THE ASCENT OF MONT VENTOUX

Letter to Francesco Dionigi de'Roberti of Borgo San Sepolcro, professor of theology in Paris. Malaucène, April 26, 1336. (*Fam.*, IV, 1, in *Le Familiari*, ed. V. Rossi, I, 153–61; *Opera* [Basel, 1581], pp. 624–27.)

To Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, of the Order of Saint Augustine, Professor of Theology, about his own troubles

TODAY I ascended the highest mountain in this region, which, not without cause, they call the Windy Peak.[1] Nothing but the desire to see its conspicuous height was the reason for this undertaking. For many years I have been intending to make this expedition. You know that since my early childhood, as fate tossed around human affairs, I have been tossed around in these parts, and this mountain, visible far and wide from everywhere, is always in your view. So I was at last seized by the impulse to accomplish what I had always wanted to do. It happened while I was reading Roman history again in Livy that I hit upon the passage where Philip, the king of Macedon—the Philip who waged war against the Roman people—"ascends Mount Haemus in Thessaly, since he believed the rumor that you can see two seas from its top: the Adriatic and the Black Sea."[2] Whether he was right or wrong I cannot make out be-

1. [The name of the mountain appears as "Ventosus" in Latin documents as early as the tenth century, though originally it had nothing to do with the strong winds blowing about that isolated peak. Its Provençal form "Ventour" proves that it is related to the name of a deity worshiped by the pre-Roman (Ligurian) population of the Rhone Basin, a god believed to dwell on high mountains (cf. C. Jullian, *Histoire de la Gaule*, VI, 329; P. Julian, "Glose sur l'étymologie du mot Ventoux," in *Le Pélérinage du Mt. Ventoux* [Carpentras, 1937], pp. 337 ff.).]

2. [In his *History of Rome* (xl. 21. 2–22. 7) Livy tells that King Philip V of Macedonia went up to the top of Mount Haemus, one of the highest summits of the Great Balkans (*ca.* 7,800 ft.), when he wanted to reconnoiter the field of future operations before the Third Macedonian War, which he was planning to fight against the Romans (181 B.C.). Since

cause the mountain is far from our region, and the disagreement among authors renders the matter uncertain. I do not intend to consult all of them: the cosmographer Pomponius Mela does not hesitate to report the fact as true;[3] Livy supposes the rumor to be false. I would not leave it long in doubt if that mountain were as easy to explore as the one here. At any rate, I had better let it go, in order to come back to the mountain I mentioned at first. It seemed to me that a young man who holds no public office[4] might be excused for doing what an old king is not blamed for.

I now began to think over whom to choose as a companion. It will sound strange to you that hardly a single one of all my friends seemed to me suitable in every respect, so rare a thing is absolute congeniality in every attitude and habit even among dear friends. One was too sluggish, the other too vivacious; one too slow, the other too quick; this one too gloomy of temper, that one too gay. One was duller, the other brighter than I should have liked. This man's taciturnity, that man's flippancy; the heavy weight and obesity of the next, the thinness and weakliness of still another were reasons to deter me. The cool lack of curiosity of one, like another's too eager interest, dissuaded me from choosing either. All such qualities, however difficult they are to bear, can be borne at home: loving friendship is able to endure everything; it refuses no burden. But on a journey they become intolerable. Thus my delicate mind, craving honest entertainment, looked about carefully, weighing every detail, with no offense to friendship. Tacitly it rejected whatever it could foresee would become troublesome on the projected excursion.

Petrarca knew the exact location of this mountain from Pliny's *Natural History* (iv. 1. 3 and xi. 18. 41), it must have been a slip of his pen that made him substitute "Thessaly" for "Thrace."]

3. [Mela *Cosmographia* ii. 2. 17.]

4. [Cf. Cicero *De imperio Cn. Pompei* 21. 61, where he praises the courage of Pompey, who took over the command of the Roman armies in 77 B.C. though he was then but an "adulescentulus privatus."]

What do you think I did? At last I applied for help at home and revealed my plan to my only brother, who is younger than I and whom you know well enough. He could hear of nothing he would have liked better and was happy to fill the place of friend as well as brother.

We left home on the appointed day and arrived at Malaucène at night. This is a place at the northern foot of the mountain. We spent a day there and began our ascent this morning, each of us accompanied by a single servant. From the start we encountered a good deal of trouble, for the mountain is a steep and almost inaccessible pile of rocky material. However, what the Poet says is appropriate: "Ruthless striving overcomes everything."[5]

The day was long, the air was mild; this and vigorous minds, strong and supple bodies, and all the other conditions assisted us on our way. The only obstacle was the nature of the spot. We found an aged shepherd in the folds of the mountain who tried with many words to dissuade us from the ascent. He said he had been up to the highest summit in just such youthful fervor fifty years ago and had brought home nothing but regret and pains, and his body as well as his clothes torn by rocks and thorny underbrush. Never before and never since had the people there heard of any man who dared a similar feat. While he was shouting these words at us, our desire increased just because of his warnings; for young people's minds do not give credence to advisers. When the old man saw that he was exerting himself in vain, he went with us a little way forward through the rocks and pointed with his finger to a steep path. He gave us much good advice and repeated it again and again at our backs when we were already at quite a distance. We left with him whatever of our clothes and other belongings might encumber us, intent only on the ascent, and began to climb with merry alacrity. However, as almost always happens, the daring attempt was soon followed by quick fatigue.

5. [Virgil *Georgica* i. 145–46; Macrobius *Saturnalia* v. 6.]

Not far from our start we stopped at a rock. From there we went on again, proceeding at a slower pace, to be sure. I in particular made my way up with considerably more modest steps. My brother endeavored to reach the summit by the very ridge of the mountain on a short cut; I, being so much more of a weakling, was bending down toward the valley. When he called me back and showed me the better way, I answered that I hoped to find an easier access on the other side and was not afraid of a longer route on which I might proceed more smoothly. With such an excuse I tried to palliate my laziness, and, when the others had already reached the higher zones, I was still wandering through the valleys, where no more comfortable access was revealed, while the way became longer and longer and the vain fatigue grew heavier and heavier. At last I felt utterly disgusted, began to regret my perplexing error, and decided to attempt the heights with a wholehearted effort. Weary and exhausted, I reached my brother, who had been waiting for me and was refreshed by a good long rest. For a while we went on together at the same pace. However, hardly had we left that rock behind us when I forgot the detour I had made just a short while before and was once more drawing down the lower regions. Again I wandered through the valleys, looking for the longer and easier path and stumbling only into longer difficulties. Thus I indeed put off the disagreeable strain of climbing. But nature is not overcome by man's devices; a corporeal thing cannot reach the heights by descending. What shall I say? My brother laughed at me; I was indignant; this happened to me three times and more within a few hours. So often was I frustrated in my hopes that at last I sat down in a valley. There I leaped in my winged thoughts from things corporeal to what is incorporeal and addressed myself in words like these:

"What you have so often experienced today while climbing this mountain happens to you, you must know, and to many others who are making their way toward the blessed life. This

which appeared rather to my mind than my eyes. An incredibly strong desire seized me to see my friend[13] and my native land again. At the same time I rebuked the weakness of a mind not yet grown to manhood, manifest in both these desires, although in both cases an excuse would not lack support from famous champions.

Then another thought took possession of my mind, leading it from the contemplation of space to that of time, and I said to myself: "This day marks the completion of the tenth year since you gave up the studies of your boyhood and left Bologna. O immortal God, O immutable Wisdom! How many and how great were the changes you have had to undergo in your moral habits since then." I will not speak of what is still left undone, for I am not yet in port that I might think in security of the storms I have had to endure. The time will perhaps come when I can review all this in the order in which it happened, using as a prologue that passage of your favorite Augustine: "Let me remember my past mean acts and the carnal corruption of my soul, not that I love them, but that I may love Thee, my God."[14]

Many dubious and troublesome things are still in store for me. What I used to love, I love no longer. But I lie: I love it still, but less passionately. Again have I lied: I love it, but more timidly, more sadly. Now at last I have told the truth; for thus it is: I love, but what I should love not to love, what I should wish to hate. Nevertheless I love it, but against my will, under compulsion and in sorrow and mourning. To my own misfortune I experience in myself now the meaning of that most famous line: "Hate I shall, if I can; if I can't, I shall love though not willing."[15] The third year has not yet elapsed since that perverted and malicious will, which had totally seized me and

13. [Petrarca is referring to Giacomo Colonna, bishop of Lombez, who had gone to Rome in the summer of 1333; cf. *Fam.*, I, 5 (4), and I, 6 (5).]

14. [*Confessions* ii. 1. 1.]

15. [Ovid *Amores* iii. 11. 35.]

reigned in the court of my heart without an opponent, began to encounter a rebel offering resistance. A stubborn and still undecided battle has been long raging on the field of my thoughts for the supremacy of one of the two men within me.[16]

Thus I revolved in my thoughts the history of the last decade. Then I dismissed my sorrow at the past and asked myself: "Suppose you succeed in protracting this rapidly fleeing life for another decade, and come as much nearer to virtue, in proportion to the span of time, as you have been freed from your former obstinacy during these last two years as a result of the struggle of the new and the old wills—would you then not be able—perhaps not with certainty but with reasonable hope at least—to meet death in your fortieth year with equal mind and cease to care for that remnant of life which descends into old age?"

These and like considerations rose in my breast again and again, dear father. I was glad of the progress I had made, but I wept over my imperfection and was grieved by the fickleness of all that men do. In this manner I seemed to have somehow forgotten the place I had come to and why, until I was warned to throw off such sorrows, for which another place would be more appropriate. I had better look around and see what I had intended to see in coming here. The time to leave was approaching, they said. The sun was already setting, and the shadow of the mountain was growing longer and longer. Like a man aroused from sleep, I turned back and looked toward the west. The boundary wall between France and Spain, the ridge of the Pyrenees, is not visible from there, though there is no obstacle of which I knew, and nothing but the weakness of the mortal eye is the cause. However, one could see most distinctly the mountains of the province of Lyons to the right and, to the

16. [Two rival wills are struggling in Petrarca's breast, the old one not releasing him from his amorous servitude and blocking his spiritual progress, the other urging him forward on the way to perfection (cf. Augustine *Confessions* viii. 5. 10; x. 22–23, and Petrarca's Sonnet 52 (68).]

left, the sea near Marseilles as well as the waves that break against Aigues Mortes, although it takes several days to travel to this city. The Rhone River was directly under our eyes.

I admired every detail, now relishing earthly enjoyment, now lifting up my mind to higher spheres after the example of my body, and I thought it fit to look into the volume of Augustine's *Confessions* which I owe to your loving kindness and preserve carefully, keeping it always in my hands, in remembrance of the author as well as the donor.[17] It is a little book of smallest size but full of infinite sweetness. I opened it with the intention of reading whatever might occur to me first: nothing, indeed, but pious and devout sentences could come to hand. I happened to hit upon the tenth book of the work. My brother stood beside me, intently expecting to hear something from Augustine on my mouth. I ask God to be my witness and my brother who was with me: Where I fixed my eyes first, it was written: "And men go to admire the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the ocean, and the revolutions of the stars—and desert themselves."[18] I was stunned, I confess. I bade my brother, who wanted to hear more, not to molest me, and closed the book, angry with myself that I still admired earthly things. Long since I ought to have learned, even from pagan philosophers, that "nothing is admirable besides the mind; compared to its greatness nothing is great."[19]

I was completely satisfied with what I had seen of the mountain and turned my inner eye toward myself. From this hour nobody heard me say a word until we arrived at the bottom. These words occupied me sufficiently. I could not imagine that this had happened to me by chance: I was convinced that what-

17. [The small-sized manuscript codex of Augustine's *Confessions*, a present from Dionigi, accompanied Petrarca wherever he went until the last year of his life, when he could no longer read its minute script and gave the book to Luigi Marsili (see p. 33) as a token of his friendship.]

18. [Augustine *Confessions* x. 8. 15.]

19. [Seneca *Epistle* 8. 5.]

ever I had read there was said to me and to nobody else. I remembered that Augustine once suspected the same regarding himself, when, while he was reading the Apostolic Epistles, the first passage that occurred to him was, as he himself relates: "Not in banqueting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil your lusts."[20] The same had happened before to Anthony: he heard the Gospel where it is written: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and come and follow me, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven."[21] As his biographer Athanasius says, he applied the Lord's command to himself, just as if the Scripture had been recited for his sake. And as Anthony, having heard this, sought nothing else, and as Augustine, having read the other passage, proceeded no further, the end of all my reading was the few words I have already set down. Silently I thought over how greatly mortal men lack counsel who, neglecting the noblest part of themselves in empty parading, look without for what can be found within. I admired the nobility of the mind, had it not voluntarily degenerated and strayed from the primordial state of its origin, converting into disgrace what God had given to be its honor.

How often, do you think, did I turn back and look up to the summit of the mountain today while I was walking down? It seemed to me hardly higher than a cubit compared to the height of human contemplation, were the latter not plunged into the filth of earthly sordidness. This too occurred to me at every step: "If you do not regret undergoing so much sweat and hard labor to lift the body a bit nearer to heaven, ought any cross or jail or torture to frighten the mind that is trying to come nearer to God and set its feet upon the swollen summit of insolence

20. [Rom. 13:13–14, quoted by Augustine *Confessions* viii. 12. 29.]

21. [Matt. 19:21, quoted by Athanasius in his *Life of St. Anthony* (Latin version by Euagrius), chap. 2, and from there by Augustine *Confessions* viii. 12. 29.]

and upon the fate of mortal men?" And this too: "How few will ever succeed in not diverging from this path because of fear of hardship or desire for smooth comfort?[22] Too fortunate would be any man who accomplished such a feat—were there ever such anywhere. This would be him of whom I should judge the Poet was thinking when he wrote:

> Happy the man who succeeded in baring the causes of things
> And who trod underfoot all fear, inexorable Fate and
> Greedy Acheron's uproar. . . .[23]

How intensely ought we to exert our strength to get under foot not a higher spot of earth but the passions which are puffed up by earthly instincts."

Such emotions were rousing a storm in my breast as, without perceiving the roughness of the path, I returned late at night to the little rustic inn from which I had set out before dawn. The moon was shining all night long and offered her friendly service to the wanderers. While the servants were busy preparing our meal, I withdrew quite alone into a remote part of the house to write this letter to you in all haste and on the spur of the moment. I was afraid the intention to write might evaporate, since the rapid change of scene was likely to cause a change of mood if I deferred it.

And thus, most loving father, gather from this letter how eager I am to leave nothing whatever in my heart hidden from your eyes. Not only do I lay my whole life open to you with the utmost care but every single thought of mine. Pray for these thoughts, I beseech you, that they may at last find stability. So long have they been idling about and, finding no firm stand, been uselessly driven through so many matters. May they now turn at last to the One, the Good, the True, the stably Abiding.

Farewell.

On the twenty-sixth day of April, at Malaucène.

22. [Cf. Matt. 7 : 13–15.]
23. [Virgil *Georgica* ii. 490–92.]

ON HIS OWN IGNORANCE AND THAT OF MANY OTHERS

Opera (Basel, 1554), pp. 1123–68; (1581), pp. 1035–59; L. M. Capelli, *Pétrarque: Le traité De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (Paris, 1906); and P. Rajna, "Il codice Hamiltoniano 493 della R. Biblioteca di Berlino," *Rendiconti dell'Accademia dei Lincei*, XVIII (*5a* ser., 1909), 479–508. The Dedication, dated January 13, 1368, belongs in Book xiii of the *Seniles*, as No. 5, but is printed before the text in the Basel Editions of the *Opera*.

To the grammarian Donato the Apennine-born, with a little book dedicated to him

HERE at last, my friend, you have the little book long since expected and promised, a little book on a vast matter, namely, "On my own ignorance and that of many others." Had I been allowed to beat it out on the anvil of my inventive genius with the hammer of study, you may believe me, it would have grown into a camel's load. For can there be a wider field, a vaster ground for talking, than a treatise on ignorance and especially on mine? You shall read this book, as you are in the habit of listening to me when I tell tales at the fireside on winter nights, rambling along wherever the impulse takes me. I have called it a book, but it is a talk. It has nothing of a book besides the name: neither the bulk nor the disposition; it has not the style and, above all, not the gravity of a book, since it was written quickly on a hasty journey.

However, I have had the whim to call it a book, because I wanted to win your favor with a small present and a great name. I was convinced that whatever comes from me will please you. Nevertheless, I intended to cheat you. It is customary to cheat another in this manner even among friends. When we send them a few apples or some choice morsel of dainty food, we put these things into a silver vessel and wrap it in pure white

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