

Gur Zak. *Petrarch's Humanism and the Care of the Self*.

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Gur Zak elegantly demonstrates that Petrarch's notion of care for the self defines his humanist philosophy. By considering the intertwining of identity and textuality, Zak demonstrates that Petrarch's fragmentation reconfirmed for him the belief of the ancients that philosophy can bring wholeness to the soul through the practices of reading and writing. In his attempt to cope with his experience of fragmentation Petrarch developed an ethical program centered upon the assertion that "self" is a state of mind from which we are exiled but to which we may return "through constant cultivation and care, and particularly through the use of writing as a spiritual technique" (10).

The engaging introduction treats *Familiare* 6.2, Petrarch's letter to Giovanni Colonna, which describes the ruins of Rome. These images become metaphors for the poet, who "like the glorious city . . . is subjected to the ravages of time, constantly changing, leaving behind only fragments" (3). The letter reveals the centrality of writing to Petrarch's moral program and demonstrates that the experiences of exile and of fragmentation are intrinsically united in the poet's mind. After grounding the reader in the history of humanism as well as in major social developments of the later Middle Ages, the introduction offers a contextual frame for the rest of the book, which is to be understood against the backdrop of the growth of urban life and the emergence of the linear conception of time. In effect, Petrarch's "acute awareness of the passage of time and historical context — unparalleled by any of his predecessors — also led to his sense of fragmentation and loss" (8).

In chapter 1, "The Indeterminate Self: Writing, Desire, and Temporality in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarij fragmenta*," Zak examines the poet's uses of writing within his collection of 366 vernacular poems, the work for which Petrarch is best remembered. Beginning with an analysis of the incipit sonnet, Zak asserts that writing emerges simultaneously as an unwavering aspect of the poet's existence, and a meditative exercise that allows him to return repeatedly to the beginning, "the time 'before time,' thus abolishing time's constant passage" (21). And yet, Zak suggests, Petrarch's attempt to transcend his sense of fragmentation through writing is undermined by the realization that writing, intimately connected to desire, is the source of the poet's fall into an exile characterized by temporality and flux.

The second chapter, "The Crisis of the Narrative Self," examines Petrarch's rejection of the solution offered by both Dante (in the *Vita nuova*) and Augustine (in the *Confessions*) to the problem of temporality and the experience of exile. Petrarch's attempt to create his past in writing reveals the ambiguity dominating his experience. Of particular importance is chapter 3, "Petrarch's Humanism and the Ethics of Care of the Self," in which Zak discusses the poet's return in his Latin writings to the Stoic notion of "care of the self." Focusing on the epistolary collections and the *Secretum*, Zak applies Petrarch's hermeneutics of self to his uses of writing. Despite the Augustinian and monastic roots of Petrarch's focus on the

care of the soul through reading and writing, the poet departs from medieval tradition, and establishes humanism as an intellectual alternative. The final chapter, "Ovid, Augustine and the Limits of the Ethics of Care of the Self," continues a consideration of the letters and the *Secretum* as Zak investigates the tensions that ultimately arose from Petrarch's "efforts to cultivate the self through writing" (158).

By considering Petrarch's works in both Latin and in Italian throughout his monograph, Zak commendably eschews the division of the author between "Latin humanist" and "vernacular love poet." Targeted at an academic audience, this is an absorbing and well-documented study that will be of great use to scholars who work on Medieval and Renaissance literature in Italian, comparative literature, philosophy, and related fields. The volume is carefully annotated, includes a bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and provides a helpful index. In sum, this fascinating book offers a new perspective on the second crown of Italian literature, and an original way to understand the modernity of the poet of the self.

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