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Petrarch's Deer in *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* 190 and the *Visio Beatifica*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the mysterious deer associated with the beloved in *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Rvf*) 190 and examines its significance in connection with the *visio beatifica* of the lady in *Rvf* 191–193. The deer in sonnet 190 recalls the traditional imagery found in bestiaries and in the patristic tradition, where the animal allegorises the good Christian and Christ himself in their fight against evil. The statement ‘Nessun mi tocchi’ (*Rvf*, 190, 9) on the deer’s neck, in turn, echoes the words that Jesus says to the former sinner Mary Magdalene after his resurrection. These elements portray the lover as a penitent sinner, and the beloved embodied by the deer as a Christic presence, introducing the beatific vision in *Rvf* 191–193. The association of the lady with Christ, however, will prove to be a symptom of idolatry, in contrast with the moral conduct that the subject pursues in *Rvf* 264.

KEYWORDS

Petrarch; *Rvf*; deer; vision; baptism; idolatry

Deer are recurrent figures in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Rvf*), with both the stag and the doe representing the characteristic troubled attitude of Petrarch’s poetic persona towards the beloved. One of the most important references to the deer in the *Fragmenta* can be found in sonnet 190:

Una candida cerva sopra l'erba
verde m'apparve, con duo corna d'oro,
fra due riviere, all'ombra d'un alloro,
levando 'l sole a la stagione acerba.
Era sua vista sì dolce superba,
ch'ì' lasciai per seguirla ogni lavoro:
come l'avaro che 'n cercar tesoro
con diletto l'affanno disacerba.
'Nessun mi tocchi – al bel collo d'intorno
scritto avea di diamanti et di topazi – :
libera farmi al mio Cesare parve'.
Et era 'l sol già vòlto al mezzo giorno,
gli occhi miei stanchi di mirar, non sazi,
quand'io caddi ne l'acqua, et ella sparve.
(*Rvf*, 190)¹

The poem offers a rich and complex fabric of symbols. Let us briefly outline the traditional interpretation of the text. Commentators explain the poem as an ecstatic vision in which the hunter-lover is driven by his predatory sensual desire ('come l'avaro che 'n cercar tesoro', 7), and seeks to

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¹All quotations from the *Rvf* are cited from Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata, 2nd edn (Milan: Mondadori, 2005). Due to limitations on library access during the COVID-19 pandemic, English translations from Latin sources in this essay are my own.

chase the immaculate deer-beloved through a landscape between two rivers. The episode ends when ‘era ’l sol già vòlto al mezzo giorno’ (12) and the poetic persona falls into the water.² According to recent commentaries and studies, symbolic elements in the sonnet illustrate the condition of purity that characterises the animal, and thus the beloved. The deer’s coat is white, a colour associated with virtue. The statement ‘Nessun mi tocchi’, ‘libera farmi al mio Cesare parve’ (9, 11) relates to a hunting scene and indicates the release of the deer from a game reserve, that is to say, from the chains of earthly love by means of divine grace. ‘Cesare’, thus, is glossed as referring to God, who made the deer immune to temptations. The diamonds and topaz in which the statement is written are considered a further sign of virtue, on the basis of the traditional belief that these two minerals were an antidote to lust.³ Turning to the references to water in the sonnet, the two rivers are glossed as the Rhone or the Sorgue, and the Durance, thereby indicating Avignon as the location.⁴ Maria Luisa Doglio interprets the poetic persona’s fall into water as his awakening after an ecstatic vision, the ‘passaggio, inevitabile, dalla contemplazione alla realtà fisica’.⁵ Stefano Carrai, in turn, drawing on Ernesta Caldarini, writes: ‘L’infornuto simboleggia [...] la défaillance dell’amante, è “la conseguenza e il segnale del negativo abdicare della coscienza nel rapimento estatico” cui egli va soggetto’.⁶

To date, critics have not thoroughly investigated the imagery of redemption that the deer – as a Christological figure – may evoke, nor its relationship with the imagery of the *visio beatifica* in the manner of a *visio Dei* in *Rvf* 191, 192, and 193. Thomas Peterson takes a first step in this direction: although his analysis briefly mentions the beatific vision in poems 191–193, he does not offer any further exploration of what role, if any, the figure of the deer in *Rvf* 190 plays in instilling a state of beatitude in the poetic persona, or how the animal relates to the content of the three poems that follow.⁷ In this essay, I propose that the deer serves to associate the beloved with the good Christian and with Christ the Redeemer, and introduces the beatific vision of the lady in *Rvf* 191–193.⁸ My argument is based on three observations. First, the deer in the sonnet recalls the traditional imagery of bestiaries and in the patristic tradition, where it allegorises the virtues of both the faithful and Christ himself in their fight against evil. Second, the symbolism of the deer is intimately connected with a central element in the sonnet, water, which evokes the possibility of a baptismal cleansing of sins and guilt. Third, the statement ‘Nessun mi tocchi’ (9) echoes the scriptural ‘noli me tangere’ [do not touch me] (John 20. 17), which Jesus, after his resurrection, addresses to the penitent sinner Mary Magdalene.⁹ All these elements are tied together in the sonnet through the imagery of vision and redemption suggested by the deer; and create a conceptual link between *Rvf* 190 and *Rvf* 191–

²See Stefano Carrai, ‘Il sonetto “Una candida cerva” del Petrarca’, *Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 3 (1985), 233–51; and the following annotated editions: *Canzoniere*, ed. by Santagata, pp. 832–36; *Canzoniere: Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), II, 874–80; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Sabrina Stroppa (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), pp. 322–23; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Paola Vecchi Galli (Milan: BUR, 2012), pp. 685–87. See also Enrico Proto, ‘Il sonetto “Una candida cerva” di Francesco Petrarca’, *Rassegna critica di letteratura italiana*, 28 (1923), 129–40; Bartolo Sozzi, ‘Per il sonetto “Una candida cerva”’, *Studi petrarcheschi*, 8 (1976), 213–17; Maria Luisa Doglio, ‘Il sonetto CXC’, in *Lectura Petrarce*, ed. by Gianfranco Folena and others, 18 vols (Florence: Olschki, 1982–1999), V, 249–70; Sabrina Stroppa, ‘Gli occhi “stanchi di mirar”: Agostino e Gregorio Magno in *Rvf* CXC’, *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 40.3 (2004), 553–62; Stefano Pezzè, ‘Laura terrena e Laura celeste: da *candida cerva* a *beatissima* in cielo’, in *Laureatus in Urbe I*, ed. by Luca Marozzi and Paolo Rigo (Rome: Aracne, 2019), pp. 49–61.

³Carrai traces the imagery associated with diamonds and topaz back to Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, XXXII. 15; Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, XVI. 13; Albert the Great, *De mineralibus*, II. 2; Pierre de Bersuire, *Reductorium morale*, X. 40 and XI. 125; Matteo Silvatico, *Pandectarum medicinae liber*, CCCXC. See Carrai, ‘Il sonetto’, p. 239.

⁴Carrai and Santagata identify the rivers as the Rhone and the Durance; Bettarini, Stroppa, and Vecchi Galli identify them as the Sorgue and the Durance. See respectively Carrai, ‘Il sonetto’, p. 235; the commentaries in *Canzoniere*, ed. by Santagata, p. 834; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Bettarini, II, 876; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Stroppa, p. 323; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Vecchi Galli, p. 686.

⁵Doglio, p. 269.

⁶Carrai, ‘Il sonetto’, p. 237, citing Ernesta Caldarini, ‘Da Lancillotto al Petrarca’, *Lettere italiane*, 27 (1975), 373–80.

⁷Thomas E. Peterson, *Petrarch’s ‘Fragmenta’: The Narrative and Theological Unity of ‘Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta’* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), p. 145. On the imagery of the beatific vision, see also the commentaries in *Canzoniere*, ed. by Bettarini, II, 881–85; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Vecchi Galli, pp. 698–99.

⁸However, the deer in *Rvf* 212 is associated with the subject’s fruitless endeavours in obtaining Laura’s love.

⁹All quotations from the Latin Vulgate text of the Bible are cited from the *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. by Robertus Weber and others, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969).

193.¹⁰ However, the alignment between the lady and Christ, and thus the depiction of the beloved as a redeeming figure, is the consequence of an idolatrous attitude on the part of the subject. The poems' beatific vision does not constitute the culmination of a Christian conversion but stands instead as an epiphany of temporary and secular pleasures.

The Symbolism of the Deer in the Christian Tradition

The bestiary tradition of the *Physiologus* is a useful starting point for an investigation of the image of the deer in the sonnet. Written by an anonymous Greek author in the second century AD, the *Physiologus* combines the description of real and mythological animals with their allegorical interpretations in the light of Christian doctrine. One of its Latin renderings, the *Physiologus B*, had been reworked by the twelfth century with excerpts from Isidore's *Etymologiae*, creating the *Physiologus B-Is*. This version was particularly influential during the late Middle Ages and contributed to the compilation of vernacular bestiaries in France and Italy.¹¹ In its allegorisation, it associates the deer with both the faithful and Christ, and in both cases the association involves water:

In psalmo quadragesimo primo: 'Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus.' Physiologus dicit quoniam, ubi agnoverit cervus serpentem esse, implet os suum aqua et effundit in foramine et cum quodam sp[i]ramine oris sui attrahit serpentem foras, et conculcans cum pedibus suis interficit eum. Ita et Dominus noster Iesus Christus, videns inimicum diabolum in omni generis humani natione inhabitantem, habens in semetipso divine sapientie fontem, cuius non potest antiquus draco sufferre sermones. [...] Montes apostolos dicit et prophetas, cervos homines fideles qui [...] perveniunt ad agnitionem Christi. (*Physiologus B-Is*, 30)¹²

[In Psalm 41: 'As the deer longs for springs of waters, so my soul longs for you, God'. The Physiologus says that when the deer learns where the serpent is, he fills his mouth with water, discharges it into the hole and draws the serpent out with his breath before stamping it to death with his feet. Our Lord Jesus Christ acts in a similar way, he sees the devil in human beings and has the fount of divine wisdom, whose sermons the ancient dragon cannot withstand. [...] The apostles and prophets are said to be mountains, and the faithful who [...] attain the knowledge of God are deer.]

After quoting Psalm 41, the *Physiologus* explains that the deer, in its desire for water, represents the soul of the good Christian longing for salvation. The text also reworks the traditional rivalry found in encyclopaedic sources between the deer and the serpent, interpreting this as a symbol of the antagonism between Christ and evil: as the deer kills the serpent through water, so Christ fights evil by means of the fount of divine wisdom that resides in him. The inclusion of the serpent, which is absent from the texts both of Psalm 41 and of *Rvf* 190, emphasises the purity of the deer.¹³

Christian exegetes have highlighted all these features associated with the deer, elaborating on the imagery of water and that of the serpent.¹⁴ Augustine, for example, aligns the deer with the catechumens who wish to purify themselves through the power of holy water:

¹⁰For a discussion of the issue of lyric sequences in Petrarch, see Teodolinda Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence: Time and Narrative in Petrarch's *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*', *MLN*, 104.1 (1989), 1–38; Zygmunt G. Barański, "Weeping" and "Singing" with Orpheus (and with Dante): Emotional and Poetic Structures in *Rvf* 281–90', in his *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: Literature, Doctrine, Reality* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2020), pp. 417–40 (pp. 420–24). On the figure of Laura-Beatrice as opposed to a Laura-Medusa, see Kenelm Foster, 'Beatrice or Medusa', in *Italian Studies Presented to E. R. Vincent*, ed. by Charles P. Brand and others (Cambridge: Heffer, 1962), pp. 41–56; Aileen A. Feng, *Writing Beloveds: Humanist Petrarchism and the Politics of Gender* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), pp. 20–33. On the use of biblical images in Petrarch's *Rvf*, see for example Silvia Chessa, *Il profumo del sacro nel 'Canzoniere' di Petrarca* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2005), pp. 99–154.

¹¹On the *Physiologus* and medieval bestiaries, see for example Willene B. Clark, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), pp. 5–33.

¹²Text quoted from *Bestiari medievali*, ed. by Luigina Morini (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), pp. 70–72.

¹³On the antagonism between the deer and the serpent, see Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, VIII. 50. 118; Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, XII. 1. 18.

¹⁴See Maria Pia Ciccarese, *Animali simbolici: alle origini del bestiario cristiano*, 2 vols (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2002), I, 316.

‘Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum, sic desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus.’ Et quidem non male intelligitur vox esse eorum qui, cum sint *catechumeni*, ad gratiam sancti lavacri festinant. Unde et solemniter cantatur hic psalmus, ut ita desiderent fontem remissionis peccatorum, quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum. [...] Ipse enim *fons et lumen est* [...]. Si et fons est, et lumen est; merito et intellectus est, quia et *satiat animam avidam sciendi*; et omnis qui intelligit, luce quadam non corporali [...] sed interiore illustratur. [...] Lumen hoc desidera, quemdam fontem, quoddam lumen quale non norunt oculi tui. [...] Serpentes necat, et post serpentium interemptionem, [...] ad fontes acrius currit. Serpentes vitia tua sunt. (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, XLI. 1–3)¹⁵

[‘As the deer desires water, so my soul longs for you, God’. This verse is rightly understood as the voice of the catechumens, who are hastening to the grace of the holy font. This Psalm is thus solemnly sung in order that the catechumens long for the fountain of remission of sins, just as the deer longs for water. [...] God himself is a fountain and light [...]. If he is a fountain, he is light as well; and rightly he is comprehension too, which satiates the soul eager to know; and everyone who comprehends is illuminated by a light that is not corporeal [...] but internal. [...] Long, you, for this light, a fountain, a light such as your bodily eyes cannot know. [...] The deer destroys serpents, and after killing serpents, [...] it runs to the springs of water more keenly than before. The serpents are your vices.]

Here too, the deer is a figure of the soul seeking goodness and a symbol of Christ in his fight against evil. For Augustine, water represents both God and the baptismal font, which provides humans with divine enlightenment and cleanses them of sin. The imagery of purification connected to the deer and water also recalls the notion of redemption.

Read in this light, the deer in sonnet 190 offers a Christological depiction of the lady. It allegorises the purity of the beloved, as commentators have observed, but this purity is that of Christ the Redeemer and – following his example – that of the good Christian. The two rivers in the sonnet, then, relate to the imagery of the deer and represent holy water as a source of goodness and light.¹⁶ As I will observe later, Augustine’s words concerning the fountain and the light of God sought by the catechumens further illuminate the link between the imagery of the deer in sonnet 190 and the *visio beatifica* in sonnets 191–193. Petrarch’s reference to midday (*Rvf*, 190, 12) contributes to this interpretation, in that the sun, especially when it reaches its zenith, is a traditional Christic symbol.¹⁷

The ‘Due Riviere’

Water is an important element in the sonnet, featured at the beginning and at the end of the poem. The lyric persona sees the deer ‘fra due riviere’ (3), in a space that is separate from his own position. Then, the subject falls ‘ne l’acqua’ (14). I have touched upon the traditional interpretations of the rivers and the fall. A reading of these elements that thoroughly engages with the imagery of the deer, and thus with the content of *Rvf* 191–193, is also possible.

In many cultures, water serves as a boundary between different states, through a process of death and rebirth, and marks the passage from this life to the afterlife or through different stages of the afterlife.¹⁸ Hence, water is also associated with a change of state in a human’s lifetime, serving as

¹⁵Text quoted from the *Patrologia Latina* (henceforth *PL*), XXXVI. 464–65. Emphases mine.

¹⁶See also the observations, based on different sources, by Mia Cocco, ‘Il sonetto CXC del Petrarca o la poetica dello specchio’, in *Forma e parola: studi in memoria di Fredi Chiappelli*, ed. by Dennis J. Dutschke and others (Rome: Bulzoni, 1992), pp. 81–108 (pp. 96–98); Giovanni Barberi Squarotti, *Selvaggia diletta: la caccia nella letteratura italiana dalle origini a Marino* (Venice: Marsilio, 2000), pp. 213–33.

¹⁷On the sun as a Christic symbol in Petrarch, see for example Olivia Holmes, ‘From “Un sol n’è dato” to “Il di s’appressa”: The Day of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*’, in *Writing Relations*, ed. by Deanna Shemek and Michael Wyatt (Florence: Olschki, 2008), pp. 1–15 (pp. 3–5).

¹⁸This function of water is explicit in classical mythology, in which all mortals must cross rivers before entering the underworld: the river Styx and the river Acheron separate the world of earthly life from Hades, as Petrarch would have been able to read in Ovid’s tale of Orpheus and Eurydice (*Metamorphoses*, X) and in Vergil’s account of Aeneas’s descent to the underworld (*Aeneid*, VI), respectively. In Dante’s *Commedia*, the river Acheron marks the boundary between Ante-Hell and Hell itself (*Inferno*, III). Ulysses tries to transcend human limits by embarking on a voyage by sea (*Inferno*, XXVI). The mountain of Purgatory, in turn, is separated from the earth by water (*Purgatorio*, II). Eden’s water comes from two rivers in turn: on their path to purification, souls must first cross the Lethe and then the Eunoè (*Purgatorio*, XXVIII–XXXIII).

a means of purification that confers a rebirth on a symbolic level. Mircea Eliade observes that in water everything is dissolved and regenerated: what is immersed in it dies and rises again, 'able to receive a new revelation and begin a new [...] life'.¹⁹ In Christianity, the idea of water as an instrument of purification and regeneration informs the sacrament of baptism. The Greek term 'baptismós' means 'immersion' and was borrowed by Christian liturgy to indicate a method whereby part of the catechumen's body was submerged in water.²⁰ In this rite, the link between ablution and regeneration relates to Christ's passion: as Christ dies and rises again, redeeming humans from sin, so the good Christian 'dies symbolically with immersion, and is reborn, purified, renewed'.²¹ In this regard, Saint Paul writes: 'quicumque baptizati sumus in Christo Iesu in morte ipsius baptizati sumus' [any of us who were baptised in Jesus Christ's name were baptised in his death] (Romans 6. 3). Thomas Aquinas relates baptism to Christ's passion even more clearly: 'baptismus aquae efficaciam habet a passione Christi, in quantum eam sacramentaliter rapraesentat' [baptism with water derives its efficacy from Christ's passion, inasmuch as the former represents the latter in sacramental form] (*Super sententias*, IV. 4. 3. 3).²²

The symbolism of water and the imagery of the deer in sonnet 190 are consistently woven together through their associations with baptism and converge to suggest an idea of rebirth, which has the beloved at its heart. Water separates the lover's old life, based on the pursuit of material goods such as those of a hunter, from a potential new life, along the same lines as the imagery of baptism, which represents Christ's passion and redemption. The lady, in turn, is associated with the good Christian – who has been baptised and who lives according to God's word – but also with Christ the Redeemer, whose example is to be followed by the faithful. In other words, Petrarch's rivers mark the possibility of a regeneration. Correspondingly, the beloved, embodying the purity of those who have shaped themselves according to Christ's message, offers an example to aim for and a means of rebirth for the subject: her presence seems to act as an invitation to the poetic persona to reach her, and thus to cross the river and experience a rebirth through the purifying power of water. The imagery of the rivers recalls an Edenic location, which foreshadows and relates to the explicit mention of the Lethe in sonnet 193: 'et Lethe al fondo bibo' (*Rvf*, 193, 4).

In this context, it is not surprising that poem 190 presents similarities with Dante's Eden.²³ In *Purgatorio*, xxviii, Dante describes the last stages of his purifying voyage and recounts his arrival in the Earthly Paradise:

ed ecco più andar mi tolse un rio,
che 'nver' sinistra con sue piccole onde
piegava l'erba che 'n sua ripa uscio.
[...]
Coi piè ristetti e con li occhi passai
di là dal fiumicello, per mirare
la gran variazion d'i freschi mai;
e là m'apparve, sì com'elli appare
subitamente cosa che disvia
per meraviglia tutto altro pensare,
una donna soletta che si già.
(*Purgatorio*, xxviii, 25–27, 34–40)²⁴

The first of the rivers in Dante's Eden, the Lethe, temporarily prevents the pilgrim from pursuing his journey, but does not impede him from traversing the river with his gaze to contemplate Matelda

¹⁹Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 194.

²⁰*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by Frank L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 827.

²¹Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 196–97.

²²*Corpus Thomisticum* <www.corpusthomicum.org> [accessed 22 March 2020].

²³See also Cocco, pp. 99–102; and the commentary in *Canzoniere*, ed. by Stroppa, p. 325.

²⁴The reference edition for Dante throughout this essay is Dante Alighieri, *Commedia*, ed. by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, 3 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1991–1997).

across the water.²⁵ It is worth noting the considerable parallels between sonnet 190 and Dante's encounter with Matelda. Both the subject in Petrarch's sonnet and the pilgrim in the *Commedia* stand on the near side of the river and look at a female presence on the far side. Moreover, Matelda stands between two rivers, like the deer in Petrarch's sonnet: although Dante does not explicitly mention her position, we clearly understand from the text that she stands beyond the first river, the Lethe – which Petrarch will in turn include in *Rvf* 193 – and thus before the second river, the Eunoè. Both texts introduce the appearance of the deer and that of Matelda with the phrase 'm'apparve' (*Rvf*, 190, 2; *Purgatorio*, xxviii, 37). In both cases, the epiphany captures the viewer's attention and diverts it away from any other activity or thought: the sight of the deer is 'sì dolce superba' that the subject leaves 'per seguirla ogni lavoro' (*Rvf*, 190, 5, 6); Matelda manifests herself as 'cosa che disvia | per meraviglia tutto altro pensare' (*Purgatorio*, xxviii, 38–39). Finally, another lexical echo is found in the reference to 'erba' (*Rvf*, 190, 1; *Purgatorio*, xxviii, 27), which characterises the settings in both Petrarch's sonnet and Dante's *Commedia*. These similarities do not however imply that the two texts have the same meaning, nor that Petrarch needs to be read through a Dantean framework. While Dante describes a Christian regeneration enacted by God's will, Petrarch narrates the effects of the lady on his persona within a secular love story. Whereas Matelda remains involved in the purgatorial baptismal rite, Petrarch's deer disappears. Its disappearance is not necessarily surprising within the context of a vision and serves to connect sonnet 190 to the next poem, where Petrarch describes the evanescence of the vision of Laura as 'il suo fuggir sì ratto' (*Rvf*, 191, 9).

It should be noted that in sonnet 190 the viewer does not cross the river but instead falls into it, leaving the outcome of the potential redemptive process undetermined. The poetic persona's contact with water does not occur as a deliberate choice, but rather as the passive consequence of the vision of the deer. As I suggest, the narrative of sonnet 190 is connected to and developed by the three poems that follow. In this way, the fall and the contact with water are a prelude to the *visio beatifica* in *Rvf* 191–193, taking the subject into an ecstatic dimension. At the same time, the fall leaves a veil of ambiguity and foreshadows a sense of failure in the pursuit of a salvific state of beatitude. This inconsistency, I will note, is to some extent associated with the construction of Petrarch's macrotext and with the different narrative architecture that characterises, in terms of lyric sequences, the 'di Giovanni' and the Vatican forms of the songbook. These labels indicate the two phases of transcription of the *Canzoniere* as documented by the Vatican Library's MS Vaticano Latino 3195, the original copy of the songbook: the former comprises the poems that Petrarch's copyist, Giovanni Malpaghini, transcribed under the author's supervision between October 1366 and April 1367 on a set of folios now in the codex (fols 1^r–38^v, 53^r–62^r); the latter constitutes the form of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* as completed by Petrarch himself, in the same manuscript and with the insertion of other folios, from the second half of 1368 until his death in 1374 (fols 38^v–49^r, 62^r–72^v).²⁶

'Nessun Mi Tocchi'

While the deer and water of sonnet 190 recall Christ's passion, the statement 'Nessun mi tocchi' (9) overtly echoes Jesus's resurrection, and plays a crucial role in identifying the imagery of redemption

²⁵On Dante's Eden, see Daniel J. Donno, 'Moral Hydrography: Dante's Rivers', *MLN*, 92.1 (1977), 130–39; Theodore J. Cachey, Jr., 'Cosmographic Cartography of the "Perfect" Twenty-Eights', in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, ed. by George Corbett and Heather Webb, 3 vols (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015–17), III, 111–38. On the symbolism of baptism in *Purgatorio*, see also Chiavacci Leonardi's commentary in Dante, *Commedia*, II, 921.

²⁶Not long before his death, Petrarch renumbered the last thirty-one poems already transcribed in MS 3195, the current *Rvf* 336–366, in order to change their position within the same sequence, and added *Rvf* 246 and 327. In referring to the Vatican form or redaction, I refer to what is for the modern reader the last form of the *Canzoniere*, which does not necessarily coincide with a definitive version. For an account of the last forms of Petrarch's songbook, see Marco Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima: storia e racconto nel 'Canzoniere' di Petrarca*, 2nd edn (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), pp. 283–327, 331–32. On the problematic question of Petrarch's last and definitive version, see Stefano Zamponi, 'Il libro del Canzoniere: modelli, strutture, funzioni', in *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta: codice Vat. lat. 3195: commentario all'edizione in fac-simile*, ed. by Gino Belloni and others (Rome: Antenore, 2004), pp. 13–72; H. Wayne Storey, 'Doubting Petrarca's Last Words: Erasure in MS Vaticano Latino 3195', in *Petrarch and the Textual Origins of Interpretation*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 67–91.

evoked in the sonnet. Stefano Carrai provides a comprehensive investigation of this verse. He challenges the traditional interpretation according to which this line, along with the verse 'libera farmi al mio Cesare parve' (11), derives from Solinus and proposes instead that Petrarch may have relied on a different, possibly oral, source. Carrai observes that the motto 'noli me tangere, Caesaris sum' [do not touch me, I am Caesar's], which is traditionally indicated as part of the Solinus intertext, is not documented before Petrarch, let alone in Solinus, but could have originated in the fifteenth century, 'desumendolo dal testo petrarchesco e traducendo in latino i versi del sonetto mediante il ricorso a brani evangelici notissimi', namely 'noli me tangere' [do not touch me] (John 20. 17) and 'reddite ergo quae sunt Caesaris Caesari' [render to Caesar that which is Caesar's] (Matthew 22. 21).²⁷ The link between Petrarch's verse and that in the Gospel of John, I argue, serves to reinforce the imagery of redemption that the sonnet conveys. In other words, this connection contributes to the depiction of the Christological image of the deer, and thus of Laura, and portrays the subject as a penitent sinner.²⁸ A closer examination of the gospel narrative of John, in which the statement is found, provides further support for this point. On the Sunday morning after the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene visited Jesus's tomb but found the sepulchre empty and the resurrected body of Christ appeared to her:

Dicit ei Iesus noli me tangere nondum enim ascendi ad Patrem meum vade autem ad fratres meos et dic eis ascendo ad Patrem meum et Patrem vestrum et Deum meum et Deum vestrum. Venit Maria Magdalene adnuntians discipulis quia vidi Dominum. (John 20. 17–18)

[Jesus said to her: 'Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father, but go to my brothers and tell them I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord'.]

Two parts of this passage are worthy of note. First, when Mary Magdalene tries to approach Jesus, he warns her by saying 'noli me tangere' [do not touch me]. As these words show, the statement 'Nessun mi tocchi' in sonnet 190 is reminiscent of Christ's warning. Second, Mary Magdalene is the first witness of Christ's resurrection, that is to say, his manifestation as God. While there is no evidence proving a conscious relationship between the sonnet and the Gospel of John, it is unlikely that Petrarch would not have had those scriptural echoes in mind when composing his poem.

Who was Mary Magdalene? Two distinct characters in the Gospel of Luke have been conflated under this name: an anonymous prostitute (Luke 7. 36–50); and Mary of Magda, from whom Christ expelled seven demons, a sign of massive moral or physical evil (Luke 8. 1–3). Although Mary of Magda and the prostitute are two different figures, Gregory the Great in his *Homiliae* began a long-lasting tradition according to which they were the same person: 'Maria Magdalene, quae fuerat in civitate peccatrix, amando veritatem, lavit lacrymis maculas criminis' [Mary Magdalene, who had been a sinner in the city, by loving the truth washed the stains of sin with her tears] (*Homiliae in Evangelia*, XXV. 1).²⁹ Mary Magdalene thus becomes the penitent prostitute who has not only converted to Christ's teaching, but also testifies to his resurrection, the act through which Jesus reveals himself as God and makes salvation possible with the atonement for original sin.³⁰ Alongside the traditional associations between the deer and Christ found in bestiaries and in patristic exegesis, the statement 'Nessun mi tocchi' emphasises the role of the deer-beloved as a redeemer. Likewise, the poetic persona who observes the deer recalls Mary Magdalene in the gospel story of Christ's resurrection, that is, the penitent sinner who has the privilege of seeing God and who benefits from this encounter. Just as Mary Magdalene was the first to see and announce her vision of God, so the poetic subject contemplates and recounts, through his poem, the manifestation

²⁷Carrai, 'Il sonetto', p. 248. On the biblical line 'noli me tangere', see also Feng, p. 71.

²⁸A first step in this direction is taken by Cocco, p. 97.

²⁹PL, LXXVI. 1189b.

³⁰On medieval interpretation of the figure of Mary Magdalene, see Jacques Dalarun, 'Regards de Clercs', in *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, ed. by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, 5 vols (Paris: Plon, 1992), II: *Le Moyen Age*, ed. by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, pp. 31–54 (pp. 45–50).

of the lady in Christological fashion. The reference to Mary Magdalene and her vision of Christ is a prelude to the lover's contemplation of the beloved in the manner of a *visio Dei* in *Rvf* 191–93.

Petrarch was in fact particularly familiar with the cult of Mary Magdalene. The *Vita apostolica beatae Mariae Magdalenae*, an eleventh-century hagiographical text possibly written in Burgundy, tells us that when the early wave of Christian persecution began, Mary Magdalene and a cohort of Christ's disciples were expelled from Palestine. They were thrust into a boat and cast adrift at sea. By good fortune, they were washed ashore in Provence. After years spent preaching, Mary Magdalene retired to a holy cave near Marseilles, today known as the *Sainte Baume*, where she lived out the rest of her life in ascetic contemplation.³¹ As Petrarch documents in a letter to Philippe de Cabasoles (*Seniles*, XV. 15), in 1336 Cardinal Giovanni Colonna asked the poet to accompany an unspecified person on a visit to the cave of Mary Magdalene. During the visit, Petrarch composed a poem in Latin hexameters dedicated to the saint. The poem, which addresses Mary Magdalene as 'Dulcis amica Dei' [Sweet friend of God] (*Seniles*, XV. 15. 6), opens by invoking the saint's aid.³²

Why does Petrarch ask for help from Mary Magdalene? As a penitent sinner of carnal commerce, she was particularly attractive, in terms of devotion, to those guilty of sexual misdemeanours.³³ Petrarch's devotion to Mary Magdalene further suggests a sense of identification between himself and the saint in the sonnet. This association and the reference to Easter bring us to Avignon and to that Good Friday when the poetic persona's desire for the lady triggered his perdition. As Petrarch writes in his codex Ambrosianus, he first met Laura on 6 April 1327, in the church of Saint Claire in Avignon (fol. 1^v).³⁴ The same date is also given in the sonnet 'Voglia mi sprona, Amor mi guida et scorge', where we read that the subject first entered the labyrinth of love in the year 'Mille trecento ventisette, a punto | su l'ora prima, il dì sesto d'aprile' (*Rvf*, 211, 12–13). In the narrative of the *Canzoniere*, particularly in the sonnets 'Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro' (*Rvf*, 3) and 'Padre del ciel' (*Rvf*, 62), he relates that his first encounter with the lady took place on a Good Friday. The day associated with Christ's passion is thus transformed into the day of the poetic persona's perdition, his *dies Veneris*.³⁵ It is then that the subject's 'guai | nel commune dolor s'incominciaro', after *eros* penetrated his persona 'per gli occhi al core' (*Rvf*, 3, 7–8, 10). The poet sheds light on the conflict between the love that the good Christian is expected to reserve for God and the desire that the lady arouses in the subject when he sees her. In sonnet 190, instead, the images of the deer and the rivers illustrate a different attitude towards the beloved on the part of the poetic persona. Here, Petrarch does not propose the association between his error and the sight of the lady which characterised *Rvf* 3, but instead aligns the beloved with Christ.³⁶ With a shared reference to Easter, the imagery of potential rebirth resonating in sonnet 190 is antithetical to the perdition recounted in sonnet 3.

If, as critics have suggested, the 'due riviere' (*Rvf*, 190, 3) do indeed indicate Avignon as the location of the sonnet, the meaning of the poem should be understood in light of Petrarch's view of the city. In Petrarch's works, Avignon is associated with Babylon in order to emphasise the sin and

³¹See Katherine L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 35–54.

³²Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum senilium*, ed. by Elvira Nota and others, 5 vols (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), IV, 422–27. See also Ernest H. Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 18; and the appendix in *Rerum senilium*, IV, 616–17.

³³See Thomas J. Heffernan, 'Mary Magdalene', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), III, 1096–97.

³⁴See Francesco Petrarca, *Le postille del Virgilio ambrosiano*, ed. by Marco Baglio and others, 2 vols (Padua: Antenore, 2006), I, 190–92.

³⁵It has been noted that in 1327 Good Friday fell on 10 April. For a discussion of this problem, see for example Frederic Jones, 'Arguments in Favour of a Calendrical Structure for Petrarch's *Canzoniere*', *MLR*, 79.3 (1984), 579–88 (pp. 579–81); Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima*, pp. 125–26; Vinicio Pacca, 'La struttura senaria del *Canzoniere*', *Italianistica*, 33.2 (2004), 77–82; Francisco Rico, *I venerdì di Petrarca* (Milan: Adelphi, 2016), pp. 48–66.

³⁶The acknowledgement that the lady should not be blamed for the subject's error is expressed in *Rvf* 70.

moral corruption that characterises it.³⁷ In the *Fragmenta*, Avignon is defined as ‘empia Babilonia’, ‘madre d’errori’ (*Rvf*, 114, 1, 3); ‘nido di tradimenti’, a place in which ‘Luxuria fa l’ultima prova’ (*Rvf*, 136, 5, 8); ‘avara’ (*Rvf*, 137, 1); ‘Fontana di dolore, albergo d’ira, | scola d’errori et templo d’eresia’, and ‘fucina d’inganni’ (*Rvf*, 138, 1–2, 5). A clear connection between Avignon and Babylon emerges from what Petrarch writes in the *Sine nomine*, where he defines himself as ‘Ierosolimitanus exul inter et super flumina Babilonis’ [in exile from Jerusalem, between and on the two rivers of Babylon] (*Sine nomine*, IX. 10).³⁸ In the letter that follows, Petrarch clarifies his earlier cryptic words, and explains that Avignon constitutes a new Babylon, a place that lacks not cupidity and lust, but mutual aid and pure love (*Sine nomine*, X. 10). The expression ‘super flumina Babilonis’ which Petrarch employs at the end of *Sine nomine* IX is a quotation from the first verse of Psalm 136. The Psalm expresses the yearnings of the Jewish people in exile following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. In Petrarch’s letter, the reference to the Psalm was part of a polemic discourse against the Avignon papacy: as the people of Israel were in Babylon, in exile from the holy land of Jerusalem, so the papal seat is kept away from the holy site of Rome. In the Middle Ages, the topic of the Jewish exile was interpreted figurally.³⁹ The deportation of the chosen people was held to be a figure of the human soul’s exile on earth. The end of the exile, in turn, was interpreted as the result of a redemptive transition from a state of sin to a state of blessedness. The figural meaning of the Psalm is also explained in Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, which Petrarch recalls in *Sine nomine* X. Here Augustine, after reading the Psalm as an allegory of human captivity, clarifies the contrast between Jerusalem and Babylon: ‘unam cui finis est pax aeterna, et vocatur Jerusalem; alteram cui gaudium est pax temporalis, et vocatur Babylonia; [. . .] Jerusalem interpretari visionem pacis; Babyloniā confusionem’ [the aim of one is eternal peace and is called Jerusalem; the other pursues the pleasures of temporary peace and is called Babylon; [. . .] Jerusalem means vision of peace; Babylon means confusion]. Augustine then glosses the rivers of Babylon as those things ‘which are loved in this life, and pass away’ (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, CXXXVI. 1–3).⁴⁰

The imagery associated with the Tigris and Euphrates in the Bible helps to shed light on the possible relationship between the rivers in poem 190 and those in Avignon. In the scriptural tradition, these rivers had two meanings. On the one hand, they are two of the watercourses in Eden (Genesis 2. 10–14); on the other, they also provide water to Babylon, the Mesopotamian city in which the Jews were held captive (Psalms 136). The dual significance of the biblical rivers encompasses both Petrarch’s negative view of Avignon as a new Babylon and the Edenic setting of *Rvf* 190. The ‘flumina Babilonis’ (*Sine nomine*, IX. 10) and the ‘due riviere’ (*Rvf*, 190, 3) constitute two sides of the same coin, resulting in an ambiguous play of contrasts and parallels. While Avignon is a place of confusion and lust, *Rvf* 190 recalls imagery of vision and redemption. This opposition is consistent with the dichotomy between sensual love and spiritual love that resonates in poem 190, in which the poetic persona shifts from the condition of a hunter driven by sensual desire to a state of potential rebirth. On closer inspection, though, the deer in *Rvf* 190 will prove to be an idol, in accordance with the significance of Babylon and its rivers as symbols of temporary and secular pleasures.

³⁷On Petrarch and Avignon, see Michelangelo Picone, ‘Avignone come tema letterario: Dante e Petrarca’, *L’Alighieri*, n.s., 43.2 (2002), 5–22; Alex Cannegieter, ‘From Babylon to Eternity: Appropriation of the Babylon-Motif in Christian Homiletical Constructions’, in *From Babylon to Eternity: The Exile Remembered and Constructed in Text and Tradition*, ed. by Bob Becking and others (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 72–102; Ronald L. Martinez, ‘The Book without a Name: Petrarch’s Open Secret’, in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, ed. by Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 291–99; Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 95–120.

³⁸Francesco Petrarca, *Liber sine nomine*, ed. by Giovanni Cascio (Florence: Le Lettere, 2015), pp. 96–99 (p. 98).

³⁹See, for example, Erich Auerbach, ‘“Figura”’, in his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, ed. and trans. by Ralph Manheim, new edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 11–71 (first publ. in *Archivum Romanicum*, 22 (1938), 436–89).

⁴⁰PL, XXXVII. 1761.

The Deer and the Deification of Laura

By virtue of its Christological associations, I argue, the deer in *Rvf* 190 introduces the beatific vision of the beloved which is narrated in *Rvf* 191, 192, and 193. Alongside their shared theme, the link between *Rvf* 191, 192, and 193 is also documented by the *mise en page* in the Vatican Library's MS Vaticano Latino 3196, the so-called *Codice degli abbozzi* of Petrarchan autograph pages, in which the three sonnets form a triptych (fols 1^v–2^r); the connections between *Rvf* 190 and *Rvf* 191–193 are in turn displayed by the layout in MS Vaticano Latino 3195, in which the four poems cover an entire page (fol. 38^v).⁴¹ Robert Durling's analysis of the *sestina* 'Giovene donna' (*Rvf*, 30) helps us to shed further light on a possible narrative unity connecting *Rvf* 190 with *Rvf* 191–193 through the imagery of the contemplative vision. Durling highlights the association between the branches of the laurel under which the lady stands in the *sestina* and the arms of Christ's cross; furthermore, he draws attention to a tradition, found for example in Bede, that connects the 'topacii' (*Rvf*, 30, 37) with the contemplative life and the beatific vision: 'In topazio, eorundem ardens contemplatio monstratur' [in the topaz, fervent contemplation is shown] (*Explanatio Apocalypsis*, III. 21).⁴² Durling additionally argues in his analysis of the *sestina* that the figure of the beloved, made from precious material, is an idol because the lover 'worships it instead of God, he meditates on it instead of God'.⁴³ If the laurel that shadows the deer in sonnet 190 is also associated with the cross, the references to Christ's passion and resurrection in the poem are further reinforced; the presence of topaz on the deer's neck, in turn, plays a crucial role in foreshadowing the contemplative experience of the *visio beatifica* which takes place in the next three sonnets. However, the subject's contemplation of the lady runs the risk of idolatry, along the same lines as in the *sestina*.

The question of the beatific vision of God informed a theological debate of great importance in the 1330s, in Europe and particularly at the papal seat in Avignon. In 1331, Pope John XXII had maintained that the soul of the good Christian cannot see the Divine face to face until the Last Judgment. Five years later, in the constitution titled *Benedictus Deus*, his successor Benedict XII established the dogma according to which the souls of the just are granted the beatific vision of God upon their deaths. While Petrarch did not take part in this debate directly, the discussion stimulated his interest and its implications can also be felt in his poetry. As Peterson observes, Petrarch was not concerned with the doctrinal issues per se 'but sought to translate the ecclesial question about beatific visions into an experiential question about the happiness gained by gazing on the beloved'.⁴⁴

Maria Cecilia Bertolani has carried out a detailed investigation into the theological question of the *visio beatifica* or *visio Dei* in reference to Petrarch's works. She proposes that the vision of the beloved in the *Fragmenta* is concerned with an earthly dimension and portrays the lady as a source of beatitude in this life. In this regard, Bertolani suggests that there is a possible parallel between the vision of God experienced by the blessed and the vision of the beloved on the part of the lyric subject. Just as the philosopher may rejoice at a mystic vision of the divine essence on earth, which constitutes a prelude to the vision of God in the afterlife, so the poet may achieve a state of beatitude through the earthly contemplation of the beloved.⁴⁵

The *visio beatifica* as it emerges in *Rvf* 191–193, I argue, establishes a conceptual bridge to *Rvf* 190 and its Christological resonances, creating a lyric sequence of four poems. In sonnet 191, the poet draws a parallel between God and the beloved, but also between the subject and the blessed. The poetic persona derives as much beatitude from gazing at the lady as the blessed do from looking at God:

⁴¹See also Stefano Carrai, 'I primi testi autografi del Vaticano 3195 (*Rvf* 190–200)', in *Il 'Canzoniere': lettura micro e macrotestuale*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 2007), pp. 433–48 (pp. 435–37).

⁴²Robert M. Durling, 'Petrarch's "Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro"', *MLN*, 86.1 (1971), 1–20 (p. 13).

⁴³Durling, p. 15.

⁴⁴Peterson, p. 145. On the theological debate about the beatific vision of 1331–1336, see Christian Trottmann, *La Vision béatifique: des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1995).

⁴⁵Maria Cecilia Bertolani, 'La visione beatifica: una disputa avignonese (*Fam.* ll. 12)', in *Motivi e forme delle 'Familiari' di Francesco Petrarca*, ed. by Claudia Berra and Paola Vecchi Galli (Milan: Cisalpino, 2003), pp. 611–37; *Petrarca e la visione dell'eterno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), pp. 187–91. See also Maria Grazia Blasio, 'Il dibattito religioso tra Due e Trecento', in *Petrarca, l'umanesimo e la civiltà europea*, ed. by Donatella Coppini and Michele Feo, 2 vols (= *Quaderni petrarcheschi*, 15–18 (2005–2008)), I, 231–59.

Si come eterna vita è veder Dio,
né più si brama, né bramar più lice,
così me, donna, il voi veder, felice
fa in questo breve et fraile viver mio.

Né voi stessa com'or bella vid'io
già mai, se vero al cor l'occhio ridice:
dolce del mio penser hora beatrice,
che vince ogni alta speme, ogni desio.

Et se non fusse il suo fuggir sì ratto,
più non demanderei: che s'alcun vive
sol d'odore, et tal fama fede acquista,
alcun d'acqua o di foco, e 'l gusto e 'l tatto
acquetan cose d'ogni dolzor prive,
i' perché non de la vostra alma vista?
(*Rvf*, 191)

The experience of the vision of the lady is defined as 'hora beatrice' (7), that is, a moment of beatitude. Petrarch aligns the beloved with God as a source of good and replaces the carnal desire that drove the hunter-lover at the start of sonnet 190 with an ecstatic contemplation. Indeed, sonnet 191 presents a clear link with the previous poem. The first link is in the notion of swiftness: the beloved's 'fuggir sì ratto' (9) may allude to the disappearance of the deer, which vanished at the previous sonnet's end (*Rvf*, 190, 14). Secondly, both sonnets share the motif of sight: in poem 190 the poetic persona's eyes are 'stanchi di mirar, non sazi' (13); in poem 191 the subject, like the blessed contemplating God, is 'felice' and wonders whether he may live on the beloved's 'alma vista' (3, 14). In both cases, the vision from which the lover derives satisfaction is a temporary event in the earthly 'breve et fraile viver' of the subject (*Rvf*, 191, 4).

The *satietas* that characterises the poetic persona's vision of the beloved recalls Augustine's reading of the deer and water in Psalm 41 as an allegory of baptism and of the subsequent acquisition of the light of God, 'quia et satiat animam avidam sciendi' [which satiates the soul eager to know] (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, XLI. 2).⁴⁶ The use of the same verb, 'saziare' and 'satiare', in Petrarch and in Augustine again reinforces the link between sonnet 190, along with poem 191, and the imagery of vision and redemption. In *Rvf* 190 the observer's eyes are tired but not yet satiated. In *Rvf* 191, instead, he will be fully satisfied with contemplation: as in eternal life 'né più si brama, né bramar più lice' (2), so the view of the lady 'vince ogni alta speme, ogni desio' (8), or, as Augustine would say, satiates the soul eager for knowledge.

The beatific vision of the beloved continues in the following two poems. Sonnet 192 is built on the polyptoton of the verb 'vedere' and recounts the process of glorification that the subject undergoes upon seeing the beloved:

Stiamo, Amor, a veder la gloria nostra,
cose sopra natura altere et nove:
vedi ben quanta in lei dolcezza piove,
vedi lume che 'l cielo in terra mostra.
(*Rvf*, 192, 1–4)

The poet emphasises the divine status of the lady by associating her with 'cose sopra natura altere et nove' (2). The 'lume' of the lady recalls the light, or 'lumen', which Augustine associates with water, and thus with the rite of baptism, and is reminiscent of the Christic symbol of the sun at its zenith in *Rvf* 190. It also brings to mind the Thomistic concept of 'lumen gloriae', a state of grace that allows select rational creatures to access knowledge through the vision of the divine essence (*Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 12, a. 5).⁴⁷ After describing the beatitude coming from the beloved, sonnet 193 then

⁴⁶PL, XXXVI. 465.

⁴⁷On the connection between this sonnet and the 'lumen gloriae', see also Bertolani, *Petrarca e la visione dell'eterno*, p. 194; and Blasio, pp. 245–52.

further develops the symbolism of Eden and purification concerned with water that was foreshadowed in sonnet 190:

Pasco la mente d'un sì nobil cibo,
ch'ambrosia et nectar non invidio a Giove,
ché, sol mirando, oblio ne l'alma piove
d'ogni altro dolce, et Lethe al fondo bibo.
(*Rvf*, 193, 1–4)

In contemplating the lady, the poetic persona drinks the water of the Lethe, the river of oblivion. The sonnet has links to poem 190, in which the imagery of the river and the deer serves to depict the Christological status of the beloved. While in sonnet 190 the poetic persona falls into the water after gazing at the deer, here the subject reaches the status of beatitude that such contemplation has allowed. Carnal desire is abandoned and the subject is spiritually content with his contemplative experience of the beloved.⁴⁸ The term 'cibo' in *Rvf* 193, in fact, brings us back to Dante's experience on the far side of the river Lethe: 'l'anima mia gustava di quel cibo | che, saziando di sé, di sé asseta' (*Purgatorio*, xxxi, 128–29).⁴⁹

Although Petrarch's poetic persona describes the lady as a Christological creature, it should be remembered that sonnets 190–193, unlike Dante's *Comedy*, form part of the narrative of an earthly love story. Contemplation is not an *itinerarium mentis in Deum* in the manner of mystics, but a state that permits the lover to pursue spiritual happiness through the beloved.⁵⁰ The view of the lady as a source of good, aligned with God, is precisely the attitude that Petrarch's Augustine condemns in the *Secretum*. The meaning of the fall at the end of poem 190, I will suggest, should be examined in the light of an idolatrised view of the beloved.

Petrarch's Anti-Hunt and the Illusions of Spiritual Love

References to vision along with the imagery of baptism also emerge from the allusions to hunting in *Rvf* 190. The religious historian Mircea Eliade observes that in Eurasian folklore pursuing a cervid 'leads to a radical change in the hunter's situation or in his mode of being', which entails passing from the profane to the sacred.⁵¹ Sergio Cicada, in turn, notes that in classical literature golden antlers are a distinguishing feature of supernatural deer.⁵² Eliade's and Cicada's observations are consistent with the Christological function of the deer in the sonnet. Not only do the 'duo corna d'oro' (2) raise the deer to a sacred dimension, but the presence of male traits such as antlers on a female deer may serve to foreground the extraordinary character of the animal. More importantly, the chase signals a mutation in the poetic persona, as one would expect from an encounter with a Christological entity. These references call to mind the legend of Saint Eustace.

Although many higher-ranking members of the clergy were keen on hunting, the official position of the Church was a critical one. Hunters were associated with sinners because of their longing for

⁴⁸Some of the elements shared between *Rvf* 190 and 193 are also found in the *Triumphus pudicitie*. The *Triumph* narrates the victory of the chastity of Laura over the power of passions. The beloved wears a white gown, which recalls the white coat of the deer. She captures Love with a chain, immersed in the Lethe, of diamonds and topazes, the same stones found on the deer's neck (*Triumphus pudicitie*, 118–24). Over the course of seven verses, Petrarch offers a portrait of the chaste lady, while making use of the same symbolic elements which in *Rvf* 190–193 are scattered between the first and the last sonnet.

⁴⁹On the term 'cibo', see Paolo Trovato, *Dante in Petrarca: per un inventario dei dantismi nei 'Rerum vulgarium fragmenta'* (Florence: Olschki, 1979), p. 27.

⁵⁰Etienne Gilson, *La Théologie mystique de Saint Bernard* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1947), pp. 193–215, has shed light on the differences between the lover's experience in secular poetry and that of the mystics. See also Bertolani, *Petrarca e la visione dell'eterno*, p. 188.

⁵¹Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis: The Vanishing God*, trans. by Willard Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 162.

⁵²Sergio Cicada, 'La leggenda medievale del Cervo bianco e le origini della "matière de Bretagne"', *Atti della Accademia nazionale dei Lincei. Memorie: classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filosofiche*, 8th ser., 12 (1965–66), 3–120. See also Paolo Galloni, *Il cervo e il lupo: caccia e cultura nobiliare nel Medioevo* (Bari: Laterza, 1993), pp. 87–95; and Stefano Pezzè, *Commento storico-critico alla 'Cerva bianca' di Antonio Fileremo Fregoso* (Rome: Aracne, 2019).

material goods.⁵³ Hunting itself was viewed and presented as a battle of evil forces against the Christian soul. Hugh of Saint Victor interprets the deer pursued by hunters as the chaste and pure soul under attack, claiming that ‘venatores sunt daemones’ [hunters are devils] (*Miscellanea*, 177).⁵⁴ The opposition between secular hunting and Christian values informed tales of conversion, in which the protagonist is a skilled hunter who converts to a holy life. Hannele Klemetilä includes these tales among the anti-hunting discourse of Christian propaganda in the Middle Ages.⁵⁵ The legend of Saint Eustace, which spread from the 1260s thanks to Iacopo da Varazze’s *Legenda aurea*, is one of the best-known stories of this sort:

Eustachius antea Placidus uocabatur. Hic erat magister militum Traiani imperatoris. [. . .] Quadam enim die cum uenationi insisteret gregem ceruorum reperit, inter quos unum ceteris speciosiore et maiorem conspexit [. . .]. Placidus hunc toto nisu insequitur et ipsum capere nitentur. [. . .] Qui cum ceruum diligenter consideraret uidit inter cornua eius formam sancte crucis supra solis claritatem fulgentem et ymaginem Ihesu Christi qui per os cerui [. . .] ei locutus est dicens: ‘O Placide, quid me insequeris? Ego tui gratia in hoc animali tibi apparui. Ego sum Christus quem tu ignorans colis. Elemosine tue coram me ascenderunt et ob hoc ueni, ut per hunc quem uenabis ceruum ego quoque te ipse uenarar’. (*Legenda aurea*, CLVII)⁵⁶

[Before conversion, Eustace’s name was Placidus. He was a Roman general serving the emperor Trajan. [. . .] While hunting one day, he encountered a herd of deer, one of which, he saw, was more beautiful and mightier than the others [. . .]. Placidus pursued the deer eagerly, trying to capture it. [. . .] Observing the animal intently, between its antlers he saw the holy cross, shining more brightly than the sun, and the image of Christ, who [. . .] spoke through the deer’s mouth saying: ‘Placidus, why are you pursuing me? For your own good, I am appearing to you through this animal. I am Christ, whom you worship unconsciously. Your prayers have ascended before me and I have come to you, so that through the animal you were hunting, I myself could hunt you.’]

Thanks to this vision, Placidus and his family were converted and received the sacrament of baptism from the Bishop of Rome. Eustace’s conversion, with its marked contrast between the good hunter and the good Christian, reveals an opposition between a life based on passions and a life centred on the precepts of God. The vision of Christ diverts the hunter away from the pursuit of earthly goods and towards the pursuit of spiritual aims.⁵⁷ The deer, in turn, shifts from being an object of secular desire to being a figure of Christ, who is able to promote the subject’s redemption.

The legend of Saint Eustace and Petrarch’s sonnet 190 contain several shared references and overlapping themes. First, like Eustace, the poetic persona has a vision of a prodigious deer. Second, in both the saintly legend and Petrarch’s poem, the deer is associated with, or at least reminiscent of, Christ and Christian redemption, and subsequently the symbolism of baptism. Third, the presence of antlers in the poem may be intended to evoke the legend of Eustace and his vision of the cross. By virtue of their links with this legend, Petrarch’s lines offer the image of a potential anti-hunt. The sensual chase of the lover-hunter in sonnet 190 ceases at the sight of the deer and gives way to the beatifying vision in poems 191–193. The subject’s longing for sensual goods is turned into a state of spiritual happiness originating from the lady.

⁵³The Church’s position was scripturally and exegetically motivated and was based specifically on the references in the Bible to two hunters, Nimrod and Esau. The former is described as a great sinner who was also a hunter (Genesis 10. 8–12). The latter, a hunter himself, is not explicitly mentioned as a sinner (Genesis 10. 22–34), but is nevertheless associated with sin in the exegetical tradition. The Pseudo-Jerome commentary on Psalm 90 notes that Esau was a hunter because he was a sinner and that the hunter *par excellence* is the devil, who longs to chase our souls into perdition (*Breviarum in Psalmos*, 90). This statement was also included in Canon IX of the *Decretum Gratiani*. In addition, Odo of Cluny associates God’s contempt for Esau with Esau’s skills as a hunter (*Collationes*, l. 35). Among the notable critics of hunting, John of Salisbury maintains that the hunt is likely to arouse passions (*Policraticus*, l. 4. 391a). The attitude of the Church towards hunting also had legal implications. In 1215, for example, the statutes of the Fourth Lateran Council forbade hunting and hawking to all clerics. See Marcelle Thiébaux, ‘The Medieval Chase’, *Speculum*, 42.2 (1967), 260–74 (pp. 263–65); Hannele Klemetilä, *Animals and Hunters in the Late Middle Ages: Evidence from the BnF MS fr. 616 of the ‘Livres de la Chasse’ by Gaston Fébus* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 187–223 (pp. 196–97).

⁵⁴PL, CLXXVII. 575a.

⁵⁵Klemetilä, pp. 196–98.

⁵⁶Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, ed. by Giovanni Paolo Maggioni and others, 2 vols (Florence: SISMELE–Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2007), II, 1224–33 (p. 1224). See also the similar story of Saint Hubert.

⁵⁷See Klemetilä, p. 208.

The description of the beloved as a beatific presence constitutes only one of the poetic persona's fluctuating attitudes towards the lady during his love experience. In Petrarch's *Secretum*, the voice of Augustinus condemns precisely this view:

AUGUSTINUS Ab amore celestium elongavit animum et a Creatore ad creaturam desiderium inclinavit. Que una quidem ad mortem pronior fuit via.

FRANCISCUS Noli, queso, precipitare sententiam: Deum profecto ut amarem, illius amor prestitit.

AUGUSTINUS At pervertit ordinem. [...] Quia cum creatum omne Creatoris amore diligendum sit, tu contra, creature captus illecebris, Creatorem non qua decuit amasti, sed miratus artificem fuisti quasi nichil ex omnibus formosius creasset, cum tamen ultima pulcritudinum sit forma corporea. (*Secretum*, III. 147–48)⁵⁸

[AUGUSTINE She has detached your mind from the love of heavenly things and has turned your desire from the Creator to the creature. This has always been the fastest road to death.

FRANCIS Please do not jump to conclusions: there is no doubt that my love for her has led me to love God.

AUGUSTINE You have inverted the true order. [...] While every creature is to be loved for the love of God, you were instead seduced by the creature and have not loved God as you should have, but you have only admired him as her maker, as if he had not created anything more beautiful in the universe, whereas bodily beauty is the lowest form of beauty.]

If the sonnet is read via Augustinus's words, the deer would not lead the subject to the love of heavenly goods ('amor celestium') but capture his mind as a result of an illusory view ('creature captus'). In this opposition between heaven and earth, the deer-beloved takes the form of an idol, since the subject worships this in place of God.⁵⁹ Instead of offering a salvific vision of the Holy Cross, as happens in Eustace's legend, the deer's golden antlers in the sonnet may precisely be an idolatrous element, echoing the words of the Psalmist: 'Deus autem noster in caelo [...] simulacra gentium argentum et aurum' [Our God is in heaven, people's idols are silver and gold] (Psalms 113. 11–12). Augustinus's teaching in the *Secretum* returns in the *canzone* 'I vo pensando' (*Rvf*, 264), which forms the start of the second part of the *Rvf*:

ché mortal cosa amar con tanta fede
quanta a Dio sol per debito convensi,
più si disdice a chi più pregio brama.
(*Rvf*, 264, 99–101)

The poetic persona acknowledges that it is wrong to love a mortal creature with the sort of devotion that should be reserved for God. However, as the subject confesses in the *congedo*, he longs for better conduct but continues to pursue the bad:

ché co la morte a lato
cerco del viver mio novo consiglio,
et veggio 'l meglio, et al peggior m'appiglio.
(*Rvf*, 264, 134–36)

The lyric ego recognises what the path to salvation requires, but he is still attached to the thought of the lady, which is, as Augustinus says in the *Secretum*, the fastest road to death.

The link between *Rvf* 190 and 264 is not apparent, especially in the last redaction of the *Fragmenta*, the Vatican form. However, the two poems were closely related in the version of the songbook known as the 'forma di Giovanni', that is, the portion of MS Vaticano Latino 3195 transcribed and set up by Petrarch's assistant Giovanni Malpaghini, as discussed above. The 'di Giovanni' redaction was divided into two parts: the first contained *Rvf* 1–120, the ballad 'Donna mi vène' (now *Estravaganti*, 18), and *Rvf* 122–178, 180–190; the second consisted of *Rvf* 264–318.⁶⁰ When Malpaghini completed his task, the poems we know as *Rvf* 190 and 264 were situated at the

⁵⁸ Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum*, ed. by Enrico Fenzi, 10th edn (Milan: Mursia, 2015), p. 216.

⁵⁹ I adopt the technical definition of 'idol' which Durling associates with the beloved in his reading of *Rvf* 30: see Durling, p. 15.

⁶⁰ On the ballad, see Francesco Petrarca, *Trionfi, Rime estravaganti, Codice degli abbozzi*, ed. by Vinicio Pacca and Laura Paolino (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), pp. 729–32.

end and the beginning, respectively, of two contiguous sets of texts. As Domenico De Robertis has observed, the conclusion of Malpaghini's work 'corrisponde a una scansione organica, a una distribuzione che in qualche modo dà già carattere al lavoro'. Marco Santagata has argued that 'quella da lui [Malpaghini] fissata è dunque una nuova forma del *Canzoniere*, dotata di una sua autonomia e quindi, presumibilmente, di una sua logica interna', in which sonnet 190 marks the end of the first part and *canzone* 264 introduces the second.⁶¹

The juxtaposition of *Rvf* 190 and 264 in the 'di Giovanni' form, with no other lyrics in between, suggests an interplay and coherence between the two poems: the sonnet narrates the possible benefits of spiritual love, while the *canzone* acknowledges its limits, in accordance with Augustinus's words in the *Secretum*. In the calendrical structure of the *Canzoniere*, *Rvf* 264 coincides with 25 December, the *dies natalis*, that is to say, the day of Christ's nativity but also, for Petrarch and his contemporaries, the beginning of a new year.⁶² With sonnet 190 serving as an internal epilogue, the subject returns to the issues associated with Easter in *Rvf* 3 through an idolatrised view of the lady. In its function as internal prologue, *Rvf* 264 inaugurates the poetic persona's troubled search for a new life in Christ's arms, in correspondence with the day on which Jesus was born and a new year begins. In this light, the fall into water in *Rvf* 190 could indicate the subject's recognition of the illusory benefits of spiritual love, before the reflections in *Rvf* 264. However, in the Vatican redaction, *Rvf* 190 is followed by the triptych of *Rvf* 191–193. Petrarch may have sought to assemble poems characterised by a certain thematic coherence. In this context, the presence of water engages with the imagery of baptism, redemption, and the *visio beatifica* which emerges in the entire lyric sequence. At the same time, the poetic persona's fall continues to evoke a sense of illusion, insufficiency, and passivity, as if to denounce a lapse resulting from the error of idolatry, which emerges more clearly in the 'di Giovanni' form.

The sonnet 'Una candida cerva' has been glossed by several commentators as the conclusion of the *terna del sole* (*Rvf* 188–190), a lyric sequence of three poems, each associated with key moments of the day according to a progression that follows the solar path: from afternoon and sunset (*Rvf* 188), to midnight (*Rvf* 189), up to the sunrise and noon of a new day (*Rvf* 190).⁶³ As I have argued, in the Vatican redaction of the *Canzoniere* this sonnet also introduces the triptych of the *visio beatifica* (*Rvf* 191–193). In this regard, *Rvf* 190 may be seen as the overlap point between two lyric sequences outlining a solar climax that starts with sunset in *Rvf* 188; continues with midnight in *Rvf* 189; and culminates at midday, as indicated in *Rvf* 190, when the Christic symbol of the sun reaches its zenith and the beatific vision of *Rvf* 191–193 takes place.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The deification of the beloved in *Rvf* 190–193 constitutes a sign of idolatry and as such is one of the non-linear attitudes that the subject reflects upon and confesses in his prayer to the Virgin (*Rvf*, 366). Here the poetic persona returns, as it were, to Augustinus's verdict in the *Secretum* and asks for Mary's aid in the name of her son's Passion:

Vergine gloriosa,
donna del Re che nostri lacci à sciolti
et fatto 'l mondo libero et felice,

⁶¹Domenico De Robertis, 'Contiguità e selezione nella costruzione del *Canzoniere* petrarchesco', in his *Memoriale petrarchesco* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1997), pp. 65–86 (p. 72) (first publ. in *Studi di filologia italiana*, 43 (1985), 45–66); and Santagata, pp. 257–60, 303–07. See also Sabrina Stroppa, 'La conclusione della prima parte della "forma di Giovanni": il trittico *Rvf* 188–190 nello specchio di 163–165', *Per leggere*, 22.1 (2012), 7–22 (p. 17).

⁶²See Jones, p. 587.

⁶³See the commentaries in *Canzoniere*, ed. by Santagata, p. 832; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Stroppa, p. 322; *Canzoniere*, ed. by Vecchi Galli, pp. 681, 685, from which I borrow the expression 'terna del sole'.

⁶⁴See also Stroppa, 'La conclusione', pp. 13–17.

ne le cui sante piaghe
prego ch'appaghe il cor, vera beatrice.
(*Rvf*, 366, 48–52)

By recalling the scriptural context of the crucifixion, which also characterises sonnet 190, the subject invokes the redemptive role of Christ's 'sante piaghe' (*Rvf*, 366, 51). The poetic persona abandons the depiction of the beloved in Christic terms and turns to Christ, 'verace Dio' (136), through the intercession of Mary, 'vera beatrice' (52). The happiness that the Redeemer has offered to the world, which is now 'libero et felice' thanks to his sacrifice (50), contrasts with the individual and temporary enjoyment of the subject during his ecstatic vision of the idolatrised beloved, which has made the observer content in his 'breve et fraile' earthly life (*Rvf*, 191, 4).⁶⁵ In this light, the lyric persona's contemplative experience in *Rvf* 190–193 is more reminiscent of the temporary pleasures that Augustine associates with Babylon in his *Enarrationes* than of the vision of eternal peace connected with Jerusalem. Petrarch's subject does not experience Dante's purification in Eden, nor Eustace's conversion, but makes use of these intertexts to emphasise his idolatrising attitude towards the lady. Mary Magdalene is likewise left in the background as an ideal model, one that further illuminates the divine status of the beloved and at the same time highlights the distance between the lover and the saint.

While *Rvf* 366 offers a meditation on the lover's own earthly conduct, at the end of the *Triumph* Petrarch once again suggests the lady's ability to promote a state of beatitude, but this time from the celestial perspective of eternity, and thus in direct competition with God.⁶⁶ In his *ultimus cantus*, Petrarch writes: 'se fu beato chi la vide in terra, | or che fia dunque a rivederla in cielo?' (*Triumphus eternitatis*, 144–45).⁶⁷ As Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden observe, Petrarch's wish is 'projected forward to an indeterminate future', when the resurrection will take place.⁶⁸ Indeed, Petrarch's lines in the last *Triumph* recall Saint Paul's words on the partial knowledge of the divine essence in this life and its full knowledge in the afterlife: 'videmus enim nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem; nunc cognosco ex parte, tunc autem cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum' [now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known] (I Corinthians 13. 12). The protasis in Petrarch's conditional, 'se fu beato', allows the possibility for the lady to act as a beatifying presence on the earth but leaves the target of her beatifying power undetermined in the pronoun 'chi'. The poetic persona's inability to achieve a full state of blessedness during his mortal life is the result of his own error and not of any inadequacy on the part of the beloved. Her earthly presence was only a veil, which the protagonist of the *Fragmenta* had worshipped as an idol. Her authentic beatifying significance, the subject hopes, will be realised and revealed from the perspective of the eternal, in the afterlife, where the poetic persona is now longing to see Laura's truest self.

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⁶⁵See also Carrai, 'I primi testi autografi', p. 437.

⁶⁶On the vision of Laura in the *Triumphus eternitatis*, see Maria Cecilia Bertolani, *Il corpo glorioso: studi sui 'Trionfi' di Petrarca* (Rome: Carocci, 2001), pp. 137–39; *Petrarca e la visione dell'eterno*, pp. 225–27. On the metaphor of the body as a prison, see Luca Marozzi, *Petrarca platonico*, 2nd edn (Rome: Aracne, 2011), pp. 13–42.

⁶⁷Petrarca, *Trionfi*, pp. 505–38 (p. 538).

⁶⁸Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, 'From Paradox to Exclusivity: Dante's and Petrarch's Lyrical Eschatologies', in *Petrarch and Boccaccio: The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. by Igor Candido (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 129–52 (p. 149).

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