



## Chaucer and Petrarch: “S’amor non è” and the *Canticus Troili*

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**Abstract:** The scholastic ambience of *S’amor non è* (*Rvf* 132) is not accidental; in it Petrarch demolishes the medieval cornerstone of knowledge by contradicting Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction. When Chaucer, however, translated the sonnet in the *Troilus*, he had to ponder its pensive U-turns within the framework of Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*. From this perspective, Troilus’s “If no love is” is less a retort to the law of non-contradiction than an interrogation of the law of the excluded middle. Chaucer’s Pandarus simultaneously substantiates the law and gives it the lie.

The extent of Chaucer’s knowledge of Petrarch’s Italian poetry has always puzzled scholars. He translated one sonnet: “S’amor non è” (*Rvf* 132). Did he encounter this poem alone or did he read it in a florilegium? If the latter, was it in a gathering of various works by mixed, probably unidentified writers or a version of the *Rerum vulgariū fragmenta*? In either case, why did he single out this particular poem, which, one imagines, he memorized or copied? If Chaucer knew other lyrics from Petrarch’s cycle, why does he not recall them, or if he does, as some think, why are these allusions so fleeting and elusive? Did neither the local nor the overarching architecture of the *Canzoniere* interest him? From Correggio on (1356-58), “Io canterei d’Amor sí novamente” and “Amor m’a posto come segno a strale” precede and follow “S’amor non è”; as Piero Boitani has noted, these poems are also marked by their antitheses and paradoxes (62, 66). More importantly, they clearly form a sequence; they create a narrative out of lyric moments—*in nuce* what the collection does as a whole. When Chaucer inserted his translation of Petrarch’s sonnet in the *Troilus*, he did precisely the opposite. He interrupted the narrative and deliberately marked the interruption by having his narrator insert himself into the poem:

And of his song naught only the sentence,  
As writ myn auctour called Lollius,  
But plainly, save our tonges difference,  
I dar wel seyn, in al that Troilus  
Seyde in his song, loo! every word right thus  
As I shal seyn; and whoso list it here,  
Loo, next this vers he may it fynden here (Book 1, 393-99).

Such a frenzy of metafictional fabrication is hard to ignore; scribes responded to it by giving the song that follows a title, “Canticus Troili.” Their intervention, of course, repeats the narrator’s, even if the rubric shows they took his title but disregarded everything else he said. Had they not, they might have added “edidit Lollius et recognovit Chaucer.” Indeed, the narrator is so determined to name his source, one begins to wonder why Chaucer, if he

knew the song was by Petrarch, did not attribute it to him. The fame of the man who, in the words of the Clerk, “enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie,” was as great in the mid-1380s, the presumed date of the *Troilus*, as it was a decade later, when we think Chaucer decided to have his Oxford logician praise Petrarch in the prologue to the tale of Griselda. Certainly the pervasive sense of historical distance that colors everything in the *Troilus* would argue against naming a contemporary poet. But Chaucer actively courts anachronism as well; again and again the knights and ladies of ancient Troy behave as if they were in fourteenth-century London, the “New Troye,” as it was called at the time (Federico 1-28). From this perspective, the invention of Lollius as the last word on the war starts to feel like an evasion, a distraction designed to avoid naming the real author of the song. At the same time, as if to anticipate the contradictions that Troilus is about to utter, the narrator goes on to embrace both word for word and sense for sense translation, which from Cicero and Horace on were thought to be at odds with one another. His enthusiasm is infectious; we feel his excitement that Troilus will declare his love for the first time in the very next stanza. Yet with each assurance that we will hear exactly what he said, the narrator makes us equally sure that the words we are about to read are not Troilus’s. Neither are they Lollius’s, nor are they Petrarch’s. They are his. Even before Pandarus enters the poem, the narrator has identified himself, and his author, as the reader’s go-between, the man who interposes himself between the events of the story and their relation. If Chaucer did read “Io canterei d’amor sí novamente,” the narrator of his *Troilus* achieves Petrarch’s desire to “speak of love in a strangely novel way.”

It seems fitting to find oneself asking so many questions about Chaucer’s adoption of a poem that is nothing but questions. One can easily imagine its psychomachia catching his eye; of less moment, I think, were the lyric’s formal properties (Mazzotta 11, 35, and 56). The text Chaucer read probably was written in two seven-line segments; that, at least, is the way it appears in manuscripts of the *Canzoniere* (Rossiter 117). In any event, Chaucer translated its fourteen lines into three rhyme royal stanzas. One imagines, then, that the technical aspects that mattered to him had less to do with the fact that the poem was a sonnet than with the challenge of accommodating its structure and rhyme scheme to the stanza he had developed. Chaucer, that is to say, likely considered Petrarch’s poetics not in isolation but in conjunction with Boccaccio’s *ottava rima* and the French *ballade*.<sup>1</sup>

We can be fairly sure as well that Chaucer was unaware of the conversation Petrarch’s poem conducts with Dante’s “Tutti li miei pensier parlan d’Amor” (Alighieri 13); there is no evidence that Chaucer knew the *Vita Nuova* or any of its *rime*.<sup>2</sup> Petrarch’s antitheses reminded Auerbach of Augustine’s fondness for them (Auerbach 30). I prefer to think, however, that Chaucer was struck less by the poem’s rhetorical flair than its intellectual audacity. In it he heard an “I” speaking as if he were an Abelard, parsing the *sic et non* of his condition, or an Aquinas, ever ready with a *sed contra*. Unlike the stilnovists, however, who conscripted the language of scholasticism to understand themselves and love, this speaker demolishes the cornerstone of knowledge by contradicting Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle established non-contradiction as philosophy's foremost principle; without it, he claimed, no one could know whether anything exists, what it is, or what it is like. We could not tell, that is, whether Socrates is, whether he is human or not-human, or whether he is pale or white. Aristotle discusses the consequences of these assertions in the *Metaphysics* (IV, 3–6, especially 4); anyone instructed in the arts of the trivium in the Middle Ages would have been familiar with them. Petrarch certainly was. He controverts all three forms of the principle that Aristotle gives. In existential terms, he shows that, in his case at least, the same thing, Love, belongs and does not belong to the same thing at the same time and in the same respect. In terms of belief, he shows that it is possible to suppose the same thing to be and not to be, and in terms of what one can say about things he shows that opposite assertions can be true at the same time.

In the first stanza, Petrarch deploys every mode of analyzing cause and effect in order to understand himself. He is left, however, only with questions; “not knowing” has become the state in which he exists, the ontological condition that defines what he is:

S' amor non è, che dunque è quel ch' io sento?  
 Ma s'egli è amor, perdio, che cosa et quale?  
 Se bona, onde l'effecto aspro mortale?  
 Se ria, onde sí dolce ogni tormento? (Petrarca *Canzonere*, 641)

If it is not love, what then is it that I feel? But if it is love, before God, what and what kind of thing is it? If it is good, whence comes this bitter mortal effect? If it is evil, why is each torment so sweet. (*Petrarch's Lyric Poems* 271)<sup>4</sup>

The speaker opens in doubt and remains in uncertainty; the mood of his entire meditation is subjunctive, yet the emotion he feels is so present, so mastering, it can only be expressed in the indicative. His self-inquiry actually starts midpoint, with a mental about-face. Before he speaks, he has already realized that he is subject to passions that exhilarate and aggrrieve him; at some point he had concluded that he must be in thrall to Love, who elates and afflicts his servants, on the principle that effects resemble the cause that has generated them. This is the force of his *dunque*, his *ergo*; but this deduction—Love has made me like him—which his experience has seemed to confirm, is precisely what he now inverts. Instead of positing Love as the source of his particular state, he begins with what he senses, the starting point, as Aristotle had insisted, of all knowing. As a result, Love is demoted from a *priori* cause to negative inference: what else could it be that has made him to feel as he does?

By the end of the first line Petrarch, then, has implicitly set induction and deduction at loggerheads. In the rest of the quatrain he reverses course; he reconsiders the possibility that it is Love that has so affected him and discovers he is equally at sea. He can define neither the *quid* nor the *qualis* of Amor: “s'egli è amor, perdio, che cosa et quale?” If it is a *bonum*, how is it that his experience is bitter enough to kill him? If it is a *malum*, why are its torments so sweet? He has reasoned his way, in other words, into thinking what he thought before the poem began, that Love has brought him to be as he is.

In the second stanza, he moves from intellect to will, from passive to acting subject, but finds himself just as perplexed:

S'a mia voglia ardo, onde 'l pianto e lamento?  
 S'a mal mio grado, il lamentar che vale?  
 O viva morte, o dilectoso male,  
 come puoi tanto in me, s'io nol consento?

If by my own will I burn, whence comes the weeping and lament? If against my will, what does lamenting avail? O living death. O delightful harm, how can you have such power over me if I do not consent to it?

The will is the faculty that, informed by reason, chooses the best means to gain an end that is good. Petrarch, by contrast, knows only that it is impossible to know whether he wills or, if he does, how he can have chosen instruments so unfit to achieve his desire. Of course, it is possible that he has been overpowered by a force greater than himself; if so, however, his groans and laments are as futile as those he'd make if he had chosen to love. Will he, nill he, the outcome is the same. The only way he can accommodate alternatives that are at once congruent and mutually exclusive is to express them as oxymorons, the poet's figure of companionable incompatibilities.

Petrarch begins to synthesize all these contradictions by introducing the sestet with a line that logically belongs to the previous quatrain: "Et s'io 'l consento, a gran torto mi doglio" ("And if I do consent to it, it is entirely wrong of me to complain").<sup>5</sup> The concatenation connects the parts of the sonnet and unbalances them; its octave becomes an octave with nine lines, its sestet a sestet with five. The poem's formal structure, in other words, reflects the proportioned disequilibrium of the speaker who pronounces it.

In the concluding lines, Petrarch seems to turn to ethics (if not to theology) to circumscribe and resolve his confusion:<sup>6</sup>

Fra sí contrari vènti in frale barca  
 mi trovo in alto mar senza governo,  
 sí lieve di saver, d'error sí carica  
 ch'i' medesimo non so quel ch'io mi voglio,  
 et tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno.

Amid such contrary winds I find myself at sea in a frail bark, without a tiller, so light of wisdom, so laden with error, that I myself do not know what I myself want (or want for myself), and I shiver in midsummer, burn in winter.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than provide moral direction, however, the speaker's self-indictment leaves him rudderless. No sooner does he compare himself to a "frale barca" than the trope collapses into solipsism. Lacking the ballast of wisdom, over-cargoed with willful error, "i' medesimo non so quell ch'io mi voglio," "I myself do not know what I myself want." Every word in this verse except "non" and "quel ch'" means "I," yet the "I' medesimo," the subject "I myself" who does not know, is and is not the "mi voglio," the reflexive "I myself" who wants and wills for himself. So split is the speaker by his befuddled intelligence and

confounded will, he becomes his own metaphor, at once identical to himself and alien from himself. This paradoxical state is then re-expressed as the midsummer shivers, the burning winter sweats he feels; the sonnet ends with ontological oxymorons whose truth subsists in the self-cancelling effects they conjoin.

Petrarch, of course, detested scholastic logic. His conclusion is resolutely poetic: the most accurate account he can give of himself is as a metaphor, a transgressive figure that asserts similarity and difference simultaneously. For him, even the most hackneyed trope, the bewildered soul as wind-tossed ship at sea, tells us more about himself that is true than all the principles and protocols of any prior or posterior analytics.

Chaucer, as Peter Travis's book-length reading of "The Nun's Priest's Tale" makes clear, was conversant with the pressing philosophical issues of his day; he would have been fully able to appreciate Petrarch's sonnet as a rejoinder to the law of non-contradiction (345). But when he decided to incorporate it in the *Troilus*, Chaucer had to ponder its pensive U-turns within the framework of the *Filostrato*. He had to reconsider Petrarch's poem, that is to say, in light of Pandaro, Boccaccio's Galeotto, the character he invented who gave his name to fiction's power to solicit, mediate, and interject itself as the object of readers' desire. From this point of view, Petrarch's sonnet shifts focus; it becomes less a retort to the law of non-contradiction than an interrogation of the law of the excluded middle, the law that says a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time. Chaucer's Pandarus, who even more than his Italian counterpart operates as surrogate for "il libro e chi lo scrisse," as well as for the narrator and all readers, substantiates the law and gives it the lie.

To my mind, however, the adjustments Chaucer made to Petrarch's poem tell us less about why he transplanted it in the *Troilus* than about the use he put it to. I agree with Patricia Thomson (317); by translating "S'amor non è" as "If no love is," Chaucer made Troilus's song even more abstract than he found it. Mindful as he is, however, Troilus still is trying to express the bewildering emotions he deeply feels. Later, in a scene that perfectly mirrors this one, Criseyde also tries to articulate the hopes and fears love engenders. After a particularly daunting thought about the great energy lovers must expend to "coye" those who would censure them, the narrator catches her wavering mind by saying:

And after that, hire thought gan for to clere,  
 And seide, "He which that nothing undertaketh,  
 Nothing n'acheveth, be him looth or deere."  
 And with an other thought hire herte quaketh;  
 Than slepeth hope, and after drede awaketh;  
 Now hoot, now cold; but thus, bitwixen tweye,  
 She rist hire up, and went here for to pleye. (Book 2, 806-12)

The difference between Criseyde's vacillations and Troilus's is devastating. Troilus burns and shivers because he is in love with Criseyde; Criseyde runs hot and cold mulling over whether she will love Troilus. The name Chaucer gives the difference between them is Pandarus; he is *differance* written large, so large we might say these moments echo and

contradict one another. This moment is the reason Chaucer gave Troilus Petrarch's song and his translation of its contradictions.

If "S'amor non è" is not Chaucer's unique encounter with Petrarch's Italian poetry, it certainly is his most extended. The way he translated the sonnet, both formally as the "Canticus Troili" and more generally in the way he elaborated its patterns and ideas, reveals an artist making sense of a land that was both recognizable and strange and a literature that was both like and unlike any he had read. In this sense, Petrarch's lyric embrace of blindness and insight is a metaphor for Chaucer's experience of Italy.<sup>8</sup> And in this sense, this instance of Chaucer's Petrarchism, the first in England, stands as harbinger and valediction to all the Renaissance refashionings that would follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Rossiter (115-18) nicely summarizes the debate between those scholars who, like David Wallace, hold that Boccaccio's *ottava rima*, itself a development of the *cantare* stanza, influenced Chaucer's development of the rhyme royal stanza and those who, like James Wimsatt, think that Chaucer transposed elements of the French *ballade*. Rossiter (112-14) also rehearses the opposing arguments of Wilkins and Kleinhenz about the Sicilian or Provençal origin of the sonnet.

<sup>2</sup> On Petrarch's sonnet and Dante's "Tutti li miei pensier" see, most recently, Rossiter, 111-12. On the literary pedigree of the poem, see Boitani (59-61) and Picone (316-17).

<sup>3</sup> The scholastic cast of the sonnet has been noted; in her commentary, Bettarini, for instance, follows Boitani (57) in noting that Petrarch sets his oxymorons about whether it is Love, *an sit*, and what is Love, *quid sit Amor*, within the framework of scholastic dialectic (Petrarca Canzoniere 640-42). Petrarch's rejection of the philosophic analysis of love is, I think, more pointed and thoroughgoing than even Boitani and Bettarini suggest.

<sup>4</sup> I have slightly altered Robert Durling's translation of this stanza; for "che cosa e quale," Durling has "what kind of thing is it." Petrarch is wondering about both the nature ("cosa") and the characteristics ("quale") of Love.

<sup>5</sup> Durling's translation is "And if I do consent to it, it is wrong of me to complain."

<sup>6</sup> As Rossiter points out, Matthew 14.24 may lie behind Petrarch's figure of the boat assailed by contrary winds: "But the boat in the midst of the sea was tossed with the waves: for the wind was contrary" (127).

<sup>7</sup> Durling's translation of "ch'i' medesimo non so quel ch'io mi voglio" is "that I myself do not know what I want."

<sup>8</sup> On Chaucer and Italy, see further Warren Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

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