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Introduction

No single figure has been as closely identified with the emergence of cultural modernity in Europe as Francis Petrarch. From Jacob Burckhardt and Theodor Mommsen to Paul Oskar Kristeller and Hans Blumenberg, he has been depicted as "the first modern man," a label that implies a mixture of notions, including being the discoverer of psychological interiority, the defender of natural curiosity, and the promoter of a new sense of the historical past. This bold suggestion has further been strengthened by descriptions of Petrarch the Latin author as the founder, or at least the first powerful voice, of the pervasive cultural movement known as Humanism, as well as the first person to draw a sharp distinction between the "dark ages" of medieval times and the rebirth of classical civilization in a dawning Renaissance. At the same time, we also have an abiding understanding of Petrarch the vernacular poet as the inventor of a form of the love lyric and of the lyric collection, which would soon come to dominate the Western tradition.

Gone, more or less, are the innocent days when we could speak about Petrarch in quite such confidently romanticized terms. Today we are far more aware that the notion of embodying a historical period's multitude of experiences and events in a single human being is simply untenable, no matter how well known the name or pervasive the influence. We now recognize the need to understand, as it were negatively, the many crucial aspects of the time that are effectively invisible in Petrarch's works (daily social, economic, and political realities; the lives of women and the poor), and, somewhat more "positively," those places where Petrarch's quest for solitude and autonomy, his propensity for dismissing the degraded present in favor of the classical past and a hoped-for posterity, masks profound implication in the social, political, and religious networks of his age.

The Petrarch we undertake to introduce in this volume represents neither a symbolic bridge over the chasm between historical epochs after centuries of presumed immobility, nor an autonomous agent who acted alone upon the historical stage in accordance with a new sensibility all his own

that came to transform the cultural program of his time and for centuries to come. Over the last few decades, a recurring topic in Petrarch scholarship has, rather, been how deliberately he "fashioned" and refashioned himself for his contemporaries, and, even more, for the future generations by whom he confidently, and accurately, expected to be read and admired. His "self," or, perhaps better, his many and often contradictory selves, are largely the effect of skillfully deployed literary-rhetorical strategies. As many contemporary readers have argued, the inner conflicts, the self-doubts, the subjection to love, the yearning for earthly glory, and the following penance and regret are as much carefully constructed postures in dialogue with a web of other texts and voices as they are reflections of the writer's inner, psychological conditions. And we have increasingly come to recognize that our image of Petrarch standing at the boundary between historical eras, as between an old self and a new, is one that he himself initiated and fostered.

Still, despite all of the qualifications we have now introduced to the "myth" of Petrarchan modernity, there is no doubt that he remains a crucial point of reference in the history of Western culture. In our time, he is best known for his magnificent collection of vernacular Italian verse, commonly referred to as the *Canzoniere*,[1] but by Petrarch himself entitled *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (hereafter abbreviated as *RVF*), and its key role in the emergence and affirmation of vernacular literatures throughout Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, especially, though not exclusively, through the pervasive phenomenon we now call "Petrarchism." Yet, the seminal influence of Petrarch's many other works, mostly Latin, can be seen in the triumphalist pageantry and artwork of the Renaissance, so clearly indebted to his one other major Italian poem, the *Triumphi*; in the dramatic growth and evolution of the pastoral mode which his *Bucolicum carmen* helped to refound; in the resuscitation of classical epic as a leading genre, through his much-touted, if never completed, *Africa*. Petrarch is also the first post-classical figure to use the dialogue form – in *Secretum* – and the epistolary collection – notably the *Familiares* and the *Seniles* – as major cultural vehicles. His *De viris illustribus*, alongside his friend Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrorum* and *De claris mulieribus*, relaunched the genre of secular biography, while his *De remediis utriusque fortunae* became an indispensable repertory of moral exempla for at least two centuries. In other words, we may still correctly claim a primary Petrarchan influence on much of Renaissance literary culture in Italy, throughout Europe, and beyond.

And though it is no longer possible to assert, given the recent work of Ronald Witt, James Hankins, and others, that Petrarch literally founded the Latin Humanist movement, nonetheless there is no doubt that he made himself its early focal point and inspiration. His antiquarianism (the

collection of Roman coins), his book-hunting (the rediscovery of Ciceronian letters), his philological restoration of texts (Livy's *History of Rome*), his active celebration and circulation of the classics, his promotion of interest in Greek (including the sponsorship of a translation of Homer), his powerfully influential rearticulation of "the myth of Rome," his fusion of Christian autobiography with classical moral philosophy (Augustine with Seneca and Cicero), his attempt to reintroduce classical Latin style: all would become hallmarks of the Quattrocento and Cinquecento Humanists.

Who, then, is our Petrarch today? Contemporary scholarship is largely focused on the complexities and seeming contradictions in Petrarch's life and work. On the one hand, he is much more the prototype of the worldly courtier, advisor, and protégé of the powerful (the Colonna, King Robert, the da Correggio, the Visconti, the Carrara) than had formerly been imagined. And yet, as Charles Trinkaus already was arguing fifty years ago, he is also far more deeply engaged with problems of Christian faith than he once seemed to be, while his work at times reveals a profound investment in "medieval" theological traditions and institutions, particularly monasticism.

At the center of Petrarch's understanding of himself – and of much modern analysis of the man and his works – is his exalted conception of his special role as "poet." In 1342, at the age of thirty-eight, he was crowned in Rome as *poeta laureatus* (based largely on the unconfirmed expectations raised by the rapidly circulating news of his *Africa*), a title which he claimed had not been conferred since antiquity. Nevertheless, he was anxiously aware that he had rivals: notably, Dante and Albertino Mussato, to say nothing of Zanobi da Strada, all of whom had claims to laureation, and Giovanni Boccaccio, his younger friend and colleague, who both openly celebrated and intermittently challenged his exalted position.

"Our" Petrarch is one whose career must be read over time and in a series of transitions – both geographical and ideological – between critical political, intellectual, and spiritual contexts. Perhaps because he always took such a polemical stance in relation to the fourteenth-century papacy, we have tended to underestimate the influence of Avignon – where Petrarch spent much of the first half of his life – on his early formation. In fact, however, the papal court and the city of Avignon (where the papacy was transferred from Rome in 1309, and where it would remain, with one brief exception, until shortly after Petrarch's death), were fertile ground for the young poet-intellectual *in fieri*. They and the nearby pastoral "Vaucluse," where he sought refuge from courtly corruption and intrigue, were constant points of reference in his literary and other writings, often in dialectical relationship with a nostalgic and idealized vision of Rome, a city he would not in fact visit until he was in his late thirties.

When Petrarch's father moved the family to Carpentras, just a few miles from Avignon, the city was already turning into a kind of medieval cosmopolis. Within a few years after Pope Clement V settled in Provence in 1309, the papal curia developed into the most powerful court in Europe, and Avignon into a key political and cultural center, where intellectuals, artists, theologians, lawyers, notaries, and artisans from all over Europe (including, for instance, the painter Simone Martini, the Franciscan Ubertino da Casale, and the nominalist theologian William of Ockham) were to be found at various times. Despite the evident importance for Petrarch of the dynamic transmission of ideas and texts connected to the papal curia and to the city in general, and the nourishing patronage he received from members of that curia, notably Cardinal Colonna, Petrarch rapidly developed a strong critique of the increasing economic and secular power of the papacy, much like that in a preceding generation of Dante and the White Guelf party, to which his father had also belonged. All the popes during the seven decades of the Avignon papacy were French and closely connected to the French king: clearly a reason for resentment among the growing group of Italian immigrants, who wanted to return the papacy to Rome and to restore that city's traditional title as *caput mundi* of the Christian world.

By attending to this political context, we can shed significant light both on Petrarch's troubled relationship to the Avignon papacy and on his ambitious program of cultural renewal. Though from 1330 on he was closely linked to the curia, especially through his appointment as chaplain to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, a recurring theme in Petrarch's work, early and late, is his diatribe against "the Babylon on the Rhône," to which he applied a dark apocalyptic rhetoric inspired by the radical Franciscans of the time (as exemplified by his polemical *Liber sine nomine*). Paradoxically, then, Avignon represented both a steady benchmark wherever else Petrarch lived in his roving life – in Bologna and Parma when younger; in Milan, Padua, and Venice when older – and a continual point of tension in his literary production. And throughout his life it formed a shadowy backdrop for his grandiose vision of Rome renewed, whether in his early support for the regime of the visionary Cola di Rienzo, his later hopes for Emperor Charles IV, or his impassioned pleas to Pope Urban V near the end of his life. For Petrarch, in comparison to Rome, Avignon was a city without memory, without past, and therefore without any future. Still, Petrarch's vision generally differed from Dante's fantasies (in the *Monarchy* and political letters, especially) of reviving the Roman Empire and his ideas about the sacred origin of power.

Despite intermittent attempts to influence great political and religious leaders of the time, Petrarch's main focus was on the cultivation of an exclusive network of friends and colleagues independent of any political or

religious institution: a network that had Petrarch himself at its privileged center. The main thrust of Petrarch's cultural project increasingly became a cult of exemplary individualities from the glorious Roman past (from Scipio Africanus to the late, book-length, *Life of Caesar*; from Virgil and Cicero to Seneca), coupled with a retrieval of religious interiority modeled by St. Augustine: ideas that came to be pervasive in the following centuries. And, of course, it was at Avignon, and nearby Vaucluse, that he first created the myth of Laura and entered onto the path of collecting vernacular lyrics into a songbook, or *canzoniere*: the *RVF*, the work for which he is now best remembered. The *RVF* would go on, especially in the sixteenth century, to reshape the European poetic tradition and provide the linguistic model for Italian cultural-political identity that would endure at least through the Risorgimento or Italian unification in the mid-nineteenth century.

The effects of the "Avignon" experience would linger with Petrarch for the rest of his life. His representations of that experience, through which it is known us, would, however, be filtered and revised from the perspective of the latter half of his life, as many of the works first written in Avignon underwent considerable revision and, to some degree, ideological re-orientation. During the late 1340s and early 1350s, when Petrarch was gradually making up his mind to leave Avignon definitively for Italy, he underwent a series of traumatic and transformative experiences, which, for instance, led Hans Baron, Francisco Rico, and Hannah Wojciehowski to hypothesize a radical shift in his ideology. These included his bitter disappointment following the collapse of Cola's re-founded Roman Republic; the devastations of the Black Death, which killed both Laura and Cardinal Colonna, as well as many other friends and acquaintances; the violent deaths of two other dear friends at the hands of brigands; the offer, ultimately refused, of restitution of his confiscated patrimony by the Florentine Republic; and his budding friendship with Giovanni Boccaccio, which would become so central to him both personally and intellectually in later years.

From 1353 on, he would live primarily in Italy, under the protection of a series of powerful Northern Italian patrons – the Visconti in Milan, the da Correggio in Padua, the Venetian Republic – whom his Florentine friends, Boccaccio in particular, saw as tyrants. In reply, he would claim repeatedly, though not entirely persuasively, that (as he would say most directly in a very late letter), "I was with the princes in name, but in fact the princes were with me" (*Sen.* XVII.2). In this period, as he reached the zenith of his Europe-wide fame, he would consolidate both his humanistic scholarly project (including the joint sponsorship, with Boccaccio, of a translation of Homer into Latin) and his Augustinian-Franciscan Christianity, while ceaselessly writing new works and revising old ones. And even while continuing

to write patronizingly and dismissively of vernacular poetry, he would carry out extensive revisions to and expansions of the *RVF*, and launch his new and ambitious vernacular work, the *Triumphi*.

This *Companion*, then, aims to give a wide-ranging and nuanced view of Petrarch's life, of his works, of the complex interactions between them, and of their significance in social and historical perspective, respecting the continuously evolving and dynamic pattern of his career. In this way, our book seeks to address the multiple ways in which Petrarch lends himself to the teaching and study of the periods often referred to as the later Middle Ages and early Renaissance in Europe, both as a symptom and as a transformative agent. Moreover, we seek to strike a fruitful balance between incorporating the recent and valuable tendency to bring Petrarch's long-neglected Latin works, which constitute the vast majority of his writings, back to center stage and respecting the fact that his most enduring literary legacy remains his Italian lyric collection, the *RVF*. And we take note of the fact that, for all his seeming self-absorption, Petrarch constantly positions himself in dialogue: with contemporary friends, and enemies; with peers, patrons, and, occasionally, subordinates; but also with the classical past, and, less explicitly, with more recent voices in the nascent vernacular tradition; and, of course, with the future readers whose admiration and imitation he hopes and indeed expects – not in vain, as it turned out – to win. In partial recognition of how very successful he was in reaching those future readers and evoking and provoking their response, we devote some four chapters to his reception and influence in Italy and Europe in the two centuries following his death, and a final essay to his tortuous "confrontation with modernity," as Giuseppe Mazzotta puts it.

The book is divided into six parts, each devoted to a specific aspect of Petrarch's life, works, relationships, and thought, but continually in anticipatory or retrospective dialogue with one another. Part I sets forth an intellectual and cultural biography of Petrarch organized around the crucial dates, places, and activities of his life, while simultaneously foregrounding his recurrent attempts to shape posterity's perception of him. Our knowledge of Petrarch's life is extraordinarily rich in comparison to that of virtually any of his contemporaries or precursors, even the notoriously autobiographical Dante. The reason is simple, but also creates significant complications in how we are to assess what we think we know: Petrarch writes about himself endlessly, at once documenting the events of his life, his friendships, his interests, his political values and projects, his interior conflicts and complacencies, and his style of thought. Previous biographies of Petrarch, particularly the seminal study of Ernest Hatch Wilkins, but also that of Ugo Dotti, set out to reconstruct his life based largely on Petrarch's own declarations concerning

it, even as the "constructed" and even "fictive" elements of these works has long been recognized. We, instead, provide a bare-bones chronology of historically and biographically significant events in Petrarch's life, followed by two different, partial accounts of that life and the works associated with it, filtered through primary, recurrent interests and problematics that Petrarch himself makes structuring principles in telling and retelling his own story; notably, his restless penchant for travel in his life and revision in his works (Chapter 1) and his cultivation of a vast and influential network of friends (Chapter 2).

In the following two parts we introduce principal works from the two linguistic traditions in which Petrarch wrote. Part II offers four chapters on Petrarch's writings in the vernacular: three exploring the structures, themes, and compositional processes of the *Canzoniere* or *RVF* from different perspectives (Chapters 3–5) and one on the less well known, but important, *Triumphi* (Chapter 6). Part III is devoted to Petrarch's major Latin works, which in his own mind, as well as in the eyes of his contemporaries, formed his greatest and most significant accomplishments. Because of the vastness of Petrarch's Latin oeuvre, we have chosen to focus on a few key works, genres, and topics rather than attempt a comprehensive survey. This part opens with a treatment of Petrarch's most important poetic works in Latin, especially the epic *Africa* and the pastoral *Bucolicum carmen*, as well as the *Epystole metriche* or verse letters (Chapter 7). The *Africa* was Petrarch's debut as a Latin poet and constituted a deliberate effort to establish himself as the modern heir to the great classical poets. Though circulated only in fragments, and never finished, it became the basis of his international reputation and the occasion for his coronation with the laurel crown in Rome. This early, yet never fully realized success would define and haunt Petrarch throughout the rest of his career. The other two works, both complete, represent a successive and in some ways more successful realization of Petrarch's temperament and his poetic gifts. Chapter 8 offers a probing examination of Petrarch's *Secretum* or *Secret*, revealing a complex "defense of poetry" and of the imagination at the heart of a text that presents itself as the dramatization of a spiritual and vocational crisis. Chapter 9 treats Petrarch's lesser known, yet crucial, spiritual and contemplative works, especially the complementary works, *De vita solitaria* (*The Life of Solitude*) and the *De otio religioso* (*On Religious Leisure*). Chapter 10 focuses on Petrarch as letter-writer and collector of letters. Well acquainted with Seneca's moral epistles and famously the discoverer of Cicero's "lost" letters to Atticus, in his middle years Petrarch embarked on an ambitious program of collecting, editing, and rewriting (and even inventing out of the whole cloth) his own epistolary productions.

Part IV focuses attention on Petrarch's pervasive engagement with ancient, as well as late-medieval and contemporary, writers and thinkers; an engagement through which he sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly articulates his vision of the nature and purpose of intellectual and artistic endeavors. Chapter 11 deals with Petrarch's relationship to the ancients – the classical authors as well as the Church Fathers – and especially the ethical implications of his continuous balancing between classical and patristic Christian models of style. Chapter 12 explores the intertextual filiations that link Petrarch to the recent vernacular past: to Dante, of course, but also to lesser known precursors, as well as both the Occitan and early Italian tradition. Finally, Chapter 13 directs our attention to Petrarch's ferocious polemical invectives against intellectual, and occasionally personal, opponents of his own day: against the detractors of his beloved Italy (*Invective against a Detractor of Italy*), against the abstract speculations of Scholasticism (*On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*), and against those who prefer the physical sciences (especially medicine) to the moral, spiritual, and poetic disciplines (*Invective against a Physician*). The chapter carefully situates these polemical texts in the vital intellectual world of the mid-fourteenth century – emphasizing the enmity that Petrarch's fame aroused in would-be rivals – and goes on to anticipate the role of model that these texts later took on for the flourishing genre of Humanist invective.

The last two parts examine, as it were, Petrarch's "future": his vision of and importance for the nascent realm of European modernity. Part V explicitly follows Petrarch's "afterlife" in the two centuries we now call "the Renaissance." Successive chapters specify his importance for the formation of Italian and European Humanism, especially in the fifteenth century (Chapter 14), his seminal role in the courtly lyric phenomenon known, of course, as "Petrarchism" in relation to the sixteenth-century Italian context (Chapter 15), his function as privileged interlocutor for the emergent figure of the female poet (Chapter 16), and his influence on love poetry from throughout Europe (Chapter 17). Finally, Part VI is dedicated exclusively to the volume's concluding chapter, "Petrarch's Confrontation with Modernity." Chapter 18 revisits the central, vexed question of Petrarch and modernity, taking into account both the patently "modern" elements of his thought and the equally evident "reactionary" elements that seek a return to an idealized past, Christian and/or classical. The thesis, which in many ways reflects the perspective of the editors of this volume, is that "Petrarch is a modern who, paradoxically, disavows his modernity, and he does so mainly as a way of acknowledging his rootedness in the communal memories of tradition."

In conclusion, we believe that the fascination of Petrarch is as potentially alive and relevant today as it ever was – not because his works can be seen as single-handedly redefining the course of Western culture, nor because he himself can be made into a trope for the dawning of a new historical era and a new mode of consciousness, but rather because his struggles to shape and interpret his own place in the world and to negotiate a middle way between tradition and innovation, along with his evident desire to produce models that others might imitate in order to do the same, represent a singularly valuable example of the problematic intersection between individual consciousness and historical context, between personal identity and cultural constraint, between now and then.

NOTE

1 "*Canzoniere*" literally means "collection of songs."