

The New World of the Renaissance

John Herman Randall

John Herman Randall (1899-1980) was an American philosopher and professor at Columbia University. He wrote The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age (1940) to serve as the textbook for a class on Contemporary Civilization at Columbia. The following comes from ch. 6.

The Discovery of the Humanity of the Classics

It was but natural that these interests should turn men more and more to the records of the past. The interest in the ancient literatures really dates from the founding of the universities in the twelfth century; the early students had as intense a love for the classics as the fourteenth-century scholars. Abelard's pupil, John of Salisbury, collected the Latin poets and delighted to read them. The discovery of Aristotle and the consequent preoccupation with science, with man's destiny rather than with his [118] life, only postponed the later revival. Europe was learning from the past, taking what she fancied. In Dante the two interests are equally vivid; he is full of ancient Rome, and pagan and Christian symbols serve him alike throughout his masterpiece.

Petrarch,¹ seventeen when Dante died, is the vanguard of the changed emphasis. Distrustful of Aristotle, disdainful alike of the human and the literary value of the scholastic writings, loving the glory of this world and intensely interested in his own personality, author of an autobiographical and posing *Letter to Posterity*, devoted above all others to his beloved Cicero, writing immortal sonnets to his earthly Laura in the Italian tongue, yet desiring such lapses from Ciceronian grace to be expunged, insatiable in his search for the manuscripts of the ancients and stirred to wrath by their neglect — he laments that he was born out of his time:

Among the many subjects which interested me, I dwelt especially upon antiquity, for our own age has always repelled me, so that, had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I should have preferred to have been born in any other period than our own. In order to forget my own time I have constantly striven

to place myself in spirit in other ages, and consequently I delighted in history.²

In reality his hearkening to the call of the new and his retention of the old were intensely of his own age. He turned from Aristotle to Plato, remarking, on hearing the former's authority taken,

Sometimes I asked, with a smile, how Aristotle could have known that, for it was not proven by the light of reason, nor could it be tested by experiment.³

He preferred rational to supernatural explanations of events, yet religiously he was faithful to the medieval world; the Fathers he read, yet it was Augustine the man rather than the thinker whom he admired. His Latins he interpreted allegorically, yet was a careful scholar as to texts. The monastic life he approved of — as giving tranquility to the scholar. A curious blend of the old and the new, he sums up his attitude.

There is a certain justification for my way of life. It may be only glory that we seek here, but I persuade myself that, so long as we remain here, that is right. Another glory awaits us in heaven and he who reaches there will not wish even to think of earthly fame. So this is the natural order, that among mortals the care of things mortal should come first; to the transitory will then succeed the eternal; from the first to the second is the natural [119] progression."⁴

Let us leave him climbing Mount Ventoux for the view — strange aberration, in medieval eyes! — and reading Augustine on sin and concupiscence at the top.

Even beyond Cicero there beckoned another world, a world of cities like Florence, where the widest human interests, in science and philosophy, were made to revolve about man the citizen. Petrarch and his friend Boccaccio⁵ yearned for the Greek tongue, and patiently endured the barbarities of a Greek-speaking rogue whom they set up as professor and put to work on a plodding translation of Homer. It was not till the third generation of humanists that any could really read Greek. Glorious

² *Letter to Posterity*, qtd. in Robinson and Rolfe, *Petrarch*, 64.

³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴ *Secretum*, qtd. in Robinson and Rolfe, *Petrarch*, 452.

⁵ [Ed.] Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), Florentine author of *The Decameron*; along with Petrarch and Dante, he wrote in the vernacular.

¹ [Ed.] Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), a Florentine scholar, whose poems immortalized his beloved, Laura. Petrarch wrote in the vernacular, and is often considered the father of the Italian Renaissance.

was the day when a learned Byzantine, Chrysoloras, accepted a chair at Florence. Bruni⁶ gives us the spirit of the age:

I was then studying Civil Law, but . . . I burned with love of academic studies, and had spent no little pains on dialectic and rhetoric. At the coming of Chrysoloras, I was torn in mind, deeming it shameful to desert the law, and yet a crime to lose such a chance of studying Greek literature; and often with youthful impulse I would say to myself,

"Thou, when it is permitted thee to gaze on Homer, Plato and Demosthenes, and the other poets, philosophers, and orators, of whom such glorious things are spread abroad, and speak with them and be instructed in their admirable teaching, wilt thou desert and rob thyself? Wilt thou neglect this opportunity so divinely offered? For seven hundred years, no one in Italy has possessed Greek letters; and yet we confess that all knowledge is derived from them. . . . There are doctors of civil law everywhere; and the chance of learning will not fail thee. But if this one and only doctor of Greek letters disappears, no one can be found to teach thee."

Overcome at length by these reasons, I gave myself to Chrysoloras, with such zeal to learn, that what through the wakeful day I gathered, I followed after in night, even when asleep.⁷

Petrarch and Bruni represent the first enthusiasm; succeeding scholars grew alike more critical and more influential. The demand for learning seemed insatiable. The answer was the production of books printed on paper from movable type, in place of the old and imperfectly copied parchment manuscripts. Forty-five copyists working for two years under Cosimo de Medici produced only two hundred volumes; by 1500 there were in Europe at least nine million books, of thirty thousand titles, and over a thousand printers. The new printing spread with a rapidity that would have been impossible with the communications of a hundred years earlier. The first surviving specimen was [120] printed in Mainz, on the upper Rhine, before 1447; three years later Gutenberg and Fust had set up there a partnership whence issued the famous forty-two line Bible and the thirty-two line Latin grammar of Donatus, symbolic of sacred and secular learning, the Reformation and humanism. By 1465, the press had reached Italy; by 1470, Paris; London followed in 1480, Stockholm two years later, Constantinople in 1487, Lisbon

in 1490, while Spain characteristically lagged behind till 1499. Thus by 1500 all the chief countries of Europe were provided with the means for the rapid multiplication of books. The consequences for intellectual life were momentous. The number of those who could share the best knowledge increased a thousand-fold; it became worth while to learn to read, and to write for a wide circle of readers. A library could now contain a wide variety of secular works, instead of the few expensive writings of the fathers and doctors. Prices sank to an eighth of the former cost, and, judged by our standards, were low indeed. Ideas could now be sure of a wide hearing; and though the Church soon attempted to control the new force by her censorship, the printing-press had made it impossible ever to extirpate a living idea.

Above all, the circle of the educated, formerly confined largely to the clergy, broadened immeasurably; that rapid spread of knowledge and beliefs we call a period of enlightenment was made possible. It is difficult to see how the great movements of the next century, the permeation of the humanistic attitude, the spread of the Reformation, the rise of national literatures to consolidate the national state, could have occurred without the printed page. Ducal collectors in Italy might be ashamed to own a printed book, but all Europe learned from them. Universities, too, sprang up in every land as strongholds of the new learning, nine in Germany, seven in Spain; and for the first time schools appeared in the towns, as training places for other than the clergy, like Deventer in Holland and Saint Paul's in London. Princes and merchants vied with each other as patrons, from Alfonso of Naples, whose emblem was an open book and who reverently received a bone of Livy from Venice, to the magnificent Lorenzo, the banker and boss of Florence, patron of all the arts and letters, connoisseur and dilettante, who danced through life singing, "Quant' è bella giovinezza!"⁸ [121]

Lefèvre d'Étaples brought the new learning to France in 1492, Colet was leader in England, Reuchlin in Germany. These Northerners shared less of the pagan exuberance of the Italians, and were all more interested in combining their new life with the Christian tradition. Biblical critics and reformers of ecclesiastical abuses, they were intent on making of Christianity a purer and simpler gospel for this world. While the Popes were reveling in beauty and putting the earnest Christian Savonarola to death, d'Étaples was discovering the message of Jesus and the Protes-

⁶ [Ed.] A Florentine like Petrarch and Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) is often credited as the "first modern historian."

⁷ Bruni, *History of his Own Times in Italy*, qtd. in H. O. Taylor, *Thought and Expression in the Sixteenth Century*, I.36.

⁸ [Ed.] From a well-known poem by Lorenzo Medici: "Quant'è Bella Giovinezza / Che si fugge tuttavia! / Chi vuol esser lieto, sia / Di doman non c'è certezza" [How beautiful is Youth / which flees so quickly. / Whoever would be happy, be so now, / for there's no certainty in tomorrow.] This is Medici's re-phrasing of Horace's *carpe diem quam minimum credula postero* [seize the day, and trust as little as possible in the future] (*Odes* 1.11).

tantism of Paul. Greatest of all these apostles of Enlightenment, Dutch Erasmus was editing the Bible, undermining by subtle thrust the medieval ideal and system, and preparing the way for the revolt from the Church that was to break his heart.

The Heritage of Rome and Greece

What did these eager scholars find in the literature of Rome and Greece that so admirably expressed the sentiments they felt rising all about them? They found the arid field of textual criticism, the tools of the grammarian, the thin white light of the scholar's passion; they found the periods of Cicero and the rules of Quintilian. These things doomed Europe to centuries of schooling in the polished and studied but meager literature of Rome, to a formal and barren preoccupation with the bones of language, with style engraved on mediocre thought, to the sodden horrors of imitation Horace and veneer Virgil; if they did not stifle scientific thought, they at least guaranteed that no schoolboy should hear of it. In countless ways the world has paid dearly for the revival of learning. Yet this was not what they were seeking, and it was not the true gold they found. They discovered a great authority for their break with the medieval spirit, and out of the conflict of authorities eventually arose freedom. They discovered the beauty of form, that men about them were prodigally pouring forth, and in Plato its Justification. The Platonism of the Renaissance, if it lacked the full-bodied life of the Greek poet and wandered off into the vagaries of Neo-Platonic mysticism, of astrology and magic and strange secret lore, compounded of Arabian and Jewish dreams, had at least regained its joy in beauty. In spiritually minded, disembodied Florence the Platonic Academy lived again as in a [122] vision. There Ficino the translator and the musician sought to reconcile Plato and Moses, Socrates and Christ, and burned his lamp before his master's shrine. There gentle, tolerant, all-sympathetic Pico, "the Earl of Mirandola, and a great Lord in Italy," celebrated Plato's birthday, and sought a universal religion commingled of Platonism, the Jewish Kabbala, and Christianity. There Bembo the Cardinal discoursed of the love that is not of the flesh fleshly, but of the spirit in beauty, and made living again the *Phaedrus*, and Socrates' wise priestess, Diotima, like a figure of Botticelli. Tempered with the sanity of Aristotle, Spenser even pressed Plato into the service of the Virgin Queen, and carried a haunting and romantic beauty into the green fields of England. Plato, too, brought mathematics once more into repute, and thus by devious ways led Europe to take up again the thread of Al-

exandrian natural science. Full earnestly the age believed with the poet of the myths that "the soul that hath most of worth shall come to birth as a poet, lover, philosopher, musician, or artist."

But most of all the humanist scholars brought from their Cicero and their Greeks the happy, natural, and wholesome enjoyment of the goods of human life in a refined civilization, and the wisdom and sanity of balance, temperance, the golden mean. Harmless pleasures and natural tendencies they here found regarded as the means out of which reason is to order a good life, not a thing of the Devil to be repressed by divine aid or else to be indulged in shame and guilt. With these ancients, living well was an art, a skillful technique, not a moment of ecstatic rapture in a day of despairing self-torture. Their ideal was "excellence," the complete and perfect functioning of all the potentialities of human nature; their maxim, "Be perfect," be healthy and skilled in mind and body, do not miss a single opportunity of well-rounded development in this rich world. And though in their new-found freedom from monkly asceticism and self-discipline most of the worshipers of the free life of Greece yearned romantically for all the joys and pains of human experience at once, and burned for that crowded hour of glorious life that is really so remote from Greek prudence, not all flared up like Gaston de Foix, who lay dead in his beauty at twenty, lord of five victories. The true Aristotle of the *Ethics* was discovered in deed as well as in text, and the magnificent energies of a [123] Leonardo da Vinci were kept in control by the calm wisdom of an indomitable will. In Spenser's vast allegory of the *Faerie Queene* the moral throughout is Aristotelian moderation.