A Modern Contemplation of ‘Acedia’ in “The Secretum” of Petrarch

Whence it is proved by experience that a fit of accidie should not be evaded by running away from it, but overcome it by resisting it.


It seems astonishing that nearly one thousand years after the writing of The Monastic Institutes, wherein Book X is defined at some length the notion of accidie, Francis Petrarch, at the dawn of the Renaissance, should so concern himself with this malady. Such was the power of Christianity in the middle ages. Today, few average Christians would suffer such guilt over a sin originally observed in monks, the sin of spiritual sloth, which St. John Cassian further defined as “spiritual weariness or distress of heart…akin to dejection, and … especially trying to solitaires” meaning monks (The Monastic Institutes, Book X, Chapter 1). St. John Cassian felt strongly enough to identify accidie as a deadly sin. Christianity was born of misery, so it is no surprise that the early Christian thinkers should ally themselves with Stoicism and not Epicureanism. Both Christianity and Stoicism are prone to fatalism; the connections are manifold:

In the life of the individual man, virtue is the sole good; such things as health, happiness, possessions, are of no account. Since virtue resides in the will, everything really good or bad in a man’s life depends only upon himself. He may become poor, but what of it? He can still be virtuous. A
tyrant may put him in prison, but he can still persevere in living in harmony with Nature. He may be sentenced to death, but he can die nobly, like Socrates. Therefore every man has perfect freedom, provided he emancipates himself from mundane desires. (Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*. p. 254)

Christianity, however, offers a promise of salvation from earth’s misery in the afterlife; Stoicism makes no such concession. Curiously, Petrarch’s ‘Francis’ never has his interlocutor, St. Augustine, remark on this glorious solution, though it could be argued that salvation is the main underlying theme. Rather, St. Augustine continually reminds Francis that “the whole life of a philosopher is a meditation upon death” and that “really there is nothing more profitable to think about than death: other thoughts may turn out to be in vain, but not this one” (92, 93). Clearly, times have changed. Today, Joel Osteen, the most popular pastor in the United States, whose church in Texas averages more than 42,000 attendees at weekly services and who was named "Most Influential Christian in America" in 2006 by churchreport.com, preaches not a philosophy of death but a so-called “prosperity gospel” which focuses on good health and prosperity for Christians. In a CBS *60 Minutes* interview on Oct. 14, 2007, Osteen explained that “he sees himself as more of a life coach, that he teaches in a motivational style, and that he likes to keep his messages simple, or the same each week. Osteen also mentioned that he helps people with how they live out their lives, and that he thinks there are probably others better qualified or gifted for explaining Bible verses” (CBS.com). While perhaps not truly indicative of Christian thought today, Osteen’s positive message is likely more reflective of the modern Christian’s philosophy than St. Augustine’s. It seems we have
evolved from the Stoic approach to that of the Epicurean, from Plato’s to Aristotle’s concept of eudaimonia. All recognize the primacy of virtue, and while no Christian today would profess a vulgarized hedonism as representative of Christ’s teachings, neither is it any longer much professed that one must suffer to be a good Christian. How may one flourish if one is compelled to dwell on death as the only topic worthy of contemplation? Petrarch, as ‘Francis,’ admits that he usually does consider death as imminent (given the violent times in which he lived, this is no surprise), but “with no other result than [that of] poisoning his joy of life” (Shey). St. Augustine reminds him to be grateful for sending such “salutary” thoughts. It seems more than apparent that the source of acedia in Francis is the enormity of this example of cognitive dissonance, and while “most likely eternal death will not touch one visited so often by the thought of death,” this one will still be haunted by the phantasmata, not merely of the senses awakened in him but of the self-evident and natural reaction to the knowledge that limiting one’s mental health to thoughts of misery in the face of so much to enjoy is not, in fact, virtuous or truly Christian. Might Francis, in his attack of acedia, more effectively meditate on any number of other more optimistic elements of Christian doctrine? For example, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3) or “from Matthew 6:33, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Despite myriad and revolutionary movements over the past several hundred years in Christian thought, this one still remains: “To defeat sin, one must not only have a strong will, but also he must free himself from passions born of the senses,” or to use the common expression, sins of the flesh, the most obvious being fornication. Though
Petrarch does not admit of his affairs in the *Secretum*, his guilt, his unhappiness, his acedia, it seems clear to me, is the result of these indiscretions, especially since he had taken a vow of celibacy. Thus, he maintains the closest association to the joys of sex that he can without actually falling prey to physical sin: his continued adulation and virtual deification of Laura from afar and in his art. St. Augustine chastises him, of course, for placing his thoughts, once again, on the body, “which is corruptible, weighs down the soul and earthly living oppresses the mind that dwells upon many things” (Shey 231). In the third dialogue, Petrarch has St. Augustine boldly proclaim: “There is nothing which makes us forget or neglect God like the love of earthly things. This is especially true in the case of what is called Love, as though that were a proper name for what they say (the worst blasphemy of all) is a god” (67). Modern psychology would likely recognize Petrarch’s projection, but what to make of St. Augustine’s insistence that mortal love for another is akin to blasphemy? We might trace this attitude to Pauline misogyny, which is certainly not geographically specific to Palestine. Hesiod, too, had little to say in favor of women. Plato, at least, was willing to consider women as philosopher-kings, but not likely to be one. No, it seems that Petrarch, having been trapped by necessity as a writer in need of a salaried church appointment, resisted, quite naturally it seems to me, being “condemned to lifelong bachelorhood” (ix). Though guilt-ridden, he should count himself lucky for having mistreated women. He knew of Abelard.
Works Cited

Pitts, Byron. “Joel Osteen Answers His Critics”
