MISZELLEN

Leonard Forster

TWO NOTES ON PETRARCH AND PETRARCHISM

1. Secularisation and 'auctoritas' in Petrarch

The way in which petrarchists like to start out from a motif, image, line of verse or even just a phrase of Petrarch himself, using it as a springboard, and go on to elaborate it in quite a different sense is well known. By doing this they are ranging behind them the authority of the Master. In much the same way medieval poets, especially Walter of Châtillon, used to embody in each stanza a line from a classical author; this was known as an "auctoritas". In an age of "imitatio" and of "auctoritas" in a more general sense they are thus justifying the existence of their work.¹ What in Petrarch is secondary, subsidiary, even incidental, becomes the main point of the new poem — and none the worse for that. It is less often realised that Petrarch himself often proceeded in a very similar way. He likes to take up a biblical text or just an image from a biblical text or a mere reminiscence and secularises it by applying it to himself in quite a different context, which then becomes the real subject-matter of the poem. In this way he subtly invokes the authority of scripture as the essential background to his whole work. This procedure sometimes leads him close to blasphemy. In [22] "A qualunque animale alberga in terra" the train of thought is: all animals rest at night, only he suffers day and night because of Laura's cruelty. This is built up on Matth. 8.20 "Vulpes foveas habent et volucres coeli nidos: filius autem hominis non habet ubi caput reclinet". The implied parallel between Petrarch and Christ is at first sight shocking, but it is worth looking at more closely. Christ is a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief: the whole Canzoniere is witness to the fact that Petrarch is too, so the parallel which to us seems blasphemous is meant as a sort of "imitatio Christi". He goes on to exploit imagery of the forest, where the animals live, and the stars of the night like Laura's eyes. All this has only a remote connexion with the biblical text. So too [133] "Amor m'ha posto come segno a strale" takes up an image from Lamentations III.12 "possuit me quasi signum ad sagittam", also used in Job 6.4., Job 16.13 and Psalm

38.2. The faithful bewails his calamities and the trials the Lord has imposed upon him. In Petrarch it is not the Lord who has imposed them but Love (and some, e.g. P. Boitani, have felt this too to be blasphemous). His sonnet goes on to deal with images arising: arrow/target; snow/sun; wax/fire; clouds/wind, none of which occur in any of the biblical passages except arrow/target which gave rise to the rest. He implicitly equates Love with God. He does the same in [35] “Solo e pensoso”, where he secularises Psalm 139.7 ff. “Quo ibo a spiritu tuo”: he cannot escape from Love, which here too is equated with God. He takes up the same psalm in [163] “Amor che vede ogni pensiero aperto” (v.1-4, “Domine probasti me et cognovisti me”) but also the similar passage in Amos 9.2 ff. The attributes ascribed in the Old Testament to the God of Israel are transferred by Petrarch to the god of Love. In this way these poems acquire an unsuspected spiritual component, subtly suggesting the unity of sacred and profane love. Nor does he restrict himself to biblical texts; he takes up a passage from the Augustinian Soliloquies (cap. 34, PL 40.893) beginning: “Quid est hoc quod sentio”. The author goes on to speak of fire and light, both of them attributes of divinity. Though the fire is surely the fire of divine love, the word love does not occur; it is Petrarch who introduces it in the very first line of his poem: “S’amor non è, che dunque è quel ch’io sento?” [132], after which he goes off into the celebrated series of paradoxes about the nature of love. The original is straightforward: “quis est ignis ... quae est lux?” He desires to be kindled by this fire and lit by this light. But then he too goes on to paradoxes: “Ignis sancte, quam dulciter ardes, quam secrete luces, quam desideranter aduris!” which are very much in Petrarch’s vein, though Petrarch himself uses others here. The pattern is similar and there are plenty of parallels throughout the Canzoniere; one need only consult McKenzie’s concordance under “foco, ardere, luce, lume”. The motifs come together in [18] “la luce che m’arde e strugge dentro a parte a parte”.

He can do the same with works of classical antiquity. In [23] “Nel dolce tempo de la prima estade” he takes up and elaborates Horace Od. IV.11.35 “minuentur atrae Carmine curae”. What for Horace is a conclusion is a beginning for Petrarch, a justification for his poetry. In [26] “Più di me lieta non si vede a terra nave” he does both: he leads off with a reminiscence of Statius Theb. II. 193 ff.:

Nec minus haec laeti trahimus solatia quam si

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