

## **Dissent from Mt. Ventoux: Between Christian and Secular Humanism in Petrarch's *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi***

### **Disentimiento desde el Monte Ventoux: entre humanismo cristiano y humanismo secular en el *De ascensu montis Ventosi* de Petrarca**

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**Abstract:** Petrarch's letter *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* has long served as the founding document of "renaissance humanism". Since the beginning of renaissance studies in the mid-nineteenth century, the letter has become almost a talisman for summoning the new, secular spirit of humanism that spontaneously arrived in Italy in the fourteenth century, took hold of the hearts and minds of Europeans in the fifteenth century, and led to cataclysmic cultural, religious, and political changes in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. This reading, still common among non-specialists, especially in the English-speaking world, is overly simplistic and ignores Petrarch's profound debt to classical and Christian tradition, obscuring the fundamentally religious character of the letter. This article examines how scholars came to

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assign the letter so much importance and offers an interpretation that stresses Petrarch's continuity with tradition and his desire to revitalize rather than reinvent the traditions of Christian scholarship and contemplation.

**Keywords:** Petrarch – Mt. Ventoux – Textual Reception – Modernity – Humanism

**Resumen:** Durante mucho tiempo, la carta *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* de Petrarca ha sido considerada como el documento fundacional del “humanismo renacentista”. Desde el comienzo de los estudios renacentistas a mediados del siglo XIX, esta carta se ha convertido en una suerte de talismán utilizado para invocar el espíritu nuevo y secular del humanismo, un espíritu que, se suele decir, llegó a Italia espontáneamente durante el siglo XIV, logró penetrar los corazones y mentes de los europeos del siglo XV y condujo a cambios supuestamente catastróficos en la cultura, la religión y la política durante los siglos XVI, XVII y XVIII. Esta interpretación, todavía bastante extendida entre quienes no son especialistas, particularmente en el mundo anglosajón, es extremadamente simplista y desconoce la profunda deuda que Petrarca tiene con la tradición clásica y cristiana, ocultando el carácter fundamentalmente religioso de la carta. El presente artículo examina cómo esta carta adquirió tanta importancia en el mundo académico e intelectual, y ofrece una interpretación que enfatiza la continuidad de Petrarca con la tradición, poniendo de relieve el deseo del autor italiano de revitalizar, en lugar de reinventar, las tradiciones de la erudición y contemplación cristianas.

**Palabras clave:** Petrarca – Monte Ventoux – recepción de textos literarios – modernidad – humanismo

In antiquity and throughout the middle ages, going into the mountains was in itself a remarkable feat and a sure sign of *virtus*, whether military as in the case of Hannibal or religious as in that of St. Benedict. In late antique popular culture and in the lives of the saints, the mountains were the abodes of demons and centaurs, places the average person avoided at all cost and where a holy hero, such as St. Antony, might test his mettle against the forces of darkness. In Petrarch's *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, we see something new: the mountain stands almost as a challenge,

always looking down on the insignificant humanity that inhabits its base. The most discussed portion of the letter is this first passage:

Altissimum regionis huius montem, quem non immerito Ventosum vocant, hodierno die sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate ductus ascendi. Multis iter hoc annis in animo fuerat; ab infantia enim his in locis, ut nosti, fato res hominum versante, versatus sum; mons autem hic late undique conspectus fere semper in oculis est.<sup>1</sup>

Petrarch's claim that he completed his ascent *sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate* has inspired generations of mountain climbers, scholars, and the literary public at large. Outside of the context of the rest of the letter, Petrarch's long-held desire to climb the mountain seems a prototype of the modern conquest of nature and exultation in the indomitable human spirit, a posture seemingly far removed from the soul enslaved by concupiscence of the Middle Ages.

Based on this reading, later generations have fashioned Francesco Petrarch's *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* into a foundational document of the Renaissance, the secular afterglow of which sent forth the first rays of enlightenment into a world still shrouded in the darkness that followed the fall of Rome.<sup>2</sup> Petrarch himself has become the *locus*

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<sup>1</sup> "Today, led only by the desire of seeing the celebrated height of the place, I climbed the highest mountain in this region, which not without reason the locals call Ventoux (Windy). For many years it had been my intention to undertake this journey; since, as you know, I have been in this place from my childhood, placed here by fate, who twists human affairs: moreover, this mountain is visible far and wide; it is almost always before one's eyes". Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 1. All excerpts are from the letter of Franciscus Petrarca, *Ad Dyonisium de burgo sancti sepulcri ordinis sancti Augustini et sacre pagine professorem, de curiis propriis*, in *Petrarch's Ascent of Mount Ventoux: The Familiaris IV, I*, ed. Rodney Lokaj (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 2006), 94-106. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Knöbl, "Observaciones sobre el concepto de modernidad," *Sociología Histórica* 7 (2017): 167-185, summarizes the letter's place in the

*classicus* of this new spirit,<sup>3</sup> while this letter acts as the screen for the projections of later ages, a text wherein diverse varieties of modernists situate the birth of their intellectual tradition.<sup>4</sup> The letter, decontextualized, has been made to serve as the canonical expression of everything new and wonderful in Petrarch.<sup>5</sup> While Petrarch was

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contested definition of “modernity and modernities” and its relation to constructions of the concept of “Renaissance”.

<sup>3</sup> This frame is common in undergraduate survey courses in North American universities. Bondanella and Musa's *The Italian Renaissance Reader*, which has for decades served as the standard anthology, stresses Petrarch's individuality and inventiveness and says that he served as a model for later humanists. While this may be partially true, it minimizes Petrarch's imitation of classical and Christian models and his own understanding of following well-trodden paths that, although hidden by centuries of growth or deemphasized by his late medieval culture, were nonetheless traditional. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Mark Musa, eds., *The Italian Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1987). The classic biography in English, Morris Bishop's *Petrarch and His World*, devotes a chapter to the letter. Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and His World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1963): 100-112. Bishop's reading is characteristic of an earlier tradition that regarded the letter as a completely factual and straightforward report of Petrarch's journey in the company of his brother. As such, it focuses on Petrarch's humanistic enjoyment and conquest of nature rather than the spiritual and allegorical implications of his ascent. While the two standard English-language introductions to Petrarch's life and works, Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi, *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009) and Albert Russell Ascoli and Unn Falkheid, *Cambridge Companion to Petrarch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) repeatedly acknowledge the letter's fame and influence, neither treats it extensively.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the varieties of Petrarchan modernisms, see Unn Falkheid, “Petrarch, Mont Ventoux and the Modern Self,” *Forum Italicum* 43/1 (2009): 5-28. Falkheid engages critically with Charles Taylor's account of the modern origins of “the self” and critiques contemporary readings of Petrarch that see his theological account of conversion as being in keeping with a traditional, Augustinian understanding. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> For the context of the letter in Petrarch's correspondence and in Petrarch's works in general, see the chapter entitled “Humanism and Monastic Spirituality” in Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 147-66. Mazzotta argues that the letter is part of a larger theme, “[t]he subordination of secular experiences to religious truth”, that occurs throughout

certainly an author of genius, he was for all that a man, and a man of his times.<sup>6</sup> A fresh reading of *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* is necessary to bring into focus the work and its author, an individual situated in a particular time and tradition, novel but also an organic continuation of the culture in which he lived. Only then can a picture of Petrarch that is realistic and representative rather than idealized and anachronistic be drawn. Reading *de Ascensu* anew within the fourteenth-century context in which it was composed rather than through the preoccupations of nineteenth-century cultural historians and their successors allows the emergence of a new, older Petrarch. It makes possible the expression of an important continuity with the Christian culture of the middle ages, a culture that so many have seen as the great antagonist of Petrarch the Modern, who proclaims a new, secular way of life in a world dominated by monasticism and circumscribed by Scripture, Tradition, and the Fathers.

As mentioned above, many commentators have focused their attention on the opening passages of *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, taking Petrarch's praise of nature's beauty and the pleasure of a vigorous mountain climb as indicative of a new attitude, but they largely ignore the second half of

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Petrarch's writings in both Latin and the vernacular. Mazzotta, *Worlds of Petrarch*, 163. Mazzotta provides a more extended consideration of Petrarch's letter collection in Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Petrarch's Epistolary Epic. Letters on Familiar Matters: *Rerum Familiarium Libri*", in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, edited by Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 309-319.

<sup>6</sup> The secondary literature on Petrarch's letter is immense, especially in Italian. Contributions appear frequently in *Petrarchesca* and *Quaderni Petrarcheschi*. Francisco Rico, *Vida u obra del Petrarca* (Padua: Antenore, 1974) provides an excellent introduction to the historical context in which Petrarch wrote and focuses on the *Secretum*, a work closely related to *de Ascensu*. For a general orientation with special attention to Petrarch's sources and manuscripts and his participation in wider literary traditions, see the foundational work of Giuseppe Billanovich, "Petrarca e il Ventoso," *Italia Medievale e Umanistica* 9 (1966): 349-401. The best monograph on Petrarch's letter remains Bortolo Martinelli, *Petrarca e il Ventoso* (Bergamo: Minerva Italica, 1977). Ugo Dotti, "I primi sei libri delle *familiari* del Petrarca," *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 150 (1973): 1-20, examines Petrarch's methods of collecting and composing his correspondence and his project's connections to the *Secretum* and St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

the letter, which makes explicit the implicit Christian allegory of the ascent as Christian life.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, the two halves of the letter form a unity that brings the beauty of God's creation together with a powerful meditation on the nature of sin and conversion. Far from being an unwelcome medievalism, the second part of *de Ascensu* sets forth a program for a new way of living in active contemplation. Petrarch's letter ought to be read anew, neither as the first spark of the Enlightenment nor as a source of Romantic Medievalism, but rather as the founding document of a humanism that has more in common with the mendicants, Beguines, and adherents of *Devotio Moderna* than with Rousseau and Voltaire. When read as the fourteenth-century document that it is, Sts. Antony and Augustine emerge as the equals of or superiors to Livy, Ovid, and Vergil, and Petrarch points the way forward not to secular enlightenment but to Christian humanism. There is undoubtedly something novel in *de Ascensu*, but it is not the awakening of a secular consciousness that banishes religion, but rather a new charism of Christian life, the rebirth of a Christian humanism that supplements but does not replace Scripture with the Classics. Nor is Petrarch a liminal figure, a Christian intoxicated by the possibilities of the secular but too committed to the old world to pass through the portal and enjoy the light of the newly dawning day. Rather, Petrarch blazes the trail taken by Erasmus and More, living a life of contemplation in the world, a life dedicated to the pursuit of truth and wisdom in harmony with traditional Christian devotion, studying Cicero and Vergil alongside Scripture and the Fathers.

Like so many other personalities who play a part in the history of the renaissance, Petrarch suffers from being made to act in plays written by others.<sup>8</sup> It is certain that Petrarch wanted to be remembered, but it is

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<sup>7</sup> For the often-overlooked religious aspects of the letter, see Donald Beecher, "Petrarch's 'Conversion' on Mont Ventoux and the Patterns of Religious Experience," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 28/3 (2004): 55-75. Beecher finds the letter's narrative structure too perfectly reflective of models to be anything but a fictional allegory. A similar interpretation of the letter appears in Robert M. Durling, "The Ascent of Mt. Ventoux and the Crisis of Allegory," *Italian Quarterly* 69 (1974): 7-28.

<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas More has suffered a similar fate. For a discussion of the anachronistic treatment of More by his modern biographers and the hermeneutical difficulties diachronic rather than synchronic readings of his life

equally certain that he is today celebrated as something far different from anything he could have imagined. This article will begin by mentioning two versions of Petrarch remembered by literary historians: the founder of (secular) humanism so dear to English-speaking historians on the one hand, and the writer of vernacular lyrics, who is a supporting character in the story of the foundation of Italian literature on the other. Next, a reading of Petrarch's most famous letter will provide the basis for arguing that Petrarch was rather first and foremost a Latin writer, concerned to develop the best parts of his tradition rather than to make a decisive break from it.

How did Petrarch become the founder of humanism? Burckhardt's epoch-making interpretation along with the anglophone work of Symonds cast the Renaissance as a profound break from the medieval world, with Petrarch as a central figure in the forging of a new consciousness.<sup>9</sup> While these earlier historians had studied the Renaissance as a political phenomenon that led to the formation of the modern nation-state, scholars working in the early twentieth century attempted to demonstrate the primacy of literature in the creation of the new cultural landscape of the early modern period.<sup>10</sup> If anything, this new focus pushed Petrarch into an even more central position in explaining the origins of the modern mentalité. This interpretation was especially widespread in the English-speaking world. By 1914, Petrarch was eulogized as "the first modern scholar and man of letters" in an extensive biography by James Harvey Robinson.<sup>11</sup> Robinson's assessment that "no complete edition of [Petrarch's] works has ever been published"<sup>12</sup> remains valid despite several attempts over the last

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and works introduce, see Travis Curtright, *The One Thomas More* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, vol. 2 (Reprint. London: John Murray, 1921), 69-87. Jakob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 2.<sup>a</sup> ed., rev. (New York: Phaidon, 1945), 179-181.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Whitfield, *Petrarch and the Renaissance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1943), 11.

<sup>11</sup> James Harvey Robinson, *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters* (New York: Putnam, 1914).

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, *Petrarch*, 21.

century to fill the void, perhaps confirmation that Petrarch is an historical personage more discussed than read. Robinson's project was to recover Petrarch as an individual, to stress the centrality of the author's Latin works to his own conception of his mission and legacy, and to balance the romantic legend of Petrarch as the "father" of the sonnet and of European vernacular lyric poetry with an account of his scholarly achievements and the status as the founder of modern Latin letters.<sup>13</sup> In dismantling the old myth of Petrarch, Robinson recast him as a culture hero of a different sort: the father of philology and literary studies, the first gentleman and man of leisure, the herald of a new, secular *otium* – of a life of contemplation lived beyond the walls of the cloister.

While Robinson's work was indicative of a largely successful movement to recover Petrarch the scholar, it, like so many well-intentioned scholarly enterprises, went too far in disenchanting the old myth while constructing an account that was no less mythical but far less enchanting. For a variety of cultural and political reasons concomitant with the great upheavals of the century, Petrarch's reputation in the English-speaking world, either as the exponent of vernacular poetry and literary father of Shakespeare and Goethe or as the prototype of the man of letters ensconced in the ivory tower, slipped further and further into oblivion, except as a convenient name used to explain complex cultural developments in textbooks on the history of Western Civilization. In Italy, Petrarch, considered the last and least important of the "founders" of the national language, maintained his reputation as a lyric poet but could not compete with Dante, nor did his Latin works emerge from the obscurity in which they had languished for centuries.

In the midst of the last great war, some of the greatest authorities on humanism and the renaissance came together to discuss to what extent

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<sup>13</sup> Today, scholars are well aware of the origins of the sonnet in the *Scuola Siciliana* of the court of Emperor Frederick II in the thirteenth century. Despite this, the "classical" form of the sonnet, consisting of octave and sestet and following a regular rhyme scheme, still bears Petrarch's name, so that we anachronistically refer to Dante's earlier sonnets in the *Vita Nuova* as "petrarchan". For the reception of Petrarch in nineteenth-century England, see Edoardo Zuccato, *Petrarch in Romantic England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 126-156.



the movement begun by Petrarch was indebted to the past.<sup>14</sup> In a broad-ranging discussion that encompassed science, medicine, philosophy, and literature and anticipated many of the anxieties and hopes about the dawn of a post-modern age, these scholars were eager to demonstrate significant continuities between the middle ages and the renaissance and to stress that the art and letters of the period we now call “early modern” were in fact a rebirth of classical antiquity rather than something altogether new and original. Thorndike in particular sought to deflate not only Burckhardt’s renaissance but also Petrarch’s reputation as anything more than an expert rhetorician.<sup>15</sup> Towards the end of the twentieth century, Stephen Minta summarized Petrarch’s influence on later literary tradition thus:

The bulk of his literary output was in Latin, but it is for his two works in Italian that he is now remembered...I doubt if he is much read today, but over the past four hundred years or so his reputation as one of the very finest European lyric poets has never been successfully challenged...it is difficult to explain why Petrarch’s work should have exercised so powerful an influence...Petrarch was not the earliest important love poet in Italy...He gave to the European tradition no new lyric forms. He was not even responsible for the invention of the ‘Petrarchan’ conceits which abound in literary histories. But for all that he remains, in the view of many, the first modern European love poet, indeed

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<sup>14</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *et al.* “Some Remarks on the Question of the Originality of the Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4, n.º 1 (1943): 49–74.

<sup>15</sup> After cataloguing several medieval accounts of the leisurely ascent of mountains, Thorndike wrote that “...all Petrarch’s account proves is his capacity for story-telling and sentimental ability to make a mountain out of a molehill”. Lynn Thorndike, “Renaissance or Prenaissance?”, in “Some Remarks on the Question of the Originality of the Renaissance”, by Ernst Cassirer, *et al.*, 72. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4/1 (1943): 49-74.

for some the first modern European man.<sup>16</sup>

Minta's evaluation is non-committal. Although he admitted that Petrarch had few readers in the later twentieth century, Minta believed that the Petrarch myth was still in need of deconstruction. With all of these qualifications, it seems that there is little reason for the generalist to read Petrarch in the here and now, except insofar as some knowledge of him and his work is necessary for appreciation of the English renaissance poetry that students must study in order to fulfill the requirements of their degrees, or for students in Italy, who must take an unfortunate detour from the more interesting works of Dante and Boccaccio to appreciate the role of this proverbial "third wheel" in driving the establishment of Italian literature.

Around the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Italian scholar Amadeo Quondam wrote a study entitled *Petrarca, l'italiano dimenticato*,<sup>17</sup> in which he discusses Petrarch's contemporary place alongside Dante and Boccaccio, with whom he forms the *tre corone fiorentine*.<sup>18</sup> In this study, Quondam proposes a *gioco degli spiccioli* (game of pocket change) as an index of national identity.<sup>19</sup> Italians, on emptying their pockets, are likely to find depictions of Roman and Italian renaissance art but will only find one person: Dante, on the obverse of the €2 piece, the highest denomination. In Italian education and culture, Dante has so eclipsed his two rivals as to be almost the self-sufficient incarnation of Italian literature. Boccaccio remains familiar due to the charm of his *Decameron* and its importance as an example of literary excellence in prose, but at a time when Petrarch's readership has reached its nadir worldwide, even in his homeland few have read his

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Minta, *Petrarch and Petrarchism: The English and French Traditions* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980), 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Amadeo Quondam, *Petrarca, l'italiano dimenticato* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2004), 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, forming a succession somewhat like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

<sup>19</sup> Quondam, *Petrarca*, 20-22.

works or could name them if asked.<sup>20</sup> Petrarch, it seems, is too classical, too French, too lyrical. In an age when an education no longer consists of deep training in multiple languages and their associated literatures and historical consciousness is becoming ever more abbreviated, what appeal can Petrarch have? Lyric poetry has never been less popular, and the reclusive academic is no more an appealing figure in the third decade of the twenty-first century than he was one hundred years earlier when Robinson discovered Petrarch's invention of the professorial life.

The remainder of this discussion will attempt to excavate a different Petrarch, neither the vernacular Romantic nor the Latin philologist but the originator of a truly novel way of life nonetheless: the renaissance Christian humanist. By reading Petrarch's *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* anew but with a view towards his innovation within a framework of substantial continuity, a new Petrarch emerges, every bit as enchanting as the old Petrarch but truer to his time and his own understanding of himself and his works, one who is able to merge the disparate strands of secular and sacred, Romance and Latin.

Stepping away from both versions of Petrarch, we return now to Petrarch's own words, where he tells of the catalyst that finally resolved him on climbing the mountain:

Cepit impetus tandem aliquando facere quod quotidie  
faciebam, praecipue postquam relegenti pridie res  
Romanas apud Livium forte ille mihi locus occurrerat,  
ubi Philippus Macedonum rex – is qui cum populo  
Romano bellum gessit – Haemum montem Thessalicum  
conscendit, e cuius vertice duo maria videri,  
Adriaticum et Euxinum, famae crediderat, vere ne an  
falso satis comperti nichil habeo, quod et mons a nostro

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<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Christopher Celenza writes that Petrarch was “the central figure behind the Renaissance revival of antiquity”. Christopher Celenza, *The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 17. Celenza's biography, *Petrarch: Everywhere a Wanderer* (London: Reaktion, 2017), has done much to rehabilitate Petrarch's reputation and renew scholarly interest in his life and works.

orbe semotus et scriptorum dissensio dubiam rem facit.  
Ne enim cunctos evolvam, Pomponius Mela  
cosmographus sic esse nichil hesitans refert; Titus  
Livius falsam famam opinatur; michi si tam prompta  
montis illius experientia esset quam huius fuit, diu  
dubium esse non sinerem.<sup>21</sup>

Petrarch's love of the classics does not elevate them to authorities. He wishes to contend with them in *aemulatio*, to test through experience what others have been so long content to believe by reading ancient books. *Fama*, so often *falsa*, will give way to *experientia*. Petrarch, the rational actor, has it within his reach to determine the truth or falsity of the claims of the ancients and intends to do so. And since he is the ruler of his mind, endowed with the power of judgement, he will not allow issues that can be so easily tested to remain doubtful. So far, it is not difficult to see why some readers of Petrarch have been so eager to imagine this letter as heralding a new spirit of rational enquiry and empirical examination.

Throughout the first half of the letter, Petrarch adopts an easy, flowing, conversational tone in close imitation of Cicero's epistolary style. His chattiness, though, is studied, and his apparently unselfconscious narration is interrupted by frequent citations from classical authors.

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<sup>21</sup> "The impulse to accomplish at some future date what I have today done overcame me the day before yesterday as I was rereading the deeds of the Romans in Livy. By chance that celebrated passage came to me, that one wherein Philip, king of the Macedons – that is he who waged war against the Roman people – climbed Mt. Haemus in Thessaly, from whose peak one could see two seas, the Adriatic and the Euxine, should one believe the tale. I do not consider it terribly clear whether this is true or false, since the mountain is far removed from our land, and the disagreement of writers makes the matter doubtful. I will not enumerate all of the authorities, but it bears special mention that Pomponius Mela, the cosmographer, reports this fact without hesitation; Livy considers it to be false; if the chance of proving by experience whether the report of that mountain were true were as near to hand as the same of Mt. Ventoux, I should not have allowed it to remain long in doubt". Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 2. For a discussion of the manuscript Petrarch used and its impact on his reading of the ancient geographers, see Billanovich, "Petrarca e il Ventoso", 391-92.

Petrarch's letter is not a chance survival of a genius' pile of ephemera; it is a conscious literary product with a definite moral, one might even say ascetic, end. After the prologue discussed above, Petrarch narrates his arrival at the foot of Mt. Ventoux:

Statuta die digressi domo, Malausanam venimus ad  
vesperam; locus est in radicibus montis, versus in  
boream. Illic unum diem morati, hodie tandem cum  
singulis famulis montem ascendimus non sine multa  
difficultate: est enim prerupta et pene inaccessibilis  
saxose telluris moles; sed bene a poeta dictum est: labor  
omnia vincit improbus.<sup>22</sup>

Petrarch's attitude toward the mountain seems changed now that he has seen it up close. Looming from the north, the mountain appears as a *prerupta et pene inaccessibilis saxose telluris moles*. No longer a target for easy conquest by man's will and ingenuity, it is once again a threatening force of Nature, the mistress that rules all and reminds man that he is but the cleverest animal and subject to her no less than the beasts. Petrarch almost despairs of his project, seeing no clear path upwards, but literature comes to his aid. The Poet (Vergil) reminds him of the positive value of hard work. In a pattern that will repeat many times in the remainder of the letter, a pagan sage heartens Petrarch at the critical moment, just when he seems ready to abandon his ascent.

Although Petrarch has been succored for the moment, he gives the first indication that his ascent will be something more than a pleasurable constitutional. Man will conquer Nature, but she will not be mastered easily. Having prevented the irruption of the indomitable other, that which is greater than man and not subject to the ordering principle of his reason, Petrarch returns to calm confidence that he will be successful:

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<sup>22</sup> "On the appointed day, we left home and went to Mausane in the evening. The place is at the foot of the mountain, facing north. We stayed there one day, and today at last, taking each a servant we climbed the mountain, not without much difficulty: for there (the mountain) is a mound of jagged and almost pathless earth; and the poet has spoken well when he said: 'a difficult labor cures all ills.'" Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 6.

*dies longa, blandus aer, animorum vigor, corporum robur ac dexteritas et siqua sunt eiusmodi, euntibus aderant; sola nobis obstabat natura loci.*<sup>23</sup> Petrarch seems to possess all things necessary for his ascent, yet he tellingly says that only nature stands in his way. Even if he can trust his character, his firm resolve, and his body, the force of nature lingers as imminent threat. What seemed at the beginning of the letter an innocent fancy has become a hard-fought battle against an unmoving and impassive menace.

Before his journey can begin in earnest, Petrarch is greeted by a familiar helper, the shepherd:

Pastorem exacte etatis inter convexa montis invenimus, qui nos ab ascensu retrahere multis verbis enisus est, dicens se ante annos quinquaginta eodem iuvenilis ardoris impetu supremum in verticem ascendisse, nichilque inde retulisse preter penitentiam et laborem, corpusque et amictum lacerum saxis ac vepribus, nec umquam aut ante illud tempus aut postea auditum apud eos quemquam ausum esse similia.<sup>24</sup>

The appearance of so archetypical a figure at this crucial moment seems too perfect to be accidental. Whether historical fact or literary invention, the shepherd plays an important role in Petrarch's ascent and further enhances the journey's significance as something more than the mere satisfaction of curiosity. A good shepherd would provide Petrarch with

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<sup>23</sup> "The day was long, the air refreshing, our spirits high, and our bodies strong and agile. Whatever else one needs for mountain climbing, we had as we went up; only the nature of the place stood in our way". Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> "We came across a shepherd, much aged, among the mountain dales, who expended many words trying to prevent us from our ascent, saying that he fifty years ago and struck by the same impulse of youthful ardor had made the climb and had gotten in return nothing save regret and labor, and his body and clothes cut by stones and thorns, and that no one had heard that anyone had dared to do likewise either before or since". Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 7.

the guidance and protection he needs to reach his destination, but instead, this *pastor malus* tries to dissuade Petrarch from his purpose and convince him that he is driven by no noble impulse but rather *iuvenilis ardoris impetu*. The shepherd urges complacency, the comfort of the known against the promise of something better. With this shepherd, Petrarch has signaled to his reader that there is something supernatural about his ascent. By using the familiar trope of the shepherd and casting him as a tempter, Petrarch connects his journey with the medieval pilgrimage and the monastic withdrawal into the desert. Petrarch's quest to enjoy the secular pleasure of a mountaintop view has been invaded by the demonic forces that inhabit the desert places in the lives of the saints. The shepherd attempts to force Petrarch to abandon his purpose and to descend to consideration of things corporeal: scratched legs and torn clothes. The only things the shepherd says Petrarch is likely to find at the top of the mountain are *penitentiam et laborem*.

Petrarch is greatly struck by what the false shepherd says. From this point onwards, the letter takes a decisive turn towards the religious. What began *sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate* becomes explicitly the struggle to ascend not the summit of Mt. Ventoux but rather the ladder that leads to the blessed life. With difficulty, he shakes off the shepherd's false enticements:

Sic sepe delusus quadam in valle consedi. Illic a corporeis ad incorporea volucris cogitatione transiliens, his aut talibus me ipsum compellabam verbis: –Quod totiens hodie in ascensu montis huius expertus es, id scito et tibi accidere et multis accedentibus ad beatam vitam, sed idcirco tam facile ab hominibus non perpendi, quod corporis motus in aperto sunt, animorum vero invisibiles et occulti.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Having been led astray repeatedly in this way, I sat down in a vale and turned my thoughts, with a sudden mental exertion, from things corporeal to things spiritual, and I urged myself onwards in these words, ‘What thou hast suffered so many times today in your ascent of the mountain, thou shalt know that it

Petrarch's breezy style has been suddenly replaced by the severe tone of inner criticism. The studied spontaneity of Cicero's epistles fades as Petrarch becomes introspective. All this is a sign that Petrarch, in a state of inner turmoil, *volucris cogitatione transiliens*, is trying to redirect his thoughts, to force himself to consider the spiritual rather than material benefits of his climb. Petrarch has been building towards this transition slowly, telegraphing his intention from his arrival at the base of the mountain. As he continues, Petrarch's language becomes more and more Christian. His quotations from classical authors recede further into the background as Scripture, the Fathers, and the lives of the saints come to the fore.

At the climax of the first half of the letter, Petrarch interprets his journey to the foot of the mountain as a moral struggle:

Equidem vita, quam beatam dicimus, celso loco sita est; arcta, ut aiunt, ad illam ducit via.<sup>26</sup> Multi quoque colles intereinent et de virtute in virtutem preclaris gradibus ambulandum est; in summo finis est omnium et vie terminus ad quem peregrinatio nostra disponitur. Eo pervenire volunt omnes, sed, ut ait Naso,<sup>27</sup> velle parum est; cupias, ut re potiaris oportet.<sup>28</sup>

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befalleth both thee and many as ye approach the blessed life; yea, such is not so easy for men to see, since the movement of the body is in the open, but those of the soul are invisible and hidden.” Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Mt. 7:14.

<sup>27</sup> Ovid, *Epistulae ex ponto*, 3.1.35.

<sup>28</sup> “I, for one, consider that the life that we call blessed is found in high places; the narrow path, as they say, leads to it. There are also many hills rising between us and the mountain, and we must make our way in great strides, pressing on our strength with yet greater effort. At the summit is the consummation of all things along with the end of the road upon which we set out our pilgrimage. All desire to arrive there, but, as Ovid says, ‘It is too little merely to wish for a thing; you must have a burning desire to attain it.’” Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 13.



The hills and valleys that Petrarch encountered as he approached the mountain have become symbols of the small acts of virtue that he must constantly employ as he makes his way through life. They are the necessary preparatory exercises for the great exertion, the great test that will come at some point in the life of every person. The two-fold nature of Petrarch's allegory becomes clear, and the distinction between the ascent of the mountain and the ascent to heaven is blurred. Although he has adopted the gnomic voice of the moral theologian, Petrarch curiously retains Ovid as a secondary adviser. In this particular passage, Petrarch makes his first definite scriptural citation and follows it nearly immediately with an Ovidian gloss. Petrarch uses Ovid to bring the lofty sublimity of Scripture down to the mundane. Petrarch makes the spiritual Scripture real by uniting it to the most corporeal of Roman poets. The two halves of Petrarch are brought into harmony through this clever glossing. He has found a spiritual use for his carnal pleasure. This may seem novel, but it is in fact an ancient, or more properly, an early medieval practice. Ovid was a favorite author of the Carolingians and the School of Chartres, whose *accessus* without fail counted him among the moral philosophers and teachers of ethics.<sup>29</sup> What many have thought to be a modern feature of *de Ascensu* – citing the classics – proves to be rather a sure sign that Petrarch is a medieval. The relationship of the Church Fathers to classical literature was notoriously strained. One thinks of St. Augustine condemning his own sorrow at Dido's suicide or St. Jerome's *Somnium Ciceronis*. It is only in the middle ages that Biblical commentators, monks, feel comfortable with the dead paganism of the ancients, which was still a vital if waning force in late antiquity, and make what use they can of it to understand the mysteries of Scripture. Petrarch uses Ovid to make an incisive psychological and spiritual point: the difference between will and desire. This distinction will form the axis of discussion for the second half of the letter as Petrarch attempts to discover his motives and goals.

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<sup>29</sup> The Ovidian *accessus* are the subject of Amanda Gerber, *Medieval Ovid: Frame Narrative and Political Allegory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For translations of the *accessus* along with extensive explanatory notes, see Stephen Michael Wheeler, *Accessus ad Auctores: Medieval Introductions to the Authors (Codex Latinus Monacensis 19475)* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2014). For the Latin text, see R. B. C. Huygens, ed. *Accessus ad auctores* (Berchem-Bruxelles: Latomus, 1954).

Having made his transition from the material to the spiritual, Petrarch's language becomes more and more colored by biblical idiom and the language of the fathers. Throughout this section, the abstract language of necessity and volition is married to the hard reality of the hills and valleys at the foot of the mountain:

Tu certe – nisi, ut in multis, in hoc quoque te fallis – non solum vis sed etiam cupis. Quid ergo te retinet? nimirum nichil aliud, nisi per terrenas et infimas voluptates planior et, ut prima fronte videtur, expeditior via; verumtamen, ubi multum erraveris, aut sub pondere male dilati laboris ad ipsius te beate vite culmen oportet ascendere aut in convallibus peccatorum tuorum segnem procumbere; et si – quod ominari horreo – ibi te “tenebre et umbra mortis”<sup>30</sup> invenerint, eternam noctem in perpetuis cruciatibus agere.<sup>31</sup>

Petrarch uses this language of verticality to organize his thinking. He contrasts the *culmen beatæ vitæ* with the *convallibus peccatorum tuorum*, *ascendere* with *procumbere*. Petrarch's goal in scaling Mt. Ventoux is not bodily exercise or aesthetic pleasure, but a mortal struggle against *terrenas et infimas voluptates*. The Psalmist serves as Petrarch's authority here. He no longer needs Livy, Vergil, or Ovid to mediate and guide him toward scripture. Having taken time to consider prayerfully what is most important and what he truly desires, Petrarch

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<sup>30</sup> Ps. 107:10.

<sup>31</sup> “You certainly, unless, as in much else, you deceive yourself also in this matter, not only wish but also strongly desire it. What then holds you back? Nothing at all, except that the path through worldly and base pleasures seems, at first glance, to be easier and quicker; nevertheless, after much wandering, you must climb to the top of the mount of the blessed life under the weight of an unwisely deferred labor or lie down, lazy as you are, in the pits of your sins; and if, (which I shudder even to forebode) that the shades and shadows of death should find you, you spend an eternal night in unending torments”. Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 14.

finds his answer in the Bible, not in the classics.

But his resolve is short-lived. Petrarch's inner struggle continues, and he follows a new authority, St. Augustine, in examining the power and utility of memory:

Tempus forsan veniet, quando eodem quo gesta sunt  
ordine universa percurram, prefatus illud Augustini  
tui:<sup>32</sup> "Recordari volo transactas feditates meas et  
carnales corruptiones anime mee, non quod eas amem,  
sed ut amem te, Deus meus".<sup>33</sup>

Petrarch imagines himself at the end of his life, running through the catalogue of his sins. The *memento mori* plays an important part in much of Petrarch's writing, whether in the *Secretum* or his letter to posterity.<sup>34</sup> The pleasures of this world are good, but their goodness pales in comparison to that of the life of the world to come. Following St. Augustine, the act of memory shows that God uses even sin to fulfill his purposes. Indeed, knowledge of sin is the indispensable first step in conversion. Petrarch's preoccupation with death and the account that he must render at the end of time run counter to modern expectations of what Petrarch, the first humanist, ought to have been concerned about, but it fits both his historical context and the themes of his wider body of writing. Of all his modes, and Petrarch was certainly a diverse and

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<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Confessiones*, 2.1.1.

<sup>33</sup> "Perhaps a time will come when I shall run through all of my deeds in order, repeating the words of your Augustine, "I want to remember the foul deeds that I have committed and the fleshly corruptions of my soul, not so I may love them, but so that I may love you, my God." Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Trinkhaus discusses Petrarch's treatment of death in the *Secretum* in his *The Poet as Philosopher: Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 61-65. For an edition of the *Epistola Posteritati* along with extensive studies, see K. A. E. Enekel, Betsy de Jong-Crane, and P. Th. M. G. Liebrechts, eds., *Modelling the Individual: Biography and Portrait in the Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).

diffuse writer, it is the penitential, the Augustinian, that is most effective. Once the fire of his passion for Laura dimmed and his hopes for a new Scipio who would restore Rome faltered, Petrarch still had St. Augustine, always in his breast pocket, urging him to daily conversion, withdrawal from worldly concerns, and contemplation.

Now Petrarch lets his spirit run free. The inner turmoil of his struggle to control his passion bubbles up to the surface. Here Petrarch seethes with an emotion his will can only just contain:

Michi quidem multum adhuc ambigui molestique  
negotii superest. Quod amare solebam, iam non amo;  
mentior: amo, sed parcius; iterum ecce mentitus sum:  
amo, sed verecundius, sed tristius; iam tandem verum  
dixi. sic est enim; amo, sed quod non amare amem,  
quod odisse cupiam; amo tamen, sed invitus, sed  
coactus, sed mestus et lugens. Et in me ipso versiculi  
illius famosissimi sententiam miser experior:<sup>35</sup> Odero,  
si potero; si non, invitus amabo.<sup>36</sup>

While this soliloquy may seem a prototype for nineteenth-century Romanticism, its language is Augustinian. The breathless alternation between extremes, the self-criticism, and the investigation of motive are reminiscent of the prologue to the *Confessiones*. One almost expects Petrarch to end this diatribe with *sero te amavi*,<sup>37</sup> but instead Petrarch makes Ovid speak for him. In context, this shift back to Ovid is not

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<sup>35</sup> Ovid, *Amores*, 3.11.35.

<sup>36</sup> “Truly, much that is doubtful or painful is still with me, that which I used to love and do not now love; I lie: I love it, but sparingly; yea, I lie once more: I love it truly, but with great sorrow; now at last I have spoken the truth. So it is; I love, but what I should not love to love, what I should desire to hate; I love it nevertheless, but unwilling, forced, sorrowful, and in lamentation. And I, sorrowing, feel in my very self the truth of that famous line: ‘I would hate it, if I were able; if I cannot, I will love it unwillingly.’” Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.27.

abrupt. The quotation seems apt, and unlike his previous use of Ovid, Petrarch here quotes him without attribution. Petrarch is in control, masterfully leading the reader to expect an Augustinian climax in this emotive crescendo but subtly leading his discourse back to Ovid. Such use of style and citation to create a harmony of seemingly disparate materials is Petrarch's genius. The following and closing sections of the letter are the most clearly theological, and this last nod toward Ovid, using him to make an Augustinian point, seems intended to slip past the reader but on reflection, show once again Petrarch's deft ability to blend the two halves of his inner world.

Petrarch now directly associates his climb with monastic life. He uses St. Antony, the first monk, as an example for imitation:

Quod iam ante Antonio acciderat, quando audito  
Evangelio ubi scriptum est: "Si vis perfectus esse, vade  
et vende omnia tua quecumque habes et da pauperibus,  
et veni et sequere me et habebis thesaurum in celis",<sup>38</sup>  
"veluti propter se hec esset scriptura recitata" ut  
scriptor rerum eius Athanasius ait,<sup>39</sup> "ad se dominicum  
traxit imperium".<sup>40</sup>

Antony, converted not by argument but by hearing the words of scripture, experiences a moment of perfect clarity and creates a new form of religious life. St. Antony finds the words of scripture to be tailored especially for him, and he is led into the Lord's *imperium*. In such an important place in the letter, the climax of the second section and of the epistle as a whole, Petrarch uses the word *imperium*, an

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<sup>38</sup> Mt. 19:21.

<sup>39</sup> Evagrius, *Vita Antonii*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> "The same thing happened before to Antony, when he heard the Gospel where it is written: 'if you wish to be perfect, sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and come and follow me and you will have treasure in heaven.' The scripture having been read as if for his special benefit, as his biographer Athanasius says, he drew himself to the Lord's empire". Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 31.

unusual synonym for the usual *regnum*. This cannot be unintentional. Petrarch is, just as Antony and Augustine before him, recognizing that Caesar's imperium is bound by time. Although Petrarch would never abandon his project of restoring Rome's temporal power, he seems already to have decided in *de Ascensu* that his true home is in the Kingdom of Heaven. While Petrarch's secular political ambitions cannot be denied, this passage is evidence that he thought long and hard about the relationship between the two swords of his world's polity and sought his citizenship in the City of God.

Petrarch goes on to unite St. Antony and St. Augustine in a progression that leads ultimately to himself: *et sicut Antonius, his auditis, aliud non quesivit, et sicut Augustinus, his lectis, ulterius non processit, sic et michi in paucis verbis que premisi, totius lectionis terminus fuit...*<sup>41</sup> Petrarch's conversion is not just ascent from consideration of the material to the spiritual, or the judging of the City of God to be superior to the City of Man, but it is finally a conversion from letters to revelation, from reading to hearing. Petrarch here reveals his intimate devotional life, the way he could converse with God without the mediation of *auctores* or *patres*. The inadequacy of literature to satisfy but his abiding love for it is a central theme of Petrarch's writings. He struggles to balance the various impulses in his life — the poetic, the Roman, and the religious — but the religious always triumphs in the end. Petrarch sees that a life lived in contemplation is closest to the *vita beata celso loco sita*, but he strives to find a way to live that life within the world and to maintain his participation in the republic of letters and the political world of Rome abandoned by both emperor and pope. This, rather than secularism or pure aestheticism, is the real novelty in Petrarch's meditative ascent. As if in answer to one who should mistake *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* for a hymn to nature, Petrarch ends his reflection thus: *o quanto studio laborandum esset, non ut altiozem terram, sed ut elatos terrenis impulsibus appetitus sub pedibus*

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<sup>41</sup> "And just like Antony, when he heard these things, sought nothing more, and like Augustine, when he had read, waited no longer, so also I had an end of all my reading in those few words which I mentioned above..." Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 32.

*haberemus!*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "With what zeal must we work, not that we possess the heights of earth, but that we keep under foot those appetites which sprang forth from our earthly impulses!" Franciscus Petrarca, *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi*, 34.

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