"Humanism"
Catholic Encyclopedia

Humanism is the name given to the intellectual, literary, and scientific movement of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, a movement which aimed at basing every branch of learning on the literature and culture of classical antiquity.

Believing that a classical training alone could form a perfect man, the Humanists so called themselves in opposition to the Scholastics, and adopted the term *humaniora* (the humanities) as signifying the scholarship of the ancients. Though the interval between the classical period and their own days was regarded by the Humanists as barbarous and destructive alike of art and science, Humanism (like every other historical phenomenon) was connected with the past. The use of Latin in the Liturgy of the Church had already prepared Europe for the humanistic movement. In the Middle Ages, however, classical literature was regarded merely as a means of education; it was known through secondary sources only, and the Church saw in the worldly conception of life that had prevailed among the ancients an allurement to sin. On the rise of secularism these views underwent a change, especially in Italy. In that country the body politic had grown powerful, the cities had amassed great wealth, and civic liberty was widespread. Worldly pleasure became a strong factor in life and freer play was given to sensory impulse. The transcendental, unworldly concept of life, which had till then been dominant, now came into conflict with a mundane, human, and naturalistic view, which centred on nature and man. These new ideas found their prototypes in antiquity, whose writers cherished and extolled the enjoyment of life, the claims of individuality, literary art and fame, the beauty of nature. Not only ancient Roman culture but also the hitherto neglected Greek culture was taken up by the movement. The new spirit broke away from theology and Church. The principle of free, scientific inquiry gained ground. It was quite natural that the value of the new ideal should be exaggerated while the medieval national culture was undervalued.

It is customary to begin the history of Humanism with Dante (1265-1321), and Petrarch (1304-74). Of the two Dante, by reason of his poetic sublimity, was undoubtedly the greater; but, as regards

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Humanism Dante was merely its precursor while Petrarch initiated the movement and led it on to success. Dante certainly shows traces of the coming change; in his great epic classical and Christian materials are found side by side, while poetic renown, an aim so characteristic of the pagan writers yet so foreign to the Christian ideal, is what he seeks. In matters of real importance, however, he takes the Scholastics as his guides. Petrarch, on the other hand, is the first Humanist; he is interested only in the ancients and in poetry. He unearths long-lost manuscripts of the classics, and collects ancient medals and coins. If Dante ignored the monuments of Rome and regarded its ancient statues as idolatrous images, Petrarch views the Eternal City with the enthusiasm of a Humanist, not with that of a pious Christian. The ancient classics — especially his lodestars, Virgil and Cicero — serve not merely to instruct and to charm him; they also incite him to imitation. With the philosophers of old he declared virtue and truth to be the highest goal of human endeavour, although in practice he was not always fastidious in cultivating them. However, it was only in his third aim, eloquence, that he rivalled the ancients. His ascent of Mont Ventoux marks an epoch in the history of literature. His joy in the beauty of nature, his susceptibility to the influence of landscape, his deep sympathy with, and glorious portrayal of, the charms of the world around him were a break with the traditions of the past. In 1341 he gained at Rome the much coveted crown of the poet laureate. His Latin writings were most highly prized by his contemporaries, who ranked his "Africa" with the "Æneid" of Virgil, but posterity prefers his sweet, melodious sonnets and canzoni. His chief merit was the impulse he gave to the search for the lost treasures of classical antiquity. His chief disciple and friend, Boccaccio (1313-75), was honoured in his lifetime not for his erotic and lewd, though elegant and clever, "Decameron" (by which, however, posterity remembers him), but for his Latin works which helped to spread Humanism. The classical studies of Petrarch and Boccaccio were shared by Coluccio Salutato (d. 1406), the Florentine chancellor. By introducing the epistolary style of the ancients he brought classical wisdom into the service of the State, and by his tastes and his prominence greatly promoted the cause of literature.

The men of the revival were soon followed by a generation of itinerant teachers and their scholars. Grammarians and rhetoricians journeyed

from city to city, and spread the enthusiasm for antiquity to ever-widening circles; students travelled from place to place to become acquainted with the niceties of an author's style and his interpretation. Petrarch lived to see Giovanni di Conversino set out on his journey as itinerant professor. From Ravenna came Giovanni Malpaghini, gifted with a marvellous memory and a burning zeal for the new studies, though more skilled in imparting inherited and acquired knowledge than in the elaboration of original thought. In another way the soul of literary research was Poggio (1380-1459), a papal secretary and later Florentine chancellor. During the sessions of the Council of Constance (1414-18) he ransacked the monasteries and institutions of the neighbourhood, made valuable discoveries, and "saved many works" from the "cells" (*ergastula*). He found and transcribed Quintilian with his own hand, had the first copies made of Lucretius, Silius Italicus, and Ammianus Marcellinus, and, probably, he discovered the first books of the "Annals" of Tacitus. About 1430 practically all the Latin works now known had been collected, and scholars could devote themselves to the revision of the text. But the real source of classic beauty was Greek literature. Italians had already gone to Greece to study the language, and since 1396 Manuel Chrysoloras, the first teacher of Greek in the West, was busily engaged at Florence and elsewhere. His example was followed by others. In Greece also, a zealous search was instituted for literary remains, and in 1423 Aurispa brought two hundred and thirty-eight volumes to Italy. The most diligent collector of inscriptions, coins, gems, and medals was the merchant Ciriaco of Ancona. Among those present from Greece at the Council of Florence were Archbishop (afterwards Cardinal) Bessarion, who presented to Venice his valuable collection of nine hundred volumes, also Gemistos Plethon, the celebrated teacher of Platonic philosophy, who subsequently relapsed into paganism. The capture of Constantinople by the Turks (1453) drove the learned Greeks, George of Trebizond, Theodorus Gaza, Constantine Lascaris, etc., into Italy. One of the most successful critics and editors of the classics was Lorenzo Valla (1407-57). He pointed out the defects in the Vulgate, and declared the Donation of Constantine a fable. Despite his vehement attacks on the papacy, Nicholas V brought him to Rome. Within a short period, the new studies claimed a still wider circle of votaries.

The princely houses were generous in their support of the movement. Under the Medici, Cosimo (1429-64) and Lorenzo the Magnificent (1469-92), Florence was pre-eminently the seat of the new learning. Its worthy statesman Mannetti, a man of great culture, piety, and purity, was an excellent Greek and Latin scholar, and a brilliant orator. The Camaldolese monk Ambrogio Traversari was also a profound scholar, especially versed in Greek; he possessed a magnificent collection of the Greek authors, and was one of the first monks of modern times to learn Hebrew. Marsuppini (Carlo Aretino), renowned and beloved as professor and municipal chancellor, quoted from the Latin and Greek authors with such facility that his readiness was a source of wonder, even to an age sated with constant citation. Although in matters of religion Marsuppini was a notorious heathen, Nicholas V sought to attract him to Rome to translate Homer. Among his contemporaries, Leonardo Bruni, a pupil of Chrysoloras, enjoyed great fame as a Greek scholar and a unique reputation for his political and literary activity. He was, moreover, the author of a history of Florence. Niccolo Niccoli was also a citizen of Florence; a patron of learning, he assisted and instructed young men, dispatched agents to collect ancient manuscripts and remains, and amassed a collection of eight hundred codices (valued at six thousand gold gulden), which on his death were, through the mediation of Cosimo, donated to the monastery of San Marco, to form a public library, and are today one of the most valued possessions of the Laurentiana Library at Florence. The aforesaid Poggio, a versatile and influential writer, also resided for a long time at Florence, published a history of that city, and ridiculed the clergy and nobility in his witty, libellous "Facetiæ". He was distinguished for his extensive classical learning, translated some of the Greek authors (e.g. Lucian, Diodorus Siculus, Xenophon), appended scholarly and clever notes, collected inscriptions, busts, and medals, and wrote a valuable description of the ruins of Rome. His success in seeking and unearthing manuscripts has already been mentioned. Plethon, also mentioned above, taught Platonic philosophy at Florence.

Bessarion was another panegyrist of Plato, who now began to displace Aristotle; this, together with the influx of Greek scholars, led to the foundation of the Platonic academy which included among its members all the more prominent citizens. Marsilio Ficino (d. 1499), a Platonic

philosopher in the full sense of the term, was one of its members, and by his works and letters exerted an extraordinary influence on his contemporaries. Along with his other literary labours he undertook the gigantic task of translating the writings of Plato into elegant Latin, and accomplished it successfully. Cristoforo Landino, a pupil of Marsuppini, without sharing his religious ideas, taught rhetoric and poetry at Florence and was also a statesman. His commentary on Dante, in which he gives the most detailed explanation of the allegorical meaning of the great poet, is of lasting value. Under Lorenzo de' Medici, the most important man of letters in Florence was Angelo Poliziano (d. 1494), first the tutor of the Medici princes and subsequently a professor and a versatile writer. He was pre-eminently a philologist, and gave scholarly translations and commentaries on the classical authors, devoting special attention to Homer and Horace. He was, however, surpassed by the youthful and celebrated Count Pico della Mirandola (1462-94), who, to use Poliziano's phrase, "was eloquent and virtuous, a hero rather than a man". He noticed the relations between Hellenism and Judaism, studied the Cabbala, combated astrology, and composed an immortal work on the dignity of man. An active literary movement was also fostered by the Visconti and the Sforza in Milan, where the vain and unprincipled Filelfo (1398-1481) resided; by the Gonzaga in Mantua, where the noble Vittorino da Feltre (d. 1446) conducted his excellent school; by the kings of Naples; by the Este in Ferrara, who enjoyed the services of Guarino, after Vittorino the most celebrated educationist of Italian Humanism; by Duke Federigo of Urbino, and even by the profligate Malatesta in Rimini. Humanism was also favoured by the popes. Nicholas V (1447-55) sought by the erection of buildings and the collection of books to restore the glory of Rome. The ablest intellects of Italy were attracted to the city; to Nicholas mankind and learning are indebted for the foundation of the Vatican Library, which in the number and value of its manuscripts (particularly Greek) surpassed all others. The pope encouraged, especially, translations from the Greek, and with important results, although no one won the prize of ten thousand gulden offered for a complete translation of Homer.

Pius II (1458-64) was a Humanist himself and had won fame as poet, orator, interpreter of antiquity, jurist, and statesman; after his election, however, he did not fulfil all the expectations of his earlier

associates, although he showed himself in various ways a patron of literature and art. Sixtus IV (1471-84) re-established the Vatican Library, neglected by his predecessors, and appointed Platina librarian. "Here reigns an incredible freedom of thought", was Filelfo's description of the Roman Academy of Pomponio Leto (d. 1498), an institute which was the boldest champion of antiquity in the capital of Christendom. Under Leo X (1513-21) Humanism and art enjoyed a second golden age. Of the illustrious circle of *literati* which surrounded him may be mentioned Pietro Bembo (d. 1547) — famous as a writer of prose and poetry, as a Latin and Italian author, as philologist and historian, and yet, in spite of his high ecclesiastical rank, a true worldling. To the same group belonged Jacopo Sadoleto, also versed in the various branches of Latin and Italian culture. The chief merit of Italian Humanism, as indeed of Humanism in general, was that it opened up the real sources of ancient culture and drew from these, as a subject of study for its own sake, the classic literature which till then had been used in a merely fragmentary way. Philological and scientific criticism was inaugurated, and historical research advanced. The uncouth Latin of the Scholastics and the monastic writers was replaced by classic elegance. More influential still, but not to good effect, were the religious and moral views of pagan antiquity. Christianity and its ethical system suffered a serious shock. Moral relations, especially marriage, became the subject of ribald jest. In their private lives many Humanists were deficient in moral sense, while the morals of the upper classes degenerated into a pitiable excess of unrestrained individualism. A political expression of the humanistic spirit is "The Prince" (Il Principe) of Niccolo Machiavelli (d. 1527), the gospel of brute force, of contempt for all morality, and of cynical selfishness.

The pillaging of Rome in 1527 gave the death-blow to Italian Humanism, the serious political and ecclesiastical complications that ensued prevented its recovery. "Barbarian Germany" had long since become its heir, but here Humanism never penetrated so deeply. The religious and moral earnestness of the Germans kept them from going too far in their devotion to antiquity, beauty, and the pleasures of sense, and gave the humanistic movement in Germany a practical and educational character. The real directors of the German movement were upright scholars and professors. Only Celtes and a few others are reminiscent of Italian Humanism. School and university reform was the

chief aim and the chief service of German Humanism. Although German interest in ancient literature began under Charles IV (1347-78), the spread of Humanism in German countries dates from the fifteenth century. Æneas Sylvius Piccolomini, afterwards Pius II, was the apostle of the new movement at the court of Frederick III (1440-93). The renowned scholar Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) was versed in the classics, while his friend Georg Peuerbach studied in Italy and subsequently lectured on the ancient poets at Vienna. Johann Müller of Königsberg (Regiomontanus), a pupil of Peuerbach's, was familiar with Greek, but was chiefly renowned as an astronomer and mathematician. Though Germany could not boast of as many powerful patrons of learning as Italy, the new movement did not lack supporters. The Emperor Maximilian I, Elector Philip of the Palatinate, and his chancellor, Johann von Dalberg (later Bishop of Worms), Duke Eberhard of Würtemberg, Elector Frederick the Wise, Duke George of Saxony, Elector Joachim I of Brandenburg, and Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz were all supporters of Humanism.

Among the citizens, too, the movement met with favour and encouragement. In Nuremberg it was supported by the above-mentioned Regiomontanus, the historians, Hartmann Schedel and Sigmund Meisterlein, and also by Willibald Pirkheimer (1470-1528), who had been educated in Italy, and was an indefatigable worker in the antiquarian and historical field. His sister, Charitas, the gentle nun, united with true piety a cultivated intellect. Konrad Peutinger (1465-1547), town clerk of Augsburg, devoted his leisure to the service of the arts and sciences, by collecting inscriptions and ancient remains and publishing, or having published by others, the sources of German history. The map of Ancient Rome, named after him "Tabula Peutingeriana", was bequeathed to him by its discoverer, Conrad Celtes, but was not published until after his death. Strasburg was the earliest German stronghold of humanistic ideas. Jacob Wimpheling (d. 1528), a champion of German sentiment and nationality, and Sebastian Brant were the chief representatives of the movement, and attained a wide reputation owing to their quarrel with Murner, who had published a paper in opposition to Wimpheling's "Germania", and owing to the controversy concerning the Immaculate Conception. As in Italy so in Germany learned societies sprang up, such as the "Donaugesellschaft" (Danubiana) in Vienna — the most prominent

member of which, Johann Spiessheimer (Cuspinian, 1473-1529), distinguished himself as an editor and an historian — and the "Rheinische Gesellschaft" (Rhenana), under the above-mentioned Johann von Dalberg. Closely associated with the latter was Abbot Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), a man of universal attainments. The life of these two chief societies was Conrad Celtes, the fearless and unwearying apostle and itinerant preacher of Humanism, a man of the most varied talents — a philosopher, mathematician, historian, publisher of classical and medieval writings, and a clever Latin poet, who celebrated in ardent verse his ever-changing lady-loves and led a life of worldly indulgence.

Into the universities, too, the representatives of the "languages and belles-lettres" soon found their way. In Basle, which, in 1474, had appointed a professor of the liberal arts and poetry, the movement was represented chiefly by Heinrich Glareanus (1488-1563), celebrated as geographer and musician. The best known Humanist of Tübingen was the poet Heinrich Bebel (1472-1518), an ardent patriot and an enthusiastic admirer of style and eloquence. His most widely-known work is the obscene "Facetiæ". Agricola (d. 1485), in the opinion of Erasmus a perfect stylist and Latinist, taught at Heidelberg. The inaugurator of Humanism in Mainz was the prolific author, Dietrich Gresemund (1477-1512). The movement secured official recognition at the university in 1502 under Elector Berthold, and found in Joannes Rhagius Æsticampianus its most influential supporter. In the itinerant poet Peter Luder, Erfurt had in 1460 one of the earliest representatives of Humanism, and in Jodokus Trutfetter (1460-1519), the teacher of Luther, a diligent writer and conscientious professor of theology and philosophy. The real guide of the youth of Erfurt was, however, Konrad Mutianus Rufus (1471-1526), a canon at Gotha, educated in Italy. A zeal for teaching coupled with a pugnacious temperament, a delight in books but not in their making, religious latitudinarianism, and enthusiasm for the antique were his chief characteristics. The satirist Crotus Rubianus Euricius Cordus, the witty epigrammatist, and the elegant poet and merry companion, Eobanus Hessus, belonged also to the Erfurt circle.

In Leipzig also, the first traces of humanistic activity date back to the middle of the fifteenth century. In 1503, when the Westphalian

Hermann von dem Busche settled in the city, Humanism had there a notable representation. From 1507 to 1511 Æsticampianus also laboured in Leipzig, but in the former year von dem Busche removed to Cologne. From the beginning (1502) Wittenberg was under humanistic influence. Many were the collisions between the champions of the old philosophy and theology and "the poets", who adopted a somewhat arrogant attitude. About 1520 all the German universities had been modernized in the humanistic sense; attendance at the lectures on poetry and oratory was obligatory, Greek chairs were founded, and the scholastic commentaries on Aristotle were replaced by new translations. The most influential of the humanistic schools were, that of Schlettstadt under the Westphalian Ludwig Dringenberg (d. 1477), the teacher of Wimpheling, that of Deventer under Alexander Hegius (1433-98), the teacher of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Hermann von dem Busche, and Murmellius, and that of Münster, which underwent humanistic reformation in 1500 under the provost Rudolf von Langen (1438-1519), and which under the co-rector, Joannes Murmellius (1480-1517), the author of numerous and widely-adopted textbooks, attracted pupils from such distant parts as Pomerania and Silesia. Good academic institutions also existed in Nuremberg, Augsburg, Strasburg, Basle, etc.

The humanistic movement reached its zenith during the first two decades of the sixteenth century in Reuchlin, Erasmus, and Hutten. Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522), the "phoenix of Germany", was skilled in all the branches of knowledge that were then cultivated. Primarily a jurist, an expert in Greek, a first-rate authority on Roman authors, an historian, and a poet, he nevertheless attained his chief renown through his philosophical and Hebrew works — especially through his "Rudimenta Hebraica" (grammar and lexicon) — in the composition of which he secured the assistance of Jewish scholars. His model was Pico della Mirandola, the "wise count, the most learned of our age". He studied the esoteric doctrine of the Cabbala, but lost himself in the maze of its abstruse problems, and, after having become, in academic retirement, the pride and glory of his nation, was suddenly forced by a peculiar incident into European notoriety. This occurrence has been not unjustly termed the culminating point of Humanism. Johann Pfefferkorn, a baptized Jew, had declared the Talmud a deliberate insult to Christianity, and had procured from the emperor a mandate

suppressing Hebrew works. Asked for his opinion, Reuchlin on scientific and legal grounds expressed his personal disapprobation of this action. Enraged at this opposition, Pfefferkorn, in his "Handspiegel", attacked Reuchlin, in reply to which the latter composed the "Augenspiegel". The theologians of Cologne, particularly Hochstraten, declared against Reuchlin, who then appealed to Rome. The Bishop of Speier, entrusted with the settlement of the strife, declared himself in favour of Reuchlin. Hochstraten, however, now proceeded to Rome; in 1516 a papal mandate postponing the case was issued, but finally in 1520, under the pressure of the Lutheran movement, Reuchlin was condemned to preserve silence on the matter in future and to pay full costs.

But more important than the lawsuit was the literary warfare that accompanied it. This strife was a prelude to the Reformation. All Germany was divided into two camps. The Reuchlinists, the "fosterers of the arts and of the study of humanity", the "bright, renowned men" (clari viri), whose approving letters (Epistolæ clarorum virorum) Reuchlin had published in 1514, predominated in numbers and intellect; the Cologne party, styled by their opponents "the obscurantists" (viri obscuri), were more intent on defence than attack. The most important document of this literary feud is the classical satire of the Humanists, "The Letters of the Obscurantists" (Epistolæ obscurorum virorum, 1515-17), of which the first part was composed by Crotus Rubianus, the second substantially by Hutten. Ostensibly these letters were written by various partisans of the Cologne University to Ortwin Gratius, their poet and master, and were couched in barbarous Latin. They purport to describe the life and doings of the obscurantists, their opinions and doubts, their debaucheries and love affairs. The lack of culture, the obsolete methods of instruction and study, the perverse expenditure of ingenuity, the pedantry of the obscurantists, are mercilessly ridiculed. Although the pamphlet was dictated by hatred and was full of reckless exaggeration, an inimitable originality and power of caricature secured its success. The Humanists regarded the dispute as decided, and sang the "Triumph of Reuchlin". The latter, however, ever remained a true supporter of the Church and the pope.

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1467-1536) was termed the

"second eye of Germany". Vivacious, acute, and witty, he was the leader and literary oracle of the century, while his name, according to the testimony of a contemporary, had passed into proverb: "Whatever is ingenious, scholarly, and wisely written, is termed erasmic, that is, unerring and perfect." His extraordinarily fruitful and versatile literary activity as profound Latinist and incomparable revivalist of Greek, as critic and commentator, as educator, satirist, theologian, and Biblical exegete, it is impossible to dwell upon here (see ERASMUS, DESIDERIUS). Ulrich von Hutten (1488-1523), a Franconian knight, and enthusiastic champion of the liberal sciences, was still better known as politician and agitator. The strengthening of the emperor's power and war against Rome were the chief items of his political programme, which he preached first in Latin and subsequently in German dialogues, poems, and pamphlets. The jurists and the Roman Law, the immorality and illiteracy of the clergy, the fatuity of unpractical pedantry, were mercilessly scourged by him, his aim being of course to make himself conspicuous. Finally, he enlisted in the service of Luther and celebrated him in his last writings as a "hero of the Word", a prophet and a priest, though Luther always maintained towards him an attitude of reserve. Hutten's death may be regarded as the end of German Humanism properly speaking. A still more serious movement, the Reformation, took its place. The majority of the Humanists set themselves in opposition to the new movement, though it cannot be denied that they, especially the younger generation under the leadership of Erasmus and Mutianus Rufus, had in many ways paved the way for it.

The progress of Humanism in other lands may be reviewed more briefly. In France the University of Paris exerted a powerful influence. By the end of the fourteenth century the students of this institution were already conversant with the ancient authors. Nicolas de Clémanges (1360-1434) lectured on Ciceronian rhetoric, but the earliest real Humanist in France was Jean de Montreuil (d. 1418). In 1455 Gregorio of Città di Castello, who had resided in Greece, was installed in the university to lecture on Greek and rhetoric. Subsequently, there came from Italy scholars and poets — e.g. Andreas Joannes Lascaris, Julius Cæsar Scaliger, and Andreas Alciati — who made France the docile daughter of Italy. Among the leading scholars in France may be mentioned Budé (Budæus), the first

Hellenist of his age (1467-1540), the accomplished printers Robert (1503-59) and Henri (1528-98) Estienne (Stephanus), to whom we are indebted for the "Thesaurus linguæ Latinæ" and the "Thesaurus linguæ Græcæ"; Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), famed for his knowledge of epigraphy, numismatics, and especially of chronology; the philologist Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614), well known for his excellent edition of the classics, and Petrus Ramus (1515-72), a profound student of Greek and medieval philosophy.

Classical learning was naturalized in Spain through Queen Isabella (1474-1504). The school system was reorganized, and the universities entered on a new era of intellectual prosperity. Of Spanish scholars Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540) enjoyed a European reputation. In England Humanism was received with less favour. Poggio, indeed, passed some time in that country, and young Englishmen, like William Grey, a pupil of Guarino's, later Bishop of Ely and privy councillor in 1454, sought instruction in Italy. But the troubled conditions of English life in the fifteenth century did not favour the new movement. In the spread of classical learning William Caxton (1421-91), the first English printer, played an important part. The learned, refined, charitable, and courageous chancellor Thomas More (1478-1535) was in a way an intellectual counterpart of Erasmus, with whom he was on terms of closest intimacy. Of special importance was the foundation of such excellent schools as Eton in 1440, and St. Paul's (London) in 1508. The founder of the latter was the accomplished Dean John Colet (1466-1519); the first rector was William Lilly (1468-1523), who had studied Greek in the Island of Rhodes, and Latin in Italy, and was the pioneer of Greek education in England. During the sojourn of Erasmus at Oxford (1497-9) he found kindred hellenistic spirits in William Grocyn and Thomas Linacre, both of whom had been educated in Italy. From 1510 to 1513 Erasmus taught Greek at Cambridge.