



# The R/renaissance(s), Humanists And Classics

by Jerome Moran

*huius enim scientiae cura et disciplina ex  
universis animantibus uni homini data  
est idcircoque humanitas appellata est.*

(For the attention to this knowledge  
and training in it has been given to a  
**human** alone out of all living beings  
and on that account it has been  
called *humanitas*)

Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 13.17 [my clumsy  
formatting, of course, and plodding  
translation]

First, where does the Renaissance fit  
in chronologically with other periods of  
the past? There is general agreement that  
the Renaissance should be dated from  
1300 to 1650, though some believe that a  
more accurate and meaningful starting  
date would be 1400/1450. The Middle  
Ages is generally taken to be the period  
500 to 1500 (a considerable overlap with  
the Renaissance then), though some  
would date the start to the Arab conquests  
beginning about 640. A period of the  
Middle Ages is traditionally known as the  
'Dark Age(s)'. Those who believe that the  
term is still appropriate (many reject it  
because of its negative connotations) date  
this from 500/600 to 800, though some  
extend it to 1000. (See later for the origins  
of the terms 'Renaissance', 'Middle Ages'  
and 'Dark Age(s)')

Every Classics teacher knows how  
important the Renaissance and the  
Renaissance Humanists were for the  
history and development of their  
subject. In fact, what we call a Classics

teacher was known in Italian in the  
Renaissance as a *umanista* (hence  
'Humanist'). The Humanists were  
extremely important educational,  
literary and cultural figures, and they  
were prime movers of the Renaissance.  
Humanism was a defining feature of  
the movement. I shall return to  
Humanism and the Humanists later.

What is less well known is that in  
the Middle Ages there had already been  
two movements and periods in the West  
each of which it is now customary to  
call a Renaissance (or renaissance).  
These were the period 750 to 900,  
known as the 'Carolingian Renaissance'  
after Charlemagne (Carolus Magnus),  
and the period 1050 to 1200 ('the long  
twelfth century'), the age of the early/  
first Humanists, known as the 'Twelfth  
Century Renaissance'. Some refer to  
each of these two periods as a 'mini-  
Renaissance' (hence the lower case 'r'  
above). As many as *five* Byzantine (mini)  
renaissances have been identified, two  
of them (800–1000 and 1260–1453)  
more important than the other three.  
(This sounds impressive until you realise  
that if it is true then there must have  
been five slumps or periods of decline  
too. The Byzantine Empire did in fact  
have a very chequered history.) And of  
course Byzantine learning and culture,  
and the conservation of literary texts  
from classical antiquity (though many  
failed to be conserved), had a great  
influence on the Renaissance in the  
West, both before and after 1453.

'Renaissance' is a French word for an  
originally Italian phenomenon. It may  
have been used in the sense of a historical  
and cultural epoch for the first time by  
Jules Michelet in 1855 (though he applied  
it to a period of French history, not  
Italian). B L Ullman, *Italian Studies in the  
Renaissance* (1973) pp. 24 onwards,  
discusses the history of the words used to  
describe the phenomenon. He says that  
'no single word found general acceptance  
... to describe the phenomenon' and that  
'The idea of rebirth came into use very  
slowly'. The Latin word for rebirth *renasci*  
is used by Nicolas de Clamanges soon  
after Petrarch's death in 1374. From 1518  
Melanchthon uses *litterae renascentes*  
frequently, and others used *litterae renatae*.  
The metaphor of rebirth caught on more  
widely with Vasari's use of the Italian  
word *rinascita* for the fine arts in 1550,  
some 250 years after the beginnings of  
the Renaissance, and about 100 years  
before its end.

The idea of a *rebirth* suggests future  
growth and development, to maturity and  
beyond. And can one read anything into  
the choice of tenses used for the Latin  
verb? The present tense (still being used  
in 1518) suggests something that has not  
even been born but is in the process of  
being born. The past tense gives no  
indication of the stage of growth or  
development reached. The metaphor of a  
living thing is suggestive in itself. The  
Renaissance is not seen as a thing that has  
been created, whole and complete.  
Instead it is still to emerge or still to reach

its consummation. Either way it is a work in progress.

The words *renaissance* (French), *renasci*, *renascentes*, *renatae* (Latin) and *rinascita* (Italian) all mean ‘rebirth’ and denote the supposed rebirth of classical antiquity. ‘Rebirth’ is a metaphor, of course, and not altogether an apt one when applied to classical antiquity, in spite of what was said above, since the same thing (as opposed to the same kind of thing, here a culture) cannot be born twice — and is a culture something that is *born*, even once? If one is to stick with the metaphor, it is better to think of the birth and rebirth of culture rather than of the culture of classical antiquity. The birth of the Renaissance is not the rebirth of a previous culture but rather of culture again after the culture-free Middle Ages (as Petrarch saw it). Of course the idea that classical antiquity *was* the birth of culture, i.e. ‘high culture’, is questionable, however attractive it may appear, especially to us Classicists, possibly with Eurocentric myopia. Petrarch, learned though he was, knew little enough of classical antiquity as a whole, and even less of cultures before it — or after it.

The Renaissance then was the ‘rebirth’ of culture or the ‘birth’ of a new culture (chiefly art, literature, learning), beginning in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and still within the period of the Middle Ages (the idea of the ‘Middle’ Ages is owed to Petrarch (1304–1374) : see below). The birth of culture was thought from Petrarch onwards to have been in classical antiquity. The culture of the Renaissance was based on, inspired by, derivative of that of classical antiquity. Very broadly speaking, the earlier part of the Renaissance mostly imitated aspects of the culture of classical antiquity, based on the discovery (curiously called ‘*re*discovery’ usually — when was the ‘discovery?’) of the physical remains, including written remains, of ancient Greece and Rome that had been largely unknown to Western Europe during the Dark Ages and earlier part of the Middle Ages. Later it became more creative and less imitative. Very broadly speaking.

Taking its lead from its founder Petrarch, the Renaissance was largely ignorant of and unfairly ignored or disparaged the Middle Ages as an age of culture. In fact, especially from 800 in Christian Europe and Moslem Spain, it could boast of many cultural

achievements, some of which influenced the culture of the Renaissance. If there was a ‘Dark Ages’ it was 500/600–800 and due to the upheaval caused by the collapse of the Roman Empire. The new conditions were generally not favourable to cultural, i.e. ‘high culture’, activity.<sup>1</sup> And of course, as we have seen, the Middle Ages contained two renaissances. It has even been said that *every* century from 800 onwards (five centuries from the end of the Dark Ages to the start of the Renaissance) could lay claim to have been a renaissance. Classical antiquity and the Renaissance did not have a monopoly of cultural activity and achievement, as the historian Charles Haskins insisted, one of the first to draw attention to the achievements of the period 1050–1200 in his provocatively titled book *The Renaissance Of The Twelfth Century*.

1300 conventionally marks the start of the period of Latin known as ‘Neo-Latin’, a return to the use of a form of Classical Latin as against contemporary Medieval Latin (both of them varieties of standard Latin, of course).<sup>2</sup> This can be seen as a linguistic renaissance of a piece with the main cultural Renaissance and inspired by the same motives. A return to ‘proper’ Classical Latin was regarded by the Humanists in particular as central to the Renaissance movement, though there was some disagreement among them on just how far the return should go. Contemporary Medieval Latin was for them tainted with the same degeneracy as the Middle Ages generally, a time of darkness, inactivity and ignorance, as Petrarch described it. Scholars already had access to manuscripts containing Classical Latin and so were aware of the extent to which contemporary standard Latin had strayed from the standards of Classical Latin. The spate of discoveries of more manuscripts served to confirm this. The Carolingian Renaissance had earlier instituted a return to the teaching of Classical Latin, but many centuries had passed since then. So important was the Humanists’ campaign for a return to Classical Latin that it is safe to say that **we would not be teaching it to our students now had it not been for them**. So the campaign was successful, but it was not an overnight success as Medieval Latin continued to be used alongside Neo-Latin until at least 1500.

As I have suggested, the Renaissance as a term of high culture (it was an age of

innovation in other areas too) is almost synonymous with the development of Humanism. As far as we can tell, the word ‘humanism’, in its German form *humanismus*, was first used in 1808 by the German educationist F I Niethammer. He used it (a translation of the Latin word *humanitas*) to mean a Classical education, as his source Gellius had: see below). As I have said, a person who was in effect a teacher of Classics (a Renaissance Humanist) was known in Italian as a *umanista*. Clearly there was once a connection, still being made in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, between Classics and Humanism, as the latter was then understood. Nobody today would make such a connection: we don’t think of Classics when we think of Humanism. But maybe some people in Scotland still do, where Latin is/was known as ‘Humanity’; and an Oxford Classics course is known as *Literae Humaniores*. And Classics of course in some places is now just one, no longer the *whole* of, what is termed the ‘Humanities’.

All these terms have their origin in the Classical world, specifically in second century CE Latin. Aulus Gellius at *Noctes Atticae* 13.17 introduces the term *humanitas*. He quickly makes a connection between this and education by equating it with the Greek word *paideia*, which he says is the equivalent of the Roman *eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes* (‘learning and training in the good [i.e. liberal] arts’). He maintains that this was the meaning it had for earlier writers, in particular Varro and Cicero, which *omnes ferme libri declarant*. *Humanitas* for Gellius does not mean humanity, humaneness, human nature or the human condition, or any of the things that are subsumed under the modern notion of Humanism. It means first and foremost what is distinctive of, peculiar to, human beings (see the quotation at the beginning of the article). Gellius sees this as the ability to learn, especially to learn what is most worth learning and what is most becoming of a human being to learn. *Humanitas* therefore is equated with learning and the objects of learning, and this is the meaning it had for the Renaissance Humanists. In Renaissance parlance, *humanitas* is what the *umanista* learns and helps others to learn, which is essentially knowledge of classical antiquity. Humanism is therefore essentially a Classical education, which is what Niethammer said it was centuries

later. *Humanitas* for the Renaissance Humanists comprised the ‘classically grounded verbal arts’ (Celenza) of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy, collectively known as *studia humanitatis* (the ‘Humanities’), more colloquially referred to among the Humanists as *haec nostra studia*.

The differences between the Renaissance and classical antiquity (and neither of them was a monoculture, of course, both embracing several countries and each lasting for hundreds of years) were much greater than the similarities. The main difference was Christianity, which informed the Renaissance much more deeply and widely than it did classical antiquity and was at odds with pagan antiquity in a number of ways. Christianity came late to antiquity, especially as a widespread phenomenon, and played little part in the cultural life of the empire before late antiquity i.e. before c. 300 CE.

The Renaissance(s) was a selective, not a wholesale, attempt to create a culture like that of classical antiquity, since many of the features of the original, especially of art and literature, if not paganism as such, were incompatible with the tenets of Christianity, as some had always been. Classical antiquity was more of a guiding principle than a template. The Renaissance was not as secular a movement as it is often claimed to have been; certainly there were few, if any, atheists or agnostics or Humanists in the modern sense, any more than there had been in classical antiquity. Petrarch, the

founding father of the Renaissance, was a devout Christian who saw the new movement as an instrument for strengthening Christianity, not subverting it. But artistic, literary and scholarly activity generally was increasingly more concerned with documenting and examining human experience and the human condition than with the unquestioning acceptance of the authoritarian tenets of religion.

I have already explained the origin of the word ‘Renaissance’ and some of its earlier cognates. The term ‘Middle Ages’ is generally used in the west, of the west only, and of Europe only or mainly. The term derives from the Latin expression *medium tempus* used by Petrarch to denote the period between the end of the Roman Empire and his own day, so about 500–1300 (‘middle’ between the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome and their ‘rebirth’ at the start of the Renaissance). But most people now extend it to 1500 to cover most of the period of the Renaissance (‘middle’ between the ancient and modern worlds), and some date it from the Arab conquests and rise of Islam from about 640, which marked the most decisive end of the Roman Empire in the west.

The first part of the Middle Ages (500/600–800) is still referred to by many as the ‘Dark Age(s)’, after an image called up by Petrarch, who applied it indiscriminately to the *whole* of the Middle Ages: 800 years unilluminated by cultural achievement and unilluminated by historical enquiry. The actual term in Latin

*saeculum obscurum* was not used by Petrarch but was coined by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century church historian Baronius to denote the period between the two mini-renaissances in the west, i.e. 900–1050. Most of those who still use the term apply it to the period before 800 only, the start of the mini-Renaissance of the ‘Carolingian Revival’; some extend it to about 1000.

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<sup>1</sup>Interestingly, there was a Byzantine dark age that extended over roughly the same period and was marked by the phenomenon of ‘Iconoclasm’. Like the dark age in the West it was succeeded by a renaissance, the ‘Macedonian’ renaissance.

<sup>2</sup>If that is what Alcuin achieved. Some think that it was (just another form of) Medieval Latin, even further removed from contemporary, everyday spoken Latin than what it was intended to replace, as one might expect in fact. Alcuin was familiar with Classical Latin and the debased version of it that he sought to reform. However, the vernacular for him, i.e. the language that was spoken by most of the people most of the time, coming from Britain, was Anglo-Saxon, not everyday contemporary spoken Latin, which was already very different from the existing Medieval Latin of the day. The difference between the Latin vernacular and either the contemporary standard Latin or the Latin he sought to replace it with would have been less apparent to him — not that he would have cared much, one supposes.