In the pages that follow, I want to suggest that Petrarch addresses head-on the challenges to understanding, and most acutely to understanding the past, that contemporary philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer pose as the hermeneutical problem. What is more, Petrarch addresses this challenge with instruments ready to hand from the two traditions that since antiquity have informed the field of hermeneutics, namely ethics and rhetoric: ethics, because the act of understanding is like any other action, in a tradition of moral philosophy that goes back to Aristotle, colored by the character or ethos of the understander; and rhetoric, because, as I have tried to show in some detail in an earlier project, the principles of literary reception, theoretically understood, derive from principles of literary production—a derivation that stands to reason if, as Gadamer and others have argued, interpretation reverses composition. In Petrarch’s case, the authorizing interpretive principle is intimacy. Petrarch calls it familiaritas; and it is this familiaritas, as I hope to show, that does the kind of hard work in the labor of understanding how we understand, especially how we understand the past, and even more specifically how we understand the writings of the past, that caritas, far better known in hermeneutic circles, does for Augustine. Whereas the Augustinian hermeneutical principle is for the most part both derived from and deployed in the service of understanding scripture, however, Petrarchan familiaritas is most at home in the letter—the so-called “familiar letter”—whose special significance has not escaped contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. “Just as the recipient of a letter understands the news that it contains”, Gadamer observes:

---

1 See Eden 1997, 4, quoting Gadamer 1976, 25, that “the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality completely interpenetrate each other”.

2 For Petrarch as devoted reader of Augustine, see Nolhac 1965 [1892], 2: 193–95; Quillen 1998.
and first sees things with the eyes of the person who wrote the letter—i.e., considers what he writes as true, and is not trying to understand the writer’s peculiar opinion as such—so also do we understand traditionary texts on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own prior relation to the subject matter.3

Setting a paradigm for readers of all kinds of texts, letter-readers, Gadamer claims, rely on their own pre-understanding to enable meaning.4

Long before Gadamer, Petrarch appreciates fully the paradigmatic nature of the familiar letter for writing as well as reading more generally. But his appreciation, like Gadamer’s, derives in turn from traditional texts that shape his own expectations. In Petrarch’s case, these texts are not exclusively, but they are most dramatically, Cicero’s *Letters to Atticus*, which Petrarch serendipitously discovers at the Cathedral of Verona in 1345—a discovery that inspires the project of his greatest letter collection, the *Familiares*, which inspires in turn the humanist fashion for letter-collecting.5

Petrarch’s hermeneutics of intimacy, in other words, belongs to a complex, longstanding and influential tradition that features Cicero but does not begin with him. For Cicero himself both practices and preaches throughout his letters a rhetoric of intimacy that looks back in turn to, among others, Aristotle, especially Aristotle’s ethical and rhetorical writings. In the remainder of this essay, then, I want to sketch what I think is a plausible if partial genealogy of a Petrarchan hermeneutics born from the familiar letter and grounded in the concept

---

3 Gadamer 1989, 294.
4 Gadamer (1989, 163) also recognizes the hermeneutical value of familiarity: “The written word and what partakes of it—literature—is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity. This is like nothing else that comes down to us from the past”.
5 On Petrarch’s discovery; see *Familiares* XXIV 3; Bernardo 1975–1985, 1: xxii; Pfeiffer 1976, 9–11; Wilkins 1955, 170–81; Wilkins 1961, 51–52. On Renaissance letter-collecting, see Clough 1976, who offers a conflicting account of the influence of the *Familiares* (38): “Moreover the first printed edition of Petrarch’s letters did not appear until 1492, which further underlines the insignificant part his actual letter collections played in stimulating those of the humanists. This, of course, is not to deny that his idea of editing his own letters was widely known and seen by the humanists as confirming the rightness of their editing their own letters”. Constable, on the other hand, denies altogether the impact of Petrarch’s discovery, calling it “an event of personal rather than general significance” (1976, 39).