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Petrarch's *Secret Inner Struggle*

The *Secret Inner Struggle*, comprising Book II of Francesco Petrarch's *Secretum*, presents a dialogue between Petrarch as a young man and St. Augustine, a representation of his later, more experienced self. The conversation focuses on Petrarch's attachment to worldly pleasures and pride, as St. Augustine urges Francesco to act more humbly and to dedicate himself to higher ideals. As much as the dialogue may simply be a harsh self-criticism, it reads like a treatise on St. Augustine's *Confessions*, with constant references to Roman and Greek thinkers, and attempts to reconcile these with Christianity.

The character of Francesco, despite being the antagonist to St. Augustine in the dialogue, is going through many of the same crises that the north-African bishop dealt with in the fourth century. Attached to knowledge and reading, proud of eloquence and beauty, Francesco –like Augustine in the *Confessions*- is tormented by the thought of a spiritual downfall at the price of mundane wisdom. Yet despite this awareness, his pride keeps him from committing himself to a life of humility and dedication to God.

The figure of St. Augustine is as much a revival of the fourth-century bishop as it is the voice of Francesco Petrarch the writer, an older and wiser thinker than his namesake in the dialogue. Augustine constantly prods the younger Francesco throughout the dialogue, criticizing his choices and driving him towards an understanding of the right path. His first step is to instill deep fear in Francesco, thus assuring that he will listen to what Augustine has to say. This is achieved by likening Francesco's problems to an oncoming military surprise attack that has the potential to devastate his soul.

With his fear established, Francesco succumbs to the harsh criticism that Augustine voices. The first trait to come under attack is Francesco's love of reading, which Augustine says is useless without some knowledge of oneself. Furthermore, as the wise old man states, it serves no purpose to know the right path if one does not follow it. Next, Augustine rebukes the young writer for his proud eloquence, for it is a talent that can never be perfected due to the limits of language. Finally, he admonishes Francesco for his vanity, reminding him of the story of Narcissus and emphasizing the ultimate proof of human frailty: death.

Much akin to the philosophical thoughts of the historical St. Augustine, the character Francesco attempts a rebuttal to his interlocutor's strong accusations. He says that he realizes full well the inadequacies of language and the futility of intelligence, and sees beauty as useless and short-lived. He asserts that his significance is not self-made, but rather brought about by the insignificance of others. St. Augustine warns him of this point of view, stressing that self-exaltation is "dangerous and useless." He goes on to criticize Francesco's avarice and ambition, a charge that the younger immediately denies. Augustine, using memory as a tool of philosophical introspection, reminds his opponent of days when he would simply enjoy nature and meditate on life. Now, Augustine accuses, he has gone to seek riches and fame in the city, no longer content with simplicity. The nearer Francesco gets to death, the more he worries about amassing wealth.

The young writer defends himself, stating that he tries to satisfy both his spiritual and physical needs. Coming very close to Augustine of Hippo's account of his attraction to Manichaeism, Francesco tells his interlocutor of the Greek division of Apollo and

Dionysus, a dualism of mind and body. Augustine does not directly criticize this theory, but rather admonishes Francesco for dividing his time unequally between body and soul. He accuses Francesco of spending most of his time on passionate, avaricious endeavors, leaving only what little is left to spend on “honorable pursuits.” Francesco explains that he only wishes to not be in need, and to not have to succumb to others. Augustine replies, however, that this is a tremendously impossible goal to reach, as even kings are in need of things, and must succumb to God.

At this point, the young writer comes to the realization that he should cast away his mundane desires, and seek the fulfillment of his heart. He asks St. Augustine to continue with his criticism, as he now hopes to learn the right path. Augustine shortly praises Francesco for not being gluttonous or overly angry, but then goes on to deal with his lust, which leads the young writer away from any spiritual goal. Francesco understands, and promises to follow the advice given by Plato, which is to neglect the desires of the body in order to reach the divine. Satisfied with Francesco’s promise, St. Augustine urges him to pray humbly to God for help, and to do so immediately, lest he lapse into his old habit of thinking and not acting.

Many elements in the *Secret Inner Struggle* mirror the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, such as Francesco’s attachment to lust, his embracing of dualistic thought, and his incessant quest for knowledge. More subtle hints at the *Confessions* are the use of memory as a means to show change over time, and the many excuses Francesco makes for his mundane behavior. It is no coincidence that Petrarch chose St. Augustine as an interlocutor in the *Secret Inner Struggle*. Perhaps no medieval thinker better represents the struggle to Christianity than Augustine of Hippo does. By harking back almost 1000

years to Augustine, Petrarch was not simply criticizing himself as a young man, but rather attempting to show the universality of the struggle to Christianity.