

Exploration of the Self in a Religious-Ethical Context from Late Antiquity through the Early Renaissance: St. Augustine, Boethius, and Petrarch - Past Ideas for our Future

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There are many efforts to defend the Humanities against countless attacks by university administrators, the public, and, implicitly, even by students. In light of those problems, this article returns to three of the most important intellectuals in the history of western culture, St. Augustine, Boethius, and Francesco Petrarch, examining their respective fundamental dialogic narratives in which they probed their own self and discovered answers to the most critical questions in life. This paper suggests that we can profoundly promote the Humanities by returning to the bedrock of our discipline established by these three authors whose concepts about the self and its relationship with the transcendental being (the divine, Summum bonum, etc.) continue to offer central perspective also for the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Research addressing the Middle Ages commonly faces a double-edged challenge, either having to handle utter ignorance and disregard on the part of the public, or being appropriated by the modern media industry and social groups recreating the past in a fanciful, light, and playful manner often far removed from historical reality – see the Society for Creative Anachronism or the countless attempts at medievalism by other groups, artists, film makers, composers, sculptors, novelists, or poets.¹

The outcome tends to be, unfortunately, a high level of ambivalence, confusion, and misunderstandings, if not utter ignorance, and hence also of a dangerous tendency among relevant administrators or decision-makers to eliminate, whenever a possibility arises, positions for professors or researchers who used to teach medieval history, art history, philosophy, language, and literature. Of course, the Humanities in general struggle hard at the present time

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1. See, for instance, Andrew Elliot, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media. Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017); Richard Utz, *Medievalism. A Manifesto* (York: ARC Humanities Press, 2017); *Studies in Medievalism* XXIX, ed. Karl Fugelso. Politics and Medievalism (Studies), 1 (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2020); *Studies in Medievalism* XXX, ed. Karl Fugelso. Politics and Medievalism (Studies), 2 (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2021). The number of relevant studies on this phenomenon is legion, which underscores the huge interest in the Middle Ages as a field of experimentation and leisure activities.

to maintain their academic status, often because they do not necessarily produce a money stream flowing to the university, or because they do not have, at least allegedly, enough students who, after their graduation, find meaningful and well-paying jobs outside of academia. Moreover, the current student generation is increasingly less prepared than ever before to devote themselves to intensive and expansive readings of primary or secondary literature from earlier times. What is not being expressed in a Twitter mode, for instance, is easily dismissed as unpractical or too time-consuming, hence not worth the attention or energy of the learners. The internet is abuzz with comments about those issues, but immediate and pragmatic solutions do not seem to be available at the current moment.

Unfortunately, one of the additional consequences of this malaise has thus often been that students vote against a course or a field of study with their feet if it is not required, if it is not easy, and if it appears as challenging in intellectual terms, without having a direct bearing on future job opportunities. Just as in the discipline of classical or ancient languages and cultures, the examination of medieval literature is a demanding task, but anyone exposed to texts from that period would easily confirm, once access has been gained through translation, for instance, or the close study of the relevant language, that the critical engagement with the voices from the pre-modern period proves to be worth the effort for the personal growth of the individual today.²

We always need to determine undoubtedly the relevance of our subject fields over and over again, we need to demonstrate their relevance to our students, their parents, the administration, and the public, and we need to pursue ways to identify our field as significant in global and specific terms, if they are not critically important within the wider academic context or for society at large. But this is basically the task of all research areas which ultimately disappear altogether if they do not succeed in addressing those fundamental questions.³ *Bildung* used to be of high value at large, whereas today education seems to be

2. See, for example, two of the most fundamental studies addressing this concern globally: Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Public Square Book Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London and New York: Penguin, 2012). Cf. also Frederick Luis Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter: A Commonsense Approach* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008). Other relevant studies can be found both in English and in many other languages.

3. See, for instance, James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*. The William G. Bowen Series, 70 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); *The Making of the Humanities*, ed. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn. The Modern Humanities, 3 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Theodore George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). The literature on this topic is, of course, legion; it concerns us all, and we must continue probing our own identities. In essence, that's what the Humanities are all about, drawing mostly from literature and other related media.

something that can be purchased and applied immediately in practical terms so that the graduate of the university or a college can immediately start working and earning money. This would be what Friedrich Schiller called at his first university lecture in Jena on May 26, 1789, the "Brotgelehrte": "[N]icht bey seinen Gedankenschätzen sucht [der Brodgelehrte] seinen Lohn, seinen Lohn erwartet er von fremder Anerkennung, von Ehrenstellen, von Versorgung" (The bread-oriented scholar does not seek his reward in the treasures of his mind, but in the [shallow] recognition by others, in receiving honorable posts, in his income).⁴

The Current Goal

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to join a chorus of jeremiads, not to lament the allegedly global downfall of the Humanities, and not to worry about our future determined by doom and gloom. On the contrary, the intention is to identify or revisit three of the most important voices from late antiquity and then the early Renaissance as some of the most fundamental contributors to a deep intellectual discourse that continues until today, all sharing the ideals of internalized dialogues in which the self finds itself confronted by external forces and needs to learn how to comprehend and identify itself in its own properties and values. This philosophical, literary, and ethical quest constitutes to be one of the most essential features and challenges in human existence and can be found in many different cultures throughout time, such as in Greek and Roman classical times. Returning to those literary-philosophical documents serves intriguingly well as a critical reminder of who we really are, today, that is, the heirs of thousands of years of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life, here seen exclusively through a western lens simply by default and not by intent, although the same phenomenon applies, of course, to all other cultures across the world.

Drawing our attention to monumental figures such as these three authors might prove to be a most important reminder that we all are, in fact, nothing but dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, as the Neo-Platonist scholastic writer Bernard of Chartres (d. 1124) had famously formulated.⁵ We certainly see farther than

4. For a useful introduction, summary of the lecture, and a historical-philosophical analysis, see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Was_hei%C3%9Ft_und_zu_welchem_Ende_studiert_man_Universalgeschichte%3F. For the text in its original version itself, online, see https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Was_hei%C3%9Ft_und_zu_welchem_Ende_studiert_man_Universalgeschichte%3F (both last accessed on October 25, 2022). Both Schiller and his famous statement have been discussed already from many different perspectives, which does not need to be summarized here.

5. For an exemplary study of this observation, see Hillel Levine, "Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants': A Case Study in the Impact of Modernization on the Social Epistemology of Judaism," *Jewish Social Studies* 40.1 (1978): 63–72; he refers to the important book by Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript*

them in practical, technical, scientific, or medical terms, but they must be credited with having established the foundation of all of our current knowledge, understanding, and comprehension, focusing on ethics, morality, spirituality, and a philosophical approach to all aspects of life. I simply claim that they continue to have much to say to us because they already formulated fundamental insights of timeless value and can be recognized as extremely influential sources for cultural history ever since. The history of reception in their cases confirms the validity of the present attempt to recover what we have learned from them and to demonstrate the importance of their insights.

Returning to those giants is not a turn away from the present and the future, but a renewed effort to explore our basis and to rebuild who and where we are today. Stepping backward can certainly offer the great opportunity subsequently to step forward more energetically, with more insight, and with more understanding under our belt.⁶ Retreating can thus mean a reassembly of our intellectual forces and drawing more effectively from our historical and cultural resources to address the future.⁷

There is nothing wrong with focusing on the present world when we examine humanistic issues; in fact, it is a crucial, absolutely necessary task because we exist in that world and must learn how to cope with it right now if we want to build the bridge to our own future. But exclusivity and a myopic approach in that regard could also entail that we ignore the traditional perspectives and find ourselves in the dangerous situation of talking about the imminent situation without understanding the roots and historical development that led to where we are today. The all-engaging gaze into the future might threaten to place us into a dangerous intellectual vacuum and removes us from the foundation of our ethics, morality, spirituality, and intellectual history.

(New York: Free Press, 1965); cf. also Søren Frank, *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). In his *Metalogicon* from 1159, John of Salisbury attributed that statement to Bernard: “Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.” See also Richard William Southern, *Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 203. See also the excellent survey online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standing_on_the_shoulders_of_giants#cite_note-OTSOG-6 (last accessed on July 13, 2022).

6. I have discussed this global aspect already at great length in “Introduction,” *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms – Methods – Trends*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), XV–XXIII; and in “Medieval Culture—An Introduction to a New Handbook,” *Handbook of Medieval Culture: Fundamental Aspects and Conditions of the European Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen. 3 vols. (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), vol. 1, 1–17.

7. See now, for instance, Willem B. Drees, *What are the Humanities for?: Human Humanities on the Value of Humanistic Inquiry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Racism, sexism, misogyny, nationalism, and many other phenomena as perceived or recognized today are not at all simply the result of current conditions. Hence, only if we embrace a horizontal (presentism) and a vertical (pastism) perspective at the same time can we hope to gain a full understanding of the critical issues at stake and move forward in a constructive fashion.

Past Voices for our Self-Examination

These unique voices to be studied here are those by St. Augustine, Boethius, and Petrarch, who for a long time have certainly all been well researched, examined, and discussed in a multitude of different contexts and from many perspectives. They constitute, of course, among many others, the cornerstones of the huge building which we call the history of western culture and are hence very well known – the same phenomenon exists, of course, in other cultures as well. However, studying their works in conjunction with each other promises to address several fundamental issues also in the Humanities at large at the present moment, perhaps leading us out of the doldrums of negativity and a sense of disorientation within the academy.⁸ To assume that premodern literature, or philosophy and religion, for instance, might have little to say to us is simply an expression of ignorance and a blatant denial of countless opportunities to grow in epistemological terms based on centuries and even millenniums of previous ideas, narratives, artworks, or teachings.⁹

First, comparing some of their texts with each other will allow us to recognize a specific type of discourse shared across the centuries, with Augustine having been the fundamental source for the two other authors and countless others, while he himself was certainly deeply influenced by his predecessors in

8. From a Nordistic, and yet globally valuable perspective, see Alexander van Nahl, "Medieval Scandinavian Studies—Whence, Where to, Why," *Humanities* 11.70 (2022), online at: <https://doi.org/>; or https://mdpi-res.com/d_attachment/humanities/humanities-11-00070/article_deploy/humanities-11-00070.pdf?version=1653999456.

. I myself have addressed this issues numerous times, see now Albrecht Classen, *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: The Meaning and Relevance of Medieval and Modern Literature* (Chisinau, Moldova: Elvira Press, 2022); DOI: 10.3390/h11030070; cf. also id., "The Poetic Word as a Medium for Human Self-Discovery and Identity," *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 5.1 (2022), online at: <https://journalofsocialsciences.org/vol5no1/the-poetic-word-as-a-medium-for-human-self-discovery-and-identity/>.

9. G. R. Evans, *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002). See also the contributions to *Historical Understanding: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Zoltèn Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

antiquity as well, as to be expected in light of the constant concatenation of ideas passed on from one generation to the next. The Classics are undoubtedly a natural ally of Medieval Studies, the latter deeply anchored in the former, and both, in unison, powerful enough to address universal concerns of a timeless nature, which had a huge impact on the following centuries.

Second, focusing on those three luminaries will empower us to present a very different image of the Middle Ages than the untrained audience might be used to or might expect to find in the first place. Whatever we might say regarding that age, there is no doubt that it was just as complex and diversified in cultural, philosophical, religious, or linguistic terms as is our own world, even if in a bit different configuration. Third, the study of those three voices in tandem with each other opens significant perspectives toward an intellectual dimension people might not associate the Middle Ages with and which scholars also do not tend to pursue because we often find ourselves too much in academic silos and do not perceive the many connections across the disciplines because philosophy and literature, for instance, have never been limited by so-called national boundaries. And finally, the analysis of those three intellectual giants can reveal the true extent to which we today find ourselves intellectually, spiritually, and culturally grounded in those sources in a myriad of ways.¹⁰

The quest for the own self, one's identity, and the search for values rooted in ethics and religion, in philosophy and aesthetics, has continued from the earliest Middle Ages until today, and this very quest constitutes not only an intellectual exercise but proves to be essential for the meaning of all of human life. Boethius, for instance, though deeply grounded in his own intellectual framework and addressing a late antique audience from the post-Roman period, uncovered insights into the true nature of people and the need to go on a quest for happiness as the fundamental concept of all human existence. The continuous history of reception of his work until the present, even if often ignored or neglected in the modern time, underscores the validity of certain ideas as they had been developed in the past. We could, of course, adduce many other thinkers and authors addressing the same issues pertaining to the meaning of our being here on earth. However, as we will observe, examining those three writers, Augustine, Boethius, and Petrarch, will significantly shed important light on the seminal nature of their insights and hence on the relevance of the medieval past for us today.

To be sure, the annals of medieval philosophy are filled with profound, meaningful, surprisingly relevant thinkers who have much to say also to us today

10. See, for instance, Robert McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent: Augustine, Anselm, Boethius, & Dante* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2006); Scott MacDonald, *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Kennedy, Rick, *A History of Reasonableness: Testimony and Authority in the Art of Thinking*. Rochester Studies in Philosophy, 5 [i.e. 6] (Rochester, NY: The University of Rochester Press, 2004).

regarding ethics, religion, identity, the meaning of the world, the afterlife, freedom of will, etc.¹¹ But by selecting those three writers we find ourselves in the ideal situation of identifying a unified discourse extending over almost a thousand years, predicated on the same rhetorical and intellectual notion, that is, on the same quest for personal identity, on the concept of spirituality as superior to materiality, and on the idea that the individual can discover him/herself through introspection, reflection, and examination, especially with an intellectual guide at one's side.

As I have recently argued in a new paper, the search for the self via introspection emerged already in the twelfth century, as exemplified by the Spaniard Petrus Alfonsi, a converted Jew, in his *Dialogus contra Iudaeos*, and by the Middle High German poet Hartmann von Aue, in his *Klagebüchlein*.¹² However, the truly significant documents concerning the self within the context of the transcendental dimension were produced already in late antiquity, which then exerted an enormous influence on the intellectuals throughout the following centuries. We should, of course, refer here to some of the seminal studies published by Ernst Robert Curtius or Erich Auerbach, who have already convincingly demonstrated the global connections between antiquity, the Middle Ages, and us today, but the present approach still deviates from their contributions and promises to bring to the table of the current discourse three interconnected voices from the past.¹³

We observe here the strategy of resorting to the mode of a fictionalized

11. It would be impossible to provide here a critical overview of medieval philosophy, an entire academic discipline; see, however, the contributions to *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John Marenbon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund. Sec. ed. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2020); *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Richard Cross and J. T. Paasch. Routledge Philosophy Companions (New York and London: Routledge, 2021).

12. Albrecht Classen, "Exploration and Discovery of the Self in the Twelfth Century: Spanish/Latin and Middle High German Perspectives. Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogus contra Iudaeos* and Hartmann von Aue's *Klagebüchlein*," to appear in *Mediaevalia et Humanistica*.

13. Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948; Leipzig and Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2022). For recent critical studies, see, for instance, Robert Stockhammer, "Weltliteratur e Medioevo: Auerbach e Ernst Robert Curtius," *Intersezioni* 37.3 (2017): 341–62; Jan-Dirk Müller, "Wiedergelesen. Ernst Robert Curtius: Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter (1948)," *Poetica: Zeitschrift für Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft* 50.1–2 (2019): 160–68; Silva De Laude, "Il Medioevo secondo Ernst Robert Curtius e Aby Warburg," *Immagine e parola* 1 (2020), 45–69; Albrecht Classen, "Ernst Robert Curtius and the Topos of the Book. The Impact of an Idea on Modern Philological Research," *Leuvense Bijdragen* 87.1–2 (1998): 59–78. For a grand study by famous Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht about some of the most famous Romanists, see his *Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten: Karl Vossler, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Werner Krauss*. Edition Akzente (Munich: Hanser, 2002).

dialogue particularly well in the cases of Petrarch and Boethius, but St. Augustine also utilized, in a way, that introspective approach, questioning himself and teaching thereby his audience through his conversations with God. This is not to claim that this triumvirate represents a unique, or the supreme unit of medieval thinkers beyond all other voices. But we can be certain that all three were of greatest influence on their contemporaries and their posterity. Moreover, by choosing these three writers as our witnesses, we can build an excellent epistemological bridge from late antiquity to the early Renaissance, with Petrarch actually revealing that he still belonged to some extent to the medieval culture while he already explored new options associated with late medieval and early modern humanism. Before I proceed, however, I must also admit that this issue to be addressed would be the topic of an entire monograph, whereas here I can only reflect on some small issues and draw important lines of connections as food for thought in the wider context of the Humanities today.

To return to the same metaphor as above, we are only dwarfs on the shoulders of giants and ought to respect them to the fullest degree, even though we can now see further in material or technical terms. The spiritual dimension, as profoundly examined by Augustine, Boethius, and then Petrarch, is still waiting for us, which reminds us once again of the supreme importance of the Humanities for the academy at large.

St. Augustine – Church Father, Philosopher, and Author

It would be tantamount to carrying owls to Athens if I were to reexamine the life and works of this major theologian (354–430), who set up, perhaps almost uniquely and single-handedly, the foundations for the medieval and subsequent worlds in his quest for God, for the reflections on the true properties of this existence and the next. The goal here cannot be to discuss this intellectual founding father extensively; instead, it is much more modest, as I will only investigate in a concentrated manner Augustine's fundamental effort to come to terms with his own self and to create the most important autobiography in the western world.

His *Confessions*, composed in the last few years of the fourth century, responded to a range of political and religious pressures, and they were also the outcome of his personal need to come to terms with himself, his life, his spirituality, and self-concept. As the English translator of the *Confessiones*, Henry Chadwick, comments, "The *Confessions* is more than a narrative of conversion. It is a work of rare sophistication and intricacy, in which the apparently simple autobiographical narrative often carries harmonics of deeper meaning. . . The very title carries a conscious double meaning, of confession as praise as well as of

confession as an acknowledgment of faults."¹⁴

Augustine's *Confessions* consists of thirteen books, which trace many aspects of his personal life, focusing, above all, on his discovery of his Christian faith (or move away from his Manichean concept) and the transformation of his self into a new person deeply devoted to God. While the details of this profound introspection do not concern us here, I will examine instead, through a few excerpts, the major thrust and purpose of this monumental work which was created at the end of Roman antiquity and influenced countless generations ever since. The fact by itself that he endeavored to reflect on his own inner self within the framework of his external life strongly suggests the emergence of the individual probing itself and a critical fashion. Of course, the *Confessions* constitute one of the pillars of Christian theology, but we can be content here with reading it as a crucial beginning of autobiographical writing in which the author examines his own progress through life, outlining the many troubles, conflicts, worries, tragedies, realizations, and developments in material and spiritual terms.¹⁵

Already the first line of book 2 – book 1 is mostly devoted to his search for God – signals the major impetus of this work, discovering a pathway toward the own soul and its stirrings: "I intend to remind myself of my past foulnesses and carnal corruptions, not because I love them but so that I may love you, my God" (24). Of course, Augustine names his own moral and spiritual shortcomings, above all, and lays bare his inner struggles, fears, insecurities, failures, desires, and dreams: "But I in my misery seethed and followed the driving force of my impulses, abandoning you [God]" (25). Of course, throughout his entire work, Augustine consistently refers to God to whom he feels obligated and yet often seems to be far removed from, contrasting his worldly sinfulness with the ideals of true devotion to God.

Most importantly, Augustine outlined a clear division between his external life and his heart, projecting thereby a most significant interiorization and hence the clear awareness of individuality: "Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart" (29). At the same time, maintaining the ultimate purpose of this book of self-reflections, this heart is mirrored in the higher being: "You had pity on it

14. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. with an intro. and notes by Henry Chadwick. Oxford World's Classics (1991; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; reissued 1998 and 2008), ix.

15. See, for instance, Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*. Reprint edition (1967; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); James J. O'Donnell, "An Introduction to Augustine's *Confessions*," online at: <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/introconf.html> (last accessed on July 14, 2022); for an excellent summary, discussion, and scholarly apparatus, see Annemaré Kotzé, "Confessions," *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 26 March 2012; online at: <https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=5912> (last accessed on July 14, 2022).

when it was at the bottom of the abyss" (25). But we would mistake Augustine if we read his *Confessions* only in religious terms. Instead, he clearly acknowledges the presence and even beauty of the external world: "The life which we live in this world has its attractiveness because of a certain measure in its beauty and its harmony with all these inferior objects that are beautiful" (29). Logically, he refers to the beauty and value of friendship and love that bond people together, which thus set the tone for a continuous discourse on this emotional experience of which we are the heirs until today.¹⁶ Augustine would not be Augustine if he did not associate many of the internal drives we have as people with sin, which thus leads him to appeal to God on a regular basis to help this human creature so easily subject to evil: "So the soul fornicates when it is turned away from you and seeks outside you the pure and clear intentions which are not to be found except by returning to you" (32). The sinfulness, however, translates into evil acts in one's life, so reflecting on his existence in material and spiritual terms, Augustine conceives of a highly complex relationship between the individual and the Godhead, between the interior and the exterior. Moreover, while discussing his own sinful act committed in conjunction with some of his friends, the author also observes the important role which society plays because the individual is never completely alone and easily becomes a victim of social pressures. The autobiography thus widens the perspective and correlates the personal, inner drives with the material life on the outside to which the soul has to respond on a daily basis: "As soon as the words are spoken 'Let us go and do it', one is ashamed not to be shameless (34).

Although Augustine's discourse seems to be a monologue, there is an imminent conversation with God to whom he appeals for help and with whom he engages the whole time: "My God, how I burned, how I burned with longing to leave earthly things and fly back to you. I did not know what you were doing with me (39). From stage to stage in his life, Augustine encountered ever new people and had to face their own characteristic features, strengths, and weaknesses, such as during his period of studying: "That explains why I fell in with men proud of their slick talk, very earthly-minded and loquacious. In their mouths were the devil's traps and a birdlime compounded of a mixture of the syllables of your name" (40).

16. See the contributions to *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge. *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 6 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010); *De amicitia: Friendship and Social Networks in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Katariina Mustakallio. *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae*, 36 (Rome: Inst. Romanum Finlandiae, 2010); Jacob McDonie, *Friendship and Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: The Linguistic Performance of Intimacy from Cicero to Aelred* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020); *Vera Amicitia: Classical Notions of Friendship in Renaissance Thought and Culture*, ed. Matthias Roickand Patrizia Piredda. *Court Cultures of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, 10 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022).

Nevertheless, we observe him progressing, despite many fallbacks and shortcomings, often realizing, at least in his later years when he composed the *Confessions*, the difficulties of reaching out to God and to learn what his personal relationship with Him would constitute (43). In the course of his self-reflections, Augustine also explores profound intellectual, ethical, moral, and philosophical aspects and transforms hence his writing process into a learning process: "I also did not know that true inward justice which judges not by custom but by the most righteous law of almighty God" (44).

A major portion of Augustine's *Confessions* is focused on the question regarding the nature of evil and God's justice, which humans have a hard time understanding because it is beyond their comprehension. The writer's reflections thus go back and forth between his personal stance regarding the situation in this world and in the other and then the position taken by God, as much as he might be able to grasp it. However, Augustine composed his *Confessions* from the perspective of an older man who looks back to his youth and shudders at the ignorance and foolishness he was guilty of then: "I was ignorant of these principles and laughed at your holy servants and prophets. By my mockery I only achieved the result that I became ridiculous to you" (48). Although there is no direct partner to whom he might address his reflections, it is obviously God to him he turns all of his attention, admitting his shortcomings in his early years: "I confess to you Lord that to the best of my memory (and it is a matter which I have frequently discussed) I was more moved by your answer through my vigilant mother than by the dream itself" (50). In other words, we clearly recognize a two-pronged approach, first talking to himself, and then addressing God Himself. This is not to say that Augustine completely ignored his later audience, but he created through his discourse a new intellectual platform for the exploration of his inner thoughts, his memories, his concerns and fears, his aspirations and dreams. The more he engaged with both himself and with God, the more he succeeded in establishing a narrative interiority, which then set the tone for his posterity throughout the Middle Ages and also the early modern age. Little wonder that famous Georg Misch engaged with Augustine's text in his seminal study on this genre.¹⁷

Most significantly, for Augustine, there was a deep shame about his earlier errors in religious terms, having been misled by the Manicheans. But he also urged his audience not to ridicule him for that; while he had already gone through a painful process of suffering and subsequent healing, others, mightier

17. Georg Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*. 4 Vols. (in 8 sub-volumes). 4th ed. (1907–1969; Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976); cf. also Albrecht Classen, **Error! Main Document Only.** *Autobiographische Lyrik des europäischen Spätmittelalters. Studien zu Hugo von Montfort, Oswald von Wolkenstein, Antonio Pucci, Charles d'Orléans, Thomas Hoccleve, Michel Beheim, Hans Rosenplüt und Alfonso Alvarez de Villasandino*. *Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur*, 91 (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi, 1991).

and wealthier than him, would still run into that problem:

Proud people may laugh at me. As yet they have not themselves been prostrated and brought low for their soul's health by you, my God. But I shall nevertheless confess to you my shame, since it is for your praise" (52). In this regard, the autobiography transforms into a narrative mirror for other people to reflect on their own lives and to accept Augustine's experiences and revelations as lessons for themselves.

The *Confessions* truly turn out to be a literary avenue for Augustine to trace his path from ignorant youth to mature adulthood, from the false belief of the Manichean to the Catholics, and the interior monologue often assumes a dramatic character with indirect dialogues with his friend, for instance, who then died after he had been baptized while in a coma. Movingly, Augustine relates how his friend had seemingly recovered, had then rejected him in his old and hence wrong faith, and then suddenly died after all: "My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was not there. I hated everything because they did not have him, nor could they now tell me 'look, he is on the way', as used to be the case when he was alive and absent from me" (57). We are hence presented with varied perspectives and dialogic encounters, which transform the autobiographical account into a double-sided mirror.

On the one hand, Augustine manages to look at himself, on the other, the audience is invited to follow the narrative development through the interior space of the author's reflections. However, there always lurks the dialogic strategy throughout the text because Augustine addressed God directly and appealed for help and inspiration: "Now, Lord, all that belongs to the past, and with time my wound is less painful Can I hear from you who are the truth, and move the ear of my heart close to your mouth, so that you can explain to me why weeping is a relief to us when unhappy?" (58).

Indeed, the key strategy pursued by Augustine consists of drawing from the generic elements of the autobiography and memoirs but engaging consistently with God in an implicit dialogue: "Look into my heart, my God, look within. See this, as I remember it, my hope; for you cleanse me from these flawed emotions. You direct my eyes towards you and 'rescue my feet from the trap" (59). All of his personal memories and reflections thus establish the narrative platform to enter into a conversation with God and thus to regain his own soul embraced by God. Despite the seeming monologic performance, the *Confessions* thus prove to be dialogic after all, which laid the foundation for all subsequent literary and philosophical works throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, whether we think of Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogus Clericalis* (ca. 1160), Hartmann von Aue's *Klagebüchlein* (ca. 1170), Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* (ca. 1220), or the anonymous *Gesta Romanorum* (ca. 1330).¹⁸

18. See now the contributions to *Knowledge in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund. The Philosophy of Knowledge, 2 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); cf.

Within that framework, however, Augustine embedded, which made his work so famous, an almost infinite flow of concepts of ethical, moral, religious, and philosophical kind, such as his exploration of friendship and love and the great need for the human being to pursue mercy, trust, love, and other values (61). At this point, Augustine turns to the truly crucial component of his entire memoirs, the warning about the tempting danger of the material objects in our lives that hold the soul prisoner and mislead it completely to trust the “transient things”: “For these things pass along the path of things that move towards non-existence. They rend the soul with pestilential desires; for the soul loves to be in them and take its repose among the objects of its love. But in these things, there is no point of rest: they lack permanence” (62). And from here, Augustine examines many of the false concepts people embrace, such as vanity (62), disorientation in this life and the need to turn to God (63), the quest for happiness (64), false judgments (65), the imprisonment in the corporeal world (67), pride and instability of the character (68), lust (70), and so forth. All those personal shortcomings happened in his youth, and he felt deeply lost in the course of it, as he then expresses it most movingly: “But what good did this do for me? I thought that you, Lord God and Truth, were like a luminous body of immense size and myself a bit of that body” (68). While he achieved the highest accolades as scholar, rhetorician, and teacher, he really had lost or had not even found yet, the true path toward God (71). Consequently, the *Confessions* aim for personal liberation, for the grace of God, and for the gift of the true faith: “Protect us and bear us up. It is you who will carry us; you will bear us up from our infancy until old age” (71).

Revealingly, Augustine calls his own mind “vagabond” (77), indicating thereby his feeling of loss and disorientation in the spiritual world, and his deep desire for enlightenment and understanding. But he had to wait many years, as the personal reflections indicate, so the *Confessions* basically served him as a platform to reflect on his material and spiritual development. Neither eloquence nor rusticity of expression would be a guarantee to discover truth: “Wisdom and foolishness are like food that is nourishing or useless. Whether the words are ornate or not does not decide the issue” (78). Consequently, it would be erroneous to take even this treatise as a pilot light in the human quest for spiritual uplifting because each individual would have to determine his/her own way and mode of life.

Nevertheless, the famous author took it upon himself in a monumental fashion to reflect upon the many different forces influencing his life, to trace the many moves back and forth, to identify the workings of God in his existence, and to probe and challenge himself through the autobiographical examination. The term ‘confession’ appears as rather shorthand for a much larger literary

also Berthold Wald, *Substantialität und Personalität: Philosophie der Person in Antike und Mittelalter* (Paderborn: mentis, 2005).

enterprise, that is, to investigate the meaning of his life and that of his fellow citizens and to open the perspective from the individual to the Godhead. Accordingly, when we turn to the conclusion, Augustine gives ultimate praise to the creator because “we see the things you have made because they are. But they are because you see them. We see outwardly that they are, and inwardly that they are good. But you saw them made when you saw that it was right to make them” (304). We could call this masterpiece hence an internal dialogue with himself and God, which set the standards for all future theological, personal, spiritual, and philosophical quests.

The Consolation of Philosophy: Boethius

This then allows us to turn to the most influential late antique or early medieval philosopher, Boethius (d. ca. 525), who was the crucial steppingstone from one cultural period to the next. Boethius was highly praised as the ‘schoolmaster of the West,’ as the initiator of western reception of Greek classical knowledge (Aristotle), and as the most impactful thinker of his generation. The circumstances of his premature death, caused by stoning in a Pavia prison due to the charge of alleged state treason (certainly fabricated) remain obscure and do not need to be investigated here. However, shortly before his execution, he utilized his remaining time meaningfully and composed the monumental treatise *De consolazione philosophiae* (ca. 524), which pursues different goals than Augustine’s *Confessiones*, but in essence continued with the same quest of discovering the meaning of happiness and the purpose of one’s life.

His remains were entombed in the church of San Pietro in Ciel d’Oro in Pavia, also the resting place of Augustine of Hippo, perhaps as a hint at their intellectual fellowship. Throughout the centuries, medieval and early modern authors responded to Boethius, either by adopting his philosophical stance or by giving him extraordinary praise. In Dante’s *Divina Commedia, Paradiso, Canto X*, lines 121–29, for instance, Boethius’s spirit is pointed out by Saint Thomas Aquinas,¹⁹ and we easily discover a continuous stream of Boethius enthusiasts,

19. Marcia L. Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400–1400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Adrian Papahagi, *Boethiana Mediaevalia – A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2010); Joachim Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius, “De consolazione philosophiae”*. Texte und Kommentare, 6. 2nd expanded ed. (1978; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006); see also *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Part II. For the latest edition of the *Consolatio*, see Daniela Mairhofer and Agata Mazurek, *Der “Oxforder Boethius”: Studie und lateinisch-deutsche Edition*. Texte des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit, 58 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2020).

whether we think of Geoffrey Chaucer, Lorenzo Valla, Sebastian Brant, Queen Elizabeth I, or Shakespeare.²⁰ In simple terms, Boethian thinking has had a huge impact on the medieval and also modern world in literary, religious, and philosophical terms.²¹

While Augustine elaborated on his internal struggle through an autobiographical narrative, Boethius resorted to the dialogue between his own fictional persona and the allegorical figure of Philosophy who arrives at his darkest hour in prison and engages him in a didactic conversation about the meaning of human life and personal happiness.²² In essence, Philosophy teaches him that most aspects of our earthly existence are determined by contingency and hence cannot be trusted. Or, we are controlled to a large extent by Fortune and are subject to its constantly moving wheel. Hence, no earthly joys or material profits can be trusted since they are only loans to us and can be taken away at any moment's notice. Understanding the true property of this phenomenon constitutes already a major step forward toward one's healing, or learning process, aiming for one's independence, happiness, self-sufficiency, or unity with the absolute good, the *summum bonum*. In essence, Philosophy calls out all those values that seemingly make people happy, whether power, money, health, fame, love, family, and respect as nothing but illusions or mediums for self-deception. In essence, none of those aspects can be trusted, and in the end, only the realization of the workings of Fortune would achieve the desired effect, freeing us from that ever-turning wheel of Fortune and gaining a liberty that rests exclusively in the absolute good, in happiness.

One of the most curious moments occurs when Philosophy reminds Boethius that misfortune actually carries a positive value for the individual because it provides insight into truth. Referring to friendship, she tells her disciple, the prisoner and death-row inmate, that true friends prove themselves only in times of danger or sickness. Only true friends stick it out with each other

20. *Vernacular Traditions of Boethius's De Consolatione philosophiae*, ed. Noel Harold Kaylor and Philip Edward Phillips. Research in Medieval Culture (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2016); Albrecht Classen, "Boethius and No End in Sight: The Impact of *De consolatione philosophiae* on Early Modern German Literature From the Fifteenth Through the Seventeenth Century: Andreas Gryphius and Johann Scheffler (Angelus Silesius)," *Daphnis* 46 (2018): 448–66 (online at: doi 10.1163/18796583-04601010).

21. *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. Margaret Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981); see also the contributions to *Boethius Christianus?: Transformationen der "Consolatio Philosophiae" in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Reinhold F. Gleis, Nicola Kaminski, and Franz Lebsanft (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).

22. There are many editions and translations of Boethius's text; here I rely on Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans., with intro. and notes by Richard Green (Indianapolis, New York, and Kansas City: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1962); for further reflections on this text, see Joel C. Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius's Consolation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

and thus demonstrate profound strength. False friends immediately fall away and can never be trusted: "adverse fortune is more beneficial to men than prosperous fortune. When Fortune seems kind, and seems to promise happiness, she lies. On the other hand, when she shows herself unstable and changeable, she is truthful. . . . Finally, good fortune seduces weak men away from the true good through flattery; but misfortune often turns them around and forcibly leads them back to the true good" (40). Instead of lamenting his terrible destiny, Boethius ought to feel thankful: "Now you complain of lost riches; but you have found your friends, and that is the most precious kind of wealth" (41).

Once all the material dimensions have been moved aside, Philosophy takes the second step and reminds Boethius of the ultimate source of happiness, the only one that can be trusted, that is, the only force that is not dependent on Fortune and enjoys its own sustenance from itself. The author might have the Christian teaching in mind, or he might aim for a purely Neoplatonic interpretation according to which the origin of all life finds its resting place in the one force behind all material existence, the good. The good is defined as the happy, which in turn proves to be the one entity that draws only from its own being and is not in need of anything outside of itself. This could be thought of as God, or as self-sufficiency as such. True happiness, hence, does not rest in material, worldly goods, but in the deep source of it all from which all life originated. Only this freedom would guarantee contentment, or freedom, which in turn leads to true happiness: "the good is defined as that which, once it is attained, relieves man of all further desires. This is the supreme good and contains within itself all other lesser goods" (43).

Boethius also raises the question of whether there is free will, or whether we are dependent on God's decisions. Philosophy knows how to respond and determines that God exists both in the past and in the present at the same time. God would thus not "know" the future in a visionary manner but would be there with the individual during all three stages of time, past, present, and future: "if you will think about the foreknowledge by which God distinguishes all things, you will rightly consider it to be not a foreknowledge of future events, but knowledge of a never changing present. For this reason, divine knowledge is called providence, rather than prevision, because it resides above all inferior things and looks out on all things from their summit" (116). And: "this power of divine knowledge, comprehending all things as present before it, itself constitutes the measure of all things and is in no way dependent on things that happen later" (119).

Although Boethius, in his role as a prisoner and student of Philosophy's teaching, is willing and ready to accept the lessons, which all sound reasonable and prove to be logical by themselves, he still has deep troubles comprehending why then he, as a truly good person, innocent of all those trumped-up charges, has to suffer from the doings of those evil people who can only think of how to bring about his demise. This then leads over to the fundamental discussion

pertaining to the role of good and evil, and why there is so much evil in this world. Boethius is willing, as he formulates it in books three and four, to accept the basic explanation about the fake properties of Fortune, or that Fortune itself is defined by its own fickleness or constant change. And yet, he struggles hard, as all people certainly do who reflect upon those issues, to comprehend the larger schema of things, i.e., the relationship between the human creature and the divine being.

How then would evil enter this world, and Philosophy offers the stunning argument that there is no real evil, as much as there seem to be evil people who have apprehended Boethius and thrown him into prison despite his clear innocence. Only slowly, and with much resistance, does the author finally realize what Philosophy is trying to tell him when she resorts to the astounding metaphor of the plants that all want to live and thrive. Evil, if it were to exist, would be a force in all living things driving them to a sort of suicide insofar as plants, for instance, would deliberately seek out dark, dry, cold, and rocky places where no real life is possible: "Thus, this love for the self clearly comes from natural instinct and not from voluntary activity. Providence gave to his creatures this great urge for survival so that they would desire to live as long as they naturally could" (68). However, those are then plants that remove themselves from the potentials of full existence and return, voluntarily, so to speak to their own origin, or simply commit suicide, if they had a will on their own. Pursuing evil in human terms would then be tantamount to submit completely under Fortune and to seek out willingly a miserable death where death would await them.

By contrast, all beings desire to be good, which now means, as we can conclude altogether, to aspire for independence, freedom from contingency, the gaining of self-sufficiency, and to join the supreme good as the only viable purpose for life: "whatever loses its goodness ceases to be. Thus wicked men cease to be what they were; but the appearance of their human bodies, which they keep, shows that they once were men. To give oneself to evil, therefore, is to lose one's human nature" (82).²³

But why are there, then, evil people still around if that goal were so easy to perceive? Why does Boethius have to suffer such a terrible death, as he bitterly complains to Philosophy? Should not all people be able to listen to their own inner drive toward happiness and embrace it fully, abstaining from committing acts of evil? Stunningly, Philosophy then suggests that there is no real evil, and as much as poor Boethius has to accept his unjustified death, he should not even think that is a miserable victim of malfeasance or vicious plotting against him.

In fact, already in the first book, Philosophy had reminded him that his entire life had been a happy one, that he had achieved much both in intellectual

23. Robert Sharples, "Fate, Prescience and Free Will," *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 207–27.

and personal terms, witnessing, for instance, the rise of both of his sons to the rank of Consul. She also refers him to the fact that he is happily married, enjoys the deep friendship and love of his father-in-law, and that he should be proud of his many accomplishments throughout his life.

She acknowledges that his imminent murder would have to be lamented, but she chastises Boethius for his shortsightedness, his demand on life that it would always be good to him. The wheel of Fortune constantly turns, so he should not complain so badly about this one time, though deadly, change in his life. Moreover, as we learn from the later books, there is no reason to fear evil because it does not really exist. The argument for this curious thesis is actually quite simple. Insofar as happiness is identified with goodness, and the latter with self-sufficiency, it is obvious that only the absolute good, maybe God, can be truly happy. All beings, however, strive for happiness, endeavor to extricate themselves from the dependency on Fortune, to gain this powerful notion of inner freedom from Fortune. The wicked ones, however, strive for the very opposite of their own nature: "what greater weakness is there than the blindness of ignorance? . . . they are made weak by intemperance and cannot overcome their vices . . . Anyone acting that way loses not only his strength but his very being, since to forsake the common goal of all existence is to forsake existence itself" (79).

In his Neoplatonic thinking, Boethius argues that all life is determined by the strife to free oneself from material existence, or from contingency where everything depends on Fortune. Once the individual has moved beyond that realm and entered the sphere of the absolute good, at least trying to participate in that good, then a sense of real happiness can be experienced. All of life is defined as a movement from birth to death, and within that short span the individual, or any creature, aims for the realization of its own potential. To become oneself constitutes the fulfillment of the own destiny, which can only aim for the good. However, those who do acts of evil, who exist at least in this material domain, move deliberately away from this natural vector toward the good and thus turn against themselves. In short, the more evil-natured an individual proves to be, the less it can really claim to be or to participate in goodness, or self-sufficiency. Hence, in the end, evil eliminates itself. Even though Boethius has to suffer at the hand of evil people, Philosophy consoles him with references to this course of all life, toward happiness. In other words, those who submit themselves to evil move away from their own target of being and destroy themselves. They operate like a plant that deliberately takes root where it cannot exist in the long run, in the shade, in a dry spot, in a location without soil. Evil people perform the same 'suicidal' action and thus disappear in the long run.

Considering the trenchant nature of Philosophy's teaching addressing so many fundamental questions in human life regarding the role of Fortune, the search for happiness, the meaning of the good, the concept of evil, the notion of free will, and providence, it is little wonder that Boethius exerted such a profound

influence and can still be accepted as a major pilot light in modern human existence.

Francesco Petrarch: His Secret Investigation of His Self

As our third witness for our case that pre-modern writers have much to tell us and support us in our endeavor to recenter the Humanities with the help of late antique and medieval/Renaissance authors, I call upon Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374), who, in direct response to both Augustine and Boethius, reflected once again on the meaning of his own life and reached a profound understanding when he composed his *Secretum Meum* (begun ca. 1342, completed, or revised, in 1347).²⁴ Although we have commonly identified Petrarch as the major spokesperson for the early Italian Renaissance, which might certainly be true in light of many of his other texts, here in this dialogue treatise, closely modeled after Augustine and Boethius, he resolutely resorted to the medieval *Zeitgeist* and espoused strong religious concepts for his own spiritual well-being. We might hence reach the preliminary conclusion that the traditional system of periodization (Middle Ages, Renaissance, Modernity) might not help us all that effectively in coming to terms with past voices and their relevance for us today.

Whether medieval or early modern, in his *Secretum* we encounter an individual anxiously probing his own self and trying to engage with the ultimate questions of all life, which explains well why this dialogue poem has been regularly regarded as one of Petrarch's major contributions to western thought. Here we observe once again the fundamental strategy of taking a step backward, here to Augustine, in order to step forward in a renewed form of his own spirituality.²⁵ Although the title and the structure of the work might associate the *Secretum* directly with the genre of religious confessions, we would be better advised to identify it as part of a long tradition of *consolatio* literature, which goes directly back to Boethius.²⁶ Petrarch probably intended this work to be more of a

24. *Petrarch's Secret: Or The Soul's Conflict with Passion. Three Dialogues Between Himself and S. Augustine*, trans. from the Latin by William H. Draper (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1911); see also the studies by Davy A. Carozza and H. James Shey, *Petrarch's Secretum with Introduction, Notes, and Critical Anthology*. American University Studies, XVII.7 (New York, Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 1989).

25. Giulio Levi, "Pensiero classico e pensiero cristiano nel *Secretum* e nelle *Familiari* del Petrarca," *Atene e Roma* 35 (1933): 60–82; Klaus Heitman, "Augustines Lehre in Petrarca's *Secretum*," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 12 (1960): 34–53; A. Castelli, "Suggerimenti di un lettura del *Secretum* di Francesco Petrarca," *Rassegna delle scienze filosofiche* 22 (1969): 109–33; Massimo Verdicchio, "Petrarch's Secret: *The Secretum*," *Italian Quarterly* 57 (2020): 123–46; Gabriel Haley, "Petrarch's Secularized Contemplation," *Essays in Medieval Studies: Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association* 35 (2021), 115–33.

26. Francisco Rico, *Vida u obra de Petrarca: Lectura del Secretum*. Studi sul Petrarca, 4

personal reflection to come to terms with his quest for meaning in life and death, as the full title indicates: *Secretum de secreto conflictu curarum mearum* (A Private Conversation about the Secret of My Anxieties).²⁷

On a very simple formal level, we are immediately alerted to Petrarch's intention with his work as it is predicated on an exchange with Augustine who addresses him in his unhappiness and chastises him for having forgotten, so it seems, his own mortality. One of the essential tasks of all people would be to reflect on death in a meaningful and profound manner, which hence would facilitate the struggle against one's unhappiness (41). St. Augustine, as he is formally labeled here, emphasizes three points that all people should consider: 1. if one is unhappy, one would certainly aim with all one's abilities to overcome this depression and aim for recovery, which should be considered a strong possibility (2.). But the third point (3) is that people tend to give themselves over to the pleasures of this world (42).

Petrarch essentially agrees and emphasizes that unhappiness tends to be a common problem among people, irrespective of what the critical cause of it might be (43). Augustine severely challenges his opponent for having forgotten the fundamental teachings of the classical philosophers such as Cicero, and highlights the central importance of the virtues which would, if closely observed, avoid the danger of falling into unhappiness (44). Following he repeats his earlier outline, urging his listener to keep in mind that the "first step in escaping the perplexities of human existence and rising to a higher kind of life is a meditation on the fact of death and human unhappiness" (45). But Petrarch cannot quite follow his teacher, pointing out that he would not know of any people who voluntarily had embraced unhappiness, and Augustine responds with a serious warning about his self-deception in this case, emphasizing that unhappiness remains the result of one's own inability and unwillingness to rid oneself of this feeling, as he himself had already outlined in his *Confessions* (48). Only a very strong desire for virtue and for happiness would be enough to achieve the desired goal (50).

As simple as this concept might be, that is, pure and full desire for happiness, Augustine warns Petrarch that there are many forces in life pulling the individual both up and down, meaning that spirituality and material pleasures contradict each other. First of all, constant "meditation on death . . . leads to this goal, along with the constant recollection of your mortality" (52). Reflecting on one's own mortality and that of all other living creatures, on the fragility and hence transitoriness of all things represents a major step forward in truly desiring happiness, which proves to be uncannily similar to Philosophy's observations in Boethius's treatise about the true nature of Fortune which deceives all people

(Padova: Antenore, 1974), 7–38.

27. See also *Petrarch's Secret: or the Soul's Conflict with Passion (Three Dialogues Between Himself and S. Augustine)*, trans. William H. Draper (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2015).

until they can free themselves of the contingency of the material existence: "Surrounded by all these things, one cannot escape noticing reminders of one's own mortality" (53). Unfortunately, although people have reason, only very few know how to use it properly and thus to distinguish themselves clearly from animals (54).

The key concept would be to keep death deeply in mind, to respond to this phenomenon with emotions, and to recoil at the thought of death: "you must place no hope in your talent or eloquence, in wealth and power, or in physical beauty or worldly fame, that the judge cannot be bribed, deceived, or appeased, that death itself not an end of trials, but a passage – and picture this a passage through all kinds of punishment" (56).²⁸ Death must be regarded as a matter of invariability and unavoidability, and then the human being begins to understand life more fully and can work effectively against unhappiness (56–57).

Undoubtedly, the approach pursued here is very different from the one espoused by Boethius, and even Augustine in his *Confessions* had emphasized a rather personal, confessional perspective. Here, in Petrarch's text, Augustine argues from the point of view of death exclusively and identifies it as the critical vehicle to learn the truth about life through that lens only. Of course, this message at first terrifies Petrarch, but Augustine reminds him that pleasure derived from sinfulness will ultimately lead to every greater unhappiness once it catches up with him (57). And he warns him to keep the larger schema of things in mind and to discipline himself so as to focus more firmly on the central aspects in human life (62).

In the second book, Augustine points out that despair in these matters would be the "ultimate evil" (65), urges Petrarch to observe more humility and keep a clear distance to the things of this world (66). Most intriguingly, he tells him that all of his worldly knowledge would be for naught if he were lacking "self-knowledge" (67), and if he would ignore all the teachings about virtue learned from the reading in the Scriptures and elsewhere, he would fail in his most essential task as a human being (67). Rhetoric and eloquence would not compensate for many of his shortcomings (68), and pride in one's own body or physical skill would be nothing but an expression of self-illusion (69), as Boethius had already formulated. In fact, Augustine goes so far as to define human life as a prison: "you poor humans know and love your prison; and although you are on the point of leaving it or being dragged out of it, you cling to it and worry about

28. Particularly the fourteenth century was deeply vexed by the constant reminders of death brought about by the Black Death, and other pandemics; see Jean E. Jost, "The Effects of the Black Death: The Plague in Fourteenth-Century Religion, Literature, and Art," *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: The Material and Spiritual Conditions of the Culture of Death*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, 16 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 193-238. See also the other contributions to this volume.

decorating what you ought to hate" (71).²⁹

If we scan through the subsequent sections of Books two and three, we recognize that Augustine actually offers a wide spectrum of ethical teachings for general human beings, regarding pride (71), greed (72), flattery (72), old age (74) but also modesty, and self-discipline (75). He also turns to avarice (75–76). When he considers wealth or the power of the mighty ones, we clearly perceive the basic teachings formulated by Boethius: "Certainly the kings and lords of the earth whom you think so rich need countless things" (77).

There would be many more points to be raised, especially in book three, but neither here nor in the case of Augustine's *Confession* there is an easy way into the text and to grasp in clear terms what the Church Father has to say, parallel to the statements by the other writers. Petrarch, to be sure, feels horrible and is deeply afraid of the other's comments about his own life and the general human shortcomings, but in the course of time, the two move toward each other's standpoints regarding virtue, the little value of material objects, and the need to keep death in mind all the time in order to prepare oneself for the afterlife. Arguing, as to be expected, from a very religious standpoint, Augustine insists that true happiness can rest only in a non-material afterlife. However, as the subsequent exchange reveals, humans always tend to pursue the easy path and avoid the hard climb, which really disorients and misleads them badly – a concept clearly formulated also in Petrarch's account of his ascent to Mount Ventoux in the Provence, in a letter to his former confessor, Dionigi di Borgo San Sepolcro, from ca. 1350 (*Epistolae familiares* IV, 1).³⁰ Significantly, there he reached the peak, after many struggles and wrong turns down the slope, instead of aiming for the top, and then gazed into the distance, but only to remember, after all, his Augustine. Instead of dedicating himself to the amazing beauty of the panorama below him, Petrarch then pulled out of his pocket a copy of the

29. As to the topic of imprisonment, prisons, and slavery, see my monograph *Freedom, Imprisonment, and Slavery in the Pre-Modern World: Cultural-Historical, Social-Literary, and Theoretical Reflections*. *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 25 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), and the contributions to *Incarceration and Slavery in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: A Cultural-Historical Investigation of the Dark Side in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Albrecht Classen. *Studies in Medieval Literature* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books, 2021). The comments by Augustine in Petrarch's *Secretum Meum* add important theological reflections on this topic of lack of freedom.

30. For an English translation, see Carozza and Shey, *Petrarch's Secretum* (1989), 153–60; cf. Theodore Ziolkowski, "'Tolle Lege': Epiphanies of the Book," *The Modern Language Review* 109.1 (2014): 1-14; Albrecht Classen, "The Discovery of the Mountain as an Epistemological Challenge: A Paradigm Shift in the Approach to Highly Elevated Nature. Petrarch's *Ascent to Mont Ventoux* and Emperor Maximilian's *Theuerdank*," *The Book of Nature and Humanity in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. David Hawkes and Richard G. Newhauser, with the assistance of Nathaniel Bump. *Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 3–18.

Confessions, began to read in it deeply, and thus deliberately fell back to the medieval *Zeitgeist* determined by Augustinian ideas.³¹ Whether he recovered thereby his individuality, as claimed by Unn Falkeid, might be a matter of debate.³²

Leaving those questions aside, we can firmly conclude that Petrarch's endeavor to engage with this Church Father, to incorporate the concepts as developed by Boethius, and the reliance on the dialogue as the ideal forum for the exploration of the self within the context of the divine afterlife constituted a fundamental literary enterprise we must not ignore even today.³³ As Rocco Montano claimed, here we come across a major stepping stone for the emergence of an inner consciousness, but Petrarch was not at all the first to work at that goal, as our discussion of Augustine and Boethius has already shown.³⁴ Petrarch's interlocutor emphasizes that the true path toward happiness would be to dismiss material treasures and even erotic love and to turn one's attention fully to God (114).

Augustine's message here is clearly a theological one, but it convinces Petrarch and makes him reconsider his traditional approach to life, to his writing, to love, and his traditional endeavors: "If you do not desire immortal things, if you do not have regard for eternal things, you are wholly of this earth. Your fate is sealed; there is no hope left" (135). Hence, only the constant realization that life is short, that no one can predict the arrival of death, and that true happiness rests in the time after one's death, would support one's effort to live well and fully according to the highest ideals people can aspire for (136–37). Only the constant reminder of one's mortality would open the right pathway toward a meaningful life and would provide ultimate happiness, not in a morbid, but in a

31. Pierre Courcelle, "Pétrarque entre Saint Augustin et les Augustins du XIVe Siècle," *Studi Petrarqueschi* 7 (1961): 58–71; Lyell Asher, "Petrarch at the Peak of Fame," *PMLA* 108.5 (1993): 1050–63, online at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/462985>.

32. Unn Falkeid, "Petrarch, Mont Ventoux and the Modern Self," *Forum Italicum* 43.1 (2009): 5–28; here 23: "Petrarch articulates a universal truth about the human being; all the exemplars of the species are subjected to the inconstancy of time and space. Petrarch the wanderer, *peregrinus ubique*, demonstrates in this way that every human being is an irreplaceable and unique individual on his physical and spiritual journey throughout this earthly life."

33. Donald Beecher, "Petrarch's 'Conversion' on Mont Ventoux and the Patterns of Religious Experience," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 28.3 (2004): 55–76; Elke Waiblinger, "Augenlust und Erkundung der Seele: Francesco Petrarca auf dem Mont Ventoux," *Raumerfahrung-Raumerfindung: Erzählte Welten des Mittelalters zwischen Orient und Okzident*, ed. Laetitia Rimpau, Peter Ihring (Berlin: Akademie Verlag; 2005), 179–93. Most recently, see Peter H. Hansen, "Upland on Mont Ventoux," *Mountain Dialogues from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. Dawn Hollis and Jason König. Ancient Environments (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 215–28.

34. Rocco Montano, "La presa di coscienza: Il *Secretum*," id., *Lo spirito e le lettere: Disegno storico della letteratura italiana* (Milan: Marzorati, 1970), vol. I, 197–200.

philosophical sense (143). The wise person understands where one's true "homeland" (143) is, and s/he "desire[s] to be saved and be free" (143). Ultimately, as Augustine advises, "Follow the urging of your soul" (143). Petrarch himself finally refers, at least indirectly, to Fortune, hoping that it will not be "an obstacle" to the ideals by Augustinian and Boethian concepts (144).

Finally, a Few Other Voices: Dante and Johannes von Tepl

Parallel to those three voices, we find, of course, numerous other members of one and the same huge choir whose voices have resonated throughout the centuries. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) deserves to be mentioned here above all because his *Divina Commedia*, completed in ca. 1320, consists of a pathway through the afterworld which Dante the pilgrim succeeds to traverse only with the help of his guide Virgil in the first section, and then by Bernard of Clairvaux, and finally by his beloved Beatrice when he reaches *Paradiso*. Although a traveler through the afterlife, the literary framework constitutes a focused search for the self and the divine in one and the same moment. The actual teaching, however, takes place through the constant exchange with the various helpers and teachers who instruct the pilgrim about the meaning of the individual scenes and the figures appearing before his eyes.³⁵

About eighty years later, the German-Czech writer Johannes von Tepl created his dialogue poem *The Plowman* (ca. 1400), in which Death and the Plowman, a stand-in for all human beings, debate the meaning of death and life, of marriage, and personal happiness. At first, the Plowman voices greatest frustration, sorrow, and anger over the loss of his wife, as all honest mourners would do, but in the course of the debate between the two, the Plowman ultimately recovers his own self and defends the beauty of life as the highest glory of God. Death, by contrast, deeply steeped in the Middle Ages, dismisses the value of all material existence and insists, although at the end he loses himself in the heated debate, on his absolute superiority.

Ultimately, God intervenes and grants Death the victory because this is a law of nature. However, he also bestows honor upon the Plowman as a worthy defendant of life here on earth.³⁶ Both in Tepl's poem and in Dante's absolute

35. For an excellent website with many different resources, see <http://www.worldofdante.org/> (last accessed on July 10, 2022); Guy P. Raffa, *The Complete Danteworlds: A Reader's Guide to the Divine Comedy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Still of seminal importance, Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim, intro. Michael Dirda (New York: New York Review Books, 2007). There is, as to be expected with a major poet like Dante, a legion of relevant studies on him.

36. Albrecht Classen, "Der Ackermann aus Böhmen – ein literarisches Zeugnis aus einer Schwellenzeit: Mittelalterliches Streitgespräch oder Dokument des neuzeitlichen Bewußtseins?," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 110.3 (1991): 348–373; Christian Kiening,

masterpiece, we observe deep influences of Augustinian and Boethian thinking, and we can trace those easily throughout the following centuries as well.³⁷ We also recognize clearly the continuous struggle also by these medieval authors and philosophers to come to terms with their own inner self, their soul, with the question of meaning life, and the deep concern about the correct path here in this life, toward God after death. We cannot compare Dante's *Divina Commedia* or Johann von Tepl's *Ackermann* with the philosophical treatises by those three authors discussed above, but their works also signals the ongoing search for personal identity, meaning, and orientation in a rather opaque world filled with suffering, pain, and, above all, lack of direction.

Final Thoughts: The Humanities through a Medieval Lens

This now allows us to conclude with some final reflections on all of those voices as the bedrock of the Humanities until the twenty-first century. Of course, no one would have to study thoroughly Augustine, Boethius, Hildegard of Bingen, Dante, Petrarch, or Johannes von Tepl, among a host of many other names from that long time period, some being philosophers, some mystics, and some poets. Nevertheless, ignoring their individually profound impact on the entire history of western culture, philosophy, and literature might entail a dangerous level of ignorance when turning one's attention to any other texts from later ages. It might go too far to claim that those writers exerted a pervasive, ever-present impact on their posterity, but to ignore them today also blinds us to the fundamental ideas underlying the huge scaffolded body of Humanism and hence its study in the Humanities.

There are, perhaps surprisingly for those who are not familiar with those intellectual giants from the past, only few basic concerns and ideas in human life, such as death, love, meaning of life, and the quest for God. Each individual, also today, has to engage with them in one way or the other, and the more sensitively we approach them, the more profoundly will be our responses. We do not have

Schwierige Modernität: der "Ackermann" des Johannes von Tepl und die Ambiguität historischen Wandels. Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters, 113 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998). Again, this is also one of those texts that have attracted much scholarship.

37. As to Boethius, see Albrecht Classen, "Boethius as a Source for Late-Medieval German Didactic Poetry? The Example of the Gnostic Poet Heinrich der Teichner," *Carmina Philosophiae* 15 (2006): 63–88; id., "Boethius and No End in Sight: The Impact of *De consolatione philosophiae* on Early Modern German Literature From the Fifteenth Through the Seventeenth Century: Andreas Gryphius and Johann Scheffler (Angelus Silesius)," *Daphnis* 46 (2018): 448–66 (online at: doi 10.1163/18796583-04601010); *A Companion to Boethius in the Middle Ages*, ed. Noel Harold Kaylor and Dario Brancato. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 30 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012).

to agree with Augustine, Boethius, or Petrarch, or with any other major figures from the pre-modern world, in specific terms. However, as we have seen, in their own reflections they had already come to terms with most of the crucial issues by questing for an understanding of human happiness and spirituality, which might be simply two different terms for the same phenomenon.

I would not want to argue that we turn away from the philosophical or literary discourse of our own time, by far not. But anyone dedicated to gaining more extensive understanding of him/herself through a humanistic approach would have to acknowledge the roots, the tree trunk, the branches, and the leaves of the metaphorical tree. The three voices discussed here certainly represent major sections of the extensive root system of the tree representing us until today.³⁸

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38. See, again, the individual studies in my edited volume, *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century* (2022). I have no doubt that we could make similar claims with regard to many other major literary figure or philosopher, both in the West and in the East, or in other parts of the world. We are, to repeat the famous observation, only dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, but considering, for instance, Boethius's *De consolatioe philosophiae* even today means that the giant helps the dwarf to develop further.

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