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From the Medieval to the Renaissance: An Analytical Study of the History of the Idea of Humanism

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Abstract

This paper attempts, by humbly conforming to the methodology chalked out by Arthur O. Lovejoy, to trace the history of the idea of humanism to evince the original classicist meaning with which the term, humanism, was associated during the Renaissance. Rejecting the proclivity of the traditional historiography to posit the Renaissance against the "dark" Middle Ages, it seeks to unearth certain threads weaving them together to a great extent. In this context, this paper specifically concentrates on the mapping of the trajectory of the Renaissance humanism starting with the medieval tradition of the Ars Dictaminis. It further explores the manifestations of the idea of humanism in different spheres of Italian culture during the Renaissance.

Keywords: History of ideas, Renaissance humanism, *Ars Dictaminis*, Italian culture.

Considering the baggage of meanings associated with the word, "humanism", it appears a daunting task to figure out the history of the idea of humanism. As the influence of humanism penetrated into more or less all the aspects of the Renaissance period, it is conducive to draw out certain boundaries with temporal and spatial markers within which the present study will operate. This paper focuses particularly on the historical trajectory of the development of the idea of humanism in Italy, the cradle of European Renaissance, from the eleventh century to the fifteenth century.

According to Arthur O. Lovejoy, the historians of ideas strive to penetrate into the philosophical doctrines or systems which often turn out to be a "heterogeneous aggregate" or an "unstable compound", in order to exhume their constituent elements or, what Lovejoy calls, their "unit-ideas". This will result, Lovejoy claims, in the understanding that the primary ideas being limited, most philosophical systems are distinctive not in their components but in their arrangements of old elements which enter into them. Therefore, after recognising and differentiating the unit-ideas of a philosophical doctrine or system, what we are left with is largely a "unity of name". Lovejoy further states that after differentiating the

unit-idea, the historian needs to trace the idea connectedly through different provinces of history where the idea appears in any important degree, in order to fully understand its nature and historic role (3-15).

In the traditional historiographies of the Renaissance such as the account provided by Jakob Burckhardt, the Renaissance has largely been portrayed as a decisive break from the Middle Ages. What these accounts have unfortunately failed to identify is the crisscrossing in the Renaissance period of diverse intellectual thought currents most of which had flowed from the previous periods. One of the major ideas traditionally associated with the Renaissance is the idea of humanism. However, the term, humanism, has generated in recent times much confusion because of the vagueness with which modern scholars frequently employ it, thereby clouding the basic classicist meaning of the Renaissance humanism. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that the term itself was non-existent during the Renaissance. Paul Oskar Kristeller has wonderfully charted out the etymology of the term. The term, *humanismus*, was coined in 1808 by the German educationist F. I. Niethammer to express the emphasis on the classical studies in secondary education as against the rising demands for a more practical and more scientific training. The term was applied in this sense by a number of the nineteenth century historians to the Renaissance scholars also advocating the central role of Greek and Latin classics in the curriculum. The term, *humanismus*, in the specific sense of a pedagogic programme had its root in the Latin word, *humanista*, and its vernacular equivalents in other languages, which were used in the sixteenth century to refer to the professors or teachers or students of the humanities. The term, *humanista*, was derived from *umanista*, a student slang of the Italian universities for the professors of humanities, a slang which was analogous to terms such as *legista*, *jurist*, *canonista* etc. used for several centuries to refer to the professors of older disciplines. The term, *humanista*, was in turn derived from an older term, humanities or *studia humanitatis*, used in the sense of a liberal or literary education by Roman authors like Cicero and Gellius. By the first half of the fifteenth century, the term, *studia humanitatis*, was used for a clearly defined set of scholarly disciplines including grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. The study of each of these subjects was based on the reading of standard classical texts in Latin and to a lesser extent in Greek (22).

Before delving any further, it seems imperative to investigate the historical background of the humanist movement in Italy. Around the eleventh century in Northern Italy, a number of rich urban centers came into prominence. These cities of *Regnum Italicum*[1] rejecting the traditional hereditary monarchical system, adopted a republican form of government centered on a figure known as the *podesta* as he was invested with supreme power or *potestas* over the city.[2] The workings of these cities depended to a large extent on writings or documentations and therefore, there was an increasing demand for people who could write well. As a consequence, the study of rhetoric which was already established in the medieval Italian universities, acquired tremendous importance. The primary aim of the study of rhetoric was

to enable the students to draft official letters and other such documents with maximum clarity and persuasion. The concept of letter writing as a special technique was first developed in Bologna early in the twelfth century as an offshoot of the University's basic concern with the training of lawyers and judges (Wieruszowski, *Ars Dictaminis* 361). The leading master of rhetoric at Bologna during this period was Adalbert of Samaria, who seems to have been first to describe himself as a dictator or instructor in the *Ars Dictaminis* (Murphy 213). The *dictatores* laid down the rules of composition in their books and even appended to their works *dictamina* or model letters to illustrate how their precepts should be put to use. It was through the medium of model letters that the *dictatores* started to concern themselves with the legal, social and political issues of the cities. According to Quentin Skinner, this development occurred in two ways. Firstly, by the middle of the twelfth century, the *dictatores* in the model letters discarding remote or fanciful subject matter, started to select as the content issues which were of immediate practical interest to the students. Secondly, in the early thirteenth century, the teaching of *Ars Dictaminis* was combined with the teaching of *Ars Arengendi*, the art of making formal public speeches. Subsequently, the *dictatores* began to add to their theoretical treatises model orations along with the usual model letters. A further development took place when the *dictatores* and their pupils in the first half of the thirteenth century started to offer direct commentary on civil affairs through their letters and speeches. One of the genres of political writing that emerged directly from the *Ars Dictaminis* was the advice-books intended to provide guidance to the *podesta* and city magistrates, in which the *dictatores* presented themselves as political advisers of the rulers.

In the second half of the thirteenth century, the study of *Ars Dictaminis* in Italy took an altogether different turn. A number of leading Italian *dictatores* during the second half of the thirteenth century went to France for education, adopted the humanist tradition of rhetorical instruction prevalent in the French cathedral schools and universities and returned to teach these new methods of study in the Italian universities. One of the first *dictatores* to follow this path was Jacques Dinant who after studying rhetoric and Latin literature in France came to Bologna as an instructor in the *Ars Dictaminis* towards the end of the thirteenth century (Wilmart 120-121). The humanist assumption was that the subject should be taught not merely by the inculcation of rules (*artes*) but also by the study and imitation of the standard classical authors (*auctores*). The French method of teaching rhetoric through the medium of *auctores* was, however, severely criticized by the traditional medieval *dictatores* as "superstitious and false" (Wieruszowski, *Arezzo* 594). Bonacampagno da Signa, one of the leading *dictatores* of medieval Italy, disparaged the humanist tradition of rhetorical instruction at the beginning of his manual, *The Palm*, by claiming that "I do not recall that I have ever read Cicero as a guide to rhetorical technique" (106). However, the method of studying rhetoric with the help of standard classical models soon became established in the Italian universities. The humanist rhetoricians of the second half of the thirteenth century resorted particularly to the works of Cicero and Quintilian upholding them as standard

models for study and imitation. Kristeller, therefore, has rightly argued that the Renaissance humanism must be understood as a characteristic phase of the rhetorical tradition in Western culture (23-24). A further development which began to take place subsequently was that a number of students who started to study rhetoric merely as a part of their legal training programme, became extremely interested in the writers and orators of classical antiquity. As they started to look at the classical writers as important literary figures who needed to be studied not merely as models of rhetorical styles, they could qualify as the first of the true humanists. Kristeller regards the Renaissance humanists as direct professional successors of the medieval *dictatores* from whom the humanists inherited various patterns of epistolography and public oratory (24). Like the medieval *dictatores*, a number *quattrocento* humanists such as Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Leon Battista Alberti were either secretaries of princes or cities or teachers of grammar and rhetoric at universities or secondary schools and sometimes both of them.[3] However, Kristeller also points out the major differences between them. The study and imitation of the standard classical authors was not important to the medieval *dictatores*, but was of utmost importance to the humanists. Moreover, whereas the *dictatores* achieved considerable importance in the sphere of politics and administration, the Renaissance humanists through their classical learning attained much greater social and cultural prestige (93).

The fervent preoccupation of the Renaissance humanists with the retrieval of classical antiquity underlay their contributions in the fields of both Latin and Greek studies. In the field of Latin studies, the humanists paid most attention to the discoveries of classical Latin authors unknown or neglected during the Middle Ages. The humanists made available through numerous copies ancient Latin texts that survived in only one or two manuscripts. Although classical Latin authors such as Virgil or Ovid or Seneca or Boethius were already well known during the Middle Ages, Kristeller argues that some authors such as Lucretius or Tacitus were discovered by the humanists (25). The case of Cicero was somewhat different as though some of his works such as *De Inventione* or *De Officiis* were used during the Middle Ages, his *Brutus*, his letters and many of his orations were rediscovered by the humanists. The humanists not only copied and edited the classical Latin texts, but also developed the technique of textual and historical criticism. Moreover, they produced a vast body of commentaries on the various Latin authors, which became gradually more scholarly in the course of the Renaissance period.

The contributions of the humanists appear much more novel in the field of Greek studies than in the field of Latin studies. Greek books and instructions were rare in the medieval Latin speaking Western Europe though the study of classical Greek literature flourished during the Middle Ages in the Byzantine East. The Renaissance humanists were deeply influenced in their Greek studies by the scholarly contacts with the Byzantine scholars (Kristeller 26). The humanists not only introduced Greek in the curriculum of universities and secondary schools but also imported from the Byzantine and later Turkish East almost the

entire body of Greek literature. One of the major contributions of the Renaissance humanists was that they gradually translated into Latin a large body a Greek literature. However, it should be kept in mind that during the later Middle Ages a number of Greek texts on medicine, mathematics and astronomy besides the philosophical works of Aristotle were translated into Latin. The Renaissance humanists besides providing many new versions of already translated works, translated for the first time Greek poetry, historiography, oratory, non-Aristotelian philosophy and even some additional writings on mathematics and medicine (Kristeller 27).

The Renaissance humanists, however, in their study of the classical antiquity adopted a completely new attitude. The study of the classical period throughout the Middle Ages was marked by the absence of any feeling of discontinuity with the cultures of Greece and Rome. A sense of belonging to essentially the same civilization continued to persist and it was most pervasive in Italy. According to Panofsky, the effect of this continuous sense of belonging was that in all the rapprochements with the classical tradition taking place throughout the Middle Ages, we never find any effort being made to approach the culture of the ancient world on its own term (110-111). Panofsky finds this tendency in Romanesque periods of arts and architecture, in which classical elements of decoration were generally applied in a thoroughly eclectic manner, while Greek and Roman figures tended to appear as "barons" and "damsels" in medieval landscapes, often engaged in Christian rituals and invariably dressed in wholly anachronistic styles (85-86, 102). Even, the practice of the early humanist rhetoricians was affected by this tendency, which is evident from the fact that without attempting to understand Cicero's views about the aims and purposes of rhetorical instruction, they concentrated solely on fitting Cicero's oratorical texts into the existing framework of the *Ars Dictaminis*.

A change in attitude came up toward the end of the *trecento*, as the civilization of Rome was started to be regarded as a separate culture which should be reconstructed and appreciated on its own terms (Skinner 86).[4] This novel attitude towards the classical culture led to the development of a non-anachronistic classical style. It was first achieved in sculpture and architecture in early *quattrocento* Florence where Ghiberti and Donatello began to imitate the exact forms and techniques of classical statuary, while Brunelleschi made a pilgrimage to Rome to measure the precise scale and proportions of the classical buildings. Such transformations took place in the art of painting as well, evident in the works of the Florentine painters such as Botticelli and Pollaiuolo. This new attitude towards the classical antiquity, however, was first vigorously articulated by Francesco Petrarch. Rejecting the humanist rhetoricians' project to uphold the writings of Cicero only as models for the purpose of rhetorical study, Petrarch sought to recover What Cicero considered the special value of an education founded on a combination of rhetoric and philosophy. In *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero claimed that the aim of education is to cultivate the *virtus*. He further stated that "it is from the word man (*vir*) that the word virtue (*virtus*) is derived. It is the special quality of

virtus that, Cicero believed, should be sought above all, not merely "if we wish to prove possessors of virtue" but also "if we wish to be men" (195,197). Therefore, the fundamental aim of education is the development of *vir virtutis*- the truly manly man. Petrarch also discovered the importance Cicero placed on the study of rhetoric and philosophy to shape the *vir virtutis*. As the true *vir* must possess wisdom, Cicero included the study of moral philosophy in the educational programme. But the *vir* must also be capable to put his wisdom to practical use thereby playing the role of a citizen. Therefore, Cicero believed that the study of rhetoric should also be given a prominent place in his education. Cicero was one of the first thinkers of classical antiquity who attempted to forge a synthesis between the scholastic tradition and the rhetorical tradition. It was this synthesis of philosophy and rhetoric in Cicero's works that, Kristeller argues, provided the humanists with a favourite ideal, namely the combination of eloquence and wisdom, an ideal which influenced a large body of Renaissance literature. Kristeller, therefore, rightly observes that "Renaissance humanism was an age of Ciceronianism . . . " (29).

The humanists appropriated the assumptions underlying Cicero's concept of *studia humanitatis*: first that it is possible for men to attain universal excellence and second that the right kind of education centered on the studies of rhetoric and philosophy is essential for achieving this goal. In his treatise, *On his Own Ignorance*, Petrarch defended humanist studies against the study of scholasticism by claiming that though Aristotle teaches " . . . what virtue is . . . but his lesson lacks the words that sting and set fire and urge toward love of virtue and hatred of vice . . ." (103). Petrarch prescribes the solution of this weakness in the study of rhetoric, and especially the rhetoric of Cicero. Leonardo Bruni ended his *Dialogue* with a tribute to Petrarch as "the man who restored the *studia humanitatis*, at a time when such studies were extinct, and showed us the way to gain learning for ourselves" (94). As the humanists were extremely concerned with the precise details of the education, they started to establish by the beginning of the fifteenth century their own schools in order to ensure that the right subjects were properly taught. The aim of this new programme of education was to enable the students to attain universal excellence, to be the ideal "Renaissance man" possessing, what Ophelia says of Hamlet, "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword" (292).

The concept of universal excellence, however, had certain larger implications. It prompted the humanists to negate Augustine's belief that the highest form of excellence can never be attained by human beings because of their inherently fallen nature. Rejecting such a notion, Petrarch in his treatise *On Famous Men* paid attention to certain heroes of the ancient world who, according to him, succeeded in attaining true *virtus*. Rejecting the Augustinian notion of a predetermined universe, Petrarch and his followers placed the humanist quest for universal excellence within an essentially Christian framework, an endeavour that found its culmination in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Pico's argument was that by exercising his free will with which he is invested, man can either descend to the level

of beasts or rise to the level of heavenly angels. The humanists conclude their account by claiming that the reason for devoting oneself to a life of the highest excellence is the hope to acquire the highest possible amount of honour, glory and worldly fame. When Petrarch was crowned as a poet, he said that the highest aspiration for a man of letters must be to make himself "worthy of glory" and thus to gain "immortality for his name" (Wilkins 174).

After the middle of the fifteenth century, the influence of humanist learning started percolating into other areas of studies. It was due not only to the fashionable prestige of humanities, but also to the fact that almost every scholar received a humanistic training in secondary school before acquiring professional training in any of the other disciplines in the university. However, the humanist influence did not affect the content of those sciences (Kristeller 92). Some of the humanists felt the need to incorporate the study of philosophy within *studia humanitatis*. Consequently we find a number of thinkers in the fifteenth century such as Cusanus, Ficino and Pico and many more in the sixteenth century who combined humanist ideas and philosophical concepts derived from different origins.

In conclusion, it can be said that Renaissance humanism should not be viewed as a philosophical tendency or system. It was an educational programme centered on the study of classical literature and it contained strong cultural and philosophical implications. An analysis of the history of the idea of humanism is conducive to understand its origin and manifestations in different fields which in turn leads us to a more comprehensive understanding of humanism and above all of the Renaissance itself.

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Notes

1. The term *Regnum Italicum* refers only to that part of Northern Italy corresponding to the Lombard kingdom of the Dark Ages, which Otto I reincorporated into the German Empire in 962, and therefore, does not refer to entire Italy. For further details, see Skinner (4-6).
2. The *podesta* was usually brought from outside the city to ensure no conflict of interests or loyalties and was elected by popular mandate. However, his status was that of a salaried official and not of an independent ruler. At the end of his six month's term, he was required to submit a formal scrutiny of his accounts and judgements before gaining permission from the city which had employed him. For a more comprehensive account, see Skinner (3-4).
3. The term *quattrocento* refers to the cultural and artistic events of the fifteenth century Italy.

4. The term *trecento* usually refers to the cultural accomplishments of the fourteenth century Italy.

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