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Arthur Tilley
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PART I
FRANCE AND ITALY

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CHAPTER I

THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

I

WHEN under the mighty impulse of the world-movement which we call the Renaissance men began to cut themselves adrift from the moorings of authority and tradition, they were not left wholly without a chart in their voyage across unknown seas. They had to guide them the wisdom of the ancients as recorded in the writings of their poets, philosophers, and historians. Yet there were some who preferred to shape their course by observation and experience, and it is an error to suppose that Humanism was the whole of the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci, the most perfect and complete embodiment of the Renaissance spirit, owed little, either in his speculations or in his manifold achievements, to the teaching of antiquity. The truth is that the Renaissance manifested itself in so many different forms, varying in quality and degree according to the soil which produced them, that in order to arrive at a just idea of the movement as a whole we must steadily keep in view all these manifestations. And this can be best done by starting from the man who was the real source of the Italian Renaissance. The little drawing which represents the Sorgues flowing out of a rock above Vaucluse, and which is presumably by Petrarch's hand¹, symbolises the whole movement. The stream is the Renaissance, the rock is Petrarch.

¹ P. de Nolhac, *Pétrarque et l'Humanisme*, 2 vols. 1907, II. 268.

For the Renaissance is the passage from the mediaeval to the modern world, and Petrarch under various aspects foreshadows the beginning of the modern world. He has been termed “the first modern man of letters,” “the first modern writer of autobiography,” “the first modern tourist,” and all these aspects have been summed up in Renan’s well-known phrase, “the first modern man.” He inaugurated in fact most of the activities which we regard as characteristic of the Renaissance. He collected manuscripts, he studied ancient monuments and coins, he wrote Latin prose and verse. And if we penetrate beneath these outward manifestations and look for the spirit which prompted them, we find in the first place that he was essentially an individualist. He was the first articulate rebel against the mediaeval conception that man existed only for the sake of Church or Corporation—that he had no individual rights, no individual conscience, no individual aims and aspirations. In none of his writings is the character of his individualism more clearly brought out than in his *Secretum*, that intimate work in which he lays bare the recesses of his soul¹, and to which he has given the form of three dialogues between himself and St Augustine. Thus the first modern man is brought face to face with the man who inaugurated the mediaeval world, and the cultivated individualism of the Renaissance is contrasted with the ascetic self-suppression of the Middle Ages. In the first Dialogue St Augustine impresses upon Petrarch the duty of self-examination and urges him to meditate upon death. In the second he arraigns him for various sins and infirmities, love of money, ambition, vanity, unchastity, and above all for that species of melancholy which mediaeval theologians called *accidia*, and which is often found in men of Petrarch’s self-centred temperament. On all these points the penitent recognises the justice of his confessor’s accusations, and with evident sincerity promises amendment. In the third Dialogue the

¹ In the Basle editions it is called *De contemptu mundi*. It has been well translated into English by W. H. Draper under the title of *Petrarch’s Secret*, 1911.

Father begins to probe deeper-seated diseases. He tells Petrarch that he is held in bondage by two strong chains, Love and Glory. "You call these chains? Do you want to rob me of the noblest of passions? Do you wish to darken the brightest region of my soul?" Then his inexorable monitor proceeds to examine him with regard to his love for Laura. Petrarch makes a stout defence, but at last he owns himself beaten and submissively accepts the proffered medicine. The other chain remains. "You desire more than is right", says his confessor, "the glory conferred by men and immortal fame." "I freely confess it," is the answer, "but this is a passion that I cannot curb." Once more St Augustine drives him from position to position, and urges him to abandon his studies. But Petrarch's last word is that "though he sees the straight path of salvation, he has not the strength to restrain his heart's desire." Nominally the victory is with the mediaeval ideal, and in fact the dialogues, which were written in 1342, coincide with a marked amendment in Petrarch's moral and spiritual health. From this time he rose

On stepping stones
 Of his dead *self* to higher things.

Yet Koerting is right when he speaks of Petrarch as being in his heart not altogether convinced. He will not, at any rate, abandon his love of letters, or his desire for posthumous fame. Truly, as Koerting says, the *Secretum* "may be called the charter of Humanism and the Renaissance¹." So too in the treatise *On a solitary life*, written at Vacluse a few years later, the central thought is the duty of self-culture and the development of the individual.

Yet Petrarch's individualism was far removed from the intense self-absorption of a Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He recognised to the full the claims of others to their individuality. Above all he venerated with a glowing admiration

¹ G. Koerting, *Petrarca's Leben und Werke*, Leipsic, 1878, pp. 646 and 648. And see the whole chapter for an admirable summary of the *Secretum*.

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those who had devoted this individuality to noble and great ends. For him history was the record of the illustrious men who had made it. The *De viris illustribus*, which he originally planned to embrace the lives of the great men of action of all ages and countries, but which in its definite form he limited to Roman history from Romulus to Titus, was regarded by him as his *magnum opus* in prose, the masterpiece which with its pendant in verse, the epic poem of *Africa*, should win for him immortality. It was in a similar spirit of admiration that he wrote his letters to the great writers of Rome, to Cicero, Varro, Horace, Virgil, Livy, Seneca, Quintilian.

Individualism implies not only freedom of action, but, almost as a necessity, freedom of thought. And this in active natures leads to freedom of inquiry, which in its most elementary stage is "an honest curiosity for information about everything." Petrarch had a large measure of this curiosity. In the well-known letter¹ in which he describes his ascent of Mont Ventoux he finds fault with the *frigida incuriositas* of the generality of mankind. He himself had a love of travel unusual in his age. Indeed, during his later years, after he left Vacluse, he had something of the restlessness which is so marked a characteristic of the Renaissance². Three years before the ascent of Mont Ventoux, he had visited Paris, and had prolonged his journey through Flanders to Liège, Aachen, and Cologne. He knew all the chief cities of Italy—Rome, Florence, Naples, Venice, Milan, Pavia, Parma, Bologna, Ferrara, Verona, Mantua, Padua. In later life he was sent by his patrons the Visconti on a mission to the Emperor (Charles IV), and he found him in his camp at Prague "on the confines of the barbarians." Four years later he paid a second visit to Paris. His interest in travel and geography is further shown by his *Itinerarium Syriacum*, which traces the journey of a pilgrim to Jerusalem,

¹ *Ep. de rebus familiaribus*, iv. 1 (ed. Fracassetti).

² He says of his second visit to France that he went "non tamen desiderio visa millies revisendi, quam studio, more aegrorum, loci mutatione taediis consulendi" (*Ep. ad post.*).

giving a brief description of the places of interest on the route, and by the numerous notes on geographical matters which he made in his manuscript of Pliny¹.

A higher stage of free inquiry is reached with the critical spirit, the spirit which takes nothing on trust, which makes an independent examination of everything, irrespective of tradition or authority. This spirit too Petrarch possessed in a high degree. Nothing more clearly marks his position as the parent of the Renaissance, as “the first modern man,” than his antagonism to nearly all the branches of mediaeval learning, to its astrology, its jurisprudence, its medicine, its logic, and its theology. The opposition to Aristotle, which runs through the *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, is prompted rather by an orthodox churchman’s antagonism to the Averroist interpretation of Aristotle’s writings than by a critical examination of those writings, with which he was necessarily only imperfectly acquainted, but it is highly significant that, while Dante proclaims Aristotle as “the master of those who know,” Petrarch, only a generation later, raises the standard of revolt against his infallibility, and by asserting the superiority of Plato foreshadows the philosophic thought of the Renaissance².

The same critical spirit takes another form in the preface to the *De viris illustribus*, where Petrarch explains his method of using his authorities. “I do not try to reconcile the historians, nor to collect all their narratives; I only follow those whose greater credibility or superior authority commands respect³.” This is the true principle of historical inquiry. So too in the second book of the treatise *On the solitary life*, when he is dealing with the lives of those saints who had led a solitary life, he does not content himself with reproducing the hagiographical records, but tests them so far as he can by independent investigation. “The founder of modern criticism,” to quote Koerting again, “could not

¹ Nolhac, I. 75.

² See Nolhac, I. 8 and II. 148 ff.

³ Ego neque pacificator historiarum neque collector omnium, sed eorum imitator, quibus vel verisimilitudo certior, vel auctoribus maior est.

refrain from applying the principles of free inquiry even to ecclesiastical writings; even here he broke with the blind belief in authority of the Middle Ages.”

Such was the new spirit which descended upon Petrarch and made him one of the most powerful agents of human progress that the world has ever seen. He is rightly termed the first humanist, for he was the first man to claim free play for human aims and aspirations. But he was also the first humanist in the narrower and historical sense of the term¹. It was in the pages of the great writers of antiquity that he found nourishment for his belief in humanity. He prized literature as a form of intercourse with great men. He communed with Virgil and Horace, with Cicero and Seneca, as with wise and eloquent monitors².

¹ *Humanitas* was used by the Romans to signify a liberal education, the education befitting a man. “‘Humanitatem’ appellaverunt id prope-modum, quod Graeci ‘*παιδείαν*’ vocant, nos ‘eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes’ (good conduct) dicimus... Huius enim scientiae cura et disciplina ex universis animantibus uni homini data est idcircoque ‘humanitas’ appellata est” (A. Gellius, XIII. 17). This passage is paraphrased by Battista Guarino in his educational treatise *De ordine docendi et studendi* (written in 1459) as follows: “To man only is given the desire to learn. Hence what the Greeks call *παιδεία*, we call *studia humanitatis*. For learning and training in virtue are peculiar to man; therefore our forefathers called them *Humanitas*, the pursuits, the activities, proper to mankind. And no branch of knowledge embraces so wide a range of subjects as that learning [*i.e.* classical learning] which I have now attempted to describe.” On a medal of Vittorino da Feltré, executed by Pisanello not long before 1446, the date of Vittorino’s death, the great schoolmaster is described as *omnis humanitatis pater*. Similarly on a medal of Piero Candido Decembrio, made by the same artist in 1448, the inscription runs, *Studiorum humanitatis decus*, or, as we should say, the glory of classical scholarship (G. F. Hill, *Pisanello*, pp. 176 and 179, plates 54 and 56). For, as Guarino implies, the Italians of the fifteenth century regarded classical literature as supplying in a larger measure than any other subject that learning and training in virtue which were peculiar to man. Hence this literature was spoken of as *literae humaniores*, as the literature that was distinctively human, that was distinctively proper to man, and those who studied this literature were called humanists.

² *Libri medullitus delectant, colloquuntur, consulunt et viva quadam nobis atque arguta familiaritate junguntur* (*Ep. de rebus fam.* III. 18).

He found in their glowing pages a consecration of human aims, and a guide to human endeavour. But he also learnt from them the mystery of style, regarding it not as a trick to be slavishly copied, as did the Ciceronians of a later period, but as the expression of the individual man. This is the feature of Petrarch's own Latin style. Though it is defective from the point of view of Latinity, it has a charm which is wholly wanting to the correct compositions of most scholars from the Renaissance downwards; it is the expression of the individual man; it bears the impress of his idea of beauty. For Petrarch touched and retouched his writings many times before they satisfied his artistic sense. In 1341 he thought that he had almost completed his *Africa*, but he went on working at it for another dozen years. Finally he threw it aside, and it has come down to us in an incomplete state¹. The same fate attended the *De viris illustribus*, for the pen dropped from his hand when he was working at the Life of Julius Caesar.

If in his Latin writings Petrarch's imperfect mastery of the language renders his artistic expression unequal and hesitating, it is otherwise with his vernacular poetry. No poet, not even Pindar or Virgil or Milton, has ever shewn a truer or a more watchful sense of style, and the form, at least of the *Sonnets*, is as impeccable as the style.

Koerting rightly sees in this careful attention of Petrarch to literary form a sign of the important part which art was destined to play in the whole culture of the Renaissance. But Petrarch was interested in other forms of art besides literature. He was a warm lover of music, and played on the lute with considerable skill. His friendship with the Sienese painter of the Papal Palace at Avignon, Simone Martini, is well-known, and few painters have had a subtler feeling than Simone for beauty of colour and outline, or greater skill in the expression of it². Petrarch,

¹ There is almost certainly a gap of three and a half books between the present fourth and fifth books.

² B. Berenson, *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, pp. 45-47.

too, loved beauty in nature as well as in art. His descriptions of scenery, especially of his beloved Vaucluse, shew the precision and the warmth of a careful and loving observer. He was also an enthusiastic gardener, versed in the principles of horticulture and working with his own hands¹.

Between the solitary of Vaucluse and the sojourner in the courts of princes there seems a sharp contrast. Early in May 1353 he left Vaucluse, which had been his home for sixteen years, for ever, and immediately after crossing the Alps accepted an invitation from the head of the Visconti, Archbishop Giovanni, the "Great Viper." His eight years sojourn at Milan as the client of the Visconti, those most able and unscrupulous of despots, whose aim was the enslavement of Italy, was as perplexing to his friends as it is to us, and the explanation which he gave to Boccaccio can hardly have satisfied him better than it satisfies the modern reader². Equally disconcerting is his affection for that treacherous adventurer, Azzo da Correggio, sometime lord of Padua, to whom he dedicated the most popular of his Latin treatises, the *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, and for Jacopo II da Carrara, whose able rule of Padua was inaugurated by murder and forgery. But here it is chiefly important to notice that in these episodes Petrarch once more reveals himself as the parent of the Renaissance. His ready acceptance of the patronage of Italian princes was the first step towards that shameless importunity for place and pelf which disgraced the humanists who came after him. His blindness to the vices of the tyrants who honoured and flattered him foreshadows that indifference to sin which was the ugliest feature of the Renaissance, and which was the chief cause of that long night which descended upon Italy. Power and energy, independently of their aims, had the same attraction for Petrarch as they had for the Italians of a later generation. His relations with Giovanni and Galeazzo Visconti mark the

¹ Nolhac, II. 260 ff.

² See *Epistolae variae*, xxv. (Fracassetti, III. 264 ff.).