

its survivors either turning toward frenzy, grasping as much sex and debauchery as possible before the plague hit them, or becoming religious fundamentalists, flagellants trudging naked from town to town, whipping themselves and praying constantly. Few had acted with calm, and even fewer had tried to prevent the disaster.

Does man make a difference? Ask Petrarch. Ask Leonardo Bruni, or Plethon, Bessarion, and Cusanus. Look at them, and then look at yourself in the mirror:

APPENDIX

Petrarch, the Language-Maker

Not only was Petrarch instrumental in reviving knowledge of the works of Plato and Classical Greece, but, together with his older contemporary Dante and his younger contemporary Boccaccio, he actually invented the modern Italian language. As a result of their efforts, Italian became the first literate form of a modern European vernacular, a necessary prerequisite for the development of a national language-culture and, hence, a modern nation-state.

The verb “invented” is not too strong. For thousands of years, both before and after the period of Roman dominance, the people of the Italian peninsula spoke an assortment of vernacular dialects. These were not just differences in accent, as we have in America, but idiomatic and syntactical differences so great that they could stand in the way of communication. Educated people wrote in Latin, and Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch were no exception.

Dante realized that the growth of human freedom and the possibility of salvation were hindered by the fact that the most important and elevated thoughts in all of mankind’s history could only be discussed by the learned few in a language almost incomprehensible to the vast majority. Writing with immense courage in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante hurled down a challenge before all of Western civilization: the vernacular tongues are “nobler,” said Dante, than the “artificial” language of the Court and the Schools; we must elevate these vernaculars to the level whereat they can express ideas as well as, or better than, Latin or Greek. Dante’s epic *Commedia* embodies that challenge, and scientifically demonstrates the method of solution.

Dante wrote the *Commedia* in his version of Tuscan, the dialect spoken in his beloved home, Florence. His followers Petrarch and Boccaccio continued the exercise brilliantly, creating a language of powerful musicality which was plastic enough to adopt many of the neologisms and usages that flowed from the pens of these three

What would you have done, if Petrarch had asked you to help him in the mid-1340’s? Would you have turned your back to work on the harvest as usual, or joined the never-ending quarrels about taxes and careers? Would you have said that the future is in the hands of God, and that you could not do anything about it?

Petrarch knew that God was not so stupid, as to create human beings who were some kind of impotent cattle, born only to be slaughtered. But, do you?

In 1515, about 150 years later, the Florentine patriot Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a short dialogue to celebrate this achievement. Machiavelli longed for a unified Italian nation, and a unified Italian language to help bring it about. “A common tongue of Italy” had not yet come into being, concluded Machiavelli, but when it did, the “true source and foundation” of it, would be the work of the Florentine writers, “among whom Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio hold pride of place, to such a degree that no one can hope to rival them.”

Petrarch, Chaucer, and Shakespeare

The Dante-Petrarch-Boccaccio language project was so successful, that its reverberations were heard across Europe, and no place so loud as in England. During the Fourteenth century, England was undergoing its own linguistic turmoil, as the Latinized French of the old Norman oligarchy was giving way to an evolving English vernacular. The pivot of this transformation was to be the courtier and diplomat Geoffrey Chaucer (?1343-1400). An amateur versifier from his twenties, Chaucer was intellectually reborn by a series of diplomatic visits he made to Italy between 1372 and 1378. It is hypothesized, but not proven, that Chaucer met Petrarch in Padua in 1374.

Exposure to the rich harmonies and strong rhythms of Italian verse, and to the imaginative narratives of tale-tellers like Boccaccio, opened Chaucer’s mind to the heights to which he could take his own vernacular. Chaucer’s borrowings from the Florentine trio are too extensive to describe here; it is sufficient to repeat an accolade from Chaucer’s masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, the founding document of modern English verse:

I wol yow telle a tale which that I
Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
As preved by his wordes and his werk.

He is now deed and nayled in his cheste,
 I preye to god so yeve his soule reste!
 Fraunceys Petrark, the laureat poete,
 Highte this clerk, whos rethoryke sweete
 Enlumined al Itallie of poetrye.
 [*Clerk's Prologue*, 26-33]

Chaucer's deep public debt to Petrarch inextricably linked English and Italian poetry for years to come. It soon became almost obligatory for an English gentleman with poetic aspirations to complete his education with a tour of Italy. Two of these "Italianate Englishmen," as they were called, were Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547) from the period of Henry VIII. Wyatt and Surrey embarked on a project to master Petrarch's poetics, translating and adapting many of his poems.

As a result of their project, the two popularized in English the sonnet form most often used by Petrarch (an

8-line octet followed by a 6-line sestet)—which today we call a "Petrarchan sonnet." Surrey experimented with a variation of Petrarch's sonnet, dividing the 14 lines into three 4-line quatrains, followed by a couplet. At the same time, both he and Wyatt emphasized the need to regularize English meter, pointing to the 10-syllable iambic pentameter as the most felicitous analogy to the 11-syllable line favored by the Italians.

But, the greatest "Italianate Englishman" never went to Italy. Fifty years after Surrey and Wyatt, William Shakespeare was inspired by their Petrarchan verse, and wholly adopted Surrey's sonnet form into what we today call the "Shakespearean sonnet." And, following its development in the dramas of his contemporary Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare perfected the iambic pentameter line as the means to give voice to the most beautiful and content-laden English ever heard.

—Michael Minnicino

NOTES

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19. Quoted in C.M. Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon, The Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
20. *Ibid.*
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22. Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man." See translation at www.pinter.com/john/dignity.htm

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