

Demetrio S. Yocum. *Petrarch's Humanist Writing and Carthusian Monasticism: The Secret Language of the Self*.

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Throughout his adult life, Petrarch was tormented by uncertainties about the relative merits of the secular and religious lives. But while this anxiety derived its strength from its relevance to Petrarch's broader moral concerns, it was brought into particular focus by his experience of Carthusian monasticism, and most especially by his sometimes ambiguous relationship with his brother Gherardo, a *renditus* at the monastery at Montrieux.

Thanks to the work of those such as Henri Cochin, Giuseppe Rotondi, Michael Seidlmayer, Giles Constable, and Anna Maria Voci, scholars have readily acknowledged the importance of the Carthusian order to our understanding of Petrarch's wider humanistic project, and a steady stream of new studies on the subject has been published in recent years.

Despite the march of scholarship, however, it is the contention of Demetrio S. Yocum that Petrarch's intellectual debt to the Carthusian order has yet to be brought into sufficiently sharp focus. Since Petrarch's thought is often supposed to have been "inherently contradictory and unsystematic," Yocum argues that scholars have tended to neglect the "common line of philosophical and theological development running through" the *Secretum*, the *De otio religioso*, and the *De vita solitaria* (24–25). Combined with a preoccupation with classical and patristic influences, this has — Yocum believes — prevented "the possibility of a specific Carthusian matrix of recurrent themes discussed . . . in all three treatises" from being taken as seriously as it deserves.

As he makes clear in his introduction, Yocum's study is intended to rectify this perceived omission. In the four chapters that follow — devoted to solitude, *otium*, liturgy, and reading and writing, respectively — he sets out to demonstrate that Petrarch's humanism was deeply marked by an adherence to monastic practices that bear the hallmarks of an identifiably "Carthusian paradigm" (26).

It cannot be denied that this volume yields some interesting insights. Equipped with an exhaustive knowledge of fourteenth-century monasticism, Yocum manages to tease out a number of subtleties that have previously escaped notice. Most significant in this regard is a stimulating survey of Petrarch's depiction of the *solitarius* in the *De vita solitaria* (155–75). Convincingly linking the stages of the

solitary man's day with the hours of the Divine Office, Yocum demonstrates a clear link between Petrarch's text and the hymns prescribed in the Roman breviary that suggests a more observant lifestyle than his status as a secular cleric would have demanded.

But while it undoubtedly contains some points of scholarly value, this study is severely undermined by a number of fundamental weaknesses. Of these, two methodological issues stand out as being of particular concern. On the one hand, the argument suffers from tunnel vision. So anxious is Yocum to tie Petrarchan texts to Carthusian practices that he consistently overstates the intellectual uniqueness of Saint Bruno's order and omits to give due consideration to other possible sources of inspiration. Thus, in chapter 2 ("Rethinking Solitude: The Practice of Solitude and Silence in Petrarch and Carthusian Spirituality"), no effort is made either to distinguish between the many different views of *solitudo* offered by classical and patristic authors or to relate the discussion to the *vita activa-vita contemplativa* debate. By the same token, in chapter 5 ("Rethinking Reading and Writing: Petrarch and the Carthusian Practice of Silent Reading"), one searches in vain for any meaningful engagement with Saint Augustine's influence on Petrarch's textual practices.

On the other hand, the treatment of Petrarch's own works leaves much to be desired. Although lengthy quotations are provided, the concepts contained therein are rarely examined with the precision required. In chapter 3 ("Rethinking *Otium*: Cultivating Soul through Soil"), for example, no distinction is drawn between *otium* and solitude, and on this basis the exact signification of the former is left unexplained. No mention is made of the "wiles of demons," the "snares of the world," or the "lures of the flesh," which Petrarch identified as the obstacles that *otium* was intended to overcome, and the specific practices prescribed in the *De otio religioso* (the study of the Gospels, experiential identification with the saints through reading, and the *meditatio mortis*) are passed over in silence. Indeed, rather than analyzing these crucial points, almost half of the chapter is given over to a long but baseless discussion of a supposed connection between *otium* and gardening, grounded solely on a misreading of portions of the *De vita solitaria* (114–40). Perhaps exacerbated by a number of glaring lacunae in the bibliography, such conceptual clumsiness is sadly all too common.

Thus hampered by its methodological weaknesses, Yocum's study tends to fall back on mere assertion. All too often, the reader finds him/herself obliged to labor through a lengthy comparison between a (sometimes badly misconstrued) Petrarchan passage and an aspect of Carthusian thought before being presented with the barely substantiated affirmation of a connection between the two.

Despite accurately identifying an important issue in Petrarchan studies, therefore, this otherwise bold volume ultimately fails to prove that Petrarch's humanism was as heavily indebted to Carthusian monasticism as its author would like us to believe, and its broader contribution to the field must hence be regarded as rather limited.

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