

Petrarca and the Art of Poetry

LEONARDO BRUNI

1436

THE Latin language, in all its perfection and greatness, flourished most vigorously in the time of Cicero, for its first state was not polished or refined or subtle, but, mounting little by little to perfection, it reached its highest summit in the time of Cicero. After his age it began to sink and to descend, as until that time it had risen, and many years had not passed before it experienced a great decline and diminution; and it can be said that letters and the studies of the Latin language went hand in hand with the condition of the Roman Republic, which had also grown in power until the age of Cicero.

After the liberty of the Roman people had been lost through the rule of the emperors, who did not desist from killing and eliminating the men of excellence, the flourishing condition of studies and of letters perished, together with the welfare of the city of Rome. Augustus, who was the least evil of the emperors, had thousands of Roman citizens slain; Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero did not leave anyone alive who had the face of a man. There followed, then, Calba, Otho, and Vitellius, who killed off each other within a few months. After them there were no more emperors of Roman blood, since the country had been so ruined by the preceding emperors that no one of any excellence remained. . . . Why am I relating all this? Simply to

Think what it is to remember the notable triumphs of the generals, to see the statues and the monuments bearing witness to illustrious deeds, to reflect upon the famous works of the philosophers, and the myrtle and laurel wreaths of the poets, surpassing those of Greece herself, to recall to memory the military discipline in which Rome excelled other nations, and the authority of the laws by which the whole world was governed, and the striking example of morals.

All these achievements, not to mention others, and to say nothing of the rest of Italy, our ancestors, to their very great dishonour, neglected with godlike irresponsibility and allowed them to be defiled, to be snatched away or shamefully destroyed by foreign peoples. And if all the glories of Rome may not be restored, at least, in the splendour of your poetic fame take pity on these immense misfortunes, and ease them as much as you can by taking them upon your dutiful shoulders . . . so that among the barbarian nations Rome can display at least something of her ancient majesty. . . . And mingling with the choruses of the rejoicings, I shall add my voice to those who are extolling your name with well-deserved praise: "Now Justice, the Maid, returns, the reign of Saturn is now restored."

From *Lettere edite ed inedite di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Corazzini (Florence, 1877); trans. M.M.M.

*The Portable Renaissance Reader, ed.
Sewes Bruce & Waverly M. McLaughlin
(Niking, 1977)*

demonstrate that as the city of Rome was destroyed by the emperors, who were perverse tyrants, so studies and Latin letters experienced a like ruin and decay, to such an extent that finally almost no one could be found who understood Latin literature with any refinement. Then Italy was invaded successively by the Goths and the Lombards, barbarian and foreign peoples, who almost completely extinguished all knowledge of letters, as appears in the documents drawn up in that time, than which nothing could be found more coarse and crude. From the time when the liberty of the Italian peoples was recovered, by the defeat of the Lombards who had occupied Italy for two hundred and four years, the cities of Tuscany and elsewhere began to revive, and to take up studies, and somewhat to refine the coarse style. So little by little these came to recover vigour, but very feebly, and without any true sense of refinement, paying more attention to writing in vernacular rhymes than to other forms. And so until the time of Dante few knew the cultivated style, and those few understood it rather badly, as we have said in the life of Dante.

Francesco Petrarca was the first who had such grace of talent, and who recognized and restored to light the ancient elegance of style which was lost and dead, and although in him it was not perfect, nevertheless by himself he saw and opened the way to this perfection, by recovering the works of Cicero, by enjoying them, by understanding them, and by adapting himself as much as he could, and he learned the way to that most elegant and perfect fluency. Certainly he did enough merely by showing the way to those who came after him. Thus, devoted to these studies and manifesting his talent even as a youth, Petrarca was much honoured and renowned, and was asked by the pope to act as

secretary of his court, but he never consented or sought his own gain; nevertheless, in order to live in ease and in an honourable fashion, he accepted benefices and became a secular cleric. This he did not so much of his own will as constrained by necessity, since little or nothing remained of the inheritance from his father, and in marrying off one of his sisters he spent almost all of the paternal inheritance. His brother, Gerardo, became a Carthusian monk, and died persevering in the religious life.

The honours of Petrarca were such that no man of his age was more highly esteemed than he, not only beyond the Alps but in Italy herself. For, coming to Rome, he was solemnly crowned poet laureate. He wrote in one of his letters that in 1350 he came to Rome for the Jubilee, and in returning from Rome made his way to Arezzo to see the place where he was born, and when they learned of his coming all the citizens came out to meet him, as if a king had come to them. In conclusion, so great was his fame and the honour accorded him by all cities and states and by all the people throughout Italy, that it seemed an incredible and wonderful thing. Not only was he sought after and revered by the populace and the middle class, but he was provided with lavish pensions by the highest and greatest princes and lords. He spent some time with Messer Giangaleazzo Visconti, who begged him most graciously to deign to remain with him; and he was greatly honoured likewise by the lords of Padua. So great was his reputation and the reverence in which he was held by these lords that oftentimes they argued at length with him to persuade him to take precedence in entering or leaving a place, and to take the place of honour. So honoured and rewarded in this life, Petrarca lived until the very end of his days.

He had in his studies a singular gift, that he was highly skilled in both prose and poetry, and in both forms he wrote a great many works. His prose was graceful and flowery, his poetry was refined and full and very lofty. And this grace in both forms of writing has existed in few or in none except him, because it seems that nature inclines either toward the one or the other and man is wont to dedicate himself to that one in which he excels by nature. Hence it happened that Vergil, who was most excellent in poetry, accomplished nothing in prose, or wrote nothing; and Cicero, who was the greatest master of style in prose, achieved nothing in poetry. We see the same thing in other poets and orators, that they won high praise in one of these forms of writing, but none of them, that I remember having read about, in both. Petrarca alone excelled by his singular gift in both forms of writing, and he composed many works in prose and poetry, which there is no need to enumerate since they are well known.

Petrarca died at Arquà, a castle of Padua, to which he had retired in his old age for peace and a leisurely life, removed from all disturbance. As long as he lived he maintained the very closest friendship with Giovanni Boccaccio, who was famous in that age in the same studies. So that when Petrarca died, the Florentine Muses, as if by hereditary succession, passed to Boccaccio, and in him dwelt the fame of the aforesaid studies. And this succession was also temporal, for when Dante died, Petrarca was seventeen years old, and when Petrarca died, Boccaccio was nine years younger than he, and thus by succession went the Muses.

From "Vita di Messer Francesco Petrarca," in P. Villani, *Liber de civitate Florentinae famosiss civibus*, ed. G. C. Gallichi (Florence, 1847); trans. M.M.M.

The Glory of the Latin Language

LORENZO VALLA

c. 1430-1440

AS OUR ANCESTORS, winning high praises, surpassed other men in military affairs, so by the extension of their language they indeed surpassed themselves, as if, abandoning their dominion on earth, they had attained to the fellowship of the gods in Paradise. If Ceres, Liber, and Minerva, who are considered the discoverers of grain, wine, oil, and many others have been placed among the gods for some benefaction of this kind, is it less beneficial to have spread among the nations the Latin language, the noblest and the truly divine fruit, food not of the body but of the soul? For this language introduced those nations and all peoples to all the arts which are called liberal; it taught the best laws, prepared the way for all wisdom; and finally, made it possible for them no longer to be called barbarians.

Why would anyone who is a fair judge of things not prefer those who were distinguished for their cultivation of the sacred mysteries of literature to those who were celebrated for waging terrible wars? For you may most justly call those men royal, indeed divine, who not only founded the republic and the majesty of the Roman people, insofar as this might be done by men, but, as if they were gods, established also the welfare of the whole world. Their achievement was the more amazing because those who submitted to our rule knew

that they had given up their own government, and, what is more bitter, had been deprived of liberty, though not perhaps by violence. They recognized, however, that the Latin language had both strengthened and adorned their own, as the later discovery of wine did not drive out the use of water, or silk expel wool and linen, or gold the other metals, but added to these other blessings. And just as the beauty of a jewel set in a golden ring is not diminished but enhanced, so our language, in uniting with the vernacular speech of others, conferred splendour: it did not destroy it. For not by arms or bloodshed or wars was its domination achieved, but by benefits, love, and concord. Of this achievement (so far as I can conjecture) the sources have been, as I have said, first, that our ancestors perfected themselves to an incredible degree in all kinds of studies, so that no one seems to have been pre-eminent in military affairs unless he was distinguished also in letters, which was a not inconsiderable stimulus to the emulation of others; then, that they wisely offered honourable rewards to the teachers of literature; finally, that they encouraged all provincials to become accustomed to speak, both in Rome and at home, in the Roman fashion.

But since this is sufficient, I shall say no more about the comparison between the Roman Empire and its language. The Roman dominion, the peoples and nations long ago threw off as an unwelcome burden; the language of Rome they have thought sweeter than any nectar, more splendid than any silk, more precious than any gold or gems, and they have embraced it as if it were a god sent from Paradise. Great, therefore, is the sacramental power of the Latin language, truly great is its divinity, which has been preserved these many centuries with religious and holy awe, by stran-

gers, by barbarians, by enemies, so that we Romans should not grieve but rejoice, and the whole listening earth should glory. We have lost Rome, we have lost authority, we have lost dominion, not by our own fault but by that of the times, yet we reign still, by this more splendid sovereignty, in a great part of the world. Ours is Italy, ours Gaul, ours Spain, Germany, Parthia, Dalmatia, Illyricum, and many other lands. For wherever the Roman tongue holds sway, there is the Roman Empire.

But now the Greeks are going around, boasting about the abundance of their languages. Impoverished as they say it is, our one language is more effective than five of their dialects, which, according to them, are so much richer than ours. The Latin language is a single tongue, like one law, for many peoples; in one Greece there is not a single language (which is a scandalous thing), but many dialects, like factions in a state. Moreover, foreigners agree with us in speaking as we do; the Greeks cannot agree among themselves, much less hope to induce others to speak their language. Among the Greeks, various authors write in Attic, Aeolic, Ionic, Doric, Koine; with us, that is among many nations, no one writes except in Latin, in the language that embraces all disciplines worthy of a free man, just as among the Greeks they are diffused in many dialects. Who does not know that when the Latin language flourishes, all studies and disciplines thrive, as they are ruined when it perishes? For who have been the most profound philosophers, the best orators, the most distinguished jurists, and finally the greatest writers, but those indeed who have been most zealous in speaking well?

But when I wish to say more, sorrow hinders and torments me, and forces me to weep as I contemplate

the state which eloquence had once attained and the condition into which it has now fallen. For what lover of letters and the public good can restrain his tears when he sees eloquence now in that state in which it was long ago when Rome was captured by the Gauls; everything was overturned, burned, destroyed, so that the Capitoline citadel hardly survived. Indeed, for many centuries not only has no one spoken in the Latin manner, but no one who has read Latin has understood it. Students of philosophy have not possessed, nor do they possess, the works of the ancient philosophers; nor do rhetoricians have the orators; nor lawyers the jurists; nor teachers the known works of the ancients, as if after the Roman Empire had fallen, it would not be fitting to speak or understand in the Roman fashion, and the glory of Latinity was allowed to decay in rust and mould. And many, indeed, and varied are the opinions of wise men on how this happened. I neither accept nor reject any of these, daring only to declare soberly that those arts which are most closely related to the liberal arts, the arts of painting, sculpture, modeling, and architecture, had degenerated for so long and so greatly and had almost died with letters themselves, and that in this age they have been aroused and come to life again, so greatly increased is the number of good artists and men of letters who now flourish.

But truly, as wretched as were those former times in which no learned man was found, so much the more this our age should be congratulated, in which (if we exert ourselves a little more) I am confident that the language of Rome will shortly grow stronger than the city itself, and with it all disciplines will be restored. Therefore, because of my devotion to my native Rome and because of the importance of the matter, I shall arouse and call forth all men who are lovers of elo-

quence, as if from a watch tower, and give them, as they say, the signal for battle.

From De elegantis lingue latine, in F. A. Gægg, Latin Writings of the Italian Humanists (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927); trans. M.M.M.

Germany Invokes the Muses

JOACHIM VON WATT

1518

~~ALTHOUGH the splendour and dignity of the three tongues, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, have developed a special and fitting art of poetry for utterances of the highest beauty, yet it can be shown that there are many other peoples who have practised this art, when nature has called it forth in their souls, as we have said, and it is evident that they have achieved in it their own special delights. To pass over other peoples for a time, I have often reflected, brother, on the great care, zeal, and effort the Germans have exercised in cultivating this art of poetry in their own language, a language most capable of elegance and copiousness of expression. Today the humbler sort of men still sing their poems on various themes, composed appropriately in the most precise rhythms, and arranged in the most regular sequence of syllables, and these indeed are very ancient songs, the work of only the most learned masters of varied subjects. . . .~~

~~Our own Germanic writers, during the common calamity of studies, were so wisely devoted to the art of poetry that they would have preferred to be accused of~~

FRANCIS PETRARCHA

A SELF-PORTRAIT

From a letter to Francesco Bruni, papal secretary in Avignon. [Milan], October 25, 1362. (*Sen.*, I, 6 [5], in *Opera* [Basel, 1554], p. 824; [1581], p. 745.)

YOU make an orator of me, a historian, philosopher, and poet, and finally even a theologian. You would certainly not do so if you were not persuaded by one whom it is hard to disbelieve: I mean Love. Perhaps you might be excused if you did not extol me with titles so overwhelmingly great: I do not deserve to have them heaped on me. But let me tell you, my friend, how far I fall short of your estimation. It is not my opinion only; it is a fact: I am nothing of what you attribute to me. What am I then? I am a fellow who never quits school,¹ and not even that, but a backwoodsman who is roaming around through the lofty beech trees all alone, humming to himself some silly little tune, and—the very peak of presumption and assurance—dipping his shaky pen into his inkstand while sitting under a bitter laurel tree. I am not so fortunate in what I achieve as passionate in my work, being much more a lover of learning than a man who has got much of it. I am not so very eager to belong to a definite school of thought; I am striving for truth. Truth is difficult to discover, and, being the most humble and feeble of all those who try to find it, I lose confidence in myself often enough. So much do I fear to become entangled in errors that I throw myself into the embrace of doubt instead of truth. Thus I have gradually become a proselyte of the Academy² as

1. [In the word *scholaricus* so many meanings are united (schoolboy, student, scholar), that it cannot well be rendered by a single word in a modern language.]

2. [On the skeptical outcome of the New Academy, Petrarca got his information from Cicero's philosophical writings, especially from the

PETRARCA: A SELF-PORTRAIT
one of the big crowd, as the very last of this humble flock: I do not believe in my faculties, do not affirm anything, and doubt every single thing, with the single exception of what I believe is a sacrilege to doubt.

Academia posteriora. There he found Cicero saying (i. 12. 46) that in Plato's books nothing is firmly stated and much discussed "in both directions" (*in utranque partem*).¹

from The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, ed. Ernst Cassirer and Paul Oskar Kristeller (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1948), 34-47, 382-393.

Francis Petarch

THE ASCENT OF MONT VENTOUX

Letter to Francesco Dionigi de'Roberti of Borgo San Sepolcro, Professor of theology in Paris. Malacène, April 26, 1336. (*Fam.*, IV, 1, in *Le Familiari*, ed. V. Rossi, I, 153-61; *Opera* [Basel, 1581], pp. 624-27.)

To Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, of the Order of Saint Augustine, Professor of Theology, about his own troubles

TODAY I ascended the highest mountain in this region, which, not without cause, they call the Windy Peak.¹ Nothing but the desire to see its conspicuous height was the reason for this undertaking. For many years I have been intending to make this expedition. You know that since my early childhood, as fate tossed around human affairs, I have been tossed around in these parts, and this mountain, visible far and wide from everywhere, is always in your view. So I was at last seized by the impulse to accomplish what I had always wanted to do. It happened while I was reading Roman history again in Livy that I hit upon the passage where Philip, the king of Macedonia—the Philip who waged war against the Roman people—"ascends Mount Haemus in Thessaly, since he believed the rumor that you can see two seas from its top: the Adriatic and the Black Sea."² Whether he was right or wrong I cannot make out be-

1. [The name of the mountain appears as "Ventosus" in Latin documents as early as the tenth century, though originally it had nothing to do with the strong winds blowing about that isolated peak. Its Provençal form "Ventour" proves that it is related to the name of a deity worshipped by the pre-Roman (Ligurian) population of the Rhone Basin, a god believed to dwell on high mountains (cf. C. Jullian, *Histoire de la Gaule*, VI, 329; P. Julian, "Glose sur l'Étymologie du mot Ventoux," in *Le Pélerinage du Mt. Ventoux* [Carpentras, 1937], pp. 337 ff.)]

2. [In his *History of Rome* (xl. 21. 2-22. 7) Livy tells that King Philip V of Macedonia went up to the top of Mount Haemus, one of the highest summits of the Great Balkans (ca. 7,800 ft.), when he wanted to reconnoiter the field of future operations before the Third Macedonian War, which he was planning to fight against the Romans (181 B.C.). Since

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PETRARCA: ASCENT OF MONT VENTOUX

cause the mountain is far from our region, and the disagreement among authors renders the matter uncertain. I do not intend to consult all of them: the cosmographer Pomponius Mela does not hesitate to report the fact as true;³ Livy supposes the rumor to be false. I would not leave it long in doubt if that mountain were as easy to explore as the one here. At any rate, I had better let it go, in order to come back to the mountain I mentioned at first. It seemed to me that a young man who holds no public office⁴ might be excused for doing what an old king is not blamed for.

I now began to think over whom to choose as a companion. It will sound strange to you that hardly a single one of all my friends seemed to me suitable in every respect, so rare a thing is absolute congeniality in every attitude and habit even among dear friends. One was too sluggish, the other too vivacious; one too slow, the other too quick; this one too gloomy of temper, that one too gay. One was duller, the other brighter than I should have liked. This man's tacturnity, that man's flippancy; the heavy weight and obesity of the next, the thinness and weakness of still another were reasons to deter me. The cool lack of curiosity of one, like another's too eager interest, dissuaded me from choosing either. All such qualities, however difficult they are to bear, can be borne at home: loving friendship is able to endure everything; it refuses no burden. But on a journey they become intolerable. Thus my delicate mind, craving honest entertainment, looked about carefully, weighing every detail, with no offense to friendship. Tacitly it rejected whatever it could foresee would become troublesome on the projected excursion.

Petrarca knew the exact location of this mountain from Pliny's *Natural History* (iv. 1. 3 and xi. 18. 41), it must have been a slip of his pen that made him substitute "Thessaly" for "Thrace."³

3. [Mela *Cosmographia* ii. 2. 17.]

4. [Cf. Cicero *De imperio Cr. Pompei* 21. 61, where he praises the courage of Pompey, who took over the command of the Roman armies in 77 B.C. though he was then but an "adulescentulus privatus."⁴]

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What do you think I did? At last I applied for help at home and revealed my plan to my only brother, who is younger than I and whom you know well enough. He could hear of nothing he would have liked better and was happy to fill the place of friend as well as brother.

We left home on the appointed day and arrived at Malacène at night. This is a place at the northern foot of the mountain. We spent a day there and began our ascent this morning, each of us accompanied by a single servant. From the start we encountered a good deal of trouble, for the mountain is a steep and almost inaccessible pile of rocky material. However, what the Poet says is appropriate: "Ruthless striving overcomes everything."⁵

The day was long, the air was mild, this and vigorous minds, strong and supple bodies, and all the other conditions assisted us on our way. The only obstacle was the nature of the spot. We found an aged shepherd in the folds of the mountain who tried with many words to dissuade us from the ascent. He said he had been up to the highest summit in just such youthful fervor fifty years ago and had brought home nothing but regret and pains, and his body as well as his clothes torn by rocks and thorny underbrush. Never before and never since had the people there heard of any man who dared a similar feat. While he was shouting these words at us, our desire increased just because of his warnings; for young people's minds do not give credence to advisers. When the old man saw that he was exerting himself in vain, he went with us a little way forward through the rocks and pointed with his finger to a steep path. He gave us much good advice and repeated it again and again at our backs when we were already at quite a distance. We left with him whatever of our clothes and other belongings might encumber us, intent only on the ascent, and began to climb with merry alacrity. However, as almost always happens, the daring attempt was soon followed by quick fatigue.

5. [Virgil *Georgica* i. 145-46; Macrobius *Saturnalia* v. 6.]

Not far from our start we stopped at a rock. From there we went on again, proceeding at a slower pace, to be sure. I in particular made my way up with considerably more modest steps. My brother endeavored to reach the summit by the very ridge of the mountain on a short cut; I, being so much more of a weakling, was bending down toward the valley. When he called me back and showed me the better way, I answered that I hoped to find an easier access on the other side and was not afraid of a longer route on which I might proceed more smoothly. With such an excuse I tried to palliate my laziness, and, when the others had already reached the higher zones, I was still wandering through the valleys, where no more comfortable access was revealed, while the way became longer and longer and the vain fatigue grew heavier and heavier. At last I felt utterly disgusted, began to regret my perplexing error, and decided to attempt the heights with a wholehearted effort. Weary and exhausted, I reached my brother, who had been waiting for me and was refreshed by a good long rest. For a while we went on together at the same pace. However, hardly had we left that rock behind us when I forgot the detour I had made just a short while before and was once more drawing down the lower regions. Again I wandered through the valleys, looking for the longer and easier path and stumbling only into longer difficulties. Thus I indeed put off the disagreeable strain of climbing. But nature is not overcome by man's devices; a corporeal thing cannot reach the heights by descending. What shall I say? My brother laughed at me; I was indignant; this happened to me three times and more within a few hours. So often was I frustrated in my hopes that at last I sat down in a valley. There I leaped in my winged thoughts from things corporeal to what is incorporeal and addressed myself in words like these:

"What you have so often experienced today while climbing this mountain happens to you, you must know, and to many others who are making their way toward the blessed life. This

is not easily understood by us men, because the motions of the body lie open, while those of the mind are invisible and hidden. The life we call blessed is located on a high peak. 'A narrow way,'⁶ they say, leads up to it. Many hilltops intervene, and we must proceed 'from virtue to virtue' with exalted steps.⁷ On the highest summit is set the end of all, the goal toward which our pilgrimage is directed. Every man wants to arrive there. However, as Naso says: 'Wanting is not enough; long and you attain it.'⁸ You certainly do not merely want; you have a longing, unless you are deceiving yourself in this respect as in so many others. What is it, then, that keeps you back? Evidently nothing but the smoother way that leads through the meanest earthly pleasures and looks easier at first sight. However, having strayed far in error, you must either ascend to the summit of the blessed life under the heavy burden of hard striving, ill deferred, or lie prostrate in your slothfulness in the valleys of your sins. If 'darkness and the shadow of death'⁹ find you there—I shudder while I pronounce these ominous words—you must pass the eternal night in incessant torments."

You cannot imagine how much comfort this thought brought my mind and body for what lay still ahead of me. Would that I might achieve with my mind the journey for which I am longing day and night as I achieved with the feet of my body my journey today after overcoming all obstacles. And I wonder whether it ought not to be much easier to accomplish what can be done by means of the agile and immortal mind without any local motion "in the twinkling of the trembling eye"¹⁰ than what is to be performed in the succession of time by the service

6. [Matt. 7:14 (Sermon on the Mount).]

7. [A typical metaphor familiar to ecclesiastical writers; cf., e.g., Anselm of Canterbury *Letters* I. 43 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, CL VIII, 113, etc.), where it is used as a friendly wish in salutations.]

8. [Ovid *Ex Ponto* III. 1. 35.]

9. [Ps. 106(107):10; Job 34:22.]

10. [I Cor. 13:52; Augustine *Confessions* VII. 1. 1 (cf. Shakespeare, *Merchants of Venice*, Act. II, scene 2, line 183).]

of the frail body that is doomed to die and under the heavy load of the limbs.

There is a summit, higher than all the others. The people in the woods up there call it "Sonny,"¹¹ I do not know why. However, I suspect they use the word in a sense opposite to its meaning, as is done sometimes in other cases too. For it really looks like the father of all the surrounding mountains. On its top is a small level stretch. There at last we rested from our fatigue.

And now, my dear father, since you have heard what sorrows arose in my breast during my climb, listen also to what remains to be told. Devote, I beseech you, one of your hours to reading what I did during one of my days. At first I stood there almost benumbed, overwhelmed by a gale such as I had never felt before and by the unusually open and wide view. I looked around me: clouds were gathering below my feet, and Athos and Olympus grew less incredible, since I saw on a mountain of lesser fame what I had heard and read about them. From there I turned my eyes in the direction of Italy, for which my mind is so fervently yearning. The Alps were frozen stiff and covered with snow—those mountains through which that ferocious enemy of the Roman name once passed, blasting his way through the rocks with vinegar if we may believe tradition.¹² They looked as if they were quite near me, though they are far, far away. I was longing; I must confess, for Italian air,

11. [Though Petrarca was familiar with the idiom of southern France, he misinterpreted the Provençal word *fibolo*. There is still today a spring just below the summit of Mont Ventoux called "Font-fibole" and a ravine near by by name of "combe fibole," the word meaning a water conduit or a rivulet, but the summit can have received the name only secondarily (P. de Champville, "L'itinéraire du poète F. P." in *L'Ascension du Mt. Ventoux* [Carpentras, 1937], p. 41).]

12. [Hannibal is said to have made his troops burn down the trees on rocks obstructing their way and pour vinegar on the ashes to pulverize the burned material when he crossed the Alps in 218 B.C. (Livy *History of Rome* xxi. 37; cf. Pliny *Nat. Hist.* xxiii. 57). Later authors referred to this incident as an example of Hannibal's ingenuity in overcoming seemingly unsurmountable obstacles (Juvenal *Satire* 10, 153).]

which appeared rather to my mind than my eyes. An incredibly strong desire seized me to see my friends¹³ and my native land again. At the same time I rebuked the weakness of a mind not yet grown to manhood; manifest in both these desires, although in both cases an excuse would not lack support from famous champions.

Then another thought took possession of my mind, leading it from the contemplation of space to that of time, and I said to myself: "This day marks the completion of the tenth year since you gave up the studies of your boyhood and left Bologna. O immortal God, O immutable Wisdom! How many and how great were the changes you have had to undergo in your moral habits since then." I will not speak of what is still left undone, for I am not yet in port that I might think in security of the storms I have had to endure. The time will perhaps come when I can review all this in the order in which it happened, using as a prologue that passage of your favorite Augustine: "Let me remember my past mean acts and the carnal corruption of my soul, not that I love them, but that I may love Thee, my God."¹⁴

Many dubious and troublesome things are still in store for me. What I used to love, I love no longer. But I lie: I love it still, but less passionately. Again have I lied: I love it, but more timidly, more sadly. Now at last I have told the truth; for thus it is: I love, but what I should love not to love, what I should wish to hate. Nevertheless I love it, but against my will, under compulsion and in sorrow and mourning. To my own misfortune I experience in myself now the meaning of that most famous line: "Hate I shall, if I can; if I can't, I shall love though not willing."¹⁵ The third year has not yet elapsed since that perverted and malicious will, which had totally seized me and

13. [Petrarca is referring to Giacomo Colonna, bishop of Lombes, who had gone to Rome in the summer of 1333; cf. *Fam.*, I, 5 (4), and I, 6 (5).]

14. [*Confessions* ii. 1. 1.]

15. [Ovid *Amores* iii. 11. 35.]

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reigned in the court of my heart without an opponent, began to encounter a rebel offering resistance. A stubborn and still undecided battle has been long raging on the field of my thoughts for the supremacy of one of the two men within me.¹⁶

Thus I revolved in my thoughts the history of the last decade. Then I dismissed my sorrow at the past and asked myself: "Suppose you succeed in protracting this rapidly fleeing life for another decade, and come as much nearer to virtue, in proportion to the span of time, as you have been freed from your former obstinacy during these last two years as a result of the struggle of the new and the old wills—would you then not be able—perhaps not with certainty but with reasonable hope at least—to meet death in your fortieth year with equal mind and cease to care for that remnant of life which descends into old age?"

These and like considerations rose in my breast again and again, dear father. I was glad of the progress I had made, but I wept over my imperfection and was grieved by the fickleness of all that men do. In this manner I seemed to have somehow forgotten the place I had come to and why, until I was warned to throw off such sorrows, for which another place would be more appropriate. I had better look around and see what I had intended to see in coming here. The time to leave was approaching, they said. The sun was already setting, and the shadow of the mountain was growing longer and longer. Like a man aroused from sleep, I turned back and looked toward the west. The boundary wall between France and Spain, the ridge of the Pyrenees, is not visible from there, though there is no obstacle of which I knew, and nothing but the weakness of the mortal eye is the cause. However, one could see most distinctly the mountains of the province of Lyons to the right and, to the

16. [Two rival wills are struggling in Petrarca's breast, the old one not releasing him from his amorous servitude and blocking his spiritual progress, the other urging him forward on the way to perfection (cf. Augustine *Confessions* viii. 5. 10; x. 22-23, and Petrarca's Sonnet 52 (68).]

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left, the sea near Marseilles as well as the waves that break against Aigues Mortes, although it takes several days to travel to this city. The Rhone River was directly under our eyes.

I admired every detail, now relishing earthly enjoyment, now lifting up my mind to higher spheres after the example of my body, and I thought it fit to look into the volume of Augustine's *Confessions* which I owe to your loving kindness and preserve carefully, keeping it always in my hands, in remembrance of the author as well as the donor.¹⁷ It is a little book of smallest size but full of infinite sweetness. I opened it with the intention of reading whatever might occur to me first: nothing, indeed, but pious and devout sentences could come to hand. I happened to hit upon the tenth book of the work. My brother stood beside me, intently expecting to hear something from Augustine on my mouth. I ask God to be my witness and my brother who was with me: Where I fixed my eyes first, it was written: "And men go to admire the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the ocean, and the revolutions of the stars—and desert themselves."¹⁸ I was stunned, I confess. I bade my brother, who wanted to hear more, not to molest me, and closed the book, angry with myself that I still admired earthly things. Long since I ought to have learned, even from pagan philosophers, that "nothing is admirable besides the mind; compared to its greatness nothing is great."¹⁹

I was completely satisfied with what I had seen of the mountain and turned my inner eye toward myself. From this hour nobody heard me say a word until we arrived at the bottom. These words occupied me sufficiently. I could not imagine that this had happened to me by chance: I was convinced that what

17. [The small-sized manuscript codex of Augustine's *Confessions*, a present from Dionigi, accompanied Petrarca wherever he went until the last year of his life, when he could no longer read its minute script and gave the book to Luigi Marsili (see p. 33) as a token of his friendship.]

18. [Augustine *Confessions* x. 8. 15.]

19. [Seneca *Epistle* 8. 5.]

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ever I had read there was said to me and to nobody else. I remembered that Augustine once suspected the same regarding himself, when, while he was reading the Apostolic Epistles, the first passage that occurred to him was, as he himself relates: "Not in banqueting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil your lusts."²⁰ The same had happened before to Anthony: he heard the Gospel where it is written: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and come and follow me, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven."²¹ As his biographer Athanasius says, he applied the Lord's command to himself, just as if the Scripture had been recited for his sake. And as Anthony, having heard this, sought nothing else, and as Augustine, having read the other passage, proceeded no further, the end of all my reading was the few words I have already set down. Silently I thought over how greatly mortal men lack counsel who, neglecting the noblest part of themselves in empty parading, look without for what can be found within. I admired the nobility of the mind, had it not voluntarily degenerated and strayed from the primordial state of its origin, converting into disgrace what God had given to be its honor.

How often, do you think, did I turn back and look up to the summit of the mountain today while I was walking down? It seemed to me hardly higher than a cubit compared to the height of human contemplation, were the latter not plunged into the filth of earthly sordidness. This too occurred to me at every step: "If you do not regret undergoing so much sweat and hard labor to lift the body a bit nearer to heaven, ought any cross or jail or torture to frighten the mind that is trying to come nearer to God and set its feet upon the swollen summit of insolence

20. [Rom. 13: 13-14, quoted by Augustine *Confessions* viii. 12. 29.]

21. [Matt. 19: 21, quoted by Athanasius in his *Life of St. Anthony* (Latin version by Ewagrius), chap. 2, and from there by Augustine *Confessions* viii. 12. 29.]

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and upon the fate of mortal men?" And this too: "How few will ever succeed in not diverging from this path because of fear of hardship or desire for smooth comfort?²² Too fortunate would be any man who accomplished such a feat—we were there ever such anywhere. This would be him of whom I should judge the Poet was thinking when he wrote:

Happy the man who succeeded in baring the causes of things
And who trod underfoot all fear, inexorable Fate and
Greedy Acheron's uproar. . . .²³

How intensely ought we to exert our strength to get under foot not a higher spot of earth but the passions which are puffed up by earthly instincts."

Such emotions were rousing a storm in my breast as, without perceiving the roughness of the path, I returned late at night to the little rustic inn from which I had set out before dawn. The moon was shining all night long and offered her friendly service to the wanderers. While the servants were busy preparing our meal, I withdrew quite alone into a remote part of the house to write this letter to you in all haste and on the spur of the moment. I was afraid the intention to write might evaporate, since the rapid change of scene was likely to cause a change of mood if I deferred it.

And thus, most loving father, gather from this letter how eager I am to leave nothing whatever in my heart hidden from your eyes. Not only do I lay my whole life open to you with the utmost care but every single thought of mine. Pray for these thoughts, I beseech you, that they may at last find stability. So long have they been idling about and, finding no firm stand, been uselessly driven through so many matters. May they now turn at last to the One, the Good, the True, the stably Abiding.

Farewell.

On the twenty-sixth day of April, at Malauencé.

22. [Cf. *Mart. 7: 13-15.*]

23. [Virgil *Georgica* ii. 490-92.]

ON HIS OWN IGNORANCE AND THAT
OF MANY OTHERS

Opera (Basel, 1574), pp. 1123-68; (1581), pp. 1935-59; L. M. Capelli, *Petrarque: Le traité De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (Paris, 1906); and P. Raina, "Il codice Hamiltoniano 493 della R. Biblioteca di Berlino," *Rendiconto dell'Accademia dei Lincei*, XVIII (5a ser., 1909), 479-508. The Dedication, dated January 13, 1368, belongs in Book xiii of the *Seniles*, as No. 5, but is printed before the text in the Basel Editions of the *Opera*.

To the grammarius Dorato the Aephrine-born, with a little book dedicated to him

HERE at last, my friend, you have the little book long since expected and promised, a little book on a vast matter, namely, "On my own ignorance and that of many others." Had I been allowed to beat it out on the anvil of my inventive genius with the hammer of study, you may believe me, it would have grown into a camel's load. For can there be a wider field, a vaster ground for talking, than a treatise on ignorance and especially on mine? You shall read this book as you are in the habit of listening to me when I tell tales at the fireside on winter nights, rambling along wherever the impulse takes me. I have called it a book, but it is a talk. It has nothing of a book besides the name: neither the bulk nor the disposition; it has not the style and, above all, not the gravity of a book, since it was written quickly on a hasty journey.

However, I have had the whim to call it a book, because I wanted to win your favor with a small present and a great name. I was convinced that whatever comes from me will please you. Nevertheless, I intended to cheat you. It is customary to cheat another in this manner even among friends. When we send them a few apples or some choice morsel of dainty food, we put these things into a silver vessel and wrap it in pure white

liked to quote and make use of the teachings of all the different ancient thinkers and schools accessible to them. They did it often in a rather haphazard and superficial manner, but they broadened the horizon and enriched the source material on which pro-founder thinkers could afterward draw. Pico's syncretism was a philosophical justification of this Humanist procedure and for the first time gave to it something like a positive method and dignity.

Thus the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* is not merely a piece of rhetoric; it contains ideas that are of major importance in the thought of Pico and in the thought of the Renaissance.

Pico della Mirandola

ORATION ON THE DIGNITY OF MAN

I HAVE read in the records of the Arabians, reverend Fathers, that Abdala the Saracen,¹ when questioned as to what on this stage of the world, as it were, could be seen most worthy of wonder, replied: "There is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man." In agreement with this opinion is the saying of Hermes Trismegistus: "A great miracle, Asclepius, is man."² But when I weighed the reason for these maxims, the many grounds for the excellence of human nature reported by many men failed to satisfy me—that man is the intermediary between creatures, the initiate of the gods, the king of the lower beings, by the acuteness of his senses, by the discernment of his reason, and by the light of his intelligence the interpreter of nature, the interval between fixed eternity and fleeting time, and (as the Persians say) the bond, nay, rather, the marriage song of the world, on David's testimony but little lower than the angels.³ Admittedly great though these reasons be, they are not the principal grounds, that is, those which may rightfully claim for themselves the privilege of the highest admiration. For why should we not admire more the angels themselves and the blessed choirs of heaven? At last it seems to me I have come to understand why man is the most fortunate of creatures and consequently worthy of all admiration and what precisely is that rank which is his lot in the universal chain of Being—a rank to be envied not only by brutes but even by the stars and by minds beyond this world. It is a matter past faith and a wondrous one. Why should it not be? For it is on this very account that man is rightly called and judged a great miracle and a wonderful creature indeed.

2. But hear, Fathers, exactly what this rank is and, as friendly

1. [Abdala, that is, Abd Allah, probably the cousin of Mohammed.]
2. [Asclepius i. 6 (*Hermetica*, ed. W. Scott, I, 294).] 3. [Ps. 8:5.]

auditors, conformably to your kindness, do me this favor. God the Father, the supreme Architect, had already built this cosmic home we behold, the most sacred temple of His godhead, by the laws of His mysterious wisdom. The region above the heavens He had adorned with Intelligences, the heavenly spheres He had quickened with eternal souls, and the excrementary and filthy parts of the lower world He had filled with a multitude of animals of every kind. But, when the work was finished, the Craftsman kept wishing that there were someone to ponder the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its vastness. Therefore, when everything was done (as Moses and Timaeus bear witness), He finally took thought concerning the creation of man. But there was not among His archetypes that from which He could fashion a new offspring, nor was there in His treasuries anything which He might bestow on His new son as an inheritance, nor was there in the seats of all the world a place where the latter might sit to contemplate the universe. All was now complete; all things had been assigned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders.⁴ But in its final creation it was not the part of the Father's power to fail as though exhausted. It was not the part of His wisdom to waver in a needful matter through poverty of counsel. It was not the part of His kindly love that he who was to praise God's divine generosity in regard to others should be compelled to condemn it in regard to himself.

3 At last the best of artisans ordained that that creature to whom He had been able to give nothing proper to himself should have joint possession of whatever had been peculiar to each of the different kinds of being. He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: "Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt

4 [Cf. Plato *Protagoras* 321c ff.]

desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine."

4 O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills. Beasts as soon as they are born (so says Lucilius)⁵ bring with them from their mother's womb all they will ever possess. Spiritual beings, either from the beginning or soon thereafter, become what they are to be for ever and ever. On man when he came into life the Father conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God.⁶ And if, happy in the lot of no created thing, he withdraws into the center of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, in the solitary darkness of God, who is set above all things, shall surpass them all. Who would not admire this our chameleon? Or who could more greatly admire aught else whatever? It is man who Asclepius of Athens, arguing from his mutability of character and from his self-transforming nature, on just grounds says was symbolized by Proteus in the mysteries.

5. [Frag. 623 (Marx).]

6. [Cf. Ficino *Theologia Platonica* xiv. 3.]

Hence those metamorphoses renowned among the Hebrews and the Pythagoreans.

5. For the occult theology of the Hebrews sometimes transforms the holy Enoch into an angel of divinity whom they call "Mal'akh Adonay Sheba'oth," and sometimes transforms others into other divinities.⁷ The Pythagoreans degrade impious men into brutes and, if one is to believe Empedocles, even into plants: Mohammed, in imitation, often had this saying on his tongue: "They who have deviated from divine law become beasts," and surely he spoke justly. For it is not the bark that makes the plant but its senseless and insentient nature; neither is it the hide that makes the beast of burden but its irrational, sensitive soul; neither is it the orbed form that makes the heavens but their undeviating order; nor is it the sundering from body but his spiritual intelligence that makes the angel. For if you see one abandoned to his appetites crawling on the ground, it is a plant and not a man you see; if you see one blinded by the vain illusions of imagery, as it were of Calypso, and, softened by their gnawing allurements, delivered over to his senses, it is a beast and not a man you see. If you see a philosopher determining all things by means of right reason, him you shall reverence: he is a heavenly being and not of this earth. If you see a pure contemplator, one unaware of the body and confined to the inner reaches of the mind, he is neither an earthly nor a heavenly being; he is a more reverend divinity vested with human flesh.

6. Are there any who would not admire man, who is, in the sacred writings of Moses and the Christians, not without reason described sometimes by the name of "all flesh," sometimes by that of "every creature," inasmuch as he himself molds, fashions, and changes himself into the form of all flesh and into the character of every creature? For this reason the Persian Eranthes, in describing the Chaldaean theology, writes that man has no semblance that is inborn and his very own but many that are external and foreign to him; whence this saying of the Chaldeans:

7. [Book of Enoch 40: 8.]

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"Hanorish tharah sharinas," that is, "Man is a being of varied manifold, and inconstant nature."⁸ But why do we emphasize this? To the end that after we have been born to this condition—that we can become what we will—we should understand that we ought to have especial care to this, that it should never be said against us that, although born to a privileged position, we failed to recognize it and became like unto wild animals and senseless beasts of burden, but that rather the saying of Asaph the prophet should apply: "Ye are all angels and sons of the Most High,"⁹ and that we may not, by abusing the most indulgent generosity of the Father, make for ourselves that freedom of choice He has given into something harmful instead of salutary. Let a certain holy ambition invade our souls, so that, not content with the mediocre, we shall pant after the highest and (since we may if we wish) toil with all our strength to obtain it.

7. Let us disdain earthly things, despise heavenly things, and, finally, esteeming less whatever is of the world, hasten to that court which is beyond the world and nearest to the Godhead. There, as the sacred mysteries relate, Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones hold the first places; let us, incapable of yielding to them, and intolerant of a lower place, emulate their dignity and their glory. If we have willed it, we shall be second to them in nothing.

8. But how shall we go about it, and what in the end shall we do? Let us consider what they do, what sort of life they lead. If we also come to lead that life (for we have the power), we shall then equal their good fortune. The Seraph burns with the fire of love. The Cherub glows with the splendor of intelligence. The Throne stands by the steadfastness of judgment. Therefore if, in giving ourselves over to the active life, we have after due consideration undertaken the care of the lower beings, we shall be strengthened with the firm stability of Thrones. If, unoccupied by deeds, we pass our time in the leisure of contemplation, con-

8. [The source of this quotation could not be discovered.]
9. [Cf. Ps. 82: 6.]

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sidering the Creator in the creature and the creature in the Creator, we shall be all ablaze with Cherubic light. If we long with love for the Creator himself alone, we shall speedily flame up with His consuming fire into a Seraphic likeness. Above the Throne, that is, above the just judge, God sits as Judge of the ages. Above the Cherub, that is, above him who contemplates, God flies, and cherishes him, as it were, in watching over him. For the spirit of the Lord moves upon the waters, the waters, I say, which are above the firmament¹⁰ and which in Job praise the Lord with hymns before dawn. Whoso is a Seraph, that is, a lover, is in God and God in him, nay, rather, God and himself are one. Great is the power of Thrones, which we attain in using judgment, and most high the exaltation of Seraphs, which we attain in loving.

9. But by what means is one able either to judge or to love things unknown? Moses loved a God whom he saw and, as judge, administered among the people what he had first beheld in contemplation upon the mountain. Therefore, the Cherub as intermediary by his own light makes us ready for the Seraphic fire and equally lights the way to the judgment of the Thrones. This is the bond of the first minds, the Palladian order, the chief of contemplative philosophy. This is the one for us first to emulate, to court, and to understand; the one from whence we may be rapt to the heights of love and descend, well taught and well prepared, to the functions of active life. But truly it is worth while, if our life is to be modeled on the example of the Cherubic life, to have before our eyes and clearly understood both its nature and its quality and those things which are the deeds and the labor of Cherubs. But since it is not permitted us to attain this through our own efforts, we who are but flesh and know of the things of earth, let us go to the ancient fathers who, inasmuch as they were familiar and conversant with these matters, can give sure and altogether trustworthy testimony. Let us consult the Apostle Paul, the chosen vessel,¹¹ as to what he saw the hosts of

10. [Gen. 1:2.]

11. [Acts 9:15.]

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Cherubin doing when he was himself exalted to the third heaven. He will answer, according to the interpretation of Dionysius,¹² that he saw them being purified, then being illuminated, and at last being made perfect. Let us also, therefore, by emulating the Cherubic way of life on earth, by taming the impulses of our passions with moral science, by dispelling the darkness of reason with dialectic, and by, so to speak, washing away the filth of ignorance and vice, cleanse our soul, so that her passions may not rave at random nor her reason through heedlessness ever be deranged.

10. Then let us fill our well-prepared and purified soul with the light of natural philosophy, so that we may at last perfect her in the knowledge of things divine. And lest we be satisfied with those of our faith, let us consult the patriarch Jacob, whose form gleams carved on the throne of glory. Sleeping in the lower world but keeping watch in the upper, the wisest of fathers will advise us. But he will advise us through a figure (in this way everything was wont to come to those men) that there is a ladder extending from the lowest earth to the highest heaven, divided in a series of many steps, with the Lord seated at the top, and angels in contemplation ascending and descending over them alternately by turns.¹³

11. If this is what we must practice in our aspiration to the angelic way of life, I ask: "Who will touch the ladder of the Lord either with fouled foot or with unclean hands?" As the sacred mysteries have it, it is impious for the impure to touch the pure. But what are these feet? What these hands? Surely the foot of the soul is that most contemptible part by which the soul rests on matter as on the soil of the earth, I mean the nourishing and feeding power, the tinder of lust, and the teacher of pleasurable weakness. Why should we not call the hands of the soul its iras-

12. [Dionysius the Areopagite. The writings current under that name, composed by an unknown author probably about A.D. 500, were long attributed to Dionysius, the disciple of Paul, and hence enjoyed an enormous authority.]

13. [Gen. 28:12.]

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