

Introduction



The essays collected in this volume are the products of various occasions and are also widely separated in time. Consequently they cannot be considered by the standards of unified discourse; and yet I would venture to claim they all share a single theme.

Such a unity is notable in the title, especially in its boundaries and chronological parameter, “from Petrarch to Valla.” It is also important to clarify from the beginning that I do not use the term “humanism” in a generic and indeterminate sense, and still less according to a standard definition that presumes one version more “authentic” than another. The studies here are of a historical nature and therefore incompatible with standardized and unhistorical paradigms, however valuable and useful they may be. In other words, if these studies are not systematic, and if they follow partial points of view wherever they lead, they are nevertheless arranged according to a specific perspective that culminates in Valla and finds its necessary antecedents first in the work of Petrarch and then in the elaborations of his legacy by Florentine humanists (primarily Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini), and to some extent by humanists in Venice and especially in Lombardy, such as Pier Candido Decembrio and Cosma Raimondi, to whom I pay some attention.¹ My primary aim is to identify an ideological movement that develops out of Petrarch’s work and that is given its most precise and structured configuration by the aforementioned authors of the first half of the fifteenth century.

To speak of defining an ideological movement naturally implies pro-

posing a method suitable to the task. The links between humanist texts and their sources are not always evident at first sight. According to traditional scholarship, it would seem that each text has a story of its own, and that, on account of this, the modern exegete ought to limit him- or herself to an investigation of what I shall call the vertical ties connecting a given text to its classical sources. The underlying assumption of this approach is that it is important to ascertain the level of knowledge of the “ancient” and the capacity to reproduce it. No less meaningful and important, however, are what I call the horizontal ties linking contemporary texts or those of the same general historical period. An analysis of these relationships is more difficult, and not only because of the dearth of lexicons and in some cases even of edited texts. A reference of this kind was almost always left implicit, being signaled to the sensitive reader by the allusion to, or literal citation of, certain expressions and characteristic connections; it can be conducted on the model of a common citation of an ancient author, or on an original expression; it can signify agreement as much as an elaboration (even radical) of some propositions, or even a disagreement and a reversal of thesis. In essence, it is a fabric of cultural and ideological relations that can be reconstructed by textual comparison more effectively than with epistolary or other kinds of documentation, if they exist. Such a methodology should at the very least make it possible to map the most fundamental features of an intellectual movement, and thereby transcend mere static paradigms and the search for general principles.

For a single example, only once in Poggio Bracciolini’s letters is the work of Petrarch mentioned, according to the index in Harth’s edition. And yet, checking from his letters two other explicit occurrences of his name, we learn that Poggio had carefully acquired Petrarch’s opera, and that he saw in him a model of the self-taught man. Therefore, Petrarch was quite present in the background of Poggio’s work, and a comparison of Poggio’s writings with Petrarch’s comments provides us with an essential criterion of interpretation, not only of Poggio, but also of his contemporaries who will be discussed here. Like Poggio, they too, for their good reasons, were accustomed to using Petrarch’s name only infrequently and reluctantly.

Such insistence on Petrarch’s influence also requires the explanation of an important term in the title of this collection, that is, the concept of “secularization.” This term is not intended to denote any kind of an

all-embracing *Weltanschauung*. Still less is it to be understood as the opposite of “religiousness,” even though in the sphere of secularized culture religious devotion seems weakened and at times even absent. This investigation is not concerned with religious sentiments (or even with those irreligious), but rather with indirect cultural aspects. The opposite of “secularization,” as it is defined here, would be “prescriptive,” to be understood in the sense of a culture that obeys canons established by the common agreement of ecclesiastical, ethical, and educational institutions. Petrarch’s great accomplishment was to point the way (in the words of Leonardo Bruni, a good witness, “he opened the path”) for a new culture that could break out of the authoritative and publicly sanctioned structures of late scholasticism, that is, of a culture especially intent on the systemization, or itemization, of inherited knowledge and age-old norms. Viewed in this light, Petrarch’s famous and highly personalized catalogue of “my own favorite books” reveals its amazing potential of opposition and provocation.

Chapter 2 treats this theme in detail. While it is a tentative experiment in methodology, the chapter can be considered both the centerpiece of this collection and the essential path for essays that follow, for illustrating and verifying analytically the approach I propose in this essay. It is this trail that links Petrarch’s discussion on the Church Fathers with his scornful condemnation of Valerius Maximus and, with that condemnation, of the contemporary technique of the *exemplum* and current styles of preaching (the same that Poggio pursued in his polemic against San Bernardino); but also, more generally, his scorn of the modules of ancient ethical stereotypes, on which Valla would later exercise his radical criticism.

The real dilemma was not so much the opposition of an ancient abstract paradigm and a Christian one but rather the manner of confronting authority *tout court*. It finds its clearest expression in Valla’s *De vero bono*, in the context of the twofold and parallel debate about Cicero and Augustine alike, in which I presume to recognize the interpretive key to this controversial work.

Actually the Christian tradition (and primarily the Church Fathers), precisely because it held canonical authority, was the most direct target of the polemic. It constituted that very untrespassable barrier, according Archbishop Pizolpasso’s warnings to Decembrio (“whoever assails a wall he does strike his own head himself”); while Decembrio answered op-

posing his own truth, which “is to be given preference over all authorities.”² However, as we can easily understand, such polemical themes as a rule were disguised, as a tactical device to avoid indictment but also for the more intrinsic reason of an ongoing ambivalence. As a point of reference, Augustine is no less important for Petrarch than he is for Valla. Nobody could fail to acknowledge that the Augustine of the *Confessions* (as well as the *Enarratio in Psalmos*) was essential to Petrarch; but no one could claim that the character of Augustinus called upon to be Petrarch’s interlocutor in the *Secretum* is the same *Augustinus magister* of the ecclesiastical tradition. The dilemma would be found again in an even more radical form in the work of Valla a century later. Here, a kind of retaliatory exchange takes place between classical philosophy and Augustine’s “Christian doctrine,” resulting in the elimination of the entire doctrinal and ontological system of each, according to the old controversial device by Christian apologists of *proprio mucrone confodere*, piercing someone with his own sword. Therefore, it would be more accurate to say that such an approach to Augustine (although we could go so far as to include other Christian authorities, not to mention Sacred Scripture itself) is aimed at challenging the trends of contemporary scholasticism. Only by a misinterpretation—of both the matter and its Latin expression—one would state that the *studiorum summa conformitas* that, according to a Petrarch’s saying, would link him with the authoritative Augustinian friar Dionigi of Borgo San Sepolcro is to be understood as a declaration of the congeniality of studies. This way one would confuse a thing with its opposite: an individualized culture, liberated from enforced cultural institutionalism, and a typical and eminent exegete of the “great authorities” of scholasticism, such as Dionigi typically was. Once again, an even more pronounced discrepancy (and a greater confusion) would arise when Valla’s interventions in theological matters were compared to, or even identified with, the official and principally Augustinian-based theology of the age.

If a clear distinction is not made between scholasticism (and the related tendency in the late Middle Ages to gather encyclopedic collections of knowledge) and the rival trends of humanism, the contrast would presumably look like one of competing disciplines within the broader ambit of a common scholarly institution. The eminent individuals who constitute the focus of the essays in this book were indeed indisputable protagonists of an influential and important intellectual movement, but it was

a movement of a noninstitutional nature. The opposition Valla encountered—and ultimately failed to overcome in his attempt to introduce into a common scholarly background a substitute for the traditional scholastic method—is a good indication of how severe the break had become. This is a culture of few but distinguished initiates who coexist in various ways with a much broader institutional base rich in various evolutionary solutions and compromises, as well as with a more traditional scholasticism and other more or less related and concurrent trends of ecclesiastical and theological studies. An ancient text recovered in its entirety, like Quintilian, for example, can be well-circulated and become a general resource for the teaching of rhetoric, but not for the reading and the very personal conclusions Valla draws from it. These conclusions, therefore, should be contemplated in quite another setting, especially in those passages where Quintilian's name is cited authoritatively by Valla primarily for polemical purposes, in order to justify more boldly personal propositions.

For these very reasons, the proposal to reduce the dissension to a mere difference of opinion among disciplines and methods of teaching—authors against the arts, rhetoric against dialectic—cannot be accepted without serious reservations. Even more misleading would be to assume the polemic against scholastic Aristotelianism as the main feature of the humanist movement, to the point of furnishing its real identity. The anti-Aristotelian polemical motives from the time of Petrarch to Valla's are well-known, and this is not the place to review them. Aristotle is twisted into a symbolic representation of the most arid doctrine of the new dialecticians and is thus contrasted with the copious Ciceronian eloquence. Such is the characterization Petrarch presents in his invective *Contra eum qui maledixit Italie* and elsewhere. Valla echoes him, in typically emphatic fashion, in *De vero bono*, setting himself against the “wretched and pallid dialecticians,” so that even Marcus Tullius would be too much of a “philosopher” and not enough of an “orator.” Yet no anti-Aristotelian polemic can explain Petrarch's attacks on the Papal curia, on Patristic compilations, on the “labyrinth” of canonists and theologians, and on Valerius Maximus and religious preaching. Moreover, however ingenious the interpretation, no “rhetorical methodology,” not even the most daring, can be linked to Valla's doctrine that “pleasure” is the sole motive for human action. The “humanists” (and I use this general term reluctantly and only for convenience) were in turn reproached by their opponents for their rhetorical facility, to be understood negatively as a lack of speculative

rigor. Thus, Alonso of Burgos accused Bruni of using rhetoric to relativize the sound principles of ethics, while from a juridical and philosophical standpoint Lauro Quirini rebuked Poggio in similar fashion for relativizing the idea of “nobility,” a concept certainly more profound “than could be discussed by eloquent men.” Once again, however, beyond the commonplace (typified since antiquity) of an opposition between rhetoric and philosophy, there is something else: a distrust of doctrinaire principles on the one hand, and the accusation of relativizing the norms of individual and social conduct on the other. In short, Aristotle is used to personify the scholastic system, in spite of the fact that such system by far transcends him, and, moreover, its origins largely predate the rise of Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century. The anti-Aristotelian and antidialectical polemics are also a way to conceal and to legitimize the transgressive will to measure themselves, more or less boldly, against the very sources of scholasticism, the “great authors” and the Church Fathers. A historiographical investigation, therefore, should identify this hidden side, and attention to the practice of implicit reference will also be essential to the purpose.

The clearest trait of an intellectual movement that asserts itself with the insignia of its anti-traditional challenge is provided by the mutual connection of a truly Petrarchan imprint of three principle components: the linguistic-exegetic concern (roughly the ground of traditional trivium), and the historiographical and moralistic concerns in their various mutual connections. Surprisingly enough, the last of these, morality, has received the least attention and will consequently enjoy a privileged position in these essays. They will briefly consider its essential formulations in Petrarch but will concentrate especially on Poggio, perhaps the most representative author on the subject, and will conclude with an investigation of Valla’s radical conclusions. The piece titled “The Consciousness of the Latin Language” (chapter 1) may be considered an exception to the principal topic of this collection, inasmuch as it was written at an earlier time, differing in both occasion and priority of interests. Its conclusions, nevertheless, are directly relevant to the fundamental concept of secularization. It not only deals with a humanist consideration of language that goes so far as to affirm its independence from the normative categories of grammar and rhetoric of the scholastic tradition; also, and more importantly, this independence goes along with the rejection (especially by Valla) of the linguistic ontology of the Isidorean lexicographic tradition.

(These issues are highlighted in the *Postscriptum* discussion concerning the recent book of M. Tavoni, not published here.)³

As I wrote above, I have not intended to propose a paradigm of humanism in my discussion of the humanist movement from Petrarch to Valla; indeed, quite the opposite. Existing simultaneously and in competition is a patristic humanism that finds its most authoritative voice in Ambrogio Traversari, as well as a genuine expression in the letters of Francesco Pizolpasso.⁴ But if only in passing, another important aspect in the developments in humanism must be hinted at here. There was a sudden interruption in continuity of the most radical issues that are the focus of this book. The principal motives can be recognized in Valla's consequential radicalism, in the subsequent inquisitorial trial of 1444, and then, on a broader scale, in the papal restoration by Nicholas V (1447–1455), who aimed at both promoting and controlling cultural initiatives. This will be seen, through the essays presented in this volume, in the tone of impotence and uneasiness that appears in Poggio's writings in old age, or, on the other hand, in the reactions provoked by Valla's *De vero bono*. For a fuller consideration of these issues, I should like to refer to my own summarizing essay of the developments of Quattrocento humanism published elsewhere.⁵ Therefore it would be misleading to look upon the cultural and ideological features discussed in these essays from the perspective of the latter half of the Quattrocento and its various trends as, for example, the textual philology of Poliziano, the ethical treatises of Pontano, Paolo Cortesi's rhetorical Ciceronianism, or even Giorgio Valla's Platonizing encyclopaedism. In other words, although decisive and influential in various ways, the humanist movement represents on a whole and in its most original motives an interrupted tradition, so that the uncertainties and lacunae existing in modern historiographical interpretations have been in some way affected by its rapid development, followed by an equally sudden interruption and realignment within an orderly discipline (Italian culture of the late Quattrocento is, in fact, largely characterized, as its principle feature, by a general program of reorganizing school-teaching).

In conclusion, let me recount a personal experience. I was first introduced to the themes treated in these essays through the edition of some of Poggio's unedited writings, to be published as an appendix to the reprint of the *Opera omnia*. There I observed Poggio's way of dealing with citations from sacred and profane authors. Before the publication of the reprint, it had been almost impossible to consult Poggio's works outside

of a few specialized libraries: an indication, without a doubt, of a general lack of interest as well as of critical and historiographical concern. I began with Poggio and with Poggio I should like to conclude. P. O. Kristeller, among others, has observed that every scholar, however great his adherence to objectivity, cannot help but bring with him some of his own preferences. It is not my task to judge my own objectivity; nevertheless, by concerning myself with an author surely polemical and militant, yet fighting for an ideal of independence, colloquial attitude, and tolerance, I take pride in having assumed the defense of a good, indeed, an excellent, cause.