

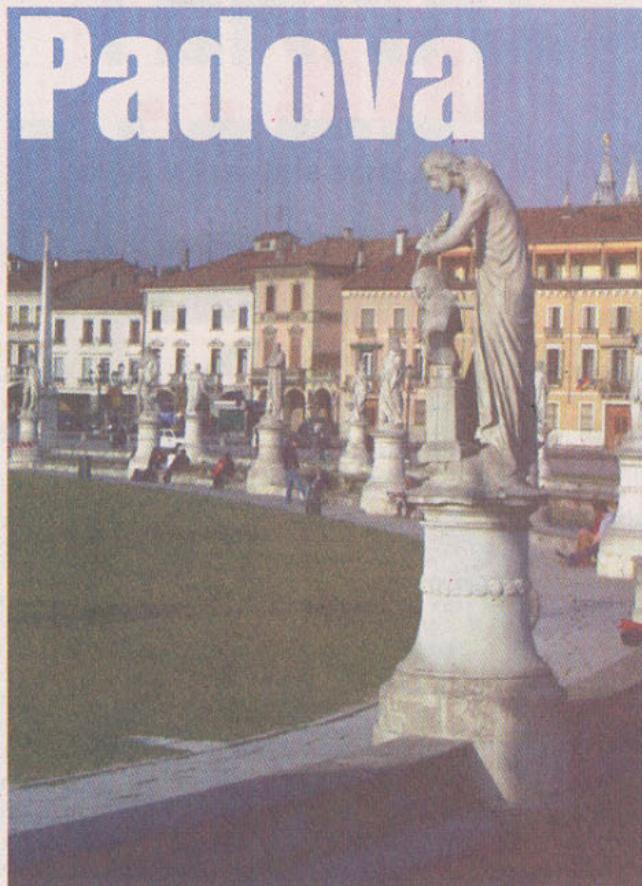
The Sonneteer of Padova

I have taken the train from Rome to the northern Italian town of Padova just to spend the afternoon with a special gentleman of a rather poetic temperament and rare, old world charm. And by old world I mean really old: the world of medieval courtly manners! Actually it would be appropriate to call him a modern Renaissance man.

He has been urging me to come and see him in his hometown ever since we met over the pages of his sonnets, dedicated, unfortunately, not to me but to another woman--the beautiful and mysterious Laura. But I am not jealous, after all, to a poet's sensibility a woman is more than an individual; she is an ideal, a spiritual excuse, a voice calling within where poetry resides. I have come to hear him speak about all this, in his own words, and his own handwriting.

Soon, I find myself standing before a glass-protected case in which lie open some of the manuscripts and illustrated pages from gilt-edged books, specially one called 'Canzoniere' that has awaited my eyes since the 14th century when it was penned--by my friend. As I murmur aloud the quaint Italian 'Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse/ il suono di quei sospiri...' I feel the sospiro or sigh of ages pass from a long ago poet to me:

'O You who hear the sound, in scattered rhymes, of those sighs on which I fed my heart, in my first vagrant youthfulness...'



I hear my poet-friend speak to me across the centuries and sense his presence. "Signore Petrarcha?" I ask as I turn around. 'Lady,' he bows. 'You came, grazie!' He leans against a portrait of himself. "And by the way, I may be Petrarch to everybody, but call me Francesco." No wonder you were considered the first modern man, I say to myself as I take his proffered arm and stroll around the rooms of the Civic Museum of Padova where exhibits from his life are spread around as a retrospective celebrating his 700th anniversary, called: 'Petrarch: His Life and Times.'

"You know, Francesco, you don't look so old." I glance at him. "Just because I am more than 600 years older than you doesn't mean I'd show up looking like an old fogey for a lady." I smile and tell him that for his birthday I have brought him nothing but my admiration. He shakes his head modestly, "Lady, I merely followed the metier I loved, to the best of my ability. My father wanted me to study law, a subject I detested as being a dishonest one. I gave in to my passion for poetry and Latin literature. Still, in the end what remains is only a fraction of that creative power that was lent to me."



NEEMAN SOBHAN

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