

Francis Petrarch

Familiar Letters

From James Harvey Robinson, ed. and trans.
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To Homer **253-261**

[Page 253] Long before your letter reached me I had formed an intention of writing to you, and I should really have done it if it had not been for the lack of a common language. I am not so fortunate as to have learned Greek, and the Latin tongue, which you once spoke, by the aid of our writers, you seem of late, through the negligence of their successors, to have quite forgotten. From both avenues of communication, consequently, I have been debarred, and so have kept silence. But now there comes a man who restores you to us, single-handed, and makes you a Latin again.

Your Penelope cannot have waited longer nor **[Page 254]** with more eager expectation for her Ulysses than I did for you. At last, though, my hope was fading gradually away. Except for a few of the opening lines of certain books, from which there seemed to flash upon me the face of the friend whom I had been longing to behold, a momentary glimpse, dim through distance, or, rather, the sight of his streaming hair, as he vanished from my view,---except for this no hint of a Latin Homer had come to me, and I had no hope of being able ever to see you face to face. For as regards the little book that is circulated under your name, while I cannot say whose it is I do feel sure that it is yours only as it has been culled from you and accredited to you, and is not your real work at all. This friend of ours, however, if he lives, will restore you to us in your entirety. He is now at work, and we are beginning to enjoy not only the treasures of wisdom that are stored away in your divine poems but also the sweetness and charm of your speech. One fragment has come to my hands already, Grecian precious ointment in Latin vessels. . . .

To turn now to details, I am very eager for knowledge, and consequently was delighted beyond **[Page 255]** all measure and belief by what you wrote about your instructors, of whom I had never before heard, although now I shall reverence them because of the merits of their great pupil; and about the origin of poetry, which you explain at the greatest length; and about the earliest followers of the Muses, among whom, in addition to the well-known dwellers upon Helicon, you place Cadmus, the son of Agenor, and a certain Hercules, whether the great Alcides or not I do not fully understand; and, finally, about the place of your nativity, concerning which there used to be very vague and misty views here in my country, and no great clearness, so far as I can see, among your compatriots; about your wanderings, too, in search of knowledge, into Phoenicia and Egypt, whither, several centuries after you, the illustrious philosophers Pythagoras and Plato also made their way, and the Athenian law-giver who in his late years wooed the Pierian Muses, wise old Solon, who while he lived never ceased to admire you, and when he died doubtless became one of your cherished friends; and, last of all, about the number of your works, the majority of which even the Italians, your nearest neighbours, have never so much as heard of. As for the barbarians, who bound us upon two sides, and from whom I would that we were separated not by lofty Alps alone but by the whole wide sea as well, they scarcely have heard - I will not say of your books, but even of your very name. You see how trivial a thing is this wonderful fame which we mortals sigh for so windily. . . .

[Page 256] And now what shall I say about the matter of imitation? When you found yourself soaring so high on the wings of genius you ought to have foreseen that you would always have imitators. You should be glad that your endowments are such that many men long to be like you, although not many can succeed. Why not be glad, you who are sure of holding always the first place, when I, the least of mortals, am more than glad, am in fact puffed up with pride, because I have grown great enough for others---though I scarcely can believe that this is really true---to desire to imitate and copy me? In my case the pride and joy would only increase if among these imitators there should be found some few who were capable of surpassing me. I pray---not your Apollo, but the true God of Intellect whom I worship, to crown the efforts of all who may deem it worth their while to follow after me, and to grant that they may find it an easy thing to come up with me, and outstrip me too. . . .

But I am wandering. It was my intention to speak to you of Virgil, than whom, as Flaccus says, this earth has produced no soul more spotless; and to suggest to you, great master of us both, certain excuses for his conduct. . . . I admit the truth of everything that you say concerning him, but it does not necessarily follow that I lend a sympathetic ear to the charges that you base upon this failure of his to make anywhere any mention of your name, laden and bedecked though he is with your spoils,---mention, you remind me, such as Lucan made, remembering in grateful strains the honour due to Smyrna's bard. **[Page 257]** Far from that, I am even going to suggest to you additional cause for complaint. Flaccus also remembers you, in many a passage, and always with the highest praise. In one place he exalts you above the very philosophers; in another he assigns to you the highest seat among the poets. Naso remembers you too, and Juvenal, and Statius. But why try to mention all who mention Homer? There is scarcely one of our writers but that belongs in that class. Why is it then, you will say, that I find the one man from whom I deserved most gratitude proving so utterly ungrateful? Before I answer you let me furnish you still another reason for complaint. Observe that he was not equally ungrateful in every case. Musaeus and Linus and Orpheus are referred to more than once. So also, and with even greater humility, Hesiod the Ascraean and Theocritus of Syracuse. And finally, a thing that he never would have done if he had had any touch of jealousy, he takes pains to speak of Varus and Gallus, and certain others of his contemporaries.

Well, have I aggravated sufficiently the resentment which I proposed to assuage, or entirely remove? The natural conclusion, certainly, for anyone to draw, if this were all that I had to say. But it is not; we have not considered yet the reasons for all this, and given them their due weight, and that we should always do, especially when we are sitting in judgment upon others.

Is it not true, then, that he chose Theocritus for his guide and model in the *Bucolics*, and Hesiod in the *Georgics*, and, having done so, took pains to introduce **[Page 258]** the name of each in its appropriate place? Yes, you will say; but after choosing me for his third model, in his heroic poem, what was there to prevent his making some mention there, in like manner, of my name? He would have done so, believe me, for he was the gentlest and most unassuming of men, as is proved by all that is written of him and all that we know of his daily life; but impious death forbade. The others he had referred to wherever he thought of it or found it convenient; for you, to whom he owed so much more, he was reserving a place that had been determined not by mere chance but by the most careful consideration. And what place, think you? What but the most prominent and conspicuous of all? The end of his glorious work!---it was for that that he was waiting; it was there that he was intending to exalt you and your name to the stars in resounding verse, and to hail you as his leader. What better place to praise a leader than at the journey's end? You have good reason, then, for lamenting his too early death, and so has the whole Italian world; but for reproaching your friend, none whatever. . . .

Now, in conclusion, I must run over the various little complaints that are scattered up and down the whole length of your letter. You grieve because you have been mangled so by your imitators. But do you not see that it could not possibly have been otherwise? No one could deal comprehensively with so great a genius. Then you mourn because your name, which was held in great honour by the lawyers and physicians of old, is despised by **[Page 259]** their successors of to-day. But you forget that these professions are filled now by men of a very different stamp from those who followed them in former times. If they were of the same sort they would love and cherish the same things.

So put away your indignation and your grief, and be of good hope; for to have gained the disfavour of the evil and the ignorant is to have given sure sign of virtue and genius. . . .

A word now with reference to your complaint that the valley of Fiesole and the banks of the Arno can furnish only three men who know you and love you. You ought not to wonder at this. It is enough; indeed, it is a very great deal, more than I should have expected, to discover three Pierian spirits in a city so entirely given up to gain. But even if you think otherwise you need not be discouraged; it is a large and populous place, and if you seek you will find there a fourth. And to these four I could once have added a fifth, a man who well deserves to be honoured thus, for the laurels of Peneus bind his brow - or of Alpheus rather. But alas! the great Babylon beyond the Alps has contrived to steal him away from us. To find five such men at one time and in one city, is that, think you, a little thing? Search through other cities. Your beloved Bologna that you sigh for, hospitable though she is to all who are of studious mind, has yet but one **[Page 260]** such person, though you seek in every corner and crevice. Verona has two; Solmona one; and Mantua one, if the heavens have not tempted him quite away from the things of earth, for he has left your banner and enlisted under that of Ptolemy. Rome herself, the capital of the world, has been drained of such citizens almost to a man, strange though it seems. Perugia did produce one, a man who might have made a name for himself; but he has neglected his opportunities, and turned his back not on Parnassus only but on our Apennines and Alps as well, and now, in old age, is leading a vagabond life, in Spain, toiling as a copyist to earn his daily bread. And other cities have given birth to others, but all of these whom I have known have before now left this mortal home and migrated to that continuing city which one day shall receive us all. . . .

For a long while I have been talking to you just as if you were present; but now the strong illusion fades away, and I realise how far you are from me. There comes over me a fear that you will scarcely care, down in the shades, to read the many things that I have written here. Yet I remember that you wrote freely to me.

And now farewell, forever. To Orpheus, and Linus, and Euripides, and all the others, I beg you to give my kindest greetings, when you come again to your abode.

Written in the world above; in the *Midland* between the famous rivers Po and Ticino and Adda and others, whence some say our *Milan* derives its **[Page 261]** name; on the ninth day of October, in the year of this last age of the world the 1360th.