

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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FRANCESCO PETRARCHI

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PETRARCH'S LETTERS

BY BIRGER R. HEADSTROM

ON THE history of human affairs there is probably no man who has been less understood or appreciated than Francesco Petrarch. To the student of history he is known merely as the father of Humanism and as the leader of a great intellectual movement; while to the world at large, his chief claim to renown is his incomparable sonnets of Italian verse. But, to the keen and acute student of mankind, there is a greater, a deeper, more infinite side to this great man which, unfortunately, the world has either overlooked or underrated by his ultimate gift to the service of humanity. It is the man himself; his inner spirit, that is so well manifested as to be a perfect example of God's greatest creation.

We cannot gain an insight into the extraordinary nature and remarkable personality of Petrarch in his practical achievements, or in his sonnets, but in his letters—the mirror of his soul. And as his position in history is estimated by the influence he exerted on the destinies of mankind, so in turn do his letters have a vast historical significance, as they are the reflection of his character, his ideals, his inspirations, but above all else his human nature—*suus humanitas*, in which his great inspiration was to find expression.

There is no questioning Petrarch's position in history; his place is secure for all time. As a shaper of human affairs and the destinies of mankind he will take rank with Napoleon. His great inspiration exerted a profound influence on the development of intellectual activity and thought, and his beliefs and ideals were of such a significant importance that they laid the foundations of modern culture.

Petrarch, besides his estimable worth to the service of humanity, is the greatest mirror of his age. He reflects, as no man does, the times of the transition period between medieval learning and modern erudition. He is, in some respects, the typical product of the Middle Ages. He was acquainted with the culture of the Latin Christian fathers, and shared his contemporaries' ideals and beliefs in some measure, but unlike his contemporaries he saw the fearful future that lay in wait for mankind should the depraved and chaotic state in which intellectual activity had fallen during the fall of the Roman Empire be allowed to continue. He saw the beauties and interests in the culture of Hellenistic Greece, and sought to awaken men's eyes to the inspiring and spiritual ideals of the Old Masters. He loved the past for its own sake. Not that it supported his ideas of theology or Christian morals, but that it was to him inherently interesting. He found a love in antiquity that tended to become almost an ecstatic enthusiasm.

Petrarch saw in the wisdom of the Hellenic Greeks an escape from the fruitless subtleties of a dogmatic scholastic theology. He saw a way out of the dark and gloomy superstition of the Middle Ages into the light of love and beauty, the casting off of all despotic authority of religion, and the assertion of the right for a man to think and act for himself. He felt, as no man had felt since the pagan days, the "joy of living." He believed the Greek and Latin writers of antiquity, provided they became the object of a profound and passionate study and emulation, were potent to bring a new life into a paralyzed world; a world that had become sickened and diseased by a continual strife and turmoil, by the pestilence and famine that had followed, and by the biased and imperious intellectual learning that had been allowed to exist in the weird and mystic asceticism of the monasteries. He was obsessed with the idea that the civilization of the Greeks and Latins was not a thing of the past, but that poets and thinkers of antiquity lived with him—that they were his neighbors.

That was the secret of his inspiration. Obsessed with that dominant thought that the culture of Hellenistic Greece was the open sesame to a new life, a life of love and beauty, the door to a great and bright future, of man's independence and self-reliance, he preached the revival of the classics. He became the foe of ignorance and superstition, the champion of culture and learning, the counsellor of princes, the leader of men, the prophet of

a new and glorious age. He was the light that showed the path to glory.

Petrarch exerted a vast and profound influence on his contemporaries. He knew everyone worth knowing, and he constantly strove to enlighten their minds to the vision he had seen until there gradually grew a firm conviction that there was a certain preciousness in the culture of antiquity that was much better than anything produced since the invasion of the German Barbarians. Scholars became imbued with the same spirit and began to carry on the work he had shown them. The germ which they strove to develop they knew as "humanitas," the culture to which man alone is able to aspire. To them it was a familiar intercourse with the best writers of ancient Greece and Rome.

There is no estimating the value of the service the ancient classics have given to the development of mankind. Their significance in lifting humanity out of the dark and chaotic Middle Ages to a life of higher and better ideals is most noteworthy, but the ultimate position of human-kind today, and the progress of thought and learning in modern culture, can only be attributed to the inspiration and genius of Petrarch.

Petrarch's ultimate gift to mankind is not his only claim to our attention. His chief charm lies, perhaps, in his own humanism, which is so exquisitely reflected in his fascinating and interesting letters. They are a perfect mirror of his great soul. They are a true revelation of the wonderful spirit that was constantly battling to attain the ideals to which he aspired. In them we learn to become acquainted with the man himself, his character, his ideals, his loves. They are the reflection of the man who sought to open men's eyes to the beauties and interests of life, who sought to lift mankind from a state of depravity and corruption to a higher plane worthy of all that is good and true: who sought to instill into men's hearts an appreciation of that sublime sense of a higher idealism that is the rightful heritage of all human-kind.

Petrarch wrote his letters not only to serve a practical end but also with the aim that they should bring him enduring fame. They are an artistic creation, executed to that degree of perfection that can only be attained by one who is endowed with the gifts of genius. And though Petrarch disavowed any intention of writing them for posterity, or that he took any pains with them, no one can fail to see that each one is a carefully prepared

and developed Latin essay with all the observance of the rules of good literature. And, furthermore, these letters were not to be treated lightly. "I desire," he writes, "that my reader, whoever he may be, should think of me alone, not of his daughter's wedding, his mistress's embraces, the wiles of his enemy, his engagements, house, lands, or money. I want him to pay attention to me. If his affairs are pressing, let him postpone reading the letter, but when he does read, let him throw aside the burden of business and family cares, and fix his mind upon the matter before him. I do not wish him to carry on his business and attend to my letter at the same time. I will not have him gain without any exertion what has not been produced without labour on my part."

Through them all runs that strain of a self-consciousness, which is apt, at first, to give an unpleasant impression, but beneath a thin veil of vanity and a sensibility of self-importance, we discover the secret of his great soul which was constantly grappling with the mysteries of life. We recognize him across the gulf of centuries to be a man with passions and emotions like ourselves, who, tossed on the stream of life, met with the contradictions he felt within himself, and baffled by the emotions he experienced, vainly strove to attain a new ideal of a temporal existence. Petrarch knew himself; and all his writings are pervaded with a self-revelation; he lays bare a human soul, with its struggles and sufferings. As Gaspari says: "Petrarch was a master in one respect at least, he understood how to picture himself; through him the inner world first receives recognition; he first notes, observes, analyses, and sets forth its phenomena."

Petrarch had aspirations to be both a scholar and a poet. He executed his works with the finesse of a master, making the utmost of those extraordinary abilities which he had at his command. Yet it is not his great works on which he spent years of toil and labor that have served to keep his name alive, but it is rather by his incomparable sonnets in Italian verse which he composed as a youthful diversion that he is still remembered by the world at large. They earned an enviable reputation for him among the illiterate, but such a notoriety he despised. They were not the deep and profound results of a scholar's meditation that could be the foundation for a scholar's enduring fame, but rather cheap and common poetry the results of an idle entertainment. Of the *Canzoniere*, "these trivial verses, filled with the



false and offensive praise of women," he has this to say, "I must confess that I look with aversion upon the silly boyish things I at one time produced in the vernacular. Of these I could wish everyone ignorant, myself included. Although their style may testify to a certain ability considering the period at which I composed them; their subject matter ill comports with the gravity of the age. But what am I to do? They are in the hands of the public and are read more willingly than the serious works which with more highly developed faculties, I have written since."

Yet, it is just that his lyrics, those "popular trifles in the mother tongue," are the chief claim to his popular renown for in them he finds his best literary expression. It is true that they reveal a great spirit expressing its ideals in a literary form, attainable only by a genius, but they, nevertheless, fail to give us the picture of him as do his letters; they are his sentiments beautifully expressed, but they do not reveal to us the reviver of a forgotten culture and the prophet of a future age of brightness and splendor, the direct result of his great love for intellectual activity.

As to his scholarly aims, Petrarch has this to say, "Among the many subjects which have interested me I have dwelt especially upon antiquity, for our own age has always repelled me, so that, had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I should have preferred to have been born in any other period than our own. In order to forget my own time I have constantly striven to place myself in spirit in other ages, and consequently I have delighted in history."

Therein lies the secret of the great influence which he exerted on his contemporaries. He was an indefatigable scholar, and by his own untiring efforts to discover the lost works of the great writers and thinkers of antiquity, he stimulated a widespread interest in the establishment of the intellectual world in its rightful patrimony. And by his own ceaseless striving to open men's eyes to the beauties of Hellenic culture, he fostered the ambitions of the scholars with whom he came in contact. The ancients were human who delighted in sensuous beauty and who enjoyed life for the sake of it, who trusted nature and its natural impulses. Petrarch was above all else human and he saw in the classics the personification of his own loves. It is not then very difficult to see why he became the guiding star of the transition period between the learning of the Latin fathers and

the modern scholars. He was possessed with the spirit of one who has an ideal which nothing can prevent him from attaining. Petrarch was imbued with the spirit of love for an ideal; his emotions knew no bounds on his finding or unearthing a lost or forgotten work. It was a rare find to him that gave him a great inward satisfaction; and which set him aglow with the inspiration of a spiritual pleasure that so enabled him to continue his work with that ecstatic enthusiasm so characteristic of his love for learning. No wonder then that he could sway men's minds to his way of thinking. No wonder then that his great inspiration was to have a lasting effect on the destinies of mankind, and was to be the impulse that was to set human affairs in the channel that was to lead human-kind into an age of resplendent light.

Petrarch was aware of the task he had before him, and in his letters he tells us of the corrupt and depraved state of the texts of the Old Masters which had been allowed to become so by the disgraceful and intolerable conditions that had existed during the Middle Ages. He even went so far as to say that had Cicero or Livy returned and read his own writings he would have vehemently declared them to be the works of some barbarian. And we find the high regard he had for the preciousness and estimable worth of the works of the writers of antiquity when he says, "Each famous author of antiquity whom I recall places a new offence and another cause of dishonor to the charge of later generations, who, not satisfied with their own disgraceful barrenness, permitted the fruit of other minds and the writings that their ancestors had produced by toil and application, to perish through insufferable neglect. Although they had nothing of their own to hand down to those who were to come after, they robbed posterity of its ancestral heritage."

Petrarch was naturally very much aware of the intellectual predilections of his time, but he was as little in sympathy with them as Voltaire was with those of his age. We find in his letters a perfect mirror of his nature when he rejects and discards the educational ideals of his times as utterly disgraceful and unendurable. Scotus and Aquinas he held in cheap estimation, and he regarded nominalism or realism as valueless, having no foundation for an existence whatsoever. Such a disregard did he assume towards them that he preferred to obtain his religious doctrines and beliefs from the Scriptures and the almost forgotten church fathers, especially Augustine and Ambrose.

But his total disregard for medieval culture finds its greatest expression in his assertion of his aversion and contempt for Aristotelism. He ventured to say, that although Aristotle was a scholar of high and esteemable repute, he was inferior, at least, to Plato, and that many of his views were quite worthless. This antipathy in Petrarch is a natural outcome of his repugnancy towards medieval learning. Intellectual activity had fallen, since the invasion of the Vandals, to such a low plane that it had practically become enshrouded in a superstition and fanaticism, which were simply the fruit of an ignorance born of an eremitical separation from the world's affairs. Aristotle was the dominant influence in all thought during the Dark Ages, and his authority was virtually despotic on all matters of learning. He held a fascination for the medieval mind that amounted almost to worship. He was "the Philosopher" whose knowledge was omniscient, and whose dicta were unquestionable; he was "the master," as Dante terms him, "of those who know." Theology, the fruit of the Middle Ages, was, if not dominated, at least, affected to an appreciable extent by him in fact, so much so that Luther began his revolt by a tirade on "that accursed heathen."

It was natural then that Petrarch should have had such a strong antipathy towards the "great thinker of antiquity." A foe of medieval learning was a foe of Aristotle. He has this to say of the supreme authority of his age when suggested a discussion on some point of Aristotelism; "I would then either remain silent or jest with them or change the subject. Sometimes I asked, with a smile, how Aristotle could have known that, for it was not proven by the light of reason, nor could it be tested by experiment. At that they would fall silent, in surprise and anger, as if they regarded me as a blasphemer who asked any proof beyond the authority of Aristotle. So we bid fair to be no longer philosophers, lovers of the truth, but Aristotelians, or rather Pythagoreans, reviving the absurd custom which permits us to ask no question except whether "he" said it. . . . I believe, indeed, that Aristotle was a great man and that he knew much; yet he was but a man, and therefore something, nay, many things, may have escaped him. I will say more . . . I am confident, beyond a doubt, that he was in error all his life, not only as regards small matters, where a mistake counts for little but in the most weighty questions, where his supreme interests were involved. And although he has said much of happiness . . . I dare assert

. . . that he was so completely ignorant of true happiness that the opinions upon this matter of any old pious woman, or devout fisherman, shepherd, or farmer, would, if not so fine-spun, be more to the point than his."

Such a strong opposition to the supreme authority of the Middle Ages implied the prophecy of an intellectual revolution. It was not arrogance or a manifestation of his sense of his own importance, that led Petrarch to take such an attitude towards the culture of his age, but rather his instincts and training that made it impossible for him to worship the Stagirite in the same respect as the Schoolmen had for their master.

And towards natural science he had also a strong aversion, declaring that it was not worthy the attention of a man of learning; he says of those who were interested in natural phenomena: "They say much of beasts, birds and fishes, discuss how many hairs there are on the lion's head and feathers in the hawk's tail, and how many coils the polypus winds about a wrecked ship; they expatiate upon the generation of the elephant and its biennial offspring, as well as upon the docility and intelligence of the animal and its resemblance to human-kind. They tell how the phoenix lives two or three centuries, and is then consumed by an aromatic fire, to be born again from its ashes. Even if all these things were true they help in no way toward a happy life, for what does it advantage us to be familiar with the nature of animals, birds, fishes, and reptiles, while we are ignorant of the nature of the race of man to which we belong, and do not know or care whence we came or whither we go?"

But in spite of the extreme antipathy he held toward the culture of his period he remained essentially a child of the Middle Ages. He accepted the beliefs of the Church and never questioned its authority. He never became separated from the monastic theory of salvation, although he many times questioned its implications.

The reading of pagan literature had agitated the Church from the very beginning. There were many who had defended the "heathen writers" and there were also many devout followers of the Church who harshly condemned "the idle vanities of secular learning" for the reason as Gregory says, "that the same mouth singeth not the praises of Jove and the praises of Christ." Petrarch's profound and passionate study of the pagan works, however, in no wise affected his sense of the religion of the

Church. He remained always a devout Catholic, being extremely pious and filial in his views, and having a strong dislike for heretics. He accepted the ascetic ideal, and believed in the superiority of the monastic life, feeling that it is the only sure road to Heaven. And though in a letter to Gherardo, his brother who had become a monk, he begs that he become not discouraged and despair of salvation, though his spirit belong to this world, he nevertheless, writes that his reflections are not wholly his own but those of another self, of a "monastic pen." Petrarch, though he saw some virtues in monasticism, had really no love for the seclusion and routine of the monastic life. He loved life too well, and the pleasures it offered. His earthly ambitions were too strong for him to devote his life to follow the vows of an ascetic. He lived with a preoccupation of his own aims and ideals. Was not life an opportunity for something more than merely a brief period of probation in which man prepared for the beatific reward in another world? as was the medieval conception of mortal life.

Although Petrarch accepted the monastic view, he never thoroughly embraced it. His ambition for posthumous fame burned with undying fervor within his breast. There were higher, more worthy secular aims than merely doing the routine labors of the monastery with the expectation of a commensurate spiritual reward. Was it not something to obtain the approbation of his own generation and of those to come? Was not an ambition for an earthly reputation and an undying fame a noble and imperial instinct to which he should bend his energies? Assuredly he reasoned; were not the great masters of antiquity, whose names will go down in the generations to come, inspired with a beatific vision? The problem that confronted him was not a simple one for the Old and the New waged their incessant battle for supremacy within him. And in a letter to Boccaccio he presents his views that religion does not necessarily require one to give up literature. He says in part: "Neither exhortations to virtue nor the argument of approaching death should divert us from literature; for in a good mind it excites the love of virtue, and dissipates, or at least diminishes, the fear of death. To desert our studies shows want of self-confidence rather than wisdom, for letters do not hinder but aid the properly constituted mind which possesses them; they facilitate our life, they do not retard it."

Petrarch could never see the monastic advocacy of the dis-

carding of all secular pursuits. He was always the champion of the classics, and always ready to defend his ambitions. He was imbued with the spirit of mortal man who desires something that cannot readily be had. And the proud boasts of Horace and Ovid, who had claimed (and had taken a certain pride in doing so) immortality for their works, spurred him on in his striving for personal glory which he termed as a "splendid preoccupation." He tells us frankly of his longing for the fame which he hoped to secure by his Latin writings, but he was quite aware of the difficulties in store for him when, in a letter to one Messina, he writes on the impossibility of acquiring fame during one's lifetime. He says in part: "Let us look for a moment at those whose writings have become famous. Where are the writers themselves? They have turned to dust and ashes these many years. And you long for praise? Then you, too, must die. The favour of humanity begins with the author's decease; the end of life is the beginning of glory."

It is unfortunate that in his letters we find no reference, barely two or three allusions, to Laura, the woman who was the inspiration of his life, and who is the theme of nearly all of his Italian sonnets. She exerted a great influence on him in his youth, and we find in his Confessions that his love for her tormented him. It was so deep, so pure, that he feared, according to his monastic views that it would be the obstacle to eternal salvation. Yet he was passionately fond of her, and in his letter to posterity he says: "I struggled in my younger days with a keen but constant and pure attachment and would have struggled with it longer had not the sinking flame been extinguished by death—premature and bitter, but salutary."

On the fly-leaf of his favorite copy of Vergil there is written: "Laura, who was distinguished by her own virtues, and widely celebrated by my songs, first appeared to my eyes in my early manhood . . . in the year 1348, that light was taken from our day. . . . Her chaste and lovely form was laid in the church of the Franciscans. . . . I have experienced a certain satisfaction in writing this bitter record of a cruel event, . . . for so I may be led to reflect that life can afford me no farther pleasures; and, the most serious of my temptations being removed, I may be admonished by the frequent study of these lines."

It is regrettable that so little is known of her, and though much has been made of her descriptions in the Canzoniere, they

are simply poetical and allegorical. Unlike Dante who worshipped Beatrice, and made the world know it, Petrarch is exceedingly reserved in letting the world know of his affection for Laura.

The genuineness of the passion that pervades his sonnets gives us a great insight to his soul and shows us his human nature which found such a fine expression in his devotion and love for a woman. His love for her tortured him constantly. Petrarch was forever engaged in trying to unite the two opposing ideals, moral and intellectual, to which he felt himself drawn. Within his heart there was constantly waged the battle between the monk and the lover; between the medieval ecclesiastical and the modern secular conception of love. In his Secret we see the greatest of his humanistic qualities. Therein he defends the higher conception of love, and though he holds it in the light of all that is good and true, worthy of the noblest instincts of man, he cannot escape from the monkish influence that is so firmly implanted within him. He vehemently and passionately declares that what he loves and admires is the soul—that innate spiritual goodness; and that he owes everything to her who has preserved him from sin, and who has helped him to develop his great powers; but he in turn is forced to confess that it was her virtue that enabled them to maintain a platonic love, and that since he met her his life has been nothing but degenerate. Secular pursuits are too noble to be classed with such a degrading passion as love—that base passion that only seizes the common herd, that the passion of love injures the soul; that it is not compatible with the higher ideals of life.

Such conflicting thoughts of the monk and the lover filled him with apprehension, and the fear that it would prove to be the barrier to eternal salvation. Flee from the temptation rang in his ears, find a remedy in travel, but alas! the burden Petrarch bore was too heavy to be so easily flung off.

Petrarch, like so many of his countrymen from Marco Polo to Columbus, was passionately fond of travelling. He saw the beauties and pleasures of the outside world. "Would that you could know," he writes, "with what delight I wander, free and alone, among the mountains, forests, and streams." His frequent journeys to various places gave him the opportunity of making friends everywhere and exercising his influence on them for the purpose of attaining the ideal he cherished. He made friends

with kings and princes, with popes and scholars, and he tells us in his letters his intercourse with them was such as to excite the envy of the less fortunate. His letters exhibit a deep interest in public affairs, but like those of many of his contemporaries his political views are broad with that total disregard of human nature which finds such an extraordinary expression in Machiavelli's Prince. His international fame brought him into association with the greatest men of his age. It was not only the estimable worth of the gospel he preached, but it was also his charming personality that made him the idol of his time. He was honored and feted, as he tells us with becoming frankness and unblushing pride, by rulers and potentates who vied with each other in showering honors upon him. He was courted by Kings and Popes, and even enjoyed the friendship of the far-away Emperor. Even the King of France claimed the honor of his presence at the French court, as Voltaire was sought by Frederick the Great.

But it was among the men of letters that his influence was the greatest. He was the supreme ruler among them. And of his work he writes to Boccaccio: "I certainly will not reject the praise which you bestow upon me for having stimulated in many instances, not only in Italy but perchance beyond its confines, the pursuit of studies such as ours, which have suffered neglect for so many centuries. I am indeed one of the oldest among us who are engaged in the cultivation of these subjects.

The secret of this great influence that made him the greatest figure of his period and the leader of an unsurpassed intellectual movement, lies not only in his profound insight and moral and intellectual sagacity, but in the fact that he was above all else essentially a child of his age. He was the most typical product of his time, and though he was in advance of his world he was of it. He was not only a prophet of a future age, with ideals and inspirations, but he was a human being with all the humanistic qualities that are essential, with a personality that brought him wide popularity, and that raised him high above his contemporaries, making him the hero of their worship and the idol of their admiration. He belonged to the medieval as well as the modern world, to the present and the future. There was a certain sympathy between him and his age. He understood the world, and he was essentially a part of it. Like Luther and Voltaire he was to address a generation that was waiting for a leader to guide



it into a new era, a new future of glories and triumphs, and that was ready to obey his summons when it should come.

The importance of Petrarch's letters can never be appreciated; their scantiness, and the fact that they are the only reliable mirror of the man and the period preceding the Renaissance, give to them an intrinsic worth that no one can fail to cherish as one of the world's greatest treasures, even though we seem to have lost sight of their influence on contemporary events and modern **culture**.