

2. Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), *The Ascent of Mount Ventoux*:

I turned my eyes toward Italy, the place to which my heart was most inclined. The great and snow-capped Alps seemed to rise close by, though they were far away – those same Alps through which that fierce enemy of the Roman name once made his way, splitting the rocks, if we can believe the story, by means of vinegar. I sighed, I must admit, for Italian skies which I beheld more with my thought than with my eyes, and an inexpressible longing came over me to see once more my friend and my country, though at the same time I reproached myself for this double weakness which came from a soul not yet up to manly resistance – and yet there were excuses for both my desires, and several excellent authorities could be cited to support me.

Then a new idea came to me, and I started thinking in terms of time rather than space. I thought: ‘Today marks ten years since you completed your youthful studies and left Bologna. Oh, eternal God! Oh, immutable wisdom! Think of all the changes in your character these intervening years have seen! I suppress a great deal, for I have not yet reached a safe harbour where I can calmly recall past storms. The time, perhaps, will come when I can review all the experiences of the past in their order saying with the words of your St Augustine: ‘I wish to recall all my foul past and the carnal corruption of my soul, not that I love them, but that I may the more love you, O my God.’ Much that is dubious and evil still clings to me, but what I once loved, I love no longer. Come now, what am I saying? I still love it, but more moderately. No, not so, but with more shame, with more heaviness of heart. Now, at last, I have told the truth. The fact is I love, but I love what I long not to love, what I would like to hate. Though I hate to do so, though constrained, though sad and sorrowing, I love none the less, and I feel in my miserable self the meaning of the well-known words: ‘I will hate if I can; if not, I will love against my will!’ Not three years have passed since that perverse and wicked desire which had me in tight hold and held undisputed sway in my heart began to discover a rebellious opponent who was no longer willing to yield in obedience. These two adversaries have joined in close combat for supremacy, and for a long time now a gruelling war, the outcome of which is still doubtful, has been waging in the field of my mind.’

Thus my thoughts turned back over the last ten years, and then with concentrated thought on the future, I asked myself: ‘If you should, by chance, prolong this uncertain life of yours for another ten years, advancing toward virtue in proportion to the distance from which you departed from your original infatuation during the past two years since the new longing first encountered the old, could you not face death on reaching forty years of age, if not with complete assurance at least with hopefulness, calmly dismissing from your thoughts the residuum of life that fades into old age?’

Such thoughts as these, father, occurred to me. I rejoiced in my progress, mourned for my weaknesses, and took pity on universal inconstancy of human conduct. I had by this time forgotten where I was and why we had come; then, dismissing my anxieties to a more appropriate occasion, I decided to look about me and see what we had come to see.

In this passage by Petrarch, he discussed how he has this persistent longing for things he wish he was able to hate. He discussed this initially with his longing for his friends and his home country, how after seeing the skies of Italy he began to miss them. He then goes on to discuss an old love he has held onto. Both of these are viewed as weaknesses for him and that he should be able to let go of feelings like these. It is written in a very passionate and contradicting fashion. He wrote like he was begging for something, saying things like “Oh, eternal God! Oh immutable wisdom,” as though he were begging for the answer and had an indisputable passion to let go of these things. He also goes back and forth with himself, starting with saying he “no longer loves,” the things he used to, but immediately realizes his feelings and reverted immediately by saying “what am I saying? I still love it, but more moderately. No, not so, but with more shame, with more heaviness of heart,” he spoke very passionately about his unchanging feelings and how he wished there was a change.

Other parts of the work discussed how he felt that he would always choose the easier paths in life, even if that meant he would take longer and they would be more tiring in the end. He discussed him climbing a mountain with his brother, who decided to take the fastest but more steep path, while he would always end up choosing the flatter and longer path. This ended with his reaching the summit much later than his brother and more tired than he could’ve been. Spiritually this showed how his brother was able to reach these greater spiritual heights a lot sooner than Petrarch since he was able to overcome the difficulties that were shown before him. Petrarch shows jealousy for his brother and had a desire to be able to change his ways of thinking in order to be able to reach these heights sooner. The extract showed how no matter how much he desires to be able to change and reach these heights, he was always stuck and kept holding on to his past desires.

Petrarch’s parents had wished for him to become a lawyer, which is a more serious discipline and does not reflect or show in his later works. After their deaths he had changed his path and followed his true calling of creative writing and being a scholar. He had written other things, such as his letter to Homer, which included more use of this very passionate writing style. Since he had always dreamed of meeting Homer but would never get the chance, his letter to him was filled with passion and love for the Greek philosopher which can be compared to his writings of his ascent. He filled his works with much love and was very obvious in the emotions he had felt at the time of writing them. Petrarch had also written many lyric poems, which were again filled with a lot of passion. He talked about his love and his emotions of never finding the things he most desired. In his sonnet 134, he discussed how he finds “no peace, and I am not at war.../One keeps me jailed who neither locks nor opens,” which showed how these he is not fighting anything with these emotions, but he has no other choice than to feel them. He is alone in his thoughts and feelings but had no way to change the way his heart reacts to his consuming love.

Other humanists at the time seemed to want to be able to express their desires for change and discuss the work of the ancient Greek philosophers which is something that Petrarch was also trying to explore. He wrote his letter to Homer as a declaration of love even though he was never able to learn any Greek. He was able to preserve the texts written by these philosophers with the help of others who did understand Greek which was something

others were also doing at the time. He had this desire to understand their works and ideas much like other scholars such as Pico della Mirandola. Pico had the desire to protect the works of the Greek philosophers from improper translation and wanted to restore the original meaning. Other humanists, such as Thomas More and Juan Luis Vives had the same values, but denounced the nobles and landowners of their time and also had the belief that humanists can continue and should continue to develop and be better.

Much of Renaissance humanism was the belief that man was more than the church and there was more spiritual studying to be done. There was also a big emphasis on ancient Greek texts and beliefs. These humanists emphasized the importance of man in relation to every other living being and how they are able to decide for themselves, unlike other beings. Man has no pre-set role to play and thought is an important factor in that. They had issues with things such like class structure and restrictions. Though many of them still practiced religion, they had an idea of independence they believed to be true for man and that man is able to create and think for himself. There was more value placed on freedom and knowledge which was not seen under the church before this time. More value was placed on Greek texts compared to the Roman texts that had been studied previously, though many did not understand Greek and instead only knew Latin. This passage shows a desire to be able to think for himself more and not be tied to his previous restrictions, though the path is more challenging and does not provide the same comfort as his instilled beliefs.