

Francis Petrarch and the European Lyric Tradition

Francis Petrarch was born from a Florentine exile in Arezzo on July 20, 1304; he died in Arquà, near Padua, during the night of July 18-19, 1374. Heralded as the first Renaissance man and one of the greatest Humanists of all times, Petrarch exercised by far his greatest influence by means of his *Canzoniere*, entitled: *Francisci Petrarche laureati poete rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, a collection of 366 poems, on which Petrarch worked through most of his adult life until his death, celebrating the Petrarch-persona's alternating relationships with an idealized woman, Laura.

Petrarch's *Canzoniere* incorporates many of the previous songbooks' technical and poetic characteristics, from the exploitation of virtually all available metrical forms to the construction of his collection following the bipartite structure typical of Dante's *Vita nuova*: namely, the celebration of the beloved, first, when she is alive; and, second, when she is dead and in heaven. The aspect in which Petrarch surpassed all previous lyric traditions and which fascinated all poets for centuries to come, was the poetic I's unremittingly introspective analysis of all facets of the human psyche in its never-ending attempts at bridging the gap between the self and the other, personified by the beloved. The conclusion of the *Canzoniere*, however, seems to overturn that seemingly impossible human endeavor of connecting with the feminine other. The Petrarch-persona, in fact, turns himself wholly to the Christian Godhead through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, thereby placing a religious and sacred seal on a poetic creation that is characterized more by the personal, individualistic, and earthly pursuit than by a supernatural search.

Petrarch's *Canzoniere* influenced, modified, and shaped all lyric poetry for the next three centuries, until the middle of the 17th century, and constituted a constant point of reference for many poets throughout the 18th, 19th, and also 20th centuries. The unparalleled literary phenomenon that swept through most of Western Europe, particularly Italy, France, Spain, and Great Britain, became known as Petrarchism and constituted one of the most revolutionary and innovative trends in modern poetry. Insofar as poetry, in all its manifestations, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, has shaped and shapes humans' way of thinking and relating to each other more so than philosophy and technology, one can appreciate the importance of Petrarch in Europe's literary and cultural history. The seventh centenary of Petrarch's birth, therefore, is an appropriate moment for reflecting on Petrarch's and Petrarchism's influence especially in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, and Great Britain.

With the support of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Annali d'Italianistica* has celebrated the seventh centenary of Petrarch's birth in two ways: first, by organizing a Symposium on Petrarch and the European lyric tradition in the Spring of 2004 on the campus of the University; second, by publishing the selected papers of the Symposium in this issue of *Annali*.