PETRARCHAN CARTOGRAPHIC WRITING

Theodore J. Cachey, Jr.

**Introduction: Petrarch's poetic representation of space**

Widely recognized as the first modern poet and traditionally considered the father of Humanism, Francis Petrarch (1304–1376) is not normally thought of in relation to the history of travel. Yet Petrarch was among the most inveterate travelers of his age; and he occupied, in terms of intellectual history, a position at the vanguard of geographical and cartographical knowledge of his time. The poet’s *oeuvre* cumulatively constitutes a ‘representation of space,’ in Lefebvrian terms,¹ that can be considered canonical for the crucial period in spatial history that witnessed the dawning of a new Atlantic age of discovery, exploration, conquest and colonization. Petrarch, for example, offers virtually first-hand testimony of the mid-fourteenth century re-discovery and colonization of the Canary-Fortunate islands in a passage of the *De vita solitaria* (as does Boccaccio in his *De canaria*).²

But Petrarch was not a passive observer content simply to register the geographical birth of the modern world. He was a poet and his contribution to the spatial history of the West was ‘poetic’ in the broadest, Vichian sense of the term.³ For the poets in traditional society mediated and shaped by means of the historicity of their bodies and the body of their works the apprehension and organization

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¹ See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 35–40. For Lefebvre three concepts are fundamental: spatial practice, which slowly and surely produces the society as space ('secretes' it is the term Lefebvre uses), representations of space, and representational spaces. Lefebvre distinguishes 'representations of space' from 'representational spaces.' Representations of space are conceptualized spaces, of those who identify what is lived and perceived with what is conceived. Such conceptions tend 'towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs' (39). Representational space is defined as 'space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of inhabitants and users but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe' (39).

² *De vita solitaria* 2,12. See Cachey, 'Petrarch, Boccaccio and the New World Encounter', and *Le isole fortunate*, 83–121.

of space as well as social practices. From the perspective of a history of space for example, Petrarch’s philological and poetic appropriation of an Augustan spatial paradigm, can be understood to mark the transition between Roman political geography and representations of space as studied by scholars like Eleanor Leach, Claude Nicolet, and James Romm to early modern national-colonial forms of ‘cartographic writing’ recently discussed by Tom Conley for early modern France. I propose to discuss one example of this literary appropriation and mediation in this essay: Petrarch’s investigations of Thule, or, as Vergil had it, of \textit{ultima Thule}.

But first, some brief background on the nature of my own investigation is in order. I have recently undertaken a reconsideration of Petrarch’s \textit{Opera omnia} which focusses on the metaphor and the reality of travel. Generally speaking, I take their intersection to be central to an understanding of Petrarch’s life and works. A measure of Petrarch’s broader significance, and his impact on the history of space emerges moreover from the consideration of the fault line that runs between the poet’s conceptual representation of space (which he struggled to fix and to master, revising it repeatedly during the course of his seventy odd years) and the representational spaces, to use Lefebvrian terms, which he traversed (i.e. the lived space of fourteenth century Mediterranean world and especially of Italy and France in all their territorial and cultural specificities and discontinuities). Petrarch’s seminal role, in this spatial dimension, on the history of modern literature and the history of modern travel is, I suspect, no less significant than his already widely documented and recognized influence in more traditional literary-historical terms.

This is not to say that the issue of Petrarch’s travel has not been in clear view for some time. For example, the major American Petrarch scholar of the last century E.H. Wilkins’ still fundamental biographical sketch of the poet took the title ‘Peregrinus ubique’ (a pilgrim everywhere), while Italy’s major literary critic of the last century, Gianfranco Contini memorably called Petrarch an ‘irrequieto turista’ (an anxious tourist) in a famous essay.\footnote{The tag ‘peregrinus ubique’ is from \textit{Metrical Epistle} 3.19.16 to Barbato da Sulmona: ‘incola cev nusquam, sic sum peregrinus ubique’ (I am nowhere a citizen and a foreigner everywhere). \textsc{Contini} termed Petrarca ‘L’irrequieto turista’ in ‘Preliminarì sulla lingua di Petrarca’, (xv).} Clearly, an Augustinian notion of the pilgrimage of this life is as pervasive throughout Petrarch’s writings as are the reports and recollections of the poet’s own incessant