

Rereading the Renaissance

Reviving the foundational humanist texts

THE ONLY THING most teachers and students of the humanities agree on, it often seems, is that these are troubled times for their field. For a whole variety of reasons—social, intellectual, and technological—the humanities have been losing their confident position at the core of the university’s mission. This represents an important turning-point, not just for education, but for our culture as a whole. Ever since the Renaissance, the humanities have defined what it means to be an educated person. The very word comes from the Latin name of the first modern, secular curriculum, the *studia humanitatis*, invented in fourteenth-century Italy as a rival to traditional university subjects like theology, medicine, and law.

According to Princeton historian Anthony Grafton, one of today’s leading scholars of the Renaissance, “the *studia humanitatis*, the humanities....encompassed quite a specific range of subjects: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, the arts that gave a command of Latin, the language of learning, and oratory, history, poetry, and moral philosophy.” For centuries after, these disciplines were considered indispensable for any well-educated person. Still more important, they helped to define an ethical ideal: they were “forms of thought and writing,” Grafton explains, “that improved the character of the student.” To study the humanities was to grow more independent and intrepid, both intellectually and morally; it was the royal road to becoming a complete human being. In the words of the critic George Steiner, A.M. ’50, modern education has been defined by the principle “that the humanities humanize.”

Even today, most members of institutions like Harvard would instinctively endorse, in some form, the proposition advanced six centuries ago by the Italian Renaissance humanist Pier Paolo Vergerio: “We call those studies liberal, then, which are worthy of a free [*liber*] man: they are those through which virtue and wisdom are either practiced or sought, and by which the body or mind is disposed towards all the best things.” But today, every part of Vergerio’s confident creed is coming under increased attack. For one thing, “liberal studies” can appear less useful, to the student and to society as a whole, than concrete scientific and technical knowledge. Bet-

ter to emerge from college as a budding biologist or financier, our practical-minded culture incessantly tells us, than as a mere reader of books. Meanwhile, the humanities themselves have become infinitely more self-critical in recent decades, so that “virtue” and “wisdom,” unproblematic terms for Vergerio, are now contested battlegrounds. Reading canonical texts, many people now believe, is not the road to freedom, but a subtle kind of indoctrination.

This tumultuous moment, when the humanities and humanism itself face an uncertain future, is the perfect time to shine a new light on the age when they were invented. That’s why it seems especially fitting that Vergerio’s treatise on education—along with a galaxy of other fascinating, inspiring, and almost wholly unknown texts—is being discovered by a new generation of readers, thanks to the I Tatti Renaissance Library (ITRL; www.hup.harvard.edu/itatti/index.html). Readers have long been familiar with the color-coded jackets of the Loeb Classical Library—red for Latin, green for Greek—which offers standard texts of ancient authors in accessible English translations. Now the ITRL’s pale-blue covers have become synonymous with neo-Latin literature, which began in the fourteenth century with the revival of classical learning that sparked the Italian Renaissance.

The series, inaugurated by Harvard University Press in 2001, is edited by professor of history James Hankins and sponsored by Harvard’s Center for Italian Renaissance Studies. It takes its name from Villa I Tatti, the estate near Florence of the celebrated Renaissance art connoisseur Bernard Berenson, which he bequeathed to Harvard as a home for the center. Drawing on the expertise of the world’s leading Renaissance scholars, the series already includes 20 volumes (with 40 more commissioned to date) and has helped to transform students’ understanding of a seminal period in Western cultural history.

According to Higginson professor of English literature and professor of comparative literature emeritus Walter Kaiser, former director of Villa I Tatti and a moving force behind the series, it is already making “a major difference to the teaching of Renaissance history of thought” by making available to students texts that were often referred to, but seldom actually read. Hankins notes that “Renaissance Latin is terra incognita still,” and the ITRL has enabled many new explorers to see “the fauna and flora that dwell on...the ‘lost continent’ of Renaissance Latin literature.” Other fields, too, are benefiting

by Adam Kirsch



from the series' rediscoveries. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, a biographical dictionary of female figures from ancient myth and history, has become an important resource for women's studies, proving so popular that it is now available in paperback.

But even for readers outside the academy, the volumes in the ITRL are fascinating and important. They offer a wholly new way of understanding the tremendous intellectual flourishing of the Italian Renaissance, a period we usually encounter only through its visual art and architecture. The very names of Fra Angelico, Botticelli, or Leonardo da Vinci can draw huge crowds to art museums, and their individual styles are still immediately recognizable after more than 500 years. Yet the writings of their contemporaries, the first humanists, are practically unknown, even though they continue to influence our ideas about education and literature.

The Neo-Latin Tomb

THE CURRENT OBSCURITY of Neo-Latin literature is a giant historical irony, since it was precisely for the sake of posthumous fame that the Renaissance humanists chose to write in Latin. In the fourteenth century, Petrarch and Boccaccio were celebrated for their poems and stories in Italian, but they had no faith that

their vernacular works would give them the immortality they craved. After all, by the time Petrarch became the first writer to look back systematically to classic Roman literature for inspiration, Latin had already dominated Europe for two millennia. It was the language of the Roman empire and the Catholic Church, of law and medicine and diplomacy. Naturally, as Hankins writes in an essay on "The Rise and Fall of Neo-Latin," "if an author hoped for a fame that could spread throughout the world and outlast his own time, he would have to write in Latin."

The innovation of the humanists, however, was their determination to vault backward over 15 centuries of linguistic and cultural change, to recapture what they considered the pristine Latin of the classic Roman authors. By studying the poetry of Virgil and Ovid, the historical works of Livy, the letters and oratory of Cicero and Quintilian, the Renaissance humanists hoped to recapture what they believed to be the true spirit of the Augustan age. After a thousand years of what suddenly seemed like darkness, literature would light their way back to Italy's glorious patrimony. As Boccaccio wrote, "I begin to hope and believe that God has had mercy on the Italian name, since I see that His infinite goodness puts souls into the breasts of the Italians like those of the ancients—souls

which seek fame by other means than robbery and violence, but rather on the path of poetry, which makes men immortal."

The Neo-Latin writers represented in the ITRL succeeded in giving Latin a new lease on literary life. Jacob Burckhardt, in his classic nineteenth-century study *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, noted that, "For fully two centuries the humanists acted as if Latin were, and must remain, the only language worthy to be written." Their purified version of Latin spread beyond Italy to become the language of the nascent Republic of Letters all across Europe. But in time, the modernizing spirit that the Renaissance let loose came to see Latin itself as archaic and outmoded. Even as the Neo-Latinists were writing works they hoped would last forever, the modern European languages began to produce their own classics: Rabelais and Montaigne, Shakespeare and Cervantes. Today, it is these vernacular writers whom we read in order to taste the spirit of the Renaissance, and not Latin masters like Angelo Poliziano, Leonardo Bruni, and Leon Battista Alberti. The Neo-Latinists thought they were putting their works into a time capsule; in fact, it turned out to be a tomb.

The career of Francesco Petrarco, known in English as Petrarch, offers a striking example of Latin's reversal of fortune. While Petrarch wrote Italian poems throughout his life, he certainly did not expect that his sonnets and canzoni would be his major claim on posterity. Giannozzo Manetti, the Florentine humanist whose group biography of Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio, *Lives of Three Illustrious Florentine Poets*, is found in the ITRL's volume of his *Biographical Writings*, speaks for his age when he de-



Portrait of Petrarch

© Archivio Iconografico, S.A./Corbis

clares that “among the many remarkable fruits of [Petrarch’s] studies, the principal one was his revival of correctness and good taste in Latin diction, which he brought back to light out of darkness after it had been nearly defunct for over a thousand years.”

If anything, Manetti suggests, Petrarch’s works in Italian actually made him less respectable in the eyes of his contemporaries. Manetti, a fifteenth-century Florentine humanist who also served his city as a politician and soldier, says that he wanted to write about these local celebrities in order to rescue them from their bad reputation among the learned—which they earned by writing too well in Italian. “While the common people, who are illiterate and uneducated, hold these famous men in the highest esteem for their intellect and erudition,” Manetti complains, “the erudite and the learned, on the other hand, despise and dismiss the vernacular writings at which they excelled as if they were worth little or nothing. So it happens that they are praised to the skies by illiterate and uneducated people, whereas learned men take up their poems or their stories, if ever, only to amuse themselves.”

The negligible, merely amusing works Manetti is referring to, of course, include the *Divine Comedy*, the “Sonnets to Laura,” and the *Decameron*, now some of the most canonical works in Western literature. Far more creditable, to writers and readers of neo-Latin literature, were Petrarch’s manifold services to the Latin language. He did not just write a Latin epic, the *Africa*, and many *epistolae metricae*, or letters in verse. He was also a pioneering textual editor, responsible for the first modern critical edition of Livy, and a manuscript-hunter who discovered many unknown letters of Cicero.

When a Good Book Was Hard to Find

INDEED, ONE OF THE MOST MOVING THINGS in Petrarch’s life and work is his sense of the precious rarity of good books—the opposite of our own postmodern sense of literature’s crushing abundance. In the fourteenth century, before the study of Greek had been reintroduced into western Europe, Petrarch made an abortive attempt to learn the language—hoping, as Manetti says, “that the great quantity of books written in that language would finally satisfy his intense desire to read, since the regular and constant perusal of Latin texts had not done so.” Before the invention of printing and the rediscovery of many ancient authors, finding good new books to read was an ordeal of a kind we can hardly conceive in the age of amazon.com. Manuscripts first had to be tracked down, often in dusty monastic libraries, and then copied by hand. The British historian Lisa Jardine, whose fascinating book *Worldly Goods* explores the material culture of the Renaissance, gives a telling example of the expense and labor involved in assembling a library. Cosimo de’ Medici, the ruler of Florence and one of the richest men in Europe, gave his agent Vespasiano da Bisticci an unlimited budget for books: “[A]s there was no lack of money,” the latter reported, “I engaged forty-five scribes and completed two hundred volumes in twenty-two months.”

No wonder Petrarch never had enough to read, as his modern biographer, Ernest Hatch Wilkins, Ph.D. 1910, records. “I am possessed by one insatiable passion, which I cannot restrain—nor

would I if I could...I cannot get enough books,” he wrote to a relative in 1346. And the rarity of books made them precious in a way that we can only dimly grasp today. Petrarch’s paean to his books still defines the humanities’ most elevated ideal of reading as a communion of souls: “Gold, silver, gems, fine raiment, a marble palace, well-cultivated fields, paintings, a splendidly caparisoned horse—such things as these give one nothing more than a mute and superficial pleasure. Books delight us through and through, they converse with us, they give us good advice;

One of the most moving things in Petrarch’s life and work is his sense of the precious rarity of good books—the opposite of our own postmodern sense of literature’s crushing abundance.

they become living and lively companions to us.” Wilkins notes that Petrarch’s reverence for books affected his entire household, including his illiterate steward, Raymond Monet. “Though Raymond could not read,” Wilkins writes, “he loved the books, and had learned to know them by name. When Petrarch put a book into his hands he would press it to his heart, and sometimes, in a low voice, he would talk to its author.”

But as Petrarch’s own work in the ITRL shows, the life of the Renaissance humanist was not all quiet hours in libraries. The volume of Petrarch’s *Invectives* collects four masterpieces of vituperation, the poet’s contributions to the savage literary controversies that were typical of his age. “Of all men who ever formed a class,” Burckhardt noted regretfully, the humanists “had the least sense of their common interests, and least respected what there was of this sense. All means were lawful, if one of them saw a chance of supplanting another.” Just how far they were willing to go can be seen in Petrarch’s *Invectives against a Physician*, in which he repeatedly mocks a papal doctor for spending his life among stool samples: “You wish to speak about any subject whatsoever, and forget your own profession which, in case you don’t know, means inspecting urine and other things that shame forbids me to mention.”

Learning versus Piety

MORE ENLIGHTENING, if not quite as pungent, is Petrarch’s *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*, which goes beyond invective to become, in the words of editor David Marsh, Ph.D. ’78, “an intellectual autobiography and a cultural manifesto that shaped the course of Italian Renaissance humanism.” The provocation for Petrarch’s outburst is seemingly trivial: one evening in 1366, after what must have been a bibulous dinner, a group of four high-born Venetian intellectuals held a mock-trial of the poet and came to the verdict that he was “certainly a good man but a scholar of poor merit.” When the insult reached his ears, it provoked him to write this pamphlet, which, in between jibes and insults, engages in a serious inquiry into the relationship between education and morality.

In this short work, Petrarch is perhaps the first writer to address one of the major intellectual problems of the modern world: the sense, later embodied in the myth of Faust, that knowledge might be incompatible with goodness. The more educated men become, Petrarch laments, the less likely they are to remain pious. Even today, there are fundamentalist believers who echo his complaint that, in the intellectual world, “no one is a man of learning unless he is also a heretic and a madman, and above all, aggressively perverse.” And although Petrarch was himself one of the most learned men of his day, he maintains that he would rather be known as a good Christian than as a great classicist: “If You choose to grant me nothing else,” he prays, “let it at least be my portion to be a good man. This I cannot be unless I greatly love and devoutly worship You. I was born for this, and not for learning. If learning alone is granted us, it puffs up and ruins, and does not edify. It becomes a gleaming shackle of the soul, a wearisome pursuit, and a noisy burden.”

In several of the other volumes in the ITRL, we see just how acute the conflict between learning and piety could become. It was inevitable that scholars who dedicated themselves to resurrecting the spirit of antiquity should run up against questions of faith and morals; after all, though the humanists were all at least nominally Christians, the writers they worshipped were pagans and freethinkers. There were several popular techniques for defusing the theological dynamite hidden in the Greco-Roman classics. Petrarch, for instance, cited the example of the ancient Israelites, who in the Book of Exodus were commanded to plunder

the Egyptians’ gold before making their way to freedom. So, too, Petrarch wrote, pious Christian writers can despoil the pagan poets of their beautiful language, and use it to serve the true god.

In the work of Leon Battista Alberti, the conflict between pagan and Christian worldviews is not so easily reconciled. Alberti is best known as the Italian Renaissance’s leading theorist of art and architecture: the first to give a mathematical definition of the laws of perspective and to revive the classical aesthetic of Vitruvius. More important still, Alberti’s many achievements helped to define what we now think of as the Renaissance Man: the supremely well-rounded individual, expert at horsemanship and literature, painting and oratory, engineering and politics. Jacob Burckhardt used him as a living symbol of the Renaissance: “In all by which praise is won,” he wrote, “Leon Battista was from his childhood the first.”

But Alberti’s love of the classics, philosophy, and worldly fame also led him into conflict with traditional Christian ideas about piety and virtue. That tension is both concealed and expressed in his satirical novel *Momus*, one of the most entertaining books in the ITRL. In telling the adventures of Momus, the Greek god of discord and criticism, Alberti composed a rollicking picaresque that respects no sacred cows, social or religious. The long and complicated story is set in ancient Greece, allowing Alberti to avoid any direct confrontation with the Christian faith. But in *Momus*’s barbed, troublemaking speeches, Alberti ventriloquizes some explosive religious doubts. At one point, Momus, having assumed the shape of a human philosopher, declares “that the gods’ power

was nothing other than a vain, useless, and trifling fabrication of superstitious minds. He said that the gods were not to be found, especially gods who took any interest in human affairs.” Another disputatious philosopher offers a powerfully modern argument against belief in divine goodness:

But from time to time it happens that I’m able to doubt why it is that we call the heavenly gods ‘fathers’ and ‘most holy’....Who could ever bear without emotion—even in the case of depraved children—that any father, however angry, would permit those whom he wishes to be considered his own children to suffer a worse lot in life than that of the greater part of the brute animals?

Change “the heavenly gods” to “God the Father,” and the argument is equally potent against Christianity. Indeed, as Petrarch complained, the humanists generally had little use for the Christian virtues—humility, piety, self-abnegation—which had been praised (if not always practiced) in Europe since the Dark Ages. In their rediscovery of the classic authors, humanists were also rediscovering a different ethical ideal, which held that the highest goal of human life is to win glory through famous deeds.

Nowhere is this clash of value systems more striking than in the life and work of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, the humanist poet and diplomat who would eventually ascend the papal throne as Pius II. Before he became pope, Piccolomini was as worldly as any of the humanist intellectuals Petrarch despised. The ITRL contains his play *Chyrsis* (in the volume *Humanist Comedies*), an extremely racy farce about prostitutes and their clients, and his essay on “The Education of Boys” (in the volume *Humanist Educational Treatises*), which ringingly asserts that “there is nothing men possess on earth more precious than intellect.”



Portrait of Leon Battista Alberti, c. 1460
©Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Most fascinating of all is Pius's autobiographical work, the *Commentaries*, whose first volume has appeared in ITRL. In this memoir, the only one ever written by a sitting pope, Pius gives an absolutely worldly, even profane, account of the inside workings of Vatican politics. He seldom even pretends that his ascent to the papacy was an act of divine providence; he is too obviously fascinated by the sordid world of high politics, and too proud of his own skill in navigating it. The scene in which Pius, then a promising diplomat, plots his future career with the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III, could have come directly out of a back room at Tammany Hall:

One day, Aeneas was out riding with the emperor. Climbing the ridge of Monte Cimino above Viterbo, the emperor summoned Aeneas to his side. "Now look," he said, "We are going to Rome. It looks like you are going to be a cardinal. And your luck won't stop there. You're going to the top. The throne of Peter awaits you. When you get there, make sure you don't forget me.

Pius is too much a creature of his age, however, to believe that he ought to conceal his thirst for glory. At the very beginning of the *Commentaries*, he acknowledges that, in strictly theological terms, ambition is a vain error, for whether you end up in heaven or hell, earthly fame can do you no good: "In wretchedness there is no pleasure, not even from renown; and the perfect happiness of the blessed is neither increased by the praise of mortals nor diminished by their scorn. Why then do we strive so hard to achieve the glory of a good name?" he asks. But that he does strive for glory, Pius cannot deny: "there can be no doubt," he continues, "that the living take pleasure in the glory that is theirs today, and hope it will continue after death. It is this which sustains the most brilliant intellects and (even more than the hope of a celestial life, which once begun will never end) encourages and invigorates the human spirit."

As this passage shows, the idea that ambition could be a noble spur, rather than a sinful snare, was sufficiently novel that all the humanists felt the need to defend it. In his essay on "The Character and Studies Befitting a Freeborn Youth," also in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, Pier Paolo Vergerio notes that, "Generally speaking, the first mark of a liberal temper is that it is motivated by eagerness for praise and inflamed by love of glory; this is the source of a certain noble envy and a striving without hatred for praise and excellence." In his biography of Dante, Gianozzo Manetti concedes that the illustrious Florentine "was perhaps more eager for honor and glory than would seem appropriate to a great and serious philosopher. Yet despite their many writings on despising fame," he insists, "even great philosophers and stern theologians have not managed to remain immune to the natural desire for glory, yielding to what people call its incredible sweetness." And one of Petrarch's best known poems, the canzone *I' vo pensando*, is devoted to that same sweetness:

A thought that is sweet and sharp abides in my soul, a wearying and a delightful burden. It fills my heart with desire and feeds it with hope, for when I think of glorious



and generous fame I know not whether I freeze or burn, or whether I be pale and gaunt; and if I slay it, it springs up again stronger than ever. This thought has been growing in me ever since I slept in swaddling clothes, and I fear that it will go down with me into the tomb.

If Petrarch, Pius, Alberti, and the other major writers in the ITRL could look down on the world today, they would surely be shocked at how badly their plans for posthumous fame had gone awry. Their guarantee of immortality, Latin, has itself become a dead language. More, the Western world is currently in the midst of questioning all their cherished assumptions about the value of literature, education, and the *studia humanitatis*. No longer can we so ardently embrace Vergerio's prescription for human flourishing: "What way of life, then, can be more delightful, or indeed more beneficial, than to read and write all the time?" But the spirits of the humanists would certainly rejoice to see that, in the I Tatti Renaissance Library, their Latin masterpieces are being given the chance to reach a new audience, and to make their names live again. ▢

Contributing editor Adam Kirsch '97 is the book critic of the New York Sun and the author, most recently, of *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*.