

Think what it is to remember the notable triumphs of the generals, to see the statues and the monuments bearing witness to illustrious deeds, to reflect upon the famous works of the philosophers, and the myrtle and laurel wreaths of the poets, surpassing those of Greece herself, to recall to memory the military discipline in which Rome excelled other nations, and the authority of the laws by which the whole world was governed, and the striking example of morals.

All these achievements, not to mention others, and to say nothing of the rest of Italy, our ancestors, to their very great dishonour, neglected with godlike irresponsibility and allowed them to be defiled, to be snatched away or shamefully destroyed by foreign peoples. And if all the glories of Rome may not be restored, at least, in the splendour of your poetic fame take pity on these immense misfortunes, and ease them as much as you can by taking them upon your dutiful shoulders . . . so that among the barbarian nations Rome can display at least something of her ancient majesty. . . . And mingling with the choruses of the rejoicing, I shall add my voice to those who are extolling your name with well-deserved praise: "Now Justice, the Maid, returns, the reign of Saturn is now restored."

From *Lettere edite ed inedite di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Corazzini (Florence, 1877); trans. M.M.M.



Petrarca and the Art of Poetry

LEONARDO BRUNI

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THE Latin language, in all its perfection and greatness, flourished most vigorously in the time of Cicero, for its first state was not polished or refined or subtle, but, mounting little by little to perfection, it reached its highest summit in the time of Cicero. After his age it began to sink and to descend, as until that time it had risen, and many years had not passed before it experienced a great decline and diminution; and it can be said that letters and the studies of the Latin language went hand in hand with the condition of the Roman Republic, which had also grown in power until the age of Cicero.

After the liberty of the Roman people had been lost through the rule of the emperors, who did not desist from killing and eliminating the men of excellence, the flourishing condition of studies and of letters perished, together with the welfare of the city of Rome. Augustus, who was the least evil of the emperors, had thousands of Roman citizens slain; Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero did not leave anyone alive who had the face of a man. There followed, then, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, who killed off each other within a few months. After them there were no more emperors of Roman blood, since the country had been so ruined by the preceding emperors that no one of any excellence remained. . . . Why am I relating all this? Simply to

demonstrate that as the city of Rome was destroyed by the emperors, who were perverse tyrants, so studies and Latin letters experienced a like ruin and decay, to such an extent that finally almost no one could be found who understood Latin literature with any refinement. Then Italy was invaded successively by the Goths and the Lombards, barbarian and foreign peoples, who almost completely extinguished all knowledge of letters, as appears in the documents drawn up in that time, than which nothing could be found more coarse and crude.

From the time when the liberty of the Italian peoples was recovered, by the defeat of the Lombards who had occupied Italy for two hundred and four years, the cities of Tuscany and elsewhere began to revive, and to take up studies, and somewhat to refine the coarse style. So little by little these came to recover vigour, but very feebly, and without any true sense of refinement, paying more attention to writing in vernacular rhymes than to other forms. And so until the time of Dante few knew the cultivated style, and those few understood it rather badly, as we have said in the life of Dante.

Francesco Petrarca was the first who had such grace of talent, and who recognized and restored to light the ancient elegance of style which was lost and dead, and although in him it was not perfect, nevertheless by himself he saw and opened the way to this perfection, by recovering the works of Cicero, by enjoying them, by understanding them, and by adapting himself as much as he could, and he learned the way to that most elegant and perfect fluency. Certainly he did enough merely by showing the way to those who came after him. Thus, devoted to these studies and manifesting his talent even as a youth, Petrarca was much honoured and renowned, and was asked by the pope to act as

secretary of his court, but he never consented or sought his own gain; nevertheless, in order to live in ease and in an honourable fashion, he accepted benefices and became a secular cleric. This he did not so much of his own will as constrained by necessity, since little or nothing remained of the inheritance from his father, and in marrying off one of his sisters he spent almost all of the paternal inheritance. His brother, Gerardo, became a Carthusian monk, and died persevering in the religious life.

The honours of Petrarca were such that no man of his age was more highly esteemed than he, not only beyond the Alps but in Italy herself. For, coming to Rome, he was solemnly crowned poet laureate. He wrote in one of his letters that in 1350 he came to Rome for the Jubilee, and in returning from Rome made his way to Arezzo to see the place where he was born, and when they learned of his coming all the citizens came out to meet him, as if a king had come to them. In conclusion, so great was his fame and the honour accorded him by all cities and states and by all the people throughout Italy, that it seemed an incredible and wonderful thing. Not only was he sought after and revered by the populace and the middle class, but he was provided with lavish pensions by the highest and greatest princes and lords. He spent some time with Messer Giangaleazzo Visconti, who begged him most graciously to deign to remain with him; and he was greatly honoured likewise by the lords of Padua. So great was his reputation and the reverence in which he was held by these lords that oftentimes they argued at length with him to persuade him to take precedence in entering or leaving a place, and to take the place of honour. So honoured and rewarded in this life, Petrarca lived until the very end of his days.

He had in his studies a singular gift, that he was highly skilled in both prose and poetry, and in both forms he wrote a great many works. His prose was graceful and flowery, his poetry was refined and full and very lofty. And this grace in both forms of writing has existed in few or in none except him, because it seems that nature inclines either toward the one or the other and man is wont to dedicate himself to that one in which he excels by nature. Hence it happened that Vergil, who was most excellent in poetry, accomplished nothing in prose, or wrote nothing; and Cicero, who was the greatest master of style in prose, achieved nothing in poetry. We see the same thing in other poets and orators, that they won high praise in one of these forms of writing, but none of them, that I remember having read about, in both. Petrarca alone excelled by his singular gift in both forms of writing, and he composed many works in prose and poetry, which there is no need to enumerate since they are well known.

Petrarca died at Arquà, a castle of Padua, to which he had retired in his old age for peace and a leisurely life, removed from all disturbance. As long as he lived he maintained the very closest friendship with Giovanni Boccaccio, who was famous in that age in the same studies. So that when Petrarca died, the Florentine Muses, as if by hereditary succession, passed to Boccaccio, and in him dwelt the fame of the aforesaid studies. And this succession was also temporal, for when Dante died, Petrarca was seventeen years old, and when Petrarca died, Boccaccio was nine years younger than he, and thus by succession went the Muses.

From "Vita di Messer Francesco Petrarca," in P. Villani, *Libera de civitatis Florentinae famosis civibus*, ed. G. C. Galletti (Florence, 1847); trans. M.M.M.



The Glory of the Latin Language

LORENZO VALLA

c. 1430-1440

AS OUR ANCESTORS, winning high praises, surpassed other men in military affairs, so by the extension of their language they indeed surpassed themselves, as if, abandoning their dominion on earth, they had attained to the fellowship of the gods in Paradise. If Ceres, Liber, and Minerva, who are considered the discoverers of grain, wine, oil, and many others have been placed among the gods for some benefaction of this kind, is it less beneficial to have spread among the nations the Latin language, the noblest and the truly divine fruit, food not of the body but of the soul? For this language introduced those nations and all peoples to all the arts which are called liberal; it taught the best laws, prepared the way for all wisdom; and finally, made it possible for them no longer to be called barbarians.

Why would anyone who is a fair judge of things not prefer those who were distinguished for their cultivation of the sacred mysteries of literature to those who were celebrated for waging terrible wars? For you may most justly call those men royal, indeed divine, who not only founded the republic and the majesty of the Roman people, insofar as this might be done by men, but, as if they were gods, established also the welfare of the whole world. Their achievement was the more amazing because those who submitted to our rule knew