

Petrarch: Bringing the Great Minds of the Past to Life

Petrarch's world was characterized by horrors that appeared truly apocalyptic: the worst economic collapse in history; the deadliest pandemic; global combat between Christian and non-Christian; religious schism; and constant war and popular insurrection throughout Europe.

Petrarch's lifetime (1304-1374) coincides almost exactly with the transfer of the Papacy from Rome to Avignon in France from 1309 to 1377. This *de facto* kidnapping was one part of a complex controversy that dominated Christendom in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries, over the limits of the secular power of the Papacy to command kings and, more important, levy taxes. At this time, all Italy was divided into two factions: the partisans of the German Emperor, the Ghibellines; and the Papalist Guelphs. In the city-state of Florence, the Guelphs were further split into the extremist *I neri* (the Blacks) and the moderately secular *I bianchi* (the Whites).

The intellectual leader of the Whites was Dante Alighieri. One of his political subordinates was Petracco dell' Incisa, Petrarch's father. Eventually, the faction fight came to blows. The Whites lost, and their leaders were sent into exile. Both Dante and Ser Petracco wandered from city to city. Francesco was born in Arezzo; seven years later, when the Petracci lived in Pisa, Dante stayed with them. Giovanni Boccaccio (born nine years after Petrarch) was the illegitimate son of Boccaccino di Chelino, onetime Prior (governor) of the Florentine Republic and a partner in the Bardi banking firm. The collapse of the Bardi in 1340 was the proximate cause of the global economic collapse during Petrarch's lifetime. Boccaccio's stepmother was a kinswoman of Dante.

Contemplating Mortality

After legal studies, Petrarch took minor orders (but never the priesthood) and became an ecclesiastical bureaucrat serving the Avignon Papacy. As his literary talent became recognized, he was offered a series of sinecures that allowed him to devote much of his time to poetry. In 1336, he climbed Mount Ventoux in southern France, carrying along a copy of his beloved St. Augustine's *Confessions*. At the summit, contem-

plating his mortality, Petrarch realized that his arduous climb was the metaphor for the remaining years of his life.

Petrarch soon reached a profound understanding: The seeming impotence of humanity to prevent the ceaseless wars and fratricide and political chaos of the time was not the "will of God," but rather the failing of man. For hundreds of years, Christian thinkers had ignored a true understanding of the great ideas of the past that had built civilization, just because those ideas came from "pagans." Had not Augustine stood on the shoulders of the ancients, to become the greatest of all Church Fathers? By allowing the great ideas of the past to "waste and spoil, through our own cruel and insufferable neglect," wrote Petrarch in one of his famous "Letters to Marcus Tullius Cicero," we fail "to cultivate our own talents, thereby depriving the future of the fruits that they might have yielded."

Against the Aristoteleans

The arduous climb to which Petrarch committed the rest of his life was to end the dark period of human ignorance and bring alive again the mental life of all the great minds of the past.

By the end of his life, Petrarch had amassed one of the greatest libraries in Europe, filled with works of Plato and other Greeks not seen in the West for centuries; he personally rediscovered much lost correspondence of Cicero after painstaking research. The Republic of Venice unsuccessfully offered Petrarch a palace in exchange for his library; seven years before his death, Venice deployed several Aristotelean scholars from the University of Padua to befriend the old man, and then attack his reputation for scholarship. Petrarch answered them publicly in "De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia" ("On His Own and Many People's Ignorance"), his last major work. The Aristoteleans think I am ignorant?, asked Petrarch. Well, "I have sixteen or more of Plato's books at home, of which I do not know whether they have ever heard the names. They will be amazed when they hear this. If they do not believe it, let them come and see."

—Michael Minnicino