marcel, in his preface to a French edition of Marsilio Ficino's *Teologico Platonico*,[28] offers us one example of this process. While proving that the work was finished no later than 1474, he nevertheless finds allusions to Florentine events of the years 1475-1477, to a banquet given by the Cardinal Bembo in 1480, and a quote from a work written in 1481. This paradox is a sign of the constant reworking that the work underwent, through dialogue, at the *Accademia Platonica*.

A millenary metaphor may be of help in characterizing the problem: a poem that is published as soon as it has been written, says Florence Dupont, immediately becomes literature: it is para-lyzed, monumental, "cold." In contrast, works intended to be sung in private in circle, such as at the academies, are "hot": per-formance – action – is what gives them life. This opposition between hot performance and cold writing, which Dupont uses in her *L'Invention de la littérature*,[29] comes from Origen (184-253 A.D.); in his treatise *On the Principle* he asserts that the words *psyche* (soul, a feminine noun) and *psychron* (cold, neutral nouns being necessarily cold) have the same root. As Origen sees it, the soul is congealed spirit, which can be warmed by dialogue, by the obser-vation of things of the senses, and the ascent toward higher truths, both intellectual and moral (in the Latin meaning of *mores*, that is to say social truths).

At the academies Petrarchan forms and themes were funda-mentally reshaped. In both poetry and music there thus emerged two "Petrarchisms"; one was Catholic, maintaining a reverence for the text; the other gave ultimate priority to music, assigning to the poem a secondary role within a foundation ritual that cele-brated a regenerated norm. Ronsard and Petrarch's disciples lim-ited themselves to imitating the forms and formulas of their master without challenging its semantic signification. The acade-micians, however, used it to create an oral form that took the metaphors literally. Their aim was to work for the general good by restoring totality to life.

These men addressed a world debased by the Fall. By the power of their consensus they were able to reach beyond the

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human, inverting the order of time and myth to return to a golden age. The harmony that had been lost in the Fall had to be recovered, the state of being before sin restored; and with this recaptured harmony a new community, witness for all, was to be created. Its locus was to be at court, which comprised the society's best (Greek *aristoi*), its princes and philosophers. These last believed themselves, and were believed to be, capable of understanding the underlying harmony and of seeing the light of principles through the surrounding veils of illusion. By turning inward they were to create a *universitas* in the Medieval sense of totality; here the individual was conceived in the spirit of the Medieval corporation and representation meant an entire social group, not a voluntary coalition of various individual agendas.

This endeavor was part of the aristocracy's attempt to recover its spiritual and political preeminence. The idea that polyphonic music was reserved for an elite imitates both the ethical music of the Greeks and the function of sung poetry in Greek cities. It created a special, sociologically interchangeable kind of man (like the hoplite in a phalanx), who is seen as the sole possessor of effectual speech and bears witness for the entire community to the consensual relation that underlies society in general and the living person in particular. From the point of view of social relations, the written word was what remained after life and the moment were gone;[30] but it was also a regenerated norm for generations to come. The political dimension of this problem can be glimpsed by reviewing two events that occurred between 1540 and 1550. In them we can see the degree to which the political and religious authorities feared the academies.

The first example is often cited in relation to homosexuality;[31] it is a ruling, promulgated in 1541, by the Venetian supreme court, The Tribunal of the Ten, that forbade educational institutions – that is, the academies – from using secret or private locations. The aristocratic academies, which were dedicated to education, attached great importance to the secrecy of their meetings, holding them in private homes.

The second event occurred in Naples: using three separate decrees (1544, 1546, 1547), the Viceroy Pietro di Toledo had the principal academies of the city shut down; the *Sereni, Oziosi,*

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Ardenti, and *Incogniti* (a name itself revelatory of a secret). The decrees condemned not only the academies' secrecy but their "disrespectful statements in regard to Spain"; the decree of 1546 adds: "Their members all too often take it upon themselves to sound off on matters of theology."[32] Benedetto Croce mentions a "spy," a theology student at the university, whom the Viceroy used to infiltrate the academy of the *Sereni*:[33] "Inside their private homes these people create little convents (*conventiculi*) where theology, a subject outside of their sphere, is often discussed; they also discuss profane and ignoble matters."

The *prammatica* of 1547 holds the "royalist and anti-clerical barons" responsible for these reprehensible practices. These "barons" – descendants of those heroic companions to the emperors which the songs sang about – were comprised of the upper ranks of the kingdom's feudal lords, its patrons of the arts, and those who belonged to the academies by right of birth; the Neapolitan academies were royalist opponents of the Viceroy, which is not a contradiction. Rather, they favored an aristocratic form of government, subordinate only to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who did not govern directly in Naples but delegated his authority to the Viceroy. The barons, in virtue of the personal fealty they swore to the sovereign, considered themselves the "natural" repository of this responsibility, although not as individuals but as a community. In competition with the Church, they claimed for themselves all responsibility in earthly politico-spiritual matters: both jurisdiction over the material life of the lower clergy and supervision in earthly matters over their dependencies. They acknowledged but one legitimate role for the Church: that of guiding individual souls to salvation. The spiritual domain was thus split into two distinct and separate areas, the political and the religious; the first comprised society, the second the individual.

The Platonic Renaissance in Italy

The Turkish incursion in the 14th and 15th centuries played an important role in the history of ideas in Italy. Beginning in the 14th century, a "unionist" faction within the Orthodox clergy began to

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seek an end to the centuries' long schism. One of the Byzantine envoys to the Holy See, the Calabrasian monk Varlaam, was Petrarch's preceptor. The Council of Ferrara was convened in 1434, and the Palaelogos Pope Jean VIII attended in 1438. The Cardinal Bessarion, an important unionist figure within the Orthodox delegation, ended his days in Italy and left his library to the city of Venice. The Council was moved to Florence in 1439, where a decree of union was promulgated. But this agreement among the clerical elites was rejected by the base – that is, by the monasteries and lower clergy – who feared, under the agitation prompted by the Turks, that the union would lead to another Crusade. This episode left two idiomatic traces in the European languages: "Better the turban than the tiara"; and "to discuss the sex of angels when the city is on fire."

This period saw the transfer of several schools of philosophy to Italy, among them that of Gemistus Plethon. These schools had preserved the traditions of the schools of Antiquity: the educational process consisted of a dialogue between a master and his pupils in which the students, arranged in a circle, were seated on the same level as their teacher. The contrast between this approach and the formalism of the scholastic method, with its *lectio* and *disuptatio* (these tools of absolutism), was total: the Italians preferred this Mediterranean alternative to the method imported from the barbaric North.

The first Italian "academies," which sprang up in Florence during the period of the Council and run by Manuel Chrysolaras and Jean Argyropoulos, were run as schools of philosophy. Their pedagogy was based on the Platonic doctrine of the accessibility of "divine things" through dialectic: in the face of the impossibility of discussing God in physical terms (since no one could reach the divine point of view), Plato and his disciples chose, among the available types of human discourse, the one that was nearest to the actual truth of the forms; in other words, an intermediate mode of knowledge situated between everyday human truth and the truth of *divine things*, which are farthest removed from the socio-physical context: either myth or this poly-logue between equal partners in which the individual disappears. The *logos* produced in such a dialogue was associated with the demonic function of Eros, the *logos erotikos*[34] and developed in stages. Seneca, in his *The Tranquility of the Soul*, recommended a slightly drunken condition as helpful.

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Desire, producing an escape from the self (by erotic fury[35]), led to dialogue which, thus inspired from the outside, allowed for the creation (or recreation) of a normative discourse, valid for all, that was sanctified in social relations. Dialogue was thus viewed as an intermediate stage, comprising both commemoration and exchange, between tragedy and law. The aristocratic academies, dedicated to music and poetry, put this entire program into practice.

The Poets of the Academies: *Il bianco e dolce cigno*

Il bianco e dolce cigno (The Sweet White Swan) was written in Ferrara at the ducal academy and published in 1538, to music written by Arcadelt (1504-1568): it must thus be read in light of the above discussion. The first edition attributed the poem to Giovanni Giudiccionni, the papal nuncio at the court of Charles V; later editions attributed it to the Neapolitan Alphonso d'Avalos (1501-1560): from the point of the academies, the search for its real author is a pseudo-problem. The subject was well known to all: a white swan dies, singing but inconsolable, while the poet to which it is compared dies crying but content. He is thus comparable to the figure of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*, who discusses his imminent death with his disciples in the following terms:[36]

> Will you not allow that I have as much of the spirit of prophecy in me as the swans? For they, when they perceive that they must die, having sung all their life long, do then sing more lustily than ever, rejoicing in the thought that they are about to go away to the god whose ministers they are. But men, because they are themselves afraid of death, slanderously affirm of the swans that they sing a lament at the last (...) And I too believe myself to be the consecrated servant of the same god, ... I have received from my master gifts of prophecy which are not inferior to theirs ...

This theme would have suited Dante and Boccaccio: the prophetic and celestial swan is not so far removed from the peacock with the "angelic plumage" and "incorruptible flesh"; but the swan sings, its immortality is not inherent but embodied in ritual; it does not express an absence of transformation – the incorruptible – but the presence of metamorphosis, a change of nature and species. In ancient and pre-Christian Europe, and even for the Church, birds were seen as intermediaries between the human

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and "higher" spheres. In Medieval imagery the soul was depicted in the form of a bird. Prophetic interpretations of the flight and behavior of birds remained widespread. The swan – and not the peacock, with its deformed feet – represented a kind of purely spiritual *alter ego*: the part of us that lives permanently in the celestial city.[37] The swan is master of three of the four elements – air, water and earth – but not of fire, the element of desire; the swan is comfortable in the three higher spheres of the sublunary world: earth, water, and sky. This epiphany of purity, in which only desire and fire are missing, is perfectly fitting.

For the personalized Christianity of the Renaissance, metamorphoses ceased to be believable and swans were no longer thought to be the equal of humans. The white bird's function was to occupy a lower level of the hierarchy of beings and to certify the hierarchy's validity. In England the swan, the aristocratic animal, was identified with the poet who dies singing but misunderstood. He is like an albatross among geese, as can be seen in the last lines of Orlando Gibbons' poem of 1612, *Silver Swan*:

> More geese than swan live
> More fools than wise.

This silver swan of heraldry embodies the often stressed difference between the human animal (the crowd) and the wise and noble one, a distinction that fails to take desire into account. At the French court, it would have been unthinkable to associate the Phoenix, who was a symbol of royalty and whose nature was to die and be reborn, with this totally mortal image of poetic flight. But let us listen to the poem:

Il bianco e dolce cigno contando more	The sweet white swan singing in death
Ed'io piangendo giung'al fin del viver mio	And I crying as I reach the end [span and aim] of my life
Stran'e diversa sorte	A strange and different fate
Ch'ei more sconsalato	He dies in despair
Ed'io more beato	And I die contented
Morte che nel morire	A death that in dying
M'empie di gioia tutto e di desire	Fills me completely with joy and desire
Se nel morir, altro dolor non sento	If in dying I feel no other pain
Di mille volt'il di sarei contento.	I will be happy to die a thousand times a day![38]

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The first distich is an imitation of Martial:

Dulcia defecta modulatur carmina lingua Cantator cygnus funeris ipse sui[39]	With failing tongue it croons sweet songs The swan singing its own funeral rites.

This distich, like its Latin model, is composed in hexameters, but in lines of twelve syllables instead of seven or eleven, which is the norm for the madrigal. These archaisms suggest the form of fable or myth, while the meter corresponds to that of the tale. Having laid out the situation in terms of an antithesis, the poem then establishes the swan's superiority over the poet: while the noble beast dies in song the poet dies in tears. The poet's death takes up more space here than in Martial (five words compared to two) and the *giung' al fin* presupposes a period of prior expectation that suggests the hope of its being satisfied. The *fin* (end) has a double meaning: this end is also a potential goal. In Italian, *al fin* also means "Finally!", like a sigh that will separate this permanence from the death of the timeless in order to inscribe it in the narrative order: an imagined, biographical time.

The central section of the poem inverts the first opposition by changing the level of discourse. Now it is the swan who dies disconsolate (because of having lost its sole possession, life), while the poet dies contented because death is but a passage, not an end: an entropic process has been transformed into one of renewal. Everything experienced by this four-voice "I" is sensual. The effect of death is to fill the poet with desire and "joy" – the *joÿ* of the Troubadours, a mixture of enjoyment and anguish. This symmetrical sequence is hierarchically structured around *ed io more beato* (And I die contented), highlighting the poet's death. On another level it in fact explains its superiority: animal death is truly hopeless because it is irrevocable. The exclamatory, rapid-fire conclusion to the poem insists on the importance of desire and a regenerated life.

It is not specified whether the poet is a lover or has a beloved. Like the bird he is solitary, but unlike the swan we do not know what he looks like, although his place is at the summit and center of the world. The absence of an other is characteristic of madrigals; and here the anonymous speaker is compared to a being situ-

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ated at a different level of existence: he has four voices and is himself speaking to others. The work is constructed around an antithesis between a dying swan and a dying poet, with their attendant sensations. This kind of ambiguity, called a *concetto* (concept or conceit), with its reference to death and the non-personalization of the subject of the enunciation, is typical of the poems taken up by the madrigalists of the academy. Its eroticism is a function of the contrast – neither morbid nor lugubrious – between death and desire. This *concetto* expresses a tacit understanding between "death" and "little death," located at the point of juncture between pleasure, desire and death.

The poem is thus transformed into an erotic emblem and linked to what is essential; to death and rebirth, and, through the allusion to the resurrection of the flesh (and beyond the flesh), a renewal of the cosmos and society. As Fernand Braudel put it,[40] "it was the academies that caused the frescoes to be whitewashed." However, for those who hired painters to whitewash the "shameful parts" of the frescoes, true eroticism was situated at another level: this excess, situated in the flesh and in society, revealed a religious dimension that went beyond the flesh and served to validate ritual.

This death, which contains the impetus to life, would seem to harmonize an implicit Christianity with a youthful, earthly paganism. Desire – which swans lack – activates this connective harmony. The passive results of this connection are health, the seasons, fertility, earthly love, and social, natural, and cosmic harmony. Music – but not any kind and not from anyone, that is to say not from swans – connects the hierarchically arranged levels of this totality. The following table, based on the works of Ronsard and d'Avalos, summarizes the difference between the two "Petrarchisms" of the 16th century:

Danteism in the 16th Century	Petrarchism in the 16th century
Written-oral-sung: room for improvisation. Music hierarchically superior	Inviolability of writing, music of secondary value Poem hierarchically superior

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Communal discourse, *I* of the enunciation a four-voiced individual	Personal discourse, addressed to another historical and identifiable *I*
Absent or anonymous beloved, fused with the community	A real and historical beloved
Effectual speech, coinciding with action, indissociable from the collective act.	Secular speech linking one subject to another and to a reality that completes the action
Permanence; profane and cyclical time	Linear and sacred time; irreversible
Death as a passage toward a totalizing beyond	Christian death
A hierarchy of degrees of perfection, two mirror-image "cities," with possible "passage" between them	Immanence and transcendence, impossibility of a "passage" beyond the human dimension
Harmonic thought. Harmony containing the religious dimension	Linear thought, quest for salvation. Harmony subordinate to the religious dimension.

Thus two contradictory modes of thought coexisted within the Medieval *universitas*. During Petrarch's generation they became incompatible, producing a schism: while Petrarch followed a Humanist and Catholic path (which are not contradictory), Boccaccio – the late, Florentine Boccaccio – took up the Avveroist and neopagan heritage of the young Dante. In the 15th century this latter tendency was further complicated by its cross-breeding and hybridization with a philosophical element, which I have called "Platonist"; and was further enriched in the 16th century with the poetic-musical praxis of the Italian aristocratic academies.

Both movements rejected Scholasticism and the Middle Ages in general, advancing instead the traditions of Classical Antiquity and the attempt to reintroduce a feeling for nature that the Church had eradicated from society;[41] in both cases we thus have an attempt to go back to ancient sources. However, the Petrarchan aim – one of several such attempts – was to reintroduce the feeling for nature, but in a way subordinate to Catholicism, by envisaging a kind of allegory in which the world itself becomes a symbol; by contrast, the aim of Dante and Boccaccio,[42] and later of the Platon-

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ist Academies, was to offer a sacralized nature accessible to human beings. Believing in the efficacy of human desire, in its potential to act on the universe and society, they were in this way pagans.

This entire history is enmeshed in a system of meanings and events that bear witness to a total transformation of the way in which society was conceived. In the beginning, the discussion concerned clerics, who at this period were also society's educated. The debate was prolonged between 1285 and 1300 in the quarrel between the young Dante and his Florentine poet friends of the *dolce stil' nuovo* – Guido Cavalcanti and Dino da Pistoia. A third period, between 1360 and 1370, separated Boccaccio from Petrarch. The final period, that of Petrarchism itself, occured in Italy between 1515 and 1560 and divided the Petrarchists of the absolutist courts from those of the aristocratic academies. A theological event, which had ramifications for poetry, intersected this debate: the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1434-1439), which was the source of a Platonic Renaissance in Northern Italy.

Petrarchism as such took shape soon after this, in Florence, in an educated and aristocratic milieu where two competing visions of society coexisted: one of them, the Petrarchan, was rising, with its Catholic and absolutist "Humanism"; the other, the Dantean, was falling, with its pagan and aristocratic "Platonism." By the 16th century the first movement became dominant, and its context was government by monarchy; the locus of the second were the aristocratic academies, founded in 15th-century Florence and based on the Platonic idea, defended in *The Republic*, of an alliance among the aristocracy, philosophy, and poetry. A century later absolutism had won the day on the ground (in France and Italy) if not in all hearts and minds (in Italy). Indeed the debate was still alive around 1540 in aristocratic and educated circles at the courts of the smaller Italian cities.

The aristocratic academies of the 16th century envisaged a political alternative to monarchy; that of an enlightened aristocratic government, actuated by music, philosophy and poetry, an alliance of the best born and best spoken serving the public good. Under an absolutist government, the orderly interdependence of feudal society reduced its members to one of two positions: governor or governed; and to two ranks: monarch or subject. In the aristocratic state

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of which the academies dreamed, the nobility, as intermediary, was to create a totality by uniting the monarch to his subjects (the people). By suppressing the intermediate ranks, absolutism – especially in France – undermined the hierarchy of the social orders and helped to prepare the way for the emergence of popular sovereignty.

The aristocratic model of government produced in the academies was based on the feudal-chivalric system dreamed of by poets such as Ariosto and Boiardo. Seeing themselves as the intellectual and political heart of the court, the academy schools sought to produce guardian servants qualified to speak in the name of the entire community. These chosen ones assigned themselves the role of the city's heralds and witnesses: a totalizing function intended to connect both ends of the hierarchy.

The Medieval "aristocracy of the Bishops" presents an excellent example of this kind of ideal construction: in the 7th century, the Pope, *primus inter pares*, began his letters with the following salutation: "To XXX, Gregory – or Boniface – , bishop, servant to the servants of God." "Bishop" was his supreme title, and his authority lay in service:[43] in this vertical relationship, service is the essence of authority. When writing to kings and abbots he would begin with the impersonal: "To his dear son," thereby signalling his "natural" and spiritual primacy and designating a distance of one level of kinship. This superiority, based on the all-encompassing nature of the divine, was not in contradiction with the pope's subordination to the king in the terrestrial city: the two were not situated on the same level. The same pope, writing to the king, addressed him in the same breath as "his son and master," thus expressing the fundamental opposition of this value system: subordinate to Caesar on this earth, the pope is one step above him in relation to the divine source: a proof by origin or genesis, this is an expression and result of the divine nature. However, when writing to another bishop, the pope would address him on the same level of kinship beginning with "To my dear brother." The pope, a bishop elected by God and monarch by divine right, yet chosen by his colleagues in a way similar to the Germanic emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, ruled over the earth but governed collegially, which invested this function with a kinship relation: a kinship-parity, source of an older brother-younger brother hierarchisation.

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Finally, suffering is a major theme in the poems produced by the academies. However, in the Middle Ages it was not the pope but bishop whose function it was to serve as witness or martyr for the suffering of all; and according to the theoreticians of the academies, this function was an element of the master's *dignitas*, his burden of responsibility and source of honor.[44] The 16th-century Petrarchists blurred not only the meaning of suffering but the totalizing function of the aristocracy; they did, however, preserve an instrumental role for the aristocracy that well corresponded to the reality of absolutism. Dante had dreamed of uniting imperial and papal offices, and his epigones of the 16th century held on to this dream. Their works underscore the totalizing function of the community of intermediaries, which is comprised of witnesses, guardians, and servants of the system; these best born, and often martyred *sur-hommes* were nevertheless worth more as a community than as individuals. The function of royalty, no longer understood in terms of either pope or emperor, is left unresolved by the Dantean side; and without it, this contradiction no longer has a higher level on which to be resolved: the royal function simply ceases to exist.

Dante and the academies function in a coherent and finite universe-system in which ritual serves to unify the separate but ultimately interdependent and hierarchically-arranged social and qualitative orders. Poetry from Petrarch to Ronsard resounds within a universe simultaneously multiple and simplified, in which music equals monody – one voice, one path. Poetry and the *litterae* cease to serve a ritual purpose, becoming instead an art of the occasion in the service to the monarchy.

Notes

1. G. Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), ed. by B. Hattaway, Kent State University Press, 1970, p. 2, quoted in: W. Rebhorn, *The Emperor of Men's Minds*, Ithaca, 1995, p. 21.
2. See P. Ténoudji, "La République, la mathématique et la musique," in: *Les Temps modernes*, 586 (1996). The formulation "the encompassing of the opposites" (*l'englobement des contraires*) comes from Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Paris, 1996; the simultaneous "yes and no" from Maria Daraki, "Sortir du structuralisme," in: *Esprit*, May 1994.

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3. Hannah Arendt, *Love and St. Augustine*, Chicago, 1996.
4. The classical source is Ovid, but it first reached the West via the Andalusian Muslim mystics in the 12th century, notably Ruzbehn Baqli. H. Corbin and M. Mo'in (ed.), *Le Jasmin des fidèles d'Amour*, Paris/Teheran, 1958.
5. H. Arendt, (note 3 above), p. 96.
6. I have in mind here a commentary to the book of Matthew, 16:18 ("And I say this to you: you are Peter, the Rock, and on this rock I will build my church …), by Gerard Haddad (*Les bibliocastes*, Paris, 1991); in Hebrew the word "father" is written as *aleph*, "son" as *beth* or *noun*, "rock" as *aleph, beth, noun*. "Only then," Haddad writes on p. 25, "can we grasp the true complexity of the 'pun' on which the Church is based."
7. As Freud sees it (in *Moses and Monotheism*), Christianity is the only religion where the son, not the father, is killed.
8. I'm thinking here of an excerpt from the *Chevalier à la Charette* (2821-2823): "In the name of God, who is the son and the father / who gave himself as mother / one who was his daughter and servant."
9. That is, with Pietro d'Albano, Marsilio da Padua, Taddeo da Parma.
10. *Le Familiari*, X, IV.
11. Giovanni Boccaccio: *Trattello in lauda di Dante* (1361), Milan, 1995, pp. 57, 155.
12. III, 9. 4, in: *Tutte le opere*, Milan, 1993, p. 151.
13. II, 7, 1993, p. 53.
14. 1993, XLI, p. 76.
15. Teresa D'Avila, *Moradas del castillo interior*, 1577, Sevilla, in: *Obras Completas*, Madrid, 1948, Vol. I, p. 58.
16. This school exercise, made up of antitheses, served as a model for Du Bellay (*La nuit m'est courte, et le jour trop me dure, Olive*, XXVI), Ronsard (*J'espère et crains, je me tais et supplie, Amours de Cassandre*, XII), and Louise Labé (*Je vis, je meurs, je me brûle et me noye, Oeuvres*, VIII).
17. F. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, Milan, 1991, sonnet CCXXIII.
18. Ronsard, *Sonnets pour Hèlene*, I.
19. End of the sonnet quoted above (note 17).
20. Petrarca (note 18 above).
21. Ronsard, *Hymne de la mort* (1555), p. 175.
22. Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1938, reed. 1974, Vol. II, p. 979.
23. 1995, pp. 57, 153.
24. Ibid., pp. 80, 220.
25. *Les Généalogies*, 1380, XVI, 10.
26. *Discorsi della famiglia*, II, 12.
27. Both the Italian madrigal and *canzone alla francese* combined Petrarchist poems with the Franco-Flemish song of Josquin Desprez and Ockeghem.
28. Paris, 1964, p. 16.
29. Paris, 1994.
30. This entire paragraph, up until the "but" which follows, was inspired by ideas advanced by Florence Dupont, *L'Invention de la littérature*, 1995, and Marcel Détienne, *Les Maîtres de vérité*, 1961.
31. See, for example, G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex, Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, New York, 1985.
32. S. Riccio, *Vita di Don Pietro di Toledo*, Naples, 1846, p. 57.

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33. B. Croce, "L'accademia dei Sereni," in: *Aneddoti di varia letteratura*, Bari, 1953, pp. 11, 302.
34. Plato, *Symposium*, 208c; *Republic*, 458d.
35. The theme of poetic fury or enthusiasm is a favorite and recurring theme of Renassiance Italians: from *Phedra* to Horace (*Odes*, III, 4, 5), Pliny (*Épistle*, VII, 4), Ovid (*The Art of Love*) and of course in chivalric and courtly literature (beginning in the 12th century and in *Tristan*).
36. Plato, *Phaedo*, XXXV, 84.
37. In the Hindu pantheon Brahma, who is the origin of all created life, is depicted riding a swan. For the Celts and Germans, swan-women were seen as divine hypostases with the gift of prophecy. Those of the Celts were linked to Dumezil's first and third functions (royal origin and fertility) while the Germanic Valkyries were linked to the second (warrior-protectors).
38. Venice, 1539; I have made use of the text found in the second edition, published by the same editor in 1541.
39. Read in Morisset and Thévenot, *Les lettres latines*, Paris, 1978, Vol. IV, p. 1008.
40. F. Braudel, *Le Modèle italien*, Paris, 1994, p.130.
41. As we will see below in regard to Petrarch, this eradication also took the form of a transformation of nature into a symbol or epiphany of the divine nature itself, separated from society and accessible only to a few "renunciators": I am thinking here of St. Francis of Assisi.
42. I realize that this study artificially isolates the young Dante of the *Vita Nuova* and the "old," Florentine Boccaccio, after his acquaintance with Petrarch. The writings of the "old" Dante and "young" Boccaccio are probably best classed as "Petrarchan-Humanist." Although the young Boccaccio tries to overcome desire, his most misogynist treatise, *il Corbaccio* (1350), nevertheless makes use of "intellectual vision."
43. The papal letters quoted in this paragraph were read by the present author in *L'Histoire ecclésiastique du peuple anglais*, written by Bède le Vénerable, trans. P. Delaveau, Paris, 1995, pp. 125-145.
44. See, among others: G. Muzio, 1571: *Il gentilhuomo, trattato de la nobilità*, Venice; G.B. Nicolucci, called Le Pigna, 1561: *Il principe*, Florence Sansovino; F. Patrizi di Cherso, 1553: *Dialogo del honore* (containing: *il barignano*), Venice, Guffio; P. Rocchi, 1571: *Dialogo del gentilhuomo* (1568), Lucca, Sardi; A. Romei, 1586; *Discorso della nobilità*, Venice; R. Varano, 1575; *Nato nobile et in città libera*, Ferrara, Baldini.

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