Humanists and Europe

Dreams and Realities of Renaissance Europe

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Abstract

Humanism was a cultural movement that developed rapidly in Italy in the fourteenth century before spreading throughout early modern Europe. Based on a return to the authors of antiquity, advocating the renewal of the study of the humanities (the *studia humanitatis*) and putting forward a new vision of the place of man in the world, it gradually became a dominant cultural model throughout the continent. The terms Renaissance, humanism and Europe are often closely associated. But to which Europe are we referring? Did people at the time really have a feeling of belonging to Europe? Even if we have undoubtedly inherited a certain idea of Europe from the Renaissance, which ideas did it encompass at that time? From a Christian Europe governed by the pope to a Europe of confederations, from a Europe of plural identities to a new humanist Europe *République des lettres*, a wide range of projects for Europe were put forward between dreams, hopes and disillusionment.

Article

In the mid-fourteenth century, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, known in English as Petrarch (1304-1374) announced, in a fit of poetic enthusiasm, the imminent dawn of a new age marked by a profound cultural renewal encompassing the letters, science and the arts. A new era, commonly referred to as the Renaissance since the 19th century, would revive the golden age of antiquity and sound the victory of light over darkness. "Shaking off the darkness," Petrarch wrote in his poem *Africa*, "our descendants will see once more the pure sun of long ago / you will see the Helicon turn green with fresh shoots / the laurel will flourish: then shall arise / the sublime, fertile minds, whose ardour / shall restore the ancient love of the Pierides ... then you shall be young once more, while the light of a happier age will shine for the poets." A century later, in 1484, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), an eminent member of the Platonic Academy in Florence, cultivated the certitude of living in a golden age which "has brought back to light those liberal arts that were almost all extinguished: grammar, poetry, oratory, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and the ancient melody of the Orphic lyre."

The Italian humanists, the pioneers of a vast scholarly movement destined to become "a dominant cultural model in Europe" by the sixteenth century, laid the foundations for an irresistible intellectual

and cultural current "which opened the way for a transformed vision of the world, for a renewal of the modes and forms of knowledge, for a widening of the sources of literary and artistic inspiration, for an overhaul of the education system ... for a liberating criticism of traditions and of institutions ... and, ultimately, for a new image of man" (Jean-Claude Margolin).

From Petrarch to Erasmus, from Lorenzo Valla to Guillaume Budé, from the Italian Wars (1494-1559) to the Reformation and the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598), from the great discoveries to the scientific revolutions begun by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) and by Galileo (1564-1642), the European continent became the stage where it seemed possible to build this renewed world where man, that 'great miracle' according to the prince of philosophers Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), was expected to become the new civilising hero.

Thus, it is tempting to associate the words "Renaissance," "humanism" and "Europe," reassured by the idea that Europe would above all be the daughter of the Renaissance. It should be asked, however, whether this Europe of the humanists really existed and whether it had an identity of its own, shaped (among other things) by the principles considered so important today: unity, consciousness, and a feeling of belonging to Europe?

A response to these questions shall be set out it two stages, the first analysing the abortive attempts to achieve the dream of a united Europe during the Renaissance, and the second envisaging humanism as the construction of a dominant cultural model on a European scale.

Europe and the Europeans: ideas between hope and disillusionment

The idea of Europe during the Renaissance encompasses several realities, of which two, at least, are undisputed. Firstly, Europe was a mythical tale. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Europa appeared in the guise of a Phoenician princess, the daughter of King Agenor and Telephassa; the god Zeus fell in love with her and, transformed into a bull, ended up ravishing her. Renaissance art, which of course had a fruitful interest in ancient myths, often represented Europa as a charming young girl accompanied by a bull: in painting, for example, in Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1559-1562, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum), in sculpture in Bortolomeo Bellano's work (1470-1490, Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello), and in the medals created by Florentine artist Gianpolo Poggini (1564).

Secondly, there was no doubt that Europe was a well-defined geographical reality. Herodotus (484-420 BC), of course, and Strabo (58 BC-25 AD), whose works were translated into Latin in 1453 identified it as the smallest of the three continents that, along with Asia and Africa, make up the inhabited world (Oikumene), as did Pierre d'Ailly in his *Imago Mundi* (1410).

Beyond myth and geography, the age of the humanists also saw the birth of two unique projects for a united and unified Europe, seen as all the more urgent and necessary because of the rising Turkish

threat in the Mediterranean, symbolised by the capture of Constantinople on 25 May 1453. Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the great humanist scholar and Pope from 1458 to 1464 under the name Pius II, launched a call for a crusade by the Papal Bull of 13 October 1458, inviting all Christian princes to meet in Mantua to prepare for holy war. This alone was considered capable of halting the Turkish advance and defending Christian Europe from the fury of an enemy of the faith viewed, in a climate of strong eschatological tensions, as the precursor of the antichrist. The pope thus dreamed of being at the head of a united coalition of Christian Europe, bringing together all Europeans behind a common cause in a *Respublica christiana*, a term first used by Pius II. This old dream of a crusade, updated for the fifteenth century, never came into being; the dream of a Europe united by faith would also evaporate in 1517 when Luther published his 95 theses in Wittenberg.

In the same context, for the same reasons, but in a different form and in open opposition to the papal project, another initiative for the construction of a united Europe was undertaken by the King of Bohemia George of Podiebrad (1420-1471). Between 1462 and 1464 he proposed the creation of a political Europe of confederations where all European princes who so wished could unite their forces to repel the Turkish threat. For Podiebrad this Europe was to be a political Europe, a Europe built on an alliance between four nations: the Gallican nation, the Germanic nation, the Italian nation and the Spanish nation (to which a fifth was added, the English nation). Headed by a president—neither the Emperor nor the Pope would be able to apply—and a limited council on which each nation was represented, Podiebrad's Europe had its own judiciary and an assembly charged with legislative questions. While this project never came into being, it nevertheless led to the signing of several alliances, including the treaty between France and Bohemia signed on 16 July 1464.

An echo of this "Europe of Nations" appeared in the sixteenth century on a number of maps featuring the allegoric-cartographical image of *Europa Regina*. The first such example is a map by Johannes Putsch (Joannes Bucius Aenicola) published in 1537. Here, continental and insular Europe are represented as a crowned female body, an empress/queen holding an orb in her right hand and a sceptre in her left. Spain forms the head, France the shoulders, and Germany the chest with Bohemia at the centre. Italy is represented by the arm and Sicily by the orb. Greece, meanwhile, is placed on the right-hand edge of the body, just opposite Asia. Around it are placed the Atlantic Ocean, the *mare nostrum*, Scandinavia, Africa and Asia. This map also features several rivers (the Po, the Rhone, the Rhine, the Elbe), mountain ranges (the Apennines, the Alps) and cities (including Rome, Venice, Paris and Strasbourg as well as Constantinople and Belgrade). The image of *Europa Regina* was widely disseminated: it was taken up in Heinrich Bünting's *Itinerarium sacrae scripturae* (1587), for instance, and in the 1588 edition of Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia,* as well as in the versification by the grammarian Gérard du Vivier of Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Antwerp, 1570) who wrote "The woman you see sitting on high / in grave majesty, richly, as it should be / on her head the imperial crown / and in her right hand a royal sceptre / with her left hand at the helm of the world /

Here is our Europa who has as a general / through the Romans in the past, ruled the world."

In a single, crowned female body, here is a Europe revealed in all her majesty, an iconic and clearly propagandistic image that seeks to underline Europe's "incontestable and uncontested superiority" over Africa and Asia (J.-F. Margolin).

Faced with the Ottoman threat, in a Europe torn apart by internal divisions, such stirrings of shared identity suggested, during the Renaissance, the possibility of a Europe shaped by an awareness of the cultural specificity of the Occident. The great discoveries begun by Christopher Columbus (1450-1506), Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) and Fernando Magellan (1480-1521) also contributed, albeit very gradually, to the formation of a European identity. However, it is clear that this was by no means a general feeling and that this awareness often led Europeans to turn in on themselves. Most humanists, confronted by the realities of their world, in fact tended to cherish attachments to a sense of identity that was anything but European. Petrarch, for instance, said that he was above all Italian, as he was proud of the strong bonds of Italian culture in a politically fragmented Italy. In the sixteenth century, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) confessed his irreducible love for his Italian homeland, in a letter to Francesco Vettori on 16 April 1527: 'I love my fatherland more than my soul'. The increasing strength of national sentiment and xenophobia makes it impossible to believe that everyone during the Renaissance felt European. There are numerous examples. In 1376, Coluccio Salutati, a humanist and chancellor of Florence, launched a virulent appeal not to let the voracious French seize hold of Italy. Poggio Bracciolini, apostolic secretary to Pope John XXIII, wrote a letter to his friend Niccolò Niccoli on 18 May 1416 describing his pleasant stay at the thermal baths of Baden, in which he identified the cultural gulf separating Italy and Germany: "These good Germans would have been excellent citizens of Plato's Republic where everything was held in common... it's extraordinary ... there is no discord. The passion of jealousy, which torments almost all husbands elsewhere, is wholly unknown to them ... Oh! How different their customs are from our own." A few years later, in 1480, Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, architect, friend and biographer or Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), when writing about the construction of the dome of Florence's cathedral stigmatized "those Germans who claim to be modern." And, for instance, Pope Julius II, at the head of the church from 1503 to 1513, only seemed to act based on a single obsession: throwing the barbarian invaders, including the French, out of Italy.

Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536), the prince of the humanists, noted this lack of a European consciousness with much regret. Recalling that the distance between one country and another was meant to separate bodies and not souls, he denounced what he called cruel human perversity: "The Englishman is the enemy of the Frenchman simply because he is French, the Briton hates the Scot simply because he is a Scot. The German is in disagreement with the Frenchman, and the Spaniard with both of them."

If one can speak of Europe, therefore, one must first recognise that it is a notion which, for the humanists, above all encompassed the plurality of spatial-cultural realities. It is a plural Europe full of contrasts, in which they were encouraged to engage with a familiar kind of otherness often in a way they found positive: a Europe of diversity, mobility and sociability, a Europe of the roads taken by ambassadors like Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), by artists like Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Jan Van Eyck (1390-1441) by writers and intellectuals like Montaigne (1533-1592) and Charles de Bovelles (1480-1533) and also by men of war and *condottieri* like the Englishman John Hawkwood (1320-1394) or Louis II de la Trémoille (1460-1525), for example, who ended up engaged in combat on the Italian peninsula.

When faced with these numerous dissonances, does it still make sense to speak of a Europe of the humanists? Yet there was a common dream which, between the middle ages and the early modern period spread on a European level: the dream of a Europe of wisdom, of knowledge and of reason, of a Europe called upon to become a new republic of letters, overcoming national divisions and particularistic identities.

The Europe of the Humanists or the new Republic of Letters

The expression *Respublica Litteraria* appeared for the first time in the writings of the Italian humanist and politician Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454) in a letter addressed to Poggio Bracciolini dated 6 July 1417. Closely associated with the rise of humanism in Renaissance Italy and Europe, it was seen as a vector of a dominant cultural model. Humanist thought, in all its plurality—literary, political, philosophical and artistic—sought to establish the canons of human perfection from a perspective that was at once ethical, aesthetic and social. Humanism, fuelled by a deep conviction in the necessity of civilizational renewal, hoped for a return of antiquity, seen as essential for giving rise, in the spirit of universal vocation, to a new free, dignified man, master of his own destiny.

The return to antiquity, especially Greco-Roman antiquity, led to the establishment of a "common repertoire of references," authors and texts on which to build a new era. The School of Athens painted by Raphael on the walls of the *Stanza della Signatura* in the Vatican between 1508 and 1511 encapsulates in a single image the performative fascination that the humanists had for the great scholars of the ancient world: gathered around Plato and Aristotle, who stand at centre stage, a kind of interdisciplinary conversation is taking place bringing together Socrates, Aeschines, Xenophon, Chrysippus, Zeno, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Archimedes and Ptolemy.

It was this thirst for all things ancient that inspired the poet Ronsard (1524-1585) to say of the ancients: "let us pillage them." Languages, texts, relics and archaeological ruins were the essential sources for this process of rediscovery. As such, a perfect knowledge and mastery of ancient languages opened readers to the truth of the ancient texts. Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), the father of

philology, wrote in his *Elegantiae* (1440) that "In any case, so sad was the age of the past, where one found no hint of a scholar, that we should congratulate ourselves all the more on our own era during which, with continued effort, I am sure that we will restore the language of Rome, even more than the city itself, and with it all the disciplines."

The "language of Rome," classical Latin, the Latin of Cicero, became the *lingua franca* of the humanists. Thus, from the end of the fourteenth century, Latin philology was on the rise, as was Greek philology thanks to the Byzantine scholars who settled in Italy such as Manuel Chrysoloras (1350-1415) who taught Greek in Florence after his arrival there in 1397. Latin, Greek and Hebrew, wrote Erasmus in a letter to Thomas Wolsey on 18 May 1519, were "the three languages without which all doctrine is incomplete."

Numerous discoveries of ancient manuscripts in the abbeys of Cluny and Sankt Gallen enabled humanists to unearth ancient treaties by authors including Cicero, Quintilian, Lucretius, Plautus and Statius. In 1416, in a letter to Guarino da Verona, Poggio Bracciolini described, in militant terms, the discovery of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*: "among countless manuscripts that it would take too long to list I found Quintilian safe and sound, though covered in mildew and dust. In fact these books were not to be found in the library, as befitted their worth, but in a dark and miserable prison at the bottom of a dark tower to which one would not even send prisoners condemned to death." The ancient authors embodied an archetypal perfection which needed to be resuscitated: Cicero was the model for prose, Virgil for the epic and Horace for lyric poetry. Readings, translations, studies: humanist bibliophilia was in its heyday. Janus Lascaris (1445-1535) was twice sent to the Orient by the Medici in order to collect Greek manuscripts. He came back with more than 200 works. Also in Florence, Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421-1498), nicknamed the "king of the world's booksellers" kept up a flourishing trade in books by classical and contemporary authors. As a book dealer he supplied the great libraries of the age: from Alfonso the Magnanimous, King of Naples, to Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, and the King of Hungary Matthias Corvinus. European humanism was a humanism of the book, and books a keystone of humanity. For the Byzantine humanist cardinal Basilius Bessarion (1403-1472), who wrote to the doge Cristoforo Moro and the Venetian senate on 31 May 1468 in order to donate his library to them (1024 manuscripts, including 482 Greek works), books were the showcases of the words of the wise. Not only were they replete with the example set by the ancients, their customs and laws, and full of religion, but "they live, talk, converse with us. They teach us, instruct us, console us, they remind us of all things ancient by placing them before the eyes of our memory. So great is their strength, their dignity, their majesty and ultimately their sacredness, that if there were no books, we would all be coarse and ignorant with no memory of the past, without any example on which to rest. We would have no knowledge of human and divine things. The same tomb that houses the bodies of men would also erase their names forever."

A new sensitivity to archaeological remains also offered a gateway to antiquity. The popes Martin V (1417-1431) and Eugene IV (1431-1447) undertook to protect and restore ancient monuments. Like Poggio Bracciolini who, in his meditation *On the Vicissitudes of Fortune* (1431), gave a description of the ruins of Rome, Flavio Biondo (1388-1463) was fascinated by these traces of a past age. His *Roma Instaurata* (1444-1446) was not merely a rationally organised catalogue of the monuments of Rome but also the fruit of extensive archaeological and archival investigations.

The Europe of letters to which the humanists aspired was a Europe of the humanities (*studia humanitas*). In the Italy of the Quattrocento, the renewal of the humanist *paedeia* was the work of Pier Paolo Vergerio (1370-1444), Maffeo Vegio (1406-1458) and Matteo Palmieri (1406-1475). In their treaties they developed a new educational pedagogy, outlining a path of study centred on the seven liberal arts plus history and philosophy. For the love of letters, man became virtuous, responsible and well equipped to become a socially useful citizen of the world. Vittorino da Feltre (1378-1446) another grand master of the Italian Renaissance, called by the Gonzaga to Mantua, opened the *Casa Giocasa* in around 1425, a school which advocated the total education of man, both of his mind and his body, through a programme of physical education, sports and games.

The education of man was also at the centre of philosophical reflection. Giannozzo Manetti in 1452 and later Pico della Mirandola in 1486 defended the concept of human dignity, based on the freedom "given to man by the creator" to move within the great chain of being and to exercise free will. Dignity, liberty, responsibility: "men are not born, they are made" wrote Erasmus in 1529.

Founded upon the rediscovery of antiquity, on the *studia humanitatis* and on a new understanding of man's place in the world, the Republic of Letters extended throughout Europe thanks to the many networks of humanist sociability. The circulation of people, and above all of letters, was the key to the spread of humanism. The *Epistolae familiares* of Cicero were the archetypal model. In the middle of the fifteenth century, for instance, the author Cristoforo Landino published something resembling a textbook containing prototypes of letters for all occasions. This book went through around forty editions between 1485 and 1550, an indication of the importance attached to this practice.

Printing also had an important role in the spread of humanist thought and ancient texts throughout Europe. In Venice, Aldus Manutius, whose emblems were a dolphin and an anchor, embodies the archetype of a humanist printer. He was associated with Erasmus, admired Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola and was one of the first printers to print in Greek characters.

Academies and princely courts were the major sites of the spread of Renaissance humanism: these ranged from the Platonic Academy in Florence sponsored by Cosimo de' Medici ("Cosimo the Elder") in 1463 to the Accademia Pontaniana in Naples founded by Antonio Beccadelli ("il Panormita", 1394-1471) and directed after 1471 by Giovanni Pontano (1426-1503), from the intellectual coterie of

a princely court like the Milan of the Sforza with Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481) or Ferrara where the Este employed Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441-1494) and Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) to Urbino under the Montefeltro or the Aragonese court in Naples, not to mention the France of François I, who founded the Collège des lecteurs royaux (Collège de France) in 1530 at the behest of Guillaume Budé (1468-1540).

Within the princely courts, humanism underwent a process of politicisation, which reformulated the ideal of good government and the figure of the scholar prince. A cultural project was thus transformed into a political one in a Europe of princes and letters. In 1520, in the *Florentine Histories* (Book VIII), Machiavelli evoked the figure of Lorenzo de' Medici when outlining the portrait of the humanist prince, "a civilising hero" (Laurent Bolard): he wants to make his city greater and more beautiful, he organises festivals, celebrations and processions where the events and great deeds of antiquity are represented. He is driven by a desire to ensure the abundance of his land and the unity of his people. He loves those who excel in the arts and he makes protégés of talented people: musicians, architects, artists, philosophers and poets.

The Europe of the humanists undoubtedly had many faces. It was multi-faceted and incomplete. Between hope and disillusionment, it was a space of shared exchanges and cultural influence, a laboratory of ideas, projects and advances which are surely the legacy of a certain idea of Europe, an idea to which we continue to aspire.

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