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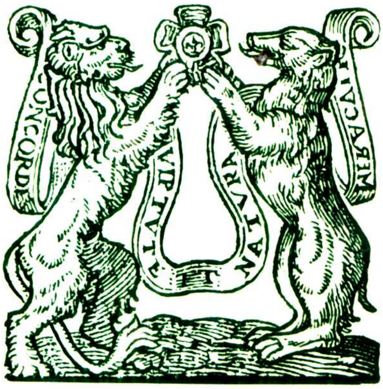
Monteverdi
AND THE END OF THE RENAISSANCE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Monteverdi
AND THE END OF THE RENAISSANCE

GARY TOMLINSON

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Preface

THE MUSIC HISTORIAN focuses first on works of music, whatever else he might survey. These are his primary texts. They are ordered systems of symbols, linguistic webs that conveyed meanings to those who created, performed, and listened to them. The historian's task is to describe what he takes to be those meanings.

In this book I attempt to describe the meanings of the secular works of Claudio Monteverdi, the foremost Italian composer at the end of the Renaissance. My narrative revolves around the works themselves—nine books of madrigals, three complete operas and a fragment of a fourth, and numerous canzonette, *scherzi,* and *arie,* all produced between 1584 and 1642. But it is not restricted to these works. For, as anthropologists, general historians, and others frequently remind us, meaning does not reside in isolated expressive acts but arises from the relations of these acts to their contexts. In seeking to understand the significance of an individual artwork, we seek to describe as fully or, in the fashionable parlance, as "thickly" as possible its connections to the context from which it arose.

These connections take various forms because the context of any work is manifold and complex. The linguist A. L. Becker has enumerated four general categories of relation between a text and its context; they conform rather neatly to the conceptions underlying my book and may serve as the starting point for a synopsis of it. The contextual relations of a text and its constituent units, Becker writes, include "1. The relations of textual units to each other within the text. . . . 2. The relations of textual units to other texts. . . . 3. The relations of units in the text to the intention of the creators of the text. . . . 4. The relation of textual units to nonliterary events with which units in the text establish relations of the sort usually called *reference.*"[1] In *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* my narrative shifts among four varieties of interaction between Monteverdi's works and their contexts, each similar to one of Becker's categories: from analysis of individual works (Becker's relations within texts), to the placing of these works in traditions of similar works (relations among texts), to description of Monteverdi's expressive ideals manifested in his works (the creator's intentions), to elucidation of the relations of the works to the broader ideologies of the culture that produced them (extratextual reference).

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[1] A. L. Becker, "Text-Building, Epistemology, and Aesthetics in Javanese Shadow Theatre," p. 212. I was introduced to Becker's work by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who discusses it in *Local Knowledge,* pp. 30–33.

The organization of the book reflects these more-or-less distinct perspectives. Chapter 1 begins with a sketch of Italian culture in the sixteenth century—a composite portrait, I should say, pieced together from the writings of many historians of the Renaissance. This culture was marked above all by a tense confrontation of many opposed ideologies; two of them, late humanist currents and revivified scholasticism, bear particular relevance to my subject. After this introduction the bulk of chapter 1 reconsiders, in the light of the standoff of humanist and scholastic values, the famous polemics of three important cultural leaders around 1600: Galileo Galilei, the poet Giambattista Guarini, and Monteverdi himself. The chapter as a whole provides a conceptual frame within which to view Monteverdi's achievement.

Chapters 2–9 narrate the story of Monteverdi's secular composition in roughly chronological order (with attention also to his sacred works where necessary to fill out the plot). These chapters are concerned especially with the first three relations of text and context listed above: the structure and coherence of individual works, the place of these works in traditions of like works, and Monteverdi's intent in shaping his works as he did. But of course these relations interact in fundamental ways with the broader perspectives described in chapter 1. So chapters 2–9 extend and elaborate these perspectives, presenting a moving picture of subjects that in chapter 1 had more the quality of a snapshot. Monteverdi's individual development provides an eloquent, sixty-year commentary on the development of his culture.

And, conversely, general changes in his culture illuminate the course of his career. In chapter 10, finally, I plot the trajectory of Monteverdi's career against the background of late- and post-Renaissance values in the half century from 1590 to 1640. As in chapters 2–9, the image is dynamic rather than static, but now the hierarchy of terms is reversed: now Monteverdi's culture elucidates his work. As Italian culture evolved, so also, gradually and not without the strain attendant on so much personal growth, did Monteverdi's world of meanings.

All three sections of this book, it is worth emphasizing, are bound in an essential reciprocal relation. Chapter 1 does not merely provide definitions for the following chapters, nor do chapters 2–9 merely provide evidence for the general conclusions of chapter 10. Instead all the chapters are meant to interact in a manner reminiscent of Dilthey's hermeneutic circle, and each of the four relations of text and context is meant to be deepened by the other three. Clifford Geertz has characterized the interaction I want in this way: "Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another."[2] Monteverdi's culture, viewed in

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[2] *Local Knowledge*, p. 69.

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the most comprehensive fashion, tells us about his individual works, just as they, all of them and each of them alone, tell us about it.

My narrative is much enriched by the special nature of the texts in question. For Monteverdi's works are vocal works and therefore involve not one text but two: a preexistent poetic text, with its own meanings arising from all of Becker's categories, and a musical text, constructed to reflect in various ways the meaning of the poetry it sets yet not without its own, more-or-less independent levels of meaning. Vocal compositions are texts within texts; they carry meanings within meanings. Or perhaps, since their meaning arises on every level in essential relation to their state of linguistic duality, it is best to add a fifth category cutting across the other four. The contextual relations of Monteverdi's works, their sources of meaning, include the relations of two recognizably distinct languages joined as a single text.

These relations affect all others as well. Consideration of the internal coherence of the work must now involve not only music but also poetry and the interaction of the two. Consideration of the place of the work in traditions of like works must now refer to purely poetic as well as musico-poetic traditions. Our interpretation of Monteverdi's intentions must embrace interpretation of the meaning he found in the poetry he set. And our conception of the reference of the work to nonmusical and nonpoetic realities is conditioned especially by our ideas of Monteverdi's poetic readings. To deemphasize the poetry Monteverdi set in an attempt to concentrate on his music would be to impoverish at the start the context of his works. For this reason I have devoted much attention to poetic meanings—in individual poems, personal styles, and stylistic traditions—throughout my study.

It should not need to be said, finally, that this story of Monteverdi and the end of the Renaissance is only one of many Monteverdi stories that might be told. In keeping with the conception of text outlined above, I have aspired to convey meaning more than to prove conclusions. That is, I hope to have *described* as fully as I am able, to have constructed a richly significant context for my subject. In such an endeavor, claims of certainty, correctness, and truth do not involve positivistic notions of proof. They are rather—to paraphrase Leo Treitler, a penetrating writer on musical historiography—no more than claims that I have provided the most coherent narrative that is consistent with all my data.[3]

I have tried to include musical examples in the text whenever they are essential to understanding my discussion, though the reader should if possible have complete scores of Monteverdi's works at hand while reading chapters 2–9. In most cases I have consulted original or early sources in preparing my examples. In those cases where I have not—the excerpts from Monteverdi's Vespers of 1610, *Scherzi musicali* of 1632, and *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* and most of the excerpts from works by composers other than Monteverdi—my sources are named in the captions. The translations of Italian poetry and prose are my own unless otherwise noted.

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[3] See Leo Treitler, "History, Criticism, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony," pp. 208–9.

Part of chapter 5 appeared previously in my article "Madrigal, Monody, and Monteverdi's *via naturale alla immitatione*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34 (1981), 60–108 (© 1981 by The American Musicological Society, Inc.); part of chapter 7 appeared in "Music and the Claims of Text: Monteverdi, Rinuccini, and Marino," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982), 565–89 (© 1982 by The University of Chicago; 0093-1896/82/0803-0005$01.00; all rights reserved). One more bibliographic acknowledgment is in order here, to a work whose great importance to my study could not be adequately recognized in my notes. This is the so-called New Vogel: the *Bibliografia della musica italiana vocale profana pubblicata dal 1500 al 1700*, compiled over the past century by Emil Vogel, Alfred Einstein, François Lesure, and Claudio Sartori (Pomezia, 1977). Without this bibliography my work would have taken longer and yielded less. As it would have, also, without the generous support of a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and without leave time and two research grants from the University of Pennsylvania.

My other acknowledgments are more personal: to Mary Watson, who willingly helped in the final preparation of the manuscript; to David Hathwell, editor for the University of California Press, who worked hard to rid my manuscript of countless infelicities and inconsistencies, and to others there, especially Doris Kretschmer and Marilyn Schwartz, who saw it through production; to James Chater, who kindly shared with me his transcriptions of unpublished Marenzio madrigals; to Anthony Newcomb, who nurtured my love and understanding of the madrigal through countless singing evenings at his home (and who never spared the *vini prelibati*); to Louise Clubb, who as teacher and friend guided my studies of Italian literature and life; to Elio Frattaroli, who lent special support at difficult moments; and to many other colleagues, friends, and students who lived graciously with Monteverdi while I lived with him.

Ellen Rosand found time, during a period of innumerable pressing obligations, to read through my manuscript and offer invaluable suggestions. My brother Glenn drank cappuccino with me next to the Duomo and listened patiently, while Jonathan Kerman urged me always not to stint broader perspectives. Joseph Kerman has somehow excelled in three roles, each difficult enough in itself, as mentor, father-in-law, and friend. His vision stands behind the book as its direct and its dialectical stimuli, and his insight has allowed him to understand and encourage my need for both. He read the manuscript, clarifying and sharpening the narrative at countless points. My wife, Lucy Kerman, also read it—we have lost track of how many times—and again and again brought her deep conceptual skills to bear on its improvement. She should know that I accepted her suggestions thankfully, if not always amiably. Her love and support reached much beyond the actual writing of the book, of course, to realms not easily expressed. It is enough to say that the book could not have come into being without her.

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INTRODUCTION

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Oppositions in Late-Renaissance Thought: Three Case Studies

ITALIAN CULTURE of the late sixteenth century offers a picture of stark philosophical contrasts and intellectual eclecticism. The unprecedented explosion of information during the previous century, set off in particular by an astonishingly active printing industry and new technological and geographical discoveries, presented literate Italians with a bewildering variety of thoughts on almost any subject and fostered ideological conflicts of increasing severity and clarity. Not surprisingly, then, historians have often conceived of this culture as a confrontation of conflicting intellectual, spiritual, and social forces: classical versus Christian tradition, secular versus sacred realm, Aristotelianism versus Platonism, totalitarianism versus republicanism, feudalism versus capitalism, logic versus rhetoric, and traditional varieties of mystical thought versus emerging scientific rationalism. Indeed William Bouwsma, one of the most eloquent of these historians, has viewed late-Renaissance culture as an even more general conflict of antithetical world-views embracing many of the dichotomies named above; he calls these views the medieval and Renaissance "visions." And, finally, Bouwsma's visions reflect one more pair of opposed terms, often invoked in discussions of Renaissance culture: humanism and scholasticism. It is with these last terms that we will be most lengthily concerned, for they bear especially important implications for the intellectual and artistic climate of the late *cinquecento*. To understand their significance at this time, however, we must quickly trace their origins some three centuries before.[1]

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[1] On humanism and scholasticism I follow in particular John W. Baldwin, *The Scholastic Culture of the Middle Ages*; Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*; William J. Bouwsma, *The Culture of Renaissance Humanism*; Bouwsma, "Renaissance and Reformation"; Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty*; Eric Cochrane, "Science and Humanism in the Italian Renaissance"; Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism*; Hanna H. Gray, "Renaissance Humanism"; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (hereafter *Renaissance Thought, I*); Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought, II*; Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*; Jerrold E. Seigel, " 'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric?"; Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism*; and Henry Osborne Taylor, *The Medieval Mind*.

Paul Oskar Kristeller has taught us that scholastic premises and methods came late to Italy, imported from France in the decades before 1300—just prior, that is, to the first stirrings of Italian humanism. Italian scholasticism was therefore not so much a medieval mode of thought superseded by Renaissance humanism as it was, like humanism, "fundamentally a phenomenon of the Renaissance period whose ultimate roots can be traced in a continuous development to the very latest phase of the Middle Ages."[2] Fourteenth-century writers were aware of its recent origins; for Petrarch, writing in 1367, it was "the modern philosophic fashion."[3] We shall see, in fact, that it coexisted with humanism throughout the Italian Renaissance and dominated certain branches of knowledge that resisted humanist intellectual tendencies.

Scholastic thought arose in the universities of the late Middle Ages and was closely associated from the first with the teaching there of theology, philosophy, natural philosophy, medicine, and law. It was marked by two broad, related tendencies: a reliance on authority and a faith in the absolute truth of knowledge gained through rigorous deductive logic. The Schoolmen accepted as authoritative the major ancient texts in the fields that most concerned them—texts like Justinian's *Corpus iuris civilis,* Aristotle's *Physica* and *De historia animalium,* and of course the Scriptures and Patristic writings. And the most common forms of scholastic writing were determined by their dependence on authoritative texts: the commentary on preexistent works (this would dominate the writings of Italian scholastics) and the *quaestio,* an interpretive format for reconciling the views of various authorities most brilliantly developed in the *Summae* of Thomas Aquinas.

But as this description of the *quaestio* suggests, the authorities seemed to disagree on numerous points, large and small. So the acceptance of their views necessitated an immense interpretive effort to rationalize the apparent discrepancies. The means for this effort were sought in Aristotle's *Organon,* a comprehensive group of logical treatises recovered in its entirety only during the twelfth century. Aristotelian logic, in particular the body of syllogistic methods exhaustively analyzed in the *Organon,* thus provided the foundation for scholastic philosophy, the base on which its greatest monuments were built.

The scholastics' deference to past authority suggests a deeper premise of their thought, one that Bouwsma has linked to the medieval vision in general. The authority of the huge and newly recovered Aristotelian corpus sprang in large part from its awesome comprehensiveness: it presented an ordered view, especially of logic, biology, and other natural philosophy. Indeed, to some medieval scholars it seemed to present a systematic exploration of the full potential of human reason itself. The appeal of such a presentation to scholastic thinkers reveals their fundamentally optimistic view of man's intellectual capabilities. The scholastic vision and the related medieval vision "assumed not only the existence of a universal order but also a substantial capacity in the human mind to grasp this order."[4] Many scholastic writers were confident that complete knowledge was attainable by man and indeed had already been attained by a few ancient and early Christian writers in their fields of expertise.

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[2] Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought, I,* p. 36; see also pp. 116–17.

[3] Francesco Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others,* p. 53.

But if reality was closed, systematically ordered, and completely apprehensible, as the Schoolmen believed, then knowledge itself must be limited. Accepting the authority of the ancients could ultimately entail rejecting the possibility of new ideas in the disciplines they had mastered. In the debased scholastic tradition of the sixteenth century, to look ahead for a moment, this corollary was frequently followed to its logical end. The minor Aristotelian philosopher Lodovico Boccadiferro, for example, chastised a too-venturesome colleague with these words: "Most of these new opinions are false. Were they true, they would already have been adopted by one of many wise men of past ages."[5] In the face of the geographical, cosmological, technological, and other discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the scholastic deference to authority sometimes hardened into dogmatism, a turn from observation and practical experience to the security of ancient thought that Galileo would ridicule mercilessly. In an era of rapidly expanding intellectual horizons, sixteenth-century scholastics emphasized the claims of reason and theory over the imperfect conclusions drawn from observation and practice. The inability of these late scholastic thinkers to assimilate novel ideas stimulated important questions about scientific, scholarly, and artistic innovation in sixteenth-century intellectual circles and ultimately helped to provoke the first *querelles* of the ancients and moderns.[6]

But we have jumped ahead somewhat and must return now to the origins of humanist thought. Unlike scholasticism, humanism was native to Italian soil, a response to imported scholastic trends that seems to have been nurtured by the circumstances of Italian urban life in the late Middle Ages. The complex network of responsibilities and dependencies necessary to rule these communes and organize their commerce encouraged a pragmatic view of the uses and ends of knowledge, one embodied long before the Renaissance in a professional class of *dictatores,* notaries hired to write speeches, documents, and the like. This worldly, ad hoc use of learning sprang from an engagement with everyday concerns and human actions foreign to scholastic thinkers. It tended therefore to espouse the active life over the seclusion of the *vita contemplativa.* Its expedient pragmatism contrasted sharply with the scholastic view of knowledge as a logical, hierarchical structure rising to systematic understanding.

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[4] Bouwsma, *Venice and Republican Liberty,* p. 5.

[5] Quoted from Umberto Pirotti, "Aristotelian Philosophy and the Popularization of Learning," p. 175.

[6] See Hans Baron, "The *Querelle* of the Ancients and Moderns as a Problem for Renaissance Scholarship."

By the fifteenth century the effects of humanist learning were felt in the Italian universities, long dominated by scholastic subjects like law, medicine, and natural philosophy. Certain scholars, soon referred to as *humanisti,* began to stress the value of the *studia humanitatis,* a group of disciplines that scholastics considered inferior to more systematic studies. The *humanisti* valued moral philosophy over Aristotelian natural philosophy and celebrated the moral teachings derived from poetry and history. They condemned what seemed to them the useless excesses of scholastic logic. And they replaced it with a new dialectic, based as much on Cicero and Quintilian as on Aristotle, that blurred the distinction between scientific demonstration and plausible argumentation and challenged the superiority of formal proof to suasive talk.[7] In place of the logical construction of all-embracing ontologies and the systematizing of individual disciplines, they and their nonacademic comrades like Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, and Poggio Bracciolini, all chancellors of the Florentine republic and heirs to the *dictatores,* pursued the more modest end of swaying their fellow men to morally and politically right actions in the real world.

The importance of rhetorical persuasion to this vision is obvious. Indeed the revival and revaluation of ancient and particularly Ciceronian rhetorical practice form the cornerstone of the humanist achievement. This high regard for rhetoric grew in conjunction with a new human ontology, in which the will assumed a centrality at odds with its scholastic position as mediator between reason and the base passions. For the purposes of argument, in fact, the traditional ranking of intellect over will could even be reversed, as when Petrarch, one of the first humanists, wrote, "It is safer to strive for a good and pious will than for a capable and clear intellect. The object of the will, as it pleases the wise, is to be good; that of intellect is truth. It is better to will the good than to know the truth."[8] This celebration of the will as the motivator of virtuous action merged in humanists with an abhorrence of philosophy in a vacuum—of knowledge not put to good use. Already shortly after Petrarch's death Pier Paolo Vergerio united philosophy and rhetoric (and history, another source of practical instruction) in a Ciceronian linkage essential to humanist thought: "By philosophy we learn the essential truth of things, which by eloquence we so exhibit in orderly adornment as to bring conviction to differing minds. And history provides the light of experience—a cumulative wisdom fit to supplement the force of reason and the persuasion of eloquence."[9]

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[7] Lorenzo Valla and Rudolph Agricola are two of the leading figures in this shift from a syllogistic to a topical logic; see Norman Kretzmann et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy,* chap. 43, and Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue,* chap. 5.

[8] *On His Own Ignorance,* p. 105.

[9] Quoted from Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt, eds., *The Earthly Republic,* p. 15.

Humanist esteem for man's will, like the pragmatic humanist view of knowledge and dialectic, arose in interaction with the requisites of communal self-governance. Through the will, more than through the intellect, man's passions could be swayed and channeled to result in right action. And only thus could the special needs of the new society—to accommodate quickly changing circumstances and to persuade others to respond effectively to them—be answered. Behind the humanist exaltation of oratorical persuasion lay a recognition of the passions as dynamic forces directing human thought and action, and a felt need to control and exploit these forces.

In all this the humanist world-view resembles Bouwsma's Renaissance vision, in which the medieval excitement at man's vast intellectual capabilities gave way to a dimmer view of his ability to rationalize the world around him. The systematic, hierarchically ordered medieval ontology now seemed instead a disordered, often baffling reality, and attempts to understand it were characterized most typically by an effort to cope with "the incessant flux of things."[10] Humanists had little faith in the encompassing theories of scholastic thinkers. They recognized the validity of practical experience and accepted its fragmentary and unsystematic nature, albeit uneasily, as the inevitable impression of a complex reality on the imperfect human intellect. Hence they were led to make reason dependent on sense and experience, as Paolo Sarpi, a friend of Galileo and with him a late representative of the humanist tradition, explained:

> There are four modes of philosophizing: the first with reason alone, the second with sense alone, the third with reason first and then sense, the fourth beginning with sense and ending with reason. The first is the worst, because from it we know what we would like to be, not what is. The third is bad because we many times distort what is into what we would like, rather than adjusting what we would like to what is. The second is true but crude, permitting us to know little and that rather of things than of their causes. The fourth is the best we can have in this miserable life.[11]

Because the humanists were not confident that man could explore the furthest limits of knowledge, they tended to adopt a more progressive view of human understanding and achievement than the scholastics. The ancient writers were transformed, in Eric Cochrane's words, "from a series of infallible statements or texts into individual, fallible, historically conditioned human beings." What scholastics regarded as authoritative statements humanists saw as working hypotheses that "carried with them the injunction to try them out in practice."[12] Or, as Petrarch expressed it, "I certainly believe that Aristotle was a great man who knew much, but he was human and could well be ignorant of some things, even of a great many things."[13] A new cultural relativism allowed at least the considerable independence of modern from ancient culture and by the sixteenth century even argued its superiority in such areas as technology (where inventions like the compass, the printing press, and gunpowder gave eloquent testimony to modern prowess). In this light we should view frequent late-*cinquecento* claims of artistic autonomy from the ancients, like these words from Jacopo Peri's introduction to *L'Euridice* of 1600: "And therefore, just as I shall not venture to affirm that this is the manner of singing used in the fables of the Greeks and Romans, so I have come to believe that this is the only one our music can give us to be adapted to our speech."[14] We shall see that Monteverdi insisted on a similar autonomy even from more recent musical authorities.

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[10] Bouwsma, *Venice and Republican Liberty*, pp. 4–5.

[11] Quoted from Bouwsma, *Venice and Republican Liberty*, pp. 519–20; Bouwsma's translation.

[12] "Science and Humanism," pp. 1053–54.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that humanists abandoned the quest for philosophical truth in realizing the power of rhetoric and admitting the baffling diversity of society and the world. They strove instead, along with Pier Paolo Vergerio, to utilize the limited truths available to them to shape their own and others' responses to the vagaries of life. The unity of philosophy and eloquence, not the abandonment of philosophy, was the central message of Renaissance humanism. And this Ciceronian impulse set Petrarch decisively apart from the earlier Italian *dictatores* as the spokesman for a new cultural force. As Jerrold Seigel has written:

> To speak in favor of solitude was, in Petrarch's terms, to speak as a philosopher. To accept the city and the moral values which the give and take of community life required was to speak as an orator. Petrarch's statements moved continually back and forth between these two positions, between the claims of an abstract wisdom, and the moral standards of the everyday world. This alternation . . . grew out of his attempt to combine the two lives of the philosopher and the orator. Petrarch recognized that rhetoric and philosophy both attracted and repelled each other, and humanist culture embodied this dialectic.[15]

The dialectic that Seigel describes persisted in humanist culture through the sixteenth century and beyond. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century it was not philosophy itself that the humanists disdained but the view that a systematic philosophical knowledge independent from the ethical ambiguities of daily existence was attainable and desirable.

The humanist perception of reality as fragmentary and even incoherent encouraged the reconsideration of the relationships among the intellectual disciplines and the consolidation of their differing methods and goals. This increased attention to

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[13] *On His Own Ignorance*, p. 74.

[14] From the facsimile of the original edition, edited by Rossana Dalmonte.

[15] " 'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric?," p. 37.

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