Literary Imagination
Towards the end of book 2 of the *Secretum*, written (it is thought) between 1347 and 1354, Petrarch, agonising over why it is he is so sorely afflicted with *accidia*, or what Cicero called *aegritudo*, passes, in response to the probing questions of his interlocutor ‘Augustinus,’ from one possible cause to another.¹ The problem is not easily fathomed. Perhaps this condition of spiritual sickness, of which one distant root is evidently the Greek adjective ἀκηδής, ‘uncared for,’ used for example for the unburied body of Hector and, in this context, suggesting the lack of closure afflicting Priam as a result of ritual neglect,² was in Petrarch (or his fictional double who appears in the *Secretum* as ‘Franciscus’) the tearful memory of the expropriation by greedy executors of Ser Petracco’s, his father’s, house—and with it Petrarch’s own books, including his copies of Virgil and Isidore of Seville. Or at least this is what the dialogue seems to be referring to.³ Yes, this sadness might play its part. But it is nothing that cannot be kept at bay by reading Seneca’s *De tranquillitate animi*, or other such consoling books, provided they are read, as Franciscus and Augustinus agree, with the right kind of practical attentiveness.⁴

Might *accidia* be the effect of ambition for high office, which will after all always bring disappointment, whether at success or failure? Surely not, protests Franciscus: I have always sought mediocrity, he insists, and have never deluded myself with the delusions of office. And yet, he confesses, it is true that the contrary seems to be the case: it is as if I were still deluded.

² Iliad 24.554. I am grateful to John Falconer for this reference.
³ Secretum, ed. Fenzi, p. 190; see Fenzi’s n. 229 on p. 350.
⁴ Ibid., p. 192.