



TOMÁŠ NEJESCHLEBA

Petrarch's Ascent of Mont Ventoux and Philosophy*

*Dedicated to Paul Richard Blum on
the occasion of his 70th birthday*

ABSTRACT: The aim of the paper is to determine the philosophical meaning of Francesco Petrarch's famous letter addressed to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, dated in the year 1336. The letter, which describes Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux and his experience on the summit allows for multiple interpretations. Similarly to the interpretation of Petrarch's entire work, the literary context has been emphasized and the philosophical meaning of the letter has been somewhat neglected. Different philosophical interpretations are discussed in the paper. Petrarch's catch-phrase "desire to see" as the poet's motivation of the venture is the starting point for the most. Apart from the popular alpinist context, which is doubtful, the letter was considered as the beginning of the aestetisation of the landscape or as the emergence of the subject-object philosophical paradigm. The symbolic and metaphoric understanding of physical and spiritual ways is another interpretation level of the letter. Finally, the letter can be viewed as an expression of a general philosophical attitude to the world.

KEYWORDS: Francesco Petrarca • Renaissance Philosophy • Mont Ventoux

The aim of this article is to determine the philosophical meaning of Francesco Petrarch's celebrated letter concerning the ascent of the mountain Mont Ventoux, dated 26 April 1336. Petrarch allegedly wrote this letter, addressed to his confessor father Dionigi, immediately after his descent from the Windy Mountain. The letter became one of the most important Latin works of this Italian poet, as well as the subject of discussion and analysis from various points of view in the modern era.

* This article is a result of the research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR 14-37038G "Between Renaissance and Baroque: Philosophy and Knowledge in the Czech Lands within the Wider European Context". The article is based on the Czech study *Petrarkův výstup na Mont Ventoux a filosofie*, [in:] F. Petrarca, *Výstup na Mont Ventoux*, Praha 2014, p. 97–125, which was substantially rewritten, updated and amended.

As concerns his philosophical perspective, the first question to be asked is whether Francesco Petrarch and his work in general belong to the history of philosophy at all. The answer to this seemingly trivial question is far from simple. On the one hand, Petrarch was engaged, to some degree, in philosophy. Apart from being a poet, rhetorician and historian, he viewed himself – as did his contemporaries – as a moral philosopher¹ in complete accordance with the concept of the study of humanities (*studia humanitatis*) emerging at that time.² If Petrarch is therefore to be placed within the history of philosophy (as can be seen, for instance, in the case of Paul Oskar Kristeller), it is primarily with regard to the moral-philosophical issues occurring in a number of his works.³ On the other hand, a part of Petrarch's interest in ethics also lies in his criticism of scholasticism, that is medieval philosophy, which will be replaced by the above-mentioned study of humanities, contributing to improvement in morality. Medieval philosophy, including ethical writings, for example the commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, seems useless to Petrarch from this point of view; in his perspective, it has no effect, as it does not lead to a moral life. This humanist attack on the scholasticism is presented for the first time in Petrarch's treatise *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* [*On his Own Ignorance and that of Many Others*],⁴ and may thus raise the legitimate question about the extent to which the author is a philosopher, or rather a philosophy critic, and the extent to which he belongs rightfully to the history of philosophy as an important thinker-philosopher, or only in the negative sense as its sharp critic or even its fierce enemy. Petrarch's radical turn from the scholastic

¹ Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *Humanism*, [in:] *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds. Ch. B. Schmitt, Q. Skinner, E. Kessler, J. Kraye, Cambridge 1988, p. 129; Petrarch was characterized as a moral philosopher by his contemporaries Pierre Bersuire or Francesco Bruni. Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *Petrarch's Stellung in der Geschichte der Gelehrsamkeit*, [in:] *Italien und die Romania in Humanismus und Renaissance*, eds. K. W. Hempfer, E. Straub, Wiesbaden 1983, p. 102–121, especially p. 105.

² *Studia humanitatis* included grammar, rhetorics, poetry, history and moral philosophy; cf. e.g. P. O. Kristeller, *The Medieval Antecedents of Renaissance Humanism*, [in:] *ibidem*, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, Stanford, California 1964, p. 150. Although Petrarch did not write any work on grammar or any similar kind of work, he may be regarded as a grammarian in the contemporary wider sense due to his interest in classical philology. Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *Humanism*, p. 129; cf. *ibidem*, *Petrarch's Stellung ...*, p. 107.

³ Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers ...*, p. 6. Starting with Petrarch, the humanist interest in philosophy was focused on moral philosophy. Cf. e.g. B. Copenhaver, Ch. B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy. (A History of Western Philosophy 3)*, Oxford – New York 1992, p. 29.

⁴ Cf. J. Hankins, *Humanisms, Scholasticism, and Renaissance Philosophy*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. J. Hankins, Cambridge 2007, p. 39–45, sub-section “Petrarch's critique of scholasticism”.

tradition and his return to classical authors and literature may be understood as an independent philosophical attitude – i. e. philosophizing in the humanist manner as shown below. It should be admitted, however, that all of it has the form of an attack on the philosophical search for the truth in general.⁵ His admiration for classical literature and its imitation should not be perceived as a new philosophical method but as an alternative to it, and it becomes a manifestation of Petrarch's belief in the sterility of philosophy and science.⁶ The relationship between the image of "Petrarch the man of letters" and "Petrarch the philosopher" is thus significantly asymmetrical. No one has ever, in all probability, characterized Petrarch as a philosopher-thinker par excellence when questioning the importance of his literary work, while the opposite attitude is obviously not uncommon. It thus seems that Petrarch the poet and writer overshadows Petrarch the philosopher, or even stands in stark contrast to him, so that the first one even contradicts the other one completely.

Let us not be, however, as austere as Petrarch with regard to scholastic philosophy, and let us not exclude him, as if in return, from the company of philosophers, claiming that in order to comprehend his meaning it is enough to leave him to the history of literature. Let us come back to the already mentioned Kristeller, who addresses the poet, among other things, in the first chapter of his *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*.⁷ Although Kristeller does not perceive Petrarch as a systematic philosopher, in his view Petrarch's works confront us with tendencies and motifs which influenced the following generations of humanists and the history of philosophy in general. What shall be pointed out, apart from the already mentioned emphasis on moral philosophy and aversion to the scholasticism, is the admiration of Cicero and the praise of Plato as the greatest of all philosophers. Petrarch also emphasized the topic of fame, which was later transformed on the

⁵ Cf. *ibidem*. Petrarch attacks all areas of scholastic Aristotelianism, from metaphysics and natural philosophy to Aristotelian ethics.

⁶ The attitude of E. Garin is interpreted in this way; cf. L. Pompa, *Introduction*, [in:] E. Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, vol. 1, Amsterdam – New York 2008, p. xxx–xxxii; for Garin's interpretation of Petrarch, see chapter "From Petrarch from Salutati", p. 139–166.

⁷ Petrarch also holds a sovereign position in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, in the chapter *Humanism*, written again by P. O. Kristeller, cf. above. Kristeller focuses on Petrarch in a similar way even elsewhere, cf. e.g. *ibidem*, *Petrarchs Stellung...*, p. 117–119. In contrast, e.g. the publication *Philosophen der Renaissance*, ed. P. R. Blum, Darmstadt 1999, although inspired by Kristeller's *Eight Philosophers*, neglects Petrarch as an author deserving a separate chapter. The editor of this book, P. R. Blum, is nevertheless the author of the entry *Petrarch* in Ueberweg's *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, an as yet unpublished volume on Renaissance philosophy. I would hereby like to thank P. R. Blum for providing him with the manuscript of the contribution.

metaphysical plane into one of the most renowned disputes of Renaissance philosophy – the dispute on the immortality of the soul.⁸ Another gift of Petrarch to the later generations is the love for solitude, melancholy and, last but not least, an interest in human beings and their problems.⁹

It is, in particular, due to the last aspect mentioned above that Petrarch belongs to the history of philosophy. If one intends to speak of Petrarch the philosopher, one needs to observe the starting points established by Petrarch himself, and follow the assumptions from which his thinking is derived. From the perspective of scholastic philosophy (as well as from the perspective of post-Cartesian philosophy, as in this regard medieval and modern philosophy show a remarkable mutual correspondence) Petrarch can be reproached for not being systematic and for dereliction of topics from metaphysics and natural sciences. All of this, however, is a manifestation of his exclusive understanding of philosophy as a practical discipline which should, along with Cicero, teach the art of good and happy living (*ars bene beateque vivendi*).¹⁰ Petrarch brings philosophy from heaven down to earth again, in a Socratic way so to say, and shifts the human being to the centre of attention, replacing nature as the focus of interest. This is also why his style does not take the form of a proof, but is targeted at persuading the reader or listener. In this regard Petrarch's approach (let us call it a philosophical approach) goes hand in hand with rhetoric.¹¹ It is therefore impossible to separate Petrarch the thinker (philosopher) from Petrarch the rhetorician, writer and stylist, as it is exactly this form where the essence of Petrarch's philosophical thinking is revealed.

The above-mentioned general tendencies may also be found in Petrarch's renowned letter concerning the ascent of Mont Ventoux, the Windy Mountain. The letter is certainly not mentioned in all publications on the history of philosophy, and even certain authors, otherwise not neglecting Petrarch, apparently do not feel the need to pay any special attention to the letter about the ascent of Mont Ventoux.¹² Does this mean that the philo-

⁸ Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *The Immortality of the Soul*, [in:] *ibidem*, *Renaissance Concepts of Man and other Essays*, New York 1972, p. 22–42.

⁹ Eugenio Garin also dedicates certain space to Petrarch when dealing with the history of Italian philosophy; similarly to Kristeller, he notices influential topics introduced by Petrarch, particularly in relation to Cicero, Plato and Aristotle. Cf. note 6.

¹⁰ Cf. H. Nachod, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristeller, J. H. Randall, Chicago 1948, p. 24.

¹¹ Cf. E. Kessler, *Die Philosophie der Renaissance. Das 15. Jahrhundert*. München 2008, p. 23–25.

¹² From the already mentioned authors, the letter is not addressed for instance by Eugenio Garin, Eckhard Kessler, or James Hankins.

sophical relevance of the letter, within Petrarch's otherwise philosophically saturated work, may be questioned, or that it may be omitted for its marginal position within Petrarch's philosophical thinking as a whole?

Perhaps it was the paradigmatic study of Giuseppe Billanovich¹³ that somewhat reduced the philosophical interest in the letter. Billanovich convincingly points out that for correct comprehension of the letter there is a need to turn to the classical authorities Petrarch followed and referred to, particularly those framing the letter. Firstly, he turns to Livy – as stated at the beginning of the letter, re-reading his *History* was the impulse to undertake the venture, and to Augustine, as the seemingly random quotation from his *Confessions* at the end of the letter in fact closes the adventure. The names of the classics Pomponius Mela and Seneca (the key reference to him was surprisingly not identified by Billanovich) have to be added, and especially Cicero, because the discovery of his letters incited Petrarch to write and collect his own correspondence.¹⁴ We are thus provided with a constellation of classical authorities, these being Petrarch's epitomes worth following and imitating in the spirit of the emerging principles of the Renaissance and the study of humanities as a rebirth of the Antiquity. The framework established by the classical authors also delimits the boundaries for interpretation of the entire letter: from Livy as the starting point to Augustine as the destination. This is why the text shall be interpreted primarily as a literary artefact.¹⁵

Paul Oskar Kristeller, one of the most prominent experts on humanism and Renaissance philosophy, does not avoid, in contrast, a philosophical interpretation of the letter.¹⁶ Let us now, without denying the literary-historical interpretation, refer to Kristeller and take into account the motifs occurring in the letter, which may be understood as impulses for philosophy itself. These motifs emerge gradually throughout the work and represent individual topics which may be considered from the philosophical perspective.

One can begin with the topic naturally occurring first; that is, contextualizing Petrarch's letter within the history of alpinism.¹⁷ Petrarch has

¹³ G. Billanovich, *Petrarca e il Ventoso*, Padova 1966, cf. the German translation in: A. Buck (ed.), *Petrarca*, Darmstadt 1976, p. 444–463.

¹⁴ This fact, as the basic framework for interpretation of the letter, is pointed out by a number of authors, most recently by D. Weber, *Petrarchs Mons Ventosus*. Überlegungen zu Fam. 4,1, "Wiener humanistische Blätter", 2000, 42, p. 52–80, especially p. 52.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Pfeiffer, *Petrarch und der Mont Ventoux* (zu *Familiars IV, 1*), "Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift", Neue Folge, 1997, p. 1–24, especially p. 23.

¹⁶ Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers...*, p. 13–14.

¹⁷ Cf. D. Weber, *Petrarcas Mons Ventosus*, p. 54. Literary works of this kind are mentioned by A. Kablitz, *Petrarcas Augustinismus und die Ecriture der Ventoux-Epistel*, "Poetica", 1994, 26, p. 31–69, especially p. 32, with a primary reference to the article of G. Carducci,

been declared “the father of mountaineering” and the date of the alleged ascent of Mont Ventoux is regarded as the date of “the birth of alpinism”.¹⁸ This “mountaineering” context is frequently denied,¹⁹ in spite of the fact that the letter contains all the formal stages which a record of a mountain ascent should include from the viewpoint of alpinism: preparation for the journey, the ascent itself, the experience from the peak and the descent.²⁰ If there is still doubt as to whether Petrarch actually undertook the ascent,²¹ and the importance of the letter is still seen in the literary or moral-philosophical planes, it is not surprising that Petrarch has been stripped of the alpinist primacy by much later achievements dating back to the fifteenth century.²²

Il Petrarca alpinista, [in:] G. Carducci, *Opere*, vol. 10, Bologna 1898, p. 149–160. Cited according to *Bolletino '900. Electronic Journal of '900 Italian Literature*, 2007, <http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2007-i/Carducci.html>

¹⁸ Walter Schmidkunz's epilogue to the (600 year) anniversary publication of the letter with a German translation; F. Petrarca, *Sendschreiben die Besteigung des Mont Ventoux betreffend*, München 1936, translated by J. V. von Scheffel. Cf. R. Groh, D. Groh, *Petrarch und der Mont Ventoux*, “Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken”, 1992, 46, p. 290. In this sense, Petrarch was also praised sixty years later by Helmut Zebhauser, who published this translation again as part of his publication: H. Zebhauser (ed.), *Frühe Zeugnisse – Die Alpenbegeisterung*, Bruckmann Verlag 1986. Ten years later, however, the same author influenced by the literary analysis of the letter rejected the factuality of Petrarch's achievement and caused a shock among alpinists; cf. H. Höfler, *Fragwürdigkeit im Alpinismus*, “Bergsteiger”, 2009, 3, p. 86.

¹⁹ E.g. M. O'Connell, *Authority and the Truth of Experience in Petrarch's 'Ascent of Mount Ventoux'*, “Philological Quarterly”, 1983, 62, p. 507–520; R. Groh, D. Groh, *Petrarch und der Mont Ventoux*, p. 292.

²⁰ This structure is pointed out e.g. by J. Pfeiffer, *Petrarch und der Mont Ventoux*, p. 10. He does not elaborate on the alpinist meaning of the structure; in contrast, he highlights its similarity to the stages of the mystical medieval mountain ascent of Willian of Saint-Thierry (treatises *De contemplando Dei* and *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei*), *ibidem*, p. 17. Pfeiffer, however, doubts a direct connection (with reference to K. Heitmann, *Petrarch und der Humanismus des 12. Jahrhunderts*, “Romanische Forschungen”, 1956, 68, 1/2, p. 149–151).

²¹ From the claims against the factuality of the ascent (cf. e.g. R. Groh – D. Groh, *Petrarch und der Mont Ventoux*, p. 292) one might mention here the alpinist one: the hike is a 40-kilometer walk with an elevation of 1,300 meters, and one should add the lack of experience, training and familiarity with the terrain, which is not marked in any way. In contrast, Petrarch's description of the journey is quite close to the present-day alpinists, so they do not doubt the authenticity of the ascent; cf. H. Höfler, *Fragwürdigkeit im Alpinismus*, p. 86.

²² In this respect, the Swiss botanist Conrad Gessner (1516–1565), who ascended Mount Pilatus near Luzern in 1541, is often mentioned. *Descriptio Montis Fracti sive Montis Pilati ut vulgo nominant, iuxta Lucernam in Helvetia, per Conradum Gesnerum*, [in:] C. Gessner, *De raris et admirandis herbis...commentariolus*. Zürich, 1555. Cf. e.g. J. Neatte, *Mountaineering Literature: A Bibliography and Material Published in English*, Seattle 1986, p. 69. Gessner ascended the mountain not only for botany-related reasons,

Petrarch's letter includes at least a hint of the ideological background of later alpinism and, as much as this idea remains undeveloped and may seem to be a meaning-dependent part of an entirely different strategy from the perspective of the overall composition of the letter, it is still worth a philosophical reflection in itself. When two centuries later Conrad Gessner admits the joy the mountains bring him and reveals his plan to ascent at least one every year, in order to achieve, among other things, the pleasure of the spirit,²³ it is impossible not to be reminded of Petrarch's desire to ascend Mont Ventoux. Petrarch described his desire at the beginning of the letter with the following words:

Today I ascended the highest mountain in this region, which, not without cause, they call the Windy Peak. Nothing but the desire to see its conspicuous height was the reason for this undertaking.²⁴

"The desire to see" as the sole motivation of the entire venture, the experience of the pleasure from the view, emerges perhaps for the first time with Petrarch. This is a phenomenon underlying modern mountaineering and hiking, regardless of whether it was Petrarch's goal. Even the romantic admiration of mountains has its type in Petrarch's letter to Dionigi: was it not the same desire that led Johann Wolfgang Goethe to the peak of Brocken in 1777?²⁵ This "desire to see" is specifically the first philosophical aspect

but primarily for his own pleasure and experience. Cf. his letter *Epistula ad Jacobum Avienum de montium admiratione*, [in:] C. Gesner, *Libellus de lacte et operibus lactariis*, Zurich 1541; cf. the English translation in: A. S. Weber, *Because It's There: A Celebration of Mountaineering from 200 B.C. to Today*, Lanham, Maryland 2003, p. 16–21 (before Gessner, Weber mentions only Petrarch). It is worth mentioning the attempt at ascending the same mountain undertaken as early as 1387 by a group of Luzern clergymen; the ascent was, however, prohibited by their superiors. Cf. K. Steinmann, *Grenzscheide zweier Welten – Petrarchs Besteigung des Mont Ventoux*, [in:] F. Petrarch, *Die Besteigung des Mont Ventoux*, Stuttgart 1995, p. 41.

²³ "Constitui posthac, Aviene doctissime, quam diu mihi vita divinitu concessa fuerit, quotannis montes aliquos, aut saltem unum conscendere, cum in suo vigore plantae sunt, partim earum cognitionis, partim honesti corporis exercitii, animique delectationis, gratia. Quanta enim voluptas, quanta sunt putas animi, ut par est affecti, deliciae, montium moles immensa spectando admirari, et caput tanquam inter nubes attollere?" C. Gessner, *Epistula ad Jacobum Avienum de montium admiratione*, p. 2.

²⁴ F. Petrarca, *The Ascent of Mont Ventoux*, transl. H. Nachod, [in:] E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristeller, J. H. Randall Jr., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p. 36.

²⁵ Goethe describes the ascent in a letter to Johann Heinrich Merck from the year 1778. Cf. *Briefe an Johann Heinrich Merck, von Göthe, Herder, Wieland und anderen bedeutenden Zeitgenossen*, ed. K. Wagner, Darmstadt 1835, p. 138. Goethe's ascent to the highest mountain of the Harz is mentioned in relation to Mont Ventoux by Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt 1966, p. 337, although he also points out certain differences: for

of Petrarch's letter, which is still discussed as the key motif and a certain testimony to the change in philosophical thinking at the turn of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Jacob Burckhardt can be credited with this: in his 1860 epochal book *The Culture of Renaissance in Italy* he values Petrarch as the first entirely modern thinker ascribing new meaning to the outer world and nature.²⁶ Owing to Burckhardt, the popularity of Petrarch's letter with literary scholars²⁷ increased and also became the subject of reflection on Petrarch's position within the history of philosophy.

The above-mentioned new meaning of nature lies in its aesthetization. If Petrarch undertakes his venture only for his desire to see, to enjoy the view and experience the unusual blowing of the wind at the peak; nature and the outer world become a new subject of aesthetic experience. This is why the German philosopher Joachim Ritter introduced his renowned lecture on landscape and the function of the aesthetic in modern society with a reference to the letter about Mont Ventoux, ascribing to it a historic importance for the birth of the modern concept of landscape.²⁸ Petrarch's achievement is subsequently perceived as the beginning of aesthetic curiosity and an emphasis on sensory experience, as well as the aesthetic fascination the soul encounters when looking out on the landscape.²⁹

Aesthetization of nature, supposedly originating with Petrarch, is part of a greater shift in thinking at the turn of the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, which is understood, even more, as an epochal change: aesthetization is an aspect of the birth of subjectivity. According to Ernst Cassirer, it is in

instance, Goethe stayed on the mountain for fourteen days enjoying the solitude. This is once again a motif provided to modern literature by Petrarch. Another aspect worth attention when comparing both letters is Goethe's character of a forester and its parallels with Petrarch's shepherd: a forester living at the bottom of the mountain for many years without ever ascending it, whom it is difficult to persuade to become a guide to the poet.

²⁶ Cf. J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, Berlin 1928, p. 295.

²⁷ The widespread impact of the letter is documented e.g. by Rainer Maria Rilke's letter of 14 May 1911 to Lili Schälke in which the poet compares his experience from a journey to Egypt with Petrarch's experience from Mont Ventoux; cf. D. Weber, *Petrarcas Mons Ventosus*, p. 54.

²⁸ Cf. J. Ritter, *Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft*, [in:] *ibidem*, *Subjektivität. Sechs Aufsätze*, Frankfurt 1974, p. 141–163 (originally separately Münster 1963).

²⁹ Cf. H. R. Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, München 1977, p. 141–145; K. H. Stierle, *Petrarchs Landschaften: zur Geschichte ästhetischer Landschaftserfahrung*, Krefeld 1979, p. 23–27. Cf. R. Groh, D. Groh, *Petrarca und der Mont Ventoux*, p. 291. Cf. a critical evaluation of this traditional interpretation: E. Weiblinger, *Augenlust und Erkundung der Seele – Francesco Petrarca auf dem Mont Ventoux*, [in:] *Raumerfahrung – Raumerfindung. Erzählte Welten des Mittelalters zwischen Orient und Okzident*, eds. L. Rimpau, P. Ihring, Berlin 2005, p. 179–194, especially p. 179–180.

Petrarch's work that nature begins to have a value reflected in the soul, in one's reflecting self; it is where a tension between nature and a thinking soul, taking nature as its own means of expression, is formed. The urge towards nature and the outer, and the polarity towards the soul are features of the modern approach to the world, and Petrarch's letter serves as evidence of the gradual formation of the modern subject-object issue.³⁰ The ascent of Mont Ventoux thus symbolizes the beginning of a new era, the beginning of a new perception of nature and the world and man's relationship to it.³¹

The tension between the inner and the outer seems indeed a crucial topic of Petrarch's letter to Dionigi, as it is not a mere description of outer experience – a mountaineering achievement, but rather a dialog of the soul with itself, incited by a transcendence to the outer world. This aspect of the work is revealed on several planes.

The allegorical or symbolic meaning of the physical ascent is often emphasised. One can stress the parallel between Mont Ventoux and the sacred mountains Athos and Olympus, shrouded in the clouds hiding the divinity in their heights, providing the opportunity to discern God on high: a mountain as the seat of God appears in various mythologies, as well as in the Old Testament, and this symbol is further developed in patristic literature, in particular by St. Augustine.³² By mentioning these mountains, Petrarch certainly intends to embed his ascent into a theological-mystical framework, and the letter may thus be perceived as a literary rendition of the theology of the Augustinian tradition.³³ The relationship between Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux and the ascent of a soul to God, the type of which may be found in medieval mystical literature³⁴, creates one plane of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual. Furthermore, the analogy of the ascent of a mountain to the ascent of a soul to blissful life is pointed out even by the author himself:

³⁰ Cf. E. Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, Darmstadt 1963, p. 151–153.

³¹ It is not surprising that, obviously under the influence of post-modernism, reflections from the end of this period beginning with Petrarch appear in literature. If the date of the alleged ascent of Mont Ventoux, i.e. 26 April 1336, is supposed to symbolize the human desire to overcome determined boundaries, this attitude is ruined exactly 650 years later, on 26 April 1986, with the explosion of the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl. Cf. K. Steinmann, *Grenzscheide zweier Welten ...*, p. 40.

³² Cf. Psalm 68:15-16: "The hill of God is as the hill of Bashan; a high hill as the hill of Bashan. Why leap you, you high hills? This is the hill which God desires to dwell in.", formed by Augustine into a mountain as a cipher for Christ; cf. D. Weber, *Petrarcas Mons Ventosus*, p. 60.

³³ Cf. J. Pfeiffer, *Petrarca und der Mont Ventoux*, p. 10–13.

³⁴ Cf. above, William of Saint-Thierry (*Do contemplando Dei* and *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei*) or Bonaventura (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*).

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 towards the blessed life.³⁵

It is well documented that Petrarch speaks here about two paths: the steep and straight path chosen by his brother Gherardo, who is known to have become a monk, and the comfortable but long path taken by Francesco. The topic itself, however, does not only belong to the tradition of mystical theology; it can even be encountered in purely philosophical sources, as illustrated by a letter attributed to Diogenes of Sinope (the Cynic) which is surprisingly similar to that of Petrarch:

I came to Athens and when I heard that one of Socrates' students teaches about the blissful life, I came to his home. It was here that he spoke about the two paths leading to him and he said that there are only two paths, no more: one is short, the other is long. Everyone can choose which one they take [...]. When we came closer, he showed us two paths leading to the Acropolis: one of them was short, but steep and demanding, the other was long, but gradually rising and comfortable. He said: [...] these paths to the blessed life are of the same kind. Let everyone choose the one they shall take [...].³⁶

Both classical and modern philosophical literature reveal that the symbol of a mountain ascent alluding to mental processes is alive as a philosophical topic, as documented by passages from a cult book by the American writer and philosopher Robert Pirsig, where this topic is transformed into a symbol of a philosophical effort itself.³⁷ The ascent of Mont Ventoux shall be a reflection of psychomachia, an allegorical image of contention of virtues and vices in a human mind: it is impossible not to notice the similarity between the Latin word for mind (*mens*) and for a mountain (*mons*).³⁸

³⁵ F. Petrarca, *The Ascent of Mont Ventoux*, p. 39.

³⁶ Translated according to the German translation by E. Müseler, *Die Kynikerbriefe*, 2. Kritische Ausgabe mit deutscher Übersetzung, Paderborn–München–Wien–Zürich 1994, p. 39–41. Cf. D. Weber, *Petrarch's Mons Ventosus*, p. 60–61. Diogenes' letter (ep. 30.1–2) comes from the imperial period and it is improbable that Petrarch would have known of it directly; the similarity is nevertheless so great that the ways of mediation shall be considered.

³⁷ R. M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. An Inquiry into Values*, 1974, p. 85.

³⁸ Cf. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *A Likely Story: The Autobiographical as Epideictic*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion", 1989, 57, no. 1, p. 32. The allegorical interpretation is strictly rejected by Robert M. Durling, *The Ascent of Mt. Ventoux and the Crisis of Allegory*, "Italian Quarterly", 1974, 18, p. 7–28.

The relationship between the outer and the physical to the inner and the spiritual in Petrarch's letter is not, however, limited to the symbolism and the rather traditional metaphor of a mountain ascent. It is the second plane that is much more important for interpretation of the letter, as well as for reflection on its philosophical meaning: Petrarch's "turn at the peak", incited by a "random" reading of the following passage from Augustine's *Confessions*,³⁹ in view of which all previous actions are revealed to be vain:

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 revolution of the stars – and desert themselves.⁴⁰

The reference to Augustine may not necessarily promote a purely theological context. Similarly to the case of the symbol of a mountain and an allegorical interpretation of a mountain ascent, background from classical philosophy may also be identified. Even Petrarch himself seeks the auspices of Seneca's eighth letter to Lucilius through a half-acknowledged quotation ("nothing is admirable besides the mind");⁴¹ the quotation of Augustine is thus embedded in a context entirely different from the original one. Another passage of the same – i.e. the stoic origin, is one from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, where the emperor-philosopher explicitly encourages a turn to one's own self instead of resorting to the mountains:

Men seek retreats for themselves, houses in the country, sea-shores, and mountains; and thou too art wont to desire such things very much. But this is altogether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in thy power, whenever thou shalt choose, to retire into thyself.⁴²

The turn to one's own self, into the soul, is typical for the philosophical schools of the Hellenic period. Petrarch only follows up on these schools, obtaining in his work a new meaning, thanks to which this Italian poet cannot be regarded as a mere epigone of Roman stoicism. It may seem that the breaking point, the quotation from Augustine, throws Petrarch from the promisingly developing turn to the outer world, and the sensory experience evident in the first part of the letter, back to the previous centuries, which did not trust outer experience, let alone make it the subject of aesthetic ad-

³⁹ For the parallel between Petrarch and Augustine with regard to the ascent of Mont Ventoux, cf. M. J. Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance. Art and Philosophy from Petrarch to Michelangelo*, Cambridge 2005, p. 99–106.

⁴⁰ F. Petrarca, *The Ascent of Mont Ventoux*, p. 44. Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.8.15.

⁴¹ Cf. Seneca, *Epist.* 8,5.

⁴² Cf. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4, 3, translated by G. Long.

miration. This is also why Petrarch is described by Hans Blumenberg as an early modern, and at the same time a deeply medieval author. The emerging cognitive desire is immediately negated by Petrarch; his Augustine ends the struggle between the outer and the inner, and transfers aesthetic curiosity into the category of the superfluous.⁴³ It is specifically this concept of “curiosity” (*curiositas*) which becomes crucial for this interpretation and demonstrates the complex structure of Petrarch’s letter. In Augustine’s *Confessions*, curiosity is one of the vices of impious pride and prevents the achievement of a blissful life.⁴⁴ It is a “theoretical curiosity”, the desire for knowledge (*appetitus noscendi*) connected primarily to the sight, “the desire of the eye” (*concupiscentia oculorum*).⁴⁵ In the Middle Ages, this connection between curiosity and sight⁴⁶ is emphasized, and curiosity also comes closer to the vice of acedia (*accidia*, torpor, lethargy), for instance in Ivo of Chartres, who also explicitly mentions mountaintops as places through which a person cannot achieve blissfulness, unless turning to the solitude of one’s own heart. Without this turn into one’s self, all (outer) solitude becomes acedia, curiosity and vain glory.⁴⁷ Even Thomas Aquinas regards curiosity as a vice and places it among those stemming from the primary vice of acedia.⁴⁸

A person of Petrarch’s day thus had to perceive a venture undertaken for the desire to see, not only as unusual and needless (as in the case of the shepherd mentioned by Petrarch in his letter, who warns him of unnecessary exertion), but even as something undue and reprehensible. The ascent receives its actual meaning only when taking into account the above-

⁴³ Cf. H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, p. 336–338.

⁴⁴ Augustinus, *Confessiones*, 5, 3, 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 10, 35.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bernhard of Clairvaux, *Sermo “Qualiter Voluntas Hominis per gulam, curiositatem et superbiam ac per omnes sensus carnis, renitatur voci divinae”*, [in:] *Sancti Bernardi Opera* IV, ed. J. Leclercq, H. Rochais, Roma 1966, p. 83, for whom curiosity is served by an unsteady walk and undisciplined sight: “Nam curiositati pes vagus, et indisciplinatus oculus famulantur.” Cf. J. Pfeiffer, *Petrarca und der Mont Ventoux*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Yves de Chartres, *Ep.* 192: “Non beatum faciunt hominem secreta sylvarum, cacumina montium, si secum non habet solitudinem mentis, sabbatum cordis, tranquillitatem conscientiae, ascensiones in corde, sine quibus omnem solitudinem comitantur mentis acedia, curiositas, vana gloria, periculosae tentationum procellae.” Cited according to P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 3, Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 311–600*, Oak Harbor, WA 1997⁵, p. 139, digitized edition <http://www.ccel.org>.

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 35, a. 4. For the transformation of the meaning of the concept of curiosity in the history of philosophy, cf. G. Müller, *Neugierde*, [in:] *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Band 6, eds. J. Ritter, K. Gründer, G. Gabriel, Basel 1971–2007, p. 736.

mentioned statement by Augustine, which is presented as its antithesis. The polarity of the outer spatial experience (which may be seen as a manifestation of the Aristotelian concept of “theoria”⁴⁹) and the Augustinian inner temporal experience (as the original context of Augustine’s statement is a reflection on memory) fully reveals the antithetical character of the letter.⁵⁰ The admiration of the observed is replaced by scepticism and awareness of vanity of such an activity.

It cannot be argued, however, that this sceptical attitude is the last eventuation of the entire letter. The turn to one’s self is inconceivable without the prior outer ascent. The tension between the outer and the inner, between the undue desire to see and scepticism towards the meaning of outer cognition, does not vanish. The inner struggle is revealed by Petrarch at the peak of the mountain:

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 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.⁵¹

According to Paul Richard Blum, Petrarch repeats here the central motif of his love poetry: the torn state caused by the fact that a sensory object is perceived intellectually.⁵² The outer object of love and desire shall be replaced by a dive into one’s intellect and inner self; the inner scenery is, however, created in a dialogue with the outer scenery. Curiosity is one of the vices, and yet it was curiosity that drew Petrarch up the mountain where he turns to his inner self. Is it thus actually necessary to forsake it entirely, or shall we attribute the indisputable role of our servant to it?⁵³

⁴⁹ The Aristotelian “theoria” became the central concept of Ritter’s interpretation of Petrarch: cf. J. Ritter, *Landschaft*, p. 174. Ritter links Petrarch’s words *sola videndi cupiditate ductus* with the beginning of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* I, 1, 980 a22.


⁵⁰ Petrarch’s letter is characterized as an antithetical transcription of conventional allegoresis and an important work of early modern hermeneutics in V. Lau, *Allegorie des Sehens, Auslegung des geschichtlichen Seins und skeptische Narativität: Francesco Petrarca: Die Besteigung des Mont Ventoux*, “Scientia Poetica. Jahrbuch für Geschichte der Literatur und Wissenschaften”, 1999, 3, p. 1–19.

⁵¹ F. Petrarca, *The Ascent of Mont Ventoux*, p. 42. With regards to the context, cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 368 “*Qui amat animam suam perdet eam*”, PL 38 (<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorsi/index2.htm>), i.e. an interpretation of J 12, 25: “He that loves his life shall lose it; and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.”

⁵² P. R. Blum, *Petrarch*, a manuscript.

⁵³ Petrarch takes a similarly ambivalent attitude even to his own vice of acedia: he admits suffering from it and at the same time confesses that it brings him pleasure; Petrarch,

Paul Richard Blum adds another perspective. Petrarch himself does not remain inside his solitude, although he claims that Augustine's words read at the peak were only intended for himself. On the contrary, having entered the outer world and subsequently turned into his own self, he enters the outer again, as he intends to convey his message: he writes a letter to Dionigi. And this is what the task of philosophy may be, as P. R. Blum points out: a philosopher can only turn to the outer, reflect on it critically inside the inner self and finally return and convey the message to other human beings,⁵⁴ as it is the human being that stands at the centre of all philosophical efforts within the Socratic-Petrarchan perspective.

Petrarch's letter concerning the ascent of Mont Ventoux indeed hides numerous motifs and aspects of philosophical relevance, which have been providing impulses for further development: from aesthetization of reality to the subject-object issue, from symbol and the metaphor of the physical and the spiritual to hermeneutics and scepticism about reflections on the nature of philosophy in general. It still remains for the reader to decide whether the letter should be read as a literary, philosophical or theological work, or even as an alpinist one. 

TOMÁŠ NEJESCHLEBA – Profesor filozofii oraz Kierownik Centrum Badań Tekstów Renesansowych na Wydziale Sztuki Uniwersytetu Palackiego w Ołomuńcu. Zajmuje się przede wszystkim filozofią średniowieczną (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventura), renesansową, wczesną filozofią nowożytną oraz jej relacją do medycyny (Johannes Jessenius) i nauki (Valerian Magni). Pracuje także nad recepcją włoskiej filozofii renesansowej w Czechach (Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola).

TOMÁŠ NEJESCHLEBA – Professor of philosophy at the Chair of Philosophy at the Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc (Czech Republic), and the Head of the Centre for Renaissance Text of the Faculty of Arts. He focuses on medieval philosophy (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventure), Renaissance philosophy, early modern philosophy and its relationship to medicine (Johannes Jessenius) and science (Valerian Magni). He also works on the reception of Italian Renaissance philosophy in the Czech lands (Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola).

ORCID: 0000-0003-3130-9302

Secretum meum II, 45: "And what may be called the utmost peak of all suffering is the fact that I indulge myself in my own tears and pain with some kind of ominous delight." Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers...*, p. 14.

⁵⁴ P. R. Blum, *Philosophy of Life in Francesco Petrarca's Poetry*, "Czech and Slovak Journal of Humanities", 2018, 1, p. 12. The author would hereby like to thank Prof. Blum for providing him with the material.