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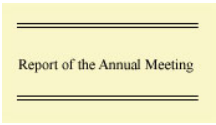

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THE REVIVAL OF CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY OR THE FIRST CENTURY OF HUMANISM: A REAPPRAISAL

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It is almost a hundred years since Georg Voigt published *The Revival of Classical Antiquity or the First Century of Humanism* (1859)[1] and Jacob Burckhardt published *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860).[2] Together these two books set a pattern for the interpretation of humanism and the Renaissance which went almost unchallenged for half a century and which still exercises a pervasive influence upon our conceptions of the period. During the past fifty years or so, however, that interpretation has been not only challenged but profoundly modified in a variety of directions, some of them mutually exclusive. The learned controversy has focussed primarily upon the interpretation of the Renaissance as a whole; but humanism was such an integral part of Renaissance culture that its interpretation has shared all the vicissitudes that have characterized recent Renaissance historiography. Almost every aspect of the humanist movement has become problematical. It has been looked at from new points of view and set in new frames of reference. It is not my intention, however, to discuss here the various trends in recent interpretation of the Renaissance and of humanism, nor to outline once more the familiar picture drawn by Voigt and Burckhardt. I have done so at some length elsewhere.[3] But it seems to me that the time has come to ask what has emerged from a hundred years of research and interpretation. Specifically, I would like to try, as briefly as possible, to reappraise "the revival of classical antiquity or the first century of humanism," to quote Voigt's title, as it appears to me in this year of grace 1957. With the scope of Voigt's work in mind, I shall limit my discussion to Italian humanism from about the middle of the fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century, the crucial period of the origins and early growth of the movement.

The first problem for the historian here, as always, is that of causation. What caused the literary world of Italy to turn with such enthusiasm to the study and imitation of the classical Latin and Greek authors? And why at this particular stage in the development of Italian culture? The contribution of Petrarch and the influence of his personality, which Voigt stresses so strongly and to which he devoted more than a fifth of his book, seems an inadequate explanation. True, it was Petrarch who first brought a new understanding and appreciation to the study of classical literature and by his indefatigable missionary zeal aroused the interest of Boccaccio and other contem-

[1] G. Voigt, *Die Wiederbelebung des klassischen Altherthums oder das erste Jahrhundert des Humanismus* (Berlin, 1859).

[2] J. Burckhardt, *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (Basel, 1860).

[3] See W. K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston, 1948).

porary scholars. It is true also that his personality did much to influence the direction in which humanism would develop. Yet, had his empathetic love of the Latin authors been a mere personal idiosyncracy, it would not have aroused a similar enthusiasm in so many of his countrymen.

A much more fundamental cause of the classical revival can, it seems to me, be found in the peculiar social development of Italy in the preceding period. The wealthy upper classes of the Italian cities had by the fourteenth century achieved sufficient cultural maturity and self-confidence to be ready to seek a culture suited to their peculiar needs. Lay education, fostered by large-scale business enterprise, was wide-spread among the middle and upper classes, while the concentrated wealth produced by capitalism furnished the means for patronage as well as the leisure to cultivate literature and the arts. But a society with new interests seldom creates a completely new culture. More commonly it will utilize its legacy from the past and adapt it to suit its own needs and tastes. Neither the chivalric nor the clerical literary traditions of the Middle Ages, however, could furnish an adequate foundation for a new urban culture. The upper class laymen of the Italian cities had lost contact with the feudal and chivalric *mores* that had produced the secular literature of medieval France, while at the same time they lacked the professional training and special interests of the clerical schoolmen. But if medieval traditions proved inadequate, the Italians had only to turn to a more distant past to find a more congenial inspiration in the culture of a society very much like their own. The literature of Roman and Greek antiquity was the product of a wealthy, aristocratic, secular, and predominantly urban society, a society in which the citizen's life was set in the framework of a non-feudal state; a society, in short, in which the upper classes of the Italian city-states could easily imagine themselves at home. They had only to approach it in a receptive spirit to find in it a storehouse of secular knowledge and human wisdom, the whole expressed in literary forms different from and, on the whole, more perfectly finished than those inherited from the Middle Ages.

So much has been written about the humanists' preoccupation with the form of classical literature[4] that it seems necessary to emphasize the fact that they were attracted to it by its intellectual content as well as by its aesthetic form. It was doubtless the beauty of Latin speech that first aroused the enthusiasm of Petrarch in his early youth and, poet that he was, he never ceased to revere the artistic mastery of the ancient writers. The influence of a classical sense of form was, indeed, apparent in his Italian poetry. But as he grew older he learned to value more and more what could be learned from the thought and

[4]The charge that the humanists were interested in form only and cared little for the content of literature was a constant theme with nineteenth century historians and is still current. See, for example, Voigt, pp. 428 ff; F. de Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (Naples, 1871; Eng. trans. New York, 1931), I, 373 *et passim;* P. Monnier, *Le Quattrocento* (1900; 2nd ed., Paris, 1924), I, 229 ff; R. Sabbadini, *Storia del Ciceronianismo* (Turin, 1885). For a vigorous rebuttal, see J. H. Whitfield, *Petrarch and the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1943).

the varied knowledge of the ancient authors. The exigencies of their craft forced his successors to become philologists, but only the pedants among them — and let that age which is without pedants cast the first stone — ever forgot that form and content were inseparable characteristics of the literature they so greatly admired. What the humanists sought in the classics was a foundation upon which to build a culture in the broadest sense. What they found in the ancient literature was a liberal education.

The term adopted by the Renaissance scholars to denote this form of culture and education based on classical studies was *humanitas* or *studia humanitatis*. It was a term much used by Cicero and was apparently introduced into Renaissance usage in the Ciceronian sense by Leonardo Bruni in a dialogue *De studiis et litteris* written in 1401. Somewhat later the term *humanista* or humanist was applied, on the analogy with the classification of law students as *jurista* or *canonista*, to students of the humanities. The modern derivative, humanism (*Humanismus*), is a product of nineteenth century German scholarship. Like many similar terms, it has been used in such varying senses that it seems worth while to define it carefully. Occasionally it has been used to denote mere philological classical scholarship. More frequently it has been applied to any philosophy which centers attention upon man. It has even been confused at times with an attitude that would more properly be called humanitarian. Even in antiquity some confusion as to its meaning apparently existed, since Aulus Gellius, writing in the second century A.D., felt it necessary to define the correct usage of *humanitas*.

> Those who have spoken Latin and have used the language correctly [he wrote] do not give the word *humanitas* the meaning which it is commonly thought to have, namely, what the Greeks called *philanthropia* signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good feeling toward all men without distinction; but they give to *humanitas* about the force of the Greek *paideia*, that is, what we call *eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes* or "education and training in the liberal arts." Those who earnestly desire and seek for these are most highly humanized, for the pursuit of that kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, have been granted to man alone among the animals, and for that reason it is termed *humanitas* or "humanity."[5]

It was in this proud sense that the Renaissance scholars used the term, with the additional limitation that for them "education and training in the liberal arts" was inseparable from the study of classical literature. As a specific historical phenomenon, humanism or the *studia humanitatis* meant a fairly well defined group of intellectual disciplines: grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy, all based upon the study of classical authors.[6]

It is this definition of humanism as the study of both the form and the general content of the classical literature that differentiates Renaissance humanism from the so-called clerical humanism of the

[5]*The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, Eng. trans. by J. C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library, 1927), II, 457.

[6]Cf. P. O. Kristeller, *The Classics and Renaissance Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. 11.

twelfth century, and to an even greater degree from the scholastic study of ancient Greek philosophy and science. The clerical humanists of John of Salisbury's generation were seduced by the beauty of classical Latin style and imitated it to the best of their ability. But, as devout clerics, they were suspicious of the ideas expressed in pagan writings, or were simply indifferent to their secular content; while, as products of a feudal age, they were incapable of understanding the social milieu and the ways of thinking reflected in the classical authors. The scholastic philosophers and theologians, on the other hand, who superseded the clerical humanists in the thirteenth century were largely indifferent to classical style, but were deeply concerned with the content of certain aspects of Greek thought, though only those which could serve the technical needs of their specialized professional disciplines. Whether the scholastics were in fact closer to the living tradition of antiquity than were the men of the Renaissance, as Étienne Gilson has contended, is a matter of opinion, but to call them humanists is to rob the term of all specific meaning.[7]

Although they had their own group of disciplines, which they regarded as within their province, the Italian humanists did not form an organized academic profession. They had as yet no firmly established place in the universities, which in Italy were concerned chiefly with the professional courses in law, medicine and natural philosophy. An occasional humanist might be called to give a few lectures at a university, and several held fairly permanent posts as professors of rhetoric, fulfilling the traditional function of the earlier *dictatores* as teachers of formal composition for practical use. But, for the most part, they functioned outside the universities, as independent men of letters. As such, they have been regarded as forming a new class in society.[8] Most of them were laymen, or if, like Petrarch, they had taken minor orders as a prerequisite to clerical patronage, their way of life was little affected thereby. After their work had made classical education fashionable in cultured society, some men with humanist training rose to high position in the church, two or three even to the highest. But the majority of the humanists remained free-lance writers and teachers, seeking a living as secretaries in the papal *curia* or in the chancelleries of the Italian states, as state historians, as tutors to the children of princes and wealthy citizens, or simply by soliciting patronage from princes, prelates, businessmen and *condottieri* to whom they dedicated their written works. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that some of them were guilty of gross flattery of the rich and powerful, or that the highly competitive, uncertain and wandering life they led developed in them some un-

[7]E. Gilson, "Le Moyen Âge et le naturalisme antique," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge,* VII (1932), 5-37; cf. J. Maritain, *True Humanism* (New York, 1938) and critical review by G. G. Coulton in *Journal of the History of Ideas,* V (1944), 415-33.

[8]P. O. Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome, 1956, pp. 563ff rejects this interpretation and argues that the humanists were simply the successors of the medieval rhetoricans; but see R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries,* Cambridge, 1954) p. 329 for the uncertain and anomalous position of the humanists in the universities.

amiable qualities. Despite the high respect in which classical studies were held, the pay a humanist could claim was generally much less than that accorded to a jurist or a member of the other established professions. They felt, with some justice, that they were not appreciated at their true worth, and the feeling tended to make them arrogant and assertive. Competition for patronage, too, bred professional jealousies that sometimes found expression in literary feuds replete with obscene abuse. There seems no reason to believe that the humanists as a group were more immoral than any other social class, but their immoralities were better publicized. It is unfair, however, to judge the humanists, as Voigt and others have tended to do, by the most disreputable members of the class.[9] A more balanced view must also take into account such men of high character and sober purpose as Coluccio Salutati, the venerable chancellor of Florence, or the inspired teacher, Vittorino da Feltre.

It is unfair, too, to judge the humanists by the disparity between what they aspired to achieve and what they actually accomplished.[10] To reach a fair estimate of their achievement during this pioneering period, one must take into account the magnitude of their task. The restoration of all that survived of classical literature involved first of all a systematic search for manuscripts. The story of their search and its results is too well known to need repetition.[11] It was encouraged and financed by wealthy patrons who built up their libraries by buying rare manuscripts or having them copied. Nearly all the reigning princes, the Visconti, the Gonzagas, the Estensi, and such wealthy Florentine citizens as Niccolò Niccoli and Cosimo de' Medici collected libraries which were made available to scholars. In mid-century Nicholas V founded the Vatican library, which soon became the largest public library in Europe. It is obvious, of course, that the classical authors discovered by the humanists had not been literally unknown in the Middle Ages. Recent research, too, has shown that medieval scholars were fairly familiar with the main body of classical literature.[12] Still, a large number of minor works and some of major importance existed only in rare copies widely scattered and almost forgotten in decaying monastery libraries. What the humanists and their wealthy patrons did was to gather together and make available almost the whole surviving body of classical literature. When we remember that even Petrarch, who idolized Cicero, did not know the *Familiar Letters*, which Salutati discovered in 1392, we cannot doubt the importance of the collectors' work for the full understanding of antique civilization.

[9]For a generally unfavorable picture of the character of the humanists, see Voigt, pp. 401 ff; Burckhardt (Eng. trans., London, 1921), pp. 273 ff; J. A. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, II (London, 1897), 374 ff.

[10]Sabbadini, for example, called the learning of the humanists an immense illusion. See the Preface to his *Storia del Ciceronianismo*, cited above.

[11]The fullest account is in R. Sabbadini, *Le scoperti dei codici latini e greci ne' secoli XIV e XV*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1905-14); see also J. E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1908), II, 24 ff.

[12]Cf. M. Manitius, *Handschriften antiker Autoren in mittelalterlichen Bibliothekskatalogen* (Leipzig, 1935); J. W. Thompson, *The Medieval Library* (New ed., New York, 1957).

The collecting, copying and diffusion of manuscripts was, however, but a part, and not the most laborous part, of the task the humanists had set for themselves. Many of the manuscripts they found were defective, having been copied by monks whose knowledge of Latin was imperfect and who were frequently careless. Poggio complained that a codex of Cicero's *Philippics*, which he had found, was so full of errors that to emend it called for divination rather than conjecture. 'There is no woman [he added] so stupid or ignorant that she could not have copied more correctly."[13] To secure a faithful text it was thus necessary to compare as many copies as possible, to emend faulty readings, to weed out interpolations and to reject forgeries. And this in turn required a minute study of the problems of paleography, orthography, grammar, syntax and usage, all without the aid of printed texts, manuals, dictionaries and all the other aids regarded as indispensable to modern classical scholarship. In the process the humanists founded the science of critical philology. It was as yet a layman's science with little or no institutional organization, but their attitude toward it was not that of dilettanti. They brought to their task the patient and laborious devotion to *minutiae* which is the indispensable characteristic of the scientific scholar. When one considers the quantity of midnight oil sacrificed upon the altars of classical scholarship, the charge of frivolity so frequently brought against the humanists seems rather unfair.[14]

As philologists the humanists were forced to develop a discriminating critical sense. Apparent in nearly all of them, it reached its fullest development in this period in the work of Lorenzo Valla.[15] After having been brought up in Rome, Valla led a wandering life. He taught in various cities, spent some years under the protection of Alfonso of Naples and finally returned to Rome to spend his last years under the patronage of Pope Nicholas V. His widely ranging critical sense, reënforced by an irrepressibly combative spirit, brought him into conflict with jurists, philosophers, monks and theologians and even for a time with the papacy. In a treatise *On Pleasure* he examined in turn the ethical doctrines of Stoicism, Epicureanism and Christianity, and although he concluded that the last was superior to the other two systems, his sympathetic presentation of the Epicurean point of view shocked the serious-minded. He offended the theologians by exposing the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite as spurious and questioning the tradition that the Apostles' Creed was actually composed by the Apostles. He also combined historical with philological criticism to demonstrate that the Donation of Constantine, the document on which papal claims to territorial sovereignty in Italy were founded, was an eighth century forgery. But, for all the diversity of his critical interests, Valla remained essentially a grammarian and philologist. His textual criticism of the New Testament, which later exerted a strong influence on Erasmus, was a work of pure scholarship without

[13]Poggio Bracciolini, *Epistolae*, III, 17; quoted in Monnier, I, 264.

[14]See, for example, Voigt, p. 467.

[15]There is no good full length study of Valla. For a brief sketch see A. Renaudet, *La fin du Moyen Âge* (Paris 1931), pp. 517 ff.

theological connotations. For the further development of humanism his most important work was the *Elegantiae linguae latinae,* a systematic survey of correct classical usage, based on an empirical study of the best classical authors. Its appearance marked a turning point in the development of humanist scholarship and literary taste. The early humanists had been eclectic in their choice of classical models, accepting as classical any pagan or Christian author, prior to the seventh century A.D. Valla, with his keen critical and historical sense, distinguished between the various periods in the development of Latin and gave his full approval only to the usage of the last century of the Roman Republic and the first century or so of the Empire. Although Valla would not have approved the exclusive Ciceronianism of some of the later humanists, his work marked a decisive step in the process which finally converted a living tongue into a dead language by selecting one moment in its historical evolution as standard and freezing it at that point.

The humanists of the first century of the movement, however, were still free from the cramping effects of a too exclusive classicism. But in their writing they did model their style on that of the ancient authors and thereby they laid themselves open to the often repeated charge that they were mere imitators, devoid of originality.[16] The fact is simply that they wanted to write well, and they could think of no better way of doing so than to write as much like the ancient masters as possible. The method they used to achieve that end, however, led to rather more literal imitation than was altogether beneficial.[17] It was their common practice to jot down in note books words, phrases, metaphors and turns of speech as well as all sorts of factual material and expressions of opinion culled from the classical authors. These they studied and committed to memory. In their own writing they drew upon this store-house, reassembling the fragments to suite their purpose. At the worst, this method led to writing that was little more than a mosaic of borrowed phrases, overloaded with an unnecessary burden of classical allusion. At the best this detailed analysis of classical style made the writing of the humanists more correct, more flexible, simpler and more artistically integrated. One has only to turn from the rambling incoherence of a medieval chronicle to Bruni's *History of Florence* or from the ponderous dullness of Gower's *Vox Clamantis* to Valla's dialogue *De libero arbitrio* to appreciate what the humanists had gained by their study of classical form, even though something of spontaneity might have been lost in the process. It was this minute study of classical authors, too, which enabled the humanists to recreate in their own minds so vivid an impression of the whole social and intellectual atmosphere of the ancient world. It must not be forgotten, either, that imitation of classical models reintroduced into literature a number of literary forms which had been neglected in the Middle Ages: the

[16]This charge was most common among nineteenth century Romantic critics who represented the classical revival as an interruption of the spontaneous development of the national literatures.

[17]For description of this method, see Bolgar, pp. 265 ff.

dialogue, the essay, the familiar epistle, comedy, tragedy, and the literary treatment of history, biography, moral philosophy and political theory.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that little if anything of what the Italian humanists wrote during this period has remained a living part of the world's literature. And this fact has reënforced the charge that imitation of the classics robbed them of the originality they presumably might have had if they had used their native tongue. It may be true, indeed, that the task of restoring the ancient authors and of developing a classical style absorbed the energies of the humanists and directed them into scholarly rather than creative channels. The circumstances of their employment and patronage, too, forced them to write a great deal of occasional material that could have no interest for a later age. As masters of the classical style so highly prized by contemporary taste, they were called upon to compose endless orations, eulogies and manifestos for every public occasion. But perhaps the most important reason why these writers, who were so much esteemed in their own day, have been neglected by later generations is that what they found in the classics and strove to disseminate was then new but later became, thanks largely to their efforts, an integral part of European culture and as such seemed commonplace. It remains so even in our own generation when a classical tag no longer serves to point a moral or adorn a tale.

It seems to me that to have brought a fresh appreciation to classical poetry and prose and a fuller understanding of those aspects of antique thought that medieval scholars had neglected or had failed to comprehend was surely in itself an original contribution. In the classical Latin literature, which had never been deeply influenced by the systematic Greek philosophy and science which attracted the scholastics, the humanists found a wealth of comment on moral philosophy, ethics, history, political theory and, in general, on the problems of man seeking a pattern for the good life as individual or as citizen. For Petrarch and his successors Cicero was not only the supreme master of eloquence; he was also the *magister vitae*, the wise man who could teach men how to live. And it added to the charm of this ancient wisdom that it was presented in literary form, not in syllogisms or *summae* or the professional jargon of the schoolmen. It was a form which appealed strongly to laymen like the humanists and their patrons, most of whom were not trained in professional philosophy or theology. Any educated man, living in a not too dissimilar society, could read and appreciate Cicero's treatises *De amicitia*, *De senectute* or *De officiis;* and any humanist felt himself qualified, after intensive study of the ancient authors, to write similar treatises or to discuss the problems of the good life in elegant letters or dialogues. Looking over lists of humanist writings one finds such titles as *De tyranno*, *De fato et fortuna*, *De avaritia*, *De re uxoria*, and many more of the same sort. That the men who purveyed the ancient wisdom to their generation were not in all instances wise men is irrelevant. Nor was it really important that most of them were not very original or systematic thinkers. The turn of phrase was frequently an echo of a

classical source and the ideas were selected in an eclectic and haphazard fashion from a variety of systems. What is important is that they took from antiquity what suited the needs of their age as the scholastics had done before them. In both cases there was imitation and excessive respect for antique authority, but in both cases also the creation of something new, without which the cultural evolution of Western Europe would have been different.

One of the services which the humanists performed in their capacity as moral guides to the urban society of Italy in this transitional age was to erect a secular ideal of virtue and the virtuous life alongside the Christian, a lay morality alongside the clerical and monastic. an ideal not so much in conflict with Christianity as independent of it. The conceptions of the good life which they found in their classical models were based exclusively on experience in this world, the experience of thoughtful and responsible citizens. The ancient authors could speak directly to men who were trying, perhaps unconsciously, to reconcile their way of life with ideals inherited from the Middle Ages. A strong strain of Franciscan idealization of poverty ran through the piety of fourteenth century Italy, and the medieval belief that monastic rejection of the world represented the highest form of religious life still haunted the minds of thoughtful men. It certainly haunted the troubled soul of Petrarch, and in his dilemma he turned for guidance not only to St. Augustine but also to Cicero and Seneca.[18] In the teaching of the Stoic sages that the wise man will be indifferent to poverty or wealth, to good or evil fortune, he found an ideal of virtue that accorded well enough with the Franciscan and monastic ideals, but which still left the door open for the acceptance of wealth and honour. Among the vagrant humanists who followed him, the Stoicism they preached seems often no more than a pathetic justification of their actual poverty and the uncertainty of their lives.[19] Stoic indifference to honors and glorification of the contemplative life of the sage was frequently distorted into a justification for the neglect of all civic or family responsibilities. But, as the humanists, and particularly the Florentine group, learned to understand Cicero more fully, they found in that noblest Roman a positive support for the active life of the citizen, and when, having recovered a knowledge of Greek, they went directly to the *Ethics* and the *Politics* of Aristotle, they found in his conception of moderate wealth as an aid to virtue an ideal more suited to the life of a mercantile society.[20]

The ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of citizenship found a particularly responsive echo in the Republic on the Arno around the turn of the century when Florence was fighting for her liberty against the expanding despotism of Giangaleazzo Visconti. In Florence more than anywhere else the humanists were closely associated with the upper class of citizens who dominated the government of the

[18]See Petrarch, *Secretum*, Eng. Trans. by W. H. Draper (London, 1911).
[19]Cf. C. E. Trinkaus, *Adversity's Noblemen: the Italian Humanists on Happiness* (New York, 1940), p. 56 f.
[20]Cf. H. Baron, "Franciscan Poverty and Civic Wealth as Factors in the Rise of Humanistic Thought," *Speculum*, XIII (1938), 1-37.

republic. A number of them — Salutati, Bruni, Marsuppini, Poggio — held office as chancellors of the republic. Others enjoyed the patronage of such wealthy families as the Strozzi, the Alberti, the Albizzi and the Medici and came to share their political and social attitudes. During the struggle against the Visconti despotism the Florentine humanists gained a new appreciation of the ideals of the ancient Roman Republic and applied them to the contemporary political scene with considerable propagandist effect. They also placed a new emphasis upon those aspects of antique thought which would give support to the bourgeois ideals of sober thrift and of responsible family and civic life and which would contribute to the education of good citizens. And these ideals of "civic humanism," as it has been called, were given a wider circulation by treatises in the vernacular such as Luigi Palmieri's *Della vita civile* and Leo Battista Alberti's *Tratto della cura della famiglia*.[21]

Aside from their eclectic borrowings from antique moral philosophy, the humanists absorbed many ideas and attitudes simply through breathing, although at second hand, the intellectual atmosphere of the ancient world. From their reverent communion with the great poets, moralists and historians they gained a heightened awareness of individual personality, an awareness particularly marked in Petrarch, who was in this as in so many other respects the prototype of humanism.[22] With this went a desire for fame and for a secular form of personal immortality in the memory of posterity. The humanists not only yearned for immortal fame themselves; they believed it in their power to confer it upon others through their writings; and some, like Francesco Filelfo, were ready to sell their pens to the highest bidder. The humanists, it is true, were not responsible for the individualism which characterized Renaissance society — it was a natural outgrowth of the economic, social and political development of the age — but they did furnish it with models and with the authoritative sanction of antiquity. They also found in the fully developed and cultured personalities of the ancient world models for imitation more congenial to their age than the medieval ideals represented by the feudal knight or the ascetic monk. When the humanists argued, as Poggio did in the dialogue *De nobilitate*, that nobility depends solely on personal worth, they were merely applying concepts drawn from the pre-feudal society of antiquity to the post-feudal society of the Italian cities. Reverence for the sages and the great men of antiquity, too, bred in the humanists a profound sense of the dignity of man, which ran counter to the belief in man's innate depravity that was one of the persistent strains in medieval thought. It has been argued recently that St. Thomas Aquinas presented a stronger philosophical defence of human dignity and individual worth than did the humanists, and in fact their ideas received philosophical formulation

[21]The fullest discussion of Florentine civic humanism is in H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1955); see also E. Garin, *Der italienische Humanismus* (Bern, 1947).

[22]Voigt, pp. 80 ff., cf. H. Eppelsheimer, *Petrarca* (Bonn, 1926), pp. 157 ff.

only in a later generation in the *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486) of Pico della Mirandola.[23] But it is significant that the early humanists founded their concept of the dignity of man not upon man's place in a divinely ordained cosmic scheme or great chain of being, but simply upon the potentialities of man as a human being. Finally, the humanists' acceptance of the classical, pre-Christian authors as moral guides led to an emphasis upon ethical and moral conduct as ends in themselves, independent of their theological implications, which later bore such diverse fruit as, on the one hand, Machiavelli's utterly secular conception of *virtù* and, on the other, the lay piety of the Northern "Christian humanists," with its Erasmian conception of religion as a matter of ethics rather than dogma and of Christianity as the *Philosophia Christi*.

The reverence of the humanists for antiquity and their efforts to find in it a pattern for life have led many historians to regard the classical revival as a revival of paganism and to blame it for the irreverence and immorality, the hedonism and worldliness they found in Renaissance society.[24] After the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century there was long a tendency to picture the Renaissance as a peculiarly wicked age in contrast to the Christian-ascetic Middle Ages. There was certainly a good deal of conventional as well as original sin in Renaissance society, although whether there was more than in the Middle Ages, or whether it was simply better publicized, is open to question. But there was no revolt against Christianity and very little evidence of atheism or scepticism. What there was would be found among the Averroist schoolmen rather than among the humanists. The paganism, in the strict sense of the word, to be found in humanist writings was purely a matter of literary convention. The morality they drew from antiquity was certainly not pagan in the nineteenth century sense of the word. The humanists were in fact, like other people, more or less religious according to their individual temperaments. They were aware of no antagonism between Christian doctrine and the high-minded moral and ethical teaching they found in the ancient sages, so that they could devote themselves to their classical studies in the secure conviction that they could have all this and Heaven too. What they did introduce into the intellectual life of Renaissance Italy was not paganism but an enormously increased body of secular material and non-religious interests. Their influence greatly accelerated both the laicization and the secularization of culture, tendencies already apparent in the preceding generations and which would have developed in any case, although not so rapidly, as a result of the social changes which were transforming the medieval world. These secular interests competed

[23]Eng. trans. in E. Cassirer *et al.*, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 223 ff.

[24]The view expressed in Symonds, II, 12 f; 381, is typical of the nineteenth century. L. von Pastor distinguished between the Christian and the pagan strains in humanism. See the Preface to his *History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages* (London, 1899). For a sane reassessment of the problem, see Kristeller, *The Classics and Renaissance Thought*, pp. 70 ff.

with religion for the attention of lay society, but they were not in any positive way antagonistic to the Christian faith.

Recent research has established beyond doubt the fact that many of the humanists were deeply religious, and that characteristically medieval forms of religious thought may be found in Petrarch and many of his successors. And this discovery has led some historians to regard all signs of Christian piety among the humanists as evidence of the continuation of medieval traditions and as ground for annexing the Renaissance to the Middle Ages.[25] In this connection it is sometimes necessary to point out that Christianity was not a medieval invention and that the Middle Ages have not had a monopoly of Christian faith. It seems to me that the fact that many humanists were pious Christians is not sufficient reason in itself for regarding them as medieval. That some characteristically medieval traits persisted in humanist thought should not be surprising, since the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance was neither sudden nor complete. But the preoccupation of the humanists with antique moral philosophy and classical scholarship could not leave their religious thought entirely untouched and it did in fact lead them with each generation further from the medieval norms. The results were not yet clearly apparent in the work of the Italian humanists of this first century of the movement, but their emphasis upon ethics rather than speculative theology and their philological interest in the works of the early Fathers, above all Valla's textual criticism of the New Testament, pointed the road along which Erasmus and the "Christian humanists" later travelled.

If the new learning, as the humanists liked to call their classical scholarship, was not antagonistic to Christianity as such, it was, however, positively antagonistic to medieval scholasticism. It was not the Christian content of scholastic thought that alienated the humanists. On the contrary it was the lack of concern with spiritual things in the so-called Averroists of the Italian universities that aroused the wrath of Petrarch and caused him to denounce them as materialists and little better than atheists. It must not be forgotten that theology never held the dominant place in the Italian universities that it did at Paris and the other northern schools.[26] The scholastic learning with which the Italian humanists came in contact was largely concerned with law, medicine, and natural philosophy, subjects which made small appeal to the humanists who, as lay men of letters, were primarily concerned with the literary form and the ethical and moral content of classical literature. Petrarch spoke for the whole clan of the humanists when he called down a curse on all their houses: jurists, doctors of medicine, and philosophers alike. What could their knowledge contribute to the good life?[27] This was one of the crucial objections of the humanists to scholasticism as they knew it. Even

[25]For discussion of this tendency in recent scholarship, see Ferguson, pp. 344 ff.

[26]The best survey of the medieval universities is still H. Rashdall, *The Universities in the Middle Ages* (rev. ed., Oxford, 1942).

[27]See Petrarch, *De suis ipsius et multorum aliorum ignorantia;* Eng. trans. in Cassirer *et al,* pp. 47 ff.

the systematic theology of the schoolmen, so far as they were acquainted with it, seemed inadequately concerned with the immediate ethical and moral problems of human life. A second objection was to the form of scholastic learning, which was technical, syllogistic, and expressed in Latin that fell far short of classical standards of elegance.

In rejecting scholasticism the humanists undoubtedly limited the scope of their intellectual interests. Recent historians of science have deplored their indifference to the natural sciences, the study of which was included under natural philosophy in the scholastic curriculum, and have tended to regard the whole period of humanist ascendance as a regrettable hiatus in the development of scientific thought.[28] The fact may be admitted and the explanation is simple. The humanists' interests lay elsewhere, within the circle of the *studia humanitatis*. It has also been charged that they contributed little, in this early period at least, to formal philosophy[29]. This too may be admitted. As philosophers they were amateurs[30]. Their philosophy was largely a matter of ethics and good sense, founded upon eclectic gleanings from the antique literary sources. Its aim was simply to aid men to live well.

The difference between humanist philosophy and that of the professional schools was reflected in the work of the humanists as educators[31]. Having rejected scholasticism and with it the educational methods and aims of the medieval universities, the humanists were forced to construct theories of education and methods of instruction of their own. As was to be expected, they based their theories on classical models, drawing heavily upon Cicero's *De oratore* and Quintillian's *Institutio oratoris*. These works dealt primarily with the training of orators, that is, men equipped to take an active part in public affairs. Since the orator's function involved speaking well, training in literary composition was essential. But the ideal orator envisaged by Cicero and Quintillian was not merely a rhetorician, but a philosopher, a virtuous and broadly educated man. And the achievement of this ideal was the aim expressed in all the humanist treatises on education. In the civic humanist circle in Florence education was clearly designed to produce responsible and devoted citizens. Alberti in the *Trattato della cura della famiglia* insisted on the obligation of citizens to serve the state, and Palmieri in *Della vita civile* stressed the

[28]See especially G. Sarton, "Science in the Renaissance," in J. W. Thompson, G. Rowley, F. Schevill and G. Sarton, *The Civilization of the Renaissance* (Chicago, (1929); and L. Thorndyke, *Science and Thought in the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1929), pp. 1 ff.

[29]For a survey of the literature on Renaissance Philosophy, see P. O. Kristeller and J. H. Randall, Jr., "The Study of Philosophy of the Renaissance," in *Journal of the History of Ideas,* II (1941), 449-96. See also E. Garin, *La filosofia,* I (Milan, 1947); and G. Saitta, *Il pensiero italiano nell'umanesimo e nel rinascimento,* I (Bologna, 1949).

[30]Cf. Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters,* p. 561: "I should like to suggest that the Italian humanists were not good nor bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all."

[31]The best studies of humanist education are W. H. Woodward, *Vittorino da Feltre and other Humanist Educators* (Cambridge, 1921; and *Studies in Education during the Age of the Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1924).

similar educational aim of fitting men for active life in society. In the courts of Ferrara and Mantua, where the two greatest schoolmasters of the Renaissance, Guarino of Verona and Vittorino da Feltre founded private schools for the education of the children of princes and courtiers, the aim of education was more specifically directed toward the formation of well rounded and harmonious personalities. Both gave due emphasis to bodily exercise as well as to intellectual discipline, to religion, morals and good manners as well as to book learning. Vittorino stressed above all the duty of the schoolmaster to consider the individual personality of his pupils and to develop their potentialities to the fullest extent. It was an educational program practical only in a small aristicratic school, and the finished product it aimed at was the perfect courtier as later described by Castiglione. Despite minor differences of aim and method, however, all the humanist educators were agreed that the essential basis of education was a thorough knowledge of the Latin and Greek classics, including the writings of the early Christian Fathers. From these could be derived everything that an educated man needed to know and all, too, that was needed for the formation of his character. Except for the emphasis on classical scholarship, it was in no way a technical or professional training, although it might serve admirably as a foundation to which professional training could later be added. The great humanist schoolmasters like Guarino, Vittorino and later Federigo of Urbino could obviously reach only a small number of students directly, but their educational ideals exercised a wide-spread and lasting influence. Neither their curriculum nor their educational aims would have seemed strange to a nineteenth century head master of Eton or Harrow.

In this program of education for life and citizenship the study of history played an important part. The humanist educators urged the reading of the ancient historians as models of prose style, but also, as Bruni pointed out in his treatise *De studiis et litteris*, because history furnished an invaluable treasury of examples of ethical, moral and political behaviour from which citizens and statesmen could learn much to their advantage[32]. More important than this rather unoriginal recognition of the pragmatic value of history, however, was the historical perspective the humanists gained from their classical studies. When the medieval world chroniclers turned to the distant past, writing the history of the world from the creation, they adopted the divine view of history — a view shared by too many of our students. A thousand years were as a day in their sight. Their conception of temporal distance was as uncertain as the notion of spatial distance indicated on a monastic *Mappa Mundi* or indeed, in any medieval

[32]L. Bruni, *De studiis et litteris ad illustrem Dominam Baptistam de Malatesta tractatulus*, ed. Israel (Zschopau, 1880), p. 10.

painting[33]. Moreover, so long as they believed the Holy Roman Empire of their own day to be an unbroken continuation of the ancient Roman Empire, they were unable to envisage ancient civilization as a distinct historical phenomenon or as constituting a chronologically limited historical epoch. The Italian humanists, on the other hand, viewing the peaks of antique civilization across the gulf of medieval barbarism, were forced to form a new periodization of history based upon a clearer realization of chronological distance.[34] In their view, antiquity formed a distinct historical period, separated from them by a thousand years of darkness, during which all culture was dead or dormant, to be revived again only in their own day. Moreover, they had learned from their classical models to think of history, not as the divinely ordained history of mankind since the creation, but as the history of individual secular states. When they began to write history in the classical manner, they therefore wrote the history of their own Italian states, usually beginning with the decline of the Roman Empire. They thus took history out of the theologically oriented framework of the world chronicle in which Augustine had placed it and gave it a purely secular setting and content. In short, they replaced clerical history by lay history. The result was a revolution in historical thought, the beginning of modern historiography. Many critics have deplored the loss of local color which they felt resulted from the humanists' use of classical Latin in their histories,[35] but any loss in that direction was more than compensated by the coherence and historical insight they gained from their study of the ancient masters.

The first work to demonstrate the full effect of these various factors on historical writing was Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*, written while he was chancellor of the republic between the years 1437 and 1444. Here Bruni set a standard of literary style, historical criticism, and coherent organization that differentiated his work clearly from even such late chronicles as that of Giovanni Villani, and made it the model followed by nearly all later humanist historians. Bruni's thought had been profoundly influenced by Aristotle's *Politics*, which he had translated, and by the political atmosphere of Florence in the period of its struggle against Visconti aggression. More than any other historian of his age he perceived

[33]That there was a psychological relation between the lack of spatial and of chronological perspective in the Middle Ages has been suggested by E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (New York, 1939), p. 27 f: "Just as it was impossible for the Middle Ages to elaborate the modern system of perspective, which is based on realization of a fixed distance between the eye and the object, and thus enables the artist to build up comprehensive and consistent images of visible things; just as impossible was it for them to evolve the modern idea of history, which is based on the realization of intellectual distance between the present and the past, and thus enables the scholar to build up comprehensive and consistent concepts of bygone periods."

[34]For discussion of humanist historical writing and interpretation of history, with bibliography, see Ferguson, pp. 1 ff.

[35]See, for example, Burckhardt (Eng. trans.), p. 244 f; Voigt, pp. 440 ff; V. Rossi, *Il Quattrocento* (Milan, 1933), pp. 169 ff; E. Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (Munich, 1936), pp. 9 ff.

the vitally important rôle of the free communes in the evolution of medieval Italy, and his conviction that political freedom was a necessary prerequisite to civic virtue and a vigorous culture led him to advance the novel theory that it was imperial despotism that was primarily responsible for the decline of Roman civilization. His rejection of the theory that the medieval empire was in fact a continuation of the Roman Empire, too, demonstrated the distance historical thought had travelled since Dante wrote the *De monarchia*.

The historical perspective which the humanists gained from literature and history was further reënforced by their eager study of the physical remains of the ancient civilization they so much admired and by their desire to envisage the life of ancient Roman society as concretely as possible. Niccolò Niccoli, the Florentine merchant turned humanist, collected antique sculpture, coins and medals as well as manuscripts, and made them available to students. Poggio was haunted by the spectacle of grandeur and decay presented by the ruins of the ancient Roman buildings and monuments and wrote a description of them in his treatise *De varietate fortunae*. The real founder of modern archaeology, however, was the indefatigable papal secretary, Flavio Biondo of Forli. With infinite labor and critical skill Biondo reconstructed the topography, monuments, manners and customs of ancient pagan and Christian Rome in two encyclopedic books: *Roma triumphans* and *Roma instaurata*. Then, enlarging the range of his research, he compiled a geographical and historical survey of Italy since ancient times under the title *Italia illustrata*. Finally, in his *History from the Decline of the Roman Empire* he furnished a factual account of Italian history from the sack of Rome by the Visigoths to his own time. This was a scholarly work, founded upon critical examination of the sources, but it lacked the literary style, the coherent organization and the historical insight of Bruni's work. Later humanists scorned its pedestrian style but borrowed from it freely, usually without acknowledgement.

The foregoing discussion has dealt primarily with the humanist interest in classical Latin literature and ancient Roman civilization, for that was as yet the most important part of their recovery of the antique heritage. The first half of the fifteenth century, however, also witnessed the first decisive steps in the rediscovery of ancient Greek literature. This was in a much more literal sense a recovery of something that had been lost than was true of the revival of classical Latin. For centuries knowledge of Greek had almost disappeared in Western Europe.[36] Despite their dependence on Aristotle and other Greek authorities, which they read in translations of uneven value, few of the medieval schoolmen could read Greek, and of Greek literature as such they knew little. Nor would they have been greatly interested had it been available. The humanists, on the other hand, were eager to recover just those parts of Greek literature that the schoolmen had ignored; not logic, metaphysics and science, but history, biography, poetry, drama, and works of moral philosophy. These were the

[36]L. R. Loomis, *Medieval Hellenism* (Lancaster, Pa., 1906).

aspects of Greek culture that had exerted a powerful influence on the Latin writers of the classical age, and no ardent admirer of Cicero could avoid having his curiosity aroused about the literature which that master of eloquence had regarded as the most perfect expression of *humanitas*.

There were, however, serious obstacles in the way of the Italian students who first desired to master Greek. They were starting from scratch. Greek manuscripts were rare in Italy and such aids as manuals, grammars and dictionaries were practically non-existent. That Petrarch, with all his linguistic talent and enthusiasm for antiquity, never learned Greek is a measure of the difficulty involved. He treasured a manuscript of Homer, which he had acquired, but to the end it remained Greek to him. What the Italian scholars needed was a competent teacher to give them a start, and the real introduction of Greek studies into Italy can be dated from the appointment of a distinguished Byzantine scholar, Manuel Chrysoloras, to a chair in the Florentine university in 1397. At the news of his arrival scholars came from all over Italy to sit at his feet. Pier Paolo Vergerio resigned his post as professor of logic at Padua and Leonardo Bruni abandoned his legal studies to come to Florence to seize the unprecedented opportunity.

Chrysoloras lectured for only three years in Florence and for three more in Milan and Pavia, but before he returned to Constantinople in 1403 he had sown the seed which others could now cultivate. Once started, the Greek revival progressed steadily. Guarino and Filelfo followed him to Constantinople to complete their training, and returned to teach. Bruni mastered Greek sufficiently to translate a number of Greek works. Both Guarino and Vittorino gave the study of Greek an important place in the curriculum of their schools. The hunt for ancient manuscripts now included the Greek, and a number were imported from Constantinople. Thus, when an ecumenical council of the Greek and Roman churches met in Ferrara and Florence in 1438 and 1439 in a vain attempt to heal the schism, Italian scholars were already prepared to make the most of the opportunity to fraternize with the learned Byzantine delegates, some of whom also remained to teach after the council had ended. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 came too late to be of decisive importance for Greek studies in Italy, but it did help to accelerate the movement. The refugees brought many more Greek manuscripts, and they swelled the number of Greek teachers, editors and translators, but that is all.

Although Greek studies were well founded before 1453, the influence of Greek culture on humanist thought was still relatively slight.[37] The number of Italian scholars who could read Greek well enough to be influenced by Greek style was still fairly small, and the work of translating, which spread the influence of Greek thought to a larger audience, did not get well under way until the second half of the century. On the whole, it seems to have been the Greek prose

[37]Cf. Bolgar, pp. 276 ff.

writers — the historians and philosophers — who were most widely read in this period. Since Petrarch, the humanists had nourished a prejudice against the philosophical and scientific works of Aristotle, which they identified with scholasticism, but they seized upon the *Ethics* and *Politics* and the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics* and incorporated them into their eclectic system of moral philosophy. Many of the humanists, it is true, professed a preference for Plato over Aristotle. They were charmed by his literary style and found the dialogue form of his works more to their taste than Aristotle's textbookish treatment, but the systematic study of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy did not begin till after the middle of the century.

In conclusion, then, how should we assess the achievements of the first century of humanism? It must be admitted that the humanists of this period added little to systematic philosophy, science, or religious thought, and that they wrote little that proved of lasting literary value. But they did achieve what, above all, they set out to achieve, and no one questioned the magnitude of that achievement until with the Romantic movement a generation arose to call them damned. They assembled, edited, and made permanently available almost the whole body of classical Latin literature and they reintroduced the study of Greek in Western Europe. They established the study of both the form and the content of the classics as the indispensible basis of a liberal education, and they found in the sane and broadly human *Weltanschauung* of the ancient world a lay morality and a model and a justification for the secular life. Their exclusive preoccupation with the classics cut across the literary traditions of the Middle Ages. They broke the scholastic monopoly of learning, and they also put a period to the chivalric cult of courtly love and the literary tradition of the *Roman de la rose* with all its machinery of dream sequence and allegory. Romantic critics have blamed the classical revival for interrupting and distorting the natural evolution of the national literatures; but what emerged when the humanist movement had run its course was a vernacular literature, both in Italy and the North, which was greatly enriched in content and in aesthetic discipline, a literature which no longer expressed the exclusive attitudes of a single social class, as did the feudal and clerical literatures of the Miiddle Ages, but could appeal to all educated men. Finally, as a result of their classical studies, the humanists developed a new critical sense and historical perspective and founded the modern disciplines of philology, historiography and archaeology. Taken all together, what the humanists accomplished was surely an original achievement; and I would like to quote in conclusion the pertinent comment of a distinguished historian of humanism:

> The effect of the classics on Renaissance thought and literature may show us that it is possible to learn from the past and be original at the same time. Originality is greatly to be admired, but it is a gift of nature or providence; it cannot be taught, and I doubt if it is harmed by knowledge or increased by ignorance.[38]

[38]Kristeller, *The Classics and Renaissance Thought*, p. 89.