

Dissent in Descent from Mt. Ventoux: Examining Petrarch as Christian Author

Petrarch's *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* has long served as a screen for the projections of later ages. Jackson Spielvogel's recent textbook on Western Civilization frames the letter as a foundational document of the Renaissance (Spielvogel 2014: 344-347), and in this conventional view, Petrarch himself incarnates a new spirit that sends forth the first rays of enlightenment into a world still shrouded in the darkness that followed the fall of Rome. Petrarch's ascent, then, acts as the beginning of the fissure that would develop into the definitive rupture between medieval and modern worldviews. In this text, diverse varieties of modernism have made their home, beginning with Burckhardt (Burckhardt 1945: 180-181) through Symonds (Symonds 1925: ii 69-87), to the present. When Petrarch wrote *de Ascensu*, though, he was no legend, and the epistle was only a letter. Reading *de Ascensu* anew within the fourteenth-century context in which it was composed, rather than through the preoccupations of nineteenth-century cultural historians and their successors, allows the emergence of a new, older Petrarch, realistic and representative rather than idealized and anachronistic.

This fresh reading of *de Ascensu Montis Ventosi* brings into focus the work of an individual situated in a particular time and tradition, novel but also an organic continuation of the culture in which he lived. Petrarch was every bit as much the heir and culmination of his predecessors as he was the midwife of a new way of looking at the world. Taking a broader view of the man and his letter shows how things new and wonderful in Petrarch are not a rupture from but rather maintain important continuity with the Christian culture of the Middle Ages (Ascoli: 1991: 265-79). Petrarch was not merely a liminal figure, intoxicated by the possibilities of the secular but too committed to the old world to pass through the portal and enjoy the light of the newly dawning day. Rather, he blazed the trail later taken by Erasmus and More, living a life of

contemplation in the world, a life dedicated to the pursuit of truth and wisdom in harmony with traditional Christian devotion, studying Cicero and Vergil along with Scripture and the Fathers. The novelty in *de Ascensu* is not the awakening of a secular consciousness that banishes religion but rather a new charism of Christian life, the rebirth of a Christian humanism that supplements but does not replace Scripture with the Classics.

Bibliography

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