

# From Laurel to Fig: Petrarch and the Structures of the Self

*The following extracts are taken from the Italian Lecture, delivered by Professor Nicholas Mann FBA, Director of the Warburg Institute, University of London, on 9 November 1999 at the British Academy.*

In 1916 Mrs Angela Mond offered funds for a lecture series 'to be on some subject relating to Italian literature, history, art, history of Italian science, Italy's part in the Renaissance, Italian influences on other countries, and any other theme which the Council may consider as coming with the scope of such a Lecture'. The lectures are delivered biennially.

**Y**ou may perhaps have heard something about me, although it is not very likely that my obscure little name will have been able to travel far in time and space. And perhaps you would like to know what kind of a man I was, and what became of my writings, especially those whose reputation may have reached you, or whose name you may have heard mentioned ...' The voice, reaching successfully across space and time, is that of Francesco Petrarca, to whom I shall henceforth refer as Petrarch, planning for posterity in an autobiographical letter specifically addressed to future generations and, like so much else that he wrote, unfinished. The project was an unusual one for the fourteenth century, and indeed for the Middle Ages as a whole: autobiography was not a common genre in an age less insistent on the value of the individual, however insignificant, than our own; the few examples that we have, if they are other than merely formulaic in content, reveal the overarching influence of the *Confessions* of St Augustine.

Even in those opening words, Petrarch reveals some of his characteristic traits: a modesty almost unbecoming in one sufficiently convinced of his own reputation to address future readers; an awareness of the importance of his works as the vehicles for that reputation; an implicit faith in the power of the text – the letter – to reach those to whom it was addressed. The picture that he proceeds to sketch of himself is marked as much by its self-indulgence as by its lucidity, but it is far from complete, for the story that it tells peters out in about 1351, almost a quarter of a century before his death. It would seem that he started to write it in the 1360s, and that he continued to work at it until at least 1371. Yet the narrative, which naturally shows all the benefits of hindsight, does not live up to its own promises: for a fuller picture we must look elsewhere. The fact that we can, and that Petrarch has left us so much material for the documentation of his own life, is probably more significant than his failure to

complete his one exclusively and overtly autobiographical text. It turns out that in the last seven years of his life (1367–74) he frequently chose to look back, in letters and in polemical texts, at the events of earlier years, but it also becomes apparent that this retrospection is coloured by the desire to make of the recollection of things past an artful and coherent narrative, what he several times called a '*fabula*'. Into that narrative he wove his various works, and as we unpick its threads with the benefit of our hindsight, we become aware of underlying structures which hold it all together, interlacing events, real or imagined, with all manner of texts which both evoke and on occasions actually constitute those events.

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It is plain that writing well and living well are in Petrarch's case inseparable, and linked by a single fundamental method, which is that of imitation. By this I do not mean what we might call plagiarism, but *imitatio* in the creative sense in which we constantly encounter it in Petrarch's writings. He was deeply aware of the traditions on which he depended: thus we find him looking to the authors of antiquity not only for literary genres – from epic to eclogue – or structures – from epistle to dialogue – but also, more narrowly, for thoughts and words, while at the same time he may imitate them in the reported actions of his life. It is rare to find a moment of biographical significance which does not have a classical or other illustrious example behind it. To quote but one example, Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux is explicitly linked to the climbing of Mount Hemo in Thrace by Philip V of Macedon as related by Livy, and is thus firmly located in an historical and classical context, while its unusual nature is deliberately emphasised by the royal example that he is following.

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The first of Petrarch's crises is explored in the memorable letter (*Familiars* IV 1) in which he tells how on 26 April 1336 he and his brother Gherardo came to climb Mont Ventoux. The starting point in the text is *cupiditas videndi*, a desire to see from the top of the mountain that St Bernard would have called *curiositas*, and a state of sin. Petrarch's account appears highly circumstantial, and I shall not linger over the details of the climb, except to say that he and his brother set off before dawn from a little inn at Malaucène, each with a servant. Gherardo went shinning up the mountainside by the steepest but shortest routes, while Petrarch kept looking for easier paths on the lower slopes, being ready to climb for longer if the incline was less steep. So that by the time Gherardo reached the upper ranges, Petrarch was still struggling some way below. Finally, though, he caught up with his brother, but almost immediately started his search for easier paths and found himself going down into the valleys again. 'Thus, as before,' he ruefully exclaims, 'I encountered serious trouble: I had tried to put off the effort of having to climb, but the nature of things does not depend upon human desires, and it is impossible for a body to arrive at a summit by descending ...'

One may pause at this stage on the slopes and ask what is going on. Scarcely, I think, a feat of mountaineering. We should first note the stamp of Lactantius upon the narrative: in an extended passage of the *Divine Institutes*, he deals with the image of the Pythagorean Y, which Petrarch elsewhere associates with the crucial crossroads that arise at crisis points in a man's existence. Lactantius writes to the Emperor Constantine that there are two paths along which all life must proceed: one which leads to virtue and to heaven, which is steep and rugged from the start; the other which sinks to vice and to hell, and which at its beginning appears to be pleasant and well-trodden, but later becomes steep, rough with stones, overgrown with thorns, and interrupted by deep waters or violent torrents.

Finally, after repeatedly falling back in the Lactantian manner, and after explicitly comparing his rather unsuccessful method of climbing with his equally indirect approach to the blessed life, Petrarch reaches the summit. There, he falls into a meditation, inspired by the impossible panorama that opens out before him. He looks back over his 'perduti giorni': a decade of sins, ambition and desires, and gives his retrospection an explicitly Augustinian tone by quoting the beginning of the second book of the *Confessions*: 'I want to remember the abominable deeds that I perpetrated in those days, and the carnal corruption of my spirit. I do this, my God, not because I love those sins, but so that I may love you ...'

But the role of St Augustine does not end there. For it turns out that Petrarch had carried up with him (surely not by chance) his copy of the *Confessions*. He lets the book fall open and reads the first passage that comes to his eyes, in that part of the tenth book where Augustine considers the role of memory and the function of the images of the past that we store inside ourselves. He proceeds explicitly to relate his experience on the mountain top at the age of thirty-two to the dramatic conversion of Augustine under the fig tree at the same age, lighting upon a passage in St Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

Thus Petrarch establishes a clear parallel of considerable spiritual significance. And if we should be in any doubt as to the credentials of his act of imitation, he immediately dispels them by reminding us that Augustine was himself imitating – or claiming to imitate – St Anthony, who had come by chance across a passage in the Gospels which had commanded him to 'go home and sell all that belongs to you'. The implications of this chain of *imitatio* are that Petrarch's version of the ancient divinatory practice of the random consultation of books, the *sortes Virgilianae*, has led him to a fundamental turning-point on his journey: from the sinful desire to see to the healing need to know himself.

Professor Mann is the British Academy's Foreign Secretary. An account of his first months in office can be found on page 36.