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Italian Renaissance humanism entered its heyday in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. By then it had become a fixture in courts and chanceries all over the peninsula, had gained a sturdy foothold in universities, and had seeped into the consciousness of political and economic elites. Furthermore, Italian humanists could boast of a remarkable array of achievements, having hunted down an impressive number of wholly or partially lost ancient texts, reintroduced Greek to the Latin West, reformed Latin style and orthography to accord with classicizing tastes, and broadly instituted their brand of education in the classics. Finally, they were still relatively impervious to the twin challenges of the vernacular at home and cultural competition from across the Alps, both of which would eventually undermine their hegemony. It was a time of triumph – and of reflection. Having ascended to the apex of culture, Italian humanists turned around to take a view of the path they had trodden. They ruminated on their own education and development, recorded the deeds of the forerunners, founders, and great exponents of the humanist movement, took stock of the goals by which they had been guided, and honored the ideals that had nourished them on their way.

One such piece of humanist self-reflection is provided by Leonardo Bruni, the chancellor of Florence and the undisputed princeps of the city’s intellectual life, who in old age committed to his Memoirs (ca. 1440) an account of his youthful studies, vividly recalling his fateful decision to abandon law and learn Greek with the Byzantine scholar and diplomat Manuel Chrysoloras. Not only would he thus “come face to face with Homer, Plato and Demosthenes … and converse with them and become steeped in their marvellous teaching,” but he would also win “useful knowledge” and “abundant pleasure” as well as “enhanced repute,” since “for seven centuries now no one in Italy has cultivated the literature of Greece and yet we recognize that all learning comes from...
Bruni then goes on to describe his cohort of fellow students. He singles out the Florentine patricians Roberto de’ Rossi and Palla Strozzi as two who had made the most progress, notes that some students, such as Jacopo Angeli da Scarperia, were of advanced age, and remarks that the logician Pier Paolo Vergerio, although “an ornament of the schools of Padua, was drawn by the reputation of Chrysoloras to come to Florence to study under him there.” In a few, short paragraphs Bruni offers precious testimony about a formative moment in the evolution of humanism: the arrival of Manuel Chrysoloras and the enduring instauration of Greek studies in Italy. This passage holds many further insights for the historian: that Greek was pursued by rich and humble, young and old alike; that the opportunity afforded by Chrysoloras attracted to the city non-Florentines of established reputation in different fields; and that the young Bruni claimed to have been lured away from the assured income of a legal career by an idealistic longing to commune with the ancients.

Bruni’s Memoirs are also a valuable source for the way humanists viewed humanism and their involvement in it, giving voice to the passionate zeal for an (initially) unremunerative labor of love, to the regard for revered teachers, to the perceived importance of certain cities, and so on. In another sense, however, a source like the Memoirs is wholly unremarkable: it is far from unique. Even a cursory reading of humanist letters, literary prefaces and dedications, ceremonial speeches and poetry, biographies and works of history reveals that their authors enjoyed few things as much as commenting on the content, nature, and what they (usually) considered to be the success of humanism. There were also more formal sources for thinking about humanism, such as necrologies, funeral orations and anthologies, verse compilations in praise of great poets, and dialogues discussing the contributions of leading litterati. Ultimately, exhaustive accounts and

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histories of humanism were even written. Literary self-reflection seems to have been as automatic as it was unceasing in the humanist community.

This book is concerned with that self-reflection and the self-conception of Italian Renaissance humanists embodied therein. By self-conception is intended specifically what humanists thought they were doing qua humanists, what they thought the goals of their movement were, what cultural significance it had for them, and how they viewed their common history. The broad aim of this study is to reconsider the nature of humanism without recourse to theoretical or philosophical categories, especially those extraneous to the time period or not identified as relevant by the historical actors themselves. On the contrary, the point is to take humanists on their own terms and thereby to restore as much as possible of the spirit of their movement to the body that has been so thoroughly dissected on the historian's examination table. This approach is motivated by a desire to give humanists, for the first time in a modern historical monograph, the chance to explain themselves, and thereby to contribute to the necessary project of redefining our understanding of Italian Renaissance humanism.

I say necessary because no broad study has yet been undertaken into what humanists thought humanism was. And yet it is a commonplace of historical method that any object of inquiry must first be understood on its own terms before it can be understood on ours. Without concern for this fundamental insight, since World War II scholars have cast humanists as republican ideologues, educational and moral reformers, philosophers and legislators of social norms, devotees of a stylistic ideal, lovers of eloquence,


4 See the sources reviewed below, pp. 15–20.

Italian Renaissance Humanism in the Mirror

and a professional movement of novi homines attached to the disciplines that comprised the studia humanitatis. Most of these views are indebted at least as much to modern concerns as they are to contemporary sources. On the other hand, under the spell of Paul Oskar Kristeller’s powerful and influential – and ostensibly non-ideological – interpretation, humanism has gradually lost any convincing raison d’être beyond the universal motivations of careerism and financial gain. The upshot is a Lilliputian view in which the comprehensibility of humanism decreases the more closely the magnifying glass is applied to its features; and much as happened to Gulliver when perched upon a Brobdingnagian bosom, microscopic familiarity has bred contempt.

Paying attention to what humanists thought was important about what they were doing can correct our perspective in two indispensable ways. First, it pushes essential characteristics of humanism to the fore, that is, those traits and activities that humanists themselves discerned as central to their identity, those by which they recognized each other and which served to distinguish them as humanists in the eyes of others. Second, it connects those characteristics to cultural aspirations and ideals that make humanism comprehensible as a widespread movement, a movement, furthermore, in which many individuals took pride in taking part or with which they expressly sought to identify themselves. The first insight will help us to understand better what humanism was, the second for what purpose it existed. And with this information we can then retrieve not only the magnificent sense of importance humanists enjoyed about themselves, but also the gigantic significance humanism had in its own day.
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and in subsequent history. If Quattrocento humanists were first and foremost rhetoricians, if they were determined to revive classical Latin in their time, if they cherished the beauty of eloquence – petty concerns from the modern standpoint, esoteric if not elitist and thus considered of little importance for broad cultural trends – we must wonder why the humanist program captivated contemporaries and generations, indeed centuries, to come and managed enduringly to transform European culture. As this study argues, it is because language was insolubly linked for humanists with broader cultural conditions and ideals, and in a way that is inverse to our understanding of the mechanisms of civilization. Whereas we tend to view cultural excellence as the product of social stability, economic prosperity, political power, and military might, the humanists believed it to be the premise to these latter conditions. The remedy for Italy’s social, political, and military ills, they reasoned, was cultural refinement. And there was no greater refinement than linguistic refinement. As they saw it, reviving the glory of ancient Latin language and literature was the path to reviving the strength, the excellence, the greatness of Roman antiquity. From this perspective, humanism emerges as an elixir, a strategy for renewing civilization via the literature that stood as the greatest testament to the possibility of civilization itself.

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The sources for humanist self-conception have barely been tapped for their invaluable evidence, and they have been largely ignored in recent work. They received the most sustained attention in the nineteenth century. Georg Voigt drew substantially from the humanists’ claims about their own movement, especially as found in letters and literary dedications, in his magnum opus, whose title plainly states his understanding of humanism:

Attention to humanists’ explicit claims is also manifest in the canonical interpretation of humanism bequeathed from the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). Burckhardt was heavily influenced by the biography of the humanist Leon Battista Alberti, subsequently considered by scholars a deceptive autobiography, which celebrated the perfection of the ideal individual. Although only one of many sources and pieces of evidence that underlie *Civilization*, it was instrumental for Burckhardt’s conception of humanism as a distinctly modern culture of individualistic liberation from the intellectual and spiritual straitjacket of the Middle Ages.

Historiographical currents in the twentieth century took decidedly less interest in humanist accounts of humanism. These played no perceptible role in the major challenges to Burckhardt’s vision, which came in the 1950s first at the hands of two German scholars, both émigrés who found their permanent homes in American academic institutions: Hans Baron and Paul Oskar Kristeller. Baron formulated his theory of civic humanism by focusing his attention on Florence at the turn of the fifteenth century, which at that time found itself menaced by the expansion of Milanese tyranny.

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and eloquent Latin had become fused with the intellectual defense of the republican commune against the growing trend towards signory in Italy. Although long influential, Baron’s idealistic view has now been reduced to a more grounded interpretation both of Renaissance republicanism and of humanism’s relationship to it; nonetheless the concept of umanesimo civile still holds sway in Italian scholarship. Kristeller, on the other hand, based his interpretation not so much on a thorough reading of a selection of texts as on his magisterial view of the whole corpus of humanist literature. He concluded that Italian humanism was a rhetorical and literary movement, steeped in the (especially Latin) classical tradition, that took shape in a professional class of notaries, teachers, secretaries, and diplomats. In his view, humanism lacked any coherent civic ideology, was generally devoid of sophisticated philosophical content, and was basically equivalent to the studia humanitatis, the cycle of disciplines comprised of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Contemporaneously with


Kristeller, the Italian scholar Eugenio Garin developed a contrary view of humanism, one very much descended from Burchhardt. The two parted ways at their respective conceptions of philosophy, which Kristeller understood as a rigorous, systematic investigation of truth within a restricted range of topics. Garin, on the other hand, had a broader understanding of what constituted philosophy. He concentrated his work especially on the close reading of literary texts, drawing out of them their authors’ philosophies of life and general worldviews.

Thus he considered humanism to be a fundamentally philosophical movement, and one generative of important new conceptions of man, of religion, and of social relations – a movement of thought with certain common themes, analogous to the Enlightenment. Garin also identified humanism with the general intellectual culture of the Renaissance period as a whole, tending to broaden the concept precisely where Kristeller narrowed it.

The recent publication of essays on Kristeller and the influence of his thought, John Montfasani (ed.), Kristeller Reconsidered: Essays on his Life and Scholarship (New York, 2006).


An example is his Rinascite e rivoluzioni, ch. 1: “Èt à buie e rinascita: un problema di confini,” where the thought of fifteenth-century humanists like Bruni and Valla is joined with the revolutionary stance of Cola di Rienzo, on the one hand, and early Enlightenment figures, on the other. Kristeller articulated this major difference between his approach and Garin’s in a letter to Garin dated September 21, 1953 (Pisa, Scuola Normale Superiore, Fondo Garin): “Quando conclusi dalla mia asserzione che gli umanisti italiani non furono filosofi (e penso al Poggio, al Guarino, a Pio II, al
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The result has tended to be a broad and unsatisfying split between Italian and Anglo-American scholarship. The former, following Garin and concentrating on what seem to be representative writings, such as histories, educational treatises, or works of political or moral philosophy, conceives of humanism as an essentially ideological phenomenon growing out of a reaction against medieval culture. The latter, taking its cue from Kristeller, emphasizes continuity with the Middle Ages and has tried to penetrate to the deeper meaning of humanism by way of the activities and especially the professional interests of its participants. This interpretive bifurcation is especially evident in related fields of Renaissance scholarship, such as political, economic, social, or art history, where the focus is not on humanism itself but in which some understanding of humanism is nevertheless deemed necessary for the topic under discussion. In such cases, Italian scholars are generally content to rely on Garin, Anglophones to fall back on Kristeller. And no wonder, as both their interpretations are eminently useful, broadly inclusive, and pliable enough to admit of all kinds of research within their explanatory boundaries.

And yet, despite their clear advantages over the paradigms of Burckhardt and Baron, neither of these interpretations can claim to be definitive. The strength of Garin’s understanding is that it places humanism within an intelligible intellectual and cultural context in European history; its weakness is that it has great difficulty identifying the various aspects that make up a humanist profile. It is strong on why, we understand what. The opposite is the case for Kristeller, who developed his view largely in reaction to other schools of thought he saw as too preoccupied with the coming of modernity.

Filelfo ecc., ma non al Ficino o al Pico) che io rifiuto qualsiasi significato filosofico al Rinascimento, non fa altro che identificare umanesimo e rinascimento, cioè mi attribuisco quell’uso di parole che tu veramente segui nel tuo volume sull’umanesimo.”


and with reigning ideological controversies – Burckhardt with liberalism, Baron with republicanism and the civic applicability of Bildung, and Garin with modern science, the Enlightenment, and the Gramscian notion of organic philosophers – rather than with the phenomenon itself. To be sure, Kristeller’s view of humanism was also shaped by ideological battles of the twentieth century. But where others (like Baron and Garin) cleaved to one side or another, Kristeller tried to purge humanism of all ideological overtones according to the model of scientific research (Wissenschaft). Wanting to describe humanism in the least tendentious and most value-free way possible, he reduced it to the barest facts he could. The result is an interpretation surely sound in its component parts but that lacks a convincing rationale. Kristeller can reliably tell us about many of humanism’s salient characteristics, but he cannot tell us about one of the most, if not the most, important: for what purpose did humanism come about, i.e., what did humanists strive for? What sense does a professional movement guided by the revived studia humanitatis make in the larger context of European history? Why did anyone want to be a humanist, especially in its earlier stages when it held no widespread social or economic advantage? At stake is the telos, the final cause, of humanism.

An attempt has been made to answer this question by focusing on humanists in their role as educators. Heavily influenced by his reading of humanist educational treatises, Paul Grendler described humanism as an educational ethos dedicated to instilling virtue in students by way of reading the great literary works of the ancients.


36 Kristeller’s evident lack of interest in the causes of humanism has been pointed out by Ronald G. Witt, In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni (Leiden, 2000), pp. 3–4.

37 This issue has been insightfully addressed, though not from within the Kristellerian paradigm, by Francisco Rico, El sueño del humanismo: (De Petrarca a Erasmo) (Madrid, 1993); and D’Ascia, “Coscienza della Rinascita.”

38 The classic study of humanist education, to which all subsequent scholarship has added or responded, is Eugenio Garin, L’educazione in Europa (1400–1600). Problemi e programmi (Bari, 1957).

39 Paul F. Grendler, Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600 (Baltimore, 1989). On humanist educational ideals, see Humanist Educational Treatises, ed. and tr. Craig Kallendorf