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Petrarch

by MORRIS BISHOP

"I was born to this world," says Petrarch, "in the Via dell' Orto of the City of Arezzo, just at dawn on Monday, July 20, in the thirteen hundred and fourth year of this latest age which takes its name from Jesus Christ, fountain and author of all my hope." The house of his birth still stands at the town's top, across from the cathedral. Houses occupied by great ghosts live long.

He was christened Francesco Petracco, a slightly inelegant name which he Latinized to Petrarca, which we have Anglicized to Petrarch.

He was an Aretine only by circumstance. His father, Ser Petracco, was an office-holding notary, or attorney, in Florence, living on the edge of poverty. He belonged to the bourgeois party of the Whites; and in the revolution of 1302 he was banished, together with Dante and many others, and took refuge in Arezzo, some sixty miles away. But as Arezzo gave a chill welcome to plotting Florentine exiles, Ser Petracco had soon to seek his fortune afar. His wife, Eletta, and baby were permitted to return to the family house in Incisa, on Florentine territory.

According to a dear family story, Francesco, seven months old, was transported to Incisa in a sort of sling depending from a stout

stick borne over a mounted servant's shoulder. In fording the flooded Arno, the horse slipped and fell; the servant nearly lost his life in saving that of the child. This is the kind of incident that has made Fortune a deity.

In Incisa was born, in 1307, Francesco's brother Gherardo, the product of a furtive visit of Ser Petracco. In 1310 or 1311 the family was reunited for a year in Pisa, and there, or possibly in Genoa, Ser Petracco was visited by his old friend and fellow exile Dante. By this time Ser Petracco found a post in the papal court, which had removed from Rome to Avignon. There, in 1312, his wife and sons joined the exile.

Avignon was a town of some five thousand inhabitants. The arrival of the papal court affected it as would the establishment of the United Nations in a rural American county seat. Cardinals' trains were billeted in citizens' homes, petitioners and office seekers camped in the streets, on the walls, in cemeteries. Signora Petracco and the boys found lodgings in the town of Carpentras, fifteen miles away, and there they spent four happy years. Writing, years later, to Guido Sette, a schoolmate and a lifelong friend, Petrarch remembered in Carpentras only joy, security, peace at home, liberty in public, and country silence round about. He recalled tenderly how the boys watched out the night in talk on the eternal subjects. He remembered also that while his companions were studying their Latin for grammatical and rhetorical lessons, "I was noting down the substance of thought—the pettiness of this life, its brevity, haste, tumbling course, its hidden cheats, time's irrecoverability, the flower of life soon wasted, the fugitive beauty of a blooming face, the flight of youth, the trickeries of age, the wrinkles, illnesses, sadness, and pain, and the implacable cruelty of indomitable death." Already he was oppressed by the sense of time and its hurry toward the end.

One day his father came to Carpentras with Guido Sette's uncle. Despite Signora Petracco's fears, they visited the famous Fontaine de Vaucluse, fourteen miles away. Francesco was enchanted with the lovely rocky gorge and with the fountain itself, a mysterious swirling pool, where long-hidden underground waters

furiously emerge under limestone cliffs. This, he said, was the place he would most wish to live, rather than in any great city.

Francesco, Gherardo, and Guido Sette were sent to the University of Montpellier and then to Bologna, to study law. Seven wasted years, Francesco called them, but although he detested the law—the art of selling justice—he had time to read widely in the classics, to perfect his Latin style, and to correct his Italian not far from the Tuscan fount. He loved fat Bologna, *pinguis Bononia*, its songs and its dances; he loved also to escape on feast days for long country walks, returning after dark to climb the crumbling walls.

The parents died, and Francesco and Gherardo returned, in 1326, to Avignon. Francesco always maintained that his guardians robbed him of his small property, an act which reinforced his dislike of the law. He refused to practice—"I couldn't face making a merchandise of my mind," he said—but he must have had some employment at the papal court, for he and his brother led the life of elegant young men about town.

Francesco was tall and active, with a clear complexion, between light and dark, keen, lively eyes, and reddish-brown hair, which turned prematurely gray, to his great grief. He was vain of his good looks. He later recalled to Gherardo how the pair of them would work all night on their coiffures, sometimes burning their brows with curling irons, how they would dispose every fold of their gowns, terrified lest wind should discompose them and horses splash them with mud; and he recalled his very long, very tight boots, which would have crippled him if he had not revolted in time. He remembered their stylish talk, with dislocated words and dropped syllables, and their popularity, their swarms of visitors, and the vain, lewd songs they sang. He wrote poetry in the current mode, which he was later careful to destroy, and he had more than his share of amorous success with the light women who followed the papal court.

On April 6, 1327, when he was not yet twenty-three, he attended the early morning office at the church of St. Clare. There and then for the first time he saw Laura, and there and then the

god Amor's arrow pierced his heart and made a wound never to be staunched.

To rid himself of Laura's obsessing image, he says, he traveled far. But again he says that the real reason was a great inclination and longing to see new sights. He got as far as Paris, Flanders, Germany, Rome; he would have liked to push on to the farthest Indies, to Tarprobane. Even in old age he loved to travel on a map, with the aid of books and imagination. He has been called the first tourist, journeying for pleasure alone; and indeed it is hard to think of a predecessor, for even Herodotus wandered with a book in view.

For pleasure alone he climbed Mont Ventoux, which rises to more than six thousand feet, beyond Vaucluse. It was no great feat, of course; but he was the first recorded Alpinist of modern times, the first to climb a mountain merely for the delight of looking from its top. (Or almost the first; for in a high pasture he met an old shepherd, who said that fifty years before he had attained the summit, and had got nothing from it save toil and repentance and torn clothing.) Petrarch was dazed and stirred by the view of the Alps, the mountains around Lyons, the Rhone, the Bay of Marseilles. He took Augustine's *Confessions* from his pocket and reflected that his climb was merely an allegory of aspiration toward a better life.

To qualify for the right to receive income from church benefices he took the tonsure, which committed him to nothing much (though ruining his stylish coiffure). Aided, no doubt, by wealthy patrons, he bought a small house in the picturesque gorge of Vaucluse, thus linking forever the names of Petrarch, Laura, and Vaucluse. His retreat was only twenty miles from the hateful city of Avignon, the Western Babylon, with its traffic noise, its scavenging pigs and dogs, and its filthy dust blown by the mistral. When he went to town he tried to make himself insensible, but he had much business in Avignon, for he was already well known as a poet and scholar, and of course Laura was there.

If he did not exactly discover the love of wild nature, he established it as a literary convention for all later times. His

beautiful descriptions of country sights and sounds, of the little Sorgue, with its crystal waters and the emerald luster of its bed, moved and still move the poetic imagination of the Western world. But his solitude was laborious. "I rise at midnight, leave the house at dawn; and in the fields I study, think, write, and read. I fight off sleep as long as I can, and keep dainties from the body, pleasures from the soul, sloth from my behavior. All day I wander on bare mountains, dewy valleys, and in mossy caves, alone with my thoughts." He lived simply. A servant once asked him, "What do you eat?" "Polenta, toasted turnips, greens, vegetables, sometimes delicious cows' milk." "No meat?" "I'm not a wolf that feeds on flesh."

He worked fruitfully, producing, in Italian, poems of love's longing and despair, which were passed from literary hand to hand, with copies taken on the way. They were diffused throughout Italy, sung to the lute in such gatherings of gentlefolk as Boccaccio describes. In Latin he wrote giant compendiums of ancient learning, an epic poem which was to rival Virgil's, and endless enchanting letters. His retreat was not a rejection of the world; it was a roundabout means of attaining worldly fame.

This he gained. For him Rome revived its ancient custom of crowning a poet with symbolic laurel. On April 8, 1341, on the holy ground of Rome's Capitol, he became the first laureate of modern times. His celebrity spread far: an old blind poet from near Genoa had himself led, and often carried, by his son to Naples, in order to hear and feel the presence of his idol. Missing Petrarch there, the pilgrims pursued him to Parma, and for three days blessed God for their companionship with poetic divinity.

The attainment of one's ambition is always disillusioning, or so we are told. Petrarch's sense of human vanity and void increased; he went through a period of crisis. His dear brother Gherardo, shocked by the death of the woman he loved, entered a Carthusian monastery, to spend a six-year novitiate in virtual silence. Was not this, indeed, the better way? In his self-questioning mood Petrarch wrote a beautiful series of penitential psalms, and also his extraordinary *Secretum*. This, his secret book, never revealed

during his life, is a dialogue with Saint Augustine. The saint, with robust assurance, explores Petrarch's character and faults and brings to light his subconscious motives. He berates Petrarch for his sensuality, his overweening love of fame, his really ridiculous sighing for unattainable Laura, and his *accidia*, or fits of unreasoning gloom. "Give yourself back to yourself!" says the saint. The little book, stemming from Augustine's own *Confessions*, is the first example of introspective self-analysis of modern times.

His sensuality bore its fruit. He had a son, Giovanni, born in 1337, and a daughter, Francesca, born in 1343. Whether there was one mother or two we do not know. Petrarch did his best for his children. He had them legitimized, gave the son the best education obtainable, and procured for him an ecclesiastical living; but the boy was a sad scapegrace, at least in the father's eyes. He died at the age of twenty-four, in the Plague of 1361. The girl, on the other hand, was the consolation of Petrarch's later years.

From 1343 onward Petrarch spent more and more of his time in Italy, partly because he obtained comfortable canonicates there, partly because Vaucluse had nearly served its purpose, and partly because he enjoyed implication in great affairs. In Parma, during the Great Plague of 1348, he learned that his Laura had died on the sixth of April, twenty-one years to the hour from the moment he had first seen her in the church of St. Clare. (The coincidence is astounding; whether too astounding for belief depends on one's capacity for belief.) He lived for a time in Padua; he visited Florence and was triumphally received. The city restored his family property to him; but as he did not immediately make his residence there, it took the property back again. He returned for two years to Vaucluse. After his departure, his house was robbed of everything except his books; he never saw it again. He settled in Milan, city of the Visconti tyrants, hateful to all Florentines. For this he was much blamed even by his best friends; and indeed it does seem a surrender to an ambition he affected to despise. He served the Visconti as envoy to Venice and to the Emperor Charles IV, and he made an official trip to Paris to felicitate the blood-

thirsty King John the Good of France on his release from an English prison.

In Milan, in 1359, he received a visit from Boccaccio, nine years his junior. The two became fast friends; their precious correspondence is a literary treasure. (Petrarch left Boccaccio, in his will, money to buy a warm dressing gown for "winter study and lucubrations by night.")

Restless, he left Milan in 1361 for varying stays in Pavia, Padua, and Venice. The city of Venice gave him a palazzo on the Riva degli Schiavoni, whence he could watch the ships setting forth for the Black Sea and Egypt and the Holy Land. In return, he offered his books to the city, expecting them to be the nucleus of the first public library since ancient times. (But after his death they were not delivered; at least twenty-six of them arrived, after centuries of adventure, in Paris.)

Venice did not satisfy him; nothing satisfied him. Four young Aristotelians visited him, and made clear that they thought him an old fogey. He was shocked by a cleric à la mode, who praised only Averroes, and called Paul and Augustine and the rest a lot of gabblers. He was inspired to write the treatise *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*.

He was old and tired and conscious of being out of date. He removed to Padua and bought a country house at Arquà in the hills to the southward. It still stands, in its olive groves and vineyards, flower-framed, bird-beloved, as in his day. His daughter Francesca joined him. She had married well; her son Francesco was the image of his grandfather. The child's death at the age of two nearly broke the old man's heart. "I never loved anything on earth as I loved him," he grieved, but he came to love no less his winsome granddaughter Eletta, named for his mother.

Illness gathered: fevers, fainting spells, foot trouble, and the itch. He was so thin that he was afraid of vanishing. Boccaccio urged him to take things easy, to stop writing. "No," he said; "nothing weighs less than a pen, and nothing gives more pleasure; it is useful not only to the writer but to others far away, perhaps even to those who will be born a thousand years from now."

In the morning of July 19, 1374, he was found dead at his writing desk, the pen dropped from his hand on his *Life of Julius Caesar*. (But some distrust this story, too exquisitely apt.) He lacked a day of reaching seventy years, the Psalmist's span.

"What am I?" he had asked himself, a few years before. "A scholar? No, hardly that; a lover of woodlands, a solitary, in the habit of uttering disjointed words in the shadow of beech trees, and used to scribbling presumptuously under an immature laurel tree; fervent in toil, but not happy with the results; a lover of letters, but not fully versed in them; an adherent of no sect, but very eager for truth; and because I am a clumsy searcher, often, out of self-distrust, I flee error and fall into doubt, which I hold in lieu of truth. Thus I have finally joined that humble band that knows nothing, holds nothing as certain, doubts everything—outside of the things that it is sacrilege to doubt."

Petrarch is important to us in three ways—as a poet, as a humanist scholar, and as a living human being.

The irruption of Laura—or love's reality—into Petrarch's life turned him from a rhymester in the prevailing mode into a great poet.

Who was Laura, his muse? Some have doubted if she ever existed. They point to the Provençal convention that a poet must sigh forever for an unattainable lady, to Petrarch's presumed desire to outdo Dante's mystical love for Beatrice in his *Viva Nuova*, to the discord between Petrarch's proclaimed devotion for Laura and his simultaneous gross amours, and to the convenient triple meanings of the word *Laura*: *il lauro*, or the poetic laurel; *l'aura*, the zephyr; *l'auo*, gold. Laura, they say, is merely an allegory, a useful fiction.

No, Laura was a real woman. Many efforts have been made to track her down. The identification with Laure de Sade, née Laure de Noves, is very old, and while it presents difficulties, it is not at all unlikely. An identification is not, perhaps, very important, but readers always want to know how much is true in any fiction, as writers are usually reluctant to tell.

His *Rime in Vita e Morte di Madonna Laura*, 366 poems (the

leap-year number), give us plenty of specific facts. Laura was young, golden-haired, noble, rich; she came from the hill country near Vacluse, and she was married and settled in Avignon. She was one of a group of young matrons who went bathing and boating together. Many of the poems take their rise from an incident—the poet's attempt to purloin a glove; an eye affliction of Laura's; a new dress, purple with pink spots, blue-bordered, reminding the poet of phoenix feathers.

We have other evidence of her reality. In Petrarch's *Secretum*, his private, undivulged self-examination Saint Augustine sneers that Laura's body, worn out by illness and frequent childbirths, has lost its old beauty. Petrarch admits the fact, but protests that she cleansed his youthful soul of all filth and taught him to look upwards. "Nonsense!" says Augustine, a hardheaded confessor. "She has ruined your life! She turned you from the love of the Creator to the love of the creature!" Augustine makes his charge admit that Laura's youthful beauty, and her significant name, allured the poet, and that he had besieged her with his sensual desires. "But she never yielded!" protests Petrarch. "I could never love anything else! My soul is so used to adoring her, my eyes so used to gazing on her, that all is not she looks dark and ugly!"

What exactly did he want? He is always pleading in his poems for "pity," for "yielding," for the gift of mercy forever sought by the Provençal poets. One may amuse oneself by imagining that one day she might have decided to "yield." How he would have fled! She would have ruined his whole book.

Long, hopeless fidelity is the poet's best theme. But it has to be sincere, it has to be true. Then it has to be converted into beautiful poetic form. Every reader of Petrarch's poems must feel their truth and must recognize their beauty.

His commonest device was to take an incident of the endless courtship and develop it in sonnet form into a "conceit," or a fancy, or a coherent rounded thought. Some of the conceits are very thin-spun, elaborate, on the edge of absurdity. The form was enthusiastically adopted by the poets of Italy, France, and Eng-

land, and the Petrarchan sonnet gained a universal vogue which eventually brought upon it nearly universal scorn. (But the "conceit" has returned to poetry today.) The fading of the Petrarchan tradition has left in many minds an aversion from Petrarch, wholly undeserved, for much of his poetry is simple, straightforward, expressing a deep emotion in everyday words which magically turn to lovely harmonies.

Instead of describing unknown, unread poems, let us take an example.

T.S. Eliot said that, knowing no Italian, he picked up a copy of Dante and stumbled through a few lines, and knew that this was great poetry. We may attempt the same test with a sonnet of Petrarch's, to see, in reading it aloud, how some of the sound and sense come through. (The reader is warned to notice the triple pun in the first line, and advised that *crine* means hair, and that *leggiadrette* is a diminutive of *charming*.)

*L'aura che 'l verde lauro e l'aureo crine
soavemente sospirando move,
fa con sue viste leggiadrette e nove
l'anime da' lor corpi pellegrine.*

*Candida rosa nata in dure spine,
quando fia chi sua pari al mondo trove?
Gloria di nostra etate! O vivo Giove,
manda, prego, il mio in prima che 'l suo fine;
sì ch'io non veggia il gran pubblico danno
e 'l mondo remaner senza 'l suo sole,
né li occhi miei, che luce altra non hanno,
né l'alma, che pensar d'altro non vole,
né l'orecchie, ch'udir altro non sanno
senza l'oneste sue dolci parole.*

What does it mean? Why this:

*The gentle airs, breathing a little sigh,
lift the green laurel and her golden hair;
and Laura's face, so delicately fair,*

sets free the vagrant soul from body's tie.

*She is the candid rose, thorn-compassed, shy,
and yet our age's glory and despair.*

*O living Jove, grant me this single prayer,
grant only that before her death I die.*

*So I'll not see the sun go out, to bring
the world's disaster, and to leave behind
my eyes, no other light discovering,*

*my soul, to one unending thought confined,
my ears, that never hear another thing
but the sweet language of her virtuous mind.*

Laura died; and Petrarch commemorated her in his *Triumphs*, mostly a very exhausting parade before her of ancient heroes and heroines, in *terza rima*. But there are few sweeter poetic passages than his description of Laura's death:

*Non come fiamma che per forza è spenta,
ma che per sé medesima si consume,
se n'andò in pace l'anima contenta,
a guisa d'un soave e chiaro lume
cui nutrimento a poco a poco manca,
tenendo al fine il suo caro costume.*

*Pallida no, ma più che neve bianca
che senza venti in un bel colle fiocchi,
parea posar come persona stanca.*

*Quasi un dolce dormir ne' suo' belli occhi,
sendo lo spirto già da lei diviso,
era quel che morir chiaman gli sciocchi:
morte bella pareo nel suo bel viso.*

*Not like a suddenly extinguished light
her spirit left its earthly tenement.
She dwindled like a flamelet, pure and bright,
that lessens in a gradual descent,
keeping its character while waning low,
spending itself, until its source is spent.
Not livid-pale, but whiter than the snow*

*the hills in windless weather occupying,
only a mortal languor did she show.*

*She closed her eyes; and in sweet slumber lying,
her spirit tiptoed from its lodging-place.*

It's folly to shrink in fear, if this is dying;

for death looked lovely in her lovely face.

This is not, in fact, true; for Laura died of the plague. And anyway, Petrarch was far away. But what of it?

Petrarch was the first modern scholar, the first modern literary man (for Dante we must call medieval). He loved to write, rising often at midnight to get to his desk. A friend tried to force a vacation on him and locked up his books and papers; Petrarch fell into feverish headaches, and the friend, alarmed, gave him back the key.

He wrote, as he read, with passion. He said: "I write to please myself; and while I write I converse eagerly with our elders, in one way I can. And I gladly forget those among whom I was forced by evil fate to live; I employ all my power of mind to escape them and seek out the ancients. As the very sight of my contemporaries offends me, the remembrance, the splendid deeds, even the bright names of men of old allure me and fill me with inestimable joy; so that many would be shocked to learn how much more I find my delight among the dead than with the living."

His reading was a communion with ancient spirits, alive in books. He wrote them personal letters; he called Cicero his father, Virgil his brother. A great volume of Cicero, disturbed on his shelves, fell and wounded his ankle, making him wonder what he had done to make Cicero angry. He called books "welcome, assiduous companions, always ready to appear in public or go back in their box at your order, always disposed to speak or be silent, to stay at home or make a visit to the woods, to travel or abide in the country, to gossip, joke, encourage you, comfort you, advise you, reprove you, and take care of you, to teach you the world's secrets, the records of great deeds, the rules of life and

the scorn of death, moderation in good fortune, fortitude in ill, calmness and constancy in behavior. These are learned, gay, useful, and ready-spoken companions, who will never bring you tedium, expense, lamentation, jealous murmurs, or deception." What a fine quotation for a library, or a publisher!

He served well his ancient friends. He discovered several lost works of Cicero and gave them to his world. With Boccaccio, he engaged an Eastern scholar to translate Homer into Latin. He loved to examine and caress Greek books, though unable to understand them, and he tried in vain to learn the language.

"I have got rid of most of my passions," he wrote a friend, "but I have one insatiable thirst—book-buying." Yet in the end his library numbered only two hundred volumes, partly, to be sure, because he was always giving books away.

We call him the chief reviver of ancient learning. His example stimulated others to collect the classics and to copy them or have them copied. He aroused also a vogue for the critical study of ancient texts, which abounded with copyists' errors. He said that if Cicero or Livy should read current examples of their writing, they would disavow them as the work of barbarians. He developed principles of stylistic analysis, rejecting, on the basis of style alone, works ascribed to Cicero and Virgil. He found a treatise of Saint Ambrose so un-Ambrosian that he took it from the saint and gave it to Palladius.

His own formal Latin style was, and is, recognized as a modern model. It is thoroughly Ciceronian—exact, subtle, sensitive. When a Pope wanted to make him apostolic secretary he escaped the unwanted task by submitting an essay couched in such high style that the Pope rejected it as unpopal. In his letters he employed a lower, familiar manner, easy and flowing, and individual. "The style is the man," he said, long before Buffon. "We all have naturally, as in our person and movements, so in our voice and speech, something singular and our own." He advised a friend not to cling slavishly to the ancients, but to graft the new on the old, for the first inventors were men, too. "Don't believe the common statement that there's nothing new under the sun, and

nothing new can be said. True, Solomon and Terence said that; but since their time how much is new!"

His critical sense was keen. He called a treasured document of Julius Caesar a fake; he read an absurd, ill-written life of Saint Simplicianus and said outright that he did not believe a word of it. He opposed supernatural explanations, preferring to rest on plain reason. He was anti-Aristotle, he said, whenever Aristotle was anti-common-sense. He rejected astrology (which was formally taught in Italian universities) because it denied human liberty. "Can celestial bodies deviate from their courses, break all their laws, run in irregular orbits, to give warnings to men? Ridiculous!" He was skeptical even of miracles, since so often lies, follies, and frauds hide under the veil of religion and sanctity.

Essentially, he taught the blending of faith and love with exact, rational, critical method, as he blended in himself the poet and the scholar. One must approach knowledge with emotional desire; one must examine it with cool distrust. "Theology is a poem, with God for subject," he said. But theology is also a rational science, susceptible to reason.

This attitude, this union of love and reason, is humanism. Properly we call Petrarch the first humanist.

With all his modernism, he retained much of the medieval. The word "medieval" would have surprised him; he thought medieval times were modern times, and he thought they were very bad times. He took for granted their social, political, and religious structure, the antithesis of human and divine, the contempt of this world, which is a mere proving ground for the next. But he had no interest in scholastic philosophy or in medieval literature in general. He pinned his faith to Plato, not to Aristotle, the supreme medieval master. While, of course, he knew his immediate poetic predecessors in France and Italy, he never mentions most of the great medieval classics, barely even Dante. He did not own a copy of the *Divine Comedy* until, late in life, he received one as a present from Boccaccio.

He loathed the world that he saw, with a good deal of justifica-

tion, for it was filled with wars, plagues, tyranny, cruelty, ignorance, and political and religious cynicism. He turned backward, to the Roman classics, to the Bible and the early Fathers, to escape the present; he dimly realized that his backward-turning was at the same time a forward-turning.

His times recognized him as an intellectual leader. His fame was great, first as a poet, then as a moral philosopher. He was the counselor of princes and of the Emperor, the public critic of popes. He brought to his age a new concept, or an old, forgotten concept, of the possibilities of man's existence on earth.

Petrarch was the first man since Saint Augustine, a thousand years before, to give himself to us entire. His *Letter to Posterity* is the first modern autobiography. (With a few exceptions, the Middle Ages barely conceived of the literature of private recollection.) His intense self-consciousness prompted him to self-analysis, and since he was a literary man, his self-analysis took shape in self-expression. His enormous collection of letters makes an endless *journal intime*—and the first.

He was a great introspective. Introspection was hardly a new discovery. Every religious practiced it, especially the mystics. However, they were concerned only with the soul's welfare, with sin and salvation, whereas Petrarch, like any modern, was seeking first of all self-knowledge. "What use is it to know things if you don't know yourself?" inquired his mentor, Saint Augustine, in the *Secretum*. Most of Petrarch's work is an effort to know himself and to display himself completely, with his shortcomings and faults, and also his virtues. He never tired of exploring his inner world. We may know him as we know no other man since antiquity, until we come to Montaigne.

We know, as we might have suspected, that his self-consciousness proceeded from a profound youthful self-distrust, *diffidentia*. To gain confidence and self-mastery, he surrendered to passion and ambition. But passion and ambition led him far from self-mastery; it was necessary to subdue them. Finally, recovering his liberty, he learned to scorn the world, and thus to gain pos-

session of himself and to find at last peace and happiness. His was a lifelong process of self-culture, prompted by and ending in egotism.

His introspection did not prevent him from looking on the external world with delighted, observant eyes. His appreciation of scenic beauty and of country charm has no parallel in medieval literature. His realization of the beauty of mountains was not to reappear in recorded words until the end of the seventeenth century. (He describes, for instance, the blue waters of Como, with the snowy peaks of the Alps overhanging the lake, with forests hiding their heads in clouds, with the dark roaring of torrents pouring out of the heights, and everywhere the murmuring of brooks and the twitter of birds.) He loved flowers and country labors, and when asked his profession liked to reply, "gardener." On the other hand, he did not notice medieval architecture. He mentions only twice, I think, a church's beauty (the golden glitter of St. Mark's in Venice, and the rising Cathedral of Cologne, *pulcherrimum templum*.) The superb Palace of the Popes in Avignon was to him only a gloomy Tartarus. Nor had he much taste for art, though he had Simone Martini paint a small, portable portrait of Laura to sigh over, and though he knew Giotto personally and left in his will one of Giotto's paintings to a friend. ("The ignorant do not understand the beauty of this panel, but the masters of art are stunned by it.") Music, however, he loved; a good concert made him cease to envy the gods their privilege of listening to the music of the spheres.

His sense of beauty awakens occasionally corresponding chords within us. Frequently in his poems, often in his prose, a phrase or set of phrases will leap out as a personal communication over all the years that separate us.

One stormy night in Venice he sat writing late, in his study overlooking the Riva degli Schiavoni. He heard a great shouting below and ran to look down from his highest window. *Deus bone, quod spectaculum!* A number of ships were casting off from the marble quay below. "Their masts considerably overtopped the two corner towers of my palazzo. And at this moment, with all the stars hid-

den by clouds, as my walls and roofs were shaken by the wind, as the sea roared hellishly below, the ships cast loose from the quay and set forth on their journey. One, perhaps, was bound for the river Don, with passengers for the Ganges, the Caucasus, the Indies, and the Eastern Ocean. My heart bled for these unhappy men. And when I could no longer follow the ships with my eyes, moved and stirred I picked up my pen again, exclaiming: 'Oh, how dear to men is life, and how little account they take of it!'

Again, he writes: "I had got thus far, and was thinking of what to say next, and as my habit is, I was pricking the paper idly with my pen. And I thought how, between one dip of the pen and the next, time goes on, and I hurry, drive myself, and speed toward death. We are always dying. I while I write, you while you read, and others while they listen or stop their ears, they are all dying."

These are expressions of a modern sensibility, with its awareness of the mystery and marvel of common experience. Petrarch helped to form and define the modern sensibility, which is, indeed, an eternal sensibility. Petrarch is frequently termed the first modern man. I would go farther; I would call him one of the eternal men. As he turned back to find his companions in the great past, we too may turn back, to find in Petrarch a companion and a friend.