

INTERPRETATION

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INTERPRETATION

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THE "LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM" OF LORENZO VALLA AND THE RENAISSANCE HUMANISTS*

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Renaissance humanism has made perhaps its largest bequest to today's freshman composition teachers, for this movement was, at its core, a pedagogical movement¹ which profoundly shaped not only the study of classical languages but also the methods by which vernacular languages came to be taught in the schools. Lorenzo Valla and the Renaissance humanists strove to establish the primacy of a single form of the Latin language, that form common to the great writers of antiquity, and to this end railed incessantly against those medieval teachers and writers whose so-called debased Latin had come to dominate the schools. In so doing, they were guided by the concept of a normative or standard dialect, a concept which more and more controlled both the study of the classical languages and, in time, the study of the national languages. Today, a significant number of rhetoricians have renounced that heritage, declaring:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.²

An analysis of the humanist position as set forth by Lorenzo Valla, together with the history of its evolution and ultimate rejection, will not only illuminate the process of change which has produced this

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remarkable *volte-face*; it will also serve to restore an understanding of the Renaissance arguments for the primacy of a single language. These educational precepts, whose validity and efficacy are as defensible today as they were in the fifteenth century, provide, when properly understood, both a critique and a defense of the contemporary students' right to their own language.

The context which gave rise to the humanists' reforms and their call for a return to the Latin of antiquity is often misunderstood. We who read and appreciate the vernacular works of Dante, Froissart, and Chaucer may misread the humanist position unless we look to the most prevalent genre in use among the medieval literati, the literature of their professions, for this genre provided their primary contact with written and spoken Latin. After nearly two millennia of use, the Latin language had become the vehicle for new concepts in philosophy, in law, in statecraft, and in medicine, adopting new terms and structures invented to convey those concepts. Late medieval culture, however, lacked television, newspapers and interfacing computers; thus the language developed independently within each discipline and subdiscipline, so independently in fact that a modern student of medieval Latin must have access to at least four or five lexicons. Such specialization did not bother the humanists in and of itself; they never physically invaded the chanceries and the Inns of Court to cast out the word-changers. Rather, the proximate and efficient cause of the humanist call for a return to classical Latinity was the burgeoning dominance of scholastic Latin in the schools, especially in the basic trivium, the introductory courses in Latin grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, for there the impact of scholastic thought and scholastic diction was effectively to block the student's access to the much broader corpus of information and modes of expression available within the classical tradition.

The dominance of the Scholastics was reflected in both the organization and the content of the trivium. In the late Middle Ages the sequence of the trivium was grammar, rhetoric, and finally dialectic, which drew upon the first two for its matter; consequently skill in argumentation alone, and not skill in the other aspects of eloquence, came to be the highest and virtually the only art inculcated in the trivium.³ The emphasis on dialectic was more than a matter of sequence; it impinged on the content of the courses in grammar and rhetoric as well. The Scholastics had been compelled

to develop a vocabulary and syntax suitable for dialectic and thus fifteenth-century students learned their Latin grammar, which they assumed to be the grammar of an ubiquitous and long-lived language, through the medium of a language that was neither ubiquitous nor long-lived, but rather restricted to a specific time—the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—and, more importantly, to a specific place, i.e., the haunts of the Scholastic philosophers, who, it must be pointed out, were not to be found in the chanceries, the courts, or the pulpits but chiefly in the universities. To be specific, the basic grammar text from the thirteenth century onwards was Alexander of Villa Dei’s *Doctrinale*, a poem of some 2,600 lines which gave a more or less accurate and comprehensive list of prescriptions for Latin grammar in mnemonic but not memorable hexameters.⁴ By the last half of the fifteenth century, however, each line had gained a lengthy and markedly Scholastic discussion which the student was also required to master. Thus a single line from the *Doctrinale*, *Artifici regimen datus hic ut ‘epistola Pauli’* (the governing of the maker is indicated in this way: ‘Paul’s letter’) gives rise to a discussion which reads in part:

Definition: the word signifying a thing made by man can govern the genitive signifying the efficient cause of that thing, as *epistola pauli*.

Question: Whether this rule can be turned around or not?

Solution: Yes, for a word signifying the maker can govern the genitive signifying the thing made by him . . . This type is called *ex vi causae efficientis* because the governing word signifies a cause; but when it signifies an effect, then it is called *ex vi effectus causae efficientis*.

Argument: the governed word is prior to the word governing, but the effect is posterior to the cause. Therefore, it cannot govern the cause.

Solution: The effect is posterior to the cause according to nature. Nevertheless, I say then that the word “effect” signifies confusedly and the word “cause” prescriptively; effect can be prior by reason of confusion, and according to this the more confused words are prior words. . . .⁵

This passage represents only a fraction of the commentary on this one line—multiply this by 2,600 and then have pity on the student, as Valla and the Renaissance humanists did when they sounded their call for reform.

The most resonant call to humanist action came from Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) in his Preface to the Book I of *De Linguae Latinae Elegancia*,⁶ a clarion call which, because of its completeness and its

eloquence, was repeated through almost 60 printings before 1532⁷ and then re-echoed in the minds of countless students who used that work as the text-book of Latin style until 1800.⁸ This Preface deserves attention because it is probably the most comprehensive humanist statement on the primacy of classical Latin as well as the most often read; it deserves a close and thorough reading because Valla had taught rhetoric at the University of Pavia for four years, then served as secretary to the humanist prince Alphonso the Magnanimous of Aragon, and finally returned to teaching as Professor of Eloquence at the University of Rome. Thus his Preface has a powerful but subtle emotional impact, an impact which came to be so great that the exposition of Valla's own position was obscured for other readers by his call to action. Further, the figures which control this piece are figures which lost their metaphorical nature and became the substance of arguments about language even to this day. Nonetheless, Valla does take a position which, when stripped of its hortatory rhetoric, is not uncommon among both Renaissance and modern humanists. That such a position actually exists in this Preface, however, is neither so obvious nor so memorably stated as Valla's call to action, and so his rhetoric, the goals of that rhetoric, and its historical weaknesses must be carefully identified.

Valla's intent in the *De Elegantia* is to promote a return to the language of Augustan Rome;⁹ to this end he causes the image of Rome—Rome as empire, Rome as a fallen and yet somehow persisting commonwealth, and Rome as a republic—to dominate the Preface. Valla begins with a personal judgment expressed as a comparison between the establishment of the Roman empire and the spread of the Roman language: "Often, when I review by myself the deeds of our ancestors and those of other kings and peoples, our men appear to have distinguished themselves above all the rest not in might alone but in the dissemination of language."¹⁰ It should be noted, first of all, that this is expressed not as a statement of fact but as a statement of opinion, carefully qualified by an abundance of *I*'s in its formulation. More important, however, is the two-fold potential of this statement: it might be an intimation of a cause-effect relationship developing from the close temporal and spatial conjunction of the Roman language and the Roman empire, a relationship that would have a certain ring of pragmatic truth; or, it might simply be a quite different but as yet undefined assertion by

Valla which he is going to qualify and then prove in his own way. For Valla and his contemporaries, it is the latter, a somewhat startling assertion that is worthy of demonstration in itself, for to claim that Rome was as distinguished for the spread of its language as it was for its might in arms would be a novel idea indeed for a society which valued the warrior king above all others; it would perhaps not be as novel for Alphonso and his circle, yet if it were to be proved true, it would go far to compensate for that prince's own political failures and to enhance his limited successes.

In support of this novel assertion, Valla first calls his readers' attention to an important difference between the Roman empire and its predecessors: "It is clear that the Persians, Medes, Assyrians, Greeks and others held sway far and wide; although they were somewhat inferior to the Romans, they did hold sway longer; yet none of them thus spread their language as our ancestors did."¹¹ Valla, however, does not permit his readers to explore the political ramifications of that phenomenon but rather he presents it as a historical fact whose importance lies in its transcendence of history and politics:

Such an accomplishment is indisputably much more outstanding and splendid than to have spread the imperium itself, for those who add to the imperium are usually laden with great honor and called emperors; those who bring benefits to men, however, are more properly extolled with divine honors and not human ones, for they are not only concerned about the size and fame of their city but also about the well-being of the state and the safety of men. Thus our ancestors surpassed the rest of men in military matters and in their many honors; they surpassed themselves, moreover, in the extension of their language, as if leaving their empire on earth and joining the company of gods in the heavens.¹²

The euhemerism of this passage is not, of course, to be taken literally, but it does firmly reinforce Valla's claim that the ubiquitous language promoted by the Romans transcends their transitory empire because of its own inherent virtue, a virtue far superior to any possessed by long-dead empire-builders: "For what reason," he asks, "would any equitable judge not prefer those who were preserving the holy rites of letters to those illustrious men who were waging terrible wars?"¹³ Thus Valla's euhemeristic argument, though it treats of an historical and political phenomenon, effectively denies any consideration of politics and emphasizes instead the supernatural nature of

the phenomenon of lasting importance—the Latin language—which miraculously escaped what was for Valla and his contemporaries the inexorable process of historical collapse.

Thus the Roman language and not the Roman state is clearly Valla's concern, for looking to his own day, he calls attention to the historical reality: "That imperium, like an unwanted burden, races and nations have long abandoned; this language, however, all have thought sweeter than nectar, smoother than silk, more precious than gold or gems."¹⁴ Indeed, the language has an almost supernatural power: "The bond [*sacramentum*] of the Latin speech is great; indeed, it is a great power [*numen*] because among travellers, foreigners, [*barbari*] and enemies it is guarded scrupulously."¹⁵ Thus Valla's novel assertion in the opening lines of the Preface is confirmed: "We have lost Rome, we have lost the dominion, we have lost the imperium . . . through the fault of time; nonetheless through this speech we rule even now a more glorious dominion."¹⁶ No one knows better than the secretary to Alphonso V that the Roman Empire as a political reality is and will be no more; thus it follows that while what remains—its language—echoes that empire, the important fact is that it transcended that empire by virtue of the benefits it offered mankind. Valla's primary image of Rome thus persists, but it is a Rome which he and his audience have radically redefined as something supernatural and therefore outside of history.

If this transcendent Rome persists for Valla, what then is his problem? Continuing to use the image of Rome, he moves backward to an earlier period for his rhetorical answer: "What man of letters, what lover of the common good can abstain from tears when he sees the language in the same condition as Rome taken by the Gauls, everything turned upside down, put to the torch, and destroyed, so that the Capitoline citadel barely survives?"¹⁷ This image of republican Rome under attack by the Gauls in the 4th century B.C. dominates the remainder of the Preface. Through this image Valla bewails the decline of good Latinity and at the same time suggests the disastrous consequences of insisting upon a strict correlation between the political empire and its language: "Indeed, for many years now not only has no one spoken in good Latin but no one who has read it has understood it . . . it is as if, since the Roman imperium is lost, it is no longer fitting either to speak the Roman language or to savor the brilliance of Latinity which has been allowed to become

useless through rust and neglect.”¹⁸ Valla’s concern, as should be obvious to those entwined in his rhetoric, is for a world of the mind, where it is Valla’s wish that “the Roman tongue . . . flourish more than the city itself, and that along with it all disciplines shall come to be restored.”¹⁹ If that wish is to be realized, however, something must be done, and so Valla, assuming the warrior role so ubiquitous in the daydreams of scholars, issues his call to action and “gives the signal for attack”; as he himself will say later, “I have taken on the most difficult part of the task . . . in order to render others more quick to pursue the work to be done.”²⁰

Valla’s transition to figures and images of an earlier Rome is not accidental; rather it is a subtle shift to images supporting a transcendent and apolitical idea which we have seen developing throughout this Preface, an intellectual commonwealth for which the Roman republic is adopted as the proper analogue. Valla laid the groundwork for such a shift in his earlier insistence upon the benefits accruing to mankind, and not territorial expansion, as the mark of a great rule; he now makes that shift explicit by his Ciceronian oratory and his call for a new Camillus. By echoing the opening of Cicero’s most famous Catilinarian oration, Valla takes for himself the mantle of that great republican and anti-imperialist as he cries

How long, citizens (for so I call literate men and those who cultivate the Roman language, who are the true and only citizens; the rest indeed are better said to be non-residents), how long, citizens, will you suffer your city (I do not mean the home of the imperium but rather the source of our letters) to be held by the Gauls, that is, Latinity oppressed by barbarians [*barbari*]?²¹

For his contemporaries, this echo would be novel and yet very appropriate; for Valla, it is the opportunity to suggest succinctly not one but two elements which threaten his commonwealth of the mind, for the conjunction of Catiline’s shadow, the image of the Gauls, and the reference to *barbari* describe for his fellow rhetoricians the crux of the problem facing classical Latinity. With this echo Valla depicts classical Latinity as a commonwealth of the mind under attack both by “new men” such as the Scholastics who wish to refashion the language in their own image and by the territorial languages whose vocabulary and syntax have intruded into legal and diplomatic Latin. Both of these groups are rightly called *barbari*, not because they are rude and uncultured (though that inference is permitted for the sake

of the image) but because they commit barbarisms, which for rhetoricians from Quintilian to Valla were primarily gross errors in the use of a language, and only secondarily indices of a lack of culture. For Valla and his contemporaries, to say that something is "*infinitem a parte ante et a parte post*" is to commit a barbarism, not because the idea is rude and unsophisticated (which it certainly was not) but because the use of *post* and *ante* in this way is meaningless to anyone save another philosopher. Equally barbaric were the formulations of lawyers who wrote a blend of Latin and their own vernacular but still called it Latin. Thus Valla's metaphors—the shadow of Catiline and the Gauls—fuse into the equally metaphoric pun *barbari*, a pernicious force which must be repulsed by the warrior rhetoricians lest this republic of the mind and its attendant benefits be lost to mankind.

It is the concrete figure of Camillus, however, which conveys the full sense of the action Valla is promoting, for this Roman is, above all, a republican whose renown derives from the services he rendered his society. Camillus, as Livy described him and thus as Valla and his contemporaries would have known him, first saved the city by his victories against the Gauls.²² Valla therefore portrays contemporary attempts at writing histories in classical Latin as analogous to Camillus' taking of Veii, their translations of Greek works as Camillus' exile at Ardea, and their poems and orations as his defense of the heart of Rome. But Valla's appeal for a new Camillus permits him to demand more from his audience. Valla, like Camillus in his oration to the assembly reported by Livy,²³ does not see the restoration of the fatherland as an end in itself, but as an act which insures the members of that commonwealth the continued enjoyment of its benefits. The historical Camillus restored the Roman republic and then proceeded to make the benefits of that republic attractive to plebians as well as patricians; Valla would have a new Camillus restore freedom of expression to the intellectual commonwealth represented by the Latin language and in so doing open that commonwealth to all men. Valla is too much the medieval Christian to believe that such a human hero and such a territorial restoration is possible in a world grown old; nonetheless, he is conscious enough of the power of language and rhetoric to think that it could be imitated in man's spirit, which for Valla and his contemporaries was the only dominion worth holding.

These images of Rome—Rome as empire, Rome as a fallen and

yet somehow persisting commonwealth, and this new and spiritual Rome as a republic to be restored and defended—control the work and thus remain in the reader’s mind long after he has set the work aside. There are other concepts in this preface, however, which are expressed through other images, concepts which for Valla and his contemporaries flow naturally from the major images and which constitute an important element of their position on Latin’s place in society. Valla’s exaltation of the Latin language is founded upon the fundamental and existential fact of its ubiquity in time and in space, an ubiquity whose magnitude created an intellectual commonwealth of a dimension far greater than any such before or after. Because this commonwealth is of the mind and not of the world, the ordinary relationships between the conqueror and the conquered need not apply; thus, Valla never argues that other languages are intrinsically inferior to classical Latin and should therefore be eliminated but instead first uses the relationship between Latin and the vernacular languages to demonstrate exactly how supernatural this commonwealth of the mind really is:

. . . They who accepted our imperium . . . thought that they gave up their own and stripped themselves of freedom but not of the chance of injury; with respect to the Latin language, however, they did not think their own to be diminished, but rather built up in some way, as wine, discovered later, did not preclude the use of water, nor silk the use of wool and linen, nor did gold cast other metals out of their possession but rather added its gain to their other goods.²⁴

In fact, Valla sees the rise of classical Latin as a phenomenon concomitant with the amelioration of the vernaculars, and as just the opposite of a temporal invasion, expanding his simile with yet another image:

And just as a gemstone encased in a gold brooch is not disfigured but rather adorned, so our language as it was acquired brought splendor to the common speech of others, but did not replace theirs, for it did not achieve dominion by arms or gore or wars but by good deeds, love, and concord.²⁵

While this position flows naturally from Valla’s earlier assertion that the spread of the Roman language was something supernatural, it also introduces a separate image pattern, a world of commingled wine and water, silk and wool, gold and bronze, elements which are

not mutually exclusive but rather complementary to one another. Controlling the value-system of this passage is the image of the gemstone and its golden brooch which, because of both its lack of specific referents—which language is the gemstone and which the brooch?—and its studied ambiguity—which is more valuable, the gemstone or the brooch?—tends to preclude any invidious comparison between Latin and the vernacular languages with which it coexists.

Valla has more to say about other languages later in the Preface, for having denied the intrinsic superiority of Latin while asserting its primacy by virtue of its more beneficial ubiquity and greater utility, he also addresses the issue of ideas contained in other languages through a short discussion of Greek. At this point in the Preface, Valla has described the physical geography of this transcendent commonwealth of the mind, comparing it favorably to the commonwealth of the Greeks:

The Greeks may go and brag about the richness of their tongues; our single tongue, impoverished as they would have it, has nonetheless done more than their five which are the richest (if we would believe them). The Roman language is one, like a single law, for many races; there is not one language for all of Greece (which ought to be a cause for shame) but rather many, like factions in a republic.²⁶

What may be overlooked in this comparison is the fact that Valla sees himself as responding to a pre-existing claim made by certain of his contemporaries which he must refute if his claim for Latin is to be valid. His refutation, like the Preface as a whole, is dependent upon the image of an intellectual commonwealth, for while he appears at first to challenge the Greek claim to pre-eminent richness with a faint echo of Calchas' warning to the Trojans—"if we are to believe them!"—he ultimately faults them for dialects that are "like factions in a republic." For an intellectual commonwealth such as that envisioned by Valla, this factionalism represents a fatal flaw which will prevent the formation of a Greek republic of the mind. His final evaluation of the Greeks' claim, then, is this:

Authors among them speak in various dialects—Attic, Aeolian, Ionian, Doric and Koine; among us, that is, among many nations, no one speaks save in the Roman tongue in which all the disciplines worthy of a free man are contained, just as they are in the multiformed language used among the Greeks.²⁷

Valla's position on the vernacular and his concept of Latin's function in a world of vernaculars are common to virtually all of the North European humanists, with Erasmus as the sole exception; more importantly, it is the position adopted by almost all the teachers who wrote on the theory of education in this period. Erasmus and John Sturm, Erasmus' disciple who reconstituted the school at Strassburg in 1538, stand quite alone in their utter contempt for the vernacular; most humanists imitate Rudolph Agricola, who could appreciate Petrarch's poetry and who applied himself diligently to the study of Italian in order to recite its poetry and prose properly; or Alexander Hegius, who attacked those who committed barbarisms in either Latin or their own language; or More, whose Utopia envisions children being instructed in the vernacular. Juan Luis Vives perhaps best stated both the humanist respect for the vernacular and the central argument for the use of classical Latin when he wrote in his *De causis corruptarum artium*,

Quintilian says that to be eloquent is first to express all that the mind has conceived and secondly to cause that expression to be perceived by those listening; without the latter, the former is like a sword kept in a scabbard and stuck there. It does not matter what language is used, for there are many men eloquent in Scythian, French, German and Spanish; because a man may be learned and eloquent in Latin and Greek he will not necessarily be eloquent in another language, for such men are but babblers to Parthians and Medes. . . . Certainly, no one ought to favor or even approve of vileness and flaws in speech, for from such vileness and flaws has come the greatest part of, first, the destruction of art, and finally, the destruction of judgment.²⁸

Vives here gives voice to the premise upon which both Valla and the North European humanists (with the noted exceptions) base their arguments for the re-establishment of classical Latin, the premise of Quintilian's definition of eloquence which supports without any sense of contradiction both an argument for the reinstatement of classical Latin in the schools and, at the same time, the argument for instruction in the vernacular. Eloquence, these humanists consistently argue, is not a function of any language's intrinsic superiority; rather, it is a function of any language's ability to communicate one's well-formed thoughts effectively to one's audience. The historical fact of Latin's ubiquity, Valla and others argue, is a godsend not possessed by any other language; therefore that language ought to be used because of its historical effectiveness in both the formulation of

an idea and the communication of that idea to the broadest possible audience. The position of such Renaissance humanists does not deny a student the use of his native tongue; rather, by being led to a mastery of classical Latin, the student is made better able to formulate and communicate ideas beyond his immediate circle, something he could not do using the Latin of the philosophers or his native tongue. This was indeed a humanistic approach to language.

Valla's presentation of this humanist position was not only widely accepted by his fellow humanists but also received the widest possible dissemination through the long-lived popularity of the entire *De Elegantia* as the standard and authoritative text-book of classical Latin style. This popularity, however, had a pernicious potential which Valla could not have recognized: what was for his fellow rhetoricians a symbolic call to arms in defense of an academic position could be read by less sophisticated and more nationalistic readers as a pragmatic statement about the role of language within a nation. The success of Valla's rhetorical manipulation of the image of Rome depends for its success upon a set of medieval commonplaces which did not persist much beyond his lifetime and which thus could not control the reading of this Preface in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century schoolrooms. Valla's subtle rhetoric invites misreadings. If the reader is not struck by the novelty of Valla's assertion that Rome distinguished itself not so much in might as in the dissemination of language, he would tend to see Valla's thesis as a cause and effect relationship wherein the Latin language plays a central role in the rise of the Roman Empire, a cause and effect relationship whose proof is almost self-evident. For such a reader, the rest of the Preface would be a restatement of that relationship, with the work as a whole pointing to the necessity of spreading the language along with the imperium, a very commonsense position indeed. Even a reader who is able to avoid that misreading might nevertheless fall prey to the allusiveness of Valla's euhemeristic treatment of those Romans who spread the language as they spread their imperium: If such a reader does not follow Valla's shift of subject from the transitory Roman heroes to their eternal and transcendent language, he may also be able to view such euhemerism as a metaphor for glory and thus may merely be left with the idea that the dominance of a single language (especially his own) is a credit to himself and his nation. Further, a reader of the seventeenth or eighteenth

century may very well not be inclined to admit that his own nation was incapable of surpassing the Romans; by the nineteenth century, it would be assumed that it had in fact surpassed that empire. Thus Valla's rhetorical movement from the physical Roman empire to a spiritual commonwealth would not be immediately perceived or appreciated; instead, a progressive Englishman would find in the Preface a description of an inferior state which, although it rotted in the end, did have a sound political philosophy which England improved and put to use in its own empire. Finally, the distinction between empire and commonwealth so crucial to an understanding of Valla's position gradually ceased to be anything more than a very abstract distinction as territorial expansion and the common good became more and more synonymous: within a century, such a distinction can be found only by a Raphael Hythloday in the never-never land of an Utopia. In short, Valla's Preface can be misread in so many ways that his metaphor of the gemstone and the golden brooch cannot prevent a tacit value judgment by later readers, for those who were inclined to see the ubiquity of a language as an imperialistic weapon, a path to glory, or a feature of a truly superior state would come to set the gem of their language at the center of the golden brooch of the classical tradition, a gem whose worth they would value for itself and far above that of its setting.

The humanists' arguments for the primacy of Latin as set forth in this Preface lost ground gradually and almost imperceptibly, for the earliest proponents of the vernacular readily admitted the preferability or 'elegance' of classical Latin even as they attempted to elevate the study of the vernacular tongues. Richard Mulcaster is notable in this respect: historians such as Joan Simon see him as a radical innovator, who, she says, "cast mockery on the humanist plans for a classical education from the nursery onwards" (a plan that is perhaps more properly attributable to Erasmus than to most humanists) when he argues "It is not proof because Plato praiseth it, because Aristotle alloweth it, because Cicero commends it, because Quintilian is acquainted with it or any other else . . . that therefore it is for us to use."²⁹ I suggest, however, that what he is rejecting here is a much older tradition of appealing to the ancients as authorities, and that his utilitarian argument is in perfect consonance with the reasoning of the earlier humanist writers, for Valla and his successors base their preference for Latin not on its antiquity

but on its spatial and temporal ubiquity. Mulcaster, moreover, argues in his "Peroration" to the *Elementarie*, one of the first English grammars, that "No one tongue is more fine than another naturally, but by industry of the speaker who . . . endeavors to garnish it with eloquence and to enrich it with learning."³⁰ Echoing Valla, he notes that "the Roman authority first planted the Latin among us here by force of their conquest; the use thereof for learning does cause it to continue, though the conquest be expired."³¹ Further, he argues that "there be two special considerations which keep the Latin and other learned tongues, though chiefly the Latin in great countenance among us, the one thereof is the knowledge which is registered in them, the other is the conference which the learned of Europe do commonly use by them in both speaking and writing."³² Nonetheless, Mulcaster is a Protestant Elizabethan Englishman who has observed the growth of the English language and the English nation, and thus he writes:

For is it not indeed a marvelous bondage to become servants to one tongue for learning's sake the most of our time, with loss of most time, whereas we may have the very same treasure in our own tongue with the gain of most time? Our own bearing the joyful title of our liberty and freedom, the Latin tongue remembering us of our thralldom and bondage? I love Rome, but London better; I favor Italy, but England more; I honor the Latin, but I worship the English.³³

Mulcaster then goes on to describe the necessary improvements in the study of the English language which would bring it up to the level of Latin in usefulness, an improvement that is possible because of a concept of linguistic evolution and historical progress, neither of which Valla or his immediate successors ever recognized. Mulcaster subscribes to the central humanist ideal of effective communication as the criterion for language preference; his nationalism, however, caused him to attempt to create within his national language elements which would allow it to equal and surpass the effectiveness of classical Latin. Mulcaster's attempt was not in vain; what he hoped for actually came to pass over the course of the next 400 years, as is evidenced by the ubiquity of English today.

This humanistic argument for the study of the vernacular was to be soon overshadowed by a much more popular appeal which, I suggest, may have been reinforced by a misreading of Valla's Preface. John Brinsley, in his *Ludus Litterarius or the Grammar Schoole*

(1612), argues that English should be taught because

The purity and elegancie of our own language is to be esteemed a chiefe part of the honour of our Nation: which we all ought to advance as much as in us lieth. As when Greece and Rome and other nations have most flourished, their languages also have been most pure: and from those times of Greece and Rome we fetch our chieftest patterns for the learning of their tongues.³⁴

Brinsley’s defense of the English language appears to echo Valla’s euhemeristic treatment of the Romans; for Brinsley however, it is no metaphor, but rather a concrete historical reality: the glory which Valla rhetorically gave to the language itself Brinsley would assign to the state by means of the language. For Valla the glorious fact is that the language continued to exist despite the ultimate fall of the Roman empire, that it created a transcendent republic of the mind. For Brinsley, the glorious fact is England itself, a glory enhanced by her language. In like manner, the Augustan poetry of the next century, while drawing on the Latin tradition as a frame of reference, would be English and not Latin poetry, written about English and not Roman subjects, and it would be intended to ameliorate the English language and nation and not to create an appreciation of Rome or the Roman language. For those poets—whose poetry was profoundly political—language serves the nation above all and only serves the intellect in passing to that end. This was not Valla’s conception of language; nonetheless, it was suggested by his rhetoric.

Even more pernicious was the postulation of a causal relationship between language and empire, a causal relationship set forth by Edward Gibbon in a formulation much like that of Valla’s opening lines: “So sensible were the Romans of the influence of language over national manners that it was their most serious care to extend, with the progress of their arms, the use of the Latin language.”³⁵ For this idea, Gibbon cites three sources—Augustine, Pliny the Elder, and Justus Lipsius³⁶—but in so far as the first two are quoted in the third,³⁷ I think it safe to assume that Lipsius was his only source. I would suspect, however, that there is a third unacknowledged and perhaps even unrecognized source—Valla’s Preface—for Lipsius’ thesis is almost antithetical to Gibbon’s, as Lipsius argues that the pronunciation of Latin (like the language itself) was garbled because it never was firmly established and like a transplanted tree really never took root.³⁸ As Gibbon sees it, however, the Latin language was but

another weapon in the Roman arsenal, one which was wielded with great effect. Such an attribution is possible because Valla's text was still in use as a manual of style³⁹ and because Valla's Latin opening—"non modo ditionis . . . verum etiam linguae propagatione ceteris omnibus antecelluisse"—might be ambiguous to a hasty reader (as it was for me at least) since he might mistake the ablative of respect for an ablative of means, especially if he is predisposed to see a causal relationship therein. I suggest, then, that Gibbon may indeed be echoing a youthful misreading of Valla in his perception of the relationship between Rome's military successes and its language. Such a suggestion becomes stronger when, later on in the same section, Gibbon appears to criticize the Greeks for arrogance (as Valla had done) and to state that both the Greeks and Egyptians isolated themselves linguistically and thus never flourished politically,⁴⁰ a criticism which had led Valla to conclude only that the Greek language could never be the basis of an intellectual commonwealth. Gibbon, however, clearly sees language as a tool of empire, a political tool which was ignored by the Greeks and Egyptians to their detriment. Gibbon's view of the relationship between language and empire, moreover, has been accepted by many to this day; consciously or unconsciously, states seem to operate on this very principle.

Was Valla actually misread? Did his image patterns in the Preface to the *De Elegantia*, reinterpreted by later readers, shape our political perception of language? The answer to the latter can only be an inference made from a close reading of Valla's text in light of the medieval values which make his rhetoric work and from a dispassionate evaluation of modern history. That he was misread by empire-builders is hard to document, for few politicians are willing to attribute their great ideas to a textbook from their youth. I suggest, however, that the one instance where Valla is clearly misread can make the prevalence of such a misreading not only possible but probable. One could reasonably expect that Foster Watson, the eminent student of Renaissance education in the early twentieth century, would be objective in his presentation of Valla's position. Nonetheless, he reads Valla's Preface as both the embodiment of Italian nationalism and thus as the statement of an attitude towards vernaculars that is almost antithetical to that of Vives.⁴¹ Further, he supplies a partial translation of this preface which silently edits out the passages wherein Valla treats the vernaculars. Finally, his transla-

tion retains only the concrete image of the Roman state, fusing together the Roman empire and the Roman republic in such a way that the important distinction between empire and commonwealth is obliterated;⁴² thus he misreads, misrepresents, and finally denies the work’s rhetorical movement in support of Valla’s chief concern, the commonwealth of the mind, and sees instead only rampant nationalism. Professor Watson was a competent Latinist and an extremely well-read student of Renaissance humanism and pedagogy; he was not an empire-builder, but a scholar and teacher. If this is his learned impression of Valla’s position, how must this Renaissance humanist then have appeared to thousands of schoolboys between 1477 and 1800?

I have suggested that Valla’s Preface to the *De Elegantia* is dependent upon a perception of the Roman state as something irretrievably lost in time and which can only be recreated as a commonwealth of the mind. When that historical perspective was supplanted by the idea of progress, when the Roman state was seen as something that could not only be reduplicated in time and space but even surpassed, then Valla’s work became ripe for misreading. I would also suggest that Valla’s work lies silently at the center of modern quarrels about language in the classroom, for today Edited American English (the ideal standard English, a form no more and no less definable than classical Latin) is seen by both its proponents and its opponents as an integral part of the political system: many of its proponents tend to view this form of the English language as an intrinsic and almost infallible indicator of social position within a natural societal hierarchy; those who rail against it view it as a concrete manifestation of political oppression. Further, both proponents and opponents claim the mantle of the Renaissance humanists in the defense of their positions; its proponents argue that they, like a new Camillus, are fighting the good fight to restore the standards and hold off the barbarians; its opponents argue that their position is the divinely sanctioned one, for their intent is to benefit all humanity and not any political system, since all such systems are bound to collapse in a process as inexorable as a world growing old. Both of the parties to this dispute, I suggest, fail to appreciate fully the humanist position; both parties are blinded by the accretions of intervening interpretations of the humanist position. Valla had argued that the Romans spread their language more broadly than any

other nation, and that the excellence of a language is a function of the benefits it brings to all men. From that, modern proponents of Edited American English have fallaciously come to infer that various languages have varying intrinsic values which must be defended, while its opponents have come to infer, equally fallaciously, that the spread of a single language is a political and imperialistic act which must be resisted for the common good.

Renaissance humanists such as Valla, Agricola, Hegius, More, and Vives neither made nor permit such inferences. Their argumentation, when stripped of its once powerful but now pernicious rhetoric, is existentially simple: a contingent fact of history provided their culture with a vehicle for communication that could reach more people, contain more information, and provide access to a larger frame of reference than any other language or dialect; therefore, if they were to promote effective communication, they should emphasize mastery of that language above all others, but were not to deny the validity of any other language. Thus, Vives was no less a humanist for explicitly stating that there was eloquence in the vernacular; Mulcaster was no less a humanist for his search for eloquence in English; and those who teach composition and rhetoric today are no less humanists for insisting upon a student's mastery of Edited American English—in order that he might assert himself most effectively within a larger societal group—while at the same time recognizing that the student's natal dialect has its own unique value, its own unique eloquence in situations they may never have encountered.

¹See Augusto Campana, "The Origin of the Word 'Humanist,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 9 (1946), 60-73; and Paul Oscar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome, 1956), pp. 553-83.

²This is the resolution adopted by the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) on March 21, 1972 ("Secretary's Report No. 66," *College Composition and Communication*, 23 [1972], 325). This resolution was subsequently augmented by a series of position papers distributed to the members of the CCCC and was characterized by *Newsweek* as "more a political tract than a set of educational precepts." ("Why Johnny Can't Write," *Newsweek*, December 8, 1975, p. 61).

³See Richard McKeon, "Renaissance and Method in Philosophy," *Studies in the History of Ideas*, 3 (1935), 37-114; and his later "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 17 (1942), 1-32.

⁴Dietrich Reichling, ed., *Das Doctrinale des Alexander de Villa-Dei, Monumenta Germaniae Paedagogica*, 12 (Berlin, 1893).

⁵This passage from Gerhard von Supthen's "*Glossa Notabilis*" is cited by Terrence Heath in his article "Logical Grammar, Grammatical Logic, and Humanism in Three German Universities," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 18 (1971), 14. While this article ignores the equally important role and evolution of the *Doctrinale* in the grammar schools, it does provide a valuable overview of the adversary relationship between this grammar and humanist reforms.

⁶All references to and citations from this Preface will be based upon the text found in Lorenzo Valla, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Eugenio Garin, *Monumenta Politica et Philosophica Rariora Series I, Number 5* (Turin, 1962), I, 3-5. A truncated version of this Preface may be found in Florence A. Gragg, ed., *Latin Writings of the Italian Humanists*, (New York, 1927), pp. 146-49.

⁷Eugenio Garin, "Premessa" to Valla's *Opera Omnia*, I, vii, n. 3.

⁸Paul Oscar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, (Stanford, 1964), p. 25.

⁹For a detailed study of the entire *De Elegantia*, see Henry J. Stevens, Jr., *Lorenzo Valla's Elegantiae: A Humanistic View of the Latin Languages*, Diss. Bryn Mawr 1973. Especially important is Stevens' discussion of the term *elegantia*, whose sense of "appropriate choice" may be opposed to the sense of our modern "elegance."

¹⁰"*Quum saepe mecum nostrorum maiorum res gestas, aliorumque vel regum, vel populorum considero: videntur mihi non modo ditionis nostri homines, verumetiam linguae propagatione caeteris omnibus antecelluisse.*" p. 3.

¹¹"*Nam Persas quidem, Medos, Assyrios, Graecos, aliosque permultos longe, lateque rerum potitos esse: quosdam etiam ut aliquanto inferius quam Romanorum fuit, ita multo diuturnius imperium tenuisse constat: nullos tamen ita linguam suam ampliasse ut nostri fecerunt.*" p. 3.

¹²"*Opus nimirum multo praeclarius, multoque speciosius, quam ipsum imperium propagasse. Qui enim imperium augent, magno illi quidem honore affici solent, atque imperatores nominantur: qui autem beneficia aliqua in homines contulerunt, ii non humana, sed divina potius laude celebrantur. Quippe qui non suae tantum urbis amplitudine, ac gloriae consulant, sed publicae quoque hominum utilitati, ac saluti. Itaque nostri maiores rebus bellicis, pluribusque laudibus caeteros homines superarunt, linguae vero suae ampliatione seipsis superiores fuerunt, tanquam relicto in terris imperio, consortium deorum in coelo consecuti.*" p. 3.

¹³"*Quare quis aequus rerum aestimator non eos praeferat, qui sacra literarum colentes, iis, qui bella horrida gerentes clari fuerunt?*" p. 3.

¹⁴"*Illud pridem, tanquam ingratum onus, gentes, nationesque abiecerunt: hunc omni nectare suaviorem, omni serico splendidiorem, omni auro gemmaque preciosiore putaverunt. . . .*" p. 4.

¹⁵"*Magnum ergo Latini sermonis sacramentum est, magnum profecto numen, quod apud peregrinos, apud barbaros, apud hostes, sancte ac religiose per tot secula custoditur. . . .*" p. 4.

¹⁶“*Amisimus Romam, amisimus regnum, amisimus dominatum, tametsi non nostra sed temporum culpa: veruntamen per hunc splendidiorem dominatum in magna adhuc orbis parte regnamus.*” p. 4.

¹⁷“*Nam quis literarum, quis publici boni amator a lachrymis temperet, cum videat hanc in eo statu esse, quo olim Roma capta a Gallis, omnia eversa, incensa diruta ut vix Capitolina supersit arx?*” p. 4.

¹⁸“*Siquidem multis iam seculis non modo Latine nemo locutus est, sed ne Latina quidem legens intellexit: . . . quasi amisso Romano imperio, non deceat Romane aut loqui, aut sapere, fulgorem illus Latinitatis situ ac rubigine passi obsolescere.*” p. 4.

¹⁹“*. . . confido propediem linguam Romanam virere plus quam urbem et cum ea disciplinas omnes iri restitutum.*” p. 4.

²⁰“*De me tantum affirmare possum . . . difficillimam sumpsisse laboris partem . . . ut redderem alios ad caetera prosequenda alacriores.*” p. 5.

²¹“*Quousque tandem Quiretes (litteratos appello et Romanae linguae cultores qui et vere et soli Quirites sunt, caeteri enim potius inquilini) quousque inquam Quirites urbem vestram non dico domicilium imperii, sed parentem literarum a Gallis esse captam patiemini, id est, Latinitatem a barbaris oppressam?*” pp. 4-5.

²²Livy 5.43 ff.

²³Livy 5.51-54.

²⁴“*. . . qui imperium nostrum accipiebant, suum amittere et (quod acerbius est) libertate spoliari se existimabant, nec fortasse iniuria. Ex sermone autem Latino non suum imminui, sed condiri quodammodo intelligebant: ut vinum posterius inventum aquae usum non excussit: nec sericum, lanam linumque: nec aurum, caetera metalla de possessione eiecit, sed reliquis bonis accessionem adiunxit.*” p. 3.

²⁵“*Et sicut gemma aureo inclusa anulo, non deornamento est, sed ornamento: ita noster sermo accedens, aliorum sermoni vernaculo contulit splendorem, non sustulit. Neque enim armis, aut cruore, aut bellis dominatum adeptus est: sed beneficiis, amore concordia.*” p. 3.

²⁶“*Eant igitur nunc Graeci et linguarum copia se iactent. Plus nostra una efficit et quidem inops (ut ipsi volunt) quam illorum quinque (si eis credimus) locupletissimae: et multarum gentium velut una lex, una est lingua Romana: unius Graeciae (quod pudendum est) non una, sed multae sunt tanquam in Republica factiones.*” p. 4.

²⁷“*Varie apud eos loquuntur autores, Attice, Aeolice, Ionice, Dorice, Koine: apud nos, id est, apud multas nationes, nemo nisi Romane in qua lingua disciplinae cunctae libero homine dignae continentur, sicut in sua multiplici apud Graecos.*” p. 4.

²⁸“*‘Eloqui est,’ inquit Marcus Fabius, ‘omnia quae mente conceperis promere, atque ad audientes perferre;’ sine quo supervacanea sunt priora et similia gladio condito, atque intra vaginam suam haerenti: non refert quo sermone, nam et in Scythico, et Gallico, et Germanico, et Hispano multi sunt eloquentes: nec quod Latinus, et Graecus sermo, eruditi sint, et copiosi, continuo nullus erit in alio sermone eloquens, nam et his ipsi Parthis ac Moedis*

barbarismi sunt. . . . Equidem sordes et vitia sermonis nemo vel amare debet vel probare, unde maxima pars cladis tum artium, tum judiciorum est accepta.”

Juan Luis Vives, *Opera Omnia* (1745; facsimile rpt. London, 1964), VI, 180.

²⁹Joan Simon, *Education and Society in Tudor England*, (Cambridge, 1966), p. 353.

³⁰E. T. Campagnac, ed., *Mulcaster's Elementarie* (Oxford, 1925), p. 267.

³¹*Elementarie*, p. 268.

³²*Elementarie*, p. 268.

³³*Elementarie*, p. 269.

³⁴John Brinsley, *Ludus Litterarius or The Grammar Schoole*, ed. E. T. Campagnac (Liverpool, 1917), p. 22.

³⁵Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (New York, 1906), I, 46-47.

³⁶Gibbon, *Decline*, I, 47, n. 39.

³⁷Justus Lipsius, *De Pronunciatione Linguae Latinae* (Antwerp, 1586), p. 13.

³⁸Lipsius, *De Pronunciatione*, p. 15.

³⁹Gibbon called Valla “a fastidious grammarian” (*Decline*, VII, 332) and later, “an eloquent critic and a Roman Patriot” (*Decline*, VIII, 349). Gibbon’s education in the classical languages did not really begin until his sojourn in Lausanne where, under the tutelage of M. Pavillard, he spent a large part of his time reading both primary and secondary sources and laboring to develop both his French and Latin styles. The *De Elegantia*, it must be remembered, was the best work on Latin stylistics available at that time.

⁴⁰Gibbon, *Decline*, I, 48-49.

⁴¹Foster Watson, *Vives on Education* (1913; rpt. Totowa, N.J., 1971), pp. cxxvi-cxxviii.

⁴²Watson, *Vives*, p. cxxvii, n. 3. The only other published translation of this Preface is found in James B. Ross and Mary M. McLaughlin, eds., *The Portable Renaissance Reader* (New York, 1953), pp. 131-35; this translation, however, also suffers from the same silent compression of images, sentences and ideas, though to a somewhat lesser extent.