

THE ITALIAN
RENAISSANCE
R · E · A · D · E · R

EDITED BY
JULIA CONAWAY BONDANELLA
AND MARK MUSA


A MERIDIAN BOOK
NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY
NEW YORK AND SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO



FRANCESCO PETRARCA

1304-74

ITALY'S GREATEST HUMANIST AND MOST INFLUENTIAL AND LASTING LYRIC POET. Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch, as he is known in English, was born in Arezzo, a small town in central Italy. He spent much of his youth in Provence, where his father, a Florentine notary, was living in exile in the city of Avignon, then the temporary location of the papacy. He studied law first at Montpellier and then at Bologna, returning to Avignon after his father's death in 1326. It was on Good Friday of 1327 in a church in Avignon that he claimed to have seen for the first time his beloved Laura, the inspiration for his *Canzoniere*, a collection of 366 lyric poems of various subjects and metrical forms (sonnets, madrigals, canzoni or songs, sestinas).

Soon afterward, Petrarch entered the service of the powerful Colonna family, and by 1341 his reputation as a classical scholar was so great that he received two separate invitations to be crowned poet laureate from the city of Rome and the University of Paris. He accepted the first invitation—thus symbolically asserting for future generations of Renaissance humanists who followed his model the primacy of Rome and the Latin classics over the theological speculations associated with the Scholasticism of the French university—and received the poet's crown from the Roman Senate on April 8, 1341. From that point on, Petrarch became a major force in European culture, traveling all over Italy and Europe and writing a number of major Latin works, including the epic poem *Africa*, numerous personal and literary letters, and various philosophical and moral works. He died in Arquà, a small town near Padua, on the night of July 18-19, 1374, after having achieved the goal he had set years earlier for himself—universal fame as a scholar and poet.

Petrarch's reputation rests upon two very different, though related, bodies of work. His Latin writings (two brief selections of which are included here) reflect his interest in the revival of classical antiquity, his tireless efforts to locate and edit the major texts surviving from the ancient period, and his desire to leave his mark on European culture.

FRANCESCO PETRARCA

Not only was he a brilliant intellectual, but he also understood quite well the role of the individual human being and the place of fame in society. His "Letter to Posterity" shows us the self-portrait of a man who wished to be remembered as a student, scholar, poet, and humanist. "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux," describing his climb of the 6,273-foot-high mountain near Avignon in 1336, reveals another characteristic quality of his thought which would color all of the Renaissance culture—his introspection, his interest in nature, and his unique blend of Christian values with the best of the learning from classical antiquity.

Petrarch claimed to prefer his Latin works to his vernacular poems. Yet his *Canzoniere* became the model for stylish, elegant, and eloquent love poetry not only in Italy but also throughout all of Western Europe from his own day until the seventeenth century. It inspired a major tradition in Western lyric poetry, known as Petrarchism, and it was a major and determinant influence upon Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Ronsard, Donne, and countless other late-medieval and Renaissance poets and playwrights, who often employed Petrarchan language or conceits in their dramatic works. Laura—the beautiful but enigmatic muse who inspired these lyrics—apparently died during the Black Plague of 1348 (the same pestilence eloquently described in Boccaccio's *Decameron*), and Petrarch's *Canzoniere* ("Songbook") recorded the various changes in his thoughts and emotions between his first vision of Laura until and after her death. Like all of the truly great love poetry of the Western lyric tradition, a major portion of which Petrarch did so much to establish, the *Canzoniere* actually concentrated more upon the psychology of the poet in love than upon the beloved.

57
Petrarch's humanism, incorporating the ideas of newly rediscovered classical texts, might be said to have given the European Renaissance its direction. More than any other man, he helped to establish what it meant to be a learned, cultured individual, and the humanist movement in Italy and later throughout all of Europe was to follow his example. In his lyric poetry (written in Italian rather than Latin), Petrarch invented what became a universal poetic language, providing a model for centuries of poets who found his *Canzoniere* a veritable gold mine of conceits, metaphors, and attitudes toward literature which they would incorporate into their own personal expression.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

41
Petrarch, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Thomas G.

(2)

FRANCESCO PETRARCA

Bergin, *Petrarch* (New York: Twayne, 1970); Julia Conaway Bondanella, *Petrarch's Visions and Their Renaissance Analogues* (Madrid: Studia Humanitatis, 1978); Julia Conaway Bondanella and Mark Musa, "Petrarch," in William T. H. Jackson, ed., *European Writers: The Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (New York: Scribner's, 1983); Nicholas Mann, *Petrarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Charles Trinkaus, *The Poet as Philosopher* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); E. H. Wilkins, *The Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

(3)

LETTER TO POSTERITY*

You may, perhaps, have heard tell of me, though even this is doubtful, since a poor and insignificant name like mine will hardly have traveled far in space or time. If, however, you have heard of me, you may wish to know the kind of man I was or about the fruit of my labors, especially those you may have heard of or, at any rate, of those whose titles at least may have reached you.¹

To begin with myself, then, what men say about me will differ widely, since in passing judgment almost everyone is influenced not so much by truth as by whim; there is no measure for praise and blame. I was, in truth, one of your own, a poor mortal, neither of high origin, nor, on the other hand, of too humble birth, but belonging, as Augustus Caesar says of himself, to an old family.² As for my disposition, I am not by nature evil or wanting in modesty except as contagious custom may have infected me. My youth was gone before I realized it; young manhood carried me away; but a maturer age brought me to my senses and taught me by experience the truth I had read in books long before: that youth and pleasure are vain—the lesson of that Author of all times and ages, Who permits wretched mortals, puffed with emptiness, to wander for a time until at last, becoming mindful of their sins, they learn to know themselves. In my youth I was blessed with an agile, active body, though not particularly strong; and while I cannot boast of being very handsome, I was good-looking enough in my younger days. I had a clear complexion, between light and dark, lively eyes, and for many years sharp vision, which, however, unexpectedly deserted me when I passed

*This and most of the other selections from Petrarch come from Petrarch, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. and ed. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), although some poems from the *Canzoniere* were newly translated for this volume by Mark Musa. Additional explanatory notes have been added to those previously published in *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works* by Julia Conaway Bondanella.

"LETTER TO POSTERITY"

my sixtieth birthday, and forced me, reluctantly, to resort to the use of glasses. Although I had always been perfectly healthy, old age assailed me with its usual array of discomforts.

My parents were good people, Florentine in origin, and not too well off; in fact, I may as well admit it, they were on the edge of poverty. Since they had been expelled from their native city,³ I was born to exile, at Arezzo, in the year 1304 of the age beginning with Christ's birth, July the twentieth, on a Monday, at dawn. I have always had great contempt for money; not that I wouldn't like to be rich, but because I hate the work and care which are invariably associated with wealth. I never liked to give great feasts; on the contrary, I have led a happier life with a plain diet and ordinary foods than all the followers of Apicius,⁴ with their elaborate dinners. So-called banquets, those vulgar bouts, hostile to sobriety and good manners, I have always found to be repugnant. I have always thought it tiresome and useless to invite others to such affairs, and no less so to be invited to them myself by others. On the other hand, to dine with one's friends I find most pleasant, and nothing has ever given me more delight than the unannounced arrival of a friend—nor have I ever willingly sat down to table without a friend. And nothing annoys me more than display, not only because it is bad in itself, and opposed to humility, but because it is disturbing and distracting.

In my younger days I struggled constantly with an overwhelming but pure love affair—my only one, and I would have struggled with it longer had not premature death, bitter but salutary for me, extinguished the cooling flames.⁵ I certainly wish I could say that I have always been entirely free from desires of the flesh, but I would be lying if I did. I can, however, surely say this: that, while I was being carried away by the ardor of my youth and by my temperament, I always detested such sins from the depths of my soul. When I was near the age of forty, and my vigor and passions were still strong, I renounced abruptly not only those bad habits, but even the very recollection of them—as if I had never looked at a woman. This I consider to be among my greatest blessings, and I thank God, who freed me while I was still sound and vigorous from that vile slavery which I always found hateful. But let us turn to other matters now.⁶

I have taken pride in others but never in myself, and insignificant as I was, I have always considered myself to be even more so. As for anger, it very often did harm to me but never to others. I have always been most desirous of honorable friendships, and have cherished them faithfully. And I boast without fear, since I know I speak sincerely, that while I am prone to take offense, I am equally quick to forget offenses and have a

good memory for benefits received. I had the good fortune of associating with kings and princes, and having the friendship of nobles to the point of exciting envy. But it is the cruel fate of the elderly that sooner or later they must weep for friends who have passed away. Some of the greatest kings of this age have loved me and cultivated my friendship. They may know why; I certainly do not. I was on such terms with some of them that in a certain sense they seemed to be more my guests than I theirs; their eminence in no way made me uncomfortable; on the contrary, it brought with it many advantages. I kept aloof, however, from many of whom I was very fond; such was my innate spirit for freedom that I carefully avoided those whose high standing seemed to threaten the freedom I loved so much.

I had a well-balanced mind rather than a keen one, one adapted to all kinds of good and wholesome study, but especially inclined to moral philosophy and poetry. In the course of time I neglected the latter and found pleasure in sacred literature, finding in it a hidden sweetness which I had previously taken lightly, and I came to regard the works of the poets as mere amenities. Though I was interested in many subjects, I devoted myself especially to the study of antiquity, for I always disliked our own age—so much so, that had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I would have preferred to have been born in any other time than our own. In order to forget my own times, I have always tried to place myself mentally in another age; thus I delighted in history—though I was troubled by the conflicting statements, but when in doubt I accepted what appeared to me most probable, or else yielded to the authority of the writer.

47 Many people have said that my style is clear and compelling; but to me it seems weak and obscure. In fact, in ordinary conversation with friends, or acquaintances, I never worried about my language, and I have always marveled at the fact that Augustus Caesar took such pains in this respect.⁷ When, however, the subject matter or the circumstances or the listener seemed to demand otherwise, I have given some attention to style, with what success, however, I cannot say. Let those to whom I spoke be the judges. If only I have lived well, I care little how well I spoke. Mere elegance of language can result at best in an empty reputation.

My life up to now has, through circumstances or my own choice, been disposed as follows. Some of my first year was spent at Arezzo, where I first saw the light of day; the following six years were, since my mother had by this time been recalled from exile, spent at my father's estate at Ancisa, about fourteen miles above Florence. My eighth year was spent at Pisa, the ninth and later years in Transalpine Gaul, at

Avignon, on the left bank of the Rhone, where the Roman Pontiff holds and has long held the Church of Christ in shameful exile,⁸ though a few years ago it seemed as if Urban V was on the point of restoring the church to its ancient seat. But clearly nothing is coming of this effort and, what is worst of all, the Pope, while he was still living, seemed to repent of his good deed. If he had lived a little longer, he certainly would have learned what I thought of his return.⁹ My pen was in my hand when suddenly he gave up both his exalted office and his life. Unhappy man! To think he could have died before St. Peter's altar and in his own home! Had his successors remained in their capital he would have been looked upon as the cause of this fortunate change or, had they left Rome, his virtue would have been all the more conspicuous as their fault, in contrast, would have been the more evident. But such lamentations here stray too far from my subject.

So then, on the windy banks of the river Rhone I spent my boyhood, under the care of my parents, and then, my entire youth under the direction of my own vanities. There were, however, long intervals spent elsewhere, for at that time I spent four full years in the little town of Carpentras, a little to the east of Avignon. In these two places I learned as much grammar, logic, and rhetoric as my age permitted, or rather, as much as is usually taught in school, and how little that is, dear reader, you well know. Then I went to Montpellier to study law, and spent four years there, and then to Bologna for three years where I attended lectures on civil law, and many thought I would have done very well had I continued my studies. But I gave up the subject altogether as soon as it was no longer necessary to follow the wishes of my parents. It was not because I disliked the power and authority of the law, which is undoubtedly very great, or because of the endless references it contains to Roman antiquity, which I admired so, but rather because I felt it was being continuously degraded by those who practice it. I hated the idea of learning an art which I would not practice dishonestly, and could hardly hope to practice otherwise. Had I made the latter attempt, my scrupulousness would undoubtedly have been ascribed to incompetence.

So at the age of twenty-two I returned home.¹⁰ Since habit has nearly the force of nature, I call home my Avignon exile for I had lived there since childhood. I was already beginning to become known there, and my friendship was sought out by prominent men. Why, I do not know. I must confess that this is a source of surprise to me now, although it seemed natural enough at an age when we are used to considering ourselves as worthy of the highest respect. I was courted first and foremost by that eminent and noble Colonna family which at that period

FRANCESCO PETRARCA

adorned the Roman Curia with their presence. While I might be now, at that time I was certainly unworthy of the esteem in which the family held me. I was especially welcomed and taken to Gascony by the incomparable Giacomo Colonna, then Bishop of Lombez,¹¹ the like of whom I doubt that I have ever seen or ever shall see. There in the shade of the Pyrenees I spent a heavenly summer in delightful conversation with my master and the members of our company, and never do I recall the experience without a sigh of regret.¹²

Returning, I spent many years in the house of Giacomo's brother, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, not as if I were a servant and he my lord but rather as if he were my father, or better, a most affectionate brother. It was as though I were in my very own home.¹³ About this time, youthful curiosity impelled me to visit France and Germany. And while I invented other reasons to gain the approval of my elders for the journey, the real reason was burning desire for new sights. First I visited Paris, as I was anxious to discover what was true and what fictitious in the accounts I had heard of that city. After my return from this journey I went to Rome, which I had ardently desired to visit since I was a child. There I soon came to be a great admirer of Stefano, the noble head of the Colonna family, who was an ancient hero, and I was in turn so welcomed by him in every respect that it was as though I were his son. The affection and good will which this excellent man showed me persisted until the end of his life, and it lives with me still, and never will it fade, not until I myself cease to be.

Having returned I experienced the innate repugnance I have always felt for city life, and especially for that disgusting city of Avignon which I truly abhorred. Seeking some means of escape, I fortunately discovered a delightful valley, narrow and secluded, called Vacluse, about fifteen miles from Avignon, where the Sorgue, the prince of streams, has its source. Captured by the charms of the place, I transferred myself and my books there. If I were to tell you what I did there during those many years, it would prove to be a long story. Indeed, almost every bit of writing I did was either done or begun or at least conceived there, and my undertakings were so numerous that even to the present day they keep me busy and weary. My mind, like my body, is more agile than strong, so that while it was easy for me to conceive of many projects, I would drop them because they were too difficult to execute. The aspect of my surroundings suggested my undertaking the composition of a sylvan or bucolic song, my *Bucolicum carmen*. I also composed a work in two books on *the Life of Solitude (De vita solitaria)*, which I dedicated to Philip, now exalted to the Cardinal and Bishop of Sibina. He was always a great

"LETTER TO POSTERITY"

man, but at the time of which I speak, he was only the humble Bishop of Cavaillon.¹⁴ He is the only one of my friends who is still left, and he has always loved and treated me not episcopally, as Ambrose did Augustine, but as a brother.

One Friday in Holy Week while I was wandering in those mountains I had the strong urge to write an epic poem about Scipio Africanus the Great, whose name had been dear to me since childhood. While I began the project with great enthusiasm, I soon, owing to a variety of distractions, put it aside. The poem was called *Africa*, after its hero, and by some fate, whether the book's or my own, it did not fail to arouse the interest of many even before its publication.¹⁵

While leading a leisurely existence there, on one and the same day, remarkable as it may seem, I received letters from both the Roman Senate and the Chancellor at the University of Paris, summoning me to appear in Rome and Paris, respectively, to receive the poet's laurel crown.¹⁶ In my youthful elation I convinced myself that I was quite worthy of this honor and recognition which came from such eminent judges, and I measured my own merit by the judgment of others. But I hesitated for a time over which invitation I should accept, and sent a letter to the Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, of whom I have already spoken, asking his opinion. He was so nearby that, having written to him late in the day, I had his reply before nine the next morning. I followed his advice, and recognized the claims of Rome as superior to all others (I still have the two letters I wrote to him on that occasion showing that I took his advice). So I set off for Rome. And although, as is the way of youth, I was a most indulgent judge of my own work, I was still uneasy about accepting my own estimation of myself as well as the verdict even of such men as those who summoned me, despite the fact that they would certainly not have honored me with such an offer, if they had not believed me worthy.

So I decided to visit Naples first, and there I went to see that celebrated king and philosopher Robert,¹⁷ who was as illustrious a ruler as he was a man of letters. He was, in truth, the only monarch of our times who was both a friend of learning and of virtue, and I asked him to examine me in such things as he found to criticize in my work. The warmth of his reception and judgment remains to this day a source of astonishment to me, and undoubtedly also to the reader who happens to know something of the matter. When he learned the reason for my coming, the king seemed very pleased. He was gratified by my youthful faith in him, and felt, perhaps, that he shared in a way the glory of my coronation, since I had chosen him above all men as my qualified critic.

FRANCESCO PETRARCA

After talking over a great many things, I showed him my *Africa*, which pleased him so much that he asked me as a great favor to dedicate it to him. This was a request I certainly could not refuse, nor, in fact, would I have wished to refuse, even had it been in my power. He then set a day during which he would consider the object of my visit. He kept me busy from noon until evening, and since the time proved too short, with one discussion leading to another, we spent the two following days in the same way. Thus, having tested my ignorance for three days, the king finally pronounced me worthy of the laurel. He wanted to bestow that honor upon me at Naples, and urged me to agree to this, but my love for Rome was stronger than the insistence of even so great a monarch as Robert. At length, finding me inflexible in my purpose, he sent me on my way with royal escorts and letters to the Roman Senate in which he enthusiastically expressed his flattering opinion of me. This royal judgment was in accord with that of many others, and especially with my own, but today I cannot accept either of those verdicts. In his case, there was more affection and encouragement of youth than devotion to truth.

So then, I went to Rome, and continuing in spite of my unworthiness to rely upon the judgment of so eminent a critic, I who had been merely a simple student received the laurel crown to the great joy of the Romans who attended the ceremony.¹⁸ This occasion is described elsewhere in my letters, both in prose and verse. The laurel, however, in no way gave me more wisdom, though it did arouse some envy—but that is a tale too long to be told here.

Leaving Rome, I went to Parma, and spent some time with the members of the Correggio family, who were very good men and most generous to me but much at odds with each other. They gave Parma such a good government as it had never before had within the memory of man, and such as it is not likely ever to enjoy again.

I was most conscious of the honor I had just received, and worried for fear that I might seem to be unworthy of the distinction; consequently, as I was walking one day in the mountains and happened to cross the river Enza in the region of Reggio Selvapiana, I was struck by the beauty of the spot and began to write again the *Africa*, which I had put aside. In my enthusiasm, which had appeared to be dead, I wrote some lines that very day, and some more each day that followed until I returned to Parma. Here I happened to find a quiet and secluded house (which I later bought, and which is still my own), and I continued my task with such ardor and completed the work in so short a time that the fact I did so still amazes me to this day. I was already thirty-four years old when I returned to the fountain of the Sorgue, and to my transalpine

"LETTER TO POSTERITY"

solitude. I had stayed long both in Parma and Verona,¹⁹ and I am thankful to say that everywhere I went I was treated with much greater esteem than I merited.

Some time after this, my growing reputation attracted the kindness of Giacomo the Younger of Carrara, a very fine man whose equal, I doubt, cannot be found among the rulers of this time. For years, when I was beyond the Alps, or whenever I happened to be in Italy, he constantly sent messengers and letters, and with his petitions he urged me to accept his friendship. At last, though I expected little satisfaction from the venture, I made up my mind to go to him and see what this insistence on the part of so eminent a person, and one who was a stranger to me, was all about. Then, after some time I went to Padua, where I was received by that man of illustrious memory not as a mere mortal might be received, but as the blessed are received in heaven—with such joy and such unbelievable affection and respect that I cannot adequately describe it in words and must, therefore, be silent. Among other things, when he learned that I had been a cleric from boyhood, he had me made a canon of Padua in order to bind me closer to himself and to his city. In short, if his life had been longer, that would have put an end to all my wanderings. But alas! nothing mortal is enduring, and there is nothing sweet which sooner or later does not become bitter. He had scarcely given two years to me, to his country, and to the world before God, Who had given him to us, took him away.²⁰ And it is not my blind love for him that makes me feel that neither I, nor his country, nor the world was worthy of him. Although the son, who succeeded him, was a very sensible and distinguished man, who like his father was always very cordial and respectful to me, I could stay no longer after the death of this man to whom I was so closely linked (even by the similarity of our ages) and I returned to France, not so much from desire to see again what I had already seen a thousand times, as from hope of getting rid of my misfortunes (the way a sick man does) with a change of scene. . . .²¹



THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE R · E · A · D · E · R

EDITED BY
JULIA CONAWAY BONDANELLA
AND MARK MUSA



A MERIDIAN BOOK

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

NEW YORK AND SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO

1. This letter was intended to conclude the *Epistolae senecae*, one of Petrarch's two main collections of letters, and to reveal to succeeding generations a structured account of his life. In his vast correspondence, Petrarch was inspired by the letters written by classical writers, such as Cicero, some of whose letters to Atticus he had discovered in Verona. These letters showed him that earthly undertakings and the life of an individual, even one of modest birth, could be of interest to posterity.
2. See Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, 2.
3. Petrarch's father was exiled in 1301 as a result of fighting among the Guelph factions in Florence.
4. Apicius was a Roman chef of considerable sophistication who lived in the time of Tiberius and wrote a famous cookbook.
5. This reference to a love affair suggests Petrarch's attachment ended at the woman's death. Yet in the poetry and other works, Petrarch's preoccupation with Laura is lifelong.
6. Petrarch had taken minor orders in the Church and had two natural children whom he legitimized: Giovanni, born in 1337; and Francesca, in 1343.
7. Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, 87.
8. In 1309, Clement V, the French Pope, (1305-14), had moved the papal court to Rome.
9. Urban V (1362-70) took the papal court back to Rome in 1367 but returned to Avignon in 1370. In several metrical epistles to Urban's predecessors, Petrarch urged them to return to Rome.
10. After his mother's death around 1320, Petrarch and his brother Gherardo went to Bologna and studied law. They left Bologna in 1326 when their father died.
11. Lombez is thirty miles southwest of Toulouse in France. Giacomo was bishop from 1328 until his death in 1341.
12. During the summer of 1330, Petrarch also met Ludwig van Kempen (his friend "Socrates") and Lello di Pietro Stefano dei Tosetti ("Laelius"), to whom he addressed many letters.
13. Petrarch served as household chaplain on the staff of Cardinal Giovanni Colonna (d. 1348) for about fifteen years, between 1330 and 1348.
14. Philippe de Cabasoles (d. 1372) shared Petrarch's love of learning and the rural life. His diocese included Vaucluse. He became a cardinal in 1368.
15. Petrarch began his Latin epic in 1338 or 1339; it was never completed and was published only after his death in 1396. Petrarch never seemed fond of this work.
16. Through his own persistent efforts, Petrarch received these invitations to become poet laureate on his thirty-sixth birthday, September 6, 1340. Little of his work had been written or published by that time.
17. Petrarch set out for Naples on February 16, 1341. The grandson of Charles of Anjou (the brother of Saint Louis), King Robert, was also Count of Provence. Hence, Avignon belonged to him, and he resided there between 1318 and 1324.
18. The coronation held on Easter Sunday, April 8, 1341, was adapted from the medieval academic graduation ceremony.
19. He went to Vaucluse in 1342, returning to Parma the next year.
20. Petrarch accepted his canonry on April 18, 1349. Giacomo was assassinated by his nephew in December 1350 and was succeeded by his son Francesco.
21. Petrarch returned to France in June 1351. The letter breaks off at this point with no explanation.

Benedetto sia 'l giorno, e 'l mese, e l'anno,
E la stagione, e 'l tempo, e l'ora, e 'l punto
E 'l bel paese, e 'l loco ov'io fui giunto
Da' duo begli occhi, che legato m'hanno;

E benedetto il primo dolce affanno
Chi' ebbi ad esser con Amor congiunto
El'arco, e le saette ond'i' fui punto,
Ele piaghe che 'n fin al cor mi vanno.

Benedette le voci tante ch'io
Chiamando il nome de mia donna ho sparte,
Ei sospiri, e le lagrime, e 'l desio;

E benedette sian tutte le carte
Ov'io fama l'acquisto, e 'l pensier mio,
Ch'è sol di lei, sì ch'altra non v'ha parte.

Francesca Petrarca

Blessed may be the day, the month, the year,
And the season, the time, the hour, the point,
And the country, the place where I was joined
By two fair eyes that now have tied me here.

And blessed be the first sweet agony
That I felt in becoming bound to Love,
And the bow and the arrows piercing me,
And the wounds that go down so deep to move.

Blessed the many voices that I raised,
Calling my lady, to scatter her name,
And blessed be my tears, my sighs, my heart;

Blessed may be the paper where more fame
I earn for her, my thought by which she is praised
Only her own: no one else has a part.

trans. Anna Maria Armi

Petrarch, "Familiar Letters"

from Morris Bishop, Letters from Petrarch,
(1966)

A Fanatic Admirer of Cicero

BOOK XXIV / 2

To Enrico Pulice of Vicenza; 13 May, probably 1351.

Spending the night in a suburb of Vicenza as a guest, I found a new subject for a letter to you. I left Padua about noon, and it happened that I arrived at the gates of your city about sundown. I was undecided whether to stop there for the night or to go on, for I was in a hurry and the light would last for some time still. But who can conceal himself from the eyes of his lovers? You arrived with a group of eminent men, who abound in that little city. This removed all question. You captured my hesitating spirit with the snare of your cheery and varied talk. Though I intended to push on, I lingered; and when I noticed that the light was fading, night was already upon us. I remarked then, and not for the first time, that nothing robs us of time unawares like conversation with friends. They are the great thieves of time, though we should not regard time as stolen or lost that we spend on our friends—or that we devote to God.

Well, not to dwell on all the details, you remember that by chance someone mentioned Cicero, as is so often the case among scholarly men. That name put an end to our random talk. We all concentrated on him; from then on we dealt with nothing but Cicero. We took turns singing his praises, or better his panegyric. But on this earth is nothing perfect; there is no man in whom one may not justly find some fault, no man whom we may not modestly criticize. While I like nearly everything in Cicero, beloved and venerated above all men;

while I admire his golden eloquence and his celestial genius, I cannot praise his frailty of character, his inconstancy, evident in many indications. When I hinted this I saw that all present were astonished at the strangeness of my opinion, and especially a certain old man whose name escapes me but whose face I remember well. He is a fellow townsman of yours, and a venerable scholar.

The circumstances seemed to demand that I should extract my letter-book from its box. When I produced it, it provoked even more talk. For among my many letters to contemporaries there are a few addressed to illustrious ancients, inserted for variety's sake and as a pleasant little diversion. These would startle a reader not forewarned, on his finding such famous ancient names mixed with modern ones. Among them are two to Cicero himself. The first makes strictures on his character; the second praises his genius. You read these aloud to the intent listeners. A warm but friendly argument followed. Some approved my words and admitted that Cicero was properly criticized. But the old gentleman would have none of it. He was so captured by Cicero's fame and so filled with love for the author that he preferred to applaud even his errors, to accept his darling's vices with his virtues, rather than to condemn the slightest fault in his paragon. Thus he found no answer to me or to others, except to oppose to our words the splendor of Cicero's name. He kept stretching out his hand and exclaiming: "Gently, please, gently with my Cicero!" When I asked him whether one might suppose that Cicero had ever made a mistake in anything, he would shut his eyes and turn his face aside as if the words had struck him a blow; he would groan: "Alas, are they denouncing my Cicero?" It was as if we were talking not of a man but of a god. So I asked him whether he thought Cicero was a god or a man.

"A god!" he immediately replied. Then, realizing what he had said: "A god of eloquence!"

"Quite so," said I. "For if he is a god, he could not have erred. True, I have never yet heard him called a god; but if Cicero calls Plato his god, why should you not call Cicero yours? Except that our religion does not approve of our setting up our own gods."

"I was joking," said he. "I know Cicero was a man, but he was a man of divine genius."

"That's better," said I. "For Quintilian called him celestial in language. But if he was a man, he certainly could err, and in fact he did."

When I said this, he shuddered and turned away, as if I were

attacking not another's fame but his own life. And what could I say, who am such a profound admirer of Cicero? I felicitated the old gentleman on his zeal and ardor, though it smelt a little of pythagoreanism. I was very happy to find such a cult for a great genius, such reverence, that a mere suspicion of human weakness in it was regarded almost as sacrilege. And I marveled at discovering a man who loved Cicero more than I did myself, for I have always loved him above all men. The old gentleman kept the same deep-rooted opinion of him that I had held as a boy. And even at his age my friend could not entertain the thought that if Cicero was a man, he must consequently have erred in a few cases, if not in many. I think he had faults, indeed I know it, although in no one else's work do I take more pleasure. Cicero himself was well aware of his faults, and often bewailed them bitterly. Unless we admit that he was conscious of them, in our eagerness to praise we deny him self-knowledge, and also we deny him modesty, which prompts much of our praise of his philosophy.

Anyway, on that day we talked long, and when the hour grew late we rose and abandoned the argument. But you asked me, since time was too short at the moment, to send you from my first stop copies of my two letters, so that you might examine them in detail and become a peacemaker between the parties, or possibly a defender of Cicero's high purpose. I applaud your intention, and enclose the copies you ask for. I do so, rather strangely, in fear of winning my case, and in hope of defeat. I must warn you that if you do win, you will be taking on more of a task than you realize. For Annaeus Seneca demands that you be his champion in a similar conflict. My next letter criticizes him, in fact. I played a game with these great geniuses, impudently perhaps, but affectionately, distressedly, and, I think, truthfully; somewhat more truthfully than I liked, indeed. Many things in both authors delighted me; only a few things disturbed me. It was the latter things that moved me to write the letters; perhaps today I should not do so. For it was long ago that I scribbled them off (though I have put them last in my book, on account of their dissimilarity in subject from the others).

I still grieve for the fate of these great men, though I cannot overlook their faults. But it won't escape you that I do not condemn Seneca's private life or Cicero's attitude toward the state. Let us not confuse the two cases; I am now dealing with Cicero alone. I know that he was a most vigilant, worthy, effective consul and that he was always a very patriotic citizen. And yet—I certainly cannot praise his inconstancy in friendship, his bitter, pestilential, causeless quarrels,

harming only himself, his misjudgment of his own position in the state, so contrary to his usual keenness, and finally his youthful taste for wrangling, unseemly in an elderly philosopher. And you must realize that neither you nor anyone else can make a proper judgment without faithfully reading through all Cicero's letters, out of which the controversy arose.

Farewell.

A Letter to Cicero

BOOK XXIV / 3

To Marcus Tullius Cicero; from Verona, 16 June 1345.

Franciscus sends his greetings to Cicero.* I have been hunting for your letters long and persistently. I discovered them where I least expected to, and avidly I read them. I could hear your voice, Marcus Tullius, confessing much, complaining of much, speaking in various moods. I was already well aware what a master you were for others; now at last I learned what kind of a guide you were for yourself.

Now, wherever you are, it is your turn to listen, not to good counsel but to the laments inspired by the true love of an adorer, who speaks from times long after yours. He writes in tears. O perturbed, uneasy spirit! Or to quote your own words, O noble, ill-fated elder! Why did you choose to involve yourself in so many vain contentions and unprofitable quarrels? Why did you abandon the retirement proper to your age, profession, and fortune? What false dazzle of glory led you, an old man, to implicate yourself in the wars of the young? What tempted you to dealings that brought you to a death unworthy of a philosopher? Alas, you forgot your own wise advice to your brother, and the salutary counsels of your own masters. Like a traveler in a dark night, you carried a lantern, which has served to light for others the way on which you yourself stumbled and fell.

I shan't mention Dionysius, or your brother and your nephew,

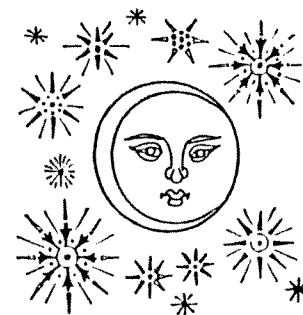
* Petrarch had discovered in the cathedral library of Verona a manuscript of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*, a work previously unknown. These letters revealed the intimate Cicero, the ambitious and unscrupulous politician, the intriguer and courtier. Also, in their occupation with the concerns of everyday life, the "familiar letters" suggested to Petrarch that his own might make a book.

and, if you are willing, even Dolabella. Now you praise them all to the skies, now you overwhelm them suddenly with abuse. Perhaps this is pardonable. I omit your treatment of Julius Caesar, whose well-tested clemency set free even those who assailed him. I say nothing of Pompey the Great, with whom, it seemed, you were on such a friendly footing that you could do with him what you liked. But what frenzy provoked you against Mark Antony? Love of the republic, I suppose you would say; but you admit that the republic had already totally collapsed. And if fidelity to the state and love of liberty impelled you, why were you so familiar with Augustus? What answer can you give to your Brutus, who said: "If indeed you are so fond of Octavius, it must be that you are not opposing a tyrant but are seeking one friendly to you." And this is my last and most serious grievance, unhappy Cicero: you reviled the very man you had previously lauded,* though he had done you no harm, but had merely failed to check your enemies. I grieve for your fate, my poor friend; I am filled with shame and distress for your errors. With that same Brutus, "I can put no trust in those arts by which, I know, you made your own character." What avails it to instruct others, what boots it to be forever talking in elegant phrases about the virtues if you do not listen to your own words? How much better it would have been for you, the philosopher, to have grown old in country peace, meditating, as you yourself write somewhere, on eternal life, not on this transitory existence! How much better if you had never held the fasces of power, never longed for triumphs, never corrupted your spirit with any Catilines!

But how vain are my words! Farewell forever, my Cicero.

Written among the living, on the right bank of the Adige, in Verona, a city of Transpadane Italy, on the 16th of June, in the 1345th year of that Lord whom you did not know.

* Apparently Brutus.



A Second Letter to Cicero

BOOK XXIV / 4

From Avignon, 19 December 1345.

From Franciscus to Cicero, greetings. I hope my previous letter did not offend you. However, you yourself admit the truth of Terence's words in his *Andria*: "Indulgence makes friends, the truth makes hatred." If you are offended, let this letter mollify you, and prove that the truth is not always hateful. If we are irritated by true criticisms, we are pleased by true praise.

If you will permit my frankness, Cicero, you lived as a man, you spoke as an orator, you wrote as a philosopher. It was your life that I censured, not your mind, not your tongue. I admire your mind, I am bewitched by your tongue. And in your life I ask only constancy, and that taste for quiet which is proper to the practice of philosophy, and withdrawal from civil strife, when once liberty was dead and buried and the republic tearfully interred.

Observe how differently I treat you than you did Epicurus, in many places and especially in your book *De finibus*. Every time you mention his life with approval, you laugh at his mind and thought. I never laugh at you. I am sorry for your life, as I have said; I acclaim your genius and your noble utterance. O great father of Roman eloquence, I thank you, as do all who bedeck themselves with the flowers of the Latin language. It is from your fount that we draw the waters that bathe our fields. We are sustained by your leadership, by your words of encouragement, by the light that illumines our simplicity. It is by your presence in spirit that we have gained whatever art and principles in writing we may possess.

We had another master for poetry, since necessarily we had to follow one supreme guide in prose and another in verse. We were moved to admire one who spoke and one who sang. Begging the pardon of both, I must admit that neither could have attained to the double mastery. The other could not have maintained himself on your high level; you could not have submitted to his metrical bonds. No doubt I should not have ventured without a precedent to say this,

however much I feel it. But that great man Annaeus Seneca of Cordova said it long before me, or perhaps he merely wrote down others' words. As you yourself lament, he was cut off not by ripeness of years but by the raging civil wars. He could have seen you face to face, but never did so. He was nevertheless a great enthusiast for your work and for the work of that other writer. But he rules that each of you should stay within his own limits and yield, in all else, to his fellow.

But I am teasing your expectation; you want to know who the other master is. You know him personally; you must remember his name: Publius Virgilius Maro, of Mantua. You prophesied great things for him. For we read that you were struck by some youthful production of his, that you inquired for the author, that you, an elder, welcomed the young man, and with your inexhaustible flood of eloquence you combined a certain amount of self-praise with a very splendid tribute to him. You called him, in fact, "the second hope of great Rome." These words of yours so delighted him, so clung in his memory, that twenty years later, after your death, he inserted the exact words in his divine poem. If you were able to read his poem, you would be very glad that you had discerned in his first flower the promise of fruit to come. And you would have congratulated the Latin Muses, in that they now contested the victory with the overweening Greek Muses, and perhaps even bore off the palm. Authors are divided on this subject. If I comprehend aright your mind in your books—and I feel that I know it as well as if I had lived with you—you will choose the second alternative; in poetry as in oratory you will call Rome supreme. I do not doubt that you will command the *Iliad* to yield to the *Aeneid*. Propertius did not shrink from making this claim when Virgil was just beginning his work. In the passage where he studies the fundamentals of poetry, he openly utters his opinion and his hopes in these lines:

Yield, O ye Roman writers, yield, ye Greeks!
A greater work than th' *Iliad* is born!

So much for the other master of Latin literature, the other hope of great Rome. Now I return to you. You have heard what I think of your life and genius. Are you interested in hearing about your books, how fate has treated them, how they are regarded by the general public and by scholars? Some brilliant volumes are still in existence. We are barely able to list them, much less absorb them utterly. The reputation of your works is immense; your name is on everyone's lips; but your serious students are few, whether because the times are

unpropitious or because men's wits are dull and sluggish, or, as I think more likely, because greed diverts our minds to other ends. Thus some of your books have perished, I suspect, within the time of men now living; and I do not know if they will ever be recovered. This is a great grief to me, a great shame of our times, a great injury to posterity. As if it were not infamous enough to neglect the cultivation of our own minds, so that the following age will draw no profit from us, we must despoil the fruits of your labors and those of others also, through our cruel, intolerable negligence. For what I deplore in your case is matched in others, with the disappearance of many books by illustrious writers.

But since I am now dealing only with your own case, the most conspicuous one, here are the names of your lost books: the *Republic*, *On Familiar Matters*, *On the Military Art*, *In Praise of Philosophy*, *On Consolation*, *On Glory*. (But about this last item my feeling is rather one of faint hope than of complete despair.) And we have lost a good part out of the surviving books. It is as if we had fought a great battle with oblivion and sloth and had now to mourn some generals killed and some crippled and strayed. This has been the fate of many of your works, but especially of *The Orator*, the *Academics*, and the *Laws*. These have escaped so mutilated and deformed that they might almost better have perished entirely.

In conclusion, you will wish to learn of the condition of Rome, the city and state. You will want to know what the homeland looks like, what concord prevails among the citizens, what men have gained control, and with what wisdom they rule the empire, whether our boundaries are now the Danube, the Ganges, the Ebro, the Nile, the Don, whether the man has arisen who, in the Mantuan's words, "will limit our empire by the ocean, our fame by the stars," and who "will extend our rule beyond Garama and the Indies." I suspect that you are very eager to have answers to these and suchlike questions. Your filial piety, the patriotism that undid you, prompts your inquiries.

But no, it is far better that I should breathe no word. Believe me, Cicero, if you should learn the state of the world today, your tears would rain down, wherever in heaven or in Erebus you may be lodged. And so, Cicero, farewell forever.

From the land of the living, on the left bank of the Rhone, in Transalpine Gaul, in the same year [as the previous letter], on the 19th of December.

The Ordering of the Familiar Letters

BOOK XXIV / 13

To Socrates; June 1361.

I began my letter-book with your name, and I finish with it. You have what you wished, my dear Socrates—a book of my trivia, compounded of all sorts of things in all sorts of styles. No wonder it will grate on delicate ears. On the other hand, as the spirit of man is capricious and variable and as everyone has his individual taste, perhaps the very variety will please some who may not like the general character. Others will forgive me if they remember that the book was not my own idea; it answers the pleas of my friends and proceeds from my desire to oblige them. Nor have I been deterred by fear of criticism, or by my other occupations or by the irreparable expenditure of my time, so little and uncertain.

If anything offends you in the book, you must ask not my pardon but your own. You must say: "It was I who wished it; taking more account of me than of himself, he could not refuse." The best friend is he who disregards his own fame in deference to his friend. Many men, including the worthiest, hold their fame more dear than life or property; if they scorn it for a friend's sake, obviously they would scorn lesser things if the necessity should arise.

I began this book as a young man; I finish it when already old. Or rather I pause in mid-course, for this is one of those books to which death alone gives the final touch. How can I expect my conversations with friends to be ended by anything but the ending of life? What can silence me while I breathe, when I plan to speak to them still with my chill lips from the grave?

In the ordering of these letters I took account not of the subjects but of the times of writing. Except for the last few, written to illustrious men of old, which I brought together in one place because of their unity of character, and except for the first letter, which, though written later, preceded the others in place of a preface, almost all the letters appear in the order in which they were written. Thus the reader, if he is at all curious about it, may follow my own progress and

understand the course of my life. I had originally intended not to repeat the same phrases two or three times; I admit I have not fully succeeded therein. I tried to, but a multitude of things interfered—the variety of the letters and the compelling distractions of a mind busily intent on other matters. But now, since many other subjects are buzzing in my head and summoning my pen to other tasks, since no one knows how much of life remains for me, since this book has grown big enough and can hold no more, unless it is to expand beyond the proper size for books of this sort, I have decided to put in a final volume any letters excluded and out of order here, and any others I may write. That final volume will take its name from my age, which is "senile." That is, if you, comrades, still think you should not be deprived of any works of mine, and if I continue to prize your wishes above my own.

But in begging for my letters you should have guarded against one thing. While you applaud all my works without distinction, while you don't want to let anything disappear, while you publish with loud applause things that in my private judgment are not worth it, I am likely to fall into the hands of those critics who are revolted by other men's works, who acclaim, applaud, and admire only their own writings, and who are happy in the approbation of their own little coterie. My friends, you are exposing me unarmed and defenseless to their criticisms. I cannot complain of your affection for me; certainly no one on earth is dearer to you than I am. But as in other things, there is a proper measure of love. If it is exceeded, you may harm the one to whom you wish to bring advantage. You are too indulgent toward me, too favorable; you grant me too much, you push me too hard, you oppress me with your excess of love.

Now to thee, worthy reader, whoever thou art, I beg and pray, by our common zeal for learning, by thy care for thine own fame, be not afflicted by the variety of my subjects or by my humble style, and bear in mind what I have said thereupon at the beginning of this work.

Farewell.

96

Ite, caldi sospiri, al freddo core;
 Pompete el ghiaccio che pietā contende,
 E e prego mortale al ciel s'intende,
 Morte, o mercé sia fine al mio dolore.

Ite, dolci penser, parlando fòre
 ·Diquello ove 'l bel guardo non se stende:
 Sepur sua asprezza, o mia stella n'offende,
 Sarem fuor di speranza e fuor d'errore,

Dir se pò ben per voi, non forse a pieno,
 Che'l nostro stato ẽ inquieto e fosco,
 Sicome 'l suo pacifico e sereno.

Gite securi omai, ch'Amor vèn vosco;
 Eria fortuna po ben venir meno,
 S'a i segni del mio sol l'aere conosco.

Francesca Petrarca

Go, burning sighs, into that frozen heart;
 Shatter the ice that now with pity vies,
 And if a mortal prayer can reach the skies,
 Let death or mercy end at last this smart.

Go, loving thoughts, and speak aloud and show
 What hides where her fair glance is not exte
 If her contempt or my star is offended
 We shall be out of hope and out of woe.

You certainly can say, though not quite well
 That our condition is as dark as hell,
 While her own is serene, peaceful and fair.

Go, you are safe, because Love comes with us
 And wicked fortune may decline and pass,
 If the signs of my sun predict the air.

trans. Anna Maria Armi

lected from the literature of all countries evidence of the origin and progress of the sense of natural beauty, and himself, in his 'Aspects of Nature,' achieved the noblest masterpiece of description—Alexander von Humboldt has not done full justice to Petrarch; and following in the steps of the great reaper, we may still hope to glean a few ears of interest and value.

Petrarch was not only a distinguished geographer—the first map of Italy is said to have been drawn by his direction—and not only a reproducer of the sayings of the ancients, but felt himself the influence of natural beauty. The enjoyment of nature is, for him, the favourite accompaniment of intellectual pursuits; it was to combine the two that he lived in learned retirement at Vacluse and elsewhere, that he from time to time fled from the world and from his age. We should do him wrong by inferring from his weak and undeveloped power of describing natural scenery that he did not feel it deeply. His picture, for instance, of the lovely Gulf of Spezia and Porto Venere, which he inserts at the end of the sixth book of the 'Africa,' for the reason that none of the ancients or moderns had sung of it, is no more than a simple enumeration, but Petrarch is also conscious of the beauty of rock scenery, and is perfectly able to distinguish the picturesqueness from the utility of nature. During his stay among the woods of Reggio, the sudden sight of an impressive landscape so affected him that he resumed a poem which he had long laid aside. But the deepest impression of all was made upon him by the ascent of Mont Ventoux, near Avignon. An indefinable longing for a distant panorama grew stronger and stronger in him, till at length the accidental sight of a passage in Livy, where King Philip, the enemy of Rome, ascends the Hæmus, decided him. He thought that what was not blamed in a greyheaded monarch, might well be *excused* in a young man of private station. The ascent of a mountain for its own sake was unheard of, and there could be no thought of the companionship of friends or acquaintances. Petrarch took with him only his younger brother and two country people from the last place where he halted. At

the foot of the mountain an old herdsman besought him to turn back, saying that he himself had attempted to climb it fifty years before, and had brought home nothing but repentance, broken bones, and torn clothes, and that neither before nor after had anyone ventured to do the same. Nevertheless, they struggled forward and upward, till the clouds lay beneath their feet, and at last they reached the top. A description of the view from the summit would be looked for in vain, not because the poet was insensible to it, but, on the contrary, because the impression was too overwhelming. His whole past life, with all its follies, rose before his mind; he remembered that ten years ago that day he had quitted Bologna a young man, and turned a longing gaze towards his native country; he opened a book which then was his constant companion, the 'Confessions' of St. Augustine, and his eye fell on the passage in the tenth chapter, 'and men go forth, and admire lofty mountains and broad seas, and roaring torrents, and the ocean, and the course of the stars, and forget their own selves while doing so.' His brother, to whom he read these words, could not understand why he closed the book and said no more.

Some decades later, about 1360, Fazio degli Uberti describes, in his rhyming geography, the wide panorama from the mountains of Auvergne, with the interest, it is true, of the geographer and antiquarian only, but still showing clearly that he himself had seen it. He must, however, have ascended far higher peaks, since he is familiar with facts which only occur at a height of 10,000 feet or more above the sea—mountain-sickness and its accompaniments—of which his imaginary comrade Solinus tries to cure him with a sponge dipped in an essence. The ascents of Parnassus and Olympus, of which he speaks, are perhaps only fictions.

In the fifteenth century, the great masters of the Flemish school, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, suddenly lifted the veil from nature. Their landscapes are not merely the fruit of an endeavour to reflect the real world in art, but have, even if expressed conventionally, a certain poetical meaning—in short,

67

57

47

THE ASCENT OF MOUNT VENTOUX

To Dionisio da Borgo San Sepolcro¹

64 58

Today I climbed the highest mountain in this region, which is not improperly called Ventosum (Windy).² The only motive for my ascent was the wish to see what so great a height had to offer. I had had the project in mind for many years; for, as you know, I have lived in these parts from childhood on, having been cast there by the fate which determines human affairs. And so the mountain, which is visible from a great distance, was always before my eyes, and for a long time I planned on doing what I have finally done today. The impulse to make the climb actually took hold of me while I was reading Livy's *History of Rome* yesterday, and I happened upon the place where Philip of Macedon, the one who waged the war against the Romans, climbed Mount Haemus in Thessaly.³ From its summit, it was reported that he was able to see two seas, the Adriatic and the Euxine. Whether this is true or false I do not know, for the mountain is too far away, and there is disagreement among the commentators. Pomponius Mela, the cosmographer—not to mention the many others who have talked about this occurrence—accepts the truth of this statement without hesitation, while Livy, on the other hand, thinks it false. I, certainly, would not have left the question long in doubt if that mountain had been as easy to explore as this one. But let us drop the matter and return to my mountain here: I thought it proper for a young man in private life to attempt what no one would criticize in an aged king.

When I thought about looking for a companion for the ascent I realized, strangely enough, that hardly any of my friends were suitable—so rarely does one find, even among those most dear to one, the perfect combination of character and purpose. One was too phlegmatic, another too anxious; one too slow, another too hasty; one too sad, another too happy; one too simple, another more sagacious than I would like. I was frightened by the fact that one never spoke while another talked too much; the heavy deliberation of some repelled me as much as the lean incapacity of others. I rejected some for their cold lack of interest and

[14]

"THE ASCENT OF MOUNT VENTOUX"

others for their excessive enthusiasm. Such defects as these, however grave, are tolerable enough at home (for charity suffers all things, and friendship rejects no burden), but it is another matter on a journey, where such weaknesses become more serious. So, with only my own pleasure in mind, with great care I looked about weighing the various characteristics of my friends against one another without committing any breach of friendship and silently condemning any trait which might prove to be disagreeable on my journey. And would you believe it? I finally turned to my own family for help and proposed the ascent to my younger brother, the only one I have, and whom you know well.⁴ He was delighted beyond measure and gratified by the thought of acting at the same time as a friend as well as a brother.

On the appointed day we left the house and by evening reached Malaucène, which lies at the foot of the mountain on the north side. We rested there a day and finally this morning made the ascent with no one except two servants. And it is a most difficult task indeed, for the mountain is a very steep and almost inaccessible mass of rocky terrain. But, as a poet once put it well: "Persistent labor conquers all."⁵ The day was long and the air invigorating, our spirits were high and our agile bodies strong, and everything else necessary for such an undertaking helped us on our way. The only difficulty we had to face was the nature of the place itself. We found an old shepherd among the mountain's ridges who tried at great length to discourage us from the ascent, saying that some fifty years before he had, in the same ardor of youth, climbed to the summit and had got nothing from it except fatigue and repentance and torn clothes and scratches from the rocks and briars. Never, according to what he or his friends knew, had anyone ever tried the ascent before or after him. But his counsels merely increased our eagerness to go on, as a young man's mind is usually suspicious of warnings. So the old man, finding his efforts were useless, went along with us a little way and pointed out a steep path among the rocks, continuing to cry out admonitions even after we had left him behind. Having left him with those garments and anything else we thought might prove burdensome to us, we made ready for the ascent and started to climb at a good pace. But, as often happens, fatigue soon followed upon our strenuous effort, and before long we had to rest on some rock. Then we started on again, but more slowly, I especially taking the rocky path at a more modest pace. My brother chose the steepest course straight up the ridge, while I weakly took an easier one which turned along the slopes. And when he called me back showing me the shorter way, I replied that I hoped to find an easier way up on the other side, and that I did not mind taking a

[15]

longer course if it was not so steep. But this was merely an excuse for my laziness; and when the others had already reached a considerable height I was still wandering in the hollows, and having failed to find an easier means of ascent, I had only lengthened the journey and increased the difficulty of the ascent. Finally I became disgusted with the tedious way I had chosen, and decided to climb straight up. By the time I reached my brother, who had managed to have a good rest while waiting for me, I was tired and irritated. We walked along together for a while, but hardly had we left that rise when I forgot all about the circuitous route I had just taken and again tended to take a lower one. Thus, once again I found myself taking the easy way, the roundabout path of winding hollows, only to find myself soon back in my old difficulty. I was simply putting off the trouble of climbing; but no man's wit can alter the nature of things, and there is no way to reach the heights by going downward. In short, I tell you that I made this same mistake three or more times within a few hours, much to my brother's amusement and my anger.⁶

After being misled in this way a number of times, I finally sat down in a hollow and my thoughts quickly turned from material things to the spiritual, and I said to myself more or less what follows: "What you have experienced so often today in the ascent of this mountain, certainly happens to you as it does to many others in their journey toward the blessed life. But this is not so easily perceived by men, for the movements of the body are out in the open while those of the soul are invisible and hidden. The life we call blessed is to be sought on a high level, and straight is the way that leads to it.⁷ Many, also, are the hills that stand in the way that leads to it, and we must ascend from virtue to virtue up glorious steps. At the summit is both the end of our struggles and the goal of our journey's climb. Everyone wishes to reach this goal, but, as Ovid says: 'To wish is not enough; you must yearn with ardent eagerness to gain your end.'⁸ And you certainly both wish and ardently yearn, unless you are deceiving yourself in this matter, as you so often do. What, then, is holding you back? Nothing, surely, except that you take a path which seems at first sight easier leading through low and worldly pleasures. Nevertheless in the end, after long wanderings, you will either have to climb up the steeper path under the burden of labors long deferred to its blessed culmination, or lie down in the valley of your sins; and—I shudder to think of it!—if the shadow of death finds you there, you still spend an eternal night in constant torment." These thoughts stimulated my body and mind to a remarkable degree and made me face up to the difficulties which still remained. Oh, that my soul might follow that other road for which I long day and night, even as

today I conquered material obstacles by bodily force! And why should it not be far easier: after all, the agile, immortal soul can reach its goal in the twinkling of an eye without intermediate space, while progress today had to be slow because my feeble body was burdened by its heavy members.

One mountain peak, the highest of all, the country people call Filiolus ("Sonny"); why, I do not know, unless by antiphrasis, as is sometimes the case, for the peak in question seems to be the father of all the surrounding ones. At its top is a little level place, and it was there that we could, at last, rest our weary bodies.

My good father, since you have listened to the troubles mounting in the heart of a man who ascends, listen now to the rest of the story, and devote one hour, I pray you, to reviewing the events of my day. At first, because I was not accustomed to the quality of the air and the effect of the wide expanse of view spread out before me, I stood there like a dazed person. I could see the clouds under our feet, and the tales I had read of Athos and Olympus seemed less incredible as I myself was witnessing the very same things from a less famous mountain. I turned my eyes toward Italy, the place to which my heart was most inclined. The great and snowcapped Alps seemed to rise close by, though they were far away—those same Alps through which that fierce enemy of the Roman name once made his way, splitting the rocks, if we can believe the story, by means of vinegar. I sighed, I must admit, for Italian skies which I beheld more with my thought than with my eyes, and an inexpressible longing came over me to see once more my friend and my country,⁹ though at the same time I reproached myself for this double weakness which came from a soul not yet up to manly resistance—and yet there were excuses for both my desires, and several excellent authorities could be cited to support me.

Then a new idea came to me, and I started thinking in terms of time rather than space. I thought: "Today marks ten years since you completed your youthful studies and left Bologna. Oh, eternal God! Oh, immutable wisdom! Think of all the changes in your character these intervening years have seen! I suppress a great deal, for I have not yet reached a safe harbor where I can calmly recall past storms. The time, perhaps, will come when I can review all the experiences of the past in their order saying with the words of your St. Augustine: 'I wish to recall my foul past and the carnal corruption of my soul, not that I love them, but that I may the more love you, O my God.'¹⁰ Much that is dubious and evil still clings to me, but what I once loved, I love no longer. Come now, what am I saying? I still love it, but more moderately. No, not so, but with more shame, with more heaviness of heart. Now, at last, I have

FRANCESCO PETRARCA

told the truth. The fact is I love, but I love what I long not to love, what I would like to hate. Though I hate to do so, though constrained, though sad and sorrowing, I love none the less, and I feel in my miserable self the meaning of the well-known words: 'I will hate if I can; if not, I will love against my will!'¹¹ Not three years have passed since that perverse and wicked desire which had me in tight hold and held undisputed sway in my heart began to discover a rebellious opponent who was no longer willing to yield in obedience. These two adversaries have joined in close combat for supremacy, and for a long time now a grueling war, the outcome of which is still doubtful, has been waging in the field of my mind."

Thus my thoughts turned back over the last ten years, and then with concentrated thought on the future, I asked myself: "If you should, by chance, prolong this uncertain life of yours for another ten years, advancing toward virtue in proportion to the distance from which you departed from your original infatuation during the past two years since the new longing first encountered the old, could you not face death on reaching forty years of age, if not with complete assurance at least with hopefulness, calmly dismissing from your thoughts the residuum of life that fades into old age?"

Such thoughts as these, father, occurred to me. I rejoiced in my progress, mourned for my weaknesses, and took pity on the universal inconstancy of human conduct. I had by this time forgotten where I was and why we had come; then, dismissing my anxieties to a more appropriate occasion, I decided to look about me and see what we had come to see. The sun was sinking and the shadows of the mountain were already lengthening below, warning us that the time for us to go was near at hand. As if suddenly roused from sleep, I turned to gaze at the west. I could not see the tops of the Pyrenees, which form the barrier between France and Spain, not because of any intervening obstacle that I know of but simply because of the inadequacy of mortal vision. But off to the right I could see most clearly the mountains of the region around Lyons and to the left the bay of Marseilles and the sea that beats against the shores of Aigues-Mortes, though all these places were at a distance requiring a journey of several days to reach them. The Rhône was flowing under our very eyes.

While my thoughts were divided thus, now turning my attention to thoughts of some worldly object before me, now uplifting my soul, as I had done my body, to higher planes, it occurred to me to look at Augustine's *Confessions*, a gift of your love that I always keep with me in memory of the author and the giver. I opened the little volume, small in

[18]

"THE ASCENT OF MOUNT VENTOUX"

size but infinitely sweet, with the intention of reading whatever came to hand, for what else could I happen upon if not edifying and devout words. Now I happened by chance to open it to the tenth book. My brother stood attentively waiting to hear what St. Augustine would say from my lips. As God is my witness and my brother too, the first words my eyes fell upon were: "And men go about admiring the high mountains and the mighty waves of the sea and the wide sweep of rivers and the sound of the ocean and the movement of the stars, but they themselves they abandon."¹² I was ashamed, and asking my brother, who was anxious to hear more, not to bother me, I closed the book, angry with myself for continuing to admire the things of this world when I should have learned a long time ago from the pagan philosophers themselves that nothing is admirable but the soul beside whose greatness nothing can be as great. Then, having seen enough of the mountain I turned an inward eye upon myself, and from that moment on not a syllable passed my lips until we reached the bottom. The words I had read had given me enough food for thought and I could not believe that I happened to turn to them by mere chance. I believed that what I had read there was written for me and no one else, and I remembered that St. Augustine had once thought the same thing in his own case, as he himself tells us when opening the book of the Apostle, the first words he saw were: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences."¹³ The same thing happened earlier to St. Anthony, as he listened to the Gospel where it is written, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come follow me."¹⁴ He believed this scripture to have been spoken specifically for him, and by means of it he guided himself to the Kingdom of Heaven, as the biographer Athanasius tells us.¹⁵ And as Anthony on hearing these words asked for nothing more, and as Augustine after reading the Apostle's admonition sought no farther, so did I conclude my reading after the few words which I have recorded. I thought in silence of the vanity in us mortals who neglect what is noblest in ourselves in a vain show only because we look around ourselves for what can be found only within us. I wondered at the natural nobility of that human soul which unless degenerate has deserted its original state and turned to dishonor what God has given it for its honor. How many times I turned back that day to look at the mountain top which seemed scarcely more than a cubit high compared with the height of human contemplation, unless it is immersed in the foulness of earth? As I descended I asked

[19]

myself: "If we were willing to endure so much sweat and labor in order to raise our bodies a little closer to heaven, how can a soul struggling toward God, up the steps of human pride and mortal destiny, fear any cross or prison or sting of fortune?" How few, I thought, are they who are not diverted from this path for fear of hardship or the love of ease! And how happy those few, if any such there be! It is they, I feel, the poet had in mind when he wrote:

Blessed the man who is skilled to understand
The hidden cause of things; who beneath his feet
All fear casts, and death's relentless doom,
And the howlings of greedy Acheron.¹⁶

How earnestly should we strive to trample beneath our feet not mountain tops but the appetites which spring from earthly impulses!

In the middle of the night, unaware of the difficulties of the way back and amid the preoccupations which I have so frankly revealed, we came by the friendly light of a full moon to the little inn which we had left that morning before daybreak. Then, while the servants were busy preparing our supper, I spent my time in a secluded part of the house, hurriedly and extemporaneously writing all this down, fearing that if I were to put off the task, my mood would change on leaving the place, and I would lose interest in writing to you.

You see, dearest father, that I wish to conceal nothing of myself from you. I describe to you not only the course of my life but even my individual thoughts. And I ask for your prayers that these vague and wandering thoughts of mine may some day become coherent and, having been so vainly cast in all directions, that they may direct themselves at last to the one, true, certain, and never-ending good.

MALAUÈNE
26 April

1. One of the *Epistolae Familiares* (*Letters on Familiar Matters* IV.1), this letter may have been written in 1336 or as late as the 1350s. It is addressed to an Augustinian monk, once Petrarch's confessor, who was a professor of philosophy and theory at the University of Paris. Petrarch probably met him in Paris in 1333. He had given Petrarch the copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions* mentioned later in this letter which Petrarch always carried with him.
2. Mount Ventoux is in southern France near Malaucène, from which Petrarch and his brother began their climb with two servants. Before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mountain-climbing was a rather uncommon pastime. People tended to protect themselves from nature.
3. Petrarch implicitly compares himself to Philip of Macedon, who according to Livy made a climb of Mount Haemus (Mount Balkan in Bulgaria), which is in Thrace, not Thessaly.
4. Petrarch's brother Gherardo joined him in law school in Bologna and chose the monastic life in 1342. Petrarch was always troubled by his inability to devote his own life exclusively to God.
5. Virgil, *Georgics* I. 145-46. This often-cited line comes from Virgil's poem on farming, which explores the beauties of nature and the dignity of man who understands the natural world through hard work.
6. Dante's *Divine Comedy* begins with the protagonist's efforts to climb a hill covered by a dark wood.
7. Petrarch alludes to Matthew 7 and 14.
8. *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Letters from the Black Sea* III.1.35).
9. Giacomo Colonna, the friend, had been in Rome since 1333.
10. *Confessions* II.1.1. Augustine was an important influence on Petrarch's writings.
11. The quotation is from Ovid (*Amores* III.xi.35). The problem of the divided will is in St. Paul (Romans 7:14-25) and St. Augustine (*Confessions* VIII.5.10).
12. *Confessions* X.8.15. On the date Petrarch claims to have made the climb, he was thirty-two years old, the same age as Augustine at his conversion.
13. St. Paul (Romans 13:13-14) is quoted in *Confessions* VIII.12.29.
14. Matthew 19:21.
15. Augustine cites the *Life of St. Anthony* II in the *Confessions* (VIII.12.29).
16. Virgil, *Georgics* II. 1490-93.