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PETRARCH AT THE CROSSROADS

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'I find myself at a critical crossroads, and do not know which way to turn. It is an extraordinary story, but a brief one. On this very day, almost at the third hour, a letter was delivered to me from the Senate inviting me, with the most vigorous and persuasive arguments, to receive the poetic laureate in Rome. On this same day, towards the tenth hour, a messenger came to me with a letter from ... the chancellor of the University of Paris ... urging me with the most delightful arguments to go to Paris. I ask you: who could ever have imagined that something of this kind could happen here in this craggy place? Because the whole thing does indeed seem incredible, I am enclosing the two letters with the seals still attached...'[*Fam*. IV 4] Thus, in a letter from Vaucluse, dated 1st September, presumably of 1340, Petrarch presents to posterity the first evidence that he chose to preserve of the long process that was to lead to his coronation with laurels in Rome on Easter Day 1341.

I shall be returning to this event, of some significance for cultural history, and above all for Petrarch's personal history (or myth), a little later this afternoon, but I want to take as my point of departure his opening words: ancipiti in bivio sum : I am at a critical crossroads (the critical nature of it is being further underlined by the tautologous form in which he expresses it: *anceps* itself implies two-headed, as if to reinforce the two tracks of the *bivium*). Petrarch was fond (with good classical precedents) of describing life as a journey, and himself as a traveller - *viator*, or *peregrinus ubique* - a wanderer everywhere [*Ep*. III 19 16]. Indeed what we know of his life (and thanks to his efforts to record it, we know a great deal) reveals that he was rarely stationary for long. The most notable of his journeys as he records them can be summarised rapidly: during the long years of his residence in or near to Avignon, he made a summer's expedition to Lombez, the Pyrenees and Toulouse in 1330, a journey north across the Ardennes and to Cologne beyond in 1333, taking in Paris on the way, an excursion to the summit of Mont Ventoux in 1336, and visits to Rome in 1337 and 1341, when he travelled to Naples first. On returning from this last voyage (and his coronation), he decided to move back to Italy, yet for the next decade oscillated constantly between Italy and Provence, visiting Naples again in 1343, and many other Italian cities: Verona in 1345, Rome again and Genoa in 1350, Vicenza and Ferrara in 1351. During the eight years that he then spent based in Milan (from 1353 onwards) he visited Basle and Prague in 1356, and Paris in 1360-61; even the last twelve years of his life were divided between Venice and Pavia, Padua and finally Arquà, the village in the Euganean hills a few miles to the south of Padua where he had a small house built for himself, and where he was to die in 1374. Significantly, even his will, drawn up in 1370, reflects this perpetual motion: he makes separate provision for his burial in any one of seven places where death might strike him.

He left a good many letters about these travels, and constantly reflects upon them: in the prefatory epistle to the *Familiares* (the first of his two great letter-collections), presumably written once the collection was complete, he notes that 'until now almost my whole life has been spent in travel' [*Fam*. I 1]; a virtually identical statement is to be found in one of his later letters, *Seniles* IX 2, dating from about 1368: thus almost the whole of his epistolary *oeuvre* is so to speak framed by this overarching consideration. But, typically, Petrarch is not satisfied to observe his life: he needs to impose significant patterns upon it (or to model it to those patterns), and to extract moral lessons from it. 'Just as there is there is nothing worse for a man than not to know what he wants' he declares, 'so there is nothing worse for a traveller than not to know where he is going' [*Fam*. XX 4 36; cf. also *De ignorantia*, pp.58-9 of Nachod translation], and he quickly adds a classical precedent to lend meaning to life: '[Homer and Virgil] make the perfect man, in their description of his character and actions,

travel the entire world, always learning something new. They did not believe that the man they shaped with their eloquence could do what they wished of him if he were to remain constantly in one place' [*Fam*. XV 4 5]. After the *exemplum* come the imitation: 'I confess that it was my youthful ambition to follow the advice of Homer's poem: to behold the customs and cities of many peoples, and to contemplate with curiosity new lands, lofty mountains, famous seas, celebrated lakes, hidden springs, noted rivers and many other sites. I believed that I might thus become learned, something which has always been my fundamental desire, and that I might do so expeditiously and briefly, without too much effort, but rather with great pleasure'. His youthful optimism about the ease of travel was clearly unjustified, but what we see here is the curiosity of the tourist both given a rationale in terms of a classical model and brought firmly into a didactic framework. It is not enough to pass through places and enjoy them; we must learn from them and, as he says elsewhere, always press on, mindful of our goal, not lingering in pleasant spots or enjoying the road for its own sake for 'it must be to the traveller's credit to pass by many things swiftly, never pausing until he has reached his aim. And which of us is not a traveller? We are all on a long and difficult journey in a period of time as brief and as hostile as a rainy winter's day...'[*Fam*. I 7 14]. After the event, Petrarch on several occasions takes the trouble to justify his travels: in his *Letter to Posterity*, unfinished like so much of what he wrote, but probably reworked in the 1360's, he speaks of his youth when he was driven by the urge to travel across France and Germany: 'whatever other reasons I may have alleged at the time, the real reason was my burning desire to see and study many things' [p.10] (we shall have reason to return to this *cupiditas videndi*). In 1368, in his treatise *On his own Ignorance and that of Others*, he specifically relates his visits to Montpellier, Bologna, Toulouse, Paris, Padua and Naples to the desire to study there, so that he might return more learned and a better man; and we also know that he frequently returned from his travels with manuscripts (especially of works by Cicero) which he had found, and which were greatly to enrich his intellectual life.

On the other hand, he does not often speak of the realities of the road, though he admits to preferring to travel by any means other than by boat [*Fam*. V 5 19-21, V 6], and notes in his *De remediis* (I 114) and elsewhere the accidents that can occur; when he does dwell upon the miseries of travel, it is specifically to contrast them with the cloistered calm of life in the Charterhouse where his brother has made his profession: that *vacatio*, or freedom, which compares so favourably with the lot of the traveller, whom 'learned men senselessly call happy when he is constantly confronted by impassable, rugged and slippery places and endless ambushes by robbers, when he can be certain only of danger and toil, ever doubtful of repose and hospitality.'[*De otio religioso*, p. 93 l. 20]

One letter, *Familiares* XXI 12, puts the whole issue in a nutshell (though rather a large one!), from which I will quote a few lines: ' For some the road is easier, and for others more difficult. For some it is longer, and for others shorter. But for all the speed is the same. We progress along different paths, but with similar footsteps, and by different roads we all seek the same goal ... to this we impulsively proceed; every moment urges us onwards, driving us despite ourselves from this sea into that port, as strange travellers who love the journey and fear its ultimate end.'

The journey, needless to say, is life. Little wonder then that, in full awareness of his own restlessness (sometimes at least, it must be said, imposed upon him by the demands of diplomatic missions undertaken on behalf of his patrons), Petrarch reflected in his writings the polyvalency of his travels; they were not simply a pattern of real movement, but at the same time the enactment of a profound aspect of his psychology: something between curiosity, the thirst for the new, and a deep dissatisfaction, an unwillingness to settle down and define himself and his deepest concerns.

Which takes me back to his crossroads, presented in the letter with which I began as at the very heart of his preoccupations: the making of his career as poet laureate. It is first essential to understand the implications of the term *bivium*. What did the crossroads, or more exactly the parting, the forking of the ways, mean to Petrarch? Certainly, a moment for crucial decisions, often associated with the passage from youth to maturity: the term, which he does not use often, occurs, for instance, in a letter of advice to Pandolfo Malatesta who must choose whether or not to take a wife [*Fam*. XXII 1 6]. But above all, it clearly has much wider moral resonances. In a letter to the teacher Giberto Baiardi dated 26 March 1351 [*Fam*. VII 17], Petrarch urges him to take charge of his son Giovanni: 'this young man...is in need of advice, for he is troubled by the torments of his age. As you will see, he has now arrived at the Pythagorean crossroads (the *bivium pythagoricum*) of his life; never has his prudence been weaker, never the danger to him greater. The left hand path certainly leads to hell, the right hand one to heaven; but the former is easy, level, very wide, and worn smooth by the tracks of many men, while the latter is steep, narrow and difficult, and bears the footprints of only very few' [Cf. also *Ep*. III 32]. Petrarch then quotes the passage from Matthew 7 (13-14) that clearly lies behind these words: 'for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth into life, and few there be that find it'.

Already at this stage the nature of the crossroads is clear: it is the choice, for life, between good and evil. Petrarch's reference to it as the *bivium Pithagoricum* is especially interesting, and is developed at some length in a letter [*Fam*. XII 3] written the following year (1352) in which he urges his friend Zanobi da Strada, who has also come to a crucial choice, to abandon his career as a schoolmaster which he sees as the wrong road. He sketches out the two ways, to left and to right, between which he must choose, and then illustrates the *bivium* graphically by reference to Pythagoras who 'forged on the anvil of his genius a new letter of the alphabet, which is superfluous for writing, but very useful in life. This two-horned and exemplary letter reaches to the heavens with its narrower right-hand horn, while with its broader left horn it seems to curve towards the earth. The left horn, they say, represents the path to hell, for the approach to it is pleasant and easy, but the destination miserable and bitter; while for those who enter the path on the right, the efforts required are huge, but the reward is of the highest'.

Petrarch might have derived this information from a number of sources [cf. Mommsen in *JWCI* 16 (1953), 184 sq.]: Servius speaks of the letter y in his commentary to Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI 136), though judging by the absence of any marginal annotations at this point in his Virgil manuscript, Petrarch did not show any flicker of interest in what Servius has to say. On the other hand, he certainly knew Isidore of Seville's discussion of the point in the *Etymologies* (I iii 6-7), where he states that Pythagoras invented the y as a symbol of life: he identifies the lower branch of the letter with youth, and the forking of the other two as what occurs at adolescence: the choice lies between the harder path to the right, which leads to the good life, and the easier to the left, which leads down to destruction and ruin. Petrarch also certainly knew, as we shall see, the passage by the fourth-century scholar Lactantius in his *Divine Institutes* [VI 3] where he deals with the question: 'they say that the course of human life resembles the letter y, because every man, when he has reached the threshold of adolescence, and has arrived at the place 'where [as Virgil says] the road divides itself into two parts', is in doubt, and hesitates, and does not know to which side he should rather turn...the two ways belong to heaven and to hell, for immortality is promised to the righteous, and everlasting punishment is threatened to the unrighteous'.

Petrarch frequently alludes implicitly to this parting of the ways - for instance in his *Penitential Psalms* of 1346, where almost the very first words are 'Iter rectum sponte deserui' [I 2]: 'I have left the path of righteousness of my own accord, and have wandered far and

wide in the byways...', or above all perhaps in the famous *canzone* [*RVF* 264] of the same period, 'I'vo pensando', with which the second part of the *Canzoniere* begins, and which dramatizes the tension between the two roads: that which his love has led him along, and that other, to which he struggles to return:

vo ripensando ov'io lassai'l viaggio
da la man destra ch'a buon porto aggiunge.

The poem ends with the admission that the struggle is not yet over: 'e veggio'l meglio ed al peggior m'appiglio': I can see which is the better, but still incline towards the worse.

Most interestingly, however - and I here encroach on terrain magisterially surveyed by scholars such as Panofsky and Mommsen - Petrarch seems to have played a significant role in the transmission to posterity of the image of Hercules at the crossroads. We know from Cicero, who quotes Xenophon, that when Hercules came to the age of puberty and thus entered upon the road of life, he was much tortured by his desires, and withdrew to a solitary place where he meditated upon the two paths that seemed open to him: that of *voluptas* (pleasure), and that of virtue. He was able to choose the latter. Now Petrarch could not have known Xenophon, but he certainly knew Cicero, and drew upon his *De officiis* (I 32 118) to place this episode in the first book of his own *De vita solitaria*, as an example of the advantages of solitude. It appears that Petrarch is the first writer for some thousand years to revive the story. But he gives it an extra twist (quite apart from the rather gloomy moral lesson that he draws from it for the rest of us, who are not capable of retreating to a lonely place and coming to the right decisions), and that twist is precisely to integrate into Cicero's story the image of the crossroads, with all its Pythagorean implications. Where Cicero wrote of Hercules merely that he saw two paths ('duas cerneret vias'), Petrarch writes: 'when, as if at a crossroads ('velut in bivio'), he hesitated long and hard'. Hercules's heroic choice of Virtue, the subject of endless iconographical explorations by Renaissance and other artists, enabled him, Petrarch says, not merely to reach the peak of human fame, but even, according to some, a god-like state.

Thus the crossroads, which confronts us all on the journey of life, is a place of intense significance, and the choice that it offers is a truly vital one. So that when, in 1350, Petrarch writes to his elusive friend the French poet and musician Philippe de Vitry, urging him to overcome all obstacles and to travel away from his native land, he can remind him that the obstacles themselves make the journey worthwhile: 'all virtue, all noble delights are difficult to obtain. By descending, a man arrives at obscene pleasures; by ascending, at honourable ones' [*Fam*. IX 13].

The topographical orientation of the two paths, like the two strokes of the letter y, one leading steeply up to higher, and better, things, the other sloping gently towards perdition, has as we have seen an obvious moral schema behind it. Nowhere is that dichotomy more clearly marked in Petrarch's writings than in his letter describing the climbing of Mont Ventoux, which represents on the face of it his most audacious and innovative journey. It has even been described as the first feat of modern mountaineering, even though Petrarch was not in fact the first to climb that particular mountain: the philosopher John Buridan appears to have done so a few years earlier, and as we shall see, Petrarch meets a shepherd who also claimed to have been to the top. To understand the exact nature of Petrarch's exploit, we must first look closely at the terms in which it is described.

The letter, *Familiares* IV 1, to which Petrarch himself gave the title *de curis propriis* (on personal concerns), tells how in 1336 he and his brother Gherardo came to climb Mont Ventoux. The first words are programmatic, and, I would suggest (and others, notably Billanovich, have suggested this before me) utterly disingenuous: 'today, led solely by a desire to see (*cupiditas videndi*) the great height of it, I climbed the highest mountain in this

region...'. Petrarch claims that the idea of this expedition had been in his mind for many years, but that he was finally inspired to action by reading in Livy's *Roman History* of how King Philip V of Macedonia climbed Mount Hemo in Thessaly. His account appears highly circumstantial: he invited his brother to join him, and they set off before dawn one morning from a little inn at Malaucène, each with a servant. On the lower slopes they met an old shepherd who tried to dissuade them from climbing higher by saying that he himself had been to the summit some fifty years earlier, and had returned with nothing but regrets, fatigue, bruises and torn clothes. The young men, however, as young men are wont to do, took no notice of his warnings and pressed on. Some time later they stopped on a cliff. 'From there we once again began to climb, but more slowly, and I in particular pursued a more modestly inclined mountain path. My brother proceeded to the heights by shortcuts over the ridges of the mountain, whilst I, being weaker, turned towards the lower slopes. As he kept calling me back to point out the most direct path, I answered that I hoped to find an easier route on the other face of the mountain, and that I would not shrink from a longer road if I could climb less steeply. Having offered this excuse for my laziness, I was still wandering through the valleys without finding a more gentle approach anywhere by the time that the others had reached the peak. The road got longer, and my burden heavier, yet despite my exhaustion, and despite the confusion of my straying, I was still determined to seek the heights. Finally, exhausted and distressed, I caught up with my industrious brother, who had refreshed himself with a long rest, and we climbed along side by side for some time. We had scarcely left that slope, however, when I, forgetful of my former wandering, pursued the easy stretches of the paths and headed downhill to end up once again in the valleys. Thus, as before, I encountered serious trouble: I had tried to put off the effort of having to climb, but the nature of things does not depend upon human desires, and it is impossible for a body to arrive at a summit by descending...'.

One may pause at this stage on the slopes and ask what is going on. Scarcely, I think, a feat of mountaineering. I shall come back to some of the details, but would first remark that the stamp of Lactantius upon the narrative is plain. Precisely in the chapter [VI 3] of the *Divine Institutes* where he speaks of the Pythagorean y, he writes to the Emperor Constantine that there are two paths along which human life must proceed: one which leads to virtue and to heaven, the other which sinks to vice, and to hell. He then quotes philosophers who have 'represented the path which leads to virtue as steep and rugged from the start, though anyone who overcomes the difficulties and climbs to the summit finds a level path, a bright and pleasant plain, and can enjoy the delightful fruits of his labours in plenty. But if someone is deterred by the difficulties of the first approach, and turns to slip aside into the path of vice, which at its beginning appears to be pleasant and well-trodden, he finds when he has advanced in it a little further that its pleasant appearance vanishes, and that the road then becomes steep, rough with stones, overgrown with thorns, interrupted by deep waters or violent torrents, so that he gets into difficulty, hesitates, slips and falls.'

Finally, nonetheless, after repeatedly falling back in the Lactantian manner, and after a prolonged meditation which explicitly compares his rather unsuccessful method of climbing with his equally deviant approach to the blessed life, Petrarch reached the summit. From there he looked down and surveyed the view in amazement: to the East, the Alps and Italy beyond, a sight which inspired considerations about the passing of time, the weight of his sins, his lust and his ambition, and the two selves which had fought for control of him. Then, to the West, more mountains on the right, and Marseilles and Aigues Mortes to the left. Before the vast spectacle of the outer world, his mind switched to the inner world of his personal concerns, and he decided to open his copy of St Augustine's *Confessions* (which he just happened to have carried up with him) at random, whereupon his eyes lit upon a passage [X 8 end] which reads: 'men go to admire high mountains, and the great flood of the seas and rolling rivers and the ring of ocean and the wheeling of the stars, yet to themselves

they give no heed'. And from that moment onwards he paid no further attention to the grandiose spread of nature around him, but turned his mind inwards, and spoke not another word until he was back at the foot of the mountain that night.

This substantial letter, which I have only paraphrased in the briefest of manners, and every word of which merits the closest attention, is such a thicket of learned strategies and references that it is easy to lose one's way in it. I should like to propose two signposts to give some sense of direction to what I have to say: imitation and allegory. By imitation I mean *imitatio* in the full sense in which we constantly encounter it in Petrarch's writings. As a rather self-conscious and upwardly mobile dwarf on the shoulders of giants (if I may borrow Bernard Silvester's image), Petrarch rarely fails to remind us of those great men who support him, and yet usually seems further determined not only to dwell upon the manner of his sitting, but also to underline the superior nature of his own vision from on high. In this particular letter, the first overt reference to the exemplary tradition is relatively straightforward: it is to the mountaineering exploit of Philip of Macedon. But even this does not go undiscussed: there is a learned dispute to settle. Was Philip's belief that he would see both the Adriatic and the Black Seas from the summit of Mount Hemo correct or not? According to Livy, it was not; according to the classical cosmographer Pomponius Mela, it was (and Petrarch can thus indulge in quoting a little-known authority which he himself had been instrumental in recovering for posterity). After the display of erudition comes the hubris of our increasingly self-confident dwarf: 'for my own part, if I could climb that mountain - Hemo - as rapidly as I can this - Ventoux - I would quickly clear up the uncertainty'. From there it is but one step to justifying his action: 'it seemed excusable for an ordinary young man to do something which was thought unexceptionable in an elderly king'. Petrarch's exploit is thus firmly located in an historical and classical context, and its unusual nature is deliberately emphasised by the royal example that he is following. The message at this stage is that the *cupiditas videndi*, the urge to see that he quotes from the outset as his sole motive, finds its full justification in such a notable precedent.

There is, however, more to it than that. The crucial imitation on this journey is not that of King Philip, but of St Augustine. And it is the episode with the book at the summit which give the letter its fundamental meaning. Petrarch prepares us for it carefully: you will remember that once he has reached the summit he looks towards Italy (visible, he says, more to his mind than to his eyes), and falls into a first meditation. It is the tenth anniversary to the day of his departure from Bologna and his beloved homeland, after completing his studies there. He looks back over a decade of sins, and storms that he has weathered, and recalls Augustine, quoting the opening words of the second book of the *Confessions*: 'I must now carry my thoughts back to the abominable things that I did in those days, the sins of the flesh which defiled my soul. I do this, my God, not because I love those sins, but so that I may love you'. Petrarch thinks of the progress (or otherwise) of his love-affair with Laura, and the struggle between his desires and his better self, and then his mind projects into the future (for he is effectively at a crossroads again), and he wonders whether he will be able to maintain his progress along the path of virtue. Then, returning to the mountain-top, he scans the view, and allows his copy of St Augustine's *Confessions* to fall open at random, with the highly significant (but surely not entirely accidental) result that we have seen: the production of a text urging not awe at nature but *contemptus mundi* and introspection. It is, furthermore, a passage taken from that part of the tenth book where Augustine considers the role of memory and the function of the images of the past that we store inside ourselves. If the opening words of book II of the *Confessions* seemed programmatic enough as an introduction to the summit of Mont Ventoux, then surely what Petrarch finds when he gets there is even more emphatic. For he then explicitly relates his experience on the mountain top to the dramatic conversion of Augustine under the fig tree: he compares his happening upon the passage [VIII 12] in the *Confessions* with what occurred to his illustrious

predecessor, who had heard an inner voice commanding him to read the first passage in the scriptures that his eyes should fall upon as he opened the book, and who had this lighted upon St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (13 13-14), where he read 'not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envy. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof'.

Thus Petrarch records, or, I rather think, creates) a clear parallel of considerable spiritual significance. And if we should be in any doubt as to the credentials of his imitation, he immediately dispels them by reminding us that Augustine was himself imitating - or claiming to imitate - St Anthony, who had come by chance across a passage in the Gospels which had commanded him to 'go home and sell all that belongs to you'. The implications of this chain of *imitatio* are that Petrarch's version of the ancient divinatory practice of the random consultation of books, the *sortes Virgilianae*, has led him to a fundamental turning-point on his journey: from the desire to see to the need to know himself.

I said just now that Petrarch may have been creating rather than recording a spiritual experience. It may be helpful briefly to consider the evidence for this, which will in turn lead us on to the second of my promised signposts, that of allegory. There is little doubt that the letter is not what it purports to be, that is to say that it is not a spontaneous and immediate account of a real event. What Petrarch tells us is that as soon as he had returned by moonlight to the little inn from which they had departed before dawn that day, he withdrew to a quiet corner while his servants prepared a meal, to write his letter 'speedily and on the spur of the moment (*raptim et ex tempore*), lest through delay my determination to write might lessen, or my feelings perhaps change because of a change of place'. He dates the letter 26 April from Malaucène, and we may deduce from the reference to the tenth anniversary of his departure from Bologna that he intends us to understand the year as 1336. It is of course intrinsically unlikely that a man who had got up before dawn to accomplish a trek of some 40km, including a climb to 1300 metres, would, returning in the depths of night (*profunda nocte*), and on an empty stomach, proceed to write such a long and carefully articulated letter. It is the more unlikely since it contains no fewer that 20 direct or indirect quotations from classical, scriptural and patristic sources. But then we know how carefully Petrarch edited everything that he wrote, often years after the event.

There is no doubt that the date is significant: 26 April was a Friday, and Petrarch was much given to penitential experiences, or exercises, on Fridays; the year 1336 is not only a poignant anniversary, as Petrarch tells us, but is also the 32nd year of his life, precisely the age at which Augustine underwent his conversion. When one further considers the explicit references to the beatific life as being located on high, and recalls how he describes his brother Gherardo's climbing method - straight up the steepest paths to the top - we may be fairly sure that Petrarch is referring to the fact that Gherardo had taken the more difficult, but more direct, route to spiritual heights by entering the Charterhouse at Montrieux, an event which did not however occur until 1343. At the very least, then, it seems likely that even if some such expedition really did take place in 1336, it was not until at least seven years later that it could have assumed its full significance and be written up in such elaborate form. Indeed, Billanovich has shown on impeccable philological grounds that Petrarch must have reworked the final version of the letter as we now have it in 1352 or 1353, ten years after Gherardo became a Carthusian, and eleven years after the death of Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, to whom the letter purports to be addressed.

What is the significance of this elaborate rewriting (if it is not actually inventing) of a journey? Apart from the clear references to Augustinian precedent of which I have spoken, which are incidentally reinforced by the identity of the addressee, for Dionigi had given Petrarch the fatal copy of the *Confessions* in 1333, and was himself a Hermit of St Augustine,

there is a clear allegorical thread running through the letter.

As a point of reference, albeit for a slightly oblique approach, I should like to take Petrarch's first eclogue, *Parthenias*, an avowedly allegorical text, in which he casts himself and his brother in bucolic and naturally Virgilian guise as two shepherds, Silvius and Monicus, whose different styles of life are contrasted. Monicus lives in beatitude in an isolated cave; Silvius wanders unhappily about in the woods and the foothills looking for an inaccessible peak. In this case, Petrarch obligingly provides us, or to be more exact, his brother, with an explanation of the hidden meaning of the text, in the form of an exegetical letter (*Fam.* X 4) dating from 1349. Monicus's cave is the Charterhouse; Silvius's wanderings are provoked by his secular studies, and the peak that he seeks is that of fame. The model is not entirely the same as that of the Mont Ventoux letter, but the comparison is instructive, and at least one passage [X 4 27] significant: 'the descent from the mountain's summit to the deepest valleys, and the ascent from the deepest valleys to the mountain-tops, to which Silvius refers in speaking of himself, represents the journey from the heights of theory down to the level of practical exercise, and back up again, caused by the changing nature of our feelings'. In 1349 Petrarch could take stock of his situation compared to that of his brother, but was not yet perhaps able to see beyond the image of the mountain as peak of worldly achievement. By 1353, when he completed his letter to the long-dead Dionigi, the full value of the ascent had become clear to him.

The spiritual topography of mountains already had a long and honourable history: the theme of ascending the mountain of the Lord, for instance, is commonplace in the sermons and treatises of any number of patristic writers whose works were certainly accessible, and probably familiar, to Petrarch: Helinand, Peter Damian, Aeldred of Rievaulx, St Anselm, St Bonaventure and others. [Cf Martinelli; quotes *PL* 177 924-25] Hugh and Richard of St Victor in particular had set out a typology for spiritual ascent based on a climb out of valleys representing evil, through fields, up hills and mountain slopes, to the peak from where we can raise our eyes to behold God. Petrarch himself reflects this idea in at least one poem (129) of the *Canzoniere*, where a mountain is represented as the place of absolute solitude and spiritual achievement. Something very similar clearly lies behind his account of the conquest of Mont Ventoux. Yet at the same time there are two significant differences. The first is that when Petrarch reaches the peak he does not look up to God, but looks down at what lies below and behind him. And in looking down he does not indulge (as some critics have it) in the pure aesthetic contemplation of the wonders of nature: we might indeed be inclined to think that what he sees is, like Italy in his own words, more in his mind than in his eye: that it is not first-hand experience at all, but what in generic terms Augustine says men go to look for: mountain peaks, rivers, coasts and seas.

The second difference is that, far from being a conquest of spiritual heights, Petrarch's arrival at the summit is greeted by Augustine's warning about the vanity of such exploration, and heralds a parting of the ways, a change of direction, a turning of the eye inward from the initial *cupiditas videndi* to that introspection which might lead to a kind of conversion. For the desire to see is, in Augustinian terms, a category of *voluptas*, Hercules's left-hand path, and therefore in need of correction: seeing for its own sake is as sinful as knowledge for its own sake (or indeed travel for its own sake: we must never lose sight of the goal). Pure aesthetic pleasure derived from contemplation is as wicked as scientific curiosity. 'The higher a traveller climbs', Petrarch says in another letter, 'the nearer he is to descent...'[*Fam*. I 6 14]. Little wonder then that, as he climbed down, Petrarch tells us that he repeatedly thought that in retrospect the mountain seems scarcely one cubit high when compared with the loftiness of human meditation: once climbed, and once its allegorical value is exhausted, it shrinks into insignificance. The task in life, he reflects, is not to struggle for a higher place on earth, but to trample underfoot those base appetites which

arise from our earthly desires [IV 1 33-4].

At very much the same time as he completed his account of the ascent of Mont Ventoux, Petrarch was also putting the finishing touches to what is in many ways his most remarkable text: remarkable not merely for the intense self-awareness that it reflects, but also for the way in which it prefigures the 'talking cure' of psychoanalysis. This is the *Secretum*, or to give it its full title, *De secreto conflictu curarum mearum*: concerning the intimate conflict of those cares which are also evoked in the title of the letter I have been discussing: *De curis propriis*. It takes the form of a dialogue, spread over three days and conducted in the presence of Truth, between Augustinus and Franciscus. It is of course no accident that Petrarch should have chosen to represent St Augustine as his father confessor here, but the characters represent more than their historical equivalents. Augustinus stands not just for the saint whose writings had had such a profound influence on Petrarch, but stands also for Petrarch as self-critic, the moralist trying to persuade his love-sick and ambitious *alter ego* of the folly of his ways. Franciscus on the other hand is in effect our young mountaineer: a man of supreme earthly aspirations, and a poetically passionate lover, to whom Augustinus, the older and wiser self, preaches the ways of salvation. The theoretical crisis that St Augustine had precipitated on the mountain top is here dissected in all its practical implications for Petrarch's innermost equilibrium.

Not surprisingly, one of the central themes of the third book of the *Secretum* is what Augustinus calls the two adamantine chains that bind Franciscus to earthly concerns: his love and his desire for fame. When Franciscus comes to analyse the errors of his youth, he uses the image of the crossroads [*Prose*, pp. 150-52]. He says that he thinks the theory of the Pythagorean y, 'which I have heard of and read about, is not misconceived. Indeed, when climbing by the straight path I came, still at that time modest and sober, to the *bivium*, and was ordered to go to the right. Instead I turned, whether foolishly or insolently, to the left', and here he quotes Virgil on the parting of the ways, as does Lactantius in the passage that I referred to earlier. 'For what particular reason' asks Augustinus a little later, 'when you had met [Laura], did you choose the left-hand path?' And Franciscus replies: 'I think because it seemed more even and wider open; the right-hand one is steep and narrow'.

One cannot fully understand the account of the conquest of Mont Ventoux without reference to the *Secretum*: the crossroads which Franciscus here identifies is precisely the one into which Petrarch had stumbled blindly as he tried to reach the top of the mountain. Or, putting it differently, and with possibly more regard to the real chronology of Petrarch's life-crisis rather than the one he artfully imposed upon it, the journey to the summit was carefully created to narrate the drama which Petrarch had by the early 1350's identified as being at the centre of his inner conflict: the need to seek solitude and to escape from the pulls of earthly desires. At the same time, the introspection which makes the self-analysis of the *Secretum* possible is clearly the outcome of the injunction delivered on the mountain-top by St Augustine's text: know yourself.

You may feel that I am placing too much stress on the imaginary nature of what looks like a perfectly convincing real journey, and that all of this has little to do with travel. Yet Petrarch, as I said earlier, spent much of his time on the road, and frequently reflected in his writings on the nature of that activity. He was also aware of the text as a medium for that displacement of the self, spatial and temporal, that occurs on journeys real or imaginary. Indeed in a letter written when he was 64 [*Sen*. IX 2 pp. 944-45], he announces that he will in future restrict his movements: 'I have therefore decided that I shall henceforth travel to [distant] lands not by way of interminable voyages by boat or on horseback or on foot, but on occasion in a brief letter [cf. also 'brevi papiro' *Var*. 61], and often in books and in my mind, so that, as I have so frequently wished, I can go to those shores in the space of an

hour, and return, not only unharmed, but untired; not simply sound in body, but also without worn shoes, untroubled by rocks and brambles, mud and dust'. This was no more than the logical conclusion of a process in which he had been long involved.

When, in the early 1350's, at a time when, as we have seen, he was assiduously filling out and polishing many of his earlier writings for posterity, he edited two letters written many years before to Giovanni Colonna [*Fam*. I 4-5] about his real travels to the north in the 1330's, he effectively changed them into learned disquisitions upon the history of the outer reaches of the Roman empire, and takes refuge from the real summer's heat of that expedition in the poetic snows of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Or when, around 1340, he wrote to the same correspondent reminding him of the trips that they had made together round the ruins of Rome, he recalls the monuments not in any true topographical order such as that in which they might have visited them, but rather in an ideal and reconstructed historical order, ranging from the shrine of the goddess Carmentis and the palace of her son Evander down to the sites of Christian Rome, pausing metaphorically at each to evoke some choice fragment of his knowledge of the past. If travel is a pretext for literature, then literature is also the privileged locus of travel.

This is perhaps clearest in his *Itinerarium*, a guide to the journey to the Holy Land which he himself never undertook, but which he wrote apparently at the request of his friend Giovanni Mandelli in 1358. There was a flourishing tradition of such guidebooks, which had grown up in association with crusades and pilgrimages, so that there was nothing intrinsically new about Petrarch's venture, though characteristically he added his personal touch to an existing genre. To the conventional combination of pious intent and practical description he brought a considerable wealth of scholarship, adding *exempla* at every stage, not just of religious fervour but also of entirely secular *virtus*: St Erasmus appears side by side with Aeneas's nurse, Scipio and Cicero; Virgil's tomb receives as much attention as the church of Santa Maria di Piedigrotta. Constant archaeological (as we would now say) details embellish the journey, dependent as much upon Petrarch's immense booklearning as upon any personal observation, and the tombs of Alexander the Great or Pompey seem almost as important as that of Christ.

The interaction between the aims of the traveller and those of the writer becomes particularly evident in the choice of route. The normal port of embarkation for the Holy Land was Venice. But Petrarch proposes Genoa, which has the real geographical disadvantage of entailing a sea-voyage (something which Petrarch professes to detest) down the whole length of Italy, but the literary advantage of enabling him to incorporate a detailed description of the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy closely related to a poetic version he had already elaborated many years before as part of his epic poem *Africa* [18-25; cf. *Afr*. VI end]. Equally, his description of the Bay of Naples in the *Itinerarium* is indubitably based on earlier accounts that he had written in the *Familiares* and his verse letters [*Fam*. V 4; *Ep*. II 7; 16]: the whole area was rich in Virgilian echoes (such as the entrance to hell) of little use to pilgrims, and lent itself infinitely better than the Adriatic coast to literary and historical amplification.

He makes no secret of not having seen all that he was describing, nor of the art or artifice, of which he is proud, of condensing such a long voyage into such a short text (three months' travel in three days' writing, he says [80]), but justifies his attempt as a kind of literary self-portrait. 'Like a lover', he says, 'you asked for a picture of the person you are missing to console you during his absence: not the normal outlines of the face, which change perceptibly from day to day, but a more stable image of my mind and my intellect, which are certainly the better part of me'[7]. This image is built partly upon direct recollection of places that Petrarch had visited, but that is merely the scaffolding for a much more complex structure of references to poetical, historical, geographical and cosmographical texts, and

even to maps, which Petrarch certainly possessed [43]; evidently the second half of the itinerary, from the moment when the ship leaves Otranto and Italian soil, is entirely speculative, based exclusively on reading rather than experience. Thus he warns against staying too long in Cyprus, (a land, he says, known only for idleness and luxury, where Venus is more revered than Mars or Minerva), and offers a choice between various routes, quoting the prophet Isaiah as authority for the view that Damascus 'vaut le détour' as Michelin might say. In the end it is of course the aim of the journey, not the places visited on the way, that is all important: 'it is', he says, 'a hard road, but for the man going to his salvation no road should seem too difficult'[66]. The object is not to see the Red Sea and dream of spices, but constantly to bear in mind that King of the Jews and the city where he is buried. Thus Giovanni will cross land and sea on foot and by boat, while Petrarch will hasten over the surface of his paper with his pen, and at the end Giovanni will return home, and Petrarch will return to his studies [80].

If I have dwelt on the *Itinerarium*, it was to show that Petrarch was also concerned with real travel, for himself or for others, but that as always his treatment of it is the product of the alchemical mutations of his writing. With this in mind, I should like now to return for one final visit to Petrarch's crossroads. You may remember that in the passage with which I began he spoke of a critical crossroads - *bivium anceps* - in his career: he was faced with the choice between travelling to Rome or to Paris to be crowned with laurels. We have seen that *bivium* for Petrarch betokens a crucial moment of choice between two paths, one good but steep and difficult, and requiring effort; the other sloping gently towards perdition. Why should he describe the receipt of two letters in such dramatic terms, and what conclusions might one draw from this in the light especially of his letter about Mont Ventoux?

First, it is worth noting that the link that I am implying between the two letters is not purely of my making. They are respectively the fourth and the first letter in the fourth book of the *Familiares*. We know how carefully Petrarch structured his great collection of correspondence, and it seems most unlikely that he would have placed the letter about the coronation so soon after that about Ventoux if he had not intended the one to bear upon the other. Given this, two possible routes of enquiry offer themselves. The first is to ask whether the road to Rome is the right-hand one, whereas the road to Paris, which in this case Petrarch rejected, would lead only to vice. There is at least some strength in the view that Rome, and especially coronation with laurels there, represented all that Petrarch most aspired to, and that the road to it was indeed arduous. But there is nothing to indicate what view he might have held of Paris. On the other hand, our second route of enquiry brings some corroboration: in the Mont Ventoux episode, the choice between the two paths is charged with meaning, most of which has little to do with climbing real mountains. What then if Petrarch's crossroads in Vaucluse on that autumn day in 1340 is in fact the self-conscious prelude to another remarkable, and almost entirely plausible, fiction? This time the path that leads to Rome will in effect take Petrarch to his personal Parnassus. In the allegorical account of the coronation that he gives in his third Eclogue, the nymph Daphne crowns the aspiring poet Stupeus with laurels on Mount Olympus. The heights of the mountains that he had longed for since his youth were thus not so much those of Ventoux (where he discovered some uncomfortable truths, thanks to St Augustine), but the mountain of immortal fame where Apollo and the Muses dwell, and Petrarch, like Hercules, might achieve almost god-like status by being crowned with laurels: a fitting reward for a man who so often likens his pursuit of Laura in the *Canzoniere* to that of the nymph Daphne by the god Apollo.

There are many other reasons for thinking that the coronation may in fact never have taken place (or was at most a minor academic ceremony), despite Petrarch's highly circumstantial accounts of the pomp of it, and despite - or because of! - Boccaccio's curiously antiquarian

celebration of it in the form of a mock-classical inscription. But it is nonetheless not only a pivotal moment in Petrarch's career as lover and poet (it occurs, conveniently, exactly two thirds of the way through his great lyric affair with Laura, but that is another story) but also the keystone in his whole elaborately constructed conception of himself. If there were a conclusion to be drawn at the end of this journey, or if, to adopt Petrarch's view, I were constantly to bear in mind the object of the voyage, it would be to cast further doubt upon the historical status of the coronation, but also to pay tribute to the elegance and skill with which Petrarch composed the work of art that was his life.

What in effect I have been trying to explore is the relationship between the outer and the inner worlds in Petrarch's experience. This is not, however, simply the self-indulgence of one who is determined to make a magic mountain out of a series of scholarly molehills: the question as to how an outstanding intellectual in the fourteenth century perceived and presented the world around him surely has vital implications for cultural history. Was there, for instance, as is often said, a new perception of nature current at the papal court of Avignon in the fourteenth century, mirrored in the luxuriant Italian frescoes of the Tour de la Garderobe, and in a number of Petrarch's poems and letters? One can, after all, find stirring descriptions of nature in fourth-century Greek church fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom, yet Burckhardt claimed, in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, that 'the significance of nature for a receptive spirit is fully and clearly displayed by Petrarch, one of the first truly modern men'. It has further been suggested, much more recently, that Rousseau owes to Petrarch, who would thus be a founding father of Romanticism, his 'exaltation de la solitude dans la nature'. In the famous letter on the Valais in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Bernard Guyon tells us in his edition, 'comme Pétrarque au Mont Ventoux, St Preux entreprend l'ascension qui conduit à la pureté des sommets: lente élévation d'Eros qui se purifie...'. I have tried to show that this cannot be the case; St Preux's ecstasy and self-effacement in contact with nature is the very opposite of what Petrarch experiences on the summit: the need to turn inwards from the spectacle of nature and to know himself. Eros, far from being purified, is rejected as proper to the left-hand path that leads downwards to damnation. The concrete aspects of the world that Petrarch evokes on his long and wayward climb are all assigned a place in the moral scheme of things; only when that has been put behind him can the vital processes of the inner world begin: the examination of the soul requires that the eyes be closed to the world around.

This is not to suggest that Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux does not have its place in the history of aesthetics, regardless of whether his account of it is true: as a fiction it is quite as significant [cf. Jauss, *Aesthetische Erfahrung*, p. 140 sq.]. But the world in which it is enacted is still manifestly the Augustinian one in which Petrarch grew up: he does not simply enjoy the view or experience the landscape in an aesthetic sense, for that would be tantamount to sin. Rather, he moves from the outer world to that within. As he looks down, he recalls accounts of Athos or Olympus, and finds them less incredible; as he looks around, he thinks of Hannibal crossing the Alps and longs to return to Italy with him. Life, or this representation of it, leads to literature; literature feeds back into his consciousness as the Augustinian text abolishes the surroundings in favour of the self. In this sense, Petrarch, who himself elsewhere speaks of being at the confines of two peoples, looking both forwards and back, is, I would suggest, for all his self-consciousness, still standing at the crossroads of the medieval and the modern worlds.