RENAISSANCE HUMANISM: THE PURSUIT
OF ELOQUENCE *

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The difficulties and dangers of reducing Renaissance humanism to some single formula have become increasingly apparent. Renaissance humanism contained many schools of thought, and it is clear that the differences and changes within humanism must be examined both in themselves and in their relation to particular historical situations in order to gain a true appreciation of the humanist movement. But even while stressing the essential elements of diversity, it is possible to discern some constant features in the tradition of Renaissance humanism, certain basic presuppositions and attitudes which identify the movement as a whole. To suggest such a common denominator is not to maintain that one may thereby explain humanism—for this cannot be done by treating the history of ideas in isolation—nor to claim that one may thus assess the full significance of any individual humanist. Nonetheless, some understanding of what makes humanists alike may provide a meaningful background to the analysis of humanist texts and can throw into sharper focus the manner in which various schools of humanism do differ.

Modern commentators have too often distinguished between "form" and "substance" in their consideration of humanist literature. In their anxiety to penetrate to the significant ideas of humanism, they have regarded these as separable from the formal structures within which those ideas were expressed. So, paradoxically, the conventions which, to the humanists, created an intelligible and constant frame of reference through which they could communicate clearly with their audience have been cast aside by a later age as irrelevant to the exposition and comprehension of their mode of thought. As a result, the particular assumptions underlying the humanists' own stress on form have not always been treated sufficiently as an integral dimension of their thought. It is curious that many interpreters who have pointed out the humanists' insistence on reading classical works as a whole and in context should not have drawn from such assertions the conclusion that the humanists intended their works to be approached in the same spirit; that their writings were, perhaps, designed with that specific expectation in mind.

It may be objected that much humanist writing is wordy, tedious, repetitive, so that the historian of ideas can justifiably abstract what

* The present essay is a revised and expanded version of a paper delivered in a session dealing with humanism during the meetings of the American Historical Association at New York in December 1960. In annotating the paper, I have made no attempt to provide a comprehensive bibliography, but only to indicate immediate citations and references.
is really interesting. Or it may be objected that much humanist writing cannot be taken seriously as literature. But in the analysis of the humanists' thought and work, their pretensions must be considered, their stated purposes kept in mind. To that end, it is essential to understand the humanists' reiterated claim, that theirs was the pursuit of eloquence. That claim, indeed, reveals the identifying characteristic of Renaissance humanism. The bond which united humanists, no matter how far separated in outlook or in time, was a conception of eloquence and its uses. Through it, they shared a common intellectual method and a broad agreement on the value of that method. Classical rhetoric—or classical rhetoric as interpreted and adapted in the Renaissance—constituted the main source for both. It provided the humanists with a body of precepts for the effective communication of ideas and, equally important, with a set of principles which asserted the central rôle of rhetorical skill and achievement in human affairs.

In pointing to the rhetorical concerns of Renaissance humanism, it is not necessary to conclude, as has sometimes been done, that humanist writing was "merely rhetorical" or that humanism was a "merely literary" movement. The term "rhetoric" must be divorced from its pejorative associations. By "rhetoric" the humanists did not intend an empty pomposity, a willful mendacity, a love of display for its own sake, an extravagant artificiality, a singular lack of originality, or a necessary subordination of substance to form and ornament. Nor did the humanists identify rhetoric with "sophistry" in the popular sense, as the specious manipulation of language and argument for purposes of deception. They distinguished carefully between "true eloquence" and "sophistry," perceiving in the latter a perversion, not a consequence, of the former. True eloquence, according to the humanists, could arise only out of a harmonious union between wisdom and style; its aim was to guide men toward virtue and worthwhile goals, not to mislead them for vicious or trivial purposes. It was this conception of eloquence which the humanists placed in opposition

1 Among recent interpreters of humanism, P. O. Kristeller in particular has pointed to the importance of rhetoric. See especially his Renaissance Thought (New York, 1961), I, 9-13, 19, 22-23; V ("Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance"), 8ff. The indebtedness of the present essay to Professor Kristeller's work is very great indeed. Among the specialized studies dealing with humanist rhetoric and related topics, the following have been of most value: A. Buck, Italienische Dichtungslehre vom Mittelalter bis zum Ausgang der Renaissance (Tübingen, 1952); D. Cantimori, "Rhetoric and Politics in Italian Humanism," Journal of the Warburg Institute, I (1937-1938), 83-102; A. Galletti, L'Eloquenza (Milan, 1938); E. Garin, "Note su alcuni aspetti delle Retoriche rinascimentali e sulla 'Retorica' del Patrizi," Testi Umanistici su la Retorica, ed. Garin, Rossi, & Vasoli (Rome & Milan, 1953), 7-36; R. Sabbadini, II Metodo degli Umanisti (Florence, 1920), and Storia del Ciceronianismo (Turin, 1885); C. Trabalza, La Critica letteraria, II (Milan, 1915); G. Vallee, "Retorica medievale e retorica umanistica," Delta, N.S., No. 2 (1952), 39-57; K. Vossler, Poetische Theorien in der italienischen Frührenaissance (Berlin, 1900).
to scholastic philosophy. Scholasticism they criticized both on aesthetic grounds and for its failure to concentrate on "wisdom," on really essential matters. In this controversy, the humanists were not contrasting one finished philosophical system with another, but neither were they simply opposing literary form to philosophical substance.

Professor Kristeller has demonstrated conclusively that the interpretation of humanism as a new system of thought locked in mortal combat with scholasticism cannot be maintained. Systematic philosophy, as he points out, was precisely what the earlier humanists did not profess; their interest lay rather in the realm of the studia humanitatis, or of the liberal arts, understood generally as comprising the studies of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Hence the term "humanist" originally had reference to this preoccupation with the "humanities" and was first used to describe the professional teacher of the studia humanitatis. Professor Kristeller has argued also—and here his emphasis seems to me somewhat misleading—that in their capacity as teachers and practitioners of this largely literary culture, the humanists belonged to and continued an older profession, that of the medieval dictatores; that their concerns can be understood to a considerable extent as an outgrowth of their calling as rhetoricians; and that their contribution lay not in the creation of a new field of activity, but rather in their insistence on the cultivation of a more classical style, on the imitation of classical models, within the forms already prescribed and followed by their medieval predecessors. Thus the humanists emerge as a professional group whose activities and ideas can be explained as a function of their calling, and their conflicts with scholastics may be seen as typical academic disputes between disciplines which were always struggling to achieve a larger jurisdiction without questioning one another's existence.

That Renaissance humanism falls into the larger rhetorical tradition of the West, a tradition which persisted in the Middle Ages, is beyond doubt. The humanists did not invent rhetoric, and many of their ideas, including their stress on classicism, had been anticipated in the thirteenth-century ars dictaminis. It is true, too, that the rhetorical tradition carries with it certain kinds of writing, certain types of educational activities, a tendency toward certain beliefs. But with internal variations accompanying that tradition there may come important shifts in the specific convictions which define the intellectual outlook of its adherents. Those variations may not be so great objectively as they appeared subjectively to those who developed


3 Kristeller, op. cit., 100ff.

4 Ibid., 113-116.
them, but the subjective consciousness of novelty is of some historical significance. To say that the humanists merely introduced a more classical tone into a fixed series of activities does not indicate why it appeared so essential to them to return to the classical models of the studia humanitatis, or why they failed to recognize, indeed disclaimed, continuity with medieval practice. To suggest that their attitudes are explicable in terms of their professional concerns, which are naturally in competition with those of other professions, does not explain how they articulated those concerns, how and why in a particular age men should have turned to rhetoric and claimed for it a special educational and cultural rôle.

A given Renaissance humanist might be in the technical sense a professional rhetorician; the humanist as such need not be. Certainly the term "humanist," as first applied in the later fifteenth and earlier sixteenth centuries, referred specifically to the professional teachers of the humanities, and these teachers often occupied chairs of rhetoric. Yet many who participated in the humanist movement would not come under this description. Before the word "humanist" gained general currency, the humanists were referring to themselves and to their colleagues by other names—sometimes "philosophers," often "poets." Most frequently, however, they called themselves "orators." By this, they meant not that they made a living by the teaching or practice of oratory, but that they wished to be known as men of eloquence. An "orator" could have made his career in government, in the Church, in leisured study and collecting, in teaching or writing or scholarship. He might have written poetry or history or commentaries on classical texts; he might have composed treatises on moral or political philosophy; he might have devoted himself to translation or editing. Usually, of course, his work included a variety of these activities. The orator was, by definition and inclination, a non-specialist. Further, the humanist's attack on scholasticism and his defense of the studies of the humanities represented more than a struggle for academic precedence, even though it was not all-out war of displacement. While the humanists did not oppose a new systematic philosophy to the systems of the scholastics, they did oppose to the method of the scholastics another method, and to the values which they believed implied in scholastic method, a different ideal of the aims of knowledge and debate.

The Renaissance humanists believed that education should equip a man to lead a good life, and that therefore the function of knowledge was not merely to demonstrate the truth of given precepts, but to impel people toward their acceptance and application. They believed also that men could be moulded most effectively, and perhaps only, through the art of eloquence, which endowed the precept with life,

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8 See, for example, B. Fazio's De viris illustribus liber (ed. L. Mebus, Florence, 1745), in which Fazio classifies the majority of the humanists of his age under the heading "De oratoribus."
immediacy, persuasive effect, and which stimulated a man's will as well as informing his reason. In attacking scholastic logic and scholastic Latin, the humanists were condemning at once an attitude toward knowledge which appeared to stress the abstract and intellectual, to have no true utility or direct relevance for human life, and criticizing what they regarded as the failure of the scholastics to communicate important truths with persuasive effect. The humanists had a horror of abstract speculation carried on for its own sake, of specialization which led to absorption in purely "theoretical" questions or in the elaboration of exclusively "technical" concerns. Their orientation was toward rhetoric rather than logic, ethics rather than metaphysics; their interest lay in questions of education rather than of epistemology, in the subject-matter of literature rather than of natural philosophy. The humanists were contrasting a general and practical culture to the professional and academic activities and attitudes which, in their interpretation, were symbolized by scholasticism. Whether their understanding of scholasticism was correct is, for the moment, immaterial. What matters is the image of scholasticism which they built up and the ideal of eloquence which they proposed to substitute. The central point of this contrast was formulated in terms of the "merely intellectual" on the one side, the "actively persuasive" on the other.

Always, in comparing and preferring the classical author of eloquence to the scholastic philosopher, the humanist states that the first not only makes one see what virtue is, but makes one feel and will to practice it. "The object of the will," Petrarch maintained, "is to be good; that of the intellect is truth. It is better to will the good than to know the truth." Against the Aristotle of the scholastics, from whom one may gain a greater learning, but not a more intense desire for virtue, Petrarch asserts the claims of the great Roman authors, Cicero, Seneca, and Horace in particular:

... they stamp and drive deep into the heart the sharpest and most ardent stings of speech, by which the lazy are startled, the ailing are kindled, and the sleepy aroused, the sick healed, and the prostrate raised, and those who stick to the ground lifted up to the highest thoughts and to honest desire. Then earthly things become vile; the aspect of vice stirs up an enormous hatred of vicious life; virtue and 'the shape, and as it were, the face of honesty,' are beheld by the inmost eye 'and inspire miraculous love' of wisdom and of themselves, 'as Plato says.'


7 Ibid., 103.

Erasmus, in his colloquy The Godly Feast, had one of the characters express the same idea:

... I would rather let all of Scotus and others of this sort perish, than the books of a single Cicero or Plutarch. Not that I condemn the former entirely, but I perceive I am helped by reading the others, whereas I rise from the reading of these somehow less enthusiastic about true virtue, but more disputatious.9

For the humanists, it was of course the studies of the liberal arts which affected will as well as intellect in the appropriate way. These studies had been given eloquent expression in classical literature; they were concretely embodied in a series of texts. The ancient texts as they stood proved, to the humanist, that knowledge and eloquence were necessarily related. The studia humanitatis could be pursued through the masterpieces of the past. Their relevance to human experience needed no demonstration. Their capacity to teach men, to spur them to achievement, had been tested. While individually the studia humanitatis possessed different subject-matters and aims, together they represented an interconnected whole, sharing the common purposes and methods of eloquence.10 What was needed was a return to those sources which exemplified the humanists' ideals. The liberal arts were to be re-endowed with eloquence through the imitation of the classical models. They would become again the basis of a general education and of an integrated culture, replacing the arid specialization of contemporary learning. The modern orator, reviving ancient tradition, would become a teacher of life as well as of letters.11

attolluntur; ita ut terrena iam sordeant et conspecta vitia ingens sui odium, virtus internis spectata oculis formaque et tanquam honesti visa facies, ut vult Plato, miros sapientie, miros sui pariat amores." Note the rhetorical language; the ideas and images employed repeat ones used typically to describe the power and effect of eloquence. Cf. Cicero, De officis, I, 55.

9 Erasmus, Convivium religiosum (Opera omnia, I [Leyden, 1703], cols. 672–689), col. 682: "... cum hos quosdam recentiores lego de republica, de oeconomica, aut ethica praeceptientes, Deum immortalem, quam frigent prae ilis, imo quam non videntur sentire quod scribunt, ut ego citius patiar perire totum Scotum, cum aliquot sui similibus, quam libros unius Ciceronis, aut Plutarchi: non quod illos in totum damnem, sed quod ex his sentiam me reddi meliorem, cum ex illorum lectione surgam, nescio quomodo, frigidius affectus erga veram virtutem, sed irritatior ad contentionem." The English translation above is that of Craig Thompson, Ten Colloquies (New York, 1957), 155.

10 The themes of the unity and interconnection of the liberal arts, and of the unity of eloquence as embracing the liberal arts, are common in humanist writing. A particularly important passage for such discussions is Cicero, De oratore, III, 21–24. Some typical humanist elaborations of such themes are to be found in the collection Reden und Briefe italienischer Humanisten, ed. K. Müllner (Vienna, 1899).

11 See, for example, the funeral oration for Guarino da Verona composed by Ludovico Carbone, the text of which is reprinted both by Müllner, Reden u. Briefe, 89–107, and by E. Garin, Prosatori Latini del Quattrocento (Milan & Naples, 1952),
The humanists' stand on eloquence implied an almost incredible faith in the power of the word. The sweeping claims which ancient writers on rhetoric had made for the impact of oratory were reiterated by the humanists for the written as for the spoken word. The classical precepts governing the art of oratory were now applied to all forms of literature. The process of merging rhetoric and literature within a generalized view of eloquence had been initiated already in later antiquity, and the humanists continued and extended this development. For them, after all, the existing models of eloquence were precisely the surviving texts. The written word of the past still possessed vital authority, still enclosed the essential material of useful knowledge and right action, still enabled men to visualize and benefit from the heroes, institutions, and ideas of the ancient world. Antiquity had life and force because of its perpetuation in literature.

For Petrarch and his successors, Cicero's oration Pro Archia was a sacred text. They often cited or adapted the passage which celebrated the rôle of letters as bestowing glory upon subject and author alike, maintaining that letters provide the best, even the exclusive vehicle of immortality for men, deeds, and ideas. The speech might be invoked in its original sense to apply to poetry, as by Petrarch in his coronation oration, but it was also used to expound the claims of eloquence as a whole. And a favorite commonplace of the XVth century was to deplore the darkness of the Middle Ages, dark not because they lacked men of talent or noble acts, but because the light of eloquence had not illuminated and so preserved them. Hence they languished in tenebris.

382-417; the latter with an Italian translation. Carbone praises Guarino in the following terms: "Nec enim solum recta litteratura, sed boni etiam mores a Guarino disceabantur, ut veterum oratorum consuetudinem revocaret, qui non minus erant vivendi praeceptores quam dicendi auctores, ut Phoenix ille apud Homerum Achilli juveni comes datus dicendi facieendi magister, ut eum et verborum oratorem et rerum actorem efficeret." (Müllner, 98-99; Garin, 400.) The passage is taken from Cicero, De oratore, III, 57: "Nam vetus quidem illa doctrina eadem videtur et recte faciendo et bene dicendi magistra, neque disiuncti doctores sed eodem erant vivendi praeceptores atque dicendi: ut ille apud Homerum Phoenix qui se a Peleo patre Achilli juveni comitem esse datum dicit ad bellum ut illum efficere oratorem verborum actoremque rerum." Cf. also III, 141.

13 Cicero, Pro A. Licinio Archia poeta oratio, VI-XII.
15 See Andrea da Siena's praise of rhetoric in Müllner, Reden u. Briefe, 110-111.
16 See, for example, Benedetto Accolti, Dialogus de praestantia virorum sui aevi (Philippi Villani Liber de civitatis Florentiae famosis civibus . . . et de Florentinorum litteratura principes fere synchroni scriptores, ed. G. C. Galletti [Florence, 1847], 101-128), 111-112.
The humanists followed the Ciceronian tradition also in their portrait of the orator as hero. The true orator, they maintained, should combine wide learning, extensive experience—and, according to most humanists, good character 17—with persuasive capacity. His rôle was to instruct, to delight, and to move men toward worthwhile goals. His eloquence would represent a unity of content, structure, and form, without ever losing sight of the sovereignty of substance or of the didactic aims which were to be realized, and could only be realized, through the cooperation of argument and style. Without his eloquence, truth would lie mute, knowledge would never serve the reality of human affairs or speak to the needs of worldly existence. The other arts would be lost, society ill-organized; justice might not triumph nor evil be vanquished. The humanists' *uomo universale*, if such there was, is to be found in their picture of the ideal orator, master of many arts and governor of his fellows, through the force of his eloquence forging a link between the intellectual and practical spheres of human experience.18

In Cicero's *De Oratore*, the influence of the great orator had been described in these terms:

It is the part of the orator, when advising on affairs of supreme importance, to unfold his opinion as a man having authority; his duty too it is to arouse a listless nation, and to curb its unbridled impetuosity. By one and the same power of eloquence the deceitful among mankind are brought to destruction, and the righteous to deliverance. Who more passionately than the orator can encourage to virtuous conduct, or more zealously than he reclaim from vicious courses? Who can more austerely censure the wicked, or more gracefully praise men of worth? Whose invective can more forcibly subdue the power of lawless desire? Whose comfortable words can soothe grief more tenderly? 19

These and similar ideas were repeated over and over in humanist writing; another commonplace, but a commonplace taken seriously. Its truth, the humanists believed, had been proved in antiquity. So, for instance, Machiavelli urged in the *Art of War* that military leaders be trained in oratory:

This practice has been totally disregarded in our times. Read the life of Alexander the Great, and see how often he was obliged to make public

17 On the matter of good character, they cited especially the prescriptions of Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*, XII. i, ii).


speeches to his army. Otherwise, since his army had become rich and loaded down with spoil, he could never have led it, and subjected it to so much trouble and annoyance, through the deserts of Arabia and to India. Countless times situations arise in which an army will come to grief if the captain does not know how or does not undertake to speak to it. For such speech takes away fear, fires souls, increases determination, uncovers snares, promises rewards, points out dangers and the way to escape them, reproves, entreats, threatens, fills again with hope, praises, condemns, and does all those things by which human passions are allayed or incited.  

The persistence of this image of the orator's power reveals the persistence of those assumptions which in the XIVth century had inspired, and which in the XVIth century continued to guide, the humanist pursuit of eloquence. Those assumptions grew out of the conviction that knowledge should serve practical ends, that human learning ought to have utility for human life, that education should instruct both will and intellect, and that in persuasion and eloquent discussion lie the effective means of conveying truth. In turning to rhetoric as the teacher of these means, the humanists derived from it more than literary formulae, slogans about education, or aesthetic satisfaction. The subjects which seemed to them of interest were just those which, according to the ancient rhetorician, fell within the province of eloquence. Equally important, rhetoric provided a source for the humanists' basic modes of argument and analysis. Ancient doctrine held that it was the function of rhetoric to argue over matters which presented alternative possibilities, problems about which different points of view could be maintained, questions open to debate because they could be judged only in terms of probable truth and were not susceptible to scientific demonstrations of irrefutable validity. The principal questions to which the humanists addressed themselves could be ascribed to this category. Thus they developed their ideas in the framework of rhetorical argumentation not only because of their artistic and didactic ideals, but also because their discussions appeared to fall naturally within the area to which rhetorical analysis was applicable.

20 Machiavelli, Dell'Arte della Guerra (Tutte le opere, ed. G. Mazzoni & M. Casella, Florence, 1929), 326, cols. 1–2: "Per questo gli eccellenti capitanì conveniva che fussono oratori, perchè senza sapere parlare a tutto l'esercito, con difficoltà si può operare cosa buona; il che al tutto in questi nostri tempi è dismesso. Leggete la vita d'Alessandro Magno, e vedete quante volte gli fu necessare concionare e parlare pubblicamente all'esercito; altrimenti non l'arrebe mai condotto, sendo diventato ricco e pieno di preda, per i deserti d'Arabia e nell'India con tanto suo disagio e noia; perchè infinite volte nascono cose mediante le quali uno esercito rovina, quando il capitan o non sappia o non usi di parlare a quello; perchè questo parlare liva il timore, accende gli animi, cresce l'ostinazione, scuopre g'inganni, promette premii, mostra i pericoli e la via di fuggirli, riprende, priega, minaccia, riempie di speranza, loda, vitupera, e fa tutte quelle cose per le quali le umane passioni si spengono o si accendono."

21 See esp. Aristotle, Rhetoric, I, 2 (1357a); Cicero, De Oratore, II, 30.
Several tendencies of humanist thought and expression may be cited to illustrate the pervasive influence of rhetoric. The humanists' modes of argument from example and from authority, their emphasis on "verisimilitude," on variety, and on vividness, their insistence on representing general types or conveying universal lessons through the concrete, the visual, the emotionally convincing—all these bear both a formal and a substantive relation to rhetoric. The humanists applied to their analysis of many disciplines the ideas and the vocabulary of rhetoric. Alberti, for instance, adapted the teachings of ancient rhetoric to the formulation of an "art" of painting.22 In their discussions of the "art" of history, Renaissance humanists utilized rhetorical doctrines in describing the structure and purposes of historical writing and defined history within the classification of eloquence.23 The humanists also assimilated the concepts of rhetoric to precepts of another nature. The terms "decorum" and "imitatio," for example, are central in both rhetoric and moral philosophy, and the humanists often appear to fuse their meanings whatever the context. Thus, the imitation of stylistic and of ethical models are spoken of in identical terms; or the idea of always speaking appropriately, of suiting style and manner to subject, aim, and audience is treated as the exact analogue of behaving with decorum, of choosing the actions and responses which are best in harmony with and most appropriate to individual character and principles on the one hand, the nature of circumstances on the other.

Their presuppositions about eloquence identified the humanists with no one school of philosophy. The same general assumptions could be adopted and developed by men who maintained quite different positions on the rôle of human will and reason, the relative value of the active and contemplative lives, or the relationship between secular learning and religious concerns. However, in reflecting on such issues the humanists recognized certain common boundaries, outlined by their concern with rhetoric and by the structure of belief which underlay it, and these in turn influenced both the form and the substance of their theoretical discussions. For the majority of humanists, philosophy signified ethics or practical philosophy as opposed to pure logic or metaphysics. It belonged to the liberal arts, to the studies of eloquence, and it required, in return, the support and the voice of


23 In this classification and approach the humanists were, of course, influenced by classical precedents. Their "arts" of history began essentially as compilations of ideas and statements about historical writing garnered from ancient rhetorical sources, and especially from Cicero and Quintilian. In codifying and systematizing such references, the humanist artes were not, however, always precisely true to the original spirit of their sources. One of the earliest examples of a full-fledged humanist ars historica along these lines is the discussion presented by Pontano in his dialogue Actius (I Dialoghi, ed. C. Preverita, Florence, 1943), 192–203, 208–231.
eloquence. Moral philosophy was connected with poetry, which taught ethical truths under the guise of fiction, and with history, which showed how its precepts had actually been, and should always be, applied in practice. The other branches of speculation had value especially in their relation to ethics, or should at least be directed toward the problem of how to find and lead the best life; studied for their own sake, they became merely academic.

For consigning moral philosophy, understood in its widest sense as including political and social theory, to the hands of the "orator", the humanists could find precedents in a number of ancient sources. When they turned to other aspects of philosophy, they usually attempted to apply, to some degree at least, the tools and concepts of rhetoric. Their efforts were ordinarily directed at simplifying, or even popularizing, the philosophical systems of antiquity. They were more interested in showing essential similarities and compatibilities among ideas than in making close discriminations among different schools of thought, and they were typically eclectic in their views. All these tendencies were reinforced by the humanists' rhetorical-didactic concerns. It was regarded as the task of eloquence to take what was at hand, to make it generally intelligible and useful. Over-attention to precise contrasts could be criticized as word-splitting and concentration on points of little import. Virtue and vice, prudence and folly might, after all, be described in different languages and exemplified in a variety of ways while remaining substantially the same for all. The moralist had, of course, to declare what was unacceptable and erroneous, what could not be reconciled with the true standards of ethics and religious teaching, but his major aim must be to instruct by constructive synthesis.

Even in the disputes carried on among humanists over the relation between rhetoric and philosophy—for example, in the famous controversy between Ermolao Barbaro and Pico della Mirandola, resumed seventy-three years later by Melanchthon—the ultimate issue lay in the definition of eloquence rather than in totally opposed views as to its value. The participants wrote consciously in the tradition of ancient debate over the same subject and attached themselves to different strands of that tradition. At the same time, all three were

25 On the rhetorician as an eclectic, see Quintilian, XII. ii, 23ff.
26 The texts have been translated, with an introduction, by Q. Breen in this _Journal_, XIII (1952), 384–426. Pico's letter to Barbaro and Barbaro's reply (but not his first letter) have been reprinted, with an Italian translation, by E. Garin in _Prosatori Latini_, 804–823; 844–863. Melanchthon's epistolary treatise of 1558 is in the _Corpus Reformatorum_, IX (1842), cols. 687–703.
27 On the traditional and conventional nature of the debate between rhetoric and philosophy, see Kristeller, _op. cit._, 12.
humanists arguing for a common view of eloquence as "wisdom speaking copiously," and each made use of rhetorical forms and conventions in developing his case. Pico's defense of the "barbarian" philosophers and their lack of eloquence took the position that philosophy and eloquence are distinct, even mutually exclusive, that philosophy is higher than and has no need of eloquence. At first sight, Pico's case is directed against some of the most cherished convictions of the humanist. According to his argument, philosophers should be judged entirely by their wisdom. It is the philosopher's responsibility to know and to demonstrate rational and certain truths. He speaks to the learned, the grave, the sage with a formal austerity suited to his profession of truth and to the dignity of his subject. The rhetorician's art, by contrast, is one of seeming and deceiving. His subjects belong to the court and to the forum; they are matters of opinion and appearance. His appeal must be to the vulgar and unlearned. His goal is that of swaying rather than of intellectual demonstration, and to this end he adopts all those devices of superficial ornament, distortion of reality, and linguistic prestidigitation which together constitute "eloquence.

In the form and manner of Pico's argument, there was revealed also the humanist rhetorician, as both Barbaro and Melanchthon were quick to point out. Pico began by praising Barbaro's rhetorical talents and went on to develop his case through a speech uttered by an imaginary scholastic in his own defense. The speech is elegantly written, as a scholastic would not have composed it (here the very lack of decorum indicates the counter-argument which Pico keeps in mind). It is filled with classical references, examples, and commonplaces, carefully selected to support one side of the argument, and it is constructed according to canons of rhetorical argumentation. The form makes it possible for Pico to show his own regard for eloquence while maintaining the distinction between philosophy and rhetoric, the precedence of substance over form. Throughout, his manner expresses the resolution which Pico, speaking again for himself, makes explicit at the end of the letter:

Well, dear Ermolao, the above is perhaps what those philosophers might present in defense of their barbarism . . . I do not fully agree with their opinions, nor do I think their case will set on fire a candid and literal mind. But I have given freely of myself in this matter, as in something of ill-repute; so that, like those who praise the quartan fever, I might test my abilities. My special aim was like that of Plato's Glaucon, who praised injustice, not seriously, but to goad Socrates to the praise of justice. Likewise, so that I may hear you defend eloquence I have attacked it rather violently, for a little while even over the protest of my feelings and natural disposi-

28 Cicero, De partitione oratoria, 79: "Nihil enim est aliud eloquentia nisi copiose loquens sapientia . . . ."
29 Prosatori Latini, 808–812.
tion. Had I thought the Barbarians right in their neglect of eloquence I should not almost wholly have left off studying them; I should not a short time ago have taken up Greek letters. ... However, let me freely express my feeling: Certain grammaticasters turn my stomach, who when they have made a couple of etymological discoveries become such show-offs, so tout themselves, so boastfully strut around, that as compared with themselves they would have the philosophers esteemed as nothing.\textsuperscript{30}

Barbaro, in his reply, adopted similar conventions. His main defense is contained in the imaginary discourse of a scholastic sympathizer outraged by Pico’s admirable rhetoric and frightful logic. Where Pico put “inappropriate” language into the mouth of his scholastic, Barbaro has his character speak appropriately—that is, scholastically. In the process, he manages to exhibit his rhetorical prowess and elaborate his points while poking fun at the scholastic. Barbaro recognizes Pico’s quotations and allusions, and he counteracts them by adducing either the context of the passages involved\textsuperscript{31} or different statements from the same authorities.\textsuperscript{32} Barbaro maintains that Pico has defined rhetoric as sophistry in the worst sense, and that true eloquence has a meaning quite different from that which Pico has assigned to it. Eloquence, especially that which is appropriate to philosophy, does not involve deception, according to Barbaro; the fact that men may have used rhetoric for mendacious purposes is an indictment of the men and not of rhetoric as an art. Philosophy, precisely because of the nobility of its subject matter, deserves a clear and forceful exposition suited to its particular needs and arising out of eloquence.\textsuperscript{33} Further, Barbaro argues that in using rhetoric to attack rhetoric, Pico has only proved its worth;\textsuperscript{34} in showing rhetoric and philosophy to be distinct, he has shown how much the latter may gain from the former. The point at issue, he declares, is an old one; good arguments may be adduced on either side. In the end, the most persuasive testimony must win out—namely, the achievement of Plato and Aristotle, who typify philosophic wisdom joined to eloquence.\textsuperscript{35}

It would appear, then, that Pico had not been arguing against rhetoric in Barbaro’s sense, but against the consequences to which its abuse could lead. He was warning against the excesses to which, in his view, contemporaries had carried too narrow and too easy a faith in rhetoric. He was opposed to the confusion which some had made between philosophy and rhetoric, and the resulting willingness

\textsuperscript{30} As translated by Breen, 402 (Prosatori Latini, 822).

\textsuperscript{31} For example, Barbaro answers Pico’s charge that it is part of the orator’s task to lie by alluding to the whole gist of Quintilian’s discussion on this point (XII. i, 33ff.). See Pico in Prosatori, 808, and Barbaro, ibid., 852–4.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., especially 854–6.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 850–860.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 844–6. This argument, too, is a commonplace, often used in connection with Plato’s criticism of rhetoric. Cf. Cicero, De oratore, I, 47.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 860–2.
to guide internal matter by external form, as well as the consequent disregard for philosophy as such. But he was also arguing—and this was Barbaro's conclusion, too—that in combining the two elements, after the model of the Greek philosophers, lay the ideal goal. Similarly, Barbaro rejected the narrow definition of rhetoric against which Pico protested and maintained that "true" eloquence meant a subordination of form to substance and the creation of an appropriate harmony between the two.

Melanchthon's position was further than Barbaro's was from that of Pico, but even here a general area of agreement may be observed. Melanchthon utilized the same conventions as had his predecessors in debate. He, too, compliments Pico on his rhetorical accomplishments; he, too, takes another persona and proceeds to cite the texts and the examples of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian.\footnote{He takes the persona of Barbaro and writes as, in his opinion, Barbaro ought to have written in answer to Pico.} The end of Melanchthon's letter balances that of Pico's: his argument, Melanchthon concludes, is not with Pico, but against the scholastics; he does not believe that Pico's opinion really differs from his, but Pico has requested debate; and just as Pico has written against the empty pretensions and excesses of certain "grammaticasters" who scorn philosophy, so he finds it necessary to protest against those who call themselves philosophers while being in fact enemies to true philosophy and to the revival of the "meliora studia."\footnote{Melanchthon in Corpus Reformatorum, IX, col. 702.} As Pico had made the extreme case for philosophy divorced from eloquence, while admitting the power of the two combined, so Melanchthon voices the extreme argument for rhetoric as the highest philosophy, while maintaining that eloquence, to be worthy of the name, must be wise.\footnote{Ibid., esp. cols. 689–691.} The entire controversy, according to Melanchthon, lies in the definition of "eloquence."\footnote{Ibid., col. 691: "Tota igitur nobis de definitione controversia est, quid sit Eloquentia, aut certe de fine, quem ad usum hominibus Eloquentia concessa sit."} It is not the specious art described by Pico, but a faculty for clear expression and communication, for the exposition and dissemination of truth, which is applicable and necessary to all disciplines and which translates them into useful and effective, as well as into intelligible terms.\footnote{Ibid., cols. 692, 693, 696–9, 702.} Melanchthon may have assumed too readily that his "eloquence" and Pico's "philosophy" were identical, but it is nonetheless true that they are not absolutely opposed. The positions of the two humanists involve differences of emphasis and of philosophical interest, but they remain within a common framework of reference.

The literary forms and the modes of argumentation associated with eloquence were applied by the humanists to a great diversity of issues.
Their choice of form did not shackle originality, nor was it incidental to the expression of their ideas. Thus the humanist oration could be a stultifying and imitative stringing together of expected clichés, but it could also become an elegant, imaginative, and serious argument. The compelling motive behind its use was the humanists’ belief in the importance of moving, swaying, and entertaining as a part of persuasive instruction, in the necessity of lending immediacy, color, concrete force to their appeals. The fixed conventions of the oration could be adopted to underscore meaning, as Erasmus used the rules of panegyric in the Praise of Folly. The conventions of oratory might also give an author the opportunity to state arguments which he could then claim had not been meant literally. Thus Valla, attacking the authenticity of the Donation of Constantine, called his work a “declamation,” the term for an oratorical exercise. In the practice of declamation, ancient orators were supposed to be able to construct equally convincing cases for opposing sides of the same question. Among the exercises recommended for students of oratory, Quintilian listed that of proving and disproving the veracity of particular texts, and rhetorical handbooks included precepts for dealing with documentary problems as well as systematic topics and categories for arguing over the questions whether, by whom, when, where, and why something had been done or not done.

The structure of Valla’s Declamation, the fictitious speeches within the speech, and the appeal to the emotions of his audience are all clearly rhetorical. So, too, is the nature of Valla’s argument. Its concern is with verisimilitude, with what may be convincingly believed, with what may be reasonably taken to have occurred. Surely, Valla argues, Constantine would scarcely have been likely to have made the donation, his sons to have permitted it, the senate or people to have tolerated it, or Sylvester to have accepted it. Surely Roman emperors and early Popes would not have behaved in so extraordinary a manner, and clearly others would have dissuaded them from such conduct, had they proposed it. With these rhetorical deductions Valla combines argument from authority and example in establishing a case built up by a mounting chain of probable truths and moral indignation. He presents the philological and documentary evidence which to us may appear conclusive as one persuasive argument in a series. Valla’s Declamation demonstrates the way in which rhetorical analysis could serve as an approach to historical analysis. Rhetoric offered a kind of rigorous common-sense method of ascertaining what was or is or will most probably be true; it also described procedures by which these findings might be rendered persuasive. Typically, the

41 L. Valla, De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione declamatio, ed. and with an English translation by C. B. Coleman (New Haven, 1922).
42 Quintilian, II, iv, 18-19.
mode of "historical criticism" characteristic of Renaissance humanism is founded on rhetorical argumentation. Humanist philology, too, played a rôle. It created instruments for precise textual investigations; it may have implied an "historical" conception of language and its uses. But the ideas and methods of philological criticism were not ordinarily, and not systematically, applied to history directly, except in partnership with or at the behest of rhetorical analysis. Valla's Declamation shows the creative results of rhetoric, and not only of philology, in the service of humanist historiography. The questions he asks of events, policies, and motives are about what is really likely to have happened. His answers depend on evidence and on imaginative reconstruction woven together into a case whose purpose is to convince us, in an area where scientific results are unobtainable, that his picture of a given historical situation has verisimilitude while the commonly accepted account offends in numerous respects against credibility. The humanist rhetorician seeks to determine historical probabilities by means which are, on the whole, hypothetico-deductive. He judges by a preconceived standard of what things are likely to happen, what behavior may be expected of given types of men, what outcome may generally be assumed in certain kinds of situations. There are some obvious limitations to this approach. It may not allow for the fact that the "improbable" could occur; it may be unduly restrictive in its notion of credibility. The rhetorical approach to historical materials may, as it did in the hands of Valla, demolish an historical legend while painting a quite fictitious portrait of the institutions and figures of an entire historical period.

In dialogue, the humanists found the most flexible form for discussing issues of all sorts. In their view, dialogue could bring to life and dramatize with persuasive effect the actual process of exposition, analysis, and debate appropriate to the matters under discussion. Rational thinking about such subjects was regarded as in itself a mental dialogue; the form, through externalizing, could help to teach the method of thought. The development of a dialogue could demonstrate how questioning was essential to the illumination of truth.43 The humanist, presenting his interlocutors as men of firm reputation and experience, could attach at once authority and a concrete, personal tone to the ideas which he had them express. Otherwise he might employ invented interlocutors, or stage a simple question and answer session between himself and some disciple or friend, again on the assumption that to "see" and "hear" individuals engaged in discourse would have a greater effect on the audience than would the reading of a straightforward treatise. In dialogue, a humanist could state a clear position or refuse to take one. Some dialogues were left deliberately without explicit conclusion, either because the author

43 For a discussion of these points within a dialogue, see Leonardo Bruni's Ad Petrum Histrum dialogus (ed. E. Garin, Prosatori Latini, 44–99), 46–62.
wished to point out what could be said on different sides of doubtful or complex matters, not to assert one final decision, or with the purpose of allowing the reader to render his own judgment. It was possible in dialogue to take up a number of issues, sometimes quite unrelated ones, without sacrificing its unity. Dialogue, according to humanist practice, should show busy men engaged in thoughtful leisure, it should be non-formalistic, ostensibly casual; in setting and atmosphere it should be natural and unhurried. All this required careful design.

To dialogue as to the other types of eloquence the humanists applied the principle that form and content must be fused, that language and tone must suit both the speaker and his argument. In Erasmus' Ciceronianus, we have a humanist dialogue which provides both an example of and a rumination on that tradition. Through the fictitious characters in his dialogue, Erasmus pictures the schools they typify. He intends to bring to life, as an object lesson to be shunned, the so-called Ciceronians and their views, and to present a model of the lessons that ought to be followed. The argument is developed rhetorically; the style is everywhere meant to reflect, to afford concrete proof and exemplification of its theme. Erasmus argues that literary imitation should be based on many models rather than one alone and that it consists in following the spirit rather than the letter of the model texts. He argues further that eloquence is not a matter of external devices but that it is "wisdom speaking copiously" and rests in a true appreciation of decorum, the appropriate suiting of language and form to subject and ideas, which can come only out of a deep understanding of issues. Erasmus argues, finally, that the eloquent man through imitation has learned not to reproduce the exact style of others, but has learned to represent himself through eloquence. Clearly, Erasmus intended that his own style should stand as a striking model of the practical application of all these precepts, to confirm and to illustrate his own precise understanding of the nature of imitation. So, for instance, Erasmus quotes and paraphrases passages from numerous ancient authors, and not Cicero alone, and weaves them into a pattern distinctively his own. His teachings on decorum, on the inappropriateness of clothing Christian ideas in pagan dress, are paralleled by the language he employs in referring to Christian themes. The precept that the object of imitation is ultimately to represent one's self is followed here as elsewhere by Erasmus, whose aim was always to picture himself, his mind, his opinions. The lack of any individual characterization in the dialogue is a direct result of this

44 Erasmus, Ciceronianus sive De optimo dicendi genere dialogus (Opera, I, cols. 969-1020). An English translation is available by Izora Scott, Controversies over the Imitation of Cicero (New York, 1910), 19-130.
45 Erasmus, Ciceronianus, col. 1001.
Erasmian aim: he wishes to delineate not other individuals, but himself.\textsuperscript{46}

In the \textit{Ciceronianus}, Erasmus is arguing over doctrines of rhetoric. But these doctrines, like that of eloquence, are carried beyond the confines of technical rhetoric. In maintaining, for instance, that eloquence must look always to the \textit{decorum}, and that a mechanical, externalized classicism is inconsistent with that goal, Erasmus is discussing the spiritual and historical distance between the facts of antiquity and the requirements of modern Christianity.\textsuperscript{47} In urging the application of eloquence to Christian truth, he is urging a particular program of theology and education. Finally, in seeing the nature of "true Ciceronianism" to lie in understanding and following the spirit rather than the letter of authority, Erasmus is indicating his whole approach to doctrine and is pointing to the area where he believes the actual reconciliation of past and present, paganism and Christianity, to be both possible and necessary.

It is important to note that in attacking Ciceronianism and in exploring its empty formalism, Erasmus was not attacking the authority of Cicero—on the contrary, his complaint was precisely that the "Ciceronians" failed to understand Cicero's teachings correctly and so could not properly use him as a model. Nor was he questioning the humanist conception of the fundamental importance of rhetoric; instead, he was asserting that some humanists misunderstood and abused eloquence, and that by debasing content and exalting form for its own sake, they had become incapable of achieving eloquence. For Erasmus, as for other humanist critics of Ciceronianism and formalistic rhetoric, the argument was not over the basic presuppositions of eloquence, but over the means by which they were to be realized.

Rhetoric has been called "the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors." Too often, the attempt is made to destroy that barrier by regarding rhetorical form as the chaff which can be separated from the wheat of humanist thought. "What subject," asked Melanchthon, "can possibly be richer than that of the dignity and utility of eloquence?"\textsuperscript{48} The question was, of course, rhetorical, but the answer was clear. It was the pursuit of eloquence which united humanists of all shades. To ignore the impact of eloquence and of the ideas associated with it is to distort the mentality of humanism and to disregard a vital dimension of Renaissance thought and method.

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\textsuperscript{46} For the discussion above, see esp. \textit{ibid.}, cols. 971–2, 987–1004, 1026.


\textsuperscript{48} Melanchthon, \textit{op. cit.}, col. 688: "Quae enim materia locupletior existere potest, quam dicere de dignitate atque utilitate Eloquentiae?" The English translation is that of Breen, \textit{op. cit.}, 414.