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Gobbet Test

A commentary on Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), The Ascent of Mount Ventoux:

Written in a familiar tone of voice, which is a common in renaissance humanist letters, Petrarch's letter to his friend and confidante Dionigi is a commentary on differing worldviews and spirituality. Petrarch's views focus heavily on the soul and body and their connections. His own fraught journey up Mount Ventoux becomes an allegory for the soul ascending to God and the struggles it (the soul) faces along the way.¹

Petrarch, known as the father of humanism, draws heavily upon other classical works such as Plato and Aristotle in the traditional humanist views of returning ad fontes (to the original sources).² Plato's views that the soul is different to the body and is of more value and Aristotle's musings that we understand the soul through the body. Petrarch's journey up the mountain mirrors this. He took the long hard way up, but when he reached the summit, he opened his copy of St Augustine's confessions and read a passage that represented his spiritual enlightenment.³ In this passage, it is stated that men admire nature but neglect themselves – this being their spiritual wellbeing and the accumulation and sharing of knowledge. However, there is also an emphasis on the present and the importance of human experiences as a way to honour God.

'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.'⁴

¹ King, L. M., *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources* (Indiana: Hackett, 2014) p. 4

² Nicholas Mann, 'The Origins of Humanism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.8

³ King, L. M., *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources* (Indiana: Hackett, 2014) p.5

⁴ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, p. 5.

Despite Petrarch and his brother climbing the same mountain, his brother (who became a monk) took the harder path up and reached the summit first. Petrarch took the easy path, often doubling back on himself before eventually reaching the summit hours later. This arduous journey represents that the easiest path is not always the best and can lead to having to put in more work in the long run. Though his brother took the harder path, he reached the top first, representing that if you put in the hard work, you will reach your goals, and enlightenment, much sooner. As he had access to the papal library, his brother became a monk, and his friend was also a monk, Petrarch had a good working knowledge of Christian texts and doctrine. This comes across in his work, as well as his conflicts between finding enlightenment and giving in to base pleasures.

Petrarch talks in an intimate tone, hinting at his deep friendship with Dionigi, who was an Augustinian monk. This intimate tone carries over to the reader, again forming a humanist way of writing. Also uniquely humanist is Petrarch's words of the 'inconstancy of human conduct' - this emphasises the unique potential that human beings have been given by God, but also that they should strive for knowledge and to be the best that they can be.

'I suppress a great deal, for I have not yet reached a safe harbour where I can calmly recall past storms.'⁵ In renaissance humanist views, the dignity of human beings is a value that is held in high regard. This passage refers to Petrarch's spiritual and emotional wellbeing being 'cast adrift', not yet being in a place where he can look back on his life and its tribulations in a calm and impartial manner. These 'past storms' also refer to Petrarch's unrequited love for a woman called Laura, which he waxes on about in his sonnets. In these loose sonnet forms, compiled in *the Canzoniere and Other Works*⁶ we can see Petrarch's longing. Petrarch's sonnets are also linked to the humanist movement in that the renaissance humanists tried to reunify music and poetry in the way it was believed the ancient Greeks did. This, however, brought up conflict in Petrarch, caught between his base desires for a woman and his want for enlightenment. This goes back to his ascent of mount Ventoux, in that he could do what was easy and give in to his desires for Laura, or choose the more difficult path and resist, which would lead him to a life of good.

In his lifetime, Petrarch also wrote a letter to Greek Classicist Homer, who was long dead. In this missive, he lamented the fact that he could not speak to him as he (Petrarch) struggled to learn Greek. Due to this he commissioned his friend to help translate Homer into Latin, so he could understand his words. This transcribing of ancient Greek and Roman sources was essential in renaissance humanism, with

⁵ Petrarch, F and Musa, M., *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

⁶ Petrarch, F and Musa, M., *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

translations of various works taking place across Europe to expand and share knowledge.⁷

In conclusion, Petrarch's 'The Ascent of Mount Ventoux' serves as an allegory for his spiritual struggles and how one must get through these struggles in order to achieve enlightenment. He speaks in an informal tone, which appeals to the reader and makes him seem more trustworthy, as though he and the reader are simply having a conversation. This makes the information he presents easier to digest and think about. He also relates his views to Christian humanism, and his ideas of the soul.

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