Abandoning the ‘Valley of Your Own Sinfulness’:

*Francesco Petrarca as a Moral Philosopher*

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“...In theology, there is no novelty without danger...”

- *The Theologians*, J.L. Borges
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Abstract

This essay examines specific Latin works by Francesco Petrarca; *The Mont Ventoux Letter, On Religious Leisure, Secretum, Letter III, 12 “To Marco Genovese,”* and *The Triumph of Eternity*. By reading these works, this paper aims to reconstruct Petrarca’s position on salvation and the role that literature and poetry have in the pursuit of it. This essay also questions the traditional interpretation of the poet as torn between his responsibilities as good Christian and his love of poetry. Through a textual analysis of the works, especially *Secretum*, this essay finds that his Latin works contain a strategy for salvation that is based on specific guidelines for self-reflection. Additionally, Petrarca’s debt to the discussion on fourteenth century theology and moral philosophy is explored.
1. Introduction: Petrarca’s Genius

In her essay titled *Francis Petrarch: The First Modern Friend*, Dolora Chapelle Wojciehowski writes “Petrarch has come to stand metonymically for his era.”¹ Her statement is representative of the popular critical opinion that recognizes Francesco Petrarca’s literature as the model of humanism and the inspiration for the Renaissance. The Canzoniere is regarded as the most important of his works, due to its influence on the construction and attitude of romantic vernacular poetry throughout Europe. Scholars also praise him for his interest in classical writers, whom he appreciated for their literary skills and whose texts he aimed to incorporate into his own literature.

Modern scholars are not alone in their opinion of Petrarca’s significance, his contemporaries also celebrated his numerous achievements. Aldo Scaglione quotes a fourteenth century letter written by Coluccio Salutati, that describes him as “greater than Virgil because he was not only at least as excellent as he in poetry but also in eloquence (prose), where Virgil had left no mark.”² According to Salutati, the poet’s literary contributions are more significant than Virgil, which is very high praise. He continues; “Thus Petrarch combined in himself the peaks of poetry, eloquence, and moral philosophy.”³ He considers Petrarca’s three areas of literary production as interconnected and equally important. His comments reflect the opinions of fourteenth century

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contemporaries who viewed the poet as a noteworthy moral philosopher, whose poetry and prose expressed theological concerns.

Salutati understood moral philosophy as an expression of Christian intellectual thought on questions of immortality and salvation. His perception of the duties of such writers is representative of his contemporaries during fourteenth century. In Jeremy Catto’s essay *Currents of Religious Thought and Expression*, he writes that there was a concerted effort to resolve enduring religious questions such as “God’s relation to the world, the human soul and the nature of redemption” during Petrarca’s time. The studies of moral philosophers were centered on issues of how to live a moral life that leads to salvation. Catto writes that the writers who defined certain Christian pursuits were not only clergy members, but were also secular men. Additionally, he describes men who consider issues of Christian doctrine as involved in intellectual work that also fulfilled men’s souls. When describing Petrarca as a moral philosopher, Salutati is recognizing the poet’s deep interest in questions that were integral to the daily practice of his love for God.

Contrary to the ideas expressed by Salutati, most modern critics do not view Petrarca’s prose and poetry as equally valuable. Many choose to artificially separate them and ignore all his references to moral philosophy and theology. Utilizing such a narrow scope of inquiry leads to severe misunderstandings of his texts. These unnecessary distinctions usually result in a portrayal of the poet as divided emotionally, a view that is not fully supported by careful analysis of his works. For example, a popular theory

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6 Ibid, 44.
7 Ibid, 48.
describes the poet as divided between pursuing poetry and salvation. Those who study this division argue that his literature aims to reconcile this conflict. These scholars impose their own preconceived ideas on his poetry and thus, ultimately miss the common threads that are consistent throughout his works, a fact that was clear to Salutati and Petrarca’s contemporaries.

To understand the writer properly, it is imperative that we first study his works as a whole. This essay constitutes a first attempt to reconstruct his views on a number of issues pertaining to salvation, and in particular, on the way in which his pursuits as a poet relates to his duties as a good Christian. We will see that many of his Latin texts consider self-reflection as a privileged path that leads to heaven. If we then look at the environment in which these works were produced, we will see how Petrarca was an active participant in the contemporary theological debates on salvation.
2. Literature Review: Contemporary Interpretations of Petrarca

After 700 years, scholars have developed a variety of different textual strategies and frameworks to understand Petrarca’s rich texts. A particularly prevalent one is based on interpreting his works as produced by an emotionally conflicted man. He is described as torn between his love for God and his passion for Laura, the real-life woman who functioned as his poetic muse. Critic Alexander Lee describes this group as influenced by a “romantic impulse” that leads to an understanding of the poet as tormented by this conflict. This understanding of the poet does not allow for the study of his works as intellectual pursuits.

Instead, these readers interpret the literature as his attempt to tackle his personal moral dilemmas and confusions. This perspective implies that it is impossible for the poet to reconcile his commitments to the Church with his interests as a poet. Hans Baron epitomizes this interpretation by describing the poetry as the result of his deeply troubled soul that “arose from a psychological situation of sadness and despair.”

A recent essay, published by Brenda Deen Schildgen, titled Overcoming Augustanian Dichotomies in Defense of the Laurel in Canzoni 359 and 360 of the Rime Sparse adopts the same view as Baron when reading the vernacular poetry. Schildgen focuses on Canzoni 359 and 360, and argues that these poems illustrate Petrarca’s confusion. Her essay describes how both poems detail the danger of pursuing poetry over salvation. Regardless of his

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10 Ibid, 6.
fears, he was unable to abandon his literature and pursue salvation.¹¹ She argues that his desire in writing both Canzoni was to settle his own feelings on this moral issue. However, his poems were unable to help reconcile his divided soul, and he remains uncertain.

Schildgen’s analysis of the Rime Sparse poems fails to recognize the important textual parallels that are shared with his Latin works. Poems 359 and 360 seem to show a divided Petrarca and both poems end with the continuation of his uncertainty: “That I have heard your lawsuits pleases me,/ But such great litigation needs more time.”¹² This type of conclusion is repeated throughout his Latin texts allowing Petrarca to explore the same questions of morality in multiple works throughout his life. Schildgen overlooks how poem 360 also provides an opportunity to understand Petrarca’s relationship with literature in regards to his Christian responsibilities, a question that is discussed at length in his Latin texts. The poem describes his literary aspirations as also connected with his love for God: “Yet more, and this surpasses all,/ I give him wings to soar above the heavens through/ Things mortal, value right/ A stairway to our maker...As he has sometimes said himself in rhyme.”¹³ Although Schildgen argues that these poems epitomize the poet’s inner feelings of uncertainty regarding the pursuit of poetry, a close reading results in the understanding that he was not tormented by this question, rather that he discussed it at length in multiple genres.

Even though scholars primarily view the vernacular poetry through this framework, this overarching interpretation is also frequently applied to his Latin texts. Usually, these

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¹³ Ibid, 407.
readers understand Secretum as the work in which the poet’s inner feelings are most clearly on display. In the book, Petrarca imagines a conversation with Saint Augustine, where they discuss the poet’s concerns regarding his death and his potentially dangerous earthly passions. An example of such a reading can be found in Armando Maggi’s summary of the work for Petrarca: A Critical Guide to his Complete Works. He argues that the two main characters, Francesco and Saint Augustine, “[clearly]... represent the author’s own contrasting viewpoints.”14 This argument stresses that the goal of the work is to provide an opportunity to settle his conflict between his Christian duties and his goals as a poet. Similar to Baron and Shildgen, these scholars read the text through the same narrow framework that leads them to the same conclusion: he wrote poetry and Latin prose in order to quell his fears and confusions.

This restrictive framework is applied regardless of his text. Lyell Asher’s essay Petrarca at the Peak of Fame views his letters also as an example of his confusion. Her essay examines the Mont Ventoux narrative, which describes a young Petrarca’s climb up a mountain that is soon transformed into an allegorical journey where he voices his fears of not being saved. She argues that in the letter he illustrates his “self-conscious awareness” of his potential as a poet.15 She writes that he draws comparisons between himself and Ulysses, in an effort to express his own trajectory to greatness.16 Her essay also interprets the poet as divided between the goals of his poet self and his religious self; “…the humbled pilgrim tripping down one side of the mountain [was] pulling the celebrated poet up the

16 Ibid, 1060.
other.” This metaphor successfully divides the man into two separate entities, each with their own contrary desires. If one side of the poet gains the upper hand, the other must suffer. Her view does not promote an actively intellectual view of the poet. Rather, she, like Hans Baron and others, offers a limiting and restrictive interpretation of his works.

Some scholars who study his Latin texts in an attempt to explain his theological interests also impose the same restrictive perspective. Sam Steward’s essay The Passion and the Soul of Petrarch identifies biographical details such as his brother’s decision to join a religious order, as the motivation for writing moral philosophy. He writes that witnessing the plague’s devastation on his brother’s monastic community “had a terrific effect on [him] and on the religious evolution of his spirit.” His particular analysis also incorrectly utilizes Petrarca’s emotions as an interpretive tool for his texts.

The aforementioned scholars illustrate how pervasive this view is. Due to the popularity of this perspective, it constitutes the basis of many studies and critical editions on Petrarca’s texts, ultimately influencing future scholarship. This essay aims to show how such a reading is incorrect, and does not offer accurate ways of interpreting the theological implications in his text. Rather, we will show how Petrarca uses his poetry and

17 Ibid, 1050.
19 Ibid, 425.
20 Although Steward’s essay is quite old, his analysis exemplifies the choice to utilize Petrarca’s biography as an interpretive tool. In addition, his essay shows the prevalence of this view for at least half a century.
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prose to exercise self-reflection, which he describes as an instrumental activity in gaining salvation. He not only practices these convictions through his works, but he also theorizes the specifics of these moral exercises in a few theological treatises. His emphasis on self-reflection earns him the reputation as a moral philosopher that his attributed to him by his contemporary Salutati.

2a. Literature Review: Saint Augustine and Petrarca

Some scholars correctly realize the importance of Petrarca’s respect and passion for Saint Augustine as a way of analyzing the poet’s theological concerns. In many of his works, including his Latin prose and letters, there are many references to the Saint and his treatises. For example, in the previously mentioned Mont Ventoux letter, Saint Augustine acts as a moral guide for Petrarca, and in Secretum the Father of the Church is one of two main characters, the poet himself being the other. Thus the connection between the two writers is clear and warrants further research. We will briefly survey what scholars have argued concerning the nature of the relationship between Petrarca’s writings and the Christian Father, which emphasize the poet’s interest in salvation as inspired by intellectual passion.

H. James Shey’s essay The Form and Meaning of Secretum in Petrarca’s Secretum with Introduction, Notes, and Critical Anthology he outlines the scholarly research concerning which of Saint Augustine’s works influenced the poet. In addition to various other contemporary theologians, Shey recognizes the Christian Father’s Confessions and Soliloquia as the most influential. Shey writes that in both works, the narrator is “seeking to know himself and the highest good,” which is the same goal of many of Petrarca’s Latin
works. Additionally, both *Confessions* and *Secretum* are understood as representative of consolatory literature, which is meant to offer helpful or consolatory advice to someone. Shared between Petrarca and Saint Augustine is a similarity of genre, that also begins to shed light on the significant role that the Christian Father embodied in the poet’s literature.

In his essay *Philology and Theology*, Joachim Krupper identifies the “rhetorical and aesthetic aspects” of Saint Augustine’s moral treatises as the motivation behind Petrarca’s own interest in theology. He argues that the beauty of the Saint’s prose inspired the poet to emulate these aesthetic qualities. Krupper’s essay diligently explains the many textual similarities between Petrarca’s *Secretum* and Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*. He argues that the poet’s main goal in referencing the Saint’s texts was to encourage his audience to read or re-read the writings of the Christian Father. In addition, Petrarca was also interested in the way in which the Saint understood the mechanics of salvation: the appropriate path a good Christian should take in order to ensure the achievement of eternal life. His essay portrays the poet as a teacher who is devoted to educating his readers on Saint Augustine’s discussions on salvation.

In Historian Jaroslav Pelikan’s book, titled *The Christian Tradition*, he describes the poet as a passionate and insightful reader of Saint Augustine. He casts him as an enthusiastic Augustinian whose major theological interest was in revisiting the Saint’s texts so as to interpret his understanding of salvation. Pelikan, like Krupper also focuses on the *Secretum*. Unlike modern literary critics, he does not interpret the book as an expression of

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the poet’s confusion. Instead, he places it and its author within a larger context of contemporary awareness of the Saint’s treatises on salvation. He argues that the plot, as well as the numerous references to the Christian Father, illustrates Saint Augustine’s influence on the theological discussions during the fourteenth century. His interpretation is surprising, given that unlike literary critics, it recognizes the importance of Petrarca’s literary production as more than simple diaries, but as intellectual exercises.

Carol E. Quillen’s essay, A Tradition Invented: Petrarch, Augustine, and the Language of Humanism, describes the aesthetic debt the poet owes to Saint Augustine. She specifically focuses on how the poet studied and emulated the Saint’s stylistic models when engaging in theological debates. She writes that while the poet commonly utilized the Saint’s words and style, his reasons for doing so are complex. She describes how Petrarca desired to perfect his style of argumentation, so that his own discussions on issues of salvation would be perceived as important. As a result, the poet re-appropriated the Saint’s literary style to construct his own theological arguments.

Quillen, Pelikan and Krupper portray the poet as a deeply intellectual man who used Saint Augustine’s treatises on salvation as an educational tool. They describe the poet as interested in refining his argumentation throughout his production, so that he could engage more fully with contemporary theologians. The aforementioned scholars also show that Petrarca was an active participant in the theological debates of the time. Additionally, some scholars also describe him as willing to pursue his own unique interpretations of the Saint’s

25 Saint Augustine is described as the “paradigm for the inner life.” (Ibid, 21).
27 Ibid, 181.
28 Ibid, 200.
texts on salvation. Such studies give substance to Salutati’s description of the poet as a moral philosopher.

In another contribution to the study of Petrarca, the already quoted Brenda Deen Schildgen’s essay *Petrarch’s Defense of Secular Letters, the Latin Father, and Ancient Roman Rhetoric* further dissects the relationship between the poet and Saint Augustine. Although she insists on viewing him as divided, she correctly identifies the Christian Father as the poet’s inspiration for discussing theology. Schildgen writes, “Petrarch’s Augustine is an enduring voice through all his introspective interludes, raised by the poet himself as a judge, a critic, an advocate of Christian spirituality and morality.”

She argues that the poet deliberately chose the figure of Saint Augustine in order to elevate the importance of his own works. Furthermore, the poet’s choice allows for him to discuss his own opinions on salvation, while protected by the name of a widely respected theologian.

In much the same way, Alexander Lee’s previously mentioned *Petrarch and St. Augustine: Classical Scholarship, Christian Theology and the Origins of the Renaissance in Italy*, argues that Saint Augustine’s theological example led the poet to develop his own answers to theological questions. This “intellectual debt” can be found in *Secretum* and *On Religious Leisure*. Lee identifies these works as representative of this relationship, because of the text’s discussions on salvation and the correct way to earn it. He asserts that both works show the poet’s ability to offer a unique approach to this theological issue and that his study of the Saint’s texts helped to develop his own “distinct moral

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perspective[s].” 31 Lee’s conclusion is significant because he provides an explanation for why Petrarca would offer new strategies on how to pursue salvation that differ from the Saint’s. He casts the poet as interested in respecting the Saint’s authority, but also willing to discuss his own interpretations on theological issues.

The scholarly arguments examined in this essay illustrate Petrarca’s rational interest in theology as a consistent intellectual pursuit. Thus reading his works as the result of an internally conflicted soul becomes difficult to support. The aforementioned scholars emphasize the poet’s interest in Saint Augustine, and demonstrate the seriousness of his literary passions. Many readers of the poet also find clues in the text that support this perspective.

Before we begin surveying Petrarca’s ideas on how to achieve salvation as expressed in his Latin works, we will provide a brief overview of the theological discussion at the time. In doing so, we then be able to show the poet as representative of a larger contemporary interest in Saint Augustine’s works on salvation. This summary will also show that the poet’s desire to interpret the Saint’s treatises in new ways, was not unique, but also a common trend.

31 Ibid, 27.
3. Overview of Theological Era: Discussions at the time of Petrarca

In the introduction to his book, *Salvation and Sin*, David Aers recommends that scholars refrain from summarizing the theological debates of the fourteenth century because the discussions are “too heterogeneous and eclectic to allow such homogenizing assumptions to shape any study.”32 Regardless of his advice, many academics have written conflicting accounts of Petrarca’s time. We will look at two of these summaries. The first is by the already quoted Jaroslav Pelikan, and Justo L. Gonzalez authors the second. Both provide valuable accounts of the general theological interests during the fourteenth century and explain the high level of influence Saint Augustine’s texts had on these discussions.

Jaroslav Pelikan’s *The Christian Tradition: Reformation of Church and Dogma* characterizes the fourteenth century as comprised of philosophical writers who were dedicated to interpreting Saint Augustine’s texts on salvation. He names the era the “Augustinian Synthesis” due to this common desire to “preserve the substance of the doctrines of God and man... as these had come down from the fathers, and above all Augustine, but to do so in a way that took account of the new challenges and new opportunities of the 14th century.”33 Pelikan describes a theological environment where most theologians were primarily interested in the conclusions offered by Saint Augustine. He also writes that these thinkers had a high level of respect for the Saint and his discussions on God’s involvement in salvation. However, he shows that they openly

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engaged in innovative interpretations of the Saint’s texts, by theorizing how his treatises could be applied to the new modern era. These writers welcomed a variety of opinions because of the “pregnant plurality of fourteenth century thought which was recognized by thinkers at the time.” Pelikan’s account shows that these many opinions all shared a common foundation in Saint Augustine’s texts, and that each helped to construct a theological era dedicated to understanding salvation.

In his book, titled *A History of Christian Thought: From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation*, Justo L. Gonzalez’s depicts a different picture of the fourteenth century. He describes two different factions that engage in a lively discussion on Saint Augustine’s texts. One group insists on the persuasiveness of the Saint’s theory on divine intervention and the second group is described as followers of Aristotle who desired a more rational way of ordering their lives based on scientific inquiry and analysis. Gonzalez views this conflict between the two groups as a significant problem that dominated the theological landscape. Gonzalez echoes Pelikan’s account, by also portraying the fourteenth century as primarily concerned with the application of Saint Augustine’s texts.

Both Gonzalez and Pelikan view Petrarca’s era as largely concerned with the Saint’s treatises on salvation. Their accounts show that Saint Augustine was widely read and debated throughout Europe. This perspective on the fourteenth century shows that Petrarca’s passion for the Saint as well as his intellectual curiosity, was not unique. His own philosophical texts were a part of a widespread theological discussion.

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34 Ibid, 10.
Before we introduce textual evidence to further reconstruct the historical context that affected his works, we will review the progression of this essay's argument. We began by introducing Salutati’s description of Petrarca as a writer of poetry, prose and moral philosophy, and whose texts were equally valuable. Modern scholars do not share Salutati's understanding of the poet, and instead frequently separate the poet’s literary production into individual genres, which results in a misinterpretation of his works. We recounted one popular misreading that views his works as an example of his troubled soul. This view is unable to offer a compelling argument for the significance of his references to Saint Augustine, due to a limited perspective on the texts. Scholars who not subscribe to the aforementioned framework describe the Christian Father as a source of literary and theological inspiration for the poet’s works. This essay also recognizes that Petrarca was not the only fourteenth century writer who was deeply interested in the Saint. Other writers active during this time also read his theories on salvation and developed their own conclusions and interpretations. These radically different views on salvation co-existed during the fourteenth century, creating a free exchange of interpretations, ideas, and strategies for the pursuit of the heaven.

3a. Contemporary Religious Texts

To further explore how philosophers of the fourteenth century readily accepted these new interpretations, although still grounded in Christian orthodoxy and doctrine, we will refer to the texts of two contemporary theologians who engaged in such interpretations. Both Thomas of Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux were influenced by the Christian Father’s texts, but developed vastly different opinions on his treatises on salvation. First we will look at Thomas of Aquinas, whose theological treatises have shaped
Catholic doctrine for centuries, and then conclude with Bernard of Clairvaux, whose texts are also quoted directly by Petrarca.

Eleonore Stump’s *Aquinas* illustrates that even within the works of a single theologian, it is possible for multiple understandings of how a man can be saved to emerge. Her book provides an overview of the philosopher’s works that clearly show two contradictory answers to the problem of salvation. Although he is responding to Saint Augustine’s moral treatises on how to live virtuously, Aquinas’ texts identify two different methods. The first is the “doctrine of atonement” which argues that men must appeal to God for forgiveness to be saved.  

39 The second method, which opposes his first, is the “doctrine of faith,” which shows that men are welcomed into heaven because of their faith in God.  

40 Despite the obvious contradictions between the two approaches, Stump argues that Aquinas and his contemporaries embraced both interpretations.  

41 Her book establishes that even a single theologian could openly explore multiple different approaches to theological issues, without fear of repercussions.

Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Concerning Grace and Free Will* further illustrates the diversity of interpretations on Saint Augustine’s moral treatises. Although his work was completed in the twelfth century, it is representative of monastic texts that were widely read and considered during the fourteenth century. His most influential legacy lies in his discussions on salvation, influenced by Saint Augustine’s in *Confessions*.  

42 Concerning *Grace and Free Will* argues that man’s skills are examples of God’s love and grace. He writes

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40 Ibid, 378.
41 Ibid, 378.
“...what are called our merits may be properly described as seed-plots of hope, incentives to love, tokens of a hidden predestination, foretastes of future felicity, the way by which we reach the kingdom, not the moving cause of our kingship.”

His strategy details how these gifts are the reason for men’s salvation; the gifts and skills that they are born with are the only tools they will need to reach salvation. Bernard’s method introduces concepts, such as God’s foreknowledge, that influenced Thomas of Aquinas’ description of the doctrine of faith. Although Bernard interpreted Saint Augustine, he develops a vastly different interpretation that led to a unique method for pursuing salvation.

Both Thomas of Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux used the Church Father’s discussions on salvation to construct their own methods. This overview of both theologians illustrates the many possible interpretations on Saint Augustine’s texts, as well as the larger community’s acceptance of these new strategies. Petrarca’s Latin texts exhibit the same willingness to reference the Saint, as well as re-interpret him. Before we examine the poet’s understanding of salvation, we will develop a timeline for the chosen works, which clarifies the precise ordering of his texts.

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4. Chronology:

This essay examines Petrarca’s Latin works because of the common theme of salvation that is woven through the texts. His Latin literary production illustrates the poet’s own unique interpretations of Saint Augustine’s moral texts. Each chosen volume for this essay emphasizes the same tools necessary for salvation, repeated self-examination and reflection. It is necessary to develop a chronology of the Latin compositions so as to examine each work in the proper order. In doing so, the variations in his chosen strategy become clear, thus showing that Petrarca also enjoyed exploring multiple interpretations.

The proposed chronology for this essay is derived from three separate scholarly studies. We will use the timelines devised by Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi in Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works, H. James Shey’s contained in Petrarch’s Secretum, and Peter Hainsworth’s timeline in The Essential Petrarch as well. Each work will be examined in a similar manner, beginning with a detailed summary, followed by a discussion of the relevant quotations that exemplify the poet’s concern with salvation and the importance of self-reflection.

The Mont Ventoux Letter will be analyzed first. Written on April 24th, 1336, it is an appropriate starting point for analyzing his interest in self-reflection as a path to salvation. Maggi lists the letter as one of the first works of literature he completed in his adult life. Hainsworth describes it as the most famous of Petrarca’s correspondence. It also initiated his interest in letters that stemmed from a desire to engage in the classical

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tradition of corresponding on issues of politics, travel, literature, and moral philosophy.\textsuperscript{46} Addressed to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, the \textit{Mont Ventoux} letter establishes the poet’s interest in salvation and marks the beginning of a life long inquiry into self-reflection as a path to salvation.

Following the letter, we will examine Petrara’s \textit{On Religious Leisure}. Both Maggi and Shey’s chronology agree that Petrarca completed this work in 1347. Written after visiting his brother’s monastic order, the text is concerned with the attainment of salvation and focuses on how one should best order one’s life.

Following \textit{On Religious Leisure}, this essay will discuss the most complete of his moral treatises, the \textit{Secretum}. Shey’s chronology argues that this work was begun 1341-1342, however, both Maggi and Shey show that he revised the work throughout his life. Shey’s timeline lists two additional revisions to the text, first in 1349, then again 1353.\textsuperscript{47} The work was finally completed in 1356.\textsuperscript{48} In Hans Baron’s previously discussed essay, \textit{The Evolution of Petrarch’s Thought}, he discusses the immense difficulty of placing the \textit{Secretum} in Petrarca’s timeline because of his habit of “keeping [this] work in his desk throughout his life.”\textsuperscript{49}

Petrarca’s letter titled \textit{Familaires III, 12} is the most difficult to organize into the poet’s chronology. Hainsworth explains that Petrarca began collecting letters in the early 1350s and began to choose the letters to be included in both his \textit{Familiares} and \textit{Seniles}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid, ixxvii.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid, xv.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Hans Baron, “The Evolution of Petrarch’s Thought: Reflections on the State of Petrarch Studies”, \textit{Bibliotheque d’Humanisme et Renaissance}, 1 (1962) 11.
\end{itemize}
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collections at the same time. This particular letter retells the theological advice Petrarca offers to a friend, Marco Genovese.

Finally, we will look at the last work completed by the poet, *The Triumph of Eternity*. Shey writes that this work was written during the last four years of his life, from 1370-1374. This composition was chosen to conclude this study because it is the poet’s final discussion on salvation and self-reflection. Although this essay is primarily concerned with the Latin texts, and *The Triumph of Eternity* is a vernacular poem, we argue that it is a part of a tradition of Latin poems that celebrate mortal glory, known as the *Triumphs*. This final *Triumph* is the final poem in a cycle of six. This poem is an allegory of eternity that is heavily influenced by the poet’s previous considerations on the mechanics of salvation. This final text can be viewed as a summary of the main aspects of Petrarca’s sustained discussion on self-reflection as a tool for reaching eternity.

The following analyses of these works illustrate the scope and breadth of his interest in moral philosophy. Each Latin work focuses on self-analysis as an important step in securing a seat in heaven, an idea that adheres to contemporary church doctrine. Interestingly, this common thread in his Latin works provides insight into the interests of his poetry. In the Latin texts, he takes seriously his role as a devout Christian and explores the ways one can self-reflect.

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5. *Familiares* 4.1; The Mont Ventoux Letter

In the *Mont Ventoux* letter, Petrarca shows how self-reflection is one of the most efficient paths to attain eternal salvation. This text describes a day when the young poet and his brother decided to climb to the top of Mont Ventoux. Such a narrative is typically interpreted as an allegory depicting the circumstances that lead to a virtuous life. Although the two youths start their journey with the “compulsion to climb,” they are soon exhausted and each chooses a different strategy.\(^{52}\)

The brother, Gherardo, walks straight up, while the poet doesn’t “mind taking a longer route [proved] it was less steep” and “hopes to find an easier approach around the other side.”\(^{53}\) This new route proves to be more treacherous and results in far more “misadventures.”\(^{54}\) Finally, Petrarca decides to follow his brother’s example, and this is when he draws the comparison between the difficult climb and the path that leads to paradise; “while bodily movement is plain to see, movements of the spirit are invisible and hidden.”\(^{55}\) He realizes that while climbing a mountain, one can see the distance separating him from the top, but mortal men cannot see how far they are from reaching heaven, and thus may become lost on the journey.

As he nears the top, he describes his fear of making mistakes in his life and becoming lost “in the darkness and shadow of death.”\(^{56}\) Once reaching the peak, he opens his copy of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* for guidance. The Saint’s words inspire him to

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\(^{53}\) Ibid, 221.

\(^{54}\) Ibid, 221.

\(^{55}\) Ibid, 220.

\(^{56}\) Ibid, 221.
realize how easily a man’s soul can become corrupted and damned without his awareness: “how many find themselves being diverted from this path either by fear of the duress involved or out of the desire for softer options.”\textsuperscript{57} While walking down the mountain, he considers the Saint’s advice in relation to his earlier decision to take the easier road up the mountain. The letter concludes with his hope that his newly practiced exercise of self-analysis, as explained by Saint Augustine, will provide him with the tools necessary to “steer toward the one goal that is good, true, sure, and fixed.”\textsuperscript{58}

The \textit{Mont Ventoux} letter is difficult to interpret because of the seemingly autobiographical nature of the text. It describes Petrarca’s experience of self-reflection from a first person perspective. He utilizes this tone throughout his Latin works so as to highlight the personal nature of self-reflection. The first person narrative of this text also allows the audience to experience his self-analysis. By focusing on the theological issue of salvation, the letter becomes much more than a diary; it is a testimony of anxieties that are common to all mankind when contemplating the afterlife. During his journey, “his mind [leaps] from corporeal to incorporeal matters.”\textsuperscript{59}

In the course of the letter, Petrarca seems to imply that there are at least two kinds of self-examination, one that is useful and leads to salvation, and another that is completely useless. In fact, the first attempt, which occurs when walking up the mountain, causes the poet to become paralyzed with fear, because of the sins in his life. Additionally, his “ill judged postponements” frequently complicate the pursuit of virtue.\textsuperscript{60} By postponing self-reflection, he realizes that the task will only grow more onerous because it hasn’t been

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 226.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 226.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 222.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 222.
practiced periodically. The first attempt ends with the contemplation of what he believes to be his certain fate after death: “eternal night and perpetual torment.”

A successful self-examination comes only after reading Saint Augustine’s advice at the top of the Mountain. The Christian Father criticizes men who “have no thought for themselves” or their souls. He asserts that fear is what prevents these men from becoming aware of their decisions and to enthusiastically pursue salvation. Petrarca responds to the Saint’s words:

“...just as Augustine looked no further after reading what he read, so I too limited myself to the few words I have quoted. I silently reflected how poor are the moral resources of mortal men, who neglect the noblest part of themselves, drifting from one distraction to another, lost in vapid entertainments for the eye and looking in the outer world for what could have been found within.”

In the aforementioned quotation, the poet is referring to Saint Augustine’s Confessions, where the Christian Father was also dramatically altered by the written word. After reading the bible in the Garden, the Christian Father describes his conversion; “I had no wish to read further, nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.” Petrarca is clearly referencing the Christian Father’s literary experience by reading this passage of Confessions upon reading the peak of Mont Ventoux. He also follows the Saint’s example and ponders only a few short sentences.

Petrarca writes that while walking down the mountain he was able to consider not only the Saint’s advice but also the decisions he had made. Here is where Petrarca openly

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61 Ibid, 222.
62 Ibid, 223.
63 Ibid, 225.
65 Ibid, 227.
engages in correct self-reflection. He realizes that mortal men who are without the benefit of Saint Augustine’s texts, suffer from a disadvantage when pursuing salvation. He writes that like the Christian Father, he also examined himself based on the literary advice he read, and began to reflect. It is also important to note that this first introduction of self-awareness is also heavily influenced by Saint Augustine. The Christian Father is recognized as one of the first Western theologians to understand that a deep, contemplative love of God, lead to salvation.66

Petrarca’s successful self-reflection inspires him to write the letter that we are now analyzing. At the conclusion, he writes that although he was inspired by the Saint’s advice, he was still “wandering” through his life. 67 Despite this morose conclusion, the poet will dedicate many more works in Latin to solidify this newly acquired illumination and devise ways to integrate it in his daily life.

On Religious Leisure

On Religious Leisure adds two new elements to Petrarca’s theory on the importance of self-examination; he shows the significance of joining a religious order and he discusses some of the necessary steps one must take to facilitate self-reflection. While in the Mont Ventoux letter, the poet only quoted Saint Augustine, in this work, he discusses additional readings and authors that he considers useful to this process.

On Religious Leisure is divided into two books. The first book praises the monk’s strategy for salvation, which is to “take time” and practice “leisure.” 68 He defines leisure as a religious exercise that allows one to engage in daily and repetitive self-reflections, an activity which is suited to the monotonous life of a monk. Men who have the opportunity to practice leisure have the time to reflect and contemplate salvation, which ensures their access to heaven. The poet writes that “true virtue,” is inspired by leisure and that it “has this capacity: it arouses minds; it stimulates feelings,” continuing the cycle of self-analysis and contemplation that leads to heaven.69 Those who cannot take the time to reflect on themselves will not be saved and will not enjoy God’s grace. For example, he states that men who are not apart of a religious order “will never attain salvation” because “nothing [is] waiting for [them] at the end.”70

Book Two describes a strategy for ordinary men to pursue salvation. First, they must become aware of the “worldly objects” that cause their unhappiness.71 Petrarca writes that “nothing is more miserable than humanity,” and that the salvation is

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69 Ibid, 23.
70 Ibid, 12.
71 Ibid, 58.
unattainable for those who cannot practice leisure. 72 Men need to begin by familiarizing themselves with the moral treatises authored by the Fathers of the Church as well as classical thinkers. 73 The next few chapters of Book Two summarize various pieces of advice from these texts, so as to illustrate the importance of this knowledge in reaching salvation. The final chapter warns readers of the difficulty in studying these texts, for men can interpret the words differently, creating confusion. 74 Petrarca encourages his audience to read and discuss classical and religious treatises and to gain the necessary education to practice the same self-reflection he observed in monks.

In this work he also uses an autobiographical tone. He claims that his own doubts have led him to pursue advice that may help him navigate his life more successfully. He finds that Saint Augustine’s Confessions offers “sober and serious… complex, yet varied and efficacious teachings.” 75 However, despite the Saint’s words, he is again concerned for his own soul, and asks his brother and the monks to “make good use of [their] leisure” and to “weep for [him] as he tries to also reach salvation.” 76 Similar to the Mont Ventoux letter, the use of first person perspective allows the poet to carefully lead his audience through a detailed explanation of his personal strategy to ensure salvation.

Monastic communities are able to pursue it through prayer, good works, and self-reflection. Instead, secular men must abstain from “all matters in which the peril of [their] soul lies.” 77 He encourages them to carefully assess themselves, to identify their own sins.

72 Ibid, 58.
73 Ibid, 59.
74 Ibid, 145.
75 Ibid, 146.
76 Ibid, 148.
77 Ibid, 19.
In order to fully become aware of their sins, secular men will require strong literary guidance, which can be found in Classical texts and theological treatises.

Although he does not explicitly describe a reading curriculum, he clearly has his own education in mind. “You can not fool me World, for I have tasted you, I know you, and moreover, I have the example of a great leader before me.” Petrarca shows that his familiarity with Christian and classical texts provides an essential understanding of the world. In addition, these works offer prospective guides whose texts will help secular men on the path to heaven. His argument encourages men to emulate his education so as to minimize the difficulty and confusion inherent to the pursuit of salvation.

The second new element that is found in On Religious Leisure is how God’s grace helps to make self-reflection seem less frightening. Book One describes the importance of God’s intervention: “which faith has produced will stand solid and wholly intact when confronted by hostile sapping, batter rams, and whatever Satan will have erected.” The process of self-reflection cannot begin without one’s faith in God, which dispels the many earthly sins that may prevent a man from attaining salvation. Petrarca explains that God inspires the process of self-awareness, and thus divine inspiration ensures its success. As one begins to reflect on himself he should not be terrified because “nothing will seem impossible, nothing incredible” once one realizes that “god is omnipotent and good.”

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78 Ibid, 82.
79 Ibid, 39.
7. *Secretum*

Even though Petrarca describes the *Secretum* as a “private conversation” and thus not “intended for wide circulation,” the work contains the most detailed description of his moral philosophy.\(^{81}\) It provides multiple examples of how to conduct a repeated self-analysis as a means for achieving salvation. The latest elaboration of his moral doctrine can be found in his radical interpretation of Saint Augustine’s theological treatises in an attempt to find a way that would allow men to focus on mortal pursuits while at the same time still working toward their eternal salvation.

The work recalls a mystical conversation between the author, Francesco, and Saint Augustine, under the watchful gaze of Truth. Over the course of three days, the Saint shows Francesco his moral ills and convinces him to adopt the life style changes he deems necessary to save his soul. The gravity of this conversation is not lost on Francesco who remarks: “much criticism was spoken against the behavior of our age and against the common failings of men in general. It seemed that the whole of the human race was being reproached.”\(^{82}\) Even though the conversation focuses on the personal sins of the fictional character Francesco, its moral implications can be applied to all men. The immanence of death is often emphasized in order to spark a discussion of how one should contemplate the inevitability of the afterlife.

In book one and book two Saint Augustine criticizes Francesco for being unhappy and shows him how his condition is the result of his many moral ills. He describes Francesco’s soul as “imprisoned” in his body and thus he “has forgotten [his] divine

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\(^{82}\) Ibid, 39.
creator.”83 The Saint recommends that he repeatedly remind himself of the brevity of his life, and that his current habits do not present a path for achieving virtue. Saint Augustine is critical of Francesco’s previous attempts at self-reflection, and points to their insufficient results. Petrarca’s description of the harmful affects of Francesco’s sins, is reminiscent of how the real Saint Augustine describes his own attempts at self-reflection in his Confessions. The Christian Father describes himself as divided between his responsibilities to God and his love of earthly pleasures: “If all these things tug at our will with equal force, and all together at the same time, will not these divergent inclinations put a great strain on the human heart, as we deliberate which to select?”84 However, despite this similarity, Petrarca’s Secretum deviates from the issues discussed in Confessions.

The second book discusses Francesco’s more serious moral ills, such as his desire for wealth and his all-encompassing anger caused by “subservience” to the powerful men around him.”85 The Christian Father again reminds Francesco to examine himself carefully and reiterates his advice from Book one; “…if you reflect that you have fallen into this maze of your own free will and can escape, if you so will, you will gain considerable consolation.”86 Saint Augustine argues that self-examination is essential for one’s happiness as well as for the general welfare of one’s soul. Even though the Saint is able to describe Francesco’s sins, the poet must recognize them so that he may be able to achieve happiness.

Book three contains the most controversial debate between Francesco and his mentor. Saint Augustine aims to not only make Francesco aware of the two main barriers to

83 Ibid, 41.
85 Ibid, 90.
86 Ibid, 94-95.
his salvation, “love and glory,” but to also persuade him to abandon both pursuits.\textsuperscript{87} He criticizes Francesco’s love for the mortal woman Laura that diverts his attention from God and salvation. To help Francesco realize the danger of pursuing glory instead of God, he prescribes a strict regimen of prayer; “let no day or night pass without tearful supplication... [and] divine aid will be at hand.”\textsuperscript{88} Unlike in the previous two books, Francesco is no longer complacent; he decides to counter the Saint’s arguments. However, despite Augustine’s passionate pleas, Francesco is unwilling to abandon his pursuit of glory because he yearns to create “an excellent work, one that would be exceptional and quite out of the ordinary,” and believes that if he continues to work toward this goal, it will be realized.\textsuperscript{89} Francesco argues:

> “Even so, there is a method to my madness. I am convinced that a man must seek after the glory he may reasonably hope for in this life while he still lives. That greater glory will have to be enjoyed in heaven when we get there and no longer even think of earthly glory. And so I think the proper order is that mortal men should first think about mortal things and that eternal things should follow transitory things, because the most logical order is to proceed from the transitory to the eternal, whereas to go from the eternal back to the transitory is impossible.”\textsuperscript{90}

Francesco contends that it is rather Augustine who misunderstands the demands of salvation. He argues that men are constrained by their humanity because mortal men are unable to pursue immortal goals during their mortal life. However, they are capable of pursuing mortal glory. Francesco draws a clear separation between heavenly glory and mortal glory by describing each type of glory as a characteristic of two different planes; earth or heaven. Francesco also argues that the proper way of achieving salvation is to first

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\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 130.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 130.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 136.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, 137.
focus on achieving human glory during the human life. Once men have reached their human potential, then they can focus entirely on immortal goals. Francesco is very clear that if one switches this order, it will be impossible to achieve either immortal or mortal glory. His strategy is to refrain from putting salvation at the center of his life until his literary aspirations are fulfilled.

This strategy is introduced after two books of debate and self-analysis, so that he is able to rid himself of his most dangerous passions, such as lust for Laura. His confidence in this idea is portrayed in the conclusion of the text. He tells Saint Augustine that while he will work to “collect scattered fragments of [his] soul” and although it would be “a much safer course to tend to the care of [his] soul” he “cannot restrain [his] desire to study.”91 The work ends with Francesco advocating for his own mortal desires, rather than following the Saint’s advice to give up all his goals.

91 Ibid, 144.
8. *Familiares III, 12; “To Marco Genovese”*

In this letter found in the *Familiares* collection, Petrarca becomes a mentor for the young Marco Genovese, offering advice on how to reach salvation. Drawing on similar ideas from his larger works, Petrarca successfully advises his mentee and emboldens him to pursue a political life, worthy of salvation.

He begins his letter by praising Marco for his character and reminding him of their relationship; “I also recall that most glowing proposal of yours which in those early days of our friendship in extended discourse you trustingly revealed to me.” Petrarca explicitly states he hopes to challenge Marco to “exercise his memory” and revisit the decisions in his life that led him to become a public servant. Throughout the letter, he emphasizes God’s love of Marco as well as of public servants, ensuring him that his career is not “opposed to that divine grace.” The letter concludes by offering two pieces of advice; it encourages Marco to become a man worthy of salvation, and it asks him to live a life in preparation of heaven.

This letter continues to stress the importance of self-reflection by asking Marco to be vigilant in his decisions and reassures him regarding his final success: “how many also,

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92 In Aldo S. Bernardo’s introduction to his translation of the *Familiares* letters, he writes that the collection is comprised of fictions letters “that were added to the collection to produce a desired effect—that of a learned man.” However, it is unimportant if this young man excised because the letter serves a more important function as an example of a relationship that furthers each participant’s pursuits of salvation. Quotation found in Francesco Petrarch, *Rerum Familiarium Libri I-VIII*, trans. Aldo S. Barnardo, (Albany: State university of New York Press, 1975) xvii.
93 Ibid, 147.
94 Ibid, 147.
95 Ibid, 148.
96 Ibid, 147.
having dropped anchor far from such gates, have completed the voyage of this life most happily!" 97 However, and more importantly, Petrarca deviates from the set of traditional recommendations that are usually provided to young men that are preoccupied with their eternal souls. Far from censuring his interest in politics, the poet encourages it. He writes the he should “not despair” because God is aware of all decisions, and sees the merit in his life.

The time will doubtless come, my friend, which you long for, when you can raise yourself from the ground....You will at length do what you have long done in your mind, and with the same Helper who was your inspiration; and you will accomplish it, as I hope, in the security of a more perfect age and of a more mature judgment rather than in the attempt of a youthful indiscretion and impetuosity....so when the passions are quiet, the judgment secure, and the ferment of youthful pride restrained...one proceeds in greater safety to salvation.”98

Marco is described as longing for the abilities necessary to gain salvation, similar to the feelings expressed by Francesco or the young poet in the Mont Ventoux letters. Petrarca assures him that he will reach his goal with the help of Saint Augustine and other Christian Fathers. The letter advises Marco to wait and trust in God’s help. When he grows older, he will benefit from “mature judgment” as he reflects on his life. He argues that once he matures, he will be able successfully navigate toward salvation.

The aforementioned quote can be interpreted as advancing a new perspective on salvation; during youth, one must trust in God, but once one matures, the road to salvation becomes more manageable due to self-awareness. Petrarca recognizes that Marco’s “concern for [his] citizens” diverts him from fully pursuing salvation, but that he should not be worried.99 When he is older, he will have ample opportunity to focus on salvation.

97 Ibid, 137.
98 Ibid, 146.
99 Ibid, 145.
Petrarca insists Marco’s youthful passion for politics is not an impediment to his salvation; “Martha’s active solicitude is not to be scorned even though Mary’s contemplation may be superior.” The poet argues that Marco’s dedication to his city-state and his people is a virtue, although he has had little leisure time for self-analysis.

This letter concentrates on two of Petrarca’s previously discussed theological concerns: the importance of divine intervention and self-reflection. Both issues had already been explored in the Secretum and in On Religious Leisure. However, in this new letter, Petrarca seems to have solidified his opinion on the matter, so much that he feels confident advising others to follow his example.

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100 Ibid, 146.
9. The Triumph of Eternity

The *Triumph of Eternity* is one of the final works by Petrarca and it reiterates his lifelong appreciation of self-reflection as well as offering a glimpse into his final thoughts on salvation.

The poem begins with Petrarca's narrator proclaiming his trust in God and by lamenting his inability to appreciate God's brilliance sooner; "I should have opened/ my eyes sooner, not lingered till the end."\(^{101}\) However, he reflects, that “never has divine grace come too late” and thus, even at this time in life, he is free to consider what eternity looks like and how salvation might feel.\(^{102}\) The poem then outlines a thought experiment in which the narrator allows his “mind to reach deeper into itself” so that he may see heaven, “timeless and beautiful”.\(^{103}\) While imagining heaven, he portrays an idyllic landscape where people are clearly divided between those who lived virtuous lives and those who were preoccupied with pursuing human glory.

Towards the end of the poem, Petrarca's narrator reflects on his own mortality and although, he does not know the exact date, he believes “the day draws near.”\(^{104}\) This clarity allows him to recognize the follies of man; “how vain are our obsessions/ how futile are our labor and our sweat,/ and how much individuals are deceived.”\(^{105}\) The narrator ends his poem mourning for his love, Laura. Unable to forget her, he describes how one day, everyone will recognize her beauty and her kind spirit, just as he did. As he nears his death,

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\(^{102}\) Ibid, 154, line 13.

\(^{103}\) Ibid, 154, line 21.

\(^{104}\) Ibid, 157, line 110.

\(^{105}\) Ibid, 157, lines 106-108.
he “can’t easily remove the memory [of Laura] from [his] heart,” but he is confident that his vision of heaven is the foreshowing of his own salvation and that he will see her again.106

The mental experience we described emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, because the narrator is able to picture eternity within himself. Although this image is a poetic device, the idea of deeply looking inside one’s self for answers is common throughout Petrarca’s Latin works. Those who do not look inside themselves are “impoverished in reason and resolve,/utterly sick and wretched mortal men!”107

In addition, the poem visualizes salvation as a journey, a rather common metaphor throughout the different texts we’ve studied since the Mont Ventoux letter. The poet writes that he who “…finds the ford/by which to cross this rushing mountain torrent/ that is called life and is so much adored.”108 Although life is treacherous and dangerous, the reward of succeeding is priceless. This image recalls Petrarca’s own misguided wanderings that is described in the Mont Ventoux letter. Once he was able to find the correct path, he was able to reach salvation.

The Triumph of Eternity concludes Petrarca’s life long considerations on salvation bringing into the vernacular works the conclusions that he had developed while writing in Latin.

106 Ibid, 158, line 141.
107 Ibid, 153, line 52-53.
10. Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, we criticized the common view of Petrarca as a deeply conflicted man, torn between his love for poetry and his Christian responsibilities. Over the course of our argumentation, we have clearly shown that this perspective prevents modern readers from recognizing his accomplishments as a moral philosopher. To rectify this misunderstanding of his texts, this essay showed the development of his strategy for pursuing salvation described in his Latin works.

We proved how the poet was motivated by an intellectual interest in Saint Augustine, rather than a desperate attempt to reconcile his divided soul. In our survey of relevant scholarly articles, we argued that Petrarca was heavily influenced by the Saint’s ideas on theology as well as his literary style. His interest in the Christian Father’s moral treatises, lead to the poet’s desire to also engage in moral philosophy. This essay also described how theologians in the fourteenth century also introduced new interpretations of the Saint in order to advance contemporary debates.

The texts that were chosen for this essay clearly demonstrate Petrarca’s primary concern as the attainment of salvation. This theme is the main preoccupation of Petrarca’s works, characterizes him as a moral philosopher, thus confirming Salutati’s intuition. Although each of the texts examined offers a unique perspective on the problem of salvation, they all identify self-reflection as the necessary tool to achieving salvation.

In our study, we began with the Mont Ventoux letter, where the introduction of this strategy first occurs. The text describes a successful self-examination but provides very little direction for implementation. We then moved to On Religious Leisure for the type of
education necessary to improve one’s chances in the after life. Here for the first time, God’s grace is introduced as the second main factor involved in salvation. After we discussed the Secretum, which provides the most comprehensive example of self-reflection by offering a model that can be followed by the reader. In it, Petrarca also advances the idea that the duties of a good Christian and the preoccupation of this world can be reconciled, and that an involvement in earthly matters does not necessarily result in eternal damnation. In fact, during his argument with Saint Augustine, he maintains the he will first fulfill his literary aspirations and then later dedicate himself to a fulltime pursuit of virtue. In the letter to Marco Genovese, Petraraca’s belief in the possibility of reconciling salvation and earthly concerns has become so strong that he advises his young friend to continue his involvement in politics and to wait until old age for worrying about the afterlife. However, during this discussion of the importance of earthly matter, he still acknowledges the importance of self-reflection, which is always at the center of what he believes constitutes a moral life.

In conclusion, we would like to return to the epigram used at the beginning of this study. The quotation was selected from J.L Borges’ short story The Theologians, which tells the tale of a rivalry between two thinkers over whose theories best exemplified piety and the truth of God. Both men are portrayed as arrogant and radical, and their vicious debate results in the execution of one of them.

We take this story to be a cautionary tale, warning us against those who claim absolute “truth” and “perfect understanding” of a given text. In the struggle between such

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individuals, it is the often the joy of reading that is the first victim. In reuniting Petrarca’s Latin and vernacular works, we hope we can prevent such a tragedy from happening: the new perspective we just sketched promises interesting discoveries in works we thought by now devoid of any surprises.
11. Bibliography


