



Petrarch's Poetics: From the Abyss of Representation to Creative Imitation

Luis Gonzalo Portugal, University of Oregon

Abstract: This article examines concepts such as creative imitation and the impossibility of representation in order to suggest an ethic of reading in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Such ethics illuminate possible new relationships between Renaissance and Baroque.

As was the case with any poet of his time, Petrarch (1304-74) understood that Homer, Ovid, and Virgil's time was not his. The break with this community of great writers of the past, in which medieval writers had worked, implied a tripartite division of history: a glorious past forever lost, a dark time of anachronistic practices, and finally a humanistic renaissance with the consciousness of its historical circumstances. With this historical division, Petrarch created the anxiety in which the modern poet would work: revive the writer of antiquity through a new perspective to emphasize its own historical moment. However, according to Thomas Greene, the poet in the Renaissance was "not a neurotic son crippled by a Freudian family romance, which is to say he is not in Harold Bloom's terms Romantic. He is rather like the son in a classical comedy who displaces his father at the moment of reconciliation" (41). Ignacio Navarrete, following Greene's ideas of the poet in the Renaissance, has paid attention to Petrarch's need to create his own voice: "Borrowing from Cicero, Petrarch advises an imitator to be like a bee, tasting from various flowers but transforming the nectar into a honey all its own. ... Petrarch stresses the transformatory aspect of imitation and the need to be true to one's personal style" (10). Thus, when Petrarch goes back to the models of antiquity it is with the aim of creating his own innovative writing. Following this line of thinking, I believe that the work that best shows us this creative process of imitation and originality is *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, better known as the *Canzoniere*. The main topic of this work is the inordinate love that the poet felt when he was young for Laura, a woman Petrarch met on April 6, 1327. In the *Canzoniere* the voice of the elder poet is constantly mentioning the "giovenile errore,/ quand'era in parte altr'uom da quel ch'i' sono" (1, 3-4). However, the final poems of the collection present the poet's earthly passion transformed into love for the Virgin and God: "re del cielo invisibile immortale/ socorri a l'alma disviata e frale" (365, 6-7).

We can consider that the conflict between the young desire and the older voice underline also the historical conscience of the poet of Renaissance. In fact, Anne Cruz has affirmed that the conflict between these voices is precisely what creates the poetic writing of the *Canzoniere*: "La poesía del *Canzoniere*, al admitir el pecado de idolatría, se vuelve una anticonfesión, ya que en ella, en vez de buscar absolución, Petrarca se obsesiona en el incesante recontar del pecado original" (5). Cruz is following John Freccero's idea about the

context, is no longer related to a mechanical repetition of a sacred text or the undeniable correspondence between words and objects, image and concepts. The truth works now as a process of individualization in the breakdown of representation. In fact, in this new context of the truth the transcendence becomes “un problema etico che allude a una significazione originaria, a un enigma che si esprime nella percezione dell’infinito nel voto dell’altro” (62). Instead of an eternal truth appears the truth of uncertainty and doubt for the other. The absolute is now relative and is under the sign of disruption. Therefore, this truth will be related to the fragmentary and continuous process of writing.

It is also important to bear in mind that the *Canzoniere* is a work of mourning for Laura. Petrarch begins to write the poems after Laura’s death. Hence, we can distinguish a double writing of loss in the *Canzoniere*. The first is the interruption of death as Laura dies, and the second the impossibility of grasping Laura with the poetic language. The *Canzoniere* is not only mourning for Laura but also for poetry itself. Therefore, the truth as fragmentation of the world can be seen as well as mourning for language and poetry. In this sense, modern poetry would be a continuous mourning.

George Hartley starts his book about representation pointing out that Orpheus has a double loss in John Ashbery’s poem “Syringa.” The first loss is Euridice’s death and the second the impossibility of representing that absence. When the mourning is about Orpheus’ own lament we encounter a poem that presents its breakdown of representation: “At such a moment we are faced with the beyond of representation: the point at which the representational apparatus turns in on itself and collapses in its inability to flesh out some adequate embodiment of the loss. But it is this loss itself that is the constitutive element of representation” (3). Hartley understands that the orphic song goes beyond representation when this second loss becomes an active presence. We can consider that the double loss in this Orpheus is parallel to the double loss that was observed in Petrarch. The mourning for poetry in the *Canzoniere* is an active breakdown that goes beyond representation, because the object of desire cannot be grasped and this impossibility becomes an active theme. The conversion of Petrarch in the *Canzoniere* takes place after this impossibility of grasping Laura. The love of God is linked then with this mourning of the poem, since God is the absolute impossibility of understanding.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this impossibility of representation is not just an isolated poetic concern of Petrarch alone. In fact, the problem of representation opens the modern perception of writing and poetry itself. Michel Foucault has pointed out that until the sixteenth century “one asked oneself how it was possible to know that a sign did in fact designate what it signified; from the seventeenth century, one began to ask how a sign could be linked to what it signified” (43). According Foucault, during the Baroque era the profound relationship between language and the world was dissolved and since then language is no longer related to the world in a pristine way. However, what can be seen as a big change in the epistemological world of the seventeenth century can be seen also in Petrarch’s poetic fragments. This seems to be more than a simple coincidence: Petrarch was aware of the modern world where the representation and the value of models will change

the way we perceive the world and writing, the appearance and reality, and certainly the truth.

As we know, the Baroque was a global crisis of representation in different levels of society. Peter Burke contends that Baroque art, working on Alexander Koyré's ideas, was produced precisely in the core of such crisis:

The new philosophical distinction between “primary qualities,” things as they really are, and “secondary qualities,” things as they seem to human senses, is surely related to a recurrent theme in Baroque art and literature—the gap between appearance and reality, *être* and *paraître*, *ser* and *parecer*, *Sein* and *Schein*. Pedro Calderón's play of the 1630s, *La vida es sueño*, is the most famous expression of this sense of life as a dream. (250)

This uncertainty of reality as consequence of the break of representation in the Baroque could also be a continuity of the ethical reading that we saw in Petrarch.

Steven Shankman has proposed an ethical principle in the Baroque using the concept of allegory from Walter Benjamin. Shankman understands that the Baroque allegory does not give a message of salvation:

In terms of ethics, though, Baroque allegory is preferable, for Benjamin, to classicism and romanticism, for classical and romantic works of art—with their seamless unity of form and content—enchant us and thus cause us to forget our responsibilities to others. ... Thus the baroque *Trauerspiel*, through allegory, breaks the spell of classical art, since in the Baroque we are not meant to be totally engrossed by the representation itself at the mimetic level. ... We are thus left with the ruins of an allegory which point to no redeeming truth, fragments that, however, awaken our sense of the catastrophe of history that we can only resist by assuming the responsibility to make remake our society in the image of justice.

Shankman, following Benjamin, assumes that this ethical principle is possible only within the Baroque experience, where the form and the content are no longer in correspondence and the human being is displaced from the core of creation. Lollini, on the other hand, puts the ethical aspect in the individualism of Petrarch in the process of the creation of an individual subject (the truth). However, Shankman and Lollini coincide in placing the ethical principle in the breakdown of representation, in those moments when the form and the content, words and things do not have direct relationship anymore. For them the inalienable nature of the other emerges in the fracture of a stratified world. Thus, the responsibility for the other can appear in the ruins of the representation, outside of the enchanted world. In this scenario, these two views about ethics complement each other, because both of them visualize different moments and levels of the failure of representation in modernity even when they are not referring to the same historical period or the same texts.

We also have to consider that both Lollini and Shankman are addressing the ethical perspective in an artistic context, a space where the influences are creating a continuous

process of assimilation and creation. In this sense, it seems that a very important concept has not been grappled with in this ethical discussion: the creative action of imitation. Imitation, or more properly *imitatio*, was one of the most important concepts in the Renaissance. Imitation was used to create a double path which first established a connection to the literary tradition of antiquity and second served as an instrument to create a personal voice (on *imitatio* and imitation, see also the essay by Alicia Colombí-Monguió in this issue). Consequently, we cannot consider only the level of representation to try to understand the artistic creation in both Renaissance and Baroque. We must consider the importance of the imitation and its process. Imitation would be then a creative act that takes distance from its model instead of the representation that wants to grasp its object as a whole. Following this line of thinking, we can affirm that the limits of representation are also the possibilities of imitation.

Greene points out that the practice of imitation in the Renaissance had several levels, some of them contradictory: “The process called imitation was not only a technique or a habit; it was also a field of ambivalence drawing together manifold, tangled, sometimes antithetical attitudes” (45). The imitation that concerns us now is what Greene calls the “creative” or “heuristic” imitation with its metaphoric nature. Greene argues that the metaphoric imitation from the Renaissance broke with the organic world of the medieval imitation:

Medieval intertextuality can properly be thought of as metonymic, Renaissance intertextuality as metaphoric. ... Intertextuality is metonymic because the later text touches, connects with, grows out of, the earlier one. All writing enjoys a neighborly community. Thus there is no perceived threat of anachronism, no clash *mundi significantes*, no itinerary from concrete historical moment to another. (86)

A metaphoric imitation necessarily creates a comparison between the model and the new version. This conflict does not arise with the medieval imitation, which Greene calls metonymic. In the Renaissance and in the Baroque the artist encounters the same problem: implementing diverse practices to obtain his autonomy and then rival his predecessors. However, the Baroque is a new level of conflict in the metaphoric imitation. In the Renaissance the metaphoric comparison brings the text from antiquity to actualize it with the constant risk of anachronism. In contrast, the Baroque uses the anachronism to renew the model. The model is present as something unfamiliar, a fragment out of place, and this is what precisely revitalizes the model because the disruption, what is out of place, occupies the new core of attention in the Baroque.

Renaissance and Baroque are dealing, on different levels, with the problem of tradition and originality, representation and imitation. The loss in Petrarch’s poetics is an active and creative space in the same way that anachronism is a motor for invigorating the tradition in the Baroque. After Laura’s death the impossibility of grasping her with the poetic language is, following Hartley’s reflections, a vigorous presence of the representation itself. Thus, the truth is not to grasp Laura, it is the continuum process of writing or the mourning that affirms the creation. The ethical reading would then comprise the breakdown of

representation and the active force of imitation. In this context, the ethical reading can be observed in the Renaissance and Baroque on different levels of operations: in a small fragment in Petrarch's writing or in the mass society of the Baroque.

Works Cited

- Burke, Peter. "The Crisis in Arts of Seventeenth Century: A Crisis of Representation?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40 2 (2009): 239-261. Print.
- Cruz, Anne J. *Imitación y transformación. El petrarquismo en la poesía de Boscán y Garcilazo de la Vega*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1988. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1973. Print.
- Freccero, John. "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics." *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 35-40. Print.
- Greene, Thomas M. *The Light in Troy. Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1982. Print.
- Hartley, George. *The Abyss of Representation. Marxism and the Postmodern Sublime*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Lollini, Massimo. *Il vuoto della forma. Scrittura, testimonianza e verità*. Genova: Marietti, 2001. Print.
- Navarrete, Ignacio. *Orphans of Petrarch. Poetry and Theory in the Spanish Renaissance*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1994. Print.
- Petrarca, Francisco. *I sonetti del Canzoniere. Los sonetos*. Introducción y traducción de Atilio Pentimalli. Barcelona: Bosch, 1981. Print.
- Shankman, Steven. "Eruptions of the Ethical Baroque." *Konturen* I (n.d. [2008]): n. pag. Web. 25 Jan. 2011. <http://konturen.uoregon.edu/vol1_Shankman.html>.