Vergil’s alleged interest in Plato is stressed in the numerous accounts of his life (the *Vitae*) which were in circulation already since antiquity, but became especially popular from the ninth century\(^1\), when medieval thinkers, inspired by Plato’s model of the poet-prophet (i.e. *Ion* 533d-534e; *Apol.* 22c; *Leg.* 4.719c; *Men.* 99d; *Ph.* 85b), embraced the conflation of poetry and philosophy\(^2\). In the same vein, under the influence of Neoplatonism, Vergil’s poetic imagery was invested with philosophical nuances and read as an allegory of “experiencing” God\(^3\). Thus, as I have argued recently\(^4\), Dante and Petrarch\(^5\) were familiar with the allegorical interpretation of Vergil through Servius\(^6\) and early manuscripts of Auctus Donatus. Nevertheless, Dante was less sceptical about Plato’s metaphorical understanding of poetry as a means of approximating the Idea of Beauty (*Phdr.* 244-51) than Petrarch, who was committed to the Ciceronian model of poetry and its role in the republic\(^7\). The tension between poetry and philosophy is evident in Petrarch’s *Secretum* and his *Rime Sparse* which contain striking Platonic and Dantean

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\(^1\) For a description of the extant *Vitae*, see Upson 1943, 103-4.


\(^3\) Comparétti 1895, 104-5. Vergil was often seen as a proto-Christian; Perkell 1999, 18 and Markos 2013, 61.

\(^4\) Anagnostou-Laoutides 2015, *passim*.

\(^5\) For Platonism in Dante, see Costa 1971, 65-70 and De Forest Duer 2003, 251-295; also, Kirkham 1992, 239-47 on Dante’s intentional parallelisms between his life and that of Vergil. For Petrarch’s use of Neoplatonist thought in his commentary of Vergil, see Lord 1996, 3-7 and Hankins 1990, 4-15, 35-43, 145, and 200; Petrarch relied on Augustine, Cicero, and Macrobius for his understanding of Plato; cf. Laird 2010, 139-147 for Vergil as the model of a professional poet for both Dante and Petrarch.

\(^6\) For Dante’s familiarity with Servius’ *Commentary* of Vergil, see Rand 1914, *passim*; Moore 1969, 189-91; Lohe 2001, 49-80; Brugnoli 2002, 471-6. Petrarch had his own copy of Servius’ *Commentary*; see O’Rourke Boyle 1991, 51; Mann 1996, 10-11.

\(^7\) Murphy 1997, 84; Hankins 2003, 501; Petrarch modelled his *Africa* on Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* (see Warner 2005, 81), while in *On his Own Ignorance* he repeatedly claims to be a Ciceronian; Mazzotta 1993, 82.
references\(^8\). Here, I argue that, while still defending Dante’s allegorical use of poetry, Petrarch expresses a predilection for philosophy.

**Platonic Vergil**

Although Vergil’s affinity with Platonic ideas is stressed both by Aelius Donatus and Servius (VSD 35), none of these sources claim that he was a dedicated «Platonist»\(^9\). However, his predilection for Plato is stressed twice in Auctus Donatus where we read that Vergil had a sexual preference for boys in emulation of Socrates and Plato (AD 29: *libidinis in pueros pronioris … ut Socrates Alcibiadem et Plato τὰ παιδικά*)\(^10\); also, that despite having studied Epicureanism under Silo and being familiar with many philosophical dogmas, he preferred Plato above all other philosophers (AD 189: *nam Platonis sententias omnibus aliis praetulit*).

These interpolations do not appear either in the *Vita Suetoni* or the *Vita Servii*\(^11\). Servius openly admits Vergil’s inconsistent use of the various philosophical schools\(^12\), yet he does praise Plato as a champion of philosophy (*ad Aen. 6.668*). Furthermore, his comments on the sixth book of the *Aeneid* on the fate of the souls entombed in a body (*Aen. 6.124-8*) as well as the purification of souls in the Underworld (*Aen. 6.724*) indicate that Servius was quite willing to infuse Stoicism with Macrobius’ Neoplatonic ideas\(^13\) – after all, Vergilian Stoicism was never far from Platonism\(^14\). Besides, Servius’ allegorical interpretation of the *Aeneid* was famously encapsulated in his understanding of the golden bough of book 6 «*per altam scientiam philosophorum, theologorum, Aegyptiorum*” (“through the deep knowledge of the philosophers, the theologians, the Egyptians”), which adumbrates the Neoplatonic tradition, especially Porphyry\(^15\).

Porphyry was the first to collapse the distinction between poetry and philosophy through his reference to the Homeric poems as “a screen of poetic fiction masking a gen—

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\(^8\) See, for example, Sturm-Maddox 2009, 55-62.

\(^9\) VSD 46.

\(^10\) Anagnostou-Laoutides 2015, 338.


\(^12\) Wilson-Okamura 2010, 80-81. For Vergil and Epicureanism, see Armstrong 2003, 2. For Vergil and Stoicism, see Wigodsky 2003, 224.


eral truth about human experience”\(^{16}\). Proclus used the word *parapetasma* in the same sense\(^ {17}\). According to Macrobius, Vergil concealed his true meaning *sub pio velamine figmentorum* (“under a pious veil of fancies”)\(^ {18}\), revealing thus himself as a sage *omnia disciplinarum peritus* (“skilled in all disciplines”)\(^ {19}\). His words impressed Boccaccio who wrote (Gen. 14.18.12):

\[
\text{Veritatis quippe optima indagatrix philosophia est, comperte vero sub velamine servatrix fidi sissima est poesis}
\]

Philosophy is the best investigator of truth, but poetry is the most faithful custodian, *beneath her veil*, of the truth that has been discovered.

Furthermore, Boccaccio aptly summarizes Vergil’s appreciation as a Platonic sage in the Middle Ages by urging his reader thus (Gen. 14.13)\(^ {20}\):

\[
\text{Lege Virgilium, et orantem invenies: Iuppiter omnipotens, precibus si flecteris ullis etc. quod epythetum nemini deorum alteri datum comperies. Reliquam autem deorum multitudinem non deos, sed dei membra aut divinitatis officia putavere, quod Plato, quem theologum nuncupamus, etiam opinatur.}
\]

Read Virgil and you will find him praying: Almighty Jupiter, if you are moved by any prayers etc. You will come across that adjective that is given to no other gods. The rest of the multitude of gods, however, are not gods, but are regarded as parts of God or aspects of divinity, on which Plato, whom we call the theologian, also agrees.

Petrarch, Boccaccio’s close friend, insisted that *Virgilium in multis Platonicum certum esse* (it is certain that Vergil is a Platonist on many issues, ad *Aen.* 6.713-5)\(^ {21}\), a phrase which alludes to the tradition of Auctus Donatus\(^ {22}\). Furthermore, having read Macrobius’ *Saturnalia* closely\(^ {23}\), Petrarch decorated his famous manuscript of the poet’s

\(^{16}\) Ossa-Richardson 2008, 343; Lamberton 1983, 7.

\(^{17}\) Ossa-Richardson 2008, 343; Lamberton 1986,185. Proclus saw Platonic philosophy as divine philosophy; Uždavinys 2009, 16.

\(^{18}\) Ossa-Richardson 2008, 343; Willis 1970, 6. Macrobius was familiar with Porphyry’s exegesis of Homer, as is evident from *Commentariorum* 1.12.1.

\(^{19}\) And, of course, a rival to Christian wisdom; again, Ossa-Richardson 2008, 343 and Willis 1970, 75; cf. Irvine 1994, 80.

\(^{20}\) Ricci 1965, 990.

\(^{21}\) Lord 1996, 5.

\(^{22}\) See Anagnostou-Laoutides 2015, 341-3.

\(^{23}\) Lord 1982, 252 and id. 1996, 4-7 and 14-22.
works with an image of Servius lifting a veil to reveal the meanings of the poet. As Tudeau-Clayton noted (1998, 28)\textsuperscript{24}, in the frontispiece «Virgil is represented … as a vates whose texts are divinely inspired» while «Servius … is represented as a priest-like mediator, who stands between the divinely inspired text and those the text both addresses and represents». Under the figures of Servius and Vergil, an inscription, probably composed by Petrarch himself, reads\textsuperscript{25}:

\begin{quote}
Servius altiloqui retegens archana Maronis,
Ut pateant ducibus pastoribus atque colonis
\end{quote}

Servius unfolding the sacred mysteries of the sublime Maro that they may be visible to leaders, shepherds, and farmers.

Petrarch returns to this \textit{velum allegoriarum} often in his works including his \textit{Res Seniles} and his \textit{Secretum}\textsuperscript{26}.

\textbf{Vergil in Dante and Petrarch}

Dante presented Vergil as a Christian prophet\textsuperscript{27}, yet steeped in Platonic references; thus, echoing Macrobius, his Vergil is «il savio gentil che tutto seppe» (“the noble sage who knew everything”)\textsuperscript{28}. Dante lacked formal education but became familiar with Greek philosophy through his friend Brunetto Latini (cf. \textit{Inf.} 15.30); he was also well-acquainted with the Neoplatonic tradition fostered by Augustine and ultimately going back to Plotinus as well as with Cicero’s treatise \textit{On Friendship} and Boethius’ \textit{Consolation of Philosophy}\textsuperscript{29}. Besides, Dante was greatly influenced by pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who invested Christian mysticism with Neoplatonic ideas and whose definition of evil \textit{(DN 4.19.716D)} and hierarchy of being (see \textit{DN 4.13.712B} on God as Love;

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{24}] See Greene 1982, 35 for Vergil on Petrarch’s frontispiece «as in a pose often assigned to biblical prophets or evangelists».
\item[\textsuperscript{25}] Tudeau-Clayton 1998, 28 – here I quote her translation.
\item[\textsuperscript{26}] Ossa-Richardson 2008, 351; Rizzo and Berté 2006, 312 ad Petrarch \textit{Res Sen.} IV.5; cf. his \textit{Secretum} 3 and \textit{Prose} 206, 212. Also, see O’Rourke Boyle 1991, 20 for the Augustinian origin of the motif (cf. \textit{De libero arbitrio} 3.14.41; \textit{PL} 32, c).
\item[\textsuperscript{27}] Raffa 1995, 271-273; Anagnostou-Laoutides 2015, 346.
\item[\textsuperscript{28}] Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008, 463-4. Dante generally seems to neglect Cicero’s speeches; Conte 1999, 205.
\item[\textsuperscript{29}] De Forest Duer 2003, 161; cf. Marsh 2009, 211 on Petrarch’s \textit{Veritas} which corresponds to Dante’s Beatrice.
\end{itemize}


cf. Par. 10.115-7) Dante reworks in the Inferno\(^{30}\). According to John of Scythopolis, it is thanks to Dionysius, with his dual degrees from Paul and Platonism, that «the bastard teachings of the Greek philosophers have been restored to the truth»\(^{31}\). Influenced by the Neoplatonist conception of Poros, Dante in his Paradiso casts Beatrice and her beauty as Poros, the means through which he finally reaches Heaven\(^{32}\). Thus, Dante is familiar with the Servian approach to Vergil which draws on the same sources.

The poet, tired with the political fragmentation of Florence\(^{33}\) which led him to exile and cost him his much-aspired coronation in his native city\(^{34}\), turned to Vergil for an example of how individuals (rather than states) ought to seek salvation. Dante employed Vergil as his guide to an esoteric search for truth\(^{35}\) which was dissonant with Petrarch’s Ciceronian ideals and his belief that the poets could show the way for the ideal republic\(^{36}\). Furthermore, by casting his Vergil as a poet cum philosopher, Dante seeks to mirror his own attitude to philosophy and the role of the poet in society: after the death of Beatrice, Dante consoled himself with the pursuit of philosophy and became so engrossed in philosophical studies that he calls Philosophy (Conv. 2.12.2-7) the «noble lady» with whom he has now fallen in love, a personification reminiscent of Boethius’ «Lady Philosophy» and Cicero’s «exhortation of Philosophy»\(^{37}\).

Petrarch, on the other hand, tried to reconcile Vergil’s Platonism with the Christian dogma and Cicero’s republican ideals\(^{38}\). Hence, in his Vita Solitaria, written in 1346, Petrarch portrayed Vergil and Cicero as preferring contemplative isolation (De Vita Sol. 2.7.2)\(^{39}\) in emulation of Plato (De vita Sol. 1.7)\(^{40}\). The motif had also introduced his Collatio laureationis, delivered on the occasion of his coronation as poet laureate on

\(^{30}\) Perl 2008, 53-83.

\(^{31}\) Prol. 17D; Roremand Lamoreaux 1998, 146; Stang 2012, 19; cf. Petrarch, Fam. 21.10.13 where he portrays St. Paul as visiting Vergil’s tomb with tears in his eyes.

\(^{32}\) De Forest Duer 2003, 251-252.

\(^{33}\) Franke 2009, 263-4; Raffa 2009, 34.

\(^{34}\) Sturmi-Maddox 2009, 293-4 citing Par. 25.1-9 for Dante still hoping for his coronation in Florence.

\(^{35}\) Freccero 1986, 30, 37-44. My argument here does not refute Dante’s interest in Florentine politics of the time; see Anagnostou-Laoutides 2015, 348-9 and 336-7 with n.10.


\(^{37}\) De Forest Duer 2003, 161.


\(^{39}\) On this tradition in Auctus Donatus, see Anagnostou-Laoutides 2015, 344.

\(^{40}\) On Petrarchan isolation, see Enenkel 1998, 26-7; Lee 2012, 206-207.
April 8, 1341 in Rome\textsuperscript{41}; there Petrarch employed Vergil’s \textit{G. 3.291-2} praising the poet’s \textit{amor} for contemplative solitude\textsuperscript{42}:

\begin{quote}
\textit{sed me Parnasi deserta per ardua dulcis / raptat amor}
\end{quote}

but to the arduous desert of Parnassus sweet / love seizes me.

The \textit{Collatio} offers the first example in which pagan verses replace scripture as a subject of a \textit{sermo} and the poet usurps the role of priest as interpreter\textsuperscript{43}. The text advocates the role of poetry and the poet in «restoring the ancient polis at the centre of a unified Christian Republic at the centre of the Holy Roman Empire»\textsuperscript{44}. Still, Petrarch’s tendency to read classical texts with the reverence due to scripture recalls Dante, «the unnamed presence that looms over so much of Petrarch’s production»\textsuperscript{45}. Hence, although in his speech Petrarch imagines himself as Cicero\textsuperscript{46}, he clearly also wishes to pose as Platonic/Dantean Vergil. Notably, in \textit{Purg. 31.139-44} Dante the poet wrote:

\begin{quote}
\textit{O isplendor di viva luce eterna, / chi palido si fece sotto l’ombra / sì di Parnaso, o bevve in sua cisterna, / che non paresse aver la mente ingombra, / tentando a render te qual tu paresti / là dove armonizzando il ciel t’adombra, / quando ne l’aere aperto ti solvesti?}
\end{quote}

O splendour of living light eternal, who has ever grown so pale under Parnassus’ shade or drunk so deep of its well that he would not seem to have a mind disabled, trying to render you as you appeared there, Heaven with its harmonies overhanging you, when in the free air you disclosed yourself?

Petrarch was concerned that Dante’s poetic vision would not be understood by the uneducated masses (cf. \textit{Fam.21.15}), and rightly so, given the reaction of both commentators and leading priests to the \textit{Divine Comedy}\textsuperscript{47}; his efforts to ameliorate the tension between Dantean poetry and the Church have been often noted in scholarship\textsuperscript{48}. How-

\textsuperscript{41} Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008, 452; Laird 2010, 140; Usher 2009, 161-192.


\textsuperscript{43} Looney 2009, 135.

\textsuperscript{44} Looney 2009,133. Also, see Sturm-Maddox 2009, 296.

\textsuperscript{45} Looney 2009, 135; Petrarch claims (\textit{Fam.21.15}) to have read the \textit{Commedia} in 1359, but he had clearly read it earlier; Eisner 2007, 134.


\textsuperscript{47} Anagnostou-Laoutides 2015, 348.

\textsuperscript{48} Houston 2012, 51-52; Sturm-Maddox 2009, 302-304.
ever, Petrarch’s engagement with Dante’s Platonic vision in the *Secretum* and his *Rime Sparse* can, in my view, reveal another aspect of their constant dialogue on the roles of poetry and philosophy.

*Rejecting Poetry (= the Sirens), Embracing Philosophy (= Silence)*

In the *Secretum* Petrarch introduces his readers to Veritas, a female figure corresponding to Dante’s Beatrice and Plato’s Beauty. The work, written as a dialogue between Petrarch and Augustine, immediately brings to mind Plato’s works. In book I Veritas reminds the poet that he has deviated from the path of virtue, having succumbed to ephemeral pleasures. But her speech is non-human and, therefore, she seeks to communicate her message through the mediation of Augustine, Petrarch’s revered master. The Stoic theories of passion, Cicero’s precepts, and Vergil’s poetic teachings are all discussed in the exchange that ensues. Book I concludes with the suggestion to meditate on death and opts for a definite turn to Platonic truth advocated by both Augustine and Cicero\(^49\). Notably, at this point Augustine and Petrarch agree to reflect on the matters raised: *in silentio respiremus* (“to breathe in silence”)\(^50\). The motif of contemplative quies and silentio during which one ponders on eternal values is often revisited in the remaining two books of the *Secretum* which Petrarch chooses to conclude with an impressive image of cosmic silence in which he will have the opportunity to recover himself\(^51\):

\[
O \textit{utinam id michi contingat, quod precaris; ut et duce Deo integer ex tot anfractibus evadam, et, dum vocantem sequor, non excitem ipse pulverem in oculos meos; subsidentque fluctus animi, sileat mundus et fortuna non obstrepat.}
\]

How I wish that it happened to me what you pray for; so with God as my guide I may escape whole from so many traps, and while I follow him who calls me, I may not throw dust in my eyes; and may the waves of my soul settle down, the world be silent and adversity not soar against me.

In the second book of the *Secretum* Augustine tries to chastise Petrarch on account of his professed dedication to the writings of Plato (*et hec ex Platonis libris tibi familiariter nota sunt, quibus avidissime nuper incubuisse diceris*). In his response, Petrarch admits that, in Cicero’s steps, he is in awe of Plato’s authority, but has difficulty with following


\(^{50}\) Marsh 2009, 212-213.

\(^{51}\) My translation; cf. *Fam.*50.3.12 stressing his aspiration for “the silence of a higher life”.
his argumentation in a rational way: Plato … etsi rationem nullam afferret, … ipsa auctoritate me frangeret – to which Augustine advises continuous meditation:

Unum semper ante oculos habeto Platonis superiorum illam haud spernendam esse sententiam: ab aignitione divinitatis nil magis quam appetitus carnales et inflammatum obstare libidinem. Hanc igitur doctrinam assidue tecum uersa.

Always have in mind one thing; that memorable maxim of Plato which must not be spurned: «Nothing more can impede your knowledge of divinity than carnal appetite and ardour of passion». So meditate that doctrine incessantly.

In the course of the Secretum Petrarch is found guilty of amorous feelings and his unwillingness to give up his poetic glory\(^{52}\). His poetic ambition is especially attacked in the second half of the third book where by questioning his Africa, Petrarch questions his coronation\(^{53}\). As already pointed out by Marsh, the subtext for the three books of the Secretum is, of course, Dante’s Divine Comedy with its Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso\(^{54}\); notably, although the work does not offer a solution to Petrarch’s dilemma to continue with his literary projects or not, in reality he did opt for contemplative silence in the spiritual company of Saint Ambrose in Milan\(^{55}\). In doing so, Petrarch emulated Augustine, but, also, Cicero and Vergil\(^{56}\). Furthermore, as Kirkpatrick observed, the implications of the Secretum are too obvious in the 366 lyric poems of Petrarch\(^{57}\), written in the vernacular, and discussing Laura, the woman whom Petrarch adored, and who, unlike Dante’s Beatrice, is portrayed as too susceptible to human error.

The motif of Platonic silence remains constantly on Petrarch’s mind throughout the Rime Sparse\(^{58}\). In a way, Petrarch, struggling in the awareness that both poetry and philosophy were closely associated with rhetorical eloquence\(^{59}\), seems to opt for Augustine’s

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\(^{52}\) McClure 1991, 29; Marsh 2009, 213.


\(^{54}\) Marsh 2009, 216.

\(^{55}\) Marsh 2009, 217; in Milan Petrarch wrote Fam. 21.15 summarizing his discussion with Boccaccio on Dante.

\(^{56}\) See Edgeworth and Stem 2005, 7-9 on silence in the Aeneid; although they do not examine the Platonic background of Vergilian silence, they discuss the possibility that by his silence Vergil wished to reserve for his readers the element of choice. On Augustine’s contemplative isolation, see Kenney 2005, 142-145.

\(^{57}\) Kirkpatrick 34 and id. 2002, 226-227.

\(^{58}\) The following poems contain references to silence: 18, 20, 23, 37, 46, 49, 71, 105, 123, 125, 135, 150, 164, 171, 172, 177, 185, 205, 207, 215, 237, 261, 270, 283, 293, 302, 309, 330, 356.

\(^{59}\) Siegel 1965, esp. 147-150; cf. id. 1968, 34-57 and Lee 2012, 318-334. In On his Own Ignorance Petrarch refers to Plato as «the most eloquent of all men»; cf. Cic. De Or.1.2.47; cf. Aug. Civ. 8.9 arguing that among pagan philosophers Plato and his followers were the closest to Christianity.
model of marking his spiritual progress «by a movement from speech to silence, from outer appearance to inner truth»\(^60\). Petrarch writes (Fam. 1.8.20)\(^61\):

\[
\textit{Profecto itaque, nisi videri magis quam esse propositum nobis est, non tamen plausus insane multitudinis quam veritas in silentio placebit.}
\]

Truly then, unless our purpose is to seem [learned] rather than to be so, the applause of the foolish crowd will not please us so much as truth in silence.

Poetry then can only be appreciated as a medium; accordingly, Petrarch designed Laura’s inconsistencies of character to emphasize her role as a mere medium, not the real truth\(^62\). Although his Laura differs in that from Dante’s Beatrice, Petrarch’s lady is, nevertheless, inspired by Dante and his invocation to Apollo in Par. 1.14-6 where we read:

\[
\textit{O buono Apollo, a l’ultimo lavoro} \\
\textit{fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,} \\
\textit{come dimandi a dar l’amato alloro.}
\]

O good Apollo, for this last labor make me such a vessel for your power as you require to bestow the beloved laurel.

Like the seductive Sirens, poetry is alluring and can condemn one to becoming famous in the mouths of the uneducated masses – a fate Dante and by his own admission Petrarch’s early poetry had suffered. Hence, in Rima 167 Petrarch refers to a heavenly Siren which promises him a divine revelation through death, yet, at the same time keeps reminding him of the earthly pleasures to which he is so prone. In Rima 366 Petrarch prays to the Virgin Mary in terms that identify her both with truth and wisdom; in his prayer he asks for forgiveness because «Medusa and an error turned him to stone» (ll. 111-12)\(^63\). However, Petrarch’s connection of poetry to the deceptive Sirens is also a very accomplished allusion to Vergil, Dante, and importantly Plato.

Vergil famously described Aeneas (Aen. 5.838) as avoiding the shores of the Sirens, steering instead to Italy. The episode has been interpreted as an allegory to Vergil’s rejec-

\(^{60}\) Siegel 1965, 157.

\(^{61}\) Trans. Siegel 1965, 158.

\(^{62}\) See Siegel 1965, 158-168 on the role of inconsistency in Petrarch in light of his humanistic experience.

tion of the Homeric world⁶⁴, but, in my view, Petrarch appreciated it as an allegory to
remaining focused on man’s teleological goal as per Augustine’s repeated advice in the
Secretum⁶⁵. Dante and Vergil faced the Siren in Purg. 19 where Vergil manages to expose
her ugliness, thus steering Dante away from her; as Valle argued⁶⁶, Dante’s dream of the
Siren is not only the inspiration of his Comedy, but, crucially, the only instance when
Dante is critical of his vision and aware of its reliance on his imagination – the qualities
he attributes to Beatrice are those he projected upon her. The Sirens’ ambiguity was also
stressed in Plato’s Republic (esp. 10.614-621) where it allows the philosopher to insert a
strange astronomical excursus into eschatological theory, according to which the Sirens’
song reflected cosmic harmony⁶⁷. Notably, Cicero had interpreted the song of the Si-
rens as passion for knowledge (Fin. 5.18.49); in the same vein, Plutarch argues (Quaest.
conv. 9.14.6.2) that we fail to listen to this divine music because of our fleshly passions
which obstruct us from acquiring divine knowledge. For Plutarch the problem with the
Platonic text focuses on the connection of the Muses with the Sirens or, rather, deter-
mining when eagerness for divine knowledge becomes infatuation and hence, diversion
from truth. Hence, in Catalepton 5.11-13 Vergil rejects rhetoric⁶⁹ and the Muses (on
account of their falsehood) to follow the Epicurean philosopher Siro:

Ite hinc, Camenae, vos quoque ite saluete,
Dulces Camenae, nam fatebimur verum,
Dulces fuistis

Go away Muses, even you go away,
sweet Muses, for let us confess the truth –
you have been sweet

Boethius, on the other hand, introduced the idea of the Muse of Philosophy (Consol.
Phil. 1.1.11)⁷⁰; equally, a number of early Christian thinkers juxtaposed the Sirens’

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⁶⁴ Kyriakidis 1998.
⁶⁵ Siegel 1965, 166.
⁶⁶ Valle 2013, 6, 9-12.
⁶⁷ Proclus tried to restore cohesion to the Platonic vision, by arguing that there are three kinds of
Sirens, celestial, terrestrial and subterranean; Liefferinge 2012.
⁶⁸ Liefferinge 2012, 494-9; also, see Schlapbach 2014, 41-56 on the confusion of Sirens and Muses
in the Neoplatonic tradition and Augustine’s association of the Muses with knowledge in his De Ordine.
⁶⁹ Cf. Mazzotta 1993, 40-2 for a summary of Petrarch’s Ciceronian appreciation of rhetoric as a
means to knowledge, despite Plato’s rejection of it in both Phaedrus and Gorgias; Siegel 1965, passim; cf.
n. 59 above.
⁷⁰ Schlapbach 2014, 48-49.
knowledge with that of God urging their audiences to listen to the “choir of prophets”\(^{71}\). The problem of the Sirens is, in my view, anticipated in Plato who insists in Resp. 617e that

\[
\text{ἀρετὴ δὲ ἀδέσποτον, ἣν τιμῶν καὶ ἀτιμάζων πλέον καὶ ἐλαττῶν αὐτῆς ἕκαστος ἕξει. αἰτία ἔλομένου. θεός ἀναίτιος.}
\]

virtue has no master; each of us will have more or less of it according to whether one honours or despises it. The blame is with him who chooses. God is blameless\(^{72}\).

From this point of view, the choice to embrace virtue is ours and, equally, Vergil’s silence at the end of the Aeneid probably stresses the audience’s choice\(^{73}\). However, any correct choice ought to be graced by divine authority; hence, despite its appeal, the Sirens’ song must fail for truth to be embraced\(^{74}\). Just as Licentius, Augustine’s student, ponders in silence (\textit{tacitus ac diu consideratus}) his master’s advice to use his poetic gift by employing philosophizing allegories (\textit{De Ordine} 1.8.24), so Petrarch, who in the \textit{Secretum} is found guilty of licentiousness, including his delight in writing poetry, is keen to take a step further and lift the veil of poetry. Troubled by the element of choice, yet ready to journey beyond the ever-changing human experience, subject to uncertain impressions and deceptive mortal speech, Petrarch wishes to follow the examples of Dante, Vergil, and Plato and embrace philosophy; thus, he tries to purify his soul for the divine music which he knows exists only in silence.

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\(^{71}\) For example, Methodius of Olympus, \textit{De autexusio} 1.1-3; Ambrose, \textit{Expositio in Lucam} 4.2 (= CCSL14.106); also, see McDonald 1994, 266-267.

\(^{72}\) My translation.

\(^{73}\) Edgeworth and Stem in n. 59.

\(^{74}\) Fagan 2013, 50-64; also, Rhodes 2013, 127, 353, 457.
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