THE WORLD'S CLASSICS



PETRARCH

SELECTIONS FROM
THE CANZONIERE

AND OTHER WORKS

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Translated with an Introduction and Notes by MARK MUSA

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INTRODUCTION

PETRARCH was born on 20 July 1304 in Arezzo, a town in central Italy, where his family had been in exile from Florence since 1301. His father was the Florentine notary ser Petracco, and his mother Eletta Canigiani of Ancisa. His childhood was spent at Ancisa and Pisa until 1312 when the family moved to Avignon, at that time the papal residence. A housing shortage obliged Petrarch and his younger brother Gherardo to settle with their mother in nearby Carpentras. Here Petrarch began to study grammar and rhetoric. Early in 1316 he embarked on a legal training at the University of Montpellier. But even then the young man preferred reading the classical poets to studying law: it is said that during a surprise visit his father discovered a number of books hidden in his son's room and proceeded to burn them, but, moved by the boy's pleading, he saved Cicero's Rhetoric and a copy of Virgil from the fire. It was about this time that Petrarch's mother died.

In 1320 he and Gherardo went to Bologna to attend the famous law schools, where they remained until their father's death in 1326. Suddenly free to pursue his own interests, Petrarch quickly abandoned law and began to participate in

the fashionable social life of Avignon.

When the family income was depleted, Petrarch took the four minor orders required for an ecclesiastical career, and in the autumn of 1330 became a private chaplain in the service of Cardinal Giovanni Colonna who respected Petrarch as a great classical scholar. Petrarch remained connected with the family until 1348. In 1333 his intellectual curiosity took him to Paris, Flanders (where he discovered two manuscripts of Cicero's orations), and Germany. On his return to Avignon he met the Augustinian Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, who directed him towards a greater awareness of the importance of Christian patristic literature, and became his friend and confessor. So strong was the Augustinian's influence on him that until the end of his life Petrarch carried with him a tiny

copy of St Augustine's Confessions, a gift from Dionigi. In 1336 Petrarch climbed the 2000-metre-high Mount Ventoux in Provence, some forty miles north-east of Avignon; on reaching the summit, he opened his little book at random, and read that men go to admire mountains and rivers and seas and stars, yet they neglect themselves. He describes this experience in spiritual terms in a letter to Dionigi (see p. 11 below). In this letter, dated 26 April 1336, Petrarch describes his struggle to climb the mountain by means of paths that attracted him because they were not very steep, but which often led him downhill and in so doing increased his fatigue. What is implied in the passage is that the poet's brother Gherardo, a Carthusian monk at the fictional time of the letter (in fact he became a monk seven years later), by choosing the more difficult path, the one that goes straight up, reaches the spiritual heights much sooner than his brother. This flux and indecision, the attraction to the world of the flesh as well as that of the spirit, the difficulty of choosing the steeper path which leads to good, are driving forces in much of the poet's work. They are essential to the movement of his Canzoniere.

Petrarch's reputation as a man of letters and the important canonries to which he was appointed at various times now assured him the ease and freedom he needed to pursue his studies and writing. During this period he participated in a polemic concerning the papal residence, expressing in two Epistolae metricae (Metrical Letters) his conviction that the papacy must return to Rome. He saw Rome for the first time early in 1337, and the ancient ruins deepened his admiration for the classical age. That summer he returned to Avignon, where his son Giovanni was born out of wedlock to an unknown woman. In the same year he went to live at Vaucluse, near the source of the river Sorgue about twenty miles east of Avignon. There he led a life of solitude and simplicity, and conceived his major Latin works. In 1338 he began his De viris illustribus (On Illustrious Men) and about that time he also started his Latin epic on Scipio Africanus, called Africa. In 1340 Petrarch received invitations simultaneously from Paris and Rome to be crowned as poet. He chose Rome and was crowned on 8 April 1341. Not only was his coronation a personal victory, it was a triumph for art and knowledge as well. In antiquity this ceremony represented the greatest tribute that could be bestowed on a living

poet.

On his way back from Rome Petrarch stopped at Parma. There, with renewed inspiration, he returned to the writing of his Africa. Shortly after Petrarch returned to Avignon, in April 1343, his brother Gherardo became a Carthusian monk. It was in the same year that Petrarch's daughter, Francesca, was born. She, like her brother, was illegitimate, although Petrarch eventually did have them both legitimatized. Gherardo's decision moved Petrarch deeply, leading him to reexamine his own spiritual state. Though his Christian faith was unquestionably sincere, he felt incapable of his brother's renunciation. His inner conflict inspired the writing of his Secretum (The Secret), a biographical and self-analytical dialogue in three books, between St Augustine, who is the poet's conscience and confessor, and Petrarch, who remains aware of his failure to realize his religious ideal, yet unable to renounce those temporal values which have motivated his life. The Secretum serves as an excellent introduction to Petrarch's collection of Italian poems, the Canzoniere, in so far as his relationship to his lady is concerned. In both works Laura is immutable, fixed in her perfection, while Petrarch, the lover, wavers, changes his mood, and experiences a variety of emotions. Both works deal with the passing of time, the effects of age on Laura's beauty, and her premature death. The Secretum not only confirms many of the concerns underlying the Italian poems of the Canzoniere, it also suggests that Laura was, indeed, a real woman. And the Secretum has a particular analogue in the Canzoniere: the canzone 'From thought to thought' (p. 47), which moves with the grace and force of the poet's spiritual struggle between passion and self-deception.

In the autumn of 1343 Petrarch went to Naples on a diplomatic mission for Cardinal Colonna. He recorded his

impressions in a number of letters.¹ On his return he stopped at Parma, hoping to settle at Selvapiana, but a siege of Parma by Milanese and Mantuan troops forced him to flee to Verona in February 1345. There, in the cathedral library, he discovered the first sixteen books of Cicero's letters to Atticus as well as his letters to Quintus and Brutus. He personally transcribed them and it was these letters of Cicero that stimulated him to plan a formal collection of his own letters.

From 1345 to 1347 Petrarch lived at Vaucluse and began writing his De vita solitaria (On the Life of Solitude) and the Bucolicum carmen, a collection of twelve Latin eclogues. In May an event took place in Rome which aroused great enthusiasm in him: Cola di Rienzo, who shared Petrarch's fervent desire for the rebirth of Rome, had in a successful revolution gained control of the Roman government. Petrarch encouraged Cola by exhorting him to persevere in his task of restoring Rome to her universal political and cultural mission. He then started out for Rome. But Cola's dictatorial acts soon brought him the hostility of the Pontiff and antagonized the Roman nobles. News of Cola's downfall before the year was over prompted Petrarch to write his famous letter of reproach,² which tells of his bitter disillusionment.

Rather than proceed to Rome, Petrarch remained in Parma, where in May 1348 he supposedly received news of Laura's death—a victim, probably, of the plague. The Black Death deprived Petrarch of several of his close friends that year, among them Cardinal Colonna. His grief is reflected in the poems then written to Laura and in letters of this period, one of the most desolate being addressed to himself (Ad se ipsum). Three eclogues and the Triumphus mortis or Triumph of Death (following the Triumphs of Love and Chastity) were also inspired by the pestilence.

Because of the losses he had suffered, a period of his life seemed to have ended. And so in 1350 he began to make the formal collection of his prose letters in Latin called Familiares.

¹ Familiares, V. iii. 6.

² Familiares, VII. 7.

Since 1350 was a Jubilee Year, Petrarch made a pilgrimage to Rome. On his way he stopped in Florence, where he made new friends, one of whom was Boccaccio. After a brief stay in Rome he returned northward and arrived in Parma early in 1351. In the mean time the Pontiff was soliciting his return to Avignon, while Boccaccio was despatched from Florence with a letter of invitation promising Petrarch a professorship at the University and the restitution of his father's property. Petrarch chose Provence, where he hoped to complete some of his major works. He arrived at Vaucluse in June 1341, accompanied by his son. In Avignon in August of that year he refused a papal secretaryship and a bishopric offered to him: he was impatient to leave the papal 'Babylon' and wrote a series of violent letters attacking the Curia, known as the Epistolae sine nomine (Letters Without a Name).

In the spring of 1352 he returned to Vaucluse, resolved to leave Provence. The following spring, after visiting Gherardo, he crossed the Alps into Italy. For eight years he stayed in Milan under the patronage of Giovanni Visconti, enjoying seclusion and freedom for study while at the same time using his pen to urge peace among Italian cities and States. He worked on the Canzoniere, took up old works (including De viris), and began the treatise De remediis utriusque fortunae (On Remedies Against Both Kinds of Fortune), a lengthy book structured around the medieval conventions of allegory, psychic debate, and the Exemplum. Written over a period of approximately ten years, it sets out examples of how to deal with both fortunate and unfortunate circumstances. Of all his works it was the one most highly in demand all over Europe in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He was entrusted with diplomatic missions which brought him into direct relation with several heads of State, including the Emperor Charles IV.

In June 1361, Petrarch went to Padua because the plague (which took the life of his son and several friends) had broken out in Milan. In Padua he completed the Familiares and started work on a new collection of letters, the Seniles (Letters of Old Age). In the autumn of 1352 he settled in Venice,

where he had been given a house in exchange for the bequest of his library to the city. From Venice he made numerous trips until his definitive return to Padua in 1368.

Petrarch's Paduan patron, Francesco da Carrara, gave him some land at Arquà, a few miles south of Padua in the Euganean hills. There Petrarch built a house to which he retired in 1370. He received friends, studied, and wrote, and there his daughter Francesca, now married, joined him with her family. Except for a few brief absences, he spent his last years at Arquà, working on the Seniles and on the Canzoniere, for which he wrote a concluding canzone to the Virgin Mary. He continued to revise his four Triumphs (of Love, Chastity, Death, and Fame), and added two more (of Time and Eternity). He died on the night of 18–19 July 1374, and was buried beside the church of Arquà.

The combination of a charming personality, a great intellect, and the rare ability to sell himself, talent and all, made Petrarch one of the most famous men of letters of his times. Colucci Salutati, in fact, in a letter to Roberto Guidi which discussed Petrarch's poetry, prose, and philosophy in both Italian and Latin, raises him to even greater heights than the literary giants of antiquity. Petrarch cherished his independence and solitude above all, and for this reason, though he was the friend of popes and rulers as well as of the common everyday citizen, he never wholly committed himself to any one person or cause. One might say Petrarch loved Petrarch more than anything or anyone else, and because of this he kept detailed records of his life and works. This preoccupation with his own state of mind is probably best displayed in the 366 Italian poems of the Canzoniere. This edition presents as a sample just some of the most outstanding.

The Canzoniere, a work of great craftsmanship, genius, and psychoanalytical self-examination, is also instilled with the poet's deep concern for worldly glory. Petrarch, like Dante before him, was fully aware of his enormous talent; although Dante was to a great extent interested in his own worldly fame, the reader of the Canzoniere cannot help but sense that

Petrarch yearned for it far more. The desire for fame and glory, for immortality through his literary production, was a driving force in Petrarch's life. He had an immense respect for the classics, studying them with great care, and considered it his duty to restore them to their true place in the world of letters. He was a collector of books and manuscripts and put

together a very fine personal library.

Petrarch in his own time was recognized most of all for his Latin writings and not for his Italian poetry. It was, in fact, for his Latin epic, the Africa, and not his Italian Rime that at the age of thirty-seven he received the crown of the poet laureateship in Rome. In the eyes of his contemporaries, his imitation of Virgil's Aeneid and the Eclogues in his own Africa, which he himself always considered to be his claim to fame, made him a second Virgil, and his many writings dealing with the problems of moral philosophy as well as the content and style of numerous and widely read letters put him on a level with Cicero. It was one of Petrarch's main concerns in his Latin writings to teach his fellow Italians to regard the great writer-statesmen of ancient Rome not as distinguished dead figures of the past but rather as living models of the present and future worthy of imitation. In these estimable Romans Petrarch saw a legacy and a means of spiritual unity amongst his fellow Italians. His canzone 'Italia mia' (p. 43) is full of the spirit of national unity.

In Petrarch's 'Letter to Posterity' (p. 1), which the reader will notice is incomplete, and most likely intentionally so, and from which we learn many things about his life, especially the period up to 1341 and the time of his coronation, the poet makes no mention of his Italian poetry. It is clear from this letter that he wished to be remembered by future generations as the student, scholar, and lover of classical antiquity and not as the author of his Italian Canzoniere. In a letter written two years before his death on 18 July 1374 he refers to his poems written in Italian as nothing more than 'trifles' and expresses the hope that they will remain unknown to the world. Nevertheless, the fact remains that he spent a lifetime preparing for the publication of the poems, revising and polishing his

'trifles' from at least the second half of the 1330s until his death—this we know from the many corrections and notes in his own copy of the poems, preserved today in the Vatican Library. From his notes in the margin of his edition we can assume that each poem in the Canzoniere has its position there for an important reason. Much like Dante's Vita nuova, the collection of Petrarch's poetry is carefully structured with

a purpose in mind.

To the collection of his Italian verse he gave no specific title. It is known to us today as simply Rime or Canzoniere or the Rime sparse, and contains 366 poems in all: 317 sonnets, 29 canzoni, 9 sestine, 7 ballate, and 4 madrigali. Petrarch called the collection by the modest name of Rerum vulgarium fragmenta. The poetry explores such themes as the fragility of mortal things, the vanity of earthly joy, the fleeting nature of time, and life as a journey in search of peace and the conquest of solitude. The Canzoniere is clearly more than just a love story. The collection includes poems on the return to Rome and in praise of Italy, others on fame and virtue and the death of friends and patrons. The great majority of the sonnets deal with the poet's love for Laura; the longer poems tackle political and religious matters as well. The division of the collection into 'In vita di madonna Laura' ("The Lady Laura in Life') and 'In morte di madonna Laura' ('The Lady Laura after Death') was not the work of Petrarch, but is a division made by many editors since the sixteenth century. But not all editors make the break at the same point. Some manuscript versions of the collection (the Chigi version and the post-1366 versions) begin the second part of the Canzoniere with poem 264: 'I'm always thinking, and I'm caught in thought' (p. 60). In the Vatican Latin 3195 manuscript the division is indicated by an elaborate initial for poem 264 preceded by seven blank pages which could imply that Petrarch intended to add more poems at this point. Other editors break at sonnet 267 ('O God, that lovely face, that gentle look', p. 64).

It is especially in the second part of the Canzoniere that we find frequent allusions to the act of writing—a reminder of the self-consciousness both of the poet and of his poems. The

poet finds that he is unable to write, and yet is forced to write. Writing helps him, yet it is writing that makes him suffer because of his love, for which only writing can provide the cure. A double paradox. Love leads to poetry while poetry creates love and preserves it. And poetry will earn fame for its creator and assure him a place in posterity.

Petrarch does not tell us much about the lady Laura. We would expect him to say something about her in his 'Letter to Posterity' (p. 1) where he mentions a number of his friends. He refers, and only in vague terms, to a love in his youth but does not mention her name, and this is over with in one sentence. Instead, mention of his first meeting with Laura is made (and this could well be a fictitious meeting) on the flyleaf of his Virgil manuscript, as is her death exactly twentyone years later. Petrarch kept the identity of Laura so much a secret that some of his critics were led to believe that the lady never truly existed, that she was a fictitious love and that the name stood not for a real lady but rather for an important concern in the poet's life: the 'laurel' or symbol of fame and glory. In fact, the poet often plays on the similarities of the lady's name 'Laura' and the tree 'laurel'. But who Laura was, married or unmarried, is not important, since such information does not provide us with a better understanding of the Canzoniere. The lady we must concern ourselves with is revealed by Petrarch's collection with its own particular construction. Suffice it to say that the existence of Petrarch's Laura is certainly as real as that of Dante's Beatrice, and both ladies exist for many of the same reasons. Above all Laura was the epitome of excellence, one that never changes. She is the poet's inspiration, the ornament of his verse. The reader of the Canzoniere, however, is not long into the poems before he or she realizes that Laura is not the main subject of the work. Petrarch himself is its subject and centre, and the work itself is his own psychoanalytical notebook, an ever-changing portrait of the self.

Petrarch's two Italian works, the Trionfi and the Canzoniere, were the source of what has become without doubt the

longest-lived lyrical tradition in literary history: 'Petrarchism'. Both of these works were widely circulated in manuscript form before their first printing in 1470; thereafter, editions with extensive notes and commentary circulated throughout Europe, serving as the fountain of European Petrarchism. The elegant poetry of the Trionsi presented a challenge to the poets of Europe and eventually established the terza rime form outside Italy. It also had a significant impact upon European iconography during the Renaissance, upon painting, tapestries, enamels, medals, emblems, pageants, and theatre. It was the poetry of the Canzoniere that appealed to love poets all over Europe because it represented self-analysis and introspection at the most sophisticated level. Catullus and Ovid no longer satisfied the new sensibility.

The influence of the Canzoniere appears first in Boccaccio and gradually becomes stronger with the minor poets. In his Troilus and Criseyde around 1385, Chaucer adapted Petrarch's sonnet 132 ('If it's not love, then what is it I feel?', p. 49). In Spain, the Marqués de Santillana was writing sonnets in the Petrarchan style in 1440. In the late fifteenth century Cariteo and his followers, such as Tebaldeo and Serafino, were stressing the techniques of Petrarch's verse, especially his use of the conceit, and this generated much enthusiasm both in Italy and abroad. French poets such as Maurice Scève, Saint Gelais, King Francis I, Clément Marot, and Philippe Desportes (who became a kind of international broker of Petrarchism between Italy and England, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Germany) as well as Wyatt and Surrey in England were enchanted by Petrarch's verse.

The early manifestation of Petrarchism was based to a large extent on the contemplative and melancholic aspects of the Canzoniere, and it was encouraged by the poetry and poetics of Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), who firmly believed that the language of poetry should be like that of Petrarch, which was purified of excess and vulgarity. Although Bembo's poetry does not provide inspired examples of this, among his followers are some of the greatest poets of the Renaissance: the Italians Ariosto, Michelangelo, and Marino; and in France

the Pléiade, including Ronsard and Du Bellay, whose Petrarchism would influence Watson and Sidney in England, ultimately affecting Spenser, Shakespeare, and William Drummond. Boscán began experimenting in 1526 with Italian forms in Spanish verse, and with Garcilaso de la Vega started a successful Petrarchan movement in Spain. Late in the sixteenth century Petrarch's influence appeared in the Netherlands in the poetry of Jan van der Noot; and after 1600 in that of Pieter Hooft and Constantijn Huygens. Petrarchism was prevalent in Germany in the seventeenth century with Weckherlin, Optiz, and Gryphius. Even before 1600 it had spread to Poland, Hungary, Dalmatia, and Cyprus.

All over Europe Petrarchism became a growing creative force which renewed the poetic art of the lyric. The figure of Laura represented the new ideal of a woman who was both woman and wisdom as well as beauty and virtue. She was the illuminating centre of the poet's life and art. There were some Petrarchists who stressed the individual features of the lady's beauty, and this group became so popular that a school of poets sprang up who began to parody the lady: among them Berni, du Bellay, and Quevedo. Petrarch's poetry and its poetic devices gave birth to much great poetry and also much that was mediocre. The fact remains, however, that it served as the universal model of poetic language, stimulating both inside and outside Italy the development of poetic diction and scansion. It showed poets how to express their deepest feelings in a sensitive, elegant, and dignified manner, and how to use imagery to convey the commonplaces with wit and grace and power. It became a period style, a process which evolved and adapted itself to all talents, tastes, and temperaments.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

PETRARCH'S verse does not always flow free and easy. At times the syntax can be rather convoluted or distorted, depending, of course, on the special effect he is trying to achieve. His language always strives to imitate the mood and meaning of his poems. My goal in these translations has been to preserve this delicate element in Petrarch's poetry and never to sacrifice the movement and meaning of the verse to the tyranny of rhyme. I am, however, concerned with the sounds of words and their position in my translation of each of the poems. When sound in the Italian text seems to be the dominant element in a particular poem, then I am careful to imitate this sound by choosing words that play with and echo each other. In short, I have tried to be faithful to the poem's meaning without being too literal, and faithful to its sound and music without being archaic or restricting myself to a formal rhyme scheme. Nothing is as good as the original, and if any of my translations should tempt the reader to look at Petrarch's original, then I have more than succeeded in my purpose.

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