

SECRETUM MEUM ES

(Familiarum Rerum XXIII 13, by Petrarch)

Thou canst ill abide that others take advantage of thy labours. Do not be indignant, nor wonder at it; life is full of such mocking jests and one should not marvel at ordinary events, all the more so as it is very seldom that anything else happens. Few things serve the person who made them and most often the greater the labour, the less the reward.

A short marble slab covers the founders of great cities, which are enslaved by foreigners; one man builds a house, another lives in it and its architect lies under the open sky; this man sows, that one gathers and the man who sowed dies of hunger; one sails, another becomes wealthy with the merchandise brought across the sea and the sailor is miserably poor; lastly, one weaves, another wears the cloth and the weaver is left naked; one fights, another receives the reward of victory and the true victor is left without honours, one digs up gold, another spends it and the miner is poor; another collects jewels that yet another bears upon his finger and the jeweller starves; a woman gives birth to a child amidst suffering, another happily marries him and makes him her own, to the loss of his mother.

There is not enough time to list all the examples that spring to mind and what else does that well known verse of Virgil's mean: Not for yourselves do you make nests, oh birds? Thou knowest the rest....

Thus, in 1359, Francesco exhorts his friend Socrates to bear with composure, that others profit from his labours.

It almost seemed that the poet was trying to accept that he had been born in a century, in which he could not claim the paternity of the noble teachings he had conceived for mankind, without putting himself in serious danger.

After Simone's death, fifteen years earlier, his inner thoughts were troubled by frustration and terror. The frighteningly rapid expansion of his cards all over Europe had taken him completely by surprise.

(Familiarum Rerum XIII.6) Petrarch to Francesco di Sant'Apostoli concerning how the ignorant masses profane the name of poetry.

...I shall tell thee what will make thee laugh even more: even I, the most hostile among all men to divination and magic, am at times called a negromancer by these excellent judges, because of my friendship with Virgil...

(*Familiarum Rerum XIII. 7*) Petrarch to Peter abbot of San Benigno, regarding the incurable mania of writing.

...At last I have realised that it may be perfectly true, that whilst I try to do good to myself, I am unwittingly doing myself and many others harm and that the complaint, addressed to me by an old father of a family, might be correct: he came to me one day and sorrowfully, almost in tears, said: "whilst I have always respected thy name, look at what thou hast rewarded me with in exchange: thou art the cause of my only son's ruin"::: Every day letters, every day verses rain on me from all over Italy; and that is not enough, because tempests of letters fall upon me even from abroad and not only from France, but from Greece, Germany, England...and all this would be nothing if this creeping malady had not at last penetrated – and how to believe it? – even the papal court. What dost thou think that the jurists – the doctors – do? They no longer recognise either Justinian nor Aesculapius; they do not hear the howls of their clients or patients; they have been deafened by the names of Homer and Virgil. What use is it to report humbler aberrations? Carpenters, dyers, farmers, have dropped their ploughs and the other tools of their trades and talk of the Muses and of Apollo; it is impossible to describe the extent of this plague, which earlier used to strike but few... Thou findest many standing in the public squares, none in Helicon, for many taste the honey of the Muses with their lips, but none of them can digest it. Judge now how great and pleasing a thing possessing this poetry can be that so delights those who dream of it as to force them, though busy and avaricious, to neglect business and money! ...I carry the suffering of my sin, full of disquiet at home, and not daring to go out and be seen in public, as people attack me from every quarter.

They question me frantically, clutch at me, give me advice, discuss, quarrel, say things unknown to the Mantuan shepherd and to the old Meonian (Etruscan). I wonder, smile, commiserate, grow angry and at last am gripped by fear that the magistrates may call me to judgement and accuse me of corrupting the public good. If the sickness spreads, I am lost: shepherds, fishermen, clodhoppers, the oxen themselves will but bellow poems, and ruminant but poems....

Being of a prudent disposition, he had forced himself to stifle his legitimate pride, denying his authorship of the game created with Simone, whereas he would have so loved to have received the world's applause, even if it came from the "vulgar herd", which he so often claimed to despise.

His terror was caused by the fact that the subjects illustrated in the cards were scrupulously echoed in his writings. His intimate friends, who haunted his library, and with whom he had no secrets, might have unwittingly spoken of the game to somebody and if such information were to come to some French cardinal's or to the Pope's ear, he would have been hauled up in front of the tribunal of the Inquisition.

As the cards had also got to Siena and Florence, Francesco suspected that Simone, before dying, had ordered other copies of the game from his followers, to be sent to his Sienese friends.

His able rhetor's brain, however, was busy devising a series of arguments in his own defence: although people were fascinated by the game of *Triumphs*, none of his poetic compositions, then known to the public, mentioned the subject: perhaps he would write the *Triumphs* in the next few years, to be read once he was dead, like his *Sine Nomine*, and the *Rerum Memorandarum Libri* on

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Contact: rolando.fusi@email.it - rosalynd@alice.it

the Virtues and Vices, that were safely hidden in Parma and nobody would ever read them while he was alive.

The French, moreover, never had anything to do with these classical themes and the allegorised vices in the pack were neither easy to understand, nor clearly directed at the prelates of the Avignon see. *Fortune* and the *Hanged Man* were general concepts, that could apply to anybody; only the *Tower*, surmounted by its turret, unfortunately, unequivocally recalled Benedict's apartments in the papal palace.

Anyway, everybody knew that there were two conflicting factions in the Holy See: the French cardinals who were faithful to the king of France and the Italians, who wanted to move the papal see back to Rome. Even if the fact, that he had conceived the pack, still had to be proved, the pack of cards was merely one of the many accusations levelled at the Avignon see, that had even been advanced by French critics. After all, Jean Dupin, had certainly not measured his words, in his *Melancholies*, on the Papal State, written in Provençal!

Petrarch, however, had a pronounced bump of common sense and this led him to remember that the situation was dangerous, not because of the accusatory images in themselves, but because they had spread everywhere and had penetrated every level of society, whereas all the other accusations had not been heard of outside the Venaisin County.

As a last resort, if really up against it, he could have claimed that his thoughts might have inspired some painter: after all Simone was already dead. Ashamed of having even thought of such a thing, he raged, not wishing to recognise any weak or base aspects in himself.

He had lately noticed that people in the papal see looked at him differently; moreover the pope, who suspected him of having something to do with the *Devil's Bible*, had accused him of negromancy, under the pretext, that the cards, that "stank" of Petrarch, were being used by the *tireurs de cartes* for fortune telling, which was forbidden by the Church.

(Familiarum Rerum IX 5 – by Petrarch)

... now, therefore, am I judged at the same time well-intentioned towards my enemies and an enemy of my friends, a lamb amongst wolves and a wolf among lambs? To what purpose did I keep myself at a distance from business and from towns, searching out solitude and peace, loving quiet and silence, if I am now considered the forger of evil? ...labour is often changed into harm and rarely does the beginning match the end. This is what I have got from what should have given me the reputation of innocence: no less than the suspicion of hatching new intrigues and plots to damage the most excellent people; perhaps - and this came to my ears, after it had been given credit by the great, the great I say for their wealth and not because of their talents – perhaps, I say, to many I may seem a negromancer and magician, probably because I often keep my own company and – this moves me both to laughter and rage – because I read Virgil's writings, as these highly erudite men say and this I cannot deny: yes I do read them. This is the reason of all this suspicion. This is what causes them to condemn my studies. And I marvel more that Apuleius of Madauras was

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accused of magic, which he defended himself against, in a wonderfully elegant book. I do not need such a laborious defence; I have not yet been hauled up before a court and one only speaks ill of me in whispers, in the darkest corners. And dost thou think that it be a thing of little moment that the frail barque of my fame be so often hurled against these rocks of ignorance? Exercise thy ingenuity, spend sleepless nights, write something that will then fall into the hands of thy censors, only to be called a magician, if thou hast said something that they, who nothing understand, cannot fathom.

The more cultured and shrewder prelates were beginning to understand how damaging and dangerous Petrarch's writings were for Holy Mother Church.

If one excluded the innocuous, enchanting sonnets dedicated to Laura and a few mannered religious compositions, all Petrarch's work drew on ancient philosophies and tended to induce his 14th century readers to adopt a novel ethical and religious approach to faith, that did not celebrate the *Docta Ignorantia*, the humility and simplicity of spirit, that mankind was supposed to cultivate, in order to meekly approach the Church and its sacraments, but rather advocated individual awakening and new self-awareness.

The cardinals of the papal see, however, wrapped up in their irrepressible bureaucratic and courtier-like vocation, did not understand the changes in society, that Petrarch voiced. So tightly were they caught up in their efforts at interpreting the designs of the pontiff, that they did not perceive the true danger and simply endeavoured to cast out any dissenting votes from the Sacred College.

Not even Ser Petracco of Parenzo, Francesco's father had understood what his son was looking for in the Classics, which distracted him from the legal studies, he wanted his son to follow. During a memorable quarrel with his son, Ser Petracco burnt all the ancient manuscripts, on which his son spent such long hours, all however, save the Virgilian codex, which he himself had had copied for his son.

In the late Middle Ages, after the chaotic migration of populations, a renewed humanity had settled into groups, classes, hierarchies. In no other period had the masses lived, worked or thought in so uniform a fashion. The greatness or power of the individual did not depend on chance or on personal qualities, but on the more or less vigorous manner in which he or she managed to be a perfect exponent of his or her system. Within this crystallised society, Thomas Aquinas and Dante had already praised the *Cives*, the citizen - well integrated in his community, according to his merits and natural capacities - exhorting him to recognise his salvation in the Church...

Petrarch, on the other hand, had become an eager supporter of the *Vir*, the individual, armed with Virtue, capable of morally uplifting himself, without depending on his own era, or on the system he belonged to. Petrarch's self-reliant *Vir*, like Aeneas, armed with the ancient cardinal virtues and concentrated on building his inner self, was capable of confronting the variable events of life, finding his divine origin within himself, thanks to his own efforts. Truly disconcerting theories, which undermined the very survival of all churches, inasmuch as they questioned the philosophical and theological justifications crucial to their existence. Whence the enormous and lasting success of his *De remediis utriusque fortunae* in the countries where Wycliff, Huss, Calvin and Luther's thinking was to challenge papal and clerical authority.

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Which was one of the reasons why a cloud of distrust had begun to surround the poet. Notwithstanding the reassurances proffered by the cardinal of Boulogne and the brotherly advice offered by the bishop of Cavaillon, which had led him to believe that he would be taken on as private secretary to the pope, his hopes were dashed, because his style was accused of being “*too elevated to suit the humility of the Roman prelacy*”.

(Familiarum Rerum XIII 5 by Petrarch) ...When I learnt this from those who were so assiduously kind to me, I was at first, amazed and feared that they were attempting to offend my little worth with ironical words, as I am fully aware of my shortcomings in many things as well as in my speech. But when they swore that the pope and college of cardinals really had judged me in this manner, and that the only thing they wanted me to do was to accustom myself to lowering my talents – I refer their words – and simplifying my style; moreover when what my two friends had told me was repeated to me by other princes of the Church, I was seized by the kind of joy that a person on the threshold of his hated prison feels, when he suddenly beholds an unhopd for liberator appear, as I judged this to portend a safe escape, and I was right. Namely, when I was asked to write something that would prove that I was able to hover near the ground and adapt myself to humble expressions – and this was declared the easiest thing in the world for me by those who were pushing me towards a high, but narrow prison – I opened the full wing-span of my words and talents to lift myself off the ground, as first Ennius and then Virgil used to say, and flew up so high as to remove myself, if possible, from the view of those who held me prisoner. I suppose the Muses and Apollo protected me, and though it was no poetic work that I wrote, it seemed to most of my readers insufficiently comprehensible, although it was extremely clear, some even thought it was Greek or rather barbarian: such are the intellects to which our government is entrusted!

Where could he find a safe haven? Paris was impossible and Naples too, where he had been invited to reside, did not attract him, after the death of king Robert. Guelph Florence, the city of bankers “*mercatrix et lanifica*” offered no better assurances.

(Familiarum Rerum XV 8 by Petrarch)

...no place on earth pleases me; wherever I turn, I see only trouble and thorns; I believe that the time has come for me to pass on to the other life, as here, I confess, I feel ill at ease, whether the fault be mine, of the place or of mankind or of all together ...no longer, as often before, can I find peace at the source of the Sorgues, a poor, narrow countryside, but solitary and peaceful, if one compares it with other richer sites, and more than suitable to whoever devotes himself to honest and peaceful study. As far as the place concerns me, I could live here in the most complete tranquillity, if I were not troubled by the winds from outside. For, even in my harbour I scan the horizon with fear, and am chiefly frightened by nearby Babylon, which they call the Roman see; a strange name, as nothing could be less Roman, nothing is more hated there than Rome; and its nearness, the sight of it and its stench are truly terrible and hostile to all happiness, so much that it, alone, would be sufficient to put me to flight, without mentioning the remains of past tempests, that persecute the frail barque of my life even within this harbour

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Regretfully, “for futile reasons” he left his house in Vaucluse, his friends, the beloved libraries in Avignon and returned to Italy, taking refuge where the Inquisition would not be able to get at him, if not with great difficulty: in Ghibelline territory, under the protection of the Visconti. No wonder Guelph Boccaccio indignantly protests at his friend Francesco for choosing such an abode, but Petrarch certainly could not explain to him why a Tuscan cleric, an admirer of Robert of Anjou, had suddenly decided to take shelter in Ghibelline territory. He could not possibly tell him that he was the inventor of the cards, that had spread like wildfire all over Europe, and contained such bitter and comprehensible accusations against the corrupt Avignon prelates.

Petrarch’s house in Arquà

He therefore stifled his frustration and terror and, as he wrote on the last page of his *Secretum*:

“*Adhero michi ipse quantum potero, et sparsa anime fragmenta recolligam, moraborque mecum sedulo*” (“I shall keep myself to myself for as long as I can and gather up the scattered fragments of my spirit and sedulously live within myself...”).

The hope that he would, one day, be able to disclose the truth, led him to sow revealing allusions in his *Familiarum Rerum*, in his sonnets and in the works he kept with him until his death (like the *Triumphs*), or which he did not finish, like the *Rerum Memorandarum Libri*.

So successful were his precautions and his veiled discourse, that the secret, hidden for so long, became a real secret, that has been kept to the present day.

In the following centuries, the Church became increasingly aware of the enormous damage inflicted on it by Petrarch’s writings.

Wycliffe had defied the Pope’s authority, but his followers had been burnt at the stake and Wycliffe’s own remains had been dug up and flung into the waters of the Swift.

Huss had been tricked into going to Constance and had been burnt at the stake, causing the Hussite wars, that were only suppressed after nearly fifty years of massacres. Calvin had constituted a theocratic organism, hostile to the Church, which did not, however undermine it. Luther had also created a Church, that called the pope diabolical, but did not suggest that mankind could do without the salvation offered by the Gospels. Galileo Galilei, in his scientific speculations, had involuntarily found himself confuting the Holy Scriptures, but had been re-accepted by the Church, after his abjuration. These and many other episodes, which beset the progress of the Church, did not diminish its ascendancy over the faithful and were resolved each time, either with rhetoric or by changing opinion, without any apparent contradiction.

Francis Petrarch, a cleric, privy to the most intimate secrets of the highest ecclesiastical hierarchy was something different. He advocated a philosophy of life that refused spiritual guidance, priestly orders, constituted religions. He upheld Seneca’s stoical and self-sufficient thinking, and did not only challenge and question the existence of the Catholic Church, but of all churches. In his writings, he reminded his readers that mankind has within itself its own strength, and the capacity of recognising good from evil. Re-evoking the wisdom of the ancients, he opened up a novel initiatic way towards individual emancipation, praising love, natural morality and the personal quest

for truth. The Gnostic thinking of the Cathars, which he had become acquainted with, probably in his youth, had also doubtless inspired him to search within himself for a renewed “*vir*” – “armed with virtue” - capable of looking the churchman, legislator, or governor in the eye and judging him for what he really was, without fear or submission, but not necessarily refusing, if convinced, the other’s authority.

He nourished justice, temperance and fortitude in his heart and perceived in himself the light of the one and only Creator of the Universe, upon whom, the various ecclesiastical hierarchies spread around the world, taking advantage of the innate religious sense in mankind, obstinately proclaimed their exclusive rights.

Petrarch was neither an atheist, nor a churchman, nor an enemy of the Church. He was simply a free man, a citizen of the world. For as long as his ideas remained concealed, he could neither be excommunicated, nor burnt at the stake, as the writings he published in his lifetime did nothing to confute the dogmas of the Church. Too discreet to publish the *Triumphs*, the *Rerum Memorandarum Libri* or his *Secretum*, while he was alive, after his death, he was to inspire generations of thinkers with his lucid and poetic intuitions.

The stoical teachings, the quest for knowledge and the courage to live in doubt, without leaning on spiritual crutches, attracted many luminous intellects, delighted to follow in Petrarch’s footsteps. Think, for instance of the eclectic ideas of Pico della Mirandola, of Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*” or Voltaire’s tolerant and anti-absolutist philosophy. The only safe haven for Petrarch, in his century, was death. He died one day before his seventieth birthday between the 18th and 19th July 1374.

On the 24th July he was buried near the church of St. Mary in Arquà, his funeral service performed before Francesco da Carrara the Elder, the bishop of Padua, and other bishops.

Sixteen doctors of the university of Padua carried the bier and friar Bonaventura from Prague, later cardinal, gave the funerary oration.

In 1380, his son in law, Francescuolo da Brossano, his heir, had a pink marble sarcophagus set up in the graveyard of the church, into which the body of the poet was transferred. Petrarch himself is supposed to have composed the words engraved on the sarcophagus:

FRIGIDA FRANCISCI LAPIS HIC TEGIT OSSA PETRARCE; SUSCIPE VIRGO PARENS
ANIMAM; SATE VIRGINE PARCE. FESSAQ(UE) IAM TERRIS CELI REQUIESCAT IN
ARCE

M CCC LXXIIIJ XVIIIJ JULIS

(This stone covers the cold bones of Francesco Petrarca; receive his soul oh virgin mother; protect the virgin’s seed (see page 90). Tired now of the earth let it rest in the citadel of the sky).

His son-in-law’s inscription reads:

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VIRO INSIGNI F.(RANCISCO) P.(ETRARCE) LAUREATO FRANCISCOLUS ED BROSSANO
MEDIOLANENSIS GENER INDIVIDUA CONVERSATIONE AMORE PROPINQUITATE ET
SUCCESSIONE MEMORIA

(To the illustrious man Francis Petrarch, poet laureate, his son-in-law Francescuolo da Brossano, Milanese, in memory of the everlasting bonds of love, family relationship and inheritance).

There used to be another inscription, attributed to the poet, which is no longer legible, because of successive restorations:

INVENI REQUIEM; SPES ET FORTUNA VALETE NIL MIHI VOBISCUM EST; LUDETE
NUNC ALIOS

(I have found peace, farewell hope and fortune; I have nothing more to do with you; now play with others)

The marble sarcophagus in which Francis Petrarch's body was enclosed, did not protect it from the Dominican friar, Thomas Martinelli of Portogruaro, who, the 27th May 1630, shortly after midnight, having, with others, split a corner of the enormous sarcophagus, managed, by rummaging blindly inside, to separate his jaw and body from the skull that had contained such a brilliant mind and to steal some of the bones from his right arm and perhaps part of his right hand, which had so assiduously written against the Church's corruption.

Prof. Giovanni Canestrini, who described the third opening of the tomb, carried out the 6th December 1873, enclosed the following extract from a document, kept in the municipal archives of Arquà.

From behind the tomb, which looks towards midday and the west, where there is now a piece of Verona marble in profile, placed there with art, which grips the said tomb with grappling hooks, sealed with lead, the largest grappling hook towards sunset has in the lead the seal of St. Mark, the device of the Republic of Venice, on the other, on the left, the seal of the city of Padua, that is also impressed in large figures on the said grappling hook and one can see the year and the initials of the city, as follows: C.1630.P., which signifies Civitas Patavina. Of this sacrilegious robbery, the planner was a certain bad regular friar, named Tomaso Martinelli of Portogruaro, here sent on purpose by the Florentines with the order to remove some little part of that blessed body; and this because they envy our Paduans for having that beloved body; according to these orders the said friar attempted to obtain something that the great poet had used, but to no avail; he thought with monies to win over the deacon of the village, Batista Polito, one Stefano blacksmith, one Zulio Galo, Aneto Bono and a young lad of twelve years, son of the said Zulio and together with these after midnight of the 27th May 1630, as there was a dark night and a strong storm, with a great

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sledge hammer he broke the western corner, and then the cases in which that body was closed and getting the lad to put his arm inside, extracted, not without great difficulty, the right arm and having done this, that robber friar ran away with all his accomplices; upon the morn, the present excellent vicar roused the municipality by ringing the alarum bell and then informed the representative of Padua and with the doge's order 11th September under the great doge Nicola Contarin, order is given that the precious urn be closed and strict investigations be made as to the guilty and if not found, immediately announcement be made to search for them.

And moreover:

We received this morning the letters of Your Serenity dated XI instant with the order to form most diligent enquiry regarding the case of gravest temerity committed by those, who in the past months dared impiously to open with violence, in the place known as Arquà, the tomb of the famous Petrarch, and remove from it the bones of one of his arms, despising every law and humanity itself, adding that we should give due sworn account as to the veracity of our saying: which we can even execute immediately, as we have discovered that the most illustrious sir Podestà preceptor organised the enquiry with great diligence and had it examined by one of his judges. From the said enquiry, it emerges that, during the night of the 27th May last, the said execrable excess was perpetrated and those responsible were a Dominican friar named Friar Tomaso Martinelli, who preached the last Lenten masses at the church of Arquà and, due to the death of the Archpriest of the said church, had at the time the curacy in loco of the said Archpriest and was accompanied by one Bastian Politi deacon of the place, by one Steffano blacksmith and by five others who that evening all went to sup with the aforesaid preacher, and perpetrated the act together, removing by force a stone portion of the said tomb, with chisels and saws and through that hole with a hook extracted two bones from the arm of that venerated man and took them away. The tomb was mended and secured by this magnificent city; all this being done, on the 19th August last, unkown people again tried to open the sepulchre, again at night-time, but in vain, and with new diligence this same city secured the sepulchre in greater measure; upon which second attempt the illustrious sir Podestà preceptor had another enquiry held, and again sent a notary to the site; and as our magnificent city greatly resented this repeated excess, my lords the deputies appeared before the said most illustrious Podestà preceptor and demanded that all the aforesaid dealings should be reported to your Serenity, to obtain increased authority for the due chastisement of the miscreants, which as it has not followed, the said lords deputies recently presented a document, which was to be sent to your Serenity, wherefore, after receiving it, when we had resolved that we would send it together with the above information to the exalted Council of the Ten, the above letters were brought to us, in obedience to which we bring your Serenity the whole series on this affair, for your complete information regarding the succession of the events. Thanks

From Padua the XV of September 1630

VINCENZO CAPELLO Podestà, sworn and in his own hand.

PIERO SAGREDO Captain, sworn and in his own hand.

Thus do all human efforts end, as Petrarch himself had concluded in his writings. The cards that he had created with his friend Simone, to urge mankind to pursue virtue and knowledge, have today become something totally different. It is neither possible nor right to think that this can be changed. It would not be amiss, however, to remember that they were the product of such noble minds.

If thousands of players in Las Vegas, Montecarlo, in the taverns and drawing rooms from one side of the world to the other, handle infinite packs of cards for enormous sums of money, for beans, or to read the future, it is because two Tuscans in the 1300s, far from home, in Avignon, amused themselves by working out a game in which, ability and chance, perfectly blended, would induce mankind to have fun, whilst ennobling itself.

Petrarch's sepulchre in Arquà

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