

Latin in the Period of Humanism

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1. *The new Latin*

In a letter of August 9, 1352 Petrarch tells Francesco Nelli how he had been won over by two persuasive friends and had taken a post at the Papal Curia. As he prepared for the loss of personal liberty naturally entailed in the burden of apostolic secretary, Fortune offered him a unique exit. His style appeared too elevated for the needs of the Curia and he was asked to write in a more humble mode. Given an exam on an assigned theme, he strove instead to write as much as possible in a sublime style. And he succeeded perfectly:

Quod dictaveram magne parti non satis intelligibile, cum tamen esset apertissimum, quibusdam vero grecum seu mage barbaricum visum est: en quibus ingeniis rerum summa committitur!

[That which I had composed was not clear enough to a large part of them, since, though it was very straightforward, to some, however, it appeared as Greek or rather Barbarian: Oh, to what minds the greatest of matters is entrusted!]

Long study and a great love of classical antiquity had led Petrarch to follow new paths in stylistic elaboration, so removed from the taste of the majority of his contemporaries, to produce that dawning which he describes with badly concealed pride. A process of renewal begins with Petrarch, so swift and deep that the humanists of the 1400s, while they recognized Petrarch as the initiator of the process, would still have considered his style too barbaric. Leonardo Bruni writes, "Francis Petrarch was the first to have so great a gift of intelligence that he recognized and called back into the light the ancient grace of the lost and extinct style and, although it was not perfected in himself, he alone saw it and opened the way toward its perfection, rediscovering the works of Tullius and savoring and understanding them, adapting

himself, as far as he could and knew how, to that most elegant and accomplished eloquence; and indeed he achieved much, if only to have shown the way to those who had to continue after him.” The consequences were so important that, fifty years after the episode just related, a similar exam would be administered to nominate as apostolic secretary the humanist and Ciceronian, Leonardo Bruni.

The social and political weight of this new Latin style was great. It has been observed that language can serve a fundamental role in the formation of social groups and that it had that role especially in the case of humanism. For the humanist cultural élite Dionisotti could use the term “caste,” which expresses well the character of a cultural movement whose aggressiveness and expansive force were supported by a proud consciousness of its own superiority. This superiority also consisted in the use of a new linguistic and stylistic tool, a token of membership so important that, to deny the possession of it to an adversary, was the equivalent, in some respect, of rejecting him from the “caste.” For this reason, in the great humanistic conflicts, the stinging invectives which the champions of the new movement exchanged with each other move chiefly on the level of language and style in a fierce examination of the “errors” of ones adversary, and the injurious accusations of filthy manners, of obscure origins, and so forth, there remain circumstantial motives relating to the traditional repertory of the genre.

The superiority of the new style is expressed on the social and political level assuring the humanists privileged access to high offices and positions of responsibility (we have just seen an example of this in the case of Leonardo Bruni). Dionisotti effectively described an episode set in the beginning of humanism that shows the weight, even the political weight, that the new linguistic tool was already acquiring: Petrarch, ambassador of the Viscounts at Paris in January 1361, replies to the King of France in Latin declaring that he didn’t know French. Because he actually understood French perfectly well, and Provençal also, there can be no doubt that his Latin oration had the meaning of a proud display of superiority on the part of the “herald of a new culture, that had been able to launch the new-born and already admirable language of Dante, to the extent that it was able to set in opposition to the secular predominance

of the French language the far more admirable and truly decisive weapon of a Latin unknown to moderns.” (Dionisotti, 1958) Dionisotti speaks of the new Latin as a weapon (*arma*), and an assessment of humanist eloquence in terms of military power already echoed at the end of a passage of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, which, though well known, cannot be passed over without a full citation at this point:

Commendanda est multis in rebus Florentinorum prudentia, tum maxime quod in legendis cancellariis non iuris scientiam, ut pleraeque civitates, sed oratoriam spectant et quae vocant humanitatis studia. Norunt enim recte scribendi dicendique artem non Bartholum aut Innocentium, sed Tullium Quintilianumque tradere. Nos tres in ea urbe cognovimus Graecis et Latinis [litteris] et conditorum operum fama illustres qui cancellariam alius post alium tenuere, Leonardum et Carolum Aretinos et Pogium eiusdem rei publicae civem, qui secretarius apostolicus tribus quondam Romanis pontificibus dictarat epistolas. Illos praecesserat Colucius, cuius ea dicendi vis fuit ut Galeacius Mediolanensium princeps, qui patrum nostrorum memoria gravissimum Florentinis bellum intulit, crebro auditus est dicere non tam sibi mille Florentinorum equites quam Colucii scripta nocere.

[The foresight of the Florentines should be recommended in many matters, especially because in the reading of the Chancellors they observe not the knowledge of law, as many cities do, but oratory and what they call the humanities. For they know that the skill of writing and speaking well is not handed down by Bartholus and Innocent, but by Cicero and Quintilian. In this city we recognize three who are distinguished in Greek and Latin letters and the report of the works of the founders, who have held the Chancellorship in succession, Leonardo and Carlo Aretino, and Poggio, a citizen of the same republic, who formerly had composed letters as apostolic secretary for three Roman pontiffs. Coluccio had preceded them, who had such power in speaking that Galeacius, prince of the Milanese, who in the memory of our fathers brought a very grievous war against the Florentines, often was heard to say that a thousand

Florentine knights could not harm him as much as the writings of Coluccio.]

2. *Continuity and Innovation*

Humanistic Latin is the fruit of a process of renewal and recovery of the ancient tradition, grafted on the trunk of medieval Latin. The aspects of continuity are stronger than critics in the past, too much swayed by the assertions of the humanists themselves, were prepared to recognize.

The Latin of the early Middle Ages was a literary language learned at school and used by an élite, a language of clerics clearly separate from the vulgar forms spoken by the laity. This form of the language continued to evolve and be renewed, yet in particular ways, different from the spoken language. The linguistic base consisted of the form assumed by Latin in the last centuries of the Empire, when the very significant influence of the new Christian spirituality was accompanied by the reemergence of vulgar and spoken traits, even in the written language, which a strong normalizing tendency had caused to disappear from the literary language in the classical period. Also characteristic was the presence in some authors with a taste for the baroque, inflated, studied expression, at times obscure, that persisted in medieval literary Latin. Medieval Latin is linked to late Latin not only by a continuity of linguistic development, but also because of the language of the liturgy and certain texts fundamental to medieval culture (Martianus Capella, Boethius, Isidore, etc.), in addition to texts of the Christian religion, and the same grammatical and lexical tools—Donatus, Servius, Priscian, the glossaries, etc.—which were the foundation of school instruction in the following centuries and provided the basic materials for the reworking of medieval grammars and dictionaries. The weight and importance of this tradition was so great that the humanists continued for a long time to make use of the same tools, though polemicizing against medieval grammars, and the fact that a Valla dared to attack the authority of Servius and Priscian, and to criticize the linguistic usage of the Vulgate, of Lactantius and Boethius, gave rise to scandal and lively polemical reactions.

Once the separation of the spoken and written language had become finally complete, at different times in the various regions

of the Latin-speaking world the developmental impetus of speakers disappeared, the forces which had an effect on medieval Latin were, by now, only the tradition of the schools, the speculations of the learned, the imitation of models of the past, the taste and creativity of the individual artist, and finally the rapport with other cultivated languages, such as Greek, or with spoken languages, which see chiefly neologisms created to meet the need for expressions required by new matters and new institutions. These are the same forces which continued to affect humanistic Latin. We dedicate an appropriate paragraph to the tradition of the schools, as also to the delicate and complex problem of connections with the vulgar tongue. Here follow some observations on elements of continuity and differentiation between humanistic Latin and medieval Latin with respect to the enlargement of the lexical patrimony and imitation.

Medieval Latin developed largely through the enrichment of the lexicon: from semantic innovations to neologisms formed according to ancient rules of word-formation, to calques and loan-words (numerous Grecisms, even fanciful), to the recovery of precious and rare words, even those attested only in glossaries and grammars, and finally to curious learned manipulations (an adjective *aevus* created from *longaevus*, a substantive *ptalmus*, “eye,” from *monophthalmus*, *inceps* from *deinceps*). In limited instances one arrives at the creation of a separate tongue, as that of the *Hisperica famina*. There are also, as Ludwig Traube observed, involuntary neologisms which have their origin in corruptions in manuscripts of ancient authors.

In the humanistic period the problem of neologisms is largely debated in theoretical terms, especially in the field of historiography, in relation to the need to be clear and precise in treating contemporary matters and institutions. The proposed solutions range from the rigorous classicism of a Fazio, and later of a Bembo, to the theory that new matters require new words (Valla, Flavio Biondo, etc.), legitimized by an appeal to *usus*, which the ancients themselves observed. According to the supporters of this theory *bombarda* must be used instead of *ballista* or *tormentum*, which indicate completely different weapons, and *imperator* will not be used for the commander of a military unit, but rather modern terms for modern institutions (*capitaneus*, *senescalcus*, etc.). One compromise solution to the

two opposing tendencies consists of introducing the modern term with expressions such as *ut vulgo aiunt*, *sic vocant*, *ut ita dicam*, *si licet dicere* and others similar, or by using the classical term and then explaining it in periphrasis.

If terms inherited from the Middle Ages continued in use in the first phase of humanism, the tendency to exclude them is already evident in Petrarch and grows increasingly. Valla attacks Poggio for using *aliqualis*, a medieval creation largely spread from the thirteenth century on, which also appears in Petrarch and Boccaccio. A feature of humanism is also the progressive limiting of the possibility of expanding the lexicon. On the one hand, with insistence on *proprietas* in the use of words, efforts are made to eliminate all departures from and expansions of the semantic field, which began in the Middle Ages, in order to achieve a strict regard for only those meanings already attested in antiquity. On the other hand, the possibilities of coinage of new words tend to be limited by the rules that govern the formation of words in ancient Latin, employing only the possibilities offered by composition and derivation. Pontano criticizes the compound *coincidentia* coined by Bruni to indicate hiatus, because it does not conform to the classical rules of composition, and in a charming little Underworld scene in the dialogue *Charon*, in which he caricatures the pedantry and quarrelsomeness of the grammarians of his time, he has the shade of Menicellus (the grammarian Antonio Mancinelli) severely criticize the diminutive *epistolitia* (“letteruzza”), used by Panormita. Then, with Ciceronianism, comes the complete exclusion of neologisms and the limiting to the classical period only, if not to Cicero alone, then to the ancient lexical patrimony to which he belongs.

Naturally, because it is entirely involuntary, the phenomenon of neologisms originating from manuscript corruptions (a subspecies of which are the false Ciceronianisms) continues, and there are also semantic innovations originating from misunderstandings: a good example of this is a neuter noun *sophos* with the meaning of *sophia*, “wisdom,” recently demonstrated by Alessandro Perosa.

With the narrowing of the field of innovation, the opportunities for expressive enrichment of the language remain entrusted to a

learned operation already in practice in the Middle Ages, as we have said, and now developed especially by the humanists: the recovery of rare words, even words attested only once, even those transmitted only by glossators. To give an especially blatant example, I will cite the case of the term *leguleius*, a humorous extemporaneous creation (*Augenblicksbildung*) of Cicero, after the model of the genteelisms in *-uleius*, which appears once in the *De oratore* (I. 236), and in the citation of Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*, XII.3.ii). Valla liked the term, and used it more than once, and naturally had a good laugh answering the careless accusation of Poggio for having used a word which Cicero would never have used. It was probably by way of humanistic Latin that the term then passed even into Italian.

At times the recovery of a rare word occurs through processes exquisitely philological. With an example from ancient manuscripts, Politian reclaimed the term *sororientes* from a passage in Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis historia*, XXXI, 66), in reference to the swelling of a young woman's breasts, which grow together like two little sisters, and seizing the elegant *hapax* he inserted it in his ode, *Puella*. Later he found another instance of the rare word in Festus, who cites a fragment of Plautus attesting the word *sororiare*. This leads him to think that in Pliny also he had to restore *sororiantes*, and substitute this second form in his ode as well, as appears from the citation which he makes in chapter 25 of the second century of the *Miscellanea* dedicated to this word:

Nam quae tibi papillulae
stant floridae et protuberant,
sororiantes primulum,
ceu mala punica arduae,
quas ore toto presseram
manuque contrectaveram,
quem non amore allegerint?
cui non asilum immiserint?
quem non furore incenderint?

Thus the second century of the *Miscellanea* is dedicated to the restoration of *manupretium* (“the price of the work of ones hands”) in passages of Plautus and Pliny the Elder, in which the

term was corrupted in different ways. Politian made use of this word in his time, as he himself mentions in a marginal note, in the first century of the *Miscellanea*, in chapter 74.

As for neologisms, debates and polemics broke out even over the use of rare words or *hapax legomena*. Giorgio Merula, the humanist and Alexandrine historian of the Visconti, in a violent attack on the first century of the *Miscellanea* of Politian, which remains unedited in our own day, criticized his style for “nova quaedam atque insolentia verba,” and for the affected display of archaic words, words that were recherché, uncommon, and obscure. Bartolomeo Scala, chancellor to the Medici, gave the ironic epithet *ferruminator* to Ermolao Barbaro and Politian, blaming the obscurity stemming from their style on the use of words “ascita nimium et remota” (*ferrumino* “glue” had been used by Barbaro). Politian replied with a letter, a very interesting one for its knowledge of his views on Latin style, in which he also gives a theoretical justification for the right to use less common words, as long as they are Latin and attested in good authors (“latinitas et apud idoneos repertas”):

Iam praeceptum illud Caesaris quod obiici protinus solet, ut tanquam scopulum refugiamus infrequens verbum, magis fortasse illo saeculo valuerit, quo latine adhuc omnes loquebantur, quam nostro. Iure enim tum poterat argui qui parum contentus foret aetatis suae vocabulis. Nunc autem vulgo latinus sermo nescitur nec a nutricibus iam, sed a magistris discitur; apud quos certe nulla magis haberi verba et usitata debent et recepta quam quae de veteribus illis magnorum auctorum thesauris proferantur.

With this Politian clearly identified the nucleus of the question: it was pointless to discuss familiar or rare words in an artificial language that lacked the control of the linguistic awareness of the speakers. If one wanted to turn this language into something that it could draw only from literary testimonia, a truly pliable and effective tool, it was necessary to help oneself selectively to the entire linguistic patrimony transmitted from antiquity by way of writing.

The recovery of rare terms in humanists like Politian and Pontano is born of something more than preciousness and

satisfaction of the learned (Paoli speaks of a “raffinato alexandrianismo” [refined Alexandrianism]). There is, among other things, also a desire to reappropriate the language of the past in all its nuances and power to achieve a technical precision of expression restoring to plants, animals, utensils, illnesses, body parts, etc., their own names. To this end the technical writers in medicine, veterinarian medicine, cooking, botany, astronomy, architecture, agriculture, are read and studied with particular attention. This also explains the lively humanist interest in authors like Martial, the Statius of the *Silvae*, Pliny the Elder, particularly rich in *realia* and technical terms. Even that *ferrumino* that we have seen criticized by Scala more than a rare word is the technical language (frequently used by Pliny and by the juriconsults, as Politian mentioned in the letter to Scala already cited). Related and complementary to this aspiration for technical precision of the language is the interest in the elements of the spoken language, inferred above all from authors like the comic dramatists and Catullus.

As far as imitation is concerned, in the Middle Ages, lacking every historical consideration of the language, there was an total eclecticism and one drew indifferently from models of very different ages. Moreover, no account was taken of the distinction between poetic and prosaic language, using indifferently poetic words and constructions in prose and vice versa. The same occurs in humanistic Latin. The humanist discussion of models for imitation or for rejection traces from chronological considerations. However restriction of field, the humanists acted from the beginning excluding flatly, at least on a theoretical level, all the medieval authors. Toward the end of the 1400s the eclecticism until then dominant in imitation begins to be contrasted with the theory according to which it happens to imitate one sole author to avoid the heterogenous mixing of different elements, as “in unum agrum plura inter se inimicissima sparsa semina.” This sole author cannot be other than he who has been the acme of Latin eloquence, Cicero. From the admiration and cultivation of Ciceronian eloquence, which had been one constant of humanism from its beginnings, there was born thus the extreme phenomenon of ciceronianism. It has been observed that it is connected with a growing sense of extraneousness for the Latin language, of which, according to the Ciceronians, one can seize only by means of imitation. And one

arrives at affirming that to follow an author is necessary as to have a guide in foreign regions.

Contemporaneously with the diffusion of Ciceronianism, the taste for the rare word that we have mentioned above leads to other excesses degenerating into the cerebral and systematic obscurity of the school of Bologna, that is, of Filippo Beroaldo the Elder and of his pupil Giovan Battista Pio. The style of the latter, which was also the object of satires and pasquinades, was woven with preciosities drawn from Apuleius, Symmachus, Fulgentius, the glossators, Plautus. The chief work of Beroaldo had actually been a commentary on Apuleius and one would even give the name Apuleianism to the stylistic current of Bologna. It should be emphasized that the imitation of Apuleius was not a novelty: this author had exercised a great influence on the first rhetorical exercises of the Latin Boccaccio and on the vernacular Boccaccio and had influenced the precious and obscure style of some *dictatores*. The same Petrarch had read with attention much more of the rest than he himself would want to make known and from it he had taken words and stylistic cadences.

As far as the mixing of prose and poetic language, it is characteristic of humanistic Latin no less than post-classical and medieval Latin. One need only consider for example the most singular style, strongly colored with poetic elements and thus interwoven with poetic citations explicit and implicit to touch the cento, of the *Historia de duobus amantibus* by Enea Silvio Piccolomini. Although the humanists succeeded in recovering, at least on the theoretical level, the distinction between the two styles, Angelo Decembrio, younger brother of the more renowned Pier Candido and pupil of Guarino Veronese, in his *Politia litteraria* puts in the mouth of Guarino himself the affirmation that one may not use in prose all the words and all the metaphors that are permitted in poetry and he has him conclude, after numerous examples of words only allowed in poetic language: “Adeo ut me ipsum qui nunc vobis praecepta do saepe paeniteat cum recolo in libro meo *De liberis educandis* “tellurem” pro “terra” incautius edidisse”. At the end of the century Guarino himself will be blamed by the Ciceronian Paolo Cortesi for abuse of poetic words. Valla, in his *Elegantiae* claims to research not so much the license of poets as the use of orators

and he distinguishes often with subtlety between poetic usages and usages of prose.

In conclusion, although humanistic Latin may be properly characterized as a reaction to the Latin of Scholasticism, an organic continuity binds it by more aspects to Medieval and Late antique Latin. In the lexicon, orthography, syntax, and style Latin above all of the first period of humanism, but, especially for certain authors, even in the 1400s, presents numerous characteristics without parallel in Classical Latin, but which appear in Medieval Latin and often already in late antique and Christian Latin. This is not always recognized and it happens that some editors remove these “irregularities” correcting according to the rules of Classical Latin or that some critics speak of grammatical errors of humanistic Latin or of a genial disregard of the rules. At times one also perhaps exaggerates in speaking of “italianisms” with respect to phenomena that recur rather in this continuity of tradition: we will see examples in the following paragraph.

3. Links to the vernacular

The study of humanistic Latin cannot derive from the phenomenon of bilingualism and must keep in mind of the play of reciprocal influences between Latin and the vernacular. This is, as is known, a field of investigation of extreme importance for the history of the Italian language, on which humanistic Latin acts deeply contributing also to the slow process of formation of a literary Italian able to overcome the fragmentation of the local varieties and destined to meet therefore the competition with Latin itself. But no less fascinating and necessary appears the investigation on the other side: in fact, it will come to respond finally, on the basis of a deeper and systematic documentation, to the question whether and to what extent the spoken language has taken on the characteristics of humanistic Latin and has contributed to that profound disconnection from ancient Latin that characterizes it precisely in its oldest realizations (I'm thinking, for example, of the Latin style of Poggio, of Piccolomini, and of Pontano). Before indicating some of the problems and signaling possible lines of inquiry on this second side, I would like to show the importance of the influence exercised by humanistic Latin on the vernacular by way of some

examples of new words, or new uses of words already in use, which precisely by means of humanistic Latin have passed to Italian and at times to the entire European culture becoming a firm patrimony of it.

As is known, the neologism *traducere* for “translate” is attested for the first time in a letter of Leonardo Bruni of 5 September 1400 and is then frequent in humanistic Latin. In humanistic Latin “*accademia*” begins to assume its modern meaning. For “*leguleio*” one may see what we have said above (p. xxx). Still more interesting is the case of two words of great cultural importance, deriving from metaphors used one time by ancient authors and taken up again in humanistic Latin, by means of which they have acquired such a common use that awareness of the original metaphorical sense has been completely lost. The terms are “classical” and “plagiarism.” *Classicus* indicated anciently those belonging to the first of the five classes in the Servian census, while those belonging to the remaining others were all *infra classem*. In Gellius (XIX. 8. 15) one finds the metaphor “*classicus... aliquis scriptor, non proletarius*” to indicate a writer of the first order. The metaphor pleased the humanists, who often picked it up. The term came thus to be used very commonly. Until now the earliest examples cited are all non-Italian and of the 1500s (Beatus Rhenanus in 1512, Melanchthon in 1519, the archbishop of Toledo, Fonseca, in a letter to Erasmus of 1528), but I can now add a pair of earlier instances and Italian, both of the Bolognese humanist Filippo Beroaldo the Elder:

Non Livius, non Quintilianus, non Plinius, non Celsus, non
quispiam ex illa cohorte scriptorum *classicorum* hoc
vocabulum [i.e. the word *passio*] usurpant.

Unum illud non praeteribo, Fulgentium mihi videri inter
proletarios minutosque scriptores magis quam inter *classicos*
enumerandum.

In antiquity with the word *plagium* one meant the crime consisting of keeping a free person in subjection under pain, or the slave of another. Martial uses *plagiarius* metaphorically, with regard to someone who has appropriated his poems, in a pleasant epigram (I.52) whose point consists precisely in applying in jest

the legal terminology of the crime of plagiarism to a literary theft imagining the *libelli* as slaves placed at liberty by their legitimate owner but enslaved by another. Even this time the means between this metaphorical use isolated in the ancient world and the modern use seems represented by humanistic Latin, and precisely by a recognized passage of the preface to the second book of the *Elegantiae* of Vall clearly inspired by the epigram of Martial.

Today the opinion is widespread that the Latin of the first stage of humanism is characterized by a remarkable influx of vernacular, even if a classical philologist, a very refined connoisseur of language and style, has affirmed that “bilingualism, or better diglossia of the humanistic poets knows interferences almost in a unique sense, from Latin to Italian, and not vice versa.” In an essay very well received and cited Raffaele Spongano has maintained that the Latin literary prose of humanism “for its lively part repeated mostly the attitudes of the vernacular than those of Latin.” Although the examples cited by him do not document his assertion. As proof that Latin had adopted the expressive schemes of the vernacular, its plain syntax, “the simple concatenation and speed of the phrases, the cadence with no sound of periods, the short measure of the constructions, the omission of all the purely grammatical ties and the consequent connection only ideal of one into another period” he cites a famous passage of the *Theologia platonica* of Ficino in which instead the presence of the model of Seneca is very much in evidence; and in general, in fact, his own discourse suffers from excessive simplification, he having measured humanistic prose by only one kind of Latin prose, the Ciceronian of oratorical type. The second example adopted by him is not better chosen, a passage from a letter of Coluccio Salutati, in which the influence of medieval rhetorical models of the *ars dictandi* is clear, whether for the use of the *cursus*, or the artificial order of the words characterized by hyperbata and incastri, pleasure in lists and of varieties of lists, the presence of “tricola,” most of all of membra of increasing size and often synonymous. Salutati had studied at Bologna, a city famous for its rhetorical teaching and for the renewal shown to the *ars dictandi*, and had had among his teachers the renowned Pietro da Moglio, whose obscure and artificial style would have given rise later to the reproof by a humanist such as Guarino Veronese. This formation had a

decisive influence on his Latin style, which is preserved in the complex much nearer to medieval Latin than that of Petrarch. We are then within a tradition purely Latin and the influence of the vernacular has nothing to do with it. Spongano insists among other matters that the initial position of the verb in the long series of phrases is modelled on the vernacular “*Sciunt igitur alii gyros mirabiles equitando conficere...*” “*Congrediantur alii splendentes in armis...*” “*Exsiliant alii strenue...*”, etc., but this is simply the *ordo verborum* common even in Classical Latin for this kind of concessives: *Salutati* certainly has present the famous “*excudent alii spirantia mollius aera*” (*Aeneis*, VI, 847) and even the Horatian “*laudabunt alii*” (*Carmina*, I, 7, 1), and substituting the subjunctive for the future he shows he has cultivated the modal sfumatura that the future had in these cases. Spongano also cites the phrase “*et quoniam sic se movet quod*” (“and since it moves thus that”), “where the vernacular, instead of impressing in Latin the proper expressive image, barbarizes it with locutions not its own”: but the use of *quod* for *ut* is of late and medieval Latin and the reflexive *se movet* is already in Cicero; it is a matter therefore once again of continuity within a secular tradition, a continuity that will be able at the most to have been favored by the fact that corresponding usages were alive even in the spoken language. With this last example we have entered the vital part of a problem with which it will be opportune to pause.

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As far as imitation was concerned, in the Middle Ages, lacking every historical consideration of the language, there was a complete eclecticism and models from the most diverse periods were drawn from indifferently.

Moreover, no attention was paid to the distinction between poetic language and prose; poetic words and constructions were used in prose and viceversa. The same happened in humanistic Latin. The humanistic discussion of models for imitation or rejection proceeds from chronological considerations. From the outset the humanists practiced the exclusion of all medieval authors, at least on a theoretical level.

Toward the end of the 1400s the eclecticism, until then dominant in imitation, begins to be contrasted with the theory according to which one must imitate a single author to avoid the heterogeneous mixing of diverse elements, as if *in unum agrum plura inter se inimicissima sparsa semina*; this one author can be none other than he who was the culmination of Latin eloquence, Cicero. From admiration and from the cult of Ciceronian eloquence, which had been a constant feature of humanism from the beginning, the extreme phenomenon of Ciceronianism was born. It has been observed that this movement is connected with a growing sense of exclusivity for the Latin language, of which, according to the Ciceronians, one can be adopted only through imitation; and one affirms that it is necessary to follow an author just as it is necessary to have a guide in foreign lands.

The Latin of the first stage of humanism is characterized by a remarkable influence of the vulgar tongue, even if a classical philologist, a very refined connoisseur of language and style has affirmed that bilingualism, or better *diglossia*, of the humanistic poets saw interference almost in one direction only, from Latin to Italian, and not the reverse.

Many phenomena attested in literary Latin of late antiquity and the Middle Ages were facts of the spoken language which continued into the Romance languages. When these phenomena appear in humanistic Latin, it can be difficult to determine whether it is due to the continuity of an uninterrupted Latin literary and school tradition or to the influence of the vernacular.

4. *The School*

The humanistic renewal of Latin occurs in a situation in which the school has a fundamental role, concerning itself with a language no longer spoken and whose first stages remain entrusted to elementary instruction. For centuries the school was basically identified with instruction in Latin and to learn to read and write meant to learn Latin. Even in the latter half of the 1300s it is an exception to learn to read and write in the vernacular. What type of pedagogical tradition did the humanists have to take into account? What influence did they exercise on this tradition, what changes did they make in programs of study, in textbooks, in the choice and formation of their masters? The

humanistic pedagogy has been and is the central theme in studies of humanism, but there is still need of detailed research to respond with greater precision to these questions. Many manuscripts of elementary instruction remain to be examined, studies on humanistic grammars and their relations with the medieval and ancient tradition are still in their infancy (we lack, among other things, editions of texts and systematic censuses concerning how much humanism in fact produced grammars, and manuals of prosody and metrics, rhetorical treatises, etc.), a great number of masters are yet to be brought out of the shadows.

The communal society had seen lay schools arise alongside episcopal and monastic schools: lay schools owing their existence either to the private initiative of an individual or of a corporation, or the school with masters paid by the commune. Instruction began generally at six or seven years of age. The school was divided into various grades or classes. There were chiefly two large categories of the *non latinantes* and of the *latinantes* (i.e. those who learned to compose in Latin), entrusted to the care of distinct masters in the larger centers, while in smaller centers one person had to take on the older as well as the younger students.

The *latinantes* were often divided into *minores* and *maiores*. Grammar was studied from the handbook, the *Doctrinale* of Alexander of Villedieu, a grammar in hexameters written in 1199, which had a huge success in the late Middle Ages and in the humanistic era. Works to be read were chosen from a series of late antique and medieval books which became the traditional readings in the school: these are usually indicated by modern scholars as *auctores octo*—from the title of a collection of these texts in one of the first printed books—but perhaps it is more convenient to designate these as *auctores minores*. Eventually one moved on to the reading of *auctores maiores*, chiefly Vergil, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Terence, Lucan, Statius's epic, the tragedies of Seneca, and the study of rhetoric. Direction in reading was provided by an *auctorista*. This name was replaced in the second half of the 1400s by the name *humanista*, i.e. master of the *studia humanitatis* or of *humanae litterae*. This word, which proved to have so great a fortune in the history of culture, had a humble, technical/school origin.

Naturally, even the initiator of humanism, Frances Petrarch, had this kind of educational training. He always showed a deep disdain for the school. For him, true masters were the greats of the past, and in a celebrated passage of one of the *Seniles* (XV, I) he recalls how as a youth, when he was bored with Prosper and Aesop (two of the *auctores minores*, i.e. the *Epigrammata* of Prosper of Aquitaine and an edition in distichs of the so-called *Fabulae Romuleae*), he was already completely taken by the pleasure of Ciceronian prose, even without fully understanding it. He traces a vivid and spiteful picture of the school of his day in a letter of 1352 (*Epp. Fam.* XII,2), in which he urges his friend Zanobi da Strada, who at that time was the master of a school, to stop wasting time teaching children and leave this bleak task to men who are not capable of better, diligent and slow-witted, who seek a modest income and care nothing for renown.

A century later, Poggio Bracciolini propounds the same ideal of learning outside of every school structure and through direct familiarity with the great ancients. In 1455, in a polemic with Alamanno Rinuccini (*Epp.* XIII, 3) who, together with other youths, sought to bring famous professors from other places to the *Studium* in Florence to lecture on rhetoric and poetry, Poggio affirmed that eloquence is not acquired through masters, but by reading and writing, and that neither Petrarch nor Coluccio Salutati, neither Leonardo Bruni nor Carlo Marsuppini, Ambrogio Traversari, Roberto Rossi, Niccolo Niccoli, Giannozzo Manetti or himself had learned eloquence from masters, but by themselves, with diligent reading and practice.

At first the humanistic movement developed outside the school and in opposition to it. The violent polemic against medieval authors could not help but openly attack the school manuals and the *auctores minores*. The manuals were criticized especially for ruining the taste of children with their corrupt and barbarized Latin. Children, so the humanists claimed, while their tender age is still impressionable, are to be put in touch only with the most agreeable and pleasant authors and not these crude and harsh writers. The Latin language is sought “in those and such as keep it clear and most refined.” Erasmus affirmed: “Sacratior quidem est liber Psalmorum quam Odarum Oratii, sed ex his quam ex

illis rectius discitur sermo Latinus.” [Holier, indeed, are the Psalms than the Odes of Horace, but Latin expression is learned more correctly from the latter than the former]. (*De recta Latini Graecique sermonis pronuntiatione* I/4).

5. LATIN IN THE THEORETICAL REFLECTION OF THE HUMANISTS: THE QUESTION OF THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE OF ANCIENT ROME.

I think it useful to discuss briefly one of the questions most lively debated in the bosom of humanism, and that is whether the ancient Romans spoke Latin or vernacular. It concerns in fact a central issue in the reflection on the problem of the language that accompanies the development of humanistic Latin and a key to understanding the theoretical positions standing beneath the vision of Latin (and of its relationship with the vernacular) held by the major representatives of the humanistic movement.

In the spring of 1435, in the antechamber of Pope Eugenio IV, in a group of apostolic secretaries consisting of Antonio Loschi, Poggio Bracciolini, Cencio de’ Rustici, Andrea Fiocchi, Biondo Flavio, Leonardo Bruni, there arose a discussion of the problem whether the ancient Romans were used to declaiming their orations in Latin or in vernacular. The question, as we know from Biondo, had already been debated among the learned of that time. The arguments adopted on that occasion by the participants were taken and developed in writing by some of them, and especially by Biondo Flavio in the work *De verbis Romanae locutionis ad Leonardum Aretinum*, dated Florence, 1 April 1435, by Leonardo Bruni in a letter to Biondo from Florence, 7 May 1435, and, later, by Poggio Bracciolini in the *Historiae convivalis disceptatio III* (1450). But other humanists also intervened in the dispute: Leon Battista Alberti, Angelo Decembrio, Guarino Veronese, Francesco Filelfo, Lorenzo Valla and the Milanese historian of the Sforza family, Leodrisio Crivelli; in this last figure it is noteworthy that the theoretical question is placed in relation to a practical question which we have already mentioned, that is, the need to introduce vernacular terms into historical works, beside the Latin translation, for greater clarity.

Bruni, with whom Loschi and Cencio de’ Rustici were in agreement (the same opinion will be maintained next by Angelo Decembrio, who puts it in the mouth of Leonello d’Este),

projected the contemporary situation into antiquity. Latin would have been even then the language of only the learned, different from the spoken language. It is impossible for him to think that Latin, a grammatical language with cases, tenses, moods, conjugations, declensions, could have been learned effort from the earliest infancy and spoken by all without need of study. The people who listened to the orators or went to the theater to see Plautus and Terence as much as the unlearned of modern times understand at mass and enjoy at the theater, especially of the mime and the scenic apparatus; the words of the orators were destined to be understood by those few learned people who had in hand the government of the republic.

This thesis, which is given to easy jokes on the part of modern scholars, is substantially, as has been observed, in the course of medieval teaching of Latin, or *grammatica*, as an artificial and immutable language, born by convention and learned by art and by few (“ad habitum... huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa”), contrasted with *locutio vulgaris*, a language *naturalis* that all learn to speak from infancy “sine omni regula nutricem imitantes”. The fourteenth-century grammarian, Enrico di Crissey, expresses it thus:

Latinorum populorum quidam laici dicuntur et quidam clerici... Laici vero dicuntur habere ydiomata vocum impositarum ad placitum, quae ydiomata docentur pueri [a] matribus et a parentibus; et ita ydiomata multiplicia sunt apud Latinos, quia aliud est apud Gallos, aliud apud Germanos, aliud apud Lombardos seu Ytalicos. Clerici vero Latini dicuntur habere ydioma idem apud omnes eos et istud docentur pueri in scolis a gramaticis.

It is characteristic of the new humanistic spirit that all the testimonies offered by ancient texts begin to be gathered and examined to see whether the hypothesis of an artificial Latin language, not spoken by all and learned at school, finds confirmation. The recognition that numerous indications document the contrary—that is the thesis sustained, against Bruni, by the majority of the humanists that took part in the dispute, from Biondo Flavio to Poggio, from Alberti to Guarino, from Filelfo to Crivelli—was heavy with consequences, because

Latin too was reduced like the other languages to a mutable and transitory historical reality and opening the way to recognition that even Latin, far from being a predetermined and immutable language, had assumed different aspects in the course of centuries. Besides, the acknowledgment that even Latin had once been a spoken language gave a hard blow to the traditional distinction between spoken languages, based on *usus* and not grammatical, and artificial languages (besides Latin, Greek and Hebrew also), based on *ars* and equipped to be alone of grammatical character, and allowed to imagine that even the vernaculars followed their own rules and that it was possible to grant a grammar even for them. This important recognition is already present in the pamphlet of Biondo Flavio:

Quamquam omnibus ubique apud Italos corruptissima etiam vulgaritate loquentibus idiomatis natura insitum videmus ut nemo tam rusticus, nemo tam rudis tamque ingenio hebes sit, qui modo loqui possit, quin aliqua ex parte tempora, casus modosque et numeros noverit dicendo variare prout narrandae rei tempus ratioque videbuntur postulare.

This affirmation has been rightly considered of such importance for opening the way for studies of Italian grammar. A little later Alberti will write his rules of the Florentine language precisely to show, as he says at the beginning, that it is possible to write a grammar even of the vernacular.

Other fruitful impulses are elaborated in the course of the discussion. So, for example, Dante, who considered the natural languages a *prius* and the artificial ones a *posterius*, seemed to think that the similarity among the Romance languages and Latin, that probably had not escaped him, was owed to the fact that the inventors of Latin based themselves, “at least in part, on elements deduced from the vernacular”; the humanists, instead, let fall the relationship and affirm explicitly (Biondo Flavio, Alberti, Guarino, Filelfo, Crivelli) that the Romance languages are the fruit of a degeneration and barbarization of Latin caused by the barbarian invasions.

Another new and important concept is that of the difference between spoken and written languages, between *sermo vulgaris* and learned language. Even those who support the unity of the

spoken and written language in antiquity admit to themselves a difference between the language of the unlearned and that of the learned, and Biondo Flavio especially emphasized the importance of the social conditions and education attained in differentiating the spoken language of the various classes and various individuals.

Opinor non negabis in vulgari aetatis nostrae loquendi genere, cuius gloriam inter Italicos apud Florentinos esse concesserim, multo facundiores esse qui honesto nati loco ab urbanis educati parentibus et civilibus innutriti sint officiis quam ceteram ignavae aut rusticanae multitudinis turbam; cumque eisdem verbis sermonem utrique conficiant, suaviloquentia unum placere multitudini, incondito garritu alterum displicere. Pari modo apud Romanos, etsi latinis omnes verbis quibus uni utebantur et reliqui, quos tamen parentes, educatio, consuetudo bona et morum gravitas vita praestantiores reddiderunt, quamquam litteris carerent, oratione etiam praestantiores ac potentiores erant.

This too contributes, naturally, to demolishing the traditional vision of Latin as an artificial and immutable language, a unitary and undifferentiated mass.

The various solutions to the problem of the spoken language in ancient Rome also influence the evaluation of the vernacular. The traditional vision maintained by Leonardo Bruni was able to furnish, projecting it into an exemplary antiquity, a certain license of nobility to the vernacular, which instead became devalued by him who asserted an origin from the profound corruption of Latin perpetrated by the barbarian invasions. And at any rate the recognition that the ancient writers made use of the same language for their literary works in commonly used by the mass (even if, naturally, with a major degree of elaboration and stylistic refinement) implied that the moderns as well were able, on the example of the ancients, to elevate their mother tongue to the literary level.

The reply given to the question by Biondo Flavio and by the majority of the humanists, while admitting a profound diversity of conditions of Latin in antiquity and in modern times, compelled them to take note of the break that had occurred and

see Latin as a language no longer living. Therefore, it will not be a case that the most tried champion of Latin, the sustainer of its irreplaceable and perennial function as a language of universal culture, the proponent of the “magnum... latini sermonis sacramentum”, that is, Lorenzo Valla, takes a position in favor of the thesis of Bruni. Because it is Valla who is, by general admission, the founder of the historical study of the Latin language, the fact may appear surprising that he had taken up, though, as we shall see, with substantial changes, the traditional thesis of the medieval ascendancy, instead of taking its place on the positions of Biondo, Poggio, etc. Probably by an unconscious refusal to admit it, modern scholars like Girolamo Mancini, Remigio Sabbadini, Vittorio Rossi, Riccardo Fubini, Salvatore Comporeale, Gianni Zippel, have placed Valla, instead, among the supporters of the thesis of Biondo. I think therefore that it is opportune to pause with the affirmations of Valla, either because they have often been misunderstood, or most of all because some of them are of surprising novelty and importance. Valla expresses his opinion in bitter polemic with Poggio in two different settings, but very close in time: the *Antidotum primum*, which is from 1452, and the *Apologus*, written between the end of 1452 and the beginning of 1453. It is emphasized preliminarily that in the *Apologus* Valla asserts that he does not wish to expound on that occasion his view, because his purpose is not this, but that of combatting the theses of Poggio. At any rate, though by means of the form of a systematic demolition of the theses of his adversary, the position of Valla emerges clearly.

In defending the thesis of Bruni against Poggio, Valla introduces in reality some modifications that transform it radically. Bruni, who, as we have seen, still identified *grammatica* and Latin, had denied that the language spoken by the ancient Romans was Latin: Valla, dropping the terms of the question, asserts that Latin is not only the language spoken by the ancient Romans, but also that spoken by the modern Romans. But this admission does not bring him to accept the thesis of Poggio that anciently to speak *grammatice*, “according to grammar”, all simply would have learned by use, without the need of teachers. He refutes it, rather, point by point and with violent irony, relating among other things, and as proof of the impossibility for the mass to learn to speak grammatically, the story of the priest who claimed

that his servant spoke grammatically with him and he chastized him because he did not say “da mihi clavem” and “ubi est clavis?”; to which he, piqued, began in his turn to chastize his patron with words that have become a common joke: “Modo clavis, modo clavem, nunquam vidi homo talem”. Poggio himself on the other hand at his age still knows neither how to speak nor to write *grammatice*, as the infinite errors he commits show. If anciently he had been able to learn to speak *grammatice* by custom alone, to what purpose would have served the schools and so many books and teachers of grammar? Valla ends with a dilemma: “Quid ais? aut ars grammatica est et ab eruditis, non autem a nutricibus tradebatur aut ars non est quam omnes fatentur esse artem”. Guarino, who helps in the discussion in the role of judge, intervenes inviting Poggio to declare himself beaten. Moreover Valla turns to insist on the same point, asking himself among other things how it could ever be possible that what the moderns learn with so much trouble, so many teachers and in so many years, the ancients would have learned playing in the course of two years from when they began to speak, so to be able to understand those orators and poets that the moderns with difficulty understand as adults. Nor can it be said that the moderns are slower of intellect, because in some skills they do not yield to the ancients. The impossibility of speaking *grammatice* without having studied is proven also by the distortions that the Roman lower classes constantly make with Latin expressions: “domina covata” for “Domine, quo vadis?”, “arocielo” for “Ara coeli”, etc. Nor are the relics of Latin declensions and conjugations in Spanish, cited as evidence by Poggio, valid; because in fact Spanish would not have kept “inflexionem... casuum... nec participia quaedam atque gerundia supinaque nec derivandi, nisi in paucis, usum nec alia plurima quae grammatica praecipit?”. From where would Spanish, Italian, French have taken the article that Latin does not have?

In conclusion, Valla is in agreement with Bruni in judging as very broad the divide that anciently separated the language of the masses from that of the learned (and it is a further proof of his acuity to have emphasized as precisely in the judgment about the breadth of this divide that there is the heart of the question) and in denying the grammatical character of the language of the unlearned. However, he asserts explicitly that the divide was

within a singular Latin language. In the last analysis, Valla understood a real feature of literary Latin of the classical period: its strong normative tendencies, the stylistic refinement and the distancing from the spoken language. The sharp separation imagined by him between the speaking of the unschooled exclusively governed by custom (*usus*) and that of the learned that has a grammatical character and is therefore regulated by *ars* rather than *usus*, is the theoretical assumption on which the *Elegantiae* are based, the which, as has recently been observed, despite the repeated claims for *usus* of the authors, propose a linguistic model substantially immobile and immutable, “a metahistorical language valid for all times, that can be learned equally well by the ancients and by the moderns... and that for the ones and the others constitutes the most perfect instrument of knowledge available to man”. We are, however, far away from the medieval conception of Latin as an artificial language removed from the action of the time: Valla is well aware that the language, whether spoken or written, is subject to changes like every human phenomenon and it is precisely the establishment of the degeneration of literary Latin that occurred in the Middle Ages that leads him to take up the battle of the *Elegantiae* to restore it to its ancient purity. This is why he himself says in the *Antidotum primum*:

Certe que nunc lingua in usu Romanis est Latina appellanda est, etsi multum degeneravit ab illa prisca. Non enim credibile est aliam nescio unde venisse linguam et illam veterem e possessione deiecisse et in exilium relegasse atque in insulas deportasse, cum videamus idem contigisse in lingua grammaticae loquentium, quam tu Latinam vocas, que adeo ab illa veteri differt ut vix eam Cicero si a mortuis redeat queat intelligere.

The modern vernacular is therefore for him a degeneration of the ancient spoken Latin language, entirely parallel to the degeneration of the ancient literary language into medieval Latin and of modern times, a Latin so different that Cicero would not have been able to understand it. Where it is to be emphasized, besides to the clear assertion that the written language no less than the spoken is subject to degenerate, the awareness of the direct continuity between the modern vernacular and the ancient spoken language.

Valla underlines therefore the uninterrupted continuity, even in decadence, of the Latin language in its two-fold aspect of *sermo vulgaris* and *sermo doctus*. The preface to the first book of the *Elegantiae*—one of the highest and moving celebrations ever written on the Latin language—is entirely pervaded by a sense of this continuity: the Romans of today are the heirs of a glorious tradition that the medieval decline has obscured, not interrupted.

An allusion to the debate over the spoken language in ancient Rome seems to be understood in the words cited above of the letter of Politian to Bartolomeo Scala in 1493, in which one underlines how Latin of modern times is used by few and learned at school by teachers and not spoken by everyone any more and learned by nurses like that ancient one and therefore is pointless to discuss words frequent or rare in a language no longer in general use. His words give us a measure of the change that had occurred: it is no longer a matter of denying or of recognizing the grammatical character of the vernaculars or of asking oneself about the divide between the spoken and written language in ancient Rome, but of taking note of the detachment between ancient and modern Latin, the one a living language and therefore regulated even by reference to the custom of speakers, the other by now only a language of culture based exclusively on reference to the literary testimonies of the past.